



Illustrated by Kurt Huggins

The Silence Before I Sleep

Adam-Troy Castro

1.

Before I bothered traveling for six months to see it for myself, Sunfire had been described to me in glowing terms as a palace in the sky.

Phrases like that immediately trigger my alarms. I begin to suspect that someone's trying to sell me something.

This particular little word-image came to me courtesy of one of the brokers I employ to triage the requests for my services. He's one of the more repellent people I deal with, down to odor, appropriate enough for a guy who makes his living by helping connect people with contract killers; you won't find many drawn to the work who qualify as charming. But it's still a useful service. He spares me the jobs that would strike me as too dirty and many of those where I would be set up to fail.

Blowing smoke through the gap in his teeth, he offered the “palace” description with a smirk, one he meant me to see, sharing his position that the description was both literally true and the pretty summary that hid an uglier truth.

I didn’t ask the man to share the joke. I’d had enough exposures to his idea of humor. I did ask him if he was certain that the job would be worth my time. He said yes. Smirking.

Negotiating through him, I got agreement to a substantial kill fee in case I decided not to follow through, packed my assistant Justin and myself into a bluegel crypt for our months in transit, and emerged from hibernation in orbit around a planet known as Vireczin, so pretty and blue from orbit that I could not wait until a view from ground level gave me an excuse to hate it.

And yes, now that I’d ridden the elevator down to the planetary surface, I had to agree.

Sunfire was both one of the most beautiful structures in the Universe, and one of the most philosophically disgusting.

It was the only human construct in Vireczin’s northern hemisphere, and one of only two on the entire planet, the other an equally ridiculous palace many thousands of kilometers to its south. The two homes and their respective lands shared the planet between them, populated only by the two landowners and their respective support staffs, a vast population of thousands dedicated to supporting the whims of only two.

Beyond that, this solar system boasted no other civilization. No other cities, no other states, just these two exercises in overwrought ego, planted in opposite hemispheres.

The wealth required to obtain control of an entire solar system, construct an entire Earth-sized planet in the Goldilocks zone, engineer its ecosystem to the most minute specifications, establish defenses that prevented any of known space’s peoples from coming in and just taking it all for themselves, and then—just as superfluous frosting—to construct this pair of outrageous palaces to inhabit was obscene: more than the collected income of some entire civilizations. And especially pointless, as both of the rich people involved chose to live on only a few square kilometers of it. It was the very definition of wretched excess for its own sake, nauseating even to someone like myself who had spent her career dealing with humanity’s most wretched.

Sunfire, the northern estate, sat atop what looked like an unsupported disk, floating two thousand meters above the verdant greenery of a rainforest to rival the mythical, long-vanished Amazon. As we circled the disk in our skimmer, I could make out rolling hills, gardens, a zoo, a community of smaller structures, and Sunfire itself, a palace with crystal spires stabbing upward as if intent on threatening the heavens. Each of the main structure’s competing towers had a mirrored surface studded with facets that resembled jewels, and beneath the tropical sun cast colorful reflected sunlight into the surrounding skies. Raging waterfalls plunged from four compass points along the periphery of the disk, to capture basins set within the forest canopy far below. Rainbows inevitably glowed around the clouds of mist.

To the naked eye, all of this did indeed appear to float without support, a feat that could be achieved given the level of technology the mistress of this palace could afford. Even so, I suspected trickery, and so I made a point of ordering my pilot Justin to circle at a distance, until I could produce an explanation for the illusion. For long minutes I could not arrive at one. Then it occurred to me to wonder just what fed those four waterfalls, and I got it. The estate rested on five transparent pylons, including one thick one at the center that was always in shadow, and four more slender that stood obscured within those waterfalls. What waters forever pumped up the central pipe forever left via those four tumbling waterfalls to forever collect in a subterranean cistern that forever fed the intake; no more impressive than any perpetual fountain, really, except by being larger.

The wealthy build many monuments to themselves. The corollary, that they crave these monuments, is all an impartial observer needs to resist what they want, awe.

I hated them all as much as I depended on them for my livelihood, and so I was pleased to uncover the artifice beneath the illusion. “Just who do they think they’re impressing?”

My assistant Justin turned to look at me. He was young and he was brilliant and he was happy for the work after escaping the hellhole world he’d come from, and I had never slept with him

and never would, despite the knowledge that he would have liked to and that I would have enjoyed it as well. He said, "I don't think they're impressing anybody. I think they're just making themselves feel better."

"Than what?"

"Than however they can't help feeling."

I glanced at him. "Please tell me what you're talking about."

"Look, it's just a feeling. My father once told me a legend from old Earth, of a man of extensive and undeserved inherited wealth who tried to accomplish great things, but failed at everything he attempted. He went into business and after a couple of decades had to dissolve his enterprises to avoid poverty. He went into politics and was destroyed by scandal. He married women but twice managed to turn their love into hate. Ultimately he retreated to a vast estate, more palatial and stuffed with treasures than any man should need; and though it brought him no happiness, succeeded at last at utterly controlling some part of his map, and spared him the requirement to get along with other people. In the end he died alone, longing for one of the playthings of his youth." He gestured at the floating monument to ego. "Being the master of all you survey spares you from ever having to survey anything else. It's also a virtual guarantee of loneliness."

People sometimes ask why I keep him around, if we're not lovers; this kid who I once encountered on an assignment, and then took with me when I left. I say that it's for moments like that.

Guilt never entered it, even though I'd needed to kill that garrulous old Dad of his, who had been trying to murder him at the time.

"Bring us in."

Justin sent Sunfire's security the request, and they assumed our nav, guiding us to a landing platform between waterfalls. Even there, excess ruled. The surface where they set us down was not some flat functional expanse of white or grey or black, designed to serve its assigned purpose without any nod to aesthetic concerns. Instead it was a bejeweled mosaic, glittering in the overhead sun and a genuine work of rainbow art that inevitably felt a shame to insult by parking an ugly vehicle on it. Another psychological trick, I suspected. Visitors, most of whom wanted something, would just have to feel bad about profaning this place's beauty with their grubby little vehicles.

A reception committee of three waited at the edge of the platform, where the mosaic gave way to greenery and a curving path of flagstones marked what I presumed to be a preferred route to the palace. The greeters appeared to be humanoid, but their voluminous robes and concealing hoods rendered it impossible to tell whether they were male, female, some other gender, or for that matter even representatives of *Homo sapiens*. We were likely meant to wonder; more theatrics.

The second we left the climate-controlled environment of the transport's ionic bubble, I felt the warmth of the sun, not tropical but close to it, a light breeze flavored with the scent of living things, and a subtle additional tingle that was neither atmospheric nor environmental; it felt good, like a massage, and was sufficiently pleasant that I knew that it had to be an engineered effect and not a natural feature of the planet.

"Smells good," muttered Justin. "Almost as if they're trying to cover up something."

The three greeters stood with heads bowed in a manner that seemed less deference to a visitor than an effort to retain anonymity. A wholly neutral voice emerged from the tallest one, at the center. "Rage Laskin."

"Just Rage, please." I use my surname when legally required, but most of the time prefer the single syllable, the name I use to market my services.

"And this young man behind you—"

"His name's Justin, but you need not address him. He will make no direct contribution to these negotiations."

It sometimes helps to let the locals think that the kid's just an unimportant luggage-carrier. Less danger for him, more opportunities for him to supplement our intelligence.

The hooded heads appeared to angle toward one another, miming silent negotiation by eye contact. This could have been communication or empty posturing, and again, it required conscious effort to remind myself that I shouldn't care. I had not been hired yet. The existing staff owed me no explanations.

Then the tall one said, "We will take you to the countess."

More false grandeur. There could be no royal titles on this planet, because there was no royal lineage; no history of inherited titles, going back generations of the inbred and spoiled defenestrating one another in order to edge ever closer to the throne. This was a private holding, shared by a count and countess who may have been torrid lovers once but had, from my intelligence, lived separately and within their own chosen keeps for years now. If they had titles, it was because they had at one point early in their residency considered it cute to bestow those upon themselves and thus force their respective support staffs into the contrasting status of peasantry. This was more privileged role-play on the part of people who had nothing better to do. But the role-play of powerful people, and so I was left to contemplate the inevitable questions that had been bothering me since my summons here: to wit, why the pretentious snots had chosen count and countess, instead of king or queen, or emperor and empress.

The flagstones became a path, and the path took us through sculpted topiary and dancing fountains—more use for all that water—and sculptures of dangling metalwork that captured the constant low breeze and turned it into music that sounded less like chimes than like actual human voices, singing in exquisite harmonies. Flitting explosions of color somersaulted by, if not birds then whatever this ecosystem used as their equivalent. There were insects, which I've always detested, but they did not seek us out or make a nuisance of themselves. There were also plenty of other hooded figures, their features just as shrouded, even as they drifted from one place to another, on errands that must have been hard to do with their arms inside their robes. We passed a display of dancing fire and a corral where tusked creatures unfamiliar to me but identified by the lead escort as something called elephants stood around in what could be imagined majesty or boredom, another paddock where pink amoeba the size of houses came together and then separated in a ritual that might have been conversation or coitus, and a third occupied by something that appeared to me to be on fire but didn't seem to suffer from it. I let the escort go on until I said, "Does she make all of you dress like that?"

"When on duty," it said.

"It seems cumbersome."

The escort managed a shrug without any specific movement of the shoulders. "One quarter of Sunfire is a spacious walled compound reserved for staff. In there we dress, live our lives, as we please. When elsewhere on the estate, we respect our lady's preferences regarding proper attire."

"I was told that she never leaves the palace itself."

"She never does," the escort said. "But she does monitor us from her chambers, to make sure that there are no infractions."

"Is that important?"

"To her it is."

"Gee," I said, with dripping irony. "It sounds like a rich life."

Trailing behind us, Justin asked: "What about us? Do we have a dress code too?"

He was supposed to stay silent: seen but not heard, really. But it was a sufficiently cogent question that I let his intrusion pass while our guide replied.

"You are not yet on staff."

"I will never be on staff," I said. "Nor will he."

"She's right about that," Justin said.

The escort said, "You are here to undertake an assignment."

"Not the same thing. I provide services. But I only work for myself."

The escort said, "Not all of us can afford to be so particular."

It was a reminder that I, too, was privileged.

But then the guide added, "I suspect that she will own as much of you as she wants," and

there was a finality to it that made further argument an exercise in mere contradiction.

The ornate gate of the palace was still some distance away, and I presumed we would enter via the front, but then we walked around some concealing topiary and found a ramp heading down, into relative darkness. A servant's entrance, then. Or one reserved for guests. I intended to be neither, but again, I was used to dealing with the obscenely wealthy and knew when to allow them their whimsies. The narrated part of our tour trailed off into silence as our surroundings became a featureless utility corridor devoid of any detail worth noting, even at the two or three intersections with identical corridors heading infinite distances to the left and right. This was a warren, all right, but warrens have no character.

Here, character of any kind was reserved for the lady of the house.

* * *

2.

The general story, that I received only slight revisions to as we penetrated the castle, was that of a lady industrialist who had emerged out of nowhere, fully funded and with enterprises already up and running, thanks in large part to heavy investments from the independent software intelligences known as the *Alsource*.

Everybody insisted that she was the genius behind every innovation she introduced to interstellar commerce, and that the *Alsource* supported her in large part because in the typical pattern of human events she would have had to sell her brainstorm to some other megacorporation like the *Bettelhines* or *Dejahcorp*. Others said that it was ridiculous to imagine that any human being could outthink the *Alsource*, and that they were just using a front woman for their own intellectual property.

It didn't matter, really. What mattered is that she became a charismatic, beloved figure, of the sort whose exciting entertained the billions whose existences were stuck at a more mundane scale. Over the decades of her carefully maintained youth, she blew through a dozen major love affairs, some with celebrities on her scale, some with royalty, and some with people chosen for their mere beauty: an excessive number of which ended not just with surfeit but with substantial venom and often hefty settlements to satisfy the lawyers.

Then came a man called *Bastian Nagharly*, with charisma to match hers and a backstory impossible to verify that placed her as the single great lost love of *Arla's* life, returned from wherever he'd been to reclaim his place by her side. He was gorgeous, though with enough scars to keep him interesting; quick-witted, though never cutting; courtly, without ever being phony. He was such a genius himself that she confessed that he had been a financial partner all along; this, too, was impossible to verify.

Either way, their passion for one another ignited the media, and was presumed to be one of the great love stories known to humanity. They certainly couldn't keep their hands off each other, even in public, and they developed the cutest habit of finishing each other's sentences. They were joined at the hip until the strains started to show in multiple public explosions. There were well-distributed images of them glowering at one another, and details of them barely speaking.

To everyone's surprise, they put their holdings under a trusteeship and announced their shared retirement on this customized garden world. Where, from day one, they had lived in separate estates.

Nobody claimed to know what had happened to sour everything.

We reached what I presumed to be an elevator, which, according to our escorts, only I was authorized to enter. I secured the promise that they would find *Justin* somewhere comfortable to wait and went in. The doors to the utility corridor closed, and for a heartbeat I waited for the car to move; but instead there was a bright flash of light, and another set of doors opened, revealing that this was not an elevator but a decontamination chamber, sterilizing any pathogens I might have brought with me from the world outside or the one I had been summoned from, seven standard months ago.

Inside I found a vast black space with no visible walls and a circle of relative light inhabited by an old woman in an ankle-length tunic. Nobody that rich needs to look old—you can be a child

for centuries, if you want—but she had a complexion like parchment and a craggy face that advertised a level of antiquity I'd never seen, the age nobody with financial resources ever needs to be, when the eyes and cheeks grow sunken and the features however lined with wrinkles develop a closer resemblance to the death's-head grimace that we all hide beneath the flesh. She had clouded eyes, but as I stepped in, her gaze followed me with sufficient accuracy that I presumed the effect to be artificial, as much a façade as the glory of the palace above.

She said, "I'm Arla DeQuy. And you're Rage." She allowed a pause before adding, "The renowned assassin."

I refrained from snorting. "There is no such thing as a renowned assassin. Any such person is known to the authorities and in danger of getting her head blown off."

She did not smile—I got the impression she was incapable of it—but she did tilt her head in a manner than expressed her appreciation. "Renowned among those with the resources to know those who stand out in the profession."

"Even then, my lady, I never self-identified as such. If I called myself that, most localities I entered would imprison me or kill me, just on general principles."

"Really." Her forehead crinkled. It had the texture of paper crumpled and then unfolded, only to be crumpled and unfolded again, leaving creases sufficient to mark multiple lives and not just one. "And yet you are said to be the very best at the art."

"People misreport my methods. My approach to the work is different, and not simple enough to be contained by such a blunt label."

More crinkling above the eyes. "I am sure I'll find the distinction interesting. You are very beautiful, Rage."

Given how easy it is to change faces, I have always considered that an empty compliment. Might as well praise my pants. But I nodded.

She led me to a spot where, on command, a round table and two low chairs rose from the floor to accommodate us. More theatre, I guessed. A bottle filled to the brim with pink liquid arrived with the table, flanked by two glasses thin enough to discourage any drink more substantial than a sip; not flutes, but tubes. She poured the drinks, placed one before me and another in front of herself, without telling me what it was or asking if it was anything I wanted. Then she sat and studied me through the eyes of extreme age, her face dipped to angle that studious gaze past the overhang of her brow. I noticed that she did not touch her drink, so I did not touch mine.

Then she said, "Be honest. What do you think of my home?"

"Excessive."

"You don't envy it?"

"Not it or you. I don't envy sadness."

"You are a perceptive woman. All this is sad. It is a monument to sadness. Not one square centimeter of it functions as anything but a pretty wrapper on a dirge."

I didn't tell her that the perception had been my assistant's, not mine. "I do have a solution to that, countess."

"Tell me."

"Stop being sad."

Her forehead became another eruption of crinkles. "You think that possible?"

"Countess, I am also by most measures a woman of considerable resources. I don't own worlds, but I still have a home on a planet I love, clothes to wear, food to eat, the company of people who interest me, the leisure time to enjoy myself doing the things I want to do, and enough in the way of savings to work only at the tasks that intrigue me. Possessing comparatively nothing, by your scale, I nevertheless enjoy a full life. I am not inclined to feel sympathy for any abhorrently wealthy person who wishes me to consider her pathetic."

Anger flared in her cold eyes. "And if I've lost a part of me I'll never get back?"

"So what? You're incomplete. I'm incomplete. The whole damn human race is incomplete. We fight to live anyway because it's the only shot we've got."

Her expression was so blank that I wondered if I'd said too much. I wasn't frightened of the

prospect; the worst she could do was kill me, and nobody excels in a career like mine without having a healthy disrespect for her own survival. The more likely outcome was banishment, the decision on her part that she didn't want to hire me after all, and this I'd find at most irritating, the months of wasted travel for a commission that failed to materialize.

When she finally spoke, it was a course-change. "You refuse the title of assassin."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I frame my responsibility as finding solutions to problems. That doesn't always mean killing people. I require only that you tell me the nature of the problem you have with your target. I tell you in advance that I will search for a less extreme solution. Most of the time, I manage the trick."

"Interesting. But if you are not an assassin, then—"

"I'm a consultant."

"Do you actually intend to be that banal?"

"It's more accurate than 'assassin.'"

"I've always found it a euphemism for pretending expertise while doing nothing."

"Not in my case. If I agree to the job, I will solve your problem, or not take payment."

"And if that requires an assassination?"

"The work does sometimes involve casualties."

"And is that not the same thing as killing on order?"

By this time in my life I could have this conversation in my sleep. "I don't take assignments I cannot live with. If I can't, I won't waste your time by pretending I'll take the job, or your money by taking payment for anything other than the transactional expenses involved in preliminary research."

"So your ethics are situational."

"Potential clients imagining me a mere monster-for-hire have asked me to murder families, to massacre entire communities, to carry out vendettas against innocents who had done nothing but offend those in power. I've had no problem saying no to such requests and, if I'm sufficiently revolted, carrying out an intervention just as extreme to prevent the contract from ever being offered to anyone else."

"*Just as extreme?*"

"I have clearly stated limits about how dirty I'm willing to get, how much evil I'll let pass without intervention. If you have any concerns that I might find your cause indefensible, then tell me right now that we can't come to terms, and I'll just leave, without further question."

She sipped from her tube, licking the thick pink liquid from her lips before continuing. "And the young man?"

"He's an assistant. No need to worry about him."

"Should I believe that?"

The question discomfited me—I didn't want any special attention accruing to Justin—but I shrugged it off. "I don't care what you believe."

"Very well. We'll concentrate on our business relationship. In the hardly unlikely event that my request did revolt you, just how would you propose to survive any perception on my part that you had now become part of the problem?"

It was a smart question, and I appreciated that she asked it without dissembling. "If you believe me capable of accomplishing whatever you want, you also believe me capable of protecting myself. Trust me when I say that didn't travel this far without first making my own extensive arrangements to survive this meeting—or at the very least to ensure that neither you nor your palace would survive anything happening to me."

She said, "It sounds like the safest thing to do is just pay you a retainer and ask you to go away."

"Could be. If your cause isn't justified."

The ensuing silence lasted almost a full minute before she lowered the thin glass to the table. When she did I saw that at some point during the process of sipping from it she'd spilled a little

and that the drop sat beside the base of the glass like spilled blood, if spilled blood could be pink; the comparison came to mind regardless, and I knew without further inquiry that I was not the first contractor she'd come to, or the tenth. If I was not her last hope, she would never be satisfied with whoever came after me.

"What you said, about me sitting in the darkness, wallowing in my misery: it's true."

"Yes."

"It's also true that the man I wish to send you after made it impossible for me to do anything else."

Usually, when a woman says that of a man, there is only one possible explanation. "Did he—"

"Please. Rape is the act of lesser monsters, of simple everyday brutes, of predators lurking in alleys or taking advantage of their own physical strength. If his crime against me were anything as banal as that, then I promise you, I would have used all the resources at my disposal to recover from the trauma. I would have moved on and taken my primary revenge in the way that many are forced to, by living. No, Rage. What this man has done to me is an entirely more intimate violation. It requires a form of vengeance far more substantial than merely killing him, and if you were kind enough to take my contract, I don't want him dead. I want him alive but miserable."

She had still left me with more questions than answers, and for a moment they all fought each other, for the honor of being the first spoken. Ultimately I asked the most practical. "How?"

"I want him to live with the knowledge that he has nothing to look forward to, nothing to fill his years with save the same emptiness I feel. I want him to know, as I do, that he will never draw breath for any reason but the dry tyranny of his own respiration. Your challenge is managing that. Will you take that commission, or must I reimburse you for your time and send you on your way?"

It had been years since a client's anger had so completely set my heart to pounding.

After a few seconds I said, "I haven't accepted the assignment yet. But I'll get back to you."

* * *

3.

The official guest facilities on Sunfire included about a dozen luxurious villas by the waterfalls, all fine enough to honor the most distinguished visitors, with valet service from an army of servants dedicated to that job who had for years now not had any distinguished visitors to practice on. Arla offered me access to one of these, even asked me if I wanted a separate one for Jason, but I demurred; taking one would have been too much like positioning myself as a friend. Instead I asked if there were any spare quarters within the servant village. It was behind those walls that I found modest but comfortable homes a human being might not be too self-conscious to be caught dead in, and a community of retainers who had shed their concealing robes and now mingled like family in the central square. They were a community of sentients from multiple different species, from the squat semi-humanoids known as Bursteeni, to the massive apparent beasts of burden known as Kurth, and they moved among each other as if this proximity were no more unusual than breathing.

We stopped, at one point, in a plaza where a party was in full swing, under the brilliant mid-day sun. There were dozens of celebrants, most but not all of them human, singing and dancing and being silly in the manner of any creatures who will themselves to enjoyment. They danced in circles, coming together before separating into smaller groups, and the key purpose of their revel appeared to be that which I have never been able to generate: bliss as a spontaneous thing, divorced from any specific purpose. The contrast with the personal despair of the castle's lady gave me pause. Did these people know how tragic she considered herself? Did they care? Had they all been here so long that they could no longer consider themselves tethered by her misery, or by the gravity they were obliged to assume everywhere else but in this compound?

Justin said, "It would be nice to join them, for a bit."

A thin man with a hawk nose and hooded eyes untouched by his toothy smile, overheard us and said, "The owned are allowed their revels."

I said, “Do these people consider themselves owned?”

“Historically, most people should. There are only two employers here, after all, and they exist with such animosity toward one another than it is virtually impossible for anyone who works for one to seek a position with the other. At least, here we have sunlight, and a slice of the pie that is more than adequate for the lot of us—even if the only alternative for the unsatisfied is to find some method of emigrating off-world entirely.”

“Worked for me,” Justin remarked.

I gave him a glance that did not yet know whether it should be annoyed. But no, Justin was smiling. Throwing a random and not unappreciated compliment to the boss.

I asked the man with the hawk nose if he was trying to hitch a ride.

“No. I’m happy enough. The position I have here is better than I could ever hope for elsewhere. But I have a friend here who has been talking about leaving for quite some time. When she found out you were coming, she said that she wanted to approach you, and I wanted to make sure that the encounter was not left up to chance. It may be asking a lot, but are you willing to stay here until I can summon her?”

Justin and I glanced at one another. It was, of course, not up for him to say. But he had always been a primary advisor in matters of conscience, and the look he gave me was that of someone who hoped that I’d be open to the idea. It wouldn’t be the first time. It’s a courtesy many with vehicles offer to those who need relocation. And so I said, “You are an interesting person yourself, Mister—”

“My name is Ghuvan. I am best described as this facility’s ombudsman. I help the staff in matters that the countess will not—such as arranging travel, since we otherwise require no more than one supply drop a year. Are you willing?”

“I won’t make a commitment,” I said, “but if you can bring her here, fine.”

Ghuvan departed.

It was maybe twenty minutes before we saw him again. In that time, we spoke to other members of the staff and found out a few things about the backstory between the count and countess, none of them substantial, and here were several suggestions that we speak to a local pet man, here as representative to his masters the AIsource.

We had just gotten directions to his quarters when the woman Ghuvan had mentioned came up to us. She had a deep tan complexion, long shiny black hair, and one of those necks so delicate that it barely appeared strong enough to hold up her head; but she was graceful, and it was hard for me to imagine someone as beautiful as her being so hesitant unless she had spent too much of her life bowing and scraping as a servant.

Her accent was just some spice behind otherwise excellent command of the common tongue. “You are . . . from off-world, yes?”

I refrained from saying, *Obviously*. “Can I help you?”

“I am Hafa. Mr. Ghuvan said that you might be leaving in a few days?”

I said, “Our business might be over then. He said you want to hitch a ride?”

“Yes. I wish to exchange this life for another. If it pleases you, I will refrain from straining your resources, and be happy for conveyance to any confederate transport hub. If there is an unoccupied berth, I can pay.”

Justin and I usually avoided entanglements like this, at least on the job, but this Hafa wasn’t asking to become part of our lives, only to fill a spare bluegel crypt when we left.

I asked her, “How long have you worked for the countess?”

“Only two years. I confess that I arrived without planning this as final destination where I could earn my keep, and was fortunate, at that, to find a position here instead of at the count’s home. But it is not my ambition to stay.”

“Why not?”

She offered an enigmatic smile. “Is it not enough to desire a life with no more counts or countesses?”

It was a perfect answer: sketchy, but specific enough to explain everything.

Justin said, “You don’t like bowing and scraping?”

"I can do both, if it is required by my employment contract. But it is not my preferred lifestyle, no. I would also prefer a place where I could walk on the ground, instead of on some floating palace above it. It is time to see something else of the Universe. Again: I can pay."

If true, she'd saved her earnings well, for someone so apparently young. Most people have to sign a diplomatic contract to afford interstellar travel. Her past, before arrival here, must have been interesting.

I summoned her name. "Hafa?"

"Yes."

"I don't know how long we're staying, or for that matter how much advance word we'll get before we have to go. And I don't know if we're going anywhere you'll want to be. This young man's name is Justin. Give him your contact codes, and you can speak further over the next day or so."

She gave him a contemplative look. "I am available. Are you?"

The actual nature of the question was obvious.

Justin said, "I am."

She said, "There are sights worth seeing here. Saying goodbye to them will be more enjoyable with company."

She bowed lightly and provided him with the information. I watched, not listening, thinking of the kind of life lived by the majority of human beings; the kind of life where people did not so much emigrate to distant worlds but end up trapped on them. Still, her departure was as magnetic to the eye as her arrival.

I turned to Justin to ask what he thought and found the question answered by his eyes.

I said, "She's very beautiful, isn't she?"

He sometimes suffers from his proximity to me, from the inevitable misunderstandings from people who imagine us a couple; and also from his dedication to the job, which often requires him to resist distractions in the field. They come up often. He's also very beautiful.

He said, "I like her."

It was the most superfluous admission of the day.

"Well, then, as long as you'll be spending time together, employ her as guide. Do specify, for both of us. I have no problem with you having fun. Just don't be an ass."

He looked wounded. "Am I frequently an ass?"

"You are male. You are inevitably sometimes an ass."

"All right," he said, after some reflection. "I'll try not to be."

A short walk away we reached a bungalow set apart from the others, the only structure in the servant community that was set off by its own fencing. Fortunately, the door opened in response to a simple request at the gate, allowing Justin and I to pass through and enter the tiny structure aside.

What we found within was a home that appeared an effort to duplicate in less space the bleakness to be found in the home of the countess, and a single figure, half-naked and all-mad, sitting cross-legged on a floor that he'd covered with several centimeters of dirt. The fronds and flowers of some plant that bloomed in darkness made impenetrable rain forest at the corners of the room, the enforced illusion of night boosted by the thousands of pinprick holes in the ceiling, admitting motes of daylight that served as stars.

He was human, physically; the right number of arms, legs, joints, and ribs. He looked old, not that it was useful testament to his actual antiquity. His privates were hidden beneath a loose, tiny scrap of cloth. But there was more to him, somehow, something that here manifested as a corrugated cable that exited his right temple, curved upward, and culminated in a silver ball the size of a closed human fist. It would hover above his head for the duration of our conversation: his leash, and his statement of allegiance.

I said, "You're the pet man."

It was stating the obvious.

"Yes."

"You don't work for the countess."

“No. I’m a liaison to the countess. I belong to my masters in the AIsorce.”

Every once in a while, the independent software intelligences known by that name promise a creature like this a lifetime of absolute hard-wired contentment in exchange for jettisoning all free will and living as their obedient servant. Pet men were essentially a modern answer to that species once common on Old Earth, dogs; though the creatures who kept them were much farther beyond Man than Man had ever been to Dogs. Some people found the result repellent because it violated the inherent dignity of all Mankind. I, who had never believed in that hypothetical construct, found the result repellent only because I had no problem understanding how tempting the lifestyle can be, to someone whose life had crashed.

My life has crashed more than once. I might have considered an escape like his. My problem is that I am constitutionally incapable of taking easy outs.

None of that mattered much, really. The pet man’s presence documented that the count and countess, wealthy as they were, were still intimately associated with the AIsorce and possibly also owned by them, if only by debt.

I asked the pet man, “Have your masters had many dealings with the count and countess?”

“Enough,” he said, with absolute calm, “that my keepers find it polite to keep a permanent representative on site. In practice, there’s not much for me to do; any more than there was, when it was only her alone, or only her and Bastian together.”

“You knew her before she met him?”

“*Met* is not quite an accurate word. *Arranged* is better.”

This was portentous enough to ooze significance. “What does that mean?”

“If you had known her before Bastian, as I did, you would have known the complete creature, a genuinely brilliant mind who absolutely deserved the wealth her creations earned her. You would have known a woman of beauty, of wit, of dazzling spontaneity; someone who any number of other human beings could have loved, had they been able to breach the walls the struggles of her early years erected around her heart.”

Justin said, “You’re a bad poet, mister.”

“I am. Perhaps because, despite giving up my heart to my masters and despite being rendered incapable of not just the physical act but the necessary emotional connection with other human beings, I still could not help my reverence for her. Alas, by the time Arla became who she was, she had discovered one key drawback of extraordinary wealth: it insulates you from others. It makes you expect everyone else to indulge all your whims; it makes too many of those who get close not potential lovers but determined predators, who only want a piece of what you have. She was wounded by multiple prior lovers, all of whom turned out to have ambitions to be more than props in her life, before she decided that her next lover would not be left to social happenstance.”

I said, “So you’re saying she sought a matchmaker.”

“Of a sort.”

“The AIsorce?”

“No. Some inferior imitators who have mastered some of their technology. Foolish. There are so many imitators.”

“Why not the AIsorce?”

“You would have to ask her that. I always assumed she wanted to avoid surrendering influence over her love life to her financial backers.”

“And something went wrong.”

“Using their inferior methods, it was almost inevitable. She should have asked my masters. They are better at calculating and enhancing the human mind. But she was, as I say, reluctant. So she went to her less trustworthy . . . what was your word? Matchmaker? And their metrics were faulty.”

“How?”

“When he first showed up, Bastian seemed to be perfect. You only needed to see them together to believe it. It was easy to believe that they made each other complete.”

“But . . .”

“Instead they quickly made each other hollow.”

“I don’t understand.”

He communicated a shrug without actually performing one. “I was a man long enough to know that some lovers make your life larger; others, smaller; still others, cage-like. Some pull all life from one another and turn each other into shells. It is a function of who you become, to enter the relationship. Arla and Bastian did not realize that to enter this one, they had emptied each other, to the core. And what you see today is the result.”

I did not fully understand this, but got the gist.

I said, “You’ve lived at both their estates.”

“I’ve shuttled back and forth between them, as needed. Both established quarters for my convenience, and I presume that the count still has a home for me, though there hasn’t been any need for my presence there, for some years now. This suits me, as it’s a much less congenial place. When they sundered all communication, I was just left to remain in the palace where I was at the time, and have remained here ever since.”

“But you can tell me about the count’s palace.”

“I can give you some idea what to expect, yes. At the bare minimum, I can make sure you don’t call it a palace again. It’s a castle, not a showplace.”

“Meaning?”

“It does not look like the person who lives there is having any fun.”

“Anything else?”

“It has been some time since I saw it last. He must have changed any number of things.”

I smiled at him. “Honestly, I don’t expect operational intel. I just want a sense of the man. From someone other than the offended party.”

“I can tell you first that if he doesn’t want you there, you will find it impossible to land. If he does want you there, you will merely find it very difficult.”

“And?”

“It is my judgment that you will likely be able to get as far as the estate. And from there to the castle. But if you enter with bad intent, that will likely be the end of you.”

“How many prior attempts have there been?”

“Arla has sent dozens in the last twenty years. Only one in ten have returned.”

Interesting. The countess had left this detail out of my briefing. “Who did she send?”

The pet man provided a list of names. In fiction of a certain sort I would have known all of them by reputation, even considered one or two of the deadlier individuals respected colleagues. Sorry. The Universe is a big place and there’s no shortage of people like me, offering mayhem for pay. I may be “renowned,” as she put it, but that simply means I have high marks in what must be a rather teeming book of candidates; and I’m sure that the same was true for them, the poor bastards. On being done, he said, “The ones who returned—they returned as failures. Suspect as traitors. Some suffered at Arla’s hands. Only those who were able to justify themselves were able to leave.”

“This would have been nice information to have.”

“I have provided it in time, I think.”

I grunted. “Your masters the AIsources still have a financial interest in the holdings of these people. Right?”

“And in their physical and emotional well-being. In long term.”

“Will *they* seek to stop me?”

“The AIsources find this situation very interesting. I believe that they will watch with great interest. Whether they choose to play a part is beyond my capacity to predict.”

I asked a few follow-up questions, receiving only a little of value. After a few minutes, I thanked him for his time and moved on. Leaving that shadowed house, and reentering the comfortable familial atmosphere of the support staff community, was like leaving a pressurized environment where the air had begun to go bad, and entering one where the air was of extraordinary sweetness. It led to the reflection that this planet had more than its fair share of people who locked themselves up inside boxes; a thought that would return sooner than I could know.

We retired to our own quarters, a little but comfortable bungalow as antiseptically pleasant as any guest quarters in any estate where the rooms afforded to visitors could be afforded any luxury but personality, and there I activated the hiss screen designed to stymie any of our host's listening devices.

I asked Justin, "What do you think?"

"That it's bad enough to get involved in other people's wars. This is getting involved in other people's bedroom tantrums."

"She's offered fair payment."

He sighed. "Yes. She has."

"And we've worked for worse people."

"Yes. We have."

"What do you have against these?"

"That I've been poor."

I said nothing.

To fill the silence, he elaborated. "They've spent fortunes to build this fantasy when there are worlds where people are homeless and starving. That they used it to turn their backs on one another and fight a war without banners. That they are, in the end, silly infants. And that you don't want to take this commission, not if Arla's just eager to behold you if you fail."

"Still," I said, "they're silly infants who pay very well."

"If we live to spend it."

I thought that over for some time and then said, "I haven't made up my mind yet. But I think I'll go pay the good count a visit."

He was not surprised, but clearly also not happy. "All right."

And I grinned. "Don't be so upset. You have someone to call."

* * *

4.

The world's other pretentious palace, Greysadow, sat deep in its southern latitudes, just south of an uninhabited continent.

I let my skimmer plan the flight and spent the hours plugged into a neurec of Arla and Bastian making love.

It was a public document, obtained before our journey here, and I could only wish it was as entertaining as the capsule description sounds.

The worlds of Man have differing standards of pornography. On one of those planets where the future count and countless conducted their business prior to turning their back on the ebb and flow of upper-class society, recordings of the sort were as common and as accepted as vacation holos, mounted on walls. Many were the people who preserved their lovemaking sessions for a posterity that might be theoretically interested, and while I didn't understand the custom myself, it was a treasured tradition of the world in question, and I had no eloquent response beyond a shrug and a reference to a certain rationalization that's been common in humanity's disparate cultures for thousands of years.

"*When in Rome . . .*"

In this particular case I could have added another: *this isn't pornography, this is research.*

I would like to report that the preserved erotic interlude was an epic demonstration of mastery in the art, but it was nothing much. Recorded from Arla's viewpoint, and capturing all her sensations and emotional responses, it communicated the phenomenon of sex with someone you enjoy, but are mostly accustomed to; energetic enough, and pretty enough in that they performed in a room where every surface, including their own bodies, was a glowing metallic gold. But I sensed no real excitement, no real room for surprise, even within the standard deviation of a long-time couple. Neither side was dominant, but neither were they particularly generous. They met standing at the center of the gold chamber, ankle-deep in a liquid substance that was the same color as everything else, and from there they embraced, and kissed, and moved to a shiny hammock of sorts where she lay on her back and he pulled himself on top of her, in an act that struck me as less inspired than game. There was a second go where

they swapped positions, that worked at precisely the same level, and I mean precisely, neither better nor worse, not by an iota. The rule that even bad sex is usually pretty good did apply, but given all the effort they had put into making the act seem exotic and profoundly beautiful, there was precious little in the way of specialness. It was comfortable. No better.

It didn't necessarily mean anything. No doubt the vast majority of couples settle in some happy value of routine, if they last long enough. What I found interesting was the time-stamp, less than a year after he appeared out of nowhere and joined her life: that should have been well within the first throes of their relationship, before the endorphins cooled and the novelty turned to sand. This was like they achieved distraction and declared it paradise, a great epic of passion so profound enough that it could fuel whatever bottomless malice they felt for one another now.

I supposed that you could call this the opera theory. Great passions can be seen as the arc of a pendulum. All-consuming love can become all-consuming hate at the opposite extreme of the curve, if that pendulum is swung with sufficient violence. But the problem here was that—in the absence of any concrete cause—I could determine nothing operative in these emotions, no force that qualified as more than settling. I'd certainly felt more during one-night stands.

So, okay, theories. One was that they'd been lovers before, at some point in their mutual past so distant that the memory was more gilded than they actually turned out to be when their brokers brought them back together. The other was that they really were new to each other in this recording but cold to the core: people who just weren't capable of feeling, or performing, at the heights others could. They liked each other, a little bit; they enjoyed the act, a little bit; and they considered this the absolute peak human love story only because they didn't know any better. Then they had their falling-out, for reasons the countless still hadn't shared with me, and it was only because they were so obscenely rich, and by that standard at the center of their respective universes, that they were able to dramatize it to the outright ridiculous degree, the declarations of ruined happiness and so on, that they could afford.

Theoretically, if you're rich enough, you can finance the construction of a planet-sized statue of somebody who's caused you minor annoyance, and then entertain yourself forever, by nuking it. (I don't think anybody's ever actually done this, and if someone has, I don't want to know. I meant what I said when I began the sentence with *theoretically*.) Given the scale of your life, it wouldn't matter that this is a ridiculously over-sized response to a minor annoyance. You have the resources to do anything you want and therefore can afford for all your responses to be over-sized. That guy who mildly annoyed you that one time? Build that statue and bring on the nukes! Do what you must to exercise that resentment! Let this be the scale of your response to a *minor* irritation and then worry about scaling up to the appropriate response for a *genuine* offense! Why not? You're rich! You can afford it!

And that almost seemed appropriate, for two people so vainglorious that they spent their days actively resenting each other across a battlefield the size of a planet. Maybe it was the explanation. Maybe this went no deeper than two wealthy wastes of space with no actual human connection, exercising their anger at a minor breakup, at the scale that only they could. It would fit the facts.

But then I had been in the room with Arla.

She really was as bereft, as incapable of connecting with the life she could afford, as she seemed. It did not feel like her being vainglorious. It felt like her being genuine.

I did not understand it.

But maybe, after speaking to Bastian, I would.

I was, in any event, still contemplating this when the skimmer's nav program alerted me that I had arrived within the airspace claimed by Greyshadow.

It stood in a place below the southernmost tip of the world's largest continent where the ocean to the east and the ocean of the west met, with their attendant weather systems, to argue it out.

It was not a friendly discussion.

What I saw from my skimmer, three thousand meters above sea level, was a raging, furious

battle, with monsoon winds and waves tall as mountains, slamming against one another with an elemental anger that never stopped.

Vireczin was a garden world, and so there must have been other places where the ocean waters glistened like mirrors, not disturbed by even the most tentative ripple. But whether you are designing an ecosystem or merely inheriting one from ancestors, the energy of heat being exchanged from one region to another always has to be spent somewhere, and so much of it was spent here, in a confrontation that must have begun at the moment waters first filled the sea basins.

A pylon rose from the raging waters, battered by thunderous waves at its base. It rose rain-slick but defiant twenty-five hundred meters about sea level and supported another disk as large as the one I'd visited in the north, bearing the estate of the man the countess wanted deprived of his happiness. It was a different environment, and it possessed an entirely different character: instead of parkland surrounding a fairy tale castle, rocky crags supporting an unlovely fortress of mortar and stone, all surrounded by a perpetual thunderstorm that appeared wholly disconnected with the much larger, no less unnatural, tempest that surrounded it.

My request for an in-person colloquy with the count received an automatic reply that I was welcome to visit but that it required me to arrive without my vehicle.

My advance intelligence specified that this was among his rules, but I had been hoping to avoid that silliness.

No, they wouldn't send anybody out in one of their own vehicles to pick me up.

If I wanted to visit I would have to take care of the logistics on my own.

They said this with mechanical courtesy, but only an idiot would have not detected snottiness in the terms.

"But if I do land," I said, "if I do knock on your front door, the count will meet with me?"

"As long as you survive a descent without vehicle, he will be more than pleased."

"Very well," I said. "I'll get back to you."

The conversation was recorded. If I stopped now, and returned to Arla with the job undone, it would provide clear evidence that I had not brokered a separate deal. But that would work only if she was interested in being reasonable. Someone with manias on her scale did not necessarily have to be.

I considered my options for a bit, then contacted Justin via hytex.

The image showed him a little embarrassed to be caught at play. His skin was shiny with wet, his hair flattened to his forehead. The greenery behind him glowed in the bright sun. Birds twirped.

He said, "I gather you haven't gone in, yet. Are you going in yet?"

I said, "Still deciding. How's the tour?"

"Irritating when we have to wear the official uniform to get away with walking the grounds. Those robes are hot. More fun when we're sticking around the servant quarters. Here, it's downright fun. They have a garden with a lagoon to swim in."

"I've guessed that much. And Hafa?"

"We're getting along."

"Has she given you anything?"

"Well, I've received quite a bit more about Arla's vindictive streak. Nothing that really comes as a surprise. You don't operate a major corporation like hers without a talent for bastard misbehavior, and here in her little slice of paradise it's got to be a talent that needs exercise, now and then. Another reason to abort, in my opinion."

"Noted," I said. "Has she given you any more about Ghuvan?"

"The ombudsman? I get the impression that he's more powerful here than he let on. He has easy access to Arla, whenever he wants: more than I would expect from the HR department. If that's all he does. But I get the impression from others that he is the place to go, if you're an employee with a problem. Beyond that—I don't know."

I grunted. Something did seem off. "Has Hafa told you anything about her own background?"

"She's mentioned a few planets I've never heard of, which isn't unusual. She seems to travel

around a lot. She's told me she's been hopping around since young childhood. I guess it's why she's in such a hurry to leave here; it's gotten boring. She hasn't pushed about where we'll be headed next. I guess she's telling the truth about wanting to go anywhere."

"All right. Keep digging."

"Okay."

"And keep enjoying yourself. What's next on the agenda?"

He hesitated. "Dinner."

"As part of one of those public spectacles?"

"No. A private meal. But, Rage . . ."

There were volumes of worry in the silence that followed.

Then he said, "You're actually going in."

"I'm actually going in," I said. "If I'm not back in contact within three days, you probably won't hear from me. Make sure your movements can be accounted for, in case Arla finds a reason to be unhappy with me. And—I mean it. Have a good time."

"Sure. Worrying about you is going to make that real easy."

I cut the connection and spent about fifteen minutes calming myself with breathing exercises designed to blunt the crazy, common-sense fear that went along with doing what I was about to do. Then I suited up, directed my skimmer to hover in place and await instructions, then dialed the ionic shield to 50 percent permeability and leaned out.

The freezing cold hit me right away. So did the gale-force winds. It was all I could do to hold on to the fuselage and not be ripped away into open space. I had a face-plate on, and it was next to opaque with fog and damp immediately, which is why I immediately shifted from straight visual to AI mapping. In short order it delivered a cartoonish image of the pylon and grounds, overlaid with an isobar illustration of the hurricane-force air currents, and a helpful dotted line that posited my likely trajectory if I let go and surrendered myself to the gale. It provided me with a nice pie-wedge of the most likely landing places, including a hefty percentage colored in red that indicated either a landing in the sea, or an immediately fatal collision with the pylon and the estate that topped it. The chances of death exceeded over 85 percent. The green part of the wedge, representing a landing on target if not yet guaranteeing one I could be happy with, was the narrow slice that remained. The chances of survival intact, in condition that would permit me to proceed further, were only .02 percent.

I calculated a course that would in calm air result in a likely successful landing, and aimed seven hundred meters in another direction, arcing my body to catch an updraft and steer me away from a bone-crushing impact with the crashing waves far below.

I picked a spot and directed my suit's attitude jets to do whatever they could to deliver me there.

Chances of death dropped to 67 percent.

Chances of survival intact rose to 7 percent.

I was absolutely certain that I was going to die.

This conviction felt like an old friend. I regularly find myself in circumstances where I have to accept that death is not only possible but probable. Filed as a near-certainty, it enters the realm of accepted fact and is processed as something I already know. This leaves room for the next instruction, "Now arrange life."

So, fine: I was going to die, but I had room to process and follow survival strategies as a means of increasing the impossible percentages.

I let go, flattened myself against the wind, and allowed the storm to take me. I saw it taking me too far from my target and changed my personal bearing from kite to missile. I spun, corkscrewed, more than once screamed, but kept away from panic, that sometimes helpful response that rewards action at the expense of calculation. I had one wry thought, that there are better ways to make a living, but that was whipped out of me by a sudden lashing impact with what felt like a sheet of rain, and immediately replaced that with more calculation, renewed focus on the impossible structure in my direct path.

Chances of Death had risen to 69 percent. Chances of uninjured survival had risen to 4.7

percent. More chances of living, fewer chances of lingering with terrible imagery.

One of my mentors had defined this dilemma for me.

Accept that you're going to die.

Then arrange life.

I hurtled toward the pylon. The conditions changed every few seconds, and so every few seconds I faced about a dozen separate tastes of ugly death, that I then had to compensate for and avoid, all while the winds sucked at my body heat and tried to send me spinning off into the void. It was impossible to avoid losing control, of course; an observer would have seen a hurtling body, turning ass-over-teakettle every second as the winds kept ripping me away from any controlled trajectory.

The trick was regaining control as frequently as I could, and each time at the precise moment; and there was a moment about a fifty meters from the disk when the artificial landscape jerked above me, and I saw the naked death of the pylon, standing in my path and promising a collision that would reduce me to liquid.

Chances of Death: 87 percent. Chances of uninjured survival: .02 percent.

I was almost certainly going into the sea or being shattered against that bloody upright pole.

I hurtled past the pylon, escaping the immediate worst outcome, and hit what I had been aiming for: an updraft. It didn't deliver me to the altitude I needed, but it slowed my descent, and actually gave me altitude, at an airspeed within reach of what I needed for survival. The real risk was slamming into the disk at terminal velocity from below, but I cleared it. The landscape dipped back into view again, terrifyingly close, and with a quick burst of my attitude jets I released a therapeutic scream as it stopped being an object I was approaching but instead an object below me, that I was certainly going to hurt.

Chances of Death: 64 percent. Chances of uninjured survival: 4 percent.

An arm's length from outcroppings and crags that could still kill but were more likely to inflict crippling injury, I deployed a microfiber chute, felt the telltale jolt of deceleration and immediately released, rather than let it catch the wind for any longer than that.

Chances of Death: 42 percent. Chances of uninjured survival: 8 percent.

I now knew that I would not clear the estate unless some gust decided to take me; what remained to be seen was whether I would break every bone in my body and be left sprawled in agony for however long it took some maintenance bot to clear the debris.

Another chute, deployed and immediately jettisoned.

The rocky landscape of the estate was no longer a blur, but was still moving by beneath me at terrifying speed.

Seconds to impact.

I activated a landing system that would have been suicide to deploy any earlier than this moment. Inflatable crash cushions exploded from my back, my chest, my upper arms, my midsection, my legs. I was a flying marshmallow, and it was as that that I hit one rocky outcropping that might have powdered my bones otherwise, flipped over it, and hit another outcropping beyond. It did not kill me, but I think that might have been statistical error. Impact hurt, a lot.

The Chances of Uninjured Survival readout fell to zero and vanished, no longer relevant. I had sustained injury, after all. It was replaced by another metric, Chances of Post-Landing Mobility.

Chances of Death: 37 percent. Chances of Post-Landing Disability: 47 percent. Chances of Post Landing Mobility: 16 percent.

Two of my cushions deflated. A brief interval with the wind trying to reclaim me, and gravity won, ramming me against a steep rocky slope and killing two of the cushions that remained. The one cupping my ass remained, and I had time to think that it was a good thing I didn't have Justin surveilling me, because he would capture this imagery and make sure to spring it on me at inconvenient times.

The diagonal rock face that had caught me was currently catching the brunt of the storm, and its long life as the recipient of so much driving wind and water had rendered it smooth as a mirror, slick with the waters flowing down it in waves. Gravity took over from momentum as the dominant force working on my mass, and so I began to slide, an inevitability I was more or less

inclined to accept until my punch-drunk mind accessed the problem of just where all this water was headed. I looked down and saw how the cliff converged with another diagonal a third its altitude, forming what would have been an unequal V, if the vertex below me was not an open chasm beyond which raging whitewater churned on its way downhill. It probably fed a plunge down to sea level. Slipping into that torrent would be very bad.

I kicked out with both legs and hit the other converging wall with the soles of both feet. It was a painful impact I could feel all the way up to my hip, and the rain-slick surface did not want to provide traction, but the brace held. I stopped. I felt a bone or two crack, screamed the way any sane person would have, and held on, aware that at the bare minimum I had stopped.

My display confirmed for my convenience that I now had skeletal damage and therefore hadn't really beaten the odds.

Like hell I hadn't.

My suit released surgical nanobots into my system, already seeking to find the sources of damage and knit them, none of which would happen in time to be a factor in the next few minutes at least.

I was still straddling a torrent, like a smashed bug someone was trying to wash off a pane of glass.

I looked to my left and saw no help there, just a vertical pile of rocks that would be the devil's own challenge to climb. To my right, another jagged rockfall, but one that looked that it provided more opportunities for a climber. It was slightly further away, but it would be silly to base my decisions on a meter or two when I had just traveled thousands in chaos.

I began to edge along toward that more promising opportunity for ascent. This was maybe the most difficult part of my journey: putting all possible pressure on my left leg while shifting my right as far as I could in that direction, and then shifting my back to follow. It was the part involving my back that hurt the most, each move the prompt for a blinding jab of pain, and each one another opportunity for my feet to slip and surrender my weight to the water that wanted me to fall through the empty chasm and into the foamy white.

I cursed. A lot. I made up new names for the worst person in my life, the woman who had taken in a homeless girl whose age was still in the single digits and started teaching me to do the things I was doing now, the things I had no alternative to doing because it was now all I was good at. She had given everything but warmth, anything like approval until I was finally better than her and it was time to try to kill me. I can't say I'd loved or hated her. By the last few years I'd only seen her as a means to an end. But I sure as hell missed her, and this was one of those situations where I couldn't help hearing her as a voice crying, *What do you want? Sympathy?*

I thought: *Go to hell, Kina.*

And you too, John. I made a life despite your rules.

I reached the rockfall to my immediate right and was now faced with an immediate problem: how to transfer from my current position to a climbing one, without relinquishing my brace against the opposite wall and plunging through the gap into the rapids. I fumbled with my right hand and found no handhold likely to hold my weight. A visual check established that there was an irregularity to my right, too far away to reach from my position, that could be helpful, but from this angle I would not be able to reach it by merely reaching. It was going to be an awkward switch, and a vital one. The only comfort was that if I failed, I would likely have only enough time to realize that I had failed and not a great interval afterward to contemplate it. It was amazing how much that kind of consideration helps, sometimes.

I concentrated on my soles of my feet, the only two points of contact with the opposite wall, put everything I had into making them hold, and allowed my knees to bend, creating a spring. Then I leaped. I slid upward, saw the potential handhold for a heartbeat, then slid back down, bracing my feet in the same position they'd been before. Not enough. Try again, this time with a little assistance from my suit burners. It wouldn't be fun. The running water might get a chance to heat up.

I leaped again, this time initiating a burn. I couldn't afford much anymore, but this time I was able to propel myself half a meter farther than my own muscle power might have managed on

its own. Just as I began to slip back down, I rolled to my right and clutched the two tiny handholds, knowing that the water flow would make them hard to keep.

My left hand got nothing.

My right held taut but was almost yanked free by my own weight.

For a moment I hung crazily, my legs swinging above the chasm as the whitewater it held seemed to gnash like teeth. Then I initiated a roll, got my other hand rammed into an irregularity so slight that most human beings would not have been able to see it, and pulled myself up.

The ledge I pulled myself onto was only a few centimeters deep and far from a secure haven, given the rainfall intent on cleaning all foreign objects from the rocks. I nevertheless took a deep breath before continuing. It was my first real break since leaving the skimmer. This may have been as little as 10 percent of the job of infiltrating the count's home, but returning to the task too quickly would have been a good way of surrendering myself to the drainage channel and winding up a corpse in the ocean below, gift to whatever creatures this count and countess had arranged to inhabit it.

And, again: to hell with the super-wealthy, while I was at it.

I painfully got to my feet and examined the climb above me. The rockfall, actually of course not exactly that, but another engineered surface with a craggier surface that provided more opportunities for handholds, was only about twenty meters high and by all standards a beginner's climb. Of course, it would be a bitch to do it with injured legs, in freezing rain, only to sacrifice what shelter I now had from this insane wind.

The only route from here to anywhere else was, of course, through that bitch.

I said a few choice words and began my ascent.

* * *

5.

The spiders came for me in numbers when I was close to the top.

They were mechanoids about the size of my fist, each one a little sphere sprouting up to a dozen flexible, jointed tentacles ending in sharp points. I had been hearing the scratching, skittering noises for a few minutes now and had hoped that it came from some no-doubt-nasty but easily dealt-with form of vermin, like that legendary and possibly mythical homeworld creature known as the Norwegian rat; but keeping my eyes out did no good. The first sign that one had drawn close was a sharp pain in my right wrist, which was with the hand gripping a surface crack at the waist-altitude. I'd had my eyes on the little protrusion I was grabbing with my left, and I glanced down fast enough to see the little bastard withdraw the little sampling needle it had sunk into my flesh. The skin there tingled in a nasty manner that I associated with general anesthetic. The spider met my eyes with its own visual sensors, which had been designed for God knows what reason to look cute and appealing. They blinked.

I relinquished my grip on the crack and mashed the little bastard with a punch.

Then I felt another little sting in my left hand, the one above me, and I knew that if those shots were meant to paralyze me so I could be collected at the castle's leisure, I had a limited amount of time to get to the ridge.

The form of paralysis that began to affect my hands, as I raced upward, was a nasty one. Sensation failed before mobility. I could still grab things, and I could still manage a fairly firm grip, but the knowledge was only visual; my sense of touch could not confirm anything. Every grip I managed was at best a firm guess, and if there was any indication of disaster that would have been picked up by my fingers, I had no way of knowing it. I cannot say that I was still climbing. I was crawling, doing most of the work farther up my arms, and even those were beginning to feel increasingly disconnected, like strangers to me. I could not afford to fall, though, not when a tumble down these rocks would be multiple values of fatal, and so I willed myself the rest of the way, with I cannot even tell you how much ineptitude, until I could wedge myself into a flat area just below the rim, a place so close to the unprotected wind that I could have had hands capable of reducing the rock the powder and still been in danger of being carried away by a gust.

A third spider sank its needle into my left knee. When I looked down it was shaking its head slightly, like a diner smacking her lips in satisfaction. And now that leg had only minutes of life

and feeling left to it. I had no idea how bad this was going to get, as the drug circulated through my system, and as more of it was delivered by multiplying bots; but I might reach the point where cumulative paralysis started affecting vital functions, like my heart.

I still popped my head up, into the wind and rain, was immediately drenched, and then ducked my head, cursing. There were maybe one hundred meters between me and a smoother, elevated bridge leading directly to the castle's front gate. But of course if I attempted the distance I would not be traveling in a straight line. I would be navigating a maze of rock outcroppings, some no doubt as difficult to climb as the one where I'd landed, and others much worse, including quite a few obstacles I couldn't even guess at. In the absence of wind, I would have just traveled along the ridges as much as possible, but the premise of attempting that in this wind was exhausting just to think about; and of course I still had those bots to worry about.

Many, as it turned out. I estimated hundreds, gathered in rows on every elevated point between me and that bridge, each cocking their heads and reacting to my movements in ways that suggested a chatty conversation.

Oi! Look at her!

She's a bold one!

What does she think she's doing, out there on the jagged rocks?

I don't know! What do you think she's doing?

All I know is that we're supposed to immobilize every intruder.

But look, she's barely moving!

I don't care. She's got some attitude, she does. She killed Tommy!

This comic-opera flight of fantasy, fueled in equal parts by my personal tendency toward whimsy and likely the beginnings of delirium, ended when I spotted movement between myself and the largest concentration of genial little chatting bots and refocused. It was a closer crag, about half the distance, and about thirty little bots had just crested that ridge, an advance force marching in my direction. None of them seemed at all bothered by the rain or wind, and why would they be? This was the environment they were designed for,

Well, shit.

I had thought I was done with the attitude jets, never meant for sustained flight, but rather for course changes in free fall; they would never keep me aloft for more than a short hop, but a sort hop was all I needed. I still had my attitude jets, and there was enough juice left in them to attempt a short flight. I returned to my nav program, which helpfully informed me that given the powerful shifting winds, a successful flight between my current location and that bridge was another game of percentages that included significant odds of a headlong impact against another outcropping or solid wall. That, sad as it was to admit, represented a substantial improvement of getting there on my own, with or without those bots seeking to disable me. The way I felt right now—the fog spreading to my mind—I wasn't going to be able to contribute much in the way of volition. So I told the nav to wing it and not bother with keeping me informed on the odds.

Of the flight that followed, I have to tell you that the wind was not cooperative at all and that I don't remember much of it, except for the fleeting image of a cliffside covered with thousands of chattering little bots unhappy that I'd deprived them of their play, a bridge support looming in front of me, and a panicky diversion that culminated with me skimming/sliding painfully across a horizontal surface of rain-slick simulated cobblestone.

I think I lost a couple of teeth.

They would grow back soon, but until then the taste of copper was enough to piss me off.

Only a self-important rich bastard would not only live in this region of a planet that also had paradise habitats but also make people come to him.

The wind tried to peel me off and return me to open air. I had my gloves extrude sticky needles and pressed down until I felt sufficiently attached.

Then I passed out, more or less.

It was not strict unconsciousness, but that semi-sleeping state that ends thought without quite removing awareness or the knowledge of one's surroundings. If it ever became deeper I

was not aware of it, but there appeared to be a few time ellipses, separating the moments when I snapped to and something had changed about the light or the intensity of the rainfall. I had no way of knowing whether I'd missed seconds, or minutes, or hours, but the sting sites were all now tingling painfully, as sensation returned. My nanobots, surely, though there was also no way of knowing just how long they may have taken to counteract whatever coursed through my system.

I was, in any event, as sleepy there as I'd been on the smoothest sheets in any luxury hotel. I like pampering myself. After freefall and the bots, lying there in a howling rain qualified as pampering myself.

Eventually, I woke with a snotty nose and a gravelly chest and the sense that I was now awake enough to get back to moving.

The bridge I'd reached crossed over the craggy, nominally unpassable rock formations that made up most of the count's domain, presenting a straight path to the nonsensically gothic castle at the estate's center. It was not safe ground, as it was rain-slick and under constant assault by a powerful crosswind, constantly urging me toward a potentially deadly fall to my left. The vaulted door of the count's fortress, shielded by an overhang and flanked by immobile guards, stood maybe a hundred meters before me, and it was more testimony to the inhabitant's pretension that each one held what looked like a spear in deference to the manse's theme. They appeared in no hurry to venture into the storm to get me, or even to acknowledge my presence with shouted mockery. And why should they, really? The bots employed to keep the crags free of intruders were probably siblings to another order of mechanisms that would eventually come by and sweep this walkway, if I stayed much longer.

Standing would offer the storm more of my body's surface area and challenge the gusts to carry me off. So, to the hell with it, I had to crawl. I lay face down, face-screen to the cobblestones, feet and knees and gloves all maximizing contact with the bridge as I pulled myself forward, one grunted meter at a time.

More than once during that endless approach, I found myself contemplating just how much this environment seemed geared to reward prostration over the proudly upright. Anybody visiting the count had to approach in a position of absolute humility, like a worm approaching a god. Maybe this was deliberate. Maybe the countess's home was designed to deliver the god as gracious host, bathed in sunlight; maybe the count's version was designed to offer the alternate version of the divine, the terrifying fortress within which the blessed one sat, arms clutching the sides of his elevated throne.

Or maybe I was full of crap. Maybe the count just liked the heavy atmospherics. Either way, not one agonizing meter earned him any points with me. If this came down to a physical confrontation, I looked forward to beating the arrogance out of him.

This kept me going until I was sufficiently close to that arched door, three times my standing height, for the winds to let up a little. I rose off my belly, caught my breath, and rose to regard the two guards. They both wore a form of all-concealing armor that resembled the classical imagery of the homeworld's middle ages, without slavish fealty to that model; let us just say it was evocative. The golden face-plates, hiding any features there might have been, glittered with collected mist, leading me to the thought that standing out here, on the wrong side of shelter, in a posting that made more sense symbolically than it did in terms of practicality, could not have been considered a plum job.

My nanos had healed most of my damage, but I wasn't sure I was up to dueling them.

So I tried talking. I spoke in Mercantile. "Take me to Bastian."

One of the two guards, I couldn't tell which one, responded in a secondary diplomatic language known for its high level of formality. "No."

"Then open the door."

"It will be opened. Just not by us."

"What are you going to do? Ask me a riddle now?"

It would have been well within the character of the place to stymie all petitioners with a quick brainteaser, after first battering them to the borders of consciousness.

The guard said, “No. We are not people in armor. We are minor AI in statues attached to the communication system. Your actual escort will arrive in a moment.”

I felt silly. “Oh.”

Then the door behind them slid into the wall, revealing a giant.

* * *

6.

Look, I understand the thematic fealty to the premise of this place, of hiring a behemoth as the palace greeter, but there’s such a thing as going overboard.

This guy was three and a half meters tall. Things had been done to him to inflate him past the three meters that is these days the usual limit on human height, things that had caused additional distortions to his forehead, his face, his jaw. His skin had a golden, metallic sheen, and there was a lot of that sheen, because there was a lot of that skin. His only clothing covered his midsection, including abs that were craggier than the surrounding landscape, and seemed almost at scale.

I received no real impression of the entrance hall behind him, except that it was vast, that it was no protection from the surrounding cold, and that aside from the occasional burning torch it was so dark that it presented no actual contrast with the grim overcast of the exterior storm. It did not communicate warmth, even in this contrast. At least it was more honest than Arla’s equivalent.

He said, “I am Quarry.”

“You look like you could fill one.”

“You are Rage Laskin.”

“Yes. As I said when asking permission to land.”

“You are a professional assassin.”

I rolled my eyes. “Why does everybody call me that?”

“You kill people for money.”

“I take care of problems for money. It’s not the same thing.”

“If you intended stealth, you have failed. It is hard to hide the arrival of an assassin on a world with only two estates and a current average yearly visitation of less than five people. Your request for landing clearance, less than a day after meeting with the countess on Sunfire, does not leave many dots to connect.”

“It wouldn’t,” I replied. “But then I identified myself accurately, and let you know I was coming. These are not the actions of a woman who thinks she can get away with an assassination on this particular visit.”

Big people sometimes give the impression of being slow-witted, and when they hesitate, it is hard not to imagine the grinding of gears, the suffering sounds of ancient machinery struggling to initiate movement. I have learned the hard way that this can be a dangerous illusion.

Quarry said, “Any assault on the count’s person, any sabotage committed against the systems that sustain life at this estate, and any attempt to compromise the loyalties with his staff will be met with immediate response. It will not be pleasant or swift. The order has already been given that you are not to be harmed, but that you will be restrained, and also that in such a case you will certainly, absolutely be *kept*. Do you understand?”

“Consider me warned.”

He stepped aside and indicated with a swept arm that I was now officially invited to pass. I hesitated, measuring the indicated space, before advancing. It was a little like walking past some ancient pillar that stood on a base that could not be trusted to support it; the sense that with any prompt as weak as an inconvenient tremor, it would descend at speed and mash me into paste, was overwhelming.

Servants that size are hired specifically to give that impression, but in my life I had learned that there are times when it is appropriate to trust.

His arm descended to club me in the shoulder and drive me to the stone floor. Its speed established once that the misconception already mentioned of big people being slow and lumbering is a goddamned lie. I moved just enough for him to miss and then used that arm as part of

a ladder to his shoulders. In a second I was straddling his neck and holding a very sharp blade to his throat. I held it just tight enough to depress the skin, prior to puncture.

I kept my tone light. "How did I do?"

If he did anything at all, I would have had no alternative to killing him. But instead he showed restraint, and from deeper in the darkness of the front hall came the sound of something my services don't often elicit, polite applause.

They approached together, and by this I don't mean that they walked side by side, but that they walked in synch, with such precision that they might have had invisible rods linking every joint on one body to its equivalent in the other. Not nearly as tall as him—slender, yes, and so graceful that it hurt my eyes—they nevertheless struck me as more dangerous, and by the time they entered a less dim part of the room and revealed their faces, I knew why. They were clearly a cylinked pair, two people who had shed their separate identities in order to exist as one composite soul, an order of magnitude smarter and more resourceful than any sole human being could ever manage to be. I'd seen the kind in combat, once many years ago, and it had instilled in me a deep reluctance to enter any situation where I might have to fight one. I didn't think I could.

They were not identical. One was light-skinned and one was very dark, almost as dark as me. One was half a head shorter than the other. They were as beautiful as anybody I'd ever seen, moving with a grace that practically qualified them as liquid, hairless but for the matched crescents of silver stubble that, situated at the center of their foreheads, was the only indication of a hairline. Their eyes were dark, their shared smiles more like slivers of displayed teeth. Their jumpsuits were made of some super-black material so resistant to light that it was impossible to apply depth perception to their bodies, except in outline; the collars closed tight just below their respective jawlines. Their expressions reflected perfect understanding that they had succeeded in giving the desired impression, as a shared threat best avoided.

They were another link to the Alsource, who possess a total monopoly on the medtech that cylinks people.

Together, they said, "I am Meira."

I did not make the mistake of asking which one that referenced. It would be both their names, the name of the person who had been born in those two skins, when their separate personalities were forged into one.

I said, "I'm Rage."

"Yes. I know." Their shared voice appeared to come from some space between them. "An interesting name for someone who exudes such calm."

I said, "Are you so young you don't know that rage can be controlled?"

"No. I said, 'interesting,' not paradoxical. But from your response to Mr. Quarry here, it appears to be appropriate in any event. Even recovering from injury as you clearly are, you're like a coiled spring."

"He did force me to defend myself."

"Yes, and in making that sacrifice he helped us measure your speed and reflexes, reducing your odds of success at any personal combat with us by a conservative estimate of about a third. That and the exhaustion you must feel, after battling the elements, give me a significant advantage that I am not likely to relinquish even if you attempt to take me by surprise. I do not believe it worth the effort. Go about your business honestly, and I will pretend that we are friends. Do anything else, and either us or the automated defenses will devote the next few seconds after that to demonstrate that we are not."

I still had my blade to Quarry's neck. "Just how many times does your intake process require me to have this conversation?"

"We are done with all verbal warnings."

"All right, then." I released the giant and hopped down, landing light on my feet and still expecting an attempted strike from the behemoth or team action from Meira. I received neither. They parted, gesturing for me to walk between them, and I overcame my reluctance and obeyed, still dripping from the tempest. "When can I see him?"

“He’s eager to meet you.”

* * *

7.

It took us five minutes just to make our way out of the entrance hall, one of those chambers so large that the ceiling seemed obscured by a layer of clouds. There was enough detail in that distant sky, enough in the way rafters, latticework, for the shadows cast by the lights below to form a lattice of light and darkness, one that I pegged as accentuated by the canny placement of mirrored surfaces. Show business, I figured, in the same way that Arla’s fairytale palace was show business, an exercise in impressing the visitors that Bastian’s approach to hospitality seemed desperate to discourage. That, the false sentries, the giant, and this cylinked pair furthered the impression that he wanted any newcomers to think of him as a distant and unapproachable figure, too fearsome even for people capable of getting this far, which already made me suspect that sooner or later a fresh trap would be sprung.

That didn’t happen. This estate had already put me through enough hell as the price for allowing me to get this far.

They took me to a hidden door at the rear of the echoing entrance hall and from there to a series of passages so unadorned with atmosphere that they must have been the domain of servants alone. It was a longer walk than seemed sensible, and there were enough switchbacks along the way that we frequently seemed to be covering the same ground more than once. Conversation was minimal, though at one point I asked Meira if there was anything that would be helpful for me to know. They said, “He’s smarter than you’ll expect. But don’t expect charm.”

It wasn’t until we reached the count, multiple sub-levels down in a chamber that they called the Crypt, that I understood why.

If Arla’s choice to surround herself with paradise belied an actual lifestyle as rusty recluse, then Bastian’s choice to surround himself with a formidable castle of fear belied his own actual lifestyle as cosseted fetus. He existed as the sole occupant of a giant transparent cylinder, multiple stories high, filled to the brim with a liquid that while translucent was not precisely water. It was, incongruously, a light shade of pink, and visibly saturated with some gritty solution that rendered the man buoyant enough to float in a position ten meters off the reservoir floor. The liquid rendered his features foggy and distorted, though I could from some angles discern the handsome features of the glamorous, fairytale figure he’d been sold as, at the point when he’d publicly joined Arla’s life. He wore a slight frown and nothing else, though tubes entered him at every orifice but his eyes and at several points on his torso where orifices must have been made. His limbs drifted gently in the pink.

The four of us, Meira, Quarry, and myself, had entered the chamber at ground level, where I was allowed to look up in blinking disbelief. After a bit, I said, “This is ridiculous.”

Both Meira’s bodies nodded. “I agree.”

“Is he even conscious?”

“It’s difficult to define. He lives in the world he prefers. He only emerges for minor medical procedures that can’t be performed in utero. He does, however, remain in control of his business concerns, and all matters involving life in this residence, and can be communicated with.” They hesitated. “He is not bad to the people who work for him. It’s one reason we’re so protective.”

“Another, I suppose, would be that his death would leave you and everybody else who works here looking for a means to leave this planet in search of another employer.”

“Many of us would have to,” Meira said. “Others would prefer to live here, if we could first get permission to move the castle to a more pleasant location. Or to descend to some more hospitable region and build a home for ourselves. There’s no specific reason we can’t. The southern hemisphere does belong to him, after all, and he has made provisions for our ability to stay after his death. Until then, we honor our contracts and stay.”

“Here. On the worst part of the planet.”

“Not quite the worst,” Meira said. “Like all planets, it has its hellish regions, the ecological price for its paradises. But yes, one among the worst. He was quite adamant about this being his

home, and we who serve him must accept without comprehension his desire to live amid the fury and then spend his existence insulated from it, by stone and glass.”

We circled the cylinder once, examining the various machineries at its base that kept the liquid solution heated to the optimum temperature and salted to the optimum buoyancy, with a little mini-lecture about the engineered microorganisms that kept the solution clear of Bastian’s wastes. Meira went to so much more detail than they had to that I realized they were starved of conversation and happy to share these features of the life they had chosen, their fealty to a man who had gone to such trouble and expense to separate himself from the world, all in pursuit of a promised home that might or might not materialize. I let them go on, all the while wondering at equivalent length why two recluses this extreme would not just choose some less elaborate cage for themselves. No answer seemed forthcoming.

At length they led me to a doorway at the periphery of the cylinder room, which turned out to lead to another room very much like it, with a smaller and unoccupied cylinder, and at last I understood what I would have to do to communicate with the man. They took my clothes. They sprayed me with a chemical that smelled, distantly, of a little berry I’d enjoyed once, on the only planet where it grew. They then gave me twenty minutes of orientation, explaining that because I would not be staying in my own cylinder for long I would not need the network of tubes that kept Bastian healthy and fed, just waterproof patches over my eyes and mouth and nostrils and ears, all attached to microtubes which would keep a few sensors and other attachments. They promised me, with an unknown level of trustworthiness, that they would retrieve me if I ran into trouble, and they led me up a rolling ladder to the top of the cylinder, before lowering me in.

I expected a shock of cold, like jumping into a pool or lake. What I got instead was a brief burning sensation, as if the medium was boiling, followed immediately but a more neutral warmth that settled as the air I’d driven into the soup climbed up my bare skin, to the surface.

The illusion took several minutes to form, the bits and pieces of the world I knew gradually giving way to a scene from some harder, more sharp-edged purgatory.

I stood naked in a landscape as stark as the exterior of Bastian’s castle. The resemblance was slight. These rocks were all level and smooth on top, like a patio, the spaces between them a series of crevasses too narrow a careless human step. They extended as far as I could see, in every direction. The air was not quite transparent, but instead wispy with some foul-smelling smoke, as if a conflagration beyond knowing burned just out of sight.

One male figure sat cross-legged on one of the stones, eyes downcast. His face was in shadow so dark that I could not make out his features, though he remained clearly the man I had come here to see. He was not quite alone. Other naked figures, a small legion of them, all sat on their own stones, equidistant and also shrouded in darkness. Somewhere, among them, one was screaming. I could not tell whether it was a man or a woman or anything in between. But I got the impression that it was someone new, someone not reconciled to capture by this terrible place.

I wondered whether it was possible to back out now, instead of pursuing this closer to a fate like theirs; if a shouted plea from me would summon Meira and the others to pull me out, before my conference with the figure before me. The question had more to do with my own nature than with their mercy, and after a moment I knew that I had to go on. I am not one to leave questions unanswered.

So I approached the cross-legged figure and said, “Bastian.”

“Half of him,” he said. And then, “How do you like my hell?”

To the extent I was raised, and not simply allowed to develop, I was not raised to believe in that terrible, rumored place; but I did know the basics. “If it’s Hell, sir, you have chosen it for yourself.”

He made a sound that was not laughter, but what happens to that sound when all mirth is drained from it. “Maybe I have not chosen it as much as retreated to it, for lack of any other choice. You are Rage?”

“Yes.”

“An interesting name.”

“A long story.”

“And if you are like the others who came before you, you have come here to take away my capacity for joy.”

I shook my head. “I came here to find out if there was any point to even considering the assignment.”

“Why?”

“Because if you already feel no joy, the assignment was superfluous and there’s nothing else I need to do.”

“And in that case?”

“Then I would leave you alone.”

“And if you met me and concluded that I did have the capacity for joy?”

“Then I would have to make my decision, wouldn’t I?”

He grunted. “You’ve come a long way for someone who hasn’t even made up her mind.”

I had no idea whether the conveyed emotion was irritation, amusement, acknowledgment, or simply understanding. Maybe it was nothing but placeholder, encouraging me to keep talking. I ended up adopting that interpretation. “Sometimes I know that a job is worth doing. Sometimes I know that it’s nothing I would do even with a knife to my throat. And sometimes, I must know. In this case, I decided that I had to know.”

Another mirthless chuckle, and he looked up. His face came into the light. It was the same face he’d worn as a wealthy member of the corporate aristocracy, sculpted and handsome and a likely fantasy object for untold millions; but it was also colorless and empty and defeated, and not a look that preserved the appeal he’d once had. “Look around you, Rage. Do you think your assignment superfluous?”

“I think you’re depriving yourself for reasons I can’t even guess at.”

“I’m not capable. I had only a limited supply to spend in the first place, and I used it up in less than a lifetime. In only a few years, actually.”

They were the words of a malignant narcissist having himself a pity party, and yet I sensed in the personality vacuum before me that this was not the explanation. Neither was untreated mental illness, or depression. He felt rational, even accepting of his lot, and this like everything else on this stupid planet chilled me with its self-contained, venomous logic.

I said, “Then gather more.”

“I wish that were less complicated.”

“Nothing’s too complicated if it’s an alternative to this.”

“I agree. And so?”

I swept my arm, indicating all the shadowy figures with us. “Who are these others?”

“These others are prior assassins, sent here by Arla to take away what doesn’t exist. It felt appropriate to imprison them, for presuming to steal from me.”

“Will you do it to me?”

“My people have already indicated that you agreed to all security measures we required, and that your visit here is likely only research. You have just indicated the same. I can content myself by warning you off. But I have yet to make up my mind. Speaking different words or taking different actions, you could have ended up like one of these others; their bodies discarded, their minds recorded and projected into this medium I inhabit, to endure permanent damnation among the silent and immobile.”

I have to admit it; the prospect almost made me faint. “Does Arla know you do this?”

“She does.”

“She didn’t warn me.”

“She doesn’t care about you. She just wants to send you a message: that nothing has changed, that joy is impossible, that there is no room for deliverance from our shared misery.”

I said, “Has the message been received?”

“It is. And yet I have yet to decide what to do with you. Do you have any suggestions?”

“Just one.”

“Make it, then.”

I said, “Hire me.”

“To do what?”

“To spirit away her ability to feel joy.”

“She has already sacrificed that.”

“So it seems. And yet, sir: are you sure?”

I waited. I waited a long time. Clearly, I would be freed from this place only when, and I hated to think it but if, Meira had me pulled from the cylinder. But many long minutes passed without that happening, with no change in my surroundings but a certain lengthening of the shadows.

Then he said, “Have you met my cylinked pair, Meira?”

“Yes. They’re not my first.”

“You do know how the Alsource make them. They take two or more people who have volunteered for the alteration. The subjects undergo hundreds of micro-surgeries, many a day, some quite painful, to ensure that their two neural maps are linked, the two separate personalities merged into one in a manner that makes them one brand new individual with all the memories of the two prior ones. They are wonderments, but rare in this universe. The Alsource do not make many; maybe only a few hundred pairs exist, total. And one would think that a combined psyche that large could find room for contentment. But when I knew Meira in the outside world, they told me that they were thinking of finding a third, to add to their gestalt. I suspected then, and I suspect now, that their evolution began with the same conviction among each of their two original minds that they were missing something, and I perceive that it is something they still feel as a pair, the reason that they feel hunger for a third. This hollow feeling is, I believe, inherent in the human animal, however modified by artificial means. Do you understand me?”

“Yes. But I don’t understand why you’re telling me this.”

“I have always enjoyed my association with the Alsource. Always liked their skill at rewiring the human brain. The many ways they have, of altering human consciousness. Always wished it was something a human being could do for himself.”

“Bastian—”

“Arla felt that way too. She could buy anything but belief in her own status as complete person. It went poorly, in conjunction with her refusal to surrender part of her soul to another. It was, in the end, the key barrier between herself and happiness.”

“And you?”

“She,” he said, “has always been my barrier.”

We talked a bit longer. The shadows grew. The patches of darkness on his face moved like amoeba flowing together to form a larger organism. Behind him, it was the same, the shadows flowing to join with other shadows, the few places of relative light becoming indistinct, more white blobs than oases of relative detail. And then, just as I was certain that they were going to resolve into an inky totality that would just be darkness and nothing else, I had that moment of disconnect we’ve all known, whenever we suddenly reinterpret whatever we’ve been looking at and realize that it’s actually something else entirely: it was the real world asserting itself, upon my removal from the cylinder.

In this now-solid place, the two remaining lighter shapes became Meira, staring at me. Quarry stood behind me, holding me up with a pair of massive hands, and pinning my arms behind my back. I was upright enough and being held at a height just high enough for the wet bare feet to rest on the floor, though I was no means supporting my own weight, not yet. I appreciated his help and considered it kind. And for a few heartbeats I found this an oddly peaceful position to be in, not the most comfortable in the world but at least one that offered more in the way of hope than the self-made purgatory where I’d just been.

Then common sense intruded, and I was able to recognize my current position as one that many people who lead a dangerous life know well, that of a prisoner having arms held behind the back for the convenience of others about to administer a beating.

I said, "He hired me. He's said I can go."

Meira's two bodies nodded. "He has ordered us to allow it. I'm honor-bound to obey."

I was too shaky to say something smart-ass. "Yyeah?"

"But I'm also security here, and I want to ensure that you never come back."

She punched me square in the face.

* * *

8.

I have no particular reason to describe the beating that followed, except to say that it was very thorough. A full account would require many repetitions of the word *again*. Meira was very professional about it. Not for them the brutality conducted without plan that continues until its wielders are exhausted, and their target either dead or so close to it that the difference between one condition and the other is almost nonexistent. Meira let me know early on that she had no intention of breaking or killing me, just of instilling within me a permanent aversion to Bastian's half of the planet and so kept everything she did just within my own capacity to endure it, allowing me several periods of rest broken only by her own kind reminders that there would be only a little more, just a little.

It was not the worst beating I'd endured in my life. There had been two others, one experienced during my apprenticeship and one experienced on a job I still don't like to talk about. But those were worse, definitely worse, because the people at the other side of those fists and boots had not harbored any ambitions of my eventually walking away. They'd taken no particular cares at all. Meira kept such firm control of what she was doing that I have to call her a *maestro*, really; an artist. She took me right to the brink, and then she told me that it was nothing personal and had the nanos heal me. After which she served me a warm meal and said that if I ever came back it would be worse for me.

I wasn't broken to the level of subservience, but I still found myself thanking her.

After which she allowed me to call down the skimmer, loaded me aboard with some packed snacks for the trip, and wished me luck. "Arla can be vindictive," she said. "We'll see if you can survive her."

I flew from the southern hemisphere to the north, sleeping for much of the trip, and dreaming for too much of it. This is the thing about violence: even those who live with it daily need time to process it. A beating experienced while awake will be experienced, in a form freed of concrete laws, while asleep. Blood spilled years ago is spilled again, behind closed eyes, years from now. Flying back to Arla with fresh helplessness not far in my past, I relived many occasions where I'd needed to fight for my life. Waking, aware that this had now joined my unconscious palate and that I'd have to deal with it while facing anything the job obliged me to face in the future, I wanted nothing more than to turn the damn skimmer around and find some stealthier way into that ugly castle, that I could enjoy toppling Quarry, crippling the two halves of Meira, spilling the reservoir that contained Bastian and consigning that damned place to the sea.

It would have been fun. Oh, it would have been fun.

But I'd slept for almost as long as I needed to in order to eat up the trip, waking with only residual pain and no small reservoir of self-disgust.

Lush rain forest flew by below me.

I asked the Nav system just how long we had until arrival at Arla's, and it told me that we'd be docking at Sunfire in seventeen minutes.

I shook off about fourteen layers of foggy stupidity and activated my hyltex link with Justin.

He came on the line immediately, not frantic as a lesser assistant might have been, but wholly professional, betraying urgency only with measured efficiency. "Rage. Are you all right?"

"No," I said. "Are you?"

His voice went wary. "Should I not be?"

"The two of us together, we might not be. What have you been doing?"

"Asking questions. Getting what history I could. Touring Arla's part of the estate. It's like an amusement park, Rage. A hundred things to do, everything from elegant ballrooms to riding stables. It's like they're twenty minutes from a grand social event and all the guests all lost their

invitations. The servant quarter is still the only part I didn't find suffocating."

"Because it's alive," I said. "Because it's inhabited by people, human and otherwise. I suppose you've spent more time with this Hafa, by the way."

"I have. She's been a very instructive guide, to both the places and the politics."

"Do you like her?"

"Do I *like* her? You *know* I like her."

It was vivid reminder of just how young he was. "Have you slept with her?"

Warily: "I can't say it's off my list of options. Are you jealous?"

I almost laughed like a loon at that. Justin's a sweet boy, and we've had some fun together, but he is still a brother, not a lover. "No. Just unsurprised."

"Rage, what—"

"Has she elaborated on her reasons for leaving?"

"She's young. She feels stifled. She wants more."

"What has she said about the politics here? The conditions, for Arla's servants?"

"They're less than dystopian, considerably short of ideal. The staff have full power over their quarter of the estate, which is considerably more than some of them had on the shithole worlds they came from. Many were recruited from industrial hells or economic disaster areas of one sort or another and are happy enough here to consider Arla a benefactor. It's only when they enter into her areas that they have to act faceless, and it's the key drawback of their lives here: that they know Arla's at the center of all, miserable by preference. There's almost an Omelas quality to it, really, if you catch the reference."

I didn't, but that was typical. Like his recent allusion to the rich man left pining for a childhood toy, it was another of the fruits of his fascination for the stories and legends of the past, and I didn't have the time for annotation. "When we're done you should go find her and tell her we're going."

He frowned. "That soon? Not even a debriefing?"

"Not if I can help it. I'm going to try to come in fast. Get her if you can, but meet me at the dock if you can't."

He didn't waste time asking me for the whys. Instead he did what was necessary and broke the connection. I had a horrid moment wondering if I'd ever hear his voice again, but put it aside, because that kind of thought is never helpful in a crisis. It's just a worthless subroutine, that gathers more and more processing space to itself, when the mind needs to be fully engaged with the problem at hand.

It's known, in survival situations, as the *how-can-you-possibly-stay-so-calm-in-a-time-like-this* principle. It can't matter that the person you care about might be in danger, might be enduring Jujee-alone-knows what horror right now, or five minutes from now, before you can get there. If torture or death is on the menu right now, and you can't affect it, then worrying about what it's like is a waste of your energy. The only thing that matters is getting there, maximizing your approach and your plan of attack, and being ready to deploy it on your arrival.

In the meantime, fear is bullshit.

* * *

9.

Five minutes out, the Nav System received a message from Sunfire. The skimmer was not allowed to fly any closer under its own guidance. Failure to relinquish control to the locals amounted to agreeing to get blown out of the sky.

I would like to report that I shouted something like, "Try it, you bastards," set the controls to manual, and with brilliant flying skills evaded a series of airbursts and a swarm of local drones, to fly low over the green fields of Sunfire, scoop up Justin and Hafa, and brilliantly evade all pursuit, all the way back to orbit.

None of that would happen, of course, in part because I am not that good, and the defenses of Sunfire were not that bad, and because the transport that actually belonged to me, the one that had brought us to Vireczin, the one with the extra bluegel crypt that Hafa wanted to occupy, the one that represented safety, was docked at an orbital facility that belonged to the count

and countess. Pursuit, if it came to that, would have already beaten us up there. So no such swashbuckling resolution was possible. The best I could hope for was not being stopped, and the greatest chance I had of that was getting out before someone thought of giving the order.

So I cancelled my approach and withdrew, circling their perimeter as I tried to make up my mind. Only after a few minutes did I attempt another go, receiving the warning again. I apologized and circled some more, then attempted another approach.

This time I got airbursts. They shook me up and made it clear that they had progressed to full willingness to blow me out of the sky.

Their precision was depressing.

They took control, guided me in to the same platform where we'd landed yesterday, and met me with a reception committee about three times larger than the one that had greeted us yesterday, these taller and bulkier and possessed of arms that were small only in that they were portable; they were still capable of reducing me to atoms. I spotted Justin and Hafa, both under guard, in the phalanx, and from this found more sad confirmation of the deterioration in our status among the locals. It appeared to be recent, and it appeared to be extreme.

I stepped out and approached the chief hooded figure, a creature of indeterminate but otherwise apparently humanoid physiognomy who nevertheless pushed the boundaries of a human being's size. "Hello."

His voice was like an earthquake in a bottle. "Rage Larkin, you're under arrest."

"I suspected as much. What, exactly, does that entail?"

"You will be brought to the countess for interrogation."

"I refuse your arrest," I said, "and furthermore demand to be escorted to the countess for debriefing."

I've earlier referenced the useful cliché about very large people being very slow of mind. It wasn't true for the count's bodyguard Quarry. It was true of this guy. It took him five full seconds to calculate the difference between his characterization of the moment and my own, and decide whether it was worth his trouble to treat it as matter for dispute. I triangulated just how much trouble I was, or wasn't, in, by the absence of any blow that clubbed me to my knees.

Ultimately, he said, "Are you trying to be funny?"

"I'm not a comedian. I don't care whether you laugh or not. But we both want the same next thing: for me to stand before the countess. In the absence of any resistance, you might as well be polite. I'll cooperate."

There was another lengthy pause. Maybe he consulted his superiors in that moment and maybe he didn't. But after that time, he stepped aside and allowed me to pass him, at which point two rows of hooded behemoths fell in on both sides of me.

Justin was allowed to join me. He bore a fresh bruise on his cheek and a sweaty look that testified to an energetic chase sometime in the recent past. I looked past him and saw the woman Hafa, also looking like she'd just been through hell; she was flanked by two of the hooded figures and did not appear eager to try to break free of them. She looked more resigned than fearful but looked away when I tried to meet her eyes.

He said, "What did you do?"

"I returned."

"Were you not supposed to?"

"Not when returning is inherently suspect. Either way, there's a difference between what the countess expected and what she can acknowledge expecting. Pay attention."

He shut up, and there he did exactly what he was supposed to, because the phrase *Pay Attention* was an established code between us, functioning as a warning that there was more going on here than I had the time or privacy to explain to him, and that we would both be much better off if he just shut up. He understood. He may be a trusted ally, and he may be damned useful in the field, but *shut up* covers more ground than most people imagine; and the ability to comply is a skill that's been mastered by far fewer people than would count it among their areas of expertise.

The sky was blue, and the sunlight was glorious, and we paraded past rich gardens of such

variety that even to be in their proximity was to glory in the versatility of life in this universe and to have that thought underlined by the little colorful blurs that were the local curated fauna, flying among us without fear. It could have been beautiful. I suppose it was beautiful. Garden spots are not forbidden to humanity's worst.

But Justin did what he was supposed to do and shut up.

And it was in silence that we marched into the tunnel that led to the estate underground, and so it went until we were delivered into the company of the countess.

* * *

10.

We returned to the same black space without walls, the same old woman without warmth, the same sanctum divorced from feeling beneath the estate grounds meant to communicate paradise. The other day, she'd been a dignified matron; today, her anger was palpable, the churning surface of an ocean that threatened to burst free and wash us all away at any moment.

Ghuvan was here, looking stiff and formal, and so was the pet man, sitting directly on the floor in a manner that underlined his apparent aversion to furniture, his little loincloth as strategically placed as before. They were both positioned as part of an equilateral triangle that featured Arla as the vertex aimed at us.

Arla said, "I hired you to do a job."

I glanced at Justin and Hafa, standing together at the distance dictated by her guards, their shared silence expressing entirely different feeling. Justin was weighing everything he saw, trying to get back to whatever epiphany I'd already arrived at; Hafa was staring at the floor at her feet and trembling as if this might not be enough deference to save her from being eaten alive. I had only spoken a few sentences with her and at the time had gotten no real impression beyond that of youth and vitality and a hunger for new experiences; the fear seemed new, and from the sight alone I would not have been able to tell whether it was genuine or performance, though I secretly happened to believe the latter.

"I said: I hired you to do a job."

I took my time turning back to the old woman.

I said, "I told you I was not an assassin, but a consultant—that I find solutions to problems, and that I use my own judgment before deciding what to do. That includes taking no action at all, countess. It is my judgment that doing nothing is the most efficient solution to the problem, for both parties."

"I expected a report, at least. You tried to leave without giving one."

"In the first place, I never took the assignment. In the second, the mission turned out to be irrelevant. The count is already as incapable of joy as you are."

"He is not happy. That is not the same thing."

"In most cases, it would not be. But the man I saw—the man whose soul I saw, for lack of a better phrase—has no intention of ever leaving the hell he's built for himself. He has locked himself in. He's not going to leave, not unless he changes so much that he becomes, effectively, a different person. That is not impossible, but I see little chance of that happening. He is committed. So the mission becomes superfluous."

Her grimace tightened. "You have accepted half your fee."

"I accepted what it cost to bring me here. The terms were that I took that on arrival and the rest upon agreeing to take the job. By our contract I kept the first half if I decided I could not help you. I have decided that I cannot."

"You. Have. Defrauded. Me."

"You could have paid me to turn a blue sky blue, or to paint the colors of the spectrum the same shades they always have been. Those are missions already accomplished. So is this one. If my mission really was what you say it was, then you have no reason for dissatisfaction. If it's something else, specify what remains to be done. Otherwise let me go."

"How do I know that he didn't outbid me? Made me your target instead of him?"

I rolled my eyes. "If the mission from him is to kill you, I refuse. I leave, never come back, and never represent a possible danger again. If the mission is to render you incapable of happiness,

then I judge that mission also superfluous, and again refuse the second half of my payment. You can track my transport and confirm that it leaves your system, that it returns to mine, and that I get to return to my old life. And again it's over with. No reason to interfere except for paranoia or malice."

She had built to explosive fury: "*Did you make a deal with him?*"

"Yes. I did, and it included the reciprocal assignment, to target your capacity for happiness, the way you targeted his. Saying yes was the most efficient way to escape imprisonment, and it came with all the same spoken conditions, in specific the one that I would take only that action that struck me as optimal. As it happens, I came to the same conclusion with you that I did with him. And so there is nothing else I need to do."

"Just to say yes to him was betraying me."

I rolled my eyes. "I only said that I'd get back to him. Everything that has happened since you and I last parted fits under the category of research, and what my research establishes is that you would have been perfectly content to see me dead or imprisoned. All my failure would have meant is that you would then send another—and another, and another—until finally one came back, under conditions that would not require you to indulge your reputation for vindictiveness. I believe I've met all those conditions."

"You do."

"Yes. I understand the actual terms of our contract."

A businesswoman as savvy as she was would not have reached her station without developing an effective mask, to hide all her cards during tough negotiations. Maybe one person in a hundred would have seen that mask slip now, would have known that she had, at bare minimum, realized that I'd seen through her. Justin would, of course, be one of them, but I could not afford a glance to confirm it.

She said: "What do you want?"

"No further contact with you."

She stared at me for almost two full minutes, and then she glanced at the pet man, who nodded back. And at Ghuvan, who nodded back. Entire worlds of meaning passed between the three of them, with those fleeting looks, and anybody with the key I had would have been able to write a full transcript. But then she glanced back at me, and she said,

"You do know that my reach extends far beyond this world. If you betray me, I will see to it that you suffer for that decision."

"I assumed as much."

Another long, penetrating look, and for a minute or so I feared that I had miscalculated, that all I'd done putting the full weight of my understanding on the table was give her a reason to murder me and try again. But then the tension went out of her shoulders, all at once, and she said,

"Go."

* * *

11.

The size of the escort back to our transport was no smaller than it had been when they'd wanted to arrest me; it was, if anything, larger, because this time Ghuvan and the pet man were among them. It was clearly a matter of some internal importance that we be seen off, and I had no problem with that, not as long as we were off-world by the end of it. Of that departure I say only that I took special notice when Hafa bid farewell to Ghuvan. They did not hug, but they took each other's hands and regarded one another with complicated silence before he released her, and she turned her back on the palace of the countess to board.

Ghuvan insisted on a farewell to me as well, and what he said was lost and contemplative.

"You know, I have spent my career working for the obscenely wealthy. I live with them, and so I enjoy all the luxuries they do. In actual net worth, I am poor. But I am content to not be one of them. Having seen what I've seen, with others before her, I am more content than I can tell you."

I did not reply. What was there to say?

The pet man's nod toward me was equally complicated but unpolluted by any emotions deeper than placidity, and I was sufficiently irritated by the events of the last few days that for an instant I envied him, even while knowing that I would never do to myself what he had done to himself. A very wise man had once told me that the secret to contentment was simplicity, and if that's so I will never know contentment, because I prefer to be complicated.

Departing Vireczin involved the same tedium as departing any other civilized planet. We flew to the base of the space elevator. We turned the skimmer in to the crew there. We rode up to the orbital anchor point, and we reclaimed our docked transport. This all took well over a day, and of it I can say only that I spent much of it watching Hafa be abundantly happy, a state of mind that rebounded in Justin's favor. Over that day in the elevator and the subsequent bureaucratic nonsense involved in reclaiming our transport, there were a number of times when I turned some corner or another and saw the two of them sitting together, discovering each other, and delighting in the discovery.

It remained palpable as we left the planet behind and she stood at the viewscreen and watched for the several minutes for the paradise world Vireczin to shrink from the dominant object in our sky, to a pinprick of light no longer possible to distinguish from all the others. Throughout, she glowed much brighter than it did.

I received two more messages from the planet, wrapping up my time there, and upon reading them reflected that the universe is a much stranger place than we know, or could know.

But over by the view, my charges were still exulting in their fresh infatuation with one another.

Justin said, "Happy?"

She took a deep breath. "More than I expected to be, really."

"Why?"

"I was happy there, Justin. I had a life. Friends. Lovers. But I also knew that I was suffocating. I knew that there was a universe beyond that servant's quarter, and I knew that I wanted to see it again. I don't know if I'll now have someone to see it with, but I hope so; either way, I know that I now have a chance at freedom that I'd never have had there." She kissed him lightly. "Thank you. Thank both of you."

I felt a sudden weariness that went beyond the usual letdown after completing an assignment, that had more to do with the part of the job I've always hated, the knowledge that the injustices that create need for my services would continue, in one form or another, long after I'd left. "Hafa."

She turned to me. "Yes?"

"I'm also in a hurry to get out of this solar system. Go with Justin so he can get you situated. We'll be right after you."

She was a little surprised by my peremptory command, but understood that she was still only a passenger here and that it was her duty to obey. "All right," she said and then surprised me with a full-on hug, fierce with the relief of a successful escape. "Thank you."

I returned the hug. What else could I do?

Justin took her to the crypts, and after enough time to do all the arcane things that needed to be done to secure someone in the bluegel that makes survival in interstellar jumps possible, returned, looking troubled. He had been seeing, but had been unable to identify, something troubling in my demeanor since before our departure from the planetary surface and had respected my privacy during our ascent, but had been unable to miss the significance of me putting Hafa in the gel first and not getting ready for my own suspension, something I have historically done as soon as our own course was set.

The delay meant that he and I needed to have a conversation. And if it had to be done without Hafa, it could not be good.

He sat down beside me, his landing heavier than his weight could account for. "What?"

I asked him, "Do you love her?"

The question stunned him. "We haven't known each other long enough. Right now, I just *like* her. Isn't that enough?"

“Do you think it could become love?”

“It’s a bit early, I think. Something to explore. But why are you asking?”

It was one of the only times in the years we’d been traveling together, never once sleeping together, that he had looked at me with such hostility in his eyes. It was so much unlike him that it broke my heart a little, and what broke my heart even more was the knowledge that I might now have to hurt him enough to lose him as a friend.

I placed a hand on his knee. “You don’t know her. You just know what she’s been showing you, like an expert, over the past couple of days. She’s been doing everything she could, to interest you and keep you interested, and that means you don’t know who she is; you don’t know what she’s really like. You only know that she’s been as ingratiating as possible with the guy who could be responsible for getting her off a world, and out of a life, she was desperate to leave.”

He stiffened, obviously so much farther gone than he had admitted even to himself that these words hurt. “I guess I’ll find out for sure, when we get where we’re going. There’ll be no pressure, then.”

“I’m sorry. But for your own good you’ll have to hear the rest of it now. Get us a couple of drinks and I’ll tell you all about it.”

We don’t use intoxicants along on our professional trips, but we do keep some packed with the transport supplies, for those intra-system trips when suspension makes no sense, and we have nothing to do to fill the hours but look at each other.

He came back with two small shot glasses, put one in front of me and another in front of him, and then he sat back, not sullen, but unhappy.

I said, “It’s not her fault. It’s Arla’s.”

“What does she have to do with this?”

I averted my eyes, aware that this would be clumsy, and that at the beginning, at least, I’d only be feeling my way.

I said, “A long time ago, rich enough to buy anything else, she refused to look outside herself for the answers to her problems. Instead, she tried to be clever, to treat love and happiness as artifacts that be bought. Like the rich man in that old Earth legend you mentioned. See? I paid attention.

“She probably really was the genius behind her own empire. I don’t think it matters whether she was or not. She either came up with those innovations, or persuaded the AIsorce to market them with her as front-woman, taking the proceeds. It doesn’t matter. If she was the original genius, what happened was more tragic. If she wasn’t, then at bare minimum, the AIsorce saw profit—or at least an interesting experiment—in allowing her to front the enterprise, and it was still tragic.

“What matters is that, ultimately, she wanted what most people want: love, acceptance, a family to go home to at the end of the day. And from the stories we’ve been told, that failed her, as it fails so many. All her relationships fell apart. She could get love for a little while, but she couldn’t make it stick. Her status prevented it. Or maybe some already broken part in her own nature, some deficiency; or maybe just bad luck. Who knows?

“Some people who have this problem let it destroy them. Some give up trying. Others just keep trying and more often than not keep on making the same mistake. A few, a very few, search themselves for the mistake they’re making.

“Arla had the disadvantage of being insanely wealthy and thus usually able to buy anything she wanted.

“When we were together, Bastian called special attention to something I already knew about, the AIsorce talent for rewiring the human mind. Of course, what he used as example was the construction of cylinked pairs, the trick that can fuse two separate minds into one combined personality.

“For a little bit, I wondered why he would make such a big deal about that, when I was clearly already familiar with it, if from nowhere else than from Meira, the pair he had in his employ.

“But then we spoke a little more, and he explained. It turned out that he was just orienting me, for the real explanation. What happened to begin the great doomed Arla-Bastian love affair, way back when, was a similar but entirely different trick, one that would appeal only to a

malignant narcissist or someone who love has irrevocably failed.

“Instead of turning two minds into one, slicing one personality in half to make it two.”

I waited for him to get it.

He got it, blinking. “Bastian?”

I nodded. “In theory it’s fairly simple. Cloning exists; genetic manipulation exists. And growing a single human organism is a lot easier, in terms of scale, than making a world. Even without technological assistance, there are a lot of paired human beings who can do it without even intending to.

“Making a customized organism is not much harder. All the parties responsible had to do, physically, was produce a body that indulged all of Arla’s aesthetic standards for beauty. The real challenge was then imbuing it with a personality that was her perfect complement, one she could love without reservation. And instead of trusting that quality to luck, as the vast majority of human beings must, she had what she hoped would inevitably be the perfect complementary relationship, two people who were *actually* two sides of the same coin, *designed* for her.

“Giving a little of herself, to make this possible, having those pieces installed in him, making herself less but making the intended pairing more; creating as lovers a more vulnerable, more open version of herself and a new person who would be her perfect complement, was the kind of thing someone would only do if she saw no other option: but it is what she did, and what we saw down below.”

He shook his head. “That’s crazy.”

“I agree with you. But it’s not just crazy. It’s also stupid. You don’t need a degree in human psychology to know that nobody’s completely at home in their own skull. That’s not a bug, but a feature. I said this to Arla herself, the other day. Everyone’s broken; we just do the best we can with the pieces we have.

“But she was rich. She was also shut off. She had had her affairs, she had her flings, but as someone who ruled untold riches, she had never known love with an equal. And there was no one she could trust. Why not take from her own wetware a mind that was made up of bits and pieces of herself, clearly a different person, but absolutely her other half?”

“I don’t know. Maybe this was a trick her friends in the AIsorce could have pulled off. Only, as the pet man came out and told us, she cut corners. She didn’t go to them. She picked some inferior competitor. I don’t know who. And that agency made mistakes that the AIsorce would not have made.

“She did not get a partner who made her complete. Instead, she got reduced to something less than complete herself, holding on to some lopsided union with an incomplete version of herself who was also not a perfect complement.

“They were happy for a little bit, but in the end their interior architectures crumbled, they both felt the void within themselves, and they got to the point where they could no longer live as what they were. Their relationship broke, and because they were now so shoddily built they had no internal architecture to keep them from collapsing.

“And so they ended up down there in Vireczin, two fragmentary people on opposite sides of a gulf they could not bridge, bearing complementary wounds: her bearing all the anger, and him bearing all the guilt.”

Justin had forgotten all about Hafa, for now. He was too caught up in the size of the catastrophe, the extent of the damage done.

It was, I realized while he still grasped for words, an old premise given a new dimension. Self-mutilation, with hyphen, meant any damage done to the body; this new version, self mutilation without hyphen, meant any damage done to the soul. She had mutilated her self, literally. And what now lived on Vireczin was what was left.

He said, “They still had the AIsorce as allies. They could have asked help from them.”

“They could have,” I agreed. “But you fail to take into full account the impulse among broken people to live in misery out of spite. Arla, incapable of joy, hated her other half so much she needed him to be just as incapable of joy. And she needed to stay broken herself, to justify it.

“Hers became the life of someone who stays in a burning building because she wants to pun-

ish someone who would be upset to see her burn.

“And so this went on for a long time, Arla going just mad enough to finance all these assaults on his castle, by people tasked with making sure that he remained broken.

“And then. One day. She came up with another idea.

“She could never allow herself to be fixed, but she could ask the Alsource to make a being who was a complete, idealized version of herself. One who could feel joy, who could go live a life she could not.”

“She had Hafa—get that name? ‘Half-a’—engineered to live the happy life she cannot.”

I saw it land on him. It landed hard. He took his drink. Then he took my cup and drank it too. He put it down, glanced back in the direction of the cabinet bearing the bottle he had taken them from, and sat there looking like a man who’d had the guts ripped out of him. I was desperately sorry that I had to do it to him, but I knew from the sight that he would survive it, that he would move on, because he was whole inside, and not a hollow misshapen shell.

I said, “Are you okay?”

“No,” he said, looking like he needed another drink. “But you can finish it.”

I went on: “Arla took satisfaction in the prospect of Hafa escaping this terrible situation, moving on to a full existence somewhere else, and being happy as long as Bastian continued to live in eternal misery.

“Of course, she had to continue making sure Bastian didn’t make any progress, and so she continued to finance assaults on him, just to make sure he was still broken. And when Sunfire had a visitor, it was an opportunity to get Hafa out, to her mind hiding what was symbolically Arla’s own escape in the routine occurrence of a staff member deciding to seek her fortunes somewhere else.

He said, “You wouldn’t have been able to do that, if you’d been killed.”

“No. But you could have. You were already being set up to do it. You were barely there at all before Ghurvan arranged the introduction.”

Justin said, “But why me in particular?”

I wanted to say, *Why not you? You’re terrific.* But the circumstances called for more brutality.

“I set the stage myself, without meaning to, by representing you to them as an assistant of no particular importance. That established you as available. If they didn’t already have you in mind, that put you on their map then.

“It wasn’t that exacting a map, I’m afraid. Arla’s obsessive. She’s been smuggling out Hafas all along. Maybe they weren’t all named Hafa. Maybe some looked quite different. Maybe some of them acted quite different. But they were all versions of her, with the capacity to feel joy reconstructed. She’s been growing them, one after another. It’s supposed to be a secret from Bastian, but he’s always known. Even without his spies—and he has plenty—he still knows the way she thinks, has always been aware of it, even though he cannot admit it, except to the occasional visitors like me who he trusts to get them out.”

He said, “Does Hafa know what she is?”

“I have no idea. She may be no more than two years old and unaware of her own nature, with every memory before that point implanted. Or she may be no more than two years old, and a de facto child fully aware of her own artificial nature. I’d rather not know, myself.

“But I do know this, Justin: at *best*, even if she’s everything she was intended to be, she’s still only an imperfect copy of an already broken woman. She’s had the empty places patched up, and that might be fine, but we’re left with the knowledge that she was built out of Arla’s hunger for love, and therefore built to feel love and inspire love. She’s a distorted image of what a prospective lover would want. And you might very well decide that this is something you have no problem with.

“Who knows? Maybe she’s perfect, and you’ve met your soulmate. She wouldn’t be alone in being made up of bits and pieces. We all are, after all. Our parents, our early experiences. Our natures.

“But there comes the other complication: how badly the engineering of a perfect match went for Arla. It may very well be that what you’re looking at, with Hafa, is the seed of another

imminent disaster, just as heartbreaking, for anyone she decides she wants. There's no way to tell.

"Maybe she's wonderful and maybe she's not.

"But you're my friend, and at bare minimum I'm sure that you need to know."

He sat for a bit, digesting that, and then he said, "Is that what we are, Rage? Friends?"

It hurt that he would need to ask, as it was meant to.

"Of course."

He digested that a bit, picked up the empty shot glasses, and said, "I believe you."

I listened as he went to the basin, cleaned the cups, and returned them to storage; and also as he went to the crypt room and auto-prepared himself for hibernation. If you have ever listened to somebody do that, you know that you can follow the whole process just from the sounds. You can hear the various tasks being performed, the various precautions being taken, the various monitors being set and the various attachments being applied, all before the sound of the lid coming down. It takes a bit, even if you're like Justin and have it down to a science. It seems to take longer when it functions as a full rebuke to the person left in the next chamber.

Soon, I heard only the silence before my own sleep, and was aware that I had no idea what, if anything, Justin would say to me when we arrived home and the time came for decisions. Even if I could stay awake all the way home, I would still have no idea. He was probably the person I knew best in all the universe, and the knowledge would not arrive until he declared it by doing whatever his heart, and his conscience, told him to do.

Maybe he'd just understand that I had no choice but to tell him. Maybe he'd never forgive me for telling him. Maybe he'd take it out on Hafa. And maybe he'd take it out on me. These were all possibilities on the other side of the line.

In a few minutes, I'd begin my own bluegel process and end it closing my eyes until the answer was there to be had.

But until then, I took another look at the final messages that had come from Vireczin. They were documentation that this had been a lucrative trip, indeed. Full payment from Arla, a concession that I'd fulfilled my contract by ensuring that Bastian remained joyless even as her own last stabs at joy fled to a future where that joy remained possible: a manifestation of the hate she still had for him, and always would. And also full payment from Bastian, concession that I'd also fulfilled the terms of my contract.

It was true, what I'd told Arla. I'd promised to take away her joy.

But I'd also promised to take care of it.