

The Savannah Problem

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This is the hard truth Draiken must take to his heart.

He has only minutes to live.

He is about to die violently.

He is forced to accept that, not fear it, and yet keep moving toward it, ignoring his minimal chances of survival.

That is the only way to get past it.

If he does die, he has chosen an appropriate tomb. The space habitat known as Piithkarath was originally constructed decades ago for use by Niriirgaans, a minor, slightly built species best known for sharing a distant ancestor with the much more common and much more politically powerful Riirgaans. Most of the cultural and biological differences between the two races are of only academic interest right now, or ever, as the much-less prosperous Niriirgaans surrendered this facility to their human creditors a couple of decades ago. They have not done well, as a civilization, since—a tragedy that can be explored at another time. But the one distinction of life-and-death importance today remains: the Niriirgaans are downright emaciated by most human standards. They are stick-figures, who might have been able to pass through these cramped spaces side by side. A human being of average width has only a few centimeters of clearance at each shoulder and even less at the corridor junction points.

Human beings have been gradually replacing sections of Piithkarath ever since. It now comfortably houses more than two million of them, mostly in the refitted and expanded areas. It is an industrial hub, one of the key manufacturing centers of this solar system. Almost all of the remaining original corridors have been closed off, for safety reasons. Some of the more agile residents, like Draiken’s quarry, still use them, sometimes to smuggle illegal substances, sometimes just to move about without being seen in public, and sometimes, as in this case, because

they have the instincts of rats.

This is one of those original corridors. The walls and low ceiling hem Draiken and his quarry in, as surely as any cage.

If Draiken does die, as seems almost certain, then the width of this place will render it a most appropriate coffin.

It is above all things a spectacularly unpromising place for a knife fight.

Draiken has been following the target for half a kilometer through this passage, never more or less than twenty meters behind him. He has made no effort to escape notice. It would not be possible. His footfalls on the corrugated metal floor, though light and graceful, are still as amplified as any sound carried through a hollow tube. Nobody, not even the most oblivious civilian, could possibly miss his presence. But it might be enough in context for his actions to be ambiguous, to be possible to interpret as benign, to potentially be just some stranger heading in the same direction, on a route with no turnoffs.

His trained eye can still see the heightened alert in his target's stride.

It is a look of a man preparing to whirl and kill his tail.

The target, a man named Jathyx, does what Draiken would be doing himself in a situation like this: assuming the worst, putting off aggressive defense as long as possible, recalculating the form that defense will take at the rate of once or twice with every step. Without ever doing anything as obvious as turning around to grab a look, he is constantly taking Draiken's measure, calculating his distance, his gait, his likely threat level, whether it will be best to strike high or strike low, whether he should go for a killing blow or leave enough alive to question. All while deciding whether it will come to that, presuming more and more, as the slow-motion chase goes on, that it must.

He must sense that the confrontation can be no more than a minute off.

Draiken must take him on not far from a certain advantageous position, rapidly approaching. He can choose to do it a little early or a little late, but the chances of apprehension increase the further his remove from the optimum position.

Increasing his speed—but only by about a third; success was still best served by subtlety—he reflected not for the first time during this tail the key reason why he's chosen to confront Jathyx in this narrow space. The man is lethal with a blade, but advance intelligence has it that his most terrifying trick has always been deftly darting past his opponents, and in that moment of crippling blindness striking the death blow from behind. Many enemies have felt that last stab of agony in the small of their backs, still wondering where the son of a bitch got off to. At this particular trick, Jathyx is unparalleled, such a genius at the move that Draiken would not stand a chance. In face-to-face confrontations, he's merely one of the best: a key distinction that increases Draiken's chance of surviving the next few minutes from None to Not Likely.

Draiken gains five paces and feels the increased proximity as a sudden eruption of tension, a closer kiss from the abyss.

Five more and Jathyx now clearly knows that the moment is nigh, that he will have to turn and strike, not too soon as that would surrender the advantage, not too late as that would be suicide, but at the precise moment, as clearly defined as a heartbeat: the unknown pursuer's last heartbeat.

For Jathyx, choosing the moment will not be difficult. Really, the circumstances could not possibly be more perfect. The approaching footfalls will be telling him everything he needs to know, as surely as echolocation.

Five more paces.

More.

Draiken is now a mere ten feet behind his prey, slowing down, trying to match his stride with the target's. It won't confuse Jathyx by more than an arm's length, if that, but that much can be vital when dealing with a figure whose very reach is a radius of immediate death. Draiken is at this moment unsure that it will be enough, and he is aware that if it isn't, it might very well spell the end of his own life, without closure on the quest that has consumed his

last years. He cannot allow this to trouble him. Some of his associates long dead have made the mistake of thinking that the trick is to not care. It is why they're now dead. The trick is to care but to forbid caring from influencing him, to accept death as the almost certain outcome and then try to change it.

So if he dies he dies.

Now arrange living.

At the point when Draiken reaches the device strapped to his belt, he is so close that odds are fifty-fifty whether he might survive to press his thumb against the touch pad.

It is a near thing. Jathyx is already whirling, bringing up his weapon at the same moment.

The high-pitched shriek blaring from the micro-speakers affixed to Draiken's chest, shoulders, and forearms is, like the footfalls that came before it, magnified by the cramped spaces. It's agony for Draiken, who's practiced with it and who was prepared for it, and it must be even worse for Jathyx, for whom it must come as complete shock. It would scare the average human being out of his skin, and take almost everybody out of the fight completely.

It merely throws off Jathyx's upswing, just enough that Draiken, bringing his arm down to bat the jab aside, does not completely embarrass himself in the attempt.

He does succeed in preventing the blade tip from entering his belly—which it would have, despite the light armor he's wearing.

He does not prevent the cutting edge from slicing open his forearm before he seizes hold of his opponent's wrist; a grip that almost but not quite fails to prevent that jab from being redirected. He only suffers another grazing slash across his side.

He has been wounded twice in two seconds.

The sonic blare cuts off. It was only designed to last a second or so. Any more than that and what advantage of surprise it had provided would have been lost, as it handicapped both combatants equally. It would also attract Piithkarath authorities, draw them to investigate the noise, and even if they're only likely to arrive long after the fight is decided, render it moot.

Draiken doesn't mind creating a disturbance. He does mind it attracting trouble.

Jathyx's expression betrays no satisfaction at having drawn both first and second blood, merely more calculation. It is a face made for calculation: flinty eyes, sharp cheekbones, a focus on killing that is not that of a bully, but that of a butcher. He knows he is still in for a fight.

Draiken provides him with one, throwing his weight into it, slamming the man's arm against the wall, twisting just enough to render it painful, knowing even as he does that it is not enough. The blade remains in hand. It is all cutting edge, ridged to prevent wounds from closing up quickly, and heated just enough to burn, without the potential benefits of cauterizing. It is made to slip in and out, without lodging in or being much deflected by bone. It has likely killed many.

Its master will not drop it just because his wrist is slammed against a wall. Draiken can do it a hundred times. It won't matter. It is an extension of his arm, one that defines him, and one that—for all he knows—presents his only chance of survival against this stranger he can only consider an assassin.

Besides, he can do the math as well as Draiken can. With Draiken's blood now flowing freely down his arm and onto the other man's, what grip Draiken has on Jathyx's stabbing hand is now being rapidly lubricated by one of the most slippery substances extant. It won't be long, seconds, before it interferes with Draiken's hold. At which point, the master of the knife will be able to stab and slice with impunity.

Draiken performs a half-spin and slams his own back against the corridor's opposite wall, using it to support him as he rams his left knee into his opponent's thigh. Moves like that are ordinarily all about throwing the other guy off balance, but this one causes Jathyx more pain than most, because sewn into the very fabric covering Draiken's knee is a barbed razor that is sheathed in its housing whenever Draiken's using that leg to walk, but which is exposed and deadly when the leg is bent. It slices right through the other man's clothing and into his flesh, drawing a wound as deep on his opponent's thigh as the one on Draiken's forearm.

Jathyx must be wondering now whether missing the femoral artery was deliberate. Surely

this stranger didn't go to all this trouble just to keep him alive!

He still can't be worried much. After all—Jathyx must be thinking, as he staggers backward, pulling his slippery wrist from Draiken's grip with a violence that slices a ragged trail across Draiken's palm—it is not the first time he's been cut in a fight. It hasn't happened often, but he's met professionals within shouting distance of his own skill more than once. They're all dead, and he's still alive.

They're both staggering now, but the advantage, Jathyx must think, is all his.

Draiken advances. Deflects a slice aimed at his throat with bloody cost to his shoulder. Slices at his opponent's right calf with another spring-loaded blade in his shoe. Lets Jathyx, reeling, try to disembowel him. Backs away from that slash and advances again, almost sacrificing his intestines to miscalculating his quarry's ability to recover. Avoids that, empathizes with the overwhelming frustration Jathyx must feel at being unable to circle, because he feels the same goddamned way, then goes for an old-fashioned punch and flattens Jathyx's nose.

The floor where they fight is now greasy-slick with blood, and both are slowed not just by their own weakened conditions but by the necessity of not succumbing to a fatal slip. The difference is that Draiken is less handicapped by being slowed down. He's fast, even supernaturally fast, but his speed has never been his greatest advantage in close quarters. His willingness to give up blood, in exchange for his opponent's blood, is. That is an advantage Jathyx, who's won most of his encounters without a wound, does not possess. The major lapse in his training is lack of familiarity with his own limitations, much less willingness to skirt them.

All he has is his skill with a blade. That helps him out only at the beginning of a fight.

Draiken's advantages come closer to a difficult fight's conclusion, which is one reason why he's always put most of his efforts into getting past all the early unpleasantness.

Jathyx puts everything he has into one last assault, slashing, jabbing, forcing Draiken's retreat, but only driving him, no longer quite managing to cut him. Draiken, who's exhausted, allows Jathyx to exhaust himself more. He watches the profusely bleeding wound on his opponent's leg, tracks the labored breathing that is the best Jathyx can manage after the destruction of his nose, stays outside the radius of death, and watches for the moment when he will be able to pierce that radius to its vulnerable origin, without subjecting himself to any further damage.

Against his will, Draiken smiles.

It does only take another minute.

* * *

Draiken is tempted to reward himself with rest, not in the least because the most strenuous part is yet to come, and because summoning the stamina to keep going is borrowing from the future to pay the debts of the present. He's not in great shape. Even if he presses on and lives, he will pay for this later.

But first he tends to his own wounds. Nanomedes would take too long for his current purposes, but he does have a liquid spray that congeals as something very much like flesh, that can stop bleeding and keep him mobile as long as he obtains more extensive treatment before long. The one terrible cost is that it burns like hell: not the mere sting of disinfectant but an active amplification of all the pain receptors in the surrounding tissue. He is not falsely brave about it. He hates it.

He takes care of the wound on his forearm and the one on his palm and the one on his side and the one on his shoulder, and in no time at all he has succeeded in replacing one form of burning agony with another. *Whee.*

Once he is done taking care of himself, he deals with Jathyx, who he'd never harbored any ambitions of killing. This has been an exercise in subduing and capturing a wild beast, no more.

He leaves the nose alone, but addresses the cut on Jathyx's thigh, arresting the blood loss.

Fully conscious, Jathyx continues to stare at him, saying nothing.

That is because he is paralyzed. The entire immediate goal of this encounter has always been to apply a little device about the size of a coin to the base of his neck.

The neural block renders him a temporary quadriplegic and therefore portable, if not immediately cooperative.

The entire encounter would have gone much easier had there been some means to get within the kill radius and apply the block in some more peaceful manner. Draiken has managed that trick with others less formidable than this man. He's himself the survivor of a fight with a pair of strange individuals named Oscin and Skye Porrinyard, who managed the trick on him in less than thirty seconds, subduing him with no blood spilled by anybody. But those two had advantages he does not, advantages that had rendered them something more than conventionally human, and in his game it's always been best to use the tools you have, not the tools you wish you have.

Jathyx needed to be slowed down quite a bit before the block was possible. So Draiken used the tools he had: the cramped quarters, the blades in his knees, and his own not-inconsiderable skill at doing damage to an opponent. He'd been surgical about it, using the block only after it became a practical possibility.

Another man, more irritated than himself, might have inflicted additional punishment on the neutralized enemy out of sheer vindictiveness. Draiken is irritated but not that irritated. He recognizes that he's the aggressor here.

All things being equal, he probably owes this dangerous fellow an effusive apology.

Draiken has used a setting that paralyzes the man's vocal cords, as well; but that does not mean he has to be silent himself. "You won't believe this, but I'm sorry."

His captive's gray eyes regard him with natural skepticism.

"I told you I don't expect you to believe it. But I'm not an assassin sent to kill you, or a bounty hunter sent to deliver you to your enemies. I just need to take you someplace for a while. When I'm done with you, you'll be free to go. I'll even compensate you for your trouble."

More skepticism.

"No, I still don't expect you to believe it. But now's as good a time as any to introduce the premise. I'll go into detail later."

Draiken deactivates the heat generating function on Jathyx's knife, and stows it among his own belongings, in order to return it to him later. This might not be the safest possible concern, but for all he knows, it's a prized possession with sentimental value. He's not a gentle man, but he can be a polite one.

Then he says, "I'm also sorry for this next part," because he is.

He steps over Jathyx in order to pass him in the narrow space, gets a grip under the arms, gets his upper half off the deck, and commences dragging him. For the first couple of paces the spilled blood on the floor serves as a lubricant, rendering the effort just slightly easier than it might have been otherwise; but it's still dragging a dead weight, while winded and wounded himself, and it costs him more of his failing strength. He huffs. There's no point in fooling himself. He might be in superb condition by most human standards, but he's still an old man.

Only a couple of meters later, not quite spent but not feeling great either, he reaches the place he's been aiming for, a hard left at the end of the corridor, representing the outer station wall. He lowers his captive to the ground, takes a deep breath that fails to make him feel any better, and taps the voice-activated htex link on his throat. "I'm here."

"That would be true no matter where you were. I presume you mean at the rendezvous?"

He sighs. "Yes."

"And from the sound of it, still alive."

"Yes."

"I confess relief. I wasn't sure you would be."

"Neither was I," Draiken says. "Our intel was correct. This is one deadly son of a bitch."

"It's always a relief to find out you can trust your intel. Commencing burn."

A black dot, representing the activities of a programmed nano-fleet, appears waist-high in the bulkhead to the right, expands in two directions to become a horizontal line, then after achieving its desired width, heads downward to incorporate a pair of parallel vertical lines. At floor-level the two endpoints head toward one another again, and upon joining, form a square

cut-out.

The cut-out slides away, and Delia Stang appears in the opening. She is a massive woman, a titan by any reckoning, and certainly too large to fit through that gap herself, not with her shoulders, which have—if anything—grown even larger since his unfortunate first encounter with her on New London. She's constantly working on her physique, is Delia Stang, and she does not seem anywhere near satisfied with the results even though she already appears more like idealized and animated statuary than a human being. This is literally true. Her face is tinted a shade of metallic gold that shines as if gilded, though it's just the color she's chosen for herself, for reasons she's never deigned to share with him. Right now, that myrmidon face shows nothing but relief. "You do look even more like crap than usual."

"I'm not surprised. Be gentle getting him out of here."

Her gigantic arms gleam in the brighter light of the corridor as they emerge from the opening and, by her definition of gentle, drag the immobilized man into the darker space beyond.

The oblong space Draiken enters on following suit is one of those forgotten places left behind, when various strata of civilization insist on building upon those that come before them. It is what got left behind by the years of refits the surrounding infrastructure has undergone to accommodate the dimensions of human beings. Someday very soon it will be incorporated in an expansion of the corridor Draiken just left, but for now it is a dim and dusty emptiness, sealed off and unsuspected by most going about their business in the more heavily traveled sections of Piithkarath. It is pressurized, and within the station's generated gravity field, but is lit only by the little portable lamps that Stang has affixed on the ceiling to keep her company while she waited for Draiken to make this rendezvous.

All week long she's been letting him know that she resents her relatively passive role in this operation, and she continues bitching now as she takes her tools and fuses the cut-out section of corridor wall back to its original home. "How was it in there? Nice and *roomy*, I suppose."

"Downright luxurious," he says.

"Nothing but elbow room for a pair of tiny killers like you. It's a wonder you even noticed each other, in a space that palatial."

Stang is realistic about her size, having done everything she can during her life to build on it, but not happy about the practical considerations that prevented her from taking a more active role, fighting by his side in the corridor.

Just yesterday, trying to make light of it, Draiken told her that it would be the tightest spot she'd been in since the birth canal. The remark had not gone unpunished.

Once she finishes the patch job—it's ugly, but it will hold, and it looks industrial enough that almost everybody who takes the corridor from now on will just blame the station's regular maintenance crew, whose work isn't much prettier—the three of them occupy a space where they can go undetected indefinitely. That's of course longer than they need. They plan to escape with their prisoner within a very few minutes. But they can take their time.

It took days of examining the station plans to find this place, the one useful access point near their quarry's habitual travels; days more of vigils in silence and darkness to confirm that they would not be disturbed while they had Jathyx in hand.

That is the least-celebrated aspect of the work that has deformed Draiken's life. Most of the time, the brief intervals of action are just hiccups in the painstaking drudgery one must endure to ready for it. That's how you get to live.

This may be the only place on the entire station that fits the joint requirements of being close to Jathyx's regular movements, and of presenting opportunities for moving him without running afoul of station security. It's not like they could have just stuffed him into a box, and blithely taken him through customs. Station custom agents tend to catch that sort of thing. It makes them cranky.

And then there's Jathyx's current employer, a powerful local drug syndicate employing him as enforcer. They'd be even crankier. They like having him around to cut throats. They have connections at the custom gates, as they'd just about have to. And this kind of thing makes them even crankier.

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Better to avoid all such forms of crankiness.

Hence this forgotten space.

Which has everything they need, including potential access to space, just a few centimeters across the bulkhead. Just no airlock.

Right now, it's a space occupied by several items that Draiken and Stang have gone to ridiculous pains to smuggle in over the past few weeks.

One is a great padded object that, now inflated, is about the size and shape of a comfortable two-person mattress, propped up against the far wall of this forgotten place and completely covering it (not to mention the crawlspace the two of them had needed to use to drag its uninflated form where they needed it). There are four smaller packages at its base, all still sealed in plasgel and also vivid reminders of the headaches they were to obtain and put in place.

Draiken unseals two of these, winces each time at the hissing tang of stale air, and pulls out two flexible EVA suits, one in his size and one in Stang's. He dons his, glancing over at Jathyx, who's doing quite an impressive job hiding any dismay he might be feeling over the appearance of materials for navigation in vacuum.

"Don't worry. We have something for you, too. I didn't leave you to die in there, and I won't let you die in vacuum either."

The paralyzed man displays no relief, nor appreciation, of this intelligence.

Stang dons hers. It's a somewhat older model than Draiken's, another function of the difficulty involved in finding one that fits her. The helmet adds several inches of height to her already towering frame, and makes further demands on her ability to fit within this forgotten space; she stoops.

"Here's yours," Draiken says. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry about this next part, too."

For reasons now lost to history, it's called a potato sack. It is not an EVA suit capable of powered navigation. There is no reason Draiken and Stang would have gotten one for a prisoner whose opportunities for rebellion need to be kept limited. Besides, it's hell to get an actual spacesuit on a man whose limbs are not capable. The potato sack is a flexible escape pod, of a model meant to be shelved and stored in large number whenever not in use. It's basically a flexible bag, open at one end for insertion of that hypothetical John the Disabled Casualty. The procedure is to pull it over John's head, burn-seal the open end, and attach an air supply that will keep the passenger alive during transfer. John will enjoy radiation shielding, temperature control, and a breathable atmosphere. He does not have his own means of propulsion, any ability to navigate, light, a window to ascertain his predicament, openings for his limbs, or any degree of dignity. He's just a body in a bag, utterly dependent on anyone lugging him from one airlock to another.

This has got to be an additional irritation for their very dangerous prisoner, another reason for him to hate Draiken and Stang just on general principle, but.

You know.

Can't be helped.

Draiken and Stang stuff Jathyx into the potato sack, perform all the operations necessary to render it a viable habitat, and inflate the thing. At its full extension it becomes bean-shaped, a pudgy oval almost comical in light of its serious purpose. It is only recognizable as a habitat because of the air tank, also a less-than-optimal model, they've attached to the intake.

With their work so close to finished, there is still a lot to do, and they labor in silence, not from stealth but from focus on procedure. They attach four cables between the corners of the big inflated mattress, and from there to a flexible loop at the base of the potato sack, near where their prisoner's feet must be. Draiken uses a shorter cable to secure the belt of his own suit to the potato sack's other end and another to secure himself to Stang.

She turns to nod at him, and communicates via private channel.

"If we get killed," she says, "I'll never talk to you again."

Draiken says, "What would you say, anyway?"

He's been making more jokes, in response to hers, in part because they're the only possible response to hers. He supposes it might be love. He's come close to the emotion a few times in

his life, but is not the kind of man who recognizes it.

It would be nice to be. Someday. But until then he has this unfinished business.

* * *

Both Draiken and Stang are trained in the use of explosives. Over the course of their partnership, which has not been an extraordinarily long one, they have established that despite his significantly longer career, she still possesses the edge when it comes to exacting work.

He is not foolish. He defers.

Nevertheless, he watches for an error as she sets the charges on the bulkhead opposite the parcel they have come to call the Mattress. There are many of them, a couple of hundred in fact, the size of coins, and she arranges them in a square almost the size of that entire wall, leaving only half a meter of metallic lip between the desired hole and the floors, ceiling, and wall that surround it. Once she is done she produces a tube of explosive paste and draws a line over connecting the dull gray dots, turning the dotted line into a solid one.

She then opens the last of the packages, removes a set of magnetized weights with hand-grips, and affixes them to what will be the center of the popped-out section of bulkhead. There are two of the cables left, each about twenty feet long, and she strings each length from the handles on those weights to a vest-shaped harness she slips on over her EVA suit.

What they have constructed is a train of objects, linking the sabotaged bulkhead to the mattress-shaped object at the far end of the forgotten space. They are: the bulkhead, the magnetic weights, two flexible cables connecting the weights to Stang's harness, the harness, Stang, another flexible cable, Draiken, another flexible cable, the potato sack containing Jathyx, and finally, the four flexible cables leading from the sack to the Mattress.

Secured the way Stang is, it would be difficult for her to turn around, but she speaks to Draiken on their encrypted channel. "Want a countdown?"

"I've never liked them," he says. "Just tell me when you're about to blow the wall."

"Sometime today, I expect."

She makes it happen.

There is sound, a drumbeat of concussive pops, for what seems less than a second.

The charges work. The square outline flares like white fire, each coin-shaped bomb an even brighter point of sheer destruction, rendering the bulkhead more a perforated line than a solid wall barrier between this forgotten space and vacuum.

The entire wall goes, all in one piece, propelled by the pressurized atmosphere of the station.

Explosive decompression sucks them out so fast that all Draiken and Stang experience is a painful jerk followed by a blur of movement. But this is what happens. The wall goes. The weights pull the cable, which pulls Stang who pulls the cable pulling Draiken who pulls the cable pulling the potato sack, which in turn pulls the Mattress, an object under pressure designed to inflate upon any sudden drop in air pressure. The flexible cables pull the two suited people and the sack containing their prisoner right through the center of the opening they have made and thus protect all three from the potentially catastrophic results of an unfortunate escape trajectory.

Meanwhile, in the fraction of a second, too short for human perception to measure, that it takes the Mattress to be pulled along behind them, it does what it was designed to do and reacts to the sudden alarming drop in air pressure by expanding to four times its previous size. By the time it gets to the breach, where it is arrested by the metallic lip defining the borders of the escape route Draiken and Stang have arranged for themselves, it completely fills the available space and becomes as secure a plug as any of the tens of thousands of people aboard Piithkarath could possibly hope for. It will certainly last long enough for emergency systems to close off this entire section of the station, and alert station maintenance crews of the blowout.

The evidence will certainly point to unknown, if remarkably considerate, saboteurs. But no one will die, not even from panic; a factor key to Draiken's planning.

He's been a killer, many times. He's not a murderer. Not for the most part.

Some of the cables attaching the various segments of the chain Draiken and Stang have made of themselves are breakaways, designed to snap at specific moments of stress.

The cables dragging Stang behind the blown-out section of bulkhead snap first, releasing that potentially dangerous object before it can be yanked back toward them with a force capable of flattening them.

Bringing up the rear, the ones attaching the potato sack to the mattress, break only at their fullest extension, which means that they part only after they arrest the forward momentum of the remaining objects in the chain. For the three human beings, the result is a jolt at least as painful as the sudden acceleration immediately before it, but it controls their flight. They don't go hurtling so far into nothingness that their propellants aren't enough to get them back.

Draiken's helmet includes a rear-display confirming that the potato sack is still sealed to vacuum and that Piithkarath is too, something he'd worried about. Given its patchwork origins, the station wall is lumpy, unlovely in outline, clearly the product of several generations of engineering overlaid on top of one another; but there is no sign of any additional escaping air. A knot of tension dissipates. He hadn't needed anything else on his conscience.

Stang's voice erupts from his helmet speaker. "I'm fine. Thanks for asking."

Draiken glances at another of his internal helmet monitors. Jathyx, stuck inside an opaque sack and likely wondering what the hell just happened, shows elevated heart rate and blood pressure but is otherwise in perfect health. "Me too. And our cargo, too."

"I'm so pleased. Taking us in."

She executes a burn and begins their operation's most delicate phase, navigating them the quarter kilometer, as the crow flies, toward the hatch where their vessel is docked. There are such points all over the station, but they have arranged one as close to their point of egress as possible.

There are a number of places along the way where random eyes could be glancing out a porthole and see a large figure dragging along a smaller one and a sack; no doubt they're seen by any number of people along the way. But EVAs for maintenance are fairly common on Piithkarath. Wholly unremarkable, in fact. Few people outside of station security would have any immediate reason to link this specific pair (and whoever happens to be in that sack, probably someone not suit-rated) to the brief alarm that sounded elsewhere, not when they're chugging along with such nonchalance, such an utter lack of furtiveness. Station security itself might be hard-pressed to draw an instant connection.

Of course, they'll soon know that the blowout was sabotage and commence their furious manhunt.

But not now.

Keeping suit chatter to a minimum, they skirt the station exterior and in a matter of minutes get to the nearest docks, where a handful of other transports sit, unintended and dark. Piithkarath is an out-of-the-way station in an out-of-the-way system, but there are still Bursteeni shuttles, Riirgaan shuttles, even a single Tchi transport, resembling a terrestrial mushroom the way theirs do, and somehow—colored by the nature of the species that piloted it here—somehow conveying that it's snotty and judgmental, even in its silence. Nobody pays them any special attention, especially not the small flurry of dart-shaped one-man skimmers who race by them at high speed, toward the scene of the blowout.

Their own transport bears the markings of a small inner-system trader, though those markings are holographic and can be changed to any of several possible templates stored in their system. They enter through the cargo airlock, and once inside, with the still-paralyzed Jathyx safely locked away inside a set of quarters they've repurposed as a brig, they activate an inactive program they've already hidden within the station's security system, one that retroactively declares them in compliance with all outgoing cargo inspections and clears them to leave, in this the few minutes before anybody can think of suspending all departures.

As an extra safety measure, they have tinkered with the sensors of their docking station, which will now fail to update its own status; for the time being, it will continue to report to the station harbormaster systems that there is still a transport docked here. They will not

receive any updates indicating that a vessel has left. It's the kind of bullshit error clerical software makes all the time, and should cover their absence until somebody thinks of performing a manual ship-by-ship inspection. At which point, a forced update will reveal that they left two days ago.

This tampering will be discovered, eventually. Probably too soon. But it will give them a head start.

So they haul ass. Piithkarath is a lumpy, receding shape in the distance, less than twenty minutes after their manufactured blowout. It's so far as daring an escape as any Draiken has ever been a part of, but he still doesn't relax. He's spent too much time confined to feel safe anywhere near any authorities that might want to jail him, and so he spends these precious minutes continuing to monitor activities at the station, for any sign that anybody might be coming after them. They're far from safe, of course. Sooner or later station security will draw a connection to the one transport that left. Once that happens, they will be hunted for as long as they remain in this solar system.

Status quo, more or less.

Delia Stang reclines her chair and puts her giant legs up on the counter, all while enjoying a bottle of her latest favorite brew, a concoction he's tried on her urging and found beyond vomitous. She has changed out of the generic maintenance uniform she wore on Piithkarath, to pants that must have taken a miracle to find, somewhere, that manage the impossible trick of being baggy on her. They are patterned with a hideous pink/orange camouflage pattern that fits no ecosystem he is aware of, though they must be surplus from some planetary conflict, somewhere.

"You know," she says, "there are people who have spent all their lives on that station."

"I know."

"No, think about it. Tens of thousands of people. They're born in debt and can't afford even a brief vacation to inner system. They don't know what it's like to feel dirt under their shoes. They have one employer: the station's owners. They'll never make the jump to any other system, not unless they sign up with the Dip Corps, or Bettelhine, or some other wretched master."

"So?"

"So imagine it. Birth. Childhood. The teen years. Adulthood. Never seeing a horizon, let alone ever traveling beyond it. Having kids who'll spend their lives in the same cage, not finding that strange."

"What's your point?"

"This mission you've arranged for yourself, that I've been stupid enough to sign up for, mostly because I have nothing better to do, is all about opposing tyranny. And I'm down with that. But you ever stop to think that 90 percent of what humans call life under tyranny is . . . inertia? Being stuck in some local system, whether good or bad, and being unable to move beyond it?"

"Every day."

She tips the bottle back for another chug. "I don't think you'll ever make a difference without accounting for human surrender to complacency."

"Well," he says, after a moment, "that might just be one of those things we'll have to grow to accept."

He does not acknowledge her delayed reaction to that.

The two of them have been together for about a year, more or less, excluding the time they've spent between systems in bluegel suspension. They are partners, casual lovers, as close to friends as it's possible for them to be. It's an unlikely relationship given that she knocked him unconscious within two minutes of first meeting him. But what else are you going to do when the pair of you get put on a fast train out of Dodge, out to the edges of human space where it's been judged you won't be a nuisance for a while? You know no one else. You might as well make the best of it. And he has to admit they've done just that. They make a good team, indulging each other in their respective forms of madness: a far more congenial one than he had with his last traveling companion, Thorne, who would love him and try to murder him, on

more-or-less alternating days. At bare minimum, with Stang, he never has to worry about waking with her knife to his throat.

Piithkarath becomes a dot in the distance, one that blinks out as it becomes too far to see. He sets course for the nearest planetary body of any size, Henry, an airless outer-system world so worthless that it's been generations since it was mined for any raw materials of any value. Unless anybody else has reason for a joyride there, which is unlikely, it has a current population of exactly four, all connected to the matter at hand. Draiken considers the approximately forty hours it will take this vessel to traverse the distance, for a few seconds indulges the aggravating impatience of the man with something to do who knows it will be several days before he can do it, and then, as he had with the snatch on Piithkarath, reminds himself that the job is, and always has been, waiting.

She says, "You going to talk to him?"

"It won't be much of a conversation."

"What are you waiting for, a good dirty joke to break the ice? I have one about a Bursteeni afflicted with premature ejaculation."

"I've heard it."

"Then tell him. It's exactly the sort of thing to win the undying trust of a knife man."

"I don't think so. When I first heard it, I wanted to kill the guy who told it. After that performance in the corridor, I don't think Jathyx needs much more in the way of motivation."

"No, I guess not. But you have to admit he won't be able to walk out on you."

He chuckles, considers continuing to monitor the security response on Piithkarath, realizes that the only real value in doing that will be to continue putting off the inevitable, and with deep resignation cedes the monitors to Stang.

* * *

Their transport, a little freight carrier Draiken and Stang have modified to meet their special needs, was designed on the theory that a crew of between four and six people would spend long periods using it as their home, while working intra-system runs.

Not all transports of the kind are built for comfort, and so there are any number where, in order to pack in more cargo, the sleeping facilities consist of patches of retractable netting that can be stretched across the cramped common space and affixed to hooks on the opposite wall to form hammocks. Either that, or padded nooks, crammed under one piece of infrastructure or another, which are homey only to the extent that they're just large enough to fit a human body. It's not a fun way to live.

Draiken, who'd spent many a long journey in similar conditions, would have been just fine with that, but sheer consideration had dictated more for Stang, who might have collapsed most hammocks and wouldn't have fit most padded nooks. So they'd gotten their hands on a vehicle with actual, separate crew quarters: including the chamber that now belongs to Stang, a plus-sized, even if still cramped in context, double-sized room originally intended as master bedroom for a married couple.

He shares the bed occasionally, but mostly uses the adjoining quarters, originally intended as the home of a lower-ranked crew-member, or child. He's a man who spent decades sleeping on a one-man fishing boat. This is luxury.

Nobody lives in the quarters next to that, an empty room they use as auxiliary pantry.

The room past that is the one they've repurposed as a brig. It locks from the outside and has a door with sliding panel for the periodic deliveries of food on a tray. Inside is just a narrow bed and a toilet, a handheld sonic shower, and a sink with faucet calibrated to measure the voyage's comfortable daily ration of water. There's a voice-activated htex and neurec system, incoming only, designed to provide the occupant with enough entertainment to get an occupant through the tedium of incarceration: drama, music, novels, even moving landscapes for use as wallpaper, though Draiken has spent enough time in prison himself to not mistake this for any illusion of freedom.

Jathyx lies flat on his back on a slick cover Draiken's placed there to protect the bed from any seepage from his wounds. The ship's miniature first-aid drone, not as advanced as a state of

the AIsorce Medical kiosk but certainly sufficient to treat his injuries, hovers above him, stitching his various injuries with nano-surgery.

His expression remains what it has always been: furious.

This is a man Draiken's intel holds responsible for at least fourteen murders, some surgically precise and some impressive shows of enthusiasm for the work. He is reputed to possess an explosive temper and to be considered a dangerous associate, even for his allies in the local cartel. There are few people he cannot get away with killing and even fewer he wouldn't want to. But Draiken doesn't need the dossier to see all that in Jathyx's eyes. On the stage of Jathyx's imagination, Draiken is being sliced to the bone, opened to the elements like the pressurized bag of blood that all human beings are—and those eyes are direct viewports to that stage, where the spectacle is being scripted and rehearsed and played out, all in preparation for the moment, not long from now, when it may be rendered reality.

Draiken clicks the hextex link on his throat. "I've shut down your vocal paralysis. You may ask questions if you want."

"I don't need your answers. I will break free, and I will kill you."

"I'm not surprised you would say so."

"If you know anything of me, you know I will kill you."

Draiken sighs. "I didn't pick you at random. I know all about you. Both the rumors and the reality. They say you've been killing since you were fourteen."

"Twelve, actually."

"Then let's put aside the threats as redundant. The thing is, I've been on the other side of this conversation more than once, and I know how it goes. Certain things must be said, just to retain your own sense of dignity. Next thing, you'll posit some particularly unpleasant way of killing me, some method that will sound like it hurts a lot. That will oblige me to point out how helpless you are now, and that will oblige you to snap that you don't care, that you've just made a vow. Can we just take all that as given and skip ahead to the parts more enlightening to both of us?"

To Jathyx's stew of emotion, now comes frustration, as he finds all his instinctive retorts cut off. "Who sent you?"

This was a question of substance. "Nobody. This is our own project. We have no intention of handing you over to anyone, not the law and not any of your enemies."

"Revenge, then."

"Sorry, no. You've spilled a lot of innocent blood in your life, but I'm not exactly entitled to any sense of false superiority. I've left a considerable amount of collateral damage. If I went after you the way I did, it's only because you're a damned dangerous person to approach. I'm not suicidal. I needed you neutralized before we could even have this conversation."

Jathyx is silent for a while. "That won't save you."

"I'm not counting on it."

"You won't always enjoy the advantage of surprise."

Draiken resists the temptation to roll his eyes; he wants to get off this treadmill of a topic, but knows that there is no way past his prisoner's bravado but enduring it. "Sooner or later, if you're right, you'll have your freedom and we'll fight to the death, yours or mine or both of ours, together. Sooner or later, if I'm right, we won't. Believe me when I assure you I find this a boring subject. I'm prepared to explore it with you until you see the sense of moving on to the reason we came after you, the reason I believe you'll eventually see we have common cause."

"You want to recruit me for something?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"You're a fool. I already have employers who pay me well. You can't force me to work for you."

"I've been a fool a few times in my life. But I don't think I can force you into anything. I'm sorry enough that I had to do all this just to arrange for you to listen."

"I may very well listen and decide to kill you anyway."

“As you’ve more than adequately pointed out, you’ve already decided to kill me. Deciding that again would be redundant. I’m betting that once you listen, you’ll either change your mind or delay any action against me until our mutual business is concluded.”

“I will blind you before I kill you.”

“Possibly,” Draiken says. “But you’re repeating yourself, and I’ve had more than enough of indulging you in this. Are you ready to listen a little?”

The eyes still bore hate. They are still gateways to a universe of imagined murder, some of which echoes prior killings, remembered with whatever a man like this feels, that might be capable of approximating fondness. But his lids descend a fraction, a change in demeanor easiest to interpret as surrender to hearing Draiken out.

Then Jathyx says, “I am your prisoner. I will listen, but as a man, not as an invalid.”

Draiken considers that, a sober and experienced risk to benefit analysis that includes full assessment of how he would feel himself, in this killer’s place. They are, neither of them, men who respond well to helplessness. After a moment he says, “Fair enough. There’ll be a delay of a couple of hours, while I make arrangements.”

He leaves the brig, locking Jathyx in with his ambitions of blood.

* * *

Delia Stang calls him crazy.

It is not the first time she has called him crazy. A disproportionate percentage of their partnership has consisted of her questioning his sanity in various colorful ways. During one recent confrontation of the kind, she said that if he could ever contrive to wear his skull inside out, the sharp spikes normally pointing inward would be cutting slices out of everybody around him. He actually agreed then, and he is forced to agree now. This is crazy. But sometimes, to get to the other side, one must cross the torrent. Gaining Jathyx’s trust, even for the length of an explanation, requires risk.

“He’ll kill you,” she says.

“Likely so,” he says.

“I don’t want you dead.”

“I don’t want me dead either.”

“You’re his jailer, now. You can force his cooperation.”

He almost laughs out loud. “Is that how it works, Delia? My jailers were unable to force my cooperation. It’s the central fact of my life.”

“You didn’t kill people as easily as he does.”

“Not as capriciously,” he allows. “But certainly as easily.”

“This is a bad idea.”

“Granted. And if we limited ourselves to good ideas, nothing of any worth would ever be accomplished.”

He tells her how it’s going to be, and then he returns to his own quarters, where for the next hour he sits still while another nano-system sets about knitting his own wounds. It’s a rush job, and it doesn’t return him to his peak condition, but it heals him at least to the point where he and Jathyx will be facing each other on a more-or-less equal playing field. He disposes of his clothing, uses the handheld sonic to bathe, dresses in a new skintight black suit with additional padding over the throat and abdomen.

All this feels absurdly like getting spiffed up for a job interview, in hopes of making a good impression. And the point is, he does want to make a good impression.

He does not admire this Jathyx—no man who respects life even provisionally could—but he does respect him.

He returns to Stang, with whom he has another brief and contentious conversation. It includes the fresh intelligence that Piithkarath has declared the blowout an act of terrorism and has alerted security forces system-wide. The station itself has been placed on lockdown, calling an entire halt on all arrivals and departures. They have not yet discovered that there has been a departure; or at least, they have not yet heard from any eyewitness who might have been peering out into space, who will react to this misapprehension by saying, “What are you talking

about? I saw one leave myself!" All in all, encouraging, even if Draiken is incapable of adding up positives and being encouraged. There's always another shoe ready to fall.

He gives Stang her orders and then heads back to the brig, with her following close behind.

Jathyx is of course where Draiken has left him, though the nanites have done their work and are no longer forming cloudy gray fog around his wounds. He watches Draiken without apprehension, his only visible emotion an eye-rolling contempt.

Draiken says, "Just so you know, this cell is now locked from the outside. No power at your possession, or mine, can open it. My partner is under strict orders not to intervene in anything that transpires here. If we fight, it will be up to me to defend myself. If you take me hostage, she will do nothing to bargain with you. And if you kill me . . ."

" . . . she will kill me. I understand."

"No, you do not. She will not kill you. She will not cut off your air or your water. That would be outright murder. Nor will she ever open the door again, not even to feed you. She will just leave this vessel somewhere we are confident that it will never be found, pick up another we have waiting, and go on with her life. You will be left aboard to spend what remains of yours locked in this room, waiting for death to claim you."

The anger in Jathyx's eyes somehow finds a way to burn brighter. "You are the son of a whore."

"Quite possibly. I don't know what my mother did for a living. I also don't consider the word an insult. A whore was one of the best women I've ever known, and I still suspect that leaving her might have been the biggest mistake I've ever made. Both considerations are irrelevant. Either way, my partner is under orders not to spill her own blood for what would have become a lost cause. With me dead, you will live for however long it takes you to resort to consuming my rotting corpse, and up to three to four weeks more, depending on how well you conserve your energy. And how long it takes you to decide it's faster to just use this."

Draiken produces Jathyx's knife, places it on the bed within what will be easy reach, once the man is able to move again. Then he moves to a certain place on the wall equipped with a flip-down panel meant to function as a shelf, which happens to be strong enough to function as a seat. Here he parks himself, gets comfortable, addresses his easy gaze to his prisoner's volcanic one, and after a few heartbeats of measuring the moment taps his hyltex link and murmurs the code that inactivates the neural block.

Jathyx doesn't just rise. He doesn't just leap to his feet.

What he does feels more like teleportation than movement. In an eyeblink he has the cutting edge of his blade at the soft place where Draiken's jaw meets Draiken's neck, the pressure he exerts just past the threshold of pain.

He whispers, "And what if I arrange for you to be a long time in dying?"

"I'm not sure I understand the question."

Jathyx presses his blade tighter against Draiken's throat. "I can kill a man where he stands. But when it suits me, I can also devote days to the same task. I can dedicate my first cuts just to rendering you my plaything, then take my time reducing your body to its component parts, in the manner that hurts the most. I know how to preserve your life for weeks while still leaving you the strength for screaming. How much of that will the freakish bitch be able to take, before she can take no more? Do you truly believe that she cares so little for you that she'll be able to refrain from intervening?"

Draiken must crane his neck as much as he can in order to minimize that painful pressure against his throat. He takes what breath is possible without helping that cutting edge in its designated purpose, and says, "You're . . . right. That's one contingency plan I . . . failed to mention."

"Eh, pig? What stops me from reducing you to whimpering animal, and obligating her to take action out of sheer pity?"

"I never said we didn't have a contingency for that. I only said that I neglected to mention it."

"You think you can play games with a man who has a knife to your throat."

“It’s not a game. This room has been equipped with a sound-dampening field. When it’s on, nothing that happens in here can be heard anywhere else in the transport. If I ever start screaming in agony, she’s to cope with the problem by activating it and rendering herself unable to listen. Oh, she’ll check the monitors every few hours, just to confirm that I haven’t turned things around somehow, but in the meantime, she’ll leave us alone, as instructed. And if she ever returns to discover that I’m too far gone . . . well, she’ll just seal the room, permanently. I promise you that any impulse she might have to avenge me will be more than satisfied by that.”

Jathyx wears the expression of a man whose desire to kill, at this moment, is so overpowering that he might well consider slow starvation a fair price. But there’s still a rational mind somewhere behind that, doing the math.

Draiken can almost follow along with those calculations and see how they conflict with the burning need for immediate satisfaction.

He is aware of the moment when Jathyx makes his decision.

Draiken feels a loosening of the pressure against his throat.

And that’s when he moves.

There has been no telltale tension in his limbs, no flickering glances to give away his plans. There is just action. With his left hand he seizes Jathyx’s wrist and yanks that arm to one side, taking the knife out of play. With his right he drives four iron knuckles into Jathyx’s Adam’s apple. Without even leaving his seated position he drives a knee into the other man’s crotch, and in the same breath shoves him back.

Jathyx falls back on the bed, but rises at once, the knife flashing.

Draiken is already extending both hands, palms outward, in a show of peace. “I just needed to remind you that I’m a dangerous man, too. I’m under no obligation to tolerate a knife to my throat.”

“If it came to that,” Jathyx wheezes, “your willingness to tolerate it would not be an issue.”

“Possibly. I honestly don’t know how another fight between us would end. I just know that it would be stupid of you to try, and stupider of me to make you. Kill me and you lose. Force me to kill you and you lose. Anything in between, except for listening to me, and you lose. Honestly, you’re a murderous son of a bitch, and you might not even be sane, but you must see our mutual situation. A little patience on both sides, and we might both come out of this.”

More furious calculation. Followed by a grunt and a sudden downward stab that ends with the hilt protruding from the bed, ready to be claimed again at any moment.

“You are still the son of a whore,” Jathyx says, with considerably less heat.

“If she taught me anything,” Draiken replies, “it’s that someone stuck with a dirty job should do it well.”

It would be out of character for a man like Jathyx to laugh out loud. He might not even be capable of that physical function. But the edge of one lip curls up just the slightest bit, and the raging fire in those gray eyes cools a couple of degrees.

This is not peace. Draiken’s life expectancy has not improved since that corridor on Piithkarath. It might still be measurable in seconds.

But communication has been established.

Jathyx says, “Speak.”

* * *

Draiken is aware that he now briefs a creature with compelling reason to want him dead, and so he edits his prepared explanation as he goes.

Backstory is the first thing to be cut to the bone. “I call myself Draiken. It’s not my birth name, but the one I’ve been using for a while. If you need more details of my career to this point, I can fill them in later. But I’m skipping to the part that’s important.”

“Continue.”

“Some time back, I started trying to track down some old captors of mine. I’d been hiding out for a while and so didn’t know that the methods they once used for psychological torture have been refined to a frightening degree. They are now being used throughout human civilization. I’ve found out that there are techniques now that can control your perceptions, that

can edit your beliefs and your senses at will; that they are being studied now, in part as preparation for controlling entire populations. It is my belief that if the people wielding these powers are not stopped, they won't stop until they wipe out all free will."

Jathyx rolls his eyes. "This is a crazy belief, dead man. If anybody could do these things, we would all be slaves already."

"It is admittedly more pervasive in some places than others. And one of the reasons that's so is that there are several groups, all possessing different forms of this knowledge, and all refining it in different ways. They may not all have the same agenda, but they're all working on the same project. Often at cross-purposes. Sometimes as outright enemies. Sabotaging each other's progress. Claiming one another's territory."

"A turf war."

"At least in part, yes."

"And whose side are you on?"

"No side," Draiken says. "I want to smash them all, equally. I want the very capability taken out of the human equation. I have no idea how I'm going to accomplish this. The question's too big. Until then I just fight delaying actions."

Jathyx weighs this information. "You expect me to believe that you're an idealist."

"A pragmatist. But you can call me by whichever label you prefer."

More contemplation. "Either way, what you're telling me is that you fight a war you can't win, against too many enemies to count."

"Yes."

"You are not just an idealist. You are a fool."

"Quite possibly."

"I have a weak spot for fools," Jathyx says. He falls silent for a few seconds, and then he resumes. "I'm going to give you more than I ever gave anybody whose throat I ever promised to cut. You can stop talking right now, turn this crate around, and bring me back to Piithkarath. I'll forego killing you myself, go back to living my life, and take satisfaction in the knowledge that I don't have to kill you, because someone else will. That's a one-of-a-kind offer that won't be made again."

"It's generous," Draiken admits. "But there's more you need to know."

"If you insist. The offer's expired."

This declaration comes complete with a sudden twitch, a faked reach for the knife.

Draiken does not react. He can tell the difference between a feint and a genuine attempt. He knows that the gesture was a test.

Jathyx grins at him, for the first time showing real pleasure in this negotiation. He gets up, goes to the sink, runs some of his allotment of water into a cup, then hesitates. "How do I know the water isn't drugged?"

"What would be the point of that? I already had you completely paralyzed. You can't get more neutralized than that."

"I can think of any number of reasons you might want me mobile but drugged."

Draiken spread his hands, palms upward. "I could get you water from another source, but you'd have the same distrust of any I could provide, from anywhere aboard this vessel. Believe me: I've faced this kind of situation myself. Whatever you might think, you'll get thirsty enough to surrender to trust me on this point."

Jathyx considers that, shows teeth, drinks, returns to the sink, gets more water, drinks that, and returns. "You were saying?"

* * *

For a few minutes, Draiken is able to speak without interruption.

"The various factions use different methods, and they're all experimenting with levels of control. Some reduce the people they dominate to what amount to robots, unable to make even the simplest decisions for themselves; but that's very labor-intensive on the part of management. Another way is to set up various plants serving your agenda, steering the decisions of the locals in your favor. You don't even need a majority. You just need people occupying

the right positions of influence . . . in industry, in the media, in law enforcement, in the courts. Making this decision instead of that. That decision instead of this. Steering the society where you want it to go.

“And it’s been known to work. But then you’re faced with the standard issue that faces so many conspiracies. They fall apart. People lie, suffer attacks of conscience, develop other agendas, get caught, and tell everything. Above a certain number of participants, it’s downright inevitable.

“But not if you first make sure that your plants are incapable of betraying you.

“Not if you make sure that they’re incapable of even considering ever going into business for themselves.

“You let them do what they think comes naturally, enjoy what they think is free will, and if that isn’t enough, re-connect with them from time to time, to adjust their parameters. It’s no less slavery, of course, the reduction of human beings to machinery; but you can even say it’s somewhat more humane; they won’t *know* they’re machinery. They’ll just do everything you, their owner, wants them to do, and everybody they influence will just follow that agenda of their own accord. Men and women of free will, not aware that they’re following the dictates of robots.

“This is happening on Piithkarath. I have a list of about three hundred names, all in positions of influence, all steering policy. Three hundred who are mentally incapable of being steered from that agenda, who make sure that the dominant vision for Piithkarath never improves *too* much, that the society as a whole is *prevented* from addressing the conditions that their hidden controllers find to their advantage. I assure you, it’s only a pilot program now, but in the next six months, they are headed for the implementation of stage two, and that’s when things on your little station will really turn to hell.”

Jathyx pulls the knife from its sheath in the mattress and starts to manipulate it in his hand. It does not seem preparatory to another attack. It seems more like this fidgeting frees a part of his brain to focus on consideration of Draiken’s story. “Do you possess any proof of this nonsense?”

“Yes.”

“Share it.”

“I intend to. I need you to be patient with me for two days, and then I can.”

Another flip of the knife, and now Draiken knows for certain. Jathyx is weighing the consequences of breaking their enforced truce, regardless of consequences. It might go either way.

Jathyx surprises him by gently inserting the knife back in the previous wound in the mattress. “Assuming you do provide proof, I do not know why I would care. I am already a murderer, in the employ of monsters engaged in selling addictive poison to the lost. I make my living because the world around me is a corrupted hell. It’s never bothered me as long as it’s gotten me what I want.”

“True,” Draiken admits. “I have no illusion of ever appealing to your better instincts. I don’t make the mistake of presuming you have them.”

“Then why are we doing this, dead man?”

“I think you still have an important part to play. One that is not inconsistent with your nature.”

“Tell me.”

“When I provide my proof.”

Now Jathyx does laugh. It is not a happy sound. It reminds Draiken of something long petrified falling apart, the ground where it had stood being pelted by the debris. But when he speaks again, his tone is almost affectionate. “I believe you are mad.”

Draiken replies with an equivalent lack of mirth. “That’s not at all inconsistent with being the son of a whore.”

“No, dead man. It is not. But even mad sons of whores have been known to possess great secrets, from time to time. So I will wait two days for the delivery of your proof, and I will then decide for myself.” He shows teeth. “At that point, I will also require you to show me how I

may profit from a new job as revolutionary. There would otherwise be no point in changing a life that has served me so well, up until now. I suppose that we will not endure these next two days in one another's company, each waiting for the other to fall asleep?"

"I am not that mad," Draiken says.

He taps the link at the throat, to reactivate Jathyx's neural link. The assassin goes limp and falls flat on his back, his eyes now back to promising murder. As is, Draiken must admit to himself, only reasonable under the circumstances.

He stands, pulls Jathyx's knife from the mattress, and places it on the little table beside the bed. With another prisoner, he would confiscate it, in order to avoid tempting self-harm. But he has gotten enough of a sense of this man to know that what he does, he does because his are the only concerns that matter. Those concerns do not currently include any ambitions of ending it all. But with the knife, he might feel a little more secure, a little more inclined to wait for what's coming. It's a small show of good faith, one that might make a difference, in the days to come.

Draiken sends another hytex signal and waits.

After about two minutes, far too much time to be accounted for by distance, the food slot in the door slides open. It is at waist-height, the wrong altitude for eye contact, but Stang has knelt. Her relief upon seeing Draiken in control is palpable and warms him more than he would have guessed.

She unlocks the door for him, saying, "Look at you. All alive and everything."

"It's a habit of mine."

Only when the brig is safely behind him, the door once again sealed and an impassable barrier to Jathyx's homicidal ambitions, does Draiken tap his throat and cancel the man's paralysis. He doesn't need to look at any monitors to imagine the assassin's immediate reaction to the return of his capacity for movement. No doubt it involves much in the way of cursing, followed by immediate minute examination of his cell for any weak spots that can be exploited.

Of course, this is not just what Jathyx would do, but also what Draiken himself has done, at his several prior tastes of incarceration. And so he has allowed the man much to occupy his time: a false air vent that will take almost a full day to loosen, likely using the knife as screwdriver, revealing nothing behind it but the brig's second bulkhead. A means of retracting the bed, to provide floor space that will seem to promise another means of egress, through the machinery beyond. That will take a determined captive still further, through a narrow gap between bulkheads likely to remind him of the narrow corridors on Piithkarath. But in all meaningful ways, that is also sealed off.

It's always a good idea to keep animals occupied.

* * *

Nothing much happens for the next couple of hours. They are in a slow-moving transport, designed for interplanetary hops so short it doesn't even have bluegel crypts for corpus storage at relativistic speeds. It seems to lumber. Of course, Draiken is well-used to the phenomenon, the psychological version of relativity, that turns all journeys ponderous when constructive action is a comfort reserved for destinations. He does the only thing he can do: he trains. He stands in the middle of the available space and constructs a mental battleground, in which opponents of great skill assail him from all sides. He partitions part of himself toward construction of their tactics, separates that from the part of himself that must counter-attack.

Exercise of his physical resources is not the concern; those are fine, and he has already given them a life-or-death workout today. What matters is the capacity of his mind, to face incoming problems and devise instant strategies for response. He runs several hypotheticals, each time placing himself at a disadvantage. An enemy leaps in from behind; he spins, evades, strikes, fends off the counter-attack. Now two more come, from opposite sides. He assesses which one may be evaded, which one must be neutralized. A strike, a kick. An exercise in keeping an eye on one enemy while not losing the one who, like Jathyx given his preferred strategy, circles behind him. Can one be used against another? Can he force one to back off, while engaging the other? Add a third. Arm one with energy weapon. Give one a teemer,

which can incapacitate an enemy with a single flash of light. Add more variables. And more after that. Assume that they will keep coming until you fall.

He “dies” twice. Lives twice but is on one of those occasions too immobilized by injury to escape the arena. That might as well be another death.

He once again admits to himself something that’s become increasingly obvious, after the last few years: he’s getting old. Not just in years—and in those he’s very old indeed, so old that he long ago would have withered and died, without access to various rejuvenating technologies; in terms of apparent age, a different thing, he’s currently about forty, Hom Sap Mercantile. And if all he cared about was vigor of body and mind, he could retain this level of health, indefinitely, simply by continuing to seek out those treatments. But they do not solve every possible problem. He has acquired too many memories, too many reflexes, too many learned responses. His experiences have made him about as dangerous as it’s possible for a human being to be, but they have begun to crowd one another, to conflict in elementary ways that make it more difficult to call on instinct. Now, increasingly, choices require conscious mediation. This has slowed him down significantly. He is still dangerous. But the inevitable decline has begun and cannot be slowed by any technology capable of providing him with more years. Sooner rather than later, he will still be able to walk about, interact with others in peaceful situations, even strategize campaigns for younger men, but he will not be able to face a creature like Jathyx and imagine that muscle memory can save him. That’s going away, and will not be coming back.

And naturally, the race between that and the scale of the mission he has set for himself, increasingly argues that he will not live to see its end, a conclusion he’s been coming to of late, that is becoming impossible to deny. . . .

Stang cannot know what he’s thinking, of course, but given the context, it’s unfortunate that when she finds cause to interrupt him, she doesn’t call him by name. “Old man! Stop boxing imaginary phantoms and come over here!”

He banishes the mental hypotheticals, wishing that it were possible, in genuine tactical situations, to do the same with actual enemies. (This, too, is not quite as instantaneous a shift as once it would have been.) He shakes his head and joins her at the monitor console. “What?”

“We’re being followed.”

She calls up a holomap of the system, displaying the relative positions of Piithkarath, Henry, their own transport, and the one tracking them. Given that the human eye would not be able to see all four locations on any graphic preserving their relative distances, the four essential locations are larger on the map than they are in real life, a necessary fiction that makes them appear to be closer to each other than they actually are. The actual distances are irrelevant to the basic knowledge: the object in pursuit is gaining.

Draiken rubs his jaw. “Are they Piithkarath forces?”

“I didn’t see them leave the station, but this far out it’s hard to imagine where else they could have come from. Their course certainly implies it.”

“What does the station’s manifest say?”

This is public knowledge, available system-wide to anybody with a hynet link.

Stang says, “It says that nobody’s left. It hasn’t even detected us yet.”

“What kind of vessel is it?”

“I think it’s a Dart.”

This is the popular term for a class of small craft with an official name not nearly as descriptive. It is built for maneuverability and speed. It’s slightly smaller than their own transport, which is made for a family-size cargo hauling business. It can run with a crew of two, carry a maximum comfortable crew of five, even support eight if you’re willing to risk fistfights over farting and body odor. It’s the kind of vessel built for trips where everything else comes in second to rapid acceleration and rapid deceleration, as well as instant maneuverability. This one’s exact offensive capabilities would depend on how it’s been customized.

Their own transport is armed for only light engagements, the amount more or less required in a regularly patrolled system that’s not exactly a lawless frontier. It can’t outmaneuver or outrun

a Dart.

He says, "Is its heading at all ambiguous?"

Stang shrugs. "We're in a heavily traveled system; I can point you to any number of other small craft in range. But theirs is the only one that left Piithkarath after we did, heading in the direction we are. The implication is pretty damn obvious."

"You know what I find interesting?"

"I'm not sure this is the right time for an exhaustive list of your hobbies."

"About this."

"No, old man. What?"

"It's not a fleet of interceptors; it's one vessel. I doubt it's anybody in authority, intent on arresting us for sabotage."

"You never know," she says. "It could be some lone, awkward deputy hoping to impress the sheriff with his police work."

"Doesn't feel like that. This is something else."

"Something like?"

"I don't know. Maybe the *actual* law on the station. Somebody who could get away with leaving, this long after the breach, when all departures would have been shut down."

"The cartel. Jathyx's employers."

"Possible," Draiken says. "But that doesn't feel right either."

Stang glances at the holo display. To human eyes, the two distances are still what they were at the start of this conversation. A set of numbers below the pursuing vessel continues to count down, establishing that the distance between it and them is narrowing at a rate that can be measured.

She says, "I don't think they're using their top speed. I think they still think they're sneaking up on us. And that brings up the parable of the boy and the lion."

"I'm not familiar with it."

"Lions were a legendary, and no longer extant, predator species from the homeworld. They were known as the king of the beasts, and they . . ."

"I know what lions were." During his classical education, references to them had been as common as references to dragons and klingons. "Go on."

"A boy native to the region is crossing the savannah on foot when he becomes aware of a lion following him. There is no cover, no rescuers he can call to. His one advantage is that the lion is in no hurry. As long as his own gait remains unhurried, the lion's gait is unhurried. It only gains one step for every ten he walks. Of course, he could run, but then it would run—and there is no contest between them. If it runs, it will bring him down in seconds. He can just barely see a tree in the distance, one that might permit him to evade the lion, if he can get to the higher branches capable of supporting his weight, where the lion would be too heavy to follow. So the problem becomes algebraic. Given the variables, can the boy cover that distance, losing one pace out of ten, and still have time to climb before the lion reaches him?"

"I don't know. Can we?"

"As it is, they'll be on us in five hours."

There's nothing they can use for cover, no gravity well they can use for tricky maneuvers, not within the next five hours. There's just emptiness, all the way to Henry, making them the equivalent of that boy trapped on the savannah.

He says, "Let's make sure what we're talking about."

Stang plots a radical course change, almost perpendicular to the current heading. It is a move so sudden and so nonsensical that to any observers not intent on bringing them to heel, it would look like the people aboard were having a violent argument. The Dart does not alter its course immediately, there being a number of light-seconds between their position and its own, but within thirty seconds of the intelligence aboard being able to know, it changes course, not to parallel, but to intercept.

She tries to take advantage of the built-in delay, faking another course change and then, just before the delay built in by the other vessel's reaction time, cutting hard in the opposite

ANALOG

direction. This trick regains some of the seconds lost. But the pilot of the Dart compensates and is again in less than a minute on track for interception.

She tries zig-zagging. But the chief problem with a zig-zag is that it averages out to a straight line. In open space, a three-dimensional version of Delia's hypothetical savannah, any real course change only steers them further away from where they need to be. Whoever's piloting the Dart reacts to the first couple minutes of this, but then appears to realize that there's no point; over the next few minutes of that he just maintains course, drawing a beeline that gains for several minutes.

Whoever's chasing them might not be a genius at this sort of thing, any more than the lion of the mind-problem. But he doesn't have to be. The circumstances only require basic competence.

"That's enough," Draiken says. "Give us as much time as you can."

She restores their original heading to Henry, a place that they will now never reach without a confrontation. "We'll have to decide what to do, soon."

"After lunch," says Draiken.

* * *

People unused to crises have a common question, "How can you think of food at a time like this?" Draiken has spent his life being confronted by one crisis or another, and he knows that when you have a moment of peace before the inevitable eruption of an emergency, you damn well force yourself to think about it. This is especially so when you don't know if you might be facing capture by enemies who might not obey scruples about feeding you regularly. You take care of your nutritional needs while you can.

He brings Stang one of those super-spicy, semi-curdled stews she unaccountably loves, that she has identified as comfort food from her childhood, but which completely disgust him, a man who once crossed a desert without supplies and had nothing to eat but the occasional carrion so old that it had been abandoned even by scavengers. Honestly: in the pursuit of survival he's eaten stuff not fit for human consumption, and he would still even in the final extremity hesitate about resorting to one of her stews. He can only wonder about the conditions of a childhood that would foster enthusiasm for them. His own meal is not much better. It's emergency rations and designed to motivate survival, because nobody in the universe would ever willingly choose it for a ceremonial final meal: a kind of simulated fish loaf that Draiken, who still mourns the years he spent in a sunlit place eking out a living from the sea, cannot help but consider a war crime.

They dine together, watching the Dart grow closer. Then he gathers up and disposes of the leavings, and makes a more appetizing meal for the prisoner.

He slides open the panel in the door. "Food."

Jathyx collects the tray, and returns, stooping to position his narrow eyes at slot altitude. "And why are you still here, dead man? Have you decided you have more to say to me?"

"Somebody's chasing us. Somebody not station security. Are your friends trying to rescue you?"

"I have no friends." This sounds less like defiance than a simple statement of fact. "What do you think of me? That I would sit and drink, take topical euphorics, share jokes, with men I might be ordered to kill tomorrow? Enjoy the companionship of those who might be ordered to kill me?"

"Whatever you want to call it," Draiken says. "Would they come for you?"

"We have a saying, those of us who kill for them. We are not men. We are knives, with men attached. Break a knife and it can be replaced. Break a man and he can be replaced. We admit to no friends, no brothers: just our own strong grip on the blade, the rewards of money, power, living on our feet instead of our knees. No, dead man: my employers would only come for me if they had some reason to turn the blade against my own throat. To rescue me? Eh, not so much."

This lines up with all the intel about the ethos of the cartel on Piithkarath. It sounds psychopathic, but Draiken knows that he has no right to feel superior to it, not after his years working

covert operations for agencies with much the same attitude toward the disposability of their agents.

"Perhaps," Jathyx says, with what appears to be genuine fascination, "they come for you? Or your giant bitch? Those who have done the kind of things you can do, do you not also have stalkers who will take to stalking you?"

"I do," Draiken says. "Enjoy your meal. I'll be back with another, if I'm still alive."

He slides the panel shut, stands for a moment with his forehead pressed against the cold metal of the door, and for a few seconds bats his forehead against the unyielding surface, miming a form of self-harm that might well be appropriate.

Then he returns to Stang, receives confirmation that the Dart is still following, and says, "As long as it's inevitable, might as well find out what they want."

"I'm sure that if you phrase yourself politely enough they'll let us go."

"It would be nice, but I'm not hoping for that. Just a clear statement of intent. Start with requesting identification."

Stang composes a text signal and sends it flying.

They wait two minutes for it to be received, for possible replies to be considered, for a response to be composed and sent.

None arrives.

"Ask them if they want us to release the knife."

"Not 'Jathyx'?"

"I'd rather not send any signals with his name, to bounce around Juje-knows-where. Say 'the knife' and if they're after him, they'll know who we're talking about. Nobody else will make any sense of it."

She complies. Another two minutes pass. No response. But the numbers on the position map continue to count down.

"One last question," Draiken says. "Ask them if they're looking for the last free man."

She gives him a look of frank skepticism. "Full of ourselves, are we?"

"It's sarcasm," he says. "Something my enemies used to call me, in the old days."

"So they're the ones who thought you were full of yourself."

He grins a little. "You have absolutely no idea."

"Were they right?"

"Whatever ground I was able to gain against them, I gained by being the most aggravating, self-righteous bastard alive. Drove a number of them around the bloody bend. In any event, they're more likely to connect that title to the person I used to be, than this name, 'Draiken.' I didn't start using it until much later."

She composes the message and fires it off.

One minute and thirty seconds later the reply arrives, and it's nothing they could have expected: a few seconds from some ancient dramatic presentation, culled from Juje alone knows what obscure archive. Four beings, a human woman and three apparent aliens, or rather, three unmistakable human beings made up to resemble creatures who might be alien or might be beings out of myth or might just be eccentric dressers, stare up at the sky in horror as some woman piloting a personal transport of some kind uses the vehicle's exhaust to write words in the air. It is not any alphabet Draiken knows. It must date back to the era of the original artifact. But from the reaction of the woman on the ground and her oddly-attired friends, whatever those letters spell is supposed to reduce them all to despair.

The image freezes, and two words in the more recognizable lettering of Hom.Sap Mercantile appear, providing the translation

(SURRENDER DOROTHY!)

before the image fades.

Stang says, "I've got to hand it to you, Draiken. You have some interesting enemies."

"That I do."

He doesn't elaborate. He doesn't tell them how often their interrogations of him had included such irrelevant bullshit, including the calculated use of outdated iconography, leaving him

ANALOG

with little to cling to but his own crumbling sense of self. It's this, if nothing else, that persuades him that this is something he'd almost given up on encountering, a direct connection to the very same people who'd once devoted so much time and energy to breaking him.

And so he feels something that he hasn't permitted himself to feel in some time.

Rage.

She says, "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that there is a way to deal with a lion stalking you on the savannah."

"Yes?"

"You drop some raw meat."

* * *

A little less than thirty minutes later, their transport drops a potato sack from its rear cargo bay.

Not that this matters much, but it is not the same potato sack they earlier used to haul Jathyx around. Standard protocol requires the material to be inspected at length after each use, to eliminate any possibility of undetected micro-punctures turning it into a death trap for your next passenger. Otherwise, re-using a potato sack, if it cannot be avoided, is a good way to risk hauling around a corpse, or delivering an oxygen-deprived idiot. No, it's better to use another sack straight out the package; better still if you also strive for redundancy and only carry passengers clad in vacuum suits, which is not always possible if you're evacuating casualties in a hurry. But it sure as hell makes sense if your living cargo is both competent and ambulatory.

This sack comes from a different manufacturer and is larger, less padded, more amorphous, than the lumpy parcel previously occupied by Jathyx. Stang has inflated it only enough to give it some semblance of shape, and so it undulates like an oversized soap bubble with every movement Draiken makes. He tries to stay near its center, touching its interior walls as little as possible, though of course he cannot avoid his own minimal movements and the resulting air currents making him drift into those walls far more often than he would like. It does no harm. It's just annoying.

The sack does not slow down just because it's been jettisoned. Nothing exists to arrest its forward progress; it continues heading in the general direction of Henry, at the same speed their transport had been. It's still moving faster than most vehicles have, for most of humanity's history. But Stang had braked by about half their prior forward rate, before ejecting it, in order to leave room for accelerating to leave it far behind. Had the walls not been opaque, Draiken would have seen their transport transition from being almost motionless in relation to him, to being a distant speck of light among many, dimming to nothingness.

The assumption, of course, is that he has interpreted the Dart's message correctly, that it will match velocities to collect him, and not let him spin in the void, an untenable distance from rescue, rather than continue to chase Stang. It also assumes that his pursuers won't accelerate again, once he's been collected, to resolve that loose end afterward. Given their greater acceleration potential, both strategies would work, rendering this sacrifice pointless.

Either way, he will soon be in a great deal of trouble. All that remains to be decided is what form of trouble that will be: slow suffocation, or capture.

And again he thinks what he thought in that narrow corridor on Piithkarath.

He is going to die.

Either by their hands or by his own; because he will not permit himself to fall back into their hands, to be tortured and poked and prodded, the way they once had.

Once, he'd been confined to a place even smaller than this. It was one of several cells where he'd been brought to, after one attempt at escape, or another. This one was a little circular hole glowing with pink light from no visible source. It was not tall enough to stand in nor wide enough to lie down in, not unless he curled into a fetal position, an undignified measure he would not resort to.

So he sat with his knees drawn up in silence until the pink light flared and a familiar voice known to him from many interrogations spoke to him, through some unseen speaker. "We don't enjoy this, you know."

The words were peevish and sorrowful, the tone that of a put-upon parent, tired of constantly having to discipline a child who refused to learn.

The man not yet known as Draiken said, "I am not concerned with what you enjoy."

"We are people like any other. We have friends. Families. Life outside this place. We are human. We feel pity. We cannot help feeling sorry for you, at your dogged refusal to surrender to the inevitable."

"There is nothing inevitable."

"We have given you something many dispossessed throughout history would have killed to obtain: a home. It is comfortable, and it is secure, and if we your caretakers sometimes go to extreme lengths to break you, it is no more than the solicitousness of a new pet owner, trying to teach a puppy the rules of the house. That is love, whether you recognize it or not. We are prepared to indulge you, to see to any needs you might have. All you need to do is love us back."

"I give you nothing, not my love and not my hate."

The voice said nothing for a long time. Then he resumed: "You are aware that to catch a powerful fish from an open boat, one allows it just enough freedom, at the end of the line, to spend itself to exhaustion. We apply this knowledge to recalcitrant men. We let them escape, let them deplete their failing strength on a fruitless attempt at distance, then draw them back. If they escape again, we let them go farther; then farther still. Always they end up in the hands of us, their benefactors. You play the role of the fish, whether you know it or not. We let you go and we catch you again, and any freedom you enjoy in the middle is just illusion, a necessary fiction to aid in your housebreaking. It is routine."

"I killed three of you this time. You did not take it as routine."

"No one can be pleased by the failure to learn. The ones you killed were once as stubborn as yourself, but they learned to take their orders with enthusiasm. You will be one of them, before long. You will come to know the value of acceptance and cooperation."

"I accept nothing. I cooperate with nothing."

The owner of that voice is dead now, he has heard; not by his own hand, but by the mortality that afflicts all men, even those who live at a time when rejuvenation is a thing. No one lives forever, not even those who can enjoy more than one taste of youth. Draiken is not only willing to die, not only resigned to it, but there are times like now when he looks upon that prospect with a rancid eagerness, as long as he can wound the part of the Universe that is home to such voices.

And so he waits, and so he is calm, even in his inability to control what happens next. He just waits, and thinks of Aletha, and of Thorne, and of the Porrinyards, and of Stang; of Andrea Cort, who had been a strange alien thing he'd regarded as a puzzle that, had he obeyed different priorities, might have been a puzzle worth solving; and of many others before them who he had known and could have loved, had he ever been able to feel safety in love.

Not for the first time, he regards himself with an honesty too brutal to be taken from other men, and he tells himself, *you are too stupid to live.*

In this way he occupies his time until the abrupt jolt advises him that it is time to return to survival mode.

Something's pulling at the sack. Claiming it.

He can picture an EVA-suited form taking it by the handle and initiating a burn, to carry it to a waiting airlock.

So it's to be capture, then. Which had always been the greatest likelihood. Even had the pilots of the Dart not been after him specifically, they cannot know who or what has been left in this surprise package for them to find; they must open and examine.

All right, then.

More tugging, repositioning.

Followed by the sudden return of weight, as the potato sack enters the Dart's generated local gravity. Draiken happens to be floating at the center of the sack at the moment, and as the sack lands hard on a metal surface, he does too, protected both by it and his EVA suit. He emits an

involuntary grunt, one that fortunately cannot carry all the way to his captor while the airlock around them remains in vacuum. Then he hears the incoming whoosh of pressurization, the familiar sound of an inner door sliding open, and multiple sets of footsteps as the potato sack is dragged into the Dart proper.

Nobody talks. It would be helpful to derive information from whatever words his captors exchanged as they performed immediate tasks; even that minimal but critical intelligence, the very number of them, as they aligned their efforts with one another with the assistance of sentence fragments like, “Get that,” and “Careful,” and “Over here.” He might even be able to gauge just how hostile they were. But they say nothing: they work, if not as a well-oiled machine, then certainly as a silent one. They are either practiced at retrieving potato sacks from interplanetary space, or so used to working from each other, that they need no chatter between them as they carry it to a central location where they can work on it together.

By the time they lower him back to the floor, where he gets the sense of them surrounding him, he thinks that he might be facing three people, but he cannot be sure.

They cluster at the base of the sack, where the immediate plan must be to keep an eye on him as they undo the seal.

But he has no intention of leaving via that exit.

What he’s carried with him all this time in the sack, what he now takes from its magnetic clamp at his hip, is an item from his transport’s tool kit, one of several he requisitioned for use during his capture. It’s a hypersaw, a handheld tool used for something he’s never been any good at—repairs in space. The blade, already sharp, can be set to piston at a thousand times per second, slicing almost all surfaces like butter; among them, EVA suits, which is why the two-hundred-page manual is rich with fervent warnings to exercise caution and only use it when the blade is pressed against the specific surface you wish to cut. You don’t want to hold it at your side, when it’s on, the manual warns. Allowing it to brush against your EVA suit in vacuum would be a bad thing. You could get killed that way.

He turns it on and, in one steady slash, opens a slit a meter and a half long, that he launches himself out in the same moment. As it happens, they’d put him down near a bulkhead and so there is not much room to roll away before rising, not with grace, but he eschews grace, uses that wall as a launching pad, and rises facing them.

He sees at once that his estimate is wrong.

There are five of them.

Draiken performs an instant assessment of their likely threat level, in the process indulging an intermittent old habit of giving them provisional names as he goes.

There are two men, one slightly built but possessing the edited-down look of a man whose speed will make him dangerous in a fight. *Call him Alpha*. The one next to him is larger, bulkier, meaner-looking, already forming fists that resemble blunt objects. *Beta*. Their expressions are dull portraits of malice, and so Draiken makes the simple guess that they’re muscle, not leaders.

The one still in an EVA suit, sans helmet, is a slightly-built woman with jet-black hair and features obscured by a tattoo-scape of jagged lines, possibly intended as lightning-bolts. *Shock*. The fourth, behind her, is another woman, whose almond-shade skinsuit matches her complexion and appears an odd attempt to simulate nudity: the bristly halo around her head is not hair, but a prosthetic wireset, that constantly waves back and forth as if driven by an unseen breeze. *Awe*. The fifth, behind all of them, is not human at all, but a Riirgaan, whose fixed features and reptilian cast fail to hide the posture of a being who had not expected their prisoner to rebel in quite this manner, quite this soon. He backs away as far as the limited space inside the Dart will permit him, content to use the human beings as shield. No reason to name him right away, not when *the Riirgaan* will be more than sufficient.

Draiken can only wish he’d doffed the suit. It will offer some protection, but in a fight against five, he would much prefer to be light on his feet and have all his martial skillset available to him.

He is just beginning to consider ways to talk his way out of this when the two men he’s

mentally dubbed Alpha and Beta march toward him, not caring about his brandished hypersaw at all.

God damn it.

Against his better judgment he flicks off the hypersaw and returns it to its magnetic sheath, because he would rather not slice bloody gobbets from human beings if there's any way to avoid it.

He puts Alpha down with a jab to the throat, takes the tackle that drives him against a wall to his back, rams an elbow into the side of Beta's head, breaks Beta's toes with his heel, puts him down and breathless with a punch to the belly.

A kick to the face and Beta's down, though not necessarily out.

Alpha's clutching his throat but trying to rise.

No time to be fancy about this.

Draiken breaks his kneecap.

Alpha falls to the deck screaming.

* * *

Shock and Awe speak in unison, their shared voice seeming to emanate from the empty space between them. "Those two," they say, "never were big on strategy. They're always the first two down, against anybody at all formidable."

And Draiken thinks, *Oh, Hell.*

They're the recipients of cylinking, an enhancement he's only encountered once before, on New London. Their minds have been wired together, forming one personality out of two. Essentially one person, they enjoy shared greyware with ridiculous advantages when it comes to strategic cooperation, reaction time, and the capacity to run rings around any unenhanced person trying to take them out in a fight. He knows this. He is supernaturally fast by most human standards, but his last fight with a linked pair ended with him in custody after twenty seconds.

They say, "Are you Draiken?"

He is, of course, still wearing his helmet, which obscures his face. But he sees no practical benefit in denying his identity. "It's one of the names I use. Who are you?"

They don't answer. They just come after him, one on each side of the deflated potato sack, their movements effortlessly coordinated even though one is in a bulky EVA suit and the other is not.

Draiken does what makes the most sense and goes after the unsuited one, Awe, going for a strike in mid-chest to deprive her of breath.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with his strike, but it fails utterly. She is not where she should be, but somehow just outside his range, and even as he tries to correct for a backswing, Shock is driving a kick into his hip.

The impact of this blow does not get past all the armor and the padding beneath it to vulnerable flesh and bone, but it accomplishes what it is meant to in driving him back a step and forcing his attention to just staying on his feet. He stumbles against the bulkhead to his right, corrects, lashes out at Awe again, and again somehow misses, not by a mile as the ancient saying goes (whatever a "mile" is), but by a margin so narrow that anyone without her shared condition would have likely flinched; she does not. Instead, she drops out of sight, and he would normally devote time right now to wondering just why she'd do that, but he does not have that time; not when the next unexpected input is his helmet's face-plate, crumbling.

EVA suit faceplates are not supposed to fragment. They can be broken, and they can be penetrated, but they are built to withstand impacts that would reduce the human face behind them to a soup of bone and liquefied flesh. If they don't survive anything that's been thrown at them, it's a near certainty that the person behind them won't either.

Draiken therefore finds it a shock to feel multiple micro-fragments of the transparent material peppering his cheeks and forehead, stinging one eye in what amounts to agony, and yet to still be alive at the end of it, his eyes watering at a suddenly unobstructed view.

Shock withdraws her gloved hand. He had not seen her strike coming at all. She is wearing

something on the tip of that hand, something that makes that entire hand look fuzzy and out of focus. Whatever it is gives off a high-pitched whine; high-speed vibration of some kind, though it escapes him how it can pulse fast enough to shatter his faceplate and not do the same favor for all the bones in her fingers.

The one positive is that this development simplifies things. If they're using deadly weaponry, so can he.

The negative is that when he clutches for the hypersaw on his hip, he finds Awe's hand already on the handle. His gloved hand has landed on her bare one, and for no more than a heartbeat, the outcome remains in doubt. Her grip is sure even if part of it is on the blade, his is not so much on the hilt as on her fist.

Were they fighting for a knife, or for any other weapon in a holster, she would win or at the very least hold him at bay long enough for Shock to strike again.

The one variable in his favor is that the on-off switch for the hypersaw is not in the hilt, but in his suit.

He experiences what happens next as a jolt of pure agony, as their struggles slice through the material of his suit and beyond it to take out a slice of the skin at his hip—but he is prepared for the pain and willing to take it in order to bestow what Awe gets; an equal shock that forces her to instinctively shift her grip away and gives him time to seize his own hold. He yanks the hypersaw away, and she screams, clutching that hand with the other. It no longer looks quite like a hand, the fingers and half the palm now dangling by a mere strip of skin and sinew.

It's more damage than he planned on or wanted, and had he the luxury of fretting over the morality of his actions, he would likely feel bad about it. But he has taken some serious damage himself, and so it's remarkable enough that he refrains from bringing the saw to bear and instead elbows her as hard as he can in the face, slamming the back of her skull against the bulkhead and giving her the excuse she probably needs to pass out.

Shock looks green. She would. Draiken's past encounter with the linked pair known as the Porrinyards has given him the impetus to research just how the enhancement works. She would have felt everything her other half Awe just felt, the same way she would have felt a direct attack on herself.

More to the point, more critical where tactics are concerned, is something he's learned about linked pairs, in general.

The forced unconsciousness of one of her bodies reduces the useful intelligence, and the reaction speed, of the other by about half.

He advances.

She jabs with the glove. He blocks it with his hypersaw. The impact gives off a burst of heat and light that stuns both of them. They fall back and join again. This time he gives her a deliberate opening. She jabs, not going for his exposed face, but for his chest, her blurred fingers cutting through the reinforced material of his EVA suit like wet paper. For an instant he feels a tremendous heat even through the inner layer of padding, and is aware that if his chestplate offers no protection then neither will his flesh, or his ribs.

He does something she surely would have foreseen, had her other half and sibling still been awake.

He brings the hypersaw down like a guillotine and amputates her hand at the wrist.

Even as it tumbles to the deck, she stumbles back, features contorting in disbelief.

He puts her down, as humanely as he knows how, as much of an eleventh-hour mercy as it might be.

He tells the Riirgaan, "If you have something to address their wounds, this is the time to get it. As long as you don't make any sudden moves against me, I won't stop you."

The Riirgaan advances, first hesitantly and then with haste, eager to get the job done so he can scurry back out of range as soon as possible. He takes a canister from its slot on the bulkhead, sprays the mangled hand of one linked woman with fast-congealing crystal, then does the same for the other's pulsing wrist-stump. He doesn't bother with the two men,

whose injuries are less serious and not as urgent to him as putting distance between himself and this man who took out his team in less than minute. "Thank you," he says. "You did not have to give me that opportunity. I consider it a kindness."

The Riirgaan's apparent surrender strikes Draiken as a relief. He has had to fight more martially inclined members of the species from time to time, and the sons of bitches can kick. He says, "Who sent you?"

"I like that," the Riirgaan says. "You don't waste any time on asking who I am. You know that my name would mean nothing to you, and that neither would the names of my colleagues. You get straight to the heart of the matter, with your very first question. Most efficient of you, sir."

"It doesn't seem to be saving me any time," Draiken says.

"You already know who sent me. It's been many years, and so most of the parties who once harassed you have either scattered or retired or died. But some of their heirs remain, and though the position they reported to you on Greeve was that they'd written you off as yesterday's problem, they have been apprised of some of your recent exploits and feel that you've established the potential to become a renewed nuisance today. My associates and I are among several independent agencies who have been tasked to return you to their custody, for debriefing."

"You know that I would rather die than once again subject myself to their version of debriefing."

Riirgaans are incapable of smiling, but in dealing with humans they sometimes employ a wry bow, and so this Riirgaan employs one now. "That was discussed, yes. You may take comfort in the knowledge that alive is still preferred, though only just in some quarters."

"How did you know where to find me?"

"Your movements are not easy to predict, sir, but once we establish the first few map points, the rest is relatively easy to narrow down to a few possibilities. One nearly needs to list the places that align with your specific interests, and narrow them down according to your most recent confirmed movements. The use of certain mind-manipulation technology on Piithkarath certainly made it a locale likely to attract your interest, and though we didn't know what you look like now, it was a simple matter to take up residence there and wait for you to identify yourself by making some noise. This you did."

"They've never employed nonhumans before."

"I assure you," the Riirgaan says, "they've made all sorts of allies in recent times. A necessary adaptation, given what's coming for humanity."

"Which is?"

"War, sir."

"Among who?"

The Riirgaan appears to take pleasure in enlightening him. "Between everybody and humanity, of course."

"You're lying."

"Do you ever pay attention to anything but your own petty obsessions? Surely you've noticed how much grumbling there's been, of late, among the nonhuman powers? It has been significant, and most intelligent analysts suspect that your race's years of being permitted to exist unmolested, in all its perverse rapaciousness, have entered their twilight. Soon, many powers will cooperate in a reckoning of genocidal scale, and until then, what centers of power you have are scrambling for allies and sponsors. Your old antagonists are among those trying to find . . . a place."

This is too much for Draiken to take in, right now. He might have time to dwell on it, later, but he has learned that the best possible way to deal with a problem well beyond his ken is to break it down into smaller ones, and worry only about those. So he says, "Where were you to take me?"

"If you were willing to go there, then you just maimed a number of my people for no reason."

"Where?"

The Riirgaan gives him the name of a star system. The name of a planet, in that star system. The name of a city, on that planet. He gives each with what seems like pleasure. And then, as has always been inevitable, as has been visible to Draiken since the beginning of this conversation, he makes the move he has always intended to, a sudden grab for the hidden projectile weapon Draiken spotted as far back as the beginning of this conversation.

It has never been a major concern.

Nor is it now.

The Riirgaan is easy.

* * *

It is now five days later. This together with the period already traveled constitutes more than twice the length of time he originally promised Jathyx it would take to reach their destination, but between the irritating delay with the Riirgaan's crew, the principled care they took in disabling that vessel and stashing it somewhere where it may be retrieved and its occupants rescued before their life support fails, certain subsequent difficulties in rendezvousing with Stang, and a few other problems involving navigation past system security forces—who because of the problems have now had time to fan out through the entire system looking for the vessels that left Piithkarath after the explosion—it has not been the easiest of journeys.

It would be nice to have the easiest of journeys, just once; but Draiken is aware that in this business he might have to wait for his passage into the land of the dead.

They land in a pockmarked debris field on that part of Henry now swathed in night, one kilometer away from another vessel that sits atop a lumpy ridge, waiting for them. A brief exchange of signals with that other vessel, just to confirm that all is well, and Draiken opens the door to the brig, inviting Jathyx out.

Jathyx emerges warily, blade in hand, the look of a man who knows that this must be some kind of trick. "I'm surprised, dead man. No paralysis?"

"No," Draiken says. "And you can keep your weapon, if you prefer. This is the time for trust."

"Again: you are a fool. Nothing keeps me from cutting your throat."

"Nothing," Draiken agrees, "except that I've already stopped you from doing it twice."

"Come on," Stang says. "We're about to meet new people. We're showing you enough respect to allow you the chance to do it with dignity."

It's been days in the confines of that small room, and a spirit as feral as his must cry out for the blood of his jailers, but Jathyx sees the sense of this argument, and with no shortage of grumbling returns his blade to its sheath. "This is for you, woman. The other I still owe a death, until he proves otherwise, but you, I'm beginning to think, might be worth knowing."

She jerks her eyes Draiken's way. "Tell him that. He's near-sighted."

The suit Draiken wore during his altercation with the crew of the Dart may have been damaged beyond repair, but nobody who has any choice at all travels in space without spare gear, and as long as he has had to provide several for Stang, who's hard to fit, he has done himself the same favor. It further fosters trust to let Jathyx examine all of them first and decide which one he will wear, and which one Draiken will wear.

This process, aggravating as it is, delays their departure by twenty minutes, but at last they're ready to go.

Henry is a small world that occupies no strategically useful position and has already been mined of everything that might have made it interesting to anybody. It's not that nobody ever goes there, it's that there's no good reason to go there unless you need to go somewhere, anywhere: not quite the ass-end of this solar system, but certainly as dull a place as the solar system has to offer. The conditions there are only one-eighth g, and so, once they leave the generated gravity of their vessel, they bounce about comically, in the manner that people just naturally do, when visiting such places. After the long days of confinement, it is hard not to feel some exuberance, despite the urgency of their message, and even Jathyx displays some jolliness, as they make their way across the cratered landscape, to the vessel waiting for them in the near distance. Even his regularly reiterated death threats—and honestly, he seems incapable of passing more than thirty seconds without issuing some reminder that they remain in force—now

emerge as amiable, more like respect paid to ritual than imminent promises.

Draiken still walks behind him, a vantage point that, in the absence of ambient sound, provides constant tactical knowledge of the man's movements. He cannot see the assassin's face, but gait alone conveys his upbeat mood, which lifts his own, and so it happens that about halfway across the distance they must travel he surrenders to his own heart and says, "Would you like to know something that might surprise you, Mr. Jathyx?"

"It depends on what kind of surprise you mean. A knife in the back is a surprise, but not one anyone would welcome."

Draiken says, "It won't be that."

"What, then?"

"I don't think it's going to matter to you at all, but it needs to be said: despite everything, I like you. I think we're very much versions of the same person. I think that if circumstances were different, we could be friends, even brothers."

"I have never had friends, or brothers. Nor needed them."

"I know. You've told me some of this."

It is nearly possible to shrug in a space suit, but Jathyx's momentary hesitation communicates the same meaning. "It is who I am."

"I agree, you've been the weapon of corrupt forces for an awfully long time, now, and one possible explanation is that it's your nature and all you were ever capable of. Another is that you are what you are because it was always most useful, to those corrupt forces, for you to think of yourself that way and to reject any possibility that you might live by any other means. But every man harbors many other potential versions of himself, including men who may have deserved life more, who they may not be aware of, and who they deny the chance to live. I know this intimately, Jathyx. I have spent the entirety of my life murdering the other men I always could have been. Happier men, more peaceful men. Burying them, so that I could be the one who walked away from the grave."

"I think you believe you are superior to me."

"Not at all," Draiken says, mildly. "I have made my choices. But I, at least, made them with my eyes open."

"And so?"

"I'm about to deliver on my promise."

By now they are almost upon the other vessel. The airlock opens to admit them, and they step inside, a certain awkwardness rising between them now that everything that can be said, up to this moment, has been said. The outer door closes, the airlock does what airlocks do, and they enter, finding a room where one tall woman in her apparent sixties, with dusky skin, harsh features, and eyes like breaches into their own version of vacuum, stands at rigid attention, hands clasped behind her back. She wears the gray uniform of a naval commander from one of the smaller Hom.Sap alliances, her hair gray and cut so close to the scalp that the individual bristles look like needles. The overwhelming impression she gives is iron strength.

Draiken removes his helmet. "Hello, Commander."

"Hello, Mr. Draiken. I had almost given up on you. And Delia. I'm happy to see that this vain-glorious fool hasn't gotten you killed yet."

Stang has also removed her helmet. "Not for lack of trying."

"I know. I've been monitoring system traffic. The two of you certainly know how to break things." She nods at Jathyx, who remains helmeted, almost frozen, as paralyzed as he might have been, had Draiken decided to reinstitute the security measure so recently used to control him. "And I suppose this is the man you've been talking about? I'm afraid I need more than an anonymous, space-suited figure to believe what you've been telling me."

"You'll get it," Draiken says. He glances at the prisoner, who still remains unwilling to unveil himself, and says, "Mr. Jathyx, this is General Lera Arkhem, representative of the system defense forces of the Belari Alliance, an independent government allied with the Confederacy, but not of it. She's traveled a great distance, and suffered any number of professional hardships, to come here. I've gone to a great deal of trouble to bring you two together. Please show your

face.”

Jathyx still remains helmeted. His voice is unamplified and muffled by the transparencies between himself and this vessel’s atmosphere, but is still intelligible enough for his anger to ring loud and clear. “You lied, dead man. You said this was all about proving your mad story to me.”

“No,” Draiken says, mildly but with a regret as palpable as the tension between them, “I never said anything like that. I only said that this was about delivering proof, and allowed you to assume that you were the intended recipient. In fact, you *are* the proof, and she is the ally I seek.”

“Son of a whore!”

“Maybe. Please believe me when I say that I also hope, with all my heart, that you will take as much enlightenment from what’s about to happen, as she does. I’d like to believe that it’s not too late for you. Please remove your helmet.”

The general’s expression flickers. Perhaps she already knows, can already see through the opaque faceplate what she has come here hoping to see. Perhaps this is the first moment she has really dared to believe. And perhaps she has just sent a message, because a door in the wall behind her chooses that moment to slide open, admitting three other people: a woman in her apparent forties, a lean boy occupying the precise time of life when youth gives way to adulthood, a girl about five years younger who clings to the woman both young people resemble, stoically fighting back tears.

Both the boy and the girl also bear an unmistakable resemblance to Jathyx.

The man whose purpose all this time was to function as living testimony reaches for his helmet, but is overcome with violent trembling before he can complete the act of removing it.

Draiken steps over to him and a practiced flicker of his hand taps in the emergency code normally reserved for releasing those suffocating inside suits that have run out of air. Jathyx’s faceplate slides sideways into its internal housing, revealing the same ferret-like, savage features the man had worn while committing untold savageries on Piithkarath—but now they are trembling with fear and hysteria, and glistening with the tears flowing down his cheeks. His agony emerges in the form of a scream. “I was an orphan!” he insists. “I committed my first murder when I was twelve!”

“Impossible,” says the general, whose equally distraught expression now makes it much easier to discern the maternal resemblance. “You only disappeared five years ago.”

Adam-Troy Castro's short fiction has been nominated for two Hugos, three Stokers, and eight Nebulas. His 27 books include three novels about far-future murder investigator Andrea Cort, and six about the very strange young boy named Gustav Gloom. See www.adamtroycastro.com.