

THE COPENHAGEN INTERPRETATION

Paul Cornell

With nominations for two *Doctor Who* episodes, “Father’s Day” and “Human Nature”/“The Family of Blood”; a comic, *Captain Britain and MI-13: Vampire State*; and a novelette, “One of Our Bastards Is Missing,” Paul Cornell is the only person to be a Hugo finalist in all three media. Paul’s thrilling new tale of daring espionage in a timeline somewhat different from our own is his first story for *Asimov’s* and his third in a series concerning Jonathan Hamilton. Paul is also the author of two novels, *Something More* and *British Summertime*, from Gollancz. A third book will be coming out from Tor in 2012.

The best time to see Kastellet is in the evening, when the ancient fortifications are alight with glow worms, a landmark for anyone gazing down on the city as they arrive by carriage. Here stands one of Copenhagen’s great parks, its defense complexes, including the home of the Forsvarets Efterretningstjeneste, and a single windmill, decorative rather than functional. The wind comes in hard over the Langelinie, and after the sun goes down, the skeleton of the whale that’s been grown into the ground resonates in sympathy and gives out a howl that can be heard in Sweden.

Hamilton had arrived on the diplomatic carriage, without papers, and, as etiquette demanded, without weapons or folds, thoroughly out of uniform. He watched the carriage heave itself up into the darkening sky above the park, and bank off to the southwest, swaying in the wind, sliding up the fold it made under its running boards. He was certain every detail was being registered by the FLV. You don’t look into the diplomatic bag, but you damn well know where the bag goes. He left the park through the healed bronze gates and headed down a flight of steps toward the diplomatic quarter, thinking of nothing. He did that when there were urgent questions he couldn’t answer, rather than run them round and round in his head and let them wear away at him.

The streets of Copenhagen. Ladies and gentlemen stepping from carriages, the occasional tricolor of feathers on a hat or, worse, once, tartan over a shoulder. Hamilton found himself reacting, furious. But then he saw it was Campbell. The wearer, a youth in evening wear, was the sort of fool who heard an accent in a bar and took up anything apparently forbidden, in impotent protest against the world. And thus got

fleece by Scotsmen.

He was annoyed at his anger. He had failed to contain himself.

He walked past the façade of the British embassy, with the Hanoverian regiment on guard, turned a corner and waited in one of those convenient dark streets that form the second map of diplomatic quarters everywhere in the world. After a moment, a door with no external fittings swung open and someone ushered him inside and took his coat.

"The girl arrived at the front door, in some distress. She spoke to one of our Hanoverians, Private Glassman, and became agitated when he couldn't understand her. Then she seems to have decided that none of us should understand her. We tried to put her through the observer inside the hallway, but she wouldn't hear of it." The ambassador was Bayoumi, a Musselman with grey in his beard. Hamilton had met him once before, at a ball held in a palace balanced on a single wave, grown out of the ocean and held there to mark the presence of royalty from three of the great powers. He had been exactly gracious, as he had to be, making his duty appear weightless. In this place, perhaps that was what he took it to be.

"So she could be armed?" Hamilton had made himself sit down, and now he was focusing on the swirls of lacquered gunwood on the surface of the ambassador's desk.

"She *could* be folded like origami."

"You're sure of the identification?"

"Well . . ." Hamilton recognized that moment when the diplomatic skills of a continental ambassador unfolded themselves. At least they were present. "Major, if we can, I'd like to get through this without compromising the girl's dignity—"

Hamilton cut him off. "Your people trusted nothing to the courier except a name and *assume* the EM out of here's compromised." Which was shoddy to the point of terrifying. "What?"

The ambassador let out a sigh. "I make it a point," he said, "never to ask a lady her age."

They had kept her in the entrance hallway and closed the embassy to all other business that day. Eventually, they had extended the embassy's security bunker to the hallway, created a doorway into it by drilling out the wall, and set up a small room for her inside it. She was separated from the rest of the embassy by a fold, which had light pushed through it, so Hamilton could watch her on an intelligent projection that took up much of a wall in one of the building's many unused office spaces.

Hamilton saw her face, and found he was holding his breath. "Let me in there."

"But if—"

"If she kills me nobody will care. Which is why she won't."

He walked into the room made of space, with a white sheen on the walls for the visual comfort of those inside. He closed the door behind him.

She looked at him. Perhaps she started to recognize him. She wavered with uncertainty.

He sat down opposite her.

She reacted as his gaze took her in, aware that he wasn't looking at her as a stranger should look at a lady. Perhaps that was tipping her toward recognition. Not that that would necessarily be a sign of anything.

The body was definitely that of Lustre Saint Clair: bobbed hair; full mouth; the affectation of spectacles; those warm, hurt eyes.

But she couldn't be more than eighteen. The notes in his eyes confirmed it, beyond

July 2011

all cosmetic possibility.

This was the Lustre Saint Clair he'd known. The Lustre Saint Clair from *fifteen years ago*.

"Is it you?" she said. In Enochian. In Lustre's voice.

He had been fourteen, having left Cork for the first time, indentured in the 4th Dragoons because of his father's debt, proud to finally be able to pay it through his service. He'd had the corners knocked off him and had yet to gain new ones at Keble. Billeted in Warminster, he had been every inch the Gentleman Cadet, forced to find a common society with the other ranks, who tended to laugh at the aristocracy of his Irish accent. They were always asking how many Tories he'd killed, and he'd never found an answer. Years later, he'd come to think he should have told the truth and said two and seen if that would shock them. He'd been acutely conscious of his virginity.

Lustre had been one of the young ladies it was acceptable for him to be seen with in town. Her being older than he was had appealed to Hamilton very much. Especially since she was reticent, shy, unable to overawe him. That had allowed him to be bold. Too bold, on occasion. They were always seeing and then not seeing each other. She was on his arm at dances, with no need of a card on three occasions, and then supposedly with some other cadet. But Hamilton had always annoyed Lustre by not taking those other suitors seriously, and she had always come back to him. The whole idiocy had taken less than three months, his internal calendar now said, incredibly. But it was years written in stone.

He had never been sure if she was even slightly fond of him until the moment she had initiated him into the mysteries. And they had even fought that night. But they had at least been together after that, for a while, awkward and fearful as that had been.

Lustre was a secretary for Lord Surtees, but she had told Hamilton, during that night of greater intimacy, that this was basically a lie, that she was also a courier, that in her head was the seed for a diplomatic language, that sometimes she would be asked to speak the words that made it grow into her, and then she would know no other language, and be foreign to all countries apart from the dozen people in court and government with whom she could converse. In the event of capture, she would say other words, or her package would force them on her, and she would be left with a language, in thought and memory as well as in speech, spoken by no other, which any other would be unable to learn, and she would be like that unto death, which, cut off from the sum of mankind that made the balance as she would be, would presumably and hopefully soon follow.

She'd said this to him as if she was making an observation about the weather. Not with the detachment that Hamilton had come to admire in his soldiers, but with a fatalism that made him feel sick that night and afraid. He hadn't known whether to believe her. It had been her seeming certainty of how she would end, that night, that had made him react, raise his voice, drag them back into one of their endless grindings of not yet shaped person on person. But in the weeks that followed, he had come to half appreciate those confidences, shrugging aside the terrible burden she put on him, and her weakness in doing so, if it all was true, because of the wonder of her.

He had done many more foolish and terrible things while he was a cadet. Every now and then he supposed he should have regrets. But what was the point? And yet here was the one thing he hadn't done. He hadn't left that little room above the inn and gone straight back to the barracks and asked for an interview with Lieutenant Rashid and told him that this supposed lady had felt able to share the secret of her status. He hadn't done it in all the weeks after.

The one thing he hadn't done, and, like some Greek fate or the recoil from a prayer

too few, here it was back for him.

Six months later, Lustre Saint Clair, after she'd followed His Lordship back to London and stopped returning Hamilton's letters, had vanished.

He'd only heard of it because he'd recognized a friend of hers at some ball, had distracted the lady on his arm and gone to pay his respects, and had heard of tears and horrors and none of the girls in Surtees' employ knowing what had become of her.

He'd hidden his reaction then. And ever after. He'd made what inquiries he could. Almost none. He'd found the journals for that day on his plate, and located something about a diplomatic incident between the Court of Saint James's and the Danes, both blaming the other for a "misunderstanding" that the writer of the piece was duty bound not to go into in any more detail, but was surely the fault of typical Dansk whimsy. Reading between the lines, it was clear that something had been lost, possibly a diplomatic bag. Presumably that bag had contained or been Lustre. And then his regiment had suddenly mustered and he'd been dragged away from it all.

For months, years, it had made him feel sick, starting with a great and sudden fear there at his desk. It had stayed his burden and only gradually declined. But nothing had come of it. As he had risen in the ranks, and started to do out of uniform work, he had quieted his conscience by assuring himself that he had had no concrete detail to impart to his superiors. She had been loose-lipped and awkward with the world. This is not evidence, these are feelings.

That had been the whole of it until that morning. When he had heard her name again, out of Turpin's mouth, when Hamilton had been standing in his office off Horseguards Parade.

That name, and her seeming return after fifteen years of being assumed dead.

Hamilton had concealed the enormity of his reaction. He was good at that now. His Irish blood was kept in an English jar.

At last he had heard the details he had carefully never asked about since he'd started doing out of uniform work. All those years ago, Lustre had been sent to Copenhagen on a routine information exchange, intelligence deemed too sensitive to be trusted to the embroidery or anything else that was subject to the whims of man and God. Turpin hadn't told him what the information was, only that it had been marked For Their Majesties, meaning that only the crowned heads of specific great powers and their chosen advisors could hear it. Lustre had been set down in one of the parks, met by members of the Politiets Efterretningstjeneste, and walked to Amalienborg Palace. Presumably. Because she and they never got there. They had simply not arrived, and after an hour of Dansk *laissez faire*, in which time it was presumably thought they might have gone to the pub or had a spot of lunch, the alarms had begun. Nothing had ever been found. There were no witnesses. It had been a perfect abduction, if that was what it was.

The great powers had panicked, Turpin had said. They'd expected the balance to collapse, for war to follow shortly. Armies across the continent and Solar System had been dispatched to ports and carriage posts. Hamilton remembered that sudden muster, that his regiment had been sent to kick the mud off their boots in Portsmouth. Which soon had turned into just another exercise. Turpin's predecessor had lost his job as a result of the affair, and shortly after that his life, in a hunting accident that was more of the former than the latter.

Hamilton had known better, this morning, than to say that whatever was in Lustre's head must have extraordinary value, for it to mean the end of the sacred trust of all those in public life, the end of everything. The thought of it had made him feel sick again, tugging on a thread that connected the import of what she'd carried to her willingness to talk.

"Is this matter," he'd asked, "still as sensitive?"

Turpin had nodded. "That's why I'm sending you. And why you're going to be briefed with Enochian. We presume that'll be all she's able to speak, or that's what we hope, and you're going to need to hear what she has to say and act on it there and then. The alternative would be to send a force to get her out of there, and, as of this hour, we're not quite ready to invade Denmark."

His tone had suggested no irony. It was said mad old King Frederik was amused by the idea of his state bringing trouble to the great powers. That he had aspirations to acquisitions in the Solar System beyond the few small rocks that currently had Dansk written through them like bacon.

The warmth of Turpin's trust had supported Hamilton against his old weakness. He'd taken on the language and got into the carriage to cross stormy waters, feeling not prayed for enough, yet unwilling to ask for it, fated and ready to die.

And so here she was. Or was she?

Was she a grown homunculus, with enough passing memory to recognize him? And speak Enochian too? No, surely that was beyond what could be stuffed into such a foul little brain. And assigning such personhood to such an object was beneath even the depths to which the Heeresnachrichtenamt would sink. Was she a real person with grown features to suggest young Lustre? That was entirely possible. But what was the point, when she'd be suspected immediately? Why not make her look the age she was supposed to be?

"Yes," he said in Enochian. "It's me."

"Then . . . it's true, God's-seen-it. What's been obvious since I . . . since I got back."

"Back from where?"

"They said someone with authority was coming to see me. Is that you?"

"Yes."

She looked as if she could hardly believe it. "I need protection. Once we're back in Britain—"

"Not until I know—"

"You know as well as I do that this room, this building—!"

"On the way in, when this was a hallway, why didn't you let yourself be observed?"

She took a breath and her mouth formed into a thin line. And suddenly they were back fighting again. Fools. Still. With so much at stake.

He should have told them. They should have sent someone else.

"Listen," she said, "how long has it been since you last saw me?"

"Decade and a half, give or take."

He saw the shock on her face again. It was as if she kept getting hurt by the same thing. By the echoes of it. "I saw the dates when I got out. I couldn't believe it. For me it's been . . . four years . . . or . . . no time at all, really."

Hamilton was certain there was nothing that could do this. He shook his head, putting the mystery aside for a moment. "Is the package safe?"

"Typical you, to gallop round. Yes! That's why I didn't take the observer machine! Those things have a reputation, particularly one here. It might have set me babbling."

But that was also what a homunculus or a cover would say. He found he was scowling at her. "Tell me what happened. Everything."

But then a small sound came from beside them. Where a sound couldn't be. It was like a heavy item of furniture being thumped against the wall.

Lustre startled, turned to look—

Hamilton leapt at her.

He felt the sudden fire flare behind him.

And then he was falling upward, sideways, back down again!

He landed and threw himself sidelong to grab Lustre as she was falling up out of

her chair, as it was crashing away from her. The room was battering at his eyes, milky fire, arcing rainbows. Two impact holes, half the chamber billowing from each. An explosion was rushing around the walls toward them.

A shaped charge, Hamilton thought in the part of his mind that was fitted to take apart such things and turn them round, with a fold in the cone to demolish artificially curved space.

Whoever they were, they wanted Lustre or both of them alive.

Hamilton grabbed her round the shoulders and threw her at the door.

She burst it open and stumbled into the sudden gravity of the corridor beyond. He kicked his heels on the spinning chair, and dived through after her.

He fell onto the ground, hard on his shoulder, rolled to his feet, and jumped to slam the door behind them. It did its duty and completed the fold seconds before the explosion rolled straight at it.

There was nobody waiting for them in the hallway.

So they'd been about to enter the fold through the holes they'd blown? They might have found their corpses. It was a mistake, and Hamilton didn't like to feel that his enemy made mistakes. He'd rather assume he was missing something.

He had no gun.

Alarms started up in distant parts of the building. The corridor, he realized, was filling with smoke from above.

There came the sound of running feet, coming down the stairs from above them.

Friend or foe? No way to tell.

The attack had come from outside, but there might have been inside help, might now be combatants pouring in. The front door had held, but then it had been folded to distraction. If they knew enough to use that charge, they might not have even tried it.

Lustre was looking at the only door they could reach before the running feet reached them. It had a sign on it that Hamilton's Danish notations read as "cellar."

He threw himself back at the wall, then charged it with his foot. Non-grown wood burst around the lock. He kicked it out. The damage would be seen. He was betting on it not mattering. He swung open the door and found steps beyond. Lustre ran inside, and he closed the door behind them.

He tried a couple of shadowy objects and found something he could lift and put against the door. A tool box. They were in a room of ancient boilers, presumably a back-up if the fuel cells failed.

"They'll find—!" Lustre began. But she immediately quieted herself.

He quickly found what he had suspected might be down here, a communications station on the wall. Sometimes when he was out of uniform he carried a small link to the embroidery, usually disguised as a watch to stop anyone from wondering what sort of person would have something like that. But he would never be allowed to bring such kit into a supposedly friendly country. The link on the wall was an internal system. He could only hope it connected to the link on the roof. He could and should have called the FLV. But he couldn't afford to trust the locals now. He couldn't have their systems register an honest call to Buckingham Palace or the building off Horseguards Parade. That would be a sin against the balance. So there was now only one person he could call. If she wasn't in her boudoir, he was dead and Lustre was back in the bag.

He tapped on the connector and blew the right notes into the receiver, hopefully letting the intelligent sound he was connecting to push past any listening ears.

To his relief, Cushion McKenzie came straight on the line, sounding urgent. Someone in the Palace might have tipped her off as to where he was tonight. "Johnny, what can I do for you?" Her voice came from the roof, the direction reserved for officers.

“Social call for papa.” He could hear the running feet coming along the corridor toward the door. Would they miss the damage in the gathering smoke?

“Extract, package, or kill?”

Kill meant him, a stroke that would take his life and erase what he knew, painlessly, he was assured. It was the only way an out of uniform officer could choose to die, self-murder being an option denied to the kit stowed in their heads. Cushion represented herself on the wider shores of the public embroidery as a salonist, but she was also thoroughly job. She’d once walked Hamilton out of Lisbon and into a public carriage with an armed driver, keeping up a stream of chatter that had kept him awake despite the sucking wound in his chest. He’d wanted to send her flowers afterward, but he couldn’t find anything in the *Language of Blooms* volume provided by his regiment that both described how he felt and kept the precious distance of the connection between them.

“Extract,” he said.

“Right. Looking.”

She was silent for a moment that bore hard on Hamilton’s nerves. Whoever was seeking them was now fumbling around like amateurs in front of that door. Perhaps that was why they’d botched the explosives. Hamilton feared amateurs most of all. Amateurs killed you against orders.

“You’re in an infested rat-hole, Major. You should see what’s rolling out on my coffee table. Decades of boltholes and overfolding, hidden and forgotten weapons. None near you, worse luck. If a point time-stop opens there and collapses Copenhagen—”

“If we punch out here, will it?”

“Possibly. Never was my favorite city. Preparing.”

Something went bump against the door. Then started to push at it. Lustre stepped carefully back from where the bullets would come, and Hamilton realized that, thanks to the length of the comms cord, he had no option but to stand in their way.

He thought of moments with Annie, giving his mind nothing else to do.

The thumping on the door was concerted now. Deliberate.

“Ready,” said Cushion.

Hamilton beckoned and then grabbed Lustre to him.

“And in my ear . . . Colonel Turpin sends his compliments.”

“I return the Colonel’s compliments,” said Hamilton. “Go.”

The hole opened under them with a blaze that might be the city collapsing. Hamilton and Lustre fell into it and down the flashing corridor at the speed of a hurricane. Bullets burst from the splintering door in the distance and tore down the silver butterfly tunnel around them, ricocheting ridiculously past them—

Hamilton wished he had something to shoot back into their bastard faces.

And then they were out, into the blessed air of the night, thrown to the ground by an impossible hole above them—

—that immediately and diplomatically vanished.

Hamilton leapt to his feet, looking round. They were in a side street. Freezing. Darkness. No witnesses. Cushion had managed even that. That was all she was going to be able to do tonight, for him or for any of his brothers and sisters anywhere in the Solar System. Turpin had allowed that for him. No, he checked himself, for what was inside Lustre.

He helped Lustre up, and they stared at the end of the street, where passers-by were running to and fro. He could hear the bells of Saint Mary’s tolling ten o’clock. In the distance, the embassy was ablaze, and carriages with red lights and bells were flashing through the sky, into the smoke, starting to pump water from their ocean folds into it. Those might well come under fire. And they were the only branch of public life here that was almost certainly innocent of what had just happened. The

smell of smoke washed down the street. It would be enough to make Frederik close the airways too. Turpin and Her Majesty the Queen Mother were being asked, in this moment, to consider whether or not the knowledge Lustre had was worth open warfare between Greater Britain and a Dansk court who might well know nothing of all this, who already *knew* those secrets. But rather than let a British carriage in to collect the two of them, they'd spend hours asserting that their own services, riddled with rot as they might be, could handle it.

Across the street was a little inn with grown beef hanging from the roofline, pols music coming from the windows. The crowds would be heading to see the blaze and offer help in the useless way that gentlemen and those who wished to be gentlemen did.

Hamilton grabbed Lustre's hand and ran for the door.

He ordered in Dutch he called up from some regional variation in the back of his head some of the real beef, potatoes, and a bottle of wine, which he had no intention of drinking, but which served as an excuse as to why they wanted a discreet booth to themselves. Lustre looked demure at the landlord, avoiding his glance, a maid led astray. A maid, it suddenly occurred to Hamilton, in clothes that would raise eyebrows in London, being fifteen years out of the fashion. But they had no choice. And besides, this was Denmark.

They vanished into the darkness of their snug. They had a few minutes before the food arrived. They both started talking at once, quietly, so that the landlord wouldn't hear the strange tongue.

She held up a hand and he was silent.

"I'll tell you the whole bit," she said. "Fast as I can. Have you heard of the three quarters of an ounce theory?"

Hamilton shook his head.

"It's folk science, *Golden Book* stuff, the kind of infra-religious thing you hear in servant pools. This chap weighed all these dying people, and found, they say, that three quarters of an ounce leaves you at death. That being the weight of the soul."

"Is this really the time for dollymop theology?"

She didn't rise to it. "Now I'm going to tell you something secret, For Their Majesties secret—"

"No—!"

"And if I die and not you, what happens then?" she snapped. "Because just killing me will *not* save the balance!" She'd added an epithet to the word, shocking him at the sound of it in her mouth. "Oh yes, I want to make sure you know that, in case push comes to shove." She didn't give him time to formulate a reply and that was probably a blessing. "What kind of out of uniform man have you become, if you can't live with secrets?! I don't care what you're cleared for, it's just *us* at the moment!"

Hamilton finally nodded.

"All right, then. You probably haven't heard either, your reading still presumably not extending beyond the hunting pages, about the astronomical problems concerning galaxies, the distribution of mass therein?"

"What?! What is this—?"

"No, of course you haven't. What it comes down to is: galaxies seem to have more mass than they should, loads of it. Nobody knew what it was. It's not visible. By just plotting what it influences, astronomers have made maps of where it all is. For a few years that was the entire business of Herstmonceux. Which I thought odd when I read about it, but now I know why."

The dinner came and they were forced to silence for a moment, just looking at each other. This new determination suited her, Hamilton found himself thinking. As did the harsh language. He felt an old, obscure pain and killed it. The landlord departed

with a look of voyeuristic pleasure. "Go on."

"Don't you see? If the three quarter ounce theory is true, there's weight in the world that comes and goes, as if in and out of a fold, up God's sleeve as it were. Put loads of that together—"

Hamilton understood, and the distant enormity of it made him close his eyes. "That's the extra mass in those galaxies."

"And we have a map of it—"

"Which shows where there are minds, actual foreigners from other worlds, out there—!"

"*And perhaps nearby.*"

Hamilton's mind reeled at the horror of it. The potential threat to the balance! Any of the great powers—damn it—any *nation*, could gain immeasurable advantage over its fellows by trading intelligence with foreigners. "And this is what's in your head. The greatest secret of the great powers. But this is old news—they must have found a way to deal with it—"

"Yes. Because, after all, any of them could put together enough telescope time to work it out. As near as I can figure out, they shared the info. Every great court knows it at the highest level, so the balance is intact. Just about. I suppose they must have all made a secret agreement not to try to contact these foreigners. Pretty easy to check up on that, given how they all watch each other's embroidery."

Hamilton relaxed. So these were indeed old terrors, already dealt with by wiser heads. "And of course communication is all we're talking about. The distances involved—"

She looked at him like he was an erring child.

"Has one of the powers *broken* the agreement?!"

She pursed her lips. "This isn't the work of the great powers."

Hamilton wasn't sure he could take much more of this. "Then who?"

"Have you heard of the heavenly twins?"

"The Ransoms?!"

"Yes, Castor and Pollux."

Hamilton's mind was racing. The twins were arms dealers, who sold, it had been revealed a few years ago, to the shock of the great powers, not just to the nation to which they owed allegiance (which, them being from the northern part of the Columbian colonies, would be Britain or France), or even to one they'd later adopted, but to anyone. Once the great powers had found that out and closed ranks, dealing with the twins as they dealt with any threat to the balance, their representatives had vanished overnight from their offices in the world's capitals, and started to sell away from any counter, to rebels, mercenaries, colonies. Whoring out their services. The twins themselves had never shown their faces in public. It was said they had accumulated enough wealth to actually begin to develop new weapons of their own. Every other month some new speculation arose that one of the powers was secretly once more buying from them. Not something Britain would ever do, of course, but the Dutch, the Spaniards? "How are they involved?"

"When I was halfway across this city, on my original mission, a rabbit hole similar to the one we just fell down opened up under me and my honor guard."

"They can do that?!"

"Compared to what else they're doing, that's nothing. They had their own soldiers on hand, soldiers in *uniform*—"

Hamilton could hear the disgust in her voice, and matched it with his own. Tonight was starting to feel like some sort of nightmare, with every certainty collapsing. He felt like he was falling from moment to moment as terrible new possibilities sprang up before his eyes.

"They cut down my party, taking a few losses themselves. They took the bodies with them."

"They must have mopped the place up afterward, too."

"I was dragged before them. I don't know if we were still in this city. I was ready to say the words and cut myself off, but they were ready for that. They injected me with some sort of instant glossolalia. I thought for a second that I'd done it myself, but then I realized that I couldn't stop talking, that I was saying all sorts of nonsense, from anywhere in my mind, ridiculous stuff, shameful stuff." She paused for breath. "You *were* mentioned."

"I wasn't going to ask."

"I didn't talk about what I was carrying. Sheer luck. I wrenched clear of their thugs and tried to bash my brains out against the wall."

He had put his hand on hers. Without even thinking about it.

She let it stay. "I wouldn't recommend it, probably not possible, but they only gave me two cracks at it before they grabbed me again. They were planning to keep injecting me with the stuff until I'd spilled the words that'd let them use an observer to see the map. They locked me up in a room and recorded me all night. That got quite dull quite swiftly."

Listening to her, Hamilton felt himself calm. He was looking forward, with honest glee, to the possibility that he might be soon in a position to harm some of these men.

"I gambled that after it got late enough and I still hadn't said anything *politically* interesting they'd stop watching and just record it. I waited as long as I could with my sanity intact, then had at one of the walls. I found main power and shoved my fingers in. Wish I could tell you more about that, but I don't remember anything from then on until I woke up in what turned out to be a truly enormous void carriage. I came to in the infirmary, connected to all sorts of drugs. My internal clock said it was . . . four years later . . . which I took to be an error. I checked the package in my head, but the seals were all intact. I could smell smoke. So I took the drug lines out best I could, hopped out of bed. There were a few others in there, but they were all dead or out of it. Odd looking wounds, like their flesh had been sucked off them. I found more dead bodies in the corridor outside. Staff in that uniform of theirs. There was still somebody driving the thing, because when I checked the internal embroidery, there were three seats taken. I think they were running the absolute minimum staff, just trying to get the thing home, three survivors of whatever had happened. The carriage was throwing up all sorts of false flags and passport deals as we approached Earth orbit from high up above the plane. I went and hid near the bulwark door, and when the carriage arrived at one of the Danish high stations I waited until the rescue party dashed on. Then I wandered out." Her voice took on a pleading edge, as if she was asking if she was still in a dream. "I . . . took a descent bus and I remember thinking what classy transportation it was, very bells and whistles, especially for the Danes. When I listened in to the embroidery, and checked the log against what I was hearing, I realized . . . and it took some realizing, I can tell you, it took me checking many times . . ."

Her hand had grasped his, demanding belief.

"It had been four years unconscious for me . . . but . . ." She had to take a deep breath, her eyes appealing once again at the astonishing unfairness of it.

"Fifteen years for us," he said. Looking at her now, at how this older woman who had started to teach him about himself had stayed a girl of an age he could never now be seen with in public . . . the change had been lessened for him because it was how he'd kept her in his memory, but now he saw the size of it. The difference present between them was an index of all he'd done. He shook his head to clear it, to take those dismayed eyes off him. "What does it mean?"

She was about to answer him. But he suddenly realized the music had got louder. He knocked his steak knife from the table to the seat and into his pocket.

Lustre looked shocked at him.

But now a man looking like a typical patron of an inn had looked in at their booth. "Excuse me," he said, in Dutch with an accent Hamilton's eye notes couldn't place, "do you know where the landlord's gone? I'm meant to have a reservation—"

A little something about the man's expression.

He was getting away with it.

He wasn't.

Hamilton jerked sidelong rather than stand up, sending the knife up into the man's groin. He twisted it out as he grabbed for the belt, throwing him forward as blood burst over the tablecloth and he was up and out into the main bar just as the man started screaming—

There was another man, who'd been looking into the kitchen, suddenly angry at a landlord who, expecting the *usual* sort of trouble, had turned up the piped band. He turned now, his hand slapping for a gun at his waist—

Amateurs!

Hamilton threw the bloody knife at his face. In that moment, the man took it to be a throwing knife, and threw up a hand as it glanced off him, but Hamilton had closed the gap between the two of them, and now he swung his shoulder and slammed his fist into the man's neck. The man gurgled and fell, Hamilton grabbed him before he did and beat his hands to the gun.

He didn't use it. The man was desperately clutching at his own throat. Hamilton let him fall.

He swung back to the booth, and saw the other twitching body slide to the floor. Lustre was already squatting to gather that gun too.

He turned to the landlord coming out of the kitchen and pointed the gun at him. "More?!"

"No! I'll do anything—!"

"I mean, are there more of *them*?!"

"I don't know!" He was telling the truth.

Professionals would have kept everything normal and set up a pheasant shoot when Hamilton had answered a call of nature. So, amateurs, so possibly many of them, possibly searching many inns, possibly not guarding the exits to this one.

It was their only hope.

"All right." He nodded to Lustre. "We're leaving."

He got the landlord to make a noise at the back door, to throw around pots and pans to slam himself against a cupboard. Gunfire might cut him down at any moment, and he knew it, but damn one Dane in the face of all this.

Hamilton sent Lustre to stand near the front door, then took his gun off covering the landlord and ran at it.

He burst out into the narrow street, into the freezing air, seeking a target—

He fired at the light that was suddenly in his eyes.

But then they were on him. Many of them. He hurt some of them. Possibly fatally. He didn't get off a shot.

He heard no shots from Lustre.

They forced something into his face and at last he had to take a breath of darkness.

Hamilton woke with a start. And the knowledge that he was a fool and a traitor because he was a fool. He wanted to bask in that misery, that he'd failed everyone he cared about. He wanted to lose to it, to let it halt his hopeless trying in favor of

certainty.

He must not.

He sought his clock, and found that it was a few hours, not years, later. He'd kept his eyes closed because of the lights. But the light coming at him from all around was diffuse, comfortable.

Whatever situation he found himself in, his options were going to be limited. If there was no escape, if they were indeed in the hands of the enemy, his job now was to kill Lustre and then himself.

He considered that for a moment and was calm about it.

He allowed himself to open his eyes.

He was in what looked like the best room at an inn. Sunlike light shone through what looked like a projection rather than a window. He was dressed in the clothes he'd been wearing on the street. A few serious bruises. He was lying on the bed. He was alone. Nobody had bothered to tuck him in.

The door opened. Hamilton sat up.

It was a waiter, pulling a service trolley into the room. He saw that Hamilton was awake and nodded to him.

Hamilton inclined his head in return.

The waiter took the cover off the trolley, revealing dinner: what looked like real steak and eggs. He placed cutlery appropriately, bowed, and left once more. There was no sound of the door being locked.

Hamilton went to the trolley and looked at the cutlery. He ran his finger on the sharp, serrated edge of the steak knife. There was a message.

He sat down on the bed and ate.

He couldn't help the thoughts that swept through him. He felt them rather than discerned them as memories or ideas. He was made from them, after all. They all were, those who kept the balance, those who made sure that the great powers shared the Solar System carefully between them, and didn't spin off wildly into a war that everyone knew would be the last. That end of the world would free them all from responsibility, and join them with the kingdom that existed around the universe and inside every minuscule Newton Length. The balance, having collapsed, would crest as a wave again, finally, and stay there, finally including all who had lived, brought entirely into God. That much rough physics Keble had drummed into him. He'd never found himself wanting the final collapse. It was not to be wished for by mortals, after all. It was the shape of the very existence around them, not something they could choose the moment of. He enjoyed his duty, even enjoyed suffering for it, in a way. That was *meaning*. But concussions like this, explosions against the sides of what he understood, and so many of them, so quickly . . . No, he wouldn't become fascinated with the way the world around him seemed to be shaking on its foundations. This was just a new aspect to the balance, a new threat to it. It had many manifestations, many configurations. That was a line from some hymn he barely remembered. He would be who he was and do what had to be done.

That thought he heard as words, as the part of himself that had motive and will. He smiled at this restoration of strength and finished his steak.

The moment he'd finished eating, someone came for him.

This one was dressed in the uniform that Lustre had mentioned. Hamilton contained his reaction to it. To his eyes, it looked halfway to something from a carnival. Bright colors that nevertheless had never seen a battlefield, with no history to be read therein. The man wearing it looked like he'd been trained in a real

army; he walked, Hamilton behind him, like he'd known a parade ground. A former officer, even. One who'd bought himself out or deserted. He ignored Hamilton's attempts to start a conversation. Not questions, because he was already preparing himself for the forthcoming interrogation, and pointless questions were a hole in the dam. Instead Hamilton spoke only about the weather, and received just a wry look in return. A wry look from this bastard who'd sold his comrades for a bright coat.

Hamilton gave him a smile, and imagined what he'd do to him, given the chance. He'd left the knife beside his plate.

The corridors were bright and smooth, made of space, cast with colors and textures for the comfort of those who lived here. Hamilton followed the man to the door of what looked like an office and waited as he knocked on it and was called to enter. The door slid open on its own, as if servants were in short supply.

The chamber they stepped into was enormous. It was a dome, with a projected ceiling, on which could be seen . . .

Above them was a world. For a moment, Hamilton thought it must be Jupiter, on its night side. But no. He reeled again, without letting his face show it. This was a world he hadn't seen before. Which was impossible. But the notes in his eyes told him the projection was hallmarked as real space, not as an imagined piece of art. The sphere was dark and enormous. Its inky clouds glowed dully like the coals of hell.

"Hey," said a voice from across the room, in a breezy North Columbian accent, "good evening, Major Hamilton. Delighted you could join us."

Hamilton tore his gaze away from the thing above them.

Across the chamber were standing two men, one to each side of an enormous fireplace, above which was carved, and Hamilton was sure it had actually been carved, a coat of arms. Normally, the out of uniform man would have recoiled, but he was now in a world of shock, and this latest effrontery couldn't add to it. The arms weren't anything the International Brotherhood of Heraldry would have approved of, but something . . . *personal* . . . the sort of thing a schoolboy would doodle in his rough book and then crumple before his peers saw it. Arms of one's own! The sheer *presumption*.

The two men were smiling at him, and if he hadn't been before, now Hamilton was ready to hate them. They were smiling as if the coat of arms and the unknown world they claimed was real were a joke. Like their pantomime guards were to Hamilton, though he wondered if these two saw *them* like that.

"Am I addressing the two . . . Mr. Ransoms?" He looked between them. And found a mystery had been repeated.

The men were both tall, nearly seven footers. They both had thinning hair, the furrowed brows of an academic, and had decided to wear glasses. More ostentation. They were dressed not like gentlemen, but in the sort of thing one of the husbands who came home to those little boxes in Kent might have worn for an evening at the golf club. They were similar in build, but . . .

One had at least a decade on the other.

And yet—

"These are Castor and Pollux Ransom, yes," said Lustre, from where she stood on the other side of the room. She had a glass of brandy in her hands, which were shaking. "The twins."

Hamilton looked between them. Everything about them was indeed exactly the same, apart from their ages. This must have the same cause as Lustre's situation, but what?

The younger man, Pollux, if Hamilton recalled correctly, separated himself from

the fireplace and came to regard him with that same mocking gaze. "I assume that was Enochian for the obvious answer. It's true, Major. We were born, in a place that had the Iroquois name of 'Toronto,' but which people like *you* call Fort York, on the same day in 1958."

Hamilton raised an eyebrow. "What's the difference, then? Clean living?"

"Far from it," laughed the older twin. "In either case."

"I guess you'd like some answers," said Pollux. "I'll do my best. You certainly left chaos in your wake. At 9:59 PM, the Court of Saint James's officially declared Denmark a 'protectorate of His Majesty,' and dispatched forces 'in support of King Frederik,' whom they allege—"

"They declare," corrected Hamilton.

Pollux laughed. "Oh, let's get the manners right, and never mind the horrors they describe! All right. They *declare* that the mad old bastard has been the victim of some sort of coup, and intend to return him to his throne. A coup very much in the eye of the beholder, I should think. A lie more than a declaration, I'd call it. I wonder if Frederik will survive it?"

Hamilton gave no reply. He was pleased to hear it. But it only underlined how important the contents of Lustre's head were.

Pollux continued his explanations with a gesture around him. "We're in a mansion, a perfectly normal one, in lunar orbit." He gestured upward. "That's an intelligent projection from another of our properties, one considerably beyond the political boundaries of the Solar System. We've named that object 'Nemesis.' Because *we* discovered it. It's the sun's twin, much less bright." He shared a smile with Castor. "No metaphor intended." He looked back to Hamilton. "Traveling at the speed of light, it'd take around a year to get there."

"You speak of a property there—" Hamilton wondered if they'd sent some automatic carriage out to the place and were calling it by a lofty name.

"We've got several properties there," said Castor, stepping forward to join his brother. "But I think Pollux was referring to the star itself."

Hamilton knew they were goading him. So he gave them nothing.

"Do you remember the story of Newton and the worm, Major?" asked Pollux, as if they were all sharing the big joke together. But the man wasn't attempting courtesy, his tone of voice scathing, as if addressing a wayward child. "It's part of the balance nursery curriculum in Britain, right? You know, old Isaac's in his garden, an apple falls on his head, he picks it up and sees this tiny worm crawling across its surface, and so he starts thinking about the very small. *Unaligned* historians have sunk almost every detail of that old tale, by the way, but never mind that. Isaac realized that space needs an observer, God, to make reality keep happening when there's none of us around. You know, he's the guy in the forest when the tree falls, and because of him it makes a noise. He's part of the fabric of creation, part of and the motive behind the 'decreed and holy' balance. And the stars and the galaxies and the tremendous distances between them are like they are just because that's how he set up the stage, and that's all there is to it. The balance in our Solar System is the diamond at the center of an ornate setting, the further universe. But it is just a setting. Or at least that's the attitude that the great powers' academia has always encouraged. It keeps everything fixed. Held down."

"But you know, we're not much for academia, we like to get our hands dirty," said Castor, who sounded a little more affable. "The two of us have our feet planted in the muddy battlefields of Mother Earth, where we've made our money, but we've always looked at the stars. Part of our fortune has gone toward the very expensive hobby of first class astronomy. We have telescopes better than any the great powers can boast, placed at various locations around the Solar System. We also make

engines. A carriage that slides down a fold, altering gravity under itself at every moment, is capable, in the void, of only a certain acceleration. The record keeps inching up, but it's a matter of gaining a few miles an hour because of some technical adjustment. And once you've reached any great acceleration inside the Solar System, you're going to need to start decelerating in a few days, because you'll need to slow down at your destination. It wouldn't be out of the question to send an automatic carriage out into the wilds beyond the comet cloud, but somehow nobody's gotten around to doing it."

"That always puzzled us."

"Until we heard whispers about the great secret. Because people talk to us, we sell weapons and buy information. It became clear that for a nation to send such a carriage, to even prepare a vehicle that greatly exceeded records, would be to have every other nation suspect they'd found something out there, and become suddenly aggressive toward them, in a desperate attempt to keep the balance."

Hamilton kept his silence.

"When we stumbled on Nemesis in a photographic survey, we realized that we had found something we had always sought, along with so many other disenfranchised inhabitants of Earth—"

"Land," said Hamilton.

They laughed and applauded like this was a party game. "Exactly," said Castor.

"We tossed a coin," said Pollux, "I was the one who went. With a small staff. I took a carriage with a fold full of supplies, and set it accelerating, using an engine of our own, one limited by *physical* rather than *political* principles. I struck out for a new world. I opened up a new frontier. For *us*, this time. For all the people shut out when the great powers closed down the world—" He noticed that his brother was frowning at him, and visibly reined himself in. "The carriage accelerated until after a year or so we were approaching the speed of light. We discovered, to our shock, that as we did so, the demands on the fold became extraordinary. It seems, incredibly, that there is a speed limit on the universe!"

Hamilton tried to keep his expression even, but knew he was failing. He didn't know how much of this he could believe.

"By my own internal clock, the round trip took four years—"

"But I remained here as fifteen years passed," said Castor. "Because when you approach the speed of light, time slows down. Just for you. Yeah, I know how mad it sounds! It's like God starts looking at you *differently!*"

"And you should see the beauty of it, Major, the rainbows and the darkness and the feeling that one is . . . finally close to the center of understanding."

Hamilton licked his dry lips. "Why does all this happen?"

"We don't know, exactly," admitted Castor. "We've approached this as engineers, not theorists. 'God does not flay space,' that's what Newton is supposed to have said. He theorized that God provides a frame of reference for all things, relative to Him. But these spooky changes in mass and time depending on speed . . . that seems to say there's a bit more going on than Newton's minuscule gravitation and minuscule causality!"

Hamilton nodded in the direction of Lustre. "I gather she wasn't on that first trip?"

"No," said Pollux. "That's what I'm coming to. When the carriage started decelerating toward Nemesis, we began to see signs of what we initially took to be a Solar System surrounding the star. Only as we got closer did we realize that what we had taken to be small worlds were actually carriages. Ones the size of which human beings have not dreamt. The carriages of foreigners."

Hamilton's mouth set in a line. That these had been the first representatives of humanity! And the foreigners were so close! If any of this could be true. He didn't

let his gaze move upward as if to see them. He could almost feel the balance juddering. It was as if something dear to him was sliding swiftly away, into the void, and only destruction could follow. "So," he said, "you drew alongside and shook hands."

"No," laughed Pollux. "Unfortunately. We could see immediately that there were enormous symbols on the carriages, all the same design, though we couldn't make anything of them. They were kind of . . . like red birds, but deformed, unfocused. You needed to see two to realize they were a symbol at all. We approached with all hulloos and flags, and suddenly our embroidery was flooded with what might have been voices, but sounded like low booming sounds. We yelled back and forth, uselessly, for about an hour. We were preparing a diagram to throw into the void in a canister, stick figures handing each other things—"

"I'll bet," said Hamilton.

"—when they switched on lights that just illuminated their insignia. Off, then again. Over and over. It was like they were demanding for us to show ours."

Hamilton pointed at the monstrosity over the fireplace. "Didn't you have that handy?"

"That's a later invention," said Castor, "in response to this very problem."

"When we didn't have any insignia of our own to display," said Pollux, "they started firing at us. Or we assume it was firing. I decided to get out of it, and we resumed acceleration, rounded the star, and headed home."

Hamilton couldn't conceal a smile.

"Before the next expedition," continued Castor, "we built the biggest carriage we could and had the coats of arms painted all over it. But we needed one more thing: something to barter with." He gestured toward Lustre. "The contents of her head, the locations of the missing mass, the weight of all those living minds, a trading map of the heavens. Depending on where the foreigners came from, we might have information they didn't. Or at least we could demonstrate we were in the game. And if one group of foreigners didn't like us, we could go find another."

"But she proved to be made of strong stuff," said Hamilton.

"After she'd tried to shock herself into either death or deadlock, we kept her on ice," said Castor. "We sent her with the staff on the main carriage, in the hope they could find a way to breach her along the way, or maybe offer her to the foreigners as sealed goods." Hamilton was certain the twin was enjoying trying Lustre's modesty with his words. "But their response this time was, if anything, more aggressive. Our people left a number of orbiting automatics, and a number of houses ready for occupation, but barely escaped with their lives."

"It seems they don't like you any more than we do," said Hamilton. "I can understand why you'd want her back. But why am I still alive?"

The twins looked at each other like they'd come to an unpleasant duty sooner than they would have liked. Castor nodded to the air, the doors opened by themselves, and a number of the pantomime guards strode into the room.

Hamilton controlled his breathing.

"Chain him to the fireplace," said Pollux.

They pulled the shackles from the same folds where Hamilton had been certain they'd kept weapons trained on him. His kind retired, if they did, to simple places, and didn't take kindly to parties in great houses. A room was never a room when you'd worked out of uniform.

They fixed his wrists and ankles to the fireplace, and stripped him. Hamilton wanted to tell Lustre to look away, but he was also determined to not ask for anything he couldn't have. He was going to have to die now, and take a long time about

it. "You know your duty," he said.

She looked horribly uncertain back at him.

Pollux nodded again, and a control pedal appeared out of the floor, light flooding with it. He placed his foot on it. "Let's get the formalities out of the way," he said. "We'd give you a staggering amount of money, in carbon, for your cooperation."

Hamilton swore lightly at him.

"And *that's* the problem with the world. All right, I tried. What I'm going to do now is to open a very small fold in front of your genitals. I'll then increase the gravity, until Miss Saint Clair elects to stop using Enochian and says the words that will allow us to observe the package in her mind. Should she cut herself off from the world with her own language, I'll start by pulling off your genitalia, and then move on to various other parts of your body, using folds to staunch the blood flow, killing you slowly while she's forced to watch. Then I'll do the same to her." He looked quickly to Lustre, and for a moment it looked to Hamilton like he was even afraid. "Don't make me do this."

Lustre stood straight and didn't answer.

"Say what you have to say to cut yourself off," said Hamilton. "Say it now."

But, to his fury and horror, she maintained the same expression, and just looked quickly between them.

"For God's sake—!" he cried out.

Pollux pressed gently with his foot, and Hamilton tensed at the feel of the fold grabbing his body. It made him recall, horribly, moments with Lustre, and, even worse, moments with Annie. He didn't want that association, so he killed it in his mind. There could be no thoughts of her as he died. It would be like dragging a part of her through this with him. There was no pain, not yet. He reserved his shouts for when there would be. He would use his training, go cursing them, as loud as he could, thus controlling the only thing he could. He was proud to have the chance to manage his death and die for king, country, and balance.

Pollux looked again at Lustre, then pressed slightly more. Now there was pain. Hamilton drew in a breath to begin telling this classless bastard what he thought of him—

—when suddenly there came a sound.

Something had crunched against something, far away.

The twins both looked suddenly in the same direction, startled.

Hamilton let out a choked laugh. Whatever this was—

And that had been an explosion!

A projection of a uniformed man flew up onto the wall. "Somehow there are three carriages—!"

"The church bells!" said Hamilton, realizing.

Castor ran for the door, joining a great outflowing of guards as they grabbed arms from the walls, but Pollux stayed where he was, a dangerous expression on his face, his foot poised on the pedal. One guard had stayed beside Lustre also, his rifle covering her. "What?!"

"The bells of Saint Mary's in Copenhagen. Ten o'clock." He was panting at the pain and the pressure. "You said the city became a British possession at 9:59. While we were falling." He swore at the man who was about to maim him, triumphant. "They must have put a fold in me with a tracker inside, as we fell! Didn't harm the balance if we landed in Britain!"

Pollux snarled and slammed his foot down on the pedal.

Hamilton didn't see what happened in the next few seconds. His vision distorted with the pain, which reached up into his jaw and to the roots of his teeth.

But the next thing he knew, Lustre had slammed a palm against the wall, and his

shackles had disappeared. There was a shout of astonishment. The pressure cut off and the pain receded. He was aware of a guard somewhere over there in a pool of blood. Reflexively, he grabbed the rifle Lustre held. She tried to hold onto it, as if uncertain he could use it better than she could. They each scabbled at it, they only had seconds—!

He was aware of regimental cries converging on the room, bursting through the doors.

He saw, as if down a tunnel, that Pollux was desperately stamping at the pedal, and light had suddenly blazed across his foot again.

Pollux raised his foot, about to slam it down, to use the fold in the center of the room, opened to its fullest extent, to rip apart Hamilton and everyone else.

Hamilton shoved Lustre aside and in one motion fired.

The top of Pollux's head vanished. His foot spasmed downward.

It seemed to be moving slowly, to Hamilton's pain-dulled eyes.

The sole of the man's shoe connected with the control.

For a moment it looked like it had done so with enough force that Pollux Ransom would not die alone.

But it must have landed too softly. By some minuscule amount.

The corpse fell aside. Its tormented soul had, a moment before, vanished from the universe.

"That'll be a weight off his mind," said Hamilton.

And then he passed out.

Six weeks later, following some forced healing and forced leave, Hamilton stood once again in front of Turpin. He had been called straight in, rather than returned to his regiment. He hadn't seen Lustre since the assault on the mansion. He'd been told that she had been interviewed at length and then returned to the bosom of the diplomatic corps. He assumed that she'd told Turpin's people everything, and that, thus, at the very least, he was out of a job. At the worst, he could find himself at the end of the traitor's noose, struggling in the air above Parliament Square.

He found he couldn't square himself to that. He was full of concerns and impertinent queries. The lack of official reaction so far had been trying his nerves.

But as Turpin had run down what had happened to the various individuals in the mansion, how Castor was now in the cells far beneath this building, and what the origins and fates of the toy soldiers had been, how various out of uniform officers were busy unraveling the threads of the twins' conceits, all over the world, Hamilton gradually began to hope. Surely the blow would have landed before now? King Frederik had been found, hiding or pretending to hide, and had been delighted, once the situation had been starkly explained to him, to have the British return him to his throne. Denmark remained a British protectorate while His Majesty's forces rooted out the last of the conspirators in the pay of the Ransoms. And, since a faction in that court had been found and encouraged that sought to intermarry and unify the kingdoms, perhaps this would remain the case for some considerable while.

"Of course," said Turpin, "they weren't really twins."

Hamilton allowed the surprise to show on his face. "Sir?"

"We've found family trees that suggest they're actually cousins, similar in appearance, with a decade or so between them. We've got carriages on the way to what we're going to call George's Star, and people examining that projection. We don't expect to find anything beyond a single automatic in orbit."

"So . . . the girl—" He took a chance on referring to her as if he didn't know her, hoping desperately that she'd kept the secret of what he hadn't reported, all those

July 2011

years ago.

“We kept an eye on her after the interviews. She told us she’d learned the access codes for Ransom’s embroidery from when she was on that enormous carriage she mentioned. Another thing we tellingly haven’t found, by the way, along with any high performance carriages in the Ransom garages. But she hadn’t quite got enough detail on the earliest years of Lustre Saint Clair’s life. A brilliant cover, a brilliant grown flesh job, but not quite good enough. She faltered a little when we put it to her that, struggling over that gun with you, she was actually trying to save Pollux Ransom’s life. We decided to let her out of the coop and see where she led us. As we expected, she realized we were on to her and vanished. Almost certainly into the Russian embassy. Certainly enough that we may find ourselves able to threaten the Czar with some embarrassment. You must have wondered yourself, considering the ease of your escape from the embassy, her reluctance to take the observer machine. . . .” He raised an eyebrow at Hamilton. “Didn’t you?”

Hamilton felt dizzy, as if the walls of his world had once more vibrated under an impact. “What were they after?”

“Easy enough to imagine. The Russians would love to see us move forces out of the inner Solar System in order to secure an otherwise meaningless territory in the hope that these fictitious foreigners might return. And just in the week or so while we were interviewing her, you should have seen the havoc this story caused at court. The hawks who want to ‘win the balance’ were all for sending the fleet out there immediately. The doves were at their throats. The Queen Mother had to order everyone to stop discussing it. But fortunately, we soon had an answer for them, confirmed by what we got out of Castor. An elegant fable, wasn’t it? The sort of thing Stichen would put together out of the White Court. I’ll bet it was one of his. You know, the strange-looking wounds, red birds, booming sounds, fine fly detail like that. If we hadn’t planted that tracker on you, the girl would have had to find some way to signal us herself. Or, less wasteful, you’d have been allowed to escape. Of course, the Ransoms’ worldwide network isn’t quite the size they made it out to be, not when you subtract all the rubles that are vanishing back to Moscow. But even so, clearing all that out makes the balance a bit safer tonight.”

Hamilton didn’t know what to say. He stood there on the grown polished wood timbers and looked down at the whorls within whorls. An odd thought struck him. A connection back to the last certainty he recalled feeling. When his world had been set on sturdier foundations. “Ambassador Bayoumi,” he said. “Did he make it out?”

“I’ve no idea. Why do you ask?”

Hamilton found he had no reason in his head, just a great blankness that felt half merciful and half something lost. “I don’t know,” he said finally. “He seemed kind.”

Turpin made a small grunt of a laugh, and looked back to his papers. Hamilton realized that he’d been dismissed. And that the burdens he’d brought with him into the room would not be ended by a noose or a pardon.

As he made his way to the door, Turpin seemed to realize that he hadn’t been particularly polite. He looked up again. “I heard the record of what you said to him,” he said. “You said nobody would care if she killed you. It’s not true, you know.”

Hamilton stopped, and tried to read the scarred and stitched face of the man.

“You’re greatly valued, Jonathan,” said Turpin. “If you weren’t, you wouldn’t still be here.”

A year or so later, Hamilton was woken in the early hours by an urgent tug on the embroidery, a voice that seemed familiar, trying to tell him something, sobbing and yelling in the few seconds before it was cut off.

But he couldn’t understand a word it said.