

The Vastol Vendetta



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A tale from Turaset



CHAPTER ONE



Governance Hall, Vastol City.

Senior councilmember Berna Vanther pressed her fingers to her eyes. They were itchy again, no doubt from reviewing the hundred-page brief of discharge practices from the combustion industry. Bunkum, all of it, and worth less than its postage.

She flipped her copy closed and snapped at the industry head across the table, “You can’t expect us to take this with a straight face. Liberty Lumps? Justice Juice? Your business is coal and oil.”

Director Gareg di Gar, a man who always gave her the distinct impression of bristle and steel, cocked his head back and met her gaze. He wore the barest hint of a sneer. Everything in that attitude of his from the drape of his ponderous arm on the table to the simmer in his narrowed eyes mocked the importance of this meeting. It mocked the environmental assault they’d all gathered to discuss. His aide, at least, seemed to understand the gravity today. That slight man, next to di Gar with his arm in a sling, that one kept turning his water glass round and round in nervous circles. If he kept at it like that, Berna thought, the youngster would drill a hole right through the wood.

Di Gar’s words came, all alabaster smooth and silky. “It’s a matter of maintaining a sense of humor, Councilor. Our language communicates good will.”

“Good will my hind,” she shot back. “There’s coal ash in the Turas River, ash from your facilities.”

“Wrong. It isn’t ours.”

“We have data to prove it is.” She grabbed a second report, the official one ordered from the environmental commission, and flipped to page twelve. “Eighteen cases of cholera last week. Thirteen the week prior.” She paged to a chart and turned it to him. “Look at these numbers. The germs are breeding directly downstream of your discharge. And the lead concentration is off the scale—completely unheard of—which puts our *children* at risk. All of this at your hands, director, your hands!”

One of her colleagues a few seats down muttered, “Overwrought.”

Astonished, Berna turned to each of the councilors in turn. She’d hand-picked today’s attendees for their experience with environmental law. She’d explained to each one of them that the ultimate purpose of the meeting was getting inspectors inside this man’s industry. The last thing she’d expected from any of them was such an overt break of decorum. She adjusted her lapel pin, the five-point star, one point for each term served. No other councilor here had more than four. “Your children are poisoned by his waste. I’m *overwrought*?”

Next to her, Joshi Nabahri, Prime Chancellor of Nasoir, murmured, “No need to get worked up.”

She bristled. Not at the words but the serious tone, which always struck her as being at odds with his boyish face. Joshi Nabahri was the youngest chancellor ever elected, at least fifteen years younger than she herself, and Berna wondered again if the note of command in his voice was why he’d reached the pinnacle of the political class so quickly.

I’ve passed more law than Joshi ever has.

It was a churlish thought, and Berna pressed her lips.

To her left, Maevyn, her protégé, was gripping the arms of her chair so fiercely it looked like a death hold. Maevyn’s jaw was set—in fear? It could be anger. Or indigestion, for that matter. Berna released a sigh. Maev was too inexperienced for a meeting of this magnitude; too sweet for politics, and despite keeping herself plainly-dressed, looked as though she’d really be better suited to a career in modelling.

It was her high cheekbones, Berna thought; they set Maev's face into sleek lines. Still, Berna held hope that her friend might grow into a legislative force one day. When it came to the environment, Maevyn had a natural talent, and if harnessed—

“Director,” Chancellor Nabahri said, bringing Berna's attention back, “you discharge straight into the river.”

“As you require.”

Nabahri frowned. “But the sheen. It's alarming. You've exceeded allowances.”

Yes, the official report confirmed as much. Berna paged to another chart and shoved the document over, grazing her water in the process. Irritated, she pushed the glass to the side. “Mercury's entering the bay. It'll be in all major fish species within months. Seventeen percent of the economy depends on fishing.”

Gareg's eyes narrowed further.

She continued, more loudly. “Residents in the bayou have lodged complaints. Mussel beds are dying. Fishmongers want the entire delta quarantined.”

“There's a simple fix,” the chancellor said. “Check your reservoirs—inspect the seals and triple check your discharge, make certain it's all in code.”

Asking di Gar to involve himself in any cleanup effort was laughable, given the industry's past, but this was only the first of two solutions under consideration. Of course, sitting over there like a pompous lump of coal, di Gar just smiled, noncommittal, nonresponsive. Berna clenched her jaw.

Di Gar's aide, the one introduced as Thom Vanger, that one seemed less twitchy now. Instead, there was a curiosity to his expression. Despite the flop of hair hanging over his eyes, Berna saw intensity in his gaze. He was studying Maevyn.

Well, Berna thought, he'd probably never been in a supervisory committee meeting before, and these were always something of a grab bag when it came to the lawmakers in attendance. Perhaps Vanger was wondering why a councilor so young as Maevyn was here, or maybe he

wondered why Maev was so obviously tense. She looked like she wanted to bolt straight out the door.

Berna turned to di Gar, “In the southern district, water’s coming out of the taps brown. It’s worst in the homes downstream of station twenty-nine. Teachers say the children aren’t sitting still, and they suspect the water.”

“Bah,” Gareg said, downing his own glass. “If a teacher can’t hold a child’s attention, fire the teacher.”

“If I had children in school,” Berna retorted, “I’d listen to their teachers. Do you have children?”

Gareg laughed. “At my age? Rather more than I can count, most of whom passed long, long ago. There’s very little you could tell me about children, or any difficulty they might face, that I haven’t experienced first-hand.”

It was so callous, how he said it, so utterly at odds with the words themselves. Of course, the words were probably a tactic on his part, meant to remind the room of his remarkable longevity. Anyone like di Gar, who’d inherited genetically-enhanced telomeres, who never seemed to age and who watched entire millennia come and go, might become callous about hardship and death as a matter of course. She pushed against her eyes again, and then against the faint ache beginning above her brow line. Everything about so-called telomerics like di Gar, Berna mused, unsettled her. Their lives spanning centuries and the aura of inevitability they seemed to evince, of entitlement or superiority—as though they were untouchable by simple virtue of *age*. Even the way he sat, watching everyone down the bridge of his bulbous nose, oozed arrogance.

And the populace, by and large, bought into the mass delusion. Telomerics were almost seen as gods. Unsettling, indeed.

They weren’t untouchable, not to Berna. Gods? Rubbish. And yet, such a common view might explain why her colleagues held themselves silent. *I should have considered that when I picked members.*

“Every last child,” di Gar said, “is important to Garco; to the entire combustion industry. Your children matter as much mine; as much as any that young Thom might father someday.”

Thom Vanger shifted uncomfortably in his chair and adjusted his sling.

“Our industry,” di Gar said, his eyes growing fierce, “improves your standard of living. Period.”

She snapped, “Then clean your waste, *sir*.” A few others grunted, and for the first time that afternoon it felt as though the room had shifted to her quarter. Berna suppressed a smile.

The chancellor called for order. The room settled and he said, “The ash tanks appear weak.”

Weak? The reservoirs were sliding down the very river banks. Autore, Chancellor Nabahri’s penchant for understatement galled.

“Our liners are solid, the seals intact. There’s no leakage, no undue discharge from any of our refineries, and certainly not those on the riverfront.” Di Gar laughed and took a swig from his aide’s glass. “Thom and I need a clean river as much as you do.”

Berna scoffed. “I’m glad you’re enjoying the water. It was pulled from station twenty-nine.”

Di Gar’s face tightened.

“Oh, that bothers you?” Berna pulled her report back, paging through for the paragraph on solvents. “It bothers me, too. Tell me, Director, what other possible source could explain trihalomethane?”

Chancellor Nabahri threw her a squelching glance. She glared, straight at him. Nabahri ignored her, turned to di Gar and said, “We’ve set aside funds for Garco to upgrade its tanks.”

Well, score a point for the home team, Berna thought. At last, Nabahri was unveiling Option One.

She waited. She forced herself to relax through the silence, while di Gar just sat over there like an ancient statue. Chiseled black marble, immobile, impossible, the only sign of life in his eyes, which burned more fiercely. Then his face eased and he laughed. “Funds? I think not. Retrofitting implies guilt, and it’s a waste of taxes besides. My reservoirs are sound.”

Another long minute stretched out. One of her colleagues began to fidget, perhaps bothered by the standoff with this ancient man. Berna shook her head. It wasn’t age that gave a person wisdom. It was depth

of experience, and di Gar was a stubborn fool. Still, if he was foolish enough to refuse the funds there'd be stronger grounds for Option Two.

Nabahri said, "Your reservoirs are quite old, Gareg. In fact, their age is a matter of record. I can't see how a retrofit equates to guilt, and frankly I'm boggled by your answer. You're passing up free money."

"A handout? Absolutely we pass. Spend it on those teachers you fret about. Contamination of the river? Pah. It could come from anywhere. Wood ash, careless pig farming. Fierno, it could be tailings from the mineral mines in Paismais. Regulate those!"

This time, Berna allowed a smile. Regulations, yes. Option Two. *But it'll be you, di Gar.*

Nabahri said, sounding as perplexed as before, "The contaminants are not mine tailings."

Next to Berna, Maevyn opened her mouth. Berna grabbed her by the wrist and shook her head slightly. Maevyn closed her mouth. The girl's hand was trembling. Berna squeezed it again and Maevyn gave her a small, grateful smile.

Maevyn had been the one to suggest funding when they'd hammered out the first draft of their proposal, saying that would solve the issue, if the industry acted in good faith. It was a smart idea, Berna had decided, because the ploy put di Gar on the defensive—unifying the committee behind regulations.

As if reading some of these thoughts, Nabahri said, "A retrofit takes care of the issue."

"Takes care of the issue?" di Gar replied. "Who among us truly understands the ways of the Mighty Turas? Those germs could be natural, seeping out of the riverbed. Would you regulate nature?"

Berna locked eyes with him. "Nothing about this is natural."

He rolled his eyes.

She said, "A retrofit is only one option. We're happy to designate a team to come in, measure ash released, do some monthly reporting, recommend immediate measures to regulate your operations. You get the idea."

Di Gar's jaw firmed and his face reddened.

The chancellor picked up the attack. “Gareg. If Berna says your numbers are off, it’s because she’s looked at them twelve ways to next week and they all agree. If she says your numbers are off, you’d better believe it.”

She flushed. It was the river that mattered, not some bit of flattery from Nabahri. Years ago, when she was small, the Turas River ran hard and clear and cold through the heart of Vastol, white and frothy, water spirits dancing toward the bayou. In those days, the Turas was a sparkling gem.

The river needed her now, as much as the city depended upon it.

Nabahri said, “Berna’s bill calls for stronger regulations, and I support it, but the vote could go either way. Refurbishing your tanks—Gareg, it’s so much simpler. Take the money, fix the tanks. It’s a one-shot deal and you can spin the retrofit however you like. Frame it as an act of goodwill.”

Di Gar leaned forward, his eyes like embers and his voice low. “You waste my time. My workers live in Vastol, drink this water. If we held any blame I’d be the first to correct it.”

In that momentary glint of his eyes Berna saw pure cussed obstinance. Entangled and threaded into combustion as he was, enmeshed with Garco, she wondered if he’d ever bend, ever capitulate to the greater good, or if he’d prefer for the whole meldeta industry—and Vastol City along with it—to break into a thousand dying pieces instead.

Maevyn murmured into her lap, “He’s lying.”

Berna glanced over. No—ego and deceit weren’t the same.

Nabahri said, “Gareg. Take a few days and think it over. There’s no need to rush your decision.”

“No. Our tanks are sound.”

The chancellor leaned back, his face smoothing out. “All right. I’ll see to it the waterways bill gets a vote, possibly within two weeks. Thank you for your time, director.”

They adjourned, di Gar striding from the room with Vanger right behind. Berna remained in her chair and held Maevyn’s arm as the others pattered out.

One subject hadn't come up—air quality, Maevyn's specialty and the subject of her natural talent. When they were alone, Berna said, "Are you feeling all right? You were so anxious, all afternoon."

"Every word out of his mouth was a lie. I don't trust either of them. His aide—Thom? Thom Vanger? He's something else. He's no aide."

"Why do you say that? The aide just sat there. He didn't even speak." The only memorable thing about Thom Vanger had been his arm in that sling.

"His metabolism kept spiking."

Berna leaned back, puzzled. Maevyn was aerovoyant, a genetic ability almost as rare as di Gar's genetically-protected chromosomal telomeres. In Maevyn's case, her inherited condition—engineered before humanity left Earth—gave her the ability to read the molecular composition of air. "You can see my metabolism?"

"I see your breath, Councilor. I infer your metabolism. I think everyone here could see how frustrated you were, but I doubt anyone else saw how much carbon you were exhaling. Your metabolism was high. Thom Vanger looked like a volcano."

"I didn't get that."

"And he kept studying me."

Well, that was true. Berna hadn't paid the young man much mind, but yes, thinking back, he had watched Maevyn quite a bit. "You think he suspects you're aerovoyant?"

"I do. And I bet he knows about the people who've gone missing."

A few people, possibly, were missing. Five or six, tops. According to Maevyn, they were aerovoyant like her, and, also according to Maevyn, they'd been killed. Berna doubted any such nefarious conspiracy existed. Maevyn was excitable. She was over-reacting. Removing a genetic class of people—such a thing could possibly have happened on old Earth but not on Turaset. Not in this day and age. "I doubt Gareg di Gar's *aide* is abducting people."

"I didn't say that. But someone is, and Vanger was watching me, and he was excited. Di Gar takes zero responsibility for his pollution.

You've said as much. Someone like me, who can see their carbon emissions? I'd have to be an idiot to bring up air quality."

Paranoid, that's how her friend sounded, although the more Berna considered the idea, the less crazy it seemed. Prudence was part of wisdom. "All right. We'll remove anything to do with air quality for the time being. If we can get a final draft to Nabahri by week's end, he'll get it to the floor by the end of next."

Maevyn's eyes darted to the chair Vanger had used. "I don't like how he was watching me."

"Maev! Forget Thom Vanger. We *won* today. The river won today. It's a good day. And there's a bill up north to protect the mountain ranges—this is a real tipping point." Berna smiled. "If you're upset on a day like today, you might not be cut out for the long haul of politics. Today's a win."

Maevyn rose from her chair. She paced to the other side of the room and set her hands on the back of Vanger's chair. "He kept *staring* at me."

Berna studied Maevyn closely. Her voice had that same edge it held when she'd first explained her ability to Berna. The same hesitancy, same fear, as though the last thing she wanted was for even a friend to know of her ability. And yet, Maevyn's description of air that day three years earlier—the effects upon it from agriculture, from rain, sunlight, every process imaginable—had convinced Berna of one thing: aerovoyancy was an absolute gift to environmental law. That day, Berna had vowed to recruit Maevyn into any pollution bill she ever wrote.

Maevyn's gaze, locked onto Berna's face, grew fierce. "I'm going to find out what that runt knows about the missing aerovoyants."



CHAPTER TWO



A small home outside Vastol City.

Melville supported his cousin around the shoulders and held a cup to her lips. He could barely feel the weight of her, so wasted had she become. “A few more sips,” he said.

She pursed her lips and pulled her head away. He sighed. Ascorb brew was the only thing with the slightest chance of easing Luisa’s agony, but it was a piss-poor analgesic. He put the cup to her lips again. “Please, Luisa, try.” It twisted his guts to badger her; the concoction would make a healthy person retch.

She took some at last, her face tight. Her shoulders tightened under his arm as she swallowed, and he lay her back on the pillow. Luisa’s voice came thorny and thin. “Make it stop.”

“Give it a few minutes. The ascorb will help.”

Not by much though, not with her body collapsing from organ failure. The harshest truth of the matter was that stronger drugs existed! They hadn’t vanished when the laws changed. Denying Luisa true relief—*that* should be the crime. It wasn’t as if addiction would be a concern for someone so near the end of her life. But Nasoir’s congress, in its infinite wisdom, had made stronger drugs impossible to find.

Luisa plucked at her sheets, and Melville pulled them a little more snugly about her. “My back,” she said. “I can’t get comfortable.”

“Here, here. Don’t, Luisa, I’ll turn you.”

It had been the prime chancellor who'd pushed the final congressional vote to ban analgeson, the narcotic that could ease her pain. Rumor had it his marriage fell apart over addiction.

The faint odor of bile wafted from a bowl near the head of the bed. Melville kept his breathing shallow and took the bowl to rinse in the small lavatory off her room. When he returned, Luisa was whimpering and he winced, the sound of her pain stabbing at his deepest guilt, the node in his heart, the place in which he locked away his most private secrets. The place Melville hid his past, where he tried to forget how very much of his soul he'd lost.

"Thank you for sitting with me," she whispered. "You're a good cousin."

He cringed, unable to bear her words. Luisa was the last person who should live under such a grotesque misconception, or who should think that he was anything other than a cowering shell of a man. "Shh, shh." Sitting with her now, feeding and wiping her, it barely touched the edge of his guilt. On nights when he woke screaming, with his uncle's—her father's—anguished cry reverberating in his thoughts, "*Melville, no!*" he'd redouble his commitment to making Luisa's final months of life as comfortable as he could.

He stroked her head, seeking distraction in the caress. Her hair had grown so brittle. Her scalp like worn parchment. "Rest. Try to sleep." After a few minutes her eyes closed. Melville kissed her forehead gently and left, pulling the door as he went.

In the little front room, what Luisa called her brightening room because of its pair of wide windows and light blonde wooden floor, two guests waited. They were speaking in undertones. Melville's voice turned chilly. "Keep your voices low, both of you. She wakes easily. Why are you here?"

Gareg di Gar chuckled. "Simple. We want you back."

Back? Back into the program that had taken his soul? The program dreamt up by combustion? Never. He'd never rejoin the very people who'd ordered his uncle Jose's death.

"The program is struggling. We need your help."

"You can take that *program* and ram it up your ancient hind."

Gareg didn't bat an eyelid, but then, he'd no doubt heard worse over the centuries.

To Melville's thinking, telomerics like Gareg were no more than yet another bizarre genetic version of humanity. They were, quite simply, one more example of the genetic engineering tricks batted about during Earth's final years; a test-tube experiment in human form, an unnatural trait in an endless buffet of manipulated genes. These bizarre human variants had been sent from Earth to the worlds humanity sought out for colonization. Worlds like Turaset.

Melville didn't think about Gareg's centuries anymore; instead, he pondered how telomerics like Gareg got by without any moral code. It must have to do with a sense of immortality, Melville thought, living for millennia without the specter of aging. Such a life span could warp a man in a dozen different ways.

Gareg gestured to the second visitor, a young man in desperate need of a haircut. Gareg said, "Young Thom here, Thom Vanger. He's one of our newer discerners."

Thom's voice cracked. "It's an honor to meet you, Mr. di Vaun. Sir."

Plainly Thom was new to the program. He didn't look jaded yet.

Di Gar said, "Congress is voting to regulate our pollution—"

"That's far past due," Melville said.

"—and the chancellor backs it. They'll moan about emissions before too long."

The man's entitlement set Melville's teeth on edge. This top-of-the-heap executive lay behind all the ruthless murders the discernment program demanded.

He ordered Uncle Jose's death.

And yet, as true as it was, Melville clutched onto ownership. *No*. He held to the weight of Jose's murder. It was *he* who had killed Jose. He who had agreed to cut his own uncle. Remembering that was the simplest way to stay clear of Gareg's infernal program once and for all. "Those laws, Gareg, would protect this planet. Nabahri should have moved sooner."

"Laws will never clean the air. Technology will."

Autore. How had he ever failed to hear this man's arrogance? Melville crossed to the windows and threw the curtains wide to let in the last of the evening light. "The lengths you go to hide your waste, Gareg, it's craven."

"Patience. In a few decades, we'll have technology to draw the pollution down. Trust me. Seeing the millennia come and go, as I have, living and toiling through that—it changes one's perspective. Time shifts a man's view. Give it time. We'll build tools to decarbonize. Earth almost did."

And yet, Melville mused, time had yet to change human instinct. Drive, greed, the need for dominance—no, those hadn't changed. Gareg's words were propaganda. Get Nasoir up to the technological standard once enjoyed on Earth and trust human ingenuity to avoid the exact technological cost that had brought Earth down.

There'd been a time when Melville swallowed Gareg's lies wholesale, but not anymore. Each life he'd taken, in the bloody name of advancement, had cost him peace of mind, naivety, gullibility. His soul. A chill ran through him.

"These things come in pairs," Gareg continued. "Every advance leads to challenges; each challenge a new opportunity to advance. It's evolution. It's technological evolution."

"Evolution?" Melville spat, then registering the heat in his voice, threw a glance down the hallway. Waving his hand to silence Gareg, he went to Luisa's door and listened. Still quiet. He turned back. The light through the windows was dimming as the first of Turaset's suns sank below the horizon. On the wood floor, the shadows grew long and crisp.

"Yes, evolution. We correct as we go."

Melville recalled the day he sliced into his final victim, and how he'd huddled in a corner afterward, reliving the memory of the man's face smoothing into lifelessness again and again. Melville's partner had found him like that. Ephraim had fallen next to him, and they held one another, shaking and in tears.

"I want you back," Gareg said. "Congress needs to show more respect."

The young man, Thom, cleared his throat. “Mr. di Vaun, sir, you’re a legend. You’re what we all want to be. They say you spot aerovoyants from fifty yards.”

From the sling the boy wore, Melville wondered if Thom had been tortured during his training as he himself had been. There was no other sign to suggest abuse. Thom seemed content enough. A slight boy, and clear skinned, sitting there on the tattered couch. Thom seemed to be Melville’s own past, a young man exploited but not seeing it yet. A man with his emotions stirred and stoked. A man bizarrely determined to see a misguided commitment through.

“Is it fifty now?” He’d never identified an aerovoyant past twenty yards, but it was true he’d been the sharpest in the program. Even in a crowd, Melville saw them without fail and never made a mistake. The joke going around had been that he smelled them.

He spotted the other traits, too. Before Ephraim had so much as suspected Gareg was telomeric, Melville had been certain of it. And Thom, too, had a look about him. The sling was part of it, but it went beyond that. Something in how Thom stayed out of arm’s reach. He might be piezoelectric. That would fit.

Thom said, “Sir, I think there’s an aerovoyant on Vastol’s council. She sat across the table, and her tempo-ocular distance seemed about right. But I’m not sure.”

“Autore, Gareg. This is why you need me? Because your people can’t manage estimations from across a *table*?”

“You were very good,” Gareg said.

“Listen, Thom. What you’re doing is built on half-truths. Look at Gareg’s suit then look at the couch. Tell me he cares about anyone’s quality of life but his own. You, Thom, kill to line his pocket.”

As he spoke, Melville pushed back against the memories. His uncle’s face, sliced wide, his orbits fully exposed while his body strained against the restraints. *Melville!*

“This man!” Melville crossed back from the windows, grabbed Gareg’s lapels and yanked at him then released him. “Telomerics. To someone like him, you and I are fleas.” The director didn’t react, and again, why would he? “To him, Thom, a lifespan of eight years is the

same as eighty. And why not? Why *not* kill an eight-year old? Or an eighty-year old? Or *anyone!*”

A moan came from the hallway. “Father!”

He pivoted to Luisa’s cry and the fury inside him shrank. That cry had the same timber her father’s voice had held. ‘*Melville!*’

Half a soul... He twisted inside, dread replacing his rage.

“How’s your cousin?” Gareg said mildly.

Uncle Jose had been aerovoyant. Melville locked eyes with Gareg and hissed, “You play at caring about Luisa. Don’t play with me.” He strode to Luisa’s door, slipped it open and stole to her bed. He rested a hand lightly on her shoulder. The room was dark, and he kept his breathing shallow, to avoid smelling the smell of a long and natural death. Her room had none of the odors he’d learned to associate with death—the formaldehyde and latex and other laboratory scents. No, her room smelled faintly of decay. He opened the window and turned back to her. Under her lids, her eyes darted. “Shh, shh,” he said, crossing over. After a moment her breath steadied. He adjusted the sheets and returned to the brightening room.

“She sounds strong,” Gareg said as he walked in. “Strong enough to survive many months. They say the pain doubles, even triples, in those last weeks.”

Melville threw the front door open. “I want you out.”

He didn’t budge. “I’m not your enemy, and we agree that Luisa’s suffering is pointless. I can help.”

“Get out!”

“My grandmother had pancreatic decay. That was how she died, and why I know something about your cousin’s pain. When you watch a person die, a person with whom you’ve spent centuries, oh, it’s profound.” Gareg looked down to the shabby rug at his feet, and his voice dropped. “I always believed it was the centuries that made her death so hard, all of the time we had shared together. But seeing you like this... Even with your scant three decades I realize how alike we are.”

Alike? That was a joke. Gareg had never given of his soul for combustion. Gareg never felt remorse; at least Melville had never seen

any indication of such. There'd been a time when Melville aspired to be like Gareg—strong, above reproach. Untouchable. It was hard to reconcile the man he'd once been with who he was now. Gareg was no more than a petty thug, and they were nothing alike.

The man was still speaking. His voice had grown soft.

“Grandmother was telomeric of course, and I knew her for over a millennium. We were close. When you know a person that long, you can't help it. My mother was born here, on Turaset, but my grandmother—she was born in space, over three thousand years ago. Imagine that! And my youth, growing up on Grandmother's tales. Tales of Earth's wondrous space-faring technology. Crossing space!” Gareg shook his head with an expression between bemusement and regret. “To think in timescales of mere decades. How do you do it?”

“We manage.”

Gareg laughed. “Yes. And a good job of it, too. But Melville, think. Imagine if you lived as I have. Imagine believing that something is attainable within *my* lifetime, a *telomeric* lifetime, no more than two or three thousand years. Melville. Imagine the dream of returning to the stars. And then, an age passes with no progress, and you despair. A century can come and go, and another, and there's no change, no advancement toward that most noble goal.”

Melville studied Gareg more closely. The man's frame was relaxed; his face contemplative, as though he felt real regret for lost years.

Gareg said after a quiet moment, “That's what combustion is driving toward. Reaching Earth standard and regaining space.”

But at that, Melville scoffed. The old fairy tale, that Earth had reached a utopia. “If Earth was so perfect, why did we leave? Tell me that, Gareg. Why did we leave the very apex of our existence if it was so grand?” His voice rose as he spoke, and once more he forced it back down. “They ran from a dying world, panicked and afraid. It was no apex. Romanticizing the end of Earth as you do—you're delusional.”

Gareg tipped his head back and forth. “Perhaps. Still, I know what I've lived here, on Turaset, and you can surely imagine *that*. Imagine witnessing decline. A plague strikes, and everyone jabbars on about

public health for decades on end. The only focus becomes eradicating a disease germ. All of that human capital *wasted* on a bacterium.” He threw a fist into his open hand. “You toil for centuries to convince your neighbors to try and claw back, one fingernail at a time, just to regain lost ground! All the while knowing the real goal is grander. Humanity *must* return to space, Melville. Find new worlds, new homes. That’s our destiny, what Earth realized, and what has slipped from our collective vision.”

“They ran from a dead world. You’d repeat their foolishness by killing ours.”

Gareg shook his head. “They mastered *space*. To you, space travel is ancient history. To me, it’s... *almost* a memory. It’s tangible reality. My grandmother lived it.”

Thom had watched agape throughout the exchange. His eyes hadn’t left Gareg’s face, and the director’s eyes had lit as he’d spoken, a flicker blossoming into a blaze. “For centuries at a time,” Gareg said, “I’ve thought we’d never find our way. Out of filth, out of subsistence living. And yet I’ll say it again. Our ancestors mastered space. They *owned* it.”

Against his will, Melville felt a whisper of wonder steal through his mind at the thought of life among the stars.

“We deserve no less, and now, with combustion rising, it’s within reach.” Gareg laughed. “Melville! We can’t let Congress block us. We need to send a message. Thom thinks he’s found a target, but he’s not sure.”

Melville groaned. No matter his contempt for politics the personal price was too high. Gareg knew well enough that those aerovoyancy genes were meant to protect Turaset from too-rapid air pollution. And yet, after centuries of struggle and plagues, was it any surprise that every genetic warning and beacon their ancestors had placed in the human code had become such bitter pills to swallow?

He’d been barely sixteen when he proudly joined combustion. The cities, with their frigid winters and manure littering the streets had needed technology simply to make life livable. He’d been more than

proud—he'd been downright jubilant when they'd hired him. Assassination had been nowhere in the recruitment materials.

The discernment trainers insisted from the start, as Gareg did now, that the program served a greater good. They'd given him hallucinogens, taught him to feel pleasure at advancing technology and making society better for the masses, wealthier at every level, and for over a decade he'd been the sharpest discerner of the lot until finally the faces plaguing his dreams grew too demanding, too torturous for the hallucinogens to erase. Unable to go on, the sea of dissected eyes and temples swimming before him, he vowed to get out. With his partner Ephraim he'd deprogrammed and weaned off the drugs. They pulled themselves free of discernment.

“You could help us,” Gareg said.

“No. *Autore!* You want to debate combustion? You and I would not be *having* this little chat if our ancestors on Earth had shown any restraint. One world would have sufficed!”

Gareg punctuated each of his words with a fist to the palm. “This is not Earth. If they'd had telomerics to guide them, be the wise eye to their actions, they would have preserved their world.”

Melville ran his hands over his face. These ancient telomerics were as flawed as anyone; long life didn't correct basic human failings. Gareg was as short-sighted, as ego-driven as the next person walking down the street. *Autore*. The number of friends Gareg must have outlived. The man's own life more in the distant past than the present. When Gareg was born, Turaset's population would have been, what, a few hundred? How much terraforming had even been accomplished, at that point? The world Gareg had spent his boyhood on would have been nothing like the world was now. Perhaps that was why the man saw no problem with damaging Turaset.

He sighed heavily. The human brain wasn't designed for a telomeric lifespan.

A small wail came from the back of the house. Gareg looked down the hallway just as Melville did.

“I admire your devotion to your cousin.” Gareg pulled a pill bottle from his jacket pocket. “Listen, Melville. Take this. It'll help.”

Melville stared at the man's offering. He recognized the label—analgeson, a few doses at least. He met Gareg's eyes warily.

"Just work with Thom for a few days, not to rejoin anything, just to get Thom's head around those tempo-ocular measurements. Do that, and we'll see to it Luisa has all the analgeson she needs."

Dead silence held the room. Melville didn't move, his eyes fixed on the bottle. This wasn't a middle ground, but wrongness. Training Thom to become a better killer was surely the same as killing himself.

Still, Melville turned it over, and from the hall came another moan.

But training *wouldn't* involve killing. There'd be no death cries, no tortured faces. Of course, in a way it could be worse, because, Melville thought, once his skill and knowledge was in Thom's hands, it was out of his own control.

"Three days," Gareg repeated. "Bring home whatever drugs you like. As much as you like."

Thom spoke, his voice cracking again. "I could use your help, sir."

The boy's chin was soft with fuzz. Maybe, Melville thought, maybe Thom was still impressionable. Maybe he'd listen to a few unorthodox ideas. Maybe Melville could steer Thom *out*, and some of his guilt with it. He stared at the pill bottle and turned Gareg's offer over. If he convinced Thom to leave, it might mean lives saved. He could ease Luisa's pain *and* keep Thom from going further down such a misguided path.

"Three days?"

Gareg smiled. "That's all we need, I think."



CHAPTER THREE



Governance Hall, Vastol City.

Berna grinned and ran her hand across the final bill. It sat in front of her with the heft of law, square and solid on her desk. “This’ll pass. Great work.”

Maevyn paced, chewing on one of her nails.

“Stop worrying. I’m telling you, we have a winner here. Your suggestion was brilliant, by the way, diverting that retrofit funding into bayou reclamation. It buys three more votes, and we already had a great shot at passage.”

Maevyn threw her a glance, still frowning.

“You know,” Berna said, “I remember when the bayou was simply magical. Years and years ago. There were night-birds—have I told you? They made music at dusk. They harmonized with one another—it was absolutely enchanting. Everyone would stop whatever they were doing to listen. Oh! And light-lizards, swimming up to the shore. The glow on the reeds was like a story book. Imagine if the light-lizards came back.” Berna leaned back in her chair, smiling. Days like these were the ones that made politics so fantastic.

Maevyn grabbed her copy and flipped through it again, as if she hadn’t scrutinized every word a hundred times. “When’s the vote?”

“Two weeks.”

“Nabahri said he’d get it on the floor this week.”

“He will. He wants two weeks for debate. You really should be listed as co-author.”

“No. Not with this.” Maevyn indicated her eyes. “Put me on something with nothing to do with pollution. That’d be safer.”

She seemed one step away from a nervous breakdown. Berna frowned. “Are you feeling all right?”

“I’m spooked.” Maevyn began pacing again, from Berna’s desk to the narrow window that faced out to one of Vastol’s quieter streets. “I can’t get that Vanger idiot off my mind. You have no idea what it’s like to feel like a freak of nature. You think I’m paranoid.”

“It doesn’t matter what I think.”

“Genocide is happening, right before our eyes.”

No, there was no evidence of genocide, just five or six missing people. Berna said patiently, “That’s an extreme interpretation. You know, given the lack of any bodies.”

Maevyn shook her head. “When Turaset was founded they should’ve given everyone this trait.”

“Everyone? Maevyn, come on.”

“One way or another, yes, everyone should have it.” Maevyn fell back into her chair and her face grew dark. “I’ve been drafting another bill.”

Berna suppressed a flare of irritation. As a probationary councilor, serving her first term, Maevyn had precious little chance to move anything, let alone a bill, even so far as the floor of City Council. “Well. That’s a useful exercise, I suppose.”

“Imagine if we reinstated the founding precepts.”

Disbelieving, Berna laughed. “What, daily check-ins? Morning recitations of Earth’s ills? You have no path to debate, not without a more senior co-author. You can’t be serious.”

“I am.”

“Maevyn. The founders faced the absolute *end* of humanity. That’s why the precepts were written, but it’s insane to suggest them today. Listen, take some time off. You’ll feel better.”

Maevyn grabbed the edge of the desk and her voice pitched higher. “There’s historical precedent for reinstatement.”

“Once! In limited form, during the deadliest plague in our history. I can’t believe what I’m hearing.”

Maevyn’s eyes turned hollow, her voice empty. “My whole life is *this*. My eyesight. Seeing what’s in the air, literally. Being... being privy to... to a different understanding of the world, not because of anything I’ve done, but because of who I am.”

It raised an age-old conundrum. How could one person empathize with the fundamentally different life experience of another? Aerovoyants were so incredibly rare, Berna mused, and Maevyn was right. Her experience of sight was foreign to anything Berna had ever experienced.

“For anyone like me,” Maevyn continued, “it’s the same. We hate leaving the house, meeting new people. Feeling like if they knew, if they figured out what we can do, even if they just suspected it—that what they’d see in us is nothing more than some old genetic experiment.” She gave an angry laugh. “Serious? You bet your hind I’m serious. I want the founding precepts enacted, at least temporarily.”

“To what *possible* end?”

“Justice! Autore! For one minute, think about having more than anyone around you—having an extra *sense*. And anyone that finds out treats you *differently*. Every newborn should have this trait.”

The wild look in Maevyn’s eyes—even her hair seemed crazed. Berna quelled panic winding up from her stomach. This councilwoman in front of her may be brilliant and insightful, but she needed to get a grip.

“The truth of the matter is you can’t see what’s right in front of your face.”

Berna inhaled. She held her tongue.

“The nitrogen, the carbon. It’s like we’re two different species.”

Berna stood and walked to the small drop-leaf console against the wall. Stalling, getting her head around whatever it was Maevyn was going through, not reacting, but trying to understand her friend’s perspective. Berna poured two glasses of water, thinking as she had many times before that the founding was a chapter of Turaset’s history

best forgotten. There'd been so many abilities coded into humanity, so fervently, without much regard for the wisdom of any particular change, as though humanity had wanted to test every possible genetic engineering feat imaginable. Parts of the genome had been pruned out completely, seen as remnants of their violent, hominid past. Too much of the precepts involved steering gene numbers toward some imagined ideal. She'd even written a school essay on it once, that the *idea* of steering gene frequencies—in a sense, eugenics—was as Turasetian as the remarkable abilities themselves. And here was Maevyn, descended from all of that and advocating some sort of reinstatement.

Berna walked back and handed a glass over. “Not a single councilor would go for anything like you’re suggesting. I suppose we all have crazy notions—”

“*Crazy?*”

“—of one sort or another.” She sat, leaned back and studied Maevyn, who was looking off to the side. Berna sighed. “Look, clearly you feel strongly. Sometimes good bills are built from that kind of passion.”

Maevyn gave a curt nod.

“I suppose you’d want DNA profiling. Parentage recorded. That sort of thing.”

Maevyn’s expression turned keen. “Yes.”

“What else?”

“Would you actually consider it?”

“Of course not. No, nothing like what you’ve said would ever pass.” But it had been a long time since she’d looked through the founding precepts, and in fairness they might hold an occasional piece of wisdom. “Who knows? There could be an angle to work from. So,” she repeated, “what else?”

“For one thing, I want to look at the original child-number policy. If I knew my genetics were safe, or encouraged, I’d have as many babies as I was required to have. Twice as many—I’d have twenty if I could. It’s the quickest way to build up numbers, and it builds families and communities. I think I’d make a good mother.”

“Maev. We can’t *make* people have children. That falls under the freedom laws.”

“My survival should fall under the same laws. There aren’t enough aerovoyants to begin with. We don’t ever admit having it. If there were more of us, that would solve everything. People would *know* us. We’d be more than just the descendants of some old experiment. The stigma would die.”

“Is that your goal?”

Maevyn shot her a blazing look beyond her years. “Pathetic, isn’t it? All I want is the freedom to leave my house without looking over my shoulder every third step.”

Berna sighed heavily. “Send me the draft. I’ll read it. We’ll talk.”



CHAPTER FOUR



Luisa's home, and a small town in the foothills north of Vastol City.

Luisa enjoyed two nights of uninterrupted sleep and two days of pain-free peace thanks to the handful of analgeson Gareg had left. Melville had even made her laugh twice with tales he'd learned years earlier from the northern cities. She'd laughed so hard he'd joined in, until, still laughing, she begged him to stop.

The memories of his victims' death cries quieted. His guilt began to fade, and Luisa's little home turned almost cozy.

It seemed a small price to spend three days with Thom for more of this, particularly if he could steer the young man out of discerning. Autore, lives could be saved. He could do that, convince Thom to leave as he and Ephraim had; as others had occasionally gotten out. The thought of risking a return to the training labs, where access to hallucinogens and opiates was easy, including the very drugs he'd been addicted to, planted a cold knot of dread in the pit of his stomach. If he could manage two things—staying clear of the mind-altering drug known as euphoron and having a plan in place in case he failed—he would willingly suffer through three days.

Ephraim was his back-up plan. His old partner. Ephraim would agree to be Melville's lifeline.

He sent a courier telling Ephraim to expect a visit and drove up the following day, through the foothills of the continental ranges toward Collimais, a village so deeply nestled in the pine-scented outlands that

Melville often wondered if the townsfolk might be entirely ignorant of the civilized coast.

Collimais. Backward, dusty, woodfire-fueled barbarism. This was the life Ephraim chose in their final days together. He said he needed distance from Melville. And, there'd been a girl.

Melville arrived mid-morning. Ephraim came out of his wife's inn as Melville pulled up next to the stable. Unshaven, Ephraim stood there wearing nothing but a pair of coarse-weave trousers.

Melville strode up. "You've gone native."

"Why are you here?"

Melville blinked. "I don't want to be, believe me." There was frustration in his voice. Of course there was; this man was supposed to be his friend. "Autore, Ephraim, I thought you'd welcome a visit."

"You're working for Gareg? What in all fierno could possess you? Mell?"

"No. Three days, in the labs, and no discerning."

Ephraim exhaled, forcefully.

"If you saw Luisa, the pain she's in. If you heard her you'd understand. She cries for Jose! Ephraim, you remember, what they demanded of me—" He swallowed, couldn't say it, the coercion they'd used on him to make him kill his own uncle.

Ephraim turned away to the little worktable next to the stable and fiddled with a carriage harness. "So this is your plan—to give in to them. Did you try *buying* analgeson? There must be some on the black market."

"I looked." The words came with anguish; from his impotence to relieve Luisa's pain. Every effort he'd made, every dark alley and second-hand drug dealer and fierno, even the raw stuff, trying to distill it himself into a usable form, all of those efforts had failed. "Vastol. Narona, Granvil. I've looked everywhere. Tried everything. There's no analgeson on the market, but Gareg has stores."

Ephraim turned back and his gaze was chilly, his eyes almost silver. It was the expression he used to chill others. He cast it on Melville. "I knew they'd find a lever against you. So help me, Mel, we *talked* about

this, that they'd try to get us back. You *sever* your feelings for Luisa and stay out. If you walk back into that maldeto—Autore. Let her die."

"Ephraim! You sound like the trainers. Giving her one bit of peace... Is it so much to ask? After Jose..." He couldn't say more, not with the wail that suddenly filled his ears. He felt it came from within him, but it might have been the air blowing past. Desolate.

"We were *addicts*. We swallowed every drug they handed us."

"But we got out! If things go wrong, I need you."

"Autore! You nearly died from euphoron withdrawal. Do you not remember? I tried to *kill* you, so *I* could go back. Now you want to traipse right back in, because di Gar *asked*?"

Melville had forgotten that, the day Ephraim nearly strangled him, so desperate had he been to return.

"You *cannot* go near those drug stores."

But, Melville thought, he'd always had it worse than Ephraim. Ephraim had never been tortured in the training, had never been asked to kill his own uncle. Melville had fought harder than Ephraim ever had, to get out. And, therefore, he was stronger than Ephraim. "No," he said. "*You* cannot go near them. Here's what I remember. You were my *brother*. Come to Vastol, that's all I ask. I need you, in case the euphoron, Autore forbid, finds its way into me. In case I slip."

Something strange lay in Ephraim's eyes, budding fear or uncertainty.

Melville pushed into it, threw himself into his plea. "I know the risk this time. I won't go near the euphoron. I won't! Come to Vastol, stay at Luisa's. Check me every evening; you'll know if I'm slipping. Autore, Ephraim, if I go off the rails, I don't know what I'll do."

Another long moment.

Melville said, "I won't kill anyone."

"You can't promise that."

"I *am* promising. I need you."

"I don't *trust* you! Not when you're talking like this. We're killers, Mel. And we're not partners, not anymore. The thought of partnering with you, with anything to do with combustion—even three days—no.

There're other ways to make her comfortable. Ascorb tea, pressure therapy, hypnosis—”

With a howl, Melville sank to his knees. “We’ve tried it all!” He sobbed, the pressure of his despair welling up and taking his last shred of fortitude. In wracking breaths, he said, “Her sheets soaked. Her skin so fragile I can barely touch her. She’s dying. My friend, *please*.”

“We agreed to never cross this threshold.” Ephraim’s face hardened, and his voice grew guttural, animal-like. “Ardelle’s pregnant. She worries she’ll miscarry again. I won’t leave her.”

But I need you. Any one of a thousand triggers could undo him. The preserved tissues, the racks and tools, if Thom himself was using. Melville curled over, grew fetal in his crouch.

Ephraim’s voice was like a mist, heavy and wet and insubstantial. “Mel. Let Luisa die. Choose your own life. Pain is part of life. Mel, Mel, surely Luisa understands. Surely she would never want you to do what you plan.” Ephraim swept his arm to encompass the pathetic inn and rutted street beyond, the rundown homes, the sagging porch stoops, “Choose a simpler way.”

And yet, every day until Luisa’s death would be torture for her; for Melville himself. Each cry from her lips would cut into his guilt. Every wail would raise his victims, and after he laid her to rest, her face would join the others to swim in his thoughts. He couldn’t take one more ounce. It would kill him.

I will relieve her however I can.

Something in him cracked and blew away. Ephraim was no friend, not anymore. The man slumping over there, covered in foothill dust. He’d never understood the industry as fully as Melville had. Ephraim hadn’t been there the day the trainers dissected Melville’s own genetic trait, sliced it out of his left ear, taken his augmented ability to hear beyond the normal human range. They’d tortured him to break him, and they had, but that day had also branded into him gut-level certainty of the depths to which the industry would sink for the barest chance of an advance.

No, the trainers had never tortured Ephraim, nor forced him to kill a relative.

How could he have thought Ephraim would help? Melville barely knew this rumpled stranger, the man he'd once thought of as closer than a brother. Melville stood, brushed the knees of his trousers, and pretended composure. "Thank you for your time, Ephraim. My regards to Ardelle."



CHAPTER FIVE



Leaving Governance Hall.

“Why was it cancelled?” Maevyn hurried to keep up, but Berna was in no mood for chitchat. Chancellor Nabahri had been so hesitant through the meeting she’d just had with him, saying the waterways bill wasn’t ready, that he wouldn’t advance it to the floor of congress yet, and still—still!—he thought di Gar might take the offered funds. Unbelievable.

“Berna, I asked you a question.”

Berna strode through the foyer. “Nothing was cancelled. The vote was postponed.”

Maevyn stayed on her heels. “Did they reschedule it?”

Berna pushed the door wide and a waft of night air blew up against them; a breeze off the river. The stagnant twinge from upstream was there too, courtesy of the bloom of germs flourishing in Garco’s discharge. She quelled her disgust and headed for the river walkway.

“Did they?”

She kept going, started down the boardwalk.

“Berna!”

Berna stopped and turned. “Yes! Joshi rescheduled. But he can always postpone, as long as he wants. Stop pinning your hopes on a date.” She started down the boardwalk again.

Maevyn remained right behind, an annoying little puppy. “Don’t you see? I filed intent in committee today to debate reinstatement of

the precepts. Your meeting happened right after. The chancellor got cold feet because of my filing!”

Berna stopped, drew a deep breath, and turned. “You introduced intent at the lowest possible level. Committee debate is nothing. I doubt Nabahri knows anything about it. He postponed a congressional *floor* debate. It happens all the time. Maevyn. Go home, get some sleep. You look terrible.”

Maevyn laughed in disbelief. “You want me to go home and sleep? Nabahri just threw us a slide-ball.”

Berna looked at her friend more closely. Maevyn wore the same checkered blouse she’d had on yesterday, her hair was yanked into a clip and her eyes bloodshot. Berna said, “You really do look horrible.”

Maevyn’s voice dropped. “I’m not sleeping at all. I had that Garco runt followed.”

“What?”

“I hired a woman to follow Vanger. Don’t look at me like that. It feels like he shows up everywhere I go, so I hired someone. She told me Vanger doesn’t have a registered domicile in Vastol. And there’s no birth record for him. None.”

“What?” Berna said again. “Why are you going through *birth* records?”

Maevyn locked eyes with Berna but didn’t answer. “The first time a record of the name ‘Thom Vanger’ shows up is three years ago, but it wasn’t at Garco—it was at Renico. Combustion’s facilities in Renivia Province.”

“So? He changed his name and transferred.”

“Berna! Before aerovoyants started disappearing in Vastol, there were stories out of Renivia Province. Vanger’s a discerner, I’m sure of it.”

Berna tried to corral her thoughts. The way Maevyn kept looking about, fidgeting with her hands—her friend’s feelings were palpable. Berna said, “You’re not in any condition to be alone tonight. Stay with me.”

Maevyn hesitated, looked behind and around before saying, “No. I’d rather track him.”

“*Track* him?” She took Maevyn by both shoulders. “You’re making me nervous. Stop fidgeting.”

Maevyn raised her eyebrows. “Thom Vanger wants to abduct me and I’m making *you* nervous.”

“Ah... I’m sorry. Look, isn’t it possible your mind’s playing a few tricks? Maev. Stay with me, sleep on my couch. Or don’t sleep but stay with me. You wouldn’t be alone. You could clean up, get a change of clothes.”

Maevyn shook her head. The furious set to her jaw, the way her eyes were growing moist in the dim evening light, the whole of Maevyn’s discomfort melted Berna’s heart and she took her friend into a hug. “Maev, sweetheart. What’s going on?”

“Nothing. This is my life. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Maevyn pulled away and headed off, her hands jammed in her pockets.

The next morning, she came into Berna’s office in the same slacks, same blouse. Berna pulled a comb from her bag and handed it over. “I brought some clothes for you. They’re hanging in my chambers.”

“Thanks.”

“Where did you end up?”

“I met up with the woman I hired, and we went to my place. We didn’t go in, though, because Vanger was right outside. He sat there, for hours. We watched him. He was waiting, for me.”

Her words came detached and calm, and oddly with that, Berna believed for the first time that her friend’s life might truly be at risk.

Maevyn said, “They’d want me dead no matter what, but they also want our pollution bill dead. If I go missing, you’d pull the bill. I think that’s the gamble. That we’d back off if I was missing. They think they’re the law.”

“Miere.” Berna’s voice came thick. Yes, such a gamble... yes, true enough, she’d pull the bill if Maevyn went missing. Her assessment—that Vanger’s surveillance was an attack on politics itself—felt exactly on target. “Hire a bodyguard.”

“I might. Don’t worry; I’ve taken precautions. I can defend myself.” Maevyn opened her case. “I also cleaned up my draft last night.”

“Where? Outside your *apartment*?” Berna took the papers Maevyn held out. They were puckered along their corners.

“No. Well, a bit. There’s an all-night chapel near the docks. I went there.”

Berna scanned the summary. These were no founding precepts; they were far more extreme. The precepts had been structured around minimizing death; they penalized aggression and required everyone to produce four or more children. They’d always unsettled Berna, but what Maevyn now envisioned terrified her. Camps, segregation, monthly check ins. Berna flipped to the second page of the summary. “I can’t believe what I’m seeing. Psychological evaluation? Assigned matings? Sterilizing geno-normative individuals? You can’t even define normative genetics. All of these defy freedom laws.”

The young councilor stood there, cut in half and shrinking. “Every bill we put forward is weakened at least two-thirds in committee. This won’t be final. But it’ll get noticed like you noticed it just now. It’ll grab attention and make the council face up to the abductions.” She looked up, straight into Berna’s eyes. “And it’ll make Combustion think twice about threatening anything to do with our waterways bill.”



CHAPTER SIX



Discernment training laboratory on the grounds of Garco, outside Vastol City.

Melville checked Thom's measurements. "That's right. Tempo-ocular distance increases by two or three percent when aerovoyants use their ability. It's slight, but you can see it, especially if the tissues are well-developed from use. It has to do with the orbits locking into the alternate position. See," he said, pointing at another sample.

It was unnerving, how little discomfort Melville felt working through the dissected organs with Thom. It came back to him as naturally as breathing, as though simply being in this lab erased the years he'd spent denouncing the program.

Genocide. He barely felt the atrocity in this place, surrounded by clinical specimens and chemical odors. These samples on the laboratory workbench were the exact ones he'd trained on, except for two on the end. With a convulsive shudder he recognized the irises on those. His final victim, the man he and Ephraim took before they agreed to get out.

They never needed to torture Ephraim. I always had it worse; fought harder to leave.

He'd be strong enough to stay clear of the euphoron. He had to be. He wasn't himself when infused with the rapture of that particular opiate.

Thom was studying an older pair of orbits. Melville recognized them. They came from a woman, Gretel someone-or other, who'd

once lived in Collimais. Thom said, “The left eye was activated when this sample was taken. The right orbit’s relaxed into normal vision.”

“Are you certain?”

“I am.”

Thom had gotten every sample correct.

“You’re right, sir, drilling through more samples makes a difference. I can almost picture your subdermal tissues just looking at you.”

Melville swallowed against the bile now rising in his throat, recalling the day that sort of discerning sight had fallen into place for him. He’d come here to stop Thom from learning more of the craft of discerning, and yet this place had somehow coaxed Melville to do the opposite.

Thom said, “People are ligaments and bones. Vessels and glands. We’re parts. I can *see* it.”

Melville closed his eyes, mentally denounced the decade he’d spent viewing others in such a mechanical way. Yet here he was, training Thom. He swallowed again and gripped the cart in front of him. Another day’s supply of analgeson sat there. He and Thom would be done tomorrow. He’d have all the medication Luisa needed.

‘You are good, cousin.’

He shoved the cart away and turned back. “Yes Thom. People are no more than *parts*.”

He whirled and strode away. Thom’s words pulled on another pain—the physical torture inflicted on him when his trainers began removing his own unusual ability, the ability to hear the world as song. *I said no. I said no!*

An itch began on his neck, below his earlobe, and went up and around. He rubbed at the scars around his ear, a pointless habit; he’d never be free of the memory of that day, the pain and warmth radiating down his neck as he’d screamed, pleaded, and finally agreed to kill Jose to keep the second half of his trait. Melville very nearly sobbed right then, in front of Thom. *Losing half destroyed it all.* He no longer heard the symphony of life. His hearing was as normal as anyone’s.

Thom poked another specimen, turned it over and opened it along the incision, examining the pad of extra cones in the retina. Thom no longer wore a sling—although the end of a thin pink scar was visible at his wrist.

“How do you feel about murder?”

Thom looked up. “Steering gene frequencies isn’t murder. We’ve done it since the founding.” He pointed his needle at the retina. “We needed this once, so there used to be more aerovoyants. And we sterilized people who were too aggressive. Times change, but we’ve always done this kind of stuff.”

“We could simply sterilize aerovoyants.”

“Sir? Is this a test?”

“*All* of it is a maldeto test! Every day as a discerner tests you.”

Thom didn’t say anything for a moment, and then he said, “Respectfully, most days don’t. But we need the tissues for training purposes, and the aerovoyants don’t survive their extraction. It’s necessary.”

“You are excusing the murder of innocent people. How many lives have you taken?”

“Two.”

“Only two?” Puzzlement clouded Melville’s thoughts. Thom had a few years in the program at least. He should have taken half a dozen or more by now. “One during training, I presume.”

“That’s right. The other last year, in Masotin. I play it safe. I don’t want to make a mistake. I’m afraid I’ll cut into someone and find out they don’t have it.”

A flicker of hope lit, because that could be a good sign. Thom had a shred of decency after all. Although, even one field kill would have whetted the boy’s appetite. In training, there was compulsion. In the field, the kill was fully intentional.

Melville rubbed at his ear.

Thom must have—or must have once had—his own unusual trait. The boy was a piezoelectric, Melville was certain of it, although the trait was less common than his own audiovoyancy. Piezoelectrics had

an extra bone running down each forearm, nestled against the radius. The piezus bone stored mechanical energy as charge.

“They took one of your piezus bones, didn’t they?”

Easily, Thom said, “Yes, the weaker one. I can still land a shock with the other.”

“Autore, man, they *maimed* you.”

Thom shook his head and held out both arms. He twisted his hands, but the movement was restricted on the right, the unscarred side. “The trait restricts full motion, see? One of my cousins had both sides removed.”

So, Thom still had his trait, after a fashion, on one side.

Thom went on. “Mr. di Gar and I, we talked about whether my bones were useful. We decided to take it out of the left arm; it was weaker anyway, and that’s my knife hand, so more flexibility comes in handy. We decided to leave the right side alone. I can still shock people. That’s handy too.”

Melville turned away, everything in him growing tight. A person couldn’t go a month without slamming into another genetically modified person, and the industry always found ways to leverage the traits to whatever benefit they deemed suited them best. “Gareg,” he swore, slamming his hand on the specimen counter.

The eyeballs jumped.

“Thom, when they took my ear, my audiovoyancy...” Melville couldn’t continue. It was from the depth of that torment that he’d attacked Luisa’s father. But Thom had *chosen* to limit his trait. Melville took a breath. “Nevermind. So, you’ve made a field kill. What drugs did they recommend?”

Thom laughed. “Euphoron.”

“Autore,” Melville said, a rumble of fear swirling up. “You’re on it now, aren’t you?”

“A bit.”

The training kill, in the lab, that was always fumbling mess. But the first field kill would be different whether drugs were involved or not. Raw, powerful, almost sexual. Preying on a fellow being. Seeing fear

when that person understood. After proper training, a field kill was close to frenzied lust—and euphoron heightened all of it.

“So that’s where you are. One field kill under your belt.”

“Yeah. In Masotin. The rush was amazing.”

Euphoron. Melville wondered how to steer Thom from *that*. He slid a tray of eyeballs to the back of the specimen counter, covered them with plastic sheeting and said quietly, “You want more, don’t you?”

“Sir, I want to advance Nasoir.”

“Of course.”

“It wasn’t the rush.”

He considered Thom’s words. “It was the righteousness.”

“Yeah. Yeah! That’s it. I felt it, you know? It was right, to get rid of the variable.”

“Mmmm.”

“We have a mission, with a clear goal. And when I killed that aerovoyant I knew I’d moved us closer.” Thom snorted. “He sort of looked like a kid I knew back in school.”

Melville took the tray, walked to the freezer tanks and stored the samples. “How was it the next day?” *Melville, no!*

Thom didn’t answer, and Melville closed the tanks. “Did you see his face? Hear his screams?”

“They said that’d get easier.”

“Sometimes they hand out amnesion.”

Thom shuffled. “I’m fine.”

Melville took him by both arms. “Listen to me. This is important. You are becoming an instrument for something very dark. And you’re at a pivot point, where you still have choice. But you are *losing* your ability to choose. By following their rules, you’re giving it up of your free will. Don’t do it. Get out of this infernal program. Get out before you’re addicted.”

“Sir. I think... maybe when you were in the program it was that way. Combustion’s rising, and we need it to expand. We need discerners, and we need people sympathetic to combustion wherever we can get them, too. Heads of business, banks. We need them on the legislatures.”

“The legislatures? What are you going on about?”

“The councils. We need representation. Some of the council members want to drag us back to the old times.” Thom paused, maybe he expected Melville to say something, but these words were not the standard line Melville had been trained on.

Thom said, “There’s a new bill, right now, and some of the provisions include forced breeding and selective killing of newborns. One of Vastol’s councilors wants to implement the founding precepts, only more extreme.”

“What?” His word came thick, in disbelief.

“This bill, it’s an act of war if you ask me, and this councilor is the same woman I told you about who’s probably aerovoyant. Mr. di Gar wants industry people on the councils, so they can work their way up to congress. That way we can stop this nonsense.”

“You’re saying this bill... What exactly, Thom, are you saying?”

“From what I’ve heard, we’d live in camps. We’d register our genetics. Any travel we made would be documented. Me? I’d have to father sixteen children. You too, because of your audiovoyant genes. My sister’s geno-normal, we think, and she’d be sterilized.”

Melville had never been enamored of the government, not by any stretch, but this—to control lives, movements, *reproduction*—such a bill was heinous.

Thom glowered. “The councilor—it’s like the precepts are some kind of sacred book to her. She thinks by framing her bill like that, on some kind of sacred tradition, no one will see her self-interest. She’s protecting her hide! She doesn’t care about Nasoir.”

Melville leaned suddenly against the specimen counter, caught himself on the lip and stared, uncomprehending. “*She’s attacking us?*” She was their prey. She was nothing, an aerovoyant, no more than a target.

Thom smiled. “Us. Yes, sir.”

The government would never so brazenly act... But it seemed they would. “I’d be forced to have children?” The room spun. Such a law was unfathomable, that a scant few dozen individuals in Vastol could force him to father sixteen squalling offspring when he’d never desired a

single one. The freedom laws were the only piece of governance that had ever made any sense...

“Sir?”

Combustion asserting dominance and adversaries fighting back, each side entrenched, no right, no wrong... a moan escaped. “Did you say they’re calling for camps?”

“Yes. They say there’s legal precedent to treat us like livestock.”

His head lolled. Thom’s words shifted into meaningless pressure.

“Sir?” Thom seemed to say it from a great distance.

He waved at the door. He needed Thom to leave. What kind of councilor would be so deranged?

‘They pose a risk...’ His old trainer’s words flitted through his thoughts. Who? Who posed the risk? Aerovoyants? Di Gar? Lawmakers? Biology, technology, law—fighting, strike, counterstrike.

One way or another, the woman writing this bill had to be stopped.



CHAPTER SEVEN



'The Delta Vagabond,' on the riverfront.

Joshi Nabahri, the youngest politician to ever serve as Prime Chancellor of Nasoir, spotted a dab of roe onto his sweet wrap. “Going backward like you suggest would raise more than a few eyebrows.”

“It’s not really a backward step,” Maevyn said. “What I’m trying to do, is to reconnect us with our core identity.”

Her eyes were shining. In the dim patio candlelight, Berna couldn’t be certain if Maevyn was excited or nervous. When Berna had suggested the meeting, as a way to convince Maevyn once and for all to tone down her rhetoric, Maevyn had been nervous. And yet when they’d entered the restaurant and found Joshi already there, Maev practically glowed. It had seemed as though she saw this evening as some sort of affirmation.

But there was no way the chancellor would support her ideas, and so Berna sat, content to let *him* explain the workings of politics. For once.

“Sir,” Maevyn said, poised and straight-backed, “the way I see it, the founding precepts are a tool we can use if we decide to. They were a tool we needed to survive, and so they’re part of us. It isn’t backward to bring that part forward a little.”

It surprised Berna how well Maevyn stated her case. The girl had a knack for debate when she put her mind to it. The clink of glasses

around them, the hush of river tumbling nearby—the entire evening felt as though it might one day be seen as the pivot when law was conceived.

Maevyn said, “One thing’s changed. There are plenty of us now.” She laughed, sounding confident.

Berna wondered if she’d practiced that. It could be the wine that made Maevyn seem more relaxed. The deft way she was going on, it struck Berna that her friend might indeed sway the chancellor with her arguments. Berna shifted uneasily.

Maevyn paged into her draft. “Within a few generations, each slice of every single town and city, as defined on page seven, here and here, would see equal representation in the population. Chancellor, that’s the truest definition of democracy. At its heart, this bill is about fairness. Justice.”

Nabahri smiled, but it looked like tolerant humor more than support, and Berna released a sigh of relief. He said, “I can’t get the idea of breeding camps out of my head. Talk about unorthodox!”

Maevyn’s eyes remained bright. “Oh, we’ll cut that during compromise.”

“And the requirement for sixteen children? People might object.”

“There’s a list of exemptions on page thirty-two. We’ll provide a petition for exclusion for, well, anyone who’s uncomfortable with the idea.”

He chuckled. “In that case why stop at sixteen? Make it thirty-two.”

Berna looked at him in astonishment. “Sir—”

“Oh relax, Councilor. Your protégé’s ideas are a breath of fresh air. They remind me of the kind of passion brings us all into service in the first place.”

Unbelievable. “Maevyn’s bill is dead on arrival. It’s completely divisive, and with or without compromise I don’t see that changing.”

“Berna, this is harmless talk. Tell me Maevyn. What chance do you think you have at passage? After due process, of course.”

Maevyn’s eyelid twitched and her expression strained. Berna leaned forward. “Maevyn? You’ve not *tallied*, have you?”

She looked down. “I asked some members.”

“You *what*? You’re out of order, probationary councilor.”

The chancellor gave a quick smile. “No, Berna, initiative’s good.”

“Who was stupid enough to answer?”

“What?” Maevyn seemed puzzled by the question.

There was a basic principle here. Berna snapped, “I can’t begin to imagine a probationary councilor approaching me to ask what my vote might be on a pre-compromise draft. You’ve only just announced intent to introduce in committee. Maevyn—this is contempt of legislative decorum.” She threw her napkin onto the table.

The girl’s poise faltered; she seemed to sink. “Well, only a few people agreed to talk.”

That, at least, made sense. Anyone at the congressional level should have declined. A few on the city council might not have the sense to do so.

Nabahri swirled his last bit of wine and downed it. “Berna, you’re right. Maevyn should rein in her enthusiasm, but she has vision. Hang onto your fire, Maevyn, and listen to Berna. She can rally votes to pass anything she brings forth. She could pass mandatory schooling if she put her mind to it. Work hours, you name it.”

Yes, he was right about that, and it was because she followed the rules.

“You, young lady, have drive. Berna has years. I’m pleased you’re working together.”

Unease roiled her thoughts. Maevyn’s scribblings, if hammered into something that could actually pass, would reshape society. Given the draft’s aggressive language, it made sense upon reflection that Maevyn had been bold enough to approach congressmembers directly.

“So,” the chancellor said, “of those few who talked, the what’s the count?”

Maevyn’s eyes darted past the railing, away from patio altogether. “They’re mostly hostile.”

“Count me hostile too,” Berna said. “Hostile as *fierno*.”

Maevyn tipped her head down. “One or two said they’d read it.”

Berna shoved her plate away.

More loudly, Maevyn said to her, “Vastol is classist.”

Berna spat, “Make up your mind, Councilor. Is the problem class, or gene frequencies?”

“Both. People like Gareg sit on top, with their hand on every switch. There’s no opposing people like him. Industries claim rights to secrecy, self-determination. They charge us however they see fit. They say it’s all in the public interest. Shouldn’t my safety be in the public interest?”

“Is that how you’re promoting this thing? As some sort of pillar of *equality*? I think you need to look at the exact provisions you’ve outlined, one by one, especially the ones allowing government to stick their fingers into every choice a person would ever make. Ask yourself if you really have Nasoir’s advancement in mind. Chancellor Nabahri, I expected more from you tonight. You’re encouraging this nonsense.”

“Again, there’s no harm in talk, Berna. And Maevyn, Berna’s absolutely right. But it sounds like you’ve got people thinking.” Nabahri set his napkin next to his plate. “Here at one of the finest restaurants in Vastol, you’ve got us talking ancient history and ways to structure society. I like it. I like it very much. You know, Gareg says progress has a technological component, but progress has a cultural component too. New ideas. I love it. The stuff of the future.”

Berna hissed, “You can’t be serious.”

“Maevyn’s draft moved you, wouldn’t you agree? Her ideas may be good or bad, but they spur discussion and that leads to cultural movement. She’s right about Gareg, by the way. He thinks he’s in charge. A simple debate of this bill might tell him we see it otherwise. Berna, help her tone it down, and we’ll take it from there.”

She had no good response. She nodded curtly. At least the directive gave her authority to assert oversight of the drafting.

They rose to leave, and Nabahri bid them good night.

Maevyn and Berna walked toward the riverfront residential district, and the rushing water soon muted any last sounds from the restaurant’s patio. If nothing else, Maevyn’s outrageous ideas made the waterways bill appear positively tempered.

The stretch of wetland between the business district and residential townhomes was poorly-lit waterfront, or, Berna thought less kindly,

swampland. She kept her eyes on the raised pathway winding through dogtail reeds and gallberry bushes. “Maevyn, you’ll certainly be censured for tallying so early.”

“I know.”

“So why in Autore’s name—”

At that moment something crashed and there was a blur to the right. Two men lunged up and out from the shrubs. Berna screamed. Maevyn was yanked away. A man clasped Maevyn to himself. He looked about thirty, with horrible scarring around one of his ears.

With him was Thom Vanger.

“Let her go,” Berna said, hands up defensively. She had height and reach on either of these two.

Thom Vanger took Maevyn from the other man, who said, “We won’t hurt her.” Then the man stared pointedly at Vanger, and he nodded.

Surreal, that’s how this felt, with Maevyn’s claims of abductions—of murders—crystallizing into human form. “You’re with Combustion,” Berna said to the stranger.

“I was.”

“What’s your name?”

“Di Vaun. Your friend’s aerovoyant.”

“She isn’t,” Berna said, tensing and broadening her stance.

“We won’t hurt her.” He said it calmly, as though reporting the weather.

No. That wasn’t quite it. He said it calmly, as though confessing. Guilt lay on his face. She said, “You look like you want to.”

“I don’t care if she counts carbon or not. I don’t care if she carries every maldeto genetic variation in the books, and I sure as fierno don’t care about Combustion. But you. You *government*. You, I care about.”

“We have nothing to do with you.”

“You take analgeson from us, under some cooked-up pretext of addiction. You sit in offices and decide you know what belongs in our bodies, while we suffer and die in pain.” He tipped his head at Thom. “When I worked as Thom has, killing people like your councilor friend, my attacks were targeted, in every last case, and I never inflicted

pain on my victims. But you, you cause pain to the entire population. And now you write law requiring procreation? You write law—to document heritage? To trace our comings and goings? Who the *fierno* do you think you are?”

In a weird moment of split vision Berna heard *her* argument, her passions, even her own past opposition to the banning of certain painkillers coming from this man, this admitted murderer, this *youngster*. But she said nothing, instead she gauged the scene a second time. Vanger was holding Maevyn firmly, and Maevyn held herself still. She locked eyes with Berna, but whatever she was trying to communicate was unclear.

Di Vaun’s face contorted in rage, and the scars around his ear grew red in the dim light. “You whittle away our rights, one by one, like those rights are sheep to be slaughtered. I won’t have it. No!”

Maevyn’s eyes were wide brown circles; her head was back, and she clutched her handbag as if her life depended on it. She looked almost as though she didn’t exist in this moment.

“Maevyn,” Berna said softly, and with the utterance her colleague’s paranoia filled her own heart. Berna felt death lay, mere moments away, and a fiery passion to survive flamed within. A desire to hold a child, many children; those feelings warred with a profound commitment to never visit her fate upon another. “Oh, dear girl,” Berna whispered.

Maevyn thrust her hand into her bag and yanked something out, moving more quickly than Berna could follow. Maevyn jabbed Thom’s leg, and he howled and grabbed, but sank to the ground.

“Maevyn!” Berna lunged but di Vaun caught her, pinned her hard. She threw her elbow back. He grunted, doubled over. Berna grabbed him. He didn’t fight.

Maevyn stood before them, waving a syringe, a wild light in her eyes. “I know your name, di Vaun. You die now.”

He didn’t move. He eyed Maevyn’s needle. “What’d you give Thom?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

Berna said, “You’re not authorized to brandish—”

“He would’ve killed me.”

Di Vaun tensed. “He would *not*. Thom was beginning to listen to reason. He was not here because of your trait, but because of your obscene bill.”



CHAPTER EIGHT



Continuation, Melville's viewpoint.

"I have rights," Maevyn cried. "I have a right to have children without worrying that they'll be hunted and killed."

"And I have the right to choose otherwise," Melville roared.

The councilor who held him gripped more firmly.

"You can relax the hold," he said through gritted teeth. "I'm no killer." On the other hand, the aerovoyant might well be. Not many drugs would take out a fully-grown man like Thom so quickly.

At that moment, footfalls pounded toward them.

Melville twisted his head to look, and he startled. It was... *Ephraim*, running up. The last person Melville expected.

Breathing heavily, Ephraim's gaze swept the scene.

Melville watched the aerovoyant—was it Maevyn?—and she kept her eyes on him as well. Melville repeated, "I'm not a killer. And I have no intention of being injected with *that*."

"Mel," Ephraim said, still panting and still eying both women, "Gareg sent word, said you were back in. Wants me back too. Are you medicated?"

"Fierno, Ephraim, I'm not with the program. I was getting Thom out. Thom, who might be dead now thanks to that one."

Ephraim looked from the aerovoyant to Thom to Melville. "Why are you here, if not to take her?"

"Ask these women. Ask about the law they're working on."

The councilor holding him snapped, “You assaulted us over Maevyn’s preliminary *draft*?”

He ignored her. “You, Ephraim, would be sterilized. Ardelle’s pregnancy might be your last chance at fatherhood. I, on the other hand, would need to father sixteen brats.”

Maevyn cried, “You’d murder me.”

With a savage twist of his head at Thom, Melville belted, “You’re the one killing here.”

“Mel. Calm yourself.” Ephraim said to the older woman, “I’m Ephraim Vonard. Mel and I, yes, we were with combustion, but we left years ago. If he says you’re safe, you are. If he says he’s out, he’s out.”

Sincerity rang in Ephraim’s words, and he stood with his hands up. But the younger councilor, Maevyn, she didn’t seem to hear the earnestness in his voice. She kept weaving her arm back and forth, pointing her needle at Ephraim, then himself. When she spoke, her voice was too high. “Why should I trust you?”

The older councilor said, “Yes, why?”

Ephraim patted the air in a soothing gesture. “Dear girl, we’re clean. And the fear you’re feeling—fear’s never a reliable compass.”

Her eyes grew a bit less wild.

“Ephraim,” Melville said. “Check Thom.”

“Ma’am, is it possible he’s alive?”

The young woman stepped back. “He’s not breathing.”

“Well, you’d see if he was.” Ephraim knelt and put a finger on Thom’s neck. “No pulse.”

Melville swayed against the councilor holding him. Moves and countermoves, free will and death, all of it distilling down into a gross contortion of balance. Thom’s death for Maevyn’s life. It could have been Maevyn dead and Thom alive.

No one had been saved, and the only solace of the past three days was the analgeson he’d secured for Luisa.

Ephraim put his ear to Thom’s chest. Melville took a sharp breath. Here and now, Ephraim was no more than a rumpled country innkeeper, and yet—the image was exact, down to the last detail, of a

tableau years earlier during the height of their drug-crazed days when they took as many as they could. He and Ephraim always checked their victims, wanting them alive for the return to the lab.

He collected his thoughts. “Councilor. Tell the woman holding me I’m no threat to either of you.” Aerovoyants could do that, and this one was fully developed. The degree to which she’d be able to estimate his physiology was astounding.

The muscles near her temples twinged.

“His metabolism is low, Berna, and he’s calm. I don’t think he’s a threat.”

“I’m not.”

There was a silent moment, and the grip on his arms relaxed. The older councilor, Berna, she seemed to need a minute to wrap her little political head around what Maevyn had announced. Then Berna said, “What about that one?”

Maevyn looked at Ephraim, who was standing again. “Him too.”

“Then put the needle away.” Berna stepped around Melville to face him. “We need to report Vanger’s death. You two will each give a statement. Tell the authorities Maevyn acted in self-defense.”

“Of course.” Melville straightened his sleeves.

“And let’s talk about the draft that Maevyn—”

A shooting pain lanced into his back at the same time that a raw scream ripped from the aerovoyant’s throat. His knees buckled and he collapsed, his cheek scraping hard against a gallberry bush. Something fell on him—it was her—but his legs refused to work.

Ephraim was crying out, “Stop it! Stop!”

The jab eased. Melville lurched over to lie on his back. She still held the syringe, but Ephraim had pulled her to himself before she’d emptied it. Everything blurred. He recognized the sensation flooding him. She’d given him a narcotic, part of a blend he’d used in the past. Part of the blend was euphoron...

Dark pleasure held him. Memories flooded into his thoughts, faces; each came with rapture this time; there was no moral grey zone. He knew the target, the variable, the thing to be removed. The woman

standing in front of him, her face swam into his vision. She was a target.

He was too heavy, and he sank.

#

Melville woke in Luisa's brightening room. His eyelids were raw, and someone was moving about nearby, in the kitchen from the sounds of it. "Hello?" Melville's voice was hoarse.

Ephraim's head poked around the kitchen doorway. "You're awake." He disappeared and after a few seconds brought out a tray with a carafe. He sat and poured Melville a cup.

Melville pushed to sit. Ascorb brew. The smell would put a well man off, but he took the cup. Piss poor ascorb.

"They're dead. Both of them."

Melville looked at Ephraim in shock.

"No point sweetening the news. Their bodies were pulled out of the river this morning."

"Autore. What happened?"

"You were out. You needed a doctor, so I took you. That's the last I saw of them." And yet, something in Ephraim's eyes clouded. Ephraim was holding back.

Melville recalled what he could of the night. The pleasure of euphoron, the dark certainty of righteousness. Dread shuddered in his chest. "Ephraim, it wasn't *me*, was it?"

Ephraim shook his head slowly. "You were unconscious. You've been here ever since."

"Autore, it wasn't *you*..."

Ephraim's eyes grew hooded. He looked away and didn't answer for a long minute, and when he did, his words were halting, his voice twisted around his words, as though he navigated something sinister. "Gareg... he could have found someone. Anyone. Hitting that target—any discerner in the program would jump at the chance to take that girl out."

Whatever that councilor had dosed him with, the demons of his past had welcomed it. In horror, he felt a desire to kill at Ephraim's words. "Every time they get their drugs into me I change..."

“I know.” Ephraim’s words were haunted.

“Ephraim. If Thom and I hadn’t gone to the waterfront those councilors would be alive. Thom would be alive.”

“Don’t play these games. Under the circumstances, your intent was good, Autore! You wanted to get Thom out. You’re out. I’m out. Stay out. Keep away and you’ll be all right. We’ll be OK.”

But three people dead.

Thom’s death would be easy for the authorities to sort. The autopsy would lead straight to Maevyn and any supply of needles she kept. The councilors’ deaths—somehow Gareg always kept his people outside the law.

But it hadn’t been him. *I think I’d remember.*

And Ephraim had gotten him to a doctor, one in the industry no doubt, but Melville didn’t want details. No one was likely to connect them to the councilors’ deaths—no one alive knew they’d been to the waterfront.

Ephraim said, “I don’t plan to ever set foot in a city again. Ardelle and I, we want a family, and Mel, I’m staying far from you. You do the same. Just stay out.”

Ephraim was right. Melville would steer clear of Combustion, of anything to do with discerning, anything to do with his past. And he’d do so without Ephraim.

Autore help him, he would.



THE END

