

**JAMES S. A.
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THE CHURN

AN **EXPANSE** NOVELLA

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THE CHURN

Burton was a small, thin, dark-skinned man. He wore immaculately tailored suits, and kept the thick black curls of his hair and the small beard on his chin neatly groomed. That he worked in criminal enterprises said more about the world than about his character. With more opportunities, a more prestigious education, and a few influential dorm mates at upper university, he could have joined the ranks of transplanetary corporate executives with offices at Luna and Mars, Ceres Station and Ganymede. Instead, a few neighborhoods at the drowned edges of Baltimore answered to him. An organization of a dozen lieutenants, a couple hundred street-level thugs and knee-breakers, a scattering of drug cooks, identity hackers, dirty cops, and arms dealers followed his dictates. And a class of perhaps a thousand professional victims—junkies, whores, vandals, unregistered children, and others in possession of disposable lives—looked up to him as he might look up at Luna: an icon of power and wealth glowing across an impassable void. A fact of nature.

Burton's misfortune was to be born where and when he was, in a city of scars and vice, in an age when the division in the popular mind was between living on government-funded basic support or having an actual profession and money of your own. To go from an unregistered birth such as his to having any power and status at all was an achievement as profound as it was invisible. To the men and women he owned, the fact that he had risen up from among the lowest of the low was not an invitation but a statement of his strength and improbability, mythical as the seagull that flew to the moon. Burton himself never thought about it, but that he had managed what he did meant only that it was possible. Anyone who had not had his determination, ruthlessness, and luck deserved pretty much whatever shit he handed to them. It didn't make him sympathetic when someone stepped out of line.

"He...what?" Burton said

"Shot him," Oestra said, looking at the table. Around them, the sounds of the diner made a white noise that was like privacy.

"Shot. Him."

“Yeah. Austin was talking about how he was good for the money, and how he just needed a few more days. Before he could finish, Timmy took that shitty homemade shotgun of his and—” Oestra made a shooting motion with two fingers and a thumb, the movement turning seamlessly into a shrug: a single gesture of violence and apology. Burton leaned back in his chair and looked over at Erich as if to say, *I think your puppy peed on my rug.*

Erich had recommended Timmy, had vouched for him, and so was responsible if things went wrong. It felt like they were going very wrong. Erich leaned forward, resting on his good elbow, hiding his fear with forced casualness. His bad arm, the left, was no longer than a six-year-old’s and scarred badly at the joints. His disfigurement was the result of a beating he’d suffered as a child. It wasn’t a fact that he’d shared with Burton, nor would he mention it now, though it did figure into the calculations that were his life. As did Timmy.

“He had a reason,” Erich said.

“He did?” Burton said, raising his eyebrows with feigned patience. “And what was it?”

Erich’s stomach knotted. His bad hand closed in a tiny fist. He saw the hardness in Burton’s eyes, and it reminded him that even with his knowledge, even with his skills, there were others who could fake identity records. Others who could fake DNA profiles. Others who could do for Burton what he did. He was expendable. It was the message Burton meant him to take.

“I don’t know,” he said. “But I’ve known Timmy since forever, yeah? He doesn’t do anything unless there’s a reason.”

“Well,” Burton replied, pulling the word out to two syllables. “If it’s since *forever*, I guess that makes it all right.”

“Just, you know, if he did that, he did it for something.”

Oestra scratched his arm, scowling to hide the relief he felt at Burton’s focus turning to Erich. “I got him in the storage room.”

Burton stood up, pushing back his chair with the backs of his knees. The waitress made a point not to look at the three as they moved across the room and out though the doors marked EMPLOYEES ONLY, Burton and then Oestra and Erich limping at the back. She didn’t even start cleaning the table until she was sure they were gone.

The storage room was claustrophobic to begin with and lined with boxes, making it even smaller. Cream-colored degradable storage boxes with flat green adhesive readouts on the side that listed what they contained and whether the cheap, disposable sensors in the foam had detected rot and corruption. The table

in the cramped open space at the center was pressed particleboard, as much glue as wood. Timmy sat at it, the LED fixture overhead throwing the shadow of his brow down into his eyes. He was barely halfway into his second decade of life, but the red-brown hair was already receding from his forehead. He was strong, tall, and had an unnerving capacity for stillness. He looked up when the three men came in, dividing his smile equally among his childhood friend, the professional thug he'd just disappointed, and the thin, well-dressed man who controlled everything important in his life.

"Hey," Timmy said to any of them.

Erich moved to sit at the table, saw that Oestra and Burton were standing motionless, and pulled back. If Timmy noticed, he didn't say anything.

"I hear that you killed Austin," Burton said.

"Yeah," Timmy said. The empty smile changed not at all.

Burton pulled out the chair opposite Timmy and sat. Oestra and Erich carefully didn't look at each other or at Burton. The object of all their attention, Timmy waited amiably for whatever came next.

"You care to tell me why you did that?" Burton asked.

"It's what you said to do," Timmy said.

"That man owed me money. I told you to get whatever you could from him. This was your tryout, little man. This was your game. Now, how do you go from what I actually *said* to what you *did*?"

"I got whatever I could get," Timmy replied. There was no fear in his voice or his expression, and it left Burton with the sense he was talking to an idiot. "I couldn't get money out of that guy. He didn't have any. If he had, he'd have given it to you. Only thing you were getting from him was a way to make sure everyone else pays you on time. So I took that instead."

"Really?"

"Yup."

"You're positive—you're *convinced*—that Austin wouldn't have gotten my money?"

"I don't mean to second-guess why anybody gave it to him in the first place," Timmy said, "but that guy never met a dollar he didn't snort, shoot, or drink away."

"So you thought it through, and you came to the conclusion that the wise and right thing to do was escalate this little visit from a collection run to a murder?"

Timmy's head tilted a degree. "Didn't spent a lot of time thinking about it. Water's wet. Sky's up. Austin gets you more dead than alive. Kind of obvious."

Burton went silent. Oestra and Erich didn't look at him. Burton rubbed his hands together, the hiss of palm against palm the loudest noise in the room. Timmy scratched his leg and waited, neither patient nor impatient. Erich felt a growing nausea and the certainty that he was about to watch an old friend and protector die in front of him. His stunted hand opened and closed and he tried not to swallow. When Burton smiled his small, amused smile, the only one who saw it was Timmy, and if he understood it, he didn't react.

"Why don't you wait here, little man," Burton said.

"Arrright," Timmy said, and Burton was already walking out the door.

Out in the café, the lunch rush had started. The booths and tables were filled, and a crowd loitered in the doorway, scowling at the waitresses, the diners who had gotten tables before them, and the empty place reserved for Burton and whoever he chose to have near him. As soon as he took his chair, the waitress came over, her eyebrows raised, as if he were a new customer. He waved her away. There was something about sitting at an empty table in full view of hungry men and women that Burton enjoyed. *What you want, I can take or I can leave*, it said. *All I want is to keep your options for myself*. Erich and Oestra sat.

"That boy," Burton said, letting the words take on an affected drawl, "is some piece of work."

"Yeah," Oestra said.

"He's good at what he does," Erich said. "He'll get better."

Burton was quiet for a long moment. A man at the front door pointed an angry finger toward Burton's table, demanding something of the waitress. She took the stranger's hand and pushed it down. The angry man left. Burton watched him go. If he didn't know any better, this wasn't the place for him.

"Erich, I don't think I can take your friend off his probation period. Not with this. Not yet."

Erich nodded, the urge to speak for Timmy and the fear of losing Burton's fickle forgiveness warring in his throat. Oestra was the one to break the silence.

"You want to give him another job?" The words carried a weight of incredulity measured to the gram.

"The right job," Burton said. "Right one for now, anyway. You say he watched out for you, growing up?"

"He did," Erich said.

"Let him do that, then. Timmy's going to be your personal bodyguard on your next job. Keep you out of trouble. See if you can keep him out of trouble too. At least do better than Oey did with him, right?" Burton said and laughed. A

moment later Oestra laughed too, only a little sourly. Erich couldn't manage much more than a sick, relieved grin.

"I'll tell him," he said. "I'll take care of it."

"Do," Burton said, smiling. An awkward moment later, Erich got up, head bobbing like a bird's with gratitude and discomfort. Burton and Oestra watched him limp back toward the storage room. Oestra sighed.

"I don't know why you're cultivating that freak," Burton's lieutenant said.

"He's off the grid and he cooks good identity docs," Burton said. "I like having someone who can't be traced keeping my name clean."

"I don't mean the cripple. I mean the other one. Seriously, there's something wrong with that kid."

"I think he's got potential."

"Potential for what?"

"Exactly," Burton said. "Okay, so tell me the rest. What's going on out there?"

Oestra hoisted his eyebrows and hunched forward, elbows on the table. The kids running unlicensed games by the waterfront weren't coming up with the usual take. One of the brothels had been hit by an outbreak of antibiotic-resistant syphilis; one of the youngest boys, a five-year-old, had it in his eyes. Burton's neighbor to the north—an Earthbound branch of the Loca Griega—were seeing raids on their drug manufacturing houses. Burton listened with his eyelids at half-mast. Individually, no one event mattered much, but put together, they were the first few fat raindrops in a coming storm. Oestra knew it too.

By the time the lunch rush ended, the booths and tables filling and emptying in the systole and diastole of the day's vast urban heart, Burton's mind was on a dozen other things. Erich and Timmy and the death of a small-time deadbeat weren't forgotten, but no particular importance was put on them either. That was what it meant to be Burton: those things that could rise up to fill a small person's whole horizon were only small parts of his view. He was the boss, the big-picture man. Like Baltimore itself, he *weathered* storms.

* * *

Time had not been kind to the city. Its coastline was a ruin of drowned buildings kept from salvage by a complexity of rights, jurisdictions, regulations, and apathy until the rising sea had all but reclaimed them for its own. The Urban Arcology movement had peaked there a decade or two before the technology existed to make its dreams of vast, sustainable structures a reality. It had left a

wall seven miles long and twenty stories high of decaying hope and structural resin that reached from the beltway to Lake Montebello. At the street level, electric networks laced the roadways, powering and guiding the vehicles that could use them. Sparrows Island stood out in the waves like a widow watching the sea for a ship that would never come home, and Federal Hill scowled back at the city across shallow, filthy water, emperor of its own abandoned land.

Everywhere, all through the city, space was at a premium. Extended families lived in decaying apartments designed for half as many. Men and women who couldn't escape the cramped space spent their days at the screens of their terminals, watching newsfeeds and dramas and pornography and living on the textured protein and enriched rice of basic. For most, their forays into crime were halfhearted, milquetoast affairs—a backroom brewer making weak, unregulated beer; a few kids stealing a neighbor's clothes or breaking their furniture; a band of scavengers with scrounged tools harvesting metal from the buried infrastructure of the city that had been. Baltimore was Earth writ small, crowded and bored. Its citizens were caught between the dismal life of basic and the barriers of class, race, and opportunity, vicious competition and limited resources, that kept all but the most driven from a profession and actual currency. The dictates of the regional administration in Chicago filtered down to the streets slowly, and the local powers might be weaker than the government, but they were also closer, the gravities of law and lawlessness finding their balance point somewhere just north of Lansdowne.

Time had not been kind to Lydia either. She wasn't one of the unregistered, but very little of what was important in her life appeared in the government records. There, she was a name—not Lydia—and an address where she had never lived. Her real home was four rooms on the fifth floor of a minor arcology looking out over the harbor. Her real work was keeping track of inventory for Liev, one of Burton's lieutenants. Before that, she had been his lover. Before that, she had been a whore in his stable. Before that, she had been someone else who she could hardly remember anymore. When she was alone, and she was often alone, the narrative she told herself was of how lucky she was. She'd escaped basic, she'd had dear friends and mentors when she was working, she'd been able to retire up in the ad hoc structure of the city's underworld. Many, many people hadn't been anywhere near as fortunate as she had been. She was growing old, yes. There was gray in her hair now. Lines at the corners of her eyes, the first faint liver spots on the backs of her hands. She told herself they were the evidence of her success. Too many of her friends had never had them.

Never would. Her life had been a patchwork of love and violence, and the overlap was vast.

Still, she hung warm-colored silk across her windows and wore the silver bells at her ankles and wrists that were the fashion among much younger women. Life, such as it was, was good.

The evening sun hung over the rooftops to the west, the late summer heat thickening the air. Lydia was in the little half-kitchen warming up a bowl of frozen hummus when the door chimed and the bolts clacked open. Timmy came in, lifting his chin in greeting. She smiled back, raising an eyebrow. There was no one with him, and there never would be. They had never allowed someone else to be with them when they were together. Not since the night his mother died.

“So, how did it go?”

“Kind of fucked it up, me,” Timmy said.

Lydia’s heart went tight and she tried to keep her voice calm and light. “How so?”

“Burton told me to get what I could out of this guy. Looking back, I think he just meant money. So.” Timmy leaned against the couch, hands deep in his pockets, and shrugged. “Oops.”

“Was Burton angry?”

Timmy looked away and shrugged again. With that motion, she could see him again as he’d been as a young boy, as a child, as a baby. She had known his mother when they’d worked together, each watching out for the other when they turned tricks. Lydia had been there the night Timmy was born among the worn tiles and cold lights of the black-market clinic. She’d made him soup the night Liev had turned him out the first time and while he ate told him lies about her first time with a john to make him laugh. She’d picked music with him for his mother’s memorial and told him that she’d died the way she’d lived, and not to blame himself. She had never been able to protect him from anything, so she’d helped him live in the jagged world, and he gave her something she couldn’t describe or define but that she needed like a junkie craved the needle.

“How angry is he?” she asked carefully.

“Not that bad. I’m gonna be watching Erich’s back for a while. He’s got some things need doing, and the boss doesn’t want anything going pear-shaped. So that’s all right.”

“And you? How are you?”

“Eh. I’m good,” Timmy said. “I think I’m coming down with something. Flu,

maybe.”

She walked out from the kitchen, her food abandoned, and put the back of her hand to his forehead. His skin felt cool.

“No fever,” she said.

“Probably nothing,” he said, pulling his shirt up over his head. “I got the shakes a little, and I got dizzy a couple times on the way back. It ain’t serious.”

“What happened to the man Burton sent you to?”

“I shot him.”

“Did you kill him?” Lydia asked as she walked back to her bedroom. The ruddy light of sunset filtered through yellow silk. An old armoire stood against one wall, its silver finish stained and corroded by years. The bed was the same cheap foam queen-sized she’d had when she was working, the sheets old and thin, softer than skin with wear.

“Used a shotgun about a meter from his chest,” Timmy said, following her. “Could have stuck your fist through the hole. So, yeah, pretty much.”

“Have you ever killed a man before?” she asked, lifting her dress up over her thighs, her hips, her head.

Timmy undid his belt, frowning. “Don’t know. Beat some guys pretty bad. Maybe some of ’em didn’t get back up, but no one I know about. You know, not for sure.”

Lydia unhooked her bra, letting it slide to the cheap carpet. Timmy took his pants down, kicking them off with his shoes. He didn’t wear underwear, and his erect penis bobbed in the air like it belonged to someone else. There was no desire in his expression, and only a mild distress.

“Timmy,” she said, lying back on the bed and lifting her hips. “You aren’t getting ill. You’re traumatized.”

“Y’think?” He seemed genuinely surprised by the thought. And then amused by it. “Yeah, maybe. Huh.”

He pulled her underwear down to her knees, her ankles. “My poor Timmy,” she murmured.

“Ah shit,” he said, lowering his body onto hers. “I’m all right. At least I’m not getting sick.”

Sex held few mysteries for Lydia. She had fucked and been fucked by more men than she could count, and she’d learned things from each of them. Ugly things sometimes. Sometimes beautiful. She understood on a deep, animal level that sex was like music or language. It could express anything. Love, yes. Or anger, or bitterness, or despair. It could be a way to grieve or a way to take

revenge. It could be a weapon or a nightmare or a solace. Sex was meaningless, and so it could mean anything.

What she and Timmy did to and for and with each other's bodies wasn't a thing they discussed. She felt no shame about it. That other people would see only the perversion of a woman and the boy she'd helped raise pleasuring one another meant that other people would never understand what it mean to *be* them, to survive the world they survived. They were not lovers, and never would be. They were not surrogate mother and incestuous son. She was Lydia, and he was Timmy. In the bent and broken world, what they did fit. It was more than most people had.

After, Timmy lay beside her, his breath still coming in small, reflexive gulps. Her body felt pleasantly tender and bruised. The yellow over the window was fading into twilight, and the rumble of air traffic was like constant thunder in the distance, or a city being shelled two valleys over. A transport ship for one of the orbital stations, maybe. Or a wing of atmospheric fighter planes on exercises. So long as she didn't look, she could pretend it was anything. Her mind wandered, delivering up what had been nagging at her since Timmy had told her all that had happened.

Burton had sent Timmy to collect a debt, Timmy had killed the man instead, and Burton hadn't cut him loose. Two points defined a line, but three defined the playing field. Burton didn't always have need of boys like Timmy, but sometimes he did. Right now, he did.

Lydia sighed.

The churn was coming. It was the name Liev had given it, back before. All of nature had its rhythms, its booms and busts. She and Timmy and Liev and Burton were mammals, they were part of nature, and subject to its rules and whims. She had lived through perhaps three, perhaps four such catastrophes before. Enough that she knew the signs. Like a squirrel gathering food before a hard winter, Burton collected violent men before the churn. When it came, there would be blood and death and prison sentences and maybe even a curfew for a time. Men like Timmy would die by the dozen, sacrificed for things they didn't know or understand. Maybe even some of Burton's lieutenants would fall the way Tanner Ford had back when she'd been Liev's lover. Or Stacey Li before him. Or Cutbreath. The history of her corrupted world echoed with the names of the dead; the expendable and the expended. If Burton had kept Timmy on, it was because he thought it was coming. And if Burton thought it was coming, it probably was.

Timmy's breath was low and deep and regular. He sounded like a man asleep, except his eyes were open and fixed on the ceiling. Her own skin was cool now, the sweat dried or nearly so. A fly swooped through the air above them, a gray dot tracing a jagged path, turning and dodging to avoid dangers that weren't there. She lifted her first two fingers, cocked back her thumb, and made a thin cartoon shooting sound with her teeth and tongue. The insect flew on, undisturbed by her small and violent fantasy. She turned her head to look at Timmy. His expression was blank and empty. He was still, and even in the warmth that followed orgasm, there was a tension in his body. He wasn't a beautiful boy. He'd never be a beautiful man.

Someday, she thought, I will lose him. He will go off on some errand and he will never come back. I won't even know what happened to him. She probed at the thought like a tongue-tip against the sore gum where a tooth has been knocked out. It hurt and hurt badly, but it hadn't happened yet, and so she could bear it. Best to prepare herself now. Meditate upon the coming loss so that when it came, she was ready.

Timmy's eyes clicked over toward her without his head shifting at all, without any expression coming to his face. Lydia smiled a slow, languorous smile.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

He didn't answer.

The catastrophe began four days later. Quietly, and with near-military precision, the city opened a contract with Star Helix security. Soldiers from across the globe arrived in small groups and sat through debriefings. The plan to end the criminal networks operating in Baltimore would be announced after the fact, or at least after the first wave. The thought, widely lauded by the self-congratulatory minds in administration, was to take the criminal element by surprise. In catching them flat-footed, the security teams could cripple their networks, break their power, and restore peace and the rule of law. The several unexamined assumptions in the argument remained unexamined, and the body armor and riot control weapons were distributed in perfect confidence that the enforcers would arrive unanticipated.

In fact, what Burton and Lydia knew from experience, many, many others felt by instinct. There was a discomfort in the streets and alleys, on the rooftops, and behind the locked doors. The city knew that something was near. The only surprise would be in the details.

Erich felt it like an itch he couldn't scratch. He sat on the rotting concrete

curb, drumming the fingers of his good hand against his kneecap. The street around him was the usual mix of foot traffic, bicycles, and wide blue buses. The air stank. The sewage lines this near the water were prone to failures. A few doors to the east, a group of children were playing some kind of complex game with linked headsets, their arms and legs falling into and out of phase with each other. Timmy stood on the sidewalk, squinting up into the sky. Behind them was a squatter's camp in an old ferrocrete apartment block. In a locked room at its center, Erich's custom deck was set up and primed, connected to the network and prepared to create a new identity from birth records to DNA matching to backdated newsfeed activity for the client, as soon as she arrived. Assuming she arrived. She was fifteen minutes late and, though they had no way to know it, already in custody.

Timmy grunted and pointed up. Erich followed the gesture. Far above, a star burned in the vast oceanic blue, a plume of fire pushing a ship out of the atmosphere. Near the horizon, the half moon glowed pale, a network of city lights crossing the shadowy meridian.

"Transport," Erich said. "They use mass drivers for the stuff that can take the gees."

"I know," Timmy said.

"Ever want to go up there?"

"What for?"

"I don't know," Erich said, staring down the street for the client. He'd seen her picture: a tall Korean woman with blue hair. He didn't know who she'd been before, and he didn't much care. Burton wanted her made into someone new. "Piss out the window and make everyone down here think it was raining, maybe."

Timmy's chuckle sounded polite.

"It's what I'd do, if I could," Erich said, making a swooping gesture with his good hand. Zoom. "Get up the well and out of here. Go where no one cares about who you are so long as you're good at what you do. Seriously, it's the wild fucking west up there. You want nineteenth-century Tombstone, Arizona, it's alive and well on Ceres Station. From what I heard, anyway."

"Why don't you go, then?" Timmy said. With a different intonation, it could have been dismissive. Instead it was only a mild kind of curiosity. It was part of what Erich liked about Timmy. There was almost nothing he seemed to feel deeply.

"Starting from here? I'd never make it. I'm not even a registered birth."

“You could tell them,” Timmy said. “People get registered all the time.”

“And then they get tracked and monitored and wind up dying on basic,” Erich said. “Anyway, no one’s taking me for a vocational. Waiting lists for that are eight, ten years long. By the time I came up, I’d have aged out.”

“Could build one, couldn’t you?” Timmy asked. “Make a new identity and put it at the front of the list?”

“Maybe,” Erich said. “If you gave me a couple years to layer it all in like I did for Burton. He can go *anywhere* with docs I built for him.”

“So why don’t you go, then?” Timmy asked again, his inflection as much an echo as his words.

“Guess I don’t want it bad enough. Anyway, I’ve got real stuff to do, don’t I? I wish she’d fucking get here, right?” Erich said, unaware that he made everything a question when he wanted to change the subject. Unconsciously, he made a fist with the hand of his bad arm. Timmy nodded, squinting down the street for the client that wasn’t coming.

Most of their lives had been spent on streets like this. The trade that exploited prostitutes and their illegal children was the second largest source of unregistered births in the city. Only religious radicals accounted for more. It was impossible to know how many unregistered men and women were eking out lives on the margin of society in Baltimore or how many had lived and died unknown to the vast UN databases. Erich knew of perhaps a hundred scattered among the legitimate citizens like members of a secret society. They congregated in condemned buildings and squats, traded in the gray-market economy of unlicensed services, and used their peculiar anonymity where it was most helpful. Looking down the pocked asphalt street, Erich could count three or four people that he personally knew were ghosts in the great world machine. Counting him and Timmy, that was half a dozen all breathing the same air while the plume of the orbital transport marked the sky gold and black above them. There was old water in the gutters, black circles of gum and tar on the sidewalk, the combined smell of urine and decay, and ocean all around them. Erich looked up at the sky with a longing he resented.

He knew himself well enough to recognize that he was a man of desires and grudges, so well in fact that he’d come to peace with it. The blackness of space where merit counted more than the placement on a bureaucrat’s list, where the brothels were licensed and the prostitutes had a union, where freedom was a ship and a crew and enough work to pay for food and air. It called to him with a romance that made his heart ache. On Ceres or Tycho or Mars, the medical

technology was available to regrow his crippled arm, to remake his shortened leg. The same technology could be found fewer than eight miles from the filthy curb where he sat, but with the triple barriers of being unregistered, basic medical care waiting lists, and his own ability to function despite his disabilities, space was closer. Out there, he could be the man he should have been. The thought was like the promise of sex to a teenager, rich and powerful and frightening. Erich had resolved a thousand times to make the effort, to build himself an escape identity and shrug off the chains of Earth, of Baltimore, of the life he'd lived. And a thousand and one times, he had postponed it.

“Get up,” Timmy said.

“You see her?” Erich said.

“Nope. Get up.”

Erich shifted, frowning. Timmy was looking east with an expression of mild curiosity, a casual witness at someone else's wreck. Erich stood. At the intersection a block down, two armored vans had pulled to a stop. The logo on their sides was a four-pointed star. Erich couldn't tell if the people getting out were men or women, only that they were wearing riot gear. Metallic fear flooded his mouth. Timmy put a strong hand on his shoulder and pushed him gently but implacably across the street. Two more vans came to a halt at the intersection to the north.

“What the fuck?” Erich said, his voice distant and shrill in his own ears.

Timmy got him across the street and almost up to the doors of a five-story squat before Erich pulled back. “My deck. My setup. We've got to go back for it.”

A deep, inhuman voice broke the air, the syllables designed in a sound lab to be sharp, clear, and intimidating. *This is a security alert. Remain where you are with your hands visible until security personnel clear you to leave. This is a security alert.* At the intersection, teams of armored figures were already questioning three men. One of the civilians—a thin, angry man with close-cropped black hair and dark olive skin—shouted something, and the security team pushed him to his knees. The biometric scan—fingerprints, retina scan, fast-match DNA—took seconds while the man's arms were held out at his sides, his elbows bent back in restraint holds.

“I think maybe you used to have a deck,” Timmy said. “I don't think you got one right now.”

Erich stood unmoving, caught between the animal urge to flee and to protect himself by hiding the evidence. Timmy's thick fingers closed around his good

shoulder. The big kid's expression was mildly concerned. "We don't go right now, they're gonna have you and it both. I sorta screwed up the last thing Burton told me to do. Let's not burn my second chance getting you caught."

This is a security alert. Remain where you are with your hands visible until security personnel clear you to leave.

Erich swallowed and nodded. It was the nearest he could come to speech. Timmy turned him toward the squat and pushed him forward.

In the streets, the security teams converged slowly, moving from person to person, door to door, floor to floor. Before the operation was through, they would identify three hundred forty-three people and detain four who appeared in the operational database as persons of interest. Three unregistered individuals would be identified, entered into the system, and held pending investigation. The two of the unregistered who refused to provide a name would have names assigned to them. The operation, covering three city blocks, would locate an unlicensed medical clinic, three children in distressed circumstances, seven pounds of S-class psychoactives, eighty-two instances of illegal occupation, and the network interface deck and data collection setup offered up by a blue-haired detainee in exchange for a reduced penalty. The process would take ten hours, and so it was still hardly under way when Timmy and Erich emerged from the undocumented access tunnel that connected the squat with an abandoned seawater pumping station. They walked together, Erich with his good hand stuffed deep in his pocket, Timmy with the same amiable air that was his default. Erich was weeping silently. Above them, the transport ship was gone, the golden exhaust plume now only a streak of smoke against the sky.

"I'm dead," Erich said. "Burton's going to fucking kill me. They got my deck. They got everything."

"Wait a minute," Timmy said. "*Everything* everything? Burton's stuff was on the—"

"No. I'm not stupid. I don't store records of how I keep Burton clean. But I didn't wash it down after the setup. I was going to do it after we were done. It's going to have DNA on it. Shit, it may even have fingerprints. I don't know."

"So what if it does?" Timmy asked with a shrug. "You're not in the system."

"Not now," Erich said. "But if they pick me up ever, for *anything*, it's going to be with a little highlight alert linking back to that fucking deck. They'll know what I do. And then they'll know to ask."

"You don't gotta say anything," Timmy said, his tone almost apologetic.

"I won't get a chance. Burton finds out they've got my DNA, all he's gonna

see is a path back to him. I'm a loose end, man. I'm dead."

All around the city, traps shut.

In the north, five dozen armored security personnel blocked intersections and shut down metro stations. The door-to-door search and control operation converged on a seven-story office building controlled by the Loca Griega. The local men and women took shelter where they could, hiding in bathtubs and basements and soot-caked hard-brick fireplaces. Things dense enough to hopefully block the infrared and backscatter and heartbeat sensors Star Helix carried. Network signals went dark. The Star Helix employees moved forward in tight formation, forced to use their eyes instead of their tech, the plates of armor on their chests and backs and bellies making them seem like vast beetles in the autumn sunlight. When the perimeter around the building was established, monitoring stations were constructed, watching the windows for the vibrations made by voices. A wave of dragonfly-small surveillance drones swept in, and for a moment it seemed like perhaps the violence wouldn't come. And then, as one, the hundreds of small, cheap Star Helix robots fell to the ground, victims of Loca Griega countermeasures, and the building bloomed with gunfire. Seventeen Loca Griega died before the sun went down, including Eduard Hopkins and Jehona Dzurban, reputed to be the Earth-surface coordinators of the Belt-based syndicate. The plume of smoke that rose from the building darkened the air for hours and left the city air gray and hazy the next morning.

At the same time in the west, where the municipal limits gave way invisibly to the regional jurisdiction, a warehouse owned and operated through a complex web of shell companies was locked down. The security teams emptied a three-block radius using a small fleet of armored buses and an operational procedure designed for response to sarin gas attacks. When the warehouse's perimeter was breached shortly before midnight, it contained ten thousand unrecorded assault rifles, half a million rounds of tracer-free ammunition, seventy cases of grenades, and a computer room ankle deep in melted slag. There was no evidence of anyone having been present in the warehouse, and no trail of ownership for any of it.

Checkpoints at the evacuated rail terminal, the spaceport, and the docks identified seventy people traveling on falsified accounts. All of them were independents or small fry in a larger organization. The security forces hadn't expected to catch anyone high on their priorities list in the first pass. The more powerful, better-connected targets were either smart enough not to travel during a crackdown or else had cleaned accounts to move under. Instead, the thought

was that among the small-time thugs and operatives, there might be one or two desperate and foolish enough to provide them a lead to someone bigger. Someone worth having. And so without knowing who Burton was, what he looked like, his name or description or precise role in the criminal ecology of Baltimore, they were hunting him. And they were also hunting others, many of them much higher-priority than himself. Organizace Bayyo had a presence in the city, as did the Golden Bough. Tamara Sluydan controlled several blocks north of the arcology, and Baasen Tagniczen an area twice Burton's—though not so profitably run—in the Patapsco Valley Housing Complex. There was a great deal of crime, organized and otherwise, for the forces of law to concern themselves with, and no net was so strong or fine that nothing slipped through.

In times like these, when he couldn't know whether he had been compromised, Burton played it safe. He had half a dozen apartments and warehouses outfitted to act as temporary command centers, and he moved between them almost at random. Some of his people, he knew, would be caught up. Some of those who were would buy short-term leniency with the coin of information. He knew that would happen, and he had plans in place that would protect him from discovery, obscure his involvement in anything actionable, and punish brutally and irrevocably whoever had chosen to make that trade. It was understood that anyone captured would be wiser to trade their own underlings to the security forces than to sell out Burton. The risk devolved on the little guy. Shit rolling downhill, as it had since the beginning of time. Which was, in part, why what happened to Liev was so unfortunate for everybody.

Liev Andropoulous had worked for Burton since coming to Baltimore from Paris more than twenty years before. He was a thickly built man, as round in the chest as the belly, and strong enough that he rarely had to prove it. His appetite for women occasioned jokes, though rarely the sort made in front of him, as did his habit of placing his long-term lovers in positions of comfort within his organization when he ended their relationships. As one of Burton's lieutenants, he oversaw three full-time whorehouses, a small network of drug dealers specializing in low-end narcotics and psychoactives, and an unlicensed medical facility that catered to the unregistered population. By custom, he worked from a small concrete building at the edge of the water, but when the churn began, he was leaving his lover's apartment on Pratt. The woman's name was Katie, and she had the olive skin and brown lips that Lydia had had twenty years before. Liev was a man of deep habits and consistent tastes. His kissed her goodbye for the last time on the street outside the apartment building, then walked away to

the north while she went south. It was a perfunctory gesture, meaningful only in retrospect, as so many last kisses are.

The streets were crowded, the air muggy and close. The saltwater and rotting fish smells of the encroaching Atlantic were omnipresent, as they always were on hot days. Private transport wasn't allowed, and the lumbering buses moved like slow elephants in the press of midday bodies. A beggar plucked at Liev's sleeve and then backed away in fear when Liev turned to scowl at him. In the cacophony of the city, the whine of the flying drones should have been inaudible, but something caught Liev's attention, tightening the skin across the back of his wide neck. His footsteps faltered.

From above, the ripples in the crowd would have looked like the surface of still water disturbed by the convergence of half a dozen fish intent on the same fly. For Liev, it was only a sense of dread, a burst of useless adrenaline, and the offended shouts of the civilians pushed aside by the armored security men. As if by magic, a bubble of open space appeared around him. Liev could see clearly the scuffed and stained concrete on which he walked. The man in the Star Helix uniform before him held a pistol in both hands, the barrel fixed on Liev's chest. Center of mass. By the books. Behind the helmet's clear face shield, the man looked to be somewhere in his middle twenties, focused and frightened. Liev felt a pang of amusement and regret. He held his arms out at his sides, cruciform, as five more security men boiled out of the gawking crowd.

"Liev Andropoulos!" the boy shouted. "You are under arrest for racketeering, slavery, and murder! You are not required to participate in questioning without the presence of an attorney or union representative!" Tiny flecks of spittle dotted the inside of the face shield. The boy's wide eyes were almost jittering with fear. Liev sighed.

"Ask me," he said slowly, enunciating very clearly, "if I understand."

"What?" the boy shouted.

"You've told me the charges and made the questioning statement. Now you have to ask me if I understand."

"Do you understand?" the boy barked, and Liev nodded.

"Good. Better," Liev said. "Now go fuck yourself."

The prisoner transport blatted its siren, shouldering its way through the crowd, but before it had crossed the distance to Liev, before he had been slotted into the steel cell and made secure, news of his capture was radiating out through the neighborhood. By the time the transport began moving again, making its way north toward the nearest tactical center, Burton had already seen a recording of

the arrest. Katie, sitting at a noodle café with her little brother, got the news on her hand terminal and broke down weeping. Dread passed through the network of Liev's employees and underlings. Everyone knew what would happen next, and what would not. Liev would be taken to a holding cell, processed, and interrogated. If he kept quiet, he would be remanded to state custody, tried, and sent to a detention center, likely in North Africa or the west coast of Australia. More likely, he would cut a deal, parting out the network of crime he'd controlled bit by bit in exchange for clemency—the names and ID numbers of his pimps in order to serve his time in North America or Asia, the details of how he laundered the money for a private cell, which physicians had moonlighted in his clinic for library access.

They would ask him who he worked for, and he wouldn't say.

For Burton's other lieutenants, it complicated the future and simplified the present. One of their own was gone and unlikely to return. When the worst had passed and something like normalcy returned to Burton's little kingdom, business that had been Liev's would be shared among them, granted to some newly promoted member of the criminal nobility, or a combination of the two. How exactly that played out would be the subject of weeks of negotiations and struggle, but later. Later. In the short term, all such agendas gave way to the more immediate problems of avoiding the security forces, protecting the assets they had, and making it very clear to everyone under them that selling out information for the favor of the court's mercy was a very, very bad idea.

In a basement lab at the corner of Lexington and Greene, eighty gallons of reagents used in alkaloid synthesis were poured into the water recycling stream. At the locally renowned Boyer Street house, two overly talkative prostitutes went quietly missing and the doors were locked. The body of Mikel "Batman" Chanduri was discovered in his two-room apartment at sundown, and though it was clear his death had been both violent and protracted, none of his neighbors had anything to report to the security men who'd come to interview him. Before the sun had set, Burton's lieutenants—Cyrano, Oestra, Simonson, Little Cole, and the Ragman—went to ground like foxes, ready to wait out the worst of the crackdown, each hoping that they would not be another gap in the organization like Liev, and each hoping that the others—not all, of course, but a few—would. One or two, perhaps even three, harbored some plots of their own, ways to see that their rivals within Burton's organization fell prey to the dangers of the churn. But they didn't speak of them to anyone they didn't trust with their lives.

And in an unlicensed rooftop coffee bar that looked down over the human-

packed streets, Erich hunched over a gray-market network deck the owner had bolted to the table. He was trying to keep his panic from showing, wondering if Burton had heard about the capture of his deck, and hoping that wherever Timmy had rushed off to when they'd heard of Liev's arrest, he'd get back soon. The coffee was black and bitter, and Erich couldn't tell if the coppery flavor was a problem with the beans or the lingering taste of fear. He sat on his newsfeed, set to passive for fear that his search requests would be traced, and watched as all around him more traps snapped shut, his gut knotting tighter with every one.

When Lydia heard what had happened to Liev, her first action was to put on her makeup and style her long, gray-streaked hair. She sat at the mirror in her bedroom and rubbed on the flesh-toned base until the lines in her skin were gone. She painted her lips fuller and darker and redder than they had ever been in nature. The black eyeliner, reddish eyeshadow, rust-colored blush. Despite the danger she was in, she didn't hurry. A lifetime of experience had drawn connections in her mind that linked sexual desirability, fear, and fatalism in ways she would have recognized as unhealthy if she'd seen them in someone else. She pulled her hair around, piling it high and pinning it in place until it cascaded, three-quarters contained, to her shoulders in the style Liev had enjoyed back when he had lifted her up from the working population of the house and made her his own. She thought of it as a last act of fidelity, like dressing a corpse.

She shrugged out of her robe and pulled on simple, functional clothes. Running shoes. Her go-bag was a nondescript blue backpack with a three-month supply of her medications, two changes of clothes, four protein bars, a pistol, two boxes of ammunition, a bottle of water, and three thousand dollars spread across half a dozen credit chips. She pulled it down from the top of her closet, and without opening it to check its contents, went to the chair by her front window. The curtains were pale gauze that scattered and softened the afternoon light, graying everything. She pulled a sheer yellow scarf over her hair, swathed her neck, and tied it at her sternum, the ironic echo of her old hijab. Then sat very still, feet side by side, ankles and knees touching. Primly, she thought. She waited in silence to see who would open her door, a security team or Timmy. The darkness, or else the light.

The better part of an hour passed. Her spine hurt, and she savored the pain, keeping her face placid. Smiles or grimaces, either one would disturb her makeup. Then footsteps in the hall, like someone clearing their throat. The door opened, and Timmy stepped in. His gaze flicked down to her back, up to her face. He shrugged and nodded to the hall in a gesture that said, *Can we go?* as

clearly as words. Lydia stood, pulled on her pack as she walked to the door, and left her room for the last time. She had lived there for the better part of a decade. The necklace that Liev had given her the night he'd told her he was moving on, but that she would be cared for, hung from a peg in the bathroom. The cheap earthenware cup that Timmy had painted with glaze when he was eight years old and given her for what he'd mistakenly thought was her birthday remained in the cupboard. The half-finished knitting that an old roommate had left when she disappeared twenty years before sat hunched in a plastic bag under the bed, stinking of dust.

Lydia didn't look back.

"My spirit animal is the snake," she said as they walked south together. They went side by side, but not touching. "I shed my skin. I just let it slough away."

"Okay," Timmy said. "Come on this way. I got a thing waiting."

The waterline was cleanest near the new port. There, the ships and houseboats rested in clean slips made of flexible ceramic and the bones of the drowned buildings had been cut free and hauled away. With every mile farther from the port, the debris grew less picturesque, the charm of the reclaimed city giving way to the debris of its authentic past. Little beaches formed over asphalt, gray sand swirling around old blocky concrete pillars standing in the waves green with algae and white with bird shit. The stink of rot came from the soupy water and the corpses of jellyfish melting where the tide had left them.

Timmy's boat was small. White paint flaked off the metal where it hadn't been scraped well enough before being repainted. Lydia sat in the bow, her legs folded under her, her chin high and proud. The motor was an under-the-waterline pulse drive, quiet as a hum. The water in their wake was louder. The sun was near to setting, the city casting its shadow on the waves. A handful of other boats were on the water, manned by children for the most part. The citizens of basic with nothing better to do with their time than spend the twilight on the water, then go home.

Timmy ran them along the coast for a time, and then turned east, out toward the vast ocean. The moon had set, but the lights of the city were bright enough to travel by. The islands had once been part of the city itself, and now were ruins. Timmy aimed for one of the smaller, a stretch not more than two city blocks long by three wide humped up out of the water. A few ancient walls still stood. The boat ran up onto the hard shore, and Timmy jumped out, soaking his pants to the thighs, to pull it the rest of the way up. The metal screeched against the rotting concrete sidewalk.

The ruin he led her to was little more than a camp site. A bright yellow emergency-preparedness sleeping bag lay unrolled on a foam mattress. An LED lamp squatted beside it with a cord snaking up the grimy wall to a solar collector in the window. A small chemical camping stove stood on a driftwood board placed over two cinderblocks, a little unpowered refrigerator beside it to store food. Two more rooms stood empty through the doorway. If the house had ever had a kitchen or a bathroom, it was lost in the tumble of rubble beyond that. Outside, the city glowed, the violence and bustle made calm and beautiful by even such a small distance. The wail of the sirens and angry blat of the security alerts became a kind of music there, transformed by the mystical act of passing above waves.

Timmy pulled off his water-soaked pants and dug a fresh pair out from under the sleeping bag.

“This is where you go?” Lydia said, putting her hand on the time-pocked window glass. “When you aren’t with me, you come to this?”

“Nobody bugs you here,” Timmy said. “Or, you know. Not twice.”

She nodded, as much to herself as for his benefit. Timmy looked around the room and rubbed his hand across his high forehead.

“It’s not as nice as your place,” he said. “But it’s safe. Temporary.”

“Yes,” she said. “Temporary.”

“Even if Liev does tell ’em about you, it’s not like it’s over. You can get a new name. New paper.”

Lydia turned her gaze back from the city, her right hand going to her left arm as if she were protecting herself. Her gaze darted to the empty doorway, and then back. “Where’s Erich?”

“Yeah, the meet didn’t happen,” Timmy said, leaning against the wall. She never ceased to be amazed by his physicality. The innocence and vulnerability that his body managed to project while still being an instrument of violence.

“Tell me,” she said, and he did. All of it, slowly and carefully, as if worried he might leave something out that she wanted to know. That she found interesting. The low rumble of a launch shuddered like an endless peal of thunder, and the exhaust plume rose into the night sky as he spoke. It had not yet broken into orbit when he stopped.

“And where is he now?” she asked.

“There’s a coffee bar. The one at Franklin and St. Paul? On top of the old high-rises there. I got him there when it was done. They’ve got a deck there you can rent by the minute, and since his got taken, I figured he’d like that. Gotta

say, he was pretty freaked out. That DNA thing? I don't see how that's gonna end well. If he's right about how Burton's gonna react..."

Lydia shook her head once, a tiny gesture, almost invisible by the light of the single LED lamp. "I thought you were his bodyguard. You were assigned to protect him."

"I did," Timmy said. "But then the job was done. Burton didn't tell me I was supposed to go to the bathroom with him for the rest of his life, right? Job was done, so the job was done."

"I thought you were his friend."

"I am," Timmy said. "But, y'know. *You.*"

"Don't worry about me. Whatever comes to me, I have earned it a thousand times over. Don't disagree with me! Don't interrupt. Burton asked you to protect Erich because Erich is precious to him. The particular job he assigned you may be over, but worse has come to the city, and Erich is still precious."

"And I get that," Timmy said. "Only when they got Liev—"

"I have lived through the churn before, darling boy. I know how this goes." She turned to the window, gesturing at the golden lights of the city. "Liev was only one. There will be others. Perhaps many, perhaps few, but Burton will lose some part of his structure to the security forces or to death. And the ones who remain afterward will become more important to him. He is a man who values survivors. Who values loyalty. What will he think, dear, when he hears that you left Erich to come spirit me away?"

"Job was done," Timmy said, a little petulantly she thought.

"Not good enough," she said. "Not anymore. You aren't the boy Erich drinks with anymore. You aren't even your mother's son now. Those versions of you are gone, and they will never come back. You are the man who took a job from Burton."

Timmy was silent. Far above them, the transport's exhaust plume went dark. Lydia stepped close to him and put her hands on his shoulders. He wouldn't meet her eyes. She thought that was a good sign. That it meant she was getting through to him.

"The world changes you and you can't stop it from doing so. You have to let go of being someone who doesn't matter now. Because if you live through this time—just live through it and nothing more—you will be more important to Burton. You can't avoid it. You can only choose what your importance is. Will you be someone he can rely upon, or someone he can't?"

Timmy took a deep breath in through his nose and sighed it out. His eyes

were flat and hard. “I think I maybe fucked up again.”

“Only maybe,” Lydia said. “There still may be time to repair the error, yes? Go find your friend. You can bring him here.”

Timmy’s head jerked up. Lydia rubbed his shoulders gently, beginning at the base of his neck and stroking out to the bulges of muscle where his arms began, then back again. It was a gesture she had made with him since he was a child, a physical idiom in their own private language. Her heart ached at the sacrifice she was making. *The world changes you*, she thought. Hadn’t she just said that?

“Bring him here? Y’sure about that?”

“It’s all right,” she said. “It’s temporary.”

“Okay then,” he said. She felt a tug of regret that he had given in so quickly, but it passed quickly. “I’ll leave you the good boat.”

“The good boat?” she said to his retreating back.

“The one we came in.”

The door closed. The gray that passed for darkness swallowed him up, and five minutes later she heard what might have been a skiff splashing in among the waves. Or it might only have been her imagination. She pulled herself into the warm, stinking, plastic embrace of the sleeping bag and stared at the ceiling and waited to see whether he returned.

* * *

All through Baltimore, the struggle between law and opportunity continued, but most of the citizens allied themselves with neither side. The unlicensed coffee shop filled with customers looking for a cheap way to make their dinners on basic seem more palatable, and then with younger people who either didn’t have the currency or else the inclination to take amphetamines before descending to the one-night rai clubs on barricaded streets. A few parents came home from actual jobs, proud to spend real money for a stale muffin and give their credits to the gray-market daycares run out of neighborhood living rooms. Very few people stood wholly for the law or wholly against it, and so for them the catastrophe of the churn was an annoyance to be avoided or endured or else a titillation on the newsfeeds. That it was a question of life and death for other people spoke in its favor as entertainment.

Erich, sitting at the rented deck with a newsfeed spooling past, felt the distance between himself and the others who shared his space more keenly than they did. His sense of dread, of a chapter of his own life ending, was unnoticed by the heavysset woman who brewed the coffee and the thin man at the edge of

the rooftop who spent his hours sending messages about tangled romantic involvements. To the other habitués of the coffee shop, Erich was just the crippled man who was hogging the deck. An annoyance and an amusement, and no one would particularly notice or care if he vanished from the world.

Timmy arrived just after midnight, his broad, amiable smile softening the distance in his eyes. To anyone who didn't look at him closely, he seemed unthreatening, and no one looked at him closely. He pulled a welded steel chair up to the bolted-down deck and sat at Erich's side. The newsfeed was set to local. A pale-skinned woman with the Outer Planets Association split circle tattooed on her sternum and Loca Griega teardrops on her cheeks had blood pouring from her nose and left eye while she struggled against two Star Helix enforcers in gear so thick they barely seemed human. Erich smiled, trying to hide the relief he felt at Timmy's return.

"Loca," Erich said, nodding at the feed. "They're having a bad night too."

"Lot of that going around," Timmy said.

"Yeah, right? You...heard from Burton?"

"No. Didn't try to find him yet either," Timmy said with a shrug. "You want to hang out here some more, or you about ready to go?"

"I don't know where to go," Erich said, a high violin whine coming in at the back of his voice.

"I got that covered," Timmy said.

"You got a bolt-hole? Jesus, that's where you've been all this time, isn't it? Getting someplace safe to hide?"

"Kind of. But, you know, you ready?"

"I need to stop someplace. Get a deck."

Timmy frowned and nodded at the table before them. *There's one right there* was in his eyes. Erich pointed at the bolts anchoring the machine to the wooden tabletop. Timmy's expression went empty and he stood up.

"Hey," Erich said. "What're you...Timmy? What are you—"

The thick woman who brewed the coffee looked up at the broad-shouldered young man. The coffee bar had been hers for three years, and she'd seen enough of the regulars to recognize trouble.

"Hey," the large man—boy, really—said, his voice making the word half apology. "So look. I don't mean to be a dick or anything, but I kind of need that deck."

"You can use it here, you buy some coffee. Or rates are printed on the side," the woman said, crossing her arms.

The big kid nodded, his brow knotting. He took a scuffed and stained black-market credit chip and pressed it into her palm.

“Shit, Jones,” she said, blinking at the credit balance on the tiny LED display. “How much coffee you want?”

The kid had already turned back to the table where the cripple with the baby arm had been sitting all day. He hit the table with his fist hard enough that everyone on the rooftop turned to look at him. After the third hit, the wood of the tabletop started to splinter. There was blood on the big boy’s knuckles, and the cripple was shifting back and forth anxiously as the table fell to sticks and splinters. The boy pulled her little deck free with a creaking sound. The bolts still hung from it, the wood torn out from around them. Blood dripped from his hands as he tucked the machine under his arm and nodded to the cripple.

“Anything else you need?” Timmy asked.

Erich had to fight not to smile. “No, I think I’m good now.”

“All right then. We should go.” Timmy turned to the woman and lifted his swelling hand to her in a wave. “Thanks.”

She didn’t say anything, but pushed the credit stick into her apron and waddled back to get a broom. They were gone before she returned, walking down the stairway to the street.

“That was incredible,” Erich said. “The way you did that? I mean, damn it. Everyone in there was cold as stone, and you were just madness and power, man. Did you see that? Did you see how gassed they were at you?”

“You said you needed the deck,” Timmy said.

“Come on! That was critical. You can brag about it some.”

“Tables don’t fight back,” Timmy said. “Come on. I got a boat.”

Erich’s relief left him chatty, but he didn’t talk about the fear he’d felt when Timmy had left him. Instead, he filled the trip with everything he’d seen on the feeds, and he told it all like he was telling ghost stories. The security forces were watching the ports, the trains, the transports up to the orbitals and Luna. Eighteen dead today, maybe three times that many in custody. It was news all over the world, and farther. There had even been a lady from Mars who’d come on for a while talking about the history of Earth-based police states. Wasn’t that cool? All the way to Mars, they were talking about what was going on right then in Baltimore. They were everywhere.

Timmy listened, adding in a few words here and there, but mostly he walked until they reached the water, and then he rowed. The ceramic oars dipped into the dark water and lifted out again. Erich drummed his fingertips against the

stolen deck, anxious to reconnect it to the network, so see what was happening and what had changed in the time since they'd left the coffee bar. That being connected would somehow protect him was an illusion, and Erich half knew that. But only half.

At the little island, Timmy pulled the boat onto shore and marched into the ruins where a light was burning. An old woman was sitting beside a chemical stove, stirring a small tin pot. The smell of brewing tea competed with the brine and the reek of decaying jellyfish. She looked up. Her face was like a mask, the makeup applied so perfectly it shoved her back into the uncanny valley.

"I found your tea," she said. "I hope you don't mind."

"Nope," Timmy said, not breaking stride. "Come on, Erich. I'll get you set up."

They walked through a doorway without a door and into a small room. It was even less comfortable than the one with the old lady. There was nothing on the floor but the glue marks where there had once been carpeting. Mold grew up along one wall, black and branching like tree limbs. Timmy put the deck on the ground. His knuckles were black with blood and forming scab.

"You be able to get signal here?" Timmy asked.

"Should be. May need to find a way to power up in the morning."

"Yeah, well. We'll come up with something. So this is your room, okay? Yours. That one's hers," Timmy said, pointing a thumb at the lighted doorway. "Hers. She asks you in, you can go in, but she asks you to leave, you do it, right?"

"Of course. Sure. Christ, Timmy. Your place, your rules, right?" Erich smiled, hoping to coax one in response. "We've always respected each other, right? Only, seriously, who is she? Is that your mom?"

It was like Timmy hadn't heard him. "I'm gonna get some sleep, but come morning, I can go back in, get some food. And I'll check in with the man."

Erich felt his belly go cold. "You're going to talk to Burton?"

"Sure, if I can find him," Timmy said. "He's got the plan, right?"

"Right," Erich said. "Of course."

He opened the deck, ran it through its startup options, and connected to the network. The signal strength wasn't great, but it wasn't awful. he'd been in half a dozen basement hack shacks with worse. He opened the newsfeed, still set to passive. The glow from the screen was the only light. Erich was cold, but he didn't complain. Timmy stood, stretched, considered the skinned knuckles of his hand with what could have been a distant sort of ruefulness, and turned to go

back to the old woman and the light.

“Hey, we’re friends, right?” Erich said.

Timmy turned back. “Sure.”

“We’ve always watched out for each other, you and me.”

Timmy shrugged. “Not *always*, but when we could, sure.”

“Don’t tell him where I am, okay?”

* * *

Security crackdowns, like plagues, had a natural progression. A peak, and then decline. As terrible as they might be at their height, they did not last forever. Burton knew this, as did all of his lieutenants, and he made his plans accordingly. Burton moved through his safe houses, playing shell games with the security forces. The first night, while Erich and Lydia slept in their respective rooms in the little island ruin and Timmy tried to find someone in the organization to report to, Burton slept in a loft above a warehouse with a woman named Edie. In the morning, he moved to the storage in the back of a medical clinic, locking the door and hijacking an untraceable connection so that he could speak to his people with relative safety. Little Cole had closed down her houses, locked away her reports, buried a month’s supply of drugs, and taken a bus to Vermont to stay with her mother until things died down. Oestra was still in the city, moving from place to place in much the same fashion that Burton was. Ragman and Cyrano were missing, but it was early enough that Burton wasn’t concerned yet. At least they weren’t in the newsfeeds. Liev and Simonson were.

And there was other evidence, indirect but convincing, of where the little war stood. Even in the first morning after the catastrophe began, security teams were calling on Liev’s underlings, sweeping them up for questioning. Some, they held. Others, they released. Burton had no way of knowing which of those who had been set free had cut deals with security and which had been lucky enough to slip through the net. It hardly mattered. That branch of the business had been compromised, and so it would die. The demand for illicit drugs, cheap goods, off-schedule medical procedures, and anonymous sex could be neither arrested nor sated, and so the thing that mattered most for Burton’s little empire was safe. Would always be safe. The question of how to feed the city’s subterranean hungers was only a tactical one, and Burton could be flexible.

The temptation, of course, was to fight back, and in the following days, some did. Five soldiers from the Loca Griega left a bomb outside a Star Helix substation. It exploded, injuring two of the security contractors and damaging

the building, and all five bombers were identified and taken into custody. Tamara Sluydan, who really should have known better, organized street-level resistance, starting a two-day riot that ended with half of her people hospitalized or in custody, eighteen local businesses looted or set afire, and the goodwill of her client base permanently damaged. Burton understood. He wasn't a man without passions. If someone hurt him, of course he wanted to hurt them back. Phrases like "even the score" or "blood for blood" came to mind, and each time they did, he made the practice of tearing them apart to himself. "Even the score" was the metaphor of a game, and this wasn't a game. "Blood for blood" made it sound as if through more violence, past wrongs could be balanced, and they couldn't. The hardest lesson Burton had ever learned was to endure the blows, accept the damage, and let someone else strike back. Soon, very soon, the crackdown would shift from its great, overwhelming force to individual struggles. It was in his interests to see that those struggles were with the Loca Griega and Tamara Sluydan, not with him. As soon as the enemy was clearly defined in the collective mind of Star Helix and Burton's name and organization were not central to their plans, the storm would move on and he could begin to reopen the folded fronds of his business.

In the meantime, he moved from one place to the next. He told people he would go one place, and then arrived at another. He considered all his habits with the uncompromising eye of a predator, and killed the ones with flaws. Anything that connected him with the patterns of the past was a vulnerability, and wherever possible, he chose to be invulnerable. It wasn't the first time he'd been through this. He was good at it.

And so when it took Timmy the better part of a week to find him, Burton's annoyance was balanced against a certain self-centered pride.

The office was raw brick and mortar, newsfeeds playing on five different screens. A sliding wooden door stood half open, the futon where Burton had slept the the night before half visible through it. Oestra, whose safe house it was, sat by the window looking down at the street. The automatic shotgun across his legs seemed unremarkable. Timmy had been searched by three guards on the street, and he'd been clean. Even if he'd swallowed a tracking device they would have found it, and the big slab of human meat would have been bleeding out in a gutter instead of smiling amiably and gawking at the exposed ductwork.

"Timmy, right?" Burton said, pretending uncertainty. Let the boy feel lucky he'd remembered that much.

"Yeah, chief. That's me." The openness and amiability was annoying. Burton

glanced toward Oestra, but the lieutenant was squinting at the brightness of the day. Burton scratched his leg idly, his fingernails hissing against the fabric of his pants.

“You got something for me?”

Timmy’s face fell a little. “Just news. I mean, I didn’t have any stuff. Nothing to deliver or anything.”

“All right, then,” Burton said. “What’s the news, Tiny?”

Timmy grinned at the irony of the nickname, then sobered and began his report. Burton leaned forward, drinking in all the words as fast as they spilled from Timmy’s lips. When Oestra risked a glance back, it was like watching a bird singing away while a cat stood in the too-still pose of a carnivore waiting to pounce. The details came out in no particular order: Erich was in a safe place, Timmy had been taking food to him, the fake profile deal had been interrupted by the security crackdown, Erich’s original deck was gone but he had a replacement, the police probably had his DNA profile now. Oestra sighed to himself and looked back out the window. On the street, a half dozen young men who hadn’t just condemned their friends to death slouched down the street together.

“He’s sure about that?” Burton asked.

“Nah,” Timmy said. “We didn’t hang around and watch them find the deck or anything. I figured it’d be better, you know. To get out.”

“I see.”

“Erich wanted to go get it. Grab the hardware, I mean.”

“That would have been a mistake,” Burton said. “If security had the deck and the man, that...well, that’d be bad.”

“Was what I thought too,” Timmy said.

Burton sat back, the leather of the chair creaking. Back past the bedroom, Sylvia started running the shower. Sylvia or Sarah. Something like that. One of Oestra’s, provided with the bed. “Where’s the safe house?”

“I’m not supposed to say,” Timmy said.

“Not even to me?”

The boy had the good sense to look uncomfortable. “Yeah, not to anyone. You know how it is.”

“Is there anyone there with him?”

“Yeah, I got a friend there.”

“A guard?”

“Not really, no. Just a friend.”

Burton nodded, thinking hard. "But he's secure?"

"He's on the water. Anyone starts coming in, he's got a boat and about a dozen decent places to hide. I mean, nowhere's a hundred percent."

"And you're protecting him."

"That's the job," Timmy said, with a shrug and a smile. Burton couldn't quite put his finger on what it was about the boy that was so interesting. Over the years, he'd had hundreds just like him who came through, worked, disappeared, died, were fed to security or found God and a ticket out of town. Burton had a nose for talent, though, and there was something about this one that kept bringing him back to the sense of the boy's potential. Perhaps it was the casual logic he'd used when he'd killed Austin. Maybe it was the deadness in his eyes.

Burton got up, raising a finger. Timmy sat deep in his chair like a trained dog receiving a command. Sylvia—whoever—was singing in the bathroom. The splash of water against porcelain covered the sound of Burton opening the gun safe, pulling out the pistol and its magazine. When he stepped back into the main room, Timmy hadn't so much as crossed his legs. Burton held the gun out.

"You know what this is?" he asked.

"It's a ten-millimeter semi-auto," Timmy said. He put his hand out halfway to it, and then looked up at Burton, his eyes asking permission. Burton nodded and smiled. Timmy took the gun.

"You know guns?"

Timmy shrugged. "They're around. It feels...sticky."

"It's got a resin of digestive enzymes," Burton said. "Won't hurt your skin much, but it won't hold prints and it breaks down any trace evidence. No DNA."

"That's cool," Timmy said, and started to hand it back. Burton tossed the magazine onto the boy's lap.

"Those are plastic-tipped. Organ shredders, but they don't work on armor," Burton said. "Still, step up from that homemade shotgun you've used, right?"

"Right."

"You know how those things all go together?"

Timmy weighed the pistol in one hand, the magazine in the other. He slid them together, checked the chamber, flicked the safety on and off. It wasn't the practiced action of a professional, but talented amateur was good enough for his purposes. Timmy looked up, his smile blank and empty. "New job?" he asked.

"New job," Burton said. "I know you and Erich grew up together. Is this going to be a problem for you?"

"Nope," Timmy said, slipping the gun into his pocket. There hadn't even

been a pause.

“You’re sure?”

“Sure, I’m sure. I get it. They’ve got him in the system now. If they get him too, there’s all kinds of things he compromises. If they can’t get him, nothing gets compromised, and I’m the only guy who can get close to him without him seeing it coming.”

“Yes.”

“So I kill him for you,” Timmy said. He could have been saying, *So I’ll pick up dinner on my way*. There was no bravado in it. Burton sat, tilted his head. The friendly smile and the empty eyes met him.

“All right, I’m curious,” Burton said. “Did you game this? This was your plan?”

“Shit no, chief,” Timmy said. “This here’s just happy coincidence.”

Either it was truth or the best deadpan Burton had seen in a long time. The shower water turned off. On the newsfeeds, a woman in a Star Helix uniform was saying something, a dour expression on her face. Burton wanted to turn up the volume, see if the press statement was something useful to him like reading fortunes in coffee grounds. He restrained himself.

“I will need proof,” Burton said. “Evidence, yeah?”

“So what, you want his heart?”

“Heart. Brain. Windpipe. Anything he can’t live without.”

“Not a problem,” Timmy said. Then a moment later, “Is there anything else, or should I go?”

“You watched out for this kid your whole life,” Burton said. “He vouched for you. Got you in with me. And you’re really going to put a slug in his brain just like that?”

“Sure. You’re the man with the plan.”

When the boy left, Burton came to stand beside Oestra, watching him walk away down the sunlit street. The thinning reddish-brown hair and wide shoulders made him look like some kind of manual laborer twice his age. His hands were shoved deep in his pockets. He could have been anybody.

“Think he’ll do it?” Burton asked.

Oestra didn’t answer for a long moment. “Might.”

“He does this for me, he’ll do anything,” Burton said, clapping Oestra’s shoulder. “Potential for a man like that.”

“If he doesn’t?”

“There are a lot of ways to dispose of someone disposable,” Burton said.

Burton walked back to the chair, shifted the newsfeed buffer back to the start of the Star Helix woman's press announcement. The woman started talking, and Burton listened.

Timmy's ruin had long since become a misery for Lydia, and misery had become a kind of pleasure. Their days had taken a kind of rhythm. Erich woke first in the morning, his uneven footsteps playing a tentative counterpoint to the rough sound of the waves. Lydia lay in the warmth of her cocoon, the slick fabric wrapped around her until only her mouth and nose were in the free air. When she could no longer pretend sleep, she emerged and made tea on the little stove, and when she was done, Erich transferred the solar charger to his deck and squatted over it, scanning the newsfeeds with a ferocity and single-mindedness that made her think of a poet chasing the perfect rhyme. If Timmy was there, she would walk with him to the boats or survey the newest supplies he had smuggled to their private island: fresh clothes, carryout tandoori, charged batteries for the deck and the lamp. More often, he was not there, and she haunted the shore like a sea widow. The city glowered out at her from across the water, like a great angry gray face, condemning her for her sins.

Is this the time? she would wonder. *Has he left now, never to return? Or will there be one more? Another time to see his face, to hear his voice, to have the conversations that we can only ever have with each other?*

She knew that the churn was playing itself out there, across the narrow waves. Security had likely come to her rooms on Liev's word and found them already abandoned. The men and women she'd worked with these last years were part of the past now. Part of a life she'd left behind, though nothing else had begun. Only this island exile and its waiting.

At night, Erich would eat with her. Their conversations were awkward. She knew that she was uncanny to him, that he thought of Timmy as his own friend, a character from his own past. Her appearance and the reticence she and Timmy had to making her explicable were as odd to Erich as if lobsters had crawled up out of the sea and started speaking Spanish. And yet if they did, what could anyone do but answer them, and so Erich and Lydia reached the odd peace of roommates, intimate in all things and nothing.

That night, Timmy crossed the waves unnoticed by her or Erich. Lydia was looking east over the ruined island to the greater sea beyond. Erich curled in the room that common habit designated as his, snoring slightly as the deck ran down its charge to nothing beside him. Timmy arrived quietly and alone, announced only by his footsteps and the smell of fresh ginger.

When he emerged from the darkness, two thin plastic sacks hung from his left fist. Lydia shifted, not rising, but coming up to rest on her knees and ankles in a posture she imagined to be like a geisha, though she'd never met a real geisha. Timmy put the sacks down beside her, his eyes on the shadows past the doorway. Far away across the water, gulls complained.

"Two?" she said.

"Hmm?" Timmy followed her gaze to the sacks. A glimmer of something that might have been chagrin passed through his eyes fast as a blink. "Oh. The dinners. Hey, is Erich back there?"

"He is," Lydia said. "I think he's asleep."

"Yeah," Timmy said, straightening. He put a hand into his pocket. "Hang on a minute." He walked back toward the black doorway as if he were going to check on the other boy, perhaps wake him for his supper.

"Wait," Lydia said as Timmy reached the doorway.

He looked back at her, twisting at the shoulders, his body and feet still committed.

"Come sit with me."

"Yeah, I just gotta—"

"First," she said. "Come sit with me first."

Timmy hesitated, fluttering like a feather caught between contradictory breezes. Then his shoulders sank a centimeter and his hips turned toward her. He pulled his hand from his pocket. Lydia opened the sacks, unpacked the food, laid the disposable forks beside the plates. Every movement had the precision and beauty of ritual. Timmy sat facing her, his legs crossed. The bulge of the gun stood out from his thigh like a fist. Lydia bowed her head, as if in prayer. Timmy took up his fork and stabbed at the ginger beef. Lydia did the same.

"So you're going to kill him?" Lydia asked, her voice light.

"Yeah," Timmy said. "I mean, I ain't happy about it, but it's what needs to get done."

"Needs," Lydia said, her intonation in the perfect balance point between statement and question.

Timmy ate another bite. "I'm the guy that took a job from Burton. Used to be the job was one thing. Now it's something else. It's not like I get to tell him what to do, right?"

"Because he's Burton."

"And I'm not. You were the one who said I'd be important to him if I made it through this shitstorm. This is part of that."

“I said Burton would *see* you as important,” Lydia said. “There is more to you than what he sees. There’s more to you than what anybody sees.”

“Well,” Timmy said. “You.”

Even I do not know your depths floated at the back of her throat like a cough. She didn’t have it in her to say the words. If it was true, so what? When had truth ever been her friend? Instead she took another bite of the beef. He did the same. She imagined that he was giving her the time to gather herself. It might even have been true. The perfectly straight lightning bolt of a railgun transport lit the black sky, its thunder rolling after it like a wave. The ginger and pepper burned her lips, her throat, her tongue, and she took another bite, welcoming the pain. It was always pleasant when pain was on the outside.

“And who will you be to yourself?” she said at last. “Doesn’t what you think matter more than what he does?”

Timmy’s brow furrowed. “Yeah, I don’t know what you just said.”

“Who are you going to be to yourself, if you do this?” She put down her fork, leaned across the space between them. She lifted his shirt as she had countless times before, and the erotic charge of it was still there. Never absent. She pressed her palm against his breast, her skin against his skin in the place above his heart. “Who will you be in there?”

Timmy’s face went perfectly still in the unnerving way it sometimes did. His eyes were flat as a shark’s, his mouth like a plaster cast mold of himself. Only his voice was the same, bright and amiable.

“You know there ain’t no one in there,” he said.

She let her fingertips stray to the side, brushing through the coarse hair she knew so well. She felt the hardness of his nipple against her thumb. “Then who will you put there? Burton?”

“He’s the guy with the power,” Timmy said.

“Not the power to kill Erich,” she said. “Not the power to make *you* kill him. That is you and only you. People like us? We aren’t righteous. But we can pretend to be, if we want, and that’s almost the same as if it were true.”

“I get the feeling you’re asking me for something. I don’t know what it is.”

“I am not a good person,” she said.

“Hey. Don’t—”

“If I were, though? If I *were* that woman? What would I want you to do?”

Timmy took another mouthful of beef, his jaw working slowly. In his concentration, she saw the echoes of all the versions of himself that she had known from baby to toddler to young man to this, now before her. She folded

her hands on her lap.

“That’s a long way to say I shouldn’t do it,” he said.

“Is that what I said?” she asked.

Erich’s yawn came from the doorway. Lydia felt the blood rush from her face, tasted the penny-bright flush of fear as if she had been caught doing something illicit. Erich came into the light, scratching his sleep-tousled hair with his good hand. “Hey,” he said. “Did I hear you get back, big guy? What’s the word?”

Timmy was quiet, his gaze fixed on Lydia, his expression empty as a mask.

“Guys?” Erich said, limping forward. “What’s the matter? Is something wrong?”

Timmy’s sigh was so low that Lydia barely heard it. The boy she had loved for so long, and in so many ways, put on his cheerful smile and looked away from her. She felt tears pricking her eyes.

“Yeah, bad news,” Timmy said. “Burton’s not taking the whole thing very well. He’s put out paper on you.”

Erich sat down, the blood draining from his face. He grabbed his bad arm reflexively, unaware that he was doing it, and looked from Timmy to the woman and back. His heart thudded like a drum in his ears. Timmy licked his fork clean and put it down. The woman was still as stone. Erich felt his world fall out from underneath him, and that he had known it would was less of a comfort than he’d expected. Anyone looking in at the little circle of light from the shadows would have seen only three faces in the black, like a family portrait of refugees. Erich broke the silence.

“Are you *sure*?”

“Yeah, pretty sure,” Timmy said. “Seeing as how I got the contract.”

Erich stopped breathing. Timmy stared at him, expressionless for several infinitely long seconds.

“We’ve gotta find a way to get you out,” his big friend finally said, and Erich started breathing again.

“There’s no way out,” he said. “Burton’ll track me down anywhere.”

“What about that deck?” Timmy asked. “It ain’t your old one, but can you still sample with it?”

“What do you mean?” Erich said.

“You’ve got the escape plan for Burton. The clean one. Why don’t you put your sequence on it? Use it to get out of here?”

“I can, sure, but they’ve already got my *other* deck, remember? I put my

DNA on a record, the flag goes up, and I'm in for questioning."

"Yeah," Timmy said. "Well maybe you could...Shit. I don't know. Maybe you could think of something."

"I knew," Erich said. "The second I saw those bastards coming down the street, I knew it was over for me. I'm dead. It's just a matter of time is all."

"That's always true," Lydia said, her mind taken with other matters. "For everyone."

"Might as well be you," Erich said to Timmy, giving his friend permission. Terror and love warring in his chest.

"Nope," Timmy said, cocking his head to one side as if he'd only just made the decision in that moment.

"Erich," Lydia started.

"As long as I'm alive," Erich said, ignoring her, "Burton's not safe. He's not going to let me slide."

Timmy frowned, then grunted in surprise. Maybe pleasure.

"What?" Erich said.

"Just that it works the other way too," Timmy said, levering himself up to his feet. "Anyway, I gotta go back in."

"Back in?" Erich said.

Timmy brushed his hands across his wide thighs. "The city. I gotta go back to the city. Burton's expecting me."

"You're not going to tell him where I am, are you?" Erich asked. Timmy started laughing and Lydia took it up. Erich looked from one to the other, confused.

"Nah, I'm not going to tell him where you are. I got something of his I need to give back is all. Nothing you have to worry about."

"Easy for you to say," Erich said, ashamed of the whine in his voice.

"I'll leave you the good boat," Timmy said, turning toward the darkness.

"Will you be back?" Lydia said. She hadn't meant to, because she knew in her heart, in her bones, and deeper than that what the answer was. Timmy smiled at her for the last time. *I take it back, she thought. Kill him. Kill the boy. Kill everyone else in the world. Shoot babies in the head and dance on their bodies. Any atrocity, any evil, is justified if it keeps you from leaving me.*

"Eh," Timmy said. "You never know."

The darkness folded around him as he walked away. Her hands were made of lead and tungsten. Her belly felt hurt and empty as a miscarriage. And underneath the hurt and the horror, the betrayal and the pleasure she took in her

distress, something else stirred and lifted its head. It took her time to recognize it as pride, and even then she couldn't have said who or what she was proud of. Only that she was.

The boat splashed once in the water, her almost-son and sometime-lover leaving the shore for the last time. Her lifetime was a fabric woven of losses, and she saw now that all of them had been practice, training her to teach her how to bear this pain like a boxer bloodying knuckles to make them strong and numb. All her life had been preparation for bearing this single, unbearable moment.

"Shit," Erich said. "Were there only two dinners? What am I going to eat?"

Lydia plucked up the fork that had been Timmy's, gripping the stem in her fist like holding his hand again, one last time. Touching what he had touched, because she would never touch him again. Here this object had opened his lips, felt the softness of his tongue, and been left behind. It held traces of him.

"What's the matter?" Erich said. "Are you all right?"

I stopped being all right before you were born, she thought. What she said was, "There's something I'd like you to do for me."

* * *

The streets of Baltimore didn't notice him pass through them this one last time. More than three million people lived and breathed, loved and lost, hoped and failed to hope that night, just as any other. A young woman hurrying home later than her father's curfew dodged around a tall man with thinning hair and pants wet to the knee at the corner of South and Lombard, muttering obscenities and curses at him that spoke more of her own dread and fear than anything the man had done. Four Star Helix security employees, out of uniform and off-shift, paused at the entrance to an Italian restaurant to watch a civilian pass. None of them could have said what it was about him that caught their attention, and it might only have been that they'd operated on high alert for so many days at once. The civilian went on, minding his own business, keeping himself to himself, and they went into the building's garlic and onion smells and forgot him. A bus driver stopped, let two old women, a thin-faced man, and a broad-shouldered amiable fellow come on board. Bus service was part of basic, and the machine followed its route automatically. No one paid, no one spoke, and the driver went back to watching the entertainment feeds as soon as the bus pulled back into traffic.

Nearer Oestra's safe house, things changed. There were more eyes, more of them alert. The catastrophe of the churn hung thick in the air, the sense that

doom might come at any moment in the shape of security vans and riot gear and voices shouting to keep hands visible. Nothing like it had happened that day or the one before, but no one was taking comfort in that yet. The guards who stopped Timmy were different than the ones he'd seen earlier, but their placement on the street was the same. They stopped him, took the pistol that Burton had given him, scanned him for tracking devices, firearms, explosives, chemical agents, and when they found he was clean, they called in. Oestra's voice through their earpieces was less than a mosquito but still perfectly recognizable, a familiar buzz and whine. They waved Timmy on.

Oestra opened the door to him, automatic shotgun still in the lieutenant's hand, as if he hadn't put it down all day. Probably, he hadn't.

Timmy stepped into the main room, looking around pleasantly. The newsfeeds flickered silently on their screens: a street view from sometime earlier in the day with five security vans lined up outside a burning apartment building, a serious-faced Indian woman speaking into the camera with a dour expression, an ad with seven bouncing monkeys reaching for a box of banana-flavored cakes. The world cast its shadows on the bare brick wall and threw stories into the gray mortar. The churn, running itself to exhaustion. New stories from around the world and above it filling in the void.

"You're back," Oestra said.

"Yup."

"You do the thing?"

"It got a little complicated," Timmy said. "The man still here?"

"Wait. I'll get him."

Oestra walked to the back, one set of footsteps fading into the safe house, then a long pause made rich by the murmur of voices, then two sets of footsteps coming back. The timestamp beside the dour Indian woman read 21:42. Timmy considered the curtains. Blue-dyed cotton with cords of woven nylon. The chair Oestra had been sitting on before, leather stretched over a light metal frame. A kitchen in through a wide brickwork archway. The bedroom in the back with its futon, and a bathroom somewhere behind that.

"Tiny," Burton said. "What's the news, little man?"

Burton's white shirt caught the light from the screens, dancing in a hundred colors. His slacks were dark and beautifully cut. Timmy turned to him like he was an old friend. Oestra walked past them both, taking his place by the window. Timmy glanced back at him only a few feet away, a shotgun across his thighs.

“Well,” Timmy said. “Truth is, I ran into a little hiccup.”

Burton crossed his arms, squared his shoulders and hips. “Something you couldn’t handle?” he asked, his voice hard with disapproval.

“I’m waiting to see,” Timmy said.

“Waiting to see if you can handle it?”

“Well, yeah,” Timmy said with a wide, open smile. “Actually, it’s kind of funny you put it that way.”

When the big man stepped back toward the window, the movement was so casual, so relaxed, that neither Oestra nor Burton recognized what was happening. Timmy’s thick fingers grabbed the back of the leather chair, pulling back and down fast and hard. Oestra twisted trying to keep from falling and also bring the shotgun to bear at the same time, managing neither. He spilled to the floor, Timmy’s knee coming down hard on his neck. Oestra’s muffled roar was equal parts outrage and pain. Timmy reached down and ripped the man’s right ear off, then punched down twice, three times, four. Burton ran for the back bedroom. There wasn’t much time.

Unable to use it with Timmy on his neck, Oestra dropped the shotgun and twisted, trying to get his arms and legs under himself, trying to get the leverage to push Timmy back. Timmy reached down and hooked his finger into the gunman’s left eye, bracing the head with his knee and turning his wrist until he felt the eyeball pop. Oestra’s screams were wilder now, panic and pain taking over. Timmy let the pressure up, scooted to the left, and picked up the abandoned shotgun. He fired once into Oestra’s head and the man stopped screaming.

Timmy trotted across the room, shotgun in one hand. Burton boiled out of the bedroom, pistols in either fist and teeth bared like a dog’s. The front window shattered. Timmy ducked through the brick archway into the kitchen, shifted his grip on the shotgun, and swung it hard and low, leading with the elbow like a cricket player at the bat as Burton roared in after him. The sound of the connection was like a piece of raw steak being dropped on concrete. Burton’s feet flew out from under him, but the momentum of his rush carried him stumbling into the space beyond. Timmy lowered the shotgun toward the man’s head, but Burton whirled, dropping his own guns and grabbing the shotgun’s barrel. The smell of burning skin was instantaneous. Timmy tried to pull back, but Burton kicked out. His right foot hit Timmy’s knee like he’d kicked a fire hydrant, but Timmy still stumbled. The shotgun roared again, and the refrigerator sprouted pocks of twisted metal and plastic. Burton twisted, pulling

himself in close. Too close for the shotgun's long barrel. He hammered his elbow into Timmy's ribs twice and felt something give the third time. Timmy dropped the shotgun, and then they were both down on the floor.

They grappled, caught in each other's arms, each man shifting for the position that would destroy the other in a parody of intimate love. The fingers of Burton's left hand worked their way under Timmy's chin, digging at his neck, pushing into the hard cartilage of his throat. Timmy choked, gagged, pulled back the centimeter that was all Burton needed. He pulled his right arm up into the gap, braced himself, twisted, and now Timmy's arm and head were locked. Burton gasped out a chuckle.

"You just fucked the wrong asshole," he hissed as Timmy bucked and struggled. "Your little cripple boyfriend? I'm gonna burn him down for days. I'm gonna find everyone you ever loved and kill them all slow."

Timmy grunted and pushed back, but the effort only made Burton's lock on him tighter.

"You thought you could take me, you dumbfuck piece of shit?" Burton spat into Timmy's ear. "You thought you were tougher than *me*? I owned your momma, boy. You're just second-generation *property*."

All along their paired bodies, Burton felt Timmy tense and then, with a vast exhalation, relax, melting into the hold. Burton pulled tighter, squeezing. There was a report like a pistol shot when Timmy's shoulder dislocated and the resistance stuttered. Burton's grip broke. Timmy rolled, cocked back his fist and brought it down on the bridge of Burton's nose. The pain was bright. The volume of the world faded. The fist came down again, jostling the kitchen. The light seemed strange, reducing the red of the bricks and the yellow of the stove to shades of gray. Burton tried to bring his arms up to cover his face, to shield him from the violence, but they were a very long way away, and he kept losing track of them. He had them up, but they were numb and boneless. The attacks easily brushed them aside. The fist hit his nose again, and he didn't know if it was for the third time or the fourth.

Shit, he thought. *This is just going to keep going on until that fucker decides to stop.*

The impact came again, and Burton tried to say something, to scream. The impact came again, and afterward followed a few seconds of darkness and silence and calm. Burton felt very sleepy. The impact came again. Calm. The impact came again and again and again. Each time, the violence felt more distant and the emptiness between more profound until a kind of forgetfulness came

over him.

Once Timmy was sure that he was alone in the apartment, he rolled onto his back. His left arm hung from the socket, limp, useless, and disconnected. He levered himself up to his knees, breathing hard between clenched teeth. Then stood. He took the automatic shotgun in his one good hand and stepped out to the main room. On the screen, the Indian woman was still speaking, wagging a finger at the camera to make a point. The timestamp beside her read 21:44. Two minutes. Maybe a little less. Timmy walked to the front window. The guards from the street weren't at their posts. He nodded to himself and went to stand by the front door. When the knob turned, he waited. The door flew open, and he fired three times, once straight ahead, and then angling to the left and right. Someone started screaming and the door banged closed again.

Timmy went back to the kitchen. He flipped on the burners, pulled down the roll of cheap paper towels from the wall. He found a bottle of peanut oil in the cabinet and doused the towels with half of it before he put them directly on the heating element. A flurry of footsteps came from the front and he fired the shotgun again, not aiming at anything. They retreated. The oil-soaked paper caught fire, and Timmy picked up the burning roll, trotted to the bedroom, and threw the flaming mass into the bunched covers. By the time he was back in the kitchen, the flame shadows were already dancing in the archway behind him. Timmy put the half-full bottle of oil directly onto the heating element and walked to the back of the safe house. The stairway leading to the alley was narrow and white. He didn't see anyone, but he fired the shotgun twice anyway then tossed the gun back into the fire. If there had been a guard there, they'd fled. Timmy walked out into the night.

He moved slowly, but with purpose. When his path crossed with other people's he smiled and nodded. Once, when he had almost reached his destination, an old man in a black coat had stopped and stared at his bruised and bloody hand. Timmy smiled ruefully, shrugged, and didn't break stride. The old man didn't raise an alarm. Around here, a muscle-bound thug with blood on his cuffs and skinned knuckles didn't warrant anything more than a disapproving look.

The security forces had put a fresh lock on Lydia's door, but Timmy knew the back way in. He slid through the window into the bathroom he'd known so well over the last few years. It still smelled like her. They'd gone through everything. Her towels and the shower curtain were on the floor. Bottles of medications littered the sink. He dug through until he found some painkillers and dry

swallowed three. In the kitchen, he wrapped his shoulder in ice, then waited motionless until the swelling was down as far as it was going to go. Putting his shoulder back in its socket was a question of lying on the bed, his grip on the mattress bottom hard and unforgiving, and then pulling back slowly, relaxing into the pain, until it slid back into place with a wet, angry pop. He stripped, washed himself with wet hand towels, and changed into a fresh set of his clothes. Ones that didn't have anybody's blood on them.

The churn, the crackdown, the catastrophe. The cycle of boom and bust. The turn of the seasons. Whatever name was applied to it, the inevitable cascade of events in the city rolled on just the same. When the fire trucks came and put out the blaze, they identified the two bodies as Feivel Oestra and an unregistered man. The unregistered was a small, compact, dark-skinned man in an expensive shirt and tailored slacks. He had no tattoos, and a wide birthmark on his right shoulder blade in the shape of a rough triangle. Both men had died by violence. If the fire had been meant to conceal that, it failed. If it was only meant to foul any trace DNA or fingerprint evidence, it did well enough. Add to that the fact that Oestra was on the Star Helix lists as someone to bring in for questioning, and the broad strokes of the story came clear.

The same night, fifteen men loyal to the Loca Griega were surrounded in a nightclub. The hostage situation that rose out of it left two people dead and ten in custody, and the attendant lawsuits against Star Helix and the owners of the nightclub were the top of the local and regional newsfeeds. Oestra's death was little more than a footnote, something mentioned and then moved on from. Other things—smaller things—fell even below that level of obscurity. A woman selling illicit painkillers out of her apartment beside the arcology had a screaming fight with one of her clients, called security, and was taken away for questioning. A sweep of the ruins on the bay islands found a small squatters' camp with an LED lamp, an emergency prep sleeping bag, and an exhausted chemical stove, but anyone who had been living there was gone. An art dealer contacted with a request for assistance with an investigation killed himself rather than come in. None of those events raised any notice at all.

Soon, the paroxysm of violence, legal and otherwise, would thin back down to the normal background radiation of human vice. Very serious people would argue about whether the program had worked. Some would argue that crime had gone down, others that it had actually risen. Star Helix would take its payment from the government and settle out of court most of the complaints made against it. One of the remaining lieutenants would rise to the top, or the whole criminal

apparatus would turn over to a new organization, a new generation. Within a year, there would be a new working normal that would run more or less gracefully until the next time. People of little importance would survive and make names for themselves. The mighty would fall, the meek would rise up in their places and become mighty. But all that would come later.

In the pearly light that came before the dawn, one other thing happened that went unnoticed, meaningless to anyone but those involved.

It was on a street down near the water's edge. The eastern sky was brightening with the coming dawn, the western sky still boasted a scattering of stars. Traffic on the street was thick, but not yet the immobile crush that would come with the light. Sea and rot perfumed the air, but the cool made the scent seem almost pleasant. A tea-and-coffee stand was opening, sporting the blue-and-pink logo of a popular chain and a tray of baked goods just the same as a million other trays on five continents and two worlds. Old men and women on basic huffed down the sidewalk, getting in the day's exercise before the sun came up. Young men and women staggered home from long nights at the street clubs and rairai joints, exhausted from hours of dancing, drinking, sex, and frustrated hope. Soon, the streets and tube stations would thicken with the traffic of those who had jobs to go to, and then be released to the masses for whom basic was a way of life.

A boy on the verge of manhood stood on a corner near the tea-and-coffee stand. He was taller than average, and muscular. His close-cropped reddish-brown hair was receding, though he was young. His expression was blank, and he held himself in a tight, guarded way that could have been grief or the protecting of some physical injury. His right hand was swollen, the knuckles skinned. If it hadn't been for that last detail, the security team might have passed him by. Three women and two men, all in the ballistic armor and helmets of Star Helix.

"Morning," the team lead said, and half a beat later the tall man smiled and nodded. He turned to walk away, but the other personnel shifted to block his path.

The man tensed, then made the visible decision to relax. His smile was rueful. "Sorry. I was just heading out."

"I respect that, sir. We appreciate you taking a moment," the team lead said, placing a hand on the butt of his pistol. "Really did a number on your hand."

"Yeah. I box."

"Can be a good workout. I'm going to need to see your ID."

“Don’t got it on me. Sorry.”

“We’ll need to check you against the database, then. That isn’t a problem, is it?”

“Think I got the right to refuse that, don’t I?”

“You do,” the team lead said, letting a hint of hardness slip into his voice beneath the casual words. “But then we’d need to take you to the substation and do the full biometric scan to exclude you from the persons of interest list, and there are a whole lot of very unpleasant people who are in that queue. You don’t want to hang out with them. Not if you have someplace you need to be.”

The big man seemed to consider this. He glanced back over his shoulder.

“Looking for someone?” the team lead asked.

“Was more thinking there might be some folks looking for me.”

“So. How do you want to play this?”

The man shrugged and held out his hand. The team’s data analyst stepped forward and tapped the collector against the thick wrist. The readout stuttered red, then went to solid green. The seconds ticked away.

“If there’s something you want to tell me,” the team lead said, “this would be the time.”

“Nah,” the big man said. “I think I’m good.”

“Yeah?”

“You know,” he said, “good enough.”

The team lead’s hand terminal chimed. He pulled it out with his left hand, his right still on the butt of his gun. The readout had the red border of a flagged profile. The big man’s body went very still while they read. It was a long moment before the team lead spoke.

“Amos Burton.”

“Yeah?” the big man said. It could have meant, *Yes, I killed him*, or *What about him?* All the team lead heard was the affirmation.

“I’ve got a travel flag on you here. You’re cutting it pretty close.”

Amos Burton’s eyebrows rose and the corners of his mouth turned down. “I am?”

“You’re shipping out to Luna on the noon launch from Bogotá station, Mr. Burton. These apprenticeship programs are tough to get into, and last I heard, they take it mighty poorly if you miss your berth. Might wind up waiting another decade to get back on the list.”

“Huh,” the big man said.

“Look, there’s a high-speed line about nine blocks north of here. We can take

you there if you want.”

“Erich, you sonofabitch,” the big man said. Instead of looking north, he turned to the east, toward the sea and rising sun. “I’m not Mr. Burton.”

“Sorry?”

“I’m not Mr. Burton,” the man said again. “You can call me Amos.”

“Whatever you want. But I think you’d better haul ass out of town if you don’t want to get in some serious shit, Amos.”

“You ain’t the only one that thinks that. But I’m good. I know where the high-speed lines are. I won’t miss my ride.”

“All right then,” the team lead said with a crisp nod. “Have a better one.”

The security team moved on, flowing around the big man like river water around a stone. Amos watched them go, then went to the tea-and-coffee stand, bought a cup of black coffee and a corn muffin. He stood on the corner for a long minute, eating and drinking and breathing the air of the only city he’d ever known. When he was done, he dropped the cup and the muffin wrapper into the recycling bin and turned north toward the high-speed line and Bogotá station and Luna. And, who knew, maybe the vastness beyond the moon. The sweep of planets and moons and asteroids that humanity had spread to, and where the chances of running into anybody from Baltimore were vanishingly small. A needle in a haystack all of humanity wide.

Amos Burton was a tall, stocky, pale-skinned man with an amiable smile, an unpleasant past, and a talent for cheerful violence. He left Baltimore to its dynamic balance of crime and law, exotics and mundanity, love and emptiness. The number of people who knew him and loved him could be counted on one hand and leave most of the fingers spare, and when he was gone, the city went on without him as if he had never been.

Meet the Author

James S. A. Corey is the pen name of fantasy author Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck. They both live in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Find out more about this series at www.the-expanse.com.

[Also by James S. A. Corey](#)

THE EXPANSE

Leviathan Wakes

Caliban's War

Abaddon's Gate

Cibola Burn

THE EXPANSE SHORT FICTION

“The Butcher of Anderson Station”

“Gods of Risk”

“The Churn”

**If you enjoyed
THE CHURN,
look out for**

CIBOLA BURN

by James S. A. Corey

The gates have opened the way to thousands of habitable planets, and the land rush has begun. Settlers stream out from humanity's home planets in a vast, poorly controlled flood, landing on a new world. Among them, the Rocinante, haunted by the vast, posthuman network of the protomolecule as they investigate what destroyed the great intergalactic society that built the gates and the protomolecule.

But Holden and his crew must also contend with the growing tensions between the settlers and the company that owns the official claim to the planet. Both sides will stop at nothing to defend what's theirs, but soon a terrible disease strikes and only Holden—with help from the ghostly Detective Miller—can find the cure.

Chapter 1

Basia

Basia Merton had been a gentle man, once. He hadn't been the sort of man who made bombs out of old metal lubricant drums and mining explosives.

He rolled another one out of the little workshop behind his house and toward one of First Landing's electric carts. The little stretch of buildings spread to the north and south, and then ended, the darkness of the plain stretching to the horizon. The flashlight hanging from his belt bounced as he walked, casting strange moving shadows across the dusty ground. Small alien animals hooted at him from outside the circle of light.

Nights on Ilus—he wouldn't call it New Terra—were very dark. The planet had thirteen tiny, low-albedo moons spaced so consistently in the same orbit that everyone assumed they were alien artifacts. Wherever they'd come from, they were more like captured asteroids than real moons to someone who grew up on the planet-sized satellites of Jupiter. And they did nothing to catch and reflect the light of Ilus' sun once it set. The local nighttime wildlife was mostly small birds and lizards. Or what Ilus' new human inhabitants thought of as birds and lizards. They shared only the most superficial external traits and a primarily carbon base with their terrestrial namesakes.

Basia grunted with effort as he lifted the barrel onto the back of the cart, and a second later an answering grunt came from a few meters away. A mimic lizard, curiosity drawing it right up to the edge of the light, its small eyes glittering. It grunted again, its wide, leathery, bullfrog-shaped head bobbing, and the air sac below its neck inflating and deflating with the sound. It waited for a moment, staring at him, and when he didn't respond, it crawled off into the dark.

Basia pulled elastic straps out of a toolbox and began securing the barrels to the bed of the cart. The explosive wouldn't go off just from falling on the ground. Or that was what Coop said, anyhow. Basia didn't feel like testing it.

"Baz," Lucia said. He flushed with embarrassment like a small boy caught stealing candy. Lucia knew what he was doing. He'd never been able to lie to her. But he'd hoped she would stay inside while he worked. Just her presence

made him wonder if he was doing the right thing. If it was right, why did it make him so ashamed to have Lucia see him?

“Baz,” she said again. Not insisting. Her voice sad, not angry.

“Lucy,” he said, turning around. She stood at the edge of his light, a white robe clutched around her thin frame against the chill night air. Her face was a dark blur.

“Felcia’s crying,” she said, her tone not making it an accusation. “She’s afraid for you. Come talk to your daughter.”

Basia turned away and pulled the strap tight over the barrels, hiding his face from her. “I can’t. They’re coming,” he said.

“Who? Who’s coming?”

“You know what I mean. They’re going to take everything we made here if we don’t make a stand. We need time. This is how you get time. Without the landing pad, they’ve got to use the small shuttles. So we take away the landing pad. Make them rebuild it. No one’s going to get hurt.”

“If it gets bad,” she said, “we can leave.”

“No,” Basia said, surprised to hear the violence in his voice. He turned and took a few steps, putting her face in the light. She was weeping. “No more leaving. We left Ganymede. Left Katoa and ran away and my family lived on a ship for a year while no one would give us a place to land. We’re not running again. Not *ever* running again. *They* took all the children from me they get to take.”

“I miss Katoa too,” Lucia said. “But these people didn’t kill him. It was a war.”

“It was a business decision. They made a business decision, and then they made a war, and they took my son away.” *And I let them*, he didn’t say. *I took you and Felcia and Jacek, and I left Katoa behind because I thought he was dead. And he wasn’t.* The words were too painful to speak, but Lucia heard them anyway.

“It wasn’t your fault.”

Yes, it was floated at the back of his mouth, but he swallowed.

“These people don’t have any right to Ilus,” he said, struggling to make his voice sound reasonable. “We were here first. We staked claim. We’ll get the first load of lithium out, get the money in, then we can hire lawyers back home to make a real case. If the corporations already have roots here when that happens, it won’t matter. We just need time.”

“If you do this,” Lucia said, “they’ll send you to jail. Don’t do that to us.

Don't do that to your family."

"I'm doing this *for* my family," he said softly. It was worse than yelling. He hopped up behind the controls and stomped on the accelerator. The cart lurched off with a whine. He didn't look back, couldn't look back and see Lucy.

"*For* my family," he said again.

He drove away from his house and the ramshackle town that they'd started out calling First Landing back when they'd picked the site off the *Barbapiccola's* sensor maps. No one had bothered to rename it when it had moved from being an idea to being a place. He drove toward the center of town, two rows of prefab buildings, until he hit the wide stretch of flattened dirt that served as the main road and turned toward the original landing site. The refugees who'd colonized Ilus had come down from their ship in small shuttles, so the only landing pad they'd needed was a flat stretch of ground. But the Royal Charter Energy people, the *corporate* people, who had a UN charter giving the world to them, would be coming down with heavy equipment. Heavy lift shuttles needed an actual landing pad. It had been built in the same open fields that the colony had used as their landing site.

That felt obscene to Basia. Invasive. The first landing site had significance. He'd imagined it someday being a park, with a monument at the center commemorating their arrival on this new world. Instead, RCE had built a giant and gleaming metal monstrosity right over the top of their site. Worse, they'd hired the colonists to build it, and enough of them had thought it was a good idea that they'd actually done it.

It felt like being erased from history.

Scotty and Coop were waiting for him at the new landing pad when he arrived. Scotty was sitting on the edge of the metal platform, legs dangling over the side, smoking a pipe and spitting on the ground below his feet. A small electric lamp that sat beside him colored him with an eerie green light. Coop stood a little way off, looking up at the sky with bared teeth. Coop was an old-school Belter, and the agoraphobia treatments had been harder for him than others. The thin-faced man kept staring up at the void, fighting to get used to it like a kid pulling off scabs.

Basia pulled the cart up to the edge of the pad and hopped out to undo the straps holding the barrel bombs down.

"Give me a hand?" he said. Ilus was a large planet, slightly over one gravity. Even after six months of pharma to build his muscles and bones everything still felt too heavy. The thought of lifting the barrels back to the ground made the

muscles in his shoulders twitch in anticipated exhaustion.

Scotty slid off the landing pad and dropped a meter and a half to the ground. He pushed his oily black hair out of his eyes and took another long puff on his pipe. Basia caught the pungent, skunky smell of Scotty's bathtub-grown cannabis mixed with freeze-dried tobacco leaves. Coop looked over, his eyes fighting for focus for a moment, and then the thin, cruel smile. The plan had been Coop's from the start.

"Mmm," Coop said. "Pretty."

"Don't get attached," Basia said. "They won't be around long."

Coop made a booming sound and grinned. Together they pulled the four heavy barrels off the cart and stood them in a row next to the pad. By the last one, they were all panting with effort. Basia leaned against the cart for a moment in silence while Scotty smoked off the last of his pipe and Coop set the blasting caps on the barrels. The detonators sat in the back of the cart like sleeping rattlesnakes, the red LEDs dormant for now.

In the darkness, the township sparkled. The houses they'd all built for themselves and one another glittered like stars brought down from the sky. Beyond them, there were the ruins. A long, low alien structure with two massive towers rising up above the landscape like a termite hill writ large. All of it was run through with passageways and chambers that no human had designed. In daylight, the ruins shone with the eerie colors of mother-of-pearl. In the night, they were only a deeper darkness. The mining pits were off past them, invisible as all but the dimmest glow of the work lights on the belly of the clouds. Truth was Basia didn't like the mines. The ruins were strange relics of the empty planet's past, and like anything that was uncanny without posing a threat, they faded from his awareness after the first few months. The mines carried history and expectations. He'd spent half a lifetime in tunnels of ice, and tunnels that ran through alien soil *smelled* wrong.

Coop made a sharp noise and shook his hand, cursing. Nothing blew up, so it couldn't be that bad.

"You think they'll pay us to rebuild it?" Scotty asked.

Basia cursed and spat on the ground.

"We wouldn't have to do this if it wasn't for people wanting to suck on RCE's tit," he said as he rolled the last barrel into place. "They can't land without this. All we had to do was not build it."

Scotty laughed out a cloud of smoke. "They were coming anyway. Might as well take their money. That's what people said."

“People are idiots,” Basia said.

Scotty nodded, then smacked a mimic lizard off the passenger seat of the cart with one hand and sat down. He put his feet up on the dash and took another long puff on his pipe. “We gonna have to get gone, if we blow this. That blasting powder makes serious boom.”

“Hey, mate,” Coop shouted. “We’re good. Let’s make the place, ah?”

Scotty stood and started walking toward the pad. Basia stopped him, plucked the lit pipe from between his lips, and put it on the hood of the cart.

“Explosives,” Basia said. “They explode.”

Scotty shrugged, but he also looked chagrined. Coop was already easing the first barrel down onto its side when they reached him. “It’s buena work this. Solid.”

“Thank you,” Basia said.

Coop lay down, back against the ground. Basia lay beside him. Scotty rolled the first bomb gently between them.

Basia climbed under the pad, pulling himself through the tangle of crisscrossed I-beams to each of the four barrels, turning on the remote detonators and syncing them. He heard a growing electric whine and felt a moment of irritation at Scotty for driving off with the cart before he realized the sound was of a cart arriving, not leaving.

“Hey,” Peter’s familiar voice yelled.

“Que la moog bastard doing here?” Coop muttered, wiping his hand across his forehead.

“You want me to go find out?” Scotty asked.

“Basia,” Coop said. “Go see what Peter needs. Scotty hasn’t got his back dirty yet.”

Basia shifted himself out from under the landing and made room for Scotty and the last of the four bombs. Peter’s cart was parked beside his own, and Peter stood between them, shifting from one foot to the other like he needed to piss. Basia’s back and arms ached. He wanted this all over and to be back home with Lucia and Felcia and Jacek.

“What?” Basia said.

“They’re coming,” Pete said, whispering as if there were anyone who could hear them.

“Who’s coming?”

“Everyone. The provisional governor. The corporate security team. Science and tech staff. *Everybody*. This is serious. They’re landing a whole new

government for us.”

Basia shrugged. “Old news. They been burning eighteen months. That’s why we’re out here.”

“No,” Pete said, prancing nervously and looking up at the stars. “They’re coming right now. *Edward Israel* did a braking burn half an hour ago. Got into high orbit.”

The copper taste of fear flooded Basia’s mouth. He looked up at the darkness. A billion unfamiliar stars, his same Milky Way galaxy, everyone figured, just seen from a different angle. His eyes shifted frantically, and then he caught it. The movement was subtle as the minute hand on an analog clock, but he saw it. The drop ship was dropping. The heavy shuttle was coming for the landing pad.

“I was going to get on the radio, but Coop said they monitor radio spectrum and—” Pete said, but then by Basia was already running back to the landing pad. Scotty and Coop were just pulling themselves out. Coop clapped clouds of dust off his pants and grinned.

“We got a problem,” Basia said. “Ship’s already dropped. Looks like they’re in atmosphere already.”

Coop looked up. The brightness from his flashlight threw shadows across his cheeks and into his eyes.

“Huh,” he said.

“I thought you were on this, man. I thought you were paying attention to where they were.”

Coop shrugged, neither agreeing nor denying.

“We’ve got to get the bombs back out,” Basia said. Scotty started to kneel, but Coop put a restraining hand on his shoulder.

“Why?” he asked.

“They try to land now, they could set it all off,” Basia said.

Coop’s smile was gentle. “Could,” he said. “And what if?”

Basia balled his fists. “They’re coming down *now*.”

“See that,” Coop said. “Doesn’t inspire a great sense of obligation. And however you cut it, there ain’t time to pull them.”

“Can take off the primers and caps,” Basia said, hunkering down. He played his flashlight over the pad’s superstructure.

“Maybe could, maybe couldn’t,” Coop said. “Question’s should, and it’s a limp little question.”

“Coop?” Scotty said, his voice thin and uncertain. Coop ignored him.

“Opportunity, looks like to me,” Coop said.

“There’s people on that thing,” Basia said, crawling under the pad. The nearest bomb’s electronics were flat against the dirt. He put his aching shoulder against it and pushed.

“Isn’t time, mate,” Coop called.

“Might be if you got your ass in here,” Basia shouted. The blasting cap clung to the barrel’s side like a tick. Basia tried to dig his fingers into the sealant goo and pry the cap away.

“Oh shit,” Scotty said with something too much like awe in his voice. “Baz, oh *shit!*”

The cap came loose. Basia pushed it in his pocket and started crawling toward the second bomb.

“No time,” Coop shouted. “Best we get clear, try and blow it while they can still pull up.”

In the distance, he heard one of the carts taking off. Pete, going for distance. And under that, another sound. The bass roar of braking engines. He looked at the three remaining bombs in despair and rolled out from under the pad. The shuttle was massive in the black sky, so close he could make out the individual thrusters.

He wasn’t going to make it.

“Run!” he shouted. He and Scotty and Coop sprinted back toward the cart. The roar of the shuttle rose, grew deafening. Basia reached the cart and scooped up the detonator. If he could blow it early, the shuttle could pull out, get away.

“Don’t!” Coop shouted. “We’re too close!”

Basia slammed his palm on the button.

The ground rose up, hitting him hard, the rough dirt and rocks tearing at his hands and cheek as he came to a stop, but the pain was a distant thing. Some part of him knew he might be hurt very badly, might be in shock, but that seemed distant and easy to ignore too. What struck him most was how quiet everything was. The world of sound stopped at his skull. He could hear his own breath, his heartbeat. Everything past that had the volume turned down to one.

He rolled onto his back and stared up at the star-speckled night sky. The heavy shuttle streaked overhead, half of it trailing fire, the sound of its engines no longer a bass roar but the scream of a wounded animal that he felt in his belly more than heard. The shuttle had been too close, the blast too large, some unlucky debris thrown into just the right path. No way to know. Some part of Basia knew this was very bad, but it was hard to pay much attention to it.

The shuttle disappeared from view, shrieking a death wail across the valley

that came to him as a faint high piping sound, then sudden silence. Scotty was sitting beside him on the ground, staring off in the direction the ship had gone. Basia let himself lie back down.

When the bright spots it had left in his vision faded, the stars returned. Basia watched them twinkle, and wondered which one was Sol. So far away. But with the gates, close too. He'd knocked their shuttle down. They'd have to come now. He'd left them no choice.

A sudden spasm of coughing took him. It felt like his lungs were full of fluid, and he coughed it up for several minutes. With the coughing the pain finally came, wracking him from head to foot.

With the pain came the fear.

**If you enjoyed
THE CHURN,
look out for**

ANCILLARY JUSTICE

by Ann Leckie

On a remote, icy planet, the soldier known as Breq is drawing closer to completing her quest.

Breq is both more than she seems and less than she was. Years ago, she was the Justice of Toren—a colossal starship with an artificial intelligence linking thousands of corpse soldiers in the service of the Radch, the empire that conquered the galaxy.

An act of treachery has ripped it all away, leaving her with only one fragile human body. And only one purpose—to revenge herself on Anaander Mianaai, many-bodied, near-immortal Lord of the Radch.

1

The body lay naked and facedown, a deathly gray, spatters of blood staining the snow around it. It was minus fifteen degrees Celsius and a storm had passed just hours before. The snow stretched smooth in the wan sunrise, only a few tracks leading into a nearby ice-block building. A tavern. Or what passed for a tavern in this town.

There was something itchy familiar about that outthrown arm, the line from shoulder down to hip. But it was hardly possible I knew this person. I didn't know anyone here. This was the icy back end of a cold and isolated planet, as far from Radchaai ideas of civilization as it was possible to be. I was only here, on this planet, in this town, because I had urgent business of my own. Bodies in the street were none of my concern.

Sometimes I don't know why I do the things I do. Even after all this time it's still a new thing for me not to know, not to have orders to follow from one moment to the next. So I can't explain to you why I stopped and with one foot lifted the naked shoulder so I could see the person's face.

Frozen, bruised, and bloody as she was, I knew her. Her name was Seivarden Vendaai, and a long time ago she had been one of my officers, a young lieutenant, eventually promoted to her own command, another ship. I had thought her a thousand years dead, but she was, undeniably, here. I crouched down and felt for a pulse, for the faintest stir of breath.

Still alive.

Seivarden Vendaai was no concern of mine anymore, wasn't my responsibility. And she had never been one of my favorite officers. I had obeyed her orders, of course, and she had never abused any ancillaries, never harmed any of my segments (as the occasional officer did). I had no reason to think badly of her. On the contrary, her manners were those of an educated, well-bred person of good family. Not toward me, of course—I wasn't a person, I was a piece of equipment, a part of the ship. But I had never particularly cared for her.

I rose and went into the tavern. The place was dark, the white of the ice walls long since covered over with grime or worse. The air smelled of alcohol and

vomit. A barkeep stood behind a high bench. She was a native—short and fat, pale and wide-eyed. Three patrons sprawled in seats at a dirty table. Despite the cold they wore only trousers and quilted shirts—it was spring in this hemisphere of Nilt and they were enjoying the warm spell. They pretended not to see me, though they had certainly noticed me in the street and knew what motivated my entrance. Likely one or more of them had been involved; Seivarden hadn't been out there long, or she'd have been dead.

"I'll rent a sledge," I said, "and buy a hypothermia kit."

Behind me one of the patrons chuckled and said, voice mocking, "Aren't you a tough little girl."

I turned to look at her, to study her face. She was taller than most Nilters, but fat and pale as any of them. She out-bulked me, but I was taller, and I was also considerably stronger than I looked. She didn't realize what she was playing with. She was probably male, to judge from the angular mazelike patterns quilting her shirt. I wasn't entirely certain. It wouldn't have mattered, if I had been in Radch space. Radchaai don't care much about gender, and the language they speak—my own first language—doesn't mark gender in any way. This language we were speaking now did, and I could make trouble for myself if I used the wrong forms. It didn't help that cues meant to distinguish gender changed from place to place, sometimes radically, and rarely made much sense to me.

I decided to say nothing. After a couple of seconds she suddenly found something interesting in the tabletop. I could have killed her, right there, without much effort. I found the idea attractive. But right now Seivarden was my first priority. I turned back to the barkeep.

Slouching negligently she said, as though there had been no interruption, "What kind of place you think this is?"

"The kind of place," I said, still safely in linguistic territory that needed no gender marking, "that will rent me a sledge and sell me a hypothermia kit. How much?"

"Two hundred shen." At least twice the going rate, I was sure. "For the sledge. Out back. You'll have to get it yourself. Another hundred for the kit."

"Complete," I said. "Not used."

She pulled one out from under the bench, and the seal looked undamaged. "Your buddy out there had a tab."

Maybe a lie. Maybe not. Either way the number would be pure fiction. "How much?"

“Three hundred fifty.”

I could find a way to keep avoiding referring to the barkeep’s gender. Or I could guess. It was, at worst, a fifty-fifty chance. “You’re very trusting,” I said, guessing *male*, “to let such an indigent”—I knew Seivarden was male, that one was easy—“run up such a debt.” The barkeep said nothing. “Six hundred and fifty covers all of it?”

“Yeah,” said the barkeep. “Pretty much.”

“No, all of it. We will agree now. And if anyone comes after me later demanding more, or tries to rob me, they die.”

Silence. Then the sound behind me of someone spitting. “Radchaai scum.”

“I’m not Radchaai.” Which was true. You have to be human to be Radchaai.

“*He is*,” said the barkeep, with the smallest shrug toward the door. “You don’t have the accent but you stink like Radchaai.”

“That’s the swill you serve your customers.” Hoots from the patrons behind me. I reached into a pocket, pulled out a handful of chits, and tossed them on the bench. “Keep the change.” I turned to leave.

“Your money better be good.”

“Your sledge had better be out back where you said.” And I left.

The hypothermia kit first. I rolled Seivarden over. Then I tore the seal on the kit, snapped an internal off the card, and pushed it into her bloody, half-frozen mouth. Once the indicator on the card showed green I unfolded the thin wrap, made sure of the charge, wound it around her, and switched it on. Then I went around back for the sledge.

No one was waiting for me, which was fortunate. I didn’t want to leave bodies behind just yet, I hadn’t come here to cause trouble. I towed the sledge around front, loaded Seivarden onto it, and considered taking my outer coat off and laying it on her, but in the end I decided it wouldn’t be that much of an improvement over the hypothermia wrap alone. I powered up the sledge and was off.

I rented a room at the edge of town, one of a dozen two-meter cubes of grimy, gray-green prefab plastic. No bedding, and blankets cost extra, as did heat. I paid—I had already wasted a ridiculous amount of money bringing Seivarden out of the snow.

I cleaned the blood off her as best I could, checked her pulse (still there) and temperature (rising). Once I would have known her core temperature without even thinking, her heart rate, blood oxygen, hormone levels. I would have seen any and every injury merely by wishing it. Now I was blind. Clearly she’d been

beaten—her face was swollen, her torso bruised.

The hypothermia kit came with a very basic corrective, but only one, and only suitable for first aid. Seivarden might have internal injuries or severe head trauma, and I was only capable of fixing cuts or sprains. With any luck, the cold and the bruises were all I had to deal with. But I didn't have much medical knowledge, not anymore. Any diagnosis I could make would be of the most basic sort.

I pushed another internal down her throat. Another check—her skin was no more chill than one would expect, considering, and she didn't seem clammy. Her color, given the bruises, was returning to a more normal brown. I brought in a container of snow to melt, set it in a corner where I hoped she wouldn't kick it over if she woke, and then went out, locking the door behind me.

The sun had risen higher in the sky, but the light was hardly any stronger. By now more tracks marred the even snow of last night's storm, and one or two Nilters were about. I hauled the sledge back to the tavern, parked it behind. No one accosted me, no sounds came from the dark doorway. I headed for the center of town.

People were abroad, doing business. Fat, pale children in trousers and quilted shirts kicked snow at each other, and then stopped and stared with large surprised-looking eyes when they saw me. The adults pretended I didn't exist, but their eyes turned toward me as they passed. I went into a shop, going from what passed for daylight here to dimness, into a chill just barely five degrees warmer than outside.

A dozen people stood around talking, but instant silence descended as soon as I entered. I realized that I had no expression on my face, and set my facial muscles to something pleasant and noncommittal.

"What do you want?" growled the shopkeeper.

"Surely these others are before me." Hoping as I spoke that it was a mixed-gender group, as my sentence indicated. I received only silence in response. "I would like four loaves of bread and a slab of fat. Also two hypothermia kits and two general-purpose correctives, if such a thing is available."

"I've got tens, twenties, and thirties."

"Thirties, please."

She stacked my purchases on the counter. "Three hundred seventy-five." There was a cough from someone behind me—I was being overcharged again.

I paid and left. The children were still huddled, laughing, in the street. The adults still passed me as though I weren't there. I made one more stop—

Seivarden would need clothes. Then I returned to the room.

Seivarden was still unconscious, and there were still no signs of shock as far as I could see. The snow in the container had mostly melted, and I put half of one brick-hard loaf of bread in it to soak.

A head injury and internal organ damage were the most dangerous possibilities. I broke open the two correctives I'd just bought and lifted the blanket to lay one across Seivarden's abdomen, watched it puddle and stretch and then harden into a clear shell. The other I held to the side of her face that seemed the most bruised. When that one had hardened, I took off my outer coat and lay down and slept.

Slightly more than seven and a half hours later, Seivarden stirred and I woke. "Are you awake?" I asked. The corrective I'd applied held one eye closed, and one half of her mouth, but the bruising and the swelling all over her face was much reduced. I considered for a moment what would be the right facial expression, and made it. "I found you in the snow, in front of a tavern. You looked like you needed help." She gave a faint rasp of breath but didn't turn her head toward me. "Are you hungry?" No answer, just a vacant stare. "Did you hit your head?"

"No," she said, quiet, her face relaxed and slack.

"Are you hungry?"

"No."

"When did you eat last?"

"I don't know." Her voice was calm, without inflection.

I pulled her upright and propped her against the gray-green wall, gingerly, not wanting to cause more injury, wary of her slumping over. She stayed sitting, so I slowly spooned some bread-and-water mush into her mouth, working cautiously around the corrective. "Swallow," I said, and she did. I gave her half of what was in the bowl that way and then I ate the rest myself, and brought in another pan of snow.

She watched me put another half-loaf of hard bread in the pan, but said nothing, her face still placid. "What's your name?" I asked. No answer.

She'd taken kef, I guessed. Most people will tell you that kef suppresses emotion, which it does, but that's not all it does. There was a time when I could have explained exactly what kef does, and how, but I'm not what I once was.

As far as I knew, people took kef so they could stop feeling something. Or because they believed that, emotions out of the way, supreme rationality would result, utter logic, true enlightenment. But it doesn't work that way.

Pulling Seivarden out of the snow had cost me time and money that I could ill afford, and for what? Left to her own devices she would find herself another hit or three of kef, and she would find her way into another place like that grimy tavern and get herself well and truly killed. If that was what she wanted I had no right to prevent her. But if she had wanted to die, why hadn't she done the thing cleanly, registered her intention and gone to the medic as anyone would? I didn't understand.

There was a good deal I didn't understand, and nineteen years pretending to be human hadn't taught me as much as I'd thought.

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