



Auberon (Expanse 8.50)

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Category: Science Fiction, Horror

Description: Auberon is one of the first and most important colony worlds in humanity's reach, and the new conquering faction has come to claim it. Governor Rittenaur has come to bring civilization and order to the far outpost and guarantee the wealth and power of the Empire.

But Auberon already has its own history, a complex culture, and a criminal kingpin named Erich with very different plans. In a world of deceit, violence, and corruption, the greatest danger Rittenaur faces is love.

Total Pages (Source): 20

AUBERON

The old man leaned back in his chair, ran his tongue over his teeth, then lit a fresh cigar. His left arm was a titanium and carbon-fiber prosthetic grafted deep into the bones of his shoulder, but his natural right arm was just as intimidating: scarred and pocked by decades of violence and abuse. His hair was a fluffy white fringe that cupped the back of his skull, and he wore a thin mustache like it was a joke he was in on.

“All right. So we’ll get a new governor who answers to a different boss,” he said. “It happens. Everyone’s playing by the rules, and then something rolls through and changes them all. Things get scrambled for a while until everyone figures the new rules out.”

His second went by Agnete because it wasn’t her name. She didn’t roll her eyes. She was used to the old man getting poetic, especially when he was thinking something through. The fingers of his metal arm shifted unconsciously, the wrist curling in on itself the way the real one had, back in the day.

The office wasn’t really an office at all. At the old man’s level, business could be done anywhere, and he liked the little bar on the Zilver Straat plaza with its wide-bladed ceiling fan and the smells of salt and sulfur coming off the bay. He claimed it reminded him of the kinds of holes and corners he’d grown up in, back on Earth. Some days, people came to meet him there. Occasionally, he’d go out and sit with people in other parts of the city. Someone powerful needed a loan and couldn’t get one. Someone needed a supply of agricultural chemicals or drugs, pornography or off-book sex workers, untraceable security teams or zero-day code exploits, then

sooner or later they came to the old man.

“The thing is,” he said, “you only have so long to figure out the new rules. That’s what kills you. You’ve got to look at the situation like you’re just coming into it, because you are. And sure, maybe it’s got the same street and the same people. That doesn’t mean it’s the same place. All the things you just take for granted about how it works are up for grabs again, and—”

“Permission?”

He scowled, but he nodded her on.

“Boss,” she said, “we didn’t just get a new governor. We got conquered.”

The old man grunted dismissively. He didn’t like being interrupted. Agnete nodded toward the wallscreen behind the bar. The newsfeed from Sol had the secretary-general of Earth, the speaker for the Martian parliament, and the president of the Transport Union—the most powerful people among all the scattered human billions—being humiliated and brought to heel by the new order like the burghers of some half-razed medieval town. The combined fleet was in tatters. The void cities broken or occupied. Pallas Station was reduced to pebbles and hot gas. Medina, at the heart of the gate network, taken over by the half-alien ships that had boiled out of Laconia system. The whole human orthodoxy overturned in what felt like a moment. High Consul Winston Duarte had named himself ruler of all humanity and had killed enough people to make it true. Emperor of the galaxy.

“This time is different,” she said.

The old man spat smoke and grunted again.

* * *

The gate network had opened more than thirteen hundred solar systems to humanity, almost all of them with one or two or three planets in the Goldilocks zone. Under hundreds of suns, evolution had improvised new answers to the overwhelming question, What is life? With carbon and nitrogen, hydrogen and sunlight and time, the possibilities weren't limitless, but they were mind-boggling. The DNA and asymmetric chirality of organic life on Earth and its Sol system colonies turned out to be idiosyncratic in a wide and creative universe. Even animals shaped by the same selective pressures to look similar to Terran life—the grass trees of Bara Gaon, the humpbacked pigeons of Nova Brasil, the skinfish of New Eden—only needed a glimpse under a microscope to show they were as different from their Terran counterparts as a bull from a bicycle.

A human being could eat all day and still starve to death in the great garden of Sigurtá, surrounded by bright fruits and soft vegetables, trees heavy with fat birds and rivers filled from bank to bank with things that almost passed for trout.

The forest of life was varied and exotic, and the trees there didn't get along with each other. Or most of them didn't anyway.

At first glance, Auberon system didn't seem exceptional. Three modest gas giants, none of them larger than Saturn. A single wet, life-bearing planet with a large but unexceptional moon. There were no alien artifacts the way there had been in Newhome and Corazón Sagrado. No weirdly pure ore profiles like on Ilus or Persephone. Just a scattered handful of planets, a couple of asteroid belts, and a star burning its slow way toward a billion-year-distant collapse. Among the hundreds of systems to which humanity was heir, it could have been anyplace.

But it was now the most important human system outside of Earth, Laconia, and maybe Bara Gaon Complex. Only a few decades into its settlement, and it already boasted a dozen cities, each of them in the middle of built-up rural areas like the floral disc in the center of a daisy. There were six dwarf planets with mining and

refining developments big enough to have permanent civilian populations growing around them. There was a transfer station built to accommodate the trade between it and the other, less fortunate colony worlds. It was the second most developed human settlement in the universe, and on track to keep growing for centuries. And the thing that made its first settlers the winners of history's land-rush lottery was that, apart from competing for sunlight, the biosphere of Auberon barely interacted with the plants and animals of Earth.

There was a famous image of an Earth apple tree and an Auberon-native tree, their roots intertwined as if each were acting as soil for the other. That mutual biochemical shrug made ope

n-air farming possible on Auberon. Contamination by local organisms tended not to mean more than a mild case of gas. And because it was the most habitable of the new planets by orders of magnitude, it was developed. Because it was developed, it was influential. Because it was influential, it was wealthy. And because it was wealthy, it was corrupt.

And now, it was Biryar Rittenaur's problem.

A woman's face appeared on his handheld. She had a prominent chin, long white hair in tight curls, and a high forehead... Biryar tapped his fingers against his thigh. He should know this one. A face like a spade. A spade is a garden shovel. Shovel...

"Michelle Cheval," he said. "President of the Agricultural and Food Production Workers Union."

The handheld shifted to a young man's face. Pleasant, neutral, with a mole at the side of his mouth that reminded Biryar of a cartoon rabbit. That was the image he'd built—cartoon rabbit with a basketball. He knew it was the right image, but he couldn't make the jump to why he'd chosen it.

“Damn it,” he said, and tapped the man’s profile. His name was Augustin Balecheck. He was the deputy minister in charge of planetary transportation security. Mona leaned over his chair, resting her chin on Biryar’s shoulder.

“What was this one?” she asked. He could smell the almonds on his wife’s breath and feel the shifting of her jaw against his as she chewed. It was the third year of their marriage, and he had never stopped loving the smell of her skin close to his.

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“A rabbit basketball player,” he said. “The mole was like a rabbit whisker. Balecheck like ‘ball check.’ Also traveling is a foul in basketball, and he’s planetary transportation.”

Her sigh meant she was thinking. She pointed a thin, graceful finger at Deputy Minister Balecheck’s mole. “He got that because the guy he was deep-throating had paving tar on his scrotum.”

Biryar coughed out something close to a laugh.

“That man’s cheek is a ball check,” she said, “and the paving tar will remind you of the road system.”

“Good lord. Are you always this obscene, Dr. Rittenaur? I’m not going to shake the man’s hand while I imagine him having sex.”

“If you don’t like it, erase it from your memory and go back to the cartoon rabbit thing,” she said.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to now.”

She tapped her forehead with the tip of her finger, and she grinned. “Which is my point. It works better if you commit to the process,” she said. Then she kissed his ear.

Biryar had two hundred and eighteen individuals and fifty-three organizations to commit to memory. More than any literal cartography, it was the map of the territory he was going to have to travel as the first Laconian governor of Auberon.

He hadn't been surprised when Duarte had chosen him. He'd worked for the empire since he was old enough to enter government service, excelled in his coursework, taken every initiative to rise among his peers. He had done his thesis on High Consul Duarte's early philosophical works and their relationship to examinations of grand strategy throughout human history. Auberon hadn't been a specific ambition of his, but a posting of importance to the empire had been. Medina or Bara Gaon or Sol, a position in the High Consul's cabinet or teaching at the university on Laconia would have served his hopes as well.

The reason, he knew, that he was in the cramped military cabin en route to a governor's mansion was Mona. Her small, round face and wide, dark eyes made her seem younger than she was and somehow elfin, but his wife was the best soils scientist of her generation. While he had been writing an academic love letter to the most powerful man in the empire, she had been mapping out paths to bring the thousand different biospheres into accord, to engineer everywhere what Auberon had happened onto by chance.

Before she'd taken a single step under Auberon's sun or drawn a breath of its air, Mona understood the richness of its dirt, and the potential that rested there. Her post would be at the Xi-Tamyran Agricultural Concern in the capital city of Barradan, where the governor's office would be. Their skills and backgrounds were perfectly suited for the post. He could only hope that the millions of inhabitants of Auberon saw that too.

He switched to the next image. A hard-faced woman with dark-brown eyes. He didn't need a mnemonic device for her. Suyet Klinger was the Auberon representative of the Association of Worlds, and one of the only people he would be ruling over that he'd actually met. He tapped to move to the next image but the screen shifted on its own and a scheduled request took its place. He let a breath out between his teeth and rose from his crash couch. Mona popped another almond into her mouth and watched him walk the few steps to the cabin door.

“I’ll be back,” he said. She nodded, and didn’t speak.

They were already in their braking burn, the floor of the Notus pushing up against them at almost half a g. It was a short walk to the meeting room where the head of his security, newly assigned from Medina Station and picked up on the way through the gate hub, was waiting for him. The relief Biryar felt at putting aside the memorization work was evidence that greater discipline was called for. He made a mental note to go back to it as soon as the meeting was done. Not because he wanted to, but because he didn’t. And it was his duty.

Major Overstreet was a thickly muscled man with pale skin and bright-blue eyes that left him seeming eerily corpse-like. He’d served with honor and distinction most recently under Colonel Tanaka and then Governor Singh of Medina Station. And when Medina had faced its crisis, Major Overstreet had stepped in to prevent atrocities being carried out in the name of the empire. He was a hero, and to be honored. But when Biryar sat across from him, the back of his neck itched a little and felt the shadow of the guillotine.

“Governor Rittenaur,” Overstreet said, rising to his feet and saluting. “Thank you for your time.”

“Of course, Major. Thank you for your work.” Their usual pleasantries. There was neither warmth nor animosity behind them. They were two people entirely defined by their formal relationship: fellow cogs in the machine to which they were committed. It was comfortable.

“I’ve reviewed the report from the Association of Worlds,” Overstreet said. “There are some decisions that need to be made about your accommodations, and it would be useful to me to have some guidelines about your risk tolerance.”

“What are we looking at?”

Overstreet pulled up a report and sent it to the wallscreen. The format was familiar. Biryar had been reading and interpreting security reports for years, and usually for places he'd never physically been. He took in the slopes of Barradan's hills and the curve of its roads from a scattering of lines. The compounds that had been offered to him were marked in Laconian blue. He touched the northernmost.

"This has the fewest angles of approach," Biryar said. "That's a fence?"

"Decorative fence on a half-meter wall. Easy to reinforce. But it's also the farthest from the Xi-Tamyan campus, here," Overstreet said, indicating the far side of the city. "Which means the most exposure in transit for Dr. Rittenaur."

Biryar leaned forward, considering the other options for his new home in this new light. "What about this one?"

"Open grounds—like most places in Barradan—and approachable from three directions. But we can build a wall, the structures are defensible, and it would minimize daily transit exposure."

The potential for separatist violence had been proven on Medina and in a handful of the colony worlds. The enemies of Laconia and the High Consul were out there, and some would be on Auberon. In Barradan. Some would pass him in the streets, and he might not know them.

And they would pass Mona as well.

"The one closest to Xi-Tamyan will do," he said, and as soon as he said it, he felt a rightness in the choice. "And there's no need to build any walls. Let's not establish our new administration by hiding in our shell like a turtle. Personnel and active security show more engagement and openness."

“Yes, Governor,” Overstreet said with a bland smile as he collapsed the reports.

The real protection wouldn't be walls and fences. It would be the narrative of power. The Tempest in Sol system was a massive deterrent, even though it was very far away. The Notus was smaller, but close by, and Auberon system didn't have the military power to deny it.

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“There will be a reception after we arrive,” Overstreet said. “I’m coordinating with the local authorities.”

“If you are satisfied with the security arrangements, please move forward,” Biryar said, agreeing. “I trust your judgment.”

It occurred to Biryar then that he’d just chosen the home he might spend the rest of his life in based wholly on its abstract qualities, without knowing the color of the walls or the shapes of the windows. If he had, it wouldn’t have changed anything.

The Notus was rated for atmosphere, so there was no reason to dock at the lunar station. There was a landing complex just east of the city designed to withstand the ship’s drive plume until they switched to maneuvering thrusters and settled to the ground. With the turbulence of atmospheric passage and the vibration of the drive gone, there was nothing to drown out the soft ticking of the hull plates as they cooled. Biryar let the crash couch hold him up. The gravity of his new home planet pulled him gently into its cool blue gel.

He had imagined this moment a thousand times. His arrival at his new post, and the heroic, grave impression he wanted to give to the people who were now under his control. It was important that they should see him as something near the platonic ideal of a wise governor—stern, merciful, wise. And he also wanted them to recognize his loyalty to the High Consul and Laconia, as a model for them. As an example to be followed.

Now that the occasion was actually upon him, he was mostly aware of just how badly he needed to visit the head.

He heard his cabin door open, and then the soft padding of feet on the deck. Mona smiled down at him. She had her formal dress folded over her arm, ready to be put on. It was high-waisted and high-collared with layers of lace in Laconian blue. She was dressing for this moment not in her role as soil scientist but as the spouse of a governor. Her eyes betrayed only a little of her tiredness and anxiety. To anyone who didn't know her, not even that.

“Ready?” she asked.

Are you ready to take control of a planet? Are you ready to command the lives of millions of people and forge the most valuable planet in the greater human sphere into a tool that will, in time, feed trillions of people under a thousand different suns? He told himself that the flutter he felt in his stomach was excitement. Not fear. Never dismay.

If she had been anyone else in all of humanity, he would have said Yes, I am. But it was Mona, and so his true feelings were safe.

“I don't know.”

She kissed him, and the softness of her lips and the strength of them were a comfort and a promise. He felt his body starting to react to her and stepped back. Distracted and aroused was no way to start his tenure as governor. The millimeter lift of her eyebrows meant she understood everything he hadn't said.

“I'm just going over to my cabin to change,” she said.

“That sounds wise.”

She took his hand, squeezed it. “We're going to be fine,” she said.

Less than an hour later, he walked down the gantry and stepped for the first time onto the planet. His planet.

From sunrise to sunset lasted a little over four standard hours on Auberon, with cycles of light and darkness changing only slightly with the seasons. By local convention, day was two cycles of light and one of darkness, night the reverse. Noontime on Auberon was always dark, and midnight was bright. It was midmorning, but it looked like sunset. Red clouds high above them, and huge sessile organisms like trees or massive fungi lifted red streamers as if all the world were touched by fire.

The small group that had been invited to greet him was by definition the most honored citizens of Auberon. The order in which he acknowledged them was important. The formality with which he held himself, whether he smiled or didn't when he shook their hands. Everything mattered deeply, because what High Consul Duarte was to the empire, Biryar Rittenaur was to Auberon. Beginning now.

The streets of Barradan were narrower than the broad boulevards of Laconia, with buildings that crowded the pavement. Brick the gray-green color of the local clay. The lights all glowed with the full spectrum of sunlight to say that this darkness was daytime, and would become dimmer and warmer when consensus night came. Security forces with rifles and riot gear kept his path clear as he moved through the maze of intersections. If someone had planned the city, they'd done it with the aesthetics of an earthbound ghetto. More likely, Barradan had bloomed with no intention beyond satisfying the needs of the moment.

Biryar traveled in an open car, the wind of his passage stirring his hair. Something smelled foul. Like a sewer that had failed. Mona wrinkled her nose at it too.

"Indole," she said. She saw the blankness of his response. "Technically 2,3-benzopyrrole. Just a couple carbon rings and some nitrogen. The local biome really

likes it. Nothing to worry about.”

“It smells like...”

“Shit. Yes, it does,” Mona said. “The soils team tells me we’ll get used to it in a couple days.”

“Well. Elements are elements, and there’s only so many things you can make with them, I suppose,” he said. “Some smell better than others.”

The compound was lit for noon when they pulled in. The house was shaped like a horseshoe, with pink stucco walls and polished metal sconces every few meters. Local insect analogs swarmed around the brightness. The courtyard in the center was paved in plates of carbon-silicate lace engineered to shine blue as a beetle’s carapace. Starlight seemed to swim in its depths, reflections of the galactic disk overhead. The capital city of his planet didn’t yet generate enough light pollution to drown the sky. The stars were the only things that reminded him of Laconia.

His personal staff stood at attention beside the building’s wide central doors. Laconian guards and local administrators, all in formal dress, all waiting for Major Overstreet’s inspection before they met their new master.

He was home now. For better or worse, this was his place in the universe, and might be for the rest of his career. Mona’s sigh was barely audible, and he thought there was regret in it until she spoke.

“It’s beautiful,” she said.

* * *

The reception began a few hours later. The sun was directly overhead in the second of

the day's two brightnesses, and Biryar kept reflexively thinking of it as midday. He was impressed by the heat of the sunlight and the humidity of the air. Either the sewer stench had gone down with the rising sun or he was already growing used to it.

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There were easily a hundred guests at the reception. Many of them were on the lists he'd committed to memory, but there were some others: a thin-faced woman with her hair in an elaborate plait, an older man with a thin mustache and a prosthetic arm, an agender person with a pinstriped linen suit and the studied respectability of a banker. Today was Auberon's first glimpse of what Laconian rule would mean, and the people—city, planet, and system—were driven by their uncertainty and their fear. It was Biryar's duty to project calm and strength, the implacable authority of the new regime, and its geniality and benignity to those who gave it their undivided loyalty.

He'd intended to wear a jacket, but he gave up the idea. He was happy to see that the guests had also chosen lighter shirts and soft, airy blouses. Mona's blue lace looked almost heavy by comparison, but she wore it with grace. She moved through the party as assured and confident as if they had lived in these rooms for years, not hours. She laughed easily and listened intently as she spoke to the man with the prosthetic arm. He felt the twinge of jealousy in his breast as a mixture of admiration, love, and exhaustion.

As he moved among the guests, he found himself orbiting her. Touching her arm as they passed, laying claim to her the same way he was laying claim to the world. The glitter of amusement in her eyes, invisible to anyone but him, meant she saw what he was doing, and that she forgave him his weakness. Or that she enjoyed the power she had over him. They were two ways to say the same thing.

The first sign of trouble seemed so trivial that he didn't see its significance at all at the time. They were in a side garden where the local plants pushed their ruddy way up from a lawn of grass. A fig tree from Earth had spread its limbs above a small carved-stone table. The fruit was ripe to splitting, and added a sweetness to the foul

air.

Mona was sitting across from a woman maybe twenty years older than either of them. The woman's graying hair was starting to escape an austere bun, and her cheeks were flushed from one drink too many. When he saw Mona's frown, Biryar stepped lightly over, ready to act as his wife's savior. He found he had misread the situation.

"We were so close," the older woman said. "Six more months, and we could have cracked it. I swear to fucking God."

Mona shook her head in sympathetic outrage. The older woman looked up at Biryar, a flash of annoyance at his interruption melting into embarrassment when she recognized him.

Mona took his hand. "Dear, this is Dr. Carmichael. I told you about her work on amino acid array translation."

Biryar smiled and nodded as his mind churned. Carmichael. What was array translation? He'd known this one... He found it. "Coaxing the local biology into growing something that can nourish us."

Carmichael nodded a little too strongly. A lock of her hair escaped unnoticed and fanned out behind her head as if she were on the float. When she spoke, her voice was reedy, caught in the uncertain space between anger and whining. "My funding was reallocated. They just took it away. I wouldn't pay the bribes, and so they said I was difficult to work with!"

"That sounds distressing," Biryar said, putting sympathy in his tone while keeping it out of his word choice.

"It was," Carmichael said, nodding. Tears brightened her eyes. "It was really

distressing. That's exactly the word."

Biryar nodded back, mirroring her.

"I will absolutely look into this," Mona said.

"Thank you, Dr. Rittenaur," Carmichael said,

still nodding. "We were so close. I can show you the data."

Biryar smiled down at Mona. "If that could wait until another time, there's someone I'd like you to meet, dear."

"Of course," Mona said, rising. She and Carmichael exchanged farewells, and Biryar steered her away into the house without any clear idea where he was going except out of the older woman's sight.

"It's early to be taking sides in local disputes, don't you think?" he said as they walked.

Mona looked at him. She was tired too. Overstimulated and out of her element just as much as he was. When she spoke, she snapped.

"Her work is exactly what Auberon should be focused on. If she got sidelined because she wouldn't pay a bribe—"

"Corruption is a problem here. We knew that, and we'll address it. Maybe this is an example, or maybe she just has a story that makes her feel better. Either way, please don't commit us to anything on the first day." It came out harder than he'd meant it. Worse, it came out patronizing.

Mona's smile was warm and inauthentic, intended for onlookers and not for him. She squeezed his arm gently, bowed her head, and disengaged. He felt a little stab of distress. They should have put off the reception until they were both more rested. This was the kind of fight they only had when they were tired or hungry. They'd finish it in private if they had to. He didn't think it would amount to more than that.

Still, he regretted it.

The reception carried on through the remaining two hours of daylight and into the second sunset of the day. The light grew redder, and the crowd of people began to thin. Biryar went over his mental list of people he thought it was important to acknowledge. Arran Glust-Hart, the forensic accountant with the Association of Worlds. Nayad Li, the director of planetary logistics. Devi Ortiz, the minister of education. A dozen more. As the evening drew to its close, the irrational fear of introducing himself twice to the same person started to grow. He hadn't accomplished everything he'd hoped with the reception, but he knew himself well enough to recognize the point of diminishing returns. He remembered one of the High Consul's sayings: Overdoing is also falling short. Better to have a good night end well than push for perfect and undo what had been achieved.

He'd woken on a ship under burn. He would sleep at the bottom of a gravity well. The thought was enough to make his limbs feel heavy. A glass of whiskey, maybe. A boiled egg with some pepper and salt. And sleep.

He didn't notice quite how he found himself in the little drawing room that looked out over the courtyard. It was a cozy space with a tall, thin window and chairs made of some thick, fibrous wood strung with raw silk. The floor was made with the same green-gray bricks he'd seen on the drive in. A knotwork carpet commanded the center of the room. The older man with the prosthetic arm stood at the window, looking east toward where the sky was just fading from black to charcoal with the coming of the nighttime dawn, which put the hour near ten o'clock.

Biryar was certain the man hadn't been in his briefings list. The arm—titanium fused to his living flesh—would have been hard to forget. But even without that, the face was striking. The man's skin was pale and papery without seeming frail. Only well lived-in. A line of fluffy white hair ran from ear to nape to ear, leaving a wide, smooth scalp. A thin, white mustache. He wore tight black trousers and a pale shirt with an open collar. An unlit cigar was clamped in his lips. The one-armed man turned and nodded to Biryar as if he'd been expected.

"Turd of a planet," he said. "It's home, though. I remember the first time I came down. I thought I was gonna puke, it smelled so bad." He lifted his cigar between a thumb and finger. "It's when I started with these. Just to kill off my sense of smell. But I do love it now."

"I'm looking forward to making it my home too," Biryar said. "I don't believe we've been introduced."

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“Makes me think of the Raj,” the one-armed man said, as if he hadn’t heard Biryar. “That was a weird thing, wasn’t it? Dinky-ass little Britain using maybe a hundred thousand people to keep their boots on three hundred million necks? You can have the best guns ever, and those odds still suck. No, I do not envy you. Not even a little bit.”

Biryar’s smile went slightly tighter. Something about the moment felt off. “I think your understanding of history leaves something to be desired.”

The man turned, pale eyebrows lifted. He shrugged his real shoulder. “Maybe that part. There’s other bits of history I know better. You ever hear the question ‘Silver or lead?’”

Biryar shook his head. “I don’t believe so. What’s your name? Who are you with?”

“My friends call me Erich,” the one-armed man said, grinning. His teeth were the color of old ivory. “So anyway, there was this thing way back when. They used to have these huge recreational drug companies. Totally illegal. And when someone new would come into town or get elected or whatever, the question was: silver or lead? Plata o plomo. Does the new sheriff in town take a bribe or a bullet? Hell of a slogan. It’s simple, you know? Boils everything down. You have to admire that.”

Biryar’s exhaustion fell away. His heart began to tap at his ribs, but he didn’t feel panicked. His mind was cold and sharp, and he was suddenly very present. “Are you threatening me?”

“What? Jesus, no. We’re just a couple guys talking history.” The old man took

something from his pocket. At first Biryar thought he was going to light his cigar, but instead the old man placed the little device on the windowsill with a percussive tap. He stepped back from it. A small black shape, curved along one side.

Biryar gestured to it with his chin, asking the question without speaking.

“It’s a token for the local exchange network,” the one-armed man said. “It’s tied to a private, anonymized account with about fifteen thousand new-francs in it. That’s enough to buy even someone like you a little privacy.”

“For what?”

The man spread his hands. “Whatever. I don’t judge.”

Biryar stepped carefully to the window and picked up the token. The resin looked like smoky glass. Obsidian. The old man smiled until Biryar dropped it to the floor, put his heel on it, and ground it against the brick. The one-armed man’s eyes narrowed. The facade of good humor was gone, and Biryar knew he was facing a predator.

“Are you sure about that?” the old man asked.

“Don’t make me raise my voice. This is my house. And there are a lot of armed people in the compound right now,” Biryar said.

The man smiled. “There are. And some of them are probably pretty loyal to you. Others, maybe not as much. You a gambling man?”

In the window, the night’s single, swift dawn was already breaking. Blue sky and high, scudding clouds. The two men stood still as stone for three long breaths, then the old man turned to the door and walked out. Biryar felt the shout swelling in his chest. He didn’t let it out.

He was shaking. Trembling. He picked up the token. The resin was cloudy with scratches now, but he didn't know whether he'd managed to break whatever mechanism it contained. He told himself that he would not leave the room until he could gather himself again into the man he was supposed to be. He wouldn't rush out into the reception looking panicked. But then he thought of Mona earlier in the night, listening intently to the one-armed man, and he couldn't wait any longer.

The one-armed man had vanished. Mona, sitting on a wide sofa with a gin and tonic in her hand, saw him and put her drink down. He hoped it was only the intimacy of their marriage that let her see his distress. When she came to him, he kissed her ear and whispered.

"Find our guards. The ones from the Notus, not the locals. Stay with them."

She pulled back, smiling like a mask. She spoke without moving her lips. "Are we in danger?"

"I don't know," he said. "I'll find out."

With Mona warned, he could move to offense. He summoned Major Overstreet to his private office. Sitting at the wide wo

oden table where he'd never sat before felt like being in a mousetrap.

Overstreet stepped into the room and stood at attention. The only sign of fatigue was a slight darkness in the skin under his eyes. "Sir?"

Biryar kept himself calm, or as calm as he could. When he got to the old man's threat, Overstreet became almost eerily still. When the full report was given, he put the token on the desk. Overstreet picked it up, considered it, and placed it back down. Biryar leaned forward in his chair. He hadn't said anything yet that the old man

wouldn't have known from being present when it happened. That was about to change.

“How certain are you that our conversation here is private?” Biryar asked.

Overstreet hesitated. Then, “An hour ago, I would have said I was certain, sir.”

“Now?”

“I'm less certain.”

The silence had weight. “I think it would be very unfortunate to leave the compound so soon after arriving. I will visit the Notus in the morning to finish clearing the diplomatic documents. We can have a conversation there.”

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“I will have Laconian guards stationed to assure your safety.”

“And Dr. Rittenaur’s.”

“Yes, sir. And I will begin an investigation as to who this individual was at once, and who allowed him on the property.”

“Thank you,” Biryar said. “This has to be our first priority now.”

“Agreed, sir. I’ll have a preliminary report ready before you reach the Notus. And...” Overstreet pressed his lips together and looked away.

“What’s bothering you, Major?”

“This was either an egregious failure on the part of the local forces or an outright subversion of security protocols. Either way, there will have to be consequences. Before I begin an investigation, it would be good to have some sense of how you would prefer to escalate this. Should that be needed.”

It was a measure of how much the encounter had shaken him that Biryar hadn’t considered this already. On Laconia, a breach of this magnitude would mean someone was executed at the least, and more likely sent to the Pens as a test subject. But on Laconia, a breach like this would never have happened. The first decision of his career would be whether to execute someone and very possibly alienate the planet he’d come to preside over. And the decision was complicated by what had happened with Governor Singh on Medina.

“We both understand the dangers of overreach,” Biryar said, speaking the words gently, as if they were sharp. “If the offending party is a native of Auberon, arrest them and turn them over to the local authorities. The processing of their case will need to be thoroughly and completely monitored. We will respect the laws here to the degree that we safely can. I won’t escalate until Auberon’s legal system has the chance to do this well.”

“And if the issue began with us?”

Biryar smiled. That was easier. “If a Laconian is responsible for breaking protocol and putting our administration at risk, either now or in the future, we will execute them publicly. Laconian standards are absolute.”

“Understood, sir,” Overstreet said, as if Biryar hadn’t simply restated a policy that traced back over thousands of light-years to the desk of High Consul Winston Duarte himself. Overstreet hesitated, then: “One thing, sir? Until this is addressed, I’d be more comfortable if you carried a sidearm.”

Biryar shook his head. “It will be seen as a sign of fear. I trust your security force to make it unnecessary.”

“I appreciate your confidence, but I’m asking you to do it anyway,” Overstreet said. “The man was in your house.”

Biryar sighed, then nodded his agreement. Overstreet left.

Mona was sitting on the edge of the bed when he reached her. Worry etched lines around her mouth. Probably around his as well.

“What happened?” she said. “Is there a problem?”

“The criminal element of Auberon is concerned by our arrival. As they should be,” he said. “There was a threat. We’re looking into it.”

She pulled her knees up, hugging them to her chest, and looked out toward the windows. She looked lost and small. She was right to feel that way. They were one ship full of people to command a system of millions.

Thick shutters were closed against the brightness of the too-fast sun and the heat and stench of the consensus midnight. A line of brightness showed the seam where they met. Biryar sat beside her. A dozen things came to mind that he might say to her. This is our duty or Some pushback had to be expected or We will destroy them.

He kissed her shoulder. “I won’t let anyone hurt us.”

* * *

Agnete scratched her chin to make it seem more like she was thinking and less like she was struggling to keep her temper. The old man sat at the breakfast bar. His bathrobe was a gray that could have been any other color before it faded. His fake arm was going through its diagnostic reboot, shivering and twitching. The old man did it every day even though the documentation said it was a once-a-month thing. The speed and violence of the reboot sequence made her think of insects.

When her outrage had subsided enough that she could be polite, she said, “That was a move, boss. Not sure I would have done that.”

“It was a risk,” he said, dismissively.

But whatever his tone, he wasn’t at the Zilver Straat bar. Just the fact that he’d started moving his meeting places said he was taking the situation seriously. She didn’t know whether she felt worse because of the new level of threat or better because he knew it

was a problem. Even if he wouldn't say it out loud.

They were sitting in an apartment over a noodle bar. It wasn't quite a bolt-hole, although the old man had a few of those around the city and around the planet, and probably some she didn't know about. The light of afternoon dawn slanted in the clerestory windows, tracking down the far wall quickly enough to follow it if she was patient. She wasn't.

The old man poured ouzo over ice with his real arm, the liquor going cloudy as it filled the glass.

"This new governor's going to fuck us up now, isn't he?" she asked.

The old man didn't answer at once. His fake arm was almost done with its reboot. He used it to pick up the glass, and it seemed all right. Steady. He sipped his drink. "He's going to have to try. That's his job. It's still our home pitch, though."

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“How hard is this going to be?” she asked. Her irritation was already fading, and her mind was turning toward what needed to happen next. Planning for violence. When the old man spoke, his tone was lighter than she’d expected.

“I don’t know. He’s a tight-ass, this one. I mean, it seems like these Laconians all are. Not a big surprise. You take a bunch of Martian Congressional Republic fanatics and interbreed them for a few decades, it’s not going to tend toward a greater mental flexibility. I’ve got a few ears in place. We’ll see how he reacts.”

“Electronic?”

“Nope. Just people who like gossip and drinking. They’ll do.” The old man ran a metal finger around the rim of his glass, his mouth pulled into something that was almost a smile. “This guy. He’s... hungry. I just don’t know what for yet.”

“Does it matter?”

He drank down the rest of the ouzo in a gulp. “Of course it matters. Hungry pays our bills.”

“No, I mean, why do we care what he wants or needs when we’re going to kill him? Sure, maybe he’d look the other way if we got him a lot of exotic talcum powder and a bottle of whiskey, but that’s not going to matter much when he’s dead.”

The old man shook his head slowly. “I’m not killing him. Not yet anyway. We start knocking off governors, maybe we get a little time to breathe before the next guy comes, but the next guy’s going to be even more of a shithead. Better if I figure this

guy out.”

“Permission?” Agnete said.

The old man waved his metal hand in a slow circle, inviting her to speak her mind.

“You already made the call,” she said. “He joins up by taking the bribe, or he turns it down and we kill him. He turned it down, so now we kill him. Those are the rules.”

The old man scratched at his hairy, white chest. Outside the window, a local pigeon—six compound eyes and bat wings covered with feathery cilia—landed, chittered, and flew off again. The old man smiled after it as if the interruption had broken his train of thought. When he spoke, she knew it hadn’t, and that the conversation was over.

“The rules,” he said, “are what I say they are.”

* * *

Mona Rittenaur’s office was on the top floor of the northwest corner of the Xi-Tamyran building. It was twice as large as her cabin on the Notus had been, with intelligent glass from floor to ceiling that not only adjusted the level of light as Auberon’s sun sped across its wide blue sky, but corrected the color to give the landscape below her a sense of greater constancy. She knew from her briefing that the illusion was supposed to make the transition to Auberon’s unfamiliar daily cycle easier, but after the first few days, she disabled the feature. She wanted to see the world around her as it was.

“Dr. Rittenaur?” a woman’s voice said from the doorway, and then, belatedly, a soft knock. “You wanted to see me?”

Veronica Dietz was her liaison with the workgroups. Mona had been coming to the office for a week now, and apart from being the living symbol of how anxious Xi-Tamyian Agricultural Concern was to have a solid relationship with the new Laconian government, her role in the research had been nebulous.

She was ready to define it.

“Yes,” Mona said, “I heard about some research on amino acid array translation. I’d like to see the records on that.”

“I don’t think it’s a live workgroup,” Veronica said. “We had some preliminary work a few years back, but the powers that be thought the microbiota compatibility work had more potential.”

“I understand,” Mona

said with a smile. “Just bring me what you have on array translation. It doesn’t need to be complete.”

“You got it. Anything else?”

“Not for now,” Mona said, and Veronica vanished back behind the door.

Dr. Carmichael’s tipsy, weeping voice had stuck with Mona since the reception. Biryar was focused on the incident, the threat, whatever euphemism he and Overstreet were using for it. The criminals and terrorists who saw Laconia as something that could or ought to be resisted. That they’d made a threat on the same day the Notus arrived bothered her, but she couldn’t do anything about it directly. This, she could.

The records appeared on her system a few minutes later with a tagged note from

Veronica offering to bring in some tea and one of the apple pastries from the break room. Mona thanked her in text but turned the offer down. Veronica's job required that she be solicitous and friendly, but it didn't cost Mona anything to treat her nicely.

The records of Dr. Carmichael's work were preliminary, as Mona expected. They also weren't quite as impressive as she'd been led to believe. There was good, solid work in it, though. If it had been done on Laconia, Carmichael would have had more tools for the experiments. And she might still, if Mona pushed to have her transferred back home. It tickled her a little, the prospect of swooping in and rescuing a languishing career just because she could.

The microbiota compatibility workgroup that had been funded instead was headed by a broad-faced man with brown eyes and hair as thin as mist: Dr. Grover Balakrishnan, previously from Ganymede, one of the oldest and most respected agricultural centers in Sol system. His plan was essentially harnessing evolutionary pressure to develop soils that supported both Sol and Auberon trees of life. Start a few hundred samples of mixed microbes, then part out the most successful ones. Iterate a few dozen times, and let selective pressure do the work.

It was sloppy. And, to her eyes, less likely to get replicable results than Dr. Carmichael's work. That didn't mean that there had really been a conspiracy to quash the array translation project. It might just have been a bad decision. She went back to look at the funding committee reports. It took her most of the morning and well into the midday darkness before she found the smoking gun.

Deep in the patent payment agreement that covered any products derived from the microbiota compatibility studies, a new name appeared. Only it wasn't really new at all.

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V. Dietz.

Veronica.

Mona went through all of the present workgroups, and again and again, all through the studies, it appeared. Whatever discoveries Xi-Tamyan made in their facilities on Auberon, Veronica Dietz was contractually entitled to a cut. Each one was small, but taken together, they would be enough to make her fantastically wealthy. People had been murdered for much less money than her liaison made in a month. And that was before her salary.

Mona went through again, this time looking for the justification for the payments. Some service that Veronica did for the researchers that made the payments make sense. There was nothing apart from the inescapable conclusion that if anyone was going to make anything, Veronica Dietz got a slice.

When her system chimed, she flinched. Veronica's voice came from the speaker, as friendly and casual as ever. It was only the intensity with which Mona listened that made it seem fake as a carnival mask.

"Hey, Dr. Rittenaur. I'm heading down to the commissary. Do you want me to get you anything?"

The steadiness of Mona's voice surprised her. She would have thought that something would make it tremble: surprise, fear, anger. But she only said, "No, I'm fine," and let the connection drop.

* * *

Biryar had only ever been to two executions. The first time, he had been a child, and Laconia had still been more wilderness than civilization. One of the soldiers who had come with the first fleet had been careless in his driving. Maybe even intoxicated, it was hard to remember the details now. A boy from the original scientific expedition had been struck and killed. Duarte himself had overseen the punishment, and attendance at the death had been mandatory.

Before they killed the man, Duarte had explained that discipline was critical for them all. They were a small force in a single system, with no influx of immigration to draw from. It had seemed a strange argument at the time. If people were so rare and precious, killing one seemed wasteful.

Later he understood that the preciousness was what made the sacrifice profound. The soldier had died quickly, and while it didn't undo the man's crime, it showed the members of the civilian scientific expedition that Duarte and his followers valued their lives and the lives of their children. If the driver had lived, bringing the two populations together would have been difficult or impossible.

The second time, it had been a young construction worker in the capital who used the wrong proportions when mixing concrete for the foundations of one of the buildings. No one had died, but the error, if it hadn't been found, could have led to hundreds of deaths when the structure collapsed. Duarte had held a ceremony—again mandatory—so that everyone could understand the severity of the problem and the sorrow with which the young woman was being sent to the Pens. Biryar hadn't watched her die, but he still remembered her tear-streaked face as she made her apology to the community.

Laconia had always been the few and the pure against the many and the corrupt. Like the Spartans from whom they took their name, Laconians were severe within their

group, both to forge the iron discipline that had led them to victory and to demonstrate to others the sincerity of their beliefs.

It was hard, but it was necessary.

Now the Laconians present in the courtyard stood at attention, representing the empire and its uncompromising resolve. Biryar had his place of honor at the front of the assembly.

“I apologize,” the prisoner said, “for the shame I brought on my companions. And for the wrong I have done to my commander and the High Consul.”

The sunlight hurt Biryar’s eyes, and a thin film of sweat stuck his shirt to his back. The pistol felt heavy, the holster like someone constantly tapping his hip for attention. There were more locals in attendance than he’d expected. Some were employees of the local newsfeeds, but many of them had come as sightseers and tourists drawn by the spectacle of punishment the way they would be to a sporting event.

The prisoner, an ensign assigned to logistics and supply, had given a pharmaceutical printer and two boxes of reagents from the Notus’s medical supplies to a local criminal to produce untaxed recreational drugs. The local buyer was in an Auberon-administered prison and faced two years’ confinement if she was convicted. The trial was apparently a lengthy process. The Laconian side of the theft would be dead before Biryar ate dinner.

The prisoner hung his head. A guard led him up the steps to the little platform. The prisoner knelt. Biryar’s nose had grown mostly insensible to the sewer smell of Auberon, but a particularly strong whiff of it came on the breeze. It felt like a comment. Tradition, such as it was, allowed anyone higher in the chain of command to give the order, but symbolically, Biryar knew it had to be him. The prisoner’s

commanding officer, a woman Biryar had known peripherally for almost a decade, stood on the platform with a sidearm at the ready.

Biryar stepped forward to the sound of a single, dry drum, met her gaze, and nodded. He half expected tears to glisten in her eyes, but her expression was blank. After a moment, she nodded in return, pivoted, and fired a single round into the back of the prisoner's head. The sound was weirdly flat. The drum stopped, and a medic came out to certify the death.

And it was over. Biryar turned to the cameras of the local newsfeeds, careful to present his better profile. The crowd looked shocked. That was good. State violence was meant to be shocking. It was done to prove a point, and it would have been a pity for the sacrifice not to have its effect. He paused long enough to be sure that they'd all gotten a good image of him for the feeds, then turned toward the Laconian contingent. He wanted to go back to

his office, get a cold gin and tonic, and close his eyes until his head stopped aching.

Most of the people in Laconian blue had come with him on the Notus, but Suyet Klinger, the local representative of the Association of Worlds, and her staff had also chosen clothes that echoed Biryar's uniform. Blue almost the right shade and tailored in a similar cut. Not Laconian uniforms, but something that rhymed with them. Her face, as he stepped to her, was grave.

"I'm very sorry, sir," she said. "I'm sure that was very difficult for you."

He knew what he was supposed to say. Discipline is the policy of the High Consul. It should have been easy, but the words that came to his mind were Why are you sure?

Klinger knew nothing about him but what she'd been told by Laconia. She would have been just as solicitous to anyone who had come in his position. And if someone

else had been in her role, he would have treated them the same way he did her. They weren't people to each other. They were roles. This was etiquette, and the inauthenticity of the situation oppressed him.

He nodded to her. "Discipline is the policy of the High Consul," he said, and she averted her gaze in respect. The forms were there to be followed.

He moved through the grim crowd, acknowledging each of them and being acknowledged. Form. It was all just keeping form. The shadows shifted around them as the sun raced for the horizon and left him feeling like he'd been there for hours, but there were more nods to exchange, more words to mouth. The dead man was hauled away to the recyclers, and the medics retreated.

It was strange and in a way unfair that the local thief would live and might even go free. Being Laconian meant being held to a higher standard, and so transgression against that standard required a higher response, but it still bothered him. Or at least it did for the moment. If he could get some rest and a decent meal, it might not. The faces in the group began to blend together, one following another following another until he didn't know or care who he was speaking to.

He came to a man he hadn't met in person before, with brown hair, a serious expression, and a mole on his cheek like a dot of paving tar. Biryar almost pulled away, shocked by the sudden visceral image of how the fleck of tar had gotten there, and then felt amused and even strangely pleased.

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“Deputy Balecheck,” Biryar said. “Good to finally meet you.”

Balecheck’s eyes widened a fraction. The surprise at being recognized melted quickly into a smile as they shook hands, and then Biryar moved on. From the other man’s point of view, it had been a gratifying moment that showed his importance to the new governor. Functionally, it was an example of building the kind of good relations with the local authority that would cement Laconian rule on Auberon. It was also a smutty joke with his wife, but that was a fact Biryar would keep entirely private. At least until he was alone with Mona.

It works better when you commit to the process, she’d said. He had to commit to the process of governing Auberon, even the parts that he found difficult. Especially to those parts.

A car waited for him at the edge of the courtyard, ready to take him back to his offices. When he ducked into it, Major Overstreet followed and sat across from him. His pale, bald face shone with sweat.

“How are you doing, sir?”

“Fine,” Biryar said. “A bit of a headache.”

“The stutter,” Overstreet said.

“The what?”

The car pulled away, and cool air, as fresh as if it came from the Notus’s recyclers,

touched his face and filled his nose. He noticed the absence of Auberon's stench and dreaded the end of the ride when he'd step back into it. It made more sense to keep exposing himself to the foul air. Breaks from it like this could only prolong his acclimation.

"They call it the stutter, sir. It's common among new arrivals. The four-hour cycles don't sync well with normal circadian cues. Irritability, headache. Some people get vertigo after about a month that clears in a few days. It's just our brains learning the new environment."

"Good to know," Biryar said. "Is it bothering you?"

"Yes, sir, it is," Overstreet said. "I'm looking forward to it being over."

The growing twilight in the streets was the real one. The end of the day and the beginning of evening. If he did it right, Biryar hoped to be asleep before the nighttime dawn. If he could just sleep through and give his body the impression of a full twelve hours of darkness... The longing for rest surprised him. Maybe he was more tired than he knew.

"What progress have you made on that other investigation?" Biryar asked.

"The man with the metal arm," Overstreet said, making the words like the heading on a report. Neither a question nor a statement, but a tag that identified the content to follow. "He is a known figure in the local criminal demimonde. He goes by several names, but he has no entry in the law enforcement systems. He has no accounts on the exchanges, though given the token he tried to bribe you with, it's safe to assume he has significant access to untraceable funds."

"Where did he come from?"

“There aren’t any records of his arrival in the databases.”

“So he grew out of the dirt?” Biryar said, more sharply than he’d meant to.

Overstreet shrugged. “I’m moving forward with the assumption that the local databases are at least inaccurate and more likely suffering ongoing compromises.”

Biryar leaned back in the seat. A group of young men were playing football in the street, and the security detail was yelling at them to move off and let the cars through. Biryar watched them. Long-limbed, lanky young men. Maybe Belters. Maybe just adolescents. Any of them could be a separatist terrorist. All of them could be. For a moment, it felt like madness to be on the planetary surface at all. There was no safety here. There couldn’t be.

“He’s not a criminal mastermind,” Overstreet said as the car started forward again. “He’s just got a head start. We will track him down.”

“Don’t turn this one over to the local police. He should be our guest until we can fully understand how he got past our security arrangements.”

“I understand,” Overstreet said. “No formal arrest, then?”

“Once he’s helped with our security review, we can revisit the issue,” Biryar said. And then, a moment later, “He was talking with my wife.”

“Yes, sir. I understand.”

The compound was well guarded now. Laconian marines in powered armor stood like sentries at the approaches and on the roofs. He lost something by having them there. Duarte’s rule through him should have been inevitable and confident. A standing guard made him seem concerned, and concern made him look weak, but he couldn’t

bring himself to dismiss them or release them to other duty.

As he stepped into the private rooms, he unbuttoned his collar. In the time since they'd arrived, Biryar had made some changes to the governor's compound. He hadn't brought many things from their old home on Laconia, but what there was had pride of place. The picture of Mona receiving her Laconian distinguished service award, framed on the front wall where the light caught it. The clay sculpture she'd given him as a wedding gift. A calligraphic print of one of High Consul Duarte's sayings—Effort in Discipline. Effortless in Virtue—in gold leaf.

Everything else in the rooms was foreign. The fluted wall sconces with different spectrums of light for daytime darkness and night. The grain of the false wood paneling, made from the treelike organisms of Auberón to mimic the trees of Earth. Neither one was his home. It felt like the room itself was telling him that he didn't belong. Like it was pushing him away. He was sure that, with time, the sensation would pass.

He stretched. The knot between his shoulders appeared to be there permanently now, like the grit in his eyelids. The door behind him opened with a click, and Mona's footsteps—as familiar and unmistakable as her voice—followed. He looked over at her, and his heart sank to his gut.

“What's wrong?” he asked.

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She dropped into a cushioned chair and shook her head. A small, tight, unconscious gesture he'd seen before. Anger, then. Well, better that than fear. He went to sit near her, but didn't touch her. Her rage didn't respond well to physical comfort.

"This place is rotten," she said. "Xi-Tamyan has a scam going on in it that has profoundly compromised its research priorities for years. Years. Maybe since they came here."

"Tell me," Biryar said.

She did. Not only the way her liaison had added herself to the patent agreements, but that she was married to the union comptroller, that she had gotten the placement in Mona's office over several other more qualified applicants, that her reported income didn't remotely match the payments made to her. With every sentence, Mona's voice grew harder, the outrage rising the more she thought about it. Biryar listened, leaning forward with his hands clasped and his gaze on her. Every new detail felt like a weight on his chest. Corruption layered on corruption layered on corruption until it seemed like there was more disease than health.

"And," Mona said, reaching her crescendo, "either management and the union didn't know, in which case they're incompetent, or they did, and they're complicit."

Biryar lowered his head, letting it all settle. Mona's gaze was fixed on nothing, her head shaking a fraction of a centimeter back and forth, like she was scolding someone in her imagination. She probably was.

There was a soft knock at the door. One of the housekeepers hoping to sweep or

change their bedding. Biryar told them to come back later and got a muttered apology in return. Mona hadn't even noticed. He risked taking her hand.

"That is disappointing," he said.

"We have to fix it," she said. "This can't be permitted. This scam has cost years. Veronica has to be arrested and removed. The union has to be investigated and purged. I don't know how deep this goes."

"I will bring this to the attention of the local magistrates," Biryar said. "W

e'll address it."

"Magistrates? No, we need to go now and arrest her. Ourselves. She's undermining the most important colony world that there is. You're the governor."

"I understand that. I do. But if what she's done is illegal under Auberon's law, then it's a matter for the local courts. If I step in, I have to step very carefully."

Mona drew back her hand. The weight in Biryar's gut grew heavier, the knot in his back ached. He pressed his lips thin, and went on.

"I am building on fear and hope," he said. "Fear of the Tempest and the Typhoon, and hope that they won't come. Our best path is to be seen as all-powerful but benevolent. Even indulgent. When we have a larger fleet, more experience, loyalty among the local police and military forces? Then we can enforce our ways here. We're still in our first days. I have to be careful not to overreach."

Disappointment changed the shape of Mona's eyes. It softened her mouth. He felt the apology at the back of his throat, but it would have sounded like he was sorry for not giving her what she wanted, and he would mean he was sorry that the situation was

what it was.

“If the payments to her don’t really go to her...” Mona said. “What if her income report is accurate? She could be part of a crime syndicate. That man who was here? With the arm? She could be working for him.”

“And I will have our people look into that. If she is, we’ll take action.”

“We should be taking action anyway,” Mona said. “I’m Laconia’s eyes on the most significant agricultural research that there is. You’re the governor of the planet. If we aren’t doing something, why are we here?”

“Please lower your voice.”

“Don’t patronize me, Biryar. It’s a real question.”

“We’re staying alive, Mona,” he snapped. “We are picking our fights, we’re identifying the most immediate threats and addressing them, and we are doing everything possible to give the impression that we could bring overwhelming power to bear and merely choose not to.”

“Because that isn’t true,” Mona said.

“It will be. Given time to establish ourselves, we can dominate any system, but we can’t dominate all of them at once. So this is how we govern. We are present, we exert influence, we exercise power when we have to, and we graciously allow self-rule until another option exists for us.”

“Self-rule?” Mona said, and her voice could cut skin. “Duarte sent us here so we could see the situation firsthand. And react to it. How is the two of us doing nothing self-rule?”

“Self-rule for them,” Biryar said. “Not for us.”

* * *

The old man sat on a metal barstool at the edge of the warehouse. Dust floated in the beam of light from holes near the roofline where ratdoves—which were neither rats nor doves—had chewed their way through to shelter. Agnete stood beside him, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, a pistol in her hand. The old man was watching and rewatching video from the official government newsfeed. The poor asshole kneeling on the platform, mouthing some words, then the governor nodding like an old Roman emperor giving the thumbs-down, and the executioner putting a bullet through the prisoner’s skull. Every time the gun fired, the old man laughed. It wasn’t mirth. It was derision.

“This man,” the old man said, tapping the frozen image of Governor Rittenaur, “is fucking hilarious.”

“He just killed one of his own men to make a point,” Agnete said.

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“Right? You know who does that shit? Theater majors,” he said. Then, seeing her expression, he put the hand terminal in his pocket. “It’s easy to execute your own. Someone that follows your orders, they’re easy to kill. This ‘We hold ourselves to an exacting standard’ thing? I’ve seen it before. It’s showy, because who does that shit? But it’s easy.”

“I don’t know, boss. It made an impression,” she said. In the distance, the whine of an electric motor and the clash of the steel fence rolling open. The old man heard it and rose from his stool.

“Well, it shouldn’t have,” he said, walking toward the loading dock. “We’re sure they were fighting? Him and his wife?”

Agnete shrugged. She didn’t like the way the boss thought about two things at once. It made her feel like he wasn’t concentrating on the business at hand.

“They were yelling at each other,” she said. “Your friend in housekeeping couldn’t make out all of what they were saying.”

“Interesting. Our guy didn’t want money, so maybe he’s not greedy. But if he and the sweetheart aren’t getting along, maybe there’s an itch we can scratch there.”

“Honeypot?”

“There’s a reason the classics are classic.”

“I’m on it,” Agnete said. “But after we’re done here.”

The loading dock door hummed for a second, warming up, then clattered as it rose. Dust and translucent scales came down into the light. The truck was old and rusting. The logo of a grain hauling company that had gone bankrupt four years earlier still peeled on its side. The back of the truck opened and four men came out. All of them carried guns.

The old man sniffed, cleared his throat, sneezed.

“Bless you,” one of the four men said. The leader.

“Thanks,” the old man said. The new men waited, motionless. Agnete tightened her grip on the gun, but didn’t raise it. For a long breath, no one moved.

“If this is the delivery,” the old man said, “maybe you could deliver it. If it’s something else...”

Bless You shook his head. “It’s the delivery, but the price has gone up.”

“Disappointing,” the old man said, but amiably. “How much?”

“Doubled.”

“Nope,” the old man said. “Too greedy. Try again.”

Bless You raised his gun and the old man’s titanium arm moved too quickly for the eye to follow. The deafening report of the gunshot almost drowned out the metallic sound of the bullet impact. The thugs were quiet, as if they’d been stunned by their own violence.

“Boss?” Agnete said.

The old man had his real hand pressed to his chest, pain in his features. His false arm reached out before him and opened its closed fist. The bullet dropped to the warehouse floor with a sharp tick.

“You boys,” the old man said, enunciating each word clearly, “just fucked all the way up.”

“Hey, Erich,” Bless You started to say, fear in his voice. An apology? Whatever it was, he never got to finish.

High in the rafters, the turret emplacement had heard the old man give the go phrase. The warehouse went bright with the stutter of its muzzle flash. The four men fell together. The staccato roar of the gun echoed through the warehouse space and then faded, leaving only a high-pitched whine in Agnete’s ears.

“You all right?” she asked. Her voice sounded faint and distant. She opened and closed her jaw a few times to make the ringing in her head go away.

“Yeah, yeah,” the old man said. “I just hate it when the arm does that. Feels like the fucking thing’s about to rip loose every time.”

“One of these days, it will.” She walked to where the men were writhing in the guano and dust on the warehouse floor. Fléchette rounds had ripped bright red holes in their skin. The electrical smell of the shock rounds mixed with charred skin like roasting pig.

This was how the old man worked. Everyone had been looking at Agnete and her pistol, thinking she was the muscle. It had made them overconfident.

“You see,” the old man said, not to the fallen thug but to Agnete, “this is the difference. A buy goes bad, and I need to send a message that that’s not okay. I could

go the Laconian way, right? Kill you and send these fuckers home. Would that make any sense?"

"I guess not," she said.

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“Grandstanding,” the old man said, his false hand wrapping fingers around Bless You’s throat. “It’s immature, is what it is.”

Bless You tried to say something. Before he could, the old man used him to send a message.

* * *

Self-rule for them. Not for us.

Mona knew enough about psychology to put her feelings in context. As Veronica sat across the table from Mona, shifting the display between the reports, breaking down the datasets into digestible summaries and giving an overview of where the labs stood with the active experiments, Mona knew intellectually that the woman’s voice wasn’t really all that grating. Veronica’s habit of interrupting herself and never quite getting back to the first sentence wasn’t all that rare a quirk. Her haircut didn’t really make her look like she was wearing a “respectable administrator” costume. Those were all artifacts of Mona’s own state of mind.

The knowledge didn’t help.

“We’re expecting to see some data from the photosynthesis study at North Field by the end of the week,” Veronica said. “The preliminary report is, as you can tell, looking pretty good.”

She had to know, Mona thought. There was no way that the tension and antipathy

were going under Veronica's radar. The smile was just the same as it had always been, the solicitous manner, the ready facts and reports. The woman had to know that Mona loathed her, but there was no sign of it. So either Mona was very good at hiding her emotions or Veronica was.

"What about the microbiota compatibility studies?" Mona asked.

Veronica shook her head as she spoke. "Those aren't in North Field. Balakrishnan's workgroup is all in the old facility. I mean, nothing's really old around here, right? We've only been on the planet for a couple decades."

You're changing the subject, Mona thought. Making Veronica Dietz uncomfortable was one of the few real pleasures in her day.

"When do we expect results from Balakrishnan's study?" she asked.

"I think the next assay starts in about a month, but I'm not a hundred percent on that," Veronica said. "I can check if you want."

And tell me whatever is most convenient for you, Mona thought. If Balakrishnan's results needed to be a failure to keep Veronica's skimming unnoticed, Mona had no doubt that the study would mysteriously fail. Just the way Dr. Carmichael's array translation study had become less promising when this woman—this snake, this parasite—didn't get a piece of it.

"Take a look for me," Mona said, standing up. "We can go over it in... five?"

"All right," Veronica said, as if the request were perfectly reasonable. Prepare a report in the time it takes to brew a cup of tea. Mona waited as Veronica walked out—she wouldn't leave the woman in her office alone—and then locked the office door behind her and headed right along the pale-green hall and then right again into

the commissary.

She poured herself a cup of green tea and picked up a sugar cookie from the dessert table before sitting down alone at a table by the window. Tall white clouds rose on the horizon, glowing gold and red in the sunlight. She scowled at them. Someone had cracked the window open, and the breeze actually smelled fresh. She'd become so desensitized to the local environment that the fecal smell of the planet's biology didn't even register to her anymore.

The situation with Veronica was becoming a problem, and not just because Veronica was a problem. Mona was meant to be reporting back to Laconia. There was a whole team of soil researchers and agricultural biologists waiting for her to share the insights of Xi-Tamyan and Auberon. There had even been queries from Dr. Cortázar, which was one step short of attention from Winston Duarte himself. She should have had a preliminary report ready to go, outlining the state of play not only for research here but across the colony worlds that Auberon partnered with. Instead, she had notes on a criminal conspiracy, and a solemn injunction from Biryar that she should leave any action to the same regulatory bodies that had let it happen in the first place. The frustration was a restless energy in her spine. It was keeping her from focusing on her work. She had to get past it.

She couldn't get past it.

She kept remembering Dr. Carmichael at the reception her first night on Auberon. Her own excitement she'd felt when she heard about the array translation, the possibilities that a comprehensive mapping plan would give, not just here but across all the colony systems. And the disbelief that anyone would intentionally undermine something with so much potential. It had been so recent, and yet that past version of herself already seemed so naive. Auberon was changing her, and she wasn't sure she liked what it was changing her into.

She finished her cookie in a bite, gulped down the last of her tea, and headed back to her office. Not that she wanted to be there. Just that the commissary was annoying her now too. Or rather that she was still annoyed, and nothing she'd found gave her any respite.

Veronica hadn't returned with the report. Mona sat at her desk, looking sourly out her window. Same world, different view. Barradan spread out to her right: streets and houses and domes. The local wilderness was on her left, exotic and untamed and almost unimaginable in its diversity and richness and strangeness. This should have been everything she'd hoped for. All the pieces were there.

Self-rule for them, her husband said in her memory. Not for us. But...

Something shifted in the back of her mind. The thought came to her fully formed, like she had already planned everything and had only been waiting for the right moment to be conscious of it.

Point one: Either the administration of Xi-Tamyan was aware of Veronica's scheme or their eyes were so thoroughly off the ball that it had been permitted by default. Two: as the spouse of the governor, she was more valuable to Xi-Tamyan than Veronica Dietz would ever be. Three: What was good for the goose might very well be quite excellent for the gander.

She turned to her desk, a frown etching itself into her forehead almost hard enough to ache. She pulled up the financial records and tried to reallocate funds, just to make sure she couldn't. That was fine. Her breathing was shallow and fast, but when she made the connection request, her voice sounded calm.

"Dr. Rittenaur?" an older man said from the screen. He had thin, gray hair and a little beard that didn't disguise his double chin. "How can I help you?"

“I’m having trouble with accounting. I need to allocate funds for a Laconian state project, but it gives me an error code.”

The man with the double chin looked chagrined. “I’m not... I’m not sure that...”

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“It should be under Special Projects with the code for the Laconian science directorate? What would that be?”

“I don’t think we have a code set up for that, ma’am.”

“We’ll have to find something temporary, then. There is something for cooperative governmental programs, isn’t there? We can use that for now.”

“I... um... I guess you could,” the man said.

“Not perfect, but...” She shrugged and laughed. “If you clear the access problem, I’ll take care of it that way.”

She smiled patiently. She’d done nothing wrong. Not yet. If he pushed back, everything could be explained away. But she was the face of Laconia at Xi-Tamyran. And Laconia had just destroyed the largest navy in history and conquered the human race. She let the silence stretch. The man’s face flushed a shade darker as he decided whether he was going to tell her she couldn’t.

He tapped something into his console. “There you go, ma’am,” he said. “It gives you any more trouble, just let me know.”

Mona’s smile widened by just a few millimeters. “Thank you,” she said, and dropped the connection.

After that it was easy. She copied Dr. Carmichael’s old funding structure and put it in a new branch under joint governmental projects, updated the contact information so

that any issues or questions routed directly to her. She was expecting the funding level to refer back to some pool of money, but it was just a text field. She could put in any value she liked, and the money was summoned from nothing. She put in the value that Veronica's unspecified powers that be had refused. Then she doubled it, and closed the file.

Just like that, she'd funded the project that should have been going for months. She'd wait for a few days. Make sure that no red flags came up, and then she'd tell Dr. Carmichael to start renting lab space and equipment.

She sat back in her chair, folded her hands, and let out a long, satisfied sigh. There was a warmth in her chest, spreading slowly out toward her limbs like she'd just had a shot of gin. Her back relaxed, her heart felt like she was dropping from orbit for the first time. Pleasure and risk. On impulse, she kicked her shoes off and ran her bare feet through the office carpet, feeling the texture of it against her skin.

The soft knock came, and Veronica stepped in. "Sorry that took a little longer than I'd thought. Interruptions all the time. You know how it is."

"Yes, I do," Mona said.

* * *

Biryar didn't know what changed in Mona, only that something had, and he was glad of it. He saw it in small things. She slept more deeply now, and woke without being prodded. She ate better, and explored more of the local foods—fish and onion and a spicy red sauce the locals called sarkansmirch. He'd sampled it himself, but found a metallic aftertaste he didn't care for. She was laughing more than she had, and there was an ease in the way she held herself.

Her work with Xi-Tamyan might have been part of it. She had started sending reports

out to the researchers on Laconia, and the responses from home had been positive and encouraging. She'd begun negotiations for Laconia to get full datasets directly from the company and integrate some of its high-level researchers into the staff on Laconia proper. It was part of Duarte's long-term plan that coming to the capitol should be a reward. A mark of favor. The soft power of culture and status would do more to stabilize Laconia's central position in the grand human project than any number of warships. It was good that Mona's position let her advance that.

Biryar's own job wasn't going quite as smoothly.

He hadn't found the trick yet of sleeping through the Auberon nights. Most nights, he woke as the midnight sun fell, lying awake in their bed for half of the dark hours until morning. He'd considered talking to the physician about it. If it continued, he might. The local food also unsettled him, and he found himself eating the same diet he had on the Notus: mushroom curries

and yeast-based cheeses. Even those didn't quite taste the way they should. He might not register the stink of the planet as often these days, but it had affected his senses all the same. And the pervasive sensation of unease, as vague as it was profound, wasn't helped by Overstreet's security briefings.

In the weeks since Laconia had officially taken over governance of the system, Overstreet had uncovered a dozen examples of embezzlement, theft, extortion, and financial misconduct just in the mechanisms of government that Biryar had inherited from the former head of state. Only two had involved Laconians. One had been the execution in the square, the other had killed himself when Overstreet's military police had come to arrest him. Everyone else had been turned over to local authorities, but Overstreet suspected that the judicial system was as flawed as the executive government. As the security audit broadened to the major businesses—the Transport Union, Xi-Tamyar, Oesterling Biotics, and half a dozen more—Biryar expected more rot to come to light.

The only good news Overstreet had to offer was the disappearance of the one-armed man. He hadn't appeared in any monitored public spaces. He hadn't shown up in any financial scans. If it hadn't been for the footage from the reception, he might only have been an unpleasant dream. Overstreet's analysis was that a local criminal had tried to come on strong, overplayed his hand, and fled when he understood the magnitude of his miscalculation.

The reports coming in from other systems showed that the separatists were still very much at work. The governor of Nova Catalunya, a man Biryar had trained with, had died in a shuttle accident that was being investigated for sabotage. Governor Song, on Medina Station, found another discrepancy in the station map that hid a service corridor, abandoned now, that the terrorists had used as they planned their missions. Drive plumes had been sighted in half a dozen systems that couldn't be tracked back to known ships.

The ghosts of unrest were everywhere. The separatists couldn't stand in an open battle with Laconia, but they could resist in small ways, and those small ways could have body counts too. He didn't bring his worries to Mona. Better that one of them should sleep well. If it felt a little strange not to tell her everything, at least the cause was noble. He still felt the urge now and then to unburden himself to her. He didn't have anyone else.

Instead, he tried to keep his attention on his own duties: playing kingmaker in local politics until Laconia was so established and unquestionable that he could play king. He found himself crafting the role of Governor Rittenaur as if he were acting a part in a play. He had come to notice when his own impulses were different from what Governor Rittenaur's would be, and then bury his own judgment to give space to the requirement of his office. He was a professional impersonator of himself. It required, among other things, a close relationship with the local newsfeeds.

"I understand that the Notus is slated to leave Auberon," Lara Kasten said. She was a

host for one of the popular public newsfeeds. Not a reporter, but a warm, approachable interviewer whose greatest strength was the intensity with which she could listen.

“It’s already burning for the ring gate,” he said. “It will still be weeks before it leaves the system, but yes. It’s on its way.”

“That’s got to feel a little odd.”

His office, decorated in the local style, had casual chairs set beside a window that looked out over a garden of Earth plants. This was the fifth interview he’d granted her. It was important that the local population know him. Normalize his presence. Lara’s approach to their conversations suited his needs.

“Not really,” Biryar said, looking out at the red sunset of late morning. Clouds on the eastern horizon already turning from gold to gray. “The Notus is a valuable resource, and needed elsewhere. We have a great deal of work to do here, but Auberon doesn’t need a warship. We’re a very safe system. The situation is quite stable, and with the loyalty and cooperation of the authorities, I expect it will stay that way.”

Lara smiled and leaned forward to pick up a glass of iced tea. She took it with sugar. He knew that from the last time they’d talked. Previously, she’d worn a high-collared white blouse, but today she had one in Laconian blue with a scoop. Instead of returning the glass to the side table, she leaned forward and put it by her feet. He was careful not to notice the tops of her breasts as she did it.

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“But it was your way home, wasn’t it?” she said. “Even if you never intended to use it. You spent your whole life on Laconia?”

“I did. But Auberon is my home now.”

“What’s that like for you?” she asked, and he thought there was a real curiosity in the question. He saw himself for a moment through her eyes. The proverbial stranger in a strange land, given power and responsibility and asked to be strong for his nation and the people over whom he ruled.

“I’m happy to be here. I am. Auberon is a beautiful planet and an important part of the empire.”

He nodded to himself, silently approving his own answer. That was the right thing to say, and the right way to say it. Turn the question back to the system itself. Not him, but them. Good that when the locals look at him, they see themselves reflected.

He waited for the next question, but Lara was quiet. The sky darkened, and the first stars came out. The little moon, halfway to full, glimmered. She tilted her head, the straight, honey-colored hair hiding one eye, an impish smile on her lips. Biryar felt himself smiling back, and he chuckled when he spoke.

“What?”

“You’re happy to be here? That’s all? You’re the most important man in this system. There are literally millions of people looking up to you. You’re on a planet you didn’t set foot on until it belonged to you. It must be... hard? Intoxicating? What is it like

for you, Biryar?”

He shook his head. The breeze from the window was warm against his cheek. Lara’s eyes were locked on his. He found that he wanted to tell her. He wanted to spread out all the ways that being Governor Rittenaur of Auberon system was different from what he’d expected, even after his training. The displacement of being so far from everything he’d known, the unease of knowing that there were people who hated him, not for himself but what he stood for.

That wasn’t what his duty required of him.

“I can’t imagine anyone’s terribly interested in that,” he said, and his voice sounded almost melancholy in his ears. That was odd. He recentered himself and said, “I am really very happy to be here.”

Lara’s smile faded. The last red light of sunset caught the curve of her throat, and Biryar felt the impulse to turn the office lights on. He also felt the impulse to leave them off. He didn’t move. Her expression wasn’t impish now. He remembered the time in their third interview when she’d told him about her brother’s death, how sorrowful she’d been. How strong in her grief. Of all the people on this stinking world, he felt closer to Lara than to anyone that hadn’t come on the Notus with him. She knew him.

She leaned forward again, this time reaching not for her drink but her handheld. She held it up for him to see. The recording marked second after silent second. She turned it off and set it back down.

“What is this like for you?” she said.

He was silent for a moment, uncertain whether he was going to answer. However much he wanted to.

“It’s...” Biryar was surprised to find a thickness in his throat. “It’s difficult. Sometimes.”

She nodded, acknowledgment and encouragement in the same single motion. Biryar leaned toward her, his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped.

“I am trained for my duties as thoroughly as anyone could be. But knowing something intellectually or from simulations... it isn’t the same.”

“You feel alone,” Lara said.

“I do, in a way,” Biryar said. “This is off the record, of course.”

Her smile was in shadows now, but he could make it out. “Just between us,” she said, and traced an X over her chest. “Cross my heart.”

He felt something shift,

deep in his gut. Like a relaxation of a fist held clenched so long that the letting go ached. He drew in a breath, held it, and as he exhaled, he sank. “It’s overwhelming. Not always, but sometimes. I feel like a splinter, and Auberon is festering around me. Isolating me. Trying to push me out.”

Her voice was soft, but not pitying. He couldn’t have stood it if she pitied him. “That’s terrible, Biryar.”

“It is. And I don’t know what to do about it.”

For a moment, the only sounds were the ticking of the walls as they cooled in the darkness and the murmur of midday traffic in the distant streets. Lara shifted, and he found himself very aware of her presence. Her physicality and solidity. Her hand

touched his, and it felt like a rope to a drowning man. She moved close to him, and he had the weird impression that she was reaching for the pistol at his side, that she was going to take it from him to make some demonstration of a larger point. It was only when her lips touched his that his mind exploded in cold alarm.

He stood up, backing away in the darkness of the room. "I'm sorry. No, no. I'm very sorry. I didn't... This is not..."

He found his desk, pulled up his controls, and turned on the lights. The office flooded with the bright blue-yellow of the daytime. Lara knelt in the space between their chairs, looking up at him in surprise. Biryar wiped his hands on the sides of his jacket. His tongue felt like it wasn't responding the way it should. Like he was having a stroke.

"This is..." He shook his head. "We should... we should finish the interview. This was very nice. I'm glad to have your friendship. Yes. We should finish the interview."

He pressed his lips shut to make himself stop talking. He sounded like an idiot. Lara rose to her feet. She wasn't blushing as much as he was.

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“Biryar, I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s just—”

“No. It’s fine. Everything is fine. There won’t be any repercussions.”

Lara eased herself back into her chair, plucked her blouse straight. Biryar stepped closer, but didn’t take his seat. His blood was still electric. What if someone had seen them? What was he going to say to Mona, because he had to tell Mona. It would be a betrayal not to. He swallowed.

“I didn’t mean to spook you,” Lara said.

“I’m not spooked,” he said. He meant to follow it up with I’m married, but what came out was different. “I’m Laconian.”

Lara quirked a smile, and he thought there was regret in it. She took her handheld, her finger hovering just above the button to start the recording again. Her eyes were asking if he was certain, but he was himself again. Or no. He was Governor Rittenaur. That was better. She tapped the button, and the seconds began counting up again. Biryar put his hands on the back of his chair, pressing into it like it was a podium. He thought back to where the conversation had been.

“I’m really very happy to be here,” he said. “Auberon is a fascinating planet with a great future before it. I hope that my service here will help it come into its rightful place as one of humanity’s great centers of science and culture. And I know the High Consul has the same ambitions for it.”

He nodded sharply, more to himself than to her. That was the right answer. That was

what he was supposed to say. Who he was supposed to be.

Lara tilted her head. “Do you want to sit down?”

* * *

The yacht was a small one, and the old man didn’t like it much. In all the time Agnete had been with him, he had only used it three or four times that she knew of. He’d grown up in a coastal city, but she didn’t have the impression there had been a lot of yachts involved. The fact that he was in it now meant he was running out of places to be that he was certain the local security forces weren’t watching.

He sat with his arms out at his sides. Two days of stubble competed with his thin mustache. The sun was overhead, the light glimmering off the water and his false arm. He was smoking a cigar as thick as his thumb and as long as his finger. The city rose up at the horizon like a mirage.

The woman sitting across from them had gone by KarKara when they’d first met her. It was Lara now, which suited her better.

“I swear to God, I had him.”

“We shouldn’t have rushed you,” the old man said.

“I didn’t rush. I had him. We had rapport. We had shared jokes. He was into me.”

“And then?”

Lara opened her hands. “Then the moment came, and he backpedaled. I don’t know. Clearly he and his wife have a monogamy agreement, and he’s taking it seriously. Maybe that’s a Laconian thing.”

“Did he say that?”

“No, it’s a guess,” Lara said. “He was babbling by the end. Lots of words, but none of them meant anything.”

“What do you think of him?”

She considered. Agnete could see from the way the woman held her hands that Lara almost liked the mark. There was nothing like being told no to make someone attractive.

“That man needs something,” Lara said, “and he needs it bad. But it’s not what I was offering.”

The old man blew out a cloud of white smoke and watched the wind shred it. “That’s what I think too. Is he maybe into guys?”

“That’s not it,” Lara said. “I’ve met maybe one person in twenty who claims to be monogamous and actually is. I think this guy is really into his wife.”

The old man muttered something obscene. Then, “I don’t get it. He’s not looking for money. He’s not looking for kink. What is it with this guy?”

Lara said, “I think he’s looking for a way out.”

“Of what?”

“His own skin.”

“Well I’m looking for a way not to take that literally, but this fucker does make it hard.” He looked out over the water. Something large and pale passed under them,

but didn't break the surface. The old man sighed. "Maybe we should just kill him."

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Agnete said, “Why were they fighting?”

He shifted his head to look at her. Agnete met his gaze without flinching. “He and his wife were fighting about something. And then they stopped. Maybe there’s something in that?”

The old man weighed the idea while he took another puff on his cigar. His eyes shifted up to the sky, but he wasn’t looking at anything. Or not anything that was there.

“He have any friends?”

Lara shook her head. “None that he ever talked about. He doesn’t do relationships with people. Just responsibilities to them.”

“So just the wife, then, as far as you know. Sex and friendship. That’s a tough knot to unwind.”

“I think he really loves her,” she said. Again the little twitch of regret. They were going to have to be careful how they used her, moving forward. She was going to talk herself into falling in love with Rittenaur if they took their eyes off her.

The old man made a deep, soft sound. Like satisfaction. The yacht bobbed on the waves. “I forget, you know? I just forget.”

“What, boss?”

“How complicated people are. How many kinds of hunger we’re working with.”

“Not following you.”

The old man shrugged, and the fake arm almost matched the real one. The movement was still just a little asymmetrical. It made him seem jaunty.

“There was a guy I knew back in Sol system used to say that money was like sex. You thought it would fix everything until you got a lot of it. Because that’s what we all reach for. Anything we need, anything we want, anything that’s grinding us down, we can get high or rich or laid and make it better. Only if that was true, people would eventually get enough drugs or money or sex and be happy.”

“We’d be out of jobs,” Agnete said.

“But Rittenaur...” The old man went on like she hadn’t spoken. “This guy lives his whole life in this culture where it’s about...”

“Duty,” Lara said.

“So,” Agnete said, “the way a normal person tries to get out of the hole by putting a needle in their arm or fucking a pretty body or working a hundred hours a week, he tries to get out by being a good man.” She said the words slowly to see if they sounded true.

“Only it doesn’t work for him any better than that other shit does for the rest of us,” the old man said. Then, a moment later, “Look at the wife. If he loves her as much as Lara thinks, she’s the weak spot.”

“What am I looking for?” Agnete asked.

“Whatever’s there. Every addict has to hit bottom,” the old man said. “Maybe we can help him with that.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Agnete said.

“I know it didn’t exactly work, but...” Lara hesitated, afraid to ask. “Our thing?”

She was asking about the debt her attempted seduction was going to pay off.

“How much did you owe us?” he asked.

“You know exactly how much,” Lara replied.

“Yeah, yeah, it’s off the books now,” the old man said. “But stay out of my casinos. You’re very bad at poker.”

Business concluded, they watched the sun speed across the sky and dive for the horizon. The water was turning golden as they angled back for shore. The old man made them all steaks on the little range, the meat decanted fresh from the growth disk.

When they got back to civilization, Agnete put her resources into the wife and Xi-Tamyan Agricultural Concern, where she had offices. She wasn’t looking for something in particular—an affair, an illegal drug habit, a second life. Anything.

Even so, it took her days to find it.

* * *

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Biryar didn't know what he had expected from Mona when he told her. Anger, perhaps. A sense of betrayal. A rupture in their marriage at least, an estrangement at worst. He had laid out all that had happened: the interviews, the connection that had been cultivated during them, and—with his heart in his throat

—the kiss. Mona sat across the breakfast table from him, listening to every detail. Only at the end, when he outlined all the precautions he was putting in place to see that it never happened again, did a line of concern draw itself on her forehead.

“She just stole a kiss?” Mona asked. “That’s all?”

“But I allowed myself to permit a sense of... of intimacy that made it possible,” Biryar said. His eggs had grown cold and thick while he spoke. “This was my fault. It will never happen again.”

She'd taken his hand then, and when she spoke there was a seriousness in her voice so studied and careful that he suspected there was amusement behind it. “Thank you for treating me with respect. I mean that. But I'm not angry with you at all. Don't beat yourself up over this, all right?”

He kissed her fingers, and the subject had never come up again. He went back to his duties with the relief of having dodged a bullet. He policed himself more harshly, wary of any other transgression. Biryar the man wasn't to be trusted. There was only room for Governor Rittenaur, so he tightened his control and pushed out anything besides duty and decorum. It was the only way.

He attended meetings with Suyet Klinger of the Association of Worlds and approved

the trade agreements for the Transport Union. He stood witness at another execution when Overstreet discovered a Laconian guard who had been extorting sexual favors from a local man. He made his reports to the political officer back on Laconia and received guidance that tracked back to Winston Duarte himself.

That he couldn't sleep, that his food tasted strange and left his stomach upset, that the sunlight began to give him headaches, that he sometimes had the weird oppressive sense of drowning at the bottom of an ocean of air, that was only his acclimation going slowly. A few more weeks, and he would be fine, he was sure of it.

He was able to maintain the illusion that everything was under control until the day the one-armed man reappeared.

The conference was in Carlisle. It was the third-largest city on the planet, and fewer than a million people lived in it and the area around it. It was in a higher clime than Barradan and in the northern hemisphere where the seasonal shift made the air was cold and the daylight periods slightly briefer. The trees were similar to the ones in Barradan, but with the cold weather, they had shriveled, wrinkled, and gone limp. The dark trunks bent toward the stony ground. The reception and Biryar's speech had been planned for a courtyard in the center of the mayoral complex, but a storm changed direction as Biryar's transport left Barradan, and a cold and bitter rain was pelting down from low clouds when he arrived. As his liaison rushed him from his transport and into the mayoral complex, Biryar sniffed the air, hoping to find some hint of the minty smell of wet Laconian soil. Rain on Auberon smelled like nothing. Or it smelled like an open sewer, and he couldn't tell any longer. One or the other.

The liaison apologized his way down the wide, pale hallway. The change in the weather had come with no warning. They hadn't thought they would need to shift to the secondary venue—a public theater just across from the complex—until the last moment. It would only take them a little time to have it ready and the audience of local business and government leaders taken there. Biryar swallowed his annoyance

and made himself as gracious as he imagined Duarte would have been in his place.

The waiting area belonged to the mayor herself, part of her private apartment. If he would make himself at home and be comfortable...

In fairness, the waiting room was pleasant enough. A wide glass window looked out over a vast, wild landscape. Rough, toothlike mountains rose above the city, halfway lost in the gray of the storm. The rain that struck the window froze there for a moment, then melted and dripped down. When the clouds finally cleared, the landscape would be encased in ice. Ice like a second skin. Ice like a shroud.

His speech was on the importance of maintaining robust trade with the other systems and Laconia's commitment to keeping the economy of Auberon strong. He knew it by heart. Instead of reviewing it again, he sat on the little couch and looked out at the weather. The door opened behind him, and a man in a crisp white jacket and matching gloves came in carrying a tray with a thermos of coffee, two cups, and a plate of pastries.

"Put them on the table here," Biryar said. "I can serve myself."

"You know, Governor," the old man said as he placed the thermos and cups on the table at Biryar's side, "I have got to give it to your security people. I've been trying to see you for a while now, and they've got your place buttoned up tighter than a horsefly's asshole."

The old man smiled. Even before Biryar registered the glint of metal between the man's cuff and his glove, he remembered the thin mustache.

He's come to kill me, Biryar thought, and a thrill ran through him. He felt the weight of the sidearm on his hip, even as he sensed that a gun probably wasn't going to help. He knew enough killers to know that he wasn't one, and that the man facing him was.

He nodded solemnly.

“I was wondering if I’d see you again. You’ve been hard to find as well.”

The one-armed man sat down across from him and spoke as he plucked off his gloves. “Well, I was worried that we’d gotten off on the wrong foot. That’s my fault. I come on a little strong sometimes. You want some coffee?”

“Cream, please,” Biryar said. His heart was tapping against his ribs like it was desperate for his attention. He let his hand casually drift toward his hip.

The one-armed man’s voice was harder. “If you pull that gun, it’ll mean we’re having the worst version of this conversation. Honest to Pete, you’ll wish you hadn’t. No sweetener?”

“No,” Biryar said. He let his hand drop to the sofa, near his holster but motionless. It was dangerous to move forward, but he wasn’t going to give up ground either. He imagined pulling the gun and firing. How quickly could he do that? How long could it take? The rest of his life, maybe. “Just cream.”

“Good choice. I like it black myself. The older I get, the more bitter shit suits me. You ever feel like that?”

“Sometimes,” Biryar said.

The man held out a coffee cup on a saucer, and Biryar nodded toward the table. He wouldn’t take it. The old man was holding it with his prosthetic hand. How fast was the mechanism? What weapons were concealed in it? It was like watching a snake that he knew was venomous, and wondering how long a bite would take to stop his breath.

“What can I do for you?” Biryar said, trying desperately to make the words sound casual. As if he were in control. “Or are you here to make good on your threat?”

“Nah, we’re past that. But I am here on business, as it were,” the man said, putting the coffee cup down on the table. “I have something for you. Kind of a peace offering.”

“I didn’t know peace was an option between us. I was hoping to have you tried, sentenced, and executed.” The provocation struck home. The man smoothed his mustache. Biryar knew he shouldn’t have said it, but the fear was shifting in him. Turning to something like courage. Or anger. Or a mad, dark, rushing hope that Biryar didn’t wholly understand.

“I get that. But let me ask you something. Hypothetically, there’s someone in your organization. Laconian, not one of ours. Let’s say they’re making up projects in your name, using them to falsify work orders. Fudging the budget. That’s a problem for you, right?”

“You know the answer to that.”

“I do. But I’d like to hear you say it just the same. If it’s not a problem.”

The one-armed man looked distracted by the conversation. A few centimeters would put his hand on the pistol. The angle made it awkward to draw. Biryar shifted his weight a little to make it easier, and the one-armed man shook his head like he was reading his mind.

“Misappropriation of Laconian funds is at best larceny, at worst treason,” Biryar said. “One is a prison sentence. The other is death.”

“What about a governor’s pardon? You can do that, right?”

“No Laconian is a

bove the law,” Biryar said. “That is what discipline means.”

“That’s what I thought,” the old man said. His eyes locked on Biryar’s as he drew a handheld from his pocket. “For what it’s worth, I am sorry about this.”

He held it out. Biryar’s gaze flickered down to it, and then back up, ready for the attack. It took a few seconds for what he’d seen to register. Mona Rittenaur. Almost against his will, his eyes drifted back down. The old man kept holding it out, and this time Biryar took it.

The financial records were marked as Xi-Tamyar, and the spreadsheet listed Mona’s

name. And monetary amounts. Budget levels and outflows. There were other names, and one rang a bell. Carmichael. The woman whose research had been unfairly canceled. The one they'd fought over. The one-armed man forgotten, he shifted through the files. Mona's name was highlighted. And the words cooperative government programs. If programs like that existed, he would have known about them. He would have had to approve them. He hadn't.

The storm had grown worse, the wind so terrible, it was shaking the building itself, making the walls shudder, only it wasn't any louder. And the beige surface of the coffee was smooth and still. Something else was shaking. Biryar put down the handheld.

"What do you want from me?"

"Nothing," the man said. "I'm just letting you know that one of your own stepped a little off the path."

"Blackmail?"

"For blackmail, you need an ask. I don't want anything from you. I have this information. I'm giving it to you. That's all. I'm being the good guy here."

And now it was his duty to tell what he'd learned to Major Overstreet. And it would be Overstreet's duty to arrest Mona. Biryar would have to recuse himself, so they'd send her back to Laconia for trial. His Mona. The woman whose fingers he kissed in the morning. He tried to imagine what it would feel like to see her sent to the Pens. It was like trying to imagine being dead.

Or he could hide the information, make her scrub away all sign of it. Cancel the projects. Erase the financial trail that led to her. Then, when Overstreet found them, they would die together. His sternum ached like he'd been punched there. Everything

under it was hollow. He could hardly draw a breath.

It was perfect. Even if he could pull his pistol and shoot the one-armed man dead, there was still a bullet coming for him. Worse, it was coming for Mona, and there was no way to stop it. He couldn't even die to protect her. He tried to move, but he was made from clay. He saw sympathy in the other man's eyes.

"Truth is, if Xi-Tamyan found out about this, they'd probably praise her initiative and give her a raise. Those guys just do business that way. But she's one of yours, so..."

"Discipline," Biryar said. There was no way out. The end of his world had come. There was nothing to do but welcome it.

It wasn't a thought, it wasn't considered. Like water moving down, it was simply the way things worked. The way they had to be. Natural. Biryar drew the pistol, lifted it to his head, and pulled the trigger. The old man's eyes barely had time to widen.

His false arm, though, had a mind of its own, and it was faster than either of theirs. Before the trigger came back a full millimeter, the gun wrenched away. The old man cried out, clutching his real hand to his chest. The metal hand held Biryar's pistol, its barrel visibly bent.

"Jesus fuck, but I hate it when it does that," the old man said. Then, with heat, "Fuck is wrong with you, kid?"

Biryar didn't answer. He wasn't there. Governor Rittenaur, the voice and face of Winston Duarte, didn't make sense here, and without him, Biryar was like a vine whose trellis had collapsed. He had no form. No structure. He couldn't even die.

The one-armed man put the ruined pistol on the table, picked up Biryar's cup of coffee, and sipped from it.

“Okay. I get it.”

“I can’t lose her,” Biryar said. “I can’t stay with her, and I can’t lose her. What else is there to do?”

“They really do a fucking job on you people, don’t they?” the one-armed man said. Then after a long moment, he sighed. “Listen to me. I didn’t lose my arm in a fight or anything. I was born wrong. Something about not enough blood flow. Stunted development. Whatever. It was like a skinny little baby arm. Mostly I just kind of curled it up against my chest here and forgot about it. I did fine. It was nothing big. I kept meaning to get it seen to, you know? Take it off and regrow it from gel? But one thing and another, I just never seemed to get around to it. You know what I mean? People would give me shit, and I’d laugh and say how, yeah, it would be a good idea. But I didn’t do it. Then maybe fifteen years ago...”

He raised his metal hand, rotating it in the light.

“This,” the old man said. “It’s fucking badass. Basically a built-in waldo with virtual intelligence and pattern matching. It’s not networked, so it’s unhackable. And it’s strong as shit. Bends steel. Stops bullets. You know what else it does? Plays piano. No shit. I can’t, but it can.”

“It’s very nice,” Biryar said.

“You’re young yet. I’m not. There’s this thing when you get older where you have to make a choice. Everyone does. You have to decide whether you care more about being your best self or your real one. If you’re more loyal to who you ought to be or who you really are. You know what I’m talking about?”

Biryar nodded. He was weeping.

“Yeah,” the old man said. “I thought you might. I’m going to tell you a secret. I’ve never told anyone this, not my girlfriends, not my closest allies. No one. You listening to me?”

Biryar nodded again.

“I miss my real fucking arm,” the old man said. “I liked it better when I was me.”

Biryar sobbed, and it sounded like a cough.

“I don’t want anything from you, Governor. But I would ask you this. Looking at where you are now, and the choices you’ve got? Is there anything you maybe want from me?”

The wind howled, threw a handful of hail at the window. Biryar barely heard it.

“You can’t make this go away,” he said. “Overstreet will find it. He’ll know.”

“He will,” the old man said. “You know. If.”

They were quiet. Biryar felt something happening in him. Something he both didn’t recognize and also knew as well as the sound of his own voice. “Could you have done it? Could you have killed me?”

“Yeah,” the old man said. “Half a dozen times. Easy. But it would have been a risk. I don’t get to pick your replacement, right? Thing about this Overstreet fella? He’s not on his home pitch. If something happened to him, maybe it’d be a good idea to put together some locals to take over the security jobs. People who know the lay of the land. How things work here.”

“If something happened to him?”

“Yeah. If,” the old man said. And then, “Do you want it to?”

Biryar breathed yes.

The one-armed man relaxed and stood up. He put on his gloves again, looked out at the sleet and rain and hail. The half-hidden mountains. “This isn’t just you.”

“What?”

“Don’t feel bad, because it ain’t just you,” the one-armed man said with a lopsided shrug. “There are, what, a couple hundred decent-sized colony worlds with shiny new Laconian governors on them? And this thing has or is going to happen on every single one. It’s the basic problem with religion, be it Jesus or Vishnu or God Emperors. Ideological purity never survives contact with the enemy.”

“I don’t—” Biryar started.

“Yeah, you do,” the one-armed man said, then stepped out and closed the door behind him.

Biryar sat for a moment, waiting for the guilt and horror to come, for his conscience to overwhelm him. Half a planet away, Major Overstreet was probably just waking up. There was time to call him. To warn him. Mona was waking up too, in their bed. Biryar took a long breath and let it out through his teeth. He felt something deep and profound, but he didn’t know what he felt. It was too big to judge.

The liaison came in, and Biryar tucked the handheld in his pocket. The liaison’s eyes widened at the pistol, but Biryar pretended not to notice that it was there. They walked together across a covered bridge and into the theater where his audience was waiting.

* * *

Mona felt the hair on the back of her neck go up the moment she stepped into her house and found Veronica Dietz waiting in the parlor. It had been a long day that followed a restless night. Biryar had been in Carlisle, and she never slept as well when he wasn’t on the other half of the bed. She’d wanted nothing more than to come home, take off her shoes, drink some wine, and relax. Finding Veronica lying in wait was like feeling a snake move in her pillowcase.

“Veronica,” she said, feigning pleasure.

“Yes, ma’am,” Veronica said, and then stopped. It was like she was waiting for Mona to say something. The moment stretched.

“I wasn’t expecting to see you here,” Mona said, carefully.

Veronica blinked, confused. “Oh,” she said. “I had a request from the governor’s

office. I thought... that is I assumed that you—”

“I’m sorry,” Biryar said, coming into the room. “That was me.” He took Mona’s hand, squeezed it gently, and kissed her fingers. “I missed you.”

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“I’m glad you’re back,” Mona said. Something was wrong. Or if not wrong, at least very different. She didn’t understand what was happening, except that Biryar was ushering them both to sofas and motioning them to sit. “How was Carlisle?”

“Fine. It was fine. I had some time to think, and I wanted you both here.”

Mona felt a stab of fear, but she took a seat. Veronica lowered herself into a chair. “What’s this about, dear?” Mona asked.

“It’s important that Auberon and Laconia be very much coordinated. In the sciences,” Biryar said. There was something very odd about the way he spoke. He seemed looser. Calmer. Maybe a little melancholy. That might have been more alarming than Veronica’s presence. “So I’ve taken the liberty of requesting a placement at the science directorate in the capitol. And I’ve recommended Ms. Dietz for the position. Transport will be entirely taken care of. Your housing will be in the university comple

x with some of the best minds in the empire. Xi-Tamyar has already been informed.”

Veronica’s mouth was open. Her face was pale. Mona felt like she’d been spun too long on a swing. She didn’t understand what Biryar was thinking. And then she did.

“Her living expenses...” Mona said.

“All overseen by Laconia,” Biryar said. “Everything will be overseen by Laconia.”

“I can’t do that,” Veronica said, and her voice was tight. “That’s very kind of you.

That's... But I have so much here that I can't really—”

Biryar raised a hand, and his voice went quiet. Quiet, but not soft. “Ms. Dietz, it is critical to the success of this colony that you understand what Laconian culture and discipline are, just as we learn what it is to be from Auberon. You will accept this position, and you will take the honor seriously. We will be treating you as one of our own.”

Veronica seemed to be having a little trouble breathing. Mona felt something equal parts joy and vindictiveness brighten her heart. She thought she saw Biryar glance at her, a smile ghosting on his lips, but it was gone before she could be certain. His handheld chimed, and he looked at it before refusing the connection. When he looked back up, he was somber. He stood and drew Veronica to standing.

“This position could change your life,” he said.

“I don't know what to say,” she said.

“You're welcome,” Biryar said, and escorted her to the door. “Please don't mention it. I hope you won't think I'm rude, but—”

“No,” she said. “No, of course.”

“Good,” he said, and closed the door behind her. When they were alone, he seemed to sag into his bones, all his muscles gone slack. He turned back to her and smiled sheepishly. Mona shook her head.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes. No. I don't know. I feel like I'm smiling more often,” Biryar said as he came back and sat beside her. He rested his head on her shoulder the way he had when they were first courting. It made him seem younger. “Next time, let me approve it. It's

safer that way.”

She was about to say Approve what? but the question would have been a lie. He knew, and she knew that he did. Instead, she said, “I will.”

His handheld chimed again. She caught a glimpse of it as he silenced it. The red band of a high security alert. An emergency. He took her hand, lacing his fingers in among hers.

“Who’s that from?” she asked.

“Overstreet’s office,” Biryar said. “I’ll get back to them. It’s nothing that won’t wait a few minutes.”

She shifted to look him in the eyes. He was serene. He was grieving. He was himself in a way she hadn’t seen in months.

“What happened?” she whispered.

She felt him shrug. She watched him look into her. “I’ve committed to the process,” he said.

The handheld chimed again.