



THE NEW ANIMALS

a novel
by Groods

Chapter 1

When the Mover passed, the rest of the world ceased to exist. There wasn't room for anything else.

The titanic engine emerged first as a sound, far out of sight, and little more than a subsonic thrum of anxiety. It would grow in volume, and become visible as a dark blot among distant trees and hills. And it would grow, and grow. Once it was within a mile, the sound was deafening. It was the roar of the earth itself rejecting the magnetic beast, of metal grinding on metal, of machines within machines within machines. The cacophony was the world, for all time. It would only begin to fade with the imperceptibility of the end of eternity. Feeling would return first, to limbs shaken by the vibration of the earth. Hearing would be reluctant.

Geir had only rarely left his noise-suppressing hood down when the train passed. He had plenty reminders of the thing's magnitude, without experiencing all one hundred and twenty decibels of its roar. The way it warped its rail just by traversing it was enough. Let alone the wake it left, creating waves of frost melted by the friction and rolled aside to freeze again in brittle hoars, rippling diagonally out from the rail. Or the birds that dropped out of the sky, disoriented by the sound and pressure, their air sacs ruptured.

When the Mover was well past, Geir returned from the shelter of the tree line to resume his route. In his padded coat and coverall, the train left a sweltering heat behind, as much from its magnetic propulsion as from the exhaust it vented. The Arctic cold would swallow it back up, soon.

His wristband computer showed him two anomalies within a kilometer of his position. The first he could see from here. The lower wall of the rail was twisted by the heat, the metal puckered outward like a six-meter line of scar tissue. Geir double-tapped on the anomaly with one talon to flag it, and took a picture. One of the six-legged repair robots would make its way there to tease, weld, and grind it flush.

The rail itself was almost three times as tall as Geir, a slab of steel taller than a house and fifteen hundred kilometers long, with a track inset two thirds up its sides for the Mover's wheels to hold from underneath. It hummed softly, even when the train was far away and stopped. What went on inside it was above Geir's paygrade to know, but he knew it at least housed the fleet of repair bots.

Geir out his left side to the rail and walked. His route was one hundred kilometers east to west, just about halfway along the rail's length. He had about another day's worth of walking before he reached its eastern extremity. And it would be just over fourteen hours before the train came back the other way.

He dug the carcass of a bird out of the re-freezing slush. It had hit the rail at full force, disoriented. He threw it off to the side, where the train's wake wouldn't catch it when it came back west. When Geir missed the bodies of small animals near the rail, they accumulated, carried along, rolled against the ice and strung with one another into a string of gelatinous gore that would eventually settle and become a diagonal stain in line with the waves of ice.

It was no danger to the train, but Geir preferred not to let it happen. Human colleagues, when he returned to the terminal, snickered at what they called a preoccupation with carrion. He had stopped engaging with them.

When the sun went down, Geir called his base station. He liked it to keep its distance during the day, following him at a distance of four kilometers instead of walking alongside him as the company recommended. He'd had many years to fine-tune the way he did his job, after all. The lumbering robot caught up with him as he was staking out a campsite, a safe thirty meters out from the rail. It studied him with the two small cameras slung underneath its coffin-shaped body, which were all it had for a head, until he gestured for it to set up camp.

The base camp carried a single folding chair and a portable fire pit, and contained his pantry. Geir selected a packaged meal of beans and meat, reheated it, and watched the stars emerging as he ate.

"Want some?" he offered a forkful to the base station.

The robot stared, waiting for a recognizable command.

When he was finished, Geir deposited the meal's tray in the base camp's compactor, and patted on it to open its lid. The robot leaned forward and opened up, to accept the zoan into its padded interior.

Geir had slept out in the cold for the first few months on the job. He'd moved past romantic notions about it since then.

At dawn, Geir packed his campsite back up and told the base camp to resume its four-kilometer distance. He set his coat aside and pulled on his protective gloves, and worked the trunk of a blasted juniper with his fists. He had learned quickly that his arms became soft and sore when he walked the rail for weeks on end without working them. He wore the gloves down faster than any of his colleagues.

Another mark came up on his display, a few kilometers' walk farther. It was a repair bot, fallen from the rail and inert on the ground. Geir checked it over, and tried to sync it with his wristband. It had completely failed, and its battery was too low even to return a signal. Geir folded its legs down as best he could and hefted it to carry with him.

The robot's body was a flat rectangle, that could rest against the rail when not in use. About fifty by eighty centimeters, and five or six deep. On the occasion that he had to handle one, these always reminded Geir of the atlas in the library in the receiving home that had taken him in after he had been decanted. Memories of taking it from its stand and carrying it over to his beanbag chair to pore over, tracing the lines in it that he didn't know the meanings of for years. The black and brown ones printed centuries ago; the blue ones drawn in more recently by hand, to show where the coastlines were now.

Geir used to resist memories of the time before he volunteered. He didn't anymore: he recognized the firm barrier between then and now. It didn't bother him anymore to be reminded. But it also didn't bear thinking about.

His wristband showed him the nearest drone slot in the rail. He tapped a switch in his wristband to open it, and deposited the dead bot inside. Something took it and drew it in, and the slot snapped shut after it. Geir cleared a dead squirrel out of the way, and kept walking.

At fourteen hours from the Mover's eastward passage, Geir left the rail to wait at the tree line, resting against one of the nearest birches, whose railward branches had all been stripped bare. He put his hood down and let the cool wind rustle his feathers.

The train didn't come.

Chapter 2

The operation was routine. The target traveled and had an easily found schedule, and he drank alone between meetings. Robin presented herself to him as an equally lonely visitor at the hotel bar, while Sparrow and Dove monitored from the room adjacent to his. The human engineer confessed a “fondness for bird women,” and invited her to his room. Once he was drugged and unconscious, Robin let Sparrow and Dove in, and they set to work.

The body wouldn’t need to be hidden or disposed of, though the team was prepared for that contingency. With his history of conspicuous melancholy and alcoholism, no one would be surprised to find the engineer dead alone in a hotel room. And Robin had been careful to avoid cameras and witnesses. She might be memorable, a well-dressed zoan in an upscale hotel, but she also knew how not to draw eyes.

Sparrow prepared the poison, while Dove looked through the target’s briefcase and luggage, scanning any documents he found with a wave of the camera in his thumb. Robin suited up and prepared to vacuum any feather dust she had left in the carpet or on the human.

The alert came in through all of their subdermal earpieces at once.

Expedite operation and return to base.

The accipiters exchanged a brief glance, and packed their equipment back up. Before they withdrew, Sparrow covered the human with a pillow and fired two silenced rounds into his head, and a third into his chest.

“Could have been done anywhere,” Robin complained while they loaded back into the aircar secreted on the roof. “Could have been done by a drone.”

“But it got done,” Dove said.

“But what’s so important,” Sparrow said. “That there’s no time to do it right?”

The Mover's schedule varied, of course. By an hour or two. Geir swiped on his wristband to the page that gave the train's status—it hadn't even departed from its eastern terminal. He tapped on the icon that showed it on the right end of the line crossing his screen, bringing up a dialog of basic diagnostics.

Status: ready

Power: 100%

Crew: on board

That was all. He didn't have access to any more. Maybe there was a system error, and the computers weren't updating its location. A lot would have to go wrong for that to happen, though: the Mover had its own GPS, the crew and the terminals communicated constantly, and the rail itself knew where the train was.

Geir waited another hour, with no change on the status page. The cold was much sharper when standing still. Wind bit at his beak and eyes. Finally he swiped to the other third page of his display, and tapped the call button.

Calling the station was harshly frowned upon. Geir would forfeit his pay for this period, if the administration deemed the call unnecessary. But there was no answer. Presumably a number of railminders were calling now. Possibly all of them at once.

The zoan took back to his route. He reached the end of his hundred kilometers—he touched the tree that grew right on the end of it, as he always did—and waited. In all his years, he hadn't encountered the railminders who walked the stretches adjacent to his. He had probably met them in the mess when he was off duty, but he wouldn't have known which other sullen workers they were. He stared off eastward, into the length of snow and steel and trees that was just like his but not, wondering if any distant dark mote in the white was his counterpart, headed this way. Then he turned and headed back west.

"Do you know anything about it?" he asked the base camp when he set up for the night.

The two cameras only looked at him. He wondered if anyone at the station saw him through those. If so, they had seen him press the call button several times. Geir sighed and took his place in the padded coffin for the night.

He didn't walk the next day. He remained in the base camp's chamber as long as he could stand to, emerged, ate, worked his punching routine twice, and sat in his folding chair, facing the rail.

He didn't like not walking. He didn't like where his mind went. Thinking about the several years before he had volunteered to work, finding labor and trouble on the streets, sleeping under bridges and fighting for brief gigs bouncing at clubs or shadowing pushers. It wasn't that he was bothered by the memories. It was that, the more idle he was, the more immediate they seemed. A day waiting for word about the Mover's silence compressed fourteen years into nothing.

It wasn't the difficulties that he wanted distance from. It was the bitter, alkaline frustration that had driven him out of the receiving home in the first place. The weariness, and the anger. It was that he was finally free of the dreams of Samuel, and he didn't want them back.

When the zoans were decanted from the growing baths in their factories, there was a frantic dash to find homes for them. There were millions—grown in secret, no longer commercially viable, but too close to human to summarily destroy (though it was well known that every manufacturer flooded at least some of their baths with ammonia). Most were adopted by human families or communities. It was charitable to take in a zoan. Receiving homes sprang up, like the one into which Geir had been decanted, to take in a dozen or more, promising loving and communal upbringing. There was no preparing for the world to suddenly receive a new population of several million. Born at the age of five, they bore the features of animals, and came imprinted with motor and sensory and rudimentary language skills. Everything else, humanity had to figure out.

A barbatus model, Geir had the face, flesh, and talons of the lammergeier that lent him its name. He had been earmarked as exotic. He at least would always have that.

The Mover remained stationary at its eastern terminal, and the station was still silent. Geir's base camp had provisions for another week, at which point a car would come to bring him back to the station for his break. By the end of the second day, he no longer believed that there would be a car at all. He could possibly stretch his supplies out for a second week if he skipped meals. And maybe he could put the base camp in power-save mode, stay in it and be protected from the wind but not the cold.

He called the base camp over to the rail. Meals and collapsed firepit tucked into his coat, he gestured for the robot to crouch, and climbed onto it. When it set its rubber forefeet on the steel wall and raised itself as high as it could, Geir could just get his fingertips over the edge of the track inset high on the rail. Straining frozen muscles and digging with talons, he dragged himself up into the track—and from there to the top.

Geir had never seen the rail from any angle but below, except far in the distance where the ground dipped into a valley. It was as tall as a house, and as wide as one. The wind threatened to knock him off the edge as soon as he stood up, and, worse, the fear gripped him that the train could come after all. He glanced repeatedly east and west as he tentatively stepped forward from the edge. To either direction, the rail disappeared into the distance, swallowed by the hills and forests on either side. No Mover. And no support engine coming from the west. Geir put his base camp to sleep with a gesture, and crossed to the rail's northern side.

Below, the snow was piled much higher against the rail than on the southern side. The ground rose gradually into mountains Geir often forgot were there. And, far to the east, he saw his counterpart, the minder for the northern face of

this section. Only a dot in the white—but there was no way they had missed the figure standing atop the rail.

They met as the sun was setting. Geir recognized the other zoan from the station, but they had never spoken. A hare model, tall ears bound down to his shoulders for warmth, he was grizzled and suspicious.

"Armand," he offered a hand after Geir lowered himself to the snow, and rattled off the serial number he'd been decanted with.

"Geir." The barbatus didn't like to use his serial number as a surname. "Did you get any word?"

"None. And my car was supposed to come today."

"Mine's in a week, but something tells me it's not coming."

"I think we've been cut off. They're shutting the MVR down."

"Maybe."

"I've been at this for fifteen years, they never tell us shit." Armand scratched at his chin nervously, swiped back and forth on his display, in case there was any news.

"Just fourteen for me."

"A mere pup," Armand attempted a laugh, but was evidently not in the mood. "They think we're good out here. I mean, I am. But there's what, forty of us?"

"Thirty-eight, between the two shifts."

The hare's nose twitched.

"Either way, all our last paychecks are moot."

"I was planning to abandon ship if you didn't have any news."

"I've been planning that for years."

"Give it one more day?"

The hare shrugged. He gestured to the north with a wave of his snout, away from the Mover's wake if it came after all.

Armand didn't sleep in his base camp. He carried a bedroll with him, along with a hunting rifle and other supplies. He also didn't eat his prepared meals,

most of the time: his base camp's sleeping chamber was stuffed with the carcasses of snowshoe hares and ptarmigan, each shot cleanly through the head and wrapped in linen. He dressed and cleaned one of each by the day's last light, and cooked them over the firepit. Geir had eaten worse.

"So which were you," Armand leaned in. His lagomorph teeth were ill-suited to the meat. One of many oversights in zoan design. "Job, Street, House, or Adoption?"

"Receiving house," Geir said. The meat was no trouble for him.

"Adoption," Armand bounced one of his legs with agitation. "But it was a big house, with several of us. So kind of the same thing."

"Just with a family, not a staff."

"Something like that. Mother and Father were determined that zoans could be whatever humans can. So they ran it more like a school than a house."

"Not that any of us would know," Geir allowed.

"I've known some jobbers though. Getting spit right into a factory or a warehouse, it messes them up way worse."

"Sure."

"You think there's anything waiting for us if we go back? Should we even bother?"

Geir shrugged.

"If not, there's a city right there," he said.

"For what it's worth."

"Right."

Under his scowl and his fidgeting, Armand was clearly not as stoic about the possibility of the Mover being shut down as he was trying to look. His agitation was less anxiety than it was nervous excitement. Geir understood. He felt it, too. But unlike the hare, he still hoped the train would run.

Chapter 3

They began the trek back west together the next morning, when there was no change in the Mover's status and no answer from the station. Their destination was seven hundred kilometers away, but Armand knew of a town a fraction of that, back west and a ways north of the rail. They abandoned the Mover in favor of a straight line through the woods. The base camp wouldn't come with them, so they emptied its stores into linen bags the hare had brought and left it too.

Armand pried occasionally about Geir's receiving home. Not impolitely, but Geir didn't want to talk about it.

"It was okay," he said. "But I ran away."

"To do what?" Armand shifted his rifle to release his ears and let them stand back up. The thick juniper forest blocked most of the wind but still let the sun through, so it was much warmer than at the rail's side.

"Just sick of living at home. Did my own thing for a few years."

Armand nodded approvingly.

"A couple of us ran off," he said. "Mother and Father drilled us hard. They had us in university courses when we were seven. Well, twelve. Anaïs took off first. My sister. Or, you know."

"What'd she do? Her own thing?"

"Not so much. She's at the Animal Enclave."

"Ah."

"Always trying to get me to go there. Good for her, but I'm not sitting around growing corn and singing songs."

They spent another night in the snow and had another half a day's walk before they reached the town. It was little more than a crossroads, with a few dozen houses scattered around a small cluster of old red-brick shops and civic buildings. From a distance it looked like a spot of black mold among the foothills.

Every public screen in the downtown showed the same thing: the charred, bombed-out remains of the MVR-601 station. There was little remaining, only a

partial shell amidst crumbled ruins. Three days after the explosion, firefighters were still putting out residual blazes, there and in the surrounding blocks that had been damaged.

“Better than I thought,” Armand muttered. “We weren’t just sold out.”

Geir was quiet. There was no coming back from this, most likely. If the company didn’t close entirely, it would at least never return to the same model under which he had been employed. He dug nervously at his knuckles with his talons.

“Let’s get something to eat,” he said.

A diner in the downtown recognized the zoans by the company accounts in their wristbands and fed them on credit. Geir hadn’t needed to spend any money in years. He didn’t make any to speak of, either—the company charged him back for his meals and use of the base camp, and anything else it could think of—but he wasn’t so destitute he couldn’t pay for a cup of coffee and a stack of pancakes.

“Shouldn’t have let us do that,” Armand noted when they ate. “We’re off task; our accounts should be frozen.”

“I’m sure admin is just busy,” Geir guessed.

“Any day, they’ll lay all the railminders off at once. And they’ll tear the MVR down and sell it for parts. Cash out of whatever’s at the east terminal. Move on to something else.”

“Probably.”

“What do you think it is over there?”

Geir shrugged.

“Above my paygrade. And my paygrade keeps getting lower.”

“I think they’re building a new Uptown. They know none of us could afford a single shirt there, so they don’t want us to know.”

“I think they’re mainly waiting to see if the other terminal gets bombed too.”

“Yeah. We would’ve heard it that’d happened already.”

Geir connected his wristband to the town's wireless and looked the news up for himself. There was little else to sift through: a UN representative had died in an aircar collision; scientists confirmed the presence of large pockets of water in the earth's mantle. But the Mover station was the big story. Every outlet was still broadcasting live feeds of the burning station, from all different angles. Lans-Cartier Industrial was saying nothing. Some commentators expected the entire company to go under. The cost to build a new terminal to receive the Mover at its western end would be in the billions, and would take months if not years.

While he was looking, the next wave of headlines came over all of the news outlets. Someone had taken credit for the bombing. Geir went still when he saw the photograph and chiron. The serious canid features, half-lidded eyes and very slight, involuntary smile. Much older than the last time Geir had seen them. But also unmistakable.

It was Samuel. Leader of the Zoan Front.

This changed everything.

It is 2208. The zoans—all of them in the world—have reached ten years old, a threshold some geneticists and many media figures thought would be impossible. Their mostly-human bodies have entered and in some cases completed adolescence, their mostly-human brains are wrestling with the social and the abstract. In their first decade, they were quiet novelties, watched by the whole world, described and made predictions for; now they are starting to speak, and on occasion, to be heard.

Geir is one of twenty-six who were taken in by a receiving house in the old districts of Terrace, the city colloquially known as Uptown. Like his fellows, he is curious, and anxious, and sometimes vocal. He fights and plays with the other animal-faced wards and with their human neighbors. He is not much given to

thinking deeply, even if he likes to observe and understand the others and their world.

Of his fellows, he is closest with Samuel, a zoan modeled after the South American maned wolf. The two of them sneak cigarettes between their lessons, steal beer from their caretakers' kitchen and throw the empty bottles off overpasses.

Of the original twenty-six zoans at the Andrew C. Brightlove Foundation's receiving house, three had died suddenly at age seven, as had almost a fifth of zoans worldwide. It had been sad for Geir, but hadn't cast the seriousness over him that it did his housemates. Samuel has been especially stricken. He is angry, he wants Geir to discuss things with him that the barbatus has not considered and can only cursorily comment on. Questions such as, whether a zoan is more alike to the animal whose appearance they were given, or to the human whose genetic makeup was much closer. Questions such as, whether the caretakers had shown enough respect to the three who died, or if their tearful memorial was merely performative.

Not only Samuel, but everyone argues whether being decanted at age five means they are ten years old or fifteen. Collectively the zoans, at least in the Brightlove House, agree that they are more alike to their teenaged neighbors than those born in the same year. At fifteen, they are Not Children. At fifteen, the Foundation needs to hear them.

Three things happen this year that deepen the zoans' seriousness.

First, a wave of antipathy for zoans sweeps through the human world, now that they are more visible. They find themselves openly mocked by their neighbors and the media; they hear public figures suggest that the UN was wrong for disallowing the factories to breed them with subhuman intelligence and sell them directly into labor.

Second, another of the surviving twenty-three vanishes and is found dead in a landfill weeks later. There is no response from the police; the Foundation verbally chastises its caretakers, and that is all.

Finally, it is discovered that the Foundation receives almost one million dollars per year for each zoan it takes in at its several receiving houses, between childcare payments and tax incentives. The money is intended for the zoans' care, the caretakers' salaries, and the upkeep of the facilities, but it is untraceable, especially for the children themselves. Nothing the Foundation or even the ground-level staff can say will recover the trust they lose.

This is when Samuel ascends.

After pleading with the authorities and the staff to find and protect the murdered zoan, and hearing myriad unconvincing excuses for the Foundation's tax breaks, the wards of the Brightlove House are finished. Samuel gathers Geir and five others who are strong and healthy, and they oust the Foundation staff. With input from all who are willing—even Geir, to some extent—they draft their articles of emancipation, and a demand that the Foundation sell the facility to the zoans, collectively.

Samuel is willing to pay three hundred thousand dollars for the facility. Geir cannot even guess how he has that money, but he is in awe.

Uptown never sends its police. Besides that very little civic coin is ever spent in the working-class districts at the best of times, the police are occupied with the protection of a construction site in the leisure district and have no force to spare. All twenty-two zoans of the Brightlove house are granted emancipation, and the Foundation doesn't fight the purchase.

The ensuing days are exciting, heady. Plans, discussions, philosophizing. Despite the stakes, challenges are welcome. The independent household is a minor media darling, though commentaries are rarely charitable: The Animals are Running the Zoo. Footage circulates of Samuel and Geir watching police drones through a barred window.

When the Foundation withdraws it takes all of its contracts with it, for supplies and utilities: Samuel puts together a team to badger the former staff to identify and re-establish them. Geir helps with that, and sits in on negotiations with city authorities. He has reached his adult height, and is transforming from scrawny to wiry. His beak and talons are threatening enough that he need only be present to make a difference.

The Brightlove House isn't the only story like it, not even that same year. But for all intents and purposes, Samuel is zoankind's first revolutionary.

"I took this job thinking I'd be away from civilization," Armand said. He and Geir were outside again, taking stock of their meager supplies before they parted ways. "It didn't really feel like it. I couldn't get out of sight of the damn rail."

"Me too," Geir lied, partially.

"I don't think I could do it for real, anyway. Just live out there. I'm a city boy, all I've got is book smarts."

"Do you think you'll live with your sister?"

The hare shifted his jaw thoughtfully, and shook his head.

"Figure something out," he muttered. "I always thought I'd have some warning before the job went away. Granted, I always thought the moment it did, I'd just peel off and live in the woods. I guess I'll stick around here, I know there's good hunting. Did you ever have plans?"

"No. I kind of thought I'd sprain my ankle one day and they'd find me frozen three weeks later."

Armand glared, evidently not realizing the bird was serious.

"But since that didn't happen, there are a few couches I could surf," Geir added.

"Life's too long to make plans," Armand said.

Geir nodded. He smiled, a little.

Presumably they had a few more days before the company realized their credit was active, but they withdrew a few hundred dollars each in cash to be safe. Geir was willing to bet that any number of abandoned railminders had done so already. Considering the millions the company hemorrhaged every day, he didn't think there was any reason to expect any reprisal. Geir took the last few frozen meals, and Armand the last of his game. They shook hands, and Geir went to find a ride.

"Nice working with you."

Chapter 4

Uptown—Terrace—had grown in the near-decade since Geir had left it. It looked from the bus like a gleaming utopia of clean glass skyscrapers, giant monuments of bronze and copper, fanciful modern palaces. That veneer had been nascent fourteen years ago, if well underway. The fabulous city, the Uptown of dreams that was the playground of twenty of the world's richest men, was a ring that encircled the much bigger city inside. In there were hundreds of square miles of slums, where ninety-nine percent of the populace lived, most of them employed at maintaining the luxuriant outer ring. One small part of it was the old city, where the Brightlove House had been.

The wonders of Uptown were famous. The ten tallest buildings built by man rose from the eastern end of the outer ring. From one of them ran an eternal cascade, that fed a private lake. Water had to be pumped up nearly three hundred stories at all times. The several colossi that straddled lower roofs and crouched benevolently in public squares were supposed to evoke the lost ancient world, though really they were mainly tacky.

There was always construction. Old wonders were removed, as oligarchs surpassed one another and bought up each other's properties, and new ones created constantly. Three of the world's seven Stampers were occupied there permanently.

The only roads into Uptown entered the city by tunnel. Anyone going to the outer city, after all, came by their own aircar, or by VTOL shuttle from the airport just past the suburbs. The last thing Geir's company credit had bought him before his account vanished was a seat on a bus, an ancient and dirty vehicle that took him there in a little more than a day. It was the merest fraction of the price of the most modest air fare, and much closer to anonymous.

Beyond the tunnel was the city he knew. Rough roads, dark and unpainted buildings, long blocks all abandoned and run-down. Groups of both humans and zoans standing shiftlessly in front of old apartment buildings. The heights of the

outer city were only visible in the distance on long straight streets, of which there were few. The stream of airbusses passing overhead were new. Bringing inner-city dwellers to work in the outer, dozens at a time. The soft whirring of their blades added up to a constant drone.

When he disembarked, Geir left his padded coat on the bus for the next traveler to find, threw out the tray of his last packaged meal, and then had nothing left of his employment with the Mover. His wristband computer had shut off at the same time as his account. He was back in Terrace with nothing to his name but the ID tab in his thumb and a few hundred dollars that might have disappeared with his company account. He might as well never have left.

No one bothered him in the streets. Humans may be unthreatened by birds at their normal sized, but once one reached their scale, the viciousness of that beak and those claws became much more apparent. Geir had learned early that he could bank on that, whether it meant biting the kneecap of a security guard when he was small or brandishing talons to ward off interlopers about his business. The black streaks at the sides of his beak seemed to inspire wariness too.

He took some time to stroll the blocks around the bus station. The site of the Brightlove House was not far, but the facility itself was long gone. After his time there, Geir had done some of his business in this area. He recognized some of the buildings, the tenement houses with small storefronts facing the street, the walkways and roads crossing above the ground level. Really, there wasn't much in the fourteen years since he'd left to override the memory.

Geir hadn't heard much about the Zoan Front, naturally. It had begun a couple years before he volunteered to enter the workforce, a continuation of Samuel's revolutionary career. There had been word about it here and there: it had intercepted a shipment of pharmaceuticals, or it had offered security to protesters at the home of an anti-zoan pundit. Or its members were threatening humans in the street and ransacking their homes; Geir had highly doubted those rumors. If Samuel or his lieutenants had ever undertaken any major action, news

hadn't reached the dormitories in the Mover station. From the little research he'd been able to do before his account had expired, Geir understood the Zoan Front to be notorious, but not necessarily feared—until the station bombing. Their activities had been increasing rapidly. Or, at least, the activities attributed to them. None of its ranking members, especially Samuel himself, had been found or even heard from since the leader had taken credit.

So, Geir had to do some hunting. But he had an idea of where to start.

A decade ago, the Ironclad had been a likely location to pick up work. It was in a central location, its bar was cheap, and it was known to jam cameras and listening devices in its vicinity. A dealer could solicit clientele without fear, or low-level gangster could find bored toughs to pay for protection or intimidation, but it wasn't so divey that it wouldn't attract anyone a little higher up, too. It was somewhere ZF operatives could find jobs to fund their cause, and find alternate sources of supplies when the authorities stamped theirs out. If it was still there, it was worth a look. Or at least a drink.

It still stood, Geir found, but it wasn't the same. Previously, the Ironclad had occupied a small space at street level, its rough brick edifice covered in posters and graffiti and its sign overshadowed by a bridge on the level above. Now it seemed to have swallowed up the space that opened onto that bridge as well, and cut wide glass windows into the wall. There was an airbus pad near it: good for business, apparently. Geir took a seat at the bar in the lower, older half.

The interior was brighter and cleaner. Not not bright, and probably not clean, but there wasn't a shadowy booth or disused corner in sight. A mirror and a line of taps behind the bar, where before had been rows of liquor bottles and a conspicuous shotgun. Geir suspected a complete turnover in staff and ownership in his absence.

It was a workers' bar. The other drinkers sat quietly with their glasses, exhausted, dressed in coveralls and service uniforms. There was a stage for

musicians, but no one on it tonight. Geir ordered his first scotch in a decade and observed.

The middle-aged human bartender gave him only a perfunctory smile and poured him a finger. When she went to the back soon after though, her replacement made Geir smile.

A youthful zoan, lupine model, the new bartender relieved the human with a nod and a light punch on the shoulder. He was tall and slim, and much of his fur was shaven or slicked down with product. Wiry and skinny, dressed in a dark muscle shirt with an inscrutable logo on it and plaid capris. A black extension woven into his scalp to give him long hair like a human's. His shaved arms and neck were tattooed, and several piercings hung from his ears. One tattoo amidst the jumble on his neck was the familiar ZF.

It didn't mean he was affiliated. But it was starting point.

Geir downed his drink and caught the wolf's eye for a second. Cranberry, as his nametag read, came over with a musical strut and identified the drink from scent.

"Hun," he winked when he delivered the next.

Geir flashed an easy smile.

"I'm looking for someone," he said. "Are you connected in these parts?"

"I know a person or two," the wolf leaned in and raised a pierced eyebrow. "I guess I get around."

"And are you affiliated?" Geir leaned his head to the side, to indicate the other's tattoo.

Cranberry smiled.

"Not as such, I wouldn't say," he rested his elbows on the bar and lowered his voice. His tone indicated something different from his words.

"What've they been up to?" Geir asked.

"Well there's no way you haven't heard about their big hit last week," Cranberry said. "That was a surprise—but they're flush with money now. And cops."

Geir took his meaning, and shook his head.

"Not a chance," he said.

"Good enough for me. You're too handsome to be a cop anyway." Wink. "Out in public you have to call them terrorists. But you won't find a zoan who really feels that way. Not here. Who's it you've got your eye on?"

"I'm just looking to make contact."

"Ah."

Cranberry tapped a claw on the counter.

"I would get broken in half over someone's knee if I gave a name," he said.

"But: three more drinks and maybe I'll give you a place."

"That sounds even more risky."

"Oh, for you maybe, not for me. One of those drinks is for you, the other two are for me, got it?"

"On the job?"

"There's no one looking over my shoulder today, I can cut loose."

He proffered the small glass pay block, with a playful flourish. Geir pressed his thumb against it.

"Thirty percent tip," he told it.

"Ooh," Cranberry smiled and palmed the block. He backed away and poured one more finger into Geir's glass, and the first for himself, then raised his to toast. "Weeknights at the carpet factory on Wakefield. Tell the guy you're hoping to see a broken jaw."

"ZF code?"

"Nah. Just what I said the first time I came in. Worked for me."

"What am I walking into?"

"You'll like it. But don't make anybody mad. I pick up some of those guys' drops sometimes, and they tip well."

"Sure."

"Not as well as you of course, hun."

"Of course not."

Geir finished his drink while Cranberry tended to other customers, gave the wolf a nod and left. Three was more than he'd wanted, but he'd always held his alcohol well, and the burning in his throat kept him alert.

Chapter 5

He didn't know the carpet factory, but he knew Wakefield. It was the site of one of the zoan factories—though not his birthplace—that had stood empty the first years of his life before being portioned out for smaller stores and offices. People talked about it in mystical terms, but by the time Geir had ever made the pilgrimage, it was just one dingy commercial neighborhood among many. Probably had been before, too. Only in the few short months between the leak of the manufacturers' plans and the zoans' emergence had it been a special place.

It looked like a lot of the city did, now. Built up but still poor. The original factory had been an unassuming single-story building the size of the entire block; it had three more levels to it now, all blocks of full buildings built onto its roof wherever urban planners could find space. Fewer overhead walkways though. The evening sun made it hot. Geir could see one of the Stampers in the distance, planted at the southern end of Uptown to print some new luxurious hotel.

The carpet factory was on a block adjacent to the old one. Its face was a concrete slab hunkered between more inviting office blocks on either side, with the name Baniff Textile over a pair of metal doors in the middle. An airtruck lifted off from a landing pad above it while Geir cased it, presumably bringing a load of fresh carpeting to one of the Uptown towers.

Something lavish, no doubt. High quality but not flashy.

A little after the sun went down, someone came out to lean against the wall by the metal doors. Looking casual, but obviously a door man. It was Thursday night, just Geir's luck. He hadn't had to worry about days of the week in years. Geir approached him.

The doorman was a big human, wide in the shoulders and hips, heavy, shaven-headed and bearded. He eyed the barbatus without acknowledging him.

"I was hoping to see a broken jaw," Geir said.

The human laughed, a single huff whose content of mirth Geir couldn't guess at. He looked the vulture over and decided, like Cranberry had—though probably for different reasons—that he wasn't a cop.

"Forty," he said, offering a pay block.

Geir thumbed it.

"You only had thirty-eight," the doorman said, but shrugged and waved Geir on with a tilt of his head.

Geir had a few thoughts on what he might find in the factory. He wouldn't have been surprised if it were a labor trafficking operation he was walking into, that gave Cranberry a cut for every passer-through that he tricked into it. If so, he was ready to take a big chunk out of the doorman's neck on his way back out. Once he was through the vestibule, though, he relaxed.

The hallway leading into the factory's offices was blocked off for the night, and a side door labeled Employees Only was propped open across it. That led to a stairwell down, from which the sound of cheering and shouting emanated. Past a human strung-out on the stairs, and a couple more sitting on the lowest steps and shouting, there was a thick crowd in the factory's basement.

The center of the basement was depressed, and had been roped off. A canid zoan leaned against the ropes, breathing deeply and brushing blood out of his eyes with gauze-wrapped hands. Someone else was being carried off.

Geir found a place to stand and watch.

A few minutes later, a squamate zoan jumped the ropes and stirred the audience up for the next fight. It would be Local Ben versus Mr. Grouch's Left. Local Ben was a meaty human with beady eyes and a hairy back. He climbed into the ring and rested his arms casually against the ropes.

The audience parted to make way for his opponent. On the far end of the basement, near the boiler, another human sat, brooding in a folding chair, with a hardened and contemptuous scowl. He had several toughs with him, but he was

flanked by two very large zoans. The one at his left, a rhinoceros model, made for the ring with a businesslike stride.

The lizard shouted for the fight to start, and leapt out of the way as the two combatants closed in on each other. Both were large and muscular, thick but not flabby. They jabbed experimentally with their wrapped fists, feigned kicks at each other's knees. Local Ben took the first serious swing, catching Grouch's Left in the face. The rhino took it easily.

The market for rhinoceros zoans had originally been for rugged heavy lifters: rubble clearers, porters for construction materials. Prototypes had been tough and dumb, extremely strong and scarcely sapient. The rhinoceros features had been a signifier of their role, mere packaging. They would have competed with another biotech company's ox model. Then the UN ruling had come in, forbidding the limiting or manipulation of an artificial humanoid's capabilities. After that, zoans' respective species had to be effectively cosmetic. The rhinoceros in the ring had no innate advantage in strength, size, or endurance.

Though the thick skin counted for something.

Local Ben kicked Left in the stomach and hit him in the eye with a headbutt. The rhino was staggered, but came back to grapple his opponent at the waist and throw him off balance enough to lift him off his feet for a suplex. The human rolled out of it skillfully and rained quick punches against the other's abdomen, while Left brought a powerful elbow down on his back.

There didn't seem to be any broad restrictions on the fighting, except maybe against piercing or cutting; Left didn't seem to make any use of his horn. Still, the combatants gouged and bit, and weren't shy about aiming for the groin. Both were well bloodied by the end. Which came when Left threw Local Ben to the ground and scored a powerful kick on the human's chin.

The audience celebrated as Left rested briefly against the ropes, smoldering. There was no activity from Grouch by the boiler, only whispers exchanged by

some of his toughs. The rhino didn't wait to be announced as the winner before ducking the ropes and returning to the scowling human's side.

Geir stuck around for several matches, late into the night. His attention was on the crowd. He watched for who took and handled bets, who handed out winnings, who kept track of fighters. Mostly he watched Grouch.

The human didn't seem to be affiliated with the organizers of the fight, but he was clearly given a certain respect by everyone involved. The way he cast glances at the toughs behind him, Geir guessed that they were hirelings and not Grouch's own. An organized crime figure, maybe, or maybe a wealthy Uptown visitor with a taste for violent thrills.

The contests were going strong at midnight, but Geir had seen enough for now. Back outside, he looked for a sheltered spot away from the street; he was completely broke, after all. Many alleys were occupied, and he had to back off from more than one promising spot at knifepoint. Downtown Terrace had been like that in his time, too, but not quite as much.

He was closer to the bus station than to the carpet factory when he found a safe place, just inside the window of a vacant storefront. He wouldn't mind the walk in the morning.

Chapter 6

The past week had been a flurry of quick, allegedly high-stakes and often uncomfortably visible assassinations. Sparrow's team was given photographs and shuttled to locations with tight time constraints and little direction. Half of the time, they had to resort to a sniper shot that decapitated the target and killed a bystander too, on a public sidewalk. They had not yet failed to eliminate a target, but at this rate it was an inevitability.

The accipiters were forbidden from communicating with the other teams, or anyone outside of themselves and Kuiper, their handler. Nor did they need to ask to know that they were being carefully supervised. Sparrow could speculate all he wanted privately, and he was sure Robin and Dove did the same, but they couldn't compare suspicions.

In the automated jet on the way to reach a target in Beirut, Sparrow worked on tuning the rifle. It was a precision instrument, not intended to be fired more than once before being taken back to the armory and repaired. The woman in Beirut would be its third discharge in a row. The field kit for recalibrating its components and grinding away microscopic warping in its barrel could only do so much good: if the shot missed, it wouldn't be Sparrow's fault.

"She's another zoan," Robin said, from across the cargo bay, where she was studying footage of the target.

"That doesn't matter," Dove reminded them.

"No, it doesn't," Sparrow and Robin agreed almost in unison.

But it was curious. Very few of their targets, for elimination, intelligence gathering, or acquisition, were zoan. It made sense: the total zoan population was almost negligible to that of humans. And even if they were trusted by organizations in which they might earn clout, their species hadn't existed long enough for many to reach those positions. There had been some, and the number had certainly increased with time, but whatever urgent contract they were operating under, targets had been almost a third zoan.

It was a coverup for something, Sparrow was convinced. Based on their wildly different social classes, and the rapidity with which they had to be eliminated, the targets were not politicians, executives, the developers of technologies competing with the client's, or any of the usual categories with which the team dealt. They had to be people possessed of certain knowledge. Witnesses, planners, hired hands, their families.

Sparrow hated working in the dark. And he hated not being able to do the job right. He thought he might hate killing zoans. He hated a lot of things, lately.

The jet brought them to a private airstrip outside the city, where an aircar waited to bring them to their target. From that point they were silent. They communicated through subvocalization broadcast into each other's earpieces, artificially reconstructed in their voices. Sparrow handled the rifle, Robin spotted, and Dove kept them undetected.

The aircar stabilized itself eleven kilometers from the target's position in the Beirut Central District. She was predicted to exit a building at four thirteen in the afternoon and take a seat at an open-air restaurant nearby.

"That was probably arranged for us," Robin noted.

Sparrow slid the aircar's door open, rifle slung across his back, and climbed out. three hundred meters above the city, to the roof. The broad and flat roof was just long enough for him to mount the rifle and flatten himself out, stock braced in his shoulder.

Robin was doing most of the work of aiming. The rifle triangulated with feeds from cameras all along the path its bullet would take, and made microscopic adjustments beyond Sparrow's already precise movements, accounting for wind, air pressure, air quality, the rotation of the earth, and a hundred other factors. The view in the eyepiece—which was molded specifically for an avian head—was a high-definition reconstruction that no simple lens could provide at this distance, superimposed with a rendered prediction of what the view would show in about twenty seconds. The cervid zoan exited the building only a few seconds later than

she was expected to, checked a wristband computer nervously, and headed for the restaurant. She carried a briefcase, which she clutched tightly. When she sat it was with good posture, a stiff neck, legs crossed and briefcase held in her lap. Whether she had a real meeting, or another Stuyron operative had set her up to expect one, was irrelevant. She was there, and few other heads crossed the scope in front of hers.

Sparrow placed the crosshair on her head, in the thick of her jaw muscles. However much of the work was done by computer, it still ultimately relied on his steady hands and controlled breath. He made sure of both, and squeezed the trigger.

The future view froze as soon as the bullet left the chamber. Sparrow held his breath for twenty long seconds, as people passed in front of the target as predicted, and the cervid repeated slight moments he had just seen her make.

If the bullet didn't hit its mark, there would be no use in firing again. There would be chaos in the BCD, and the target would be long gone by the time a second bullet hit. But the rifle held two rounds, and Sparrow was prepared to pull the trigger a second time, if it needed to happen.

But it didn't. The bullet hit the target just above the heart, about thirty centimeters lower than Sparrow had aimed. She erupted.

The force of the bullet knocked her chair backwards by a meter, cut a table in half behind her, and buried itself another meter deep in the concrete, spraying debris into the air almost with the force of a bomb. She was in a cloud of dust by the time the ripples from the impact tore her open and left her in more than one piece.

Sparrow had the rifle back over his shoulder and swung down into the aircar within five seconds of the impact. The door closed and the vehicle peeled away from its stable position to return to the airstrip. They were in the former Lebanon for twenty-eight minutes, and were then off for the next target.

“It didn’t hit where I aimed,” Sparrow complained when they were underway. “We’re ruining it the way we’re using it.”

“Then use a garrote on the next one,” Dove said.

Sparrow was quiet. Something had him uneasy, that he couldn’t pinpoint. He settled on the recklessness of it. That wasn’t like Stuyron Security Solutions. The Fixing and Espionage division was meticulous. That was a hard fact that had been drilled into all fifteen of the accipiter zoans it had bought from the factory. It bothered Sparrow that they would accept a contract like this, that necessitated sloppy work. That was it. That was what made his stomach tremble, so slightly.

He wanted to voice the thought to the others, but he knew he couldn’t. It had been years since any of them had taken punishment; Sparrow didn’t know what the company would do to an insubordinate adult. He opened the tuning kit again and set back to work.

“My readout says you don’t have any money,” Cranberry said when he got to Geir at the Ironclad, early in the evening.

“I guess I’m not leaving here buzzed,” Geir smiled. He tipped his glasses.

“You should’ve been more than buzzed last night.”

“Vultures have strong stomachs.”

Cranberry laughed through his nose.

“Did you check it out?”

“I did.”

“Not exactly a revolutionary planning event, I know, but plenty of connected characters hang out there.”

“Names I found myself, that you didn’t give me.”

“That’s it, honey.”

“So it’s no risk for you to tell me what you know about Mr. Grouch.”

The wolf shifted his feet, elbows against the bar.

“Now that’s not the angle of approach I would’ve expected,” he whistled.

“I like to be subtle.”

Cranberry chewed thoughtfully on a lollipop.

“Grouch is a muscle-for-hire guy,” he said. “At least, that’s what you hear about. All of those guys have fingers in lots of pies. He’s got his two big zos, they do shakedowns and guard stuff. Then he bets on them in the fights and doubles his income.”

“They always win?”

“I’ve never heard of one losing.”

“And people let them keep fighting?”

“Who’s gonna stop them? Everyone likes to watch them win, anyway. Except the anti-zos, but they like it anyway because they’re taking orders from a human.”

“What do you know about the zoans?”

Shrug. “They’re big. Grouch calls them ‘Left’ and ‘Right,’ and they keep their mouths shut. And neither drinks.”

Geir chewed on that for a while. Cranberry didn’t have any other information for him, about Grouch’s affiliations or history. A few other faces Geir had picked out were small-time mobsters, known police informants, or had ties to other revolutionary groups. No one in the ZF’s official structure was showing their face these days.

“—and if anybody calls themselves ZF to your face, don’t believe them,” Cranberry added. “There’ve been a couple attacks in the last few days that they supposedly took credit for, but they were obvious mob hits.”

“Could be real,” Geir suggested. “They have to get funding from somewhere.”

“Yeah. You know,” Cranberry said before he had to attend to other patrons. “I was thinking I’d buy you a drink—but if you’re poking at Grouch, I’m not sure I can put myself in the crosshairs like that.”

Geir smiled apologetically.

“How it goes,” he said.

“Yeah. Good luck, babe.”

Chapter 7

Friday nights, the festivities at the carpet factory seemed to begin later. There was a small crowd building at the door when Geir arrived, chatting and drinking while they waited to be let in. At about seven o'clock, the crowd started to concentrate on the door, sand in an hourglass.

"I know you don't have any money," the doorman said when Geir reached him.

"I get that a lot," Geir said.

"I did you a favor yesterday. No more."

"Just one more, I think."

"Why?"

"Because tonight I'm going to challenge tonight."

"You have to be inside to challenge someone."

"What if it's Grouch?"

The doorman raised his chin, disbelieving, but his mouth took on an amused twist.

"Well sure, then. But you'd better do it."

Tonight there was a big chalkboard set up to the side of the ring, listing fighters, matchups, and odds, and a cadre of bookies and their bodyguards. There had been betting happening yesterday, but it looked like Friday was the main event, when the big money-handlers made their way to Wakefield.

It was about half an hour before the fights started. The crowd was getting good and rowdy, presumably the first combatants were preparing. Grouch wasn't there yet, but his seat was ready for him, in the same place and with a wide berth. Grouch, L and R were on the chalkboard.

Geir made sure to be near the ropes.

The mobster made his appearance during the first fight. The two humans inexpertly battering each other in the ring were interrupted by a slight hush in the audience that threw them both off their game. Left and Right, the huge rhino

and alligator zoans, towered above most of the crowd as they pushed through in front of their dour-faced employer. Owner?

Grouch stopped to talk with a bookie at the board, grimly and quietly. Between several yards of jostling shoulders, Geir could just see the human press his thumb to a pay block. He spent the week building up his zoans' stats, and made his bets on Friday. Busy man.

After several drawn-out bouts between tough-looking but clearly unseasoned fighters, human and zoan both, the squamate announcer declared that it was time for the heavyweights. A roar of approval from the crowd. The next matchup was between a large, scarred, and highly disciplined human, and an equally burly badger-model. It was fast and brutal, and the badger might lose the eye his opponent jabbed at for the victory. Right was next.

The alligator climbed over the ropes without fanfare, but to anxious applause. His opponent was a tall, stocky, and muscular human who bounced on his feet in a boxer's stance. From the audience's response, Geir thought the human must be a champion in his own circuit. Under other circumstances, he would have been more than formidable. But he was up against Right.

The alligator was at least two meters tall, and broad. He hadn't done any showing off, but as soon as his opponent was ready, rather than stripping off his white tank top, he clutched with his dull claws at the fabric and tore it in half, while showing his teeth with a growl. The crosshatching of ventral scales on his chest and belly was broken up with numerous scars; Geir guessed that his back was even worse.

As soon as the lizard started the match, Right took two strides forward to meet his opponent in the middle, and threw a wild hook with one fist. The human tried to duck it, but couldn't. It took him square in the cheek and temple, knocked him sideways off his feet and to the ground. He didn't get up.

The crowd cheered at the blow, but was stilled by the suddenness of the end. The cheering returned with a delirious edge, as two grunts leapt in to drag the

unconscious loser away. Right turned away, confirming Geir's suppositions about his back.

The alligator moved to return to his spot by Grouch. That was when Geir made his move.

It didn't take any showboating to drive the audience wild with excitement. A surprise challenger ducking between the ropes, let alone after such a show, was enough to renew their fervor. Geir hung his shirt over the rope, and slid his glasses over it. The key was to appear more confident than he was.

There were no judges or referees, the only people to stop him were the lizard, the bookies, and the organizers, if they were here. There were some startled looks among those, but no objections to feeding Right another snack.

In the distance, Grouch looked on with smoldering contempt. But he also said nothing.

Right turned back around and glowered at Geir. There was real anger in his eyes, and frustration. Geir could apologize later.

"Grouch's Right versus a Vulture!" the lizard shouted. "Go!"

The downed human's first mistake—the only one he'd had time for—had been to assume that Right would be slow. While the alligator wasn't fast, he was far from sluggish. When he came for Geir he tried to land a direct punch into the barbatus's eye, but Geir anticipated and dodged it. While he did, he swung the strong point of his shin into the other's kneecap. It didn't put the alligator down instantly, but it would make every step painful for him.

Right grabbed for Geir with both arms, and almost got a hold of him, but the vulture narrowly slipped away. Geir drummed his fists into Right's lower back, as if it were a tree in the arctic. The rough scutes made it close. When Right pulled away to swing at him, Geir stomped on his foot with his heel, scraping at the tip with his talons as he drew his foot away.

Something he had learned in his time after the Brightlove House: to bring down a large opponent, deal in small injuries.

He took a number of hits himself, punches to the stomach and claws raked across his arms. Each one was a reminder of how long it had been since he had done this. But he caught them right, twisting to minimize the damage.

He trapped one of Right's arms in the crook of his elbow, and twisted it back while he brought up a knee to drive into the alligator's side. The huge jaw opened, reached and clamped shut just inches away from Geir's face.

Right landed a blow to Geir's head, and the vulture staggered. Another to his gut. Dizzy, Geir barely caught the second with his muscles. Even absorbed by the muscle, it was still like the green-scaled fist were being driven into him by a truck.

As in the rhino's case, thick skin counted for something. Geir's knuckles were torn and bloodied from the scutes, and he couldn't be sure he was even hurting his opponent. Right continued to bear down with blows from his hands and knees. Geir kept in close so those couldn't build momentum, but they were still wearing him down.

He got behind Right, and wrapped his arms around the armored back to buy himself a moment to breathe. At the same time, he raked at the alligator's calves with his talons, pulled one hand away to give a few more stiff jabs to his side. Right twisted and reached, furiously trying to dislodge the smaller zoan.

Geir caught a glimpse of Right's eye. It wasn't fierce, there wasn't determination in it. Only sheer, desperate frustration. And Geir didn't think it was from the accumulation of small wounds, or not entirely.

The vulture let go and backed away, to steady himself, and wipe blood from his eyes, and gauge his opponent's state from his next moves. Right turned with no great hurry, breathing hard. He was definitely taxed by the stinging cuts and bruised muscles. But in addition to that, he was visibly losing whatever discipline he had. When he swung he left himself open for a kick in the gut. And when he charged, he wasn't prepared to catch Geir's forearm in his throat.

It was the surprise more than pain that dropped Right to his knees. Someone smaller or softer-skinned might have come away with a crushed windpipe, and as hard as he collided with Geir's arm, he might have thought that was what happened. He landed with his hands on the ground, gasping.

Geir raised a foot and brought the heel down between Right's shoulders, knocking the bigger zoan's hands out from under him. As soon as the huge, shovel-shaped mouth hit the floor, Geir punched him in the top of the head.

Right spasmed and lay still. The crowd was quiet, shocked. Geir had a clear view of his opponent's employer, staring across the basement with burning fury. Not childlike desperation like the defeated alligator, but the rage of someone who had thought a victory bought and paid for. Someone who could—and would—do something about it.

As the audience began to come to terms with Right's defeat, the lizard jumped in to declare the winner.

"Get this motherfucker a beer!" he shouted, and urged the victor out of the ring.

A few people cheered and slapped Geir on the back as he retrieved his shirt and glasses—the latter unwelcome, given all his new cuts and bruises. Most, probably the ones who knew the circuit better, kept their distance. They knew what wrath he was going to face. One of the organizers shook his hand, and when their implants met, transferred him fifteen hundred dollars for winning a fight. And then backed away as quickly as she could.

Geir had made himself poison. A familiar feeling; he'd missed it, a little.

Someone gave him the requested beer, and he raised it but didn't open it. He found a spot in the stairwell back to the entrance to sit and hold the bottle against his wounds until it lost its chill.

As he'd expected, someone came for him. He didn't know for sure if the two humans who found him in the stairwell were from Grouch's entourage, but chances were good. He shrugged and let them drag him to his feet, back down to

the basement, and into a network of halls past the boiler. Once out of the crowd, both drew pistols, one of which poked into his back the rest of the way. They left him in a storage room, amidst wire shelves packed with cardboard boxes and old clerical equipment. Not tied to the chair they sat him in, but with pretty clear instructions to stay.

The dark when they shut the door on him was probably supposed to be frightening, but it was really quite soothing for his aching head.

They left him there for hours, while his cuts scabbed over and the numbness in his bruises deepened into cloying aches. It wasn't unlike spending the night in his base camp's chamber, by the Mover's rail. For a moment he thought he missed the mindless robot, having it as his only company and sitting across from it while he ate his beans. Then he had trouble picturing it at all. As if his years in the tundra had vanished entirely once he'd come back to Terrace.

There was a barrier slipping down, the one between his life here and his afterlife in the snow. It was when he saw Samuel in the news, credited for the bombing, that it had begun. It was one thing to think about his earlier life when he was outside of it.

Chapter 8

Samuel isn't the first boy Geir kissed—that was a human from the packed and unruly school down the block from the Brightlove house, with whom he had played as a small child and come to feel strangely about as he grew. That kiss had been mutual, but the two had been disturbed by it and had never spoken again. Geir thinks about that a lot, throughout the day that he realized that he was going to kiss the wolf. When he realized that the kiss was an inevitability, and that he must be prepared for the worst to come of it.

But in the evening, when they have finished with their studies and stolen away together into the House's closed library like they do most nights, he ceases to worry, and it happens naturally. He plants his hands against the bookshelf on which Samuel is reading, and they look at each other, and they kiss. It's awkward, with one's lupine snout and the other's raptorial beak, but they make it work. Afterward, Samuel pulls a book off the shelf and slaps Geir with its open pages, playfully and shyly, and it will be some weeks before they kiss again, but in the moment both laugh and sit down together on the floor.

It is a year yet before Samuel will lead the movement for emancipation, with Geir as his lieutenant. This is when they start to discuss the issues that will lead to it. Or, rather, Samuel discusses them, while Geir, who is not quite civic-minded enough to hold all the pieces in his mind at once, quietly fawns.

The barbatus zoan is tall—nearly his adult height already—but thin, and has not quite begun to become strong, but he has been increasingly physical. He jogs the neighborhood streets in the hours that he is allowed out of the facility, he takes easily to whatever games the others invite him to play, and he does not hesitate to throw a measly punch when someone makes him angry. And he is getting made angry more and more often. Sometimes for things people do to him; more often for things he sees them do to others. The caretakers and teachers and counsellors—and sometimes the police—don't always agree that he was acting in

anyone else's defense, and often on reflection he isn't sure himself. Part of the reason he loves Samuel, part of the reason he wants to be with him all the time, is because Samuel knows what makes Geir fight, he can suggest a framework for fairness that makes more sense than anything the teachers try to impart. In the past months, Geir has started fewer fights over a look he thought a human gave another Brightlove zoan, or the sounds someone made when eating. And more over name-calling, bullying, and snitching.

To the caretakers, that doesn't mark any change in Geir's behavior. To Samuel, it means everything.

In the library, Geir tells Samuel he will be at his side forever.

Don't say that, Samuel says. We don't know if we'll believe the same things in ten years.

That doesn't make sense to Geir. He can't imagine coming to feel differently from Samuel. But he accepts the proscription, and they continue to sit together in peace.

When Grouch entered the storage room, he left his retinue at the door and came alone. The smoldering fury Geir had seen from across the basement was gone, replaced by the half-lidded, calculating look he'd worn before the defeat. Up close he was an unimpressive figure: aging, unkempt, angular but soft. He wore a nondescript button-up shirt and hooded jacket, over khakis and old sneakers. His hairline was receding.

"You lost me a lot of money today, bird," he said. "And if you ask me, that was the point. Not whatever you won. Not the satisfaction."

Geir was quiet.

"The fight was to send me a message," Grouch continued. "From who?"

"Just me," Geir said. He hadn't anticipated how much it would hurt to talk.

“Just you. Nobody knows you. You’re not one of the big orgs. A message doesn’t mean anything coming from just you.”

“It’s still just me.”

Grouch glowered.

“Then what was the message?”

“That I’m looking for work,” Geir said.

The human was unamused.

“You want me to do you a favor when you put one of my earners in the hospital.”

“You put him in a fighting ring.”

“I’m not negotiating with you.”

“I can do everything your zoans do, and I’ll do it for room and board.”

“Do you think this is a joke?”

“I took a beating. I’m pretty serious. You’ve seen what I can do. I’m an asset. Dump me on the street, I’ll find out who your competitors are and I’ll be their asset. Take me on and I’ll work off whatever I lost you.”

“Or I could shoot you.”

“You could.”

Grouch mulled it over, his face a mask of disdain.

“You’ll pay,” he said. “Everything you lost and more. Once you have, I’ll decide whether you owe more. If I find out you’re working for someone, I make you put a bullet in your brain.”

“Understood.”

The door closed back after Grouch left, shutting Geir in the dark again. They left him there for the rest of the night, until well into the morning, when the door opened again. This time it was Left, the rhinoceros zoan, who entered.

Left wasted no time, but punched Geir hard in the face without a word. Amidst the blinding pain and flashing lights, Geir felt himself being slung over the bigger zoan’s shoulder, before he passed out.

Chapter 9

Grouch's compound was deep inside one of Terrace's modest highrises, parts of several floors of office space converted into what seemed to be both his home and his base of operations. It was fortified and guarded. Left and Right each had their own quarters, and there were bunks for security and whatever other goons came and went.

And there was a jail. That was where Geir was staying.

It was a small and bare room with only a mattress in it, a harsh fluorescent light up above and a drain in the floor. Geir spent three days on that mattress, recovering from the damage Right had done to him. He was sure he wasn't the only one to have bled into the fabric. Someone tossed him two-packs or painkillers and cheap protein bars through a slot in the door, and there was a glass of water waiting for him on the floor every morning. He had gotten by with fewer amenities.

The first day Geir was up and about the cell, Grouch came to see him. Like before, the human left any retinue outside. He forced Geir to shake his hand, so Geir's thumb implant would meet one on the side of his hand.

"Your first installment is everything you won," he said.

"I'm glad to pay it."

"Don't be cheeky. You're on a trial run today."

That appeared to mean that Geir was to fill in for the still-recovering Right on a muscle job today. Some of Grouch's humans escorted the vulture out of his cell and into the nest of halls and closed-off rooms that surrounded the main domicile, to a staging room. Left was already there, arms folded and eyes narrowed at the bird. Geir kept his hands in his pockets and his face neutral.

At the center of the room was a huge table display, a cheap modern cathode ray tube screen facing upward beneath a glass touch screen. Grouch sent a file to

it from his wristband device. The face of a zoan, horse model, appeared on the screen. The human jabbed at it hard, twice, with two fingers, and left.

The rhinoceros zoan looked over the face on the screen, and then back at Geir, no less acid than before.

“That’s our mark,” he said. His voice was deep and it rumbled, but was quiet. He scrolled the screen to a second page that had more information.

The contract was addressed to Grouch, by what Geir assumed to be his nom de guerre. Anthony, as the horse was named, owed one hundred and ten thousand dollars in protection fees, to whoever had hired Grouch to collect it. The horse was a facilitator, the middle-man for a number of rackets who connected people with the unattainable supplies they needed. He operated out of his home, an apartment a couple districts over from Wakefield.

Geir read the information over and looked to Left. He thought it best to stay quiet.

“Collect and warn,” the rhino growled.

The vulture nodded. It was familiar work, but it was clear that he was to follow his partner’s lead. They each took a pistol from one of several drawers of weapons, and no other supplies. It was a simple and low-risk job; even the pistols were mostly for show, anyway. Though an important part of it.

Left glared at Geir throughout the car ride over. They sat on either end of an unmarked ground-van navigating the winding network of streets, in silence but for the rumble of the wheels on the rough asphalt. Geir didn’t try to avoid the rhino’s eyes, but he kept his face even.

“Why did you get in the way?” Left said finally.

“Right’ll be fine,” Geir said.

“We had a good thing. We had a rhythm.”

Geir tapped his gun against his knee, idly.

“Rhythms change,” he said. “If it weren’t me it’d be someone else.”

The rhino’s disdainful eyes shifted appraisingly.

“House or Adopt?” he grumbled. He’d already narrowed it down.

“House.”

“Street. And Manny: street.”

“Manny?”

“Right. Street.”

Geir nodded. Both of Grouch’s zoans, just released into a city at birth, to survive or not, like about one sixth of all zoans. The vulture’s childhood had been in the lap of luxury by comparison.

“I’ve had time on the street,” Geir assured him.

“No, you haven’t. Whatever you think, you haven’t.”

Geir didn’t argue. Of course leaving the liberated receiving home in his later teens was a fraction the hardship of navigating the inner city alone with the body of a five-year-old and only vague pre-imprinted instincts to work with.

“But you’re zo,” Left looked away. “Better than nothing.”

The van rocked and shook when it stopped to deposit them at the target’s location. When they climbed out the back, they were on the uppermost level of inner Terrace, three streets above the ground, and awash in the glint of sunlight on metal.

A Stamper had been dropped only a block away.

From this angle the colossal machine was like a fortress, its chrome curtain an outer wall stretched between four yellow turrets at its corners. It had been lowered into place to print something at the edge of Uptown, another statue or maybe some low-rise condominiums. The vertical slivers that made up the curtain, covered in layers of graffiti, fit firmly over the buildings on either side of the lot it occupied. Behind them the real machine, the vast and complex printer head and the mechanism that moved it, was invisible. The drones that had dropped it into place sped back to their dispatch.

If he hadn't spent fourteen years in the shadow of the Mover, Geir might not have believed such a machine could exist. But here in the decaying hive that used to be his home, there were three of them.

Unimpressed, Left waved Geir on.

Jared, the facilitator horse, lived in a tenement on the eastern side of the inner city, just a few blocks from Uptown. It was a cold, gray concrete slab with walkways along its front above the street. Human and zoan children who had been playing out front were running to watch what they could see if the Stamper, while their tired-looking elders sat quietly in folding chairs by their doors. None of them paid much mind to the two toughs climbing the stairs with pistons in their waistbands. The air smelled thickly of tobacco.

Their target's home was far down a hall inside. Cramped, smelled faintly of mold, lit only by an LED strip down the middle of the ceiling. That was how most people lived in Terrace, even before Uptown took off. Geir stood to the side of the door while Left banged on it without a word.

"I swear—" the horse's voice came through the door moments after the peephole darkened. "You don't have to come in, I'll find the money!"

Left backed up and kicked the door, heel hitting just above the handle so the deadbolt tore straight through the wall and sprayed splinters. The zoan inside only barely avoided being hit by the solid wood, fallen to his seat and scrabbling away.

"I'll pay!" he shouted again, holding an arm in front of his face.

Left stepped over him and into the apartment. Geir followed suit. It was much nicer inside than he would have expected. It was small but clean. Light-colored walls hung with benign—and real—paintings, short but lush carpet, a nice leather couch with a glass coffee table. A humble kitchenette, a couple closed doors to other rooms. The first thing Left did was knock a teapot off the one-eye stove, cracking the real tiles on the floor below it and spraying steaming water across the room.

Geir lifted the cowering horse by his shirt and sat him hard on the couch, gesturing with a slight smile to watch. While Jared 13R-C88 sank, wide-eyed, into the leather, the vulture gathered the paintings off the wall and slit them open one by one with a talon. As if he were looking for something behind the canvases, but of course there wouldn't be any cash hidden. The ruined artwork he discarded on the carpet.

One door led to a bathroom. Geir emptied the mirror-fronted medicine cabinet into the sink and wrenched it from the wall to throw on the ground. In the space behind it, he found a manilla envelope that contained a number of handwritten IOUs made out to Jared, and informal barter contracts. Geir waved it at the facilitator and moved on to the other door. Left was still zealously working the den, stomping chairs and throwing beer bottles out of the refrigerator.

The second door was locked, but it didn't take as much force as the front. It opened onto an adjoining apartment, which Jared appeared also to own. His real base of operations.

The second den was stacked all around with cardboard boxes, televisions and monitors, pairs of shoes wrapped in plastic. The only furnishings were a desk and several small filing cabinets, presumably for records too sensitive to be kept online. Mostly suppliers, probably.

Each item had a tag that would probably tell Jared where he had acquired it, whom for, and how much was owed on it. None of it that Geir saw was very expensive, so it wouldn't be worth the effort for Grouch's client to fence. He flipped a few flat screens over and tore up a few pairs of shoes, and scattered some of the paper records on the floor.

Left finished tossing the bedroom and came back to the horse shaking on the couch. He took Jared by the collar and made to hit him in the face, but stopped and looked to Geir.

"You like to fight so much," he growled.

Geir hesitated, but nodded and handed his seized envelope to Left to take over. He hit the facilitator twice in the eye and cheek, not like he would in a fight but hard enough for a noncombatant. Jared pleaded uselessly before either blow but stopped after the second, head lolling in a daze.

"You have thirty more days," Left shoved the horse back onto the couch.

Before they left, the rhino took Jared's hand in his, to transfer whatever money he had. Probably only a couple hundred; this wasn't the home of someone who was trying to skim.

The van was on its way back when they reached the street. While they waited, bloody-knuckled and buzzed with adrenaline, the asphalt vibrated with the motions of the Stamper's hidden printer head. The steel curtain around it cast a heavy shadow over the block. Geir had to wonder if the client who had just ordered the facilitator shaken down would someday lose everything when someone tore down their building to print something else in its place.

"He'll never make it," Geir observed as the van pulled up.

"So?"

Shrug. Geir had seen it dozens of times. The different protection rackets did it in different ways: some out a person out of business after one missed payment, others shook them down deadline after deadline while they racked up more debt, actively hurting their chances of ever getting paid. In thirty days, Jared 13R-C88 would be hassled again, or else Grouch's client would kick him out and absorb his operation into their own.

Most outfits didn't want the trouble of cleaning up after killing someone. Geir could hope that was the case with this one.

"If someone doesn't pay, they pay," Left added when they were loaded up, as if insulted that Geir seemed not to know it.

"It's my first day," Geir spread his hands apologetically.

Left grunted.

"I'm Geir."

The rhino gave him a sharp look.

“No,” he said. “You’re not. If Grouch takes you on, maybe he’ll call you something. The name they put on you in the factory doesn’t exist.”

“Even Manny?”

Growl.

“Okay. What’ll he call me?”

“I don’t know. Left, Right, Center.”

“I’ve never been center-anything in my life.”

“Maybe he’ll just call you The Third One.”

“Yeah. Does that mean you’ll get a smaller cut?”

“We don’t get ‘cuts.’ We get a bed indoors.”

“Oh. So he used zoans for free labor. Like we were made for.”

Left rolled his eyes.

“That’s Housie shit,” he said. “I never had a bed indoors before him.”

Geir backed off. This wasn’t the time to sow division. He’d never been an argued, anyway.

“What are you going to say, it’s illegal?” Left surprised him by pursuing. Moreso, in that it was obviously a joke.

“They don’t need us anymore anyway,” Geir waved his beak back in the direction they’d come from. “They’ve got Stampers and Movers now.”

“If they made muscle bots Grouch would throw us out right away.”

“If he could bet on them in fights too, anyway.”

That was too far; Left soured again at the reminder of where Geir had come from, and turned away. Fair enough.

After a few minutes of silence, the rhinoceros opened the envelope in his hands and shook out its contents to look over.

“You know he’s going to make us collect on these,” he shook his head when he recognized them.

Chapter 10

Whether Stuyron's client had eliminated all its targets or the crisis had overcome them and they could no longer pay, the spree came to an abrupt end. For the first time in several grueling days, Sparrow's team was off active assignment. Each received instructions to return to their cover home and await activation.

After one day of rest in his rented cottage, Sparrow made his request.

He went for groceries on his second day home, to replace the produce that had spoiled on his extended assignment. On the long road back from Utrecht he recognized Robin on her motorcycle, and knew Kuiper must have agreed to meet; none of the accipiters would stray near each other's cover homes if not. Both his partners and their handler were in his home when he arrived. Sparrow put his groceries away and returned with a fresh pot to take one of the four chairs around the coffee table in the den. Robin and Dove both gave him questioning looks.

"I'm due back in the Hague in three hours," Kuiper said, with a smile but without preamble.

"We can be quick," Sparrow promised.

He poured four small mugs of coffee and sat straight, as he and all his accipiter brethren had been taught to. Robin and Dove sat the same, while Kuiper's back was against the back of his chair, and his legs crossed. All eyes were on Sparrow.

"We are dissatisfied," the hawk said.

It had always been rare for any of Stuyron's hawks to make a request of a handler, even though they were assured that their needs would be met. In their youth, it had been nominally allowed, but tacitly met with reduced privileges and harsher training. Both Sparrow's partners tensed, but Kuiper only gave a mild, interested look from above his mug as he drank.

"You've been performing excellently," the human noted.

"With the parameters of our work," Sparrow elaborated.

The others recognized what he was talking about. He had anticipated the slight easing in Robin's muscles, but not the subtle set to Dove's brow.

"Which parameters?" Kuiper was all patience. "Your per diem can be adjusted as needed."

"We're being given assignments on too short of notice, we can't do our work properly."

"But, like I've said, you've been meeting your objectives with aplomb."

"We aren't thugs, we have standards for our work."

"We are concerned that the last weeks represent a new model for us," Robin rephrased it.

Kuiper raised a finger to quiet them.

"We are working with a client who has a very urgent contract," he explained.

"The expedience is a part of their request."

"And it isn't up to us to negotiate with clients," Dove said.

"Their contract isn't finished?" Robin asked.

"No, it isn't."

"Will there be another week like the last?"

"We'll do whatever we're asked," Dove looked pointedly at the other two.

Kuiper folded his hands in his lap, mug on the table. He smiled but he weighed his words.

"That is between the client and management," he said. "You are fulfillment officers, remember."

Sparrow resisted the urge to tap a talon against his beak. He did that when he was nervous. He needed to stop. Suppressing tells was basic training. Dove's offense at his concerns was having undue effect on him. He couldn't remember a time in fifteen years that any of the accipiters, at least the ones who would become his team, had been at odds. They'd had unity and cooperation drilled into them from the day they were decanted and delivered to Stuyron as children.

"Is that all?" Kuiper was congenial.

“No. We would like a guarantee that we won’t be asked to compromise our work.”

“We don’t need that,” Dove put in. “Our work is our work.”

“What do you think, Robin?” Kuiper looked to the third.

“We would like our discomfort noted,” Robin chose her words. She looked at Sparrow sidelong. “We don’t want to be undervalued. But we wouldn’t make an ultimatum.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” Kuiper switched his legs and knit his fingers together. “I’m sensing something else, Sparrow.”

“The wear on our equipment—”

“I need you to be honest with me, Sparrow,” Kuiper was not much older than the hawks, but he had been involved in their training from the start; he talked, sometimes, like a teacher to a child. “Remember that our service is a machine, and you are modules within it. To keep it running, I have to know what the problem is.”

Sparrow breathed deeply.

“I don’t like killing zoans,” he said.

Their handler’s smile was sickly sympathetic.

“There isn’t to be any discussion of that,” he said firmly. “And I won’t report that you complained, this time. Is that understood?”

“It is,” Dove said, eyes hard.

“I can see, however, if there is an opportunity for your team to take on the higher-profile targets in the coming wave. Those might be more satisfying for you. That’s what I can offer.”

Robin nodded immediately. Dove’s eyes were harsh, but there was a note of pleading to them.

“We’ll accept that,” Sparrow said.

“I’m glad this could be resolved.”

Their handler gave them a nod and left through the back door, where there would be a stealth aircar waiting for him. The hawks looked at one another.

“You should have told us what you were going to say,” Robin said.

Sparrow didn’t say anything. He cast his eyes to the floor.

“I can’t believe you would say that,” Dove glared. “I can’t believe you would think it.”

“There are no jobs you would rather not do?” Robin turned to the bigger hawk.

“It doesn’t matter what we’d rather do, it matters what we’re assigned to do.”

“Well, I agree with Sparrow. We’ve been killing more zoans. There aren’t many of us.”

“There are plenty of zoans. There are millions.

“Very few next to humans.”

“If they’re our targets, they’re our targets.”

“Their Stuyron’s clients’ targets,” Sparrow said.

Dove’s brow furrowed. The three of them were the same submodel, spizaetus pattern: the black crown made his brow look even heavier.

“Why does that matter?

“They aren’t our targets.”

“We are Stuyron,” Dove spoke slowly, clipped his words harshly. “Stuyron brought us in. We would have been disconnected in the baths to die, or thrown out on the streets when we were ten minutes old, but instead we have a place, and we’re cared and provided for. So they’re our clients. Even if we don’t sign the contracts.”

“I’m not arguing against any of that,” Sparrow said.

“Then make sense.”

“If Kuiper comes through,” Robin interrupted them. “We will be working better targets, we’ll have more breathing room, we might not be rushed. That’s half the problem, isn’t it?”

Sparrow nodded, but he wasn't sure. He had never been curious about a client before, but more and more, he wanted to know at whom they were being aimed and why. And even wanting it felt like betrayal: of his superiors in the company, but also of Dove. And, by Dove's logic, of Robin as well.

He stood and nodded, stretched his neck to unbunch the feathers around his turtleneck.

"We should be ready whenever we're called back in," he said to his partners. "You shouldn't be here."

He didn't wait to see them out, but mounted the old stone stairs to shut himself in his bedroom.

Chapter 11

"How did he do?" Grouch asked Left when they returned to the compound, eyes on Geir.

"He did fine," Left admitted. "Wasn't too gentle. Didn't showboat."

"He can start to work off Right's bills, then."

Grouch shook the zoan's hand, to transfer the money they had taken from Jared 13R-C88. Then he took Geir's, too, not trusting that the vulture hadn't taken anything himself. It came with the species, Grouch or no.

"You're in the bunks with them," he said, when he was satisfied he wasn't being skimmed from. "Until I decide if this is a long-term deal."

He turned away from them, to check his wrist display privately. His office was small and unassuming, though Geir could tell that its furnishings were expensive. Desk and chairs of real wood and fabric, light-colored carpet woven with a tasteful floral pattern, shelves of paper records.

"I have calls to make," the human said. "Go away."

The office was off a main hall, which for all Grouch's stolid severity had a welcoming luxury to it. Geir assumed it was where the mobster held his meetings, and probably took his meals alone. It was set up like the dining hall of an aristocratic manor, with a long table, bunched velvet wall hangings and faux-marble figures on pedestals against the walls.

"Have to share a room with you now," Left growled.

He fumbled a pack of nicotine gum out of his pocket. In designing zoans, humans hadn't been sure how to adapt a pachyderm's stumpy forefeet to fingers, and had settled on the half-measure of tapered keratinous fingertips that were impossible to develop much dexterity with. Geir offered a hand with the gum, and Left grudgingly accepted. The human world may not be fully adapted to hooked talons, but Geir's were easily deft enough for most tasks. He got the tablet out of its foil-backed case and returned it.

"Why Grouch?" Left asked when he accepted it. "If all you needed was money you could've just fought. Now you've got shit."

"Bed indoors," Geir shrugged. Added, "I wanted stable work, and I've done muscle before. A long time ago."

"Even as a Housie?"

Geir considered telling stories about the enforcing he'd had to do to keep the Brightlove House running, but if Grouch hadn't told his zoans yet who they were working with, maybe it was for the best. If Grouch had even found out himself; the human still hadn't said anything about it.

"I ran away," he explained, more or less honestly. "I was on my own for a long time."

Left shrugged.

"Come on," he said.

He showed Geir through the aging hallways to the office block that had been converted into the zoans' bunk. With a hand on the knob to let him in, he gave a grim but dismissive look: Right was inside.

It was surprisingly well-appointed, if sparse. Left and Right had low beds like those in a firehouse, each with a footlocker and a minifridge, and a weight bench between them. All good quality, not cheap. Also no bed for Geir at present. That was alright.

The alligator sat on the far bed from the door, back to the bird. Shirt off, like the last time Geir saw him, scarred scutes on display. He had been occupied with something beyond the beds, but when the door opened he stopped. His head turned the merest fraction, enough to show the gauze packed over one eye. And enough to direct his growl at the intruder.

Geir didn't waste time being apologetic, let alone indirect. He crossed the wide room, sparing a moment to inspect the weights setup, and stood across the bed from Right. The alligator stood: a simple, economic motion, whose effect he had plenty of experience to know. To anyone less than remarkably tall, he kept rising,

up and up. So much bigger than he seemed when seated. So much bigger than seemed possible.

When Right turned, Geir had a brief view of what he had been working on. An arrangement of potted plants occupied the far end of the room, carefully trimmed and freshly watered. But it disappeared when Right squared on him.

Shovel-shaped snout hung low, fearsome teeth right in front of Geir's beak. The uncovered eye—a bit bigger in proportion than that of a real crocodilian—was full of anger and hurt.

Geir offered his hand.

"Geir," he said. He didn't smile. That might seem like gloating, and he was not.

The alligator only continued to glare for a moment, then turned away. Left pushed past Geir to talk with his partner privately. Geir kept out of it and backed off, but watched. Left talked seriously and in a hush; Right didn't say a word.

"If Grouch wants you here then Grouch wants you here," the rhinoceros turned back to Geir. "Right isn't gonna be trouble. But you're on the floor."

Geir nodded acceptance of the circumstances.

"Will I get blankets?"

"If he's got extra somewhere, and wants to give them to you. Is this the life you got in the ring to get into?"

"A bit more spartan than I expected. What's Grouch's deal?"

"Before my time and I don't ask." Left fumbled out another piece of gum, on his own this time. He gave it some thought, though. "I know he used to have a wife and kids."

"Ran out on them?"

"People say they ran out on him because he was borrowing money. Who knows. He doesn't talk about it. I've heard him say he used to be under someone's thumb but he isn't anymore. He says it like he killed whoever it was."

"But he paid or canceled his debts and now he's a big player too."

“Guess so.”

“Does he ever work with any of the big outfits?”

Sunken rhinoceros eye turned on him impatiently.

“I dunno. It’s not our business who he works with.”

“What about activists, resistance groups?”

“Housie shit. It hasn’t always been me and Manny—Right. We had another third five years back. He thought he could use Grouch to get in on bigger action.”

“Did he?”

“Grouch shot him in the face where the weight bench is.”

“Ow.”

“It smelled like bleach in here for weeks.”

“I’m not looking for any bigger action. I just want to be good at the job.”

“You’re fine at the job. I’m going to bed. You figure something out”

Left spat his gum out into a wastebasket and went to confer with his crocodilian opposite, and leaving Geir to figure out his own sleeping arrangements. For tonight it seemed like that was going to be the bare, stiff carpet on the far end of the rhinoceros’s bed.

Chapter 12

Left was already on the weight bench when Geir woke, pressing with an urgency that probably didn't much help his strength. The clattering of weights reminded the vulture that he wasn't completely recovered yet from the head blows Right had dealt him.

Having the form of a rhinoceros, of course, Left would have always lived under pressure to maintain a weight and toughness that may not come natural to him. As it was, he was nearly as large and musclebound as his partner, and drew power from a stocky and well-exercised core. Still, he never wore any expression but one of intense frustration when he worked out.

Beyond him, the alligator still slept, on his side with his back to Geir.

One of Grouch's armed men banged on the frosted door and let himself in. His assault rifle hung from its shoulder strap, on standby in case the boss's muscle made trouble.

"He wants to see you," the young human informed Geir.

Grouch was in the dining hall, standing next to one chair pulled out from the table. He looked as disgruntled and suspicious as ever. Geir understood. He took the seat, and faced his boss.

"It looks like it might work out to keep you around," Grouch said, as he dismissed the guard. "So I've been digging."

Geir nodded. It had only been a matter of time before he was found out; he had to hope he didn't seem like a threat.

"—and why can't I find anything?"

Geir hadn't realized he had been holding his breath until he let it out, blinking. All he could do was shrug.

"A human can be born off the grid," Grouch lowered his head another fraction. "Every single zoan has a catalog number and a public database entry. Why does yours have nothing in it?"

“I’ve never looked myself up,” Geir admitted. It was basically true: when he had been at Samuel’s side in the news, his history had all been one click away—and when he’d been working the rail, looking back on his record was the last thing he’d wanted to do.

And so: Grouch didn’t know about his history with the ZF, after all.

“Well, I’m here,” Geir raised his hands powerlessly. “I was born.”

Grouch came around so he could show Geir the record that came up on his wristband display. The database entry showed a walkaround capture of his face—a little inaccurate, because those were based on projected adult appearances, calculated based on factory genes before zoans were even embryos—and little else. It gave his factory-assigned name and familiar twelve-digit serial code, the number and corporate owner of the factory at which he had been grown. Nothing about the Brightlove House and its revolution, nor his several arrests before and after leaving it, not even his employment with Lans-Cartier Industrial.

“If you’ve done muscle work before, then you’ve been arrested,” Grouch said. He straightened, still behind the chair and out of view. “And there isn’t even that. Do I need to tell you how it looks?”

“Cops would’ve built me a profile. Something’s obviously just wrong with it.”

“You could be anybody. The last thing I need is trouble, I should put you down and spare myself.”

“I can tell you what should be there.”

Geir didn’t sense any movement behind him. He hadn’t noticed a gun on Grouch’s person, but that didn’t mean he didn’t have one. Nor that there weren’t armed men on the other side of each door waiting for a signal.

“Try,” Grouch said.

The vulture thought back to what he had told Left, and Cranberry, and to scraps of names and information he had encountered in the past.

“I was a Housie,” he stated it as though it were part of a long list of personal factoids he had to sift through. “But it wasn’t a real receiving house, it was a

family that adopted us all and called itself that. They were the Morrrows, in Chicago. I ran away when I was two...I mean, seven. I got arrested a lot. I was in juvie all the time. There should be at least ten B&E's, a lot of thefts, a lot of squatting. I started working for bookies and dealers when I was ten, because I was big for my age."

Grouch was quiet. All of this could be disproven if he spoke directly to anyone involved.

"How'd you get from Chicago to Terrace?" the human shoved the chair with a boot, which he braced on its crossbar.

Geir searched for a story, and found none.

"I joined the workforce," he said. "I worked a rail line for fourteen years."

"The one that was bombed?"

"Yeah...I quit before that happened."

"Why?"

"I was tired of it."

Silence.

"I'm not a cop," Geir repeated. He was sharply aware of what might have been a gun just brushing the feathers of his neck.

"This is the part where you explain why you're here."

"Joining the workforce is suicide for a zoan," Geir blurted. "You do it when you're done being alive. You get some credit but they don't actually pay you, you're just doing a mindless task until you die. I walked up and down a railroad track for fourteen years. It was like I was dead, and I thought I wanted it that way. There was everything before, and it was over; now I was dead and in limbo, just walking back and forth forever."

"But you weren't dead," Grouch said. His voice was unreadable.

"So I came back to life."

There was silence for what felt like a long time. Then Grouch withdrew his boot from the chair, and came back around to face the bird. His eyes were cold: there wasn't anger in them.

"I'm going to have the three of you collect some of your last target's debts," the human said, as if there had been no threats spoken. "Be out by noon."

He took his tablet with him and returned to his office, leaving Geir in the dining hall alone. The zoan sat quietly, head spinning, for some time before he scooted the chair under the table and went to inform his new partners of the day's assignment.

Geir was quiet on the drive, as the van took the three of them to the homes and workplaces of Jared 13R-C88's debtors. He sat across from the other two, and while Right's gaze burned on him, Geir didn't have the energy to meet it. He made a show of polishing his glasses to avoid it.

Left had a wristband that showed their targets and what they owed. It was sour work: mostly poor families who had to give up meager valuables to pay for necessities Jared had gotten them. Only a few better-off businessmen owing on Uptown amenities.

As Left said, people paid, or they paid.

"Leave him alone," the rhinoceros finally chided the alligator, after a few stops.

Right huffed once, and then dropped his angry glare. He sat back on the bench, arms folded, and breathed. The glare had been heavy; Geir felt better.

"You did hurt him," Left muttered.

"Does he do this with everyone he gets into the ring with?" Geir asked.

"Most don't hurt him."

That certainly followed what Geir had seen.

"The fighting is Grouch's idea, right?"

"Eh. It keeps us sharp. He'll put you in the ring eventually."

"I'm guessing we don't get a cut of his winnings."

Left glared.

"Housie shit," Geir backed off. Raw as he felt after his questioning earlier, there was one benefit: apparently he wasn't one step away from being identified as he had thought. "Have you ever worked for the Zoan Front?"

Left rolled his eyes.

"Guarded a parley one time. Held cops off a protest. Might be other times when we didn't know the client."

Right had turned to put his feet up on the bench, back to his opposite. He had a small notebook, and was drawing in it. Geir didn't pry.

"Are they one of the major players in Terrace?" the vulture asked.

"They don't do shit. Everyone's volunteers, no one's hard. Maybe they blew up the train station, but that had to be a fluke." Right's shoulders shuddered in a single soundless laugh, and Left added: "Like you beating Right."

"Sure," Geir smiled.

"They might be wising up," Left continued. "They've been getting in on real rackets the last couple weeks. Last job we did before you came around was work a guy over that they stole a drop box from, with a quarter million in it."

"They could be planning something big," Geir mused.

"They've got new management."

"New management?"

"It used to be the guy on the news who'd hire us. Now it's some zo lady. We haven't worked with her yet though."

"What happened to the other guy?"

"I don't know. Probably in hiding. Everyone's after him. Why are you so interested?"

"I worked on that train line. That's the job I lost."

"Shit."

That had both other zoans' attention. Right didn't put his feet back on the floor, but cocked his head to listen, brows raised.

"Were you there?" Left leaned in.

"I was out walking the rail, but one day later and I would've been. The company laid me off but comms were down and supplies had quit coming, so I'd walked away anyway. Still don't know who died, not sure I want to."

"Over a thousand," the rhinoceros reported. "It took out buildings all around, too."

"Grouch let you read about it?"

"It was everywhere, he couldn't stop us hearing. People thought the ZF was hot shit for a few days, like maybe they had other targets they were gonna blow soon. It's been two weeks though, everyone's moved on."

Geir shook his head. He couldn't believe Samuel would give the word to kill thousands, but it had been so long since Geir had even heard from him. He had to hear it from Samuel's own mouth.

"If the ZF hires us, you know you can't say no," Left said seriously.

"Cross that bridge," Geir smiled.

At the next stop, he stopped Right after Left had disembarked. The alligator paused and turned to him slowly, his enormous snout a pendulous obstacle in the confines of the van. Geir offered a hand, relaxed as he could make it.

"Sorry," he said.

Right tossed his head slightly, and grunted. It was the least hostile thing he'd said to Geir so far.

Geir lifted his shirt and parted the feathers to show the bruise on his side, half again the size of the thorny fist that had made it, still black and purple and not fading any time soon.

"You gave me what I had coming," he said.

The alligator nodded. He said nothing, but the quick jab he gave at the bruise with the side of his hand as he climbed out of the van was more playful than malicious. It still hurt, though.

Chapter 13

Within the week, Grouch had Geir in the fighting ring. The gangster never spoke to him, but let Left explain what was expected of him. It was understood that his victory over Right was a fluke, and no one thought he would win like the other two, though punishment would be severe if he lost. The vulture worked his disused muscles on the weights afforded the three zoans—no bed yet, but at least some blankets showed up one night—and even sparred with the other two and some of Grouch's humans. On Friday night, he stood behind Left in the carpet factory basement, waiting for his match. He was on the board as Grouch's Third.

Unknown despite the splash he'd made fighting Right, Geir was clearly in a lighter category than his colleagues. His opponent was a ropy zoan of a vague mustelid model, tall and battered but green. Any zoan could count on having the same years of experience, but how much of it was direct or indirect was an unknown. Geir took a few hits, but the mustelid didn't have any defense against his practiced blows. He won with a knee to his opponent's chin, which knocked the other zoan to the floor long enough for the lizard to count him out.

When he left the ring to shake the bookies' hands and receive his winnings, he caught a familiar face in the crowd. Cranberry, arms folded, lifted a hand to wave from across the basement. Once he was sure he wasn't going to be called back to Grouch's side right away, Geir went to meet the wolf.

"I heard the barb who knocked Grouch's Right out was coming back to the ring," Cranberry said wryly.

"I haven't gotten myself killed yet," Geir said.

"Not yet. I'm keeping my distance still, you know."

"I know. But you can still buy me a drink."

"It seems like you should be the one buying, hon, with that cool thousand you just came into."

"That's all spoken for already, unfortunately."

"I told you this was a bad angle. I've got some news for you. Is it safe to tell it?"

Geir considered, and led the wolf to the storage room in which he had been locked the last time he was here. Not secret, but out of direct sight.

They kissed as soon as they were alone. It took Geir by surprise—doubly, because it was as much his move as Cranberry's. He'd had a few brief trysts after Samuel but before the Mover, nothing since. Maybe it was adrenaline after the fight, maybe it was a cover in case they were followed, or maybe Cranberry wanted something Geir couldn't give. For the moment, he questioned and interpreted nothing, as the wolf wrapped his legs around the bird to hold himself closer, hands clutching at Geir's cheeks.

Afterward, they parted and rested against the shelves, breathing hard.

"Yeah," Cranberry said. There was no reason to discuss what had just happened.

Geir tipped his glasses back down to his eyes and shifted his weight.

"What do I need to know?" he asked.

"I had some ZF guys come through the other day," the wolf said, seriously, though he was still straightening out his skewed piercings. "At the Ironclad. I kept them talking."

"You don't have to tell me if it puts you in danger."

Cranberry thought about that, said nothing about what he decided.

"Someone split off after the bomb," he said, in a hush. "Her name is Sike, and she took half the ZF with her."

"More radical?"

"Dunno. But they're operating under the name ZF. Just the letters, not Zoan Front."

"They're the ones who have been digging their heels into organized crime."

"The guys said they have to get funded for bigger actions. They had plenty of cash, though."

"Did they say anything about Sike?"

"Nope. Just that they liked her."

"What do you think?"

"It sounds like the ZF is a hot mess right now. If that's still where you're hoping to get, then you're hopping into an oven."

"And you can't point me to the guys who came to the Ironclad?"

Cranberry smiled ruefully.

"Hon," he said, but didn't finish the thought. "I like a man with a purpose, but I'm backing off, okay? That's how I survive rubbing elbows with the boys I do."

"I'll let you know when things are sorted," Geir said.

The wolf rolled his eyes, but nodded.

"I owe you a drink," he said, as he left. "If you do ever sort things."

And Geir would sort things. But it sounded like those things were more complicated than he'd thought.

2215, and the zoans are twelve-or-seventeen years old. No longer tucked away in group homes and scurrying in shadowed alleys, they are out, they are present in everyone's lives, they are emerging as citizens. Where they had previously been heard, they now have the chance to be listened to.

The Brightlove House has been independent for years. It has no human staff, its teenage occupants are all emancipated and have so far successfully provided for themselves. Their agreement with the city's government holds, and they are rarely hassled. They are infamous in their community, as a curiosity and a fluke, an example of the strangeness of the times.

In winning independence, Samuel had agreed not to instigate similar rebellion outside his new fiefdom. At the time, that had seemed a fair sacrifice; the other terms were more than satisfactory, and there was so much work to be

done in the years immediately following emancipation. There was paperwork to complete, there were contracts to negotiate. Detractors of zoan independence protested; and opportunists, thinking the house would be affluent and vulnerable, tried to get in: for many months, much of Samuel's attention was on repelling them, with Geir's help. But soon, their needs were met, lines of communication were in place and stable, and their assailants ceased to be allured by the novelty of the independent zoan house. The challenge Samuel faces now is that of administration.

Geir can see right away that Samuel is struggling. The chrysocyon is often on edge, antsy, irritable. When they sit together at nights, he complains about petty disagreements among the Brightloves that he has to mediate, and about the pressure he feels to have answers for everyone who brings him a problem. Like the rest of them he is only seventeen, he knows no more about governance than they do. Geir makes suggestions, but in addition to his age, Geir completely lacks the propensity that has made Samuel successful so far.

Toward the start, Samuel appreciates Geir's suggestions, the care that they represent, even if they are inactionable. Less, as the months progress. Geir perceives over time that Samuel wishes badly to ask him to stop, so he does. They often do not talk, now, but they are not unhappy in each other's company.

House meetings are frequent. Calls for Samuel to appoint some kind of government are frequent, but he refuses. The Brightlove House is a small community, he says, every member should be able to know every other's needs, negotiate in a friendly manner and avoid harming or undercutting. He may reluctantly accept his role as mentor, but he will not put any zoan above any other. Some insist that those who most directly helped overthrow the caretakers should be given authority, and this Samuel especially denounces.

The Brightlove House's first trial is held in the summer.

Cameron 55-D4XR comes to Samuel with a complaint about Jeremy DC8-089. Jeremy has been verbally abusive to many of his housemates and zoan

neighbors: Cameron has noted a pattern. A rabbit model, Jeremy targets zoans modeled after non-mammalian animals. He scoffed when Cameron, a piscine model, raised the accusation. Then, in the night, the plaintiff was woken by an unseen assailant forcing his door and holding a pillow over his face—not to suffocate him, but to frighten and distract him as the intruder stole the rations from his cooler. In the morning Jeremy made sure his victim saw him casually eating a candy bar in the garden, which should have been a rare commodity.

There have been similar disputes in the House's independent years, but the accused buckled quickly and it took only brief talks to repair damage and restore harmony. When Samuel and Geir approach Jeremy, the rabbit only laughs off the accusation. Cameron insists, and he denies it again, smugly and barely hiding his derision. Geir breaks into Jeremy's room and finds twice the rabbit's rations in his cooler.

So what? Jeremy says. Are you gonna call the cops? Humans?

The trial is as informal as Samuel can make it. He asks everyone in the house for insight or testimony, invites those who offer it to sit around the dining tables pushed into a square and share. Geir has to drag Jeremy in, and Cameron is too scared to attend. When everyone has spoken, the picture is clear: Jeremy's attitude has been an affront to everyone, and none believe he will stop if unpunished.

Samuel asks them all to decide on a punishment. In turn, they all ask him to decide.

Jeremy says that Samuel won't mete any out. Everyone is indebted to the maned wolf, but he has no authority. His attitude is enough that Samuel asks Geir to lock him in his room until there is consensus.

There is none, for several days. Samuel and the others propose and reject numerous modes of punishment. It is proposed that Jeremy's rations should be halved: Samuel insists that hunger should never be wielded as a weapon. That Jeremy should be forced to do unwanted work, cleaning the bathrooms and

maintaining the yard: Samuel will not permit anyone to exercise the power required to force him.

Cameron and several others come to Geir in the night, when he is sitting guard at the rabbit's door. They say that Samuel cannot make this decision, that he will waffle and deny any justice indefinitely. They ask that Geir let them in to punish Jeremy in kind for his assault, plus extra to account for his violent words. Allow it, and they will ask no more of Samuel.

Geir knows Samuel would disapprove, but he also knows that Cameron is right. His friend will make no move to deter actions like Jeremy's, and while he doubts their community would crumble, he also knows that distrust in Samuel would be disastrous. He refuses to let the group in. He does it himself.

After the beating, Jeremy does not wake in the morning. Geir admits to Samuel what he has done, and the rabbit is rushed to the hospital, bones broken and bleeding internally.

Samuel doesn't say a word to Geir for the rest of the day. It isn't that he's angry—not at the bird, anyway. He understands Geir's reasons, and to some extent even agrees with them. But every aspect of the crisis fills him with frustration and distress. He feels useless, and hopeless, and clueless, he feels like he dove into shallow water but just kept sinking and sinking beyond where the bottom should be, and that is the first thing he says when he speaks again.

In the next months, the commune seems to be functioning again, but there is a difference in the air. No one has the words to express it, but the handling of Jeremy has opened up a vault of uncertainty that had been undiscovered before. Even those who had come with Cameron to request the action sense the danger in it. To Geir, it feels as though his fists are not his own: someone will direct them at a target again soon, and he does not even know who will do it, or whether he will resist.

A new specter is spreading across the world, as the zoans approach their eighteenth birthday. The matter is hotly debated: will they be granted the status

of adulthood? Some authorities insist it should be withheld until their twenty-third, when they have been alive for eighteen years. Others say they should be considered minors forever. Adulthood is a matter of reliability, they say; we can't know what maturity this first generation will have at that age. Especially since there has not yet been a successful zoan pregnancy—those will come in the next few years—so their mettle has not been properly tested.

What would they do with the freedom?

For the Brightloves the question is abstract. There is a pall as the UN deliberates, as the youths worry that their emancipation will be rescinded. But the pall is background noise, one of many anxieties the zoans all share. Another reason for them to be on edge.

Sentiments like Jeremy's are becoming commonplace. In childhood, zoans had been unified by their otherness from humans, but now most of the commune's population scarcely deals with them, and hasn't in years. Their animal faces look more different from one another than they had realized, and they don't know what to think.

Mammals are more sophisticated and others are dumb and simple—or else mammals are more like humans, and shouldn't be trusted. Mice eat cheese, dogs are gross, reptiles are cold-blooded, therefore unfeeling and scheming. Cops are pigs, so porcine zoans are in league with oppressors. Predator animals should lord it over prey animals—or should be subjugated so they can't give in to their killer instincts.

Geir hears them all every day. They are widespread ideas, spoken casually, rarely meant but also scarcely questioned. He asks Samuel to let him form a clandestine police force, himself and a few trusted compatriots, to root out and quash this thinking, even if it takes violence to do so. Later he will recognize the dangers in such a force and think himself stupid for having wanted it, but in the moment he is deeply frustrated that Samuel will not let him. He doesn't understand the wolf's reasons, he only knows the threats. But he also knows that

Samuel spends hours every day trying to concoct a response. Nothing he does is offhand.

Eventually Samuel accepts a title. President, Administrator, something like that. He starts to allow the Brightloves to choose officials for acquisitions, fundraising, communications, security, and such—though he loathes it. Geir is the first Officer of Internal Security, and his chief supporters are the ones who came with Cameron. He holds the office for a few weeks before resigning.

Geir doesn't know when he realizes he wants to leave the Brightlove House, or what specifically drives the feeling. He can wax romantic about the pain of watching Samuel feel like a failure, or about the good he could do elsewhere, but he suspects all along that his reasons are much more banal. The revolutionary life is hard, and he feels no drive to continue in it. He is also weary of the squabbles between his housemates, and truth be told, he has spent so long directly at Samuel's side that he feels distant from the rest. Besides, he will soon be eighteen, and when he is, he wants to break with his childhood.

That he thinks of those reasons before he thinks of Samuel, he also takes as a sign.

He doesn't let the malaise draw out. The conversation with his boyfriend is brief and to-the-point. With beak and mouth they talk about his need to be elsewhere. With their eyes they express that their love for one another is not reduced by an ounce, but their lives are filled with other feelings they could never have anticipated, a rolling ocean of them, whose tides all the love in the world couldn't hold back. They embrace, but then they back up and shake hands. Geir is only the third to leave Brightlove House.

While the vulture seeks a new niche for himself in whatever of Terrace's strata will take him, he hears word now and then about how the House fares. It enjoys a brief burst of economic growth when the UN rules that zoans must be granted adulthood at eighteen. Holds firm when Terrace begins to sell its neighborhoods off to pay its civic debts. It seems much smaller when spoken of thirdhand; not

the roaring piconation Geir had helped to build, but an isolated little building surrounded by miles of dark city. After a couple years, Geir hears that Samuel has dissolved it as an entity and sold the property to one of its tenants, while the rest have scattered. The maned wolf gets word to him, inviting him to meet, catch up or at least talk. Geir thinks of reasons not to: he has obligations now, his crowd is dangerous. The message he sends back, though, is more honest: I'm not ready. And before that has had a chance to change, his friend has vanished into the underworld. Rumors circulate that Samuel has returned to his roots as a revolutionary, that he has founded a new rebel group at a global scale, but Geir puts it out of his mind. He is busy, and he is poor—and, moreover, that was another life, and it's behind him.

Chapter 14

“You don’t have to do this!” the target pled from within the bag over his head. “Stop the car!”

It was only Geir and Left on this job. Grab the guy—Hank, a human—and bring him to Grouch for a talk. No more information than that. He’d resisted, cowering through his apartment and throwing anything he could reach at the approaching zoans while blubbering incoherently, but hadn’t put up a fight once they got their hands on him. He recognized Left, and knew whose behalf they were here on.

“He doesn’t have to bring me in,” he kept going. “Anything he wants—he can just take it! He knows that!”

“Quiet,” Left growled.

It didn’t work; Hank was chattering too much to hear anyone else. The car that had answered their call had seats arranged like an old person-driven vehicle, so that the two zoans were up front and the human in the back, out of reach and not even facing each other. Geir and Left could exchange annoyed glances all they wanted but short of climbing over the seats they had to put up with him.

“Do you know who he is?” Geir asked the rhino. He didn’t bother lowering his voice.

“Not our business,” Left grumbled, jabbing irritably at his wristband to distract himself.

By now, Geir had been in Grouch’s employ for most of a month. The routine was surprisingly consistent. Unremarkable workaday labor that was nearly as rote as railminding, if not for the variety of locations it took him in the city, and the company of his partners. Shakedowns, intimidation, standing guard outside meetings—often between two humans whose names and faces meant nothing to him. Three nights a week fighting at the carpet factory, where he had fortunately not yet lost. He was bringing in a lot of money for Grouch.

He could only ask the occasional question—at bars between jobs; of bystanders unbothered by the muscle’s presence; at public terminals when he wasn’t being watched—but he kept his ear to the ground. The ZF had slowed down on robberies and shows of strength but was starting to put out tendrils into every racket in Terrace. A fence remarked on his surprise that they had become regular clients, when previously they had always been very circumspect around explicitly illegal activities. Another facilitator said they came to him often with large orders and paid with paper money. Very few who dealt with them ever had before the Mover station bombing. And, the few times he had felt safe asking about Samuel, no one had seen him.

“If it’s about Parson, that’s over and done!” the human was still yelling. “I don’t work with him anymore, I swear!”

“Quiet,” Left growled more forcefully. It seemed to work a little better this time.

“Parson?” Geir asked.

“Heard the name,” Left shrugged.

The antiquated arrangement of the seats at least let Geir watch out the front windows, rather than a camera view on his wristband. They shimmering white-and-crystal skyline of the city’s opulent outer ring slid gently past in the distance. Complete with a new colossal monument to some human business tycoon or other, stack of books under one arm and other hand raised to the sky. Pointing anywhere but the city where all the work he was rich off of was done. That one had gone up in the last two weeks, printed by a Stamper and coated in reflective brass.

“Have you ever been to Uptown?” Geir asked his partner idly, while the momentary quiet permitted small talk.

“Couple times. Some big players have places there. Nothing worth seeing.” He reconsidered. “Manny liked some of it.”

“I’m gonna get your name out of you one of these days,” Geir smirked.

The rhinoceros looked at him sidelong.

“Darius,” he said, as the captive in the back started up again.

Geir offered to shake his hand, but was met with a grumble.

When they arrived, Hank stumbled docilely up to Grouch’s complex, though without shutting up. The boss was waiting in the dining hall, hands in the pockets of his sweatpants, when they reached him. He gestured away with the bag, and Geir removed it.

“I swear,” Hank said as soon as he could see, continuing from whatever he had been ranting about.

“Do you know why you’re here?” Grouch asked.

“Please—”

“I’ve been hearing about your side business. And I’ve got friends that don’t like it.”

“I don’t—”

“You’re going to hand it off to—”

“No, I swear I—”

Grouch let out a loud huff from his nose, accompanied by a look to the zoans that meant to sit the captive down. They did so, none too gently, and stood back. The older human leaned closer to Hank’s face and dictated terms lowly but forcefully. Hank agreed to each, nodding and sputtering.

Some business accomplished, the boss stood back up and turned away to tap something in on his wristband.

“That job...” Hank said quietly. “The one for Palmer—I didn’t know...”

“Shut up,” Grouch turned back to glower.

“It wasn’t supposed to be that way, you can’t blame it on me—I was just hired hands, Palmer didn’t tell me anything. I didn’t know the guy was rich or that they’d come after you...”

Grouch had his pistol out, muzzle against Hank’s forehead.

“Say another word,” he snarled.

“I didn’t know he was gonna use it against you—”

The gunshot, unsilenced, was deafening in the dining hall. It caved the seated human’s head in and knocked the chair over, splattering bone and blood on the parquet. Grouch wiped the same off his face and slipped the gun back into his waistband.

“You didn’t hear any of that,” he glared at his zoans. “Do something about this. I have to make some calls.”

He returned bloodied and furious to his office, leaving the ruined body to be disposed of, and Geir startled but intrigued.

Chapter 15

Another two weeks later, Grouch called the zoans to a meeting in another room off the dining hall, which Geir had never seen. It was a war room, with touchscreen table in the center, like the one in the armory but much larger, round, and flat. Chairs scattered around the walls, unused.

“That means it’s a big job,” Left explained when they were on their way.

The human guards were on alert, and more of his staff was there already. Some unfamiliar, too. The guards confiscated everyone’s wristbands when they entered.

Grouch was there, but he wasn’t the one who spoke. While he stood to the side, with a somehow deeper scowl on his face than usual, a tall human in shirtsleeves and a tie came forward.

“That’s Palmer’s man,” Left said softly. “We’ve worked for him before.”

Palmer’s man glanced around at the faces present before he spoke. He lingered on Geir—the newest one, probably.

“You’ve all been chosen for a team,” he said. His accent was Mid-Atlantic, and he probably smoked. “The job is in one week.”

The job he described was nothing like the quick day-to-day work Grouch had been putting Geir on. It was, in fact, a heist. The team, which was made up mostly of Grouch’s men, was to infiltrate a home in a high-rise in Uptown and locate a stash of paper money.

Palmer’s man gave only a broad overview of the operation: a team would occupy a power station to weaken security; a team would hack a communications node to hide their presence; a team would enter the suite and retrieve the money; and so on. It seemed to be understood that all would be in contact with the tall stranger, and not with each other.

That was why they had given up their wristbands. They weren’t to know whose home they were invading or how much money it was (though the fact that it was physical cash indicated that it must be a great deal), or even all the details

of the job. The humans probably received some cut of the take; maybe Palmer would allot some to the zoans, but Grouch would absorb it. Though from the things he had heard Hank blab, it sounded as though Grouch was as small a component in Palmer's plans as the rest of them.

In the ensuing days, the group was divided into teams, and those sequestered from one another within and around Grouch's compound. The three zoans were, predictably, the security detail for the infiltrating team. Palmer's man gave them printouts of the building and their route to and through it, to study and memorize, and brought them briefly each day to the war room to go over their roles with the table screen.

The idea was a precision strike. The infiltrating team would be familiar with the penthouse, and would get in and out in however long it took to locate the money, likely only a few minutes. All security would be neutralized along the way, and there would be no trace that anything had happened except for a few unexplained hiccups in the computers. The muscle was there in case the other residents of the tower were unpredictable. They were to deflect any passersby, and were expected to cause so much trouble that police went after them, if necessary. The tall human made no apologies for the risk.

They had a three-dimensional model of the building and the penthouse, built from hidden camera and microphone data. High confidence that there would be no one there, and no extra security within. Moderately high confidence that there would be no extra security on the money itself. Even so, the security team would be going inside with the infiltrators.

"Do you do these often?" Geir asked Left when they were left alone in their bunks.

"Sort of. Mostly for this guy."

"He's got Grouch under his thumb. He can get free work out of him."

"What does that matter?"

“Just an observation. But working in Uptown seems risky. Police would come down hard on everyone.”

“We do it all the time. We just don’t hit real Uptown targets.”

“Who do you think this is?”

“Doesn’t matter. Probably some Terrace factory manager who got uppity and moved out.”

“With enough cash that someone would want to steal it?”

Right gave a long and loud sigh from his end of the room, where he was trimming his plants.

“Don’t ask questions,” Left translated shortly. “Especially not with Palmer. You haven’t made Grouch mad yet.”

“Sure. I’m just used to knowing.”

"You'll get the picture someday."

The alligator laughed, a single harumph. And he was right; there wasn't much Geir was less interested in than getting the picture.

Chapter 16

Uptown wasn't walled off from inner Terrace as such, but neither was it easily accessed. The wealthy traveled by aircar and rarely had any reason to come see where their goods were made. Hence, the bright and clean towers that began rising from the dirty three-story streets twenty-five miles from the city's center rarely had doors at ground level, or even windows that would look out onto the relative squalor. Heavy-duty airtrucks had reduced the need for shipping tunnels beneath the street, too. The tunnels that were left were old and poorly maintained, such as the one the burglars took early in the morning the next week.

As promised, they moved separately. There were six cars in total, bringing a team of fifteen. The tunnels were tight and round like sewer pipes, and dove deep from the surface roads to meet the towers at their roots.

The zoans had new wristbands that were controlled by Palmer's man, by which he coordinated them. No communication with the other teams, though the security and infiltration teams would move together once inside. The shaven-headed human repeated their instructions on the drive, as their car lurched between cargo trucks from one junction to the next. Their job was the simplest. They would escort Team I through the loading dock, where the staff would be distracted and facial recognition briefly offline. They would get into the HVAC center, where a service elevator would take them to the residential floors. Other teams would be interfering with anything that could stop or detect them, and Palmer's man would alert them of anyone that got through. They needed only to ride, get in, and stand guard.

Geir had been involved in heists before the Mover. They had been small teams, carefully and cooperatively coordinated, messy and hard-fought, the take apportioned among conspirators. This was something else entirely. This was someone with a lot of money looking at something, asking it, and their staff acquiring it near-frictionlessly. It would have been done entirely by computer if the money hadn't been in cash, just a deposit made to the owner of an intruder AI

and a large return minutes later. Either the take was astronomical, or the job was meant as a thumb in the eye to its holder.

The car let Team S off at the loading dock, a metal hatch at the end of a concrete bulb at the end of a tunnel, among an endless line of trucks. The hatch opened without their needing to do anything, only stand with the three humans of Team I and wait a matter of seconds. Someone on the other end was working it.

The intake room was wide and harshly lit with cheap LEDs, seemingly miles of skate wheel conveyor tracks snaking across it. There was still a skeleton crew there, passing packages along in weary boredom. If they noticed the six intruders, they were too busy to care, or else disinterested.

All of them were zoan. Workforce volunteers, most likely, sacrificing eleven to fifteen hours a day for enough to pay for a place to sleep the rest of the time. Like Geir with the Mover, but without the fresh air and open sky. The vulture didn't like to look at them.

The HVAC center was the size of the building that housed Grouch's complex, and had its own dedicated geothermal plant. The air was thick with chemical scents, and the din of turbines of different sizes spinning at different speeds, of percussive clanging and metal-on-metal grinding. All that to provide total climate control in the thousands of rooms and halls above. There was an alert on readout screens, which Palmer's man told the team to ignore; that was another team's work, and the reason there was no one here.

The doors to the service elevator were open when they found it. It was wide and linoleum-tiled, badly scuffed from years of having heavy equipment dragged through it. Palmer's man gave them the code that would bring them up to the residential floors.

Geir had never been in a building meant for luxury. It had him nervous: in his experience, wealthy humans defended their spaces with burning zeal. The

humans were a little on edge too; Left and Right were calm, even bored. Maybe being dazzled by lush carpet and high ceilings and inviting light was Housie shit.

The residential floors were also where the real danger was. Once they were out of the HVAC node on the target's floor, they were at risk of being seen and reported by the tenants. There were police housed on every third floor, and the thieves looking like they didn't belong may already be enough to get them called. Geir and the others had to hope staff walked the halls enough to desensitize witnesses to the sight of Terracers and zoans.

The halls were wide, their carpet thick and the doors widely spaced. What struck Geir most, though, were the pleasant cool and the even, neutral lighting. The slightest breeze in his feathers, just enough to keep the air from feeling still. The carpet—he had to wonder if it had been produced in the factory above the fighting ring—had an easy quarter-inch of give under his weight. Scarcely recognizable as the same kind of place as the dim, green, and stuffy apartments he raided daily.

The target's door was opposite the HVAC node, a long walk they would have to make a second time. Team I followed directions from their wristbands, while Team S kept watch ahead and behind. Only a few times did a door open and a tenant step out, to shrink at the harsh look given by the huge zoans passing them. Any one of those could have reported it, but if they did, the police didn't come immediately. Somewhere, another team was diverting them.

The doors weren't numbered, but bore screens that displayed whatever information their tenants wanted to share. Names, titles, professional certificates. Short looping videos of families in nice clothing at a summery location, with kids and dogs. The occasional zoan, either the resident or an employee. Sometimes only a blank screen with a code for trusted visitors to scan.

That was the case on the target door. A small rectangle in the center of the door was filled with minute, multicolored, moving particles, which one of the

infiltrators scanned with her wristband. The door unlocked: someone, somewhere, had gotten them access.

"Team S," Palmer's man said through their wristbands. "Station one at the end of the hall. One of the vocal ones. The other two go in ahead of Team I to make sure it's clear."

Left agreed to be the lookout, and Geir slowly nudged the door open. No traps or extra locks, no one standing on the other side with a gun. But there was a gun.

A whole cache of them.

The door opened onto an entry hall perpendicular to it, classic brick and mortar with spaces, currently unoccupied, for signs and pictures. The guns were to the side, stashed under an empty coat rack. Rifles and pistols ready to be grabbed on short notice, extra magazines on a shelf above them. It must have taken some doing to get those in here unnoticed.

"Don't touch those," Palmer's man said.

Creeping down the entry hall, it became more and more clear that this wasn't a home, or wasn't only one. The decorations that had come with the apartment were stacked against the half-wall between the hall and the kitchen, and equipment cases of various size were scattered throughout.

"Come back to those."

There was no one in the kitchen, or hiding in the closet beside it. Behind the brick wall was a large living room, with a split-level floor, couches at its sides and a red-and-black rug, huge television on the wall surrounded by empty bookshelves. Couches covered with recently-thrown-off blankets and changes of clothes. The far wall was entirely glass, and looked out over the breathtaking outer city and the mountains beyond.

While Team I looked in silence for any sign of the money, Geir checked the bathroom and closets along the other wall. He moved aside the blankets from the couches. One of them, he realized, wasn't a blanket, but a banner.

It said, in crude paint on linen: ZF. Despite himself, Geir smiled.

Right went directly to the glass wall and stood with his hands braced against it to look out. The alligator may never even have ridden an air car, to see this kind of view. Geir gestured for Team I to allow it. He moved on to the bedrooms.

There was nothing identifying in any of them, but Geir already knew: whether this was her home or the staging point for a cell of her splinter-ZF, he was here to steal from Sike. Whoever Palmer was, he knew about her stash and had discovered its location. Maybe he had even maneuvered her himself, put her on the run so that this Uptown safehouse would be the best hiding place for it. Or maybe he had a dozen teams like this one, striking a dozen of Sike's strongholds, knowing only one would succeed. It cost him nothing, after all.

But it was right there, at the bottom of the closet in the smallest bedroom. A pair of duffel bags with a cheap retina scan lock on a loop between their zippers. Keeping the camera on his wristband pointed away, Geir crushed that easily between the tips of his talons and unzipped one.

Paper money was rare, generally reserved for important but vulnerable exchanges between banks or governments. The most Geir had ever seen was one million, in the back of a secure aircar he'd helped ground once, in ten stacks of one hundred thousand-dollar bills. This duffel bag was stuffed to bursting with stacks like those, in twenty-thousand-dollar bills. It had to be hundreds of millions of dollars. Maybe billions.

Geir took off his wristband, and stomped on it.

The muzzle of one of Team I's pistols poked in through the bedroom door. Geir flattened himself against the wall until the human was inside, clapped a hand over her mouth and clubbed her with the butt of her own gun. He sat her down carefully on the side of the bed less visible from the door, and tossed its sheets over her. The duffel bags were heavy but manageable, one over each shoulder. Geir made a break for the entry hall, while the others of Team I were in the other bedrooms.

Right was in the entry hall, keeping watch. His eyes fixed on Geir's cargo. He hadn't had an alert from his wristband yet, but he understood.

The vulture froze. It wouldn't do any good to slip the alligator a stack of cash out of one of the bags. Right–Manny; it was safe to assume Geir was officially out of Grouch's employ now–had nowhere to go but back to the compound, where anything he had would be taken away anyway. Geir sighed ruefully and shrugged, settling into a defensive stance. Manny growled. He had his fingers ready to tap the alert button on the wristband.

But he didn't do it. He dismissed the alert, and turned to let the vulture through. There was nothing for him in return but an apologetic nod.

There was no avoiding Left's–Darius's–view out in the hall, so Geir ran, as fast as he could while balancing the duffel bags, in the opposite direction. He didn't hear anything, but he was able to see when he turned the corner that the other two humans were coming after him. By now Palmer's man would know, and would be frantically looking for ways to unclear the path that had gotten the two teams this far. Would he risk letting Geir get caught, and the money seized? Probably not. The path would be clear, back the way he'd come. He would

have an easy, unguarded escape route.

And he did. There was evidently nothing the rest of Palmer's team could do to stop him that wouldn't forfeit the operation or worse. The shaven-headed human had counted on total loyalty, to him or to Grouch.

That, and the assumption that none of Grouch's underlings had anywhere to go with that kind of money. He might have foregone trying to catch the bird and turned straight to fences and banks, expecting to get it back as soon as Geir tried to exchange it. They probably thought he wanted it for himself.

There was probably plenty of security footage of him sneaking back out through the HVAC center and the loading bay, but once he was out on foot in the tunnels he was gone. He took random turns, hugging the curved wall to avoid the

endless crush of huge vehicles, got himself well and truly lost, so no one following would find him.

Chapter 17

Cranberry looked dismayed at the sight of Geir, when the bedraggled vulture dragged himself in to the Ironclad minutes before closing. Then he saw the battered duffel bags.

“No, no, no,” he pointed back out the door and charged from behind the counter. “I don’t know what you’ve got but I know it’s bad news.”

He shuffled Geir back out to the street, swatting at his shoulders with a bar rag. Still, he followed, and waited to hear what Geir had to say.

“Morning,” Geir wiped his glasses with his shirt.

“Tell me you just own more than one shirt now, and you didn’t—” Cranberry looked around before whispering, “—steal something from Grouch!”

“Just the one.” And it was stained and tattered after a day of hitching rides on the bumpers of driverless trucks, falling off more often than successfully dismounting.

“I’m not hearing a no, hon.”

“For what it’s worth, Grouch was never in the chain of ownership.”

“Somehow that doesn’t make me feel a lot safer.”

“I’m going to be out of your hair. I just need to ask you something.”

“I’m not hiding your stolen goods, if that’s what you mean.”

Geir shook his head.

“Is Samuel still in hiding?”

“Last I heard.”

“Do you know any way of getting word to him?”

“May I remind you, honey, that I’m not involved with any of that? I serve drinks, and I manage some drops.”

“I understand.”

Cranberry sighed. He tried to stuff his hands anxiously into his pockets, but he was in a skirt today that didn’t have any. l

“There are some nerve centers I could press on that might reach him,” he said.
“No promises, and not zero-risk.”
“I can’t give you anything in return.”
“No. No, you don’t have to. What’s the message?”
Geir had had plenty of time to think about it.
“Tell him that someone who wasn’t ready has gone home.”

Waiting outside the strip that stood where the Brightlove House had been, holding what might have been billions of dollars in cash, was neither wise nor safe, but Geir risked it for a few days. The machine shop in the strip was all automated, the other stores closed, and the human kids who came every day to play soccer in the parking lot thought he was a bum. He didn’t recognize the zoan who finally came to meet him on the evening of the fourth day, but he recognized the gait and demeanor of someone assigned to make contact.

“You’re the one who’s ready now?” the ermine-model said, when he had come just within earshot.

“And I’ve come home.”

The ermine typed something in on his wristband, probably an affirmative and a description, and waited for a reply. He kept one hand in the pocket of his long jacket, implying a gun. His fur was rusty brown over a white throat that he covered with a turtleneck. He wore large black boots, though zoans were designed not to need them; a protest fashion that recurred on occasion.

He held his wrist out to Geir. From it, a voice:

“Are you there?”

It was Samuel.

A rush of feelings made Geir smile involuntarily, and it took a moment to get any words out.

“Yeah,” he said. “It’s me.”

A long pause on Samuel’s end, too.

“Ben says you have luggage.”

“Something that belongs to you.”

“Sorry if I’m cautious...”

“What Sike took from you.”

The pause was longer this time.

“I gave that to her,” Samuel’s voice was low. “I don’t want it.”

Geir’s brow constricted.

“I can’t just leave it here,” he said.

“No. No, you can’t. It’s okay. Go with Ben, he’ll bring you here.”

“Okay.”

“Geir—”

“Yeah?”

“You don’t know how happy I am that it’s you.”

“I’ll find out, I think.”

Samuel hung up, and Ben nodded. Geir hefted the bags over his shoulders and followed the ermine to the aircar waiting around the corner.

The complex Ben took him to was one of the taller ones in inner Terrace, twenty or thirty stories high and built like a concrete cube. Only narrow strips of windows running up its sides, thread-thin compared to its girth. There were probably hundreds of apartments in it: ancient, not wired for modern surveillance; the perfect place to lay low. The aircar deposited them on the roof. Ben had a key for the access stairs.

The inside was like all the old tenements in the city. Gray, poorly lit, with scratchy carpet and nothing to mask the noise from the tenants on the other side of any given wall. The restless unemployed stood in their doorframes, checking for signal on their wristbands and quietly ignoring passersby. Geir suspected that all the zoans among those were Samuel’s, keeping watch.

There were two undisguised guards at the door Ben brought him to, a rooster and a jackrabbit model, both dangerously skinny and both proudly wearing ZF tattoos on their shaven necks. The ermine exchanged a few words with them, and went inside for a few minutes before coming out to call Geir in with his luggage.

The apartment was wider and nicer than the hallway, if minuscule and spartan compared to the one from which Geir had taken the money. A kitchen on one side and a den on the other, where a stiff-looking couch faced a large television. A hallway across from the entryway, with doors on either side and at its far end. That last one opened, and Samuel emerged.

The maned wolf had done some growing since they were seventeen. He had easily six inches on Geir, standing on the long and spindly legs his model was designed with. His mane, previously always thick and rich, was thinner and faded, his muzzle had gray in it and his eyes were lined. But he was himself, the boy who had liberated the Brightlove House, and who had been Geir's only love.

Samuel crossed the apartment without a word, clasped one of Geir's hands in his. He looked into the vulture's eyes for what felt like a long time, before they embraced.

"Jesus Christ, Geir," he said. He didn't finish the thought. There was an odd desperation in his voice, but outweighed by joy.

For his part, Geir wasn't sure he could talk. He let Samuel hold him—so strange to be the smaller of the two, now.

Abruptly, Samuel backed away, standing stiffly and guarded. He looked at the two bags at Geir's feet, and shook his head against a question he hadn't asked.

"No," he said. "It's been eighteen years. You have to tell me where you've been. What you've been doing."

"There really isn't anything to tell," Geir managed over the endorphin rush. "There really isn't."

Samuel smiled. The cloud was forming, of the question Geir was going to have to ask.

“But I’ve missed you,” Geir added, truthfully.

“It’s been the same-old, same-old,” Samuel said nervously. “Nothing you didn’t see at Brightlove. Nothing we didn’t do together.”

Geir nodded. He tried to keep his composure, he really did. And he tried to remember that had been burning for weeks, and right up until he had seen Samuel’s face. It had seemed so urgent, but he couldn’t keep his mind on it. He couldn’t keep any thoughts straight, until he stepped forward and touched Samuel’s hand with the backs of his fingers, until he clutched at it and rested his other hand in the thinning mane. Then he was bracing himself against the wall, and they were kissing, and it was so much like the times they had before, so long ago. Almost alike—but not, and better for it.

“Wait,” Geir said, as much to himself as to Samuel.

And Samuel in turns was anxious, too, but neither could stop for what felt like several minutes.

They made it to the end of the hall before they managed to part, overwhelmed by each other’s presence. Geir looked to the floor, and Samuel slid partway down the wall, hands on his knees.

“I thought you were dead,” the chrysocyon managed. His face, never without an edge of worry, became serious.

“I guess I did, too,” Geir. “I was working.”

“I know.”

“Sam.”

Part of Geir refused to believe they were together again; another part of him accepted it but disbelieved the intervening years. It made him feel foggy and slow, like he was asleep and awake at the same time.

“Sam,” he tried again. “I have to ask you something. I came all the way here to ask it.”

“I don’t want to talk about that,” Samuel met Geir’s eyes. There was a tremor to his voice. “I’m not ready.”

“I think we’re both doing things today we weren’t ready to before.”

Samuel pursed his lips and looked away, and relented.

“No,” he said. “It wasn’t us.”

Relief flooded Geir, but it was diluted with a twinge of disappointment. He had to relinquish the small hope he’d let build, that he would find a Samuel who was newly fierce, dangerous, and earthshaking, despite the horrors done in his name.

“What do you know?” the vulture asked.

Chapter 18

The Zoan Front has been flagging. Among other things, it is facing the same problem as all zoan organizations: there simply is no new blood to recruit. True, the first generation of naturally-born zoans is slowly growing in numbers, but the oldest of them are still small children. The factory-grown generation is in its thirties, bereft of the youthful fire that brought new animal-faces to the cause for many years. And while there are humans willing to help during an action, the organization will not, and should not, consider them for membership.

For Samuel Brightlove—he has officially adopted the surname by now—it is a matter of friction. In his heart his passion hasn't decreased in the slightest, and may even have sharpened and brightened with time, but for the effort he is able to summon and the influence he is able to wield accomplishes less and less. As if he is throwing something, but the air grows thicker and rougher and the same strength gets less and less distance.

It affects everything the Zoan Front does. They are less effective in their community efforts and their covert resistance actions. And in fundraising. Debts mount.

The ZF can't take out loans or solicit donations through legal means. Their corporate sabotage and redistribution operations have seen them classified as a terrorist group—which the government and media had been eager to do for years. They have had to scrounge, to hire out operatives for illicit work, to borrow from dangerous parties.

When news reaches Samuel of the bombing of the Lans-Cartier MVR station, he scarcely pays attention. It is another disaster, another injustice, one of many that occurred just that day, however sensational it may have been. Samuel cannot take the time to care, he will be smothered by suffering and he will fail his organization.

It is sixteen hours after the explosion that two humans request a parley with the leader of the Zoan Front. They come in suits and sunglasses, nondescript, as

close to anonymous as they can be. They need help unloading the aircar that brought them. They have brought more paper money than Samuel has seen in his life, more than he suspected was even in circulation.

They say: Take credit for the MVR station bombing, and this is yours.

They offer no other information, aside from assurances that they are not entrapping him to bring the UN's full weight down on the ZF. They are earnest, and they are frightened.

Samuel accepts the money. By the end of the day, his face and false statement are being shown on every screen, by every media outlet. He calls in the officers he trusts to help him construct a lie, and the ones he doesn't to spread it. Soon, the underworld of Terrace believes the Zoan Front had a second cell, which had been preparing for years in secret for this bombing. Even the rank and file of Samuel's organization believe it.

Samuel is not seen for the next several days. He is not in hiding: he is paying off the Zoan Front's debts, in person and with great caution. The looks his debtholders give him are varied, they have every kind of suspicion, aroused by this windfall immediately following the bombing. He says nothing to anyone about it.

Though the organization is safely afloat again, not to mention flush with virtually boundless funds, Samuel gets no rest. He is hounded for statements about the bombing, both from daring investigators and from his own people. And the police are after him. The local Terrace Police Department, the North American Bureau of Investigation, and Interpol. He sleeps in a different safehouse every night. It is a miracle he isn't caught: he suspects interference, by whoever paid him to take credit.

Those in his organization whom he has not trusted with the truth begin to see him with new respect, and awe, and apprehension. They think they must not know him like they thought they did. He must have machinations he doesn't

share. Maybe he is a genius, maybe he is overextending himself, maybe he is dangerous to his own Front.

A loud voice among them is Sike, originally Psyche 133-6R8. The falcon-model zoan has been frustrated for years with what she sees as the Zoan Front's timidity, a fear of getting its hands dirty to enact real change. She is not impressed by the bombing: one direct action, she accuses, done in secret. She wants to know how it was done, who took part, what other cells does Samuel command. She isn't alone. She and her supporters among the low-ranked officers harry Samuel and anyone else they can get access to. Their leader doesn't respond to them.

A week after the explosion, NABI releases an official death count: one thousand, five hundred, and ninety-eight confirmed dead, another two thousand injured. Two hundred unaccounted for, presumed dead. Samuel finds himself looking at the list several times a day, reading a few names before swiping away from it in distress. This is when he sees Geir's picture.

Obviously his former friend is older, more filled-out and sterner in the face, but the photograph is unmistakably him. Geir 19e9-sr4-6WR7C, zoan, barbatus. Cause of death: incineration. When the shock passes, Samuel is overcome with horror.

He investigates what he can. He finds in public records when and where Geir had volunteered for the workforce, and from there he finds the record of Geir's employment with Lans-Cartier. Fourteen years in the workforce should comfort him—in the zoan mind, Geir was dead long before the explosion—but it does not. It isn't ten years ago, when there had not been time for any zoan to have had a life while working. Samuel fears—he knows—that his friend, his love, had been snuffed out, in agony.

Killed by an bombing on which Samuel has very publicly put his own name. Samuel spends a sleepless night assaulted by thoughts of headlines drawing the connection. Of the famous footage showing himself with his avian confidante in

the window of the Brightlove House, paired with the vulture's employee profile from the list of the dead. Of journalists coming to him to ask: Was the bomb a smokescreen to take revenge on a former lover? Did you plant Geir in the MVR station years ago with this plan? How did you convince him to sacrifice himself for you?

After many hours, Samuel knows that he cannot, cannot face any of those possible encounters. He abandons his rest and takes desperate action. There can't be anything to find.

The fixer he hires demands a prodigious sum. Samuel pays it in cash, up front, with the promise of as much again after if there are no tricks. He stays at the fixer's side; watches her assemble a team to build the worm that will do what he asks. After several days of work, they send the worm after Geir.

All it does is find and transfer access. It hunts down every record of Geir, every appearance of his photograph in the press, every document about him, every mention of him, across countless exabytes of Internet. And collects the permissions for each one, delivers all to the fixer, who then shows her computer to Samuel, and allows her client to do the honors.

Samuel taps on the button reading yes, and the words and pictures begin to disappear. As fast as the worm is able, it delivers the instruction to the hosts of every scrap of identifying information, to erase them, zero them out, generate whatever fake names or pictures it took to replace them.

When he takes his hand away from the computer, it is already at work removing Geir from existence. He regrets it instantly. His muscles are heavy with shame. But he also knows he is safer now, the chance that he will be confronted is suddenly infinitesimal.

He spends several days verifying its work. Searching for signs of the old news and commentary posts that had included the two of them. They aren't there. The manufacturer's record exists still, and some workforce records, but they are

corrupted and hard to access. He pays the fixer the rest of what he has promised her. It is just a dent in the sum he was paid to say he had killed his friend.

The Zoan Front loses a number of operatives in the ensuing days, as NABI cracks down. Good fighters and volunteers, probably in prison for the rest of their lives. But it is not as big a blow as it should have been. The story is that the organization committed a heinous act of mass murder, and law enforcement of all stripes is hunting it down. But these are only token arrests. Someone is holding the police back, because they know that too many questions will reveal the truth. Amidst this, the Front's work has slowed nearly to a halt, out of fear and caution. And because its leader has retreated into a cocoon of melancholy and cannot be roused. There is worry, then there is discomfort, and then there is agitation.

The loudest agitator, Sike, threatens openly to splinter the Front. She will take the work into her own hands, do what isn't being done. She has supporters. They only speak Samuel's name with disgust. Samuel calls her to his safehouse.

When she comes it is with an ostentatious swagger. She expects to be martyred, to leave chastised and branded and with proof that the old guard fears her. She doesn't expect to find Samuel sitting at his desk, fingers laced pensively over his muzzle, surrounded by bags stuffed with an enormous sum of paper money.

Take this, he tells her.

They don't talk long. The falcon never really comes to trust him. But they agree: she will use this money, whose origin he will not reveal but that she probably suspects, to form and fund a revitalized splinter faction of the Zoan Front, and he will do nothing to stop her, so long as she doesn't move against anyone who stays behind. And as long as she maintains the line that Samuel orchestrated the MVR bombing. When she leaves, he can already see that she is dazzled by the money, but he isn't going to back out.

For now, he is going to go into hiding. He has more enemies than ever, and he feels utterly incapable of directing his organization. Yet nothing would be more

dangerous for them now, he thinks, than for him to step aside. He doesn't know the nature of the storm he has brought down, but for the time being, all there is to be done is to weather it. And as it is, he isn't sure he wants to emerge from hiding, back into a world in which he has killed Geir.

"But you weren't at the station," Samuel met the bird's eyes for the first time since he had begun to explain.

"I got lucky. A day later, and I would've been."

"Did you think the bombing was me?"

"I had my doubts. But I had to hear it from you."

"It took you a while to find me. I guess that's a good sign."

"I figured if you were blowing up buildings, or if you had a reason to let anyone think you were, then if I picked up where I left off, we'd cross paths eventually."

Samuel looked down. The ochre fur atop his head, however faded with age and stress, had the same hypnotic texture that had always drawn Geir's eyes, like rich wheat fields in a breeze. Geir still couldn't believe they were together again.

"So now what?" his old friend asked.

"There are some people I'll want you to help out," Geir shrugged. "I had to break some eggs on the way. If they get a stack of cash they'll know who it came from."

The crysocyon smiled bitterly.

"I guess we can put that money to good use," he said. "Are you going to walk away, now that you have your answer?"

There was no accusation in Samuel's voice. Both the zoans recognized that Geir leaving the Brightlove House had been...if not the right choice, then a reasonable choice, in a sea of reasonable choices. And the question had been

there, wordless, at the edge of Geir's mind. Maybe ever since he had gotten the ride back to Terrace. He had concertedly resisted asking it.

"I don't think I've ever had a plan in my life," he smiled. "At the moment, that includes plans of walking away."

Samuel reached a spindly arm across the hall, and they clasped hands. There would be explanations, and revelations, and silences to come; for now there was time just to be together.

Chapter 19

Being in hiding meant that the two zoans never left the apartment. They spent most of every day in Samuel's bedroom, while the revolutionary kept in contact with his forces through a wristband computer. It was the longest Geir had ever spent indoors in his life.

The bedroom was, at least, much larger than Geir would have expected, probably the same square footage as the rest of the apartment. It was old and none too well kept up, but clean, and climate-controlled. Samuel's bed faced the door. The maned wolf kept a pistol on the nightstand, and called to have a second brought for Geir. They shared the one bed, just like when they would sneak into each other's rooms at Brightlove.

The bird was pleased to find that one of the side rooms had been converted into a small gym. Treadmill, weights, punching bag. For the restless idle fugitive. Only the treadmill showed signs of much use by Samuel, but Geir had the punching bag broken in quickly. By the end of the second day they already had to call for a roll of duct tape to cover up where the hard-edged scales of his knuckles were starting to puncture its leather.

Geir told Samuel about his return to Terrace and his time under Grouch, piecemeal. He knew there was no need to hide his most unsavory muscle work from his friend, but he did anyway. But he didn't hide what an injustice he'd done to Left and Right, Darius and Manny.

"And what do you think happened to Grouch?" Samuel asked.

They sat in the bed together, distracted from sleep by conversation. Side by side and nude, Geir felt small next to the other, even though he weighed half again as much.

"It depends who Palmer is," he shrugged. "The one who had him under his thumb."

"Oh. Palmer is the nom de guerre for the daughter of Gentry Aerospace's CEO. She plays with organized crime like it's a toy. I borrowed a lot from her."

“Oh. Then what would she do?”

“She’s in it for fun. She’ll make him squirm.”

“I’m alright with him squirming.”

“She’ll probably hire his people out from under him.”

“That could be good for Darius and Manny.”

“Maybe. I’ll have someone check on them. I guess I could poach them from her if it’s not.”

Geir nodded and clicked his beak thoughtfully.

“You said Sike was zealous,” the bird said, thinking about the money again. “A true believer and all that. That isn’t what I heard about her.”

“Yeah,” Samuel nodded ruefully. He ran the backs of his fingers down the black stripe that gave him his name. “I don’t know what she was doing. We had a plan for how she’d get her faction off the ground, she’s not following it.”

“Do you think she wasn’t genuine?”

“No, she was. She had a fire in her. I’d say she’s just young—but, you know.”

“She never expected to have that much money at her disposal,” Geir suggested. “She’s lost her perspective.”

“Or she’s trying too hard to hold on to it. Overcorrecting, focusing on building a power base before she attempts any real revolutionary praxis, trying not to let herself think she’s ready before she is. But she’s digging herself into a hole, she’ll be stuck in a profit-driven criminal niche if she keeps going.”

“Maybe it was good for her to lose the money.”

Samuel smiled and looked away.

“Okay,” Geir relented. “We can get it back to her. Some of it. After we help Darius and Manny. And maybe Cranberry.”

“You’re saying ‘we’ a lot.”

“Maybe I’m even more ready than I thought.”

The maned wolf let his hand rest amidst the feathers of Geir’s chest.

“We were young,” he said.

Geir didn't need clarification.

"Yeah."

"How could we have kept Brightlove going? It was going to fall apart. You saw it. You warned me."

"My ideas for it were pretty terrible."

"You were a kid. And I was a kid. And everyone we were trying to help was a kid. There weren't going to be any good ideas."

"You had good ideas."

Samuel shrugged that off.

"The older I get," he said. "The more I think zoans weren't born five years old, we were born zero; we were twelve years old at the end."

"We weren't babies. We came out of the factories as five-year-olds."

"We were imprinted with a five-year-old's motor and sensory skills, and language skills, and some basic epigenetic concepts. There's a lot of learning we missed, not being alive before that. The second generation is so different from us already."

"Have you met a zoan kid?"

"A couple."

"I haven't. They happened while I was on the rail."

They were quiet for a while. Even with days together, Geir's body still tried to reject touch, however much he invited and craved it.

"I think," he changed the subject. "We keep the Zoan Front going."

"Oh?"

"I think we can take a step back. Sow some doubt about the Mover station, until you can get out in public again. You can leave revolutionary praxis to Sike—make sure she does it—and start over, like we're doing the Brightlove House again. You up front, figuring out what zoans need and talking to the humans who have it, me behind you making sure they keep their word."

“They’re not going to let the bombing slide. It was terrible, and I’ve put my name all over it. And whoever actually did it has a lot of resources to bring to bear if I renege on the deal.”

“Well, I haven’t worked out every kink.”

Samuel laughed, with a tone that indicated he didn’t think Geir’s idea would work. Like he thought it was cute. Geir was always given to trust Samuel’s judgment, but he would take cute if that was all he could get.

The wristband on Samuel’s nightstand buzzed with a message for him. He ruffled the vulture’s feathers one more time and rolled over to check it.

He just managed a wordless gasp, before the bedroom door crashed open. He fumbled for his gun, while Geir was in a daze.

Two figures poured in from the dark doorway, in a quick and efficient military formation. They were zoans, avian, accipiters of a model Geir didn’t know by name. Dark masks over their beaks, fingers on the triggers of suppressed automatics, stalking on taloned-and-scaled humanoid feet like Geir’s. They split up and moved forward, coordinating silently.

Geir was frozen. He was in his room in the Brightlove House, in the arms of his love. He was so far from here, this dark and secret apartment that was being invaded.

The burst from Samuel’s unsuppressed pistol sent a shockwave through Geir’s ears and feathers. His shot went wide; he’d had barely a second to aim. The powdery explosion of plaster, drywall, and wood far behind the hawks was a slowly expanding halo Geir’s eyes would not pull away from for an eternal fraction of a second.

Both hawks pulled their triggers. Part of Geir braced for the shot—but both guns were aimed at Samuel. The revolutionary’s body leapt and danced, chunks of flesh exploding around his ribs and abdomen in a mist of blood and pulverized bone. Three shots from each assassin: and a fourth each in the head after they

came another step closer. Samuel was a shredded ruin before Geir regained the cognizance even to roll off his side of the bed, gun in hand.

Half of Geir was crying out in shock and despair. The other half was automatic. He had little experience with firearms, but he could aim it in the direction of the hawks and open fire. Like Samuel he didn't come close to hitting, but he made the hawks back up enough that he had room to dart past them. A shot grazed his thigh as he passed the door, but it didn't slow him down.

Something struck Geir hard in the face, when he dashed out the door. It knocked him back, but didn't put him down. With the pounding in his head from the first gunshot, this wasn't much worse. But it took him a moment to recognize that the assailant he ducked to tackle was another hawk, the butt of his rifle now wet with blood. Geir drove this one into the opposite wall with his shoulder, drove fists into his armored abdomen and bit his gun hand hard. The hawk wore protective gloves, but they didn't stop Geir's beak from crushing bone, enough that the hawk couldn't hold on to his rifle.

The two who had killed Samuel had been slim, but this one was tall and broad. An inch or two taller than Geir, even. For a brief moment, that only meant that he was a better target. The vulture drove his fist, with a force he hadn't even shown Manny, into the assassin's face, below the eye and behind the cere. Withdrew it, and struck again. In his rage, he wanted to keep going, to reduce the skull to splinters, eradicate the killer, even if this hadn't been the one to pull the trigger. But there wasn't time. The others would be on him soon. Geir gave the hawk one last crushing blow with his own forehead, and ran.

The bodies of other zoans littered the halls. All of Samuel's guards, and at least a few bystanders who may have posed a threat to the assassins. Geir stumbled over them on his way.

One door was open a crack. Geir crashed through it, knocking the elderly human away from where she had been peering out at the noise. He ignored

someone's calls for help, and a baby's crying, and made for the window opposite the door.

There was no fire escape on this window, but the building across the alley from it had one. Geir collected himself on the windowsill, didn't look back, and leapt. He caught the metal rail on his chest, after a drop of ten feet. It knocked the breath out of him, and the fiery pain across his body told him it had cracked a rib at least. He scrabbled but failed to hold his weight against it, dropped, and caught himself by one arm on the floor below. Shoulder, elbow, trapezius and latissimus muscles exploded. But he kept his grip, and heaved himself over to fall on his back onto the wire platform.

He took a moment to catch his breath, and then another, and then another. Part of him screamed out, insisting that every second wasted was death. The rest of him knew, laying naked and bleeding on the cold, sharp metal, that the hawks weren't coming. They'd been there for Samuel; they probably hadn't even bothered chasing him.

Something about that made it worse.

Chapter 20

Geir didn't know how long he lay there, if he slept or if shock rendered him catatonic. His mind refused the memory of what had just happened: it was a nightmare, he was still in bed with Samuel and when he opened his eyes the maned wolf would still be beside him, and there would be no pain. He vacillated interminably between thinking so and knowing the truth, and maybe real dreams as well.

It was still dark when his eyes opened and were not clouded, his breathing was even. It wasn't a cold night, but the warmth felt sapped from his body. Children looked out from windows across the street, watching the naked zoan laying on the fire escape. He's still there.

The assassins were likely long gone, back to report to whoever had ordered Geir's friend killed. Maybe some police had come to investigate the shooting, probably not. No one but the curious children had bothered even soaring a glance to Geir.

He stood, stiff and sore, feathers matted with dry blood from at least three different sources. Glancing down, he was still dozens of stories above the ground.

Public nudity wasn't nearly the taboo for a zoan that it was for a human, not one whose features were obscured by soft down, at least. Still, Geir wasn't going to wander the city openly in this state, and he wasn't about to let himself be taken to a hospital. The building to whose side the fire escape clung was abandoned, so Geir ducked in through an unboarded window in search of something to cover himself. He had to stop frequently, whenever he thought of the hawks, of their employers and their victims. Any squatters in the vacant apartment husk had to have heard him shouting and pounding his already bloodied fists against the walls. And indeed he found a camp recently abandoned inside a door poorly blocked with a chair. He stole the blanket from the ancient mattress and coiled it around himself, aggravating his damaged ribs as he did so.

Back on the fire escape, he made the agonizing descent over at least half an hour, before slipping off the final ladder and hitting the pavement below hard. He had to rouse himself again with great effort to get back to his feet after that.

He was on the lowest of inner Terrace's three levels, most of the sky blocked out by roads above. Brief glimpses of the pristine towers beyond teased him with madness. They made him think about Palmer, about Sike's money.

Had it been Palmer who gave the order? It could have been. As Geir limped to the street, he imagined his hands on the aeronautics heiress's head—or some stand-in human figure's—driving his thumbs into her eyes. The thick blood, eye and brain matter pooling and overflowing up to his wrists.

Or had it been Grouch? Had the gangster avoided punishment and avenged himself with a blow much worse than killing his traitor?

Or Sike, reasoning who had stolen from her?

It could have been any of them. It could also have been none of them. It could have been NABI, ready to give up the pretense of investigation. Or the real bomber. It didn't matter; the visions of violence that swam in Geir's mind were universal, undiscerning. Anyone connected to Samuel, he would have fallen on them with beak and talons and all his remaining strength, had they appeared in his path. And it would have gotten him killed, because he was weak and injured and raving.

He didn't have any intention in his walking. He only kept going, immune to the worried and sometimes amused looks he received, because stillness focused his mind too much on what had happened. On the way he found himself a shirt and pants on racks set outside a thrift store, for which he paid with a snarl that no one contested. When he was clothed he picked up into a run. Each percussive step was a flare of pain in his cracked ribs. No one stopped him when he crossed into the sterile, unpeopled streets of Uptown, or another hour later on the median of the turnpike that led out of town.

In the evening, Terrace was behind him. From here it was a sky-high wall of pristine spires and statuary, alone in the plains and obscuring the mountains beyond. It was both the smug barrier put up by the rich around their playground, and also the teeth of a demon leaping up from under the earth, chewing up everything it touched. Before now, Geir realized, there had been something alluring about it. He couldn't say what precisely, but for all the evils it represented, it had still felt like a lively chemical soup, full of activity and possibility. A place worth coming back from the dead to. Now he saw no life, he felt no possibility. Sterilized, a dead machine digesting itself and the land around it. Geir turned away from it.

The turnpike was cracked and disused; the demon-machine-city was fed by aircar. Off it, the scattered remains of ruined suburbs stretched for kilometers. Everything had been drawn inside the luxury ring, there was no more city out here. Geir descended an off ramp and picked through some swampy grassland that had been a neighborhood some decades ago. He was in the towers' shadow, and wouldn't get out of it tonight. The still pools and tall grasses among the old foundations teemed with insects, making every intact house a bad prospect for a place to rest.

Some ways away from the road, there was a two-story house on what had been a sizeable plot of land, surrounded on three sides by woods. The sun was far below the city's skyline, so Geir settled on it, whatever it's state.

The house was long empty, though some faint smells lingered that suggested it had been squatted in not too long ago. No furniture, holes punched in the walls to get at its copper wiring. Hardwood floor dusty, but intact. Geir crept room to room, and found no signs of current occupation. Empty beer bottles in one room, a naked and mildewy mattress in another. Geir chose a room with no windows and lay down on the floor. He hadn't realized how much his body still hurt until he was stationary.

He moved to set his glasses aside, and realized only now that they were still on the end table across the bed from Samuel's body. In a way he was glad to have left something of himself there with him.

The last thing he thought before he slept was that: no, he'd been wrong. Maybe an assassin had pulled the trigger, and maybe some kingpin or federal officer had ordered the hit, but none of them were really to blame for Samuel's death. Terrace, the all-devouring demon, had eaten Samuel up. The merest morsel; it would hunger for more and more, until there was no one left to feed it.

Chapter 21

Geir thought the lurching of the floor had been part of a dream, or a brief sensory jolt as he was woken up. He lay in the dark with his eyes open, not convinced that he was awake at all, until the house shook again.

Lights beat in unsteadily around the door to the room he had chosen to shelter in. Blue and white, waving rapidly back and forth.

The vulture peered out the door to where he could see the window in another room. It only revealed a beam of light, shining periodically from above. The house shook again, and the light shut off. Geir crept to the window and looked out.

In the dark, he could only see the trees outside and a little of the abandoned down down the road. He should have been able to see Terrace to the west, but there was a void on the horizon, a lightless emptiness. The faint sound of propulsion fans mingled with the rustling of leaves. Geir looked up.

The latticework of machinery above was meaningless to him, especially in the dark. Rails and catwalks and girders swayed, crisscrossing the sky, just illuminated by moonlight. Beyond that, the round, bulbous body of a drone hovered, not quite stable, high in the air.

It was a Stamper.

Squinting at the void again, Geir recognized the curtain that surrounded the work area. He'd seen it often, usually far in the distance, in Terrace, printing a new luxury club or monument in Uptown. But he hadn't seen it from the inside.

The four stakes had already been planted at the work area's corners, and the curtain was now being lowered, one tall plate at a time. Geir ducked back inside and hurried down the stairs. His heel punched through the rotting wood of one, but he managed to keep his footing and stumble out the front door. He made it out in time to see the last plate drop into place. Heavy machinery growled and whirred into life, as the seven building-sized printer heads began to slide slowly back and forth on their rails to calibrate themselves. An alarm sounded,

deafeningly loud, drowning out the synthesized voice that echoed a warning from above.

The Stamper began to lower its heads, to begin by leveling all the obstacles within its curtain.

Between the sirens and the ponderous machinery, Geir thought it must be as loud as the Mover. The sound crushed his head and made his cracked ribs ache. He thought he might collapse as he made for the street. Behind him, one of the printer heads centered itself over the house he had just left and began to lower. With a sputtering series of cracks, it released a controlled air jet, several a second, that pulverized the house. The pressure front from it carried Geir forward.

Other printer heads were closing in on remaining structures, roads, and trees around the work area. The thunderous groaning of their rails as they moved into position vied with the sirens. Blasts echoed as they flattened the forest and began to dig the foundations for whatever they would be printing.

One of them headed in the direction of the stake Geir was making for. Its rails came down a scant three meters above Geir's head. Behind him the assemblage of inscrutable industrial machinery spat its jets at the road, skimming back and forth to blast away the asphalt. Hot chunks struck Geir in the back, thrown from closer and closer behind him.

The service entrance at the foot of the stake was locked but gave when Geir crashed through it shoulder-first. The internal structure was mostly hollow, with wire stairs spiraling up its interior, lit by track lights at ankle height. No exit to the outside, at least at ground level. The entire stairwell groaned and shivered with the motion outside it; signs surrounded the door he had just come in through, warning about the dangers outside. Do not enter: Stereolithography in progress.

Geir sat on the lowest steps, fingers knit into the feathers of the ruff atop his head. He wondered, at first, if whoever had hired the assassins had enough resources to command a Stamper and deploy it to crush the escaped witness.

That was ridiculous, of course; they could have sent a single hawk after him at any time. Geir was just unlucky. So unlucky.

He stood eventually to mount the stairs. They rattled under his feet, sturdy enough but only meant for emergencies. The nearest door was several stories up. It proved to be a maintenance hatch leading to one of the many motor units that drove the printer heads. That wasn't any good to him—but he kept it in mind, in case he needed to try and sabotage the machine and get himself caught, which wasn't out of the question.

A platform several more flights up had a schematic of the Stamper on the wall. Geir could hardly see it, and had to cup a hand over it to reflect the low light off his dull gray scales. It may have been a machine, but it had to be navigated like a building. The schematic showed him the location of the control center, up among the crossbars that stabilized the structure at the top.

He trod carefully up to the top of the stake and through the corridors that connected it to the rest of the machine, but it became clear that there was no need. The Stamper was completely unmanned, at least at this stage in its work. There might be cameras picking him up, but there was no alarm, no warning over loudspeaker that he was trespassing. The vulture was alone in the dark tunnels, just him and the pulsing fluids and steam running through the pipes surrounding him.

A hatch took him outside, and now he was no longer crouching through underground tunnels but up on a catwalk far, far above the earth. The drones that had carried the Stamper had departed, and the open sky above was clear and starlit. Leaning carefully over the edge, the moon and safety lights showed him only a tangle of turning and sweeping beams, too dense to see through without sunlight. Thick cables and tubes ran all around, feeding the seven printer heads with materials, power, and coolant, and taking away their waste and exhaust. Booming, crashing, and hissing noises deafened him even far above.

The catwalk was hot. So much power ran through the conduits below, so many pipes vented their exhaust directly into the metal, it practically steamed. Geir's zoan hands and feet were designed to be impervious to heat, cold, and harm, but he knew when he needed to move quickly to avoid injury. He clambered along the top of the stabilizing crossbar, shaken frequently by the movement below, until he reached the low, back-sloped nodule in the middle. Its hatch let him in without a thumbprint or swipe card.

Inside, the control center was banal, surprisingly officelike. Metal grate floors still, but painted drywall and a tiled ceiling. Lockers full of safety equipment along the back wall, a single old-fashioned terminal in the front. The chair was built into the floor for stability, and sat over a viewing window in the floor, in case the Stamper's work was visible. Lights came on when Geir took a step inside. He sat cautiously at the terminal and looked it over.

It had an obtuse but not inscrutable interface, through which an operator could monitor supply levels and check the status of the print. Geir scrolled through its menus, unsure what he could do. Halting the print altogether would only get him trouble, and would probably require some kind of authorization anyway.

He found the print job. Currently it showed only the topography of the earth within the Stamper's curtain, and transparent blocks representing the printer heads, moving over it and making it even. It looked like such a gentle process here. There was a timeline at the bottom of the screen, currently at two and a half hours of an estimated ninety-three. Geir dragged the handle on the timeline forward, and the model of the print grew, layer by layer. It looked to be a spacious villa in the works, one large building and several smaller ones surrounding a courtyard, fountain, and vinyard. The printer heads would cut troughs in the ground and create irrigation pipes, would lay down concrete for the courtyard, and extrude convincing wooden frames for vines to be grown upon later.

Just another project for one of Uptown's rich. No murderous plan to annihilate Geir. He had to wonder if Stampers often failed to identify people in their work areas.

He found the controls for the curtain. They were locked down while stereolithography was in progress, but a long, circuitous investigation of their options revealed that he could command the system to lift one plate at a time, temporarily. That would have to do. He raised the plate nearest the stake through which he had entered, the one he knew he could traverse, by three meters. It would stay for forty minutes.

Weak as he was, he stumbled several times on the stairs, tumbling down several at a time and jarring his strained shoulder badly. The maintenance exit at the bottom was locked from the inside, and a strip of red lights blared when he tried its crash bar. He backed up and kicked it with all of his weight. It took four of those before it buckled, and another two to dislodge it from its frame.

There was a storm outside. The jets were shrieking and clods of earth were being flung as though by a tornado. Geir covered his face and trudged out, arms and torso receiving stinging cuts from the detritus.

The open plate was to his right. Geir couldn't look up to see it, but the trough it had punched into the ground was twenty meters across and two thick, and as deep as Geir's waist. The metal sheet could come down at any moment, and Geir doubted it had any way to sense a living body in its path. He jumped in, stumbled on the packed dirt and twisted his ankle, and forced himself back up to climb clumsily over the other side.

The plate came back down right behind him. Its impact shut the printers' banshee cries out almost completely, and threw Geir into a roll. He lay unmoving for a long time, eyes on the sky and the hulking, thrumming cube beside him.

The day was gray and the wind was cold, though it was far from snowing. Geir didn't have any idea where he was going, but it felt better to walk than not to.

Shaken by the narrow escape, Geir had put as much space between himself and the Stamper as he could once the sun was up. He supported his swollen ankle with a branch snapped off from a tree the huge machine had crushed under its curtain. It took a while to get away from the cube's shadow, which lingered even after the Upton towers slid under the horizon.

He kept to the road. There wasn't as much traffic leaving Terrace as there was going in, and it was mostly driverless freight pallets. The occupied vehicles showed no interest in slowing down for a battered zoan in a beat-up and singed shirt walking with a gnarled cane. Geir suspected that his scowl, which he couldn't suppress, didn't help. There was going to be no ride for him.

No hunter, the vulture managed to pounce—painfully—on a hare that was too interested in the road to see him lumbering at it. He hadn't eaten in days, and he ended up eating it raw rather than hunt for sticks and hope he could make a fire without the help of his base camp. He may not have a real vulture's powerful stomach to counter disease or bacteria, but he was more than equipped to rip and tear. Bitterly nourished, he left what wasn't palatable at the side of the road.

Standing over it, the pile of guts and bone and flesh, Geir began to recognize the scene. The road running at his side and stretching off to either horizon; woods in the distance; the long, maybe endless walk ahead of him. His eyes were already scanning for disoriented birds coming in to slam against the rail and join the wake of dead and detritus.

He couldn't have said why it made him as angry as it did. Nonetheless, he stood paralyzed for a long while, cold wind at his back and eyes aching with anger. Or something else.

When it cooled, he continued. Standing lividly with clenched fists and bloodied beak wouldn't get him a ride any better than walking and hoping would.

Deep into the evening, he left the roadside to try and gather the kindling for a fire. Many of the trees on this stretch of road were dead or dormant, the grass was dry. The small fire he managed—a pile of twigs stuffed with handfuls of grass and contained within a circle of concrete chunks from the edge of the deteriorating road—wouldn't burn for long. But it cooked the mostly-intact carcasses of the two road-killed squirrels he'd scrounged and carried with him the last several miles. He didn't do the skinning or cleaning very well, but some meat was better than none.

Sitting on a log by his dwindling fire, holding a stick with which he was spearing scraps off a cooked animal, Geir remembered something.

Chapter 22

“He says he knows your brother,” Deckert said, from where he hung inside Anaïs’s door. He shrugged, osprey eyes impartial.

That had Anaïs’s attention.

“Did he say which one?”

Deckert shook his head. Anaïs started to pack up her notes and nodded briskly for the bird to let the newcomer know she’d be there shortly.

She shielded her eyes from the sun and walked as quickly as she could from her hut to the Welcome Center without looking agitated. She shouldn’t mind how she looked, but everyone in the Animal Enclave had seen her a mess, and she wanted that to be over.

It had to be about Armand, though.

None of her other brothers would know someone who would come first in person before calling. It wasn’t like there weren’t computers in the Enclave. She knew she shouldn’t get her hopes up, though. If it was about Armand, it didn’t mean it was about Armand being alive—just like the letter. The damn letter.

The Welcome Center was really another two-room hut, on the edge of Enclave grounds, with a low, angled roof that extended over the porch. Enough potted plants on that porch to call it a garden, the tallest of them framing the Welcome sign that listed the commune’s rules. Anaïs let herself in.

Deckert stood in the main room, hands folded. The interview room. Carl was also there, which was no surprise. An iguana zoan, Carl looked like a bruiser; while there was no official security division in the Enclave, people often called him in if they expected trouble. The osprey gestured with a tilt of his head to the door of the back room.

The stranger who knew Armand was a sight to behold. He was a barbatus, a lammergeier model, one of the showy types, but he was anything but presentable right now. His clothes were worn and dirty, his feathers coarse and matted. Exposed scales covered in scratches, dried blood on his beak. One of his ankles

was supported by two slats of wood duct taped around his shin. He sat slumped in the interviewee's chair, eyes sunken.

"I'm Anaïs," the cheetah zoan offered him her hand, which he took perfunctorily, and let go without shaking. "Forgive me for cutting to the chase, but I'm told know my brother...?"

"Armand," the stranger's voice was deep and honeyed, but scratchy with exhaustion. "Hare, rugged survivalist."

Anaïs's heart was in her throat.

"Do you—" she gulped and started over. "When did you see him last? Was it before..."

"It was after," he might have smiled, just a little. He knew how good of news that would be for her. "We were both rail minders on the Mover track, we were out when it happened, and we walked into town together."

Anaïs closed her eyes and took a deep breath. The way Armand was, any number of things could have gotten him since then, but knowing, or at least hearing from one source, that he hadn't been in the station when it was bombed—that was something she hadn't had in these past months.

She sat down across from the vulture and brought up her wristband to type on. Gave the stranger a smile.

"Just a second," she apologized. "Today's not my day on welcome duty, I need to pull the intake form up."

Nod.

"Was that the only time you met Armand?"

"We probably ate in the cafeteria at the same time every couple weeks. But yeah, that was the only time."

"Ah. Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't ask your name."

"It's Geir, G-E-I-R, One-Nine-E-Nine—"

"We don't do serial numbers here. Do you have a surname? If you don't and you want to take one, we can get it formalized for you."

He thought about that, with a quirk to his beak.

“I’ll have to think about it,” he said. “Are you hoping to stay with us? There’s a screening process if you are.”

Geir’s eyes swung to the floor, unfocused for a second.

“I don’t know,” he said.

Anaïs marked that as Undecided.

“Did you read the rules when Deckert let you in?”

“No.”

“I can go over them with you. Some of them are stricter than others.”

“Okay.”

“Will you consent to medical attention?”

“Some.”

“And do you need assistance getting around, cleaning yourself, eating?”

“No.”

“You look like you might.”

“I don’t.”

“Okay. Will you consent to a background check?”

He smiled.

Chapter 23

A hot and wastefully long shower made Geir feel ten years younger; so, only about twice his age now. The water ran an unnerving gray-brown after filtering through his feathers, and it carried twigs and pebbles, plant fibers, rubber and tar particles, dried blood, unknown other contaminants. When he was thoroughly cleaned, a nurse saw to him. A bluejay zoan, friendly but quiet. Which was good; Geir wasn't ready to talk yet. She bandaged his wounds, painfully cleaned out several infected cuts, and left him with a bottle of antibiotics and a stern warning not to forget them, as many cuts as he had on him. It took a pair of shears to get the makeshift brace off his ankle. The sprain had long since healed beneath it.

There was something obscene about the sight of himself in the mirror, feathers pristine and wounds neatly bandaged—when somewhere far away, several hundred miles to the north, Samuel may still be lying in his bed, punched full of holes and fur caked with blood and brain matter. Geir regretted accepting the medical attention, he wanted to smear his face with dirt, rip the stitches out, get the cuts good and inflamed.

That wouldn't have done anything but get him censured or kicked out of the Enclave, but he was pretty sure they wouldn't take Samuel in his current condition either.

The Animal Enclave was somewhat famous. It was far from the only zoan commune to have sprung up in the species's short lifetime, nor was it the first, but it had sunken its teeth into the soil and flourished enough to catch the public's eye. Not unlike the Brightlove House, except there had been no controversy or threats of violence surrounding it. For one, because it had been founded when the zoans were already adults; more knowledgeable and experienced, with legal access to more resources, and less naïvely headfirst than Samuel's experiment. And, maybe more importantly, because it made no attempt to live among the human populace. There had been rumors that it was a place where zoans went to free themselves from human norms and live like the animals

they resembled: naked and violent, cannibalistic, perverse. Clickbait and idle whispering born from the public's disdain. But the Enclave had never had to deal with gawkers, spying drones, police agitators, despite doing much the same as the ill-fated receiving house.

True to its name, it was settled in a clearing surrounded by thick woods. It was mainly a collection of huts, hand-built from locally harvested wood and clay, arranged along walkways of flagstones sunk into the thick grass. Modern, but humble. A few bigger structures scattered throughout, but not bigger by much. Gardens and a barn, small fields at the outskirts for communal crops. Room for a couple hundred permanent occupants.

This was the former United States, land which Geir had always pictured as parched wasteland, but it was lush. Hot and prone to tornadoes, but green, verdant. The last legs of his travel, part walked and part hitchhiked, had been under jewel-blue skies and a beating sun. It seemed it would be no different in the coming days.

There were spare clothes for him—the ones he'd stolen in Terrace were beyond hope. Big as he was, he had to settle for a pair of worn pants and a faded tank top that had probably once had a graphic on it but was now a blank gray. He didn't tell anyone yet that he wore glasses. They might have gone off and tried to get him some. He saw well enough, anyway.

Anaïs came back while he sat on the stoop of the medical house after his shower and checkup. A cheetah-model, she was thin and bony, big eyes and jet lips. She wore a shoulder-length wig that matched the dark stripes and spots on her face, a smart suit and skirt. It was hard to imagine her growing up in the same household as Armand. Or, in another way, it was easy.

She stood furtively for a moment, waiting for him to say something.

"I'll put a word in for you if you decide you want to stay," she said when he stayed quiet. "And I wanted to say, I appreciate you coming all this way."

Geir shrugged.

“I’m guessing you came because you knew my name,” the Cheetah said. “That makes me curious.”

“About what?”

“The MVR track Armand was on is two and a half thousand miles away. You didn’t start walking as soon as you split up, that would be a waste of time if all you needed was money and shelter. So there was something else between, and you came here to get away from it.”

“Yeah,” Geir would freely admit to that much. He wasn’t going to give any details, though.

“Did...that involve Armand?”

“No. He wasn’t there.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“A couple days after the...bombing, found a town where I could get a ride. That was all.”

“Oh.”

“He went off into the woods.”

“That’s what he always wanted to do. I guess I sound fixated on him.”

Geir shrugged. Armand wasn’t Samuel, so he was fair game.

“It’s just—I know brothers aren’t a normal thing for zoans, right? I’m very worried about him.”

Geir nodded.

“He’s probably still in those woods,” he offered.

“I hope so.”

There was a question Geir didn’t want her to ask.

“You haven’t heard from him?” he put it off.

“Well...” she found a piece of paper in her briefcase, worn and folded into quarters. “I got a letter from him. He only ever sends snail mail.”

She offered it to him to inspect, acquainted as he was with its writer. The handwriting was neat and straight, and the hare’s signature was elaborate but

legible. The letter itself was terse and perfunctory. Mostly a list of things Armand had shot lately, a couple questions about people Geir assumed to be other siblings from their adoptive home. Nothing about the Mover job at all, let alone the explosion. It did sound like the hare he'd met.

"It came about three weeks after the bombing," Anaïs explained. She was jittery even talking about it. "God, I can't even tell if he wrote it before or after. I was worried sick about him, then I got word, and this was the word I got. I was a mess. And everybody saw me being a mess."

Geir handed the letter back.

"The bomb didn't get him," he assured the cheetah.

"I'm so glad to know it." Then she asked it. "Did you have...a family?"

Geir closed his eyes. And opened them again, because Samuel was right there.

"I was a Housie," he said. "Not quite the same."

"But it also isn't not. Are you in touch with anyone from your house?"

"No."

He winced, because he said it too forcefully. Immediately he could see it in Anaïs's eyes that she had some idea of what had happened between the rail and here, or at least whom it had involved. Mercifully, she didn't press, but looked away.

Geir stood up. He kept his eyes on the grass between his feet.

"How long do I have before I have to decide if I'm staying?" he asked.

"No set time. People will be in touch with you. If you waffle, they'll pester you. That's how most things work here."

Geir afforded a brief smile at that. He wasn't one to waffle—he didn't think.

Chapter 24

There were several vacant guest houses on the commune grounds, grouped in their own cluster near the road. Far from commercial hospitality: the one Geir was given was spartan, a thatch-roofed bungalow with a cot and unstocked kitchenette in it, and a single charging node for electronics. Utilitarian, stark, and more of a quarantine for outsiders than a welcoming space for visitors.

Being in quarantine felt about right to Geir.

He didn't sleep hardly at all the first night, though he retired to his accommodations early in the evening and lay in his cot for more than half a day. He didn't know if it was because he was suddenly stationary after days of walking and hitchhiking, or because the balmy heat made him restless, or because Anaïs had asked about family, but he could not quiet his mind. He thought about Samuel. He thought about times they had sat in the common room in the Brightlove House, holding hands while they studied. He thought about the way he had tried to help the maned wolf through periods of indecision after the revolution. He thought about the way Samuel's slim body had danced and bounced in the bed beside him as bullets bit into it.

He imagined having had the wherewithal to throw himself over Samuel before the hawks had opened fire. Or pushing him out of the bed and buying himself time to attack. Deep into the night, blind in the complete dark, he ran scenarios through his head, to the point that he caught himself thinking, for a few seconds at a time, that he had found the solution, that the horror had not really happened, because he could somehow enact the plan that was in his mind. It sickened him whenever he realized he was thinking it.

In all the years he had walked the Mover rail, he had considered the Brightlove House and its zoans gone, nonexistent, had considered Samuel a memory. One that could be set aside to concentrate on his job. It had felt like a heroic effort, a great sacrifice. How easy it had been, when Samuel, and their

work together and their life together, had actually been there, for Geir to return to if he had wanted. It seemed so obvious now that the knowledge had sustained him. A font of protection, a warm and secret sun. And maybe it had been stubbornness, not pain, that had kept him from returning long ago.

When he finally slept, it was to banal dreams.

Geir dreams that he is walking the rail. The flat-bodied spider bots are malfunctioning continuously, every few dozen meters he finds another one on its back in the snow, and he has to insert it into the slot on the rail for repair. It puzzles him at first, but as more and more bots turn up broken, it becomes amusing. He laughs at each one he finds. Something about them failing one after another. In the dream the humor of it makes perfect sense.

Oh, and there's another one, he says to Samuel, at easily the tenth bot in a row.

Because Samuel is walking the rail with him. In a padded coat and pants that are far too short for him, that would need another fifteen centimeters to cover his wrists and ankles. Goggles to protect his beautiful eyes from the wind. Samuel laughs along. He hangs behind Geir as they walk, and doesn't say anything, but smiles warmly when Geir looks back at him.

What a relief that Samuel is alive. Geir feels as though he was certain the maned wolf was dead, but he must have been mistaken. What a relief that they had not, in fact, been parted. In fact, as they stand over yet another bot and inspect its functions on their wristbands, Geir isn't sure he even remembers why he thought they had been. What had made him so sure? It is irrelevant, now. Just another worry to be discarded. They are together, as they always have been, and there is nothing to it but to keep walking.

If there was more to the dream, it vanished when Geir opened his eyes and was still in the hot, barren guest house. The bird rolled to his side, eyes unfocused on the floor. He didn't think he was going to leave the guest house today, no matter how late it was.

"And you haven't talked to him since?" Gladys asked, with a look of concern.

"He won't even come to the door," Anaïs explained. "But I know he's still in there. It's been four days."

"We don't have infinite space," Ortiz said while he baited his hook. "Someone will need that house eventually."

"I know that."

She had ignored the founders' office and come straight to the bend in the creek she knew was their favorite fishing spot. They took about one in three of their meetings out there. After all, Gladys said, what was the point of the commune if administration had to be anyone's entire life?

"He did come a long way," Gladys offered.

"We assume," Ortiz put in. "He hasn't been walking for three straight months."

Ortiz had always been more draconian with regards to the Animal Enclave's rules and admissions than his sister. He was one of few zoans Anaïs had ever met who really seemed older than others, by virtue of his sternly fatherly affect. She didn't really like it. It was too much like living with Dad again.

"Something happened inbetween," Anaïs countered.

"So he's on the run?"

"He's grieving, I was going to say."

The two mustelids nodded in tandem, and Ortiz cast. The hook hit the water loudly.

"One more day," he said.

"Ort," Gladys chided him.

"Okay, two."

"At least until his background check comes in," Anaïs pleaded.

"We tried," Ortiz didn't look away from the water. "There's nothing there. That's why we're cagey."

"What do you mean?"

"People slip through the cracks," Gladys shrugged. "There's no record of a barbatus named Geir, except saying that he was decanted. We've seen it before."

"Not much," Ortiz grunted.

Anaïs furrowed her brow.

"He told me the start of his serial number," she said.

"We've got his serial number. There's nothing there."

"What about the detective?"

"Bollard's busy. We're not his only clients."

"Can we hire someone else?"

"We could, or we could accept the obvious, that the guy is fishy. We got him on his feet, and now he's getting time to convalesce; we did right by him, and he doesn't have to stay. He hasn't even said he wants to."

Anaïs sighed. It was true.

"Okay," she said. "I'll let him know."

She started back for the clearing, but Gladys caught up with her. The otter stopped Anaïs with a hand on her shoulder.

"Dear," the parental thing was a family trait. "It's about your brother, isn't it?"

Anaïs stopped and searched for ways to avoid answering. None were forthcoming.

"I guess I'm hoping he knows more than he's said," she admitted. "And that it's good news."

"I know it's a hard thing for you," Gladys lowered her voice, though they were easily out of Ortiz's earshot. "And you have to accept that this bird might not know any more than he's told you. But I'll talk to Ort. I won't let him kick the bird out until you're ready, okay?"

Anaïs saw herself in the clearing on the day she received the letter, failing to hold back tears of grief and frustration, snapping at anyone who tried to reassure her, and then at anyone she saw at all. She was certain Gladys only came after her because of the outburst, handling her with kid gloves, so to speak. She set her jaw, but held back anything unwise she might have said.

"How's your work, dear?" the otter asked.

"It's fine," the cheetah let out a breath. "I'm polishing one application, researching another one."

"Good. You do a great job. What about your other work?"

Anaïs darkened. She knew the founders thought her other project was ridiculous. They would say so out loud if she didn't bring in as many grants as she did.

"Goodbye, Gladys," she said. "I'll tell him about the deadline."

"Well, take care." The otter gave what was meant to be a motherly smile. She didn't pull it off as well as her brother did.

Chapter 25

Anaïs stood outside the occupied guest house for a few minutes, debating with herself whether to let herself in. Geir was inside; she could see his shadow moving around the edges of the cot he'd stood up against the window, and he'd been heard pounding on the walls. That was, of course, plenty of reason to leave him be. Ortiz was right that the vulture looked dangerous. She left him alone for now. Surely he could intuit that the Enclave's hospitality, while plentiful, couldn't be endless. Grieving or no.

The sky was an oppressive blue and the sun made its presence known. Almost thirty-seven degrees, according to Anaïs's wristband. Still, she was too flustered to work, and when she was agitated she craved the open sky. She went walking, taking in the gardens around the residential huts and watching the bots tend to the crops around the perimeter.

She fell in with a breathing circle that was assembled on the grass. Thirteen or fourteen zoans sat and lay facing the center, and the cheetah joined the partial second ring that was forming. Jasmyn was leading it.

"You are filled with shame," the heron was saying. "It clings to the inside of you like plaque. You didn't ask to be made, but you were. They made you to put you to work, and you know it. You've been conditioned to be ashamed to live your life, because you live it instead of working. You deserve to be light and easy. How do we clear the shame out?"

The breathing did calm Anaïs, a little. Sitting on her knees with her back straight, briefcase to the side. Jasmyn's narrative was annoying; you couldn't say something so broad about every zoan's experience, even if it was almost certainly true. But sitting together, breathing in unison, focusing on the calm, that helped.

Gladys and Ortiz had fought over the breathing circles, therapy sessions, and late-night ceremonies. The otter, for: we are a sanctum for zoans; we're not just a place to live, we also need to be a place to heal, and a counterpoint to the world

that drives people here. The marten, against: we are a commune, we are a functional body, not a new-age cult; we can't give off that image.

Anaïs had been there at the beginning, twelve years ago. She was one of the first who had answered the founders' call, following several aimless years after leaving home. She'd seen the rough start, the money troubles, the constant arguments over policy—how like the history of zoanity in microcosm it was. The rise to infamy and then the gentle settling into quiet sustainability. She may not have done much to shape the place, but she had been there, ever toiling at grants and helping, as did everybody, to keep it afloat.

Maybe freed if just a little bit of plaquelike shame, Anaïs excused herself from the breathing circle and retired to a stone table outside the residential area. She flattened her wristband onto the carved stone surface and stared at the search prompt.

She searched for Geir's public record. As Ortiz had said, it was practically empty. Geir, barbatus, serial number such-and-such did exist; there was the photo of him taken at decantation, there was the artificially aged-up estimate of how he should look thirty years later (as usual, that was off, yet unmistakable). Nothing else. Not even a mention of his destination after leaving the factory. Anaïs had seen corrupted records before, even sabotaged ones, but there was usually at least something there. It was possible he'd given a false name, the name of another barbatus with his same phenotype.

She didn't think the Housie detail was false. That was an off-the-cuff explanation for his attitudes, and something a full third of zoans would have experience with, so it would be hard and unwise to lie about it. Anaïs went back to the zoan registry and filtered for barbatus-models sent to receiving homes. Of the twenty million zoans originally manufactured, barbatus had accounted for about four hundred; the list was easy to scroll through. A high proportion of them had been in receiving homes, probably because the name vulture scared human adopters away, the ones who didn't know this was a lavish, showy model.

There were six phenotypes, therefore different models of the barbatutes' estimated adult appearances. Anaïs grouped the entries by phenotype, and compared the forty-some who shared the portrait with Geir. None of the others had significant gaps in their profiles. Six had died at age seven, another three since then. The rest were well-documented. Most lived in Europe and Africa.

Anaïs sighed. This was all work that the founders, or whoever they had assigned to perform the background check, had already done. Bollard, the human detective the Enclave contracted with sometimes, might have more resources, like access to security networks for facial and gait recognition, to help trace someone's movements.

Anaïs could try to hire someone else, but it would have to come out of the community fund, and the founders had already made their opinions known. The two mustelids weren't supposed to be leaders, or to have any particular station above any other zoan in the commune, but their roles made their equality nominal at best, in practice. Besides, Anaïs didn't want to disappoint them. Especially not Ortiz.

She had another thought, curled on her bed with her wristband propped up where she could see it. She pulled up the location of the bomber MVR station, the one in which Armand had spent some nights every few weeks. Any search for it brought up a flurry of clips and articles about the bombing, the destruction, the terrorist behind it. Photos of the barren plot where the station's burned-out shell had been razed within days of the explosion, still taped off and unoccupied. Anaïs swept those all away: she only needed the name of the city.

She had already done any number of searches for signs of Armand, in journalist blogs and on commentary sites, public records and leaked police reports. Searches on his name, his serial number, on hare and jackrabbit and lagomorph and every other name his model went by. She set to the process again, but with Geir's information, and the words barbatus, bearded vulture, lammergeier, bone-eater.

She searched all afternoon, without results. So he probably hadn't stuck around at the site of the bombing. She chose another town near the MVR's route, and started over.

Anaïs ignored the door and went straight for the window against which Geir had propped his mattress, because she knew the bird had tuned out her knocking. The window rattled loudly when she pounded her open hand against it.

"Geir?" she called in. She could see movement around the edge of the mattress when she pressed her face against the glass. "Geir 19e9-sr4-6WR7C?"

The shadow at the edge grew bigger—but instead of moving out of the way, the mattress slid an inch over to better block the window. Anaïs banged on it again.

"What about Grouch's Third?"

No answer.

"The 'surprise newcomer to the Baniff Boiler in Wakefield?' The 'wonderbird to put your money on before his odds go stale?'"

The door finally opened, and Geir peered outside, a mix of anger and something else (but mostly anger) in his eyes. He stepped out just enough to take the cheetah by the arm and pull her forcefully back inside. Anaïs hadn't been aware before just how much bigger than her the vulture was. The scaled knuckles on the hand that grabbed her were split and bruised.

Geir released her once inside and turned away, hands tense with frustration. Anaïs rubbed her wrist, raw from the grasp of his spicules.

"What?" the vulture muttered.

"Well," Anaïs moved around to face him and showed him her wristband, where she had written her notes while searching. "Since this means there's no way they'll let you stay, I need to talk to you now."

"What do you think I know?" Geir demanded.

"I don't know, but I think I can't trust anything you've told me so far."

He set his jaw.

"What do you think you know?" he growled.

"One: A barbatus zoan identical to you appears in the fighting circuit in Terrace and makes a splash. Two: that zoan is identified as 'Grouch's Third,' and starts being seen around the city doing enforcer work. Three: every criminal outfit in the city puts out a reward for him. Four: people start saying he's associated with—"

"No."

Geir advanced on her by a step, head down and breast heaving. Anaïs gritted her teeth. She had thought about how dangerous it would be to confront him, knowing what she knew.

"—associated with the Zoan Front, the ones who bombed the MVR station. Four...Five: its leader is killed, and Grouch's Third is seen escaping the scene."

"No!"

The vulture threw his head back, but didn't attack her as she was ready for him to. Instead he turned to the side and drove a fist into the wall, cracking the plaster a centimeter deep.

Anaïs blinked and steadied herself. For the first time, she took in the environment. It was dark; the mattress was leaned up against the front window and the back one had a blanket thrown over it. Geir looked like he had showered, but his clothes were unwashed, and the single room smelled strongly of...uninterrupted occupation was the term Anaïs decided on. Cans of food and beer from the guest house's pantry were scattered on the floor around the one chair, holes punched in them by a beak. And, as suggested by the noise complaints, there were several caved-in spots around the wall like the one he had just made, some much deeper and some bloody.

"So," Anaïs gathered the nerve to keep talking. "I need to know. Did you even meet my brother, or was he just a name connected to another barbatus who was presumed dead?"

Geir didn't turn away from the wall. He flexed the hand he had just punched through the wall, streaked with pink from plaster dust mixed with blood from newly reopened knuckle wounds.

"They said I killed him," he said quietly. "I was their cover."

"Armand?"

"Samuel."

The vulture drew two long breaths, and went to the kitchenette sink to rinse off his hand. Anaïs didn't follow him.

"Samuel Brightlove?" she asked.

"Stop saying his name, please."

Anaïs folded her arms and planted her feet, looking much more sure than she felt.

"Answer the question," she said.

"Will you believe me? I haven't lied to you."

"You left out an awful lot of details."

"I didn't hitchhike straight from the rail to here. I hitchhiked straight here from the bed where the only person I've ever loved was shot right next to me."

She held her ground.

"So, were you the bomber?"

He wrapped a wad of paper towels around his hand and turned, resting against the counter. In the dark, the black feathers that gave his species its name were like the wide and deep seams of a mask.

"The Zoan Front didn't bomb the Mover station," he said heavily. "I went all the way back to Terrace, I fought, and I stole, and I cheated and I killed, to hear that from Samuel's own mouth. He was paid to take credit for it, then he saw that

I worked there and he thought...he thought I'd been killed. Then someone else killed him, probably over the money."

Anaïs opened her mouth but she couldn't think of a way to respond. Her instinct was to think he was throwing lies at her—but that was far, far too grand a claim to make, if all he was doing was covering his tracks.

"I told you, we were both railminders," he said. "I met him after the Mover stopped running, we found our way to civilization and split up."

"Then...then, why did you come here?"

"Because I had a way in. And because it was far away. I wanted to be far away."

"And you knew Samuel—the Zoan Front?"

"We grew up together."

"The Brightlove House."

"I loved him. And I walked away...but I came back. And I would've stayed even if he had bombed the station. I would've stayed even if he had killed your brother."

"Okay. So, what do I tell the founders?"

Shrug.

"I don't care. It was a waste of my time to come here."

Anaïs felt herself relenting. She wasn't really sure why.

"I don't have to tell them everything," she said. "They can't find anything on you. So...we can cherrypick."

Geir turned his back to her again, leaned with his hands on the counter and his beak hanging pendulously.

"Come outside," the cheetah urged.

She gave him a long several seconds before she left herself. After the dark of the guest house, it was blindingly bright out. Until Geir stepped out beside her, and cast his shadow over her.

"Okay," the vulture said, grimly. "Let's cherrypick."

Chapter 26

Geir's interview with the Intake Committee was set for the next day. As Anaïs explained, it was formed by random selection among commune members, plus the two founders. That was an advantage of an all-zoan community: everyone was a seasoned adult. For now, anyway.

They gathered around a table in a meeting room attached to one of the administrative offices. A humble space but far from ramshackle. The seven committee members were politely dubious when they smiled at the newcomer.

"Applicant interview," one of them, ambiguous squamate, said into her wristband, and held it out for him. "Name."

"Geir."

"Serial number—for our records; we don't use them as surnames."

Geir gave it.

"Zoan species."

"Gypaetus barbatus, bearded vulture, lammergeier."

"Pronouns."

"He, him."

"Thanks."

The squamate rested her hand where the wristband would catch everyone's voice. One of the founders, the mustelids, opened.

"Geir. I'm Gladys Parker. Before we get to our questions, tell us about yourself, please."

Geir started with the details he and Anaïs had determined were least likely to have him turned away.

He was manufactured, decanted, and raised in Terrace. He had the equivalent of a high school education, and had served in the workforce for fourteen years. No mention of the Mover and the bombing, except to say that he was employed by the Lans-Cartier Company. And the risky part: the receiving home that took him was one of the facilities run by the Brightlove Foundation.

That had the committee's interest.

"Was it that one?" one of them asked.

"It was."

"Were you involved?"

"I was involved."

"That's incredible," another said.

"The Brightlove House is well-documented," Ortiz, the other founder, leaned forward. "There isn't a mention of you anywhere."

Geir nodded, and feigned apologetic frustration.

"I think Lans-Cartier did that when I quit," he told one of the few lies he and the cheetah had agreed were necessary. "I don't know why. I'll bet there are a lot of zoans who have worked for them who don't have any documentation anymore. I couldn't get work when I came back to Terrace because of it."

"What did you do, then?"

"I was homeless for two months, before I remembered the Animal Enclave."

"You don't look like you were homeless for two months."

Geir raised his empty hands.

"Barbatus is a show model, I clean up well."

That earned some smiles, though not from Ortiz. Anaïs had said he would be the least credulous.

"I fought over food and places to sleep," Geir said seriously. "Terrace is a hard place, especially now."

"Were you associated with Samuel Brightlove?" Ortiz asked pointedly.

Geir couldn't help a rueful smile.

"At the beginning. He orchestrated the takeover. We all helped; we were basically a nanostate of our own, everybody was involved. But we didn't talk after it dissolved."

Again, all true.

"What was your job with Lans-Cartier?"

They knew he had met Armand, and there was no hiding that Armand had worked at the station that was bombed. He and Anaïs had suggested and ruled out any number of excuses. It had to be another lie.

“I monitored shipping between their facilities up north. I double-checked stock and pallet weight.”

“Why did you quit?”

“It was fourteen years. You know what the workforce is for zoans.”

The founders may not have, but there were some grave looks among the others. All seven conferred silently, on their wristbands.

“Geir,” Gladys asked. “What did you hope to find, when you came to us?”

He and Anaïs had disagreed on how honestly he should answer that question, how directly he should cater his response. It wasn’t until he spoke that he decided to ignore her advice.

“I don’t know,” he said, earnestly. “I could say that the Animal Enclave sounded like what we were trying to build at Brightlove, but I wasn’t thinking about that. It was a destination that was far away from where I was. The only image I had in mind was of the House, but out in the woods...and, really, I didn’t expect to make it in. I expected someone to turn me away when I came to the door, and I would just turn around and look for work.”

“What,” Ortiz this time. “is your feeling on the relationship between zoans and humans?”

It was a good sign that he was asking that question. It was a screen against subtler red flags, which meant the committee wasn’t worried enough by Geir’s history to refuse him outright. Anaïs had briefed Geir on the Enclave’s official stance: that humans and zoans were virtually identical, and the creator/creation relationship was irrelevant. She had urged him to cleave to it closely. They rejected applicants who referred to humans as an oppressing class, even if it was part of the commune’s fundamental internal credo.

“When I was young,” Geir said. “I thought humans owed us. I would have told you that making us to be their slaves was a crime that couldn’t be forgiven or paid for. I don’t think, anymore, that it’s right to say ‘humans’ made us. There are humans we have to thank for aspects of our lives, I’d say thank you to some and I’d wish harm on others, but it doesn’t matter that happened before we we existed. We deserve the same things they do.”

“Wish harm?”

“I can be angry. But I’m not vengeful. There are matters of fairness, and I’m of the opinion that they’ll never be settled.”

“And if they never are, what should we do in the meantime?”

“Feed ourselves, protect ourselves, help each other up when we get knocked down.”

Ortiz’s smile was wry; that was too close to verbatim what Anaïs had coached Geir to say. It wasn’t a lie, though. Even if it wasn’t all he would have said himself.

“What skills do you have?” Ortiz asked.

(“Do not mention intimidation,” Anaïs had said.)

“I’m accustomed to physical labor,” Geir said. “I’m strong and sturdy, and I have the patience to stick with a simple task for a long time if needed.”

He smiled, but he saw that the committee was unimpressed.

“It was a long time ago,” he sighed. “But I was at the ground level of a nanostate. I wasn’t the mover and shaker, but I helped plan it and organize it, and keep it provided for.”

The committee conferred. That wasn’t insignificant.

“And what do you need in a home?” Gladys asked. “Which is to say, are we able to accommodate you?”

“I could tell you about some of the conditions I’ve lived in. I don’t need much; food, water, and a bed.”

“Well, keep in mind that we don’t consider ourselves to be accommodating someone if they aren’t thriving beyond basic survival.”

“I might not know, then.”

Anaïs: Pity would work with Gladys and most of the pool of committee selectees, but not Ortiz.

“Let me give you an example,” the otter knit her fingers and watched him closely. “We have living spaces, but they’re limited, so about half of us have to share one. We grow some of our own food, and we’re able to buy enough to make up for what we can’t grow, but we don’t have the resources to provide everyone mc for instance, a vegetarian diet. And, while we don’t spy on anyone, we can’t offer zero surveillance, there are just too many pressures on us.”

Geir nodded.

“I have no dietary restrictions and no health problems that need treatment, to my knowledge. I guess I need large portion sizes, and a punching bag if possible. And glasses. I will sleep in a box if needed.”

“It would have to be a big box,” one of the other committee members got a laugh.

“We’re also—” another looked to the founders for permission to speak. “We’re also not very well equipped for conflict management. Can you handle disagreements, frustration, or personality conflicts without moderation?”

Geir blinked. A couple weeks ago that would have been an easy yes, but it took a moment’s hesitation now to nod.

“And, if you have issues with anger, would you agree to speak with a human therapist?”

“The most experienced zoan therapist is only so experienced,” Gladys explained laughingly.

That would be dangerous. Still, Geir nodded.

Then Ortiz asked the question Geir had most hoped he wouldn’t.

“You know,” the marten started slowly. “There’s a connection between the Brightlove House and the Lans-Cartier Company. Can you tell us anything about that?”

“There’s nothing to say,” Geir shook his head. “I can’t believe Samuel would do something like that. That’s part of why I left Terrace, I didn’t want to be near the Zoan Front.”

“The bombing didn’t affect you?”

“I wasn’t working for Lans-Cartier when it happened. I had already quit. I didn’t even hear about it until later, because I didn’t have access to a computer.”

“You knew Anaïs’s brother, though, who worked on the MVR rail at the station that was bombed.”

“I’d taken deliveries there a few times. We would eat in the cafeteria after we unloaded, I ate with Armand once.”

He had proposed the thought to Anaïs of implying that the meal had led to a one-night-stand, but she had scolded him for it. The implication wouldn’t offend her brother, but making it without his consent would. Still, it was a humanizing detail amidst the most tangled of his lies. He compromised by letting his feathers stand up sheepishly: he thought the committee understood.

At the very least, Ortiz moved on from the subject.

The committee had more questions. Was he religious? No. Did he take issue with zoans who were? Not usually. How would he feel if the Enclave invited the zoan families who had succeeded in reproducing? Naturally he had no objection, but like many zoans he had a great deal of difficulty imagining zoan infants. He’d damaged the guest house: was he willing to do the repairs himself? Of course. Right-handed or left-? Right-.

After an hour or so of questioning, the committee members all tapped on their wristbands for a few quiet minutes. Then, though they weren’t supposed to be in charge, the founders prepared to give their answer.

“We trust that you know we can’t offer you a permanent place,” Gladys said, apologetic but serious. “With no records on you, we have to take you at your word in a way we haven’t with anyone else who has applied—and we see hundreds a

year. However, the committee has agreed to extend a probationary invitation to you, while we have vacancies.”

“You would have the privileges of a permanent member,” Ortiz added. “And our by-laws would still hold. We may have to give your spot away, if we have more applicants.”

Geir was suddenly uneasy as he hadn’t been before. All seven committee members watched, waiting for his response. He wondered if any of them saw him growing tense.

“I accept it,” he said.

One by one, each member of the committee extended a hand for him to shake. A loose handshake, so that the contact in the webbing of their thumbs didn’t meet; a sign that this was no monetary exchange. Geir kept up his easy smile.

Ortiz was the last to shake. He shook firmly and patted Geir on the back, on his way out of the meeting room.

“Don’t take the questioning personally,” he said. “We’re glad to have you. Since you’ve been talking to Anaïs so far, she’ll give you an orientation. Welcome to the Animal Enclave.”

Chapter 27

“God, tell me I’ve done the right thing,” Anaïs said when Geir found her after.

“They warned me I’d have to live alongside religious zoans,” Geir prodded.

“Oh. Dad tried. It didn’t take. Well, it did with a couple of us.”

“I see.”

“You’re on your best behavior forever now, okay?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll see where I can put you.”

She took him along to the residential circle within the clearing. The houses were small, outwardly tidy, oftentimes surrounded with gardens. Most let the grass grow naturally, and there were bees everywhere. The cheetah referred to something on her wristband frequently, looking for an open spot.

“Gladys said there were vacancies,” Geir noted. “I wouldn’t think there ever would be.”

“People leave all the time. There’s always been high turnover.”

“Even with all the screening?”

“Zoans have it hard; most of us aren’t used to having a stable place to live. Or work that’s important, because it’s for our fellow zoan’s wellbeing instead of a human’s profit.”

“Ouch.”

“I’m not judging. I just mean that people have their own reasons to walk away from Omelas.”

Geir knew a literary reference when he heard one, even if he didn’t know the story. He let her have that one.

“What work do you do for your fellow zoan?” he asked.

“I apply for grants. I spend about six hours a day on them, and I’ve gotten us about forty percent of our total funding.”

“Not bad.”

“I hate it.”

“Oh.”

“It’s okay. It’s far from thankless. I’m supposed to have assistants, but they keep leaving. You don’t have experience writing grants, do you?”

“I’ve acquired plenty of funds in my time, but I don’t think they would like the way I do it.”

Anaïs raised an eyebrow at him.

“This one is empty.”

She pointed him to a heavy-roofed bungalow near the middle of the circle. It was made of dark wood, and much of its edifice was obscured by unkempt plants drooping out of hanging pots. On the inside it was much like the guest house, but brighter and better furnished.

“There’ll probably be a vote to put you in with someone else so a permanent member can have a solo. Enjoy it for now.”

Geir looked it over, sampled the tap water, flushed the toilet. The thought of a living space being designated his was deeply unsettling...he took comfort in the thought that it might be taken away from him. Though he wouldn’t give it up voluntarily.

“I’m taking you at your word,” Anaïs put her hands on her hips and looked away from him. “That there’s no hitman coming from Terrace to shoot us up. And that NABI won’t shut us down for harboring you.”

“Careful,” Geir tapped a finger on his beak. “I’m told there’s non-zero surveillance here.”

“They don’t watch you in your house. They glance at your computer use and maybe have someone keep an eye on you if they’re worried. The security team rotates out; you’ll probably be on it if you stick around.”

Geir nodded. While talking to the committee he had been totally untroubled by the thought of contributing daily to the commune’s upkeep; suddenly he felt resistant again. Suddenly he wanted to lock the doors if this—his—house and sleep for a long time.

“You’re thinking about Samuel Brightlove,” Anaïs could see his mood darken.

“I guess so.”

“You can’t tell anyone about him. Especially not that you don’t think he did the bombing. There are conspiracy theories surrounding that bombing, and most of them are right-wing obfuscatory trash; keep your beak shut if you don’t want the committee to second guess itself.”

Geir let out a breath and nodded. Yesterday, sitting in the painfully bright sun with Anaïs and outlining his abridged life for the intake interview, it had been easy to agree to uphold Samuel’s lie. Now it felt as though every time he had to, it would be a knife in his own chest.

In his own house, sitting around his own table, Anaïs showed him a map of the commune, with a promise that she would walk him around when she had time. She pointed out the mess hall and co-op, her house, the gym, the all-purpose temple. Security and supply sheds spotted throughout. The labor office, where he would be expected to report within the week.

“I try to concentrate my work in the late morning and early afternoon,” she said. “I’ll beet you outside after six.

“After six.”

“Will you be okay?”

Geir nodded.

“Don’t punch through these walls, they’re a lot more expensive.”

Geir nodded.

The cheetah stood and offered, tentatively, to shake his hand. He gave her the moneyless handshake as he had the committee, and she left.

The next morning, Geir returned to the co-op his host had showed him to. It was only twice the size of the very small houses, but it was packed with supplies. Non-

perishable foods, hardware, construction materials, bags of seeds and soil, arranged as tightly as possible around the walls and a central aisle, hard to browse for the jumble of labels. An attendant manned a counter at the front, a rodent-model who smiled politely, evidently used to new faces. They assured Geir that the computer would know what he took, so there was no need to sign it out. Geir checked out a bucket of drywall mud and an applicator, a lawn bag, soap and a pack of disposable sponges.

Before the day was as hot as it would get, Geir returned to the guest house. He gathered the cans he'd left on the floor and counter, emptied out the fragments of drywall and plaster where he had hit the walls, and mudded the holes over. He washed the floor thoroughly—it wasn't big—and rearranged the furniture he'd used to cover the windows. There was no matching the paint on his own, but other than that, by noon the guest house was in as good of shape as when he had entered it days earlier. The co-op attendant accepted the leftover mud and sponges back, and pointed him to the trash compactor near the clearing's southern edge to discard his detritus.

Meals in the mess hall involved a ceremony of gratitude conducted by a zoan Geir hadn't met, hippocampus model. The seasoned commune members filled their trays and waited to begin eating until it was finished, but no one took issue with Geir clumsily scarfing his sandwich and observing. The seahorse led something like a prayer, though it invoked no particular being or force, asking all the zoans to give thanks for the shared bounty and for each other. They all ended it by touching a finger to each corner of their tray, before finally eating. Geir didn't think he would do that.

Otherwise, it was much like eating at the cafeteria in the now-destroyed Mover station, though the atmosphere was lighter and the diners were less gloomy. And none were human. Some were curious about the newcomer, but Geir certainly didn't invite conversation.

His host had pointed the gym out to him, but he hadn't been inside. Like the co-op, it looked much like the houses, and may well have been repurposed from one sometime after the commune's inception. It was hardly fully equipped, but it was more than Grouch's zoans had. No punching bag, but at least there was a pulldown bar. Geir didn't feel like working out today.

He had made a deal with himself that he wouldn't retreat to his house before sundown. He was spent, though, in a way that wasn't characteristic of him. Then again, it hadn't been like him to hide in the guest house in the dark for several days, either. Right? He made himself sit on the porch instead of going inside, muscles twitching and forehead strangely tight.

The entire commune was maybe three hundred meters across, and though he wasn't at its edge, he could see almost all of it from his porch. No building was more than one story tall except a couple security posts, which Geir had so far not seen anyone occupy. At any given time, there was at least one group using one of the grassy circles scattered around the clearing for yoga, calisthenics, or just quiet sitting.

On the way here he'd hitchhiked through small industrial cities, rundown towns, miles of countryside dotted with abandoned houses and overgrown parking lots. The Animal Enclave was strange among them. It wasn't that he felt unwelcome—out of place, sure—but there was something that felt unreal. A detail missing, without which the healthy grass and calm zoans would never have all the solidity of waking reality.

It was the quiet, Geir decided. There was no quiet in Terrace, and while the Mover rail could be dead still, the knowledge of the cacophony that was never more than a few hours away was good enough to make it just as loud as the city. Anywhere else Geir had been was next to a highway, under an airtruck route, or surrounded by machinery. Without that, it was as if the world weren't turning beneath him.

He didn't say it to himself, but the thought formed: it wasn't an absence of noise in the Enclave; it was an absence of quiet in himself.

Anaïs came by when he had been sitting for a couple hours. She was in a tank top and exercise shorts, and had tied her wig into a ponytail. She was panting and her eyes were wide.

"On the nose, isn't that?" Geir asked.

"Are you surviving?" she ignored him.

"Are you?"

"I actually stand a chance of having a good day if I get a run in. Do you run?"

"I get my exercise from violence."

"Hilarious. I'm going to come inside, okay?"

Geir shrugged. If anything, it was an acceptable loophole in his self-imposed deal. He followed the cheetah in and sat with her at the small table in the kitchen.

"I haven't looked in the fridge yet," he admitted.

"It's empty, this isn't a guest house." Anaïs took a long drink from her water bottle and let her breath slow. "I have to check on you."

"Okay."

"How are you?"

"I'm okay."

"I'm told you went ahead and cleaned up after yourself."

Geir shrugged.

"You didn't have to do that. It makes you look embarrassed."

"They can think that if they want."

"You're—" Anaïs started to say something but bit it back, started again more gently. "Sure. I'm just antsy. Do you have any questions?"

"How often do people join and leave? It doesn't seem like anyone's even surprised I'm here."

"I couldn't give you statistics. Pretty often. If there's anything about this place that bugs me, it's that it's all about routines. If you're getting the cold shoulder, it's just because people are doing what they did yesterday, and you weren't here yesterday. They'll warm up."

"Sure."

"Has anyone talked to you about glasses yet?"

"No."

"It takes us a while to get them, but we have a stockpile. I'll take you to see if there are any in your prescription in the meantime."

"Okay."

She was quiet for a moment, unsure if he was goading her or just being sullen. He might not have either.

"What's with the prayer?" Geir asked finally. He illustrated by tapping a rectangle on the table with one talon.

Anaïs's eyes lit up.

"That's one of mine," she said. "Did you like it?"

"No. I found it bewildering. And maybe a little embarrassing."

Anaïs rolled her eyes.

"You make up prayers?" Geir asked. "Humans already think this place is a cult."

"They'll think that no matter what we do. Don't forget that I've been here from day one. I've had a lot of time to look at what works and what doesn't, who's happy and who isn't. As much time as anyone has had to look at zoans and wonder why we are the way we are."

"We're rectangles," Geir repeated the four-corners motion.

"Every zoan is depressed. Did you read a lot in the Brightlove House?"

"Some, when I had time."

"Think about how far back human literature goes: thousands and thousands of years. It's humans taking things that have been said by humans before them,

and communicating them to humans who will come after them. And that's only the conscious kind, the things that were written on purpose; folklore and mythology has the same structure but it emerges organically and evolves unconsciously. And you can examine it, pick it apart, dig deeper and deeper into it, and you'll always find something older and more basic. Archetypes and memetic cores. And that all comes together like a safety net for humans; there's always some common understanding, some pre-established input. It lets them have a baseline level of confidence that zoans don't. Any given zoan can have the bottom drop out on them at any time, and they'll be alone and lost."

Geir looked at her.

"This is from the household that wanted to prove zoans could achieve anything humans can," he said.

The cheetah huffed. She looked angrier than Geir had expected her to be. She brushed it off, though.

"Well," she said. "I'm a hundred percent sure you've met my brother, then."

"I ate rabbits with him. Or maybe hares."

Anaïs shivered.

"Okay, I know what he'd say—but eating the kind of animal you're based on..."

"I stay away from poultry myself."

She huffed again. Laughter this time.

"Zoans need something to bind them together," she sobered. "Something symbolic, that can be that safety net but also touch everyone differently in their own lives. The four corners are about having a boundary between the within and the without: yourself and your world; yourself and others; what you have and the context it comes to you from. It's there but it's permeable. Maybe the gesture is silly. I don't know. We try these things, they evolve, we scrap most of them."

Geir nodded. He still wasn't going to do it.

"Did you consider," he asked. "That it might be why some people walk away from omelettes?"

Anaïs narrowed her eyes.

“You know the name,” she suppressed a smirk and stood up. “I need a shower. I’ll see you in the mess for dinner. Or not. Nothing’s mandatory.”

Chapter 28

Geir flipped out of his bed at the rattling sound against his door. When he had his wits about him he felt foolish, reacting as though he were still living on the Terrace street instead of his own house in the Animal Enclave. The rattling continued, though, paired with a tapping against the wood.

In the middle of the night it was pitch dark, aside from a faint ray of moonlight from the window by the door. Geir flattened himself against the wall to try and see in front of the door, but the angle didn't allow it. There was no reason to expect an intruder, anyway.

He opened the door, and didn't understand at first what he saw. A pile of straw, swooping from the doorstep up towards him, lit by a small oil lamp. When the straw homunculus rattled the staff it held at him again, he recognized the humanoid shape: a zoan in a costume, wrapped in straw from snout to foot, only barely illuminated. They held their miniature lamp in one hand, and a long walking stick tipped with a rattling gourd in the other. Once they had given it a loud shake at the vulture, they turned away and stalked to the door of the next house. There were a dozen other zoans following, dim shapes in the moonlight.

Geir sighed and joined them.

The costumed goblin stopped at several more houses, tapped on the doors until someone answered, and moved on. Without a word the crowd followed them along the way. When they had amassed a sizeable trail of sleepy zoans, the goblin raised staff and lamp, then pranced in the direction of the woods. The rest followed.

A little ways into the wood, Geir saw a light deeper in, casting flickering shadows onto the undergrowth. The smell of smoke grew stronger as the straw goblin led the rest towards it.

The light revealed a smaller clearing, where Geir joined a loose ring of thirty or forty other zoans. They surrounded an earthen mound, with a bonfire at its

base. Several figures stood atop the mound, in similar strange masks and costumes, too obscured by smoke and darkness for Geir to see in detail.

This was already tiresome, but Geir kept quiet, standing with his shoulders hunched and his hands in the pockets of his sweatpants, and waited among the crowd for something to happen.

He recognized some of the others who had been summoned, from passing encounters throughout the day. There were no wigs among them, he noticed, and the few who'd worn shoes during the day had gone without them. Pure zoan, for the ceremony.

Someone else climbed up to the mound, and the five masked sentinels began to hum, loudly. The newcomer was naked except for a tight skirt and another mask, the shape of a quadrupedal animal's full body in mid-leap. They began to speak, but Geir couldn't pick out the words above the humming and the flames.

There was a quality to the humming, a very slight and certainly deliberate dissonance, that resonated within Geir's head. It made him lightheaded.

There were two bowls being passed around the circle, approaching Geir from opposite directions. Held in both hands, drunk from, and passed along. Zoans dressed like the speaker above, but without the running-animal mask, followed the bowls, carrying large ceramic bottles with which they refilled them as they were emptied. One of those, Geir could just barely tell, was Anaïs.

The clockwise bowl was empty when a heron passed it to Geir. The cheetah was ready with the bottle. She refilled the bowl without looking at the vulture, humming a slow melody that swam thinly with the dissonant notes filling the air. The fluid had a sweet and earthy smell, and reflected the light of the fire. When Geir drank, it was mild and bitter.

The other bowl was slightly thicker, and tasted much more strongly. Geir drank the last sip of it, and handed it along to the heron, for whom it was refilled.

The speaker's words fell into a rhythm. Geir still couldn't make them out, but he liked the rhythm anyway. Someone thumped a counter-rhythm on a drum.

One of the masked hummers? Had they had instruments before? They did now. The full moon above the trees felt suddenly very near. Geir had trouble taking his eyes off it.

His head swung back and forth with the beat. Gently at first, but increasing in force. Part of him wanted to stop it, but part insisted that no, it was the drums moving him, not himself. It was having a similar effect on others in the audience. They leaned back, swaying and nodding, eyes wide despite the smoke. The fire seemed to follow wherever Geir looked. It was there when he faced it, and it was there when he looked around at the others. And his hands were there, and his feet were there, and his beak was ten meters long. For a moment he panicked, fearful that he would spear someone on its gigantic hook, rake gashes through the earth with his world-sized talons—but he didn't, the world shaped itself perfectly around him to remain unharmed.

He was dancing, and others were dancing. There were words being said and he couldn't hear them, but he knew their meaning, even if he didn't know what he knew. The words were old, and the dance was old, and the fire was old. He didn't know why he had thought the four musicians had been wearing masks, they were clearly beasts of straw and bone and flower. He laughed at his mistake. He was delighted to have been wrong.

He saw the heron, and he felt an upswell of love. He put a hand on her shoulder and they looked into each other's eyes, and from each other's eyes back into their own. And the lizard on the other side of him, and the zoans beyond each of them. He remembered the ones he hadn't seen come to the woods and he felt the same warmth when he thought of them. Even the ones outside the commune, the sad ones in the towns on the road and the angry, fearful ones in Terrace.

Someone took his head and turned him around. His world filled with gold and black, stripes that made a face.

"Do you...?"

The voice was far away, but he heard that much. A thumb touched his forehead, and the curve of his beak.

"Do you...?"

He did, but he couldn't speak. But he thought the world of gold and black knew, knew that he did. Knew his response to the question. The fire came back into the world then, and the musicians and the ring of exultant zoans. And he was there with them, and he watched himself among them for all of the night.

He was less pleased with the memory of it in the morning. Somehow he had made it back to his house and had fallen asleep on the floor beside his bed, and the hallucinogenic visions had continued on into disorganized dreams. Dreams in which he felt happy, but the brief fragments he could remember of their content afterward seemed quite disturbing.

The sun was up and it was bright and hot. Geir would have stayed stubbornly inside all day, but his windows were pats of plasma that made the house stuffy and miserable. Close to noon, he showered—his own shower; that might have been the most unique part of it all—and shuffled out to take shelter in the air-conditioned mess hall.

He wasn't hungry, though the night had taken a toll on his body. He only wanted to sit in the relative cool. Facing away from the few others who had come early for lunch. Thoughts spinning, he got maybe a half an hour out of this solitude, before Anaïs found him.

"You have to make sure I behave, I know," he said when she sat across from him.

"You sure behaved last night," she grinned.

"Was that weird drug ritual another of yours?"

“First off, a ritual is a single action; that was a ceremony. And no, that one is all Terence. I do think Terence lays it on a little thick.”

“What was the point of it?”

“You didn’t think the chant was a little on the nose?”

“You know what the Mover is, don’t you? I can barely hear anything more than two meters away from me.”

“The four corners were about establishing the boundaries between individuals; this one is about dissolving them. It happens at midnight so you’ll probably be in a hypnagogic state, the fire makes the air wavy, so people’s outlines run into each other. The chant is stupid, I think, but it’s about oneness. ‘The sea comes to meet you. The trees come to meet you. You and your brother, your brother and you.’ And the drugs help. They’re carefully controlled, don’t worry.”

Geir looked away from her, fidgeting with his talons.

“Samuel hated to use the symbolic,” he said. “He didn’t want Brightlove to have any iconography or special identity. He said, once you start tying the revolution to something spiritual, you start making people dependent on it, so they won’t survive without you and your system. Or you make them think you’ve fulfilled promises you haven’t.”

Anaïs regarded him levelly for a moment before she responded.

“Keep in mind that the Brightlove House fell apart.”

Geir remembered the way Samuel’s body had leapt and shaken with each shot fired into it.

“There’s room for things Samuel didn’t like,” he allowed. “I assume the masks are primal archetypes.”

“Terence designed those. He’s way too into European paganism, he won’t listen to me when I tell him that’s not what we’re doing here.”

“Well,” Geir scratched a talon anxiously at the table. “I want forewarning next time, before any ritual.”

Before Anaïs could complain about the word, someone else sat down next to her. The heron from the night before. Smiling brightly and knowingly at Geir.

“There’s the one who did,” she winked.

Geir very loosely remembered the Do you. It was buried in the image of a wall of yellow and black that swallowed and absorbed the entire world.

“Jasmyn,” the heron offered a hand over the tray she set down, the same loose no-money shake. “You kept saying that. ‘I do! I do!’”

Geir smiled mildly. There was no reason to be embarrassed for how he’d acted when drugged.

“Geir,” he said.

“Jasmyn’s been with us for nine years,” Anaïs announced. “She does a lot of our outreach.”

“I do some of our outreach. It’s not that glamorous. You’re the one in the guest house, aren’t you?”

“I was. I’m a real Animal now.”

“I’ll say. How do you like our zoan paradise?”

“I’ll see after I’ve been put to work.”

“Put to work? Ouch.”

“Geir was in the workforce,” Anaïs explained quickly. “He’s got some well-earned resentments for us to sublimate into prosocial behaviors.”

Geir allowed it.

“And he got out? I’ve always heard they never let you out, once they’ve got their hooks in you.”

“There were extenuating circumstances,” Geir considered what details were safe to tell, and wondered what was being spread already. “I was with Lans-Cartier.”

“Oh. Were you...”

“No. But I’d been there.”

“Did you ever see the Mover?”

“I saw it coming in and leaving. I’ve never heard as well since.”

Jasmyn shook her head in wonderment.

“What do they even need a train that size for?” she mused. “Did you see them load it?”

“You couldn’t see it once it was in the station; they wouldn’t even let anyone watch. Loading was all automated.”

“Of course it was,” the heron rolled her eyes. “You know why they made it so big in the first place, right?”

Geir shrugged. The heron dug clumsily into her sandwich, her long beak as much a hazard in close quarters as Manny’s alligator snout.

“Anything automated,” she said. “They make it as big and as unwieldy as they can. They make it loud and heavy and expensive, so they can point to it and say, ‘This is what automation is like; wouldn’t slave labor be so much better?’”

Geir considered that.

“They love their Stampers, though,” he said. “If you’ve ever been to Terrace—”

“Oh, they love that they can drop a big cube on a poor neighborhood and replace it with a hotel made out of gold. But you know they could automate construction without it.”

Geir smiled bitterly.

“Maybe,” he said. “Don’t underestimate how much an oppressing class likes its shows of power.”

The heron granted him that. They argued agreeably until she excused herself to lead the four-corners prayer at noon. Geir still abstained. But, grudgingly, he admitted to himself that he could see the sense in it.

“I see a hard-shelled gangster opening up a little,” Anaïs prodded afterward. “Watch out, or our dangerous symbols might start building a sense of community in you.”

Geir smiled but looked away dismissively. He did have positive feelings towards Jasmyn, uneasy as it made him to recognize that they were to some

degree influenced by the ceremony. In his mind, their beaks were still kilometers long and intertwined.

“It’s a tightrope,” he said. Then, “What were you asking?”

“When?”

“At the end of the ceremony, you were asking people, ‘Do you’ something.”

The cheetah snorted, off her guard.

“You were looking dizzy. I was asking you: ‘Do you need to lie down?’”

Chapter 29

The next day, a punching bag appeared in the gym, without fanfare. It had clearly been bought used; it was musty and lightly worn, but still firm and heavy. Geir didn't wait to lay into it. It was his first controlled workout in weeks, and he hadn't realized how tender his muscles had been getting.

He didn't think it was a coincidence when Ortiz came to his door later in the morning.

"Geir," he nodded in greeting when the door opened.

"Mr. Parker."

Ortiz smiled. Zoans who had taken surnames never asked to be called by their first names instead. A pine marten model, he was slender and a little taller than Geir, but stood with a casual stoop. And like the vulture's, his hands seemed to seek his pockets when idle. How he wore corduroy in this heat was unfathomable.

"I'll cut to the chase," he said. "An opportunity came up, and I'd like to see what chops you've got from the Brightlove days."

Geir folded his arms and lowered his head.

"An opportunity."

"I have a meeting this afternoon with county officials. Normal government stuff. I think you should come along."

"In person?"

"After all these years, they still don't take us seriously enough to listen to us if we're not right in front of them."

"What would I do?"

"Probably nothing. But your alma mater was famous for knowing how not to get shafted. If you picked anything up, maybe you'll be of help."

Geir granted him that. Though he doubted Ortiz would appreciate the methods he'd used in his day.

They left in one of the Enclave's cars in the afternoon, Ortiz with Geir and two others he hadn't met. All had suits like humans in official roles wore, out of a

closet in the co-op. Geir's barely fit, but it was tolerable and presentable. Ortiz promised to write a suit in his size into the budget.

The county seat was a small town, surrounded by balmy Dakotan grasslands and far outside the old cities that had been abandoned following the climate shift. Invasive tropical flora, transplanted when local plants had begun to die, crawled up the sterile gray walls of the government buildings in its downtown. It was all broad, flat planes and opaque glass walls. Only one road for ground traffic; everyone else had to come by air.

The zoans of Ortiz's party were the only nonhumans in town, it seemed. Walking from the dropoff lane through the half-overgrown plaza leading to the multipurpose government buildings, they were given brief sidelong looks by the humans coming and going. Geir had to guess that any zoan in town—especially in a suit—was assumed to be here on behalf of the Animal Enclave. The other two split off for another meeting, but Ortiz called Geir to stay with him.

He was to meet with the Commissioner of Waste and Water Treatment, to discuss the Enclave's request for a designated water filtration plant adjacent to its grounds. Geir didn't ask what the marten expected him to do. He didn't know anything about zoning, licensure, or urban planning.

But, as Ortiz had said: the Brightlove House had been expert in not getting shafted.

And that's what the Commissioner seemed to be planning. She met them in a small but well-appointed room, equipped with a touchscreen desk to which she and Ortiz broadcast the files they had prepared. Standing over it, like a sheaf of unread papers, she explained her position:

The county would accept the proposal for a filtration plant, but it would be a full-scale one that would serve the entire county in addition to the Enclave, and the Enclave would be expected to maintain it.

Ortiz seemed to know about the deal. He didn't need to tell the Commissioner that the Enclave didn't have the resources to do that; it was only prepared for the

size of facility it had requested. Nor did he need to remind her that the parcel of land on which the plant was to be built had been apportioned by the county at the commune's inception for its necessary utilities. He still told her, but it was a signal to Geir: This was her act of aggression, you're here to counter it.

The Commissioner responded. The Animal Enclave had a population of under three hundred, much lower density than the surrounding county. It paid reduced taxes, and it didn't contribute to the economy. The county isn't wealthy, and the whole county would benefit from this plant.

The two of them discussed for a long time—Geir wouldn't call it a negotiation, because neither budged. He could see in the way the human talked that she thought the entire issue was ridiculous. It was an insult, and there was a twinge of desperation to her voice whenever Ortiz didn't capitulate.

She thought she was having her arm twisted for petty reasons. She didn't think the Animal Enclave was a cult, and she probably didn't think that she held any prejudice against zoans. No: she thought the Enclave was frivolous. Like hobbyists defending a yacht or a golf course.

Geir stepped in.

He didn't give her any specifics—he had none to give—but he explained, briefly, why having to maintain a full-scale plant would mean shutting down the Enclave. A reminder that its inhabitants handled their own infrastructure and food and therefore both relied on the majority of them being available for work. And furthermore, that the commune existed at the mercy of grants and donors, whose moneys were given according to very carefully described budgets. Funding received for a self-contained community living in peace could be rescinded if that community were to transform so drastically.

Of course, he was not a smooth talker. And he wasn't there to intimidate. But he remembered the way humans reacted when he loomed, and when he tilted his head so they could see the size and power of his beak. And when they didn't, they found the black stripe and beard handsome and red eyes striking. When he

talked, he set a hand on the desk where the Commissioner could see the talons, and leaned forward with what she could decide to see as menace or not. He had her eyes, and it was more than politeness.

She looked at him for a moment without a word, and back at Ortiz. The marten tapped on the desk to bring up a stack of documents he hadn't revealed yet, wherein he proposed a well-researched compromise that was more favorable to the county than any he had offered before. It involved the routing of some portion of the Enclave's proposed filtration system back to the county, as well as upgrades to a different facility that wouldn't require Enclave zoans to maintain it. The commissioner had less to say about it than about previous offers, and she sealed a tentative agreement within half an hour.

When she shook hands with them both as they left, she didn't avoid touching hand contacts. Her personal area network would report how little it was able to find on Geir later.

"That was only a test," Geir observed when he and Ortiz were back out in the main hall.

"You got your point across, though," the founder patted him on the arm. "She wasn't ready to accept anything before you made your case. I think you gave her a good nudge."

Geir nodded. He still thought he had read the Commissioner well. He'd find out later if she wanted him censured for threatening her.

"One thing, though," Ortiz held up a finger. "We do rely a lot on the county for our infrastructure. They provide most of our utilities and internet access."

"I am new."

"You are. But I think I believe you now about the Brightlove House."

"Did you not before?"

Ortiz wrinkled his nose thoughtfully.

"I think I did," he said. "It was a very specific claim to make spuriously. Especially when you were in a position to tell us anything, and we couldn't have disproved it."

When they reached the plaza outside, Ortiz added:

"I still don't buy that you didn't have anything to do with the Zoan Front, though."

The wink he gave when he said it was less reassuring than it was probably meant to be, but it carried with it an earnesty that told Geir he was at least not being extorted. The vulture didn't say anything. That may have been the purpose of this test: to determine whether he would be more useful in civil or uncivil circumstances.

Maybe he should have been annoyed at being tested without being told, but he found, as they regrouped with the others and waited for their car to return, that he didn't really mind. As Ortiz had said, he'd given the human a good nudge. Maybe he was better suited to it than he had been in his youth. Maybe there was a role for him in the Animal Enclave, other than patching up walls he'd broken himself.

On the drive back, Ortiz offered him a beer out of the car's cooler.

"I know I misrepresented it a bit," the marten acknowledged. "But we really did dodge a bullet in there, and you were a part of it."

Geir accepted the drink and punched out its tab with the hook of his beak. It was an audience-pleasing trick. Following the others' lead, he shrugged out of his suit jacket and loosened the sleeves of the shirt underneath.

"Why did you found the Animal Enclave?" he asked.

"Why did you emancipate your receiving house?" Ortiz countered.

"If you and Gladys are brother and sister, then I'm assuming you were adoptees, like Anaïs and Armand."

"We were."

"So you weren't emancipating your own home."

"A lot of people assume that adopted zoans had it easy. I know it gets a lot worse than what Gladys and I had to deal with, but just believe me when I say that we were equipped to understand what was going on elsewhere when we started to learn about it. It needed to be done, is why we did it. And we turned out to be better at community organizing than we were at taking standardized tests or competing for low-paying jobs."

Geir took a sip.

"Does that make it less real to you?" Ortiz prodded.

"Not at all."

"Good. And it isn't all us, anyway. We got it together, but we're not really in charge. All the first thirty who joined up with us did more work than you can imagine, and everyone since has been just as vital. And I'm hoping you'll be, too."

Geir looked out the window for a minute while he drank, watching the tropical grasslands slip past the worn asphalt.

"How close were we really to being shut down?" he asked. Shut down and put to work on the water filtration plant that was supposed to be theirs.

"This time, not very. That was the county's first response. They always start with an offer that would just absorb us and put us to work for them; they know they won't get it, but that's how humans deal with zoans. A couple folks have kept pushing, though, and we got out by the skin of our teeth. Or beaks."

"Has there ever been a risk of going under?"

"Not since the first few years. It was always touch and go then. But we've had ten good stable years. We're lucky, because we're known all around the world—just like you were—so we always have applicants who have the skills we need."

"And you have to turn most of them away."

"You've seen what kind of constraints we have. If we could get a little bigger, we'd be able to take some people in without putting them to work, but we just can't."

"I'm told Gladys is more willing to."

Smile.

"There are people who call Gladys our To Each, and me our From Each. I don't like to use the language of communism, that's a human response to human systems. But I'm a firm believer that you have to dig your foundation before you can build your house. The rest of the world doesn't have a very good safety net for the zoans we can't take in, but it isn't nothing. We keep in touch with everyone who applies, anyway. We've changed our minds and accepted some, and we've connected others with work or care."

Geir nodded. Brightlove had declared early on that it would only be a sanctuary for its own original inhabitants, for the same reasons.

"Especially now that we know there'll be more generations," Ortiz added. "At least one more. We have to keep the Enclave running so it'll be there for them, too."

It made sense. A lot more could be forgiven when it had looked like zoanity would vanish within the lives of the humans born alongside it. But the initial goal was still there: to provide a place in the world for zoans to live free of the mistreatment and marginalization they received elsewhere, free of the specter of poverty, capture, and endless labor.

Geir could feel something of Samuel's dream here.

Chapter 30

Despite being pleased with Geir's performance, the founders didn't call on him in the next few days to put his bureaucratic skills to use. In the meantime, Geir brought himself early every morning to the gym to work with the punching bag and weight machines. He spent less time isolated in his house, though still most of it. The company of the other Enclave zoans was slowly starting to seem more inviting. He still didn't take part in the four-corners prayer, but he waited for it to be over before he ate.

A pair of glasses close enough to his prescription appeared in the co-op, ready for him to pick up.

He had taken to climbing the security posts, so he could lean against the railing and look out over the distance. Especially in the evenings, when the sunset off the clouds cast a pinkish tint on the clearing and the woods beyond it.

Maybe it was some Brightlove instinct resurfacing, now that he had been indulging in some semblance of his role in those days. Lookout duty had rotated between members of the security team, when the house had been the target of frequent assaults, break-ins, and pranks. Samuel himself would bring Geir drinks up on the roof, and they would sit together while watching for the familiar silhouette of a human face lurking in the surrounding streets, or a camera drone.

Up on the lookout post was the first time Geir thought about Samuel and first remembered a moment with him, rather than his death.

"You're becoming a fixture," Anaïs said, mounting the ladder.

"I like the view," he said, without turning to her.

"It also keeps you from having to meet anyone else, I'll note."

"I will. I don't think I need to remind you that I spent fourteen years alone up there."

The cheetah took the spot beside him against the railing. Her wig shone a bold red in the sunset. Geir hadn't seen her since he'd ridden out with Ortiz.

"I've been making calls up around where you said Armand should be," she said, more seriously. "I don't suppose you remember the name of the town."

"I don't."

"He probably wouldn't be in the same place anyway. I mean, I don't know."

"Did he write often before?"

"No. It'd be completely random. Sometimes two weeks apart, sometimes a year."

Geir could have said something useless, but he didn't.

"Why do you use a briefcase?" he indicated the one Anaïs had rested against the railing between them. "Do you use paper records?"

"Oh," she shifted, maybe unconsciously, to cover it just slightly with her shin. When she was flustered, he thought he heard just a hint of an accent. Northern Irish, he thought. "I like to write by hand."

"Your rituals and symbols."

"And grant work, and everything else. I think I do better work that way. No, that's not it, I just like it. It helps."

"My handwriting is lousy."

"I have no doubt about that whatsoever."

"Did you ever talk about those with your siblings? The symbol things."

Anaïs rolled her head and sighed.

"They think it's silly. Armand got it, but he thought I was being too concrete, he thought it should be vague and mystical."

"I'd think he would like it concrete."

"Armand's a mystery." She tapped a finger on the railing, vacillating on something. "There's something I've been working on...I don't know. It's...nevermind."

Geir nodded and let it pass.

"It's something deeper," Anaïs continued. "Coming from the same place as the rituals and prayers, but..."

She opened her briefcase and fingered through the folders in its second pocket, but then held the one she selected against her chest instead of offering it to Geir.

"Working title, Iuism," she admitted, stone-faced while she waited for his reaction. "For the Ancient Egyptian word for newborn animal."

"A religion."

"I would call it more of a unified cosmology, but in layman's terms. Yes."

"I thought you specifically didn't want a pagan angle."

Anaïs tentatively held out the top sheet from the folder. It was covered densely in her tight handwriting. Lists, questions, bubble diagrams.

"It's not the same approach. It's not an explanation for the unknown, it's more of a lexicon. Iuists wouldn't be worshipping deities or reifying metaphysical concepts. I mean, they could, those could exist alongside it. The idea is that zoans should think about and talk about the world differently from how humans do. And we should derive power from the way we situate ourselves within it."

Geir gave her a considerate smile and looked back to the treeline, where the sun was just about to disappear.

"Okay, so broadly speaking," Anaïs gestured to a list she had written boldly. "We think of things either as physical, spiritual, or vague; and as something that exists, something that happens, or something nebulous. Love, Tree, Baby, Retirement, Gratitude, Vacuum. When you think about a tree, you talk about a physical thing that exists, but you also think about a conceptual archetype based on your ideas of what a tree is and what it does, and things you've heard about trees. Humans have different cultures and they all think about trees in their own ways, but by and large it's the physical instance and the archetype. And they spent hundreds of thousands of years building those archetypes. We've existed for thirty-five years—thirty if you don't count the baths. We didn't get a chance to develop those. So let's clear the table and situate tree here and talk about what we collectively think when we think about it."

"Why do we need a different way to think about trees?"

"Because...everything the humans think, the whole system of how they conceive of the world—it lets them do to us what they do to us."

Geir had no response to that. He watched the faint wavering of shadows in the leaves as the sun went down, slightly blurred without his glasses.

"We're small," Anaïs said, more softly. "The Enclave. And we're either going to disappear or we're going to get bigger. But everything about how we do things works because we're small. All I see is that when we get bigger, we either fall apart or we become something we don't want to be. This is what I think we need to avoid that."

Again there was nothing Geir could say. He hadn't even stayed with the Brightlove House long enough to see it collapse.

"You think it's ridiculous," the cheetah put the sheet away. "Almost everyone does. If they don't, they think I'm trying to start a cult, or they think it's a tool for totalitarianism."

"Well," Geir turned to lean his back on a post and face her. "Try to win me over."

Anaïs huffed, detecting condescension.

"I'm more amenable to strategies against zoan social collapse than I might look," Geir showed his noblest profile.

"Fine, fine." The cheetah dug out another sheet, on which she had plotted a three-by-three chart. "That adds up to nine domains: physical things that exist down to vague and nebulous things. I have placeholder names for the domains; physical happenings are in *Peristasis*, vague existing things are in *Brume*, nebulous spiritual things are in *Ingenue*. You talk about those like they're places. Each domain has—don't laugh—gods, judges, and muses."

"But you know that you made them up, so either you lie or Iuists also know that you made them up."

“It’s not about believing that they’re literally real, it’s about the frame of reference.”

“So it’s an artificial linguistic overlay.”

She pursed her lips, as much as her jubatus features allowed.

“You’re relying on a Western post-Calvinist viewpoint,” she chided.

“Am not.”

“You’re just humoring me then.”

“Name some gods, judges, and muses.”

Eyes narrowed, she pulled out another folder and flicked the first page from it officiously.

“This is all subject to change,” she prefaced.

Chapter 31

By the time the sun was completely down, Anaïs was describing her symbolic deities from memory and didn't need a light to read by. Geir didn't see the application for it; it sounded more to him like she was writing a novel. Though, moreso, it sounded like the idle rigor of a child raised under pressure to excel. And he was sure she knew it; it didn't bear mentioning. He listened while she explained in detail, both sitting with their feet dangling from the platform.

It was well past dark when Geir's lookout skills alerted him to something moving in the woods. He stood back up and looked back out into the moonlight-mottled dark. In a space where the woods thinned, he definitely saw human faces. That was a shape, a pattern of light and shadow he had been long conditioned to seek out in the dark.

"There's someone out in the woods," he explained when Anaïs fell quiet. "Do you ever have breaches?"

"We used to, but not in years; we're too remote. What do you see?"

Geir pointed her to the thin spot where he'd gotten a glimpse of the humans. There was a brief flash a few meters on, an arm and shoulder just barely visible. The cheetah turned to something else she saw, and alerted Geir. Lights from two wristbands, among the houses. They silhouetted their holders, so their faces were invisible.

"That's Gladys's house," Anaïs said.

"They should know," Geir glanced back to where the humans had passed.

He didn't see any more sign of the humans, but the lights advanced towards the tree line.

"Are they meeting?" Geir asked.

"With humans, at midnight?"

Anaïs's wristband lit up brightly, annihilating everything but her face in darkness.

"They're not online," she observed. "Their schedule is public."

She typed something, but Geir stopped her before she could send it. They met eyes, and quietly agreed. The founders were moving in secret: either they were about to be ambushed, or it was a meeting the commune would disapprove of. Or it was nothing.

“I have a guess where they’re going,” Anaïs said on the way down from the tower.

She led Geir at a brisk jog by the light of her wristband, across to the eastern end of the clearing and into the forest. Light off, she picked surprisingly surely through the woods in the dark. They came to a lazy stream that caught the moonlight well, and Anaïs gestured to be quiet while they traced it northward.

As soon as they saw the lights at the bend in the creek, they hid within the thick undergrowth. Down an incline of rock and loose, leafy dirt, Gladys and Ortiz Parker stood amidst their fishing gear and lawn chairs, discussing in a hush by the light of their wristbands. It was much too far for Geir to hear, especially with the buzzing of night insects and frogs in the forest, but he could see clearly.

The founders acknowledged the two humans who stepped out of the trees. The newcomers were pale but dressed in dark clothes and stocking caps. They held guns, aimed at the ground.

“Can you hear them?” Geir whispered.

Naturally Anaïs’s hearing was much closer to that of a human’s than of a real cat, but it was still strong, and had the advantage of large, cupped ears. She closed her eyes to concentrate.

“I missed the first part,” she whispered. “The humans are saying, ‘The last clerical didn’t work out.’ Something about ‘physical,’ something about a quota.

“Gladys says...‘We have some candidates.’”

The otter produced a few pages, folded up into quarters, from a pocket. Real vulture eyes could easily have seen what was on them from Geir’s distance; as it was, he could only see that they were a mix of text and pictures.

Ortiz turned away, arms folded, and faced the creek.

“She’s talking about Jasmyn,” Anaïs said. “I don’t know what. The human says...he says ‘Where?’”

“What is this?” Geir asked, in the hopes that what he suspected was wrong.

“Ortiz says that Jasmyn is happy here, people would ask questions...”

Anaïs fell silent, understanding the exchange as Geir did. She rocked back on her heels, eyes intense but unfocused.

“What are they saying?” Geir pressed. He had to ask it again before she answered.

“They’re saying, ‘Would you rather people ask questions, or you fall behind?’ This isn’t happening.”

“Keep going. I can’t hear them.”

“Gladys is asking if they can offer extra physical workers to keep up. She’s telling them about you, now. She says you volunteered yourself for physical labor, and no one would be surprised if you didn’t stay. Ortiz says you have too much value to the administration.”

Anaïs glared at Geir. Her face was little more than a silhouette, slightly darker than the black around her, but Geir could see the distress in it. More disbelief than he felt. Still, he urged her on. They couldn’t be rash.

Gladys and Ortiz gave the humans several candidates. There was no indication whom the humans represented, or what specifically they were asking for, beyond zoans who could do physical or clerical work. When the meeting was over, humans and zoans took separate paths, the way they had come, and left nothing behind.

“That’s the people who leave,” Geir said aloud when they were definitely out of earshot. “They’re being sold for labor.”

“Gladys and Ortiz are obviously being strong-armed...”

“Does that matter?”

Anaïs turned her wristband’s light on, dimly but bright enough to show the rage on her face. Geir’s too, most likely.

“I’ll kill them,” she said.

“We might still be wrong,” Geir cautioned her. “You should go talk to Jasmyn. Casually. They won’t take her if you’re there, and if they come anyway then maybe it’s something benign.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, and nodded.

“Come on,” she said, and stood to lead Geir back to the clearing.

There was already no sign of the founders, but Geir and Anaïs still kept quiet and out of the moonlight when possible. Jasmyn’s house was near the outside of the residential circle, close to the center of the commune. Anaïs stopped Geir in the shadow of the next building away from it.

“Wait till I go in,” she said. She was breathing deeply, keeping her words measured. “I’ll signal you if she’s already gone. Come by in the morning.”

“Okay.”

“We’re wrong. There’s nothing to it. It can’t be real.”

Whatever betrayal Geir felt, he knew it must be tenfold for her. He gave a nod and trusted that she sensed it.

Anaïs went to the door and knocked, old-fashioned. Like the straw goblin. A little while later the door opened and Jasmyn was there, in pajamas and long beak hanging drowsily. Geir couldn’t hear the excuse the cheetah made for the late-night visit, but it was good enough that the heron took her hand, as if supportively, and invited her in.

Geir lingered, watching carefully for any sign of intruders stalking the heron’s place. When he was satisfied they had either been discouraged by the company or had never planned to take her tonight, he turned his back. He wasn’t going home, however.

The lights were on in the civic office, where no doubt the founders were in turns sulking and scrambling to find more satisfying offerings. Much as Geir wanted to burst in on them and demand answers, he cooled himself down enough to take a subtler approach. Their houses would be open.

The two mustelids lived next door to each other, in houses no different from those available to any member of the commune. Geir didn't know which was which, but he figured either was equally likely to be the hiding place for their evidence. He chose the one closer to the perimeter.

The door was locked—already more security than other houses used—but the window wasn't. It only took a little jostling to shake that open from the outside. Once he was in, he made no effort to be secretive. If Gladys or Ortiz came home and found him searching, that was all the excuse he needed to confront them. He turned on the lights and took his time.

Nothing indicated which of the siblings's home this was. It was well-lived-in, but still had a sparse impersonality to it, as if its owner might move to a different unit at any time. A floral-patterned rug, silverware in a tray on the counter, a bed with a thick hand-sewn quilt on it. A desk with several drawers, none of which seemed to hide anything illicit.

Nothing under the bed except a tacklebox. No safe in any of the cabinets. Geir pulled up a corner of the rug and felt around the hardwood underneath. A small section of one board was loose. Beneath it, a metal document case stuck in a narrow hole dug into the foundation. Geir took it to the counter and easily checked its quaint physical lock. It had been left unlocked: it was old and opened often, its owner had long since lost the patience to keep it consistently secure.

There were several folders inside, and a few key cards. Geir flipped through some of the former. One held a stack of physical copies of the enclave's founding documents, and renewals to them. Some papers from the Parker household including photos of the adoptive family. And below those, a stack of files on zoans in the commune.

There were about thirty of them. They listed the subject's application date; most were from the past year, just a few farther back. Geir's wasn't there, of course, because Gladys had it with her. The information appeared to be compiled from the background checks. The usual public data: name and serial number,

manufacturer, plant of origin, model and phenotype, destination upon release, employer history. Then: criminal and medical records, psychiatric reports, known associations.

Notes in red pen, discussing the likelihood that they had friends who would ask about them if they disappeared. Gauging happiness in the commune. Marking indicators of compliant personalities and learning disabilities. The packets were sorted by bright red numbers written at the top.

Geir took the pages with him. He drank a beer out of the refrigerator while he considered his options. Then he tore the small refrigerator away from the wall and threw it across the room, so that it crushed a wall of photographs. Kicked it one more time on his way out.

The high-pitched roar of frogs and insects pressed on his skull as he stormed in the direction of the administrative office. If the mustelids had been right there, headed to their homes, he would have torn into them as he hadn't any of his opponents in the carpet factory. He had never been one to use his natural sharp implements in a fight except for a strategic coup: the blunt impact of knuckle, elbow, knee, and heel was the violence he craved. But if the founders didn't have an answer that could satisfy him, he didn't intend to hold back. If he even let them speak.

The faint light in the window of the administrative office was all he could see. It advanced with him, until he could see movement inside.

Then something hit him in the side of the head. Hard.

Chapter 32

When the hood came off Geir's head, he was too groggy from the impact to see clearly. He had been aware of being forced into this chair, his arms dragged behind its back and ziptied at the wrists. Quiet voices conferring on the other side of the room. Now the bright and blurry shapes swam together in his vision to become a concrete floor, a workbench, two figures facing him.

He recognized the curve of their dark accipiter beaks, the black crests and brown cheeks. Large eyes watching him coldly.

Geir roared wordlessly. He thrashed in the chair, unable to do more than rattle its legs on the floor. When one of the hawks approached to hold the chair stable, he felt Samuel's blood on him, hot mist and gore splattered in his feathers. He tried to bite at the hawk's hand when she moved around him, but she avoided it easily.

Her grip on the chair was shockingly firm, and made all his struggling useless. He fell forward, neck slack, struggling to control his breath.

"Are you done?" the other hawk asked. There was no harshness in his voice.

Geir gave him nothing.

"No one will hear you if you keep yelling. And we're ready if you try to fight."

"Very ready," the one behind him added.

"Get it over with," Geir growled.

"We're not here to kill you," the one in front said.

"Then fuck you."

The hawk looked up to the one behind him. Geir expected to be hit again—but instead, she cut the ziptie.

"I'm Sparrow," the one in front said. "And she's Robin."

"You killed Samuel," Geir reminded them.

"We did. He was the last zoan we killed, and we hope the last we ever will."

Geir glared. He still saw Sparrow's gloved hands on the rifle, Robin circling around to fire from the other side of the bed. He flinched when Sparrow stepped closer.

"We have an offer for you. We're taking action against the people who hired us to kill Samuel Brightlove."

"Fuck you," Geir repeated.

Sparrow nodded and took a breath. His eyes searched the room for a few moments before they came back to Geir's.

"You want to hit me," he said.

"I want you to die," Geir spat.

"That's not going to happen. But you can hit me."

Geir narrowed his eyes. The hawk came in close and leaned forward, undefended.

"I want you to love someone like I loved Samuel," Geir said. "And I want to murder him in front of you. And then I want you to die."

Sparrow nodded, and punched Geir in the face. The vulture let it happen, let the concussive blow whip his head against the back of the chair, while the cold pain spread. He accepted the next punch too, on the other side.

He couldn't resist responding to the third one.

Ignoring Robin behind him, Geir caught Sparrow's fist on his forearm, and leapt from the chair with all the force he could muster. He returned the blows, and many more, driving Samuel's killer across to the opposite wall. The hawk guarded his face with his forearms and struck out when he could, connecting with swift and crushing punches that Geir ignored.

But he couldn't sustain it. The image in his mind was too strong: at first it zeroed in on Sparrow with the gun, Sparrow pulling the trigger—but it always swung away to show him Samuel instead. His partner died in his mind, over and over, and the violence didn't banish the memory. He slipped, and he slowed, and the hawk put up only token resistance and then none at all. Hands on Geir's

arms, turning him aside so that he staggered and fell to his elbows on the workbench, chest heaving.

There was blood on him now. Spattered on his knuckles and flung in droplets into his feathers. He could tell himself it wasn't Samuel's, but his scales and feathers wouldn't believe it.

"Bring some ice for him," one hawk called to the other.

Geir rested his head in his hands. He tried to refuse the ice bundled in a towel that one of the hawks brought him, but he didn't have the energy. It was cold against his aching face and fists, and slowly grew damp.

"We were the property of Stuyron Security Solutions," Sparrow explained.

"Were," Geir noted.

He had washed his face and hands in the industrial sink in the corner of this basement, and now his feathers weighed heavily, like a hand pressing down on him. He still had cuts that oozed in turn, and cleaning up also hadn't done anything for the blood on his shirt.

"We liberated ourselves," Robin said.

The two hawks leaned against the workbench across from Geir, casual but serious. Sparrow nursed a few swollen spots on his face with another bundle of ice, little inconvenienced by them.

"Where's the third one?" Geir asked. "On lookout?"

"Dove didn't feel the same," Sparrow said. "He stayed behind."

"Loyal," Geir said.

"They purchased us straight from the factory. Stuyron was our home and our world long before it was our employer."

"Just assassins for hire. Nothing personal."

"Not only assassins," Robin corrected. "We did espionage, and fixing, too."

“And not for hire. Contracts had nothing to do with us. We were implements of the company.”

Geir breathed in deeply, smelling the melting ice in his bundle. He was too tired to rage against the hawks’ excuses. Acceptance that fighting them would do no good was a knife in the eye, but it was also the warmest pool to slip into.

“We were providing support for a coverup operation,” Sparrow continued. “They gave us dozens of targets. Many of them were zoans.”

“You killed all of them.”

“We did. The client was the Lans-Cartier company.”

Geir looked up.

“They were covering up the explosion,” Robin took over. “The bombing was a lie, obviously. They paid Samuel Brightlove to take credit.”

Sparrow showed Geir an image on his wristband. A diagram of the Mover station, highlighting places in its support structures in yellow.

“The building was built by a Stamper,” the assassin explained. “The explosives were printed into its walls by design. They were detonated by accident.”

Geir couldn’t help but study the diagram closely. He thought of the model on the Stamper’s terminal outside of Terrace, how easily it could have included anything within the walls it printed.

“They were going to bring it down themselves,” he said aloud. “So they could point at the Stamper, and call automated construction a hazard.”

“So there were engineers who knew, or could guess,” Sparrow nodded. “And architects, and software designers, and others.”

“And after they were dead,” Robin added. “Samuel Brightlove was the last one who knew definitively that he hadn’t been involved, so they had him killed too.”

“They had you kill him,” Geir growled.

“They had us kill him,” Sparrow was unapologetic.

Geir closed his eyes against a swell of pain in his head. Samuel had thought he had inadvertently taken credit for killing Geir—but in reality, the company to

which Geir had sacrificed fourteen years, and on whose dime he had lived and eaten and slept, had killed Samuel.

“And what do you want me to do?” he asked sourly.

“Didn’t you ever wonder what exactly the MVR was carrying?”

Geir was quiet. Of course he had—in the first few years. The general line from the company was that the Mover was one leg of a vital industrial supply chain, that it received and delivered goods of all kinds to bring between hemispheres. His supervisors had played the secrecy off as a matter of safety and industrial privilege. At any rate, it had ceased to concern him that the Mover had a role of any kind, except to provide the rail for him to walk.

“After neutralizing Brightlove, we were reassigned,” Sparrow brought up another picture on his wristband. “We were assisting with security here.”

Geir wasn’t sure what he was being shown at first. He thought it was a photograph of the station before the explosion, until he realized that he didn’t recognize the city around it at all. This was the opposite terminal.

“What is it carrying?” he asked.

“Look closer.”

Geir leaned in, and the hawk zoomed in on the image, showing the unfamiliar city beyond. What Geir had taken to be a low-lying urban sprawl revealed itself as cranes and scaffolding, the frames of skyscrapers and warehouses. Construction: an entire city of it. And, looming in the distance, a Stamper.

Sparrow brought up another image, taken from ground level and farther away. A wall enclosed the city, transparent and maybe ten stories high. Blasted dirt and concrete bunkers on either side. The Stamper straddled it, evidently adding another layer.

“What is this?” Geir looked back up.

“We weren’t allowed to ask questions,” Robin said. “But we’ve investigated on our own.”

“There was a resort town there,” Sparrow explained. “It was being expanded as a luxury city.”

“Like Uptown,” Geir guessed.

“But new from the ground up. No impoverished center, and all of the infrastructure hidden away. And in secret, to skirt UN regulations. There is another city underneath, for workers and shipping.”

“What about the wall?”

“Have you heard about the mantle lakes?” Robin asked.

“Water under the surface,” Geir shrugged.

“There’s talk—among the kinds of people who would want a luxury city to themselves—of a chance that the water in them will be displaced and flood the surface, especially if they’re exploited as a power source. A lot of companies are moving towards that, and they’re suppressing research into the risks.”

“There’s supposed to be another glacial melt, too,” Sparrow added.

“I’ve never heard of any of this,” Geir said.

“The flood is probably pseudoscience, but it’s winning a lot of commitment to lots in the dome.”

“For the last sixteen years, the MVR has been bringing materials and workers out to the site. They built an unregistered Stamper, and it’s printing the dome, while the workers build the city.”

“By workers, you mean zoans,” Geir said.

“Ninety percent or more.”

Every time the train had made its eastward trip, it had been carrying zoans into servitude. Maybe even some from the Animal Enclave. While Geir had covered his ears and waited quietly for it to pass.

“So they thought it would make sense for the Zoan Front to be behind the bombing,” he guessed. “And if they had to reveal the city, people who thought Samuel was a terrorist would assume he was wrong about it.”

“The official story is that Samuel Brightlove had the MVR station bombed because he suspected it was being used to traffic zoans as laborers, but he never made a statement himself due to a schism in the Zoan Front.”

“And that I killed him afterwards,” Geir tried not to let his misery into his voice.

“Specifically, that you were one of his operatives. You oversaw delivery of the explosives, and you detonated them at his command. When you returned to Terrace, you killed him in a power play for control of the Zoan Front, but then disappeared.”

“This isn’t public information,” Robin anticipated Geir’s next question. “Only what NABI and WorldPol believe. We made sure of that.”

Geir was too weary to acknowledge the flush of anger that tried to rise in him.

“What’s my next move?” he asked. “According to NABI and WorldPol.”

Sparrow folded his arms.

“We want to sabotage the other terminal,” he said.

“How? You don’t have the resources. You liberated yourselves.”

“Part of our assignment was to recover the money Lans-Cartier paid Samuel Brightlove. We only reported half of what we found.”

Geir could only nod.

“If you agree,” Sparrow met his eyes levelly. “You will be our cover, and the one to vindicate the Zoan Front.”

“If I agree?”

“You can refuse.”

“But we suggest you don’t,” Robin added.

Geir swallowed and stared at his hands, split knuckles cooling under the ice.

“What about Gladys and Ortiz?” he asked. “The Enclave.”

“They’ll only know that you left in the night,” Robin said. “Your friend will assume they killed you.”

“They’ll keep getting away with it. You know what they were doing?”

“They’re being extorted by a company they don’t have a chance to fight. It will have their commune dismantled in a month if they don’t comply. Besides, the same thing is likely to happen to any unattached zoan, wherever they are. If anything, it’s more likely outside the Animal Enclave.”

The flush of anger came back, but it still never took hold. The temptation to accept that logic was strong, and Geir was so tired. He didn’t accept it, but he didn’t argue.

“If I do this,” he said. “We’ll need help, and there are some people I owe the chance.”

Chapter 33

The Lower Level was the seediest bar in this part of the city, a few blocks from the Ironclad. A lot like the oldest of Cranberry's coworkers described his place of work, back in the day. Where the Ironclad had scaled up just a little in its operation and its clientele, the Lower Level was a favorite for the really downtrodden, who didn't want to be interrupted by gangsters and revolutionaries. It was also almost free of surveillance, and as such, a place where his underworld contacts occasionally called him to meet.

He wasn't sure whom he was meeting this time. The message came anonymously, no calling card or codename. That wasn't unheard of, but it made him anxious. He was fastidious with the drops, and always timely, so he was sure no one took issue with his compliance, but he never knew when one gang was going to make a move on another, or try to get secrets out of him. It had happened before, and he'd almost lost fingers for it.

Cranberry studied the thin crowd cautiously on his way to the bar. They were mostly human, all quiet today. The Lower Level only served drinks; no one came here for supper or conversation. No lookers today, either.

The wolf took a spot at the bar, as he had been instructed to. He made a show of looking at the drink list, to avoid the bartender's attention.

The other person waiting at the bar, a big zoan in a nondescript hooded sweatshirt, turned to him. Cranberry almost tripped over the nearest barstool when he jumped.

"Chee-rist," he shook his head. "You're going to be the death of me."

"I have that effect."

Geir flashed a smile—the one that had taken Cranberry in months ago—from deep under his hood. His beard was clipped up under his beak and he didn't have his glasses on. The smile didn't linger like it had every other time Cranberry had seen it. He wanted to throttle his heart for immediately feeling sorry for the bird.

He shook that off, with a dramatic shake of his head, and set his hands on the bar to tap his fingers nervously. He ought to walk away right now. But he didn't. Oh boy, he was going to talk.

"If you leave right now I won't call anyone," he said. "But I really should. I really, really should."

Pause.

"After what you did," he really couldn't keep his mouth shut. "After what you used me to do."

The barbatus was quiet for a second, and then closed the distance between them. Cranberry froze in his tapping, but suppressed a flinch.

"I loved Samuel," Geir said. "I've loved him all my life. I didn't kill him."

"Who framed you, then?"

"I don't think it would be safe for you to know that."

"Honey, please." Cranberry rolled his eyes.

A rough, scaly hand reached tentatively and lay on top of Cranberry's. Despite himself, he closed his fingers around it.

"Look—" he said, before he knew what to say, and paused. "I don't have any reason to believe you, except that I also don't have any reason to think you're a good actor. God help me if you burn me on this...but, if you're not here to set the record straight with your old and very single friend, then what are you doing?"

Geir took his hand away, which made Cranberry want to keep holding it. But the bird was being very serious.

"I just need some news," he said. "And to catch up with a few people."

"Well, ask."

"Does everybody know? About Samuel."

"It's not public knowledge, average guy on the street probably hasn't heard, but anybody connected thinks the big beardo with no record planted the bombs and then came back and killed him. I don't think police care, as long as it doesn't mess up any rich human's dress."

The bird nodded, ruefully.

“Is Grouch still in business?”

Cranberry almost laughed.

“Oh no, hon. Grouch is history.”

“Palmer?”

“Palmer, big time.”

“I think I’m okay with that. What about his zoans?”

“Tying up loose ends, are you?”

“In a way, but they’re not the loose ends. I left them out to dry.”

“I haven’t heard anything. It could be they’re not going by Grouch’s Left and Right anymore.”

“What about by the names Darius and Manny, or Emmanuel?”

“Well, there’s a Darius who gets earmarked on some of Banshee’s takes...”

He told Geir what he knew. There was no harm in that, right? They got drinks and moved to a vacant table, as far from any prying ears as possible. It was hard to remember believing this bird had been behind so much chaos.

“Okay,” Cranberry shook off the spell he was under. “What is safe for me to know?”

Geir took a long time to answer, long to the point that Cranberry worried he wouldn’t.

“I grew up with Samuel,” he said finally. “We were in the same receiving house. He had all my info erased because I worked on the Mover, and he thought the bombing killed me. I came back to tell him it didn’t.”

“I didn’t know I had royalty drinking here all this time.”

“We had a few days together after I got to him. But he’s gone now.”

“Was the bombing him?”

Silence.

“Did he have a good reason?”

“He did.”

“Who did kill him?”

“I’ll just say it wouldn’t surprise you. Don’t do any speculating, especially after meeting me.”

“My mind is as clear as my schedule.”

He risked taking the bird’s hand this time. God, he wanted something to happen between them, but also god, it shouldn’t.

“Are you picking up where he left off?” he asked.

“I’ve always thought of myself as a failed revolutionary,” Geir said. “But I think I was wrong. Samuel wanted to make a world that was fair for zoans. I just wanted to do right by Samuel. He’s not here to do right by, anymore. So I think, maybe, that’s what’s left.”

“You don’t have to, hon. You’ll there’s nothing wrong with not fighting for a while. You can do right by yourself.”

The bird smiled bitterly.

“That hasn’t worked out too well so far,” he said.

Geir stood to leave. He offered a hand.

“For the drink,” he said. “And the risk.”

Cranberry clasped it. He had a feeling that when he checked his account later, it would have increased by much more than the cost of the beer.

Chapter 34

There wasn't much need for secrecy on the way to find Darius. The neighborhood was impoverished, spread out across a couple blocks on the lower and middle levels. Human children played recklessly in the streets and adults, about half of them human and half zoan, watched from the doors to their apartments and row houses. Geir kept his hood up and beard clipped, but but he didn't bother keeping out of sight. None of them had any interest in the goings-on of the revolutionary animal militias, and if they did, they probably put little stock in anything news outlets said about their players.

The hawks had offered to simply grab everyone Geir had asked for help finding, but he wouldn't let them. The contacts he's made on his way to Samuel's side didn't need any more disruptive surprises on his behalf.

Banshee was the optimistic name of a small-time thug who seemed to do much the same kind of business as Grouch but on a very small scale, only loosely under the control of a broader crime ring. Offering his services seemed to be a natural stopgap for Darius. Deprived of a place in Grouch's complex, the rhinoceros had done the best he could, and it wasn't much. Working under Banshee had enabled him to find in his employer's territory, opening from the bottom of a staircase below the street. Windowless except for an egress that was filled in with cement.

There was a door camera but it didn't seem to work. It took a few minutes of knocking before anyone came. Darius opened the door a crack, and frowned when he saw the barbatus.

"You," he growled.

He dragged Geir, compliant, inside by the collar. Assuming wisely that Geir would get inside one way or another. He had a shotgun in his other hand and made sure it was visible. It looked like a toy in his grip.

"Give me a reason not to use this," he demanded.

Geir didn't answer. He lowered his hood and kept his hands visible. The rhino relented and tossed the shotgun aside with a huff.

"I'm the idiot for trusting an 'activist,'" he muttered.

"I never lied to you."

"Oh no? Not when you said you hadn't seen your leader in fifteen years?"

Darius's place looked about the size of the bungalows in the Animal Enclave, but tighter and colder. There was a couch that seemed to double as a bed, a wall screen, a single unit of drawers, and not much else. Beer bottles and used paper plates around the floor. Geir stayed where he was by the door, while his host paced.

"Don't know anything about loyalty," the rhino said. "You sell Grouch out, everything falls apart."

"I was loyal to Samuel."

"Sure."

"You don't buy the line that I murdered him?"

"I don't care if you did or not. Anything you did after you ran out on us is bullshit."

"The money belonged to Samuel, and it was my way back in."

"Grouch gave you a home. Not that you'd have any idea what it means not to have one."

"I'm not going to apologize for what happened to Grouch," Geir said. "But I will apologize for how it splashed back on you. It wasn't supposed to happen the way it did. The money was Samuel's, and it was my way back in. The plan was to turn around and give you and Manny a hand."

"But he ended up dead before you could buy your way out of being a traitor. He was a useless prick who made everyone else a target so he could brag about his own body count. Just tell me what you want and get out."

Geir ignored the jab as best he could.

"I want your help shutting down the thing Samuel was killed to protect."

Darius laughed derisively.

"For fourteen years," Geir continued, grimly. "I walked up and down the rail, and didn't know it was carrying supplies and slave labor to build a new Uptown without the unsightly Terrace in the middle of it. I was being loyal then. Then the company building it murdered the love of my life in front of me, to cover up that they blew up their own building. I'm not the activist Samuel was, but I've been given a chance to make sure the project they killed him for isn't easy. And I might be able to convince the people who gave me that chance to help me make sure you and Manny aren't worse off than you were when I got started."

The rhino's face didn't soften, but he at least sat with that for a few breaths before he said anything.

"None of that means shit to me," he waved a hand dismissively. "You and he got where you are by stirring up shit that comes down on everyone else, and I don't owe you anything."

He picked his shotgun back up to punctuate the point, though he held it haphazardly by the barrel. One breath, two.

"Manny is trying to find a manager in a different circuit," he said, more softly. "You can ask him."

Darius's information led Geir to another fighting ring, far from any of his old haunts in Terrace. Dangerously close to Uptown, in fact. Like the carpet factory, it was an all-analog operation, but the hawks were able to track enough chatter to know that the next day would be a fight featuring a champion zoan by the name of Emmanuel.

Geir showed up early.

This ring was still secretive, but was at least above ground. It used a condemned warehouse that opened onto the second level of the city. Lifeless and

locked down from the outside, but close to time a pair of door men came to unlock its huge steel door and linger by it. They accepted generous bribes to let Geir in early and without questions. The inside was similar to the carpet factory's boiler room, but wider and emptier. There were a few people scurrying around, checking the cordons and the chalkboard. They ignored the vulture. Some derelict industrial equipment had been moved out of the way to leave a large open space in which a square had been cordoned off. Old chassis and assembly line robot arms propped up corrugated steel dividers off to the side, which Geir took to be where fighters and managers prepared. Seated alone in one of the cubicles behind the divider was the familiar alligator, facing the wall and wrapping his fists.

Geir called out to him. The gentle heaving of Manny's scarred back slowed, but he didn't turn around.

"I'm sure you're not happy to see me," Geir said. "I had reasons to do what I did, and I'm sorry the fallout hit you. I'm here to ask—"

The alligator said:

"Rematch."

He turned just enough that one slit eye peered at Geir over his shoulder. There wasn't only fury in it. He'd talked to Darius.

"Okay."

The audience knew who Geir was as soon as he stepped forward to challenge Emmanuel in the ring. Whether he was the mysterious barbatus who had challenged and beaten the alligator months before, or the one who had murdered the leader of the Zoan Front, everyone recognized him. He left his hoodie, shirt, and glasses on the rope like before, and hopped lithely into the ring.

This would have to be quick.

If losing Grouch's patronage had cost Manny any confidence, it didn't show in the ring. He came in as strong as he ever had, with a roar and a display of his tough-skinned muscles. In his first advance he drove a fist at Geir's gut that the bird only barely escaped, to catch him with the other against the side of the head. It knocked Geir to the floor—but not for good.

It seemed the alligator had learned to anticipate Geir's speed and feints. They had sparred together for weeks, after all. The vulture got a number of hits in to his sides and back, but not enough to add up. Meanwhile he took a pummeling that left him bruised and woozy.

He brought out the talons. At every chance he swiped and dug at his opponent's arms and face. He let himself be caught in a grapple to dig deep into the alligator's thickest scutes, leaving bloody gouges.

That was a mistake. Manny wasn't going to let him pile on the small wounds this time. He trapped Geir's arms under his own, and while the bird struggled to free himself, reared back.

Geir barely had time to register the headbutt coming in, before the world exploded and vanished.

He was loosely aware of someone carrying him, after some indefinite time, and of being dropped to the floor elsewhere. He swam in and out of consciousness, dizzy and nauseous, until he recognized the two figures above him, in the cubicle behind the corrugated divider.

Darius, kneeling, offered him a hand.

"Manny talked me into it," he said.

Chapter 35

With his presence now widely known in Terrace, Geir had to be out quickly. Departing from his home was much easier this time than the last, with the help of the hawks who had been the reason he'd fled then. They had their own aircar, for one. Which had its own minifridge, quite welcome after the beating Geir had taken. The beer he had stocked it with became his first-aid cool compresses as soon as they lifted off from the parking lot above the warehouse.

"You didn't say you have a team already," Darius observed, eying the hawks suspiciously.

"It was a long story," Geir said from behind a can held over his swollen eye. "These are Robin and Sparrow. They killed Samuel."

"Did they."

The car was just big enough for its five passengers to sit with some space, in two facing rows. Darius and Manny needed the sixth seat between them to account for their shoulders. A transparent floor showed the city receding below them.

"Under orders," Geir almost believed he was at peace with it.

"So you took the money you stole from Grouch to hire them right back," Darius guessed.

"He didn't hire us," Robin shot back. "We recruited him."

"Abducted might be a better word," Geir smiled. "But hear them out."

Sparrow and Robin explained the operation they had been assigned, and what they had uncovered about the reasons for it. The specifics clearly didn't affect the new recruits much, but the injustice was undeniable.

"What's in it for you, then?" the rhino asked. "They treated you like royalty as long as you did your job, and you ran out. If it was to get away, you're going right back and putting a target on yourselves. And there's no way you're doing it without spending whatever money you've got."

Sparrow looked at him coldly for several seconds. Both the hawks were unnervingly rigid in their movements, and inexpressive. Killers trained from birth—and maybe before—to be aloof, disconnected, but intensely observant.

“It’s worth it,” the hawk said, and Robin agreed.

Darius didn’t press it. Geir suspected he was less puzzled by the sacrifice than watchful for subterfuge. The rhino was, after all, turning his back on something fairly stable to trust them with his safety.

Manny leaned in to whisper something to Darius, who repeated it to the others.

"He says, 'What changed?' If you were good with everything your bosses had you do up till now."

The hawks looked at each other. If their expressions communicated anything, Geir couldn't tell. Robin looked back to the recruits.

"We grew up," she said, wryly, and shook her head to invalidate the response. "All our lives, we thought the orders we were given were...something special. You can't understand it. Stuyron paid an enormous sum for the factory that grew us to skirt the UN rulings, so they were conditioning us before birth, in the same way that you were being conditioned with basic language and social skills. And we were delivered still in portable baths, to be decanted on Stuyron's grounds, so that our experiences would be one-hundred-percent controlled. As soon as we were decanted, they had us learning to fight, to deceive, and to follow orders. They told us: the foundational principle of existence is the orders that we will be given, and all of life is only preparation to carry those orders out.

"We weren't only assassins. We also did surveillance, intelligence gathering, corporate sabotage. Our work was almost always at the executive level. We stole trade documents, and assassinated CTOs. So imagine what it was like when we were suddenly killing ground-level employees, and architects, and secretaries, by the dozen.

“Stuyron trusted that we wouldn’t tell a difference. But we did. And by the time they had us working in the dome, we saw through it all.

“I can’t talk for Sparrow, but I know that I would do anything to get out from under the shame I feel for how long it took me. Realizing that our orders meant nothing. That the central pillar of what they told us it meant to be alive was only petty jockeying between rich old humans who think of the entire zoan species as slaves. That’s what changed. Sparrow and I see the sum total of everything we’ve done, and we’d rather walk in and be killed than do nothing to correct it.”

The aircar was quiet. Darius and Manny conferred, almost as silently as the hawks had, and they told no one what about. Below them, the transparent floor showed the overgrown land outside of the city far below. They passed over the Stamper that had been dropped on Geir, its many printer heads whirring away at another structure next to the fresh villa it had recently finished.

“So, what’s our plan?” Darius asked.

Chapter 36

The aircar crept slowly, just above the taiga forest whose northern edge Geir had skirted for so many years. In the distance, the rail was an occasional metallic glint near the horizon, which the vulture tried not to watch.

They landed in the woods a few miles from the dome city and the eastern terminal. From what little they saw before the aircar dove below the canopy, it was hard to believe that this place was a secret. The unfinished dome was some forty kilometers across, space enough for hundreds of thousands of the elite above and potentially millions of workers below. And no wonder the Stamper had taken so many years only to reach this height. Certainly there were many around the world who knew about it; with the Mover offline, there was a constant stream of airtrucks bringing supplies—and zoans—from every direction. It was probably far more efficient than using the Mover, too.

The hawks had some limited access to the city's systems. The aircar was masked from detection as long as it didn't come within two hundred meters of the glass wall, and all five conspirators had false credentials that were convincing enough to be overlooked in a routine security sweep. Anything more and they would be detected immediately.

They stepped out into the arctic cold, amidst a thin layer of snow that had fallen through the canopy. The trunk opened for them, revealing five silvery Lans-Cartier padded coats just like the ones Geir had worn for fourteen years. They were to be disguised as railminders, reassigned while the Mover wasn't running. Geir was hesitant to slit open the vacuum packing and put it on, but he shook his reticence off.

Sparrow also distributed wristbands and earpieces, which would sync up with his and Robin's subdermal ones. They would be in touch at all times: if caught, destroy both if possible.

Equipped, they emerged from the woods.

The glass dome was fogged and dusted with snow, obscuring the city beyond it except for vague shapes. Cranes towered above, and the higher floors of a few nearly-complete skyscrapers. The earth thrummed with vibrations from the Stamper, which was extruding away on the northern side of the wall.

MVR-602, the station at the Mover's eastern terminal, was a huge structure, the only complete one that could be seen from outside. Extending half a kilometer into the dome, it was dark and hunched, mostly broad planes of concrete, unadorned except for buttresses along its sides. The gigantic train was embedded in it now, like a dart in a wound. Half the dome's current height, it hugged the rail another three kilometers eastward. Not the longest train ever built, but the biggest in every other way.

Right now the Mover lurked, snow-capped, like a subdued beast. Incapacitated but furiously impatient to run again. In two months without it in action, there was some healing around the rail. Snow on the ground instead of the rhythmic chevrons of freezing-thawing-refreezing slush. Not a dead bird or squirrel in sight. The trees on the north edge of the forest had even begun to put out needles on the side facing the rail. All of that would change within days of the 601 station being rebuilt.

The conspirators joined quietly with a thin crowd of workers moving towards a tunnel opening in front of the base of the dome, which connected to the station. Most of the others were railminders, put to work digging infrastructural pits outside the wall. They knew what was on this end of the rail, and so couldn't be dismissed like those on the other side. All zoan, they went quietly and without a word to the others coming to take over for them.

They formed a single-file line at the entry booth, where cameras scanned their faces and the badge numbers on their coats before letting them through a turnstile. Geir's team was spread out in the line, so he couldn't see if the others made it through, but nothing stopped him. A light on the turnstile turned green and he stepped onto the escalator beyond it. The long tunnel that the moving

walkway carried him through was dark and lit only by LED strips on the ceiling. It would probably be closed and filled in, if the flood the city's builders hoped for ever came.

"I'm inside," Geir whispered for his earpiece to pick up. Over the next few minutes, he heard the same message from each of the others, and an affirmative grunt that must have been Manny.

There was no escalator on the other side. Rather, the moving walkway let Geir off underground, in a wide room through which wove a cordoned path. This would be the 602 terminal's version of the check-in queue. Mundane, and the most likely place to be caught. Zoan workers matriculated slowly through the winding path, glumly silent, and at the opposite end were called up to a row of cubicles where someone waited with a hand scanner and an earpiece.

The human who checked Geir in was as tired and disinterested as any of the zoans. She asked his employee number: he gave the one that the hawks had found for him and which adorned the badge on his coat. She waved the antiquated hand scanner over him. At the old station, employees were told it was a health check, looking for disease or parasites picked up in their solitary weeks. While it probably did look for those, no one doubted that it was also checking for recording or listening devices, or anything that might be used to break into the loading bay. The hawks had confirmed as much. And, naturally, those precautions were much stricter on this end. Sparrow and Robin had masked their earpieces and non-company wristbands to the protocols in place before their departure: they could only hope nothing had changed since.

"You have an internal infection somewhere," the human said. "Make sure to go to Health Services."

That would be thanks to some particularly bad punches in the warehouse ring, Geir was sure. He couldn't hide a brief smile, which he masked with a cough and a nod. The woman let him through.

Geir backed against the far wall of the hallway inside, and announced to the others that he had passed check-in. The others were still in line. They were to rendezvous in the cafeteria once they were all in.

The underground levels of the 602 station were noticeably dingier than anything Geir had seen at the other one. There was no need here to maintain the appearance of a regular commercial enterprise. Gray walls leaked runoff from melted snow and construction, a number of lights were out.

When Geir turned the corner he expected to take him to a stairwell that would lead to the ground level he was familiar with, he nearly hit his head on the twin fore cameras of a base camp robot. The headless, moose-sized quadruped backed up automatically at the same time that he jumped. Its cameras peered at him as if curiously, while he regained his bearings. There was another one farther down this next hall, lumbering under a burden carried in its large body. Of course, while the railminders were busy with other jobs, their base camps would also be put to work elsewhere. Maybe his and Armand's abandoned bots had been recovered and brought back too. Geir sidestepped it and headed on his way.

Aside from its dinginess, the cafeteria was more or less identical to the one in which Geir had taken his meals (and sat idly, and glowered, and occasionally orchestrated an impromptu brief tryst with a coworker) for fourteen years. The vulture took a tray and filled it with meat freshly zapped out of its packaging, along with the real workers on their break. Without thinking he took a seat at a small table near the exit, as though he were really here on break, not infiltrating with a team. He stared at the tray for a long time. The smell of the food sank into his brain, trying to erase everything that had happened since the day the train had stopped moving.

He pressed a finger against one corner of the tray, and held it there, watching it.

"All of us are through check-in," Sparrow's voice sounded softly in his ear. "Moving to the rendezvous point."

Geir stood up from his table and left the tray there. The others met him near the entrance, slowly trickling in as though from different directions. They had successfully infiltrated. The rest would be much more complicated.

They went over the plan quietly. Their earpieces could convert subvocal speech into synthesized voice, but only the hawks were skilled at communicating clearly enough that way. While they pretended to loiter idly, their voices were in the others' ears.

The chief difference between the MVR-602 station and its twin was that this one also served as the base for the Stamper. At its far end was an array of chemical tanks that could be run into a port onto which the printer would be lowered when running low. The tanks ranged in size from a few liters to the size of buildings. When the train brought a load from the west, it would discharge its own tanks into them through a complex duct system that ran above the ceiling of the highest floor. None of the chemicals were combustible, but many were toxic.

According to the hawks, the ducts were highly reliable and secure, but there were procedures in place in the case of a leak nonetheless. The ground level, which included the cafeteria, dormitories, and commissary, had a semi-independent ventilation system from the others. Therefore, it was possible to trigger an evacuation of the upper levels without releasing fumes into the lower.

"I'll be at ground level with you," Robin reminded Darius and Manny. "We will be tracking security activity and waiting for the signal."

"We'll have to get access to the freight elevator," Sparrow said. "It may take some time; railminders don't have clearance for it."

"I have a plan for that," Geir said.

He and Sparrow split away from the others. They had the station's floor plan at the ready on their wristbands, hidden behind a tab that mimicked the default employee's information page in case of prying eyes. Hallways labeled *SSM* for *Station Service and Maintenance* wound around the open areas like termite

tunnels. Several service and freight elevators dotted those, but only one reached the highest floor, near the middle of the building.

"Do you have access to the base camps?" Geir asked. "The...Long-term Attendant Robots."

Sparrow tapped something into his wristband, and sent the results to Geir's.

"Limited," he said.

They didn't have any direct control, but they did have a list of all one hundred and forty base camps active in the station, and the status of each. When Geir selected one, the floor plan showed him its current assignment, and its route. The hawk understood.

Most of the camps were on the other levels, assisting with automated tasks. Still, there were plenty trudging through the halls on one errand or another. Of the few that were headed to the elevator, there were three that were currently in parts of the level that the saboteurs could access safely.

"Meet here," Sparrow tapped on a corner of the wide space into which the freight elevator opened at the top level.

They split up, Geir to intercept the base camp that would come through the dormitories and Sparrow to take the one that would be near the gymnasium.

Geir discarded his coat on the bunk closest to the first door he passed in the dormitory hall, holding on to the rebreather the hawks had supplied. It was cold inside, but adrenaline was making him sweat. Nodding politely but absently to other zoan workers coming to and from the bunks, he kept his head down and pretended to be headed for the showers. Instead of turning to them, though, he went the opposite way, to a side hall that opened onto supply closets and SSM passages. He reached it just as the base camp ducked through one of the latter doors.

The robot stopped when he stepped in front of it. Before it could sidestep him, he raised a hand in the gesture that meant *open up*.

Chapter 37

As he'd hoped, the false credentials he had were enough. The base camp sat, doglike, and opened the lid to its sleeping chamber. It had been loaded with machining supplies: grease, solder, tape. Geir set those on the floor next to a supply closet, and climbed inside.

The robot's climate control system was inactive, so it was a stuffy and claustrophobic ride. Geir had just enough room to raise his hand and watch its progress on the floor plan. As soon as it reached the top floor, he signaled for it to release him.

The freight elevator opened into a machine shop, a wide and dark space filled with workstations for living machinists and automated processes both. Few of the former were there now, but the sounds of saws and rivet guns and vacuums were still piercing. The base camp lumbered off to wherever it was supposed to deliver its abandoned cargo.

Sparrow was already at the corner he had pointed to. He had also left his coat behind, now all in black. He said something, but even with the earpiece Geir had no chance to hear it above the din. Instead, the hawk pointed to the exposed ductwork running along the ceiling and then highlighted a door on the floor plan.

There were security guards in the station, but they were sparse. As the hawks had explained, Stuyron didn't anticipate espionage. Aside from keeping the station running, safe from the elements and from accidents, the majority of active security operations was dedicated to monitoring the activities of the workers and interfering with attempts to organize or escape. All other security was handled primarily by computers and cameras, which the hawks' privileged access allowed them to bypass easily, with care. Geir and Sparrow had to stay out of sight of living employees where possible, but it didn't take long to find the hall from which they could reach the access panel they needed.

They readied their rebreathers before entering. Generic models for zoans, those were long tubes better suited to a canid snout than a beak, transparent and

flexible enough to press flat and secret within a shirtsleeve. They offered about fifty minutes of safety, which should be more than the saboteurs needed.

The chamber outside the hallway was wide and dark, run through with hundreds of ducts. Only barely enough space for a body to squeeze between them; most repair work would have been done by bots like miniatures of the ones that maintained the Mover rail. Sparrow had highlighted which ones they needed on a schematic on their wristbands. They crawled in and slid the access panel closed behind them.

Outside the habitable rooms and halls of the station, the Stamper had done less to hide its printing process. Coarse ridges ran the length of the concrete and polymer walls, and the biggest of the ducts, which had been printed in place before others were installed by hand. Irregular protrusions and loose whiskers made the crawl hazardous. The drone of flowing air and chemicals was deafening.

As Geir climbed across banks of pipes he could see the long, dark drop to the side, between walls below. Gaps like that were where the explosives were hidden, all throughout the building.

The vulture stopped at one of the two ducts highlighted on his wristband. This one was an air vent; Sparrow continued on and upward, seeking the pipe carrying the proper toxic gas. The hawk left Geir with one end of a plastic hose, uncoiling the rest as he went. Geir felt around under the ankle of his work jeans, where there was hidden a pen-sized laser cutter.

"I'm at the target," Sparrow announced through Geir's earpiece some minutes later. He was far out of sight, lost in the tangle of lead, steel, and PVC.

At that signal, Geir counted to ten, and turned on his laser cutter. The bright, two-inch blade was a burning white light that made the dark around it hard to see. It took just a few seconds for him to burn through the printed steel wall of the air duct, but minutes more to shave the edges of the new hole to the right diameter. Airflow from the duct cooled the edges quickly enough that he could insert the rubber fitting, and the hose to that.

The hose was only a centimeter in diameter; the leak didn't need to be severe. Nor was there any need to hide what they had done. In an hour, either the building would be gone, or the saboteurs would be caught.

"This end's ready," Geir said.

"Removing the clamp."

It would take a few minutes for the gas to reach detectable levels. Sparrow climbed back to the air duct, and they returned through the access panel. From the hallway there was no sign it had been entered.

The teams verified that they were in place: Robin at the ready to announce an evacuation onto the train, Darius and Manny to enforce it and hold off any security who might interfere. They didn't have access to the safety system itself, but they knew its response times: approximately nine minutes for the gas to build up, and another ten to monitor the situation before confirming it as a leak. That gave them twelve minutes before the alarm.

Geir and Sparrow hid in the machine shop, rebreathers hidden and laser cutters palmed. Their credentials still only cleared them for the ground level, so they had to be prepared for dire measures if they were noticed. Geir was prepared to hit, rip, and strangle if necessary, underworld brute that he was—but the hawk readied his talons, beak, and laser with cold, military efficiency. It was the professional attitude with which he and Robin had entered Samuel's room and dispatched their target.

A look that passed between them told Geir that Sparrow could see that thought in his eyes. The assassin said nothing, but let his own eyes remind the vulture of the discipline he needed right now.

When the alarm sounded, the shrill, high-pitched buzzer pierced through Geir's already diminished hearing like rebar driven through his head. It sounded for ten full seconds, long enough for all the living staff to hear it over their work.

"Emergency," a synthesized voice sounded in its wake. "All staff proceed directly to evacuation route. Emergency. All staff proceed directly to evacuation route."

The few machinists in the shop looked at one another in alarm, and shut their stations down. Geir and Sparrow fell in easily with them as they filed towards the freight elevator, along with a number of others coming from elsewhere on the top floor. When it opened they flowed inside and waited. After several repetitions of the synthesized message, the alarm sounded again. Only a little quieter in the elevator. Faint lights flashed as twenty-some employees checked their wristbands for word on what kind of emergency it was. There wouldn't be any; the company would decide after it had been handled whether or not to inform anyone.

It was crowded, and the elevator wasn't stabilized for comfort. Bodies jostled against one another. Geir couldn't hear the worried murmur over the alarm, but he sensed it.

His wristband vibrated, announcing a message from Sparrow.

Human male third in from the right door is security. Don't let him see me.

The man in question was roughly Geir's height, in gray coveralls as though he had been working among the machinists. He was scanning the crowd himself, nodding periodically as if counting. Geir lowered his head and waited for a shock from the elevator's motion to step forward as if he had stumbled, positioning himself between the human and his former supervisor as well as he could. Facing away in the hopes he wouldn't be recognizable as an intruder from behind. A clumsy and unconvincing move, if anyone was paying attention.

He's coming for you, another message read.

Geir tightened his stance, and rolled the laser cutter into position to turn it on if needed. He turned slowly, displacing a smaller human, to get an eye on the security man. That man was definitely watching him, and moving closer, though trying not to disturb anyone. The vulture took a slow step closer to the wall, and another. There was no avoiding suspicion now. The security man had probably

found Geir's employee profile, and if he hadn't noticed it was false, he at least knew the bird wasn't supposed to be here.

The man raised a hand to flag Geir down. Geir floundered on the decision whether to deploy his laser cutter, which would cauterize any wounds to avoid visible blood but would be hard to control at these quarters, or to rely on his own talons. He readied the latter, and brought his hand up, ready to catch the human in the throat.

But the security monitor stopped, suddenly stiff. His eyes went wide and he fumbled for the wall. Sparrow was behind him. The hawk pushed the man forward so he was pressed against the wall, and Geir held him upright with an elbow, covering the smoldering line in the back of his coveralls where Sparrow had lasered subtly through his spine and lung. The weapon was already out of sight. They didn't know if he was still alive when the elevator stopped at the second level and its passengers hurried nervously out.

Chapter 38

The evacuation route from the freight elevator took the growing stream of employees to an external stairway near the middle of the station's length. Geir and Sparrow peeled away quietly before reaching it, and replaced their rebreathers. They took an emergency stairway back up one floor, to where the security block was housed.

All security personnel were included in the evacuation. The company trusted their computers to handle surveillance in an emergency, given that there was no population in hundreds of kilometers not directly involved with the corporate project that was the domed city. Sparrow and Robin had assured their partners that they were able to bluff that system in the short term. They still had to trust that they were able to get inside.

The security block was one office complex among many in the managerial wing of the third level. It was housed behind glass walls, unassuming and even inviting from the outside. Also abandoned. The main doors were open due to the evacuation, and Sparrow was able to unlock the one to the deeper complex easily. Beyond it was a sterile hallway with doors on either side, and a heavy blast door at its end. That was the one to which the hawk brought Geir.

It took him some doing, interfacing with its lock through his wristband, but after several minutes he was able to make it open. Beyond it was the control center, which housed the only terminal with override permission on every system.

Robin reported that they believed they had every worker from the ground level in the loading bay, and she was sweeping for stragglers while they boarded.

The control room was wide, its far wall occupied with an enormous arcing screen that hung over long banks of computers and desks. Right now the screen shone with harsh yellow light, an orange emergency icon blinking in the middle. The many other smaller screens were locked. Sparrow led Geir down from the walkway that overlooked it all, and to one terminal in the middle of the back row.

The hawk could get access to it, but it had to be Geir who used it. If there was anything left to find after, it had to be Geir whose fingerprints were found on the screen, his spectacled face on the news next to Samuel's.

Assaulted by but growing numb to the alarm, Geir sat in front of the touchscreen that was hardwired into the floor and listened for Sparrow's instructions. He accessed the controls for the backup geothermal generator. It was small and its turbines only ran at night, recharging the auxiliary batteries used by other systems. But its cooling coils happened to be positioned next to one of the secret explosives.

It was simple to override its safety precautions. From the override terminal and with Sparrow's access, Geir had only to tap *Continue* when the computer warned him against a setting he chose. He flushed the coolant and closed cooling vents. And finally, he activated the vacuum that kept the generator clean of particulates, and left it running. *Continue, Continue, Continue.*

The combination of the three, with several other safety measures disabled, would overheat the generator within an hour, to the point that at least a fire was guaranteed, if not an explosion. Either would easily be enough to set off the implanted explosives.

The last step was to let a virus, prepared by the hawks, in to the system. The virus simple, antique ransomware, which would lock the generator's systems down from all access, so that even if the sabotage were detected in time—which it was sure to be—it couldn't be reversed. For all intents and purposes, the communication request from Sparrow's wristband was the detonator.

Geir's talon hovered over the handshake button. He was doing this in Samuel's name, he told himself.

Samuel hadn't ordered the bombing of the other station.

Would he have ordered that of this one, knowing what Geir knew?

Geir thought he would.

He might.

But no.

It didn't matter.

The builders of this city had taken Samuel from him. He accepted the virus.

Nothing showed on the override terminal to indicate anything had happened, but it had. There was no preventing the explosion now, from anywhere else.

But just to be safe, Geir stood and lifted the chair on which he had been sitting over his head, to bring it down with all his strength on the computer. Twice, three times. Until the override terminal was only a pile of sputtering conduits and shattered glass.

"Everything's in place," Sparrow said into his earpiece.

"We have control of the train," Robin reported in response. "Get here now."

When Geir and Sparrow hurried from the control room, there was a familiar lurch in the floor, more intense than the vulture remembered it since he was two stories higher than he had ever been when it had happened at 601. The train was powering up.

Chapter 39

There was access from the third floor to the loading bay. Between the bay and the offices was a sorting facility that ran the length of the station. Conveyor belts and mechanical arms, transit tubes, canvas bins, all idle since the Moved had stopped running. The floor became textured steel, the walls drab and chipped.

Sparrow stopped Geir as they searched for a door into the bay. He was hearing something in his earpiece.

“What is it?” Geir tried to ask, uselessly. The alarm swallowed everything beyond his own feathers.

“Go,” the hawk waved him on. He had his laser cutter out. “They’re on to us. Dove is here.”

Immediately after he said it, a blast sounded, just barely above the alarm. A red streak opened across Sparrow’s shoulder and the assassin flinched. Geir had time to see a figure in one of the doors leading to the offices, before the gun went off again and sparks exploded from a bullet striking machinery. He dove behind a sorting arm, while Sparrow took cover elsewhere.

He knew the zoan who came into the light. The third spizaetus, the one he had encountered when fleeing the scene of Samuel’s murder. The one who hadn’t touched his lover, but the one now who wasn’t his ally. He hoped the headbutt he’d given this one’s beak still hurt.

“I’ll hold him off,” Sparrow said in Geir’s ear.

The smaller hawk darted to another piece of cover, and the bigger one tracked him with his pistol. Surely there were more security personnel on their way. If Sparrow was willing to risk not making it to the train, Geir should accept that sacrifice.

But he didn’t. While the bulkier bird was focused on his former partner, Geir crept around to the side, seeking an advantage. What he found was one of the canvas bins, which he grabbed drove with all his weight. He had several free strides before Dove even sensed him, wheels and footfalls silent below the

shrieking buzzer. Once he did notice, Dove twisted and started to leap out of the way, but he had no time. The bin's hard metal frame rammed into him at waist height, drove him back and pinned him against the base of another sorting arm. It was an impact that could have broken bones and ruptured organs, but Geir knew better than to expect the best. The gun was still in play, even if its holder was too shocked by the sudden injury to aim and fire it. The vulture made for the nearest door facing the train, and trusted Sparrow would too.

After a short hall, Geir pushed through another door, and the Mover was before him. He came out onto a metal catwalk one story above the platform, in freezing air. The train still towered over him, a black serpent that extended into the distance to either side. Six stories tall, it was solid and featureless except for a line of red window high up on its sides. According to sparse illustrations Lans-Cartier shared with the public, the sides folded open to allow hundreds of mechanical arms, hooks, cranes, and magnets to load and unload it, a central conveyor bringing its contents forward from the kilometers of length that didn't fit in the station. All those machines were closed up behind protective panels in the loading bay's walls, leaving only a tall, sterile cavern surrounding the serpent.

Geir clambered down the stairs to the platform, which thrummed under his feet with the electromagnets below. The wide open space mercifully reduced the harshness of the alarm. Even the cold was welcome.

There was one gangway open, leading to a human-sized door at platform level. Manny crouched just inside it, waiting to let Geir or Sparrow on, and repel anyone else. The alligator extended a hand to help Geir over the gangway, eyes gravely serious.

Geir couldn't help but give him a hearty slap on the back as soon as he was across, which was returned in kind, but much harder. And as soon as he was aboard, Sparrow leapt in behind him.

"We're aboard," Geir breathlessly alerted the team, just as Manny slammed a hand against the panel that shut the door.

Geir was aboard the Mover. The titanic, unknowable force that had passed overhead for fourteen years. Would it be as loud on the inside as from the ground around it?

Manny led him and Sparrow up a winding stairway, bare metal chipped by the passage of thousands of claws trafficked to labor in the domed city. Up several floors, to this car's passenger cabin.

Just above the ringing in his ears, Geir could hear the murmuring of the evacuated workers in the cabin when Manny opened the door. Robin had reported more than three hundred of them. Significantly more than they had expected, and every one of them zoan. They all stood—there was no seating—below the cabin's low ceiling, nervous and angry. Many of them still in their coats, just as many in jeans and undershirts; a few wrapped in towels, evacuated directly from the showers. Robin and Darius stood in front, hawk typing on her wristband and rhinoceros keeping an eye on the crowd.

"Departing now," Robin declared.

Geir leaned against the wall in exhaustion. He fumbled his rebreather off and took a deep breath of clean, if stale, air. Sparrow beside him peeled his sleeve up to inspect the graze across his shoulder. The train was moving, it would be clear of the station soon.

"The generator is heating up," Robin reported. Her voice was distant and muffled; she was speaking aloud. "They're trying to get in and shut it down, but they're still locked out. They're also evacuating the surrounding buildings. Twenty minutes."

"Good," Geir said.

"What then?" it was Darius who asked. "There's no hiding. Everyone will know exactly where we are. They'll just grab us."

Geir thought about it, as he had avoided doing up until now.

“That depends how willing they are to admit to their part in it,” he said. “And who they were keeping it a secret from. Maybe they’ll grab us, maybe they’ll have all of us erased from the zoan database and say Samuel is still alive and the Zoan Front did it.”

He smiled. He didn’t think that was very likely, but he liked the thought.

All the workers were another matter, though.

No one had asked them to be made part of it. Some would be thrilled, overjoyed to know what had been done. Others frightened, torn from an unkind but knowable life. Could any of them walk away safely? Were they just going to be dragged back as soon as the company found a way to cover its losses?

Well, an hour ago every one of them had been condemned to a life of servitude. It may snatch them right back up, but Geir’s team had bought them a chance to escape it. And no one was going to drag an apology out of him for it. Not even Darius.

It might not be wise, but he started to say so.

The moment he opened his beak, however, Manny lifted his head and pointed with concern at a disturbance in the crowd. Geir, along with Darius stood back straight and craned his neck to see. Pushing through the worried zoans was Dove, battered and scowling.

“Everybody down!” Geir shouted as loudly as he could, shaking Sparrow by the good shoulder.

Some of the workers complied, while most were confused. The hawk moving amongst them, knowing he’d been seen, readied his pistol so that he could kill one or more zoans at any moment if he were threatened. Darius and Manny moved to try and take him down if given the word, while the hawks stepped up to face him.

“Sparrow!” Dove shouted when he had come within a few meters of them. He stopped, gun inches from the head of a mountain lion zoan ducking in front of him.

Geir shifted closer to the middle of the cabin, feeling nakedly unarmed.

“Put the gun down,” Sparrow held his hands up in peace.

“Stop the train,” Dove barked. “Stop the train and unlock the computers.”

“It’s too late, Dove,” Robin said.

“It’s too late for *you*,” the bigger hawk stepped forward, gun on another target.

“How could you do this? You were my brother and my sister!”

The other hawks didn’t answer. The squamate who was the gun’s current target shook with terror.

“If you kill any of them the rest will jump you,” Geir called.

Dove considered for a moment, then raised his gun to point at Geir.

“You ran away,” he still addressed the other hawks. “That was enough. I know you were struggling. I knew where you went, where you were hiding, and I didn’t tell anyone. I thought I was protecting you, and you’d come back when you’d had time to think. But you can’t come back now. You’ve thrown everything away. You...”

“We would never have changed our minds,” Robin shook her head. “Put down the gun, Dove.”

“Our eyes are open,” Sparrow said. “Stuyron didn’t care about us and doesn’t care about you. You could come with us.”

Dove took another step forward, free from the crowd now.

“You can’t say that,” he growled. He shook the gun forcefully in Geir’s direction. “And don’t think I don’t know who he is. You’ve ruined us, and you’re going to ruin Stuyron. All you had to do is do the job. You used to know that, but someone poisoned you. Unlock the computers.”

No one moved. Dove repeated himself, louder, to the same result. He took another step forward.

He did have a scar on his beak.

“If the station blows, he dies. I can take all of you out, and some of them. Unlock the—”

Geir swept his wrist up and under Dove's, at the same time that he bent forward to grapple him at chest level. The gun went off with a terrible bang, just over Geir's head. While Dove tried to right himself, the vulture wrapped his free arm around the one with the gun and held it straight, and shouldered him against the wall. He pressed with all his weight against the hawk's ribcage, wrestling for the weapon. Amidst grunts and cries, the tip of the scarred raptor beak dug into Geir's cheek, tearing deep through the flesh. The gun went off multiple times, each discharge another explosion inside Geir's head.

The vulture twisted around so he could get both hands on the gun. Talons digging into the yellow hand, he kept it aimed at the floor. The others were all backing away, trying to stay out of the gun's trajectory while frantically seeking an approach. Until the spizaetus lifted a foot, and dug its talons into Geir's calf, buckling the knee involuntarily. Geir dropped to the floor, clutching at the gun hand all the way down until he lost his grip. The cold metal floor seared the gaping wound on his cheek, and an elbow bounced his head off it once, before the pistol's barrel pressed hotly against his skull.

Chapter 40

He couldn't see or hear anything for time out of time. Firecrackers exploded in his skull. There was shouting, but he was too dizzy to think to try and make out the words being said.

Until: "Okay."

It was Sparrow.

The gun withdrew, and the knee Geir hadn't realized was pinning his wrists against his back. He struggled to push himself off the floor, but Dove, now standing, planted a foot on him to hold him down.

"You're lucky," Dove said. "They think they can get in."

"We'll lock it back down if you kill him," Robin threatened. "Or anyone here."

"I still need him, anyway."

Geir felt a scaled hand bunch among the feathers at the crown of his head and peel him off the ground, enough for the hawk's other arm to wrap around his neck. Downy strands of bloody skin and muscle stuck to the floor until Dove lifted him up. He blinked against wooziness from the blow to the head, while his captor backed away, towards the hatch leading to the next car. The gun was now pressed into his other cheek, singeing feathers opposite the matted tear.

"They'll know if you shoot me," Geir gasped after the hatch shut behind them. "They'll lock it back down."

"And if they lock it back down, I'll shoot you."

He could still see the other hawks through the window in the hatch as Dove backed him down the flexible corridor. He tried to subvocalize for his earpiece, the command to lock the computers anyway. They probably heard, too, but they did nothing. And for all he struggled, he couldn't do anything to make his captor shoot him.

Through the next hatch, and into the next car's empty passenger cabin. Dove kept going.

"Where are you taking me?" Geir wheezed.

"My siblings can turn their back on the company that raised us," Dove snarled. "But I'm going back. I need you alive until the coolant is running, so you're coming too."

"Do you think Lans-Cartier will treat you like a hero?"

"You people don't know anything."

Far out of the others' sight, Dove turned Geir to face the front of the train and released him.

"Walk," he commanded.

Geir didn't comply, and received a kick to the back that started him moving.

"It's no use trying to make me kill you," the hawk said. "We'll get there whether you move now or not. Hands out."

Geir walked.

Since the Mover was built only for this single track, which was almost completely straight, its cars were long. It was another two hundred meters through this empty passenger cabin to the next connector, and after that they were in the eastbound locomotive.

They were at the center of the top floor. Below them was the central conveyor, which brought cargo to either end where the loading arms could reach it, and below that was the engine. Dove walked Geir through a maze of small corridors, like the halls of an ancient battleship. Geir had no idea what was in the front of the locomotive, behind the severe, flat-faced edifice that charged across the taiga. The rooms he passed were not unlike those on the third floor of the station: rooms for meetings, communications, storage. What might have been business-class sleeping quarters for the nine-hour ride. Shockingly banal.

"You don't know anything," Dove repeated. "Don't know anything about loyalty, about being good to the people you owe."

He shoved Geir through another door, which led to a catwalk above the engine. Far below were two banks of turbines, four or five stories down. Stationary except for two; most of the work was being done by the westbound

locomotive. If Geir threw himself over the edge, would the hawks determine that he had been killed?

It might not even work. He might just lie broken amidst the turbines, while Dove escaped.

At the end of the catwalk was one final door, which opened to the cockpit. The train was being piloted remotely, but this was where Dove could take control of the eastbound end. It was a bank of manual controls, two meters wide, the eastern wall a window of thick, red-tinted glass. That window looked over the rail far below, and the incomplete domed city receding into the distance among the mountains.

"Sit down," Dove commanded. When Geir sat: "Start it up."

Geir pressed a bloody finger against the touchscreen to wake it up. It recognized Dove's face above him and let him in.

"Decouple us."

After a minute of searching through the controls, Geir found what he needed, and disengaged the coupling between the locomotive and the rest of the cars. The process would take another minute.

"Start up the engine."

The Mover shuddered around them, as the turbines below them began to spin. And again, much more dramatically, when the decoupling was complete and the locomotive was free. They were traveling westward at one hundred kilometers an hour, skidding by inertia on a cushion of magnetic repulsion. Geir anticipated the next instruction and engaged the engine, slowing the locomotive as it prepared to reverse direction.

"I don't have to kill you," Dove remarked. "I can take you in, and you can be the martyr you want to be. You can tell everyone whatever you want about your lover. That he was some great freedom fighter too, and not killed by his own lieutenant in a power struggle."

The locomotive crawled to a stop, and then began, slowly, to move forward. How far could the earpieces be apart before the others couldn't hear him? Was it even worth taking any action now?

The 602 station was a slowly growing spot on the horizon, its surrounding city obscured by trees. It should have been on fire by now, if the generator was overheating on schedule. There was no guarantee it wouldn't still overheat and set off the explosives, but Geir saw little chance of that.

His hands still hovered over the touchscreen. The locomotive was moving slowly, keeping a safe distance until Dove's superiors gave the all-clear. Geir turned its speed up. Just a little at first, then significantly. Enough that he felt himself pressed slightly into the seat.

"That's too fast," Dove said.

Geir shrugged, as though he didn't know what to do. The hawk reached forward to adjust the speed himself. And Geir bit his hand.

Dove spat something in Dutch and swung at Geir's head with the butt of his pistol. As many times as the barbatus had been hit in the head lately, he barely felt the blow from the pistol. His vulture beak wasn't as sharp as a hawk's but it ripped through scale, tendon, and bone well enough. When Dove pulled away his hand was as ruined as if it had been crushed in a vice.

Geir kicked away from the controls, knocking the hawk off balance with the back of the chair. He twisted out of it and shoved his captor through the door, and pulled it closed behind him, sliding the emergency crossbar into place.

"Lock them out!" he shouted, in the hopes the communicators were still in range.

With Dove pounding on the door, Geir knelt in front of the controls again. He scrolled through the different systems Dove had given him access too, and turned off everything he could, except for the engines. No communication with the rail or the station. No GPS. No automatic safety features. No brakes. And he turned the power up, and up, and up.

The acceleration staggered him and knocked him back against the door. Warnings blinked on the screen, about velocity and proximity to the terminal.

Geir smiled, and watched the station draw nearer.

He closed his eyes.

But no. There was no peace in it. Geir pressed his hands against his head, though it made the bite wound sting. What was he doing? Destroying the Mover station was the hawks' mission, it wasn't a gesture he was making for Samuel. Not even for himself.

The door against his back shook again. Dove had regained his footing and was trying again. Geir undid the crossbar.

He let the door swing slightly inward the next time Dove hammered on it. He was ready for it when the hawk tried to kick it open, bracing it with his shoulder. As soon as he felt the impact, he spun around it, to where Dove still tottered off-balance. He didn't give the hawk time to aim, but barreled at him, low, and lifted him off the ground.

He didn't watch Dove go over the railing. It didn't matter if the assassin fell to the ground, shattered against a turbine, or caught and clung to the walkway. Geir just kept going.

The offices and business class quarters were mazelike, but they had enough order to them that Geir could navigate towards the side of the train. The first exit he found was sealed, and he had no way to force it open. There were two more in this hall that ran dorsally down the south wall, equally inaccessible. Geir pulled away and searched for a stairwell. The one he found only took him down one story. He almost fell, still light-headed and now at the mercy of the train's increasing pace.

One of the doors on this level had a manual lock, in the form of a wheel. Geir clutched and heaved it, and it gave. The door swung open, and the air current outside immediately tried to suck Geir straight out into the sky. He held himself in by the doorframe and looked out, squinting against the battering wind. Trees,

ice, and snow flew past below him. He was five stories up, in addition to the height of the rail—and approaching three hundred kilometers per hour. It would be impossible to survive the jump.

There was a dark shape above him, up at the level of the doors he had tried above. It began to descend, just as Geir recognized it. It was the aircar the hawks had brought him in. Whether one of them was piloting it remotely or they had instructed it to seek him out, he couldn't guess, but it was here. It hovered at the level of his door, about two meters away, struggling to match the locomotive's speed. The side door slid open.

Geir reached out as far as he dared, and almost lost his grip on the doorframe. Just barely swinging back in, he caught sight of the domed city, not far at all. Setting his jaw, he stepped back and jumped.

The aircar began to peel away as soon as he landed on its glass floor, the motion slamming him hard against the front seats. It wasn't built for this kind of speed, and could only slow and turn widely. Geir struggled to his knees and grasped the bar above the side window to hold himself up. The car was perpendicular to the train, slowly pulling out of its powerful jetstream. The station was right there, a scant hundred meters away.

The train sped into its maw and disappeared inside. In the long seconds as it traveled the last half kilometer to the solid back wall, mechanical noises screeched audibly as the station tried helplessly to slow it. Shutting off the electromagnets in its rail so the vehicle dropped to the bare metal and skidded; throwing loading equipment into its path.

It wasn't enough.

The far end of the 602 station erupted outward in every direction, white-hot fire buckling the walls and sending concrete chunks flying out into the city-under-construction. Then the next row of buttresses closer to the glass wall did the same, and the next.

A wave of pressure struck the aircar and sent it tumbling in the air. Geir was knocked to the ceiling, rolled against the seats, thrown to the wall. He could see only flashes of bright light and complete darkness. When the car hit the ground, the darkness was all there was.

Chapter 41

The sun peered harshly just over the Mover's stationary length when Geir finally reached it. Wrapped in a space blanket from the ruined aircar's first-aid kit and only hoping that he had successfully fixed his dislocated shoulder, he had no idea how far he had walked. But the snowy boreal woods surrounding the Mover's catastrophic wake were old territory to him, and a few nights curled within his wrapping or reflective foil were little challenge.

It took him some time to recognize the mottled shapes in the snow a little ways from the north side of the rail. It was an encampment. Three hundred newly freed zoans left to wonder what they would do, as they looked to the column of smoke still billowing over the eastern horizon. And among them, the raised hand of an alligator waving him down.

Sparrow jogged out to meet him. The hawk was disheveled, his shoulder bandaged, and his eyes bright and nervous in a way Geir hadn't suspected they could be.

"We had every reason to think you were dead," he said with something like wonder.

"So did I," Geir smiled, though it tore at the bandages he had inexpertly wrapped around his head to cover the wound on his face.

A cervid zoan who had come forward as a former med tech redid Geir's bandages, checked him for other injuries and frostbite. Around the campfire with him sat Manny, recovering from a ricocheting bullet that had caught him in the side, Darius looking after his friend, and the hawks. Robin and Sparrow were visibly anxious to ask after the fate of their brother; Geir didn't volunteer the information.

"Everyone here had lives," Darius observed, looking out over the encampment. "Not good ones. But they're gone now. We're the reason."

Geir didn't say anything. Even if he'd had anything to say, the deer was plucking feathers from his back to clear space to stitch up a cut he'd gotten on the walk.

"They're working it out," the rhinoceros went on, thoughtfully. "They've chosen lookouts, figured out who can hunt and who can cook."

Darius looked down at his hands, which he was pensively rubbing together.

"I don't know what I can do," he said, more softly.

Manny lifted himself up on one arm so he could whisper something into the rhino's ear. Whatever it was, it made them both laugh.

Geir looked out over the encampment. He couldn't help think a face among the hundreds struck him as familiar, but he couldn't pinpoint which one. There were so many. And no one could be certain they would be safe here. In the next few days, maybe they would move farther out into the woods, maybe even up into the mountains. Or maybe they would disperse, and all take their chances trying to find their way to a town. That would be their decision to make. Samuel wouldn't have prevented it, if he were here, and neither would Geir.

With fresh and itchy stitches in his back, Geir had to take a walk, despite having only sat for a few hours. He circled the camp, trying to identify the face that seemed so familiar. Until finally he saw Armand again.

It had to be impossible, didn't it? Armand wouldn't have turned around and reapplied to work with Lans-Cartier. Or maybe he would. Or maybe he had been snatched out of the woods and sold to the domed city like the so many others.

Geir called his name, but received no answer. He moved to follow him. The hare had been sitting at one of the many small fires, staring listlessly. Now he was up and walking, into the woods.

When Geir found him sitting alone on a fallen log a ways from the encampment, he knew he had been wrong. This was another hare zoan, probably the same species, maybe even the same phenotype, but not Armand. Geir started

to turn away, until the hare sighed loudly and buried his eyes in his hands. The gesture made Geir not want to leave him alone.

“I know you’re there,” the hare said, without looking up. “You’re the one who did this, got us all out here.”

Geir tossed his head noncommittally. He couldn’t deny it.

“I’d been walking the rail for six years,” the hare continued. “I didn’t know how...bad it was. And they might come take us all back.”

Geir nodded.

“If not us, other zoans,” the hare’s voice was sour, and slightly tremulous. “And if not now, later. Now zoans can reproduce; it’ll happen to the children, too. What am I supposed to think? What’s even the reason not to just go back and let them take me? Put me to work for the rest of my life, clearing rubble.”

Geir thought about it, beak pressed tightly shut. He scratched anxiously at his beard, and took a stick from the ground. With it he scratched a line into the light snow. And another, and another, until he had drawn a three-by-three grid.

“I think it helps to reframe your view of it,” he said. “If you step back, and think about humans holding us, it’s something that *happens*, and it’s *spiritual*; put that here in this space—something like *taking you* is something that happens but is *physical*, put that in this space, and we’ll call it *Peristasis*...”

