Gersha doesn't want to be a glorified pimp. Tilrey doesn't want to be a glorified whore. But, in a frozen city at the top of the world, centuries after the Unraveling of life as we know it, those are their roles. And not playing your role can get you killed.

Gersha is an insecure member of the meritocratic elite. Tilrey is a kettle boy, his body the currency of power. When a political maneuver brings them together under one roof, they become unlikely allies. They both know better than to believe in love, but in a city where revolution is brewing, stranger things have happened.
forced prostitution, dub-con, and internalized oppression, so please be warned that it gets quite dark at times.
While the driver was busy checking the battery level, Tilrey Bronn wandered to the parapet and gazed down at the city. The vicious cold seared the healing bruises on his left cheek and chin.

The sun had just set, and a gap between the granite monoliths offered a view all the way to the fiery western horizon. Except for a few trams trundling back and forth near ground-level, the city looked deserted. It took his breath away to see the untouched expanses of snow and deep violet sky.

So clean. So pure. Just for this moment, Redda was all his.

If he jumped right now, the driver wouldn’t arrive in time to stop him. The fall from the thirtieth floor would kill him before the cold had its turn.

Tilrey held the thought close to his chest where he held his most precious memories. Now. Here. The end.

If he jumped, he would never have to go inside the apartment, never have to remove his coat and boots, never have to smile placidly at a stranger and get on his knees and say, Whatever you like, Fir.

They would scatter his ashes over the Wastes, because Drudges aren’t supposed to take their own lives; they wouldn’t return his remains to his mother. She would receive a one-line notification: So much for your son, the glorified whore.

She should say good riddance to the dishonor, but she wouldn’t. He was her only child, and she’d always loved him too much.

Why was he thinking about his mother? He hadn’t done that in years.

A hand closed possessively around his elbow. “Trying to catch your death, lad?”

And just like that, it was too late. Fantasy remained fantasy. “Yes,” Tilrey said, deadpan.

The driver tugged him away from the railing. “Don’t even joke about that. Verán would kill me if anything happened to you on my watch. And you’ve got a job to do.”

“I’m well aware of that.”

Verán wanted Tilrey to beg some silly little junior Councillor to take him in. And Tilrey would do it on his knees or prone, because how else did he do anything?

He allowed himself to be led through the wind-seal into the steamy interior, trying to make his mind go as blank as the snowfield below. Maybe next time.

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Gersha Gádden had been a Councillor of the Republic of Oslov for nearly a year. Many of the perks of the office still felt new to him, starting with the private mag-car and its driver, Bosh, an ox-shouldered fifty-year-old military vet who was impervious to the cold and generally made Gersha feel like a hothouse flower.

So when Bosh stuck his head in the door, Gersha stiffened. He’d just settled on the couch with his
tea and his coding. “What is it?”

“Got a visitor, Fir. Councillor Verán’s driver brought him.”

At lunchtime recess, Verán, the majority leader, had said something about sending Gersha a “gift.” It wasn’t Gersha’s birthday, and he hadn’t done any special service to the Party, so he’d dismissed the words as one of the older Councillor’s esoteric jokes. If anything, he’d been expecting a platter of eel rolls or pickled herring from the Restaurant.

Instead, in the doorway stood a young man.

The most attractive young man Gersha had ever seen—tall, lean, and strong at once, pale-cheeked and golden-haired, with heavy-lidded eyes cast down, all sullen arrogance. Gersha recognized him as the General Magistrate’s kettle boy, which didn’t explain why he was here.

“What do you want?” he asked absurdly.

As Bosh withdrew, the boy raised his cobalt blue eyes. “Fir Councillor Ernst Gerhard Gádden?”

“Uh, yes. Though I prefer Gersha.”

The boy’s face bore bruises, maybe a few days old. Verán’s driver still stood just behind him, one possessive hand on his arm. What in green hells was going on?

The boy extended his hand. Like all kettle boys, he was dressed like an Upstart of the highest Level—like Gersha himself—in a bizarre mimicry or parody of his betters. The clothes fit his well-muscled chest and thighs like a glove.

“I’m your gift, Fir,” the boy said.

Heat spread over Gersha’s face, fixing him to the spot. What kind of twisted joke was this? Was Verán sending him a whore to try to prove he couldn’t get it up? The dickless wonder, he’d heard one of his subordinate staff call him behind his back.

A lifetime of training in manners took over, and he reached out to clasp the kettle boy’s hand, superior meeting inferior. The brief touch made Gersha tremble as he glanced from the boy to Verán’s driver, a slighter man than Bosh. “I fear there’s been some mistake.”

The driver maintained a poker face. “I was told to bring him to you, Fir. He’s yours for the night.”

“But that makes no sense.” Gersha glanced from one to the other, hoping for anything more enlightening than mute obedience. “I haven’t done anything that would merit this.”

“Fir Verán thought you merited it, Fir.” The kettle boy’s voice was blank, mechanical. “He instructed me to serve you tonight the way I serve him.”

Gersha felt hopelessly lost, but the only thing worse than admitting it was admitting it in front of them both. “Come in, then, lad,” he said in as lordly a tone as he dared, and nodded to the driver in dismissal.

The boy came in, sliding and sealing the door behind him, leaving the driver outside in the coldroom. “Thank you, Fir,” he said. “I’m sorry this came as a surprise.”

Now that they stood side-by-side, it was clear the boy had five or six inches on Gersha. The dark-blond hair tumbling in his face, humid from the outdoors, made him seem young, almost
adolescent. Yet his physique was mature, a slender waist and neck paired with shoulders nearly as broad as Bosh’s.

In a porno, an actor who looked like that would have sent blood rushing straight to Gersha’s groin, but this was reality. He was protective of his personal space at the best of times, and he did not like sharing his bed. That was why he’d filed the onerous paperwork for sanctioned lifetime celibacy.

“It’s not your fault. Sit,” he told the boy, indicating the two right-angled white couches. And then, worried that he sounded too rude, “Make yourself comfortable. I’m going to call Verán and clear this up.”

Damn Verán. Did he think this was funny, offering Gersha the GM’s kettle boy, the most precious currency the Island Party had?

Kettle boys were part of the old ways, feudal customs from just after the Great Unraveling of the Tangle, back when Oslov lived in caves in the Southern Range. Every petty lord in those days had a boy to sit at his right hand, brew his tea for him, pleasure him in bed. A boy who did the things the lord wouldn’t dare ask of the woman who bore his children. A boy who could be sent to a friend’s or rival’s house as a form of currency, a token of bonds made or renewed.

The custom was a barbarism from long before the age of meritocracy, but that hadn’t stopped the Council members from keeping it alive in their own way. For their gratification. For convenience.

“Fir Verán thought you might do that.” The boy sat down fluidly, a few feet from where Gersha had left his tea and handheld. Way too close, as if he thought Gersha might want to start pawing him immediately.

Beautiful as the boy was, the thought of touching a stranger was repellent, and Gersha snagged the handheld and pressed it to his chest.

“Keep your data devices away from Laborers.”

“You didn’t say your name,” he said, to hide the awkwardness.

“They call me Nettsha.”

“Is that short for something?”

“Linnett,” the boy said. And then, when Gersha looked perplexed, “Because I belonged to Fir Linnett before I belonged to the Island.”

Bror Malkien Linnett, the previous General Magistrate, had been the Island Party’s nemesis until he was convicted of high treason and exiled to the Wastes. Gersha supposed calling the boy by his old master’s name was a sort of taunt. “But what’s your name?”

The boy said formally, as if he were being questioned by a constable, “Bronn, first name Tilhard, middle name Edvard.”

“Tilhard, then?”

“You can call me whatever you like, Fir. I’m here for you.”

“But I didn’t ask for you.”

The boy looked up quizzically for an instant before lowering his eyes, long lashes shadowing his cheeks. “Fir Verán wanted to give you a gift, Fir. I’m here to do whatever you’d like.”

This was pointless. The boy had a script from which he couldn’t or wouldn’t deviate. Gersha
swiped his handheld and hit the number, determined to clear this up even if it meant further humiliation.

After a moment, the screen lit up with an image of Ludovic Verán, the majority leader, sitting on his own couch and stirring his tea with a brittle hand. “Gersha!” he cried.

Gersha didn’t like the mocking twinkle in the man’s eyes. “Visha,” he said sternly, using Verán’s nickname.

The old man raised a hand to silence him. “I thought I might hear from you. Though I was expecting elated thanks, and you don’t look particularly elated.”

Gersha was thirty-six and an elected Councillor of Oslov. But whenever he spoke to Verán, he went back to being just Per Gádden’s awkward, embarrassing nephew—someone who, without the majority leader’s patronage, would never have had a Council seat at all.

“Forgive me, Visha,” he said, with a guilty glance from the screen to the boy. “I’m afraid I was startled. What have I done for Magistrate Linden that he would honor me with this . . . this honor?”

Bruises. Who’d struck the boy? Surely not Verán, but could the Magistrate have done that?

Verán looked far too amused. “You’re so circumspect, Gersha. Most of your colleagues would have enjoyed my gift without looking for strings attached.”

“You know me too well, Visha.” Gersha grinned, trying to pretend he didn’t care. A near-fossilized political animal, Verán was ninety-five percent innuendo, and Gersha always felt like a blushing schoolboy during their conversations.

Verán coughed or laughed, it was hard to tell which. “I knew you’d be surprised, Gersha. That’s precisely why I chose you.”

“Chose me?”

Again Gersha glanced at the boy, who sat almost preternaturally still, his eyes down. Surely he knew what this was about?

“Let me explain, then,” said Verán on the screen, all business. “Dear Gersha, I rely on your discretion. The boy’s been living with the General Magistrate, who—keep this between us—has developed a quick temper in his old age.”

The smallest movement caught Gersha’s eye. A twitch.

Suddenly he found himself unable to look away from the faded bruises marring the boy’s smooth, high cheekbone and square chin. Had the doddering old Magistrate really done that? Had the boy stood still and let it happen? A shiver moved from Gersha’s scalp down his spine.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said stiffly to Verán.

“Yes, well.” Verán sounded unconcerned, as if the Magistrate beating his kettle boy were merely another of the many hassles of politics. “I can assure you, the boy didn’t invite that kind of treatment. He’s a little sullen and stupid, but he’s serviceable enough. Well trained. Almost no backtalk. He’s got better things to do with that pretty mouth.”

Gersha reddened again, acutely conscious of the boy’s presence. “I see.”
“Anyhow. It’s traditional for the Party’s boy to live with the GM, but under the circumstances, I need to move him elsewhere, where he’ll be gentled. He’s our best currency, and a body like that doesn’t inspire gentleness in most of your colleagues.”

God, all these euphemisms. Gersha hated politics. “Where do I come in?”

“You little fool, I thought the boy might live with you.”

Gersha drew in his breath, trying not to show he felt the sting of the playful insult. In his own way, he thought, he was as trapped as the sulky, bruised boy.

He owed his position to Verán, and staying in Verán’s good graces meant doing whatever Verán wanted. But what would it mean for him now? Sharing his home? Losing his privacy—the privacy of his bed?

“I don’t know anything about kettle boys, Visha,” he objected. “The politics, the hierarchy, the rituals of the exchange—it confounds me.”

“You’ll catch on fast. That’s not the hard part. I chose you because I know you can control yourself.”

Would Gersha ever stop blushing? “I’m not sure what you’ve heard, but I—I may be celibate,” he forced himself to say, “but I’m not fully asexual. I, uh, it’s more a matter of choosing to live a solitary life.”

“I never assumed you were a man without desires.” Verán looked disturbingly smug. “I only meant to say you have admirable restraint.”

So that was why Gersha was the recipient of Verán’s gift. Because he was (semi-)chaste, prudish, self-controlled. Someone who wouldn’t play roughly with the Party’s toy.

Gersha wondered if Verán knew about his twice-monthly visits to the Sanctioned Brothel. With all the surveillance data the man had access to, why not?

In the corner of his eye, the boy sat very still.

“Not that I expect you to abstain, of course,” Verán went on tartly. “You’ll have use of him on free-nights when he’s not otherwise occupied. And I don’t want you to think I’m imposing on you in any way, Gersha. Think of tonight as a trial run. If he doesn’t please you, that’s the end of it.”

Gersha felt the blush spread down his neck. He stared at the taut white cushions of the sofa.

And then, before he could stop himself, he looked at the boy, his gaze going first to the mouth—and yes, it was full, flushed, and soft-looking.

The blue eyes were harder. While the mouth remained impassive, those eyes met Gersha’s without flinching, so fierce now that Gersha had a brief impulse to shield himself.

His throat closed. His skin crawled, not unpleasantly, as if grazed by phantom fingertips. What would it be like to have a boy like that desire you? To have him push you up against the wall?

A moment later, the boy lowered his eyes again, the picture of docility or boredom or numbness.

Verán was still talking, oblivious, about how “serviceable” the boy was. The majority leader had to be enjoying every minute of this. Poor Gersha, he blushed like a virgin schoolgirl, he’d tell
Gersha had to say yes tonight, if only to forestall future jeering. It was the theme of his life, this forced march through a vast and convoluted maze that other people had arranged.

If it didn’t work out, he’d say so, and if it did—well, maybe he could spare the boy future beatings. He had a lifelong tendency to think of self-protection first, but that was selfish and cowardly. As a Councillor, he needed to learn to consider the good of the collective, the welfare of his inferiors.

Anyway, he was the Upstart here. He didn’t have to do anything he didn’t want to.

“Thank you for your generous gift, Visha,” Gersha said, bowing his head in consent and wondered what the fuck he’d gotten himself into.

After a few parting words, he blanked the screen of the handheld, set it aside, and turned resolutely to face his guest. His gift.

“You can call me Gersha—not ‘Fir,’ please. And you’re—Tilhard, did you say?” Take control. Don’t show fear.

“They call me Nettsha.”

“You said that already.” Gersha lowered himself onto the couch the boy wasn’t occupying. He wasn’t ready to get closer just yet. “But I don’t choose to call you by the name of a traitor. What do your friends call you?”

The boy’s blank expression suggested Gersha had disobeyed some sort of protocol, but he said, “Tilrey, Fir. Or Rishka.”

And I asked you to call me Gersha. Not by my honorific. But Gersha didn’t press the point. “So, how does this work, Tilrey? I’m supposed to give you sap, aren’t I?”

“You’re not ‘supposed’ to do anything, Fir. I’m here for you.”

Yes, yes, enough. Clearly the lad had been well programmed with kettle boy obsequiousness, but that might not stop him from tattling to Verán about everything they did tonight.

Best to follow protocol, as far as he knew it. Gersha dug in his tunic pocket and pulled out a vial, still three-quarters full of viscous black liquid. “Hold out your hand,” he said, trying to sound as brisk and superior as Verán.

The boy—Tilrey—extended his hand, but a slight furrow had appeared between his brows.

“I did something wrong, didn’t I? What?”

The boy shook his head, shoulders bowed. “Of course not, Fir.”

“If you don’t stop agreeing with everything I say, I’ll go mad, and that will be embarrassing for us both. Tell me what you want.”

The boy looked pained. “Men usually prefer me to drink the sap from their hand, Fir.”

Of course they did. Suppressing a fastidious shiver, Gersha dribbled the sap into his palm and held it out.

He did not watch as the boy bent over. He felt the large, warm hand gently clasp his own smaller
The boy’s tongue lapped at the sap, exploring the ridges of his palm.

The contact sent a shiver from the roots of Gersha’s hair to the tender soles of his feet. He groaned involuntarily as his cock hardened.

Green hells. Verán would probably find all this hilarious.

The boy slid his tongue one last time the length of Gersha’s palm—he must know how that felt—and straightened.

“It’s getting late, Fir,” he said. “Maybe we could go in the bedroom?”

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Gersha chose to disrobe in private. When he returned from the bathroom in his pajamas and robe, the boy was sitting on his bed.

He was still fully dressed in the garb of his betters—the tunic tightly cinched at the waist, the collar buttoned nearly to the chin. Absurd clothes for someone who was probably no more than—

“How old are you?” Gersha asked, leaning back against the pillows. Plenty of distance. His erection had subsided while he was dressing, but he had no confidence his cock would remain docile.

He wasn’t going to do anything, he’d decided. Not tonight, because he didn’t feel comfortable with strangers, which the boy still was.

The tricky part was making sure Verán didn’t find out.

“Twenty-three, Fir.” The boy’s lank hair had dried, glinting gold under the recessed lights of the canopy. He did not look excited or apprehensive to be in Gersha’s bed, only businesslike. “You might be surprised how young I can seem for you.”

Gersha swallowed against his dry mouth. “I only wanted to be sure you were of age.”

A blinding, impersonal smile. “I’m flattered, Fir.”

What happened now? What was the protocol?

Gersha had a whore he visited twice a month at the Sanctioned Brothel—an older man with a plain face, a soft voice, and clever, callused hands. These encounters were simple. They exchanged a few pleasantries, and then the man sucked Gersha’s prick—sometimes after a massage—and Gersha tipped him a vial of sap.

Because the whore wasn’t especially attractive, Gersha felt free to ignore him and focus on the sensations. Twice he’d fucked him, at the man’s suggestion, but he’d found the whole process as embarrassing as it was gratifying. Nothing he particularly wanted to repeat.

Now here was this boy, far too attractive, sleek and enormous and wrapped in stiff clothing like a package, promising to be “young” for him.

“Shall I undress, Fir?” The boy’s fingers hovered at the clasps of his tunic.

Gersha shook his head, edging back against the headboard. He didn’t want to know how he’d react to the sight of the golden chest beneath the dark wool, let alone the muscular thighs or the hips or—no. Think about something unappetizing. Think about Verán.
He licked his lips. “I want to know something, lad—Tilrey. Answer me truthfully.”

“Of course, Fir.”

“Are you going to tell Verán what happens between us tonight?”

The blue eyes opened wide. Guileless. “Of course not, Fir.” The boy’s deadpan baritone voice didn’t match that gaze—there was something older in it, experienced and cynical. “I’m bound by the principle of discretion.”


The boy had a way of ghosting a shrug that subtly reproached you for asking. “What happens with a Fir in bed stays between him and me.”

“Good.” Gersha wished the boy would stop calling him *Fir* with that exaggerated submissiveness. It felt fake.

Then again, all whores faked it for their patrons, just as Laborers in general pretended to respect Upstarts far more than they actually did. Gersha couldn’t blame them.

He’d never been a free thinker, let alone a Dissenter. He had no quarrels with meritocracy. But his own mother was low-named, and the arrogance with which his father’s family treated her was one of his earliest, most shameful memories.

Not that Gersha understood what it was like to be a Laborer. But he tried to treat them with a certain respect, as fellow Oslov if not peers, and that had to count for something, didn’t it?

He would be candid. It was the only respectful way.

“So you won’t tell our friend Verán what happened here tonight?”

“Of course not, Fir.”

“Good. Because nothing’s going to happen. I’m not in the mood to have you.”

The boy went statue-still, his high brow and square chin stark against the muted blues and grays of the room.

Gersha pushed back the duvet and reached for the overhead light switch. “So take off those clothes if you want to be comfortable, or don’t if you don’t. Your choice. I’ve had a long day and I’m going to sleep.”

Abruptly the boy was on his knees facing Gersha. His eyes were too bright, too focused.

“I could help you sleep, Fir.” A new note had crept into his deep voice—insinuation? Pleading?

Gersha flipped the switch, leaving only the bedside lamp on. “I don’t need the help.”

“You don’t find me attractive, Fir?”

Gersha didn’t answer, his blush coming thick and fast, and the boy added softly, “Maybe it’s the banged-up face?”

Gersha’s heart had begun thudding hectically; he didn’t know if it was the confrontation or the boy’s sheer proximity. “You’re attractive,” he managed.
“But not to you.” The voice deepened to a growl on the last word.

And suddenly Gersha was talking without knowing what he was saying. “If you’re worried about what I’m going to tell Verán, you needn’t. If he wants you to live with me instead of the GM, I’m happy to serve the Party in any way, regardless of—”

“Oh, then you’ll let me suck your cock, Fir?”

“I—what?”

Tilrey unbuttoned his collar, let his heavy tunic swing open, and shrugged it off his shoulders. The synthetic shirt underneath showed Gersha every plane of his chest.

“You’ve probably heard about my mouth, Fir.” The boy did a passable imitation of Verán’s querulous voice: “He’s not one of those eager boys, he just lies there when I fuck him, but his mouth—his mouth can’t get enough of my cock. I’m sure you’ve heard how deep I can take you. How I never gag. How much I like it.”

At some point Gersha had stopped being able to make coherent sounds. He shifted the duvet to camouflage the painful bulge between his legs.

He’s a whore. He’s reading a script. Varsha, Gersha’s whore at the Sanctioned Brothel, always made little sounds as if he were enjoying sucking Gersha’s prick. He always got his vial of sap at the end.

But Varsha wasn’t particularly articulate, and the words the boy had used just now made Gersha want to peel that shirt off his chest and rut him into the bedclothes. He felt off-kilter—drunk on power, decadent with presumption. Terrified of being exposed as a fraudulent Councillor, a fraudulent Upstart, a mere man.

“You asked me what I want, Fir,” the boy said. “And what I want is to suck your cock. Right now.”

You don’t really want that. But every time the boy said suck your cock, blood flooded to the organ in question, and everything got hotter and tighter and more urgent.

Is this who I am?

Gersha did not grant permission. But when the boy closed the last inches between them and palmed his cock and began stroking it through the fabric, he shut his eyes and grunted his surrender.

When the boy eased Gersha’s cock out of his pajamas as if it were something precious, and leaned over and ran his tongue around the head, there was no going back. After all, Gersha was only human.

And when the boy took Gersha’s full length into his throat—deep, yes, deeper than Gersha had thought possible, the tight glove of muscle flexing and compressing, holding and releasing and caressing him—then the world grayed before Gersha’s eyes, and he didn’t care if Verán heard about all this tomorrow.

He didn’t care about anything except more.

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Men with principles could be such a fucking hassle. You had to coax them to take what was theirs.
Tilrey sucked the Fir to the root—not a vast accomplishment, the man’s cock being no bigger than average. Working by rote, he tongued the base, then withdrew to give proper attention to the tip.

At least this one kept himself clean. He tasted faintly of soap as well as sweat.

In. Out. You had to cover the whole distance without skimping. That was usually enough to convince them there was something magical about their cock, something you couldn’t get enough of.

Tilrey wasn’t particularly good at being fucked. Wasn’t as responsive as he should be, and couldn’t pretend to enjoy it when he didn’t, the way some of them wanted you to. But he almost never failed to seduce a man with his mouth.

Some kettle boys flirted and flattered, but he was known mainly for his oral talents and his imperviousness. Councillors liked to call him a “strapping boy,” as in “Why would a big, strapping boy be scared of a little pain?”

He wasn’t. Anyway, the Magistrate usually only used the flat of his hand, with a few kicks thrown in for good measure.

Tilrey bruised too damn easily, though, and the bruises hung around too long for him to hide them from one free-night to the next. So here he was.

Fleetingly, he remembered the view from the parapet at dusk. The snow, the violet sky. *If I had jumped?*

No point in thinking about that now.

Fir Gádden uttered a braying moan when he came, sending warm seed gushing into Tilrey’s throat. It was always nice to get a Councillor properly under control, to figure out what he liked. Much nicer than answering awkward questions.

Tilrey swallowed every drop and licked his lips, as he’d been trained to. Then he raised himself on his elbows to get a good look while Councillor Gádden was too limp with pleasure to look back. The man was so jumpy that it hadn’t seemed wise to eyeball him much in the living room; the one time Tilrey had met his eyes, he’d flinched like Tilrey’s gaze burned him.

The Upstart’s slight body was well proportioned enough, but above the neck was where he became exceptional. Dark, curly hair, nearly black, contrasted with pale skin. The cheekbones were high and delicate, the eyes heavy-lidded and coal-lashed—the secretive eyes of an elusive beauty. When he opened them, they’d be green as the sea.

“Gersha’s too pretty for an Upstart,” Verán had told Tilrey before sending him off tonight. “I’d love to be a fly on the wall while he has you.”

The old Councillor had sighed lasciviously at his own fantasy, making Tilrey tense with disgust. It seemed wrong for Upstarts to desire one another in the same crude way they desired him.

Wrong, but not unfamiliar. Councillor Linnett had lusted after some of his younger peers and colleagues, too.

Including this one.

When Tilrey stepped through that door and laid eyes on Gersha Gádden, pieces had snapped together. It wasn’t their first meeting, even if Gádden didn’t remember him.
Nearly five years ago, when Tilrey was still new and green and living with Linnett, Linnett had tried to talk Gádden into a threesome. The younger man wasn’t a Councillor back then, just a senior programmer in Int/Sec, and Linnett invited him to dinner on the pretense of quizzing him about new translation software.

Tilrey remembered Gádden’s sea-green eyes and his nervousness. Nervous himself in those days, he couldn’t meet either man’s gaze during the meal. His throat closed as he imagined spreading his legs for the young Upstart while Linnett watched.

Tilrey had always hated crowd scenes, hated being made into a spectacle. It was one thing he wasn’t impervious to.

After an hour of earnestly dull conversation, Linnett had invited Gádden back to his apartment, all the while stroking Tilrey’s arm in a way that implied the two of them would share the boy. The invitation was tasteful; Linnett was never crude. But Gádden was shy, or perhaps just understandably uneager to give himself to a powerful man four decades his senior. He made an excuse and vanished into the night.

“Ah, well,” Linnett told Tilrey in bed later. “Win some, lose some—if you’ll excuse a banality.”

It was no surprise that Councillor Gádden had failed to recognize him; Tilrey was attractive in the most generic way possible. But he hoped Gádden didn’t make the connection later. If the young Councillor wasn’t blazingly enthusiastic when Verán asked how things had gone tonight, Tilrey might be blamed.

All things considered, it was good he’d seduced the little prude.

His reward would be living full-time with a privileged, principled fool who insisted on asking him earnest questions and using his real name. Talking to him.

Tilrey was familiar with such “enlightened” Upstarts. Linnett had talked to him like an equal all the time he was slicing Tilrey open and dissecting him and turning him into something else. So many cuts, and so intimate.

By contrast, most members of the Island Party didn’t hide their disdain for him, and that was a relief. It was easier not to be talked to, or to be talked down to. It was easier to follow orders and take blows and remain silent and inscrutable. It was easier to be called by a name that was not the name his mother had given him.

It was easier to pretend he’d never had a mother.

Fir Gádden seemed to have dozed off. Tilrey stretched out beside him, then decided it was wiser to give the skittish Upstart his space. He pulled off his indoor shoes, folded his tunic, and lay down across the foot of Gádden’s bed. Not enough room for his legs, but he’d manage.

He would find out what Gádden liked besides his mouth, and then he would have the man eating out of his hand. At least this one wasn’t impotent like the goddamn Magistrate.

As always, as he drifted off to sleep, Tilrey went home.

He saw and heard the far-off city of Thurskein, where he’d grown up: dingy-white corridors, clanking echoes. A bowl of soggy greens. Red-faced girls coming from their jobs on an assembly line, their arms streaked with grease. The outdoor ski slopes and frozen river where his school cohort went for physical education.
He saw his best friend Dal combing her hair, black as Gádden’s. She was daring and reckless, feared and adored, and he lived for the complicit flash of her eyes. When she kissed him for the first time, both of them sixteen, he felt as if the heavens had reached down and handed him an inexplicable honor.

He didn’t know back then that people simply desired him. Men, women, Laborers, Upstarts. People. Most of them.

He didn’t know that someday he would hear a Councillor call him “serviceable” and feel not shame, but a dull acceptance verging on pride.

Maybe next time he’d jump.

***

Later—the room was dark now—Tilrey woke from a shallow sleep and turned over, careful not to pitch himself off the bed.

He found himself looking up into the Upstart’s eyes.

A tentative hand on his shoulder. “You can’t be comfortable like that. Come up and sleep by me.”

Tilrey did as he was told, keeping a few feet between them. When the man lifted the duvet, he crept under it, but he made no attempt to touch Gádden, though he felt oddly tempted by the man’s aura of not wanting.

He hoped he wouldn’t cry out in his sleep the way he sometimes did. He hoped the Upstart’s post-sex fug of charitable feelings would be intact in the morning.

*My, my,* said Linnett’s voice in his head, where it resurfaced periodically. *This might turn out well for you.*
Warmed Up

The boy slept through Gersha’s alarm.

He rested supine on Gersha’s bed, half covered by the duvet, oddly formal in his shirt and trousers. His torso was lean overall, but shoulders, biceps, and pectorals bulged through the synthetic fabric like armor. His face looked even younger now, less guarded—a schoolboy sleeping through a test.

Next time, Gersha would tell him expressly to remove his clothes. Not for Gersha’s pleasure, but for the boy’s own comfort.

_Hypocrite._ Gersha flushed at the memory of the pleasure he’d had last night. He hadn’t meant to, but—well, the boy was so insistent. So assured.

It couldn’t hurt to take a little pleasure, could it? He hadn’t made himself vulnerable. Hadn’t blurted out any secrets.

The boy mumbled something and opened his eyes. “Fir?”

Gersha backed away, trying to pretend he hadn’t been staring. He’d already showered and was fully dressed, the white Councillor’s robe swirling behind him.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you. Sleep as long as you want; Bosh will bring you home.”

The boy sat up and stretched, a leisurely movement that hiked up his shirt to expose the lattice of taut muscle on his abdomen. “Thank you for last night, Fir,” he said huskily.

Gersha felt his breath hitch. He left the room without another word.

***

“So,” Verán asked later that day, as they recessed and gathered on the benches around the tea dispenser in the echoing marble hall. “How’d you like my gift?”

Gersha had been dreading the question. He smiled cryptically and spoke the line he had scripted for himself: “He’s everything you said and more.”

“You don’t sound enthusiastic.”

How did one enthuse without embarrassing oneself? “You were right,” Gersha said, dropping his voice. “About his . . . mouth.”

Verán raised his cup. “What did I tell you? So, do you want to be the caretaker of our lovely piece?”

The crudeness of the term crushed something inside Gersha, but he said stiffly, “I would be honored.”

It was what he’d already resolved to say. For the boy’s sake, for the sake of his career and his family. Not for his own.

Across the hall, no more than five yards away, the General Magistrate of Oslov, Edmond Linden, held court on a bench between two smiling sycophants. He was one of those old men who appear to be regressing to infancy, his head a boulder balanced on a pudgy body, his skin fresh as a
baby’s, his voice barking and peremptory.

That man had left bruises on Tilrey. Remembering the boy asleep in his bed, Gersha felt his initial disgust turn to anger. **Why would anyone—**

Verán bent to whisper in his ear. “If you happen to talk to Besha, keep it quiet for now, eh?”

“Why?”

Gersha followed the older Councillor’s gaze over to one of the junior Councillors who were listening reverently to Linden. Arvan Linbeck, known as Besha, was a spindly young man with a long, sly face and watery blue eyes. A political prodigy, he’d been Gersha’s schoolmate and had two years superiority over him in the Council. The sight of his false, facile smile always made something go cold in Gersha’s chest.

“He’s going to be furious I didn’t choose him,” Verán explained.

“Why didn’t you choose him?” Besha was Verán’s protégé and reveled in the complex webs of allegiance that Gersha had no patience for; it would have made perfect sense for him to take charge of the kettle boy.

Verán cackled. “Have you seen the way Besha looks at the boy? No restraint. If he got a chance, he’d eat him alive.”

Gersha stared into his tea, trying to think about the decryption he’d been supervising for Int/Sec. Anything to distract himself from a sudden mental image of Besha with his head thrown back, Tilrey’s mouth attached to his cock.

Besha was a runt; Tilrey could practically shrug him off. But he wouldn’t. He’d go down on his knees for him, like he’d done for Gersha, and smile the whole time. And then roll over, and keep smiling.

If Gersha took on the task of being Tilrey’s caretaker, he’d have to deliver him to such men twice or three times a week. And he, like Tilrey, would have to smile politely the whole time. Both of them serviceable in their own ways.

His gaze moved from Linden’s self-satisfied face to Besha’s attentive, clever one. So many different kinds of hunger, so many ways to feel unsafe.

“So you don’t worry that I’ll eat the boy alive,” he said.

Verán laughed outright. “Gersha, your middle name is restraint.”

***

“How’d it go last night?”

Jorning, the Magistrate’s driver, had a habit of slipping into Tilrey’s room without knocking. Tilrey liked his privacy, but he didn’t object, because the driver had intervened in more than a few beatings that threatened to go off the rails.

“Not bad.” He closed the Tangle book he was balancing on his knee. “Verán was right—Councillor Gádden’s ice cold. But I warmed him up a bit.”

He wants me to pack up your stuff."

Something leapt in Tilrey’s chest. Hope? Dread? He wasn’t sure anymore. “So it’s happening. I’m out of here.”

Fourteen months in the Magistrate’s apartment. Fourteen months of struggling to please a strange, finicky, half-senile Upstart. Fourteen months of learning to enjoy the release that came with pain.

He might even miss it.

The driver’s face had crumpled. Poor Jorning, wearing all his emotions up front.

Tilrey dropped his book, rose, and twined his arm companionably around the other Laborer’s waist. “Will you miss me?”

Jorning sucked in his breath, his cock going hard against Tilrey’s hip. He didn’t turn it into an embrace, though, because they both knew Tilrey would never do anything but tease him when they weren’t putting on a show in the Magistrate’s bedroom.

That was how Jorning stopped the beatings. If the Magistrate couldn’t have blood and bruises when he was in his worst moods, he would accept a display of humiliation. They’d learned to oblige him—Jorning playing the brute, Tilrey his victim. Just roles.

“Guess I fucking will,” Jorning said with a soft burr in his voice.

They were both native Thurskein boys. Tilrey had arrived with that same accent, but within a year he was speaking like a Reddan.

He gave the driver’s cock a sly stroke, because he was leaving and why not? “Miss you, too. Would’ve been hell here without your ugly mug to cheer me up.”

Jorning elbowed him playfully—then gasped as Tilrey’s hand tightened. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to.”

Did he? All he knew was that he liked the helpless, gaping expression on men’s faces when they came.

After a short and visible inner struggle, Jorning batted Tilrey’s hand away. “Nah, not now. Make me miss you worse.”

“Have it your way.”

“It’s better like this,” Jorning said, looking miserable. “Better for you, I mean, lad. This new Councillor, he’s not rough, right?”

Tilrey grinned at the idea. “The worst thing Fir Gádden could do is lecture me to death.”
In a basement storeroom on the outer rim of the frozen city, at the end of a long warren of dusty corridors, a young man looked up from a stack of papers and asked, “What did you get?”

“Not much.”

The young woman who’d just opened the door wore a long quilted and hooded jacket, and a voluminous knotted scarf obscured her lower face. Her eyes were narrow and bright blue.

“Let’s see.” The young man reached across the desk to take the smeared sheet of paper she’d just unfolded. Like the young woman, he wore clothes dictated by a low-middling Laborer ration level—a class of file clerks, warehouse stockers, and nursing aides.

“Huh,” he said, running his finger down the handwritten lines. “I thought you said this was a decrypted message. It looks like nonsense.”

The young woman crossed her arms. “It’s Oslov, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, but the words—” He frowned. “Let the Teflon leader ride with the chosen one in a little red Corvette to the gate of the white city? It’s like one of those old feudal ballads, only weirder.”

“I found it on Fir Verán’s handheld,” the young woman said. “It came from somebody in Int/Sec with the heading ‘classified material, intercepted transmission,’ so it’s important.”

“That’s not much use if we can’t understand it.”

The young man pushed the paper away. He had a delicate, doll-like face and a healing sore at the corner of his scowling mouth. “Maybe this relationship isn’t going to be as productive as I hoped.”

The young woman turned toward the door with the long-suffering air of someone accustomed to being undervalued. “I turned young Akeina for you.”

“He’s a fool.”

“I know, but we’ll work on him. You do realize what I risked to bring you that message, Irin?”

“I know, I know.” The young man pursed his lips. “I’ll work my Sector contacts. Maybe we can turn a lower admin in Discourse who reads that ancient Harbourer gabble. You’ve done well, Sister Valde. Is Verán going to have you again?”

“Not likely soon. He and my Akeina aren’t usually on the same side of the table, and Verán doesn’t like girls anyway. Strict Whybergian.”

“Aren’t they all,” Irin said mockingly. “What about the Magistrate’s piece? He’s with Verán a lot, I hear.”

“Nettsha?” Her face went sour. “He’s with all of them, but I don’t think I could turn him. There’s something off with that boy—maybe the Magistrate’s beaten him stupid. Anyway, he doesn’t talk to me.”

“Give it a try, at least. Seduce him. Isn’t that what you’re good at?”

“You can’t seduce a whore. They know all the tricks. But there might be other ways.” She raised
her palm in a half-hearted salute. “To a level playing field, Brother Dartán.”

The young man mimicked her gesture and repeated the words, with far less irony. “To a level playing field, Sister Valde.”

The young woman left the storeroom and wended her way down two long, stuffy corridors, up two flights of concrete stairs, through another maze of corridors, down more stairs, and through a weather-sealed door.

She dashed the short distance across a frigid, snowy rooftop—she wore no outdoor coat or gloves—and barreled through another door, where she stood for a moment, catching her breath and blowing on her fingers.

Five paces away, on the far side of a deserted soup kiosk, a loose panel in the wall opened to reveal a jumble of discarded clothes. The young woman pulled off her quilted jacket, tucked it deep inside the compartment, and withdrew a stiff white tunic with a pleated skirt. She put it on, cinching it tight around her slender waist, and replaced the panel.

Then she strode down a wide, well-heated concourse to the transport platform, where she caught the mag-tram back to the city center.

Tonight was a free-night, but work hadn’t let out yet, and the tram was nearly empty. There was no one to gawp at the person dressed like a kettle boy, or to do a double-take as they realized she was, in fact, a girl.

At the Central Café stop, the young woman stepped off the tram. She tugged off her outdoor boots in the clammy mud room and sauntered out among the tables, which were occupied by a smattering of slacking Upstarts and whores.

“Hey, there, Celinda,” said the busboy with a love-sick grin. Old Luziane, working the counter, nodded in welcome.

The young woman did not acknowledge them. She headed toward the long bay of windows on the west wall, to the usual table. The usual crew was there: István’s boy, Bror; red-headed Karl-Andreas; dark-eyed Ulli; and the Magistrate’s piece, Tilrey or Nettsha, sporting another fresh bruise.

Her people. Kettle boys. Pieces. Whores. They were the only friends she had, and none of them knew her at all.

***

Sunset was still distant, but heavy clouds turned the city to a pool of slate, harsh yellow diode lights outlining the tram platforms. Bror, Ansha, and Ulli were playing Five-Square.

Tilrey hated games. By passing the time, they confronted him with how much of his life was sheer time-passing. It was years since he’d had a goal beyond getting from one free-night—or, for him, work night—to the next.

He swirled the dregs of his tea, recalling that he still needed to move a few things from Linden’s place, like those library books he’d hidden in the compartment under the bed.

In two hours and fifteen minutes, toil would end in the Sector. At that point, it would take Fir Gádden approximately fifteen minutes in rush-hour traffic to return to his apartment, where Tilrey would need to be waiting—showered, combed, and dressed in fresh clothes—with a pot of tea at
No, there wasn’t time for a refill. But, green hells, he was having trouble keeping his eyes open. He shouldn’t have dipped into the sap when Bror offered.

“Hey, Cela!” Bror called. “Thought we weren’t gonna see you.”

Tilrey felt his back stiffen as Celinda Valde sauntered over to them.

She might be wearing clothes exactly like his—tradition decreed there was no such thing as a kettle girl—but he was painfully aware of the differences. The curves, the graceful stride, the pitch of her voice. She reminded him of a time when he hadn’t lived almost exclusively in a world of men.

Tilrey didn’t want her the way he’d once wanted Dal—he wasn’t sure he was capable of that kind of wanting anymore—but he did like to be near her.

So of course Celinda had to be sap-addled and status-obsessed. Very early in their acquaintance, he’d said a few awkward things to her, perhaps tried to flirt like the shy eighteen-year-old he was then, and she’d shut him down with such cool disdain that he’d feigned indifference to her ever since. She had her heart set on a high-Drudge husband, Bror said.

From the corner of his eye, Tilrey watched her slide into her usual seat. Slump into her usual slump.

“We need a new pot,” she said.

Bror leapt to his feet, ever the gentleman. “I’ll get one. Deal you in, Cela?”

“Not worth your while,” Ansha said. “Ulli’s cheating.”

Ulli grinned wide. “Does it matter? All we’re playing for is V.”

“The principle matters.”

“We’ve all got plenty of V,” Ulli pointed out. He tugged a vial of sap from his tunic as an illustration. “Hey, Rishka. Did you move to your new Councillor’s place yet?”

“Mostly.” Tilrey had helped Jorning bring his clothes over, then arranged them in the closet and cubbies of his new room. The layout of Gádden’s apartment was identical to Linden’s, as were the furnishings. Only the window in Tilrey’s new room was different—a skylight. He’d like that.

“You like him?” Ulli shoved glossy waves of dark hair off his high brown brow. “The new Fir? He’s young, right?”

Tilrey shrugged. “He seems manageable.”

Ansha said, “Try to contain your enthusiasm.”

Tilrey stared into his cup, suddenly conscious of Celinda’s eyes on him. “He asked me to call him Gersha instead of Fir.”

Ulli snorted. They’d all known Councillors who begged you to treat them like equals, then pulled rank at the first opportunity.

“How’s he?” Tilrey inquired. “You mean Fir Gádden? He does a lot of work in Discourse and Int/Sec, doesn’t he?”
Verán hadn’t given Tilrey the man’s work history. “He’s got a programming background, but yeah, I think he’s on the Int/Sec committee.”

Bror caught the last exchange as he slopped the new pot onto the table. “Isn’t Gádden a sanctioned celibate? He’s not some kinky type, is he, Rishka?”

“Just uptight.”

“Because the last thing we need is another asshole hurting you.”

Tilrey squirmed under Bror’s gaze. The other kettle boy cared about him in a way he wasn’t used to—like an over-protective elder brother, he supposed, though he wouldn’t know.

Bror was the only reason Tilrey was here in the midst of this circle. When he first arrived, the other kettle boys had kept their distance from Linnett’s new acquisition. Then Bror walked up to Tilrey at the gym, flashing that halogen smile, and asked if he needed somebody to spot him. He never made fun of Tilrey’s Skeinsha accent or asked if he were really eighteen.

It was Bror, too, who’d kept Tilrey company after some of his worst nights with the Magistrate, sitting close and only touching when asked to.

So maybe Tilrey owed him a reassurance. Was that what you did for friends? “Gádden’s okay. He seemed a little nervous with me. Wanted to take it slow, lots of please and thank you.”

Ulli said, “Watch out—he sounds like the type to fall in love with you, Rishka.”

Bror guffawed, and Ansha joined in the amusement. Only Celinda sat unmoved. She poured the contents of a vial into her palm and licked it clean.

When the laughter subsided, she asked, “Has this uptight Councillor fucked you yet, Tilrey?”

The table went quiet.

Tilrey poured himself some tea. He could feel them all looking at him, while his silence spoke for itself.

Bror said, “Stop trying to bait him, Cela.”

The others returned to their game. Celinda still stared at Tilrey with wide eyes, blue as his own. Her lips curled maliciously as she mouthed no.

***

Fir Magistrate Linden was home early.

When Tilrey ducked out of his old room carrying three library books, the chief executive of the Republic of Oslov was sitting ensconced on the couch, frowning at his handheld.

Tilrey went still and bobbed his head, careful not to make eye contact.

The books were titles from the Tangle era, technically off-limits to Laborers, but that wasn’t what worried him. Linden had never deigned to notice his kettle boy’s reading matter; he only knew that Tilrey could read because he sometimes asked him to read the Council Record aloud.

The old man didn’t look up, and Tilrey began moving toward the door. Nothing sudden. No fidgeting; even blinking should be slow. It wasn’t that he cared, really, but a bruise would be
inconvenient just now.

“So, the boy’s off.”

Tilrey swiveled to face the magistrate, still not looking up. “Yes, Fir.”

“Verán tells me he’s going to live with that little new Councillor. Per Gádden’s nephew.”

“Yes, Fir.” No tone, no expression.

If the Magistrate minded that Tilrey was leaving, or even knew the reason for it, he showed no sign. While it might be directed at Tilrey, his violence was never born of frustration with anyone but his equals, and he viewed other Upstarts who bothered themselves about Laborers as weak.

He made a grunt in his throat that might have been disgusted or just reflective, then switched to the usual form of address to an inferior. “Verán seems to think you’re a vital asset to our party. Me, I never understood what the fuss was about.”

Perhaps that was the Magistrate’s way of admitting You never made me come. Tilrey said nothing.

Privately, his failure humiliated him. Yes, the Magistrate was approaching his eighties and virtually impotent, but still, he should have been able—

Linden rose and strolled over to Tilrey. His body was so ungainly that his speed and grace were always surprising.

An arm’s length away, he halted. “Our lad will behave himself, won’t he? Not take unfair advantage of young Gádden’s generosity?”

“Yes, Fir.”

As the Magistrate’s hand entered his peripheral vision, Tilrey let himself cringe. Sometimes a gesture of submission made Linden snap out of it. Sometimes it merely made things worse. He’d learned to intuit Linden’s moods in a flash—an involuntary process, like losing his accent—and they determined whether he cowered or stood and weathered the blows like a block of wood.

This time his intuition was sound. Linden only ran one finger down Tilrey’s cheek, tracing the bone as one might touch an artifact in a museum. “I wish I could have seen it,” he said.

Tilrey would never forget that touch. Plump, almost pillowy, yet hard enough when wielded as a weapon.

“Seen what, Fir?” he asked and braced himself, part of him hoping for a light smack or cuff to cut the tension. Enough of that cheek! It wouldn’t hurt much, and there was something comforting about knowing what you were and where you stood in life.

But Linden let his hand fall to his side.

“I wish I’d seen what the others see in you,” he said, with something approaching genuine regret. “Malsha Linnett thought you were quite special, but to me you were just another nasty little whore.”
Duties

Though the Council had recessed early for the free-night, Gersha found reasons to dawdle at the office. Messages to send. Archives to comb for keys to the latest Harbourer transmissions his colleagues in Int/Sec had sent him.

He told himself he wasn’t dragging his feet because the boy had moved into his spare room this morning. Because the boy was going to be waiting with a pot of tea, expecting to lap another vial of sap from Gersha’s palm. Because they’d have to talk civilly, as if nothing had happened three nights ago. And because, all through it, Gersha would be trying to keep his helpless, pathetic arousal in check.

He’d much rather go to the Sanctioned Brothel for a massage and a blow job with no conversation required. Or curl up on his couch with a book.

But Gersha was a Councillor now, and Councillors had duties.

So he finally buzzed for Bosh, who brought the car around. He pulled on his outerwear and endured a few bracing seconds of Redda’s late summer before he was safely inside the well-heated car.

A brief, silent journey, another dash through the cold, and then he was peeling off his coat and boots in the coldroom, cheeks raw and lungs throbbing. At the inner door, he hesitated—but where could he hide?

This is my apartment, he reminded himself. I am the Upstart here. He should be grateful to me.

And strode into a living room that already, in some indefinable way, felt less his.

Nothing was actually different or out of place, except for the boy himself. He rose smoothly from the couch as Gersha approached and stood with hands clasped behind his back. “Good evening, Fir.”

“Good evening, Tilrey.” Be authoritative. “Did you find everything you needed? Did someone help you move your things?”

The boy nodded. “The Magistrate’s driver gave me a hand, Fir. I apologize for not having the kettle on, but I wasn’t sure of your schedule. And I don’t know how you prefer your tea.”

Gersha sank into a sofa. He couldn’t imagine anything less important than his tea preferences. “I, uh—well, I usually take it black and smoky, with a little salty synth-butter.”

Today Tilrey’s tunic and trousers were blindingly white with crimson piping, making Gersha feel like his own clothes needed a wash. “A Caravan blend, maybe?” he asked. “Pine-smoked? Pink salt in the butter?”

Gersha wasn’t sure what any of that meant. “Perfect.”

The boy bobbed his head, as formal as a Councillor in chambers, and backed into the kitchen. “Next time it’ll be ready when you arrive, Fir.”

Was that what Linden had beaten him for? Not having the tea ready? Gersha nearly laughed, then hated himself for the impulse.
 Freed by the boy’s absence, he walked to the window and contemplated the swirl of an early-autumn snow squall, shifting restlessly from foot to foot.

Earlier today, he’d tried to convince himself he could get some control over the situation by looking up the boy’s records. He’d learned that Tilrey Bronn was born in Thurskein, the son of a career bureaucrat mother and a mechanic father. The latter died in a helicopter accident before he was born; his mother currently served as lieutenant supervisor of her sector. Tilrey had taken the academic track in school and passed the E-squareds with scores that were technically almost high enough to get him Raised. With those numbers, he could easily have found a top posting in his home city, or perhaps a low-level clerkship here in Redda.

Why would a person of high intelligence choose to trade on his body instead of his mind? It ran contrary to the very design of society. Was the boy lazy, Gersha wondered, or selling himself for easy access to sap? Yet he didn’t have the dull eyes or slow-motion walk of an addict.

Could Tilrey have cheated on the E-squareds and been caught? But then his scores would have been voided, and besides, the test was nigh-on-unhackable.

Gersha turned to find the boy setting up the tea tray. Knobby iron kettle, brown ceramic tumblers, humble aroma of steeping leaves. Simple, reassuring things.

He accepted the tumbler the boy offered him—then, because Tilrey seemed to be waiting for further instructions, said, “Pour some for yourself. And sit down,” indicating the couch across from his.

Tilrey did sit down, but on the other end of Gersha’s own couch. Had he missed the gesture, or deliberately disobeyed?

Oh well. This made it easier to do the thing with the sap.

Gersha poured a fingernail’s length of a vial into his tea, then dumped the rest in his palm. Held it out, feeling like an idiot.

This time, he forced himself to watch as Tilrey licked the sap from his hand. The boy did it gracefully, as if the act weren’t demeaning. His hair dipped to tickle Gersha’s forearm, while the slide of his tongue down Gersha’s cold-chapped, sensitive palm wakened memories of the other night.

And just like that, Gersha was hard, tenting the trousers under his tunic. Shit.

Tilrey straightened. Wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Ah, that’s nice, Fir. Thank you.”

Gersha shifted miserably, trying to think of something harmless to say. Do you like my apartment? Why are you sucking cocks for your keep?

Somehow his eyes came to rest on the boy’s mouth. He wasn’t fully aware of it until Tilrey said, “You can kiss me if you like, Fir.”

Did Gersha look like a love-sick boy in need of a cuddle? He never kissed Varsha at the Sanctioned Brothel.

The mild horror must have shown on his face, because Tilrey added quickly, “Or anything else you want.”

“I know that, lad.” Was the boy patronizing him? “I just thought we could get to know each other a
bit first.”

Tilrey smiled in a way that lit up his face and intensified his beauty without thawing the core of his eyes. His teeth were very white. “Didn’t we get to know each other last time?”

Gersha’s cheeks burned. His arousal hadn’t abated. “I know you’re very good at what you do, but—but—”

*But I don’t believe in treating people like things?* No. He was in no position to take the moral high ground. *But you’re not my type?* Transparent lie. *But it makes me a little queasy thinking about all the other men you’ve been with?* Rude. *But I know I’m expected to fuck you, and I don’t know how to properly, and I worry about coming too soon?* No, no, no.

“But . . . you scare me a little.” Had he really just said that? “I have someone I, er, patronize at the Sanctioned, and we get along just fine, but he’s not very attractive, and you, well, you *are.* Very.”

Tilrey’s grin had dimmed to a sleepy half-smile. He barely seemed to register the compliment. “What does your ‘someone’ do for you, Fir?”

“Uh, well—I’d rather keep that private. Between him and me.”

“Something like this, maybe?”

Abruptly Gersha realized the boy was easing himself off the couch, onto his knees. He pressed his own knees together, too late. Tilrey was nudging them apart with his body, his hand creeping into Gersha’s lap.

Why did he have to react to every touch like a frightened schoolboy? At nearly forty, shouldn’t he have cast aside his inhibitions and learned to enjoy sex with willing near-strangers the way other men of his class did?

The problem wasn’t that Tilrey was a near-stranger, he decided. It was that Verán’s hands had been all over the boy, Besha’s too, and—

But it was hard to follow this thought, because Tilrey was palming Gersha’s stiff cock through layers of fabric. Then lifting Gersha’s tunic, and opening his trousers, and taking a firmer grip. And Gersha wasn’t pushing him away, wasn’t objecting. He closed his eyes to give himself plausible deniability, arched his spine, and felt a murmur of pleasure grow in his throat as the boy’s hand found a steady rhythm.

When Tilrey’s wet mouth slid down his length, Gersha groaned helplessly. *Vibrant green hells.* It was just like before, and he wasn’t stopping it, and what a fool he must look with his head thrown back and his mouth open.

*It’s what you’re supposed to do,* he reminded himself. *Let him pleasure you.* But this didn’t feel like the simple transactions he had at the brothel. The boy was taking him so deep, nudging Gersha’s balls with his chin, it felt like Gersha might disappear inside him.

And still he couldn’t resist. His breaths tapered into gasps, into sharp little cries, his whole body at the mercy of a tongue and throat that moved like a single organism devilishly designed for this one purpose.

Just as he was reaching release, Tilrey edged backward, and Gersha moaned in frustration.

Fingers gripped him firmly around the base. “Am I still too attractive for you, Fir?”
Had he said that? He didn’t remember saying that.

And then that tongue, whose wetness he still felt on his palm, traced a line up his cock from base to tip. Gersha’s legs went weak with pleasure. His brain seemed to float far away, toward the recessed lights on the ceiling, leaving his useless body behind.

“Say I’m just right.”

Again that teasing touch, this time around the head. Gersha knew how deep the boy’s mouth could take him, and he needed it desperately, needed it now—

“Say it.”

Gersha released his breath in a sob. “You’re just right. So right.”

His orgasm was an electrical storm that gripped every nerve and muscle, turning each fitful sensation into one spasm of white-hot pleasure. His back arched sharply, his shoulders and hips pressed into the upholstery. He felt his fingertips in the boy’s hair, clamping the scalp, and had no idea how they’d got there.

This time, when he realized the boy was swallowing him down and licking him clean, he had the presence of mind to whisper, “Don’t. You don’t have to.”

So much of this was wrong—swallowing spunk was unhygienic. Degrading. And holding Tilrey’s head down had been boorish, the sort of thing Verán or Besha would do, selfishly taking their pleasure.

But he’d never felt this way before. Warm and full and taken care of. And he didn’t have to worry about whispering or mockery later, because the boy was bound to discretion.

Tilrey squatted back on his haunches, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “But I wanted to. Shall I run us a bath, Fir?”

Gersha’s eyelids were drooping. He wanted to protest, but his body felt waterlogged. He barely managed to nod before the delicious fullness took over and carried him away.

***

Tilrey watched water gush into the tub, chewing his bottom lip. Was this working? Or was he losing his advantage?

He liked knowing exactly what each new man wanted from him. Sometimes he was a passive victim, sometimes a willing lover, but those were only roles. If you knew what a man wanted and could give it to him, you always had the upper hand—Linnett had taught him that.

Maybe he’d overplayed his hand by making the Fir beg for it. Some men didn’t forgive that sort of liberty. And he’d said the thing about kissing, wrongly supposing Gersha was the sentimental type.

Gersha. It was the first time he’d used the nickname even in his head. The Fir’s full name, as Tilrey knew from reading the Council Record aloud to the Magistrate, was Ernst Gerhard Gádden, a ponderous one that suited him better.

He didn’t like the way Gersha’s driver had surveyed him today—sizing him up as if to see whether Tilrey posed a threat to his sensitive Upstart. He wasn’t going to get along with this Bosh the way he had with Jorning.
Then again, he probably wouldn’t be asked to service Bosh while Gersha watched, or to bend over and let Bosh use a belt or a dildo on him. That did force a certain intimacy.

As always, Tilrey cringed inwardly as he remembered the performances he and Jorning had put on for the Magistrate’s benefit. It was a good thing Gádden—Gersha—didn’t know about those, what with his squeamishness.

It was still possible the young Councillor’s shyness was hiding some sort of kink, but Tilrey increasingly thought not. Shyness was an odd trait for a high-named Diplomat, but not unprecedented. Hadn’t Linnett told Tilrey that in his own youth he’d been impossibly timid?

Entering the bathroom now, Gersha looked like a boy who’d been caught pinching sweets from the cupboard. He must have changed in the bedroom, for he wore only a robe that he discarded quickly, his slight body a flash of white disappearing into the water.

Tilrey shut off the tap and turned the jets on low, then strolled over to face the Upstart. He’d removed only his shoes. “Shall I undress, Fir?”

“If you like.”

Tilrey felt his jaw clench. *Goddamn you, act like an Upstart. Give me orders.*

The Upstart was chewing his own lip now, foggy green eyes fixed on the distance. “It is a little awkward for me to bathe while you stand out there fully clothed.”

“You think?” To blunt the edge of the cheek, Tilrey slid out of his clothes in the swift, graceful way he’d done a thousand times. He folded each garment before dropping it on the bench: bulky tunic, clinging shirt and undershirt, loose trousers, briefs.

When he was done, he straightened and clasped his hands behind his back, angling for inspection, but Gersha had averted his eyes.

Tilrey lowered himself into the roiling water. “Don’t like what you see?”

He hadn’t meant for that to come out so earnest. He remembered Linden’s finger tracing his cheekbone. *To me you were just another nasty little whore.*

Gersha’s adam’s apple bobbed, as if he were swallowing something bitter. “I already said otherwise.”

That wasn’t enough. Tilrey was the jewel, the Island’s best currency. Being just another whore was not enough, and the frustration of not knowing what Gersha wanted, really wanted, was starting to make him a little desperate. “You can look, you know. You can look all you want, Fir. Take what you want, too.”

The Upstart flushed. “I wish you’d . . . stop.”

“You didn’t want me to stop back in the living room.”

Gersha pressed his hands to his temples. “No, I mean stop talking that way. Like you’re playing a part, trying to seduce me every fucking second. It makes me nervous.” He scrubbed his eyes. “I don’t like strangers in my space. Even if they’re offering me sex. Even if it’s sex like *that.* For all I know, you could try to kill me in my sleep.”

Tilrey barked with laughter. “That worries you, Fir?”
He’d fantasized about killing Linnett in his sleep a few times, back in the beginning. He hadn’t done it, any more than he’d offed himself any of the many times he’d had the opportunity.

“I’m not a stranger, Fir,” he went on. “I’m not your peer. Think of me more like . . . well, like a new pillow or comforter or a vial of sap. A sleep aid. Something to make you comfortable.”

“You’re a human being, not linen.” But Gersha shut his mouth, looking slightly placated. “The way you were talking before, that doesn’t make me comfortable.”

Honesty. Always helpful. “What would, then, Fir?”

“Could we just be real for a while?”

Tilrey’s eyelids fluttered in the steam, and behind them, Linnett appeared. I need you to be real with me, the old man said in his memory. That’s why I hurt you. You are so very beautiful when you have no defenses left.

Tilrey’s real self was the last thing he would show to any Upstart, and then only if they battered him till he broke. Sometimes he had trouble even showing it to himself.

But acting “real”? Easy enough. Maybe Gersha preferred to fuck Laborers who were rough around the edges—brothel whores, drivers, and the like. Bluff, masculine men, good-hearted but obtuse. No whorish solicitude.

“I’ll be straight with you, then, Fir,” Tilrey said, lowering his voice and injecting a bit of the old Skeinsha burr, trying to sound more like Jorning. “No more of the customary bullshit.”

“I appreciate that.”

Tilrey grinned and closed his eyes, breathing in the chlorine. Maybe this was working after all.

Gersha went on, “Since we’re being real with each other now, could you answer a question for me?”

“Sure, Fir.” He didn’t bother to open his eyes.

Tell me more of what you want. Tell me everything.

“About your E-squareds?”

***

“You know what I’m talking about. It’s in your record.” Gersha gazed at the bubbles above the jet, willing himself to think of Tilrey as a logistical problem and not a naked young man sitting a yard away from him. “You took them in terminal year. You scored in the ninety-ninth percentile.”

“Among Laborers.”

“It’s still exceptional. You’re very bright.”

“It’s kind of you to notice, Fir,” Tilrey said, in a tone that indicated he didn’t think it was kind at all. “My mother hoped I’d go into admin. Didn’t suit me.”

God, how did you ask this? “But how did . . .”

“I crammed for the test and forgot most of it, Fir. You don’t need to worry that I’ll be sneaking glances at your handheld, or trying to discuss differential equations in bed.”
“I wasn’t worrying about either of those things,” Gersha said brusquely. “I only wondered how . . . well, how you ended up in this posting.”

Tilrey laughed. “You know how Fir Linnett was, Fir. Always on the lookout for something new and pretty to put in his bed.”

“But how . . .”

“That’s how we two first met, isn’t it?”

The edge on the boy’s voice told Gersha he was supposed to follow this abrupt change of subject. But he was lost. “When we first met? A few days ago?”

“You really don’t remember, Fir?”

Gersha searched his memory for interactions with Linnett before the coup and the exile—back when Linnett himself was Magistrate. He didn’t remember ever seeing him with a kettle boy, except—

Oh.

It had been about five years ago, an incident he’d done his best to forget.

At first he’d been flattered that the GM wanted to discuss his research. Excited about having a booth in the Restaurant, even. Then Linnett showed up for dinner with a boy—a disturbingly young boy, scrawny and unhappy looking, who didn’t say a word.

At the end of the meal, the Magistrate invited Gersha home. He clasped the boy’s arm, making it crystal clear what he wanted and what he was offering in exchange, and Gersha’s stomach turned. He made his excuses and fled.

Once home and safe, he’d felt a swell of desire to save the boy, to wrest him from the Magistrate’s horny claws, followed by pure gratitude that he would never have to fuck anyone to better his lot in life. For days afterward, he couldn’t stop seeing Linnett’s eyes lingering on him as if his own body, too, were up for grabs.

Gersha might physically resemble his poor mother, but he would never be her. And that boy—but of course.

“That was you,” he said, wishing fervently it weren’t true. “I couldn’t tell.”

Tilrey seemed amused. “I wasn’t that memorable?”

Gersha ignored the jibe. “You were eighteen then?” He felt his throat close, remembering the genteel disappointment on Linnett’s face and the mute wretchedness on the boy’s. Like a prisoner. “Tell me you were of age.”

“You didn’t look it.” Gersha closed his eyes, feeling as if he were falling deep, deep into some abyss. That boy, that silent child. And tonight—what have I done?

Warm fingers poked his arm gently and withdrew. “I was a kid then, Fir. Skinny little Skeinsha. Nowadays, well, I work out four times a week, I swim miles in the pool, and I promise you, nothing you can do will hurt me. Nothing you could even imagine doing, in your wildest dreams.
Shall we go in the bedroom?”

***

Fir Linnett had a rule about kettle boys. Who knew if it was traditional or if he’d made it up?

“On your first night in a new house, the master of the house should fuck you,” he’d instructed Tilrey. “If he wants, he can appoint a proxy to do it, like his driver. But someone has to, because you won’t really belong to the new household until you’ve been fucked in his bed. And not belonging causes all kinds of trouble.”

This was related to a second rule: “Never trust a man who claims he doesn’t want to fuck you.” Tilrey had witnessed the truth of that one himself.

Now he was breaking both rules.

Oh, he’d managed to coax Fir Gádden onto the bed, and he’d managed to peel the robe apart and get his hand around the man’s cock. Gádden was squirming and groaning under him, clearly anticipating Tilrey’s mouth again.

But it was time for Gersha to do some of the work.

Tilrey captured the base of the Upstart’s stiff cock and knelt up to look into his face. “How do you want me, Fir? On my back or front? Or I can get on top and do the work, if it’s easier for you?”

The Upstart’s pupils were blown, his lips moist and red. “Do you mean you’d . . . fuck me?” he asked tentatively.

“Of course not! Not unless you wanted that.”

Tilrey wondered how Linnett’s rule would apply to a Councillor who liked getting fucked. He’d encountered a few like that, but most of them were ashamed to admit it. Was that Gersha’s secret proclivity? Tilrey could fuck on demand, of course, but it wasn’t his strong suit.

To his relief, the Upstart shook his head. “Honestly, I just want to sleep right now.”

Tilrey shifted his grip on the man’s cock, gave it a full pump. “Parts of you feel otherwise, Fir.”

Gersha responded with beautiful abandon, arching his back. The steam of the bath had glued dark curls to his forehead and temples. For an instant, Tilrey felt the distant stirring of something like desire.

As if Gersha had sensed it, too, he reared up into a sitting position and reached awkwardly for Tilrey’s groin. “You’re not hard.”

Was that the problem, then? Tilrey guided the man’s hand to his own cock and allowed Gersha to give it a clumsy stroke. As always, the touch was enough to bring his organ to full attention.

That was also thanks to Linnett. Most men won’t care about your responsiveness, the man had said the night he started training that reflex into Tilrey. But for those who do, it needs to be instant.

He’d mastered the “instant” part. But actually coming—well, they rarely cared whether he came.

The Upstart’s face brightened, as if he thought he’d achieved something by making Tilrey hard. He didn’t resist when Tilrey removed the hand tactfully from his cock and pressed Gersha onto his back so he could get to work with his own hand and mouth again.
Every few minutes the Upstart tried to reach for Tilrey, insisting that he ought to reciprocate, but he never put up a fuss when Tilrey swallowed him again. Eventually Gersha was too busy writhing and moaning and twisting his fingers in Tilrey’s hair to attend to anyone’s pleasure but his own.

*That* was how a skilled professional handled things.

As the Upstart’s warm load shot into his throat, Tilrey realized he’d probably lost his last chance to be fucked tonight. If Linnett was correct, he would never be able to trust this handsome little Upstart.

Or maybe Linnett was full of shit, and the two of them just needed more time.

Some men’s jizz tasted to him of summer, of the musky, tight-packed moss that grew in the Southern Range. Tilrey swallowed again and rolled over, resting his head against the Upstart’s hip. Gersha was just shy. It would take a while to wear down his defenses.

Long ago, in another life, Tilrey had been shy, too. *Ridiculously bashful*, Linnett had said fondly. Oh, how he’d blushed when a man even touched him. That was what Gersha remembered from that night at the Restaurant, and why he hadn’t recognized Tilrey on their second meeting.

The pathetic, stupid shyness. The pride.

Gersha mumbled something.

“What’s that, Fir?”

A hand threaded itself through his hair—gingerly, this time. “I hope I wasn’t too rough.”

Tilrey suppressed a laugh. “Oh no, Fir. You weren’t rough at all.”

The Councillor closed his eyes, sighed, and murmured, “I think you’ll be the ruin of me.”

***

Much later, Gersha woke from a dream of being trapped in a sauna, plagued by a sense that he’d forgotten to do something.

Had he not closed the outer door properly? Not locked the door of his study? (Laborers were never supposed to have access to your study.) Had he left a slate or other handheld device lying around? Forgotten a vital work folder he needed from his office in the Sector?

No, none of those. He’d gotten the boy hard and then not made him come.

Opening his eyes, he realized why he felt so unusually warm and constrained. His head was pillowed on the boy’s broad chest, his lips pressed to a sleek plane of pectoral, his arm wound around Tilrey’s waist. Something weighed on his bare thigh—the boy’s hand.

Gersha nearly yanked himself free. Caught under the boy’s bulk, his forearm was going numb. They were too close, and how would he extricate himself, and how had this even started? Who had reached for whom?

Then he felt the steady rhythm of Tilrey’s sleeping breaths on his hair, and he went still, something in him unwinding. He’d never slept with anyone this way, unless you counted his mother when he was very small.

Tilrey rolled onto his side, releasing the pressure on Gersha’s forearm. Gersha inched away, but
not far, staying within the semicircle of one strong arm. Some half-conscious part of him craved the warm, pulsing cliff of the boy’s body, where he would be enclosed. Protected.

In this way, he dozed off again. When he woke, dawn was breaking, harsh steel blue through the blinds. The boy was no longer attached to him—instead he was thrashing from side to side, moaning.

“No,” the boy was saying. “No, I can’t, Fir.” His voice sounded pitchy, young, tremulous with a fear that was difficult to imagine in him.


Tilrey came awake with a start. For an instant, his eyes rolled wildly, his face pure panic.

Then his gaze focused on Gersha, and his features settled into their usual placid attentiveness—brow unfurrowed, lips quirked in a half-smile. “I was making noise in my sleep, wasn’t I, Fir? I woke you. I’m so very—”

Sorry. Gersha felt it coming and cut it off. “I was awake already, love. Don’t worry about it.”

What had he been dreaming about? It felt too soon in their acquaintance to ask, and anyway, sometimes nightmares are just nightmares.

Gersha molded himself to Tilrey’s body, his nose grazing a shoulderblade. Cautiously draped an arm over Tilrey’s waist. “It’s still early. Go back to sleep.”

Tilrey’s breathing evened out. His hand reached around to clasp Gersha’s—palm warm, fingers tense and strong. “You’re so good to me, Fir.”

Gersha didn’t answer. Love, he was wondering. Where did that word come from?
This world has been in my head since I was a teenager, but this is the first time I've really let it out to play. Thank you for reading, and thanks to those who've given kudos!

“It’s not your fault,” Bror said, slurring a little as he raised the jug to his lips again. “Everybody knows you’re the best fuck in the city, Rishka.”

“The best,” Ulli echoed from his position spread-eagled on the floor.

Ansha said nothing, just crawled over to Ulli, picked up his hand, and flew it around like an airplane.

Tilrey let his head fall back on Bror’s thigh, felt Bror’s fingers in his hair. He’d had a vial and a third of sap, as well as several swigs from the jug, and things were becoming pleasantly hazy.

His gaze hovered on the ceiling of the bedroom, which, like the blankets and carpet and curtains, was the color of new snow in the sun. Lucky they were all wearing neutral tones; any real color would have been a stain.

On days when Councillors didn’t require them, kettle boys enjoyed a freedom that was rare in the city. When the Café felt too public, they generally resorted to unoccupied apartments in West Ring Two for their recreation. The units were officially off-limits, but easy to sneak into, and no one cared what a bunch of off-duty pieces were doing.

“You’ll have that little prude eating out of your hand in a week,” Bror said. “Didn’t you say you woke up in his arms?”

“It was him in my arms.”

The others guffawed. “Aw, he wants you to protect him,” Ulli said. “Big, strapping boy like you. Maybe you should ask if he wants your cock instead of your ass.”

“I tried that.”

Bror sat up and began to massage Tilrey’s shoulders. “Poor Rishka,” he crooned, then said in Tilrey’s ear, “Want me to suck you off later? Make you feel better?”

“Are you propositioning him and not me?” Ulli complained from the floor.

Bror made a rude gesture in his direction. “I can’t help it if he’s pretty when he’s sad.”

Ansha said in a cold-sober voice, “Maybe Tilrey should have shown more enthusiasm with Gádden.”

They all turned to look at the ginger boy, who reddened as he went on, “I mean, sometimes it’s not enough to lie there, you know? You have to show a Fir you like it. Tell him how big his cock is,
how good it feels. Make him feel special.”

Tilrey sat upright, shaking off Bror’s soothing hands. “Are you giving me lessons in my trade?”

“I’m just saying, Rishka. Maybe this Gersha needs a bit of sugar. You don’t have to be so . . . sullen all the time.”

Tilrey thrust his legs over the edge of the bed, head spinning. His cheeks burned as he remembered all the different forms of “sugar” he’d tried on Fir Gádden two nights ago. The flirting, the teasing, the buttering up.

Ansha was right that he didn’t usually bother with seduction. Why would he? Most Upstarts simply looked at him and grabbed. With them, his sullen blankness was the only shred of dignity he had left.

But when there was a reason to seduce an Upstart, he was a fucking pro. No one could say otherwise.

“Maybe I don’t like begging for their cocks like a pathetic fucking slut.” He barely recognized his own voice. “Maybe I don’t need to.”

“Hey now, hey, Rishka.” Bror was on his feet, eager to keep the peace. “Ansha didn’t mean anything by it. He’s just being an asshole.”

Ansha said nothing, edging away from Tilrey. That was always his way—attacking and insinuating, then turning coward when you took the bait.

Tilrey itched to kick him in the ribs, the way Magistrate Linden had sometimes done to him once he was on the floor. To see the redhead sprawl, too puny to defend himself.

Instead, he headed for the door, batting aside Bror’s outstretched hand and muttering about taking a leak.

“Check on Celinda while you’re out there,” Bror called after him. “She’s been away too long.”

In the hallway john, Tilrey kicked the wall a few times—which hurt his indoor-booted feet like hell—and dunked his face in cold water.

Ansha’s heckling had sobered him. He needed more sap. He needed Bror’s mouth. Sometimes when he was miserable, the older boy’s skillful touch was all that could bring him back to himself.

Just as long as Ansha didn’t stick around. The last thing he needed was the little prick seeing him in a vulnerable position.

Ansha was jealous—they all knew it. For some unaccountable reason, the ginger boy wanted what Tilrey had: the status that came from belonging to two successive General Magistrates. Our best currency, as Verán liked to say. Our jewel.

Well, he was welcome to it. If Tilrey could have changed places, he would have.

He half hoped Celinda had vanished somewhere, as she often did; he didn’t want her as an audience, either. She wasn’t in any of the stalls, so he explored down the echoing corridor.

Through the wind-seal that led to the mag-tram platform, he caught a glimpse of movement outside. A slim form slumped against one of the concrete support columns, its blue coat dusted
with snow.

Celinda. How long had she been out there? Even now, in the relative mellowness of fall, a half-hour outside could be lethal.

He didn’t think before breaking the seal and crashing through the heavy door. Cold slammed him like a transport truck, shooting through every pore in his thin shirt and trousers as if stripping him naked. He floundered across the platform, his boots slithering on ice patches, and seized the girl by the back of her collar.

Celinda turned, her face infuriatingly calm. Through the afternoon gloom and the realization that his fingers were already going numb, Tilrey saw she held a squat clay pipe like a driver’s—a black-market stimulant.

“I was just having a smoke,” she said, as warm vapor bled into the frigid air.

Tilrey trawled her backward, each breath a stab in his lungs, and shoved her through the seal into the warm interior.

“You’ve been away for half an hour,” he managed between gasps, as he re-sealed the portal and deposited her on the floor.

Stupid, insolent girl. Damn her. Pain twisted behind his eyes, the lashes already rimed with frost. “If you took Soldrid—here, like this—we’d all be blamed. Not that I care if you live or die, but—”

He stopped when he realized Celinda was laughing at him.

Not long or loudly, but laughing. She snuffed out her pipe and rubbed her eyes, her cheeks scarlet from the cold. “So you thought I wanted to freeze myself to death! Oh, what a hero you are. Big, strong man rushing out to save me without even a coat or real boots.”

He stared at her.

“What a tragedy! You must have thought I couldn’t bear my sordid life anymore. Oh, I didn’t know you were such a man of sentiment and honor, Rishka! Here I thought you were only a fuck-piece like me.”

Now that Tilrey could breathe again, the urge to kick something or someone had returned. “Outdoors isn’t something you play with,” he snarled.

Celinda rose to her feet and brushed herself off. “Really, love? You’ve never been tempted? Never played with the cold?”

“No.” How did she know? “I’m not stupid.”

“Oh, that’s interesting. Because Lersh at the Café told me once he found you actually sitting in the snow by the tram platform. It was summer, but you were close to frostbite, he said. Was that a game?”

Curse Lersh for telling her that—it was a shameful memory. “That was nothing. I was looking at the view for ten minutes.”

The cold, he dimly remembered, had felt good. He hadn’t consciously intended to hurt himself—he’d worn all his outergear—but he’d stayed a lot longer than ten minutes. Terrified of Fir Verán’s displeasure, Lersh and another clerk had manhandled him back indoors.
The mockery on Celinda’s face melted into something softer. “We all have bad days sometimes.”

When Tilrey didn’t answer, only rubbed his hands and combed them through his hair to strip it of tiny beads of frost, she crept closer to him. “You’ve had a lot of bad days, haven’t you, Rishka?”

The full-throated commiseration in her voice stirred something long buried inside Tilrey. Some foolish thing. Celinda knew how to work men’s emotions in a way he couldn’t—a woman’s way, he supposed. He didn’t allow himself to look down into her eyes as he asked, “Why are you making up to me? What the fuck do you want?”

Celinda released her breath. “You’re angry all the time, Rishka. Any fool can see that.”

Angry. Sullen. Bror, Ansha, and Ulli always wondered what his problem was. But she didn’t sound perplexed.

“So?” he said, feeling a strange release as he admitted it. “You’re pissed off at the world, too. What does it matter?”

He was still shivering in his damp clothes. She cupped his elbow, steadying him. “What if you could do something about it?”

It took a moment for the words to sink in. “What do you mean, ‘do something’?”

“Something more effective than sulking. What if you could change things?”

“You mean . . .” Tilrey tried to imagine what could possibly change. “Switch my posting? Verán wouldn’t allow it.”

It wasn’t something he liked to admit, because she and Bror and the others, as far as he knew, could leave this life whenever they chose. They had no secrets in their past, no threat hanging over them.

“No, silly. Use your posting. You’ve got so much more power than you realize.”

Power? And then Tilrey understood—she meant privileged knowledge. Like all kettle boys, he heard and saw things Drudges weren’t supposed to see and hear.

“What, are you selling secrets now?” A darker thought came to him. “Are you a shirker?”

Celinda let him go and stepped away, her face hard. “Never use that word. That’s what they call us to make our Dissent seem like nothing but laziness.”

“So you’re a Dissenter?” Freedom to Dissent is one of the pillars of the Republic, his teacher droned in his memory, quoting Whyberg. Dissenters are patriots; Dissidents are traitors.

She shook her head. “Only Upstarts get to Dissent. They’re pampered babies with fantasies about changing the world, and if they’re caught doing anything really naughty, Aunt or Uncle will make sure they get a slap on the wrist. But when we start asking questions, first it’s ‘shirking,’ and next thing it’s Dissidence. And they round us up.”

She lowered her voice on the word, and a chill stole down Tilrey’s spine. “What are you saying?”

“Maybe I don’t love the way things are.” Her shrug was full of bravado. “Do you?”

I don’t want to be in a dark cell. He knew the dimensions of such a cell, and how it smelled, and how you gradually lost all sense of boundaries.
But Celinda wouldn’t sacrifice herself for a fantasy of equality dreamed up, as she’d said herself, by high-minded Upstarts. She was too smart for that, too self-preserving. Was she testing him?

“You’re showing off,” he said. “I expected better of you.”

“Do you like being a piece, then, Nettsha?” Celinda hissed his hated nickname, any pretense of sympathy gone. “Do you like being slapped around? Do you like that Verán has your balls in a vise?”

“Fuck you.” He balled his fist, cursing himself for taking the bait. “But I’m not stupid. You know what’s out beyond the cities, Cela. Cold and wind.”

“And barbarian Outers and terrifying Harbourer warlords and social chaos.” She rolled her eyes. “I grew up on the same stories as you. Don’t you realize it’s how they keep us in line?”

“But it’s still true. Without unity, we’d have died in the Unraveling. And it’s good to have Levels. I may not want to be . . . this, but I’m warm and safe and I only work a few days a week. There are worse things.”

Celinda arched her eyebrows. “Are you done reciting the party line? I’ve seen you reading Harbourer books.”

So that was why she thought he might have Dissenter sympathies. Damn her for being observant, and damn him for being careless. Dissenters read Harbourer and Tangle-era books, of course, and learned Harbourer out of sympathy with the Republic’s enemy.

“Those books are in the public library. I read them because I’m bored, and they’re not considered dangerous.” Except to Laborers. “I’ve never contemplated the slightest infraction,” he said, hating his own virtuous tone.

Damn Linnett, too, for betraying the Republic and fleeing to Harbour, leaving Tilrey to be tossed in a cell and interrogated until the new ruling party was satisfied that he wasn’t a traitor like his master. Damn everything that might send him back there.

“Good to know you’re a model citizen.” Celinda rolled her eyes. “I’m not trying to take your books away, Rishka. All I’m saying is, if a person like you wanted to help out other people like him, he could do a lot.”

“Like what?” He bit his tongue. What if she had been sent to test him?

“You live with Fir Gádden, who’s on the Int/Sec Committee and has clearance to decrypt Harbourer communications. Certain people might benefit from opening a private Harbourer communications channel.”

This was too much information, far too much, and Tilrey felt unsafe just having it. He said, “You have no idea what you’re playing at. Back in Thurskein, we had real Dissidents. They opened a channel to a Harbourer warlord and started selling him black-market tech. It only took a few months for the army to swoop in. The lot of them were executed—quick trials, no burial fires—and every one of their associates was locked up. My whole sector was punished.”

“That’s because they were stupid enough to sell tech,” Celinda said.

“It’s all the Harbourers want from us—Weapons to kill each other. They aren’t our friends.”

Far south of Oslov, south of the Wastes, Harbour began—green fields and forests, fruits and
flowers, blue lakes, unimaginable animals. Rich lands people fought over. Tilrey knew from books and Linnett’s stories that it wasn’t all chaos, but what use was another world if you couldn’t get there?

“And you actually think there’s a good way to rebel? I didn’t know you were so naïve.” He hoped that was a suitably orthodox response.

Celinda stared a moment longer, her eyes too wide, as if scrutinizing him for signs of ambivalence. Finally she said, “I thought you’d have more balls than that,” and stalked down the corridor.

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“It must be odd, sharing your lodgings for the first time,” said Ranek Egil. “Personally, if I ever do marry, I think I’ll insist on separate dwellings.”

Gersha shrugged, fiddling with the handheld. He’d hastily blanked the screen when his old friend entered, hiding an intercepted Harbourer transmission. Egil was in Int/Sec, too, but he was only an interrogator, his security clearance limited to files on suspected enemies of the Republic.

“The boy’s quiet,” Gersha said, straining to sound neutral on the whole matter. “If I didn’t know he was there, I’d think I was alone.”

Ranek perched himself on the wide windowsill and swung his legs. “Is he sweet-drowned?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“Lots of whores are. Addicts can be a security risk—yes, even your precious Councillor’s pieces. If you don’t feed them enough sap, they turn elsewhere, and they’re prime recruitment targets for Dissident cells. I assume you’re keeping your files locked up?”

Ranek’s professional paranoia felt misplaced, but Gersha was grateful his old friend wasn’t asking him what everyone else clamored to know. How was it? Was he in a haze of bliss? Was the boy’s mouth as exceptional as advertised?

The two had been friends since their school days, despite the status gap between them. With his long, brown face and canny, glinting eyes, Egil seemed intuitively to grasp Gersha’s need for space and freedom from awkward questions. He himself hadn’t married or applied for celibacy yet, and if he fucked anybody, he didn’t talk about it.

“Everything’s under lock and key,” Gersha promised, smiling despite himself. Ranek was as obsessed with security as Tilrey was with protocol. “Anyway, he has high E-squareds. Sensible boy.”

“High intelligence in Laborers is a proven risk factor for Dissidence,” Egil pointed out. “Remember the case of Beirth Eikengren—he was a Magistrate’s kettle boy. From Thurskein, with high test scores.”

Trust Egil to pull out a case file at least a century old. “This boy isn’t the resentful type. He’s been through some . . . rough treatment, but he’s easy-going.” Gersha blushed as he spoke, wondering if he was trying to convince himself. There were so many parts to Tilrey: the sulky stares, the ready obedience, the welcoming mouth, the incongruous past.

Ranek’s eyes had narrowed. “Trust your instincts, then.”

Should I? Gersha was almost relieved when the office door opened and Verán stuck his head in,
still dressed in full Council regalia.

“Gersha, my love,” he said. “I’ll see you at the Lounge shortly, yes? With our piece?”

Gersha nodded, but his pulse leapt into stress mode. Tonight was a free-night, three days since he’d slept in Tilrey’s arms (don’t think about that). For the first time, it was his responsibility to hand the boy off to another Councillor, hand-picked by Verán for the honor.

“Of course,” he said stiffly.

“Good, good.” Verán’s eyes flitted to Egil, didn’t linger. “I promised him to Besha tonight, so that’s an easy one.”

Gersha glanced at Ranek and winced to see the interrogator’s brown eyes full of sympathy. Ranek remembered what a prick Besha had been—to both of them, but especially to Gersha—back in their school days.

You can’t object. You’re not allowed to. All the same, as Verán began to slip out, Gersha said, “I thought you told me Besha was, er, too unrestrained with the boy.”

A tiny smile graced Verán’s dessicated face. “Feeling possessive, are we?”

The familiar mortifying flush swelled Gersha’s capillaries. He didn’t bother to shake his head; Ranek, who had an interrogator’s instincts, would know the truth.

“Besha’s more than earned a reward this week,” Verán went on. “He has a remarkable talent for squeezing swing votes out of waffling members of the opposition.” He cocked a brow. “You’d know that, Gersha, if you’d bothered to attend the argument sessions—or do anything but show up and vote the way I told you.”

And he was gone.

It was an open burn, a reminder of his unworthiness. Gersha stared at the handheld in his lap, hiding his humiliation behind blankness. When Ranek set a hand on his shoulder, he flinched.

“Fuck them,” the interrogator said. “So you don’t want to sling shit in their political latrine. Your sec programming is more important than anything they’ll ever do in their miserable lives.”

“That’s kind of you to say.” And if Verán or Besha told you to jump, you’d probably ask how high.

Was that an unfair judgment of Ranek, or a realistic one? Maybe it didn’t matter. Gersha reached out, awkwardly, and clasped his friend’s hand. “Thanks, though, really. Sometimes I feel like the Council’s a frozen lake and I’m caught under the ice.”

“I don’t envy you, my friend,” Ranek said. “Not even the part about the boy. I don’t envy you at all.”
When the coldroom hissed open, Tilrey was ready. Washed. Dressed. Combed. Cleansed everywhere he could be.

The driver came in alone. “Fir’s waiting in the car,” he grunted.

Tilrey began the five-minute task of donning his outergear. He and Bosh had exchanged only a few words since his arrival, but the man’s demeanor wasn’t friendly. He was clearly one of those salt-of-the-earth types who thought whores belonged penned up in brothels, not traipsing around dressed like Upstarts.

Having grown up in Thurskein, Tilrey was still learning the social nuances of being a Laborer in Redda. Everyone who wasn’t busy sucking up to Upstarts seemed to be busy despising other Drudges for doing so. Could he blame those who scorned him for the literal sucking up he did?

He tried not to replay Celinda’s taunts in his head.

Bosh unsealed the door and ushered him out into the cold, then into the warmth of the car. Fir Gadden, sitting the backseat with his gaze glued to a handheld, scarcely glanced up as Tilrey settled beside him.

“Evening, Fir.” He made his voice casual and courteous, implying nothing about how their relationship might have changed since their night together. That was for the Fir to decide.

Gersha nodded perfunctorily and returned his gaze to the machine.

Bitterness seeped into Tilrey’s throat as Bosh gunned the engine and maneuvered into the thoroughfare. He’d thought he was making progress—that they were making progress.

Had the sensitive little Upstart been upset by his cries in the night? He cursed sleep for interrupting his control.

We all have bad days, Celinda had said. For Tilrey, good days were the ones when he forgot himself, living in an anesthetized now. Bad days were full of remembering.

Curse Celinda, too. Curse her for reminding him of his friend Dal, his first and last love, who’d dared him to go to that Dissident meeting six years ago. If he hadn’t wanted so desperately to impress Dal, to make her love him back, he’d never have been forced to leave Thurskein.

Celinda was not Dal, though, and he didn’t trust her even to be what she appeared. You heard sometimes about Drudges tempted into treason by Sector plants sent to offer provocation. Did anyone really still think his loyalty was worth testing?

If he hadn’t been so loyal, so trustworthy, Tilrey could have made a great many Island Councillors
uncomfortable. One in particular . . .

He shoved that out of his mind, staring out at the frozen, seemingly deserted city. Breaking discretion could only backfire on him, and collecting information to aid enemies of the Republic was unthinkable.

And Dal was safe at home, living her life, getting posted and married and soon, no doubt, having kids, because he’d gone to that shirker meeting in her place. He might never see her again, but he had that much comfort.

The old buildings of the central ring slid past, snow flurrying on their massive sandstone window arches and cornices. Tilrey had taken this trip so many times from different starting points—from Linnett’s lodgings, from Verán’s, from Linden’s. Always with a certain foreboding, always schooling his face to obedient blankness.

He was no shirker. He wanted to fill his posting properly, so properly that no Upstart would ever have the satisfaction of catching a flash of disgust or rebellion on his face. If only the cold would sink to his bones and transform him into the inert, serviceable thing he was supposed to be.

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Gersha let the boy climb out first. Following, he clutched his handheld fiercely, though he hadn’t read a word since Tilrey joined him.

The boy’s presence, even a few feet away, unleashed a flood of sense-memories. The sinewy curve of a shoulder. The tang of sweat. The weight of an arm. The even rhythm of breathing.

How long would Gersha be a love-sick adolescent? When did it stop?

Now Tilrey stood waiting in the garage, silhouetted against the floodlights and the storm. When he pulled off his hood and hat, damp hair tumbled into his eyes, and Gersha resisted an urge to brush it back.

I could, he reminded himself. He belongs to me. Only . . . not tonight.

Bosh unsealed the door and led them into the cloakroom, where he whisked Gersha’s coat, boots, and scarf into an orderly line of other Councillors’ outergear as quickly as Gersha could remove them. Tilrey hung up his own things.

When Gersha headed for the inner door, the boy didn’t follow. “Fir.”

“What’s wrong now?” Gersha’s tone sounded hideously rude to his own ears, but Tilrey’s expression didn’t change.

“With all due respect, Fir. Generally you would, uh, take my arm and lead me in.”

“Oh, I would, would I?” But yes, of course. He’d seen other Councillors parading their kettle boys around like lords of olden times bringing maidens to the marriage altar.

I’m not doing that. But if Gersha didn’t, Verán would react with arch amusement. The majority leader was probably already ensconced inside, just waiting for him to do something gauche.

“Fine,” he said, and seized hold of his piece. Given their height differential, he felt awkward tucking the boy’s forearm snugly under his elbow, but of course Tilrey went effortlessly where he was led.
“Perhaps there are a few more customs you could educate me on,” Gersha said, steering them into the foyer. “Am I standing up straight enough? Is my pacing correct?”

“Fir,” Tilrey said, very low with no hint of reproach, and something about the vibration of his deep voice shut Gersha up instantly, reminding him of the other night. *Green hells, I hope he can’t feel me trembling.*

A young Laborer in a server’s apron stepped forward to intercept them, proferring a tray of sliced eel-and-seaweed roll. Gersha had already dined at his desk; he waved the food away. “Where’s Fir Verán’s booth?”

“Beyond the partition straight ahead of you, Fir.” Tilrey gestured down the steps into the main room. “That’s where he always sits.”

The sunken oval in front of them was upholstered in charcoal-gray velvet, from the spacious round booths to the walls. Reserved for Councillors and their lackeys and sycophants, the Lounge sparkled with pinprick lights strung to combat the gloom of lengthening nights. Spruce branches from the Southern Range bristled from tall vases, filling the air with their sharp reminder that somewhere something was green.

The booths were aflutter with white-robed Councillors and a smattering of young admins, there to offer support and curry favor. As they descended, Gersha thought he saw a burly young man wink in their direction.

A kettle boy, clearly—he sat close beside Councillor István, wearing a stiff-collared tunic. If Tilrey noticed the greeting from his counterpart, he didn’t react.

Gersha hoped the two of them were friends. He hoped, as unselfishly as he could, that the boy wasn’t lonely.

He could count on one hand the times he’d paid court to his late uncle or Verán at the Lounge, never staying longer than was absolutely necessary. Voices slurred around him, other voices growing loud and hectoring, and the thick atmosphere of deal-making and toady ing and self-indulgence made him squeamish.

“What a waste,” he said primly, tugging Tilrey past one of the vases of spruce. “We should nurture our surviving trees, not use them as decoration.”

“I like them,” Tilrey murmured.

“Ah, there you are, dear Gersha!”

Verán beckoned them over to his booth, strategically positioned at the room’s center. Councillors’ and admins’ heads swiveled. Gersha realized abruptly that he was clutching Tilrey’s arm as if he were the one who needed leading.

Verán beckoned again, impatient. “Krisha, Janik, slide over. Dubok, go check and see if Lindahl’s found those files yet.”

The booth rearranged itself—two junior Councillors standing to clear a path, while Verán’s tight-lipped admin hustled off on her errand. Gersha prepared to make his way in, but Tilrey said in an undertone, “I go first.”

Face hot again, Gersha stood back to allow the boy to slide in beside Verán. Of course.
The banquette was deep and comfortable, but he still felt smothered as his companions reseated themselves. Things only got worse when Verán cocked a finger at the newcomers and asked the whole booth, “Don’t they make a fetching pair?”

Murmurs of assent. Councillor Saldegren, a rotund swing voter with a handsome brown face, said, “Excellent solution, Visha. I was becoming distinctly concerned about our boy.”

Verán picked up his tea. “Our boy? Have you joined the Island while I wasn’t looking, Vanya?”

The cronies and admins chuckled politely at this barb, while Saldegren, unruffled, grinned and said, “Wishful thinking.”

An aproned server materialized beside Gersha. “Something to drink for the Fir Councillor?”

“Uh—smoked with whipped synth-milk, please.” Was there a proper thing to order here? Not that it mattered, since everyone was lacing their tea with whole vials or more of sap, turning the stimulant into a powerful depressant.

The server turned to go. Gersha cleared his throat, and she about-faced.

“You haven’t taken his order.” He indicated Tilrey.

Confusion crossed the server’s face before she wiped it into blank readiness. “And for the lad?”

“Same as the Fir.”

Tilrey’s face had gone expressionless, like the server’s. It remained so as he bent to Gersha and said, “You order for us both, Fir. Or else they’ll just bring me whatever you have.”

Was there any end to this etiquette? Gersha glared at the table-top, grateful for the low lighting.

_It is beneath me to degrade my inferiors. As I earned my place, so could they take it from me._ Whyberg’s creed, part of the oath he’d taken when he was eighteen and Raised officially to Upstart status. Did those words mean nothing now?

Verán and his tablemates had returned to their rehash of the successful vote. It had something to do with Evaluation and Notification of youth, but Gersha hadn’t bothered to read the interminable text of the bill.

He preferred to focus on the work of the Int/Sec committee, the deciphering of Harbourer transmissions that might warn of potential threats. It was morally unambiguous toil that put his generally admired programming skills to use. Why lose himself in the thicket of domestic policymaking, the labyrinthine mechanics of meritocracy?

Now it occurred to him, though, that the endless policy debates weren’t just abstract annoyances. For an intelligent child born to Laborer parents, a slight change in Evaluation policy could mean the difference between a life of scutwork and one of autonomy and intellectual stimulation. All Oslovs served in their own ways, of course, but still, to force a strong intellect into a subservient role . . .

Before he could stop it, his gaze drifted to Tilrey. The boy stared into space, his face eerily blank.

As Gersha watched, Tilrey’s shoulder twitched infinitesimally. Verán canted toward him with that self-satisfied half-smile, and abruptly Gersha realized the Councillor was touching the boy under the table.
He let his gaze fall. Sure enough, as the Councillor spoke to his colleagues, gesturing with his free hand, his other one rubbed the boy’s thigh lazily—not a purposeful movement, but a possessive one.

Tilrey’s face remained slack, his lids drooping.

The tea arrived. Verán appropriated Tilrey’s cup and poured an entire vial into it.

“You’ll need your strength tonight, love,” he said, pitching his voice for the whole table. And then, “Ah, speak of the devil! Here’s the man of the hour.”

“You give me too much credit, Visha.”

Besha had arrived, smiling too widely. The sandy-haired young Councillor looked disarming boyish in repose, but he had a restless energy that Gersha didn’t trust, like a wire spitting sparks.

Who is this Besha, anyway? his uncle’s voice asked inside his head. A nothing. A low-named little climber. No one who should ever intimidate a Gádden.

The booth rearranged itself again, a junior Councillor taking his leave to make room for Besha on Verán’s other side. Besha ordered his drink, with a flirtatious smile at the server, and turned to face Gersha. “How goes the honeymoon?”

Some people guffawed; others went quiet. Flustered, Gersha said the first thing that entered his head: “It might go better if people didn’t keep asking me.”

The grin dropped off Besha’s face. “Please forgive me, Gersha. You know what an uncivilized wretch I am.”

Gersha nodded stiffly. And now you and Verán will crow about how I can’t take a joke.

“Don’t they look handsome together?” Verán asked, no doubt still surreptitiously stroking Tilrey’s thigh. His tone went plummy and ironic, as it always did when he was surrounded by his faithful. “If I were you, dear Besha, I’d be furiously jealous of the lucky husband. You know how to get votes on the Council floor, but you’ll never have those winsome green eyes, will you?”

Merriment broke out around the table—and it was Besha who’d gone red, Gersha saw through the haze of his own humiliation.

Still, he felt demeaned, too—“winsome green eyes” indeed. He struggled to think of a clever riposte. Perhaps, Visha, you should keep your own eyes and hands to yourself? No, no. “There’s no reason to be jealous. I’m simply doing my duty to the Party.”

The group bellowed with laughter, Besha loudest of all.

And Besha did not let it go. A few agonizing minutes later, when the political chat had rekindled, he leaned over and asked Tilrey in a stage-whisper, “There is a honeymoon, I hope, love? Or is it true what I’ve heard, that Gersha’s too cerebral for lust?”

“You might ask him, Fir,” Tilrey said tonelessly.

Gersha clenched his fists under the table. “Perhaps you should ask me.”

“Now, now, Besha.” Verán patted the younger Councillor’s cheek. “You’re incorrigible.”

“And you encourage him.” Gersha forced himself to look from Verán’s hooded eyes to Besha’s
mocking blue ones. Twice as a schoolboy he’d gone blind with rage and attacked the other boys who tormented him; neither time had gone well. He tried to be like his uncle, killing with courtesy. “If you want to know something about my private activities, why not ask?”

“I tried to ask you,” Besha protested. “You shut me down.”

Verán glanced rapidly between them, a hunger hollowing his gaunt features. “I could be wrong, but I think our Gersha is the one feeling jealous tonight.”

Oh, this was murder. When would it end? “If it amuses you to think so.”

Verán ignored him. “If I am wrong, I’m sure he won’t flinch when you take your prize home.”

Besha giggled like a schoolgirl. “Let’s see if he does.”

“Let’s see indeed.”

Verán whisked sideways with two fingers. Tilrey rose immediately, responding to what Gersha realized, belatedly, was a gesture of dismissal.

This time the Councillors on both sides of the banquette had to get up, leaving only Verán sitting serenely in the middle. Standing, his cheeks burning, Gersha felt the skirt of Tilrey’s tunic graze him as the boy went to join Besha, who had exited on the other side.

Nearly a foot shorter than Tilrey, Besha clapsed the boy’s arm as if he’d been doing it all his life, nodding in Verán’s direction. “You honor me too much, dear Visha. Until tomorrow in chambers.”

Another nod, a flash of cheek. “Until tomorrow, Gersha.”

“Go easy on him!” one of the other junior Councillors called jocularly.

Gersha could feel their eyes shift to him as Besha led Tilrey upstairs to the foyer. And now he understood how hard it was to keep one’s face utterly still.
This chapter features some light bondage and role-play.

Besha rolled on his side with a plaintive grunt. “Could you maybe try struggling a little harder? Not submitting so much?”

“Of course, Fir. It’s just—he put a lot of sap in my drink. And the restraints don’t help.”

“Excuses, excuses.”

Tilrey experimented with thrashing his arms, which Besha had shackled to the bedframe a half-hour ago. The cramped muscles sent pain shooting from elbow to shoulder.

He settled for bucking and squirming his hips. They both knew who was actually stronger, but for the purposes of this game, the struggle had to seem real.

Satisfied with the facsimile of resistance, Besha muscled Tilrey down into the bedclothes, scissored his legs over his head and pressed his knees down. “You’re going to like this, laddy,” he said, his free hand fumbling with the lube. “Lie still like a good boy, and I’ll show you how much.”

“I want to go home, Fir,” Tilrey objected, playing his assigned role, slipping into his old accent. “I’m just eighteen, and I know I broke the law, but you can’t legally—you can’t—”

Besha poked him with a slick finger. “Tell me again what I can’t do?”

“Please, Fir . . .”

Besha always had the same fantasy scenario, and Tilrey knew his role by heart by now: the wayward Skeinsha schoolboy who’d been caught selling goods on the black market. Besha was the sadistic admin sent to break up the crime ring. There were handcuffs, threats, token slaps. The schoolboy pleaded as the Upstart offered him a deal: his fresh, virgin ass in exchange for his freedom. Then the Upstart wearied of the negotiation and took what he wanted with brutal efficiency.

This hackneyed bondage-porn plot was Besha’s preferred wanking material. It was close enough to Tilrey’s real life that he knew he should feel uncomfortable, but these days he was bored with being fucked in pretty much every possible variation, and Besha’s kinks, at least, offered him a chance to do something.

He always gave his pleas a slight over-emphasis, like an actor hamming to express contempt for the script. Besha never complained.

“Shush.” Besha backhanded him, the blow barely stinging. “Who owns you now, Drudge?”

“The Republic,” Tilrey whispered, as if in last-ditch resistance. “No human being can own another, Fir; that’s what my schoolbooks say, it’s part of Whybergism—”
He expected another slap, and he got it.

“Don’t you dare quote Whyberg at me, you little thieving shit. I own you now, okay? Say it: You own me.”

Tilrey gasped as if stifling a sob, though his eyes were dry. “You own me, Fir.”

“Good, you little slut. Now, you’re going to lie still and open up for my fingers, and you’re going to open up for my cock, and you’re going to like it. Understood?”

“Understood, Fir.”

From that point, the play proceeded without dialogue. Tilrey writhed and gasped obligingly, then gave a genuine cry as he was rolled over and the shackles yanked his martyred arms.

Prone, he gave up any pretense of resistance. He levered himself slightly on his knees to ease Besha’s entry, then focused on breathing and removing his mind elsewhere, as usual.

Somewhere clean. Somewhere cold. He remembered how the wind had flayed him yesterday when he pulled Celinda indoors.

How easy it would be to rear up and throw Besha off, cuffs or no cuffs. If he were determined enough, he could probably throttle the young Councillor with the chain.

If he did ever murder an Upstart, he reflected, it wouldn’t be Besha. Besha was entertainingly insecure, with his opportunist’s habit of playing both sides, and it was pleasant to imagine how he’d react if he ever learned just how much Tilrey knew about him.

Not that it mattered. Not that it would change anything. Still, the humiliation he’d see on that sly face.

Besha thrust in fierce, awkward jerks, muttering, “Little slut,” before settling into a more workable rhythm. Tilrey closed his eyes and perched on the cornice of the building outside, staring into the storm. Still naked, yet somehow barely feeling the cold.

From a distance, he enjoyed listening to Besha come undone, his slick sociability fraying into raw, inarticulate desire. It was flattering to be the cause of that, and he wondered if Gersha would be similarly incoherent when they finally fucking. Maybe, but surely less vocal.

Would Gersha mind if he didn’t pretend to enjoy it? Besha didn’t notice, or else he preferred it that way.

“Oh lord. Oh, green land of my fathers.” Besha wound his fingers in Tilrey’s hair and jammed his face into the pillow, his thrusts speeding up again. “You’re mine, you’re fucking mine—”

Outside. The cold swirled about him like his element, buoying him up, cleansing him.

Besha came with a hoarse grunt and collapsed on top of him. “Oh, green hills, lad. You drive me mad. You’re a fiend. You’re going to kill me one of these days.”

Tilrey waited patiently as the complimentary insults subsided into happy murmurs, then into even breathing.

Finally, fearing the Councillor would doze off, he asked, “Could you maybe give me a hand, Fir? I’m going a little numb.”
Besha roused himself to unlock the cuffs, apologizing profusely. “I like the authenticity of these, but they don’t hurt, do they?”

“No.” Not so I feel it. “They’re fine, but what happened to your scarf, Fir?”

Besha froze, head to one side. “Scarf?”

Tilrey had hoped for this reaction, but he kept his face innocent. “The one you used to tie me up our first time, Fir. Green and blue, with a very thin red stripe—I haven’t forgotten it.”

Besha relaxed. “Sentimental, are you?”

“Maybe a little.”

The Councillor traipsed across the room, naked, and fished in his discarded tunic for a fresh vial. “I left it in my apartment in the Southern Range. Maybe during the mid-autumn recess we can revive your memories.”

“Maybe, Fir.” Teasingly ambiguous.

Back in bed, Besha offered sap on his outstretched palm, but Tilrey took only a lick for courtesy’s sake. “Verán gave me a whole V. I don’t want to pass out on you.”

Besha gulped the rest of the sap and sank back, pulling Tilrey’s head into his lap. “It’s so fucking unfair how little time we get together.”

Tilrey made a noncommittal sound.

“What game do you think Verán’s playing?”

“Game?”

“Don’t play dumb. Why’d he give you to that little eunuch Gădden?”

“Because he’s smart, Fir.” Tilrey’s wrists still stung; he rubbed them. “A eunuch wouldn’t put mileage on me. You, on the other hand . . . well, there’s a certain wear and tear.”

Besha smiled delightedly, snarling his fingers in Tilrey’s hair just enough to make the roots smart. “I do have a hard time holding back. You look so pretty when you’re hurt.”

The way your eyes mist over, Linnett had said once. You’re always lovely, Rishka, of course, but when you’re in pain and trying to hide it, you become heartbreakingly beautiful.

Tilrey rolled over, disentangling himself from the Upstart. “You can’t hurt me.”

“Of course not, love.” A sickly-sweet smile. “It’s all in fun.”

Rage was not an acceptable emotion right now, but for an instant Tilrey felt a rushing in his ears, a gathering heat. That fucking Ansha giving him lessons on whoring, telling him he should be nicer to the men who used him. As if he could change the arc of his neck or the involuntary tearing of his eyes.

Something about him appealed to sadists, whether it was how he looked in pain or simply his capacity to take it. Maybe Gersha could see it. Maybe that something, and Gersha’s principled distaste for it, was why Gersha wouldn’t fuck him.
He tamped down the shame, because the only way to keep a modicum of self-respect was to accept
the rules of their game, and said playfully, “You know, Fir, I could hurt you if I wanted.”

Besha pinched one of his biceps in assent. “Maybe so.”

“Anyway, you shouldn’t be jealous of Fir Gádden. It doesn’t become your dignity to squabble over
a whore.”

“I know, but I can’t help it. Verán’s having the time of his miserable life pitting us against each
other. Gersha’s done nothing for the Party but unpuzzle a few ciphers. He’s only a Councillor
because his uncle was one, while I worked my way up from nothing.”

“From nothing, Fir?” Tilrey allowed himself the luxury of smiling skeptically, knowing Besha
liked a little cheek. “You and Fir Gádden went to the same school, had the same advantages—”

“You know nothing about that.”

The words came short and sharp, and Tilrey didn’t ask for elaboration. Sometimes it was satisfying
enough to knock an Upstart off-kilter, without knowing why.

Besha sat up and nuzzled his neck, sucking hard enough to raise a welt. “Is Gersha a eunuch?”

“Discretion, Fir.”

“I know. I know.” Besha sighed against him. “Back when we were in school, everybody wanted to
fuck Gersha—does that surprise you?”

“He’s not bad looking.”

“Oh, you think so?”

Tilrey shrugged.

Besha delivered a harder love bite. “He was so shy and quiet—but remote, too, you know? Like he
barely knew we were there. I wasn’t after him myself, but a few high-named boys were. One of
them twisted my arm until I agreed to be the go-between. I did my best to coax Gersha into his bed,
but Gersha played dumb, and I couldn’t force him. I ended up sucking off the other lad just to
soothe his bruised ego.”

Interesting. “Why would you need to do that, Fir? Uh . . . soothe the other boy’s ego?”

Besha’s shoulder jerked. “I told you, didn’t I, that I worked my way up from nothing? That boy
was very high-named. His uncle ended up recommending me for a Diplo Notification.”

So Besha had oiled the gears of meritocracy. Tilrey had had his suspicions before. You and I have
something in common, you little bastard. Whom, he wondered, had Besha sucked off to land
himself in the Council? Or to wed that imposing Councillor wife of his, besides the wife herself?

“Anyway, now Verán has a furious boner for him,” Besha said.

“For Gádden?” Yes, that was obvious.

“He’s always trying to touch him. And why? There’s nothing special about Gersha, except that he
says no.”

How true that was—the second part, anyway. “I wouldn’t know anything about saying no, Fir.”
Tilrey let his tongue dart against the knob of the Upstart’s shoulder, then spoke directly into Besha’s ear: “You didn’t say no, did you, Fir? When Verán asked you?”

It was a guess bolstered by a long study of body language. The way Verán touched Gersha was tentative, longing. The way he touched Besha was more like the way he touched Tilrey—assured of possession.

Besha stiffened. Briefly, Tilrey thought he might get a true blow this time, the kind that would make his ears ring and his adrenaline flow.

*Please*, his body said, vibrating too eagerly with vivid sense-memories of Linden’s beatings. He pushed the feeling aside, telling himself it was just the perverse thrill of damaging Verán’s property. He didn’t want to be hurt, not really, yet *please. I can take it. Give me release.*

But Besha slumped back against him, too sated to take much offense. “I only ever used my mouth on Verán. And only before I was elected Councillor. Mind you be discreet about that.”

“Of course, Fir.” Tilrey filed away the information. *What a fascinating little piece of political scum you are.*

Linnett must have thought so, too. Sometimes Linnett’s voice was so clear in Tilrey’s head that he confused it with his own.

*All this information could be useful one day,* Linnett said. *I got where I was by knowing people’s secrets. And when I sold those secrets to our enemies in exchange for a retirement refuge in the southern sun, I didn’t regret it for an instant.*

“I imagine it’s hard to advance in the Sector,” Tilrey said. “Even for a brilliant man like you, Fir.”

“You have no *idea* how hard it is.” Besha nipped his earlobe. “Meritocracy, my ass—with all due respect to Whyberg, we’re neck-deep in entrenched power these days. Nepotism everywhere you look. You’re so lucky not to have a care in the world. No arms to twist. No minds to change. Nothing to do but enjoy and be enjoyed.”

“I am lucky, Fir.” The words came automatically.

And yes, maybe Tilrey enjoyed parts of it. He enjoyed coaxing men like Besha to indiscretions. He enjoyed knowing them better than they knew themselves.

*What are you going to do with that knowledge?* Linnett whispered. *Are you ever going to do something besides smile and submit?*

“Anyway, whatever I have, I’ve earned it.” Besha reached between them and folded Tilrey’s fingers around his bulging cock. “Now, how about showing me just how lucky you feel?”

***

They weren’t supposed to meet in the morning.

Gersha always rose early, even the morning after a free-night, when the start of work was delayed. Dawdling at home depressed him; it was something his mother used to do when she’d been sapping heavily. He remembered her lounging on the couch in her robe, tears in her eyes as she begged him to stay with her just a little longer. *My lovely boy, my sweet boy, you’re the only one who really cares about me—*
Then he’d arrive at school hours late, and his dad and uncle would give him verdant hell. *She’s useless! Stop letting her distract you!* In the end, they’d managed to send her away to a place where she could distract him no more.

Most days, Gersha slipped off to the Sector after a shower and a few swallows of porridge and strong tea. But today was different. Last night he’d only managed a few fitful hours of sleep.

It wasn’t because Tilrey wasn’t in his bed—they’d only had two nights together, after all. It wasn’t because he was having nightmares about the boy lying in Besha’s arms—how ridiculous, he wasn’t *that* jealous.

But last night, as Gersha tossed and turned, he’d felt the unmistakable alertness of someone waiting for something. And now, as the door of the coldroom hisped open, he knew what he’d been waiting for.

Tilrey stepped into the living room. He was dressed just as immaculately as he had been last night, his collar buttoned to his chin. The old bruise on his cheek had faded. When he saw Gersha, he paused, and a change came over him, so fast Gersha barely caught it. First a drawing-in, as if he were donning protective gear. Then an all-over affected softening, a dropping of the eyes.

“Sorry, Fir. I didn’t see you there.”

Gersha’s anger was a stab. *Fresh from Besha’s bed and already making up to me.*

He pushed the feeling away—he had no reason to be angry—and picked up the teapot. “Would you like me to pour for you? There’s plenty.”

It wasn’t Tilrey’s fault he’d had to oblige Besha. He wasn’t a cheating lover, just a man doing a job.

Tilrey looked like he might rather escape. “Thank you, Fir. That would be very kind.”

Seated on facing couches, they sipped their tea in silence. Gersha tried not to glance at Tilrey, tried not to remember how the soft the boy’s hair had felt against his bare arm. He wracked his brains for something to say. Did the boy have pastimes besides going to the gym? Hobbies?

But the words that emerged from his lips were “I’m sorry about last night.”

“Excuse me, Fir?”

“The way I behaved to you in the car.” Maybe this was why Gersha hadn’t been able to sleep. He needed to apologize. “I was rude. It wasn’t malicious; sometimes I’m very awkward.”

“You don’t have to—”

“And please don’t say I don’t owe you an apology.”

After a moment, Tilrey smiled, affectionate but perhaps a tad ironic, as if he were humoring Gersha. “Your apology is accepted, Fir.”

“Call me Gersha. Please. I’ve told you that several times.”

“Of course. Gersha.” Tilrey raised the cup to his lips, the cuff of his tunic riding up. A red welt circled his wrist, bruised and blistered at the edges.

Gersha froze. That couldn’t be what it looked like. Verán wanted the boy treated gently, and Besha
wouldn’t—but who else?

“What’s wrong, Fir?” Tilrey’s gaze followed his.

When he understood, he yanked his cuff down, but Gersha was already on his feet.
Besha was in his office, eating dry rice wafers and entering data from piled-up paper reports into a handheld, when Gersha muscled his way past the secretary. He strode up to the desk, ignoring his colleague’s affected greeting.

“What the fuck did you do to him?”

He clutched the edge of the desk, looming over Besha’s seated figure, and silently begged Besha to rise and give him an excuse to knock him back down. Fall on him. Pummel him. Fighting had never gone well for Gersha at school, but he was past caring.

Besha froze like a prey animal—he’d never been much of a brawler, either. “Gersha, what on earth are you—”

The urge to hurt someone fevered in Gersha’s veins, fusing his usually ungainly limbs and brain into a coordinated whole. “You left marks on the boy!”

“I what?” The other Councillor looked genuinely baffled.

Gersha circled his right wrist with the fingers of his left hand. “He told me it was ‘nothing,’ but I saw for myself. You know how Verán feels about him being hurt.” Verán’s fastidiousness wasn’t what mattered, and he hated himself for mentioning it, but it was the consideration Besha was most likely to respect.

Recognition bloomed on Besha’s face, followed by relief. “Oh, the edges on those cuffs. I’m sorry, Gersha. He’s got such sensitive skin.”

He went on, seeming not to register Gersha’s escalating rage. “It may look bad today, but they’ll fade by next free-night. You won’t have anything to explain to the next man you give him to.”

If he hit Besha now, Besha wouldn’t hit back, and then security would come and restrain Gersha and shoot him up with tranqs. I’d be censured. Lose my seat. Lose Tilrey. He closed his eyes, clenching his fists until the nails bit into the palms.

Then he took two deep breaths and opened his eyes. “I don’t care about ‘explaining’. I care about him not being hurt. Why would you do that? Are you deranged like the Magistrate?”

Besha scrambled up from his desk, agitated again in his turn, as if Gersha had finally found the right button to press. “Don’t be ridiculous! Linden liked to leave the boy a bloody mess on the floor. Split his lip, even broke his jaw once.”

Nausea clouded Gersha’s vision. “Verán didn’t tell me that. Why didn’t he do something sooner?”

“Well, Linden kept saying it was an accident, you know, and the boy didn’t contradict him. For all his cheek, he’s very loyal. Anyway, I would never, ever beat poor Nettsha. Trussing him up is no worse than giving him a love bite. And he likes it!”

Before he could stop himself, Gersha gave Besha a shove, sending him staggering backward. “You decadent fuck, he doesn’t like any of what you do to him.”

Or any of what I do to him, probably. He felt sick, his body weak and wrung-out as if the one aggressive act had sapped his will.
Besha raised his hands, blue eyes widening. “He does like it, I swear to the soul of Whyberg. I always ask him first. Always—and that’s way more than most men do.”

Gersha couldn’t move, mesmerized by the images rising from the maelstrom of his thoughts, leering and misshapen. It’s only a game, Tilrey had protested an hour ago in the apartment. I don’t mind being restrained. But not minding wasn’t the same as liking. Besha was lying, or deceiving himself.

Or did he know ways to make Tilrey happy that Gersha couldn’t even imagine?

Besha perched himself on the edge of his desk, his cockiness creeping back. “I know how you feel, Gersha. Believe me! Seeing him marked by anyone else makes me want to tear the bastard’s balls off.” He grimaced. “That’s why Verán keeps baiting me about him. I’m too attached.”

“If you were so ‘attached,’ you wouldn’t leave bruises on him.” The words came out in a growl.

“It’s just a kink! A mild one. And I told you, he likes it. If he asked me not to restrain him, I wouldn’t.”

From the increasingly confident look on Besha’s face, it was clear where this was going. Prude. Celibate. Eunuch.

They were two schoolboys again, both of them low in the dormitory pecking order for different reasons, and Besha was trying to badger Gersha into sleeping with a senior boy whose uncle was a powerful Councillor. Every time Gersha said no, the persuasion got a little more insulting: Aren’t you even curious? Everybody else does it. He likes you—are you flattered? Do you want to be a virgin forever? Or does your cock not work?

Back then, Besha had left him flustered and miserable, but Gersha was an adult now. He had working equipment, he understood the violence of desire, and for once he would not be shamed by his refusal to do what everybody else did.

“You think you know what Tilrey likes?” He drew himself up to his full height, making his voice cold and precise. “You don’t even call him by his real name—you call him by the name of the psychopath who used to own him. He’s not your lover, Besha. He’s a stranger to you.”

Besha’s grin tipped into a scowl. “You’re quite the expert. After what—a few nights with him?”

Gersha ignored the barb. It felt good to force Besha into a defensive position. A hot and pleasurable self-righteousness roared in his ears, but the impulse to do immediate violence had passed.

“What happens in your bed isn’t my business. But if I see him hurt that way again, there will be consequences.”

He turned on his heel and threw open the door, a little dizzy with the rush of getting the last word. “I appreciate your taking this time to talk, Councillor Linbeck.”

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The first book was the history of a vicious plutocrat. The second, an account of a campaign for the highest political office in a now-vanished empire. The third, romantic fiction about two young men separated by the absurd social strictures of pre-Whybergian society.

Sitting in a sunlit carrel in the Public Library behind Central Café, Tilrey tried to choose among the
dusty, weak-spined tomes. The romance was set in the ancient Tangle city of New York, which fascinated him, but he didn’t like stories that hinged on love and sex as motivators. Tangle politics could be interesting, but he heard enough about votes and influence in his daily life.

Anyway, studying defunct politics might be viewed as seditious. Ever since his conversation with Celinda, worry had been nagging him.

Tangle books were classed as “academic and archival,” their use officially limited to Discoursers and Diplomats at Upstart level. Given that most of them were written in English, an early form of Harbourer, most Laborers were unlikely to pick them up in the first place.

The on-duty librarians always stamped Tilrey’s selections without comment. They saw the red dot on his ID file, marking him as a kettle boy, and assumed he was fetching books for a Councillor. A harmless errand, nothing worth reporting.

And it was harmless. True, only Tilrey ever read the crumbling Tangle books; sometimes he thought he was the only person in all Oslov who’d even opened them. But there was nothing subversive about his search for distraction.

He was mind-numbingly bored. In five years as a kettle boy, he’d already read all the Oslov books the library contained except for the manuals on programming languages. Most of the modern Harbourer volumes, too. What else was left?

And the pre-Unraveling world, he had to admit, was addictive. To think of all those people, those nations sprawled across the world, that chaos of conflicting motives with no central planning—

“Nettsha! Your friend Ansha said you’d be here.”

At the sound of Besha’s voice, Tilrey tried to sweep all three books into his lap at once.

Too late. The slight Councillor had snuck up on him, fresh from the Sector and still in his white robe of office.

Something was wrong—Counciltors almost never left the Sector during workdays. Tilrey sprang up and offered the chair, deciding, if Besha asked, to pretend he’d discovered the books abandoned in the carrel.

But Besha had other concerns. “What did you tell him?” he demanded, ignoring the proffered seat, his voice shrilling above library levels.

Oh, so it was only a sequel to this morning’s foolishness. Tilrey was relieved, though it felt wrong to sit while an Upstart was standing. “Tell who?”

“Don’t play dumb with me! Gersha barged into my office and threatened me. What on earth did you say?”

Poor Gersha, too principled for his own good. And poor Besha, terrified of any threat to his position as Verán’s favored lieutenant. Tilrey had never seen the man’s smugness wiped so thoroughly off his face.

On free-nights, he had endless tolerance for the fragile egos of Upstarts. During his free time, less so. “Gádden happened to see the marks, Fir,” he said matter-of-factly, raising his right wrist to display the welts. “I told him I wasn’t hurt, and he shouldn’t be concerned.”

“Well, you didn’t do it very convincingly.” Besha crossed his arms, the swishing of his
voluminous sleeves robbing the movement of its intended menace. “Why didn’t you tell him you
like being shackled?”

“That wouldn’t be discreet, Fir.” And “like” is a strong word. “I told him it was a game, and I
wasn’t in any pain, and he should let it go. What else could I say?”

Besha seems really upset, observed Linnett inside his head, thoughtful. Which means Gersha was,
too. You have them both in a tail-spin.

“You should have called off the little bastard!” Besha’s freckled features wore an expression of
theatrical aggrievement. “Do you know how busy I am today, lad? Your jealous lover dogging me
is the last thing I need.”

Oh my, said Linnett. Notice that word, “lover”? It seems Besha figured it out before you did.

Shut up. It was a figure of speech.

But now Tilrey knew what to do. He rose—slowly, so as not to intimidate Besha with his height—
and slouched against the carrel, fixing the smaller man with the sultriest gaze he could manage
with no sap in his system. “Don’t worry about Gersha, Fir. I’ll handle him.”

“You should have handled him this morning!”

Besha’s right hand flailed, punctuating the words. Tilrey captured it and stroked it with his thumb.

Yes, good, Linnett whispered. Get him closer.

Such behavior was frowned upon on workdays, and downright forbidden with the Councillors to
whom Tilrey’s favors were supposed to be rationed out. Besha flinched at the impropriety, but then
he went pliable, eyes gleaming with desire. “You oughtn’t to tease me, love.”

None too hurriedly, Tilrey raised the man’s hand to his lips and kissed the palm before finally
releasing it. “I’ll handle Gersha,” he repeated. “Now you, Fir, go and govern the Republic and
forget this foolishness. It’s not worthy of either of you.”

As Tilrey watched Besha sweep back down the aisle, Linnett whispered again in his head: He isn’t
just principled or prudish, your little Gersha. None of that would have been enough to put him on
the war path. He cares—and you can use that.
Handled

Chapter Notes

This one starts with a database and ends in bed; I enjoyed writing it, and hope you enjoy reading it. Many thanks to everyone who’s left kudos; I love comments, too!

Two days after the confrontation, Gersha’s anger had subsided into a tedious state of dread.

For the first time in his political career, he’d drawn a line and made a threat, and surely there’d be consequences. Besha was on edge, that much was clear. He treated Gersha with exaggerated civility in the Council chamber or in front of Verán and avoided him everywhere else.

Which probably meant he was plotting something, such as driving a wedge between Gersha and Verán, and Gersha didn’t trust himself to know how to neutralize that kind of counter-move.

So he kept a low profile, attending the minimum of Council sessions, working in his office until nearly midnight on intelligence briefs and decoding protocols. The only people he talked with were his admins and Councillor Albertine Linnett, the exile’s daughter, who was angling to be the new head of the Int/Sec Committee.

“I’ve been combing your searchable database of Tangle lore,” she said, on an unannounced visit to his office. “It’s a marvel, Gersha—where’d you find the time?”

Gersha flushed. In her early fifties, Albertine Linnett was icy, ageless, and regal; it was the first time he’d seen her display anything like enthusiasm. “It’s a pet project. Verán thinks it’s a waste of time, all my historical archiving.”

“But it’s so much more than that! The deeper we dive into decrypting Harbourer communications, the more we see using a second level of code.”

“Yes!” He wasn’t able to hide his excitement at being, for once, appreciated. “I’m convinced it’s all about the lore. We see the Tangle as a vanished, corrupt time, but to Harbourers it’s alive and present through an oral tradition. They weave its tropes and memes into their everyday speech and their private negotiations. What we’ve forgotten here in the Republic, they could use against us.”

Linnett promised to work on getting him more resources for the database project, and Gersha spent the rest of the afternoon in a flurry of coding. It felt good to confront meaningful challenges instead of sitting in meetings, and it was a distraction from . . . well, from that.

He would have stayed late, but heavy snowfall was forecast. He headed home with a certain trepidation, even though Tilrey always made himself scarce on work-nights.

The last time they’d spoken, that awful morning after the night of the Lounge, Tilrey had made it painfully clear that the last thing he wanted was for Gersha to make a fuss about Besha’s treatment of him. Give it a day, and you won’t see a single mark on me. It’s just a game. Look at me, Fir—do I look breakable?

The boy had maintained a respectful posture and tone, the way he always did. But Gersha could tell he thought the whole thing was ridiculous.
Could Besha have been telling the truth when he said Tilrey liked being hurt? The possibility had been nagging at Gersha for the past two days, haunting him as he lay in bed and felt the ghost of the boy’s warmth against him.

*I haven’t been making him happy. I know I haven’t.*

Gersha defrosted a bowl of fish and rice and shut himself up in his study, where he ate between bursts of typing, trying to lose himself in the debugging again.

A soft knock sounded.

No one ever interrupted him in here, in the dead of night, so at first he thought his ears were playing tricks on him. After the second knock, he supposed Bosh must have come to warn him of an emergency power outage.

He grabbed the empty bowl and opened the door.

Tilrey stood on the other side, in the dimness of the master bedroom. He held a tray on which a steaming teapot was flanked by a cup and a selection of biscuits. “I noticed you were up late, Fir.”

The steam smelled delicious; Gersha couldn’t help breathing it in. “You don’t have to wait on me on work-nights,” he pointed out, taking the tray.

Tilrey shrugged and relieved him of the empty bowl. “I was on my way to bed when Bosh warned me you might forget to eat. But it looks like you heated up dinner.”

“I do forget to eat sometimes.”

“Bosh notices, Fir. He’s quite protective of you.”

Gersha’s cheeks warmed. “I guess I didn’t realize that.”

Tilrey really was on his way to bed; instead of the usual tunic, he wore pajama pants and a thin T-shirt, his feet bare on the beige carpet. Loose as the clothes were, the drape of the thin fabric over broad shoulders made something churn in Gersha’s belly.

He said, telling himself he was being polite, “Don’t go. Would you take tea with me?”

“There’s only one cup, Fir.” There was a playful quirk to the boy’s mouth, as if he’d anticipated this.

“Then get another.”

Without a word, Tilrey headed for the kitchen. Gersha followed him a few steps—then stopped short.

What was he doing? It wasn’t a free-night. The boy’s time was carefully rationed. Tilrey belonged to Verán and the Party, not to him, and they weren’t supposed to socialize outside their designated nights. It went against protocol, against the proper distribution of sexual currency, against all order—

Then again, it was just tea.

Mindful of the rule against allowing Laborers into his study, Gersha set out the tray in the bedroom, on the small table between two never-used armchairs. Returning, Tilrey paused in the doorway, his solid bulk going fluid, a grin spreading across his face. “This is comfortable.”
Gersha looked away to hide his blush. “The living room seemed too formal. I’m not . . . I mean, well, you understand. I’ll be back at work soon.”

“Of course, Fir.”

The snow whipping the windows and veiling the city reassured Gersha a little. Not that it really mattered, but there was something sheltering and concealing about a storm. It was a night to hunker down with someone else’s warm body, to curl oneself around—stop thinking about that!

Tilrey melted himself into one of the low-slung armchairs. Gersha sat straight-backed in the other and began pouring.

“I should do that, Fir.”

“No.” He was still blushing, damn it. It was like an allergy. “I don’t want you serving me. This is just a break. For us both.”

“A break.” Tilrey took the cup. The shirt stretched tight over his right pectoral, tracing the outline of a nipple.

Gersha shifted. He’d removed his own tunic when he came home, replacing it with pajamas and a dressing gown, and he felt oddly vulnerable. “No sap tonight,” he said gruffly. “Because I’m at work.”

The boy blew on his cup. “Believe me, Fir, I don’t suffer from any lack of sap.”

“No?” High Upstarts controlled the flow of sap, and Gersha hadn’t given Tilrey anything outside their two free-night tea ceremonies. He remembered Ranek’s warning that the boy might be an addict, but it seemed unlikely. Gersha knew the signs too well—dreamy eyes, shuffling gait, slurred speech.

“Verán always gives me a few vials when he sees me, Fir. More than I need. I like to keep my head clear.”

“That’s . . . uh, good. Smart of you.”

The boy had reached for a biscuit, making Gersha’s eyes dart to his bared wrist before he could stop himself. The imprint of the handcuff was faded but visible.

He tried not to visualize the sequence of events that might have produced those marks. Besha snapping the restraints on, grinning in that smug way of his, and stretching Tilrey’s arms above his head. Tilrey passively accepting it—or worse, smiling languidly and arching his back to meet Besha’s touch.

Again that self-righteous rage flowed through Gersha—and then abruptly, unsettlingly, transformed itself into a different kind of heat. He made sure the robe was draped to hide his erection.

Green hills, did he want to hurt the boy? To bend his strong body into contortions? To suck and snuffle at his neck until violet contusions bloomed there? Or did he just long to make Tilrey shiver with unfeigned, helpless pleasure?

*He likes it.* Three little words that tormented him.

Banishing the images, Gersha raised his head to find the boy looking at him. The pale blue eyes
were wide and innocent—without insinuation, yet somehow unnerving.

“I’m sorry,” he said—the first words that came to mind.

“For what, Fir?”

“Two days ago,” Gersha cleared his throat. “I should never have, uh . . . questioned what happened in another man’s bedroom. That was indiscreet.”

But was it wrong? He still stood behind the fiery rebuke he’d thrown at Besha. He still quietly seethed as he remembered the Lounge—Tilrey’s zombie blankness, the Councillors’ crude remarks, Verán stroking Tilrey’s thigh beneath the table.

Still, in his haste to protect Tilrey, could he have been ignorant? Patronizing? Prudish? Unfair?

“You didn’t mean to be indiscreet, Fir,” Tilrey said. “You meant to look out for me.”

He rose and sidled over to Gersha’s chair. Gersha stiffened at the nearness of him, the largeness of him, but he relaxed when, instead of touching him, Tilrey sank down cross-legged on the carpet, his head inches from Gersha’s dangling hand.

“Thank you,” the boy said softly, as if finishing his thought.

“I should have listened to you. I shouldn’t have made a stink.”

“You meant the best for me, Fir. And Besha . . . ” Tilrey chuckled, low. “I like to imagine you getting in his face a bit. He must have been terrified. I’d like to see you on fire like that.”

*What’s going on here?* Gersha tried to swallow, but his throat was dry and tight, his cock still achingly erect. He felt the presence of Tilrey’s hair, so near his fingertips, like an unchecked fire.

“Besha would never be terrified of me,” he managed. “I’m not . . . imposing.”

“Neither’s he, Fir. He has a sharp tongue, but you might be surprised at what’s underneath. He’s far more worried about his position than you are.”

“Should you be telling me that?”

“Probably not.” And then Tilrey’s hand was clasping his, holding it still. The thumb rhythmically massaged his palm. “This is nice, Fir. Waiting out the storm with you.”

“We aren’t supposed to,” Gersha managed to say. “You do know—”

“Oh, I do know, Fir.” Tilrey dropped his hand, rose easily, and perched himself on the armrest of Gersha’s chair. “There’s something I’m curious about, Fir, with your permission.”

Gersha cringed. Burned. The boy was so close and so big, so bulky and still strangely graceful. It was impossible to imagine refusing him anything.

“What are you curious about?” he whispered.

Instead of asking a question, Tilrey tipped Gersha’s chin up, very gently, and kissed him.

It started as a tentative exploration of Gersha’s lower lip; of the left corner of his mouth; of his upper lip and the tender, bristly muzzle that was due for a shave.
Then Tilrey’s tongue flickered between Gersha’s lips, and before he could tell himself no, Gersha was opening his mouth into the probing warmth. Leaning into the body perched above him, gripping it by the elbows.

Last time he’d said no to the offer of a kiss, and now he had no idea why.

The boy’s mouth tasted like smoky tea. His tongue had a way of advancing and deftly retreating—first aggressive, then demure, then aggressive again. He drew back to plant soft kisses on Gersha’s cheek, then below his ear, his tongue darting out to lick the sensitive lobe, and Gersha ached to erase the remaining distance between them. His fingers tightened as Tilrey began to slip off the armrest. “No, don’t . . .”

But instead of leaving, Tilrey lowered himself with a grunt and wedged himself into the chair beside Gersha. “I was going to fall off. Ah, but sorry, I’m crushing you, Fir. Too much of me.”

Gersha shook his head. Half the boy’s weight had landed in his lap, yes, but all he could think was more. He pulled Tilrey’s face down to his, burying his hands in the dark-blond hair.

He kissed along the boy’s firm jawline, rubbing the stubble there, and the tiny prickle of pain went straight to his cock. He opened his mouth on Tilrey’s throat and sucked hard, savoring the salty tang.

Too late, he realized his mistake and pulled away, speaking in a growl that surprised him. “Tomorrow’s a free-night. Whoever you go to, he’ll see any mark I make.”

He expected that to bring the boy to his senses. But, instead of bowing to the importance of protocol, Tilrey gave a small tug to Gersha’s robe and sent it tumbling off his shoulders. “I know a place you won’t make marks, Fir.”

“But we can’t.” What’s wrong with you? “Not tonight.”

Gersha wasn’t sure how he managed to disentangle himself from the boy’s limbs, much less to stand up, with every part of him vibrating like a power line in a snowstorm. “We can’t,” he repeated, knowing his arousal was now mortifyingly visible through his thin trousers.

Tilrey rose, too, languid as ever, and slipped out of his shirt and trousers as one might shake off a chill.

“But we want to,” he said, nearly under his breath. “And who’s going to know?”

Naked beneath, he stepped around Gersha and stretched out unhurriedly on the bed, showing every inch to advantage. The grooves between his flat stomach and hips, the taut muscles of his thighs, the fine reddish hair that crept down his lower belly to his long, broad cock—it was all new somehow, as if Gersha had forgotten. How could he have forgotten? Or had he never properly looked?

“There’s something I haven’t told you, Fir,” Tilrey said, patting the duvet beside him.

Gersha swooned more than sat on the bed. He let Tilrey pull him into the warm cliff of his chest, strong arms pinioning him. Shivered as he felt the hot breath in his ear, and heard the husky whisper:

“I like you better than the others. I want you to take me now.”

Gersha’s thoughts vanished, whisked into the white draperies above their heads. There was only
the blood throbbing in his neck and his cock, the frantic pulse of yes, yes, yes.

Then he was shoving Tilrey down, opening the boy’s mouth roughly with his tongue, claiming the wetness inside. Rolling on top, gasping and thrusting helplessly against the boy’s hips and half-hard cock like a kid trying to ravish a phantom in his first wet dream.

And it seemed this would go on forever, this terrifying, beautiful, humiliating loss of control, until Tilrey smiled gently and raised himself on his elbows and said, “Let me show you, Fir.”

***

This was working out fine so far. It would be fine.

Two birds with one stone, as they used to say in the Tangle. He’d stop Gersha from making further trouble with Besha and get himself properly fucked at the same time.

The Fir was rock-hard; there was no need to coax his organ into position. Tilrey had lubed and opened himself beforehand. All he had to do was roll Gádden onto his back, tease his trousers down, and straddle him.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” the Upstart protested as Tilrey lowered himself gingerly onto the swollen prick, supporting himself with one hand and holding Gersha’s organ steady with the other.

“I don’t break, Fir.”

The position was awkward; it felt wrong having this much control. But once he had Gersha in deep, Tilrey could clench him tight and piston his hips. He clasped one of the Fir’s hands as the poor man began gasping and bucking against him, hopelessly in thrall to his cock.

Not such a prude after all.

“Oh green hills.” Gersha’s other hand fastened on Tilrey’s thigh, tight enough to bruise, as he fucked upward. “This isn’t—we shouldn’t—you’re not—”

“Shhh, Fir.”

And the young Councillor went obligingly silent, except for hoarse, racking grunts and stifled moans. Clearly he didn’t want to express his pleasure openly, which gave a particular relish to each muffled sound. Tilrey experimented with different rhythms—fast and shallow, slow and brutally deep—and was rewarded with plangent groans from those shapely lips.

Maybe he wasn’t so bad at being on top after all.

A woman had taught him how to fuck—Adeled Linden, the General Magistrate’s sister. Their first time, she’d straddled him and set the rhythm with her hips, cooing, “You’ll be on top next time, my lovely big brute.” He’d writhed beneath her, panting and gasping just as helplessly as Gersha was now.

Tilrey wasn’t any kind of virgin then, hadn’t been for a while. But the only other woman he’d been with was Dal in Thurskein, and they’d been kids, Dal still clumsily trying to figure out how to come with him inside her.

He’d been petrified of hurting Dal, back in those days that felt like another life. With Adeled, all he had to do was lie still and try not to fly apart from the bliss.
Afterward, she’d snuggled beside him, cradling him in her arms. As his erection wilted, he remembered that she was pasty and pudgy and older than his mother and bore a family resemblance to the man who beat him. Still, he felt a shameful thrill as Adeled whispered, “My big boy. What a lovely cock. You did so well.”

The next time, he was on top, and she coached him on his rhythm. Now Tilrey recalled her advice, though he wasn’t the one doing the penetrating: Vary it. Pull yourself back. Build your stamina. Yes, yes. Oh, you’re going to come so hard.

Gersha cried out as he came, a long, half-stifled shout that sounded half-triumphant and half-outraged. Tilrey pulsed his hips a few more times and then went still, feeling the Upstart’s warmth gush inside him.

At last. Linnett would have been proud of him, finally establishing his place in this household. And even Linnett would have to admit that Gersha Gádden had been a tough nut to crack.

Nuts—what were they? Why did you have to crack them? Sometimes Tilrey absorbed the expressions from his Tangle books without a clue what they meant.

He lifted himself carefully off Gersha’s cock, wiped it, and tucked it neatly back in the trousers. “Next time you’ll be on top, Fir. And you’ll see just how unbreakable I am.”

After a long moment, the Councillor rolled over and mashed his nose into Tilrey’s side. His black curls were damp and tousled, his pale skin beautifully flushed, the delicate freckles around his nose disappearing. “Verán,” he murmured. “If he knew about this . . .”

“He doesn’t need to, Fir.”

There was no point in saying that Verán probably didn’t give a fuck when or how Gersha enjoyed Tilrey, protocol or no protocol, as long as he left no marks. Because Gersha was a mere seat filler in the Council, and his loyalty to Verán was assured, he didn’t need to be incentivized.

Pointing that out would only wound the little Councillor’s vanity. Besides, if tonight were any indication, the allure of the forbidden was a sure-fire way to get Gersha going.

“You could have fucked me twice before, and you didn’t,” Tilrey pointed out, pulling the Councillor’s slender, still-clothed body close to his naked one and feeling it tremble from the recent release. “You were owed one.”

Gersha murmured something against Tilrey’s bare skin, his lips soft and wet.

“What’s that, Fir?” It had been nice claiming that mouth, and even nicer to see Gersha’s alabaster skin redder as his heavy eyelids closed. The man was like an adolescent, unself-conscious in bed, undone by the novelty of his own desire.

No wonder Linnett had wanted to have Gersha, just as Verán clearly did. But they’d both struck out where Tilrey had not.

Don’t be smug, Linnett whispered. If you get too confident, you’ll lose him.

“Don’t owe me anything,” Gersha said sleepily. He explored Tilrey’s chest, stroking around a nipple. “Shouldn’t work that way. This idea . . . Verán calls you currency. Don’t understand it. Sap can be currency—medium of exchange. Person can’t.”

“I don’t mind, Fir.” Was it so bad to be a medium of exchange, a social lubricant, much like the tea
he poured or the sap he guzzled from men’s hands?

*Powerful men need powerful incentives to compromise,* Linnett had told him once. *To put aside their quarrels and find common ground. That’s what you are.*

At the time, Tilrey had objected that Whyberg said no person should treat another person as a means to an end. And Linnett had laughed and called him a smart boy. *But Whyberg was a man of principle, and principles have never protected us from Unraveling. Do you know what does protect us? Millions of acres of icy Wastes and silos full of nuclear warheads.*

“I like having an end to serve,” Tilrey said now, nuzzling at the Upstart’s neck, marveling at the delicate symmetry of his collarbone. “Doing a job well makes me proud.”

Gersha gasped fetchingly. “You do *like* it? I don’t want this to be just an . . . exchange.”

Tilrey captured the Upstart’s hand and brought it to his lips, kissed the palm. “This can be whatever you want, Fir.”

Gersha arched his back as if the soft pressure of Tilrey’s lips had gone straight to his cock. “I should have . . . satisfied you. I was selfish.”

It wasn’t something he heard often. “But Fir, I’m totally satisfied.”

Gersha’s free hand reached awkwardly for Tilrey’s cock. “You are? Did you—”

Tilrey intercepted the hand, steered it away. The last thing he needed was to be achingly erect for twenty minutes without release. These days, Bror was the only person he allowed to bring him to completion, the only person he trusted with the secret that he couldn’t come without an explicit order to do so.

Adeled Linden had looked at him pityingly when he told her. *Linnett did a number on you, didn’t he?* There were humiliations you got used to, and others you didn’t. Since then, Tilrey had preferred not to inform his Upstart partners about his little problem. Luckily, few of them wanted to see him get off.

And she was right, of course. It was Linnett’s doing.

He could still hear that almost hypnotic voice in his head, too. *Wait for it,* Linnett had chanted, as he stroked Tilrey with agonizing slowness. *On my command and only on my command. Ah, yes, that’s good. You’ll rule the world once you can control your impulses.*

And Tilrey had believed what he was told—that he was learning to control himself—when in fact he was learning how to be controlled. By Linnett’s hand, by Linnett’s voice, by a mere flick of the man’s finger or his eyes.

God, he missed Linnett sometimes—a deep-down ache mixed with intense relief that he would never again see the man who had known and owned him more intimately than anyone else ever would. Who had broken him and then assembled the jagged pieces into something new.

*Is it so bad? I made you harder. Stronger.*

There’d been good times, too. They had a ritual: after Linnett fucked Tilrey, the Magistrate would serve them spicy Harbourer tea in bed and reminisce about that other world where he’d served as an ambassador in his youth. The green hills and valleys, the running rivers and fields of rippling grain. Tilrey would listen, rapt, and even ask questions that the Magistrate answered with great
seriousness, as if they were equals.

Linnett had told Tilrey openly that he preferred Harbour to Oslov, something he surely never would have divulged to his colleagues. “This place is as safe as a meat locker and has about as much culture,” he’d say, curling his lip, then reach over to stroke Tilrey’s hair. “But you make up for it sometimes.”

And Tilrey didn’t tense up, because just for that moment it was good.

Now, gazing down at Gersha, with his aristocratic features and his beautiful eyes, he wondered if Linnett in his youth had ever been like this—timid and ashamed of his own power. Maybe Gersha, too, would come into his strength. Maybe Tilrey could help him and reap the benefits.

“I’m very satisfied,” he told his Councillor, in a sensual purr that closed the discussion.

You have him now, Linnett said approvingly. Maybe you can make something of him.
The storm ended near dawn, leaving two feet of new snow to waft and sparkle in the sunlight. For the ensuing four ten-days, fine and frigid weather reigned, as it sometimes did in early autumn near the Pole. Beams slanted through the windows of the Public Library and threw the dust of the stacks into relief.

Sunlight hit the white scarf that Tilrey had wound around his neck, probably to hide someone’s love bites. Hidden by the stacks, Celinda watched him turn the pages of one of his brittle old volumes.

The other kettle boys were playing cards out in the Café, but Tilrey seemed to prefer his own company. And his precious books.

Were they written in Harbourer, or actually in ancient English? And did he understand it all? It wasn’t explicitly forbidden for Drudges to speak foreign languages; everyone learned a few words of Harbourer and the ancient tongue at school. But a skill like Tilrey’s wasn’t normal or encouraged. What purpose could it possibly have, if not to set up illicit communications channels with the Republic’s rivals?

At least, that was how her friend Irin Dartán saw things. The scrawny little Dissident had recruited her, and now he was determined to recruit Tilrey as well.

“Try Bronn again,” Dartán had insisted, when Celinda met him in the storage room he used as a base of operations. “You said he’s not like the others.”

No, Tilrey wasn’t like Bror or Ansha or Ulli, all of whom had freely chosen to serve Upstarts. Celinda didn’t know Tilrey’s story; Bror, who knew some of it, refused to tell her. But she suspected it wasn’t too unlike her own.

In her teen years, Celinda had tasted sap out of boredom and come back for more. Before she knew it, she harbored an aching emptiness that only the sticky black sweetness could fill. She met a friendly Upstart, much older, who freely shared his supply. He deflowered her and passed her to another Upstart, who passed her to a Councillor. All of them kept her drowned in that sweetness, and for a while, that was all that mattered.

Then, just over a year ago, an Upstart had raped her kid sister—yes, raped, not “taken advantage of” or any other minimizing euphemism—and gotten a mild reprimand, while her sister was declared “unstable” and packed off to moral rehab because she’d complained. And Celinda came to understand the focusing power of rage.

By sheer force of will, she managed to reduce her sap intake to a vial a day. She devoured law codes and political books, trying to use her pathetic clout to obtain some kind of justice. And here, in the Library, she met Irin Dartán.

“You know that’s a dead end,” he’d said, when she told him her plans. “They twist the law any way they want.”

When she informed Dartán she intended to quit her posting because the stink of male sweat was starting to turn her stomach, he said, “Don’t. There’s so much more you can do where you are.”

And so she stayed. On paper, Celinda belonged to a female Councillor, because Whyberg frowned on using members of the opposite sex for pleasure. In reality, though, her protector was Erich
Akeina, a prominent swing voter, and everyone knew she had the same purpose Tilrey did: the endless, tedious satiation of men’s needs.

So here she was, risking her life and freedom to wipe the smug superiority off at least a few Upstart faces.

“Trying to hide something under that scarf, love?” she asked, slipping out of the stacks.

Tilrey closed his book when he saw her. Tugged the scarf tighter. “Been sunning yourself outdoors again?”

Celinda ignored the dig. “Ansha said he saw you in the Lounge last night. Saldegren was drooling all over you, and Gádden was looking daggers at him. Sounds like you managed to get the little prude revved up after all.”

Tilrey reopened his book and pointedly turned a page. “Are you here to tell me anything I don’t already know?”

“No, love.”

He tensed when she used that word—just barely, but enough. Celinda sauntered over and perched herself on the edge of the carrel facing him.

Dartán had told her to seduce Tilrey. She’d been skeptical, because the boy seemed to have zero genuine interest in fucking anyone except Bror, and that was probably only for comfort. But sometimes she wondered.

She swung her leg gently, her toes grazing Tilrey’s calf, and looked into his blue eyes, so similar to her own. The youthful, guileless gaze that kept Upstarts blind and besotted.

She asked, “Why do you break your head open reading these old books? Do you actually think it’s fun?”

“Yes.” He returned his gaze stubbornly to the page.

“Why?” She teased at his trouser leg with her toe, imagining how it would feel to sit down in his lap and feel his cock harden beneath her. To kiss those full lips. To let him press her back against the shelves.

She was over sex, mostly, but there was something piquant about how much he seemed to want to show her he wasn’t interested.

Tilrey scraped his chair back, out of her reach. “It’s an escape, reading these books,” he said. “It’s like going somewhere with none of our rules. Did you know that in the Tangle, you never got tested for a Level? There were no Levels. There was just money.”

“What’s that?”

“Currency. Everywhere you went, you had to offer it in exchange for services. No one was assigned a posting. You could be whoever you wanted.”

“That sounds awfully subversive.” She mouthed the last word. “Are you sure a nice loyal boy like you is supposed to be fantasizing about freedoms like that?”

“I don’t fantasize about it. I’m just curious.” Tilrey shut the book with a clap and stood up. “There
was a lot more freedom in the Tangle, and a lot more misery. It was chaos, more or less.”

“I thought you were scared of chaos.” Celinda hopped off the carrel and followed him through the dim labyrinth of stacks toward the circulation desk. In the place she knew was a blind spot for the security cams, she snagged his tunic to hold him still.

When Tilrey wheeled to face her, glaring, she whispered, “Even if we could just get rid of the corruption and cronyism and the legacy Upstarts, that would change everything. It would be like a new morning.”

“Stop it. You’re repeating what spoiled young Strutters have told you.” The derogatory term for Upstarts. “I know you’ve been sleeping with Akeina’s nephew Fredrich.”

That part was true, but Celinda had recruited the moony-eyed young Upstart to their cause, not the other way around—not that she could tell Tilrey that. “Dismiss us all you like, but we’re a movement of Laborers. And there’ll always be more of us than of them.”

“You’ll be a movement of nothing if you open a channel to Harbour.”

“Shh!” Celinda glanced involuntarily toward the nearest cam. “You know nothing. You’ve been told nothing. You’re a nice ass and a nice mouth, but you could be more.”

As she said it, she gave him an eyeballing the way an Upstart would, head to toe. Radiant hair and eyes. Broad shoulders. Long legs. Big cock. Still young and pretty, for now.

“There’s more to you,” she repeated. “I can see that.”

Something opened in Tilrey’s face. Something softened for an instant—and then, just as quickly, his shutters slammed down again. “You’re a fool. I could tell Verán every word you’ve been saying, and I probably should.”

“You won’t.”

“They’ll crush you.”

The words made Celinda shiver, but she held his gaze without dropping the bravado. “I’m not scared. You seem to be.”

“I have a feeling you’ve never been in a cell. I have a feeling you’ve never been crushed.”

He rubbed his hands together as if to pulverize a small creature, and his pretty face twisted into something that made Celinda shudder inside, though she held herself quite still.

“You’re scared,” she said. “A strapping boy like you, scared to speak up without a Fir’s explicit permission. Scared to show anyone who he really is. Scared of his own shadow.”

She caught his flinch when she said those words. She wouldn’t forget.

...Something was wrong with Gersha.

For the past four ten-days, he hadn’t been able to focus on anything but the next free-night. His usual soothing rituals—running at the gym, sipping tea at his desk, taking the tram to an outer ring of the city to watch the sunset—felt empty.
He came home too early each night from the Sector, and when he stepped inside, he always paused at Tilrey’s door, listening.

Not that he expected the boy to come out on a work-night. After that night, the night of the storm, they’d kept their congress to their designated free-nights, the ones when Tilrey wasn’t required elsewhere.

They’d had just four nights together since the storm, but each loomed immense in Gersha’s memory. Four nights were apparently sufficient to learn to do things he’d thought were impossible for his body and mind, to discover parts of himself he’d never met before.

“You seem different,” Ranek Egil told him as they took tea together in Gersha’s living room, two days before the annual Council election. “Markedly less tense.” His eyes flitted toward the door of Tilrey’s room.

“He’s not here. He always works out on eighth-evening.” Gersha realized he was blushing; why had he assumed Ranek was talking about the boy? His friend would think he was obsessed.

But Ranek only said in his dry way, “It’s good. You could use a break” and returned to discussing the upcoming battle for the Council’s Int/Sec committee chair.

Ranek hoped to convince him to push for Albertine Linnett’s candidacy, even though Verán was sure to oppose it. Gersha tried to force himself to focus on all the reasons Ranek thought the other leading candidate was unfit—abuses of power, championing of enhanced interrogation techniques, fudging of records—but his mind kept drifting back to those four nights with Tilrey.

Who had he become during those long fall nights? He’d always seen himself as gentle, civil, reasonable, considerate. This new Gersha could be voracious, violent. On the third night, unable to wait for Tilrey to undress, he’d shoved the boy against the wall, yanked down his trousers, and sucked him hard like that—first standing, then sprawled over the edge of the bed. He’d pushed his face into the comforter and thrust ruthlessly, not even thinking about Tilrey’s comfort.

Who am I to criticize abuses of power? he thought.

Afterward, he’d apologized profusely for his roughness and offered—begged, really—to reciprocate with his hand or his mouth. Tilrey just grinned and said he appreciated the Fir’s enthusiasm but he’d rather rest.

“Resting” happened in each other’s arms. Gersha had never expected to enjoy such moments, either. When his mother hugged or cuddled him as a child, she often went to excess, squeezing him until he felt like she might smother him.

With Tilrey it was different. Sometimes in the office or the Council chamber, when Gersha’s gaze drifted to the swirling flakes outside, he learned that the body had its own memories, vivid and sightless.

His body remembered being cradled in the crook of Tilrey’s arm or pillowed against the boy’s chest, dewy with sweat. It remembered their breathing falling into synch, their chests rising in unison. It remembered sitting with Tilrey’s head on his lap and stroking the silken richness of the boy’s hair, marveling at its dark and flaxen and reddish strands, his fingers rubbing the sensitive nape.

Sometimes Gersha was the one who held Tilrey as they slept, gripping the boy’s powerful deltoids and feeling the tickle of soft hair on his chest. He’d learned that Tilrey struggled and kicked like a
restless child in his dreams.

And sometimes it was Tilrey who stroked Gersha’s hair, assuring him that his dark curls and even the black hair on his chest and groin—which had always embarrassed him, so obvious against the pale skin—were beautiful.

“You’re lovely,” Tilrey had said on their second night. “You make me want to swallow your cock, Fir. May I suck your cock?”

Just the words made Gersha groan in anticipation, but he forced himself to sit up and nudge the boy to arm’s length.

“It’s my turn to pleasure you,” he said firmly. “Anyway, I—it embarrasses me when you flatter me like that.”

“I wasn’t flattering, Fir.” Tilrey stared straight into his eyes. “You’re beautiful.”

Gersha reddened and looked away, and Tilrey went on, “I’ve noticed it bothers you when people mention your looks. Is there a reason?”

Gersha took a deep breath. “I resemble my mother. She was low-named, and my father married her for her looks, for his pleasure. His family never let him forget it. My uncle used to speak slightly of her in front of me.”

Study harder, Gersha. Let’s hope your brain comes from the Gádden side, not from that little green-eyed, sap-sucking slut.

“Did your father defend her, Fir?” Tilrey stretched out, propping himself on an elbow.

“Not really. He knew he’d made a foolish choice, and he was ashamed. My mother was . . .” The words caught in his throat. “She was sweet-drowned. Ended up in moral rehab. She died soon after I left school.”

“I’m sorry.” Tilrey was looking right at him. Long brown lashes, finely etched brows. “I’m sure she’d be proud of you being a Councillor.”

“I doubt it. She complained about my father and his ‘snobbish’ family, said she hoped I didn’t take after them.”

“So now you don’t like to be reminded of how you take after her. But maybe it’s not a bad thing, Fir. Everyone knows you’re a brilliant man.”

Do they? Gersha relaxed back into Tilrey’s arms, felt the boy’s chin rest protectively on the crown of his head. Good. This feels too good.

“Verán thinks I’m a toady,” he said. “A naïve little fool to order around. Besha thinks—”

He stopped just in time, not wanting to ruin the moment.

But Tilrey, to his surprise, laughed. “Don’t worry about Besha. He’s jealous of you.”

“Now you are trying to flatter me. Don’t—”

“I’m not,” Tilrey protested. “I shouldn’t say this, Fir, but Besha thinks you’ve led a charmed life. And why shouldn’t he? You have brains and beauty. And status. All you lack is the confidence to use them.”
And then his hand snaked around and grasped Gersha’s cock in a way that brooked no arguments. “Don’t make me wait anymore.”

For nine days afterward, until their next night, those words rang in Gersha’s head. *Brains and beauty. All you lack is the confidence.*

He told himself not to take Tilrey seriously. Whores offer compliments as easily as smiles and hand jobs. But it was so strange, so novel, to imagine himself as someone with untapped potential. Hadn’t he attained as much status as he could reasonably expect, perhaps even more? His uncle had always compared him unfavorably with his cousins, and none of them was a Councillor.

Alone in his office, or among his colleagues, Gersha felt small, dry, limited. A creature of fears and habits and restricted ambition.

But in bed with Tilrey, his desire became engulfing, boundless. And when Gersha brought Tilrey to the Lounge and handed him off to other Upstarts, his jealousy was a fire that threatened to consume everything for miles.

He hid it—he had to. They were approaching the election with three seats hotly contested, and Verán needed every tool at his disposal to gain the support of key constituencies. The Island party’s majority was still a small one.

So Tilrey went home with Saldegren, who could work both sides of the aisle; and with Erich Akeina, who represented a key cadre of young programmers; and with old István, who spoke for senior members of the admin corps.

Only Upstarts could cast Council votes, but many rank-and-file types, Verán kept telling Gersha, were just as bone-headed as Laborers. Too many still supported the Mainland party, which had driven the Republic into foolish alliances and conflicts with the petty barons of Harbour, ending decades of robust isolation. It was all Linnett’s doing, his toxic legacy. They had deposed and exiled the man, but his cosmopolitan sympathies lived on.

“A lone Oslov is a strong Oslov,” Verán would say during those endless evenings at the Lounge, patting Tilrey’s hand or stroking his thigh under the table.

And Gersha would nod dutifully, digging his nails into his palms until they bled.

Sometimes he caught Besha sneeringly eyeballing him, but he pretended not to notice. At best, a feud between the two of them would amuse Verán. At worst, it might cause real trouble.

And Gersha couldn’t tolerate that. Not now. Not when he’d just found something—someone—who made him see his gray world limned with a glow of anticipation.

“Gersha?” Ranek was peering at him. “Am I putting you to sleep? Maybe I’m getting too far into the weeds.”

“No, no.” Gersha grabbed the pot and poured them both another cup, though the tea was lukewarm. He tried to remember what his friend had been saying. “I’m very interested in the research on oblique and subliminal interrogation techniques.”

“You don’t have to be, but the point is, Karishkov isn’t.” Ranek leaned forward eagerly. “When he directed Int/Sec, he never listened to the people in the trenches, actually dealing with subversives. He—”

But at that moment the coldroom door hissed open, and Tilrey came in, home from the gym, and
Ranek’s voice might as well have been the wind battering the windows for all Gersha heard.

***

That voice.

That dry, reasonable, slightly nasal voice. Tilrey had heard it before, at a place and time that ensured he wouldn’t forget it.

He knew he should duck into his room before Gersha and the other man felt obliged to acknowledge him, but the apartment was shrinking and pulsing around him. The lights seemed to dim, and the walls were too close.

His words to Celinda echoed in his head. They’ll crush you. They’ll crush you.

And now Gersha had noticed him and was beckoning him over. Damn. Tilrey forced himself to step down into the living room, hands clasped behind his back, gaze on the floor. “I didn’t mean to disturb you, Fir.”

“You aren’t disturbing anyone,” Gersha’s voice was tense, but not too tense—his companion must be a friend. Did Gersha have friends, then?

“Tilrey, this is Ranek Egil. He works in the Sector. Ranek, Tilrey.”

The stranger actually stood up to clasp Tilrey’s hand, something no high-named Upstart would do. “Pleased to meet you,” he said.

Tilrey forced himself to focus on the man’s face and saw nothing remarkable there—high brow, sharp chin, curious dark eyes. He held his hand very still in Egil’s grasp, and it was a relief to be released.

“I’d ask you to join us,” Gersha was saying, “but the conversation is all Sector business.”

“Absolutely mind-numbing,” Egil agreed, his eyes flitting away from Tilrey.

That voice. Tilrey was sure.

Behind his back, he rubbed the hand Egil had touched as if he could remove the residue. “I’ll leave you to it, then. It was an honor to meet you, Fir Egil.”

Twelve steps back to his room. He closed the door quietly, shutting out Egil’s voice droning something about chain of command, and threw himself down on his bed in the dark. He folded his knees to his chest, making himself as small as possible, and covered his ears, though he couldn’t hear them anymore.

And he was back there, nearly three years ago, in the cell.
The Cell

Chapter Notes

Flashback! Also, please note, I've added an "imprisonment" tag.

The cell was five paces wide and three paces deep, with padding on the walls, a toilet in one corner, and a grate on the floor. When the fluorescents were on, the walls glared mercilessly white, but most of the time there was no light, not even a sliver under the door.

During his time there, Tilrey had become very acquainted with the feel of the cell under his hands, with its rare scents and sounds. He tried to count the days, but there was no way. It seemed to take him days to figure out why he was there at all.

At first, when the soldiers came for him at the gym and cuffed him and pricked his neck with a sedative, he thought he’d unwittingly committed a crime. When he woke in the cell, and no one came to read him the charges, he decided this must be Linnett’s idea. The man liked to play mind games, to goad Tilrey and watch him react, though he’d never done anything this drastic before.

“Malsha,” he whispered into the darkness of the cell, using Linnett’s preferred nickname. “I don’t know if you’re hearing this, but you can stop now, okay? Whatever point you wanted to make, you’ve made it. I’m begging you, Fir. Is that what you want?”

A day or so after Tilrey delivered this monologue (he guessed), a voice spoke from the walls of the cell. Male, dry and nearly monotone. “Stand up.”

He didn’t think before scrambling to his feet. Clearly no one was physically present with him, but just as clearly they were watching. He clasped his hands behind his back. “Fir?”

“You answer questions; you don’t ask them.” No scolding, no intonation at all. “Why do you think you’re in detention, Bronn, Tilhard Edvard?”

“I don’t know, Fir.” He tried to press down the wild hope that if he said the right thing, they’d open the door and let him out.

“You were calling on Magistrate Linnett. Why?”

Tilrey felt his face flush. “If I did something wrong, he’d be the one to report me.”

“Why do you think you did something wrong?”

It went on like that. No one ever entered the room; no one did anything to him. But the lights kept going on and off erratically, and the Voice came at irregular intervals, too. Sometimes it stayed for minutes, sometimes for hours, quizzing him in circles. Asking him all kinds of questions, mostly about Linnett.

The questions went way beyond the bounds of discretion, but after a while, Tilrey didn’t care. When he wasn’t begging to be let out, even just for an hour, he answered everything he was asked.

The Voice offered no information in return, but Tilrey drew inferences. Fairly quickly he deduced
that Linnett had *not* put him here, because Linnett was no longer in charge of things at all.

Was the (disgraced? former?) Magistrate in a cell of his own right now? Was such a thing possible?

The Voice kept asking Tilrey whether he’d seen Linnett entertain Harbourer diplomats at home (no), whether he’d heard Linnett speak about someone named Colonel Thibault (no), and whether Linnett ever talked about Harbour.

Tilrey didn’t lie. “He often spoke of Harbour, Fir. He talked about his years as a diplomat there. The trees and grass and running rivers, and flowers in the summer, and houses made of red bricks. And animals. The food—he talked for hours about the food. He said he dreamed of returning there after he retired.”

“Did he tell you *how* he planned to return to Harbour?”

The Voice was intent. This was important.

But Tilrey could offer nothing. “He only said he wanted to. He never talked about politics. He said they bored him and we had better things to do.”

This wasn’t entirely true, as Linnett had given Tilrey a thorough education in how the Council worked and the strengths and foibles of each member. But it was true he’d never spoken of international politics. Certainly he’d never mentioned that he’d made a deal with a Harbourer warlord to use Oslov’s military might on the warlord’s adversaries, then hacked into the Republic’s weapons mainframe and fired a missile on a Harbourer province without Council authorization.

That was the full story, one that Tilrey would learn only much later, because the Voice gave almost nothing away. It was adept at framing its questions.

After days (ten-days?) of this grilling, Tilrey finally remembered overhearing an interaction that had seemed innocuous at the time, but now took on a more sinister cast. “I was on my way back from the gym, and Fir Linnett didn’t hear me come in. He was talking to another Upstart—a man, younger. Something about activation codes. Q-something codes, he called them.”

The Voice became excited. “Did you see this other Upstart? Would you recognize his voice?”

But no, Tilrey hadn’t, and no, none of the many recordings they played him sounded like Linnett’s likely co-conspirator. It was a dead end.

It took several days (ten-days? months?) for the Voice to give up on using Tilrey to crack the case. During that time, Tilrey slept shallowly, knowing the Voice could return at any moment; eventually, he found an equilibrium state halfway between sleep and waking.

But, painful as it was to be surprised by the Voice, it was worse to have nothing to anticipate at all. When the interrogations finally stopped, at first he didn’t believe it. Then he couldn’t tolerate it. The silence turned to a foreboding drone, and the darkness began to congeal in his lungs, smothering him.

After who knew how many hours (days?) in the unyielding dark, trying to convince himself this wouldn’t last forever, Tilrey called out. Screamed. Pounded on the door and the walls, begging for the Voice to return, or the guards, or anyone at all.

Food and water still arrived occasionally through a slot in the door, but he saw and heard no sign of human beings. The cell offered no effective means of hurting himself. He considered smearing shit
on the walls, but the stink would only make the cell less bearable, and he no longer believed anyone would come and clean it up.

They might all be dead out there now, that most recent food delivery his last. He might be alone.

When his voice was raw, he sat very still in a corner and counted seconds, minutes, hours. He might have lost his place a few times, but he thought he’d reached thirty-nine hours, forty-three minutes, and ten seconds when the cell door opened.

He shrank back in his corner, the light in the doorway searing his eyes. Men entered—the same guards who’d taken him out for an occasional shower and shave when he first arrived. They cuffed his hands behind his back, fastened the cuffs to a tether, and vanished again.

The brief contact with human beings was as calming as a sedative; suddenly he could sleep. Minutes or hours later, Tilrey woke from a light doze to find someone else in the room.

“How are you feeling?”

It was still pitch-black, but either he was really crazy now or the Voice was here. Meters away. It sounded oddly relaxed, almost satisfied.

Tilrey sprang upright, though the tether kept him from standing. “Fir,” he said hoarsely, well trained not to ask questions. “I’m thirsty.”

“Would you like some water? Maybe a protein bar?”

“I . . . yes. Please. Fir.” He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been fed, or maybe he’d just stopped noticing.

A real human being was close to him, warm and breathing. A bottle was pressed to his lips. He drank, and then the Voice said, “Right here, take a bite,” and there was a protein bar.

Tilrey took a bite and then another. A real, invisible hand held the food out, patient, till he was done. He didn’t wonder how the Voice could see him when he couldn’t see anything; later, he would surmise the man was wearing a night-vision visor.

“You haven’t been eating, Tilrey,” the Voice said with gentle reproach. “Verán won’t be happy if you come to him skin and bones.”

“Verán?” He stopped short, nearly choking on the bite, because that was a question and no questions.

But the Voice no longer seemed to mind. During the interrogation, it had been terrifyingly blank, but now it sounded almost happy to explain things to him.

“Councillor Verán,” it said. “You’ll be going home with him tomorrow; you’re property of the Island now. ‘To the victor belong the spoils,’ as they like to say.”

If someone had made this announcement in his life before the cell, Tilrey would have had questions. He might even have objected, as respectfully as possible, that he didn’t want to be anyone’s property and never had, that Linnett had kept him under duress—whatever the polite euphemism for that was—and that he’d much rather return to his native Thurskein and never see an Upstart again.

Now he only said wonderingly, “I’m going home.”
“Eat,” said the Voice. It—no, he, because this was a flesh and blood man—held out another protein bar.

“I’m not officially here,” the Voice added while Tilrey was chewing. “My sessions with you are over; my report’s been filed. Nothing’s being recorded now; everything you say stays between you and me.”

Tilrey tried to process this, but he still hadn’t got past I’m going home. Wasn’t capable of caring whose home it was. “Thank you, Fir.”

“I wanted to have a chat with you,” the Voice went on, “because, statistically, you’re rather special. By the fifteenth day of an interrogation in solitary, the majority of subjects are rather more . . . well, let’s just say they don’t hold together as well as you have.”

Fifteen days. It had been fifteen days since the Voice arrived. Tilrey wanted to kiss the number, to press it close to his heart. He’d be able to forget fifteen days out of his life, to put them behind him.

“Thank you, Fir,” he said again. And then, remembering his fits of begging and pounding on the walls, “But I haven’t held together.”

The Voice laughed, almost fondly. “In eighty-five percent darkness, with no regular routine, most detainees reach that point six days before you did. You have more stamina than I’d have expected, particularly for a kettle boy. In fact, that’s why I drew things out as long as I did. First because your stoicism made me suspicious, and then out of curiosity, to see when you’d break.”

Tilrey’s mouth went dry. But he understood. Malsha—Linnett—had also liked to speak of “breaking” him.

“Did you enjoy the show then, Fir?” he asked, feeling his old self creep back.

The Voice ignored the insolence. “I noticed you have a serious offense on your record,” it said. “Or rather, you did. Linnett had it expunged when he took you as his kettle boy, but nothing in our database ever really disappears. When you lived in Thurskein, you attended a shirker meeting. At the request of a now-executed Dissident operative, you translated a letter from the Harbourer.”

Tilrey went cold again. He pressed himself close to the wall. “That happened when I was seventeen, Fir, and it was only one meeting. I never went again. I was showing off, trying—”

“To impress a girl. Yes, I made a few inquiries. Believe me, if I thought you were an actual Dissident, you wouldn’t be leaving this cell tomorrow.” The Voice sounded smug, as if it knew exactly how much it was frightening him. “And I knew our friend Malsha, traitor or not, was far too smart to keep a subversive in his bed.”

“I’m not a subversive, Fir. I believe in the Republic. I believe in Levels and meritocracy. I don’t have thoughts above my station. I—”

“Yes, yes, I know.” The Voice was bored. “I’m not interested in your teenage indiscretions. I’m only wondering how you came by your high threshold for . . . discomfort.”

Tilrey swallowed. “Is this part of the interrogation?”

“I’ve already told you the interrogation is over. For the purposes of research, though, I do have questions. Have you had experiences like this in the past? Are there any particular methods you used to mitigate the effects of your confinement?”
It took Tilrey a moment to comprehend what he was being asked. “I was in a cell for a day or so in Thurskein, after they arrested me for that offense you mentioned. But it wasn’t like this.” And I’ve been confined plenty since then, locked in my room for convenience or punishment, but I don’t care to discuss that. “As for ‘mitigation’—well, I counted.”

The Voice asked him to explain about the counting, and Tilrey did, glad he’d managed to distract the man from prying into his past. Maybe, if he could keep him talking a little longer, the darkness wouldn’t feel so bad afterward.

The Voice asked him a dozen or so questions about his physical and mental reactions during the fifteen days; maybe he was taking notes, though Tilrey couldn’t see the glow of a handheld.

Finally the Voice said briskly, “This has been very informative, Tilrey Bronn. Thank you for cooperating. If you ever leave your present service, you might consider coming to Int/Sec for reposting. With your skills and your stamina, you could be well suited to working as an asset in the field.”

It was clearly meant as a compliment, but the idea of becoming a spy didn’t appeal, especially since Tilrey could guess what the Voice meant by “your skills.” “Thank you, Fir,” he said.

A hand materialized from the darkness and rested on his shoulder.

Tilrey shrank back, then froze. Of course. Why else is he here? He wants what they all do.

“You misunderstand me.” The hand clapped him lightly, in an almost friendly way, then went away. He heard someone rising. “That’s not what I came here for, and those cuffs must be starting to cramp you. I’ll send the guards along to remove them. Goodbye now.”

Footsteps. Impossibly far from Tilrey, a rectangle of light appeared.

The owner of the Voice stepped into it—just for an instant, visible as a featureless body against the glare—and was gone. The door closed, and darkness took possession of him again.

***

Tilrey sat up in the dark in Gersha Gádden’s apartment and stretched. In a moment, he’d switch on the light and go on with his life.

He hoped Gersha hadn’t noticed his reaction to the Voice. And the Voice—had the Voice told Gersha?

Not a voice now, a man.

Egil, that was his name. He was just a piddling little sub-admin, it turned out, a junior interrogator—his ration-level, evident from his clothing, was not high. He probably hadn’t advanced in the three years since he’d been assigned to question Tilrey. After all, he’d failed to learn who Linnett’s accomplice was.

Gersha should have friends who were on his own Level. Maybe Tilrey could find a discreet way to tell him so.

Staring into his dark room, he tried to reassure himself. Records of the interrogation were probably classified, nothing Egil could speak of even to a Councillor. Anyway, what did it matter if Gersha
knew? Tilrey had been cleared of any connection to Linnett’s treason. He hadn’t embarrassed himself. He’d “held together.”

Still, he didn’t want Gersha to know about the cell and the darkness and the counting. He didn’t want Gersha to know he’d said thank you, over and over, to a man who’d tortured him.

And something worse. In the days after Tilrey “went home” with Councillor Verán, the early bad days, he sometimes wished he were back in the dark cell, shackled to the wall and chatting with the Voice and eating a protein bar from an invisible hand.

The Voice had spoken to him almost like an equal. Used his name.
Election Night

Chapter Notes

This is the chapter with on-page gang rape, so please be forewarned. It's a dark one, but things will get better shortly (and then worse again, and then a lot better, because we are headed for a happy ending, or as happy as it's ever going to get in this world).

Election Day was a long one; Upstarts had a full twelve hours to vote. No one in the Sector was doing much work. Admins and Councillors clustered in the marble hallways, gesturing intensely at readouts of the preliminary results on their handhelds.

Gersha took refuge in his office, but the gossip and murmurs outside made it difficult to focus on his coding. He chose a Tangle-era book from his extensive library and opened it at random, hoping to find a few new idioms his research assistants had missed.

It was a seductively strange world, the Tangle. Such disorder and uncertainty. This book was a pre-industrial one about a handsome young peasant who improved his status in a monarchical society by sleeping with various noblewomen and memorizing an entire book considered sacred by his culture.

Skimming, Gersha found himself imagining the young peasant with Tilrey’s face. But then—oh. The hero committed a foolish crime of passion and had his head cut off.

That was why, he supposed, Whyberg and the Founding Council had decided that Laborers shouldn’t vote for their Council representatives. Hot heads. Too many passions.

Passions like the one that devoured him now. Perhaps his uncle was right—for all his studiously cultivated coding skills, Gersha resembled his mother. A weak-willed little social climber, not a true person of intellect and merit. His coldness, his prudishness, his celibacy might all be masks, ones he’d used to fool even himself.

But . . . when she wasn’t drowning herself in sap, his mother loved him. Gersha had memories of her bending over him, crooning songs from feudal sagas; when he was older, she told him the accompanying blood-soaked stories, and he listened in fascination. Her touch could be clinging and unwelcome when she was sapped, but for his first ten years, her smile was the most beautiful thing he knew.

A cry went up in the hallway, whoops of joy echoing off the cold gray marble. Gersha closed his book. Outside, snow continued to batter the dark city with brutal indifference.

A message appeared on his handheld: We’ve done it. All three seats! Time to fête our new colleagues. Get the boy dressed and bring him to my quarters in an hour.

Gersha’s heart sank, and he covered his ears to shut out the sounds of the Island’s triumph.

***

At home, Tilrey was waiting for him, wearing a midnight-blue tunic with yellow piping. Gersha had never seen this outfit before, and the yellow was so almost subversively bright that he found
himself nudging Tilrey against the wall so he could run his hands over the fabric and feel how tightly it cleaved to the boy’s narrow waist.

“Did you have a nip of sap in the Sector, Fir?” Tilrey asked, playfully tolerating this.

“No.” Though everybody else had been partaking. “You know where we’re going, right? Bosh told you? I wish we could just stay here.”

“So do I, Fir.” Tilrey caught Gersha’s hand, raised it to his lips. “Have you ever been to a post-election party?”

“No.” The last election was the one where he’d been seated. Verán had invited him over to celebrate, but Gersha had begged off and stayed home, nursing a cold and already regretting running in the first place.

“It can get a little decadent, Fir.”

“Decadent.” It was the word Whyberg used for the chaotic cultures of the Tangle, and for the feudal chieftains after that. Gersha looked for signs of joking in Tilrey’s eyes, found none. “What does that mean?”

“Just . . . wild. You may see things you don’t like.”

“I’ll brace myself, then,” Gersha said, trying his best to make it into a joke.

“As shall I, Fir.” Tilrey pressed his hand, palm to palm. “Just remember, whatever happens won’t mean anything the next day.”

“I don’t understand.” The boy’s touch intoxicated Gersha, as always, but now a chill moved through him, chasing out the drunken sensation. “What might happen?”

Tilrey’s hand cupped Gersha’s cheek. Gersha closed his eyes, back in that rapturous space of being alone together, as the boy’s lips met his.

“The kinds of things you’d expect, Fir, when your colleagues indulge. Just, please, promise me you won’t make a scene.”

Anger flushed Gersha’s cheeks, and he nearly pulled away. Then teeth closed on his bottom lip, nipping gently.

“For both our sakes,” Tilrey whispered into his mouth, “do control yourself, Fir. I adore you when you’re righteously angry, but there are right and wrong times for it.”

\textit{Of course I can control myself. What does he mean, he adores me when I’m angry? Is he patronizing me?}

But the kiss was deepening, and when Tilrey pulled back to tuck a curl behind Gersha’s ear, Gersha murmured, “I promise.”

***

For most of the year, Councillors of the Republic weren’t particularly known for their wild parties, but things could get indecorous in the wake of a victorious election.

From his position on the couch, lolling more or less on Verán’s lap with his bare feet resting between Besha’s thighs, Tilrey had a good view. About fourteen Islanders had jammed themselves
into Verán’s apartment, including the three newly elected Councillors.

Most of the remaining guests were men, several women having taken their leave early. Some clustered around Verán’s couch, eager to win his favor. Others formed smaller groups, talking and laughing with a raucous boisterousness never heard in the Lounge.

Someone had brought a few bottles of black market liquor, the kind of rotgut soldiers and drivers drank. You weren’t supposed to mix it with sap, so everyone did. The women who remained were drinking hard; one of them stared at Tilrey across the room with an expression of voyeuristic pity, fascination, or both. He stared back until she dropped her eyes.

And Gersha? He’d vanished nearly an hour ago, into Verán’s study or bathroom, clearly taking refuge from the scene in here. His disappearance had roughly coincided with Tilrey’s licking a half-vial of sap from Verán’s palm.

The hefty dose had numbed Tilrey, was still numbing him, and he told himself he didn’t care. Didn’t care that Verán’s hand was burrowing under his tunic, or that Besha was possessively massaging his foot and ankle. Didn’t care that Gersha was off sulking somewhere. Trust Besha to remind him of the latter, though.

“Gersha’s deserted us,” the little Councillor said, slurring. “He’s mad with jealousy. Did you see him, Visha?”

Verán snickered absently. “I’m starting to think you’re projecting, Besha. It’d be fun to get a rise out of him, but Gersha’s cold as a cod, always has been.” He pinched Tilrey’s waist beneath the tunic, the other hand sneaking between his thighs. “Or is Gádden in love with you, child?”

“He’s a strong word, Fir,” Tilrey said. The word Verán had used, ináthera, also meant breathlessness.

He glanced across the room to where Bror lounged on a couch beside his own aged patron. His friend’s presence was reassuring; as much as they could, they’d look out for each other.

Verán gave Tilrey’s balls a brisk squeeze through his trousers, clearly beyond the point of caring who noticed. “Don’t correct my vocabulary. Is Gádden infatuated with you, then?”

“I don’t know, Fir.”

“How can you not know?” Verán tightened his grip, making Tilrey tense against the pain. “You’ve spent, what, five, six nights with him?”

“Gersha doesn’t appreciate what he has,” said Besha. “What I’d do for five nights with Nettsha.”

“All you’d have to do to have him tonight is win a seat away from the Mainland.” Verán withdrew his hand and smacked Tilrey’s thigh. “Up. Time for the next stage of this foolishness.”

The next stage, unsurprisingly, took place in the bedroom.

Tilrey let his mind go blank, the way he always did when things started to veer out of his control. (Control yourself, he’d told Gersha. Easier said than done.)

He sat on Verán’s bed and pulled his feet up without being told, hearing the murmurs and rustles of the other guests as they followed in Verán’s wake. He kept his gaze on the blinding bleached whiteness of the duvet so he wouldn’t have to count them or meet their eyes. Didn’t look up when
Bror settled beside him.

Bror’s hand poked itself into his peripheral vision, a dark pool of sap in the palm. His breath was warm on Tilrey’s hair as he bent to whisper, “They want us together. This is for you.”

It was too much sap, over his usual limit, but Tilrey drank it all, grateful for an extension of the numbness. “You take me,” he said. “Easier.”

Someone had pulled an armchair to the head of the bed, and Verán settled himself there with the aid of his cane and Besha’s arm. “Whom do we want to see on top?” he barked, silencing the group.

The clustered Councillors offered no opinion. Tilrey could feel them becoming a touch abashed, but also intensely watchful.

Besha, leaning on the back of Verán’s chair, said, “Nettsha should take Bror. That’d be different.”

“Opinions pro and con?” Verán asked with gravity, as if he were on the Council floor.

“Con: Nettsha’s good at being on the bottom,” objected a younger voice, perhaps Akeina.

“Pro: he’s got a big cock,” said someone else.

Bror cleared his throat, slipping his arm around Tilrey. “With all due respect, Fira, we’d be happy to perform for you either way, but Nettsha is, I think, tired—”

“Meaning he’s sapped to his eyeballs,” a woman said derisively.

A man chuckled. “What a hard life, lounging around all day at the Republic’s expense.”

“Enough! We don’t want to argue all night.” Verán jabbed an imperious finger at Bror. “Fine, lad. Put him on his back and make it slow. Do it like a lover.”

“With pleasure, Fir.” Bror raised Tilrey’s chin and kissed him, long and wet, then tugged him tenderly into a supine position.

Tilrey tensed at first. He hated how fulsome and flattering Bror got around Upstarts. Submitting was one thing; pretending to like it was another.

But his mouth opened reflexively to Bror’s tongue, and when Bror got tired of that and transferred his attentions to Tilrey’s neck, and then to a nipple, the steady suckling relaxed him. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine they were alone in their usual room in the unoccupied apartment, amusing themselves on a long gray afternoon.

It was just sex, something they were both good at. Warm skin on warm skin, comfort and camaraderie with no expectations.

Bror unclasped the neck of Tilrey’s tunic and pulled off the tight garment, stage-whispering, “Ah, you’re so beautiful.”

Hands reached under his shirt and peeled it up; a warm tongue lapped at his other nipple. Tilrey arched his back—trained reflex, or genuine reaction? He had no idea anymore.

Someone gasped, and he remembered the crowd around the bed—breathing, watching.

*It’ll be over soon. Let it happen.*
Bror was easing off Tilrey’s shirt and trousers, his thigh rubbing knowingly against Tilrey’s cock, and of course Tilrey was hard, but he was outside his body, feeling the belly fire of arousal from a distance. “Ready?” Bror whispered and rolled him back and spread him out, and the humiliation left him numb again, deep inside himself, trying to focus on his breathing.

When Bror crooked a finger inside him, slyly stimulating his prostate, he sucked in his breath and reared up before the numbness rushed in again. Let them see what they want to see.

“I told you he was capable of enthusiasm,” Besha said, close to his head.

Verán snorted gently. “Well, of course. Bror could make the dead stand at attention.”

He didn’t feel at attention. He was floating somewhere between the bed and the perfectly white draperies, like a man fallen and hallucinating in the snow. Drowning.

_Someday I’ll jump from that parapet or another parapet, and no one will be able to stop me._

“Open your eyes, Nettsha,” Verán said sharply. “And keep them that way.”

Tilrey obeyed before he had time to think. His bleary gaze took in the peering audience of Councillors, white robes and mostly white faces, before fixing on the only face that mattered.

Gersha. He stood behind the others, halfway out of the room, but it was clear he could see what was happening on the bed. His face was livid, his eyes wide and glistening in the way Tilrey usually liked to see, but these weren’t tears of bliss.

Tilrey looked away again. Though he remained pliant in Bror’s arms, something within him went dead still.

Gersha had promised. He would control himself, just as Tilrey was, and let this happen. But would it really mean nothing tomorrow?

He kept his gaze trained upward and stared at the canopy while Bror fucked him—gasping theatrically and hissing obscene compliments for the watchers’ benefit, while Tilrey made no noise at all.

He counted. Bror was clearly holding back a little, varying his rhythm, trying to give the Councillors a good show. Perhaps he hoped that would make things easier for his friend afterward. It took him seven minutes and forty-nine seconds to spatter Tilrey’s stomach and chest with come and collapse heavily, burying his face in Tilrey’s neck.

Only after Bror had whispered, “You doing okay?” and gotten up again, and the Councillors had begun to get bored and wander back into the other room—only then did Tilrey allow himself to glance where Gersha had been.

His young Councillor was gone.

***

The late-night tram was oddly peaceful, an oasis of glaring fluorescents wending its way between the snow-encrusted behemoths. Gersha remembered how much he used to enjoy taking the near-empty tram home late at night from the Sector, before he had a car and driver. How anonymous he used to feel under his heavy coat.

He didn’t enjoy this ride. He’d removed his robe of office and sat with his feet up on the seat, his
face hidden behind his knees, grateful that no one—not even Bosh—would see the look on his face.

He’d left Bosh and the car behind at Verán’s, with calm instructions to wait and bring Tilrey home when he was done performing his function at the party. Bland, formal phrases to hide the inflammation that burned in him: the shock, the misery, the shame.

That was it: shame. It was one thing to hand Tilrey off at the Lounge and know he was going to another man’s bed. It was another thing to watch it happen.

Not with an Upstart, at least. But he would never forget the sight of Tilrey giving himself so easily, so seemingly willingly, to that kettle boy with the thick neck and the stupid, amiable expression. Gersha wasn’t even sure of the other boy’s name—Bror something?

Sleeping in each other’s arms, he and Tilrey had been so close that sometimes Gersha wasn’t sure where one of them ended and the other began. Whose freckle was that? Whose scar? Whose breath? Now, in the tram, he felt Bror’s hands on him, Bror’s tongue in his mouth. Bror was all over him, inside him, while the entire party watched.

And Besha—Gersha closed his eyes, trying to obliterate the memory of Besha’s furrowed brow and his hungry eyes, watching the whole thing.

He already knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep tonight in the bed he and Tilrey had shared. Everything would assault him with unwelcome memories—the pillows, the duvet, the book on the bedside table. The room’s very outlines would be crisp and hostile in the new light of his solitude.

Because he could never have Tilrey again.

Not if the penalty for their love-making was this bone-deep ache, this disgust with everything that met his eye. Not if the memories of their time together had to be polluted by Verán’s sarcasm and Besha’s lust and the glassy-eyed fascination of the other Councillors. No—if Gersha so much as touched the boy now, all their faces would swim before his mental vision, mocking him.

Little green-eyed whore. You look just like her.

Was he being fastidious? Cruel? Maybe a little, but then, it wasn’t like the boy would really care if he stopped going to Gersha’s bed. Such things didn’t affect him the way they apparently did Gersha.

Verán was right to call Gersha “infatuated,” and maybe even that other, much worse term, in love. He had no boundaries, no restraint.

Gersha rose and got off at his stop, proud of how dry his eyes had remained. He was old enough to know a whore can’t be a lover, and that celibacy is not a commitment one tosses lightly aside.

But then, as the cold buffeted him, he heard Tilrey’s voice say, “Whatever happens won’t mean anything the next day.” And he strode to the parapet and gazed down at the city and wept, his tears freezing before they fell.

They melted when the cold drove him back into the apartment. The thought of his bedroom was still unbearable.

He paused before Tilrey’s door, then eased it open—stealthily, as if he expected to be caught. As if he didn’t have a perfect right to enter any room in his own home.
The bed in its alcove was neatly made, the closet shut, nothing on the bedside table. It was hard to believe anyone lived here. Gersha fell to his knees and pressed his face against the spread, the pillow—and yes, there was the faint musk he knew so well from his own bedclothes.

He meant to leave, but something took hold of him, and he groaned and sprawled out full length, clutching the pillow to his chest.

He lay there, breathing the scent in, until his eyes closed.

***

The first man was middle-aged, with a puffy face and sparse, carrot-colored hair. He had won the drawing of lots, but he looked more weary and duty-bound than happy as he plunked himself on the bed.

“Congratulations on your election, Fir,” Tilrey said, after the Councillor-elect had stared at him for what felt like a full minute, either shy or loath to make a move.

Well, perhaps it wasn’t a sufficiently appetizing prospect. Tilrey had been allowed to wash Bror’s spunk off his chest, but not to dress, and he was far too aware of his bee-stung lips and the love bites purpling his neck. He twitched the duvet down, exposing the rest of his body, and was relieved when the Upstart took the bait and crawled forward to roll him over.

Best to get it over with fast.

“I’m not hurting you, am I?” the man asked somewhat later, moving monotonously on top of Tilrey.

Tilrey shook his head and resumed biting his knuckle to blunt the sensation. “A little raw, Fir,” he added after a moment, thinking the man might want to hurt him. The problem with first-timers was that you never knew.

The Councillor-elect thrust a little more gently after that. Two minutes and eighteen seconds later, he came, shuddering hard and crying a name Tilrey couldn’t make out.

The second man must have been waiting behind the door. Youngish for a Councillor, he had a long, dour face.

“I don’t think I want to be inside you,” he said, once the first man was gone and they were alone. “No offense, but my immune system is sensitive.”

“I’m tested for everything twice a month, Fir.” In another life, Tilrey might have been offended by the disgust twisting the Upstart’s face. Now he only cared that the man’s squeamishness could cause trouble. Verán wanted him to oblige all three of the new Councillors and might know if he didn’t do it properly. Men talked about these things.

“But you just—well, you and that other piece . . .” The man gestured helplessly at the spot where Bror and Tilrey had been. “And then my colleague. I don’t relish the thought of going third, that’s all.”

_Believe me, I relish the thought of you doing it even less._ But he didn’t roll his eyes. “Maybe there’s something else you’d like?”

“Maybe,” the Councillor-elect allowed.
Tilrey crept to him on his knees, the way he had that first night with Gersha, and unbuttoned the man’s trousers. The sensitive Upstart turned out to be highly amenable to the ministrations of his mouth.

“You won’t belong to our Island until you’ve sampled its exclusive fruits,” Verán had proclaimed grandly to the Councillors-elect an hour earlier, after Bror had gone to clean himself up. To make sure everyone understood the metaphor, he’d leaned over the bed and patted Tilrey’s ass. “Still gloriously fresh and ripe, believe me.”

Tilrey didn’t feel particularly fresh, but now he distracted himself thinking about fruits, where they grew in Harbour, and how they might look before they were dried and shipped thousands of miles north for Oslov consumption.

Linnett had given him a fresh apple once, something he’d never eaten before or since. *In Harbour, you can pluck an apple off a tree and take a bite, the Magistrate had said. You can bathe in rivers and lakes, if you find one that’s sewage free. You would not believe the sensation of cool running water on your skin, Rishka—it feels alive.*

Sometimes he cursed Linnett for teaching him so much about a world he’d never see. Was Linnett living out his exile happily in some Harbouerer fiefdom right now, strolling in the grass and eating apples and peaches off trees?

The second man came with an animal grunt, a warm gush in Tilrey’s throat, and lay back on the pillows looking unpleased with himself. On the way out of the room, he tried to give Tilrey a vial of sap, but Tilrey shook his head.

“You’re Verán’s guest, Fir.” *And I’m not a cheap brothel whore.*

The third man didn’t say a thing, just lunged. That was something of a relief, because Tilrey’s throat was raw. He let the loose-bellied, white-haired Councillor-elect push his legs over his head and braced himself, knowing this one wouldn’t tenderly prep him as Bror had.

(This was nothing, he reminded himself, closing his eyes and clenching a fist. He’d had worse nights.)

The man panted and grunted, his incoherent vocalizations occasionally solidifying into a “slut” or “whore,” and took an eternity to finish. Then he collapsed on top of Tilrey and began to snore.

Tilrey tried to sleep as well, but everything itched or was sore, and the man’s head was weighing hard on his collarbone. And now he couldn’t repress stray thoughts of Gersha.

The look on the young Councillor’s fine-boned face as he’d stood there. The horror.

Tilrey was relieved when the door clicked open, and Verán called, “Finleifer! I’m hoping you’re done in there. I’m an old man, and I’m particular about sleeping in my own bed.”

With a series of grunts, the third Councillor-elect hauled himself upright and went in search of his clothes. Tilrey lay still until he was gone, then stretched each martyred limb and tugged the duvet up to cover himself.

He hadn’t rested long when Verán yanked it back down again.

“Well, then, lad.” The majority leader traced new, fingertip-sized bruises on Tilrey’s shoulder. “How do you like our new blood?”
Tilrey rolled obediently toward the old man, knowing he wasn’t required to answer. The sap Bror had given him was wearing off, and he ached like hell, but he could endure one more, and probably more than that. *Strapping boy.* “Maybe I could shower first, Fir?”

Verán made a repulsed sound. “I don’t want your ass tonight, thanks. Lie back and give me your mouth.”

Letting Verán’s cock choke him wasn’t pleasant, but it was comparatively easy. Tilrey closed his eyes, focused on breathing with the man’s scrotum dangling in his face, and let his thoughts drift to Gersha.

He’d been doing that a lot recently. He didn’t imagine the sex, just gazing down on the man’s sleeping form.

The golden freckles, the unruly curls, the delicate incipient crow’s-feet. The knob of the shoulder, the slim hips; the coarse, dark chest hair.

*My little Strutter,* he thought, imagining tracing the graceful line of the Councillor’s hip with a finger. What would it be like to fuck this man? *My passionate prude. I know how to make you squirm and cry for mercy.*

Tilrey kept Gersha in his mind as he swallowed down Verán’s load, trying not to wince at the dry itch in his abused throat. He thought of Gersha as he curled into himself and turned his back on the majority leader, not giving two fucks whether he was being disrespectful. He thought of Gersha as he slipped toward sleep.

His last thought woke him with a jerk.

*Of course it’ll mean something tomorrow. He’ll never want me again.*
Rereading this, I think Bror might be the MVP of this story, just in terms of being the best at actually being a human being.

Gersha woke with a jerk and realized, with horror, that he was still in Tilrey’s bed. He hadn’t even closed the door or turned out the lights. What time was it?

He scrambled to his feet and began frantically putting the bed to rights. It wasn’t as neat as he’d found it, but that couldn’t be helped.

To his relief, it was only dawn. A glance at the outdoor cam showed him the car hadn’t returned. Safe in his own room, he undressed, showered, and re-dressed, cinching the belt and collar of his tunic as tightly as he could. His eyes burned from last night’s foolish tears.

Yes, you are a fool!

Bosh and Tilrey still hadn’t returned. Rather than risk meeting them on his way out, he retired to his study and fiddled with a fix for a bug in his database.

At last he heard the distant hisp of the wind-seal. He crept into the corridor, staying out of sight, until Tilrey’s door had opened and closed.

Entering the coldroom, he ran into Bosh, who was taking his breakfast out to his quarters in the garage. The driver looked bleary with fatigue and liquor—someone at the party must have been generous with the bottles.

“Morning, Fir. You want the car?”

“No, eat your breakfast—I’ll take the tram.” Gersha inclined his head toward Tilrey’s door before he could stop himself. “You were gone all night. Is he—?”

“Sleeping, Fir. Long night. Needn’t worry yourself.”

Something flashed in the driver’s usually impervious eyes—was it sympathy, or contempt, or even reproach?

Gersha felt his jaw tighten. “I’m off to the Sector, then,” he said.

***

Toward noon, two voices rumbled outside Tilrey’s door, debating whether he was asleep. “Come in, Bror,” he called, recognizing the newcomer.

Bror tiptoed in, or as close to tiptoeing as someone his size could manage. Tilrey didn’t sit up or turn his eyes from the wall. A fresh dose of sap had renewed the numbness, lozenges had soothed his throat, and a steaming shower had sluiced away all tangible traces of the Councillors-elect, but he still didn’t particularly feel like showing anyone his face. Bror would understand.
“You should be asleep,” his friend scolded gently.

“I got a couple hours.” A lie.

Somehow it was always worse after than during. Last night he’d had perfect control of every physical response, but some time this morning the armor of affected indifference had slipped away, leaving him in a body that shivered and flinched and kept warning danger.

Stupid fucking body.

His nostrils twitched at the fragrant steam from the teapot Bror had brought. “Did Bosh brew that?”

“Yes.” Bror settled beside him on the bed. “He wanted to bring it in himself, too. Said I’d disturb you. What’d you do to make him so protective—suck him off?”

The rough joshing was Bror’s way of trying to jog him out of his funk; Tilrey was grateful. “In the poor bastard’s dreams. No, I think he’s just worried about what Gersha might think. Pour me a cup.”

He sat up by inches, cautious with his aching muscles, and sipped from the tumbler his friend offered. Bror was so close, though. Bror’s breath on his face, liquor-scented. Bror’s fingers inside him. The little groans Bror made right before he came. The circle of Councillors, some barely breathing while others pleased themselves shamelessly.

Tilrey pushed the sense-memories away; closed his eyes and tried to clear his mind. “I needed this. Thanks.” And I need you.

Bror tugged a pillow into place behind Tilrey’s head, his bluff good cheer fading. “Green fields of hell, Rishka. I wish I’d found a way to beg out of it. I could’ve said I couldn’t get it up.”

“Better you than somebody else.”

“But still . . . shit. I hate performing like that. I hate how you hate it.”

So do I. No. No. Make this into a funny story to tell at the Café. “If you hadn’t, they might have enlisted Bosh,” Tilrey pointed out.

Bror laughed weakly. “That would’ve made his year.”

“I don’t think he likes me. He’s cold as fish eggs.”

“And probably as soft.”

This led them into ribald speculations on Bosh’s proclivities and cock size, and Tilrey was abjectly grateful when Bror bellowed with laughter, far more than his attempts at wit deserved.

“You’re trembling, love.” Brow furrowing again, Bror reached out to stabilize Tilrey’s tipping cup.

Get away from me. Bror was stifling him with his bulk, the smell of his sweat, the stink of his come. The body Tilrey had regained last night, the stupid victim body he couldn’t control, cringed back into the alcove.

They won’t ruin Bror for me. “I’m fine. Just don’t—”

“Sorry. Wasn’t thinking.” Bror retreated to the other end of the bed. “I’ll just sit here, ’kay? Or is
“No. You’re fine. Sorry.” Unable to meet his friend’s gaze, Tilrey lay back and stared at the faintly reflective surface of the polymer wall. White, white, white—why was everything in his world white? The color of new snow was soothing and inspiring, according to Whyberg. Pure. Clean.

Each time he’d slipped toward sleep this morning, there they were. The white-haired one saying Slut. The slightly rancid taste of the fastidious one’s come. The redhead’s hand shoving his head into the pillow.

Being passed hand to hand like a vial of sap was nothing new, not really, but he’d never reconciled himself to it. Not since the first time it had happened, a punishment he knew he’d earned, and Linnett had looked at him solemnly and said, What a shame it is to have to do that to you. Think about something else. “I’ve lost all the ground I gained,” he mumbled.

“What’s that?”

“With Gersha. I was really getting somewhere until last night.”

“Had him in the palm of your hand, huh? I’m not surprised.” Bror had moved closer again. His hand raised itself in Tilrey’s peripheral vision, then went still.

“It’s okay. Go on. Anyway, he was there when we were . . . he got an eyeful. Really not his scene.”

The big hand came down and rested lightly on Tilrey’s right shoulder blade, unmoving. “The Fir knows it’s not your fault.”

“I’m not sure he cares.”

“Fuck him, then. It’s not like you need anything from him—he’s just Verán’s errand boy.”

“He’s . . . not like the others, though.” He didn’t know how to explain his complicated feelings about Gersha to himself, let alone to Bror.

Bror snorted. “What’s different? He takes ass when it’s offered, just like all of them.”

Maybe Bror was right. Maybe Gersha had woven an illusion of his own mental and moral superiority and drawn Tilrey into its web. Still . . . “He could be so much more of a force in the Council than he is. His name, his looks, his talent—he lets it all go to waste because he hates politics and flattery and the rest of it.”

Another snort. “I don’t blame him for that. You’re good at all that shit, though, Rishka. You should give him a tutoring session.”

He’s right, Linnett said quietly in Tilrey’s head. You don’t hate politics. You know exactly what Gersha refuses to learn. You could teach him.

He shook his head, as much at the inner voice as at Bror. “He’s got delicate sensibilities. After last night, he may not ever look me in the eye again.”

“Seriously?” Bror’s hand began moving in small circles, massaging his rhomboid. “Does he not get how being a kettle boy works?”

“Oh, he gets it. That doesn’t mean he accepts it.”
Tilrey felt a frustrated huff of breath on his nape. “Fuck him and his delicate sensibilities, then. If the little green-eyed prick ever hurts you in any way, shape, or form, I’ll start a rumor that he prefers girls.”

Tilrey smiled at the absurdity. “I don’t think that’s Gersha’s problem.”

He’d just successfully appreciated an irony. His control was creeping back. Soon—not today, but maybe tomorrow or the day after—he would stop feeling phantom hands on him, and this election night would lose itself among the other memories he kept locked up securely in his mind. Whatever happened with Gersha, they would not own him, after all.

“Shut up and give me a real massage, Brorsha,” he said, arching into the touch. “My back’s killing me.”

The Sector was nearly empty on this post-election afternoon, but Gersha couldn’t focus. His throat ached and his lids drooped, yet laying his head on the desk brought only tormenting thoughts. He saw his secret life ripped wide open, spread out on Verán’s bed for all to see. Glassy eyes. Slack mouth. Parted thighs.

He tried to read his Tangle book, but each sentence summoned the wrong kind of memory. A road? Bosh and Tilrey in the car. A woman’s bared neck? Bror sucking on Tilrey’s skin, leaving purple marblings. A king’s imperious command? Verán’s curled lip as he watched.

He was relieved when Ranek Egil stepped in, bringing news and gossip from the lower echelons of Int/Sec. After a lengthy surveillance operation, a young Upstart Dissenter—Councillor Akeina’s nephew—had been taken into unofficial custody last night. Because he’d been instrumental in building the case, Ranek had hoped to serve as First Interrogator, but his boss had chosen a rival with seniority.

“All I can do is observe,” Ranek groused. “She’s making a royal mess of it, if you ask me. The only way to get a high Upstart to confess to a crime is to appeal to his vanity.”

“And which crimes do you want him to confess to?” He wondered what it would be like to have some clearly defined transgression to hide, instead of a free-floating shame.

“Dissenter ideology. Recruiting Laborers to his cause. Using his access to power to foment resistance among the lower orders. Right now, he’s pretending he’s the one who was recruited, not the instigator. But he’s given up his main Drudge contact, so we can pit them against each other. We simply have to break Akeina enough to use him to our advantage.”

*Break him.* An ugly phrase.

Still, the distraction was welcome. Lost in the minutiae of Ranek’s case, Gersha was starting to feel sleepy. He snapped upright as a tap sounded on the office door—where was his secretary?

“I should get back to it. Supposed to be on my lunch hour.” Ranek pulled open the door to reveal a tall, burly Laborer in a snow-white tunic.

Words died in Gersha’s throat as he recognized Bror, whose surname he didn’t even know and whose filthy hands and lips he couldn’t stop feeling all over him.

The muscle-bound kettle boy was grinning disarmingly. In a detached way, Gersha watched Ranek react to the spectacle, taking an exaggerated step back and then allowing himself a tiny, wolfish
smile. Was that what Ranek found attractive, then—bull necks and blunt noses?

*He can’t just barge in here. Why on earth?* To cover his embarrassment, Gersha mumbled something about a message from Bror’s protector, Councillor István, clutching a pen beneath his desk to steady himself. Kettle boys did not carry messages, but Ranek might not know that.

The interrogator smiled blandly, clearly sensing Gersha’s discomfort, and said, “I’ll leave you alone, then.”

Without being invited, Bror took the chair Ranek had vacated. He stretched his long legs into the space between them, his gaze unnervingly direct.

Gersha had rarely seen a Laborer confront an Upstart this way. The disrespect might not be voiced, but it was palpable. He met Bror’s eyes, the pen sweat-slick in his fist. “What brings you here, lad? This is completely irregular.” *No tolerance,* whispered the voice of his uncle. *Make sure he knows his place.*

Bror held his gaze. “Rishka doesn’t know I’m here, and you can’t tell him. Okay, Fir?”

Gersha’s chest went tight with rage at the boy’s commanding tone, but somehow the only words that reached his lips were “You’ve seen him today? He’s all right?”

Bror shrugged. “Will be, because he’s tough, but he’d be better if Verán hadn’t decided to pass him around to all the newly electeds. Guess you already know that, the way your colleagues run their mouths.”

Gersha’s lunch forced itself upward. He couldn’t claim to be surprised, but he hadn’t wanted to know for sure. Now he had no choice but to visualize Tilrey lying there the way he had for Bror, letting it happen. Maybe worse. Maybe he’d smiled at each man and joked and called them his favorite—

Bror’s voice cut through the sick whirl in his head. “Well, if you didn’t already know, you fucking should. I’m going to say something, Fir, and if you take offense and tell Fir István on me, I’ll deny saying it. And he’ll believe me, Fir, because, frankly, I’m better liked than you are.”

The heat came up so quickly it made Gersha’s eyes prickle. He tried to breathe through the anger, the humiliation. “Did you come to the Sector just to insult me?”

“No.” Bror planted his hands on his tree-trunk thighs and leaned forward. “I came here to tell you to stop being a fucking pussy.”

For a long moment, Gersha couldn’t speak. Then he heard his own voice from a great distance—ice-brittle, like his uncle’s. “Ah. I see, then.” *I could have you thrown in a cell or a brothel.*

“No, you don’t see. You think you’re special and hot shit and more pure than the others—delicate fucking sensibilities or whatever—but you don’t see anything, Fir. You want to live in a dream world, that’s your business. But if you dump my friend for something he can’t help, then you are a fucking pussy.”

The word burned red hot between them, singeing Gersha’s cheeks. Then he registered the rest of what Bror had said. “‘Dump’ him? Tilrey? What do you mean? Why would I do that?”

Bror regarded Gersha narrow-eyed, as if he should understand. “All he was doing last night was his job. Following orders. You think he wanted to play that crowd scene with me?”
The phrase made Gersha wince. “I understand that,” he said with excruciating dignity. “And I have no intention of ‘dumping’ Tilrey. I fulfill my obligations.”

“Good. You’ll never touch him again, though, will you, Fir?”

The question left Gersha at a brief loss. “Is that any of your business?”

Bror rose and took a looming step toward him. “Yeah, my friend is my business. He’s not in a real good position here, being a Skeinsha and all, and I don’t like it when Strutters treat him like a toy they can pass around or throw away. If it’s Linden or Verán doing it, I have to suck it up. But you, Fir?”

Gersha wiped his sweaty palms on his tunic. If this man doesn’t leave in the next ten seconds, I’ll call security. “I have no plans to ‘throw him away,’ and I still fail to see,” he said, “why it matters to you what your friend and I do or don’t do in bed. I’m sure he’d be mortified if he even knew you were here.”

Of that much he was sure. Tilrey’s pride was undeniable.

Bror didn’t look cowed. “Yeah. He might not talk to me for a year, which is why you aren’t gonna tell him. I don’t know what your deal is, Fir. But I think Rishka actually likes you, and I can’t say I understand why, but he hardly ever likes anybody, and if you hurt him, I swear, you’ll have me to answer to.”

***

Dozing at last, Tilrey opened his eyes when the door clicked open. “Bosh?”

The room was dark; the skylight, covered with drifted snow, offered no clues to the hour. He’d tried to read for a while, but the book had fallen from his hand when weariness overcame him.

The footsteps were too light and hesitant to be Bosh’s or Bror’s. “Fir,” Tilrey concluded, turning over to face the intruder. “Home already?”

“I woke you, didn’t I?” The formal discomfort in Gersha’s tone was reminiscent of their first meeting. “Bosh says you haven’t eaten. Could I get you some broth? Or tea?”

“Tea, maybe, Fir. But I’m fine.”

All these hours, he’d been certain Gersha would never set foot in his room again. Now that he’d been proven wrong, Tilrey found to his surprise that the Fir’s presence caused him more itching discomfort than his absence had. Why doesn’t he just leave me alone?

This was good, he reminded himself. But he should have gotten up, dressed. Not allowed Gersha to see him this way.

After the door shut behind the Upstart, he rose unsteadily. By the time Gersha returned bearing the tea tray, he wore a shirt and trousers, but there was nothing he could do about the mottled flesh on his neck or his swollen, wanton-looking mouth.

“Thanks, Fir.” He reached for the cup—no shaking this time. “You didn’t have to. Be up and about tomorrow.”

Gersha perched uneasily on the edge of the bed, his eyes trained to Tilrey’s right. “I just wanted you to know I’m here,” he said stiffly.
The awkwardness was so familiar, so painful, that Tilrey knew abruptly what he had to do. It was risky, but if he didn’t, he might lose the high-strung Upstart for good. The distance between them now would grow into a chasm.

He held out his free hand. “Come here, Fir.”

Gersha twitched at the unexpected command, but he took Tilrey’s hand and let it draw him closer, eyes still averted.

*Good.* Over the course of their nights together, he’d trained Gersha to follow his lead, probably without the Upstart’s realizing it. *You learned that from the best,* Linnett boasted.

“Put down your cup, Fir. You don’t want to spill it.”

Gersha obeyed again. And when Tilrey’s arm swooped around his waist and drew him down into the bedding, he didn’t protest, only emitted a soft sound that might have been a grunt or a sob. Then he molded himself to Tilrey’s body as he had so many times before, hiding his face against Tilrey’s side.

The Fir’s body needed only a reminder to bridge the gap his mind couldn’t, leaping over the obstacles of pride and protocol. Tilrey understood; muscle memory had far too much power over him, too.

Gersha *did* care for him. There was a dark triumph in seeing it at last.

He drew his fingers through the man’s black curls, feeling almost in control again. “I told you things happen on Election Night, Fir, and they don’t matter. Why are you so sad?”

“Because I—” Gersha tried a few times to eject choked words. “I’m so ashamed. I’m ashamed of us—Upstarts—and the things we do.”

“Shh, Fir.” Tilrey scrubbed his fingers over the man’s scalp, tracing the delicate curve of his skull. “You didn’t make the world. All you can do is live in it.”

“It’s wrong for them to treat you like a toy. I should speak up. Someone should. Verán—”

“If you objected to anything he does, Verán might send me to live with Besha. We wouldn’t have any more time together. Anyway, Fir, it’s my choice to live this life. I could have run away when Linnett was arrested. I could have refused this posting and let them send me somewhere else, even if it was a cell.”

“Would they really have sent you to prison?”

“Or a brothel—something less luxurious than this.” Tilrey shrugged as if he didn’t know each word was a nail to the Fir’s tender heart. “Fir Verán doesn’t like to be crossed. I’m captured property. Spoils of war. When your property turns on you, what do you do with it?”

“You aren’t property.” Gersha’s head rested on Tilrey’s chest. “And I’m letting you comfort *me.* It’s absurd. You should hate us.”

“I don’t need comforting, Fir.” Tilrey let his hand tangle in the Upstart’s curls again. He despised pity, but if he had to play the tragic victim for a bit, so be it. “Having you close, though—I like that. Will you stay with me while I go to sleep?”

“Of course I will.” An indrawn breath, too close to a sob.
For a moment, Tilrey considered blowing Gersha just to make sure the Upstart didn’t start getting skittish again. But no, he wouldn’t try that, and not just because his throat still ached from the night before. Gersha needed to believe there was something pure in their feelings for each other.

He needed Tilrey to be a martyr. A cause. Anything but another piece of ass.

So that was the role he’d play—and maybe it was also the truth, or a piece of it. He did resent Upstarts, when he let himself. He did wish he could trust this one to be different.

Or even love this strange man, if love were an emotion he could still feel.

Gersha’s arm encircled him, drawing him close. “Just sleep, love.” And then, a little later, low in Tilrey’s ear, “I wish I could do more for you. So much more.”

***

When Tilrey’s breathing had been slow and even for nearly an hour, Gersha disentangled himself and rose as quietly as he could.

For a while, he allowed himself to watch the boy’s chest rise and fall, prolonging this interlude in which they weren’t an Upstart and a kettle boy, just two souls on an even keel, both in need of peace.

*Having you close—I like that.* Was Bror right? Did Tilrey really, somehow, like him? What had he done to earn that?

*I am a fucking pussy.* Gersha could have made a disruption last night. Insisted on taking Tilrey home. Risked losing him.

Or, if he’d been more clever, more shameless, maybe he could have manipulated Verán to his will. Verán touched Gersha too often, gazed at him too long. Playing on the old man’s desires, he might have done *something*. Instead, he’d taken one look at the scene in the bedroom and bolted like a frightened child. He was no use to Tilrey at all.

But he would be. If he had to learn politics for that purpose alone, so be it. He didn’t know why helping Tilrey should matter so much, didn’t want to dwell on it, only knew that Bror’s words had cut him to his core. Never in his life had he stood up for something, not really. He’d stood aloof and disapproved of his peers, but he’d never spoken that disapproval, let alone acted on it. Never shown his mettle.

Rising from the bed, his spine stiffening with resolution, Gersha felt a heavy object tumble to the carpet. He picked it up—a book with library binding.

Idly he turned it to see the spine. A chill ran from his crown to his knees as he recognized the title, written in ancient English.

His eyes flew again to Tilrey, but not for a last fortifying glimpse. The boy’s eyelids were barely quivering, his brown lashes impossibly fine against his pale cheeks. The blanket exposed his broad shoulders. He looked like an artist’s dream of a happy Laborer: the picture of strength, of beauty, of innocence, of solid Whybergian values.

Why on earth was he reading a book from the Tangle?
Ranek Egil had never seen his friend so agitated. Even in their school days, Gersha had always maintained a certain composure—serene, stoic, or sullen. For all his blushing, his underlying feelings could be hard to read.

And Ranek was good at reading people.

But now there was no missing the alarm and confusion on Gersha’s face as he leaned forward on his elbows. “Nearly sixty books over four years? How could they have missed that? Why didn’t someone flag it?”

Ranek shrugged, showing nothing. Letting his friend think he was dispassionately considering this in a professional capacity. “It’s not technically illegal for a Laborer to borrow Harbourer or Tangle books, just tricky. And for a kettle boy, whose ID is linked with yours, it’s not even that.”

“He’s been doing it for years. Back when he was with Linden, Verán, Linnett. Why didn’t anyone notice?”

“Most Councillors wouldn’t notice their kettle boy is reading, to be honest, let alone what he’s reading. They’d consider it beneath their dignity.”

Ranek had never felt particularly attracted to his friend—or, frankly, to anyone—but he had to admit the gray-flecked green eyes were lovely when they went wide and startled, as they did now. Gersha asked, “Are you saying I should let this go?”

“Not at all. After all, the real danger isn’t that the boy is reading Tangle books. The danger is that he’s bringing them to someone else to read.” Many Dissenters and Dissidents were fascinated by the Tangle and its antiquated models of social order, finding inspirations for revolt there.

Gersha’s knuckles whitened on the desk edge. “Or he could be reading them and using the knowledge to decipher Harbourer communications.”

“That seems rather unlikely, unless you’ve been leaving your sensitive files around.”

Gersha looked horrified. “I would never! But not everyone is as careful.”

Ranek wondered if Gersha was growing paranoid as he aged. The Councillor didn’t know, couldn’t have known, that Tilrey Bronn had been arrested as a teenager for translating a missive from Harbour. Linnett had suppressed that evidence.

The interrogation had convinced Ranek the boy was clean of abiding subversive sympathies, but now he wondered. A kettle boy who spoke Harbourer and ancient English could, in theory, be dangerous.

Or useful.

For his own private purposes, he resolved to foster Gersha’s fears without saying anything concrete. “All I know is that most shirkers are addicts, and so are most whores. And kettle boys have a lot of free time on their hands. Plenty of leisure to resent the system.”

Gersha’s hands clawed at the table. “This one has reasons to resent the system, Ranek. Believe me, I know. I don’t want to imply he would ever act on it, but he hasn’t always been . . . treated well.”
Ranek thumbed up Tilhard Edvard Bronn’s familiar file on his handheld. *I hadn’t thought of you in so long, lad, and here you are.*

“He’s been in the hospital a couple times,” he said without emotion, reading the screen. “Broken jaw, minor concussion. And before that, right after Linnett was exiled, he spent nearly two ten-days in a detention cell here in the Sector.”

“A cell? Why on earth?”

“Don’t get excited—it was a standard security measure. He came from Linnett’s household, so they interrogated him, just in case.” Ranek scrolled, pretending to read the record for the first time when he knew it almost by heart. “They used Class 1c methods—lightweight stuff. Isolation in darkness, irregular routines.”

He looked up from his handheld to see Gersha staring at him as if stricken. Well, that was interesting. Until now, he wouldn’t have guessed that his friend actually cared about the boy. And that, too, could be useful.

“*Very* lightweight,” he assured his friend. “I went through similar things as part of my training. And you know,” he added experimentally, “some data suggest Laborers don’t feel things the way we do. Thicker-skinned and all.”

Gersha flinched. “I don’t believe that about him. I’m not sure I believe that at all.”

“I’m not sure I do either.” *Mustn’t scare him—not if I want this, and I do. One more chance to talk alone with Bronn. See what I can do with him.*

Gersha asked in a low voice, “And what did they find in this interrogation?”

Here Ranek could tell the truth. “The boy knew nothing about Linnett’s treason. His answers were consistent. He held up fine.”

Better than fine. Ranek was still proud of the monograph he’d written on the boy’s interesting stamina, though it hadn’t gotten him the promotion he’d hoped for. That bastard Karishkov . . .

“Why did it take two ten-days, then?” Gersha sounded almost angry.

“The interrogation itself didn’t take that long—we let the subject wait a while first. We call it ‘marinating.’” He’d better stop there. “Anyway, if we issue a warrant and bring him in again, just for possessing these books, that would technically count as a second offense. Do you want that?”

The Councillor froze, as Ranek had known he would, at the prospect of putting the boy back in a cell. “Do we have to?”

Gersha must be downright besotted with the boy, his tenderness at war with his native suspicion and insecurity. For an instant, Ranek allowed himself to indulge in empathy for his friend. How painful it must be to care about someone you had scant power to protect.

He said, “No, that’s not necessary. We can start with intensive surveillance of the subject for a ten-day. If he has a friend or contact he shouldn’t have, we’ll find out.”

He doubted they’d find much, but an idea was hatching in his brain—a risky one with considerable potential pay-off. Meanwhile, he couldn’t scare off Gersha, couldn’t let him panic and tell Verán. The majority leader might laugh it off, because most high Upstarts were arrogant, oblivious fools who took their superiority for granted. Or he might not, and then Ranek would lose control of the
Gersha looked a little gray as he asked, “Does Verán have to know about this . . . surveillance? I’d prefer not to trouble him unless you actually find something.”

“No one needs to know a thing.” Ranek dimmed his handheld, smiling disarmingly. *Just a friend taking the time to help you.* “We have discretion to act without entering anything into public records until we reach the level of a Class 4d—if you’ll give me your permission, of course.”

“I . . .” Gersha wouldn’t meet his eyes. “Maybe it’s nothing. Maybe I should just ask the boy about the books. After all, he wasn’t hiding them.”

*Don’t back out now!* Ranek made his voice grim and censorious. “That’s the last thing you should do. As long as there’s even a slim chance the boy *is* a shirker, you mustn’t give him the slightest sign you suspect him. After all, if he’s innocent, he’s in no danger.”

Another flinch. “I suppose that’s true.”

“Will you promise me to keep it quiet? And allow me to act at my discretion?”

After a pause, Gersha nodded. “You promise he won’t be hurt? Nothing will happen to him that I don’t approve first?”

“Promise,” Ranek said.

***

It was several hours after midday, still prime work hour in the Sector, but no one would miss Gersha this afternoon. He closed the door and swept his eyes around Tilrey’s room, taking in the neatly made bed, the lozenge of sunlight from the skylight, the sterile, unlittered surfaces.

Then he pulled a drawer from the built-in dresser and began carefully transferring the contents to the carpet.

Ranek had assured him that an Int/Sec agent would conduct a discreet search of the “subject”’s belongings. Once he heard that, Gersha knew he had to get here first.

Surely, if Tilrey had incriminating possessions besides the books, he’d know better than to leave them in an unlocked room. *Surely.* He might be a shirker—yes, it was within the bounds of possibility—but he was no fool.

So far, nothing but clothes. Thermal undershirts and leggings, woollen trousers, meticulously folded shirts, tunics, T-shirts and sweatpants and fleeces. Pulling out a pile of briefs, Gersha held them fastidiously by his fingertips.

As if he hadn’t undressed the boy a dozen times. This was *his* room in *his* house. There was a reason only he had the power to lock or unlock it.

A distant thud made him freeze. Bosh had assured him Tilrey was at the gym for the next several hours.

It was only a gust of snow against the skylight. Feeling like a common spy or thief, Gersha returned to his inventory. He found the Tangle book on the bedside shelf, along with a book in modern Harbourer—courtly poetry, nothing subversive—and a few classic Oslov novels. No bookmarks or markings in any of them.
Did Tilrey actually read Harbourer and English? Or was he, as Ranek had suggested, bringing the books to a third party? If so, he seemed remarkably unconcerned about hiding the evidence. Perhaps he simply assumed, as Ranek had also suggested in his cruelly matter-of-fact way, that Councillors had their heads too far up their asses to notice or care.

Abruptly furious, Gersha sped through the rest of the room, opening one compartment as soon as he banged another closed. He would not be played for a fool. All that touching, all those soft glances and whispers and compliments—it was nothing now. It meant nothing. The other Councillors underestimated Tilrey’s intelligence, but Gersha knew better. Was he so desperate for affection that he’d ignored obvious warning signs?

*If I were him, would I Dissent?* The question wedged itself in his mind. Tilrey had plenty of reasons to hate Upstarts, as Gersha himself had told Ranek just now. It was no excuse, of course, but it was certainly a *reason*, and Gersha had done things for much lesser reasons.

*Show me you wouldn’t do it. Show me you would. Show me who you really are.*

Nothing. No contraband electronic devices or liquor or even sap. No personal photos or letters or mementos or gifts. Aside from the books, nothing in this room or the bathroom indicated that an individual lived here and not some generic composite of a kettle boy.

Waiting would be agony, but he wouldn’t touch Tilrey till he knew. Not till Ranek reported back. Lucky that their next scheduled night together was more than a ten-day away.

Gersha stared into the bathroom mirror. It made his skin look gray, his eyes enormous.

“Where are you?” he asked, suddenly unsure whether he was speaking to Tilrey or to himself. “*Who* are you?”

***

Bror slicked back his wet hair, panting. “That’s the last time you beat me, laddy.”

Tilrey stumbled across the deck and snagged his towel, legs weak and eyes stinging from the chlorine. “Doubt it. I had more than a second on you.”

“Back in fighting trim, eh?”

Tilrey didn’t answer, only scrubbed the towel across his shoulders. Election Night was twelve days in the past now, and he’d gone from cowering in bed to bench-pressing 240 and swimming twenty-five laps, beating Bror’s ass in the bargain. But he didn’t need a reminder.

Bror knew better than to press the point. Five minutes later, in the sauna, he asked with studied indifference, “Verán give you the free-night off?”

“He’s letting me stay home with Gádden.”

Bror gave him a shoulder-punch. “That’s not even work, right?” When Tilrey didn’t respond, he added, “I mean, things are going good again with the Fir, right? From what you were saying, I thought things were going pretty well.”

Tilrey stared into space, letting the heat bake its way to his bones. He’d barely caught sight of Gersha since that evening in his bedroom when he’d dozed off in the Councillor’s arms. Bosh had brought him to two free-night assignations, but the Fir hadn’t shown his face once.
Gersha's fickle, Linnett mused. A strange one. But that won't matter if you show him a good time tonight.

Tilrey pushed the voice of the exiled Magistrate back down. The important thing now was to build up his strength and stamina. To become impregnable. Why should he worry about one little Councillor’s moods?

Because you have no power of your own, love. With a brilliant young Councillor on your side, that might change.

Would it? Until now, Tilrey hadn’t thought about much besides making Gersha like him enough to want to keep him around—a basic survival goal. Was power even an option? It seemed like a ludicrous idea, yet he’d seen that Bror had power of a sort, enough power to set boundaries with Upstarts, partly because his family was well established in Redda and partly because his Councillor adored him.

With Linnett, Tilrey had felt protected, insulated from other Councillors’ whims (though not, of course, from Linnett’s own). Linnett had even promised to make him his secretary once he’d passed the age appropriate for a kettle boy. At the time, Tilrey hadn’t relished the idea of sitting at a desk in the Sector, but now it seemed intensely preferable to his current situation. What if Gersha could convince Verán to transfer him into an honorable posting with potential for advancement? A place where he might even exercise some influence?

It was worth a try. It was certainly better than contemplating leaping off a parapet again, or joining Celinda’s band of Dissidents.

“Things are going fine,” he said.

On the way out, Bror insisted on stopping at the hydration kiosk to flirt with the girl who whipped up kale-and-protein shakes. The two of them were clearly on the verge of setting up an assignation, and Tilrey was beginning to fidget, when he felt eyes on him.

He turned to find a tall young Upstart girl in workout clothes, slender and ginger-haired. Vera Linnett, Albertine’s daughter and Malsha’s granddaughter. “Fir’n?” he said cautiously.

Vera flushed and smiled in a distant way that recalled her grandfather, not meeting his eyes. “Rishka. It’s been a while.”

A chill moved under Tilrey’s skin as he gave her a weightless grin. Was she following him, or was this a chance meeting? “It has been a while, Fir’n. How are you?”

Vera was Tilrey’s age, but, like many of her high-Upstart peers, she seemed younger to him, barely out of adolescence. She rarely articulated her emotions, yet they were as untamable as the nimbus of apricot hair that sprang from her forehead. Now her eyes glowed with a silent plea; her full lips parted and closed again. “Not bad.” She traced a pattern on the floor with her toe. “And you?”

“Fine, Fir’n.” No expression.

The last time they’d seen each other, her grandfather had sat between them, his hand tight on Tilrey’s knee, watching them both with eagle eyes. The time before that—well, they’d been in Vera’s apartment, in her bed. The memory was a jumble of blinding afternoon sunlight and awkwardness. He hadn’t known how to make her come, and she’d made a great show of passion that seemed forced, and Tilrey wasn’t sure if he was using or being used.

“You must be out of Uni now, Fir’n. In your first Sector posting.”
“Yes.” She matched his formality. “I’m working in industrial admin, overseeing four sectors of Karkei.”

The plea hadn’t left her eyes. What was she hoping he’d do? Gather her in his arms and give her a deep, tender kiss?

“How can I help it, when you’re being a fool?” he asked. He widened his eyes. “I didn’t intend any such thing, Fir’n.”

“Well, you know I despise the Sector, it’s all protocol, and things have been even harder since . . . well, lately.”

Since your family was disgraced by the patriarch’s treason. “We probably shouldn’t be talking, Fir’n,” Tilrey said, finally getting to the point. “The Party is sensitive about my time.”

Vera hovered for an instant, her eyes going glossy, as if deciding whether to take the hint. Then she sprang forward and closed tremulous fingers on his arm. So romantic. He wondered if she’d been reading Tangle novels, too, or just watching the corny streams about doomed love between Levels, which always ended with preachy monologues about finding a more appropriate partner.

“How can I help it, when you’re being a fool?” she said, words coming in a quiet flood. “Rishka, I’m so sorry. I’ve been so worried for you. I got so desperate, I asked that awful Tollsha Linden about you, and I could tell from the way he answered that he wasn’t telling the whole truth. Have they hurt you?”

Her pity made his mask go up—cold, polite. “Of course not. I serve the Island now, Fir’n, that’s all.”

“Someone told me they saw you with bruises. I—”

Bror wheeled to face them. “Were we in your way, Fir’n?”

Vera loosed her grip, arms dropping to her sides. “No. Of course not. I only—”

“We wouldn’t want to inconvenience you.” Bror’s voice was bland, but the words had edge. “My friend’s in a hurry to get home to his Fir, who’s a very important Island Councillor and doesn’t like him to waste his time being friendly to love-sick Strutter girls.”

“Bror,” Tilrey said warningly.

Bror ignored him. “Plus, in case you hadn’t noticed, your family doesn’t control the Council anymore.”

A tear drifted down Vera’s cheek. “It’s not—I mean, I know that. I wasn’t trying to—I’m sorry.”
“Bror,” Tilrey said again, to remind his friend he could fight his own battles, but Bror spoke over him, stepping between them: “If you care about Rishka, leave him alone.”

To Tilrey’s own surprise, he wanted to defend Vera. Blushing, wet eyes—it was all painfully, intimately familiar, and more compelling than he liked to admit. She might barely know him, or only the fantasy of him she’d built in her head, but she did care. “She wasn’t doing anything,” he said. “We were just catching up.”

“Well, now you’re caught up. You don’t belong here, Fir’n Linnett.”

Beaten, Vera turned to go with a last naked glance at Tilrey. “I will see you again. They don’t own you. You’ll remember that?”

Tilrey opened his mouth to say, *Forget me. I’m not worth it.* But Bror took hold of his arm and kept it fast.

“Don’t be a stupid kid,” he said as the Linnett girl finally retreated. “Just because she thinks she’s the heroine of a fucking saga doesn’t mean you have to play the hero. You want girls? I can get you girls who’ll give you the ride of your life.”

He winked at the pretty server to illustrate his point. She winked obligingly back. “Hell, all you have to do is smile, and you’ll be fighting them off.”

Tilrey nudged himself free. “I told her to go away.”

“You didn’t want her to. I could see it in your eyes. Look, I know it’s flattering to get a Strutter chick wet for you, but that doomed romance bullshit is for them, not us. You want to get yourself in deep shit with Verán?”

“No.” Verán might find the whole thing amusing, but he would probably still use it as an excuse to make Tilrey’s life unpleasant.

Lucky that Bror had intervened, because he had been tempted. If he had to have a doomed romance, it couldn’t be with anyone in Linnett’s bloodline. Gersha was much safer.

Wait, wait. *Romance?*

Bror was still busy plotting to hook him up with a girl. “I bet Celinda would fuck you. No, don’t look that way—I’ve seen how you look at her. I haven’t seen her around this week, but she’s somewhere.”

“No thanks,” Tilrey said.

“Someone else, then. Who do you fancy? Anybody but that soppy Strutter mess.”

God, of course. Gersha looked at him the way Vera did—with sheer, abject adoration. Until now, Tilrey hadn’t thought about it that way, hadn’t realized he was falling prey to the same foolish temptation all over again.

Only maybe this time it wasn’t foolish. With Gersha, it was safe to let himself be adored, maybe even useful. It was *all right.*

At last, Bror seemed to register Tilrey’s expression; he stopped short, staring. “What’s funny?”

And no, he couldn’t keep the smile off his face. “What if I *like* Strutter messes, Bror?”
In Charge

Chapter Notes

This story is turning out longer than I expected, but we've reached about the halfway point. Thank you so much for reading!

15: In Charge

It was supposed to be their free-night, theirs, but Besha had invited himself over.

“Don’t mind me,” he said the instant Gersha opened the door. “I’m just on my way to the Lounge, but Verán asked me to bring you the files on the Akeina case, and he doesn’t think it’s safe to do it electronically.” A roguish wink. “You know the old man, doesn’t trust encryption protocols.”

Gersha took the stack of files without a word. On any other free-night, the interruption would have made him fantasize about slitting Besha’s throat with a rusty razorblade, but tonight he was almost grateful for the distraction.

He’d been waiting anxiously for Ranek’s report for more than a ten-day now. The surveillance had to be finished. He’d asked after it twice, only to be told that such things couldn’t be rushed.

*How can I touch Tilrey and not let him know what I know?* He felt guilty, self-disgusted, and under it all a little frightened, because . . . well, the possibilities. The boy was an unknown now. It was easy to tell himself Tilrey just had a gift for languages and natural curiosity, but how likely was that? How many Dissident infiltrations had started with similar fond assumptions?

“Come in and have some tea,” he said in a bone-dry voice.

Besha froze, as if he thought Gersha might be mocking him or setting a trap. Then he smiled a stiffer version of his usual sharkish grin. “Okay. Just for a minute.”

“Rishka? Another cup.” Gersha strode back into the living room, not bothering to look back at his guest, and collapsed on the sofa.

Tilrey, over-responsive as usual, was already in the kitchen. A minute of awkward conversation later, he returned, placed the cup and saucer before Besha, and settled himself on Gersha’s other side.

Besha had worn his scarf indoors, the way he used to do in their school days because he was prone to colds. His nose looked red and inflamed now, and he took out a handkerchief and daintily sneezed. Then his watery blue eyes returned to following the boy hungrily.

The familiar jealous rage flared in Gersha’s chest—and, just as abruptly, guttered and died. Besha didn’t even suspect. For that alone, the man was lucky.

“Why does Verán want me to look at the Akeina case?” he asked.

Besha dragged his eyes away from Tilrey. “Because you’re on the Int/Sec committee, and we’re considering trying him in front of the entire committee, possibly the entire Council. Making an
example of him for other young Upstarts. Anyway, Verán values your Intelligence expertise. You have followed the case, haven’t you? You know who I mean?”

Shame warmed Gersha’s cheeks. “Councillor Akeina’s nephew Fredrich has been charged with corrupting Laborers and corresponding with a Dissident sect. I do pay attention.”

Besha inched away from him, hands raised in a gesture that might have been apology or further mockery. “Of course you do, Gersha.”

“Then why suggest I don’t?”

As he spoke, Gersha glanced at Tilrey—why, he wasn’t sure. Was he hoping somehow to provoke them both at once? With his eagerness to play the role of jealous rival, Besha did seem to have a way of precipitating things between them. After Gersha’s outburst in the man’s office, nearly two months ago, Tilrey had slipped into his room on a worknight and seduced him. What had the boy really been trying to do?

He’d been such a fool, succumbing after a few kisses. Such an easy mark.

Besha laughed almost nervously. “You should take a dip of sap, Gersha. You’ve got too many rough edges tonight.”

Gersha propped his feet on the ottoman, wondering if Besha was more cowardly or just more cautious without Verán around to back him up. “You sap if you feel like it. Give the boy some, too. I suppose he’s been waiting.”

“That’s not my place tonight.”

“Fine, then.” Gersha rummaged in his tunic pocket for the vial he usually stowed there on free-nights, but he’d forgotten. He had to fish one out of the broken teapot on the window ledge where he kept his books.


He splashed sap into his palm, too much sap, and held it under Tilrey’s nose. He looked at the carpet while Tilrey’s fingers encircled his wrist, steady as always, and Tilrey’s hair brushed his sensitive forearm, and then came the tongue—

He clenched his other hand into a fist, face blazing, grateful that the tunic hid his involuntary reaction.

A jibe from Besha was standard for this situation, but the other Councillor managed to restrain himself. When Gersha met his eyes again, they shone a little too bright.

A silent Besha, with no naughty-schoolboy smirk—that was odd, but not unwelcome. Gersha poured the rest of the vial into the same palm and downed it himself.

Besha swallowed—you could hear it. “My turn?”

Gersha pulled out a handkerchief to swab his palm. “I think you have your own supply.”

“He seems to want it from you, Fir.” Tilrey’s voice was light, almost teasing.

“Watch the cheek, lad,” Gersha snapped—and instantly wanted to take it back, because he’d sounded like his uncle.
Was that so bad, though? Traitor or not, the boy needed reminding of his place. He knew far too many of Gersha’s vulnerabilities, and whose fault was that?

Even Besha looked chastened for once as he gulped the rest of his tea and stood up. “I really should go. Visha’s expecting me.”

“It must be so hard being Verán’s favorite, his chosen successor. Always at his beck and call, no time of your own.” Where did that cruel, sing-song tone come from? What had gotten into him?

“It can be, actually.” Besha spoke stiffly, too skilled at jeering not to know when it was directed at him. “Gersha,” he asked, turning to face them both, “have I done something to offend you—something new, I mean? I thought we’d had it out already, but if you’re nursing a grudge—”

Gersha cut him short with a laugh he hoped conveyed only scorn.

He knows my weak spots, too, damn him.

“No grudges.” He spread his hands. “No history between us. You’ve never carried on with Verán, calling me a jealous lover, and you’ll never do it again. Because I’m a Councillor of Oslov, doing my job, working for the same Party as you, and you know mocking me would be unseemly.”

Besha scrubbed a hand fretfully through his wheat-colored hair. “Of course, Gersha. Point taken. I like to have a bit of fun, and sometimes I go too far.”

What was this strange electrification of Gersha’s veins? Mere adrenaline, or an unfamiliar sense of power? He wasn’t done, though he was shaking now. “And next time Verán decides to do . . . well, what he did on Election Night, you won’t egg him on. Perhaps you’ll even try to discourage him. Because you should know such behavior isn’t worthy of any of us.”

Besha looked like he was biting the inside of his cheek. “I appreciate what you’re saying, Gersha, I really do.” He shot a glance at Tilrey, as if seeking some form of backup, but Tilrey had his eyes turned to the floor. “You understand about Election Night . . . well, things happen when people are celebrating. We can’t all be as circumspect as you are.”

A month ago, Gersha would have been shamed by the words, hearing prude and unnatural in them, but now he only said, “Maybe we should all be more circumspect, even in our celebrations. Perhaps a little more respect for our inferiors would stop things like this Akeina mess from happening. Anyway, I’m glad you stopped by.”

He tilted his head dismissively, as he’d seen Verán do, and crooked a finger in Tilrey’s direction. “You can see him out, lad.”

They both obeyed him.

When the coldroom door closed behind Besha, and Tilrey returned, Gersha braced himself. He’ll reproach me for picking a fight again, and making a fuss about things I can’t change. And I’ll have two bad choices: be meek and apologize, or snap at him the way Uncle Per would.

Instead of sitting decorously in his former place, however, Tilrey sank down beside Gersha, almost on him, in a flash of white and gold. And then, before Gersha could flinch—still expecting some kind of polite scolding—those strong arms enfolded him, and those full lips pressed him into a kiss so deep and wet he seemed to be drowning.

He resisted, but only for an instant before the grunt of protest in his throat turned to surrender. He opened his mouth wider for the explorations of the boy’s tongue, groaning into Tilrey’s mouth, knotting his fingers in Tilrey’s hair.
Tilrey’s free hand was unfastening his tunic, reaching under his shirt, flicking teasingly at his nipples. And as Gersha threw his head back, giving way to a tingling flood of sensation like the lurid colors of a sunset, that beautiful mouth whispered into his ear:

“That was perfect, Fir. You made me so hard when you showed him—us—who’s in charge. Tell me what you want next.”

***

“You may not actually want that, Fir,” Tilrey said, stroking one of his Upstart’s sleek black brows above the drooping lids. “If we tried it, there’s a good chance you’d change your mind.”

Gersha’s finely shaped lips pouted. “I thought you wanted me to be in charge. Tell you what to do.”

His head rested on Tilrey’s chest, both of them still half-clothed and covered with a sheen of sweat from the mutual groping session that had ended with Tilrey swallowing a warm vial’s-worth of the Councillor’s seed. They’d barely made it to the bedroom, and this time Gersha had been too absorbed in his own passion to try to make Tilrey come.

Or so Tilrey had thought, until Gersha murmured into his ear, in the after-glow, “Tonight I think you should fuck me.”

“I’m happy to do whatever you want, love, of course.” He stroked the wild curls back from Gersha’s forehead and added, with a sincerity that surprised him, “The way you schooled Besha tonight—it was fucking sweet, seeing him slink off with his tail between his legs. Ever since I met you, Fir, I’ve been waiting to see you like that, taking what’s yours with no apologies.”

Good, Linnett whispered in his head. Admiration is the most addictive drug there is. Build him up. Make him dependent.

Shut up. I’m not like you. Tilrey refocused on Gersha. “I meant it when I said you made me hard.”

Gersha rolled over, still half on top of him, so they were face-to-face. “But not hard enough to fuck me?”

The Councillor’s weight was in the exact right or wrong place, making Tilrey’s cock rigid. He tried to ignore it. “Forgive me for the impertinent question, Fir, but . . . you’ve never been fucked before, have you?”

Gersha shook his head, shifting to grab hold of Tilrey’s cock. His grip, damn it, was getting better, more knowing.

“I’ve never wanted it before. But with you . . . well, I’m curious.” That familiar delicate flush spread over the Upstart’s face, down his neck, making the pale skin seem to glow. “I’d like to try it.”

Tilrey felt oddly gratified by the request. “It’s not something one should rush into, Fir. Before you can, uh, enjoy it, there’s some preparation involved.”

Gersha bent and planted a wet kiss against Tilrey’s jugular, his hand pumping steadily between them now. “I know that. I prep you all the time.”

“But I’m used to it, Fir.” And I don’t enjoy it. Mostly. Tilrey’s thoughts were starting to fray, and he needed to focus. He sat up, gingerly disattaching the Upstart’s fingers from his cock, and slid
Gersha’s body off his. “The first time can really hurt if you don’t lead up to it, and I’m not, well . . .” He grimaced, with a glance at his groin.

“Small,” Gersha finished for him—with a grin so bold, so lascivious, that it sent a strange shiver down Tilrey’s spine. “No, you’re not small. And I’m not afraid to have you inside me. I think that’s exactly what I need tonight.”

Tilrey had heard such requests from Upstarts before—even from Linnett, on a couple of occasions—and he’d always complied. But coming from Gersha, the request was riskier. The young Councillor was so volatile, so fiercely protective of his person. If Tilrey gave him a bad experience, he would never forget it, and it might open a rift between them.

“Then I’ll give you what you want, love,” he said. “In good time, when you’re ready for it. How about tonight we start smaller?”

***

The first finger hurt the most, but it was a good pain—burning, stretching, spreading up Gersha’s spine. He gasped, knotting his hands in the sheets, and felt grateful he was facing away so Tilrey wouldn’t see him grimace.

It was humiliating to crouch like this, legs spread, but it was what he needed. Something to burn away the doubts and fears and the other feelings. Tonight he was just stupid, eager flesh, and nothing that happened to this flesh could touch him.

It was a subterfuge, too, he told himself. Impressed by his physical passion, his complete submission, Tilrey would never guess what was in his head.

“When I move in, push out and exhale, Fir,” Tilrey said behind him, businesslike. “It hurts less that way.”

Did this hurt when he did it to Tilrey? Nothing ever seemed to. Gersha obeyed, and the slick finger slid deeper, crooked, and rewarded him with a burst of pleasure as intense as midwinter fireworks in the black sky.

He gasped again, feeling it all the way to his fingertips and sinuses, his cock suddenly rock-hard under him. “Oh green hills and vales, how did you . . .”

“Simple. Up on your knees a bit, Fir.”

Tilrey took control of Gersha’s cock with the other hand and pumped four or five times, making Gersha whine deep in his throat. “Now,” he said, “think you’re ready for another one?”

Tilrey had taught Gersha to open him this way, and though he’d been a little repelled at first, Gersha had quickly learned to appreciate the sensation of making the boy writhe on two or three fingers, filling him with lube, making him his. Now he was the one who was being spread and manipulated, and though he told himself his involuntary physical responses meant nothing (stupid flesh), the sensation of fullness as Tilrey’s second finger breached him was almost unbearable.

He clenched both fists and bit his lip until he tasted blood, remembering just in time not to squirm, to push out, to exhale. He was a single throbbing nerve, registering pain, then pleasure, pain, pleasure—blood beading on his lip, blood engorging his cock as Tilrey began to pump it slowly again.

He was open impossibly wide now, or it felt that way, perhaps because Tilrey’s knuckles were so
big, and it *stung*, and if Besha were ever to see him this way, if Besha—

Then the second finger found his prostate, and Tilrey’s other hand pumped mercilessly on his cock, and thoughts of Besha vanished as Gersha came in a white-hot explosion of sheer bliss, bucking his hips and feeling the boy’s fingers still in him—large, close, tight.

It was like fainting. When his eyes could focus again, when he became aware of his body, Tilrey’s fingers were gone, and the boy was reaching under him with a warm rag to wipe his cooling leavings from the sheet.

Gersha rolled over with a small moan. It still stung a little, but not badly. His limbs felt wrung-out, water-logged, as if he’d just run five K at the gym.

“I thought we could get to three,” he murmured.

“Always the achiever.” Tilrey’s hand molded itself to his ass, then slid up to rub the small of his back. “I think we got close enough, Fir. See now why we need to go slowly?”

“Yes.” Part of Gersha wanted to try it again, wanted to work up to Tilrey’s cock tonight, but the rest was exhausted. He sat up, wincing, and wrapped his arms around the boy, tugging him down so they lay side-by-side. The friction of his naked skin against Tilrey’s shirt and trousers was unspeakably titillating, shameful and right at once.

“You’ve done this with others, haven’t you?” he whispered, suddenly torn in two by a desire to hear Tilrey say no, he never had, even if that meant Gersha was the only Councillor abject and decadent enough to demand such a service.

Tilrey nodded, naturally.

He looked tired and happy, too, brown lashes shadowing his cheeks, and Gersha wondered abruptly if Tilrey had given himself satisfaction, but by now he knew not to ask. The question always made Tilrey look uncomfortable; perhaps it was a breach of some kettle-boy protocol.

He reached out and traced one of Tilrey’s brows the way the boy had done to him earlier. “What was wrong with me tonight?” he asked, words spilling out of him, as if the orgasm had swept away all his good sense. “Besha—I let him in here. I let him come between us, even for a minute, when we could have been together.”

If Ranek’s team finds something, we may never be together again. The thought was a spear in his side, collapsing his lungs, choking him, and he closed his eyes and reached blindly for Tilrey, pulling the boy’s head against his shoulder.

When he opened his eyes again, Tilrey was smiling gently. “You spend far more time thinking about Besha than he’s worth, Fir.”

“Don’t call me that.” It emerged in a moan. “Not now. Use my name, Rishka.”

“Gersha,” Tilrey said, his lips moving against Gersha’s bare skin. “Gersha, my love, Gersha.”

***

In the morning, Tilrey sat up and watched Gersha dress. Usually he snuck such observations of Upstarts through his lashes, but this time he hid nothing, his eyes moving over the Councillor’s slight, taut body with undisguised admiration.
And Gersha, instead of rushing his routine, actually moved more slowly, giving Tilrey ample time to notice how the wan light struck the groove of a hip, how the cock swayed free from its bed of black curls, how gracefully the Councillor balanced on one foot to thread the other into his trousers.

*I want so much to be inside you.* The thought took Tilrey by surprise, as did the sudden stiffening of his own cock, and he tugged the bedspread over it and said the first thing that came to his mind and was *not* that: *“I think Besha wants you to fuck him, Fir.”*

Gersha gave a little start, then fastened his trousers. *“Where on earth would you get that idea? Anyway, I thought we weren’t going to speak about Besha anymore.”*

*“You’re right, Fir.”* Tilrey lowered his eyes. *“You’re right, Gersha.”*

Gersha tugged the heavy tunic over his shoulders and cinched it at the waist. *“Anyway, you have it wrong. If he wants me at all, it’s not like that.”*

*“I think you’re wrong, Fir.”*

Tilrey meant it. When he and Besha were roughhousing, he sometimes got an odd whiff of submissiveness from the little Upstart—a sense that, if he ever dared exert his full strength and turn their role-play on its head, Besha would welcome the experience of being overwhelmed. Last night, when Gersha had drawn the line and made Besha cower, he’d gotten that whiff again.

If there was one thing Tilrey understood, it was submission, both the terror and the pleasure of it. Gersha was beginning to understand, too, and Tilrey had a feeling Besha had for a while, whether he liked to admit it or not.

It wasn’t a bad thought, having Besha at his—at *their*—mercy.

*“Things are never as simple as you think they are, love,”* he said, stretching out languidly and trying to ignore the blood pulsing in his still-erect prick. *“And you have so much more power than you know.”*
The morning passed in a luxuriant haze. His fellow Councillors were mouths moving in slow motion, forming meaningless words. Quorums, studies, data points, factory outputs, trade surpluses—it was all so much blather.

When Gersha rose from his seat in the Council chamber, he winced, still feeling the effects of last night, and wondered if anyone could tell. But that was absurd, and anyway no one was looking at him; no one had eyes for anything but the data on their handhelds. Even Besha was too busy sucking up to Verán to spare a glance for him.

Idiots. Why did they think any of this mattered?

Then he was back in the solitude of his office, where he could spike his tea with sap—why not, for once?—and lean back and remember the squeeze of Tilrey’s knuckles, the tightness of Tilrey’s hand, the softness of Tilrey’s hair, and Tilrey’s voice saying “my love,” and—

A knock. “Fir Egil’s here to see you, Fir. Are you available?”

“Yes, yes, of course.” Gersha sat up too quickly, feeling that burn again, and shuttered his face so Ranek wouldn’t see anything out of the ordinary. His heart clenched in his chest, his breath coming short, his palms icy as he realized abruptly what this could mean.

Ranek had the results of the surveillance.

*I’m not ready. We need one more night. I need him inside me—*

“Well?” he asked too loudly, as Ranek sat down.

“Gersha, what’s the matter? You’re white as a sheet.”

***

The Library was quiet today, pillars of sunlit dust sifting into green shadow. When Tilrey reached his usual carrel, the one with a view of the jet-black, pyramidal spines of Government Sector, Celinda was there waiting for him.

She sat in his usual chair, her legs insolently spread in trousers, the masculine clothes emphasizing her curves. Her ash-blond hair hung loose over her face as if she’d just come from being fucked, but there was a tightness to her mouth.

Had Bror sent her to seduce him, despite Tilrey’s definite no on that issue? Or had she come of her own accord? He folded his arms. “What do you want, love?”

Celinda straightened, bringing her knees together, with a jagged smile. “Always so happy to see
me. I’m just wondering if you gave any more thought to what we discussed last time.”

“I’ve forgotten what we discussed last time. If you had any sense, so would you.”

“Oh god, Tilrey, you silly little slut.” She opened her mouth as if to laugh, but nothing came out. “Does it hurt walking around all day with that stick up your ass?”

Her expression was relaxed, almost wanton, like she’d over-sapped, but her eyes flitted nervously over his shoulder. Something was wrong.

“It’s like you think you’re one of them,” she went on. “Are you falling in love with that little Councillor of yours?”

Tilrey was about to tell her to cut the bullshit when he heard heavy footsteps behind him. He turned, expecting Bror or one of the others, and saw instead a burly stranger, a Laborer in workman’s clothes, something glinting in his hand.

When the man bodyslammed him into the nearest metal shelf, he was too startled to cry out. Then someone else was yanking his arms, pinioning them, and by the time he had the presence of mind to shove his elbow into the first man’s belly and kick out, a hand was already tugging his head back, baring his throat.

Tilrey was expecting the sharp prick in his neck. Tried to twist away from it, but his captor tangled fingers in his hair, held him still. He froze as the needle went in, knowing it could do damage if he didn’t.

The other man, the one he’d managed to hit, rebounded toward him, cursing. “Fucking bastard. You said he wouldn’t be any trouble.”

“Well, he won’t be now.” Celinda’s voice was grim. “Keep it down, why don’t you?”

*How did you deal with the cameras?* It was Tilrey’s last thought as the world grayed out around him and his legs folded. Strong arms caught him before he hit the floor.
Prisoners

“It shouldn’t take longer than a few days,” Ranek kept promising. “Just a precautionary measure, nothing official or on record.”

Gersha could feel sweat trickling down his neck. He longed to open his tight collar, but Ranek was watching him too closely. He flipped a stylus over, tapped it on the desk—anything to channel his agitation.

Ranek had found something. Not much, he kept insisting, but enough.

“We don’t like the looks of one of your boy’s associates,” he’d said as soon as he sat down. “There are some questionable connections there. It’s probably nothing, but I’d like to bring Bronn in for low-level questioning, and I’d like to do it today.”

Today. Ranek had said they’d collect Tilrey at the apartment before Gersha got home, as if that made it more acceptable somehow. As if it could possibly be acceptable for Tilrey to sleep tonight in a holding cell and not under Gersha’s roof.

And this was all Gersha’s fault.

“Why can’t you at least tell me the name of this . . . associate?” he asked for the third time, trying to wedge his thumbnail between the clip and body of the stylus, unable to meet Ranek’s eyes. “I have a security clearance.”

Ranek’s voice tightened. “In this particular case, I think it’s safe to say you have a conflict of interest. If I need to, I can get your clearance waived.”

“You wouldn’t.”

The air of self-containment and self-sufficiency that Gersha had always enjoyed in his friend now struck him as cold, almost hostile. Was this how it felt to be one of the subjects Ranek interrogated? But he was being unfair. Ranek was only doing his job, the exact job Gersha had asked him to do.

Ranek leaned forward in his chair, close enough to capture Gersha’s fidgeting hand. The contact made Gersha go still.

“For your sake, Gersha, yes, I’ll do anything that’ll keep you from getting caught up in this. The less you know, the safer you are. I need you to go about your routine as if nothing’s changed. If anyone asks after the boy, or if he can’t make it to his appointments, simply say he’s home with the flu.”

Gersha’s hand twitched, but Ranek did not loose it. The firm grip tripped a wire in Gersha, allowing him to release his inheld breath, and he blinked shameful dampness out of his eyes.

No one should touch him but Tilrey. Tilrey’s fingers circling his wrist, then in his hair, then inside him—

“You said it wouldn’t take more than a few days.” He dropped his eyes from Ranek’s, but he managed to keep his voice steady, the voice of a Councillor.

Why hadn’t he confronted Tilrey himself instead of going to Egil? Bror was right: he was a fucking
pussy. He’d failed Tilrey out of cowardice, out of fastidiousness, out of fear of breaking the tender, still-forming bond between them. What would happen to it now?

Ranek released Gersha’s hand and said, with a vibrance of sympathy in his voice now, “That’s right. With any luck, it’ll go quickly. We’ll pick him up in a few hours and start immediately.”

“And you won’t . . . hurt him?” Gersha had access to plenty of information about Int/Sec’s interrogation methods, and though he’d generally avoided perusing it, he didn’t like the little he did know.

“Of course not. ’Low-level’ means just that—no physical contact. Not a mark on him. Verán will never suspect, and the boy will never know you were involved.”

“I don’t care if he knows.” Gersha’s voice was ragged. “He might as well know. You’re not asking my permission to do this, are you, Ranek?”

Egil rose to his feet, his thin mouth revealing nothing. “No. I’m not asking your permission. I’m doing my duty to the Republic, Gersha, and I suggest you keep doing yours.”

***

Tilrey was back in the cell.

Pitch-black. He lay on something soft—clothes? A blanket? The hum of heating, far away to his left, was the only sensation he could use to orient himself.

He felt no panic, only a dull sense of inevitability. Well, darkness, here we are again.

His mouth was dry, and it took some time to sit up without his head spinning. Vexonil did a number on your central nervous system, as he knew too well; Linnett had used the tranq on him a few times, and he’d been dosed with it last time they imprisoned him in the Sector, after Linnett’s exile.

What have I done this time? Or rather, what has poor Gersha done?

The clouds in his head were retreating. Supporting himself on the wall, he rose gingerly to his feet, only to be brought up short by something attached to his right ankle.

Metal. Crouching, Tilrey explored the manacle that encircled his boot, traced its chain back to a pipe jutting from a cool cinderblock wall.

Being bound was no surprise, but if he was in the Sector, why weren’t the walls padded? And why was he still dressed in his kettle boy clothes, when last time they’d stripped him and put him in a nondescript coverall?

A door grated open.

Tilrey was on his feet instantly—the chain just allowed him to stand, with one hand on the wall for balance. He closed his eyes reflexively against the rectangle of light.

When he opened them, a fluorescent bulb illuminated the cell. It was no Sector cell at all, but some kind of basement storage room, large enough so the far corners vanished into darkness. The door had closed, and in front of it stood Celinda.

He almost laughed in relief. “What the fuck is going on, Cela?”
Celinda did not smile back. She’d replaced her own kettle boy clothes with a stained, anonymous workingwoman’s coverall, her hair braided down her back.

Tilrey remembered what had happened in the Library as a turbulent dream, but she at least was real. If she was here, then maybe he wasn’t in the Sector, and Gersha had not been sent off to the Wastes for some mysterious political reason. Anything else he could handle.

He jerked, making the chain jangle. “Can you take this thing off me?”

With irking slowness, Celinda settled herself on the floor in front of him, crossing her legs. Then she said, with none of her usual taunting flirtatiousness, “If you start yelling here, no one will hear you. We’re more than twenty meters underground in a blocked-off maintenance tunnel. If you’re a good boy, we’ll serve you tea and food in an hour.”

“I don’t understand.” Tilrey yanked hard on the chain, trying fruitlessly to dislodge the pipe, then slid down the wall into a sitting position. “Who’s ‘we’?”

“Do you really need me to tell you?”

Dissidents. The word hung unspoken in the air between them, the unspeakable word that had poisoned their last two conversations.

“Can’t be,” he said. “They wouldn’t be this stupid.”

She did smile then. “It is. We are. Exactly what you think, except the stupid part.”

“That’s madness.” He was on his feet again, unable to stay still. The two goons who’d ambushed him—were they shirkers, then? He hadn’t caught more than a glimpse of them, but he knew they hadn’t worn the unmistakable dried-blood-colored tunics of soldiers and Sector guards.

Of course they weren’t soldiers. Gersha would never have betrayed the Republic—that was pure unreason—and Tilrey hadn’t done anything to run afoul of Int/Sec himself. He’d been letting his terror of imprisonment do the thinking.

Outrage and relief flooded him at once. He refused to believe shirkers were anything to fear, not compared with Int/Sec, but how dare they?

He kept his voice reasonable. “Celinda, Gádden will know I’m gone, and then Verán will know. He’s got the whole army at his disposal, and he’ll crush you. All of you. I’m valuable to him—”

“Oh yes, I know.” The sneer was back in her tone. “The Island’s precious jewel. Verán’s best currency. And how exactly will he find you?”

“The cams.” Tilrey glanced up instinctively, looking for the tiny eyes that dotted the Library and virtually every other public space in the city. He knew about some blind spots, of course; everyone did. But there was no way a band of Dissidents could have brought him here—wherever here was—without being captured multiple times on the security stream. Facial recog would do the rest.

“Cams have operators. Some of those operators are on our side. They’re Drudges, after all, like you and me, though you tend to forget that, Rishka. It’s sweet living like a Strutter, isn’t it?”

“You should know.” Tilrey tugged again at the chain, hard, but the pipe didn’t give. He was still a little weak with the relief of realizing he wasn’t in a Sector cell, worrying about Gersha, waiting for an interrogation with the Voice.
Did Celinda really expect him to tremble at a band of disgruntled workers? Whether her friends hoped to recruit him or to hold him for ransom, he doubted any Dissident cell in Redda had ever pulled off such a stunt. In the Laborer cities of Thurskein or Karkei, major uprisings sometimes happened, swamping whole sectors—he’d witnessed one. But here there were simply too many cams, too many soldiers, too many watchful Upstart eyes.

Which meant Celinda’s friends were doomed, and all he had to do was sit and wait to be rescued. Reclaimed. The only real danger was that Verán might think he’d collaborated.

And, at home, Gersha would be safe and waiting for him.

The best tactic, he decided, was to stall and keep repeating the party line. Be an exemplary little kettle boy. “What did they promise you to join up?” he asked. “Do you really want to sacrifice everything? Your sweet life?”

Celinda’s eyes turned poisonous. “Some things are more important than our personal comfort. I may live with a Strutter, but I’m not in love with her.”

“And I am with mine?”

“So I’ve heard.”

Anger closed Tilrey’s throat, but he tamped it back down. Collapsed into a sitting position again, elbows on knees.

He was already familiar with Celinda’s tactics. She’d try to provoke him to helpless rage and reckless confessions, but she’d be disappointed. If there was one thing Tilrey knew how to do, it was wait out situations he couldn’t change.

“I like my Upstart, yes,” he said. “I like serving the Party. We’ve already been through this. I’ve told you I won’t participate in any treasonous activity, whatever you want to call it.” And that’s what I’ll continue to say, as many times as you badger me, until they come and take you off to a cell.

He didn’t like the thought of Celinda being locked up in the Sector, subjected to a Voice of her own, but he’d warned her twice. What else could he do?

You’re a coward, said a voice in his head—not Linnett this time. It was the husky, adolescent voice of Dal, his first love.

Black-haired Dal was confidence personified, raised by her four elder brothers to be a daredevil. Tilrey remembered her crossing a half-frozen brook while he stayed on the bank, leery of the swift-running water. When they were both seventeen, Dal dared him to go to a Dissident meeting, and this time he did not stand frozen in fear.

He felt such a rush at that meeting, an excitement that Celinda probably understood. The Dissidents—who called themselves “defenders of the true hearth”—spoke of eradicating the Levels, of giving everyone a vote for even the highest offices. Some of them had grown beards like feudals; others wore scarves in colors like crimson or green. They didn’t use titles or honorifics. They treated Tilrey like an adult, not a schoolboy, and asked if he had any useful skills. When he haltingly confessed to a knack for languages, the leader brought out an intercepted Harbourer transmission and asked him to translate it on the spot. Tilrey hesitated, but the urge to prove his worth—to show off, he thought now—was too strong. More importantly, he wanted to tell Dal he’d done it.
One act of childish, love-inspired rebellion, and here he was—a twisted, broken thing, but wiser. 
I’m no coward. I’m surviving, and one day I’ll have my reward.

“I understand the attraction,” he said. “Believe me, I do. But do you really want to end up in a Sector cell?”

Celinda was shaking her head. “You’re so fucking clueless. Do you think we nabbed you randomly today?”

“How should I know?”

All he had to do was wait it out. At least this nonsense was distracting him from the mental images that had been tormenting him since this morning: Gersha standing delicately on one foot to pull on his trousers, Gersha’s slim naked form, Gersha’s blushing glance at him—

“Our hand was forced, Tilrey. If we hadn’t found you in the Library, you would’ve ended up in your own Sector cell later this afternoon.”

“What are you talking about?” He tried not to let her see how the phrase “Sector cell” unnerved him; this was another mind game. “I haven’t done anything.”

“That’s a matter of opinion.”

“Stop being vague.”

Celinda shrugged—you asked for it. “Your precious Fir Gádden found one of your Tangle books, and he wasn’t pleased. He was so not pleased that he ran and cried to one of his interrogator friends in Int/Sec, who arranged to have you picked up for questioning today.”

Something went cold and still in Tilrey’s chest. She could be making it all up, of course. But how would she know about the Voice—about Ranek Egil?

He couldn’t believe it. Gersha wouldn’t have given him to Int/Sec over something as trivial as his reading, not without talking to him first. But if it were true—well, that might explain Gersha’s odd behavior yesterday.

My love, Gersha liked to call him. And last night Tilrey had said it right back, had used Gersha’s name. He’d let down his guard.

Never a good idea, Linnett whispered. She’s right—you like that little Councillor too much for your own good. You were starting to think he cared for you.

“Even if it were true, how would you know any of that?” he asked sharply, silencing the voice in his head.

Celinda must have seen he was shaken. Yet she looked less smug now than tired, her eyes glassy as if with sap or some low-level tranq.

“We have our channels,” she said. “Rishka, you keep underestimating us, insulting us, when all we want to do is help you. It’s over for you, get it? Gádden already thinks you’re one of us.”

“That’s absurd.” He seemed to be in a rapidly dropping elevator, vertigo taking hold as he tried to reconcile this picture with everything Gersha had said and done last night. “Reading Library books isn’t illegal.”
And my Fir can’t be that two-faced. It’s just not in him.

But she kept talking. “If they grill you in the Sector now, you’ll give me up, and I can’t let that happen. We aren’t letting you go. There’s no way out for you but through.”
Distractions

Chapter Notes

This chapter features a memory of past gang rape. Things will get dark here for a few more chapters, but resolution will come soon. Thanks so much again for reading and leaving kudos and comments! They make my day.

The pub was in the city’s Sixth Ring, tucked in the underground passage between a semiconductor factory and a drab block of R3-Level housing. It was a musty hole in the wall with a fizzy heater, five booths, one high slit window, a dartboard, and a long bar gummy with the residue of drinks and elbows.

Long ago, when Gersha was just out of Uni, one of his cousins had brought him here “to meet easy Drudge girls.” Gersha had no interest in girls of any Level, so while his cousin got a workingwoman liquored up, he let his eyes roam the room and tried to imagine the lives of the people who frequented this stale, wretched den.

Now it was the only place he felt comfortable seeking solace. He could sap himself into a stupor at home, but that would remind him of his mother, and tonight, for once in his life, he wanted the noisy, ignoble effects of alcohol. He wanted to self-destruct the way Laborers did.

“Grain liquor, please. Whatever you’ve got.” A scan of his ID would instantly reveal Gersha as an Upstart, so he dropped a vial of sap on the counter as payment. Hoping to blend in, he’d swapped his tunic for anonymous workout clothes and borrowed one of Bosh’s coats—an offense against Level Code, but not the kind a Councillor had to worry about.

The bartender, a sharp-nosed R2 Laborer in her forties with a long scarf wound around her head, looked dubiously at him. “I’ll get you what’s on the top shelf, Fir, but it won’t be what you’re used to.”

She turned away, leaving Gersha fuming. Could everyone smell the Upstart on him? Was it the accent—did his vowels make him sound like an uptight Sector prig?

The glass sloshed as the woman placed it on the counter. Gersha flinched at the fumes that rose from it.

“For a V you can drink all week here, Fir,” the barkeep said in a monotone. “Don’t worry, no one’ll bother you—unless you want them to. Boy, girl, something else, I can get you whatever you like.”

“No thanks,” Gersha took his glass of poison and sank into an empty booth, as far from the bar as possible, his face flaming. How many slumming Strutters came here for a quick fuck, or to see how grungy a sanctioned, government-run “leisure establishment” could be and still pass inspection?

He’d ducked out of the Sector before the end of the workday. Even the factories were still running, and the dull hum of machinery above him explained why the place was deserted.
Grateful for the solitude, Gersha downed his glass quickly, wincing at the burn of black-market Harbourer spirits. A bar could only be licensed to sell beer and cider, but the manager had clearly found a way around such trivialities.

Perhaps he should have been a Laborer. He tried to imagine leaving work every afternoon when a whistle blew. Spending the evening with friends, drinking and playing games, watching streams, sharing gossip. Cutting out early to spend the night with someone special—*don’t think about that.*

By the time he was on his feet, the barkeep had a second glass all ready for him.

With each swallow, warmth burgeoned in his head and chest, quickening his pulse and blurring his vision, bringing back the images of Tilrey—*Rishka, my love, my Rishka*—that he’d tried to dispel. But at least he was no longer seeing Ranek’s cold eyes, or the Council chamber, or the apartment he refused to return to while the boy’s room sat empty.

He’d searched that room like a fool, thinking he could protect Tilrey, thinking he had some sort of control over the process. *Fucking pussy.*

Numbness had to set in eventually. He took another gulp to make his body stop aching for the boy’s phantom touch. Hands, lips, strong arms, fingers . . .

By the third glass, the pinprick lights above the bar had switched on, and the walls and tables were melting together. Men and women in coveralls had moved into the surrounding booths and tables, where they drank their own poisons with silent determination. The window-slit showed snow whirling under a floodlight.

*This is where I belong.* Some of his mother’s ancestors could have been Laborers. Simple working people, content to let those who could grasp the precious legacy of Tangle technology make the decisions, while they broke their backs for nine hours a day and then drank themselves into oblivion.

Would he be happier in a life like this, with someone always telling him what to do? Did it matter? All that mattered was that everyone had a place, Whyberg said so, and Whyberg . . . the Council . . . the Sector . . .

Gersha reached reflexively for his handheld, because if work was over in the factories, it was also getting late in the Sector, and perhaps Ranek had an update for him. Then he remembered he was surrounded by Laborers, on their terrain. *No devices.*

He’d look at it on the tram platform, if he could get there without falling down. He levered himself upright, using the booth as a crutch, and launched himself toward the door at the back of the room, hoping it led to the stairs.

Tugging on the door futilely, he heard rough male chuckles behind him. “Need some help, Fir?”

“Hey, Fir, you dropped your scarf. Wouldn’t want to freeze that pretty face off.”

The hunger behind the words made Gersha’s spine prickle with an old dread, reminding him of his school days. If they knew he was a Gádden and a Councillor, not just a rank-and-file Upstart, would they be less likely to harass him, or more? *Savages. They hate us, all of them.*

“I’m fine, lads.” *Don’t raise your voice. You have control.* He yanked desperately on the handle—and tumbled back into the room as someone pushed the door from the other direction.

Gersha’s legs folded, but a pair of strong arms buoyed him up and carried him over the threshold
into the cold corridor. Fighting dizziness, he opened his eyes to find his face pressed against a tweed-faced down coat. Another Upstart, this one not disguised.

As he grasped for the strength to push the man away, to utter a threat to call a constable, a blessedly familiar voice said, “Hey, Fir. What are you doing in this hole?”

“Bror.” He felt his knees give again, this time with relief, because the kettle boy was somehow exactly who he needed to see. “You were right. I’m so stupid. I need—I need him.”

***

Celinda’s tongue was in Tilrey’s mouth.

The last thing he remembered was dozing off on the pile of rags. Their conversation had kept going in circles, her insisting that he “just listen to” a plan her friends had for him, while he countered that he had no interest in Dissident plans and schemes and felt safer not knowing. Eventually Celinda gave up—or so he thought—and went away, leaving him a bucket to piss in and hitting the light switch to send the basement back into oblivion.

Now the lights were back on, and she was on top of him.

As he tried to orient himself, blinking his vision clear, an expert hand pulled his head back. Again her warm, full lips claimed his, one thigh rubbing knowingly against his cock. She’d half-unbuttoned his tunic and her own coverall, and her breasts pressed against his thin shirt, nipples hardening, while her hand reached down between his legs.

When it came to arousing men, she was a professional. Tilrey groaned, feeling himself respond, but now he was alert enough to force himself upright and shove her away. “What’s wrong with you? You think you can fuck me into rebelling?”

“You want it.” Celinda stayed where he’d put her, but he could see her eyes glitter. “You’ve always wanted me.”

He yanked the tunic over his erection. “Please. I know all the same tricks you do.”

“That doesn’t stop them from working. You’re a man, you know, not a machine. Not currency. Not a ‘piece.’”

She hissed the word “man” as if it were something only she knew how to value. Tilrey tried not to hear it echoing in his head as he fastened the tunic. “I’m well aware of what I am.”

“I’ve always liked you, too, you know. I could see you were different from the others. Not a stupid little ass licker like Ansha, or a dunderhead like Bror.”

So she’d switched from provocation to flattery—an all-too-familiar tactic. He sighed.

“You do like women, Rishka. I can tell you do.”

“I like . . . everything.” *And nothing at all. Except maybe what Gersha and I were doing last night.*

There was a frantic note in Celinda’s voice now, clashing with her attempt at seduction. “We could get married, you know. I could have your child. There’s nothing stopping us.”

Married? Children? Was she truly unhinged? “And in what world would we do that?”

She scrambled to her feet and looked down on him, buttoning up her coverall. “The world where
you stop being a whore and start being a free man, and I start being a free woman, after you do one thing for us. After you kill Verán.”

“After I what?” Was this what they’d dragged him here for—to make him commit a political assassination? He didn’t have to feign his shock at the idea. “That’s absurd, Celinda. Verán is practically the General Magistrate; that would throw the whole Republic into chaos. Anyway, I’m not a murderer, and neither are you.”

“Chaos is the point. Anyway, don’t pretend you’ve never thought about killing the bastard.”

I can’t say I’d mind if he died. But he wasn’t fool enough to say so. “Talk sense, Celinda. A few hours ago, you were telling me I’m a wanted man now. If it’s true I’m already bound for a cell, how on earth would I get to Verán?”

Celinda began to pace in small, tense steps, all her sensual languor gone. “Gádden is the one who reported you. Verán thinks Gádden is a prudish little fool. If you go to him on your knees, say it was a misunderstanding, and promise to be good, the old man will let you back into his bed, believe me.”

“You’d let me go?” He couldn’t let her see how his pulse raced at the thought of getting out of here. He’d take his chances with Verán.

“I know what you’re thinking. But if you don’t execute the plan, Tilrey, we have ways of reaching you.”

Not if I rat you out to Int/Sec first. He didn’t want to do it, but what choice was she leaving him? To kill a man in cold blood or to send a crew of would-be murderers to prison.

“I don’t see why you want to kill him,” he said, stalling again. “I saw what happened in Thurskein: violence always just makes them crack down harder.”

She stopped short. “So if I give you a good reason, you’ll consider it?”

What if, somehow, they were being surveilled? “I didn’t say that.”

“It would be so easy, Rishka. Verán’s an old man who can’t walk without a cane; you’re in the prime of life. Go make up to him. Grovel. Be his pretty piece. Then, once you’re alone in the bedroom, you whip out a garrote”—she demonstrated with an invisible cord—“or even smother him with a pillow. Slip out the front door, and we’ll have you on a cargo plane to Harbour hours before his driver even finds the body.”

This wasn’t real. It was like a scene from a melodramatic stream, and the look on Celinda’s noble features said she was enthralled by her own performance.

“You can get me passage to Harbour? Letters of introduction?” Tilrey didn’t believe it for a second, but that wasn’t the important part. “You still haven’t given me anything approaching a reason,” he said, trying to infuse his voice with the proper self-righteousness.

Celinda shook her head. “Seriously? You’re asking me for a reason?”

“He’s a human being.”

“How principled of you.” It was practically a snarl. “I don’t get you, Rishka. How many times will you let them hit you and come back begging for more?”
He started to speak, but she went on: “Bror told me, you know—about what happened your first night in Verán’s house. What he made you do.”

“Bror told you that?” Tilrey couldn’t quite keep the edge off his voice. He’d trusted Bror.

“He was concerned about you,” Celinda said primly.

Well, fuck. Tilrey wouldn’t have told Bror about that night if they hadn’t been drinking too much rotgut liquor in the wretched factory pub where Bror liked to pick up girls.

Bror had already heard the rumor from someone’s driver: “Is it true they made you suck off every member of the Island Party on your first night?”

And, because he was wasted and miserable, instead of dodging the question, Tilrey said, “They tried.”

It had all come spilling out then, everything that happened after the Voice left him. Verán had come to the cell and given Tilrey proper clothes and led him back into a world of freedom and light, and oh, how pliable he’d been.

Back in Verán’s apartment, he obliged Verán, though only after he coaxed the new majority leader into telling him exactly what had happened to Linnett. Then the other Party members arrived and started drinking, and they took him into the bedroom, where he blew man after man until his aching throat and stiff tongue refused to cooperate. He begged and made excuses, and they gave him more sap and rolled him on his back and took turns riding his mouth while he concentrated on not choking.

Besha, of all people, came to his rescue, insisting on taking him off to wash his face and drink some water. Tilrey was pathetically grateful for the respite, and Besha didn’t touch him the whole time. When he emerged again, Verán’s driver shoved him down on his hands and knees and whispered, “They want to see me take you,” and he spread his legs and cooperated just to get the night over with.

And all the time they called him by the name of the man who’d shaped and broken him—“Nettsha”—and Tilrey didn’t understand, kept trying to correct them, until Besha took pity on him and explained: “It’s because you were Linnett’s boy. When we do things to you, it’s almost like we’re doing them to him.”

Damn you, Bror. How many people did you tell?

“Verán treated you like a prisoner of war that night,” Celinda said. “Not even like a whore, a proper sanctioned one, but like something he owns. He still does that, doesn’t he? Everyone knows what happened on Election Night.”

Do they? Tilrey rubbed his mouth, inching away from her. Stick to the party line. “Fir Verán hasn’t always been the gentlest to me, I suppose. But—”

“Gentlest? After he had you gang-raped, he gave you to Linden, who beat the shit out of you on a weekly basis.”

His past sounded so harsh when you stripped it of euphemisms. “Linden was a feeble old man. He barely put a scratch on me.”

“Really? Because I heard he broke your jaw once. You’re lucky he didn’t disfigure you.”
Tilrey felt a muscle tense in his jaw as he remembered how fucking much that had hurt. But it had been his fault for disobeying the unspoken rules, for raising his hand and trying to stop a beating. He hadn’t done that again.

“None of that is your business,” he said. “Or a reason to kill Fir Verán. He was exercising the prerogatives of his station, and me, well . . .”

He rose, swaying a little on his shackled foot. “I mean, look at me, Cela. Like you say, I’m in the prime of life. No one makes me do anything. Anything I do, anything I let people do to me—well, I’m no victim.”

Celinda was silent. In the dim light, it took Tilrey a few moments to realize the expression she wore was pity.

Rage clamped his throat, but no, no, rage was weakness. He’d show her he wasn’t weak.

*You have more stamina than I’d have expected,* the Voice said in his head.

“You still haven’t given me a real reason to ice Verán.” He stepped toward her until the chain brought him up short. “Kill him, and another just like him comes along. If he weren’t whipping the Party into shape, someone else would be.”

“It causes chaos, like you said, and it sends a message.” At least now she looked furious again, that horrible condescension gone. “Verán is pure oligarch arrogance, Rishka—you know that better than me. He didn’t earn his position; he was born to it. He’s the worst of the system in one man’s body.”

“Taking down the body won’t take down the system.” *Do I want to take down the system?*

“It’s a start.”

Just for a moment, Tilrey allowed himself to imagine doing what she wanted. Because, no, it wasn’t that hard.

He and the majority leader would enter the bedroom, still damp from their bath, as they had dozens of times before. Seeping that smug air of possession, Verán would lower himself onto the bed and carefully prop his cane against the nightstand. He would settle himself and reach for the lube and flick his index and middle finger sideways (“strip”) and point to the spot beside him (“there, face down”).

Tilrey would unbutton his tunic and deposit it on a chair, moving languidly as a sleepwalker. He might even smile as he sank onto the bed. Then, before Verán could ask querulously why he hadn’t removed the rest of his clothes, he would pick up a pillow and clamp it tight to the old man’s mouth and nose, pressing him flat to the duvet.

Verán’s arms and legs would flail like an insect’s. The majority leader’s muffled voice would cry “Please,” and Tilrey would press the pillow tighter to choke off his frantic cries until, at last, all movement ceased. It might not even take long.

Imagine Verán’s dying eyes brought him out of the fantasy with a jerk, because those eyes were full of contempt. Verán might plead, but he would not expect mercy. He would die thinking Tilrey had simply reverted to the animal savagery that was the natural state of Drudges.

That wasn’t what he wanted, even in his cruelest imaginings.
“If I were to do anything to Councillor Verán,” he said slowly, “I wouldn’t kill him. I’d crush him the way he crushes his enemies. I’d humiliate him.”

Celinda edged closer to him, her beautiful eyes glinting. “And that would be how?”

*To humiliate someone,* said Linnett, *target their greatest weakness. I, for instance, enjoy being in control. You would simply need to manufacture a situation in which I control nothing.*

Tilrey knew exactly how he could humiliate Verán if he chose, but he had no intention of handing Celinda and her friends the most—only—valuable secret he had. What could they do with it other than get themselves killed?

With a rattle of steel, he sank back down on his pile of rags and spoke loud and clear, imagining hidden microphones. “You don’t seem to understand, Celinda. I’m grateful to Fir Verán for giving me a home with the Island. I respect all his decisions for me. If he and Fir Gádden really think I belong in a cell for reading Harbourer books, I respect that, too.”

He had to stop there, swallowing down the bitterness in his throat, to remind himself she’d probably made up the part about Gersha. *Had* to have.

Celinda looked as if she’d stumbled on a sewage spill. “Just stop it, Rishka. No one’s monitoring you here.”

He needed to stall, to figure out how to get himself out of here without consenting to murder. “If you want help bringing down the ‘system,’ you’ll have to find another hero.”
Frigid wind whipped Gersha’s cheeks as he bent over the parapet, vomiting into the ground-level courtyard. Each painful heave of his guts pumped more acid into his raw throat, but the cold felt cleansing. Like a hard slap.

One of Bror’s strong arms had snaked around his waist, keeping him from tumbling into the rubbish bins caked with dirty snow. Gersha was grateful; if the kettle boy hadn’t happened by, he might not have managed to get himself up the stairs from the basement. He’d still be on the pub’s doorstep, a spectacle for the hard-drinking factory workers.

*Maybe I deserve that.*

“You ready to go back inside, Fir? Don’t want you to get frost-bite.”

Gersha swallowed down bile, but his stomach felt empty at last. “Thanks. You can go along—I’m okay now.”

“Nah, not leaving you like this.” Bror swung him around, hooking a shoulder under his armpit, and half-nudged, half-carried him back through the seal onto the cinderblock tram platform. “Is your car somewhere, or did you take the tram to this dump, Fir?”

“Tram.” Gersha let Bror deposit him gently on a bench. His legs were still shaky, his cheeks burning from the cold.

“You need to call Bosh, Fir. Have him pick you up.”

“No.” Gersha couldn’t face Bosh’s silent censure tonight. He fumbled in the coat for his handheld, trying to remember why he’d been reaching for it earlier. “I’ll be fine on the tram.”

“Give me that, and I’ll message Kehlo—István’s driver. He won’t ask questions.”

Gersha clutched tight to the metal casing. “You can’t use this.”

“You really think I’ve never used a handheld before, Fir?” Bror’s blunt face wasn’t terribly expressive, but now he got considerable mileage out of rolling his eyes.

*It’s off-limits. Personal data devices are for R8 and above.* But Gersha wasn’t sure he could make his eyes focus on the screen, so he typed in his password and handed the device over. “If you try to siphon my data, I’ll know.”

That earned him another eye-roll as Bror began typing, far too expertly. “I’m no hacker, believe me. Flunked out of programming. Where’s Rishka, Fir? You sure I shouldn’t call him?”

Gersha’s stomach knotted again, and he sagged against the wall, feeling the world go liquid. “No.”

“Yeah?” Bror handed the device back, his eyes narrowed. “Where is he?”

“I don’t know. Library, maybe.” The lie tasted bitter.

“Did you have a fight, Fir? You and Tilrey?”

*If only.* Gersha closed his eyes and focused on breathing. He needed news from Ranek. He needed control.
I thought it was my duty. It is my duty.

Bror fetched them water, which Gersha drank gratefully, and in less than a quarter-hour, Councillor István’s mag-car slid up to the platform. When Gersha rose, everything wobbled; he was grateful for the big kettle boy’s guiding hand on his elbow.

Once settled in the backseat with a thermal throw over his legs, he leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Normally he would have been unsettled by Bror’s muscle-clad bulk so close to him, but now it was almost reassuring. If he closed his eyes, he could pretend it was—no, don’t. You don’t deserve to think about him.

The car rose straight up with a raucous hissing of jets, then leveled out and went silent, gliding in the grip of the top mag-grid. Gersha half-opened his eyes and watched monumental factories drift by in the dark, the snow lending their rugged concrete contours a ghostly illumination that made them almost beautiful.

“Why were you in that mess, Fir? Doesn’t seem like your kind of place.”

Gersha said nothing, hoping Bror would interpret this as Keep to your own Drudge business.

But Bror wasn’t done with him. “Are you sure you don’t want me to call Tilrey?”

“No. I mean, yes, I’m sure, lad. Don’t call him.”

“Whatever he’s pissed about, he’ll forgive you when he sees you this sick. Hell, I’d even forgive you, Fir.”

The boy spoke in a magnanimous tone that gave Gersha an absurd urge to laugh. “How generous of you. You’ve made it plain you don’t like me.”

“Don’t dislike you, Fir. Just worry about my friend sometimes. He needs somebody on his side.”

For a moment, Gersha was tempted to spill the truth. Confessing, even lowering himself to beg for forgiveness, might relieve the awful pressure in his head. If only Bror were a near-equal, someone like Ranek . . .

But no, an equal would be even worse. An equal would scorn him. And this whole matter was classified. He drew himself up. “Your concern is touching, but the affairs of my house are just that.”

Bror was undeterred. “Is Rishka out with somebody else, Fir? A girl, maybe?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care,” Gersha said, then regretted his sharpness. “Bror, could you tell me something?” He pondered how to phrase it, his head throbbing. “Have you ever . . . well, are you content with your posting?”

If Tilrey had truly crossed over into the shadow realm of Dissidence, then Gersha needed to gain a better sense of why. Without that, he would never be able to help the boy.

His boy.

Bror’s massive knee nudged his. “You mean, do I like being a piece, Fir? Sure. I got decent scores in everything but prog, could’ve had a Sector job, but it sounded so fucking boring. Fact is, I don’t like getting up every morning and staring at a screen. I thought about enlisting in the army, but I wanted to see how the other half lives.”
“So you . . . you chose this?”

Bror chuckled, and Gersha realized belatedly that he must have sounded horrified. “Yeah. Went in with my eyes open. It’s got its ups and downs, but nobody’s forcing me to do anything. You’re not asking about me, though, are you, Fir?”

Was he that transparent? Gersha pressed his hands over his eyes. “I don’t expect you to—”

The car bumped to a stop, and he looked up to see the familiar parapets of his own building. Back in the land of Strutters. Safe.

Bror slid out first, then steadied Gersha as he planted feet on the concrete.

“I can’t tell you Tilrey’s story, Fir,” Bror said, his words half eaten by the wind as they moved together toward the seal. “Wouldn’t be much of a friend if I went blabbing his business. But I can tell you one thing—it’s not like my story. Not even close.”

Gersha’s breath caught. “He didn’t choose to be a kettle boy. That’s what you mean, isn’t it?”

Hadn’t he already known that on some level? If not, shouldn’t he have? Wasn’t it clear from the way Tilrey’s face went slack whenever Verán entered the room, or the way he lowered his eyes in any Upstart’s presence, like a long-term prisoner facing his jailor?

He’d known, but he hadn’t wanted to think about it, because that made him a jailor, too.

Bror shrugged. “If you want to know why he’s how he is, Fir, why not just ask him?”

***

Hours later, or perhaps only minutes, the “food and tea” that Celinda had promised arrived. A lantern-jawed boy with a face full of freckles, who looked barely out of his teens, elbowed the door open, closed it, and deposited a tray just within Tilrey’s reach. “Eat,” he said, crossing his arms.

Tilrey sampled the mug. The tea was lukewarm, unusable as a weapon. If he stood up quickly enough, gaining the advantage of surprise, could he brain the boy with the plastic tray? But he wouldn’t get far unless the boy happened to have the key to the shackle in his pocket.

The longer he stayed with these shirkers, the more he’d look like one of them when—or if—he finally got out. Perhaps promising to murder Verán was his only salvation, but would Celinda believe him now?

Back when she was on top of him, he could have caught her in a chokehold and gotten the key off her. All those hours of swimming and lifting, and he had no notion of how to use his strength in a practical context. Submitting to force was almost a reflex at this point.

He could use his tongue, though, in several ways. Perhaps to find out where he was and how many Dissident foot-soldiers he had to worry about.

He grabbed a handful of dry biscuits—stale tasting—and washed them down with the tea. “So, what’s your rank in the shirker army?”

“We’re not ‘shirkers,’ and we don’t have ranks,” the boy said sourly, leaning against the door.

“Yeah? That doesn’t sound very organized. What did they promise you when you signed up? A trip to Harbour? Your very own handheld? All the sap you can drink?”
“What do you care?”

“I’m curious.”

The boy’s eyes leveled with his, contemptuous. “They promised me freedom.”

Tilrey gulped down the rest of the rank tea; he needed his strength. “That sounds good. I can see the appeal. I mean, to someone like you who probably resents his posting. Factory, right? I wouldn’t like that, either. But how much freedom will you have when you end up in a cell? Or dumped in the Wastes to die?”

The boy hocked up loudly and spat on the floor between them. “Better than be like you, going on my knees for them.”

“You have self-respect. Good for you. But do you really think any of this will—”

He stopped, going still, as a staccato crack sounded in the distance. “What the—”

A second crack, and Tilrey’s heart thudded against his ribcage. He’d only heard such sounds out on the edge of the city where Linnett used to take him to watch the sunset; the army had a rifle range there.

“Are your friends having target practice?” If these Dissidents had managed to get or make themselves firearms, they were more dangerous than he’d thought.

But a glance at the boy showed Tilrey the shots weren’t routine. “Shut it,” the kid said, his own movements jerky and nervous as he yanked the door open and stuck his head out. “Jansha?”

A third crack echoed through the passage. “Jansha?” the boy called, louder, his voice going shrill with panic.

Somewhere in the distance an alarm began to whoop, making the hairs on Tilrey’s neck stand on end. “Are we under attack?”

But the boy was already gone—out the door and racing down the passageway, his boots pounding away from the gunshots.

Blood roaring in his ears, Tilrey hauled himself to his feet and glared at the now-open door. That damn key. If the constables had picked up Celinda’s trail and come for him, then he should be sitting put and waiting to be freed. But if the shots came from someone else—

He had no more time to think before Celinda dashed into the room, her eyes wild and her braid half-undone.

“Rishka!” She fell to her knees and seized his tethered ankle, her other hand fumbling desperately in her pocket. “I think we’re blown.”

“Oh?” Tilrey snatched the key from her shaking fingers before she could drop it. “What happened?”

She didn’t try to stop him, only whipped around to rifle through a crate. “Gotta go, now. We’ve got a few men holding them off, and there’s a skimmer outside.”

She straightened with a length of pipe clutched in one hand. The shots had stopped, but the alarm continued to whoop, jangling Tilrey’s nerves and making him curse viciously as he forced the
balky key to turn. If nothing else, he wasn’t going to be chained up here while they burned the place to the ground.

There. He kicked the shackle aside and stood straight at last, flexing his knee and hamstrings. “That’s not going to help much,” he yelled through the alarm, nodding at Celinda’s pipe.

She darted to him and dug her nails into his arm. “We need to get out before they seal the building.”

He didn’t move. “No.”

“Are you crazy?” She wrenched at him, shrieking through the mechanical whooping, “You can’t stay here—you’re with us now. They’ll try you for treason, Rishka!”

The word sent a cold bolt shooting down Tilrey’s spine. But there was an odd flatness in Celinda’s eyes, something that didn’t match her tone or her increasingly frantic efforts to budge him. Something held in reserve.

He wasn’t sure what to make of it, but he had inner reserves, too, didn’t he? “No,” he said, firmer now. “You go, but I belong here.”

“They’ll kill you, Tilrey! They’ll drop you in the Wastes!” Her eyes were wet, her whole body shuddering, but something was still off. Something was missing, almost as if she were performing her terror.

“Maybe,” he said, emboldened. “I think I’ll try my chances.”

All at once the alarm broke off, leaving a gaping, palpable silence. Tilrey could hear his ears ring. Celinda brandished the pipe, her face too calm for the implied threat. “I’ll drag you if I have to.”

Seriously? But the word died in Tilrey’s throat as heavy footsteps thudded in the corridor. Soldiers’ steel-toed boots—those had never meant anything good for him. Despite his resolve to stay put, adrenaline shot through him, narrowing his vision to the open door.

Three red-uniformed men burst into the room, rifles drawn, taking in the scene with professional acuity. Tilrey raised his hands automatically, but he had no time to speak before two of them grabbed him and slammed him against the cinderblock wall, knocking the breath from his lungs.

A knee lodged in the small of his back, then withdrew as he was allowed to stand. Broad fingers collared and cuffed him, and Tilrey could feel the full length of the nearest captor’s body, smell his sweat. Goddamn soldiers. Peering sideways through a haze of disgust, he could see the third soldier cuffing Celinda, who didn’t seem to be struggling at all.

And then everything went weirdly still.

The soldier’s grip loosened. He stepped back, allowing Tilrey to turn cautiously.

Beside Celinda stood a newcomer, a slight, dark Upstart with narrow, febrile eyes. No longer cuffed, Celinda was straightening her hair and clothes, her mouth set but not frightened.

Tilrey lurched toward her, but the soldier yanked him back. “What—”

Then he got a better look at the Upstart.

“The show’s over,” the man said, rubbing his palms. “That was a lovely performance, Rishka. I
expected you to crack any minute, but you stood firm.”

Ranek Egil. The face had taken a second to place, but he would never forget the voice.

“I know who you are now.” It came out in a gasp, as the soldier whipped him back around and pressed his cheek to the rough cinderblock. Again came the sharp prick in his neck.

“I should hope so,” said Egil.

*They were the ones putting on a “show,” not me. All of them.* Dizziness overwhelmed Tilrey, his head roaring and his knees giving way, and though he knew there was no point in fighting, he rasped out, “Does Gersha know?”

Egil’s reply seemed to come from a great distance: “Of course. Sleep now. We’ll have plenty of time to catch up.”
A Smaller Cell

Chapter Notes

I'm going to double up chapters today to get Gersha and Tilrey back together a bit sooner. Hope you enjoy, and thanks for reading!

Not until dawn did Ranek finally pick up one of Gersha’s calls. “Good morning, Councillor,” he said, sounding so placid and well rested that Gersha wanted to punch the wall of the bed alcove.

He was sleeping in Tilrey’s room again—or trying to sleep—because his own room had become so enormous and empty it echoed. Here, at least, he felt hidden like a small creature in a burrow that smelled faintly of the warm body that had been so close to his twenty-four hours ago.

“I know you said the less I know, the better.” He forced himself upright, fists clenched and head swimming. “But Ranek, you need, I need—”

He’d composed a long speech, full of graceful circumlocutions and protocol-speak, to couch his pressing desire for an update. But it had vanished like the vapor of his breath outdoors. “Tell me how he is,” he demanded.

He expected Ranek to stammer and equivocate, perhaps to threaten to revoke his security clearance again. But his friend spoke warmly, without missing a beat: “He’s friendly and cooperative, and in far less mental distress than you are at the moment. Gersha, I beg of you, stop fretting and get some sleep. We’re civilized people here. Your lad will be fine.”

***

Tilrey woke naked in a box in the dark.

When he tried to sit up, he hit his head. When he tried to stretch out his arms, they met walls—walls with a slight rubbery give, but no yield. He could recline full length, and he could (carefully) roll over on his stomach or side, but raise his head five or six inches, and it hit a wall.

Panic closed his throat.

I can’t move. There’s no air. I can’t breathe.

For few instants he flailed, striking out, trying to break the walls of his prison or shove them aside. They did not budge, and when he lay still again, the box seemed smaller than before.

Calm. Calm. Very gingerly, he ran his fingertips and toes around the edges of the box, tracing its contours. Several times longer than it was tall or wide, it fit his body almost exactly, like one of those boxes where Harbourers buried their dead.

Again he forced himself to relax his throat. I can breathe. I can. He could not turn back-to-front or stand or sit or stretch his arms above his head, but he had no reason to believe the air was running out. A vent or pipe must be feeding the box somewhere. It was only terror that had been suffocating him.

He rolled on his back again, crossed his arms on his breast, and replayed the moments just before they’d knocked him out. Egil’s face, complacent. Celinda’s, sullen but not scared. The show’s over.
One thing was for sure: he was in the Sector. This was Int/Sec’s kind of tactic; he could almost
smell it in the box’s smooth, featureless walls. Probably he’d been there the whole time. The attack
on the Dissident cell had been a show acted out by Celinda, the boy, and the soldiers, aided by
sound effects, while Egil watched the whole thing remotely.

But how? Despite his earlier fears, he didn’t believe Celinda had been working for Int/Sec the
whole time; she’d seemed way too earnest. And why put on this elaborate performance for him?

Tilrey shoved the questions aside. What mattered was that, if he was in the Sector, and he wasn’t
under any grave suspicion, they wouldn’t physically hurt him. Couldn’t. It would be like last time,
and he’d survived that.

This cell was padded, too. Just a lot smaller.

“Look, Fir,” he said aloud to the darkness, “it’s true I talked to Celinda about . . . shirking.
Dissidence. In the apartment block, and then in the Library. If you were listening in then, you
know I didn’t let her recruit me. I didn’t report her like I should have, either. But . . .”

He stopped, partly because he didn’t have a good reason and partly because silence swallowed the
words, and talking made him short of breath again.

Anyway, he knew now how Egil operated. The man wasn’t going to show up and start grilling him
right away, not when he could sit and watch Tilrey react and take notes on his “stamina.” If the
business with Celinda had been the first show, this was the second.

Only maybe Tilrey wouldn’t provide a show. Maybe he had no interest in satisfying the
interrogator’s curiosity about how long he could endure this confinement before he started
thrashing and screaming for release.

Slowly, to avoid slamming up against the roof, he drew his knees toward his chest and found he
could just barely assume a fetal position.

Eyes closed. The key was not to panic, not to let more than one wall of the box touch him at any
one time. There’s no box. I’m in my bed at home.

He imagined the room spreading around him—the same shape as this box, roughly, but bigger. So
much bigger. He imagined Gersha resting to his right against the wall of the alcove—not that
Gersha had ever been in his bed except the one time after Election Night, but why not? In the
single bed, they had to lie very close. Gersha’s warm breath wafted on his cheek; his fingers grazed
Tilrey’s hip. Gersha slept beautifully, serenely, and Tilrey should be asleep, too.

I’m comfortable. If I want to move, I can move. It’s the middle of the night, so why would I sit up?

He began counting seconds.

***

The high-named young Upstart Dissenter, Fredrich Akeina, had been reduced to a sobbing heap of
a man. The wall-screen offered a night-vision view of his cell: he crouched in a corner, arms
around his knees, answering the interrogator’s questions in a small, broken voice.

Gersha took a gulp of strong tea to stabilize his whirling head. He shifted his gaze from the screen
to the gleaming marble wall of the committee room, but he couldn’t shut out the frightened
Upstart’s confession.
Young Akeina swore he didn’t believe in abolishing Levels or Whybergism. He just wanted to make things a bit fairer. No, he hadn’t recruited any Laborers to the cause; they’d recruited him.

It was that girl Celinda, his uncle’s piece, who’d done it. His uncle had given Fredrich a night with her, and they’d talked and talked, and her skin was so soft and her hair was so gold, and yes, maybe Fredrich was a bit in love with her; he couldn’t deny that. They continued to meet in secret, and Celinda convinced him Whybergism had been perverted into inherited privilege, and he agreed. He knew better now, though, of course! He’d been foolish. He repented.

Councillor Karishkov hit something on his handheld, and the image froze.

Gersha hazarded a glance around the room and saw heads shaking, jowls quivering with disgust. No one seemed moved to pity by the young man’s folly.

*That could have been me. I could have been him.*

“Nicely handled by Interrogator Gersen,” Karishkov told the assembled Int/Sec committee in his crisp, emotionless voice. “Celinda Valde, the kettle girl or whatever you choose to call her, was picked up four days ago. Interrogator Egil’s still working on her, but he thinks there’s a possibility she could lead us to a Laborer cell.”

So Ranek had managed to get a decent assignment after all. Where did that leave Tilrey, who was surely a lower priority? Gersha examined the desktop. The last thing he needed was for his colleagues to see how the spectacle of the disgraced, seduced, sobbing Upstart affected him. His head was pounding, his eyelids caked and puffy, his insides threatening to rebel, and all because of a Laborer.

Had Fredrich told the truth about being recruited by the girl, or had he hatched the plot himself? It didn’t matter, Gersha decided. Confessing wouldn’t help young Akeina; everyone knew how this went. Once they were done wringing information from him, they would give his family one chance to say goodbye, and then, having issued summary judgment, they would fly him into the Wastes and leave him there to starve or freeze. Strewn across the tundra, his bones would serve as an example for future Upstarts who might be tempted to betray their birthright.

Gersha had always known the punishment for treason, but it had never seemed quite so harsh to him before. One more time, he reminded himself of Ranek’s reassurances. *Tilrey’s cooperating. They wouldn’t do that to him, anyway. They wouldn’t, wouldn’t, wouldn’t.*

“Bullshit,” a nasal voice said.

Karishkov turned like a sharp-beaked bird of prey. Though he was about Gersha’s age, he looked and acted considerably older when he was in the Council chamber, as if putting on gravitas. “Excuse me?”

“You’re buying this bullshit confession?” Besha asked from where he lounged with his feet on the desk, his chair tipping dangerously. “We’re supposed to believe Akeina never had these ideas till a whore whispered them in his ear? Frankly, I find it hard to believe any Drudge could wield that sort of influence over a Sector admin with a level two security clearance.”

“You think Akeina wasn’t recruited, then?” Albertine Linnett asked, turning to scrutinize the younger Councillor.

Besha shrugged. “He probably was, but not by a little slut. He got that rhetoric from someone of his own Level or above, which means there are more bad actors we haven’t rooted out. Maybe in
the Sector.”

“I grant you, Akeina comes off as either lying or incredibly naïve.” There was a weary throb in Linnett’s voice. “But a Laborer cell is consistent with our research. The data show a distinct upswing in organically formed, ideology-driven Laborer-led cells, often originating in the factory cities before spreading to Redda, and—”

“Your blasted surveys again?” Karishkov swung his eyes around the room, drawing a wave of dutiful laughter from the committee members. “Clearly, Fir’n Linnett thinks we’re facing an avalanche of resentment from the lower orders.”

“Not an avalanche. Not yet. Localized pockets that could spread.”

Karishkov ignored her. “And her solution, as always, is to survey the Drudges and see what they want.”

More laughter. Linnett’s face had turned to granite.

“What does a Drudge actually want?” Karishkov asked, playing to the crowd. “An end to ‘inherited privilege’? No. That’s not a concept Laborers can wrap their heads around. They want to feel happy in their places. They want us to root out the few real shirkers, make an example of them, and give all the other Drudges, the ‘good’ ones, a soft bed and an extra ration of beer twice a ten-day. I ran Int/Sec ops in the factory cities for years; for a while, I even worked undercover, sharing work and meals and beds with them. Believe me, I know. You show me Drudges who call themselves Dissidents, and I’ll show you shirkers and malcontents giving themselves fancy names.”

“You haven’t even looked at the data,” Linnett was protesting, but Gersha could no longer pretend to follow the debate.

His stomach kept flipping, full of some sickening viscosity. He saw bones scattered across a barren landscape, felt the whistle of arctic wind. He dropped his head on the desk and closed his eyes.

***

Somewhere close to the two-hour mark, Tilrey must have drifted off. He woke gasping and struggling, his head, hips, and knees already sore from multiple impacts against the walls.

No. No. No. Fully awake now, he forced himself to stretch flat, breathe, and stop fighting. To imagine ample space around him. Plenty of air. I’m not choking. I can beat this. I can.

But did he want to beat it? The sooner he stopped “holding it together,” the sooner Egil might let him out.

He tested the give of the roof with his fingertips, holding the panic down. The surface was just spongy enough to prevent him from doing much damage by bashing his head against it; they’d foreseen that possibility.

“Let me out,” he said. And then tried repeating the words, each time a little louder, until he was screaming: “Let me out!”

The screams made his ears ring, stole his breath; if he kept this up much longer, the freak-out wouldn’t be feigned. He rolled on his side and lay very still again. “Please, Fir Egil,” he said quietly. “Let’s just get on with this.”
No answer.
There’s another memory of gang-rape in this chapter. The English passage that Tilrey reads is from Percy Bysshe Shelley's play *The Cenci* (1819).

“Gersha? Gersha, are you all right?”

Gersha woke with a start to find the wall-screen had gone dark, the recessed ceiling lights dim. The seats around him were empty; he must have slept all the way into lunch recess.

“I’m fine,” he said, forcing himself to confront Albertine Linnett’s concerned green-flecked gray eyes. “I may have, uh, indulged excessively in Drudge rotgut last night. Was Besha having much fun at my expense?”

She shrugged dismissively. “I try not to notice him. You look like death.”

Tall, gaunt, and regal like her father, Albertine Linnett had a disdain for forms and ceremonies and a tight focus on work that Gersha found refreshing in the Council chamber. She’d never struck him as particularly maternal, but now he was reminded that she was, in fact, mother to two grown children. “You ought to be at home resting,” she said, raising her handheld. “What’s your driver’s name?”

He stopped her with a gesture. “It’ll pass. I’ll just get back to my office and make myself a stronger brew.”

“If you insist. But you drive yourself hard, Gersha.” She drew herself up with unconscious elegance, settling the Councillor’s robe around her shoulders. “You’re entitled to an occasional lapse.”

“I was sorry to miss the end of your debate with Karishkov. I hope you crushed him.” He grimaced, realizing he shouldn’t be so open about his opposition to an Islander. “I mean, you seemed to have the facts on your side.”

“I said my piece. But I’m aware I’m outnumbered.”

“You wouldn’t be, if qualifications mattered as much as party, Bertine.” Her nickname felt awkward on his tongue; because of their age and party differences, the two of them never socialized outside the Sector.

Albertine made a smothered sound that might have been a laugh. “Whatever I say, whatever evidence I cite, the Island hears ‘permissive.’ They hear ‘liberal.’ They hear ‘treason.’”

*You shouldn’t have to pay for your father’s sins.* But Gersha couldn’t say that aloud; Verán’s spies were everywhere.

He rose, steadying himself on the desk. “I listen to you. I believe in the data.”

“Thanks, but don’t let Verán hear you talking that way. I’d hate to be the cause of the Council
losing your talents.”

*Maybe I need to stop tiptoeing around Verán.* The thought came with a flood of startling rage. Gersha had to compose his face again before he could say, “Maybe he ought to listen to you, too. It’s time for us to stop underestimating our inferiors.”

The word rang sour. Wrong. He sounded like such a prick, with his lordly airs and his political cant to smooth over unpleasant realities—a prick who’d just sent the only person he’d ever cared about to rot in a cell.

*He’s not going to rot; he’s fine, and I don’t care about him—I mean, I do, but not that way. Not that much. He’s a whore, he flatters me, I can’t trust him, he—*

Bile choked Gersha again, and he didn’t pull away when Albertine touched his arm and said, “Sit for a minute more. I’ll fetch you some water.”

Defeated, he sank back into his seat. “I really do want to talk to Verán about this. Karishkov doesn’t have half the creds to chair this committee that you do. Your research, your time in Harbour—”

“With or without the chair, I’ll be fine, Gersha.” Her voice had turned soothing. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Gersha shook his head, feeling a desperate urge to do something, anything, that would make a dent in the impregnable monolith that was the Sector, the city, Oslov itself, wrapped in its protective mantle of snow and ice and heart-stopping cold. The island-Republic that had birthed him, had shaped him, might someday crush him just as it had crushed his mother.

“Still,” he murmured. “Maybe I can change Verán’s mind.”

***

Tilrey had slipped into a state halfway between doze and self-induced trance when Egil’s voice woke him.

“Roll over and look up,” it said matter-of-factly, seeming to come from all sides at once.

Tilrey obeyed without thinking. He slammed his forehead and elbow hard against the box and moaned. Once he managed to arrange himself on his back, arms tight to his sides, he saw lines of white text superimposed on the box’s black lid.

Was the whole thing a flatscreen? Blinded, he blinked to accustom himself to the light, while the Voice said, “Read it to me.”

Tilrey made his eyes focus. “That’s not Oslov, Fir.”

“Really?” A hint of amusement. “Then you’ll need to translate it for me.”

“But I . . .” He stared at the text. Ancient English. Verse, nothing he’d read before, but easily decipherable. “I haven’t been trained in translation, Fir.”

Had Celinda told the truth about one thing? Had they really imprisoned him because of his foolish hobby, his leisure reading? Or was Egil just amusing himself?

“No equivocation.” Egil’s voice had returned to droning, anonymous interrogator mode, empty of
the malicious glee he’d displayed on their last encounter. “Either you can read and translate it, or you can’t. If you don’t do it immediately, that will be taken as a sworn statement that you aren’t capable of doing so. Any evidence that contradicts that statement will establish you as a perjurer. Do I make myself clear?”

_Evidence like my library records, or like Gersha’s testimony about the books I keep in my room._ Tilrey would have preferred to hold out, to play dumb, perhaps even to evoke his legal right to privacy, but there was no point. Egil had his balls in a vise, and anyway, as he’d reminded Celinda, reading English was not illegal.

Just part of a deeply suspect pattern of behavior.

“Yes, Fir.” He sighed, then began to translate the words that floated above him. Should he downplay his skills by making a deliberate hash of it? No, that might be unwise, given that the passage was relatively simple:

“If I try to speak I shall go mad. Ay, something must be done; what, yet I know not . . . something which shall make the thing that I have suffered but a shadow in the dread lightning that avenges it; brief, rapid, irreversible, destroying the consequence of what it cannot cure. Some such thing is to be endured or done: when I know what, I shall be still and calm, and never anything will move me more.”

It went on like that—a long-ago Tangle play or poem in which someone swore revenge on someone else for committing an unspeakable act against them. Like most Tangle literature, it was shamelessly, compellingly emotional, each word suffused with shock and rage and lurid hints of incipient madness. Tilrey kept his tone neutral, his translation as straightforward and prosaic as possible.

The words kept scrolling, and he kept translating until his voice ached—and the words abruptly vanished, leaving him in darkness.

“What is the story about?” the voice asked.

“A . . . a crime, Fir?”

“What kind of crime?”

Egil’s sharpness told Tilrey not to play with him this time. “Rape, Fir. The person who’s speaking . . . I believe her father raped her.”

“Is that a crime you’re familiar with? Rape?”

Was it a trick question? Celinda had used that same word to describe how Verán had treated him. “No.”

“How would you define rape?”

The bizarre line of questioning almost made Tilrey forget the discomfort of the box. Was this a diversion, or a clue? If Egil had sent Celinda to play a “show” for him, scripting everything she said and did, what was the man’s ultimate intent? To provoke him into revealing his true feelings toward Upstarts?

“Violence and coercion of a sexual nature. Sexual relations entered into without active and meaningful consent of all parties concerned,” he said, sober as the dictionary.
“Very good. Where did you learn to speak English?”

Tilrey dug his nails into both palms, but his adrenaline was flowing now, his brain working; he had a focus. *Figure him out. Don’t let him trick you into a lie or insubordination.* “I learned a bit at school, and after that, I taught myself. Fir Linnett had books of Harbourer and English grammar. He helped me.”

“You taught yourself? You’re a bright boy, aren’t you?”

That was an easy one. “Wouldn’t presume to say so, Fir. I was only passing the time.”

“Passing the time. Because you were bored? In Fir Linnett’s house?”

“Yeah. I guess you could say that.”

“Did Fir Linnett rape you?”

If Egil was trying to trap him into saying he despised Upstarts and wanted them all dead, Tilrey would win this game of wits. “Of course not, Fir. I was his kettle boy. He had a right to me.”

“What about the seven soldiers he gave you to? Did they rape you?”

Without thinking, Tilrey tried to sit up. The box’s roof whacked his forehead, and he groaned and collapsed on his side, suddenly transformed back into stupid, vulnerable flesh. “Who told you that, Fir?”

*Stupid, stupid.* He should assume they knew everything about him, down to the smallest degrading detail.

“That sounds like a question.”

Tilrey swallowed. Questions were not allowed here; he remembered that from last time. But he couldn’t stomach this kind of ambush, couldn’t pretend he didn’t care. Perhaps the rage of the verse he’d translated had bled into him.

He used the stuffy, evasive phrasing he’d learned from years of listening to Councillors, as if sounding like them could make him anything but what he was. “With all due respect, Fir, I don’t understand your line of inquiry. You want to establish I’m a subversive. You already know I was arrested for translating a Harbourer transmission for a Dissident cell when I was seventeen. You already know I read English. If you want to ruin me, if you want to lock me up, those two facts should serve your purpose, and I don’t deny either of them. So why are you prying into my sexual history?”

Silence. Tilrey’s voice seemed to echo in the tight space, growing more pathetic and querulous with each repetition, until at last Egil asked crisply, “Are you done questioning my authority?”

Tilrey nodded. Tried to look contrite, because no doubt they had cameras on him, but didn’t feel contrite at all. *Why are you fucking with me?*

“Good. Would you like to stay where you are for another twelve hours, or would you like to answer my questions?”

Had it been that long? *Do as you’re told,* his body begged him. *Get us the fuck out of here before we lose it completely.*
But once Tilrey started being insolent, he sometimes found it hard to stop. Living with Magistrate Linden, he’d learned he had a stubborn, perverse streak, or perhaps only a masochistic one.

When the Magistrate was in a bad temper, he was apt to slap or cuff Tilrey on the barest pretext: a stray glance that could be interpreted as cheeky, a wobble of the tea tray. At first, this shocked Tilrey—what had he done wrong? Linnett had almost never struck him, and always for a reason. With Linden, apologies only made things worse.

Then he realized he’d done nothing, and he learned to meekly bow his head and wait for the storm to pass. A few more months of this, and he found himself doing subtle things to get under Linden’s skin: a sidelong glance here, a raised brow there. Each time he offered this token provocation, Linden would hit him again, predictable as an assembly-line robot, and Tilrey would keep courting punishment until finally he felt the strange release of blood from a split lip trickling down his chin and wondered, *What the fuck is wrong with me?*

Maybe his problem was boredom. Maybe it was anger. Maybe he just liked to imagine he was in control.

And here he was again, refusing to knuckle under like an idiot. “You’re playing with me, Fir,” he said. “I don’t understand why.”

“I asked you a question. Answer it. When you were eighteen, the night before you moved into Linnett’s apartment, he sent you to the officers’ mess. You serviced seven soldiers that night—there’s a record of it. Did they rape you?”

*Stop baiting him. You can’t win this game.* Tilrey’s throat was sore; his forehead, knees, and elbows throbbed from repeated impacts against the walls. Barely quelled panic—*can’t breathe*—hadn’t stopped pulsing in the background of his thoughts like a refrain.

Clearly the interrogator wanted to humiliate him by making him describe the worst episodes of his life. “Fir Linnett sent me to the officers’ mess as a whore,” he conceded. “I spent one night there, yeah. I serviced those soldiers.”

Memories dodged around the safeguards that usually kept them far from consciousness. *He was lying facedown, a man’s hand pressing his face into a pillow. Trying to breathe, trying not to squirm. Telling himself, See, it’s not so bad. You can get through this.*

“Serviced them of your own free will?”

Why was he required to say it? *Drunken bickering over who was next. Pain that dulled but didn’t stop, while the carousing officers counted down to their friend’s orgasm in voices ragged with laughter.*

He said tightly, “I was sent there as a punishment, Fir. I suppose you already know that.”

The officers weren’t bad sorts, he knew in retrospect. They’d plied him with beer first, trying to make it easier on him. But he was too green, too frightened, and it hadn’t helped. When they were done, they’d written their initials on his palm with a marker, one by one, so the brothel keeper would know how many had enjoyed him. The source of Egil’s “record,” no doubt.

That dingy room was usually where he went in the dreams from which he woke with cold sweat dripping down his temples, or from which he was woken by indignant Upstarts demanding to know why he was struggling with the bedclothes.

The Voice snapped, “What I know isn’t your concern. What was it a punishment for?”
Fine, he would say it. Say it all. “I’d only just arrived in Redda from Thurskein, Fir. First I was with Fir Councillor Jena, who’d obtained me as a gift for his father-in-law, Fir Linnett. But in my first few days here, I committed a, a . . . an act of disrespect against the family. Before he took me in, Fir Linnett punished me to satisfy his honor.”

“An ‘act of disrespect’?”

Now he’d started, he might as well confess the whole debacle. “I . . . disrespected Fir Linnett’s granddaughter.”

“You seduced a high Upstart girl?” Egil sounded surprised for once, or maybe he was only pretending. “I’m impressed.”

“I didn’t ‘seduce’ her, Fir. It was nothing like that. I was just a kid, and neither of us knew what we were doing.”

“That seems rather unlikely.” Still the raised eyebrow in the voice.

“It’s the truth, Fir. Jena had me locked in a room while we were in the Southern Range—several days. I was alone except when he came in and . . .”

He tried not to remember how he’d pleaded with Jena to send him home. I can’t do this, Fir. I’m sorry. I thought I could, but I can’t. “Fir’n Vera came in there one day, looking for a book. She knew what I was, but I don’t think she really understood. We got to talking, and it just happened. She touched me first.”

One gentle, tentative finger down the back of his hand. He’d turned to find Vera’s face inches from his, and all he had to do was lean in. Her eager lips and tongue did the rest.

Poor girl. Her infatuation was flattering enough to keep him returning to her like a moth to the flame, punishments be damned. If Bror hadn’t stepped between them at the gym, he might’ve made the same mistake again.

“So that was consensual on both sides? You and Fir’n Vera?”

Now Tilrey could detect dry amusement in Egil’s voice. He swallowed, his throat parched. Just let me out of this fucking box. “Yeah. I had no right to do anything with her while I belonged to her father—I know that now. But I did. I wanted to.” And paid the price for it.

“See how easy that is? Now, tell me again, Tilrey. Was it consensual with the seven soldiers?”

Tilrey felt his will break, thick and clean-edged as glass. You’re so very beautiful when you’re in pain, Linnett whispered.

“No,” he said.

“They raped you, then? You fought them?”

Was Egil getting off on this? “Do you want all the details, Fir? How long it took, who went first, who did what?”

“Say it.” The Voice offered no clues to motive. “‘They raped me.’”

“They raped me.” He spoke through clenched teeth, despising the word and all its implications. I had no control. I never did. I still don’t. “What do you want now, Fir? An itemized list of everyone
else who ever fucked me when I didn’t want to be fucked? Because it’ll be a long one.”

“I want your truth. Obtaining which is like pulling teeth, apparently, but I’m sure we’ll get there in
the end.”

You see? said Linnett. I’m not the only one who finds it delicious to peel away your defenses until we reach the tender core.

Fuck you. You’ll never know me. The retort was on the tip of Tilrey’s tongue, but a hissing sound distracted him—coming, like Egil’s voice, seemingly from everywhere at once. Breathing it in, he smelled sickly-sweetness.

And then he was gasping, choking, pounding helplessly on the walls of his prison, begging to get out, to breathe, to live.

“Calm down,” Egil’s voice kept repeating. But Tilrey did not calm down until the gas did its work, and a merciful darkness took possession of him.
“Could you tell Egil it’s urgent?” Gersha spoke into the handheld he’d propped on Tilrey’s nightstand, the vid function turned off. “He can call me any time of night to update me.”

“I’ll red-line the message, Fir Councillor.” The Int/Sec admin spoke in a mechanical drone, as they were all no doubt trained to do.

Gersha ended the call, resisting the urge to toss the device across the room. It was nearly midnight, and he’d been calling every half-hour since he left the Sector—first filling Ranek’s box with messages, then pestering the department’s admins.

He collapsed on Tilrey’s bed, in a chaotic snarl of blankets, and stared at the ceiling of the alcove. Nursing his hangover, he’d resisted the temptation to drink or sap, instead making himself a pot of tea the way Tilrey always prepared it—though, needless to say, he hadn’t gotten it right.

Ranek must be busy grilling the Dissident girl, Celinda whatever-her-name-was. If Akeina had fingered her as his recruiter, she would naturally be the priority.

Unless . . . Ranek had mentioned Tilrey’s having a suspect “associate.” This Celinda had been a Councillor’s whore, too; Gersha had seen her at the Lounge, snuggled between Kalina Grendahl and the elder Akeina. What if she and Tilrey had been friends? Allies? Co-conspirators?

He couldn’t entertain these thoughts when he needed to sleep. He killed the light and pressed his face to the pillow, trying to drink in Tilrey’s scent. Earlier, in a shameful moment, he’d opened the closet and breathed the faint but distinct musk of the tunics and trousers hanging there.

*I’ve never tasted his come. I’ve never smelled it, never had it inside me.* With those thoughts—selfish, foolish thoughts—came a regret so sharp that Gersha could only lie very still and let it work its way through him, mortifying his flesh, poisoning the synapses of his purportedly superior brain.

That brain was reduced to stuttering, *I want, I want, I want.*

Never in his life had Gersha wanted anyone or anything more than he wanted the young man whose scent was already fading from the bedding, replaced by a coward’s characteristic bouquet of sweat and self-disgust. Wanted him selfishly, yes, but more than that. If Tilrey were a Dissident, he wanted to know why. Wanted to know him well enough to speak for him, to be his advocate. And if the boy had been playing him for a fool—but no. He didn’t believe that, couldn’t.

He needed to be stronger than his insecurities, stronger than his easily injured pride. *I can’t let things just keep happening to me. I need to do something.*

***

There was light.

It shone through Tilrey’s lids, wan and bluish but unmistakable. He opened his eyes. This time, instead of a swimming head, he had a sense of warmth and well-being.

The spotlight pooled around him, coming from directly above—far above. The white, featureless ceiling was where ceilings ought to be. Walls stretched sparsely into the dimness beyond the spot.
He’d never thought he’d be happy to be back in a Sector cell.

“It’s your turn to ask me a question, Tilrey.”

At the sound of the Voice, Tilrey scrambled into a sitting position, back against the closest wall. He was still naked, but a blanket lay on top of him. He drew it tight around his shoulders.

In the half-light beyond the spot, he could discern only the outline of a man’s shape seated on a bench or chair, but it was enough. Egil was really here.

“Thank you,” he said, meaning *Thank you for taking me out of there.*

The rasp of a throat being cleared. “We don’t have a lot of time. One question. Go.”

*Why am I here? Why am I not shackled this time? What do you want?* But he didn’t expect straight answers to those questions, and anyway, something else had pushed its way to the forefront of his mind while he was out.

“I need to know about Celinda. Is she really a Dissident?”

If she was, then she was probably in a cell like this one—or worse. Remembering the warmth of her lips, and then her stiff, dead tone toward the end of the charade, Tilrey doubted she’d been an eager participant.

“The full answer to that question is classified,” Egil said in his clipped, formal way. “I can tell you you needn’t worry about Celinda Valde, because you won’t see her again.”

Fuck. “Is she being exiled?” Tilrey tucked his hands under the blanket, trying to quell his shivering.

“You care about her a bit, then. I wasn’t sure.” Egil waited, as if for Tilrey to retort, then went on, “Put your mind at rest. I worked out a deal for Fir’n Valde, the specifics of which aren’t for your ears. She won’t suffer the full consequences of her bad choices. This time.”

“So she was a Dissident.” Tilrey felt oddly relieved. She hadn’t been faking the whole time, then, only at the end.

The creak of a body shifting in a chair. “Let’s talk about you, Tilrey. What you said earlier is true. If I wanted to keep you in a cell for life, or even to exile you, I have most of the evidence I need. The rest I could manufacture.”

Egil paused again, as if to let this sink in. Tilrey waited for the chill to creep down his spine, but found to his surprise that he felt nothing. *That box,* he realized. *As long as I’m out of it, nothing scares me.*

“I didn’t realize Int/Sec interrogators were in the habit of manufacturing evidence,” he said in a bright, ingenuous tone. “Tell me, Fir, are your superiors recording this conversation?”

Egil ignored that. “Tell me, Tilrey, when Celinda asked you to assassinate Verán, were you tempted?”

*Not this again.* “I see what you’re trying to do, Fir, but I don’t want to hurt any Upstarts. I don’t want revenge.”

“Does it get tiring, lying all the time?”
“I’m not lying, Fir.”

The chair creaked again, and suddenly Egil stopped being a nebulous outline and became a man.

He strolled over to Tilrey’s side of the cell, the blue light washing his dark uniform and sleek black hair. A few feet from Tilrey, he stopped and slouched against the wall, gazing down at him. “You aren’t shackled. And I’m not armed. You could take me hostage.”

Tilrey forced himself not to inch away. “I’m not stupid, Fir. If I did that, I’d never leave here alive.”

“Ah, but to answer your earlier question, I turned off the standard surveillance before I came in here. No one’s monitoring this conversation.”

Something’s very wrong. Or else he’s just fucking with me. Anyway, Tilrey wasn’t taking the bait. “I don’t have any desire to hurt you, Fir.”

Triumph lit up Egil’s face as he slid down the wall into a sitting position beside his captive. “And that’s another lie. You wouldn’t be human if you didn’t want to hurt me, just a little. Tell me, are there limits to your friendly compliance? You pushed Celinda away when she made advances to you. If I asked you to blow me, right now, would you?”

If I thought it would help, I’d be on my knees in a second. But Egil didn’t make it clear a long time ago. Tilrey drew the blanket more snugly around him, feeling exposed.

“You keep playing these games with me, Fir. You know only Fir Verán or Fir Linden has the authority to tell me to give myself to an Upstart.”

“Do you hear yourself?” Egil hugged his own bent knees. “When I brought in Celinda and asked her about you, she told me she’d tried to recruit you to her cause, and all you did was spout Whybergian cant like a primary school teacher. I didn’t believe her, but now I’ve seen it for myself.”

“Cant, Fir?” It had to be a trap; not since Linnett had he heard an Upstart speak so irreverently. “In your mouth, yes, that’s what it is. You’re playing a role, Tilrey. You’ve been conditioned to drop your eyes and obey—that I understand—but you’re not stupid enough to be so thoroughly brainwashed. The fact that you’re reading Tangle books tells me that much.”

Tilrey felt the other man’s eyes on him and met the gaze. “Brainwashed, Fir? I don’t understand.”

In your mouth, yes, that’s what it is. You’re playing a role, Tilrey. You’ve been conditioned to drop your eyes and obey—that I understand—but you’re not stupid enough to be so thoroughly brainwashed. The fact that you’re reading Tangle books tells me that much.”

“You know exactly what the word means.” Egil’s eyes burned into him. “Your submission is a sham. I knew it last time we spoke, and I know it even better now, because you have my friend Gersha wrapped around your little finger. Before you, I’ve never seen him warm up to anyone. If you told him to betray the Republic tomorrow, he’d do it with a smile on his face.”

Was that what all this was about? Protecting Gersha? “With all due respect, that’s absurd, Fir. Why would I do that, and why would he comply?”

Egil didn’t break the gaze. “I’ve never seen anyone as unhappy to be a kettle boy as you are. At first I thought you might be undercover, already recruited by some shirker cell or other. But now I think you’ve been shackled so long you’ve forgotten what freedom is. Or rather, the only freedom you understand is the freedom to pretend you enjoy being a slave.”

Tilrey felt his chin jerk up. “I’m not a slave, Fir. That’s a feudal atrocity. I’m a free citizen.” And
my interrogator is talking like a damned Dissident.

“Do free citizens stay in jobs where they’re repeatedly raped?”

“That’s not my word, Fir.” His breath caught. “You’re the one who made me use it. Everything I do, I’ve chosen.”

He’d said the same to Celinda, and she’d looked at him with pity. But she was an immature, angry girl, and he had grown past anger a long time ago, and Egil was just testing him.

“I see. Tell me, how did you choose to be a kettle boy? I’m guessing it had something to do with your arrest in Thurskein for translating that transmission.”

Tilrey filled in the information dutifully, though Egil probably knew it all already. “My sector had an uprising that year. An Upstart admin came to clean it up. Somebody mentioned my name, and I was caught in the sweep. The Supervisor of my sector . . .”

He stopped, trying to figure out how to describe something that was still blurry with horror. All these memories were infected with the hopeless naïveté of the boy he had been, a boy who assumed Supervisor Fernei had his best interests at heart. After all, Tilrey’s mother was the Lieutenant Supervisor. The old man was a frequent guest in their home, a sort of uncle figure. Why would he wish them any ill?

“I imagine your Supervisor had a proposition for you,” Egil said. “A way to avoid prison.”

“He . . . said I could help him save our sector. The Upstart would lighten the sanctions on us if we gave him some things he wanted.”

“And one of those things was you.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s a simple choice, lad,” Supervisor Fernei had said in his quavery voice, tenting his hands. “You can go to prison for two years for shirking, or you can fly off to Redda with our Strutter friend, who thinks you’d make a nice kettle boy. To put it crudely, you’ll be paying for your mistake with your ass either way, but if you go to Redda, you’ll have a chance to make something of yourself.”

When Tilrey hesitated and asked to see his mother, the old man shook his head. “You’re eighteen, boy. This is your decision. If you tell your mother, she’ll cry and make a fuss the way mothers do. She’ll try to keep you here, but she’ll suffer under the sanctions, too. No, you have to be bold, lad. Do what’s best for her and all of us. Leave without saying goodbye.”

So Tilrey signed the paper confirming his new posting, making himself effectively the property of the Upstart admin. And the Upstart admin brought him to Redda and sold him to Councillor Jena, who gifted him to Magistrate Linnett, who broke him down into whatever he was now.

“You weren’t given a real choice,” said Egil, his dark, liquid eyes fixed on Tilrey. “You didn’t ‘save’ your sector. Your Supervisor probably worked a deal to sell you to the admin for a few barrels of sap or some black-market tech. Your signature was helpful, but it wasn’t necessary.”

“I know that now.” Tilrey’s voice sounded brutal in his own ears. “But I was a kid, and I was scared shitless of prison, and even more scared of disappointing her—my mom. And anyway, it wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t made a stupid choice to begin with.”
“You didn’t choose.” Egil rose to his feet and looked down on Tilrey again. “You did one foolish thing, yes—translating the transmission—but after that, there were no choices. Say it.”

“I didn’t choose. Until I did.” Tilrey tried to fight the feeling of pressure behind his eyes. “Look, you got me, Fir. You want to know everything? All the gory details?”

“That’s not—”

“No, it is. It’s what you want—to know what fucked me up. Why I have so much ‘endurance’ and ‘stamina.’ So, fine. I was this sheltered kid who’d never even met an Upstart before, and Fir Jena brought me home and gave me a whole vial and fucked me while I was out cold. That was my first time.”

Egil blinked but didn’t flinch, and why should he? He’d probably heard much worse stories. There was nothing special about Tilrey’s, but he kept going, feeling that old perversity kick in.

“After that he had his driver hold me down. I kept fighting, because I was an idiot, until I did something Jena couldn’t forgive—the thing with Vera. Jena flipped out, hit me, and Linnett said he’d take care of the punishment. He gave me to those soldiers.” *A merciful act, really.* “After that, he brought me home, and he was kind, and he trained me to be useful, and I made a rational choice to comply, just like I should have from the start. And yes, maybe I still mouth off sometimes, and yes, I read English in my spare time. But I’m not a subversive. I’ve consented to this life, actively consented. Because I’m strong enough to take it now. Because I’m not a kid anymore.”

He wasn’t lying now; his throat ached with the emphasis he put on each word. He needed Egil to understand that he was in control of his life, fully in control; submission was only a helpful pretense. But could any Upstart understand that? Did Gersha?

The interrogator blinked. “Coercion makes consent meaningless.”

“Not to me.” But Tilrey was starting to feel off balance. *Why am I arguing what he should be arguing?*

“You’re smart enough to know better, but you’ve chosen to internalize what they tell you. That you chose this. That you deserve it. That you’re a free agent, and not the victim of a corrupt system that maintains and nourishes a parasitic hereditary elite under the guise of meritocracy.”

Tilrey drew in his breath, feeling dizzy. None of this made sense. “You’re speaking treason, Fir. Why are you doing that? Why do you keep trying to trap me?”

*But he’s right, isn’t he?* Linnett whispered. *I told you as much—our system is rotten to the core. I’m the only one who never lied to you.*

Egil began pacing back and forth, positively declaiming now, like Verán on the Council floor:

“Dissent isn’t treason. Critique of abuses isn’t treason. Dissent, critique, and reformism are patriotism. Whyberg wrote that principle right into our constitution. Why do you think you didn’t learn that in school? Why are Dissent and Dissidence treated as the same? Why are you petrified of saying a single word against an Upstart?”

Tilrey closed his eyes, trying to overcome the sensation of vertigo. He answered in a small voice, like a schoolboy being quizzed by an irascible teacher. “Because we have so many enemies. The Republic’s always in danger.”

“In danger, yeah—from inside as well as outside. Because any challenge to the abuses of our
system is a challenge to the ruling class. Because they monopolize everything that’s worth having and dole it out to the rest of us.”

It was true. Everyone knew it. But to talk about it, even to use terms like “ruling class”—“Fir, you’re an Upstart.”

“I am, yes,” said Egil through the pounding of Tilrey’s pulse. “Many of us are Upstarts. A few of us are even high-named Upstarts. Many of us are Laborers, too—skilled, intelligent workers. We don’t limit our membership, and we don’t have a name or a banner. We don’t sell black-market tech or bomb public places or make deals with Harbour or anything foolish like that. We aren’t trying to take down the Republic, you see. We’re patriots. We believe Oslov stands alone against the collapse of civilization, and that true Whybergian meritocracy offers the best hope of survival, and that today’s regime has betrayed that hope. We work behind the scenes, in the places where power is, to change that.

“And we need you. Will you help us?”
As the Council’s morning session broke up, Verán beckoned to Gersha from his seat near the top of the amphitheater.

_He summons, and I go._ But Gersha’s handheld still showed no messages from Ranek, and any distraction was welcome. Sheer habit made him slide into the seat beside Verán, who said, “You’ll be at the Lounge tonight? Besha told me you seemed unwell yesterday.”

_Damned Besha._ “Just a bit under the weather. I’m fine now.”

“Good, good.” The majority leader opened his lunch box and delicately nabbed a hunk of cod with his fork. “Karishkov’s done solid work with that Akeina fellow, so I’m giving the boy to him tonight.”

Something seemed to wrench itself loose in Gersha’s head, the bleary blue light of the Council chamber thickening to a haze. Was tonight a free-night again, already?

“I’m afraid the boy isn’t—he’s not disposed for—” He remembered Ranek’s suggestion and seized it like a life raft. “He has the flu, actually. Coughing and sneezing. I would have told you yesterday, but I lose track of time sometimes when I’m coding.”

“How very annoying.” Verán wound noodles around the fork, looking genuinely put out. “Flu, not just a cold? He doesn’t normally get sick.”

Gersha nodded emphatically. “He was running a fever, so I had Bosh take him to the clinic. I’m sure he’ll be fine in a few days, strong as he is.”

_Yes, he’ll be fine._ Because Gersha was done waiting. Today he would go to Int/Sec to see Ranek, all the way down to the basement cells if he had to.

Verán was still frowning. “Well, I certainly hope he’s in better shape by next ten-day when we all go to the Southern Range.”

Mid-autumn vacation—Gersha had forgotten that, too. Verán, clearly seeing it in his face, added, “You’ve messaged the staff down there to prepare your residence, haven’t you?”

“Of course.” He’d do it as soon as he could escape Verán’s clutches. But wait—there’d been something else, a reason he wanted to talk to Verán. Something he’d told Albertine Linnett.

“I’ll just have to tell Karishkov to wait for his pleasure,” Verán said. “Poor fellow.”

Oh yes. “I don’t think Karishkov is the right choice to chair Int/Sec,” Gersha said, plunging in thoughtlessly because, if he did think, he would talk himself out of this. “I’ve been meaning to tell you.”
Verán looked taken aback for an instant. Then, relaxing, he said through a mouthful of noodles, “You know, Gersha, for a brilliant programmer, you can be quite slow on the uptake. It’s rather charming. You are aware Karishkov is Island?”

“I know that.” Gersha struggled not to take visible offense at the older man’s condescension. If Tilrey could put up a bland, seamless front, letting sneering and provocation roll off his back, surely a high-named Councillor could do the same.

“So, what’s your problem with Niko Karishkov? Are you not happy with the format he puts his reports in or something?”

Gersha clenched a fist under the seat, keeping his face blank. Politics was all subterfuge. If he didn’t learn to hide his feelings, he’d never get anything done. “Of course, party loyalty is the paramount consideration. But it still seems to me that, policy-wise, Linnett has the more evidence-based approach. Her studies of factory city uprisings—”

“We can’t give a chair to a Linnett.” Verán tapped the back of Gersha’s hand, turning the scolding into something playful. “You and your numbers, my lad! I like your commitment. While the rest of us are playing our parts, fighting our little partisan battles—” his eyes flew to the chamber’s west door, where Besha was murmuring with another junior Councillor— “you’re crunching those numbers and coming up with hard data. It’s lovely.”

“I’d like to think there’s some value in my tech background.”

“Of course. The techs are the best of us.” A direct quote from Whyberg. “Numbers separate us from the lower Levels. But numbers don’t supersede the Republic’s safety, I’m afraid.”

The old man’s gaze swung back to Gersha, chilly and blue as a fresh-caught fish. “And, of course, there are other numbers one could cite. Karishkov rose fast because he’s bold and ruthless and understands how Drudges think. Under his directorship, the security services detained thirty-nine percent more suspects annually than they did under his predecessor. Would you really put a traitor’s daughter in charge of our intelligence operations?”

Albertine was right—this was hopeless. Yet, forcing himself to hold Verán’s gaze, Gersha thought he saw a flicker of something more pliable there—uncertainty or curiosity or perhaps even a shred of warmth.

_The man is attracted to you. You’ve always ignored it and hoped it would go away._ What if, instead, he could use it? Not that he’d ever sleep with Verán, but perhaps if he were a little friendlier . . .

His eyes still on Verán’s, he remembered Ranek’s litany of complaints from their earlier conversation. “But what about Karishkov’s clearance rate for those suspects? According to a source of mine in Int/Sec, when he was in charge, nearly seventy percent of them ended up being released without charges. And a small but significant number of those sought redress in the courts, claiming they were detained on bogus tips because they refused to do favors for party operatives.”

A faint blush was stealing over Verán’s withered face. “Systemic corruption wouldn’t be anything new for Int/Sec. But if you’re saying Karishkov is personally responsible, those are serious allegations, Gersha.”

Gersha widened his eyes, hoping he looked earnest and guileless. Young. “Could be just rumors, the standard grumbling of the rank-and-file. But it bears investigation, doesn’t it? Before we put Karishkov in charge of the committee, shouldn’t we know how the department views him?”
He moved his knee several centimeters to the right, letting it nudge Verán’s—lightly, discreetly, as if by accident.

Verán swallowed, and Gersha dropped his eyes.

This was mortifying, but he had a sliver of advantage now, and he needed to press it. What would Tilrey say? Something reassuringly submissive. “You know best, of course. It’s just a thought.”

“I do indeed know best.”

Verán patted Gersha’s knee, as if both to recognize and dismiss the contact between them. “But I like that you’re listening to the rank-and-file. Someone has to—they vote, don’t they?” A dry chuckle. “I’ll take it under advisement. And you, my lad, focus on having the boy healthy in time for the Southern Range. Perhaps the fresh air will pink up his cheeks, eh?”

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“It’ll be very safe and very simple. One contact per month. When you go to the gym each first ten-day, order a juice from Mirella—you already know her, don’t you? She always flirts with your friend Bror. The meeting place and time will be written around the bottom rim of the cup. When the time comes, you show up, stay for an hour, and talk to me about what you’ve seen and done in the past thirty days. Nothing more.”

“What I’ve ‘seen and done’?” Tilrey asked.

He lay on his side with his face to the wall. Now that he felt reasonably sure Ranek Egil was a traitor, he no longer felt obliged to be on his best behavior. Plus, whatever they’d gassed him with had worn off, and all his joints throbbed from his struggles in the box, though his mind remained anxiously alert.

“All I ever do, pretty much, is get fucked,” he objected, buying time. “All I ever see are the Islanders’ cocks. And I can’t talk about any of that without breaking discretion.”

Egil made a faint exasperated sound. “This code of ‘discretion’ is what they use to enslave you, Tilrey. Don’t you see that?”

Tell him what he wants to hear. Tell him whatever gets you out.

Egil wanted him to be a spy for a Dissident cell, whatever fancy rhetoric of “patriotism” you dressed it up with. Tilrey had never expected to find treason at such high levels, but that was no reason to start risking his own neck, was it?

Even if most of what Egil said was true.

“Sure, I see and hear things,” he said. “And you want me to tattle on the Island Councillors so you—you lower-named Upstarts, I assume—can have your little rebellion. Push Verán and his friends out of power. What does that do for me?”

Even the question was treasonous; asking it sent a strange thrill through Tilrey, and he told himself he was only buying time again. Egil would let him go home, and he’d tell Gersha about all of this, and Gersha would report Egil, and everything would be all right. Or would return to normal, anyway.

“We want much more than power for ourselves.” The interrogator’s voice was low and tense. “I don’t have time now to lay it out for you, but we want real reforms, Tilrey, from greater Laborer
involvement in the political process to fairer Notifications and postings. Under a neutral system, based purely on test scores, a boy like you would be serving the Republic with your brain, not your body. You might even be an Upstart.”

But of course. The ultimate lure—or mirage. “Maybe I don’t want to be an Upstart, Fir.”

“You must want something,” Egil said.

Tilrey thought of two things at once: a blue-skied spring day in the woods outside Thurskein, and the warmth of Gersha’s skin. He was worn down, tired of lying. Egil was right; he did so much of it.

“I want to get out of here,” he said, and rolled over to look at Egil. “But I don’t know that I want to be part of your conspiracy.”

Egil was pacing again, slowly; the half of his face that Tilrey could see had hardened. “How do you think Gersha would react if he knew you had a record of Dissidence? That you chose this life over a prison sentence?”

Tilrey kept his own features studiously indifferent. “Fir Linnett didn’t care about something I did when I was seventeen. I doubt Verán would, either.”

“I’m talking about Gersha, not Linnett or Verán. Because I think you care about what Gersha thinks of you.”

Tilrey didn’t trust his voice to deny it, so he said nothing.

“Believe me, I know him—he’s a man of principles with a conservative upbringing. And he’s skittish and sensitive.” Shadows made pits of Egil’s eyes. “Celinda told you the truth about one thing: Gersha’s why you’re here. He came to me because he was concerned about your books.”

Fuck. Tilrey felt the dismay twist his mouth before he could stop it. “Then I’ve lost him already.”

“You haven’t ‘lost’ him. Don’t you see? The fact that you’re here, and that he’s responsible, has put him in agonies. He’s left at least twenty messages for me, demanding to hear you’re still alive. Gersha’s in love with you, Tilrey.”

“That’s absurd.” But the word hollowed a pit in Tilrey’s stomach.

Ináthera, a passion like breathlessness. An illicit, duty-defying affection like the ones that lead to tragedy in sagas and stories. Linnett had used the word occasionally, mocking him straight-faced: You leave me breathless, child. When you blush that way, I almost love you.

Could Gersha really feel that way? Was he ready to give up everything for a glorified whore?

Egil was still talking. “And you—we—could do something with his feelings. Gersha is high-named. He’s brilliant. He was raised to worship numbers and rules—did you know that, when he was in school, his uncle would ground him for anything less than perfect scores? But he’s also empathetic, with a strong sense of justice, and he’s just waiting for someone to wake him up. With the right guidance from someone who understands politics, he could rise to power in the Council. He could represent our interests. If there’s anyone who can turn him to our cause, it’s you.”

“No.” The answer came without thought, absolute as stone. “I won’t be your tool, and I won’t turn Gersha into your tool.”
If they’d been talking about any other Upstart, Tilrey wouldn’t have thought twice about the proposal—or rather, he would have promised anything it took to leave the cell. But, for all the reasons Egil had already cited, Gersha didn’t deserve to be manipulated that way.

Even if he had put Tilrey here.

Egil looked pained. “I don’t want a ‘tool.’ I want an ally. But if you won’t cooperate willingly—well, we both know I’ve compromised myself here today. If I release you, what’s to stop you from telling Gersha everything I’ve said? Or going straight to Verán?”

“Nothing.” Tilrey held Egil’s gaze, forcing the man to stop his pacing.

“So, what choice do I have, lad? Either you join us, or I put you away for life. Believe me, I don’t want to. But I can.”

So that was Egil’s last card, face-up on the table.

Tilrey had often watched Linnett match wits with his political rivals—lulling them into a sense of security, probing their vulnerabilities, making them think he’d exhausted his own tactics. That’s right, said Linnett. Clever boy. You know what you have to do now. You do have a trump card, don’t you?

Tilrey took a deep breath. It was a risk, but he was tired of knuckling under, tired of being made to feel powerless.

“What if I told you,” he said, “that I know who Linnett conspired with to betray the Republic? Remember when you questioned me about the man I overheard with him, that day I came home early from the gym?”

Egil had gone absolutely still. “I remember. Go on.”

“I know who that man is—the man who gave Linnett the Q-codes. Those are missile launch codes, aren’t they?”

The interrogator gave his head a little shake, as if to remove cobwebs from it. “We went over this for nine straight hours the last time I interrogated you. You didn’t see the co-conspirator’s face, couldn’t ID his voice. You expect me to believe you’ve suddenly remembered?”

“No.” Tilrey did not release Egil’s eyes. “But things have changed since then. What if I told you Linnett’s co-conspirator is alive and well and reaping the benefits of his betrayal of the Republic? What if I said he’s a decider in the Council?”

Egil’s eyes had gone painfully keen. “I’d say, if there’s really a traitor at that level setting policy in the Council, and we can compromise him, he could be a powerful asset to us. Who is he?”

His voice was an interrogator’s again—bone-cold, whip-sharp, and so authoritative that Tilrey had to struggle not to spit out the name.

But if he had long practice in submission, he had long practice in discretion, too. He wrapped his arms around his knees and made his voice steel. “Let me out of here today, Fir, and I’ll give serious consideration to whether I choose to help you.”

With two steps, Egil was beside him, vibrating with fury. Tilrey knew that vibration, knew the man was itching to kick him in the side or yank him to his feet and smack him. He did not move.
Go ahead and hurt me. I have something you need.

Egil took a ragged breath and pulled his errant limbs back into line. Regained control of everything but his voice. “I can get an answer out of you one way or another, you little fool. You know I can—I’ve had you begging for mercy before, and I haven’t even brought in the heavy artillery. Why are you playing with me?”

But there was weariness behind the words, and more than a bit of fear. Egil had exposed his secret counting on the power of his word to outweigh Tilrey’s. Now that his prey had proved to have some powerful leverage, he was out of ammunition.

Tilrey ignored the threat, feeling the ghost of a smile form on his lips. “You’ve already risked your career with the little show you put on, and then giving Celinda a deal, Fir. You may not want to push your luck further. But I’m willing to meet you halfway.”

“Meaning what?” Egil asked roughly.

Well played, whispered Linnett. He’s beaten; now you set the terms.

Tilrey raised his head. “I’m happy to meet monthly with you as you desire, Fir Egil, and I look forward to being educated on your reformist movement. Perhaps one day, if I choose, I’ll educate Fir Gádden in my turn. For now, though, I’d like to go home, right away. I hear he misses me.”
I'm posting more often now since this story is finished and I'm just revising as I go. So many thanks to everyone who's left comments and kudos; I really love sharing this world!

The Security complex stretched for nearly a mile in the subterranean bowels of the Sector, a four-story well of sound-muffling concrete and hissing fluorescents. Though it was as well heated as everywhere else in the city, it somehow felt cold. Each checkpoint took you a little farther from the realm of daylight; Gersha had never been lower than the second level, and he’d been glad to get away.

Today, his Councillor’s robe and grim demeanor sufficed to get him through the first two checkpoints. At the third, an apologetic sentry asked to scan his hand-chip. Not many employees walked the long passages between the guard stations, but they spoke in hushed tones, and Gersha tried to shake off the sensation that they were staring at him. After all, he had a perfect right to be here.

“I’m expected,” he told the red-uniformed, gray-templed sergeant who controlled the gate at the fourth and last checkpoint, a rifle dangling conspicuously across his breast. “Look him up—Egil, Ranek, interrogator second-class.”

Where the other guards had been flustered, this one moved slowly and deliberately, meeting Gersha’s demands with an impervious gaze. “I’ve put in a call to Interrogator Egil, Fir. You’re welcome to wait.”

“I’ve been waiting all day.” Pent-up frustration choked Gersha, and he made his voice a whiplash of superiority like Verán’s. “I’m on the Int/Sec committee, lad. I have jurisdiction down here. I could have you reposted.”

The sergeant blinked, weary but unmoved. “You need an interrogator posting or a form K-378 to pass this point. There’s a bench, Fir Councillor.”

“What’s the problem?” a pleasant tenor voice asked from behind them.

Gersha wheeled to find Ranek approaching from the corridor he’d just traversed. After so many hours of fruitless waiting, the sight of his friend nearly made his knees buckle.

The next moment, he went taut with fury. He was a sleepless mess, and Ranek looked rested, spruce, almost happy. Something burned behind Gersha’s eyes as he asked, “Where the hell were you?”—almost not caring that the Drudge soldier was a witness to his loss of control. “And where the hell is he?”

Ranek took Gersha’s arm and led him gently to the bench, out of the sentry’s earshot. “Didn’t you get my message?”

“What message?” Gersha fought for the icy composure he usually wore in the Sector, but shudders
rocked him from head to toe. A childish voice inside him kept saying, *Please, no . . .*

Ranek’s relaxed, reasonable dark eyes met his. “I should have messaged sooner, Gersha. Your boy’s been fully cleared.”

It was too much, too soon—so much more than he deserved. Gersha’s vision blurred, the concrete walls seeming to melt as his rage did, leaving his mind blank. Soon he would feel relief, but now he was only stunned.

“Really?” he asked, not daring to believe it. “The investigation’s closed?”

His friend smiled warmly. “There was never an official investigation, and we found no questionable sympathies or connections. His reading’s an odd hobby, nothing more.”

As if from a distance, Gersha heard himself say, “Where is he?”

“That’s what I just messaged you about. He’s at home waiting for you.”

***

He was there. He was really there.

When Gersha tapped at the closed door, not daring to breathe, a voice said, “Come in.” And there was Tilrey—limp and supine in bed, as if he really did have the flu, but raising his head in greeting.

Gersha’s knees did buckle this time. He knelt beside the bed and pressed his forehead to the edge of the mattress, hiding his face, not trusting himself to retain anything like dignity.

He hadn’t made the bed this morning. Had Tilrey noticed the blankets in disarray? But that wasn’t important, just a matter of pride, and pride had gotten him into this mess.

He grasped upward blindly and found Tilrey’s hand. *I don’t care who you are when I’m not here. I don’t care what you read. I just want you.*

Fingers ghosted over his hair. “Are you okay, Fir—Gersha?”

The tears came then. Gersha clutched the boy’s hand, pressing the knuckles to his lips, and let his shoulders shake until the tension eased enough for him to say, “I’m sorry.”

“What are you sorry for?” Tilrey’s other hand tangled itself in his curls, pulling his head back.

“I’m fine, Fir. Just a little wiped out. Come sit up here.”

Old habits die hard; Gersha wiped away his tears and composed his face before he obeyed.

Tilrey did look normal, aside from his hair being unwashed and his normally pale skin a shade grayer. Drawing Gersha back against the pillows with him, he moved gingerly, as if his bones had abruptly gone brittle. “I’m the one who should be sorry, Fir. I should have told you—”

“No!” They were not going down a road that would leave Gersha feeling even guiltier, and anyway, Tilrey’s hoarseness suggested he lacked the stamina for sustained conversation. Gersha wrapped his arms around the boy carefully, not wanting to hurt him. “I’m responsible,” he said into Tilrey’s ear, trying not to let his voice wobble. “You were never obliged to tell me what you do in your spare time. If it troubled me, I should have come directly to you, but I—I was afraid. I abrogated my duty.”

The only answer he received was Tilrey’s face pressed tight against his collarbone. With a
smothered sob, Gersha grasped the boy’s larger frame with a fierceness that surprised him, drawing comfort from the solid armature of bone and muscle, until Tilrey’s slight squirm made him loosen his grip.

“You’re hurt,” he whispered.

Tilrey shook his head, face still buried in Gersha’s tunic. “Just a little stiff. No one laid a finger on me.”

“Just questions? Just talking?” The boy’s hair brushed his lips, and he held his breath for the answer.

“Just talking.”

*Thank all the possible gods.* He’d believed Ranek, of course he had, but you could never be sure about what happened in the bowels of Int/Sec. Gersha had seen for himself how little power he had there.

“I’d never have forgiven myself if anything happened to you.” He ran his hand gently down Tilrey’s back, tracing the ridges of muscle, and suddenly it seemed impossible not to confess. “I—I slept in your bed while you were gone. I imagine you noticed.”

The boy’s laugh was a faint rumble against his skin. “Thought it smelled a bit like you, Fir. Can’t say I mind.”

“I searched your things, too. I’m sorry.”

Before the words were even out, Gersha knew how Tilrey would respond, and sure enough, the boy only shrugged as if he’d expected as much. “That’s your right, Fir. Everything here’s yours.”

“No!” Gersha felt his fingers tightening. He needed Tilrey to know he wasn’t like the others—not anymore, anyway. He needed to elicit something other than that tone of wry resignation. “I promise never to come in here again without your permission. I want you to have privacy in this room; I want you to feel safe. You have as much right to that as anyone else.”

For a long moment, Tilrey just breathed against his skin, and Gersha wondered if he’d overstepped a line, disobeyed a code. Then the boy’s finger flicked his collar almost playfully, and Tilrey murmured, “That’s lovely, Fir. Very high-minded. But I hereby give you permission to sleep in my bed whenever I’m not in it.”

“And when you are in it?”

Another deep chuckle. “Even more then.”

Relaxing, Gersha stroked Tilrey’s hair, the other hand pressed to the small of the boy’s back. Tilrey’s skin under the thin shirt was warm, and he stretched and said sleepily, “That feels good, Fir.”

They rested against each other, blood pulsing warm beneath their clothing, two bodies that knew each other by heart. And Gersha cursed himself for believing, even for an instant, that there could be vital things about Tilrey he did not know.

“That will never happen again,” he said, slipping his hand gently under Tilrey’s shirt to stroke the taut, silken skin of his abdomen. “I will never not trust you again, love. I swear it.”
Magistrate Linnett sat on the edge of the bed, regarding their entwined bodies with dry amusement—or perhaps regret. It could be hard to tell.

“You look lovely together,” he said, “just as I always thought you would. Two angels, light and dark. What a pity I’m not really here to see it.”

Tilrey knew he was dreaming, one of those shallow dreams in which you remain aware of your position in bed. He could feel Gersha’s arms around him and the throb of his still-aching muscles (goddamn box), and he knew these sensations were real.

Yet so was Linnett, for now.

“I betrayed Oslov today, Malsha,” Tilrey said, knowing no actual words were issuing from his lips. “For the first time in my life, I spoke real Dissidence to a Dissident. He calls himself a patriot, but I don’t think his colleagues would see the difference. Soon I might expose your pet traitor. What do you think of that?”

In the way of dream-people, Linnett did not seem to hear any of this. He reached over Gersha and pulled up Tilrey’s shirt to run his hand down Tilrey’s spine, letting it rest in the hollow just above the curve of the buttocks. “You are the key. Do you know that?”

“The key to what?” Tilrey leaned into the touch; it was familiar, and he had a dim sensation that this dream was half memory. This had happened before. In a moment, Linnett would launch into one of his monologues.

“The key to Oslov, you sweet little fool. Look at us. We live in the same apartments as all our peers, we wear the same clothes, we follow the same rules. Whyberg built a society where all needs are met, where luxury and waste barely exist, where no one has anything to aspire to except getting to the next Level. Here you are at the top Level, and look around you. Are you impressed?”

“It’s not that bad,” Tilrey said dreamily. “Better than living in a box.”

Linnett’s voice sharpened. “Or exactly like living in a box. Notice how every wall and piece of furniture in this city is white—the color of nothing? This way of life is perfectly rational, it’s the reason for our survival, and it’s killing us—Upstarts and Laborers alike. Without waste, without want, without envy or aspiration, we have no reason to live. We need something to dream of, something to adore, something always just out of our reach.”

The dream-Linnett’s hand slid down to cup Tilrey’s ass, tender and possessive at once. “And you are that thing.”

“I am?”

“Not for everyone, of course. But for men of my Level, this—” he gave Tilrey a squeeze—“is riches. This—” a pat—“is the currency we pass back and forth. This is the motivation to excel. That’s why I say you’re the key, all you kettle boys. You’re one of the last remnants of our feudal past, when not everything was detestably rational. You’re so much more important than you realize.”

Yes, they’d really had this conversation, years ago. Back when such talk and touching still brought humiliated flushes to Tilrey’s cheeks—which was, of course, exactly what Linnett wanted.

But now the words had a different ring, a darker one. Now Tilrey wondered if he could be the key
to something else, something Linnett hadn’t foreseen.

*You weren’t given a real choice,* Egil’s voice whispered somewhere in the background of the dream. And then: *Gersha is in love with you.*

Tilrey was floating in the upper realms of sleep now, the sensation of Linnett’s hand fading as he approached full consciousness, but he still remembered how the monologue had ended:

“You’re a fantasy, and everyone needs a fantasy. With a strong enough dose of reality, Oslov might just come tumbling down.”
South

The Wastes spread out below them, blinding in the brief afternoon, almost as featureless as the cloudless pearl of sky. Gersha wanted to enjoy the year’s last days of sunlight, but a glance at all that nothingness made him shiver with vertigo, and he said, “Perhaps you should have the window-seat.”

“You don’t like flying, Fir?” Tilrey asked.

Gersha glanced around the cabin. The last daylight vacation shuttle was half full of Councillors, upper Diplomats, and their spouses and families, but the Islanders he least wanted to see—Besha, Karishkov—seemed to have taken earlier flights. Verán had offered him seats in the Magistrate’s private jet, but he’d declined.

“I don’t mind it,” he said, and then found himself confessing: “When I was twelve, there was . . . a vomiting episode. My uncle was mortified, and I started spending my vacations at school.” He hadn’t had the heart to tell Tilrey he’d never once set foot in the vacation accommodations where they were headed. It was easier to spend his vacations in the city when the South had so many unpleasant associations, and until now, Verán hadn’t demanded his presence there.

Tilrey’s hand clasped Gersha’s; his taking the initiative still always gave Gersha a distinct thrill. “If you’re uncomfortable, we’ll switch, Fir. But it’s quite a view.”

In the ten-day since he returned from Int/Sec, the boy seemed to have snapped back to his usual vitality. Hand holding was innocent enough, but the closeness of his powerful young body seethed against Gersha’s like an electric field, like sex itself. Was anyone watching them? Gersha surveyed the cabin again, but everyone was dozing or absorbed in their handhelds except one small boy who appeared to be torturing his sister with discreet pokes in the side.

Even if someone were watching, what business was it of theirs? He curled his fingers around Tilrey’s, releasing his tension into the warm grip. “I find the Wastes a little monotone, myself.”

“Not when you look closely.” Tilrey leaned over him to peer out the window, the bauble in his left earlobe clinking. Gersha repressed a wince.

When they’d met at the airfield an hour ago, Gersha coming from the Sector, Tilrey suddenly had . . . that. A hole in his ear and a hunk of barbaric jewelry dangling from it, a tiny piece of circuit board enclosed in a heavy silver rectangle.

Gersha must have recoiled visibly, because Tilrey had explained at once: “Fir Verán sent that over with his driver. It was a gift from one of the envoys to Harbour, and he wanted me to wear it, so I went to the barber to have my ear repierced.”

“Repierced?”

Tilrey looked away. “He had me wear a different one two years ago, for a while. Fir Verán gets . . . bored sometimes, I guess. He had my hair dyed then, too.”

The earring was hideous to Gersha, a relic of feudal times with no place in the ration-based dress code, but at least now he knew it hadn’t been Tilrey’s idea. “Did it hurt?” he’d asked before he could stop himself.

Tilrey had smiled like he’d said something absurd. “Not at all.”
But now Gersha couldn’t stop glancing at the foreign object in Tilrey’s earlobe, as if it were a physical part of Verán that had invaded the boy.

“You can take it off later, you know, Fir,” Tilrey said, pitching his voice intimately. “When we’re alone.”

“That won’t hurt you, either?” Gersha blushed, because this physical contact, palm to palm, was the first they’d had since the evening when Tilrey returned to him. Since then he’d been working frantically, prepping for vacation and assembling data to support Linnett over Karishkov for the committee chair, while keeping up the charade with Verán that Tilrey was recovering from the flu.

He’d been avoiding Ranek, too, ashamed of his episode of near-hysteria. Tilrey had been in the Sector a scant two days, and somehow he’d managed to convince himself the boy would return a tattered husk, or not at all.

Tilrey had been different at first—there was a visible stiffness to his movements, a feverish alertness in his eyes. He hadn’t volunteered any information, and Gersha hadn’t asked.

On the second day of the ten, Gersha had given a little speech, a very awkward one, to assure Tilrey he was now welcome to read any Tangle books he liked without vetting. To demonstrate his sincerity, he’d even brought an old volume out of his study and pressed it into Tilrey’s hands. “I read this last year. If it interests you, maybe we can talk about it when you’re done. I have so few people to discuss these things with.”

Tilrey had taken the book and said, “Thank you, Fir, I do appreciate that,” but his face hadn’t lit up.

Two days ago, Ranek had sent Gersha a file he described as a full transcript of his sessions with Tilrey, “for your eyes only, and to set your mind at rest, I hope.” Gersha hadn’t yet brought himself to open it. All that could set his mind at rest was the memory of that wonderful, terrible evening when the boy’s head resting on his shoulder had conveyed forgiveness and trust better than any words could.

Now, with the sun-dazzled Wastes in the corner of his eye, Gersha felt a tickle of hair and warm breath against his ear.

“You need to stop worrying about my being hurt. I’m fine.”

“Can’t help it.” He squeezed Tilrey’s hand, then asked, to draw attention away from his flushed cheeks, “What is that down there? The darker band?”

Tilrey craned over him again. “Those are just trees, Fir. Pines, maybe. Like the ones around the lake where that poor pregnant girl was killed.”

For a few seconds Gersha thought he’d gone mad, but then the reference slipped neatly into place. “My book. An American Tragedy. You read it?”

Tilrey nodded, though he didn’t meet Gersha’s eyes.

“The whole thing?” It was what, eight hundred pages? Full of odd words that Gersha had needed to look up, too, like “chemisms.”

Another nod. “I have a lot of time on my hands, Fir. And it wasn’t bad at all, even if the central plot was stolen from The Red and the Black. That one’s my favorite, I think.”
Gersha opened his mouth. Closed it. “Another book about a social climber.”

“Yeah.” A brief, blinding smile. “Hopefully I won’t get any ideas.”

“How many Tangle books have you read, exactly?”

The boy stared into space as if trying to calculate, or perhaps considering whether to lie. “I don’t count, but maybe a quarter of what’s in the Library. Mostly novels.” He turned to Gersha then, his beautiful eyes half-dreamy and half-apologetic. “Like I said, time on my hands.”

Gersha’s breath caught as he thought of all the precious cultural information the boy might have gleaned from those books—fodder for his database. He had so little time to read himself, and the two research assistants he’d put on it were always complaining that Tangle texts “made no sense.”

“We’re going to have to talk about that,” he said, trying to hide his excitement. He couldn’t just start using the boy in a second, unofficial capacity—it wouldn’t be fair to him. Still, he was itching to discuss some of the Tangle’s more mysterious aspects. “I’d like very much to hear your thoughts. But for now, we’re on vacation.”

***

The two-level vacation residence was small but well appointed, with gleaming pine floors, bands of crimson and teal tiles around the tub—a break from the merciless whiteness of Redda—and a pitched roof and skylight in the bedroom.

Returning to the South, where he’d been born and raised, always gave Tilrey a subtle but distinct infusion of vitality. On their brief walk from the shuttle, they’d passed a patch of exposed yellow grass and a stand of spruce, and it took all his self-possession not to veer away from the circle of houses and light out into the taiga, dragging the Fir with him.

But it was still below freezing here, if practically summer compared with Redda, and Tilrey could tell being outdoors made Gersha nervous. There’d be time to work on that.

_That’s right_, Linnett said. _Like most of us, he’s spent so long living in a well-heated box that he’s afraid to leave it. Teach him how it feels to caress a tree trunk, to climb a crag, to feel his blood pumping. And then . . ._

_You shut up_, Tilrey told the voice in his head. He sat down on the bed, beneath the skylight, and bounced to test the mattress. “I think we should make sure it’s suitable, Fir,” he said, sober-faced, patting the duvet beside him.

Ever since they’d had their little conversation about Tangle books, Gersha had been looking at him oddly, keeping an almost respectful distance, and he didn’t like it. Why’d he brought up the topic? Had he been fishing for praise? Tangle books were his private comfort, too intimate to discuss with an Upstart. Yet Gersha’s gift of that particular book, a story about a handsome lower-class boy trying to better himself, had touched Tilrey.

He couldn’t pretend to be stupid with this man—Gersha had always made that particularly hard. But he could change the subject to something safer, something that was sure to make Gersha happy. Now he hooked an arm around Gersha’s waist and tugged him down on the bed, the Fir laughing in surprise but not protesting.

“We don’t have time,” he whispered, as Tilrey rolled him onto his back to nip and suck at his lower lip.
“Are you sure, Fir?”

A groan. The Councillor’s mouth opened to him, wet and eager, and Tilrey explored it with darts of his tongue, feeling the Fir’s cock harden against his hip. His own hardened in response, and he groaned in his turn and lifted some of his weight off Gersha, nestling his face in the crook of the other man’s shoulder. “I shouldn’t have started that, Fir. I need to shower.”

They were both painfully aware that they had to be at Verán’s in less than an hour, and that from there Tilrey would go home with Karishkov. Still they dallied, Gersha’s hands sneaking under Tilrey’s tunic to stroke and knead, while Tilrey opened his lips against the Upstart’s throat, tasting salt.

Green hells, it was good, better than it should be. He’d missed Gersha’s body—his virginal trembling, his flushing, his utter wantonness when he yielded to his impulses.

More importantly, he needed the Councillor to associate him with these physical sensations, not with books and learning. How many times had he heard Verán and his cronies say they didn’t trust some Laborer who was “too clever by half”? Egil might want Tilrey to educate Gersha about reform, but even open-minded Gersha surely wasn’t ready to be educated by a Drudge.

Tilrey didn’t have to do anything Egil wanted, he reminded himself. Still, he couldn’t seem to stop remembering their conversations.

Gersha gasped briefly, rocking Tilrey’s weight on top of him, then abandoned the untimely effort. He whispered in Tilrey’s ear, “I still want what I did before. I haven’t forgotten.”

“Do you still want that, Fir?” He spoke teasingly, feeling the hateful earring weigh down his lobe, dangling between them.

It had taken an effort to sit still at the barber’s, not because he feared the prick of the needle but because he disliked what it signified. Tilrey had stayed still, though—in such a trancelike stillness, in fact, that Verán’s driver had snapped his fingers in his face when it was over and asked, “Hey, kid, you okay?”

“Yeah. Fine.” And he’d pushed the driver’s hand away as hard as he dared, remembering how that man had fucked him on his first night with the Island.

They’d both been following orders, of course. No choice, Egil’s voice kept repeating, pairing itself with Linnett’s. No choice. The recent stint in the cell had served to remind Tilrey just how little choice he had. Compared with the aftermath of that damned box—the stiffness, the muscle aches, the lingering dreads and sudden new outbreaks of panic that he was still doing his best to medicate with sap—a silver hook in his ear was nothing.

Scads of people in the Tangle wore earrings and other piercings. It was pure ornament in those days, not necessarily a mark of possession. Maybe he would tell Gersha this later, if he could find a way to do it without showing off.

No choice, said Egil, who claimed to be giving Tilrey a choice. He’d chosen not to report Egil, not to tell Gersha, so that was something, he supposed. But he still hadn’t decided whether to show up at the clandestine meeting Egil had arranged.

Gersha kissed the corner of his mouth. “Do you remember what I’m talking about, love? What I want? Or are you just pretending you remember because that’s what good kettle boys do?”

Tilrey hadn’t forgotten. The memory of Gersha’s shy request sent a white-hot bolt of desire to his
groin. “You want . . . me.”

“Inside me,” Gersha said so earnestly that Tilrey couldn’t repress a grin. He kissed Gersha back to take any possible sting from his reaction, letting the Upstart feel that he was still hard.

“Tomorrow,” he said, “we’ll be left to ourselves all day, Fir. All day and all night. And you can have anything you want.”
While this chapter introduces some new intrigue, it’s not going to stand in the way of Gersha and Tilrey’s real reunion (or, as Besha would sarcastically call it, their honeymoon) in the next chapter. Tilrey has his priorities straight. ;)

“It’s a piece of circuit board, you fools.” Verán held up the earring between his thumb and forefinger, jerking Tilrey’s head sideways. “The envoy in Betevvy got it from the duke there, who pays an artist to tear up black-market tech and make baubles out of it. They can’t seem to find any better uses for our tools than adorning themselves.”

Laughter pattered around the room, spreading outward from Verán’s roost on the central couch. Several meters away, Gersha pressed himself deeper into the windowseat and tried to concentrate on the plate of smoked salmon in his lap.

The instant they stepped into the room, Verán had beckoned Tilrey over as he always did. Rather than hover nearby, or mingle with the gossiping Island Councillors, Gersha had found this out-of-the-way spot to nurse his irritation in peace, with some help from the refreshments.

Verán had gone all out with a spread of tissue-thin smoked caribou, eel and squid rolls sprinkled with salty roe, pickled sea urchin and licorice root, rusk crackers, and a synth-cheese as creamy as Gersha imagined the real thing might be. He tried to tune out Verán’s preening voice, reminding himself, We just have to get through tonight, and we’ll have tomorrow. All to ourselves.

But they were still on about the damned earring.

“What a beautifully absurd notion,” said Davita Lindblom, Besha’s wife. “If they can’t understand our tech, why, at least they can make something pretty and useless out of it.”

“To be worn by something pretty and useful,” cracked Verán, and everyone tittered politely once more.

“But Betevvy is rather far south to be getting black-market tech,” said Lindblom.

Before he could stop himself, Gersha glanced over at her. The only female Councillor who was consistently part of Verán’s inner circle, Lindblom had a studied motherly quality to her, alternately sickly-sweet and admonishing. Ten years older and significantly higher-named than her husband, with queenly bearing and a crown of glossy brown braids, she commanded a public deference from Besha that no one else did except perhaps Verán. Gersha had seen her silence him with nothing but a quick glance or a raised brow.

“Did the envoy press the duke on his sources?” she went on, absently tugging at Tilrey’s earlobe.

Don’t touch him. Don’t hurt him. He’s mine. But all Gersha could do was turn to the window and stare out at the formless Southern dark.

“Even on vacay, my wife can’t stop talking enforcement and punishment.” The voice was a confidential hiss. “I think it makes her wet.”
Gersha turned to find Besha at the other end of the windowseat, invading his sanctuary. “You would know, I suppose,” he said, feeling his cheeks flush as he realized he’d attempted a comeback.

He expected a nasty riposte, but Besha only took a long guzzle from his tumbler. There were bags under his eyes, and his face was drawn. “I’m hiding from her,” he said. “She’s decided it’s time to conceive a third child, and I still haven’t gotten over the existence of the first two.”

“What’s existence? Or their making?”

“Oh! You’re full of sass tonight, aren’t you? Let’s just say dear Davita can manage the mechanics fine, but she knows she’s not my type.”

Gersha nodded, not eager to know the details of Besha’s domestic life. “That doesn’t bother her?”

“Why should it, as long as I do what she says?” Besha flashed a bitter grin.

This confession wasn’t unusual; whenever Davita was out of earshot, Besha made no secret of the fact that he regarded his strategic marriage as “kissing the iceberg to make a fire,” or what Harbourers call a devil’s bargain.

The cynicism still made Gersha uncomfortable. “You make me glad to be a celibate,” he said, letting his gaze roam the room. Something twisted in his chest as he saw Verán leaning over Tilrey to speak to Davita, his hand firmly cupping the boy’s knee.

He looked back to find Besha’s eyes probing his, but with none of the usual mockery. “Call it celibacy if you want,” his colleague said, “but you seem pretty committed. The two of you were quite cozy in your shared household the last time I visited, like bickering spouses.”

Gersha winced at the memory of that night, of his suspicious, jealous foolishness. “The boy and I? You know I’m only—”

“Doing your duty to the Party? Spare me, Gersha. I’m not oblivious like Verán. I see how the lad looks at you and vice versa.”

Gersha went cold. “We get along well,” he said as blandly as he could. “I don’t demand things of him that he doesn’t wish to give.”

Abruptly he remembered the bizarre thing Tilrey had said the night Besha came over—that Besha wanted him, Gersha, and wanted him in an active role. He dropped his head, feeling his face flush at the absurdity. Besha only wanted to hurt him.

As if to prove it, Besha leaned in to Gersha, his watery eyes narrowing with malice. “Does it bother you where he’s going tonight?”

Gersha followed his rival’s gaze across the room. Like them, Niko Karishkov stood on the fringes of the gathering. Lean and hawkish, with a perpetual scowl, he was glowering at his handheld.

“Niko looks excited about tonight, doesn’t he?” Besha added innocently.

Gersha didn’t take the bait. “We all do our duties.”

“Verán tells me you think Niko’s a bad candidate for the chair.”

Gersha knew better than to be surprised that Verán had relayed his feeble attempts at influence
peddling to his rival. “Frankly, I believe the man is corrupt,” he said.

“And here I thought Niko was painfully, boringly virtuous. But of course, with your own source deep inside Int/Sec, perhaps you know better than the rest of us.”

Chills were moving down Gersha’s spine now. “Excuse me?”

Besha edged closer; Gersha could feel those bleary, jaded eyes on him, though he couldn’t meet the gaze. “Verán said you had a source of inside knowledge. Is it our little schoolmate, Ranek Egil?”

Gersha shrugged in a way he hoped was nonchalant. “It’s a confidential source.”

“You needn’t be coy with me, Gersha. I’ve seen how often you and Ranek are together.”

Blood flooded Gersha’s face, giving him the adrenaline boost he needed to meet Besha’s eyes. “What are you fishing for, exactly?”

Besha’s voice had assumed the deadpan, disturbingly focused quality of an interrogator’s. “I’ll tell you exactly what I’m fishing for. Can you tell me why your friend Egil would bring the Party’s kettle boy to an interrogation cell and keep him there for the better part of two days, off the books, with all the usual monitoring equipment turned off?”

Gersha’s throat closed. The whole room had begun pulsing around him, the voices raucous and deafening, his own blood ebbing and flowing with the unruly boom of a hydraulic pump.

*How does he know?* An abyss of shame opened, and he tumbled into it, wind rushing in his ears.

But after all, what had he done wrong? Been over-cautious, that was all. “I can explain—” he began in a cracked voice.

Besha was on his feet again, the old look of triumph back on his face. “I also have my sources in Int/Sec,” he said. “They tell me Egil played quite the little skit with our boy and the Valde girl down in the basement. I can’t wait to hear your full explanation, because I imagine it’s a colorful one.”

What did he mean by a “skit”? What Valde girl? And was Verán hearing this? No, he was busy holding forth and caressing Tilrey’s knee.

“You haven’t . . .?” Gersha managed, indicating the majority leader with a tilt of his head.

“Not yet. Verán says I’ll get the boy day after tomorrow. How about you come over with him, and maybe we can all talk this out. I’m happy to let you try to convince me I shouldn’t tell Verán what you’ve been doing with his prize. Unlike you, you see, I’m not incorruptible.”

And, having rendered Gersha speechless with a parting sardonic glance, Besha beelined across the room into the arms of his loving wife.

***

Karishkov wasn’t getting into it.

Tilrey had pegged the dour Councillor instantly as a man who preferred to fuck women. But most men who preferred to fuck women still enjoyed a top-notch blow job wherever they could get it.

Karishkov’s cock was obligingly hard, and he’d groaned the first time Tilrey took it in deep, but
now the man kept twitching and fidgeting, losing his focus. His hands were moving up there—was he on his damn handheld again? Now?

Tilrey extricated himself and rocked back on his knees, keeping a firm hold on the base of the man’s organ. “Forgive me, Fir,” he said, “but you seem a bit distracted. How can I improve this for you?”

Karishkov was indeed on his handheld, looking downright disturbed by whatever he saw there—too disturbed even to register the borderline sarcasm. “Family matters,” he said curtly. “I appreciate your skills, but would you mind, uh, releasing me for a moment?”

Tilrey tucked the man’s cock back into his trousers and zipped him up, feeling a tension headache dance behind his temples. First he’d had to endure the double-teaming of Verán and Davita Lindblom—both smug and unctuous and pawing him while Gersha hid in a corner—and now this.

“Tell me what I can do differently, Fir,” he said, and heard Egil’s distant voice: You’ve never had a choice. Had he recited his script of submission so many times he believed it?

But Karishkov still wasn’t looking at him. The Councillor dropped his handheld and sprang to his feet, wheeling toward the staircase. “Vreni, what on earth?”

Tilrey turned to look. A stout, pretty woman with a dangling black braid stood halfway down the stairs, bright eyes fixed on them. She wore a dressing gown—Karishkov’s, by the look of it—and an expression of unchecked ferocity. A boy of eight or nine stood with one hand knotted in her skirts, also staring downward.

“You said you wouldn’t touch him!” the woman said in a heavy, unmistakably Thurskein accent.

Tilrey wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, feeling sick. What on earth was a child doing here? He’d obliged men while their families were home, to be sure, but behind locked doors, and the wives always knew to keep the kids well away until they were old enough to understand.

This woman couldn’t be Karishkov’s wife, though. The accent marked her as a Drudge.

Karishkov climbed the stairs two at a time, speaking in a bizarrely frantic, placating tone: “I explained this to you, love. It doesn’t mean anything. You were supposed to lock the door.”

“And you were supposed to control yourself, love. Lesta, go back in the bedroom and start packing your things.”

It made no sense. The woman was clearly a Drudge lover, a glorified whore herself, someone Karishkov could simply order to make herself scarce until he was done with his important Upstart business. Instead, he was wrapping his arms tenderly around her and doing his best to steer her and the child back into the house’s inner recesses, whispering the whole time. Tilrey caught muffled reassurances about love, loyalty, and a ski outing they would take tomorrow.

And the Skeinsha woman, instead of showing respect, was lecturing Karishkov, not even bothering to lower her voice. “Always the same story, Niko! Every time I let you persuade me to visit, every time I let you see Lesta, you lie to me. Do you really expect us ever to come again? We have a perfectly good life without your airs and graces.”

No Laborer in Redda would have dreamed of speaking to an Upstart this way, much less to a Councillor. But Tilrey understood; the woman’s easy confidence reminded him of his mother’s. She must be from the upper crust of Thurskein, where one didn’t live side-by-side with one’s betters and hence never learned to defer to them.
And Karishkov, instead of giving his mistress a sound slap and telling her to mind her own business and wait for him in bed, was abjectly trying to get back in her good graces. She must be a lot more than a fuck to him. Was this the sort of rule-defying love—\textit{ináthera}—one heard about? But Karishkov had used the word \textit{linhethnell}, family love, which made even less sense.

Mesmerized by the spectacle, yet knowing he should look discreetly away, Tilrey glanced down and gave a start. The child had somehow crept down the stairs, taking advantage of the adults’ distraction, and was standing directly in front of him.

“Are you a Laborer or an Upstart?” the boy asked in a severe voice, scowling in a way that was oddly familiar. “Mama says you’re an ‘abomination,’ but your clothes are fancy like his.”

“Verdant hells!” Karishkov hurried down the stairs and scooped up the child as if to rescue him from Tilrey, his movements as gentle as his expression was furious. “Vreni, you see what you’ve done? Is this something you want your son remembering?”

And in that instant, Tilrey saw it. The Councillor and the child had the same scowl, the same deep-set eyes, the same hawk nose.

Father and son.

He’d known a few bastards, but until now he’d never met a misbirth—the illegal offspring of an Upstart and a Laborer. With contraception universal and mandatory outside a sanctioned match, there was no excuse for such creatures to exist, yet here one was, standing before him.

The boy struggled out of Karishkov’s arms and dashed back to his mother, sniffling now. The two of them continued to yell back and forth, each blaming the other for the child’s upset, like the squabbling parents they apparently were.

Tilrey remembered hearing that Karishkov had spent his early twenties working undercover in Thurskein, rooting out Dissidence by impersonating a Laborer. He must have met his lover then, before she understood the barrier between them. But still, a Councillor spreading his seed illegally? Bringing the evidence of his crime into his home? Tilrey felt a strange, exhilarating rush, as if the house’s walls had come crashing down and let the bracing air pour in. \textit{So much for our boxes. People always find ways to break them open.}

If his interpretation of the situation was right, Karishkov had gambled his whole existence on what appeared to be a love match. Tilrey had always assumed love was a phantom, like equality and freedom and most other ideals, but in this room it had a beating heart.

Linnett was right. People did need something besides safety and order. Perhaps Egil was right, too.

He sat quietly on the couch for the better part of a half-hour, listening as Karishkov attempted to settle his illicit family upstairs. The Skeinsha woman kept upbraiding him about betrayal, and the Councillor soothed her.

The man was besotted, all right. Tilrey felt a flood of involuntary empathy.

When the upstairs quieted down, Karishkov came back, grim-faced, and sat himself on the couch. “I think we’ll need to postpone this to another occasion,” he said, clearly trying to recover his chilly composure. “I don’t feel entirely comfortable . . . well, you know, with a child. I forbade the girl to bring her brat here, but these things happen.”

Tilrey pretended to accept the half-lie. Karishkov’s tenderness had made it clear the child was no brat to him.
“You know I need to spend the night here, Fir,” he said. “Verán expects it.”

Karishkov nodded, looking beaten. “Could I impose on you to sleep on the couch, lad? I know it’s not what you’re used to.”

It was the politeness of someone who has been caught in a profoundly compromising position. But Tilrey put on his bland, obsequious face and said, “That’s no trouble at all, Fir. I understand.”

“Do you?” Karishkov’s raptor features relaxed for an instant as if part of him really did hope for understanding, even from someone whose opinion, by definition, did not count.

“She’s lovely, Fir.”

Tilrey had only meant to be polite, but Karishkov sighed deeply and said, “Too damn lovely for her own good or mine. You should have seen her fourteen years ago. A friend dragged me to the ski tournament outside ’Skein. Vreni won the slalom—so fast and graceful. She was crowing over her trophy when I met her, and the way she winked at me . . . well, I’ve never seen an Upstart woman with quite that dash.” He shook his head. “It should have ended that night, but she proved addictive.”

“We all have our weaknesses, Fir.”

Karishkov gave him a slightly harder look. “Yes. It goes without saying . . . well, I understand that you observe an absolute discretion?”

He looked so desperately worried. Though Tilrey had no intention of telling anyone, he couldn’t resist pausing a moment to watch the Fir twist on the rack he’d built himself.

*It is rather fun, isn’t it?* said Linnett. *When people are in pain, you see who they truly are. And the power . . .*

“Of course, Fir.” He gazed into the man’s eyes, knowing his own were pure as today’s sky. “My discretion is absolute.”
When Tilrey returned, just after sunrise, Gersha had already been up and dressed for three hours. He paced the living room, so distracted that he twice grazed his shin on the silly ornamental gas stove, ignoring the breakfast spread of dried fruit and sweet rice that Bosh had fetched from the central lodge.

He’d already composed at least ten messages to Ranek and deleted them. *Did you tell me everything about the time you had Tilrey down in Int/Sec? Are you aware that someone in your own department is watching you, and the result is that I’m compromised? Can you please explain to me why on earth your interrogation would involve a “skit”??*

Each time he was poised to hit send, though, he came up against the same two objections. First, that it was unwise to discuss Besha’s threat in a traceable communication. And second, that Ranek had given him a full transcript of the interrogation, and he hadn’t even read it.

Because, he admitted to himself, he didn’t want to know.

When he heard Tilrey enter the coldroom, he sank onto the sofa and closed his eyes. *I can’t hide this. He’ll know something’s wrong.*

The inner door hisped open. “Fir?” The boy’s voice suggested a better mood than one might expect after a night with the glowering Karishkov. “Are you okay? This food’s getting cold.”

Gersha opened his eyes to find that lucid blue gaze trained on him, full of concern. “You seem chipper,” he said more bitterly than he meant to. “Did you have a nice time last night?”

*This was supposed to be our day. Besha did his part, and now I’ve dealt it the death blow.*

But, instead of wincing or dropping his gaze, Tilrey laughed. “It was an easy time. Let’s leave it at that, Fir. I’m going to make us some tea and porridge—you look pale as death. Then you can tell me what’s wrong.”

Without waiting for permission, he vanished into the kitchen, leaving Gersha alone with his unpleasant thoughts.

A lifetime of training told him to pretend nothing was wrong—or, if Tilrey persisted in prying, to curtly inform the boy it was Strutter business and he’d best keep his nose out of it. Gersha’s father would have done that. His uncle wouldn’t have been in this blasted mess at all. *Be the authority at all times. Never let an inferior see you weak or uncertain.*

But Tilrey wasn’t going to be fooled by bluster, and besides, this mess *did* concern him, didn’t it? Better than anyone but Ranek, the boy would be able to explain Besha’s taunts, perhaps even to figure out a counter-move. And he’d find out sooner or later about Besha’s threat, whether Gersha told him or not, because Besha wanted to see them both together. Tomorrow.

By the time Tilrey had set the low central table with bowls, the steaming teapot, and tumblers, Gersha had resigned himself to confessing. He knelt on the floor and dipped a spoon in the fruit-studded rice porridge, trying to find words.

Tilrey filled both their cups, then knelt opposite him. “Out with it, Fir.”

Gersha looked up, feeling his cheeks go hot. “You know me too well.”
“I know when something’s wrong.”

Gersha sucked in a deep breath; the full force of those wide-set blue eyes daunted him, even with nothing hostile in them. “This isn’t fair to you,” he began. “It’s my fault and Egil’s fault, and you shouldn’t have to suffer the consequences. I mean, you already did suffer the consequences of my foolish paranoia. But . . .”

A hand nudged his. “Drink your tea, Gersha. It’ll make you feel better.”

It was the use of his name, still rare and intimate between them, that pushed Gersha over the edge. Suddenly he was telling Tilrey everything, between deep gulps of hot, smoky tea: Besha’s innuendo, his accusations, the strange remarks about a “skit” and the Valde girl—she was the Dissident, wasn’t she?—and finally the ultimatum.

“Is that all?” Tilrey asked.

Gersha looked down and realized he’d finished his breakfast. “All? You do realize how Verán would react if he knew any of this?”

Again the boy’s hand found his across the table, strong fingers teasing his own open. “Of course. But if Besha wanted to tattle to Verán, he would have done it already. If he hasn’t, it’s because, first, he knows it might do him more harm than good. And, second, because he wants something from you.”

Tilrey’s palm was broad and warm, but Gersha felt a shiver move down his spine. “What would Besha want from me?”

“Ah, that’s the question, isn’t it?” Tilrey raised Gersha’s hand to his lips, brushed the knuckles across them.

The shiver became something more enticing and electric. “I mean, well, you, of course,” Gersha said, trying to think rationally. “But I can’t give him to you, and he knows that.”

Tilrey released him—Gersha couldn’t repress an almost-inaudible grunt of protest—and rose to clear up. “We’ll find out tomorrow, so why worry now? Knowing Besha, he’s hoping you’ll spend today stewing over it.”

Gersha still felt the boy’s feather-light touch. Wanted, needed those full lips on his wind-chapped skin again. “Not what I hoped to be doing today,” he said stiffly.

“Nor I, Fir.”

Tilrey bent, with a stack of crockery held fast in the crook of his arm, and smoothed Gersha’s hair back from his forehead. Gersha held his breath as the boy’s fingers tangled in his curls, skimming over his scalp, and then Tilrey tugged his head back for a kiss that was startlingly aggressive and deep.

A strangled, needy sound escaped Gersha as the boy’s lips withdrew. Tilrey only chuckled, deep, and said, “I don’t want to break these, Fir.”

By the time Tilrey returned from the kitchen, Gersha had had a chance to regain his composure and start worrying about Besha again. He watched as the boy placed two thermoses on the table and portioned the remains of the tea into them. “What are you doing? Where are we going?” His mind flew through the possibilities. “Maybe I should go explain the whole mess to Verán before Besha can say anything.”
A small, bright object clinked onto the table beside the thermoses. The earring.

“I told you I’d take it off,” Tilrey said into Gersha’s inquiring gaze. “Because this is our day, Fir, isn’t that right? Not theirs.”

Gersha’s sinuses ached. “I wanted it to be our day, love. But . . .”

“But it still is.”

And then Tilrey was kneeling beside him, pressing warm lips to the nape of Gersha’s neck, drawing Gersha back against his chest. Gersha’s muscles seemed to liquefy. He closed his eyes and surrendered to the static of desire rising in his head, feeling his cock tent his trousers, remembering the burn of pain and then pleasure Tilrey’s fingers had given him last time, wanting to ask for that again, yet not daring to move or speak lest it all suddenly stop.

He didn’t know how long they stayed that way, only that when Tilrey released him and rose, it was too soon, leaving him so bereft his eyes filled with tears. “Please,” he whispered.

Tilrey seemed to be packing things up. “Soon, love. But we’re wasting the morning, and it’s a stunner. Come on and get your outdoor things.”

Gersha got up, incapable of not obeying. “I don’t understand. Where are we going?”

“Outdoors, Fir. We’re going outdoors.”

***

The path led away from the vacation village and followed a stream for a few kilometers across a high, glistening plain before diving into dense forest. They met occasional early cross-country skiers on the plain, including a mother and young son, but for the most part, Gersha’s colleagues and their families appeared to be still indoors.

After just five minutes of walking, with the residences still firmly in sight, the Councillor began fretting. “Are you sure you know your way? I’ve heard of people getting lost out here.”

“It’s a path, Fir.” Tilrey had been forgetting to check his pace, exulting in the opportunity to stretch his legs and draw crisp air into his lungs. He waited for Gersha to catch up and took hold of the Fir’s hand. “I’ve been this way dozens of times, and even if we did get lost somehow, you have your handheld.”

Gersha’s fingers tightened on his. “These gloves are so thin. Aren’t you worried about frost-bite?”

Tilrey swallowed down a laugh. “It’s well above freezing today, Fir. I’m not sure we need gloves at all.”

The brisk walk from Karishkov’s residence to Gersha’s had already put him in a good mood, and he was determined not to waste a perfect day worrying about Besha’s schemes. Morning sun kindled ruby and amethyst sparks on the crests of the snow banks and cast mellow light across the plain. The mountains loomed to the south and east, swathed in their local snow squalls. From this distance, they looked as murky blue and sinuous as mythical beasts raising their heads from the sea.

“You can’t be too careful with the cold,” Gersha said, sounding so much like Tilrey’s mother in the days when he came in red-cheeked from long afternoons of summer ski class that he laughed aloud.
“Forgive me, Fir.” Feeling the Upstart stiffen beside him, Tilrey squeezed Gersha’s hand. “It’s just . . . you really aren’t used to this, are you? Didn’t you go hiking or skiing in the South as a boy?”

“When I was small, yes. I remember walking with my mother, complaining until she’d carry me.” Gersha’s voice sounded stifled, awkward, and not just because of the scarf he’d wrapped an absurd number of times around his jaw. “When I was older . . . well, my mother was indisposed. My cousins went skiing, but I was always grounded during school breaks, or so it seemed.”

“Grounded?” Ranek Egil had mentioned something like this.

“When my end-of-term scores weren’t satisfactory, my uncle preferred that I stay inside and catch up on my studying.” Gersha cleared his throat; clearly, two decades later, he still found this punishment mortifying.

“It’s hard to imagine you flunking out, Fir.” Tilrey recalled what Egil had said—that Gersha had been punished for anything short of perfect test scores. Upstarts could be really odd sometimes. “With all due respect,” he said, “your uncle, Fir, may he rest in peace, sounds like a bit of an asshole.”

Fingers cinched his, and Gersha made a sound that might have been a grunt or chuckle. “He was a hard man. Very exacting. He worried I might take after my mother and disgrace the family name. But you know, I was better for the extra study.”

*You would have been even better for a few hours in the fresh air.* But Tilrey didn’t press the point, because they were approaching the spot where the path entered the woods, and he had a feeling Gersha would try to use this as an excuse to curtail their excursion.

Sure enough, the Upstart hung back, shying from the shadows the tall spruce cast over the plain. “I’d like to show you something in here, Fir,” Tilrey said coaxingly. “A place Linnett used to take me.”

The Councillor glanced back the way they’d come. “How far is it?”

“About ten minutes’ walk. It’s a historically significant site, I guess you could say, though there aren’t any markers.”

Fear and curiosity warred for a few instants on Gersha’s face. “Well, if it’s historically significant . . . No wolves in here?”

“Not this close to our settlements.” Tilrey led the way into the light-swallowing evergreens, taking Gersha’s arm for the first few paces to steady him; the poor man was practically trembling. “This belt of woods is long, but not deep; the path comes out at the generator station. Anyway, if any wolves attack, I’ll protect you.”

He spotted a stout branch in the snow, grabbed it, and swept it over the path, felling an imaginary assailant. “How’s this for beating them off, Fir?”

Gersha laughed weakly. “How can I fear anything when I’m by your side?”

“That’s the spirit. Now come on.”

They saw no wolves as they followed the path into the snowbound forest, only jagged, lichenized boulders and spruce and firs towering well over fifty meters high. Gersha started at any sound—the caw of a raven, the chitter of a squirrel. Given the depth of the silence, Tilrey couldn’t blame him; this place had always given him the shivers, too.
It was worth it, though, to see and touch a small vestige of the world that had been.

When Tilrey veered off the path onto a thinner trail that zigzagged through the trees, Gersha nearly balked. The snow was no more than calf-deep at its worst, but they had to navigate windfalls, humps, and hollows.

The Councillor had nearly fallen three times when they finally emerged into an overgrown glen that had once been a clearing. Hemlocks and other small evergreens pressed thick around four half-collapsed structures—three wood, one stone—that stood open to the sky.

“Feudals!” His fear seemingly forgotten, Gersha circled the nearest ruin, stepping inside to examine the heap of stones that had once been a firepit. “I explored a place like this in a hologram demo once, but it’s not the same. How do you think they lived like this?”

Tilrey followed Gersha as he made a full circuit of the ruins, pausing occasionally to snap a picture with his handheld.

“Linnett used to say it was a shame we didn’t preserve these sites better,” he said. “He thought we should have experts studying our past—archaeologists, they called them in the Tangle.” Whyberg spat on history and gave us all collective amnesia had been Linnett’s exact words, but it seemed wiser not to repeat them.

Gersha bent to frame another shot. “That would be a waste of time, wouldn’t it? The only reason to study the past is to make sure you don’t relive it.”

The words were textbook Whyberg, yet Gersha didn’t sound very convinced. His gaze kept darting around the clearing, but no longer with apprehension. Abruptly he loped over to the third wooden shack and stood staring at its only intact wall, his eyes too bright. “What in green hells is this?”

Tilrey knew what he was looking at. He’d reacted the same way when Linnett showed him the wall from which hung a dozen clinking metal plaques of uniform size and shape, a bit shorter than his forearm. Centuries had corroded the thin aluminum, but in places one could see the remains of colorful designs and raised lettering. Each was slightly different.

“CHQ638,” Gersha read painstakingly from one of the best-preserved specimens. “Montana, Big Sky Country. What does it mean?”

“They were places in the Tangle, Fir. Alaska, California, Newfoundland, New York.” Tilrey pointed to each in turn, careful not to touch. “Linnett said they used to attach these to their gas-burning vehicles to identify them—like our cards and chips. Maybe people kept them to remind them of where they came from.”

“You mean after the Unraveling?” Gersha stared at the plaques as if they might open windows into a teeming, unimaginable past. “They must have been desperate if they chose to come up here and live like this.”

“It was probably the only place they could escape from . . . well, whatever they were escaping from.” Tilrey tried to imagine, but his Tangle books were no help. No books, or none he knew of, chronicled the Unraveling itself.

It was radiation, Linnett had said authoritatively. Half the globe became unlivable in a few days. But Oslov history books were silent on the subject, too, and Tilrey had no idea if Linnett had been quoting an official source or just guessing.

“I don’t believe in ghosts, of course,” Gersha said. “But these people . . . I think I feel them here.”
The Councillor looked so small standing nearly knee-deep in snow, and his spectral, sea-green eyes were so troubled, that Tilrey felt a flash of tenderness. He held out his hand and, when Gersha took it, pulled the other man in close to his chest.

“I didn’t mean to depress you, Fir,” he said, his lips against Gersha’s hair. “Shall we go back in and warm up?”

“I’m not depressed. It’s new, that’s all.” The Councillor’s body relaxed, and his arms crept around Tilrey. “Do other people come here?”

“I never saw anyone here but Linnett and me. Maybe people have forgotten the path.”

“Yes, it does feel private. Like a secret. There’s something about the silence—it has layers.” And with that, Gersha’s hand slid between them, through the open flap of Tilrey’s coat, and took hold of his cock through the trousers.

It was such a non sequitur that Tilrey nearly startled and pulled away. But Gersha’s grip was surprisingly confident, and once he registered what was happening, he groaned and leaned into the pumping motion, feeling himself harden eagerly.

Still—outdoors? Even Linnett had generally saved his attentions for the bedroom. This was quite a turnabout for Gersha, but Tilrey supposed the snow would be soft when he went down on his knees.

He reached for Gersha’s cock, meaning to reciprocate and then take over the pleasuring duties, as he usually did. Instead of moaning happily, though, Gersha shied away, not releasing his grip. “Let me.”

“Let you what, Fir?”

Gersha steered Tilrey against the wall of one of the ruins, continuing to pump him in deliciously long, stubborn motions. “I want to do something, and I don’t know if I have the courage to do it indoors. I always feel like my peers are watching me.”

Tilrey let himself be manhandled; the half-rotted wood felt solid enough against his back. “What do you want to do, exactly? Because I didn’t bring any—well, you know, supplies.”

Gersha didn’t stop his rhythmic motion. “Not that, not now. I want to...”

He only mouthed the last three words, as if he were uttering treason, but Tilrey understood. Suck you off.

Not this again. He felt bone-weary even through the growing heat in his belly, the familiar surface glitter of arousal. “That’s very generous of you, Fir. Lovely, really. But it’ll be easier if I just—”

“No.” Gersha’s voice was sharp, commanding. “You always say that; you always put me off when I try to do anything for you.” He halted a moment, keeping a firm grip on the base of Tilrey’s cock. “Is it really that you don’t want it? Because if you don’t, you can just say so, and I’ll stop. I promise. But if you do want it, I want to give it to you. I know I’m not good at it, not like you are, but... I’d like to try.”

It was the tone—humble, faltering—that made Tilrey’s breath catch. He felt as if a granite boulder had been weighing on him, blocking the entrance to some secret place, and a gentle wind had come, impossibly, and nudged it aside.
He couldn’t try to distract Gersha again. It would have felt wrong, and so the truth slipped out of him. “If you really want to do that, Fir, there’s something you need to know.”

He couldn’t meet Gersha’s eyes as the man nodded eagerly. “Tell me, love. Let me.”

Tilrey drew in a ragged breath. He’d told Adeled Linden, and he’d told Bror, but this was harder. Much harder. “If you want me to come,” he said, staring down at the trampled snow, “you have to tell me to do it. Order me. Otherwise, I . . .” He felt his cheeks flush as if he were eighteen again, already seeing the look of pity on Gersha’s face. You can’t come without being told?

But Gersha looked merely perplexed. “You can control it?”

“I don’t know if that’s the word I’d use.”

“Green hells.” Those eyes were wide with honest-to-god envy now. “Every time I come near you, it’s like my cock gets a mind of its own. What I’d do to be able to give it orders.”

“I’m not the one giving mine orders, Fir. You are.” Tilrey forced himself to look directly into Gersha’s eyes; the man had to know what he was in for. “You need to choose the moment, you need to verbalize it, and if you don’t, I won’t get release. I can’t. Do you understand that?”

He expected Gersha to hem and haw, to insist that couldn’t be true, but instead, the Councillor’s jaw tightened. He peeled off his heavy gloves and stuffed them into his pockets. And then, in a single movement, he dropped to his knees, without removing his eyes from Tilrey’s.

“I understand. But what do I have to say? Anything in particular?”

Tilrey shook his head. “Just make it clear.”

Then he leaned back and closed his eyes.

He wasn’t expecting much. Most Councillors had never learned how to give a decent blow job—why should they?—and Gersha’s previous fitful efforts had been tentative at best.

But when the Councillor took hold of his cock again, the no-nonsense grip sent a shiver of need rushing up Tilrey’s spine. He bucked his hips before he could stop himself, then forced himself to go still. Make this easy for him.

The next instant, Gersha’s tongue was tracing a steady path from the base to the tip, and verdant hells, that was actually good.

Gersha must have learned something from being on the receiving end, because Tilrey recognized some of his own moves—the agonizing tickle of a tongue circling the head, the teasing dart inside the slit, followed by an abrupt deep dive into warm wetness. The Councillor still had a gag reflex, of course, so his attempts at deep-throating ended awkwardly. But damned if he wasn’t trying, taking Tilrey as deep as he could and using his tongue the whole way. And the iron grip of his hand made up for the lack of penetration.

A plane hummed through the sky; a bird called somewhere in the trees. Tilrey was dimly aware of the cold on his bare flesh, but it, too, felt distant. Right now there was only the hand and the tongue and the hot wetness and Gersha’s strange, bewitching determination to make him feel something.

Bror’s well-trained mouth could have Tilrey writhing and begging within thirty seconds, but Bror had never made him feel that odd ache deep in his throat that signaled tears. Bror had never made
his hands float up and grasp at nothing, because he wanted, he wanted—

Gersha’s throat was opening wider to him, silken and hot as fever, and before he could stop himself, his fingers were tangled in those curls, spanning that beautifully shaped skull. And he was taking control, pushing himself in, feeling his balls tighten as the heat mounted in his belly.

*Rude,* said Linnett’s voice in his head, and Tilrey let his hands fall and clenched them into fists, tears slipping from under his lids as he remembered the stinging rush of a slap. “I’m sorry, Fir.”

Instead of an answer, there was the sensation of lips and tongue lapping at his balls, rolling them back and forth, drawing first one and then the other into the warm, wet cavity, and he moaned aloud. His nerves were taut, his heart thudding, his whole body tight as a drum. Normally he could keep the arousal at a certain distance, but it was too close now, too real, a white heat fusing all his synapses, and without a release valve he might implode—

The tongue withdrew. The fist on his cock tightened. Gersha’s voice said, “You can come now, my love.”

It was an explosion instead of an implosion, the pleasure radiating outward from his groin as his limbs lost sensation. For a few instants, he was a chaos of broken bones and sinews rocketing in every direction and leaving silver trails across the sky.

When he returned to his body, the first thing he was aware of was the wall against his back, followed by the cold, followed by Gersha’s fingers tucking him nimbly back into his clothes.

Tilrey slid down the wall and sprawled beside the Fir in the snow, blood rushing so loudly in his ears he seemed to be drowning. And at last he opened his eyes and asked weakly, “Where did you learn that?”

Gersha was actually grinning, his sea-colored eyes alight. “Where do you think?”

They stayed there for a bit, Tilrey’s head on the Fir’s shoulder. He stared up at the sky between the fir branches, whitening as the day edged toward noon, and dug the fingers of his trailing hand into the snow and deeper, into the half-frozen dirt beneath. Had anyone else ever done what they’d done in this clearing?

Gersha’s gentle fingers stroked his hair back, teased over his scalp, and he felt a pleasant hum rise in his throat, in his temples. “That was good.”

Gersha opened his mouth and closed it, as if he’d meant to say something but thought better of it. Then he planted a kiss on Tilrey’s forehead. “We’d better go back and warm up.”

“You’re right, Fir . . . Gersha.” Tilrey’s fingers closed on something hard. As the two of them disentangled themselves, he yanked it from the snow and examined it.

A silver hook like the one that had been in his ear, only tarnished. Dangling from the earring was a metal disc about the size of his thumbnail; there were designs and words engraved there, but he couldn’t read them through the accumulated grime.

If this was an artifact, he shouldn’t be taking it, but he didn’t care. Shoving it into his pocket before Gersha could take notice, he wondered whether some long-gone feudal kettle boy had worn this. If a lord had used it to mark a slave, or if it had been a token of true love.
Inside the house again, Gersha kept shivering, and Tilrey made a tremendous fuss about it. He insisted on lighting the gas stove—which, it turned out, wasn’t purely ornamental—seating Gersha beside it, and fetching a blanket to drape over his shoulders. Then he vanished into the kitchen and returned with a steel pitcher of something thick, black, and steamy, with an aroma that Gersha remembered from his childhood.

“Licorice root,” he said, as Tilrey poured it into two tumblers. “I haven’t had that since I was ten. Isn’t it dreadfully sweet?”

“Not when you make it right, Fir. And it’s very good for warming you up.”

Sure enough, the sticky, spicy licorice went down smooth, warming him to his core, and Gersha felt the chills recede.

On the walk back, he’d still tasted Tilrey at the back of his throat, savoring him, and he reminded himself it wouldn’t be the last time. Now that he knew what to do, how to make Tilrey come, he wanted another chance to do it better, enjoy it longer, tantalize the boy and make him writhe and moan the way he did to Gersha. Maybe even receive the full, warm rush of semen in his throat—a prospect that suddenly didn’t seem repellent at all.

Tilrey was peering at him. “Any better, Fir? I’d never forgive myself if you took the cold.”

“I’m fine!” Gersha held out his now-steady hand in illustration. “It was my fault for, uh, taking my gloves off.”

He dropped his eyes then, because he couldn’t say what he had done with his gloves off now that they were back in the brightly lit house, flanked by the dwellings of his fellow Councillors. Out there in the woods, in the snow, he’d nearly spoken the dangerous words that had risen to his lips unbidden. I love you.

Tilrey only laughed softly, knowingly. “I’m glad you did.” And then his hand was on Gersha’s knee, sliding up under the tunic, taking firm, expert hold. “And now it’s my turn.”

The touch had Gersha achingly hard in an instant. He closed his eyes and gave himself to the motion, groaning quietly as Tilrey worked him through his trousers. The little stove washed his face with mild, trembling heat, and he felt the boy’s every exhale on his cheek, slow and steady despite the exertion.

When Tilrey dropped to his knees, though, he pulled away and sat up, afraid to abandon himself again quite so quickly. “In a moment, but—Rishka, we need to talk about Besha. About tomorrow.” He patted the sofa. “Come sit up here again. I’m . . . worried.”

It cost him something to say those words aloud, to a Laborer, and Tilrey seemed to understand. He returned to his former place and asked, “What are you worried about, Fir, exactly? When you come down to it, you didn’t do anything wrong.”

Gersha had thought so, too—from the legal point of view, anyway—but now he wasn’t so sure. Guiltily he remembered complaining to Verán about the supposed corruption of Int/Sec under Karishkov’s management. What had he and Ranek done if not exploited that corruption? “I allowed my friend to do an interrogation off the books, without proper monitoring. I asked him to. It was a waste and misuse of resources.”
And much worse, I hurt you for no reason, but he couldn’t say those words aloud.

Tilrey didn’t look reproachful, though. His eyes were canny and faraway, almost like Verán’s when he was meditating on some political maneuver. “Verán won’t care about that, Fir,” he said. “You could call him up right now and confess, and I guarantee all he’d say is ‘You’re abominably paranoid, Gersha. I could have told you the boy’s too slow to be a shirker. I can’t imagine what he was doing with those books, probably looking at the pictures, but who cares? You didn’t damage him, did you?’”

Tilrey’s impression of the majority leader was so accurate that Gersha laughed, a little painfully. “The books you borrowed don’t have pictures.”

“You expect Verán to know that? And then you’ll say no, I’m not physically damaged, and then he’ll probably suggest you ban me from the Library, but he’ll never check to make sure you actually do it. So, no harm done. Do you want to tell him, Fir?”

It was still the last thing Gersha wanted. “Besha said something else odd, though, remember? About that Valde girl being involved in your interrogation.”

“Oh. Right.”

“It’s probably nonsense, because Ranek didn’t mention anything of the kind, and the girl was a traitor, but . . .” He broke off when he saw the thoughtful, almost troubled look on Tilrey’s face. “It’s not nonsense, is it?”

When their gazes met, the furrow between the boy’s brows smoothed itself out quickly—too quickly, Gersha thought. But Tilrey only said, “You should discuss that with your friend, Fir. I’m sure he could answer all your concerns. It’s not my place . . .”

“To question his methods. I know.” Gersha tapped two fingers impatiently on his knee, remembering Ranek’s stupid file he’d refused to read. All the answers were in there, no doubt. “But if Ranek did do something truly questionable—it doesn’t seem likely, but I can’t rule it out—then Besha might use that against me.”

“Against us, Fir.”

A blush spread over Gersha’s face. Of course Tilrey had reason to side with him; he’d rather live with Gersha than with Besha or Verán or one of the others. But that throb in the boy’s voice suggested there was more at stake than just preferring not to be ordered or slapped around. Almost as if he really did care for Gersha.

He shoved the thought away roughly (I don’t deserve it, not now) and echoed, “Against us.”

Tilrey leaned forward, his knee nudging Gersha’s. “If we need Besha to be quiet, I think I have a way to keep him quiet. But let me ask you a question first, Fir.”

As always, the boy’s closeness made the very air between them vibrate; Gersha wasn’t sure he could think straight with those pale eyes fixed on him. “Go on.”

Tilrey didn’t break the gaze. “Besha is attracted to you, Fir. I’m quite sure of it. Have you ever felt attracted to him?”

The question was so unexpected, and so unwelcome, that Gersha felt his whole body draw inward as his cheeks flamed. “No! Why would you even ask that?” A dark thought slithered into his mind: Had he done anything to suggest he didn’t despise Besha as a nasty, coarse little bully? Had Tilrey
read something in their interactions that he himself wasn’t aware of?

But Tilrey only said, “It’s possible to be attracted to your nemesis, Fir. In fact, it’s not terribly uncommon.”

“Well, I—I’m not.” His face still painfully red, Gersha summoned a raft of mental images of Besha—as schoolboy, University student, Defense functionary, Councillor. At every age, the image was dominated by an insinuating smirk, a hateful smugness, both reflecting a talent for playing on Gersha’s weaknesses. It had never even occurred to him to wonder whether his rival was attractive in an objective sense. “I wouldn’t call him my nemesis,” he said. “That’s very dramatic.”

“Your enemy, then.”

“Still giving him too much credit.” Gersha forced himself to visualize Besha without the smirk—not easy—and saw a lean, boyish face with high cheekbones, full lips, and keen, steely blue eyes. Yes, all right, maybe.

The instant he spotted a flicker of beauty in the mental image, the smirk returned to it—enemy—and Gersha recoiled. “I don’t hate Besha,” he insisted. “He’s the one who hates. He’s hateful and spiteful and he’s always had it in for me, ever since we were children, and honestly, I have no idea why.”

Tilrey sounded tired. “Because he’s envious of you, Fir. Your name, your skills, maybe even your looks. We’ve been over this before. Just tell me one thing. That day he came to deliver the files, why’d you invite him in?”

That day. Remembering what else had happened that day—afterward, in bed—Gersha felt his cheeks flush again. We never finished what we started. But now, at least, he could be honest. “I guess I was a little afraid to be alone with you, after knowing about the books. I wanted you so badly it scared me.” He was already blushing, so why not admit it? “I knew Besha would be a distraction.”

“You were keyed up, and you took it out on him.” Tilrey was training that canny, Verán-like gaze on him again. “You ordered him around, practically insulted him.”

Gersha started to justify himself, but Tilrey stopped him with a sharp dart of his head. “I’m not saying you were wrong. Besha’s given you plenty of provocation. What I find interesting is that he took it. Once you started striking back at him, he rolled over.”

“He always does that. It’s his method—provoke me and then play the innocent.” But Gersha hadn’t missed the sexual connotation of roll over, and Tilrey’s face told him it had been intentional. “I know you’ve said it before, but . . . you don’t seriously think he wants that from me? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Well, he wants something.” Instead of pressing the point, Tilrey rose and started gathering the dishes. “I didn’t mean to agitate you, Fir. If you don’t want him that way, or any way, then you don’t. There are plenty of other ways to neutralize him.”

Gersha didn’t like the sound of that, or the weary certainty in Tilrey’s voice; it made him think of the handcuffs again. “You don’t want him, either,” he pointed out as Tilrey returned from the kitchen.

The boy came around behind the couch and rested warm fingers on Gersha’s nape, massaging it. “I’m forgetting myself, love. This is still our day. Why don’t I run a bath for us?”
“Don’t try to . . . manage me. I’m not like Besha or Verán; I know how smart you are.” Despite his words, Gersha was leaning into the touch. “What you want matters. I won’t let you sacrifice yourself to ‘neutralize’ Besha, and that’s my last word.”

“Then I’m sure you’ll think of a better idea, Fir.” Tilrey tugged Gersha’s head back gently and kissed him on the forehead. “Right now, a bath?”

And, feeling a bit soothed even though he knew Tilrey wanted him to feel that way, Gersha nodded.

While the tub was filling and Tilrey was in the other room, he fished his handheld from his pocket. He still didn’t leave it lying around, though he didn’t really expect Tilrey to misappropriate it, and a few times he’d even checked his mail while the boy sat on the couch beside him.

Verán had sent a curt reminder about delivering Tilrey to Besha’s tomorrow afternoon and to Saldegren’s the evening after, which made his jaw clench, but there was no backlog of messages. Ah, vacation. And then, before he could stop himself, Gersha was clicking back into older messages and finding Ranek’s file and opening it.

He’d been a coward long enough. Whatever it said, he needed to know.

The report was thirteen pages long, single-spaced, and it started with a welter of Int/Sec jargon that Gersha skimmed because it was basically unreadable. Halfway down the second page, he caught the name “Celinda Valde” and backtracked.

Following the protocol set by Case No. 59345-CK (Gurnal/Nilssen), the Agent actualized an entrapment scenario utilizing Room 472-B and Subject 662831-GB (Celinda Valde), who has confessed to Treason Level 381-D in accordance with Protocol H-86 and is cooperating with the State.

After that it descended into jargon again, all case numbers and vagueness—until suddenly, on page four, Gersha found himself reading a perfectly comprehensible dialogue:

VALDE: Bror told me, you know—about what happened your first night in Verán’s house. What he made you do. Is it true they made you suck off every member of the Island Party?

BRONN: They tried.

VALDE: Green hells, you must want to murder the lot of them.

BRONN: (dull voice) I don’t want to murder anyone. It was a bad night, that’s all.

VALDE: The way they treat you—it’s just wrong. You never even chose this life, did you?

BRONN: Not exactly.

VALDE: The word is “no.”

Something was churning in Gersha’s gut, and his sinuses ached. He knew he should stop reading, but he seemed to have lost the ability: his eyes raced over the words, line after line, and his finger kept scrolling.

The dialogue went on for pages. Here and there the report’s author inserted comments in numbing bureaucratese, essentially saying (if Gersha understood correctly) that Valde had been instructed to lure Tilrey into saying something subversive. She did this by prying into his personal history,
alternately expressing sympathy and taunting him, until he gave in and began making confessions that turned Gersha’s whole body to ice.

_I don’t want to read this. I don’t want to know these things. He wouldn’t want me to._ But his eyes refused to obey, and his brain kept absorbing the words, the stories, the images it would never be able to erase:

BRONN: _So you really want to know? Fir Jena brought me home and gave me a whole vial and fucked me while I was out cold. That was my first time. After that he had his driver hold me down._

And the worst of it was, the tears swelling in Gersha’s eyes were disingenuous tears, tears of willful naïveté. He should have known these things—well, not the specifics, but he could easily have guessed the general outlines of Tilrey’s history. Should have guessed, should have _known_. He’d seen plenty for himself: the bruises, Election Night, Verán’s casual cruelties.

But when they were together, the boy always seemed so smooth and knowing, so firmly in control, and Gersha had let himself be deceived. Now here was the truth in black and white: a frightened schoolboy taken to a strange city and strong-armed into a Councillor’s bed. You could use all the euphemisms and jargon you wanted, but it was a story of repeated rape, of myriad forms of coercion.

And the report clearly implied that Tilrey’s stoic endurance of all this, his lack of desire for revenge or redress, his refusal to take Valde’s bait, was proof of his loyalty and good character. It was obscene. Gersha, who’d never had a subversive thought in his life, wanted to shout at Tilrey to be angry, goddamn it, to stand up for himself, to join Valde’s Dissident cell, perhaps even to garrote Verán the way she’d invited him to—

“Fir? The water’s going to get cold.”

It was all Gersha could do not to drop the handheld. He blanked the screen, tossed it away, and rose heavily to his feet, struggling to wipe the evidence of his feelings from his face. “Coming.”


“No. Not a word from him.” He walked past the boy into the steaming bathroom and began numbly to remove his clothes. “I’m fine. Shall we bathe?”
“You are not fine, Fir.” Tilrey shrugged out of his clothes, very aware that Gersha wasn’t bothering to watch him. The Councillor had submerged himself in the water and was staring glumly at his knees, his jaw set. Sliding in opposite him, Tilrey could see raw, aggrieved flesh around his eyes.

“Gersha.”

The Councillor jerked his head up, as he always did when Tilrey used his name. Water vapor beaded on his pale skin, making him look more beautiful and more distressed at once, and Tilrey suppressed a shudder of arousal.

“You don’t have to tell me, of course, but I wish you would. Especially if . . . well, I thought this was our day, Fir. And I haven’t forgotten what you asked of me.”

Gersha actually flinched. “I read the report,” he said all in one breath.

“What report?”

“The one Ranek gave me. On the, uh, sessions he had with you.” The Councillor was glaring down into the water now, like a child being chastised. “Only it wasn’t him asking most of the questions, was it? It was this girl, the Dissident. I understand what Besha meant by a ‘skit’ now.”

Shit. Why hadn’t Egil warned Tilrey about a report? It couldn’t be the whole truth about his interrogation, of course, or even much of it, but Tilrey had no idea what it said, which put him at a distinct disadvantage.

“You read it just now?” he asked cautiously.

Gersha nodded, looking miserable. “I know. I’ve had it for days. But then I started wondering what Besha was talking about, exactly, and . . .”

Goddamn you, Egil, for being so careless. Then again, Besha probably had spies everywhere; from what Tilrey could tell, the most successful politicians were always the most paranoid. “And you found out something that bothers you,” he said, keeping his voice neutral.

Still Gersha didn’t look at him. “I didn’t learn anything I shouldn’t have already known.”

Did this damned report cast doubt on Tilrey’s character somehow? But Egil had promised he’d be cleared, and since the interrogator still hoped to use Tilrey as a spy for his own purposes, he had no reason to lie. If anything, Egil had made it clear his plans hinged on Gersha’s feelings for Tilrey. So what had he put in this fraud of a report to upset his friend?

Tilrey, too, had had a plan: to reach for Gersha’s cock as soon as they got in the bath and finish what they’d started earlier. It was a plan he’d been actively looking forward to realizing, and now
he had trouble not sounding annoyed as he said, “Could you please stop trying to make me guess? If it’s something that concerns me, something I’ve done, at least give me a chance to speak for myself.”

“It’s nothing you’ve done,” Gersha’s voice broke on the last word.

Tilrey recognized that tone. He was all too familiar with well-intentioned Upstarts’ pity. *Fuck you, Egil.*

“I think I understand,” he said, hearing his voice go icy. Stopped, cleared his throat, and began again in the bland, humble tone he usually used with Upstarts: “I said a lot of stupid things to Celinda, Fir, because I thought she was my friend. And to Fir Egil, because, well, he insisted on asking me about certain things. They were both trying to goad me into—”

“Expressing treasonous intent. I know.” Gersha’s eyes met his for an instant, and Tilrey was surprised by the depth of pain in them. “But you didn’t actually lie to either of them, did you?”

“Of course not.” *Green hells, I wish I knew what that report said I said.* But Egil was too smart to outright fabricate anything. He’d probably simply stitched together the parts of the interrogation that didn’t incriminate either himself or Tilrey.

“So.” He cleared his throat again. “I’m guessing you learned some things about me that aren’t pleasant. But you need to understand, Fir, all of that happened a long, *long* time ago, and—”

“Three years,” said Gersha sharply.

“What?”

“Three years you’ve been with the Island, give or take. Is it true about what Verán...”

Oh god, not this again. At least now Tilrey knew Bror hadn’t betrayed his trust, as he’d thought earlier. Egil had fed Celinda her lines, and Egil had doubtless heard the gossip through his own networks in the Sector.

“Is it true that Verán made me suck off all his cronies on my first night with the Island?” he asked, deliberately being as crude as possible and enjoying the Upstart’s wince of horror. “Yes, it’s true. In fact, I’m surprised Verán hasn’t bragged about it to you. He called it a ‘spring fling’—you know, after that obscene old feudal ritual. He must have thought the story would offend your delicate sensibilities.”

Gersha’s intake of breath was audible, and Tilrey knew the barb had gone home. “Is there anything else you’d like to know?” he went on. “Because I have plenty more salacious confessions, if that’s what gets you going. I may not be quite as eager a little slut as some lads, but I’ve been through quite a bit. I can give you all the details—”

“Stop it.”

Tilrey shut his mouth. Gersha was looking straight at him now, and the Upstart’s eyes were wet and wide with anguish, withholding nothing. There was no disgust there, no more pity, only pain. “You’re not a ‘slut,’” he said. “Never use words like that. You’re a prisoner.”

Tilrey shook his head, but somehow he couldn’t find the words to deny it.

“I knew all this already,” Gersha said in a low voice. “Or I should have known. But I chose to ignore it, I chose to look away, because I wanted you. I told myself it was fine to take what you
were freely offering. But it wasn’t really free, was it? It never was.”

Tilrey held the gaze. His anger bled away, and he felt an old familiar ache in the back of his throat. *If he actually makes me cry, damn him . . .* “It was always freely given,” he said stiffly. “To you, anyway.”

He expected Gersha to look away first, but Gersha didn’t. “Even that first night?” he asked, staring at Tilrey. “When you came and offered yourself as a ‘gift’? It was Verán’s word and Verán’s idea.”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“And that second night, when you tried to make me fuck you—that was to get me closer, wasn’t it? And that third night, when you broke protocol and basically seduced me—that was so I wouldn’t make any more trouble with Besha. Everything you’ve done has been manipulation, because it’s all you know. It’s how you survive. And I don’t blame you, because you didn’t choose any of this. You don’t want it. You—”

Tilrey didn’t even think. He needed to silence Gersha, needed to stop hearing his own ugliness laid bare, so he plowed his way across the tub and pulled the Upstart into a rough, humid kiss.

Gersha tried to yank away, and Tilrey held him tighter, fingers digging into his shoulders, not caring now if he bruised the Upstart’s sensitive skin or his sensitive feelings. He thrust his tongue into Gersha’s mouth, knowing how it felt to be held down this way, to be forcibly opened, and knowing how easy it would be to continue this in the bedroom.

*Oh yes,* said Linnett. *I really did teach you well.*

A shudder ran down Tilrey’s spine, but he didn’t release Gersha. “Is this what you want?” he whispered. “For me to be selfish?”

Gersha had stopped struggling. “Yes.”

And then, with no transition, he was kissing back, stroking his hands over Tilrey’s shoulders and into his hair, gasping in excited submission. And then he was reaching into the water, taking hold of Tilrey’s cock, rubbing it against his own erect organ, rutting up against him as he said, “You know what I want. You know exactly what I want. But I won’t take it this time unless you want it, too.”

The half-angry friction sent bolts of pleasure shooting up Tilrey’s spine. He captured Gersha’s cock and began pumping it while Gersha worked his, their rhythms falling into synch. Warm water trickled down his bangs and into his eyes, blinding him, and he blinked it away, thinking in a dim way that this was how it must feel to be totally, shamelessly in the grip of desire.

“If you still want that, we should go in the bedroom,” he managed.

His reflexes had slowed in the past few seconds, as if he were drunk or sapped. Without waiting for Gersha to nod, he made his way to the edge of the bath, careful not to slip, tossed the Fir a towel, and took one himself. Closing his eyes, slicking the wet hair out of his face, he reached for his usual equilibrium, his control, the place he went that was ice and snow and nothing else.

But he found only his own hectic breathing. And when he opened his eyes, there stood Gersha drying himself, still hard and blushing in that peculiarly becoming virginal way, and it was just too much.
Tilrey walked the Fir backward and, meeting no resistance, pressed him against the tiles, grabbed a handful of his ass, and kissed him again, long and deep. The towel flopped to the floor. This time Gersha reciprocated immediately, making urgent moaning sounds into his mouth, rubbing his cock against Tilrey’s thigh.

Tilrey had played the dominant role from time to time, but this was the first time he’d really felt like he was in charge of what happened next. Want me to be selfish? I’ll do anything I want to you, and you’ll like it.

He remembered Celinda’s ridiculous scripted proposal to kill Verán and how, for a moment, it had tempted him. But this was nothing like that. With his arms around Gersha, bending to suck and nip at the Councillor’s neck, he felt a strangely desperate desire to protect this odd, delicate, beautiful man, to hold him close, to keep him safe. To give him victory over his enemies.

*My little Councillor—so sensitive, so high-strung, so perfect, regardless of what your uncle thought. My very own.*

As if he could hear the words, as if he liked them, Gersha moaned again. “Come on,” he said, pressing his head into Tilrey’s neck. “Finally. Please.”

***

It hurt. Gersha had known it would, and he was ready, but he still gasped and bit his own knuckle as Tilrey eased the third finger into him, working it gently back and forth to stimulate that sensitive spot.

The pain made him writhe, hot and crimson, and then the pleasure froze him in place, setting off white-hot flares in his brain. Tilrey had used a pillow to raise his hips, and the sensation of holding still for this, of being held still, was exquisitely humiliating and arousing at once.

He moaned, bucking his hips to take a little more, and remembered how hard he’d always tried to keep still and quiet when he was getting serviced at the Sanctioned Brothel. His whore had even said at one point, “You can move, you know, Fir, you can make noise,” and Gersha had shaken his head and replied, “I’m fine.”

Why’d he wasted so much time trying to control himself, even in the throes of passion? Probably because once he’d overheard his two older cousins talking about a Drudge girl they’d both slept with, and one of them said, “She wiggled under me like a little slut.” And when Gersha heard the word “slut,” he thought of what his uncle always called his mother.

Well, fuck that.

A blush rose to his cheeks now, and he tried to will himself to lie still. But instead he found himself asking aloud, “Does this make me the slut? Do I want it too badly?”

Tilrey’s voice was a rumble behind him. “You told me not to use that word.”

“For yourself.” The word was stuck in Gersha’s head now, aggravating and arousing him at once, much like the boy’s clever fingers. Before he could stop himself, he said, “You can call me a slut if you want.”

He expected a polite laugh and a demurral, but this wasn’t like the last time they’d done this. Tilrey gasped harshly, as if he weren’t quite in control of himself, either. “Why would you want that?”

“Because I—because—” He strained up onto the fingers. “Because I want. Please.”
“Are you a slut, then, Fir?” Tilrey asked breathlessly, reaching under Gersha to work his still rock-hard cock. “If so, you’re wasted in the Council, because you’d make a gorgeous whore.”

The words were a slap in the face, an unraveling of everything Gersha was supposed to be; they might torment him later. But right now they were exactly what he needed to hear, blowing him apart into a haze of pleasure where nothing existed but the fingers in his ass and the hand on his cock. No status, no responsibility, no duties, no family name. No Levels at all. Just this desperate need.

And he bucked again and groaned and said, “Do it now. Fuck me.”

“Your wish is my command, Fir.”

Why do I want this? What’s wrong with me? It didn’t matter. He wanted it all: the pain, the fullness, the sensation of being taken apart and teetering right on the brink of dissolution. He wanted to be unraveled.

He said huskily, “Not a command. Not unless you want it.”

“You know I—” Tilrey’s voice broke; his breathing was hot and fierce against Gersha’s back. “You know.”

“No. I don’t know.”

The fingers withdrew, traced a slick line up Gersha’s flank—tender, as if Tilrey were a Tangle artist preparing to re-create him in marble. There was a firm pat on his shoulder blade before Tilrey’s hand left him to brace itself on the bed. And then, for the first time, he felt the boy’s cock press against his entrance.

A groan. “I might have trouble holding back. Green hells, I want you.”

“Then don’t hold back.”

At first it was overwhelming, almost unbearable. An electric shock of pain seized Gersha’s whole body like a cramp, cinching every muscle, and he gasped, seeing stars behind his eyelids.

Tilrey pulled out a little and pressed warm lips to his nape and said, “Push out and breathe, it helps,” the last word turning to a grunt as he thrust again.

It did help. Gersha’s consciousness had narrowed to a single ring of pain, a ring of fire. But Tilrey was working himself in slowly, back and forth, the ample lubricant easing the friction. The pain dulled to an ache, and then the ache became . . . something else.

Tilrey pumped Gersha’s cock again, gasping with exertion as he pulled them both slightly up off the bed, driving himself deeper. Gersha grunted at the sudden intense coupling of hurt and ecstasy as their slick bodies slid together.

Tilrey’s sweat was a sharp tang in his nostrils, the powerful grip of his fingers locking Gersha’s hips in position as the pillow beneath them flattened and yielded. Gersha braced his knees and began to move tentatively up into the thrusts, and Tilrey rewarded him with an intake of breath that was almost a whimper.

He was being widened, filled, broken in, in a way only this man could do to him. He would walk differently tomorrow. He might look different. How could anyone not see it written on his face?
“This better? You like this?”

Tilrey drew back and thrust again, shallowly, and Gersha gasped hoarsely as his pleasure center ignited. “Yeah. But I want you . . . I want you all the way.”

“Be patient, love, we’re almost there.”

A hand tangled in his hair, pressing his face into the bedspread, and together with the next, deeper thrust, it was enough to make Gersha moan through his gritted teeth. He didn’t know why, but he wanted the pressure, the sensation of being crushed into the mattress, wanted it as much as he wanted the hand on his cock or the gentle kisses on his shoulder blades.

“More,” he whispered, and then at last Tilrey slid himself all the way in and began to move faster. Gersha couldn’t reciprocate now; it took all his strength to hold firm and receive the pressure. His cock was straining in Tilrey’s iron grasp, and he felt the silken tickle of the boy’s heavy scrotum against his sensitive skin, and all at once, as Tilrey pulled out and thrust home again, he came.

The pleasure burst behind Gersha’s eyes, sweet and stinging and lurid as a sunset, a wild dance of colors and shapes set to his spiking heartbeat, and he heard a cry tear itself from his throat.

The colors faded, and for endless moments, he floated in pale nothingness as if they were outside again, in that strange clearing beside the feudal ruins. The sky was enormous, fat-bellied with snow, and it filtered into his skin, penetrating him, swallowing him, lifting him aloft to float on an impossibly mellow breeze.

When he came back to his body, Tilrey’s weight had gone still on top of him. The boy was still panting, though less frantically, his sinews still tensed. His cock was still in Gersha, still hard.

“Why’d you stop?” Gersha’s voice didn’t sound like his anymore. It was woozy, wanton.

“I—you’re done. I don’t want to hurt you.” Tilrey’s own voice was tight with frustration, as if he were trying to will himself not to need release.

“You won’t.” And though Gersha knew it would hurt, he lifted his hips and drew Tilrey in a little more. “C’mon.”

Tilrey grunted gutturally and thrust hard and fast—twice, three times—before Gersha finally found the presence of mind to say, “Come now.”

The rush of warmth was immediate. Gersha raised himself on his knees for it, keeping Tilrey inside him as the boy rode out his climax, hearing him gasp as if in pain and knowing that for one brief, blissful moment, his lover, too, had lost control.

Then Tilrey’s weight collapsed on top of him, all those working muscles suddenly slack with pleasure. “Verdant green hells,” he whispered in Gersha’s ear, his vowels suddenly thick with a Skeinsha burr. “I’ve done this before, Fir, but that was . . . different.”

The accent made Gersha want to kiss him again, but he settled for squirming a little, to get Tilrey’s weight distributed just right, and asking innocently, “Good different?”

Lips pressed his nape, and Tilrey’s voice when it came was languid and sleepy. “Blow-my-fucking-mind different.”

Gersha’s mind was drifting, and he couldn’t form words. His body ached, but it was like the good ache of his hamstrings after a long run in the gym—a sensation of having been stretched beyond
his limits and yet, somehow, having held together.

When Tilrey kissed his shoulder blade and rolled off him, some time later, he managed to murmur in protest. “Don’t go.”

The boy laughed softly, already in the distance. “I’m just going to get something to clean up, Fir. Don’t leave that bed.”
Tilrey dreamed he was outdoors again.

He was standing in the clearing where the ruins were, but they weren’t ruins anymore. They were newly raised buildings—one, in fact, was only half-completed—and smoke twined into the sky from their crude stone chimneys.

Around him milled men, women, and children wearing strange clothes—puffy coats in absurd shades of pink, orange, blue. They murmured anxiously about a storm coming. They spoke English, which Tilrey had never heard spoken aloud before, but he recognized the occasional phrase—“below zero,” “no signal,” “not coming for us.”

Then he was no longer an observer but a character in the dream, a young man who was furtively kissing his lover in the bracken behind one of the new dwellings. The other boy looked like Gersha, only younger, slight and pale with dark hair and spectral green eyes. His mouth was hot, and he moaned with abandon, rubbing himself against Tilrey.

Tilrey nipped at his lip, and the other boy yelped and said, “Careful, they’ll hear us” and drew back and held out something on his palm. “Do you like it?” he asked, speaking Oslov now. “I made it for you.”

It was a silver earring from which dangled a thin copper medallion the size of Tilrey’s thumbnail. The medallion was shiny and new, engraved with the image of a bearded man in profile, some English words, and a date he couldn’t make out. Yet somehow he now knew just what the thing was.

“A penny?” he asked, smiling, as he gripped it between thumb and forefinger. “Is that what I’m worth to you, love?”

The boy who looked like Gersha grinned back sheepishly and said, “That’s not the point. None of it’s worth anything anymore, but I don’t want us to forget where we came from.”

Sadness enveloped them both like rain clouds, and they reached for each other, but before they touched, Tilrey came awake with a jerk.

The skylight was almost pitch-dark—was it that late? Gersha’s breath was soft against his cheek, an arm encircling his back, the blankets a mess around them.

He rose as quietly as he could—Gersha shifted and muttered, but didn’t open his eyes—and stole to the window. Behind the blinds, snowflakes drifted, and the sky was dark except for a slate-blue strip on the horizon.

Tilrey was so disoriented he briefly thought it was dawn. Is our day over already? But no. The light was in the west.

Relieved, he pulled on one of the robes hanging in the bathroom, drained the bath—in his excitement, he’d forgotten—and repaired to the kitchen to make tea.

When he returned with the tray and switched on the bedside lamp, he found Gersha already sitting up against the pillows. “You said I wasn’t to leave the bed,” the Councillor said in an odd voice, somehow both awkward and languid.
Tilrey laughed. “I said that? Really?”

Instead of answering, Gersha dropped his eyes, the coal-black lashes shadowing the pale cheeks. He didn’t raise them until Tilrey deposited the tray beside the bed, went to him, and raised his chin for a kiss.

Gersha’s whole body melted, his mouth opening into Tilrey’s, and it was all Tilrey could do to wrest himself away. “I should probably pour this before it gets cold.”

“Always the tea with you. Is that really what we need most right now?”

“Tea is the foundation of civilization. And we’ve got plenty of time.” Tilrey bent his head over the kettle to hide his blush—why was he blushing now? If Gersha the prude wasn’t embarrassed by what they’d done, he shouldn’t be.

Still, the few other times he’d fucked men, he hadn’t lost control that way, hadn’t wanted it that much. He’d been careful not to hurt Gersha, as careful as he could manage, but it was hard to control his body’s desperate need to thrust into that delicious hot tightness, over and over and over —

He cleared his throat decorously and handed the Fir a steaming tumbler. “Did I really tell you not to leave the bed? I, uh, I’m not sure I remember doing that.”

Gersha smiled and patted the duvet beside him. “You did. And I obeyed.”

Tilrey slid in beside him, though he wasn’t sure he trusted himself to touch his lover again just yet. “I don’t know what I was thinking, Fir.”

That was a lie; he knew exactly where his mind had been. In a memory. Years ago, one morning in the Southern Range, Linnett had fucked him long and hard and then said, “You’ll stay in this bed till I come back. No dressing. No cleaning yourself.”

Naked under the comforter, Tilrey had listened as Linnett conducted business on his handheld in the other room. By the time the Magistrate returned, he was smarting with shame and desperate to take a piss. After he’d done that—with permission, of course—Linnett told him to roll over and had him again, this time more gently, reaching around to work Tilrey’s cock until he was desperate for release. When Linnett finally whispered, “You can come now, sweetheart,” Tilrey barely existed as anything but a molten stew of humiliation and arousal, and it wasn’t over. The Magistrate rose again to check his handheld, saying, “Same instructions, love, but I brought you your book this time.” And again Tilrey waited, trying to read, itchy and aching and turned on and miserable by turns, but never even considering getting up on the sly. When Linnett returned for the final time, he’d nuzzled Tilrey’s neck and said, “If you could see how you look when you’re fighting back tears, you’d understand why I do these things to you.”

Green hells, he hadn’t thought about that in a while. He wasn’t even quite sure if it was a good memory or a bad one.

Gersha’s arm slipped around his shoulder, pressing them close. “You sounded so commanding when you said it. I don’t think I can in good conscience disobey.”

Tilrey felt his cock stiffen at the contact—and that, too, wasn’t normal. He wasn’t supposed to respond until he was touched there. “Don’t make fun of me, Fir.”

“I wasn’t.” Gersha kissed Tilrey’s neck, then tugged his head down to whisper in his ear, “But I want to propose another rule. If I’m confined to this bed, as long as you’re on it with me, you’re
not allowed to call me ‘Fir.’”

That was harder than the Fir probably realized, but it seemed only fair. “Okay, then. Gersha.”

Gersha freed himself enough to sip his tea. “Would you like some sap now? I think I would. But you’ll need to get it, because it’s in my tunic pocket.”

Tilrey fetched the vial from the tunic, discarded in the bathroom. Back on the bed, he held it out. “Or would you like it in the tea?”

Gersha shook his head. Framed against the white pillows, his skin drew a rosy glow from the single lamp, and he seemed unself-conscious, for once, about his nudity. “I want you to pour it in your hand.”

Catching on, Tilrey blushed despite himself. “You know that’s not protocol, F—Gersha.”

Gersha laughed. “Is anything we’ve done today protocol?”

True enough. Tilrey unsealed the vial, dribbled a modest amount of the sticky golden-black liquid into his palm, and held it out.

Gersha closed his eyes, caught Tilrey’s hand, and bent his head. His tongue moved over Tilrey’s palm—tentative at first, then lapping eagerly.

Tilrey repressed a moan as his cock reminded him it was still standing at attention. When Gersha released him, he licked his palm clean, almost too shy to meet the Fir’s eyes.

“You’re hard,” Gersha said, pointing to the gap in his robe.

Tilrey adjusted it hastily. “I’m fine, F—Gersha.”

“That really is ingrained in you, isn’t it? Using the honorific.”

You have no idea. To avoid talking about it, Tilrey pulled Gersha down and hid his face against the Fir’s pectoral. Feeling the pleasant, lulling hum of the sap spread through his body, he caught a nipple between his teeth, his still-sticky fingers brushing the coarse black chest hair.

Gersha’s hand was in his own hair, stroking it. “I don’t really understand what happened earlier,” the Councillor said, thoughtful. “When I asked you to call me. . . well, to insult me. I’ve never felt any conscious desire to be degraded, but in that moment it was. . .”

Tilrey nodded against Gersha’s chest; he understood too well. “It’s just a kink, love.” Biting back the impulse to say Fir. “You’re far from the only Councillor to have it.” Sometimes the most powerful men were the ones who liked the most to lose control. I taught you that, said Linnett smugly.

Tilrey willed his memories away—the old man had no place here. “I know you don’t want to talk about Besha, but I think that might be his kink, as well.”

Gersha’s fingers tightened in his hair, yanked a little. “You’re right. I don’t want to talk about him.”

Fine, but we’ll have to deal with him sooner or later. Tilrey licked a circle around the Fir’s nipple and was rewarded with a sharp intake of breath. “I think you should take me now, love. It’s your turn.”
But Gersha was still off in his head somewhere. “I’ve thought about it, you know,” he said. “How it would feel to oblige Verán, if I really had to. I’m honestly not sure I could do it.”

Tilrey pushed himself up onto his elbows. “Verán? Why on earth would you ever need to do that, Fir—Gersha?”

He wasn’t feigning his shock. Besha had confessed to sucking off Verán in the days before he had his Council seat, but Besha was low-named. Gersha had no reason to debase himself that way.

“Oh, I don’t think I would.” Gersha’s eyes had hooded themselves. “But lately there’s something I want from him, politically, something he doesn’t want to give, and I’ve been experimenting with, well . . . being nicer to him, I guess you could say.”

“You’ve been flirting with Verán?”

The Councillor reddened down to his chest. Tilrey went on, trying not to laugh, “What is it you want? I didn’t think you were ever interested in the political maneuvering.”

“It’s hard to explain.”

*I know considerably more about politics and Council protocol than you do.* “Try me.”

“Well, it’s about the Int/Sec committee chair. Verán is dead set on Karishkov for Party reasons, but I honestly think he’s making a mistake . . .”

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Tilrey listened almost without blinking, his warm weight pressing down on Gersha, until Gersha trailed off, feeling like he hadn’t done a very good job of explaining. It felt bizarre to talk politics with a Laborer.

But Tilrey seemed to understand just fine. He asked, “Is this something your friend Egil wants, by any chance? Is he pushing for Albertine Linnett as committee chair?”

“Well . . . yes, but I’m not just taking this up because he’s my friend. Ranek worked in Int/Sec under Karishkov’s directorship. If he thinks the man was corrupt, I believe him.”

Tilrey had that canny look again. “You know that’s quite an ask, F—Gersha,” he said. “Verán isn’t going to invite a Linnett anywhere near power in his administration.”

“I know. But I despise this foolish partisanship, and I respect Albertine. She shouldn’t be judged by her father’s treason.”

Tilrey’s brows pulled together, and abruptly something occurred to Gersha, making his guts churn. Two lines from that cursed report that he’d never be able to erase from his brain: *Fir Jena brought me home and gave me a whole vial and fucked me while I was out cold. That was my first time.*

Councillor Arvan Jena was Albertine Linnett’s husband, the traitor Linnett’s son-in-law. He’d done those things to Tilrey, perhaps with his wife in the next room.

Gersha shuddered, knowing Tilrey could feel it and not caring. He kept his voice level as he said, “Do you have any reasons not to trust Albertine Linnett?”

Tilrey must have known exactly what Gersha meant. He didn’t act offended, only rolled off Gersha and propped himself up on an elbow again. “No. She’s a little cold, a little distant, but she was
always decent to me."

*Decent.* What did that even mean? “She didn’t . . .” But he couldn’t bring himself to ask questions.

“She was uncomfortable with my existence, and she looked the other way, but that’s hardly a crime. If you think she has more integrity than Karishkov, I’d go with your gut. Just please don’t sleep with Verán for her sake.”

Gersha sputtered. “I wasn’t going to do *that.* I do have standards.”

“Good.” Tilrey sat up, drawing his knees to his chest. “Look, love, I’m going to say something that goes against all your training. Are you willing to trust me?”

“What?”

“Of course,” Gersha said automatically. What had the past few hours in this bed taught him if not to trust Tilrey? His eyes flickered downward at the memory. If the boy was still hard now, he couldn’t tell, and he repressed a shiver of disappointment. *There’s still plenty of time.*

“I don’t just mean in bed. Are you willing to promise to follow my instructions and check things with me before acting on your own initiative?”

The boy had gone amazingly authoritative and businesslike, his normally open face shuttering. Gersha stared at him, trying to recognize the ardent lover of just a few minutes earlier. “But . . . why?”

“Because I have an idea, but it would take finesse. I don’t want it to blow up in anyone’s face, since there are innocent parties involved. And I can’t tell you until I can show you, because I’m not sure you’d believe me.”

Gersha felt his heart thudding. “This idea of yours—does it involve violating the principle of discretion?”

Of course it did. He knew that even before Tilrey nodded, eyes down, and said, “I don’t like it, and I know you don’t either. But right now, all I want to do is gather information. How to use it is your decision—if you promise to consult with me first.”

Those were unacceptable demands, Gersha knew. But this was an unacceptable situation, Verán’s clout in the Council against his, and Tilrey had never betrayed him. And besides, well, maybe he was curious. It was just information.

“All right,” he said. “You have my provisional trust. I’ll need more information before I take any irreversible steps.”

“You’ll get it. Here’s what you need to do, Fi—Gersha. Message your friend Egil tonight. Ask him to send you two of those tiny surveillance cameras they use in Int/Sec, rush delivery. You’ll want them by day after tomorrow.”

“Whom are we surveilling?” Too late, he realized he’d promised not to ask questions.

“You’ll know soon enough.” Tilrey’s lips formed the word *Fir,* but this time he managed not to say it aloud.

“Is it something you saw in Karishkov’s house last night?” Gersha’s brain was racing.

“I said *soon,* Gersha.”
Gersha blinked. Meeting a firm boundary when he asked Tilrey a non-personal question was
unexpected, but somehow not unpleasant; it reminded him of the solidity of the boy’s body moving
against and inside his. “What if Ranek wants to know why I need the equipment?” he asked.

“Then you just tell him it’s crucial to Albertine Linnett’s election. But, frankly, I don’t think he’ll
ask you any questions.”

Gersha was accustomed to taking orders from Verán and the other senior Island Councillors, but
this was still, well, new. He stared up at the dark skylight and decided it wasn’t a bad kind of new.
“You seem very confident about this.”

“I am . . . Gersha. And I promise to explain everything once we have corroborating evidence.”

A hand closed around the base of his cock and began artfully to work it. Gersha responded so
quickly he almost frightened himself, gasping and bucking into Tilrey’s grip. “You give me
whiplash,” he mumbled. “First politics and promises, and now this . . .”

“All I want is for you to fuck me.” The boy’s voice was husky, breaking a little. “You’re the one
who brought up politics in bed, and I proposed a solution to your problem. Whether you want to try
it—that’ll be your choice, ultimately. Can we go back to the main event?”

Stop mouthing off, lad. You’re not in charge here.

That’s what Uncle Per would have said, perhaps
emphasizing it with a slap.

But Gersha found himself physically incapable of saying no to anything when Tilrey was touching
him—besides which, the last thing he wanted was to discuss what had happened at Karishkov’s, or
to think of that man anywhere near Tilrey.

“All right,” he said. And his body fell eagerly into a now-familiar groove, released from his brain’s
tiresome scruples, sore but not too tired for another round.

The rest of the evening passed in a haze of fucking, resting, cuddling, fucking. This time, when
Tilrey rolled over and offered his ass, Gersha spent a long, luxurious time on the preparatory
stages, and when he finally entered Tilrey, he reached around and began working the boy’s cock.
And for the first time ever, Tilrey didn’t push the hand away and say, “I’m fine, Fir” or “You don’t
need to.” He groaned and rutted into the touch, shamelessly eager. Gersha remembered to tell him
to come right as he reached the verge of his own orgasm, so they collapsed together, soggy with
pleasure.

Later, when Gersha needed to use the lavatory, he made a great show of asking permission, and
Tilrey actually blushed and said, “I release you.”

Gersha didn’t consider himself released. There was something intimately, deliciously mortifying
about being confined to the bed. He ate dinner there when Tilrey brought it to him—a spread of
delicate shrimp dumplings that Bosh had dropped off—and lounged on his back afterward,
watching snowflakes whirl against the skylight, feeling satisfied in every possible way.

Then he remembered the request that Tilrey had told him to send Ranek, and he said, “Damn it, I
need my handheld.”

“I’ll fetch it,” the boy said, clearing up.

“You know where it is?” A faint wave of old worry rippled through him. Give a Laborer a device,
and he becomes a hacker. And then a shirker.
But Tilrey just cocked his head and said, “Why don’t you tell me?” Gersha did, and the boy delivered the handheld with no suspicious delay.

And Gersha stayed in bed, warm and snug in Tilrey’s arms, waking every few hours out of sheer residual excitement, until daylight broke behind the tall pines.

He meant to get up, shower, check his handheld, and start making a plan for dealing with Besha. But Tilrey’s arms remained around him. Soothed by the boy’s steady breathing, he sank into a deeper, more refreshing sleep.

***

When Gersha woke with a start, afternoon sunlight was glaring through the blinds. Tilrey stood fully dressed at the foot of the bed, holding a fresh tea tray, wearing that damned earring again.

Gersha sat up and threw off the blankets. He realized with a slight shock that he was naked, and tugged them up again. “What time is it?”

“Almost four, Fir,” Tilrey said in his usual smooth, serviceable way, as if nothing had changed between them.

“How could I sleep so long?” He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had more than seven hours.

“You probably needed the rest, Fir.” A blink-and-you-miss-it grin. “We don’t need to go over there till five—plenty of time for you to eat and dress.”

*There.* Besha’s. Gersha felt as if something reptilian had slithered into the bed beside him. “I never made a plan,” he said plaintively.

“Well, then, Fir, it’s lucky I did.”

Gersha reached for the tumbler, shaking his head reflexively. “This is my problem to deal with, not yours.”

“But it will take both of us to solve it, Fir.” Tilrey sat down on the edge of the bed, looking absurdly formal in his tunic buttoned to the throat.

“I liked it better when you weren’t calling me that.” Gersha seemed to have dreamed yesterday. Had he really abased himself so thoroughly and enjoyed it? Had he really promised to trust Tilrey to the point of letting him take the lead?

Yes. He had. And he would do it again the instant Tilrey touched him the right way—maybe even before that. Maybe a glance would suffice.

Tilrey had that faraway look on his face again. “Remember how you promised to trust me, Fir?”

“Yes, but . . . this is a whole different thing.”

“It’s a thing I can help with. Let me.”

Gersha’s thoughts kept getting tangled up with physical sensations, sense-memories of last night. He didn’t tell Tilrey yes, but he let himself be distracted—by a hot shower, by a solid meal, by his handheld, and by Tilrey’s hands waiting on him, but not really touching him.

Time raced on, and still no plan came to mind. *I need to get a grip,* he thought frantically an hour later, as they set off through the trees toward Besha’s residence.
He’d brazen it out, he decided. Deny everything, act his very most offended and self-righteous, and
dare Besha to make a stink. Hadn’t Tilrey said that if Besha wanted to tell Verán, he already would
have done it?

They could have taken a shuttle to the other end of the housing block, but Tilrey had insisted on
walking. Gersha understood why when they climbed a slight rise and came face-to-face with the
sunset. The bloody spread of vermilion and flame-colored clouds took his breath away.

He nudged his shoulder against Tilrey’s, and Tilrey draped an arm around him. They stood a few
minutes between a birch grove and a stand of stubby pines, shivering in a frigid breeze, gazing at
the indecorous, very un-Oslov melodrama of the sun’s fall toward the purple mountains. And
Gersha wondered, *Why have I never seen this before?*

“I think we’ll be fine,” he said. “I’ll simply call Besha’s bluff and remind him who’s higher-
named, who was in the top quadrant at school every term, and . . .”

He stopped. Tilrey was looking at him, and the look was coolly assessing. Not particularly
respectful. “What is it?”

“You don’t understand Besha, Fir. He doesn’t play by your rules. He isn’t going to knuckle under
because you scored higher on some coding test twenty years ago. Pulling rank will only inflame
him.”

Gersha stiffened. “And you understand him better?”

“I . . . well, yes. I know him better than I want to, and in some ways, Besha’s more like a Drudge
than an Upstart, Fir. He gives lip service to your ideals, but he’s . . . flexible. Anyway, I’ve told
you I have a plan.”

Gersha inhaled cold air, feeling insulted and a little soothed at once. Perhaps Tilrey was right, and
Besha’s malice did stem from feelings of inferiority. “And this plan?”

As the rim of the blinding disc sank beneath the mountains, Tilrey planted a brief kiss on his
forehead. “You’re not going to like some of it, Fir. But if you trust me and follow my lead, and you
don’t question anything I do or say, I think it could work.”

“You’re asking for my blind trust? *Again?*” Doubts were struggling for purchase inside Gersha,
but, tucked against Tilrey’s side, he couldn’t seem to muster a stronger objection.

“I know. I’m sorry. But I don’t think it’ll work if you know ahead of time, because, well, you’re
not much of an actor, Fir. You need to be reacting in the moment.”

That stung a little, but Gersha couldn’t deny it. “What am I going to have to do?” he asked
cautiously.

“Do you have a vial of sap, Fir? Good. When I give you a sign, I want you to bring that out, and I
want you to pour it into your hand and hold it out for him.”

That made no sense at all. “You want me to give sap to *Besha?* But I thought you didn’t want me
to pull rank. He’ll never . . .” Gersha stopped, unwilling to finish the thought: . . . *abase himself to
lap up sap from a hand. Like you do all the time, and like I did last night.*

Tilrey’s chin rested on his head just long enough to make Gersha feel obscurely, securely
protected. “You won’t be pulling rank, exactly. It’s hard to explain. Besha wants something from
you, from us, and we’re going to give it to him. But not in the way he expects. And I . . . well, I
have a trump card.”
Well, I definitely did not plan anything like this chapter when I started this. But Besha grew on me, the little weasel, until I wanted this to happen and I wanted it from his POV. Hope it works!

By the time the outside buzzer sounded, Besha had been waiting for-fucking-ever. He’d been pacing the living room, taking nips of sap to steady his nerves and then reproving himself, because the last thing he wanted was to get blissed-out and off his guard.

Not that Gersha Gádden posed anything like a threat to him, of course. After spending all yesterday with his wife, enduring her insinuating comments and her scarcely veiled mockery, Besha could have flicked ten Gershas aside like bugs. In fact, looking forward to this rendezvous, to the delicious prospect of getting exactly what he wanted, was the only thing that had gotten him through that marital misery.

But the mechanics of getting what he wanted could still be tricky, and besides, he liked to stay sharp in all situations. It was the only thing he really had going for him.

“Come in, come in,” he said expansively, unsealing the coldroom. “The tea’s just steeping. Good lord, did you walk? You must both be frozen.”

“Not at all, Fir,” said the boy, who was busy removing his outergear. The flop of his damp hair in his eyes gave Besha a shiver of desire. I haven’t had you for way too long.

As for Gersha, he hung back, those sensual, heavy-lidded eyes narrowed with trepidation. When he unwound his scarf, Besha’s sharp eyes found a welter of mottled love bites the man hadn’t managed to cover with his collar.

Well, that was it. Besha was already hard. He shifted to conceal it, but didn’t remove his probing gaze from Gersha’s neck. “I see you two had a productive day yesterday, Councillor.”

Gersha went red—you couldn’t miss it even under the coldroom’s bleary fluorescents. The boy didn’t change color. He calmly hung up Gersha’s things and trailed Besha into the other room, gesturing to his Upstart to follow.

Was Nettsha calling the shots in the relationship now? Verán would find that hilarious. But if things went well, Besha wouldn’t want to tell Verán about any of this.

“Sit!” He indicated the sofas, still playing the good host, and began pouring the tea into the tumblers he’d laid out. From the corner of his eye, he noticed that Gersha made a move to sit beside Nettsha, but the boy waved him toward the facing sofa.

Oh yes, very interesting indeed. Besha had known a few high-named men who were so smitten that they took orders from their kettle boys or their mistresses. But he hadn’t expected that of Gersha, for all his teasing about being in love. The little prig seemed too cold, too rule-bound.

Besha hoped Nettsha really was calling the shots, because the boy would be more persuadable.
When had he ever refused Besha anything?

His cock swelled again as he remembered how the boy always looked when you first put the cuffs on him—how he stopped struggling and hooded his eyes and went limp, that pale throat exposed, those dark lashes shadowing his cheeks, swooning as if his spirit were leaving his body. Verdant hells, no one submitted more beautifully than Nettsha did, even if some of it was just acting.

“I do hope you’ll excuse my breach of protocol in asking you both here,” he said, settling himself beside the boy and fishing a vial from his pocket.

Gersha’s face was, if anything, redder. “Stop this charade,” he said in an almost growling voice that didn’t subdue Besha’s erection. “Why don’t you get down to business and tell us what you want?”

The boy cleared his throat. Gersha’s gaze flew to him, one dark brow raised, but he went quiet.

“How refreshing your frankness is, Gersha.” Besha poured half the vial into his palm and held it out for the boy. “I wonder if Verán would also find it refreshing if I told him everything you haven’t. How you gave his piece to your interrogator friend to . . . well, what was Egil doing, exactly? Or was it the two of you?”

Again a glance sped between the pair of them, but it told Besha nothing. His informant hadn’t been able to see or hear any of the interrogation, only the preparations for it, so he was painfully curious. Given the unlikelihood of any form of treason on Gersha’s part, his best theory so far was that the man had a secret prison kink, which would make him quite the hypocrite.

“It’s quite simple, really,” said Gersha.

He cleared his throat and launched into an explanation that was obviously specious, and perhaps downright false. The moment he spoke the phrase “antique books,” Besha’s brain switched into a less attentive gear. Who on earth gave a damn about books written by long-dead people?

He especially had trouble focusing because the boy had bent to lick the sap from his palm. Green hills and running rivers, the boy’s tongue was knowing. It was an effort not to lose track of Gersha’s dull tale, but Besha had long practice in compartmentalizing.

“You don’t expect me to believe that?” he said, when Gersha had at last fallen silent. He raised his palm absent-mindedly to his mouth and licked up the leftover sap. “I know you like to read those old tomes, dear Gersha, scholar that you are, but—” he flicked his eyes to the boy—“well, that’s just absurd.”

“Well.” Besha shrugged. Wasn’t it obvious?

He knew, of course, that Drudges could be clever. His Laborer informant in Int/Sec was invaluable, and Nettsha was clearly no fool, whatever Verán thought. But Laborer cleverness was a kind of animal cunning that had no use for books or numbers. Why read books when you could read people? Besha considered himself an expert on the matter, given that his own animal cunning was his primary asset. Privately, he despised most of what he’d been forced to study in school. And would he spend his time reading dusty old books, if he had free time? Not a chance in hell.

“You have to understand how this sounds, Gersha,” he began.

The boy interrupted in his deep voice: “Are you concerned that Fir Gádden and Fir Egil might have
been doing something untoward, Fir?”

Well, that was different. And cheeky. Since Besha could practically still feel the boy’s tongue caressing his palm, though, he didn’t answer too sharply. “Perhaps you should let your Fir speak for himself, love. And the answer is, well, of course I’m concerned.”

He turned to address Gersha. “If you really did have doubts about Nettsha’s loyalty—which seems absurd to me, but I don’t have your delicate sensibilities—then you should have gone directly to Verán. The boy belongs to the Party, not to you.”

Gersha’s knuckles had gone white on the tumbler. “He doesn’t belong to anyone.”

Besha was protesting that he’d only used a very common figure of speech, and Gersha was retorting that it shouldn’t be common, when the boy’s voice cut through both theirs: “Fir Gádden thought it prudent not to bother Fir Verán with such trivial matters, Fir.”

To his own surprise, Besha shut up. Gersha did, too.

The boy had slouched a bit on the sofa, where his rangy form looked almost languid. “That’s why the procedure was off the books, Fir Linbeck,” he went on. “I believe Fir Egil prepared a report where everything will be explained to your satisfaction.”

“That report was for my eyes only,” Gersha objected. “Not for Besha’s.”

Besha guzzled his tea and laughed; the sap was starting to go to his head. “Can’t the two of you even agree on the story you want to tell?”

Again it was the boy who answered, quite inappropriately: “He’s already told you the only story there is to tell, Fir. Now maybe it’s time for you to lay your cards on the table.”

“Oh my, we’re commanding, aren’t we?” Besha had to admit, he was finding this bossiness a turn-on. It was so different from Nettsha’s usual personality that he wondered if the two of them liked to play at role reversal. “Is he like this with you in bed, Gersha? Because I’d love to sample a bit of that.”

Gersha set his tumbler down so hard the tea splashed. It was a wonder the vessel didn’t shatter. “Enough of this,” he said. “I’ve told you everything, without deceit. So out with it. What do you really want from me—from us?”

For a few seconds, Besha savored the flush of frustration on his colleague’s delicate features, the snarl of fury in his tone. He did love getting reactions, especially from high-named colleagues who prided themselves on their composure.

When he was done enjoying Gersha’s discomfiture, he said, “It’s simple, really. I want to watch the two of you together, tonight, in my bed.”

Besha had pared down and practiced this ultimatum until it sounded like something Verán would say—tossed off, casually contemptuous. He managed to articulate it without a quiver in his voice to betray just how often he’d fantasized about precisely this.

He longed to see Gersha moaning in the boy’s arms, undone. He honestly wasn’t sure anymore whether the pleasure he took in those imaginings was about power, sex, or a potent mix of both.

“And then,” he finished, “I’ll take my turn with him, as this is my appointed night, and you can watch. That seems only fair, doesn’t it?”
Gersha sucked in his breath, his exquisite eyes pits of rage. Instead of answering, though, he went white as a waxwork, arrested by something to Besha’s left.

The boy must have given Gersha some sort of warning. Now he said matter-of-factly, “That seems quite fair, Fir. There are just a couple of conditions.”

Gersha breathed, “Good lord, Rishka, no.”

Certainly the boy deserved a scolding for speaking for both of them, but Besha was so close now to getting what he wanted that he didn’t reprove him, only asked, “Conditions?”

“Just a couple of things that would help Gersha enjoy this, Fir. First of all.” The boy flicked a finger in Gersha’s direction. “He’d like to give you a vial the way you just gave me one.”

“How did you control a situation that was so far out of bounds? The sensation was unusual and, Besha had to admit, a tiny bit intoxicating. “Is that really what you want?” he asked Gersha.

The green-eyed Councillor didn’t answer, only pulled a vial from his tunic and spilled the contents into his palm. He said to the boy, “I’m going to trust you, even though I don’t want to right now.”

Was this some sort of role-play? With Nettsha looking inscrutable and Gersha angry and stony-eyed, it was hard to say. But now Gersha stretched out his hand, practically thrusting the sap under Besha’s nose, and Besha had to do something.

Maybe it was the sap already in his system talking, but all he wanted to do was keep that confused, mortified look on Gersha’s face. So... why not play along?

He sank to his knees on the white carpet, crawled forward, and applied his tongue to the sap on his colleague’s palm. He guzzled and sucked assiduously, giving the trembling hand a tongue-massage the way Nettsha did, until Gersha wrenched himself away and said, “You’re obscene.”

Besha pitched to the side, laughing helplessly. The fresh dose of sap was already making his whole body thrum. “That was lovely,” he said. “So I’m to be the kettle boy tonight, am I? What’s your second condition, Gersha? Or perhaps I should be asking Nettsha for my orders?”

“That’s not his name.” There was nothing tentative about Gersha’s voice now. “Call him Tilrey or don’t speak to him at all.”

After a baffled moment, Besha remembered that Verán had renamed the boy. Well, it wasn’t like he’d chosen his own nickname, either. “Very well,” he said, rolling his eyes as he rose unsteadily to his feet. “I’ll call him whatever you like. Is that it for conditions? Can we retire to the bedroom?”

“No,” said Gersha, at the same time the boy said, “Yes, Fir.” And then, to Gersha, “Let’s go, Fir.”

They kept whispering to each other as they followed Besha down the corridor. Gersha sounded upset, the boy reassuring, then pleading. The whole thing was tremendously entertaining, Besha decided; even if Gersha ended up backing out, it was worth it to see him squirm this way.

As for the boy, well, he was practically begging for some kind of chastisement, and Besha had experience in delivering it. He flicked on the lights in the bed canopy and sat down with a bounce. “I hope you don’t mind if I observe at close range.”

Gersha clearly did mind. He stopped at the edge of the bed with his arms crossed, scowling.
The boy bent to murmur something soothing in his ear, then said to Besha, “One more thing, Fir. Do you still have that scarf here, like you said? The one you used to tie me up on our first night together?”

Good lord, what next? “I knew you were sentimental. It’s in the closet, top row on the left, I think.”

Belatedly, Besha remembered he’d stowed that scarf here because it was a Harbourer scarf that Malsha Linnett had gifted him. Not that it mattered, of course, since Linnett was out of the picture. But the scarf was distinctive, woven with glaring reds and greens you’d never see in an Oslov garment, and he’d worried about Davita finding it and asking questions.

The boy emerged swiftly from the closet with the scarf wound around his arm. “I thought you might like to see Fir Gádden tie me up with this, Fir.”

The words “tie me up” made Besha go rock-hard again. This time he didn’t try to conceal it, lounging back against the headboard. Maybe the clever boy had designed this whole situation to fulfill his fantasies.

“Well,” he said, trying to sound less desperately eager than he felt, “you’ve certainly earned a little discipline. But are you sure your Fir will cooperate, love? Because he doesn’t look very eager.”

Rather than answering, the boy simply pulled off his clothes—tunic, boots, trousers, shirt, briefs—and let them drop to the carpet, graceful as always. Besha’s mouth went dry. Gersha, he could see, wasn’t even watching.

Naked, his pale body golden under the lights, the boy slunk over to Gersha and began rubbing against him, whispering in his ear, apparently working his cock through his trousers. The sap in Besha’s system was making the lights blur; he blinked and rubbed his eyes.

Why an interrogation? It did bother him that Gersha hadn’t told a more plausible story. Gersha couldn’t be lying on his own behalf; he was way too proud. Could he be lying for the boy? Why?

Besha would worry about all that tomorrow; there was probably a simple explanation. Maybe Egil had recruited the kettle boy to lure the Valde girl into a confession—they were friends, weren’t they?—and Besha’s informant had misinterpreted the situation.

Impatient with the delay, he patted the bed beside him. “Come along now, Gersha. I want to see our lad give you another one of those pretty hiccups.”

Gersha looked like he might spit in Besha’s face. “You know nothing about us.”

“But not yet, no. But I’d like to.”

Gersha tried to wrest himself away, but the boy gave him a kiss on the forehead, patted his shoulder, then disentangled himself and sat down on the bed.

Gersha glared, but he stayed put. Besha felt the hot anticipation in his belly shift into overdrive. He reached out and drew the boy into a fierce, claiming kiss.

The boy submitted beautifully, as he always did when their role-play didn’t require resistance, arching his back and opening his mouth for Besha’s exploring tongue. “You little minx,” Besha hissed in his ear. “You’ve been doing all this just to rev me up, haven’t you?”

The boy only shrugged, then whispered back, his hair against Besha’s cheek, “Gersha’s having trouble getting in the mood, Fir. I’m wondering if we could help him.”
The words made Besha momentarily unable to control himself; all he could do was gasp and rut against the boy’s bare thigh. Then he collected himself and asked, “How would we do that?”

Instead of answering, the boy began unbuttoning Besha’s tunic.

This seemed like the right direction. Besha allowed the boy to peel off the heavy garment, then to tug his shirt over his head. The warm air felt good on his bare chest, and he stretched flat on his back and closed his eyes, keening gently as the boy’s lips brushed across one nipple and then the other, pausing to suck and nip.

Then he opened his eyes and gazed brazenly across the bed at Gersha, who clearly was trying not to look and not succeeding. “Are you sure you don’t want to join us?”

The boy took hold of Besha’s cock, devilishly experienced, and pumped it twice, tantalizing him. “There’s one more thing we could try, Fir,” he murmured. “Could you put your arms above your head?”

Besha understood. He’d issued such commands plenty of times, and he’d also received them, usually from his lovely wife.

But this was different, this was good, because he had Gersha’s attention now. The man’s eyes burned into him like a brand. Ever since their school days, he’d wanted to feel that intense gaze on him, to see the pupils of those sea-green eyes dilate with desire.

Maybe the feeling was more hate than love, but it set Besha on fire, making every inch of his skin raw and sensitive and needy. If Gersha wanted to see him degraded, well, fine. It was just a game, and Besha always won games.

Animal cunning and a willingness to play dirty. Those were his secret weapons, happily rare among his fellow Upstarts.

He stretched his arms high above his head and obligingly crossed the wrists. He shivered as the boy wound the scarf around them, trussing them firmly but not numbingly. The boy knew what he was doing, Besha reminded himself, as a series of tugs told him Tilrey was knotting the other end of the long scarf to the bed-frame. I’m safe. And god, I’m sapped.

One more businesslike tug on Besha’s aching, engorged cock, and then the boy was at the foot of the bed again, whispering to Gersha and reaching between the man’s legs, easing off his tunic.

Besha pulled on the knots experimentally. They held. He was no longer sure what was going to happen, and the not-knowing was more pleasant than he would have expected. A warm sense of willingness, of pre-emptive acceptance, flooded all the blood vessels in his groin.

I’m safe, he reminded himself. And after all I’ve achieved, don’t I deserve to let myself go now and then?

He moaned gently as the boy returned to him, accompanied this time by the still stiff-faced Gersha. Tilrey began tugging off Besha’s trousers. Besha lifted his hips compliantly, knowing where this was going as if he’d always known.

“I want him to fuck me,” he whispered. If they’d asked for this in the living room, he would have laughed in their faces. But now . . .

Now it was all he wanted.
The boy was talking to Gersha soothingly again, saying something about how ready Besha was and how much he was going to enjoy it. Gersha’s face still showed flashes of anger and disgust, but the bright flush there betokened the dawn of arousal.

And that was enough to make Besha roll over. The boy’s hand on his rump served as a signal. Then he was prone, and the boy was raising his hips to slide a pillow underneath. He spread his thighs without being told, and gasped as a slick finger teased at his opening.

“See how he wants it?” the deep voice said. “Do you believe me now?”

Besha reared involuntarily as the boy’s finger breached him, then exhaled and held still, savoring the sensation of fullness. It was a while since a man had done this to him, and probably never so artfully.

“Believe what?” he murmured.

The boy chuckled, a vibration Besha felt inside his body. “I told him you wanted his cock inside you. He didn’t believe me.”

“Well, I won’t believe it’s happening until you stop doing all the work, lad.” He shivered from scalp to toe as the boy’s second finger crooked itself inside him, knowingly finding the right spot. “Shouldn’t he be touching me, at least?”

“Gersha,” the boy said. “Please. You know I want this.”

It was an odd thing to say; why should Gersha care what the boy wanted? But Besha forgot it the next instant, because Gersha’s hand was moving tentatively over his back, tracing the vertebrae. And he was arching in response, driving the boy’s fingers deeper into him, his whole body aching with the certainty of need.

It was so long since he’d been able to surrender control this way, and a voice inside his head still nagged, Is it safe?

Besha silenced it. He had two beautiful men in his bed, both well under his thumb, neither capable of outwitting him. If he wanted to be broken open, if he wanted to squirm wantonly under Gersha’s reckless, inexperienced thrusts and revel in the proof that his dignified little colleague was a man with urges like any other, who was going to stop him?

“Come on, Gersha,” he breathed, bucking up against the other Councillor’s tremulous hand, craving more contact. “Come on. I want your cock now.”
Theories and Threats

When they were twelve, for about a month of the fall term, Besha had been Gersha’s friend, or appeared to be. Both always picked last for team sports, they spent most of their Physical Development sessions on the bleachers watching the other boys and girls hurl balls and cheer each other on.

Gersha admitted to Besha that he felt clueless whenever he had to work with his hands, and Besha admitted he’d nearly flunked their last coding module. He was baffled by the programming language they were supposed to be already proficient in, so Gersha tutored him after school, showing him short-cuts.

Back then, Besha’s nose was always red and running. “You don’t have to worry about Notification, Gersha,” he’d say, tugging on the muffler his mother forced him to wear indoors. “You’re a Gádden, so they’ll make you Prog or Diplomat automatically, whichever you choose. Me, my whole family’s in Med, and the last thing I want to do is deal with whiny sick people. I need to start acing these tests if I want any choice about the entire rest of my life.”

The idea that choices were desirable was new to Gersha. His mother, he knew, had made bad ones, which was why it was so important for him to do as he was told. He was even more impressed by the cutting, irreverent impressions Besha did of their classmates, their teachers, even the headmaster! It was intoxicating to imagine having so little respect for authority.

Then one day he saw Besha sitting in the refectory with Klars István’s crowd. They jeered at Gersha as he walked by, calling him a “misbirth freak” and daring him to defend himself, and though Besha didn’t join in, he didn’t object, either. From then on, they didn’t speak. And a month later, Besha was joining in Gersha’s public humiliation and doing it more cruelly and creatively than anyone else, with Klars and the others egging him on.

These days, Gersha understood it was nothing personal. Besha had been looking for a higher-named boy to latch on to, someone who could connect him to powerful people who would load the dice in his favor. Once he’d figured out that Gersha was clueless about power, he’d moved on to Klars, who was very well clued in. He’d become a hanger-on, a loyal lieutenant, a position that still served him well with Verán. And he’d never stopped needling Gersha, who’d never quite stopped smarting from that long-ago betrayal.

He smarted again as he watched Besha kiss Tilrey and Tilrey yield to it. His eyes burned and his chest ached as he watched them whisper to each other like co-conspirators. Hot pressure built in his head, agonizing and weirdly exhilarating at once, as Tilrey teased Besha’s nipples, then unbuttoned Besha’s tunic and tugged it off.

It was every nightmarish imagining Gersha had ever had, only now it was real and close enough to touch. It was a betrayal he could never have imagined as a child, because back then he’d cared for no one the way he cared for Tilrey. While he understood what Tilrey was doing, understood that Besha had to be satisfied and silenced, the spectacle of them together was shattering his heart like glass, emptying him of blood, killing him. The pain’s intensity was unbearable, sinking deep under his skin, burning like the sunset, searing like the cold—

And then Besha looked straight at Gersha across Tilrey’s body, locked eyes, and asked, “Are you sure you don’t want to join us?”

The tone was familiar, but Gersha couldn’t process the words. Wasn’t the whole point for them to
exclude him, cast him out? Was Besha mocking him, adding insult to injury?

Now Tilrey was tying Besha to the bed, and that made no sense at all. Besha was arching his back languorously, not resisting but actively cooperating, and this was no longer the script of Gersha’s nightmares. What was this?

Something lurched inside him, but the intensity didn’t vanish. It moved lower, pooling in his groin—or had it always been there? By the time Tilrey came back over to him, Gersha was already painfully hard.

Tilrey was whispering coaxing things, but Gersha barely heard. He was only aware of the boy’s hands unfastening his tunic, touching him. Misery had rubbed him raw, swelled all his synapses to the breaking point, and a single tug on his cock sent shock waves of shameful need through his body.

He didn’t want this. He wanted to remain aloof, in control. But Besha was squirming, testing his bonds, and Gersha found himself writhing in Tilrey’s arms, mimicking his rival. Some part of him wanted to be trussed up that way, helpless, displayed like a sacrifice for the two of them to enjoy at their leisure.

But that wasn’t his role here; he understood that now. When Tilrey nudged him onto the bed, he went willingly. He watched through a shimmering red curtain of arousal as Tilrey finished stripping Besha, and Besha rolled over. The words I want him to fuck me were sharp-pointed icicles sinking deep into his brain, making his temples pound, quickening his breathing.

Tilrey was still talking, crooning about how eager Besha was, but those words didn’t penetrate in the same way. Dimly, Gersha knew that Tilrey was managing them both, executing a plan; he didn’t feel any of the genuine passion he’d shown with Gersha last night. By now, Gersha knew the telltale signs of that passion, and it gave him a secret, deep-down pleasure to think that Besha would never see Tilrey that way.

Besha thought they were unveiling their intimate selves to him, but he was the dupe here.

Then Tilrey said, “Gersha. Please. You know I want this,” and Gersha’s mouth went dry.

When he touched Besha’s warm skin, stretched thin over the vertebrae, when Besha arched needily into the caress, something broke in him. All this time, while he’d been fixating on the other man’s carefully cultivated postures and attitudes, Besha had also been this—a body, tender-skinned and vulnerable, perhaps even slighter and more sensitive than Gersha’s own. A body that wanted, that needed, heedless of consequences. Tilrey had understood that when he hadn’t.

When Besha rasped out, “I want your cock now,” Gersha didn’t immediately oblige. He reached out his free hand, and Tilrey grasped it, their fingers locking across his rival’s prone, trembling form.

Then he turned and gazed directly into the blue eyes of his lover and said under his breath, “I want you to touch me the whole time.”

Tilrey nodded. His lips were bee-stung from Besha’s kiss, his eyes haunted and a little glazed, but Gersha knew he meant it.

He released Tilrey’s hand, and Tilrey drew back so Gersha could mount Besha, bracing his weight on the other man’s shoulders. Besha groaned eagerly as Gersha lined himself up, and Tilrey’s big hand latched on to Gersha’s waist, guiding and steadying him.
“Push his head down a bit,” Tilrey said. “I think he’ll like it.”

Besha moaned at the mere suggestion, even before Gersha wound shaky fingers in his hair and pressed his face into the pillow.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he said in a voice whose tremor surprised him.

For answer, Besha only bucked upward onto his straining cock, while Tilrey stroked the small of Gersha’s back and said, “I wouldn’t worry about that, Fir.”

***

Gersha’s tunic lay crumpled on the floor beside the bed where its owner was sleeping, worn out from the labors of tonight and the night before. Tilrey picked up the garment and fished the handheld out of the pocket. He wore Besha’s scarf loosely around his neck, having untied it from the bedframe. After a swift glance at Gersha, who didn’t stir, and another toward the bathroom, where Besha had disappeared, he went into the living room, took off the gaudy scarf, and stretched it out across one of the sofas.

Twice he’d been close enough to see Gersha input his six-digit password. The handheld’s screen came to life, and Tilrey swiped to the camera, framed the scarf, and snapped an image. Again, again.

He’d just hit send, messaging the photos to Gersha’s box, when Besha came in. The Councillor wore only a robe, his hair damp from a shower, and he walked like someone who’d been well fucked and was profoundly pleased with himself.

No surprise there. After Gersha had come, Tilrey had rolled Besha over and finished the Councillor off with his mouth, sparing no effort, before untying him.

Besha frowned when he saw Tilrey with the handheld, though he didn’t look exactly shocked.

“Gersha lets you use that?”

“Sure, Fir.” He’d have to stow the device back in the tunic before Gersha woke up, though that would only delay the necessary explanations.

But Besha was blocking his way, drawing him down onto the couch, twining possessive arms around his still-naked form. Out of habit, Tilrey allowed the Councillor to nuzzle at his neck, though he didn’t lean into the caress.

“I still haven’t seen the two of you together,” Besha said peevishly, nipping his earlobe. “I think I’ve been a very good sport about this, too. What’s wrong, love? You’re like a block of ice.”

Tilrey pushed him away—not roughly, but firmly. It was odd how good that one small gesture felt.

“Not now, Fir.”

Besha looked confused, perhaps wondering if they were reverting to their usual game of struggle and submission. But when he reached for Tilrey again and Tilrey retreated, his face fell. “What did I do?”

Tilrey had been planning this moment for a day and a half. Now it had arrived, his heart began to pound; his breath caught in his throat. How long since he’d openly defied a Councillor? He’d certainly never tried anything this dangerous.

There was no alternative, though. If he didn’t play his trump card—carefully, artfully—Besha
would think he had the upper hand and become difficult, then insufferable. He would keep making
demands of them, demands Gersha wouldn’t want to meet, and the whole thing would explode into
an open conflict that endangered Gersha’s future in the Council.

Tilrey hadn’t wanted to do this so soon, but he had no choice.

He held up the end of the scarf he wasn’t sitting on and said, “Fir, I remember.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

Tilrey wound the wool around his fist. “Linnett gave you this, didn’t he? I had one just like it.
When you came to see Linnett that day, you left it in the coldroom. I saw it on my way in from the
gym. I didn’t see you, but I heard you speaking to Linnett, Fir. I heard what you were offering.”

In the space of a few seconds, the smugness had vanished from Besha’s face like vapor from a
window. He stared at Tilrey blankly, only his glittering eyes betraying his agitation.

Then the usual expression of amused superiority returned, drawn over his face like a curtain. “I’m
confused, lad,” he said, as if Tilrey had begun to speak in a foreign tongue. “If you saw someone
with Magistrate Linnett, it wasn’t me. I was an admin in the Defense Block in those days. Not sure
I even met the man.”

It was a decent performance, but not good enough. Tilrey didn’t dignify it with a refutation. “It
took a while for me to recognize you,” he said, gazing into the Fir’s increasingly chilly twilight-
blue eyes. “When they interrogated me, I told them about the conversation I’d heard that day. But I
couldn’t identify the man with Linnett. None of the voice samples they played me was you, of
course, and I hadn’t met you yet. When I did meet you . . . well, you do have a distinctive voice,
Fir. A little nasal, a little drawling.”

Besha snorted softly.

“But I still couldn’t believe you were the same man. I saw how much Verán trusted you. How
could you be the traitor they were all looking for? I didn’t trust my memory of that day.”

One of Besha’s hands tightened, bunching the sofa fabric, while his face remained placid. “So you
mistook someone for me. Your point, love?”

Tilrey leaned back, holding the Fir’s gaze. “But when you tied me up with that scarf, I put it all
together. Your voice. Your scarf in the coldroom. And I knew.”

Aside from a slight narrowing of the eyes, Besha betrayed nothing. But Tilrey could see the
moment when the Councillor admitted to himself there was no denying the truth.

Besha had given Linnett the missile launch codes that Linnett had used to fulfill a promise to a
Harbourer baron. He was the traitor who’d made a snarl of Oslov’s relations with Harbour and, in
the process, rendered the Island party’s ascension inevitable.

Assuming Verán wasn’t in on the plot—and Tilrey didn’t believe it; the majority leader was too
ideologically rigid—it was a truth that could bring Besha down in an instant. Exile to the Wastes
would be the likely sentence, after a lengthy and painful interrogation. If only—

Besha smiled—a wide, slow smile, with too many teeth. “And the proof of all this? If you think a
silly little scarf convinces anyone of anything, sweetheart, I’m afraid you’re just as slow-witted as
Verán always said you were.”
Tilrey didn’t allow himself to look away, though the Councillor’s tone set his heart thudding again. It was the tone the Voice had used on him in that first interrogation.

“I imagine you’ll destroy the scarf, Fir,” he said. “And I imagine you don’t particularly care that there are images of it in Gersha’s mailbox. Or that I intend to make sure he transfers them somewhere you won’t find as easy to hack.”

Besha blinked. His smile was fading. “I suppose Gersha told you to do all this? After you tattled to him?”

Interesting. Tilrey had been wondering whether Besha was capable of realizing he’d set this trap on his own; now he had his answer. For all his irreverence, Besha had been raised to believe Laborers couldn’t outwit him, and he couldn’t process evidence to the contrary.

Fine, then. There was no point in telling the truth. Maybe Besha’s insistence on underestimating Tilrey would continue to work to his advantage.

“Of course, Fir,” he said. “Honestly, I’m not sure Verán will believe me. It’s just my word—and some photos of a silly little scarf—against yours, isn’t it? But Gersha thinks differently.”

Besha made a noise in his throat. “And what does your precious Gersha think?”

“He thinks Verán may already have reasons to doubt your loyalty. He says that, when you were an admin, you had quite a reputation for corruption.”

It was a guess, but a solid one. If Besha had been having secret meetings with Linnett, breaking his security clearance to pass him sensitive information, he’d probably been working the system in other ways, too. Tilrey doubted the man had ever done something for a non-selfish reason in his life.

“Gersha’s an idiot,” Besha snapped. “He has no idea what he’s playing with. You don’t simply accuse a colleague of treason.”

Tilrey lowered his eyes at last, pretending not to notice that the Councillor’s face had gone pale with fury. “Oh, I know, Fir. I told him it was better to keep quiet, especially since I can’t be sure. But then, at the party two days ago, you threw that thing about Egil in his face. You threatened him. And he decided it was time to remind you that you also have something to hide.”

He looked up through his lashes in the innocent way he’d perfected. “My Fir seems to think his secret can’t compare with yours. That’s what he asked me to tell you.”

Slowly but surely, Besha’s composure was fraying. It was fascinating to see. His eyes were too shiny, his fingers flexing and tightening convulsively on the couch fabric.

“And what exactly does your Fir expect me to do now?” he asked. “Lie down and do his bidding?”

Tilrey grinned. He couldn’t help it. You already did that of your own accord, Fir, and you loved it. “First of all, Fir Gádden wants to ensure his own safety. He knows you have connections. He knows you’re quite capable, if you choose, of making him meet an accident that could silence him.”

That, too, was only a guess, but Besha laughed too quickly, too harshly. “What does he think I am, a Harbourer warlord? Why would I have assassins at my disposal?”

Don’t underestimate Besha, Linnett’s voice warned. He’s dangerous, all right. Not stupid, either.
“I don’t know, Fir.” Tilrey tried to look meek again: “I’m just the messenger. “Anyway, Gersha said to tell you that, in the event of his untimely death, he’ll make sure certain facts about you reach Councillor Verán. Meanwhile, he hopes you and he can maintain a mutually beneficial relationship.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“I wouldn’t presume to say, Fir. But I think he knows you never intended to harm the Republic, whatever Linnett may have roped you into. And that you make a better ally than enemy.”

Besha snorted, but he was beginning to look more relaxed, as if he’d grasped the parameters of the threat and could handle it. “It’s so like Gersha to send a Drudge to me with this nonsense rather than facing me like a man. He’s terrified of confrontation.”

“The Fir thought it might be less unpleasant coming from me, Fir. Anyway, you know he’s very sensitive about his dignity.”

Besha made another sound, halfway between a snort and a groan; no doubt he was remembering how gleefully he’d compromised his own dignity earlier. “So he thinks he can fuck me two ways in one night. Well, point to Gersha and his false accusation, then. Well played.”

Tilrey’s nerves were still singing with the excitement of the defiance he’d shown, but he knew it wouldn’t do to leave Besha disgruntled. If he felt cornered, the man might be dangerous.

And so, fighting revulsion, he made his hand creep across the cushion and rest on the Councillor’s knee. “I don’t think Gersha wants to hurt you, Fir. Just the opposite—I think he wants to find a way you can help each other. You saw how he was tonight. You put him in a difficult position, though.”

“I did, didn’t I?” Besha took hold of Tilrey’s hand and slid it up his thigh. “You know,” he said, beginning to sound cocky again, “it was very foolish of you to tell Gersha your theories, lad. I can assure you I was never in Magistrate Linnett’s house. I obtained this scarf from a friend of mine in the embassy. I’m offended that you’d even consider such a possibility after all the kindness I’ve shown you. If you told Verán this nonsense, he’d make you pay for disturbing the peace.”

*Bluffing to keep up appearances, said Linnett icily. He knows you have him.*

“The last thing I want is to upset Fir Verán.” Tilrey smiled again—brightly, blandly, submissively. “Or to offend you. We’ve always gotten along so well. But when I was interrogated, they seemed very intent on finding the person who was with Linnett that day.”

“As they should be.” Besha stroked Tilrey’s palm with his thumb. “That person is a traitor.”

So they were going to pretend, were they? Back to a tattered facsimile of the status quo? Tilrey shrugged. “Gersha seems to take my ‘theories’ seriously, for better or worse. But he’s hoping we can all get along with no repeat of this unpleasantness. As if it never happened.”

*I’ll still have to tell him everything, just in case.* He wasn’t looking forward to that part—Gersha was so full of scruples—but there was no room for lies between them now.

Something softened in Besha’s face, then hardened again. He let his robe fall open and moved Tilrey’s hand between his legs.

“I can certainly think of more pleasant things for you to be doing,” he said.
It was an unpleasant shock to wake in a strange bed, and an even less pleasant one to realize that bed was Besha’s. Gersha could swear the room had a distinctive smell: menthol body spray, lube, and ambition. That smell was all over him now, and he didn’t want to remember why.

He threw back the blankets, slid to the floor, and went looking for his tunic; he’d never entirely removed his other clothes. Just as he bent to retrieve the garment, he heard sounds through the half-open door to the other room.

Unmistakable rhythmic sounds. The way Besha moaned when he was aroused was burned into Gersha’s memory, and now he heard those moans again, interspersed with grunts and heavy breathing.

He sat down very softly on the foot of the bed, tunic in his lap, and tried not to hear or see or think. He could go in and interrupt them, but he was supposed to trust Tilrey from now on. He would trust him. And it was no surprise that Besha had demanded what Verán had promised him in the first place.

_He doesn’t want this. He wants you. You know that now. He’s enduring it for your sake, the way you did for his._

Though Gersha had to admit he’d enjoyed fucking Besha more than he’d endured it.

He twisted a button on his tunic, reciting facts and figures in his head—all his passwords, instructions for building a basic solar heater from scrap materials, as many digits of pi as he could remember. The fucking sounds finally stopped. Silence, and then he heard Besha murmuring indistinctly, the tone half-tender and half-scolding. Then footsteps and water running.

By the time Tilrey entered the room, Gersha was fastening up his tunic, and his eyes were dry.

Tilrey retrieved his own clothes from the floor and put them on. He moved as if his body had been through something strenuous and unpleasant, but all he said was “We can go now. Fir Linbeck wants to spend the rest of the night alone.”

Besha didn’t make an appearance as they crossed the living room, donned their outergear in the coldroom, and exited through the wind-seal. It was after midnight, bracingly cold, and Gersha didn’t think he’d ever been so grateful for a stiff wind in his face.

Tilrey was walking with a lighter step now, too. As they approached the stand of trees where they’d stood to watch the sunset, he broke into a run, seized a low, nearly horizontal bough, and chinned himself up.

Gersha froze for an instant before he realized Tilrey was simply enjoying himself, not escaping from wolves or some other unthinkable outdoor threat. The boy hung suspended for several seconds, scowling with concentration, then tumbled into the snow, laughing with a youthful exuberance Gersha had never heard from him before. “Green hells, it’s good to get out of there.”

Gersha found he was laughing, too. He helped Tilrey up and kept hold of him as they walked on, winding his arm around the boy’s slender waist, supporting and supported.
“Do you really think he won’t tell Verán, though?” he asked, feeling his smile fade as he forced himself back to the subject of Besha. “Did we give him, well, enough of what he wanted?”

“He won’t tell Verán.” The boy spoke with such certainty that Gersha frowned. But he didn’t object, distracted by the eerie spectacle of the Aurora Borealis between the trees—vivid, spectral tatters of light, shifting and pulsing and drowning out the stars, as verdant as the grass of Harbour.

They walked to the edge of the plain they’d hiked two days ago and stood watching the lights flash and flutter in the sky: green and sunset-pink, coming and going with wild irregularity like the tracks of some inconceivable sky beast. Gersha let his head rest on Tilrey’s shoulder, felt the boy’s arms come around to hold him close.

“I can’t believe we did that,” he said, feeling warmer and more protected than he had for as long as he could remember. “It was risky. It was . . . embarrassing.”

Tilrey’s breath rustled his hair. “You didn’t entirely hate it, though, did you?”

No. He remembered Tilrey’s guiding, reassuring hand on the small of his back and Besha’s helpless, needy moans, the abandon that had made his rival oddly beautiful. He clasped Tilrey’s gloved hand. “But I’m not sure about ever doing it again.”

“I don’t think he’ll be making any more demands like he did tonight, Fir, but you’re going to have to manage him carefully. Start treating him like an ally. Next time you see him, show him you respect him, but you don’t fear him.”

Gersha laughed softly, gazing up at the lights. “Listen to you, sounding like a politician. You have a real talent for this.”

Tilrey echoed the laugh. “Oh, I have many talents, Fir.”

“That’s not what I meant. I didn’t—well, I didn’t mean what Verán means when he says you’re ‘serviceable.’ You’re so much more than that. You’re . . .” And then, because he already sounded like a fool and it didn’t matter, he said the next thing that came to mind, the thing he’d wanted to say in the first place: “I love you.”

The word, ináthera, seemed to echo in the frigid air around them. Gersha felt himself going very still. That particular word for love wasn’t the one you used for wives or children or the Republic. Ináthera was for sagas. It tore things apart. Why hadn’t he said something silly and harmless like “I adore you”?

No, for once in his life, he’d said what he meant. He wasn’t ashamed.

They stood there for a long moment. Tilrey didn’t answer, but he didn’t stiffen or withdraw, either, and Gersha relaxed again. He had a sense his offering, whatever it could mean here and now, had been accepted.

He felt the boy’s chin pressing gently on the crown of his head, the lips leaving a kiss there. Then Tilrey straightened and said, “We should get in, Fir. It’s below freezing. And there’s something I need to tell you before we can sleep.”

***

Tilrey had known this wouldn’t be pleasant. Part of him wanted to put it off till the end of vacation, or at least till tomorrow, so he could fully savor these moments with Gersha and not have to worry about the Upstart’s fears and scruples kicking in. And he was in no mood for a long discussion
after going down on his hands and knees in Besha’s living room and putting up with satisfying the man’s libido twice in one night.

But if he waited, Gersha wouldn’t know the full story, the true nature of the fragile, dangerous alliance they’d formed, and the next time he encountered Besha, he might be at a disadvantage. He might lash out in ways that would hurt them both—and Tilrey cared, in ways he’d never expected to care, about Gersha’s safety.

So, once they were settled back in their own living room, sprawled on a sofa and warming themselves at the hissing gas stove, he said, “There’s something you need to know about Besha, Fir.”

Gersha listened without interrupting. His mouth stiffened and his eyes widened, and he eased out of the clinch they’d been in, but he didn’t release Tilrey’s hand.

When Tilrey used his free hand to pull out Gersha’s handheld—having found no opportunity to slip it back in the tunic, he’d pocketed it himself—Gersha gasped and paled as if the machine had transformed itself into a snarling beast. “What on earth—”

“I only used it once, Fir. I won’t use it again. Check your mailbox.”

Gersha seized the handheld and cradled it possessively. He began tapping and scrolling, no doubt scanning for evidence of invasion or data theft. Five or ten minutes later, having discovered only the innocent-looking photos of a striped scarf, he shook his head. “You shouldn’t have done that. You should have told me.”

Tilrey tried to look contrite, but he’d had enough groveling for one night, and it was damned annoying how touchy Upstarts got about their precious devices. “I know, Fir. But we were short on time, and I didn’t want to have to persuade you. I wanted results.”

Gersha was biting his lip; his eyes looked a little lost, as if Tilrey had led him into the woods again and refused to lead him out. “But if this is true, if it’s true, we can’t just let Besha . . . go on. Don’t you understand that? If he committed high treason, he can’t be a Councillor of the Republic. He needs to be tried before his peers and face the consequences. That’s how things work.”

Tilrey had anticipated this reaction. How could someone like Gersha, raised in a sheltered world of test scores and rules without exceptions, begin to understand that things didn’t always work that way?

“Believe me,” he said, “if I thought Besha posed even the slightest threat to the Republic, I would have turned him in long ago. Even though I might just be tossed in moral rehab for my trouble—or worse.” Seeing the alarmed expression on Gersha’s face, he touched the Councillor’s hand. “You do realize that, love? Between Besha and me, who would Verán believe? His best lieutenant, or the person he mainly values for knowing how to suck his cock?”

Gersha squeezed Tilrey’s hand and released it; his beautiful eyes were glassy now. “I wouldn’t let that happen to you. I wouldn’t let anyone hurt you.”

“That might not be easy, Fir.” He felt like such a goddamn manipulative bastard, but he had to get past those scruples. “Things don’t have to come to that, though. Besha knows his word outweighs mine, but he’s got enough at stake that he doesn’t want to take the chance. As long as the threat is dangling over his head, I think he’ll be amenable to an alliance—one that benefits both of you.”

Gersha groaned as if the idea caused him physical pain. “An alliance with a traitor?”
“Besha may be a traitor, but he’s no subversive. I’m one hundred percent sure of that.” I also know there are real subversives hiding in the Sector, and one of them is your oldest friend. “Whatever he did for Linnett, he did to increase his own personal power. Besha’s a simple man, not an ideological bone in his body. And men who are driven entirely by self-interest—well, they can be useful, Fir. We can use him.”

Linnett, Tilrey privately suspected, had held some kind of sway over Besha thanks to knowledge of the man’s previous shady activities. Are you proud of me, Malsha? I’m just continuing what you started.

Gersha kept shaking his head, wringing his hands. The notion of not reporting a traitor to the authorities was as alien to him as the notion of Tilrey’s masterminding a plot had been to Besha earlier this evening.

Well, we all have our limitations, said Linnett’s voice, amused and resigned. But this one has promise, and you’ve done well with him, love. I think he’d ally himself with ten traitors if you asked nicely.

Tilrey took hold of Gersha’s hands and massaged them into stillness, gazing into the Upstart’s tremulous eyes. I’m not just manipulating him. I can be more than that.

“I have an idea, love,” he said. “I think Besha can help you secure the committee chair for Albertine Linnett, if that’s what you believe is best for the Republic. With the help of those cams Egil’s sending you. But you have to trust me, the way we agreed yesterday.”

Gersha flinched, but he didn’t pull away. “I’ve trusted you a lot lately.”

“I know you have, Fir.” He stroked his fingertips over Gersha’s palm, feeling the man tremble. “But once we’ve seen what’s on those cams, I’ll tell you the rest of the plan ahead of time, I promise. You do want to keep Karishkov out of that chair, don’t you?”

Gersha nodded, and his shoulders sagged. “Every step, love. You need to tell me every step from now on. No surprises.”

“No surprises.”

Linnett chuckled gently. Egil was right—the man loves you.

“And you’ll always set the course, Fir.” Tilrey was holding both Gersha’s hands out in front of him now, fixing the green eyes with his own. “I’m like Besha in one way, love—I’m simple. I focus on survival, not ideas.” Though that may change. “And it hasn’t always been a pretty process, surviving. I want you to show me how you see things. I want you to help me see more.”

To his own surprise, he meant it. His eyes clouded and his hands shook as he imagined all the things Gersha might be able to teach or show him: the secrets of Tangle books, of high-Upstart social codes, of those forbidden electronic devices. Perhaps even some of the secrets of Harbour. A Councillor could so easily find an excuse to join a diplomatic mission.

Tilrey didn’t want to defect or dissent or bring down the system—his aspirations, for now at least, were more modest. Just as Linnett had dreamed of retiring to Harbour—and had achieved his dream, with some help from Besha’s treason—he wanted to see that other world. One glimpse might be enough.

And to have power in this world . . . well, that would be interesting, too. Very.
But more than anything, right now, he just wanted to hold his Councillor in his arms.

Gersha was still trembling, but he didn’t resist when Tilrey pulled him close. And when Tilrey whispered in his ear, “I love you, Fir,” he let out a sigh as if putting down a burden he’d carried for a long, long time.

“Stay with me,” he said. “That’s all I ask.”

Chapter End Notes

It warms my cold heart to have 100 kudos on this story! :) Thank you to everyone who’s read it or left comments to fuel the fires. While this one’s almost over, I'm planning to make it part of a longer series, since there's a lot more I'd like to do with these characters and their world.
Ranek Egil had chosen a familiar place for their first meeting. At the juice kiosk at the gym, Tilrey received a paper cup with an address carefully printed around the bottom rim: a unit in the same underpopulated apartment block in West Ring Two where he often passed his free hours with Bror and the other kettle boys.

At five on a heavy work day, the building felt deserted, no voices echoing through the corridors. Tilrey hoped Egil had dealt with the cameras as he knocked on the designated door.

Egil answered. He wore the drab cover-alls of an R4 Laborer, disguising himself to a casual observer. “I wasn’t sure you would come,” he said in his neutral interrogator voice, gesturing at the sofa.

Tilrey sat in a straight chair instead. “You know I come here with my friends, Fir. You’ve watched me.”

Egil gave him a little mocking shrug. That’s what I do.

“This way your detour won’t seem unusual. You’re looking well these days, lad. And Gersha—well, I’ve never seen him so relaxed. Happy, even. What exactly are you doing to him?”

Tilrey allowed himself to smile—a real smile, with no irony. “Discretion, Fir.”

“Yes, damnable discretion.” Egil hooked one knee over the other and began jiggling his foot. “As you surely know, I fulfilled Gersha’s odd request for two surveillance cameras while he was in the Southern Range, but he still refuses to tell me precisely why he needed them. I don’t suppose you had anything to do with that?”

Tilrey kept smiling. “Thanks for those, Fir. They served their purpose.”

When Tilrey told Gersha he would need to plant the two cams in Karishkov’s residence, the Councillor had balked at first. It took a whole afternoon of explanation and coaxing, and then a night and morning of persuasion of a more pleasant kind, to make Gersha agree to violate a fellow Councillor’s privacy, no matter how much he disliked that Councillor.

Gersha’s high-mindedness was admirable—it was, Tilrey supposed, part of what he loved about Gersha—but not convenient. In the end, Tilrey brought him around by promising the recordings would never need to see the light of day. They were “insurance.” And so Gersha had trudged over to Karishkov’s apartment on the pretext that Tilrey had lost his hated earring there a few days earlier.

Karishkov was out, but his driver didn’t hesitate to admit the Councillor. By the time Gersha “found” the earring, he had also hidden both pin-sized cameras above two door-frames facing the living room. Tilrey came home the next morning from Verán’s residence to find his Fir flushed with guilty excitement, already obsessively monitoring the cam feeds on his handheld.
Egil propped his head on one hand, his keen dark eyes fixed on Tilrey. “I did you a favor, and now I think you owe it to me to tell me how you used my equipment. Who was the target?”

Tilrey smiled again, faux-innocently this time. “Gersha wanted something done, Fir, something regarding a Council vote, and I found a way to do it. I think he hopes to surprise you with the result, so discretion forbids I elaborate.”

“I don’t like surprises.” Even as he shook his head warningly, Egil seemed to be suppressing a grin. “Look at you, picking up the tricks of the trade.” He drew out a vial of sap, stuck a finger in, and licked it, recovering his professional composure. “I’m hoping your ‘result’ is what I think it is. But next time I give you my equipment, I want details first. Have you thought any more about what we talked about?”

“Which part of it, Fir?”

“You know very well what I mean.” Egil held out the vial, but Tilrey shook his head, and the interrogator went on, “If you wanted, you could tell Gersha what I am, what I’ve admitted to you. He’d believe you, and he’s still enough of a good little upholder of our corrupt regime to have me arrested and exiled as a traitor. Which would get me off your back. So, why haven’t you?”

Good question. After a moment’s hesitation, Tilrey leaned forward, holding out his hand, and let Egil dribble a bit of sap into his palm.

“I’m not ready to tell you who the traitor in the Council is,” he said.

Egil relaxed back in his seat and poked a pinky in his vial. “I didn’t think you would be. You’re not stupid. Of course, the longer you hold out on me, the more I may suspect you’re bluffing.”

Tilrey licked the sap off his own palm, savoring the fact that he didn’t have to perform an act of obeisance for once. “I think I need to get to know you and your allies a little better, Fir. I need to know exactly what you’re likely to do with any sensitive information I give you. It’s not just my own safety I’m concerned about, it’s Gersha’s.”

The interrogator snorted. “Gersha’s my friend, you know. I don’t have any desire to see him disgraced. Anyway, what do you care? You’ve been playing him this entire time like a pro.”

The sap was going to Tilrey’s head, but only a little, softening the over-sharp corners of the drab apartment. “I’m fond of him,” he said.

“Come now.”

Tilrey ignored the man’s cynicism. “I like Fir Gádden, Fir. I like living with him. I like discussing Tangle books with him. I like being in his bed. When they finally release me from this miserable posting, I’d like to be his secretary. I’d like to help him get out from under Verán’s thumb and become a force in the Council, and I have ideas about how to do it. If those ideas happen to be compatible with your ideas about reform, perhaps we can work something out. If not, well . . .”

Egil tented his fingers. “And how are you going to decide that?”

Tilrey settled back in the chair and looked the man square in the face, feeling perhaps more powerful than he ever had in the presence of an Upstart. “Why don’t you start by telling me what ‘reform’ means to you? Does it mean tweaking the ration system so that Strutters like you get eel rolls three times a week and twice-weekly hand jobs from the Sanctioned Brothel? Or does it mean breaking the stranglehold of family lines like yours on Upstart status and making the testing and Notification system actually fair?”
His voice broke on “fair,” because acknowledging or even implying that the current system wasn’t fair was already grave Dissent. For a Laborer, it was tantamount to Dissidence.

But Egil, who had to notice his discomfort, didn’t bat an eyelash.

“I’m all too happy to explain,” he said, “if you’re willing to put up with a bit of a dry lecture. First of all, yes, we intend to overhaul the Notification system so that heredity and patronage no longer play any role in Level assignment. Second, we hope to institute a system of indirect suffrage that gives people of all Levels a say in choosing their Council representatives. Third . . .”

Tilrey listened intently and nodded, though he kept one eye on the clock on the corner console. Right about now, Gersha would be leaving the Sector and heading to the gym, where he was all set to perform a task that Tilrey had assigned him. It was a delicate task, vital to the attainment of their goals (Gersha’s goals, Tilrey reminded himself, still feeling uneasy with the notion of acting on his own behalf), and they had rehearsed it in Gersha’s living room until the Councillor could play his role well, if not flawlessly.

Gersha would get it right. He had complete confidence in his little Councillor, just as Gersha had placed complete trust in him. And, though it wouldn’t do to tell Gersha about Egil and his reformists, not yet and perhaps not for a while, one day Tilrey would tell. One day Gersha would cease to be shocked by any hint of Dissent, and there would be no secrets left between them.

Egil might not grasp why it mattered to him to be honest with Gersha, to sweep away the last barriers separating them, but it did.

***

At approximately six on every second-day, fifth-day, and seventh-day, Besha treated himself to a steam and sauna at the gym. On second-day, Verán and the other Islanders were unlikely to accompany him, being still at their desks. This early in the ten-day, most Upstarts in the Sector worked till at least eight, trying to outdo one another in displays of diligence. But Besha had his private indulgences.

Armed with this information, based on Tilrey’s meticulous long-term observations, Gersha abandoned his own desk at five forty-five and made his way to the R11 gym. There he stripped, donned a robe, and proceeded to the handsome blond-wood sauna, which looked out over the jet-black, ice-glittering roofs of the lower Sector through wall-length one-way windows.

Sure enough, Besha sat alone on the middle tier, naked except for a towel draped across his lap. When he saw Gersha, he froze for an instant before his mouth relaxed into the usual smirk. “Well, look who’s slacking off for a change.”

Gersha’s throat had already tightened. He’d interacted with Besha since learning of his treason, of course, but only with people like Verán in the way. Despite everything Tilrey had said, he still struggled with his own feeling that the man didn’t deserve to be strutting around scot-free.

He gripped the handheld in his robe pocket tightly, grateful that the circumstances made his sweating seem natural and not nervous. “I was told you might be here.”

“Oh, really?” Besha inched his knees apart and grinned insolently. “Come looking for more of the same, eh?”

It was impossible to say how serious he was, but the taunt—if it was a taunt—didn’t bother Gersha anymore. Besha would always be Besha, a fizzing spark of ruthless energy and borderline-cruel
irreverence. While Gersha didn’t regret what they’d done in the Southern Range, he preferred to think of it as something he’d done with and for Tilrey. After all, the boy’s hands had stayed on him the entire time, and if they ever did it again (maybe?), it would be at the boy’s request.

“I see the vote on the Int/Sec chair’s been scheduled,” he said, swallowing hard as he settled himself on the bench beside Besha. (No more than three feet away from him, Tilrey had instructed him. Show him you’re not afraid.) “A ten-day from tomorrow.”

“I’m well aware of that.” Besha looked less amused now. “So, have you come to help me update my calendar? Or have you come to strong-arm me into voting for your preferred candidate, the one who doesn’t have a chance in hell?”

Gersha wasn’t taken aback; Tilrey had told him to expect this reaction, too. He knows about your crusade to get Linnett the chair. Verán will have told him. He’ll know why you’re there.

“No, actually,” he said as calmly as he could manage. “I’ve come to you for another reason—because of a rather delicate situation I’m facing. It’s come to my attention that one of our colleagues has . . . disgraced himself in a way incompatible with his office.”

Besha’s reaction was instantaneous. He leapt to his feet, yanked the towel tight around his hips, stalked to the window, and stood with his back to Gersha, looking down at the Sector, every muscle in his back taut.

He’ll assume you’re talking about him, Tilrey had said. He’ll get defensive, angry. Notice it, but don’t react.

When Besha turned, his face was livid with rage. “Stop taunting me in your stupid mealy-mouthed way. I know what you know, or think you know, and I’m calling your bluff. I won’t be your puppet.”

Gersha tried not to feel the full, seething force of the other Councillor’s glare. Tried not to think about all the ways Besha could easily strike back at him—at them. Tilrey’s voice in his head was a thread he grabbed gratefully: Be cold and indifferent. You’ve seen how Verán acts when someone challenges him? Imitate that.

“I’m talking about Niko Karishkov,” he said in the most level voice he could muster. “You know him better than I do, Besha, so I hoped you might be able to make him see reason. For his own good, he needs to withdraw his name from consideration for the chair. If he doesn’t . . . well, I know some people who possess rather damning evidence of his immorality. And they’re very ready to make it public.”

Besha’s look of rage had curdled into confusion. “Karishkov? Immoral? What the fuck are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about helping a fellow Islander preserve his good name.” Gersha put a throb of sincerity in his voice, just like when he and Tilrey had practiced this scene on the couch with Tilrey playing Besha’s part. “Niko and I have our differences, but I don’t want to see his life destroyed over one foolish choice.”

That part, at least, was true. When Gersha watched the footage from the security cams he’d planted in Karishkov’s vacation residence, he’d been shocked at first, then angry at the man’s hypocrisy—and then, to his own surprise, tears had sprung to his eyes.

He understood too well now how it felt to love someone against all reason, against considerations
of Level and social order. Watching Niko Karishkov play house with his Laborer girlfriend and the child who was clearly his, Gersha saw evidence of love. He saw his parents as they might have been in the early days of their marriage, before it was poisoned by his uncle’s taunts and his mother’s addiction.

And, though he shuddered at the idea of begetting a child on a Laborer, Gersha knew very well that it hadn’t been Whyberg’s idea to outlaw procreation across the divide, but a later development. The founder had argued fiercely against eugenics, inbreeding, and the hereditary transfer of power, even though modern thinkers tended to downplay that part of his theory.

When Tilrey finally told Gersha the whole plan, he’d opposed it at first, because it seemed so wrong—hypocritical on his part—to punish someone for loving the wrong person. But Tilrey had convinced him that, if all went well, Karishkov would be punished with nothing worse than being robbed of the chair. And that seemed fair enough, given Ranek’s testimony to the man’s corruption.

Always quick on his feet, Besha seemed to have recovered his equilibrium. “What is it with you lately, throwing around these bizarre accusations?” he asked. “First me, now poor Niko? Is there anyone in the Council besides you who’s not immoral?”

Gersha took a deep breath, reaching for his handheld. “Let me explain.”

“Give it up, Gersha. He’s qualified for the position, and we have the votes. And no, I won’t consent to be the middleman in your little . . .” He trailed off as Gersha brandished the handheld, his eyes narrowing. “Oh really? Video evidence?”

“If you’d care to see it,” Gersha said through his clenched jaw. Politics seemed to require superhuman patience; without Tilrey’s coaching, he would have stormed out of this tête-à-tête long ago, smarting from Besha’s insults.

But Tilrey had said, *The more he insults you, the more you know you’re getting to him*. And the nastiness did seem to be escalating.

“Tell me,” Besha asked, his eyes not moving from the dark screen, “did your clever little friend in Int/Sec engineer this whole thing? I have to say, Gersha, it doesn’t seem like something you’d come up with. Not that you’re not clever in your own way, of course, when it comes to building databases and quoting old books, but in the real world—”

Gersha made as if to withdraw the handheld. “Perhaps you’d rather not be involved, then.”

“No, no, go on. Better you show it to me than someone else.” Was that hungry curiosity in Besha’s voice now? Perhaps even malice? “You can count on my discretion.”

*He and Karishkov play at friendship, but they’re rivals*, Tilrey had said. *If Niko gets that chair, the two of them will always be competing for Verán’s attention, and when Verán is gone, they’ll compete to fill the void. Besha wants to be General Magistrate someday. He may not admit it, but he’d love to knock Niko out of the way.*

Besha’s ferocious ambition was what Gersha was banking on as he hit play.

The video was roughly a minute long, edited down from nearly forty-eight hours of footage. Tilrey had chosen the pieces, and Gersha had spliced them together.

The sneer melted from Besha’s face as he watched Karishkov and the Laborer woman enter the house arm-in-arm. The child ran ahead of them, laughing, and tossed a snowball at Karishkov, and
Karishkov admonished him, also laughing, and then knelt to check the boy’s fingers and cheeks for frostbite. Every time Gersha watched this, he was struck by how relaxed and happy Karishkov looked, nothing like the dour, punishment-obsessed man he knew in the Council chamber.

There was a family dinner scene, during which Gersha had used his remote control of one camera to zoom in on the faces and observe the resemblance. There were heartfelt embraces, too, though (to his relief) the couple had reserved the full expression of their affections for the bedroom.

When the clips ended, he expected Besha to demand a replay or an explanation. But Besha was a quick study. He stared at the black screen, the color drained from his face. Then, as Gersha watched, he began gnawing a thumb-nail, a tic from their school days.

“If Karina saw that, she’d gut him with a rusty fisherman’s knife.” Seeing Gersha’s blank look, Besha shook his head. “Karina Lindahl, Niko’s high-named Programmer wife with whom he has two lovely kids, and who’s very fond of him, and very proud of her honor and reputation. Don’t you ever pay attention to this stuff?”

“No really.” Gersha could afford to be humble now.

“I guess you’re lucky you have such devious little friends, then, to do your social engineering for you.”

“I suppose I am.” He’d worried that Besha would immediately guess the intel on Karishkov came from Tilrey, but Tilrey had laughed and said, Many Upstarts have a blind spot when it comes to us. Even after I threw his treason in his face, he doesn’t want to believe I’m the threat. It’s very useful.

Besha began pacing the hot cedar boards; his towel slipped off, and he didn’t bother to pick it up. “He’ll have to withdraw his name, all right. We can’t have the Party disgraced. I’ll go see him tonight and put it to him straight. He’ll withdraw first thing tomorrow morning; he’ll know he’s lucky I’m not making him resign his seat altogether. Then we’ll have to push the vote back and find a new candidate—”

“No.”

Besha stopped and swung around, almost as if he’d forgotten Gersha was there. “What do you mean, no?”

This will be the hardest part, Tilrey had said. You can’t let him take back control.

Gersha crossed his arms, trying not to wither under the force of the other man’s stare. “Linnett is the best qualified. The rank and file of Int/Sec respect her.”

Besha laughed a little too loudly. “How naïve are you? ‘Qualified’ doesn’t matter.”

Don’t say anything. Don’t threaten him aloud—he knows what you can do to him. He knows Karishkov isn’t the only one you can ruin. So just . . . look at him.

Gersha just looked. Holding Besha’s narrowed blue eyes was like climbing a snowy hill against a sub-freezing wind. He blushed violently, then felt the blood drain away with a speed that made him shiver, but he kept looking.

It was Besha who broke the gaze first. Stiffly and deliberately, he bent and picked up his towel. “I’d better take a turn in the cold pool before I expire.”

Gersha cleared his throat. “You’ll see Niko tonight. You’ll make him withdraw.”
“As I already said.” But he sounded peevish now, like a scolded child.

“You won’t tell Verán about the video. You’ll make it clear to Niko that he takes his orders from you from now on.”

A wild laugh. “And who am I taking my orders from now? You?”

_Ignore what he says. Recite your script._

Gersha recited. “You will go to Verán and tell him you found evidence in Int/Sec of Niko’s corrupt use of his authority to imprison citizens on flimsy pretexts. You will convince him to let Linnett take the chair because it will look like a gesture toward healthy bipartisanship, and because you know from personal experience with her that she’ll be easy to manipulate.”

“Will she?” Besha’s eyes looked a bit lost now, as if he actually expected Gersha to have an answer. “I’m going to have a devil of a time convincing Verán of that, you know.”

Gersha eased back a little, feeling the heat sink into his bones. _This is actually working. How is it working?_

“You can leave me to handle Linnett,” he said. “As for convincing Verán, well, isn’t that exactly how you got where you are? Why would your skills fail you now?”

Besha went abruptly red, his face beaded with sweat. “You don’t have a hundredth of my skills. You think you’re so far above me because of your stupid fucking lineage and your squeaky-clean record, but you’ve always been handed everything. You’re not so squeaky-clean now, and if you think I’m going to step aside and let you become General Magistrate one day, best think again.”

Gersha closed his eyes; he felt lightheaded, as if he were flying far above the taunts. “It’s a good thing I have exactly no interest in becoming General Magistrate, then. All I care about is . . . a bit of fairness. Good day, Besha.”
When Gersha came home, Tilrey was unpacking two bags from the kitchen of the Restaurant, one filled with assorted fried delicacies and the other with noodles and greens braised in various sauces. Freya Birun, who ran the Restaurant’s kitchen, was Bror’s cousin, and she was always happy to pack up leftovers from the last free-night for Bror or his friends to enjoy.

Gersha looked pale as he stepped into the living room, and so tense that Tilrey felt his own throat tighten. “Well?”

“I think it worked,” the Councillor whispered, as if he wasn’t sure he dared believe it. “He responded the way you said he would, to the letter. We can’t be sure until tomorrow, of course, when he’s spoken to Verán, but . . .”

Gersha took a few unsteady steps; when Tilrey extended his arms, he all but collapsed into them. “I can’t believe I did that. He turned on me. I felt like he wanted to claw my eyes out.”

Tilrey held Gersha upright, feeling his pulse like an electric cable, marveling at the sheer amount of nervous energy his Fir’s slight body was capable of holding. “You did so well,” he said, resting his chin on the crown of his Councillor’s head. “You’ve got him by the balls now, and he knows it.”

“We’ve got him. I couldn’t have done any of this without you.” Gersha reached up and pulled Tilrey down into a hungry kiss—then, just as quickly, jerked himself free. “I forgot—it’s not a free-night. I’m sorry.”

“Well, free-night or not, you deserve a treat.” Tilrey gestured at the food containers, inwardly a bit irked. He’s still so damn hung up on rules and protocol, even when I’ve shown him how little they matter. “I’m going to heat this up for us both.”

When he returned from the kitchen with two steaming serving platters, Gersha was settled on the couch, feet up, tunic hanging open. “I really ought to be eating at my desk,” he said plaintively, swinging his feet back onto the ground like a schoolboy who’d been reprimanded. “Verán would take you away if he caught us like this on a work-night. But those smells.”

And then Tilrey really had had enough. He deposited the food on the low table, sank down beside Gersha, and imprisoned his Fir in his arms.

“Fuck Verán,” he mumbled into Gersha’s neck—even now, he couldn’t quite say it aloud. “He can set all the rules he likes. But here, just the two of us, that’s our time, and I don’t belong to him or his damned Party. You should know that, love.” He planted an open-mouthed kiss on Gersha’s throat and felt the Councillor gasp and arch his back. “I belong to you.”

Not to you, either. Not like a thing, anyway. But he didn’t need to say that now. He had more urgent things to worry about, like Gersha coming alive in his arms, and it didn’t matter whether the food got a bit cold.

And anyway, Gersha was whispering in his ear, “Maybe it’s the other way round.”

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A few hours later, in bed, Tilrey noticed something on the floor that caught the light—the weathered metal disc he’d retrieved from the historic site in the Southern Range. It must have
rolled from his pocket earlier when they began tearing each other’s clothes off.

He showed it to Gersha, who was lounging back against the pillows with a satisfied flush in his cheeks. “Do you have any idea what this is, Fir?”

Gersha examined the disc, scratching oxidized corrosion away to reveal the original copper color. “It’s a Tangle coin, I think. Something they used for currency.”

“I know about coins.” Tilrey took it back and began trying to uncover the date. How many centuries ago had it been minted? “Pennies were copper, I think. It’s the lowest denomination: A penny saved is a penny earned. Not worth a cent.”

When he looked up, Gersha was smiling in an odd way. “You know all that from your reading?”

Tilrey ducked his head reflexively. “Just one of the useless facts filling my brain, Fir.”

“Not useless. Not useless at all.” And Gersha threw back the blankets and rose, naked, that flush in his cheeks intensifying. “Wait here, love. I want to run some things by you.”

The door to the forbidden study opened, then clicked shut. After a moment, Gersha reappeared with a tablet and stylus, settled himself in bed again, and began tapping and scribbling, face tight with concentration.

“I’m building a database, you see, of common Tangle ideas and expressions—‘tropes’ or ‘memes,’ we often call them. Harbourers, you see, are far more familiar with Tangle culture than we are, and they weave these ancient notions into a kind of code—or at least, that’s my theory.” He broke off, staring at the screen. “So, a penny and a cent are the same? Do you have any idea what ‘my two cents’ or ‘give me your two cents’ could mean? That one’s been driving me mad.”

Tilrey tried not to yield to his temptation to glance at the glowing screen, though Gersha was no longer bothering to hide it. “It means a person’s opinion.”

“You’re amazing! Half their expressions have to do with their absurd symbolic currency.” Gersha scribbled, shaking his head. “I have a whole list of other phrases that’ve been mystifying me—well, if you’re willing.”

And where did those phrases come from? Tilrey wondered. If Gersha was trying to interpret intercepted Harbourer telegraph transmissions, that material was highly classified, and Egil might be very interested, but Tilrey wouldn’t tell him. Not for now, anyway.

“Of course,” he said, his chest swelling with the warmth of a kind of praise he wasn’t used to hearing. “But I want something in exchange, love. I never learned how to speak English or Harbourer.” Gersha had sounded tentative as he pronounced the words, fitting his beautifully curved lips around them, but that was still more than Tilrey could do. “Could you teach me?”

The Councillor looked surprised, but not unpleasantly. “Of course. Maybe it’ll come in handy one day—there are diplomatic missions, after all. I’ve thought about making a trip to an embassy for research purposes.”

*Harbour. Maybe I could go to Harbour.*

To distract Gersha from the fact that he was smiling like an idiot, Tilrey drew him close. Gersha melted against him as if he’d been doing it all his life, his eyes still on the tablet. “Can you explain what it means to call someone or something a ‘dreamboat’?” he asked in a tone so pedantic that Tilrey had no choice but to pull his head back by the disheveled dark curls and kiss him.
“I think it describes you pretty well, Fir,” he said.

***

Celinda Valde had been warned not to show her face until the plane was on the ground and the customs officers had signed off, but there was no way she was staying in the dark any longer.

The crate where she’d been hiding for the past eight hours wasn’t nailed shut or latched, thank god. One push on the loose panel, and she ventured out into the creaking, shuddering cargo hold.

She’d flown before, but the plane’s whining descent still made her queasy. She crept forward, hugging a crate here and there for support, until she reached the cockpit. Two Laborer civilian pilots were busy guiding the craft to earth, the man mumbling into a radio while the woman worked a rudder and monitored gauges.

Celinda barely spared a glance for them. They’d been well compensated to pretend she didn’t exist, and anyway, she was here for the view.

Through the broad windshield, she could see everything. They were gliding over a large body of water that reflected the sunset, smooth and lucent as a pearl. Then ground raced beneath them again, and it was green.

Green. She tried to think of something to compare that color to, something in her world. It wasn’t black-green like spruce or muddy-green like cedar or pale blue-green like the sea. Like moss, maybe? Yes, the moss that covered boulders in the woods of the Southern Range in the summer could be almost that vibrant green.

That green—so green!—rippled into hills and modest mountains. The valleys were dimpled with flickering lights. She gaped at it, so rapt she didn’t notice the crew looking at her until the copilot cleared his throat and said, “You’re not supposed to be out here.”

Just try and stop me. Celinda smiled prettily at him, out of long habit, and said, “Just until we land. Then I’ll go back in my hidey-hole.”

The woman shook her head. “You’d damn well better. Customs is happy to look the other way, but not if you’re right in front of them.”

“Promise! I won’t bother you.” She made her voice light and flirtatious, primarily addressing the male pilot, who’d been sizing her up with furtive glances. “Such a smooth descent.”

He blushed and turned away to mutter numbers into his speaker. Why was she even bothering to flirt? Celinda wondered. She didn’t belong to anyone anymore. She wasn’t dressed like a kettle boy, but in an anonymous coverall, and soon she would wear whatever Harbourers wore. Maybe here she would become someone completely different. She’d never need to fill her voice with honey and suck up to a man again.

Harbour. She was going to Harbour; this was Harbour beneath her feet. The knowledge was big enough to swell her whole chest and make her breath come short, yet it still didn’t seem real.

When he put her on the long and roundabout journey to a safe asylum, fulfilling his end of their bargain, Ranek Egil had warned her that Harbour’s various warring fiefdoms were no paradise. “The air’s warmer, yes, and there are fewer rules and no cameras, but you’ll have to make your own way with no path set for you. Chaos isn’t always easy to navigate.”

Celinda had nodded with a show of respect, because Egil was an Upstart, but privately she thought
she’d navigated her own path just fine so far. Poor foolish young Fredrich Akeina, whom she’d recruited to Irin Dartán’s resistance movement, the True Hearth, had broken under interrogation and given her up. She’d been hauled into a cell, just as Tilrey had warned her. But, underestimating her importance, Int/Sec had assigned her interrogation to Egil, who just so happened to be secretly sympathetic to her cause.

Celinda still didn’t trust Egil or any Upstart; she hadn’t told him about Dartán or the True Hearth, and she was proud of herself for that. But she had a sneaking feeling that Egil might have gone easy on her because he already knew where she took her orders from. Perhaps his nameless group and the True Hearth had worked out an alliance.

Not that it mattered now. Unless she could find other refugees like herself, or funnel supplies back to Oslov, she couldn’t serve the Hearth here.

But she’d find plenty to do. She’d wash dishes or scrub floors if she had to. She’d plant green things in that rich, dark earth. She’d be free.

A gust of wind thudded against the plane, and Celinda grabbed the back of the copilot’s seat, shooting him an apologetic smile as her stomach turned over. In a moment she’d go back into her dark, onion-stinking crate, but for now she was going to drink her fill of these green hills and valleys. Not the proverbial ones that Oslovs swore by because that world was lost to them forever, but the honest-to-god reality.

*I’ll make my own way.* Right now, it didn’t sound bad at all.
“I know it’s not much,” Gersha said apologetically. “Not a proper office of your own.”

Tilrey stood in the middle of the antechamber to Gersha’s office in the Sector and looked around. He’d been here before, of course, but this was different. Now the space was his.

A tall window with a deep sill of black granite looked out on a snow-lashed exterior wall. Inside, filing cabinets leaned against white marble baseboards. Beside the highly varnished door to the office proper stood a desk holding an ugly gray console.

Tilrey had been in plenty of Councillors’ antechambers before. He’d endured the pitying or disgusted or blank gazes of their secretaries, who knew exactly what he was and why he was there. He’d sometimes hated those stiff-necked Laborer functionaries, always envied them. Now he would be one.

It had taken a full two years of Gersha’s gentle prodding to get Verán to release him from the position of the Party’s kettle boy. In the end, the majority leader had simply found someone younger and shinier to serve as his “currency,” and Tilrey did not regret it for a second.

“This is more than I ever dreamed of,” he said, not exaggerating.

He ran his hand carefully over the boxy plastic contours of the console he knew would connect him to a network of records, calendars, and databases. Nothing sensitive, of course; nothing he didn’t need to keep track of the Councillor’s appointments or to do basic research for him. Like all subdivisions of the Sector’s vast information network that were made available to Laborers, his access would be severely circumscribed.

Still, it was a network. He was being trusted with network access. It felt like freedom.

He ventured behind his new desk and sank into his new chair. Stared at his dead screen.

Gersha joined him and placed a hand tentatively on his shoulder, fingers sneaking under his collar—because even now, after two years together, Tilrey’s Councillor was still sometimes absurdly, endearingly shy with him.

“It’s not too late to choose a different posting, you know. One where you won’t have to see me every day.”

Tilrey laughed. “I think I can tolerate that.”

“Or my colleagues.”

“I want to be your secretary.” He interlaced his fingers with Gersha’s. “I can still work on your database in my spare time. And I can be your eyes and ears at all those dull committee meetings you don’t want to attend.”

“Thank god for that.” Gersha’s hand tightened on his. “You’ll understand what’s going on better than I do.”
Indeed I will. Tilrey couldn’t wait to get into the Council chambers and see the various committees in session. He already knew all the players and had a general sense of the game, but now he’d have ample opportunity to match private vices to public postures. And the knowledge he gained that way could be extremely useful.

He still hadn’t told Gersha about his regular meetings with Egil, or about Egil’s real agenda. But the time was coming. Day by day, night by night, he was working away at Gersha’s resistance, showing him how to think beyond his uncle’s rules. Just yesterday they’d had a long conversation about how the Notification system could be reformed to give children from Laborer families a better chance to Raise themselves.

You’re wasting your time, Linnett whispered in his head. Oslov can’t be reformed; the rot goes all the way to the bones. The only two choices are to escape, the way I did, or to burn it down.

But Tilrey wasn’t ready to burn anything down. Not today. He rose, keeping hold of Gersha’s hand, and—with a quick glance to make sure the door to the outer corridor was closed—drew his Fir into his arms.

Gersha’s other hand circled Tilrey’s waist, where the loose drape of a jerkin had replaced the tight cinching of his kettle boy tunic. “I’m not used to you dressed like this.”

Was there a slight wistfulness in his tone? Tilrey leaned back against the desk and guided the Fir’s hand lower, under the jerkin. “I know it’s a big transition, but we’ll see each other more than before, love. Every day here, and then at night . . . well, I’ll still be with you, if you’ll have me.”

Before coming here, they’d gone to see Tilrey’s new official residence: a tiny, windowless room in an R5 singles dorm. Tilrey had no intention of spending much time there—it reminded him of Egil’s damned box—yet it was pleasant to think of having a room all his own, with a door he could lock. Gersha always respected the closed door of Tilrey’s room in their (yes, their) apartment, but still, it was nice to have another option. And in the dorm he was just down the hall from Bror, who was also working in the Sector now.

Gersha’s breath caught as Tilrey’s cock hardened against his palm. “Oh, I will most definitely ‘have you,’ as often as you want to be there. But when you don’t . . .” His hand stopped moving, as if he’d only just realized what it was doing. “I don’t think this desk has ever been used this way before.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure.” Tilrey stroked one finger down the Upstart’s cheek, tracing the delicate bone, then buried his hand in the black ringlets and pulled Gersha to him, savoring the gasp of surrender.

The kiss made them both breathless, and for a moment nothing existed but the heat of their mouths and the trembling eagerness to be closer. But as they came apart, Gersha noticed the ball-bearing chain around Tilrey’s neck and tugged it out. “What is this? The artifact?”

Between them dangled the ancient coin Tilrey had found in the ruins in the Southern Range, buffed to something approaching its original copper.

“Bror’s aunt works in a machine shop. She drilled a hole in it for me. Verán took back his cursed earring, so . . .” Tilrey shrugged. “This is ours. It reminds me of that day.”

“And you want to be reminded?” Gersha rubbed the penny between his thumb and forefinger, the lashes drooping over his sea-colored eyes with the shyness that was so infuriating and irresistible.
For answer, Tilrey pulled his Fir close again, close enough to kiss the pulse in Gersha’s neck and feel it shudder and speed up as their bodies met. “What do you think, Fir? I dreamed this was a love token once, and now it is again. And it’s brought us luck.”

Chapter End Notes

I have a lot more story to tell about these characters and their world, so I'm making this a series and hope to post the first follow-up soon. You can also follow my updates on Tumblr.

Many huge thanks to everybody who read, left kudos, and/or commented, and especially huge thanks to mugi_says_eep for your amazing insightful comments and inspiring me to bring out my old binder of Oslov geekery. :) You guys rock! <3

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