



BY JAMES S. A. COREY

The Expanse

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The Expanse short fiction

The Butcher of Anderson Station

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Strange Dogs

TIAMAT'S WRATH

BOOK EIGHT OF THE EXPANSE



JAMES S. A. COREY



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To George R. R. Martin

Good mentor, better friend

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Acknowledgments

Prologue: Holden

Chrisjen Avasarala was dead.

She'd passed in her sleep on Luna four months earlier. A long, healthy life, a brief illness, and she left humanity very different than she'd found it. The newsfeeds all had obituaries and remembrances prerecorded and ready to spin out across the thirteen hundred systems to which humanity was heir. The chyrons and headlines had been hyperbolic: *The Last Queen of Earth* and *Death of a Tyrant* and *Avasarala's Final Farewell*. No matter what they said, they hit Holden just as hard. It was impossible to imagine a universe that wouldn't bow to the little old woman's will. Even when the confirmation came to Laconia that the reports were true, Holden still believed deep in his bones that she was out there somewhere, irritated and profane and pushing herself past all human limits to bend history just another fraction of a degree away from atrocity. It was almost a month between the moment he heard the news and the first time he let himself accept that it was true. Chrisjen Avasarala was dead.

But that didn't mean she was finished.

A state funeral had been planned on Earth before Duarte intervened.

Avasarala's time as secretary-general of the United Nations had been a

critical period in history, and her service not only to her world but to the whole human project had earned her a place of honor that could never be forgotten. The high consul of Laconia thought it only right and proper that she find her final resting place at the heart of the new empire. The funeral would be at the State Building. A memorial would be built to her so that she would never be forgotten.

The part where Duarte was complicit in the vast slaughter on Earth that defined Avasarala's career got skipped over. History was in the process of being rewritten by the winners. Holden was pretty sure that even though it didn't make it into the press releases and state newsfeeds, everyone remembered that she and Duarte had been on opposite sides, back in the day. And if they didn't, he certainly did.

The mausoleum—her mausoleum, since there wasn't anyone else of sufficient stature to share it with her yet—was white stone polished micron-smooth. The great doors were closed now, the service concluded. A portrait of Avasarala filled the center panel on the north face of the structure. It was etched into the stone along with the dates of her birth and death and a few lines of poetry he didn't recognize. The hundreds of chairs arrayed around the podium where the priest had spoken were only about half-filled now. People had come from across the empire to be here, and now that they

were, they mostly broke into little clumps with whoever they already knew. The grass around the crypt wasn't like the stuff back on Earth, but it filled the same ecological niche and behaved similarly enough that they called it grass. The breeze was warm enough to be comfortable. With the palace behind him, Holden could almost pretend that he might walk out to the wilderness beyond the palace grounds and go wherever he chose.

His clothes were of Laconian military cut, blue with the spread wings that Duarte had picked for his imperial icon. The collar was high and stiff. It scraped the skin along the side of Holden's neck. The place where his insignia of rank would have gone was blank. Empty was apparently the symbol of the honored prisoner.

"Will you be going in to the reception, sir?" a guard asked.

Holden wondered what exactly the escalation tree looked like when he said no. That he was a free man, and rejected the hospitality of the palace. Whatever it was, he was pretty sure it had already been practiced and rehearsed. And he probably wouldn't enjoy it.

"In a minute," Holden said. "I just want to . . ." He gestured vaguely at the tomb as if the inevitability of death was a kind of universal hall pass. A reminder that all human rules were tentative.

"Of course, sir," the guard said, and faded back into the crowd. Holden

didn't have any sense that he was free, though. *Unobtrusively confined* was as much as he could hope for.

One woman stood alone at the base of the mausoleum, looking up at Avasarala's portrait. Her sari was a vibrant blue that was just close enough to the Laconian color scheme to be polite and just far enough from it to make it perfectly clear that the politeness was insincere. Even if she hadn't looked like her grandmother, the subtle-not-subtle *fuck you* would have identified her. Holden ambled over.

Her skin was darker than Avasarala's had been, but the shape of her eyes when she glanced over at him and the thinness of her smile were familiar.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Holden said.

"Thank you."

"We haven't been introduced. I'm—"

"James Holden," the woman said. "I know who you are. Nani talked about you sometimes."

"Ah. Well, that must have been something to hear. She didn't always see things the way I did."

"No, she did not. I'm Kajri. She called me Kiki."

"She was an amazing woman."

They were silent for the space of two long breaths together. The breeze made the fabric of Kajri's sari ripple like a flag. Holden was about to step away when she spoke again.

"She would have hated this," she said. "Hauled into the camp of her enemies to be celebrated now that she can't crack their balls anymore. Co-opted as soon as she couldn't fight back. You could power a planet by hooking a turbine to her right now. That's how much she's spinning in this grave."

Holden made a small sound that could have been agreement.

Kajri shrugged. "Or maybe not. She might have just thought it was funny. I could never be sure with her."

"I owed her a lot," Holden said. "I didn't always realize it at the time, but she did what she could to help me. I never got the chance to thank her. Or . . . I did, I guess, but I didn't take it. If there's anything I can do for you or your family . . ."

"You don't seem to be in a position to do people favors, Captain Holden."

Holden looked back at the palace. "Yeah, I'm not really at my best these days. But I wanted to say it all the same."

"I appreciate the sentiment," Kajri said. "And from what I've heard,

you've managed to have some influence? The prisoner with the emperor's ear."

"I don't know about that. I talk a lot, but I don't know that anyone listens. Except the security detail. I assume they listen to everything."

She chuckled, and it was a warmer, more sympathetic sound than he'd expected. "It isn't easy, having no part of your life for just yourself. I grew up knowing that everything I said would be monitored, cataloged, filed, and judged for its potential to compromise me or my family. There's a record in the intelligence service archives somewhere of every time I've had my period."

"Because of her?" Holden said, nodding to the tomb.

"Because of her. But she gave me the tools to live through it too. She taught us to use everything shameful in our lives as a weapon to humiliate people who would diminish us. That's the secret, you know."

"What's the secret?"

Kajri smiled. "The people who have power over you are weak too. They shit and bleed and worry that their children don't love them anymore.

They're embarrassed by the stupid things they did when they were young that everyone else has forgotten. And so they're vulnerable. We all define ourselves by the people around us, because that's the kind of monkey we

are. We can't transcend it. So when they watch you, they hand you the power to change what they are too."

"And she taught you that?"

"She did," Kajri said. "But she didn't know it."



As if to prove the point, a guard moved across the grass toward them, keeping a respectful distance until he was sure they'd seen him and then gave them time to finish what they were saying before coming closer. Kajri turned to him, lifting her eyebrow.

"The reception is going to begin in twenty minutes, ma'am," the guard said. "The high consul specifically hoped to meet you."

"I wouldn't dream of disappointing him," she said with a smile Holden had seen before on other lips. Holden offered his arm, and Kajri took it. As they walked away, he nodded toward the tomb and the words written on it.

IF LIFE TRANSCENDS DEATH, THEN I WILL SEEK FOR YOU
THERE. IF NOT, THEN

THERE TOO.

"It's an interesting quote," he said. "I feel like I should recognize it.

Who wrote it?"

"I don't know," she said. "She only told us to put it on her grave. She

didn't say where it came from."

Everyone who was anyone had come to Laconia. That was true on several levels. Duarte's plan to shift the center of humanity away from Sol system to the heart of his own empire had found a level of cooperation and consent that shocked Holden at first and then left him with a permanent sense of mild disappointment in humans as a species. The most prestigious scientific research institutes had all moved their headquarters to Laconia. Four different ballet companies threw off centuries of rivalry to share the same Laconian Institute of Art. Celebrities and scholars rushed to new, palatial, state-subsidized estates in the capital city. There were already movies being made there. The soft power of culture set on speed scrub, ready to flood the networks and feeds with the reassuring messages of High Consul Duarte and the permanence of Laconia.

Business came too. Duarte had banks and office campuses pre-built and ready for tenants. The Association of Worlds wasn't just Carrie Fisk in a shitty office on Medina Station anymore. It was a cathedral in the center of the capital city with a lobby bigger than a hangar bay and stained glass walls that seemed to rise up forever. The Transport Union's central authority was there too, in a lesser building with fewer amenities so that it was clear physically and socially who was in favor and who was on notice.

Holden watched it all from the State Building that was his home and his prison, and it left him thinking of living on an island.

Within the boundary of the city, Laconia was cleaner, newer, brighter, and more controlled than most space stations Holden had been on. Just outside it was wilderness like he'd only seen in storybooks. Ancient forests and alien ruins that would take generations to tame and explore. Holden had heard gossip and rumors about the remnant technologies brought to shambling life by the early work with the protomolecule: boring worms the size of spacecraft, doglike repair drones that made no distinction between mechanism and flesh, crystalline caves with piezoelectric effects that induced hallucinations of music and crippling vertigo. Even as the capital city became synonymous with humanity as a whole, the planet around it stayed alien. An island of the profoundly familiar in a sea of we-don't-understand-that-yet. In a way, it was reassuring that Duarte, for all his god-emperor reach, couldn't achieve everything in just a few decades.

In another way, it was terrifying.

The reception hall was grand, but not overblown. If Laconia had been built in Duarte's image, there was a weird thread of personal restraint in the high consul's soul. However grand the city was, however overwhelming his ambitions, Duarte's palatial compound and home wasn't gaudy or even

particularly ornate. The ballroom was all clean lines and a neutral palette that reached for elegance without being too concerned with what anyone thought. Couches and chairs were placed here and there where people could rearrange them. Young people in military uniform served glasses of wine and spiced tea. More than power, Duarte made everything that surrounded him seem born of confidence. It was a good trick, because even after Holden saw through it, it still worked.

Holden accepted a glass of wine from a young woman and strolled through the shifting crowd. A few of the people, he recognized instantly. Carrie Fisk of the Association of Worlds, holding court at a long table, with the governors of half a dozen colonies fighting to be the first one laughing at her jokes. Thorne Chao, the face of the most popular newsfeed coming out of Bara Gaon. Emil-Michelle Li in the flowing green dress that was her trademark when she wasn't in a movie. And for every face Holden could put a name to, there were a dozen more who looked vaguely familiar. He moved through the thin social fog of polite smiles and nods of recognition that fell short of actual engagement. He was here because Duarte wanted him seen here, but the Venn diagram of people eager to curry favor with the high consul but also willing to risk his displeasure by cozying up to the state's highest-profile prisoner didn't have much overlap.

But it did have some.

“I’m not drunk enough for this.”

Transport Union President Camina Drummer leaned against a standing table, her hands wrapped around a glass. Her face looked older in person.

He could see the lines around her eyes and mouth more clearly when there weren’t a camera, a screen, and several billion kilometers between them.

She shifted a degree, making room for him at the table, and he accepted the invitation.

“I’m not sure what drunk enough for this looks like,” he said. “Blackout drunk? Fighting drunk? Weeping-in-the-corner drunk?”

“You don’t seem even tipsy.”

“I’m not. I’m mostly off of alcohol these days.”

“Keeping your wits about you?”

“And it bothers my stomach.”

Drummer smiled and coughed out a laugh. “They’ve let the honored prisoner out among the people. Makes me think you’re not as useful to them anymore. Have they squeezed all the juice out of you?”

The way she said it, it could have been teasing between two old colleagues, fallen from power together and living in the twilight of political acceptability. Or it could have been something more. A way to ask if he’d

been forced to betray the underground on Medina yet. If they'd decided to break him. Drummer knew as well as he did who was listening, even here.

"I've been helping as much as I can with the alien threat issue.

Anything else he asks me about, all my answers would be yesterday's news anyway. And I assume I'm here now because Duarte thinks I'm useful to him here."

"Just part of the donkey show."

"Dog and pony," Holden said. Then, seeing her reaction. "The phrase is dog and pony show."

"Sure it is," she said.

"What about you? How's the dismantling of the Transport Union going?"

Drummer's eyes brightened and her smile widened. She answered in a perfect newsfeed-ready voice, crisp and warm and false as a carved acorn.

"I am very pleased with the smooth transition to fuller oversight by the Laconian authority and the Association of Worlds. Our focus is to keep all of the old practices that were working and streamline and integrate new procedures that will cut away the dead wood. We have been able to maintain and even increase the efficiency of trade without compromising the security that the greater destiny of humanity requires."

“That bad?”

“I shouldn’t bitch. It could be worse. As long as I’m a good little soldier and Duarte thinks I’ll be useful bringing Saba in from the cold, I won’t end up in a pen.”

A murmur rose from the main entrance, and a disturbance in the crowd. All through the ballroom, attention shifted like iron filings aligning to a magnet. Holden didn’t have to look to know that Winston Duarte had arrived, but he did anyway.

Duarte’s uniform was almost the same as Holden’s. He had the same affable calm that he seemed to carry everywhere. His security detail was more obvious than whatever surveillance was on Holden, though. Two thick-bodied guards with sidearms and eyes that flickered with implanted tech. Cortázar had arrived with him too, but stood apart with the air of a teenager pulled away from a game for family dinner. The actual teenager—Duarte’s daughter, Teresa—walked at her father’s side like a shadow.

Carrie Fisk scurried up to Duarte, her coterie of governors abandoned, and shook his hand. They talked for a moment before Fisk turned to Teresa and shook the girl’s hand too. A little crowd had started coalescing behind Fisk as people tried to be unobtrusive about jockeying for a position to meet the great man.

“Creepy son of a bitch, isn’t he?” Drummer said.

Holden grunted. He didn’t know what she was talking about. It might have been just the way everyone around him was so trained to obeisance.

That would have been enough. But maybe she saw something of what Holden did: the stuttering of his eyes, the pearlescent shadow under his skin. Holden had seen the protomolecule in action as much as anyone who wasn’t in Cortázar’s lab. That was probably why the side effects of Duarte’s treatments were more obvious to him.

He realized he was staring. More than that, he realized that everyone was staring, and he was being drawn along by the pressure of their attention. He looked back at Drummer, making the conscious effort to turn away. It was harder than he liked to admit.

He wanted to ask if there was news of the underground, whether Duarte’s reign seemed as inevitable out in the wide vacuum between the worlds as it did here in his home.

“Any news of the underground?” he asked.

“There are always going to be some malcontents,” she said, walking the line between innocuous and meaningful. “What about you? How is the famed Captain James Holden spending his days? Going to parties? Waving tiny fists in impotent rage?”

“Nope. Just plotting and waiting for my moment to strike,” Holden said.

They both grinned as if it had been a joke.

Chapter One: Elvi

The universe is always stranger than you think.

That had been the favorite phrase of a professor of Elvi’s back in her graduate study days. Professor Ehrlich, a grumpy old German with a long white beard who’d always made Elvi think of garden gnomes, repeated it every time someone was surprised by the results their lab test delivered. At the time, Elvi had found the catchphrase true to the point of triteness. Of course the universe had unexpected surprises.

Professor Ehrlich was almost certainly dead. He’d been at the edge of what anti-aging technology could achieve when Elvi was in her early twenties. She had a daughter older than that now. But if he’d still been alive, Elvi would have sent him a lengthy and heartfelt apology.

The universe wasn’t just stranger than you knew, it was stranger than you could know. Every new wonder, no matter how astonishing, just laid the foundation for an even more astounding discovery later. The universe and its constantly shifting definition of what was considered strange. The discovery of what everyone thought was alien life when the protomolecule was found on Phoebe had shaken people to their foundations, and was

somehow still less disturbing than the discovery that the protomolecule wasn't an alien so much as it was an alien's tool. Their version of a wrench, only a wrench that converted the entire asteroid station of Eros into a spaceship, hijacked Venus, created the ring gate, and gave sudden access to thirteen hundred worlds beyond.

The universe is always stranger than you think. God damn right, Professor.

“What,” her husband Fayez said, “is that?”

They were on the bridge of her ship, the *Falcon*. The ship that the Laconian Empire had given her. On the screen in front of them, a high-resolution image of what everyone was calling *the object* slowly filled in. It was a planetary body a little larger than Jupiter and nearly transparent, like an enormous crystal ball with a faintly greenish hue. The only structure in the Adro system.

“Passive spectrometry says almost entirely carbon,” Travon Barrish said, not even looking up from his work screen as the data scrolled by. He was the team's materials scientist, and the most literal person Elvi had ever met. Of course he gave Fayez the factual answer to his question. She knew that wasn't what her husband had been asking. He'd been asking, *Why is that?*

“It’s packed into a dense lattice,” Jen Lively, the team’s physicist, said.

“It . . .”

She trailed off, so Elvi finished for her. “It’s a diamond.”

When she was seven years old, Elvi Okoye had returned to Nigeria with her mother when her great-aunt, a woman Elvi had never met, died. As her mother worked to take care of funeral arrangements, Elvi wandered through her house. It became a game of sorts, seeing how much of a picture of the dead woman she could create by looking at the objects she’d left behind.

On a shelf next to the bed, a picture of a smiling young man with dark skin and pale eyes who could have been a husband, or a brother, or a son. In the tiny bathroom, among the scattered packages of cheap soaps and cleansers, one beautiful crystal bottle filled with mysterious green liquid. Perfume? Poison? Without having known the woman herself, all the objects she’d left behind were fantastic and compelling.

Many years later, while rinsing her mouth, the smell triggered a memory and she realized the green liquid in the bottle had almost certainly been mouthwash. One mystery solved, but new questions arose. Why had she put mouthwash in such a beautiful bottle instead of just leaving it in the recyclable container it came in? Where had the bottle come from originally? Had she used it as mouthwash, or was there some hidden function

mouthwash could perform that Elvi had never thought of? Without the dead woman to explain, it would forever remain a mystery. Some things could only ever be understood in context.

On the view screen, a single faintly green diamond with a machine-perfect smooth surface floating in a solar system with no other planets, orbiting one fading white dwarf star. A bottle of mouthwash in cut crystal, surrounded by cheap soap on a dirty bathroom counter. Fayez was right. The only question that mattered was *why*, but everyone who knew was dead. The only answer she had left was Professor Ehrlich's.

The *Falcon* had been specially designed at the request of High Consul Duarte specifically for her, and it had only one mission: to visit the gate network's "dead systems" and see if they held any clues about the nameless enemy that had destroyed the protomolecule builders' civilization or the weird nonphysical bullets that they—or it, or whatever pronoun you used for an extradimensional alocal antecedent—had left behind.

The *Falcon* had visited three of those systems so far. Every time it had been a wonder. Elvi didn't like the phrase *dead system*. People had started calling them that because they contained no planets capable of sustaining life. She found the classification annoying and simplistic. Yes, it wasn't possible for any life they understood to live on a Jupiter-sized diamond

floating around a white dwarf. But there was also no conceivable natural process that could account for such an artifact. Someone had made it. Engineering on a scale that was awesome in the classical sense of the word. Inspiring both wonder and dread in equal proportion. To write it off as *dead* because plants didn't grow on it felt like the dread winning out over the wonder.

"They swept up everything," Fayez said. He was flipping through telescope and radar images of the solar system. "There isn't even a cometary belt clear out to a light-year from the star. They grabbed every bit of material in this entire solar system, turned it into carbon, and mashed it into a fucking diamond."

"People used to give diamonds as gifts before proposing marriage," Jen said. "Maybe someone wanted to be sure the answer wasn't no."



Travon's head snapped up from his console, and he blinked at Jen for several seconds. His rigid literalism meant he was also chemically free of anything resembling a sense of humor, and Elvi had watched Jen's flippant irony put him into vapor lock more than once.

"I don't think—" Travon started, but Elvi cut him off.

"Stay focused on the job, people. We need to know everything about

this system before we bring the catalyst online and start breaking things.”

“Copy that, boss,” Fayez said, and gave her a wink no one else could see.

The rest of her team, the very best scientists and technicians from across the empire, handpicked and placed under her command by the high consul himself, turned back to their displays. In scientific matters related to their current mission, her orders had the full force of imperial law. No one on the team ever argued.

The caveat being, of course, that not everyone was on her team, and not everything was considered a scientific matter.

“You want to tell him that we’re pushing the rollout,” Fayez said, “or should I?”

She looked at the screen again with a kind of longing. There were probably structures in the diamond. Traces like pale ink in a dead script that could point them a little further toward the next mystery, the next revelation, the next unutterable strangeness. She didn’t want to tell anyone about anything. She wanted to *look*.

“I’ll take care of it,” Elvi said, and headed for the lift.

Admiral Mehmet Sagale was a mountain of a man with coal-black eyes in a dinner plate—flat face. As the military commander of their mission, he

mostly left the scientists alone. But when something fell into an area where his orders specified he was in charge, he was as implacable and immovable as his size suggested. And something about sitting in his spartan office always felt disciplinary. Like being sent to the headmaster for cheating on a



test. Elvi hated playing the role of supplicant to a military figurehead. But in the Laconian Empire, the military always sat at the top of the authority chart.

“Dr. Okoye,” Admiral Sagale said. He rubbed the bridge of his nose with the tips of sausage-sized fingers and gazed at her with the same mix of affection and patronizing annoyance she had once given her children when they were doing something stupid. “We are woefully behind schedule, as you know. My orders are to—”

“This system is incredible, Met,” she said. Using the nickname was a little aggression, but one he tolerated. “It’s too incredible to just throw away out of impatience. We need to spend time really studying this artifact before you trot out the catalyst and wait to see if something blows up!”

“*Major* Okoye,” Sagale replied, using her military title to not so subtly remind her of their relative positions in the chain of command. “As soon as your team finishes their preliminary data collection, we will bring out the

catalyst and see if this system has any military value, as per our orders.”

“Admiral,” Elvi said, knowing aggression would fail on him when he was in this mood and trying for a placating respect instead. “I just want a little more time. We can make up the schedule on our trip out. Duarte gave me the fastest science ship in human history so I could spend more time on the science and less on the travel. Exactly like I’m asking you to do now.”

Reminding Sagale that she had a direct line to the high consul, and that he valued her work enough to build her a ship for it. How was *that* for not so subtle.

Sagale was unmoved.

“You have twenty hours to finish gathering your data,” he said, folding his hands across his wide belly like a Buddha. “And not one minute more. Inform your team.”

“This sort of rigid thinking is *precisely* why it’s impossible to do good science under Laconian rule,” Elvi said. “I should be running a university biology department somewhere. I’m too old to be good at taking orders.”

“I agree,” Faye said. “But here we are.”

She and Faye were in her quarters to shower and catch a quick bite of food before Sagale and his storm troopers trotted out their live sample of protomolecule and risked destroying a billions-of-years-old artifact just to

see if it went boom in a useful manner. “If it won’t build them a better bomb, who cares if they break it!”

She whirled toward Fayeze as she said it, and he took a half step away from her. She realized she was still holding her dinner plate in one hand.

“I’m not going to throw it,” she said. “I don’t throw things.”

“You have,” he replied. He’d gotten older too. His once-black hair was almost totally gray now, and laugh lines spread out from the corners of his eyes. She didn’t mind. She liked that he smiled more than he frowned. He was smiling now. “Things have been thrown.”

“I never—” she started, wondering if he was actually afraid she’d throw a plate at him out of frustration or just teasing her to lighten the mood. Even after decades together, she sometimes couldn’t tell what went on in his head.

“Bermuda, just after Ricki left home for university, we took our first real vacation in years and you—”

“There was a roach. A roach crawled on my plate!”

“It nearly took my head off when you hurled it.”

“Well,” she said, “I was startled.”

She laughed. Fayeze was grinning like he’d won a prize. So, of course, making her laugh had been the goal all along. She put the plate down.

“Look, I know saluting and following orders isn’t exactly what we had in mind when we got our degrees,” Fayez said. “But this is the new reality as long as Laconia’s in control. So—”

It was her own fault, really, being swept up into the Science Directorate.

Laconia by and large left people alone. Planets elected their own governors and representatives to the Association of Worlds. They could establish their own laws, as long as they didn’t directly contravene imperial law. And unlike most dictatorships in history, Laconia seemed uninterested in restricting higher education. The universities of the galaxy functioned pretty much like they had before the takeover. Sometimes even a little better.

But Elvi had made the mistake of becoming humanity’s leading expert on the protomolecule, the vanished civilization that had created it, and the doom that had wiped it out. As a much younger woman, she’d been sent to Ilus as part of the first scientific mission to explore the biology of an alien world. Until then, her specialization in exobiology had been theoretical, mostly focusing on bathypelagic and deep-ice life that had seemed like good analogs for bacteria one might find under the surface of Europa.

They’d never found any bacteria on Europa, but the gate network opened, and suddenly exobiology was a real thing with more than thirteen hundred new biomes to explore. She’d gone to Ilus expecting to study lizard

analog, and instead run face-first into the artifacts of a galaxy-wide war older than her species. She'd become obsessed with understanding. Of course she had. A house the size of a galaxy, filled with rooms full of fascinating things, and the owners dead for millennia. She'd devoted the rest of her professional life to figuring them out. So when Winston Duarte invited her to lead a team to explore exactly that mystery, and gave her a bottomless grant to do it, she hadn't been able to say no.

At that point, she'd seen only the Laconia everyone was presented in the newsfeeds. Impossibly powerful, militarily unbeatable, but not interested in ethnic cleansing or genocide. Maybe even with humanity's best interests at heart. Taking their money to do science hadn't given her many qualms.

Especially since there also hadn't been many options. When the king says, *Come work for me*, there aren't many paths to *No*.

The qualms came later when she was inducted into their military and learned the source of Laconia's overwhelming technological advantage. When she met the catalysts.

"We should get back," Faye said as he finished clearing away the last of their dishes from dinner. "The clock is ticking."

"I will. In a minute," she replied, stepping back into the tiny private bathroom they shared. One of the privileges of her rank. In the mirror over



her sink, an old woman stared back at her. The woman's eyes were haunted by what she was about to do.

"You ready in there?" Fayeze shouted.

"You go ahead. I'll catch up."

"Jesus, Els, you're not going to go see it again, are you?"

It. The catalyst.

"It isn't your fault," Fayeze said. "You didn't design this study."

"I agreed to oversee it."

"Sweetheart. Darling. Light of my life. Whatever we call Laconia in public, when you take its clothes off, it's a dictatorship," Fayeze said. "We never had a choice."

"I know."

"So why do you do this to yourself?" Fayeze said.

She didn't answer, because she couldn't have explained it even if she wanted to.

"I'll catch up."

The catalyst holding area was in the heart of the *Falcon*, surrounded on all sides by thick layers of depleted uranium shielding and the galaxy's most complicated Faraday cage. It had become clear very quickly that the

protomolecule communicated at faster than light speed. Some application of quantum entanglement was the leading theory, but whatever the mechanism, the protomolecule defied locality, much like the ring gate system it had created. It had taken Cortázar and his team years to figure out how to keep a sample of the protomolecule from talking to itself, but they'd had decades and they'd eventually come up with a combination of materials and fields that tricked a node of protomolecule into locking itself off from the rest.

A node. It. The catalyst.

Two of Sagale's Marines guarded the door to its chamber. They wore heavy blue power armor that whined and clicked when they moved. Each was equipped with a flamethrower. Just in case.

"We're going to use the catalyst soon. I want to check on it," Elvi said to the space between the two guards. For all that she had a military title, she still often couldn't figure out who was the ranking officer in any given room. She lacked the indoctrination of boot camp, and the lifetime of practice the Laconians took for granted.

"Of course, Major," the one on the left said. She looked too young to be the senior officer, but that was so often true of the Laconians. Most of them looked too young for their titles. "Will you need an escort?"

“No,” Elvi said. *No, I always do this alone.*

The young Marine did something on the wrist of her armor, and the door behind her slid open. “Let us know when you’re ready to come out.”

The catalyst’s room was a cube, four meters on a side. It had no bed, no sink, no toilet. Just hard metal and mesh drains. Once a day, the room was flushed with solvent and the liquid was sucked away to be incinerated. The Laconians were obsessive about contamination protocols where the protomolecule was concerned.

The node, it, the catalyst, had once been a woman in her late fifties.

What her name had been and why she’d been selected for protomolecule infection was not in the official record Elvi had access to. But Elvi hadn’t been in their military for long before she found out about the Pen. The place where convicted criminals were sent to be deliberately infected, so that the empire would have a limitless supply of protomolecule to work with.

The catalyst was special, though. Through some work of Cortázar’s or through some accident of the woman’s genetics, she was only a carrier. She showed early signs of infection—changes to her skin and skeletal structure—but in the months since she’d been brought on board the *Falcon*, those changes hadn’t progressed at all. And she never entered what everyone called the “vomit zombie” phase, puking up material to try to spread the

infection.

Elvi knew that she was perfectly safe in the same room with the catalyst, but she shuddered every time she entered anyway.

The infected woman looked at her with blank eyes and moved her lips in a soundless whisper. She smelled mostly of the solvent bath she received every day, but under it was something else. A morgue stink of decaying flesh.

It was normal to sacrifice animals. Rats, pigeons, pigs. Dogs.

Chimpanzees. Biology had always suffered the cognitive push-pull of proving that humans were just another kind of animal while at the same time claiming to be morally different in kind. It was okay to kill a chimp in the name of science. It wasn't okay to kill a person.

Except, apparently, when it was.

Maybe the catalyst had agreed to this. Maybe it was this or some other, more gruesome death. Whatever that would be.

"I'm sorry," Elvi said to her, as she did every time she came into the catalyst chamber. "I'm so sorry, I didn't know that they did this. I would never have agreed to it."

The woman's head lolled on her neck, nodding forward as if in mock agreement.

“I won’t forget that they did this to you. If I can ever make this right, I will.”

The woman pushed at the floor with her hands as though she wanted to stand up, but her arms lacked the strength, and her hands flopped bonelessly. It was just reflexes. That’s what she told herself. Instinct. The woman’s brain was gone, or at least changed into something that wasn’t by any sane definition a brain. There wasn’t anyone really alive in that skin. Not anymore.

But there had been once.

Elvi wiped her eyes. The universe was always stranger than you expected. Sometimes it was full of wonders. Sometimes full of horrors.

“I won’t forget.”

Chapter Two: Naomi

Naomi missed the *Rocinante*, but then she missed a lot of things these days.

Her old ship and home was still parked on Freehold. Before they’d left, she and Alex had found a cavern system on the edge of Freehold’s southernmost continent with a mouth big enough to edge the ship into. They’d put it down in a dry tunnel and spent a week running seals and storage tarps that would keep the local flora and fauna out. Whenever they

got back to the *Roci*, it would be there, ready and waiting. If they never did, it would be there for centuries. Still waiting.

Sometimes, on the edge of sleep, she'd take herself through it. She still knew every centimeter from the top of the cockpit to the curve of the drive cone. She could think her way through it on the float or under thrust. She'd heard about ancient scholars back on Earth making palaces of memory that way. Imagine Alex in the cockpit, holding an hourglass for time. Then down to the flight deck, where Amos and Clarissa were tossing a golgo ball with the numeral 2 painted on it back and forth for initial and final velocities divided by two. Then down to her cabin, and Jim. Jim by himself. Jim who meant displacement. A simple kinematic equation, three things that were all the same, easy to remember because they all stung her heart. That was one reason she'd agreed to the shell-game plan when Saba and the underground had reached out to her. Memories were like ghosts, and as long as Jim and Amos were gone, the *Roci* would always be a little bit haunted.

And it wasn't only Jim, though he had been the first. Naomi had also lost Clarissa, who would have died from the slow poisons in her implants if she hadn't chosen to die by violence. Amos had taken a high-risk mission from the underground, deep in enemy territory, and then gone silent,

missing pickup window after pickup window until they all stopped expecting to hear from him again. Even Bobbie, healthy and well, but in the captain's seat of her own ship now. They were all lost to her, but Jim was the worst.

Freehold, on the other hand, she didn't miss at all. The experience of being under a vast and empty sky had its charm for a while, but the unease lasted longer than the novelty. If she was going to live as a fugitive and outlaw, she could at least do it in something where the air was held in by something visible. Her new quarters—spare and terrible as they were—at least had that going for them.

From the outside, her bunk looked like a standard cargo container made to transport a low-yield planetary fusion reactor. It was the kind colonists in the thirteen hundred new systems would use to power a small city or a medium-sized mining station. With its actual cargo gone, there was enough room for a gimbaled crash couch, an emergency support recycler, a water supply, and half a dozen modified short-burn torpedoes. The crash couch was her bed and her workbench. The support recycler was her power and food and her waste disposal. The kind of thing that would keep the crew of a stranded ship alive for weeks, but not in anything like comfort. The water supply was for drinking, but also part of the stealth, connected to small

evaporation panels on the exterior of the container to bleed off her waste heat.

And the torpedoes were how she spoke to the larger world.

Except not today. Today she was going to see actual people. Breathe their air, touch their skin. Hear their living voices. She wasn't sure if she was excited about that, or if the energy stirring in her belly was foreboding. The one could seem so much like the other.

“Permission to open?” she said, and the crash couch’s monitor hesitated, sent the message, and then a few breaths later came back with CONFIRMED.

DEPARTURE AT 18:45 STANDARD. DON’T BE LATE.

Naomi unstrapped herself from the couch and pushed to the inner door of the container, securing the helmet on her suit as she went. When the suit showed solid seals, she double-checked them anyway, then cycled the air in the container into her emergency recycler, bringing the interior down to near vacuum. When the pressure reached the efficiency limit of the unit and stopped dropping, she popped the container doors and pulled herself out into the vastness of the cargo hold.

The *Verity Close* was a converted ice hauler acting as a long-haul shipping vessel for the colonies. The hold around her was as wide as the Freehold sky, or it felt that way. The *Rocinante* and eleven more like her

could have fit in it and not touched the sides. Instead, thousands of containers like Naomi's were locked into place and ready to be hauled out from Sol to any of the new cities and stations that humanity was building. Taming the new wilderness of planets that didn't know humanity's genetic codes or tree of life. And most of the containers were what they claimed—soil, industrial yeast incubators, bacterial libraries.

And then, like hers, a few were something else.

This was the shell game.

She didn't know if Saba had come up with the idea, or if his wife, the figurehead president of the Transport Union, had found some covert way to tell him. With Medina Station and the slow zone firmly under Laconian control, the greatest obstacle the underground faced was moving ships and personnel from one system to another. Even something as small as the *Roci* couldn't hope to pass by Medina's sensor arrays unnoticed. Traffic control through the gate network was too important to ever let that happen.

But as long as the Transport Union was still in charge of its own ships, the records could be forged. Cargo containers like hers could be moved from ship to ship, making it difficult if not impossible to track her communications—or Saba's or Wilhelm Walker's or any of the other organizing heads of the underground—to any one vessel.

Or, if the reward seemed to justify the terrible risk, something larger could be smuggled. Something dangerous. Something like the captured warship *Gathering Storm* could be snuck into Sol system. And with it, Bobbie Draper and Alex Kamal, who she hadn't seen in over a year. And who, right now, were waiting for her at a private rendezvous.

She launched herself along the row of containers, skimming past them with accuracy born of a lifetime's practice. The guide lights blinked at the containers' edges, marking the ever-changing maze of access and control and leading her toward the crew hatch. The actual crew space was probably smaller than the *Rocinante*'s. Her secret cargo container, as spacious as the crew cabins.

She didn't know the crew of the ship that had carried her for the last months. Most of them weren't aware she was there. Saba arranged things that way. The fewer people knew, the less they could say. The old Belter term for it was *guerraregle*. War rules. It was how she'd lived as a girl, back in the bad old days. It was how she lived now.

She found the airlock into the ship and cycled through. Her contact was waiting for her. She was a young woman, not more than twenty years old, with pale skin and wide-set dark eyes. Her shaved head was probably meant to make her look tough, but it just reminded Naomi of baby fuzz. Her name

might not have been Blanca, but that was how Naomi knew her.

“You’re clear for twenty minutes, ma’am,” Blanca said. She had a good voice. Musical and clean. A Martian accent that reminded Naomi of Alex.

“After that, I’m off shift. I can stay around, but I can’t keep the next guy from coming on.”

“More than enough,” Naomi said. “I just need to get to the habitation ring.”

“Not a problem. We’re going to be transferring your container to the *Mosley* in berth sixteen-ten. It’s going to take a few hours, but the work order’s already been approved.”

The pea slipping into a different shell. By the time Naomi was ready to send out her next set of orders and analysis, the *Verity Close* would be past the Sol gate and off toward some other system. And Naomi would be in her same little hole, sleeping on her same little couch, but traveling with a different ship. Blanca would be replaced by her new contact waiting for her



at the docks. Naomi had lost track of how many times she’d done this. It was almost routine.

“Thank you,” she said, and started to pull herself through toward the dockside airlock.

“It’s been an honor, ma’am,” Blanca said, spitting the words out quickly. “Meeting you, I mean. Meeting Naomi Nagata.”

“Thank you for everything you’ve done for me. I appreciate it more than I can say.”

Blanca braced. It felt like theater, but Naomi saluted the girl all the same. It meant something to the girl, and for Naomi to treat it with anything less than equal seriousness would have been rude. Worse, it would have been cruel.

Then she pulled herself into the cramped green corridor of the *Verity Close* and left Blanca behind. She didn’t expect ever to see her again.

Deep Transfer Station Three lived between the orbit of Saturn and Uranus, locked in position with the Sol gate. Its architecture was familiar: a large spherical dock capable of accepting several dozen ships at maximum capacity and a habitation ring spinning at one-third g. It was both a critical central hub for traffic in and out of Sol system and a glorified warehouse complex. Ships from across the system brought cargo here ready to send out to the colony worlds or came to pick up incoming packages. At any given time, there were probably more alien artifacts on the transfer station than anyplace else in the system.

All told, the station could hold twenty thousand people, though the

traffic rarely if ever demanded full capacity. A permanent staff and the crews of whatever ships came and went, along with contractors to run the hospitals, bars, brothels, churches, stores, and restaurants that seemed to follow humanity everywhere it went. It was a base where crews from across the system and from the other systems on the far sides of the rings could get away from each other for a few days, see unfamiliar faces, hear voices they hadn't lived with for months, climb into bed with someone who didn't feel like family. It created a constant fraternization that had led to the station's ring getting the unofficial name "Paternity Row."

Naomi liked the place. There was something reassuring in the stability of human behavior. Alien civilizations and galactic empire, war and resistance: They were there. But also drinking and karaoke. Sex and babies. She walked through the public corridor of the habitation ring with her head bowed. The underground had a false identification for her in the station system so that her biometrics wouldn't raise an alarm, but she kept from making herself too obvious all the same in case a human might recognize her.

The rendezvous was a restaurant in the lowest and outermost level of the ring. She'd expected to be ushered into a storeroom or freezer, but the man at the door led her back to a private dining room. Even before she

stepped though the doorway, she knew they were there.

Bobbie saw her first and stood up, grinning. She wore a nondescript flight suit without identifying tags or patches, but she wore it like a uniform. Alex, rising with her, had an older cut. He'd lost weight, and his remaining hair was trimmed close. He could have been an accountant or a general. Without words, they stepped into each other, arms raised. A three-way embrace with Naomi's head on Alex's shoulder, Bobbie's cheek against hers. The warmth of their bodies was more comforting than she wanted it to be.

"Oh, God dammit," Bobbie said, "but it is good to see you again."

The embrace broke, and they moved to the table. A bottle of whiskey and three glasses waited, a clear and unmistakable sign of bad news to come. A toast to be made, a memory to be honored, another loss to carry. Naomi asked her question with a glance.

"You heard about Avasarala," Alex said.

The relief came in a little rush followed by chagrin at feeling relief. It was only that Avasarala had died. "I did."

Bobbie poured out shots for each of them, then raised one. "She was a hell of woman. We won't see her like again."

They touched glasses, and Naomi drank. Losing the old woman was

hard—harder for Bobbie, probably, than any of the rest of them. But they weren't mourning Amos yet. Or Jim.

“So,” Bobbie said, putting down her glass, “how's life as the secret general of the resistance?”

“I prefer ‘secret diplomat,’ ” Naomi said. “And it's underwhelming.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Alex said. “Can't talk without food. It's not family unless there's a meal.”

The restaurant did a good Belt/Mars fusion menu. Something called white kibble that was related to the real thing, but with fresh vegetables and bean sprouts. Rounds of vat-grown beef-pork hybrid cooked in the shape of a Petri dish and touched with a sweet hot sauce. They leaned on the table here the way they had on the *Rocinante* in their previous incarnations.

Naomi hadn't realized how much she missed Bobbie's laugh or Alex's way of sneaking another small helping onto her plate when she was almost finished eating. The little intimacies of living in close quarters with someone for decades. And then not living there anymore. It might have made her sad if it weren't for the pleasure of being there in the moment with the two of them.

“The *Storm*'s crewed up pretty well,” Bobbie was saying. “I was worried for a while that it would be straight Belters. I mean, that's where

Saba's bench is the deepest. Two Martian vets running a crew full of folks who still call us inners?"

"Could have been a problem," Naomi agreed.

"Saba pulled a whole sheet of UNN and MCRN vets," Alex said.

"Young ones too. Weird being around people who were the age I was when I mustered out. They look like babies, you know? All fresh-faced and serious."

Naomi laughed. "I know. Anyone under forty looks like a child to me now."

"They're good," Bobbie said. "I've been running drills and simulations the whole time we've been parked."

"There've been a couple fights," Alex said.

"It's just nerves," Bobbie said. "When this mission's done, that shit will evaporate."

Naomi took another bite of white kibble so that she wouldn't frown. It didn't work, though. Alex cleared his throat and spoke in his changing-the-subject voice. "I'm guessing there's still no word from the big guy?"

Two years before, Saba had found a chance to slip an operative onto Laconia itself with a pocket nuke and an encrypted recall-and-retrieve transmitter. A long-odds mission to get Jim back, or destroy Laconia's rule

by cutting off its head. Saba had asked Naomi who she would trust with something that important. That dangerous. When Amos heard about it, he'd packed his bags in the same hour. Since then, Laconia had built new defenses. The underground had lost most of its presence in Laconia system, and Amos had gone silent.

Naomi shook her head. "Not yet."

"Yeah, well," Alex said. "Soon, probably."

"Probably," Naomi agreed, the same way she did every time they had this conversation.

"You two want any coffee?" Alex asked. Bobbie shook her head at the same time Naomi said *Not for me*, and Alex popped up. "I'll go settle up, then."

When the door closed behind him, Naomi leaned forward. She wanted to leave the moment where it was—a reunion with family. A bright spot in the darkness. She wanted to, and she couldn't.

"A mission with the *Storm* in Sol system is a hell of a risk," she said.

"It stands a real chance of getting some attention," Bobbie agreed, not making eye contact. Her tone was light, but there was a warning in it. "It's not just me, you know."

"Saba."

“And others.”

“I keep thinking about Avasarala,” Naomi said. There was still some whiskey in the bottle, and she poured herself a finger. “She was a hell of a fighter. Never backed down from anything, even when she lost.”

“She was one of a kind,” Bobbie agreed.

“She was a fighter, but she wasn’t a warrior. She was always leading the struggle, but she did it by finding other ways to get the work done.

Alliances, political pressure, trade, logistics. Her strategy was always that violence came last.”

“She had leverage,” Bobbie said. “She ran a planet. We’re a bunch of rats looking for cracks in the concrete. We’re going to do things differently.”

“We have leverage,” Naomi said. “And more than that, we can cultivate leverage.”

Bobbie put down her fork very carefully. The darkness in her eyes wasn’t anger. Or it wasn’t just anger, anyway. “Laconia is a military dictatorship. If you want anyone to stand against Duarte, we have to show people that he can be stood against. Military action is what shows people that there’s hope. You’re a Belter, Naomi. You know this.”

“I know that it doesn’t work,” Naomi said. “The Belt fought for