



"THERE ARE FEW WHO WRITE SCIENCE FICTION LIKE ANN LECKIE CAN.
THERE ARE FEW WHO EVER COULD." —JOHN SCALZI

TRANSLATION STATE

ANN LECKIE

WINNER OF THE HUGO, NEBULA, AND ARTHUR C. CLARKE AWARDS





TRANSLATION STATE



ANN LECKIE



orbitbooks.net

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2023 by Ann Leckie

Cover design by Lauren Panepinto

Cover images by Shutterstock

Cover copyright © 2023 by Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Orbit

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas

New York, NY 10104

orbitbooks.net

First Edition: June 2023

Simultaneously published in Great Britain by Orbit

Orbit is an imprint of Hachette Book Group.

The Orbit name and logo are trademarks of Little, Brown Book Group Limited.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

The Hachette Speakers Bureau provides a wide range of authors for speaking events. To find out more, go to hachettespeakersbureau.com or

email HachetteSpeakers@hbgusa.com.

Orbit books may be purchased in bulk for business, educational, or promotional use. For information, please contact your local bookseller or the Hachette Book Group Special Markets Department at special.markets@hbgusa.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Leckie, Ann, author.

Title: Translation state / Ann Leckie.

Description: First edition. | New York : Orbit, 2023.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022045277 | ISBN 9780316289719 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780316290241 (ebook)

Classification: LCC PS3612.E3353 T73 2023 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022045277>

ISBNs: 9780316289719 (hardcover), 9780316290241 (ebook), 9780316568173 (signed edition), 9780316568227 (BarnesAndNoble.com signed edition)

E3-20230401-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Enae](#)

[Reet](#)

[Qven](#)

[Enae](#)

[Reet](#)

[Qven](#)

[Enae](#)

[Reet](#)

[Qven](#)

[Enae](#)

[Reet](#)

[Qven](#)

[Enae](#)

[Reet](#)

[Qven](#)

[Enae](#)

[Reet](#)

[Qven](#)

[Enae](#)

[Reet](#)

[Qven](#)

[Enae](#)

[Reet](#)

[Qven](#)

[Enae](#)

[Reet](#)

[Qven](#)

[Enae](#)

[Reet](#)

[Qven](#)

[Enae](#)

[Reet](#)

[Qven](#)

[Enae](#)

[Reet](#)

[Qven](#)

[Enae](#)

[Reet](#)

[Qven](#)

[Enae](#)

[Reet](#)

[Qven](#)

[Enae](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Discover More](#)

[Also by Ann Leckie](#)

Explore book giveaways, sneak peeks, deals, and more.

[Tap here to learn more.](#)



Enae

Athtur House, Saeniss Polity

The last stragglers in the funeral procession were barely out the ghost door before the mason bots unfolded their long legs and reached for the pile of stones they'd removed from the wall so painstakingly the day before. Enae hadn't looked back to see the door being sealed up, but sie could hear it for just a moment before the first of Aunt Irad's moans of grief rose into a wail. One or two cousins heaved an experimental sob.

Enae hadn't cried when Grandmaman died. Sie hadn't cried when Grandmaman told hir she'd chosen the time to go. Sie wasn't crying now. Which wasn't necessarily a problem, everyone knew what expressions you should have when you were following the bier to the crematory, everyone knew what sounds a close relative made, and Enae could sob and wail if sie'd wanted to. And after all, among all these aunts and uncles and nuncles and cousins, Enae was the one who'd lived with Grandmaman for decades, and taken care of her in her old age. Sie had been the one to arrange things in the household these past ten years or more, to deal with the servants—human and bot—with their very different needs. Sie still had all the household codes and bot overrides, and the servants still looked to hir for orders, at least until Grandmaman's will was unsealed. Sie had every right to walk at the head of the procession, right behind Grandmaman, wailing for all the town to hear, in these quiet early morning hours. Instead sie walked silent and dry-eyed at the back.

Grandmaman had been very old, and ill-tempered. She had also been very rich, and born into one of the oldest families in the system. Which meant that the procession to the crematory was longer than one might have expected. There had been some jostling in the entry hall, by the ghost door, Aunt Irad turning up a half hour early to position herself at the front, some cousins attempting to push her out of her place, and everyone eying Enae to see how sie'd react.

None of them had lived in the house for decades. Grandmaman had thrown most of them—or their parents—out. Every year she would hold a birthday dinner and invite them all back for a lavish meal, during which she would insult them to their faces while they smiled and gritted their teeth. Then she'd order them off the premises again, to wait until the next year. Some of them had fallen away in that time, sworn off Grandmaman and any hope of inheritance, but most of them came back year after year. It was only Enae who had actually lived in the house with Grandmaman, Enae who, one might think, would be the most affected by Grandmaman's death.

But for the past week Enae had let the aunts and uncles and nuncles and cousins do whatever they'd wanted, so long as it didn't trouble the household unduly. Sie'd stood silent as Aunt Irad had changed the cook's menus and stood silent when the same aunt had raged at Enae because sie'd told the cook to disregard any changes he didn't have resources for. Sie had done and said nothing when, the very first day of the funeral week, an actual fistfight had broken out between two cousins over who would have which bedroom. Sie had remained silent when sie had heard one uncle say to a nuncle, *And look at hir, fifty-six years old and sitting at home sucking up to Grandmaman*, and the nuncle reply, *Well look at hir father's family, it's hardly a surprise*. Sie had walked on past when one cousin had surreptitiously slid a small silver dish into his pocket, while another loudly declared that she would be making some changes if she were so fortunate as to inherit the house. And in the meantime, sie had made sure that meals arrived on time and the house was kept in order. That had been the trick, all these years, of living with Grandmaman—keep calm, keep quiet, keep things running smoothly.

Grandmaman had told Enae many times that sie was her only remaining heir. But she had also said—many times—that Enae was an embarrassment. A failure. As far as the Athturs had fallen since Grandmaman's days—look at all those grandchildren and great-grandchildren and nephews and nieces and nibblings of whatever degree abasing themselves to win her favor in the desperate hope that she'd leave them something in her will—as pathetic as they were, Enae was worse. Nearly sixty and no career, no friends, no lovers, no marital partners, no children. What had sie done with hir life? Nothing.

Enae had kept calm, had not said that when sie had had friends they had not been good enough for Grandmaman. That when sie had shown any

sign of wanting to do something that might take hir out of the house, Grandmaman had forbidden it.

Keep calm, keep quiet, keep things running smoothly.

At the crematory, Grandmaman's corpse slid into the flames, and the funeral priest sang the farewell chants. Aunt Irad and three different cousins stepped forward to thank him for officiating and to suggest that they might donate money for future prayers for the Blessed Deceased. Enae could feel everyone else glancing toward hir, yet again, to see hir reaction to others acting as though they were the head of the family, the chief mourner, the now-Matriarch (or Patriarch or Natriarch, as the case may be) of the ancient family of Athtur.

"Well," said Aunt Irad, finished with her loud and obvious consultation with the funeral priest, "I've ordered coffee and sandwiches to be set out in the Peony Room." And marched back toward the house, not even looking to see if anyone followed her.

Back at the house, there was no coffee and sandwiches in the Peony Room. Aunt Irad turned immediately to Enae, who shrugged as though it wasn't any of hir business. It wasn't anymore—technically, Grandmaman's will would have taken effect the moment her body slid into the flames, but the habit of ordering the household died hard. With a quick blink sie sent a query to the kitchen.

No reply. And then someone dressed as a servant, but who Enae had never, ever seen before, came into the Peony Room and coolly informed them all that refreshments had in fact been set out in the Blue Sitting Room and their collective presence was requested there, and then turned and walked away, ignoring Aunt Irad's protests.

In the Blue Sitting Room, another complete stranger sat in one of the damask-upholstered armchairs, drinking coffee: a lanky, fair-skinned woman who smiled at all of them as they came in and stopped and stared. "Good morning. I'm so sorry for your loss."

"Who the hell are you?" asked Aunt Irad, indignant.

"A few minutes ago, I was Zemil Igoeto," said the woman as she set her coffee down on a mother-of-pearl inlaid side table. "But when the Blessed Deceased ascended, I became Zemil Athtur." Silence. "I don't believe in drawing things out. I will be direct. None of you have inherited anything. There wasn't anything to inherit. I have owned all of this"—she gestured around her, taking in the Blue Sitting Room and presumably the

whole house—“for some years.”

“That can’t be right,” said Aunt Irad. “Is this some kind of joke?”

Grandmaman would have thought it a joke, thought Enae. *She must have laughed to herself even as she was dying, to think of the looks on everyone’s faces right now.* Everything had seemed distant and strange since Grandmaman had died, but now Enae had the feeling that sie wasn’t really here, that sie was watching some sort of play or entertainment that sie wasn’t terribly interested in.

“Fifteen years ago,” said Zemil Igoeto—no, Zemil Athtur—“the Blessed Deceased found herself completely broke. At the same time, while I had plenty of funds, I wanted some way to gain access to the sort of influence that is only available to the oldest families. She and I came to an agreement and made it legally binding. In, I need not tell you, the presence of authorized witnesses. I would purchase everything she owned. The sum would be sufficient to support her in excellent style for the rest of her life, and she would have the use of all the properties that had formerly been hers. In return, on her ascension to the Realm of the Blessed Dead, I would become her daughter and sole heir.”

Silence. Enae wasn’t sure if sie wanted to laugh or not, but the fact was, Grandmaman would *very* much have enjoyed this moment if she could have been here. It was just like her to have done this. And how could Enae complain? Sie’d lived here for years in, as Ms Zemil Athtur had just said, excellent style. Enae couldn’t possibly have any complaints.

“This is ridiculous,” said Aunt Irad. She looked at Enae. “Is this one of the Blessed Deceased’s jokes? Or is it yours?”

“Mx Athtur has nothing to do with any of this,” cut in Zemil. “Sie had no idea until this moment. Only I, the Blessed Deceased’s jurist, and the Blessed Deceased herself knew anything about it. Apart from the witnesses involved, of course, whom you are free to consult as confirmation.”

“So we get *nothing*,” said the cousin who had declared her intention to make changes once she’d inherited.

“Correct,” said Zemil Athtur, picking up her coffee again. She took a sip. “The Blessed Deceased wanted to be sure I told you that you’re all selfish and greedy, and she wishes she could be here to see you when you learn you’ve been cut off with nothing. With one exception.”

Everyone turned to look at Enae.

Zemil continued, “I am to provide for Mx Enae Athtur, with certain

stipulations and restrictions, which I will discuss with hir later.”

“The will,” said a cousin. “I want to see the will. I want to see the documents involved. I’ll be speaking with my jurist.”

“Do, by all means,” said Zemil, and Enae felt the itch of a message arriving. Sie looked, and saw a list of files. Documents. Contracts. Contact information for the Office of Witnesses. “In the meantime, do sit and have a sandwich while the servants finish packing your things.”

It took some time, and a half dozen looming servants (who, once again, Enae had never seen before), but eventually the aunts and uncles and nuncles and cousins had left the house, picked their luggage up off the drive, and gone elsewhere, threatening lawsuits all the while.

Enae had remained in the Blue Sitting Room, unwilling to go up to hir room to see if hir things were still there or not. Sie sat, more or less relaxed, in a damask-upholstered armchair. Sie badly wanted a cup of coffee, and maybe a sandwich, but sie found sie couldn’t bring himself to get up from the chair. The whole world seemed unreal and uncertain, and sie wasn’t sure what would happen if sie moved too much. Zemil, too, stayed sitting in her damasked chair, drinking coffee and smiling.

At some point, after the house had quieted, Grandmaman’s jurist arrived. “Ah, Mx Athtur. I’m so sorry for your loss. I know you loved your grandmother very much, and spent your life attending to her. You should be allowed to take some time to yourself right now, and grieve.” He didn’t overtly direct this to Zemil, sitting in the armchair across from Enae, but his words seemed intended for her. Then he did turn to her and nodded in greeting. “Ms Athtur.”

“I am fully aware,” said Zemil, with a faint smile, “that I’m tasked with providing for Mx Athtur, and I will.”

“I would like some time to read the relevant documents, please,” said Enae, as politely as sie could, and braced herself to argue with an angry refusal.

“Of course,” said the jurist, “and I’ll be happy to go through them with you if you need.”

Enae, at a loss for some reason, said, “Thank you.”

“You’ll see, when you read it,” said Zemil, “that I am obligated to provide for you, as I said. How I am to provide for you is up to me, within certain parameters. I have had years to consider what that might mean, for both of us.”

“Your provisions will meet the requirements of the will,” said the jurist, sharply. “I will be certain of it.”

“I don’t understand.” Enae suppressed a sudden, unexpected welling of tears. “I don’t understand how this happened.” And then, realizing how that might sound, “I didn’t expect to inherit anything. Gr... the Blessed Deceased always said she would leave her houses and money to whoever she wanted.” *Watch them gather around my corpse when I’m gone*, she’d said, with relish. *Ungrateful, disloyal while I lived, but watch them come the moment they think they might get something from me.* And she’d patted Enae’s hand and made the tiny huff that was her laughter, near the end.

“As I said,” said Zemil, “the Blessed Deceased was facing bankruptcy. Her income had declined, and she had refused to alter her way of living. It took several years to negotiate—our ancestor was stubborn, as I’m sure you know—but ultimately she had no choice if she was to continue living here, in the way she was accustomed to.”

Enae didn’t know what to say. Sie hardly even knew how to breathe, in this moment.

“I wanted the name,” said Zemil. “I have wealth, and some influence. But I’m a newcomer to wealth and influence, at least according to the oldest families. An interloper. Our ancestor made sure to tell me so, on several occasions. But no longer. Now I am an Athtur. And now the Athturs are wealthy again.”

Another unfamiliar servant came in, to clear the food and the coffee away. Enae hadn’t eaten anything. Sie could feel the hollow in hir stomach, but sie couldn’t bring hirself to take a sandwich now, knew sie wouldn’t be able to eat it if sie did. Grandmaman’s jurist waved the servant over, muttered in her ear. The servant made a plate with two small sandwiches, poured a cup of coffee, handed both to Enae, and then took the rest and left the room.

“Have you dismissed the servants?” Enae asked. Sie’d meant to sound casual, curious, but hir tone came out rough and resentful.

“You are no longer the housekeeper here, Mx Athtur,” Zemil replied.

“I was until this morning, and if I’d known people were going to lose their jobs I’d have done what I could for them. They’ve worked for us a long time.”

“You think I’m cruel,” said Zemil. “Heartless. But I am only direct. No servants have been dismissed. None will be who perform their jobs well. Does that satisfy you?”

“Yes.”

“I will do you no favors,” Zemil continued, “leaving you in any misapprehension or uncertainty. As I said, what I wanted in this transaction was the Athtur name. There will be some reluctance on the part of the other old families to accept my legitimacy, and that will be made more difficult if you are here as an example of a true Athtur, one who so loyally cared for hir Grandmaman for so long, and rightfully ought to have inherited—in contrast with my false, purchased hold on the name. But I am also obligated to support you. Understand, I bear you no ill will, and I have no objection to providing for you, but I need you gone. I have, therefore, found employment for you.”

“Ms Athtur...” the jurist began, reproachfully.

Zemil raised a forestalling hand. “You may stay here for another month, to complete the time of mourning. And then you will take a position with the Office of Diplomacy. Your assignment is already arranged. You will find it congenial, I assure you.”

“You could just leave me my allowance,” said Enae. “I could move out.”

“Would you?” asked Zemil. “Where would you go?”

“I have a month to figure that out,” sie replied, not sure sie had understood anything anyone had said for the past five minutes, not even sure what sie, herself, was saying.

“Let me tell you what your position would be in the Office of Diplomacy. You have been appointed Special Investigator, and a case has been assigned to you. It is a situation of great diplomatic delicacy. Perhaps we should discuss this in private.” She glanced at the jurist.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said, and crossed his arms very decidedly.

“You don’t work for Mx Athtur,” Zemil pointed out.

“No,” he acknowledged. “In this matter, I represent the interests of the Blessed Deceased. And consequently, I will be certain that her grandchild is appropriately cared for.”

“If she were here...” began Zemil.

“But she’s *not* here,” said the jurist. “We have only her expressed desire, and your agreement to that.”

Zemil made an expression as though she’d bitten into something sour. “All right then. Enae, you’ve been assigned...”

“Mx Athtur,” said Enae, hardly believing it had come out of her mouth.

To Enae's shock, Zemil smiled. "Mx Athtur. You've been assigned, as I've said, to a matter of some delicacy. Some years ago, the Radchaai Translators Office approached the Office of Diplomacy to request our help in tracking down a fugitive."

Radchaai! The Radch was an enormous, multisystem empire, far enough away that no one here in Saeniss Polity felt immediately threatened by them—especially now, with the Radchaai embroiled in their own internal struggles—but close enough and powerful enough that Radchaai was one of the languages the well educated often elected to study. The Translators Office was the Radchaai diplomatic service. Enae felt the itch of files arriving. "I've sent you the details," said Zemil.

Enae blinked the message open, read the opening summary. "This incident happened two hundred years ago!"

"Yes," Zemil agreed. "The Office of Diplomacy assigned an investigator when the request first came in, who decided the fugitive wasn't here in Saeniss Polity or even anywhere in this system, and what with one thing and another the matter was dropped."

"But... how am I supposed to find someone who's been missing for two hundred years?"

Zemil shrugged. "I haven't the least idea. But I rather imagine it will involve travel, and a per diem on top of your wages. On top of your existing allowance, which I have no plans to discontinue. Indeed, the Blessed Deceased was quite miserly in the matter of your allowance, and I believe I'll be increasing it." She turned to the jurist. "There, are you satisfied?" The jurist made a noncommittal noise, and Zemil turned back to Enae. "Honestly, no one cares if you find this person or not. No one expects you to find anything at all. You're being paid to travel, and maybe look into an old puzzle if you feel like it. Haven't you ever wanted to leave here?"

Sie had always wanted to leave here.

Sie couldn't think. Not right now. "I've just lost my grandmother," sie said, tears welling again, sie didn't know from where. "And I've had a terrible shock. I'm going to my room. If..." Sie looked Zemil directly in the eyes. "If it still is my room?"

"Of course," said Zemil.

Enae hadn't expected that easy acquiescence. Grandmaman would never have tolerated her acting all high-and-mighty like this. But what else was sie supposed to do? Grandmaman wasn't here anymore. Sie blinked,

took a breath. Another. “If your people would be so kind as to bring me lunch and coffee there.” Ridiculous, sie was still holding the sandwiches the servant had handed to hir, but sie couldn’t even imagine eating them. Not these sandwiches, not here, not now. “And I’ll have supper in my room as well.”

“They’ll be happy to help you any way you wish, as long as you’re here,” said Zemil.

Enae rose. Set hir untouched food back onto the sideboard. Sie turned and nodded to the jurist. “Thank you. I... thank you.”

“Call me if you need me,” he said.

Sie turned to Zemil, but found sie had no words to say, and so sie just fled to hir own room.

Reet

Rurusk Station, Sovereign Territory of Zeosen

There were any number of people on Rurusk Station whose work could be done at whatever hour seemed best to them, so long as the work was done in a reasonable time. Reet was not one of them.

The private consultant he was meeting with presumably *was* one of them, but he had been inflexible enough that Reet had been tempted to refuse to meet at all. There was, after all, very little a consultant of any sort could have to say to him that could not be conveyed just as well by a text or voice message. But when Reet had begun to suggest so, the consultant had insisted. The meeting must be in person, and it must occur. Intrigued despite himself, Reet had agreed to the least ridiculously impossible time.

And now he stood here, in this... this facility, which had looked like nothing remarkable at the entrance (aside from an actual human keeping the door, instead of a bot, or people just coming and going freely as they did in most other places) but had turned out to be some sort of private lounge, filled with low tables and thick padded chairs and benches. And waiters, quiet and discreet, bringing food and drinks to the people sitting there talking quietly. Human waiters, not mechs or bots. Just like the guard at the door.

“You’re late,” said the consultant, when Reet presented himself. He lounged in one of the chairs, another person—a man, round-featured, brown-skinned with light, close-clipped hair—sitting in the seat next to him. An empty bench faced them both.

“I messaged you,” replied Reet, not entirely able to keep exasperation out of his voice. “There was a pipe break. I couldn’t leave until it was repaired.” Surely they could smell the musty whiff of the pipeways on him—he had stripped off his thin coverall and shoved it in the recycler, but he hadn’t stopped to shower, because he’d known he was late already and didn’t want to be even later.

He could have showered and just gone home. He could be in his tiny room, sitting on his tiny bed, eating takeout dumplings, watching *Pirate Exiles of the Death Moons*.

“Come now, Mr Hluid,” the consultant replied. “These state-mandated jobs are all make-work. Engineers fix the pipes by mech, surely, or the bots can do the repairs themselves.”

Reet considered several answers, but rather than speaking he turned to leave.

“Wait!” cried the consultant.

The man sitting beside em laughed. “Perfect!” he chortled. “Absolutely perfect. You are certainly a Schan, all the way through!”

Reet stopped. Turned back. “I’m a what?”

“Three hundred years ago,” said the consultant, “in Keroxane System, Lovehate Station was destroyed in...” E glanced at eir companion. “Let’s call it a particularly violent civil dispute.”

The man beside em frowned. “A dispute? It wasn’t a *dispute*! The Hikipi rebelled against their Phen oppressors!” The consultant made a placatory gesture.

“I’m aware of what happened on Lovehate Station,” Reet cut in. And was suddenly struck with the disturbingly appealing vision of stepping forward, grabbing this man by the neck, and biting into his cheek, teeth sinking into flesh. Impulse followed vision, but Reet kept himself standing straight and still.

“Records were lost in the destruction,” said the man, eagerly, his agitation gone as soon as it had come. Reet imagined peeling off the man’s skin, as though it were one of the cheap coveralls he worked in. What would he see?

The man continued speaking, oblivious. “Centuries of history, of culture, of genetic data, of nearly everything—gone. All that’s left is the records of a few of us whose ancestors left Lovehate Station years before. And of course, the Schans, the ancient Hikipi rulers of Lovehate Station, were supposed to have been destroyed long before that. But there have always been rumors that some escaped that destruction. Imagine if we could find them, the descendants of the Schans. What would that do to the struggle against the Phen?”

“Please sit down,” said the consultant. Reet did not, and the consultant went on with a small shrug. “You arrived here as an infant, an orphan refugee, some three decades ago. No family, no adults claimed you.”

“I’m not related to any of the families on this station,” said Reet. “Hikipi or otherwise. They checked my genetics.”

“The Schans were always very secretive about their genetic data,” said the man. “I’m Heroth Nadkal, by the way. President of the Siblings of Hikipu here on Rurusk Station.”

“The Schans,” said the consultant, “were very much their own clan within Lovehate Station when they were in power. They’re rumored to have made alterations to all their members—by birth or otherwise.”

“You could always tell a Schan,” said Mr Nadkal. “By their manner, certainly.” He indicated Reet with one hand, smiling. “But there were other ways. What those ways were... we think we have discovered.”

“Your route to this station, what we know of it, fits with someone who might have come from Lovehate Station,” said the consultant. “And your genes are distinctly odd. I would even say those oddities are unique.”

“I’m aware,” said Reet shortly. He took a breath, willing the disturbingly attractive images of skinless Nadkal away. “If those oddities had been even remotely connected to any of the Hikipi families here, surely you would have claimed me before now.” He should have gone back to his room after work and ignored this appointment. He should never have taken it to begin with. He should leave, right now.

“But no one was looking for a *Schan*, were they,” replied Nadkal, as though that disposed of the matter. “This is the result of decades of research, and careful piecing together of what fragments of information and tradition we might have.” He laughed. “Just seeing you stand there—you’re a Schan. I’m convinced of it.” He nodded. Turned to the consultant. “I’ve transmitted your fee. Well deserved, I do say. And you”—he turned again to Reet—“Mr...” For some reason, Mr Nadkal hesitated.

Reet suspected he knew what that reason was, but maybe not. Maybe it was something else. Maybe it wasn’t because Reet’s family name—the parents who had adopted him—belonged to what most Zeoseni would consider the wrong ethnic group. “Mr Hluid.”

“No,” said Nadkal. “Mr *Schan*. Depend on it. Heir to a long and glorious history. And there may not be any other Schans, here or anywhere else, but you have, I assure you, the friendship and support—and family!—of the Siblings of Hikipu. Come to our next meeting, Mr Schan.” Mr Nadkal chuckled, and rubbed his hands together. “Mr Schan. At long last, at long last. Come to our next meeting, Mr Schan, and discover what it is to be part of a community. You aren’t on your own anymore. You know

who you are now.”

It was too much to handle all at once. Reet stared at Mr Nadkal, his gut gone sickeningly tense, as though Mr Nadkal had threatened him. When it was Reet who had been imagining taking him apart. When Mr Nadkal had, in fact, just offered Reet the thing he had always wished for and always known he could never have: a history. An identity that was part of something else, not just Reet, solitary. Alone. It was too much.

There would be blood under the skin, and muscles. And if those were stripped away...

“Fuck this,” said Reet. “I’m going home and having supper.”

Nadkal laughed again. “Schan!” he cried. “You’re a Schan to the core!”

Reet bought dumplings and then splurged on a tiny milk jelly, and took it all back to his room. He had friends, or at least friendly acquaintances. Some of them (most of the people he’d known as a child) had fallen away somehow over the years. Others—well, Reet found he was in no mood to share anyone’s company, let alone try to explain what had just happened. He sat on his bed, back against the wall that a former occupant had painted with a scrawled stick figure of the goddess of good fortune, one schematic hand raised in blessing.

The dumplings were filled with some indefinite mixture of protein and plant material, strongly spiced. The familiarity of the flavor was usually soothing, but today he was too tense, and the food nauseated him. What was wrong with him? It wasn’t just Mr Nadkal and the fucking Siblings of Hikipu. It wasn’t just the sudden vision of stripping another human being down to component parts—that was something that had followed Reet, on and off, since he’d been a child. *What excites you?* a counselor had asked him when he’d been much younger. *What do you dream of doing? That’s where to look for your place, the thing you’ll prepare for.*

With trepidation Reet had confessed his desire to dissect the people around him. She’d gone straight to his foster parents, who had insisted he hadn’t meant it, it was a joke, Reet was certainly a very *odd* child but he wasn’t violent, not counting that time when he’d been little and had that problem with biting.

The counselor had accepted Reet’s apology, and he had never told anyone about his desires after that. He’d reached adulthood, not found qualifying work, and so he’d had to take a state job or pay the sloth tax, which of course he couldn’t afford since he had no one willing or able to