

Chapter 1

XXXX Firokami XXXX

“There he is!” a voice rang out from right behind his back.

“The Authorities’ shocker is set to 3 meters by default; don't let them get closer than that from any side,” he remembered and climbed higher.

The main thing was not to fall. “Don't look where you came from, look where you're going,” now surfaced in his mind.

He didn't kill that prostitute, of course, he didn't kill her; he just saw a woman lying there, went over to check, and felt a hand on his shoulder. The Authorities. He managed to twist away and bolted. “Never trust the Authorities” — that's what his family had taught him.

And now, two rips were pursuing him. He leaped onto a parking level, performing a somersault in mid-air.

“Damn parkourists,” a tall blond man cursed and ran toward the stairs.

“Here are his possible routes,” a deep and very soothing voice emanated from the gadgets, “the probability of the first one is eighty-nine percent.”

“You take the first one,” the partner, an angelically handsome man, also blond but shorter, snapped to the tall one.

“Mgh,” the Department Forty-Two detective darted along the route with effortless speed.

The fugitive took a quick look around, trying to catch sight of his pursuers. He backed toward the stairs leading up, scanning the space; two more flights and he would be on the road of the City's next level. “Always go the opposite way of your first impulse,” he remembered. Speeding upward, the fugitive rushed toward the flight of stairs, when suddenly his breath caught and pain doubled him over. He looked up; a dark-haired, very handsome man was smiling at him, though his dark cherry eyes remained dead and motionless. The man seemed so familiar, almost like kin. Desperately trying to inhale, the fugitive reached out a hand toward him. With a movement too fast for the eye to follow, the man grabbed the hand and twisted it. A fresh wave of pain cleared his head, and a memory surfaced: “you cannot grab water.” He relaxed completely, flowed out of the grip, instantly pulled himself together, and jumped down.

Pain enmeshed him while he was still in the air; paralyzed, he fell onto his back on the floor, but it didn't get any more painful.

An angel-like face leaned over him; dazzling turquoise eyes, bright as the sun, looked on calmly; the angel seemed to be smiling. He smiled back at the celestial being and collapsed into darkness.

“How did you get him—by willpower or something?” a man with dead eyes smiled; having descended, he moved smoothly and swiftly toward the “celestial.”

“My taser is set for five meters. I don't like running,” his friend smirked and spoke into a gadget, “Thanks, send the medics.”

“Sent,” came the reply.

“Done?” a tall blonde man ran into the lot.

“Yeah,” the “celestial,” who looked like his brother, smiled.

“He didn't break his back, did he?” the newcomer asked.

“I don't know. When they develop personal force fields, then we'll be able to say for sure that someone like him didn't break anything. Until then, who knows? They'll patch him up.”

“We'll hand him over to the Fifteenth; it's not our business,” the detective nodded and tossed his head with a smirk, sending the video to the Fifteenth Division, which handled street homicides. “So much for going out for coffee.”

“I told you we should have ordered it to the office,” the man with dead eyes sat gracefully on a concrete ledge. A ray of sunlight crept insidiously onto the parking lot and touched his shoulder; the man flinched, looked sharply at the beam, and, recognizing it, breathed out a smile.

“I don't like ordering in,” the “celestial” said, the corner of his mouth twitching.

On an identical parking lot across the way stood a thin, long-haired man in black; his silvery eyes remained fixed on one of the detectives for a long minute. He had watched the young man's futile attempt to escape the Authorities from start to finish. When the clinical assistance arrived, the man left the parking lot.

XXXX Firokami XXXX

“It's a good idea. If you don't like your life, come and get a new one,” rustled Jan Elm, the luminary of the City, over the radio.

This was an advertisement for Firokami's new project—the Sanctuaries. Firokami, the diamond city-state, had solved the problem of the homeless, disadvantaged children, and unwanted animals radically. Like everything it handled. It was the brainchild of Senator Agen Edject. Three types: Kiduary—a sanctuary for children, Homeuary—a sanctuary for the homeless, and Beastuary—a sanctuary for animals. These were countryside camps, even small villages. A law had been passed prohibiting the homeless and beggars from being in Firokami, and the Authorities transported them all to the Sanctuaries. All unwanted animals, whether stray or domestic pets people wanted to get rid of, were sent to the Beastuary.

The government project—the Sanctuaries—was becoming a success. Like any project where a single individual is held responsible. There was no wild bureaucratic oversight, no heavy-handed or mandatory instructions. In Firokami, this was a common occurrence: some luminary would take charge of a specific sector or social issue and required no monitoring. They already gave their all to make their assigned sector as perfect as possible. A large tract of land was allocated for each Sanctuary, so, unlike other charitable projects, there was always room for those in need. There was always enough food here—because the Sanctuaries didn't just run on government

subsidies; they had their own fields, orchards, and farms. The people who worked there taught those who arrived. Even in the Beastuary, animals were trained; they participated in various shows, worked in films, and served as rescuers, guides, and assistants. You could adopt an animal from here. You could also bring and drop off an animal at any time. No one judged those who brought them in. The Beastuary staff didn't try to force animals onto new owners. If someone's cat or dog had a litter, the owner could simply bring a basket of cute kittens or puppies to a local shelter instead of leaving them on someone's doorstep. The shelter would then transfer the animals to the Beastuary.

The same story applied to the homeless and those caught in difficult situations. The Homeuary was not just for the homeless, but for anyone with nowhere to go; they took in women whose husbands beat them, and former inmates who couldn't reintegrate into society. If a homeless woman had a child, she could come to the Homeuary and live there with them; no one tried to take the child away. Only if she wished to herself could she transfer the child to the Kiduary. In the Sanctuaries, people (and animals in the Beastuary) underwent vocational training and could stay to work and help out on-site. The first teachers were hired from among retirees—experienced and skilled individuals who still wanted to work.

It wasn't just victims of abuse who could come to the Kiduary; orphans and street children came here as well. Any child who didn't know how to navigate life could come here. If their parents didn't care about them, if the parents were in the middle of a scandalous divorce, if the parents were against the child's pregnancy, relationships, orientation, gender, or life choices—if there was anything driving the child into stress and they didn't know where to go, they could come to the Kiduary. They received a room, food, and clothing; they went to school or learned a trade. And anyone could leave the Sanctuary at any moment if they felt confident enough to become part of Firokami.

The new law stated: everyone has the right to live. So, if a child didn't want to live with their parents or in an orphanage, or simply didn't want to lead the life they were leading—they could get a second chance, a different life. Now, if a child ran away from home, the Authorities would first call the Kiduary to see if the missing person was there and ask if the child had complained about the parents. If the child complained, or was exhausted or beaten, the City officials would start digging into the parents' lives. If the child remained silent—and in the Sanctuaries, no one was forced to confess to anything—they investigated the parents themselves. The Authorities might even choose not to inform the parents that the child was in the Sanctuary.

“Your child is under the protection of Firokami,” the parents would be informed. This meant the child had been found, was alive, and was doing well. But whether the child was in a Sanctuary, with the Authorities, or with a wealthy gentleman who had taken the child in for support—the parents could not know. If the child wanted to go home, the Authorities would take them from the Sanctuary.

At first, children feared the Kiduary, and the homeless feared the Homeuary, but eventually, they saw that the Sanctuaries were not totalitarian colonies. They were, in fact, true havens. One could live, eat, and rest there. They existed simply to give those in need the strength to move forward in life.

Of course, scary stories initially circulated among the children, claiming that wealthy lords came there to recruit slaves and sex toys. Some children, exhausted by poverty, even waited for this to

happen. But it was in vain. The luminaries of Firokami stayed far away from the Sanctuaries; they always knew where to find catamites who weren't terrified.

Just one law and a mere three locations solved massive societal problems. Firokami always worked that way. It solved things. Now, Senator Edject was preparing a new project, this time for criminals and the mentally ill. And Firokami watched as the Senator's ideas took shape. Judging by the Sanctuaries, they worked perfectly.

“If you don’t like it—remake it, everything in our life is your business!...” a voice from the speaker began to sing confidently. Someone from "Cherry Branch." Probably.

Blue eyes, cold as diamonds, looked out from the holo-photograph above the desk, stern and reliable. The ray of sunlight that raced across the image shone weaker than they did.

And the sun was bright today, shining and flooding the entire City with cheer. And the City smiled back, lazy and languid. Late spring was blooming in Firokami—a time when a torrent of beauty rushed in from everywhere.

Mergen Hevia—the same tall blonde who had chased the boy at the parking lot along the primary route calculated by the department's technical specialist, the cosmically talented Phage Sonora—sat in a beige swivel chair, turned away from the holo-photo and staring out the open window. Mergen looked like a medieval warrior, a sun-drenched Viking from a romanticized fantasy. His light green eyes seemed to always be smiling, and his well-defined lips held the ghost of a kiss. Upon a first meeting, people usually liked him. Later, his refusal to be a hypocrite or play fake social games would cool the ardor of those he had charmed. Right now, the detective needed to make several boring calls that he didn't want to make. The City beckoned him to jump into the viscous air, which felt as if it were made of liquid sunlight. Mergen listened to his own radio playlist. Classics and rock. Wild riffs gave way to courtly trills. The detective spun in his chair to the rhythm of the music.

The door opened and closed silently, and a man strode into the bright, comfortable office—a design created by psychologists for the Authorities. Detective Hevia smiled and raised a hand, greeting the guest. The newcomer leaned against the door, propping it up with his weight, looked at Mergen, and smiled back. It was the same "celestial" from the parking lot.

The guest walked over to the desk and sat on the edge.

“Mosaic?” Mergen asked.

“Mosaic,” the guest sighed. That was what they called the "cold cases"—the files everyone had long since given up on and which their department handled: a mosaic. Official interest in these cases was much like interest in a literal mosaic—whoever liked it could try to piece it together. And it didn't even matter much anymore whether the pieces actually fit.

The newcomer was also a detective, Hevia’s partner—Han Paradi. He looked like Mergen, only with longer blonde hair, softer features, and dark green eyes with a blue tint—turquoise, to put it simply. He was slightly, though noticeably, shorter than Mergen, yet they were so similar that people often took them for biological brothers. In reality, they were closer than brothers—they were friends.

The friends had been working in this department only a short time. In fact, the department itself was a recent creation. Their boss—Shan Linial, a luminary and, rumor had it, an operative for the City Security Committee (CSC)—had only just received this appointment. When he was transferred to this division as its head, he handpicked those he trusted. Now, within this department, Shan was an emperor.

He had no superiors above him; the cold cases had been handed over entirely to his control. His people, his team—these were the unmanageable and uncooperative cadres, officers and detectives who had serious issues with discipline and getting along with others. The department had been operating for only a couple of months, but the results were impressive: seventeen closed cases, eight of which were major and had been deemed hopeless. Department "42," with its dull number, was located in the Gray-Brown Sector of Firokami, one of the high-crime districts. The Government—the Mayor's office (Firokami was a city-state, so its head was a Mayor with the curious name Alex Alex)—hoped that Linial could fix this. Firokami was currently undergoing a district equalization program. There were to be no "dangerous" or distinctly "upscale" districts; everything had to be comfortable for living, though Firokami loved themed districts with specific cultural codes. Multicultural diversity. Asian, Eastern, Northern lifestyles—Firokami gave districts over to authenticity. But it also kept a watchful eye to ensure these districts didn't turn into independent principalities within the City. Neither the Authorities—as the service for public protection and law enforcement was called—nor the citizens were afraid to "poke their heads" into any district. Any attempt by someone bold and arrogant to seize control of a part of the City ended with their expulsion beyond Firokami's borders or their relocation into sexual slavery for interested luminaries. The City was ruthless. And indifferent. The freedom of diversity was maintained through the brutal suppression of any attempt to shift the balance. Anyone who didn't like the City's way of life could turn to the Authorities and ask to be moved outside Firokami at the City's expense. But residents and newcomers alike preferred the ruthless City to the conventional ways of the world. With its technology and opportunities, if your freedom didn't consist of violating the freedoms of others, the non-totalitarian attitude toward any form of self-expression made life in Firokami far more attractive than anywhere else.

"Well, let's pick something then," Mergen tossed several files onto the desk and slid them forward.

"We have a new report," Khan dropped a holo-file onto the table.

"And we still have to choose a case from eternity," Mergen nodded toward the stack of holographic files and sighed. "I thought we'd only be digging through the old stuff, but new ones keep coming in just like a regular department."

Han gave an understanding grunt.

They cleared the old mosaics with a certain rhythm: a solved case, a week of rest and routine, then a new case from the "junk." Mergen called it eternity because the "junk" never ended and, it seemed, never diminished. In addition to that, the new cases closed by regular investigators were also sent to them. Shan had ordered it that way. The new mosaics were easier to crack.

Firokami liked this initiative. Criminals had to know they would never escape punishment. Under no circumstances. It had taken centuries to drive this idea home to the criminal

underworld. Consequently, the crime rate in the City was low. There was enough legalized cruelty in a City divided between sadist-lords and slaves. Yet, no idea could have survived so harmoniously for so long—distortions, "improvements," and changes would have inevitably crept in, and the criminals themselves would have occupied key positions, as always happens—and it certainly would have happened in Firokami, if the scientists hired by the Friends of the City hadn't decoded the human genome. The Keepers of the Idea—long-livers—could ensure the vision stayed alive, remained connected to modern realities, and neither stagnated nor became distorted.

"True that," Khan fanned out the files. "It's time."

"One, two, Shan's coming for you..." Mergen began a nursery rhyme from an old movie hundreds of years old, which he and Khan had adapted in their own way.

"This one!" Khan pulled out the file the rhyme landed on and opened it carelessly.

"And what have we got?" Mergen leaned back in his chair.

"People, loneliness, grudges..." Khan shook his head and shrugged.

"How original!" Mergen replied sarcastically. "Well, let's just say there was an attempt at satisfaction and close the case."

"Yeah, let's."

A tall, thin, aristocratic man entered the room. Cold, diamond-like eyes swept the room with a piercing gaze—the same eyes from the holo-photo above Mergen's desk.

"How is it going?" he asked. The man's voice was like the rustle of leaves.

"Shan," Mergen turned in his chair, "we want to tell you that another mosaic has been assembled."

Shan gave a short nod, walked over, and stood behind Mergen.

"Have you started looking into the new report?" he asked, involuntarily stroking Mergen's hair.

Mergen tilted his head back to see his boss. A narcotic, blissful calm—like a hypnotic concrete slab—weighed down on the detective's consciousness. Shan had that effect on everyone. Mergen took a breath, shaking off the viscous happiness. "Yes, it was a case about a grudge, all because of loneliness. A trifle," Mergen said matter-of-factly.

"Wonderful," Shan replied in the same tone. "And who was the offended party? I need to know who to give a lollipop to. Get to work, boys, or the lollipop is yours."

Linial smiled tenderly.

"Fine. We can't very well leave the oppressed without sweets," Mergen muttered, staring into the file.

“We certainly can’t,” Khan agreed, leaning toward his friend to read the document.

“Wonderful. You’re such kind boys. You know that?” Shan nodded and sat on the sofa right there in the room.

“So, what have we got?” Mergen asked with a sigh, making an effort to forget the touch.

“A girl, Tala Min, went missing several months ago. Five. Five months ago, on January twentieth. She was walking home from school, stopped at a shop, bought a lollipop, and never made it home.”

“I see. She’s obviously in slavery now,” Mergen shrugged.

“But who would bother? She has parents. You just pay the parents. You can always find poor parents and buy whoever you want, or find a disadvantaged pretty boy who’ll throw himself at you if you just beckon. Why would anyone want trouble with the Authorities?”

“Maybe a targeted order?”

“Do we have a photo?”

“Yeah... oh... well...” Khan pulled the photo from the dossier. The men stared at it.

“Oh, hmm...” Mergen said.

“Riiiiight,” his friend replied.

The girl in the picture was ordinary. She wasn't sexy; she wasn't even particularly cute. Just a girl. She didn't provoke a single sexual thought. No one would have bothered kidnapping her for that.

“Maybe a mutant killed her?” Khan ventured a guess.

“No. She just vanished. She’s plain... what? Well, she is!” Mergen threw up his hands in response to his friend’s reproachful look. “She’ll grow out of it. But kidnapers aren't likely to steal someone to ‘wait for them to grow.’ On the bright side, she’s almost certainly alive. We need to check if she just ran away. Fell in love with a heartbreaker. He hooked up with the prom queen. She couldn’t take it and bolted.”

“Everything was checked. The parents collected the insurance, so the insurance company ran its own investigation. Naturally, they called the Kiduary and checked the dens,” Khan said grimly.

"What did you bring?" Mergen nodded, stretching out across the desk to get a better look.

Han held out the gadget to make it easier for Mergen. He reached out and took the statement.

"Another girl missing. A sweet, boring family. We'll have to check everything from the start. All the videos are here, right?"

"Naturally," Khan nodded to Mergen.

"Yeah," Mergen opened the folder with the video files. "What else?"

"The mother works in service, the father is... a supplier at a hotel. Hardworking types."

"A regular, dreary life—I love that. And who's this?" Mergen pointed to the boy in the video.

"Ah, that's the younger brother. Ressay."

"Ressay. Perfect. We'll talk to him. If there's something wrong with this family, he's bound to know."

"But he might not talk."

"I have a photo of Shan for cases like this. Kids love him," Mergen chuckled.

"Shall we go?"

"No, let's eat something and watch the videos first."

"Ah, excellent. Food and a movie."

"Yeah, maybe we'll see some porn," Mergen sprawled languidly across the desk. The man contacted the cafe.

"Hey. How's it going? This is the Authorities. We're hungry. Remy, is that you? No. Mmm..." Khan groaned; someone new was on the line, and he'd have to explain everything. The detective looked at his friend, and Mergen reached for the gadget, but Khan just gave a grateful smile and continued. "Fine. Sally? Two lattes... and a cappuccino," Khan glanced at Shan, who sat frozen as if he'd fallen asleep with his eyes open. "A large pizza, classic. The 42nd Department of the Authorities. For Hevia. Yeah. Have a good day, girl."

The men leaned over the files, studying them and sketching out the algorithms for how they would conduct their investigation.

XXXX Firokami XXXX

"Ditt!" Korin jumped down from the tree into a pile of dry, last year's leaves. Laughing, Ditt threw a handful at his younger brother. Korin laughed too.

"It's so beautiful here," he said, looking up at the sky with his golden-blue gaze. Korin's eyes were generally blue, but on the iris itself, against the blue background, there was a yellow sun with a dark rim. When Korin was sad or angry, the golden part of the iris would contract; when he was happy, the sun would spill across the blue, making the boy's eyes seem to glow.

"Yeah," Ditt stretched out beside his brother, but his light blue eyes were fixed on Korin rather than the sky. "How's school?"

"Good," the boy answered briefly.

"Nobody's bothering you?"

"Why do you ask that every day? No. You'd know. We go to the same school, after all," Korin smiled, pleased that Ditt was worried about him.

"Just asking. You'd tell me if anything happened, right? If a teacher or..."

"Of course," Korin nodded. The gadget in his pocket vibrated. "Oh, I have to go to dance class."

The brothers rose from the ground.

"Pay attention there," Ditt smiled, straightening his brother's scarf and jacket.

"Maybe, if you don't have too many classes, you could walk me to the studio?"

Ditt thought for a moment, shoved his hands into the pockets of his gray hoodie, and nodded, causing a light lock of hair to fall over his forehead, which made Korin smile.

"I think I can even sit in on the lesson."

"Great!" Korin cut himself short. "Only, I'll be embarrassed."

Ditt laughed and put his arm around his brother's shoulders.

"Everything will be fine."

Talking as they went, the brothers reached the studio and entered the cozy hall. The dance teacher, a slave named Dean, was greeting the students inside.

His master, Laberick Gent, a restaurateur, was also there; as he often did, he had come to watch his favorite toy work. The children knew him well, and he was always kind to them.

The hall smelled fresh and sweet, like lemons, to lift the mood. A dance school, a typical pair—a loving master and a loving slave—a familiar piece of the Firokami puzzle. Another piece, a background for yet another puzzle that the detectives of the 42nd Department had begun to assemble; a piece of the story Firokami was watching now, but not the story itself.

"Can my brother sit in on the lesson?" Korin asked.

"Your brother?" Dean seemed surprised. He flicked his gaze over Ditt, then moved it to Laberick, who was sitting in another part of the hall. The man responded with a smile.

"Of course, Korin, come on in, hurry up," Dean smiled.

The brothers went into the dressing room, where other children were already gathered.

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Dean approached Laberick, elegantly crossing his arms over his chest.

"Poor family."

"What's wrong, my love?"

"He asked me if his brother could stay and watch the lesson."

"And?" Laberick shrugged.

"His brother went missing several months ago. I don't know if I should tell the parents about this?"

"Well, maybe Korin is just playing along, I mean, making it up. If the parents are normal, then tell them."

"But how can you tell? They look normal, but you can never really know," Dean shook his head, kissed Laberick, and headed into the hall toward the children.

XXXX Firokami XXXX

"Boss, come join us," Khan called out to the man.

The messenger had brought the order from the pizzeria. Shan approached and immersed himself in the diagrams his friends had drawn; he drank from the various cups they held out to him and

took bites from the slice of pizza that Mergen and Khan carefully took turns feeding him. The boss looked thoughtful.

"While you're interviewing the family, tell Fade to look for similar cases."

"Already on it, Shan," Mergen smiled. "I asked him to check last year and the spring before that, just in case these are seasonal disappearances."

"Wonderful. Good plan. Get going, guys," Shan nodded.

The men left the food and the remains of the coffee on the table and headed out.

"He could have motivated us a bit more positively than 'get going, guys,' don't you think?" Khan asked his friend.

"Yeah, like 'get going immediately, guys,' right?" Mergen smirked.

"Well, at least that," Khan said very seriously, though his sunny eyes were laughing.

