

PROLOGUE

Annual Meeting of the Seminatore Society

Paris, France

Shrine to the Original Race—formerly known as Notre Dame

March 23, 2072

9 months, 23 days to Chrysalis

BARRETT KERRINGTON, vice president of the United States, was more the type to smile and knee someone in the balls, which is what the Carthenogens were likely expecting.

Barrett got up from his seat in the massive Gothic chamber and strode forward on the gilded purple carpet. He glanced up to see that the stained glass windows from centuries of Catholicism had been replaced with depictions of historical figures from the Carthenogen home planet, Carthogena.

His ornate black silk robe fluttered, enhancing the urgency in his pace.

Two hundred fifty similarly clad Society members glowered behind him. None of them wanted to make this walk of shame. Ahead, fifteen ivory-robed Carthenogens awaited him on the dais. His petition appeared futile. He hid his cunning delight behind a mask of somber worry.

He'd devised a gambit for this very day of his defrocking. He had known this was coming for some time. Rather than disappear like

so many other gelded saps, he found a way to keep ten moves ahead and parlay his discharge into something much more enduring.

They were likely expecting him to go down in a big ruckus. He had to set them off-balance, disrupt their expectations. There would be no “ball kicking” today. Instead, he would delude them with slobbering, sniveling incredulity.

In thirty steps, he knelt on a riser and bowed his head in humble reverence—already, something out of character for him.

“May it please the Society that I should speak?”

Carthenogen Supreme Minister of Earth Huzan said, “It so pleases. Speak.” Huzan’s voice, normally monotone, bled with repugnance for those fallen from favor.

“Your Excellency,” Barrett began, keeping his eyes cast downward, “I fail to see any transgressions I may have committed.”

“You have not,” Huzan said.

“Your Excellency, then I fail to understand why I am being denied the position of president.”

“This is a matter of preemption, rather than punishment.”

“Please, Your Excellency, help me to understand,” Barrett said with a pleading quiver in his voice. He understood perfectly. He was being thrown overboard for someone more charismatic, more slick.

“You have nurtured a reputation within the Society and the citizens at large, Barrett. We need someone to carry a message that is less—abrasive.”

Barrett had blustering down to an art, an efficient tool in extorting cooperation.

“Your Excellency, I have been extremely loyal to Carthenogen... guidance. I have carried out every policy the Society has decided.”

“To be sure, you have been useful and effective,” said Huzan. “The Society is indeed grateful.”

“Then why, Your Excellency?” asked Barrett. “Why haven’t I earned the position? I have done innumerable things to benefit the Society, some of which were against my very moral fiber. *All for you.*”

“You no longer have a soul with which to bargain, Barrett.”

Minister Rooda interjected, “Whatever worth your human soul may have had, Barrett, yours was depleted on the vice presidency.”

Indeed, his soul was running at a substantial deficit.

"Your Excellency," said Barrett, "if it pleases the Society, I can do so much more for you in a position of greater power."

"We've already decided on the occupant of the position you desire," Huzan said. "Your services are no longer of advantage to us. Retire quietly when your term is up and be grateful."

There it was—exactly what he needed, to be relieved of responsibility. He would no longer be in the fishbowl. He'd be spared the expense of political capital on an election run, and would no longer be beholden to the whims of donors.

At the same time, he had an open acknowledgement of his good standing with the Carthenogens. He'd averted the ugly mistake of being forcibly removed from the Shrine. He'd dodged pariah status among his colleagues in the Society.

Still, he had one more gambit.

His head still bowed, he squeezed his eyes closed several times to force tears. Groveling wasn't his forte, but he had practiced.

"Wait!" He looked into Huzan's eyes, his trembling hands emerging from his robe. It was a startling breach of every protocol to look directly into the eyes of any Carthenogen, let alone the supreme minister of Earth. But startling was what he needed.

"I beg of you, Your Excellency!" he rasped.

An astonished murmur arose from the Society. Not known for showing any expression, every one of the Carthenogens on the dais looked surprised.

Minister Rooda's spindly fingers shot out, pointing at Barrett. "There is no *begging!*"

Rooda's timing was perfect. Barrett glanced desperately at his accomplice, his mouth flopping open, his hands still outstretched and trembling. The deposed would normally have been dragged off by now. Others might choose to walk away with a dignified stiff upper lip. Begging created drama. Doubtless, the Society members were on the edge of their seats.

Supreme Minister Huzan raised a hand to suppress the commotion.

"Your Excellency," Barrett continued, "may I still provide—*special service*—to you?"

"Your service is done, Barrett."

"But!"

"Done, Barrett!"

Barrett hung his head and struggled to lift his aging frame to a standing position. He slowly turned away. In a quick movement, he turned back toward the ministers.

"I know your *true* agenda!" For authenticity's sake, Barrett had an edge of anger—another startling move.

Gasps of shock and excited babbling echoed through the cavernous halls of the Society. Everyone there knew the true Carthenogen agenda. They were, by their own silence on the matter, complicit. Barrett was teetering on heresy.

Huzan raised his hand again. The murmuring ceased. "Are you threatening?"

"I gave you the plans for Chrysalis," Barrett said.

"Chrysalis is already underway."

"In the short time I have left in my term, Your Excellency, I can arrange an event—a commencement of sorts. Something my... replacement...may campaign for, or against, as you see fit."

Neither Huzan nor any other minister made a move to cut Barrett off. He had their full attention.

"The event," continued Barrett, "will create a crisis. The crisis will permit your newly elected president to rally the nation—indeed, the world—and harness substantial power. The crisis will provide a compelling impetus for launching Chrysalis, and, at the same time, will quell your opposition."

Barrett paused a moment, looked into Huzan's eyes, and let out a sly smile. His hand reappeared from his robe as he held up two fingers, a daring gesture. "Two birds," Barrett said, "one stone."

Huzan pursed his lips, blinked twice—a good sign. They were sold.

"There are factions within your military that are troubling," Huzan said.

Barrett had them. They had accepted his offer and were negotiating for more. Barrett was now free to navigate the global halls of power and wrest strategic favors.

"Yes, Your Excellency. That will take more time."

CHAPTER 1

Bangkok, Thailand
United States Embassy
January 14, 2073
Day Zero of Chrysalis

A LOUD BOOM YANKED Vaughn Everett Killian out of his trance on the couch.

He sat upright and listened, adrenaline surging through him. Was what he'd heard real or had he been dreaming?

He glanced at the antique bookcase against the wall. No, it hadn't fallen over.

A trickle of worry seeped into his otherwise crusty teenage indifference. He got up and approached the bulletproof windows in the family's quarters, pulling back the sheer curtains and looking out across the small embassy lawn. Jutting over the walls surrounding the compound were tattered picket signs and poorly made effigies of what he presumed to be his mother, the US ambassador to Thailand. He could just hear the picketers' muffled chanting through the thick glass.

Occasionally, there were protests in front of the embassy for one outrage or another. Usually the protesters' numbers were anemic, with fewer than a dozen showing up. Today there were thousands milling about like so much gunpowder. The crowd stretched around the street corners, suggesting that there were thousands more protesters just out of sight.