THE PHILOSOPHER OF THE CAGE

Freedom Is Included.
Escape Costs Extra.



ORION SAINT

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Revised easy-reading edition

This is a work of fiction. The characters, organizations, city, and events are invented.

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CHAPTER 1

The Door Was Working Perfectly

By the time Dr. Felix Voss purchased his third island, he had concluded that ownership was a primitive concept.

He explained this to an audience who had paid eight thousand dollars each to hear him explain it.

“Humanity must move beyond possession.”

Behind him, a screen displayed his name, his company, and a photograph of a mountain his foundation had recently fenced off.

Toma stood beside the ballroom’s emergency exit with a screwdriver between his teeth.

The door would not open.

He had reported this twice.

The first report had been classified as a maintenance issue. The second had been classified as resistance to innovation.

Onstage, Voss walked barefoot across an imported slab of Himalayan stone. His communications team called this humility. Six men had carried it upstairs.

“For centuries,” Voss said, “we have misunderstood freedom.”

Toma removed the lock cover.

There was nothing wrong with the mechanism. Someone had connected it to the building’s central permission system.

“We assumed freedom meant choosing.”

A small red light blinked.

“But what if your choices are making you miserable?”

Toma touched the two wires with his tester.

“What if someone could relieve you of that burden?”

The audience applauded with the particular warmth of people whose burdens were already being carried by somebody else.

His work tablet vibrated.

FAULT REPORT CLOSED.

DOOR OPERATING AS INTENDED.

He reopened the report.

Emergency exit does not permit exit.

The reply arrived immediately.

PLEASE IDENTIFY THE EMERGENCY.

Fire.

NO FIRE DETECTED.

I am testing it.

FALSE EMERGENCY DECLARATIONS MAY AFFECT YOUR RELIABILITY RATING.

Toma looked toward the stage.

Voss was explaining compassion.

“Imagine a society in which no child falls through the cracks.”

Toma’s daughter had been waiting eleven weeks for a hospital appointment. Last Tuesday, the scheduling platform had removed her from the queue because she had failed to attend an appointment it had never sent her.

There was an appeal button.

It opened a photograph of a woman listening.

Beneath the photograph were the words WE HEAR YOU.

There was nowhere to type.

“We can finally make institutions humane,” Voss said.

A waiter passed Toma carrying forty tiny portions of something neither of them could afford.

“Can you open that?” the waiter whispered.

“I’m trying.”

“My brother’s outside. I need to give him my car keys.”

“Go through reception.”

“They won’t let him near reception.”

“Why?”

The waiter looked at him.

Toma nodded. He knew the sort of question that could make a working man look stupid.

Onstage, the philosopher raised both hands.

“The age of unnecessary suffering is over.”

Toma disconnected the lock.

The door opened.

Cool evening air entered the ballroom. Somewhere beyond the loading dock, a truck was reversing. The waiter slipped outside.

For several seconds, everything worked.

Then Toma’s tablet sounded.

UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS EVENT.

His staff photograph disappeared.

A new message replaced it.

YOUR BUILDING ACCESS HAS BEEN SUSPENDED.
PLEASE LEAVE THE PREMISES IMMEDIATELY.

He put the screws in his pocket. They belonged to the hotel, but he could not leave them on the carpet where someone might step on them.

At the staff gate, the reader rejected his badge.

He tried again.

EXIT DENIED.

His supervisor answered on the fourth call.

“You’ll need to submit a request.”

“I can’t. They’ve closed my account.”

A long pause.

Behind Toma, through the open ballroom door, Dr. Voss asked everyone to stand in celebration of a world where nobody would ever be forgotten.

“Are you still there?” Toma asked.

CHAPTER 2

A Free Ride

Eighteen months earlier, before the door learned to think, the bus had arrived.

This was the first convincing argument.

Toma had stood at the Hill Street stop through two municipal administrations, three timetable revisions, and enough rain to appreciate that democracy did not necessarily provide a roof. The shelter contained a poster celebrating a forthcoming improvement. During storms the poster became transparent, revealing an earlier poster celebrating the same improvement.

Then the city signed with Clement Systems.

A screen appeared beneath the timetable. It said FOUR MINUTES.

Four minutes later a bus came around the corner.

Toma watched it approach with the suspicion he reserved for inexpensive drills. He boarded. The driver wore the expression of a man who had been given a new machine and would personally be blamed for every sound it made.

“New system?” Toma asked.

“New everything.”

“Will it last?”

“Ask the system.”

The driver pointed to a small blue square beside the fare box. HARBOR, it said. YOUR CITY, TOGETHER.

An assistant in a blue jacket stood halfway down the aisle, helping passengers install the application. Her name badge read ELSA, followed by HUMAN SUPPORT, because the distinction had recently become a benefit.

Toma declined. His phone was old and already contained more programs than he understood.

“No problem,” Elsa said. “You can still pay normally.”

He liked her for this.

At the hospital stop a woman came aboard with two children and a folded stroller. Her payment failed. Elsa tapped her own device, waved them through, and told the driver the city would cover it.

Toma liked her more.

That evening he told Mila about the bus.

“Congratulations,” she said. “Civilization.”

She was sitting on the kitchen floor, rebuilding a secondhand speaker. There was a bowl of screws beside her knee. Toma had taught her to put screws in bowls after

discovering that his vacuum cleaner could eat more money in thirty seconds than he earned in an hour.

The apartment was small enough that he had to step across a cable to reach the stove. Their table had one short leg. He could have repaired it properly, but it stood on a folded electricity notice and neither of them had yet found a reason to change the arrangement.

He put a bag of tomatoes on the counter.

“They helped a woman pay.”

“Maybe it’s good.”

“You say that like I said something stupid.”

“I say it like maybe it’s good.”

Mila was twenty and taking sound work wherever she could get it: wedding receptions, school productions, an experimental theater where the experiment was whether anyone would be paid. Her mother, Nadia, lived two hours north. The divorce had not been dramatic enough to deserve a book. There had been years of tired people asking the wrong questions after work. Now they spoke more kindly because they spoke less often.

Toma cooked. Mila made a hiss come out of the speaker and grinned.

“There,” she said.

“What?”

“Nothing rattles.”

He understood the pleasure.

A week later, the hotel offered Harbor enrollment at a staff breakfast. There were croissants, which management called an investment in culture. Graham Pike, facilities supervisor, stood beside an enrollment table with jam on his cuff.

“Payroll, transport, benefits,” Pike said. “One account.”

“Is there a fee?”

“No.”

“Later?”

Pike smiled the exhausted smile of a man who knew enough to dislike the question and too little to answer it.

“They say no.”

The payroll clerk, a woman called Denise who had spent eleven years correcting other people’s certainty, explained the new arrangement. Hours would move directly from the time clock into wages. No lost sheets. No waiting until Monday to correct a Friday mistake. Employees could see the hours as they were recorded.

Toma had once gone nine days without pay because an administrator had mistaken a seven for a one. When Denise

showed him a week of completed shifts on a screen, he leaned closer.

“And I can check?”

“Whenever you like.”

“And if it’s wrong?”

“You flag it.”

“To you?”

“For the pilot, yes.”

He signed.

That Friday his pay arrived correctly. On Saturday he received a message saying he had qualified for reduced bus fares. He had not filled out an application. On Sunday Harbor found a duplicate utility charge and returned nineteen dollars and sixty cents.

He bought Mila a proper microphone stand.

She opened the box on the floor, solemn as a child receiving an animal.

“You shouldn’t have.”

“Nineteen dollars sixty of it belonged to the city.”

“Where did the rest come from?”

“Excellent financial management.”

“You skipped lunch.”

He shrugged.

She assembled the stand. He watched her tighten the collar with both hands. For a moment the kitchen contained only a useful object and the person it would help.

The following month, a burst pipe at the hotel was detected before water reached the ballroom ceiling. Toma was sent directly to the right floor. A diagram showed the valve. He still had to force a swollen access panel open and scrape his knuckles on a badly placed bracket, but the location was correct.

For years he had been asked to compensate for missing information with his body. He was grateful to stop.

At the neighborhood meeting, Mayor Celia Ward stood in a school gymnasium and admitted that the old services had been failing.

She did not blame the citizens. This was unusual enough to get attention.

“We can spend another decade asking you to be patient,” she said, “or we can try something that works.”

A man asked who owned the information.

“You do.”

A woman asked whether she could refuse.

“Absolutely.”

Ruth Bell, who lived one floor above Toma, asked how the city would function if the company left.

Mara Quill, the city’s contracts director, took the microphone.

“We have continuity provisions.”

“Where can I read them?”

“They’re in the public agreement.”

“Where is that?”

“We’ll circulate the link.”

Ruth wrote something in the small green notebook she carried. Toma noticed the movement without thinking much about it.

Outside, a fine sea fog had crossed the harbor. The new streetlights softened inside it. It was the kind of weather that made even a pawnshop look as though it had forgiven somebody.

Ruth walked beside him.

“You don’t trust anything,” he said.

“Not true. I trust the twenty-two bus to be late.”

“It isn’t late now.”

“Then I’ll revise my opinion of the bus.”

“And the company?”

“When I’ve read the agreement.”

At the corner, her phone chimed. Harbor had discovered she qualified for a heating rebate.

She put on her glasses, studied the figure, and made a small involuntary noise of relief.

Toma looked away to spare her the embarrassment of being pleased.

The rebate was real. So were the groceries it bought.

Later, when people tried to tell the story as though everybody had been stupid from the beginning, he remembered that.

CHAPTER 3

The Man Who Loved Humanity

Felix Voss disliked the word billionaire.

It suggested a quantity rather than an achievement.

He preferred builder, although the last thing he had assembled personally was a bookcase during his graduate years, and that had fallen onto a visitor.

His doctoral dissertation concerned the moral obligations of institutions toward persons unable to understand the conditions of their own flourishing. It had been read by four people. One of them became his first investor, recognizing that most of the argument could be converted into a subscription.

Clement began by helping emergency services share information. During a winter flood, its software found ambulances that dispatchers had believed unavailable. It linked shelter beds to people sleeping in cars. It prevented two departments from ordering the same supplies while a third had none.

These were useful things. Felix spoke about them often because he had watched them happen.

His father had died during a regional blackout years earlier. Three agencies had possessed separate pieces of

information about the neighborhood where the older man lived. None had possessed a complete picture. Felix had spent a long time believing that a complete picture would have been love.

He did not discuss this at investor meetings.

At investor meetings he discussed addressable populations.

Leena Saye joined when Clement occupied two floors above a furniture warehouse. She was a behavioral researcher with a talent for noticing what surveys asked people to pretend. She had grown tired of charitable projects designed to produce moving photographs and very little plumbing.

At her interview, Felix asked what she wanted to fix.

“The distance between a person asking for help and the help arriving.”

He stood up and shook her hand.

For three years they worked on that distance.

Then Clement became the distance.

On a clear morning in Port Meridian, Felix sat in the company’s new tower with his shoes off. Leena had arrived with a paper report, an affectation he tolerated because she had been there before the tower.

Across the table sat Julian Crest, chief financial officer, who believed every moral problem became more manageable when divided by a customer’s remaining lifespan.

“Enrollment is excellent,” Julian said.

“Usage?” Felix asked.

“Also excellent.”

“Then why are we here?”

Leena opened the report.

“People are keeping alternatives.”

Julian looked at her as though she had identified a leak.

“They use us for transport and payroll,” she continued, “but they still call Denise at the hotel when a wage is wrong. They use the application to find a clinic, then ask a receptionist to confirm it. They print notices. They save old keys.”

“Of course,” Felix said. “Trust takes time.”

Julian rotated a chart toward him.

“So does revenue.”

The city’s pilot subsidy would expire in nine months. Clement could charge Port Meridian more, but the mayor had an election approaching. It could charge residents directly, but the launch had promised free access. The

remaining option was to sell participating institutions a reduction in uncertainty.

Insurers would pay to know whether a building’s tenants followed safety recommendations. Lenders would pay to know whether a borrower’s work pattern remained stable. Employers would pay to know which workers were likely to miss a shift.

Felix frowned at the last item.

“That sounds punitive.”

“It’s preventive,” Julian said.

“Those are often the same thing from opposite sides of a desk,” Leena said.

Felix smiled. He enjoyed objections from people he could overrule. They made agreement afterward feel earned.

“What’s your alternative?”

“Keep the systems separate.”

“And waste what we’ve learned?”

“Limit what we do with it.”

He stood and went to the window. Below, the bay looked clean from a height that removed its smell.

“The state already makes these decisions blindly. Landlords already discriminate. Employers already punish people for being poor. You know that.”

“Yes.”

“Then you want to preserve arbitrary cruelty because measured intervention offends your aesthetics?”

Leena closed the report for a moment.

She had helped move insulin to flooded neighborhoods. She had seen a dispatcher cry when the missing vehicle appeared on a screen. He was invoking work she was proud of to authorize work she feared. She could feel the join and still struggled to separate it.

“I want decisions people can contest.”

“Then build that.”

“With whom? We’re reducing support staff.”

“We’re reducing repetitive support.”

“The people whose cases repeat are still people.”

Julian checked his watch.

Felix returned to the table and put a hand on Leena’s report.

“Give me a design that protects them.”

This was how responsibility changed owners in Clement. A decision came down as an aspiration. The person below it had to make the aspiration harmless with whatever budget remained.

That afternoon Leena wrote an eight-page safeguard proposal. It required separate records for health, housing,

and employment; independent reviews before an adverse decision; staffed alternatives for people who declined enrollment; and automatic expiration of exceptional powers.

The first revision removed the independent reviews because the city could not fund them.

The second made staffed alternatives subject to demand.

The third replaced expiration with reassessment.

By the sixth revision, the document retained her name and very little else.

She could have left.

She knew this later, and disliked people who kindly explained that she had had no choice. She had had choices. They were expensive, embarrassing choices that would have ended her influence and forced her to tell her husband why the apartment they were buying was suddenly impossible.

Instead she stayed, arguing that someone reasonable ought to be in the room.

There were many reasonable people in the room. They took turns explaining why the unreasonable thing had to happen this quarter.

Her revised project became the Continuity Program. It would introduce new conditions slowly, with measurable benefits attached to each change. Adoption research would

identify the largest adjustment residents could absorb without abandoning the service.

In her first presentation she called this threshold testing.

Julian called it an excellent way to prevent distress.

Felix asked a question that Leena would remember much later, sitting in a room with a recorder on the table.

“If they’re happier after each step,” he said, “at what point have we harmed them?”

At the time, she gave him a complicated answer.

It occupied six slides.

He approved the program.