

Harp Strathe

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The Vanata & The Maeser A Vanata World Novel Book 1

by

Harp Strathe

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Prologue

Maeva watched the countryside, the convoy moving through rolling hills outside of the capital. The hills were green, late spring, a light drizzle and fog drifting. The window through which she gazed was darkened from the outside.

She almost never left the Manse. The Council of Lords was held every three years. Maeva was being taken to Shagal, where the lords would hear reports from the legislature and the executive committees, after which they would vote. It was all a formality.

She wouldn't show herself, of course. Only a select number of lords loyal to the Sashta Usur had ever seen Maeva's face, much less spoken with her. Her anonymity was a part of her security. The Sigel, an ancient and powerful computer system, knew that there was a vanata in residence at the Manse. Maeva's presence at the Council of Lords, held in the building that once would have housed the senate, was confirmed by computer scan and recorded by the Sigel, an old protocol, still active.

It was the second time she'd gone. At least Maeva knew what was going to happen this time.

When they got to Shagal, she would be taken through a private entrance behind a huge white building, nine stories high, and up the stairs, through complicated halls that had been vacated to permit her passage. She and the guards who traveled with her would step into a service elevator. When they arrived, the huge room, ornate and ponderous, would be empty, the boots of the guards echoing in the space. Maeva would step into a curtained box placed there and the guards would lock her in.

When she was safely put away, the main doors would open to admit the lords. Maeva would witness it on the monitor inside the box.

It had been dull last time. Her camera angle had been limited to a view showing a man's shoulder and the side of

another man's face, and the lords had talked about matters she hadn't really understood because nobody ever told her anything.

But boredom wasn't her worry. Maeva was dreading what would happen after the session adjourned, when there would be a dinner held in her honor on the level above, her security moving ahead of her and behind her, talking on their radios in code.

She'd be brought to a dining hall where she would enter after the men were already seated. The men would rise to greet her, a shuffling and stuttering drag of chairs. Everyone would sit and then they would stare at her—all of them. Even the ones who'd met her before at the Manse would stare at her. Members of the Usur Guard would be stationed at the entrances and exits from the room, by the windows, on the balconies, all for her protection. Her chaperone would stand directly behind her chair.

Food would be served, everyone quiet during the meal. When the table was cleared, drinks would be provided and people around her would begin to talk about events and issues and people, the topics unfamiliar to her in their particulars.

Maeva wasn't given access to media sources at the Manse. The films she watched were monitored by her chaperone for content, mostly older stories from the archives. She had no console, no tablet, not even a jotter, and wouldn't know how to access the network even if she did.

Everything that Maeva knew about the larger world was gathered from gossip by the servants cleaning her chambers, forgetting she was in the next room. She listened to people in the halls speaking in hushed voices, officials lingering to talk with one another outside doors in areas she was allowed to wander. Things she overheard security saying when they thought they were alone.

When enough time had passed, the servant would step forward and strike a hanging crystal circle with a glass rod, producing a ringing tone, at which time, hearing it, the men at the table would go silent, that being the signal that Maeva could now join the conversation.

"I've always been curious, Maeva," a man to her left had said three years ago, when she'd been nineteen, when she hadn't known what to expect yet. "What do you enjoy doing?"

Maeva had looked around, feeling the weight of their stares. She hadn't been asked this question before. When the lords were brought to sit with her at the Manse, they were restricted to a list of things they could say to her, some of them actually bringing notes and consulting them about the next topic, Maeva giving the same answers she had to the previous man.

Caught by surprise, Maeva had answered honestly. "I enjoy drawing, Lord Costine," she'd said, having memorized their names from pictures, part of her preparation for the event. Lord Costine's hair had been dyed, the gray from his picture now a uniform and dull black, but she'd still recognized him.

"Drawing?" Lord Costine had echoed. "How very interesting. Perhaps we might see some of your work?"

Nobody had ever asked to see her drawings before, mountains of papers kept in large cabinets in her chambers at the Manse. Maeva had never had a drawing teacher, but she thought a few of them might be good. She had her drawing pad with her. "I have some of my drawings here—"

"I'm sorry," the chaperone had interrupted behind Maeva's chair, speaking to Lord Costine. "There are potentially things in the Vanata Maeva's drawings that could touch on Manse security."

"Of course," Lord Costine had said, his eyes shifting back to Maeva, his fingers stroking his upper lip. "Perhaps I might see them sometime in a more intimate setting, Maeva." She hadn't looked at Lord Costine after that, reaching and taking a sip of water, setting it down.

"Are you warm, Maeva? Your cheeks are flushed such a pretty color," the man sitting across from her had said.

"No, Lord Keel."

"Remarkable skin," Lord Balstur had agreed beside him, not speaking to her. "Flushes everywhere, I imagine."

Low, companionable laughter, a background masculine rumble.

"How about music?" a young lord down the table had said to her. "Do you play an instrument, Maeva?"

"I do not, Lord Evica."

"Perhaps you dance?" another man down the table had asked her.

She'd had to glance at him to figure who it was. "No, Lord Anel," Maeva had said, looking down at her hands.

"That's really too bad. I'd like to see you dance."

There was more general low laughter and agreement, several comments out of her range of hearing. When she'd looked up, she'd seen shared glances, meaningful, pass among them.

"What did you think of the session, Maeva?"

"In what way, Lord Ista?"

He'd given a low laugh, gesturing. "Regarding the matters brought to the floor."

"I'm afraid I couldn't say, Lord Ista."

"Nothing at all?"

"No."

"I imagine that you read quite a bit?" another man said, older. "What are some of your favorite books?"

"I don't read much, Lord Menin."

"Well, I don't suppose intelligence is a requirement for vanata females," Lord Ista said.

Lord Ista's comment had created a moment of silence, too blunt, men looking down or away.

"Actually, the females of her species were selected for intelligence," a man had said, an intense brown-haired man whose eyes hadn't left her, his scent coppery. "She's probably smarter than any of us. Isn't that right, Maeva?"

"I wouldn't know, Lord Locke."

"Well, she's better looking than you, Locke, that's for certain," Lord Tervin had said, the table erupting into chuckles and then loud with more laughter, comments expanding on the theme. Lord Locke hadn't participated, his stare as focused as it had been. Maeva hadn't looked at him.

"Hands," her chaperone had said in a low voice, Maeva's twisting in small motions on her lap. She'd stopped, putting them at her sides.

"Well, tell us what you do all day, vanata beauty," Lord Gavet had proposed from down the table, an older man with white hair whose eyes had barely lifted from her breasts to her eyes when he spoke to her.

"The Vanata Maeva's daily schedule is confidential, a matter of security," her chaperone had said.

It was over soon after that. Maeva hadn't golded for any of them, and she knew that was the point of the dinner.

She hoped she wouldn't gold for any of them this time, either. She was twenty-two and late to choose, she'd been told, for a vanata. Once again, she'd been given the names of the lords and their pictures, which she'd memorized, and she saw many of the same men who had been there last time—

Becoming aware of a sound, a mechanical whine starting high and getting lower, Maeva straightened in her seat, her eyes scanning outside the vehicle. The shrieking whine got even lower in pitch, but much louder, and then the ground seemed to explode somewhere far ahead, the vehicle rocking. Maeva grabbed the handle on the door, her breath sucking in. Beside her, Maeva's chaperone jerked awake with a cry.

They were both thrown forward as the vehicle came to a stop. The opaque barrier between them and the guards lowered with a bang. One of the guards turned around, looking at Maeva, pointing a finger in her face and speaking. The Usur Guard had *never* spoken to her, not once in her life.

"Do not move," he said, and dove out of the vehicle. The world exploded outside, bright lights and smoke grenades and the sound of gunfire. Maeva heard the radio the guard had left in the car, the device squawking, a voice coming through, garbled. "Shep-alij..." someone said, and then there was interference, a spat, and then, "ambush,"

Her chaperone gave another cry, hearing the name. The resistance. Maeva was breathing fast, her eyes darting. The maeser of the resistance had found her. He was attacking the convoy to capture her. The maeser would kill her.

followed by crackling, "...air."

Someone wrenched her door open, the chaperone crying out a third time as hands came, yanking Maeva out of the car.

Chapter One

Shep strode through the smoke and rubble, passing a jeep on its side, its contents spilled. A dead usur guard was sitting, slumped, staring blankly, a red-rimmed and still-smoking hole in his side. Patrick, Shep's second, was walking fast to keep up with the maeser's longer strides.

"You're hit," Patrick said, leaning to look at the blood on Shep's shoulder.

"Shrapnel. Where have we looked?"

"Where haven't we looked?" Patrick replied, gesturing around himself at the remains of the enemy convoy. "We've searched the vehicles. She can't have gotten to the tree line. We've got drones all up and down the ridge."

"Any chance one of the drones got her?"

"No way, Shep. Not unless she can make herself invisible to heat sensors."

"We don't know what that vanata bitch can do. Expand the radius of the search. We have a camp?"

"Twenty-six helos southeast. We've thrown a shield around it. They won't know we're there, not unless they try to land on top of us."

Shep stopped, turning to his second and leaning in. They'd been in this together a long time, since the beginning. "We have to find her, Patrick, or our people died here for nothing. Search it all again. Look for a body." They could not linger. The usur's forces were on their way, never doubt it.

"You got it, Shep," Patrick said, heading out.

Shep strode toward the worst of it, fires still burning, the stench of hot metal, burned canvas and burned flesh. The mission had been to capture the vanata, but if they couldn't find her alive, maybe they would find her body in the twisted wreckage around him. That would be an outcome he could live with, but they needed a confirmed kill.

Mud sucked at his boots. At least it wasn't raining anymore. His men straightened as he passed, making the

hand signal for his rank. It had been a big operation, a long time planning. The ambush had ripped through the Usur Guard, for all the convoy had been well defended. Those fuckers had been far too confident, not imagining the resistance would be so bold as to try to take them in daylight, not far from the capital and out in the open.

But the vanata would be worth it, if he could get his hands on her. And Shep wanted her. He wanted her so bad.

The resistance hadn't taken as many casualties as he'd had feared. Still, sixteen dead, and he'd lost Vick. Shep's mind flashed to his friend on the ground, Vick's chest crushed. They'd known each other from before the war. Vick and his stupid laugh, his jokes. Sixteen good men dead to capture that woman.

And now they couldn't find her. Shep released his breath. He shook his hands, rolling his shoulders, wincing at the right one, trying to release his tension as he walked.

They'd gotten a picture of her, a drone shot when the convoy had left the Manse. Dark hair, just the upper part of her face. Not enough to really know what she fucking looked like, of course. But she'd been here when the battle started. There was no way she wasn't here now.

Maeva, the usur's daughter. Key to winning the war.

The resistance had been trying to get to her for years. The usur knew his daughter's value. Maeva was a vanata like her golden-eyed mother Shal had been. Being mated to Shal had put the Sashta Usur's ass on the throne to rule what had once been a free colony world, generations of self-governance.

Free until a minor Sashta lord had found a last remaining vanata, which meant he could take the Sigel and all its defensive capacities. The Sashta lord had then declared himself the new usur, disbanded the senate, murdering a portion of its members and threatening the others, after which he'd brought back the slave malls, the executioner fields dotted with bodies.

There weren't even supposed to be any more vanatas. They were supposed to be extinct. But the usur had found Shal, mated her, taken the throne and sired his daughter, Maeva. When that bitch mated, it would start the cycle all over again, another lifetime of oppression.

They needed the vanata neutralized.

Shep stopped, backing up, looking to his right. His men were gathered in a clear area past the trucks. He turned and went that way, hearing laughter.

The men were concentrating on a group of women in veils who were huddled together. As Shep approached, one of his men grabbed a woman's arm and pulled her out of the group and against himself, his hand running down her back and over her ass.

"Baker!" Shep barked.

The men stopped laughing, all them turning to look at Shep, making the hand sign for his rank. They straightened. Baker saw Shep's face and released the veiled woman so abruptly that she stumbled, falling to one knee, her hands going into the mud, the silky blue skirt she was wearing pooling around her, getting filthy. The woman got to her feet, stumbling into the arms of one of the other veiled figures.

Baker straightened, making the hand sign.

Shep slowed. Arriving, he got in the man's face. "What the fuck are you doing, Baker?"

"Securing the prisoners, Maeser."

"Do you often hump people you've just met? Are you desperate? Should I warn the other men you're horny?"

"Only when they're captured pleasure slaves, Maeser," the man answered, another man to his right fighting a smile, Baker's own mouth twitching.

"Do you remember how these women got to be pleasure slaves?" Shep said.

Baker erased the smile. "They were civilians chosen by the Usur Guard, Maeser." "Do they look like happy slaves to you? Did they choose this misery?"

Baker looked uncomfortable, glancing at the women. "No, Maeser."

What a prick. "Do you have a sister, Baker, or did your parents give up on procreating after they had you?"

"No, they didn't—Yes, Maeser, I have a sister."

"What's her name?"

"Saran, Maeser."

"How old is Saran?" Shep said.

"Saran's just turned fourteen, Maeser."

"How would you feel if Saran were unlucky enough to catch the eye of one of the Usur Guard because she was careless enough to go to the market to buy some bread?"

"She's just a kid—" Baker began, and then exhaled. "It would be awful, Maeser."

"Did you know that the usur's' pleasure slaves are sometimes as young as your sister?"

Baker swallowed, the other men shifting, all of them glancing at the women and then looking at each other. "I hadn't heard that, Maeser," Baker responded.

"Now you have. Do you think you could extend some fucking empathy to these women?"

Baker nodded, his shoulders slumping, glancing at them again. "I hear you, Maeser."

"Good, because you're in charge of them. You're responsible for all of them, Baker, and if anything happens to them, I'll be coming for you personally. Do you believe me?"

"I believe you, Maeser. I messed up. I'll make sure they're safe."

"Fuck you, Baker," Shep said, stepping away.

"Thank you, Maeser," Baker answered.

Shep approached the women. They were huddled, staring at him. They were all veiled, dressed in long sheer colorful silks that wrapped around their bodies. Fucking slippers on their feet. "Find them some real clothes," Shep said, several of the women looking around before they seemed to realize he was speaking to his men. "Which one of you will talk to me?"

One woman drew away from the group, stepping forward. Her light brown eyes were wide. He couldn't see her features behind the veil. "I will. What do you want?"

"What's your name?"

"Clara, Maeser."

"Thank you, Clara. Tell Baker if you need anything. We'll be moving you to a new location. There will be water and food there and medical attention, if you need it. I'm bringing in two other men I trust to ensure your safety. My people will need all of your names and where you came from. We'll do our best to get you back to your families."

Shep began to walk again. He ran his hand through his hair. Dammit, he didn't need this right now, and Patrick hadn't broken his silence to say he'd found the vanata alive, dead, or somewhere in between. Shep would take any of the three. But evidently she was fucking invisible. Shep's guts were in knots. He strode by the women, who shrank from him. He glanced at them as he passed.

He stopped short, staring at one who met his eyes, hers wide above the veil. She froze and then looked down.

But he'd seen it. A ring of gold around the blue iris. Vanata. Oh, clever girl.

He watched as she attempted to fade into the group of women. Shep leaned his head into his shoulder, never taking his eyes off her, activating his com. "This is 4-2-4-2, looking for Chance."

"Chance here," Patrick answered, his voice tense.

"Stat transport newhome, cat is near the bag but not in it, back."

Patrick blew out his breath. "Good to hear, location, back."

"Left field, northwest site, bandit run, six minutes," Shep answered as he approached the women.

They shrank from him, all eyes, and he plunged his hand into the silky mass of them, finding the arm of the one he wanted, pulling her out. She came struggling and then stilled as he shook at her to stop her efforts, staring down at her, at the eyes. She wasn't even trying to hide them.

Clara emerged from the group, seeming to find some sort of courage, Shep's eyes shifting to her. "Please, Maeser," Clara said. "Take me instead. I'm far more skilled. She's stupid and ugly. You deserve better for your kindness to us."

He smiled at Clara fiercely, feeling a surge. The vanata. He fucking had her. "I don't think so, Clara. Shapi, tell Evans to detain Clara. I have a feeling she's more than just a pleasure slave. Transport her to base. Make sure she doesn't disappear."

Shep dragged the woman he'd pulled out of the group with him, ignoring when she stumbled trying to keep up, supporting her weight easily, heading for the northwest corner of the camp where air transport was on its way.

He checked his watch. Four minutes out. He stopped, turning to the woman, who hadn't spoken, although she was breathing fast behind the veil. He ran his hands over her shoulders and then her breasts, high and full, down her belly and around her back to one very round ass. She arched away from him as his hands moved up over her waist, deep curve, and then to the flare of her round hips, each leg to her ankles.

He came up and grabbed her hair under her veil, extending her head back, getting nice and close, bringing his lips to her ear. "Any weapons, pleasure slave?"

The woman shook her head, a tight movement, not speaking. He lowered his nose to her neck, inhaling. The scent at her throat. He felt a surge in his body, her skin silky soft. He'd heard about the effect vanata women could have.

There were all sorts of stories. There had always been stories.

Vanata bitch.

He released her hair and grabbed her arm again, pulling her with him. They arrived as the air transport did, automated, lighting down. Guiding her, he followed her in. Shep passed her to sit to her right as the transport lifted, loud. She leaned away from him as they rose into the air.

Shep turned to look at the vanata, but she'd turned her head away, staring out of the open transport door and the lengthening drop, her hands twisting in small tense motions on her lap. Thinking about jumping, maybe. He grabbed her right arm, tightening his grip. She didn't get to die yet. He had questions for her first.

He fucking had her. He was sure of it. The golden rings in those eyes didn't lie. Maeva, the last living vanata, daughter of his enemy, the usur. Sashta nobility to her core, a highborn spoiled bitch whose death would turn this war in their favor.

And whatever kindness they owed to those women they'd captured didn't extend to her. She was the daughter of the usur. She was a vanata, the reason they were in this war in the first place. He smiled at her fiercely, knowing she didn't see it.

His fingers practically met his thumb around her arm, her limbs delicate. He noticed how tightly he was holding her and released her arm, moving his hand, finding a new spot and gripping firmly. She still didn't look at him.

They arrived. The shielding made his teeth ache as they passed through it, the transport touching down on the rough grass, already flattened. He pushed her out of the door, his hand still on her arm, and supported her weight while she regained her feet, dragging her toward the temporary camp, his men passing every which way.

They stared at her, puzzled by the silks, he was sure, but Shep saw the hope in their eyes. They all knew the stakes.