

# Betera's Factor

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## IN MEMORIAM

For Meme,  
whose love, faith, and optimism endure. I miss you, always.  
Wherever your spirit is, I am there also.



## TO CAROL SHETLER

Thank you for your encouragement and insight. You were with me through every iteration of the manuscript, scene change, and plot twist. You asked the tough questions to move the work forward. I could not have finished this project without you in my corner.



## CHAPTER 1

Melee Tragnor ran through the corridors of the detention center on the grounds of Plant 13. The technician was desperate to escape from the Fordham, modified humans who used psychic sensors to track human emotions.

Every employee at the plant was currently lining up for interrogation. They were as sheep to the slaughter, blindly marching toward the torment of correction. Melee longed to bring them out of their sedate consciousness for her fellow citizens did not understand the linked nature of pleasure and pain. They were numb to how happiness could spring forth from sorrow, and how strength rose from the so-called burdens of a heavy heart laden with disappointment.

Beta Union claimed to rid its population of negative emotions by replacing oppressive and obsolete feelings with a hollow utopia devoid of personal attachments and self-centered desire. If citizens were free from such a smokescreen, they could face the evil of Beta Union's constitution, a code despising everything but joy, which robbed its citizens of the capacity to

experience all their feelings. Melee believed these were essential for balanced emotional health. Without such experiences, how could her people call themselves whole?

There was very little time to contemplate the answer to the question. The Fordham, led by a senior sentinel named Prell, were relentless in their pursuit and as they closed in on Melee's position, the realization of that dream became more unlikely.

Her legs felt like gelatin, wobbly and ready to slide from underneath her hips. No matter how tired Melee was from the arduous chase, she could not stop to rest.

Melee remembered the last time she encountered Prell and his guards just before she slipped from their grasp. His tight jaw reflected a determination to extract the truth surrounding the fire raging within Plant 13.

Prell paused at an intersection, continuing to tune his senses to Melee's vibrations. She was close, the scent of her fear distinct. Two more Fordham crept behind him with rail pistols in hand. A single beam of red pulsed down the center of their faces, indicating the presence of antagonistic feelings.

"This way," Prell said, pointing to the right. "She is trapped and there is no escape."

His assessment of the situation was correct. Melee had reached a dead end, a locked gate for which she had no code key. She frantically pushed buttons on the gate's keypad, hoping for a miracle exit. There was none. She turned around, pressed her back to the door, and listened to the sound of the sentinel's clicking heels encroaching on her position. There was but one recourse left.

"I won't go!" Melee shouted to Prell and his band. "I don't need to atone. There is nothing wrong with me!"

"As it stands, you are guilty of expressing hostile vibrations," he responded. "Your present state of agitation testifies to that fact."

## BETERA'S FACTOR

“What I am is real and what you enforce is a lie,” she breathed, her chest heaving at the thought of what was to come.

“Arrest her,” Prell motioned to a female guard standing beside him. “She is to be taken for treatment.”

The woman came forward, gripping Melee’s arm, but the technician had no intention of surrendering. Instead, Melee fought her captor, seizing the sentinel’s weapon and knocking her to the floor.

Prell aimed his pistol at Melee. “Think on your decision,” he said. “You need not die, but we will oblige you if deemed necessary.”

“I’m dead already, just like everyone in this vapid world.”

Before Prell and his cohorts could react, Melee placed the weapon against her forehead and squeezed the trigger mechanism. A burst of energy erupted from the weapon, turning her head into sanguine pulp, and depositing a mess of flesh and bone on the wall.

Prell wiped a palm along the resulting stain, smearing the spatter. He raised his fingers to his nose, rubbing them together in a macabre gesture. The sentinel’s eyes then gleamed white, choking the color from his irises.

“Technician Tragnor was obviously very ill and beyond redemption,” he said with a mechanical grin to his comrades. “This cure was best for her. She will not contaminate others.”

Crawford Lear exhaled slowly as he stared out of a window toward Unity City’s skyline. His arms were crossed and his face blank. The sunset beyond the translucent State Building heralded the coming of the night with its burnt orange glow. Beta Union’s capital was indeed magnificent and in Crawford’s mind, no other city in the habitat came close to its beauty.

The metropolis featured towers and hubs combining metal, crystal and natural stone. Prefabrication and plastics were used

## BETERA'S FACTOR

sparingly in the striking buildings. Most boasted floor to ceiling windows that let in maximum natural light.

Other structures, laced with suspended apparatuses, almost defied gravity. For the most part, much of the architecture was firmly rooted in the earth. Everywhere you looked, there was something pleasant to see. Plaza fountains flowed generously with water and elegant blooms dispensed lush fragrances into the air. Public screens, in quadrangles and other open spaces, provided daily news and various programs such as sporting events, plays, and musical performances.

The streets were a bustle of noise as light trains traveled swiftly on shimmering tracks and citizens clothed in shades of the spectrum moved about with fervent energy. Everyone wore attire specific to their occupation: green for harvesters, yellow for vendors, and gray for the technicians. Fitted blue uniforms, in the hues of cobalt and cerulean, graced the bodies of Aero and Aqua employees. Crimson signaled scientific and medical vocations. Robes of aubergine cloaked senators while esteemed engineers, like Crawford, donned chocolate brown.

Last, there were the Fordham in their sleek white uniforms. Most wore accompanying capes, the better to conceal the deadly weapons they carried. Crawford often wondered why none of them were outfitted with stun rods. It seemed to him that if the habitat's main credo was built on anti-violence and the abolishment of all negativity, then the Fordham should not carry such weapons. In the wrong hands, the very nature of the instruments made them detrimental to a peaceful society.

Crawford turned away from the sight, his thoughts shifting to the next morning when at the age of thirty-four he would officially become the youngest Grand Architect of Beta Union. It would be a daunting task, managing the entire infrastructure of the habitat, and supervising the many engineers and

constructs who would be under his charge. In this, he felt no apprehension. What he felt was sheer excitement.

The responsibility was a challenge Crawford accepted with great personal pride even though pride was fast waning in Beta Union. Pride was once a source of individual satisfaction, a sense of a job well done. Now, it was a perversion, lumped in with the other professed negative vices, believed to have no value to the human spirit. Joy, gratitude, serenity, amusement, and loyalty to perpetual elation were the sole hallmarks of Beta Union's doctrine. These precepts were created by its founders roughly a century ago and upheld at all costs.

*Hence, the Fordham*, Crawford inwardly reminded himself.

Crawford was familiar with the early measures taken to create Beta Union's utopia. The first step took place when political radicals seceded from the Birth Born Coalition who ruled the founders' home planet of Enoch, a world riddled with persistent contradictions on every ideology imaginable. On Enoch, there were too many religions, too much discrimination, too little resources for the aging and impoverished, too much violence, and an unhealthy imbalance of power.

The Birth Born Coalition's concepts provoked wars against families, an extreme gap between the privileged and working classes, and forced allegiance to an absolute religious rule. While radical secessionists agreed with the Coalition's beliefs on the majority of the seven deadly sins and their respective contribution to demoralization, they surprisingly defended lust and sloth as a human right, which if all else were corrected, people could enjoy to their heart's content as no one would need to be burdened by a depressive life on Enoch.

To the radicals, lust was a natural biological trait. Love and marriage were selfish acts leading to jealousy and violence. In fact, love in all its forms, whether familial, monetary, religious, or romantic, was deadly. This declaration caused the Birth Born

Coalition to banish the radicals from Enoch and exile them to the stars. It was widely believed that the radicals would die in search of a world.

That belief proved false as the radicals found a place to suit their "immorality." Their forced migration led them to a planet they chose to christen as Tal. In their new environment, repression of humanity's darker half, and the reordering of consciousness allowed them to pursue an alternate hierarchy of needs. To create a fresh history, the founders and their successors concealed Enoch's history from citizens, choosing instead to offer a safe environment with widespread financial security, and isolation from foreign influence and fanaticism.

The founders introduced what appeared to be an egalitarian regime favoring all races, sexual orientations, genders, and abilities. Yet, though Beta Union was far away from the scattered conflicts of Enoch, some things remained unchanged. Its clandestine history was privy to those at the highest levels of government but not ordinary citizens.

*They'll change soon enough,* Crawford pondered.

He continued watching the activity in the street while ruminating in silence. Crawford was alone with his thoughts but not alone in the room. A woman, dressed in red, sat a few paces behind him in an oversized gray leather chair. She held a square sheet of translucent material in her lap. It was no thicker than ordinary paper but pulsed with information. A glowing white orb sat beside her on an end table.

"Do you see something interesting?" she asked, tucking her dark brown hair behind an ear.

Crawford turned around, relaxing his six-foot frame against the window glass. "Not particularly," he said, unfolding his arms. "It's a typical evening. Business as usual."

"What would someone born and raised in Delphia know about a typical evening in Unity City?"

## BETERA'S FACTOR

"It's not as if I've never been here before," Crawford responded, taking a seat opposite the woman. "Betera used to bring me here when I was a boy. She said Unity City's residents were the epitome of proper decorum and everything Beta Union expects from its citizens."

"Does that mean you think residents in other provinces aren't good examples of how people should behave?"

"No. Every province is the same for me."

"As they should be," the woman said softly. "Delphia once enjoyed an elevated status above all other provinces until a time came when its reputation was sullied."

"I'd prefer not to discuss that this time if you don't mind."

"It is only important that you never forget what you learned," the woman said. "No province can stand above another. Exultation is for everyone. It is something we must share, never to keep to ourselves."

"I suppose," Crawford murmured, pushing his hair away from his eyes. The motion exposed silver strands blended throughout his dark locks.

The woman looked at the sheet in her lap again. "Your record is perfect. You have never come to therapy. Is there something you feel you need to purge now?" she asked, focusing on Crawford's youthful face and verdant eyes.

"Not really. Everything is as it should be."

The orb changed color, flickering from white to yellow. The woman tapped something on the sheet. "You are experiencing some mild stress."

"It's not telling you something more explicit?" he asked, poking fun at the sphere.

"No, the Fordham are far more accurate, but I doubt you will ever have to be in their orbit. You strike me as very compliant," she said.

Crawford let out a huff and rose from his seat to return to the window. "I'm certainly not stupid enough to ever require the Fordham's particular remedies."

"In the time we have remaining, you may express any feelings of concern on the subject."

The orb's color shifted back to solid white. Crawford was suppressing his feelings, returning to an even-keeled state of normalcy. "That's not necessary," he said. "I grew up in the groups. I know why they were made the way they are."

"They are beneficial. We don't have to tag as often."

"Have you ever tagged anyone?"

"Once," she said, her voice low, almost a whisper.

"Did you feel sorry for them?"

"No. They were in error. Violations can't be tolerated if we are to remain a healthy and prosperous society."

Crawford's gaze swept to view the street once more. "Aren't dark emotions necessary to mature and learn about one's self?"

"Negative emotions hinder our well-being. They hurt us, they hurt others, and have no value anymore," she said. "Complete health is achieved by sustaining bliss at all times."

Crawford backed away from the window and crossed the floor towards the exit. He put a hand on the door, pausing to turn back to the woman.

"The past doesn't do anyone any good, but are you sure we did the right thing by getting rid of that baby with its bathwater?"

The woman said nothing to the question he posed. She stared blankly at Crawford as he made his exit. Crawford's pocket began to buzz as soon as he left the office. He pulled a triangular device from the compartment, recognizing a call from Delphia waiting on the other end. He squeezed the apparatus, causing a small projection to emanate from its base. A woman sentinel began speaking from the display.

"Your presence is required at Plant 13, grand architect."

BETERA'S FACTOR

"Is it an emergency? My role isn't official until morning."

"There is a fire at the plant," she said in a monotone voice.

"You are needed at once."

"Tell the duty officer I'm on my way," Crawford said, closing the communication.

*Why put off till tomorrow what you can destroy today?*