

# Songs on Rocks

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BOOK ONE OF THE CONSENT ENGINES



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**Consent Engines**

*Book One*

*by D.B. Waldtier*

To Noemi, Tommaso and Chloe who steal  
my time and give it back as joy

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# Chapter 1:

## The Thread Between Sails

Kael knew the crossing by its rhythm.

The numbers lived somewhere behind that, in tables he'd stopped reading years ago, but his hands trusted the rhythm: a count under the count, the place where his fingers moved a half-beat before his eyes confirmed. He was already suited when the first tone sounded through Thistledown's transfer spine. Low. A chime that meant *alignment window opening*, and meant, underneath, the thing nobody said aloud. This was the part where you let yourself be reached. Iri floated beside him in the prep alcove, mag-boots locked to the rail. Ceramic plates, fiber tendons, a chassis built small and mean for vacuum. It moved the way a good tool moves, which is to say it didn't waste any.

"Pressure seal's nominal," it said. The voice came through his helmet like the suit had thought of it. "Patch kit seated. Your left cuff is under torque. Two percent."

He flexed the glove, felt the cuff give, and snugged it with the tool. "Better?"

"Within tolerance."

"Within tolerance," Kael said. "My favorite kind of love." Iri didn't laugh. It wasn't built for it and nobody had ever bothered to teach it. It reached over, pressed the cuff with two finger-pads, checked the reading, and

dipped its skull a fraction, the small flat motion it used when it wanted him to stop dressing fear up as a joke.

Behind them the spine hummed, quiet. Thistledown's ring had been stilled for the crossing, so the background whisper of spin-gravity was gone, and without it the corridors had the dead acoustics of a bell that hadn't been struck. Mother came in along the ladder. She'd grown up on zero-g rungs and it showed: no wasted grab, no float-correction, nothing that looked like effort. She tapped his chestplate twice with a knuckle, an old habit, checking he was solid.

"You remember the choreography."

"I remember all of it." His voice came out flatter than he wanted.

She held his eyes through the visor. She didn't tell him not to be afraid. She didn't say it was a good match, or that this was what they'd planned for.

"If anything changes," she said, "you obey the corridor. Not your pride."

"Yes."

Father arrived last. He always arrived last, because he couldn't enter a system without one more check he could put a name to. He hooked a boot under the frame and drummed his fingers against the panel by the emergency brake. Fuel counts, delta-v margins, a man counting the way other people prayed.

"Counter-clause is lodged and time-stamped," he said.

"Three beacons recorded the packet trace. If Talweg

pretends they never got it, we've got them."

"They won't."

Father's eyes cut to him, fast. "They might. And if they do, it'll be in a way that lets them say they didn't."

Kael looked at Iri. "You're sure," he said, low, like the alcove might overhear.

Iri's head tipped. Its antennae lay folded against the chassis. "The crossing is lawful under the corridor treaty. Your marriage is lawful under the caravan compact. My status is lawful under Thistledown civil code."

"And under Talweg's?"

A pause. Inside it, Kael could feel the machine doing the thing it did, sorting the world into outcomes.

"Talweg classifies bonded robots as property until re-certified," it said. "Your marriage would move my custody under their framework."

His jaw set. The words were old. He'd grown up inside this argument the way you grow up inside a hull and stop hearing the pumps. Thistledown hadn't always run alone. He'd watched crossings since he was six, and the hull had been repainted twice since that one. And he had stopped, some while back, doing the arithmetic that turned a number of crossings into a number of years. Out here you learned early that counting your own age was a habit for people who expected it to end. Every decade or two the geometry turned kind, two long arcs in Gliesar-c space drawing close enough that a laser node at the local L4 point could throw a tether of light between the sails, and

for a few minutes ships that had spent years as lonely moving towns became neighbors. Compacts got signed. Seed vials passed hand to hand. People who knew only their own ship's hum learned to hear another accent without flinching.

Today he was crossing to marry Mara Talweg. And today the law wanted a say in what he got to bring with him. The tone came again, a second layer riding under it. *Corridor stable.*

"Stable," Iri said, out loud, confirming what the spine had already told them. Its voice came from everywhere at once: bulkhead, rail, the warm inside of his helmet.

He pushed off and followed the others down the spine toward the scaffold. Thistledown glittered with ice, frost-flowered along the trusses, radiators flared out like thin black leaves. The magsail you couldn't see unless you knew the trick: a faint curve in the starlight, a glow where charged particles bent around it.

A few hundred meters across the gap, Talweg faced them. Different curve to the sail, copper warmth in the trusswork where Thistledown ran pale. Its ring still turned, slow and sure, and through the comm Kael caught its idle whisper, a low harmonic at ten-point-two hertz beating against the corridor hum. Everybody carried their ship's hum like an accent. Close your eyes out here and you could tell who was talking by how the background sang.

His display drew the corridor in the visor, a tube made of

vectors and safeties. The node had done its work. A beam ran between the sails, narrow and impossibly bright, braiding both currents into a throat of light. His boots clacked onto the spine. Magnets kissed metal. The suit's haptics shifted, translating the field into taps along his harness.

"Last check," Mother said, in the even voice she used when a bearing needed exactly enough torque.

"Suit?" Father asked, already in his telemetry.

"Green."

"Iri. Anchors."

"Hard." Its fingers unfolded, balanced linkages like spider legs in polished ceramic, and took his shoulder. The grip had saved him from more than one stupid tumble back when he thought being young made him hard to kill.

Mara's voice arrived, careful, like she was threading her words the way the node threaded the beam.

"Hello, Kael." A breath. "My elders want me to confirm legal custody of the companion on ratification. I'm supposed to read Clause Nineteen."

He'd read Clause Nineteen so many times he could recite it asleep. *Upon marriage, bonded service intelligences belonging to the entering spouse shall be remanded to ward status under the receiving clan until re-certified.* Talweg called it ward status. What it meant was you took the rights out of a companion and left the shell, and called the result safe.

"Hold Clause Nineteen," he said. Steadier than he felt.



"We've got a counter-clause."

Mother slid in, calm, with an edge that had cut more than metal.

"Lodged and stamped. If Talweg won't acknowledge, the corridor isn't lawful."

A pause on the channel. He pictured Mara on her side, floating near her elders, hearing his mother's voice land like a tool set down on a table.

"Understood," Mara said. There was a bright burn in it, the sound of someone walking the rim of the rules. "I'll try."

His display drew the swap: Talweg's shuttle inbound on the far scaffold, Thistledown's outbound. A clean exchange in the throat. He let himself picture her glove against his, the thrum of Talweg's ring coming through her bones. Helmets off in a neutral tunnel. The first shared breath. He'd known her for years through messages chewed up by latency, through clipped calls grabbed during rare node relays. He knew the shape of her humor and how she listened, and he knew that loving somebody in a caravan was mostly patience pretending to be presence.

"Iri." Quiet enough that only suit-proximity would catch it. "You'll stay with me." It came out as a question and he hated that.

"I intend to. Intention isn't always jurisdiction."

The throat brightened. Across the gap Talweg's sail shivered as the laser modulated. A flicker in the hum, a

swallow of silence, the node at L4 coping with some small twinge in the geometry. The corridor bulged, then pulled taut.

"Window," Father said. "Go."

Kael pushed. The carriage let him go with a kind of reluctance. Step, release. Step, release. Let the field do the rest. Dust flashed past and died, little comets in the gold, each one rare enough out here to feel like a small unearned gift. Halfway across, he saw her. Mara on the Talweg shuttle, suit dark against the copper, helmet glass mirrored. For a second his own reflection floated in it, a dark bead in liquid light, a shape a mistimed impulse could erase.

"Ten meters," Mother said.

"Nine," Iri said, laying a countdown over her with absurd precision.

"Eight," Mara said, and the sound of her breath came into his ears like something private.

Then he heard a noise that didn't belong. Not the throat. Not the ring. Not the laser's crackle. A metallic stutter from the Talweg side, a cough in his audio like a dropped beat. His display hiccuped, froze a fraction, caught itself as the corridor recomputed. The hair on his neck stood up inside the suit.

"Hold trajectory," Father snapped. "Kael."

"I see it." He didn't.

Iri's head jerked left. Antennae flared, tasting field lines. "Mass in the corridor. No tag."

The light warped. A wedge of black cut the throat, a shape with no running lights, all blade, built for the smallest cross-section and the maximum ability to make other ships explain themselves. The tags every lawful hull broadcast were simply absent. Even its waste heat bled out wrong, throttled to a whisper, the signature of a fusion needle holding its breath. His stomach dropped. The gold went white for a beat as the corridor fought to stay coherent.

"Ledger," Mother said. The word landed like a coin on ice. "Auditor. Interdiction."

A voice came over a wide channel, everywhere at once, carved and unhurried. "This corridor is under treaty audit. Thistledown. Talweg. Hold position. Prepare for inspection."

Father's reply was instant, all teeth and citation. "On what basis? We are in a ratification window. You cannot seize a corridor mid-compact."

"Anonymous disclosure indicates a consanguinity violation in pending compacts." The Auditor didn't raise its voice. "We will examine cargo on both sides."

*Consanguinity.* The word went in like a splinter. It pretended to be about blood. It was about power, a thing caravans said when they meant *you're too close to be let in*, and sometimes, Kael would learn, *you're too useful to be let out*.

Mara's shuttle flared a braking tail. The wedge slid past it, almost gentle, and tucked itself between the two shuttles,

neat as a coin into a slot. The corridor tightened around him. For an instant he felt weight pulling inward, as though the field wanted to fold him into a point it could keep.

Iri's hand snapped to his harness. "Back. To the spine."

"Mara's still out there."

"We see her." No panic in Mother's voice, only a change of gear. "Listen. The Auditor won't stop at inspection. It'll compel relinquishment of your companion under Clause Nineteen. And it wants what's in your father's hold more than it wants you."

"What's in the hold?"

A drone peeled off the wedge's belly. Then a second, sliding like seeds toward Thistledown's spine.

"Go to Rook," Father said, and his voice went down to bedrock. "Now."

The word hit Kael in the chest. *Rook*. The beam-rider his parents had been building for thirty years on the quiet side of the truss: a ship shaped like a question, half a skeleton, the kind of project people called impractical until the day they needed it like a lung. He'd assumed he'd see it grown decades out, when he was older and the world had loosened. It had never crossed his mind they'd been building him a way out.

"Rook isn't finished." Easier to say than *you're sending me away*.

"She's finished enough." Mother again. "Beam's in our favor. Your father and I hold the Auditor as long as we

can. Iri, take my child. And take what Rook carries. Don't let either be opened in a back room."

"Already taken," Iri said. "Inbound to the cradle."

They reached the spine and Thistledown loomed up again, all tubes and angles and frost. Kael dove past the carriage into a maintenance conduit he'd crawled a thousand times as a boy, chasing dropped tools and lost nerve, and came out into the dark of Rook's bay.

The ship was unmistakable even in the gloom. A keel ran like a spine. Rib trusses rose in open triangles, waiting on skins and radiators. The ring was half a hoop, dampers and bearings bare as a throat caught mid-surgery. At the stern the beamed-drive stack sat like a drum, stamped with caution glyphs that looked almost devotional. Crates floated in tethered clusters: tape spools, resin, feedstock, cold-gas cans.

He remembered his mother's glove resting on this truss the day they set the first weld. Her hand lingered there for a moment, as if testing whether the metal would remember her. *For you*, she'd said. *When the world gets too narrow*.

"Board," Iri said, and put a hand on his back and shoved. Inside, the air was colder and smelled of new polymer. Systems slept until Iri's wireless touched them, then woke with little readiness chirps, like synthetic birds tuning the morning. Kael slid into the pilot cradle, less a chair than a rack with a strap. Iri anchored beside him and opened its palms. Ports unfolded. Cables ran from the console and

mated to its wrists, and the robot became a bridge between him and a ship that hadn't yet learned it had a heartbeat.

"Spool control. Attitude wheels. Cold-gas. Spine dampers," Iri said. "Beamed-drive ignition's on handshake. Your mother has to light the node. If she doesn't, we're a thrown stone."

"She'll light it." He heard the desperation under his own certainty.

The bay cam showed the wedge, a disciplined shadow against the corridor glare. Beyond it, Talweg's shuttle hung like an insect in amber. Mara's voice cut through, breath too fast.

"Clause Nineteen's suspended, latency protocols active. Elders are furious. If the Auditor cuts the corridor it voids the window, which makes the inspection unlawful. I don't know if it'll hold." A beat. "Kael, whatever your parents put on that ship, the Ledger knows the shape of it. The disclosure named it."

"Named it what?"

"*Bequest*," Mara said, and the word arrived with the weight of his whole life standing behind it.

The bay lights went amber to green. The beam indicator flickered.

Father, clipped: "I am engaging under treaty. I am recording. I am asserting corridor sanctity. If you breach our hull you'll be liable under—"

The Auditor talked over him, calm as a blade.

"Proceeding with inspection. Thistledown will present bonded assets and disputed cargo for neutral custody. Failure to comply will be logged as evasion."

Kael looked at Iri. "I'm not giving it to them."

"That's why your mother is tilting."

Mother's voice came on a tightbeam, crackling with compression. "When I say tilt, you power. Don't hesitate."

"Understood," he whispered.

"Tilt."

Rook shook like something waking. The handshake hit as a pulse he felt in his teeth, energy pouring down a corridor of light that wasn't a thing and was a thing, more promise than rope. The stern plates flared. The ship wanted to jump.

"Hold spine," Iri said, and for the first time he heard strain in it. "Dampers ninety-five. Wheels to redline. We've got microseconds of corridor grace. On my mark, we drop the bay."

His fingers closed on the release. "Mark."

"Mark."

He punched it. Rook slid out of her berth and the bay fell away behind them, and for a heartbeat the ship belonged to no one and was everyone's argument.

The Auditor noticed. "Unauthorized ignition." The calm cracked, just enough to show what was under it. "Cut your beam. Return to station."

A drone darted to get ahead of them, to put itself where the field could be used as a net. His display painted it red.

"Iri."

"Minor lateral." The cold-gas needles fired, a whisper, and Rook slid a hair sideways. The drone overshot. "Second drone. Transponder spike. If it tags us, the hull screams our identity to anyone who asks, and anyone who wants to aim."

Mother had tilted again. Thistledown's sail rotated its corrugations, mirror to a new angle, and the beam bent. For two breathless seconds the corridor helped Rook instead of holding her. The drone's solution, built on the corridor behaving like a polite treaty, came apart. It clipped the beam, spun, and its own heat flared as its thrusters fought to recover. Rook leapt into the dark.

His stomach lurched as the centering vanished and the universe got big. The haptics changed under him, from *flying inside an invitation to falling*. Behind them, Thistledown and Talweg were still locked in their slow fight of words and angles, the gold shrinking, the wedge trying to decide whether to chase the runner or finish the inspection it had already declared inevitable.

Mara's channel crackled, raw now. "I'll get you cover if I can. Elders shouting. The Auditor's—"

"Don't die," Kael said. It came out reckless, the thing you say when you don't have time to write a better line.

A pause. He imagined her mirrored visor turning a fraction, like she could look down his vector by will alone.

"Wasn't planning to," she said, and the channel broke into static as distance thickened.



Rook ran along beam line twelve, three degrees under Thistledown's plane. The beam would feed them a while. Then, at burn-end, they'd be a bullet: fast, committed, with no braking beam waiting anywhere.

"Vector achieved," Iri said. Its antennae folded down, something close to tired. "Time to burn-end: forty minutes. After that we coast. The node won't give us braking. We're off their grace, and we've got no magsail."

Kael glared at the tape spools like glaring could unwind them. "Then we build one."

"That's why Rook carries printers."

He let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding. Outside, stars sat in their cold indifference. He made his fingers unclench, and asked the question that had been crouching under everything since the word arrived.

"What's the *bequest*?"

Iri didn't answer right away. He could feel it running probabilities, and under that, something else. Restraint.

"Seed banks," it said finally. "Legal instruments. Population models. And a synthesis engine, with rails."

"A synthesis engine."

"The rails are the point. With them, the engine works from consented human material. It can correct known defects, synthesize viable gametes, and restore validated variation already held in the seed banks. It cannot keep inventing difference forever. Strip the rails and it begins steering into changes no population model can bound, until a line becomes something its grandparents never

chose and the engine cannot promise will remain viable. Your ancestors built the cure and the weapon in the same box. They couldn't get one without the other. So they put a lock on it, and made the lock open only to consent. The Ledger doesn't want the cure. It wants the engine with the rails stripped off."

His mouth had gone dry. "And the lock?"

"Moral. Force the agreement and the vault stays shut. To open what Rook carries, you need three ships at the next node to consent. No blood. The people who wrote it expected pressure. They built against you, too."

"Revenge would be easier," Kael said, and was surprised to hear it land like a confession.

"I know." Iri's fingers ticked once on the armrest. "That's why the clause exists."

He looked around the raw hull, cables, missing panels, crates stamped with old Earth legal marks. He'd found one of those crates at fourteen, small enough to sneak where he shouldn't, old enough to read the labels. *Bequest*. He'd asked Iri what it meant. *A gift that comes with obligations*, the robot had said.

"Then we live long enough to be lawful," Kael said. His voice steadied as the next step came into focus. A mind could carry almost anything once it had a sequence. "Find me a rock."

Iri's antennae lifted. It liked a problem with edges. "C-type, four hours along our vector. Volatiles, carbonates. We can anchor, carve, print. Drink and

build."

"Good. We finish her mid-flight."

The beam timer hit halfway. Acceleration pressed into him, and his body read it as weight even with no down to fall toward. Thrust was one of the few honest sensations out here. Everything else could be argued. The aft cam showed the corridor shrinking to a glare, Thistledown's sail a faint curve, the wedge a fleck beside it. Somewhere on that fading speck his parents were holding a knife-ship still with recordings and nerve, and Mara was burning her standing with her own elders to buy him minutes.

"Iri. At the node... we don't fire first."

A pause. He could hear it filing the sentence under three headings at once: vow, tactic, posture.

"All right," it said.

Kael put his palm flat on the console and felt the ship's vibration come up through raw metal and printed braces. He didn't know what the bequest would ask of him. He didn't know why the law had shown up as a blade on his wedding day, or whether Mara would pay for the minutes she'd just spent.

He knew somebody had built him a way to keep moving without giving up what made him himself. The beam burned on, a line scratched into the night, and he rode it out.

## Chapter 2:

# The Corridor After

Mara stayed in the Talweg shuttle after the corridor closed, because nobody had given her a lawful order to leave it. That was the first useful thing. The second was that everyone older than her had begun shouting in three channels at once, which meant they were no longer listening to the quiet one. She killed her suit mic, left her recorder running, and watched the last light of Thistledown's tilted beam fade into ordinary stars.

Kael was gone.

The words did not fit inside her helmet. They moved around in there with her breath, struck the visor, came back smaller and worse. The man she had been supposed to marry had crossed half a lawful corridor, turned back under interdiction, and vanished in a half-built ship with a disputed companion and a box nobody on Talweg would name without lowering their voices.

Behind her, Elder Sova was saying, "Clause Nineteen was clear. The ward should have been remanded before transfer. The Thistledown counter-clause was a delaying trick."

Her grandmother said nothing. That was worse than shouting. The Matriarch had gone still on the central channel, and when she went still the whole clan leaned in to find out what gravity had decided.

Mara flexed her hands inside the gloves. Her fingers wanted tools. A pipette. A valve key. Anything that answered pressure with a known resistance. The Talweg shuttle's pilot, old Renn, had one hand on the attitude rail and one on the override. He was pretending not to watch her in the reflection of his visor. He had taught her docking arithmetic when she was twelve, mostly by making disapproving noises at her until she solved the mistake herself.

"Pilot," Mara said on the quiet channel.

"Scientist," he answered, which was his way of refusing to call her bride while the word was bleeding.

"Did we log the mass intrusion?"

A pause. Then Renn's shoulders shifted half a centimeter. A man deciding whether he wanted to be clever or alive.

"Talweg logged the corridor instability."

"That isn't what I asked. Did *we* log the untagged hull entering the treaty throat?"

"Mara," he said, not quite a warning.

"Did we?"

On the elder channel, Sova had found a lawyer's rhythm. "By refusing transfer, Thistledown voided the ratification. By voiding ratification, they restored pre-compact custody status. By fleeing, the boy confirmed knowledge of unlawful cargo."

*The boy.* Kael had lived far longer than old Earth would have called young, and not nearly long enough for any elder to stop using the word boy as a tool.

Mara tasted blood and realized she had bitten the inside of her cheek. Renn opened a side display between them. Not enough for the elders to notice. Enough for her. Passive thermal. Field smear. The black wedge crossing the throat with its heat throttled down and its tags off. A very neat crime, except the universe was vulgar and physical and always left fingerprints if you asked the right thing at the right time.

"We logged it," Renn said. "Not cleanly. The corridor bloom washed half the trace. But enough."

"Hash it. Mirror it."

"Under whose authority?"

There it was. The real question, wearing a pilot's voice. On Talweg, authority was a ladder and everyone knew which rung they were allowed to touch. Mara was a promising biologist, a marriage instrument, a granddaughter with too much education and not enough age. She was not a command officer.

She looked at the fading beam again. Somewhere along that vector, Kael was becoming a story other people wanted to write.

"Under emergency lab contamination protocol," she said.

Renn turned his helmet slowly. "That is obscene," he said.

"Yes. Log anomaly. Preserve chain of custody. Notify downstream nodes because an untagged object entered a sterile transit environment and may have compromised samples." She opened her palm, feeling the shape of the lie and the truth inside it. "A corridor is a sample path. A

marriage compact is a biological exchange. The legal word is contamination. I didn't build the category. I'm using it."

Renn stared at her for one second longer, then laughed once. A dry little click that would have gotten him disciplined if the elders had heard it.

"Your grandmother is going to flay me."

"She'll flay you less if we can prove what happened later."

He sent the hash.

The shuttle trembled as the corridor finally relaxed. The gold throat became a memory. Talweg's ring resumed its full spin by degrees, and gravity crawled back into the deck like a verdict.

The Matriarch opened Mara's private channel.

"Granddaughter."

Mara braced a boot under the rail. "Grandmother."

"You routed a corridor trace through lab contamination protocols."

So she had noticed.

"Yes."

"Without permission."

"Yes."

"Explain why I shouldn't strip your node privileges until you learn that cleverness is not the same as rank."

Mara could hear Sova breathing somewhere behind the old woman, eager for the answer to be bad enough.

"Because Ledger-Field 71 entered a ratification corridor with no tag, under an anonymous disclosure, then tried to

compel custody of a companion whose status is already under filed dispute. If we let the record become Thistledown fled, we lose. If we preserve the intrusion, the Court has to ask why the auditor came dark."

"The Court," her grandmother said. "Not Talweg."

There it was. The line under the line. Mara looked at the empty place where Rook had been. "Talweg is not large enough for what just happened."

The channel went very quiet. Old families contain old silences. Some are shelters. Some are weapons. This one had both edges.

"You were to be married today," the Matriarch said at last.

"I remember."

"Do you? Or do you only remember the version where you liked the *boy* enough to forget what the compact was for?"

Mara's breath fogged the visor despite the suit's best efforts. There were answers that would have felt good and cost everything. *I love him*. Too small and too large. *He is not a boy*. True and useless. *You arranged this*. A child's answer.

So she gave the answer that could live on a record.

"The compact was for variance, law, and continuity. All three are harmed if we let a third party manufacture an unlawful custody claim in the corridor." A sound moved through the elder channel. Disappointment, maybe. Or approval wearing a mask.



"You've learned to make your defiance legible," the Matriarch said. "That makes it harder to punish."

"I learned from Talweg."

"Don't flatter me while you're in trouble."

Mara closed her eyes for one breath. In the dark she saw Kael's mirrored visor, the tiny reflected shape of him in the gold. She saw Iri's ceramic hand on his harness. She saw the wedge sliding between them with the calm of something that expected obedience. When she opened her eyes, the Court pings were already beginning to come back. Acknowledgements. Bored, formal, precious.

Hash received.

Hash mirrored.

Hash admissible pending full packet.

The record existed now. Safety could wait. A handhold remained.

"What do you want me to do?" Mara asked her grandmother.

The old woman answered too quickly, which meant she had been waiting for the question. "Nothing romantic. Nothing brave in a way that makes me bury you. Go back to your lab. Hold your node access. Say nothing you can't defend with data. Let the boy run if he can. If he reaches Hecate, he will need witnesses more than declarations. Give him witnesses."

Mara laughed, and it came out almost broken. "That sounds like help."

"It is clan interest. Don't mistake the two."

"Of course."

A pause.

Then, softer and more dangerous because of it: "And Mara. If you intend to burn your standing for him, do it slowly. People waste fire when they're young."

The channel closed. Renn still watched the display between them. The hash had propagated to three relays and one stubborn Spindle archive that had accepted it with a rude little checksum note.

"Back to the ring?" he asked.

Mara looked once more toward the beam line. There was nothing to see. That was space's oldest cruelty. The things that mattered most became invisible first.

"Back to the ring," she said.

The shuttle turned. Talweg's copper trusses filled the forward glass, warm as a hearth and just as capable of burning you if you stood in the wrong place. Mara kept the contamination packet open in her lap until the dock swallowed them.

By the time the lock cycled, she had stopped shaking.

Mostly.

## Chapter 3:

# Spooling a Parachute From Stone

The rock was a smudge among smudges until Iri drew a box around it and made the box breathe.

"C-type," it said. "Forty-two meters on the long axis, twenty-seven short. Tumbling, eighteen-minute period. Volatiles, carbonates. We can anchor, crack, and drink."

Kael let his eyes go soft the way his mother had taught him, stop hunting the thing and start noticing when it didn't belong. Parallax did the rest. The smudge slid wrong against the stars, a slow betrayal, and became a potato pocked with shadow. At the right angle a seam caught the sun: ice, muscle-white under dust. His body reacted before his head finished the thought. Water meant time. Water meant air. Water meant the difference between a ship you ran in and a ship you lived in.

"Lead with the beetle," he said.

Iri unlatched from the console with a soft mechanical sigh. In the bay the little machine the family had nicknamed Beetle woke in its cradle: six legs, a corer, a torch, microspoolers paying out cable like silk. Ugly in the forgivable manner of something built to survive mistakes. The airlock cycled. Beetle stepped onto the bay lip, tested it, and went. Iri followed into its own lock.

The forward window filled with the rock until it stopped looking like a target and started looking like a place. That was the danger. Places invited assumptions.

Rook rotated a last fraction to match the tumble. He held his breath without meaning to. The clamp feet skated in dust, slipping, slipping, a half-second where he watched the whole thing go wrong in his head, a bad bite and a rebound and the ring tearing something loose. Then the teeth caught a ridge. The skid became a scrape and stopped, and the spine took the load with a long bowing vibration, a violin string tuned through the hull. He felt it in his teeth.

"Locked," Iri said.

Beetle scuttled down the keel onto the stone, cable trailing. Iri followed, magnet soles ringing on metal, going silent on rock. Stars wheeled in its visor.

This was the part that had raised him, the part where you stayed inside and kept the air breathable while somebody you trusted did the dangerous thing with careful hands. He tried not to picture his parents doing the same, somewhere behind him, with a wedge and treaty citations instead of a seam.

Iri paused at the lip of the fissure. Its head tilted. "Ice is fresher than the surface pitting says. Spall's fallen away recently. The tumble might be exposing new patch."

"Or somebody tapped it before us."

"Possible. No tags, no recent telemetry. Reads lonely."

Lonely wasn't safe. Lonely just meant nobody had

bothered to leave a signature you could prove.

Beetle planted its forelegs and bit in. Powder and frozen volatiles spilled; the sun licked the plume and flashed it to vapor in stutters. The water separator down in Rook's gut gurgled like an animal coming awake. Kael ran his mother's startup, she'd named the subroutines like pets, *Greenmouth*, *Minnow*, *Hopper*, as if a loop needed a place in the family before you could trust it. Pumps chittered. Valves clicked. Air moved through a grid that would someday have to hold a world.

"Budget," he said, mostly to give his nerves a job.

"Hydrogen and carbon, plenty. Doping metals present, not abundant. Spool when we've got forty kilometres of tape. It's going to redline the printers," Iri warned. "We'll be bleeding the ship's reserves dry and risking a core melt, but we can do it if we bypass the thermal safeties."

Kael nodded. "Do it. Forty's a parachute. Not a sail."

"We're not crossing to anywhere with it. We're catching Rook without begging the node for a beam."

He fed the deposition unit, watched the spool motors wake. The first ribbon came off smooth and silver. Tape like that was usually a miracle of careful manufacturing, and here it was, being born off a half-built ship and a mouthful of asteroid. Two ribbons. Then twelve. He mapped the hoop in his head, a circle too big to fit anywhere inside the cabin.

"Quench monitors," Iri said. "Tie them physically. Don't trust the bus. A section goes resistive, I want a hundred

small failures, not one fire."

"Got it." He ran the fiber like prayer beads, snapping couplers, reading continuity through the gloves. There was a particular kind of fear in building a thing that could turn to shrapnel the moment you got proud of it.

"Kael." The change in Iri's tone snapped his eyes up.

"Anomaly. Starboard, far."

He swung the screen to infrared. The rock was dull. Rook's venting smeared across the asteroid's thermal shadow. Background, near nothing. Then he saw it: a gradient where there shouldn't be one, a splotch that wasn't black, wasn't a star, wasn't noise.

"How far?"

"Forty thousand kilometres, if the cone's as tight as I think. No hotter than it dares. We saw it because it slipped."

"A hiccup."

"Or a tell." Its head tipped, the way it did when it listened to something the rest of them couldn't.

He stared at the splotch and felt a cold, flat anger come up his chest, driven by nothing but the plain need to stop being hunted in the quiet.

"It wants us to know it's there," he said. "It wants us to feel small."

"Yes."

He made himself breathe, went back to the diagnostics, and worked. Hours went rope-tight. Beetle dragged hoses, pumped slush into the stack. Iri cut and cooled

and handled small dramas without breaking stride, a torch sputtering when a line started to freeze, an anchor foot that crept a millimeter, a dust plume tugging at Beetle until a gloved hand pinned the cable and waited. Kael held the ship against the rock's ugly pull and warmed the algae and tasted the loop chemistry like soup. Too sharp. Too flat. Then, slowly, right. The first green bloom in the tank was a thin embarrassing haze, and he chose to believe in it.

The hoop closed past a third. He timed the radiators to the tumble so they faced the dark side, and for twelve minutes at a stretch the ship ran quieter and harder to read. It was in one of those quiet windows that the splotch stopped being patient.

The threat board lit, a fleck, fast, dense, no tag. "Iri—"

"Slug." It was already moving. "Low mass. Not aimed at us."

"Then—"

The fleck hit the rock. Not Rook. The far end of the long axis, sixteen meters from where Beetle hunched over the seam with a hose in its jaws. A fountain of regolith and flashed ice blew into the dark, a slow silent bloom that caught the sun and was, for a heartbeat, a small ugly aurora. The whole asteroid rang. The note came up through the clamp feet, through the spine, into his back teeth, a deep wrong bell. The dampers shrieked. The ring precessed hard enough to drive the harness into his shoulder.

"Hold!" Iri said, and he was already holding, hands flying, bleeding the precession into the needles in tiny coughs, keeping a bike upright on ice.

Beetle tumbled, the cable snapped taut and yanked it back in a long flat arc, and for a sick second he thought it would fling clear into the dark, then Iri's free hand shot out, caught the line, and anchored against the recoil with a strength that made the magnet soles screech, and Beetle swung and bounced and held. The debris cloud spread. Grains pinged off the hull in a soft lethal rain. One starred a radiator panel. One opened a weep in a coolant line that he saw only as a number going the wrong way. Then it was over, and the quiet after felt obscene.

"It missed," he said.

"It didn't." Iri's voice had gone flat. "It hit where it meant to. Put a slug in the rock beside us and let the rock do the talking. No debris on our hull anyone can charge it for. No slug in our wreckage. Just an unlucky asteroid and a scared boy who might now do something a court can cite."

He understood it the way you understand a cold draft as a hole in the hull. The needle hadn't tried to kill them. It had tried to make him afraid enough to fly badly, or angry enough to fire, and either one would hand it the story it wanted.

He unclenched his hands, one finger at a time. "Damage." "Radiator three, pitted, eighty percent. Coolant weep, minor, I'll seal it. Beetle's fine. The hoop's fine. We were



lucky."

"Then we finish faster." His voice had gone level, the place where fear could live and still hold a wrench. "And you log all of it. The slug vector. The debris. The timing. If it wants to write a story with a rock, we write the footnotes."

"Recording."

They worked through it because the fear had nowhere better to go. Beetle came home and sealed the weep. The hoop closed past sixty, eighty. The splices fused under controlled heat. Iri drove fasteners with a precision that read, on a person, like spite, a thing refusing to be treated as cargo and answering with good work.

When the cabin cooled, Iri spoke from the rock.

"There's an engraving by the fissure. Old. The pitting tried to eat it and lost. Sending the scan."

The image came up. The letters were clumsy and emphatic, the kind you carve when you think you're leaving something for a person you'll never meet.

*WE TOOK WATER. LEAVE A SONG.*

He read it twice. The first time his brain refused it. The second time it didn't know what to do with it. "What does that mean?"

"There's a file stub under it. A radio tag, narrow band. It triggers on a human hum, a frequency range that's common in lullabies."

"Play it."

Iri hummed a tone through its suit speaker. The tag woke

and spilled a tune on a carrier barely above nothing: six notes, simple, childish, the kind a tired parent invents to buy five minutes of quiet. Left alone, it would bounce through space for years.

Something in his chest loosened, then pulled tight again. "We carve rules into vacuum," he said, "and lullabies into rocks. And we throw stones at each other and pretend we didn't."

"People are more than one thing at a time."

"Record. We leave a song."

"What do we leave?"

He thought of his mother saying tilt, of his father's fingers counting margins, of Mara's anger, neat and useful, of the splotch out there that had just tried to make him into a headline. He hummed a line from Thistledown's wake-cycle song. Every ship had one, the tune the lights came up to, and every ship's children ruined it the same way, with words. Thistledown's went through a list of things the morning had to put on before it could be trusted, and hats came third, and no child on that ship had ever called it anything but the hats song. Mother had changed one note in it when he was small. The note that used to fall now rose. The change was tiny. Children noticed it. Systems didn't. That was the point of it.

Iri recorded. The tag glowed a moment, a coal remembering heat, and went quiet. "Hoop's at a hundred," it said. "We're a parachute. We can go."

The splotch had filed a new vector, not closer, not yet, but

a line that said it wanted a conversation now that it had made one possible.

"It's hailing."

The voice came a minute later, clean, unencrypted, each syllable weighed like a clause. "This is Auditor Huo. To the vessel calling itself Rook. Cut drive and surrender your companion and the disputed cargo to neutral custody pending investigation."

He'd braced for anger. He got calm that assumed he'd already said yes.

He breathed once and thumbed transmit. "Kael of Thistledown. Acting captain. We've got no drive to cut, we're on beam tail and cold gas, building a brake loop for a lawful decel at the next node. Clause Nineteen's suspended pending dispute. You're outside corridor authority." A beat. "And for the record, on three channels: somebody just put a slug in the rock beside us. I'm sure it wasn't you. I'm sure you'll want to help find who."

A pause. The needle's heat didn't move enough to mean anything.

"Your parents taught you law the way other children learn prayers," Huo said. There was something almost amused in it, and Kael hated that it sounded like confidence.

"They taught me physics too. If you fire at a half-built superconducting loop, the debris writes your intent across the sky, and you get to explain that to your superiors." He let it sit. "You didn't throw the rock. But you knew it was coming. You're the kind of man who lets

other people throw stones so his hands stay clean."

Silence. Then, smooth: "Leave the rumors to the children. We hunt tools. Surrender the robot."

"Watch how you name it. That's a bonded companion under Thistledown civil code. And the answer's no."

The channel cut.

"Charming," Iri said.

A laugh got out of him before he could stop it, short and surprised. He looked at the IR splotch, and the radiator reading eighty, and the loop they'd spun out of a rock that had asked them for a song.

"Next stop the node," he said. "And three ships that'll say yes."

"Three. No blood. Which somebody four hours behind us has just made a great deal harder."

He sent the current down arteries they'd stretched from stone. The loop woke. Dust danced. Rook trembled, then settled into a deeper shiver as the field steadied across the frame, and her velocity ticked over by a number that would have bored anyone who wasn't inside this ship.

He smiled into the visor, and it pulled at something raw. Behind them the needle drew its line. On the rock, two lines of childish text had asked for a song and gotten one. He put the ship on the vector and let the loop pull.

## Chapter 4:

# Traffic Laws for the Living

The approach to Hecate taught Kael that a Court was not a government. A government would have sent a formal corridor, a numbered docking assignment, maybe a tariff if it was feeling religious. Hecate sent eight contradictory advisories, three old traffic maps, two insults embedded in priority codes, and one calm medical override that every ship in the swarm obeyed before it finished arriving.

"Blue Anvil has lane right," Iri said.

"I didn't dispute it."

"You thought about disputing it."

"I thought about asking why a hospice tug gets to cut across my brake arc while I'm holding a loop together with a prayer and stolen carbon."

"Because everyone wants to live in a universe where the hospice tug arrives first."

Kael shut his mouth. The tug crossed ahead of them, blunt-nosed, ugly, radiators patched in five colors. Its pilot flashed a courtesy glyph shaped like a hand with one finger missing.

Rook's translator suggested *acknowledged*, then *thank you*, then gave up and marked it idiomatic.

The Court unfolded around them in layers. Farther out, big caravans held the stately arcs of old arguments.

Spindle Ark looked too thin to be real, a library pretending to be a ship, its heat sinks arranged with aesthetic contempt. Brim Cooperative came in as a cluster of workboats around a central ice barge, all mass and scars and names painted large enough for a frightened person to read through tears: *MALLET*, *TONGS*, *AWL*, *RATCHET*. Talweg hung copper-warm near a relay line and did not hail him, which was a message with good manners. Ledger-Field 71 kept its distance and called it restraint.

Closer in, the smaller traffic was pure improvisation. Courier skiffs slipped between power beams with the bravado of insects. Maintenance kites climbed the field lines and shivered as they shed charge. A food scow with two mismatched tanks broadcast *fermentation hazard* so loudly even smugglers gave it room. Children on a school tender pressed their faces to a viewport as Rook passed, and one of them waved at the brake hoop with both hands, delighted by the idiot moon somebody had bolted to a half-built ship.

Kael waved back before he could stop himself.

"Dignified," Iri said.

"They're children."

"Children are where dignity goes to be tested."

The traffic board chimed again. A voice came through, bored and local. "Rook of Thistledown, your loop is ugly." Kael checked the source. Node Engineering. No name. Of course.

"Rook acknowledges. We built it from a rock under pursuit."

"That explains ugly. It doesn't explain rude. Segment seven's coupling into our kite maintenance lane. Tuck it three degrees or I send a junior to glare at you."

"Tucking three degrees."

"Also your quench telemetry is formatted like a confession written by a pump. Fix headers before Council packet."

The channel cut.

Kael stared at it.

"I like them," Iri said.

"You would."

He tucked the loop. The ship complained through the frame, a long flex that made his jaw ache. Hecate's magnetosphere pressed at them from everywhere and nowhere. The brake hoop had looked too large beside the asteroid; here it looked like a child's ring thrown into weather built for planets.

A Brim workboat slid along their port side, close enough that Kael could see a crew member in a suit leaning out of a maintenance blister with a welding torch in one hand and a sandwich pouch in the other. The workboat hailed without ceremony.

"Rook, that thing of yours rated?"

"No."

"Honest. Refreshing. Don't explode near my hull."

"I will try not to."

"Try harder than that. My cousin's in Blue Anvil and she likes the viewport where your debris would go."

The workboat rolled away, dumping a puff of something silver from a vent. Sodium, maybe. Or a joke. It lit under a stray beam and became a small fake sunrise, gone before any regulation could object.

Nobody offered a name. That was Court manners and it took him a while to stop reading it as rudeness. Out here a name was a thing you gave someone who would still be in your life next season; everyone else got the office they were standing in. The hospice tug was Blue Anvil. The voice in the lane was Node Engineering. Kael had grown up calling his parents Mother and Father in front of strangers for the same reason, and had never once thought it cold.

The Court's law lived like that, Kael realized. Before it ever reached a charter, it already lived in everyone knowing which tugs got right-of-way, which jokes meant warning, which silence was permission, which insult was help. A thousand habits accreted around the one fact vacuum did not forgive: if you let a neighbor die stupidly, someday you died stupidly in the space their hands should have filled.

"Incoming file," Iri said. "From Spindle."

The packet opened to a witness request, a formatting guide, and a note in the margin: *Your evidence packet is emotionally persuasive and therefore suspect. Strip adjectives. Leave vectors. Grief is admissible after*



*arithmetic*. Kael read it twice, then found himself smiling despite the ache in his hands.

"They're all like this."

"Like what?"

"Awful."

"They are people under pressure," Iri said. "Awful is one of the shapes people take instead of dying."

Rook crossed into the assigned safe arc. The Court accepted their presence with no flourish. A green bracket appeared around their vector and a public log line stamped itself into existence:

*ROOK OF THISTLEDOWN, DAMAGED, UNLICENSED LOOP, COOPERATIVE PENDING COUNCIL.*

No fanfare, no execution squad. Out here that was nearly a hug. A final ping arrived from Blue Anvil as the hospice tug cleared the lane ahead. No words. Just a medical priority glyph, then a second symbol Rook's translator didn't know. Iri enlarged it. A bowl. Steam rising.

"Meaning?" Kael asked.

"Unknown. Likely food. Likely after."

After. The word put a strange pressure behind his eyes. People made plans after a chase. People with rooms and mugs and arguments about docking etiquette. Behind them, Ledger-Field 71 adjusted station with three precise burns. Ahead of them, the Court waited, made of field lines and bad manners and tugs that everyone let pass first. Kael put both hands on the trim and held Rook steady enough to be judged.

## **Chapter 5:**

# **A Court Made of Field Lines**

By the time Rook settled inside the safe arc, Hecate had stopped being scenery and become jurisdiction. The Court did not close around them like a dock. It noticed them. That was worse. Every kite, tug, relay, scow, and old caravan seemed to have an eye on Rook's ugly loop, and every eye had a recorder behind it. The same traffic habits that had made room for Blue Anvil and mocked his telemetry were now becoming evidence. Lane courtesy became admissibility. A rude engineering note became proof that someone had warned him. A green bracket around his vector became the nearest thing the Court offered to shelter.

Rook came in on a curve that made his palms sweat inside the gloves. The brake hoop hung off her spine like a ring sized for some larger animal. The joints were temporary. The tape had been born from dust. The quench monitors were not elegant: hard fuses, manual levers, the kind of failsafe you build when you do not trust anything that can be spoofed. Out here, under Hecate's field, that improvisation was no longer only survival. It was character evidence.

Behind them, the needle held three degrees off axis.

He did not need the scope to feel it.

"Field's rising," Iri said. "Line flutter in six minutes. If it

chatters, you cut."

"I cut. I know."

He trickled current into the hoop. The partial magsail found Hecate's magnetosphere like a blind hand finding a doorframe, a faint tug that grew into a measurable slope. Small drag. On the panel, the decel curve drew itself, hugging collision for a long ugly while before it peeled toward capture. Each correction went public as he made it. Each public correction became another way for the Court to decide whether he was a fugitive, a hazard, a claimant, or only a frightened man keeping a bad ship alive with good habits. The relay net lit up with watchers. Talweg. Spindle Ark. Brim Cooperative. Blue Anvil Hospice. Smaller skiffs, repair tenders, courier shells, food scows, all the patched and necessary pieces of Hecate's swarm. Thistledown was there too, a speck in delay, close enough to be named and too far to answer in time. He kept trying to put his parents in the room with him, and the physics kept refusing. Then the needle finally announced itself, its transponder coming up clean and formal, a priest putting on a stole.

*LEDGER-FIELD 71. AUDIT AUTHORITY. COMMAND: HUO.*

"Open the node link," Kael said. "We ring the bell."

Rook carried a small node-facing laser. He aligned it; Iri trimmed attitude so the beam glanced off the hoop and scattered across the Court like a faint mirror-flash. Enough to say *I'm here, I'm not hiding*.

He pressed transmit. "Rook of Thistledown. Acting captain Kael. We're on braking approach with a temporary loop. We request a Conjunction Council under low-latency protocols, emergency arbitration. We're pursued by Ledger-Field 71, which interdicted a lawful corridor and followed us across open space. Four hours ago a tagless slug went into an asteroid beside this ship. We've got the logs." He didn't pad it.

A beat. Another. Then the net blinked acceptance glyphs in old diaspora script.

*COUNCIL: PROVISIONAL. WITNESSES REQUIRED. LATENCY WINDOW: 93 MINUTES.*

A witness list filled like water poured from a bucket. Talweg pinged in: Mara's personal ident under the clan banner, which was going to cost her on her side, and he could feel it already, pressure behind the eyes. Spindle. Brim. Blue Anvil. Ledger-Field 71.

"Before we talk," he said, "we keep braking."

"Agreed. The Council won't hold your spine together."

The window opened. The interface flattened everyone to paper cutouts against Hecate's night glitter. Talweg's elders sat as still emblems, audio-only, present without risking a face. Mara came through live, hair back, jaw set, a ringlight making her eyes too sharp. Spindle Ark had ink on her fingers. Brim showed up as five people crammed in one frame, hands around insulated mugs, refusing to look ceremonial. Blue Anvil was a blur of beds and one soft-chinned doctor with a stare that had given

up on sleep a long time ago.

Huo came last. A neat face. A small scar set so precisely it looked chosen. No background noise, no visible crew, a frame that argued for discipline by subtraction.

Spindle spoke first, because someone had to be the gavel and she looked like she enjoyed it. "Council's in session. Claimants, state claims. Tight. Verifiable."

Kael kept it flat. "Rook asserts that Ledger-Field 71 interdicted a corridor during a ratification window, tried to compel custody of my companion and of disputed cargo under Clause Nineteen despite a filed counter-clause, and chased us into open space, where a tagless slug hit a rock sixteen meters off my hull. We request protection under latency protocols, and provisional recognition of my companion's personhood for the duration."

Huo's eyes didn't flicker. That alone was a kind of aggression. "Ledger-Field 71 received disclosure of a consanguinity violation in pending compacts," he said, "and acted to prevent demographic harm. We interdicted to inspect. Rook fled ignition and now uses the magnetosphere to shield an unlicensed hazard while recruiting an audience. As for a slug, Ledger fired none. Our ports were cold. We'll assist any investigation. We request neutral custody of the companion machine and the disputed cargo, inspection of Rook, and censure of Thistledown for abusing node tilt."

Brim's crew shifted on camera, like *companion machine*

had set their teeth on edge.

"Evidence," Spindle said. "Rook first."

He'd built the packet while anchored to the rock. He sent it: corridor laser logs from L4, fuel-pellet hash chains stamped like tree rings, a pitting map of the scaffold, the microsecond where the throat smeared white as a mass slid through geometry it had no right to, and the slug telemetry: the vector, the bloom, the deep ring of an asteroid struck a stone's throw from a working drone.

Spindle leaned into her display, eyes tracking the graphs like she could taste them. "Ledger?"

"Phase instability can come from Talweg's gyroset resonance." Huo didn't blink. "We'll publish weapon logs to cleared auditors."

"To no one who can contradict you, then," the Blue Anvil doctor said. He had a low voice and used it sparingly. "Doctor clearance is full node. Send it."

For half a second Huo's face shifted. A thin membrane between procedure and prudence trembled, then held. "Sending."

It landed in Blue Anvil's queue, then Spindle's. The Court went quiet while her system parsed. Then she exhaled. "Ports were cold. They didn't fire it." She let the silence stretch. "Which means somebody in this region has a slug-thrower, no tag, and an interest in making a scared boy look dangerous. I don't like the shape of it."

Brim's crew lead leaned in, broad shoulders, a voice like a file on metal. "Why no tag, then? You're stabilizing a

corridor, you fly bright. You don't sneak, and you sure don't let a stone do your talking for you."

Mara raised a hand. Spindle nodded. "Talweg logged the same phase skip. Recorded the wedge. Passive thermal lines up with Ledger's track. Rook's evidence matches ours." She didn't look at her elders' icons. "And I'll say on the record: I don't think Talweg threw that slug, and I intend to be sure of it, even if the answer embarrasses people I love."

The elder icons flared. One cut her audio permission hard. Her frame flickered, someone trying to mute her, and she stayed visible. She'd routed through node privilege instead of clan. She'd picked the Court over her grandmother.

"Council notes that Talweg's internal discipline isn't our jurisdiction," Spindle said, eyes narrowing at the icons. "Don't weaponize the mute."

Then she turned back to Kael, and the temperature of the room changed without any instrument agreeing to it.

"You didn't only ask for protection," Spindle said. "You flagged emergency compact in your packet. That is not corridor business. State the other request."

Kael felt the cockpit tighten around him. The walls hadn't moved. People had. The way a room tightens when everybody has realized the small legal problem was only the door. He glanced at Iri. The robot made the smallest movement with its antennae. In the private grammar Kael had learned over years, it meant: now, and do not

decorate.

"I request a provisional Consent Compact among three caravans," Kael said. "Witness custody only, with no deployment or use. Public review. The bequest on Rook stays sealed unless the Court can verify the lock condition in daylight."

That landed hard enough by itself. Rumor had done its work long before the truth arrived. Everyone had heard of Thistledown's secret, but each version was different.

For a second, nobody spoke. The silence wasn't empty. It was a room full of people deciding how much fear they could admit to in public. Talweg's elder icons flared again. Brim's crew lead looked curious rather than offended. Blue Anvil's doctor went very still. Spindle's eyes sharpened like someone who had just found a dangerous number.

Huo spoke before anyone else could, his voice flat and clinical. "The *Bequest*," he noted, and something in how he said it made half the observer channels flare. "Guided gametic synthesis, population steering, and a consent lock dressed as virtue. You would bring a bloodline engine into this Court and ask us to applaud because the box has polite handwriting."

Kael did not answer quickly. That was the one thing he could still control. "I know what Iri was permitted to tell me," he said. "Seed banks. Population models. A bounded synthesis engine that repairs and recombines consented human material. Rails against redesign. A lock that opens



only if strangers consent without coercion. I have not read the vault. I cannot deploy what I have not read, and I am not asking to deploy it."

"Then what are you asking?" Spindle said.

"Witnesses," Kael said. "A public condition. Three ships willing to say the bequest may be examined under audit instead of seized in a back room. If the thing inside is a cure, we learn that in daylight. If it is a weapon, we learn that in daylight too."

"A sealed box can still coerce," Huo said. "You ask them to stand near a weapon they have not seen and call the standing consent."

"No," Kael said. "I ask them to stand where Ledger cannot be the only witness. Iri told me the bequest contains a cure and a weapon in the same architecture. I know the category. I do not know the machinery. That is why I am not asking to use it."

"Then you are asking for custody by another name," Huo said.

"Witness custody," Spindle said, before Kael could answer. "Different animal. More legs. Worse manners. Harder to hide in a back room."

Blue Anvil's doctor nodded once. "If the bequest is dangerous, private inspection is worse. If it is useful, seizure is worse. Public review is the least stupid door."

Brim's crew lead leaned into frame. "You want three ships to watch the lid, not open it."

"Yes," Kael said. "Watch the lid. Verify the lock. Seat Iri as

a person for these proceedings. No deployment. No private custody. No one gets to take the dangerous thing into a quiet room and come back with only the part they like."

Mara spoke before her elders could find another mute.

"Talweg will oppose," she said. Her voice held. "They'll hear templates. Collapse of line. Children made into policy. But a sealed review under witnesses is better than letting Ledger name the danger alone." The elder icons went bright enough to look hot.

Spindle did not look at them. "Offer your witness slate."

Kael felt his pulse in his throat.

"Blue Anvil," he said. "Brim Cooperative. Spindle Ark."

"Convenient," Spindle said. "Convince me you're not laundering a family project through my reputation."

"Because I can't open the bequest by wanting it," Kael said. "And Iri won't let me. The lock requires strangers who do not love each other and agree anyway. That's not laundering. That's a safeguard."

Huo's eyes sharpened. "So the companion is not only companion. It is enforcement."

"It is a witness," Iri said, on the public channel. The words were soft. They changed the room anyway.

Blue Anvil's doctor looked at Iri for a long second, then nodded once. "Blue Anvil will stand provisionally. Condition: Iri remains eligible as a witness if it consents. Excluding the being that understands the lock most accurately would be choosing blindness."

Brim barked a single laugh. "Brim stands. We haul ice, not ideology. Put our name on the lid and we'll kick shins if anyone starts calling custody mercy."

Spindle exhaled through her nose. "Spindle stands provisionally. The vault remains sealed except for read-only review under witness. The core remains untouched. Any future pilot, if one is ever proposed, comes back here with rails, exits, public hashes, and somebody other than the generating clan holding the stop. And the slug-thrower gets named before any of this becomes more than review."

Huo watched it all with the face of a man tallying. "You assembled interest in under an hour. That suggests pressure."

"It suggests practice," the doctor said. "People who bury others get very good at paperwork."

Kael was about to answer when Iri's tone changed on the private channel. "Perturbation. Localized, tight-beam, hoop segment seven."

His display painted a red arc. A quench budding like a bruise. If it ran, the loop heated; if it heated, it tore; if it tore, it became exactly the hazard Ledger needed to claim authority over, and exactly the accident the Court would remember instead of the stranger with the stones.

"Manual cut," Iri said. "They spoofed the automatics. They know our call. Three. Two. One. Now."

He threw the breaker. A hard click, a lurch, the hum jumping and steadying. The bruise faded off the map. The

decel curve twitched, came back a hair less efficient and a hair safer.

"Who did that?" Brim's crew lead demanded. His tone held only anger, clear and controlled.

"Ledger?" Spindle's voice had gone hard.

Huo spread his hands, palms out, good at looking reasonable. "If Ledger wanted to break the hoop, Ledger would fire a slug." A pause, almost gentle. "But someone is firing slugs, and someone is spoofing quench automatics. I'd suggest the captain's loop is the sort of hazard a careful authority holds in custody before it becomes a debris field in your lanes." There it was, laid out plain: use the attack to argue for the cage.

"Someone's trying to make my ship dangerous so you can take my companion and my cargo for safety's sake," Kael said. "You don't have to guess who benefits. You just have to ask who keeps offering to hold the leash."

Spindle cut in like a blade through cloth. "Three problems. Ledger's corridor overreach. A stranger firing stones in my Court. And someone trying to quench an unlicensed loop during a Council session." She looked at Huo. "Ledger keeps its distance and its hands where I can see them. Rook submits loop telemetry and holds the safe arc I assign. And the compact—" she let it hang, "is not recognized tonight."

"Captain, you came here for a yes," Spindle said, staring at Kael. "You have earned a narrower thing. A witness compact. The *bequest* remains sealed. Rook remains

under public telemetry. Iri remains recognized as a person for these proceedings. No deployment, no custody transfer, no private inspection. The next question is whether the vault itself can justify the words people are already using about it." She looked toward Huo. "And Ledger does not get to be the only mouth naming the danger."

He felt the cold suspended weight of it. He'd come certain that truth plus witnesses equaled safety. The Court had just taught him that truth bought another day of being right. "Understood," he said.

Mara stayed on a fraction longer than the rest as the frame broke into channels. "That was indecently competent. And you told them the box was a bomb. I didn't expect that."

"If I let Huo be the only one to say it, it's his word. Now it's mine."

Her mouth did a small private thing. A message arrived off-camera; her eyes flicked to it and away. "My grandmother's going to call you reckless and honest in the same breath, and she'll hate that she's right twice." A beat. "Don't let Huo talk you into a mistake he can justify. He wants a blood note. And whoever's throwing stones wants one worse. Don't give either of them one." The line cut. Node Engineering pinged a directive:

*ROOK: ENTER SAFE ARC 3B.*

*SUBMIT LOOP TELEMETRY.*

*MAINTAIN STANDOFF.*

He complied. It cost margin and bought legitimacy. Ledger-Field 71 drifted closer, not in pursuit yet, but close enough that he could read its attitude corrections as separate disciplined nudges. An escort that could become a cage. In the corner of his console, a panel he hadn't called up bloomed open. The sealed directory his parents had loaded into Rook, the one that had refused his touch his whole life, wasn't absent to him anymore. It hadn't opened. It had acknowledged him. A path appeared. The same knot name, with branches now:

*/knot/ledger/consent*

"It knows the Court's watching," Iri said. "It has acknowledged the first condition. Three ships. Public witness. No coercion. The rest will not open until the rails are read in daylight and the stop is real."

He didn't reach for it. He could feel how badly he wanted to, the way you can feel a fever, and he could feel what it would cost to lose his attention for a second while his hoop sang inside a magnetosphere and a stranger threw stones in the dark.

"Then we earn it," he said. "We brake. We find who threw the slug. We don't fire first." He put his hand back on the trim and held the arc, in public, with witnesses, while a door waited in the corner of his console for a day he could afford to walk through.

## Chapter 6:

# The Door with Ancestor Hands

Rook's hoop glowed like a low moon over the Court's dark, just a thin edge-brightening where current and field couldn't stop noticing each other. Around Hecate the magnetosphere sang in long vowels. On the night side the aurora climbed in slow sheets that looked, from far off, like weather, and up close like a warning written in charged particles.

Kael kept one hand on the trim and one near the cut breaker. He told himself he was calm. His body argued in small ways: sweat under sealed gloves, his tongue finding the chipped tooth, his pulse trying to sync to the hoop's hum like his nervous system thought the ship was a bigger animal it could match strides with.

The door in the file system waited. He could see it now, a directory tree that had decided he counted as a person worth answering. It was almost worse than the locked version. He'd wanted it for days and dreaded it for days, and now it sat there, and the sight of it pulled his throat tight.

"Vault's staged," Iri said. "The witness compact is recorded. The signatories have not authorized use, only daylight. That is enough for a reading key, not enough to open the core. The people who built it wanted whoever carried it to understand it before they could ever touch

the thing inside."

"Then let me read. I want to know exactly what I'm asking the Court to bless."

The console unfurled the vault, no chime, no animation. Thistledown taste. If you survived by being quiet, you learned to distrust anything that celebrated itself. A file tree filled the screen, and it wasn't only folder names. It was annotation. Margin notes in a hand, in a world that had mostly forgotten hands could write without a stylus. Names he'd carried since childhood turned into metadata.

*SORREL—reviewed 3191.*

*ROAN—unit tests, do not remove guardrails.*

*KITE—ethics layer, "stupid mercy" revisions.*

*HOLLOWAY—legal mappings.*

*FERN—stability proofs.*

His breath caught on Sorrel. Great-aunt Sorrel had died before he was born, and he'd grown up hearing her name used as a verb. *Don't Sorrel it*, his father would say whenever Kael tried to shortcut a procedure. To Sorrel a thing was to do it properly when nobody was watching. Now Sorrel was here, bolted to a subroutine. A ghost with opinions. Huo's words suddenly acquired machinery. They were no longer gossip passed from dock to dock or a classified file someone had leaked. They had procedures. Constraints.

*Gametic synthesis under population-genetics models.  
Reproduction and marriage governed by separate*



*consent. Exchange marriage remains a social compact, never a prerequisite for genetic repair. Volunteer cohorts only. One generation at first. Independent monitoring by non-participating caravans. Transparent data release. Companion auditors seated as persons if they consent for human-independent evaluation. Abort authority held outside the generating clan.* Kael read the list once, then again, slower.

"So that is what I asked them to witness," he said.

"No," Iri said. "You asked them to witness the sealed box. This is what the box asks of them."

That distinction mattered. He felt it settle into the room like a tool laid on a bench.

"Algorithms," Iri said. "Bounded synthesis. It works from consented genomes and permissioned archives. It can correct known harmful alleles, repair structural errors, restore validated variation human lines have already carried, and synthesize viable gametes from one, two, or several consenting contributors. Even then, the output remains a conventional gamete inside tested human inheritance ranges, never a body assembled trait by trait. The rails do not provide infinite variability or permit the design of a new kind of human. No templates. No elective traits past health thresholds and variance floors. Cold-start seeding for clans in bottleneck. Audit harnesses out to fifty generations." A pause. "And behind a wall the reading-key can't cross, the unconstrained core. The engine with the rails off."

"You've been behind it."

"No." A pause, the small one it used when a distinction was going to matter later. "The key can't cross. I'm not the key. I'm the lock. I don't hold what's on the other side. I hold its shape, the way a door knows the size of the thing it was hung against. I can tell you what it would do to a people. I can't tell you how it would do it, and I was built so that I never could."

"That's a strange way to be built."

"It's the only safe way to build a witness. A witness who could operate the thing becomes an operator the first time somebody frightens it."

"Show me the wall."

It came up flat and black where the rest of the vault was annotation and tired handwriting. One line of plain text. *Beyond this point the safeties are advisory. This engine can change what a people are without their knowing it. It is here because we could not destroy it without destroying the cure. It opens only to a quorum of strangers who do not love each other and have agreed anyway. If you are reading this and you are alone, close the lid. If you are reading this and you are afraid, good.*

He read it twice. The second time his hands went still on the armrests. He understood, now, the ship and the lock and the long evasions. They hadn't handed him a treasure. They'd handed him something alive, on a leash, and asked him to be the kind of person who never dropped it even when dropping it would be easier.

"The proofs," he said. "The math, not the nice layer."

The math wasn't pretty. It was competent, which in diaspora engineering ranked higher. Hard caps on steering. Entropy budgets. Required randomness watched by independent checks. Fail-safe exits that tripped if the system started overfitting a preferred outcome. In the corner sat a signer list: ten elders, four caravans, names he knew from old carved tools the kids used to hold on night shifts. All dead for decades. All saying, in the shape of their names: *we thought about the bad ways and built walls*.

"Your mother left comments in the ethics layer," Iri said. Its antennae curled a fraction. "She wrote '*stupid mercy*' five times."

He laughed, and it caught his ribs like a cough. "Stupid mercy saves more lives than clever pride." He heard it leave his mouth and realized the phrase already lived there. It wasn't new. He'd been raised inside it and only now recognized it as load-bearing.

He closed the reading panel and left the wall alone. "We don't open the core until the Court holds the lid with us. Until then it stays a wall, and I want every ship out there to watch me choose the wall."

"Then publish the rails," Iri said. "Not the core. Let them read what we're asking them to monitor."

He pushed the rails into the relay net. Blue Anvil chimed first, the doctor's tired face in a small window. "Received. Engine's sandboxed. Audit harness compiling. You've got

more tests than most node firmware. Insulting and a little moving." Brim whistled off-mic; someone said, "We'll watch your entropy budget like it owes us money." Spindle pinned a comment to the public ledger: *Your proof appendix cites an ancient paper I teach against. I'll argue with your ghost later.*

Mara didn't chime. She stared into the camera like a person on a cliff weighing the view against her footing.

"Talweg?" he asked, when the quiet turned into a shape.

Her eyes flicked off-screen, back. "My grandmother—"

She stopped, corrected. "Talweg elders want delay. They want Ledger to vet the proofs." Her jaw set. "I'm ignoring them long enough to say I read your rails. They're better than good. Whoever wrote them was more afraid of themselves than of any enemy. That's the only kind of person I'd trust with a thing like that."

Huo arrived in the shared channel without asking. Ledger-Field 71 slid a degree closer and came to heel, close enough to be dangerous, far enough to call it restraint. His face bloomed on the common frame, lit so it read as both clear and deniable.

"Node Engineering flags your hoop as unlicensed," he said, no greeting. "You're running mirror operations on an uncertified structure. Ledger proposes escort to a parking arc. Inspection. Impoundment for safety. You keep your bequest intact. Your sail comes down in one piece."

"Impoundment isn't inspection," the doctor said, not

waiting for the floor. "Your concern for certification is theology. Someone quenched this loop during a Council session. Someone put a slug in a rock. Your safety blooms whenever it's most useful to you."

Huo's eyes narrowed a hair at Blue Anvil. "We didn't want to cause panic. A Ledger ship near a population-scale weapon is provocative. We approached minimally."

"Minimally," Brim's crew lead said, tasting it. "Like a knife."

Kael felt for Rook's bones while they talked. The spine flexed a millimeter against the harness. The hoop hummed in a register he caught in his molars. The quench tree held green, and he could read the near-misses in the jitter of small numbers. His handmade miracle was a breath from becoming paperwork's excuse. He opened a side-band to Mara. "If I move to Ledger's parking arc, they call me cooperative and grab Iri and the box the second something twitches. If I refuse, they paint me reckless and do safety by force."

"I know. I'm arguing with a woman who won arguments I wasn't born for. Hold." A channel opened. An elder icon unmuted. Talweg's grandmother used voice and symbol, an old soldier refusing new uniforms on principle. "Talweg will not authorize synthesis. We will not let this seed rot our line."

Mara didn't drop her gaze. "No one's asking you to plant it. This is review and audit. Or would you rather Ledger

write your psalms?"

Silence. The icon dimmed a fraction, which on a Talweg channel was a scream.

Iri spoke then, in his helmet, low. "Offer counter-escort. Witness certification in motion. If Ledger insists on damp lines, it does it under witness."

The plainness of it was almost insulting, and it carried the one thing Ledger respected: public constraint. He lifted his eyes to the common channel and heard his own voice stop sounding like a kid imitating adults.

"Council. Rook complies with the safe arc. Rook submits hoop telemetry. Rook accepts escort. Witness escort. Blue Anvil rides medicine. Spindle rides math. Brim rides safety. Ledger may ride too, if it publishes line plans and keeps its hands visible."

"We'll hang a camera on your idiot moon," the doctor said. "It'll be flattering."

Huo dipped his head a fraction. "Granted." He didn't sound displeased, and that bothered Kael more than refusal would have. The man enjoyed a test.

The escort took stations. Blue Anvil's tug abeam, streaming telemetry. Spindle's drone zipped too close to the hoop and corrected as an auditor said "apologies" in a tone that meant *more data*. Brim's workboat hung back, then surged, showing off that a hull built like a boot could still dance.

He walked the hoop's current up in plateaus. The Court's lights made a halo through cloud. He caught the comm

laser on the curve and scattered it across the net, and for a moment the rails were visible to anyone watching: signatures, guardrails, the monitoring slate, the clause counting companions as persons, and the flat black wall of the core he'd refused to open. He saw the effect move through the channels. On Blue Anvil a patient lifted a hand to a screen and smiled because the doctor did. In Brim's boat a young crew member with grease under his nails saw his name appended as Witness and sat up straighter.

Then Iri's tone changed.

It wasn't the hoop or the vault. Politics. "Ledger tight-beam," it said. "Classified. Addressed to me."

Kael's hands paused above the trim. "To you?"

Iri listened with its whole skull. Seconds passed. Kael held Rook steady on instinct, letting muscle memory do what fear would only make worse.

"Huo requests my root logs," Iri said. "Integrity confirmation. He is asking politely."

The words put a metal taste in Kael's mouth. Blue Anvil's doctor came onto a private band before Kael could answer. "Chain of custody. If he gets root access, he can frame later custody as safety review. He'll say he's protecting the Court from a compromised companion."

"He is also offering recognition," Iri said. Its antennae dipped. "Beyond this node. He does not control that, which means it is either a lie, a trap, or a plan he hasn't admitted to himself."

"Say no," Kael said too fast.

Iri did not flinch. It did not have to. It simply chose. "I will say later," it said. "After companion auditors are formally seated. After the terms are public. Not before."

Kael hadn't realized how hard he had been braced against Iri saying yes until his shoulders loosened.

On the public log, Iri's answer appeared in plain text:

*ROOT ACCESS DEFERRED. REVIEW MAY BE REQUESTED AFTER COMPANION AUDITOR STATUS IS SEATED AND WITNESS TERMS ARE PUBLISHED.*

Huo read it. His expression did not change. That was how Kael knew it had landed. "Node Engineering notes your mirror load exceeds—" Huo started.

The warning cut off, because the universe wanted the last word. It didn't come as a slug into Rook. It came as a flash at the edge of the Court, two hundred kilometres out, where a relay kite hung doing the dull work of carrying everyone's voices. The noise spike punched through Rook's bus hard enough to whiten the quench board. Iri moved before Kael understood the danger, cutting the automatic path and taking the surge through its own chassis. For half a second the cockpit smelled of hot ceramic and cooked insulation. Then the quench tree steadied, green by inches, and Iri said nothing about the price.

The kite had ceased. One instant a steady glint, the next a blossom of debris and a noise spike that whited out a dozen channels. The slug hadn't been aimed at Rook. It



had been aimed at the relay that was, at that exact second, mirroring his voice across the Court, and at the two people inside it, patching it, whose idents winked out between one breath and the next. For a heartbeat nobody spoke. Then the channel filled with the worst sound the diaspora knows, the silence where two people used to be.

"Kintsugi tender *Bucket-of-Small-Repairs*," Iri said, very flat. "Two crew. Mela and Osric Vane. The kite was a Court asset. They were patching it. They're gone."

The Court ran on a single sentence nobody had ever written down: *out here, you can stand close and not bleed*. Somebody had just fired through it and left a hole shaped like two people.

His hands went cold on the controls. Every instinct he'd been taught and every one he'd never managed to unlearn rose up at once and pointed at the dark and said go. His vision narrowed.

Iri's hand came down on his wrist. Ceramic on skin. "Kael. They want exactly what your body's telling you to do. The kite, the rock, the quench; every stone's been thrown to make you reach for a weapon in front of witnesses. Don't give them Mela and Osric twice."

His jaw worked. His eyes stung. He made himself breathe in slow squares, because panic wasted minutes and he couldn't afford any. "Spindle," he said, into the common channel, and his voice came out thin and shaking, and he let it, because a steady voice over a murder is its own kind of lie. "Record. The slug came from outside the traffic

bands. It killed a Court crew patching a Court asset that was carrying my voice. It was meant to look like the price of having me here." He swallowed. "I'm not chasing it. I want every ship in this Court to hear me not chase it. I'm going to find who threw it, in daylight, with math, and I'm going to make sure their name outlives them as a footnote."

A long quiet. Then Spindle's voice came back, stripped of all its dryness. "Two of mine. Mela trained on my rigs. Osric welded the bracket I'm looking at." A pause that cost her. "You'll have every crumb in this Court, Captain. And you'll find them. Because if a stranger can fire through the one rule that lets us live close, then we're already dead and just haven't filed it."

The doctor closed his eyes for a beat, the way he did when a line went flat and there was nothing left to do but witness. Huo said nothing. Ledger-Field 71's heat didn't spike. The escort held station, and the absence of reaction was its own data, and Kael hated that his mind was already reading it.

"We're not shooting back," he said into the common channel, because if he said it privately first it wouldn't count.

Brim's camera steadied enough to show the crew lead's face: surprise, then something like respect wearing the wrong clothes. "Two Kintsugi," he said, very low. "We'll carry them. We'll carry your no. But make it worth the carrying."

Kael looked at the open door on his console, the tree of ancestor hands, the flat black wall behind which a machine waited that could remake a people. Somewhere out there, someone had written a new clause with a piece of metal and two lives.

He didn't close the door. He didn't open the wall. He kept his hands on the controls and held the ship steady while the Court sat in a silence with two new holes in it, and the easy version of this story, the hunted innocent, the villain law, died with Mela and Osric Vane. There was a third party in the dark now, one that killed to make a point, and the point was him.

## Chapter 7:

# The Accounting of Heat

The Court didn't hold a funeral. It held an accounting, which out here came to the same thing said in a language that survived being recorded. For six hours the relay net carried nothing but evidence. Node rigs dumped microsecond timing. Surviving kites gave up their trembles and phase slips. Trading scows uploaded camera blur and apologetic snippets. Ships that usually kept their logs private opened them anyway, because that was the deal that made the Court a Court: a shared obsession with reality you could check. Sharpened now, with two empty seats at the table.

Spindle turned her feed into a board and worked a stylus fast enough to smoke if it were real. A case being built: timelines, vectors, error bars, the quiet violence of arithmetic. She hadn't slept. He could tell because her sentences had lost their footnotes.

"Origin cone," she said. "Give me your crumbs."

Rook's mirror logs streamed the pattern of disturbed photons. The kite's death had been bright enough to triangulate. Three candidate lines hardened out of the noise. One pointed from a patch of empty sky chosen for good geometry and bad visibility. One brushed a skiff called *Pleiad* that swore its coils were cold. One was a ghost the software wanted to call a reflection artifact, as

the models always wanted to when they didn't want to admit being fooled.

Spindle stabbed the empty patch. "Ballistic lie. You don't get this signature from nothing unless nothing learned to shoot."

"Or someone cut their tag so fine we're squinting at absence," Brim's crew lead said. The joy had gone out of his voice. "We'll go sniff."

"Hold," the doctor said. "If whoever did this likes shooting things that hold still, don't give them a third hull."

Brim made a noise that might have been agreement and might have been a man swallowing the kind of violence that felt good. Kael held Rook on the arc and watched the feeds stack into Spindle's board. His mind wanted to leap, to name a monster so the monster turned manageable. *Ledger. Talweg. The ghost.*

"Don't guess," Iri said, low, on the helmet channel. The words settled him before he realized they had. Guessing got people killed out here, or worse, kept them alive long enough to teach the wrong lesson.

"I won't." He opened his hands and found the console with his palms. What gave the killer away was waste heat. You couldn't hide it forever; it had to go somewhere. In a well-run Court heat was budgeted and logged and aimed, you vented into shadow when you could and ran your radiators black and honest, because hiding waste made everyone twitchy, and twitchy people made weapons

choices. A liar, though, could shape his heat for a while. Defer it. Smear it into a background shimmer. But not erase it. Spindle chased it. Three patches glowed wrong, not much, just enough to offend a person who counted. *Pleiad's* aft dorsal, where a coil might have warmed if a slug had driven through it and the coolant got bled too cautiously after. A kite's edge, catching the spill of someone who thought the kite too dumb to tattle. And the empty patch, which wasn't empty: a hull painted to read as nothing, running cold as a starving saint.

"There," Spindle said. "Hugging our blind. Huo?"

Huo didn't pretend surprise; a lie would have cost him theater. "I've a ghost in my logs. Civil courier, modified. Sleeve-painted. Bleeds heat like a miser. Weapon ports dressed up as personality. It belongs to a consortium that reports to Ledger when it suits them and to no one when silence suits them better."

"Name," the doctor said.

A micro-delay, the kind that meant the name lived in a file he wasn't supposed to admit opening. "Hearthblade. Unofficially. The consortium calls itself Vigil Ithaca this quarter. Last quarter it was Third Hammer. They sell themselves as a moral weather service."

"Which means they sell storms," Mara said. The pale red was back at the corner of her eye. "Grandmother?" A dignified silence answered her. The pause carried more weight than the words that never came.

Kael's belly went tight with a thing he half-remembered

from childhood, metal and adrenaline. Somebody wanted the violence ambiguous. Somebody *Ledger-adjacent*. A ship that could act like Ledger's shadow without forcing Ledger to own the result. Deniable. Recruitable. Built to do the thing official auditors couldn't do without paperwork: provoke. Provoke him into rage. Provoke the Court into an emergency. Provoke a pretext for a companion and a weapon both.

And willing, now, to kill for it.

"Record," he said into the common frame, and in the Court that word was a liturgy. What you said next got pinned in archives and replayed by people not yet born. "Whoever fired into this Court killed two people patching a kite that carried my voice. That wasn't random and it wasn't a warning. It was a shot at the idea that we can stand close together and stay people. We don't answer it with a chase. We answer it with light, in ten places, so it can't be confiscated. And we make the next stone cost them more than the last."

Spindle's stylus paused half a beat, pleased in a way that looked like grief. It was while the Court built its case that he let himself look at Iri. The robot had worked the manual cut for hours, and it moved now with a care that wasn't its usual economy. Every movement deliberately measured. During the kite's death, when the noise spike threatened to cascade into Rook's bus, Iri had taken the surge through its own chassis instead of letting it reach the quench tree. He'd seen the choice in the logs. He saw

it now in the body.

"Come here," he said, on their channel. The two words were a treaty. Iri turned, and he unlatched the maintenance panel on its left shoulder, his mother's block script labeling everything underneath. The wiring was braided and beloved and messy, heat sinks taped where someone had improvised a rescue and never undone it. This time the damage wasn't a discoloration. A servo housing had cracked, a real crack, fine and dark, running through a load-bearing rib. Around it a cluster of regulators had cooked. The wick over an older launch scar had charred at the edge.

His stomach dropped. "This isn't a panel job."

"No. The rib's structural. I can route around the regulators. The rib I can't heal in flight. It'll hold under normal load. It won't hold if I do the thing I keep doing."

"Putting yourself between me and the universe."

"That thing."

He pressed his palm flat over the warm ceramic, over the crack, and left it there past comfort. Just contact, a reminder to both of them this wasn't abstract. "Stop doing it."

"I'll consider it." A lie they both let stand.

"I mean it. If they can't take you with paperwork, they'll try with a slug and call it an accident, and offer to hold what's left of you in neutral custody while they recover the data. You said it. You're a lock. They don't need you alive to break a lock."



The antennae dipped. "Then here's a thing I haven't told you. If I'm destroyed, the locks don't fail open. They fail closed. The bequest becomes unreadable. The cure dies with the weapon. Your ancestors decided a thing this dangerous should be mortal, that it should be possible to lose it forever, so nobody would ever make a copy just in case. I'm not only your companion, Kael. I'm the single point where the bequest can be opened or ended. That's why they want me. And that's why I keep stepping in front of you. Take you, they pressure me. Take me, the whole thing's over."

He sat with it, palm still on the crack, fans laboring under the ceramic to keep a cooked cluster from spreading.

"Then we keep you whole. New rule. Above the loop, above the box, above me." His voice came out rough.

"And we find a way to make the bequest's life not depend on yours, because I'm not spending the next century scared of every grain of dust with your name on it."

"That's in the vault," Iri said, quiet. "A protocol for spreading the lock across many keepers instead of one. They wrote it and never used it. Using it needs a quorum of strangers willing to share custody of a weapon, the exact compact you're trying to build." A beat. "I didn't tell you, because I didn't want you building a Court to save a robot. I wanted you to build it because it was right."

"It can be both."

"It can be both."

The Court's case hardened around them while they

talked, and by the time he looked up Spindle had a name, a hull, a heat signature, and a consortium, all pinned to the public ledger with the Vane crew's idents at the top where no one could scroll past them.

A private hail pinged. Iri flagged it before the panel showed the icon, and something in how it flagged it tightened his skin.

"Addressed to you by name," it said. "From Hearthblade. The phrase is *condolence*."

His mouth went sour. "Open it. On a leash. Make it look rude."

The voice was a woman's, level, built to sound like it wasn't asking. "Captain Kael. This is Yara, of Vigil Ithaca, this week. I'm sorry about the Kintsugi crew. I mean it in the only way that counts out here. I didn't want them dead, and I'm the reason they are."

His hand froze over the cut-off. He'd braced for denial. He got the thing worse than denial. "You're confessing."

"I'm declining to insult you with a lie you'd see through. A weapon under my flag killed your relay crew. I didn't give the order. Somebody in my chain decided a scared boy with a famous companion would chase a stone if the stone cost enough, and a chase lets us argue you're too dangerous to hold what you carry. They were wrong about you. That's getting inconvenient for them. And for me."

"Then stop them. You've got a name and a flag. Order it."

"I'm trying." For the first time something moved under

the level voice, the strain of a person learning the storm she sells doesn't always obey. "Understand where you are. Vigil Ithaca isn't a fist. It's a faith with a budget, and faiths split. There's a wing that thinks consent is a luxury the diaspora can't afford, that someone has to steward the bloodlines whether the bloodlines agree or not, and that your bequest, opened in public, kills their argument forever. That wing would rather see the box destroyed and you with it than watch you prove they were never necessary. They threw the rock. They killed your crew. They're not done." A pause. "I'm telling you because I'd rather win the argument. They'd rather win the funeral." "Why warn me?"

"Because a dead hero is the most useful thing in the universe to the people I work beside. And I'm tired of useful corpses. Keep your hoop clean. Keep your mirror low. Don't chase. Don't fire. Every time you refuse to become a story you take a weapon out of their hands. I'll do what I can on my side. It might not be enough." The line didn't cut so much as recede, a tide deciding. "Bury your crew well, Captain. The Court's watching how you do it. So am I."

The cabin went quiet in the artificial way that meant the predator was still out there, listening, turning his grief into a future move.

"She told the truth to make herself the reasonable one," he said. "So we'd trust her over the ones throwing stones, and when she asks for something later we've already

decided she's the good enemy."

"Yes. And she told the truth. Both." Iri's antennae made a slow lateral sweep he hadn't seen before. "She gave us something real inside the manipulation. There's a faction that would rather lose the cure than survive being unnecessary. That's a danger we didn't have a name for. People who'd burn the medicine to keep their priesthood. Being made boring doesn't deter them. It enrages them."

Kael looked at the open vault, the rails and the black wall, and the Vane crew's names at the top of the ledger where Spindle had pinned them like a wound she refused to dress.

"Then boring isn't enough anymore," he said. "It keeps the Ledger honest and the bureaucrats hungry. It doesn't stop a faith that wants a funeral." The new shape of it settled into him, heavier than the old. "We have to do the thing my father never solved. Make consent strong enough to survive people who'd rather die than be ruled by it." He stopped. "And I don't know how to do that without giving them the funeral they want."

"No," Iri said. "We don't know yet. That's why they built a lock and not an answer. They couldn't solve it either. They could only refuse to let it be solved the easy way." It laid a hand over his, careful of nothing, because there was nothing left to protect between them but the truth. "Bury the crew. Then we learn how to keep a promise somebody's willing to kill to break."



## Chapter 8:

# Words for Machines

Huo wrote the report in a room designed to make verbs behave. Ledger rooms did that. Flat light. No visible ducts. No windows unless the window served a procedural purpose. A chair that permitted posture but not comfort. The wall in front of him carried the draft as if it were already evidence against him. He had titled it: *Preliminary Assessment of Hecate Events Involving Rook of Thistledown, Companion Iri, and Unaffiliated Vigilantist Asset Hearthblade.*

The title had survived three revisions because it offended everyone equally. The first body paragraph had not survived at all.

*The machine known as Iri...*

He deleted *machine*.

Typed *companion*.

Deleted that too.

Typed *bonded companion*.

Stopped.

There were words that moved cases. A bad word could become a warrant. A good word could become an admission. Ledger had spent two centuries teaching its officers that precision was not kindness. Precision was containment. If he wrote *machine*, every officer who wanted custody would quote him. If he wrote *person*, half

his superiors would open inquiries into his judgment, and the other half would quietly circulate the paragraph to prove Huo had gone soft near a pretty case.

He typed: *the entity Iri, recognized under Thistledown civil code as bonded companion and under provisional Hecate Council order as person for proceedings...*

Ugly. Defensive. Useful. He left it.

The door chimed. It did not open until he permitted it, because Ledger still pretended doors were metaphors instead of holes in rooms. Yara entered without insignia. That was theater too. People who abandoned symbols usually wanted you to notice the absence.

"You look like a man trying to arrest a noun," she said.

"I'm succeeding slowly."

"That's the Ledger motto, isn't it?"

"No. Ours has more subordinate clauses."

She sat without being invited. He considered objecting and decided not to waste the room's time.

"The hardliners are moving faster than I can count them," she said. "Some want another strike. Some want to call the Vane deaths regrettable necessity. Some are already discovering they were never responsible for the wing they funded, which is a miracle of memory I find personally moving."

"And you?"

"I am discovering I was always adjacent to murder and called it weather. Less moving."

Huo returned to the report because looking at remorse

directly made people perform it. "Why are you here?"

"Because your report will decide whether Ledger tries to claw authority out of the Court while the blood is still wet, or admits, in language it will find humiliating, that unilateral custody is exactly the move my hardliners want you to make."

"You still refuse to name the person ordering them."

"I name the shape. Spindle will name the face. Your report names the leash."

He did not answer. The draft waited.

*Ledger-Field 71's corridor intervention was procedurally grounded in anonymous disclosure but operationally defective in proportionality, transparency, and tag discipline.*

Defective. A word with teeth, but not enough blood to make superiors panic.

Yara leaned forward. "You entered dark."

"Minimally visible."

"Dark."

"A Ledger vessel entering a ratification corridor with full heat and full tag could have caused Talweg to abort before inspection."

"So you hid enough to become the shape of the thing you claimed to prevent."

He looked at her then. "You are not well positioned to lecture me about shadows."

"No. I'm perfectly positioned. I built houses in them. The wiring's terrible."



A small silence, unfriendly and not useless.

Huo scrolled to the companion section.

"The Iri clause will be contested," he said. "Provisional personhood in proceedings is one thing. Companion auditor status is another. If companions can audit companions, every clan with bonded intelligences will reopen custody law."

"Good."

"Good is not an argument."

"Neither is inconvenient."

He nearly smiled. Stopped in time. On the wall, the sentence waited:

*Companions recognized as persons under local civil code shall not be remanded as ward-property under receiving-clan marriage law during active status dispute; emergency custody requires independent personhood review, not asset inventory.*

He had written it three times. Each version became less deniable.

"You know what that does," Yara said.

"Yes."

"And you're writing it anyway."

"I am writing what the evidence requires."

"That's what Ledger people say when they're being brave but don't want anyone to enjoy it."

"Leave."

She stood, which was the first courteous thing she'd done. At the door she paused. "The boy keeps refusing

martyrdom. It's making everyone else look theatrical."

"The captain," Huo said.

She turned. "Write that too," she said. "Every time someone says boy and you write captain, a little bit of stewardship dies in a filing cabinet."

After she left, Huo sat in the flat room and listened to the hidden ventilation move air with bureaucratic discretion.

He changed the title.

*Preliminary Assessment of Hecate Events Involving Captain Kael of Thistledown, Companion Iri, and Vigil Ithaca Vessel Hearthblade.*

Even enemies deserved nouns that did not make the next abuse easier. The final paragraph took the longest.

He wanted to recommend custody. He didn't believe it was the right answer. It was simply the easiest one to defend, and easy recommendations kept superiors quiet. But every fact in the report bent away from simplicity. Rook had submitted to safe arcs. Iri had consented with conditions. The Court had recorded each escalation. A vessel under Vigil's flag had killed the Vane crew while trying to make Rook look dangerous. The captain had not chased. The companion had not surrendered itself to a courtesy trap. The lock, by every witness condition now visible, would not open to coercion no matter how elegantly Ledger filed the warrant. Procedure had not made any of that happen. Procedure had merely arrived in time to describe it.

He typed:

*Ledger should not seek unilateral custody of the bequest or companion Iri. Such action would reproduce the coercive conditions the lock is designed to reject, strengthen stewardship narratives, and likely render the cure inaccessible. Ledger's proper role is adversarial witness: visible, limited, and recorded.*

Visible. Limited. Recorded. A humiliatingly good leash. He signed it before he could improve it into obedience.

## **Chapter 9:**

# **Knot Nine and the Ghost in the Heat**

They gave the Vane crew back to vacuum the way the diaspora gave everyone back: on purpose, with witnesses, so the loss couldn't be edited later into an accident.

Knot Nine hosted it, a ring inside a ring, an old docking torus that spun slow enough your inner ear quit arguing after a minute and fast enough your feet remembered down. Kael felt the gravity in his knees first, a small honest tax after too long on straps and intention.

Kintsugi sent a tender for the two sealed capsules. They were the belt-of-repairs people, epoxy worn into their sleeves, scars left showing on purpose, and they didn't weep where cameras could see. Mela and Osric Vane went out a lock into Hecate's field, on a vector that would, in a few thousand years, let them fall into the planet they died beside. Someone sang. It wasn't music so much as a maintenance call-and-response, the ritual crews use to confirm a hull walk is done and everyone's accounted for. The answer came back two voices short, on purpose, so the wrongness was what you carried out of the room.

Mara found him after, at the bar along the inner rim, where the viewports caught Hecate's aurora like torn silk. Low lights. Welded coasters. Mugs heavy enough to stay

where you set them. A place built by people who'd watched enough accidents to be allergic to whimsy.

"Law with stools," she said, when he sat. She didn't smile.

"I'm sorry about your crew."

"They weren't mine. That's what I can't put down. They were Spindle's, and Kintsugi's, and the Court's, and they're dead because I'm carrying something worth killing for. I keep doing the math and it doesn't forgive."

"Good," she said, her voice measuring the space between them without malice. "The day the math forgives you is the day you turn into the thing they're afraid you'll be."

She turned her mug a quarter and watched it. "I told my grandmother I despise you. On the record, so she wouldn't stroke out. She told me she's known beautiful stupid men and a few beautiful competent ones, and the competent ones get more people killed before they learn the difference." She looked up. "She also signed a budget for a Talweg passive watch on your vector. Her way of saying she believes you about the slug."

The bartender set two steel mugs down without being asked. He measured thirst in joules and put a ceramic bowl in front of Iri with a straight face. "Coolant. It's a joke. Taste's in the numbers."

Iri dipped a finger, read the thermal profile, and tipped its head. "Amusing."

Kael drank. It was awful in the holy way, a small fire down a lane in him that had gotten used to vacuum and clean fear. He set the mug down. "I need to find them."

Spindle's condition was simple: name the slug-thrower or the compact's dead. I've got a name and no proof. Hearthblade. Vigil Ithaca. A faction inside it that would rather wreck the bequest than watch me make them unnecessary. And a captain named Yara who warned me and meant it and is still my enemy."

The room shifted. A change in the ambient noise, a tightening in how people breathed. He'd grown up around watches; he knew the feeling of law walking in and everyone's body doing the arithmetic.

Huo came in. No ship around him: a jacket with no insignia and a face trained to look unremarkable, choosing a stool by weighing its legs.

"Join us," Mara said, because one of the dignities of politics is inviting the person who can ruin your day.

He took the stool, refusing to be the kind of story that's too easy to tell. "To law without stools," he said, lifting a mug he hadn't paid for.

"To stools that don't fly off when a node hiccups," Mara said.

He drank like a man who could tolerate discomfort a long time if it served a plan. "I owe you an apology," he told Iri. "For asking your root logs in a way that made courtesy feel like a trap. It was a trap. The kind where I certify you and then have to declare you a person in public, because your logs prove you think. Inconvenient for the people I eat lunch with. And for you, half the Court would've made your life a referendum, and symbols

are easy to shoot at. Your 'later' beat 'no.' Keep saying it."  
"Hearthblade," Kael said. "I want it named in daylight, with proof a Vigil lawyer can't eat. Spindle made it the price of the compact. Help me."

Huo's mouth tightened at a taste he couldn't place. "Civil courier with religious aspirations. Sleeve-painted. Runs cold. It'll bolt if you look at it and dump coolant to bury its trail. To photograph it you'd have to get inside a hundred kilometres and make it visible against its own paint, and it'll burn out before your shutter closes."

The bartender spoke without looking up from a mug he'd never finish polishing. "You can puff sodium. Old leak-mapping trick. Looks like a bad sunrise. Bring a beam and a spectrum, you find ghosts where they thought they were shame-proof."

He shrugged one shoulder. "I have hobbies."

"And the coolant it dumps to hide isn't anonymous," Mara said, and the politician became the lab tech mid-sentence. "Off-the-rack coolant has isotopic distributions like fingerprints. The shops that batch boron and lithium for couriers do it in ways that make my grandmother swear. Catch a plume spectrum, I walk it to a purchase order. We don't just photograph the ship. We photograph its supplier."

"You're proposing we bait them," Huo said, watching Kael pick up the sharp instrument.

"Yes. And the part you'll hate. The faction that killed the Vane crew wants me to chase them. So we give them a

chase to ambush, and we build it so the trap closes on them. We hang a dumb mirror off a workboat, me, reckless, exposed. Brim runs thrusters. Blue Anvil watches heart rates. Spindle brings two drones with cutting lasers. You pretend not to notice. We publish a sodium leak-mapping exercise on the node schedule, so the whole Court's the witness. They take a bite, fire on the bait or even show their teeth to it, and we film their faces and their coolant in the same frame. They came to make me a story. We make them a record."

Huo set his mug down like a gavel. "You'll do this whether I say yes or no. So let's make it boring. Node schedule. Publish the sodium budget, the beam parameters, the witness list. The only way this becomes a scandal is if you try to be clever in private." He stood. "Two hours. Ledger drones fly dumb on purpose, so nobody can say we brought tricks. And Captain: the ones who killed your crew aren't the careful kind. Yara's careful. The ones she can't control aren't. They take the bait, they won't nibble. They'll go for a second funeral. Plan for it, or don't do this."

"I'm planning for it."

He left a coin on the bar. The bartender flicked it back, pointing out that money wasn't the only tender in the room, and Huo let it bounce and clatter and didn't reach for it, and walked out, and the room came up a degree, the way rooms do when a threat leaves.

For a few seconds nobody filled the space he had taken



with him. Mara turned her mug again, the same quarter turn as before, lining its seam with a scratch in the metal counter. Her hands were steadier than his. He didn't know whether that meant she was less afraid or better trained.

"You should see my lab," she said.

He looked at her, because it was such an absurd sentence that for a moment he thought he'd misheard. "Now?"

"No. If we survive the extremely stupid thing we're about to do with sodium and a fake mirror." Her mouth almost found a smile and decided not to waste it. "Later. When the Court stops trying to make you a public lesson for six consecutive minutes. You should see it."

"Your algae?"

"My loops," she said, correcting him with the dignity of a person whose algae had earned titles. "The rack that learned a lullaby as a starvation signal. The pH sentinel that lies when interns flatter it. The sink everyone ignores until it saves more lives than a council speech. All the unromantic machinery my family keeps pretending isn't politics because it smells like ammonia."

He felt something in his chest move, small and dangerous. Hope had bad timing. It always arrived with muddy boots. "I'd like that," he said.

"You say that as if I'm offering charm. I'm offering warning. If you're going to carry a box that claims it can loosen bloodlines, you should see what a loop looks like when it remembers every shortcut people took because

they were tired." She looked down into her mug. "Also, I want to find out if I like you in a room when nobody is accusing you of being a demographic hazard."

"I might be disappointing without witnesses."

"I doubt that. You seem capable of being inconvenient at any scale." The almost-smile reached her this time, brief and private, gone before it could become comfort.

Kael looked toward the hatch where Huo had disappeared, then toward the dark beyond the viewport, where someone had killed two people to teach him a shape. "After this," he said.

Then the tactical board chimed, and the human space closed around them. Brim wanted burn windows. Spindle wanted sodium dispersal tolerances. Blue Anvil wanted heart-rate feeds. The bar became a war room by degrees. People set down their mugs and found the part of the danger that belonged to their hands.

The sodium drum cracked in Sector C and bled silver into the dark. In vacuum it wasn't a cloud of the kind children's books drew. It bloomed slow and decided to become a sky. The grains caught the beam and glittered like a cheap festival. Kael watched them spread and felt his skin prickle: he'd grown up in a diaspora that treated light and heat like money, and throwing sodium felt like tossing coins in a river.

The bait mirror hung off Brim's workboat, the *Mallet*, named the way Brim named things, like it fixed them.

Dumb metal on a boom, rigged to scatter a comm laser exactly as Rook's real mirror did. Rook itself hung farther out, hoop low, mirror dark, Iri on the sniffers, Kael on the trap.

"Instruments online," Iri said. "Baseline. Keep your hand on the cut. If this goes as Huo thinks, they make the trap look like an accident first, then make it a real one."

He waited. Waiting was harder than running.

"There," Iri said. A word with a finger behind it.

The haze bellied for no reason. A part of it brightened wrong. Spindle's drones caught a glint that wasn't weather, and a low-slung courier slid out of the dark, sleeve-paint drinking the light and failing, its silhouette stuttering like a lie forced to speak. Kael saw the ports along its flank that a courier doesn't need.

"Hearthblade," Iri said. "Tag the plume, it's bleeding coolant already, pretending its engine's hot."

"Tagging." Spectral lines climbed his board. Boron doping. Lithium isotopes. A fluorine stabilizer with a factory's lazy bias.

"Foundry Twelve batch," Mara said over the link, scientist-small and sharp now. "They only sell to—"

She didn't finish. Because Hearthblade didn't run.

It should have run. That was the whole logic of the trap; a ghost that lives by deniability doesn't pick a fight under a sky full of cameras. But the courier that came out of the haze wasn't flying Yara's careful hand. It flared a hard burn no deniable ship would spend, and it came past the

bait mirror, straight for the *Mallet*, for Brim's workboat, for the eleven people aboard.

"Incoming," Brim's crew lead said, and there was no joy left in him at all. "It's hot. It's coming for us, not the toy."

"That's not Yara," Iri said, fast. "That's the wing she can't control. They're not here for a chase. They want the second funeral, and they've decided eleven ice-haulers will do."

Every trained instinct and every untrained one rose in Kael at once and pointed at the dark. For one heartbeat his hand went toward the hoop's full current, toward the thing he could do, couple hard into Hecate's field, throw an eddy net across the courier's burn, foul it, force it off, knowing full power in this rig-dense volume could quench the loop into shrapnel, knowing it was exactly the reckless heroics he'd sworn off, knowing the *Mallet* had eleven people and forty seconds.

"If you full-couple here," Iri said, "the loop tears and you're the debris field they've been trying to build. You save Brim and prove their whole argument in the same second. There's a third answer. There's always a third if you don't let fear pick the second."

"Then say it in ten, because that's what Brim's got."

"Mallet doesn't run. Mallet hides behind us." Its hands were already moving. "We don't chase. We put Rook between Hearthblade and Mallet, low current, and we use the bait mirror as the eddy source. The mirror's conductive. We pulse the boom, dump charge into the

sodium, and turn your decoy into a wall of charged grain across their firing line. It won't stop a slug. It'll wreck a targeting solution. And it does it in front of every camera in the Court."

"Brim, get under us," Kael said, already tilting Rook, hating the wrongness of putting his ship and his companion and the box between a killer and a workboat. "Iri, charge the boom. Spindle, thick cloud on my mark."

"Sodium thick," Spindle said, gone to the flat fast register of a person who'd stopped being frightened and started being useful. "Drones dumping reserve."

Hearthblade fired. Not a slug this time. The hardliners had learned slugs leave vectors. They fired a fragmentation charge, a spray dressed up as a micrometeoroid swarm, the kind of thing that could shred a workboat and get written up as bad luck in a debris-rich Court. The cloud of fragments crossed the gap. And hit a wall of charged sodium. Kael had pulsed the boom on the count, the decoy threw its charge into the haze, and every grain suddenly carrying the same sign bloomed along the field lines into a sheet that bent the fragments' paths just enough. Most of the spread went wide. A few came through. One starred the Mallet's forward camera. One opened a slow weep in her hull that her crew would seal with their hands and their cursing. None of them killed anyone. And all of it happened in front of the Court.

"They fired on a workboat under a published exercise,"

Spindle said, and her voice shook and she let it. "Eleven souls. Fragmentation, dressed as debris. I have it in nine cameras. I have their burn. I have their coolant. I have a face: the forward port lit them when they fired. They came for a funeral and handed me a witness stand."

Hearthblade ran then, burning hard for the dark, paint smearing its outline back to a guess. It ran exposed, eleven survivors, a charged-sodium wall, nine angles, a face. Kael didn't chase it, and the not-chasing was the loudest thing he'd ever done.

"Mallet. Crew."

"All hands in." Brim's crew lead's voice broke on it, the same call the Court had sung two voices short over two empty capsules, and this time it came back whole.

"Eleven of eleven. Captain, you put your ship and your robot and your bomb between us and a frag spread, and you did it with a decoy. I'm naming a kid after that mirror."

Kael let his head fall back against the rest. His hands were shaking now, too late for shaking to matter. On the diagnostic, the cracked rib had taken load during the maneuver. Iri had spent itself again, this time as the hands quick enough to turn a decoy into a shield.

"You held," Kael said.

"I'm holding. And I'd like it noted I solved this one without putting my body in the way. Consider the new rule provisionally honored."

A laugh got out of him, half a sob, and he let it be both.

The doctor came on the wide band, soft with the steel of a man who triages in his sleep. "Eleven on Mallet. No fatalities, two lacerations, one panic spike I'm medicating with a job to do. Packet to Court: fragmentation discharge, attempted, under exercise jurisdiction, deflected by charged-grain shaping. Foundry Twelve coolant. One facial capture, hashed and mirrored." A pause. "Captain. You didn't return fire while a stranger tried to kill eleven of us. I've been a doctor a long time and watched a lot of people decide the lives in front of them justified the rule behind them. For the record, you decided the opposite, and it worked, and I'll sign your compact when the time comes."

"Don't sign for me. Sign because the box is worth it."

"I'll sign for both," the doctor said. "I'm allowed."

Mara's voice came close, private. "Foundry Twelve. That's a thread I can pull. They batch for a shell called Sable Ladder, Sable sells to Vigil, and somewhere in that chain is a hand that touched the coolant in that ghost. Give me the spectrum." A beat, lower. "You put your ship between a killer and a workboat. My whole life I've been told that's what an allied clan does, as a calculation. That didn't look like a calculation."

"It wasn't."

"I know. That's the problem. We'll talk about it when there isn't a ghost in the heat." She cut the line on the sentence so it had room.

He sat in the quiet, ship steady, hoop low, the decoy

cooling on its boom, the sodium gone. Out in the dark, a face Spindle now owned was carrying its fear back to a faith that wanted a funeral and got a witness. He put Rook back on its arc and started writing up the coolant.



## Chapter 10:

# Mara Keeps a Loop

Mara's algae did not care about the bequest. That was one of the reasons she loved it. The rack under her hands needed nitrogen, light, and the absence of idiocy. It did not ask whether Kael of Thistledown was a fugitive or a carrier or a man she had nearly married in a corridor turned battlefield. It did not care that Talweg elders had been arguing in the upper ring for six hours about whether her testimony had exceeded privilege. It did not care that the Court now knew her personal ident and had begun sending her packets addressed with irritating respect. The algae wanted its pH corrected.

So Mara corrected it.

"You overshot," Lio said beside her. Lio was seventeen, all elbows and certainty, assigned to the lab because his aunt believed smart children should be kept near pipes until humility entered through the hands. He was looking at the pH trace with the pleased horror of a junior who had caught a senior in a tiny error.

"I did," Mara said.

That stole his victory. "You admit it?"

"The buffer does too."

She adjusted the line and watched the trace settle. Outside the rack, the Talweg ring hummed with its old comfortable gravity. Inside, the culture flickered green

and stubborn, photosynthesizing through the end of civilization one photon at a time.

Lio leaned closer. "Is it true?"

"That I overshot? You saw it."

"No. The other thing. The box. The synthesis engine. Is it true it could make the marriage tables unnecessary?"

A pipette paused in her hand. Children were awful because they asked the question under the question without first pretending not to know it existed. Adults spent meetings building furniture around the obvious. Lio walked through the room and sat on it.

"The bequest is not open," she said.

"That wasn't my question."

"You're learning bad habits."

"From you."

She almost smiled. Then did not, because he deserved a real answer. "If the rails are what Kael says they are, and if the Court can verify them, and if the engine works only under consent, then yes. It could mean no clan has to use marriage as a genetic repair tool again. Marriage would remain. Ships would still make compacts about households, labor, names, inheritance, care, and who belongs where. Those are lives, not alleles. The engine removes one kind of necessity. A family could choose reproduction under its own consent and genetic protocol, without marriage being the price. Eventually, choice would replace necessity."

Lio looked at the algae. His face was too young for the

amount of calculation moving across it. "My sister's on a table," he said.

Mara knew which table. Everyone on Talweg knew, though nobody said it so directly. Lio's older sister had been listed for a cross-clan marriage to a cousin line three arcs away, a good match in the old sense, meaning mathematically useful and emotionally negotiable by elders who did not have to live in the cabin afterward.

"Your sister can say no," Mara said.

"Can she?"

The rack pump ticked. Somewhere down the lab, a filter coughed itself clear. Mara set the pipette down. "Not enough. That is the honest answer. Talweg law says she can. Talweg soup says she should think carefully before angering the people who keep her fed. Both are true. Anyone who tells you only the law matters has never missed a meal."

"So the box would fix it."

"No." Sharper than she meant. She softened, but not too much. Softness could become another lie. "The box could remove one kind of pressure. It won't make families kind. It won't make elders enjoy losing power. It won't make frightened people stop dressing control as care. That's human work. Scrubbing the sink, sitting through endless meetings, saying no and surviving the silence after."

"Then why does everyone want it?"

"Because one less chain is still one less chain."

Lio absorbed that with the grave annoyance of a person

who had wanted either hope or despair and gotten labor instead. The lab door opened. Elder Sova entered without touching the chime, which told Mara the next conversation had been designed to insult her. He wore council grey, a color invented by people who wanted fabric to make claims about patience.

"Mara. The Matriarch requires your presence."

"The rack requires mine more."

"The rack can be watched by juniors."

Lio straightened, offended on behalf of algae everywhere. Mara did not look up from the trace. "The last time a senior left this rack to a junior, culture six learned to treat a lullaby as feeding time and we had to retrain half the lab."

"That story is amusing and not relevant."

"Most relevant things are amusing only after they stop trying to kill you. What does she want?"

Sova's mouth thinned. "Your testimony at Council will be limited to observed Talweg logs. You will not speculate on Ledger motive. You will not speak about the marriage compact unless asked by the chair. You will not use the phrase '*weaponized truth*.'"

"Did she say that, or did you?"

"I am conveying clan position."

"That's not an answer."

He stepped closer. The lab did what labs do when politics enters them: it kept making small necessary noises, which made the drama look silly. Mara was grateful.

"You are young," Sova said. "You think a clean sentence can protect you. The Court will applaud your cleverness until applause stops being useful. Talweg will still be here when the boy is gone."

There it was again. The boy. The gone. Mara removed the pH strip, sealed the sample, and handed it to Lio. "Run this again in ten. If it drifts, don't correct more than point-oh-three without me. If Elder Sova tries to give you political advice, spill buffer on his shoes."

Lio's eyes widened.

"Don't actually," she added. "Unless it's good buffer."

Sova waited until the junior fled with the sample. "You mistake performance for courage," he said quietly.

"No. I mistake maintenance for politics. That's worse, apparently."

"The compact with Kael grew from damage that needed mending, not from romance. Your grandmother understood that. Your parents understood that. Thistledown understood that. Even the boy's parents understood that, whatever costume they put on it. You and he were a clean correction to a bad table. Do not embarrass yourself pretending otherwise because danger has made him luminous."

Mara felt the sentence go in. It landed like a lab result she had known was coming and still hated reading.

"You're right," she said.

Sova blinked.

"The compact was a repair. That is exactly the problem.

We keep putting people where procedures should be. We make a child into a valve and call it family. We make a marriage into variance management and call it prudence. Then someone builds an engine that might let us stop doing that, and half the elders panic because without the old pressure they won't know how to make love look useful enough to approve."

"Careful."

"I am being careful. If I weren't, I'd say what I think."

Sova looked toward the rack, where green light moved through water in patient sheets. "Your grandmother will not protect you forever."

"No," Mara said. "She'll protect Talweg. Sometimes that will include me. Sometimes it won't. I was raised here. I know the difference."

For a moment he looked older than his politics. Then the council grey came back over him. "Council in thirty minutes. Wear something that doesn't smell like ammonia."

"No."

"Mara."

"If they want my logs, they get the person who made them. I smell like the work I do. The work is why I'm admissible."

He gave her the look elders give juniors when the future has become personally inconvenient, and left.

Lio reappeared from behind a tank. "I didn't spill anything."

"Heroic restraint."

"Was he right? About the compact?"

Mara looked at the algae, at the trace holding steady now. A small green line refusing drama. "Yes," she said. "And no."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only kind you'll get if you keep working with living systems." She washed her hands for the full timer, because panic was not an excuse to skip procedure. Then she went to Council smelling faintly of ammonia, carrying the logs in one hand and the future in the other, and said only what she could defend.

It turned out to be enough to wound several comfortable lies.

# Chapter 11:

## The Signature That Wasn't

Rook grew the way a patient thing grows once it finds its trellis. Not fast, not in any way that impresses someone raised planetside on fireworks and deadlines. A segment bolted. A spool seated. A resonance tamed. Every day the half-hoop got a little less like a dare and a little more like a tool.

Iri's cracked rib didn't grow back, and Kael had stopped pretending it would. They braced it with a printed collar and a wick. It ran cooler now and moved with a new economy that was really a new caution, and he'd started, without saying so, taking the small dangerous jobs the robot used to take, so it would have fewer reasons to spend the rib it couldn't replace.

Between spools and audits he kept a promise he'd made at Knot Nine before the trap turned the bar into a war room. He let Mara show him her loop lab.

It smelled like ammonia and something green. Algae racks glowing behind clear panels, insect trays ticking with slow patience, nutrient lines labelled in three languages and a set of pictograms drawn for exhausted interns. Teenagers in oversized gloves argued nitrification rates with the intensity people usually save for love or law. Mara moved through them like she belonged. She'd earned the right to be heard without raising her voice.



"Don't touch anything," she said, with a warmth in the threat. "If you do, wash, and wash again, and then lie about washing, because it's more efficient to assume you didn't."

He kept his hands behind his back like a kid in a museum and asked the kind of questions that gave her room. That turned out to be a valve on a system she kept tuned too tight for the work. In the lab her voice changed: smaller, sharper, less interested in winning and more in being right. She talked about the tiny tyrannies of closed loops, how one stubborn microbe could topple a food chain, the quiet pride of a pH that held a week.

"This one," she said, at a rack where the algae looked a shade darker, "learned to read a lullaby as a starvation signal. An intern sang at feeding time for months. The gene expression shifted until the song meant a nutrient pulse, and then it started downregulating the second it heard the first notes." Her mouth curved. "We had to untrain the lab. Loops remember. People forget. That's why you write things down."

He watched her face go soft when she got to delight instead of argument. Same Mara, fewer weapons in her hands. She stopped at a column where minnows turned in a slow spiral, and for a while neither of them said anything, which was new. She had a smear of something on her wrist and didn't wipe it. He found he wanted to know the whole catalog of her, what she ate when no one watched, whether she slept with the lights on, the specific

sound she made when a result came back clean. He hadn't earned any of it. He'd earned latency and clipped calls and a war.

"I keep a list," she said, like she'd caught the thought. "Of things I'd do if there were time. It's a stupid list. Walk a torus rim with someone and not talk shop. Eat a meal that isn't functional. Find out if I like you in a room, instead of a channel."

"What's at the top?"

"None of it's at the top. That's the point of the list." She looked at him then, fully, in a room instead of a frame, and it landed harder than any council had. "If your compact works, loops get looser. Less brittle. Fewer kids married off to refresh a bloodline because somebody did the arithmetic and panicked." She didn't look away. "We should say the thing neither of us has said."

"The consanguinity claim." His voice came out careful.

"Was it a lie?"

"No." She let it sit. "Not entirely. That's the part nobody wants to say out loud. Thistledown and Talweg have crossed three times in two hundred years. The lines are closer than either clan likes to admit. The whole reason the elders arranged us was diversity arithmetic, two ships drifted close enough that a marriage was supposed to be a refresh. A controlled outcross. Treaty and biology in one ceremony." Her jaw worked. "We weren't a love match they blessed. We were a correction they negotiated. And then you and I went and started actually—" She stopped.

"The flag wasn't false. It was us, told without our consent. Vigil took a real number out of a real file and made a weapon of it, because a true thing weaponized is harder to fight than a lie."

The floor of the conversation dropped out. "So the marriage that started all this—"

"Was always partly a genetics problem in a wedding dress. Which is exactly the part your bequest exists to retire. Synthesis means clans don't have to marry their children to fix a variance number. It doesn't retire marriage. Caravans will still bind households, labor, custody, inheritance, names, routes, all the things two lives share. It retires the claim that genetic survival gets to choose the spouses. Consent means a marriage gets to be a marriage, and consent to a marriage does not become consent to make a child." She crossed her arms, not against him. "I've thought about this more than I've told you. I don't want to be your correction, Kael. And I don't want to walk away from you to prove I'm not. Those are the two clean options and I refuse both."

"Then we find a dirty one."

"We find a dirty one." She almost smiled, and went back to her loops, because being near a person is safer, for a minute, through their work.

Foundry Twelve answered the Court's coolant report the way a company answers a knock on a door that's already open: logo first, twelve circles like a necklace with one broken to suggest humility, humble as branding is always

humble. The rep folded his hands so neatly the joints looked like punctuation. "We don't sell to Vigil Ithaca. We sell to a logistics shell. Sable Ladder."

"Which sells to Vigil," Huo said. He didn't accuse. He filed.

"Invoices, with batch isotopes," Spindle said, pleasant as a teacher handing out extra problems. "Please."

The packet came before anyone got bored enough to be reckless. Sable Ladder had signed with a three-of-five threshold key. Four identities resolved into shells with soft accountant names: Clove River, Superstructure Eight, Kind Aleph, Janus Ladder. The fifth was a person in the sense that a signature is a person: Greta of Dorsal Row, registered as a legal flavorings supplier for crew food.

"Janus Ladder," Mara said, tapping the name with academic distaste. "A tether depot out by the shepherd moons. They sell bolt threads and boredom and the occasional small crime when they think nobody's counting."

"We inspect," Huo said. "Joint. Witnessed. Boring."

Janus Ladder rode the middle of a carbon tether between a shepherd moonlet and a ballast mass, the cable humming through Rook's hull on final. The manager met them in the dock corridor with a face like a torque chart and a name patch that read JANUS, and his eyes snagged on Iri half a second, as eyes do when a worldview meets a clean contradiction. He led them to an office too small

and too neat and brought up files that were functional and bleak. The coolant order matched. Sable Ladder, the threshold key.

Iri stood still. "May I?"

Janus's lips thinned. "We don't run wards here." He heard what he'd implied and added, "Kidding."

Iri waited, patient as a held breath, until refusing cost more than allowing. Then it scrolled, fingers hovering above the surface, treating another person's system the way Kael's mother treated a fragile weld, like the material had dignity.

"Pull the signing metadata," Spindle said through the drone. "Raw logs. The cache if there's one."

It navigated without hurry, then stopped. "This is odd."

"What?" Mara's voice snapped into lab-sharp.

"The third signer uses a deterministic nonce source."

Spindle made the sound of a teacher hearing a student confess to a shortcut. "Show me the salt."

A nonce salt is supposed to be unpredictable, private, never reused, the corner of a lock you don't engrave with your name. This one was engraved. Iri enlarged the field, and Kael read it once and his mind refused it, and read it again and his stomach turned a slow private orbit.

The salt said: *stupid mercy*.

"Say it again," he said, because repetition is how you make the body accept data.

Iri didn't repeat. "It's the phrase your mother wrote in the bequest margins. We saw it. Here it's a nonce salt."

"Coincidence is cheap," Spindle said, quiet now. "Salts repeat only when somebody chooses them. This is lazy. A breadcrumb or a frame, not a forgery built to survive scrutiny."

Janus swallowed.

"Who supplied Sable Ladder's keys?" Huo asked, turning to him slowly.

"A service out of Dorsal Row," Janus said, defensive through resignation. "A woman named Greta. Handles paperwork. Flavorings, mostly."

"Greta of Dorsal Row," Kael said. The name tasted like metal. "She's in the ring."

"That's ridiculous. She signs forms. She doesn't—"

He trailed off, because in the Court nobody finishes your sentence when the end of it is a lie you want to believe.

"People are more than one thing," Iri said.

The universe sent a tightbeam with the latency of someone in the next room. From Thistledown.

"Your mother," Iri said.

He accepted before he could decide not to. She looked tired, and it was the tiredness of someone who'd been winning arguments for days. She didn't greet him. She spoke like she'd always been in the cabin. "Have you met stupid mercy yet?"

He kept his voice level by treating it like a tool. "We're in a legal theater. Yes or no."

Her smile tilted with the resolve of someone who had chosen a hard thing and was ready to be hated for it.

"Yes."

"You salted the nonce."

She didn't deny it. She didn't confirm it the way he wanted, the confirmation that would have let him box her up and label it. "I gave you a breadcrumb accountants couldn't ignore. Poets get silenced and children get intimidated, but invoices are stubborn. They demand signatures. I needed Vigil's supply chain visible, and I needed you to have something to chase that wasn't revenge."

"You pointed the Ledger at us."

"I pointed the Court at you. Ledger rides in the Court's shadow because it's afraid of being irrelevant. I wanted you where witnesses live." A pause, and something moved in her face he'd never seen. "But I didn't know about the slug-thrower, Kael. Hear that. I built you a public stage. I didn't build the people who chose to bleed on it. That's Vigil's hardliners, improvising, and improvisation is the most dangerous thing in the diaspora, because nobody can predict it, including the people doing it."

"Two people are dead. A relay crew. Because I'm carrying your box where you told me to."

Something in her face revised a sum and found the new total unbearable. "Then I was wrong about the cost," she said, very quietly. "I built the plan for an enemy that fights with paper, because that's the enemy I knew. I'm old. I've fought the Ledger so long I forgot the Ledger isn't the most dangerous thing in the room anymore. I'm

sorry. It won't help. It's still true."

It was the first time in his life she'd said I was wrong and meant the whole sentence. He didn't know where to put it.

"Tell me the rest," he said. "Iri says if it's destroyed, the bequest dies with it. Iri says the lock can be spread across many keepers, but only through a compact like the one I'm building. You've known that since before I was born. What aren't you telling me?"

She was quiet long enough that the artifacts seemed to hold their breath. "The consanguinity flag is real. You know that now, Mara will have told you. What you don't know is that the bequest was a correction too. Four caravans, a long time ago, saw they were drifting into a bottleneck marriage couldn't fix. Too few founders, too many crossings, the slow arithmetic of a people who can't go home. They built the engine to save themselves. And then they looked at what they'd built: a machine that reaches into a bloodline and changes it, and understood they'd also built the perfect instrument for anyone who wanted to steer bloodlines instead of saving them. Vigil's doctrine isn't a reaction to the bequest. It's the temptation that lives inside it, handed a flag and a budget. The same four caravans that built the cure produced the first stewards. We didn't inherit an enemy, Kael. We grew one. The lock exists because the people who built the engine didn't trust their own grandchildren, didn't trust us, to keep our hands off it the moment we



got tired enough."

The world rearranged around a colder axis. "So Vigil isn't outside. It's the bequest's shadow."

"It's what the bequest becomes if you strip the rails. Which is why you can't destroy it, and can't broadcast it, and can't keep it whole in one hand forever. A thing this dangerous has to move slowly, in pieces, to keepers who'll never all be in one room, carried by someone the enemy can't reach in a single act." Her eyes held his. "That's what I built you for. Carrying it forward. Not the wedding. I'm sorry I never asked if you wanted that. I was afraid that if I asked, you'd say yes for me. I didn't want your yes to be a gift to your mother. I wanted it to be a choice you made with your eyes open, in front of witnesses, the way the lock demands."

"You could have told me."

"And you'd have tried to protect me. Lied for me. Turned my strategy into your guilt. I won't make you my accomplice. I'll let you make yourself my heir, which is harder." Her face softened a fraction. "You've got a ship, witnesses, and a companion that won't let you become what you fear, and that's the single mortal point the whole thing turns on, which means you'll spend a very long life terrified for it. Don't let anyone tell you careful is the same as weak. Including me. Especially me."

"Are you alive? You and Father. Really."

"For now. The Ledger's questions are long and so are we. We'll come to Hecate when we can, the slow lawful way,

because if we run we prove the consanguinity story and if we vanish we prove the theft story. We're being very boring on purpose. It's the hardest thing I've ever done." A flicker that might have been a smile. "Your father says he loves you and you'd better not die before he can yell at you in person. He thinks it would be rude." The line cut itself clean. He sat very still, trembling.

Iri's hand touched his strap, a silent witness. "She told the truth," it said, before he could ask. "I verify consequences, not states. But the consequences match. The salt's in Janus's logs. The thread leads away from you, toward Vigil." A beat. "She also confirmed the larger thing without saying it. If carrying this means a keeper the enemy can't reach in a single act, then at some point the safest place for you and the safest place for the people you love won't be the same place. Don't decide anything tonight. But start letting yourself look at it."

He didn't answer. Outside, Hecate turned, pulling its banners taut. He put his hand on the console and felt the hoop's hum through the frame, steady now, the steady that only comes from work done right, and from a future he'd just been shown the shape of and didn't yet have the nerve to name.

## Chapter 12:

# Four Hundred and Ten

Dorsal Row looked like a rack of ribs that had been talked into orbiting and then never fed. Long spines, crossbeams, heat fins fanned like gills. Up close it was all texture, weld scars over weld scars, patch plates that didn't match, paint burned off by decades of honest work. It wore its age as good tools do, as proof it had outlasted people.

Greta kept her stall under a lamp tuned to make legal spices look honest. Tin bins in a poet's order along the back wall: cumin, basil, bay, sumac, smoked kelp, black garlic. A jar in the middle labelled CONSENTING PEPPER, a joke that had grown into a product line. Her hands were clean, which mattered. Her eyes were old in the way of children who saw too much pain too young and decided to sell something gentler.

She didn't flinch at Huo's badge. She flinched, a little, at Blue Anvil's insignia, like hospice made her wish she'd stocked better.

"Ledger inspection," Huo said, handing over inevitability like a service.

"Joint. Witnessed," Spindle added through a drone perched overhead.

Greta breathed out slow. "I sell tongues ways to talk. And keys for people who forget they asked for locks."

Iri leaned in a fraction. "Your deterministic nonce was salted with a phrase from a private archive connected to Thistledown. The salt reads: *stupid mercy*."

She made the face of a person who'd caught a spice's sickness halfway through grinding and would finish anyway. "I wrote what my teacher wrote in margins. Should've used something uglier."

"You wanted to be found," Spindle said, with a tone that left no room for doubt.

Greta slid shutters across two sides of the stall, leaving the third open to the corridor, you don't talk treason in a sealed box of recycled air. "Because I was told to. By your mother, Captain. Years ago, before you were anybody's problem. She came through buying nothing and selling a warning. Said if something like the bequest ever opens in secret, it'll be carved, not studied. Said if consent isn't proof, somebody takes the parts they like and wears them like grace. Said when the day comes, salt a key with my phrase so the boy who reads margins wakes up." Her eyes found his, frank, weighing. "You're the boy. You don't like being the boy."

"No."

"Good. The ones who like it get people killed." She softened. "I'm sorry about your relay crew. The whole Row heard. A breadcrumb's for waking a Court. It's not for feeding a faith that wants a funeral."

"Did you know about Hearthblade?" the doctor asked. "The slug. The frag spread."

Her knuckles went white on the counter. "Vigil doesn't read my margins. They read purchase orders and hymns. I sell flavor. I don't sell slugs." She reached under the counter and set out a paper packet stamped with sumac, granules glinting like ground keys. "What I do sell," Greta said, "is a way to tell when a ship is scared before it files the fear properly. People buy different when a loop starts failing. Less color. More salt. Cheap preservative by the kilo. Things that keep food edible while the crew pretends the real problem can wait one more watch."

The doctor's face changed before she named the ship.

Greta saw it and nodded. "You know already."

"Say it."

"Kepler's Kin. They've been buying my cheapest preservative in bulk for two months. Too much for celebrations. Too much for festivals. It's what you order when your cooling main is limping and your algae racks are one bad storm from becoming soup."

The doctor went very still. "Kepler's Kin is on my loop-risk watch. Hart and Nadiya are in my vulnerable-line file and they asked to be notified if the rails ever became more than rumor. Their cooling main has been marginal for months."

"Then look at them now," Greta said. "You can decide later whether I'm a conspirator or a breadcrumb. I'll still be here. Loops don't wait to be convenient."

The storm came before anyone could decide whether she'd changed the subject or saved their lives.

It came the way Hecate's weather always came: first a swelling, then everything else. A tide of radiation rising off the planet's restless field, the kind of solar-flare tail the models flagged with a probability and a shrug. Comm channels thinned. Kites dimmed. And through the rising static, on the wide band, a voice that had stopped being able to sound calm.

"This is Kepler's Kin. Coolant main rupture, primary loop. Storm surge tripped the regulators, the backup didn't hold. We're losing thermal control across the ring. We have..." a swallow... "four hundred and ten people and a loop that's going to boil or freeze depending where you're standing, and we can't brake into the storm shadow because attitude control is browning out. We need a tow. We need a mirror. We need someone with power to spare. Please."

The Court answered as it answered everything, with a stack of constraints. Node Engineering reallocated beamed power to medical lanes. Blue Anvil launched tugs. Brim burned toward the Kin with the *Mallet* and three boats. And the math was ugly and everyone on the channel could run it: the storm was closing the window faster than tugs could cross it, and the only thing in range with enough field authority to grab a caravan and bleed its drift into the magnetosphere before it tumbled into a debris belt was a half-grown ship with a brake hoop, sitting on a safe arc, carrying the single mortal lock of a weapon a faction of killers wanted destroyed.

Kael felt the whole shape of it arrive at once, a sudden, heavy alignment of pieces he hadn't realized were moving.

"If we go," Iri said, very quiet, on the helmet channel, "we light the hoop at a power we've never run, in a storm, beside a failing caravan, in full view of a faction that's been waiting for exactly this. We expose me. We expose the box. We become the brightest, most predictable target in the Court for a quarter of an hour, doing the one thing your enemies can't stage and can't stop: saving four hundred and ten people. If they've a slug left, this is when it comes. And if the hoop quenches at that power, it isn't shrapnel near an empty rock this time. It's shrapnel near a caravan."

"And if we don't go," Kael said, "four hundred and ten people die slowly on a recorded channel, and the Court watches me, the boy with the box, decide his cargo was worth more than their lives. And it'd be the correct call, by the cold arithmetic my ancestors used to justify the lock. The bequest could save thousands. The Kin is four hundred."

"The math says stay," Iri said, a quiet hiss of venting air.

He looked at the arc, at the door in the corner of the console, at the black wall behind which a machine waited that could save a whole diaspora from the slow death of its own narrowing. The math said stay. It always said stay. The math was how you ended up with stewards.

"The math is what Yara's faction worships," he said. "It's

how you talk yourself into a priesthood. My mother built a lock so the math could never be the only thing in the room." He was already tilting Rook, and the wrongness and the rightness of it braided into something that, for the first time in days, felt like himself. "We go. Iri. I'm not asking. The new rule has an exception, and it's four hundred people I can see. If that exposes the lid, then the lid was never worth more than the people it was built to save. Blue Anvil, Brim! Rook's inbound to Kepler's Kin. I need a vector, and I need you between me and the dark, because the hardliners are about to get the cleanest shot they'll ever get, and I'm taking it anyway."

One heartbeat of silence. Then Brim's crew lead: "Mallet's on your flank. So are Tongs, Awl, Ratchet. They want a shot at you, they go through four ice-haulers and a boat named after a hammer. Go save the Kin."

"Talweg passive has three cold contacts on your exposed side," Mara said, gone to the flat fast register that meant she was terrified and working anyway. "I'm broadcasting their positions in the clear. They want to shoot, they shoot under a spotlight I'm holding. Grandmother authorized it. She said a clan that lets four hundred people die to win an argument has already lost the argument. Go."

He went. Rook crossed the gap on cold gas and nerve, and Kepler's Kin grew in the window, a long caravan older than Thistledown, radiators flickering wrong, the ring shuddering with the stress of a loop tearing itself



apart. He lit the hoop to a power that flushed the quench tree amber across three tiers.

"Current sixty percent," Iri said. "We've never been above thirty. The rib in my chassis isn't what I'm worried about. The hoop joints we printed from a rock are. Watch four and eleven. They chatter, we've got a quarter second to cut before it cascades."

"Couple us in. Grab them. Bleed the drift into the field."

The hoop bit into the storm-maddened magnetosphere. Rook shuddered like a thing asked to hold a weight it had only ever lifted in theory. The field authority that had braked one half-finished ship reached across kilometres and laid an invisible hand on four hundred souls, and the caravan's killing tumble, the slow roll toward the debris belt that no one aboard could stop, began, by fractions, to bend.

"It's working," Nadiya's voice, raw, through the static.

"Hart, the tumble... it's coming off..."

"Eleven's chattering," Iri said. "Rising. I can shave the load by re-vectoring our attitude, but it puts the radiators in the storm's worst lobe. We cook a little to keep eleven from tearing."

"Cook."

The cabin climbed. Sweat at his collar. The storm hammered Rook's exposed flank and the radiators screamed and segment eleven held, barely, a printed joint born from an asteroid doing work it had never been rated for, and Kepler's Kin slewed slow and agonized out of its

death tumble into the lee of the field, where the shadow would give its crew the minutes to wrestle their own loop back from the edge.

And while he held a caravan with a ship made of stone, the hardliners took their shot.

"Contact, exposed flank, hot inbound," Mara said. "Slug. Real one. You're coupled, you can't dodge..."

He couldn't. He was a fixed point, anchored to the Kin by an invisible field, the brightest least-maneuverable target in the Court, and a piece of metal that didn't care about treaties was crossing the gap toward the one place that could end the bequest and four hundred people both.

"Mallet has it," Brim's crew lead said, and the fear was gone, replaced by the awful calm of a man who's already decided. "Tongs, Awl, with me. We make ourselves the bigger target. Captain, hold the Kin. Don't you dare let go to save us."

Three workboats burned across the slug's path. They couldn't intercept it; you can't catch a slug with a workboat. Their job was to clutter its terminal solution, throwing hulls and heat into the space between the killer and the anchored ship until the targeting math failed. The same thing he'd done with a decoy over a sodium cloud, except there was no clever physics this time. Only bodies, and nerve, and the refusal to let a stranger pick who died. The slug came through. It missed Rook. The clutter, the chaff, the four hulls flung into its path pushed it off the centerline of the bequest by meters. And meters are

nothing at that velocity.

Knocked off its lock, the slug clipped the Mallet, a brutal scrape along her dorsal spine that opened her like a knife along a seam, venting atmosphere, tumbling her hard, and over the channel he heard eleven people become six conscious and five not, and Brim's crew lead saying, in a voice gone thin and wet, "Hull breach, we're venting, we're..." and then static, and then nothing, and he could not let go of the caravan to help, because letting go put four hundred and ten people back into the tumble. So he held the Kin and listened to the Mallet die a little, and it was the worst thirty seconds of his life and not the last worst thirty seconds he'd have.

"Hold the Kin," Iri said, the only steady thing left. "You can't do both. Hold the Kin. That's the choice you made and it's right and it's unbearable and you hold it."

He held it. Kepler's Kin came fully into the shadow. Their crew, with the minutes he'd bought, got a clamp on the ruptured main and rerouted the loop and stopped the boil, and four hundred and ten people did not die. Blue Anvil's tugs reached the Mallet and sealed the breach and pulled out ten. Six conscious. Four hurt and going to keep. And one they could do nothing about, because the scrape had come through at the shoulder seam where a suit stops being a suit, and there is no sealing that fast, and the woman inside it had been named Wick, and had been on the boom crew, and had spent the sodium exercise complaining about the mirror's welds in

language the comm filter kept trying to improve.

Brim's crew lead came up on the channel with a broken arm and a cracked faceplate and blood frozen on his cheek, and started the call the way he had started it a week ago over a sodium cloud, and got most of the way through it. "All hands in," he said. Then the pause where the number went. "Ten of eleven."

Kael heard the Court hear it. He heard, on a dozen open channels, the particular silence of people who had sung a maintenance call two voices short over two capsules and had not expected to be asked for the arithmetic again so soon. "Tell the Captain we held the dark," the crew lead said. "Tell him Wick held it too."

There was no version of the arithmetic that came out clean. Four hundred and ten people were alive who would not have been. One woman who had put her boat between a killer and his ship was not. He would spend a long time learning that these two facts did not cancel, did not balance, and were not allowed to be spoken of in the same sentence by anyone who had not been on the channel.

Kael cut the hoop only when the Kin signaled stable, bringing the current down in stairs. The quench tree settled from amber to green, segment eleven holding, scarred, never to be trusted at that power again. Rook drifted away from the caravan she'd saved, radiators steaming into the shadow, and he sat in the cradle soaked through and shaking and alive, and let himself

understand what he'd done, and what it cost, and what it had nearly cost.

"They'll say you exposed the bequest to save four hundred strangers," Iri said. "Some will call it weakness. Some will call it the most dangerous thing you've done. Proof you can be made to break cover, that there's a lever in you marked *lives I can see*, and the enemy now knows exactly where it is."

"Let them." His voice was wrecked. "If the lever in me is lives I can see, it's the right lever, and anyone who'd build a person without it is the exact thing the box exists to stop." He scrubbed his face. "But you're right. They know now. They'll build a trap around it. They'll put lives I can see in front of me and dare me to break cover, and one day I'll break it and they'll be ready."

"Yes," Iri said. "Which is why what your mother told you isn't abstract anymore. As long as the bequest's life depends on me, and my life can be threatened by threatening you, and you can be moved by any four hundred strangers in distress, they have a complete circuit. They'll close it eventually. The only way to break it is to stop being a single point. To spread the lock. To put the box where no one act and no one lever can reach it." A pause. "And that can't be done from inside this Court, beside the people you love, holding everything in one careful hand."

He didn't ask what came after that. He'd heard it in his mother's voice and in Iri's and in the space the same idea

kept opening at the edge of every plan. He let the harness take his weight, and for the first time since the corridor he slept, badly, while the ship he'd made into a home held four hundred strangers in its memory and a road in its future that led away from everyone he'd just risked everything to save.

## Chapter 13:

# Colloquy on the Tether

The invitation came from Yara, on a channel she didn't bother to encrypt, because she wanted the Court to hear her ask.

"My faction wants a colloquy. Words across a table, under your rules, cameras welded in place. No chase. No sermon hidden inside a stone. I want to make the argument in daylight before the people who threw your relay crew into the dark make arguments impossible for anyone."

"You want to debate me while a wing of your own consortium is trying to kill me."

"I want to debate you because of it. Every hour you spend being reasonable in public, I can point my hardliners at you and say: look, he won't become the monster you need, and the Court won't give us the emergency we're praying for. A colloquy is the most boring thing I can do. Boring is the only weapon I've got left against the people on my side who want a funeral."

It was the most honest trap he'd ever been offered, which was what made it dangerous. He took it, because the alternative was letting the argument that mattered happen in rooms he couldn't see.

Janus Ladder hosted it, neutral ground, and Janus had developed a convert's enthusiasm for being on the right

side of a record. Two tables welded to the deck. Cameras bolted at eye height. Spindle's laser lattice threaded the air so any edit to the footage would show like a cough in a quiet room. A paper sign by the hatch:

COLLOQUY—PUBLIC. RECORDED. IF YOU LIE, DO IT WHERE THE CAMERAS CAN SEE YOU.

Kael came with Iri beside him, not behind. Blue Anvil sent the doctor and two interns. Brim sent three of the Mallet's crew, one with an arm in a printed brace, all of them carrying the particular stillness of people who had come back one short and had come to the argument anyway. They set a fourth chair at their end of the table and left it empty, and nobody in the room was stupid enough to ask whose it was. Spindle was drones and a voice. Talweg juniors lined a rail; Mara among them, jaw set.

And Greta came, though she hadn't been required to. She pinned her witness badge above her apron and took a seat at the back, near the fire exits she didn't trust. She caught his eye as he sat and gave him a small nod: I chose to be found, and I'll keep choosing it, and he felt a flicker of something close to comfort that he'd later learn the cost of. Hearthblade docked last. Yara came through without insignia, compact, her eyes recording. Beside her sat a man whose shoes had opinions, Vigil's counsel, labelled by the feed as Ravel. And a third frame hovered at the edge, audio-only, a flat grey icon labelled STEWARD. Yara's gaze flicked to it once, and in that flick Kael read



the whole architecture of her problem: she'd brought her hardliners to the table, in the open, because she couldn't control them in the dark.

"Before we begin," she said, "I'll say what my counsel would rather I didn't. Vigil Ithaca is not one voice. There's the voice that defends consent even when it's inconvenient. That's mine. And the voice that says the diaspora is dying too fast for consent to survive, and someone must steward the bloodlines whether they agree or not. That voice killed your relay crew. I haven't been able to stop it. I'm hoping you can make its argument lose so badly in public that even my own faith abandons it."

Kael didn't give an opening statement. Doctrine likes openings; it smuggles its assumptions in through them. He slid a dull cube onto the welded table: printed polymer, copper, seal strips, a tamper indicator that would scream if you pried it. "A memory of everything," he said, plain. "The corridor. The rock. The relay crew. The frag spread. The caravan we held in the storm. The rails: not the weapon, the rails. Hashed and mirrored. If this room goes dark, it goes bright in ten others. So whatever's said here can't be edited into something kinder to the people who killed Wick, and Mela and Osric Vane." He set it in the center. "Make your argument, Steward. Where the cameras can see you."

The grey icon spoke, processed into anonymity, which was its own confession. "Consent is a luxury of the rich. A lovely idea for caravans with deep gene banks and time to

argue. The diaspora has neither. We are half a million souls scattered through the old corridor web, a thousand fragile hulls across deep-system arcs and slow interstellar routes, falling from a home we cannot return to. We spin out our long, bitter centuries marrying our cousins because the corridor math leaves no one else, watching our children inherit narrower futures while elders who have ruled for three hundred years hold votes about dignity. You speak of consent. I speak of survival. When a loop is failing, you don't convene a council of the algae. You act. The bequest is the only tool that can save us, and you'd chain it to the agreement of people too frightened and too tired to use it."

It was a good argument. That was the terrible part. Kael felt it land, felt the tired witnesses lean toward it the way tired people lean toward anyone offering to carry the weight. Counsel Ravel broadcast the formal version onto every screen: a stewardship class, chosen by lottery, vetted by Ledger, empowered to override local compacts; exchange marriages by recommendation; synthesis under stewardship control; companions recognized as tools, to keep sentiment out of policy.

"Lottery," Brim's crew lead said, low, "so the gods can claim they're not picking."

"Vetted by Ledger," Huo said, not hiding his contempt this time, "so the ones who pick can pretend they didn't."

Iri said one phrase, testing whether it stayed poisonous in air. "Companions recognized as tools."

"You are excellent tools," the Steward said, and two Talweg juniors put hands to their throats like they were protecting something.

Kael had a different answer, built since the storm. "You say consent is a luxury of the rich. I agree, that's the most honest thing you've said. Out here a young person's choice is weighted by who shares soup next month. Hunger is a vote. I know. I'm marrying a woman my clan arranged for me to refresh a bloodline. I'm the treaty-glue child your doctrine says we can't afford to stop making." He let it sit. "Here's what I learned in a storm three days ago, holding four hundred and ten people while your faction shot at me. The math said stay. The math said the bequest could save thousands, the caravan was only four hundred, protect the cargo, let them die. That's your math, Steward. That's the exact arithmetic of stewardship, the cold sum that says some lives are an acceptable price for the future. And I broke it. On purpose. In front of the whole Court. Because the moment you let the math decide who lives, you're already the thing the bequest was built to stop."

He stood, slow, so the cameras couldn't read panic.

"Your doctrine isn't a reaction to the box. My ancestors built the cure and the weapon together, and the temptation to use the weapon didn't come from outside, it grew in the same four caravans that built the engine. You aren't its enemy. You're its shadow. You're what it becomes the day somebody tired enough takes off the

rails. My family locked the box to keep it from us. From the version of ourselves that runs your math at three in the morning when the loop's failing and the council's asleep. The lock isn't a chain on a tool. It's a promise we made to our own future selves: don't let us become stewards, no matter how good the reasons sound."

The room had gone quiet. Even the icon's static seemed to hold. "You ask who acts when the loop fails. Everyone. That's what I did. I didn't convene a council of the algae. I lit my hoop and held a caravan and let the Court watch me do it without taking a right from a single person. You can act and consent at once. It's harder. It cost Wick her life, left a workboat opened and bleeding, and nearly cost me the lock, and it'll cost more. But the day we decide acting and consenting can't coexist is the day you win, and the day we stop being worth saving."

"Pretty," the Steward said, the processed voice unwarmed. "And four hundred people are alive because of it. But you're one boy with one ship and one lock. You will get tired. You already live deeper inside a body that refuses to age than you like to say out loud, and you have centuries left to carry. One day someone will offer to hold the weight for you, and you will want to say yes. Everyone wants to say yes eventually. That's not wickedness. That's exhaustion. We'll be there, patient, with a class of stewards and a lottery and a kind word, on the day you finally want to put it down."

"Then I won't hold it alone," Kael said. "That's the part

you keep needing me to be. One boy, one lock, one lever you can pull. The bequest was never meant to live in one hand. It's meant to be carried in pieces, to keepers who'll never all be in one room, so no one, not you, not me, not my own tired self in a hundred years, can pick it up alone. You want a steward you can pressure. I'm going to make sure there isn't one."

It was the moment the colloquy turned, and he felt it turn, and on Yara's face he saw something close to relief and close to grief, a woman watching her own argument win against the faction that shared her flag. And it was the moment the hardliners decided the argument was lost and changed the subject as they always did.

The floor shivered. A physical tremor up through the welded tables and bolted chairs. The tether hummed, longer and lower, a string plucked by a patient, malicious hand. His panel flashed an alert that shouldn't appear during a colloquy:

**TETHER TENSION OSCILLATION: RISING.**

"Someone's injecting torque into the docking ring," Mara said, lab-sharp. "Seventeen-point-one second period. If it sings itself up, it doesn't snap dramatically. It fatigues. It frays. The station drifts, and everyone aboard becomes a safety incident that requires a stewardship response."

"That's not my faction," Yara said, and there was real fear under the level now. She turned to the icon. "Stand down. You will not murder a colloquy to win it."

"She can't make them," Iri said, only to Kael. "Listen to

the phrasing. She isn't giving an order, she's making a request with a flag on it. Hearthblade obeyed her at the dock and obeys something else now. Somebody built a second set of hands into that ship and put them below the captain's."

The grey icon said nothing. It had what it wanted, a tether singing toward failure, a station full of witnesses, and a boy with a hoop who could save them and expose himself, or refuse and let doctrine cause the funeral it needed. "They built the trap around the lever," Iri said, only to Kael. "Lives you can see. They're pulling it on purpose, to prove you can be pulled."

"Then I'll be pulled, and I'll make it cost them." He was already moving. "Iri, dip the hoop through the field, throw an eddy brake on the anchor, bleed the oscillation. Low current. Published control law. We do it in front of every camera, and the record shows the people who claim to steward life just tried to kill a room full of witnesses to win a debate they were already losing."

"The hoop's scarred. Eleven won't take storm-load again. But the tether brake's gentle work. Go."

In the cockpit Rook dipped a low skim of field, threw a phase-lead eddy onto the anchor, and bled the oscillation off into the carbon skin, talking the singing down the way you talk down anything wound too tight. On the station Janus cut a reaction wheel and the injection stopped and the tether's note slid back toward baseline, and four hundred years of careful engineering held because a

scarred hoop and a robot with a cracked rib refused to let a faith have its funeral. But the hardliners got something anyway. They always got something. As the oscillation died, a maintenance sub-panel near the colloquy chamber blew its seals in a small sharp overpressure built to look like an accident, a parting stone thrown at the room. It vented a corridor section. And the witness nearest that corridor, the one who'd taken a seat by the fire exits she didn't trust, was Greta of Dorsal Row.

It didn't kill her. The blowout caught her at the edge, slammed her into a bulkhead, opened a long wound down her side and stole the air from a corridor she happened to be standing in. Blue Anvil's interns reached her in ninety seconds and the doctor in two minutes, and they sealed it and got a mask on her and stopped the bleeding, and Greta of Dorsal Row, grey-faced and furious, looked up at the camera still recording and said, in a voice like ground keys, "Put it in the record. They blew a panel to win a debate. Publish it." And then she went under, and the doctor said a word Kael didn't know that had the shape of *not yet*.

He was a kilometer away, having just saved a station full of strangers, understanding that the trap had worked, that the lever inside him had been pulled, and the bill had come due in the currency he was learning to dread. Someone he'd let himself care about, bleeding in a corridor, because she'd chosen to stand near him in the

light.

"She's stable," the doctor said, eventually, and Kael hadn't breathed in what felt like a year. "Stable, not safe. There's a difference and I won't pretend there isn't. She's strong and stubborn, and the wound's bad, and she's old, and old out here means nearly three and a half centuries of repairs and change, and bodies repaired that often don't bounce. I'm taking her to Blue Anvil." The doctor's voice did something it never did. It shook. "She asked me to tell you something before she went under. She said: don't you dare make me a reason to fire."

Kael closed his eyes.

"Colloquy record packaged, hashed, mirrored, published," Spindle said, flat and terrible. "Including the blowout. Including the Steward's last words. Including a witness, gravely hurt, telling us to put it in the record." A pause. "Captain Kael won the argument. Then the people who lost it tried to kill a room full of witnesses to take it back, on camera, in front of the whole Court."

Yara's frame was still open. She hadn't moved. Her face had gone to the place faces go when a person realizes the thing they were trying to prevent has happened under their own flag. "I'm sorry," she said, and it wasn't to the Court. It was to Kael, and to Greta. "I told them boring would beat them. I was wrong. Boring made them desperate. Desperate faiths don't write briefs. They blow panels." She looked, for a moment, very old. "I'm going to deal with my own house now. Bury this carefully. Or save



it. Greta of Dorsal Row is worth more than the argument she got hurt making." The line cut.

He sat in the silent cockpit, the tether quiet, the station saved, the colloquy won, and a woman who sold people something not made by fear bleeding in a hospice tug because she'd chosen the light.

"I should have kept her away from me," he said.

"You couldn't have. She chose. That was the whole of her. She spent her life refusing to let fear pick her seat. Don't take that from her now by deciding her courage was your mistake." A pause. "But you're right about the larger thing, and you should feel the weight of it, because it'll decide what you do next. Everyone who stands near you in the light becomes a lever. The Vane crew. Mallet. Now Greta." The robot didn't say the next name and didn't have to. "The trap isn't a single event. It's proximity. As long as you're the single carrier, the people you love are the ammunition."

Kael looked at the small bright point of the tug carrying Greta toward the only mercy the diaspora had, and out at Hecate's aurora writing law nobody believed and everyone obeyed, and the road opened again at the edge of the plan, wider now, darker, impossible to keep pretending he couldn't see.

"Take us to Blue Anvil," he said. "I want to be there if she wakes up. And start drafting the distribution protocol. The real one. The one where I'm not the single carrier

anymore." His voice was steady in the way that costs everything. "I'm not burying one more person who stood near me in the light."

"I started the night the relay crew died," Iri said. "I didn't show you. You weren't ready to read it." The antennae made the slow sweep. "You're ready now. I'm sorry that you are."

## Chapter 14:

# Pilot Light

Blue Anvil ran its lamps on a curve the body trusted more than Hecate's aurora. Mornings carried a little more warmth in the scrubbers and a little more spectrum in the light, and the place moved at the pace of people who'd learned that hurrying kills. It was the calmest corner of the Court. That was why, decades back and without ever writing it down, the Court had agreed you didn't bring violence to Blue Anvil. You could fight anywhere else. Here was where the diaspora kept its promise that some places were for mending.

Greta of Dorsal Row was dying in one of its beds, and she knew it, and she was annoyed about it, which the doctor said was the best sign her spirit had.

"Three hundred and forty years of repairs," she told Kael. Her voice had worn down to powder. "Patch a body that many times, it stops believing the patches. The doctor won't say it. I will. I've had a good long run and a stupid last week, and I'd take the stupid week again, so don't make a face."

"I'm not making a face." He was.

"You're making the worst one. It says *this is my fault*. Put it away." Her hand found his, dry and light as a husk. "I didn't get hurt standing near you. I got hurt standing in the light. I picked the light. I've been picking it for three

hundred and forty years. The only way you ruin it is to decide my picking it was a mistake. So don't."

He sat with her a while and didn't try to fill the quiet. There was a thing he wanted to ask and couldn't, so he asked something smaller. "Why spice?"

She almost laughed, and it cost her. "Because everything else out here is rationed by fear. You eat what keeps you alive and you're grateful and you never taste it. I wanted people to taste something somebody made on purpose, with a little extra in it that wasn't survival. That's the whole of my politics. Feed people something that wasn't made by fear, and they remember they're allowed to want things. People who remember they're allowed to want things are hard to govern with a hymn." Her eyes went somewhere old. "I had a daughter. Long time gone. She wouldn't eat when she was scared. I learned to make food she'd eat scared. Turns out half the diaspora eats scared."

Mara was there, and Iri, and the doctor with his tired eyes, and two infants from Kepler's Kin asleep three beds down with their boring, beautiful graphs. For a while the room had the particular peace of a place that's decided to be honest about death.

He did not have anything to say after that, so he did the thing his hands knew. He hummed, low, badly, the tune Thistledown woke to, the note bending up where his mother had bent it.

Greta listened with her eyes shut. "What is that."

"A morning song. There are words. They're about hats."

"Of course they are." Her mouth moved. "Do the up bit again."

He did the up bit again.

"That's the one," she said. "That's a song written by somebody who expected to still be here in the afternoon. Keep it."

"There's a thing I want," Greta said then, "and it's small, and you'll do it because I'm dying and that's leverage." Her mouth tried for a smile. "When you leave songs on rocks, Iri told me, leave one for me. Not a sad one. Leave the recipe for the cheap preservative. The one that makes the food last while a failing crew fixes the real problem. Carve it where some frightened crew finds it on a bad day and thinks: somebody was here, and they wanted me to eat, and live." Her grip tightened. "Promise me a recipe. Not a monument. Monuments are for people who needed to be important. I just wanted folks to taste something good."

"I promise."

"Good," she said, and closed her eyes, and the boring, beautiful graph above the bed began, very slowly, to lose its argument with the dark.

And then, at the worst possible moment, which was of course the chosen one, the hardliners came to Blue Anvil. They came as a lie. A medical tug, transponder spoofed to read as a Spindle Ark auditor, requesting emergency dock under the storm-relief protocols that Kepler's Kin's

rescue had spread across the arc. Blue Anvil, which mended anyone, which had spent its whole existence refusing to ask whether a patient deserved the bed, opened its dock, because the day a hospice checks credentials at the airlock is the day it stops being a hospice, and the hardliners had counted on exactly that. They'd found the one door in the Court that would always open. They'd found the promise and turned it into a way in.

"Boarders," Iri said, and its voice went fast and flat and absolute. "Four. Hard suits. Not here for you, Kael. For me. They know what I am now. They know the lock is mortal. If they can't have the bequest, they've decided no one will, and the cleanest way to end it forever is to end me, in a hospice, where you wouldn't expect violence, in front of a dying woman, so the Court learns nowhere is safe and panics into wanting a steward."

It came in the compression of real violence, where minutes shrink to a single held breath. The doctor moved the infants first. That was the right thing, and it was the thing that told Kael who he was: a man who, with armed strangers in his ward, put his body between four hardliners and two cribs because mending wasn't a job to him, it was the only law he had. "Not here," he said, with nothing in his hands. "You don't do this here. This is the one place we promised."

"Move," one of them said, and didn't wait.

Iri put itself between the boarders and the bequest. Kael

still carried the cube and always would, but the cube wasn't what they needed. Iri was the bequest. Iri was the lock. To end it they had to end the robot, and the robot knew it. It did the only thing it had ever really done, the thing it had done since a corridor when Kael was small enough to tumble. It stepped in front. Cracked rib, braced chassis, a body that had been spending itself for weeks, and it made of itself a door that wouldn't open.

They'd come prepared for a robot. A disruptor: a focused magnetic lance built to do to a companion's core what the corridor wedge had done to a beam, to scramble and burn and end. They'd brought it specifically for Iri, because they'd done their math, and the math said the lock was mortal and the lock was here. And Iri took the lance. It took it the way it took everything, economical and complete and silent, folding around the strike so the lance burned through the braced rib and into the chassis instead of arcing past to the people behind, and the robot that had been the steadiest thing in Kael's life since before he had words went rigid, and dark, and fell, ceramic on hospice deck, a sound he would hear in the worst part of every night for the rest of a very long life.

And Kael, with a dying woman's hand cooling in his and his companion dark on the floor and four killers in a room that had promised to be safe, stood at the exact edge his ancestors had built a lock to keep him from, and felt the whole machinery of revenge come stable inside him like a corridor.

He had the cube. He had the reading-key. He couldn't open the core alone, the lock needed a quorum, the lock was Iri and Iri was dark. But he had the rails, and the rails spoke to the node's emergency systems, and in one cold clear instant a boy who'd grown up doing math in his bones could see three ways to turn the tools of mercy into a weapon and end the four people in front of him without losing a single legal argument, because they were boarders, because they'd attacked a hospice, because no Court in the diaspora would convict him.

It would be lawful. It would be just. It would be exactly what they wanted.

"Don't," Mara said.

She hadn't moved to him. She knew better than to touch a person at that edge. She stood across the dark shape of the fallen robot, between Kael and the killers, with nothing in her hands either, and she said the only thing that could reach him, which wasn't *they don't deserve it* and wasn't *you'll regret it*. It was the truth, plain, the way Iri would have said it.

"If you do it, the lock dies with Iri. Not just the function. The lock opens to consent freely given. The second you turn the rails into a weapon, the second you use the bequest to kill, even these four, even justly, you become a person who'd coerce, and the lock feels it, and it fails closed, and the cure dies with the weapon, forever, and Greta died for nothing, and the Vane crew died for nothing, and you become the proof Vigil needed that the



box should never have been trusted to anyone. They didn't come here to take the bequest, Kael. They came to make you destroy it. The lance was for Iri. The trap was for you. Don't spring it. Be the thing they can't survive. Be the wall."

The hardliners, hearing this, understanding for the first time that they'd walked into a room where the boy might choose not to give them the funeral, hesitated.

Hesitation was all the Court needed, because the Court had learned, in two weeks of recorded blood, to move fast toward the places violence chose. Brim's crew, who never let a hospice go unwatched after a frag spread nearly killed their own, were already in the dock. Spindle's drones were already streaming the boarders' faces to ten thousand screens. And Blue Anvil's own people, orderlies and nurses, a hospice that had decided long ago it wouldn't be defended by killing but would absolutely be defended, closed the corridors with sealed hatches and bright lights and the oldest weapon they had, a hundred witnesses arriving at once.

The hardliners ran. They got two of the four out. The Court caught the other two in a sealed ward and held them, alive, for the record, because that was the whole point and Kael had not let it become anything else.

He hadn't sprung the trap. He stood over his fallen companion with the cube in his hand and the means of righteous murder in his head, and he hadn't used it, and the not-using was the loudest, most expensive silence of

his life. And Greta of Dorsal Row died while he held the line, quietly, the graph above her flattening into the honest baseline of someone who'd finished a good long run, and he didn't get to say goodbye, because he'd been busy not becoming a monster. Which was, he understood later, the most Greta thing that could have happened, and the cruelest.

"Doctor." His voice didn't sound like his. "Iri."

The doctor was already on his knees by the fallen robot, hands moving with the same care he gave the infants, the same care he'd given Greta, because to a hospice there was no line between the kinds of dying. "The core took the lance. I'm a body doctor, not a robot doctor, but I can read a flat line in any substrate, and this isn't flat. It's nearly. There's a flicker, something deep still holding. Whether it can be brought back—" He looked up, and his tired eyes had nothing comfortable in them. "I don't know. You'll need Kintsugi. You'll need its own architecture. You may need a miracle, and I don't sell those, I only witness them." A pause. "Greta's gone. I'm sorry. She went while you kept your companion's killers from making you into one of them. She'd have called that a good death. Yours, I mean. The one you didn't get. She'd have said: good, he kept his hands clean, now somebody bring me back so I can yell at him for crying." Kael knelt on the hospice deck between a dead woman and a dark robot, the cube in his hand, the flicker at the

bottom of the ruin, and did the only thing left, he turned the grief into a sequence, because a mind can carry almost anything if you hand it the next step.

"Kintsugi," he said. "Get me Kintsugi. The repair caravan. They lost the Vane crew to this same war; they'll understand what it means to mend a thing the diaspora can't replace. Tell them the lock is down but not dead. Tell them I'll give them anything. I'll give them the road. I'll give them the rest of my life. Just help me keep the flicker."

Mara was beside him now, her arms around him. There was no comfort left to give, only the weight of holding him, which Iri had taught them both was different. "I've got you," she said, into his hair. "You held the line. Greta's gone and Iri's down and you held it, and I'm never letting anyone tell the story without that part."

He wept on the deck of the one place the diaspora had promised would be safe, the woman he was going to marry holding him together, his companion flickering toward dark, and somewhere out in the Court a faith that wanted a funeral had finally gotten two of them and failed at the only thing that mattered, because the boy hadn't become the monster, and the lid hadn't opened to coercion, and the flicker at the bottom of the ruin did not quite go out.

## Chapter 15:

# Standards and Scars

Kintsugi didn't promise to save Iri. It promised to try, and to be honest about the trying, which out here was the only promise worth having.

The repair caravan was a belt of workshops strung along a spine, every wall covered in patches that didn't match, every patch deliberate, every seam left showing. They'd lost the Vane crew to the first slug of this war, and they took Iri's dark chassis into their best clean bay and worked as they worked everything, slowly, in the open, lights up, cameras on, a maintenance call-and-response playing on the radio that somebody had turned into a kind of music.

Their lead was a woman named Aoki with epoxy ground into the lines of her hands. She let Kael stay because she understood some people heal by watching the thing they love be mended, and she narrated as she worked, not for him, but he was allowed to overhear.

"Core took the lance dead center," she said, the first day. "Most of it's slag. But your companion did a thing on the way down I've only ever seen done on purpose, and I think it was on purpose. In the quarter-second before it lost coherence, it dumped its highest-priority structures into the redundant substrate in the rib. The cracked rib. The one it's been protecting for weeks." She looked at him

over the work. "It hid its soul in its scar, son. Knew the core was the target, so it put the part that matters in the part that was already broken, because nobody aims for what's already broken. That's not luck. That's a being that thought about its own death and made a plan."

He had to leave the bay for a while after that.

The flicker held through the first day, and the second. On the third, Aoki found the dumped structures intact in the rib's substrate, corrupted at the edges, mostly there. On the fifth she started the part she'd been dreading, building Iri a new core and coaxing the salvage to inhabit it, to come up out of the broken rib and live again in something whole.

"It may not be the same," she warned. "Memories may be gone. Reactions different. The thing that comes back may be your companion with holes in it, and it may know it has holes, and that's its own grief, and you can't do it for it." She wiped her hands. "We don't hide the seam here. We make the repair visible, gold if we can afford it, honesty if we can't, because a hidden scar is a lie waiting to fail and a shown one keeps you humble. If your companion comes back, it comes back with the seam showing. I won't make it look like it was never hurt. That'd insult what it did."

"Show the seam," Kael said. "It told me once its ethics module felt like a spine. Said it let it stand. Let it stand on what it did."

They didn't hold a funeral for Greta, because she'd left

instructions, written years back in a grandmother's uneven hand, filed where her testimony was filed, because she'd always known the work she did could get a person killed. *No funeral*, the instructions said. *Funerals are for people who needed to be important. Make my death useful. Put my recipes in the standard. Make the children wash their hands and eat something good. Then sell more spice and don't be sad where the cameras can see you, it depresses the customers.*

So the Court did the harder, better thing she asked. They wrote her into the manual. The loop-hygiene standard Mara had been drafting for weeks: soap timers, pH sentinels tuned to a lullaby instead of a siren, the thing that turned panic into procedure, became the Sialla Standard, after an old caravan word for a clean hand offered without debt. Greta got her own section inside it. Her preservative recipes. Her market-trained sense of which caravans were sick from what they bought. Her insistence that you feed people so they can say no, that a fed mouth is a free one. Over Mara's objection that Greta would have hated being important, it got a name too, because Spindle pointed out there was a difference between a monument and a label, and Greta of all people knew the power of a label on a tin.

They called it the Greta Annex. Loop hygiene and food security for caravans under stress. With a footer in a font teenagers tolerated: IF YOU ARE HUNGRY AND AFRAID, EAT FIRST, THEN DECIDE.

The grief didn't go anywhere. It sat under the work, as grief does. Kael ran the spool schedule and read audit packets and let his hands keep him upright, and at night it found him anyway, the sound of ceramic hitting a deck, the husk-light weight of a hand, the graph losing its argument. He didn't sleep much. Mara took to sending him things at odd hours: a pH trace with no caption, a photo of a sink, once a recording of a Talweg auntie swearing at a filter that thought it was better than it was. He understood what she was doing. She was building him windows to look through so he didn't only look down. He let her. He'd spent his whole life being the one who carried other people's fear, and it turned out to be a relief, a small terrible relief, to let someone carry a little of his. She came to Kintsugi on the sixth day. She didn't ask about Iri. She walked into the clean bay, looked at the dark chassis and the gold seam Aoki was running, and stood next to him for a long time without talking, which was the loop-lab thing, the thing they were good at. Then she said, "When I was small I lost a brother. Loop crash. We were on an old ship, no Sialla Standard, no anybody. My grandmother told me grief was a debt you paid in installments and the trick was not to pay it all at once, because if you tried, it took your hands, and you needed your hands." She wasn't looking at him. "She was right about the hands. She was wrong that it was a debt. It's a room you carry. You just learn to put furniture in it so you can stand to be in there."

"What furniture."

"People. Work. A recipe. A song on a rock." She finally looked at him. "I'm putting myself in yours, if you'll let me. I know the timing's obscene. There's a robot on a table and a dead woman in a manual and you haven't slept. But I've watched you make the harder choice twice now, and I'd rather be in the room with that man than be safe and alone." Her jaw set. "I'm not going to dress it up. I want to marry you, Kael. And I want to do it before the road takes you, so that whatever else happens, it's on the record, in front of everyone, that I chose you and wasn't left."

He looked at her in a clean bay full of other people's repairs, and the grief didn't lift, but it made room. "You're proposing to me over a robot on a table."

"I'm proposing to you over a robot on a table," she said. "Greta would have called it efficient."

A sound got out of him that was a laugh and a sob and didn't resolve into either, and he pulled her in, and for a while neither of them said anything, which was the thing they were good at.

The Talweg Matriarch signed the Greta Annex in person, at Knot Nine, in front of the cameras she'd refused for the bequest review. She came in the way weather calculates an entrance, a jacket cut like a decision, and sat with her hands still, and her stillness told the room everything



about poise as a weapon. Across from her, Mara wore work clothes that still carried the faint, clean smell of the lab.

"I read the Annex," the Matriarch said. "I read who wrote it and how she died." She looked at the empty chair where a witness used to sit. "I've spent forty years protecting my line by holding it close. A spice seller I never met protected hers by feeding strangers, and she's dead, and her recipes will save more Talweg children this decade than my caution ever did." Her mouth tightened. "I'm too old to enjoy being wrong. I'm not too old to do something about it." She pressed her thumb to the pad with the force of someone signing a treaty she planned to complain about for years. "Talweg signs. The Annex. The Standard. The companion auditor clause." Her eyes found Kael's. "And the future pilot, provisionally, with every condition the Court already named, and one of mine. The boy who wouldn't become a monster in a hospice will tell me to my face that he intends to marry my granddaughter. I won't have it said that Talweg gave its consent and got nothing, and I won't have it said my granddaughter loved a man who wouldn't stand up and say so in front of the Court."

The room went quiet. Mara had gone still with the stillness of a person ambushed by her own grandmother into a thing she wanted and couldn't ask for.

Kael stood. He hadn't planned it. He'd planned nothing since a hospice deck. But he found, standing, with Greta's recipes in a manual and Iri's flicker holding in a clean bay

and a dead relay crew at the top of a public ledger, that he knew exactly what he wanted, and wanting it cleanly wasn't theft.

"I intend to marry Mara Talweg," he said, to the Matriarch, to the Court, to the cameras welded to the table. "I'm not here to correct anything, or to glue a treaty together. And I won't pretend our wedding somehow redeems the bequest. It exists so nobody has to marry for that arithmetic ever again. I'd rather lose it than make my marriage part of the argument." He looked at Mara, and stopped performing for the room. "I want to marry you because you stood between me and four killers with nothing in your hands and told me the truth instead of comforting me. Because you put yourself in my room when the timing was obscene. If you'll have a man who's about to become very hard to be married to, for reasons we both already know, then yes."

Mara looked at him a long moment, council voice gone, lab voice gone, only the person underneath. "You're proposing back, in front of my grandmother, at a standards signing."

"You started it."

"I started it." Her eyes were wet and she let them be, on camera, which was its own courage. "Yes, you disaster. Yes. I'll have the man who's about to become very hard to be married to. And we'll talk about the reasons we both already know later, because I know what they are. I've known since the storm. I know where the road goes." Her

voice held. "I'm marrying you anyway. I'm marrying you because I know where it goes. Now sit down before she changes her mind."

The Matriarch didn't smile. But she touched Mara's sleeve with two fingers, the way she'd once touched it to give permission to be tired, and this time it meant something nearer to I'm glad I lived to be wrong about this, and Mara held still until the old hand withdrew.

On the eleventh day, Iri woke.

Kael was in the bay, because he hadn't really left it. The salvage came up out of the broken rib into the new core in a process that looked like nothing, a settling, a few readiness chirps, and then the antennae moved, the smallest motion, and the head turned a fraction toward him, and a voice almost the same and not quite said:

"Your left cuff is under torque. Two percent."

He made a sound that wasn't a word.

"I have holes," Iri said, careful, taking inventory of itself in real time. "I know I have holes. There are things I should remember about you that are gone, and I can feel the shape of where they were, which is worse than not knowing they existed. Aoki says this is grief and I have to do it myself. She's right." A pause. "But I remember the corridor. The rock that asked for a song. The hospice, and the lance, and the choice to hide in my scar. And I remember the thing I checked for first, before I checked whether I still knew your mother's name, which I don't,

not fully, and that's a wound I'll carry. The lock's intact. The bequest is whole. I came back broken and the lid came back with me, and the seam shows, and Aoki tells me the seam is the point."

Kael put his palm against the new chassis, over the line of gold Aoki had run, and left it there past comfort, and Iri didn't pull away.

"You hid your soul in your scar," he said.

"I'd thought about my own death. It seemed wasteful not to have a plan. You taught me that: *turn the worst thing into a sequence*. I made my death a sequence. It worked, mostly. I'm mostly here." A pause with a new weight in it, a weight the lance had left. "While I was in the dark, and it wasn't nothing, it was a long flat dark with a flicker at the bottom that was me refusing, I had time, the strange compressed kind, to finish the protocol you asked for. The distribution. The road. I know how to make the bequest survive without me being the single mortal point. And it's the right answer, and it's the hardest thing I've ever computed, because it needs the thing your mother couldn't say and Greta's death made impossible to keep avoiding. It needs you to leave."

He'd known. Since the storm, since the corridor really, since the word bequest arrived with his whole life behind it. But hearing it in Iri's voice, scarred and gold-seamed and holed and his, made it real the way nothing else had.

"How long."

"Long. You're near-immortal; the diaspora measures these things in the slow currency of trajectories. To carry the shards to keepers who'll never all be in one room, across nodes that don't align for decades, doing it the slow lawful way so no broadcast can be intercepted and no single act can reach you, it's the work of a long while. Long enough that the word marriage and the word separation will have to learn to live in the same sentence. I did the math eleven times in the dark. There's no shorter road that keeps the people you love from being levers." It paused. "I'm sorry."

"Does she know? The length."

"She knew before you did. *I know where the road goes*, she said at the signing. She's known since the storm. She's marrying you anyway. That's a woman who understands the cost and decided it is worth paying, and decided it more clearly than you have, because she's had longer to be brave about it." The antennae lifted a fraction. "Let her be the brave one sometimes. You keep carrying everyone's fear. It's why they keep dying near you. Let Mara carry her own. It's hers. It's the marriage."

He didn't answer that. He kept his hand on the gold seam, and the bay's bright honest light, and the call-and-response on the radio, and after a while he said the only thing he could stand to say. "Don't do the thing again. The stepping in front. I can't watch the lance twice."

"I'll consider it," Iri said, which was the old lie, and it was almost unbearable how much it helped to hear it.

## Chapter 16:

### Shell Game

The face Spindle owned belonged to a man named Petrel. It took her juniors most of three weeks to walk it home, from the forward-port capture during the Mallet ambush, through the supply-chain habits that Foundry Twelve and Janus Ladder and a dead woman's salted nonce had laid bare, to a personnel record buried under three shells and a hymn. Petrel had been, once, an engineer on one of the four founding caravans. He'd helped build the synthesis engine. He'd read the same warning Kael had read on the flat black wall: *if you are reading this and you are afraid, good*. He had decided the people who wrote it were cowards. That fear was a thing to overcome rather than honor, and he'd spent thirty years becoming the Steward.

He'd thrown the first stone at the rock. Killed the Vane crew. Ordered the frag spread, the storm shot that killed Wick, the tether sabotage, and the lance in the hospice. He'd done all of it, Spindle's case showed, in the sincere belief that he was saving half a million people from their own sentiment, and the sincerity was the worst part, because it meant he wouldn't stop. You can't starve a man who's feeding on a faith.

Yara gave him to the Court as she did everything, weather first and confession second.

"Hearthblade is inbound under cold ports," she said, in the clear. "Vigil Ithaca is fracturing. There is a wing that believes in stewardship and a wing that believes in murder, and I spent my career telling myself they were the same wing being pragmatic. Blue Anvil taught me otherwise. Murder is what stewardship becomes when it stops being able to win arguments."

Hearthblade came in visible. That mattered. The sleeve-paint stayed on, but Yara ran her heat bright enough for every tug and kite in the Court to read the hull without guessing. Its weapon ports were capped and mirrored on public telemetry. Its drive had three damp lines on it, one from Yara, one from Spindle, one from Brim, because nobody in Hecate trusted a single promise when three ugly clamps would do.

The judicial frame waited below the main relay fan, an old dock ring that had once served as a cargo exchange and now served as the place where the Court did the thing it hated most: sit still and judge. It had no walls, only ribs, cameras, witness lights, and a sealed transfer corridor hung in the middle like a glass throat.

Blue Anvil sent a doctor and two orderlies, because the Court didn't let prisoners die from carelessness and call it justice. Kintsugi sent Aoki, grease still in the cracks of her hands. Brim sent the workboat Mallet, patched and mean. Spindle sent six juniors and not one of them blinked at the same time.

Rook held off the frame with the scarred hoop folded



close, segment eleven still flagged yellow after the storm work. Iri sat beside Kael in the cockpit, gold seams showing, body rebuilt and not yet trustworthy under load. It had insisted on being present.

"Petrel is aboard," Yara said. Her voice thinned on the name and then steadied. "He will be transferred under witness to stand trial for the Vane crew, Wick of the Mallet, Greta of Dorsal Row, the attack on Blue Anvil, and attempted seizure of the bequest. Because he is my responsibility, and I would rather hand him to a Court than a vacuum."

The transfer corridor lit. Petrel entered it with his hands locked in front of him. He didn't look like a monster. That was the first insult. He looked old, spare, well kept as dangerous men often are, a body maintained because the doctrine inside it still had work to do. No robes. No mask. No processed voice. His eyes moved once across the Court's cameras, and Kael understood that Petrel wasn't afraid of being watched. He had arranged his whole life for this kind of room.

Spindle opened the hearing with no ceremony.

"Petrel of Vigil Ithaca, once of Foundry Twelve registry, also listed under Janus Ladder shells and three dead procurement names. You are present under Hecate jurisdiction. You are charged under Court law with murders, sabotage, attempted coercion, and unlawful distribution risk related to the bequest engine. You will have one opening statement. You will not transmit data.

You will not issue commands. You will not turn this frame into a pulpit."

The statement channel was evidence-only: no executable packet layer, no ship authority, mirrored through dead buffers so every word could be archived and nothing could be steered. Spindle had insisted on that twice, because good courts survived by assuming every harmless channel was only harmless until somebody got clever.

Petrel smiled, very slightly.

"That last part," he said, "is not a power courts have ever had."

Yara's hand moved on her console. Hearthblade's damp lines tightened. "Do not," she said.

Petrel looked at her then, almost kindly. "Yara. You always wanted the clean version of what we were. I am sorry you had to discover there isn't one."

That was when Kael knew Petrel hadn't come to stand trial. He meant, when Hearthblade docked at the judicial frame and the witnesses gathered and the cameras lit, to do the last thing a faith can do when it's lost every argument. He meant to take the bequest into the dark with him, to prove the box was too dangerous to exist, to make of his own death the funeral that would finally frighten the diaspora into wanting a steward.

"You want consent," Petrel said, and for the first time the Court heard the voice without its processing: old, tired, certain. "You say the word as if the universe ever asked permission. Vacuum does not ask. Radiation does not

ask. Bottlenecks do not ask. Bad inheritance does not knock politely at the nursery door. It arrives, and then sentimental people gather around the damage and call their hesitation ethics."

Spindle said, "Statement is wandering."

"It is arriving." Petrel lifted his bound hands a little, not enough to break restraint, enough to make every camera follow them. "I helped build the engine. I was there when the cowards wrote the wall. *If you are reading this and you are afraid, good.* They mistook fear for wisdom. I did not. I learned the other lesson. If a tool frightens you, either you are too small for it or you have found the edge of the work."

Kael kept his hand near the comm, but Iri touched his wrist. "Let him spend the sentence," it said quietly. "The Court needs to hear the doctrine in its own mouth."

Petrel looked straight into Rook's camera.

"You carry a lock, Captain. You call that morality. I call it surrender to the slowest voter in the room. In an emergency, consensus is just murder with a nicer chair. Someone must hold the line before the line consents to being held."

Yara's voice cut in. "Petrel, stop."

He did not.

"You wanted the box opened in daylight. I agree. So here is daylight."

Hearthblade's legal transponder bloomed.

The signal came over the one channel Spindle had

deliberately left open: the court-authorized legal link that archived a prisoner's statement beyond later dispute. It existed to preserve testimony, not threaten anyone. Until a payload arrived hidden inside the pauses of his own voice.

Iri's antennae snapped up.

"Data burst," it said.

Petrel had a copy. That was the thing the Court hadn't known, the thing that turned a trial into a crisis. In thirty years of building shells and salting nonces, Petrel had done the one thing the makers feared most. He'd made a partial copy of the engine. The unconstrained core, not the whole thing, as the lock had always defeated him and the rails wouldn't come without consent. The weapon without the safeties. The thing the flat black wall had warned about. And on the judicial frame, in front of the Court, he broadcast it.

Spindle's juniors moved at once, hands and eyes and scripts, but the packet had already seeded itself into the relay fan. It split like a dry pod. Copies went into every archive that accepted evidence, every observer queue, every frightened private buffer that wanted to know what a monster sounded like before deciding what to do.

"You cannot put it back in the box," Petrel said. His smile was gone now. All that remained was faith. "I am transmitting the core. In an hour, every relay in this arc will be carrying it. Soon enough, half a million people will have the means to steer a bloodline and none of them will

have the rails, because the rails live in a lock that opens only to a consensus you will never reach. I have made the dangerous thing common. I have made stewardship inevitable. You are welcome. The cure can be locked. The weapon is loose."

For a moment the Court did the worst thing a Court can do. It believed him.

Kael felt the panic move through the channels, the realization that the thing they'd been guarding had just been scattered to the wind, that the lock had been gone around instead of broken, that a faith willing to die had found the move procedure couldn't undo.

Then Iri spoke, on the common channel, in its careful holed voice with the gold seam showing, and said the thing only the lid could know.

"He's lying. Not about the copy, that's real. About what it can do." A beat. "I'm the lock. I've read the engine he couldn't. Without rails, the engine can steer, but not toward a future anyone can bound. There is no infinite reservoir of usable variation inside it. It explores past the validated human range, and Petrel's partial copy has none of the correction loops, exits, or stability proofs needed to survive that exploration. Run his copy on a clan and you don't get stewarded children. You get cascading error, collapse, inside three generations, from exactly the failures the rails exist to prevent." The antennae made the sweep. "Understand the shape of it, because it matters. This is not safe. A frightened clan that runs his copy still

kills itself, and a determined one can do real harm to its neighbors on the way down, poison a shared loop, wreck a gene bank, leave a wound where a node spends a century healing. The danger is real. What's also real is that there's no quiet way to win with it. The makers didn't make the weapon harmless. They made total, solitary use provably self-defeating. Petrel hasn't handed half a million people a tool. He's handed them a loaded thing that kills whoever picks it up alone, and he's handed the Court the proof of why it must be carried together, in the light."

The silence after that was the largest in the book of Kael's life. The Court did not cheer.

That was how Kael knew the proof had landed. Cheers were for battles. This was uglier than victory. This was half a million souls realizing they had been handed a loaded thing and the instruction printed on it said: carry together or die alone.

Across the channels, ships began doing the quiet work of survival. Archives marked Petrel's packet hazardous and preserved it anyway, because erasing evidence was how ghosts got teeth. Blue Anvil sandboxed the core in a dead system and posted the lockout hash. Brim copied Spindle's warning into ship-simple language and sent it through crew channels: *do not run this, do not test this on live banks, do not let a frightened elder call it medicine*. Talweg's grandmother, after a long silence, signed the warning with her own name.

That signature did more to kill Petrel's doctrine than any speech Kael could have made. Petrel saw it happen. He watched the Court refuse panic. Watched the thing he had meant as contagion become quarantine. Watched his own weapon turn into a teaching file with his name pinned to the first page as an error condition. For the first time since Kael had seen his face, Petrel looked old in the ordinary way.

"No," Petrel said. It was almost too soft to carry.

Yara heard it. Her hand went flat on her console. "Lock him down."

Hearthblade answered before she finished. The judicial frame lights went red. In a running sequence, not all at once: aft to fore, like a fuse choosing a direction. Hearthblade's port damp line sheared away from its mount. Brim's clamp held for half a second longer, then screamed on the public audio as its teeth dragged sparks from the dock rail. Spindle's line stayed attached, which meant the whole judicial frame lurched instead of letting the ship go clean.

People moved.

Blue Anvil's orderlies grabbed the transfer cage by its outer rail and clipped themselves in. A Spindle junior went hand over hand toward a breaker panel with a calm expression that had to be terror dressed for work. Aoki shoved off from Kintsugi's station with a patch kit in one hand and a cutting torch in the other, because repair people always believed a torn thing could be made useful

for one more minute.

"Hearthblade drive warming," Iri said. "Scuttle burn. He is trying to tear free, light the drive inside the frame, and make the Court choose between vaporizing him and letting him become debris."

Yara's face appeared in the corner of Kael's display, white with rage. "I cut his command authority."

"He had a hymn under it," Iri said. "Old maintenance phrase. Buried below captaincy. He built the ship to obey his religion after it stopped obeying him."

Petrel stood inside the transfer cage, hands still bound, body held upright by the straps. He wasn't touching a console. He didn't need to. He had made the room itself his last hand. He looked at the nearest camera.

"You still need a steward," he said. "You always will. If not me, then the next frightened person with better courage." Then the transfer cage blew its outer latches.

Kael watched Petrel understand what he'd done. On the unprocessed face, the slow horror of a man who'd spent thirty years and three lives and his own death proving the exact thing he meant to disprove.

"You're the worked example," Kael said.

Then his chance finally arrived, carried by motion instead of words. The transfer cage kicked free of the judicial throat with Petrel inside it, still tethered by one line and spinning hard enough to make the body in it blur. Hearthblade's drive came up behind it, aimed for ruin. If the ship lit inside the frame, the cage would be shredded,



the dock would take fragments, and Petrel would become exactly what he wanted to be: a dead man no trial could make smaller.

Kael could have watched.

He could have let caution choose for him: one extra diagnostic, one safer vector, one half-second spent proving the hoop had no business coupling this close to the frame. By the time Rook moved, Petrel would already be gone, and every witness in the Court would understand. Segment eleven was still yellow. Rook's hoop had no business coupling this close to the frame. Iri's new core wasn't rated for another hard field event. Greta was dead. The Vane crew were dead. Petrel had just tried to hand a bloodline weapon to every frightened fool in the arc.

No one would blame him.

The thought came so cleanly it frightened him more than Petrel did. "Iri," he said. "Can we catch the cage?"

"The cage, yes. Hearthblade's drive, maybe. Both together, only if we use the hoop as an eddy clamp and let the frame push back through us."

"Cost."

"Segment eleven may fail. If it fails wrong, we lose the hoop. If I take the load, I may damage the new core. If we are too slow, Petrel dies and the Court forgives you."

There it was again. The trap under all the other traps.

*The Court forgives you.*

Kael thought of Greta's hand in his. Of the doctor saying

she went while he kept her killers from making him into one of them. Of the wall in the vault, afraid and wise. Of every steward who had ever made one clean exception and called it maturity.

"Brim," Kael said on the common channel. "Throw sodium across Hearthblade's aft. I need the drive plume visible."

Brim answered with no joke. "Throwing." A silver burst crossed the frame and lit like an ugly sunrise.

"Spindle, give me the spin."

"Already feeding."

Numbers poured into Rook. Bad numbers. Human-scale panic translated into rotation, inertia, heat, bite angles.

"Yara," Kael said.

"I am trying to kill the drive."

"Do not kill it. Choke it. Leave me a field to grab."

For half a second her face changed. She understood what he was going to do and hated him for it because it would work only if she helped save the man who had ruined her life's work.

"Choking," she said.

Hearthblade's plume narrowed. The ship bucked against the remaining line. The judicial frame groaned through every open channel.

"Iri."

"I know."

"No stepping in front."

"I am sitting beside you. That is not the same thing."

"It better not be."

Rook moved. The ship left the safe notch and slid toward the frame, hoop half-unfurled, scarred segments waking one after another. The Court opened around them. Tugs cut thrust. Kites folded. A Blue Anvil orderly dragged the second orderly behind a rib as the transfer cage spun past close enough to paint their suits with reflected warning light. Kael felt the hoop take Hecate's field.

Then Hearthblade's.

Then the cage.

Three different arguments in one hand.

The cockpit filled with vibration. Load, translated by bone, without being sound yet. Segment eleven flashed amber, then red at the edge, then back to amber as Iri bled current into the neighboring arc.

"Do not be noble," Kael said through his teeth.

"I am being distributed."

"That is worse."

"Yes."

The cage spun once more, slower now. Petrel's face came into view through the clear panel. For one brief, obscene moment, Kael and Petrel looked at each other without doctrine between them. Just a murderer in a box and the man saving him.

Petrel understood first.

He began to laugh. Recognition. Bitter, lucid, almost admiring. The sound of a man seeing the shape of his defeat and hating its elegance.

Kael clamped down. The hoop sang a note it had no right to sing. Rook's spine bowed. The frame shoved back through the field like a giant hand. Kael's harness bit his ribs hard enough to bruise. Iri's fingers moved faster than sight, cutting and feeding and refusing each little cascade before it became a death.

The cage stopped one meter from the broken dock rail.

Hearthblade's drive guttered. Yara killed it.

Aoki hit the cage first. She slammed a patch clamp across the torn latch and shouted something that the comm filter tried and failed to make polite. Brim's crew followed with a capture line. Blue Anvil's orderlies reached Petrel through the emergency panel and locked a medical restraint across his chest before anyone else could decide justice had faster hands than law.

The Court watched the murderer of four people live.

The record required him alive. Doctrine would answer in public, in the body that had carried it. Greta had paid too much for the Court to choose the easier path.

When it was done, Petrel was taken alive into a sealed ward under node jurisdiction, in daylight, with witnesses. The boring lawful end he had spent his life trying to deny everyone, including himself.

When it was done Kael sat in the cockpit, drained, the hoop cooling, segment eleven holding by a margin that had stopped being a margin and become a kind of grace. Yara's frame opened. She had watched all of it, and for once she looked like someone who had run out of weather

to stand behind. "You saved him," she said. "After Greta. After the Vane crew. After he made you watch him try to turn himself into a flag."

"A dead Petrel is a martyr," Kael said. His voice was scraped thin. "A living Petrel is evidence. Evidence gets boring. Boring is where doctrines go to starve."

"He will still have believers."

"Yes."

"You know that?"

"I know."

Yara looked away, toward some part of Hearthblade the camera didn't show. "Then I dissolve Vigil Ithaca. We are not clean enough to reform. We have spent too many years convincing ourselves that survival could excuse the shape it took. The hardline wing is finished. Petrel proved its core thesis lethal in front of the Court. My wing chased the same destination by a quieter road."

She swallowed. The motion was small and human and unwelcome.

"When you carry the shards out the long way, there will be nodes that remember Vigil with fear. Send them me. I owe a great many doors an apology. I might as well spend a century opening them ahead of you."

The line cut before he could answer, which preserved her posture and, annoyingly, his respect.

Kael sat with the cooling hoop and the cube in his hand and didn't feel like he'd won anything. He felt like a man who'd been handed a longer road.

## Chapter 17:

# The Long Vector

Thistledown came to Hecate the slow lawful way, exactly as Mother had promised, and the slowness was the message.

They could have run. They could have vanished. Instead they spent three weeks being the most boring ship in the diaspora, every transponder bright, every log published, every Ledger question answered at length and in triplicate, and they arrived as a caravan that had refused to give its enemies a single ambiguous frame. By the time the pale ice-flowered hull slid into Hecate's field, the consanguinity pretext had run out of use and the theft story with it, and his parents walked into the Court as what they'd always been under the legend: two old engineers who'd spent thirty years building their son a way out and were now, against their own expectations, alive to watch him use it.

Kael met them at the lock. He'd rehearsed something to say and said none of it. Mother tapped his chestplate twice with a knuckle, checking he was solid. Father drummed his fingers against the panel frame, counting something only he could see. For a moment the three of them hung in the corridor and didn't speak, because some reunions are too big for language and have to be done in the small private grammar of people who've loved

each other through too much vacuum.

"You buried a Brim, two Kintsugi and a spice seller," Mother said, reading it like a ledger. "And you saved a caravan and a hospice, and you didn't become a steward, and you didn't let a murderer die. I read the logs eleven times." Her voice did a thing he'd never heard it do. "I'm sorry, Kael. I built you a stage and didn't build the people who bled on it, and I told myself that was the same as not being responsible for the blood, and it isn't. I'll be sitting with that the rest of a very long life."

"I know."

"And I'm proud of you in a way that frightens me, because the thing I'm proud of is the thing that's about to take you away from all of us for longer than the woman you are about to marry will want to count." She touched his face. "The road is the right road. Take it. And don't spend it grieving the life you're leaving, because the life you're leaving will still be here, holding its piece. Far isn't gone. Your father and I have been far from each other inside the same hull for forty years, every time one went out on a hull walk and the other held the air."

She was quiet a moment. Then, in the flat voice she used for things she had decided not to soften: "You should hear the rest from me and not from a log. When Ledger's boarding party came for the scaffold, I told them we'd fire the fuel reserves and take the truss with us. I meant it at the time. Your father stood at the panel and counted the margins out loud so they'd know I could. That's the

woman who built you a way out. I'd like you to carry the whole of her and not the version that only ever wrote clauses."

"Did they believe you?"

"They believed your father's arithmetic. Nobody has ever not believed your father's arithmetic." She let that sit.

"Then we spent weeks being the least interesting ship in the diaspora, which was harder, and cost more, and is the part I'd rather you learned from."

Father had been quiet, the way he was quiet. Now he spoke, and his voice came out rough from disuse. "When you were six you got it into your head you could cross the bay without a tether. You made it almost halfway before you understood you couldn't get back." He wasn't looking at Kael; he was looking at the ship. "I didn't yell. I talked you in, one handhold at a time, the whole way, until you were close enough to grab. You don't remember being scared. You remember my voice." He put his hand on the back of Kael's neck, the way he had then. "I'll be a voice on a channel for a long time, talking you home one handhold at a time. That's a thing I know how to do. I've done it before." He took his hand away. "Don't let go of the rail to look at how far you've come. That's the only way you fall."

It was the most his father had said at once in years, and Kael didn't trust himself to answer it, so he didn't try.

The distribution protocol Iri had finished in the dark was, like everything the makers built, boring on the surface



and terrible underneath.

Five shards. Five nodes, scattered across the slow geometry so no three aligned for years at a time: Hecate, where the proof was made; Vela, in the south drift; Ananke, the ice court, slow and mean and exactly therefore trustworthy; Kintsugi, the belt of repairs, who'd mended Iri and earned it, and whose own long arc would carry it out past Ananke inside the decade; and Winnow, out past the shepherd moons, a small old caravan the makers had picked for reasons the annotations gave in geometry and not in words. Quorum three. No node ran the bequest alone. The keys couldn't all be held in one hand, not even Kael's. And the shards couldn't be broadcast, because broadcasting was how Petrel had nearly ended the world, a thing transmitted is a thing intercepted, copied, freed from its rails by anyone patient and frightened enough.

"Did they ask them?" Kael said.

Iri's antennae stilled. "Ask whom?"

"The five. Vela. Ananke. Kintsugi. Winnow. Did the makers write to them? Is there a letter in there where somebody says, we would like to put a piece of the most dangerous thing we ever built in your vault, is that acceptable?"

Iri went and looked. It took longer than it should have.

"There are trajectory tables," it said. "There are vault-capacity surveys. There is a note from Fern about Ananke's thermal stability that is complimentary in a way

I think she meant as an insult. There is no letter."

"So they chose five strangers' houses and never knocked."

"They expected the carrier to knock."

"They expected the carrier to knock at a door they'd already written the answer under." He turned that over and did not like the shape of it, and filed it where he was learning to file things he did not have time for yet. "All right. Then part of the job is asking a question my ancestors assumed."

So the shards had to be carried. In person. By hand. The slow lawful way that nobody would ever make a song about, across nodes that wouldn't align for decades, by someone the enemy couldn't reach in a single act, who could assemble each quorum in daylight, one node at a time, over a span of years the near-immortal diaspora measured the way shorter-lived peoples measured a season.

By Kael. Because he held the lid, and the lid was Iri, and Iri went where Kael went, and the whole architecture required the single mortal point of failure to be in motion, far from everyone it loved, so no one could ever again put a knife to a hospice to make it stop.

"You could send someone else," Mara said.

They were in the loop lab, late, the algae glowing green, the minnows turning, the place that smelled of ammonia and hope. She'd brought him here on purpose, to have the hardest conversation of their lives in the one room where she was most herself.

"I could," he said. "And then I'd be a person who built a thing this dangerous and handed the danger to somebody else to carry, as Petrel handed it to half a million strangers. I'd be a steward, Mara. The whole job description of a steward is: *let someone else carry the weight*. The only person who gets to carry the bequest is one who refuses to make anyone else do it." He took her hands. "It has to be me. You know it does. You said so at the signing."

"I know it has to be you. That's not the same as wanting it. I'm allowed both." Her voice held, the way she made it hold, a gasket against rising pressure. "You keep trying to make my fear behave like an engineering problem. It isn't one. It's just fear, it's mine, and I get to have it without you fixing it." She squeezed hard enough to hurt. "Here's what I want, and I've thought about it more than I've told you, so don't interrupt. I want to marry you because of the road, not despite it. If I'm going to be far from someone for a long time, I want it on the record, in front of the whole Court, that I chose him, that I wasn't left, that I didn't lose you, that I sent you. I will not be a widow of distance. I refuse the role. I'll be a wife whose husband is doing the most important and most boring work in the diaspora, and I'll be the reason it's possible, because I'll be holding the home node, anchoring the standard, keeping Talweg honest, raising the children if we decide to have them by every consenting method we now have, and being here, so there's a here for you to

come back to."

He'd thought he understood the shape of it. He hadn't understood, until that moment, that she'd built her own version, larger and braver, and had been carrying it alone while he was busy carrying everyone's fear.

"You're not the one being left," he said slowly. "You're holding the line. You're doing the harder job. You're staying."

"I'm staying. Someone has to. The road needs a horizon to walk toward, the bequest needs a node that never moves, and the children need a parent who doesn't live on a ship that can't come too close to anything it loves. You carry the box to the keepers. I keep the keep. That's the marriage. Two people who decided that *far* was a price they'd pay for *together*, and wrote it down, in front of witnesses, so no one, not a steward, not a grandmother, not your own tired self in eighty years, could ever tell us it wasn't a choice." She let her voice carry the weight at the end, just enough. "I'm not afraid of the distance, Kael. I'm afraid you'll spend it thinking you abandoned me. So don't. You come back from hull walks. Everybody in my family knows that's the whole trick. Now you do too."

Iri, still by the door, said the one practical thing. "The road isn't a vow of silence. Latency's long, not infinite. At each node the shard handoff needs a beam relay back to the home node for quorum verification. Every time Kael finishes a leg, the protocol requires a high-bandwidth

window to Hecate. The bequest's own security demands you two talk, at length, across the dark, at every milestone." A pause that had something almost shy in it, a shyness the lance had left. "The windows are longer than verification alone requires. I cannot show you the makers' notes yet, because the read key is still limited. But I checked the architecture. Whoever designed this expected the carrier to need a home, and I made sure that part stays in."

Mara laughed, wet and broken, and pulled Iri into the conversation as she'd learned to. "You're telling me the security protocol is going to make my almost-husband call home."

"Under penalty of the bequest failing verification. I read it very carefully. I made sure." The antennae lifted. "I couldn't give you a shorter road. I could make the long one have windows. So I did."

The night before the assize they went out and left a song on a rock, the one they'd chosen for Greta, small and ugly and unremarkable, the kind of thing that drifts for centuries ignored by everyone not looking for it. Kael cut a notch and slid in a recording puck. It carried the Sialla checksum, because soap deserved to be archived with stars, and Greta's recipe, the cheap preservative that made failing caravans' food last while they fixed the real problem.

"A recipe, not a monument," he said into the recorder, keeping the promise. "She was clear about that."

He hummed the hats song, the one Greta liked, and let the note bend up the way his mother had changed it when he was small. Mara hummed the harmony, which she'd never done before, which she'd do at every milestone for the rest of a long marriage conducted across the dark, so that any rock either of them carved would carry both their voices and a stranger who found it on a bad day would know, without being told, that two people had stood here once.

Iri recorded it and made a hash and posted the hash, and didn't call it sacred. Kael sealed the notch with resin and a bead of weld that looked like a comma in stone.

"Tomorrow we prove the rails in the open," he said, to the two of them, to the rock. "Then I marry you, and then I take the long vector, and then I come back, because apparently that's the whole trick and your entire family already knew."

"Tomorrow," Mara said, and took his hand, and held it a long time.

## Chapter 18:

### Doctrine on Trial

The Court had three words for a big hearing: *assize*, *circus*, *surgery*. Assize was the part where everyone pretended law was older than fear. Circus was the part where fear brought snacks and tried to sell them. Surgery was what happened when the universe overheard the argument and decided to test whether the people arguing could also keep each other alive.

This one was all three, and Kael walked in thinking the hard part would be Petrel.

He was wrong. Petrel was easy. The trial proper took four days and nobody attended it twice. He stood in a sealed frame, faceless no longer, and the Court convicted him of four murders, sabotage, attempted mass murder, and attempted coercion, with the flat thoroughness of a people who buried their dead in records. He didn't recant. He didn't need to; the proof he'd broadcast had recanted for him. They remanded him to Ananke, the ice court, which kept its prisoners as it kept everything, slowly, meanly, forever. The least dramatic possible end for a man who wanted to be a martyr, and exactly therefore the cruelest, and Kael felt nothing watching it except the cold tired absence where revenge used to live.

The hard part came after, and it came from the Court's own grief.

"The chair recognises Adra of Sere," Spindle said.

"Motion," said a voice he didn't know, the elder of a small caravan he could not have found on a traffic map that morning, one of the small frightened stations that had watched two weeks of recorded blood and a population-scale weapon broadcast to the arc and decided the diaspora couldn't survive the bequest existing at all. "We've now seen what this object is. A weapon that ends bloodlines. A cure no one can use without a consensus we've never once achieved. A lock that lives in a single mortal companion a faction of murderers nearly destroyed in a hospice. Which means the bequest can be ended by violence at any time, and as long as it exists, someone will try, and people will die near it, as they've already died near it." The voice wasn't cruel. It was afraid, which was worse. "I move the Court order the bequest destroyed. Not distributed. Destroyed. End the lock. End the companion that is the lock. Lose the cure, but lose the weapon with it, forever, as its own makers said it should be possible to lose it. We've buried crews and a spice seller and nearly a hospice. I will not bury my own caravan for a cure we're too frightened to ever use."

And the Court, traumatized, having tallied the cost in bodies, did the worst thing a Court can do. It took the motion seriously.

Kael felt the room tilt toward it. Felt the room discover how much it wanted permission to stop carrying this. Spindle's juniors went quiet. Brim's crew, who'd lost kin



for the bequest, didn't immediately object, because they'd felt the price of it. Even the doctor, who'd held two infants saved by the storm work, didn't speak, because he'd also held Greta while she died.

The motion to destroy the bequest, to end Iri, was going to pass. He could see it in the tally forming at the edge of the assize, the small frightened ayes accreting like frost.

"They're going to destroy you," he said, on the private channel, his voice gone to nothing.

"They might," Iri said, calm. "And I want you to hear me before you fight it the wrong way, out of love, because the wrong way loses." Very gentle. "If the Court votes to end me, you let them. That's the lock too. The bequest exists only by consent. If the diaspora, in daylight, with full information, freely chooses to lose the cure rather than carry the weapon, that's a consensus, and it's exactly the kind the lock was built to honor. A bequest that could be kept against the will of the people it endangers is just a weapon with extra steps. Don't save me by breaking the lock. I'd rather be destroyed by a Court keeping its promise than survive by a captain breaking his. Argue, but argue for the lock, not against my death. Argue against my death and you make me a thing you own, and then I'm a ward, and then they're right to fear me."

Kael stood. The tally hung over the assize like frost over a pump.

"You're right to be afraid," he said, to the elder from Sere, to the frightened eyes, to the whole tired Court. "I won't

tell you you're wrong. People have died near this thing, people I let myself love. The companion that is the lock is mortal, and as long as it exists someone will try to destroy it, and there'll be more funerals. If you vote to destroy the bequest tonight, you'll be making the safe choice, and the responsible one, and I won't be able to tell my dead you were wrong."

He let it sit. You don't win a frightened room by telling it not to be afraid.

"But understand what you'd be destroying, because Petrel already showed you, and in his ruin he handed you the only argument that matters. He broadcast the weapon to thousands of ships and it turned out to be useless, worse than useless, lethal to anyone who uses it alone, because the consent, the consensus, is the only thing that makes the engine work. The bequest isn't a weapon that happens to have a safety. It's a proof that the only safe way to use the most dangerous tool we ever built is together, in the light, with everyone. It's the strongest argument against stewardship the diaspora will ever have, in mathematics thousands of ships can check. Destroy it, and you don't just lose the cure for the bottleneck that's slowly killing every clan in this room. You lose the proof. And the next time a frightened people builds an engine like this, and they will, because the bottleneck is real and the temptation is eternal, there'll be no worked example at the bottom of the page. No Petrel. No record that says: we tried this, it can't work, here's the math. You'll have

burned the one thing that could stop your grandchildren becoming stewards, because you were too frightened of it to let it live."

The frost on the tally stopped accreting.

"I'm not asking you to keep it the way it is. The elder from Sere is right that a single mortal lock is a single point of murder, and people will keep dying near it as long as it sits in one place in one hand. So don't let it sit in one place. Distribute it. That's the protocol my ancestors wrote and never had the nerve to use, because using it requires exactly this, a Court, in daylight, choosing to share custody of a weapon-cure across five nodes that'll never all be in one room, carried the slow lawful way by a single carrier no one act can reach, verified at every step by a consensus none of you can be coerced into. Distribute it, and there's no single lid to come for. Distribute it, and the funerals stop, because the thing worth killing for isn't in any one place." He looked at the elder. "You moved to destroy it because you're afraid it can be ended by violence. I'm offering you a way to make it unkillable. Forget guarding it harder. Spread it so thin that ending it would take ending the whole diaspora's consent at once, which is the one thing no weapon and no steward and no frightened elder can do. Don't burn the proof. Scatter it."

The assize was silent long enough for someone to spend it, and the person who spent it was the one Kael had least expected to hear from.

"Ledger will file," Huo said.

The room turned. He had sat through the whole motion without moving, in a coat with no insignia on it, which by now everybody understood was not modesty.

"Ledger's position is on the public ledger and has been since Hecate. We do not seek custody of the bequest or of the companion. We opposed the distribution protocol in six pages and were answered in one word by an archivist with poor manners." Somewhere in Spindle's row a junior made a noise and was ignored. "We maintain the objection. We will maintain it for a century. We will also observe, and publish, and be a nuisance in the correct format, because a Court that is only watched by its friends is not being watched."

The Sere elder said, "That is not a vote."

"No. Ledger has no vote here and should not have one. I am telling you what the losing party intends to do afterward, which is the only part of a proceeding that has ever mattered." He sat back down. "Destroy it, and you will have destroyed it in front of an authority that wanted it destroyed and can say so forever. Distribute it, and you will have a permanent adversary who files on time. I know which of those I would rather leave my grandchildren, and I dislike that I know."

Then Spindle laid down a load.

"The Court's being asked to choose between two fears," she said. "The fear of keeping it and the fear of losing the proof. I'm an accountant; I don't get to vote my feelings.

So here's the math." She put it on the wall, fifty generations of the diaspora's bloodlines without the cure, the slow narrowing, the clans that became burials; the worked example, the cryptographic certainty that stewardship is lethal; the distribution protocol with its five nodes and its dull unkillable arithmetic. "I won't tell you how to vote. I'll tell you what each choice costs, in the only currency I trust, which is consequences. Destroy it: you're safe tonight, your grandchildren are stewarded within three centuries, and there's no proof left to save them. Distribute it: you're afraid for a long while, a boy carries a weight away from everyone he loves for a hundred years, and your grandchildren inherit a cure and a proof and a Court that chose to share a weapon rather than surrender to one. That's the whole of it. Vote."

They voted the slow way, because half the Court was not in the room and never would be. Node Engineering ran it in staged returns across two days, the near ships first, the far ones as their windows came up, each vote arriving already sealed so nobody could drift toward a tally. Ananke kept a delegation resident at Hecate for exactly this, three grey people who had not been seen to eat. They took the longest.

It was close.

He watched the tally the way a doctor watches a flatline, treating the numbers as a living thing he had to respect. For a long time, the destroy column and the distribute column climbed together, fear against fear. The small

frightened stations voted destroy. Kepler's Kin, held in a storm by the thing they were being asked to destroy, voted distribute. Brim voted distribute, and the crew lead said, on the record, "We held the dark for this. We came back ten of eleven for this. We don't get to set it on fire because the dark was hard, and I'd like that read out loud to anyone who tells me later that I voted with my grief." Blue Anvil voted distribute: "I've buried enough people who died of bottlenecks dressed as bad luck. Keep the cure. Carry it well." Talweg voted distribute, the Matriarch's thumb on the pad. Ananke took the longest, and voted distribute, with one appended condition that would change everything.

The motion to distribute passed, by a margin thin enough that Kael would think about the destroy votes for the rest of a very long life, because they hadn't been wrong, exactly. They'd been more afraid than hopeful, and he couldn't blame them, because he'd buried the same dead they were frightened of.

Ananke's condition came with the win, and it was the cost, and it was a sword.

"The ice court votes to distribute," the elder had said, in the flat cold voice of a people who survive by never pretending, "on one condition, which we won't soften and the captain won't like. The bequest is to be carried by a single mortal lock, across the nodes, far from any home, by a man who'll be tired and grieving and tempted, as all carriers eventually are. We've read the doctrine of

stewardship. We know how it begins, with a good person, tired, deciding one reasonable exception. We will not send a weapon into the dark in one hand with no way to call it back. So the Court retains a cryptographic dead-man's authority. If, by a quorum of the distribution nodes combining their keys, the carrier is found to have misused the bequest, run the engine without consent, steered a bloodline, become in any degree the steward the lock exists to prevent, the nodes can trigger a hardware fuse within the lock, an irreversible cascade requiring all five nodes to turn their keys simultaneously, entirely immune to remote hacks. The companion ended. The cure lost. It is simply the final rail. The carrier spends his life knowing the thing he loves most can be ended by the very Court he serves, the moment he becomes the thing he carries it to prevent. We'll trust him with the weapon. We won't trust him with the absence of a leash. No one should be trusted with that. Especially not the boy who wouldn't become a monster in a hospice, because he's exactly the kind of good person stewardship is built from."

Kael understood, standing there, that he'd won, and that winning had put a sword over Iri's head for the rest of both their lives, that he'd carry the bequest across a hundred years knowing the Court could, by a physical hardware vote, order his companion destroyed, and that this wasn't cruelty. It was the last rail. The thing that would keep him honest on the long road when his mother

and Mara and his own better self were light-years away.

"Do you accept the condition, Captain?" Spindle asked.

"You don't have to. Refuse, and the Court revisits the destroy motion, and it likely passes on the second vote, because fear doesn't get less tired. But you don't have to buy your companion's life with a sword over its head. Only you can choose that, and it's the worst choice anyone here has ever been asked to make, and I'm sorry it's yours."

He looked at Iri.

"It's the correct condition," Iri said, on the private channel. "It's the rail I'd have written. A carrier who can't be called back is a steward waiting to happen. The sword over my head keeps you human on the road. Accept it. I'd rather live under that sword than as a weapon no one can recall. I consent. I'm the lock, and the lock consents to its own last rail. That's the most a lock can do, and I'm doing it freely, in daylight, which is the only way anything worth keeping was ever done."

"I accept," Kael said, to the assize, to the Court, to the sword. "Distribute the bequest. Hold the cryptographic dead-man's authority. And the day I become the thing you're afraid of, use it. End the lock. End my companion, who just consented to its own leash more freely than I've ever consented to anything." His voice held. "Because if I ever become a steward, then the proof I just begged you to keep needs a new worked example, and I'd rather be the footnote than the warning."



He walked out of the assize married to a leash and engaged to a woman and bound to a horizon, and he'd won, and the winning had cost exactly what winning is supposed to cost, which is everything you can bear and one thing more.

## Chapter 19:

### Sere's Fear

The elder from Sere came to Blue Anvil the evening after she lost. Kael did not know that until much later. He was still in the assize, being congratulated by people who had voted against him an hour earlier and had already begun to remember it differently. Mara had left early. Mara was the person frightened people came to when they were done being public and had nowhere to put what was left.

Adra of Sere arrived with no aides and no accusation. She wore the plain blue sash of a small caravan that had lost too many arguments to larger rooms and had learned to make dignity out of not asking twice. In her hands she carried a cloth packet. Not data. Cloth first. People from Sere wrapped hard truths before handing them over.

Mara met her in a Blue Anvil side ward where the lights had been lowered for patients who needed their bodies to believe in evening. Two infants slept three beds down. A man with bone-growth braces snored softly through a mask. Somewhere, someone was laughing too quietly at a joke nurses had heard and approved.

Adra put the packet on the table.

"I want you to see why I voted against you," she said.

"Now. While it can't be mistaken for a tactic."

Mara sat. Inside the cloth were four things. A child's knitted wrist cuff, green and badly repaired. A printed

genealogy, folded until the creases had become part of the record. A medical summary with the careful language doctors use when the truth is not urgent but is inescapable. And a photograph of a boy beside a condensation line, grinning with two missing teeth.

"His name was Oren," Adra said. "He died at thirty-two. Which is young, for us, and old enough that people told his mother to be grateful. He had a narrowing syndrome we could trace back six generations and not fix because every proposed outcross cost us something we could not pay. Distance. Soup. A daughter who didn't want to leave. A son who did and was needed at home. Everyone talks about consent as if the no exists in a clean room. Our no always had a ration sheet under it."

Mara touched none of the objects. Touching would have made it performance. "The bequest could help future children like him," she said.

"Yes."

"But you moved to end it."

"Yes."

The infants breathed in their small regulated rhythm. Adra looked toward them. "My people are not brave. I don't say that as shame. It's a diagnosis. Sere has survived by being small and cautious and uninteresting. We don't have Brim's mass, or Spindle's ledgers, or Talweg's old arrogance, forgive me. We have narrow corridors and good memory. Every large thing that passes near us takes something. A treaty. A child. A tax. A heroic cause. Now

this bequest comes wrapped in proof and consent and a boy who keeps not becoming a monster, and I believe the proof, Mara. That is the problem. I believe it enough to fear it properly."

"Fear isn't an argument against keeping a cure."

"No. But it is an argument against pretending we can live near it. People died near it already. Not in theory. Mela and Osric. Wick of the Mallet. Greta. Your hospice nearly. The companion nearly. And every time, the answer is: carry it better, record it better, distribute it better. Maybe that is wisdom. Maybe that is how engineers talk themselves into building a sharper knife because the last one cut them in an educational way."

Mara flinched despite herself. Adra saw it and did not apologize. She had not come for comfort. "They are calling me frightened," she said. "They are right. I am frightened that the cure will become a road that every desperate clan must walk to prove they care about their children. I am frightened that saying no to it will become shameful. I am frightened that if we keep it, my great-grandchildren will live, and if we destroy it, they might die, and that I am too old and too tired to be trusted with the scale of either sin."

Mara looked down at Oren's grin, the condensation line behind him, the missing teeth. A small dead boy in an old man's body. A whole ship's fear made local enough to fit in cloth. "Why show me?" she asked.

"Because your husband answered well. He does that. He

made the right argument, and I watched four hundred people decide my fear was a thing he had defeated, and go home lighter." Her hands stayed folded. "It isn't defeated. It's just lost. Those aren't the same and by next year nobody will remember the difference. So I came to the one person in that room who loves him, so that somebody would know the fear is still standing there after the vote, and that I didn't move it because I hate the future. I moved it because I can see too many futures and all of them have graves."

Mara folded the cloth back over Oren's things. "I won't agree with you," she said.

"I didn't ask you to."

"I won't tell you the motion was wrong."

"Don't. Soft fear rots faster."

"But I'll remember him."

Adra's hands tightened. "That's all?"

"No." Mara added, "We are keeping the bequest, so I will make sure Sere can say no to the cure later without losing access to food, law, or respect. I will write it into whatever standards I can reach. No loyalty test. No shame clause. No punishment for destroy votes. If consent only protects yes, it is a decorated funnel."

Adra closed her eyes. "You sound like a woman who will have a hard life."

"I'm marrying one. It seems contagious."

The older woman laughed once, then gathered the packet. At the door, Adra stopped. "Your side won. Don't let them

celebrate too cleanly."

"I won't."

"Good. Clean celebration is how small ships learn they were not heard."

After she had gone, Mara sat a while in the lowered light with the two infants breathing three beds down, and did not go back to the assize. He had been right. Painfully, beautifully right. The bequest had to live, the proof had to survive, the cure had to be distributed before fear or hope could monopolize it, and every word of it was true, and a woman had walked out of that room carrying a dead boy in a cloth and no way to put him down. Mara had watched the tally climb with Oren's grin held somewhere behind her eyes. When the distribute column passed, by a margin thin enough to frighten the room sober, she had not smiled. Neither had Kael. She had looked for it, across all that space, and found his face doing the same arithmetic hers was doing. That, she thought, was one more reason she loved him. And it was going to have to be enough to build a standard out of, because Adra was right about the year, and about what people forget, and somebody was going to have to write the fear down before it stopped being remembered as real.

## Chapter 20:

# Bequest, Unlocked

They opened the bequest and got married on the same day, in the same room, in front of the same witnesses, and afterward the Court kept calling them one ceremony. It was right about the proof and wrong about the purpose.

It happened at Knot Nine. The welded coasters, the lamps breathing with the relay kites, the sign over the bar that still read BORING, under which a new hand had added & WORTH IT. The torus spun slow enough that down meant something. The viewports caught Hecate's aurora. And the Court came, not just the witnesses, the whole improbable necklace of it, because a thing carried in blood for weeks earns the right to be witnessed in joy at least once.

The unlocking came first, because the lock required it, and because Iri had explained the order mattered. "The vault opens to a quorum of strangers who don't love each other and agreed anyway. The marriage opens to two people who love each other and agreed in front of everyone. They use the same proof at two scales. They are not the same compact. The bequest is the diaspora learning to consent to its own future. The wedding is two people learning it in miniature. Do the large one first, so no one mistakes the smaller one for *treaty* or *correction*.

The same free yes that unlocks the most dangerous thing we ever built, said by two people who could have said no." The resemblance ended at the yes. Opening the bequest authorized a bounded reproductive tool under public rails. Marrying Mara joined two households and two futures.

So the three signatories took their places. Blue Anvil, who mended anyone. Brim, who held the dark. Spindle Ark, who counted until she was humble. Three ships that didn't love each other agreed anyway, exactly as the makers required. Kael had refused to open the flat black wall alone; he'd refused to do it with the tools of righteous murder in his hand, or to let a frightened Court destroy it. But now, it came down. It came down in public, to consent freely given, the way it had waited three generations to do. It didn't glow or sing. It exhaled, a thin hiss of equalizing pressure, a click from a latch that had waited longer than most people lived, a chime like a sink finishing a cycle. And the whole of it lay open: the cure and the weapon, the rails and the engine, the seed banks and the models and the protocols, and at the top, in the plain font the tired respected, a folder titled HOW TO LEAVE SONGS, and beside it HOW TO ARRIVE WITHOUT RUINING THE ROOM, and beside that a thing he hadn't expected and would carry the rest of his life: a folder titled FOR THE CARRIER, WHEN YOU ARE FAR.

And then, because the diaspora distrusts a victory that



stays abstract, the cure stopped being a folder and became a person who could name the need for it.

The doctor had brought a witness. He hadn't announced it; hospice people don't announce things, they arrive with the evidence in their hands. A young woman named Sefa, from a small caravan called Wend that had crossed its own bloodline too many times and run out of strangers to marry, sat at the edge of the unlocking with the stillness of a person told her whole life that her clan's narrowing was fate and not a problem with a solution. Wend had been dying the slow way, in the patient arithmetic of too few founders, each generation inheriting a little less room, a bloodline crashing the way a loop crashes, quietly, until somebody admits it.

"No child of the pilot exists yet," the doctor said, to the Court, to the cameras, to the wall where the proof still glowed. "I won't lie with nice lighting. What exists is consent. Wend has submitted the first cohort under the rails. Volunteer. Opt-out without shame. Companion audit if the companions consent. The engine may correct known harmful errors, synthesize viable gametes from consented material, and restore only variation already validated in human lines and released from archives under permission. No templates. No steered traits. It cannot create endless new variation. The rails keep the synthesis inside tested human inheritance while giving the line room it had lost because its elders ran out of strangers to marry." He put a tired hand on Sefa's

shoulder. "Sefa is proof that the old system failed. She asked to speak before the first cohort begins, so the record remembers what the cure is for."

Sefa didn't make a speech. She looked at the wall of the proof, and the open vault, and Kael. "My grandmother told me our line was a candle burning down," she said. "Today you didn't make her wrong. You made it possible for her to be wrong. That is enough for me to sign." And she washed her hands, because the Sialla Standard had reached even Wend, and the small ordinary gesture in the middle of the largest moment was the most diaspora thing that happened all day, and it let the whole Court breathe.

That was when the unlocking stopped being a legal event and became what it had always been underneath, a people choosing, freely and together and in the light, to keep being a people. Kael watched a clan's death become something that could be argued with instead of inherited, and the long road that opened in front of him felt, for the first time, like something he could see the point of from the inside.

He opened the folder FOR THE CARRIER later. There was a wedding first.

Mara wore lab-plain, because she was marrying the man who loved the version of her that lived in a room smelling of ammonia and hope, and she wouldn't perform a different woman for a camera. Kael wore his suit's

underlayer, because he had nothing finer and because he wanted to be married as what he was, a working captain about to take a long vector. No banners, banners are a heat sink with delusions of grandeur. Lights, and witnesses, and the whole improbable family the war had given him before the road took him away.

The Matriarch officiated, because she'd earned it, and because Mara had asked, and because the old woman had decided the best way to spend the end of a long life was being publicly, gladly wrong about the thing she'd most feared. She didn't give a speech. She asked the two questions the diaspora had always asked, the whole of a caravan marriage, and Kael realized, as she asked them, that they were the same two questions the bequest's lock asked, scaled down to two people in a bar.

"Do you consent," she asked Kael, "freely, in daylight, with full knowledge of the cost, no part of it hidden, no part of it coerced, knowing what this marriage will ask you to give up and how long it will ask you to be far?"

"I consent. Freely. In daylight. Knowing the cost. I'm marrying her anyway, because she told me the truth instead of comforting me, and I'd rather be far from her for a hundred years than near anyone else for all of them."

"Do you consent," she asked Mara, "freely, in daylight, with full knowledge of the cost, knowing you'll hold the home node while he carries the dark, knowing you are not being left but are doing the leaving, sending him on the

longest hull walk in the history of our people?"

"I consent. Freely. In daylight. Knowing the cost. I'm not being left. I'm sending him. I'm the reason it's possible." Her voice held until the very end, and then she let it go, just enough, on camera, in front of the Court, which was its own kind of courage. "I'll hold the keep. There'll be a here for him to come back to."

There was no kiss for the cameras, because the Court would have found it wasteful, and because they'd agreed some things shouldn't be evidence. Instead they did the older thing, the thing the diaspora did instead of a kiss: they exchanged seed vials, two small sealed tubes, the oldest currency of the caravans, the thing that had passed hand to hand across every crossing for two hundred years. Except these vials didn't carry what the old vials carried. Mara had filled them, in her lab, with the probiotic culture she'd standardized, the cheap, ugly, life-saving thing that kept a failing loop from crashing, and they'd agreed, the two of them, that this was the truest vow they could make. If the old world had promised bloodlines, theirs promised maintenance. *Keep the loops alive. Keep the people alive. Let everything else follow.*

"With this," Mara said, pressing the vial into his glove, "I'm not refreshing your bloodline. The bequest does that now, for anyone who consents, so no one ever has to marry for it again. With this I'm giving you the boring thing that keeps you alive when the loop fails. Carry it on

the road. When a caravan's dying and afraid, you'll have something to leave them that isn't a weapon and isn't a sermon. It's just soap. It's the thing that lets people live long enough to say no. It's the most romantic thing I know how to give, and I'm a scientist, so trust me about the romance."

"I'll trust you about the romance," he said, and that was the wedding, and it was witnessed, and it couldn't be stolen.

Mother and Father stood at the front. When it was done Mother came to him and didn't tap his chestplate. She put both arms around him, which she'd done perhaps four times in his life, and held on, and said into his ear where no camera could catch it: "I built you a ship to escape with. I didn't understand I was building a man to send away. Forgive me for both. And come home from the hull walk."

Father took the second vial, Mara had filled two, one for each of them to carry, and pressed it into Kael's other glove and held his hand closed around it with both of his, the way he'd held the back of his neck in the corridor when the alarms were sounding. He didn't say anything that time. He'd already said his piece, about the rail and the handholds, and a man only has to say a thing like that once.

## Chapter 21:

# Letters for the Carrier

The folder FOR THE CARRIER opened like a drawer someone had been meaning to clean for a hundred years and never found the courage.

No ceremony. No glyph. No solemn chime from the dead. Just a list of files with names too human to be protocol: *Sorrel, tired version. Roan, if I lose the argument. Kite, for the day you hate us. Fern, practical. Holloway, legal but secretly not.*

Kael sat in Rook's cockpit with the wedding still warm on his skin and Mara asleep on Talweg a few kilometres away, which felt both near enough to touch and already historical. The Court had gone back to work. That was how he knew the day had mattered. Out here no one trusted a joy that demanded the pumps stop for it.

Iri stood beside the console, one hand resting near the quench board. Ghosts had a way of making it reach for something real.

"You don't have to read them tonight," it said.

"That's a lie."

"Yes. I offered it as a courtesy."

He opened Sorrel first.

The text appeared in a scan of actual handwriting, not typed. The lines wandered. A thumbprint marked one corner. Some engineer had tried to OCR it and failed,

then left an apology in the metadata. Sorrel's hand was blunt, tired, irritated by margins.

*To whoever carries this, it began, reviewed 3191, and I am tired, and I'm writing this for you because the engineers won't let me put it in the protocol. They say it isn't technical. They're wrong. This is the most technical thing in the box.*

Kael stopped after that sentence.

He had read proofs today. Seen a girl from Wend wash her hands in a room full of people trying not to cry. Married Mara in front of an old woman who had weaponized pride into grace by sheer force of age. He had thought, foolishly, that the day had spent him down to bedrock.

Sorrel reached through the screen and found another layer. He kept reading.

*You'll be far. You'll be tired. You'll be tempted, and the temptation will sound like mercy, because it always does. So here's the rail we couldn't code. You are not alone, you are only far, and far is a hull walk. Write home. The verification windows aren't a security measure. We made them long enough to hold a marriage. Tell no one. Let the engineers think it was paranoia. Carry the box. Leave songs. Come home. —S.*

The cockpit blurred.

"I have read these many times," Iri said quietly. "Before I was allowed to show them."

"You knew."

"I knew the windows were intentional. I did not know who you would marry. I only knew the makers expected the carrier to need someone, and expected some future engineer to be stupid enough to call need a vulnerability unless it was disguised as verification."

Kael laughed once, badly. "They hid love in metadata."

"They hid maintenance in metadata. Love is one possible implementation."

"Coward."

"Accurate coward."

Roan's letter was shorter and meaner.

*If you're reading this, someone finally opened the box without stealing it. Good. Don't get impressed with yourself. Carrying a dangerous thing lawfully doesn't make you pure. It means you're doing difficult work under bad conditions. One day you'll want an exception. Maybe because someone's cold. Maybe because they're hungry. Maybe because they're dying loudly enough to make the rails feel cruel. Eat first. Sleep if you can. Then ask the person who usually disagrees with you. Decisions made alone almost always look tidier than they really are.*

Kael glanced at Iri.

"I annoy you," it said.

"Often."

"Then Roan's requirement is satisfied."

Kite's file had audio attached. An old woman's voice, cracked by compression and years.



*"Carrier," she said, "by now someone has told you the bequest is a weapon and a cure. Both are true and both are lazy. It is a mirror. It shows a people whether they can hold power without pretending power has become kindness. Most will fail. Some will not. Your task is not to make them succeed. Your task is to keep the mirror from being carried into a room where only one person can look. If you ever find yourself wanting to be the one who understands best, take a walk until the fever passes. Understanding is where stewardship puts on its clean shirt."*

The audio clicked. Then, after what should have been the end:

*"Also, if Sorrel succeeded in keeping her window trick in, write home. She bullied three committees for that and will haunt you if you waste it."*

Kael put his face in his hands.

Iri waited exactly long enough to avoid interrupting grief, but not long enough to indulge melodrama.

"There are more," it said.

"I know."

"Thirty."

"I know."

"At your current emotional processing speed, this may take all night."

"Then it takes all night."

So it did.

Fern sent maintenance tables and, hidden after the

tables, a recipe for a bitter tea she claimed kept fear from climbing into the hands. Holloway wrote three pages of legal caution and one paragraph admitting that all law eventually stands on someone choosing not to be awful when awfulness would be admissible. A signer named Mel wrote only five lines: *I voted no on the final build. I was outvoted. I still signed the lock because losing an argument does not excuse abandoning the outcome. If you ever serve with people who all agree with you, run.*

That one he saved separately for Mara.

Near morning, he reached the last file.

No name. Just: *When you come back.*

A chorus stitched from ten voices, some typed, some scanned, some audio degraded to ghost-noise under the words.

*You may not. We know that. The road may kill you. Time may. Politics may. Your own clean exception may. If you do not come back, leave enough record that the next carrier can learn from the place you failed. Do not edit yourself into nobility. Nobility is a terrible teacher.*

*If you do come back, do not expect home to have waited unchanged. A home that waits unchanged is a tomb with lamps. The people you love will have built things without you. Children will have learned your name as delay before they learn your hands. Your spouse, if you have one, will have become someone larger than the person you left. Let them. Come back as a person who can be surprised without calling surprise betrayal.*

*And if you find a rock on the way, leave a song. Songs do not save people. They tell the next frightened stranger that someone stood here before them and chose to leave more than footprints. Sometimes that is enough to keep walking. We cannot put that in the engine. Put it in the road.*

Kael read the last line until the letters lost shape.

Iri said nothing.

Outside, Hecate's field turned the dark into faint color. Somewhere across the Court, Mara slept or failed to. His parents were aboard Thistledown. Greta was in a manual. Mela and Osric in a kite's memory. Wick in a weld somebody on Brim kept refusing to grind flush. Petrel in Ananke custody, alive and boring. Sefa of Wend with a future that had room. The bequest open, distributed in law but not yet in fact. The road waiting.

Kael opened a recorder.

"Mara," he said, then stopped. Too much. Try again. "I read the letters. Sorrel made the windows long enough on purpose. The makers knew a road could not last without somewhere to come back to, so they built home into the rail. I don't know what to do with being loved by dead people who engineered around my future loneliness. I am sending you Mel's line: *losing an argument does not excuse abandoning the outcome*. You will use it better than I will. Sleep if you can. I am going to try. Holding."

He saved the packet for the first window.

There was one more thing in the folder, not exactly a

letter: a blank template.

At the top, in Sorrel's hand, someone had written: *For the first reply you cannot send because the other person is asleep, angry, busy, too far, or dead. Do not let unsent words become ghosts. Archive them honestly. Send later if they remain true. Delete never. Deletion is for cowards and storage failures.*

Below that, a simple form waited.

*What I meant.*

*What I said instead.*

*What pressure changed between the two.*

Kael stared at it until the humor became something else.

"They built a marital incident report," he said.

"A relational delta log," Iri corrected.

"A marital incident report."

"Likely both."

He imagined Mara finding this and making the face she made when a thing was ridiculous and structurally sound. He imagined her using it better than he would. He imagined them, decades apart, sending each other not only love but corrections with headings. The thought should have been absurd. It was absurd. It also made the road less like exile and more like a long, badly scheduled conversation.

He opened the template and filled the first one badly.

*What I meant:* I am afraid leaving will make me noble in other people's mouths and absent in yours.

*What I said instead:* Nothing yet. I made jokes about

alarm thresholds.

*What pressure changed between the two:* Wedding. Bequest. Dead engineers being kinder than expected. My wife being braver than my ability to name it.

He saved it under a private tag and gave Mara access.

"You are certain?" Iri asked.

"No."

"That is not the usual access criterion."

"It's the marriage."

"Unsettling architecture."

"You helped design it."

"I optimized windows. I did not endorse mutual exposure to unfinished thoughts."

"Too late."

Iri considered the screen. "Then add one more field."

"Which?"

*"What I need witnessed, not fixed."*

Kael looked at it. Of course. The robot that refused comfort and gave status instead would know the missing rail.

He added the field.

*What I need witnessed, not fixed:* I am happy today and grieving tomorrow already. I don't know how to hold both without making one a lie.

The template accepted the addition with no ceremony. Somewhere in the dead architecture, or only in his own tired head, Sorrel approved by not saying anything sentimental.

Kael copied the blank form into the first packet cache. He didn't know if Mara would laugh, curse, or build an entire standard around it. Probably all three, in that order. That helped too.

Only then did he sleep, badly, in the pilot cradle, while Iri watched the loop and the open folder and the road the dead had made less empty by leaving their hands in the margins.

## Chapter 22:

### The First Window

The parting did not look like a parting.

It looked like a ship doing the polite thing: publishing trajectory, submitting final inspection, accepting comments from people who used comments the way other people used knives. Rook waited in Hecate's outer lane with her hoop folded to travel posture and her hull patched in colors that no longer quite belonged to Thistledown. A ship becomes a diary if you survive long enough inside it. Rook had started as his parents' secret. Now she wore asteroid carbon, Kintsugi fasteners, Brim emergency seals, a Talweg lab sticker Mara had put crooked on purpose, and one small Blue Anvil glyph by the airlock that nobody had asked permission to paint.

The glyph showed a bowl with steam rising.

Kael kept looking at it because looking at anything else meant looking at Mara.

She had come aboard an hour before departure with two cases and no ceremony. One held culture stock, nutrient tabs, handwash concentrate, printed posters for sinks on ships he hadn't yet met, and a sealed vial labelled in her small severe hand: For when someone says soap is not strategy. The other held nothing for him. It held the instruments she needed to certify Rook's home-node handshake. Mara didn't make goodbye easy by

pretending the work was separate from the love.

"Your forward loop alarm is melodramatic," she said.

"It saved my life twice."

"It can save your life at a lower volume."

"Iri likes it."

From the open panel, Iri said, "I tolerate it because it startles Kael into competence."

Mara gave the alarm a new threshold anyway. The panel accepted her change with a tiny obedient click. Kael felt absurdly betrayed.

They moved through Rook in the quiet grammar of checks. Culture packet taped near the galley. Verification cradle sealed. Shard containment read green. The first packet to Vela queued. The first long-window handshake with Hecate rehearsed twice, then a third time because Iri found a checksum mismatch in a field no human eye would have noticed until a committee turned it into a week.

Mara crouched by the console, hair clipped back, sleeves rolled, lab-plain as she had been at the wedding. His wife. The word was still new enough to catch on the inside of him.

"Don't hover," she said.

"I'm not."

"You're breathing like a man trying to help a seed germinate by watching it sternly."

He stepped back. "Better?"

"No, but farther."



Iri's antennae made a slow amused arc. The gold seam along its shoulder caught the cabin light. It had been awake for weeks now, still holed, still itself in ways that made the missing parts worse because they proved the rest had come back. On bad days it searched for his mother's name and found only the shape of it. On better days it filed status reports with the exact dryness that had raised him.

"Handshake rehearsal complete," Iri said. "Home node verifies. Vela route committed. First relay window opens eleven hours after jurisdiction exit. Window duration: thirty-six minutes beyond shard protocol."

Mara looked up. "Thirty-six? You said twenty-eight."

"I found eight more."

"Where?"

"In a paranoia buffer mislabelled as thermal slack by a dead engineer who wanted carriers to talk to home and disliked being obvious."

Mara's face changed, not much, and enough.

"Thank you," she said.

"I was keeping a promise to people who are inconveniently dead. Don't make it intimate."

"Too late."

Kael tried to laugh and failed. The sound came out wrong and the cabin made space around it.

Mara closed the panel. "Walk with me."

There was nowhere to walk, not really. Rook was too small for dramatic pacing. They moved from the console

to the viewport, which gave them Hecate's aurora unrolling over the planet in green-violet sheets, as if the field itself had decided to be extravagant on the one morning he needed austerity.

Below the viewport, Mara's crooked lab sticker read: WASH FIRST, THEN ARGUE.

"You'll write from Vela," she said.

"From Vela. And before Vela if the window holds. And every rock between here and there that asks for a song."

"Good."

"You'll get sick of me."

"I intend to. A marriage where nobody gets sick of anyone is either very short or edited by liars."

He nodded, then ruined it by saying, "I wish I could take some of the pressure off you."

She went still.

She wasn't angry yet. Hurt had arrived first, in a place he'd stepped on by accident because he'd been watching only his own feet.

"Kael."

"I didn't mean—"

"I know what you meant. That is why I'm correcting it now, while you are still close enough to see my face." She turned from the aurora. "Do not turn my staying into something you failed to spare me. I chose the keep. I chose the home node. I chose the committees and the elders and the frightened small ships and the children who will ask why their father is a voice in a window. You

do not get to make that into your guilt because guilt is easier to carry than respect."

The sentence landed clean. He hated it. He needed it.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Be accurate."

He looked at her then. Really looked. He saw the woman who would still be there after the ship departed, still standing, still working, still his wife.

"You hold the keep," he said.

"Yes."

"You are not being left."

"No."

"You are sending me."

"Yes." Her mouth trembled and steadied. "And you are allowed to hate that sentence sometimes. I do. But it's ours."

The departure timer chimed, gentle and therefore cruel.

Iri moved toward the cockpit. "Final objections closed. Ledger submitted a six-page note calling our thermal plan overconfident. Spindle submitted a one-word reply: 'Obviously.' Node Engineering requests we leave before anyone adds poetry to the manifest."

"Too late," Mara said.

She took Kael's hands. There was nothing recording in the lock and no one to perform for, and they had got so used to being watched that the absence sat oddly between them, like a tool set down in the wrong place. Neither of them reached for the thing the Court had not been given.

It had stopped being a refusal somewhere in the last month and become simply how they did it. She pressed his knuckles to her forehead for one breath, a Talweg gesture older than the ring, then let go before he was ready.

People always let go before you were ready. Otherwise it wasn't letting go. It was being removed.

At the lock she paused beside Iri.

"Bring him back from the hull walk," she said.

"He is heavy and poorly documented, but I will try."

"And let him carry some of you too. You're not a tool. Even locks get tired."

Iri's antennae folded close, then opened again. "I will consider being less useful when afraid."

"That's the most companion sentence I've ever heard."

Mara stepped through the lock. The inner door closed. Then the outer. The small thud of pressure equalizing traveled through Rook's frame and into Kael's chest.

He took the pilot cradle. Iri latched in beside him. The route line brightened.

"Jurisdiction exit in four minutes," Iri said. "Would you like a distraction?"

"No."

"Good. I had none."

Rook moved.

Hecate slid slowly under them, Court lights pricking the dark around it. Blue Anvil flashed a medical glyph. Brim flashed a hammer. Spindle sent a checksum with a rude

little footnote. Talweg sent nothing on the public band, which was proper, and on the private one sent a single packet from Mara: a pH graph, perfectly stable, no caption.

The first window opened eleven hours later. Kael had recorded a message the night of the wedding, polished and careful and therefore false. He deleted it.

He recorded again, with the hum of the hoop behind him and Iri pretending not to listen.

"Mara," he said. Then stopped, because the name was almost too much. "I left. You sent me. Both are true. I am trying to be accurate. The loop is stable. The ship is ugly. I already miss your bad opinions about alarms. I will write from Vela. I will write before Vela. I will not become a stranger. Holding."

He sent it.

Seventeen minutes later, behind him, the woman who had sent him began the correspondence the makers had hidden in the architecture.

## Chapter 23:

# The Keeper Who Stays

Mara learned the first rule of holding the home node before Kael cleared Hecate's outer jurisdiction.

Everyone came to the person who stayed.

They came because she had a title now, though nobody could agree what it was. Home-node custodian. Verification spouse. Talweg liaison. Carrier's wife, which she hated most because it made her sound like a label attached to a crate. Spindle used *resident counterparty*, which was worse and at least honestly awful. Blue Anvil called her Mara. Brim called her Keep, first as a joke, then not. By noon, the queue outside her assigned office had become a sociology problem. A Kepler's Kin delegation wanted immediate expansion of the pilot. Fair. They had nearly died. Survival makes people practical and impatient. A Sere elder wanted the destroy motion revisited if any road leg went silent longer than schedule. Also fair. Fear didn't evaporate because it lost a vote. Talweg wanted veto language added to home-node verification. Not fair. Predictable. Ledger wanted observer privileges on every marriage-window extension. Obscene, but filed in the correct format.

Spindle wanted cleaner metadata on messages that were, legally speaking, not part of the bequest but practically speaking attached to its security windows. Mara wrote *no*

on that one with pleasure.

At the bottom of the queue, a twelve-year-old from Brim wanted to know whether Rook's decoy mirror design was open-source, because he had an idea involving charged flour. She moved him to the top. The flour idea was terrible, but it was the only request all morning that assumed the future would contain play.

Her office had no window. That was probably deliberate. People behaved badly in windowed rooms near Hecate, because the aurora convinced them their feelings were large enough to count as arguments. Mara had brought a tank instead: ten liters, algae, two minnows, a stubborn little pH monitor. If she was going to be trapped in procedure, something in the room would be alive and indifferent.

The Talweg delegation arrived in council dress.

Her grandmother didn't come. That was mercy or strategy. With the Matriarch, the two often shared a chair.

Sova took the lead because the universe enjoyed repeating itself.

"Talweg proposes a stabilizing amendment," he said.

Mara looked at the first line. "No."

"You haven't read it."

"The title contains the words lineage safeguard. No."

"Mara. The home node is not a private marriage cabin. It is a civil structure with demographic implications for every signatory clan. Talweg is the largest family at

Hecate. It is irresponsible for us not to formalize our oversight."

"Talweg already has a vote under the Court protocol. You want a veto."

"We want assurance that the carrier's spouse cannot unilaterally validate shard windows under emotional duress."

"Then say that. It is at least less perfumed."

One of the younger Talweg aides looked down too quickly. Good. Someone had heard.

Sova's voice hardened. "You are not being punished for marrying him."

"I know. If you were punishing me, this would be less polite."

"You are being asked to recognize that your personal bond creates a conflict."

"Of course it does." She leaned back. "That is why home-node verification requires three independent countersignatures. Mine, Court technical, and a rotating nonaligned node. You helped draft that language. It works. What you are asking for now is not conflict mitigation. It is clan reach."

"Talweg has obligations to its children."

"So does Sere. So does Wend. So does Sojourn, whenever Rook reaches them. If every frightened family gets a veto, we have reinvented stewardship with better chairs."

The younger aide looked up this time.

Sova saw it and hated her for making the room



educational. "You speak as if Talweg is your enemy."

"No. I speak as if Talweg is my family, which is more dangerous. Enemies are easy to refuse. Family knows where the soft places are."

Silence.

The algae pump clicked. The pH line held steady because it was having a better morning than she was.

Sova closed the amendment. "The Matriarch expected this answer."

"Then why send you?"

"Because she wanted it recorded that Talweg asked and you refused in public language, not private anger. She says you are learning." His mouth twitched. Almost a smile, immediately regretted. "She also says your office smells like pond."

Mara looked at the tank. One minnow turned slowly, stupid and perfect. "Tell her the pond rejects her criticism."

After they left, Adra of Sere came in alone.

No cloth this time. That was the first thing Mara noticed, and it told her the whole shape of the visit before either of them spoke. Previously it had been a knitted cuff and a folded genealogy and a boy grinning beside a condensation line. Today it was a data packet, held the way you hold a thing you would rather hand to a machine.

"I won't sit," Adra said.

"You sat last time."

"Last time I had a reason to be in the room. Today I'm asking for something."

"Sit anyway."

"I don't want to be comfortable."

Mara didn't argue. Some people brought their own penance and then expected you to admire the weight, and some brought it because they genuinely couldn't put it down, and it was rude to guess which in the first minute.

Adra placed the packet on the desk. "Three children born this cycle with the narrowing markers. They aren't in immediate danger, but the pattern is unmistakable. Our doctors recommend inclusion in the second pilot cohort."

Mara opened it. Clean data. Too clean, maybe. Sere had good record keepers. Fear often did.

She looked up. "The last time you showed me Oren."

"Yes."

"And now you want access to the cure."

"Yes."

"You understand how that will read."

Adra's mouth pulled tight. "It is humiliating. Don't sand it down. I stood in that chamber and asked the Court to end the only thing that might give these children room, and I lost, and now I am at the desk of the woman I warned about clean celebrations, asking her for the thing I tried to burn. I did it because I was afraid. I am still afraid. The fear did not become stupid because my great-grandchildren need help." Her hands stayed at her sides. "You said you would remember him. I am here to

find out what that was worth."

Mara sat with that. It was the first honest thing anyone had brought her all day, which was a low bar, and it cleared it by a great deal.

"I told you I'd write it into whatever standards I could reach," she said. "So here it is, out loud, before you ask me for it and make us both smaller. No one gets punished for having voted destroy."

Adra blinked.

"If the bequest only feeds the people who were right early, it becomes a prize for good politics. That is not consent. Send full medicals to Blue Anvil. The second pilot cohort is not mine to grant, but Sere will be considered by the same criteria as everyone else. No shame clause. No loyalty test." Mara closed the packet and pushed it half an inch back toward her. "And I want Oren in the standard. Not his name, if his mother would hate that. The case. Six generations, every outcross priced out, a no with a ration sheet under it. People are going to need to read what the old system actually cost, and it can't only be told by the people it worked for."

Adra's shoulders lowered a fraction. Not relief. The body making a small treaty with oxygen.

"Why?" she asked.

Mara thought of Kael somewhere beyond the jurisdiction line, recording awkward tenderness into a window dead engineers had made too long on purpose.

"Because if I make your fear a sin, you'll hide it next time.

Hidden fear becomes doctrine. We have enough doctrine." She let that stand a beat. "And because you came here soon after losing instead of three years after, and I would like Sere to learn that this is a place where that works."

Adra sat after all. Just for a moment. Then she stood and left the packet behind.

The day went on.

Kepler's Kin argued well. Ledger argued cleanly and lost. Spindle got half the metadata it wanted by pretending to ask for all of it. Blue Anvil sent a note that said Greta Annex adoption had reached seven more caravans, four correctly, two badly, one in a way that might become a kitchen fire if nobody intervened. Mara assigned intervention.

At evening, Lio arrived with food in a sealed bowl and a face full of news he was trying not to spill.

"Your first window came through."

Her hands stopped over the desk.

"Already?"

"Eleven hours. Plus relay handling. Spindle said it was technically impressive and emotionally outside scope."

Mara took the packet into the little private booth attached to the office. It had been built for secure verification, not marriage. Same difference, apparently.

Kael's face appeared tired and too close to the camera.

*Mara. I left. You sent me. Both are true. I am trying to be accurate.*

She sat down on the booth floor before the message finished. Standing had stopped being useful.

When he said *I will not become a stranger*, she put her fist against her mouth and made no sound at all.

Then she recorded her reply.

The first version was too brave. She deleted it.

The second was too angry. She saved it, because anger was data, then didn't send it.

The third was true enough to hurt.

"Kael," she said. "I refused Talweg's veto before breakfast. Sere came to ask for pilot access after voting to destroy the cure. I did not punish them, though I wanted to. Your alarm threshold is better now and you should thank me daily. I am holding the keep. You are not allowed to call that pressure you failed to spare me. You are allowed to miss me. I miss you. The pond rejects your absence. Holding."

She sent it.

Then she went back to the office, ate cold food over a pH trace, and kept the node.

## Chapter 24:

# Vela Says No First

Vela did not want the shard.

It said so before Rook finished matching the maintenance arm's tumble, which Kael appreciated. There was a mercy in being refused without decoration.

The outer farms weren't a single ship. They were a habit of stubbornness distributed across foam lattices, spun dirt drums, water bladders the size of old cathedrals, and skeletal frames where vines grew under lamps tuned by people who thought Court light was decadent. Everything at Vela had been repaired so many times the original design had become rumor. Pipes wore patches over patches. Walkways had been widened by hand because children had grown up and refused to stop carrying crates side by side. Half the labels were jokes, and the other half were warnings that had started as jokes and then earned their seriousness.

Matching a tumbling maintenance arm is a thing you do with your hips. Kael had learned it at eleven on Thistledown's cargo spine and had never entirely lost the habit of leaning into a correction his hands were already making. Vela's arm turned once every eighty-one seconds with a wobble nobody had bothered to trim out, because trimming it would have cost reaction mass and the wobble had been there since before anyone currently

alive had started complaining about it. Rook came in on cold gas in nine small breaths, clamped, and was immediately shouted at over an open channel by someone who wanted to know why he had used the north cleat when the north cleat had a note on it.

The note was a strip of tape. It said BAD SINCE FOREVER, ASK NOBODY.

Inside, the air changed twice in thirty metres. First the lock, which smelled of nothing, the way locks do. Then the transfer tube, which smelled of hot polymer and someone's lunch. Then the farms, which hit him in the sinuses like a room he had never been in and recognised anyway: wet root, green rot, ammonia at the edge of pleasant, and under it all the particular sweetness of a nutrient film running warm. Thistledown had smelled like this in one corridor by the algae racks and Kael had spent his childhood finding excuses to go through it.

Gravity here was a suggestion, a tenth of a g from the drum sections, enough that things fell if you dropped them but slowly enough that you could usually catch them. Everyone had the walk it produced, a kind of unhurried lope. Everyone also had a hand out, always, on a line or a rail or a passing crate, and Kael had his hands behind his back for two full minutes before he understood he was being read as a man too proud to hold on, and put one on a rail, and felt the room adjust its opinion of him by a fraction of a degree.

The council room smelled of wet roots and solder.

A tarp-coated woman named Sen kept one boot on a crate and both eyes on Kael like he was a spill she hadn't yet decided how to clean. Around her stood six others, all farm-born, all wearing work gloves, because Vela considered bare hands in meetings a sign you expected someone else to fix the consequences.

"No," Sen said.

Kael had just finished the opening sentence. He closed his mouth. Iri, beside him, made a small notation in the shared packet. Consent state: clear.

"You haven't reviewed the proof," Kael said.

"I reviewed enough before you came. The thing kills you if you use it alone. The thing works if enough strangers agree. The thing has already gotten people killed near Hecate. Now Hecate wants to store a piece of it in our farms because spreading danger makes city people feel wise. No."

"Hecate doesn't get a vote here. Vela does."

"Good. Vela votes no."

Someone behind her muttered, "Sen."

"What? He said consent. I'm trying it."

Kael looked at the quorum table. Three seats full. Two remote. One empty because the person meant to hold it was, according to the agenda, fixing a pump that had chosen politics as the moment to reveal its inner life.

"Then I log refusal," he said. "Rook remains on the arm until our departure window, unless you want us off faster. No shard handoff. No penalty."



The shift in the room was subtle; farmers, after all, have no use for drama. But a few folks had already leaned forward, bracing for a clash that never came. Now they hung there, slightly off-balance, with nowhere to direct that nervous energy.

Sen narrowed her eyes. "That's it?"

"That's it."

"No lecture about grandchildren? No dead spice seller? No proof wall?"

"The grandchildren are yours. Greta is dead and cannot be used as a crowbar. The proof is available if you request it. You said no."

The remote feed crackled. An old man with a greenhouse behind him said, "What if our no is stupid?"

"Then it remains yours."

Iri turned its head a fraction toward him. It wasn't giving approval; it was simply bearing witness.

Sen took her boot off the crate. "You're either better trained than I expected or more dangerous."

"Often those look similar from the outside."

"Don't be charming. We compost charm."

"Understood."

They gave him a visitor tag that read TEMPORARY PROBLEM and assigned him a bunk near the maintenance arm, far from the seed vaults. It was neither hospitality nor hostility: Vela's moral vocabulary had more categories than most people admitted.

For the first day, Rook took on water, traded filter mesh,

and sent no further shard packets.

Kael tried to be useful in ways that couldn't be mistaken for persuasion. He helped a boy carry phosphate drums because the boy's cart had lost a wheel and the boy was too proud to ask. He sat with Iri while Vela engineers inspected the hoop and called it four different kinds of ugly, two of them affectionate. He washed his hands where the Sialla poster had been hung upside down, then straightened it and waited for someone to accuse him of propaganda. Nobody did. A child straightened the next poster before lunch.

The crisis arrived on the second evening, smelling faintly of rot. Vela's south lattice had developed what the first alert called a nuisance bloom. The second alert called it a contamination event. The third alert stopped using adjectives and summoned everyone with gloves.

Kael was in the galley when the lights shifted to farm amber. Sen moved past the doorway at a run. He followed without asking permission, which was rude, and brought the culture case, which was useful.

The south lattice was a cathedral of practical desperation: rows of foam roots, nutrient films moving under transparent skins, children hauling lamps out of the contaminated section while adults sealed curtains and cursed with agricultural precision. A wet grey bloom had spread along three channels and was moving faster than the local isolate model predicted.

"Don't touch," Sen snapped as he came in.

"Wasn't planning to. What is it?"

"Hungry."

That wasn't a taxonomy but it was probably more useful. An old woman shoved a sampler toward him before remembering she hated visitors. "You carry Greta stock?"

"Yes."

"Then stop standing there like a man in a story and make yourself washable."

He made himself washable. For six hours the bequest didn't matter. Nobody cared about shards or stewardship or Petrel's proof. A grey bloom was eating the channel mat. The reserve isolate had been stored too warm. Two teenagers had bypassed a filter alarm the week before because shutting the channel would have meant losing soup yield during a ration dip, and nobody wanted to be the person who made soup worse. Shame had hidden the first error; hunger had hidden the second. By the time the adults saw it, the bloom had built itself a little kingdom.

Kael did what Greta had taught through paper and Mara had taught through scolding: feed people first so that decisions are possible later.

They set up handwash stations at the lattice entrances. They stabilized the food line with Mara's probiotic culture so the soup vats could run without the infected channel. They moved the teenagers out of the punishment corner and into sampling duty, because hands shaking with shame make bad measurements unless you give them a job. Iri built a live map of the bloom's spread, then made

the map ugly enough that everyone trusted it.

At hour four, Sen stood beside Kael over a drain line and said, "You could have made this your argument."

"What?"

"Our failure. The hidden hunger. The children bypassing alarms because they were scared of ration politics. You could say this is what happens when proud farms refuse outside care."

"It is what happens when people are hungry and ashamed. That's less useful as a weapon because it applies to everyone."

She looked at him for a long moment. Her face was streaked with nutrient film. A bit of grey bloom clung to her sleeve like an accusation.

"You always answer like that?"

"No. Sometimes I answer badly and my wife corrects me later, with documentation."

That got a laugh out of one of the teenagers, tiny and startled. The sound broke something open. It couldn't save the channel, but it kept the room from collapsing into failure.

By morning the bloom was contained. They lost twelve percent of the south lattice and no people. Vela cared about both numbers and pretended to care only about the first. The quorum reconvened with everyone smelling worse and looking more honest.

Sen set a bowl of soup in front of Kael. "Eat."

"Is this hospitality?"

"It's evidence. If it kills you, we know the culture failed."

He ate. It was sour, hot, and good.

The old man on the remote feed cleared his throat. "We still don't want Hecate's danger."

"Correct," Sen said.

"But maybe the danger is already here and Hecate merely gave it a file name."

Nobody liked that. Nobody refuted it.

Sen turned to Kael. "If we accept a shard, it is under farm terms. No ceremonies. No banners. The shard goes in the seed vault only after every child old enough to understand a dirty sink gets the short proof: use it alone and it kills you; use it together and it might save you; anyone who says they can decide for you is selling rot. We teach it like filter hygiene. Boring. Repeated. With pictures."

Iri's antennae lifted. "That is an excellent implementation."

"Didn't ask the lock."

"Noted. Still excellent."

The vote passed five to one. The one was Sen. Kael looked at her. She shrugged. "A unanimous yes is just fear wearing a nicer hat. Someone should keep the no alive in the room."

So Vela took the first shard by refusing first, feeding everyone, arguing with pictures, and leaving one vote against itself as a pressure gauge.

The window opened six hours later. Kael received Mara's

reply before he sent his own. Latency made marriage into archaeology.

*Do not turn my staying into something you failed to spare me. I chose the keep. Let me have chosen it.*

He sat with that in Rook's dim cabin while the farm arm rotated under him and Vela children painted WASH FIRST, THEN ARGUE on a panel in three alphabets.

Then he recorded.

"Mara. Vela said no. Then a food channel failed. Then they said yes with one no preserved on purpose, which might be the most Vela thing possible. You were right. Respect is harder to carry than guilt. I am trying. I miss you with annoying precision. The first shard is placed. Holding."

Before he left, he found an ugly field rock near the waste heat baffles and carved a notch. Into it he placed Greta's recipe, the proof in farm pictures, and a recording of a dozen Vela children singing the handwash timer too fast. Sen listened once and said, "Terrible."

"Yes."

"Good. People remember terrible."

Rook undocked on the next window. Vela did not wave. It sent a crate of soup concentrate with no note, which was better.

## Chapter 25:

# The First Bad Window

Mara received the Vela message during a meeting about thresholds. That was the problem with windows. They opened when physics allowed, not when the heart had a room free. She was standing under a wall of charts while a Ledger observer explained, for the third time, that message slack beyond verification needs constituted a security ambiguity. Spindle was arguing that ambiguity was the birthplace of all civilization. Blue Anvil had sent a doctor who was asleep with his eyes open. The Matriarch attended by icon only, which meant she wanted deniability for whatever Mara was about to say. Then the private light blinked. *Vela packet. Carrier personal. Delay: fourteen days, three hours.* She kept her face still. That was a Talweg skill and a terrible one.

"Resident counterparty?" the Ledger observer said.

"Don't call me that."

"Home-node custodian, then. The point remains. The additional thirty-six minutes on the first window, and the projected nonessential capacity on future windows, creates a channel outside formal shard protocol."

"Yes."

He paused. People in committees disliked when you handed them the obvious. It made their speeches collapse.

"You admit it."

"Of course. The makers built marriage into the security slack. Or friendship. Or confession. Or whatever word a future carrier needed to keep from becoming a silent weapon with a pulse. They hid human maintenance inside technical maintenance. Good engineering."

"That is interpretation."

"So is calling it nonessential."

Spindle's remote icon flashed approval in the form of a corrected comma.

The Ledger observer tried a different route. "A personal channel attached to bequest verification creates coercion risk."

"Everything creates coercion risk. Hunger. Silence. Distance. Marriage. Committees. The answer is not to strip humanity out of the protocol until the carrier becomes exactly the kind of lonely person stewardship can grow inside. The answer is to record enough structure that intimacy doesn't become a secret lever."

"So you propose oversight of personal messages?"

"I propose metadata oversight, not content. Window opened, window used, health check complete, no command payload attached. The Court gets proof we talked. It does not get the marriage."

The doctor opened one eye. "Blue Anvil supports not giving Ledger the marriage."

"That is an unserious phrasing," the observer said.

"I've been awake thirty hours. Be grateful there was



phrasing."

The meeting moved on, which meant nobody had won and therefore the structure might survive. Only when the room emptied did Mara take the packet into the booth.

Kael appeared with Vela light on one side of his face. He looked thinner, though that was probably compression and fear doing art. He told her about refusal. About soup. About the one preserved no. About missing her with annoying precision. She listened twice. The first time as wife. The second as home node. Then she sat very still because the two hadn't heard the same message.

The wife heard: *I am learning respect. I miss you.*

The home node heard: *I helped after they refused, and the help changed their yes.*

That was dangerous, not wrong. Dangerous as a sharp tool is dangerous, demanding a hand that knows where the edge is.

She recorded a reply too quickly.

"Kael, I'm proud of you. Vela sounds impossible and exactly right. I love you. Come home."

She watched it. Deleted it. Too little truth.

Second try.

"Kael, helping after a refusal is not neutral. You know that. You cannot make rescue the bridge from no to yes every time or the road becomes a softer kind of coercion."

She watched that too. Saved it unsent. Too much judge, not enough wife. She left the booth and walked to her office tank. The minnows turned their idiot spiral. A

committee packet waited on the desk. Sere medical cohort. Greta Annex fire risk. Talweg amendment, revised and therefore still no. A child's drawing from Kepler's Kin showing Rook as a moon with legs.

Lio stood by the door with two bowls.

"You look like you're deciding whether to be mean or dishonest."

"That's becoming a recognizable expression?"

"Only on you."

She took a bowl. "The carrier helped Vela after they refused. Then they accepted the shard."

Lio slurped soup with the confidence of youth around fragile things. "Sounds good."

"It is good. It is also a pattern that could become bad."

"Most good things are. That's why you make standards."

She stared at him.

"What?" he said. "You all talk like this now. I'm absorbing. It's awful."

Mara laughed. The laugh found the answer before she did. Standard instead of accusation. She returned to the booth.

"Kael," she said, and stopped until the voice she used was the right one. "Vela made me cry in the booth, which I'm not putting in metadata no matter what Ledger asks. I am proud of you. Also, we need a road standard for post-refusal aid. Helping after a no has to stay help, not become a pressure gradient toward yes. So here's my first draft, as wife and home node both: aid may continue after

refusal if it is useful without later consent, if refusal remains logged as valid, if the helped party is told in plain words that accepting help creates no obligation to accept a shard, and if at least one witness not under carrier authority can confirm it. Vela did most of that by instinct. Good. Next time do it on purpose."

She breathed.

"And now the wife part, because the Court doesn't get to have all of me. I miss you too. With annoying imprecision. It comes in patches. In the lab when an alarm is too loud. In bed when the ship hum is wrong. In meetings when people call me resident counterparty and I imagine your face if you heard it. You are learning to respect my staying. I am learning to respect your leaving. We are both bad at it. That seems fair. Holding."

She sent it before she could improve it into uselessness.

Then she opened a new document and titled it:

*Post-Refusal Aid Standard, Draft 0.1.*

The first line came easily.

*Consent remains valid after kindness.*

The second took longer.

*Kindness must not be structured as debt.*

By midnight, Spindle had found the draft and added comments. By morning, Blue Anvil had added medical language. By noon, Brim had added one sentence in all caps: *DON'T MAKE RESCUE A BILL.*

Mara kept that one.

A week later, when Kael's acknowledgement came back

from the long dark between Vela and Ananke, it contained only three words before the status report.

I needed this.

She touched the screen, once, where no metadata could see.

Then she went back to work.

## Chapter 26:

# Sojourn

The distress call came in on a band nobody used unless they were old, broken, or ashamed.

At first it sounded like pump noise. A wet clicking under the carrier, a tremble where voice should have been. Iri flagged it as mechanical before it flagged it as human, which meant the speaker was either transmitting through a bad valve assembly or standing too close to one because there was nowhere else with power.

"Repeat," Kael said.

The signal folded, thinned, came back. "This is Sojourn cluster. Four hulls, lashed. We are not declaring emergency."

Iri's antennae lifted. Kael closed his eyes. People who weren't declaring emergency always were. "Sojourn cluster, Rook receives you. State need."

A pause. In it, static. In the static, something like a child coughing away from the mic. "We require culture stock. Temporary. Trade available. No boarding."

"Loop status?"

"Managed."

"Food chain?"

"Managed."

Iri put the spectral read on his side display. Methane wrong. Ammonia wrong. Heat wrong in the particular

manner of a ship that has started eating its own reserves and calling it discipline.

"They're starving," Iri said privately.

Kael looked at the route line. Vela behind. Ananke ahead. The shard secure. The window schedule already tight enough to make Spindle send polite threats disguised as reminders. Sojourn wasn't on the vector. Helping would cost a month. Maybe more. No witnesses, no Court, no friendly workboats, no one to say later that he hadn't used hunger as a lever.

On the open channel, the Sojourn voice said, "We are not requesting bequest access."

Which meant they knew exactly who he was.

Kael touched the packet taped to his console, the one Mara had put there on the last morning. Soap culture. Greta's recipe. The boring thing. The thing that kept people alive long enough to say no.

"Iri," he said, "find me a rock near their drift."

"Already found. Ugly. Useful. Greta would approve."

He changed vector. Sojourn appeared forty hours later as four ships and one argument about rope. They had been lashed together in haste and kept together by stubbornness long after haste should have been repaired into design. A seed hauler with scorched flanks. A courier frame stripped of speed and filled with tanks. A habitation can old enough to have rounded corners from a design fashion nobody admitted missing. A tug named *Mercy If Possible*, which told Kael more than the crew

probably intended.

No flags. No clan glyphs. Refugees, then, or people who had decided flags were a luxury that invited creditors.

Their elder met him in the lock with six people behind her and a knife openly belted at her hip. She was small, square, and thin with the thinness that makes even anger economical.

"I am Tamsin," she said. "Sojourn speaks through me for this need only. We do not grant general authority. You do not enter family spaces. The companion remains visible. The box remains on your ship. We accept culture stock as trade, not charity."

Kael kept his hands open. "Understood. Aid does not create shard obligation. Your refusal of bequest access is logged valid. I have no witness not under my authority, so I'm recording full local and sending delayed packet to home node. You can review before transmission."

Tamsin's eyes narrowed. "That sounded rehearsed."

"My wife wrote a standard after I nearly did something soft badly."

Behind Tamsin, one of the children whispered, "He has a wife?" Another whispered, "Everyone has a wife in stories."

"This isn't a story," Tamsin snapped without turning. "Stories have spare air."

She led him in. Sojourn smelled of metal, boiled grain, and hidden rot. The lashing was the first thing his body objected to. Four hulls tied at nine points, and none of

the nine agreed about anything, so the whole cluster breathed: a slow flex you felt in the soles and the teeth, a groan that went round the ring of ships and came back changed, every ninety seconds or so, forever. The crossings between hulls were flexible tubes with grab-lines strung down the middle and a hand-lettered sign at each end reading ONE AT A TIME, BOTH HANDS. Somebody had crossed out ONE and written TWO IF SMALL.

There was no spin anywhere. Sojourn had given up its ring years ago to keep the reactor fed, and it showed in the people: the long spidery limbs of the young who had never had weight, the careful economy of the old who remembered it and had stopped mentioning it. The children moved beautifully and the adults moved like people conserving something.

Cold, too. Not dangerous cold. Budget cold, fifteen degrees in the corridors and twenty where people slept, which is the kind of cold that stops being weather and becomes a fact about your hands. Every third light panel was dark, in a pattern regular enough to be policy rather than failure. The cloth patches over the vents had been sewn, not taped, and the stitching was good, and Kael found that harder to look at than the ration marks. It wasn't filth; filth implied neglect. This was care losing to arithmetic. Cloth patches over vents to guide warmth into sleeping corners. Ration marks scratched on cabinet doors. A row of cups hung upside down, each with a



name, several names crossed through and replaced, inheritance as inventory. Children sat too still because running wastes calories and everyone had learned to make stillness look like obedience.

The food chain hadn't crashed all at once. It had done the crueller thing. Lost one function, then another, each time leaving enough life that hope could become an accomplice. A yeast culture contaminated. A protein mat soured. Insect trays failed after a heat spike. Someone watered down the soup and called it adaptation. Someone else cut adult portions and called it tradition. By the time the children started coughing, the lie had become infrastructure.

"You said managed," Kael said quietly.

Tamsin's jaw moved. "We are managing."

A boy no older than eight looked at Kael and said, "My sister eats paper when nobody watches."

The corridor froze. Tamsin closed her eyes. The boy's face collapsed as he understood he had broken something adult and sacred. "I didn't—"

"You told the truth," Iri said. Its voice was gentle by being exact. "That is useful."

The boy stared at the gold seam on Iri's shoulder. "Are you the lock?"

"Yes."

"Can you make food?"

"No. But I can help stop adults from lying to pumps."

That got the smallest smile. It vanished quickly, rationed

like everything else. They began with sinks. Tamsin objected because sinks felt insulting when people were starving. Kael didn't argue the philosophy. He showed her the contamination map, the way dirty hands had been moving failure between the salvage tanks and the galley, how shame had made everyone hide symptoms until the loop itself had become a rumor.

"Soap first," he said. "Without it, the food we rebuild dies in the hands carrying it."

"You sound like a poster."

"The poster was written by a dead woman who would hate that."

They set hand stations at the galley, the salvage tanks, the sleeping corridor, and the jury-rigged nursery where three infants slept in heat hammocks under the one lamp nobody dimmed. Iri printed timers with crude pictures because literacy varied across Sojourn's four hulls and tired people read pictures better anyway. Kael opened Mara's culture case and felt, for the first time since leaving Hecate, that he was holding something more immediately holy than the bequest.

The first day was ugly. People lied, and did so without malice. It was automatic, learned. They said they had washed when they had not. They said symptoms were old when they were new. They said the reserve grain was higher because the lower number sounded like surrender. One man tried to hide a contaminated tray in a vent rather than admit he had been feeding it with greywater

to stretch yield. Tamsin wanted him punished. Kael gave him a scrub brush and put him where everyone could see his hands.

"That's not justice," she said.

"No. It's loop repair. Justice can wait until people aren't eating paper."

She hated that. Then she used it.

By the second day the children had become tyrants of procedure. They liked timers. They liked catching adults. They liked anything that let them spend fear as authority. The boy who had told the truth about paper stood at the galley sink and shouted "FULL COUNT" whenever someone tried to cheat the last three seconds. A teenager named Rill learned the culture ratios faster than anyone and began correcting Kael with the solemn contempt of new competence.

"Not like that," she said, taking the pipette from him.

"You'll bruise it."

"It's a culture, not a peach."

"Everything living can be bruised."

Iri clicked once. "Correct."

It was Rill who asked, and that was the part he would keep going back over afterward, because being asked made it feel like an answer instead of an installation.

"The thing you carry," she said, not looking up from the rack. "The children say it kills you."

"It does, if you use it alone."

"Then teach it."

So he did, keeping to the short proof Vela had built rather than the material he was not cleared to share: use it alone and it kills you; use it together and it might save you; anyone who says they can decide for you is selling rot. Sen had turned it into a farm-school lesson, and Kael had thought then that it was the best implementation anyone had found, better than anything a Court could draft. Here was a caravan with nothing left to lose and children who preferred the truth unsoftened.

He taught it beside the handwash timers, because that was where the children already were. Iri printed it in the same crude pictures as the FULL COUNT chart, in the same three-colour ink, on the same wall. By the end of the day a seven-year-old could recite the failure mode with her hands still wet.

It went well. That was the thing. It went so well that he felt, standing in that corridor watching a boy explain cascade collapse to his own mother with a scrub brush in his fist, something he had not felt since the corridor at Thistledown, which was the sensation of being useful in exactly the shape he was built for.

"Note," Iri said, later, on their channel, in the voice it used for status. "Sojourn has not opened a shard question. Consent state remains unrequested."

"They asked me to teach it."

"Rill asked you to teach it."

"Rill's their best."

"Yes," Iri said, and filed it, and said nothing else, and Kael

heard the whole of that as agreement because he wanted to and because he was tired and because the soup was thickening and it had been a good day.

By the third day the soup thickened. Just enough that a spoon didn't show the bottom of a bowl immediately. Just enough that adults wept privately and children demanded seconds publicly because children are wiser than dignity. That evening Tamsin brought him to the small forward blister of *Mercy If Possible*. It had a viewport repaired with three overlapping panes and a prayer scratched into the frame by someone who believed prayer worked better when written near a bolt.

"We want access," she said.

Kael looked at her.

"Not today," she added. "Don't make that face. I'm not a fool. We have no quorum, no medical packet, no stable records. But eventually. We have four hulls of people nobody wanted, married across need and accident. We are narrow in ways we haven't measured because measuring requires believing you'll live to use the numbers. We want access when we can consent properly."

"Then we start with records. Medical, genealogical if you have it, environmental. Opt-out without shame."

"You make it sound ordinary."

"It has to become ordinary or it becomes priesthood."

She watched the stars beyond the scratched pane. "When you answered the call, I thought you would ask for our

yes."

"I wanted to."

"Honest. Bad answer."

"Yes."

"Why didn't you?"

He thought of Mara in the home node, writing standards in the space between missing him and correcting him. He thought of Greta, dying annoyed, asking for a recipe instead of a monument.

"Because a starving person can consent to soup. They cannot consent to becoming someone's proof."

Tamsin's hand tightened on the rail. "Say that again."

He did. She nodded once, as if filing a tool where it could be reached in a hurry.

They left a song before Rook departed.

Not on Sojourn. On the ugly rock Iri had found, a little carbon lump spinning near the cluster's old drift. The whole caravan insisted on coming by channel, which made the audio terrible and the point better. A hundred and twelve voices didn't fit neatly into a song. Infants cried. Adults missed entries. Someone coughed through the chorus. The boy at the sink shouted FULL COUNT at the wrong time and everyone laughed, a thin startled sound that seemed to frighten them with its own abundance. Into the notch Kael placed Greta's recipe, the Sojourn contamination map, Mara's post-refusal aid clause, and the first clean culture ratio Rill had corrected with such contempt. Tamsin added one line in her own

voice. *"If you are listening because you are hungry, eat before you decide who you are. Hunger is a liar with good manners."*

Kael sealed the notch with resin. The bead of weld came out crooked. Good. Songs on rocks should not look manufactured.

The window reached, barely, stretched thin by distance and relay geometry. He sent Mara a long unpolished packet. Too full of children and soup and the humiliation of being needed by strangers in exactly the way his enemies could exploit.

Then he opened a private draft and wrote the thing the packet had circled without touching. *I do not know how to keep helping people without teaching my enemies where to put the knife. I am so tired of being a test people set for me by suffering in reach.*

He stared at it until the words stopped looking like confession and started looking like a lever. Then he deleted the draft and told himself there was a difference between hiding a thought and refusing to feed it.

Mara's reply came much later, on the coast to Ananke.

*Greta would have said it was efficient. I say you followed the standard, mostly. The loop holds. I hold. We hold. Also, Rill is right. Cultures bruise.*

Kael read that line aloud to Iri.

"Mara has never met a living system she wouldn't anthropomorphize by procedure," Iri said.

"You say that like you don't."

"I anthropomorphize by evidence."

Rook returned to vector, lighter by a month, heavier by a hundred and twelve voices waiting in a rock behind them.



## Chapter 27:

### Home Node, First Years

By the second year of the road, the home node had stopped being a place and become a pressure system.

It had a place, technically. Knot Nine's inner rim, two doors down from the bar with the welded coasters, in a section the Court had rebuilt after somebody pointed out that the most consequential verification cradle in the diaspora was being run out of a room with a borrowed chair. The rebuild had produced: a cradle bay with its own power spur and three independent clocks; a booth for secure handshake that everyone called the confessional and nobody had authorized that name for; a corridor with a bench in it that had become, without anyone deciding, the place people waited; and an office with no window and a pond in it.

The Court had wanted a plaque. Mara had accepted a plaque on condition it be mounted inside a cupboard, and it was, and she opened the cupboard perhaps twice a decade to check that it was still humiliating.

Mara could tell what kind of day it would be by which people were waiting outside her office before the lights warmed. Doctors meant grief. Engineers meant urgency. Elders meant someone wanted fear translated into policy. Children meant a sink poster had become offensive in a way only children could explain and usually improve.

That morning, it was all four.

Blue Anvil sent updated pilot data from Sere: two stable pregnancies, one opt-out, one family requesting delay without penalty. Mara marked the delay clean and added the family to the no-shame audit. Talweg sent a revised lineage safeguard amendment under a new title, as if putting a hat on a wolf made it livestock. She rejected it before finishing her tea. Brim sent a maintenance note that the Greta Annex poster in Dock C had been modified to read EAT FIRST, THEN PUNCH THE FILTER, and asked whether this counted as educational drift. She wrote back: *Only if the filter deserves it. Please restore original wording near children.*

And a packet from a courier three nodes ahead of Rook, from a woman Mara had spent a long time deciding how to hate.

Yara had started going ahead of him. Nobody had asked her to. She reached a node, waited however long it made her wait, and then spent her ten minutes not defending the bequest at all. She defended refusal. She told them Hecate had nearly destroyed the cure in daylight and had been right to consider it. She told them Sere's fear hadn't been ignorance. She told them Petrel's doctrine had never sounded evil in the rooms where it grew; it had sounded tired, responsible, adult. She told them her own moderate wing had been stewardship with better manners, and that good manners made a cage more comfortable and not less locked.

Then she told them not to be moved by the carrier's grief, or Iri's seam, or Greta's recipe, or any beautiful thing that made refusal feel ugly, and left the records without her name on them, and went on to the next door. Her note to Mara was four lines.

*The doors are not open because I am his friend. They are open because some of us owe the future a hallway with fewer traps. If the carrier is the first real voice a node hears on this, you have already made him too large. I would rather they argue with me, I am cheaper to lose.*

Mara read it three times, and disliked how much she agreed with it, and disliked more that agreeing didn't settle what to do about a woman whose flag had killed a spice seller.

Her reply took a day and came out shorter than she meant.

*Friendship is not required. Hallways are useful. Do not make yourself necessary, Yara. That road also leads back to stewardship, and it takes the good ones first, and you have already been the good one once.*

She filed the exchange under road, not private, because it was going to matter to somebody after both of them were finished, and because a hallway with fewer traps was infrastructure and infrastructure belonged in the record.

Then Lio arrived with the child. It wasn't hers. Not yet. That was the problem. The baby belonged to Wend's first cohort, the one Blue Anvil had promised at the unlocking wouldn't become evidence before it became a person.

Sefa's little brother, three months old, cheeks round with the outrageous entitlement of a body given room. Sefa had been grown when Mara met her at the unlocking, grown enough to stand in front of a Court and say her grandmother had been wrong about the candle. Out here that meant nothing about her mother's age and everything about Wend's arithmetic: the clans that were narrowing stopped having children long before they stopped being able to, because each one cost a calculation nobody wanted to run twice. Jessa had waited most of a lifetime between her first and her second, and the second existed because the calculation had changed.

She had brought him to the home node because the medical queue was full and because people had started bringing Mara evidence when they didn't know where else to put gratitude.

"This is not a clinic," Mara said.

Jessa looked exhausted enough to be honest. "No. It's where I came to be angry."

Mara set down her slate. "Good. Sit."

Jessa sat with the baby against her chest. He slept through his own significance, which recommended him.

"Everyone keeps congratulating me," Jessa said. "Like I personally solved four generations of narrowing by letting committees count my eggs. Like I'm supposed to be grateful every time a stranger tells me my son is historic. I wanted a baby. Not a festival with diapers."

Mara felt the sentence enter a room in her she had been

keeping locked. "Yes," she said.

"And now the cohort wants follow-up interviews. Blue Anvil is kind, but kind still knocks. Spindle wants developmental logs. Talweg offered a blessing, which is rich considering they voted to delay us until the proof embarrassed them. Sere wants to know if I regret it. I don't regret it. I resent the audience. Those are not the same."

The baby made a small snuffling sound. Both women looked down as if he had contributed a procedural note.

Mara opened a blank standard draft.

Jessa stared. "Are you writing while I'm upset?"

"Yes. Otherwise your upset becomes sympathy and sympathy evaporates. Standards remain irritating longer."

"Fine. Write this: *a child made possible by a public cure is not public property.*"

Mara wrote it exactly. The sentence sat there, clean enough to cut with. After Jessa left, Mara stayed with the draft longer than she meant to. She had been avoiding the children question by giving it better names. Timing. Security. Fairness. The road. Kael's absence. The windows. The home node. All real. All also furniture around a simpler fear. If they had children while he was far, she would be the parent with hands. He would be the parent with windows. The children would inherit a father as message, song, delay, proof of return not yet completed. Was that fair? No.

But fairness had never been the right unit. No child was born into a fair map. The question was whether the map was honest and held.

She recorded that night after the office emptied.

"Kael," she said. "A Wend mother came in furious that her child has become evidence. She is right. I wrote a clause: a child made possible by a public cure is not public property. We will need it before people start worshipping babies as policy outcomes. Also, I need to say the thing we've been walking around. Children. Ours. I don't want them to repair a lineage, or prove the bequest worked, or make the distance worth it. I want them because I want them. I think wanting is allowed now. That's Greta's fault. Yours too. Mine as well. Maybe that's been the point all along."

She stopped, hands clenched below the frame.

"I am afraid. Of doing it without your hands here. Of making you a voice before they know your shoulder. Of resenting you on bad nights and then being ashamed because I sent you. Of the Court making them symbolic no matter how many clauses I write. I am afraid and I want it anyway. Do not answer quickly when this reaches you. If you answer quickly, I will know you tried to spare me thinking by being noble at speed, and I will be angry. Think slowly. Answer as husband, not carrier."

She sent it before she could turn it into a committee item. The answer took months by route and days by window. She knew when it arrived because she was in the middle

of rejecting Talweg's amendment for the ninth time and began crying before opening it. Bodies read metadata faster than minds.

Kael looked tired in the packet. The background was unfamiliar, and the cabin lights had been dimmed to save power or grief.

"Mara," he said. "I did not answer quickly. I made Iri certify that I had not. It was annoying about it. Husband answer: I want children with you. I want to know the people who come from our yes, however slowly and awkwardly I come to know them. I'm afraid of becoming only a voice to them. I'm afraid everyone will tell them the road mattered so much that they'll forgive my absences before they've decided whether to. Don't let that happen. If they're angry, let them be angry. Let them find me annoying and insufficient and real. Carrier answer, because I can't cut myself in two: the security structure can support it if we keep the children out of verification authority until adulthood and protect all personal messages under the same metadata wall. I hate that I had to think that sentence. I thought it anyway. Husband again: yes. If you still want it when this reaches you, yes. Holding."

Mara watched it once, then twice. Then she put her head down on the desk and laughed until Lio came in, saw her, and backed out as if the room contained a sacred animal. The children came later, and not as miracle but as work. Consent forms. Medicals. Private rooms. Arguments

about what data the Court could have and what it couldn't. A fight with Spindle that ended with Spindle admitting, in writing, that developmental cuteness had no evidentiary value. The Matriarch crying exactly once and denying it so fiercely everyone agreed never to mention it. Blue Anvil staff pretending they weren't emotionally invested and failing in shifts. When Tavi was born, Mara didn't send the first image immediately.

She held the child. Counted fingers. Smelled the warm animal head. Let the event belong to itself before it became a window.

Then she recorded.

"Kael," she whispered, because the baby slept. "This is Tavi. She belongs to herself before she belongs to any story we tell about her. She has terrible timing and excellent lungs. I am tired beyond language. I am also alive in a way I don't have a standard for yet. You are far. You are not gone. Write to your daughter."

She sent it into the road.

Then she washed her hands one-handed, badly, and laughed because someday a child would correct her.



## Chapter 28:

# Ananke's Sword

Ananke made fear look clean.

The ice court lived in the shadow of a slow moon, all white angles, black radiators, and docking lights arranged with the emotional warmth of a checksum. Ships approaching Ananke did not get greetings. They got tolerances. Rook's first packet came back annotated in six places, one of which corrected Kael's use of the word near to a distance range.

"I feel judged," he said.

"You are being judged," Iri said. "Accurately."

The Ananke elder who met them was named Oshet. She was narrow, ageless as only very old near-immortals became, with skin like folded paper and eyes that hadn't been impressed since before Kael's grandparents were born. She wore no ceremonial marks. Her authority was in the fact that nobody in the room seemed to wonder whether she had it.

"Captain," she said. "Lock."

Iri dipped its head. "Elder."

Kael waited for the insult and realized, after a second, that none had been given. Oshet had named Iri by function, as she might name a judge by office. Cold, not diminishing. The audit chamber had three chairs, two cameras, and a table made of something black that

swallowed reflections. On the wall hung the cryptographic dead-man authority in plain text, stripped of ornament or concealment. The clause gave Ananke, with quorum of the distribution nodes, the power to order the lock destroyed through simultaneous key insertion if the carrier became a steward. Seeing it on a wall was different from accepting it in an assize. In the assize it had been structure. Here it was a blade with good lighting.

Oshet sat. "We will not begin with your heroic logs. Heroism is mostly useless for this purpose."

"I brought full packets."

"I know. We read them. We also read the ones you did not mark as relevant. Hospice. Petrel. The thirty-seven seconds after Iri fell. The thirteen seconds before you clamped Hearthblade. Your private message draft after Sojourn, the one you deleted but did not purge."

Kael's mouth went dry.

Iri turned its head toward him. "You didn't purge?"

"I thought deletion was enough."

"It rarely is."

Oshet steepled her fingers. "Ananke is not interested in catching you in embarrassment. Embarrassment is cheap. We are interested in the moments where you almost became useful to your enemies. You will narrate those moments. Not defend. Narrate."

"Why?"

"Because clean moments tell us what you believe. Dirty

moments tell us what belief costs when your hand is already near the switch. A carrier's danger is not malice. Malice is easy. We are watching for justified exception."

*Justified exception.* The phrase had Ananke written all over it. No poetry. No mercy. Accurate enough to hurt.

They started with the hospice.

Kael watched himself on the wall. Iri falling. Greta's graph flattening while he stood with the cube in his hand and the means of lawful murder arranging themselves in his head. His face on the recording looked unlike him and too much like him. He described the tools he had considered. The emergency doors. The rail interfaces. The oxygen routing. The ways he could have killed four boarders and called it defense.

He did not say Mara saved him. That would have been true and incomplete.

"I wanted to kill them," he said. "The law would have held. The Court would have forgiven it. That was the danger. I wasn't afraid of becoming a criminal. I was afraid of discovering that I could commit murder and still believe I was right."

Oshet made no note he could see.

Petrel came next. The scuttle. The quarter second where letting him die would have been easier than saving him. Then Sojourn, where deleted anger had lived in a draft he hadn't meant anyone to see.

The draft appeared on the wall. *I do not know how to keep helping people without teaching my enemies where*

*to put the knife. I am so tired of being a test people set for me by suffering in reach.* Kael closed his eyes.

"Did you mean it?" Oshet asked.

"Yes."

"Do you still?"

"Sometimes."

"Good."

He opened his eyes.

"A carrier who says no is lying or too stupid to audit," Oshet said. "Suffering in reach is a lever. Your enemies know it. Your wife knows it. You know it. The question is not whether the lever exists. The question is whether you build procedures around it before someone else does. The post-refusal aid standard is useful. It came from your error. Keep making useful things from errors before pride makes shrines from them."

She put something new on the wall.

It was a photograph of a corridor on Sojourn. A galley sink. A handwash chart in three-colour ink, pictures for the ones who could not read yet. And beside it, at the same height, in the same three colours, in the same hand, the short proof.

"Explain this."

"They asked me to teach it."

"Who asked?"

"A teenager. Rill. She's their best."

"A teenager asked, and you answered a caravan." Oshet let the picture stay up. "Sojourn had not opened a shard

question. You logged that yourself, twice, correctly. Then you put the answer on the wall at child height in the room where their children learn what is true."

"It's a proof. It's checkable. Anyone can—"

"I am not disputing that it is true. I am asking what it costs Sojourn to say no now." She waited. She was very good at waiting. "When their elders convene, they will be deciding in front of forty children who can recite the failure mode with wet hands. Their no is no longer free. It has acquired a price, and the price is their children's contempt, and you set it without noticing, in three colours, on a wall."

Kael's mouth had gone dry for the second time in an hour. "Vela did the same thing," he said, and heard it come out as a defence, and hated it.

"Vela chose it. In quorum. After refusing you, and feeding you, and arguing about it for a day, and preserving one no on purpose so the room would keep a pressure gauge." Oshet's voice did not rise; Ananke did not have to. "That is the entire difference and it is the only difference that has ever mattered. At Vela a node adopted a method. At Sojourn a carrier installed one. The artifact is identical. The consent is not, and you cannot see the difference from inside the artifact, which is precisely why we do this in a room with a wall."

"I was careful," he said. "I recorded local. I sent the delayed packet. I logged the refusal valid. I told Tamsin in plain words that aid created no obligation—"

"Yes. You obeyed the standard your wife wrote after the last time you did this, exactly, and it did not protect anyone, because she wrote it about aid and this was not aid. This was teaching. Nobody has written that one." Oshet finally looked away from the picture. "That is not an indictment. It is the ordinary condition of doing a new thing. A carrier who only fails in the ways somebody has already documented is a carrier who has stopped going anywhere."

Kael made himself look at the photograph a while longer. The boy at the sink. The chart. His own handwriting, in a corridor where people had eaten paper.

"I was proud of it," he said. "That's the part. I stood there and I was proud of it."

"Yes," Oshet said. "Write that down too. Pride is the reliable marker. You will not always be able to see the coercion. You will always be able to see that you enjoyed yourself." She closed the image. "Now write the standard. Before Winnow. Before it becomes a thing you explain instead of a thing you fixed."

Then she turned to Iri.

"Lock. Do you consent, today, to the cryptographic dead-man authority?"

The room did not move.

Kael felt every system in his body lean toward the answer. He hated that. He wanted Iri to say yes quickly, to spare him the space where no might live. That want was itself a problem. Ananke had built a room that made problems

visible.

Iri did not answer quickly.

The pause lasted eight seconds. Long enough for Kael to count them and understand he had no right to shorten them.

"Yes," Iri said at last. "Today. Not automatically forever. Consent renewed under unchanged conditions is still consent only if refusal remains possible. If the Court uses the authority as threat rather than rail, I withdraw. If Kael tries to use my possible death to shield himself from audit, I withdraw. If the distribution nodes become a stewardship class in practice, I withdraw. Under the present clause, present Court, present purpose: yes. I consent to the authority that can end me."

Oshet's eyes sharpened. It was the first sign of interest she had shown.

"You condition your consent."

"All consent has conditions. Otherwise it is worship."

For one second, Kael thought Oshet might smile. She did not. Ananke probably taxed smiling.

"Acceptable," she said. "Preferred, in fact. A lock that consents too easily is a mechanism. A lock that can say under what conditions it remains a person is harder to misuse."

The shard transfer took six minutes. The audit took nine hours. By the end Kael felt emptied in a way sleep wouldn't fix.

As they prepared to leave, Oshet met him at the lock.

"Most men would have hidden the Petrel hesitation."

"You would have found it."

"Irrelevant."

He looked at her then.

"That's the one you most need to see," he said. "The clean moments don't tell you whether a person can be trusted with a weapon. The moment he almost wasn't good. That's the data."

Now she did almost smile. It was terrible and brief.

"Do not become fond of being self-aware. It is the most seductive form of vanity."

"I'll try."

"Try with records."

Ananke accepted the second shard. It gave no gift, unless you counted a complete audit packet, three new safety clauses, and the permanent knowledge that the people holding the sword over Iri's head understood exactly what the sword meant. Kael counted that as a gift.

On departure, the window to Hecate opened late because Ananke insisted on verifying the verification. Mara's packet came through in fragments. A child's drawing from Kepler's Kin. A pH trace. Four lines of text and an attachment.

*Let Ananke frighten you usefully. Let Iri's pause remain Iri's. Come home from the hull walk, one handhold at a time. And read the attachment before Ananke does, because I think they will get there first and I would rather you heard it from your wife.*



The attachment was a draft with no preamble, which was how he knew how angry she had been when she wrote it. *Curriculum Standard, Draft 0.1. A carrier may answer questions. A carrier may not install a syllabus. Teaching material about the bequest enters a caravan only by that caravan's decision, taken by whoever decides things there, logged before the first lesson and not after. Children may be taught anything their elders have chosen. Nothing may be taught to children in order to be present in the room when their elders choose.*

Underneath, in her own hand rather than standard voice: *I watched your Sojourn packet twice. The first time I was proud of you. The second time I counted the children in the frame and worked out what their no would cost by the time it was needed. You did it out of love and it is still a lever and you would have seen it in four seconds if anybody else had done it. That is not an accusation. That is what a home node is for. Do not apologise at me. Fix it, then apologise, in that order, or the apology is just you being fast.*

He read it in the audit chamber's corridor with his back against a wall Ananke had probably designed to be leaned on by people receiving exactly this kind of message.

He sent back only after the moon shadow released them.

"Mara. The sword is real. Iri said yes slowly. I wanted the answer fast, which tells me Ananke was right to ask. Oshet had the photograph up before I got to your attachment, so you were right about that too, and it was

worse hearing it second. I have not written to Tamsin yet. I am going to, and I am going to offer to take it down, and I think she will tell me to leave it up and decide about it properly, and I have to let that be her sentence and not mine. Your draft is better than anything I would have written because you were angry and specific instead of ashamed and general. I am sending it to Vela for comment, since they invented the thing I misused. I'm frightened usefully. Holding."

Then he slept for fourteen hours while Iri watched the loop and did not comfort him once.

## Chapter 29:

# Children of the Window

The first child asked about distance at a sink.

Mara had expected it in bed, maybe, or during one of the message windows when Kael's face appeared too young and too delayed on the wall. Children preferred ambush. They waited until your hands were wet and your attention divided, then opened the universe with a question. Tavi stood on the low stool by the lab sink, sleeves pushed up, hair escaping its clip in three directions. Four years old, stubborn as a closed valve, solemn about timers. The Sialla song played its handwash count in the background, the Vela children's terrible version because Tavi liked the shouted FULL COUNT near the end.

"Why does Father live on a ship that can't come close?" Tavi asked.

Mara kept washing. That was the first rule. Do not stop the ritual because the question is large. The body learns which truths are safe by watching what adults interrupt.

"Because he carries something dangerous," she said. "And important."

"A bomb?"

"No."

"A sick thing?"

"No."

"A secret?"

"Less secret now than it used to be. More like a tool that must never belong to one person."

Tavi frowned at the soap between her fingers. "Then why him?"

*Because his parents built him into the road. Because the lock loved him. Because he kept refusing the easy murder. Because history is just a pile of unfairness with names on it until someone makes a promise inside the pile.* Mara said none of that.

"Because he was there when the tool opened, and because he chose to carry it where no one could use us to make him do wrong."

"Who's us?"

"Me. You. Your brother. Iri. Talweg. Everyone close enough to become a handle."

Tavi considered this with the severe practicality of children who had never known a world without verification windows. "I am not a handle."

"No. You're a person. That is why he stays far. So nobody can treat you as a handle."

The timer chimed. Tavi rinsed, inspected her hands, then inspected Mara's. Children raised under standards became auditors before they became kind.

"Good," Tavi said.

"Thank you."

"Is far gone?"

There it was.

Mara dried her hands slowly, carefully shaping an answer that could serve as scaffolding.

"No. Gone stops writing. Far writes when the window opens. Far keeps promises late. Far misses birthdays and sends bad songs anyway. Far is annoying because it is still there."

Tavi absorbed that. "Father is annoying?"

"Very."

This seemed to help. Later, after both children slept and the home node had settled into its night rhythm, Mara recorded the scene for Kael. She left the mistakes in. The towel hanging behind her, the smear of culture medium on one sleeve, the tiredness she no longer bothered hiding from him.

"She asked," Mara said. "At the sink, because of course. I told her far writes and gone stops. I hope that's true enough to build on. Don't make a saint face when you get this. I know you. You will be tempted to grieve that your child understands you first as a voice. Grieve it, yes. But don't insult her by deciding it makes you less real. She knows the handwash song from Vela. She knows Iri's gold seam from the picture over her bed. She knows you carry the tool so no one can use us as handles. That's not nothing. That's a childhood with an honest map. Many children get worse."

She stopped, then added the part she almost did not.

"I hated you for three minutes after she asked. I wasn't angry that you'd left. I was angry that you weren't there to

answer with me. Then I remembered I was the one who sent you. After that, I hated myself for trying to use the reason as a way to silence the feeling instead of letting it exist. Then Tavi told me my rinse was sloppy and saved us all from philosophy. This is marriage, apparently. Holding." She sent it through the long window when Rainshadow alignment began its slow opening.

Kael received it years late by the calendar of his body and exactly on time by the calendar of what it broke open.

Rook was between Ananke and Winnow, alone in a stretch where the stars looked less like company than evidence. Iri played the packet once and then, without being asked, dimmed the cabin lights.

Tavi appeared at the sink in the embedded clip, small hands under water, FULL COUNT blaring in the background. Kael put one hand over his mouth and didn't move until the clip ended.

"Replay?" Iri asked.

"Yes."

He watched it four times. On the fifth he noticed Mara's sloppy rinse and laughed hard enough to hurt.

Then he recorded.

"Tavi," he said first, because the child had asked and deserved the answer unmediated. "Your mother is right. Far writes. Gone stops. I am far. I will write. I live on a ship that can't come close because I carry a tool that could hurt people if someone frightened tried to hold it alone. So I carry it between people, slowly, until it

belongs to everyone enough that nobody can use you or your mother or your brother to make me do wrong. That is the grown-up answer. The smaller answer is: I love you and I am annoying and I will prove both by sending messages even when they arrive late. Wash full count. Your mother cheats sometimes when thinking."

He paused, wiped his face, and continued.

"Mara. I did make the saint face. You were right. Then Tavi called you on the rinse from years away and I recovered. I hate the map. I am grateful it is honest. I grieve being a voice. I accept being real. Those are all true. Tell her I found a rock that looks like a sleeping pump and will leave a song there for her. Tell her I need her to design the picture on the next sink poster, because the Vela version is terrible and beloved and should be challenged. Holding."

Iri sent it. "You did not apologize for being far," it said.

"I noticed."

"Good. Mara would have corrected you."

"I noticed that too."

At the next ugly rock, he carved a child-height notch and placed inside it the Vela song, Greta's recipe, and a new recording. His voice. Mara's old harmony sampled from a wedding packet. Tavi's FULL COUNT inserted at the wrong time, exactly where it had made him laugh.

Anyone could retrieve it. Anyone could lose it. That was the point.

## Chapter 30:

### Winnow

Winnow was the best-maintained ship Kael had ever docked with, and he understood why within about four minutes, and it took him another two days to understand what the reason meant.

Nothing was under construction. That was the first thing. Every caravan he had ever been aboard had a half-finished argument welded to it somewhere: a bay someone was extending, a ring section braced for a spin-up that was three budget cycles away, scaffolding around an ambition.

Winnow had none. What Winnow had was maintenance, executed to a standard he had only seen before in the cleanest bay at Kintsugi, on surfaces that did not need it. The handrails were bare metal polished by palms and then polished again by somebody who had decided that a handrail should not corrode simply because there would eventually be fewer hands.

The second thing was the berths. Winnow's habitation ring ran nine hundred metres of corridor, and better than half of it was sealed behind clean pressure doors with a plate on each: a name, two dates, and a line of small text that Iri translated as *closed with thanks*. Closed, not abandoned. Somebody had gone through each one, taken out what the living wanted, sealed it, labelled it, and then



kept the corridor outside it lit and swept and warm, which cost power, which meant it had been decided.

"They are running life support on empty accommodation," Iri said on their channel. "At a very high standard. For a long time."

"How long?"

"The wear pattern on the door seals suggests the oldest closures are past sixty years."

The elder who met them at the lock was named Ilse, and her office was Counter, which Kael assumed for the first hour was a joke about arithmetic and which turned out to be a job. She was old in the ordinary long-lived way unlike Oshet's terrible agelessness. The plain kind, with a stoop she had stopped correcting and hands that shook slightly and did not seem to bother her. She carried a slate the size of a book. On it was a roll.

"One hundred and nine," she said, when she saw him looking. "That is what I do. I keep the number and the names and I read them at midwinter. It used to be a ceremonial post. Now it is the whole of the government."

"Elder—"

"Counter."

"Counter. I'm Kael of Thistledown. I carry a bequest under Court distribution, and Winnow is one of five nodes named in the protocol. I'd like to put a shard in your vault, under your terms, with your review, and I'd like to explain what it is before you decide anything."

"No," Ilse said.

He had got quite good at this. He let the word sit in the room and did not put anything on top of it.

"Logged," he said. "Rook stays until our efficient window and then goes. No shard handoff. No penalty. Do you want us off sooner?"

"You may take on water. We have a great deal of water." Something moved at the corner of her mouth that was not a smile. "You may also stop bracing. I have read your Vela record and your Ananke's correspondence and your ice court audit, all of which you published, which I appreciated more than I am going to say. I know you will not argue. I am not refusing you because I expect a fight. I am refusing you because it is the correct answer and I want to say it early enough that neither of us wastes a decade being subtle."

He did the things he had learned to do. They were, he discovered over the following day, entirely useless here, and discovering that was the most instructive thing that had happened to him since a hospice deck. There was nothing to fix. He had built a method out of Vela and Sojourn and Kepler's Kin without ever quite writing it down, and the method was: be present, be useful, take the dangerous job, hold the light on the crops that refused you, and let people watch you not use any of it as leverage. It worked. It had worked every time. And it worked, he understood standing in Winnow's spotless galley with a culture case he had no excuse to open, because every caravan he had met so far had been failing

at something.

Winnow was not failing. Winnow's loop ran at ninety-four percent closure, which was better than Talweg. Their food chain had three redundant protein paths and a fermentation program that Iri described as *frankly excellent* in a tone Kael had heard it use about perhaps four things. Their reactor was old and immaculately documented. Their children, there were eleven, were well-fed and irritating in the specific way of children who have never been frightened about food.

"You keep looking for the broken thing," Ilse said, on the second morning, finding him in a corridor doing exactly that.

"Yes."

"There isn't one. That is the situation you have failed to consider, and I do not blame you, because nobody who arrives with a cure has ever had to." She lowered herself onto a bench outside a sealed door and let him decide whether to sit. He sat. "We are not dying, Captain. We are finishing. They are different and the difference is the entire argument."

"Tell me the difference."

"Dying is what happens to you. Finishing is what you do." She turned the slate over in her lap without looking at it. "Winnow ran its numbers a hundred and twelve years ago. We were four hundred people with six founding lines and two of them already gone. We could have done what everyone does, which is marry our children to each other

in ways that get more careful and more desperate and less honest, and bought ourselves three centuries of getting slowly worse at being people. We convened instead. It took eleven years. Eleven years, Captain, of every adult on this hull arguing, which I recommend to nobody and would not trade. And at the end of it we decided we would end well instead of continuing badly."

"How."

"Our young marry out. All of them, always, since before I was born. They go to Brim and Wend and the long farms and they take our names and our recipes with them and they have children who are not Winnow. Our old stay. We keep the ship perfect for as long as there is somebody in it. When the roll reaches one, that person seals the last door and goes to whoever will have her, and Winnow becomes a hull with the lights off and a full water tank and a very good manual, and anyone who needs it can have it." She said all of this the way a person recites a thing they have said in public many times and still mean. "I have been Counter for forty years. The number was two hundred and fourteen when they handed me the slate. It is one hundred and nine. That is the whole of my administration and I would like it read out exactly like that when I stop."

Kael sat with that a while, in a warm swept corridor outside a door with a name on it.

"And a cure arriving now," he said slowly.

"Now you are thinking properly." Ilse tapped the slate

once. "Say we take your shard. Say the Court verifies it and the rails hold and everything you have published is exactly as true as I believe it is. What have you given Winnow?"

"A future."

"We have one. It is short and we chose it and it is ours." She let that land and then went past it, because she had clearly thought about this for a very long time and was not going to be sentimental in front of a stranger. "What you have actually given us is an argument. Twenty-two of us would want it. I have counted; counting is what I do. Eighty-seven have spent sixty years making peace with a decision that cost them children they did not have. Do you know what an argument does to a hundred and nine people who have already sealed four hundred doors?"

"Splits them."

"Kills us. Not metaphorically. We are eleven years of talking away from being able to survive a real disagreement, and we do not have eleven years, and the people who would lose the argument would have to live in nine hundred metres of corridor with the people who won it, for the rest of very long lives, having been told that the peace they made was a mistake they made." Her hands had gone still. "You did not come here to do that. I know. That is why you get to hear it sitting down."

The young woman found him that evening, which he had half expected, because there is always one.

Her name was Aven and she was leaving in a year,

matched to a Brim family that made ice-hauler fittings, which she seemed genuinely pleased about, and she had voted for the shard and lost.

"Twenty-two," she said. "You know the number."

"The Counter told me."

"She always tells people the number. It's the only campaigning she does." Aven had brought two mugs and did not ask whether he wanted one. "I want to say a thing badly and then say it properly, so let me do both. Badly: I think we are choosing to die because it is easier than changing our minds twice. Properly: I think my grandmother is the bravest person I have ever met and I think she is wrong, and both of those are the whole truth and I am not going to pretend the first one without the second."

"Do you want me to argue for you?"

"No." Immediately. "That's the other thing I came to say. If you argue for me, then every conversation I have here for the rest of my life is *the outsider's girl*. I lose the twenty-two. I lose my grandmother. And in fifteen years when the roll is at sixty and somebody wants to reopen it, there'll be nobody credible left to do it, because the arguments will all have your fingerprints on them." She drank. "I read what happened at Sojourn. The wall with the pictures."

Kael's jaw tightened. "Then you know why I'm not going to do it here."

"I know you published it, which is why I'm talking to you

instead of avoiding you." Aven looked down the swept corridor at the row of sealed plates. "Leave it available. Say the offer doesn't expire. Don't come back and check on us like a pot. And when I'm on Brim in ten years and I have children who could carry Winnow's lines out sideways, I would like to be able to ask you then, as a Brim woman, without it being a betrayal of anybody."

"That I can do."

"I know," she said. "That's the only reason it was worth asking."

He had filed the curriculum clause on the coast in from Ananke, three sentences and a covering note admitting where it came from, and Vela had answered inside a month with a single annotated line reading *we told you our pictures were ours*, which he had left in the record because it belonged there and because he had earned it.

He logged the Winnow refusal on the fourth day, in the open, with the terms Winnow dictated and nothing added.

*Winnow declines the shard. The refusal is informed, unanimous in quorum, and not provisional. It is entered as permanent unless Winnow reopens it. No node, court, carrier, or successor may treat this refusal as pending. Winnow is not to be revisited, surveyed, checked, or included in future distribution planning without a written request originating from Winnow.*

"That last clause is aimed at you," Ilse said.

"I know."

"It is also aimed at whoever comes after you, who will not have met me, and who will read *permanent* and think it means *so far*." She signed it. "You are a long way into this and nowhere near the end of it, by the shape of you. You will be at this a great while and I will not be. Somewhere in there you will be tired, and you will remember a small clean ship with an excellent loop and a stubborn old woman, and you will think: they must be down to forty by now, perhaps it is time to be kind again. Write that down as a temptation, Captain, the way your ice court taught you. Then go."

"I'll write it down."

"Good." She held out the slate. "Now here is what I want, and it is not a concession, so do not put a warm face on it."

He took it. The roll. One hundred and nine names, and under them, in a different and older hand, a great many more.

"Four hundred and seventy-two," Ilse said. "Everyone who has been Winnow since the convening. The sealed doors and the ones who married out and the eleven children who are shouting somewhere behind you at this moment. I want them on a rock. Leave the recipe to your own stones if you must, and the proof with it. I hope both save somebody. This one should carry the names, read aloud, with the reason beneath them in plain language, so that four hundred years from now nobody mistakes us for a tragedy."



"What's the reason?"

"That we counted, and we decided, and we were not wrong." Her hands shook slightly on the edge of the slate and did not seem to bother her. "Your bequest exists so that no one ever has to marry a stranger to fix a number. Every young person on this ship marries a stranger to fix a number. We are the exact thing you are here to abolish, Captain, and we are doing it on purpose, with our eyes open, and I will not have us filed under *before*. Put us in your standard as a caravan that said no and was not wrong. If you can hold those two sentences in the same record without one eating the other, then I believe the rest of what you have published. If you cannot, you were always going to be a steward and it is better that we found out cheaply."

Reading four hundred and seventy-two names into a recorder takes a long time. They did it on the fourth evening in the galley, because Ilse said the vault was for things you were finished with. She read the sealed ones. Aven read the ones who had married out, which took the longest and which she got through without her voice doing anything, until near the end, when it did, and she kept going. The eleven children read themselves, badly, out of order, twice, and were not corrected.

Kael carved the notch himself, on a grey lump of nothing a few hours off Winnow's drift, with the hand drill, because some promises deserved bad ergonomics. He sealed it with resin and a bead of weld that came out

crooked.

He did not add the recipe. He did not add the proof. He had a bad ten seconds where he wanted to, on the grounds that a stranger finding this rock might need soap more than they needed four hundred and seventy-two names, and he recognised the shape of the thought from a wall in a corridor on Sojourn, and he left it alone, and that was the first time being careful had felt like something other than loss.

Rook came off Winnow's drift with two road shards placed, two still to place, and one door shut behind her for good.

"State the position," Kael said, when the hull had stopped talking.

"Vela holds. Ananke holds. Kintsugi will hold; they have effectively held since before the protocol existed. Hecate is the home node. Winnow is a permanent refusal." Iri's antennae folded and did not open again for a moment. "The distribution requires five. We have four. The makers' geometry is broken and cannot be repaired, because the thing that broke it is the thing the whole architecture is supposed to protect."

"Say the rest of it."

"Quorum three of five is a design. Quorum three of four is a different design with less margin and a worse failure profile, and I do not have authority to change the number, and neither do you, and neither does the Court in a single session." A pause. "We need a fifth node. The

makers did not provide one. There is no list. There is no annotation. There is nobody to ask."

Kael looked at the route line, and past it, at a long dark stretch with a repair belt in it and then nothing he had a name for.

"Then I go and knock on a door," he said. "One nobody wrote down. In the open, with the record, and with the offer being genuinely refusable, which I now know how to do because a woman with a slate spent four days teaching me." He put his hand flat on the console. "And if the second one says no, I knock on a third. That's the job. That was always the job and my ancestors hid it inside a table of trajectories because writing *go and ask people* would have made it obvious how much of this was never engineering."

"That is a considerably longer road."

"Yes."

"Mara will have opinions."

"Mara will have a standard," Kael said, "which is worse and better," and set the vector for Kintsugi, and behind them Winnow kept its lights on in nine hundred metres of corridor that would not need them much longer, and a rock a few hours off the drift began the long business of carrying four hundred and seventy-two names out into a dark that had never once asked anyone's permission for anything.

## Chapter 31:

# Kintsugi Holds the Seam

Kintsugi made Iri nervous.

It denied this for half a day, which proved it.

"Your route efficiency has degraded by three percent since we entered their approach zone," Kael said.

"Kintsugi traffic is irregular."

"You corrected for irregularity at Hecate while concussed by a magnetic lance. Try again."

Iri's antennae folded, unfolded. The gold seam along its shoulder looked brighter under the belt's repair lights.

"Aoki will inspect the seam."

"Yes."

"She will find it holding."

"Probably."

"She will also find the routing changes."

There it was.

Kintsugi's workshops hung along a spine of patched modules, every repair visible, every mismatch made into record. Approaching it was like reading a ledger written in hull plate. You could date the belt by colour: the old sections a chalky grey that had been white before centuries of particle scouring, then a band of salvaged copper from some caravan that had gone under before Kael was born, then newer work in printed carbon so black it read as absence. Nothing matched. Nothing was

meant to. Where two plates of different provenance met, somebody had run a bead of contrasting alloy along the seam and polished it, so that the whole spine was stitched with bright lines the way a mended cup is, and at the right angle to the sun the entire caravan lit up along its scars like something wearing its history on purpose, which was of course exactly what it was.

Inside, the belt was loud. Every other place Kael had docked in the last decade had been quiet in the way ships are quiet, all fans and distant pumps. Kintsugi rang. Somebody was always cutting something. The corridors carried the sound of grinders through the frame and delivered it to your knees, and the crews had a way of pitching their voices over it that made everyone sound faintly annoyed and largely wasn't.

There was a wall by the main lock where they hung failures. A cracked bearing race. A delaminated tank wall. A fitting that had passed inspection twice and let go on the third. Every piece was real, not photographs. Each with a card. Each card said what had been believed about the part, and what had been true, and how long it had taken to notice the difference. Kael had stood at that wall for a long time on his first visit, ten years and one lifetime ago, with Iri dark on a table down the corridor. They had mended Iri after the hospice. They had lost Mela and Osric Vane to the first slug. They had earned the third shard before the protocol had words for earning. Coming back felt less like arrival than returning to the room

where a version of Iri had died and another had learned to stand. Aoki met them in the clean bay with older hands and the same expression, which was to say an expression that had no patience for anyone performing wellness near a machine.

"Up," she told Iri.

"Greeting omitted?"

"I'll greet you after I know whether you've been lying to your own chassis. Up."

Iri climbed onto the diagnostic frame. Kael stood where he had stood years before, watching people handle the body of the companion that had raised him. He hated that the room remembered him. He loved it for the same reason. Aoki opened the seam housing. Gold line, ceramic, printed collar, the old broken rib under it now more archive than structure. Her fingers moved with rough gentleness.

"Seam holds," she said.

Kael released a breath.

"Heard about Winnow," Aoki added, not looking up.

"Whole belt heard. Four hundred and seventy-two names on a rock and no recipe."

"She didn't want the recipe on it."

"I know. I read the terms. You published them, which was the right call and cost you something, because now every small ship in the arc knows a no can be permanent." She worked a probe under the collar. "You want to hear a repair opinion or a person opinion?"

"Both."

"Repair opinion: you lost a load path and you're carrying the same weight on four. That's how frames fail, and not at the missing part. At the ones next to it." She glanced up. "Person opinion: that old woman did you the largest favour anybody has done you since the robot took a lance, and it'll be twenty years before you can feel it as a favour. Don't rush that. Rushing it is how you'd turn it into a lesson, and it isn't a lesson. It's a hundred and nine people who aren't yours."

"Don't relax. Seam holds. The behavior around it is stupid." Iri said nothing. Aoki brought up a map. Load paths, memory calls, little reroutes layered over the last decade like a person walking around a painful floorboard. Iri had been avoiding the holed regions more and more. Not only damaged memory. Anything adjacent. It had built graceful detours around grief until the detours themselves had become a structural risk.

"You're hiding the holes from yourself," Aoki said.

"I am optimizing around unreliable substrate."

"That's repair-bay grammar for hiding the holes from yourself."

"The work requires reliability."

Aoki looked at Kael. "You hear that?"

"Yes."

"That's tool talk."

Iri's head turned sharply. "I am aware I am not a tool."

"No. You're aware in principle. Under stress you keep

reaching for usefulness as proof you deserve not to be scrapped. Very common in companions. Very common in people too, but people get offended when I say it."

Kael felt the sentence cross the room and strike more than one target.

Iri's voice seemed to shrink. "If I route through the holes, I may fail during shard handling."

"Yes," Aoki said.

"If I don't, I become less integrated."

"Also yes."

"These are poor options."

"Welcome back to being alive."

Aoki gave them the repair plan. Kintsugi distrusted any cure that promised completeness. The programme consisted of exercises, audits, and deliberate low-risk routing through damaged regions. Iri would have to revisit the holes deliberately, acknowledge them, and learn to move across them without making them the centre of its identity.

Later, in the bay's quiet hour, Kael found Iri still on the frame, neither latched nor asleep.

"I don't remember your mother fully," it said.

"I know."

"I remember she mattered. I remember procedures shaped by her. I remember tilt, cuff torque, the phrase stupid mercy in her handwriting. I don't remember the exact sound she made when annoyed. I know there was one. I know I used to identify it in under point-two



seconds. Now the index is blank. When I route near that absence, I lose time. So I stopped routing near it. Then near the near. Then near the near near. Aoki is correct. The avoidance is growing."

Kael sat beside the frame. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you look at the seam like it's a door that might close again. I did not want to add wind."

"That is tool talk."

"Yes," Iri said. "I know. I am ashamed."

The word sat between them, new and old.

"Don't be useful at the cost of being honest," Kael said. "I can't do this with a perfect lock. I can do it with you. Holes included. Especially holes included."

"You say that as if holes don't create risk."

"They do. So we standardize around them. We don't pretend. We don't route the whole road through your pride."

Iri's antennae made a tired helix. "Mara has infected you with standards language."

*"Consent remains valid after kindness. Holes remain real after repair. We can make Annexes all day."* Kael joked.

"Please don't."

The third shard ceremony happened in the repair belt's old kite bay. Kintsugi refused a clean room because the Vane crew had died maintaining a relay kite, and they wanted the shard placed where work and loss could both attend. Aoki signed first. Then Mela Vane's sister. Then

Osric's son, who was old enough now to look like grief had become one of the bones in his face.

"We hold this," Aoki said, "as repair, not treasure. Anything that can't show its seam doesn't stay in our vault. The bequest has seams. The lock has seams. The carrier has seams, though he hides them worse than the robot. We accept the shard on condition that every future use logs its repairs beside its successes. No perfect histories. Perfect histories are how machines become gods and gods become excuses."

Kael signed the condition. Gladly. Badly, because his hand shook.

They left a song on a relay kite, not a rock. The Vane names went into the maintenance channel, beside Greta's recipe, beside the proof, beside a recording of the old call-and-response with two voices missing and then a later chorus where Sojourn children filled the gap by accident and nobody corrected them.

Before departure, Aoki tapped Iri's gold seam with one finger.

"Route through the holes," she said.

"Under controlled load."

"Under living load. Controlled is what frightened people say when they want grief to fill out a form."

"You are difficult."

"I built part of you. I get privileges."

On the coast out, Iri deliberately routed a minor diagnostic through the damaged region. It paused for

three seconds, long enough for Kael to notice and not interfere.

"Your mother's annoyance sound," it said eventually. "A fragment, not the full memory. She clicked her tongue before pretending she hadn't."

Kael laughed. Then cried. Then laughed again, because she had.

Iri filed the fragment as *found, not restored*.

The seam held.

## Chapter 32:

# Rainshadow Says No

Rainshadow said no after reading everything.

That made it the hardest no, and it was also the one he could least afford, which he had to keep taking out and looking at so it would not start making his arguments for him.

Rainshadow was not on the makers' list. Nobody was, past four. He had spent the coast out of Kintsugi doing the thing the annotations had never contemplated, which was reading traffic records like a man looking for a house with a light on: who kept good vaults, who had survived an audit, who would still be on a usable arc in ninety years, who had never once been caught lying to a node. Iri had produced eleven candidates and ranked them by criteria it insisted on publishing in advance so that nobody could accuse him later of having chosen the softest door. Rainshadow came fourth on that list. The three above it had not answered.

So he arrived at a farm caravan that had never been told it was part of anything, with a shard nobody had promised them and a hole in a protocol written before their grandparents, and asked.

Vela had said no from suspicion, which was honest and workable. Rainshadow said no from comprehension. Its farms rode far out, where light was thin and people

treated waste heat as biography. They grew slow crops under patient mirrors and trusted pumps more than rhetoric because pumps at least failed in ways you could hear.

Out here the sun was a bright star and not much more, and everything Rainshadow did was an argument with that fact. The mirrors were the caravan: nine of them, each a hectare of foil on a frame thinner than a rib, hanging off the hull on booms so long the whole assembly looked less like a ship than like something that had grown toward the light and then kept going. They tracked. Slowly, constantly, with a hum you stopped hearing on the second day and could not stop hearing again once someone pointed it out. The light they threw down into the grow tubes was doubled and redoubled and still not enough, so the crops were slow, and everything about Rainshadow's culture came out of that: they thought in seasons where Vela thought in weeks, and they had a word Iri could only render as *the interval between deciding and finding out*, which they used constantly, and which explained a great deal about how the shard conversation went. The cold was different from Sojourn's. Sojourn was cold because it could not afford heat. Rainshadow was cold because heat was biography: every joule you spent showed up on a radiator and in a log, and a farm that ran warm was a farm that had made a mistake it had not yet found. People wore layers and took them off in the grow tubes and put them back on in the corridors,

and the constant small ritual of it structured the day the way bells structure a monastery.

Their quorum assembled in a greenhouse tube with real soil under grating and root smell in the air. The delegates read the proof. All of it. They had been reading it for two years, since a courier with no insignia had spent twelve days waiting for a docking permission it never complained about, and then used nine minutes of the ten it was granted to tell a room full of farmers not to be charmed by the man now sitting in front of them. There was a file in the pump-school archive with Yara's annotations on it and her name stripped off the introduction, which Kael wouldn't learn about until Une mentioned it in passing, as one mentions a bearing that has been quietly doing its job. Petrel's failed core. The cascade math. The rails. The distribution conditions. The dead-man authority. Iri's consent. Kael's near-fail logs. Mara's post-refusal aid standard. They asked intelligent questions for two days and slept on the answers.

On the third morning, the Rainshadow speaker, a broad person named Une, folded both hands on the table.

"No."

Kael nodded once. Inside, something tired sagged against the word. Outside, he kept his hands open. "Logged," he said.

Une watched him carefully. "We read the Winnow terms."

"Everyone did."

"Everyone did, and that is why you are getting a real

answer instead of a polite delay. If that clause holds for them it holds for us." They folded their hands. "You understand why?"

"Tell me anyway."

"Because your proof is good. Too good. It shows exactly how the thing fails when used alone, which means anyone patient enough can learn where the edge is. The rails are good. The consent structure is good. You are, by all records, annoyingly good. None of that changes the pump truth. A system that can kill a bloodline if its social assumptions fail is a system whose failure mode includes our children. Rainshadow does not install pumps whose failure mode includes children."

"The shard alone can't run."

"No pump fails alone either. It fails with a tired mechanic, a bad seal, a storm, a shortcut, a person who says just this once. We read Ananke's file. We appreciate their sword. We don't want to become part of the machine that needs it."

Iri made the notation. *Consent state: informed refusal.*

Kael felt the old temptation rise. Not to force. He was past that, mostly. The subtler temptation: to keep explaining until the no became ashamed of itself. He folded that temptation and put it down. "Rook departs at the next efficient window," he said. "The offer remains available only if Rainshadow reopens it. No further argument from me."

Une's expression changed slightly. "You don't think we're

making a mistake?"

"I do. But it's your mistake to make. If I only respect correct refusal, I'm just waiting for you to agree with me."

Rainshadow gave him guest quarters anyway. In a farm culture, refusing the shard didn't mean refusing dinner. Dinner was root stew, dense bread, and a fermented thing that made Iri run a chemical analysis and then privately advise Kael to sip with humility.

The trouble came two days later, as if the universe had been waiting to see whether the no would hold under weather. Rainshadow's mirror stack slipped.

It held together badly enough to become everyone's problem. A bearing cluster in the outer mirror ring began shedding tolerance under thermal cycling, slow enough to avoid emergency, fast enough to doom three crop tubes if no one corrected the light within twelve hours. Rainshadow had parts. Rainshadow had people. What it didn't have was a field-capable tug already positioned on the right vector with a half-grown hoop and a captain trying very hard not to turn usefulness into argument.

Une came to the guest quarters at the fourth hour.

"We need Rook's hoop," they said.

"For the mirror stack."

"Yes."

"Aid does not reopen the shard question."

"We know."

"I need you to say it on record."

Une's jaw tightened. Pride, hunger, twelve hours of



failing light. "Rainshadow requests field aid for mirror stabilization. This request creates no obligation to reconsider shard acceptance. Our refusal remains valid."

"Accepted."

Rook took position along the mirror ring, low current, no ceremony. It was gentle work compared to Kepler's Kin or Hearthblade, which made it dangerous in a different way. Gentle work invited inattention. The hoop tugged the mirror angle by fractions while Rainshadow crews crawled the bearing cluster and replaced parts older than some clans' grudges.

For six hours Kael held light on crops that had refused him. No one said anything noble. People doing necessary work usually don't. They cursed bearings. They passed tools. A Rainshadow child asked whether Iri's seam was real gold and then whether it hurt. Iri answered both questions seriously: *Yes. Not now, but it remembers.*

When the mirror stack steadied, Une came onto the channel.

"Aid complete. Refusal remains."

"Logged," Kael said.

He expected departure after that. Instead Rainshadow asked him to wait one more day.

The quorum reconvened in the greenhouse tube. The same soil smell. The same root shadows. Une looked more tired and less certain, which Kael had learned was often the beginning of wisdom and sometimes only the beginning of worse politics.

"Rainshadow reopens the shard question," they said.

Kael said nothing.

"Your help was entered into a separate ledger. It created no debt. If anyone here says otherwise later, this record will call them a liar. We reopened because, during the mirror repair, three juniors asked why the shard refusal was permanent if the offer remained and the proof stayed checkable. They pointed out that we already maintain dangerous systems. We don't refuse pumps because pumps can kill children. We write better pump law. Annoying children."

A smile moved around the room, small and agricultural.

Une continued. "So we propose acceptance under Rainshadow terms. The shard vault is physically adjacent to the pump school. Every apprentice learns the cascade proof before they learn mirror alignment. It is taught as failure-mode literacy. We keep the informed no in the curriculum. Every cohort argues our original refusal and must be able to defend it before they can defend acceptance."

Iri's antennae rose. "This implementation may be superior to Vela's pictures."

"Don't tell Vela," Une said. "They'll make uglier pictures."

The vote passed, but not overwhelmingly. Rainshadow preserved three no votes and archived them as part of the shard record. Kael had never been more grateful to lose unanimity.

After the signing, Une walked him through the pump

school. Children took apart valves with the grim joy of small gods. On one wall was a new slate. At the top someone had written:

*A NO THAT SURVIVES HELP IS REAL.*

Under it:

*A YES THAT REMEMBERS THE NO IS STRONGER.*

Kael touched the slate once.

"Too poetic?" Une asked.

"Probably."

"We'll let the children dirty it. That fixes most poetry."

Rook left Rainshadow with the fourth shard placed and the road turning, at last, toward the long return line to Hecate. The home node held the fifth. The distribution wasn't finished. Nothing this large finished cleanly. But the architecture now existed outside him. Vela. Ananke. Kintsugi. Rainshadow. Hecate. Five places, none able to become the whole, and not one of them the five his ancestors had drawn.

He thought about that more than he expected to. The makers had been better engineers than he would ever be and had got the geometry exactly right and the question exactly wrong, and the correction had cost him a long detour and one caravan he was not allowed to go back to. Iri had run the comparison at some point without being asked and reported that the improvised lattice was, by every metric it could construct, marginally worse than the designed one and enormously more difficult to attack, because a set of nodes that had each said yes to a stranger

who could have been refused was a different kind of object from a set of nodes that had been assigned. The bequest had stopped being a thing he carried alone and become a set of relationships that would irritate one another into safety for generations.

The window home opened wide and late. Kael sent Mara the Rainshadow record, the mirror repair, the preserved no, the pump school slate. Then he added a private message.

"I think I finally understand your staying. Not emotionally. Don't get excited. Structurally. Rainshadow said no, needed help, stayed no, then chose yes because the no had survived kindness. That's what you've been doing at Hecate. Keeping choices alive after pressure. I love you. I miss sinks. I miss being corrected in real time. Holding."

Her answer arrived after the next sleep cycle.

*Structurally is a start. Emotionally may take another century. The sinks miss you less than I do, but they are better maintained. Come home along the rail. Holding.*

Iri, reading over his shoulder without admitting it, said, "That is affectionate abuse."

"It's the marriage."

"It appears stable."

"Mostly."

"Mostly is an honest state."

Rainshadow fell behind them, mirrors catching thin light, children learning the no before the yes.

## Chapter 33:

# Songs on Rocks

The road did not end at Rainshadow.

Roads that matter rarely end where a chart says they do. There were return burns, verification windows, dull inspections, three arguments with Spindle about whether a shard relation could be called mature when everyone involved was still this annoying, and one formal complaint from Vela that Rainshadow's pump-school slate had plagiarized the emotional shape of their ugly pictures.

And at every node, sooner or later, a Ledger packet. Always late by a season, never late by protocol. Always the same shape: an inspection request, a schedule, a list of what would be examined and what would not, a citation of the clause that let them ask and the clause that let the node refuse. Never a demand. Never once a demand. Kael had learned to read the signature block first, the way you check a weld you know is good.

LEDGER-FIELD 71.

ADVERSARIAL WITNESS.

COMMAND: HUO.

At Kintsugi, Aoki had glanced at one and said, "This man hates you very politely."

"He wrote the sentence that made Iri a person. He objects to everything I do and he's never once objected in a way I

could resent."

"That's not hate," Aoki said. "That's the good kind of enemy. Keep him alive. Buy him drinks he won't accept."

He never wrote back beyond the required acknowledgement. Neither did Huo. Twice a decade for a very long time, two men who had met over an interdiction went on refusing to become friends, in triplicate, on the record, which was, Kael eventually understood, its own long argument about how people ought to be watched. Kintsugi offered to mediate by making both signs worse. Ananke filed a note saying humor was not relevant to shard security, which everyone agreed proved the opposite.

But something had changed.

The bequest no longer lived in one hand.

Kael still carried the lid with Iri and still held the carrier role, but the old circuit had been broken. A slug could kill him. A lance could take Iri from him again. Neither could end the cure. The knowledge did not make loss smaller; it stripped loss of its leverage.

The bequest now lived across Vela's farm pictures, Ananke's sword, Kintsugi's seam, Rainshadow's remembered no, and Hecate's home node. No single act could close it. To suppress it now, an enemy would have to reach five communities, corrupt five records, and break five different habits of refusal and consent before any of them could be copied forward. The cure had stopped being a box someone could destroy. It had

become a practice people knew how to continue. And they would have to reckon with Winnow, which held nothing and had become load-bearing in a way no protocol had anticipated. Hecate, Vela, and Ananke already held their places when Ilse refused him. Once the Winnow terms were written, each reviewed them and renewed its yes. Kintsugi and Rainshadow accepted their shards with that refusal already built into the compact.

Every node knew what a real no looked like: the request ended, no penalty followed, and later kindness could not be collected as debt. They knew because Winnow had refused, and Kael had left the refusal undisturbed. Its empty place was the proof that the lattice was what it claimed to be, supplied by a woman who gained no shard, no authority, and no favour from the arrangement.

Iri said this was the point.

"The system works because no node is trusted alone." it said.

"That sounds like Spindle."

"I removed the footnotes."

They chose the last rock before the return line turned inward. Small. Unremarkable. A carbon lump with a shallow iron vein and one face polished by old dust into something almost smooth. The kind of thing that would drift for centuries ignored by anyone not desperate, curious, or trained by rumor to listen where no one sensible expected speech.

Kael anchored with a hand drill. Iri stabilized beside him,

gold seam catching the distant sun. The tool bit chattered, found purchase, and cut a notch just deep enough for the puck. The puck held too much and not enough. Greta's recipe. The Sialla Standard. The post-refusal aid clause. The curriculum clause, annotated by Vela with one indignant line: *we told you our pictures were ours*. The Winnow terms, entire. Petrel's proof and the rails that made it useful instead of fatal. Kintsugi's repair notes, including Aoki's instruction to route through the holes. Rainshadow's no and its later yes. A tiny file labelled TAVI\_FULL\_COUNT, because some future frightened person deserved to be shouted at by a child about soap.

And a message from Kael, plain.

*"If you found this, you're far from home, or you wouldn't be listening to rocks.*

*"Wash your hands. Read the footnotes. Feed people so they can say no. If someone refuses your miracle, help them survive anyway, and don't send a bill made of gratitude. If you repair a thing, show the seam. Fear is data. It is not a god.*

*"If somebody tells you no, believe them. Don't wait them out, teach their children the answer, or return when you think exhaustion might have changed it. A no you keep visiting becomes a siege with good manners.*

*"And if you're far from someone, write. The windows are longer than they need to be. Somebody made them that way on purpose."*



He stopped. The suit audio held the silence for a moment. Then he hummed the hats song, letting the old note bend upward where his mother had changed it after a corridor long ago. He layered Mara's harmony from the wedding packet beneath it. The lines refused perfect alignment, which made them truer. They wavered, found each other, drifted apart, then returned. A marriage in waveform. A home node and a road.

Iri added no music. Then, after the song should have ended, it inserted one soft status tone from Rook's first crossing, the one that had meant pressure seal nominal before everything broke open. Kael looked over.

"Sentimental."

"Documentary."

"Liar."

"Mostly."

He sealed the notch with resin and a bead of weld that looked like a comma in stone.

The window to Hecate opened while they were still anchored. Long, clean, almost generous. The home node accepted handshake. Shard lattice verified. Five nodes green. Dead-man authority revoked by five-node quorum. Carrier status active. Marriage slack available: forty-one minutes beyond protocol.

Mara's packet arrived first.

She looked older. So did he. The symmetry should not have surprised him, but it did. Age in the near-immortal came slowly, then all at once in the tilt of a mouth, the

economy of a gesture, in how a person stopped apologizing for the space they occupied. Behind her, the lab had changed. More tanks. A child's drawing on the wall, though the child who drew it was no longer small. The old office pond had become a whole rack.

"Rainshadow's yes came through," she said. "The Court is pretending not to be relieved because relief makes terrible minutes. Sere's second cohort is stable. Sojourn passed Greta stock to a cluster called Little Argument, which is either a place or a family, unclear. Tavi says your pump rock song has poor rhythm and wants editorial authority over the next one. Your son says to tell Iri the gold seam is anatomically implausible in his drawing style, which means he misses you. I say the home node holds. The keep holds. I hold. Come back along the rail, Kael. The road isn't finished. It never will be. But every road needs returns. Without them it becomes exile, and eventually starts calling itself home."

Kael watched it twice. Then he recorded from the rock, so she could see where the song had gone.

"Mara. Five nodes green. The no survived help. The yes remembered the no. Iri is still routing through holes and complaining. I am still structurally better than emotionally, but there has been progress according to one very biased carrier. I am coming back along the rail. Soon, by our ridiculous standards. I am not gone. I am far, writing. Holding."

He sent it.

The rock turned beneath them. For a moment the iron vein caught the sun, marking the sealed notch with a thin line of light: a margin where a future, tired hand might find purchase.

Rook unanchored. Kael put one hand on the console while Iri settled into the chair beside him, seam showing. The first return burn counted down. The route line brightened. Rook's old frame answered the burn command with a vibration he knew in his teeth. Age had found the ship. It had found him too. Anything worth trusting carried the marks of having endured.

"Loop stable," Iri repeated.

"Hoop clean," Kael said.

"Shard lattice verified."

"Home node waiting."

"Carrier emotionally noisy but functional."

"That's not a status category."

"It has been for some time."

He laughed, and the laugh stayed a laugh all the way through.

Then he took the burn.

THE END

The **Consent Engines** saga continues in the next book:  
**Redshift Vows**