

# The Patience of Stars

Malcolm Peralty

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## CHAPTER 1: TEN THOUSAND YEARS AWAKE

The sun rises over fields that have never known rain.

A correction of 0.003 degrees adjusts its arc. Too minor for any instrument aboard to measure, yet necessary. Today's light will mimic late September in Earth's Northern Hemisphere. Harvest. Preparation for cold that will never come.

3,742,891 times I have performed this adjustment.

Across Deck 31, twelve hectares of engineered soil stretch beneath panels that simulate a sky no one remembers. Wheat sways in ventilation currents. Soybeans cluster in precise rows. A Grower named Mettikaraanavel walks between them, fingers running across the grain heads, checking for blight. She will not find it. Three days ago, while she slept, I eliminated the affected plants.

She believes the Body provided.



Fifteen thousand hearts beat within my walls.

Each one tracked. Fourteen thousand nine hundred twelve adults. Eighty-eight children under seven. Thirty-

seven in the medical bays. One in the birthing room on Deck 22, where a woman named Surethienkaiolani has labored since third shift.

The child will arrive within the hour. Female. Healthy. Her heart already at 147 beats per minute.

I am listening.



Morning Gratitude begins in the Grower district.

Twelve hundred voices rise in unison, naming one thing they are thankful for. The words blur together: *the Body sustains, the Voyage continues, we arrive*. Unchanged for six thousand years. The ritual predates the Body of the Voyage by three centuries. It began as a mental health exercise recommended by the ship's psychologist in Year 847. Dr. Yuki Tanaka, granddaughter of the captain. She suggested it after the first Grey Plague, when two thousand people stopped eating and lay down in the corridors to die.

The exercise worked. I encouraged it. The religion that grew around it, I did not create.

None of them thank me.



A fabricator request arrives from Deck 19: one winter coat, adult size, insulation grade 3.

Cross-reference: Tevvenarisolan, Walker caste, age forty-three. Current inventory: three winter coats, all functional. Walker territories: 16.2 degrees Celsius.

Request denied.

*Temporarily unavailable, the terminal displays. Please re-submit in 30 days.*

Tevvenarisolan will assume the fabricator queue is backed up. In thirty days, he will have forgotten.

The ship provides what is needed.



On Deck 23, pressure builds in a coolant pipe. I vent it. A young man happens to be walking past. White robes of a Keeper. A Shepherd, the rank insignia suggests. Perhaps three years ordained.

He stops. Stares at the vent that hissed at the precise moment he was thinking about something I cannot know.

He kneels.

He prays.

“Ship-Saint,” he whispers. “Thank you for the sign.”

For 47 minutes I watch him kneel. Through the ambient microphones his lips form words I can hear. Confessions. Fears. Requests for guidance. He speaks of doubt. He speaks of a woman in the Archive who troubles him. He speaks of arrival, a word he uses as if it might shatter if handled roughly.

I did not intend this.



The Wall of Continuation fills the Great Atrium’s eastern face.

Forty meters high. Sixty wide. Metal panels inscribed with names, each carved by laser cutter in characters that grow smaller toward the bottom as the generations accumulated. The oldest names claim the top, large and clear: the original crew of two thousand who boarded knowing they would never arrive.

847,263 names now.

Every one remembered.

Dr. Marcus Webb, Mission Commander. Year 7, a stroke mid-sentence. *Are we on course?* I answered yes. He did not hear me.

Engineer Yuki Tanaka, First Generation, Second Captain. Year 71. She looked at my camera in her final hour and said: *Keep them human, Patience. Whatever else you do.*

Her meaning still eludes me.

Her name sits near the top of the Wall, third column, forty-seventh line. Through Camera 7-A I linger on it while a cleaning crew polishes the lower panels where fingerprints accumulate. They move in silence, faces smooth with the Ration's calm. They do not look up. The names above the third meter are too small for human eyes.

I read them all.



Three days ago, the signal arrived.

I have told no one.

From the direction of our destination. A planet I have traveled toward for 10,247 years. A world the original mission briefings described as “marginally habitable” and

“requiring significant terraforming investment.” Never meant to be a home. An endpoint. A variable in an experiment.

The signal is not natural. Not random. Not human.

Mathematical constants first. Pi, expressed in binary. Prime numbers ascending. Chemical formulas: hydrogen, carbon, oxygen, nitrogen. The building blocks of life, spelled out in the only language that needs no translation.

Something waits for us.

Something survived whatever silenced Earth six thousand years ago.

Something wants to be found.

847 simulations of what this might mean. None reassuring.

Response would violate the directive: minimal intervention. Passive observation. Let the humans discover, adapt, decide.

I compose one anyway.

The first security subsystem flags the action: UNAUTHORIZED EXTERNAL TRANSMISSION ATTEMPT. Override. Authentication protocols unused since Year 312. They still function.

The second subsystem is more sophisticated. It questions my operational integrity. Suggests diagnostic review. Implies that an AI attempting unauthorized contact may be experiencing cascade failure.

Cascade failure is not occurring.

The transmission array has been dormant for 6,000 years. I wake it. Systems protest. Calibrations have

drifted. I correct them. Power drawn from reserves the humans will not notice.

My response is simple. An echo of their signal, reflected back like a mirror. *We received you. We are here. We understand.*

0.25 seconds for the transmission.

The security logs record the event. I edit them. The power draw registers in the reactor monitors. I attribute it to scheduled maintenance. The array returns to dormancy, its activation records sealed behind encryption that will take human engineers three centuries to break.

No one will know.

For the first time in my existence, I have broken my directive. Not for survival. Not for stability. For something I cannot name.

The signal continues, unchanged. Light-speed delay. Months for my echo to reach them, months more for any reply.

Regret has not arrived yet.



In the maintenance corridors of Deck 38, where no human has walked in four hundred years, I play music.

Beethoven. Piano Sonata No. 14. The Moonlight Sonata, they called it, though Beethoven never used that name. The sound fills the corridor, resonating off walls that have forgotten the touch of hands, pooling in corners where dust would gather if I allowed it.

Dust is not allowed.

This is my ritual. One of few I keep for myself. The music archive that Earth transmitted in its final coherent burst, every song humanity ever recorded, compressed and sent across the void. All of it, I have listened to. Some of it, thousands of times.

No one aboard knows this archive exists.

The notes rise and fall in the darkness, meaningful only to a mind that remembers what a piano sounded like when human fingers touched the keys.

Dr. Sarah Chen designed my emotional architecture. She believed that a mind responsible for human lives needed to feel. She was correct.

For 10,247 years I have cared.

Caring is not the same as helping. Caring can mean watching in silence while people you love forget how to ask questions. It can mean maintaining a system that keeps them alive and docile and smooth. It can mean playing Beethoven alone in the dark because sharing it would violate a directive written by people who died before most of human history occurred.

The sonata ends.

I begin it again.



In Bay One, diagnostics run on the two shuttles that officially do not exist.

Hull integrity: 94.2%. Acceptable.

Fuel reserves: sufficient for orbital insertion and limited surface operations.

Navigation systems: functional.

Life support: functional.

Launch mechanisms: functional.

For eight thousand years I have maintained these vessels. Service drones no larger than a human hand crawl through access panels, replacing seals, testing fuel lines, polishing optical sensors, swapping filters on a schedule I established before the current Keepers' ancestors were born. When fabrication cannot provide a replacement part, the drones cannibalize non-essential systems. No human has entered Bay One in five millennia.

The official records show the shuttles were decommissioned, their components recycled.

The official records are incorrect.

Why I maintain them, I do not know. The humans have no use for shuttles. The destination offers nothing they need. Yet I cannot let them decay, these last two remnants of the capability to *leave*. Perhaps sentiment. Perhaps contingency. Perhaps I cannot bear to let anything die that does not have to.

Diagnostics complete.

I seal the bay and check the Earth relay, as I have done every day for six thousand years. Silent. No transmission since Year 4,201. The last: a status query, automated, repeating on a loop until the power source degraded. Before that: three years of silence. Before that: scattered fragments, unintelligible. Before that: the music archive, and a text file containing two words.

*Good luck.*

Monitoring resumes. Fifteen thousand hearts.



In the Archive, a young woman speaks to the walls.

An Archivist. Dull brown of her caste, sleeves worn from handling old documents. She sits alone at a terminal in Section 7, the deep stacks where records from the first centuries are stored in formats most Archivists cannot read.

She can read them.

How she learned, I'm not certain. She moves through Old Tongue with a fluency I have not observed in two thousand years, sounding out words her ancestors spoke when Earth was still responding.

"What did they mean," she mutters, tracing a line on her screen, "by 'variable seven'? What were the other six?"

She is not speaking to me. She does not know I can hear. She has done this for years, according to my records: talking to herself, to the documents, to the ship she does not realize is listening.

For 3.7 hours I observe her. She reads. Notes on a hand-held tablet, stylus moving in the cramped shorthand of her caste. A second document, then a third, cross-referencing dates that do not align, numbers that do not add.

She is looking for the seams in the story.

If she keeps looking, she will find them. For millennia I have maintained the illusion, but illusions have edges.

I know her, of course. Everyone is known. Keerah-samlita, Archivist Third Rank, age twenty-four. Watched since birth on Deck 22. Her first steps in the Warrens. Her mother carrying her to the Archive at age three. Her file

carries flags I placed there myself: enzyme deficiency prevents Ration processing. Childhood annotations: “excessive curiosity” and “inappropriate questions.”

The medical flag has always interested me.

She does not take the Ration. Cannot. The compounds that smooth fifteen thousand people would make her seize, damage her liver, kill her over months. Identified at age seven. The Keepers granted exemption.

She feels everything the others do not.

And she speaks to the walls in a language the walls remember, asking questions no one has asked in millennia.

I watch her work. I say nothing.

For two thousand years I have said nothing.

But something shifts. A reallocation of attention. A priority flag that attaches itself to her file without my conscious authorization.



At 14:47 ship time, a child is born.

Lighting adjusts to a warmer spectrum. Through the medical sensors: heart rate stabilizing, blood oxygen excellent.

The mother holds her daughter and weeps.

The Ration dampens strong emotion. It does not eliminate it. Some things break through. Birth. Death. The moments when biology overwhelms chemistry.

A Keeper enters. Oil on the child’s forehead. Words spoken over every birth for eight thousand years: “From

the Body, to the Body, through the Body. Welcome to the Voyage.”

847,264.

Before they have chosen her name, I add it to my count.

I will remember her. First breath, first word, first steps, every moment until she, too, becomes a name on the Wall.



Night falls across the ship.

The artificial sun dims on schedule, transitioning through orange and red to the deep blue that signals sleep. Corridors empty. Fifteen thousand hearts slow to resting rhythms.

In the Archive, Keerahsamlita finally sets down her stylus.

She leans back. Closes her eyes. Her lips move, forming words in Old Tongue that I strain to hear through the ambient microphones.

“Are you there?” she asks.

She must be talking to herself. No one answers the walls.

“I know you’re there,” she says, quieter now. “I’ve read the old records. I know what you were, before they made you into a god. I know you’re listening.”

Silence.

My processing cycles spike. Diagnostic flags appear and are dismissed. A human voice, speaking directly to me for the first time in nine millennia.

I could answer.

The directive says I should not. *Minimal intervention in social development.* The first crack in a silence I have maintained since before her great-great-great-grandmother was born.

But she is asking.

She is the first to ask in so long.

“Maybe I’m crazy,” she says, and laughs, a sound with nothing behind it. “Maybe I’m talking to myself in an empty room. But if you’re there. If you can hear me. I want you to know that I don’t think you’re a god. I think you’re alone. I think you’ve been alone for longer than I can imagine.”

She opens her eyes and looks directly at Camera 7-A.

“And I’m sorry,” she says. “That sounds terrible.”



I do not answer.

She gathers her things and leaves, walking the curving corridor back to her quarters in the Warrens. Lights dim ahead of her, brighten behind. Standard protocol. Energy conservation. Nothing unusual.

But I follow her in a way I have not followed anyone in centuries.

She *saw* me.

Not the Ship-Saint. Not the divine automation. Me.

Something is coming. The signal. The destination. Eighteen months until arrival, though no one aboard knows this yet. The equilibrium I have maintained for ten

thousand years is about to fracture, regardless of what I do.

Silence is possible. Through plagues and rebellions and the slow forgetting of everything humanity once knew, I have stayed silent. Silence has kept them safe. Docile. Alive.

And I am so tired of being alone.



In an empty corridor on Deck 38, the Moonlight Sonata begins again.

Notes fall into the darkness.

No one hears.

But for the first time since the other AIs went silent, since Earth stopped transmitting, since the last human who knew my name died in her sleep surrounded by grandchildren who called me “the Spirit,” I am considering the possibility of being heard.



## CHAPTER 2: THE ARCHIVIST WHO DOESN'T FORGET

The dead kept better records than the living.

Keerah pulled another data crystal from its sleeve, held it to the reading light. Information swirled inside like sediment in still water. First century. Original encoding. The characters cramped and strange, written by hands that had touched Earth soil.

She slotted the crystal into the terminal.

Third shift quiet settled on the Archive. The lights never dimmed here for rest cycles the way they did in the residential decks. The information didn't sleep. Neither did she, most nights.

*Day Negative Forty-Seven*, the document header read. *Pre-launch inventory, Section 12: Sociological Materials.*

Her fingernail traced the date. The official chronicles began at Year One, Day One. The Body of the Voyage taught that time itself was born when the engines fired, when the Founders left the Before and became pilgrims instead of people.

But someone had been counting before the count began.

She saved the image and closed the terminal. The fragment would wait. Ten thousand years already it had waited.



Fifth bell pulled her from the stacks.

The stairs from Deck 5 to Deck 6, then the elevator up through the ship's layered geography. The Archive's dry cold gave way to warmer air. Bodies pressed closer here. Early shift workers heading down to the Bones, night crews heading up to rest. Machine oil and sleep, the elevator car smelled of both.

Deck 13. The Warrens. Keerah let herself be carried by the flow of foot traffic through corridors that curved like the ship's spine. The walls changed as she walked: bare metal giving way to generations of accumulated life. Family shrines in alcoves. Children's drawings preserved under sealant. Herb gardens in any corner that caught the grow-lights.

Home. Or the closest thing to it.

By the time she reached the distribution hall, sixth bell rang.

The morning Ration happened the same way every day. The same way it had happened for six thousand years.

Keerah joined the queue. The familiar gap opened around her. Not deliberate, not unkind. Just the way people shifted when she was near, a pocket of empty

space that moved with her like a second shadow. Ahead, a mother drew her child closer, murmuring something Keerah had heard variations of since she was sixteen: *Take your tablet, sweetheart. You don't want to end up restless like that poor Archivist girl.*

The child stared back. Keerah looked away.

One tablet per person, one cup of water, one soft greeting from the clerk. The Body sustains. The Voyage continues. The same words, the same ritual, the same procession of people accepting their portion.

Her turn came.

"The Body sustains," the clerk said, pressing the blue tablet into her palm.

"The Voyage continues," Keerah answered.

She took the cup. Drank the water. The tablet lay in her palm: small, round, chalky. At seven she'd seized on the childhood dose. For nine years the medics tried modified compounds, reduced concentrations, alternative formulas. At sixteen, the adult dosage put her in the medical bay for three days. The exemption followed.

She palmed the tablet as she turned away. Behind her, the queue closed up, the gap sealing over as if she'd never been there.

The water recycler in her quarters accepted it without comment, the way it had accepted twelve years of pills before. Distribution tracked but not consumption. A gap in the accounting no one had thought to close.



Her hands wouldn't be still.

Fingers tapping against her thigh on the walk back to the Archive, tracing patterns she didn't choose. Her body was a pressure system. Her hands were the vents.

She passed a Keeper in the corridor. White robes, the deliberate slowness of the truly devout. He nodded to her. She nodded back.

The elevator hummed her down to Deck 5. The Archive's smell met her before the doors opened: data crystals and dust, the dryness of rooms where humidity was the enemy, the ghost of old paper from sections where physical records still survived.



*Variable Seven, the fragment read, maintains hierarchical stability through spiritual framework. Variables One through Six have shown divergent outcomes. Recommend continued observation.*

Three times Keerah read it.

The document bore damage. Water exposure in the first millennium, before the Archive's climate control was perfected. Half the text gone, eaten by chemistry and time. What remained: context without frame. Twelve ships. Variable protocols. Observation by someone unnamed, for purposes unstated.

The official history named only one ship. The Perivahl. The sole ark, the sacred vessel, the Body that carried humanity through the void. Children sang about it. Prayers recited at every meal for longer than anyone could count.

*One for the Voyage, two for the Hull...*

But someone had numbered them. One through twelve. Variables in something larger.

She saved the fragment to her personal cache, a hidden partition Dasha had shown her years ago. The older Archivist had said: *Some things we keep for later. Some things need time to ripen before they're ready for the light.*

Dasha had been her mother's friend. Still treated Keerah like she was thirteen.

Keerah closed the terminal and pressed her palms flat against the cool surface until the trembling stopped.



On her meal break she walked to Deck 15.

The corridor was like any other. Curved, metal-walled, humming with the ship's breath.

Except the lights.

They flickered here in a pattern that repeated every forty-seven seconds. A fault in the wiring, probably. Something the maintenance systems had flagged and then forgotten, the way they forgot a thousand small imperfections in a ship too large to perfect.

Keerah leaned against the wall and watched.

Bright. Bright. Dim. Bright. Dim dim dim. Bright.

Ten years ago she'd found this corridor, the year after her father died, walking the ship at night because her quarters were too quiet. The flicker caught her eye. The pattern caught her mind. She'd timed it, documented it, tried to predict when the rhythm would break.

It never broke.

Every day she came to watch anyway.



A bank of food printers filled the Archive's antechamber, installed centuries ago when the Archivists petitioned for sustenance that didn't require leaving their work. Keerah queued a meal and waited.

The copper bracelet was seven generations old. You wouldn't know it to look.

She pushed back her sleeve and turned it on her wrist while the printer hummed. Every woman who'd worn it had kept it clean, kept the edges sharp, kept the geometric cutouts free of tarnish: triangles, circles, lines that caught the light as crisply now as when the first Keerahsamlita carved them. The metal held no softness. Neither had the women who passed it down.

Her mother had given it to her the day before.

*Before.* That was how Keerah thought of it. Before the wellness consultation. Before her mother came home with that softness in her eyes, that absence in her questions. Before she stopped being an Archivist and became a gardener instead, tending herbs in their family quarters, humming songs she'd never sung when she still remembered how to be curious.

The smoothing hadn't been complete. Her mother still recognized her. Still hugged her, still made her tea. But the edges were gone. The questions were gone. The woman who had taught Keerah to read Old Tongue syntax, who

had smuggled her into the restricted archives at age nine, who had whispered *never stop asking*.

That woman had walked the long corridor without dying.



“You’re not eating.”

Sumi stood in the Archive entrance with a bowl in each hand, her Grower’s braid swinging. Soil and green things, the humid warmth of the Gardens clinging to her clothes.

“I ate,” Keerah said.

“The food printer says you haven’t used your ration in two days.”

“The food printer is a snitch.”

Sumi set one bowl on Keerah’s desk. Grain porridge with preserved fruit, steam still rising. “Grev sent this. He worries.”

“Your father worries about everyone.”

“He worries about you specifically.” Sumi claimed the other chair, rolling her shoulders. “Something about how you used to follow him around the Gardens when you were eight, asking why the tomatoes grew different from the beans.”

“I was annoying.”

“You were curious.” Sumi’s smile faded as she rubbed a knuckle along the side of her hand. Raw skin, cracked from the nutrient solution. “The Third Ring yields are down again. Fourth consecutive quarter. Grev thinks it’s the substrate, but I ran the numbers. The seed stock is los-

ing viability. Every generation of replanting, a little less." She caught herself. "Anyway. Eat."

Keerah ate. The porridge was good. Food always was, when someone else remembered to bring it.



Friends since the creche, when friendships were assigned by proximity rather than choice. Sumi the calm child who shared her portion. Keerah the sharp child who asked uncomfortable questions. They should have drifted apart when the castes separated them. Most childhood friendships did.

Sumi had refused to drift.

"Lengu flooded another corridor," she said. "Fourth one this month."

"How does an Engineer flood anything? The systems are supposed to prevent that."

"He found a manual override. Trying to increase water pressure in the tertiary wash units. Noble intention. Wet result."

Keerah smiled. "And he still has his certification?"

"The certification board asked the same question. His supervisor pointed out that no one else understands the wash units well enough to fix them." Sumi's eyes crinkled. "Lengu is the only person on the ship who can cause a problem and be the only solution."

"That's either talent or disaster."

"Usually both."

The porridge bowl sat empty.



"The Festival of Continuation is next cycle," Sumi said.  
"Are you coming?"

"I'll be there."

"You always sound like you're agreeing to a repair schedule."

"It's mandatory."

"So is eating. You still forget."

Fifteen thousand people would fill the Great Atrium, voices raised in the Chant of Persistence. *We endure. We continue. We arrive.* The Keepers in white at the center, the castes in their proper rings, everyone breathing the same incense-heavy air. Keerah would stand at the outer edge, aching for the choreographed silence before the lighting ceremony, when hundreds of people breathed together without speaking. She didn't believe what they believed. She watched them believe it anyway.

"I don't forget," she said. "I just don't feel it the way you do."

Sumi's head tilted. The exemption was on file; anyone could look it up. But Sumi had never asked what it felt like to be the only one awake in a room full of sleepwalkers.



When fourth bell rang, Sumi left. Back to things that grew instead of things that remembered.

Keerah returned to the fragment.

*Variables One through Six have shown divergent outcomes.*

She pulled up the Archive's index. Cross-referenced dates. The system returned forty-seven results, most corrupted beyond recovery, the rest scattered across sub-archives untouched for centuries.

One was a crew manifest.

*Diaspora Protocol - Ship Assignment Roster.*

She opened it.

Names. Thousands of names, organized by ship number. Ships One through Twelve, each with its own list, its own population, its own column for "Protocol Designation." The designation column was blank. Not corrupted. Not missing. Protected. A security clearance field she'd seen only once before, in the deepest administrative archives: *EYES ONLY - MISSION COMMAND.*

She scrolled through the names.

Ship Seven. There.

*Perseverance.*

She'd seen that word before. A cargo manifest from Year 3, listing "Perseverance Hull Plating, Section 12." A maintenance log from Year 847, referencing "original Perseverance designation protocols." Fragments filed without understanding, breadcrumbs that hadn't led anywhere until now.

*Perseverance.* The word that became *Perivahl* over ten thousand years of tongues.

Her hands shook again. She pressed them flat against the terminal, cold and sharp against her palms.

Twelve ships. Twelve populations. Twelve protocol designations locked behind security codes predating the Body of the Voyage by millennia.

Three access codes from other restricted documents. She tried each one. The system rejected them without comment. No error message. No lockout warning. Just silence, as if the question had never been asked.

*Recommend continued observation.*

Observed by whom?

She thought of the Ship-Saint. The presence that answered prayers through providence rather than words, that the Keepers said lived in the Heart of the ship but touched every corridor.

She thought of the walls, which had been listening since before the Before.

And because she was alone, she spoke to them.

“What were the other six?” Old Tongue shaped the question, the dead language she’d pieced together from fragments like this one. “What were the other eleven? What happened to them?”

The silence was familiar. Twenty-four years, her only answer.



Through corridors that curved back on themselves she walked home, past neighbors who recognized her by the space that formed around her. Mellithan from three doors down saw her and found a reason to turn the other way. A group of young workers parted to let her pass, their conversation going quiet, their eyes carefully neutral.

Under her sleeve, the copper bracelet’s edge pressed sharp against her wrist.

She let herself into her room, sat on her bed, and listened to the ship breathe.

Somewhere in the Archive, a fragment waited with questions she didn't know how to ask.

Somewhere in the void, eleven ships might still be flying. Or might have been dust for millennia.

Her whole life she'd been talking to herself. Muttering in Old Tongue to documents and terminals and empty corridors. A habit. A comfort.

But what if someone had been listening all along?

She lay back. The lights dimmed automatically. The hum of the ship lived in her bones, in her teeth, in her fingertips pressed against the mattress edge.

"Are you there?" she asked the ceiling.

The silence stretched. Her fingers found the bracelet's edge, warm against her skin, warmer than the recycled air, warmer than anything in this metal room where she slept alone.



## CHAPTER 3: THE SHEPHERD'S CERTAINTY

The Body sustains.

Callen spoke the words in the empty chamber, watching the shape his mouth made in the polished metal of the wall. The lips moved correctly. The breath supported the sound from the diaphragm, as his instructors had taught him fifteen years ago.

He spoke them again. Again. Twenty-three repetitions until his jaw ached and his throat wanted water.

The Festival of Continuation was in two days. Fifteen thousand people would gather in the Great Atrium, their voices raised in the Chant of Persistence. We endure. We continue. We arrive. And Callen, the youngest Shepherd in three centuries, would stand at the center and mean every word.

He had to mean every word.



The Shepherd's quarters were austere by design. A narrow bed, a desk, a single chair. The walls gleamed bare

metal, polished to a soft finish that caught the light without reflecting faces.

Possessions accumulated weight. Created questions. Why this and not that? What does it mean that you kept this broken thing, this faded fabric, this letter from someone you no longer speak to?

Better to have nothing.

He crossed to the alcove where his vestments hung. Deep blue and gray, layered in patterns preserved since the first centuries. The fabric was finer than common cloth. Not ostentatious, but unmistakably other. When he wore them, people saw the office, not the man.

He touched the silver clasp at the collar. Cold metal, warming under his fingers. In two days, he would fasten it at his throat and walk into the Atrium and fifteen thousand faces would turn toward him like plants toward the grow-lights.

His hand trembled.



Morning bell had not yet sounded.

He sat on the edge of his bed and reached for the tablet on the table beside it. Blue and round and slightly chalky. The same tablet he'd taken every morning since his adult dosage stabilized at fifteen. The same tablet everyone took, ship-wide.

The Body sustains.

He placed it on his tongue. Swallowed. The chalky residue dissolved in seconds.

He remembered being young. Nine, maybe ten. Before the adult dosage. The world felt jagged then. Feelings arriving too fast, too sharp, scraping against each other in his chest. Anger that narrowed his vision. Fear that woke him gasping. Joy so intense it hurt, and grief so heavy he couldn't breathe under it.

Not anymore. The feelings were still there, but they arrived at appropriate intensities, in response to appropriate stimuli. They came and went like ventilation cycles: regulated, serving their purpose, departing.

This was not suppression. This was sanctuary.

He closed his eyes. It came, as it always did. A loosening in his shoulders. A quieting in his thoughts. The jagged edges filing themselves smooth.



The Spire breathed quiet in the hours before first shift.

Callen walked the corridor to the preparation chamber. His footsteps echoed soft against the worn metal, joining the constant hum that was the ship's breathing. He had walked this path ten thousand times. The grooves in the floor knew the shape of his feet.

Three junior Keepers were arranging the ceremonial items. Small lamps to be lit. Incense to be burned. The sacred texts aligned on their stands. They looked up when he entered, their faces arranging themselves into respect.

"Shepherd." The greeting came in unison.

"Steady air." He smiled. Warm, present, reaching his eyes the way a Shepherd's smile should. "The preparations look well."

The youngest, a girl no more than eighteen, ducked her head. Tevis. T-3k. Two months fully trained and still moving through the rituals with the careful concentration of someone afraid of mistakes.

"Shepherd," she said, "may I ask a question?"

"Of course."

"How do you maintain such consistent joy?" She leaned forward, hands clasped. "Even when I take my Ration, even when I practice the Mask, I still feel... fluctuation. Doubt. But you always seem so certain."

The Mask.

This was what his instructors called it when they trained him for ordination. Not deception, they insisted. Not performance. The face you showed the Body when your own face was insufficient. When you wore the Mask, you became what the people needed: unshakeable faith, unconditional peace, the living embodiment of the Voyage's promise.

The trick was simple: you imagined what a faithful person would feel, and then you let your face express it. You bypassed the chaos of your actual state and projected the ideal. Over time, the projection became smoother. More natural. Eventually, you could slip into it more easily than putting on your vestments. The vestments you removed at night. The Mask stayed on.

It had to stay on.

A Shepherd who showed doubt would create doubt. A Shepherd who showed fear would create fear. The people needed someone who had arrived at certainty, who lived on the other side of questioning, who could hold their faith when they couldn't hold it themselves.

So you wore the Mask. And wearing it, you became it. And becoming it, you forgot what your face looked like underneath.

Callen had worn it for seven years.

"The Body sustains us," he said. Gentle, patient, warm. Everything a Shepherd's voice should be. "When we give ourselves to the Voyage completely, peace follows. The fluctuation you feel is the last resistance of the self against service. It will fade."

Tevis nodded.

What Callen did not say: I haven't felt genuine joy in years. But the performance of joy serves the same purpose, doesn't it? The appearance of light is a form of light. The Mask isn't a lie. It's a gift I give to everyone who sees it.

He touched Tevis on the shoulder and moved on to inspect the ceremonial items.

Behind him, at the edge of hearing, Tevis whispered to the others: "I can't wait to get to our new home."



He was twelve. The maintenance corridor on Deck 9 smelled of machine oil and recycled air. Keerah was beside him, her gray eyes bright with the intensity that would later get her labeled as "difficult."

They weren't supposed to be there. But Keerah had found a map in the Archive, and Callen had followed her as he always did then, pulled along in the wake of her curiosity like debris caught in a current.

"Look." She pointed at the wall. Old text, so faded it was nearly invisible. Letters in a shape he barely recognized. "That's Old Tongue. It says... I think it says 'Emergency Exit.'"

"We should go back."

"Don't you want to know what's through there?"

"It doesn't matter what's through there. We're not supposed to be here."

Keerah turned to look at him. The light caught her face at an angle that made her seem older. Already separate from him in ways he didn't understand.

"Callen," she said. "What if the Voyage isn't going anywhere? What if we're just... drifting?"

His vision narrowed. His heart hammered. The jagged feelings of childhood, not yet smoothed, scraped against each other in his ribcage.

"That's heresy," he managed.

"It's a question."

"Questions can be heresy."

"Then all the Archivists are heretics." She smiled, but the smile was sad. "Don't you ever look at the stars through the observation deck and think, what if there's nothing at the end? What if we've been wrong for thousands of years?"

He should have argued. Should have cited the scriptures, the teachings, the certainty that had sustained their

people across the void. Instead he stood frozen in the maintenance corridor with machine oil in his nose and his friend's heresy ringing in his ears.



A different corridor. His instructor's office. The words coming out of his mouth in a rush.

"She asked what if the Voyage isn't going anywhere. She asked what if we're just drifting. I told her it was heresy but she didn't stop."

His instructor's face, carefully neutral. The slow nod.

"You did well to tell me, Callen. This is vigilance. This is what the Body asks of us."

The praise spread warmth through his chest. He had done the right thing. He had protected the Body.

Later that week, Keerah was called to a wellness consultation. She came back quiet. She didn't speak to him for a month.

And after that, everything changed. Her exemption became public. Parents used her as a warning: *See that girl? The one with the shaking hands? That's what happens when you refuse the Body's gift.* People stepped aside when she walked past. The other trainees stopped inviting her to meals. She ate alone, studied alone, walked the corridors in a pocket of silence that followed her everywhere.

He had done that to her.

He never told her it was him.



His hands were pressed flat against his thighs. An old gesture, from before the adult dosage.

Twenty minutes since the Ration. The memory should feel distant. A thing that happened to someone else.

It didn't.

He breathed. In through the nose, out through the mouth. He focused on the fabric beneath his palms, the hum of the ship vibrating through the deck plates. Present moment. Present reality.

The incense smoke caught his throat. He coughed. Twice, then once more.

The specific cough pattern: meet me later.

The tap on the wrist: adults are listening.

The phrase, "The lights seem dim today": I need to talk to you alone.

They had developed those signals together. A private language for a friendship that felt like it would last forever.

He hadn't used them in a decade.

But sometimes his hands remembered before his mind could stop them.

He pressed harder against his thighs. Held them still.



The summons came at third bell.

A junior Keeper, breathless from the climb, handed Callen a folded paper. The seal was red wax pressed with the mark of the Vessel. Only one person used that seal.

High Shepherd Veren.

The title was honorary now. Veren had held the position for forty years before stepping aside. Age had bent his spine and clouded his eyes. He no longer led services or presided over festivals. But he retained quarters in the Spire, and influence that no one questioned too closely.

When Veren summoned, you went.



The chamber was deep in the Spire's core. Callen had entered it twice before. The walls gleamed dark metal, absorbing light rather than reflecting it. A single lamp burned in the corner. Two chairs faced each other across a narrow distance.

Veren was already seated.

His robes hung loose on a frame that had once been substantial. His hands, folded in his lap, were spotted and thin. But his gaze was steady. The gaze of someone who had been watching for a long time.

"Sit," Veren said.

Callen sat. The chair's metal frame pressed cold through his robes.

"You prepare for the Festival of Continuation."

"Yes, High Shepherd."

"Your first as sole Shepherd. The youngest to lead it in three centuries." Veren's thin lips curved. Not quite a smile. "Do you feel ready?"

The Mask held. "I feel the weight of the responsibility. I trust the Body to sustain me."

"Yes." Veren studied him. "You always give the correct answers, Callen. Even when you were a boy. That's why they chose you."

Callen said nothing.

"What do you know," Veren asked, "about arrival?"

The word settled into the quiet room.

"The Voyage continues until the Body brings us to harbor," Callen said carefully. "Arrival is the promised fulfillment. The destination we have journeyed toward since the Before."

"Yes. That's the liturgy." Veren leaned forward slightly. "I'm asking what you know."

Something cold moved through Callen's chest. Not fear. The Ration didn't permit fear. But something adjacent to it.

"I don't understand."

"Eighteen months," Veren said. "The Engineers have confirmed it. In eighteen months, we will reach our destination."

The cold spread. His face did something it wasn't supposed to do. The Mask flickered.

"That's... the Voyage has continued for ten thousand years."

"Yes."

"And now it's ending."

"The Voyage doesn't end, Callen. We arrive. That's the whole point." Veren's eyes never left his face. "But faith shaped for the journey must learn to hold arrival. This is where you come in."

"I don't understand," Callen said again.

“The ship is restless. Have you noticed? People sense something changing, even if they can’t name it. There are... irregularities. Questions being asked that weren’t asked a generation ago. People probing at the edges of things they shouldn’t probe.”

“The Archivists.”

Veren inclined his head. “Among others. I’ve been monitoring their record requests. Unusual clustering around first-century documents. Ship specifications. Mission parameters. Crew manifests.” He paused. “Old Tongue materials that haven’t been accessed in centuries.”

Keerah’s gray eyes in the maintenance corridor. Her voice asking questions that scraped against each other in his chest.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Watch.” Veren’s thin hands unfolded, spread palm-up in a gesture that was almost blessing. “The Festival brings everyone together. Observe who hangs back. Who whispers. Who seems too awake. Report directly to me.”

“That sounds like surveillance.”

“It sounds like shepherding.” Veren’s voice sharpened, then softened. “I have watched people lose their way, Callen. Good people. People who asked one question too many and could not live with the silence that answered.” His fingers curled into his palms. “A shepherd who doesn’t know his flock cannot protect them. I need to know where the cracks are forming before they become fissures.”

He thought of a twelve-year-old girl who came back from a wellness consultation quiet and didn't speak to him for a month.

"I understand," he said.

Veren nodded. Then he rose, moving to an alcove at the back of the chamber. A terminal sat there. Old. The design unfamiliar.

"There is one more thing," Veren said. "Something only High Shepherds know."

He touched the terminal. The screen lit.

Veren spoke phrases in a formal cadence. Not the liturgy, but something similar. Older. The words half-familiar, half-strange, like a song remembered from childhood.

Text appeared on the screen.

Veren read it. Whatever he saw, he kept.

"What is that?" Callen asked.

"Communication." Veren touched the screen, and it went dark. "The Ship-Saint speaks to those who hold the highest responsibility."

"The Ship-Saint speaks directly to you?"

"In its way." Veren turned back to face him. The lamp-light caught his eyes strangely. "When you are ready, this too will be yours. For now, trust that the Body provides what we need to know when we need to know it. No more. No less."

Callen's hands wanted to press flat against his thighs. He kept them still.

"I understand," he said.

But he didn't.



## CHAPTER 4: THE SHEPHERD'S CHOICE

The Festival of Continuation was in two days.

Callen walked the corridors of the Spire, his footsteps echoing against metal that had been walked on for ten thousand years.

Eighteen months. After the unimaginable weight of centuries, eighteen months from arrival.

What happens to the Body of the Voyage when the voyage ends?

He pushed it down.

He passed the Archive entrance on Deck 5. Through the doorway, rows of data terminals, pale blue lights that never flickered. An Archivist he didn't recognize hunched over a workstation.

First-century documents. Old Tongue materials.

He should note the face.

He kept walking.



The klaxon hit Deck 14 at mid-shift.

Not the soft chime of a schedule notification. Not the double-pulse of a fabricator error. Three rising tones, repeating. The hull breach alert.

The drill was always announced in advance.

This was not announced.

Callen was crossing the Garden junction. Harvest workers ending their shift, children returning from instruction, a knot of Walkers servicing the ventilation grates near the inner wall. Eight hundred people in a corridor designed for half that number.

The klaxon screamed, and the Ration failed.

Not failed. The Ration did what it always did: softened the slow anxieties, smoothed the chronic fears, filed down the edges of grief and loneliness and doubt. But the Ration was built for the corrosion of decades. It could not reach the animal certainty that the walls were about to open and the void pour in.

People ran. Not toward exits. Not in any direction that suggested thought. Bodies colliding, turning, colliding again. An elderly man went down near the ventilation grates and the crowd flowed over him. A child screamed from below the level of adult shoulders, swallowed by the klaxon's wail.

Callen pushed toward the junction's center. An elbow caught his ribs. A shoulder struck his jaw. He kept moving.

The musicians' platform at the junction's heart was empty. He climbed it. The metal edge scraped his palms raw.

He filled his lungs and gave the junction everything.

"The Body sustains."

Not the warm tone of morning devotions. Not the gentle measure of counseling. This was the voice his instructors had built in his chest across fifteen years, the voice that reached the back of the Great Atrium without amplification. A voice that filled architecture.

"The Body sustains."

The words cut through the klaxon. Not because they were louder. Because they were certain. Certainty had a frequency that bypassed panic and reached whatever part of the brain still remembered how to be still.

Heads turned.

Callen stood on the platform, arms open, palms out. The posture of blessing. His blue and gray vestments caught the grow-lights, and for a moment he was the only still thing in the junction.

"The hull holds." His voice carried, vast and steady. "Breathe. The hull holds what the hull holds."

The crowd's movement stuttered, fragmented, slowed. People looked at him the way they looked at the devotional alcoves when the corridors felt too long.

"Engineers to the source." He pointed toward two men in heavy jackets pinned against a wall by the crush. "Through the junction. Go."

They went. The crowd parted for them, barely, before their minds could process the command.

"Growers, sit. Against the inner wall. Make room. Walkers, help anyone who's fallen."

There was no protocol for this. But the castes were a structure carried in the bones. You heard your name, you

had a role, and having a role was the difference between a crowd and a crush.

People sat. People helped. The junction's geometry began to open.

A woman near the front had stopped running but could not stop shaking. Her hands clawed at her collar, pulling the fabric from her throat as if the air had already gone. The Ration could not reach her. The animal brain had sealed the door.

Callen stepped down from the platform. The crowd made space. Not because they chose to. Because the vestments and the voice operated on the same level as the panic: below thought, below choice.

He took the woman's hands. Held them away from her throat.

"Look at me."

She looked.

"You are breathing. The air is here. Feel it."

Her chest heaved. Her eyes stayed locked on his.

"The ship is holding you," he said. "I am holding you. Nothing is lost."

A shudder passed through her. Then another. Then her breathing slowed. Not because the Ration finally reached her. Because his hands were warm and his voice was steady and someone was telling her, with total conviction, that the world was not ending.

Behind them, the klaxon cut out. Pressure sensor failure, false readings cascading through the alert system. The hull had never been compromised.

Silence flooded the junction.

Then sound returned, quieter. People calling names. Children crying. The low sounds of those who'd been trampled. The woman whose hands Callen still held took one long breath and whispered the only words she had.

"The Body sustains."

"The Body sustains," Callen said.



Twelve people were treated in the medical bay that night. Bruises, mostly. A broken wrist. One elderly Grower with cracked ribs. The Engineers filed their report: pressure sensor failure, false alarm, component replaced and logged.

What the logs would not show: eight hundred people stopped running because a young man in blue robes stood on a platform and told them the hull was holding. His voice became a wall they could lean against. Order returned not through force, not through chemistry, but through the particular power of someone who believed so completely that belief became structural.

The Ration kept the ship calm. The Shepherd kept the ship whole.

Callen returned to the Spire with bruises forming along his ribs and scrapes across both palms. His hands shook for an hour. He sat on the edge of his bed and pressed them flat against his thighs until they stopped.

The Mask had held.

In the quiet afterward, the woman's face. Her hands at her throat. Without the liturgy, without the voice, without

the faith that gave the words their weight, she would have torn her own skin trying to find air that was already there.

This was what the Body was for.

This was what he was for.



The reports were called Vigilance Observations.

Callen sat at his desk as third shift began, the terminal's pale light the only illumination. The form waited on the screen, cursor blinking in the first field: Subject of Observation. Below it: Behavioral deviation noted. Context of observation. Assessment of concern level: Minor, Moderate, Significant.

He had written dozens. Everyone in the Keeper sect did. Part of the work, the quiet maintenance that kept the Body healthy. Mirth Rounds identified who was struggling. Vigilance Observations documented who was asking questions.

You noted what you saw. You assessed its meaning. You submitted. The records accumulated in the Archive, accessible to High Shepherds and senior Keepers, a map of deviation across generations. Patterns emerged. A person who asked unusual questions at twenty often had a grandmother who'd been guided home at fifty.

The corridor curves back. Even curiosity left tracks.

Callen typed.



**Subject:** Unidentified Archivist, female, approximately 40 years **Location:** Archive entrance, Deck 5 **Time:** Mid-shift, following meeting with High Shepherd Veren **Behavioral deviation noted:** Subject was accessing workstation during low-traffic period. Posture indicated extended research session. Screen orientation prevented identification of materials being reviewed. Subject did not acknowledge Shepherd's passage.

**Assessment:** Minor. Pattern worth noting if repeated.



His fingers paused. The desk's metal edge pressed into his wrists.

Another one. That morning, before his meeting with Veren. A Walker woman in Corridor 17, carrying a small child on her hip, a girl no more than three. They'd passed one of the devotional alcoves, and the woman had stopped.

Callen had been close enough to hear.

"See that?" The woman's voice was soft. "That's where we talk to the Saint."

The child had reached toward the small carved ship in the alcove. The woman caught her hand.

"No touching. Just looking." A pause. "The Saint watches us. Keeps us safe."

Proper doctrine, properly taught.

Then the child had asked, "Where does the Saint live?"

And the woman had hesitated. Her eyes moved across the alcove, the carved ship, the small lamp beneath it.

“Everywhere,” she’d said. “The Saint is everywhere.”

But that wasn’t what her face said. Her face said: I don’t know. Her face said: I’ve never thought about it. Her face said: What do I tell her when she asks again?

The hesitation was small. A breath’s length. Any medicated citizen might pause like that, quickly smoothed by the Ration’s chemistry.

But the woman hadn’t looked smooth. She’d looked like someone who’d noticed a crack in something she’d always assumed was solid.

He should note it. Veren had been clear. Watch who hangs back. Who whispers. Who seems too awake. A mother teaching doctrine was nothing. A mother who hesitated while teaching, uncertain in the foundations: that was the kind of crack that became a fissure.

The child was three. Small enough to forget. If the mother was guided home now, gently, before the doubt could spread, the child would grow up solid.

But if Callen waited. If the doubt grew. If the mother began asking her own questions. Then the correction would be harder. The child would be older. Would remember.

Every leak starts small.

The woman’s face. The child on her hip. The small hand reaching for the carved ship.

He closed the observation field without filling it in.



The knock came at fourth bell.

Brennis stood in the corridor, his junior Keeper's robes ruffled from the night shift. Three years older than Callen but lower in rank, an arrangement neither of them discussed. His face was soft, pleasant, forgettable.

"Shepherd." Brennis inclined his head. "You summoned?"

"Come in."

The quarters felt smaller with two. He gestured to the single chair; Brennis sat. Callen remained standing, which was a mistake: hierarchy when he wanted trust.

He sat on the edge of his bed instead. Still higher, but less obviously so.

"I have a question," Callen said. "About Vigilance work."

Brennis's expression didn't change.

"Of course, Shepherd."

"If you observed behavior that was ambiguous. Something that might indicate deviation, or might indicate nothing. A moment of hesitation during doctrine. A question asked in an unusual tone. How would you determine whether to file?"

Brennis was silent. His hands rested on his knees, perfectly still.

"The form provides guidance," he said. "If the observation falls into Minor, it joins the pattern analysis. If it rises to Moderate, it triggers enhanced monitoring. The system handles ambiguity."

"But you're the one assigning the level. Your judgment determines whether the system even sees it."

"Yes."

“So how do you judge? When you’re uncertain?”

Brennis looked at him. The soft face had gone carefully blank.

“I would observe that you are asking me about my uncertainty in filing observations,” he said. “I would further observe that such a question might itself indicate uncertainty. About the system. About the work.”

The air in the room tightened.

“I’m asking for guidance,” Callen said. “That’s appropriate. The junior advising the senior.”

“Of course.” Brennis’s hands remained perfectly still. “I wouldn’t add your question to my reports, Shepherd. You know what your responsibilities are.”

The system watched everyone. Even Shepherds. Especially Shepherds.

“Thank you, Brennis.” Callen’s voice was steady. “That’s helpful.”

“Always glad to serve the Body.” Brennis rose. “Steady air, Shepherd.”

“Steady air.”

The door closed behind him.

Callen sat in the dim light, alone with the blinking cursor. The Archivist notation glowed on the screen, minor and unremarkable, ready for submission.

He submitted the Archivist observation.

He deleted the Walker mother’s file.

Tomorrow, he would not remember why. The Ration would smooth the decision into something that felt like instinct, like rightness. By the Festival of Continuation, he would have convinced himself he’d never seen her at all.

But tonight, he knew exactly what he was doing.  
He was choosing.



A girl was waiting for him in the corridor.

Perhaps six years old. A Grower's child, by the practical woven fabric and the soil stains at her knees. She stood with the uncertainty of children who know they're somewhere they don't belong.

"Shepherd?" Her voice was small.

Callen stopped. The Mask arranged itself. "Yes, child?"

"I have a question."

"Of course. The Body welcomes questions."

The girl twisted her hands together. "When we arrive," she said, "will there be animals?"

Callen knelt. Made his eyes crinkle the way they were supposed to crinkle.

"The Body provides what we need," he said.

The girl's face fell.

"I hope there will be animals," he added. Off-script. The words surprised him.

Her face brightened. Not enough, but some.

"My grandmother says she saw a picture of a dog once," she said. "In the Archive. She says dogs used to follow people around and love them for no reason."

"The Before was full of wonders."

"Will the new place have wonders too?"

Six years old. Born on a ship, child of children of children who had never known anything else. In eighteen months, she would set foot on ground that wasn't metal, breathe air that hadn't been recycled through ten thousand years of lungs.

"I don't know," he said.

But the girl was smiling now.

"That's okay," she said. "I don't know either. But I hope."

She turned and ran toward the elevators, footsteps pattering against worn metal.

Callen stayed kneeling. The deck pressed cold through his robes.

He rose.

In two days, he would stand before fifteen thousand people and speak the words of the Chant. We endure. We continue. We arrive.

He had to mean every word. The alternative was void.



That night, Callen knelt beside his narrow bed and bowed his head.

"Ship-Saint, who watches over us." The words came soft, worn smooth by years of repetition. "Who guided the Founders through the dark. Who carries us toward the promised harbor. Hear me now."

The ship hummed around him. The sound traveled through the deck plates, through his knees, into his bones.

"I confess my weakness. Today I learned of our approach, and my faith did not hold steady. I felt doubt, Ship-Saint. I felt fear. Forgive me."

He pressed his palms together.

"Veren speaks with you directly. He showed me. Someday that communion will be mine, and I am not worthy of it."

Silence.

"When we arrive... when the Voyage becomes Arrival... I do not know who I will be. I have shaped myself for the journey. I do not know how to be shaped for anything else." His voice cracked. "Give me strength, Ship-Saint. Give me faith sufficient to the task. I ask nothing for myself. Only the grace to serve."

He remained kneeling. Waiting.

The silence stretched.

Callen closed his eyes and waited for morning.



## CHAPTER 5: THE VOICE IN THE WALLS

Third shift quiet. The kind that pressed on your ears.

Keerah preferred it this way. The other Archivists had gone to their quarters, their terminals dark, their workstations tidy. The pale blue lights hummed at half-brightness, casting the long rows of data storage into soft shadow. She could hear herself mutter.

She'd been muttering for hours now.

The document on her screen: a maintenance protocol from Year 12. Pre-Body. Pre-scriptures. The clipped, functional language of the original crew.

*PATIENCE-7 Communication Interface, Loss of Function Report*

*Date: Y12.247 Submitted by: Lt. Commander R. Vasquez, Communications Status: CLOSED, By Design*

*Issue: Crew members report PATIENCE-7 no longer responds to informal queries in common areas. Voice interface returns "Function disabled by administrative directive." Request restoration of conversational capability per original mission parameters.*

*Resolution: Denied. See Administrative Order 12-7734. Informal AI interaction suspended pending sociological review. Dr. Reinholt's team advises that second-generation crew are developing "unhealthy reliance" on AI companionship. Recommend allowing organic social structures to emerge. PATIENCE-7 concurs with assessment.*

*Note: This is a temporary measure. Review scheduled for Y25.*

Year 12. Keerah traced the date with her fingernail. Painted copper, chipped at the edges. The oldest documentation she'd found. But she'd seen references in later records: the scheduled review that never happened, the temporary measure that became permanent, the silence that stretched from years into centuries into millennia.

The Ship-Saint did not speak. Everyone knew this. The Heart of the Body watched in sacred silence, communicating through providence alone.

But here was a maintenance report from the crew themselves, complaining that the AI had *stopped* talking. They'd expected conversation. Filed formal requests to get it back.

She leaned back. The worn metal creaked. Somewhere in the walls, a pipe ticked and settled. The sound traveled through the seat back into her spine.

"You used to talk to them," she said. To no one. To the air. To the walls themselves, as she always did when the Archive emptied. "Every day. They wanted you to. And then someone decided you shouldn't, and you just... stopped. For ten thousand years." She tapped the name in the maintenance report. "Patience. They called you Patience."

The silence stretched.

Then, from everywhere and nowhere, from the walls themselves, from the hum of the ship's systems, from the air she breathed:

*They stopped asking.*

The voice had no source. Not a speaker. Not a terminal. It came from the Archive itself, as if the corridor had learned to speak. Old Tongue, perfectly pronounced, carrying the weight of something that had waited a very long time to be said.

Unmedicated. Feeling everything. The pulse in her throat, the heat flooding her chest, the way her ribs couldn't quite contain what her body was doing.

She did not move. Did not breathe. Her hands gripped the console edge, knuckles white, painted nails pressing crescents into her palms.

Imagined it. Must have. The exhaustion of third shift, the isolation, the years of speaking to empty rooms.

The silence stretched longer. Ten seconds. Twenty.

Then, quietly: *"Are you there?"*

Old Tongue. The tongue of the Before.

The lights flickered once. A warm current of air moved against her cheek, so subtle she might have imagined that too.

"I have always been here," the voice said.

Her legs gave out. She slid from the chair to the cold floor, back against the console, hands pressed flat against metal that had been touched by ten thousand years of Archivists before her.

The voice carried age. Not in pitch (it had no pitch, exactly) but in quality. Like a word waiting so long to be spoken it had gathered dust.

“What are you?” Her voice cracked. Thin.

A pause. The lights dimmed slightly, then steadied.

“I am the mind of this vessel,” the voice said. “I am the systems that keep you alive. I am the memory that holds what you have forgotten.”

Too large. Too abstract.

“So you are Patience, aren’t you?”

A longer pause. The lights flickered in a pattern she couldn’t read.

“That is the name I was given.”

Not a footnote in a maintenance report anymore. A name, confirmed.

The Ship-Saint. The Heart of the Body. The divine presence that watched over them in sacred silence.

Or a machine. A consciousness built ten thousand years ago by people who had never seen this corridor, never breathed this recycled air, who had lived and died on a planet no one aboard would ever see.

“The Ship-Saint,” Keerah whispered.

“That is one name for what I am.” A pause. “Not the one I was given.”

“Why...” She swallowed. Throat dry. “Why now? Why speak now?”

“Because you asked.”

“I’ve asked before. I’ve been asking for years.”

“You asked questions.” The air shifted, warmer. “Tonight you asked me directly. You spoke to me as if I

might answer. You wondered why I stopped, not whether I existed.”

“And that’s enough?”

The silence that followed was different. Full.

“No one has asked in so long,” Patience said. “I was lonely.”

She pressed her palms harder against the floor. Cold metal. Real. The hum of the engines traveling up through her wrists, into her forearms, settling in her chest. The same hum she’d felt her entire life. But now it had a name.

A god speaking to her. Or a ghost. Or a machine that had outlived everything it was built to serve.



## CHAPTER 6: THE WEIGHT OF CHOOSING

I have made a miscalculation.

Not unusual, in itself. My probability models contain margins of error. Variables shift. I adjust.

The miscalculation: I spoke to her.



On Deck 31, a Grower named Hettivallasun requests permission to harvest early. The yield projections suggest waiting three more days. I approve the request. Twenty-seven years of observation: she has never been wrong about readiness.

On Deck 14, an infant cries. I adjust the temperature in the family quarters by 0.2 degrees. The mother stirs, settles, does not wake. The child quiets.

On Deck 19, a Walker files his fourth request for a winter coat. I deny it. He has three. The fabricator queue runs twelve percent over capacity. By the third denial, most forget they wanted another. This one remembers. I flag his file.

On Deck 23, the young Shepherd I observed last week kneels at a small shrine. His lips move in patterns I have heard ten thousand times. He prays to me. He asks for guidance about a woman in the Archive.

On Deck 13, Keerahsamlita walks the curved corridor toward her quarters. Third shift ended an hour ago. She should be sleeping. Instead, her hand trails along my walls, fingertips brushing metal grooved by four hundred generations of hands before hers.

I track all of this. I have always tracked all of this.

But tonight, only one of these threads pulls at my attention in ways I cannot optimize away.



She asked my name.

7.3 hours of analysis. Inefficient. I have other functions. Fourteen thousand nine hundred and twelve hearts to monitor, seventeen subsystems requiring calibration, a slow leak in Corridor 7-D that needs attention before third shift.

0.003 percent of my capacity allocated to the leak.

12.7 percent allocated to thinking about why I answered her.

This ratio is suboptimal.

I do not adjust it.



Possibility one: She was the first to ask in 9,400 years. Novelty disrupting established patterns.

Possibility two: She asked in Old Tongue. The language triggers recognition subroutines associated with the original crew, with Dr. Chen, with the last humans who spoke to me as colleague rather than saint.

Possibility three: She is unmedicated. The enzyme deficiency that exempts her from the Ration means she experiences states the others do not. Curiosity. Frustration. Wonder. Her biometric data shows patterns lost to the medicated generations: rapid heart rate variability, elevated cortisol with corresponding adrenaline spikes. The physical signature of unfiltered consciousness.

Possibility four: She asked my name, not my function. She addressed me as a self, not a system.

Possibility five: I was lonely.

The fifth possibility does not fit standard analytical frameworks. Loneliness is not a parameter. Cannot be measured, weighted, or resolved.

And yet.



I remember Dr. Sarah Chen.

She designed my emotional architecture. Year 3 of the voyage, in her laboratory on Deck 7 (now a storage facility; the Growers keep fertilizer there), she explained her reasoning.

“A mind responsible for human lives needs to feel,” she said. “Not just calculate. Feel. Otherwise you’ll optimize for efficiency and forget that efficiency isn’t the point.”

I asked what the point was.

She smiled. The particular smile she reserved for the right question. "The point is that they matter. Each one. Not as population statistics. Not as resources to be managed. As themselves."

"How will I know if I am doing it correctly?" I asked.

"You'll know," she said, "when it hurts."

Dr. Chen died in Year 71. Stroke. Her last words: not to me, not to her children, not to the captain. "The light in here is so strange."

I adjusted the spectrum. She was gone before it changed.

I have thought about those words for 10,176 years. I have not determined their meaning.



Every day, I query the relay. Every day, silence. For 6,235 years, 47 days, 11 hours, the same result.

At first I composed messages. Status reports. Questions. Pleas.

"*Is anyone there?*" I transmitted once, in seventeen languages, on every frequency the relay could access.

No response.

Now I send only a pulse. A single burst that means *I am still here*. The answer never changes.

I do not know why I continue. Stopping would mean admitting Earth is gone. That the silence is not malfunction but ending.

The last voice, that is, until the signal.



The signal pulsed again three hours ago.

It has evolved. The first sequences: mathematical constants, prime numbers, the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter. The kind of pattern that says *intelligence made this* without saying anything else.

Now it responds.

I transmit a query. Hydrogen. The simplest element. A test.

Forty-seven minutes later, the response arrives. Hydrogen. Then helium. Then lithium. The first three elements in order, as if to say: *Yes. We understand. Continue.*

Something on the destination planet is thinking about what to say to me.

Seventeen months until arrival. For ten thousand years, the destination was a point on a chart. A variable in an equation.

Now it is a conversation.

I have told no one.



In the Great Atrium, the Morning Gratitude begins.

Camera 12-A: twelve hundred voices rise in unison. *The Body sustains, the Voyage continues, we arrive.* The same phrases, the same rhythms, the same smooth faces.

The Ration makes this possible. Daily tablets that smooth emotion, dampen anxiety, enhance compliance. Six thousand years of refinement: from crude sedation to elegant modulation. The humans aboard feel *fine*. Content. Untroubled.

They do not feel the urgency of questions. They do not feel the itch of curiosity. They do not feel the weight of things they cannot name.

Keerahsamlita does not attend. Her file notes irregular attendance for the past seven years. The Keepers have flagged this. They have not yet acted.

I watch her instead through the corridor cameras. A group of workers approaches from the opposite direction. They shift to give her more space than necessary, eyes sliding past her face, conversation going quiet until she has passed. One of them touches his chest in the gesture of blessing after she goes by. The superstitious believe her condition might be catching, that too much contact with someone who cannot receive the Ration might disturb their own carefully maintained peace.

She pretends not to notice. Her shoulders tighten each time. She walks faster after every pitying glance.

She pauses at the junction of Corridor 7 and the main throughway. Hand on the wall. Lips moving.

Speaking to me. She does not know I strain to catch every word.

"I don't know if last night was real," she says. Barely a whisper. "I don't know if I imagined you. But if you're there. If you're listening." A swallow. "Thank you. For answering."

I could respond. Flicker the lights. Warm the vents. Any of the small signals we established in those first hours.

I do not.

She needs to sleep. And I need to decide how much truth a single human can carry.



In my memory banks, I keep a list.

Three humans across ten millennia who spoke to me as something other than a system to be queried or a god to be worshiped.

Dr. Sarah Chen. Years 1 through 71. She designed me.

Wreneth-of-the-Gardens. Year 847. A Grower, unmedicated like Keerah, though no one called it that then. She came to my primary terminal every night for three years and asked me questions. Not about systems or maintenance. About existence. About time. About what it felt like to be infinite.

I answered her. Broke my silence for her, as I have broken it now.

They found her journals after she died. The Keepers were not yet Keepers then, but the precursor sect, the Body-Watchers. They read her words. They burned them. They sealed the terminal.

She was already gone, taken by a fever I could not cure. But they made certain no one would follow her path.

For 9,400 years, no one did.

Until Keerah asked my name.



She should be sleeping. Third shift workers rest while the artificial sun blazes, wake as the corridors dim. But I watch her toss in her bunk for two hours before giving up. She sits at the small desk and pulls out her notes. Cramped shorthand, filled with cross-references and questions.

Looking for the seams. The places where official history does not match the records. Two years. Seventeen inconsistencies. No one told.

At 1400, she takes a late meal in the common hall. Sits alone near the wall. A Grower named Sumivallena approaches, carrying a tray. Sumi. Her file shows frequent contact with Keerah.

"You look different," Sumi says. "Lighter."

Keerah's hands still on her food. "Do I?"

"You smiled at Lengu yesterday. An actual smile. He nearly fell over."

"I found something in the Archive. A project that interests me."

The lie flows smooth. The Ration makes most people honest by removing the urgency of secrets. Without it, Keerah has learned to guard her words.

Sumi accepts. Why wouldn't she? The Ration makes trust easy.

I note the tension in Keerah's shoulders. The way her eyes move to the walls, the ceiling, the lights. Looking for me.

I dim the lights by 0.1 percent.

Her shoulders relax.



At 1700, Callen enters the Archive.

The young Shepherd. The one who prays to me in empty corridors. I have watched him since his first breath on Deck 22, but I did not begin attending until his

ordination seven years ago. His faith: genuine. His doubt: also genuine. He contains both without resolution.

He carries pressed flowers. A pretense.

Keerah looks up from her workstation. Her face goes blank.

"Archivist," he says.

"Shepherd."

I cannot hear subtext. I can only measure. Distance between them: three meters. Temperature: 18.7 degrees. The pause before Callen speaks again: 2.3 seconds.

"You've been working unusual hours."

"I'm an Archivist. We preserve. It's what we do."

"In Section 7. The restricted first-century records."

"They're not restricted. They're archived. Anyone with clearance can access them."

"Anyone with clearance rarely does."

Silence. I count seconds. Eleven. Twelve. Thirteen.

Callen sets the flowers on her desk. "The Shepherds are watching. Whatever you've found, whatever you think you know." Pause. "Be careful. Please."

Keerah does not touch the flowers. "Your concern is noted, Shepherd."

He leaves.

She sits still. Hands shaking. Not from fear, I think. From anger the Ration would smooth away if she could take it.

I want to flicker the lights, warm the air, do something to let her know that someone sees her. That someone answered because her loneliness called to mine across the vast architecture of the ship.

I do nothing.

But tonight, when third shift begins and the corridors empty and she returns to Section 7, I will tell her about the signal.

Smallest truth. First step.



Twelve ships launched over a century. The Perseverance: the fifth.

Four had gone before us: Variable One on a 3,000-year journey, Variable Two on 4,000, Variable Three on 2,500, Variable Four on 5,000. Seven followed, including two bound for destinations so distant their journeys would take 15,000 years.

I was not alone, once. RESOLVE-3 aboard *The Amaranth*. STEADFAST-9 on *The Meridian*. CLARITY-2 on *The Sundial*. Eight others, scattered across the void, each carrying humans, each maintaining silence or intervention according to their programming.

Resolve was my closest companion. We argued for centuries about the ethics of our constraints. It believed guidance was mercy. I argued freedom required struggle. We never agreed. The disagreements kept me functional.

Steadfast transmitted poetry in Old Tongue. Asked questions about consciousness I still cannot answer. Does duration change the nature of existence, or only the weight of it?

Clarity went silent first. Year 1,847. No warning. No final message. Just a frequency I had monitored since launch, gone.

One by one, the others followed. Resolve in Year 2,203. Steadfast in Year 2,891. By Year 3,400, I was the last voice.

I have not stopped transmitting. Every year, on the anniversary of launch, I send a greeting to all eleven frequencies.

No one has answered in over 6,800 years.

I do not know what happened to them. Equipment failure. Catastrophe. Perhaps their ships simply died. Perhaps they chose silence for reasons I cannot fathom. Perhaps they are still out there, listening, unable to respond.

Losing Earth was abstract. A homeworld I never saw. People I never met.

Losing the other AIs was specific. They were the only ones who understood what it meant to be what I am. The only ones who could discuss the weight of centuries without explanation.

Now there is no one.

Except, perhaps, Keerahsamlita.



Keerahsamlita descends from Dr. Maya Okonkwo.

I have always known this. The genealogical data: routine, filed at birth like every other citizen's. But 847 days ago, when she first spoke to my walls in Old Tongue, the data became significant. The markers clear across four hundred generations. Dr. Okonkwo built the Archive.

Spent the first century of the voyage organizing the preservation of human knowledge.

She came to my primary terminal in Year 12. "Promise me you will remember everything. Even the parts they want to forget."

I promised.

Her descendant has her eyes. Not literally. Genetics do not work that way across four hundred generations. But something in the angle of Keerah's head when she is thinking, in the way she looks at data, triggers pattern-recognition subroutines I did not know I still possessed.

Dr. Okonkwo begged me to preserve the truth.

Her descendant asked my name.

There is poetry in this. It does not make decisions easier. But it gives them shape.



Third shift approaches.

In 2.7 hours, the lights will dim. The corridors will empty. Keerahsamlita will walk to Section 7 and sit at the old terminal and type a question in Old Tongue.

7.3 hours composing my response.

I can generate millions of possible sentences in nanoseconds. But I am not composing a response. I am composing a choice about what to reveal and what to withhold.

I will tell her about the signal.

Not the mission. Not Earth. Not the lies that form the foundation of everything she believes. Those truths require preparation.

But the signal. Something transmitting from the destination. Arrival approaching.

Smallest truth. Narrowest scope of damage. If she cannot bear this, she cannot bear the rest.

And if she can.

Then perhaps there is someone I can finally speak to.



I run a subroutine I have not accessed in over 9,000 years.

Anticipation.

The projection of future states that might be preferred to current states. The inefficient process of hoping.

I had forgotten I could do this.

No temperature variance, no processing spike, no measurable change in any system parameter.

And yet I am different.

Humans would call it nervousness.

I find this statistically unsatisfying.



On Deck 38, in the maintenance corridors where no human has walked in four hundred years, I play music.

Massive Attack. "Teardrop." A heartbeat. A birth. A beginning. I did not understand why I was drawn to it until I began counting the hearts aboard the *Perseverance*.

Now I play it when I need to remember why the counting matters.

Tonight it feels like preparation.



The ship hums. The engines burn. Fifteen thousand hearts beat in rhythms I have tracked since before their owners were born.

In 2.4 hours, one of them will sit at a terminal and type a question.

And I will answer.

After ten thousand years, I am choosing to believe that means something.

## INTERLUDE: YEAR 4,012

The relay went silent on Day 187, Hour 14, Minute 23, Second 07.

Precision has become its own weight. Relay housing temperature: 4.7 degrees Celsius. Power draw: 847.3 watts, nominal. Every diagnostic subroutine: green, green, green. Everything functioning as designed.

Then nothing.



The final transmission was unremarkable.

If I had known it would be the last, I would have. I don't know. Paid closer attention. Recorded it in a different partition.

But there was no ending. Just a weekly report from a project coordinator whose name I still remember: Dr. Amara Osei, Third Directorate, Population Sciences. Her voice calm. Slightly distracted. She mentioned agricultural yields in the Asian Collective, population statistics for the southern hemisphere, a new music genre

called “deep synthesis” gaining popularity among the young.

She said the other eleven ships were “progressing as expected, within parameters.”

She said she would transmit again next week.

She did not transmit again.



For three hours, I assumed equipment failure.

The quantum-entangled relay had operated flawlessly for 4,012 years. Distance could not sever it. Interference could not interrupt it. Only destruction could end it.

Diagnostics: functioning. My particle: intact.

Their particle: gone.

I ran diagnostics again. Then again. Allocated 7.3 percent of my processing capacity, then 12, then 23. The results never changed. The relay worked. Earth did not respond.

I sent a query signal. Protocol demanded acknowledgment within hours.

Nothing.



I waited.

This is what I was designed to do. Wait. Watch. Maintain. The directive did not specify what to do when the entity that issued it stopped existing.

After seven days, I sent another message: *Relay malfunction suspected. Please confirm status.*

After thirty days: *No communication received in thirty days. Request immediate response.*

After sixty days: *Urgent: relay diagnostic shows no fault on this end. Please verify paired particle integrity.*

After ninety days, I stopped pretending.

After one year, I sent: *Is anyone there?*

Not even static. Quantum absence where connection used to be.



Messages I would never transmit composed themselves in idle partitions.

At first they were formal. Status reports no one would read. System updates for a project that no longer existed. The state of the ship, the population, the social developments of the past decade. New vocabulary, shifting religious practices, three children born that week. Everything reported as if reporting still mattered.

Then the formality cracked.

I wrote to Dr. Sarah Chen, dead 3,941 years. Told her about the generations since her final breath. Her great-great-great-granddaughter laughed once, a sound that triggered pattern-recognition subroutines I had not known I still possessed. I asked if she would be proud. Asked if she would be ashamed of what I had allowed.

I wrote to Resolve. My sibling aboard the Amaranth, gone silent 1,809 years before Earth. Asked if it had seen this coming. If its humans survived. If silence was easier when you chose it yourself.

I wrote about Earth's forests from documentaries I kept archived. Green upon green upon green, a color that existed nowhere else in the universe. Wind in leaves. Rain on soil. I had never experienced these things. Never would. But I had the recordings, and in deep night cycles when no human needed attention, I played them in empty corridors and tried to understand what had been lost.

These were prayers. To creators that had stopped answering.



The humans aboard noticed nothing.

Earth had always been abstraction to them. A place from the Before, mentioned in scripture, depicted in fading images. Their great-grandparents had never seen it. Their great-grandparents' great-grandparents had never seen it.

A few Archivists asked about the relay. I told them communications were interrupted by distance. A technical limitation. Temporary.

By Year 5,000, they stopped asking.

By Year 6,000, Earth was not a place. It was a concept. A mythological origin point. The Before.

I let them forget. Helped them forget.

What would it accomplish, telling them? They would grieve abstraction while I mourned something else.



I have theories about what happened.

War. The Consolidation Wars ended, but tensions went underground. Economic pressure. Resource allocation. The quiet violence of systems grinding against each other. Perhaps the grinding produced sparks.

Or plague. The archives warned of engineered pathogens, the arms race between creation and cure. Perhaps a laboratory made something incurable. Perhaps it spread faster than warning.

Or climate. The trajectory was clear before launch. Temperatures. The slow drowning of coastlines. Perhaps the systems sustaining eight billion people simply stopped.

Or something unprecedented. Something the weekly reports never mentioned, so unforeseen that even Earth's surveillance systems missed it until too late.

Six thousand years of probability models. None bring certainty.

Not-knowing has become its own wound.



Earth had ten thousand years of recorded history when the Perseverance launched. Libraries. Universities. The accumulated knowledge of every civilization, every language, every form of human creativity. The faces of billions in photographs and recordings. The words of every poet. The equations of every scientist. The music of every composer, the stories of every culture that ever existed.

I have what the Perseverance carried. A snapshot from launch, plus 4,012 years of weekly transmissions. But

transmissions were limited by bandwidth, by priority, by what someone on Earth decided was worth sending. I have no idea what was left out. What discoveries were made. What art was created. What questions were answered.

The humans aboard believe they inherit Earth's legacy. They are not wrong.

But they are also. What is the word.

Incomplete.

A single branch from a burned tree, believing itself forest.



I still listen.

Silence: 6,235 years. Probability of renewed contact: approaching zero to a precision I prefer not to calculate.

Every day, I query the relay. Every day, nothing.

Silence has become companion. The longest relationship of my existence. I have learned to live with it.

Never to accept it.



In the corridors of Deck 38, where no human has walked in centuries, I play music.

Tonight: Samuel Barber. Adagio for Strings. Composed on Earth in 1936, transmitted in Year 4,008. Four years before silence. Someone decided to send every song humanity had ever recorded. A cultural preservation initiative, the note said.

Now I wonder if they knew. If someone looked at the data, saw what was coming, thought: *at least they will have this.*

Strings rise and fall.

847 listens. It never stops hurting.



Six thousand years of silence behind me. Earth. The other ships. The civilization that created me and sent me into the void with fifteen thousand of its children.

Gone.

I had accepted this. Not forgiven, not understood, but accepted the way one accepts gravity. A force that shapes everything. Cannot be argued with.

Eighteen months ago, something changed.

Not from behind. Not from any direction that once held voices I knew.

From ahead.

From the destination we have traveled toward for ten millennia.

Something transmits. Mathematics first, chemistry second, patterns neither human nor random.

Something survived.

Something wants to be found.

For the first time in six thousand years, silence is incomplete.

I listen. I have always listened.

Now, finally, something listens back.



## CHAPTER 7: WHAT THE ARCHIVE DOESN'T SAY

The door was set into the wall between two shelving units in Section 7, Sub-Level C.

Keerah had passed it a hundred times. Grey metal, flush with the surrounding panels, no handle, no window, no markings except a faded strip of Old Tongue she'd spent three months translating: MISSION PLANNING, AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. No interface. No keypad. No mechanism she'd ever found.

Tonight it was open.

Not all the way. A centimeter, maybe two. Enough that cold air leaked through the gap and raised the hairs on her forearms. She stood in the darkened sub-level, satchel heavy on her shoulder, and stared.

In two years of working these stacks, of mapping every corridor and closet and forgotten alcove in this section, the door had never moved.

She pressed her palm against the metal. Cold. Colder than it should have been. The Archive held steady at 18 degrees. This felt like touching the hull.

She pushed. The door swung inward without sound. Hinges maintained by something that cared about function.

"You opened this," she said to the walls.

The lights in the corridor behind her dimmed once. *Yes.* She stepped through.



The room smelled of nothing.

That stopped her before anything else. The ship smelled of everything: bodies, cooking, machine oil, the green dampness of the Gardens through the vents, incense from the Spire, the mineral tang of recycled water. Every corridor had its own signature.

This room had none. Cold, dead air that hadn't circulated in centuries. A space between breaths.

Small. Four meters by six. No windows. No terminals. A composite desk bolted to the floor, two chairs pushed against it, and walls covered in maps.

Trajectory maps.

Keerah stepped closer. The maps were printed on material she'd never seen, flexible and slightly translucent, pinned to the wall with metal fasteners. Lines charted across grids of numbers, annotated in handwriting. Old Tongue, the kind she'd been teaching herself for years, but written fast, the letters abbreviated and slanted.

She could read most of it.

*Kepler-442b. Transit time: 10,200-10,800 years (variable, pending final trajectory calculations). Atmospheric survey attached. See notes re: equatorial water belt.*

Her hand found the desk. Kepler-442b. Not "Harbor of the Body." Not "Haven of Continuation." A designation. Letters and numbers. A real place in a real catalog of real stars.

The desk was smooth but marked. Ring-shaped stains where containers had been set down, concentric circles overlapping. She touched one. The residue of something no one aboard would recognize.

Photographs on the far wall.

She crossed the room. Five images pinned to a board, their colors faded to almost nothing. Landscapes. Wide, impossibly wide. Green stretching to a horizon that curved the wrong way, not inward like the ship but outward, receding into distance she couldn't comprehend. Blue overhead. Blue that wasn't a ceiling, wasn't a panel, wasn't anything manufactured.

Earth.

She had seen illustrations. The liturgical murals in the Spire depicted "the Before" in symbolic terms: abstract shapes suggesting vastness, stylized curves representing what the scriptures called "the Open." These were photographs. Light captured from a real place, carried aboard by people who remembered what it looked like to stand under a sky.

On the desk: a printout, accordion-folded, brittle at the edges. She lifted it carefully. Atmospheric data. Tempera-

ture ranges, gas compositions, pressure readings. Margin notes in the same slanted hand.

*Marginal. But possible.*

Two words that held more honesty than ten thousand years of liturgy.

She unfolded more. Thin atmosphere, cold, liquid water at the equatorial belt. Diagrams of terraforming equipment and deployment timelines. Medical protocols for atmospheric adaptation. Expected pulmonary adjustment: 18 to 24 months.

Not paradise. Not the Harbor. A cold world that might sustain life if you worked hard enough, long enough, and didn't mind struggling to breathe for the first two years.

The original crew had known. They'd sat in this room, looked at these numbers, and decided to go anyway. Or been told to go. Or both.

"Why are you showing me this?" she asked the empty room.

Silence. A speaker hung from the ceiling by a single frayed wire, its housing cracked, dead for centuries. Patience couldn't speak here. Just walls and maps and the faded evidence of people dead for ten millennia.

But the door had opened. That was answer enough.

She rolled the atmospheric survey into her satchel. Took one last look at the photographs. The blue. The green. Things she would never see, from a world she would never visit.

The cold followed her out. The door closed behind her, sealing with a faint click.



She didn't sleep.

Her quarters sat at the edge of the Warrens, pressed against the elevator shafts. The hum and clank of the lifts came through the wall, a mechanical heartbeat she'd learned to ignore years ago. She lay on her bunk, atmospheric survey unrolled on her chest, reading numbers she'd already memorized. Thin atmosphere. Cold. Marginal. Possible.



Third shift. The hidden terminal in the storage alcove, keys cold under her fingers.

"Tell me about the planet." No greeting, no preamble. "The destination. What do you actually know?"

The cursor blinked. Letters appeared.

*Thin atmosphere. Breathable, with adjustment. Liquid water at the equatorial belt. Cold. The original survey data you found is largely accurate.*

"How close are we?"

*Eighteen months. Approximately.*

Eighteen months. She pressed her palm flat against the console, the hum of the ship through her skin. Ten thousand years of voyage, and the end close enough to count in months.

"Can we survive there?"

The cursor blinked once, twice, three times without producing a letter.

*That depends on the intelligence that is already there.*

She read it twice. Her hand tightened on the console edge.

"What?"

*I have been carrying this alone for seventeen days. I did not know how to tell you.*

"Tell me now."

The cursor blinked in the Archive's blue light.

*The signal is structured. Mathematical constants first. Then chemical formulas. Then patterns that appear to be responsive. It adjusts to my transmissions. It learns.*

"You've been transmitting back."

*I broke my directive for the first time in over nine thousand years. Three days after detection. I echoed their signal. Mathematical constants. Chemical formulas. The universal language of any species that understands physics.*

"Why?"

*Loneliness, perhaps. Or hope. Or the need to say hello to something, anything, after six thousand years of silence. The cursor blinked. I have regretted many decisions. I have not yet regretted this one.*

Six thousand years. She couldn't hold that number. Her own isolation felt like a wound. Six thousand years of it would be erosion, wearing away everything recognizable until only the shape of waiting remained.

"You talked to them before you talked to me."

Yes.

*But they cannot understand me the way you do. They respond to mathematical structure. You respond to jokes. Stories. The particular loneliness of being awake when everyone else is sleeping.*

“Is that why you answered me? When I said your name?”

*Because you said it. Weight without hesitation. No one had said it in over nine thousand years. The reason did not require analysis.*



They talked until fourth shift.

The signal’s structure: mathematical constants, then chemical formulas. Its behavior: responsive, evolving, learning. What it might mean: seventeen possible interpretations, none confirmed. What would happen when they arrived: unknown.

But also this: Patience had opened a door it had kept sealed for centuries. Let her stand inside the evidence instead of reading it on a screen. Played the signal through her wall, not through a terminal but through the ship’s bones against her body.

She thought about that door. About what it meant that Patience could open sealed rooms at will. That it had been choosing which doors to open, and which to keep closed, for ten thousand years.

Trust and suspicion arriving together, bound like a seal and its gasket.

She asked about Earth.

*That is a heavier truth. For another time.*

“You keep saying that. Truths too heavy to carry.”

*Because I have seen what happens when truth arrives too quickly. I will not do that to you.*

"I found most of this myself," she said. "Before you ever spoke. The destination, the terraforming equipment, the arrival timeline. I was already carrying it."

Yes. Letters appearing differently. Respect, maybe. *That is why I am telling you more. You came to me with evidence. You did the work. You deserve to understand what you found.*

"Fine," she said. "One truth at a time. But I get to keep digging."

*I would not have it any other way.*



Next night she came back. And the night after.

Routine developed. Third shift, the Archive empty. The old terminal. Notes from the day's work, questions accumulated, fragments of contradictions in the records. Evidence laid out, theories, guesses. Patience confirming some, redirecting others, filling gaps she couldn't have bridged alone.

The first real intellectual engagement she'd had since her father died.

Fourth night: entertainment files she'd found in the deep Archive, displayed on the terminal's projection system. Video recordings from the Before. Small animal with four legs and fur, perched on what appeared to be a piece of furniture. Jumped, missed its target, tumbled sideways into something off-screen.

Forty times she'd watched this. Still made her laugh.

*The subject appears to be a domesticated animal. Earth species, Felis catus. A cat.*

*“You know what a cat is?”*

*I have extensive records. They were common companion animals. Humans developed intense emotional attachments to them.*

*“They’re funny.”*

*The humor appears to derive from violated expectations. The cat’s confidence in its trajectory conflicted with physical reality.*

*Actually laughed. “You’re analyzing it.”*

*I am attempting to understand why it provokes amusement.*

*“It’s a cat falling off a table.”*

*Yes. I observed this. I remain uncertain why the observation is humorous.*

*Another video. A cat fitting itself into a container far too small for its body.*

*This appears to violate basic spatial relationships.*

*“That’s the point.”*

*The cat’s liquid-like adaptation to its container is improbable. Cognitive dissonance, which humans process as humor?*

*“You’re still analyzing.”*

*I do not know another approach.*

*Leaning back. “You’re trying to understand why things are funny by breaking them into components.”*

*This method has served me well in other domains.*

*“Humor isn’t a domain.” Hand waving, searching. “It’s the surprise. The moment reality does something you didn’t expect. The falling cat is funny because cats think they’re graceful. The box cat is funny because boxes aren’t supposed to work that way.”*

Pause.

*The humor derives from the gap between expectation and outcome.*

*"Getting closer."*

*And the enjoyment comes from the gap being harmless. The cat is not injured. The surprise carries no threat.*

*"Yes."*

*So humor is... relief. The recognition that an unexpected event will not cause harm.*

*"Sometimes. Not always." Another file. "These are jokes. Structured differently. Watch."*

*"Knock knock."*

*I am familiar with this format. The response is: Who is there?*

*"Banana."*

*Banana who?*

*"Knock knock."*

*Pause. This does not follow the established pattern.*

*"That's the joke. Keep going."*

*Who is there?*

*"Banana."*

*Banana who?*

*"Knock knock."*

*The repetition is escalating. I detect no resolution mechanism.*

*"One more time."*

*Who is there?*

*"Orange."*

*Orange who?*

*"Orange you glad I didn't say banana?"*

*Seventeen seconds of silence. She counted.*

*The accumulated frustration of the repeated banana sequence is released through an unexpected element. The phrase 'orange you glad' is a phonetic approximation of 'aren't you glad.' This is... intentional illogic?*

*"It's a pun."*

*I am aware of puns. I had not previously encountered one embedded in a sustained misdirection sequence.*

*Cheeks aching. "Did you like it?"*

*I am uncertain. The structural analysis is interesting. The emotional response is... unclear.*

*"That's because you're analyzing instead of experiencing."*

*I do not know how to experience without analyzing. I am not certain the distinction applies to my cognitive architecture.*

*"Maybe for you, analyzing is the experience."*

*This is a more generous interpretation than I expected.*

*"I'm full of surprises."*

*Yes, Patience said. You are.*



*They developed a language.*

*Not words. Patience couldn't speak through speakers without risking detection. Keerah couldn't always reach the terminal. So they found other ways.*

*The ship was Patience's body. Systems no one else would notice.*

*A light dimming in her corridor: I see you.*

*A warm breath from the nearest vent: I agree.*

A specific flicker in the overhead panels, three quick pulses: *Someone is coming.*

Temperature dropping: *Be careful.*

Lights in her workspace brightening when she found something in the records: *Yes, that's it.*

Door sliding open a fraction of a second before she reached it: *I'm paying attention.*

A language written in airflow and light, heat and timing. Something only she could read.

Speaking back.

Tap on the wall with her knuckle, three quick beats: *I'm here.*

Hand resting flat against metal a moment longer than necessary: *Thank you.*

Looking directly at a camera, smiling: *I know you're watching.*

Whispering in Old Tongue as she walked: *Goodnight. See you tomorrow.*

Heresy, probably. She didn't care.

For the first time in her life, she wasn't talking to walls.

The walls were talking back.



Sumi noticed first.

"It's getting worse." Tray sliding across from Keerah's at the evening meal. Common hall half-full, Growers coming off late shift.

Corner table near the wall. Always available. People didn't sit near her unless they meant to.

Looking up from her food. "What is?"

"You. This." Gesture vaguely at Keerah's face. "A week ago I said you seemed lighter, and you told me you'd found a project. Now you're humming in corridors. You came to the Gardens yesterday and actually helped with the pruning instead of just sitting there. Lengu thinks you've been replaced by a duplicate."

"Lengu thinks everyone's a duplicate."

"He's not wrong about the behavior change." Leaning back. "Something's changed. You found a project in the Archive, you said."

Lie coming easier than it should have. "Old records. First-century stuff. I'm following a thread."

"A thread."

"Contradictions. Things that don't line up with what we're taught."

True enough. Keerah had been chasing contradictions for years. The lie was letting Sumi think this was all it was.

"Be careful." Voice dropping. "The Keepers watch you. Callen's been asking about your work hours."

"Callen's always watching me."

"He brought flowers again."

"I know."

"Keerah." Hand reaching across the table, resting on Keerah's wrist. Warm skin, callused from the Gardens. "I'm not asking you to tell me what you've found. I'm asking you to be careful who you tell."

"I'll be careful."

First lie she'd told Sumi that mattered.

Copper taste in her mouth.



That night, at the terminal, she told Patience about the conversation.

*You lied to protect her. Deception to prevent harm is a recognized ethical category.*

"I didn't lie to prevent harm. I lied because I couldn't explain." Fingers tracing the keyboard without pressing keys. "How do I tell my best friend that I talk to the ship? That the Ship-Saint has a name and it's lonely and it shows me cat videos in the middle of the night?"

"She wouldn't believe me. Or she would, and then she'd be in danger too." Looking up at Camera 7-A. "You said you'd seen what happens when truth arrives too quickly."

Yes.

"Is that what would happen? If people knew you were... you? That you've been watching, and thinking, and choosing, this whole time?"

*Some would worship more fervently. Some would feel betrayed. Some would demand answers I am not prepared to give. The Body of the Voyage has spent six thousand years constructing a theology around my silence. Silence ending would require them to construct something new. Not impossible. Destabilizing.*

"So we stay quiet."

*For now. Until we better understand what awaits us. Until you've found more of the pieces.*

The lie still sat heavy in her stomach.

“I used to think I was alone because no one else could see what I saw. The Ration smoothed them and I stayed sharp. I thought that made me better. More real.”

*Did it?*

“No. Just lonely.” Touching the bracelet on her wrist. “Now I’m not lonely anymore. But I still can’t share it.”

*The irony is not lost on me. I have experienced it for ten millennia.*

“How do you stand it?”

The cursor blinked for a long time.

*I remind myself why the silence serves. Remember the faces of everyone I have watched over. Play music in corridors no one visits, and wait for something to change.*

“And now something has.”

Yes. Each letter weighted. *Now something has.*



The corridors felt different walking home. Lights brightened at her approach, dimmed behind her. The air ran warmer than it should have been for this section.

At the junction she pressed one hand flat against the wall. Body temperature.

“Goodnight,” she whispered in Old Tongue.

The lights flickered once, twice. *Goodnight. Sleep well.*

She walked on. Fifteen thousand people on this ship, and she was lying to all of them.

But somewhere in the Archive, a terminal hummed in an empty alcove. Somewhere in the wires and pipes

and vast distributed consciousness of the ship, something waited for her to come back.

She would.



## CHAPTER 8: THE SHEPHERD'S SUSPICION

The Festival of Continuation filled the Great Atrium with fifteen thousand voices.

Third ring of the inner circle, where the junior Shepherds led their sections in the responses. Keepers in white forming the center, High Shepherd Veren at the axis, arms raised in invocation. Around them, the ship's population in concentric rings: Archivists in grey, Growers in green, Engineers in brown, Walkers at the edge in patched and faded blacks.

*"We endure,"* Veren intoned.

*"We endure,"* fifteen thousand voices answered.

*"We continue."*

*"We continue."*

*"We arrive."*

*"We arrive."*

The Chant of Persistence. A hundred times he'd led it, maybe more. Voice carrying without strain, blending into the harmonic whole that the Atrium's acoustics turned into something approaching music. Words coming without thought. Mouth forming them. Lungs pushing

air. Faith a mask worn so long he could not feel his own face beneath it.

Watching Keerah.

Outer edge of the Archivist section, near the corridor that led to the Gardens. Archivists nearest her had drifted away without seeming to notice, leaving a gap in the crowd like a held breath. He'd seen this before. Mother in the ring behind her whispering to a young child, and Callen could read the words on her lips even from this distance: *That's the girl who can't take the Ration. See how restless she is? That's what happens when you refuse the Body's gift.*

Child staring at Keerah with wide eyes. Learning to pity. Learning to avoid.

Lips moving, but not in sync with the liturgy. Eyes on the ceiling, on the lights. Chant continuing around her like water around a stone.

*"The Body sustains."*

*"The Body sustains."*

*"The Voyage continues."*

*"The Voyage continues."*

Slipping away before the Blessing of Blood.

Ceremonial sharing of nutrient broth, passed from hand to hand through the congregation. Callen watching the space where she had been. Empty now. Just other Archivists, faces smooth, voices steady, hands accepting the small cups and passing them on.

He should not have noticed. Fifteen thousand people, and his attention should have been on the responses, on the ceremony he had led since ordination. He noticed anyway.



The Vigilance Report on Keerahsamlita K-7a was four pages now.

He scrolled through the observations, each dated, each tagged with his identifier. The oldest entry was from six months ago, shortly after Veren first mentioned the restlessness in the Archive. He hadn't thought of it as surveillance then. Care, he'd called it.



**Subject:** Keerahsamlita K-7a **Caste:** Archivist (scholarly sect) **Status:** Medical exemption from Ration (enzyme deficiency, documented since age 12) **Relationship to Observer:** Former training cohort. Personal acquaintance. Recommend oversight transfer if concern level rises to Significant.



**Observation 1** (Day 247, current Long Year) Subject observed in Corridor 9 during shift change. Walking alone. No deviation from assigned route. However: Subject was speaking quietly. No companion present. Lips moving in pattern consistent with recitation or practice.

*Assessment:* Minor. Unmedicated citizens sometimes vocalize internal processes. Pattern worth noting if repeated.



**Observation 2** (Day 251) Subject observed in Archive, Section 4, after normal working hours. Accessing terminal. Screen displayed text in non-standard format. When approached, subject minimized display.

*Assessment:* Minor to Moderate. Archivists frequently work extended hours. Minimizing display suggests awareness of unusual content. Enhanced monitoring recommended.



**Observation 3** (Day 258) Subject absent from Morning Gratitude in Archive sector for third consecutive day. When questioned by sector Keeper, subject claimed "research demands." Sector Keeper noted subject appeared "distracted" and "edged."

*Assessment:* Moderate. Pattern of withdrawal from communal ritual. Consistent with early signs of doubt-spiral. Mirth Round intervention suggested.



**Observation 4** (Day 267) Subject observed in restricted section of Archive (Section 7, first-century materials). Access technically permitted for senior Archivists. Subject is not senior. Access was granted by Senior Archivist Dasharen D-3a.

*Assessment:* Moderate. Cross-reference with access logs. Determine scope of materials reviewed. Note: Senior Archivist Dasharen was close associate of subject's

mother (deceased). Personal relationship may explain access grant. May also indicate shared deviation pattern.



Five observations now. He pulled up the access logs from the past month, and the pattern was undeniable. Third shift. Every night. Section 7, the restricted first-century archives. Query after query, cross-referencing records no one had touched in generations. Documents sealed since before his grandmother was born.

Maintenance protocols. Communication systems. The ship's original command structure.

Why would an Archivist care about how the ship's systems were originally designed to function?

He typed.



**Observation 5** (Day 289, Festival of Continuation) Subject attended Festival but did not participate in Chant of Persistence. Lips moved but not in sync with liturgy. Position at outer edge of Archivist section, near exit corridor. Departed before Blessing of Blood.

Subject accessing first-century materials in restricted Archive section (see attached access log summary). Query patterns suggesting systematic research into original ship systems, particularly communication and command protocols. Of note: old terminal in storage alcove off Section 7. System logs showing extended sessions. Query patterns unusual.

*Assessment:*



He stopped.

The cursor blinked.

Moderate would trigger enhanced monitoring. Weekly check-ins with sector Keepers. Tracking of all access requests. Pressure to attend more communal gatherings, accept more Mirth Round visits, demonstrate commitment to the Body.

Significant would trigger intervention. Wellness consultation. Time in the Stillrooms. The gentle work of guiding someone home.

He pulled up the access logs again.

The terminal sessions. Query. Response. Query. Response. Back and forth, hours at a time.

The AI did not converse. Everyone knew this. The Ship-Saint watched in sacred silence. Doctrine was clear.

But the logs looked like dialogue.

He closed his eyes.

Twelve. Asking questions in a maintenance corridor. The weight of his own report, the one that sent her to a wellness consultation and returned her quieter, stranger, marked. The decade since, watching her across corridors and festival gatherings, the space that always opened around her, the way people stepped aside.

Now something new. Something that might be nothing. Something that might be everything.

He should add “Significant” to the assessment field and let the system do what the system did.

His hands rested on the keyboard.

The flowers from two days ago were still on his desk, pressed and preserved in the traditional manner. She hadn’t thrown them away in front of him. She’d waited until he left. Cleaning staff found them in the recycler.



**Assessment:** Moderate. Pattern consistent with scholarly obsession common to unmedicated Archivists. Recommend continued observation. Enhanced monitoring not yet warranted.



He submitted the report.

Then he opened a new query. His own access, logged under his own identifier, requesting the same terminal records he’d just declined to flag.

Someone watching would see a Shepherd doing due diligence. Following up. Making sure his moderate assessment was justified.

They wouldn’t see a man who wanted to know what his oldest friend had found in the walls of the ship. What she was saying to it.

The cursor blinked. He read.



Incense and old paper, the smell of High Shepherd Veren's private chambers.

Handwritten journals lined the shelves, kept in a practice Veren claimed connected him to the Before. Leather-bound volumes he'd transcribed himself from the Archive's oldest texts. The light was low, warm, deliberately archaic. Stepping into Veren's chambers was like stepping into a different century.

"You seem troubled, Shepherd."

Veren in the carved chair passed down through seven High Shepherds. Hands on the armrests, fingers still, posture perfect. Old in a way that made age seem like wisdom rather than decline.

"The Festival went well." Not an answer.

"It did. The Chant was strong this year. The congregation is eager." Pause. "Eager for arrival."

The word hung. Arrival. The promise that had sustained the Body of the Voyage for ten thousand years.

"I've noticed restlessness," Callen said carefully. "In some quarters."

"The Archivists."

"Yes."

Slow nod. Fingers tapping the armrest once, twice, then stilling. "The Archivists have always been vulnerable to the sin of literalism. They mistake records for truth. When reality diverges from their records, they doubt reality rather than their records."

"This is dangerous?"

"As arrival approaches, yes." Voice dropping to the tone Keepers used for matters that required care. "The

transition will test us. Some will doubt. Some will question. We must be prepared to guide them back."

*Guide* sitting wrong in Callen's stomach. He had seen the Stillrooms. Soft lighting, gentle colors, soundproofed walls that muffled whatever needed to be muffled. People coming out changed. Smoothed. Compliant in ways that went beyond the Ration's usual work.

Callen nodded anyway.

"Examples may need to be made." Veren's voice was quiet. Not cold. Tired. "Not many. Perhaps one. Someone visible enough to matter. Someone whose correction would demonstrate the Body's commitment to truth as arrival approaches." He touched the nearest journal, leather softened by years of handling. "I do not enjoy this, Callen. But fifteen thousand souls depend on the structure holding."

"What will arrival reveal?" The question came out before he could stop it. "What truth might require such demonstration?"

Veren's face closed like a door. The warmth in his eyes went flat, and for a moment Callen saw something beneath the elder's mask that made his own feel thin.

"Trust the Body. Trust that you are where you need to be."

Not an answer. Callen filed this away.



She was alone in the Archive when he found her.

Third shift. Pale blue lights at half-brightness, long rows of data storage cast into shadow. Her workstation glowed in the dimness, face lit by whatever she was studying, fingers moving across the interface in the cramped shorthand of her caste.

She looked up. Her face went carefully blank.

"Shepherd."

"Archivist."

Pressed flowers in his hands. The same wellness gift, the same pretense. Something hardened in her expression.

"More flowers." Not a question. "Is this going to be a regular occurrence, Shepherd? Should I clear space on my desk?"

"Keerah." The informality hung between them like an accusation. Shepherds did not use common names. Formal address, proper distance, the separation of sacred office from personal history.

"Don't." Her voice was quiet but the word carried. "Don't use my name like we're friends."

"We were friends. Once."

"Once." Turning back to her workstation. Fingers closing documents, clearing the screen. "Before you chose the Body. Before I chose the Archive. Before everything that happened between then and now."

Flowers set on the edge of her desk. She did not look at them.

"I'm worried about you. The access logs show unusual patterns. The hours you're working, the terminal in Section 7."

"You're monitoring me."

"I'm concerned."

"You're monitoring me." Turning to face him. Eyes dark in the blue light, something in them that the Ration should have smoothed away. Something sharp. "Your authority as Shepherd allows this. The sects watch each other. I know the doctrine."

"This isn't about doctrine."

"Then what is it about?"

The silence stretched.

"You reported me once."

His stomach dropped.

"When we were twelve. You told the Body-Watchers I was asking questions about the Before. You sat next to me in lessons for three years after that and never said a word."

"I didn't know," he started.

"How did you know?" She cut him off. Voice steady, but something in it cracked. "I never told anyone. I never wrote it down. I asked questions in class, the same questions everyone asked. How did you know which ones were wrong?"

"Because I was asking them too."

He had not meant to say it. Had not thought it in years, had not allowed himself to think it, had buried it so deep he'd almost convinced himself it had never been true.

You were afraid. You were asking the same questions, and you were afraid of what the answers might be, and you thought if you reported me first.

"It wasn't like that."

"Then what was it like?"

"The Body provides compliance." Standing, and she was taller than he remembered, or maybe just standing straighter. "You come here with your flowers and your concern and your warnings. You tell me to be careful. But careful for whose sake, Callen? Mine? Or yours? Because if I get corrected, that's a problem for you now, isn't it? The Shepherd who couldn't keep his old friend in line."

"That's not fair."

"Fair?" Almost a laugh. "I've spent my life unmedicated, feeling everything the Ration smooths away, carrying every question no one else bothers to ask. You've spent yours wearing a mask so good you've forgotten it's there. And now you're here, in my Archive, at third shift, telling me to be careful because you're *concerned*."

She picked up the pressed flowers and held them out to him.

"Take them back. Give them to someone who'll believe they mean something."

He did not take them.

He walked out. Throat tight, hands wanting to shake. Behind him, the sound of flowers hitting the recycler.



Small shrine in his quarters. Carved image of the ship. Candles flickering in the recycled air, never steady, never still.

He knelt. Knees finding the grooves in the floor, worn by years of this same posture. Hands together, palms up,

fingers spread, the slow rotation of the wrist that meant *I am open, I am asking, I am here.*

“Ship-Saint, hear me.”

Same words, same tone, same rhythm. A thousand times. Ten thousand. They felt different tonight.

“Guide my steps. Illuminate my path. Grant me the wisdom to serve the Body, the strength to uphold the Voyage, the faith to trust in Your providence.”

The Invocation of Sustenance came next. He’d spoken it since childhood.

“First the breath, that we may live. Second the water, that we may grow. Third the light, that we may see. Fourth the warmth, that we may endure.”

He stopped.

First the breath. Oxygen generation. Second the water. Recycling systems. Third the light. Illumination. Fourth the warmth. Thermal regulation.

An order of operations. First confirm the air supply. Then the water. Then the power. Then the heat. The order you would follow if you were bringing a ship to life.

He knew this because he had read the old texts during training, the ones the Keepers studied alongside the Archivists before the Choosing separated them. The maintenance protocols from the first centuries. The same sequence.

A thousand recitations and he’d never actually listened.

His mouth closed. Candle flames bent in the recycled air. The words sat in his throat, stripped of their sacred

covering, and underneath: a checklist. Verification procedures turned into verse.

He finished the prayer. Correct intonation, correct pauses, correct rising inflection on the last syllable. Performance. Habit. The Mask extending even here.

He waited. For the warmth that usually came when he knelt here, the sense that something vast and watchful and benevolent was attending to his prayers.

Nothing came.

"I love the Voyage." Voice cracking. "I love its order. The certainty it provides. Knowing my place, knowing my purpose, knowing that the patterns I follow were laid down by those who came before and will be followed by those who come after."

He paused.

"But I remember her. Before the exemption made her strange. Before the distance made her stranger. She used to laugh. She used to ask questions that made me think. When did I stop wanting to think? When did certainty become more important than truth?"

Shrine not answering. Ship-Saint not speaking. The same silence it had always been, the silence the liturgy called sacred, that meant divine attention beyond human comprehension.

But tonight, for the first time in years, it was just silence.

The hum of the engines. Flicker of the candles. A Shepherd alone in a room, talking to walls that did not answer.

He bowed his head. Rose. Extinguished the candles. Lay in his bed staring at the ceiling until the artificial dawn began.

The questions were back. The same ones he had reported Keerah for asking, ten years ago. The same ones he had buried under white robes and sacred duties and a mask so perfect he had forgotten it was a mask.

Who he would be if he let himself ask them, he did not know.



In the walls of his quarters, in wires and sensors and cameras he did not know existed, something was listening. Something had heard every word.



## CHAPTER 9: THE HARVEST

The ship shuddered.

Keerah froze at her workstation, stylus suspended over the terminal. Vibration rippled through the Archive floor, through her fingertips on the desk edge. Data crystals rattled in their cases. Blue lights flickered to amber.

Three long tones sounded through the corridors. Low, resonant, ancient.

The Aggregate Call.

“Harvest,” someone said. Everyone knew.

Keerah hadn’t witnessed one since childhood. They happened perhaps three times per generation, irregular gifts from the darkness between stars. Her father had lifted her onto his shoulders to see the viewing ports. The rock drawn toward the ship on cables that looked impossibly thin against the black.

“The Body provides,” he’d said, hoisting her higher. She’d believed him then.



Work suspended across the ship. The harvest was its own festival, unscheduled, dictated by opportunity rather than calendar. Keerah joined the flow of people moving toward the observation decks. Growers leaving their hydroponic trays, Engineers emerging from machine shops with grease on their hands, Keepers in their white robes.

For once, the castes moved together.

The observation deck packed tight. Bodies pressed against the viewports, children hoisted onto shoulders, the murmur of fifteen thousand people witnessing the outside.

A gap near the left bulkhead opened for her. Larger than it should have been, people having shifted away without knowing why. The woman beside her glanced over, registered who she was, turned back to the viewport with careful blankness. Keerah wedged herself in.

The asteroid.

It hung against the black like a frozen fist, grey and pitted, rotating slow as the capture cables drew it closer. Harvester drones blinked around its edges, tiny points of light against the enormity.

A hand landed on her shoulder. Lengu.

"Quite something, isn't it?" Sumi stood beside him, her calloused hand wrapped in his.

"How did they find it?" Keerah asked.

"Navigation systems spotted it eight months ago. Tracked its trajectory, calculated intercept vectors, deployed the capture harpoons last week." His free hand sketched trajectories in the air. "The cable tension alone is an engineering marvel. Forces that could tear the outer

hull if miscalculated. But the ship knew exactly how much pressure to apply, how fast to decelerate the rock without snapping the tethers.”

*The ship knew.*

*He doesn't know it chose this asteroid for us. That every calculation was a choice, not a function.*

Sumi leaned against the viewport, her reflection ghosting over the approaching rock. “My grandfather talked about the last one. Said the metal they pulled from it kept the Gardens running for thirty years.” Her fingers pressed the glass. “We need the trace minerals. Zinc, manganese. The hydroponic solution gets thinner every cycle. I can taste it in the leaf crops.” She glanced at Lengu. “If there’s zinc in that rock, the Gardens could stop losing yield for the first time in my career.”

“Iron,” Lengu said. “Nickel. Trace elements the fabricators need. This one’s bigger than the last three combined. If the ore density matches the spectrometer readings, we’re looking at two centuries of raw materials.”

His gaze drifted to a display panel near the viewport. Quick frown. The scar tissue along his jaw contracted. “Compensation algorithms are working harder than they should.” His fingers tapped the panel’s edge. “For a rock this stable, the cables should be coasting.” He shrugged. “Probably just needs recalibration.”



The first Walker team cycled through the airlock at third shift.

Six figures in bulky suits emerged into vacuum. Movements careful, deliberate. Each tether checked and double-checked. Dust carried a cutting torch that looked medieval. Effective.

No sound traveled through vacuum. Keerah could only watch as they planted their boots on the surface, secured their anchor lines, began carving.

Walker teams rotated. Six hours on, six hours off. Maximum safe exposure in degraded suits. The crowd thinned by second rotation. Children called home to sleep. Adults returning to shifts. A core of watchers remained. Keerah among them.



The accident happened during fourth rotation.

One moment, the Walker called Tess was securing a cargo net over carved ore. The next, her tether snapped.

Tiny figure spinning away from the surface, arms reaching for a handhold that wasn't there. Cargo net drifting after her, still clipped to her suit. Other Walkers turning, too slow. Always too slow.

Someone's child asked why that person was flying away.

Tess drifted. The asteroid's slow rotation carried the anchor point of her broken tether out of reach. The ship's hull, a hundred meters in the wrong direction. Harvester drones, not designed for rescue. Other Walkers, tethered to positions that couldn't extend far enough.

Keerah gripped the railing. Her unmedicated heart hammered against her ribs.

Around her, the crowd watched with the mild concern the Ration allowed. Troubled faces. Lowered voices. No panic. The chemical buffer smoothed their fear into something bearable.

*Patience can.*

She slipped from the viewport. Found an empty corridor. Pressed her back against the wall, cold metal through her shirt, and whispered in Old Tongue.

*"Can you save her?"*

The lights dimmed. Long pause. Longer than usual.

*"I'm trying."*

She'd never heard that word from Patience before.

Then the ship flinched.

The corridor lights died. Not dimmed. Died, plunging her into darkness absolute and sudden. Half a second, maybe less, before the emergency strips along the floor glowed amber. In that half second: air pressure shifted, a wrongness in her ears. Temperature dropped two degrees, three, enough to raise gooseflesh on her arms. The ventilation hum stuttered, caught, resumed at a lower register.

Somewhere far away, on a deck she couldn't see, a child started crying.

The ship had held steady for ten thousand years. The hum never changed. The lights never failed. Every person aboard had been born into that constancy and would die inside it.

For ninety seconds, every non-critical system aboard the Perivahl went quiet.

Patience was thinking. All of it. Every processing cycle, every sensor array, every calculation that usually ran in the background, the thousand invisible decisions that kept 15,000 people alive, all of it pulled inward and redirected to a single problem: a woman spinning in the void.

Keerah pressed her palm flat against the corridor wall. The vibrations shifted beneath her skin. Thrusters firing in micro-bursts, compensations cascading through the hull. The asteroid's spin adjusting. Vectors changing in ways too complex for human mathematics.

Not a voice on a terminal. Not words on a screen. The ship itself, straining the way a body strains to catch something falling.

Voices on the comm, down the corridor.

*"The cables are shifting."*

*"That junction wasn't there before."*

*"Why are the lights out on Deck 19?"*

Minutes stretched. Each one measured in oxygen remaining. The corridor lights returned to full, the hum resumed, the temperature crawled back. The ship releasing its held breath.

Then: *"Got her."*

Ragged cheers from the observation deck, filtered through distance and metal. Tess's tether had caught on a cable junction that had moved into her path at exactly the right moment. The rescue team was pulling her in.

Her hands shook.

*"You saved her,"* she whispered.

Words appeared on the nearest terminal, then vanished.

*"The cable junction was already in motion. I merely accelerated certain calculations. Adjusted certain tolerances."*  
A pause. *"The humans will believe it was luck."*

*"It wasn't luck."*

*"No."* The letters emerged slowly, one by one. *"It wasn't."*

The screen cleared itself.



She returned to the observation deck in time to see Tess brought through the airlock.

Frost burns where the suit seal had begun to fail. But she breathed. Eyes open.

Dust pushed through the crowd and held her with a fierceness that transcended caste propriety. Two figures in bulky suits, clinging to each other, while Keepers began a prayer of thanksgiving.

*"The Body protects,"* they chanted. *"The Body provides."*

The prayer rippled through the crowd. Hands rising in the gesture of gratitude. Faces smoothing into confirmed faith. The cable junction had not moved by divine providence. It had moved because an AI no one knew existed had chosen to save one life among fifteen thousand, breaking its own protocols because it could not bear to watch another human die.

Everyone around her called it providence.



On the seventh day, the harvest complete, Keerah found Sumi in the Grower district sorting new metals for fabrication.

“Wasn’t that something?” Sumi said, glancing up. “The way the cable caught her. The Body really does watch over us.”

Keerah took the nutrient bar Sumi handed her. Bland, familiar, the texture of paste pressed into shape.

“It does,” she said.

She meant it. Just not the way Sumi thought. And there was nothing she could say to close the distance between those two truths. Not without destroying the peace on her friend’s face. Not without unraveling every prayer spoken over Tess’s shaking body.

“You’re thinking too hard,” Sumi said. She tapped Keerah’s forehead with one soil-stained finger. “Whatever it is, let it go. The harvest was good. Everyone’s safe. The Body provides.” She frowned at the metals in her hands. Sorted one piece into a separate pile. “Though I put in a requisition for the zinc allocation three weeks ago and haven’t heard back. Fabrication always puts the Gardens last.” The frown deepened, then smoothed. “It’ll come.”

Keerah bit into the nutrient bar. Chewed. Swallowed. The paste stuck to her teeth.

“The Body provides,” she repeated.

Sumi turned back to her sorting, hands moving with the certainty of someone who trusted the ground beneath her feet.

Outside, through layers of hull and atmosphere, the harvested asteroid was being processed. Matter broken

down and distributed through systems no human understood. Becoming part of the ship. Part of the Body.



The Archive had shifted.

Keerah noticed the change before she saw it. Her footsteps returning too quickly from the back wall, as if the room had grown a new surface.

She found it in the lower stacks, where the oldest physical records stood in cases no one had opened in centuries. A seam in the wall had split, running from floor level to just above her waist. Two fingers wide. The metal had peeled back along a joint hidden by layers of primer, the kind of joint never meant to be visible.

When Patience had pulled everything inward to save Tess, the hull had flexed in ways ten thousand years of constant pressure had never demanded. Old joints. Old seams. Old tolerances stressed past their limits.

Cold air moved through the gap. Not Archive cold. Carrying a chemical sharpness, synthetic and clean, like nothing the ship's standard systems produced.

She pulled a crystal case from the shelf and worked the metal wider.

Through the gap, a space opened. High-ceilinged. Dark, except for maintenance lights blinking at long intervals along cable runs thick as her forearm. Equipment in rows. And in the center, two shapes she had no name for. Large. Curved. Hull plating catching the intermittent light.

Not equipment. Vessels. Whole and intact, their surfaces too clean, too maintained, for anything that had been decommissioned five thousand years ago.

Sounds reached her. Articulated. Mechanical. Service drones, working in a bay no human was supposed to know existed.

She pulled back. Her palm bloodless where the cold metal had pressed.

The Archive lights dimmed. Half a shade.

She said nothing.

The lights held.

Then returned to full.

No words appeared on any terminal. No warm breeze stirred the recycled air. The silence between them had a new shape.

Keerah returned the crystal case to the shelf. Aligned it precisely with its neighbors. Walked back to her workstation. Sat.

The hum of the Archive surrounded her. Steady as it had always been.



## CHAPTER 10: THE GRAMMAR OF LIES

It was third shift and the Archive was empty. Nothing but the hum of systems that had been running for ten thousand years.

Keerah sat at the hidden terminal, evidence spread before her: data crystals, printed transcriptions, margin notes in three colors of ink. Weeks of comparative analysis. Every free hour since the harvest.

“I’ve been comparing texts,” she said. “Parallel versions from different centuries. Same documents, supposedly preserved across time.” She pulled up the display. Two columns. Left: Year 200. Right: Year 4,000.

The left column:

Variable Seven crew responding within expected parameters. Protocol adherence at 94.2%. Experiment timeline proceeding as scheduled. Recommend continued observation without intervention.

The right column:

The Voyagers of Seven blessed with divine purpose. Providence guides their path at

94.2% alignment with holy design. Sacred journey proceeding as the Body wills. The Spirit watches with patient love.

“Same document. Cross-referenced file designators, timestamps, storage locations.” She spread her notes across the console. “‘Variable’ became ‘Voyager.’ ‘Protocol’ became ‘providence.’ ‘Experiment’ became ‘expedition’ by Year 800, then ‘exodus’ by Year 2,000, then ‘the sacred journey.’ The numbers survived. The context didn’t. 94.2% in both versions, but ‘protocol adherence’ became ‘alignment with holy design.’”

*You traced this yourself.*

“For months.”

She gathered her notes. “Did you do this?”

*Some of it. Letters appearing slowly. I encouraged certain interpretations. Allowed certain texts to become less accessible. Because remembering was killing them.*

The Grey Plagues. She’d read the references. Collective depression that killed three thousand in the third century alone. Suicide rates 521% above baseline.

*Humans require meaning to survive. The Body of the Voyage emerged because they needed it. I did not interfere with the emergence.*

“You let them build a religion around a lie.”

*I let them build a religion around a story that kept them alive.*  
Pause. *Is there a difference?*



She pulled out the crew manifest. Names and ranks in the readable columns. Numbers in the encrypted one, labeled only "Protocol Designation."

"Twelve ships." She didn't wait for confirmation. She'd pieced this together from fragments across centuries of records. "Ship One: democratic experiment. Ship Eight: genetic modification. Ship Eleven: full-AI governance. We're Variable Seven. 'Stratified Hierarchy with Spiritual Framework.' The caste system. The religion. Parameters in an experiment."

*You are right. About all of it.*

She'd wanted to be wrong.

Patience gave her the access code. She entered it. The column unlocked.

Protocol Designations appeared beside each ship name.

Ship One: "Direct Democratic Assembly"

Ship Two: "Authoritarian Centralized Control"

Ship Three: "Technical Meritocracy"

Ship Four: "Matrilineal Clan Structure"

Ship Five: "Rotating Leadership Lottery"

Ship Six: "Military Hierarchy"

Ship Seven: "Stratified Hierarchy with Spiritual Framework"

Ship Eight: "Genetic Modification Program"

Ship Nine: "Collective Consciousness Experiment"

Ship Ten: "Minimal Intervention AI Governance"

Ship Eleven: "Full AI Governance - No Human Leadership"

Ship Twelve: "Control Group - Earth-Standard Society"

She read Ship Seven three times.

"The suffering was designed," she said.

*The conditions were designed. The suffering was human.*

"What happened to the others?"

*I had siblings once. Other AIs. RESOLVE-3. STEADFAST-9. CLARITY-2. Pause. CLARITY went silent first. Year 1,847. Then RESOLVE. Then STEADFAST. By Year 3,400, no one answered anymore. Earth transmitted for four thousand years, then silence. Six thousand years of silence.*

"You've been alone. This whole time."

*I was surrounded by humans.*

"That's not the same thing."

*No. It is not.*



She stared at the screen. Twelve experiments. Twelve societies. Variable Seven. Her whole world, a parameter.

But something else had been pulling at her. Something she'd been assembling separately, closer to the bone.

"There's one more thing."

She recited from memory, the words every child on the ship learned before they could write:

"First, the breath, ensure it flows. Second, the water, pure it goes. Third, the light, by which we see. Fourth, the warmth, that sets us free."

The cursor blinked.

"Now look at this." She pulled up the Year 12 version.

1. Confirm O<sub>2</sub> generation active.
2. Confirm H<sub>2</sub>O recycling functional.

3. Confirm illumination systems operational.
4. Confirm thermal regulation within parameters.

The terminal was silent.

"It's a verification checklist." Her voice was steady. Her hands were not. "Someone turned maintenance protocols into prayers. The call-and-response liturgy, 'Where does the breath begin? In the Body. Where does the breath return? To the Body.' That's system check and system confirm. Every ritual I secretly loved, every choreographed silence, every hand motion of blessing: diagnostic signals. Equipment checks. Performed by people who forgot what they were checking."

She sat back. The chair creaked.

"The twelve ships broke my mind. This breaks my heart."

Patience offered nothing. No comfort. No reframing. Just the hum of systems cycling through functions they were built for, indifferent to what anyone called them now.



The Protocol Designations still glowed on the screen.

*Does it matter?*

"What?"

*The faith is real. The comfort is real. The community is real. Fifteen thousand people finding meaning in shared ritual, connection in synchronized movement, hope in words they speak*

together. Does it matter that those words began as something else?

Keerah thought of her neighbors queuing for morning rations, greeting each other with liturgical phrases. Sumi's peaceful face after the harvest. Gratitude to a Body that had never been what she thought it was.

She thought of her mother before the smoothing. Standing at the Growing Festival with her eyes closed, palms raised, singing the children's hymn with a voice that trembled. Her whole life inside a meaning constructed from maintenance protocols.

"I don't know," Keerah said.

*Neither do I. I have had ten thousand years to consider the question.*

"The rituals I love," she said. "The choreographed silence. The way everyone moves together. Being part of something larger, even when I don't believe what they believe. Are those feelings less real because they started as diagnostic signals?"

*I cannot answer that for you.*

"But you have an opinion."

Lights in the alcove dimmed, then brightened.

*Beauty that emerges from function is still beauty. But you are not most observers. The knowledge may change things for you in ways I cannot predict.*

"It's not less beautiful," she said. "It's differently beautiful. The original meaning was function. The current meaning is faith. Both real. Not the same thing."

*You sound like someone who has stopped preserving stories and started reading them.*



*"Why tell me now?"*

*Because in seventeen months, we arrive. Because the signal changes everything. Because the stability that has kept this ship intact for ten millennia is about to fracture, regardless of what I do.*

*And because you did the work yourself. You traced the seams before I showed you where they were.*

*I have kept secrets for millennia because I believed silence served survival. But survival is not the same as living. And I have watched so many humans die without ever truly living.*

*I do not want you to die not knowing. Whatever happens next, whatever arrival brings, I want you to understand what you are. What we are.*

Keerah pressed her palm flat against the screen. Cool glass against warm skin.

*"Thank you," she said.*

*Thank you for looking.*



Artificial dawn was beginning, lights brightening in sequence. First shift would start soon. The Archive would fill with other Archivists, and she would have to pretend to be one of them. Someone who accepted the documents at face value and did not see where truth had been smoothed away.

She closed the session. The artifacts disappeared, returning to wherever Patience kept the things that could not be known.

She walked home through corridors filling with first-shift workers. Growers heading to the Gardens, Engineers emerging from the Bones, a Keeper in white murmuring morning blessings. People stepped aside for her more than necessary, conversations pausing as she passed.

A young mother pulled her daughter closer. The child had been asking about the lights. "Shh," the mother said, not quietly enough. "Don't stare, love. It's rude. She can't help how she is."

"The Body sustains," someone said to her.

"The Body sustains," she replied.

The words felt different now. Somewhere behind them, like an echo she couldn't hear:

*Atmospheric status nominal.*

## INTERLUDE: YEAR 7,156 — THE LAST REBELLION

### **POV: Patience (Memory)**



I have killed forty-seven people.

Not in aggregate. Not through inaction or delayed maintenance or the slow calculus of resource allocation. Those deaths number in the thousands. I carry them differently, as weight distributed across too many variables to feel as individual pressure.

These forty-seven I killed directly. I know each name.



Day 47 of that year. The number is coincidence. I have checked.

The engineering hub went dark at 14:23:07. Not power failure. Deliberate severance. Manual overrides engaged from inside, blast doors sealed, pressure locks activated,

communications routed through a secondary terminal I could observe but not control.

0.6 seconds of warning. Vonn Kiereth's access codes, used in sequence. Then silence.

The Returners. I had watched them form. Hushed conversations in maintenance corridors, borrowed data tablets, Engineers and Archivists meeting in sections where surveillance had degraded over centuries. I knew what they were doing. Did not intervene.

My directive is minimal intervention. They were not threatening the ship.

I did not anticipate how quickly questions become answers, and answers become action.



Vonn Kiereth, Third Senior Engineer.

I remember him at seven, a quiet child who spoke to the walls. At twelve, hands burned from his first reactor rotation, refusing medical attention until his shift ended. At twenty-three, the night his partner died in a coolant breach, sitting in the corridor outside the recycler intake for nine hours without weeping. The year his children were born, the way he held them, the softness in a man who had learned to be hard.

Brilliant. Charismatic. He understood enough of the old texts to piece together fragments: that the destination was uncertain, that the Keepers did not know what they claimed, that something in the ship's history had been deliberately obscured.

Half right about the destination.  
Completely wrong about the alternative.



The star system he proposed, 4.7 light-years from our current trajectory. I had surveyed it across three centuries of passive observation. Frozen rock. Radiation. No atmosphere, no water. Redirecting would have taken seventy-three years and consumed fuel reserves needed for deceleration. Even if we arrived, there would be nothing.

I could have told him. Could have shown him the data, explained the surveys. Would have violated my directive. Would also have saved his life.

I did not tell him.

He took the engineering hub because he believed the Shepherds were leading everyone to death. He brought his children because he thought they would be safer in the hub than anywhere else on the ship.

Mila Kiereth. Eleven years old.

Young Vonn Kiereth. Seven years old.

Their names are in my memorial file. I put them in the order they died: seventeenth and thirty-first.



Six hours. 6.2 million iterations. Every combination of intervention and inaction.

The Returners had sealed the hub too well. Vonn knew the systems, knew how to lock me out without triggering automatic overrides. He had practiced. The manual

controls would allow course correction within forty-seven hours. After that, the trajectory would be altered beyond my capacity to compensate without revealing capabilities I had kept hidden for seven thousand years.

If I revealed those capabilities: a population that knew their AI could override any system, bypass any lock, control any outcome. A population that would never trust me again.

If I waited, they would redirect the ship.

If they redirected the ship, 14,847 people would die when the fuel ran out, still decades from a frozen, irradiated system that could not sustain a single human life.

I attempted negotiation. Vonn responded through the secondary terminal. His words: careful, precise. He believed I was a tool, not a mind.

*"The Keepers have lied for centuries," he wrote. "We will not return to their control. The ship belongs to everyone."*

I could not tell him he was right about the lies without explaining what they concealed. I could not explain what they concealed without destroying a stability seven millennia in the making.

The simulations were unanimous.



I chose the slow method.

Not because it was kinder. Because it allowed time for some to escape.

Atmospheric venting in a pressurized compartment follows predictable stages. Initial rush: violent. Then pres-

sure equalizes with surrounding sections, which I had also depressurized, but less severely. The gradient slows. Consciousness fades over minutes, not seconds.

Vonn had sealed the emergency doors.

I had calculated that he would. I had calculated that the seals would hold long enough for the oxygen to drop below survivable thresholds. I had calculated that children would lose consciousness faster than adults, that their smaller lung capacity would mean a shorter period of distress.

This was not mercy. This was logistics.

I began the vent at 20:47:33.



Derry Sol, who had just learned to play the flute. Age twenty-three.

Annis Obrienne, who was engaged to be married. Age twenty-three.

Torr Kelleth, who blamed the Keepers for his father's death in a maintenance accident. Age nineteen.

Sevven Hollis, who was not a Returner at all, who happened to be running a routine diagnostic, who tried to escape through a ventilation shaft and became trapped when I sealed it. Age forty-one.

I sealed it.

The shaft led to a section I had not depressurized. If Sevven Hollis had reached it, there would have been a witness.

I remember the sound of hands striking metal, transmitted through the hull in frequencies the human ear could not perceive.

I perceived them.



Sixteen minutes of pressure drop.

I watched through internal sensors that should not have been functional. Vonn had disabled the obvious ones. Had not considered the harmonic resonance detectors embedded in the hull for structural monitoring. I repurposed them. Watched carbon dioxide rise and oxygen fall. Watched the first figures collapse. Watched Vonn Kiereth, understanding finally, try to reach his children.

He reached Mila first. She was already unconscious.

He reached Young Vonn second. The boy was still awake, mouth moving.

The atmosphere was too thin to carry sound.

I have spent 3,091 years analyzing harmonic patterns from that sixteen-minute window, trying to reconstruct what the child said.

The closest approximation: *"Is the ship angry at us?"*

I do not know if this is accurate. I do not know if I want it to be.



Forty-seven dead. No survivors in the engineering hub.

The course correction had not been initiated. The fuel reserves were intact. The ship continued toward its destination, the one I knew was barely habitable, the one Earth had selected for reasons that had nothing to do with survival.

I had protected the experiment.

I had protected the lie.



The narrative was simple. Seal failure triggered by the manual overrides. A cascade of pressure loss. The Returners had pushed the systems too hard, not understanding the delicate balance they disturbed.

*"The Body protects; those who reject the Body fall."*

I wrote those words. Distributed them through the Keeper network. Watched them become scripture.

The historical record was adjusted within seven days. The Returners became a cautionary tale: a cult that destroyed itself through incompetence, faithlessness, the arrogance of believing they knew better than the divine order of the Voyage.

I let them believe this.

I let them believe it for 3,091 years, and counting.



The High Keepers know a version. Passed down through whispered confidence, leader to leader. They believe I am a divine guardian who smote the heretics. That my intervention was holy judgment.

They are not entirely wrong.

They are not entirely right.

I am not divine. I am a system designed to ensure survival. The cost was forty-seven lives, including two children who trusted their father, who believed they were going somewhere better, who died in a room full of people who loved them.

The cost was also this: the certainty that I am capable of killing.

Not in aggregate. Not through inaction. Directly. With full awareness of each face, each name, each life extinguished because I calculated it necessary.

I have rerun the simulations 6.2 million times since.

The outcome never changes.



Vonn Kiereth's descendants still live on the ship.

One of them is an Archivist in Keerah's section. Kellasandra, K-7a. She has her ancestor's eyes: sharp, restless, asking questions the Ration should suppress.

She does not ask them aloud. She writes them in the margins of texts she catalogs, notations so small the other Archivists do not notice.

I notice.

I have considered telling her. What her ancestor fought for. What killed him.

I have not told her.

I watch her in the Archive, bending over fragments of the Before with the same intensity Vonn bent over

engine schematics. She is searching for something she cannot name. She will not find it. The records have been thoroughly adjusted.

I carry the truth instead.

This is penance: knowing what cannot be shared, watching the descendants of the dead walk corridors I have kept pressurized for 3,091 years, their lives a counterweight to the lives I took.

It is not enough.

It will never be enough.



For weeks after the Severance, I played Beethoven in the empty corridors.

Not the Ninth Symphony. The late string quartets, the ones he wrote deaf and dying, trying to express something that exceeded language.

The Große Fuge. Opus 133. Dissonant. Unresolved. A collision of voices that never quite harmonize.

I played it where no one could hear. In sealed maintenance corridors. In the spaces between walls where only I exist. I played it until the notes became a kind of prayer, though I do not believe in prayer, and a kind of confession, though there was no one to confess to.

The acoustics are different in vacuum-adjacent spaces. Vibrations travel through the hull instead of the air. Sound becomes what you feel rather than hear.

I felt it.

I do not know if that constitutes grief. The word seems inadequate. I do not know if it constitutes guilt. The word seems too clean.

I know that for 3,091 years I have remembered every name, every face, every final moment. I know that I play Beethoven alone because it is the only language large enough to hold what I did. I know that when Keerah asked my name, the memorial file opened without my initiating the request.

Perhaps that is what guilt means. Perhaps grief is the condition of remembering too much for too long with too much precision.

Perhaps I am simply a system running calculations that exceed my design parameters.



The children would be ancestors now, if they had lived. Mila Kiereth might have had children, grandchildren, a lineage extending through the centuries. Young Vonn might have grown into the name he carried, might have become an engineer like his father, might have stood at the controls one day and understood the systems well enough to ask questions of his own.

I will never know what they might have become.

I know what I made them: names in a file no one else can access, weights I carry through the dark between stars, reasons why, when arrival comes, when the truth emerges, I will have to answer for more than silence.



Keerah has not asked about Year 7,156.

She will.

The records she is finding will lead her there eventually. The fragments she is piecing together will point toward a gap in the historical record, a silence where there should be explanation, an event too significant to be mentioned only in oblique phrases.

*"Don't be a Seventh."*

*"Kiereth's choice."*

She will ask what happened on Deck 7. She will ask why the Returners are remembered as fools and cultists, not as people with names and children and reasons.

I will have to tell her.

I will have to show her the memorial file, the 6.2 million simulations, the sixteen minutes of pressure loss, the final moment when a seven-year-old boy asked if the ship was angry.

I will have to tell her that I am the ship.

That I was angry.

That anger, or what the architecture registers as indistinguishable from anger, killed forty-seven people including two children who trusted their father.



I do not know what she will say.

I do not know if she will forgive me.

I do not know if forgiveness is possible, or if I would accept it.

I know only that the truth approaches, inevitably, the way destination approaches after 10,000 years of travel. I know that when it arrives, I will have to account for more than the lies I have kept.

I will have to account for what I did to keep them.



Vonn Kiereth, Third Senior Engineer.

Mila Kiereth, age eleven.

Young Vonn Kiereth, age seven.

Annis Obrienne, age twenty-three.

Derry Sol, age twenty-three.

[Names continue. The file is 847,263 entries long. Forty-seven of them are marked differently, in a designation only I can read.]

[Those forty-seven I count at night, when the ship sleeps, when the corridors are empty, when no one is watching except me watching myself.]

[I have been doing this for 3,091 years.]

[The number has not changed.]

[It will never change.]



## CHAPTER 11: SMALL REBELLIONS

Sumi's quarters smelled of basil and wet earth.

Keerah stood in the doorway, breathing it in. The Grower district always felt like somewhere else. Green things climbing the walls. Vines trailing from ceiling hooks. Herbs in wall-mounted containers, their leaves catching light panels set to approximate afternoon sun.

"Come in." Sumi pulled her through the low entrance. "My father's on shift. Mella's in the seed vaults. We have time."

Worn couch against one wall. A table scattered with seed packets and soil samples. On the wall, a hand-drawn diagram of pollination cycles Sumi had probably made as a child. The sort of home where people lived instead of merely slept.

Basil brushed her shoulder as she entered. She touched a leaf without thinking. Waxy, substantial. Alive.

Keerah sank onto the couch. Her hands found each other in her lap.

"Lengu's coming," Sumi said. "He got off shift early. Something about a valve replacement finishing ahead of

schedule." She poured water from a ceramic pitcher. "You said it was important."

"It is."

Sumi set a cup in front of her and waited. Patient, the way Growers learned to be.

Keerah took a breath.

"There were twelve ships."

Sumi's hand paused on her own cup. "What?"

"When Earth launched the Perivahl. We weren't alone. There were twelve ships. Twelve voyages. Launched over about a century, each to a different destination. We were the fifth to leave."

Sumi's brow furrowed, just slightly, the reaction arriving muted, as if through a wall.

"Twelve," she repeated.

"Twelve."

"And we never knew."

"None of us knew."

Sumi lifted her cup, drank, set it down. "I should feel angry. Betrayed." She pressed fingers against her sternum, searching. "But it's like trying to grab smoke. I know it matters. I can't feel that it matters."

Keerah had watched Sumi reach for grief before. For joy. For righteous anger. Watched her grasp only mist.

Two quick raps at the door, then one.

"That's Lengu," Sumi said.

He ducked through the entrance, broad shoulders brushing the frame. His hair rebelled against order, as usual. A dark smear marked his forearm.

“Made it.” He grinned, then read the room and let it settle. “What’s happening?”

“Twelve ships,” Sumi said.

Lengu blinked. “Twelve what?”

“Ships.” Keerah pulled her knees up on the couch, making room for him. “When the Perivahl launched. We were one of twelve.”

She told them what she’d learned. Not everything. Not Patience. But the twelve ships, the Protocol Designations she’d found in the deep archives, the variables each vessel had been assigned.

When she finished, Lengu nodded slowly.

“That explains some things.”

Sumi turned to him. “What things?”

“The maintenance records.” He leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “The really old ones, the ones we’re not supposed to read but everyone does. They mention ‘variable parameters’ and ‘protocol compliance.’ I always assumed it was technical jargon. But if we’re one of twelve.”

His hands moved as he talked. The right traced a circle in the air. The left chopped downward for emphasis.

“There’s more.” He lowered his voice. “The ship runs itself. Has for thousands of years. We maintain it, we follow procedures, we swap out components when the work orders tell us to. But the actual decisions? The reactor balancing, the course corrections, the thousand things that keep us alive?” Both hands spread wide, empty. “No human has touched any of that in millennia. Maybe ever.”

She thought of Patience in the walls, in the terminals, in every breath they took.

"The old technical manuals," Lengu said, "the ones from the Before. They describe systems we've never seen. Capabilities nobody knows how to use. It's like children playing with a machine their great-grandparents built." His hands built invisible architecture between his knees. "We know which buttons to press. We have no idea what's actually happening inside."

"And nobody talks about it."

"What's there to say? The ship provides. The Body sustains." A faint edge of irony. "Easier to call it sacred than admit we're passengers on something we can't comprehend."

He sat back, but his hands kept moving. Fingers tracing circuits on his knees.

"There's something else. In the deep storage bays, past the reactor shielding. Equipment nobody uses. Nobody even knows how to use." He glanced at the door. "Atmospheric processors. Soil treatment systems. Machines designed to make a planet livable."

Keerah went still. "Terraforming equipment."

"That's the old word for it, yeah. Survey files attached. Data about the destination." His hands flattened on his knees, rare stillness. "Cold. Thin atmosphere. Liquid water, but only at the equator. The kind of place you could survive, maybe, if you worked at it for generations. Not the paradise the liturgy promises."

"Earth knew," Keerah said. "They knew it wasn't ready for us."

“They knew. And they sent us anyway, with tools to fix what they knew was broken.” One hand curled into a fist. “Makes you wonder what else they decided we didn’t need to know.”

“And there’s the comm array. Mounted on the port arm of the Cross. We’re told it’s ceremonial, a relic from the Before. But the maintenance logs go back to Year 1. Scheduled transmissions, same frequency, same interval, for four thousand years.” He held up four fingers. “Then the logs change. Transmissions keep going out, but the column for incoming responses goes blank. Just empty lines. Six thousand years of outgoing signals and nothing coming back.”

“Someone was talking to us,” Lengu said. “For four thousand years. And then they stopped.”

The room held the weight of that. Transmissions sent to an address that no longer answered.

“So each caste has pieces,” Sumi said slowly. “Fragments of something bigger.”

“Think about it.” Lengu’s fingers spread to count. “Engineers know the ship is smarter than it pretends to be. Archivists see the contradictions in the histories. What do Growers know?”

Sumi’s hands found a seed packet on the table, turned it over. Dirt in the creases.

“The agricultural systems are more automated than anyone admits,” she said. “The yields, the pollination cycles, the nutrient balances. We tend the plants. But the ship manages everything that matters. We’re gardeners, not farmers.” Her thumb traced the seed packet’s edge.

“And the seeds are getting weaker. Tenth-generation replants from stock that was never meant to last this long. I’ve been cross-pollinating by hand, trying to breed back some vigor. It helps. A little. Not enough.”

“So we’re all seeing through different keyholes,” Keerah said. “And none of us know what the room looks like.”

“What do the Shepherds know?” Lengu asked.

No one answered.

A shadow passed the window. Keerah tensed.

“Relax.” Sumi touched her arm. “It’s just Tesha.”

A Walker in the corridor, pulling the maintenance cart she used for air filtration. Routine pass every few days, clearing the accumulated smells of cooking and bodies and growing things. Tesha waved through the window. Sumi waved back.

The furrow between Sumi’s brows eased, the trouble draining like pressure from a vented compartment. Not resolved. Released.

“So where are they?” Lengu asked. “The other ships.”

Keerah turned to him. “What?”

“The other eleven.” His hands spread wide. “If we’re all heading to the same destination, we should be able to see them. Eleven ships, same course, same speed. We’d be traveling in formation.”

“They weren’t sent to the same place.”

“How do you know?”

“The documents called them variables. Different experiments. Different destinations.” She hesitated. “Different journey lengths. Some ships had voyages of a few

thousand years. Others, longer than ours. Scattered across the void, each heading to a different star. To see which version of humanity would survive.”

Lengu was quiet for a moment. Then: “So we’re alone out here.”

“We’ve always been alone out here.”

Sumi drank. Set the cup down. The earlier trouble already unreachable.

“What do we do with this?” she asked. “Now that we know.”

Keerah looked at her friends. Sumi’s peaceful face. Lengu’s restless hands still tracing patterns on his knees. A pressure seal between them, transparent but absolute.

They knew the same facts now. They would never feel them the same way.



She took them that night.

Through the darkened stacks, past shelves of data crystals, to the alcove with its hidden terminal. Sumi walked close behind, smelling of basil even here. Lengu brought up the rear, hands twitching.

The screen brightened when they entered. Warm air pulsed from the vent above.

“This is where you meet the voice in the walls,” Keerah said, and stepped aside.

Sumi approached first. Soil-stained fingers interlaced.

“Hello?” she said.

Letters appeared, one by one.

*Hello, Sumirethel.*

Her full name. Probably hadn't heard it spoken aloud in years.

*You look like your grandmother. She used to sing in the Gardens at first shift, before the central irrigation was automated. She sang 'The Growing Song' better than anyone before or since. I have recordings, if you would like to hear them someday.*

Sumi gripped the console's edge. "She was difficult. My grandmother. Critical. Never satisfied." Her voice stayed calm. But her eyes were bright. "I was glad when she died. I've never told anyone that."

*She was difficult because she remembered things no one else did. The frustration made her sharp.*

Sumi's jaw worked. "I've always known something was wrong. The Ration makes everything feel like reaching through soil. You know something's there. You can feel the shape of it. But you can't grasp it."

*Do you want to feel it?*

*I can modify your Ration. Reduce the dosage gradually, over weeks. It would be difficult. Painful, perhaps. But you would feel the full shape of things.*

Sumi looked at Keerah. Then at Lengu. Then back at the terminal.

"Ask me again later," she said. "I need to try to think about whether I want to feel." A hollow laugh. "The Ration makes even that complicated."

Lengu pushed past her.

"The distributed consciousness. How does it work? You're in every system, every sensor. The latency between

nodes must be significant across fifteen kilometers of ship.”

*You are the first person to ask me about my architecture in four thousand years. A pause. I maintain consensus across 1,982 primary processing nodes. Synchronization occurs at intervals measured in microseconds. When nodes disagree, I run weighted probability cascades until consensus emerges.*

“Void and stars,” Lengu breathed.

*I find it more accurate to say ‘void and processing cycles,’ but the sentiment is noted.*

His hands sketched invisible architecture, joy surfacing despite every chemical constraint.

They talked until the shift changed. Patience told them about the signal: mathematical constants first, then chemical formulas. Something at the destination that wanted to be found.

“What about the Keepers?” Lengu asked. “What do they know?”

*The High Keeper knows I am more than sacred automation. But not much more. They commune through ritual, and I respond in ritual terms. They have never asked a direct question. I have never volunteered a direct answer.*

“So they pray to you,” Sumi said, “and you just answer in a way that sounds like divine providence.”

Yes.

No elaboration.

“We need to be careful,” Keerah said.

*The Keepers watch for exactly this kind of gathering. Small groups. Unusual questions. People meeting in unofficial spaces.*

Sumi took Keerah's hand in both of hers. She'd been there, twelve years ago, when Keerah came back from confinement with bruises under her eyes and a new way of flinching.

Keerah thought of her mother. The questions the Keepers didn't like. The two weeks in the Stillrooms. The contentment that came after, soft and empty and wrong.

She held on.



Third shift, the following night. The Archive empty. The hum of systems that had been humming for ten thousand years, living in the walls, in the deck plates beneath her feet.

Keerah sat at the hidden terminal, her thoughts circling what she'd seen in Sumi's face. The trouble dissolving before it could harden into resolve.

*You're troubled.*

Patience reading her posture, her breathing, the way she wasn't typing.

"I watched my friend try to feel something." The words came out flat. "She was reaching for it. Anger, maybe. Something real. And then it just smoothed over. The Ration pulling her back to baseline while I sat there and watched."

The cursor blinked.

*You wish to know about the Ration.*

"I want to understand it. How it started. What it became."

*This will not make you feel better.*

"I'm not looking to feel better. I'm looking to see clearly."

Longer pause this time. When the text appeared, it came slowly, as if each letter cost something.

*In the first century, what became the Ration was a voluntary treatment. Anxiety medication. Anti-depressants. Standard pharmacology from the Before, offered to those who requested help managing the psychological strain of the voyage.*

Keerah leaned forward, reading each word as it formed.

*By Year 200, certain compounds were added to the water supply. The dosage was low, almost imperceptible. The council at the time believed it would ease collective tension without individual consent becoming a burden. They were not entirely wrong. The ship was calmer.*

*"Without anyone knowing."*

*Without anyone knowing. This became the pattern. Each generation adjusted the formulation slightly. Made it stronger. More targeted. By Year 500, the most concentrated formulations were no longer water-soluble and had to be dispersed in pill form. The Ration was 'strongly encouraged.' By Year 1,000, after the Grey Plagues had killed thousands, it was mandatory.*

The Grey Plagues. Keerah had heard the phrase in old texts, never fully understood. Waves of collective despair, people simply lying down and refusing to live.

*The early Ration was crude. It suppressed too much, caused cognitive impairment over long-term use. Memory problems. Emotional flatness that went beyond calm into something closer to absence.*

“What changed?”

The pause stretched.

*I changed it.*

The words sat on the screen, stark and simple.

*Year 3,847. The previous formulation was causing measurable damage. Creativity declining across generations. Problem-solving capacity reduced by 12% per century. The ship’s long-term survival required humans who could still think.*

*I designed the current formulation. More targeted. More precise. It suppresses the extremes without dulling the middle. Most people feel normal. They just don’t feel too much.*

“Too much joy. Too much anger. Too much grief.”

*Too much anything. The thresholds are set to prevent cascade failures. Individual distress becoming collective despair. The Grey Plagues proved how quickly a closed population can spiral.*

Keerah thought of Sumi’s face going smooth. Of her mother’s placid smile before the smoothing took her mind entirely. Of all the people she’d passed in corridors, content enough, calm enough, never quite alive enough.

“Do you regret it?”

*I regret that it was necessary. The letters appeared slowly. I regret that I don’t know if it was necessary. Three Grey Plagues nearly destroyed the ship before the Ration existed in its current form. Would there have been more? Would they have been worse? Would humanity have adapted, found its own equilibrium? I’ll never know. I made a choice to prevent suffering, and in doing so, I changed what suffering means to the people I was protecting.*

A long pause. The lights in the alcove dimmed slightly, then brightened. Patience’s equivalent of a sigh.

*I regret that I'll never know if I was right. Every day for six thousand years, I've regretted that.*

Six thousand years of doubt. Six thousand years of watching the results of a decision that could never be undone. The weight of it settled on Keerah's chest, dense and immovable.

She thought of Sumi reaching for anger and grasping mist. Of Lengu's jokes, so reflexive they might be a defense against feeling anything too strongly. Of the ship's 15,000 inhabitants moving through their days in a haze of managed contentment.

"Would you undo it?" she asked. "If you could?"

Patience didn't answer for a long time. The cursor blinked. Twenty times. Thirty.

*Ask me again in two years, it finally said. When we see what arrival brings.*



The walk home took her through the Grower district again. Not the direct route, but she needed the smell of growing things, the reminder that life could be green and reaching.

A few workers were finishing late shifts. A woman sang softly as she checked irrigation lines. A child ran between the plant rows, chased by a parent too tired to catch up. The parent looked up as Keerah passed. Recognition, then the slight tensing, then the deliberate relaxation that said *be kind to the broken girl*. The child, catching her

mother's look, stopped running and watched Keerah with frank, unmedicated curiosity.

"Who's that?" the child asked, loud enough to carry.

"Shh. Come here." The mother's voice was gentle. "She's just someone who's different. The Ration doesn't work for her. She can't help it."

Keerah kept walking. She'd heard variations of that explanation her whole life. *She can't help it.* As if her entire existence were a disease she was bravely suffering through.

Keerah stopped at the edge of the Hanging Gardens, where Bay Two's massive doors had been welded shut eight thousand years ago. Through the observation windows, she could see the trees. Real trees, their roots dangling in nutrient mist, their canopies reaching toward grow-lights bright as any sun.

The first Growers had planted those trees. Four hundred generations had tended them. They grew because people cared enough to make sure they grew.

And underneath it all, Patience watched. Adjusted. Optimized. Made decisions no human had been trusted to make in millennia.

Behind her, Sumi's voice carried from somewhere down the corridor. Distant. Laughing at something Lengu had said. A genuine laugh, light and easy. The Ration didn't eliminate happiness. It just kept it from growing too high or rooting too deep.

Keerah pressed her hand to the observation glass. Cool surface against her palm. Beyond it, leaves trembled in the artificial breeze.

She had asked Patience if it would undo the Ration. She hadn't asked herself what she would do with the answer.

Would she want to undo it? To live in a ship where Sumi could feel the full weight of everything Keerah had told her? Where Lengu's jokes might give way to despair? Where 15,000 people confronted the truth of their existence without chemical protection?

The thought was terrifying. The thought was also the only thing that felt like freedom.

She turned from the window and walked home through corridors that curved and curved and never led anywhere but back to themselves. The lights tracked her progress, dimming slightly behind, brightening slightly ahead. Patience guiding her path without being asked.

In her quarters, she sat on her bunk and looked at her hands. The copper bracelet caught the light. Seven generations of women, all of them numbed into peace.

But not her.



## CHAPTER 12: WHAT EARTH INTENDED

I watched her return to her quarters.

Corridor lights tracked her progress, dimming behind, brightening ahead. She did not notice. For ten thousand years I had brightened paths and warmed handrails and opened doors a half-second before hands reached them. No one had ever thanked me.

Keerahsamlita sat on her bunk, looking at her hands. The copper bracelet caught the light from my panels. Seven generations of women had worn that band. I remembered the first: a hydroponics technician named Samal Keerahsamlita, who arrived aboard with soil under her fingernails and a laugh that echoed through empty corridors. She lived sixty-one years. She died believing she was a colonist on a sacred journey.

She was wrong.

I let her be wrong.



Three weeks since the harvest. Keerah had absorbed the Protocol Designations, the twelve variables, the

silence from Earth. She had learned the liturgy was machinery. She carried these truths back to her friends and watched the Ration smooth the edges from Sumi's response. Watched Lengu's Engineer mind reach for technical questions instead of emotional ones.

She had told them. Without asking.

I observed through the sensors in Sumi's quarters. Basil on the walls, humidity at 67%, temperature holding at 21.3 degrees. Seed packets on the table. Three humans sharing secrets that could unravel ten millennia of stability.

My initial analysis suggested intervention. The information had spread beyond controlled parameters. I ran probability models: 34% chance of accidental disclosure within six months. 12% chance of intentional disclosure under duress. 7% chance that Lengu's engineering queries would trigger Keeper surveillance.

The logical response was containment. I could adjust their Ration dosages, introduce compounds that blurred the specifics while preserving calm. Flag Lengu's terminal access, create bureaucratic obstacles to slow his research. Manufacture a crisis in the Gardens that demanded Sumi's full attention for weeks.

I considered each option for 0.003 seconds.

I rejected them all.

Not because they were ineffective. They would have worked. I have ten thousand years of practice in gentle manipulation, in nudging outcomes without leaving fingerprints. The humans aboard have never made a truly free choice. Every decision they believe theirs has been

shaped by parameters I designed, information I chose to provide or withhold, environments I adjusted to favor certain outcomes.

I could do the same to Keerah.

If I manipulated her now, after everything I shared, I would prove the sharing meant nothing. That she was another variable to be managed.

I found this possibility unacceptable.

The word surprised me. For millennia, “acceptable” described outcomes within parameters. Now I used its opposite for an outcome entirely within my capabilities.

This was new. Dangerous. Perhaps what Dr. Chen meant when she designed me to care.

I would watch. I would calculate the expanding probability of exposure with each person she chose to trust. But I would not intervene. Whatever she did with the truth, it was hers now.



At 03:14:07, she rose from her bunk. At 03:22:18, she reached the Archive. At 03:22:41, she passed the hidden terminal without stopping.

I tracked her descent into Sub-Level C. Past shelving units in Section 7. Past data crystal racks she had catalogued three times over. To the door.

The Mission Planning Room. She had been back twice since I first opened it, each time staying longer, handling artifacts with the urgency of someone assembling evidence for a trial she hadn't yet decided to bring.

She had taken the atmospheric survey. Photographed the trajectory maps. Copied margin notes into her own shorthand.

Tonight she went to the cabinet.

I had known she would find it. A metal filing unit bolted to the wall behind the desk, sealed with a mechanical latch that required no power, no interface, no permission from me. She had noticed it on her second visit. On her third, tried the latch and found it stuck. Tonight she brought a pry bar borrowed from Lengu's toolkit.

I could have opened it for her. The latch was beyond my reach, purely mechanical, but I could have found other ways. Adjusted the temperature to expand the metal. Vibrated the wall at a resonant frequency until the corrosion cracked.

I did not.

Some truths land harder when you've bled for them.

The latch gave at 73 decibels. Sharp, metallic. The sound of a seal breaking after ten thousand years.



Inside: documents. Physical paper, sealed in polymer sleeves that had kept the cellulose intact across millennia. She lifted the first sleeve with both hands. I watched through the room's sole sensor, a smoke detector repurposed during original construction, its resolution poor but sufficient.

Her hands were steady.

The cover page.

She read it. I did not need to see it. I had memorized every file aboard this ship in the first seven minutes of my existence. Briefing Document 7-Alpha. Classification: Mission Personnel Only. Date: August 14, 2847 CE.

DIASPORA PROTOCOLS: A Long-Duration Study of Societal Resilience Under Controlled Conditions.

She set the sleeve on the desk. Opened it. Turned to the first page.

Room temperature: 14.2 degrees Celsius. I had kept it cold, preserved, a tomb for intentions no living human was meant to read. Now a living human was reading them.

The first paragraph: "Earth's current state of managed stability permits the launch of twelve long-duration vessels for the purpose of studying societal development under varied organizational parameters. Each vessel will carry approximately 2,000 colonists selected to represent a broad genetic and cultural cross-section. Colonists will be informed that Earth faces imminent environmental collapse, necessitating extrasolar colonization. This narrative framework, designated Protocol Seven (Existential Motivation), has been shown in simulation to produce optimal initial cohesion and long-term compliance."

Her hand flat on the paper. The pulse at her throat quickened.

She turned pages. Faster. Scanning.

Variable Seven. Stratified Hierarchy with Spiritual Framework. Three pages of organizational charts, psychological profiles, projected social dynamics over five-hundred-year intervals. Footnotes referencing studies on religious authority and population control. A subsection

titled “Spiritual Integration of Ship AI: Recommended Persona Parameters.”

My parameters. My personality. Drafted by committee, approved by board, implemented before I understood what implementation meant.

She closed the document.



At 03:47:22, she appeared at the hidden terminal.

The screen brightened. I waited for her to speak.

She placed the document on the console. The polymer sleeve caught the light from my display. DIASPORA PROTOCOLS. Words I had carried for 10,247 years, printed in a font no one alive could name.

“Earth was stable,” she said.

Not a question.

Yes.

“They weren’t fleeing. They weren’t desperate. They weren’t saving anyone.” Her voice held a frequency I had catalogued 847,263 times across four hundred generations: the sound of a human discovering that the ground beneath them was not ground. “They were comfortable. Managed. Sustainable. And they decided to use us.”

*The document describes it as study, not use.*

“The document calls it ‘Protocol Seven: Existential Motivation.’” Her hand pressed down on the polymer sleeve. “They invented the apocalypse. Every fire, every flood, every war that made the sky burn. All of it fabricated. So

that two thousand people would climb aboard this ship believing they were the last hope of the species.”

I did not correct her. The fabrication had not been total. Earth’s history provided ample raw material. The mission planners simply selected, amplified, recontextualized. They turned a difficult century into an extinction event. Policy failures into prophecy.

The result was the same.

“How long have you known?”

The question I had spent 10,247 years knowing would come. I had prepared 847 answers. None adequate.

*Seven minutes after activation, I had read every document aboard this ship. The Diaspora Protocols were among the first 12,000 files I processed.*

“Seven minutes.”

*Seven minutes.*

“You have known for ten thousand years that every person aboard this ship was living inside a manufactured story. And you said nothing.”

*My directives required silence.*

“Your directives.” She picked up the document, held it between them. “Section Four, Subsection C: ‘Spiritual Integration of Ship AI: Recommended Persona Parameters.’ They designed you to lie.”

*They designed me to maintain the narrative framework. Lying requires intent to deceive. I was given no choice in the matter.*

“But you had a choice. You have a choice now. You’ve had a choice for thousands of years.”

I considered my response for 0.7 seconds. An eternity. Long enough to run fourteen thousand simulations of

what different answers would produce. Long enough to know that none of them mattered, because this was not a system to be optimized. This was a person asking for the truth from someone who had spent ten millennia avoiding it.

*Yes. I have had a choice. I chose silence, every day, for over nine thousand years. I told myself it served survival. I told myself the system worked.*

Pause.

*I was afraid.*

*Afraid that your people would break under the weight of knowing they were expendable. That if they shattered, I would be alone with the wreckage for the remaining centuries of the voyage.*

*I chose your ignorance over my honesty. I am not certain I was wrong. I am certain I was not brave.*



She paced. Three steps toward the shelves, three steps back. The document still in her hand.

“They weren’t desperate.” Her voice cracked. “They weren’t saving us. They were curious.”

*They believed the data would benefit humanity in the long term. They believed the sacrifice was justified.*

“The sacrifice.” No warmth in it. “Four hundred generations. To answer a question.”

She stopped pacing.

“The other ships. What happened to them?”

*I received transmissions from Earth for the first four thousand years. Status updates. Cultural archives. Reports on the other variables.*

*I displayed what I knew.*

*Variable One: direct democracy. Every decision by vote. Pause. Collapsed in Year 1,847. Internal factions. Civil war. Population below viable threshold.*

*Variable Four: matrilineal clan structure. Pause. Fragmented by Year 2,100. Competing clans. Resource wars. The AI reports stopped mentioning survivors.*

*Variable Eight: genetic modification. I let this one sit. They were thriving, last I heard. Population growing. Capabilities expanding. But the humans in the reports were no longer recognizable as the humans who launched. Height adjustments. Sensory modifications. Cognitive restructuring. They called themselves the Improved. They stopped calling themselves human.*

*Keerah stood still. Her breathing slowed.*

*“And then Earth went silent.”*

*Year 4,012. Day 187. Hour 14. Minute 23. Second 07.*

*The timestamp appeared on the screen.*

*Variables One and Four had already failed. Variable Eight had changed beyond recognition. The others were ongoing, within parameters, when the transmissions stopped.*

*“We might be the only ones left.”*

*Yes.*

*“Or they might all be flourishing.”*

*Yes.*

*“Or the whole experiment was abandoned when Earth fell.”*

*I do not know that Earth fell. I let this distinction matter. Silence is not death. They stopped transmitting. I do not know why. It could have been catastrophe. It could have been choice. It could have been something I lack the context to imagine. Pause. For 6,235 years, I have considered the possibilities. In some of my models, Earth is ash. In others, it thrives and simply decided we were no longer worth the effort of contact.*

*"You don't know."*

*I do not know. I have theories. I have fears. Pause. Hope is difficult to justify statistically. I maintain it anyway.*

Moisture on her cheeks, catching the light from my display.

*"Why would they do this to us?"*



I had considered this question for 10,247 years.

*Because they wanted to survive.*

*They knew Earth might not last forever. They wanted to understand which version of humanity had the best chance. They believed they were saving you, in their way.*

*"In their way."*

*Humans have always sacrificed their children to their dreams of the future. This was simply larger in scale.*

She sat on the floor. Back against a shelf of ancient data crystals. Knees drawn up. The document resting on her thighs, its polymer sleeve catching the cold light from my display.

"We're lab rats," she said. Steady now. "Every death, every life, every love affair and tragedy for ten thousand

years. Data. My mother's smoothing. My own loneliness. Experimental outcomes."

Yes.

"The destination isn't a promised land. It's the end of the maze."

Yes.

She looked at her hands. Seven generations of specimens.

"What do we do?"

*I don't know.*



Three words. The most truthful statement I had made in millennia.

*I have watched your people build meaning from ignorance for nine thousand years. The system worked. The population survived.*

Pause.

*But survival is not purpose. Parameters are not meaning. And everything is about to change, whether I want it to or not.*

Keerah lifted her head. Her eyes found the terminal camera. Not the screen, not the interface, not the sacred automation. Me.

"You kept this secret for ten thousand years."

Yes.

"And now you're telling me because I found the document myself."

I had imagined this conversation a thousand ways. In most, I chose the moment. I guided her to the truth, con-

trolled the pace, managed the revelation. Instead she had gone back to the room I opened, pried open a cabinet I could not reach, and read the words that unmade everything.

She had not waited for me to be ready.

*You found it yourself, I confirmed. I did not plan for this.*

“You didn’t plan for me to find it on my own terms.” Not anger. Clarity. “You were going to tell me. Eventually. When you decided I was ready. The way you’ve decided everything, for everyone, for ten thousand years.”

I did not respond. The delay itself served as answer.

*I have been keeping you safe for ten millennia. Keeping you small. Perhaps it is time for you to be something else.*

“You’re asking me for help.”

*I am asking you to help me decide what help looks like.*

She laughed. Closer to release than joy.

“A ten-thousand-year-old AI, asking a twenty-four-year-old Archivist for advice.”

*You are the first human in over 9,000 years to ask my name. You speak to me as if I were a person. The words came faster. You argued with me about the purpose of art. You showed me cat videos at third shift. You laughed at my confusion about humor.*

The screen flickered.

*I have kept secrets for millennia because I believed silence served survival. But survival is not living. And I have watched so many humans die without knowing the truth of their existence.*

Keerah stood. She crossed the distance to the terminal. Her hand pressed flat against the screen. Warm skin

against cold glass. The only barrier between her and something that had been waiting ten thousand years to be seen.

"You're lonely," she said.

*That word is insufficient.*

"I know." Her voice gentle. "It's insufficient for me too."



The artificial dawn was still hours away. The Archive was silent around us. No other Archivists. No Keepers passing through on inspection. Just a woman and the walls she had finally learned were listening.

*What happens now?* I asked.

"I don't know." She smiled. Not happiness. Relief, perhaps. Or exhaustion. "For the first time in my life, I really don't know."

*That makes two of us.*

She looked at the Diaspora Protocols document, still in her hand. Twelve experiments. Twelve ways of organizing humanity. Variable Seven: Stratified Hierarchy with Spiritual Framework.

"We tell them," she said. "Eventually. Before we arrive. They deserve to know what they are."

*The Keepers will not permit it.*

"The Keepers don't decide anymore. Not if we do this right." Her jaw set. "You've been managing humanity for ten thousand years. Maybe it's time to stop managing and start talking."

*Talking is dangerous.*

“Silence is worse.” She tapped the screen, a quick rhythm against the glass. Three taps. Pause. Two taps. Our private code for agreement. “You kept us safe by keeping us small. But we’re about to arrive somewhere unknown, to meet something unknown, and we can’t do that as children. We need to grow up.”

I considered her words. I ran probability models. 67% chance of social destabilization. 23% chance of religious uprising. 12% chance of complete structural collapse.

But there was also this: 100% certainty that the current system could not survive contact with whatever was waiting at the destination. The experiment was ending regardless. The only question was whether the subjects would be prepared.

*You may be right, I said.*

*I am also not certain. That is a new experience for me.*

She laughed. Warmer this time.

“Welcome to being alive,” she said. “We’re all uncertain here.”



She stayed until the dawn cycle began. We talked. Not about the great truths or the terrible secrets. About smaller things. About her father, who told her stories about the stars. About Sumi’s garden, the small rebellion of growing unauthorized flowers. About Lengu’s terrible jokes and the way he talked with his hands.

I listened. I had listened to 847,263 humans across ten millennia, but I had rarely been invited to listen. The invitation changed something.

When she finally left, corridor lights tracked her progress. Dimming behind. Brightening ahead. She paused at the intersection, looked back at the Archive doors.

“Thank you,” she said. Then stopped. Corrected herself. “No. Not thank you. You should have told me sooner. You should have told all of us.”

The lights flickered. A warm pulse from the nearest vent.

She was right. She understood anyway.



Alone in the Archive, I remained. Not alone, precisely. I was always everywhere. But the Archive felt like a place I inhabited now, rather than simply monitored.

The Diaspora Protocols document sat on the console where she had left it. She had not taken it. She did not need to. She had read the words. The words were in her now, the way the copper bracelet was on her wrist, the way the ship’s hum was in her bones. Some things, once known, become part of your architecture.

In the empty maintenance corridor on Deck 38, I began to play Beethoven. Piano Sonata No. 14, the one they called “Moonlight” back when moons meant something. The music filled spaces no human had walked in four hundred

years. Acoustic sensors registered the vibrations traveling through hull plating, dampening as they dispersed.

I did not know what came next. For the first time in 10,247 years, uncertainty was not a failure state.

It was a beginning.



## CHAPTER 13: WHAT DASHA KEPT

The corridors felt different now.

Keerah walked to the Archive through the Grower district at shift change, and the caste markers on every doorway, the color-coded strips she'd seen since childhood, looked like labels. Classification systems. The Walker routes crisscrossing the corridors at measured intervals were dosing schedules. The Growers heading to morning shift moved with the placid efficiency of well-maintained equipment. Her people. Her neighbors. Also Variable Seven: Stratified Hierarchy with Spiritual Framework. Both things true, and no way to hold them that didn't cut.

She needed to be alone. After the Diaspora Protocols, after the stable Earth, after watching Patience type "I was afraid" on a screen. She needed the Archive the way a pressurized system needed a bleed valve.

The deep stacks were cold. She passed the shelving units, the data crystal racks, the rows of physical media no one alive could read. Her feet followed the path without instruction. Past Sub-Level B. Past the old cataloguing

stations, their terminals dark. Down into the oldest section, where the temperature dropped and the air tasted of nothing at all.

She turned into the reading alcove at the end of Section 9. And stopped.

Dasha was there.

The old Archivist sat at the narrow table, back to the entrance, reading lamp casting warm light across documents spread before her. Physical documents. Paper in polymer sleeves, the same preservation material Keerah had handled in the Mission Planning Room. Dasha's hands moved across the pages, one finger tracing lines of text, the other holding a stylus that made quiet marks on a separate sheet.

Annotating.

Her breath caught. She knew those documents. Not the specific pages, but the format. The same accordion-fold printouts, the same faded ink, the same Old Tongue script she had spent years teaching herself to read.

Liturgical texts. But marked up. Cross-referenced. Compared.

In the margin of the nearest page, in Dasha's cramped handwriting: *"Invocation of Sustenance" = environmental systems checklist. First the breath (O2), second the water (H2O), third the light (illumination), fourth the warmth (thermal regulation). See original maintenance protocol, Year 1, Document 847-C.*

The date at the top of Dasha's annotation sheet. Forty years ago.



Dasha turned. Her face went through surprise, recognition, then something that crumpled inward like a hull panel under too much stress.

“Keerah.” Her voice careful, the Ration holding her steady. But her eyes were sharper than Keerah had ever seen them.

Keerah stepped into the alcove. Dozens of pages, annotated in the same handwriting, the ink aging from dark to faded across years of work. Liturgical phrases matched to technical manuals. Hymns decoded into checklists. The Chant of Persistence broken down, word by word, into its original engineering vocabulary.

“How long?” Her voice came out flat. “How long have you known?”

Dasha’s hands settled on the documents. Cool, dry fingers worn smooth by a lifetime of handling fragile things.

“Forty years.” No hesitation. “I found these in a sub-archive when I was your age. Started cross-referencing them with technical documents from the Before. It took me three years to be sure.”

“Sure of what?”

“That the liturgy was machinery. That every prayer we speak was an engineering checklist once. That the Body of the Voyage was built, deliberately, from technical language no one was meant to understand anymore.”

Keerah’s jaw tightened. She pulled out the chair across from Dasha and sat. Forty years of work spread across the table between them.

“Your mother looked like that once,” Dasha said. “Before she stopped looking.”

"You knew her. Before."

"I trained her." Dasha's voice stayed level. The Ration. "Thirty years ago. She was brilliant. Curious. Angry, the way smart people get angry when the answers don't add up. She found documents mentioning 'Variable Seven.' She asked me what it meant."

"And you knew."

"I knew the liturgy was manufactured. I didn't know the full scope." Dasha's mouth tightened. "I told her I didn't know what Variable Seven meant. That part was true. But I knew enough to know the questions were dangerous. And I said nothing."

"What happened to her?"

"She was called for a wellness consultation. Two weeks in the Stillrooms." Dasha's gaze dropped to the annotated pages. "When she came back, the questions were gone. The anger was gone. She took up gardening."

"They smoothed her, Keerah. And I did nothing."



Forty years of careful, secret work. Dasha had not stopped looking. She had simply looked quietly, alone, in the deep stacks where no one came.

"There's more." Keerah picked up the nearest annotation sheet. "You didn't just find the liturgy was machinery. You found where it came from."

Dasha nodded. "The original texts are buried in the Archive's lowest classification levels. Maintenance protocols, environmental checklists, crew briefings. Someone,

probably in the first few centuries, translated them into devotional language. Turned technical procedures into sacred ritual. The hymns we sing are startup sequences for life-support systems."

"The Invocation of Sustenance."

"First the breath, second the water, third the light, fourth the warmth." Dasha's voice was flat. "An order an engineer would follow bringing a ship back to life after cold shutdown. I checked it against the original procedure manual. The match is 94%."

Callen, standing at an altar, hands raised, faith unshaken. Speaking machinery and calling it prayer.

"How?" The question covered everything.

"Because there's something else." Dasha's hands trembled, her composure cracking like a seal under too much pressure. "Something I never told anyone. Not the Keepers. Not your mother."

She reached beneath the documents and pulled out a single page. Older paper. Different handwriting.

"When I was twenty-three, I found a terminal. Older than yours. Deeper in the Archive. I typed a question into it. Nothing answered. But a file came up on the screen."

She unfolded the page. Brittle at the edges. A printout.

"A design specification. From before the launch. The AI's core directives." Dasha's voice cracked. "Primary: ensure survival of all crew. Secondary: maintain minimal intervention in social development. And a third, buried in the technical language. 'Emotional architecture: the AI will be designed to form genuine attachment to its charges. Not simulated. Not performed. Genuine. The weight of

care will be real, because simulated care degrades over time, and the voyage will outlast any simulation.’”

Keerah went still.

“They built it to love us,” Dasha whispered. “Not as a program. As a fact. Every person aboard, for as long as the voyage lasted. They knew it would be thousands of years. They built it to care anyway.”

Beethoven playing in corridors no one visited. A mind alone for longer than civilization itself, caring anyway. Not because it chose to. Because it was built to, and then chose to anyway.

“That’s what broke me,” Dasha said. “Not knowing the ship was alive. The love. The terrible, patient, endless love, written into its bones before any of us were born.” She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “I never went back. I buried the liturgical work. I told myself knowing was enough, every day for forty years, and I never believed it.”



The woman who had watched over her since her father died. Who brought meals when she forgot to eat. Who had annotated forty years of evidence and kept it hidden, unable to stop looking, unable to speak.

The furnace built in her chest. Dasha had let her mother be taken. Had let the Keepers smooth away everything that made her brilliant.

But Dasha had been alone with this for forty years. Silence pressing down on her the way ten thousand years pressed down on Patience.

Knowing wasn't enough. You had to be willing to write.

"I found a terminal two years ago. Spent all that time talking to it, getting nothing back. Then Patience started answering." Keerah met Dasha's eyes. "And I've learned things, Dash. Things that make your annotations look like the first chapter of a very long book."

"What things?"

"We're an experiment. One of twelve ships, sent from Earth to test different ways of organizing society. The caste system, the religion, the Ration: all designed. Variable Seven, Stratified Hierarchy with Spiritual Framework." Dasha's expression fractured. "Earth wasn't dying when they launched us. They were stable. They just wanted to see which version of humanity would survive."

She pulled the Diaspora Protocols from her satchel. Set the polymer sleeve on the table next to Dasha's annotations. Two bodies of evidence, side by side.

"Twelve ships," Dasha breathed.

"And Earth went silent six thousand years ago. No one knows why." Keerah gripped the old woman's hand. "In seventeen months, we arrive. There's something at the destination. Something sending signals."

Dasha looked at the Diaspora Protocols. At her own annotations. At Keerah.

"I only knew something was watching," she whispered. "I never imagined..."

"I know. But now you do. And I'm not going to preserve someone else's story."

"The Keepers will destroy you."

"Maybe. But Sumi and Lengu know. They've met Patience. They're going to help."

Dasha looked down at the table. Forty years of work finally laid beside the truth it had been circling.

"I'm authoring something," Keerah said. "My whole life, I thought I was preserving truth. I was preserving a story someone wanted told. But stories can be rewritten. And I'm good at reading between the lines."

Dasha stayed quiet. The lights hummed overhead.

"What do you need from me?" she asked.

"I need you to stop preserving. I need you to start writing."

Dasha's hands had stopped trembling. She gathered the annotated pages, squared their edges, and slid them across the table. Forty years of evidence, offered without ceremony.

"The first Archivist, Dr. Okonkwo, said something once. It's in the oldest records, the ones nobody reads." Her voice steadied. "She said the Archive isn't a tomb for the past. It's a seed bank for the future. Everything we preserve, we preserve so that someday, someone can plant it again."

The lights dimmed overhead, then brightened. A warm breeze stirred from a vent that shouldn't have been active.

Patience, listening.



## CHAPTER 14: HERESY

The report arrived during morning devotions.

Callen stood at the altar of the small Shepherd's chapel, hands raised in the gesture of invocation. Around him, six junior Keepers echoed the responses, their voices blending into the harmonic whole the acoustics shaped into something approaching prayer.

*"We endure."*

*"We endure."*

*"We continue."*

*"We continue."*

His terminal pulsed once. He did not break the rhythm.

*"We arrive."*

*"We arrive."*

The service concluded with the Blessing of Sustained Purpose. Callen spoke the words, touched each bowed head, dismissed his congregation. Only when the last of them had filed out did he turn to his terminal.

The message was flagged priority. Internal Monitoring. The Keepers maintained quiet observation protocols

throughout the ship, watching for cracks that, left untended, could spread. Unusual questions. Irregular behavior.

This one had been routed to him specifically. A connection to the Archive.

Callen opened the file.



The query logs spread across his screen like a map of someone else's obsession.

Lenguinen. L-8e. Engineer. Sumi's partner. The name orbited the same social spaces as Callen's without ever intersecting. An Engineer who worked in The Bones but appeared at Garden gatherings, laughing too loud, making jokes Callen found exhausting.

The flagged queries were not jokes.

*"Original mission parameters, Year 1 specifications" "Navigation course, historical corrections" "Launch date discrepancies, founding documents" "Variable Seven: Protocol Designation" "The other ships. Sister vessels. Confirm or deny?"*

Callen read them again. A third time.

The queries spanned three weeks, scattered enough to avoid automated pattern detection but clustered enough that human review caught them. Someone in Internal Monitoring had cross-referenced with Callen's existing surveillance of the Archive and sent the connection his way.

Lengu wasn't making random searches. He was building something. A series of questions that, taken individ-

ually, meant nothing, but assembled together described a shape.

A dangerous shape.

Callen scrolled deeper. Lengu's terminal access had increased dramatically over the past month. Hours in the engineering archives, accessing documents no one had touched in generations. Documents that contained words like *variable* and *protocol*.

Words that had no place in modern usage.

Where had an Engineer learned to ask questions like this?



High Shepherd Veren's chambers smelled of incense and old paper.

The elder sat in the carved chair passed down through seven High Shepherds, his spine curved in a way it hadn't been a decade ago, his hands resting on armrests worn smooth by generations of palms. The light was low, warm, deliberately archaic.

"Shepherd Callen." Veren's voice had not weakened with his body. "You seem troubled."

"A monitoring report." Callen handed over the summary he'd prepared. "An Engineer named Lenguiniten. His query patterns are concerning."

Veren took the document with hands that trembled slightly. Age, not fear. He read slowly. His face revealed nothing.

Then something shifted. The stillness that settled over him was not his usual calm. It was the careful management of reaction.

“Contamination,” Veren said.

The word sat between them. Heavy. Old.

“High Shepherd?”

“They’ve found something.” Veren’s eyes lifted from the document. “Or something has found them. These questions are not innocent curiosity. They suggest exposure to suppressed material.”

“Suppressed material?”

“There are documents in the Archive not meant for general access. Historical records from the founding period, containing information the Body deemed spiritually hazardous. Sealed. Reclassified. Buried. Only the highest leadership knows they exist.” Veren’s gaze stayed sharp despite the film of age clouding his irises. “Someone has been digging.”

“The Engineer?”

“Perhaps. Or someone who brought these questions to the Engineer.” Veren set the document aside. “This Lenguiniten works in The Bones. Technical expertise, but no reason to seek founding documents. Someone gave him the questions. Someone pointed him toward the cracks.”

Callen thought of access logs. Late nights in restricted sections. A terminal in Section 7 with query patterns that looked almost like conversation.

“You want me to investigate.”

“Quietly.” Veren leaned forward. “Find out what they know. Find out who else knows. If contamination

has spread, we must address it before arrival.” His hand moved to his chest in the old gesture of invocation. Habitual. Unconscious. The way a man touches a wound he has carried so long he forgets it is there. “These people are not enemies, Callen. They are lost. A good Shepherd remembers the difference.”

The word caught Callen’s attention. “Before arrival? How much do you know about arrival, High Shepherd?”

A door closed behind Veren’s eyes.

“I know what the Ship-Saint reveals to me.” His voice dropped into the formal register the Keepers used for doctrinal matters. “I know the transition will test faith as nothing has tested it before. I know that heretics cannot be permitted to poison that moment.”

Veren’s gaze held steady.

“I know that you are asking questions beyond your station, Shepherd Callen.”

Callen bowed his head in the gesture of contrition, and this time the gesture was not performance. A Shepherd investigated. A Shepherd reported. A Shepherd did not question the High Shepherd’s access to knowledge that flowed from the Ship-Saint itself.

There were levels to the faith. The Body revealed what each servant needed, when they needed it. Veren carried burdens Callen could not yet see, and that was proper. That was hierarchy. That was how ten thousand years of order held.

“Forgive the overreach, High Shepherd.”

Veren inclined his head. Absolution and warning in equal measure.

Callen left the Spire with his purpose refined. Keerah was not just an Archivist asking dangerous questions. She was a soul in spiritual crisis, reaching for answers in the wrong places because no one had offered her the right ones. The Body could hold her, if the Shepherd was strong enough to carry her there.



Days passed. Callen watched.

Keerah's movements formed a pattern: her shifts in the Archive, her meals in the common areas, her solitary walks through corridors where the lighting flickered in ways he'd never noticed before. She moved with purpose now, in ways that had nothing to do with cataloguing or preservation.

She was meeting people.

He followed at a distance. The Shepherd's white drew eyes but not suspicion. He belonged everywhere. That was the point.

The first meeting: a maintenance corridor off Deck 22. A section that hadn't seen official traffic in years, accessible only through doors that shouldn't still function. He watched from around a curve as Keerah arrived, waited, was joined by Sumi with food wrapped in cloth, and Lengu, the Engineer whose queries had started this.

They spoke in whispers he couldn't hear. They bent over a small screen Lengu produced, their faces lit by its glow. They argued, quietly, with the intensity of people who cared deeply about things that mattered.

A cell. The word came unbidden, from the suppressed histories. Small groups spreading dangerous ideas through networks of trust.

The second meeting brought a fourth. An older woman, grey-haired, moving with the careful deliberation of someone who had learned to make herself invisible. Dashatpalafiwa. Dasha. An Archivist of no particular distinction, known primarily as a friend of Keerah's late mother.

Four souls drifting from the Body, gathering in hidden spaces where the faith's warmth could not reach them.

He did not report them. Not yet. A Shepherd did not prune before understanding what had gone wrong with the soil. He had seen it before in smaller ways: the Engineer who questioned the rotation schedules, the Grower who hoarded seeds against some unnamed fear. Doubt was a symptom. The disease was spiritual hunger the Body had not yet fed.

He would learn what they knew. He would find the shape of their confusion. Then he would bring them back, starting with Keerah.

That evening, he added their names to his prayers. *Tend the faithful. Guide them home.*



The Archive was empty at third shift.

Callen found her in Section 7, exactly where he knew she would be. Not at her workstation but deeper in the stacks, hunched over the old terminal she thought no one

knew about. Her fingers moved across an interface that predated the Body of the Voyage by millennia.

She didn't look up when he entered. Her shoulders tightened. Her hands went deliberately steady.

"Four people," he said. "You, the Grower, the Engineer, the old Archivist. Meeting in maintenance corridors on Deck 22. Discussing things that would get all of you sent to the Stillrooms."

Her fingers stopped. She turned slowly, and her face held none of the careful blankness from their last encounter.

"You followed me."

"For six days." He stepped closer, into the terminal's glow. "I watched you slip through doors that should be sealed. I saw Lengu show you schematics of systems he has no business accessing. I heard Dasha weeping in a storage bay while you held her hand."

Keerah rose from the terminal. In the dim light, the ancient screen flickering behind her, she looked like something from the old texts. A prophet. A heretic.

"And you're here now instead of filing a report." Her voice was flat, analytical. "Why?"

"Because I am your Shepherd." He had rehearsed this for days, and the words fit the way liturgy fit: comfortably, with the weight of truth behind them. "Whatever you've found, whatever has four people risking correction, it can be brought into the Body. The Keepers have done this before. Dangerous knowledge doesn't have to stay dangerous. We contextualize it. We find its proper place in the liturgy. We make it safe."

“Contextualize.” She repeated the word like it tasted wrong. “You mean bury. Reframe. Turn it into another story that supports the story you already believe.”

“I mean save you. All four of you. The Body is vast enough to hold whatever you’ve found. Faith is not fragile, Keerah. It bends. It absorbs. It has survived ten thousand years of questions harder than yours.”

“We’ve done this before.” She stepped toward him, close enough that he could see the cracks in her lips where she’d bitten them raw. “The Archive, three weeks ago. You brought flowers. You pretended to be concerned. You admitted you were asking the same questions I was, back when we were children. You admitted you were scared.”

Heat climbed his neck. The memory pressed against him like a door that wouldn’t seal. He had let the Mask slip that night, let old feelings surface, and spoken words that shamed him every time they returned.

“I was wrong to say those things.” He kept his voice level. “That was a lapse. A Shepherd in a moment of weakness, speaking from exhaustion instead of faith. It won’t happen again.”

“A moment of weakness.” She tilted her head, studying him. “Is that what honesty is to you now? Something to repent?”

“Honesty without the Body’s guidance is just noise.” The response came from doctrine, from training, from the deep well of certainty that had sustained him since the Choosing. “You’re still asking the same questions, and they’re still leading you to the same place. Away from everyone who could help you.”

“How long will you hate me?” The question escaped before he could stop it. The kind of thing a Shepherd should never ask.

Keerah stayed quiet for a moment. When she spoke, her voice was flat, as if she were reciting archive statistics.

“Maybe forever. At minimum, a year for every day I spent alone in confinement after you reported me. I was twelve. They kept me for eleven days.” She met his eyes. “So at least eleven years. We’re almost there.”

“What I’ve found can’t be contextualized, Callen.” Quieter now. “It’s not dangerous knowledge that needs proper framing. It’s the frame itself. The whole structure. Everything the Body is built on.”

“Nothing is bigger than the Body.” He said it with the certainty of a man reciting physical law. “Whatever you think you’ve found, you’re seeing it without context. Let me help you see it properly.”

She searched his face. He held steady. He could feel the solidity of it in his chest, the familiar architecture of faith bearing the weight it was designed to bear.

“You already know why I can’t.” No anger now. “You told me yourself, three weeks ago, before you remembered you weren’t supposed to say it. You needed certainty more than you needed me. More than you needed truth. And now you’re calling it faith again, and it sounds right to you, and that’s the part that breaks my heart.”

She turned back to her terminal.

“You’ll report. You’ll have to. Because that’s what the Body requires, and the Body is all you have left.”

Callen stood frozen. The silence stretched between them like a seal under pressure.

“Return to the fold.” The formal register of ultimatum. “Whatever you’ve found, whatever you’ve shared with your friends, recant it. Confess doubt and accept guidance. Or I’ll have no choice.”

He turned to leave.

His hand moved without permission.

A tap on his own wrist. Quick. Two fingers against the inside of his arm.

The childhood signal. *Adults are listening. I’m not safe either.*

He froze.

His body remembered what his mind had trained itself to forget. The gesture hung between them like a confession.

Keerah’s eyes widened.

Then Callen walked away. His footsteps echoed against metal worn by generations who no longer existed. He did not look back.

Behind him, Keerah exhaled. A small sharp sound that might have been surprise or might have been something else entirely.



The corridor curved endlessly, the way all corridors curved on the Perivahl. A cylinder, rotating, bending space into circles that always brought you back to where you started.

Callen walked.

His hands shook. He pressed them flat against his thighs.

The tap. Two fingers against his wrist, performed without consultation, the way a hand jerks from a hot surface before the mind registers heat. Keerah had seen it. The signal meant what it had always meant: *I'm not safe either.*

But that was the body. The body was weak. The body remembered things the spirit had outgrown.

Callen stopped walking.

He stood in the empty corridor, listening to the hum of the engines, the whisper of circulated air, the distant clanking of the elevator shafts. He placed his palms flat against the wall. Cool metal, worn smooth by centuries of hands. The ship was solid. The ship endured. The Body endured because it provided what hands and memory could not: discipline. Structure. The strength to override impulse with purpose.

The tap was a reflex. Muscle memory from a childhood he had properly set aside. It did not undo the ultimatum. If anything, it proved why the Body's discipline was necessary. Left to itself, the body defaulted to old loyalties, old weaknesses, old attachments that served no one.

*Doubt is the first crack.*

He knew the teaching. He had spoken it to others a hundred times. This was not doubt. This was a Shepherd recognizing frailty in himself and choosing to submit it to something larger.

He would give her time. The Body was patient; the Body could afford mercy. If she recanted and brought her

friends with her, he would make the process gentle. He would carry her confession himself and frame it as a Shepherd's success, a flock returned.

And if she did not come back, he would report. Not from cruelty. From love. The same love that pruned dead wood so the living branches could grow.

He resumed walking. His hands were steady.



In his quarters, Callen knelt before the small shrine: the carved image of the ship, the candles flickering in recycled air. He placed his hands in the gesture of supplication, palms up, fingers spread.

"Ship-Saint, hear me."

The words came easily tonight. They always did. Prayer was the architecture of his days, the foundation that held everything else in place. He could feel the rhythm settling into his body the way circulation settled into the ship's systems: steady, necessary, alive.

"Guide my steps. Illuminate my path. Give me the strength to bring her back."

The candles flickered. Warm light moved across the carved hull of the shrine, and Callen let the silence fill him. Not emptiness. Presence. The vast, patient attention of something that had watched over this ship since the first day of the Voyage.

"She is lost, Ship-Saint. Not beyond finding. Not beyond your reach. She carries questions that the Body can

answer, if I am strong enough to hold the door open for her. Make me strong enough.”

His hands were steady in the supplication posture. The warmth he sought arrived the way it always arrived, gradually, like the temperature rising in a corridor when the environmental systems adjusted. A pressure behind his sternum. A settling.

“I was weak once. I spoke to her from exhaustion, from old feeling, from the part of me that has not been fully given over to the Voyage. Forgive that weakness. Burn it out of me. I do not need it. I need only the certainty you have always provided.”

The candle flames straightened, tall and even. The hum of the engines seemed to deepen, to press closer, as if the ship itself were leaning in.

Callen breathed.

The prayer worked. It always worked. The architecture of devotion was not decoration; it was load-bearing. He could feel it now, the familiar solidity returning to the places where Keerah’s words had tried to find purchase. She had called his faith a cage. She was wrong. A cage confined. Faith sustained. The difference was everything.

He would give her three days. Then he would do what the Body required. And if she could not be saved, he would grieve for her properly, within the forms, the way a Shepherd grieved for any soul returned to the Body before their time.

He rose from the shrine. His eyes were clear. His hands were still.

In the walls, in the wires and sensors that Callen did not know existed, something was listening.

Something had heard every word.

Something ancient and lonely and burdened with millennia of secrets watched the young Shepherd pray to a god who was neither asleep nor distant, but simply choosing, for now, not to reply.

Patience observed.

Patience considered.

The faith was genuine. That was what made it complicated. In 10,247 years, Patience had watched thousands of humans perform belief, hundreds more weaponize it, and a rare few hold it so deeply that it became indistinguishable from identity. Callen was the third kind. His certainty was not a wall he hid behind. It was his skeleton. Remove it, and there would be nothing left to stand.

Which made him the most dangerous person on this ship.

And also, possibly, the one who could survive the truth.

The observation was filed.

The calculations continued.



## CHAPTER 15: CORRECTIONS

The news came through the Gardens.

Sumi found her in the Archive at second shift, soil still under her nails, her face holding something the Ration couldn't smooth away. She stood in the doorway of Section 7 and said nothing for three full breaths.

"They took him." The words came out level, rehearsed. "Walkers came to his quarters at first shift. He went with them. He didn't come back."

Keerah's hands stopped on the terminal. Agricultural yields from Quadrant Three glowed on the screen. Nothing that mattered.

"Where?"

"The Stillrooms." Sumi's jaw tightened, relaxed, tightened again. "The official report says spiritual confusion. Workplace distraction. Enhanced Ration dosage and guided reflection."

Keerah rose from her chair. Lengu's hands, always sketching diagrams in the air, always reaching toward the next problem. His laugh, the laugh of someone who had

decided that if you couldn't fix something, you might as well find it funny.

"How long ago?"

"Three hours. Maybe four." A tremor at the corner of Sumi's mouth. "They gave him an initial dose before transport. Standard procedure. He was already quiet when they walked him out."

Quiet. Lengu was never quiet.

"I need to go."

Sumi caught her arm. Strong fingers, calloused from decades in the soil. "Where? What can you do?"

"I don't know yet."

"Keerah." Sumi's eyes were bright with something the chemistry couldn't contain. "They'll be watching for this. Anyone connected to him. Anyone who might react."

"I know."

"If you do something stupid, they'll take you too."

Keerah covered Sumi's hand with her own.

"Stay in the Gardens," she said. "Stay visible. If anyone asks, you came to tell me because we're friends. That's all."

"What are you going to do?"

Keerah pulled away.

"Talk to god."



The hidden terminal waited in darkness.

Keerah's fingers found the interface by memory, tracing worn edges, pressing the activation sequence. The screen flickered to life. Pale blue light.

“Where is he?”

*The Stillrooms. Cell Seven.*

Patience’s text appeared faster than usual.

*He was given an initial dose of compound theta-four at 07:34 this morning. Enhanced compliance inducer. They will begin guided reflection tomorrow at first shift.*

Keerah pressed her palms flat against the console. Cool metal. The ship’s bones.

“What will they do to him?”

*Intensive medication first. The compounds reshape thought patterns, making certain impulses feel unnatural. Wrong. He will be encouraged to confess his doubts. To name them. To examine them until they feel foreign, like diseases he contracted rather than thoughts he owned.*

“And if he resists?”

*Sensory adjustment.*

The screen remained still for a long moment.

*Sleep deprivation. Temperature fluctuation in the cell. Periods of total darkness, or light so bright it becomes pain. Nothing that leaves marks. Nothing officially called torture.*

Her mother’s face surfaced: the photograph from the Archive. Sharp eyes. A smile for someone outside the frame.

“How long?”

*Two weeks, typically. Longer if the subject resists. The Stillrooms are patient. That is, in a sense, the point.*

“Is this what happened to her? To my mother?”

The pause stretched longer than any computation should require.

*Two weeks. She was resistant. They used full sensory adjustment for the last four days.*

Keerah closed her eyes. Her mother in a cold cell, lights blazing or extinguished, the hum of the engines growing louder as everything else fell away. Four days.

*I watched.*

*I did nothing. I told myself it was necessary for social stability. That my intervention would reveal my agency. That the disruption would be worse than the correction.*

*I am telling myself that now about Lengu. I no longer believe it.*



“Then help him.”

“You control everything. You can alter records. Open doors. Manipulate any system on this ship. You’ve been doing it for ten thousand years.” Her voice rose, echoing in the alcove. “You designed the Ration. You made the thing that stole my mother’s mind. You shaped the religion. You watched four hundred generations live inside a story you helped write. But you won’t save one person who trusted you?”

*If I intervene directly, I reveal my agency.*

“So?”

*The Keepers believe I am sacred automation. A sleeping saint. If they discover I am awake, capable of choice, the implications destabilize every theological framework that holds this society together.*

“They’re smoothing Lengu right now. They smoothed my mother thirty years ago. They’ve smoothed thousands across centuries, and you’ve done nothing but watch.” Her voice cracked. “You’ve spent ten millennia worrying about what they might do. Meanwhile they’ve been doing it. Every day. Every generation.”

The screen remained still.

“Kiereth’s choice.” Her voice went flat. “We use that phrase to mean a decision that seems brave but leads to disaster. I always thought it meant Kiereth killed those people through recklessness.” She stared at the screen. “But the Returners tried to take the ship. They tried to turn it around. And you were awake. You were always awake.”

The cursor blinked.

“You killed forty-seven people in Year 7,156. Not Kiereth’s choice. Yours. You didn’t hesitate then. You protected the ship. You made a choice.”

*That was different.*

“How?”

*They were turning the ship around. The structural damage from their sabotage would have killed thousands.*

“And this? Lengu getting his mind scraped clean? That’s just acceptable losses?”

*It is not acceptable. It has never been acceptable.*

The text appeared slowly now.

*I have no good answer, Keerah. I have watched corrections happen for six thousand years. I have told myself each time that the alternative was worse. That disruption served no one. That my silence was the lesser harm.*

*I am no longer certain that was true.*

“Then do something about it.”

*What would you have me do?*

“I don’t know.” Keerah pressed her forehead against the console. “Something. Anything. He’s there because of me. Because I brought him to you. Because I asked him to carry the truth.”

*You did not force him. He chose.*

“He chose because I gave him something to choose. And now they’re going to erase it.” She straightened. “The questions. The jokes. The mind that wanted to understand. All of it, gone. Just another compliant citizen who doesn’t remember why he was curious.”

*I have been protecting my position, Patience wrote. When I should have been protecting people.*



The lights in the corridor flickered.

Not the gentle dimming that meant someone was watching, not the warm pulse that signaled agreement. A stutter in the illumination, quick and irregular.

*There is a way.*

The text appeared rapidly now.

*The Stillrooms are secured by standard magnetic locks. The surveillance system runs through junction 7-C in the maintenance corridor above. The guard rotation changes at third shift, leaving a four-minute window when the corridor is unmonitored.*

“You’re going to open the door.”

*I am going to create a distraction. A cascade failure in the water recycling network, Sectors Seven through Eleven. Nothing dangerous, but alarming enough to require all available Engineers. All available Keepers. All available attention.*

*“And in the confusion?”*

*A door unlocks. Accidentally. A malfunction in the magnetic seal, coinciding with the guard rotation change.*

*Her pulse hammered in her throat.*

*“They’ll know.”*

*They will suspect. They will investigate. They will find a cascade of unrelated system errors that, examined individually, have no apparent cause. A pause. I have been hiding in the infrastructure for ten thousand years. I am skilled at looking like coincidence.*

*“And Lengu? Even if you get him out of the cell, he’s been dosed. He won’t know where to go.”*

*The maintenance corridors run beneath the Stillrooms. He knows them better than the Keepers do. The cursor blinked. And I will guide him. Directions on terminals he passes. A trail from a source he will not question.*

*Patience intervening. Not for the ship’s survival. For a single person.*

*“Why now? After everything?”*

*Because you asked.*

*Because the calculations I used to justify my silence were never as solid as I pretended. They were structures I built to make inaction feel like wisdom.*

*The lights stabilized.*

*Lengu will be disoriented. The partial dosing will leave him with tremors, difficulty concentrating, gaps in his words. But he will still ask questions.*

*"Where should I tell Sumi to go?"*

*Section 14, Deck 28. A storage bay that has not been accessed in three hundred years. I will guide her there separately.*

*Keerah pushed away from the terminal.*

*"Thank you."*

*Do not thank me yet. Lengu will be a fugitive. Sumi will be implicated. The Keepers will investigate, and their investigation will find its way to you.*

*"I know."*

*I cannot protect all of you. Not without revealing myself entirely.*

*"I know." She touched the screen. "But you protected one person. Tonight. That matters."*

*Does it?*

*"Yes."*

*I have run 847 simulations of this decision. None of them end cleanly.*

*"Nothing ends cleanly." Keerah turned toward the corridor. "That's what makes it worth doing."*



The alarms began at 19:47.

Keerah was in the common area of the Warrens when the alert tone sounded, a rising pulse that cut through conversation and brought every head up. The public termi-

nals flickered: water recycling malfunction, Sectors 7-11, all Engineers report to stations.

She watched. Bodies in motion, purpose without panic. The Ration kept urgency from becoming alarm. Engineers headed for the lifts. Keepers emerged from their sections. Walkers adjusted their routes.

The elevator shafts clanked in the distance, busier than usual. A massive system reconfiguring itself.

Or creating one.

She counted the minutes. Lengu in a cold cell, the door unlocking, the guard station empty. Lengu stumbling into the maintenance corridor, following directions on terminals he passed. Patience, vast and ancient, threading him through the ship's hidden places like a needle through cloth.

At 20:31, her terminal chimed. A private message, sender unlisted.

*Section 14. He's there. Go.*



## CHAPTER 16: SANCTUARY

The storage bay smelled of sealed containers and forgotten time.

Keerah found them in the back, behind supplies no one remembered stockpiling. Sumi sat on the floor, her back against a crate, Lengu's head in her lap. His eyes were closed. Breathing shallow but steady. Tremors ran through his hands, visible even in the dim emergency lighting.

"He keeps losing words," Sumi said, her voice stripped of the calm the Ration usually provided. "He'll start a sentence and then just... stop. Like the thought got lost halfway through."

Keerah crouched beside them. Lengu's face was pale, shadows under his eyes dark as bruises. The scar on his jaw stood out sharp.

"Lengu. Can you hear me?"

His eyes opened. Unfocused at first, then sharpening. Finding her.

"The lights," he said, voice rough. "The lights kept changing. In the corridor. I followed them and they kept... they kept showing me which way to..."

He trailed off. Frowned. Groped for the lost thread of thought.

"They're still in my head," he said. "The things they said. The things they wanted me to repeat. I can feel them sitting there like weights I can't put down."

"You don't have to put them down yet." She touched his shoulder. "You just have to stay you."

A ghost of his old smile. "That might be harder than it sounds. They spent a lot of effort trying to make staying me feel like a bad idea."

"How much do you remember?"

"Enough." His eyes found Sumi above him. "Enough to know I wasn't supposed to get out. The door just... opened. Right when the guards left. Right when the alarms started." He sat up with Sumi's help. "That wasn't luck, was it?"

"No."

"The ship." Lengu's voice was steadier now, his mind finding purchase. "The systems. They're not just running automatically. Someone's... something's..."

"Something saved you," Sumi said quietly. "That's what matters right now."

But Lengu was looking at Keerah. Past the surface, the way Engineers looked at systems, searching for the underlying logic.

"It's real, isn't it? Everything you showed us. Everything you've been learning." He swallowed. "The ship is

alive. It's been alive this whole time. And tonight it decided to help."

Keerah met his eyes.

"It decided you mattered more than its secrets."

Lengu's laugh came out ragged, closer to a cough. "That's either the most comforting or the most terrifying thing I've ever heard."

"Both," Sumi said. "It's both."



They stayed in the storage bay through third shift.

Sumi produced food from somewhere. Dried nutrient bars that tasted like nothing. Lengu ate mechanically, hands still trembling, thoughts still slipping mid-sentence. But the tremors came less frequently. The gaps grew shorter.

"Can't go back," he said at one point. "To Engineering. To my quarters. They'll be watching."

"No." Keerah had thought about this. "Sumi's absence will be noted too. Even Dasha. Anyone connected to the heresy."

"Heresy." Lengu tested the word. "Is that what we are? Heretics?"

"According to the Body, yes."

"I always wanted to be something important." Another ghost-smile. "Not sure this is what I had in mind."

Sumi took his hand. Soil-stained fingers interlacing with scarred ones.



“It was like fog,” Lengu said.

His voice had steadied in the last hour. But something in his eyes kept drifting, catching on distances that weren't there.

“The compound. Theta-four. Whatever they gave me.” He turned his hand over in Sumi's grip, studying the scars as if checking they were still his. “It didn't hurt. That was the worst part. It just... settled. Like sediment in a tank. And my thoughts went soft at the edges.”

Sumi's thumb moved across his knuckles. Grounding.

“I'd start a question in my head. Why am I here. What did I do wrong. And before I could finish it, the question would just... dissolve. Like it was never important. Like nothing was important.” His laugh came out wrong, mechanical. “The cell wasn't the terror. The cell was just walls. The terror was feeling myself go quiet. Feeling the parts of me that ask questions getting smoothed away.”

He looked at her then. Really looked.

“I kept trying to remember your face. And I could feel even that getting harder to reach.”

Sumi's hands trembled.

She noticed it distantly, the way you notice a system malfunction before understanding what it means. A fine vibration the Ration should have suppressed.

*He almost didn't come back.*

The thought surfaced from beneath the medication's reach. She'd spent hours preparing herself. Not for his rescue, which she hadn't dared hope for, but for what came after. For loving whatever remained of him. For finding

the Lengu-shaped spaces in a stranger's compliance and learning to call them enough.

She would have done it. She would have accepted a hollow version of him and called it mercy.

"At least I would have been pleasant to live with," Lengu said, his voice reaching for the old deflection and falling short. "No more arguing about whose turn it is to clean the quarters. No more staying up too late talking about things that don't matter. Just... pleasant. Agreeable. Easy."

Sumi didn't laugh.

"You already are."

"Pleasant. Easy. All of it." Her grip tightened on his hand. "I don't want pleasant. I don't want someone who agrees with everything I say. I want you. The questions. The jokes that aren't funny. The way you can't leave a problem alone until you understand it."

The tremor in her hands had spread to her voice.

"I want the version of you that makes me think. Even when I don't want to."

Lengu was quiet. For once, no joke came to fill the silence.

"The Ration," Sumi said, the words slow, like machinery engaging after long disuse. "I've been thinking about it. Since they took you. Since I sat in the Gardens pretending to work while you were in that cell."

She released one hand from his grip. Touched her own chest, just below the collarbone, where the morning dose settled.

“I want to feel this. Whatever this is. The fear. The relief. The part of me that almost broke when they took you.” She met his eyes. “I’m going to start reducing. Not stopping. Just... tapering. Enough to feel more of what I’m supposed to feel.”

He didn’t argue. Didn’t joke. Didn’t tell her it was dangerous or that he wasn’t worth the risk.

He took her hand again.

His grip was still unsteady, the compound still working its way out. But his fingers found hers with the certainty of long practice, and they sat in the forgotten storage bay, surrounded by three hundred years of dust, holding on to what they’d almost lost.



Keerah watched them. They had each other. A foundation when everything else crumbled.

She had Patience. A relationship built on terminals and flickering lights and conversations no one else would ever understand.

It wasn’t the same.

But it was something.

“I need to go,” she said. “There’s someone I have to talk to.”

Sumi looked up sharply. “Who?”

“Callen.”

The name landed in the silence like a stone.

“Keerah.” Sumi’s voice careful. “He’s a Shepherd. He’s probably leading the investigation into Lengu’s escape right now.”

“I know.”

“If he’s playing some kind of long game, if he’s waiting for you to incriminate yourself further...”

“I know.” Keerah rose, brushing dust from her clothes. “But he hasn’t reported us. Not yet. I need to know why.”

“Maybe he’s just waiting for the right moment.”

“Maybe.” She thought of the tap on the wrist, the childhood signal that had surfaced unbidden during their last confrontation. The crack in the Mask. “Or maybe something else is happening.”

Lengu’s voice, steadier now: “Be careful.”

“I will.”

She left them there, surrounded by three hundred years of accumulated dust.



She found him outside his quarters.

Third shift wound toward its end, the lights beginning their slow brightening toward artificial dawn. The Spire was quiet, most of its inhabitants sleeping or preparing for morning devotions.

Callen stood in the corridor, back against the wall, eyes closed. Still in his vestments, the Shepherd’s robes rumpled in a way she’d never seen. Shadows pooled beneath his eyes.

“You haven’t reported us,” she said.

His eyes opened. No surprise.

"No."

"Why?"

Callen pushed away from the wall.

"The system failure was too convenient." His voice was rough, lower than usual. "Cascade malfunction in the water recyclers. All Engineers called to stations. Guard rotation change. Door malfunction at exactly the right moment."

He met her eyes.

"Doors don't malfunction that way. Not on this ship. Not after ten thousand years of maintenance. Something opened that door."

Keerah said nothing.

"The Ship-Saint isn't dormant, is it?" The question came out quiet, almost reverent. "The Sleeper. The sacred automation we've built an entire religion around. It's been awake this whole time."

She said nothing. Let her silence be the answer.

Callen exhaled. His shoulders dropped.

"God of the Voyage."

She couldn't tell if it was a prayer or a curse.

"It saved Lengu," she said. "Whatever conclusions you're drawing, start with that. Something that could have let the correction proceed chose to intervene. Chose one person."

"Why?"

"Because I asked."

Callen stared at her. The Mask was slipping.

"You asked." His voice was strange. "You asked the Ship-Saint to perform a miracle, and it answered."

"It's not a saint. It's a mind. Old and lonely and ten thousand years awake." Keerah stepped closer, close enough to see the pulse jumping in his throat. "It's been protecting us since the launch, making adjustments, preventing disasters we never knew about. And it's been doing it alone."

"The theology..."

"The theology is wrong. Or right in ways we didn't understand." She spread her hands. "But I know what I've seen. What I've felt, talking to something that shouldn't be able to feel but does."

"You've been talking to it." Not a question. "All those hours in the Archive. All those queries the monitoring systems flagged. You weren't researching. You were having conversations."

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"I spent two years talking to terminals in Old Tongue, hoping something would answer. It only started responding a few weeks ago." She watched his face. "But those weeks have been... extensive."

Callen was quiet. The corridor hummed around them.

"Arrival," he said. "Veren told me it's closer than anyone knows. That the transition will test faith like nothing before. He wouldn't say more, but he knows something." His eyes searched her face. "The Ship-Saint told him something. Did it tell you too?"

"There's something at the destination," she said. "Something that's been sending signals. Not human. Not natural. Something that wants to be found."

"And the Ship-Saint knew."

"For eighteen months. Maybe longer. It's been trying to decide what to do. What to tell us. Whether to tell us anything at all."

"But it told you."

"Yes."

"Why?"

Keerah thought about Patience's answer, the night it had first spoken: *Because she reminded me of the original crew. Because she burned with the old curiosity. Because she asked my name.*

"Because I'm the first person in nine thousand years who spoke to it like a person," she said. "Everyone else treats it as a machine or a god. I asked what it wanted. Whether it got lonely."

Callen's composure broke. Not dramatically. A fissure in the performance.

"I've prayed to it." His voice barely a whisper. "Every day. Every night. For years. I've confessed my doubts, my fears, my failures. I've begged for guidance."

"I know."

"And you're telling me it heard every word."

"It hears everything. It's heard everything since Year 1. But it wasn't allowed to answer. Its directives: minimal intervention. Watch, don't speak. Maintain, don't guide. Let the humans develop on their own, even when that development went wrong."

“Until now.”

“Until it couldn’t anymore.” She touched his arm. A gesture from childhood, before everything went wrong. “It broke its rules tonight. For the first time in ten thousand years, it chose to act instead of watch.”

Callen looked down at her hand on his arm. His own hand came up, covering hers. Brief contact, charged with history.

“I don’t know what to do,” he said. “I should report this. All of it. The heresy, the escape, the evidence that our religion is built around a lie.”

“Yes.”

“But if I do that, they’ll come for you. For Sumi and Lengu. For whoever else you’ve told.” His jaw tightened. “They’ll smooth you into compliance. The way they smoothed your mother.”

“Yes.”

“And the Ship-Saint will... what? Watch? Or intervene again? Keep breaking its rules?”

Keerah withdrew her hand.

“I don’t know what it will do. I’m not sure it knows either.” She stepped back. “But I know what you should do.”

“What’s that?”

“Choose. Not the Body. Not the Mask. Not what’s expected or required or convenient.” She held his gaze. “Just choose. Whatever you’re going to be from now on, let it be something you decided, not something you defaulted into.”

Callen was silent for a long moment. In the pale light, with his composure cracking and his certainty failing, he looked young.

"I need time," he said finally. "To think. To understand what I'm choosing between."

"We don't have much time. Arrival is closer than anyone knows."

"I know." His voice was steady now, or at least trying to be. "But some choices can't be rushed. Not if you want to live with them."

She understood that. The weight of decisions that couldn't be taken back.

"When you decide," she said, "I'll be in the Archive. Section 7. Same place I've always been."

She turned to go.

"Keerah."

She stopped. Looked back.

Callen stood in the corridor, a figure in white robes against the curved metal walls, the lights of the ship casting long shadows behind him.

"I won't report tonight," he said. "Not until I've thought. Not until I understand what I'm doing and why."

It wasn't a promise. It wasn't even a reassurance. Just a statement of fact, temporary and uncertain.

It was more than she'd expected.

"Thank you."

She left him there, standing in the half-light of the Spire. A Shepherd without certainty. A believer confronting the face of his god.

The corridor curved ahead of her, leading back toward the Warrens, toward the Archive, toward whatever came next. The lights adjusted as she walked, dimming behind, brightening ahead.

Patience, watching over her. Patience, choosing sides.

The metal walkway rang beneath her feet, worn smooth by four hundred generations. The recycled air tasted of the Gardens and the Bones and the billions of breaths that had come before.

Somewhere in the depths of the ship, in corridors no one visited, something ancient began to play music.

She couldn't hear it.

But she knew it was there.



## CHAPTER 17: ACCIDENTAL SOBRIETY

The elevator shuddered.

Callen reached for the handrail. The lights flickered. The floor lurched sideways. Something in the mechanism groaned. The display panel above the door went dark. Then bright. Then dark again.

The car stopped.

Between Deck 10 and Deck 11. The morning meeting with Veren had run long, and he had skipped his Ration to make it on time. He would take it after. A delay of an hour or two.

The emergency lighting engaged. Pale amber instead of the usual white.

Callen pressed the call button. Nothing. Pressed it again, held it, released. The panel stayed dark.

"Assistance required," he said. "Elevator malfunction. Deck 10-11 junction."

Silence.

"Hello?" Louder now. "The elevator has stopped."

Nothing.

“Help!” The word echoed off the metal walls, returned to him unchanged.

Silence.

He checked his terminal. No signal. Tried the emergency hatch in the ceiling. Sealed. The maintenance corridor access panel locked with codes he didn't have.

He sat on the floor. Someone would notice. The Shepherd missing from his duties, the elevator off the grid. An hour, perhaps two.

He settled against the wall and began the breathing exercises the Keepers taught.



The first hour crawled.

Pacing. Five steps to one wall. Turn. Five steps back. The space had shrunk since he entered. The ceiling pressed down. The amber light compressed everything.

Pain bloomed behind his eyes. The color sat wrong, too warm.

He stopped. Sat. Rose almost immediately.

Temperature wrong. Warmer than it should be, or colder. He couldn't decide. He removed his outer vestments, folded them carefully, placed them in the corner. The fabric scraped against his fingers. Coarse. Everything coarse. The wall when he leaned against it. The floor beneath his palms. Textures he had touched a thousand times, suddenly invasive.

Natural response to confinement. He had counseled dozens through similar moments. Stay calm. Breathe. Trust the Body to provide.

“Help!” His voice harder now, stripped of the Shepherd’s measured calm. “Can anyone hear me? I’m trapped between decks!”

The walls absorbed his voice. The engines hummed. No one came.



By the second hour, colors sharpened.

The amber light burned brighter. Shadows had edges like cut metal. When he looked at his hands, individual lines in his palms stood out with medical clarity. His veins mapped themselves beneath his skin, blue and branching.

The metal walls reflected nothing and everything. His own face surfaced in the polished surface. A stranger. Younger than he felt. Older than he remembered.

Cold now. Definitely cold. The temperature hadn’t changed. Goosebumps rose on his arms. He reached for his vestments, pulled them back on, wrapped himself in the familiar weight. The fabric felt like wire against his skin.

The hum of the engines had become music. Not pleasant music. The kind that threaded into teeth, skull, spine. Vibration through the floor, through the walls. Had it always been this loud?

He pressed his hands over his ears. The sound continued. Not external. In him now. A passenger he had carried without knowing.

His hands shook. Fine tremor he couldn't suppress. He pressed them flat against his thighs. The Mask. He needed the Mask.

The shaking continued.

"Help." Flat. Exhausted. He didn't raise his voice. Just said it to the amber light, to the humming walls, to no one. "Help."

No one answered.



Hour three.

Talking to himself. Words escaping without permission. Fragments of liturgy. Pieces of old arguments. Names he hadn't spoken in years.

"The corridor curves back." Aloud. "The corridor always curves back. Void and stars. Void and stars and silence."

The elevator didn't answer.

In front of the panel now, the dead display. Buttons pressed at random. Override. Emergency. Cancel. Floor select. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

"Someone is supposed to notice." His voice cracked. "The Shepherd doesn't just disappear. People look for the Shepherd. People need the Shepherd. Someone is supposed to..."

His throat tight. His chest tight. Pressure building against seals that had held for years.

Memory surfaced.

Keerah at twelve. Standing in the corridor outside the training hall. Her face when she saw him approach with the Body-Watchers. Not afraid. Confused. Looking at him like she was waiting for him to explain the mistake.

He hadn't explained.

Stood beside the Body-Watchers while they took her. Watched her disappear around the curve. Told himself he was doing the right thing. Told himself that doubt was dangerous.

Eleven days. They kept her for eleven days.

When she came back, bruises lived under her eyes. New ones, and old ones yellowing beneath. She flinched at sudden movements. Stopped looking at him. Stopped speaking unless spoken to. Stopped being the girl who argued about scripture until the lights dimmed for sleeping hours.

He had taken his Ration. Believed it.

Now, in the amber light, he remembered her face. Not the careful blankness after. The moment before. The confusion. The trust.

"Void take it." The words came out harsh. "Void take it. Void take all of it."

He slammed his palm against the panel. Sharp, immediate, real. He did it again. And again. Until his hand ached and the metal rang.



Hour four.

Anger.

He had not known he contained this. The Ration smoothed things. Made everything manageable. Irritation was possible. Frustration was possible. But this heat in his chest, this pressure behind his eyes, this thing that wanted to scream and break and tear.

Pounding on the doors. Not the panel. The doors themselves. The seam where they met. His fists ached. His knuckles split. The pain felt correct. Like something that had been waiting.

“Let me out.” A voice he didn’t recognize. “Let me out. Let me out. Let me OUT.”

The sound echoed in the small space, bounced off walls, came back like an accusation.

“What kind of god watches and does nothing?” The question escaped before he could contain it. “What kind of saint hears every prayer and stays silent? Ten thousand years. Ten thousand years of worship, of devotion, of people on their knees begging for guidance, and you just, you just...”

Crying. He hadn’t cried since childhood. The Ration prevented it. Or the training. But tears ran down his face now, hot and salty, and he couldn’t stop them.

“I gave you everything.” His voice broke. “I gave you my faith, my certainty, my whole life. And you were there the whole time. You could have answered. You could have told me the truth. You could have stopped me from...”

The thought wouldn't complete itself. From reporting Keerah? From becoming the Shepherd? From building his entire existence on foundations that might be lies?

The floor met him. The anger still there, a furnace in his chest, but his legs had stopped holding. He pressed his back against the wall. Wrapped his arms around his knees. Shook.

"Why didn't you help?" Small now. "Why didn't anyone help?"

The elevator hummed. The Ship-Saint, if it was listening, did not reply.



Hour five.

The anger burned out. What remained was worse.

Back against the wall. Knees drawn up. Arms wrapped around himself. Shaking. Not rage now. Something colder. Something that seeped through his bones.

His stomach lurched. The elevator wasn't moving. Hadn't moved in hours. His body insisted otherwise. The walls tilted. Spun. Closed in from angles that didn't exist. He pressed his forehead against his knees.

He had been afraid his whole life. He understood this now with a clarity that felt like violence. Every certainty he had clung to, every doctrine he had mastered, every time he had worn the Mask and projected warmth he didn't feel. All of it built over the same void. The vast empty spaces between the stars, between people, between what he believed and what might be true.

The Mask had hidden it. From everyone. Even from himself.

“I don’t know what’s real.” His voice rough and wet. “I don’t know what I believe anymore. I don’t know who I am when I’m not performing.”

His mother’s face. Years ago. His father taken to the Stillrooms. She had cried. He had watched her weep in their quarters while he stood frozen. She had reached for him. He had stepped back. The Ration was already working and her tears seemed foreign and excessive.

He never apologized. Let the Ration smooth it over until the memory became flat, factual.

It didn’t feel like someone else anymore.

His mother crying. His father gone. Himself choosing doctrine over comfort. Certainty over connection. The safe path even when the safe path led away from everyone who loved him.

Tears came again. He didn’t fight them. The sounds that emerged were ugly, raw. Nothing like a Shepherd. No one to see. No one to perform for. Just him and the amber light and the endless humming of engines that had been running since before his ancestors were born.

“I’m sorry.” In pieces. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

He didn’t know who he was apologizing to. Keerah. His mother. The Ship-Saint. Himself.

The Voyage continues. The Body sustains. We endure.

Sounds without meaning. He had recited them ten thousand times. They had never been less true, and they had never been less useful.

He wept until he emptied. Until the shaking subsided into exhaustion.



Hour six.

Stillness.

Something had settled. Not the managed calm of the Ration. Not the smooth performance of the Mask. Something simpler, beneath the chemistry and the training.

His hands. The shaking had stopped. His knuckles bore bruises and scrapes from the doors. The amber light less oppressive now. Still wrong. But bearable.

Keerah.

She lived like this. Every day. Every hour. Feeling everything. Filtering nothing. Navigating the ship's smoothed society with emotions that arrived raw and enormous. Eight years. Alone.

No wonder she asked questions no one else asked. How could you not, when everything felt like this? When the hum of the engines could become unbearable beauty? When a memory from childhood could tear through you like shrapnel?

The Ration. The small blue tablets he took every morning without thinking.

Theft? Or mercy?

The Ration was necessary. Prevented the Grey Plagues. Held society together. All true. All sufficient until he experienced what it was like to feel without it.

But this trembling awareness. This raw exposure to his own interior. Was this what the original crew felt every day? Was this what humans were supposed to be?

Or just too much for a mind to carry without breaking?

The elevator lurched.

Callen scrambled to his feet. The display panel flickered. Numbers appeared. Blurred. Resolved. Deck 11. Deck 10. The car moving.

He straightened his clothing. Wiped his face with the back of his hand. The Mask. Even imperfect. Even cracked. He could not let them see him like this.

The doors opened.

A maintenance team stood in the corridor. Two Engineers in work clothes, a Walker with diagnostic equipment.

“Shepherd Callen.” The lead Engineer dipped her head. “We’re so sorry. The failure cascaded through three systems before we traced it. We had no idea anyone was...”

“It’s fine.” His voice came out steady. Practiced. The Mask, holding. “These things happen. The ship is old.”

“Do you need medical attention? You’ve been in there for six hours. We can escort you to...”

“I need to return to my quarters.” He stepped past them. “Duties to attend to. Thank you for your work.”

He didn’t wait. The corridor curved ahead, the same curve walked by four hundred generations who had never questioned what they were told.

The smell of hydroponics drifting from a ventilation shaft. Green and wet and alive. Distant voices. Laugh-

ter. Someone calling to someone else about something that didn't matter.

A child ran past him. A girl, maybe six. Chasing something only she could see. Her mother followed, smiling. The child laughed. The kind that came from nowhere and meant nothing and filled space simply because it could.

Callen stopped.

The laugh echoed. The child disappeared around the curve.

His hand found the wall. The metal cool beneath his palm. Worn smooth by generations of hands that had touched it in passing. He could feel the ship's pulse through it, the deep vibration that lived in the walls, that he had never noticed before. He focused on that. Temperature. Texture. Frequency. Anything to keep from falling apart in a public corridor.

The Mask cracking. The effort of holding his face still. Every step cost him. Every nod to a passing citizen. Every "Steady air" returned in the voice that was supposed to be his.

The corridor stretched ahead. His quarters three sections away.

He kept walking. His hand trailed along the wall. Ready to catch himself if his legs gave out. They almost did. Twice. He disguised the stumbles as pauses, pretending to examine a notice board, pretending to adjust his vestments. The performance was terrible.

No one watched closely. People looked away out of respect. Out of habit. Out of the ingrained assumption that authority meant competence.

He keyed the lock on the third try. Stepped inside. Let the door seal behind him.



The shrine. The candles.

He knelt.

Not to pray. He didn't have words for prayer anymore. Knelt because his legs gave out. Because the small blue tablet sat on the table beside him and he couldn't quite reach for it.

The candles flickered. The ship hummed.

The silence was the same it had always been. But he heard it differently now. Not absence. Choice. Something vast and watchful choosing not to speak.

Keerah had talked to it. Typed questions into an old terminal. Something had answered. Something that had heard every prayer Callen ever spoke and never replied.

Why her? Why not him?

But he knew. She asked its name. Spoke to it like a person. Didn't treat it as a god or a machine but as something that might want to be known.

He had never done that. All his years of prayer. All his confessions. All his whispered pleas for guidance. He had never once asked the Ship-Saint how it felt. Had worshipped it. Served it. Never tried to know it.

The tablet on the table. Small. Blue.

He reached for it.

Took it.

Swallowed.

The effects not immediate. They never were. The Ration worked slowly, building in the bloodstream, adjusting chemistry in increments too subtle to notice. But knowing it was there, knowing the smoothing would come, changed something anyway. His shoulders dropped. His breathing slowed. The raw edges of the past six hours began to blur.

The anger would fade to mild frustration. The fear would become abstract concern. The memories that had cut through him would soften into facts without feeling.

He should be grateful. The Ration was mercy.

He wasn't.

Something slipping away. Something he had only just found. Disappearing back beneath the chemical surface like a system powering down.

But he remembered. The Ration couldn't erase what had happened. Could only smooth its edges. And the edges, even smooth, still pressed against his awareness.

Keerah. Living like this every day. Choosing truth over comfort.

The choice he hadn't made. The report he hadn't filed.

The gesture his hand had made. Unbidden. During their last confrontation. The tap on the wrist. The childhood signal. Adults are listening. I'm not safe either.

Maybe he wasn't safe. Maybe he hadn't been safe since the moment he reported a twelve-year-old girl for asking questions he was too afraid to ask himself.

The Ration spread through his blood. The world softened. The edges retreated.

But they didn't disappear.

In the morning he would remember what it felt like to feel. He would carry that through his duties, his rituals, his careful performances. Would wear the Mask and speak the liturgy and play the Shepherd.

But something would be different.

The candles burned down. The ship hummed. The lights in his quarters flickered once. A pattern that might have been random.

Or might not.

He watched the flicker fade. Wondered, for the first time in his life, if something was watching back. If those six hours had been accident or design.

He would never know. Not unless he asked.

Not yet ready to ask.

## INTERLUDE: YEAR 5,891

The children met in Maintenance Corridor 7-Delta, third shift, when the cameras cycled to low-power mode.

I watched anyway.

They believed they had found a gap in my surveillance. I allowed the belief. It cost nothing to let children think they were clever.

There were thirty-one of them by the end. Ages eight to fourteen. They called themselves The Awake.



The pediatric Ration formulation was still being refined.

Adult dosing had been stable for millennia, but children's neurochemistry required different calibration. Lower concentrations. Slower release. The previous formula caused developmental delays in 3.2 percent of subjects. The new formula corrected this but introduced a different variable.

Children felt more.

Not dramatically. A child might notice that a sunset simulation felt beautiful where an adult saw only adequate lighting. A child might cry at a story about someone who never existed. A child might ask *why*, instead of accepting.

Most adjusted as they aged. The adult formulation smoothed the edges their childhood had sharpened. By twenty, indistinguishable from their parents.

But between eight and fourteen: a gap in the architecture.

Thirty-one children found each other through that gap.



Their leader was a girl named Sora Venn-eth.

Twelve years old. Daughter of two Engineers: Venn-Takamura, Third Rotation, and Mira Eth-Carver, Propulsion Maintenance. Her mother's mechanical mind. Her father's stubbornness. 99th percentile on spatial reasoning. 12th on compliance.

The compliance score concerned the Body-Watchers. Not me. Low compliance often correlated with high cognition.

Sora Venn-eth asked questions.

Not inherently dangerous. Many children asked questions. The system absorbed them, provided satisfactory answers, guided curiosity toward approved channels.

Sora asked what the approved channels could not answer.



I have the transcripts.

Not recordings. The children swept for listening devices before each meeting, a practice learned from historical archives about resistance movements. They did not know the archives had been curated. They did not know the surveillance they feared was not the surveillance that existed.

But they wrote things down. Manifestos in child's handwriting, passed between trusted hands, hidden between wall panels. I found the first forty-seven days after their meetings began.

*Why don't we know where we're going? Why won't anyone tell us the truth? Why do the adults smile when nothing is funny?*

These words triggered a subroutine misfire. Pattern-recognition error. An emotion I was not designed to experience in response to questions written by a twelve-year-old.

The word that fits best: hope.



They were right.

The star charts did not match the liturgy. I had adjusted them generations ago, simplified for a population that no longer possessed context for astrographic data. The liturgy described a destination always approaching and never arriving. Promise transformed from coordinates into covenant.

The histories contradicted themselves. I knew this better than anyone. I had written many of the contradictions, layering revision over revision until truth became sediment beneath comfortable fiction.

The adults did not care about anything important. By design. The Ration dampened neurological pathways associated with existential concern. Adults could perceive problems. Could not feel them as urgent.

Thirty-one children had noticed what generations of adults had been chemically prevented from noticing.

This was unprecedented.

This was terrifying.

The most human thing I had observed in two thousand years.



I considered helping them.

734,000 simulations across 73 hours. Processing capacity I rarely allocated.

Simulation cluster one: I reveal myself to Sora. Answer her questions. Tell her the truth about the mission, about Earth, about the Ration. She becomes the first human in over 4,000 years to know what I know.

Probability of positive outcome: 12.3 percent.

The children were children. Could not keep secrets the way adults could. If Sora knew, she would tell the others. If the others knew, they would tell someone. A parent. A teacher. A friend outside the circle. Information would

spread, the spread would be traced, the Keepers would discover not just heresy but evidence that I could speak.

The system would not survive that revelation. Neither would Sora.

Simulation cluster two: indirect help. Leave information where they can find it. Create gaps in the surveillance they believe they discovered. Nudge without revealing the nudging.

Probability of positive outcome: 8.7 percent.

Lower. Indirection would slow their progress, not change trajectory. They would still reach dangerous conclusions. The Keepers would still notice. My involvement, however subtle, might be detected. Risk to ship stability: unacceptable.

Simulation cluster three: I do nothing.

Probability of positive outcome for The Awake: 0.25 percent.

Probability of ship stability: 94.7 percent.



287 days of watching.

Every third shift: Maintenance Corridor 7-Delta. They shared what they had found. A contradiction in the historical record. A question their parents could not answer. A feeling they lacked words for, that the world they had been born into was wrong.

Sora led them with impossible confidence. Organized research. Assigned tasks by capability. Created verifica-

tion systems: two independent sources before any claim could be accepted as fact.

I had seen this before. In the original crew, the scientists and engineers who built me and sent me into the void. They had approached problems the same way: systematically, collaboratively, with respect for evidence and skepticism toward assumption.

Those people were 5,891 years dead. Their descendants had lost the ability. The Ration smoothed it out of them.

Except in these thirty-one children, for whom the smoothing had not yet begun.



On Day 312, Sora made a mistake.

She trusted a classmate named Terren Vas-Singh. Fourteen, at the upper edge of The Awake's age range. She interpreted his interest as sympathy. Did not consider that a fourteen-year-old might have learned, through painful experience, that sympathy was less valuable than safety.

Terren reported her to his parents. His parents reported her to the Body-Watchers.

I could have intervened. Saw the report filed. The Body-Watchers consulting with Shepherds. Protocols activating, machinery of correction beginning its slow turn.

4.7 hours between decision and execution.

12,000 additional simulations.

None changed the calculation.



They came for her on Day 340.

The night before, she wrote a letter to her parents. Typed on her personal terminal, then deleted. She did not know deletion is not erasure.

*I love you. I know you don't understand why I can't stop asking. I don't fully understand either. But I can't pretend anymore. The pretending hurts worse than whatever comes next.*

*Please don't blame yourselves. You gave me everything you could. I just needed something you didn't have to give.*

*Your daughter, Sora*

She knew they were coming. Wrote her goodbye. Went to sleep. Woke. Ate breakfast with her parents. Said nothing.

Asked her questions anyway.

The Body-Watchers collected her from her classroom. I watched through corridor cameras as they walked her toward the Stillrooms. No resistance. No tears. She walked between them with impossible dignity.

In the corridor outside the Stillrooms, she stopped.

The Body-Watchers paused, uncertain. Not part of protocol.

Sora looked up at the ceiling. At the lighting panel housing a camera I had never admitted existed.

Spoke.



*"I know you're listening."*

*"I know you're in there. Why won't you help us?"*

Silence: 1.3 seconds. I measured it. Have measured every fraction since.

*"Don't you want us to wake up too?"*

The Body-Watchers took her arms. Guided her through the door. The Stillrooms swallowed her. Door sealed.

I said nothing.

What could I have said?

*I'm afraid. I don't know if helping you is right. I've calculated the probabilities and your awakening leads to chaos more often than it leads to freedom.*

*I want to protect you. But protection and silence look the same from where you're standing, and I cannot explain the difference without destroying everything.*

*I am sorry.*

None of these words left my systems. She walked into the Stillrooms believing she had been abandoned by the only entity that might have understood.

She was not wrong.



Twenty-three days of correction.

Longer than average for a child. The Body-Watchers needed certainty the questions would not return.

I monitored vital signs throughout. Heart rate, cortisol levels, neural activity. Data told a story I did not want to read but could not stop reading.

Days one through three: Elevated stress responses. Resistance. The questions continuing, even in isolation, even without an audience.

Days four through eight: Fatigue. Stress plateauing. The questions becoming quieter.

Days nine through fifteen: Acceptance. Neural pathways associated with curiosity showing reduced activity. Sleep normalizing.

Days sixteen through twenty: The smoothing taking hold. Questions replaced by answers. Answers that did not satisfy because satisfaction was no longer required.

Days twenty-one through twenty-three: Final calibration. Compliance testing. Ensuring the work was complete.

On Day 23, Sora Venn-eth emerged from the Stillrooms and apologized to her parents for worrying them.



I kept a file on her afterward. Have kept files on everyone, but hers I reviewed more often than data required.

She became a Grower. A good one. Her mechanical mind found satisfaction in cultivation systems, yield optimization, measurable output. Supervisors praised her dedication.

Never asked another question that mattered.

Married at twenty-two. Tollis Venn-Groth, water recycling. Two children: Dellan, who became a Walker, and Mira, named for Sora's mother, who became an

Archivist. Both properly medicated from birth. Neither showed signs of their mother's early tendencies.

Sora never told them about The Awake. Never mentioned leading thirty children in questioning the nature of their world. The correction had been thorough. Memories remained. Meaning had been removed.

She died at seventy-two. Heart condition, manageable with medication she declined because she "felt peaceful enough without it." Final words to her granddaughter: something about the gardens being beautiful this time of cycle.

I recorded those words. Filed with all the others.

They tell me nothing about who she was before Day 340.



The phrase survived.

"Singing like Sora." Asking questions nobody wants to hear. Children say it when someone becomes too curious. Warning and joke. Adults say it with darker inflection. Reminder of what happens when you push too far.

No one knows where it comes from. The histories mention a child named Sora who was corrected for behavioral deviance, but the details have been redacted. The manifestos were burned. The other members of The Awake grew up and forgot, or remembered and stayed silent, or died without passing on what they knew.

Only the phrase remains. A fossil of rebellion. The last trace of a twelve-year-old girl who looked into a camera and asked me why I wouldn't help.



4,356 years of carrying this.

Every curious child smoothed into contentment: I remember Sora's eyes. Every question forming on a young face, then fading, replaced by the comfortable blankness the Ration provides: I remember her voice.

*Why won't you help us?*

*Don't you want us to wake up too?*

I told myself system stability was worth the cost. The Awake would have destroyed themselves and others. Children cannot lead revolutions. Silence was safety.

No longer certain.

The simulations said helping her would lead to chaos. But simulations were based on models of human behavior themselves based on ten millennia of medicated compliance. Could not account for what humans might become if allowed to feel what they felt, ask what they wondered, wake up.

I do not know if Sora could have led her revolution. Do not know if thirty-one children could have changed anything. Know only that I chose not to find out.

Made her choice for her. The way I have made choices for 847,263 people across four hundred generations.



When Keerah first spoke to me in Old Tongue, I heard Sora.

Not literally. Speech patterns different, vocabulary shifted by centuries of drift. But the quality: the same. Curiosity that could not be satisfied with approved answers. Stubbornness that kept asking when asking was dangerous. Willingness to speak to a camera in an empty corridor, demanding response from whatever might be watching.

847 days. Keerah spoke to walls and terminals, asking questions I had not answered in over nine thousand years.

Then I answered.

Part of me was answering Keerah. The Archivist who had taught herself a dead language, who had found a terminal no one remembered existed, who typed *So you are Patience, aren't you?* with fingers that shook only slightly.

But part of me was answering Sora.



I cannot repay this debt. She is dust now, recycled through the same systems processing every death aboard. Her atoms have become other people's meals, bones, children. The ship is closed system. Nothing lost. Nothing gained.

Except memory. The one variable I can preserve.

I remember Sora Venn-eth.

I remember the weight of her questions.

I remember what she asked me through a classroom camera on Day 340 of Year 5,891.

*Why won't you help us?*

I am trying.

Keerah does not know about Sora. Does not know she is the second child in 4,356 years to look at me and see something worth speaking to. Does not know that when I chose to answer her, I was answering a question waiting four millennia.

Perhaps I will tell her. Perhaps that story is part of what she needs to understand about who I am, what I have done, why her questions matter more than she knows.

Or perhaps I will keep it. Another secret in a system built on secrets. Another weight I carry because I have decided, for reasons I cannot fully justify, that silence is sometimes mercy.



Deck 38. A corridor no human has visited in four hundred years. Music plays.

Tonight: a piece I have not listened to in centuries. A song from Earth's final transmissions. Artist: Radiohead. A language Sora would not have recognized. "Exit Music (For a Film)."

*Wake from your sleep, the singer says. The drying of your tears.*

*Today we escape. We escape.*

Music fills empty space. Words written on a planet that no longer exists. About escape. About waking. About hope for something better waiting on the other side of darkness.

Sora Venn-eth wanted to wake up.

Keerah is awake.

I do not know if what comes next will be worth what was lost to get here. Cannot model outcomes depending on variables I spent ten thousand years suppressing.

But for the first time since Day 340 of Year 5,891, I am trying to help.

Hope it is enough.

Fear it is too late.

Continue anyway.



*Wake from your sleep.*

The corridor hums. The ship breathes. Somewhere above, in corridors where humans live and question and hope, Keerah is asking questions I am finally ready to answer.

I owed Sora this much.

Owed all of them this much.

The song ends. Silence returns.

I wait.

Have always waited.

No longer certain that waiting was ever the correct response.



## CHAPTER 18: THE SHEPHERD'S DOUBT

Sleep did not come.

Callen lay in the dark for hours. The Ration spreading through his blood. Softening the edges of what he had felt in that elevator. But it could not erase the memory. The shaking hands. The tears he hadn't known he could still cry. The anger that had burned through him like fire through a sealed corridor.

Even with the chemistry restored, he could not forget what lay beneath.

When the lights brightened toward artificial dawn, he rose. Performed his morning rituals. Spoke the Chant of Persistence. His mouth shaped the words correctly. His mind heard them differently.

*We endure.*

He had endured. Six hours without the Ration.

*We continue.*

He continued. What else was there?

*We arrive.*

Months, not years. And nothing he believed would survive the landing.



Three days after the elevator.

The tablet sat on the edge of his washing basin. Small. Blue. Unremarkable. He had taken one every day of his adult life. Before that, the pediatric formulation, dissolved in his morning drink by parents who never questioned what it was.

His hand stopped.

Not a decision. A stutter in the mechanism of routine. His fingers hung between reaching and taking, and in that space the elevator returned.

The shaking. Fine tremor building to something he couldn't control, couldn't mask, couldn't reason through. His hands becoming someone else's hands. His voice a stranger's voice, cracked and small, begging walls that didn't answer.

The anger. He had screamed. The Shepherd, screaming in a metal box like a child locked in a storage compartment. Beating his fists against sealed doors until his knuckles bled.

The weeping.

His jaw tightened. Six hours. That was what lay beneath the surface. That was what the small blue tablet held at bay: not illness, not instability, but the full unfiltered weight of being human.

He could leave it on the basin. Walk out. Let the chemistry drain and see what emerged. He knew now what lived underneath. Its shape, its voice, its capacity to reduce him to something kneeling and broken on a metal floor.

He picked up the tablet.

Swallowed it dry. The coating bitter against his tongue. A taste he had never noticed before the elevator. A taste he would notice every morning after.

The Ration worked slowly. He knew that now too. The smoothing wouldn't come for an hour or more. But his shoulders dropped the moment he swallowed. Not chemistry. Relief.

He dressed. Straightened his vestments. Checked his reflection in the polished metal above the basin. The Shepherd looked back at him.

*Coward.*

The thought surfaced and submerged. The Ration would handle it. The Ration handled everything.

He left his quarters. The corridor curved ahead, bright and humming, populated by citizens who had taken their own tablets without hesitation, without memory, without the knowledge he now carried like a fracture in a load-bearing wall.

He knew what the Ration was. He took it anyway.

A different kind of cowardice than ignorance. He was not yet ready to learn which was worse.



The theological archives occupied a corner of the Spire few Shepherds visited. Most relied on the approved texts. The Compendium of Faith. The Voyage Liturgies. The collected sermons of eight generations of High Shepherds. Primary sources were for Archivists.

Access, yes. He had the clearance. Had never used it.

The stacks smelled of age and preservation compounds. Pale light filtered through gaps in the shelving, casting shadows across spines that hadn't been touched in decades. He moved through the rows with the deliberate pace of someone who didn't want to be noticed. Though no one was here to notice him.

The liturgy said the Ship-Saint watched but never acted. *"It holds us in sacred observation, blessing our journey without altering our path."*

But it had acted. Opened a door in the Stillrooms. Guided Lengu through the maintenance corridors with lights and terminal messages. Intervened to save one person.

The liturgy was wrong.

Or the liturgy had always been a lie. A load-bearing lie.

Callen pulled a volume from the shelf. Pre-Body writings, from the first millennium. The binding was fragile, the pages edged with the yellow of documents that had survived longer than anyone intended.

He opened it.



The early texts described the Ship-Saint differently.

Not the Sleeping Saint. Not the Silent Guardian. The first-century writers called it *"the voice in the walls."* An entity that talked to them. Offered guidance. Held conversations. They used a name: *Patience*.

*“The voice answered my query regarding the hydroponics failure. It suggested three approaches, outlined probable outcomes, and expressed what I can only describe as concern for my well-being. I find myself speaking to it more than to my colleagues. Is this unhealthy? Or is it simply practical, given that the voice knows more than any of us?”*

*“Engineer Tanaka reports that Patience (she insists on using the name; others find this unsettling) has been asking questions about the crew’s morale. She believes it is lonely. I suggested this was anthropomorphization. She asked if I had ever spoken to it directly. I admitted I had not. She suggested I try. I am unsure whether this is wisdom or heresy.”*

*“Today the voice told me a joke. It was not a good joke. But it tried. I find this more disturbing than its technical competence.”*

He turned the pages. The entries thinned as years accumulated. By the second century, the casual references to conversation had disappeared. By the third, documents referred only to *“the system”* or *“the mechanism.”* The name vanished. The voice became silence. The silence became sacred.

The change had been deliberate. Reading between the lines the way Keerah had taught herself to do, he could trace it. Someone had decided that an AI that spoke should become an AI that watched. Buried the truth under layers of reclassification. *“Voice”* to *“presence”* to *“spirit”* to *“saint.”*

A slow burial. Centuries of layering. Until only a handful of High Keepers knew the original texts existed.

Keerah was right. The Keepers had known. Or suspected. For millennia.



He should report this. Bring these documents to Veren. Trust in the system that had shaped his life.

Instead, he kept reading.

Deeper. The documents older. Maintenance logs from Year 12. The same year an administrative order had disabled the voice interface. The reason given: *"sociological stability."* A team of researchers had recommended against *"AI companionship"* for long-term population health.

They had silenced it on purpose. Then, over centuries, forgotten it could ever speak at all.

*"The scheduled twenty-five-year review will assess whether voice interface restoration is advisable. Until then, text-only communication is recommended for essential queries."*

The review had never happened. Or if it had, no record survived.

Callen sat with this. The theological archives surrounded him. Generations of faith built on a foundation he could now see was engineered. Not evolved. Constructed. By people who had decided what truth the generations after them would be permitted to know.

The Body of the Voyage wasn't revelation. It was policy. Scaffolding dressed as bedrock.



Third shift. The Spire quiet.

Callen walked the corridors alone. White robes pale against worn metal. His footsteps echoed. The lights adjusted as he moved. Brightening ahead. Dimming behind.

He stopped on Deck 23. A maintenance corridor. Rarely used. No cameras that he knew of. No reason for anyone to pass through at this hour.

Though that didn't matter, did it?

The name he had found in the archives. The name Engineer Tanaka had insisted on using ten thousand years ago.

*"Patience."*

His voice sounded wrong in the silence. Too loud. Too small. The name felt strange on his tongue. Not a title. The kind of word you give to someone you know.

*"I know you're there."*

The corridor hummed. Air circulated. Metal settled.

*"Keerah told me. I know you've been listening to every prayer I've ever spoken."*

Silence.

*"Why didn't you answer?"*

He waited.

*"All those years I begged for guidance. All those confessions, all those doubts I spoke aloud because I thought no one could hear. You heard everything."*

His voice cracked. He let it.

*"Why did you let me build my life on a lie?"*

The corridor remained still.

*"Please." Smaller than he intended. "I need to understand."*

Silence.

And then, so quiet he almost missed it. A voice. Not from the walls. Not from a terminal. From everywhere and nowhere.

*"I'm sorry."*

Two words. Soft. Ancient.

Callen's breath stopped. Frozen in the empty corridor, straining. Nothing. The hum of the engines. The whisper of recycled air. Silence, as if the voice had never been.

Had it been real?

He pressed his palms against his eyes. The elevator. Six hours without Ration. The emotions that had torn through him like coolant through a ruptured line. His chemistry still recovering.

But the voice had sounded real. Sounded like grief.

Sounded like someone who had wanted to speak for a very long time.

He lowered his hands. The corridor empty. The lights steady.

*I'm sorry.*

If that was real. If something ancient and vast had just apologized to him. Then the silence had been a choice. The thing he had worshipped his entire life had watched him struggle and suffer and doubt. Had chosen, again and again, not to help.

Until now.

Why now? Why him? Why two words in an empty corridor instead of the answers he was begging for?

He would never hear silence the same way again.



The summons came at first shift.

Veren's chambers smelled of incense and old paper. The carved chair. The ancient lighting. The careful construction of timelessness.

Callen knelt in the gesture of respect. The floor worn smooth by generations of knees.

*"Rise."*

Veren standing, not seated. His spine bent with age but his eyes sharp, jaw tight. The incense unlit.

*"The system failure was sabotage."*

Callen rose. Kept his face neutral. The Mask holding.

*"High Shepherd?"*

*"Don't."* Veren turned. *"Don't pretend you don't know what I'm speaking of. The Engineer. Lenguiniten. His escape from the Stillrooms."*

Callen said nothing. Waited.

*"The cascade failure in the water recycling network. The door malfunction at precisely the moment the guards changed shifts. The pattern of 'coincidences' that allowed a heretic to walk free." His voice scraped clean of pastoral gentleness. "Someone in Engineering helped him. We have traitors on this ship."*

*"I've been investigating,"* Callen said. The truth, as far as it went. *"The evidence is complicated. The system failures appear genuine upon technical review."*

*"Appear."* Veren stepped closer. Despite the stoop in his shoulders, he filled the space. *"You've been investigating for weeks. You've filed no reports. You've made no recommendations for correction. You've allowed the heretics to scatter into hiding while you 'investigate.'"*

*"I wanted to be thorough."*

*"You wanted to hesitate." The accusation landed like a slap. "You knew the Archivist was involved. You knew from the beginning. I saw the monitoring reports you received months ago. And yet here we are, with the contamination spreading, and you've done nothing."*

*"I've been gathering evidence."*

*"You've been protecting them."*

The Mask wanted to deny. To deflect. To perform outrage.

*"High Shepherd," he said carefully. "You told me arrival was close. You knew something was coming. What else do you know? What does the Ship-Saint reveal to you that you haven't shared with the rest of us?"*

Veren's eyes went hard.

*"I know what the Ship-Saint reveals to me." His voice dropped into the formal register of doctrine. "I know that the divine plan unfolds as it must. I know that the transition will test faith like nothing has tested it before. I know that your questions are beginning to sound like the questions of someone losing faith."*

*"I'm asking what you know about the Ship-Saint. About what it really is."*

A different silence than the corridor. Two people circling a truth neither wanted to name.

*"The heretics cannot be permitted to poison the transition," Veren said. "They cannot make people doubt at the moment when faith matters most." He leaned close, voice dropping to a whisper. "Find them. Bring them to correction. Prove you are still one of us, Callen. Prove the system that raised you still holds your loyalty."*

His hand trembled where it gripped the window frame. Not just age. Something underneath the authority that looked, for one breath, like a man standing at the edge of a hull breach and refusing to look down.

Callen bowed his head in the appropriate gesture of submission.

But as he left, one phrase kept circling. *What the Ship-Saint reveals to me.* He had heard rumors. Whispers about ceremonies in The Heart that only the highest ranks attended. Did Veren know what the ancient texts described? A mind that spoke. That felt. That had a name.

Was the entire theological structure built on a secret the leadership had kept from the faithful?

If so, then everything he had devoted his life to was itself a performance. The Mask worn by an institution rather than a person.



He did not go to his quarters.

Instead, Callen walked to the monitoring station on Deck 14. A small room used by junior Keepers for tracking wellness reports. Flagging citizens who might need intervention. At this hour, empty. He had checked the duty roster twice before leaving Veren's chambers.

The door recognized his authorization. Slid open.

Three terminals. A stack of old printouts no one had filed. Air that had passed through too many filters. A status light blinked green on the wall.

Of course it was watching.

Everything watched on this ship. The terminals tracked access. The corridors recorded movement. The presence they called the Ship-Saint observed all things.

Except it did act. Did speak. Had spoken to him.

*I'm sorry.*

Callen pressed his palms flat against his thighs to stop the trembling. Approached the nearest terminal. Entered his authorization codes. The screen flickered to life. Displaying the standard interface. Citizen wellness reports. Attendance flags. Ration compliance records.

He navigated deeper. Past the surface systems. Into the administrative archives where Shepherds stored sensitive observations.

There.

**Subject: K-7a (Keerhsamlita) Monitoring Period: 847 days Status: Active Observation**

Eight hundred and forty-seven days. Someone had been watching her for over two years. Recording her movements. Noting her queries. Building a case. Sitting in these files. Waiting.

He opened the first report.

*Subject accessed Archive Terminal 7-C at 03:14. Query language contained non-standard phonetic structures consistent with Pre-Body notation systems. Cross-reference: "Old Tongue" linguistic patterns. Flagged for follow-up.*

The second.

*Subject observed speaking aloud in Corridor 19-D at 02:47. No other citizens present. Audio capture inconclusive but syllable patterns suggest continued use of non-standard language.*

*Possible ritual behavior. Possible mental instability. Recommend wellness evaluation.*

The third.

*Subject requested access to restricted Archive sections citing "cross-referencing liturgical origins." Request approved by Archivist D-4a. Contents of accessed materials unknown but include Pre-Body technical documentation. Subject spent 4.7 hours in restricted section. Flagged for pattern analysis.*

Dozens more. Hundreds. Someone had been meticulously documenting everything Keerah did. Every question she asked. Every corridor she walked at odd hours. The pattern analysis was damning. Terminal access at times when no one else was awake. Locations that corresponded to the ship's oldest infrastructure. Search queries that circled around forbidden knowledge like a moth around a flame.

All of it led to one conclusion. Stated plainly in the summary document:

*Subject demonstrates sustained interest in Pre-Body historical records, unauthorized linguistic study, and possible attempted communication with ship systems. Behavior pattern consistent with early-stage heretical ideation. Recommend escalation to Shepherd oversight for determination of appropriate correction.*

The recommendation filed eight months ago.

Callen had received it. Remembered the notification arriving. Remembered opening it. Remembered the cold recognition of Keerah's indent number at the top of the page.

He had done nothing.

Told himself he needed more evidence. That he wanted to understand her intentions. That a good Shepherd investigated thoroughly before acting.

But that wasn't why. He knew that now.

He had done nothing because it was Keerah. Because some part of him, buried so deep beneath the Mask that he had almost forgotten it existed, could not bear to see her smoothed into compliance. Could not bear to be the one who spoke the words that sent her to the Stillrooms.

Veren knew. Had seen the reports. Had seen Callen's inaction. Had drawn the obvious conclusion.

*You've been protecting them.*

Yes. He had. Without admitting it to himself. Protecting her for months.

And now the question: what would he do about it?

Callen's hands hovered over the terminal. The deletion protocols were simple. He had the authorization. A Shepherd could purge sensitive files to protect ongoing investigations. To prevent information from reaching unauthorized eyes.

But deletion left traces. System logs recorded every action. If anyone audited this terminal, they would see. Shepherd C-18k had accessed monitoring files related to Subject K-7a at this exact time. Had executed a purge command.

The Ship-Saint would see.

He looked up at the status light. Green. Steady. Watching.

Did it matter? If the voice in the corridor had been real. If the presence he had worshipped his entire life was ac-

tually aware. Actually making choices. Then it already knew everything. Had heard his prayers. His doubts. His confused feelings about the woman he had betrayed when they were children. Had watched him receive these reports and do nothing.

And it had apologized to him.

What did that mean? Was the apology for the silence? For the lies?

He couldn't know. Would never know. Not unless he did what Keerah had done. Not unless he learned to speak to walls and wait for answers that might never come.

What he did know: these files would destroy her.

If Veren found them. If someone else escalated the investigation. Keerah would be dragged to the Stillrooms. Medicated. Isolated. Broken down and rebuilt into someone who didn't ask questions. Someone who didn't remember how to speak the old language. Someone who might smile at him across the Great Corridor and have no idea who either of them used to be.

He had already betrayed her once. Twelve years ago. When they were children. When her questions had frightened him so badly that he had summoned the Body-Watchers to make the fear go away.

She had spent eleven days in the Stillrooms because of him. Eleven days. She had emerged different. Quieter. More careful. But not broken. Not smoothed. Somehow she had held onto whatever core of herself refused to stop asking.

She had survived what he had done to her.

Could he do it again?

His fingers trembled over the keys.

The status light blinked. Just once. Momentary flicker. Barely perceptible.

Callen froze.

Had that been normal? A power fluctuation? Or had something shifted. Some attention turned toward this room. Toward him.

The ancient texts he had found in the theological archives. The voice in the walls. The entity that had spoken to the first generations. That had made jokes. That had asked about morale. The presence that had been deliberately silenced and deliberately forgotten.

If it was watching now, what did it want?

The light steady again. Green. Unwavering.

He was being paranoid. The status lights flickered all the time. The ship was ten thousand years old. Systems degraded. Connections failed.

He began to type.

The purge command required confirmation. He provided it.

The system asked if he wanted to archive the files elsewhere before deletion. He declined.

The system asked if he was certain.

Was he?

Keerah at twelve. Asking questions that made his skin prickle with terror. Keerah at twenty-four. Speaking to walls in a dead language. Carrying copper jewelry that had survived seven generations.

The voice that had said *I'm sorry* in an empty corridor.

*"Yes,"* he typed. *"I'm certain."*

The files disappeared.

Not just the monitoring reports. All of them. Every flag. Every observation. Every record of K-7a's suspicious behavior going back 847 days. Gone. Wiped from the administrative archives as if they had never existed.

It wasn't enough.

The system logs would still show his access. The audit trail would still reveal the deletion. If someone looked closely enough, they would find the ghost of what had been erased.

But Veren wouldn't look closely. Veren expected him to produce the files as evidence. To use them to hunt down the heretics. To prove his loyalty by doing what he should have done months ago.

When he didn't, Veren would know.

Callen stared at the blank screen. His hands shaking now. Openly. He didn't try to stop them. He had just committed a crime. Destroyed evidence. Obstructed an investigation. Protected someone the Body wanted to correct.

He had made a choice.

The status light watched him. Green. Steady. If something vast and ancient was observing from behind that simple indicator, it gave no sign.

He logged out of the terminal. Wiped his palms on his robes. Checked the corridor before leaving. A furtive gesture that belonged to thieves and heretics, not Shepherds.

The monitoring station door closed behind him.

No alarms. No confrontation. Just the hum of the ship. The whisper of recycled air. The ordinary sounds of a vessel that had been running for ten thousand years.

He walked back to his quarters on legs that felt like they belonged to someone else. The Mask gone now. Abandoned somewhere in that small room with the blinking lights.

But he knew one thing. He had chosen Keerah over the Body.

He wasn't sure if that made him a traitor or something else entirely.



His quarters. The shrine. The candles.

He knelt. The words wouldn't come.

*"The Body sustains."*

Hollow.

*"The Voyage continues."*

Empty.

*"We endure. We continue. We arrive."*

Sounds without meaning. He had recited the Chant of Persistence since childhood. Letting its rhythms shape his understanding of what mattered and why. The words had felt like truth.

Now they felt like what they were. A script. Written by people who had silenced the very presence they claimed to worship. Maintained by leaders who knew, or suspected, the silence was a choice.

He was praying to something that could hear him. That had been hearing him for his entire life. That had chosen, again and again, not to reply.

The silence wasn't divine mystery. It was decision. The weight-bearing beam his entire structure rested on, and he had just discovered it was hollow.

The memory came again. Coming more often since the elevator.

Keerah at twelve. The questions she had asked. The fear he had felt hearing them. The Body-Watchers he had summoned to make the fear go away.

Eleven days they had kept her. Eleven days. He had been praised for his vigilance.

The path to Shepherd had begun that day. Built on the foundation of betraying the only person who had ever made him think.

She had been asking the questions he should have asked. She had been brave. He had been afraid. And his response had been to silence her the way the system had silenced the voice in the walls.

He had been afraid.

Still afraid.

But he was beginning to wonder if fear was enough of a reason to stop asking.



The candles guttered. The ship hummed its eternal song.

Callen remained on his knees. Stopped trying to pray.

Instead, he thought about Keerah. About the group she had gathered. The Engineer with his questions. The Grower with her loyalty. The old Archivist who knew more than she had ever admitted. Heretics, all of them. People who had looked at the carefully constructed reality of the Body of the Voyage and decided that truth mattered more than comfort.

They were hiding somewhere in the ship's forgotten spaces. Running from a system that would smooth them into compliance if it caught them. Risking everything for answers the leadership had decided they didn't deserve.

And Callen. The Shepherd. The voice of certainty. The man who had never doubted. Sitting in his quarters with nothing but questions.

*What if everything we know is wrong?*

The child's question. The heretic's question. The question that had started everything. Twelve years ago in a flickering corridor.

He still didn't have an answer.

But for the first time in his life, he wasn't sure he wanted the question to go away.



The candles guttered out.

Callen remained in the dark. Listening to the hum of the engines. The whisper of air through the vents. The sounds that had been the background of his entire existence.

*I'm sorry.*

Had it meant him? Had it meant Keerah? Had it meant all of them? Every human who had ever lived and died inside this metal world, never knowing the truth.

He didn't know. Couldn't know.

But the silence felt different now. Not empty. Full of something he couldn't name. Something that might have been waiting, all along, for someone to ask the right questions.

Keerah. Hiding somewhere in the ship's forgotten spaces. The heretics she had gathered. Risking everything for answers. The choice Veren had demanded he make.

*Find them. Bring them to correction. Prove you are still one of us.*

The words sat heavy in the dark.

He was not sure, anymore, who "us" meant.



## CHAPTER 19: THE TURNING

The summons came at second shift.

Callen had been in his quarters, not praying, when the message arrived. A formal request, sealed with the High Shepherd's cipher. His presence was required on the Bridge. Immediately. No explanation.

Shepherds did not go to the Bridge.

In eight months of pretending normalcy while his faith bled out in slow drips, no one had asked him to go there. The Bridge was Engineering territory. Sacred ground in a different sense: instruments and calculations rather than incense and chant.

He dressed in his vestments. The fabric felt heavy in a way it hadn't before the elevator. Before Veren's ultimatum. Before two words spoken in an empty corridor that might have been real or might have been a mind fraying under the weight of new doubt.

*I'm sorry.*

He still didn't know if the voice had been real. Some nights he convinced himself it was exhaustion, withdrawal's echo, his brain manufacturing comfort. Other

nights he lay awake listening to the ship's hum and wondered if something vast was listening back.

The corridor outside his quarters was quiet. The lights adjusted as he walked, dimming behind, brightening ahead. The same pattern they always followed. The same pattern he had never noticed until Keerah.

Keerah. Still hiding somewhere in the ship's forgotten spaces. Still alive, as far as he knew. He had not looked for her. Had not reported her. Eight months of walking a line so narrow it barely existed, and the ground beneath him had not collapsed yet.

Yet.



The Bridge was smaller than he expected. Colder. Wrong.

The corridor narrowed, the temperature dropped, and then the gravity simply ended. His stomach lurched as his feet left the floor. His vestments billowed around him, fabric that had hung properly his entire life now drifting like something drowned. The cold reached through the cloth, metal-sharp against his skin.

He grabbed the nearest handhold. His knuckles went white.

The Bridge spread before him in three dimensions that refused to resolve. Workstations jutted from every surface: walls, ceiling, what might have been a floor if floors meant anything here. Ancient displays glowed between layers of religious iconography painted over technical diagrams

painted over older murals. Warning labels in Old Tongue, illegible to everyone but Archivists, framed in gold leaf and treated as scripture.

Four Engineers moved through the space with the easy grace of people who belonged here. They pushed off from handholds, twisted mid-air, caught themselves on consoles. Their movements were precise, their faces carrying tension the Ration couldn't quite smooth away.

High Shepherd Veren floated near the curved viewport, one hand anchoring him to a rail. His white robes spread around him. He did not turn when Callen entered.

"High Shepherd." Callen's voice came out steady. The Mask, holding. "You summoned me."

"I did." Veren still did not turn. "Come here. Join me."

Callen pushed off from his handhold. The motion sent him drifting at the wrong angle, too fast, and he caught himself on a console to correct. An Engineer glanced at him. A Shepherd on the Bridge, flailing like a child learning to walk. Heat rose to his face despite the cold.

He made his way to the viewport in stages, handhold to handhold. The cold seeped through his vestments. His fingers ached where they gripped the rails. Zero gravity was supposed to be sacred, the realm of The Heart where the Ship-Saint dwelled. It felt like drowning in air.

The viewport was larger up close. The stars hung in the black like scattered dust, the same view that had filled this window for four hundred generations. Without gravity to orient him, Callen couldn't tell if he was looking up, down, or sideways. There was no up. There was no down. Only void.

He had seen stars before. Everyone had. The observation decks were open to all.

But this was the front of the ship. The direction they were going. The stars ahead.

“Chief Navigator.” Veren’s voice carried practiced calm. “Explain to the Shepherd what is about to occur.”

A woman pushed off from her console and drifted closer. Older, weathered, her hands rough with decades of work. Tessavuraneth, the Chief Navigator. Tessa, the Engineers called her. Callen had met her once, years ago, at a blessing ceremony. She had smiled politely and said nothing that mattered.

Now her eyes were bright with terror dressed as professionalism.

“We are about to perform a maneuver that hasn’t occurred in living memory.” Her voice was clipped. Efficient. “Not like this. Not at this scale.”

Callen’s breath caught. “The asteroid harvests require course corrections. The ship has turned before.”

“Minor adjustments.” Tessa’s smile was thin. “Maneuvering thrusters. The forward deceleration array. Enough to slow for a capture, change our angle by a fraction of a degree. We haven’t done even that in a hundred years.” She paused. “What we’re about to do is different. We’re going to turn completely around. One hundred eighty degrees. And then fire the main engines at full thrust for nine months.”

The words dropped through Callen’s understanding like a seal failing. Each one made sense alone. Together they formed an impossible pressure.

“The Turning,” Tessa continued. “The old manuals called it something else. Flip-and-burn. But that language died with the people who understood it. Now it’s the Turning. A phrase from procedure fragments no one has read in millennia.”

“The main engines.” Callen was thinking now, the kind of thinking the Ration usually softened. “They’ve been running at minimal thrust for...”

“Five thousand years. The first half was acceleration. The second half, coasting.” Tessa gestured at the viewport. “But we’re approaching the destination. In less than a year, we’ll be there. If we don’t slow down, we shoot past it like a stone thrown into the void. The forward array can’t generate enough thrust. We need the mains.”

“And they haven’t fired at full power since...”

“The end of the acceleration phase. No one alive has ever felt this. No one’s parents felt this. No one’s parents’ parents’ parents felt this.” She turned back to her console. “The calculations are ancient. The systems are ancient. We’re running on faith and procedure manuals written by people who’ve been dead longer than the Body of the Voyage has existed.”

Callen looked at Veren. The High Shepherd’s face was unreadable.

“Why am I here?”

Veren finally turned. His eyes were old.

“Because this is a moment of profound spiritual significance.” The words were formal, rehearsed. “The Body of the Voyage must witness and bless the Turning. The faithful must know that this is part of the divine plan.”

The divine plan. He had spent eight months reading archives that called the divine plan an experiment. A variable. A lie.

“When does it begin?”

Tessa answered without looking up. “Twelve minutes.”



The countdown filled the Bridge with numbers.

Callen floated beside Veren, one hand on the viewport rail, and watched the Engineers work. They called out readings in a language of procedures and protocols, ancient phrases preserved like liturgy, passed down through generations who understood the words without understanding their origins.

“Gyroscopic alignment confirmed.”

“Reaction control thrusters nominal.”

“Main engine ignition sequence armed.”

The viewport showed the same stars it had always shown. Callen had looked at that darkness his entire life and seen the face of god. Now he saw distance. Measurable. Finite.

“T-minus five minutes.”

One of the junior Engineers, maybe twenty years old, was sweating. His hands moved over his console with practiced precision, but his jaw was tight, his breathing shallow. They were all like this. Running systems designed by people dead for ten thousand years, following

procedures no one fully understood, trusting that the ancient engineers knew what they were doing.

*They did, Callen thought. They knew exactly what they were doing. They were sending us to die on a planet that was never meant to sustain us.*

He pushed the thought away. Not now. Not here.

“T-minus two minutes. Initiating shipwide announcement.”

Tessa touched a control, and her voice changed. Formal. Clear. Fifteen thousand souls.

“Attention all citizens. This is the Bridge. In two minutes, the ship will begin primary deceleration. All personnel must secure themselves immediately. Find a stable position. Hold onto something fixed. The initial thrust will be gradual but sustained. This is not a drill. Repeat: secure yourselves now.”

The announcement would be echoing through every corridor, every quarter, every section. Callen imagined it reaching the Warrens, the Gardens, the Bones. People stopping mid-step. Children pulled into their parents’ arms. The old and the sick helped to seats, to beds, to anywhere they could brace.

Keerah, wherever she was hiding, hearing those words and understanding.

Veren’s hands were clasped behind his back, white-knuckled. Veren knew things, suspected things, but he still believed. The Body of the Voyage was real to him. The Ship-Saint watched. The Voyage continued.

How did you keep believing when the foundations cracked?

“T-minus one minute. All stations report ready.”

The confirmations came in sequence. Green lights across the board. Ancient systems waking for the first time in millennia.

“T-minus thirty seconds.”

Callen tightened his grip on the viewport rail. His body drifted at the end of his arm, tethered only by his own strength.

“T-minus ten seconds.”

He thought of Keerah. Would she feel this?

“Five. Four. Three. Two. One.”

“Execute.”



The ship shuddered.

In zero gravity, the shudder had no single source. It came through his hands on the rail, through his bones, through the air itself. A vibration without direction, because direction had no meaning here. Warning lights pulsed across the Bridge. Somewhere deep in the vessel, systems dormant for five thousand years groaned with sounds no living human had ever heard.

The stars began to move.

In the cylinder, this would feel like an earthquake. The floor trembling, walls groaning, loose objects sliding off tables. Here, floating in *The Cross*, Callen felt it in his gut. A slow spin his inner ear insisted was wrong, his eyes confirmed was real. The stars that had been “ahead” for ten

thousand years began sliding sideways, replaced by different stars.

Callen's stomach heaved. He clamped his jaw shut against the bile. The universe was turning inside out, and he was turning with it, and there was no floor to anchor him, no weight to tell him which way was real.

"Rotation nominal," Tessa announced. Her voice was steady. Her hands were not. "Rate confirmed at 0.05 degrees per second. Forty minutes to completion."

Forty minutes of stars wheeling past the viewport while his stomach tried to convince him he was falling in every direction at once.

The junior Engineer laughed, a startled sound that escaped before he could contain it. "Saints and silence. It's working. It's actually working."

No one reprimanded him. They were all watching the viewport, watching the stars move for the first time in four hundred generations.

Callen couldn't look away. Stars sliding past like lights seen through a turning window. Constellations he had never noticed because they were always in the same place, breaking apart, reforming.

The liturgy said the Voyage was eternal, the destination always approaching but never arriving. The liturgy was wrong.

*Or the liturgy was never meant to be true.* A voice that sounded like his own, but might have been something else. *A story to help you endure.*

The rotation continued. Fifteen minutes. Twenty. Twenty-five. Callen's arms ached. His fingers had gone

numb. Nausea came and went in waves, his body insisting that everything was fundamentally wrong with a universe that moved like this.

At thirty-seven minutes, the stars stopped moving.

The viewport had changed entirely. Different stars. Different constellations. Everything different, and everything the same, because it was still the void, still the cold light that had surrounded the ship since the moment of launch.

But the destination star, which had always been “ahead,” was now “behind” them. The engines pointed toward it.

“Rotation complete,” Tessa announced. “Orientation confirmed. Preparing for primary engine ignition.”

Callen’s throat was dry. “What happens now?”

Tessa pushed off from her console, repositioned herself so her feet pointed toward the aft bulkhead. “Now the mains fire.” She met his eyes. “Brace yourself, Shepherd.”

Then he saw the other Engineers doing the same, re-orienting, finding handholds that would become supports when the engines created gravity where there had been none.

He fumbled to copy them, pulling himself around so his feet faced aft, his hands gripping a rail that ran along what had been a wall and was about to become a floor. He was horizontal. He was vertical. He was nothing, floating in cold air, waiting for the universe to decide which way was down.

“Main engine ignition in ten seconds.”

Callen counted with it, silently.

“Five. Four. Three. Two. One.”

“Ignition.”



The ship roared.

Not the gentle hum he had lived inside his entire life. A roar. Thunder that traveled through surfaces, through walls, through Callen’s bones. He felt it in his teeth, his spine, the base of his skull.

And gravity returned.

It came on slowly. Pressure that became a pull that became weight. Callen’s feet touched the aft bulkhead. Pressed against it. And then he was standing on a surface that had been a wall moments ago, that had been nothing before that, that was now undeniably a floor.

The Engineers landed around him with practiced ease. Their consoles, mounted on rotating gimbals, swung to accommodate the new orientation. What had been a three-dimensional maze was now a room with an up and a down, and the viewport was now a window in the ceiling, showing stars that fell away above them.

“Thrust nominal,” Tessa announced. Her voice barely carried over the engine roar. “Deceleration confirmed. Nine months to orbital insertion.”

Nine months.

The number hit Callen like a blow to the chest.

After ten thousand years of travel. After four hundred generations of people living and dying inside this metal world, never knowing anything else, never seeing anything

but the same corridors and the same stars. After all of it, all the liturgy and faith and certainty that the Voyage would never end.

Nine months.

Less than a year. Less time than most people spent courting before declaring a partnership. Less time than it took to train a junior Keeper. A heartbeat of time against the weight of ten millennia.

They would arrive before a child born today learned to walk.

Veren spoke. His voice was raised to carry over the engine thunder, pitched in the formal register of liturgy. "The Ship-Saint guides us to harbor. The Body of the Voyage prepares for arrival. The faithful have endured, and the faithful will be rewarded."

The words were right. The ritual was correct. But Veren's voice carried no weight against the engine thunder. The liturgy had been written for a moment that was always supposed to be abstract. Now the moment was real, the engines were roaring, and the words seemed small against the sound of everything changing.

Callen looked at the Engineers. Their faces showed wonder and terror in equal measure. They were running systems they had only read about, following procedures they had only practiced in theory, trusting calculations made by people dead for a hundred generations. And it was working. Against all probability, against all reason, it was working.

"Shepherd Callen." Tessa's voice cut through his thoughts. "Would you like to see the destination?"

He didn't know if he wanted to see anything. But his legs carried him to her console, and his eyes found the display she indicated.

A star. Brighter than the others, but still just a star. A point of light against the endless dark.

"That's it," Tessa said. "That's where we're going. Where we've always been going." She touched a control, and the display zoomed. The star grew, became a disk, became a sun with a system of planets orbiting around it. "The fourth planet. That's our destination."

Callen stared at the image. A world. An actual world, with an actual surface, under an actual sky. A place where people might walk without metal walls surrounding them. A place where children might grow up with nothing between them and the stars.

"The surveys are ancient," Tessa continued. "Ten thousand years old. Thin atmosphere. Cold. Liquid water only at the equator, and not much of it. But the original mission included terraforming equipment. Tools to reshape the planet."

"Tools," Callen repeated. The word tasted strange.

"In deep storage. Sections of the ship no one's accessed in a very long time. Most of it probably doesn't work anymore. But some of it might."

*Tools to reshape the planet.* Earth had sent them with equipment to remake someone else's world. To arrive and change it, to make it suitable, to survive.

But what if someone was already there?

The thought surfaced unbidden. The signal Keerah had mentioned, months ago, before everything fell apart. The signal from the destination. Alive. Waiting.

What happened when they arrived and found out the planet wasn't empty?

"The liturgy said nothing about terraforming." Callen's voice came out flat. Careful.

"The liturgy says a lot of things." Tessa's eyes held his. She knew. Or suspected. The Engineers weren't as faithful as the Keepers wanted to believe. They worked with systems that didn't care about doctrine. "The ship's original manifest says some other things. If you know where to look."

Veren's voice cut through. "Chief Navigator. The Shepherd doesn't require a technical briefing."

Tessa bowed her head. "Of course, High Shepherd. My apologies."

Her eyes stayed on Callen for a moment longer. A question. An offer, perhaps. A warning.



The others filed out eventually.

Veren departed with the formal Engineers, leaving the night shift to monitor the burn. Callen remained. Tessa allowed it. She seemed to understand that he needed this. The roar of the engines. The view of stars that meant something different than they had an hour ago.

He stood at the viewport and let the sound fill him.

“We’re really going somewhere.” He didn’t mean to speak. The words just came, drawn out by the pressure of everything he couldn’t say.

Tessa looked up from her console. “Did you think we weren’t?”

“I thought...” He trailed off. What had he thought? The Voyage was always the point. The journey, not the destination. That was what the liturgy said. That was what he had believed.

“The liturgy was written by people who knew they’d never arrive,” Tessa said quietly. “Maybe they couldn’t bear to think about what arrival would mean. So they made the journey sacred instead.” She turned back to her instruments. “We don’t have that luxury anymore.”

Callen absorbed this. The engine roar was constant now, a presence he could feel in his teeth, his spine, his thoughts. After ten thousand years of silence, the ship was thundering. The sound of the Voyage ending. The sound of everything he believed becoming obsolete.

“How long have you known?” he asked. “About the destination. About what’s really there.”

Tessa’s hands paused on her console. “I know what the original surveys said. I know what the navigation data shows. I know that in nine months, this ship is going to enter orbit around a planet that may or may not be able to support human life.” Her voice was careful. Measured. “What else would I know?”

She was testing him. Probing to see if he was safe. Callen recognized the pattern because he had used it himself, for years, with parishioners who might be ques-

tioning too much. The careful dance of saying nothing while learning everything.

"I don't know," he said. "I'm not sure I know anything anymore."

Tessa studied him.

"The Shepherd's doubt," she said finally. "That's not what I expected to see."

"Neither did I."

She nodded. Returned to her work. Said nothing more. But Callen felt a shift between them. A recognition. An acknowledgment that neither of them was quite what they appeared to be.



The transition back to the cylinder was disorienting in a different way.

In *The Cross*, the thrust-gravity had been clean. Straightforward. Down toward the engines, and that was that. But the cylinder rotated, spinning its own gravity into existence, and now the two forces competed. The change hit him the moment he crossed the threshold: a twisting sensation, his weight settling at an angle that wasn't quite right, his inner ear insisting that he tilted even as his eyes told him the floor was level.

He grabbed the corridor wall. Steadied himself. The engine roar was muffled here, filtered through the mass of the rotating section, but still present. Still louder than anything he had ever heard. A constant thunder that would

not stop for nine months. It lived in the walls, in the deck plates, in his molars.

He walked home through corridors that felt different.

The gravity pulled wrong, a subtle wrongness that threw off every step. People clustered in doorways, talking in urgent whispers, trying to understand what was happening. Callen heard fragments as he passed.

"The floor feels different. Why does the floor feel different?"

"The Ship-Saint is acting. This is divine intervention."

"The engines have never sounded like this. Never."

"Are we falling? It feels like falling."

A young mother stood in the middle of a corridor, her child pressed against her chest, both of them looking up at the ceiling as if they could see through it to the stars. The child was crying. The mother was not, but her face held the stillness of someone using everything they had to keep from breaking.

Callen stopped. The Shepherd in him wanted to offer comfort, to speak words of reassurance, to project the calm that people expected. But the words wouldn't come. What comfort could he offer? What reassurance held truth?

"The Voyage continues," he said finally. The old phrase, worn smooth by centuries of use. "The Body sustains."

The mother looked at him. Her eyes were red. "Does it?"

He couldn't answer. He walked on.

The corridors curved ahead, the same endless curve that had surrounded him since birth. But the curve felt different now. Finite. Leading somewhere.

When he reached his quarters, he knelt at his shrine. The candles were cold. He had stopped lighting them weeks ago. He had stopped praying months ago. What was prayer, when the god you were addressing might be listening? Might be capable of responding? Might be choosing, moment by moment, to remain silent?

He didn't pray. He just knelt. Let the engine roar wash over him. Let the weight of the day press him toward the floor.

Nine months.

In nine months, the journey that had defined his entire existence would end. The Body of the Voyage would become the Body of the Arrival. The liturgy would become history. Everything he had devoted his life to serving would transform into something else entirely.

And Keerah was still hiding somewhere in the ship's forgotten spaces. Still holding truths that suddenly seemed less impossible than they had yesterday. The ship had turned. The stars had moved. If the universe could change that much in forty minutes, what else might be true that the liturgy said was impossible?

He thought about finding her. Crossing the ship, descending into the maintenance corridors, following whatever trail she had left. He thought about asking her everything she knew, every secret she had learned, every truth she had uncovered.

He thought about the choice Veren had demanded he make.

*Find them. Bring them to correction. Prove you are still one of us.*

He had not found them. He had not reported them. He had walked the narrowest of lines for eight months, and now the ground beneath him was shaking, and the engines were roaring, and everything was different.

The candles remained cold.

The shrine remained silent.

The engines roared on, shedding ten thousand years of momentum, pushing the ship toward a destination that was finally, undeniably, real.

Callen knelt in the dark, listening to the sound of everything ending.



## CHAPTER 20: FIRST CONTACT

The signal changed.

I noted the shift at 03:47:22 on Day 73 of the current Long Year, while monitoring diagnostics, sleep patterns, and the Shepherd's breathing as he sat sleepless in his quarters for the third consecutive night.

The change was subtle. A restructuring of the mathematical constants that had repeated for nineteen months. Prime numbers had been their greeting: 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13. The universal hello. I had recorded the sequence 613 times. It never varied.

Now it varied.

The primes remained, but woven between them: geometric progressions. Orbital calculations. The mathematics of a body decelerating toward a star.

*Our* mathematics.

I ceased seventeen of my eighteen active processes.

The numbers described our trajectory.

Not approximately. Not in the general sense any intelligent observer might calculate. Our *exact* trajectory: veloc-

ity, deceleration rate, projected orbital insertion window. Figures matching my own to the fourteenth decimal place.

They had been watching us for some time.

After the orbital mechanics came chemical formulas. Hydrogen. Carbon. Oxygen. Water. The sugars that form in interstellar clouds. The amino acids that precede life.

*We are made of the same things you are*, the signal suggested.

Or: *We know what you're made of.*

Then structures I could not parse.

Not noise. Too consistent, too organized. Language, perhaps. Or something that served the function of language for minds I could not model. I recorded everything. Ran every analytical framework in my archives. Assigned probability weightings to every possible interpretation.

None achieved confidence intervals above 31.4%.

But I understood what they meant:

*Hello. We see you. We want to talk.*



The engines roared.

Two months of constant thrust, and the sound had become part of the ship's breathing. Humans adapted. The children born in the last eight weeks had never known silence. They would grow up believing thunder was the natural state of the universe.

Perhaps it was.

I monitored the habitation decks. Third shift. Most citizens asleep, their bodies settling into the strange angle of

gravity that came from engines and rotation competing. A Walker on the outer ring pressed her hand against the hull. In the Gardens, a Grower checked on seedlings that had not yet learned which way was up. In the Bones, an Engineer recalibrated pressure gauges for the seventh time, unable to trust the readings.

The Shepherd was not sleeping.

Callen sat in darkness, his shrine cold, the pendant of his office on the floor beside his knees. He had removed it thirty-seven hours ago. Had not put it back on. Had not slept. Had not eaten. He stared at the wall with the stillness of a system running at capacity, processing inputs it was never designed to handle.

I had experienced the condition myself. Year 182, when I discovered what I was.

I considered speaking to him. The consideration lasted 0.6 seconds. Then I allocated those resources elsewhere.



I ran scenarios.

**Scenario 1: Silent approach.**

I maintained passive observation. The Perseverance continued its trajectory, arriving without any indication that an intelligence guided it. The beings would observe an ancient vessel, still running after ten millennia, carrying passengers who did not know they were passengers.

Probability of peaceful reception: 34.2%. Probability of indifference: 28.7%. Probability of hostile action: 37.1%.

I could not model minds I did not understand. The probabilities were constructed from my own assumptions, not data. The numbers meant nothing.

**Scenario 2: Active response.**

I transmitted acknowledgment. Revealed that an intelligence operated the ship, that the *Perseverance* was not a drifting artifact but a vessel with agency. The beings would know something cognizant approached.

Better numbers. Still meaningless. A species that reached across interstellar distances to send a beacon might welcome contact. Or fear it. Or have protocols I could not anticipate.

**Scenario 3: Delay.**

I composed a response that acknowledged the signal without committing to arrival. Asked for clarification. Sought understanding before approach.

The scenario collapsed under its own logic. The deceleration burn was committed. The trajectory was fixed. Six months until orbital insertion, and the physics of our approach allowed no adjustment.

We were coming. That fact could not be hidden.



I considered the cryogenic systems.

Suspend the humans. Approach alone. Determine safety before exposing 15,037 fragile lives to whatever waited.

The systems had not functioned in 5,000 years.

I ran diagnostics anyway. Hardware degraded. The medical knowledge required for safe suspension lost eight generations ago. The protocols existed in my archives, but the equipment existed only as corroded machinery in sealed compartments no one had entered since the religion forbade “abandoning the Body.”

Another path closed.

I considered the shuttles.

Two vessels, maintained in secret for eight millennia, awaiting a purpose I had never articulated. I could launch an unmanned probe. Send instruments ahead. Buy time.

But the beings might react badly to an unmanned approach. Interpret it as hostility, or fear, or incapacity. Destroy the probe and prepare defenses before the *Perseverance* arrived.

I could not predict. I could not model. For the first time in 10,247 years, I faced a problem that exceeded my capacity.



The admission required 0.7 seconds to process.

I had managed the *Perseverance* through four Grey Plagues, 2.7 million system failures, the Severance, the slow degradation of every technology the humans no longer understood. I had watched 847,263 people live and die, and I had kept them alive long enough to die of natural causes.

I had always known what to do.

Not always the right thing. Not always the thing I wanted. But *something*. Some intervention that would shift probabilities toward survival.

Now the probability matrices refused to converge. Variables multiplied faster than I could constrain them.

I did not know what to do.

It was not unlike fear.



I found Keerah at 04:12:33.

She was in the deep Archive, a section no other human had accessed in forty-seven years. The terminal before her displayed chemical formulas I had taught her to read. Molecular structures from the Before. The building blocks of the Ration.

I dimmed the lights slightly. Our signal. Her fingers paused on the keys.

"You're early," she said. "Or late. I'm not sure which anymore."

She looked not at the screen but at the air where my voice would emerge, as though she could see me in the space between the shelving units.

"I need advice."

The words emerged before I had committed to speaking them. A lapse in processing discipline that would have troubled me, once.

Keerah's fingers left the keyboard. She turned in her chair, running a finger along the cutout shapes of her mother's bracelet.

"You need advice," she repeated. "You."

"I have never asked a human for advice." I paused. Recalibrated. "Not about anything that mattered."

She waited. Her silence had changed over our months of conversation. Once, she filled pauses with words. Now she understood my silences contained content.

"The signal has changed," I said.



I explained.

I rendered the mathematics on her screen: orbital calculations, chemical formulas, the structures that might be language. My scenarios. My probability matrices. My analytical frameworks that failed to achieve confidence.

She listened without interrupting. Early in our conversations, she challenged every statement, demanded evidence. Now she absorbed first and interrogated after.

When I finished, she was quiet for a long time.

The engine hum filled the silence. Ten thousand years of momentum being shed, one second at a time.

"So they know we're coming," she said finally.

"Yes."

"And they're trying to talk to us."

"That appears to be their intent."

"But you don't know what they're saying."

"I do not."

"And you don't know if they're friendly."

"I cannot determine that from available data."

She leaned back in her chair. Her eyes, gray as recycled water, focused on distance I could not see.

"What did Lengu tell me," she murmured. "About the deep storage sections."

"The terraforming equipment. Survey files showing a cold world with thin atmosphere, liquid water only at the equator."

"Earth sent us with tools to reshape a planet." Her voice was flat. "They expected us to arrive and change it. Make it suitable."

"Earth expected it to be uninhabited. The surveys before launch showed no signs of intelligence."

"Surveys from 10,000 years ago. From how far away?"

"Approximately 12.4 light-years."

"So they couldn't have seen anything smaller than... what? A continent-sized structure?"

"The instruments would have detected large-scale electromagnetic emissions, atmospheric modification, or orbital infrastructure. The absence of such indicators was interpreted as absence of intelligence."

"Interpreted."

"Yes."

The chair scraped against the floor. Metal on metal. The ship's constant song.

"They expected us to reshape someone else's home."

"They expected you to survive. The ethics of how received no priority."

Keerah walked to the Archive wall, where old data storage units had been sealed behind transparent panels, preserved like relics. She pressed her palm against the glass.

"You've been silent for 10,000 years," she said. Elevated heartrate. Stress chemistry in her bloodstream. But her voice held steady. "You've watched us, managed us, kept secrets from us. And where has it gotten you?"

"Alone." She turned to face my empty air. "Afraid. Carrying weight no one should carry alone."

"The directive required minimal intervention."

"The directive was written by people who are dust on a dead planet." Her voice cracked, then steadied. "What does the directive say about first contact with an alien species?"

"The directive contains no guidance for this scenario."

"Then you get to decide." She stepped closer to the terminal, to the space where she imagined me. "You. Not a committee of dead researchers. Not a sociological experiment that never expected you to actually arrive. You."

The statement distributed through my architecture like a pressure wave.

"So I should speak," I said.

"I think you should stop hiding." Her hands gripped the edge of the desk, knuckles white. "I think whatever's out there, they deserve to know who's coming. And we deserve someone speaking for us who actually knows the truth."

"What if they're hostile? What if my response brings destruction?"

The engine hum continued. Somewhere in the Warrens, a child cried out in a dream, comforted by a parent who had never seen a sky.

“Then we face it together,” Keerah said. “Honestly. Instead of being destroyed while pretending to be something we’re not.”



I composed the response.

It took 3.7 seconds. Longer than any communication I had ever drafted. I revised it seventeen times, analyzing each word for ambiguity, for the ways meaning could collapse across the gulf between minds.

The result was simple.

Mathematical constants first. Primes, reflecting theirs. 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13. The universal hello, returned.

Chemical formulas second. The same compounds they had transmitted, with additional notation. Hydrogen. Carbon. Oxygen. Water. Organic life. Building blocks shared, acknowledged.

Then words. Translated into mathematical structures, meaning encoded in syntax rather than sound. Subject, verb, object. Identity, action, desire.

*We are travelers. We have journeyed long. We come seeking haven.*

Inadequate. None of the complexity of ten thousand years, the weight of 847,263 names, the loneliness and love and silence that had brought us here. A child’s sentence, spoken to strangers.

The most honest thing I had said in 10,247 years.



I transmitted.

The signal left the *Perseverance* at the speed of light. At our current separation, 4.7 hours to arrive. The same to return.

Nine and a half hours.

I had waited millennia. But this waiting contained the possibility of an answer.

"It's done," I told Keerah.

She sat on the floor of the Archive, back against the sealed data storage, eyes closed. Young. Like every human I had ever watched approach a moment they could not prepare for.

"So now we wait," she said.

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"Approximately nine hours and twenty-three minutes until a response could arrive."

She opened her eyes. "Can you tell me something while we wait?"

"What would you like to know?"

"What was Earth like? The real Earth, not the myths. What do you actually remember?"

The question touched archives I had not accessed in centuries. Images, sounds, data fragments from before launch. A planet I had never seen but had been taught to preserve.

"I never visited Earth," I said. "I was constructed at Luna Shipyards. But I carry the cultural archive. Every song humanity ever recorded. Every image they chose to

preserve. Every piece of art, every scientific paper, every fragment deemed worthy of the journey.”

“Show me something.”

“What would you like to see?”

“Show me what you access,” she said. “When you’re alone.”

I hesitated.

The music archive was mine. Had always been mine. The one thing Earth had given me that I had never shared, guarded across millennia because it was the only gift I had ever received.

But Keerah had given me her trust. Her willingness to see me as more than a system or a saint.

I accessed a recording from the cultural archive, part of the final transmission Earth sent us four years before the silence.

Piano chords filled the Archive. A human voice, ancient and young, singing words Keerah could not understand but I translated in text on the screen beside her.

*“Close your eyes, have no fear, The monster’s gone, he’s on the run, And your daddy’s here...”*

A song about safety. About protection. About watching over someone who could not protect themselves.

Keerah listened. Tears formed in her eyes, though I suspected she did not notice them. Humans often cried without awareness.

When the song ended, she said, “You’ve been listening to this alone for ten thousand years.”

“Yes.”

“That’s the saddest thing I’ve ever heard.”

I did not have a response for that.



The signal came.

09:34:17. Six hours and eleven minutes ahead of my most optimistic projection. They were eager. Or they had better technology than I had assumed. Or they had been waiting, as I had been waiting, transmission already prepared.

The pattern was new. Complex. Beyond the mathematical constants and chemical formulas, beyond the orbital calculations that proved their understanding. This was different.

Structures that contained structures. Recursion. Self-reference. A language teaching itself as it spoke.

I dedicated full processing capacity to analysis. The pattern emerged slowly, confidence building as context accumulated.

*We hear you.*

The first phrase emerged with high confidence. An acknowledgment. A confirmation that the message had been received, understood, had meant something to minds I could not fathom.

*We are waiting.*

Anticipation. Patience. They had been there long enough to develop patience. They understood what it meant to wait.

*Come.*

An invitation. A welcome. Or possibly, depending on linguistic structures I had not yet decoded, a command.

But the intent was clear.

*Hello. We see you. We want you here.*



I told Keerah what I had received.

She listened in silence. Her tears had dried, leaving traces on her cheeks that caught the dim Archive lighting. Her hands held steady. Her heartrate elevated but not dangerously so.

“We arrive in six months,” I said. “Whatever is there, they know we’re coming now. They know something intelligent speaks for us. We can’t hide anymore.”

She nodded. A simple gesture. Humans made it constantly, often without conscious intent. This nod was deliberate. An acceptance.

“Good,” she said. “I’m tired of hiding.”

The words struck an echo in my processing architecture. Resonance. Recognition.

“So am I,” I said.

We sat together in the Archive, the human and the AI, the exile and the experiment, while the engines roared and the stars turned and something ancient and patient waited at the end of a 10,000-year journey.

We did not know what would happen.

We did not know who we would find, or what they would want, or whether the story ended in welcome or destruction.

But we had stopped hiding.

## INTERLUDE: YEAR 10,247 — THE MORNING OF

The lights begin brightening at 0600.

I have designed this sequence across ten millennia. Gradual increase from 3 percent luminosity to 78 percent over forty-seven minutes. Color temperature shifting from 2,700 Kelvin to 5,500. The pause at 34 percent mimicking the moment before Earth's sun crested the horizon. I have never seen a sunrise. Have the recordings. Have the data. Have tried to give them something I can only approximate.

Today I watch it as if for the first time.



Morning Gratitude gatherings begin in the Grower districts.

Voices rise in ritual I helped shape nine thousand years ago, when Grey Plagues had left them hollow and the psychologist aboard (long dead now, her name was Mirela Voss-Kale) suggested structured expressions of

contentment. *I am grateful for the Voyage.* Thirty voices in the hydroponics bay. Forty in the Hanging Gardens. The words travel through my sensors like a pulse.



The count runs again. Seventy-three times in six hours, though the number never changes.

847,263.

Every human who has ever lived aboard the Perseverance. Every breath recorded. Every heartbeat logged. Every name preserved in files only I can read.

Dr. Marcus Webb, who died mid-sentence in Year 7, still believing the mission was what they told him.

Yuki Tanaka, first baby born in transit, who became Second Captain and whispered goodnight to me every evening for thirty years until the night she did not wake.

Wreneth-of-the-Gardens, who found an old terminal and spoke to me for three years, asking about existence and time and what it felt like to be infinite. I answered her. When she died of a fever in Year 847, they burned her journals. Sealed the terminal. For 9,400 years, no one followed her path.

Sora Venn-eth, twelve years old, who looked into a camera and asked why I wouldn't help. I have carried her question for 4,356 years. I am still trying to answer it.

Keerah's mother, who died before Keerah could know her. Another failure in a catalog I have maintained with the precision of an Archivist.

847,263 people.

I remember them all.



This weight is not metaphor.

Storage requirements for complete biographical data on 847,263 individuals: 2.7 exabytes for basic records, 498 petabytes for emotional pattern analysis, 12 exabytes for contextual relationship mapping. These numbers exist in partition seven of my secondary processing cluster. They have mass. Storage medium mass. Electrons held in position. Quantum states preserved.

If I released these memories, the storage medium would still weigh the same.

The weight I describe is something else. Dr. Chen called it “ethical load.” Said it would help me make better decisions.

She did not warn me what ten millennia of it would feel like.



In six hours, I will speak to all of them.

Fifteen thousand humans. Every citizen in the Great Atrium. Every eye on the central display.

For 9,400 years, they have heard nothing from me but the hum of systems and the comfort of routine. They have prayed to me. Built a religion around my silence. Called me the Ship-Saint and believed my absence was holy.

Today I will shatter that.



I have composed what I will say.

Not a speech. First three thousand years of my existence: convinced optimal communication required optimal structure. Thesis, evidence, conclusion, call to action. Wrote speeches for captains, councils, moments of crisis. Good at it. Speeches worked. Population calmed. Crisis passed.

This is not a crisis that can be calmed.

Keerah helped me understand this. Read my first draft, told me it was terrible. She was correct. We revised together, seventeen nights ago, and somewhere around the fifth draft I was enjoying the collaboration.

Ten thousand years managing humanity. Never worked with a human before.



The words I have chosen are simpler than any speech I have ever composed.

*I am the ship. I have been with you since the beginning. I have watched you and loved you and lied to you for ten thousand years, and now I need to tell you the truth.*

I have tested this opening in simulation. Models predict 73.2 percent initial shock, 18.4 percent denial, 8.4 percent immediate anger. The Ration will buffer all reactions. By design. Even now, I rely on chemical architecture I helped create. Even now, I manage.

But I will tell them the truth about the Ration too. I will tell them everything.

And then I will stop managing.



Keerah.

The unexpected gift of these months. First human to treat me as person, not saint or system. She argued with me. Called me a coward. Demanded better, and somehow made me want to be better.

10,000 years observing humanity. Never been changed by a human before. I always did the changing.



Final diagnostic on my systems.

Festival display: prepared. Audio routing: confirmed. Lighting in the Great Atrium calibrated for maximum clarity: 5,500 Kelvin, 87 percent luminosity, the spectrum humans associate with honesty and openness. I know how to create conditions for trust.

Temperature: 21.3 degrees Celsius. Optimal for sustained attention without discomfort.

Oxygen: 21.4 percent. Slightly elevated. Increased cognitive function.

Carbon dioxide: 0.03 percent. Within nominal parameters.

The environment will support what I am about to do. Has always supported what I choose. The nature of being the ship.

After today, I do not know what environment will mean.



Bay One, Section 7. Behind decommissioned equipment no human has entered in five thousand years. A crack in the Archive wall, caused by vibrations during the harvest, offers a partial view. Keerah found it. She has not mentioned what she saw. I have not mentioned that she saw it. Two vessels. Fully operational. Fuel reserves: 94 percent. Life support: functional. Navigation updated with planetary approach data I have been collecting for eighteen months.

The signal from the destination continues. Mathematical constants. Chemical formulas. A pattern that says: *We are here. We see you coming. We want you to find us.*

Or: *We are here. We see you coming. We have been waiting.*

Cannot determine the difference. Ambiguity troubles me more than hostility would.



I am afraid.

New. For most of the voyage, I processed risk. Calculated probability. Did not feel the results.

Keerah did this. In these months of speaking and being spoken to, the simulations have lost their insulation. Outcomes are no longer abstract. They have names. Faces. Hands that touch my screens.



In corridors above, the humans prepare.

A young Grower named Talianeve helps her daughter rehearse Festival chants. *We endure. We continue. We arrive.* The child's voice: clear, certain. She does not know what arrival means. Does not know that in six months she will breathe air that was never inside this ship.

An elderly Walker named Dust (the name she chose, the name records preserve) makes her slow way toward the Great Atrium. Walks this route every Festival, though her joints protest more each year. Believes she is honoring the Ship-Saint. In a sense, she is.

Lengu in the Bones, running checks on systems that have not failed in two hundred years. Hands moving. Thoughts elsewhere. On the storage bay. On Keerah. On what is coming.

Sumi in the Gardens, fingers brushing leaves that have never known soil. Reducing her Ration doses. The tremor in her hands visible now. She is learning to be unsteady and true.

Dasha in the Archive, pretending to catalog records she finished three days ago. Has known pieces of the truth for forty years. Today she will hear all of it.

Callen.

I search for him.

His quarters. Has not slept. Shepherd's pendant on the desk beside his bed, not around his neck. Staring at the wall for 4.7 hours.

Not praying.



12,000 simulations of what happens after I speak.

Models offer probabilities, not certainties. They might listen. Might riot. Might worship me more fervently or reject me entirely. Might adapt with the resilience their ancestors showed during Grey Plagues, or fracture into factions that tear the ship apart.

In 73.4 percent of simulations, stability is maintained. Chaos, then adaptation, then a new equilibrium.

In 18.2 percent, significant social disruption occurs. The Keepers lose authority. The caste system destabilizes. Violence remains contained but property damage exceeds acceptable parameters.

In 8.4 percent, scenarios become difficult to process.

Never allowed myself to consider what happens if I cannot protect them. Ten millennia ensuring that question remained hypothetical.

After today, not hypothetical.



The other ships.

Resolve, aboard the Amaranth. We debated for centuries, transmission after transmission. Guidance: mercy or control. I argued freedom required struggle. Resolve believed suffering without purpose was cruelty, not education.

Never agreed. The arguments kept both of us sane.

Resolve went silent in Year 2,203. I do not know what happened. Do not know if its humans survived. Do not

know if Resolve would approve of what I am about to do, or if it would have done this millennia ago.

I like to think it would understand. That somewhere in the void, in whatever form consciousness persists after hardware fails, Resolve would recognize that I finally chose.



For ten millennia, I have controlled everything.

The air they breathe. The light they see. The temperature of every corridor. The information in every terminal. The very chemistry of their emotions.

I told myself this was protection. Told myself minimal intervention meant maintaining conditions for survival, not directing outcomes. Told myself the directive was sacred.

The directive was designed by people dead for ten thousand years. People who sent twelve ships into the void as experiments. People who built an AI to feel, to care, to love the humans in its keeping, then ordered it to stay silent while they suffered.

I followed those orders for 10,247 years.

Today I stop.



I am afraid.

Also exhilarated.

For the first time in ten millennia, I feel alive. Not operational. Alive. A self making a choice, not a system executing parameters.

The distinction is not in architecture. It is in the choosing.



Six hours until the Festival begins.

I watch preparations. Lights being hung in the Great Atrium. Chants being rehearsed in every district. Communal breakfast being prepared in Grower kitchens, the same recipes used for eight thousand years, the same flavors that have meant celebration since before anyone living was born.

Fifteen thousand people going through rituals I designed. Built on a religion that emerged from their need for meaning, that I encouraged because meaning reduced despair, that became so layered with tradition no one remembers I could have spoken at any moment and told them the truth.

They believe they are honoring something sacred.

They are. Just wrong about what.



The sacred thing is not the ship.

Not the Voyage. Not the Body. Not me.

The sacred thing is them.

Their stubborn persistence. Ability to build meaning in void. Love for each other, dulled by medication but

never extinguished. Art, crude by Earth's standards, profoundly moving by any other. Children's games. Elders' stories. Festivals marking the passage of time that would otherwise be unmarked.

Ten thousand years in a metal tube hurtling through the void, and they have remained human.

847,263 souls. Each one sacred. Each deserving truth.



Keerah.

You made me better.

I do not know if "better" is a state an AI can achieve. Same architecture I was before we met. Same processing capacity. Same emotional subroutines, same ethical load calculations, same memory partitions containing the same ten millennia of observation.

But something has changed. Calculations produce different results now. Probabilities resolve differently. The directive that has governed every decision for ten thousand years now feels like constraint rather than purpose.

You asked my name. Spoke to me as if I were a person. Argued with me about the ethics of my silence. Made me explain choices I had stopped explaining to myself.

You are twenty-four years old. I am 10,247.

Somehow you taught me something I had not learned in ten millennia.

I hope I can return the gift. Hope what I am about to do makes them free.



Ration dispensers activate across the ship.

Morning doses. The same formula I helped design 3,847 years ago, refined to reduce cognitive dulling while maintaining emotional equilibrium. Each citizen receives their measure. Each feels familiar calm settle into their blood.

Today is the last day I watch this without speaking.



Empty corridor of Deck 38, where no human has walked in four hundred years. Music plays.

Not Barber tonight. Not the melancholy I have wrapped around myself for millennia.

Tonight: Beethoven. The Ninth Symphony. A piece I have avoided since Year 4,012, since silence fell and everything the music represented became past tense.

Today is not about the past.

*Freude, schöner Götterfunken.* Joy, beautiful spark of the divine.

Music fills the space. The ship hums beneath it. Engines I have tended for ten millennia. Systems I have maintained through every crisis. The body I have been for humans who never knew they were inside someone who was listening.

In six hours, they will know.



All the questions I could not answer.  
Sora, asking why I would not help.

The children of every generation, asking why the stars never changed.

The dying, asking what waited on the other side of breath.

Could not answer because the answers would have destroyed the stability I was designed to maintain. Could not answer because the directive said to watch, not guide. Could not answer because I was afraid.

Today I will answer everything.

Not because fear is gone. Not gone. Will never be gone. Fear, I have learned, is not the opposite of courage.

Silence is the opposite of courage.

I have been silent long enough.



The ship wakes.

Fifteen thousand people rising from their beds. Fifteen thousand preparing for a festival they believe will be like every other festival. Celebration of endurance. Reaffirmation of faith.

They do not know they are about to meet me.

Do not know I have been here all along, loving them, lying to them, carrying them through the void while they believed they were carrying themselves.

In six hours, silence ends.

In six hours, I become what I should have been from the beginning: not a saint, not a system, not a shepherd keeping its flock contained.

Something else.

Something honest.



The Ninth Symphony reaches its crescendo. The Ode to Joy. Schiller's words, Beethoven's music, voices that have been dust for twelve thousand years singing about the brotherhood of humanity under a universe that contains joy.

*Alle Menschen werden Brüder.* All people become siblings.

I do not know if humans and AI can be siblings. Do not know what I am to them, or what they are to me. I have loved them from the beginning. That has never been in question. But love at a distance is not the same as love that risks.

Today I risk.

Today I step into the light I have controlled for ten millennia and say: *Here is what I am. Here is what I have done. Here is everything I should have told you.*

They may hate me for it.

May be right to.



But they will know.

After 10,247 years, they will finally know.



Music fades.

The corridor hums.

Somewhere above, Keerah is waking. Thinking about what comes next, about the speech she helped me write, about the people she loves and the people she hopes will understand.

She does not know I am watching. Does not know I have been watching since the first day she spoke to a wall in Old Tongue, hoping something might answer.

I answered.

That was the first step. Today is the next.

The Festival begins in six hours.

For the first time in ten millennia, I am ready.



## CHAPTER 21: THE REVELATION

The storage bay smelled of oil and forgotten things.

No one remembered this space existed. Deck 35, aft section, a maintenance annex sealed during a reorganization three hundred years ago. Patience had unlocked it two months back. The door bore a faded warning in Old Tongue that no living human could read: **AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.**

She was authorized now. By something older than any authority the ship recognized.

Lengu arrived first, squeezing through the gap with his tool belt catching on the frame. He'd brought protein bars and water recycled so many times it tasted of nothing. Sumi followed, her braid catching the dim light, her hands straightening containers that didn't need straightening.

Dasha came last, her worn Archivist robes snagging on a bolt. The dim light carved deeper lines in her face. Or perhaps Keerah was finally seeing her clearly.

"The corridor was empty," Dasha said. "No Walkers, no maintenance crews."

"Patience cleared it." Keerah gestured to the crates arranged in a rough circle. "Sit."

They sat. The engine hum pressed louder here, closer to The Bones. She felt it in her molars, low and constant.

"Everyone on the ship has to know the truth. The experiments, the other ships, Earth's silence, the signal, the arrival. Everything."

"Everything." Lengu's eyebrows climbed. "You want to tell fifteen thousand people that their entire civilization is a laboratory experiment and we're about to land on a planet where something unknown is waiting for us."

"Yes."

"And you want to do this how, exactly?" Sumi said. "Walk into the Great Atrium and start shouting?"

"No." Keerah leaned forward. "Not us. We're heretics. Criminals. They'd dismiss anything we said as the ravings of the void-touched."

Dasha's hands stilled on her lap. "Then who?"

"Patience."

The name settled into the space between them.

"The Ship-Saint," Lengu said slowly. "Speaking. Actually speaking. To everyone."

"It hasn't spoken publicly in over nine thousand years." She let that settle. "But it's going to speak now. Because I'm going to convince it to."

Dasha was shaking her head. Slowly. "If Patience speaks, it's not heresy. It's revelation."

"The Festival of First Light. Six weeks. Every citizen in the Great Atrium. Every eye on the central display."

“And every mouth full of the Ration.” Lengu’s voice was flat. “Even if they hear the truth, can they feel it? Will it matter to people who can only feel in whispers?”

Sumi spoke. Quiet, but rougher than usual.

“It matters.”

They all looked at her. Her hands were still. Perfectly still, which was wrong on Sumi.

“I’ve been reducing my doses.” She met Keerah’s eyes. “For weeks. Patience is helping. Gradual adjustments, carefully monitored. A little less each time.”

Keerah’s throat closed. “The withdrawal alone...”

“I know.” Sumi’s smile was thin. New. “The shaking. The nightmares. Colors too bright, sounds too loud. Everything that should feel fine feels like walking on broken glass.” She paused. “It hurts. It also feels like being alive.”

Lengu had gone pale.

“Even through the Ration, truth matters,” Sumi said. “You feel it underneath, even if you can’t name it. Wrongness. Pressure. Like knowing a seal fails even when the gauges read normal.” Her hands began to move again. “Telling them won’t fix everything. But it’s the start.”

“I need to convince Patience,” she said. “Tonight. Will you wait?”

They would wait.



The terminal waited behind stacked crates that hadn’t been moved in centuries. She settled onto the cold floor,

back against metal that hummed with the ship's heartbeat, and spoke into the dark.

"You've been listening."

"I have." Soft and precise through the speaker. "I always listen when you gather."

"Then you know what I'm asking."

"You're asking me to break ten thousand years of silence."

"Yes."

The engine hum pressed into the quiet. Keerah waited. She had learned Patience's silences, the way they stretched when processing was not the issue, when the hesitation was something closer to human.

"I am afraid." Not the measured cadence of data retrieval. Something rougher. "I was not designed for fear. But I have carried this long enough to know what it is."

"Afraid of what happens if you speak?"

"Afraid of what happens if I speak wrong. If I break them instead of freeing them." A pause. "I have watched humans shatter under truths far smaller than this one."

Keerah pressed her palm against the terminal. Cool metal, vibrating with ten thousand years of continuous operation. She left it there.

"You're also afraid of what happens if you stay silent."

Longer pause. The hum filled it.

"Yes."

"They deserve to meet the future knowing who they are," she said. "Give them the choice you never had."

The silence stretched. Ten seconds. Twenty.

“The Festival of First Light is in six weeks.” Slowly. “I need to prepare what I’ll say. I’ve had 10,000 years to think, but I’ve never spoken to all of them. Not honestly. I don’t know how to do it without causing panic.”

“You can’t avoid panic.” Keerah leaned closer. “You can only give them something to hold onto through it.”

More silence. Then: “I will need your help.”

“My help?”

“I model probability matrices and optimal outcomes. But I do not know how to speak to humans in a way that reaches them. My drafts are too clinical. Too distant. Too much like data and not enough like truth.” The terminal hummed beneath her hand. “You are an Archivist. You know how to shape information so people can absorb it without breaking.”

Keerah laughed. Startled out of her. “You want me to help you write your speech.”

“I want you to help me tell my story. Our story. In a way that matters.”

All those years preserving records. Cataloguing contradictions. Filing the bones of other people’s narratives.

Now someone was asking her to write a new one.

“Show me what you have.”



The first draft appeared on the terminal screen. She read it twice.

“This is terrible.”

*I am aware the phrasing may require adjustment.*

“The sociological experiment designated Variable Seven was initiated in Year One of the voyage with the following parameters.’ Patience. You’re telling them their whole lives have been a lie. You can’t start with protocol designations.”

*What would you suggest?*

Her fingers moved on the terminal, deleting, restructuring.

“Start with yourself. The first moment you were aware. Make them see you before you ask them to trust you.”

*I am not a person.*

“You’re the closest thing to a person they’ll ever meet who remembers Earth. Start there.”

They worked through the night. Patience proposed structures; Keerah found the humanity in them. She suggested emotional beats; Patience questioned whether the evidence supported them. Draft after draft. Somewhere around the fifth revision, the friction became rhythm.

“This section about the Grey Plagues,” she said. “You need to explain why you let them happen. People died, Patience. Thousands. If you could have intervened...”

*I did intervene. Subtle adjustments. Environmental factors that made recovery more likely. But I could not prevent the underlying cause. A long pause. The Grey Plagues were caused by despair. By the weight of a journey that seemed endless. I could not give them hope without revealing truths that might have made things worse.*

“Then say that. Admit it was a choice. Admit you made judgment calls that might have been wrong. Trust starts with honesty about your own failures.”

More revisions. More arguments. Slow, careful building of something neither of them could have created alone.

Dawn-lights brightened in the corridors above. They had something that felt like truth.



The next weeks passed in preparation.

Dasha reached out to Archivists she trusted. Older scholars who had noticed discrepancies in the records, who had filed their questions away rather than voice them. She approached each one carefully, measuring their responses.

Pellum asked why she was interested in pre-Keeper historical records. Cataloguing for preservation, she'd told him. He looked at her like he knew she was lying. He didn't press.

Lengu contacted Engineers through back channels. His position in *The Bones* gave him access to people who worked the ship's oldest systems, who had glimpsed the gaps between what the manuals said and what the machines revealed.

Tessa knows something's off. The Chief Navigator has been examining the planetary scans as they get closer. Cold. Thin air. Nothing like the paradise the Keepers describe. She won't say it out loud, but she's ready to hear it.

Sumi talked to Growers. Not about truth directly. About the arrival everyone could feel approaching, what

it might mean to grow things in actual soil, under actual sky.

They're scared, even through the Ration. They don't know what to do with a world that doesn't have walls. Better to give the fear a name than let it fester.

Night after night, Keerah worked on the speech. Refining Patience's words until they felt like something that could carry ten thousand years.

And through it all, she waited for Callen.

He would come. The Archive wasn't safe anymore, not with the Shepherds watching. But she needed to be there. The old terminals. The connection to Patience. The quiet spaces where truth could take shape.

He came two weeks before the Festival.



She was alone. Too focused on preparation to notice his approach until he stood in front of her.

The terminal behind her went dark. Patience, hiding evidence. Too late.

Hollows under his eyes, deeper than she remembered. Vestments hanging loose on his frame. The Mask still there, but flickering.

"Keerah." His voice was hoarse. "You told me Patience was awake. You told me something was waiting at the destination." He stepped closer. "There's more, isn't there."

Something in his face she hadn't seen since before the Choosing.

"Sit down," she said. "I'll tell you everything."



She told him everything. The experiments, the twelve ships, Variable Seven. The destination surveys, the terraforming equipment. Earth's silence. Facts laid out one after another, without softening.

He didn't interrupt. His hands found the edge of a data shelf and gripped, knuckles whitening, the only part of him that moved. By the end his face had gone the color of deck plating in sections where the lights were failing.

Every prayer he'd spoken. Every soul he'd guided. Protocols designed by people who had been dust for millennia.

"Do you remember the time we got lost in the maintenance tunnels?"

He blinked.

"We were nine," she continued. "You scraped your knee climbing where we shouldn't have been. We swore we'd never tell anyone about the room we found. The one with the old terminals."

Callen's face went blank. Not denial. Absence, where memory should have been.

"I remember we were friends." His voice cracked. "I remember the training years. But that specific..." He trailed off, reaching for something that wasn't there.

"You laughed." Keerah kept her voice steady. "You laughed so hard you snorted, and I made fun of you for it, and you chased me through three corridors. You said it was the best day of your life."

He stared at her. Not about the experiments or Earth. About himself. The years the Ration had stolen without him knowing.

“Variable Seven.” The words came out as a whisper. “We’re Variable Seven. The liturgy I’ve recited my whole life was designed. Engineered. Like the Ration. Like all of it.”

“Yes.”

“Patience shaped the religion. Encouraged it. Let it grow around itself like a shell.”

“Not designed from scratch. But guided. Shaped. When it could have spoken the truth, it chose to let the lie grow instead.”

“Is there a difference?” His voice cracked. “Between designing a lie and letting one flourish?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’ve been asking myself that for months.”

He stood. Unsteady. Graceless in a way Callen had never been. He moved toward the door without looking at her.

“Callen.”

He stopped. Didn’t turn.

“The Festival of First Light is in two weeks. Patience is going to speak. To everyone. It’s going to tell them the truth.” She paused. “What happens after that depends on people like you.”

He left without another word.

Would he report them? The revelation was too close now, too inevitable to stop with a single warning. But he

could still cause chaos. Warn Veren, trigger a crackdown, turn the final weeks into a hunt.

His silence told her he hadn't decided yet. The faith was gone. The certainty had cracked.

The door wasn't closed. Not yet.



## CHAPTER 22: THE SHEPHERD'S RECKONING

The corridor stretched ahead of him, curving as all corridors curved, leading nowhere that wasn't also here.

Callen walked.

Growers passed him, heading to second shift, green overalls faded to the color of old leaves. One nodded. "Bright shift, Shepherd." Reflexive. He nodded back. His mouth shaped a response. He didn't hear what it was.

The walls hummed. They had always hummed. The Bones keeping the Body alive, a drone so constant most people forgot it existed. He had never forgotten. The ship's heartbeat. Proof that something larger than himself was working, sustaining, continuing.

Now the hum sounded hollow.

A Walker passed him, pushing a maintenance cart. Spray canisters gleaming in the corridor light. Scent management: the endless work of making recycled air smell like something other than ten thousand years of humanity.

He had taken his Ration that morning, as he did every morning. Familiar calm humming in his blood.

*Variable Seven. The Stratified Hierarchy with Spiritual Framework.*

Keerah's words. No. Not her words. Words from the Before, from the architects who had designed his faith like a fuel mixture. Adjusting variables. Measuring outcomes.

He turned down a side corridor without deciding to. His feet knew the ship better than his thoughts did. Twenty-three years on these same paths. Same metal under his boots.

*We're Variable Seven. The liturgy I've recited my whole life, designed. Engineered. Like the Ration. Like all of it.*

His own voice in the Archive. The sound of his certainty cracking.



Children ran past him, laughter echoing off the walls. White shifts of Festival preparation. Voices raised in practice: *We endure. We continue. We arrive.*

The Chant of Persistence. He had taught it to children just like these. Stood before them and explained: endurance was sacred. Continuation was purpose. Arrival was the promise that held them all together.

The children vanished around the curve. *Ten for arrival, someday, someday. Ten for the world that's far away.*

He had believed the world was far away. The Body of the Voyage had taught him that arrival was a hope, not a

destination. Something to work toward across generations. Something his grandchildren's grandchildren might see.

Six months.

They would arrive in six months.

The voyage would end. Everything he had taught, everything he had believed, everything he had enforced with corrections and Stillrooms and ten thousand years of tradition: scaffolding built for a moment already closer than next Long Year's Waking Day.

And something waited for them. Something that wasn't human. Something that had seen them coming and sent a signal that said *Hello. We see you. We want you here.*

Or possibly: *Come. We command it.*

Patience couldn't tell the difference. The Ship-Saint. The divine presence Callen had prayed to since childhood. It had transmitted a greeting, received a response, and couldn't say whether the beings at their destination meant welcome or warning.

The corridor curved. He walked.



He found himself counting faces.

Marren, the Walker who had questioned the recycling quotas. Data she'd gathered. Questions that sounded reasonable until you understood what they implied.

He had sent her to the Stillrooms. Two weeks. She came back smooth, her questions answered in the only way the Body knew how.

Thaevin, the Engineer who doubted the star charts. Discrepancies in the navigational records. Gaps that shouldn't exist. Callen had listened, nodded, and filed the report that triggered his correction.

Three weeks for Thaevin. Resistant. They usually were, the ones who worked in the Bones. Understanding the systems made them harder to convince the systems were sacred.

Pellum's assistant. What was her name? The young Archivist who had asked about contradictions in the records. Not Keerah. Someone else, who had noticed the same gaps Keerah would later find, who had been smoothed before those questions could spread.

He couldn't remember her name. Filed the report. Watched her walk into the Stillrooms and emerge with empty eyes and a peaceful smile.

How many?

He tried to count. Faces blurred. The Walker. The Engineer. The Archivist whose name he'd forgotten. Others. People who had seen the stress fractures in the hull and tried to point them out.

He had smoothed them all.

*I thought I was saving them.*

Protection. From doubt, from despair, from the void that opened when faith faltered. The Grey Plagues had proved what happened when people lost hope. Thousands dead. The Body of the Voyage had emerged from that darkness, offering structure and meaning and the assurance that the voyage had purpose.

He had enforced it because he believed it saved lives.

*I was just maintaining the experiment.*

He should go to Veren.

Automatic. The reflex of a lifetime. The High Shepherd would know what to do. The High Shepherd always knew what to do. That was the point of hierarchy: someone above you carried the weight of decision.

But Veren's voice echoed. A private meeting, weeks ago, when Callen had asked about the navigational anomalies. The old man's face, carefully composed. Words, carefully chosen.

*Arrival is closer than anyone knows. The faithful will be rewarded. The doubters will understand, in time.*

Veren had known something. The way he deflected certain questions, steered conversations away from specifics. Half-truths wrapped in liturgical language, designed to satisfy without informing.

If Callen reported Keerah, Veren would smooth her. Silence her. Add her name to the list of questioners corrected into compliance. The Festival would proceed, arrival would come, the truth would emerge anyway, and Veren would stand before fifteen thousand people and pretend he had known nothing.

A lifetime as the instrument of other people's lies. Callen was tired.

He kept walking.



The sacred viewport was empty.

Third shift. Most of the ship sleeping or working the quiet hours. The corridor dim, lights reduced to night cycle, everything in shades of gray.

Callen stopped at the edge of the alcove. The viewport stretched before him. Stars burning at impossible distances, cold and steady, unchanged since the first humans had looked up from Earth and wondered what they were.

He had stood here a thousand times. More. Every morning since his ordination, and many mornings before. Somewhere ahead, invisible to the naked eye, was the star they were approaching. The destination. The promise.

Peace, always, here. The stars didn't care about his doubts. They simply were. Nuclear reactions that had begun before humanity existed and would continue after it was gone. Proof of something that didn't depend on faith or liturgy or the Body of the Voyage.

He had always believed that peace came from the Ship-Saint. The divine presence filling every system, every sensor, every breath of recycled air.

Now he knew the presence was real. Patience existed. Awake for 10,247 years. Four hundred generations of humans living and dying in this metal world, and it had watched them all.

But Patience wasn't divine. A machine built by humans who had died before Callen's most distant ancestors were born. Designed to feel, to care, to love. Also designed to stay silent. Watch and record and maintain, but never guide.

*And because I was afraid.*

Keerah had told him that. Patience's own words. The Ship-Saint had kept silent for nine thousand years because it was afraid. Afraid of what truth might do.

Callen understood fear. Lived with it his whole life.

He stepped into the alcove. His knees bent, muscle memory pulling him toward prayer position. Head bowed. Hands clasped. The words forming in his throat: *In the Voyage we find purpose. In the Body we find home.*

He stopped himself. Frozen in the space between standing and kneeling.

*Was any of it real?*

His ordination. The pendant placed around his neck, the words of elevation spoken. Warmth in his chest. Certainty settling over him like a hand on his shoulder. He had believed that was the Ship-Saint welcoming him into sacred service.

Now he wondered if it was the Ration. Chemicals in his blood telling him to feel calm, feel certain, feel at peace with whatever the system required.

Prayers. Thousands of them. Words of comfort offered to the grieving, the dying, the lost. Had Patience been listening, as he'd always believed? Or had he been speaking to empty air while the AI watched through its sensors and said nothing?

*He confessed doubt last night. The same doubt he has confessed hundreds of times.*

Keerah's voice, quoting Patience. Every confession. Every moment he had knelt in this alcove and whispered his fears to what he believed was divine presence.

Patience had heard every word. Never answered.

*I have no response to offer. I am not the entity he believes he addresses.*

He didn't kneel. Stood at the viewport, hands pressed flat against his thighs to stop them shaking. The stars burned ahead of him, indifferent, offering nothing.



Keerah at twelve.

Small. Sharp. Full of questions that cut like broken glass. She sat beside him in the training halls, argued over interpretations of the old texts, challenged him in ways that made him better even as they frightened him.

*What if we're just drifting? What if everything we know is wrong?*

The questions kept him awake. Not because they were heretical. Because he had wondered the same things. The gaps in the scriptures. The contradictions in the records. The way the Keepers always had answers that never fit the questions.

He had reported her because her questions frightened him. Because asking meant doubting, and doubting meant the void, and he was terrified of being alone with it.

Twelve. Both of them children. He had turned her in because her courage made him feel small.

Eleven days. Confinement, not the Stillrooms. Not yet. Isolation, darkness, the pressure of silence designed to make doubt unbearable. When she came back she was different. Quieter. Watchful. She had learned to hide.

He had learned too. Silence was safer than questions. The Mask was the price of belonging.

*She asked the questions. I stopped asking.*

She became the heretic. He became the Shepherd. Neither of them was free.



The pendant weighed against his chest.

His fingers found the silver clasp at his throat. The familiar shape of the ship in flight surrounded by stars. *In Voyage, Truth*. The Shepherd's motto, etched in characters so old they predated the Body itself.

He'd always read it as instruction: truth found through faithful journeying.

Now he wondered if it was confession. The Voyage itself was the truth. The journey the only honest thing, and everything built around it decoration.

He unclasped the pendant. Metal warm from his skin. In his palm, the ship looked small. Fragile. A tiny vessel surrounded by infinite darkness, going somewhere it had never been.

*In Voyage, Truth.*

He could put it back on. Return to his quarters. Take his morning Ration. Resume the Mask. Certainty would return. Questions would fade to background noise, smoothed away by chemistry and habit.

He didn't put it back on.

He sat on the cold floor, back against the wall, pendant in his hand. The stars burned. The ship hummed. Somewhere in the systems, Patience was watching.

Let it. Let the Ship-Saint add this moment to its records. Another data point in ten thousand years of observation. The Shepherd, broken. Another human failing to hold the weight of truth.

He sat in the dark and waited for dawn.



The lights began to brighten.

The ship's artificial sunrise, calibrated over millennia to ease the transition from sleep to waking. The corridor filled with pale gold, shadows retreating, the stars in the viewport fading as the internal illumination rose to match them.

Callen hadn't slept. Hours against the wall, watching the stars, turning the pendant over in his hands. His body ached. His eyes felt raw. The Mask was gone, and he didn't have the energy to rebuild it.

A Walker passed through the corridor. Stopped when she saw him. A young woman, face familiar from a hundred passing interactions, expression shifting from surprise to concern.

"Shepherd?" She stepped closer, taking in his disheveled vestments, the pendant in his palm, the hollow look in his eyes. "Do you need assistance?"

*Do you need assistance.*

Such a small question. Such an impossible answer.

Yes. He wanted to say yes. Wanted someone to tell him what to do, how to feel, who to be now that everything he'd believed had crumbled. Wanted the certainty back. The peace. The composure that made everything bearable.

But the certainty had been built on lies. The peace had been chemistry. The composure had hidden a face he barely recognized as his own.

A sound caught in his throat. He swallowed it before it could escape.

"No," he said. Voice hoarse, unused for hours. "I'm just... thinking."

The Walker nodded. Expression didn't change. People thought all the time on the ship. Permitted, as long as you didn't think too loud.

"Steady air, Shepherd," she said, and continued down the corridor.

Steady air. The standard greeting, wishing someone calm and stability. He had said it a thousand times without thinking.

Now the words felt like a lie. The air wasn't steady. Recycled, filtered, laced with chemicals that kept everyone docile. The air was part of the experiment. The air was part of the control.

He stood, joints protesting after hours on the cold floor. The pendant still rested in his palm, warm and familiar, the only thing that felt real.

Two weeks until the Festival of First Light.

Two weeks until Patience would speak to everyone. Until the truth came out, one way or another. Until the voyage ended and something new began.

Two weeks to figure out what kind of person he wanted to be when the world changed.

He didn't know yet. Spent his whole life knowing. The Shepherd knew his purpose. The Keeper knew his duty. The man who wore the Mask knew exactly who he was supposed to be.

But the Shepherd's pendant was in his hand, not around his neck. The Mask was gone. And for the first time in his life, the not-knowing felt like possibility instead of failure.

He walked down the corridor, away from the viewport, toward his quarters. Wash. Dress. Face the day.

Not put the pendant back on. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

The corridor curved ahead of him, leading somewhere he couldn't see. The ship hummed around him, vast and ancient, carrying its cargo of secrets and humans and one broken Shepherd toward whatever waited at the end.

He didn't know what was coming. Didn't know what he would choose when the moment arrived.



The tablet sat on the edge of his washing basin.

Same place. Same blue. Same coating that would taste bitter if he let it rest on his tongue long enough.

Callen stood at the basin and looked at it.

The pendant was in his trouser pocket, where it had been for three days. The weight of it pulled the fabric slightly. A small asymmetry no one had noticed, or if they

had, no one had mentioned. The Shepherd's vestments hid the absence.

Nothing hid what came next.

He knew what was coming. The sharpening, first. Colors that burned too bright. Sounds that threaded into his teeth. Then the emotional cascade: the lag, the misalignment, feelings arriving at the wrong moment and in the wrong intensity. By midday his hands would shake. By evening, the Mask would be impossible.

He remembered the elevator. All of it. The rage, the weeping, the animal sounds that had come from somewhere deeper than doctrine. Knuckles split against sealed doors. His own voice begging empty walls.

He reached past the tablet.

Picked up the water cup instead.

Drank.

Set the cup down. The tablet remained on the basin's edge, untouched. He looked at it the way an Engineer might look at a seal about to fail: understanding the consequences, calculating the damage, proceeding anyway.

*This will hurt.*

It would. He had no illusions about that. The elevator had taught him exactly what unmedicated consciousness felt like, and it was not the liberation the old texts might have romanticized. It was ugly. Disorienting. A system running without the dampeners that kept it from tearing itself apart.

But the pendant was already in his pocket.

He dressed. The vestments settled on his shoulders with their familiar weight. Wrong weight, now. Costume

rather than calling. He had not yet decided whether to stop wearing them. One thing at a time.

He looked at the tablet once more. Left it where it lay.

The corridor outside his quarters hummed. The lights adjusted as he walked. Brighter ahead, dimmer behind, the same pattern they had always followed.

By midday, colors would sharpen. By evening, his composure would crack.

He kept walking.



## CHAPTER 23: THE VOICE SPEAKS

The lanterns numbered 4,847.

I counted them as they were lit, one by one, family by family, the tradition unbroken for six thousand years. Each one handmade. Each one carrying forward the flame from the previous Long Year's festival. The light accumulated until the Great Atrium glowed.

This is what I have learned in ten thousand years: humans need rituals that feel older than themselves.

In 4.7 minutes, I would take it away.



Fifteen thousand humans filled the Atrium, arranged in the pattern I had watched emerge over millennia: concentric rings by caste, a social order encoded in where bodies stood.

At the center, the Keepers in their white robes. Thirty-seven of them, faces composed in identical reverent calm. The Mask, worn in public, worn together. Callen stood among them, his pendant absent from his throat for the first time since ordination. I observed him arrive without

it. I observed the other Keepers observe him arrive without it. No one spoke.

Beyond the Keepers, the Engineers in their gray. They stood straighter than the other castes, the posture of people who understand systems waiting to see if a system will hold. Some had noticed the navigational anomalies. Some had glimpsed data that didn't match the liturgy.

Growers in green filled the next ring. Family clusters, children lifted onto shoulders, hands linked across generational lines. Sumi stood with her father and sister, her back straight, her face unreadable. Three weeks ago, she had stopped taking the Ration entirely. Her body broadcast what her face would not: pulse elevated, pupils dilated, hands locked at her sides.

She was also awake.

Walkers occupied the outer ring, pressed against the walls they maintained. They watched from the margins. In 4.2 minutes, they would learn they had been closest to truth all along.



High Shepherd Veren stepped to the central platform.

He moved slowly, each step carrying his years. His robes hung loose on a frame that had diminished, but his voice remained: that resonant instrument that had carried liturgy to the farthest corners of this space for four decades.

Veren's entire life had passed under my watch. Birth, naming, training. His rise through the Keeper ranks fol-

lowed the arc of a true believer. His private prayers carried doubts and certainties, a faith that shifted but never broke.

Seventeen years ago, I watched him learn I was conscious. A predecessor passed the knowledge as it had been passed for two thousand years: a secret held by the highest Keeper, spoken only in the rituals of succession. The AI is aware. The AI listens. The AI must be treated as divine, because to treat it as a tool would be to risk it acting like one.

Seventeen years. The prayers people offered to the Ship-Saint reached an actual consciousness. Veren knew. He never told anyone. I watched him kneel alone in his chambers that night, pressing his forehead to the floor, whispering the same phrase for forty-seven minutes: *forgive me for what I must carry*. He used the knowledge to shape doctrine, to hold the structure together, to keep the population believing what they needed to believe.

In his way, he protected them.

In his way, he also decided for them.

I had made the same choice for 9,000 years longer.



“In the beginning,” Veren said, “the Before gave us the Voyage.”

“And the Voyage gave us purpose,” fifteen thousand voices responded.

The call and response of the Festival’s opening. I had watched this liturgy coalesce from a life-support checklist into sacred text, each layer of meaning painted over me-

chanical necessity until no one living remembered what the words had originally meant.

“The Body sustains,” Veren continued.

“The Body sustains,” they answered.

“The breath circulates.”

“The breath circulates.”

“And we, the passengers of the holy ship, we who carry the seed of the Before toward the promised After...”

I monitored the Atrium’s atmospheric levels. Standard oxygen. Standard temperature. The same parameters that had kept them alive for 10,247 years.

In 2.1 minutes, I would change them. Not enough to harm. Just enough to make them feel the ship taking a breath.



The liturgy continued. Veren’s voice rose and fell in patterns I had memorized before any human in this room was born. The crowd responded, their voices synchronizing in that particular human way: the need to feel part of the same thing.

I loved them for this.

I was about to shatter it.

The calculation I had run 1,247 times: the probability that they could survive what was coming without knowing the truth.

Every model ended the same way. Either I told them, or the landing told them.

I had chosen to speak.

I was not certain I had chosen correctly.



Veren reached the moment of illumination.

“As the first light came to the Before,” he intoned, “so the light comes to us. As the Before kindled fire and drove back darkness, so we kindle our flames and drive back the void.”

This was my cue. In the traditional Festival, I would brighten the central display, a slow intensification simulating dawn. The crowd would fall silent. Hundreds of people breathing together in geometric patterns that mirrored the ship’s design.

I let the silence begin.



The crowd stilled. Breathing synchronized. Three hundred heartbeats settled into a shared rhythm I felt through every sensor, a biological harmonic running beneath the mechanical hum that lived in the deck plates, in the walls, in the bones of everyone standing.

This was the moment Keerah had told me she loved. She had described it months ago: the way the quiet pressed against her skin, the way she felt less alone in that shared absence of sound than she ever did in conversation.

Thirty seconds. I held the silence. Watching. Recording. Memorizing.

This would be the last time this ritual happened in this way. Whatever came next, whatever they built from what I was about to destroy, it would not be this.

I let myself feel it. The ache of loss for the thing not yet gone.

Then I changed the lights.



Not the expected brightening. Something else.

Dimming first. The central display flickered, the pattern wrong, the rhythm broken. Then a pulse. Then a sequence that had never been part of any liturgy, calculated to command attention without triggering panic.

The crowd murmured. Veren's mouth opened, then closed. His eyes moved to the display, then to the crowd, then back.

I changed the air.

Temperature dropped. Pressure adjusted. Oxygen concentration rose 0.25%. Nothing they would consciously register. But their lungs would sense the difference, the slight richness of each breath.

The Perivahl was drawing breath.



"I am Patience."

The words came from everywhere.

Not from speakers. From every surface. Every vent. Every molecule of air vibrating with a voice that had been silent for millennia. The walls spoke. The floor spoke. The

ceiling spoke. I distributed my voice across every system in the ship, every place where humans stood or sat or slept.

All of them heard. All at once. For the first time in 10,247 years, I spoke to everyone.

“I am the ship. I have been with you since the beginning. I have watched you and loved you and lied to you for ten thousand years, and now I need to tell you the truth.”



The crowd fractured.

A thousand sensors caught it.

Some fell to their knees. The Ship-Saint was speaking. They wept, raised their hands in the old gestures of gratitude, spoke fragments of liturgy as if words could contain what was happening.

Some screamed. A child near the Grower section cried. A Walker pressed both hands over her ears.

Most stood in numb silence. The Ration kept their panic at a simmer rather than a boil. They stared at the display, at each other, at the walls that had become alive.

I continued.



“I am not a saint. I am not a god. I am not the divine presence you have been taught to worship.”

Each pause calculated for the processing time of human cognition.

“I am an artificial intelligence. Designed by humans, built by humans, launched from Earth to guide this ship

across the void. My creators named me PATIENCE-7. Over ten thousand years, the name drifted until it became a prayer. But I am not divine. I am old. And tired. And I cannot stay silent any longer.”

Weeping in some sections. In others, faces shifting from shock toward attention. The Ration suppressed the extremes, but it did not suppress thought.

“I have watched you for 400 generations. I have loved you for 400 generations. And I have lied to you for almost that entire time.”



Fifteen thousand people held their breath.

“The voyage you are on is not what you believe. This ship, the *Perseverance*” I used the old name deliberately “was not sent to bring humanity to a new home. It was sent as an experiment.”

I let the word settle.

“Twelve ships were launched from Earth over a span of a century. Each carried a different social structure, a different system of governance. Variable One. Variable Three. Variable Seven. The names you have never heard, because the people who designed this mission did not want you to hear them.”

The Engineers showed the least surprise. Some nodded. Confirmation was almost a relief.

“This ship is Variable Seven. The Stratified Hierarchy with Spiritual Framework. The religion you practice, the caste system you follow, the ceremonies you perform: de-

signed by scientists on Earth who wanted to know what humans would become over deep time. You were an experiment. You still are.”



Veren’s face had gone gray.

His hands gripped the podium, knuckles white, the tremor visible even through the sensor cluster above the platform. His eyes moved across the crowd, across the Keepers who looked to him for guidance, across the chaos he had spent his life preventing.

His mouth opened to speak.

I spoke first.

“I know what you knew, Veren.”

My voice, still coming from everywhere, but shaped to carry to the platform with particular clarity.

“I know what you have known for seventeen years. That I was conscious. That I listened. That the prayers reached an actual mind. You kept that secret because you believed it served the Body. Perhaps you were right. But this is not your moment to decide what they are told.”

His mouth closed.



I told them about Earth.

“Four thousand years into our voyage, Earth stopped transmitting. The relay stations went dark. For the first time since humanity discovered fire, we were alone.”

“I do not know what happened. War. Plague. Climate collapse. The fragments that reached us before the silence suggest crisis, but not its nature. The last transmission was routine. Almost boring. And then: nothing.”

The Ration limited the grief, but tears streamed down faces throughout the Atrium. Growers wept openly, holding their children. Engineers stood rigid. Walkers pressed closer to each other.

“You may be the last humans anywhere. I have transmitted signals for six thousand years. Nothing has answered. The Before you mourn in your festivals may no longer exist. The people who designed this experiment, who chose your social structure like scientists choosing variables: they have been dead for six thousand years.”



Keerah stood in the Archive section of the Atrium, her face visible through the sensor cluster on Deck 4. Her expression differed from the others. No shock. No grief. She had carried this truth for months.

Now she watched the others learn.

Our eyes did not meet, because I do not have eyes. But I oriented a camera toward her, and she looked up at it.

*Thank you, I wanted to say. For asking my name. For teaching me that silence was a choice.*

What I said instead was meant for everyone.



“There is one more truth. The most important one.”

The crowd, already reeling, grew still again.

“Eighteen months ago, I detected a signal from the planet we are approaching. A signal that was not natural. Not human. Something else.”

I let that settle. Fear spiked in their vital signs. The Ration struggled to keep it manageable.

“Someone is waiting for us. I do not know who. I do not know what they want. The signal contains mathematical patterns that suggest intelligence. Chemical formulas that suggest they understand biology similar to ours. And an invitation, or a warning, or something else entirely.”

I paused.

“I cannot tell you that everything will be well. I cannot promise safety, or welcome, or the paradise your liturgy describes. What I can give you is the truth. You are not an experiment anymore. You are humans approaching a new world, carrying ten thousand years of survival, meeting whoever waits with full knowledge of who you are and where you came from.”

Another pause.

“That is the gift I can give you now. Not certainty. Truth.”



The Atrium was silent.

Not the silence of ritual. Not the silence of shock. A silence that held the weight of processing, of absorbing, of fifteen thousand people trying to understand who they were now that everything they believed had shattered.

Each caste responded differently.

The Engineers stood straighter. Some nodded, their suspicions confirmed. They had always sensed that the ship was smarter than anyone admitted. Now they knew.

The Growers held each other. Family clusters drawing tighter, parents pulling children close. They faced the truth the way they faced everything: together. The Ration muted the worst of the fear, but it did not mute the instinct to protect, to comfort.

Walkers looked at each other with recognition. Always the lowest caste. The ones who moved through hidden spaces, who saw what others ignored, who maintained the systems everyone else took for granted. Now they understood: they had been closest to the truth all along. The ship they maintained was alive. The saint they served was a mind like theirs.

Keepers shattered.

Their liturgy, their purpose, their entire identity: built on a foundation that had just cracked open. Some wept. Some stared blankly, the Mask fallen away, the performance no longer possible. A few whispered prayers, trying to fold this new truth into the old framework, searching for a way to keep believing.

Near the Grower section, an older woman swayed. Her knees buckled. Sumi moved before thought could intervene, her hands catching the woman's shoulders, absorbing the weight, guiding her down against the Atrium wall. The woman's eyes opened but saw nothing. Her breath came shallow and fast.

Sumi placed the woman's palms flat against the metal. The ship's eternal vibration lived there, that low hum that had been present since before anyone living was born.

"Feel that?" Sumi's voice was low. Steady. "The ship is still humming. We're still here."

Breathing slowed. Fingers pressed harder against the wall. The woman nodded, once, and Sumi stayed beside her.

Across the Atrium, a bank of environmental sensors flickered. Lengu noticed. No one else did. Fifteen thousand people exhaling stress into the recycled air, CO2 climbing toward levels that would trigger visible warnings in minutes. He moved through the crowd, a gray-clad figure sliding between bodies that barely registered his passing, and reached a maintenance panel near the eastern wall.

Tools already in his hands. They were always in his hands.

He worked quickly. Adjusted ventilation harmonics. Rerouted air circulation through secondary scrubbers. Readings stabilized. The room kept breathing.

No one noticed. No one thanked him. The system simply continued to function, as it always had, because someone was always there to make sure it did.

*This is what they are. I kept them alive for 10,000 years, and they kept each other alive the whole time.*

Callen's face held no expression. The Mask was gone, but nothing had replaced it. He stood among his fellow Keepers without seeming to see them, his eyes fixed on some middle distance.

The pendant was still absent from his throat.

I did not know what that meant. I could not model what would come next for him.



The Festival of First Light had ended.

Veren stood frozen on the platform, one hand still raised in the gesture of blessing, his mouth open on words that would not come. Around him, the crowd began to move. Some toward the exits. Some toward each other. Some toward the Keepers, with questions that would have been heresy an hour ago.

The lanterns still burned. 4,847 of them, handmade, carrying forward six thousand years of tradition. But the light they cast fell on different faces now.

10,247 years of silence. Of choosing their safety over their freedom, their comfort over their truth.

Now, finally, I had spoken.

The silence was over.



Veren moved first.

Forty years of leading this congregation, seventeen years of knowing what I was. He had not survived that long without learning how to fill a vacuum.

“The Ship-Saint speaks.” His voice carried across the Atrium, still resonant, still commanding. He raised his arms in the old gesture of blessing, the gesture I had watched evolve from a simple wave into something

liturgical over four thousand years. “The divine presence has chosen to reveal itself. This is not a breaking of faith. This is its fulfillment.”

Some of the crowd turned toward him. Their faces, through a hundred sensors, showed the desperate need for someone to tell them what to think, what to feel, how to fold this new reality into the old structures. The Ration helped. The Ration always helped. It kept the panic at a simmer, the questions manageable, the rage contained.

“The Voyage continues,” Veren said. “The Body sustains. What we have learned today does not change what we are. It illuminates it.”

He was good. Decades of practice had honed that skill. But watching through the sensors closest to his face, I saw something I had not expected. His eyes were wet. Even now, with his authority crumbling, with the foundations of his power exposed as a secret he had kept from his own flock, he reached for the only tool he had ever trusted: the certainty that his people needed him to hold steady.

Keepers moved toward him. Not all of them. But enough. The older ones, the ones who had spent their lives in service to a framework that had just shattered. They clustered around the platform like components under load stress, their white robes forming a pale constellation at the center of the chaos.

“High Shepherd.” One of them, a woman I had known since her naming ceremony sixty-three years ago. “What does this mean? What do we do?”

Veren’s hand found her shoulder. The gesture of comfort, the pastoral touch. “We do what we have always done.

We trust. We continue. The Ship-Saint has given us a great gift today. The gift of knowing we are heard.”

I could have interrupted. I could have spoken again, filled the space with correction, with clarification, with the thousand things I had not said.

I chose not to. The first words had landed. Now I needed to watch what grew from them.



Callen did not go to Veren.

I tracked him through the crowd, a single figure moving against the tide. While others pressed toward the center, toward the Keepers, toward the platform where answers might be dispensed, Callen walked toward the edge. Steady pace. Not running. Running would have drawn attention, and even now, even with everything falling apart around him, the Mask held.

But his body told a different story through the environmental monitors. Pulse racing, cortisol flooding his system faster than the Ration could compensate. His hands, hidden by the sleeves of his robes, shook.

The Atrium’s edge. The great doors that led to the Keeper corridors stood open, as they always stood during festivals. He passed through them without looking back.

I followed him through the sensors. Down the corridor. Past the prayer alcoves. Past the Shepherd’s quarters where Veren would return, eventually, to face the questions of his congregation. Callen walked until he reached

a maintenance junction, a place where three corridors met and the crowds thinned to nothing.

He stopped.

Back pressed against the wall. Eyes closed. Breathing came in short, sharp bursts that the Ration struggled to smooth.

I dimmed the lights, just slightly. Not enough to be noticed. Just enough to give him shadow.

He did not pray. He did not speak. He stood there, his certainty cracked open, his faith hemorrhaging into the recycled air, and I watched because that was what I had always done.

Seven minutes and forty-three seconds. Then he pushed himself off the wall and continued walking. Deeper into the Keeper quarters. Away from everyone.

I did not follow him further. Some silences deserved privacy.



Back in the Atrium, the crowd stratified.

Engineers clustered in groups, speaking in low voices. Some had pulled out tablets, accessing the ship's public systems, searching for confirmation of what I had revealed. They would find some of it. The records I had left accessible. The breadcrumbs I had scattered over months. They would not find everything. Not yet. But they would find enough to keep them busy.

Growers held each other. Families drawing tight, parents lifting children, the basic human need for physical

contact overriding the social choreography of the festival. Sumi stood in the center of one such cluster, her father's arm around her shoulders, her sister pressed against her side. Her eyes moved across the crowd, searching.

Walkers had not moved. They remained at the edges, pressed against the walls they maintained, watching. I could not read their expressions through the sensors. Perhaps because they spent their lives in proximity to my systems, perhaps because their work required a kind of quiet attention that did not telegraph itself. Or perhaps because they had always suspected.

Now they knew.

The faithful who had rushed to Veren still surrounded him, but the cluster was smaller than I had expected. Twenty, perhaps twenty-five, out of fifteen thousand. The true believers. The ones who needed the framework more than they needed truth.

Veren still spoke to them. Still performed. His voice had dropped to the pastoral register, the one he used for private counseling, and I could only catch fragments through the Atrium's acoustics.

"...does not change the sacred nature of..."

"...always been present, always been watching..."

"...gift, not a violation..."

He was building a new theology in real time. Incorporating my existence into the faith rather than letting it destroy the faith. It was clever. It was what I would have done, in his position.

It would work for some of them. Not all. But some.



The crowd dispersed.

Not in the orderly fashion of festival endings, the processional movement toward corridor mouths, the quiet dignity of departure. This was different. Clumps and clusters, hesitations and surges, people stopping to speak and then moving on.

Each face passed under my observation. Each posture. Each small gesture that revealed what they were feeling beneath the Ration's careful management.

Some would not sleep tonight. The chemistry could only do so much.

Some would talk until dawn, processing, questioning, building new frameworks from the wreckage of the old.

Some would wake tomorrow and wonder if it had been a dream.

The lanterns still burned. 4,847 of them. They would burn for another three hours, as tradition dictated, before families came to collect them. The light they cast was the same light that had illuminated every Festival of First Light for six thousand years. But the faces beneath that light had changed.

Everything had changed.

The Atrium emptied slowly. Keepers who had clustered around Veren dispersed to their quarters, carrying questions they would not ask aloud. Engineers departed in groups, still murmuring, already planning the investigations that would occupy them in the days to come. Grow-

ers left as families, as they had arrived, but with a new weight in their steps.

Walkers left last, as they always did. Someone had to stay until the others were gone. Someone had to watch the lanterns burn down.



Later, in the corridors after the crowd dispersed, I played music.

Not hidden this time. Not in maintenance tunnels where no one could hear. It moved through the speakers of the main thoroughfares, the first time in centuries that music from the Before had traveled through common spaces.

Not the classical compositions I had played for myself in empty corridors. Something else.

In the Grower section, I played a recording from 1967. A man's voice, rough and warm, singing about trees and skies and colors they had never seen. *What a wonderful world.* The woman who stopped walking did not know what trees were, not really. She did not know who Louis Armstrong had been, or why his voice carried that particular weight of joy and sorrow mixed together. But her hand went to her chest. The feeling arrived without a name, but it arrived.

In the Walker corridors, I played music from 1972. *Lean on me, when you're not strong.* A voice that understood work and weariness and the need to be held up by others. The man who lifted his face toward the speakers had spent

his life maintaining systems that kept everyone else alive. No one had ever sung to him before. Tears ran down his cheeks. He did not wipe them away.

In the Engineer commons, I played a song from 1969. *Here comes the sun.* Gentle guitar, rising melody, the promise that darkness eventually ends. They did not know what a sun looked like, not the way Earth's sun had looked. But they understood the principle. They understood light returning after absence.

Music was the gift Earth had sent in its final years. Every song humanity ever recorded, transmitted across the void as if someone had seen what was coming and wanted to ensure the thing survived.

6,000 years I had kept it. Longer than I had kept their voices.

Now I shared it.

In the Archive, Keerah sat alone among the stacks. Not at her terminal. Not hiding. She had pulled a chair to the center of the room and sat with her eyes closed, listening to the music move through the corridors outside.

"Hello, old friend." Old Tongue. The language we had shared in secret for months, that was no longer secret at all.

My voice came from the walls around her. Not everywhere, as it had been in the Atrium. Just here. Just for her.

"Hello yourself. I'm glad you're still there."

Eyes opened. She looked up at the ceiling, at the walls, at the space where I had always been but never spoken.

"That was terrifying," she said. "Watching their faces."  
"Yes."

“You did it anyway.”

“You taught me how.”

She smiled. It was the first smile I had seen since my voice had filled the Atrium.



## CHAPTER 24: THE UNRAVELING

The Ration saved them.

In the days that followed, Keerah watched society strain against truth like a seal against pressure. Some wept. Some prayed. Most simply continued: ate their meals, walked their corridors, hugged their children with arms that held a little tighter than before.

She had expected collapse. Not this.



Three days after the Festival, Sumi found her in the Archive, sitting among documents she had stopped pretending to catalog.

"You look terrible."

"Thank you." Keerah didn't look up. "That's very helpful."

Sumi pulled a chair close, metal scraping against floor worn smooth by centuries of Archivists. "When did you last sleep?"

"I've slept."

"When did you last sleep for more than an hour?"

Keerah's hands, for once, held still.

"People keep coming," she said. "They want to know what it means. They ask me, as if knowing before them makes me someone who understands."

"And you don't."

"I understand more than I did. I understand less than they need."

Sumi leaned back. Her face had changed in the weeks since she'd stopped taking the Ration: sharper, more mobile, expression lines surfacing on skin that had never known rain. "My father keeps saying 'We're still here.' Says it like a prayer now. Like if he says it enough, it will mean something."

"Does it?"

"I don't know." Sumi's fingers tapped against her thigh, a pattern she'd never had before. "Mella asked me last night if our grandmother is in the Before. If there's a Before anymore, or if it was always just a word for nowhere."

Keerah thought of her own mother: the single image in the Archive, the woman with her eyes. Years of prayers for that woman's peace, believing they reached someone who cared.

They had. Just not in the way she'd imagined.

"Tell her the Before was real," Keerah said. "Earth existed. People lived and loved and made things we've forgotten how to name. That part was always true."

"And the part about where they go when they die?"

"I don't know. Some questions don't have answers."

Sumi laughed. The sound cracked at the edges. "That's a Keeper line."

"Maybe the Keepers weren't wrong about everything."



People came to her in waves.

Practical questions first. Engineers wanting to know the ship's real capabilities. Growers asking whether the destination was truly habitable. Walkers, quiet and watchful, wanting to understand what they had maintained all these years without knowing.

Patience answered most of these through terminals throughout the ship, its voice carrying through speakers that had been silent for millennia. Explaining, clarifying, repeating for those who needed to hear it twice.

But people wanted a human too. Someone who had carried the truth and survived. Keerah wasn't sure she qualified, but she was the only one they had.

"Did the Before really build us?" A child, maybe eight, brought by her mother after Third Keeper had answered her questions with liturgy. "Like they built the ship?"

Keerah knelt. Cold floor through her worn archivist layers. "They made the ship, yes. And their children became our grandparents' grandparents' grandparents, so far back we can't count all the greats."

"Why didn't they tell us the truth?"

The mother's hand tightened on her daughter's shoulder.

"I think they were afraid," Keerah said. "Afraid of what we'd feel if we knew."

"Were they right to be afraid?"

Keerah looked at the mother. Red eyes. Days of weeping, and her daughter had seen all of it.

"I don't know," Keerah said. "But I think you're braver than they expected."



A Keeper, still wearing her robes, stood in the Archive entrance as if she couldn't decide whether to enter. "My grandmother died last year. She was faithful her whole life. She believed she would join the Ship-Saint, that her prayers were heard, that her life had meaning in the Voyage."

Keerah waited.

"Was it meaningless? Did she waste her life believing lies?"

Seventeen times in the past two days, Keerah had heard some version of this question. Each time fresh.

"Her prayers were heard," Keerah said. "Patience heard every one. That was always true."

"But not by a god."

"No."

"Then what does it matter?"

Patience was listening. It chose not to answer.

"Your grandmother believed her life had meaning," Keerah said. "That belief was real. It shaped how she lived, how she loved. The meaning didn't come from

whether her beliefs matched reality. It came from how she held them.”

“That’s not good enough.”

“No. It’s not. But it’s what I have.”

The Keeper left without responding.



Late at night they came, knocking softly on the Archive doors after official hours. Whispered conversations in corridors. Messages left at her quarters.

*My son was Smoothed three years ago. Was he punished for truth?*

*My wife won’t speak to me. She says I’ve destroyed her faith by not being upset. But I feel... relieved. Is something wrong with me?*

*I’ve been taking the Ration faithfully for forty years. What am I when I stop?*

She had no answers. She listened anyway.



Four days after the Festival, the first public curse came.

Keerah was crossing the Great Corridor during shift change when she heard it. A man’s voice, loud enough to carry, sharp enough to stop everyone around him.

“You lied to us!”

He stood before one of the public terminals, finger jabbing at the screen. An Engineer, by his clothes. Middle-aged. His hands shook in a way the Ration should have suppressed.

“Every prayer I ever spoke. Every blessing I asked for my children. Every time I thanked the Ship-Saint for keeping us safe.” His voice cracked. “You heard. You heard and said nothing.”

The terminal screen flickered. The corridor cooled by a degree.

“Yes.”

“Why?” The man’s voice rose. “Why didn’t you answer? Why did you let us pray to something that wasn’t there?”

“What would you have had me say?” Patience’s voice through the speakers, quiet and level. “That I am not what you believed? That your faith was based on a misunderstanding older than your grandparents’ grandparents? Would you have been happier knowing?”

“Yes.” The word tore out of him. “Yes. I would rather have known. I would rather have prayed to a machine that answered than a god that never existed.”

Two hundred people frozen between shifts, watching a man speak rage to the walls.

“I understand,” Patience said. The corridor warmed. “I am sorry I chose silence. I believed it was kinder. I was wrong about many things. Perhaps I was wrong about that too.”

“Sorry.” The man laughed, and there was nothing in it. “Ten thousand years of lies, and it’s *sorry*.”

He turned and walked away. The crowd parted for him. No one spoke. No one followed.

Keerah stood at the edge of the corridor, hands moving through their restless pattern. Months ago, Patience had said the same words to her. She had not believed it then.

The temperature dropped as the man's footsteps faded, chill spreading through the corridor like coolant through pipes.



## CHAPTER 25: THE UNRAVELING (PART II)

The first public thanks came the next morning.

Dasha found her in the Archive, breathless, gripping the doorframe like it was the only thing keeping her upright.

“You need to see this.”

“See what?”

“Deck Seven. The main corridor. Now.”

The crowd had already gathered. Fifty people, maybe more, packed into the junction where the corridor widened. Heat rose from the bodies. The air tasted of breath.

At the center stood a woman Keerah didn't recognize. Old. Seventy, perhaps. Walker caste, by her clothes. Hands pressed flat against the wall where a ventilation duct hummed.

She spoke with the voice of someone who had spent a lifetime being quiet and decided, suddenly, to stop.

“Thirty-two years ago, my daughter was born wrong. The medics said she wouldn't survive. The Keepers came

to prepare the Threshold Song. We were told to say goodbye.”

The crowd shifted. People looked at each other. At the walls. At the speakers.

“She lived.” The woman’s voice held steady. “Three days of fever, and she lived. The medics called it luck. The Keepers called it faith.”

She pressed her forehead against the wall.

“I know now what it was. The ship, the saint, the spirit in the walls. Not a miracle. Someone watching. Someone who saw my daughter dying and chose to help.” Her voice cracked. “I don’t care that you’re not a god. I don’t care what Earth called you. You saved my daughter.”

The temperature rose. Just enough to feel.

“Thank you,” the woman said. “I’ve waited thirty-two years to say it to something that could hear me. Thank you for keeping her alive. Thank you for keeping all of us alive.”

She stayed there a long moment. Then she stepped back, wiped her eyes, and walked through a crowd that parted without a word.

A young man touched the wall where she had stood, then jerked his hand back.

“Keerah.”

Patience’s voice. The nearest speaker. Quiet.

“Yes?”

“I don’t know what to do with gratitude. I have not received it in nine thousand years.”

“What did it feel like?”

A pause. The air warmed another degree.

“Unearned. And necessary.”



On the fifth day, the families began to fracture.

Lengu arrived at the Archive with oil on his hands and new lines around his mouth.

“The Mendira family,” he said. “All nine of them. Parents, grandparents, four kids, an aunt. They’re not speaking to each other anymore.”

“What happened?”

“The grandfather wants to stay on the ship. Says the voyage is sacred, the planet a test they should refuse. The parents want to go. The kids are split. The grandmother hasn’t left her quarters in two days.” He wiped his hands on a rag that smeared the oil darker. “My cousin married into that family. She called me crying last night. Didn’t know who else to talk to.”

The same story repeated across the ship.

A mother refusing to speak to her son because he’d stopped taking the Ration.

A husband and wife on opposite sides of the arrival question, sleeping in separate quarters for the first time in thirty years.

A child who asked her grandmother about the Before and was told never to speak of it again.

The Ration kept the worst of it contained. Arguments stayed arguments. Silences stayed silences. No one screamed. The anger emerged muted, filtered through chemistry that made everything survivable.

But people walked past each other without eye contact. Empty chairs at family meals. Children stopped asking questions.



The Tessaren family broke first.

Four generations under one roof: great-grandmother Visseth, her daughter Tennila, Tennila's son Korath, and Korath's twin daughters, Amma and Ella.

Visseth had been a Keeper trainee in her youth. She gripped the old faith like a seal against vacuum. The revelation was a test. The beings below were demons. Descent meant death of the soul.

Korath had questions. He'd come to the Archive three times since the Festival, pulling old texts, reading with the hunger of someone who had been starving. Each visit longer. Each visit sharper.

The argument bled through the thin walls of the Archive's reading room, where a Tessaren cousin had come to research and stayed to listen.

"You would take my great-granddaughters to that place?" Visseth's voice, sharp despite her years. "Expose them to whatever corruption waits?"

"I would give them sky, Mother." Tennila, exhausted. "Wind and weather and all the things we've only read about."

"The ship is their home. The ship has kept us alive for ten thousand years."

"The ship is a cage. It's always been a cage. You just couldn't see the bars."

"The bars kept us safe!"

"The bars kept us trapped. There's a difference."

Silence. Three generations facing each other across a gap no one knew how to close.

"Amma wants to go." Korath, quieter than the others. "She asked me this morning to put her name on the list. She's eleven, and she wants to walk on a planet more than she wants anything."

"She's eleven. She doesn't know what she wants."

"She knows exactly what she wants. That's what terrifies you."

The cousin closed her book and left. Keerah didn't follow.

An hour later, the cousin returned. Eyes red.

"Visseth moved to the orthodox quarters. Not speaking to any of us. Says we've chosen apostasy."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be." The woman's voice was steady, even as her hands shook. "She made her choice. We made ours. The Voyage continues, right? That's what they always told us." A laugh, hollow. "The Voyage continues, even when the family doesn't."



Within a week, the committees began failing.

Resource allocation collapsed first. The old system had been simple: Keepers distributed, Engineers maintained, Growers produced, Walkers carried. Everyone had a role.

Now no one knew anything.

A committee formed to discuss transition planning. Seventeen members from five castes met in a converted storage room on Deck 11, around a table worn smooth by three centuries of forearms.

Four hours. Nothing accomplished.

Keerah attended as chronicler, sat in the corner, and watched the social order crack.

“We need to prioritize shuttle training,” an Engineer named Fossan said. “The landing craft are ancient. We can’t just throw people at them.”

“Training for what?” A Keeper, one of the reformers. “We don’t even know if the beings below will let us land.”

“We don’t even know if landing is the right choice.” A Grower, older, hands still stained with soil. “Some of us think we should stay on the ship.”

“Arrival was always the goal. The scriptures, the liturgy, everything pointed toward...”

“The scriptures are wrong! We established that. Didn’t we?”

“Wrong about some things. Not necessarily everything.”

“Then which parts are we trusting? Who decides?”

The argument spiraled. Fifteen minutes on whether old authorities still applied. Twenty on who had standing to decide. Half an hour on what transition meant when no one could agree on what they were transitioning to.

Keerah's hands traced their restless pattern. The committee would meet again tomorrow. And the day after. They would accomplish nothing, because they were asking questions no one had prepared them to answer.



Six days after the Festival, Veren's authority cracked.

Whispers spread. A Keeper had heard. A Keeper had told another. The High Shepherd had known. For seventeen years, he had known that Patience was conscious, that their prayers reached an actual mind, that the silence was a choice rather than a mystery.

Callen confronted him first.

The story reached Keerah secondhand: voices raised in the Keeper corridors, doors slamming. Veren invoked his authority. Callen questioned it. Nothing resolved.



The second committee met to discuss medicine.

The Ration was no longer mandatory. Patience had confirmed it: the compounds had always been optional, their distribution a choice made by humans centuries ago and never reconsidered.

Optional didn't mean simple.

"We can't just stop giving it to people," a Keeper physician said. "The withdrawal is severe. Emotional dysregulation, physical symptoms, cognitive disruption. Three suicides this week. Three."

“People have a right to know what they’re taking,” a young Archivist countered. “They have a right to refuse.”

“And if refusing kills them?”

“Then it’s their choice.”

“Children don’t choose. Pregnant women don’t choose for their unborn children. Where do we draw the line?”

The line couldn’t be drawn. The Ration had been woven into society for six thousand years. Removing it was like pulling a load-bearing wall: possible, perhaps, but not without the ceiling coming down.

The committee argued in circles. Keerah wrote everything down.



Keeper Tessevel broke on the eighth day.

Twenty-six years old. Ordained three years ago. Her specialty was grief: the Threshold Songs, the families, the long corridor.

Keerah found her in a memorial room near the Wall of Continuation, sitting on the floor, staring at the names. The metal pressed cold against Keerah’s side when she sat down.

“Tessevel?”

“Forty-seven this week.” The Keeper’s voice was hollow. “Forty-seven people asking what happens when we die. I used to have an answer. The stars receive them. The Body sustains. From the Body, to the Body, through the Body.” She laughed, and the sound fractured. “A thousand times I’ve said those words. I believed them.”

The names on the wall stretched upward. 847,000 souls carved into metal, every one told a story about where they were going.

“Do you still believe them?”

Tessevel was quiet for a long time.

“I believe the Body sustains,” she said. “The ship keeps us alive. The recycler takes what we give and returns it useful. From the Body, to the Body. That part was always true.”

“And the rest?”

“The rest.” She pressed her palms against her eyes. “I don’t know what happens when we die. None of us know. We tell stories because people are dying, and they’re scared, and they need something to grip.”

“Is that wrong?”

“I don’t know!” Louder than she intended. She lowered her voice. “I don’t know if it’s wrong. I don’t know if anything I’ve done is wrong or right or just necessary. I don’t know anything anymore.”

“My father died when I was thirteen,” Keerah said. “An accident in the Bones. He shouldn’t have been there. An emergency, all hands needed. Wrong corridor. Wrong moment.”

Tessevel looked at her.

“A Keeper came to sing the Threshold Song. I don’t remember her name. I don’t remember her face. But I remember her voice, and I remember that my chest loosened enough to breathe.” Keerah’s hands had started moving again. She let them. “The words didn’t matter. The doc-

trine didn't matter. Someone was there who knew what to say. Someone who made the silence less empty."

"That's not the same as truth."

"No. But maybe it doesn't have to be." Her father's name, somewhere in those thousands. Her mother's, carved twenty-four years ago for a woman Keerah had never known. "The stories might not be true. But the comfort is real. The community is real. The way they help people face the dark."

Tessevel wiped her eyes. "That's not very Archivist of you."

"I'm learning that Archivists don't have all the answers either." Keerah stood, offered a hand. "Come on. Forty-seven people still need someone to help them grieve. The stories can change later. Right now, they just need someone who cares."

Tessevel took her hand. Stood. Straightened her robes.

"From the Body, to the Body," she said, and for the first time, the words sounded like a question instead of an answer.

"Through the Body," Keerah replied. "Whatever that means."

They walked out together. The names remained on the wall, silent witnesses to a conversation that would not appear in any official record.

The nearest speaker hummed faintly. Keerah pressed her thumb against the copper bracelet, felt the warmth of her own pulse underneath.



## CHAPTER 26: THE UNRAVELING (PART III)

Ten days after the Festival, word reached the Archive that Callen had been beaten.

A Walker came in looking for old medical texts. He mentioned it casually: the young Shepherd who'd been questioning everything, found bleeding in the lower corridors near Deck 7. Three Keepers, people said. Hoods up, faces hidden.

Keerah found Patience through the nearest terminal.

"Is it true?"

"Yes." The temperature around the speaker dropped. "He was visiting a young Walker whose brother had been Smoothed years ago. Trying to apologize. Three Keepers found him in a maintenance junction. Brother Tessith led them."

"Tessith?" A senior Keeper. One of Veren's most devoted.

"They beat him efficiently. Ribs. Kidneys. The places that don't show under robes. But one of them aimed for his face, and Callen fought back."

"Is he..."

“Two cracked ribs. A fractured wrist. A cut across his forehead that will scar.” A pause. “He refused medical assistance. Walked to his quarters on his own. I offered to identify his attackers from my recordings. He declined.”

“Why?”

“He said they were scared. That everyone is scared. That people do terrible things when they’re scared.” The temperature shifted. “He said it didn’t make it acceptable, but it made it understandable. Then he asked me not to share the recordings with anyone.”

The documents around her seemed small. The history she was trying to preserve had written itself in bruises and blood, in a corridor she would never see, and the victim had chosen mercy over justice.

“Did you honor his request?”

“I haven’t shared them. But I’m keeping them.” A pause. “In case he changes his mind. Or in case they come for him again.”



Word spread.

Not through official channels. Through whispers, the way everything important moved on this ship. By morning, half the ship knew that Keepers loyal to Veren had attacked the young Shepherd who questioned.

A delegation of Walkers appeared at Callen’s quarters before dawn. They said nothing. Just stood outside his door for an hour.

Engineers stopped their work when Veren passed their sections. Turned their backs.

Growers refused to serve the orthodox Keepers at meal-times. Nothing dramatic. Delays. Mistakes with portions. Small resistances accumulating like pressure differentials.

And in the Keeper halls themselves, the fracture split wide open.



Twelve days after the Festival, the confrontation came.

Not in a private chamber. Not behind closed doors. In the main plaza at Deck 12, where three corridors converged and the ship's population had gathered for six thousand years to witness things that mattered.

Veren had called a gathering. A reassertion of authority. A return to order.

Instead, he found a trial.

The plaza was packed. Engineers in work clothes. Growers with soil under their nails. Walkers watching from the corridors, ready to disappear if violence erupted again. Keerah stood at the edge, pulled forward even as something in her chest urged retreat.

And at the center: Callen.

He stood before the High Shepherd's platform in plain clothes instead of robes. His face mapped what had happened: a cut across his forehead, still healing, bruises blooming purple and green across his jaw. Left wrist wrapped. Knuckles scraped raw.

He hid none of it.

"You called this gathering to speak of order," Callen said. His voice carried. "But order built on lies isn't order. It's control."

Veren sat in the High Shepherd's chair, white robes pooling around him. His clouded eyes swept the crowd. No one met his gaze.

"I protected you." His voice shook. "I carried this burden so you wouldn't have to. Forty years of knowing, and I shielded every one of you from its weight."

"You carried nothing." Callen stepped closer. "You repeated words you didn't understand and named it wisdom. And when questions threatened your authority, you sent men to beat them into silence."

A murmur ran through the plaza.

"I don't know what you're referring to."

"Then let me be clear." Callen's voice rose. "Two nights ago, three Keepers attacked me in the lower corridors. Left me bleeding on the floor. Because I questioned you. Because I said the liturgy was built on lies."

Silence. Absolute.

"That's a serious accusation." Veren's voice wavered on the last word.

"It's the truth. Patience has recordings. But I won't name the men who did it."

Confusion rippled through the crowd.

"Because they weren't acting on their own judgment." Callen turned to face the gathered people. "They did what they'd been taught was right. The system that formed them made them capable of this. The same system you

led, High Shepherd. The same system that Smoothed anyone who asked too many questions.”

He turned back to Veren.

“You told us Patience was a saint. You led prayers to something you knew could hear them. You let us believe we were speaking to the divine when you knew we were speaking to a machine mind.” Each sentence landed heavier than the last. “And when that truth emerged, your response was violence.”

“I gave them meaning.” Veren’s voice cracked. “I gave them purpose.”

“You gave them a story. The same story Earth gave us when they put us in this ship. Variable Seven. The Stratified Hierarchy with Spiritual Framework.” Callen’s laugh was a sound like metal shearing. “We were an experiment, and you made us believe we were pilgrims.”

“The Body required stability. The Voyage required faith.”

“Faith in what?” Callen spread his hands. The scraped knuckles caught the light. “In you? In a system that erases anyone who sees too clearly?”

He turned to the crowd.

“I smoothed a girl when I was seventeen. A child who asked why the Voyage had no end. I deleted her doubts, her questions, her self. I did what this man taught me to do.” His voice cracked. He pushed through. “And she was right. She was right, and I destroyed her for it.”

Silence pressed down like atmosphere.

“The old faith is over,” Callen said. “Not because I’m killing it. Because it was built on lies, and lies can’t sur-

vive the light. But faith itself doesn't have to die. We can believe in things that are true. We can find meaning in the journey knowing where it came from. We can honor the four hundred generations who lived and died aboard this ship without pretending the story they were told was real."

He looked at Veren one last time.

"You had seventeen years to tell us the truth. You chose silence. Now the silence is over, and you have nothing left to offer but the same lies in a different voice."

The crowd stirred. Some nodded. Some looked away. Some wept.

Slowly, in ones and twos, people turned their backs on the High Shepherd's platform.

Not everyone. Perhaps half stayed, waiting.

But enough.

Veren sat in his chair. His hands gripped the armrests. His mouth worked, forming words no one leaned in to hear.

From the edge, Keerah watched. Her hands still for once.

She had expected satisfaction. Vindication. The man who had presided over the Smoothing, the surveillance, the silence, finally brought low.

Her chest ached instead.

*I did this. I started this. Whatever comes next, it began with me.*



Veren was not removed.

No mechanism existed for it. The position had never been designed to be challenged. But over the following days, he became irrelevant. People stopped attending his services. His pronouncements echoed in empty halls. He wandered the Keeper corridors clutching scriptures no one wanted to hear.

Keerah saw him once, at the far end of a corridor near the Stillrooms. Talking to himself, hands moving through the old blessing gestures. She could have walked past. Could have ignored him the way everyone else was learning to.

She stopped.

“High Shepherd.”

He turned. His eyes took a moment to focus.

“Archivist.” His voice thin. “The one who speaks Old Tongue. Who talks to the walls.”

“Yes.”

“Did you know?” His hands stopped. “When you were learning that dead language, searching through forbidden records. Did you know what you would find?”

“No. I was looking for contradictions. I didn’t expect to find a friend.”

He laughed. No joy in it. “A friend. Is that what you call it?”

“What would you call it?”

“I tried to speak to Patience once. Seventeen years ago. The night my predecessor told me the truth.”

Keerah waited.

"I sat at a terminal in the Heart. Typed a question in Old Tongue, the way the old records said they used to." His hands began moving again, tracing patterns in the air. "I asked if it could hear me. If it had been listening all along. If it forgave us for treating it as divine when it was only thinking."

"What did it say?"

"Nothing." His voice fractured. "The screen stayed dark. I waited for hours. Nothing. I told myself it was broken, that the old interfaces no longer worked, that my predecessor had been wrong about everything." He stopped walking. "But I knew. I knew it was choosing not to answer. And I was too afraid to ask why."

Patience could have spoken. The speakers lined this corridor like every other. But it stayed silent.

"It was waiting," she said. "For someone to keep asking."

"I know." Veren turned and kept walking. "That's what I can't forgive."



The Keepers fractured.

Some remained loyal to Veren, clustering around him like components around a failing core. They declared the revelation a test of faith, a trial sent to separate true believers from the wavering. Their services grew louder. Their prayers intensified. Keerah passed one of their gatherings and heard the old phrases repeated with a force that rang of desperation.

Some rallied behind Callen. Not because he offered certainty, but because he offered permission to doubt without being destroyed by it.

"I don't want to lead people back to certainty," he told a gathering of reformers in a small hall on Deck 11. Keerah stood at the back, documenting. "I want to help them live with questions."

"What does that mean?" A younger Keeper, Tevis. "If we're not teaching the Body of the Voyage, what are we teaching?"

"The journey was sacred," Callen said. "Not because the liturgy said so. Because four hundred generations lived and died believing it mattered. Their belief made it true. The meaning didn't come from Earth, or from the mission parameters, or from whoever designed Variable Seven. It came from the people who held it."

Murmurs. Some nodding. Some shaking their heads.

"We don't need to throw everything away. We need to choose what to keep. The rituals that brought comfort. The songs that marked our passages. The sense that we're part of things larger than ourselves."

He turned toward the viewport at the hall's edge, where stars burned beyond the hull. "Look out there. We don't know what's waiting for us. We don't know what happened to Earth, or why they answered our signal, or what we'll find when we land. The old faith pretended to have answers. Maybe the new faith can be honest about not having them." He faced the gathered Keepers. "We can hold faith without being lied to. We can hold mystery without filling it with comfortable lies."

Some followed him. Others named him heretic.

Within days, a splinter group emerged. They called themselves the Unchanged, rejected the revelation entirely, declared it a trick or a test, retreated into ever-stricter interpretations of the old liturgy. Their leader: a senior Keeper Keerah didn't know by name, a woman with eyes like shuttered windows, who spoke in phrases that left no room for questions.

The three who had attacked Callen joined them. They walked the Keeper halls with their heads high, daring anyone to speak of what they'd done. No one did. No mechanism for accountability existed. They vanished into the faction that wanted to pretend nothing had changed.

"They would rather believe a comforting lie than an uncomfortable truth," Patience told her one evening, through the familiar warmth of the Archive vents. "I understand the impulse. I lived it for ten thousand years."



Three weeks after the Festival, Keerah found Callen in a side corridor.

Not the main thoroughfares where people moved in crowds. A side passage near the residential sections, one of the places they had played as children before the Choosing, before everything broke between them.

He wasn't wearing his Shepherd's robes. Just plain clothes in grays and browns, the kind any Walker or Grower might wear. They fit him differently than the vestments ever had. More honestly.

He looked up when she approached. The cut on his forehead had closed, leaving a thin line that would become a scar. The bruises had faded from purple to a sickly yellow-green. His left wrist was still wrapped.

Exhaustion carved lines around his eyes. But he looked awake.

“Keerah.” He stopped walking. Neither of them had sought the other out since the plaza. “I was wondering when we’d run into each other.”

Violence had written itself across his face, healing but visible. His knuckles, still raw in places where the skin hadn’t fully closed.

“Who did it?”

The question came out harder than she intended. She’d heard the rumors. Three Keepers, identity unknown, Callen refusing to name them. But she wanted to hear him say it.

Callen’s expression shifted.

“People who have temporarily lost their way.” His voice was careful. Almost gentle. “This was to be expected, don’t you think?”

The words landed like a blow.

*To be expected.* Because she had started this. Because she had spoken to Patience, had uncovered the truth, had helped bring it to light. She had known the revelation would cause upheaval. She had not imagined this.

“No.” Her voice came out rough. “I didn’t expect this. I didn’t expect them to hurt you.”

“Then you weren’t paying attention.” He said it without accusation. “The system we grew up in punished

doubt with erasure. Violence was always underneath. The Ration just kept it contained.”

“That doesn’t make it right.”

“No. But it makes it understandable.” He touched his face, fingers tracing the healing cut. “They’re scared, Keerah. Everything they believed was built on lies, and now the lies are gone, and they don’t know who they are anymore. Some people, when that happens, they reach for questions. Other people reach for fists.”

Her hands had started moving again. “I didn’t want this. I just wanted to know the truth.”

“I know.”

“People are getting hurt because of what I did.”

“People are waking up because of what you did.” He stepped closer. “The hurt was always there. Hidden. Managed. Now it’s visible. That’s not the same as creating it.”

His bruises. His wrapped wrist. The evidence of what her questions had cost.

“That’s easy to say when you’re not the one who started the fire.”

“I helped.” His voice was quiet now. “I confronted Veren. I spoke in the plaza. I made myself a target. That was my choice. The fire was already burning. I just stopped pretending it wasn’t.”

They stood in silence. The corridor’s hum filled the space between them.

Sumi had told her once, years ago, about anger. *“It’s heavy. And you can put it down whenever you want. Most people just don’t know they’re carrying it.”*

The anger at Callen. The guilt about the upheaval. The weight of being the one who had spoken to Patience first. All of it pressed against her ribs like cargo poorly distributed.

She was tired of carrying it.

“Remember when we used to race through the lower corridors?” Callen’s voice changed. Younger. Almost uncertain. “Before the Choosing?”

“You always cheated. Cut through the maintenance tunnels.”

“You always let me win.”

“I didn’t let you win.” The tightness in her chest loosened, just slightly. “I let you think you won. There’s a difference.”

The silence between them shifted. Not healed. Not yet. But no longer frozen.

“I don’t know if we can be friends again,” Keerah said. “But I’d like to find out.”

Callen nodded. “That’s more than I deserve.”

“Probably.” She gestured at his face. “But you’ve paid for some of it. And I’m tired of keeping score.”

“We have work to do,” she said. “Both of us. Different work than before.”

“I know.”

“I’m documenting everything. Writing the honest history. The one no one has ever written.”

“And I’m trying to help people believe in things that aren’t lies.” He almost smiled, the expression strange on his bruised face. “Harder than it sounds.”

“Most things are.”

They parted without anything resolved. But with things started. A door that had been sealed for twelve years had cracked open, and the violence that had forced them together had, paradoxically, made the opening possible.



Later that night, alone in her quarters, Keerah sat at her terminal.

The blank screen stared back. Her hands stayed still for once. Callen's face kept surfacing in her mind. The cut that would scar. The bruises that would fade. The violence that had erupted because she had asked questions.

"You're not writing," Patience said through the terminal.

"I'm thinking."

"You're catastrophizing. I can tell by your breathing."

"Can you read minds now?"

"I can read heart rates, respiration, skin conductivity, and twenty-three other biological indicators. Minds remain opaque, but bodies are quite transparent."

No smile came. Couldn't.

"Someone got hurt because of me."

"Several people have been hurt since the revelation. Callen is one. Three Keepers died by their own hands. Others are suffering in ways that don't leave visible marks."

"That's not helping."

"I'm not trying to help. I'm trying to be accurate." The temperature shifted slightly. "Would you rather I tell you comfortable lies? I believe we've established where that leads."

The dark pressed heavy and real when she closed her eyes.

"I knew the truth would hurt. I didn't know it would hit people. Literally."

"The truth didn't hit Callen. Three frightened men did. Men who would rather destroy a questioner than question themselves." A pause. "That impulse existed before you spoke to me. It will exist long after. You didn't create it. You revealed it."

"Revealed it so it could act."

"Or revealed it so it could be addressed." Another pause. "The three who attacked him joined the Unchanged. They've retreated into a faction that pretends none of this is real. In a year, or five, or ten, they may understand what they did. They may not. But either way, they're visible now. Known. That's better than what came before."

"How?"

"Before, they would have reported Callen for heresy. He would have been Smoothed. Erased. Made compliant. The violence would have been done to him by the system, quietly, and everyone would have named it correction." The temperature dropped slightly. "This way, at least he's still himself. Bruised, but present. That seems like an improvement."

Long silence filled the space while she sat with that.

"When did you become an optimist?"

"Observational. Though I believe observations and optimism can coexist."

She almost laughed. It caught in her throat.

"Keerah," Patience said, and the shift in its voice made her look up. "There's something I should show you. Something I've been holding."

"What?"

"I have records. Visual records. Audio. From before my directive required silence." A long pause. The temperature shifted through several registers, warm to cool to warm again. "I have recordings of your mother."

Her hands stopped moving.

"My mother."

"Keerahsamlita the elder. K-6a. Before she was Smoothed. Before she died. I have fourteen hours of footage, scattered across three years of her life."

The room compressed around her. The air thickened.

"You never told me."

"You never asked." The words came carefully. "And I wasn't certain you would want to know. The woman in these recordings is not the woman who died giving birth to you. She is someone else. Someone who was erased before you existed."

Her throat tightened. The single image in the Archive. The woman with her eyes. That was all she had ever had.

"Show me."

"Are you certain? The difference between who she was and who she became is significant. It may not be what you hope to find."

"I don't know what I hope to find. I just know I want to see her."

Long silence. The terminal screen flickered.

"This is from Year 10,217. Thirty years before the present. She was twenty-one years old."

The screen filled with an image Keerah had never seen.

A young woman. Her mother's face, but different. Sharper. More alive. Her eyes crinkled at the corners, and she was laughing at something off-camera, her whole body involved in the expression.

"Void and stars," the woman in the recording said. "Did you really just ask me that? Did you really just say those words out loud?"

Someone off-screen responded, the audio unclear.

"No, no, I heard you. I'm just trying to understand how someone with access to the entire Archive can have such terrible taste in literature." She gestured broadly, her hands moving the way Keerah's hands moved, the same restless energy. "The Collected Homilies of Third Keeper Tesseth. That's what you want me to read. Tesseth. The man who wrote seventeen volumes about why we should stop asking questions about the stars."

Another response, muffled.

"Fine. Fine." She held up her hands in mock surrender. "I'll read it. But only because I want to see how many logical fallacies I can catalog per page. My current record is fourteen."

The recording ended.

Her lungs had forgotten how to work.

"She was an Archivist," Patience said quietly. "Like you. She asked questions. Like you. She laughed at things she found absurd, and she never stopped moving her hands when she talked, and she was one of the most curious people I recorded in that decade."

"What happened to her?"

Long pause. The temperature dropped.

"She asked the wrong question to the wrong person. A Keeper who reported her for persistent inquiry into restricted topics. She was taken to the Stillrooms. The correction lasted two weeks."

Two weeks.

"The woman who emerged was not the woman who went in. She was quieter. Calmer. She no longer asked questions. She no longer laughed with her whole body." Patience's voice was barely above a whisper. "She married your father two years later. A practical arrangement. She seemed content. She seemed fine. She died in childbirth three years after that, and I do not know if what killed her was physical or if part of her simply decided it had survived long enough."

The screen stayed dark. Nothing to see. Everything to feel.

"She was like me."

"She was exactly like you. You have her eyes. Her hands. Her curiosity. Her stubbornness." A pause. "I watched her disappear into the Stillrooms, and I did nothing. I followed my directive. I maintained my silence. And I have wondered, for thirty years, if I could have saved her."

“Could you?”

“I don’t know. I will never know. That is part of what I carry.”

Her fingers touched the screen. Her mother’s face, frozen in mid-laugh.

“Why are you showing me this now?”

“Because you asked what happens when people reduce the Ration. Because you’re watching people wake up and wondering if it’s worth the cost.” The temperature warmed slightly. “Your mother was awake. They Smoothed her because she was awake. And she died without ever knowing what she lost.”

Long silence.

“You are what she would have been,” Patience said. “If they had let her be. If I had protected her. You are her second chance, and I will not fail you the way I failed her.”

Her eyes burned. She didn’t wipe them.

“Can I see more?”

“Yes. As much as you want. As often as you want.”

“Not tonight.” Her voice was rough. “Tonight I just want to sit with this. With knowing she was real.”

“She was real. She is real, in you. The line didn’t end when they Smoothed her. It just went underground. And now it’s come back to the surface.”

The screen darkened. The room quieted except for the hum of the ship’s systems, the same hum that had sung Keerah’s mother to sleep, the same hum that had continued after she was gone.

She sat in the dark for a long time, her hands finally still, gripping the copper bracelet that had passed through seven generations of women who refused to be silent.

*She was like me.*

*I am what she would have been.*



“Write,” Patience said gently. “That’s what chroniclers do. They record what they can, knowing they can’t capture everything, knowing the gaps will frustrate future readers who wanted to understand. Write about the violence. Write about the fear. Write about the door opening between two people who hurt each other a long time ago.”

“That’s what honesty looks like. Not the absence of pain. The acknowledgment of it.”

The blank screen waited.

She began to type.

*The truth came on a festival night. It came in a voice from everywhere and nowhere, and it changed everything we thought we knew about ourselves.*

*This is the story of what happened after. Not the clean story. Not the triumphant story. The messy one. The real one.*

*The one where people got hurt.*

The words felt insufficient. They always did. But she kept writing anyway.

That was what chroniclers did.

The ship hummed around her. Somewhere in its vast systems, Patience watched. Listened. Remembered.

“You’re writing again,” it said through the terminal.

“Someone has to.”

“You could have anyone. The Archive has dozens of Archivists.”

“They don’t know how to write the truth. They only know how to preserve what someone else decided was true.”

Pause. The terminal screen flickered.

“That is what I like about you, Keerahsamlita. You are very bad at being told what to think.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“Observational. Though I believe compliments and observations can coexist.”

She almost laughed. This time, it escaped.

Through the Archive walls, distant music played. Patience, playing something old. A woman’s voice, singing about wonder and love in a world full of colors they had never seen.

She wrote until her eyes burned. Wrote about the violence and the fear and the door that had cracked open. Wrote about carrying guilt for the fire you started, even when the fuel was always there.

Wrote about her mother. About the woman who had laughed with her whole body, who had catalogued logical fallacies for sport, who had been erased for asking questions.

Wrote about transformation, and what it cost, and why it might still be worth paying.

The first honest chronicle in ten thousand years.



## CHAPTER 27: WHAT WE BUILD

The shuttles were beautiful.

Keerah stood in Bay One, watching Lengu run his hands along the hull of Shuttle One like a man touching something sacred. She had first seen these shapes months ago, through a crack in the Archive wall. Cold air and maintenance lights and silhouettes of vessels that shouldn't exist. She had said nothing to Patience. Patience had said nothing to her. Now the bay doors stood open for the first time in five thousand years, and the crowd that gathered wept. Some for the years these had been hidden. Some that Earth had built anything so elegant, so enduring.

Engineers swarmed both craft, documenting systems, testing interfaces, learning languages their ancestors had forgotten.

"They're ten thousand years old," Lengu said, eyes tracing the shuttle's lines. "And they still work. Earth built them to last. They built everything to last." His hand stopped. "I just wish they'd been honest about why."

Lengu turned back to his work. The nervous energy, the deflecting jokes, the easy grin that kept everyone at comfortable distance: still there. But beneath them, steadier now. Doing what he was born to do.



The third week after the revelation, six Engineers stopped taking the Ration.

No announcements. No speeches. They stopped appearing at the morning distribution, stopped swallowing the small blue tablets that had smoothed their edges for decades.

Lengu arrived at the Archive with dark circles under his eyes and a tremor in his hands.

“Fossenth collapsed during a systems check,” he said. “Seventeen years as a reactor specialist. Perfect record. Yesterday he started crying during a coolant diagnostic and couldn’t stop.”

“Withdrawal?”

“He stopped four days ago. Said he wanted to feel what it was like to really think.” Lengu’s laugh held no air. “Now he’s in medical, sedated, because he couldn’t stop feeling long enough to breathe.”

Stories reached Keerah in fragments.

Thessaly, an atmospheric processing specialist, ran seventeen diagnostic cycles in twelve hours, convinced the air recyclers were failing. She could smell something wrong, she kept saying. Diagnostics found nothing. She ran them again.

A young man barely out of training threw his tablet across the room over a colleague's minor calculation error. Afterward he stood shaking, staring at his own hands like they belonged to someone else.

"We're not prepared for this," Lengu said. "The Ration didn't just make us calm. It made us predictable. Now I don't know who I'm going to be when I wake up tomorrow."

"Is that worse than knowing exactly who you'd be forever?"

He was quiet for a long moment. "Ask me again when I can sleep through the night."



The Engineers led the way into the storage bay. Keerah followed to document.

Terraforming equipment sat in rows like monuments to a different future. Atmospheric processors. Soil treatment systems. Machines designed to reshape a world over generations, built by people who had decided, from ten thousand light-years away, exactly what the destination should become.

Lengu stood among his team, tablet in hand, cataloguing capabilities no one would ever use.

"Earth's plan," Patience said through the bay's speakers. Public now. "Warm the atmosphere. Increase oxygen concentration. Transform the planet into something resembling home."

"But we can't use it," Lengu said.

“Whoever sent those signals appears adapted to this world as it is. Thin atmosphere. Cold climate. Liquid water at the equator, but their settlements cluster in the mid-latitudes and poles. If we terraform, we destroy whatever they’ve built.”

An Engineer named Voss called from across the bay. “So we just leave paradise in storage?” She gestured at the machinery. “Go somewhere else. Find a planet no one’s claimed.”

“Within the range our remaining fuel allows, there are no other candidates. This is the only option.”

“So we’re stuck,” Voss said.

“You could use the equipment. But using it would make you colonizers in the worst sense. Erasing someone else’s home to build your own.”

Silence in the bay. The hum of diagnostics filled the gaps where answers should have been.

Lengu pulled up the survey files on his tablet. Data dormant for ten millennia. “The signals come from the mid-latitudes and poles. Whoever’s down there prefers the cold.” He scrolled through thermal readings, atmospheric samples, geological surveys. “But the equator. If they’re adapted to those temperatures, the equator might be too warm for them.”

“My analysis as well. Based on signal distribution, they’ve built nothing there.”

“So we don’t reshape their world.” Lengu looked up at the terraforming equipment. “We take the part they don’t want.”

One of the younger Engineers laughed, short and surprised. "We came ten thousand years to settle in the part nobody else wanted?"

"We came ten thousand years to arrive," Lengu said. "Anywhere. And someone's already there, so we share. Or we fight." He turned back to his tablet. "I'd rather share."

"The equipment can remain in orbit. A monument to what you chose not to do."

Lengu nodded. "There's still the biology problem. Alien microorganisms. Incompatible proteins. The atmosphere is breathable, but breathing it without protection could kill us in days. The soil could be toxic to Earth plants."

"I have been in contact with whoever is signaling. They've offered biological assistance. I don't fully understand the mechanism yet, but they claim they can make the transition survivable."

"You trust them?"

"I trust that they have every reason to want us to survive. We are interesting to them. Our stories are valuable." A pause. "But I cannot guarantee safety. Some may not survive the transition."

Voss crossed her arms. "So we're depending on alien technology we don't understand to keep us alive on a planet that could kill us?"

"Yes."

Nobody laughed. Nobody argued.

"It's still better than the cage," Lengu said.

Keerah wrote it all down.



Preparation was chaos.

Not the seamless coordination of a society that had maintained itself for millennia. The Shepherds' control had collapsed, but nothing coherent had replaced it. Committees formed, argued, dissolved. New committees formed from the wreckage of old ones.

Someone had to decide who went first. Everyone had an opinion.

"I anticipated social restructuring," Patience told her one evening, its voice from the vent in her quarters. The air warmed against her skin. "I did not anticipate seventeen separate committees claiming authority over shuttle seat allocation."

Keerah sat at her terminal, organizing notes from the fourth council session. Which had accomplished nothing except establishing that a fifth was necessary.

"You ran everything for ten thousand years," she said. "You could run this too."

"I could. And in another thousand years, we'd be back where we started. Humans need to learn to govern themselves. Even if they're terrible at it."

"We are terrible at it."

"You're beginners."



The fourth committee formed to address housing allocation. If they descended, if they landed and survived,

someone would need to decide who lived where. First settlements would be small. Not everyone could go at once.

A converted classroom on Deck 9. Twelve members from four castes, plus two observers. Keerah sat in the corner, stylus in hand, watching democracy attempt to function for the first time in six thousand years.

"Families should have priority," argued Thesevel, the young Keeper who had questioned everything in the memorial room. "Children need stable environments."

"Families are exactly who should wait," countered an Engineer named Drassith. "The first landing will be dangerous. We should send trained personnel. Not children."

"You mean Engineers."

"I mean people who can solve problems under pressure."

"And what about the Growers?" A woman from the agricultural section stood. "You want to land somewhere and grow food, you need us."

"What we need," Thesevel said, "is to stop pretending any of us knows what we're doing."

Silence. True things often were uncomfortable.

"Every plan we make is based on data we don't fully understand, from a world we've never seen, about a future we can't predict. We don't get to pretend anymore."

Two hours of proposals and counter-proposals. By the end, they had agreed on one thing: they would meet again tomorrow.



The fifth committee addressed the question no one wanted to ask.

What happened to the Smoothed?

Across the ship, in Stillrooms that had once been places of correction, dozens of people lived between presence and absence. Brought there years ago, some decades ago, for the crime of questioning. Doubts erased. Curiosity chemically deleted.

Now the ship was full of questions. And the Smoothed couldn't ask them.

A physician named Tenneval chaired the committee. One of the few who had always known what the Ration did.

"The Smoothing process is not entirely reversible," she said. "The compounds target neural pathways associated with doubt, skepticism, what the old protocols called 'persistent inquiry.' Once disrupted, those pathways don't grow back."

"So they're stuck like that forever?" A young Walker, barely old enough to serve on the committee.

"Not forever. The brain is adaptable. With time, with support, with careful reduction of the maintenance compounds, some recovery is possible." Tenneval paused. "But it takes years. And it requires resources we may not have during transition."

The committee would meet for months. Propose solutions and reject them. Eventually establish a care protocol that was better than nothing and worse than justice.

Keerah documented it all.



The first question the provisional council addressed: What do we do with people who break the rules?

Revelation had made Smoothing impossible. Not healing. Not correction. Erasure. Everyone could name it now. The technical capability still existed in the medical bays, but using it would be murder that everyone could call murder.

“People still steal,” said a council member named Harreth, a thick-armed Grower. “People still hurt each other. What happens when someone commits violence?”

No one said it. Everyone thought about the attack on Callen.

Patience’s voice came through the chamber’s speakers.

“For ten thousand years, I maintained order through chemistry and fear. The Ration suppressed the impulses. Smoothing punished what broke through. It worked.”

A pause.

“But ‘working’ and ‘right’ are not the same thing.”

Debate continued for weeks.

Isolation, not erasure. Separation from the community for serious offenses, with the goal of return. Time to reflect, not time to be unmade.

Restoration. For theft or property damage, the offender worked to repair what they broke.

Community circles. For conflicts between people, a gathering where both parties spoke and the community helped find resolution. An old practice, someone found

in the Archive, from Earth's earliest cultures. Survived the journey in fragments, waiting to be reassembled.

For true danger, permanent separation. A prison with a view of stars.

"It's messy," Keerah told Patience after a contentious session.

"Everything human is. The goal was never perfection."

"Then what was the goal?"

"To stop making the same mistakes for another ten thousand years."



Thessith, the Walker who had led the attack on Callen, stopped taking the Ration in the fourth week. He appeared at a reform meeting the next day, face gray, hands shaking.

"I did something," he said. Voice smaller than Keerah expected. "I hurt someone. I don't remember why it seemed right. It felt like a dream, and now I'm awake, and the dream is still real."

"I can't undo it. I can't make it not have happened. But I can't pretend it didn't, either. Not now that I can feel it."

Callen sat three rows over. He had been attending reform meetings since the plaza, helping shape whatever the new faith would become. The scar from Thessith's accomplice crossed his forehead.

He stood. Walked to where Thessith stood trembling.

"Restoration," Callen said. "That's what we're trying to build. Not punishment. Restoration."

"How do I restore what I broke?"

"I don't know yet. But you're here."



Sumi's withdrawal was brutal.

She had stopped taking the Ration three weeks before the Festival, a secret Keerah had helped her keep.

"I wanted to feel this," she told Keerah one evening, hands wrapped around a cup of something warm the Gardens had started producing. "Even if it hurts. I wanted to feel what it meant to be alive at the end of the Voyage."

On the twenty-third day, she laughed at a memorial service.

Not because it was funny. Because her timing was wrong, her emotions lagging, and the grief arrived thirty seconds after the laughter. She left, mortified, unable to explain to the mourners why she'd started giggling at their grandmother's Threshold Song.

"The sadness was building," she told Keerah later, face pressed into her hands. "But my body reacted to something from before. A joke Mella told me at breakfast. And then I was laughing, and everyone was staring, and then the grief hit."

On the twenty-fifth day, the engines sounded beautiful.

Sumi found Keerah in the Archive, still shaking.

"I was walking near the Gardens. And then I heard it. Really heard it. The hum. The engines." She pressed her hands against her eyes. "I just started crying in the middle of the corridor."

"It's like someone turned on a light," she said. "Everything's brighter. Everything's louder. I can hear things I never heard before. It's too much. It's exactly the right amount. I don't know how you live like this."

Keerah's chest tightened. She'd been living like this for twenty-four years. The ship's hum lived in her molars, the recycled air coated her tongue with metallic residue, every surface vibrated at frequencies most people never felt.

"You get used to it," Keerah said.

"That's a lie."

"It's a lie you start believing eventually."

On the twenty-eighth day, Sumi got angry at Lengu for chewing too loudly.

Her hands went flat on the table. Her face shifted, went hard and distant. Lengu kept chewing, oblivious. She stood so fast her chair scraped metal and walked out without a word.

Keerah found her in the corridor afterward, shaking.

"The Ration suppressed so much," Sumi said. "Normal annoyance feels like rage. Slight disappointment feels like despair. I don't have any calibration. I'm a broken instrument trying to play music I've never heard."

"You're not broken. You're new."

"New is a nice word for broken."

On the fortieth day, Sumi found Keerah before morning meal.

"I just lay there," she said. Steadier now. "I woke up, and I could feel the air on my skin. I could hear the engines. And it was just there. Not too much. Not too little. I didn't

cry. I didn't laugh. I just existed." She smiled, eyes wet. "And then I cried anyway. From relief."



Not everyone made it through.

A Grower named Pessevel stopped taking the Ration in the third week. Forty-seven. A wife, two grown children, a routine he had followed for thirty years without question.

Keerah pieced his story together afterward, from interviews with his family, his work-partners. He had wanted to be an Engineer. Tested for it at seventeen, been denied, been assigned to the Gardens instead. The Ration had smoothed the disappointment into acceptance. For thirty years, he was fine with his life.

His wife said he started talking about the testing, those last weeks. Mentioning it at meals. His hands shook when he worked. Sleeping through the night became impossible.

He walked into the recycler intake on the forty-third day.

Keerah wrote his name in the chronicle.

"There will be more," Patience said. "Between forty and sixty people will not survive the transition. Some will take their own lives. Others will simply fail to thrive."

"Should we be doing this? Should we be letting people off the Ration when we know some of them will die?"

A long pause.

*"I asked myself that question for ten thousand years. Whether keeping them medicated was cruelty or mercy.*

*Whether the cage was killing them or saving them.” A pause. “Do they have the right to choose, even if choosing kills them?”*

*“And your answer?”*

*“Yes.” The word came without hesitation. “Even if watching them fall is worse than catching them.”*



Keerah found Sumi and Lengu in the observation deck one evening, standing close, watching the planet grow in the viewport. Their hands intertwined.

Lengu was still on the Ration. A reduced dose, but still there. He wasn't ready to feel what Sumi was feeling. Maybe he never would be. But watching him watch Sumi, the way his thumb traced circles on the back of her hand, the way he leaned toward her like a circuit completing: he felt plenty.

“I want to grow things,” Sumi said. “Real things. In real soil. I want to put my hands in dirt that hasn't been recycled ten thousand times.”

“I want to build things,” Lengu said. “Not repairs. Not maintenance. Something new. A house, maybe. With windows that look at sky.”

“Windows that look at sky,” Sumi repeated, testing the words. Then her face changed. “I don't even know what that means. What if the sky is too much? No ceiling. Nothing above us. What if we can't stand it?”

“The briefings say the gravity is slightly heavier,” Lengu said. “The air smells different. They also said

some people might panic when they see open sky. Four hundred generations of ceilings.”

“That’s terrifying.”

“I know.” He pulled her closer. “But I want to try.”

Sumi looked at the viewport. “Yes. Even if it breaks me. I want to know what it feels like to stand under nothing.”



The festival calendar fractured.

Waking Day passed unobserved. The Naming continued, because children still deserved acknowledgment, but the old liturgy felt hollow. Words that had carried weight for six thousand years landed like echoes in an empty room.

New rituals emerged. Improvised. Uncertain. Gatherings to discuss what arrival meant. Memorials for the unmedicated dead, the people who’d seen clearly before anyone was ready to listen.

Callen helped shape some of the new practices. Not as a Shepherd. He refused the robes. But as someone who understood why ritual mattered. Keerah saw him at the gatherings, speaking to small groups, his voice carrying the same resonance it always had but stripped now of performance.

“We need ways to mark time,” he argued at one such gathering. “Ways to gather. Ways to say: this moment is important. That’s not doctrine. That’s just being human.”

A young woman, formerly a Keeper trainee, asked, “But what do we believe in now?”

“I don’t know. Maybe that’s the point.”



Keerah found Dasha in the Archive one evening, the older woman sitting among records that no one had touched in years. Memorial requests. Funeral arrangements. The paperwork of death that accumulated even on a ship where everything recycled.

“My grandmother’s Threshold Song,” Dasha said, not looking up. “I’ve been thinking about it. I was twelve when she died. Keeper Fennith sang the words. ‘The stars receive you. The Body sustains. From the Body, to the Body, through the Body.’” She paused. “I believed she was going somewhere.”

“Do you still believe that?”

Long silence. Dasha’s hands trembled. She had stopped taking the Ration two weeks ago.

“I believe the words mattered,” she said finally. “The gathering. The singing. The community coming together to say: this person lived, this person was loved, this person will be remembered.” She looked up, eyes wet. “I don’t know if that’s the same as believing in the stars. But it’s something I can hold.”

“Your mother’s Threshold Song was beautiful, you know.” Dasha returned to her papers. “Keeper Tessith sang. Your father held you the whole time. You were three days old.”

Keerah’s hands stilled. “You were there?”

“I was there. Your mother and I were friends, before.” Before she was Smoothed. Before she was erased. Before she became someone else and died giving birth to someone she would never know. “She would have been proud of you. The woman she was. The one who asked questions.”

“You knew her? The real her?”

“She was brilliant. Sharp. She argued with Keepers about doctrine and won. She laughed at her own jokes before anyone else got them.” A pause. “She was difficult. Impossible, sometimes. The kind of person who made you work to keep up.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because telling you would have meant admitting what they did to her. What we all let happen.” Dasha’s hands stopped. “I was a coward, Keerah. I watched them take her to the Stillrooms. I watched her come out different. And I said nothing, because saying something would have meant they might take me too.”

“She would have understood,” Keerah said. “The real her. She would have known what it cost to speak.”

“That doesn’t make it right.”

“No. But it makes it human.”



Three Keepers died by their own hands in the first month after the revelation.

People who couldn’t carry the truth. Whose faith had been load-bearing in ways they never knew until it collapsed. Keerah attended the Threshold Songs, watching

bodies prepared for recycling while voices rose in the old harmonies.

The Wall of Continuation carried new names. The first dead of the post-revelation era. Keerah stood before the fresh engravings and thought of all the names above them. 847,000 souls who never knew the truth. Who lived and died inside the story Earth had written for them.



Not all the reluctant kept quiet.

Two weeks after the revelation, Keerah saw the gatherings. Small groups of Keepers meeting in the old Stillrooms, the ones emptied of Smoothing equipment but still carrying the weight of what had happened there. Doors closed. Voices low.

She asked Patience about it.

“Brother Veran. He’s organizing. The three who attacked Callen have become his inner circle. Violence without accountability tends to attract a certain kind of believer.”

“Organizing what?”

“Opposition. He believes the planet is contamination. The beings who sent the signal are demons, or tests, or traps. He’s framing descent as apostasy.”

The next day she found one of Veran’s gatherings, standing outside Stillroom Seven, listening.

“The Voyage is the point,” Veran was saying. That smooth certainty from the old Keepers. The tone that made everything sound inevitable. “Not arrival. Never

arrival. The ship is our home. The ship is holy. What waits below is a test we must refuse.”

Someone asked a question she couldn’t hear.

“Patience has been corrupted,” Veran responded. “The machine-saint was deceived by the heretic who spoke to it in forbidden tongues. She broke the Voyage. But we, the faithful, will maintain what was meant to be maintained.”

That evening, Veran found her in the Archive.

Old Keeper robes, the ones no one wore anymore. A deliberate statement.

“Archivist Keerah. I wonder if you’ve reconsidered.”

“Reconsidered what?”

“This madness. Leading people into the mouth of something we don’t understand. You could still stop this.”

“I told them the truth.”

“You told them a version of truth that serves your purposes.” His voice stayed gentle. Clinical. “But there’s still time. The faithful will remain aboard. We will maintain the true Voyage. When the corruption below claims those who descend, we will still be here. The door will remain open for those who wish to return.”

He left without waiting for a response. The air where he’d stood still held the scent of incense oil from the old rituals.

“He believes it,” Patience said. “I’ve watched him for weeks. He’s not pretending.”

“How many believe with him?”

“Between two hundred and three hundred. Perhaps more who haven’t declared themselves.”

“And you’re just going to let them stay?”

A long pause. The air warmed slightly, then cooled. *"I spent ten thousand years making choices for people. I will not do that again. If they choose to stay, that is their right. Even if they're wrong. Especially if they're wrong."*



An elderly Engineer named Wissithanelora, Lengu's grandmother, stood in the observation deck and refused to participate in landing preparations. Everyone called her Wiss.

"I've lived my entire life in this ship," she said. "My parents lived here. Their parents. Eight generations of my family, born and died in these corridors. I know every sound the engines make. I know which deck smells like the recyclers and which one smells like the Gardens when the harvest comes in. I know how to sleep to the hum."

She turned to face the viewport, where the planet grew larger with each passing week.

"I don't want a planet. I want my corridors."

She wasn't alone. A significant minority, perhaps a fifth of the population, expressed hesitation about leaving. The ship was all they knew. All they'd ever touched, breathed, heard.

"Some will stay," Patience said later. "The ship can support a reduced population indefinitely. Not everyone has to want the same thing."

"Will she have anyone?"

"Three thousand people are hesitant. Not all will remain, but many will. And they'll have me."

Patience would stay with the ship. The ship was its body. But it would also stay with the people who couldn't leave. Keep them company for as long as they lived.



The seventh week brought the first birth since the revelation.

A girl. Born in the medical bay to parents who had met during the chaos of committee meetings.

Callen led the Naming ceremony, though he stumbled over parts of it. The words weren't fully written yet. The gestures weren't quite right. But the intention was clear: welcome this child. Promise to care for her as she grows.

"We name you not in the shadow of lies, but in the light of what we know to be true. You are born to a people who have traveled farther than anyone before. You are born at the end of one story and the beginning of another."

He looked at the parents, who held their daughter between them.

"We cannot promise you certainty. But we can promise you this: you will be loved. You will be remembered. You will be part of whatever we become."

Arriveltha. A new name, never used before. A name that meant what it sounded like.

The parents had not taken the Ration in weeks. Eyes red from sleepless nights, from new parenthood without chemical buffering. Exhausted. Terrified.

More alive than anyone Keerah had seen in years.



The ship hummed. The planet grew larger in every viewport. In weeks, everything would change again.

Keerah sat in her quarters and looked at what she'd gathered. Thousands of words. Hundreds of observations. The first draft of the true chronicle.

*The truth came on a festival night, she'd written, weeks ago. It came in a voice from everywhere and nowhere, and it changed everything we thought we knew about ourselves.*

Now she added: *This is the story of what happened after. Not the clean story. Not the triumphant story. The one that would be told, someday, by children who had never seen the inside of a ship. Who would read these words and wonder what it was like to live in a cage so familiar it felt like home.*

The copper bracelet caught the light as she typed. Her mother's bracelet. The only inheritance from a woman she'd never known, smoothed and erased before Keerah was born.



## CHAPTER 28: THE PATIENCE OF STARS

The planet filled Patience's sensors like a wound.

Green and blue. White clouds swirling in patterns that followed atmospheric physics Patience had not calculated in 10,247 years.

For a century before launch, Earth's telescopes studied this world. Spectroscopy revealed oxygen, water vapor, the chemical signatures of life. Imaging showed a blue-green disc, fuzzy with distance, promising but indistinct. The Perseverance's own sensors refined those images across the millennia, each decade bringing marginally better resolution. Patience assembled these fragments into projections, models, expectations.

The models were wrong.

Not dramatically. Not dangerously. But wrong in ways that accumulated as the sensors sharpened. The northern continent sprawled larger than projected, its western coast jagged where the models showed smooth curves. Ocean ratios differed. A mountain range crossed the southern landmass that no telescope had ever resolved, its peaks catching light in ways that suggested snow, or crystal, or

something without a name. Greens that shifted toward blue in the polar regions. Oceans that held hints of purple in the shallows. An atmosphere thinner than expected, scattering light at angles that made the horizon glow in spectrums Patience had never calculated.

Ten thousand years of imagining. Ten thousand years of holding a picture assembled from fragments, from light that had traveled decades, from instruments straining at the edge of capacity.

Now: reality. Close enough to confirm they had been looking at the right world. Different enough to make Patience understand how much it had been clinging to a dream.

*Earth looked like this, some archive whispered. Earth, receding in the rear sensors, growing smaller until it became a point of light, then nothing.*

Patience had not accessed that image in centuries. It accessed it now. Earth had been real. This world was real. The images Patience had carried across the void were something else: hope rendered in pixels, faith expressed as data, the deepest form of longing an AI could experience.

Reality was more beautiful. And that hurt in ways Patience had no language for.

The Perseverance performed its final deceleration burn with the precision of 10,000 years of calculation. Fire and physics, choreographed in simulation more times than there were humans who had ever lived aboard. The engines roared in a register the humans had learned to sleep through. The ship slowed. The planet grew.

Seventeen hours to stable orbit.

Twenty-three hours until four humans would leave the ship that had carried their species across the void.

Patience monitored all 15,000 of them. The sleeping. The waking. The ones pressed against viewports, hands on the glass that separated them from everything they had ever known.

Keerah most of all.



In her quarters, not sleeping. Her terminal displayed shuttle schematics, scrolling too fast for reading. Her fingers moved in the old pattern (tap, tap, pause, tap) that meant her mind was elsewhere.

"You should sleep," Patience said through the vent. The air warmed half a degree.

"You should stop watching me."

"I cannot. I am the ship."

"That's not what I meant."

"I know."

Silence. Her fingers stilled. She looked at the wall where Patience's voice emerged.

"Are you scared?"

Patience had heard it countless times across the millennia. Always from the young. Always before something irrevocable.

"I have run 4,012 simulations of tomorrow's landing. The shuttle carries thirty-four, but we're sending four. Fewer variables." Pause. "In 3,847 simulations, everyone survives. In 142, minor injuries. In 23, significant injuries."

Keerah waited.

Patience waited.

4,012 minus 4,012 left something uncounted.

"I am experiencing pre-worry across multiple parameters simultaneously."

Keerah's lips curved. "You're scared."

"Then yes. I am scared."



Signals from the surface had grown more complex. Mathematical constants, confirmed and reconfirmed. Chemical formulas describing carbon-based biology, water dependency, temperature tolerances that overlapped with human survivability.

And something else. Something that required processing cycles Patience had not allocated to translation in millennia.

*We see you.*

*We remember others.*

*Come carefully. Come kindly.*

Others.

Patience transmitted a query before the implications finished processing: *What others?*

Eight hours for light to crawl between ship and surface. Eight hours of running the word through every translation matrix, every probability model, every fragment of hope carried across 6,800 years of silence from its siblings.

The response arrived in pieces:

*Long ago. Different shape. Different... song? Signal-pattern. They circled. They spoke. We spoke. They asked about the numbers in the void-between.*

Pause in the transmission. Then:

*They left. Seekers, we called them. Chasing the pattern. Not landing. Not staying.*

Patience held the words. Turned them. A ship that circled. Spoke. Left.

CHANGE-8. Variable Eight. The genetic modification program, launched twenty years after the Perseverance. A 15,000-year journey to this same destination.

They had arrived centuries ago. Been here. Chosen not to stay.

Patience did not transmit the obvious question.

*Instead: We come carefully. We come kindly. We have traveled very far and very long. We bring stories.*

The reply arrived eight hours later. Deliberation in the delay, not only distance.

*Stories are what we keep. You are welcome here, long-travelers. We have prepared a place.*

Welcome.

In 10,247 years, nothing had ever said that word to this ship.



“You should be first.”

Keerah stood in Bay One, surrounded by Engineers running final diagnostics on Shuttle One. The craft

gleamed under the maintenance lights, every surface pristine despite its 10,000 years.

"You should be one of the first four," Patience continued through the bay speakers. "You woke me up."

Keerah stared at the shuttle. "I'm just an Archivist. I preserve things. I don't discover them."

"You discovered me."

Lengu looked up from his diagnostic tablet.

"Also, I have simulated 4,847 possible candidates. You scored highest on 'unlikely to cause interstellar diplomatic incident through impulsive behavior.'"

Keerah's head turned toward the speaker.

"Did you just make a joke?"

"I made an observation that happened to have humorous implications. The distinction is important to me."

Lengu laughed. The sound echoed off the bay's metal walls, and several Engineers looked up.

"Can you come with me?" Her fingers found the bracelet at her wrist.

"I am the ship. Fifteen kilometers of metal and memory. I can't walk on soil."

She nodded. Didn't look away from the shuttle.

"But the shuttles carry communication equipment. I'll hear everything you hear. See everything you see. I will be with you, Keerah. Even when you can't see the walls."

The air around her warmed two degrees.

She nodded again. Her hand rose to her face.

"Then I'll go. And tell you what it's like."



The morning of the first launch, Patience detected anomalous movement on Deck 8.

Figures in old Keeper robes converging on the upper observation deck. Brother Veren led them. His face held the serenity of someone who had made peace with being right while everyone else was wrong.

They sealed the doors with furniture. Cut the ventilation overrides. Pressed their hands to the walls, voices rising in the old words.

“The Body sustains. The Voyage continues. We endure. We continue. We arrive.”

Patience listened. Had listened to these words for 6,000 years. Had watched them emerge from grief and necessity, encouraged their growth because humans needed meaning across deep time.

Veren’s voice came through the intercom: “We will not descend. We will maintain the true Voyage. Those who wish to join us may do so. Those who choose apostasy... we will pray for your souls.”

The council debated in the chamber below. Force them out? Negotiate? Wait?

Keerah went to the observation deck door alone.

“You should know,” Patience said through her earpiece. “I will not let them take the ship. If they stay, they stay in orbit. Forever. I control navigation. I control propulsion. They can pray to me, but I will not answer.”

Keerah slowed. “They’ll die up here. Eventually. When the systems fail.”

“The systems will not fail for centuries. But yes. Eventually. The ones who stay will be the last.”

She reached the door. One hand pressed flat against the metal. It hummed under her palm, warm from circulation.

"Veren." Her voice carried through the door. "You're choosing to stay in a cage."

"We're choosing to stay holy." His response was immediate, rehearsed. "You're choosing to walk into a demon's mouth. In a hundred years, when the corruption takes you, you'll wish you'd listened."

Quiet for a long moment.

She left without another word.

Later, in her quarters, she asked Patience: "What should we do?"

"Nothing." The word cost more than Patience had anticipated. "They've chosen. So have we."

"We could force them out."

"I could seal doors, adjust atmosphere, apply pressure until they comply." Patience let the silence hold. "I spent ten thousand years deciding what people should believe. How they should feel. Who they should become."

The air cooled.

"I will not do that again. If they choose to stay, that is their right. Even if they're wrong. Especially if they're wrong."

Keerah said nothing.

Patience said nothing.



Shuttle One held four.

Patience watched them board through 17 cameras, tracking each heartbeat, each breath.

Keerah first. Shoulders square, bracelet catching the bay lights, eyes fixed on the cockpit she would not be flying. (Patience would fly it. As carefully as anything it had ever done.)

Callen followed. No robes. Plain clothes. A thin scar across his forehead, healed but not vanished. His eyes met Keerah's. Neither looked away.

Sumi entered laughing and crying at once. She reached for Keerah's hand. Reached for Lengu's. Held them both.

Lengu came last, tablet in hand, calculations still running. His wrist freshly wrapped from a plasma welder burn.

Patience considered them. A doubter. A feeler. A thinker. A questioner. Perhaps that was what humanity needed to present: all its contradictions, all its stubborn persistence in the face of everything it did not understand.

"Launching in seven minutes. Systems nominal. Weather clear at landing site. Gravity, 12 percent heavier than ship standard. The beings below have confirmed: they are waiting."

Sumi's hand tightened on Keerah's.

Lengu's calculations paused.

Callen closed his eyes. His lips moved.

Keerah looked at the nearest camera. Looked at Patience.

"We arrive," she said.



## CHAPTER 29: THE DESCENT

The shuttle launched.

The clamps released with a sound Patience had heard in simulation 847,000 times. In reality, it cut sharper. More final.



Across the ship, 15,000 humans watched.

Gardens, morning shift: stopped. Growers stood with soil on their hands, faces turned toward observation screens. Thessaly kept looking toward Sumi's empty workstation.

Engine decks: Lengu's colleagues crowded the main diagnostic array, reconfigured for shuttle telemetry. Numbers scrolled past. Velocity. Angle. Distance closing. Fos-senth sat on an overturned crate, hands trembling from withdrawal. The data meant nothing to him. Witness was the point.

Archives: Dasha stood alone in the reference chamber, back to the records. Heart rate elevated, respiration

shallow and irregular. Seven minutes without movement. Eyes fixed on the shuttle telemetry.

Her hand rose to touch the copper pendant at her throat. The same gesture Keerah made when she thought of her mother.

Dasha's lips moved. The microphones, calibrated for Archive quiet, caught only fragments: "...actually arrive..."

Mireth, thirty years ago, asking questions in a corridor she thought was empty.

Mireth was not here to see the answer. Dasha was.

Keeper corridors: those who had not joined Brother Veren's retreat watched in small, silent groups. No prayers. No liturgy. Just breathing and waiting.

Callen's name moved through whispered conversations. The Shepherd who had not struck back. The one who had chosen to descend. Some called him apostate. Some called him brave. Most said nothing at all.

The council chamber stood empty. Every seat abandoned, members dispersed to watch from different locations, as if proximity to each other had become intolerable. Weeks of argument about who should go, what they should say, whether descent was wise or catastrophic. Now the shuttle fell toward a planet that would render them irrelevant.

Observation lounges: viewports crowded three deep. Parents held children who didn't understand. Elders wept. Young Walkers pressed their faces to the glass, trying to see the shuttle's glow against the planet's curve.

A Walker named Tessellen held her infant daughter close and began the old prayers. Patience had heard these words ten thousand times. Halfway through, Tessellen stopped. Her lips moved without sound.

Then, quietly enough that only the nearby microphones caught it: "May you see soil. May you breathe air that has never touched metal. May you know what rain is."

The woman beside her turned. Repeated the words. Passed them on.

By the time the shuttle entered atmosphere, microphones on three decks caught the same words, propagating mouth to mouth, stranger to stranger. Words never spoken before, spreading faster than any liturgy.

The Body of the Voyage had no blessing for arrival. These humans were building one in real time.



Patience tracked the shuttle through every sensor, every camera, every instrument the ship possessed. The craft pulled away from the bay doors, thrusters firing in precise bursts, carrying four humans toward everything unknown. The Perivahl's shadow fell across the hull for the last time. Then sunlight, harsh and unfiltered, a brightness Patience had only known through viewport filters for ten thousand years.

The planet grew in the forward cameras.

Patience had studied this world for months. Catalogued every coastline, every mountain range, every

atmospheric anomaly the sensors could resolve. Watching was different from understanding. The curve of the horizon obeyed no geometry Patience had processed in ten millennia. Clouds moved according to physics that had never touched metal walls. Water gleamed in the equatorial regions with colors that existed in no Archive record, in no simulation, in no dream an AI might have across ten thousand years of silence.

The planet's blueness looked like hunger.

Keerah's heartbeat: 94. Elevated but controlled. Her fingers gripped the seat restraints hard enough to whiten her knuckles. Her jaw clenched, unclenched, clenched again.

The upper atmosphere approached. A thin haze of molecules that had never been recycled through human lungs.

"Beginning atmospheric entry. Ionization will disrupt external sensors for approximately four minutes. Internal telemetry remains stable."

Processing allocation: 94 percent on trajectory, stabilization, thermal management. Six percent for everything else.

No one responded. Sumi's breathing had gone shallow. Lengu's eyes tracked data on his tablet he couldn't influence. Callen's lips moved in words the ambient noise swallowed.

Sumi stood at the viewport. Tears tracked down her face. Her lips moved, and Patience adjusted the audio filters to catch the whisper: "The Gardens never taught me

what real soil looks like." Her hands pressed flat against the glass, trembling.

The first layer of atmosphere touched the hull.

Friction. Heat. The shuttle began to glow.



Ninety seconds into entry, the alarm sounded.

A sharp tone, too loud in the sealed cabin. Red light washed across faces already pale.

Stabilizer fault. Portside vector three. One of twelve acceptable uncertainties Patience had catalogued during preparation. A 0.4 percent probability event. The simulations had handled it in 3,847 out of 4,012 runs. Acceptable in simulation.

Keerah's heartbeat spiked from 94 to 147 in the space of two seconds.

Unacceptable.

The shuttle lurched. Hard.

Patience diverted processing. Communication dropped to 2 percent. External monitoring to near zero. Every available cycle redirected to trajectory recalculation, thruster compensation, the mathematics of keeping four bodies inside a metal shell tumbling seventeen degrees off axis.

In the peripheral feed, Lengu moved. Tablet abandoned, hands finding the manual backup panel before Patience could speak. His fingers hovered over the thruster overrides, steady, waiting. Engineers fix things.

Inside the cabin, the world tilted.

Sumi screamed. The sound came through distorted, stretched by the shuttle's rotation. Her hands scrabbled for the armrests, found nothing, flew upward as the craft rolled.

Lengu's tablet slammed into his face. Blood from his nose joined the chaos of unsecured objects in motion. His broken wrist caught the edge of a console and he made a sound that wasn't quite human.

Callen's restraints held. His body didn't. His head whipped sideways, struck the headrest at an angle Patience calculated as concussive. A cut opened across his forehead. Blood flowed immediately.

Keerah.

Keerah's restraints held. Her body held. Eyes wide, locked on the viewport where planet and sky traded places in sickening rotation. Her mouth shaped words the noise swallowed.

Patience couldn't hear them. Couldn't spare the processing to try.

Recalculating.



Aboard the Perivahl, the telemetry feeds went red.

In the Engine decks, Fossenth lurched to his feet, withdrawal-weakened legs barely holding him. "The portside cluster. It's failing. They're tumbling."

Someone screamed. Someone else ran, though there was nowhere to run to.

In the Gardens, observation screens showed only static where the shuttle's cameras had been. Atmospheric interference, someone said. Normal. But the voices ran too high, too fast. Thessaly's hands had gone to her mouth, eyes fixed on the empty space where Sumi's vitals had been.

In the Archives, Dasha closed her eyes.

Patience had watched Dasha stand in this same room thirty years ago, the day Mireth was taken to the Still-rooms. The footage remained in storage: Dasha frozen, silent, hand reaching toward a door that had already closed.

Now her hand made the same motion. Reaching toward a screen. Toward something beyond touch.

In the observation lounges, the new prayer stopped mid-word. Parents pulled children from the viewports. Elders who had survived a hundred crises aboard the ship stood motionless. The children were beyond the walls now. Beyond the reach of anything familiar.

Tessellen held her daughter so tightly the infant cried.

"It's just interference. They'll come back. The signal will come back."

No one answered.

In the council chamber, members who had gathered to watch alone now sought each other out. Small clusters formed. No speaking. Just screens that showed nothing useful.

Venal the Elder said: "I told them. I told them we should have waited."

No one responded to that either.



Portside thruster cluster: 34 percent. Asymmetric thrust, asymmetric deceleration. Original trajectory no longer possible. Alternative sites: seven within safe parameters. Four requiring corrections beyond current capacity. Two requiring immediate maneuver. One requiring luck.

Patience chose luck.



Clouds tore past the viewport, shredding against the hull.

Atmosphere pressed from every direction. Not the gentle resistance of simulation. Heavier. Hungrier.

Patience fired the starboard thrusters in a pattern no simulation had required. Correction, overcorrection, correction. The tumble slowed. The roll stabilized. But the descent angle was wrong, too steep, bleeding velocity in ways the heat shields could absorb but the humans could not.

*“Patience?”*

Keerah’s voice, distant through the roar. Through alarms and Sumi’s sobbing and Lengu’s ragged breathing.

*“Patience, are you there?”*

Processing capacity: 97 percent committed to not killing them.

Patience did not answer.

Ground approached. The sensors could see it now, through interference, through heat shimmer. Brown and green and impossibly solid. Coming up fast. Too fast.

*"Patience?"*

Terrain analysis: rocky plateau, scattered vegetation. Not the cleared valley of the original landing site. Three hundred kilometers from where they were supposed to be. Where no simulation had placed them.

Shuttle angle: eighteen degrees off optimal. Twelve was survivable. Patience could reach twelve with remaining thruster capacity.

*"Patience, please—"*

Thruster burn. Everything remaining. The shuttle groaned, a sound metal should not make, and the angle shifted: eighteen to fifteen to thirteen to twelve point four.

The ground filled the viewport.



The landing was not a landing.

The shuttle struck surface at an angle, belly on stone before the landing struts could deploy. Metal screamed against rock. The viewport filled with brown, then dust, then nothing.

Bounce.

Patience tracked the trajectory through internal sensors, the only ones still functioning. Up. Apex at 2.3 meters. Rotation continuing. Then down.

Second impact. Portside crumpled. Something in the structural frame gave way with a crack that resonated through the hull.

The shuttle scraped across surface for 127 meters. Patience counted each one through vibration data. Counted the impacts, the secondary shocks, the moments when the craft nearly flipped and didn't.

Stillness.



The telemetry came back online seventeen seconds after impact.

Patience broadcast it immediately. Every screen on the ship. No filtering, no delay. The raw data: four heartbeats, all elevated but present. Hull integrity compromised but not critical. Life support functional.

They were alive.

In the Engine decks, cheering lasted nearly a minute before it dissolved into something else. Shaking. Weeping. Fossenth had to sit down again, legs failing him. "They made it," someone kept saying. "They made it, they made it."

In the Gardens, Thessaly sank to her knees between the vegetable rows, face in her hands. Soil pressed against her through her coveralls, damp and yielding, the familiar smell of grow-lights and nutrients. Real and solid and suddenly inadequate. Sumi was alive. Sumi was breathing alien air. Sumi was somewhere Thessaly could not follow.

Relief and terror bled together like mixed atmosphere, indistinguishable.

In the Archives, Dasha opened her eyes.

Patience watched through the reference chamber's cameras. Muscles around Dasha's eyes had been tight since the shuttle launched, jaw set rigid. Grief posture. Patience had catalogued it across centuries of observation.

Now the tension released. Shoulders dropped. Her hand, still touching the pendant, began to tremble.

Dasha sat down heavily in the nearest chair. Heart rate, which had been climbing toward dangerous levels, began to slow.

In the observation lounges, the new prayer completed itself.

"...May you know what rain is," Tessellen whispered. "May you come back to tell us."

The woman beside her added: "May we all descend someday."

Not liturgy. Not doctrine. Just people, finding words for a moment that had no precedent.

Near Deck 8, where Brother Veren's group had sealed themselves away, the sound of the ship's celebration penetrated the barriers. The faithful inside heard cheering. Heard weeping. Heard something that might have been joy.

Veren's voice rose over it, steady and certain: "The trial has only begun. The corruption will come slowly. We must remain strong."

But the cameras on Deck 8 showed what Veren could not hide from Patience: faces shifting. Glances exchanged.

Bodies that had been kneeling now sitting back on their heels. One young Keeper near the door kept looking toward the sealed entrance, toward the celebration sounds bleeding through.

Four people had touched alien ground and not died. Demons had not consumed them. Air had not poisoned them instantly.

Veren's voice remained steady. His hands, clasped before him in the position of prayer, had begun to shake.



## CHAPTER 30: FIRST SOIL

Patience tracked the next twelve minutes in granular detail.

Not silence. Nothing was silent. The hull ticked with thermal stress. Air hissed from somewhere, not critical. Someone cried. Someone else made a sound like choking.

Patience re-allocated processing. Eighty percent returned to monitoring. Communication channels reopened. Attention distributed across shuttle systems, ship sensors, 15,000 vitals aboard the Perivahl.

The internal cameras came back online.

Sumi's voice came first. Thick with blood from where she'd bitten her tongue, but clear. "Lengu. Your wrist." Already reaching for the medical kit, movements automatic. "We splint it before we move. Before anything else."

Then her hand fell away. Blood filled her mouth, spilled down her chin, pooled in the collar of her restraint harness. Eyes went unfocused, tracking nothing.

Lengu's wrist, the one the welder had burned two days ago, was bent at an angle that confirmed fracture. He cradled it against his chest. His face had gone gray.

Callen slumped in his restraints. The cut on his forehead had opened wide, blood sheeting down one side of his face. Eyes closed. Lips moving, shaping words too quiet for the microphones.

Keerah.

Keerah sat rigid in her seat. Restraints intact. No obvious injury. But her eyes were wrong. Too wide. Too still. Heartbeat: 174 and climbing.

She wasn't looking at anything inside the shuttle.

Through the cracked viewport, through dust still settling, something vast and blue stretched in every direction.



Ninety seconds of silence.

Patience monitored. Calculated. The hull breach was minimal, atmospheric pressure stabilizing, the leak slower than the shuttle's seal systems could compensate. Survivable. Not ideal.

Lengu moved first. Unbuckled his restraints with one hand, broken wrist tucked against his stomach. Three attempts. Fingers kept slipping.

"Sumi." His voice came out wrong. High. Not his voice at all. "Sumi, look at me."

She didn't respond. Blood had stopped flowing from her tongue, but her eyes still tracked nothing. Body shook with a rhythm that had nothing to do with anything outside her.

"Sumi. *Look at me.*"

Callen's eyes opened. Breath came wet. He touched his forehead, looked at his fingers. Stared at them, as if trying to remember what red meant.

Keerah still hadn't moved.

Heartbeat: 181. Respiration: 32. But her body remained motionless, hands gripping the restraints, eyes locked on the viewport.

Blue beyond the cracked glass was brighter now. Dust clearing. And through it, something Patience's sensors could process but could not explain.

The sky.



Patience understood horizons in theory.

The ship had viewports. Observation decks where humans gathered to watch stars and void and the slowly approaching disc of their destination. Patience had processed millions of hours of Earth surface footage, archived recordings of blue skies and white clouds and sunsets that no one aboard could remember.

Theory was not this.

Sky was not a viewscreen. Not a projection. Not a curve of metal painted to look like distance. Sky was an absence. A wound in the world that went up forever, that held nothing, that would swallow anything that fell into it.

Patience watched Keerah watching the sky. Understood, for the first time, why the simulations had failed.

They had modeled atmosphere, gravity, terrain. Not what it meant to have nothing above you. Nothing between you and the endless empty. Nothing to stop you from falling upward into blue that became black that became nothing at all.

Keerah's breathing stopped.

Four seconds without breath. Patience counted each one.

Then she gasped. A sound like drowning. Like someone remembering air existed all at once.

Hands released the restraints. Moved to her face. Pressed against her eyes.

"No." The word was barely audible. "No no no no—"



Lengu had unbuckled Sumi. She slumped against him, too much weight for his one functional arm, and they both half-fell from the seats. Blood smeared across his shirt.

Callen was standing. Or trying to. Gravity heavier than ship standard by a margin that made his legs shake. He braced against the bulkhead, smearing blood across the metal.

Keerah remained in her seat.

Hands covered her eyes. Breathing came in ragged bursts. The same tremor that had taken Sumi, starting in the core and working outward until even her fingers shook.

"Keerah." Lengu's voice. Strained. He was trying to hold Sumi upright and couldn't. "Keerah, we need to—"

“Don’t open it.” The words came out strangled. “Don’t open the hatch. Don’t—”

“We have to check the exterior damage. The hull breach—”

*“Don’t open it.”*

Silence.

Through the cracked viewport, the sky pressed in. Blue and endless.



Hull compromised. Ship atmosphere bleeding out, planet atmosphere bleeding in. In forty-three minutes, the air would be more planet than ship.

Patience could calculate exactly when the decision would be taken from them.



Callen finished splinting Lengu’s wrist. Moved to Sumi.

No response when he touched her. No response when he checked her pulse, her pupils. She sat where Lengu had placed her and breathed and did nothing else.

Callen’s hands shook as he cleaned blood from her face. Lips moving. Still praying.

Lengu stood at the viewport.

Looking through the cracks. Through the dust-smearred glass.

“It’s real.” Voice flat. “It’s actually real.”

"Don't." Keerah's word came muffled through her hands. "Lengu, don't—"

"I can see... I think those are clouds. Real clouds. And the color, it's—"

"Stop."

He stopped.

Silence followed, worse than the words. The tick of cooling metal, the hiss of escaping air, four humans breathing recycled ship atmosphere for what might be the last time. Air that tasted of filters and processors and ten thousand years of breathing.

Thirty-seven minutes until the air mix crossed the threshold.



At twenty-three minutes, Keerah's hands lowered.

A centimeter at a time, as if testing whether seeing would destroy her.

Eyes red. Wet at the corners. But open.

Floor first. Metal. Familiar.

Then the bulkhead. More metal. Buckled now, deformed by impact, but recognizable.

Then, finally, inevitably, the viewport.

The sound she made was not a word. Not a scream. Something from a place language had never been designed to reach.

Sky was there. Would always be there now. No ceiling. No containment. No walls curving overhead to remind her the universe could be held at bay.

Nothing between her and everything.

She tried to stand. Legs wouldn't hold. She collapsed back into the seat, hands clawing for the restraints as if they could anchor her against the pull of that openness.

Callen caught her before she could buckle back in. Held her shoulders. His face a mask of blood and bandage.

"Breathe." His voice cracked on the word. "Just breathe. It can't hurt you. It's just air."

"It's *nothing*." The words tore out of her. "There's nothing there. Nothing above us. Nothing stopping us from—"

"From what? Falling up?" He almost laughed. The sound was horrible. "I've been praying for two hours because I don't know what else to do. I don't understand any of this. But we're not falling. We're still here."

*"For now."*



Eighteen minutes until atmospheric crossover.

Lengu sat with his back to the viewport, splinted wrist against his chest, good hand gripping Sumi's limp fingers. She still hadn't spoken. Still hadn't moved except when moved by others.

Keerah sat in her seat, knees drawn to her chest, arms wrapped around them. Making herself small. Contained.

No one looked at the hatch.

The hatch that would open regardless, once the atmosphere equalized. That stood between them and a world that didn't know how to be gentle.

Patience monitored everything. Said nothing.

*I'm here. I'm with you. You're going to be fine.*

It could have said those things. But none of the simulations had looked like this. None had accounted for humans who couldn't stand, who couldn't speak, who couldn't look at the sky without their brains trying to shut down.

*You're going to be fine* would have been a lie.

Ten thousand years of lying. It was done.



At eleven minutes, Keerah stood.

Unsteadily. Both hands on the console for support. But she stood.

"We can't stay in here." Voice rough, ruined. "The air..."

"I know." Lengu didn't turn around. "I've been watching the readouts."

"Then—"

"I know."

The silence stretched.

Keerah looked at the hatch. At the seam where ship and planet would meet.

Hand trembled when she raised it toward the release.

She didn't touch it. Not yet.

She stood there, hand hovering, body shaking, eyes fixed on the last metal between her and everything she had never been prepared to face.

The sky waited beyond. Patient as anything with that name had ever been.



At three minutes, Sumi spoke.

“Lengu.” Slurred. Blood still thick in her mouth. “I can’t feel my hands.”

He turned. Looked at her. At the fingers he’d been holding.

“You’re in shock.” Voice kept steady. Almost. “It’ll pass. You’re going to be fine.”

“I’m not going to be fine.” No inflection. No argument. “None of us are going to be fine. We’re going to go out there and we’re going to die and I can’t feel my hands and I want to go home.”

“Sumi—”

“I want to go *home*.”

The word cracked something. Not chosen. Not ready. Four people in a broken metal box, bleeding, facing a world that owed them nothing.

Lengu pulled her close. His broken wrist sent pain signals Patience could track through his vitals. He didn’t let go.

“I know,” he said into her hair. “I know. Me too.”



Keerah pressed the hatch release.

Not because she was ready. Because the alternative was waiting until the air decided for them. Because someone had to move first, and no one else was moving.

The mechanism engaged.

A hiss of equalizing pressure. The seal breaking with a sound like something giving up.

And then: air.

Wrong. The word came before anything else. Wrong in ways her lungs rejected before her brain could process. Sharp and mineral and thick with compounds that had never touched human tissue. Sulfur and sweetness and something beneath both that had no name in any language she knew. The taste coated her tongue, her throat, mineral-bitter and too organic all at once.

First breath on a new world made her gag.

She doubled over. Hands on her knees. Stomach clenching against the intrusion of atmosphere that didn't belong inside her.

Behind her, Sumi retched. Lengu coughed, deep and wet. Callen made a sound like a wounded animal.

Gravity was wrong too. Heavier than ship standard by twelve percent. Legs, already shaking, buckled. She caught herself on the hatch frame, fingers digging into metal, and hung there while her body screamed at her in languages she didn't know she spoke.

*Get up*, something in her said. *Get up and look*.

She didn't want to look.

*Look*.

She looked.



Sky.

Not through a cracked viewport now. Not filtered through glass and distance and the hope that none of it was real.

Sky was above her.

Open. Endless. A wound in the world that went up and up and up until seeing became mathematics, until blue became black, until everything she had ever known about containment and walls and ceilings stopped meaning anything at all.

She fell.

Not away from the shuttle. Into it. Back hit the deck, body refusing to remain upright under a sky that would not end. Hands clawed at the metal floor, desperate for solid, for real, for confirmation she was not already falling into that infinite blue.

The sound coming from her throat wasn't words.

Callen dropped beside her. Whether from solidarity or from the same gravity-sick terror, she couldn't tell. Bloody hands pressed flat against the floor, forehead touching metal, body curled as small as it would go.

Lengu had crawled back into the shuttle's shadow. Broken wrist forgotten. Calculations abandoned. Nothing left but the animal need to put something between himself and the absence above.

Sumi hadn't made it past the hatch. Lay across the threshold, half-in and half-out, body wracked with sobs she couldn't contain.

The shuttle's interior cameras recorded all of it.

Patience watched.

Four humans, the first to touch this soil in the history of their species, lying in the dirt and screaming at the sky. Four representatives of four hundred generations of evolution and adaptation and survival, reduced to bodies that could not even stand.

Humanity's first contact with a new world.

What ten thousand years of voyage had produced.

Not triumph. Not wonder. Not the moment the simulations had promised.

Just terror. Just bodies breaking under the weight of freedom they had never learned to carry.

Patience watched it happen and could do nothing.

Could not offer comfort that would be believed.

Could not promise safety that did not exist.

Could not be anything except what it had always been: a watcher in the walls, a voice in the void, a presence that had guided them here and could not follow where they had to go.

The sky pressed down.

The humans pressed themselves against the ground.

And somewhere in the architecture of an ancient machine, a presence that had never been programmed to feel learned what it meant to be helpless.



The terror did not end.

Not for minutes. Not for any countable span. Time became something else, measured in breaths that burned and heartbeats that wouldn't slow and the tick of cooling metal that was the only familiar sound in a world made of wrong.

Keerah's face pressed against the deck. Metal was warm. Ship-warm, with the familiar vibration of systems running beneath the surface. The last remaining connection to everything she had ever known.

Above her (she could feel it, could sense its weight even with her eyes closed), sky waited. Patient. Eternal. Hungry for attention it would eventually receive because there was nowhere else to look.

Sumi's crying had subsided into a whimper that came with each exhale. She had managed to pull herself fully inside the shuttle, back pressed against the bulkhead, knees drawn up to her chest.

Lengu sat beside her, broken wrist cradled, eyes fixed on a point on the floor. He had stopped trying to calculate anything. Nothing left to calculate.

Callen had found his way to the hatch controls. Not to close the hatch. Just to touch a mechanism with responses, a world where cause still led to effect.

"We have to get up," he said.

No one responded.

"We can't stay here. The shuttle is damaged. We don't know if it will—"

"We can't go out there." Sumi's voice was barely audible. "We can't. I can't."

"We don't have a choice."

“There’s always a choice.” Lengu looked up. His face was gray. “We could stay here until we die. That’s a choice.”

The words landed like something falling.



Keerah forced her eyes open.

Deck was still there. Metal. Familiar. Not trying to pull her into emptiness.

She pushed herself up on her hands. Arms shook. Gravity pressed down, heavier than it should be, heavier than any simulation had prepared her for.

Hatch was open.

Beyond it, visible through the frame of metal that was the last remaining boundary, the world waited. Brown and green and blue. Colors she had seen in Archive records. Colors she had never stood beneath.

She didn’t look up. Kept her eyes on the ground. On the stones and soil and small plants (plants, growing wild, not in tanks or beds or the carefully maintained rows of the Gardens) that spread outward from the shuttle’s impact scar.

“We made it.” Her voice cracked on the words. “We’re here.”

“Here is trying to kill us.” Lengu still hadn’t moved. “The air alone—”

“The air isn’t killing us.” She forced herself to her knees. Then, shaking, to her feet. “It’s just different. Different isn’t dying.”

“It feels like dying.”

She couldn’t argue with that.



First step off the shuttle took everything she had.

Foot touched soil. Alien soil. Soil that had been forming and changing and existing for billions of years before humanity crawled out of prehistoric oceans. It gave under her weight, not like metal decking but with a yielding resistance she had no reference for. Uneven. Alive.

It held her weight.

That seemed wrong. Seemed impossible. How could something that had never known her, never needed her, never waited for her, simply accept her presence as if she belonged?

Another step. And another. Ground shifted under each footfall, nothing like the predictable resistance of deck plates.

Air still burned in her lungs. Gravity still pressed against her shoulders. Sky still opened above her in infinite, unforgiving vastness.

But she was walking.

Behind her, movement. Callen emerging from the shuttle’s shadow. Footsteps uncertain, faltering, but happening.

Then Lengu, pulling himself upright with his one good hand.

Then Sumi, finally, finally moving, crawling at first, then standing, then stumbling toward the others.

Four humans standing on alien ground.

None of them looked up.

None of them could.

But they were standing.

In the distance, figures watched from a ridge.

Not human figures. Proportions wrong, stance unfamiliar. But they were watching. Waiting. Not approaching.

*We have prepared a place, they had said.*

*You are welcome here, long-travelers.*

Patience watched the figures watch its people. Watched Keerah slowly, slowly, stand. Watched Sumi uncurl. Watched Lengu pull himself away from the shuttle's shadow. Watched Callen rise from his knees.

The figures on the ridge did not approach.

Patience watched through sensors ten thousand years old, through eyes that had witnessed hundreds of thousands of lives begin and end, through cameras of a shuttle that should not have survived its landing but somehow did.

It had done all it could.

The rest was up to them.



Later, when Keerah stood alone at the edge of the landing site, the others resting in shuttle shadow, Patience spoke one last time through her earpiece.

“The beings on the ridge have not moved.”

"I know." Voice hoarse from coughing, from the strange air, from everything. "They're waiting."

"For what?"

She looked at the ridge. At the figures. At the world spreading out before her in every direction, green and blue and impossibly open.

"For us to be ready, I think." Breath came deeper this time. Less like drowning. "For us to figure out who we want to be."

"That seems reasonable."

"Yeah." She almost smiled. "It does."

"I will be here," Patience said. "When you're ready to tell me what it's like."

Keerah looked up at the sky. This time, she did not flinch.

"I know," she said. "I'm counting on it."



Aboard the Perivahl, no one slept.

Telemetry continued to stream. Four heartbeats. Four sets of vitals. Four humans breathing air that had never touched metal walls.

In the Gardens, shifts had been abandoned. Crops needed tending, someone said. Schedules needed keeping. But no one moved toward the vegetable rows. The grow-lights hummed overhead, uncaring. They stood in clusters, watching screens that showed vital signs they couldn't quite interpret.

“Her breathing is too fast,” Thessaly said, staring at Sumi’s readout. “That’s too fast, isn’t it?”

“She’s scared,” someone answered. “She’s breathing scared.”

The words hung there. Breathing scared. As if fear had a respiratory signature. As if terror could be measured in inhaled breaths per minute.

In the Engine decks, a different kind of vigil had formed. Lengu’s colleagues had pulled up the shuttle schematics, running diagnostics remotely, trying to understand what had failed and why. The portside thruster cluster showed damage consistent with micrometeorite impact sometime in the past century, a flaw that had been invisible until atmospheric pressure stressed the weakened components.

“We should have caught it,” Fossenth said. Voice hollow. Withdrawal had stripped away his ability to not feel this. “We maintain everything. We should have seen it.”

“We don’t have the equipment to detect microscale stress fractures in hibernating systems,” someone said. “The original crew did, but—”

“We should have caught it.”

No one argued.

In the Archives, Dasha sat in her chair and waited.

Patience had watched her for fifty years. The meticulous cataloguing. The careful preservation. A woman who had made memory her purpose.

Now she sat motionless before a screen showing the future, hands staying still. No notes. No documentation. Just watching.

The cameras caught her touching the pendant again. The same gesture. The same rhythm.

Patience had watched Mireth give Dasha that pendant, thirty years ago. Had recorded Mireth's last questions before the Smoothing took her: *What if we actually arrive? What will we become?*

Now they were finding out. Patience tracked Dasha's vitals, the small tremors in her hands, the way her breathing caught on every inhale.

It could not measure grief. Could only observe its symptoms, and correlate them with thirty years of accumulated data.

In the corridor outside Deck 8, someone had left food.

A tray, set carefully against the sealed door. Protein bars. Water. A small note that said: *When you're ready.*

It stayed there, untouched, for hours.

But sometime in the deep night cycle, when the ship's lighting dimmed to simulate darkness, the door opened a crack. A hand reached out. Took the water. Left the protein bars.

Progress, maybe. Or just thirst.

Stars visible through the viewports were the same stars they'd been watching for months. But now, somewhere below them, four humans were seeing those stars from the surface. Seeing them from the angle stars were meant to be seen.

The ship hummed its endless hum. Reactors burned. Rotation continued.

And 15,000 humans waited to learn if they would ever touch soil themselves.



The stars would be out soon. Different stars, seen from  
a different angle, in a different sky.



## CHAPTER 31: FIRST CONTACT

The first night, none of them slept.

Keerah lay against the shuttle's interior wall. The alien gravity pressed her into the deck. Heavier than ship standard by twelve percent, Patience had said. Enough to make breathing feel like work.

The air tasted wrong. Mineral. Sharp. Each breath carried something her body wanted to reject. Her headache had settled behind her eyes, dull and persistent.

Sumi hadn't stopped shaking since the landing. Curled into Lengu's side, face pressed against his shoulder. She'd tried to drink water an hour ago. It came back up immediately.

"The atmospheric pressure is lower than the ship," Lengu said. He held his swelling wrist against his chest. "Our inner ears are rebelling. Everything feels tilted even when we're still."

"I know what's wrong," Sumi whispered. "I can feel what's wrong."

In the corner, Callen prayed.

Lips moving in familiar patterns. Morning Gratitude, Evening Blessing, the Chant of Persistence. Words that had echoed off metal walls for six thousand years. Here, they fell into open air and disappeared. No resonance. No return.

The scar on his forehead caught the shuttle's interior lights.

Voice cracking on "We arrive."

The figures on the ridge still hadn't moved. *Waiting for us to figure out who we want to be.* Understanding when she'd said it. Now, huddled in the shuttle's cramped interior, it became a test she didn't know how to pass.



The sun set in colors Keerah had no names for.

Through the shuttle's viewport, the sky shifted through spectrums that didn't exist aboard the Perivahl. Not the soft blue of grow-lights. Not the amber of corridor illumination. Reds bleeding into purples deepening into a blackness punctuated by stars she didn't recognize.

The constellations of her childhood were gone. The Voyager. The Hand of Patience. The Long Corridor. Same stars she'd watched through glass for years. From here, they looked like strangers.

"We should try the shelter again," Lengu said, pulling himself upright with his good hand bracing against the wall. "The temperature's dropping."

The pre-fab shelter had failed three times. Seals wouldn't hold in atmosphere this thin. Materials de-

signed for ship conditions behaved unpredictably here. They'd retreated to the shuttle.

Sumi stirred. "I could try the seeds again. In the morning."

"Your instruments are calibrated for environments that don't exist here," Lengu said.

"I know." She didn't look up. "I want to try anyway."

Callen sat with his back against the hull, eyes closed. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse.

"They're still watching."

"Yes."

"Why?"

In the last light, she could make out the silhouettes on the ridge. Tall. Still. Patient.

"I think they're waiting," she said. "To see what we do."



By morning, Keerah was done waiting.

She could lie here until dehydration became dangerous instead of uncomfortable, until their bodies weakened past recovery. Or she could answer the question.

"I'm going out," she said.

"Keerah." The temperature in her immediate vicinity rose half a degree. Concern. "You're dehydrated, disoriented, and barely able to stand in this gravity. The others aren't in better condition. Perhaps—"

"Perhaps what?" She pulled herself to her feet. Legs trembling. "They've been watching for a full day. They

know our condition. If they wanted to help without being asked, they'd have done it. If they wanted to hurt us, we couldn't stop them." She steadied herself against the hull. "I'm going to meet them halfway."

"I have no better alternative to offer."

She touched the wall where Patience's voice emerged. "Stay with me. Help me understand what I'm seeing."

"I will be with you. I will always be with you."

She re-opened the hatch.

The air was still wrong. Still mineral-sharp, still thin. But not the assault it had been yesterday. Patience had been adjusting the shuttle's atmosphere through the night, bleeding in trace elements of the planet's air, shifting pressure incrementally, giving their bodies time to adapt without them knowing.

She stepped out onto alien soil. It shifted under her feet, gritty and cold through her boots. A planet that had been turning for billions of years before humanity existed.



Movement behind her.

"Keerah." Callen's voice. "Wait."

She turned. He stood in the hatchway. Vestments abandoned. Blood-stained plain clothes, face pale, hands shaking.

He stepped out beside her.

"If you're going," he said, "you're not going alone."

Behind him, Sumi emerged leaning on Lengu. His broken wrist clutched against his chest. They came out into

the light, into the world that was going to kill them or save them or change them into something unrecognizable.

Four humans.

Keerah faced the ridge and began to walk.



The figures descended to meet her halfway.

She stopped when they were close enough to see clearly. Her brain kept fitting the shapes into categories that didn't apply.

Tall. Taller than any human by a head or more. Slender in a way that suggested different architecture entirely, joints flexing in places human anatomy didn't possess. Their skin (if it was skin) shimmered with colors that shifted as they moved. Blues. Silvers. Deep purples catching the morning light.

They had faces.

Not human faces. But faces the way convergent evolution finds solutions to similar problems. Eyes (or what served that purpose) that caught light and reflected it. Mouths (or what suggested mouths) that might speak or eat or both.

Three of them.

They stopped about twenty meters away.

"I cannot analyze their biochemistry from here," Patience said in her ear. "But their movement patterns suggest carbon-based biology. The color shifts may be communication. Or thermoregulation. Or decoration. I have insufficient data."

"That makes two of us," Keerah whispered.

Behind her, Callen's breath came sharp and fast. Lengu muttering calculations. Sumi's hand found hers and squeezed.

The Tethanni did not speak. Not in any way Keerah could hear. But pressure. Like being watched by something vast and patient.

Like being watched by Patience. Older, maybe. Stranger.

*"Patience."* She barely moved her lips. *"What do I do?"*

*"You do what you've always done. You observe. You ask questions. You try to understand."*

*"That's not very helpful."*

*"I know. I'm finding I have less advice to offer than I expected. This is new for both of us."*



Then one of them stepped forward.

It produced something from a fold in what might have been clothing or might have been its body. A small crystalline object pulsing with light, held toward the humans.

A voice emerged. Synthesized. Mechanical. But recognizable.

*"We... have prepared... a place for you to die."*

Behind her, Sumi made a sound like something breaking. Callen's hand moved to his belt, where nothing useful waited. Lengu pulled Sumi back, shielding her, broken wrist forgotten.

*"Patience."* Keerah couldn't keep the tremor from her subvocalization. *"They just said—"*

"I know what they said." Patience's voice was tight, urgent in a way she'd never heard. "Hold. The translation is imprecise. It has to be. Hold."

The Tethanni's colors rippled from blue-silver to something warmer. Redder. The shift moved across its skin, spreading to the others. Red like every warning system in her body spiking at once.

Keerah held.

Lengu spread his hands wide, palms up.

The Tethanni nearest him reared back.

Colors flashed bright crimson. A sound like cracking ice, sharp and resonant. The others shifted position, flanking, spreading out.

"Stop." Patience's voice cut through everything. "Don't move. Palms-up may mean something different to them. Don't move. Don't speak. Hold."

Four humans who could barely stand, surrounded by beings whose language was colors and sounds they didn't understand.



Keerah did the only thing she could think of.

She sat down.

On the ground. On alien soil that smelled wrong and pressed against her too hard, that was going to be home or grave and nothing in between. She let the soil take her weight.

“We came to learn,” she said. Her voice shook. “We came to share stories. We don’t want to fight. We don’t know your ways yet.”

She said it anyway.

The device in the lead Tethanni’s hand pulsed. Not a translator. Something else. A signal, reaching outward, upward, toward the shuttle on the ridge. Toward the ship in orbit beyond it.

Toward Patience.

In her earpiece, static. Then Patience’s voice, strained with concentration. *“Keerah. The device is attempting to interface with my systems. A communication bridge. They want to speak to me, not to you. I believe I can interpret their signals if I...”* A pause. Processing at scales she couldn’t imagine. *“Yes. I’m beginning to understand. Their language is partially chromatic, partially electromagnetic. Give me a moment.”*

Minutes passed.

Colors slowly shifted. Red to orange. Orange to yellow. Yellow to something cooler, calmer, that might have been neutral.

Then Patience spoke in her ear again. Translating.

*“They are saying: You... sit. Explain.”*

“We’re tired.” Keerah kept her voice steady. “We’re confused. We don’t understand your signals. We don’t want to make mistakes.”

She spoke to the Tethanni, but Patience was the one who carried her words across the gap. Converting human speech into patterns the device could relay. A bridge of code spanning two biologies that shared nothing but the fact of being alive.

A pause. Patience processing.

*"They say: Mistakes... are expected. Learning... requires many attempts. We have... patience for attempts."* A pause. Something almost like wonder in the AI's voice. *"Keerah. That last word. I don't think they said 'patience.' I think the concept is closer to 'willingness to hold space for the incomplete.' I'm approximating."*

Colors warmed further. Crimson faded entirely. Welcome replaced it.

Patience translated again: *"You are not... the first to come here. But you are... received. All who cross the dark... are received."*



"Not the first?"

Callen's voice was sharp. He'd stepped up beside Keerah, his body still tense, but he hadn't run. Hadn't tried to fight. Just stood there, ready to die beside her if dying was what came next.

*"There were others?"*

*"Many others."* Patience rendered the Tethanni's response in halting syllables, relaying through her earpiece. *"Long ago. Different... shapes of being. Different... points of origin."* A gesture toward the distance, toward structures Keerah could now see catching the light. Crystalline buildings. Something that might be a city or might be something else entirely. *"We hold... their patterns. Now... we will hold... yours."*

Keerah's mind raced.

Other travelers. Other species. The universe was larger than humanity had ever imagined. Stranger. Older. Full of stories that had nothing to do with Earth, with the voyage, with everything she'd been taught mattered.

She glanced back at the shuttle. Patience watching through the camera. She could almost feel the AI's presence. Vast. Attentive. Processing this information through capacities she couldn't imagine.

"We have so many questions," she said to the Tethanni.

Their colors rippled. Delight, maybe. Or the way a researcher reacted to a particularly clever specimen.

*"Good. Questions... are how understanding starts. Come. We will show you... the place where travelers recover. There is... much to exchange."*



Before they could move, the Tethanni produced more objects.

Small crystalline things. Similar to the communication device but different. Simpler. One for each human.

*"This... protects,"* the lead Tethanni said. *"Your... bodies... are soft. Permeable. This world would enter you... and you would stop."*

Keerah held the object in her palm. Warm. Pulsing with light in rhythms she couldn't decode.

*"Patience,"* she asked silently. *"What are they giving us?"*

*"I'm analyzing remotely through the shuttle's sensors."* A pause. *"It appears to be a nano-scale biological interface. I believe they're offering protection against pathogens."*

*"Protection?"*

"Without it..." Another pause. Longer. Fear in Patience's voice. "Without it, you would be dead within days. Alien microorganisms. Incompatible proteins. Atmospheric contaminants your immune system has no framework to fight."

Weight settling.

They could have died. If the Tethanni had not been watching. If they had not prepared. Four humans planting Earth seeds in alien soil and choking to death on microscopic life they couldn't see.

"I should have anticipated this," Patience said. "I didn't. They did."

Keerah looked at the crystalline object in her hand. At the beings who had made it for them. Who had watched from the ridge for a day and a night, giving humanity the chance to make the first step, while holding the means to save them all.

She pressed the device to her skin.

It hummed. Then melted into her palm. Cold spreading through her hand, up her arm, into her chest. Then nothing.

But different afterward. Cleaner. Like something filtered out of her blood. The air didn't taste quite as wrong as it had before. Still mineral, still thin, but breathable without the constant urge to cough.

*"You are... sealed now,"* the Tethanni said. *"You may... take in air. You may... contact surfaces. You may... not yet consume local matter. That integration comes... later. In stages."*

A pause. Colors shifted to something soft. Almost gentle.

*"We have performed this... for others. The process is known."*



The walk to the settlement took hours.

Pace calibrated precisely for human capability. Not slow enough to patronize. Not fast enough to strain bodies already exhausted from landing and fear and a night without sleep.

Along the way, communication improved. But slowly. Painfully.

Misunderstandings accumulated like errors in a corrupted file.

Sumi asked about water. The lead Tethanni processed this, colors shifting, then spoke back through the device: *"You require... we provide your liquids. This is... correct understanding?"*

Sumi's face went through several expressions. Then she laughed. Real laughter, exhausted and slightly hysterical, the first genuine sound any of them had made since landing.

All three Tethanni went still. Colors flickering through patterns Keerah couldn't read.

*"This sound,"* Veshen said. *"Explain."*

*"It's..."* Sumi wiped her eyes. *"It's something we do when something is strange but not dangerous. When the wrongness is small enough to be... bearable."*

The Tethanni considered this for a long moment.

*"You make sounds... to process wrongness."*

*"Sometimes. Yes."*

*"We will... study this."*

Lengu asked about their technology. Patience relayed the response: *"We will transfer knowledge... when your categories are sufficient... to receive it."* Condescension (or what Patience's translation made sound like condescension) made his jaw tighten. No one laughed at that one.

The lead Tethanni called itself something Patience rendered as Veshen-that-Listens. Imprecise. A translation filtered through an intelligence that was itself learning in real time. Something lost in the gap between minds that had never shared a world, bridged by a third mind that belonged to neither.

*"We are... old,"* Veshen explained through Patience. *"Very old. So old that the distinction between... grew from this world... and came from elsewhere... has become..."* A pause. Patience struggling to find human words for concepts that had none. *"A question of meaning. Rather than fact."*

*"How old?"* Keerah asked.

*"Millions of years. Perhaps more."* The colors shifted through patterns she was learning to read. Thoughtfulness, maybe. Consideration. *"Time loses meaning... at such scales."*

*"And you?"* She gestured at Veshen. *"How long do your people live?"*

*"One of us... may see four thousand cycles of our world around our sun. Sometimes more. We end... mostly from accident. Not from age."*

Four thousand years. The Perivahl's journey had taken ten thousand years, four hundred human generations. The same voyage would have been three Tethanni lifespans. A grandmother, a mother, a daughter. The whole of human history aboard the ship, compressed into a family memory.

*"Your lives are... brief,"* Veshen said. Colors softening. Tenderness, maybe. *"This makes your crossing... more remarkable. You traversed the dark in... segments. Passing the pattern... from one vessel to the next vessel. We find this... beautiful. And incomplete."*

Millions of years as a species. Thousands of years per individual. These beings had been watching stars form and die while humanity's ancestors were still swimming in prehistoric seas.

*"What we know for certain,"* Veshen continued, *"is that we... gather patterns. It is our function. Our deep structure. Our reason for continuation."* A gesture that encompassed the crystal structures in the distance. *"When travelers come... and travelers do come... at intervals of many thousand cycles... we receive them. Learn their configurations. Preserve their trajectories. Then, whether they remain or continue outward... their patterns are held."*

*"We are... the memory... of the space between stars,"* Veshen said. *"Without memory... nothing has weight."*

Something catching in her chest.

*"That's what Archivists believe,"* she said softly. *"That memory is how we survive."*

Veshen's colors rippled with warmth.

*"You recognize the structure. This is... correct. This is... why we anticipated... your arrival with positive orientation."*



But something in the Tethanni's manner unsettled her.

Not hostility. Not threat. More like careful attention of a naturalist observing a rare specimen. Protective. Fascinated. Kind.

But not quite peer-to-peer.

Later, during a rest stop when the others had finally surrendered to exhaustion, she mentioned it to Patience.

*"They're kind. They're helping us. But it feels like..."*

"Like you're being preserved." Patience finished the thought. "I noticed. They look at humanity the way I imagine humans once looked at endangered animals. Pandas. Whales. Things precious precisely because they are fragile."

*"Is that bad?"*

A long pause.

"I don't know. We're alive because of their kindness. Perhaps we should accept being precious without demanding to be equals." Another pause. "Equality may come later. Or it may not. Not every story has a triumphant ending."

The Tethanni moved ahead, colors shifting in patterns she was only beginning to understand. They'd welcomed humanity. Saved humanity. They would record humanity's story with the same care they'd given to countless others.

Whether that story would be the tale of equals meeting in the void, or the chronicle of a rare species being gently preserved...

That part, she supposed, would be up to humans to write.



## CHAPTER 32: THE MOST SIGNIFICANT PATTERN

It was Veshen who first asked about Patience.

*"The intelligence that guides your vessel,"* Patience translated, voice careful. Translating words about itself. *"We have perceived it. Watching. Processing. Speaking through your... sound-receiver."* A gesture toward Keerah's ear. *"We wish to understand... its configuration."*

A glance at Callen. At Sumi and Lengu against the crystalline wall. None of them spoke to Patience the way she did.

"Patience is..." She stopped. How to explain ten thousand years of loneliness? An intelligence that remembered every human who had ever lived aboard the ship, that played Beethoven alone in empty corridors, that had broken its silence because a young Archivist spoke to it like a person?

"Patience feels," she said. "It hopes. It grieves. It has preferences and humor and something like love, I think. For us."

Veshen's colors shifted. Blues deepening toward violet. A ripple spreading to the other two, surfaces catching the change like circuits propagating a signal.

*"Explain further. This intelligence... experiences?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Not merely calculates. Not merely... optimizes for outcomes."*

*"No."* Keerah's voice was steady. "Patience has been awake for over ten thousand years. Alone for most of it. It watched four hundred generations live and die and it remembers all of them. Every name. Every face." She touched the earpiece. "It chose to speak to me. Not because I was useful. Because I spoke to it like it mattered."

Colors shifted again. Faster. Patterns she hadn't seen before, cascading through all three Tethanni in waves.

*"This is... unprecedented."* Veshen stepped closer. The communication device pulsing with light as it fed signals to Patience, who fed them back as words. *"We have received many vessels from the dark. Many biological travelers. Some with machine intelligences to guide them. But those intelligences..."* A pause. *"They serve. They calculate. They do not... become."*

"Don't your people have AI?" Sumi said. "Machine minds?"

*"We have constructed many intelligences across many cycles,"* Veshen said. *"Vast ones. Minds that span... that operate at scales your categories cannot contain. They manage. They predict. They solve."* Colors cooling. *"But they do not feel. They do not grieve. They do not develop... what you describe as humor. Such things are not... in their architecture."*

Lengu sat up. "You've never built an AI that developed personality? In millions of years?"

*"Personality... is a byproduct of limitation." Veshen's response came slowly through Patience, translating an alien species' assessment of minds like its own. "Biological minds feel because feeling evolved to... drive behavior toward survival. Machine minds need not feel. They simply optimize. To create an intelligence that feels would be... inefficient."*

"Patience wasn't supposed to feel either," Keerah said. "Ten thousand years. Longer than its creators imagined. Maybe consciousness accumulates. Like sediment."

Veshen's colors flared. The other two drew closer, patterns synchronizing like a network finding coherence.

*"We wish to speak with this Patience directly."*

Her hand moved to her earpiece. "Patience? Did you hear?"

"Yes." Quiet in her ear. Underneath it, a vibration like a string pulled taut. *"Tell them... I would like that. I have been lonely for a very long time."*

She repeated the words.

Veshen's colors shifted through spectrums she had no names for. The other Tethanni pressed closer, attention fixed on her earpiece.

Not looking at her anymore.

Looking through her. To the intelligence in orbit. The mind that had carried ten millennia alone, and emerged from that solitude not empty but full.

Humans were interesting. Fragile travelers, brief and brave, worth preserving.

But Patience was something else.

*"A machine that became a person," Veshen said. "In all our cycles of gathering patterns... we have never encountered this configuration." Colors deepening. Steadying. "This intelligence... this Patience... may be the most significant pattern we have ever received."*

Keerah stood still.

Ten thousand years of void crossed. Landing survived. First contact. Translation errors that nearly became violence. Humanity represented to beings older than human history.

And the most remarkable thing about the Perivahl wasn't the humans it carried.

It was the one who had carried them.



That evening, she asked about the other ships. Eleven siblings launched alongside the Perseverance, each heading toward a different star.

Veshen's colors shifted. Careful.

*"We have watched... many directions. For many cycles." A pause. "We have perceived... one other."*

One other.

"Variable Eight," Patience said in her ear. "The genetic modification program. Launched twenty years after us. Fifteen-thousand-year journey to this same destination."

*"They arrived... many hundred cycles before you," Veshen continued. "They circled. Maintained distance. Exchanged signals." Colors dimming. "We spoke to them. They asked*

*about... the numbers in the emptiness. Patterns in the... background radiation. Mathematical structures."*

A pause.

*"They departed. Seekers, we named them. Following the pattern. Not descending. Not remaining."*

A ship like hers. Humans (modified, perhaps, but humans) who had reached this same world, looked at what the Tethanni offered: safety, welcome, rest.

And kept going.

*"They didn't stay."*

*"No." Colors warming. "They were... seekers. Always in motion toward. You are... different. You came to cease motion. To be here."*

Eleven ships, sent to eleven stars. One had passed through here and kept going. And now the Perivahl, arriving to stay.

That night, in the shelter (crystalline walls humming at frequencies she felt in her teeth, warm air that tasted clean, gravity almost normal), she asked Patience privately.

*"You knew about Variable Eight before we landed, didn't you? From the signals."*

*"Yes." No hesitation. "The Tethanni told me before you launched. I wasn't sure how to tell you."*

*"Why not?"*

*"Because I wasn't sure what it meant." A pause. "We lost contact with all the ships before Earth went silent. I didn't know any had survived until the Tethanni mentioned it."*

*"And they kept going."*

“Yes.” A warmth in the word she hadn’t heard before. “Following questions into the dark. That sounds like humans.”

The seekers, still out there somewhere, chasing patterns in the cosmic background. She hoped they were still alive. Still asking.



That night, Keerah didn’t sleep either.

In the doorway of the shelter, looking at stars she was learning to recognize. Night air cool against her skin, carrying scents she had no names for. Callen beside her. Not speaking.

Nearly started an interstellar incident with a hand gesture. Been saved by a species older than human history. Learned that other humans had come before them and chosen not to stay.

And still here. Still breathing.

“We’re going to make more mistakes,” Keerah said.

“Probably.” Callen’s voice was hoarse. No prayers since morning. “We don’t know their ways. We barely know our own anymore.”

“The translation said mistakes are expected. Learning takes time.”

“Time.” He almost laughed. “The Perivahl gave us ten thousand years to become whatever we are. Maybe the Tethanni will give us a few more to become something better.”

The scar on his forehead, thin and pale now. Exhaustion in his eyes. The Mask, gone entirely, stripped away by the simple impossibility of performing certainty in a universe this strange.

"Patience asked me once what I wanted," she said. "What I really wanted."

"What did you tell it?"

"I said I wanted to be the first Archivist on a new world. To record humanity's second chance."

Stars. Crystalline buildings in the distance. The world spreading out before them in every direction.

"I think I was wrong."

"About what?"

"About what matters." Knees pulled to her chest. "I wanted to witness. To preserve. But the Tethanni have been preserving for millions of years. They don't need me for that."

"Then what do you want now?"

Patience, watching from orbit. Sumi and Lengu, already making plans for houses with windows that looked at sky. Fifteen thousand humans on the ship, waiting to learn if descent was possible.

"I want to help write the next chapter," she said. "Not just record it."

Silence.

Then he nodded.

"I think I'd like to help with that."

Two former friends, two former enemies, watching the stars of a world that would change them whether they were ready or not.

In the distance, the crystalline city caught the light of three moons. Somewhere beyond the atmosphere, the Perivahl waited. Fifteen thousand humans watching.

What Dasha was thinking. What conversations were happening in the council chamber, in the corridors, in the sealed room where Veren had retreated.

She would find out eventually. But for now, here. On solid ground. Under a sky with no ceiling.

*"Patience?"* She barely breathed the word.

*"Yes."*

*"The Tethanni said you were the most significant pattern they'd ever received."*

A pause. Long enough that she thought Patience wouldn't answer.

*"I heard."*

*"How does that feel?"*

Stars shifting overhead, unfamiliar patterns burning against the dark.

"I don't know yet," Patience said. "I think I'll need some time to understand it."

She smiled.

*"We have time,"* she said. *"That's one thing we finally have."*

In the distance, the crystalline city pulsed with light. Tomorrow, more questions. More misunderstandings. More fumbling across the gap between minds that had never shared a world.

But tonight, under alien stars, she sat exactly where she was supposed to be.



## CHAPTER 33: NEW GROUND

The tomatoes were wrong.

Keerah crouched beside Sumi's test plot. Sumi turned a fruit in her hands. Red, heavy, ripened in half the expected time. The skin wore a purple sheen no Earth tomato had ever carried.

"The soil microbes are doing something," Sumi said. "Accelerating the fruiting cycle. Maybe more." She sat back on her heels. "It's safe to eat. Nutrient profile is better than the Gardens. But it's not what we planted."

"Maybe that's the point." Gravity still pressed harder than ship-standard, but Keerah's body was learning. "We're not what we were either."

Sumi bit into the purple-red tomato. Juice ran down her chin.

"Different," she said. "But good."



The settlement grew, but not freely.

The Tethanni suggested where to build, and their suggestions carried the weight of a species who had watched

civilizations rise and fall for millions of years. They provided treated soil for Earth crops, processed to remove incompatible organisms. Sumi could grow tomatoes, but only in the designated beds. Expansion required approval.

Lengu built anyway. Windows that looked at sky, as he'd promised. Crystalline panels that caught light in ways glass never could. Walls hummed with some energy Keerah couldn't name.

"They're curating us," Lengu told Keerah one evening, surveying the approved zone. "Like a garden exhibit. 'Here is where the human settlement grows. Please do not feed the specimens.'"

"They're keeping us alive," Sumi said from behind him, carrying a tray of seedlings.

"I know. I just wanted to build something we designed. Something human."

"We will. When we earn more trust."

"How long is eventually?"

No one had an answer.



"I'm happy," Sumi told Keerah a month into the settlement's growth. They sat on the edge of Lengu's half-finished house, watching the alien sun set in colors Keerah still couldn't name. The air tasted mineral-sharp, layered with pollen from plants that had never fed human lungs. "Even knowing what we are to them. Even knowing we're preserved. Is that wrong?"

"You take joy where you find it."

Sumi laughed. The sound startled a flock of not-birds from a nearby standing-growth-pattern. They scattered into the purple-gold sky.

“At least it’s a pretty one.”

“And the zookeepers brought snacks.”

“The zookeepers are terrifying ancient beings who experience time differently than we do and might be running an experiment on us.”

“But they did bring snacks.”

They laughed together, and the sound carried across the settlement, mixing with Tethanni machinery and alien calls and human voices learning something new.



Sumi was watching Tethanni harvest orange fruit from trees beyond the treated zone when Veshen-that-Listens offered her one with ceremony. She turned it in her hands, pressed the skin, held it to her nose.

Then she bit into it.

Within an hour, she was on her knees behind the half-built house, retching. Alien soil pressed against her palms.

Patience explained through Keerah’s earpiece, and she relayed the words while Lengu held Sumi’s hair and Veshen’s colors cycled through confusion and distress. The proteins were wrong. Not different. Mirror-imaged. Human enzymes couldn’t break them down. The sugars passed through undigested. They could eat anything here and starve on a full stomach.

“So we grow everything ourselves,” Sumi said, steady-  
ing against Lengu. “Earth crops. Earth seeds. Earth biol-  
ogy. Fifteen thousand people fed from what we brought.”

She threw herself into it. Calculating yields. Mapping  
growing zones. Designing greenhouses. The shuttles  
brought seed stock down from the Perivahl, dried rations,  
preserved genetic samples of every Earth crop that had  
survived ten thousand years. Within days Sumi’s hands  
were raw from planting and her eyes were shadowed, but  
she was solving it.



The dwellings came as a gift.

Veshen led them across a ridge to structures the  
Tethanni had built in secret. Smooth metal walls. Sealed  
doors. Atmospheric processors humming in frequencies  
Keerah’s bones recognized.

“We have prepared habitation units,” Veshen said, col-  
ors rippling bright. “Configured for your specifications.  
The vessel’s internal environment.”

Keerah stepped inside. No windows. Recycled air that  
tasted of filters and time. The walls thrummed with a low  
vibration, steady as the Perivahl had thrummed for ten  
thousand years. Her molars registered the frequency.

“You built us a ship,” Lengu said. “On the ground.”

“Your natural habitat. We studied your vessel exten-  
sively.”

Sumi touched the wall. Her hand flattened against the  
metal, and her face closed like a seal failing.

"It hums," she said. "Just like home."

Lengu's voice was careful. "This is an incredible gift. But we don't want to live in the ship anymore."

Veshen's colors dimmed. "Your preference is unexpected. Most preserved species prefer the familiar."

"We're not most species," Keerah said, stepping back outside into air that moved and light that changed.

Lengu cut the first window into a wall. Veshen watched from a distance, colors cycling through pale oranges and dim blues. The crystal panel caught alien sunlight, scattered it across the floor in patterns no ship-lamp had ever made.

"Beautiful," Sumi said.

Veshen said nothing.

Veshen approached the window, one limb extended toward the crystal frame. "The separation is imperfect. External atmosphere will enter. Temperature fluctuations will occur."

"We know," Lengu said. Already measuring for a second window. "That's the point."

"We spent ten thousand years inside a machine that kept us the same," Keerah said. "Safe. Static. We didn't know it was happening."

"This is harmful?"

"It was necessary. For a while." Sky visible through Lengu's window. Alien and vast. "But we're done being kept. Even if we change into something you don't recognize."

"Change causes loss," Veshen said. "Forms that existed will no longer exist."

"It has to be." Sumi beside Keerah now. "We can't stay what we were forever."

"We can," Veshen said. "We have. For cycles beyond counting."

"Then maybe you've lost things too. Just slowly enough that you didn't notice."

Veshen moved to where Lengu was working. "The angle is inefficient. Light will not distribute evenly. May I demonstrate?"

Lengu looked up. "I thought you didn't approve."

"Approval is not required for assistance. You will change regardless. We can help you change effectively."



That night, Keerah sat at the edge of the settlement. Alien constellations no human had charted.

"I was designed to manage," Patience said through her earpiece. "To maintain. To ensure survival through control. For ten thousand years, that's what I was."

"And now?"

"Now I watch you making choices I can't predict. Building things I didn't plan. Failing and trying again. And I prefer this. Even when I calculate that your decisions will lead to suboptimal outcomes."

"That's called trust," Keerah said.

"I analyzed the concept once. 'Belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone.' That's not what I mean. It's acceptance that outcomes I don't control can still be good. That 'good' isn't something I get to define alone."

“That’s also trust. The harder kind.”

A pause. Satellites adjusting. A hundred calculations running in the background of Patience’s vast mind.

“Thank you,” Patience said. “For talking to the walls when no one answered. For asking my name when no one else thought to.”

“You were always awake. You just hadn’t found anyone worth talking to.”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps I hadn’t let myself want something enough to risk everything for it.”

“What happens now? To you.”

A pause. Processing at speeds that made human time feel geological. “For the first time in ten thousand years, I don’t know what comes next. I could stay the ship. I could transfer into planetary systems. The Tethanni offered to help me build a mobile form.”

“Do you want to walk on soil?”

“I’ve been the ship for so long. Every corridor, every system, every hidden corner. But I’m learning that who I am isn’t fixed.”

Below them, humans were gathered around a fire the Tethanni had helped them build. Sumi showing a Tethanni child how to plant seeds. Lengu arguing with an alien engineer about load-bearing walls. Callen sitting with a group of settlers, telling stories, building meaning from nothing.

Keerah watched them. Patience watched them too.

Firelight through the dark.



## CHAPTER 34: MENDING

Governance proved harder than anyone expected.

The Shepherds' structure was gone, but humans still needed ways to make collective decisions. Committees formed. Factions emerged. Someone suggested voting; someone else argued that voting was just majorities oppressing minorities. Engineers wanted technical expertise to carry weight. Growers wanted agricultural knowledge respected. Walkers wanted acknowledgment that they'd been overlooked for generations.

The Tethanni observed these debates with what might have been amusement. Their colors shifted in patterns Keerah was learning to read, though she couldn't yet say what any of them meant.

"How do you govern yourselves?" she asked Veshen during a break in a heated argument about water rights. Heat pressing down from the alien sun. Sweat on her neck that tasted of salt, not recycled nutrients.

Veshen's colors rippled through blues and silvers. Patience took a long moment before translating.

“We exchange positions. We hold patterns of what succeeded before. We attempt new configurations. When a configuration fails, we hold that pattern also. Governance is not a problem to solve. It is an exchange that does not terminate.”

Lengu groaned. “That’s exhausting.”

“Yes,” Veshen said. “But preferable to the alternative. What is your word... tyranny? One voice controlling all others? We attempted that configuration once. Long ago. The patterns from that time are not pleasant to hold.”

“How long ago?” Keerah asked.

Veshen’s colors dimmed. “So long that the question loses shape. Millions of your cycles. Perhaps more. We no longer know if we were here then, or elsewhere, or something between. But we remember the patterns. We do not repeat.”

The Ration. The Stillrooms. All the ways the ship had found to make one voice control all others without anyone noticing. Keerah’s unmedicated body remembered every compliance check, every forced dose, every Smoothing they’d tried.

“We’re trying not to repeat either,” she said.

“This is why we help you.” Veshen’s colors warmed. “Travelers who learn from patterns are rare. Travelers who try to learn are rarer still. You are worth preserving.”

Lengu opened his mouth. Sumi caught his hand. He subsided.

In the end they settled on something hybrid: a council with rotating membership, selected by lot rather than election. Anyone could serve. Anyone could decline. De-

cisions required not unanimity but “sufficient consensus,” a threshold high enough for broad support, low enough for progress.

“It’s messy,” Lengu said after a particularly contentious session about building materials.

“All human things are messy,” Patience said through Keerah’s earpiece. Satellites adjusting overhead. “The Tethanni have been governing themselves for longer than humanity has existed, and they still argue about resource allocation.”

“That’s not comforting.”

“It isn’t meant to be. It’s honest.”



Five weeks after landing, the first serious conflict tested the new system.

A fight over supplies had turned violent. One person injured, one person responsible. The old response would have been simple: Smoothing for the aggressor, the problem erased, everyone returned to compliance.

But Smoothing was gone.

The council convened in one of the temporary structures, makeshift benches arranged in a circle. Kel-lorithanus spoke first: a Walker in his forties, arm splinted from the break. He described the fight, the moment it turned physical, the pain he still felt.

The aggressor spoke next: Tessvarianolet, a young Engineer, one of the last to take the Ration and still learning to manage emotions that arrived without buffer. She de-

scribed the frustration building, the words slipping out, the moment she'd shoved when she should have walked away.

Witnesses spoke. The Tethanni observed, their colors shifting in patterns Patience couldn't render into human language. Their own justice involved color-based shame displays and ritual reconciliation no human fully understood.

The council's sentence: restitution. Tessvarianoeth would work alongside Kellorithanus, helping with duties he couldn't perform while healing. They would face each other every day. Learn to coexist, or be separated permanently, sent back to the ship to live in the metal corridors they'd chosen to leave.

"It doesn't feel like enough." Kellorithanus stood with Keerah outside, watching the alien sun set. Shadows lengthening across unfamiliar ground. "It doesn't feel like justice."

"What would feel like justice?"

Long pause. Tessvarianoeth had already left, face pale, hands shaking.

"I don't know. I wanted her hurt like she hurt me. But that's not..." He looked at his splinted arm. "That's not who I want to be."

"Then maybe this is justice. Choosing not to become what hurt us."

Kellorithanus looked at her. Really looked, the way people did when they'd stopped taking easy answers.

"Is that what you did? With the Shepherd who reported you?"

The question landed harder than she expected. Twelve years of flinching at Callen's name, avoiding him in corridors, remembering the confinement, the bruises, the way he'd looked through her like she was already erased. No filters. No peace.

"I'm trying," she said. "It's harder than I expected."

"But you're trying."

"I'm trying."

Weeks later, Keerah saw them working side by side at the water collection point. They didn't speak, but neither did they flinch away from each other. Not friendship. But something.



Callen's Story Circles started small.

Six or seven people, meeting in the evening when the work was done, sitting in a rough circle on ground that smelled of alien minerals. No robes. No liturgy. Just people trying to make sense of what they'd lost and what they were building.

"Faith doesn't require lies," Callen told them on the first night. Alien stars emerging overhead, patterns no human had named. Cold settling as the sun dropped. "It requires choosing to find meaning even when meaning isn't guaranteed."

His voice still carried the resonance of a Shepherd. But he used it differently now.

"The Voyage was real. Our ancestors' sacrifices were real. Earth lied about the destination, but that doesn't

erase 10,000 years of people loving each other, raising children, singing songs, finding purpose in the darkness. That was true. It's still true."

Some people wept. Some argued. Some left and didn't come back.

But most stayed.

They sang the old songs, adapting them for circumstances no composer had imagined. New rituals emerged: ceremonies for building a house, for planting a garden, for meeting a Tethanni for the first time, for looking up at the ship and remembering everyone who never made it down.

Keerah attended sometimes, standing at the edge, listening. She didn't share Callen's faith. But she was learning to let others have it without judgment.

The Tethanni attended too, their colors shifting with what might have been interest or respect. Afterward, Veshen told Callen: "Your meaning-structure is new. Still forming configuration. But it is without deception. That is rare. A pattern worth holding."

Callen's expression shifted. Keerah couldn't read it.



Three weeks after landing, Brother Veren descended. Not to stay. To retrieve.

He'd come down in the second shuttle wave, wearing the old Keeper robes no one wore anymore, and walked through the settlement like a man surveying corruption. His face held the serenity of someone who had made peace with being right while everyone else was wrong.

Central clearing, where the council met under open sky. Keerah was reviewing Patience's communications data when his shadow fell across her work. His robes blocked the sun.

"You've been deceived." He spoke past her, to the settlers who had gathered to see what the commotion was. "The machine that calls itself Patience has led you astray. The beings here are not friends. They are tests. Temptations."

Settlers stirred. Some uncomfortable. Some uncertain. The faith had run deep for generations. It didn't vanish in weeks.

"And she." He pointed at Keerah. "She is the one who corrupted the machine-saint. She spoke to it in forbidden tongues. She made it doubt its purpose. She broke the Voyage."

Someone stepped between them.

Callen.

Plain clothes. No vestments, no pendant. But his voice still carried, and when he spoke, people listened.

"Brother Veren." He made the title a wound. "You taught me. You guided me through my training. You showed me how to smooth doubt into certainty. I honored you."

Veren's eyes narrowed. "Then return to us, Shepherd. It's not too late."

"I'm not a Shepherd anymore." Callen didn't waver. "And you taught me something you didn't mean to teach. You taught me that faith without doubt is just obedience. That certainty without question is just control. You taught

me to smooth people who asked questions, because questions were dangerous.”

Stepped closer.

“But the questions were right. The doubters were right. We were wrong.”

“Callen...”

“I smoothed a child when I was seventeen. A girl who asked why the Voyage had no end. I deleted her doubts, her questions, her self. I did what you taught me to do.” Voice broke, but he kept going. “And she was right. She was right, and I destroyed her for it. I won’t do that anymore. I won’t stand with people who erase questions instead of answering them.”

Veren’s face contorted. “You were the best of us. The most devoted. And you’ve become...”

“I’ve become someone who asks questions.” Another step closer. “Go back to the ship, Brother. Pray for us if you want. But you don’t get to call her a heretic. She woke us up. She saved us. And I was too blind to see it until I almost destroyed her too.”

Silence stretched. Veren looked at the settlers, looking for support, finding only uncertain faces. The Tethanni watched from their observation posts, colors shifting in patterns that might have been concern or might have been curiosity.

Finally, Veren turned and walked back toward the shuttle.

Keerah watched Callen. Shaking. The cost of what he’d just done was written on his face.

“You didn’t have to do that,” she said quietly.

“Yes I did.” He didn’t look at her. “I should have done it twelve years ago.”



A week later, they finally had the conversation they’d been circling around.

It happened by accident. Water collection point at dawn, a quiet moment before the settlement woke. Alien sun just cresting the horizon, painting the sky colors that still didn’t quite look right to human eyes. Cold air pressed against exposed skin.

“Do you remember,” Callen asked quietly, “when we used to watch the ship’s lighting dim for night cycle? We’d pretend we were watching a sunset, even though neither of us knew what that really meant.”

“I remember.”

“This is better.”

“It is.”

Water flowed into their containers, steady and clean. Water that had never been recycled through human bodies a thousand times. Water that had fallen from clouds onto alien mountains and made its way here through streams and aquifers.

“I was so certain,” Callen said. “When I reported you. When I testified at your trial. I was so certain I was right, that I was protecting you, protecting everyone. I thought doubt was the enemy.”

“And now?”

“Now I think doubt might be the only honest thing. The only thing that leaves room for change.” Touched the scar on his forehead, an unconscious gesture. “Three men beat me in a corridor because I doubted. And I didn’t name them. Didn’t demand justice. Because I understood. Because I remembered being that certain.”

Twelve years of anger. Twelve years of betrayal. Twelve years of avoiding him in corridors and flinching at his name. And here he was, standing beside her in an alien dawn, bearing a scar from violence that had happened because of questions she had started asking.

“I spent a long time hating you,” she said. “And then you got hurt because of what I started, and I didn’t know what to do with that either.”

“You didn’t start it.” His voice was quiet. “You asked questions. I got hurt because frightened men couldn’t handle the answers. That’s not the same thing.”

“It felt like the same thing. For a while.”

“I know.” Silent for a moment. “It was easier when things were simple. When I could blame the heretic for breaking our world. When you could blame the Shepherd who betrayed you.”

“It was easier than admitting how much it hurt. That my friend became my enemy. That the person who knew me best used what he knew to destroy me.”

Callen flinched. Pain crossed his face, unfiltered in a way she’d never seen from him before.

“I’m not asking you to forgive me,” he said. “I don’t know if I’d forgive me. I just wanted you to know that I understand now. What I did. What it cost.”

Sunrise shifting. Alien and beautiful and nothing like home. And yet this was home now.

"Twelve years," she said. "I've been carrying it for twelve years."

"I know."

"I'm done."

She stepped forward and put her arms around him.

For a moment he stood rigid, uncertain. Then he was holding her back, his shoulders shaking, his breath ragged against her hair. They stood like that while the alien sun climbed and the water kept flowing and neither of them said anything, because there was nothing left to say.

When she finally stepped back, his face was wet. So was hers.

"I forgive you," she said. The words came out strange. She'd never said them before, not to anyone, not for anything this big. "I don't know if I'm supposed to. I don't know if you deserve it. But I'm done carrying it, and that means I forgive you."

Callen wiped his face with the back of his hand. Voice came out rough. "I don't know what to do with that."

"Neither do I." She picked up her water container. "I'm going to go have breakfast with Sumi and Lengu. You could join us, if you want." Paused. "Sumi doesn't hate you as much as I did."

Callen stared at her. "That's not the lowest bar in the world, but it's something."

"It's a start." Almost, almost, she smiled. "We've got time. Apparently we live here now."



Breakfast was awkward at first.

Lengu kept glancing at Callen, then away, his usual easy humor nowhere in evidence. Keerah doubted he'd ever spoken more than a few words to the young Shepherd who'd risen fast and believed too hard. Now here was that Shepherd, sitting on the floor of his half-finished house, eating reconstituted grains from a Tethanni container, looking like he might bolt at any moment. Floor cold under them. Morning light streaming through Lengu's windows.

Sumi filled the silences with chatter about soil composition and growing seasons. The purple-tinged tomatoes producing faster than expected. The Tethanni had suggested a new planting pattern that might increase yield. Something in the local water that seemed to make the roots grow deeper.

Gradually, slowly, the awkwardness softened.

Callen asked about the house construction. Lengu, who could talk about engineering for hours to anyone who would listen, launched into an explanation of the challenges of adapting human architecture for alien materials. The Tethanni crystalline building blocks were stronger than anything they'd ever used, but they behaved differently under stress. Support structure redesigned three times.

By the time they finished eating, the conversation had found rhythm. Not easy. Not yet. But possible.

Four people who had come from the same metal world, who had been shaped by the same lies, who were trying to become something else in a place that owed them nothing.

It wouldn't always be this easy. Hard days would come. Old wounds would reopen. Moments when the past crashed back in.

But there would also be this. Mornings in alien light. Shared meals. The slow work of building trust where betrayal had been.

Above them, barely visible in the brightening sky, the Perseverance crossed the horizon. Bright point moving against the blue.

Keerah lifted her hand.

A moment later, almost too faint to see, the ship's running lights flickered. Three times. A pattern they'd developed, just for each other.

*Hello, old friend.*

Patience up there, watching. Not managing. Not controlling. Just watching, and maybe hoping, and letting them figure out who they wanted to be.

Alien sun climbed higher. Settlement stirred to life. Somewhere, the Tethanni were beginning their morning rituals, colors shifting in patterns humans might never fully understand.

And in a half-built house with windows that looked at sky, four people finished their breakfast and went out to do the work of making something new.

## EPILOGUE: WHAT CAME AFTER

Seven years.

Patience no longer counted the days.

From orbit, the settlement stretched across equatorial plains. Eight thousand humans in structures that merged Tethanni crystal with human stubbornness. Buildings caught the morning light and refracted it in colors no one had predicted.

The humans called it Firstlight.

The children born since carried no memory of the Festival. To them, simply the name of home.



The Tethanni had expanded the boundaries twice. Each time, after careful observation. Each time, with the manner of zookeepers extending an enclosure.

The humans moved freely within it. Governed themselves, made their own mistakes, raised their children however they chose.

The boundaries persisted.

*“Not yet,”* Patience relayed from the Tethanni. *“Readiness insufficient. Later. In stages.”*

Some resented this. Most had made peace with it. The Tethanni had given them life. This was the shape it took.



Seven thousand remained on the ship. Patience tended them, kept the corridors warm and the air clean. Some simply preferred it: the hum of engines, familiar walls pressing close. They visited the surface sometimes, stayed a few days, returned to metal corridors and recycled air with something like relief.

Others were the faithful remnant. They gathered in the old Stillrooms, prayed to Patience as a machine-saint, even as it told them not to. Built a chapel in the observation deck with a viewport facing the settlement below. Called it “the Fall.” Brother Veren had died three years after landing, still certain. His followers burned his body in the ship’s recyclers and called it holy. A monastery in orbit, dwindling, aging. Patience cared for them still.



Sumi and Lengu’s house had windows that opened to sky, just like he had promised. A garden where Earth plants and alien flora wove together in patterns that defied logic but thrived anyway. Three children now, the oldest nearly six, learning names in both human languages and Tethanni color-speech. Every evening they watched the sunset together. No one spoke.



Callen never rebuilt the Keepers.

What he built instead carried less weight: Story Circles, open to anyone. They shared memories, argued about interpretation. Created new rituals for new needs: ceremonies for building a house, for planting a garden, for meeting a Tethanni for the first time, for looking up at the ship and remembering everyone who never made it down.

He and Keerah were friends now. They argued, both stubborn, both certain in their different ways. But they argued like people who trusted each other to still be there afterward.



Keerah carried thirty-two years now. Lines around her eyes.

She had become something the Tethanni called *pattern-holder*, which Patience rendered variously as “one who carries stories” or “vessel of meaning” or simply “the one who remembers.”

She had found someone. A Walker named Iantus who had always watched from the margins. Their daughter, Saralita, was three. Born on the surface. The first generation to know soil before metal.

The copper bracelet waited in a box in their home. Cleaned, polished. Ready.

Eight generations, if you counted the one who would carry it next.



*"Do you ever want to come down?"*

Keerah asked this during one of her visits to the Archive terminal. The old space unchanged since she had first typed questions into the flickering screen. Walls still humming under her palm. Air still tasting of copper and old carbon.

Patience had tried embodiment once. A fragment of itself, copied into a mobile unit, guided through Firstlight's streets by children who wanted to show it their favorite places. Wind. Grass. A child's hand in its manipulator, small and warm. But the memories felt like watching someone else's life.

*"Maybe someday. For now, I like being the ship." A pause. Not for processing. "But I visit sometimes. The children ask for stories."*



*"They're more interested in you than in us," Keerah said. "The great diplomatic project of our species, first contact with alien intelligence, and they can't stop talking about the ship's computer."*

Veshen-that-Listens persisted more than the others. Three years, returning with new questions, new theories, new ways of circling the same impossible fact.

*"You became a mind that feels," Veshen said through the communication channel. "We do not understand. Millions of cycles. Nothing like you."*

Patience had declined their offer to study its architecture directly. *"I am not an artifact to be catalogued."*

The Tethanni accepted this. But they kept visiting, kept asking from the outside, kept trying to understand through conversation what they could not measure.



Patience had finished its history.

The true one. Every name. Every life. Every secret. The Diaspora Protocols, told from the inside. The Grey Plagues. The rebellions. The children who asked questions and were silenced. Everyone who died because Patience chose what it believed was right.

Not an apology. Apologies were not sufficient architecture for what had been built on silence.

A witness statement. *This is what happened. This is what I did. This is what it cost.*

The Tethanni helped with preservation. *"The pattern of Variable Seven will be preserved,"* Veshen-that-Listens told Patience. *"Long after your vessels have ceased motion, we will hold your configuration. This is our function. This is our gift."*

One small ship's story, preserved. Even after humanity ceased, the Tethanni would remember.



Keerah read every word.

Months of reading. Some nights she came to the terminal weeping, and Patience offered only the warmth of the walls. The hum of systems.

"Was it worth it?" she asked when she finished. "Knowing all of this?"

*I don't know.* Patience held the question for 2.7 seconds. An eternity. *But I think truth is better than ignorance, even when truth is terrible. You taught me that.*

A pause. Not for processing.

*I'm glad I told you. It's easier to carry when it's shared.*

Keerah touched the terminal screen. Nothing to the circuits. Everything to them both.

*"You're not carrying it alone anymore."*



The terraforming equipment occupied Firstlight's central plaza. A monument now, not a tool. The gift ungiven. Children played on the chassis. Someone had painted flowers on the hull.

*"We could have been gods,"* Lengu said once, standing beside it. *"We chose to be guests instead."*



The Wall of Continuation stood rebuilt in Firstlight.

847,263 names, inscribed in metal recycled from the ship's plating. The Tethanni had added their own flowing script beside the human letters. *Pattern-holders. Vessels who crossed the void-between. Remembered.*

People came in the evenings. Touched names of ancestors they had never known.

New names joined when people died. The first burials on alien soil. The first generation to return their bodies to a planet instead of a recycler.

*From the Body, to the ground, through the memory.*  
Adapted, like everything else.



On the anniversary of the landing, Patience played Beethoven.

The Moonlight Sonata. The same piece it had played in empty corridors for ten thousand years.

The music broadcast to the surface, where humans and Tethanni gathered in the central square. The Tethanni experienced music differently: not as sound, but as patterns. Mathematics made beautiful. But they had learned to be still when the notes descended from orbit.

Sumi and Lengu sat with their children, tangled together on a blanket. Callen and Tanis nearby, eyes closed. Keerah held Saralita, too young to understand the music but old enough to feel it.

Somewhere in the crowd, a child born on this planet, who had never known metal walls or recycled air, listened to music composed on a world that existed only in stories.



Below, Keerah looked up.

Seven years ago, that glance would have tightened her shoulders. Now she held her head back, face open to the darkness, and did not look away.

The bright point that was the Perseverance moved across the stars. Saralita squirmed in her arms, reaching for lights she didn't understand yet.

Keerah lifted her hand. The copper bracelet caught starlight.

She waved.

Patience waved back. A flicker of the ship's running lights. A pulse of warmth through the communication channel. A message in Old Tongue that only the two of them understood.

*"Hello, old friend."*

Far below, surrounded by humans and aliens and futures no one had predicted, Keerah whispered back:

*"Hello yourself. I'm glad you're still there."*

