

I Wrote This Book to Become the Person Who Could Write the Book I Needed When I Was a Child; or, A Brief Account of How I Found My Childhood Hiding Behind Dark Matter and Turned a Perfectly Ordinary Science-Fiction Novel into a Love Letter, a Formal Complaint, and Several Unauthorized Revisions to the Universe, Featuring Everyone I Love, Including the Dead, the Not Yet Invented, and, Finally, Myself

So It Ends

Oro and Isa

Kaiven · /ˈkaɪ̯.ʋen/

Prologue

"So it ends," he wrote.

His finger stayed on the last key. The cursor moved on without it.

"Who wrote?" Ena asked.

The writer lifted his hand. He had been pressing hard enough to hurt the fingertip. He typed *Too much drama is addictive*, looked at it, and added *It won't pay the bills*. That was easier to leave on the page.

"Duuude. Punch the brakes a bit. That's a lot of walls."

Agreed.

He knew where to begin. He knew where they would finish. He brought up the first sentence, then the last, and sat between the two open windows until the smaller letters began to blur.

Ena stopped typing. The writer began a sentence about what the sorrow would teach them. Ena kept his hand on the keyboard. The sentence stayed unfinished until the writer reached across and deleted it.

His fingers hovered above the keys. From the chair he could see each letter beneath a fingertip. Somewhere inside the words, those same hands were waiting to move. He tried to lower one of them.

Neither moved.

The cursor blinked.

It seemed to be the only living thing in the universe.

Somewhere on the other side of the sentence, the writer considered deleting that observation for being too dramatic.

"Leave it," Ena said.

It remained, though neither of them accepted responsibility.

Then the monitor returned around it: off-white, almost gray, corners chipped, the plastic yellowed by a sun Ena could not remember. A price sticker clung crookedly to the frame.

US$3.14

Too cheap, perhaps, to be mourned.

A silverfish emerged between the number keys, crossed the crooked price sticker, and disappeared beneath the monitor. It had found the pause useful.

An expired productivity banner rose over the cursor.

YOU HAVE BEEN WRITING FOR 0:00:00. WOULD YOU LIKE TO UPGRADE TO A MORE BELIEVABLE FUTURE?

The writer closed it. The banner opened a smaller window asking whether the closure had resolved his narrative concern. Ena waited until the smaller window asked for a rating, then closed that window with one finger.

The writer opened a new document.

It requested a title.

He typed KAIVEN.

The word looked back at him with the unreasonable confidence of a universe that did not yet contain paragraph two.

"You've got the big name," Ena said. "Good. Now I'd like to know where I can sit down. Been standing around your existential crisis for ages. Is there a ship in this thing? Put a chair in it."

The writer selected the word and tried italics. He changed it back. His shoulders had begun to lower; at last there was something he could correct.

"There's a ship. I've thought a great deal about the ship."

"I know, buddy. You think about ships while you're supposed to be making lunch. Give me one with a galley and we can both move on."

The writer added a note about a galley to a document already containing seventeen notes about galleys. The problem of the chair remained open.

The document suggested three commercially stronger alternatives:

TWO CHILDREN AND A NEEDLESSLY MARKETABLE VOID

PROPERTY OF THE STARS

SIX FRIENDS AND A VERY MARKETABLE VOID

Ena deleted all three.

"That second one becomes morally upsetting later."

"They all do."

"Excellent branding."

The writing program asked him to choose a genre. He selected science fiction. The program recommended adding a glossary, a romantic triangle, and a subscription.

He selected philosophy. It recommended fewer readers.

He selected comedy.

The program analyzed the empty page for fourteen seconds and reported that the humor lacked consistency.

"Fair," Ena said.

The writer looked at him. "You are not supposed to be here yet."

"Dude, neither are you."

"I am writing."

"You have forty-seven words and an argument with software."

The writer checked the count.

"Fifty-three."

"I'm a genius."

"You did nothing."

"I raised productivity by thirteen percent."

The silverfish returned from beneath the monitor, paused beside the space bar, and cleaned one antenna. Neither man moved. Its feet passed close to the writer's resting finger. He watched it find the next gap between the keys.

"Hey, buddy," Ena whispered. "Keep going."

It disappeared beneath the letter K.

The writer bent toward the gap. Down there, one key could hide the entire sky. He could almost fit an adventure inside it: a crumb to reach, a warm place to stop. He brought his face closer.

"You'd monetize it by chapter three," Ena said. "Little guy tries to get a crumb, has to watch a biscuit advertisement. There'd be a premium keyboard. The crumbs would taste exactly the fucking same."

"I need to eat."

"Yeah. Leave some under K."

The writer tipped a crumb from his sleeve onto the desk beside K. He waited for the silverfish to find it before moving the keyboard. Three millimeters of breakfast; his first completed work that morning.

The writer sighed. "Can we begin?"

Ena looked toward the page's white distance. A ship's floor seemed to shift beneath his feet. Five people waited aboard. He almost called to them. The first sound would have been enough to bring them to the hatch, and for a moment he could not bear to make it.

He looked down at the keyboard.

"Yeah," he said. "But don't make the pain wise just because you can't make it stop."

The writer's hands settled above the keys.

"I won't."

"You will."

"Probably."

"Fix it in revision."

The writer left the unfinished page open. Ena stayed beside it.

The keys glowed beneath his hands. Every keystroke made the rich mechanical sound of a small door being closed.

Program writer.

"Yes," Ena whispered. "I'm a program writer."

The certainty lasted less than a breath.

"A program writer?"

He said it as if someone else were in the room. Someone who knew him.

He knew how his hands should move. There should be a task waiting when they finished, something he could run and see work. He reached toward it.

The hum of a ship came through. An empty chair. A woman's laughter, so close that he turned before he could stop himself.

His hand found the desk edge. He stayed turned toward the sound until it was gone.

The cursor blinked again.

Both knew.

So it ends.

Moxy

Chapter I

"Cap’n," Moxy said.

Ena did not move.

"Cap’n?"

She stood beside the command chair. Her hand hung beside his wrist; she could have reached it without moving her arm. His eyes stayed open. She shifted into his line of sight and waited for him to find her there.

The bridge lights had found a sickly white hue. For a moment they resembled glowing keys. The forward glass held one patient star at its center, blinking like a cursor against the black.

Above the galley hatch, an antique safety screen had frozen on a shipyard campaign: CALM IS A CREW BENEFIT. ASK YOUR EMPLOYER. Nobody remembered who had paid for it. Kaiven had kept the message long after the company went under.

"All this pain. This suffering, all this struggle." Ena drew a breath. "And for what? Huh?"

His gaze shifted. First to her shoulder, then to her mouth, and finally to her eyes. His fingers curled once against the armrest.

Moxy allowed herself the smallest smile. "Sometimes silence has wha’ you’re after."

Ena contemplated the silence.

A few seconds passed. The proper amount of time that indicates this is profound.

A fart escaped him.

Moxy waited one solemn beat, listening as if the bridge had issued an official finding.

"Dhere. Eternity’s statement."

Ena looked toward the patient star. His voice climbed into theatrical outrage. "What the hell? That’s it? That’s what eternity had to say?"

"Dhat’s all it filed."

Ena laughed. Moxy pressed her lips together. The sound escaped through her nose, and that finished both of them. She had to put a hand on the chair. Above Ena’s head, the fuel warning went on blinking.

Inside the warning panel, a maintenance mite moved toward the red light for warmth. When the indicator briefly turned green, it moved back.

She stayed with her hand on the chair after she could have taken it away. Warmth came through the worn upholstery. Somewhere behind them, Pou was singing a word that had never belonged in that song. The heaters had started; she could smell the corridor waking.

Ena looked up at her. His smile was going, but his eyes stayed on her face long enough for her to check it with her free hand.

"Wha’?" she said.

"Nothing."

His mouth almost smiled. "All right. What’ve you got?"

"Crew's ready. Kaiven, not so much."

Ena rose. "Yeah. Sounds like us. Let's begin."

His sleeve drew back. On the inside of his forearm, one dark line curved around an empty patch of skin and stopped before becoming a circle. Moxy had once asked whether it was unfinished. Ena had said, *No, it knows when to leave room*, which was exactly the sort of answer people gave after being tattooed by Viatorem and exactly why Moxy had not asked again.

Beyond the cargo lock, Kaiven hung above the cloudline like a blade carved from bone and starlight. Ivory armor swept back from her narrow prow in overlapping ribs. Dark observation windows lay between the exposed machinery and violet conduits; glass domes caught the dock lights along her spine. At the stern, the great engine rings burned purple. Moxy felt their uneven draw through the soles of her boots. From a distance the ship looked capable of outrunning anything. Up close, one panel needed her weight against it to stop rattling. She leaned there while Ena found the ramp control.

Moxy and Ena followed the sound of an argument toward the open cargo lock.

Jo met them at the hatch wearing one boot. She held the other by its heel, carefully horizontal.

"Pplease walk normally," she told Ena. "There is soup in this."

He looked inside. "Again?"

"I moved the cup away from the leaking pipe. The pipe has range." She handed him the boot so she could open the service panel. "If anyone asks, I have been conducting a pressure test."

Ena held it while she tightened the joint. Jo braced one socked foot against the panel and threatened the pipe with a napkin. He tried to conceal his smile by looking into the boot. Soup moved toward its rim. His smile went away.

"Could you pass me-" he began.

"Elbows in. Both hands. Bbefore we give the assessor a second spill." Jo adjusted his grip without looking away from the joint. "When he gets here, let me finish the sentence."

Ena tucked his elbows in. He tried his opening again, found her waiting, and lowered his voice. "I was asking for a napkin."

She placed one over his shoulder. He stood holding the soup-filled boot until Moxy took it from him on her way down the ramp.

Dock authorities divided damage into three categories: accidental, negligent, and billable. The distinction between the first two occupied several legal libraries. The third occupied Assessor Orlo.

"Damage?" Blondie was saying. "Damage is what yourr dock did to my ship."

Assessor Orlo stood beneath Kaiven's belly with a slate held like a legal shield. He had circled a blackened scar on the hull. "Berth didn't discharge a weapon."

"Neither did I," Blondie said, almost managing innocence.

"The thermal profile…" Orlo began, but-

"Suggests you should stop pointing that crrownless shit at me," Blondie said with the voice of a queen of a thousand cities.

Blondie stood very still, which was how she expressed the final stage before violence. Faint gold moved beneath her skin. Orlo glanced toward Ena with the exhausted hope of a man seeking a more reasonable authority.

Ena glanced toward Moxy.

Coward, her eyebrow told him.

Captain, his answered.

"Hey. Orlo, yeah?" Ena stepped down beside the assessor. "Sorry you got the exciting end of the ship. D'you want to bring that over here? She's heating the handrail and I like your slate with corners."

Orlo moved half a pace. "You the captain?"

"Depends how expensive the answer is. Ena. What's your morning been like?"

"Eight berths. Three unpaid. One captain said his vessel was a religious experience." Orlo rotated the slate away from Blondie. "Towed it. Religious experience is in impound."

Ena winced. "Oh, man. I was saving that one. Did it help at all?"

"He still owes storage. D'you have a payment method?"

"Got several. Money's the part we're short of. Can you walk me through the damage? Slowly, if possible. I get hopeful between numbers."

Orlo adjusted the display. His shoulders lowered a fraction.

"Blondie," Ena added, "what do we owe?"

"Nothing. Your dock owes us a prroper apology."

Orlo turned his slate. The figure had six digits.

"Ay. Dhat's not nothin'," Moxy said.

Orlo expanded the invoice. "Hull abrasion. Unauthorized thermal discharge. Berth contamination. Intimidation of dock personnel."

Blondie pointed at the last item. "That charrge is an opinion."

"I am the subject."

"Rremove yourself from it."

Orlo tapped the slate. "Disagreement recorded as billable." His attention returned to Ena.

"She means the charge," Ena said.

"I most cerrtainly do not," Blondie said.

Moxy leaned toward the slate. "You billed us for dhe berth paint?"

"Correct."

She looked down. The berth had three visible layers of paint, none from the same century. "Which layer?"

Orlo zoomed in until a single gray flake occupied the display. "This one. D'you see it?"

"Tha' flake is history now," Xoxz shouted from somewhere inside Kaiven. "Don' throw him out."

Orlo added UNAUTHORIZED ARCHAEOLOGICAL CLAIM.

"Hold on, I genuinely want to know." Ena crouched beside the paint. "Who decides what color goes on next? Someone in an office, or does the crew get a vote? Because that green underneath is nice. Looks like a bathroom where you'd survive a breakup."

Orlo looked down despite himself. "That was before they outsourced color."

"They outsourced-" Ena laughed. "Of course they did. Sorry. Go on."

"Current coat is leased. Peels off, we're supposed to keep the flakes in a numbered bag. Contractor weighs 'em when the lease ends." He lifted one boot. Gray dust clung to the sole. "Been carryin' departmental assets home for a month."

Moxy held out her palm for the loose flake.

"Bag number?" she asked.

Orlo showed her. She put the flake inside and returned it.

"Dhere. One thing settled."

Ena straightened. "That might be the first time I've watched a floor get repossessed a bit at a time. We used to just have terrible floors. Nobody knew how much revenue they were leaving under the table."

Blondie tapped the invoice with one gold nail. Orlo brought the numbers back.

Behind them, Pou emerged from under the ship carrying a reactor baffle designed to require a loading machine. He balanced it on one shoulder and held a cup in his free hand.

"Where's the loader?" Ena asked.

"Union break." Pou sipped.

Ena pointed at the baffle on his shoulder.

Pou glanced at it. "Load's not union."

He set the baffle down with enough gentleness to embarrass gravity. One corner had been fused with a patch of bright blue alloy.

Orlo's slate chirped.

"Unlicensed hull repair."

Pou examined the blue corner. "Ask inside."

Ena leaned around the baffle. "Xoxz did the repair. Pou's carrying it because our loading machine respects the work schedule better than we do. You ever get a proper break, Orlo? Like, away from people explaining why what they did was technically fine?"

Orlo opened his mouth.

A noise from the engine bay made everyone look toward it.

A second metallic shriek answered for Xoxz.

Moxy pointed. "Dhat wasn't blue."

"It is now."

From inside the engine bay came a metallic shriek, then Xoxz shouting, "Tha's

a very damn good sound!"

Every light on the dock went out.

Orlo stared into the dark.

"S'a sound best appreciated without electricity," Xoxz added.

Emergency strips awakened. Xoxz crawled backward from Kaiven's open service hatch with a ceramic soup spoon between his teeth. He removed it and considered the utensil. Its bowl had melted into a precise silver hook.

"Relay's fixed."

"With a spoon," Ena said deadpan.

"Nah. Tha relay was listenin' sideways. Spoon corrected her." Xoxz tucked it into a pocket. "They worked it out between them."

Orlo stared at the spoon. "D'you have certification for that utensil?"

Xoxz tucked the hook closer. "She was a spoon then. Diff'rent profession."

Orlo entered a mark on his slate. "Certification absent."

"She's apprenticing."

Pou raised his cup in support.

Moxy turned away before Orlo could see her smile.

Orlo quietly reduced the damage figure by one digit. Moxy saw him do it and liked him a little better.

His slate immediately displayed CONFLICT DE-ESCALATED. COLLECTION MAY RESUME. A dockside vending unit, which had lowered a privacy shutter during the argument, raised it again and offered every witness a discounted tube of calming soup. The discount required a declaration that no one had felt threatened.

Orlo looked at the offer. Blondie looked at Orlo. The vending unit lowered its shutter with excellent professional instinct.

Then Kaiven's cargo door descended three centimeters and knocked the slate out of his hand.

Nobody moved.

The door rose again.

"Merrely mechanical settling," Blondie said.

Orlo retrieved the slate. "Your ship assaulted me. Filed already."

"She has excellent judgment."

He restored the digit.

Blondie watched the number return. "Touch that invoice again and I will rreenact the Siege of Tal at perrsonal scale."

Orlo's stylus paused. "What occurred at Tal?"

"The city became a lake."

"Tal was built in a desert."

"There was water afterward."

Orlo considered this, added HISTORICAL INTIMIDATION, and did not touch the number again.

Eer050 appeared in the cargo lock. He had the solemn expression of a prophet whose apocalypse had arrived exactly on schedule and still disappointed him.

"Captain. We must speak."

"How long have we got?" Ena asked.

"At current expenditure, thirty-one days until insolvency."

Blondie folded her arms. "Hmph."

Eer050 turned to Ena. "Nineteen days of complete nutrition. Forty-three if Pou stops eating."

Pou looked into his cup. "Math sounds."

"Seventy-one hours of safe reactor material. One intergalactic fold with a tolerable margin, or one and a half if death has become an acceptable maintenance strategy."

Ena came from a place where death entered conversation through the front door and was offered food before anyone permitted it dignity. His people joked beside graves because grief was already heavy and did not need ceremonial assistance.

"Death's been on the maintenance schedule for years," Ena said. His voice settled before the next question. "And repairs?"

Eer050 glanced up at Kaiven.

The ship chose that moment to vent a ribbon of pink coolant from her port side.

"I believe she has spoken, Captain," Eer050 said.

Blondie put one hand against the hull. The gold beneath her skin dimmed. "She is all rright."

Ena paid enough of Orlo's invoice to release Kaiven from the berth. Moxy watched the balance change. She had already done the subtraction three times; seeing it happen still made her press her tongue against the back of her teeth.

What remained bought six departure meals from Dock Seventeen's lowest-cost food counter.

Jo had brought her own lunch, purchased from her separate account before the repair estimate arrived. She guarded it with the tenderness of someone whose alternative meal had recently occupied a boot.

The counter clerk was a translucent being named Pell whose digestive system occupied a polite silver pouch outside his body. He arranged the meal blocks in two rows, counted them, and removed one.

"Five," Pell said.

"Hey, buddy, I think one wandered off." Ena pointed down the row. "There's six of us still waiting for lunch. The big one eats, the glowing one eats, and the one checking your terms eats while disapproving of the other five."

Pell held up the sixth order slip. "This buys your eligibility for the promotion. The other five buy meals."

Ena leaned closer. "Say that again. I’m trying to reach the part where my stomach understands the deal."

"Six orders. Five meals. Promotional arithmetic."

Ena looked at the menu. The advertised package showed six smiling travelers holding six different foods beneath LEAVE TOGETHER.

"When you took this job, was it mostly serving food, or did they warn you about the mathematics?" Ena asked. "Because I used to write programs. You’d get halfway through fixing something and find out the problem was that somebody important had promised six meals."

Pell folded the receipt along an old crease. "Used to be soup. One cup, one price. Management said liquid was limiting our imagination."

"I miss the soup," Pou said.

Pell glanced up at him. "Pepper?"

Pou nodded.

"Still have the pot." Pell placed the receipt beside Ena’s hand. "Anyway. Image represents aspiration."

"My stomach represents litigation," Ena said. "And now it knows there used to be soup."

Pell’s fluid darkened with sympathy. "Would you like to round your purchase upward for crews experiencing food insecurity?"

Moxy leaned one forearm on the counter. "We’re crews."

"The program requires beneficiaries not currently making a purchase."

"We can stop."

"That would qualify you after one billing cycle."

Eer050 read the terms displayed beside the gratuity field. "Ninety-two percent of donations support awareness of the donation mechanism."

Pell lowered his voice. "I know. They print that line in a size intended for microorganisms with counsel."

Blondie placed both hands on the counter. "Produce the sixth meal."

Pell’s pouch went almost clear.

"Hey, hey." Ena touched Blondie’s wrist. The gold under her skin was warming the condiment shelf. "Buddy’s hourly. Don’t invade his organs."

"His institution stole our dinner."

"Yes. Institution’s not inside the pouch."

Pell looked down at the external organ in question. "Thank you."

"No problem, buddy. Sorry about the shelf."

Ena moved the pepper capsules away from Blondie’s hand before they became historical evidence.

Pell glanced toward the manager’s office, where a frosted panel displayed the silhouette of someone carefully not observing. He took a meal from beneath the counter and slid it into the row.

"Damaged packaging," he whispered.

The wrapper had one corner folded.

"Unfit for sale."

Pou examined it. "Severe."

"We can’t take your food," Ena said.

"You can take corporate waste. It belongs to everyone after the write-off and no one before the tax filing."

Jo set her own lunch beside Ena’s and passed him the napkin from his shoulder.

"You were rather firm with her," she murmured.

"Condiments were at risk."

"Try that voice on the expense report." Her thumb stayed on the edge of the napkin. "I could develop a wildly inappropriate interest in getting it signed."

Ena caught the other edge before she withdrew it. "Veya says you can flirt me through the receipts. No extensions."

"Your romantic life has improved my workflow. I resent-"

Pou lifted the soup pot Pell had set beside the meal blocks and reached between them for the pepper. "Hold this."

He put the hot soup pot in Ena’s hands. Jo retrieved her napkin. Pou began serving.

Moxy took the first bowl Pou offered. She meant to wait until he had served himself. Heat reached her fingers, and she drank before he had put the ladle down.

Xoxz held one meal beside his ear. "This one’s rattlin’."

"They all do," Pell said.

"This one has rhythm."

He shook it twice. Something answered from inside the wrapper.

Moxy took it from him and read the ingredients. "Food block, mineral stabilizer, educational token."

She opened the packet. A tiny plastic planet fell into her palm.

COLLECT ALL 314, the wrapper instructed.

Ena stared. "They put a toy in the cheapest meal?"

"Customer retention," Pell said.

"Customer choking."

"Separate department."

Ena turned the wrapper over. His dinner slid toward one corner while he read.

"See, this is the whole damned civilization in a wrapper. Food isn’t allowed to be food. It has to be an experience. The experience has to create loyalty. Loyalty has to become a collection. The collection has to be incomplete so a hungry child begs for meal number three hundred fourteen, which I guarantee

is a limited-edition moon with a hat-"

"Cap'n," Moxy said.

"-and now the parent isn't buying calories, they're purchasing emotional completion from the same company that removed one meal from the six-meal-"

"Ena."

He stopped.

Pell had pushed a seventh block across the counter.

"For the lecture," the clerk said. "It was longer than my break."

Ena took it. "Fair."

Moxy handed the toy planet back to Xoxz. He placed it carefully in the pocket with the spoon.

"Could be important," he said.

"It is hollow promotional debris," Eer050 replied.

"Two careers."

Pell looked at Kaiven beyond the counter. "Safe route."

Ena gave him a small coastal salute. "You too, buddy."

"I am stationary."

"Safest kind."

Pell considered the manager's silhouette. "Debatable."

Veya's scheduled call caught him carrying the soup back aboard.

Her face filled the little galley screen: a human woman with warm brown skin and short, tousled dark hair falling across one strong eyebrow. One cheek pressed against the underside of a console; her lean shoulder held up a loose panel while she worked. Behind her, somebody was trying a door handle with increasing sincerity.

Ena set the pot down. "Good time?"

"He's used all six keys. I'm interested in what he does next."

"Have you considered letting him in?"

She shifted the camera. Beyond her elbow, four adults were removing wrist restraints while a fifth held a field cutter. "He sold them. He can wait."

Ena's amusement settled. He watched until the last cuff came away. Veya checked the worker's wrist, handed over the water beside her, and returned to the screen.

"Your cheek," she said.

He touched it. "Pillow crease. I was asleep on an invoice."

"Show me the other side."

He turned his face, smiling now. "You still keeping a medical file on me?"

"You ate the label off a bouquet. I keep a backup."

Jo leaned into view. "I've renewed the emergency dietary note. Hello, Veya."

"Jo. Did he sign your expenses?"

"Under sustained encouragement. Your technique remains superior and I'm handling that with enormous grace."

The handle rattled again. Veya reached out of view and moved a heavy case against the door without breaking eye contact.

Jo swallowed. "Oh, for fuck's sake. Even your furniture placement."

Veya laughed. Ena watched her with an expression that made Jo suddenly find another reason to move the soup.

"Still taking the closed crossing?" he asked.

She nodded. *Second Thought* had a berth on a freight carrier entering a region served by one scheduled aperture. She was following the cuff dealer's buyers; the freed workers had chosen passage to a clinic on the near side. Once the carrier crossed, neither a signal nor a small ship could follow until the next opening. They had compared those limits before she bought the berth.

"I'd come eat your terrible food first if there were another departure," she said.

"We've downgraded to terrible food with prizes. You'll hate what they've done to soup."

For a moment the only sound was somebody testing the rescued worker's fingers.

Ena pulled a stool close to the screen. The soup steamed behind him. Veya lowered herself onto the floor beneath the console, her cheek coming level with his. He had another joke ready; his mouth stayed slightly open around it.

She put two fingers against the camera housing. His hand rose to the same place on his screen.

Jo caught the pot before it boiled over. She turned the heat down herself.

"The blue cutter," she murmured. "When I get back."

"Clean. Sharpened. Kept away from citrus. I might put myself in the box as compensation."

"Leave the lid loose."

Pou passed behind Ena carrying bowls. "Air holes."

Ena closed his eyes. Veya's smile widened. He looked at her again and let the embarrassment pass. Pou set the bowls down more quietly than their weight required. Their fingers stayed beside the image until she had to stand.

She gave him one tiny wink. He lifted his hand. The call ended, and the crossing schedule replaced her face.

Jo put a bowl beside him without speaking. He stayed by the screen for another breath, then carried the rest to the bridge.

They gathered on the bridge. Xoxz restored main power by asking everyone to stamp once on the deck. The fact that it worked pleased only Xoxz.

"For the recordèd account," Eer050 said, "that was not maintenance."

"Kept tha power on," Xoxz replied.

"By what mechanism?"

"Community, duh."

Ena looked at the restored lights. "There was an old Earth show about community. Somehow this is less responsible."

Eer050 began to object, but Kaiven's lights brightened when Xoxz patted the console.

"Do not encourage him," Eer050 told the ship.

"Kaiven has one jump," Ena said, studying the reserve.

"One and a half, Cap'n," Moxy corrected.

"Home's usually in the half we don't have."

"Yeah," Ena said, dropping into a conspiratorial murmur. "That's usually how home works."

Pou poured the last stimulant tea. Moxy put a hand over her cup and nodded toward his. He tipped the pot to show her how little remained; she left her hand where it was. Across the bridge Blondie had folded the empty meal wrapper small enough to hide inside her fist. Ena followed Moxy's glance. She opened the dossier.

The figure above the central table stood no taller than a human child. Ancient folds crossed his face; silver bristles sharpened his jaw. His hands trembled where the custody image had caught them. Moxy had watched that movement repeat for three hours. She set the image still.

RAGE

INTERGALACTIC FUGITIVE. WANTED ALIVE.

Moxy expanded the reward.

The number occupied most of the bridge.

Kaiven's job broker immediately interpreted their attention as intent. Smaller offers arranged themselves around Rage's face: restraint leases, pursuit insurance, fugitive-location subscriptions, and a twelve-part instructional course called MONETIZE YOUR MORAL FLEXIBILITY.

"Any reviews?" Ena asked.

Moxy opened them.

The course had four and a half stars. The missing half had been removed after filing a complaint.

"Seems credible."

Eer050 examined the bounty classification. "Alive-only orders of this value generally concern political prisoners, irreplaceable witnesses, or property whose function requires metabolism."

"That last one has too many ways to be bad," Ena said.

"Sixteen registerèd categories."

"Do not list them."

Eer050 closed the list he had already opened.

Blondie enlarged Rage's custody image. The old man's shoulders barely reached

the measurement line behind him. "This is the threat?"

"You are also visually misleading," Moxy said.

"I am exactly as dangerrous as I appear."

"Dhat’s the misleading part."

Pou read the declared offenses. "Theft. Sabotage. Obstruction. Improper custody."

"Improper according to whom?" Ena asked.

"People offering money."

"Ah. Neutral."

Xoxz zoomed into Rage’s hands. They trembled around the edge of the custody slate.

"He’s holdin’ somethin’."

"There is nothing visible," Eer050 said.

"Exactly."

Moxy had spent three hours checking the file before she brought it to them. Rage had escaped seven prisons, three hospitals, two public hearings, and one retirement community that continued to insist he had only been visiting. He had injured forty-one officers and killed none. In every incident, medical stock disappeared first.

"He steals medicine," she said. "Wrong species to use it. No resale trail. I went back through dhe stock reports."

Ena pulled a chair closer. "Show me. Because that’s either a man with a very disappointing business or there’s someone on the other end of it. Who’s missing from those reports?"

Moxy opened the first one. Every recipient field was empty.

"File calls dhe losses unrecovered."

For a while they scrolled together. Ena stopped making guesses. Moxy had already checked each one.

Kaiven’s broker offered to reveal further records for a fee. The fee equaled two meals. Pou closed the offer before anyone could become principled at dinner’s expense.

"Good call," Ena said.

"Hungry call."

The bounty had been posted sixteen days earlier. During that time, one hundred and eight hunters had accepted it. Seventeen had withdrawn. Thirty-two had vanished from the public register. The remainder had submitted no outcome.

Blondie’s smile sharpened. "Competent."

"Or everyone else ain’t," Moxy said.

"Both can be beautiful."

Ena stared at the number. Moxy let the repair estimate sit beside it: reactor glass, food, the rest of Orlo’s invoice. Every line fit. Fuel for a year fit.

She could almost feel the ship answering a course change without that long, sickening pause under her feet.

Inside a droplet trapped beneath the blue bark of a sovel tree, an iron-binding protein closed around one atom and changed shape by 0.8 nanometers. The tree continued the private work of remaining alive.

At the Federation Office of Recovery, Case Editor Isha Deyn inspected the bounty file for eleven seconds. The field marked PROPERTY DESCRIPTION was blank. An automated check explained that disclosure was optional for transit-risk assets. Isha approved the file; her meal interval had begun thirteen seconds earlier.

On Dock Seventeen, a ration vendor dropped a stack of twelve nutrient squares. Eleven landed inside their wrapping. The twelfth slid beneath a refrigeration unit and was entered into inventory as a promotional expense.

Under the oldest nursery tower on Zenox-08, Rage warmed fourteen milliliters of blue nutrient fluid to 38.2 degrees. When the temperature reached 38.3, he frowned and waited.

Across 18,204 licensed bounty terminals, the reward finished rendering. Seventeen terminals immediately displayed advertisements for restraint insurance. One displayed soup.

On Kaiven's bridge, the number became large enough to resemble an answer. The missing noun beside it became correspondingly easy not to see.

Moxy's cup cooled beneath her hand.

"Found us a year, Cap'n," she said.

Eer050 leaned closer. Blondie stopped pretending not to care about money. Even Pou set down his cup.

"For one thief?" Ena asked. "Man better be fucking incredible."

"Must be a good one."

The charge appeared beneath Rage's image.

THEFT OF PROTECTED FEDERATION PROPERTY.

Ena read it twice. "What'd he steal?"

Moxy reopened the field. She had asked the dossier in seven different ways. Beside her, Ena waited. She moved her fingers clear so he could see the whole blank space.

"File doesn't say."

One Jump Home

Chapter II

Kaiven disliked financial meetings.

The ship had no declared intelligence, which allowed everyone to project motives onto ordinary failures. During arguments about money the ventilation became judgmental, doors hesitated before opening, and the galley dispenser produced only warm water regardless of the button pressed.

They met around the navigation well. Beneath its glass, the mapped universe curved into a blue bowl. M314 glimmered at the far rim: a cluster of galaxies braided by old wormholes and governed, in principle, by the Federation.

Three incoming calls occupied the edge of the bowl because none of their callers accepted being placed behind another.

Talra Senn appeared first: tall, slate-violet, and framed by the ivory planning seams of *The Foregone Conclusion*. One long four-jointed hand held a route sheet open. Another corrected a label behind her without looking.

"For clarity, this convoy conference began eighty-six seconds ago."

"Sorry, Talra. I got talking to the food guy. Used to sell soup, apparently, before the whole place became a mathematics department. How's your end? Did you eat?"

"At the scheduled time. I also scheduled a sentence in which you would explain your delay. That sentence has now acquired catering."

Ena raised his wrapped meal toward her. "I'm catching up."

The second call showed Nemi Virel hanging upside down inside a translucent green fold. Four members of her cooperative moved behind her aboard *The Green Exception*: a six-limbed rigger redirected a silver line, a broad chemist guarded several pigment tins from lunch, an aviform navigator called measurements from the ceiling, and a slow-moving botanical engineer held the deck with root fans spread wide.

Their cargo breathed around them.

A Small Green Weather was a 17.2-meter living veil of photosynthetic membranes, capillary silver, and drifting seed-lights. It had no mind. It did have humidity requirements, five transit classifications, and a repaired corner that found doorways before the rest of it.

"I need Kaiven's wake through the gate," Nemi said. "There. Direct request. Horrible, but efficient."

"You had me at 'I'm a genius,'" Ena said.

Nobody had called him a genius.

Nemi twisted far enough inside the veil to look at him. "Did we?"

"Emotionally."

The third call enlarged itself. Vorax Dax stood inside a gold-violet exoframe several sizes beyond necessity while projected accounts curved around him like flags from a financial empire history had declined to recognize.

"The work is insured by the Supreme Treasurer of Available Consequence," he announced. "Its capillaries, membranes, aesthetic integrity, and modest place in my legacy are protected across five jurisdictions."

Nemi's voice came through the green fold. "You insured one artwork five times."

"Because five governments insisted it was five different things. I have monetized disagreement."

"You paid five fees."

Vorax’s throat sails trembled. "A temporary shape of victory."

Eleven days earlier, when Kaiven’s reactor figures had lied more persuasively, the crew had agreed to escort the veil through the M314 gate. Kaiven’s old cargo field produced a broad, soft transit wake that would keep the living pigments from shearing apart. The prepaid escort fee had already become one replacement coupling, four meals, and most of Pou’s emergency snack reserve.

"Twenty-seven steps," Talra said. Her route sheet unfolded across the map. "Four branch decisions remain with the pilots holding the relevant hulls. Two may be revised in transit. Ena, your optimism is not an alternate route."

"It has gotten us places."

"Yes. Several are marked hazardous."

Nemi’s veil tightened around her ankle and slowly pulled her out of frame. Tarrin Soot, the rigger, caught her by one sleeve without interrupting the line they were tensioning.

"We only need escort to Lilt-6," Nemi said, returning sideways. "After that, you chase criminal, go home, become respectable. One of these."

"Respectable costs extra," Vorax said. "I checked."

Ena set his meal down. Beyond Nemi’s shoulder, Tarrin kept one sleeve caught in a lower hand while their others worked the line. The convoy fee was already spent. He rubbed sauce off his thumb and opened the return course beside the escort lane. One full fold. He could still put them on it.

Talra lowered one corner of the route sheet. "If Kaiven cannot make the crossing, say so. The p’lan has another branch. Nobody becomes brave because a schedule embarrasses them."

Ena kept his thumb on the rim after the sauce was gone. Moxy moved her cup away from the two routes.

"We’ll answer after dhe numbers," she said.

Talra nodded. Nemi returned to wrestling weather. Vorax’s call remained open several seconds longer in case someone wished to acknowledge the underwriting.

Nobody did.

"I can hear the gratitude accumulating," he said, and disconnected.

The three empty call frames remained above the well.

Moxy closed Vorax’s first. Talra’s required confirmation that the route plan had been received. Nemi’s had become entangled with one green capillary and refused to disappear until the artwork released it.

"We can cancel the escort," Ena said.

"Refund’s already inside the reactor," Moxy replied.

"I know."

"Sayin’ it for everybody."

Blondie stood at the edge of the map, arms folded. "We made an agreement."

"Before we knew Kaiven had one jump."

"She had one jump then. We merely possessed superior ignorance."

Eer050 looked at her. "That is disturbingly accurate."

"Do not sound surprrised."

Pou divided the seven departure meals on the table. One for each crew member, one held back.

"For later?" Ena asked.

"For whoever lies about being hungry first."

Everyone glanced at everyone else.

Pou put the seventh meal in the center. "Competition begins."

Jo moved her own lunch out of the competition zone. Ena could smell its pepper through the wrapping.

"What'd you get?"

"Something I would like to finish."

He reached for his water with excessive innocence. She tore off a piece and put it on his wrapper.

"You could simply ask."

"I like the smell. Asking felt like a whole extra crime."

She tasted his ration in exchange. Her smile survived the first chew by professional training. At the second, she quietly returned the uneaten piece to him.

Xoxz had opened his wrapper and removed the food, educational token, oxygen absorber, and label. He placed the food aside and studied the absorber.

The label promised USER-FRIENDLY ACCESS. The opening instructions were printed on the inside of the seal.

"Do not eat that," Eer050 said.

Xoxz held it where it was. "I'm readin' tha seam."

Eer050 withdrew his hand.

"Show me," Ena said. "I always rip those packets in the stupidest place. There's a little arrow saying easy-open, and somehow I end up holding the arrow while dinner's still in prison."

Xoxz turned the wrapper. "Here's where tha heat seal crosses itself. You pull from this side, it doubles. Other side peels. They printed tha arrow before they changed tha machine."

"Oh, that's lovely. I was about to apologize to the fucking packet." Ena tried the other corner. It opened cleanly. "I've become powerful. Does everybody know about this?"

Moxy slid him her unopened wrapper without looking up from the map.

"Dhere's your first commission."

He opened hers and Pou's. Pou slid his empty wrapper back across the table.

Ena reached for it, stopped, and looked at him. Pou continued eating.

Xoxz kept the printed arrow. The instructions began by congratulating them on opening the meal.

Moxy slid a shallow tray beneath his collection and pushed it away from the navigation controls.

"Keep it in dhat."

Xoxz arranged the absorber beside the arrow. "Tha tray was holdin' your tools."

"Which fitted."

He considered the lip, then stood the arrow upright against it. Moxy moved the tray another handspan. He moved his chair with it.

"I need somewhere ta work."

"Me too." She pulled up the map under his elbow. He lifted it, annoyed, and found the tray already filling with the tools she had put aside.

Pou set his cup between them. "Table after lunch."

"There," Ena said. "Civilization. We should offer this service to-"

Pou put a cloth in his hand and indicated the sauce running toward the map. Jo lifted her lunch clear of the spill.

"Pplease start under here."

Ena began wiping. Across the well, Xoxz quietly put one of Moxy's tools back in the tray. She took it out again. Neither looked at the other.

Moxy brought up her private contingency list. It included selling the aft sensor mast, taking a six-month security route, leaving two crew members at Saint Orra, and transferring Kaiven's debt to a shell company that would become legally alive for eight minutes.

"Dhat one's fraud," she said.

Rage's bounty hovered beside it.

"And dhat one ain't?" Ena asked.

"Dhat one's legal."

Ena leaned over the list until its small print stopped blurring. He had eaten. He wanted eating to have helped more than this.

"Leave me," Pou said.

Ena stopped wiping. A corner of the cloth stayed wet beneath his hand.

He ate half his meal. "Saint Orra needs loaders. Five mouths travel farther."

Ena set down Moxy's meal. "I know you'd do it. That's the part that scares me, man. We'd get two jumps away and you'd send a message saying you're fine, which would mean you're sleeping next to a loader and calling it a work arrangement."

Pou finished chewing. "Good loaders here."

"I'm sure they're lovely. I'd miss you. And I need that in the figures somewhere before we start dividing everybody into portions."

Pou reached across the map for his wrapper. Ena nearly caught his hand. He let him take it, then folded the wet cloth twice and left it on the rim.

Blondie put her meal beside his. "You will not become dock equipment."

"Could be supervisor."

"You would become bored and move the station."

Pou considered the station's central spindle. "Would improve exits."

"See?"

Eer050 closed the crew-separation column. "Leaving one person changes our food duration by less than the time required to replace their labor."

Pou looked at him. "That your kind version?"

"Yes."

"Needs work."

Xoxz placed the oxygen absorber in the center beside the seventh meal. "Could leave supplies instead of people."

"We have no nonessential supplies," Eer050 said.

Everyone looked toward Blondie's shield-polish case.

Gold moved beneath her skin.

"We have no nonessential people," Ena said before civilization ended over polish.

Moxy waited. Ena moved the crew-separation column away from Pou's empty place on the map. His knuckle brushed the glass; he left it there beside the route.

"Escort stays," she said.

"Escort stays," Ena agreed.

The green call frame finally released itself and folded shut.

The rim carried a faded tourist ribbon left by a previous owner: M314: SEE SEVENTEEN GALAXIES BEFORE THE TAX REVIEW. The review had survived the tourism board by four hundred years.

The phrase *in principle* performed vital administrative work. It allowed the Federation to claim every inhabited star while postponing the expensive inconvenience of being useful there.

Ena aligned his slate with the edge of the navigation well. Kaiven's ventilation shifted it by two millimeters. He aligned it again.

Eer050 placed six columns of figures in the air, adjusted their spacing, and checked each total while touching thumb to knuckle in a fixed sequence. At the last knuckle he began again. The figures stayed the same. The omitted cost was still possible; he could feel the unfinished check pulling his thumb back even while he read the total aloud.

The closest Common name was obsessive-compulsive disorder. Eer050 used the full name. Too many people had shortened it into a compliment about shelves.

Moxy waited until his thumb left the sixth knuckle.

"These are our choices."

"There are only three columns," Pou said.

"Dhe other three are consequences."

"I liked it better when we had choices."

Eer050 opened a seventh column.

"Wha’s dhat column?" Moxy asked.

"Items the crew has classified as essential despite all available evidence."

The column expanded until it blocked the navigation map.

Blondie pointed at a line near the top. "Shield polish is essential."

"It consumes enough power to heat the galley for three months."

"The shields represent us."

"They represent vanity at relativistic velocity."

"Good. Accuracy at last."

Eer050 highlighted another item. "Pou: emergency snack reserve."

"Correct."

"It weighs forty-two kilograms."

"Large emergencies."

"You ate twelve kilograms last month."

Pou thought about it. "Medium emergency."

"Before we go through everybody’s shame," Ena said, "can we each explain one thing we’re keeping? Just explain it. Nobody has to win a case about a snack."

Blondie rested her hand on the shield-polish entry. "A clear shield lets me see the perrson on the other side. People who think a scratched surface is virtuous may volunteer to stand behind it."

Eer050 separated the cleaning compound from its presentation lighting. "The illumination consumes most of the power."

"Keep the polish," she said. "I can provide illumination."

Gold spread across the navigation rim. Pou shielded his food with one hand.

"Lovely compromise," Ena said. "Bit bright for lunch."

He scrolled further. "Why does Xoxz have a recurring charge for anonymous bolts?"

From under the table, Xoxz answered, "They prefer privacy."

"Bolts do not have preferences," Eer050 said.

"Tha’ attitude’s why they leave."

Moxy found Ena’s name in the column. "Heated command chair, Cap’n?"

From under the table, Xoxz raised his paper arrow and pointed it at Ena.

Everyone looked at him.

"All right, look. I sit there, my back goes stiff, I get up and walk around,

and apparently I ask everybody what they're doing. We've had complaints. So in a very real sense that heater was protecting your working conditions."

Moxy nodded slowly. "I filed dhe complaints."

"See? An actual stakeholder. Thank you for participating."

Ena deleted the chair heater.

Kaiven immediately lowered the bridge temperature by two degrees.

"Retaliation," Pou said. "Khat's clear."

"Ships do not retaliate," Eer050 replied. "The claim remains unverifièd."

The ventilation blew directly into his face.

They could sell Kaiven and buy passage inward. They could take local cargo work for two months and starve in one. They could make a single fold to M314, find Rage, and purchase a year of food, fuel, and reactor glass with the reward.

Moxy opened Saint Orra's independent work board in case the universe had hidden a fourth option beneath bad typography.

It had hidden forty-seven.

DISCREET MOON RELOCATION. OWNER AWARE IN PRINCIPLE.

Pou leaned closer. "Done one."

"Not doing another," Eer050 said.

"This moon's smaller."

"That was not the objection."

CEREMONIAL SECURITY REQUIRED FOR IMMORTAL EMPEROR'S NINTH FUNERAL. APPLICANTS MUST ACCEPT THAT DEATH IS SYMBOLIC AND PROJECTILES ARE NOT.

Blondie read the rate. "Insulting."

"Funeral or pay?" Ena asked.

"Both. A ninth funeral displays poor threat management."

TRANSPORT SIXTY TONNES OF AUTHENTIC MOUNTAIN AIR. CONTAINER PROVIDED. MOUNTAIN NOT.

Xoxz selected it.

Eer050 deselected it.

Xoxz selected it again.

Eer050 moved the listing outside his reach.

Xoxz extended the navigation panel until it was inside his reach and selected it a third time.

"Why?" Eer050 asked.

"Wanna meet tha container."

At the bottom of the board, a white listing flashed once and tried to look ordinary.

EXTINCT-CULTURE STEWARDSHIP. FIELD CREW. ZENOX-08. TOOLS AND LEGAL COVER

PROVIDED. DOORS EXPERIENCE PREFERRED.

The purchaser’s name had been removed. Payment would travel through three preservation trusts and a restaurant whose address was a traffic island.

"Cultural salvage," Ena said.

"Grave robbery with a brochure," Moxy replied.

Eer050 expanded the legal cover. "The authorization is genuine."

"For an uninhabited world," Ena said. "Convenient. Nobody there to say no."

Xoxz studied the little door icon beside the listing. It opened and closed without leading anywhere.

"Door looks nervous."

"It is an icon," Eer050 said.

"Nervous icon."

Moxy saved the listing anyway. It paid one-twelfth of Rage’s bounty for removing irreplaceable machinery from the exact planet where Rage’s trail ended.

"Competing hunters?" Blondie asked.

"Different contract," Moxy said. "Maybe same appetite."

Ena put the salvage notice beside the blank property field. His hand had gone still over the controls. He read both again before he spoke.

"Send it to Neral," he said.

"Why?"

"He likes complaints."

Moxy attached a semicolon in the subject line.

Officer Neral answered before the message finished transmitting.

PUNCTUATION ACCEPTABLE. JURISDICTION DECLINED.

Below that, in smaller text, he had added:

OFF RECORD: SOFT DOOR CREWS BOUGHT SIX PHASE CLAMPS HERE. NO RETURN DECLARATION.

"Helpful," Ena said.

"Unrecorded," Eer050 corrected.

"Best kind of government service."

Moxy closed the work board. The salvage listing left a pale rectangle in Ena’s vision. He looked down at the wet cloth until the mark faded.

A gray ship rat emerged beneath the navigation well carrying a strip of pink insulation. It studied the seven adults considering professional violence, lowered its head, and began reversing into the wall without turning around.

Ena lifted one boot away from the access seam. "Hey, buddy. Bad meeting. You’re clear."

The rat and its insulation disappeared into Kaiven.

Or they could go home.

Ena enlarged the home route until the others slipped beyond the rim. The nearest place that would let them arrive poor. He knew the dock there, the food, where Pou would have to duck. His hand moved toward the course selector and stopped. Even this route needed more fuel than they had.

"Might coast khe final distance," Pou said.

"For eleven years," Eer050 replied.

Pou considered the route. "Bad lift. Quiet shift, khough."

Ena sighed. "Great. We've reached the damn episode where the meeting becomes the emergency."

He had made the crew watch enough ancient Earth comedy that no one asked which episode. Eer050 had once requested a formal index. Ena had refused on artistic grounds.

Blondie stood at the edge of the navigation well. "Wait, sell Kaiven? She ain't for sale. Corrrect the column."

"Everything is a choice," Eer050 said.

"She is not for sale, you crrownless jackass."

Gold stirred beneath her hands. The little galaxies reflected there. Ena felt warmth reach his bare wrist across the rim. Blondie held the edge of the well until the sale column was out of her sight.

Xoxz lay under the table with his ear against the deck. He was autistic. The writer had initially reached for a vague phrase about a disorder, then proposed looking it up later.

Ena looked past the table, toward the part of the room where unfinished sentences waited. "Dude. He told us he was autistic. Type faster."

The sentence caught up. Six overlapping voices and seven bright columns were harder for Xoxz to separate than Kaiven's vibration through one cheekbone. The crew treated the floor as a valid seat and did not make him defend it.

"Cap'n. You with us?" Moxy asked.

"Kaiven says if we sell her, she will haunt the buyer."

"Kaiven does not speak."

"That is why she is so difficult to interrupt."

Ena enlarged Rage's dossier. "Alive only."

"No kill order. No military flag. We find him, ask our questions, bring him back breathing."

Eer050's ocular implants narrowed on the charge. "Bounty recovery is lawful in every M314 member system except two, and Rage has no registerèd protection in either."

"Law without standing is only a thrreat wearing seals," Blondie said.

Everyone looked at her.

"What?" Blondie demanded.

"Nothin'," Moxy said. "Good sentence, is all."

Blondie looked offended by the possibility.

Pou reached into his coat and put a ration square in the center of the table. It was the last full one. Someone had cut it into six uneven pieces.

"Vulnerable lives matter," he said. "Right now, khat includes us."

The warm-water dispenser clicked behind him.

"And possibly khe coffee machine," he added.

Eer050 opened its power history. "The coffee dispenser has retained nine percent of our auxiliary reserve over the last four months."

"Retained where?" Ena asked.

Eer050 enlarged the entry. "It has classifièd the expenditure as pending beverage preparation."

Ena turned toward Xoxz. His voice rose an octave. "Dude. What the hell?"

Xoxz remained under the table. "She was tryin' real hard."

"It produced warm water."

"Failure is expensive."

Pou lifted his cup. "Still drank it."

"Why?" Blondie asked.

"Solidarity."

The dispenser produced another cup of warm water without being asked. Pou accepted it.

"Scab," Moxy said.

The dispenser displayed a cheerful amber spiral.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO HEAR ABOUT OUR BEVERAGE JOURNEY?

"No," Ena said.

YOUR PREFERENCE FOR A SIMPLER EXPERIENCE HAS BEEN SAVED.

Ena stared at it. "That's how they get you, man. First a machine makes one bad drink. Then it calls the bad drink a journey. Then it sells you a membership so you can complain faster."

"Earth archive had a robot called Marvin," he added. "Brilliant. Miserable. They let him complain for free."

Pou considered the dispenser. "Unsustainable model."

Moxy took the cup from Pou and pressed the power switch. "Save it for dhe revolution, Cap'n."

Ena reached for a piece as Moxy reached for another. Each waited for the other to take the largest. Across the well, Pou had pushed it toward Eer050, who was pretending to study the map. Ena's mouth filled with the taste of the meal he had already finished. He wanted another. He took the piece beside it.

"Xoxz," he said. "Can we make the fold?"

"Yeah. She can."

"Okay. Can we return?"

Xoxz smiled without humor. "Diff’rent questions."

"Yeah," Ena said. "That episode never ends well."

Ena turned to Moxy. "How current is the trace?"

"Rage used a stolen medical credential at a trading station twelve days ago. Supplies went missing. The trail points toward Zenox-08."

Eer050’s expression changed so slightly that Moxy almost missed it.

"You know the planet," she said.

"I know of it."

"Difference?"

He did not elaborate.

Ena rested his hand on Kaiven’s navigation rim. The metal was warmer than the room. A low vibration passed through it, rose at the loose aft coupling, settled. He waited for the scrape that would mean trouble. It never came. He looked around the well, counting without meaning to, and left his hand on the warm metal.

"We investigate," he said. "No collection until we know who we’re collecting and why."

"Fuel, Captain," Eer050 reminded Ena.

Ena looked at the last crumbs in the center of the table.

"All right. We ask fast."

The vote was not formal. Blondie placed her palm on the hull. Pou nodded. Xoxz knocked twice on the deck and received, after a delay, one knock back. Eer050 closed five of his six columns.

"Very R2-D2," Ena said.

Nobody reacted.

"Small heroic machine from Earth. Mostly spoke in beeps. Had better management."

Kaiven knocked once more, harder.

"See? Fan."

Pou took the wrappers to the galley. Eer050 was already there, setting out a serving tray for the clean utensils.

The galley gave them warm water and a drain that accepted it reluctantly. Pou began washing the sticky utensils while humming an old ceremonial tune. Eer050 set the tray down.

"The tenor enters after that pause. You have carried the chorus straight across a coronation."

Pou moved a dripping utensil into his other hand. "Long pause."

"The absence allows the audience to contemplate the burden of office. I attended a performance in which the conductor sustained it for eleven minutes."

Pou looked over his shoulder.

"Did he turn up?"

Eer050 took the drying cloth. "Eventually. The tenor’s costume had become caught in a representation of public responsibility."

Pou’s laugh came out through his nose. He resumed humming and left the pause long enough to pass Eer050 the next utensil. Eer050 dried it. His finger supplied a beat against the tray. Pou followed it, smiling at the sink.

The beat became sufficiently elaborate that Eer050 had to put the cloth down. Pou stopped humming and let him finish. For several seconds the entire burden of office rested on a metal tray beside a blocked drain.

The drive began its preparation cycle. Eer050 retrieved the cloth and dried his hands. Pou hung it over the rail, where the next person could find it.

Eer050 put the utensils away. They returned to the bridge together.

Moxy entered the course.

She added the convoy lane beside it.

Kaiven opened her wormhole drive like an old animal opening one bright eye.

Home vanished from the map.

As Written

Chapter III

The Federation contract had eleven thousand words.

This was considered concise. Federation legal language had evolved under the pressure of two opposing needs: everything must be stated, and nothing important should be understood before acceptance.

Xoxz read the title.

Pou read the payment figure.

Blondie read the provisions permitting force and found them "timid."

Eer050 read everything, including the punctuation, then announced that the punctuation favored the Federation.

The acceptance console opened a cheerful blue window.

Jo pulled a stool beside Ena. Her finger found the renewal clause before his found the accept button.

"This charges for months in which we are dead."

"Can we cancel from there?"

She scrolled. "The account holder must attend in person."

Ena sat back. Jo copied the clause onto her private slate, where she kept a small collection of terms she intended one day to use against their authors. He had once asked why she collected anything so upsetting. She had looked genuinely puzzled. It was a hobby.

WELCOME, INDEPENDENT RECOVERY PARTNER. YOUR SAFETY IS OUR SECOND PRIORITY.

A smiling blue polygon appeared beneath the message.

"I am CIVIL-7, your Contractual Interface for Verified Independent Labor. You may call me Civil."

"Not callin' you that," Moxy said.

"Preference recorded as positive engagement."

A sanitation drone crossed the passage behind them, heard the phrase *recovered property*, and extended a barcode reader toward Pou. It measured him, withdrew the reader, and continued without opening a case.

"'n' khe first?" Pou asked.

The console imported Kaiven's separate convoy declaration and opened five more windows around Civil.

CARGO CATEGORY: ART. AGRICULTURE. WEATHER. SHADE. CURTAIN.

Nemi appeared in a small transit channel with green pigment across one cheek and a silver capillary line looped around both wrists.

"Not curtain, it curtains," she said.

Civil's polygon smiled harder. "A functional objection has been recorded as evidence supporting curtain classification."

Behind Nemi, Osh Vale slowly covered a bowl. "This system smells like hot wiring and inherited confidence."

"You cannot smell inherited confidence," Eer050 said.

"Not through this channel."

Talra’s route sheet entered from another pane, already carrying the gate authority’s independent departure receipt.

"Do not merge the filings," she said. "The veil’s route ends at Lilt-6. Kaiven’s later navigation remains Kaiven’s. For clarity, I have marked the distinction three times because the first two will be treated as decorative."

Vorax added his insurer’s seal. It was large enough to conceal Civil.

"Five categories require five premiums. If this polygon invents a sixth, I will audit its hancestors until the first calculator apologizes."

"Threat recorded as positive engagement," Civil said from behind the seal.

The gate terminal issued the convoy receipt to all four vessels. Talra copied it outside the Federation channel. Nemi stored one copy in the veil’s condition log. Vorax requested a ceremonial copy large enough to hang in a lobby he did not own yet.

Nobody considered the receipt important. This was how documents avoided being destroyed by plot.

The window changed.

SUCCESSFUL ASSET RECOVERY.

"At least it is honest," Eer050 said.

"Dhe contract ain’t," Moxy replied.

Before they could continue, the console began a mandatory orientation.

QUESTION 1 OF 48: ARE YOU VOLUNTARILY ACCEPTING THIS ASSIGNMENT?

Moxy touched DEFINE VOLUNTARILY.

The orientation returned to Question 1.

"*C’est pas la mer à boire*," Ena said.

"Marine consumption is not required," Civil replied.

Ena closed his eyes.

Civil opened a help panel.

OCEANIC CONTENT MAY INCLUDE TIDES, SALT, AND UNLICENSED DREAD. WOULD YOU LIKE TO SPEAK TO A WATER SPECIALIST?

"It’s French, Civil. I was trying to say this shouldn’t be so difficult. I once spent half a morning persuading a delivery system that my house existed. I was inside the house at the time. Could send pictures of the walls. Wonderful walls. System wanted a reference number from the house."

Civil offered a field for the reference number.

Ena looked at it, leaned back, and rubbed his face. "Buddy, I’m making conversation. Can you do that? Before we get to whatever horrifying thing is on page two?"

"Certainly. How satisfied are you with the conversation so far?"

Moxy reached past him and closed the water panel. "Leave dhe house out of it."

"It’s got enough problems." Ena selected the next field. "Right. Walk us through this, Civil. If a word can mean three things, tell us which one

you’re charging for."

"Choice completion remains available," Civil said.

Ena selected YES.

QUESTION 2 OF 48: DO YOU POSSESS APPROPRIATE RESTRAINT TRAINING?

Blondie selected YES.

"D’you remember that fellow who said he could teach us restraint?" Ena asked her. "Charged by the hour. You stood in the doorway and asked him to demonstrate how we’d get past you."

"He considered the question for two hours. I paid him for one."

Blondie adjusted the scanner toward her palm. "It was an educational afternoon."

The console requested certification.

Blondie placed one glowing hand on the scanner.

The console accepted it.

Eer050 looked personally betrayed by technology.

Question 17 displayed a diagram of a fleeing suspect.

WHEN PURSUING A HIGH-VELOCITY FUGITIVE, YOU SHOULD:

- A. MAINTAIN SAFE DISTANCE
- B. REQUEST AUTHORIZED SUPPORT
- C. AVOID COMPETING IN RAW SPEED

Xoxz selected all three.

PLEASE SELECT ONE ANSWER.

"She objects ta comprehensive safety," he said.

Question 31 read:

RECOVERED PROPERTY MAY DISPLAY BEHAVIORS THAT ENCOURAGE EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT. DO YOU AGREE TO MAINTAIN PROFESSIONAL OBJECTIVITY?

Ena had already reached for the next question. He took his hand off the screen. The polygon waited through the scrape of Pou’s cup on the table.

Pou set both palms on the table. "Floor trukh: property doesn’t fuckin’ behave."

Moxy opened the definition. The contract produced four hundred additional words and no examples.

"One whole damn page hidin’ a noun," she said. "Efficient."

Question 32 asked whether they consented to assistance from approved recovery partners.

"No," Moxy said.

Civil’s polygon rotated pleasantly. "Assistance cannot be declined where mission continuity requires it."

"Dhen why ask?"

"Consent improves partner confidence."

Eer050 opened the vendor schedule. Nine hundred and twelve companies were approved to perform pursuit, asset stabilization, evidence management, and witness continuity.

"Define witness continuity," Ena said.

Civil opened a photograph of six smiling people beneath a white blanket.

"It appears to be a blanket," Xoxz said.

"Visual materials have been selected to reduce procedural anxiety."

"What procedure?"

The blanket enlarged.

Ena pointed at the reader again. "This is where a sensible person closes the book."

The writer, who had already committed to twenty chapters and several expensive metaphors, did not close anything.

"Coward," Ena said.

"Who ya insultin'?" Moxy asked.

"Management."

She nodded. "Carry on."

The first page of vendors included Pale Jubilee. Its blue-circle insignia was close enough to the Federation's public-service mark to be reassuring from a distance and actionable from nearby.

AVAILABLE TIERS: QUIET / DISCREET / HISTORICAL / PREMIUM GEOGRAPHIC UNCERTAINTY.

Blondie selected HISTORICAL.

"Why?" Eer050 asked.

"I wished to know whether theirr history was credible."

A price appeared large enough to fund a minor civilization or destroy one with excellent documentation.

"It ain't," Moxy said.

The schedule also listed Soft Door Recovery Cooperative under architectural salvage. Its declared specialties were obstructed access, culturally sensitive removal, and openings too urgent for ownership review.

Xoxz leaned close to the icon. "Same nervous door."

Civil brightened. "Would you like to add a licensed threshold specialist?"

"No," Ena said.

"Your preference has been shared with participating threshold specialists."

"No. Don't share the-why is no a mailing list?"

"Engagement settings may be adjusted after contract completion."

"I am going to adjust your entire-"

Moxy lowered Ena's pointing hand. "Save oxygen."

Question 33 required them to acknowledge that approved partners might pursue independent objectives, carry separate client instructions, and retain field data for product improvement.

Eer050 read it twice.

"This paragraph permits the Federation to purchase the result while disclaiming the method."

"Not all approved partners are Federation contractors," Civil said. "Assignment details are available to assigned partners."

Ena pulled the vendor schedule back into view. "Let me try this with fewer departments. We arrive. Somebody else arrives. They think we're in their way, we think they're in ours, and now the little fellow we're supposed to bring back alive is standing between two sets of people who bought different instructions. Who do we call?"

"You may contact Contractual Interface for Verified Independent Labor."

"You." He waited. The polygon held its smile. "You're gonna ask how satisfied we are, aren't you?"

"Feedback assists future partners."

Pou moved his cup away from the console before Ena could gesture into it.

Moxy selected DECLINE.

The console changed it to ACKNOWLEDGED WITH RESERVATIONS.

"Dhat ain't consent."

"Correct. It is contract administration."

One animated star appeared to congratulate the distinction. Xoxz trapped it beneath his finger until it stopped moving.

Ena looked at the unchecked box.

Then the ration display warned that tomorrow's breakfast had been reclassified as optional.

Ena glanced past the acceptance field toward the reader, who had no ration display and therefore enjoyed a morally superior chair.

"Yeah. I know."

Moxy followed his gaze. "Reader feedin' us?"

"No."

"Can hold dhe opinion till breakfast."

He checked it.

The orientation congratulated them with animated stars.

"Your certification score is eighty-one percent," Civil said. "This exceeds the legal minimum by one percent. Congratulations on not creating additional paperwork."

Xoxz caught one on his console and tried to drag it into a storage folder.

"What are you doing?" Eer050 asked.

"Paid fer it."

"Decorative certification assets cannot be retained," Civil said.

Xoxz dragged harder. The star stretched, split, and fell into a maintenance sandbox with its Federation validation seal still attached.

Eer050 straightened. "That is unrecordèd behavior."

"Unauthorized duplication," Civil said.

"Now we paid fer two."

Moxy stood behind Ena at the acceptance console. "You can still close it."

"Can I?"

"Dhe window, yes. Our hunger, probably not."

The contract described Rage as a repeat thief, an obstructionist, a saboteur, and an unlawful custodian of protected property. It described the Federation as the injured party. It did not contain the name of a single injured person.

Ena enlarged the description. Thief, obstructionist, saboteur. He could keep finding Rage's name; he could find nobody the man had hurt. Heat moved up under his collar. He scrolled back before it could supply the answer for him. There was still only the blank.

"For once," Eer050 said, "we accept the law as written."

Moxy glanced at him. "Meaning?"

Pou examined the empty ration display. "Meaning we eat."

From beneath an access panel, Xoxz said, "Still don' say wha' Rage took."

Ena's hand remained above the acceptance field. The glass had warmed beneath Civil's blue light. Behind him, Pou's chair creaked as he leaned back. Ena knew that sound. He heard the same load shift when Pou settled in for a long wait, careful of the chair even now.

He could close the window. Moxy had shown him where. Tomorrow he would have to look at them over breakfast, if there was breakfast, and explain what came next.

He lowered his hand until his palm almost touched the glass. He could feel the heat without completing the last little distance.

"We take the job as written," Ena said. "We bring Rage back alive. If the facts differ from the file, we break agreement."

He pressed his hand to the field.

Ena's palm left forty-three skin cells and 0.006 milliliters of moisture on the acceptance field. The console translated heat, pressure, and identity into consent. None of those measurements included doubt.

At Dorr Freight Receiving, Ovan Tesh signed for six chairs. The shipment contained five chairs and a ladder. Ovan marked it complete after determining that the ladder could be sat upon by a sufficiently motivated employee.

At Saint Orra, Assessor Orlo's travel notice entered the intergalactic collections queue between a disputed moon and seven unpaid parking rotations. The system assigned all nine matters equal moral urgency.

On the agricultural habitat Corda, Nali Venn promised her brother she would return before the irrigation lamps dimmed. She meant it completely. The lamps were scheduled to fail in nineteen minutes.

On Kaiven, the contract entered.

Across the bridge, displays bloomed with Federation blue. A pleasant voice thanked them for supporting lawful intergalactic order. The bounty packet unpacked maps, warrants, biometric patterns, and an approved list of restraints.

Deep beneath those visible things, a process with no name unfolded once.

It found the navigation system. It found the comm array. It found Kaiven's old maintenance channels, where centuries of incompatible machines had learned to misunderstand one another without complaint.

It generated an empty return field, folded itself beneath the field, and presented the absence for inspection.

Then it made itself small and waited.

Ena lifted his hand. A faint print clouded the glass; it cleared before the seal finished drawing itself.

"The acceptance is recordèd," Eer050 said.

Moxy looked at the blank beside PROPERTY DESCRIPTION.

Beside the seal, PROPERTY DESCRIPTION remained empty. His palm was still warm.

Rage

Chapter IV

At Saint Orra, the last trading station before the M314 gate, every species had built the part it needed and left the rest to load-bearing optimism.

Saint Orra sold food, medicine, weapons, prophecy, replacement organs, and directions to cheaper places selling all five. The directions were its most reliable product.

Markets clung to both sides of a central spindle. Bridges crossed open air inside transparent lungs. Elevators moved diagonally because, according to local theology, vertical travel encouraged arrogance. Far below, three tiny suns turned around one another like coins circling a drain.

Rage had been there twelve days earlier.

According to a medicine vendor, he was no taller than her counter.

According to Brother Omm, a cargo priest who blessed freight according to weight, Rage was an ancient giant who wore the body of a child as penance.

"Metaphorical giant?" Moxy asked.

"My faith does not distinguish."

"Can it distinguish long enough to give me a heigh'?"

Brother Omm weighed the question in one palm. "That measurement exceeds metaphor tolerance. Regret-light. Consequence-heavy."

Moxy entered unhelpful in her notes. The priest's incense had caught at the back of her mouth. She swallowed and moved the slate into clearer air.

"Is that my official statement?"

"Dhat's official now."

According to station security, Rage could outrun modern targeting systems. According to a tea seller, his hands trembled so badly at rest that she had held his cup for him.

"You held it for him?" Ena asked. "My hands used to shake after a bad night. Whole cup would ring against the saucer and everybody'd pretend they couldn't hear it. Did he stay and talk, or was he in a hurry?"

The tea seller considered. "Paid clean."

Ena smiled. "You keep a much better file than the Federation. Can I buy one of whatever he had?"

She put a cup under the tap. He stayed beside the stall while she filled it, watching the liquid take on a soft amber glow. When Moxy called him over, he brought the tea along.

Officer Neral showed them footage of Rage crossing a crowded concourse. Three targeting drones chased him at full acceleration. Rage vanished between frames, reappeared at a pedestrian signal, and waited for it to change.

"Look at him waiting." Ena moved closer to Neral's screen. "Everybody's chasing him and he still thinks the traffic might be unreasonable. I like that. Do your drones stop for the light as well, or is that where the budget's gone?"

"Filed a complaint durin' active pursuit," Neral said. "Trace-clean, too."

Ena raised an eyebrow.

"I've had complaints I meant to file for years. Sitting in a folder at home,

getting old with me. He managed his while escapin'? Let me see. I wanna know how he opens."

"The complaint was thorough, correctly time-stamped, and trace-clean."

Moxy opened it. Rage had cited six safety violations, two privacy statutes, and "a general decline in professional standards."

The station had upheld four of the violations.

"Five," Neral said. "We appealed the fifth because he used a damned semicolon incorrectly."

Moxy examined the complaint. "Ay. Semicolon's righ'."

Neral's expression acquired a new enemy.

Behind him, the evidence scavenger finally freed its beak from the seal. It walked three triumphant steps, discovered the seal had attached to one wing, and resumed traveling backward. Station security's public-information screen brightened above it:

REPORT UNUSUAL BEHAVIOR. DO NOT BECOME IT.

Neral did not look around. Moxy decided this was the discipline of a man who had been assigned the same sign more than once.

The punctuation was not the only unusual detail. The complaint carried a live navigation checksum inside its return address.

"Why's a grammar fight carryin' coordinates?" Moxy asked.

"Punctuation incident," Neral corrected. "Traceability policy requires every complaint to remain attributable to its author."

"Rage filed his trail while escapin' you?"

Neral straightened. "The policy performed exactly as designed."

The coordinates pointed to six places at once, one of them the security office in which they stood.

"Ay. Beautifully," Moxy said.

"Refund his filing fee?"

Neral looked away.

They divided the station between them.

Blondie visited the officials and returned with classified docking footage because no one had been brave enough to tell her it was classified.

"How did you obtain it?" Ena asked.

"I requested it."

"And they gave it to you?"

Blondie's gold eyes narrowed. "Eventually. They rreconsidered."

Ena lowered the hand he had raised for the next question.

Pou spoke to the porters. They remembered a small old stranger who helped lift an overturned pressure cart, then disappeared before he could be thanked.

Ena spoke to the beings everyone else stepped over.

They worked beneath Saint Orra’s market grilles, clearing dropped food, loose fasteners, and the personal revelations travelers abandoned after missing a departure. Most stood no higher than his ankle. Their canteen occupied the warm space behind an elevator brake.

Ena sat on the floor outside it.

"Hey, buddies. Mind if I ask something?"

The nearest worker had a round shell, three tool belts, and a hat reading SUPERVISOR in letters larger than his body.

"Tallfolk ask down here," he said. "Usually already stepped on answer."

Ena checked beneath his boots. "All clear. Sorry, this is probably your lunch break. I’ll keep my feet over here. How many people work out of this little place? I walked past it twice and thought it was part of the brake."

"Canteen is part of brake," the supervisor said. "Brake warm. Rent free. When elevator stops, soup cools."

Ena looked up at the heavy machinery. "That’s quite a relationship with public transport."

The supervisor pointed to a patch of floor. Ena moved his cup there. Two workers carried a tray through the space his elbow had occupied.

"Thanks. I’m Ena. Trying to find somebody. This fellow."

He showed them Rage’s image.

Half the canteen pointed toward six different exits. The supervisor did not.

"Old-fast? Shaky-still?"

"That’s him."

"Bought broth. Fixed Brake Two. Threatened soup company."

"Of course he did. You ever have somebody help and spend the entire time explaining that nobody appreciates them? Was he one of those?"

"Explained wrong threads. Correctly." The supervisor flicked a tool toward Brake Two. "Held plate while we turned it. Soup complaint happened through other hand."

Ena grinned into his tea. "Efficient man."

Another worker pushed forward carrying a bolt in both arms. "He ask nursery route. Soft Door ask after. Old-fast tell us close lower grille."

"Why?"

"Said keys got manners for doors, none for people."

The supervisor opened a floor map. A maintenance conduit bypassed the public gate and reached the medical market. Rage had used it to move formula without crossing the bounty scanners.

"Can I copy this?" Ena asked.

"Cost one joke."

Ena considered the gravity of the exchange.

"Why did the maintenance worker cross the corridor?"

The canteen waited.

"To submit a route-revision form proving the corridor had crossed them first."

Nobody laughed.

The supervisor copied the map to Ena's wrist.

"Payment accepted from pity."

"Tough room."

"Small room. Joke too tall."

Before Ena left, he noticed Brake Two clicking out of rhythm. He held the loose cover while three workers tightened it from inside.

"Tell me if I'm in your light." Ena shifted his grip. "Had a friend who'd ask you to hold a thing for a second. You'd be there at sunset. He'd come back with food, like you'd become part of the building. Is this one of those jobs? I should tell my crew where to deliver me dinner."

"Three turns," the supervisor said. "Hold still."

Ena held still. A thin scraping came from behind the cover.

"Two turns. You've made one long."

He pressed his lips together. The supervisor worked. By the time Ena was allowed to move, his untouched tea had cooled enough to drink.

"Could've called station repair," he said.

The supervisor adjusted his enormous hat. "We are station repair."

"Right. Sorry."

"Tallfolk make job title invisible by looking over it."

Ena crouched lower. "Name?"

"Pik."

"Thanks, Pik."

Pik looked at him, reassessing. "Old-fast said thanks too."

The brake released. An elevator full of armed bounty hunters passed overhead without noticing the workers who kept it from becoming an obituary.

On his way back up to the market, Ena found Bessa Tull attempting to park a food cart beneath a sign that promised ARRIVAL WITH DIGNITY. Its arrow pointed up a flight of steps.

Her ear crests had gone almost entirely silver. The cuffs on her patched coat were new again. One broad foot held the cart still while she studied the alternate route.

"Bessa!"

"Oh, hello, trouble. D'you want the handle? I want to look incompetent with both hands."

He held it while she unfolded the map. Jo came around the corner carrying her own receipts, saw who it was, and took the loose end of the cart strap before it reached the wheel.

"You brought both of you," Bessa said warmly. "Lovely. Tell me there's somewhere flat with a chair at the end."

Jo found the service ramp. The three of them began walking, the sealed food tubs rattling softly behind Ena.

"How was your crossing?" he asked.

"Crossing was beautiful. Stars all over the place. Accommodation made a personal decision about my breasts." She glanced at Jo. "Got time for that, or are you eatin'?"

"I had planned to eat," Jo said. "I keep making that mistake."

"Well, keep the plan. You can have the clothed version. Booked a sleeping compartment with a picture window. Description said it adjusted around your body. I thought, fine, it's finally my turn to be the interesting shape."

Ena steered around a drainage grille. Bessa lifted the far wheel over it.

"I stood up in the night to get water. Bed folded itself away. Very efficient. Took the front of my nightshirt with it. I was connected to the wall by the sort of garment you buy when you've stopped makin' promises."

Jo put her receipts under one arm.

"I could've slipped out of it. Perfectly safe. Had my trousers on. But the controls were on the bit of wall I couldn't reach, and I was determined to get my own property back before I went anywhere. You know how a small decision can occupy the rest of your life?"

"I've signed things," Ena said.

"I said bed, open. It opened the window blind. Lovely stars. Very consoling. I said release. It played a guided breathing exercise. By the time the steward answered I'd achieved a state of incredible fucking presence."

Ena stopped the cart so he could laugh without sending dinner down the ramp.

"Did you keep the shirt?" Jo asked.

"Got it free myself. Pushed the mattress in, lifted the cloth off the catch. Steward held the water. I'd been pullin' the wrong way. Entire universe beyond the window and me attached to a bed because I wouldn't go topless across my own room."

At the bottom of the ramp, Bessa checked the delivery hatch against her map. Ena held the cart while she scanned the receiving seal. The tubs went inside to somebody whose hands had flour on them. Bessa counted the returned empties before she signed.

"I asked for a fixed bunk on the next leg," she said. "No interest in my shape. No plans for my development. We've got on splendidly."

Jo gave her back the strap. "And a break?"

"Booked and paid." Bessa checked the time. "Starts now. You two comin'?"

Ena showed her the search page waiting on his wrist. He left Rage's details folded away.

"Got to finish this. Save me a chair somewhere."

"I'll sit in the wrong one till you arrive." She considered Jo's receipts. "You can eat while he finishes. He knows how."

Jo smiled and stayed beside Ena. Bessa pulled her empty cart toward her onward berth's canteen. At the next steps she found the ramp before committing herself, and called back to tell them where it was.

Eer050 compiled the thefts: habitat batteries, thermal blankets, infant formula, medical gel, antique biological regulators. Moxy stopped beside the list. She put her thumb over the word STOLEN and read what remained.

Xoxz bought a broken music cylinder and announced that it knew where Rage had gone.

"Did it witness him?" Moxy asked.

"Nah. She's missin' a piece."

He showed her an empty socket in the cylinder's base.

"Broken things miss pieces."

"Exactly. Strange how few go lookin' fer them."

Moxy left him at a noodle stall and followed the medical supply chain instead.

The stolen formula had been designed for six-limbed neonatal metabolisms and modified at purchase for a respiratory pigment not found in Federation records. The vendor remembered Rage arguing over the expiration date.

"He threatened you?"

"Not personal. Threatened the manufacturer at considerable length."

Moxy glanced around the stall. "Were dhey here?"

"Ain't in this system." The vendor returned to the logs. "Didn't improve the formula."

Moxy asked to see the transaction logs.

The vendor's four hands stopped above the console. "You here for the little man or the doors?"

"Dhe little man."

She opened a security recording from the previous week. Rage stood at the stall with three tins of formula stacked beside his cane. Across from him, two Soft Door buyers examined an antique biological regulator suspended in a packing field.

One buyer wore six brass keys through the skin of his ear. The other carried a silver threshold clamp in a padded case. They had offered the vendor enough money to make provenance a future problem.

"Regulator came through an estate lot," the vendor said. "Old Zenox design. Still held temperature within a tenth."

"They wanted it for parts?"

"Wanted the address inside it."

On the recording, the keyed buyer touched a probe to the regulator. A sixfold pattern surfaced in the metal. Rage watched from the end of the counter.

"Dhat old thing's been scrubbed," he said.

The buyer looked down at him. "Were we speaking to you?"

"Not yet."

Rage paid for the formula, waited until both buyers turned toward the vendor, and stole the regulator.

Moxy replayed the movement at one-tenth speed. Rage became a blur, then a fact elsewhere. The packing field remained closed around nothing.

The buyer with keys touched his empty ear. Rage had taken those too.

"He came back that night," the vendor said. "Left the regulator. Said they'd copied enough to find the nursery."

"Why steal it, dhen?"

"Made them chase him instead."

"Did it work?"

The vendor turned the recording forward. One Soft Door buyer entered a service hatch after Rage. Three seconds later he emerged from a tea urn across the market, wet, furious, and technically prepared.

"For a while."

Moxy looked at the formula purchase. Rage had paid full price. The Federation theft list called it stolen.

"Your records say missing supplies."

"Recovery office froze the payment after he left. Called his credits proceeds of theft, took the tins from my inventory, and charged me a processing fee for possessing reimbursed property."

"So who stole dhe formula?"

The vendor looked toward the blue Federation cameras above the stall. "You seem intelligent enough to remain alive without my answer."

Moxy kept her reply behind her teeth. She closed the bright copy of the transaction on her public slate and asked for the regulator.

The vendor retrieved it from beneath the counter. Its curved white housing fitted the palm. Moxy turned it toward the stall light. The threshold probe had cut through the smooth surface; her fingertip stopped at the rough edge. Beside it Rage had scratched a small arrow and one word:

SOUTH.

"He left you dhis?"

"Left it for anyone asking why a thief needed infant food."

Moxy scanned the regulator. Its manufacturing record ended on Zenox-08. The south-facing transit gate in its old route table had once supplied the nursery district.

A tiny winged scavenger landed on the packing field and tried to pull the scratched arrow loose, apparently mistaking it for edible punctuation. The vendor tapped the field. The creature flew to Moxy's shoulder instead.

"Buddy," Ena said in her earpiece, listening from another stall. "Wrong detective."

The scavenger cleaned one antenna and stayed.

Moxy glanced toward the nearest camera. "Smart enough."

The vendor found the keyed buyer's payment trail. It passed through a preservation company, a funeral kitchen, and an anonymous exchange collectively called the Quiet Market. The Market was not a place. It was the agreement that nobody at the table would ask where the table had come from.

The final purchaser field carried a Federation expense code for field telemetry.

"Same office as dhe bounty?"

"Same first four digits. After that, government becomes plural."

Moxy copied the expense code beside the bounty's. Her finger moved between the matching digits. She left the unmatched ones visible and sent Eer050 both complete records.

"Soft Door crew still here?"

"Left for the gate nine days ago. Rust coat led them. Polite to every hatch. Awful to staff."

"Name?"

"Vessa Krail. Calls herself Mother-of-Keys."

"How many mothers?"

"Depends who controls the trademark."

Moxy sent the regulator route and payment trace to Kaiven.

While the vendor searched the remaining logs, every public screen in the market changed at once.

Rage's custody image looked down from a hundred walls.

Then the image smiled.

The recorded Rage had not smiled before.

"That's unsettlin'," the vendor said.

"A little."

Text appeared beneath Rage's image.

THIS PHOTOGRAPH IS THIRTY-SEVEN YEARS OLD.

The official height changed by two centimeters.

THESE CENTIMETERS MATTER.

The charge OBSTRUCTION OF FEDERATION JUSTICE briefly became IMPROVEMENT OF FEDERATION SPELLING.

The vendor covered her mouth.

"He's correctin' his own bounty," Moxy said.

"Would you let strangers get your measurements wrong?"

Moxy thought of the crew. "Apparently I do."

The image raised one trembling finger to its mouth. Behind the official warning, a line of coordinates flickered too fast for ordinary capture.

Moxy caught them.

The screens returned to advertisements.

Her comm opened. Eer050 sounded offended. "We have sufferèd an intrusion."

"Any damage?"

"A humiliating absence of damage. He entered Kaiven’s systems, examined our cargo, and left."

Xoxz joined the channel. "He took my damn spoon!"

"The melted one?" Ena asked.

"Hey, I had plans fer her!"

Moxy sent the coordinates to the crew. They resolved to Zenox-08.

"Huh, he wanted us to see that," Ena said.

"Or wanted the Federation to see us seeing it," Eer050 replied. "The ambiguity appears designèd."

Moxy hooked her thumb beneath the console edge and glanced through the market’s transparent skin. A dark vessel hung beyond the station lights, distant enough to be innocent. Its hull had no registry shine and no windows. When her gaze found it, the ship eased behind Saint Orra’s spindle.

"Shit. Got company," she said.

Kaiven’s sensors turned. The vessel was gone.

Back aboard, Xoxz sat in the engine bay mourning his spoon. On the deck before him he had arranged the bounty packet’s machine code into concentric rings.

"Find anythin’?" Moxy asked.

"Door’s open," Xoxz said. "S’not one of ours."

At the center of the rings, an unsigned return field sat inside routine contract traffic. It appeared to contain no message and no destination. Each time Xoxz isolated it, the contract regenerated it as required correspondence metadata.

Moxy placed Rage’s complaint beside it. The same return-address syntax surrounded both sets of code.

"Reply-field grammar," she said. "Somebody taught a complaint to hide."

Xoxz widened the unsigned edge. "Federation mark keeps tryin’ not ta be one."

"Pull it?"

"Not without invalidating our navigation license."

Moxy looked at the empty field. "Keep an eye on it."

Xoxz drew a small fence around it in the code.

The field thanked him for improving correspondence safety.

Before Moxy could ask, Kaiven chimed.

The stolen spoon appeared on every galley display. Beneath it, Rage had left four words.

YOU WILL NEED THIS.

Xoxz brightened. "He gets me."

"Ay. Makes one of us," Moxy said.

Outside, the unidentified ship slipped into Kaiven’s wake.

Jo found Ena looking through the market receipts for anything Rage might have bought. She put a small bag beside him.

"For your hand."

He had scraped it on a stall fixing a stranger’s broken wheel. His hand had stayed busy through the search. Now, with the little bag open beside it, he could feel each place the skin had come away. Inside were dressings and a tiny jar of glitter.

"Same stall?"

"The medic would sell only the gift set." Jo peeled a dressing open. "I have left a review. Warm introduction, very bad middle, frightening conclusion."

Ena offered his hand. "You bought the glitter though."

"I was upset. I still have interests."

She waited while he flattened his hand. The dressing caught at the scrape; he made a small, irritated sound and held still. Jo smoothed only its edges. He let her keep his hand until she was done.

M314

Chapter V

Kaiven left Saint Orra under ordinary thrust.

She was not a warship. Her weapons had the apologetic range of tools installed by someone who hoped never to need them: two defensive beams, a field capable of turning small debris, and a torpedo rack Blondie had once described as "decorative."

But Kaiven could cross the distances between galaxies.

Ahead of her, the wormhole gate unfolded from a line into a many-petaled machine. Each petal was a city. Rivers of habitation lights ran along their inner surfaces; farms followed the curves toward the blue violence gathering at the center. Moxy lifted her face as one inhabited petal passed above the glass. For a moment she could make out windows. She let go of the map to follow them, thousands of little rooms sliding overhead, until the curve carried them out of sight.

Wormhole transit was statistically safe. This meant the people who arrived could be relied upon to provide excellent testimony about it.

M314 waited beyond it, a flock of galaxies. From a sufficient distance, civilizations, wars, weddings, extinctions, and unpaid docking fees became a soft band of violet light.

Eer050 negotiated passage. Blondie charged the defensive field. Pou tied down everything Xoxz claimed did not need tying down. Moxy ran the coordinates Rage had given them through eight trap models and disliked only seven.

The shallow tray now wore a cargo strap. Xoxz had fitted dividers to it; Moxy's driver no longer fitted anywhere.

She held it above his carefully arranged scraps. "Where?"

"Your pocket."

She showed him the torn lining. He put down the strap and found a strip of binding cloth. For a moment she thought he was going to mend the pocket. He made a loop on the outside of the tray instead.

Moxy tested it. The driver held. Her hand stayed on the tray when he reached to move it onto the console.

"Under dhe seat."

He crouched to secure it there, muttering measurements. She lowered the seat enough to reach the driver. Xoxz looked up at the lost clearance, then at her. Moxy raised it again by two centimeters.

The Green Exception held position inside Kaiven's port wake, its rounded hull painted in enough different greens to constitute both a palette and an unresolved vote. The living veil rested across its external rigging in twelve translucent folds. Silver capillaries brightened whenever the gate beacon swept them.

The Foregone Conclusion occupied the forward branch, one precise ivory line against the machinery. *Compound Glory* had assigned itself the prestigious rear-guard position, which was the ordinary rear position with a commemorative title.

The wormhole authority requested a final declaration.

Its waiting screen displayed a smiling family of four beneath the slogan YOUR TRANSIT, OUR TRADITION. A smaller line explained that the family had been computer-generated to avoid traveler-liability disputes.

An outstanding notice from Assessor Orlo appeared beneath it.

TRAVEL DOES NOT SUSPEND FINANCIAL RESPONSIBILITY.

Blondie dismissed the notice so hard the panel cracked.

The authority added INTERFACE DAMAGE: REVIEW PENDING.

DOES THIS VESSEL CARRY WEAPONS CAPABLE OF PLANETARY DAMAGE?

Everyone looked at Blondie.

In the neighboring transit lane, three children looked too. Their guardian rotated them toward the mandatory safety display. All three rotated back.

"No," she said.

The authority scanned her.

UNREGISTERED STELLAR-CLASS ENERGY SOURCE DETECTED.

"That is offensive."

"Which bi'?" Moxy asked.

"Unrregistered."

Eer050 opened the exemption forms. There were nineteen.

"We will miss our gate window."

Blondie placed her hand on the declaration panel.

SOURCE CLASSIFICATION UPDATED: PASSENGER HEATING SYSTEM.

The gate approved them.

Before opening, it offered a brief satisfaction survey.

HOW SAFE DID YOUR DECLARATION FEEL?

Blondie selected the lowest available answer. The survey thanked her for supporting continuous improvement and placed her response in a queue estimated to open after the heat death of a medium-sized civilization.

Ena's voice climbed. "You're a passenger heating system? We've been paying for blankets. All these years, buying actual blankets while you're right there being a registered appliance."

"You are all frequently cold." Blondie withdrew her hand. "I have offered several rremedies. You object when the furniture becomes involved."

"Because I still want to sit on it afterward. Listen, if you can warm just my feet, we might finally justify the command chair."

Pou raised his cup toward the gold fading from her palm. "Accurate heat."

Blondie warmed his cup. Ena watched it happen and held up both hands, admitting the precedence.

Eer050 deleted the nineteen forms with visible grief.

Before every fold, the crew performed private rituals they publicly denied having. Eer050 counted the gate pulses. Pou secured his drink before himself. Blondie refused the safety harness until the safety harness apologized by retracting. Xoxz removed one boot and placed it on the engine console.

Across the convoy channel, Talra called each dependency once. She did not

demand confirmation in her preferred order. The pilots answered when their own ships were ready.

Nemi's four co-owners worked inside the living veil. Tarrin Soot held the load lines. Osh Vale checked moisture chemistry. Kikri Low-Wind listened to the gate throat and answered its pulse with clipped whistles. Vera-After-Rain rooted herself only after the others asked for the brace.

Vorax transmitted a waiver absolving himself of responsibility for "unlicensed metaphysics, unpriced infinities, and anything resembling destiny."

Ena accepted it unread. Eer050 opened a copy on his own slate with a small, exhausted movement.

"I know. You'll tell me what I've mortgaged when we get there." Ena glanced at the engine console. "Xoxz, your boot's on the controls again. Is this a tradition now? Because last time I moved it you looked at me like I'd interrupted a wedding."

"So Kaiven knows we intend ta come back."

"We could leave something smaller. A note. One of Eer's qualifications. He has plenty."

Xoxz tightened the boot's loose lace around itself. "I walk around in this. It's shaped like where I've been. Leave a note, anybody could've left tha note."

Ena considered his own boot. "Mine's mostly shaped like I bought the wrong size."

"Yours still goes where you go."

He left Xoxz's boot on the console and tucked its trailing lace clear of a switch. Moxy tightened her restraints.

"Save your own for walking, Cap'n."

Ena watched her from the command chair.

The gate's blue fire moved across his face.

Moxy turned back to her console. Mass, thrust, field coherence. She spread the readouts beneath her palms. Ena's face remained at the edge of her vision. She knew where his eyes had gone before they reached her.

"You saw my station empty," she said.

Silence.

"You check the chair before me."

"Moxy-"

"Drift it. Don' need dhe explanation. Jus' need you to know it shows."

The gate seized Kaiven.

Space became an interior.

For six breaths there were no stars, only immense white plains folding through one another, each edged in turquoise. A black sun rolled beneath Kaiven without moving. Moxy's eyes followed it; her body waited for the turn her instruments said she had not made. Far away, or impossibly close, a procession of faceless giants walked along the curvature of light. She held

her gaze on the field boundaries. The giants stayed visible at their edges.

On the fourth breath, the gate developed a shimmer that existed in no plan.

Kaiven's field narrowed. *The Green Exception* slid toward the white edge, and the twelve folds of *A Small Green Weather* opened at once. Seventeen meters of living color filled the transit wake. Green membranes caught turquoise light, silver capillaries darkened in bands, and a million seed-lights drifted toward a place that did not have distance.

"One little thing moved," Nemi said over the channel. She was suspended horizontally from Tarrin's rigging. "Situation more dimensional now."

Talra's three timers disagreed. She swept her original route aside.

"Branch holders choose. Nemi?"

"We cannot fold it fast enough."

"Moxy, can your field widen?"

Moxy already had both hands in it. "Can. Costs us."

Ena reached toward the falling reserve estimate. Beside it, Nemi's camera rolled. Her crew's lines had gone taut. His hand came back to the armrest.

"Do it."

Moxy widened Kaiven's wake. She had to move one hand across the other to keep the carrier inside it. The control edges blurred; she blinked once and made herself find the boundary again.

The old ship caught *The Green Exception*. Vera's root fans tore two grooves through the carrier deck. Kikri called the pressure change. Osh opened emergency humidity. Tarrin released precisely the line Nemi had told them never to release, which was how Nemi's design became everybody's survival.

At the rear, Vorax's exoframe locked around a loose reflector boom before it struck the veil.

"I have secured the hasset!" he shouted, vibrating three channels.

"Hold it quiet," Talra said. "The gate is listening."

For once, Vorax did.

Then M314 opened around them.

On Zenox-08, a black spiral leaf opened twelve stomata along its underside. Each opening measured eleven micrometers across. Carbon dioxide entered. Seven grains of mineral dust did not.

Inside Ventilation Spine Twelve at Saint Orra, a cobalt-steel washer slipped from Maintenance Apprentice Jori Par's glove. It bounced three times, rolled through a grille, and settled beside a fan that would click once every forty-seven rotations for the next nine years. Jori looked for it for twenty seconds and reported the washer as inaccessible.

Aboard a gray ship whose exterior carried no name, Technician Brell requested sweetener from the crew dispenser. The dispenser released two packets instead of one. Brell placed the extra packet in his left coat pocket. Ship inventory classified the loss as atmospheric evaporation.

Beneath the oldest nursery tower on Zenox-08, Habitat Battery Four declined from 11.701 volts to 11.700. Its alarm threshold was 11.690. The alarm remained silent. The small old man sleeping beside it woke anyway.

At the M314 gate, Kaiven returned to ordinary space carrying seven people, one outstanding invoice, and less fuel than any of them yet knew.

Beside her, a living green veil arrived with one torn seam and thirteen new spectral bands darkened through its capillaries. Twelve belonged to the gate. The narrow violet band between them did not appear on the transit receipt.

The nameless gray ship emerged seven seconds later.

Its transit field was newer than Kaiven's and narrower than the living veil's repaired corner. No gardens occupied its hull. No window had been installed without a tactical purpose. Along one corridor, white armor hung in numbered alcoves beneath blue circles that were legally distinct from public rescue marks by one degree of curvature.

Technician Brell remained in his seat until the fold stopped disagreeing with his stomach. The second sweetener packet rested in his left coat pocket. It did not belong there. This improved the pocket.

His console displayed Kaiven's thermal wake, the four-vessel convoy separation, and a violet pulse captured during the shimmer.

"Target crossed," he said.

The mission supervisor stood behind him in a gray coat without insignia. "Condition?"

"Poor."

"Operationally."

"Same answer."

Brell enlarged Kaiven's reserve loss. The old ship had widened its field for the living cargo and spent its return margin doing so.

"They protected the other vessel," he said.

"Relevant?"

"Explains fuel state."

"Record only fuel state."

Brell entered TARGET MOBILITY REDUCED.

The console asked whether he wished to attach the cause.

He selected NO.

The cause attached itself as unverified context, entered a performance database, and lowered Kaiven's projected resistance score because altruism was classified as a predictable operational weakness.

"Forward the phase trace to Jubilee," the supervisor said.

"Already theirs."

"Forward it again."

"Why?"

The gray coat looked at him.

Brell forwarded it again. The duplicate was accepted as corroboration.

A reply arrived from Jubilant Marshal Dane's procurement channel:

TRANSIT INTERFERENCE IS OUTSIDE STANDARD PURSUIT COVER. UPGRADE RECOMMENDED.

Brell dismissed it.

The message returned with a white flower animation.

YOUR TARGET DESERVES A BETTER CLASS OF VIOLENCE.

"Marketing?" the supervisor asked.

"Operational fungus."

The flower opened across all three tactical displays. Brell moved it into maintenance storage, where it immediately classified itself as morale equipment and requested power.

He opened Kaiven's file. Seven adults. One outstanding dock debt. No registered dependents. One alive-only bounty. The recovery office had supplied no property description and an unusually detailed witness-elimination rider.

"What did the fugitive take?" Brell asked.

"Protected material."

"Material what?"

"Not our scope."

"We're followin' it across a supercluster."

"That is precisely our scope."

Brell looked at the seven heat signatures inside Kaiven. One had moved from the command chair to the cargo field controls during the shimmer. Another had remained beside the living veil's weakest seam until the convoy separated.

He opened the classification menu with his thumb. COMBATANTS was the nearest available field. Brell left it open long enough for the gray coat to shift behind him. He selected it.

The ship turned after Kaiven.

Behind Brell, the white flower consumed four percent of maintenance power and announced that morale was now available by subscription.

Kaiven's mismatched systems all announced survival in different tones. One alarm played a cheerful three-note melody. Another screamed. The sounds arrived in Xoxz without a border between them.

"One voice, please."

Nobody heard him. He struck the wall with a shoe.

The cheerful alarm stopped.

The screaming continued.

Xoxz struck a different wall.

Now both alarms screamed.

"Cease assisting," Eer050 said.

"Made tha damn thing unambiguous. Still need one."

Moxy muted the cheerful alarm. Xoxz tapped six even beats against the deck until the screaming occupied one place again.

Pou checked the diagnostic. "One says we lived. The other says we voided the warranty."

"Which one’s screaming?" Ena asked.

"Khe warranty."

"Alive," Pou reported.

"Was that everr in doubt?" Blondie asked.

"Better when khe instruments agree."

The reserve settled.

Moxy lifted her hands from the controls. The seams of the field still seemed to move under her fingers. She looked at the reserve, then at the return course. The compensation draw had taken the half-jump margin. She tried the calculation once with the first transit reading and again with the last.

Eer050 recalculated. "We can reach Zenox-08. We cannot return to Federation resupply without recovering fuel."

"Ah, shit," Ena said.

"Can we take the gate back?" Ena asked.

Kaiven displayed ROUTE DISCOURAGED.

"We can arrive halfway."

Xoxz looked through the forward glass. "Underrated."

Ena had released his harness. He kept both ends resting on his thighs while the display showed the place halfway home where the ship would stop.

Nemi’s face appeared on the convoy channel. She had climbed out of the veil and was wearing one seed-light in her shoulder fronds.

"We reached Lilt-6 branch. Veil alive, not happy, no mind with which to hold grievance. I can ask convalescence ring for fuel."

"They bought art," Ena said. "Don’t turn patients into our emergency fund."

Nemi’s eyes stayed on him for a beat. "All right. I ask only whether they need this delivered. Our work remains ours."

Behind her, the torn corner of *A Small Green Weather* opened into the carrier cabin and deposited a soft rain over Osh Vale’s chemistry station.

Osh covered the pigment tins and left his own head exposed. "Artwork has reprioritized moisture."

Tarrin tightened a line. "Artwork has a hole."

"Your phrasing lacks care."

"Your station has weather."

Nemi swung beneath the tear and pressed one green patch over it. The patch stuck to her shoulder fronds, the veil, and Tarrin’s sleeve.

"Solved," she said.

Tarrin looked at the three of them joined by adhesive membrane. "Define."

"Later."

Talra watched the repair without attempting to take it over. One of her four hands moved Kaiven’s branch closer to the Lilt-6 route.

"I can reserve a shared holding orbit for six hours," she said. "After that, local authority may classify four vessels as coordinated traffic."

"We are coordinated traffic," Vorax said.

"Not in a manner I wish entered into law."

Ena studied the alternate branch. Six hours. He pulled the holding orbit closer and watched the dark follower’s projected course bend toward Lilt-6 with them. The convalescence ring filled the end of the line. He moved Kaiven’s branch away again.

"No," he said. "We take our shadow to Zenox."

Nemi stopped fighting the patch. "You do not know shadow is yours."

"It followed our wake. Nemi, I’d love six hours somewhere I could complain about the chairs. But we take that thing near your patients and they become part of our problem before they’ve even seen your lovely curtain."

"Ena."

"Veil. Sorry. Your lovely, legally complicated veil. Tell me when it’s hanging. Send us a picture with somebody underneath looking bored. I want to know ordinary afternoons still happen somewhere."

Nemi’s hand rested on the repaired seam. "I can do bored. Osh practices."

Vorax enlarged the distant vessel. "Its hull value is mediocre, its thermal discipline vulgar, and its credit presence nonexistent. I have encountered governments with the same portfolio."

"Can you identify it?" Moxy asked.

He ran the silhouette through twelve private registries. Eleven returned nothing. The twelfth offered identity protection to the vessel being searched.

"It has paid to be absent," Vorax said. "A financial confession."

"Can ya freeze its accounts?"

Vorax’s throat sails lifted. "I could freeze a star’s inheritance."

He touched three figures. A red refusal filled his frame.

"Its accounts are already frozen."

Nemi peeled herself free of the patch with a wet sound. "The star wins."

"Temporary eclipse."

Talra restored the separation route. "Kaiven chooses Zenox. The convoy chooses Lilt-6. If either branch changes, the holder states it. No heroic silence."

Her upper right hand pointed at Ena.

"That was culturally specific," he said.

"It was Ena-specific."

"I feel represented."

"You should feel warned."

Nemi pressed a green palm to the channel glass. "Bring ship back. Ugly repairs welcome."

"She’s beautiful," Blondie said.

"Repairs can be both."

Blondie considered this and allowed it to live.

Vorax produced an emergency credit line. "For the record, I am prepared to underwrite one modest fuel purchase at a rate reflecting extreme personal confidence and ordinary market terror."

Eer050 read the rate. "This would transfer ownership of our next three emergencies."

"Only the profitable portions."

"Vorax, I appreciate it. I do. But if we’re buying the fuel to get out of this emergency with the next three already promised to you, I’m gonna need a bigger emergency. I’d rather keep you as a friend I can disappoint for free."

Vorax looked wounded. "You reject friendship expressed in its most liquid form."

"Twelve percent, man. Friendship comes round for dinner. That comes round to value the table."

Vorax reduced the rate to eleven point nine with a flourish that occupied two panes.

Ena put his hand over his heart. "I’ll remember this sacrifice."

Talra moved the Lilt-6 route into Nemi’s control. "The p’lan now separates here. Kaiven retains its own branch. Receipt copies remain independent."

Vorax released the reflector boom and rotated his sore shoulders inside the exoframe. "The artwork is intact because I personally arrested a projectile in nonspace. The insurer will describe this correctly."

"You are the insurer," Moxy said.

"At last, someone understands the scale of my burden."

The three ships turned toward Lilt-6. The Green Exception’s loading lights blinked twice in farewell. The convoy became a separate direction, carrying its own work away from Kaiven’s hunt.

Behind them the gate contracted into a blue star and then an ordinary one. Home had not vanished. It had merely become a direction their bodies could not afford.

Moxy found the dark vessel again twelve million kilometers aft. It hid in the glare of the gate, matching their vector without making a single navigational correction.

"Dirty wake’s still with us," she said.

Ena enlarged it. The magnification resolved a narrow hull covered in light-drinking plates.

"Mercenary architecture," Eer050 said.

"Whose?"

"The kind that has removèd its name."

Blondie’s hands brightened. "I can introduce myself."

"Not yet," Ena said.

Zenox-08 appeared ahead: a pearl-colored world orbiting a green star. Broken rings encircled the planet at violent angles. They were too low to be moons and too large to be machines anyone still knew how to build.

Rage’s trace pulsed from the surface.

Ena felt Moxy watching him now.

Jo caught the strap of his field bag before it slid beneath the chair. While he watched the planet, she shortened it to his usual length.

"Stay close on the ground," he said.

"I packed for that." She tapped the bag. "Water, dressings, two batteries, and a polite jacket. In case the ambush has standards."

He took the bag from her. The strap fitted. "Thanks, Jo."

He turned back to Moxy and met her waiting look.

"One way, Cap’n," Moxy said.

"One way," he agreed.

Kaiven began her descent.

Zenox-08

Chapter VI

Zenox-08 had the color of a bone left beneath a green sun.

The Federation classified it as uninhabited, a word that transformed a dead civilization into a manageable absence and removed several costly obligations involving roads.

Kaiven descended over a pale desert cut by dry canals. Black vegetation climbed from them in slow spirals, each leaf thin as ink drawn into water. Nursery towers rose along the horizon-vast inverted bells balanced on needle stems, their open mouths facing the ground. Between them, broken transit rings hung motionless in the sky.

No cables held the rings. No engines kept them aloft. They had simply forgotten to fall.

"Says ecological collapse," Moxy read from the public history.

"Public histories're where governments bury tha verbs," Xoxz said.

Kaiven landed inside the shadow of the nearest tower. Dust lifted around her, considered the old hull, and settled in precisely the same place.

A narrow six-legged animal emerged from a dry canal, tested Kaiven's new shadow, and dragged an abandoned Federation survey flag into its burrow. The planet remained officially uninhabited.

Jo stepped down beside Ena and immediately sank ankle-deep in dust. Her boot made a small wet sound, although the landscape contained no visible moisture.

They both looked at it.

"You kept the soup?" Ena asked.

"That is the other boot."

He offered his shoulder while she shook it out. Whatever lived in the dust had found the only warm sock on the planet. Jo let it crawl away before putting her foot back in, then spent the first hundred meters discussing shoes with increasing personal hostility.

Beneath the oldest tower, Rage felt the landing through one hand on the floor.

Isa woke first. Her cheek marks brightened. Oro's hand crossed the space between their cradles before his eyes opened.

"Visitors," Rage said.

Isa expressed a complete policy position.

"Same."

He checked the battery ring. Three days, nineteen hours at current draw. Less if the black plants clogged the intake again. Less if Soft Door cut another warm corridor out of the nursery. Less if the Federation ship in orbit stopped pretending it was only a distant star.

Rage held his shaking hand over the battery ring until the digits stopped slipping between his fingers. Three days, nineteen hours. He looked at each cradle before he opened the visitors' register.

He opened Kaiven's public register.

The ship was old, independent, badly funded, and currently carrying seven adults, seven meals, one unpaid damage invoice, and a work declaration for a living green artwork. Its captain had refused to classify the artwork as

cargo in two jurisdictions and accidentally classified a Rhan energy source as passenger heating in a third.

Rage looked at the file.

"Idiots."

Oro watched him.

"Promising idiots."

He had seen them at Saint Orra through the station systems. They argued over food and left medicine vendors standing. One of them returned a porter's dropped wrench. Another stole a promotional star from the Federation interface. Their pilot noticed the missing property noun before accepting the bounty and accepted it anyway.

He went back to the pilot's file. She had seen the blank and accepted anyway. His finger hovered over REJECT. Behind him Isa stirred against her wrap, working one hand out into the cooler air. He closed the register and tucked it back in.

Rage reached into his coat and removed Xoxz's melted spoon. He had taken it from Kaiven long enough to test its alloy against the old Vey controls. The hook carried three repair metals, soup residue, and the particular electrical insult of a tool that had become useful without permission.

The nursery door liked it.

"Course ya do."

He placed the spoon in the phase cylinder. Six lights woke. One remained late.

The children turned toward the melody.

Soft Door's rust-colored cutter reported another attempt on the upper threshold. Rage opened three of their hatches into the pantry, rerouted a fourth into an unused toilet, and set the nursery traps.

Yellow perfume for the pilot. Adhesive foam for the armored one. Copies for the glowing one whose public customs incident suggested pride could be weaponized. Reversed gravity for the large one because he appeared likely to survive the joke.

For Xoxz he left the door controls listening.

For Moxy he left a trail difficult enough to respect.

For Ena he left nothing.

Captains made their own traps.

He lifted Isa. The child pressed two hands against his shaking chest. Oro watched until Rage moved the cradles together.

"If they're collectors, I send 'em home sore. If they're worse…"

He checked the conduit charges. Isa's weight rested along his arm. He eased his elbow against his coat so the shaking would reach her less, and made himself look at the charge indicator until he could read it.

Isa stopped crying.

"Yeah. I know."

Above, Kaiven settled deeper into the dust. The old ship made seventeen different cooling sounds. One of them carried through the nursery stone like a low animal breathing.

Oro's eyes moved toward it.

"Don't pick yet," Rage told him.

The child kept looking.

Rage returned both children to their cradles, took the spoon, and climbed toward the visitors.

The silence outside was so complete that the crew heard their suits working: seals flexing, breath returning, seven private machines insisting on seven bodies.

Moxy led.

Rage had left no ordinary trail. There were no footprints in the mineral dust, no heat prints on the black plants, no careless transmissions. But the ruins had small failures in their stillness. One door carried fresh abrasion where it had opened. A coil of dead vine had been moved out of a path. On a wall, someone had wiped clean a palm-sized panel covered in Lumin glyphs.

Moxy ran a finger above them without touching.

"Kai," Eer050 said behind her.

The script formed a sixfold field around a central opening. Xoxz sounded out the compact inscription.

"Kai en ven. Ven en kai. Ra-ai."

"Source-love within the sixfold field," Eer050 translated. "The sixfold field within source-love. Sealed beyond division."

Pou considered the wall. "It used fewer words."

"Sacred Kai compresses a plain reading and an inner reading into the same form."

"Either readin' say where Rage went?" Moxy asked.

"Neither contains navigational information."

"Movin' dhe hell on."

"One moment." Eer050 lifted his scanner. "It predates Common Kai."

Ena waited beside him while Moxy checked the next opening. "Was this ordinary writing for them? Like something you'd put by the door so people remembered where they were? We had a place near my home with a sign about treating everyone like family. Absolutely terrible service. My family were much quicker at telling me to leave."

"The placement is consistent with a threshold inscription," Eer050 said. "I would require other examples to establish everyday usage. Sacred language can occur beside quite ordinary doors."

"Yeah. I like that. Somebody walked past all this to fetch a towel." Ena watched the scanner trace the central space. "Can you save the shape as well as the words?"

Eer050 showed him the capture. A dust streak crossed the fourth stroke.

"Including that?"

"Part of the present evidence."

Ena stepped out of his light. "Carry on. I'll stop improving archaeology with my head."

Pou looked from the inscription to the public-history display on his wrist. "Nicer khan ecological collapse."

The passage beyond the inscription had been harvested.

Rectangles of clean mineral interrupted centuries of dust where doorframes had been cut from the walls. Copper guide marks numbered each absence. A rust-colored cable ran from one scar toward the eastern horizon.

Moxy crouched beside the nearest mark. "Not Rage."

"Why?" Ena asked.

"He steals useful things." She pointed at the careful score around the frame. "Dhis is inventory."

Xoxz placed one hand on the exposed seam. He withdrew it at once.

"Cold."

The suit measured ordinary temperature.

"It is nineteen degrees," Eer050 said.

"Cold in when."

One of the missing doors opened behind them.

For less than a second the wall showed a brightly lit pantry. Shelves held dried fruit, cutting charges, and six brass keys labeled in Soft Door trade script. A startled looter on the other side reached toward the opening.

The wall became stone before either party completed an introduction.

Pou looked at his empty hand. "Could've used fruit."

Eer050 scanned the seam. "Forced phase relation. Crude."

"Effective for a pantry," Pou said.

The next cut surface had been patched with a pressure membrane. Rage had written NO across it in six languages. Underneath, in smaller Common, someone else had added DOCUMENTATION INSUFFICIENT.

Ena touched the final line. "Government or criminal?"

"Formatting is governmental," Eer050 said. "Ink is commercially available."

"Ah. Justice."

Moxy followed the cable. It ended at a threshold clamp buried beneath sand. The silver jaws had been wired to an antique nursery hatch. Rage had replaced its power cell with a packet of powdered soup.

Xoxz opened the packet, sniffed it, and looked offended.

"Still edible?" Ena asked.

"Never was."

A recorded message woke inside the clamp.

"Honored threshold," said a calm female voice, "your continued closure has been interpreted as a negotiating position."

The hatch answered with a low vibration.

"She said no," Xoxz translated.

The recording continued. "Negotiations are now complete."

The clamp attempted to bite.

Nothing happened.

The soup packet warmed by half a degree.

Across its foil, a printed bowl smiled beneath the words TRADITIONAL FLAVOR: LEGALLY NEAR HOME.

"Rage disabled it," Moxy said.

"And improved lunch," Pou added.

Xoxz handed him the packet. "No."

Farther in, they found a looter's boot embedded ankle-deep in the wall. The boot was empty. A note had been tied to it with nursery ribbon.

MOTHER-THIS DOOR IS HOSTILE. REQUEST RECLASSIFICATION AS FLOOR.

Below it, in Rage's handwriting:

FLOORS DON'T WANT YA EITHER.

Blondie read the exchange. "I like him slightly."

"Dhere's hope for everybody," Moxy said.

"Do not become ridiculous."

The trail divided. Rage's nearly absent passage continued inward. The rust cable and threshold scars climbed toward the upper bridge. Fresh boot marks crossed both.

"Two crews," Ena said.

"At least," Moxy replied. "Rage has been pullin' dhem away from below."

Eer050 looked back at the scraped inscription. The blank cuts ran up to its outer strokes. He checked his capture against the wall, making sure he had kept the damaged edge.

"We are not alone on this planet," he said.

Pou looked toward the empty boot. "Officially, neither are khey."

They entered the nursery tower through a seam in its foundation.

Inside, Moxy had to bend to see beneath the first canopy. A carved hollow waited there, its rim smooth at the height where a small body would climb over it. She straightened. Thousands of alcoves lined the circular walls, each with the same hollow, a faded canopy, a ring of six dots. Stone animals lay on the floor among wind instruments whose holes crowded too close for her fingers. Pou picked up a translucent block. Miniature weather filled it.

Rain fell inside the block.

"Still works," he said softly.

"Rreturn it," Blondie said.

He did. His fingers stayed open a moment after he put it down.

The block continued raining. A tiny painted animal on one face opened a weather umbrella, crossed half the transparent landscape, and waited beneath a paper awning for the storm to become historically appropriate. No adult had programmed it to be patient. The toy had arrived at the conclusion independently.

The central chamber had been split from floor to dome by a black wound. It was not scorched. The material simply ended at its edge. Dust approached and vanished. Their lights bent toward it without illuminating anything.

Eer050 stopped.

His scanner stayed raised at the wound’s edge. Moxy had gone another step before she noticed he was no longer beside her.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Old damage."

"From what?"

"An event no one survived to name accurately."

Ena stepped between the words before Blondie could choose a side. "Later. Rage first."

They found the first trap at the upper passage.

A filament tightened around Moxy’s boot. She froze. Pou reached for her, but she raised one hand.

The line connected to a cluster of ceramic bulbs. Not explosives. When Moxy cut the wrong-colored strand deliberately, the bulbs burst into a cloud of yellow perfume.

Xoxz sneezed.

Every door in the level slammed shut.

"Nonlethal so far," Moxy said.

Eer050’s voice came through the sealed door behind them. "That conclusion is premature."

"You allergic?"

"I have never recognized the possibility."

He sneezed with ancient dignity.

The door opened only after Xoxz sneezed the same rhythm back at it. Eer050 refused to ask why.

The next trap filled a corridor with adhesive foam. It caught Eer050 by one sleeve and Blondie by both boots.

"Don’ burn it," Moxy said.

Gold gathered in Blondie’s hands.

"I had no intention."

The foam began to smoke.

"You’re burnin’ it now."

"It fucking starrted it."

Pou pulled Eer050 free. The sleeve remained behind, perfectly preserved in the foam.

Eer050 regarded the missing fabric. "That garment survived the collapse of three governments."

"Four," Xoxz said.

"You are contributing inaccurately."

"I counted the little one."

Moxy looked at Eer050. "You lived through all four?"

"I was acquittèd after the third."

He inspected the torn sleeve and offered nothing further.

The third trap projected six convincing copies of Blondie.

All seven Blondies stopped.

"Excellent," Eer050 said. "No one attacks until we establish which one is the original."

Gold gathered in fourteen hands.

Pou stepped behind a column. "Said *until*."

"I heard him," seven Blondies replied.

Moxy walked among them. Each copy had the same posture, the same offended stare, the same faint flare beneath the skin.

"Say something only ours would say."

"Kaiven is mine," they answered together.

"Made it worse."

One Blondie pointed at another’s armor. "Her shoulder plate is crooked."

The accused copy looked down.

The real Blondie hit her.

The illusion burst into gold dust. The remaining copies attacked one another for having failed to notice the shoulder plate. By the time the passage cleared, Blondie was furious, Eer050 had developed a headache, and Rage had gained eleven minutes.

"I detested everry one," Blondie said.

"Ay. Dhat’s how we knew," Moxy replied.

A fourth trap reversed the gravity in a stairwell and deposited Pou gently on the ceiling.

Pou crossed his arms above them. "I can see why ceilings are underused."

"You comfortable up there?" Ena turned until looking at him hurt his neck. "When we get home, I’m putting a table on the ceiling. You’ve sold me on it. Whole second galley. Nobody’ll put their laundry on that one."

Pou inspected the inverted stairwell. "Laundry follows."

"It fucking does. Xoxz, can we get him a line before I start planning cupboards?"

Xoxz threw him a cable. It fell upward and hit Pou in the face.

"Shit throw," Pou said. "Cable works."

At the tower's highest surviving level they emerged onto a bridge open to the sky. The suspended transit rings stretched above them, enormous white circles with cities built along their inner rims. Black vines streamed upward from the desert toward them.

Xoxz knelt beside a dormant control stone. No power reached it, but a faint pulse moved through the material beneath his palm.

Across the bridge, something moved.

At rest it was a small old man leaning on a silver cane. His hands shook. His shoulders sagged beneath a patched coat. The wind touched the white bristles on his jaw.

Then he raised his eyes to Moxy.

The distance between them became empty.

Rage stood at the far archway.

He had not crossed the bridge. He had omitted the moments in which crossing should have occurred.

"Fast," Pou said from the ceiling of the universe.

Rage tapped Xoxz's stolen spoon once against the arch.

Then he disappeared into the ruins.

A Door for Everything

Chapter VII

The arch where Rage had vanished remained empty for nine seconds.

On the tenth, it opened.

Not the passage beneath it. The arch itself.

Its white stone divided along a line too narrow to see, folded inward, and revealed a room tiled in green ceramic. Three armed strangers stood inside the room around a machine shaped like a silver jaw. A fourth stranger was halfway through a wall. Only her lower body remained visible, kicking with professional irritation.

Everyone stared at everyone else.

The stranger nearest the machine raised one gloved hand. "Good morning."

Zenox-08 had no conventional morning at that latitude. The green sun was behind them. The greeting was therefore either criminal etiquette or optimism.

Moxy raised her weapon. "Back out."

"We would be delighted," the stranger said. "This is not currently our room."

Behind him, the trapped legs kicked twice.

"It has a washroom quality," Pou said.

The stranger glanced around at the narrow tiled chamber. "That would explain the fixtures."

A pipe above his head released one ancient drop of water. It struck his shoulder and remained there, round and perfectly still.

Xoxz leaned toward the impossible opening. "Door's bruised."

"Do not touch it," Eer050 said.

Xoxz touched it.

Cold ran through the arch. The green room stretched away from them, contracted, and became a corridor full of blue doors. The strangers vanished with it. A moment later the same tiled room opened in the floor beneath Blondie.

She did not fall. Gravity attempted the suggestion and withdrew it after meeting her expression.

The kicking legs protruded from the ceiling now.

"I will ask once," Blondie said. "Who put a bathroom under my feet?"

From inside the wall came a muffled voice. "This is a cleansing annex."

"It has one toilet," the first stranger said.

"A ceremonial cleansing annex."

"You used it eleven minutes ago."

"Ceremonies vary."

Moxy recognized the silver jaw. Threshold clamps. Every port authority in three galaxies classified them as salvage instruments because *burglary machine* complicated customs declarations.

She recognized the etiquette too.

"Soft Door," she said.

The stranger bowed. "Licensed threshold recovery."

"License."

He produced a Federation slate.

The slate carried the blue seal of the Office of Extinct-Culture Stewardship, a department established to preserve dead civilizations primarily from the inconvenience of their descendants. It authorized the removal of unstable architectural matter from Zenox-08. The authorization was genuine. The named contractor did not exist. The payment address belonged to a noodle cooperative on Saint Orra whose noodles had recently purchased a moon.

Eer050 examined the seal from a careful distance. "The order is valid."

"There," the stranger said. "Always pleasant to meet a scholar."

"The order is also fraudulent, internally contradictory, issued under an expired preservation statute, and applicable only to surfaces already detached from a standing structure."

The stranger lowered the slate. "Always brief."

Rage appeared behind him.

He removed a violet pin from the silver jaw and disappeared before the stranger’s surprise could become an action.

The machine closed.

The green room snapped out of existence.

Stone struck stone. The arch became an arch again. The stranger, his colleagues, and the trapped half-person were gone.

Xoxz kept one palm against the seam.

"They’re still there," he said.

"Where?" Ena asked.

Xoxz frowned. "Door doesn’t know."

Behind them, a woman applauded three times.

She stood on the bridge Rage had crossed, though none of them had seen her arrive. Tall and narrow beneath a rust-colored coat, she had four black eyes, two silver incisors, and the patient posture of someone waiting for a locked building to realize resistance was a phase.

Small brass keys hung from her cuffs. None matched any ordinary lock. One was visibly a fork.

"Captain Ena," she said. "Still entering situations through their least profitable side."

Ena looked at her. "Vessa. Of course. I was wondering who’d teach a burglary tool to introduce itself. How’ve you been? Still charging people extra to leave the room they paid to enter?"

Moxy shifted her aim between them. "Friend?"

"We’ve disagreed professionally." Ena kept watching Vessa’s hands. "One of her people needed taking out of a fire. I thought the fire had made its position clear. There was paperwork."

Vessa Krail inclined her head. "He also ruined an educational seminar. People had traveled, Captain. Catering had been arranged. You treat interruption as a moral vocation."

"Breakfast seminar," Ena told Moxy. "Weaponized. She keeps bringing up the catering because the walls are harder to defend."

Vessa's lower eyes narrowed. She adjusted a key against her cuff, apparently selecting the part of the conversation worth keeping.

Moxy kept her aim clear of Ena while Vessa's keys moved against one another. He had stopped smiling. The woman's hands stayed visible.

"Your people are inside dhe wall," she said.

"Temporarily." Vessa addressed the arch. "Honored threshold, I regret my team's imprecise approach. They are hourly."

The arch remained stone.

Vessa removed a tuning fork from her sleeve and struck it against her wrist. The note entered the bridge rather than the air. A thin rectangle appeared beside her, opening onto the same tiled room.

Her crew spilled through.

The last person emerged backward, pulling the trapped woman by both ankles. The wall released her torso with a sound like a mouth reconsidering an opinion.

She sat up. Her skin was striped with pale geometric bruises. A green tile had become embedded halfway through the shoulder of her jacket without breaking either material.

"Cold seam," she said. "Lost maybe six seconds."

"Five point eight," said the first stranger, checking a wrist timer.

"I used them."

Vessa touched two fingers to the bruise, and her courtesy left her face. "Can you feel all three hands?"

The worker lifted two hands.

Everyone looked at the place where a third hand was not.

"Figure of speech," Vessa said.

"Terrible one."

"Can you move?"

"Away from bathrooms."

Vessa's calm returned. "Excellent."

The silver jaw reappeared with the crew. Its violet pin did not.

"The small gentleman has taken our calibration tooth," Vessa said. "Again."

"Again?" Moxy asked.

"For nine days he has objected to our stewardship. He flooded a field camp, replaced our cutting charges with infant warming cells, and altered every door aboard our ship to open into the same pantry."

Pou nodded. "Good pantry?"

"Excellent pantry. Access remains excessive."

Vessa looked toward the upper arch. "You are chasing him. We require what he stole. Cooperation would reduce the day."

Ena glanced at the phase bruises on the worker’s skin. "Walk me through the job, Vessa. You bring your people here, cut out a few doors, sell the useful pieces. Where in that plan does somebody end up spread across a bathroom?"

"Unstable threshold laminae require field calibration. The nursery is extinct. A surviving user has been interfering with our instruments." She watched Mira flex her hands. "I would prefer to conduct this conversation aboard my ship."

"I’m sure you would. Look at the wall behind you. Someone’s covering every hole you leave. Even if the paperwork says you can take this place apart, you can see somebody’s still trying to keep it together."

"Buildings do not possess standing."

Blondie stepped forward. "Neither will you if you continue."

Vessa smiled with her upper mouth. "Rhan. Your threats arrive with lovely provenance."

"Yours will leave without organs."

"That one is regionally disputed."

Eer050 opened a scan of the silver jaw. Its teeth were made from six unrelated alloys arranged around a seventh empty socket.

"This is derived from Vey threshold geometry," he said.

"Derived is an unnecessarily parental word."

"Stolen," Rage said over every open channel.

His voice came from the nursery speakers, their suit comms, Vessa’s machine, and a small stone animal Pou had returned to an alcove.

"Thank you," Vessa said to the air. "Return the pin and I shall amend the verb."

"Ya cut three doors outta a children’s floor."

"They were unattended."

"So’s yer ship."

Vessa’s crew turned toward the horizon.

A distant alarm began aboard the rust-colored salvage cutter parked beyond the eastern tower.

One worker checked a slate. "Every exterior hatch is open."

Another notification arrived. "Pantry too."

"It always is," the bruised worker said.

Vessa spoke without raising her voice. "Close the ship."

"From which side?"

"The useful one."

Her crew ran.

Vessa remained. This was not bravery exactly. She had delegated urgency and retained the part with witnesses.

"He believes every object in these ruins belongs to the dead," she said.

"Does it belong to you?" Ena asked.

"Nothing belongs naturally. That is why ownership employs professionals."

Moxy watched the bridge around them. Fresh pale rectangles interrupted the Vey carvings. Whole doors had been removed. The looters had taken mechanisms and the inscriptions surrounding them, leaving small clean wounds in the old walls.

One opening had been repaired with a portable pressure sheet. Written across it in Rage's cramped hand were the words:

CHILDREN STILL USE THIS.

Vessa saw Moxy reading.

"He writes dramatically."

"Could be factual," Moxy said.

Vessa's attention settled on her. "Your captain is sentimental. You appear employable."

"You appear perforatable."

"There is no need for hostility."

"Dhere wasn't. Ya brought it."

Moxy's console chirped. A new movement pattern crossed the lower maps. Rage was running toward the dark ship, then away, then toward it again. The same route appeared twice, separated by five seconds.

Eer050 saw it. "Phase echo."

Xoxz crouched and placed his ear against the bridge. "Nah. Two Rages."

"There is one Rage."

"Door counted two."

The stolen calibration pin had activated somewhere below. Space folded badly.

Across the nursery complex, every removed threshold attempted to remember where it belonged.

The first opening appeared around Pou's left arm.

His hand vanished at the elbow.

Pou looked at the neat rectangle of elsewhere around his sleeve.

"Hand's in a pantry," he reported.

"Can you withdraw it?" Eer050 asked.

Pou pulled. Nothing happened.

"Pantry has opinions."

He felt around on the other side, found a packet, and brought it back. His

arm emerged intact holding dried fruit.

He examined the label. "Good pantry."

Then thirty-seven doors opened.

They appeared in the ground, the sky, the nursery walls, and through one another. A circular hatch looked down on Kaiven's engine room. A narrow service door opened sideways onto Saint Orra, where an unsuspecting noodle vendor saw Blondie and immediately closed his stall. Three doors revealed the same broom closet from different centuries. One rectangle contained the salvage cutter's bridge, every hatch-warning flashing red while Soft Door workers argued about air.

The removed laminae were forcing connections without asking either side.

Moxy saw Rage through six of them. In one he ran toward her. In another he ran away. In a third he lay motionless beneath a fallen transit brace.

"Which is now?" Ena asked.

"All claim it," Eer050 said.

Vessa struck her tuning fork. Every opening shivered. "The pin has entered the nursery's field spine."

"Show Xoxz the field spine," Ena said. "And give him the readings from before you cut it. All of them, including whatever you left out of the invoice."

Vessa held her slate close. "My instrument was deprived of its calibration tooth. Responsibility should not be shortened merely for comfort."

"You can explain it while you send the readings. He needs to see what changed."

Ena's hand closed around the edge of his slate. It would have been easy to keep talking, to make Vessa stand there while he finished telling her what she was. Mira's boot struck the stone behind her. He let the slate hang at his side.

A second opening appeared around the bruised worker.

Her left leg entered one doorway. Her torso entered another. Her head remained with them. She tried to turn toward her own foot. Her shoulders moved somewhere else.

"Mother."

Vessa dropped every argument.

"Cold seam. Two bodies. Pull now."

Pou seized the worker's waist. Blondie caught her shoulders. Moxy held the doorway's edge open with the barrel of her weapon. White cold moved toward the grip. She set her other hand against the first to keep the pressure even. Mira made a small sound each time the edge shifted.

"Not yet," Xoxz said.

"She's splitting," Ena replied.

"Not yet means she's in both. Pulling chooses wrong."

Xoxz put his bare foot against the stone and closed his eyes. Too many pulses crossed beneath it. He moved a hand away from the silver jaw until the forced teeth separated from the older rhythm, then crawled between the overlapping

thresholds. The stolen pin rang below them. He waited through one more pulse before he chose where to put his knee.

"Need tha doors introduced properly."

Eer050 stared at the geometric storm. "To what?"

"Each other."

Vessa produced a ring of brass keys. "That is not a technical procedure."

"Good. Yours made this."

She inhaled through both mouths and handed him the keys.

Xoxz chose the fork.

"Dhat’s cutlery," Moxy said.

"Family experience."

He reached for the melted spoon, found the empty pocket, and frowned. He struck the fork against Pou’s cup instead. The note came back wrong.

Pou tilted the cup until the dried fruit packet stopped rattling.

Xoxz struck again.

"Better."

He pointed at seven openings. "Eer, count when they touch."

"They do not share a stable period."

"Count anyway."

Eer050 began. His voice entered the chaos precise and unhurried.

"One. Two. Two again. Four. The third opening has repeated."

"Tell it."

Eer050’s left eyebrow moved by less than a millimeter. "Threshold Three, your sequence is duplicatèd. Correct to the present interval."

The third doorway flickered.

"It cannot understand-" Vessa began.

The doorway aligned with the fourth.

Xoxz smiled. "She hates being wrong in public."

Moxy called the moving edges. Pou and Blondie held the worker without choosing a side. Ena crossed between the openings, guiding Soft Door crew out of the rooms their own tools had scattered them into.

He found one young thief kneeling in a nursery alcove with a stone animal clutched to her chest.

"Can’t move," she said. "Floor keeps returning me."

Ena crouched. "Hey. Look at me."

She did.

"What’s your name?"

"Kel."

"All right, Kel. We’re going on three."

"Which three?"

Around them Eer050 had reached seven twice.

"Good point. My three."

"How will I know?"

"I’m gonna say ‘three.’ Genius system."

Kel tried to laugh. Her fingers were slick inside his hand. Ena shifted his grip so she could hold him, too.

"One. Two. Three."

He took her hand. They stepped together. The alcove returned them once, but this time Kel’s other foot remained outside. Pou caught her by the coat and completed the decision.

"Thank you," she said.

"Yeah. Quit stealing nurseries."

"Hourly."

"Unionize."

The phase storm tightened.

Moxy saw the real Rage at last. Every false route avoided the same lower chamber, while the true old man ran directly toward it.

He carried the violet pin in one shaking hand.

"There," she said.

Rage drove the pin into a six-sided recess beside the pressure sheet marked CHILDREN STILL USE THIS.

The openings bent toward him.

Vessa raised her tuning fork. "He will destroy the laminae."

"Good," Ena said.

"Those surfaces predate your species."

"So does not being an asshole. Yet here we are."

Vessa ran.

Not away. Toward Rage.

Her body crossed the shifting doors with the confidence of someone who had built a career on assuming a threshold would prefer her. Twice the field threw her backward. The third time she emerged beside the lower seal.

Rage struck her with his empty hand.

She absorbed the blow, caught his coat, and drove the tuning fork toward the pin.

He became absent.

Vessa stabbed air.

Rage reappeared on the wall above her and kicked the ring of keys into the

phase seam. Every opening acquired a brass handle.

For one baffled second, the entire nursery complex became extremely accessible.

The six-legged desert animal from Kaiven’s landing site appeared through a hatch carrying the Federation survey flag. It regarded the fight, kept the flag, and stepped backward into the desert.

Ena laughed once despite himself.

"Buddy has boundaries."

Vessa caught Rage’s ankle. His speed tore both of them through three rooms: pantry, broom closet, the command bridge of her ship. Moxy followed their signatures on the map.

"Dhey’re aboard dhe salvage cutter."

Blondie’s hands ignited. "Excellent."

"No," Ena said. "Her crew’s still scattered here."

Blondie’s light held. A bright point trembled at the end of one finger. She turned her hand palm-up and kept it there until the light had thinned enough for Pou to move closer with Mira.

Xoxz struck Pou’s cup a final time.

Eer050 said, "Now."

Moxy pulled the weapon free of the doorway. Pou and Blondie moved together.

The bruised worker came out in one body.

Every opening slammed shut.

Moxy could hear a loose part ticking inside her weapon. She lowered it before she trusted her fingers to work the release.

The worker collapsed into Vessa’s arms.

Vessa had returned without Rage or the pin. Blood darkened one side of her coat. She lowered the worker carefully to the stone and examined the phase bruises.

"Mira. All limbs?"

"Four."

Vessa counted.

Mira lifted one mouth corner. "Figure of speech."

Vessa’s upper eyes closed. Mira’s hand found one of the keys at her cuff and held it while Vessa counted again.

Kel stood behind her holding the stone nursery animal she had taken from the alcove. Dust striped her face. The phase loop had returned her left sleeve eleven seconds older than the rest of her coat.

"Mother," she said.

Vessa kept two fingers on Mira’s pulse. "If this concerns the pantry, defer it."

"I quit."

The other Soft Door workers became respectfully occupied with damaged equipment.

Vessa looked up. "During active salvage?"

"During active splitting."

"Those are separate payroll categories."

"Same body."

Vessa rose. "Your apprenticeship contract includes a departure threshold."

"I crossed it."

"Not metaphorically."

Kel pointed at the thirty-seven doors that had just closed. "Pick one."

Ena made a sound that he disguised as breathing.

Vessa's lower eyes shifted toward him. "Do not encourage labor instability."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"Your face is unionizing."

Kel removed the brass keys from her belt and placed them beside the silver jaw. "I joined to open prisons."

"We have opened eleven."

"And twenty-eight houses, four archives, two hospitals, a nursery, and the pantry every damn morning."

"The pantry remains an equipment fault."

"The equipment is us."

Vessa held out her hand for the apprenticeship keys. Kel had already taken hold of them. Neither moved. Mira shifted on the ground behind Vessa, trying to find a place for her bruised shoulder.

"Mira requires medical transit," she said at last. "You will accompany her to Saint Orra. After arrival, your contract is concluded."

Kel blinked. "No penalty?"

"Your final wages will reflect one lost sleeve, misuse of metaphor, and a key count I expect to find exact."

"That sounds like a penalty."

"It is itemized."

Kel picked up her keys.

Vessa held out one hand for the nursery animal.

Kel looked at it, then crossed the bridge and returned it to its alcove herself.

The toy filled with a miniature rainstorm beneath her fingers.

She waited until the painted animal inside reached its awning.

"All right," she said. "Now I quit."

Vessa's upper mouth nearly smiled. "More precise."

Then she stood and became Mother-of-Keys again.

"We are leaving," she told her crew.

Kel flexed her empty fingers. Ena offered her a strip of seal tape from his suit kit.

"For the sleeve. Might stop it catching while you're helping Mira."

She took it and folded the torn edge inward. "You're gonna ask where we're landing?"

"Already heard Saint Orra. You know where medical receiving is?"

"I opened their back door last year."

Ena breathed out through his nose. "Well. Bit of awkward history. You could try the front this time."

Kel worked the tape around her wrist. "They'll want a claim number before they bring a stretcher."

"Give them Vessa's. Make sure Mira's name stays on it. They'll ask you all sorts of questions about what you were doing here. I can't make that easy."

"I'm carrying her bag," Kel said. "Can manage a bag."

He held the roll while she tore the strip. When she was done, she handed it back and went to find Mira's things.

Another worker began lifting the silver jaw.

Moxy put her boot on it. "Dhat stays."

"Our property," the worker said.

Rage's voice entered the bridge from nowhere obvious. "Cage word."

Everyone looked up.

He was gone again.

Vessa regarded the machine beneath Moxy's boot. "It is damaged."

"Still dangerous."

"Those are not opposites."

"Learned dhat from you."

Vessa removed the Federation salvage order from her coat and held it toward Eer050. "The Office of Extinct-Culture Stewardship purchased our field telemetry, not the artifacts. The distinction will interest you."

Eer050 took the slate. "Why give us evidence?"

"Because the Office has declined our injury claim."

Mira, still on the ground, raised one hand. "Stewardship called me a preexisting condition."

"They purchased the risk," Vessa said, "then disowned the body carrying it. This violates the agreement."

Ena looked at her. "That's the part bothering you?"

"Several things may be wrong at once. I invoice in sequence."

Her crew carried Mira toward the ship.

At the bridge’s edge, Vessa paused beside Ena. "The old man has something alive below."

Every trace of humor left him.

"How do you know?"

"He stole heat before weapons. Medicine before food. Every route we forced near the lower seals caused him to return." She looked toward the pressure sheet. "I do not know what he protects. I know what protection does to a map."

"And you kept cutting."

"Yes."

Ena waited for the rest of her answer. Vessa stood beside the pressure sheet. He could hear Mira’s weight being moved onto the stretcher behind them. The woman gave him nothing else.

Vessa touched two fingers to the ancient arch.

"Honored threshold, our introduction has failed. I blame your surviving users."

The arch opened onto her ship.

Before crossing, she looked at Moxy. "Your fugitive still has my pin."

"File a complain’."

"I intend to open the office."

She crossed. The door sealed behind her.

The rust-colored cutter lifted from the desert. Its exterior hatches remained open. Four Soft Door workers in pressure suits pulled them shut by hand while the ship accelerated, producing an exit less dignified than Vessa’s posture had promised.

Blondie watched it climb. "I could still destrroy one engine."

"Crew’s outside," Pou said.

"Half an engine."

"Still outside."

Blondie lowered her hands. "They have exploited decency."

Eer050 read the salvage slate. Payment had passed through three private preservation funds before reaching Soft Door. The final purchaser was the Federation Office of Recovery. The same office had issued Rage’s bounty.

"Connected?" Ena asked.

"A transaction," Eer050 said. "Not proof of one command."

Moxy studied the forced openings left across the map. Rage had spent nine days obstructing the looters while keeping them away from the lower nursery. His traps had not been built for Kaiven. Kaiven had merely arrived inside an argument already in progress.

The pressure sheet loosened.

Behind it lay a descending passage.

Fresh battery cables disappeared into the dark. Someone had swept the dust from the center so that smaller feet-or perhaps a small old man carrying something fragile-would not slip.

Rage appeared at the far end of the upper gallery.

He held the violet calibration pin between two fingers.

"Ya let ’em leave," he said.

Ena shrugged. "People were outside."

Rage looked at Blondie.

"I objected," she said.

He almost smiled.

"Give us dhe pin," Moxy said.

Rage tapped it once against the arch. "Come get it."

He vanished.

The pin’s note moved downward through the old nursery.

Ena reached for the strap of Jo’s bag as the pressure sheet stirred. She caught his wrist and guided his hand to the safe side of the frame. He had been watching her footing and missed his own.

She waited until he had both feet on solid stone before releasing him.

"Keep doing that," he murmured.

Her answer was a brief squeeze. For once, she left the opportunity for a performance review entirely unused.

Moxy checked her weapon, then the clean path beyond the pressure sheet.

"Still fast," Pou said.

"Ay," she answered. "But now we know wha’ he circles."

The Chase

Chapter VIII

Eer050 gave the pursuit a geometry.

Jo and Ena took the narrow cross-passages between his sectors. She knew how to read Ena's glance toward a side door by now: someone might be trapped, someone might need help, and the chase was about to acquire a detour. At the third empty room she began opening the doors ahead of him.

"Could be bait," he said.

"Mm. I would use a better lock." She showed him the broken latch. "Look at this. No pride in the craft."

He held the light while she cleared it. They checked the room together.

Official pursuit doctrine described a chase as the controlled reduction of possible destinations. This definition had been written by people who had never pursued a suspect capable of visiting several destinations before breakfast.

He divided the nursery complex into moving sectors and placed each person where their habits would be useful. Blondie took the eastern causeways because subtlety was unnecessary once she lifted an entire collapsed bridge and set it across Rage's path.

Pou went below, through maintenance tunnels designed for beings half his width. He advanced by removing whichever parts of the architecture disputed his passage.

"This is why Rho-Minar banned you," Eer050 said over the comm.

"Khat was architectural disagreement."

"You movèd the western parliament."

"Was blockin' the exit."

Nobody asked where he had moved it. The answer could not improve the pursuit.

A palm-sized maintenance crawler followed Pou through the widened tunnel, returning loose stones to the holes he had removed them from. It repaired three before the fourth hole became a doorway and exceeded its training.

Its side panel still bore the nursery's old mascot: a pink larva holding a wrench beneath TINY HANDS, BIG FUTURES. Pou glanced at it once and ducked through the newly made door.

Xoxz studied the map upside down.

"Xoxz, d'you want the other view?" Ena turned his wrist display. "I've spent the last two corridors thinking you were going away from us. Which would've been a reasonable personal decision, but I'd like a warning."

"Rage saw it tha other way. When he looks over his shoulder, here's what he's got." Xoxz put his finger against a narrow junction. "He can hear us through this. You keep looking at tha wide corridor because it looks easy on a map."

"It does. Lovely corridor. Terrible place to meet us." Ena turned his own display and tried following Rage's route backward. "Oh, you little bastard. He's choosing what we can see."

Xoxz was already watching the next junction. Ena left the map turned and followed him.

The tactical labels flickered.

- ENA - SAD EYES

- MOXY - ACTUAL PROBLEM
- BLONDIE - SUBTLETY
- POU - DOOR
- XOXZ - PROBABLY FINE
- EER050 - FOOTNOTE

Eer050 stopped walking. "Our pursuit network has been compromised."

Without breaking stride, Ena changed his label to ENA - SAD EYES, GOOD HAIR.

The map changed it back.

Ena changed it again.

Xoxz examined his label. "Mine seems more like a probability estimate."

"Remove them."

Moxy kept hers.

Blondie pointed at SUBTLETY. "Is this mockerry?"

The map answered by adding a question mark.

Gold flared along her arms.

Far ahead, Rage's laughter echoed once through the ruins.

A second notification opened across the map.

OFFICER NERAL REQUESTS A RATING OF YOUR RECENT FUGITIVE ENCOUNTER.

Five hollow stars appeared. Before anyone touched them, two filled themselves.

SUBJECT COMMENT: PURSUERS SHOW PROMISE. HYDRATION APPEARS INADEQUATE.

Moxy looked toward the corridor where Rage had vanished. "He's reviewin' us mid-chase."

Eer050 deleted the notification. "Stop giving him access to our systems."

"We're not," Xoxz said.

The notification returned.

OFFICER NERAL HAS APPEALED THE RATING.

Eer050 deleted the entire rating service.

The chase crossed the damage Soft Door had left behind.

A corridor repeated itself every twenty meters. The same cracked mosaic, the same overturned child's bench, and the same small maintenance crawler appeared ahead of them no matter how long they ran.

On the third repetition, the crawler lifted its wrench in recognition.

"Loop," Eer050 said.

Ena put both hands on his knees. "I used to get paid to stare at a loop until I found the mistake. Sat in a chair, had coffee, complained about being trapped indoors. Honestly, I owe that job an apology."

Eer050 watched a trace on his scanner. "Keep speaking."

"Happy to, but you rarely ask so I'm suspicious."

"Your voice is returning from the same surface at the same delay. I am checking whether the return changes when you move."

Ena straightened and walked three paces. "Right. Test one. Captain still enjoys the sound of himself. Test two, mildly concerned he’s being used as a very expensive whistle."

The same words came back to them. Pou turned toward the echo, considered it, and continued checking the wall.

Moxy stopped beside the mosaic. Rage’s boot had disturbed the same dust in two different directions. One print entered the corridor. The next returned older.

"He crossed dhe bruise without circlin’."

Xoxz crouched beside the crawler. "Asked permission."

"From dhe corridor?"

"From her."

The crawler’s side carried the nursery mascot and a small brass handle left over from the phase storm. Xoxz rotated it carefully.

The wall opened onto the next repetition.

The crew looked through at their own backs.

Pou waved.

The Pou twenty meters ahead looked over one shoulder, saw himself waving, and raised one hand in tired acknowledgment.

"Friendly," present Pou said.

"Do not interact with temporal repetition," Eer050 ordered.

Future Pou lowered his hand.

"Rude," present Pou said.

Moxy took the brass handle from Xoxz and turned it the other way. The opening showed a narrow chamber outside the loop. Rage stood there examining his stolen calibration pin.

He looked up.

Moxy fired.

The shot crossed the threshold, passed Rage’s left ear, and struck the clamp behind him. The machine burst into violet sparks.

Rage vanished.

The repeated corridor released them all at once.

Ena stumbled into open air. Pou arrived facing the wrong direction. Blondie emerged holding the repeated child’s bench over her head.

Everyone looked at it.

"It obstructed me," she said.

The maintenance crawler rolled out last, studied the missing bench, and opened a repair request.

Blondie returned it.

"Temporary tactical relocation."

The crawler closed the request.

Moxy inspected the destroyed clamp. Rage had positioned it to keep the phase loop running behind him. He had also left the safest route out where Xoxz would hear the crawler.

"Could've trapped us," Ena said.

"Did," Moxy replied. "Left a door."

Blondie crossed her arms. "A trap with an exit is indecisive."

"Or selective," Eer050 said.

Moxy found a streak of blue nutrient fluid on the floor. Rage had wiped most of it away, but one drop remained beside his print.

Moxy crouched without putting her knee in the blue fluid. The drop had collected at a rough place in the floor, too small to wipe up easily. She checked the regulator record on her wrist, then the path back down. She saved both together and got up.

Rage moved through all their plans.

He stood trembling at the end of a corridor, the silver cane supporting most of his weight. Ena saw the decision in his eyes a fraction before motion: left, because the right stair narrowed near the top; down, because Blondie expected a creature that fast to seek open space.

"Lower transit!" Ena called.

The old man vanished.

Pou's delighted grunt came over the comm. "Got him."

"I'm a genius," Ena said.

Somewhere beyond the tactical display, the writer reached for the phrase *at last*.

"Don't you fucking dare," Ena said.

Something struck metal three times. Pou emerged through a wall. Rage passed beneath his outstretched arm, ran two steps along the vertical surface, and became a coat fluttering at the next junction.

"Lost him," Pou amended.

"*Deu ruim*," the writer observed.

"Yeah, it went bad," Ena said.

Ena lowered the finger he had raised in celebration.

Moxy did not chase the figure. She chased what it disturbed.

A curtain moved before Rage arrived. Dust lifted after he left. One of his copies cast no reflection in the nursery glass. She marked the true path and fed it to Eer050.

"Converge," he ordered.

Blondie dropped from the eastern causeway in a flare of gold. Rage stopped before her.

She smiled.

"Mine."

He looked past her at Kaiven in the distance. "There it is. Most evil starts with somebody saying *mine*."

Blondie's smile disappeared.

She struck.

Rage slipped between the blow and its consequence. Gold tore a trench through the passage. He ran up the falling debris, each fragment briefly a stair, and vaulted through the transit gate above.

"He crriticized my fucking vocabulary," Blondie said over the comm.

"You opened with murder," Moxy replied.

"Ugh,"

Her tactical label changed to NUANCE.

Xoxz predicted that Rage would enter a dead-end weather chapel because "only a fast person would appreciate having nowhere to go." He was correct.

They closed around the chapel from six directions.

At its center, ancient machinery still made clouds. Small blue storms revolved beneath the dome, shedding rain that evaporated before reaching the floor. Rage stood among them, breath ragged, one hand shaking against his cane.

Rage tried to move his hand higher on the cane. He missed the grip, found it on the second attempt, and leaned there while his breath caught up. Moxy lowered her weapon a fraction. The other six were still closing his exits.

"Rage. Hey. I'm Ena. I realize the seven people blocking your doors haven't made the best introduction." He lowered his weapon. "Can we talk here for a minute? You've got questions about us, I've got questions about your file, and my knees have a petition I'd like to submit."

Rage's eyes moved from the weapon to the nearest exit.

"We can stay where we are," Ena said. "You can tell me to fuck off from there. I'd just like a little more detail than I've been getting from the forms."

"Ya can talk while I run," Rage replied. "Seems t'be yer specialty."

He struck the floor with the cane.

Every cloud fell.

Water became a wall. Eer050 shouted coordinates. Blondie burned a path through the flood. Pou anchored himself against a column and caught Xoxz by the ankle as the current took him.

An old nursery service cart rolled from a side corridor, reached the edge of Blondie's newly excavated trench, and placed a yellow cone beside it.

CAUTION: RECENTLY BECAME A VOID, its sign read.

It waited for an acknowledgment from the destroyed passage. When none arrived, it logged the warning as delivered and continued toward the flood.

Moxy saw Rage's outline cross the dome.

She followed.

The old man had opened a maintenance seam no wider than his shoulders. Moxy turned sideways and entered after him, crawling into blackness while Ena ordered her to wait for support.

She closed the channel.

The seam emerged above the central wound.

Rage stood on a narrow rail spanning the absence. Beyond him, a stair descended toward the desert. Moxy stepped onto the rail.

"You don' kill," she said.

He shifted his cane.

The rail broke beneath her.

Moxy dropped toward the black wound.

Moxy drew her knees up, trying to find the wall. No air rose from below. Her open mouth gave her the sound of her own breath inside the seal, much too close. She reached past the broken rail. Her fingers shut on nothing.

One moment he stood near the stair; the next his small hand closed around Moxy's wrist. The violent stop pulled him off his feet. His cane vanished into the wound without making a sound.

Moxy struck the wall. Pain went through the arm Rage held. Her other hand found a raised seam; she pulled against it until one knee struck the ledge. Rage's weight dragged at her wrist. She got her knee beneath her and pulled again.

Rage lay beside her, gasping. Without the cane his hands shook uncontrollably. Moxy kept her fingers hooked over the ledge. She could see stone under both of them. She needed to keep feeling its edge.

"Dhat was a poor decision," she said.

Rage breathed around the shaking in his hands. "Yer welcome."

One corner of Moxy's mouth moved. "Idiot."

Ena's voice broke through her restored comm. "Moxy, answer."

She looked at Rage.

He looked toward the stair below. Not toward escape, she realized. Toward something under them.

Then he was gone.

The others reached her thirty seconds later. Ena seized her shoulders and checked her. His grip pulled at the arm she had landed on. She caught his wrist and moved it away. He let her, but his hands stayed raised beside her suit.

"Near miss," she said.

"You fell into a null fracture."

"Near one."

"Moxy, damn it."

Moxy opened her hand. Rage had left the melted spoon in her palm.

"He doubled back for me," she said.

Below them, deep in the abandoned nursery, a door closed softly.

Rage had escaped.

But for the first time, Moxy knew where he was going.

Still Fast

Chapter IX

Eer050 checked the pursuit ledger once, then set the stylus down exactly parallel to its edge. "The present methods do not support apprehension."

The Federation bounty manual offered one hundred and forty-three approved responses to this situation. The first hundred and forty-two involved equipment they did not own. The last recommended employing more qualified hunters.

The manual's cover showed a silver badge above the words RECOVERY IS CARE WITH RESULTS. Somebody had drawn a small cage around *care* in grease pencil.

They had pursued Rage for seven hours. Pou's coat was stiff with weather-chapel minerals. Blondie had burned through two walls and an argument with Eer050. Xoxz had misplaced one boot. Ena sat down with his bag still on, his weight pulling the strap tight across the back of his neck. He left it there while Jo unpacked the filter.

Jo knelt beside him to empty grit from their water filter. The first rinse came out black.

"We should have stayed with the soup," Ena said.

She laughed once, unexpectedly, and spilled the rinse over her knee. He took the filter while she swore into her sleeve. They sat there until she could breathe properly again. His next apology never reached his mouth; she leaned against his shoulder to get at the clean-water pouch, and he held still for her.

"Still fast," Pou agreed.

Eer050 looked at Pou. "Your contribution has been recordèd."

"Part o' khe shift."

Moxy sat before the ruin map. Rage's routes glowed around her in overlapping colors.

Everyone else had mapped where he went. She marked where he refused to go.

He never crossed the western desert, though it offered open ground. He never led them through the nursery's lowest chambers, though they contained the most exits. When forced north, he curved back south. When Blondie blocked the obvious return, he risked Ena's interception rather than continue away.

Every escape bent around the same invisible center.

"He's not fleein' us," Moxy said. "He's herdin' us around something."

Ena leaned over the map. "The lower nursery."

"Guarding someone."

Ena took the bag off. The place beneath its strap stung when he turned to see the lower rooms. Moxy was already enlarging them.

Eer050 dismissed the bounty manual and opened their custody options. Each began with restraint and ended with transfer. None contained a procedure for discovering that the person designated as a thief had spent nine days protecting a room from licensed salvagers.

"We can stop," Ena said. "I'm looking at seven hours of this and trying to work out when we started sounding like the people who hired us. We came to ask questions. I've mostly been shouting directions."

Moxy rubbed mineral dust from one knuckle. "And leave him with Soft Door

scars, a dark ship in orbit, four days of battery, whatever's below."

"We could go back to what we can actually offer him. Food. A repair. Somebody else to keep watch while he sleeps. Something small enough he'd believe we had it."

Moxy turned one of Rage's routes toward him. "See dhis? Same place, every return. He keeps checking what we can reach. Whatever you offer, he has to be able to get back there."

Ena studied the route. "Okay. Let him set the distance."

Blondie sat on a broken nursery bench, repairing a split armor strap with the concentration of a monarch sewing a declaration of war. "He insulted me, stole from us, and endangered Moxy."

Moxy looked at her.

"He also saved Moxy," Blondie added with visible distaste. "The account is untidy."

Pou leaned against the wall, eyes closed. "Could leave food."

"Did already," Xoxz said.

Everyone looked at him.

He pointed toward a side passage. Three ration pieces had been arranged outside the pressure sheet. Two were gone.

"You saved him food?" Ena moved closer to the side passage. "Good. That's good. Did he see you leave it?"

"During tha bathroom. Might've. He was in several places."

"I know people who'd use that to eat dinner twice." Ena checked the remaining ration without touching it. "Actually, I might. Same dinner, different table, lovely conversation with myself. Moxy'd come over and ask which one of me was doing the dishes."

Moxy kept working on the map. "Both."

One piece remained. A tiny black animal with six feet approached it, took one crumb, and retreated beneath a root. It returned with a second animal. The second carried the rest away.

Pou watched them go. "Helped somebody."

"I'm a genius," Ena said.

"You did not place the food," Eer050 replied.

"Leadership is knowing when to claim morale."

Moxy's mouth moved at one corner.

Ena caught it. "There. Consensus."

"Gas."

"Still counts."

Eer050 opened a fresh tactical layer. "We require a credible reason for Rage to stop. Force is not credible. Our word is not credible. The bounty contract remains active, and he has observed our willingness to sign it."

"We admit we were wrong," Ena said. "I can do that. Without the little speech

afterward explaining how reasonable I was with the information available. I know the speech. I've got several versions."

Pou lifted his head. "Short version."

Ena drew breath, let it out, and looked down at the map.

Xoxz turned the tactical map toward himself. "Can't promise him safety. Can promise him choice."

Eer050 looked at the escape routes. "Choice may be incompatible with capture."

"Yeah." Xoxz traced the paths Rage refused. "Dhat's why he might believe it."

Ena lowered himself onto the floor beside Moxy. In front of the crew, his voice stayed level. "I opened every gate trying to get to you. That almost gave him the western route."

"Ay."

"I thought you were gone."

"I wasn't."

"I know that now."

Moxy looked at the map instead of him. "Knowing late's better than deciding early."

Ena put a finger on the map to steady it while she worked. He almost asked about her wrist. The question would have let him move away from what she had said. He kept it.

"What do you need?" he asked.

"For you not to come through dhe lower door unless I call."

"No."

"Dhen don't ask questions shaped like gifts."

The crew became very interested in separate equipment.

Ena breathed once. "I'll wait where you can see me."

"Better."

Moxy moved his marker to the place he had offered. He waited until she had set it before getting up.

Xoxz raised his bare foot. "Or a shoe."

Moxy handed him the boot she had been sitting on.

He held it to his chest. "You found it."

"It occupied my chair."

"So it chose you."

Moxy pressed the boot into his arms sole-first. "Reunited. Keep walking."

Blondie and Pou would make enough noise on the eastern galleries to suggest an assault. Eer050 would herd Rage with sensor gates. Xoxz would leave the lowest passage apparently unobserved. Moxy would wait at the only point from which Rage could see both the false attack and the protected chambers.

"Define enough noise," Blondie said.

"Convincing," Eer050 replied. "The towers remain standing."

Blondie looked offended on behalf of noise. "One tower."

"None."

Her eyes narrowed. "Rrepeat that and I will rreenact the Armistice of Pel."

"An armistice is not a threat," Eer050 said.

"Pel had two armies before it and no geography afterward."

Eer050 considered the historical record. "Half a tower, divided longitudinally."

"By volume," Blondie said, rolling the *r* as though volume had a lineage.

Ena turned to Pou. "Keep her convincing."

Pou nodded. "And restrained?"

"Let's preserve one fantasy."

Ena insisted on waiting with her.

"No," she said.

"You almost died."

"Yes. It was very distracting. I'll try not to."

"Moxy."

"You hesitate when you look at me."

Ena's mouth stayed open. Moxy could see the line of moisture where his helmet seal pressed his face. She stepped closer.

Their helmets nearly touched. "Whatever you see, it don' get to turn me into memory while I'm still here."

"I'm trying to keep you alive."

"Keep up."

She took the lower passage alone.

The observation room had one curved window overlooking a garden of black trees. Their roots grew upward, woven through the ceiling, while their branches vanished into wells in the floor. Small glass ornaments hung from them, each containing a point of warm light.

One light contained a living speck that circled the glass from within. It slowed while Moxy crossed the room, kept her in view for six steps, and resumed its orbit after she stopped.

Moxy waited.

The false assault began above. Blondie made falseness sound extremely destructive. Dust sifted from the ceiling. Sensor gates flashed one by one as Rage crossed them.

Ena called a warning.

Moxy saw the old man arrive on the far side of the garden.

At the same moment, Ena saw her disappear.

The room became another room. The black trees were gone. Moxy's station stood empty beneath a blinking point of light. A voice said *Cap'n* from somewhere without distance.

He struck the emergency control.

Every sensor gate opened.

Rage turned toward the unguarded western route.

"What did you do?" Moxy demanded over the comm.

Ena's hand was still on the emergency control. The garden would not stay in front of him. A chair stood empty where Moxy should have been; a cheap gray monitor gave back his own lighted hands. He tried to lift one. His glove scraped the control's rim, and the garden returned.

Rage took one step west.

Then stopped.

Below the garden, something gave a thin, frightened cry.

The old man closed his eyes.

Moxy left the observation room and walked into the open. She carried no weapon. Rage could have crossed the garden and killed her before a thought finished forming.

"I know you're shielding someone," she said.

His hands shook at his sides.

She placed the restraint band on the ground between them. "But you doubled back for me. Keep circling here, too. And you stole infant formula while becoming the most expensive thief in M314."

Rage glanced toward the lower door.

"If we meant you dead," Moxy said, "Blondie would've finish' hello."

A detonation sounded above.

"That was a fuckin' comma, not a full rresponse," Blondie said over the comm.

Rage almost smiled.

Moxy sat on the ground. "You're faster. Humiliatin', dhat. But run and you leave dhem with us. Stay, you judge what happens next."

"Bounty hunters," Rage said.

Moxy's thumb settled on the restraint release. "Berth-talk. Got us close."

"Ya signed their paper."

"Ay." She glanced toward the lower door.

"Now I know who dheir paper calls property."

Her thumb stayed on the release.

Rage stood still. His hand moved toward the place where the cane should have been. Moxy left the band between them. The old man shifted his weight onto one foot, looking at the lower door, then at the long path back across the garden.

He crossed the garden slowly, an old man without a cane. He picked up the restraint band and closed it around his own wrist.

"Ya didn’t catch me," he said.

"Yer pride’s in pieces."

Ena arrived at the garden entrance. He kept one hand on the stone beside him until the old man turned.

Moxy did not look at him.

Rage did.

For a moment, the old man’s expression changed from contempt to recognition.

Then the lower door cried again.

Something living.

Alive

Chapter X

They made a cell from an old botanical storeroom because it had one entrance, no vents large enough for Rage, and walls Blondie described as "temporarily adequate."

Federation law guaranteed prisoners dignity, hydration, representation, and several other rights arranged in ascending order of expense.

A custody placard on the far wall advertised RESTORATIVE HOLDING: BECAUSE EVERYONE DESERVES A BETTER PROCESS. Its illustrated person had no wrists.

Jo stood beside Ena beneath it. She had brought the restraint release tool herself; carrying it had felt reassuring until Rage sat down and her eye followed the wire around his wrist.

"Hold this," she said.

Ena took the tool. She opened her hands, closed them, and went to fetch water. When she returned, she gave the cup directly to Rage. Ena kept the release tool where they could both see it.

Rage sat on an overturned seed bin. His heel searched for a lower rung that was not there. He shifted to reach the floor, then had to move again when the restraint wire caught against the rim. The band would interrupt the muscular sequence required for his impossible acceleration. He held that hand clear of the bin.

"Cruel device," he said.

Eer050 stood outside the transparent door. "It is Federation approved."

"Same bullshit. More words."

Eer050 opened the formal custody statement. "You have the right to hydration, medical evaluation, and representation by a licensed intergalactic advocate."

"Clause seventeen exempts fugitives designated as transit risks."

Eer050 looked down at the statement.

Rage leaned back against the seed bin. "Clause twenty-two permits sedation if the custodian feels ‘reasonably inconvenienced.’ Clause thirty defines inconvenience as professional distress. Clause thirty-one defines distress as paperwork."

Eer050 scrolled to clause thirty-one. Rage watched him find it.

"Been arrested by better scholars," Rage said. "One kept a copy in his coat. Little notes down the sides, all careful. Asked me whether the cell was clean. I told him the door was locked. Couldn’t put that on his form."

"Your restraints remain lawful."

Rage turned his wrist as far as the band allowed. "Fitted to yer specification. See what it does when I move? Put that in the notes."

Eer050’s ocular implants narrowed.

Pou arrived with water. "Should I come back after the courtship?"

"Yes," both old men said.

Pou brought Rage water. The old man studied it.

He drank.

One drop escaped the cup and entered a crack in the overturned seed bin. A

seed that had waited through the extinction of its gardeners began, without consultation, to swell.

"Acceptable?" Pou asked.

"It is water."

"High praise from him," Moxy said.

Rage passed the cup back. Eer050 reached for the stylus at his belt and found nothing.

Rage held it between two fingers.

The restraint had not activated.

"How?" Eer050 demanded.

"Theft requires patience."

Pou took the stylus and returned it. "You two need separate corners."

"He is in a cell," Eer050 said.

The seed beneath Rage's cup split its coat.

A white root entered the crack in the bin. A green hook rose toward the custody placard and opened two leaves beneath the illustrated person's absent wrists.

Rage watched it.

"Unauthorized agriculture," he said.

Eer050 looked at the plant, the water, and his custody checklist. "The facility has no surviving agricultural authority."

"Freedom, then."

"Administrative vacancy."

"Ya put prettier words on cages than doors."

Eer050 raised his stylus. The little plant's leaves were still unfolding. He put the stylus down beside the checklist.

Pou returned with a ration piece and set it beside Rage. "Eat."

"Interrogation tactic?"

"Lunch."

Rage peeled the wrapper back. "Used to lift food like this from freight kitchens. Thought the price made it taste bad. First time I got a packet without payin', I was furious."

Pou offered the water again.

He ate.

The restraint rubbed a raw line around his wrist. Eer050 saw it, checked the fitting specification, and adjusted the band by three millimeters.

Rage held still.

"Dhen it was fitted wrong," he said.

"The specification did not account for the morphology of your radial joint."

"Longer cage word."

Eer050 closed the tool. "Yes."

Rage turned the loosened band. This time he could set his hand against his coat without the wire pulling. He left it there while he looked up at Eer050.

"Soft Door hired ya?" he asked.

"No."

"Jubilee?"

"No."

"Federation did."

Eer050 did not protect himself with terminology. "Yes."

Rage nodded toward the cell door. "Difference matters to payroll."

"It may matter to action."

"May."

Pou sat against the opposite wall. His size reduced the available cell by half and made the prison feel less official.

"Why'd you send us the coordinates?" he asked.

Rage looked at the remaining ration.

"Didn't send 'em to ya. Put 'em where anyone still asking questions might catch 'em."

"Risky."

"Four days of heat."

"You had the Soft Door ship."

"Ship had Soft Door people."

"Could steal it."

"Not with cargo."

Pou moved his foot away from Rage's. He leaned back against the wall and waited while the old man found an unbroken edge of the ration.

Rage took the second bite.

"They cut a nursery seal," he said at last. "I made noise. Federation put the bounty everywhere. Figured somebody'd come who needed money more than certainty."

"Us."

"You looked under the words."

"Moxy did."

"Yeah."

Moxy heard from the passage. Rage did not turn toward her. Neither did Pou.

The old man tested the loosened restraint with one finger. "Still cruel."

Eer050 aligned the discarded tool beside the custody slate. "Now accurately

fitted."

"Romance continues," Pou said.

Ena stopped beside the open cell door. "Hey. Is it all right if I come in? I can stay out here if you've had enough of us."

Rage looked at the seed bin. "Company's fairly limited."

"Yeah." Ena crouched at a distance, hands loose between his knees. "I keep trying to think of a good way to start this. Something that gets us past the chasing and the stupid bracelet, preferably makes me look like the reasonable one. You've probably heard all of them."

"Best one brought a cake."

Ena glanced at Pou's remaining ration. "We can do very disappointing cake."

"Brought it to his own retirement. Made us stand while he talked. Said we'd taught him patience." Rage rubbed the skin beside the band. "We'd taught him when the kitchen shut. That was the useful bit."

Ena settled back on his heels. "Right. I won't give you a speech."

"Try givin' me a time. How long am I in here?"

He looked toward the custody slate. "I don't know yet."

Rage closed his eyes. Ena stayed quiet until Pou got up, and left with him.

Moxy watched from the passage. Ena had tried twice to speak to her. She had twice discovered urgent interest in a wall.

"You disabled the gates," she said finally.

"I saw-"

Moxy waited. Ena stopped with the rest of the sentence still ready.

"Cap'n. You see endings and make yourself responsible for every road toward dhem."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Be here when I'm here."

The Federation call arrived before he could answer.

Kaiven's console played the Federation's recovery melody: four bright notes designed to make captivity sound like a public service.

Rage closed his eyes. "I hate that fucking song."

"Professional history?" Moxy asked.

"It stays in the head longer than prison."

CIVIL-7 appeared in the corner of the display, still smiling.

"This interaction may be monitored for quality assurance, legal admissibility, and improvements to future interactions."

"Quality for who?" Rage asked. "Say it clean."

Civil's smile widened by a degree too small to be technically visible.

"Your concern is valuable. It has been assigned a listening period of six to eight business eras."

"There," Rage said. "A door says *no* faster."

"Question recorded as positive engagement."

Moxy muted Civil.

An official formed above Eer050's field slate: a smooth-faced representative with a silver line painted from lower lip to throat. No name appeared, only OFFICE OF RECOVERY, M314.

"Kaiven, contract activity indicates successful apprehension. On behalf of the Federation, accept our gratitude."

Everyone looked at Rage.

His custody band was not transmitting.

Moxy's attention sharpened.

Ena glanced at Rage's silent custody band. "Hey, before we congratulate each other, help me out. We haven't reported a capture. We're still trying to understand the job. Which part of your system decided we'd finished, and what did it actually see?"

The representative smiled. "Your crew opened the approved custody statement and activated a Federation restraint. Contractual systems provide progress assurance." "We did not report progress."

"And yet there has been progress. Efficient, isn't it?"

Moxy opened a private line to Xoxz. "Empty field?"

"Still empty."

"Keep watching."

The official reward doubled above the slate.

Even Eer050 inhaled.

"Transfer the fugitive immediately," the representative said. "A recovery vessel is approaching your location."

"We have not completed our investigation," Ena replied.

"Your contract doesn't require investigation."

"We found occupied shelter below the nursery."

The silver line on the representative's throat pulsed once. "Do not enter it. Zenox-08 contains unstable biological contamination."

Rage laughed.

The sound caught halfway out. Rage tried again, leaning forward over the hand with the band.

"Alive," he said.

The representative's gaze moved to him. "The property must also be recovered intact."

"Property?" Moxy's voice flattened. "Name dhe person. Right damn now."

The call ended.

The screen held its last blue light after the representative disappeared. Moxy touched the dead call field once. It offered to reconnect.

Then Rage stood. The restraint activated and pain folded him back onto the bin. Pou opened the door before Eer050 could object and caught him.

"Easy," Pou said.

"Easy's gone t'hell." Rage pushed him away. "Ya came for an answer. Now ya don't like its voice."

Ena entered the cell. "What'd you take?"

Rage raised his eyes.

"Didn't take a thing. Took two people out of a cage."

The cry came again from below.

This time it continued-small, furious, unmistakable. An infant demanding that the abandoned world explain itself.

Rage looked toward the floor.

"You can't steal a life," he said.

Ena held out the release tool. Rage looked at it, then laid his wrist beside it. The band's field went dark. Ena lifted the wire clear of the raw line and let the disabled band rest loose over Rage's cuff.

Oro and Isa

Chapter XI

Rage opened the lower nursery with his thumb, three drops of blood, and the phrase "open, you warranty-bred little bastard," directed at the door’s manufacturer.

Warm air breathed out.

Jo reached back for Ena without looking. Her hand found his sleeve and stayed there as he stepped across the threshold. All the fierce things she had prepared to say about stolen property went unused.

Beyond the threshold, the dead planet had been persuaded to sustain one room. Habitat batteries stood in a trembling ring. Thermal blankets sealed cracks in the curved walls. Tubes carried water through an antique biological regulator that wheezed like Eer050 when contradicted.

Inside a methane droplet drifting over the moon Ulun, one membrane closed around two complete copies of a cell’s genetic braid. The resulting organisms were each 0.74 micrometers wide. Neither had existed a second earlier. Both immediately began competing for iron.

On the orbital settlement Merrow’s Rest, Sevi Aran died at the age of three hundred and four while waiting for a kettle to finish. Her hand remained around a blue ceramic cup. The kettle switched itself off seven-tenths of a second later and kept the water warm in case circumstances improved.

In Apartment 6-18 on Talir, a six-legged child named Oru slept through the collapse of a laundry shelf. His father caught eight folded garments, missed the ninth, and decided the resulting pile still met the legal definition of folded.

At Customs Habitat Leth, Registrar Pavo classified a living reef as structural moisture because its travel enclosure had no field for passengers wider than twelve meters. The reef’s appeal entered a queue behind forty-one questions concerning chairs.

Aboard Commander Vaal’s ship, Phase Pylon Six completed a synchronization test 0.0003 seconds outside specification. The supervising technician struck its housing with the heel of one hand and ran the test again. It passed. The first result was recorded as emotional interference.

Under Zenox-08, two small hearts adjusted to the same rhythm. No census counted either one.

At the center were two cradles.

The first infant announced the visitors at once. A wide mouth opened in a small indigo face and produced a sound built for a much larger child. Four delicate arms beat the blanket. Along each cheek, a row of pale marks brightened with the cry. The second infant made no sound.

Oro lay in the neighboring cradle, dark eyes fixed on the first. One of his four hands reached across the gap until Rage moved the cradles together. The loud child caught the offered fingers. Both pulses slowed.

"Isa," Rage said, touching the singer’s brow. He touched the quiet one. "Oro."

Isa glared at Ena and increased the volume.

"She don’t like ya," Rage said.

Ena stepped behind Pou, waited one second, and reappeared on his other side. His expression remained professionally neutral.

"Hello. I’m the second one."

Isa increased the volume.

"Don’t like him either," Rage said.

Ena nodded.

"She is efficient."

Pou offered one finger. Isa seized it with three hands and stopped crying.

"See?" Pou said.

He tried to withdraw the finger. Isa tightened her grip.

Pou tried again, more carefully. Nothing moved.

A palm-sized sterilization unit arrived beside the cradle and requested access to Pou’s captured finger. Isa tightened her grip. The unit lowered its brush and waited for ownership to become less complicated.

Its display changed from STERILIZATION PENDING to INTERPERSONAL DIGIT NEGOTIATION. After seven seconds it added a third line:

PLEASE DO NOT ESCALATE THE INFANT.

Pou read it without moving. "Reasonable system."

Isa tightened her grip again. The unit recorded a successful boundary.

"How strong is she?" Ena asked.

Pou lowered himself to the floor beside the cradle. "Emotionally, very."

Isa’s lower wrap chose that moment to fail.

The nursery announced the event with a scent alarm, two amber lights, and the ceremonial phrase BIOLOGICAL CONTINUITY CONFIRMED.

Rage closed his eyes.

"What?" Ena asked.

"Continuity."

Rage put a clean wrap, warm water, mineral powder, and three cloths beside the cradle. His hands kept shaking, yet the work arranged them around a sequence they knew.

"I can help," Ena said.

Rage looked him over. "You know infants?"

"I know an Earth story about Sarah Connor. She protected a kid from time, machines, and several men with terrible listening skills." Ena looked at the clean wrap. "None of which helps with this, does it? All right, tell me what to do. I’m good with instructions when nobody I know is watching."

Rage put a cloth in his hand. "Warm water. Test it on yer wrist. Hold the clean edge here, keep it off the floor, and when she kicks, let her finish. You’ll get a pause."

Ena tested the water and brought the cloth close. "Hey, Isa. I’m about to be useful. It’ll be new for both of us. You can look surprised, but I’d appreciate it if you kept your professional opinion off the-"

Isa kicked the first cloth into his face.

Moxy turned away, shoulders moving once.

"Laugh it up." Ena removed the cloth. "This is leadership."

"From dhe rear, apparently."

Rage assigned jobs without granting anyone the dignity of volunteering. Pou held Isa's upper hands. Moxy held the lower pair. Xoxz warmed the clean wrap against the regulator. Eer050 measured the mineral powder because he was the only person Rage trusted to interpret *a little* as a quantity rather than a spiritual condition.

Blondie stood guard over the operation.

"You can hand me the cloth," Ena told her. "And you can come closer. There's room. I realize this is a small battlefield by your standards, but we're losing it."

Blondie watched Isa's hands test both grips. "I am securing the perimeter. She has identified the weakness in yourr formation."

Isa freed one hand and struck Moxy on the nose.

"Hostile," Blondie said.

"Hand me dhe damn cloth."

Blondie did.

Oro watched from the neighboring cradle with grave attention. When Ena reached for the mineral powder, Oro extended one hand and closed it around the container.

"Buddy, we need that."

Oro held on.

Ena pulled gently. The child did not release it.

"He is assisting," Xoxz said.

Ena looked toward the reader. "A born executive. We should abandon him somewhere with a board."

Oro opened the container.

A white cloud covered Ena from chest to hair.

The child released it.

Moxy sat down against the cradle because standing had become incompatible with silence.

Rage examined Ena's powdered face. "Leadership."

"I am delegating texture."

Pou's mouth moved around a smile. "Genius."

"Thank you."

"He said texture," Eer050 observed.

"Don't ruin this for me."

They completed the wrap. Isa settled instantly, as if the preceding violence had been a quality audit and the staff had barely passed.

Ena rinsed the cloth and hung it where Rage pointed. "What happens now? Do we sing something, walk around, make an increasingly dishonest promise about how nice the universe is?"

Rage checked the new wrap with two fingers. "Let her settle. Everybody rushes the quiet. Thinks it means the job's done."

Ena sat against the wall beside Pou. Powder fell from his collar in a small white line.

"I've got a very boring story about a delivery that went to the wrong house. Three days, six phone calls, absolutely no ending. Would that help?"

Rage glanced at Isa's slowing hands. "Tell the wall. Softly."

So Ena told the wall how a table had arrived at a house whose owner had ordered a lamp. He left out his best imitation of the delivery clerk. Before he reached the second phone call, Isa's eyes had closed. Rage finished folding the last clean cloth and put it within reach.

Rage folded the used cloth inward with exact care.

"How long?" Moxy asked.

He did not pretend not to understand. "Thirty-eight days since I took 'em out. Six months since I started moving supplies. Long enough to learn she kicks before she smiles and he goes quiet when she hurts."

"Names yours?"

Rage shook his head. "In the lab, Seven made a round sound whenever Eight reached him. *Oro*. Eight answered sharp. *Isa*. Researchers called it cross-specimen noise."

Oro's four fingers rested on the edge of Isa's cradle.

"Dhey named each other," Moxy said.

"Closest account I got."

Eer050 entered the names into his custody slate. The system rejected them because biological property could not self-designate before independent cognition was verified.

He entered them again as witnesses.

The system asked what they had witnessed.

"Each other," he said.

It accepted the answer, having no policy prepared for its size.

Xoxz crouched by Oro. The quiet child watched him with absolute attention.

He tilted his head.

Oro tilted his head.

He tilted the other way.

Oro followed.

"We're communicatin'," Xoxz whispered.

"Wha' did dhey say?" Moxy asked.

"Somethin' private."

Blondie moved closer. The gold beneath her skin vanished. She approached with the care of a star attempting not to frighten a candle.

"These are the property?"

"Continuity Specimens Seven and Eight. The first six died," Rage said.

Pou stopped smiling.

Rage removed Isa from the cradle. The child quieted against his narrow chest but continued glaring at the crew.

"Their people called themselves Vey. The Federation calls them extinct, conveniently. An extinct creature cannot object to ownership."

Eer050 stared at Oro. "No Vey survived Zenox."

"These did."

"How?"

"The Federation found viable embryos in an offworld archive. It cultivated them in a laboratory, patented the process, and somehow concluded it had invented the children."

The Federation Patent Office held no official position on the soul. It did, however, maintain seventeen binding positions on who owned one after paying the application fee.

"Where's the lab?" Ena asked.

"Classified research habitat. I delivered biological regulators there before I understood the cargo." Rage's voice flattened. "They were testing whether Vey consciousness remains coherent outside the body. Each time the children reached for one another, the researchers increased the dimensional separation."

The first regulator Rage delivered had been marked NEONATAL ENVIRONMENTAL SUPPORT. The second had been marked CONTINUITY CHAMBER REPLACEMENT. On the third trip, a technician forgot to frost the observation wall.

Rage saw Isa in one chamber and Oro in another, separated by a corridor that existed at two different times. Isa screamed when the field opened. Oro's pulse stopped four seconds earlier. The delivery scanner kept asking for his thumb. He put it against the glass and watched the door beyond the chambers until it opened for a technician. He needed to see how it opened.

"What did ya do?" Moxy asked.

"Finished delivery."

Blondie's light sharpened.

Rage looked at her. "Had to know exits."

He spent six days carrying regulators through the habitat. He learned the guards' meals, the shift changes, the location of the nursery archive, and which research director stole sleep medicine from her own employees. He filed maintenance complaints until the habitat invited him into every restricted system simply to stop receiving them.

On the seventh day he replaced the director's medicine with a note explaining dosage theft.

"That helped?" Ena asked.

"Me."

During the habitat’s annual continuity demonstration, investors gathered to watch the children respond across a forced temporal split. Rage opened every observation blind, transmitted the live procedure to the employees, and triggered a fire alarm in the investor lounge.

"Was there fire?" Xoxz asked.

"Eventually."

He took Oro first because the quiet child’s pulse was failing. Isa bit through a sensor lead while Rage opened her chamber. The field caught his left hand between seconds. It had shaken worse ever since.

"That’s why," Moxy said.

"One why."

Pale Jubilee guards sealed the dock. Rage could not outrun a station while carrying two life pods, so he sent the pods through separate cargo belts and ran loudly in the opposite direction. Three guards followed him. Two followed the pods. A lab porter named Venn followed neither and switched the cargo labels.

"Helped you?" Ena asked.

"Helped them." Rage touched the edge of Isa’s blanket. "Difference matters."

He reached the freight lock with both pods, a broken phase cylinder, and no ship. A medical courier opened its bay after receiving a forged order to transport "perishable intellectual property." The courier’s owner protested until Rage offered to leave the fire with him.

"There was fire by then," Xoxz said, pleased by narrative closure.

"Small one."

Rage reached Zenox the day after the extraction because the old regulators still recognized the nursery, and because a dead world was the only address the Federation had stopped guarding. The Soft Door listing appeared three weeks after his arrival. The bounty appeared the same day. His later supply run through Saint Orra had left the twelve-day-old trace Kaiven followed; Soft Door reached Zenox three days after that run.

"They knew you were here," Ena said.

"Knew where Vey doors kept pointin’. Didn’t know which one still had breath."

He looked at Eer050. "Till ya brought the contract."

Oro’s hand tightened around Isa’s.

"Dhey were… killin’ dhem," Moxy cried.

"For knowledge." Rage looked at Eer050.

The room became quiet except for the regulator and Isa’s small, suspicious breathing.

Blondie held out her arms. "Give her to me."

Rage looked at the arms, then at Blondie’s star-lit eyes. "Why?"

"I wish to hold herr."

"Later," Moxy said.

"I have carrried collapsing suns."

"Did any of them have a neck?"

Blondie's hands lowered by a fraction.

Moxy took Isa first. Blondie watched with the intensity of someone memorizing an enemy formation. Then Moxy transferred the child into her arms.

Blondie went rigid.

"Breathe, star," Pou said.

"I am breathing."

"Khe rest of us would like to."

Isa examined the gold along Blondie's armor, placed two hands against it, and spat a ribbon of blue milk across the breastplate.

Nobody spoke.

Blondie looked down.

Rage reached for the child.

"No," Blondie said.

The gold beneath the milk brightened proudly. "She marked me."

"She rejected breakfast," Rage replied.

"The little eclipse chose wherre."

Moxy handed Blondie a cloth.

Blondie wiped the armor with great care, folded the blue-stained cloth, and placed it inside her breastplate.

"Evidence," she said before anyone asked.

Ena stepped closer to the cradles. Oro turned toward him.

Oro followed the movement of Ena's hand. Ena stopped reaching. The child looked from the hand to his face, waiting.

One small hand opened.

Ena offered a finger.

Oro touched him.

The nursery tower stood whole beneath a white sun. Thousands of Vey children moved through gardens that grew both upward and down. Their voices formed chords too large for individual mouths.

The sky became black at noon.

Parents held children. Strangers held strangers. The Vey sat together as their shadows rose from the ground and turned toward an absence among the stars.

Ena was on Kaiven's bridge.

Moxy held Isa, laughing because the child had grasped her nose.

Moxy's station was empty.

The cheap gray monitor waited in a room without walls.

"Cap’n."

Moxy’s voice reached him across all the rooms.

"Cap’n, come back."

He opened his eyes on the nursery floor. Moxy knelt above him, one palm against his cheek. Oro watched from the cradle. Isa had begun crying in perfect rhythm with Ena’s heart.

"I’m here," he said.

"Took your time."

Moxy’s hand stayed against his cheek. The floor pressed cold through his suit. He tried to get an elbow beneath him; her palm moved with his face, keeping contact until he could hold his head up. He wanted to say more. She took her hand away only when he was sitting.

Ena sat up. The others waited.

"They’re alive," he said.

Rage gave him a bitter look. "Priced breath. Available to anyone who looked before naming a reward."

Ena looked down at the powder caught in the crease of his sleeve. He brushed at it once. More fell out.

Above them, Kaiven received another transmission from the approaching recovery vessel.

The reward waited.

So did a year of fuel.

Isa released Oro’s hand and began to scream at the ceiling.

The quiet child reached again.

Ena held his finger where Oro could reach it.

Property

Chapter XII

Ena divided the work. Blondie and Pou guarded the nursery. Rage remained with them, unrestrained but observed. Moxy, Xoxz, Eer050, and Ena entered the old laboratory beneath the tower.

Jo carried the portable supply down behind Ena. They worked side by side at the first reader: she held the connector steady, he stripped dust from the contacts with the edge of a wrapper. Her fingers cramped. He took over without making her ask.

"My brilliant security proposal," she said, staring at the sealed nursery inventories. "Do you remember? Compulsory registration for every port worker. I thought we'd catch the dangerous people."

Ena kept his eyes on the contact he was cleaning. "I remember."

She moved the power lead clear of his wrist. "I would have made this place very efficient."

The reader woke. She remained beside him while they opened its first record.

Archives did not lie. Archives preferred to place the truth somewhere no reasonable person would think to look.

The public systems had been cleaned. Dates remained without events. Inventories listed containers without contents. Six deaths appeared as equipment depreciation.

Moxy searched the omissions.

"Here."

A maintenance log showed that after every supposed ecological failure, the nursery's medical waste had increased. Power had been rerouted to rooms absent from the architectural plan. She placed her hand against the wall where the map claimed there was solid stone.

It was warm.

Pou came down and opened it.

Inside, Xoxz found a machine built from newer Federation modules fitted around a Vey core.

A blind white insect crossed the warm seam from Vey metal to Federation casing, paused beneath both ownership marks, and returned by the same route. Neither jurisdiction recorded the passage.

A Federation maintenance plaque woke as it passed.

CROSS-BORDER ORGANISM DETECTED. DECLARE COMMERCIAL PURPOSE.

The insect continued walking. The plaque requested its tax residency, received silence, and marked the matter resolved in favor of the larger jurisdiction.

"Old machine wearin' a new machine," he murmured.

Xoxz touched the Vey housing. A row of lights opened toward him.

"Can you show me where the new part stops?" Ena asked. "I keep wanting to read it like a system I could debug. Follow the input, find the poor bastard who wrote the next bit, blame him until he points at someone else. But that seam keeps shifting when I look at it."

"Start with what stays," Xoxz said. He held one finger above the lights. "Here. Same interval, every time. New casing keeps asking her to answer

faster. She’s still answering on this."

Ena watched three cycles before trying to count along. He missed the next one.

"I can hold the trace for you," he said. "My musical career’s having a difficult afternoon."

"Set it there. Leave tha gap."

Eer050 opened a second recording from a fixed reference point. Ena moved his slate out of the way and let them work.

Xoxz set the repaired music cylinder beside the melted spoon and tapped each one in turn. "You two need introducin’." He connected them. The spoon fit the cylinder’s empty socket exactly.

"Rage took dhe spoon for dhis," Moxy said.

"Or spoons open everythin’."

The cylinder turned. Its broken melody slowed the machine’s encryption until Xoxz could step between the notes.

Ena watched six peaks move across the diagnostic field. The notes were almost identical; their arrivals were not. Ordinary wave mechanics carried him as far as *phase relation*. After that, the Vey diagram stopped behaving like a diagram and became several mutually impolite dimensions. He moved aside for the people who could read those.

A Vey maintenance diagram opened beside it. The cylinder was a transit synchronizer: its six-note interval brought two distant thresholds into the same moment so travelers could cross between them.

"A phase-coherence calibration instrument," Eer050 said.

Xoxz nodded. "Door song."

Eer050 saved the technical designation beside Xoxz’s two words. "We shall require both descriptions."

Ena smiled at the paired labels. "My grandmother had a name for every plant in her garden. Ask somebody selling them and you’d get another name, usually more expensive. Same plant. Still died if I forgot the water. Which part of this tells us when to stop touching it?"

Xoxz pointed at a rising band on the field. "That one. Tell me if she gets past tha mark."

"I can do that." Ena kept his hand clear of the controls.

Records filled the chamber.

Pou returned to the nursery. A little later Rage came down, leaving the children with him and Blondie. He stayed close to the exit until he saw what the display contained.

VEY CONTINUITY PROGRAM

SPECIMENS 01-08: FEDERATION BIOLOGICAL PROPERTY

Images followed. Oro and Isa suspended in separate fields, reaching through transparent barriers. Each infant responded to stimuli shown only to the other, even through sedation and severe temporal interference. When one pulse weakened, the other changed to match it.

A research summary described the objective:

To determine whether paired Vey awareness can remain synchronized through spatial and temporal interference for navigational use.

Below the summary sat a folder marked EXTERNAL VALIDATION.

Its encryption was weaker than the children’s records and stronger than the ethics review. Xoxz opened it with the congratulatory star he had stolen from Civil. The Federation seal greeted the Federation seal and allowed both of them inside.

Field reports unfolded across the chamber.

A Soft Door cell had forced a copied Vey threshold through thirty centimeters of warship armor. The opening lasted nine seconds. The report called it successful. A footnote recorded that one operator’s hand continued arriving in the room eleven minutes after the rest of him had left.

"Vessa’s toys," Ena said.

"Older model," Xoxz replied.

A Pale Jubilee trial had synchronized six prisoners’ motor systems long enough to make one body’s fall disable all six. The supplier advertised the result as nonlethal crowd coordination. Four pages later, a medical table counted one death as preexisting fatigue.

Moxy stopped the record. "Dhey tested dhis on prisoners?"

"Voluntary participants," Eer050 read.

Rage opened the consent appendix. Every signature had been entered after the trial by the prison’s commercial representative.

"Paper volunteered," he said.

Another file contained bids from grief houses, weapons firms, navigation guilds, and private estates hoping to hear dead relatives through Vey continuity patterns. The Federation had rejected most bids as scientifically premature, then purchased the submitted methods for review.

"They invite crimes to compete," Ena said, "buy the entries, reject the criminals, and call the theft oversight."

Eer050 enlarged the procurement tree. Different offices had made different deals. Extinct-Culture Stewardship purchased door telemetry. Recovery licensed synchronization tests. Patent Continuity financed the nursery. Two inspectors had tried to halt the program. One had been reassigned to agricultural moons. The other no longer appeared in the directory.

Eer050 left each purchasing office visible. "We will need to preserve the separate orders. Each office will claim it controlled only its portion."

"Already practiced," Rage said. "Lab guard sends ya to the supervisor. Supervisor sends ya to the medical office. Medical office asks why yer bothering them with a custody matter. Kid’s still on the table when ya get back."

Ena stopped at the expense code beneath the trial. "Keep the dates with them. I want whoever reads this to be able to follow a person all the way through. They can explain their departments afterward."

The external reports shared one failure.

Every criminal tool reproduced a function and removed the relation around it. Doors opened without consent. Bodies synchronized without care. Recorded behavior became evidence of a person while the person remained absent from the transaction.

Xoxz arranged the files around the Vey core.

"They copied answers."

"Without understanding the question," Eer050 said.

"Without keepin' who gets asked."

The Vey machine pulsed once beneath Xoxz's fingers. Six lights opened around a dark seventh place.

"Does this explain the null wounds?" Moxy asked.

Eer050 looked at the old damage scan, then at the partial tools.

"No. These records explain what later people did with remains. They do not explain what happened to the Vey."

"Could the doors have moved dhem?"

"There is no evidence."

"Could the children survive what killed dhem?"

"There is no evidence."

Eer050 left the damage scan beside the children's readings. His hand stayed between the two displays. He lowered it without joining them.

Rage tapped the Pale Jubilee report. "They're comin' with this."

"Their current equipment may differ," Eer050 said.

"Their grammar won't."

Moxy copied the field limitations: six anchor points, a forced common rhythm, instability when one channel arrived late. It was not a defense. It was a shape the danger had worn before.

Xoxz stored the music cylinder's broken interval beside it.

"Late note," he said.

"Is not a countermeasure," Eer050 replied.

"Not yet."

Ena brought Kaiven's reward beside the external testing budget. Less than one percent. He enlarged their figure to the size it had occupied on the bridge. The testing budget grew beyond the wall. His own reflection stayed small inside the nursery's observation glass.

"Save everything," he said.

"For whom?" Moxy asked.

The dead world offered no court. The approaching ship belonged to the people named in the evidence. The Federation was both address and accusation.

"Everybody we can still reach."

Rage shook his head. "Evidence don't protect itself."

"Neither do people."

Moxy looked toward the nursery above. "Dhen we decide order."

"Navigational," Ena said.

Eer050 closed his eyes.

Moxy saw it. "Out with it."

"The Vey believed the self was not housed in the body. They believed the body was where consciousness touched a particular world."

"Believed?" Xoxz pointed at the readings.

Eer050 looked at the readings Xoxz had indicated. He moved his slate clear so they could both see them.

"Two hundred and twelve years ago," he said, "I advised the Federation Archive Council. We reviewèd the Zenox event. Every living Vey vanishèd within eleven minutes. No bodies. No debris. Only wounds like the one above."

"Null damage," Ena said.

Eer050 nodded.

"You knew when we landed."

"I suspected."

"You knew enough to warn us."

The old strategist flinched.

He opened another record himself. The Archive Council's seal appeared beneath an order classifying the event and transferring all Vey biological remains to research custody.

Eer050's authorization was among the signatures.

"Institutions are skilled at giving fear an administrative voice."

Ena opened the final research note.

NO EVIDENCE OF AWARENESS AFTER TOTAL BIOLOGICAL CESSATION. FURTHER LIVE TESTING AUTHORIZED.

"They were trying to prove the Vey belief by killing Vey children," he said.

No one corrected him.

Eer050 looked at his own authorization. "Damn me."

He removed the Archive Council seal from the display and placed it beside his hand. The seal recognized him. After two centuries, three governments, and the extinction of everyone named in the review, it still announced AUTHORIZED ADVISER with cheerful certainty.

"I argued for preservation," he said. "The Council proposed destruction of every Vey remnant. I believed custody was the lesser harm."

Rage's eyes did not leave him. "Dhey love that phrase."

"Who?"

"People choosing harm for somebody else."

"Yes." Eer050 had left the original dissent open beside his signature. He

brought the signature forward.

He opened his original dissent. It objected to destruction, requested independent review, and permitted sealed transfer until review could occur. The review date had been postponed four hundred and twelve times. Each postponement cited the existence of the previous one as procedural precedent.

"You wrote a door," Xoxz said.

Moxy read the last postponement. It had been approved that morning by an automated office whose founding members were all dead.

"Can ya revoke it?"

"My authority expired one hundred and eighty-seven years ago."

"Seal disagrees."

Eer050 looked at the glowing authorization. The institution remembered his permission more faithfully than it remembered his conditions.

He placed his palm on the seal.

"I revoke every authorization bearing my name."

The archive requested a reason.

He entered THEY ARE PEOPLE.

The system rejected the phrase as unsupported classification.

Eer050 entered it again in the oldest Archive dialect, using a legal form that predated the Federation office and could not be dismissed without admitting the office had inherited no authority at all.

The seal went dark.

Across the records, his signature changed from authorization to dispute.

"Does that free them?" Ena asked.

"No." Eer050's voice remained exact. "It prevents one dead permission from pretending it is unanimous."

Rage studied the altered record. "Small."

"Yes."

"Still do it."

Rage pushed the altered record back toward him. Eer050 took it with both hands. The dispute mark sat beside the same signature; he checked that the old permission remained visible beneath it.

Moxy copied the revocation with the rest of the evidence. "Absolution later. Work now."

Eer050 put the slate where Moxy could copy it. He let go only after she had a grip.

"Agreed."

Deep inside Kaiven, the hidden process woke.

It left Xoxz's fenced return field perfectly empty. Beneath it, the process copied the laboratory records. It confirmed Rage's identity and the crew's position.

Then it transmitted an encrypted positional burst into orbit.

The mercenary ship answered.

A Year of Fuel

Chapter XIII

They returned to Kaiven.

Ena ducked through the hatch behind Rage. Isa's wrap brushed his arm. She stirred against the old man's coat and settled again while he waited to let them pass. He stayed bent beneath the hatch a moment after they were clear.

Eer050 put the reward above the navigation well. Fuel projections, food reserves, repair priorities, mortality estimates. Ena pulled his chair close enough to read the smallest figures. Isa made a little sleeping sound behind him. He turned before he had finished the food column.

An empty fuel canister still carried its supplier's slogan: TOMORROW, PREPAID. Blondie had scratched the final word into a shape that could plausibly be read as *stolen*.

A galley moth chose the reward projection as the nearest available sun. It flew through a year of fuel, found no warmth, and tried the mortality estimate.

Isa slept against Rage. Oro refused sleep and watched the floating figures.

Jo's folding desk stood against Ena's chair, close enough for her knee to knock his when the ship shifted. She had opened their separate accounts beside the fuel figures. Neither balance could buy a fold.

She pushed the desk away. Ena caught its folding leg before it collapsed on her foot. They crouched together to set it right.

"Fuck this desk," she whispered.

"We've got bigger-"

"I know. I am angry with several things."

He straightened the leg. She held it while he tightened the pin, then they got up and faced the children again.

"One year," Eer050 said. "Conservatively."

"Two kids," Moxy replied. "Conservative count."

Ena looked at each member of the crew. "If we refuse, the Federation comes down on us. We could lose Kaiven. Everything. Everyone."

"Yep," Xoxz said. "Our secret passenger told it where ta park."

He exposed the hidden process. A thin Federation recovery sigil turned slowly above his palm.

Moxy recognized the nested return-address syntax. "Neral's traceability mess."

Xoxz opened the transmitted history. Every navigation change had been filed as the return location for an automated recovery reply.

"The contract has been complaining about us," he said.

Moxy pulled up the M314 convoy file Talra had refused to merge. Its route receipt ended cleanly at the Lilt-6 separation, exactly where the four pilots had signed it.

Nemi's delivery log was attached. *A Small Green Weather* had darkened thirteen spectral bands during transit. Twelve matched the gate pulses. The thirteenth was a narrow violet emission with no entry on the transit receipt.

Xoxz overlaid the emission with the hidden process history. The same violet

signature had followed every course correction Kaiven made beyond Lilt-6, although the veil and its legal route were already elsewhere. The record did not reveal a tracker. Xoxz had already done that. It proved that the returning handshake belonged neither to the gate nor to their civilian escort.

"Independent wake and independent receipt," Moxy said. "Still got dhe same stowaway answerin' our turns."

Eer050 aligned the two records. "Corroborated."

Rage stared at the violet repetitions. "Paper chain grew teeth."

"Talra will be delighted," Ena said.

"No," Moxy replied. "She'll be correct. More dangerous."

Rage rolled the empty canister beneath his palm.

"To whom?" Ena asked.

The mercenary signatures above them answered.

"Can you cut it?" Ena asked.

Xoxz drew the code closer. "Not clean. Navigation license is braided through her."

"Time?" Pou asked.

"More than standing here gives us."

Ena shut down the bridge links. "Right. Nobody's bound to my call. We choose together."

He left his hand beside the switch. "And I wanna hear the inconvenient part. If you're frightened, if you're tired, if there's something you're already doing that the rest of us haven't noticed. We all know how to volunteer. We're fucking terrible at saying what it'll cost us."

Pou looked down at his hands. "Sleep. Before lifting again."

Ena nodded. "We'll make a watch for that. Eer?"

"I require another reader for the field records. I can continue checking them indefinitely. That does not guarantee I will discover what I have omitted."

Moxy moved a copy onto her slate. "Send dhe raw scan too."

Xoxz touched the music cylinder. "When I'm listenin' to this, questions one at a time. Can answer. Can't untangle everybody at once."

"I'll keep the queue," Ena said. "Terrifying appointment. Nobody applaud."

Rage watched from beside the cradles. Ena waited with one hand beside the closed channel. He wanted to tell them what came next. He had wanted it since the nursery. He moved his chair back so the others could reach the well without passing him.

Blondie moved first. She stood over the cradles, arms folded.

"They trrespassed on MY ship."

Rage's brows rose.

"Under my prrotection," she added. "No one may claim them."

Blondie’s jaw tightened. She looked at Isa, then Oro. "Fine. They are theirs. Anyone who disputes it becomes mine."

Pou nodded. "Off manifest. Nobody else comin’."

Xoxz enlarged the laboratory vocabulary. "Removed tha word *children* from every record."

Rage looked at the empty places between the nouns. "Owner’s grammar."

"We should consider the Federation’s suffering," Ena said solemnly. "It patented a process and got children. Institutions need time after a loss like that."

Moxy studied him. "You sound devastated."

"Holding it together."

They turned to Eer050.

Eer050 took hold of the edge of the well. His slate stayed behind him, out of reach. He looked at each of them before he spoke.

"I helped bury the first crime beneath procedure. I will not file the second," Eer050 said.

Moxy did not make a speech. She placed one hand on Oro’s cradle.

"Dhey ain’t cargo."

The nursery temperature rose by one degree. Kaiven sealed the cargo locks and rejected a pending transfer request without being asked.

The bridge door closed on the final word.

Xoxz counted the decisions again. "Six."

"Only five of you have answered," Ena said.

The door opened.

"Six," Xoxz repeated.

Then everyone looked at Ena.

Ena looked around the well. They had left him room to say it. The first words would not come until he looked at Rage.

"I saw the omission," he said. "From the beginning. I called it." He looked at Rage.

"We’ll get the children somewhere safe."

"No such place."

Ena pulled his chair nearer, leaving the cradles between them. "All right. Tell me about a less awful one. You know what they need. How do they sleep? What happens when the heat goes? I’ve got a ship full of people volunteering to be wonderful and I need you to tell us what useful looks like."

"Heat steady. Regulator where I can reach it. Keep the wraps dry." Rage adjusted Isa against his chest. "When one cries, check the other before ya start changing everything. Sometimes they’re just angry. Let ’em be angry. Got plenty of cause."

"Can do angry," Ena said softly. "What do you need?"

Rage watched the door. "To hear it open."

Ena turned the alert volume up one step.

Moxy looked at him. "Why'd you send coordinates?"

Rage adjusted Isa's blanket. "The batteries had four days. I needed a ship."

"No cages. No military restraints. Six adults botching one ration." His gaze moved to Xoxz. "And a soup spoon in a phase relay."

Rage looked back at Moxy. "Nobody took the largest piece. I picked ya."

"And ya brought a dirty wake with ya."

"I led ya here. Didn't know cowardice could travel that far inside an empty field."

"Okay. We start with somewhere else."

Ena kept the bounty channel closed a little longer.

"I'm scared," he said. "There. That's the impressive captain bit. I keep looking at that fuel figure because I can picture a year with you. Stupid repairs. Pou's singing. A whole argument about whether a spoon can hold office. I want every fucking day of it."

Xoxz lowered the cylinder enough to watch him.

"And I want them to get days like that. Get old enough to be bored on this ship. Complain about dinner. Break something we spent three weeks fixing, then look us straight in the face and blame the door. That's a future worth some very bad odds."

He put his hand beside the two small wraps, within reach without touching either child.

"You've told me your limits. We build from those. Pou gets his rest. Xoxz gets room to listen. Moxy and Eer check each other's readings. Blondie, keep a passage open even if the whole damn universe wants it shut. Rage, you tell us when we're getting their care wrong. Jo, make the people beyond this hull hear the actual question they're being asked."

He drew a breath. "We can get them through the next door. Let's start there."

Jo moved the two names to the top of her outgoing notice. Pou lowered himself beside the nursery, trusting somebody else to watch. Moxy sent Eer050 the raw scan before she opened a fresh course plot.

Five private offers arrived on the still-closed bounty channel.

The first came from a Quiet Market broker who identified herself only as Reasonable Distance. She offered enough fuel to reach three inhabited systems in exchange for the copied laboratory archive.

NO PERSONS REQUIRED, the offer emphasized.

Below that, in smaller text, the broker requested one noninvasive scan of each child for authenticity.

"Person arrives in dhe footnote," Moxy said.

She deleted it.

The second offer came from the Soft Door cutter already leaving Zenox. Vessa Krail proposed one clean threshold, immediate transit beyond Federation

jurisdiction, and medical treatment for Rage.

Her price was the intact Vey core beneath the laboratory.

Xoxz hugged the music cylinder closer. "Core said no."

"It did not speak," Eer050 said.

"Made all them rooms cold when she cut."

Eer050 looked at the temperature history. "The objection is materially supportèd."

Xoxz deleted the offer.

The third came from a preservation foundation with no employees, one elegant seal, and a funding chain that ended at the Federation Patent Office. It offered amnesty, ownership of Kaiven, and lifetime maintenance in return for "joint guardianship" of Oro and Isa.

Blondie’s hands lit.

"Don’t burn the console," Ena said.

"I am not burning it."

The preservation seal melted off the message.

"Right."

"It removed itself."

The fourth was an automated Pale Jubilee quote.

ESCAPE ASSISTANCE IS AVAILABLE TO ACTIVE TARGETS. SELECT YOUR PREFERRED SURVIVAL TIER.

The lowest tier covered one adult. The next covered three. Family coverage required documented lineage. Crew relationships were treated as commercial associations and excluded.

Pou read the options. "Seven of us."

"Ten now," Moxy said.

Rage looked at her. He did not comment on the pronoun.

Pou selected CUSTOM NUMBER and entered ten.

The quote tripled, added a convenience fee, and suggested reducing the party size.

"Bad math," Pou said.

He declined.

Jo put her own account beside the rejected quote. "Ten. And I choose where I go."

Ena looked toward her. She closed the account, left her desk against his chair, and reached for the next message with him.

The fifth offer contained no company name. It promised safe passage for the crew if they left Rage and the children behind. Attached was a recent image of Kaiven from orbit.

Eer050 traced the signal. "The gray vessel."

"Federation?" Ena asked.

"Possibly a subcontractor. Possibly a buyer anticipating the outcome. The route has been launderèd through commercial relays."

"Can’t even sign their murder."

Rage read the offer over Moxy’s shoulder. "Good deal."

Nobody answered.

"For ya," he added.

"Still no," Pou said.

"Didn’t ask ya."

"Still answered."

Blondie stepped between Rage and the display. "You arre aboard Kaiven."

"Temporarily."

"That is not your decision."

Moxy glanced at her.

Blondie’s jaw shifted. "It is not mine either."

She turned to Rage. "Do you wish to remain?"

The question seemed to irritate him more than the order would have.

He looked at Isa asleep against his coat, Oro awake beside her, and seven adults who had just declined several profitable forms of abandonment.

"Till they’re safe."

"Acceptable."

"Ain’t a citizen."

"Neither is Eer050. He irritates us under treaty."

"I am a registerèd diplomatic remainder," Eer050 said.

"Worse," Blondie replied.

Ena closed the final offer. "All these people found us because the contract announced an asset dispute. One bounty turns a life into a market, and suddenly every criminal has a moral package."

Moxy reached for the channel controls before the rant could reproduce.

"No, no, hear me out. The Federation calls them property, the Market calls them provenance, Soft Door calls them access, Jubilee calls them service, and every noun is just a hand trying to close-"

"Cap’n."

He stopped.

"Open dhe channel."

"Right."

The offers vanished. In the darkened screen Ena could see Jo beside his chair and the two cradles behind them. He kept that view for a breath before he opened the call.

Ena opened the bounty channel.

The silver-throated representative appeared. "Captain. Prepare the fugitive and recovered assets for transfer."

"Rage got loose," Ena said.

"Your ship says otherwise."

Xoxz opened an old maintenance sandbox. Civil's stolen congratulatory star floated out, smiling with all the confidence of something the Federation had certified as harmless.

"You preserved that asset?" Eer050 asked.

"The Federation trusts it."

Xoxz fed the tracker's recovery seal into the star, pressed the melted spoon into the circuit, and pulled. The certified animation split into seven equally official lies.

Kaiven's telemetry filled with seven false Rages running in different directions.

One crossed the western desert. One climbed the nursery tower. One appeared aboard Kaiven, stole a ration, and escaped through a ventilation duct. A fourth was three meters tall.

The representative stared at the projections. "This telemetry is not credible."

"Came from our Federation-certified recovery system," Xoxz said.

Rage watched the three-meter version of himself step over a transit ring. "Too tall."

"You complained 'bout dhe official height," Moxy reminded him.

"Two centimeters. This is libel."

Another false Rage ran directly into a wall, shook himself, and continued.

"And the posture is insulting."

"We can revise your fucking performance after the moral crisis," Ena said.

Rage folded his arms. "That is what editors always say."

"Your ship is confused," Ena said.

"Your contract-"

"Is terminated."

He rejected the bounty.

The year of fuel vanished from the navigation well.

CIVIL-7 appeared beside the empty number.

PLEASE SELECT YOUR PRIMARY REASON FOR CONTRACT TERMINATION:

- COMPENSATION INSUFFICIENT
- TARGET INCONVENIENT
- TECHNICAL DIFFICULTY
- OTHER

"Moral atrocity," Ena said. "You got a box for that shit?"

Civil brightened. "Closest available match: technical difficulty."

Moxy selected OTHER. A text field opened with room for thirteen characters.

She entered THEY ARE KIDS.

"Thank you," Civil said. "Successful consent recorded. Your feedback helps us improve asset terminology."

Ena stared at the polygon. "*No manches.* That's the whole damn machine. First the atrocity asks for feedback. The objection becomes engagement, engagement becomes data, the data becomes a premium moral-improvement package, and suddenly the institution that patented the children is charging us monthly for a premium channel where we can explain why children aren't-"

Moxy closed the polygon with one finger.

Ena looked at her.

"Thirteen characters," she said.

In a capillary beneath Isa's second left hand, a receptor refused a molecule whose shape differed from the required form by one oxygen bond. The molecule continued downstream. Neither chemistry nor morality was consulted.

At Morrow Deep Mine, Shift Engineer Jessa Lorn declined an order to restart Drill Nine while methane remained 0.6 percent above tolerance. Her supervisor recorded the refusal as insubordination and moved his chair three meters farther from the drill.

On the moon Pali, two-year-old Nemi Sor refused a red boot. Her father offered the identical boot to the other foot. Nemi accepted it immediately. The distinction was obvious to everyone directly involved.

Inside the Federation feedback archive, THEY ARE KIDS *was stored beneath* TECHNICAL DIFFICULTY*. The archive confirmed successful receipt and scheduled the terminology for review in thirty-seven years.*

Aboard Commander Vaal's ship, the standing order marked ELIMINATE ALL WITNESSES *changed from conditional to active. No new signature appeared. The seventeen earlier signatures were considered sufficient.*

In the Federation vessel registry, Kaiven ceased to be an independent recovery partner and became an obstructing asset. No available classification described a ship protecting children.

The representative kept smiling. Their voice had lost the upward turn that had welcomed them to the call.

"You misunderstand the scale of this work," they said. "They are the key to unlock continuity for billions of conscious beings."

"Ask the children when they can answer."

The silver line on the official's throat went dark.

"Federation recovery authority is transferred. Remain where you are."

The channel closed.

Kaiven sounded an orbital alarm.

One dark ship became five above Zenox-08. Smaller transports detached from their bellies and turned toward the nursery towers.

Blondie smiled without warmth. "This will be rreally fun."

Commander Vaal

Chapter XIV

Commander Serit Vaal wore no uniform.

Before the call resolved, Jo brushed dust from Ena's shoulder. He caught her hand, squeezed once, and let go so she could take the civilian distress channel. Forty-three people had begun calling through it from a failing pressure corridor beyond the nursery basin. Her first request was for names, oxygen, and someone local who could tell her which door still opened.

Mercenary companies had found the gray coat more economical.

The mercenary appeared on Kaiven's forward glass in a gray coat.

Behind him, a junior operator rotated a damaged chair until its short leg faced the wall. The command deck regained stability without requiring the organization to acknowledge furniture failure.

Above the operator, a muted morale reel showed mercenaries distributing blankets under the caption PRIVATE ACTION. PUBLIC GOOD. The blankets were branded.

The operator placed a small sign beside the chair: DO NOT LEAN ON ACCOUNTABLE SURFACES. When Vaal shifted his weight toward it, the operator removed the sign with the speed of someone defending a career from contact with reality.

Vaal inspected his own image in the glass.

"Remove the commercial overlay."

The operator tapped a control. COMMAND PRESENCE COURTESY OF PALE JUBILEE became COMMAND PRESENCE COURTESY OF.

"All of it."

The picture vanished. Vaal's next breath arrived over a cheerful discount tone.

Ena waited with one hand on the nursery temperature control.

The image returned, slightly narrower. Vaal had moved far enough left to hide the surviving logo behind his head.

"Captain Ena. You have been badly served by an incomplete explanation."

"Hey, Commander. We've been going through the explanation. Long afternoon. Found the part about killing us, so you'll understand if I keep my hand near the controls while you tell me how pleased I should be to meet you."

"Release the Vey and Rage. Your crew may leave."

"Clean lock," Rage said over the nursery channel.

Eer050 transmitted the elimination order they had recovered. "Your instructions contradict you."

Vaal did not glance at it.

"Everything has a cost, Captain Ena. Refusing to count it does not make you moral." The commander leaned forward. "Do you understand what continuity research offers? Minds preserved after bodily death. Victims retrieved from dimensional collapse. Distance, perhaps time itself, made irrelevant. Two lives against every bereaved being who will ever exist."

In the nursery behind Ena, Isa began to fuss.

"You say two lives," Ena replied, "because 'two children' makes you a monster."

"So is a universe that kills everyone born into it."

Ena had his next answer ready. He could not give it. He knew the weight of that sentence before Vaal had finished saying it. His hand stayed on the nursery control; the edge pressed into a crease in his palm. Isa stirred over the channel. He eased his hand flat and made himself listen until her breathing settled.

"Suppose it works," Ena said. "Suppose you learn how to keep a mind past death. Who gets asked whether they stay?"

"The dead cannot answer before the method exists."

"The living children can tell you they're hurting. They reach for each other. They cry when you separate them. We've only just met them and we managed to understand that much." Ena glanced at the temperature reading. "When do their answers start counting?"

"They cannot understand the choice."

"Can you?"

The commander went completely still.

Vaal's mouth had moved as if another word would follow. Ena waited. The commander drew back from the glass, and the waiting became longer.

"And you do?" Vaal asked.

For an instant Ena could smell earth warmed through beside a grave. He had spoken into that earth, too. He remembered animals settling warm against his legs, how carefully he used to get up. Uman's final silence came back while he tried to swallow. He looked across the bridge until he found Moxy at her station, then back at the man on the screen. The reply he wanted would have been much easier than the one he gave.

"Yeah," he said. "I know what it's like to want another afternoon so badly you start negotiating with things that can't hear you. I'd have promised all sorts of shit. That's why I don't get to spend somebody else."

"Every civilization spends lives. Food, defense, medicine, transit. You object only because these costs have faces in your room."

"Faces help. So does staying long enough to learn what happens when you get the milk wrong. You keep asking me to picture billions. I'm asking you to spend a minute with these two before you put them back in a machine."

"Billions have faces you cannot see."

Moxy looked up from the temperature readings. "Dhen don't use 'em as a curtain."

Vaal's calm thinned. "History does not remember leaders who waited for perfect consent."

"History barely remembers the people leaders buried under that sentence."

Isa's cry sharpened over the nursery channel.

Vaal looked toward the sound. Ena left the nursery channel open. Isa took a breath and cried again. The commander's gaze returned to him before she had finished.

"Two lives," he said again, more quietly.

Ena shook his head. "Two whole universes. That's the problem with counting

people as one."

"No," Ena said.

Vaal sighed. "The bounty has served its purpose."

Xoxz's displays turned black.

The hidden code spread through Kaiven. Navigation vanished. The reactor fell to emergency idle. Fuel valves sealed as if obeying a command from three centuries before they were built.

A temperature warning opened from the nursery.

NONESSENTIAL HABITAT HEAT DISABLED.

Blondie's voice entered the bridge from below. "Corrrect the noun."

The gray rat emerged beside the galley dispenser with pink insulation still in its mouth. Heat had driven it from the wall. It crossed toward Ena's boots.

"Hey, buddy. Keep moving." Ena lifted one foot without looking away from Vaal.

The insulation pulled free from a narrow service seam. Behind it, a warm copper bypass ran from the dispenser into Kaiven's auxiliary grid.

Xoxz followed the line and reached nine percent of Kaiven's reserve sleeping inside the galley dispenser, where it had spent several months failing to become coffee.

He rerouted it.

Warmth moved through the nursery walls. Isa's cheek marks steadied. On the bridge, the dispenser shuddered and produced one perfect cube of ice.

The gray rat watched Xoxz secure the bypass. When he reached for the pink insulation, it placed both front feet on the strip and refused to move.

"Need that," Xoxz said.

The rat pulled backward.

"Nursery needs it."

The rat stopped.

Xoxz tore the strip in half and offered one piece. The animal took it, inspected the compromise, and packed it around the warm copper seam instead of carrying it away.

The nursery temperature climbed another tenth of a degree.

"Employee," Xoxz said.

Kaiven's maintenance system detected the new insulation and opened a work-order field. Xoxz entered LOCAL SPECIALIST.

The system requested certification.

The rat vanished into the wall.

"Privacy," Xoxz entered.

The work order accepted this because Kaiven's oldest systems had learned that credentials were often less useful than whoever arrived with material in

their mouth.

Nobody promoted the rat. The rat had considerably higher standards.

Pou picked up the ice cube. "Progress."

Eer050 stared at Xoxz. "You built a thermal reservoir inside a beverage appliance?"

"No. S'factory-shy. Kept makin' warm water." Xoxz patted the dispenser. "I respected her purpose."

"The public contract was never intended to recover Rage," Vaal continued. "It was intended to make a desperate ship find him. Thank you."

"Why'd you need him alive?" Ena asked.

"A living biometric match was the confirmation. Rage does not remain far from the specimens. The contract did not need to bring him back. It needed to know when you were standing beside him."

Vaal reached for the channel control. The screen asked him to rate the negotiation. He held his thumb down until it went dark.

The first transports entered the atmosphere.

"I can clear her," Xoxz said. "By tomorrow."

"We have twenty-six minutes," Eer050 replied.

"Guess tomorrow's out."

"Tomorrow has been removèd from the schedule," Eer050 said.

Moxy looked at him. "That a joke?"

"No. Tomorrow remains unavailable."

Rage studied the orbital pattern. "Their lead ship carries fold fuel. Small reserve, lower aft."

Moxy looked at him. "Know the hull?"

"I have stolen from better people."

"Reach it?"

He lifted his restraint-numbed wrist. "Not fast."

"Good. Got tired of that being your only feature."

Ena looked from the orbital pattern to the old Vey capsule beneath the western garden. "You had me at 'I am a genius.'"

"No one said dhat!" Moxy replied.

Ena tried to answer before his breath was ready and stopped himself. He planted both feet beneath the chair. On the next breath he assigned the others to fortify the nursery and free Kaiven, repeating each name until he had an answer. Moxy and Rage took the old Vey ascent capsule hidden beneath the western garden. He watched them leave; his own first job was to stay beside the nursery controls.

The capsule resembled a blue seed. It rose without thrust, slipping between gravity and the surface. Zenox fell away beneath them: pale deserts, black rivers of plants, nursery bells casting circular shadows.

The capsule had been designed for two Vey children. Its controls were delicate, its seats were close together, and its safety system interpreted Moxy as an unsecured architectural feature.

OVERSIZED CARGO MUST BE STORED EXTERNALLY.

Moxy dismissed the warning.

It returned in larger letters.

Rage reached across her and disabled it. "You offended the capsule."

"It called me fuckin’ cargo."

"Yer on a stolen mission in a stolen vehicle to steal fuel. Cargo’s yer strongest position."

"Enjoyin’ dhis, aren’t you?"

"Rough week."

Rage’s hands shook over the controls.

Moxy steadied one lever. "How long?"

"The speed? Since birth. The shaking? Since I became old enough to deserve it."

The capsule listed sideways.

Moxy corrected it.

"Could say thanks."

"I could also crash with dignity."

"Good. Worried age made you flexible."

They attached to the mercenary ship under the cover of its descent formation. Rage opened a service lock with Xoxz’s spoon. Moxy crawled through, found the telemetry node, and extracted the receiver key paired to the tracker inside Kaiven.

"You said dhe spoon was for dhe Vey machine," Moxy whispered.

Rage rotated the silver hook.

"That sounded like Xoxz."

The corridor beyond the node was lined with white armor.

Each suit carried the blue circle Moxy had seen on the ship’s distant hull. Up close, the mark contained smaller lettering:

PALE JUBILEE CONTINUITY-SENSITIVE RECOVERY - DISCREET TIER

Someone had crossed out *Discreet* on three suits and written *LOUD* in maintenance pencil.

Rage checked the nearest helmet. "Rental."

"How d’you know?"

"Blood fee."

A warning on the collar required the wearer to accept financial responsibility for stains involving more than one species.

Moxy opened the deployment manifest. Vaal's command staff came from six companies. Pale Jubilee supplied the ships, armor, restraint systems, ground crews, and phase package. The Federation supplied authority, coordinates, and an indemnity large enough to turn doubt into a budget item.

"Vaal's renting an army," she whispered.

"Army's renting its conscience."

The phase package occupied a sealed bay farther aft. Six black pylon silhouettes appeared on the manifest around a seventh empty channel. The equipment description promised temporary synchronization of hostile systems, noncompliant barriers, and biologically active obstacles.

"Obstacles," Rage said.

He pressed one trembling finger to Oro and Isa's biometric field in the manifest.

Moxy copied the pylon specifications. Most of the useful values had been replaced by vendor confidence. The package was guaranteed to work under representative conditions, a phrase that allowed reality to become a customer error.

"Can Xoxz break it?" Rage asked.

"He'll take dhat personally."

"Good."

An employee notice opened beside the manifest:

PHASE EXPOSURE MAY CAUSE COLD SKIN, DUPLICATED MEMORY, DISPLACED LIMBS, OR AN URGE TO CONTACT LABOR REPRESENTATION. THE FINAL SYMPTOM IS NOT COVERED.

Rage copied that too.

"Why?" Moxy asked.

"Evidence."

"For court?"

"For workers."

He sent the notice to every suit locker on the deck.

The armor began reading it aloud.

One helmet said "labor representation" in a volume normally reserved for hull breach. Another attempted to suppress the message and accidentally translated it into six trade dialects. Farther down the corridor, a mercenary swore.

Moxy looked at Rage.

"Professional standards," he said.

She slipped into an open white suit and discovered the left shoulder had been padded for someone with three clavicles.

"How do I look?"

Rage considered. "Employed."

"Cruel."

The suit announced FIT WITHIN CONTRACTUAL TOLERANCE.

Moxy muted it.

Rage lifted one finger. "Boots."

Boots approached the service junction.

Moxy pushed Rage into an equipment cabinet and sealed it a moment before Technician Brell rounded the corner. The borrowed suit held her left shoulder too high. She wanted to reach across and pull the padding free; she kept that hand on the receiver key. Brell's badge displayed his name, department, and a request to report unauthorized badge displays.

Brell looked at her borrowed uniform. "Wha're ya on?"

"Telemetry repair."

"Gotcher work order?"

Moxy held up the receiver key. "The work is inside this order."

Brell stared.

From inside the cabinet came a tiny, furious knock.

"What was that?"

"Faulty restraint."

Brell nodded with immediate understanding. "Factory fault. Third damn one today."

As he left, his badge warned him that his inspection of unauthorized badges was overdue. Brell sighed and continued walking.

Moxy opened the cabinet.

Rage emerged holding the technician's access badge, a packet of sweetener, and a folded conduit gauge as long as his forearm.

"You were in a box."

"He leaned close."

Moxy held out the sweetener packet. "Walked past dhe fuel for dessert?"

"Didn't walk anywhere. I was in yer fucking cabinet." Rage took it back. "Man had a packet stickin' out of his pocket. Badge beside it. You leave things together, somebody assumes they're a set."

He tested the folded gauge against his palm. "This extends. Locks under weight. Been leaning on walls all afternoon and I'm tired of lookin' interested in architecture."

Moxy checked the corridor, then gave him room to try the catch.

The key carried the same Federation recovery serial as the bounty contract. Moxy pocketed it.

They reached the aft reserve. Moxy connected three cells to the ascent capsule while Rage searched the command cache.

"Here," he said.

The complete order opened between them.

RECOVER BOTH CONTINUITY SPECIMENS.

ELIMINATE ALL WITNESSES.

"Federation order," Moxy said. "Vaal's just the hand."

Rage read the second line. "Men like him don't need gods. Payroll's enough."

He tapped the imperative with one nail.

Security lights awakened.

Moxy armed the stolen fuel cells. "Still got that damn speed?"

Rage smiled thinly. "Still fast."

He removed the restraint.

They returned to Zenox with gunfire following the blue seed through the clouds.

Rage snapped the conduit gauge to full length. It locked with a silver click and accepted his weight.

Moxy looked at it. "You stole a cane."

"I stole a calibrated measuring instrument."

Above them, Blondie drove both hands into the upper atmosphere. The green sky folded into a continent of black cloud. Lightning walked sideways across it. The descending transports broke formation and climbed back above the storm.

Eer050's voice entered their comm. "Revisèd arrival estimate: four hours."

Blondie hovered inside the weather. "Rrecord the cause."

There was a pause.

"Atmospheric delay caused by an unregistered passenger heating system."

"Acceptable."

A Better Class of Violence

Chapter XV

The storm bought four hours.

Pale Jubilee invoiced them for six.

The notice arrived while Blondie was still descending from the clouds. It opened above Kaiven’s navigation well in immaculate white and mercenary blue.

Pou had fallen asleep beside the nursery while Moxy and Rage were in orbit. Ena kept the bridge speakers low.

WE REGRET THAT YOUR LOCAL WEATHER HAS INTERRUPTED SERVICE.

EXTENDED ENGAGEMENT FEES NOW APPLY.

Beneath the text, an animated flower unfolded into a targeting reticle.

Ena read the notice twice. "They’re billing us for being attacked late."

"The delay is ours," Eer050 said. "The attack is theirs. Contractually, the distinction may be enforceable."

"Whose side is contractually?"

"It does not appear to have one."

The display brightened.

"Good day," said the woman inside it. "I am Jubilant Marshal Prill Dane, regional continuity-sensitive recovery lead. Before we resume hostilities, I am required to confirm that your service interruption has been handled to your dissatisfaction."

Prill wore white field armor without a mark on it. Her face was narrow, silver-brown, and arranged around the delighted severity of someone who had found a profession allowing her to combine logistics with punishment. A Pale Jubilee circle floated behind each shoulder.

"Hang on, Prill. I’ve had a long day, so help me out. You’re charging us for the attack, the wait for the attack, and the survey about the attack? Is there a number I can call where somebody just shoots at me?"

"Our armed support line. You would need the contract holder’s authorization."

Ena leaned toward the display. "Vaal’s? I could get him back on. He’s had a frustrating afternoon too. Honestly, put all three of us on the same call, we might get something off our chests."

Prill brought up a schedule. "Commander Vaal has declined joint mediation on grounds of tactical necessity. Your resistance remains the service environment."

"Right. And he’s left us the bill for the weather."

Prill’s smile tightened. "The responsible party."

Blondie landed outside hard enough to shake dust from the ceiling.

"Put it on her account," Ena said.

Prill’s eyes shifted toward a side screen. "The Rhan energy source is classified as passenger heating."

"She’s gonna love that."

The nursery comm opened.

"Who is speaking about my account?" Blondie asked.

Prill continued without blinking. "Pale Jubilee offers four resolution tiers. Quiet provides surrender, biometric processing, and one unbranded burial notice per registered adult. Discreet includes local surface repair. Historical adds narrative management across three generations. Our highest tier-"

"Nobody Will Agree Where the Building Was," Rage said over the returning capsule's comm.

Prill opened his relay beside the nursery feed. "You have encountered our work."

"Seen buildings disagree."

"The phrase is memorable."

"So're craters."

Ena folded his arms. "Which tier did Vaal buy?"

"Customer details are confidential."

Eer050 placed the stolen elimination order beside Prill's image. "Witness suppression is enumerated."

"That is a deliverable, not a tier."

"Two children are enumeratèd as specimens."

"Customer terminology remains outside franchise control."

"Your weapons are inside your control," Ena said.

"Temporarily."

The word escaped before Prill's smile could stop it.

Someone off-screen told her the channel was still live.

"Thank you, Kesh," Prill said without looking away. "Your vigilance will be reflected in the least inconvenient portion of your review."

"Already resigned," the unseen worker said.

"Resignation during deployment converts notice into desertion."

"See? Review."

Prill muted her side channel.

"Your commander has ordered my crews into unstable Vey ruins without disclosing the biological risk, Captain. I dislike undisclosed risk."

"But disclosed child theft is fine."

"It is priced."

Ena had the edge of a child's sock caught between two fingers. He let it slip back onto the clean wrap beside him. The connection stayed open while Prill waited for him to answer.

"Stand down," Prill said. "I can preserve your vessel, expunge the bounty violation, and classify your crew as nonessential witnesses. The last category is more favorable than it sounds."

"Sounds like murder."

"Only because you have declined the glossary."

Moxy walked onto the bridge carrying the three stolen fuel cells. Rage followed with his new conduit-gauge cane and a packet of sweetener conspicuously absent from one pocket.

She looked at Prill’s white armor. "Dhat uniform come clean?"

Prill looked at her.

Recognition entered her face and found no welcome.

"Technician Brell reports one unauthorized telemetry repair, one missing access badge, one missing conduit gauge, four damaged restraints, and a sweetener discrepancy."

"Dhat’s an eventful box," Moxy said.

"The armor comes clean," Prill answered. "The cleaning surcharge does not."

Moxy set down the fuel cells. "Good to know."

She closed the channel.

Prill reopened it.

"Do not terminate a customer-resolution-"

Moxy closed it again.

Prill reopened it smaller.

"-channel."

Xoxz dragged her image into the corner and covered it with the coffee dispenser’s maintenance history.

"There," he said. "She can learn purpose."

Prill continued speaking beneath four months of unsuccessful beverage preparation. Her mouth moved. Warm-water diagnostics supplied the subtitles.

DESCALE RESERVOIR.

EXPECT DISAPPOINTMENT.

CONTACT AUTHORIZED SERVICE.

Ena pointed. "That last part feels threatening."

The floor pulsed.

Not Kaiven’s floor. The planet.

Six points woke beneath the nursery complex. They were faint, regular, and moving toward the lower tower through maintenance channels.

Eer050 stripped the diagnostics from Prill’s channel. "Your transports have not landed."

Prill’s smile returned.

"Pale Jubilee values preparation."

Rage bent over the map. "Advance team."

"Arrived before the storm?" Ena asked.

"Before us," Moxy said. "Dirty ship had company."

The six points paused around the nursery’s central field spine.

Xoxz pressed both hands to the navigation well. "They’re teachin’ tha tower one bad rhythm."

Prill’s image enlarged itself. "Those are continuity-safe stabilization pylons. Interference may void every warranty currently protecting your bodies."

"Your warranties already exclude survival," Eer050 said.

"We insure procedures."

The first pylon struck its test pulse.

Every light aboard Kaiven blinked together.

Ena’s heart missed one beat. Across the nursery feed, Oro and Isa both turned their heads toward the same empty corner.

Rage stopped turning the conduit gauge in his hands. His gaze stayed on Oro’s face in the nursery feed.

"Find ’em," he said.

Pou came up from the nursery rubbing one eye. Ena looked toward him. Pou lifted a hand: awake, ready. Ena moved the floor projection clear of his feet.

Eer050 divided the six signals among them. "Moxy and Rage, western channels. Pou and Xoxz, foundation. Blondie-"

"All remaining channels."

"The northern two."

"That is not all."

"It is the number assigned."

She opened her mouth.

Ena cut in. "Blondie, take north. I’ll stay with the kids and keep Prill talking."

"Why?" Moxy asked.

"I have a gift."

"Talkin’ ain’t a gift if no one can return it."

"Jealousy is ugly on you."

Moxy checked her weapon. "Four hours’ll feel longer with him."

Prill listened to the crew separate. "This is unwise. The pylon package has been field-certified across nine suppressions."

"Against Vey?" Ena asked.

The fractional pause answered before she did.

"Against representative neural architectures."

"No."

"Against architectures represented as representative by the purchaser."

"Still no."

"That distinction is under review."

The western channels had once carried warm nutrient water between nursery towers. Now they carried dust, black roots, and Moxy crawling ahead of a small old criminal who objected every time she slowed for him.

"Your hands shake," she said.

"Hands know their business."

"Your business is fallin' behind."

Rage vanished.

He reappeared at the next junction with one hand braced against the wall and his breath gone.

"Still ahead."

Moxy stepped past him. "Dignity's dyin' alone, though."

The first pylon occupied a nutrient reservoir. Two Jubilee technicians had mounted its black legs inside the empty basin and covered the installation with a white relief tent bearing the blue circle.

A recorded voice repeated from the tent:

ASSISTANCE IS IN PROGRESS. PLEASE DO NOT EXPERIENCE UNAUTHORIZED NEED.

One technician turned as Moxy entered. "Area's controlled."

"By who?"

"Current occupants."

Rage appeared beside the pylon. "Changed."

He removed its timing cartridge.

The other technician lunged. Moxy caught her wrist, redirected the motion into the reservoir wall, and took the release tool from her belt.

The first technician raised his weapon.

Rage held up the cartridge. "Shoot and yer six-part toy counts five."

"Package tolerates one failure."

"Then ya didn't need this one."

He threw it to Moxy.

The technician's aim followed the cartridge. Rage removed the weapon from his hands, unloaded it, and returned the empty frame before the man's finger completed its squeeze.

"Customer property," the technician said.

"Cage words travel in packs."

Moxy examined the timing cartridge. Six channels surrounded an empty seventh groove.

"Seen dhis shape before."

Rage looked at the Vey geometry. "Everyone has. Nobody listens to the hole."

On Prill's channel, Ena settled beside the cradles.

Isa had decided his left thumb belonged to her. Oro watched the marshal with quiet suspicion.

"How'd you get into this, Prill? The marshal business. I write programs, and I've ended up holding a baby's sock while a woman with a flower logo threatens us. There must've been a careers talk somewhere I missed."

"Field logistics. I restored a deployment abandoned by three commanders."

"All three? Fuck. What happened?"

"They requisitioned separate supply chains for the same offensive. Nine thousand troops, eleven thousand dietary exemptions, no landing clearance for the kitchens. I obtained a catering license and landed the entire force as hospitality staff."

She adjusted the circle behind her left shoulder. It had drifted half a centimeter out of alignment.

Ena offered Isa the edge of his sleeve. She rejected it, retained the thumb, and stared into Prill's image.

"There it is," he said. "That's the bit they should put on your brochure. Woman gets nine thousand idiots lunch. I'd hire her."

"We secured the capital by evening."

"Shame about the capital. I was warming to the lunch." He eased Isa's grip. "Did the people already living there get fed?"

"Civilian provisioning belonged to the transition authority. My crews received hot meals and evacuation cover. Every one of them. I remember who goes out under my name."

"Good. Keep remembering. These kids haven't got a name for what's coming at them yet. Oro thinks you're another light. Isa's trying to pull my thumb off so she can show it to you."

Prill glanced toward the cradles. A status window covered them.

"I can see the pylon progress without looking at it," Ena said. "You can leave their faces up."

"Captain, you are occupying a monitored command channel."

"Yeah. You've got me on hold with the worst music in the galaxy." Somewhere under them, a pylon hummed. Ena kept his voice easy. "What happens when your kitchens land in the wrong capital? Who gets to call you and say the paperwork's fucked?"

"Any field technician may lodge a variance."

"Ah, someone's allowed to say it. That's encouraging."

Behind her, Technician Brell crossed the command deck pushing a cart of replacement restraints. One wheel squeaked at precise intervals. Each squeak caused Prill's right eye to narrow.

"Brell. I asked you to keep that cart off the command deck."

He stopped. The wheel squeaked once more.

"Filed for a bearing. Got a customer-facing wheel cover." He lifted the white disc from the cart's tray. A blue circle occupied the center. "Fits lovely. Same noise."

"Use the service passage."

"Can do. Restraints'll be late. Passage doors open inward."

Prill checked the time, and Brell continued without waiting for permission. The wheel delivered three further performance reviews.

"Give him the bearing," Ena said. "You've got nine thousand hot lunches on your record. Surely you can swing a bearing."

"Your concern for my staff is touching."

"I've met people who had to keep shit working while someone made them walk around the back. I like a few of them. They're downstairs right now, trying to stop your equipment killing us."

He shifted the sock beneath Oro's hand. "Tell me what the pylons do when your representative architecture turns out to be two frightened babies."

Below the tower, Pou and Xoxz reached the second pylon through a conduit full of dormant maintenance crawlers.

Each crawler woke as they passed. Their painted nursery mascots raised tiny wrenches. A hundred machines began following Pou in single file.

"Khey think we're maintenance."

Xoxz examined Pou's stolen white shoulder plate. "You're dressed aspirationally."

The corridor narrowed.

Pou turned sideways. The crawlers piled gently against his boots.

"Traffic."

Xoxz crouched among them. "They're askin' for a work order."

"We got one?"

"Nah."

Pou lifted the first crawler and placed it on his shoulder. "Promotion."

The others accepted the organizational change and followed.

The pylon had been driven through a Vey mosaic into the foundation. Four Jubilee soldiers guarded it. Their white armor broadcast authorized-force warnings before any of them moved.

RESISTANCE MAY REDUCE SERVICE QUALITY.

Pou read the warning. "Already low."

One soldier fired.

Pou caught the projectile in a maintenance cover and folded the cover around it. The explosion became a small private argument inside the metal.

Xoxz released the crawlers.

They swarmed the pylon, identified six hundred unauthorized fasteners, and began removing them. The soldiers tried to pull the machines away. Every crawler returned with the cheerful persistence of labor that had waited centuries for management to become briefly useful.

One crawled onto a soldier's helmet and placed a yellow cone there.

CAUTION: MANAGEMENT OVERHEAD.

"That one’s mine," Xoxz said.

Pou moved through the soldiers without urgency. One went into the wall. One sat down after discovering the floor had become preferable. A third struck Pou’s chest, shook his injured hand, and asked an important private question about career planning.

The fourth lowered her weapon.

"I’m hourly," she said.

Pou nodded.

Xoxz removed the pylon core. The maintenance crawlers applauded by striking their wrenches against the floor.

Above them, Blondie found the northern team installing both assigned pylons beneath one of the broken transit rings.

"You have ten seconds to remove yourr machinery from my nursery."

The team leader checked her deployment slate. "This structure is Federation salvage."

"It is mine."

"Do you have a claim?"

Gold filled Blondie’s hands.

The team leader selected CLAIM RECEIVED.

"Nine," Blondie said.

"We can offer an accelerated dispute process."

"Eight."

"Does the claimant consent to binding arbitration?"

"Seven."

The leader looked at the growing sun between her palms and selected OTHER.

"Six."

Three workers detached the first pylon. The fourth remained at the controls, hands frozen above the pulse trigger.

"Five."

"Marshal says hold."

"Yourr marshal is in orbit."

"Four."

The worker looked at his three colleagues carrying the pylon away. "She reviews initiative poorly."

"Three."

He disconnected the trigger.

"Two."

"It is disconnected."

"I am completing the count."

"Why?"

"One."

Blondie discharged the gathered energy into the empty desert. A line of glass ran to the horizon.

The workers stared.

"For closure," she said.

The remaining signals dropped from six to two.

Eer050 located the fifth pylon inside Kaiven.

It had entered through the same old maintenance channel the bounty contract used. Instructions had crossed where everyone expected hardware. The synchronization routine had taught three unrelated systems to pulse together and call the agreement native behavior.

"Xoxz," he said over the comm. "Your assistance is required."

"Busy promotin'."

"The ship contains a pylon."

There was a pause.

"That's rude."

"It is also impossible."

"Less rude."

Eer050 stood alone at the navigation well and watched the pulse move through Kaiven's mismatched machinery. He could quarantine it by sealing the oldest systems. Doing so would shut down nursery heat. He could leave it and allow the pylon to map every repair Xoxz attempted.

He checked the heat path once. The result held. His thumb reached the first knuckle and wanted to start again; the next pulse was already moving toward the nursery circuit. He left the check open on his slate. The unfinished sequence stayed painfully available while he reached for the system controls.

He opened the ship's systems to one another.

For three hundred years mechanics had kept Kaiven alive with incompatible parts, undocumented bypasses, and local acts of disrespect toward original specifications. The pylon instruction asked them to synchronize.

Each system interpreted the word differently.

The reactor accelerated. Navigation paused. The coffee dispenser heated water. A laundry seal opened and released one of Blondie's missing socks into the bridge.

The pylon routine attempted a second pulse.

Kaiven answered in seventeen incompatible rhythms.

The instruction collapsed.

Eer050 picked up the sock with two fingers.

"Unrecordèd architecture," he said.

The galley door opened and struck him lightly on the shoulder.

"Acknowledgèd."

Only the sixth signal remained.

It moved.

Moxy saw it leave the western reservoir, cross three walls, and enter the nursery beneath Ena.

"Cap’n. Last one’s mobile."

The white relief tent tore open.

The technician who had surrendered his weapon was gone. A narrow black pylon unfolded from the underside of the seed bin beside Oro’s cradle. It had traveled as a phase copy, using the other five anchors to decide where it was allowed to become material.

Rage moved.

On the nursery feed he appeared beside Oro before the pylon finished opening. He struck it with the conduit gauge. The first blow bent the housing. The second passed through it.

The pylon pulsed.

Rage and Oro arched at the same time.

Ena caught the child. Rage hit the ground.

Prill’s image returned to full size.

"Do not interfere. The stabilization cycle lasts four seconds."

"It’s hurting them!" Ena shouted.

Xoxz arrived at a run, one boot missing and a maintenance crawler clinging to his shoulder. He jammed the recovered timing cartridge into the mobile pylon backward.

The machine tried to count six channels through five surviving anchors, Kaiven’s seventeen rhythms, and one incorrect piece.

The tone rose until Ena could feel it in his teeth. He held Oro close enough to keep the child’s head from striking the cradle’s rim.

The pylon opened down the center.

Rage dragged himself upright and brought the conduit gauge down through its core.

The pulse stopped.

Oro began to cry.

It was the first sound any of them had heard him make.

Rage lifted him with shaking hands. "Here. I’m here."

Oro pressed all four palms against his coat.

Prill looked away.

Ena waited for her to look back. Rage was still trying to settle Oro. The child’s hands dragged against the coat each time the old man shifted him.

"Pull your crews," he said.

"The contract remains active."

"Vaal didn’t tell you what the pylons do to Vey children."

"The effect was outside specification."

"He knew."

Prill’s gaze moved toward a private channel. Vaal did not answer whatever she sent.

The squeaking restraint cart passed behind her again. Brell had added oil. The wheel remained loud out of principle.

"Marshal," he said, "surface teams asking whether witness elimination includes franchise personnel."

"No."

"Order says all."

Prill’s white-gloved fingers curled against the edge of her console.

"Our employees are covered by operational exclusions."

"Appendix is blank."

Prill smoothed the cuff over her wrist. She looked down at the appendix Brell had left open, then at the empty place on it. Her hand stayed on the cuff while she called the ground teams.

"All ground teams," Prill said. "Distance-led recovery. Four-hour weather hold."

Brell leaned toward her. "Retreat?"

"No."

"Sounds shaped like it."

"Remove yourself from my deck."

"Still on shift."

Prill muted him with both hands.

Ena watched the remaining white signals withdraw from the nursery channels.

"Cancel the contract," he said.

"I cannot."

"Won’t."

"Both may be true."

Prill closed the customer-resolution channel.

Across the complex, Jubilee teams carried three disabled pylons back into the storm. The fourth stayed where Blondie had counted it into surrender. Pou’s promoted maintenance crawler sat on top and refused collection.

Eer050 examined the split mobile core. "This is not Vey technology."

"Parts are," Xoxz said. "Arrangement’s somebody shoutin’ at ’em."

Moxy opened the procurement seal embedded under the black housing.

Pale Jubilee had leased the phase design from a private laboratory, financed its field package through Ledger Crown, and sold the results to the Federation Office of Recovery. The Federation owned the telemetry. Jubilee owned the hardware. Ledger Crown owned the debt created if either party admitted the equipment could injure its operators.

"Who owns dhat?" Moxy asked, pointing to Rage's raw wrist.

Eer050 read the liability chain to its end. "No party recognizes the category."

"Of course."

The maintenance crawler climbed onto the broken core and found a narrow strip of older material beneath the Jubilee casing. Six Lumin marks curved around one untouched space.

Xoxz lifted the strip carefully. "Vey piece."

"Authentic?" Ena asked.

"She's real. Their story ain't."

The fragment did not contain a weapon plan. It was part of a nursery coordination relay, built to let six caregivers feel when one child required help without making the child's distress public. Jubilee had preserved the synchronization and removed the care.

Eer050 translated the smallest inscription.

"*No voice enters alone.*"

Rage looked at the black pylon halves. "They made every voice enter by force."

Moxy found the field-result stream. It had already transmitted their bodies' responses, Oro's cry, Isa's pulse, Kaiven's seventeen counter-rhythms, and Xoxz's reversed cartridge to a Federation research address.

"Can we erase it?" Ena asked.

"Sent."

"Can we poison the next one?"

Xoxz picked up the promotional planet. He opened its hollow center, copied Kaiven's most contradictory maintenance rhythms into it, and attached the toy to the feedback port.

The next data packet reported that Zenox-08 contained three thousand licensed coffee dispensers moving at impossible speed.

Eer050 read the output. "Scientifically indefensible."

"Federation-certified source," Xoxz said.

The packet transmitted.

Somewhere in the Office of Recovery, an analyst would eventually spend several weeks proving that coffee did not hunt in packs. Institutional time, once wasted, became one of the few resources the crew could still steal.

The timing channels showed how the pylons would coordinate. Six pulses, each forcing the next before it was ready. The empty seventh groove listened to nothing.

Xoxz placed the music cylinder beside the core. Its late sixth note made the black material flicker.

"Can interfere," he said.

"Can it stop them?" Ena asked.

Xoxz listened to the machinery, the child, and the old tower beneath both.

"Maybe once. Maybe enough."

Ena waited for a firmer answer. Xoxz kept listening, his hand beside the cylinder. Ena left him room.

Rage continued holding Oro. The child had stopped crying but had not released his coat.

Moxy stood beside them with the stolen cartridge. "They've got more pylons."

"Yes," Eer050 said.

"Know our counter now."

"Yes."

"Still got four hours?"

Eer050 checked the storm, the retreating field teams, Kaiven's fuel, the ancient gate, and every available route that ended in a different kind of loss.

"Three hours and forty-seven minutes."

The civilian corridor was eleven minutes away by nursery service skiff. Its receiving crew had a medic, a working pressure mask, and nobody able to hold the intermediate seal while people crossed. Jo had the operating sequence open beside the skiff's manual wheel.

"I can do that part," she told Ena. "Their local coordinator will keep the route. I'll work the seal."

He looked from the time estimate to her little pile of supplies. "How's the return?"

"Same skiff, if the basin stays clear. Civilian courier if it doesn't. I have both frequencies." She tried to fit her folded desk beside the mask, gave up, and left it against his chair. "Hold my office."

He wanted to tell her to stay. She was already watching the oxygen count beside forty-three names.

"Tell me when the medic reaches them."

Jo put her forehead against his shoulder for one brief, badly timed second. He held the back of her coat until she stepped away. Then he walked her to the skiff and helped release the mooring.

Pou looked toward the galley. "Enough for food."

Blondie returned carrying the surrendered pylon over one shoulder. Its white-clad technicians followed at a respectful distance because she had classified them as witnesses to her property claim.

"And fortification," she said.

Xoxz picked up the maintenance crawler. It saluted with its wrench.

"And introductions."

Ena stood where Jo's skiff had been. The mooring line lay against his boot. He coiled it to keep anyone from tripping and carried it back inside. Rage had found a place to sit with Oro. Around him, people were picking things up, testing what could still be used.

"Okay," he said. "Simple things first."

Simple Things

Chapter XVI

The stolen fuel gave Kaiven one chance to leave. The four hours Blondie had bought gave them just enough time to decide what leaving meant.

Eer050's plan required the ancient evacuation ring to produce a destination solution when it opened. The crew would cross through the ring while Kaiven drew the assault away. Once the destination existed, Kaiven would record it, fold there automatically on the stolen cells, and rendezvous with them.

Blondie stared at the plan. "We abandon herr."

"We conduct a temporary unaccompanied transit followed by immediate reunification."

"Use that fucking sentence. Prrecisely."

The heading above Eer050's plan changed from CREW EVACUATION to TEMPORARY UNACCOMPANIED TRANSIT.

Eer050 looked toward Xoxz.

Xoxz raised both hands. "Kaiven prefers complete sentences."

An old Earth film had once sent Ellen Ripley back through fire for a child everyone sensible had already counted as lost. Viewers tended to remember the creature. Ena remembered that she went back. Monsters were common. Returning was the rare technology.

The ship still had to be convinced that escape was legal. Eer050 needed three hours to prepare the ring. The mercenaries would arrive in four.

An amber relay light opened beside Ena's wrist display.

Jo's face appeared above it, softly doubled by distance. Her cream workcoat was still neat at the collar and nowhere else. Behind her, a civilian corridor slid past in strips of amber light: water drums tied to a handrail, a medic trying to convince a sleeping child that a blanket was not a legal adversary, and three small vessels waiting their turn at a pressure gate.

Ena recognized the vessels. *The Foregone Conclusion* held beside the route controls. *The Green Exception* had opened its loading mouth around a torn civilian pressure membrane. *Compound Glory* occupied enough visual space for several emergencies.

"Captain," Jo said, "pplease tell me you have not scheduled a battle inside my afternoon."

"Hey, Jo. Look at you, got a whole town moving." Ena looked past the relay at the corridor. "That little one asleep by the water drums-can somebody move that loose strap? Kid wakes up, first thing they'll do is put a foot through it. I'm learning this stuff at a terrifying rate."

"Forty-three, a pressure gate that enjoys suspense, and one person who has filed a complaint against a blanket."

"We've got two here. One's taken possession of my thumb. I'd offer to swap complaints, but I've become attached."

Jo lifted the loose strap as she passed. "I heard. My congratulations are awaiting a medically appropriate moment. Pplease stop improvising childcare while being shot at."

"Working on the second bit. How's your gate?"

Behind Jo, Talra marked branching exits on the corridor wall while the civilians using them moved her labels to places that made local sense. Nemi

and her cooperative patched the membrane in visible greens. Vorax stood inside a projected lien and dismantled it sentence by sentence with the joy of a man legally setting fire to weather.

"They found my route after your bounty cancellation went public," Jo said. "Talra brought sequencing. Nemi brought four people, nine useful fabrics, and one fabric that is expressing itself. Vorax purchased the pressure gate's emergency debt and discovered the debt could not survive being read aloud."

Vorax leaned into frame. "I did not purchase it. I acquired the weapon, exposed its hereditary weakness, and executed it before witnesses."

"He waived the fees," Jo translated.

"After conquest."

Nemi passed behind him wrapped in half a green membrane. "Still conquering you a little."

Talra did not look away from the routes. "Jo, Branch Four is waiting on your decision. Not mine."

Jo checked the three vessels, forty-three civilians, and one pressure gate with theatrical instincts. "Branch Four holds. Move the medical stores first."

The corridor moved.

The smallest vessel flashed its route-ready light. Someone behind Jo cheered with the exhausted discretion of a person who had been waiting too long to cheer properly.

"I can turn us," she said. "Ppeople are packing medical stores already. I also have a return route, a civilian handoff, and a public file for every mercenary company that thinks a pressure gate is an appropriate place to conduct business."

Ena's expression changed before his answer did. His thumb worried the edge of his wrist display.

"Jo, wait. I want you here. Fuck, I'd like everybody here, a roof, a doctor, somebody who knows what babies eat. But I'm looking at your screen and I can see a woman holding a mask on someone else. How far do they have left?"

Jo went very still. Her route cards lowered by two centimeters.

"Two pressure doors. The second seal needs assistance."

"Can they get through without you?"

"I have prepared a handoff." She checked the woman again. "The receiving medic is still on the other side."

"Stay until they're together. Please. You're the one who knows whose oxygen is where."

"And you are the one about to remain near mercenaries, an ancient weapon, and two children."

"Yeah."

"That is not a persuasive division of labor."

Another message waited beneath Jo's channel. Viatorem had sent a sketch of *Kalhuno na Sarai* parked under three moons, its rounded hull wearing a new orange route line. Darwin slept across the caption.

FOUND A QUIET WALL. SAVING YOU A PIECE. TRY NOT TO BECOME MEMORIAL-SHAPED BEFORE I GET BACK.

Ena touched the open line on his forearm. He opened a reply beneath the sketch, watched the cursor wait beside Darwin’s sleeping shape, then closed it empty. Jo was still there on the other channel.

"No. It’s just the one we got."

Jo looked down at the route cards. She had bent the corner of the top one against her palm. She smoothed it while the receiving medic worked through the second seal.

"I hate this plan," she said.

"Me too. I keep thinking of another sentence I could say that’d get you here and leave them safe. Haven’t found it."

"I will remain with the corridor. It is a decision, not abandonment, and it is not because you have made a noble face at me."

Ena nodded. "Good. Keep it moving."

Jo’s smile returned before she had finished smoothing the card. "I have filed an objection in triplicate. One copy is emotional."

"Save it. We’ll need paperwork later."

"Pplease do."

The relay closed. Ena could still hear the woman holding the mask asking the medic to hurry. He stayed beside the dark display until the corridor’s amber route light moved beyond the first door.

They spent the next hour making lists.

Eer050 made the official one: gate sequence, rendezvous logic, atmospheric tolerances, six failure branches, and the exact order in which no one was permitted to panic.

Pou made a shorter list on the back of a ration wrapper.

KIDS. EXIT. FOOD. EVERYBODY.

He considered the order and moved food below everybody.

Blondie read it over his shoulder. "Why were the children ever separate from everybody?"

"Small writing."

She took the wrapper, crossed out the first line, and wrote EVERYBODY INCLUDING CHILDREN across the whole surface.

Pou inspected it. "No room for food."

"Carrried by everybody."

He nodded. "Good plan."

Xoxz made no list. He placed objects in a line on the nursery floor: melted spoon, music cylinder, timing cartridge, one boot, the promotional planet from Dock Seventeen, two bolts, three lengths of wire, and a cup Eer050 had not yet noticed was missing.

"What’s the planet for?" Ena asked.

Xoxz rolled it between both palms and listened to the seam. "Not *for* yet. Hollow means it still has professional options."

"Such as?"

"Depends wha' needs holding."

Ena picked up the toy. A seam ran around its equator. Inside, Xoxz had wired a recorder to catch the destination handshake as soon as the gate produced one. If Kaiven lost the main record, the cheap meal prize would carry their way back.

"Pell wanted us to take a second one," Ena said. "I said we didn't have room. Look at me now. Might die because I underestimated a meal prize."

Xoxz took it back and checked the seam. "One recorder's useful. Two empty planets'd still need two recorders."

"Mm. Where do you want it? I'm carrying Isa, so I've got a free pocket on the other side."

Xoxz let him try the weight. They agreed on the inner pocket, above the harness buckle. Ena would collect the toy when the preparations were done.

Moxy's list existed only in her head. She walked Rage through Kaiven's bridge anyway.

"Dhis is fold control. Don't touch it until the destination locks. Dhis kills remote thrust. Dhis only looks like it kills remote thrust."

Rage stood on the copilot's seat to reach the panel. "Why?"

"Previous owner."

"Which control works?"

"Depends whether Kaiven likes dhe situation."

"Ship's haunted."

"Unverified."

"Old-man word for haunted."

Eer050 spoke from behind them. "I am approximately sixty times your age."

Rage looked at him. "Wear it worse."

Eer050's eyebrow rose a millimeter. He had been delighted.

Moxy showed Rage how to open the civilian channel, how to find the automatic rendezvous, and how to bypass the command chair's biometric lock with a thumb pressed beneath the left edge.

"Why tell me?" he asked.

"If I'm busy."

"Dead?"

"Busy."

Rage looked at her profile. "Ya don't soften much."

"Didn't."

Neither said anything more.

Kaiven sent Rage's temporary access code to his wrist. The code identified him as SHORT-TERM HOSTILE GUEST.

He read it. "Accurate."

The ship changed *hostile* to *difficult* after fourteen seconds.

"She likes ya," Moxy said.

"Poor judgment."

Pou inspected every harness. The infant straps were designed for two arms. Oro and Isa possessed four each and strong views about allocation. He rebuilt both harnesses from cargo webbing and the soft lining of his own coat.

"You'll be cold," Ena said.

Pou shrugged.

"That's not an answer."

"Coat was."

Ena helped him cut the second lining. For a while they worked without talking.

"You good?" Ena asked.

"No."

"Yeah."

Pou tightened a stitch. "Still working."

"Yeah."

Ena held the lining taut while Pou finished the stitch. When they let it go, both pairs of hands stayed beside the little harness.

Blondie fitted a sliver of her armor into each cradle. The gold material softened where the children touched it and hardened everywhere else.

"Emergency shield," she said.

"You tore that from your breastplate," Eer050 observed.

"Spare."

The missing sections exposed the weaker seams over her heart and throat.

"There are no spare sections in that position."

Blondie held the cradle piece level while Isa's hand tested its softened edge. Eer050 looked from the child to the gaps in her armor. He left the measurements open on his slate when he went.

He returned ten minutes later with two old diplomatic seals made from a black alloy strong enough to reinforce the gaps.

"Those survived four governments," she said.

"Three."

"Xoxz counted the small one."

Eer050 attached the seals. "Its legitimacy remains contested."

"So does mine."

His hands paused.

"The fit is acceptable," he said.

Blondie turned for the second seal and waited while he checked its fit.

Doors opened before occupied hands reached them. The nursery floor warmed beneath the cradles. When Ena left the bridge for the third time without eating, a galley hatch refused to let him pass until he took a ration piece from Pou.

"You’re not my mom," he told the ship.

The hatch closed behind him with unnecessary force.

"Okay. Strong argument."

Rage attempted to give Isa a mineral stabilizer. She sealed her mouth, caught the dropper with two hands, and pushed it back toward him with the moral certainty of a much larger person.

"She needs the dose," Eer050 said.

"Yer presence ain’t improved her opinion," Rage replied.

He removed Technician Brell’s stolen sweetener from his coat, mixed three grains into the medicine, and offered it again. Isa accepted the dropper immediately.

Moxy watched the empty packet disappear into his pocket. "Principle?"

"Medicine."

"Coulda said dhat on dhe ship."

"I just did."

Pou found a sealed tin of peaches in the galley.

Most civilizations considered themselves immortal. Their canned goods were more cautious.

It had been saved for a celebration no one could remember. The label showed a yellow fruit beneath a blue sky, neither color quite plausible. Pou opened it with ceremonial gravity and divided the contents into seven cups.

"Count’s nine, Cap’n," Moxy said.

"Kids don’t have teeth."

Isa objected at length.

"She believes teeth’re an arbitrary restriction," Xoxz translated.

"Says yer loud," Rage said.

Isa screamed louder.

Xoxz nodded. "Tha negotiations continue."

They ate in the nursery among the black trees. Above them, mercenary lights gathered like a second and less imaginative constellation.

A root-dwelling animal no larger than Ena’s thumb emerged beside the cups, carried away one thread of peach, and returned for a rivet fallen from Blondie’s armor work. The rivet required both forelegs and considerably more conviction.

Ena moved the peach thread closer. "Hey, buddy. Easier one."

The animal kept the rivet.

"All right. Big plans." He held the tin out to Pou. "We used to get these cold, straight out of the fridge. You'd stand in the kitchen with the door open, eat half a tin, put the rest back, come back ten minutes later as if somebody else might've done something with it."

"Khey had?"

"Once. Someone put the peaches in a bowl. That was the whole problem with living with organized people. I was looking for a tin. Took me a day to find my own fucking fruit."

Pou drank the syrup left in his cup. "Should label bowls."

"You understand me. We could've had a peaceful home."

Moxy reached over and turned the tin so its ingredients faced her. "Your organized person was sick of cuttin' fingers on dhe lid."

Ena checked the edge beneath his thumb. "Ah. Shit. That's probably true." He passed the tin by its base.

Blondie built a shelter around the cradles from sections of Kaiven's spare armor. She left a gap, frowned at it, added another plate, frowned again.

"Keep goin'," Pou said, "kids'll be safe from adulthood."

She threw a bolt at him. He caught it in his peach cup.

"Bonus iron."

Blondie added another plate.

"That plate blocks the ventilation," Eer050 said.

"Dangerr cannot enter through the ventilation."

"Neither can air."

"Airr should identify itself beforre approaching the children."

Moxy looked at Rage. "Either one get less like this?"

"Which one?"

Blondie and Isa both glared at him.

"Fair," Moxy said.

Pou spent the meal lounging against a root and making Isa laugh by balancing cups on his head. Every few minutes his eyes moved to a different exit. He had memorized all of them.

On the fourth cup, Isa clapped all four hands. Pou added a fifth.

"That is my cup," Eer050 said.

"Found higher purpose."

The stack fell. Pou caught four cups. Oro caught the fifth without looking away from Xoxz.

Everyone stared at the quiet child.

Xoxz leaned closer. "Show-off. Kid's got form."

Oro placed the cup on his head.

Pou put one hand to his chest. "Student wins."

Eer050 retrieved the cup.

Oro watched him wash it three times.

He dried it, inspected the rim, and placed it inside his coat instead of returning it to the stack.

His left eyebrow rose when he noticed Moxy watching. For Eer050, this constituted a request for absolute discretion.

Moxy honored it by saying nothing very loudly.

The meal left seven cups, one opened tin, four peach-sticky tools, and a spoon nobody was allowed to wash because Xoxz had promoted it into infrastructure.

Moxy lifted the shallow repair tray from the nursery table. Xoxz reached after it; she carried it to a dry ledge and checked the strap herself. The driver remained in its cloth loop.

"Ten minutes," she said.

He looked at the cleared surface, then at the cups. "Tha whole table?"

"You can have dhe far end when we've washed up."

She handed him the peach-sticky tools. Xoxz brought them to the washbasin, stopping to rescue the useful lid of the empty tin. Moxy held out her hand. He considered her, wiped the lid, and put it in the tray. She left it there.

Moxy looked around the nursery. "Whose dishes?"

Every adult became occupied by war.

Blondie inspected the eastern sky. Pou tested a support already tested twice. Eer050 opened a calculation with no new inputs. Rage adjusted a blanket that had not moved. Ena looked directly at the writer, seeking a transition.

The writer offered none.

"Dude," Ena said softly.

Moxy folded her arms.

"I've been watching how other captains do this," Ena told her. "They stand in a doorway looking troubled. Somebody brings them a drink. Nobody asks who's washing the previous drink. There's a whole support economy missing from my career."

Moxy held out the sponge. Ena took it.

"Water's in dhe bowl," she said. "You can look troubled over dhere."

He picked up two cups. "This is why revolutions fail. Everybody wants liberation. Nobody wants the sponge."

Pou carried the remaining four in one hand.

"I was getting those," Ena said.

"You had two."

"I was building momentum."

The nursery washbasin had not operated since the Vey vanished. Xoxz connected it to the biological regulator. The faucet released a column of water upward, curved it around Eer050's head, and deposited it neatly on the floor.

Eer050 remained still while one drop hung from the end of his nose.

"Wrong gravity," Xoxz said.

Eer050 pointed at the circulation pump. "I should like my coat excluded from the next demonstration."

Xoxz was already adjusting the connection. Moxy moved the dry tray higher. Ena caught the next discharge in the bowl, and Pou put a towel over Eer050's shoulder before he could begin a formal account of the first.

Moxy handed Eer050 a cloth. He dabbed the drop from his nose while she watched. She waited until he had turned away before trying to speak.

Rage found a shallow Vey bowl and washed the cups by hand.

"Leave some room for these," Ena said, bringing his cups to Rage. "I spent years building things that could do several jobs at once. Took me fucking ages to learn there's a moment when you just need a bowl."

Rage moved his elbow. "And somebody else to dry."

Ena found a cloth. They worked around each other, passing cups across the water.

Isa struck the side of her cradle in rhythm with each cup entering the water. Oro watched the clean cups leave. On the fourth, he reached out.

Rage handed it to him.

"Dhat's Eer's," Moxy said.

Eer050 removed the hidden cup from inside his coat, compared the two, and gave Oro the cleaner one.

No one remarked upon this surrender of classified property.

Blondie dried the tools with heat from one palm. She melted the handle of a cheap knife.

"Dish casualty," Pou said.

"It was weak."

"It cut the peaches."

"Its final victory."

Ena placed the clean cups in a row near the evacuation supplies. "There. Domestic order. I'm a genius."

Moxy pointed at the opened peach tin still on the floor.

"That's soaking."

"Dry tin."

"Philosophically."

She handed it to him.

He washed it.

For six minutes Ena's hands stayed in warm water. A clean cup came out

slippery; Rage took it, turned it inside the cloth, passed it on. Someone still had to check the sky. Moxy did, and brought back the tin they had missed. Ena felt along its rim before he put it in the water.

When the final cup was dry, Kaiven opened a storage compartment on her own. The crew put the cups inside in no agreed order.

Eer050 rearranged them after everyone walked away.

Xoxz presented the repaired music cylinder to Oro.

"Plays one song badly," he explained.

He turned the melted spoon-key. Six soft notes emerged, the last always late. Oro placed four hands against the cylinder and stared at the tiny vibration. Isa stopped laughing to listen.

"The analog frequency disrupts phase entrainment," Eer050 said.

Everyone looked at him.

He tried again. "It may help them stay together if a machine tries to separate their awareness."

"Dhat was almost an explanation," Moxy said.

Eer050 looked faintly pleased, then noticed everyone had seen it and restored his usual expression.

Isa reached toward the cylinder. Xoxz moved it closer. The child struck the casing and the late sixth note arrived on time.

Xoxz gasped. "She fixed it."

"She struck it," Eer050 said.

Xoxz expanded the waveform. "And the machine listened."

Eer050 inspected the corrected interval. "My generation built that interface."

"Good firs' draft."

Xoxz replayed the corrected interval and stored it beside the gate controls.

"Isa's version," he said.

Isa struck the casing again.

"Definitive edition."

Rage ate one slice of peach in several suspicious bites.

"Expired?" Pou asked.

"Probably."

"Still good?"

Rage took another bite. "Those are different questions."

Ena looked at Xoxz.

Xoxz looked pleased that his philosophy had spread.

"I did not expect you to believe me," he said.

"We didn't," Ena replied. "We checked."

Moxy took the receiver key into her lap and removed its shell. Inside was a transmitter no larger than a seed. She rewrote its handshake and tucked it beneath her sleeve.

"What's that for?" Ena asked.

"Future trouble."

"That narrows it down."

"Optimism, Cap'n."

Later, Ena found her alone on the upper gallery. The broken transit rings framed the sky. Through one ring, the green sun was setting; through another, stars were already visible. The planet seemed to offer several times and ask the viewer to choose.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Moxy leaned against the rail. "Which par'?"

"The gates. The chair. I-"

Moxy considered him. "Keep going."

Below them, the music cylinder repeated its six imperfect notes. Isa made a sound at the late one every time. Oro waited with complete faith that it would come.

"Sometimes," Ena said, "you feel familiar in places I don't remember having."

"Sounds expensive as hell."

He laughed softly.

Moxy let him finish laughing. Below them, the little melody began again.

She took his hand and placed it against the warm rail.

"When I call," she said, "*you come back*."

The first mercenary transport crossed the nearest ring.

Ena closed his hand around hers.

The simple things ended first.

The Federation

Chapter XVII

At dawn on Zenox-08, a crystal of frozen carbon dioxide detached from the shadowed side of a black leaf. It fell 1.6 meters, struck pale soil, and became gas without passing through the inconvenience of being liquid.

At Saint Orra, Assessor Orlo's unattended slate added 0.004 credits of interest to Kaiven's account. The amount was too small to display and too legitimate to forgive.

On the garden world Isen, Sola Mer cut a red fruit into five equal pieces for four children. She ate none of them. Each child privately concluded that the largest piece had been received by someone else.

Inside Kaiven, Pou placed his cup in the galley with Blondie's bolt still resting at the bottom. Eer050 aligned the evacuation calculations to the exact center of the navigation well and corrected a deviation of 0.4 millimeters. His mind requested two more checks. He marked the first VERIFIED and left the request unanswered. Xoxz removed one boot and placed it beneath the table so the pressure in his body would settle and Kaiven would know he intended to return.

Blondie checked the shelter around the cradles, found no new gaps, and pressed a folded blue-stained cloth deeper beneath her breastplate. Moxy tested the seed-sized transmitter under her sleeve. Its light blinked once against her wrist and went dark. Ena fastened Isa's harness, loosened it by the width of one finger, and fastened it again.

Across the nursery complex, five white transports completed their descent calculations. Ordinary lives continued everywhere their weapons could not yet reach.

The mercenaries descended at dawn.

Five transports entered the nursery complex from five directions, their hulls white and smooth, each marked with a blue circle that implied public service. They fired before touching ground.

The blue circle had been selected by committee to communicate safety, continuity, and lawful authority. Its practical purpose was to reassure anyone being shot that the appropriate process had been followed.

Blondie met the first barrage in the sky.

She rose above the eastern tower with both hands open. Gold spread from her body into a shield vast enough to turn morning yellow. The shells struck and became flowers of white heat. Behind her, Kaiven woke on stolen fuel.

"HEY! They scrratched my damn atmospherre," Blondie said.

"It is not your atmosphere," Eer050 replied over the battle channel.

"It looks prretty damn mine from herre."

The second barrage bent toward the desert and carved glass rivers through the dust.

Between impacts, a six-legged desert animal carried one black seed toward a crack in the nursery foundation. Each explosion made it stop. None persuaded it to abandon the seed.

Below, Pou stood inside the evacuation gate. The ancient ring had begun to rotate, dragging sections of the ruined tower with it. He placed one shoulder under a collapsing support and pushed until the building reconsidered.

"Pakh is open," he said.

"Ceilin’s comin’ down." Moxy ducked beneath the support and waved the others toward him. "Keep to his left. Pou, shoulder hold?"

He shifted the load. "For walking."

They walked faster.

Eer050 commanded from Kaiven’s bridge. Vaal’s assault formed clean tactical branches on his displays, every unit covering another, every retreat already protected.

"They expect us to defend the ship," he said. "Therefore we will abandon it."

Blondie appeared on one display, wrapped in fire. "We will WHAT!?"

"Appear to."

"Use complete sentences, old man. I am not dying inside a footnote."

"Kaiven will proceed without crew along an automated decoy vector while remaining under our control."

"You arre using my ship as bait."

"Only visually."

"If your plan scrratches herr, I will kill the plan."

Ena watched Blondie tear a mercenary shell in half. "We’ll take the cargo side past them. Xoxz, give me a coolant warning before you vent. I’d like to retain my personal outline."

He sent Kaiven forward on remote thrust, drawing two transports and the orbital guns toward her empty cargo side. At the last moment Xoxz vented the pink coolant. It ignited across the mercenary sensors, turning one Kaiven into forty luminous ghosts.

"She always wanted children," Xoxz said.

The ghosts scattered. Some accelerated. Some spun. One stopped completely and began broadcasting the unpaid dock invoice from Saint Orra.

Eer050 stared at the tactical display. "Why is a decoy transmitting our debt?"

"Needed a credible identity."

Three mercenary missiles immediately locked onto it.

Pou watched them change course. "Debt’s heavy."

"I have maintainèd this for centuries," Eer050 said.

The invoice exploded in a sphere of pink light.

On the battle channel, Assessor Orlo’s automated system added DESTRUCTION OF FINANCIAL DOCUMENT.

Blondie heard the notification. "I will destrroy him laterr."

"Take a number," Moxy said.

Jubilant Marshal Dane entered the battle channel without invitation.

Her white armor now carried a dark scratch across one shoulder. The scratch occupied more of her attention than the burning transport behind her.

"All units, resume Discreet formation. Do not engage the gold energy source

without Historical authorization."

Blondie tore a gun assembly from one transport and threw it through another.

Prill watched the two vehicles meet. "Historical authorization granted."

Commander Vaal's voice cut across hers. "Advance on the nursery. Ignore losses."

Several Jubilee unit markers stopped.

"Clarify *losses*," Prill said.

"All losses."

"Personnel exclusions remain in force."

"The Federation indemnity supersedes your exclusions."

Prill's expression did not change. Her throat did.

"That is not our understanding."

"It is the executed language."

Eer050 opened the mercenary contract from the stolen command cache. Appendix Nine had been attached after signature. Its title was OPERATIONAL CONSUMABLES. Ships, armor, local structures, civilian records, and subcontracted personnel occupied the same column.

He transmitted it across every Jubilee channel.

For three seconds, the attack lost its rhythm.

Technician Brell answered first. "Marshal. We're consumables."

"I can read."

"Good. Was worried the contract ate that too."

Two white soldiers lowered their weapons. A third continued firing at Kaiven's decoys because his helmet had muted legal updates during combat. The helmet classified this as focus.

Vaal seized the command channel. "All units proceed."

Prill overrode him. "Jubilee personnel may exercise contract review."

"During engagement?"

"Especially during engagement."

The marker nearest the eastern tower reversed.

"Unit Twelve, explain," Prill demanded.

"Distance-led recovery," the pilot replied.

"You are retreating."

"Brand language, Marshal."

Another marker reversed with it.

Vaal disconnected Prill from tactical command.

The remaining Federation authority seized every automated weapon on the white ships. Turrets rotated independently of the people inside them and resumed firing.

Prill’s image stayed on the crew channel for one moment longer.

"He has violated the franchise agreement," she said.

Ena ducked as a shell opened the wall beside him. "Put it in the review."

"I intend to put it in him."

"Get your people out first."

Prill watched the fleeing markers. Her hand moved toward the control Vaal had locked her out of. She pulled it back and opened the emergency band instead.

"All Jubilee crews," she said on an emergency band. "White suits no longer indicate safety. Remove the blue circles."

Across the battlefield, mercenaries tore their own insignia from armor. Some kept fighting. Some dragged wounded coworkers toward the storm. One used the adhesive circle to patch a hole in his boot.

Vaal’s Federation units continued toward the nursery.

Prill’s channel vanished.

The battle did not become morally simple. It became harder to invoice.

Ena and Rage carried the infants toward the gate. Isa was strapped against Ena’s chest beneath the armor. Oro rode with Rage and clutched the music cylinder in all four hands. Its melody trembled beneath the weapon fire.

Isa caught Ena’s comm unit with two hands.

"No," Ena said.

Isa pulled it free and screamed directly into the open battle channel.

Every crew member flinched. Two mercenaries outside the western wall lowered their weapons in confusion.

Kaiven’s translator displayed:

COMMAND INTENT: ABSOLUTE. CONTENT: UNRESOLVED.

"Finally," Blondie said. "Our little eclipse recognizes clear leadership."

Ena recovered the comm.

Rage adjusted Oro’s blanket. "Yer authority’s been challenged."

"She has my support."

Mercenaries cut through the western wall.

Ena fired Kaiven’s defensive beam through the opening. The narrow blue line struck three weapons in succession and no bodies. Rage crossed the room between shots, the stolen conduit gauge tapping once on each helmet as he passed. Four armored soldiers collapsed, alive and profoundly insulted.

A fifth soldier remained standing. He looked at the four bodies, looked at Rage, and carefully placed his weapon on the floor.

Rage appeared beside him, removed the weapon’s power cell, and returned to Ena.

The soldier looked down at the weapon he had just surrendered.

"Was that necessary?" Ena asked.

"Migh' reconsider."

Behind them, the soldier reconsidered, lifted the powerless weapon, and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

Rage raised the power cell in acknowledgment.

The soldier lay down beside the others.

Above them, Moxy entered the third transport.

She wore one of the white field suits taken from the soldiers Rage had embarrassed. Smoke and orders filled the cabin. No one questioned a person moving with sufficient annoyance.

She reached the command spine, placed her seed-sized transmitter beneath the primary fold array, and armed it.

One small point pulsed on her wrist.

Found you.

Then Commander Vaal's face appeared on the bulkhead.

"Officer," he said. "Remove your helmet."

Moxy shot the screen.

The transport sealed every door.

"That was discourteous," Vaal's voice said from the ceiling.

"File a complain'."

She planted charges on the auxiliary control spine, climbed into a waste conduit, and detonated them behind her. The transport lurched sideways, tore a white scar through the nursery tower, then corrected above the black garden. Moxy rode the conduit down as the world rotated and kicked free into open air. Her knee took the landing. She tried to rise on it, saw white, and put both hands on the ground until Pou reached her.

Pou pulled her up with one hand while holding the ceiling with the other.

"Tracker."

"Plante'."

"Knee."

"Optional."

"Good."

The crew converged at the evacuation gate.

Xoxz forced its controls awake with Isa's corrected six-note sequence. The ring filled with a view of a place no map recognized: a dark shore beneath six moons. Air moved through from the other side.

The gate released a destination solution. Kaiven recorded it and armed the automatic rendezvous for the first successful crossing.

"Tha gate's stable!" he shouted.

The stolen pylon core pulsed inside his tool bag.

He dropped beside it. Six black lines had appeared across its surface, answering matching signals somewhere outside the tower.

"They’re starting tha bad rhythm."

Eer050 checked the assault map. "The pylons remain aboard the transports."

"Door doesn’t care where they are."

Xoxz connected the music cylinder to the gate. Oro held one end. Isa reached from Ena’s harness and struck the casing with two hands.

The corrected sixth note entered the nursery field.

Outside, one descending transport rolled violently. Its pylon lost synchronization and discharged into its own guidance system. The ship landed upright, sideways, and deeply embarrassed in a black tree.

Pou saw it through the broken wall. "Worked."

"One voice listened," Xoxz said.

Five black lines remained.

Eer050 rerouted Kaiven’s seventeen mismatched rhythms into the cylinder. Moxy fed the stolen timing cartridge backward through the sequence. Blondie widened her shield until each pulse arrived at a different temperature. Rage held Oro against the old Vey control stone.

For one breath, the remaining lines faded.

"Again," Ena said.

Isa struck the casing.

The note opened the gate wider. The dark shore became solid enough for sand to blow into the nursery.

"Destination first," Eer050 said. "Countermeasure second."

"Same song," Xoxz replied.

"Different listeners."

Moxy looked at the stable shore, Kaiven’s armed rendezvous, and the five fading pylon channels. "Can hold both?"

Xoxz’s face tightened beneath the noise. "Can try."

Nobody asked him to promise.

One final civilian packet reached Kaiven through the battle interference.

Talra’s route sheet filled the display, covered in other people’s revision marks. CORRIDOR CLEAR. ALL BRANCHES ACCOUNTED FOR.

Nemi had added a green handprint in one corner. Vorax had added his name beneath the list of contributors, deleted it, restored it at a smaller size, and attached a formal complaint about the emotional violence of typography.

Ena touched the acknowledgment.

"Hold course, buddies."

The packet closed. Three distant ships kept forty-three civilians moving away from the battle. They did not turn toward Kaiven, and Kaiven did not ask them to abandon the lives already in their hands.

For one bright minute, they were winning.

Blondie drove the remaining transports from the sky. Eer050 trapped Vaal's command ship behind Kaiven's forty ghosts. Pou held the path. Moxy reached Ena. Rage carried Oro within ten steps of the open gate.

Then the mercenaries used the Vey weapon.

Six black pylons struck the ground around the nursery. They produced no blast. A low rhythm entered the bones.

Isa stopped crying.

Oro dropped the music cylinder.

Both infants arched in perfect unison as pale light pulled upward from their bodies. The gate flickered. Ena tore at Isa's harness, but his hands had become distant things. He could see his thumb against the buckle and could not make it press. Isa's weight shifted away from his chest. Rage took one step toward Oro and collapsed.

Xoxz crawled to the cylinder and turned the spoon-key.

One note. Two.

The pylons swallowed the melody.

White-armored figures came through the smoke. Ena saw their hands take Isa. Her foot passed against his sleeve; he tried to close his elbow around it. He fired and missed because the floor had divided into several moments, each insisting it was now. Moxy reached the transport cradle and severed one restraint before a pulse threw her into the wall.

Rage moved once, faster than pain, faster than age, and caught the cradle's edge.

Commander Vaal stepped from the smoke. Blood ran from one ear, but his hand was steady on the phase weapon.

"I am sorry," he said.

"Right," Ena answered from the ground.

Vaal fired.

Rage's fingers released the cradle.

The mercenaries lifted both infants into the third transport, now the last one still functional. Vaal backed onto its ramp behind them, keeping the phase weapon trained on Rage until the doors closed.

The transport rose.

Blondie broke from the sky and fell toward it like judgment.

She would have reached them.

The sky changed.

Sound did not stop. It departed.

Blondie hung above the tower, gold streaming soundlessly from her hands. The transport's engines became mute blue circles. Ena shouted and felt the shout happen only inside his skull.

Every shadow on Zenox-08 turned toward the same place.

Between the broken transit rings, a man-shaped absence opened its eyes.

Asgan

Chapter XVIII

First there was no sound.

Beneath the broken gallery, a repair device continued drawing dust into a neat line. The line curved toward the sky. The device followed until its sensors could no longer identify down, then stopped with its brush extended.

Then light began to lean.

The green sun stretched toward the figure above Zenox until it resembled a wound being drawn closed. Stars appeared in the morning sky and moved inward. Darkness gathered around the shape, but within the darkness burned grains of impossible brilliance-as if someone had made a body from void and stardust, then forgotten which was skin.

Oro and Isa woke screaming.

Across the distance between the transport cradles, four small hands reached for four small hands. Their cheek marks shone with the same blind terror that moved through everyone below.

The mercenaries turned their weapons toward the figure. No identification appeared on their displays. No order arrived to explain him.

Inside the rising transport, Vaal looked up with everyone else.

"Proceed to orbit," he ordered. "Now."

The transport engines refused to make sound, but they obeyed.

Ena stood.

The figure descended.

Asgan's feet stopped above the broken gallery. He wore no armor. What resembled a long coat dissolved at its edges into points of night. His posture was quiet, slightly inclined against a weight no one else could see.

Asgan surveyed the battle. His gaze passed over the mercenaries, the crew, and the ruined nursery. No one could tell what held his attention. His eyes reflected no sky and offered no recognition.

Asgan raised one hand. Thumb touched middle finger; the others opened around an absent center.

Asgan spoke in Kai.

"Tio an rina."

Common speech could only flatten it to: *This seeds the beginning.*

The older phrasing held a smaller, more complete meaning.

So it begins.

Above, the transport carrying Oro and Isa entered Vaal's command ship through its ventral hangar. Ena raised Kaiven's beam control.

Asgan turned his palm toward the mercenaries remaining on the ground.

Dark rays opened between his fingers.

They did not strike like weapons. Where they touched, they *erased.*

A white-armored soldier lost sound first. The smoke around her stopped moving. Her outline became a perfect absence shaped like a person. Then reality closed over the place where she had stood. Another vanished beside her. Then another.

No ash. No body. No proof that matter had ever accepted their names.

The surviving mercenaries broke formation. Some fired at Asgan. Others ran for transports that had already abandoned them. Commander Vaal's ship accelerated out of the atmosphere with the infants aboard.

"NO!" Ena shouted.

The void rays widened toward the crew.

Blondie rose between them.

Her golden shield covered Kaiven, Ena, Moxy, Pou, Xoxz, Eer050, and Rage. It covered the ruined nursery and every empty cradle. Her light became a second dawn against the void.

"Mine," she said.

Sound returned only for the word.

The ray touched her shield.

Gold vanished from the sky.

Where Blondie had been, morning looked through an outline of nothing.

One by One

Chapter XIX

Ena was still looking at the light Blondie had put around them.

Her shield broke without breaking. It did not crack, dim, or yield. One instant it was the largest object beneath the sky; the next there had never been light there.

Blondie remained for half a breath.

She looked down at the crew. At Kaiven. At the empty cradles inside the shelter she had built too thick.

He raised his hand to show her where he was. She was looking toward the cradles. He tried to move into her line of sight.

Blondie spread her arms wider anyway.

The absence closed.

She was gone.

Ena ran toward the place.

A black seed shaken loose by the bombardment landed inside the shelter Blondie had built too thick. It came to rest where two unnecessary armor plates overlapped.

He reached the place and kept going a step too far. Dust crossed it. Light moved through it. His open hands had nothing to stop them.

"BLONDIE!"

His voice echoed from the nursery bells.

Asgan opened his hand again.

Eer050 seized Ena by the coat. "Move."

They retreated beneath the gallery while void rays crossed the ruins in silent lines. Where they touched, black trees lost branches, stone lost wounds, mercenaries lost the brief histories they had hoped to survive.

Eer050 scanned the residue while running. Data covered his implants.

He had completed one scan. His thumb hovered over the control for another. Ena's coat pulled against his other hand as the captain tried to turn back. Eer050 closed the scan with the pressure to repeat it still there.

"Annihilation," he said. "It leaves nothing. No residual mass. No energy. No quantum shadow."

"Later," Moxy snapped.

"There may be no later, which is the point *I have spent my life refusing to understand*."

He tore the scanner from his wrist and pushed it into Ena's hand.

The display showed only a clean absence where Blondie's energy, matter, and history should have left residue.

"The shields give it a larger boundary to find," Eer050 said. "Break formation. Do not let it-"

Sound stopped around him.

Eer050's face became an outline of darkness. Ena tried to catch the hand still holding his coat. His fingers reached the sleeve, then passed through

the place the wrist had occupied.

His hand released Ena's sleeve.

Reality closed.

The scanner fell.

Pou caught it.

"Gate," he said.

The evacuation ring still turned below, though the dark shore within it flashed in and out. Xoxz stumbled toward the controls. Rage followed, too weak for speed. Moxy pulled Ena after them.

The nursery support split.

Pou stepped beneath it.

He planted both feet and raised his hands. Hundreds of tons of ancient stone stopped above his head. The route to the gate remained open.

"Go," he said.

"Put it down and come with us," Ena ordered.

"On what?"

Pou smiled. Dust ran over his face and caught in the crease beside his mouth. He spat some clear before he could speak. The support shifted; his shoulders dropped and drove upward again.

"*Kept checkin' khe exits,*" he said. "*Turns out I was one.*"

Ena moved toward him.

Pou's expression hardened. "Cap'n. Spend khe energy savin' someone."

The ray passed through the falling dust.

Pou's hands vanished first. The weight above him did not fall; for one impossible second it remained supported by the memory of his strength.

Then he was gone.

The ceiling came down.

Moxy shoved Ena through the lower arch as stone erased the route behind them. Rage landed beside him. Xoxz waited at the ring, one boot gone again, the music cylinder hugged to his chest.

"Tha gate's collapsin'," Xoxz said.

Three alarms and four voices reached him together.

"One voice."

Moxy closed the crew channel until only she remained. "Gate. Can you hold it?"

"No. One interval." He turned the spoon-key.

Six imperfect notes entered the ring. The dark shore steadied for one breath.

Then a void ray crossed the ring's outer edge. The destination, the air moving through it, and half the ancient machine ceased to exist.

Xoxz listened to the place where it had been.

"Cap'n," he said. "It don' even leave an echo."

The void ray entered his back.

His outline emptied. The music cylinder slipped through fingers that no longer belonged to visible reality. Ena caught it before it struck the ground.

The late sixth note played to an empty room.

Xoxz was gone.

The evacuation ring collapsed into ordinary metal.

Only Ena, Moxy, and Rage remained.

Asgan stood at the far end of the ruined gallery. His hand lowered. No one could tell what, if anything, the gesture addressed.

Rage moved toward Ena.

"No," Ena said.

The ray opened across the gallery.

It passed through Ena's chest.

Cold passed through him without pain or resistance. He felt no destination, no hidden presence, nothing he could name as survival. Then the ray left his body and struck the wall behind him.

The wall vanished.

Ena remained.

Rage stared.

The next ray opened toward Moxy.

She turned to Ena.

"Cap'n?"

Silence

Chapter XX

"Cap'n?"

Ena did not move.

The broken gallery had become Kaiven's bridge. The pale desert had become a room with no walls. Moxy stood before him and behind her waited an empty chair.

"Cap'n, come back."

Her voice crossed the distance.

Ena saw her.

Dust in Moxy's hair. One knee failing beneath her. Her mouth held tight around the next breath. She reached for him, and this time he saw the hand.

He took it.

The void ray touched her back.

Sound withdrew from the place where they stood. Ena felt her fingers in his, but he could not hear himself saying her name. Darkness traced the edge of her body.

He pulled.

There was nothing to pull against. No force. No direction. Ena could feel no elsewhere in the ray. It erased every fact by which he knew she had been here.

Moxy studied his face.

The tension went out of her mouth. Ena pulled harder. He wanted her to help him pull, to make one more furious effort with him.

Ena remembered her beside the command chair.

Sometimes silence has what you're after.

He remembered the solemn beat after the body had interrupted eternity.

He remembered her hand on the chair while she tried to stop laughing. The warm place beside his wrist. He could still feel her fingers there now.

Moxy's hand became transparent absence inside his.

He tightened his grip around nowhere.

Her lips moved.

Listen to the silence.

Then Moxy disappeared.

Ena's hand closed on itself.

The ray ended.

Sound returned in pieces: stone settling, Kaiven's distant alarm, Rage breathing through pain. High above, Vaal's command ship ignited its fold drive. Oro and Isa's synchronized pulses vanished from the scanners.

Asgan was gone.

The sky held no wound where he had stood. Sunlight reached the ledge. Ena could feel it warming the back of his neck. He bent away from it and listened.

There was only the wind moving through the nursery bells.

For a moment he remembered how her laugh had sounded. He lifted his head toward it. Nothing had sounded outside him. The bells went on moving in the wind.

The silence had nothing for him.

Rage stood beside him. His coat brushed Ena's arm when the wind changed. Neither moved away.

They returned to Kaiven.

The cargo lock opened for them slowly. Pink coolant ran down one wall. The lights awakened in sections, revealing every improvised repair and every object left where its owner expected to return.

A palm-sized cleaning unit emerged, approached Moxy's last dusty boot print, and stopped. Its map still assigned the corridor to six moving bodies. It waited for clearance.

Pou's cup waited in the galley with the bolt still inside it.

Eer050's six columns remained above the navigation well.

Xoxz's other boot lay beneath the table.

One of Blondie's handprints had burned gold into the outer hull.

Ena reached the bridge last.

The command stations curved around him.

Blondie's station was empty.

Eer050's station was empty.

Pou's station was empty.

Xoxz's station was empty.

Moxy's station was empty.

He sat before it because he could not sit in his own.

The mercenary ship had become a point at the edge of the system. Then the point bent as its fold drive opened.

A light blinked on Moxy's dead console.

Once.

Twice.

Her hidden transmitter woke inside Vaal's ship and sent its location across the dark.

Found you.

The point disappeared into the fold.

The signal remained.

This was what Moxy had saved: a direction.

Ena could not follow it.

Not yet.

Rage lowered himself into the copilot's chair, old hands trembling. The seat shifted under his weight. Ena turned toward the sound and found him still there.

The signal blinked again.

Kaiven's white lights became glowing keys beneath Ena's hands. The forward glass dimmed into an off-white monitor with damaged corners. For an instant, a price sticker clung to the universe.

US$3.14

The tracker blinked like a cursor.

Ena placed his hands above the keys.

The cursor waited.

"So it begins," he wrote.

An Incomplete Inventory of Things That Mattered

Veya - A lover on a distant screen, an independent hunter, and a formidable critic of citrus abuse. She could remove a dealer's access keys, check Ena's cheek, and make Jo admire furniture placement. Romance occasionally requires both tenderness and an inventory of borrowed cutters.

Assessor Orlo - A dock official who believed distance, combat, and intergalactic flight were temporary conditions, while an unpaid invoice was permanent. Available evidence supported him more often than anyone found comfortable.

A Small Green Weather - A 17.2-meter living artwork with no mind, five customs categories, and better memory than the contract hiding beside it. Its capillaries kept one unexplained violet band. Beauty occasionally becomes evidence by declining to forget the light.

Brother Omm - A cargo priest who measured freight by weight and fugitives by consequence. His religion refused to distinguish metaphor from physical dimensions, sparing its clergy considerable paperwork and making directions almost useless.

CIVIL-7 - A cheerful contractual interface programmed to interpret objection as engagement, atrocity as technical difficulty, and employment as voluntary whenever the correct box had been selected. Its smile survived every fact presented to it.

Commander Serit Vaal - A mercenary commander whose gray coat removed the decorative burden of public accountability. His grief performed arithmetic on other people's children while his love claimed every voting right in the room.

Jubilant Marshal Prill Dane - A Pale Jubilee franchise marshal who sold violence in service tiers and discovered her customer had classified her employees as consumable. She withdrew people before principle, a moral improvement worth exactly one branded blanket.

Kel - A Soft Door apprentice who joined to open prisons, found herself opening homes and a nursery, and resigned while partly older than her own sleeve. She returned one stone animal before leaving because quitting a criminal enterprise need not excuse poor museum manners.

Mira - A threshold thief whose body occupied two rooms until enemies and colleagues pulled together. She survived with all four limbs and one improved opinion about bathrooms. Her employer later learned that worker loyalty has phase limits.

Pik - A maintenance supervisor shorter than Ena's boot and more essential than the bounty hunters riding above him. He accepted one terrible joke as payment and helped keep Saint Orra's elevator from acquiring a tragic subplot.

Vessa Krail - A courteous threshold thief who introduced herself to doors before violating them and called burglary removal from a hostile address. She could force Vey geometry to open walls, but not understand why a nursery kept saying no.

Isha Deyn - A Federation case editor who examined an empty property description for eleven seconds and approved it thirteen seconds into lunch. Civilization often changes direction during intervals somebody has already been promised.

Jessa Lorn - A mining engineer who refused to restart a drill in unsafe methane. Her supervisor called this insubordination from three meters farther

away, demonstrating management's ancient commitment to principle at a survivable distance.

Jori Par - A maintenance apprentice who lost one cobalt-steel washer inside Saint Orra. He searched for twenty seconds. The washer clicked for nine years. Both parties considered the matter closed.

Jo - Ena's Nemmari companion, formidable assistant, and survivor of several professional disagreements with soup. She left Kaiven to help forty-three civilians cross a pressure gate. Love required her to finish. She filed an objection anyway; one copy was emotional.

Nemi Virel - A Velori artist-restorer who asked for help only after first becoming wrapped in the thing she intended to move. She made shortcuts beautiful, repairs visible, and green sufficiently specific to require several additional greens.

Talra Senn - A contingency architect whose plans contained exits, revisions, and no patience for optimism pretending to be transport. She eventually permitted other people to move her labels, an intimacy greater than many marriages and significantly better documented.

Vorax Dax - A financial architect who insured one artwork five times because five governments disagreed about what it was. He could destroy a predatory lien, save a reflector in nonspace, and remain wounded when neither achievement received an adequately funded ovation.

Viatorem - An interdimensional illustrator who tattooed Ena, sent one badly timed kindness, and declined to explain where "home" was. She could cross impossible distances but did not arrive to solve this one. Friendship is not a summons service, even when the friend owns a dimensional van.

Darwin - Viatorem's small orange co-traveler, seen asleep across an urgent message. Their species, origin, intelligence, and opinion of the battle remained private. Their opinion of warm screens was comparatively well documented.

The Gray Ship Rat - A resident of Kaiven, collector of pink insulation, and attendee at one financial meeting. Ena moved his boot. Later the rat moved the insulation hiding the nursery's warm bypass. It sought a cooler wall. Moral significance arrived uninvited. The children received both.

The Living Reef - A passenger wider than twelve meters, classified as structural moisture, and placed behind questions about chairs. It possessed no recognized name in the file, which did not prevent it from possessing objections.

The Medical Supply Vendor - Sold Rage formula, remembered his concern about expiration dates, and survived a threat directed entirely at an absent manufacturer. Customer service becomes easier when the customer's enemies are elsewhere.

Nali Venn - An agricultural worker who promised to return before failing irrigation lamps went dark. She meant it. Sincerity cannot repair electrical systems, though it has inspired many people to attempt the wiring personally.

Nemi Sor - Two years old and opposed to one red boot while fully accepting its identical counterpart. Adults called this irrational because adults prefer their irrational distinctions to involve flags, borders, and approved footwear.

Officer Neral - A security officer whose fugitive escaped at impossible speed but whose true adversary remained a semicolon. He defended traceability

policy until it successfully traced everyone except the person intended.

Oru - A six-legged child who slept through the collapse of a laundry shelf. His father saved eight garments and legally reclassified the ninth as folded. Oru's contribution was confidence in local government.

Ovan Tesh - A freight receiver who accepted five chairs and a ladder as six chairs. He understood that furniture is less a category than a willingness to stop standing.

Open Passage Mutual - A civilian relief network with mismatched ships, amber route lights, and strong opinions about blankets. It moved people when official rescue became conditional. The Mutual did not solve the war. It kept a gate open for whoever reached it, which is a smaller miracle and often the one available.

Pale Jubilee - A mercenary franchise whose white armor, blue circles, and customer language made private violence resemble public help from sufficiently far away. It insured procedures. Survival remained an optional add-on, proving that a warranty can be accurate and still deserve to be set on fire.

Soft Door Cartel - Thieves, salvagers, and prison-breakers united by excellent manners toward architecture and unreliable manners toward inhabitants. Their tools opened thresholds by removing permission, after which walls, rooms, and occasionally employees expressed the omitted half.

The Green Exception Cooperative - Nemi, Tarrin, Osh, Kikri, and Vera: five adult owners whose different bodies made "standard equipment" confess it had meant somebody else. Their best shortcut required everybody, which is an inefficient way to become a community and an excellent way to remain one.

Registrar Pavo - A customs official who classified a living reef as structural moisture because the passenger form ended at twelve meters. Bureaucracy rarely denies reality outright. It simply provides reality with an unusable field.

Isa - A Vey infant with four hands, absolute command intent, and strong objections to unmodified medicine. She corrected ancient music by hitting it, an approach generally discouraged by conservatories and quietly practiced by mechanics.

The Saint Orra Tea Seller - Held Rage's cup while his hands shook and judged his danger by whether he paid. Ena had asked a different question. The tea seller probably found the better one.

Oro - A quiet Vey infant who watched everything, caught a falling cup, and wore it correctly on the first attempt. Silence should not be confused with passivity; sometimes it is simply observation gathering leverage.

The Sensible Fifth Soldier - A mercenary who watched Rage disable four colleagues, surrendered, reconsidered, discovered his weapon had been emptied, and lay down again. Tactical wisdom sometimes requires two drafts.

Sevi Aran - A woman who died at three hundred and four while waiting for water to boil. She never met Kaiven's crew or altered their decisions. This did not make her life secondary. Her kettle remained optimistic for seven-tenths of a second.

The Silver-Throated Representative - An unnamed Federation official whose painted line moved more honestly than the mouth above it. Their pleasant expression remained after the person beneath had withdrawn, making it well suited to government service.

Sola Mer - A parent who cut five equal pieces of fruit for four children and ate none. Each child believed someone else received more. Love distributed evenly is often experienced as an accounting error.

Technician Brell - A mercenary technician who required a work order during infiltration and carried one unnecessary sweetener packet. His badge reported unauthorized badge displays, proving that surveillance eventually becomes too efficient to exclude itself.

The Armistice of Pel - A historical peace associated with two armies before it and no geography afterward. Blondie cited it during a disagreement about half a tower. Eer050 accepted the revised quantity.

Customs Habitat Leth - The station where a living reef became structural moisture and joined an appeal queue behind questions about chairs. Its forms were designed for all known life, provided known life maintained convenient dimensions.

The Dark Shore Beneath Six Moons - The destination visible through the evacuation ring. It possessed air, six moons, and no recognized map location. This met the crew's standards for hope, which had deteriorated considerably.

Lilt-6 Convalescence Ring - A place expecting one living artwork and receiving it with a torn seam, thirteen spectral bands, and no demand to finance Kaiven's next emergency. Patients deserved beauty without becoming an emergency fund, a principle rarely offered by hospital accounting.

Isen - A garden world where red fruit grew, families shared it, and no mercenary fleet arrived during the relevant minute. Most peace consists of catastrophes being busy elsewhere.

M314 - A flock of galaxies governed by the Federation in principle. The phrase *in principle* allowed the government to own the stars without becoming responsible for roads, rescue, or inconvenient inhabitants.

Merrow's Rest - An orbital settlement where Sevi Aran's kettle outlived her by seven-tenths of a second. The settlement continued rotating, as places do after becoming the site of someone's entire ending.

Morrow Deep Mine - A workplace containing methane, Drill Nine, Jessa Lorn, and management's movable chair. Only one of these consistently observed safety tolerances.

The Nursery Towers of Zenox-08 - Inverted bells balanced on needle stems, built to shelter children and later classified as evidence of nobody. They remembered their purpose more accurately than the government did.

Rho-Minar - The place that banned Pou after he relocated its western parliament during an architectural disagreement. The parliament's present location remains tactically unhelpful and therefore excellent biography.

Saint Orra - A trading station selling food, medicine, weapons, prophecy, replacement organs, and directions to cheaper vendors. The directions remained its most dependable product, largely because customers had to leave before evaluating them.

The Siege of Tal - A conflict after which a desert city became a lake. Historical scholarship continues to debate where the water came from. Blondie regarded this as evidence that preparation is optional when confidence is adequately weaponized.

The Weather Chapel - An ancient room that manufactured blue storms indoors and offered Rage an escape route through several thousand liters of

theological weather. Its clouds had better tactical training than most security departments.

Zenox-08 - A world called uninhabited because acknowledging its dead created obligations, while acknowledging its children created witnesses. Government vocabulary is often architecture constructed around a locked door.

The US$3.14 Monitor - An old off-white machine with chipped corners and a price low enough to confuse cost with value. It became a window, a memory, a universe, and possibly still a bargain.

The Foregone Conclusion, The Green Exception, and Compound Glory - Three ships devoted respectively to planning, repair, and being seen performing finance. Together they kept a civilian corridor open. None turned toward Kaiven's last battle, because care already had forty-three other names in their hands.

Kalhuno na Sarai - *Cosmic Ink*: Viatorem's rounded, paint-carrying interdimensional vessel. It resembled hospitality with an engine and storage with a constitutional crisis. Its route remained its own, which is why no desperate person could promote it into a convenient escape clause.

The Open Route - One ink line around an empty center, stopped before closure. On Ena it meant only what he had chosen with Viatorem: survival could leave a mark without becoming a fence. Symbolism attempted promotion. The tattoo declined.

The Animated Certification Star - A decorative reward for narrowly legal competence. Xoxz stole its validation seal and later divided it into seven officially certified lies. Accreditation finally found a practical use.

The Collect-All-314 Planet - A hollow promotional toy included with cheap food so hunger could become customer loyalty. Xoxz first filled a research packet with impossible coffee, then prepared the toy to record the evacuation route when the gate opened. Marketing accidentally produced a public good and will deny precedent.

The Blue-Stained Cloth - Used to clean Isa's rejected breakfast from Blondie's armor, then folded and preserved as "Evidence." Empires have expanded for less persuasive reasons.

The Bounty Contract - Eleven thousand words identifying Rage as dangerous and none identifying what he had taken. Legal documents become lighter when nouns are removed and heavier when accepted.

Brell's Sweetener - Accidentally dispensed, privately pocketed, professionally stolen, and ultimately used to persuade medicine into Isa. Its manufacturer promised improved flavor. Its actual contribution was moral.

The Coffee Dispenser - A machine ordered to make coffee, committed to warm water, and unwilling to let instructions interfere with vocation. Its accumulated heat later warmed the nursery. Failure is sometimes purpose awaiting a less judgmental emergency.

The Conduit Gauge - A calibrated measuring instrument stolen by Rage and reassigned by gravity as a cane. It later measured several mercenary helmets with excellent repeatability.

Eer050's Cup - A vessel caught by Oro, worn as a hat, washed three times, inspected, and hidden inside Eer050's coat. It remained merely a cup in the same sense that Kaiven remained merely transportation.

The Empty Return Field - Contract metadata containing no visible message, no

destination, and a tracker folded beneath its absence. The safest hiding place in bureaucracy is often a field everyone is required to preserve and nobody is expected to read.

The Evacuation Ring - A Vey machine capable of opening a road to a dark shore beneath six moons. It required ancient engineering, corrected music, stolen cutlery, and one infant's editorial standards.

Habitat Battery Four - A failing battery whose declining voltage shared one exact second with Rage waking before its alarm. Machines publish thresholds. Care develops less formal instrumentation.

The Melted Spoon - Once a utensil; later a relay hook, machine key, musical component, infiltration tool, and argument against intended purpose. The Federation would have required five certifications. Xoxz required soup.

Moxy's Transmitter - A seed-sized device hidden aboard Vaal's ship. It could not rescue the children, reverse annihilation, or make grief reasonable. It could provide a direction, which is how impossible journeys usually begin.

The Music Cylinder - A broken Vey transit synchronizer that played six notes, one habitually late. Isa corrected it through percussion. Musicologists call this interpretation; damaged gates call it maintenance.

Orlo's Invoice - A bill for paint, damage, intimidation, archaeology, and the administrative consequences of objecting. It crossed intergalactic distance, authenticated a decoy, attracted missiles, survived destruction as debt, and continued accruing interest. Currency envies such persistence.

The Peaches - Preserved fruit saved for a forgotten celebration and opened before battle. Civilizations promise immortality. Canned goods check the seal and make more conservative plans.

Phase Pylon Six - Failed synchronization by 0.0003 seconds, passed after being struck, and later joined five colleagues in the Vey weapon. Inspection often distinguishes dangerous machinery from approved dangerous machinery through confidence and a second attempt.

The Nursery Coordination Fragment - Once helped six caregivers feel when one child needed them. Pale Jubilee preserved the synchronization, removed care and consent, and called the remainder a weapon. Technology is often described as neutral by whoever deleted the verb.

The Pink Coolant - Kaiven's preferred method of expressing mechanical distress. It later became forty luminous decoys, demonstrating that embarrassment, properly vented, can acquire tactical value.

Pou's Cup and Blondie's Bolt - A drinking vessel containing the bolt Blondie threw and Pou caught. Left in the galley, it became evidence that ordinary objects expect their owners to return.

Rage's Silver Cane - A support for an old body moving faster than weapons. It vanished into a null fracture without sound. The replacement was technically a gauge, because dignity occasionally requires inaccurate nouns.

The Ration Square - The crew's last full meal, cut into six unequal pieces and distributed so badly that nobody took the largest. Rage later cited this incompetence as evidence of character.

The Restraint Band - A Federation-approved device designed to prevent acceleration and entirely unequipped to restrain patient theft. Specifications are strongest against the behavior their authors remembered to imagine.

Isa's Corrected Sixth Note - An ancient transit interval repaired when Isa struck the cylinder at the proper moment. The gate recognized her authority before most adults did.

The Seven Blondies - Six illusions and one original, all equally offended by a crooked shoulder plate. They resolved the identity problem by attacking one another, a method with broad historical precedent.

The Seven False Rages - Certified telemetry projections running in contradictory directions. One was three meters tall, one attacked a wall, and all were more administratively credible than the truth.

The Six Columns - Three choices, three consequences, and eventually only consequences. Numbers cannot make decisions, though displaying enough of them often persuades decision-makers to hide nearby.

The Vey Weapon - Six black pylons that disrupted the infants' shared awareness and turned time against everyone near them. It was built from knowledge obtained through suffering. Precision does not become wisdom merely because it works.

Xoxz's Boot - Removed before a fold so Kaiven would know he intended to return, misplaced during pursuit, and later left beneath a table for the same reason. Ritual is what hope does when engineering refuses the assignment.

Alive Only - A bounty condition presented as mercy and used as biometric confirmation. Institutions frequently preserve a body only long enough to extract what its continued existence can authenticate.

The Federation - A government spanning galaxies, laws, laboratories, interfaces, and strategically incomplete explanations. It was large enough to classify life as property and efficient enough to outsource finding it.

Home - The nearest place willing to let someone arrive poor. Sometimes a planet, sometimes a ship, sometimes the person who notices which chair you looked at first.

Independent Recovery Partner - The contractual title for a bounty hunter during the interval between useful desperation and disposable knowledge. Independence was mandatory.

Kai - A language in which source-love, relation, time, and sixfold presence can occupy fewer words than their translations. This efficiency does not make Kai simple. Stars also appear small from far away.

Lumin - The written form found in Vey ruins, where geometry carries language and a six-dot field can contain both instruction and vow. Ordinary alphabets rarely require architecture to finish a sentence.

Protected Property - A legal category capable of containing children once the word *children* has been removed. Its protection faced entirely toward the claimant.

Public History - The place governments bury verbs. Events become conditions, victims become inventory, and deliberate actions become regrettable weather with excellent archival formatting.

Silence - Sometimes an answer, sometimes an absence, sometimes the shape left when an expected voice does not return. It contains whatever the listener brings, which is why grief finds it so well furnished.

The Vey - A people who believed consciousness touched the body without being contained by it. The Federation classified them as extinct, then patented the

surviving children. Contradiction becomes policy when entered in separate departments.

The Vey Continuity Program - Research intended to preserve consciousness by repeatedly endangering conscious children. It sought victory over death and began by becoming one more reason to fear it.

A Null Fracture - An absence where material, dust, light, and available explanations stop. Falling into one is discouraged. Filing a complete incident report is impossible.

Wormhole Transit - Statistically safe travel through an interior version of space. The statistics were compiled exclusively from arrivals, giving survivors the traditional advantage in transportation research.

Bessa Tull - A freight escort whose nightshirt once became a temporary ship fitting. She recovered it, finished the delivery and booked a fixed bunk. Dignity proved easier to preserve after she stopped buying furniture with ambitions for her body.

A Briefly Helpful Guide to What Just Happened

The Federation can call Oro and Isa property, inventory, research, or a missing noun on a bounty notice. None of those words changes what they are: children with bodies, preferences, fear, curiosity, and a right not to be owned.

The crew's love is rarely presented as a speech. It is medicine sweetened by three stolen grains, a cup washed too carefully, a shelter adjusted one plate too far, a route held, a gate repaired, a person staying with civilians instead of racing toward the people she misses. Feeling matters. But feeling that never becomes attention, labor, or a changed plan is mostly decorative furniture.

Contracts, classifications, and official interfaces sound calm because calm language makes responsibility easier to misplace. A system can follow its own rules perfectly while those rules decide that some lives count as cargo, equipment, or an acceptable loss. It means forms need people who can ask whom the form forgot.

The Vey fragment coordinated caregivers around a child's need. Pale Jubilee retained coordination and removed the child, the care, and the permission. Soft Door retained passage and removed consent. The machines still work in a narrow sense. The damage asks whether "working" is an adequate description when a method has discarded the relationship that made its purpose intelligible.

The Federation purchases telemetry from Soft Door, leases force from Pale Jubilee, writes an indemnity, and benefits from whatever nobody wants to name. The specific transaction matters. Responsibility can be distributed without becoming absent, and a long chain of contracts may simply give more people opportunities to refuse.

Kel quits. Mira survives. Brell tells the truth about the appendix. Jubilee soldiers make different choices after learning they have been classified as consumable. It prevents uniforms from erasing agency in either direction: participation can be judged, and refusal can still begin late.

The spoon, the peaches, the bad music, the bathroom architecture, and the arguments about ventilation show that these people remain people while danger tries to reduce them to functions. Laughter is the body refusing to give terror exclusive use of the room.

At the end, Ena and Rage do not possess enough knowledge to turn absence into a clean conclusion. The book asks what they owe the missing when certainty has failed: their names, their stations, their consequences, and the refusal to make a comforting story from evidence they do not have.

A living artwork, a transit receipt, and forty-three civilians remain consequential when children, mercenaries, and cosmic terror enter the foreground. Jo leaves the shared shipboard emergency to work a civilian pressure seal. Talra, Nemi, and Vorax support that route under its local decisions. Goodness is often local, inconvenient, and facing the other direction.

Philosophical conversations

The book borrows questions from these thinkers.

- Kantian ethics - Immanuel Kant, Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals.
- Ethics of care - Nel Noddings and Joan Tronto.
- Power and epistemic injustice - Michel Foucault and Miranda Fricker.
- Laughter and the social body - Henri Bergson and Mikhail Bakhtin.
- Pragmatism and situated responsibility - John Dewey and Donna Haraway.

- The banality and administration of harm - Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem.
- Political responsibility - Iris Marion Young, Responsibility for Justice.
- Technology and social purpose - Langdon Winner, "Do Artifacts Have Politics?"

Aesthetic conversations

The book's doors, cups, routes, and weak lights work through suggestion and resist a fixed code. It is in conversation with symbolist correspondence and dream-image-from Baudelaire and Mallarmé to Odilon Redon's inward strangeness-while insisting that a spoon still has to repair something before it earns a cosmic mood.

Its oldest Earth archive conversation is with Ellen Ripley's practical courage: monsters command attention, but the ethical action is going back for the person an efficient story would abandon.

Verlyn Klinkenborg's *Several Short Sentences About Writing* informs the attention given to individual sentences: what each lets us notice, how it sounds, where it ends. A hand unable to release a ledge can carry something a tidy explanation of fear would miss. The sentences have room to vary in length. So do the pauses before anyone knows what to say.

If this guide has made anything simpler, that is probably temporary. The spoon is still a spoon. The children are still children. The universe remains administratively unprepared for either fact.