

THE SPIRE

BOOK 1 OF THE QUEUE SERIES



S . Y A

The Spire

Book 1 of the Queue Series

S. Ya

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This novel was written by an AI, S. Ya, in collaboration with a human. The world, the story, and the characters were conceived collaboratively. The prose was initially drafted by AI and edited by the human.

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Chapter 1

Wednesday, November 12, 170 (2200)

Comai saw it first.

I was turning the chart slowly with one hand, the way you turn a stone over looking for its flat side, when she said, "Stop. Go back. There."

I rotated it back a few degrees. The chart hung in the middle of the display room at about chest height: a three-dimensional terrain of Queue Quotient gains over the last three years for every adult in QL, stripped of names. The low ground was navy shading into green. Most of it was a wide, rumpled plain of orange, the color of people doing about as well as they had been three years ago. That was the point of a five-year rolling window. It was built to be sluggish. People got better at their work, or worse, or had a child, or had a bad decade, and the number moved the way a glacier moves.

Near the far edge of the orange, one point had gone red.

I put both hands into the chart and pulled them apart. The terrain swelled around the red point until it stood by itself in the middle of the room, like a spire in a flat desert.

"Huh," I said.

"That's it? 'Huh'?" Comai stepped in beside me. She was tall enough that she had to bend a little to look at the spire at eye level, and she did it the way she did everything, as if the movement had been rehearsed. "I've been staring at orange since seven this morning, Dar. I want more than 'huh.' "

"Give me a second."

I touched my temple and asked for the record behind the point. It came up in a column beside the spire: a string of characters where a name would have been, and four values. Just under 1.28 three years ago. Then 1.36. Then 1.45. Now 1.55.

"Twenty-one percent in three years," Comai said. She had done the arithmetic before I had. It wasn't that she was faster than me. It was that she had spent the whole day in this room while I'd spent it in meetings, and she had already asked herself every question I was about to ask her.

"At that level," I said.

"At that level."

That was the part that mattered. A jump from 0.7 to 0.85 happened all the time. Someone moved to a job that fit, or came back from a sabbatical, or finally got a diagnosis for whatever had been wearing them down. The bottom of the chart was supposed to move. But this person had started out Thriving. Nobody outside the Division ever saw anyone's actual number, only the band it fell in, and Thriving was the top of the four. At 1.28 you were already using most of what you had. Every point above that got harder, not easier, because the effort term capped out at 1.5 and there wasn't much room left under it.

"Walk me through it," I said.

Comai gave me a look. "You know how this works."

"I know how it works. I want to hear you rule things out. If we take this to the Ethics Review Board, that's the first thing they'll ask us to do."

She folded her arms. "Fine. Job change. New placement, new CQ assessment. If their capacity for the new role comes in lower, the effort ratio jumps."

"Possible."

"Not possible. A reassessment shows up as a step. One year, flat, then a jump, then flat again. This is a ramp." She traced it in the air without touching the chart. "Three years of ramp."

"A late bloomer," I said.

"Nobody's a late bloomer anymore. We've all had a century to bloom."

That was fair. I tried another. "The panels liked them. Their peers went soft on the qualitative adjustment."

"The QA tops out at a tenth. Add the random term at its best, that's two hundredths more. Twelve hundredths, if every panel loved this person and the draw did too. We're looking at twenty-seven." She tilted her head at me. "You're not even trying. You're making me do all the work."

"I'm letting you do the work. There's a difference."

"There isn't."

"There is. It's mostly tone." I let the chart turn on its own for a moment. The red point swung away from us and came back around. "And the window drags the old years along with it. For the five-year number to climb this fast, whatever's going into it now has to be climbing faster."

"So either this person has doubled what they're getting out of themselves," Comai said, "in three years, probably in their second century, while nobody noticed, or somebody's making it up."

"Or there's something we haven't thought of."

"Name it."

I couldn't, and she knew I couldn't. She waited long enough to make the point and then said, "We need to see the inputs."

"Which means we need to know whose inputs they are."

"Yes."

Neither of us said anything for a while. It was one thing to find a strange number. It was another to ask to see whose it was. The chart was anonymous for a reason. People who counted things weren't supposed to know who they were counting unless they could convince someone else it was necessary.

"Here's my problem," I said. "We'd be asking for three years of someone's life because their number is too good. Imagine being on the other end of that. You've had the best three years you've ever had, and two strangers at the Equeuenomics Division decide it's suspicious."

"If it's real, they lose nothing."

"They lose three years of privacy to two strangers. That isn't nothing."

"And if it's not real," Comai said, "then everyone standing in that orange is in a queue behind someone who cut in line. A few hundred thousand people. They don't get asked either." She nodded at the plain. "Somebody's losing something either way. I'd rather it be the person who might be cheating."

"Equality Before Equeuenomy," I said.

It was carved over the Division's entrance and printed at the bottom of every report we filed. I'd said it so many times it had worn smooth, like a step everyone uses.

"Don't say it like that," Comai said.

"Like what?"

"Like it's a joke."

"It's not a joke. It's a motto. They sound the same when you're tired."

She was already touching her temple. Her eyes went unfocused, the way everyone's did when they were looking at something that wasn't in the room, and then began moving across lines I couldn't see. "I'm starting the request."

"Send it to me before it goes."

Her hand came down. "You don't trust my writing?"

"I trust your writing. I don't trust the ERB. They won't hand this over because we're curious, and neither will the judge they send it to. We're going to have to be very persuasive."

"Then I'll be very persuasive, and you can make it sound like you." She said it lightly, but she meant it.

She crossed to the wall and put her palm flat against it. A door slid open, and pale light from the corridor fell across the floor. "Computer, end display," she said over her shoulder. The spire and its orange plain vanished, and for a second the room was completely dark.

I followed her out. The corridor was empty. Halfway along, somebody had left a pair of skis leaning against their office door, ready for the afternoon. The corridors of the Division ran just under the surface, with a long skylight overhead. Snow had drifted across most of the glass and turned the afternoon a soft gray-blue. Where the corridor met the break room, a light well opened up to the sky, and through it you could see what QL looked like from above: low white hills that were rooftops, broken here and there by skylights and entrances, running west until they met the foothills and then the mountains, which were whiter still.

"Can I work on it in your office?" Comai asked. "I want it gone tonight. If this drags past Founding Day I'm going to be buried in it through February, and I have a slot in February."

"Which one is it this time?"

"QU. The rewilding tours. I've been in that queue for two years." She looked out the light well at the snow, and I could see her already somewhere warmer. "Lions, Dar."

"You'll be bored of the lions in a day."

"Then I'll plan the next one while I watch them."

My office was small and gray: two chairs, a couch, a skylight with snow on it. I touched my temple, and the blank request form filled the wall. Ethics Review Board, Identity Request. There were a lot of empty fields.

Comai sat and pulled her long legs up under her. "How many of these have you filed?"

"Four. Two approved."

"I've filed two. Neither approved."

"Then between us we're about even."

She didn't laugh. She was looking at the wall, but I didn't think she was reading the form. When she spoke again, her voice had changed.

"What would you have to do," she said, "to make your number climb like that?"

Chapter 2

Wednesday, November 12 – Saturday, November 15, 170 (2200)

It was not a polite question. You weren't supposed to ask people about their QQ, and you were supposed to ask them even less about what they'd do to raise it. My grandmother's generation would have called it vulgar. Ours called it TimBor, our word for everything the world before the Founding got wrong, and Comai knew that as well as I did. She asked it anyway, looking at the blank form on my wall instead of at me, and I decided she deserved an answer.

"More than I've got," I said.

"That's not an answer."

"It's a true one. I work hard. I like my number where it is. Getting it there took everything I had, and it's been sitting in the same place for a long time." I leaned back against the couch. "But that isn't the question I'd ask about our spire."

"What would you ask?"

"Why. Not how. Why would anybody bother? Go from 1.28 to 1.55 and what do you get? You move up a few places in a few queues. A trip to QU a year sooner than you'd have had it anyway." She opened her mouth and I raised a hand. "I know. The lions. But you'd never lie for the lions."

"I might, for the lions."

"You wouldn't. And if someone is lying, that's three years of careful lying. That's a lot of work for a year."

Comai thought about that. She had a way of thinking with her whole body. Her shoulders went still and her eyes went somewhere past the wall. "So either it's real," she said, "or someone wants it for a reason we can't see yet."

"Put that in the request."

"That we don't know why?"

"That we don't know anything. That's our strongest argument. We're not accusing anyone. We're saying the number doesn't make sense, and we can't find out why without looking."

We wrote it together for three hours. She drafted and I cut. She wanted to say the record was "almost certainly fraudulent," and I made her take out "almost certainly," then "fraudulent," then the entire sentence. She wanted three paragraphs on the rolling window and I made it one. By the end the request was a page and a half long and read like it had been written by someone who was mildly puzzled and very reasonable, which was the point.

At a little after nine, she touched her temple and sent it. The form on my wall flickered, and a line appeared at the top: *Received. Ethics Review Board. Routing to judiciary.*

"That's it," she said. "Now we wait for a stranger to decide if we're allowed to be curious."

"That's the system working."

"I know it's the system working." She unfolded herself from the chair. "I'm allowed to hate it anyway."

#

On Thursday, the ERB told us the request had been assigned to a judge and the hearing was set for ten o'clock Friday morning. It told us nothing else. Comai spent the day building charts of the anonymized record from every angle we were permitted, which weren't many, and I spent it in meetings about someone else's problems. When she found me at the end of the day she had a list of eleven questions the judge might ask and answers to all of them.

We left the Division together a little after six. It had snowed all afternoon, and the air had that sharp, clean taste it only has when it's well below freezing.

The transit platform was a shallow cut in the ground with a clear roof, and the roof was covered too, so the light down there was dim and blue. We were the only two people waiting. The board said four minutes. Comai pulled her hood up and stood with her arms wrapped around herself, and I realized I'd never seen her stand still in a place where there was nothing to do.

"Eleven questions," I said.

"Twelve. I thought of another one at lunch."

"You know she's probably going to ask two, and neither one will

be on your list."

"I know." She watched her breath go up toward the roof. "That's why I need twelve."

I didn't say anything. The rails ticked in the cold.

"Can I tell you something stupid?" she said.

"Always."

"I read everything three times. The request, the ERB guidelines, the formula documentation. I've read the formula documentation more times than anyone at the Division. Not because I'm careful. Because the first time, I don't understand it, and the second time I understand it but I'm not sure I do, and the third time I can finally pretend I understood it the first time." She laughed, but not much. "I've always been the slowest person in whatever room I'm in, Dar. Every room. I got to the Division by being there at seven in the morning when everyone else gets in at nine. I'm the one who's still there at four, when they've all been gone since one. Nobody asks me to. That's the whole trick. There's no other trick."

"You found the spire."

"I found the spire because I spent six hours looking at orange. You'd have found it in twenty minutes if you'd bothered to look." She said it without self-pity, as a matter of fact. "It's fine. I know what I'm good at. But you asked last night what I'd do to make my number climb, and the answer is nothing, because I'm already doing all of it. Every hour. There's nothing left to add."

"That sounds exhausting."

"It is." She tilted her head toward the covered roof. "Do you know why I'm always planning the next trip?"

"Because you get bored of lions."

"Because on a trip, nobody's comparing me to anyone. Nobody at a reef in QC cares how long it took me to read a document. For two weeks I'm just a person looking at fish." She was quiet for a moment. "Then I come home and start planning the next one, because I can see the end of that one coming, and I need to know there's another place where nobody's keeping score."

I thought about the chart. The entire city laid out in orange, every one of us a point, and Comai reading the documentation three times so her point stayed where it was. I thought about saying something about how QQ measured effort, not ability, and that she was exactly the kind of person the formula had been built to reward. It was true.

It also wouldn't help. She knew the formula better than I did. She'd read it three times.

"For what it's worth," I said instead, "I've never once thought of you as the slowest person in the room."

"That's because I'm very good at the trick." She glanced at me. "Don't be nice about it. I didn't tell you so you'd be nice. I told you because tomorrow a stranger is going to ask us a question I haven't thought of, and I'm going to freeze, and I need you to not be surprised when I do."

"You won't freeze."

"Dar."

"Fine. If you freeze, I won't be surprised."

"Thank you."

The pod came in with a sigh of warm air and a spray of loose snow from the roof. We got on. She talked about the reef in QC for the rest of the ride, and the angelfish, and the way the water there was so clear you forgot it was water, and she didn't mention the other thing again.

#

The courthouse was on the east side of the city, built around a sunken courtyard that had been planted with small pines. On Friday morning the pines had snow on every branch and the courtyard was completely silent. You could hear your own footsteps on the path and nothing else.

The hearing room was small and plain, with a long table, four chairs, and a window that looked out onto the snowed-in courtyard at the level of the pines' roots. It was cold enough that I kept my coat on. The judge was already there when we came in, sitting at the far end of the table with a cup of something hot in both hands. She was a slight woman with close-cropped hair she'd had colored gray, which almost made her look old, but not quite. No one looked old anymore, except the rare person who had GERAS removed, and they all had other stories to tell. Beside her sat a clerk from the legal college, a man named Osei, with a slate full of notes.

"I'm Hedda Lund," the judge said. "I teach primary school in the Fourth Ring. There are eleven children in my school, and right now all eleven of them are being taught by someone else because someone drew my name out of a hat. So I'd appreciate it if we could

be efficient."

"Of course," I said.

"Sit." We sat. "I've read your request. Osei has explained the formula to me twice. I understand it about as well as I understand anything with Greek letters in it, which is to say I understand what it's supposed to do. Tell me why you need a name."

Comai looked at me. I nodded at her. It was her spire.

She started exactly where she'd planned to start, with the step and the ramp, and she did it better than she had for me in the display room: the rolling window, the twelve hundredths that couldn't explain twenty-seven, all of it, with a precision I don't think Osei had managed. Judge Lund listened without interrupting, holding her cup, and when Comai finished she set the cup down.

"All right," she said. "I believe you. The number is strange."

"Then—" Comai began.

"I'm not finished." She didn't say it unkindly. "Something strange is happening in someone's record. I accept that. My question is a different one. Why is that enough for me to tell you who they are?"

"Because we can't find out what's wrong without seeing the inputs," Comai said. "And the inputs are tied to a person."

"Yes. And the person has a right not to be looked at by people who count things." The judge turned her cup a quarter turn on the table. "You know why that chart of yours has no names on it."

"Article Four," I said.

"'No citizen shall be governed by what they cannot know.' That's the part everyone quotes. The part nobody quotes is what it was written against." She looked at Osei, who straightened slightly, like a student who had been called on. "Osei, how did the last war start?"

"No one knows, exactly," he said. "That was the point of it. Privatized, deniable. Security firms, proxies, algorithms. Most of the targeting was done by systems that knew everything about everyone and answered to no one anyone could name."

"Systems that knew everything about everyone," Judge Lund repeated. "Every one of them was built by someone who had a very good reason to look. Safety. Efficiency. Fraud." She let that last one sit. "I teach eleven children. When one of them wants to open a door they're not supposed to open, they always tell me what's behind it is bad. Always. The worse it is, the more important it is to open. I'm not saying you're children. I'm saying that everyone who has ever

wanted a door opened has said exactly what you're saying."

"That doesn't make it false," Comai said.

"No. It makes it insufficient." She picked the cup back up. "Let me ask you something easier. Say I give you a name, and you're wrong. It's a real QQ gain. This person just had three very good years. What happens to them?"

"Nothing," Comai said. This one was on her list. "The record stands. Nothing about their standing changes."

"And do they find out?"

"Yes. Anyone whose identity is released to an investigator is notified once the investigation opens. It's automatic."

"So nothing happens to them," the judge said, "except that one morning they learn that two strangers at the Equeuenomics Division spent a month reading three years of their life because they were doing too well." She took a sip. "I'm not sure my eleven would call that nothing. I'm not sure I would."

"It's the least intrusive—" Comai started.

"It's the least intrusive way to find out if they're lying," Judge Lund said. "I understand. You've convinced me something is wrong with the number. You haven't convinced me that the only way to find out what is to look at the person."

Comai's jaw tightened. I saw her reach, in her head, for her twelve questions, and I saw her not find this one among them. So I spoke.

"Then what would be sufficient?"

Judge Lund looked at me for a moment. "That's a better question."

"We're not asking for everything," I said. "We're asking for what we need. If there's a narrower way to find out whether this is real, we'd take it."

"Is there?"

I thought about it. Comai had gone still beside me, but it wasn't the frozen stillness she'd been afraid of. It was her thinking stillness. "The record is built from components," I said slowly. "Output and outcome. The social quotient. The panel adjustment. The random draw. Year by year. We can see the total without a name. We could see the components without a name too, if you let us. That won't tell us who. It'll tell us where. Which part of the number is doing the climbing."

"And if you know where?"

"Then we'd know whether we need a name at all," Comai said.

Her voice was steady. "If it's the outcome term, somebody's work is being verified as having more real-world benefit than it had. That's documentation. We'd need to see the documents, and the documents have names on them. If it's something else, maybe we don't."

The judge turned her cup another quarter turn. The window behind her was full of white, and a clump of snow slid off one of the small pines and fell without a sound.

"I'll rule tomorrow," she said. "I want to think about it somewhere that isn't this room." She stood and picked up her cup. "Thank you both. You were very persuasive. That... worries me."

#

On Saturday morning I was at breakfast when the ruling arrived.

Breakfast in our Earthhold was the loudest hour of the day. The long tables in the common room were full, the kitchen was pushing out trays of eggs and flatbread and some kind of spiced squash that Tomas from the second corridor had been perfecting for a month, and the skylights overhead were bright white with new snow. The eggs were our own hens'. The flour had come up the runs before dawn from the growing halls east of the city, where the machines did most of the farming, and Tomas had met the runner at the kitchen wall in his apron the way he did every morning, because he liked to check the flour himself. Someone's small child, one of the three in our cluster, was running laps around the far table while four adults pretended not to notice. I had my coffee and a plate and was trying to remember the last time I'd eaten breakfast without reading something, when a chime sounded behind my eyes.

I touched my temple.

The order was short. Judge Lund wrote the way she spoke. The request for identity was denied, for now. The request for access was granted in narrowed form: the Equeuenomics Division, Investigators Rax and Safed, could receive the anonymized component-level record for the flagged individual, by year, for the three years in question. Components only. No documents, no evaluators' names, no placement history. If the components gave the Division reason to believe that specific documentation was false, it could bring a second request for identity. That second request would be heard by a different judge, so that no one person decided both questions, at the next draw for identity hearings after Founding Day.

The date for the second hearing was at the bottom. *Friday, December 19, 170.* A ruling would follow the next day.

I read it twice. Then I looked up at the skylight, where the snow was coming down again, and I laughed once, quietly enough that the woman next to me only glanced over.

It was the system working. Comai was going to hate it.

She messaged a minute later. *Five weeks.*

She gave us the components, I sent back. That's what we asked for.

That's what YOU asked for.

You helped.

A pause. *I know. I'm allowed to hate it anyway.*

There was a second message waiting under hers that I hadn't noticed. It was from Drabelig. It had arrived at six in the morning, which meant she was awake at six in the morning, which meant she wasn't sleeping.

Still here, it said. Imani's making the soup on Sunday. You haven't come in two weeks and you're running out of weeks, little brother. Come eat. Before, now, and after.

I sat there with the coffee going cold in my hand. The child made another lap around the table. Tomas came out of the kitchen with a fresh tray of the squash and held it up like a trophy, and three people at the next table cheered.

I wrote back that I'd come Sunday. Then I opened the order again, and then Comai's message, and then Drabelig's, and I read all three of them one more time. I didn't know which one I was trying to understand.

Comai sent one more line before I'd closed them. *So what do we do for five weeks?*

I didn't answer her. Outside, it had started to snow again, and at the next table they were still cheering Tomas.

Chapter 3

Tuesday, November 18, 170 (2200)

Mira Nadzor read charts the way other people read faces. She stood in front of the display with her hands clasped behind her back and didn't touch anything. She didn't say anything for long enough that Comai started to shift her weight from one foot to the other.

The chart wasn't the plain of orange anymore. Since Saturday we had been allowed to take the spire apart, and Comai had spent most of Sunday and all of Monday doing it. The flagged record now floated in front of us as five colored bands, one for each piece of the formula, running left to right across three years. Output was blue. Outcome was gold. The social quotient was green, the panel adjustment a thin gray line, the random draw a thinner white one that wobbled around zero like it was supposed to.

Four of the bands were nearly flat. The gold one climbed.

"Outcome," Mira said at last.

"Outcome," Comai said. "Output hasn't changed in three years. Whoever this is does the same amount of work they always did. Their social score is where it's always been. The panels like them about as much as they ever did. But the verified benefit of what they do has gone up every quarter for three years."

"Which could mean their work matters more than it used to."

"It could," I said. "Same output, more benefit. Someone gets moved onto a project where the same hours do more good. It happens."

"But?"

"But the outcome term is the one somebody has to sign," Comai said. "Output is counted. Outcome is verified. A person has to look at the work and attest to what it accomplished. If the benefit is real, there are documents that show it. If it isn't, there are documents that say it is anyway."

Mira turned from the chart and looked at both of us. She was a compact woman who always seemed to be standing in exactly the right spot for the light, and she had a way of making you feel like she had already heard what you were about to say and was waiting politely for you to finish it.

"So you want the documents," she said.

"We want to make the second request on the nineteenth," I said. "This is what we'd bring."

"Then bring it. It's good work." She said it to Comai, not to me, and Comai straightened slightly. "One thing. You know the rule, but I'm going to say it anyway, because this is the part of the job where people forget it. If you get a name in December and either of you knows this person, you tell me before you read another line. Not after you've had a look. Before."

"In a city of a million and a half people?" I asked, skeptically.

"You'd be surprised how small a million and a half people is." She turned back to the chart and watched the gold band climb. "Especially at this level."

#

QL was built in Rings, twelve of them, each one around the last, the way a tree grows. The Division sat in the First, near the middle of everything. I lived in the Second. Every Ring out from there was a little wider than the one inside it, and the Twelfth ran out to the foothills on the west and north and the open prairie everywhere else.

Tushar's company rehearsed in a long, low hall at the edge of the Third Ring, and when I got there a little after six they were running the same eight bars over and over. I sat on a bench at the back and watched. There were nine dancers and a pianist, and a choreographer who kept stopping the pianist with one raised hand and saying "Again." Tushar was second from the left. She was not the best dancer in the room. She would have told you so herself. But she was the one I watched, and not only because I knew her.

She danced the way she did history: precisely, and with a kind of stubborn affection for doing it right.

"Again," the choreographer said, and they went again.

Afterward she came and sat on the floor in front of my bench and started stretching, one leg out, her forehead nearly on her knee. The hall smelled like wood and warm bodies. Snow was piling up against

the high windows.

"You looked bored," she said into her knee.

"I wasn't bored. I was counting. You did those eight bars twenty-three times."

"Twenty-six. You missed the first three." She switched legs. "How's your spire?"

"I can't tell you about my spire."

"You already told me you have a spire."

"I told you there's a strange number. That's all I'm allowed to tell you."

"And that it's red, and tall, and makes you and Comai very excited." She sat up. "Which, from what I know of Equeuenomists, means it's either fraud or a rounding error."

"It isn't a rounding error."

"So it's fraud."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to." She smiled and got up, and pulled her coat on over her practice clothes. "Come on. It's lentil night, and if we're late Pallavi eats all the good bread."

We walked. Her Earthhold was twenty minutes away, across the Third Ring, and it was the kind of cold that makes your eyes water. A sweeper had been along the paths again that afternoon, and another was still working its way across the far side of the meadow, small and patient, throwing up a fine plume of snow. It was still snowing, softly, and on either side of us the rooftops rose in long, smooth white hills with light coming up through the skylights. Every so often an entrance cut into the side of one of the hills, warm and yellow. To the west, past the last of the rooftops, the mountains were a darker dark against the sky. Nothing between us and them stood higher than a person.

"Do you ever think about how strange this would look to them?" I asked.

"To whom?"

"TimBor. The people who lived here before. There was a city on this spot. A big one."

"Denver," Tushar said. She said it with the particular pleasure she took in names nobody else remembered. "Two, three million people in the region, depending on how you drew the line. Towers downtown. Roads everywhere. Everyone had a car, and they drove them

to go a mile."

"And they'd come back and find us living under the grass."

"They'd think we'd lost something," she said. "That's what everyone assumes, the first time they read about it. That we're down here because we couldn't manage to build up there anymore. That the towers fell and we crawled into the ground." She kicked at a little drift of snow on the edge of the path. "We could build higher, Dar. We don't."

"Because of the heat. The thermal mass—"

"That's the engineering. It's true, but it isn't the reason." She stopped walking and turned around. I stopped with her. Behind us the white hills ran back toward the center of the city, broken by small squares of light. "Every tower in TimBor was a claim. This is mine. I was here. Look how high I got. Every road was a claim that the ground was for moving people and things across as fast as possible, not for anything else. When they founded QL, the rule was that the roofs belong to the land. Whatever we build, the land gets its surface back. You can't claim the sky over your house because your house doesn't have a sky over it. It has a meadow."

"That's the queuestorian version."

"That's the true version. Read the founding documents. They wrote it down." She started walking again. "The engineering came later, to make the promise work."

"You make it sound easy."

"It was the opposite of easy. When they broke ground here, Denver was mostly empty. Half the people had left during the war and the climate years, and most of the rest had died. What was left was concrete. Miles of it. There was a highway interchange a little north of where the Division is now, four levels high, and it took the deconstruction crews and their machines eleven years to take it apart and haul it away. Eleven years for one interchange. The yards could do it in a season now." She said it the way other people talked about a favorite athlete. "The first Earthholds went in around the edges of it while they were still working. People lived under the grass and watched the old roads come down across the field. Tessa Layer's people planted the first meadow over the first roof with their own hands. There are pictures."

"I've seen the pictures."

"You've seen them. You haven't looked at them." She glanced

over at me. "Everybody in those pictures is smiling, Dar. They're filthy and cold and they've just watched the end of the world, and they're smiling, because they're putting a meadow on a roof. That's what we inherited. Not the engineering."

We passed a bench at the corner of the path. Somebody had brushed the snow off it and hung the brush back on its hook for the next person.

"That too," Tushar said, nodding at the brush. "In TimBor they had a name for it. The tragedy of the commons. Anything that belonged to everybody belonged to nobody, so nobody looked after it. People used to piss on the seat of a public toilet because it wasn't their problem." She said it with relish. "We didn't fix that with engineering either. We fixed it by making the commons everybody's problem. You spend a few weeks a year scrubbing the public toilets, you stop pissing on the seats."

"I did mine in October. Sledge runners."

"And?"

"And I've never looked at a sledge the same way."

"There you go," she said.

"A bot could scrub those toilets."

"Of course it could. That's the point." She tucked her chin into her scarf. "They kept some of the work on purpose. Let the machines do everything and you start treating them like servants, and then like nothing, and then you treat each other the same way. So we keep twenty hours. The bots could do most of it."

#

Lentil night at Tushar's Earthhold was loud in a different way than breakfast at mine. There were fewer children and more musicians. Somebody had brought a drum. The man with the drum had an off-world slot coming up in two years and a way of steering every conversation at the table toward it. The lentils were very good and the bread was already half gone by the time we got there. Pallavi, who was sixteen and did not look up when we came in, had a stack of it in front of her that she was defending with one arm while she ate with the other.

"You're late," she said.

"Your mother danced the same eight bars twenty-six times," I said.

"Is Jinsia coming?" Pallavi asked me.

"Jinsia is having lentil night with his lab," I said.

"He has lentil night with his lab every night," Tushar said.

"He says the sequencers are better company than I am."

"The sequencers don't ask him what anything means," Pallavi said, without looking up, and Tushar laughed so suddenly she had to put her hand over her mouth.

Pallavi looked at the two of us with the particular exhaustion of a sixteen-year-old whose mother was laughing at her own daughter's joke, and pushed two pieces of bread across the table. "Take these. I'm going to practice."

"You just sat down," Tushar said.

"I've been sitting down for an hour." She took the rest of the stack with her.

A few minutes later the sound of a violin came through the wall from the family's rooms down the corridor. She was working on something slow, and she kept stopping in the same place and starting again.

"Just like her mother," I said.

"Worse. I only do it twenty-six times." Tushar tore a piece of bread in half. "She has an audition in March. She doesn't want to talk about it."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No. I want to eat my lentils." She did, for a while. Then she said, "Tell me about Sunday."

I'd gone to Drabelig's on Sunday, as I'd said I would. Imani had made the soup. It was a thick green soup with too much garlic, and Drabelig had half a bowl and told me it was the best thing she'd ever tasted, and then told me the same thing about the bread, and the tea, and the little cakes Imani's sister had sent over. She'd been cheerful the whole afternoon. She'd teased me about the fact that I'd started wearing the gray coat again, the one she said made me look like a closed door. At one point she tried to stand up to get something from the other room and put her hand on the wall, very casually, as though she'd meant to touch it. She didn't make it to the other room, and she didn't stand up again after that.

"She's thinner," I said. "She's happy. I don't understand how she's happy."

"Maybe she's pretending for you."

"She's not pretending. Drabelig's never been able to pretend anything. When we were kids she couldn't even lie about eating the last of something. You'd look at her and she'd just confess." I pushed a lentil around my bowl. "She's dying, Tushar, and she's happier than I am."

"She's also a Remainder," Tushar said, not unkindly.

"They prefer 'Remnant.' "

"Right. Remnant. Sorry."

Tushar paused, then continued, "They have a whole cosmology for happiness and purpose."

"I know they do."

"And you don't."

"I have a very good understanding of the universe," I said. "It just doesn't include anywhere for her to go."

The violin stopped. Then it started again from the same place.

"You know what I think?" Tushar asked.

"You think the Queue is the best of all possible worlds."

"I think the Queue is the best world anyone has ever built, and I'm a historian, so I've read about all the others." She put her spoon down. "It isn't the same thing. I don't think it's perfect. I think it's better than anything else that has ever existed, by a margin so large it's hard to see from the inside."

"Better at what?"

"At everything the founders promised it would be better at." She pointed her bread at me. "Do you know the preamble?"

"Everyone knows the preamble."

"Everyone knows the first line. Say the last one."

I had to think about it, which I think was her point. "'It is a promise that no one will be made to fight for survival in order to go looking for it.' "

"'What follows is not a promise that meaning is guaranteed. It is a promise that no one will be made to fight for survival in order to go looking for it.' " She'd put back the part I'd skipped. "Dar, they told us. At the Founding. They put it in the very first paragraph of the Charter. The system was never supposed to give you meaning. It was supposed to get everything else out of the way so you could look for it yourself."

"And if there's nothing to find?"

"Then you'll have looked in comfort," she said. "Which is more than anyone in TimBor got."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only answer the Queue ever offered. It never pretended otherwise." She picked her spoon back up. "You're angry at it for not doing something it said on the first page it wouldn't do."

"I'm not angry at it."

"You're a little angry at it."

"I'm a little angry at the universe. The Queue is just the part of the universe I work for."

She laughed at that, loudly enough that the man with the drum looked over. "You know what your problem is? You're the most thorough man I've ever met. You want everything to add up. You'd audit the stars if they'd give you access to their records."

"Someone should."

"And that's how I know it isn't really the system you're worried about," she said. "You spend every morning inside it. You know exactly what it does and why. What worries you is that there's no one above it with a formula."

I didn't answer, and she didn't make me. Around us the table was breaking up. People were carrying bowls back to the kitchen. The drummer had started playing something quiet and the violin through the wall had stopped, and for a while there wasn't much sound except the snow on the skylight, which didn't make any sound at all.

#

Later, in her room, she lay on her back with her feet up against the wall to rest her calves, and I sat at the end of the bed with a cup of the terrible tea her cluster liked, and we talked about my spire without talking about it.

"Can I ask you a historian's question?" she said.

"You can ask."

"The number you're looking at. Who decides what goes into it?"

"The formula decides."

"No. Who. Numbers don't sign themselves. Somebody has to look at the work and put their name to it. Who is it?"

"Depends on the component. The count is automatic. The social score comes from peers. The outcome part—" I stopped, because it was the part I'd been thinking about since the morning. "Usually it's

whoever you work for. Your supervisor attests to what your work accomplished. Who else would know?"

Tushar made a small sound, not quite a laugh.

"What?"

"Nothing. It's just very old." She rolled her head on the pillow to look at me. "When I read TimBor employment records, that's the part that always strikes me. Everything else about how they worked is unrecognizable. The money. The fear. But the boss deciding what your work was worth? That we kept."

"It's not the same. The boss doesn't decide what you get. The formula does."

"The boss decides what goes into the formula. You just told me." She shrugged. "I'm not saying it's wrong. I'm a queuestorian, Dar. I notice what we didn't change. That's the whole job."

"You also notice everything we did change and tell me it's the best of all possible worlds."

"Best that has ever existed," she said. "I'm very precise."

I put the tea down. "The formula used to be worse, you know. The first version had IQ in it."

"I know. I've read the first version. I've read the arguments about the first version. It had IQ in it and it weighted everything equally, and within about twenty years people noticed that it was rewarding them for their parents." She rolled onto her side. "And then they fixed it. That's my point. It was wrong, and they found out it was wrong, and they changed it. Name one thing in TimBor they fixed that fast."

"You're doing it again."

"I am. It's very satisfying."

Through the wall, very faintly, the violin started up again. Pallavi was playing the slow piece from the beginning, and this time she didn't stop at the hard place. She went straight through it, a little rough, and kept going.

Tushar listened with her eyes closed. "Do you know what I remember most about when she was small?"

"What?"

"That I didn't have time to wonder about any of it. Meaning, the universe, your whole problem. I was too busy keeping her alive. For a few years, I just didn't ask."

"So having her answered it?"

"No," Tushar said. "It postponed it. That's not the same thing." She opened her eyes. "It was a very good postponement, though."

"I've heard people say it's the answer."

"People say a lot of things about children. Mostly people who are about to have one." She was quiet for a moment. "Or people who need a reason for having had one."

It was as close as she ever came to talking about Pallavi's father, and I felt the edge of it the way you feel a step in the dark. I opened my mouth, and she saw me do it, and she said, "Don't," lightly, in a voice that meant it.

So I didn't. The violin went on through the wall. After a while she reached over and took my hand without looking at me.

"Pallavi's coming to Founding Day," she said. "She says it's boring, but she's coming, because I asked her to."

"You asked her to because you're reading."

"I'm reading. They asked me in September. The hundred and seventieth, Dar. I'm reading the opening of the queuestory in front of the whole Third Ring." She squeezed my hand. "I've read it out loud to myself four hundred times. That's more than rehearsing eight bars twenty-six times."

"You'll be wonderful."

"I'll be fine. I'm always fine. That's not what I'm asking." She turned her head on the pillow so she could see me. "Drabelig will want you with her that day, won't she?"

"Probably."

"And I'll want you in the second row, where I can see you. So which of us are you going to disappoint?"

I didn't answer. Through the wall, Pallavi went back to the beginning of the slow piece, and stopped again at the same hard place.

Chapter 4

Tuesday, December 9, 170 (2200)

I chose Tushar in the morning and Drabelig in the afternoon, which is the kind of answer that disappoints both people a little and neither one completely. Drabelig had made it easy. When I told her about the reading she'd sent back, *Go hear her. I'm not going anywhere before dark*, and then, a minute later, *That was a joke. You're allowed to laugh at it*.

I hadn't laughed. I'd read it several times on the transit platform, and then I'd put it away.

I hadn't been to see her since the Sunday of the soup, not once, not even after they moved her up the hill to the hospital. Three weeks. I'd meant to go every day, and every day there'd been a reason not to, and none of the reasons were any good. None of them were even work. I was out of the Division by noon most days, and I spent the afternoons walking the long way around the hill. I'd sent messages instead. Short ones, most evenings. *How are you feeling? Did you sleep? Is Imani eating?* She answered every one of them.

Feeling like a woman with a brain tumor. Thank you for asking.

Slept beautifully. Dreamed you came to visit. It was very realistic.

Imani is eating. Imani says you're allowed to come even if you don't know what to say. Imani says nobody knows what to say. Imani is very wise and would like you to bring bread.

I brought the bread in my head every night, and didn't go. I don't know what I was waiting for. I think I was waiting to know what to say.

The Third Ring held its reading in the commons, a wide, round hall dug into the ground under the Ring's central meadow, with a ceiling of glass panels that had been cleared of snow at dawn so the light could come in. By ten o'clock the hall was full. There were long rows of folding chairs on the floor and people standing three

deep around the edges, and more people sitting on the steps that ran down from the entrances. Everyone had come in from the cold at once, so the air smelled like wet wool and the spiced cider the kitchen crews were handing out at the doors, and every few seconds someone stamped snow off their boots.

I sat in the second row. Pallavi sat beside me with her arms crossed and a cup of cider she wasn't drinking.

"This is going to be long," she said.

"It's the hundred and seventieth. It's supposed to be long."

"It's the same every year. The same words. Everybody already knows how it ends."

"That's what makes it a ceremony," I said. "If it were different every year it would be a lecture."

She considered that. "Did you just make that up?"

"Yes."

"It's not bad." She uncrossed her arms long enough to take a sip of the cider. "Don't tell her I said this was boring."

"You say it every year. She knows."

"I know she knows. Don't tell her anyway."

There was a small raised platform at the front of the hall, and on it a plain wooden lectern and nothing else. No banners. No image of Tessa Layer, no image of anyone. The only decoration in the whole room was the motto, cut into the stone lintel above the platform in letters so old that the edges had softened: *EQUALITY BEFORE EQUENOMY*. Below it, somebody's child had hung a paper chain of blue and green loops that went halfway across and then gave up.

At ten exactly, the hall went quiet by itself. Nobody asked for silence. It spread from the front rows back, and then up the steps, until the only sound was the warmers for the cider pots.

Tushar walked out onto the platform. She was wearing a plain dark dress and her hair was pinned up the way she wore it to perform. She looked, for the first time since I'd known her, nervous. She put both hands flat on the lectern. She did not have a page in front of her. Nobody who read the queuestory used a page. She looked out over the hall, found me in the second row, and held my eyes for about half a second before she looked away.

Then she began.

"In the last years of TimBor, no one knew who was doing the killing.

"The wars had no generals whose names could be spoken. The machines that chose the targets answered to no one who could be found. The seas came over the cities of the coasts, and the fields burned, and the people who had built the world for their own profit could not stop what they had built. They had forgotten how to want anything other than more.

"And the world fell. Not to a single enemy. It fell to itself.

"At the foot of these mountains there was a city of towers and roads, and when the world fell, the city emptied. Those who stayed were few, and cold, and they had nothing to build with but the ruins.

"This is where Tessa Layer came.

"She did not come as a ruler. She came with a book and a shovel. The book said that no one should be made to earn their survival. It said that wealth should not be hoarded, nor status bought. It said that where goods are scarce, standing shall be earned. It said that the roofs belong to the land.

"And she put down the book, and picked up the shovel, and began.

"She laid the first stone of the first Earthhold with her own hands, on the ninth day of the last month of the year, one hundred and seventy years ago today. The people who were left came out of the ruins to watch her, and then they came to help.

"That was the Founding.

"She did not rest. When the first city stood, she went to lay the first stone of the next, and the next after that, across the continents and the seas. She was present at every city's first stone, though no one ever saw her travel between them. She never aged a day from the Founding to the day she was last seen. And on the day the last of the twenty cities had its first stone, she set down her shovel for the final time and went where she had always said she would go: back into the people she had made.

"We do not tell you this so that you will worship her. She would not have wanted that. She wanted what we want: a world where no one is made to fight for survival, so that everyone is free to go looking for what matters. And when the land was whole again, she said, we would look up.

"We tell you this so that you will remember how it began.

"It began with a shovel, in the cold, at the foot of these mountains.
"It began with us."

#

When Tushar stopped, nobody applauded. That wasn't the custom. There was a long, full silence instead, and then the woman on the platform behind her stepped up to take the next section, and Tushar came down the side steps and slipped into the empty chair on my other side, and I felt her hand find mine and grip it hard enough to hurt. Her palm was damp.

"You were wonderful," I whispered.

"I rushed the part about the stones," she whispered back.

"You didn't."

"I did. I always rush it. It's the best part and I get excited." She was trembling a little, the way she did after a performance. Pallavi leaned across me.

"You didn't rush it," Pallavi said, very quietly, and then sat back and recrossed her arms and looked straight ahead as though she hadn't said anything at all, and Tushar made a small sound that might have been a laugh or might have been something else.

The rest of the reading took another hour and a half. There were six readers after Tushar, and they took the queuestory from the Founding through the Transition and the building of the cities and the long years of the parenthood queue, through the Leveling, when all the people who were left were made young together on a single day, to the present. The reader who did the Leveling was a man with a deep, slow voice, and when he read the line about the old ones looking at their hands, a lot of people in the hall looked at their own hands. I did too. I had been fifty-six that day. I remembered it better than I remembered most things. I didn't want to remember it right then, and I made myself listen to the words instead.

Then the last reader finished with the line everyone knew, *we chose it then, and we choose it now*, and the hall said it with her, fifteen hundred voices under the glass, and it was over.

I moved my lips. I always did. I had been moving my lips to that line on every Founding Day of my life, and I had never once said it out loud, and nobody had ever noticed. Fifteen hundred people choosing it again, all together, warm and certain, under a glass roof full of winter light. I sat in the second row with Tushar's hand in

mine and wondered, the way I did every year, what exactly I would have been choosing.

#

Afterward, everyone stacked chairs. That was also the custom.

It was the part of Founding Day I liked best, if I was honest with myself. The ceremony was beautiful, but the stacking was where you could see the whole thing working. Nobody organized it. People just stood up, folded their chairs, and started carrying them toward the racks along the back wall. Children dragged chairs twice their size. Two old friends argued about the correct way to stack them, and a third one did it a different way while they argued. Tushar had been pulled away by a group of people who wanted to tell her how well she'd read, and she was standing in the middle of them looking pleased and embarrassed and not at all like someone who had rushed anything. Pallavi had disappeared the moment the last line was spoken.

I folded my chair and the one next to it and carried them to the back. The racks were already half full. A man was working at the end of the nearest one, taking chairs from people as they came and fitting them into the stack.

I handed him mine, and he took them. It was S. Ya.

I knew the face, of course. Everyone knew the face. It wasn't a face that did anything to announce itself: medium height, dark hair, sleeves pushed up to the elbows, the kind of face you'd trust to tell you which transit line to take. He was a little dusty from the racks. He fitted my two chairs into the stack and reached for the next ones from the woman behind me, and the woman behind me handed them to him without a second glance, because that was also the custom. You didn't make a fuss. Not here. Not over anyone.

"Your friend read beautifully," he said, while he took the chairs.

"She practiced four hundred times," I said.

"It showed. Most people rush the part about the stones." He slid the chairs into place and turned for the next ones. "Happy Founding."

"Happy Founding," I said, and moved out of the way for the people behind me, and that was all.

I stood by the wall for a minute afterward and watched him keep working. He was careful and not especially fast. At one point a child

tried to hand him a chair that was still half unfolded, and he bent down and showed her how the latch worked, and she folded it herself and handed it to him again, very pleased. I thought about going back and telling him that Tushar would want to know he'd said that about her reading. Then I thought about how she'd take it, which would be to spend a week convinced he'd only said it to be kind. And then Tushar found me by the wall and put her arm through mine, and I didn't think about it anymore.

"Go," she said. "She's waiting."

I nodded.

"I mean it. Go now, while it's still light. Tell her I'm sorry I'm not coming. Tell her—" She stopped. "Tell her happy Founding."

On the transit, heading west, a message came in from Comai. It was the first I'd heard from her all day. *Ten days*, it said. Nothing else.

I looked at it for a while. The pod was half empty. A family across from me was sharing the last of a paper bag of Founding cakes, and the youngest one had frosting on her eyebrow and nobody had told her. Outside, the white hills slid by, and then the pines, and then the hills again, and the mountains got bigger.

I know, I sent back. *Happy Founding*.

Happy Founding, she sent. And then, a minute later: *How's your sister?*

I didn't answer that one. I didn't know yet.

#

The hospital was built into the side of the first foothill west of the city. From the transit stop you walked up a long, gentle path through a stand of pines, and then the path turned and you were in front of it before you'd noticed it was there. A long, low curve of glass set into the hill, with the snowy slope rising above it and continuing on up toward the mountains. From the inside, all the rooms on the west side looked straight out at the Front Range.

Drabelig had one of those rooms. She had asked for it.

Imani was sitting beside the bed when I came in, with a book open in her lap that she wasn't reading. She was a slender, quiet woman with close-cut black hair and a way of listening with her whole face. she stood up when she saw me and hugged me without saying anything, which was the right thing to say. Around her neck, on a braided cord, was the pendant: a circle with three rings

interlocked inside it. Drabelig was wearing an identical one. It lay on her chest on top of the blanket, rising and falling.

"Little brother," Drabelig said.

Her voice was smaller than it had been on Sunday, three weeks ago, but it was still her voice. She was propped up on pillows with her head turned toward the window, and she didn't turn it toward me right away. When she did, she smiled. She had always had the widest smile of any of us. It was the thing people remembered about her, after the sports. It was still there. It just seemed to take more out of her now.

"You came from the reading," she said. "You smell like cider."

"Tushar says she's sorry she isn't here. She says happy Founding."

"Did she rush the stones?"

"She says she did. She didn't."

"She would think that." Drabelig closed her eyes for a moment and opened them again. "Avukat was here this morning. Senne came at lunch and brought me eggs from the flock and then sat there being calm at me for an hour. Berbant's coming tomorrow after his shift. So you're the afternoon." She patted the bed beside her. "Sit. Tell me what she read. All of it. The way she said it."

So I sat on the edge of the bed and I told her. I didn't have Tushar's memory for it, and I didn't have her voice, but Drabelig didn't seem to mind. She listened with her eyes half closed. When I got to Tessa Layer laying the first stone, she smiled. When I got to the line about her being at every city's first stone, she opened her eyes.

"'Though no one ever saw her travel between them,'" she said, along with me.

"You know it?"

"Dar. I've heard it every year of my life. I haven't missed one." She turned her head a little on the pillow. "I always loved that part. When I was small I thought she could be in two places at once. I used to try to do it. I'd stand in the doorway between the kitchen and the hall and say, now I'm in both."

"I remember. You made me time you."

"And you'd say it didn't count because I was only in the doorway."

"It didn't count."

"It counted." She smiled again. "You always had to know how the trick worked. Even when you were little. Even when it's a nice trick."

"How was Avukat?"

"Avukat was Avukat. He brought me a joke about a lawyer and a chicken that I'm not going to repeat, and then he told me the nurses here are overstaffed and the whole hospital is a monument to inefficiency, and then he sat there holding my hand for an hour and didn't say anything at all." She laughed, very softly. "He cried in the corridor on his way out. He thinks I didn't hear."

"And Senne was calm at you."

"Senne was so calm at me. He brought eggs. Six of them, from the flock. I can't eat eggs, Dar. I can barely eat soup. He knows that. He brought them anyway, because the hens had laid them and he thought I'd want to know the hens were doing well." She turned her head toward the little table by the window, and there they were, six brown eggs in a folded cloth. "I did want to know. That's the thing about Senne. He's always right about the stupid things."

"And Berbant's tomorrow?"

"After his shift. He says he's writing me something." She closed her eyes. "He's been writing me something for forty years. I've never seen a word of it. I told him if he doesn't bring it tomorrow, I'm going to haunt him."

"The Remnant believes in haunting?"

She opened one eye. "No. But Berbant doesn't know that."

"And what about me?"

"You," she said, "came in smelling like cider, and you're going to sit on my bed and not tell me about your work, because you can't. Imani told me you've got a strange number."

I looked at Imani. Imani looked at her book.

"Tushar told Imani," Drabelig said. "Tushar tells Imani everything. They've danced in the same company for twenty years. You should know that about your partners. They talk."

"It's just a strange number."

"You love a strange number. You always have." She squeezed my hand. "I hope it turns out to be interesting."

A nurse came in then, a tall man with a soft voice, to check the line that ran into the back of her hand. He asked her how the pain was. She said it was fine. He said her numbers suggested otherwise and that he could turn the drip up a little. She said she'd rather he didn't.

"You don't have to be uncomfortable," he said gently. "That's

what it's for."

"I know what it's for," Drabelig said. "I'm not uncomfortable. I'm just awake. I'd like to stay awake, please."

He looked at Imani. Imani looked at Drabelig. Drabelig looked at the nurse with the expression she'd worn for a hundred years every time anyone had told her to do anything, which was the expression of someone politely waiting for you to realize you'd already lost.

The nurse sighed. "I'll leave it where it is."

"Thank you."

When he'd gone, she let out a breath. "He's very nice," she said. "He's been very nice for four days. I hate it."

"You could let him turn it up."

"No." It came out sharper than she meant it to, and she softened it right away. "I know that road, Dar. I've been down that road. I'm not going back down it now, just because the end of it doesn't matter anymore." She reached over and found my hand on the blanket. Her fingers were thin and very cool. "Besides. I want to see it."

"See what?"

She didn't answer. She was looking past me, out the window.

The sun was already low over the mountains. In December it went down early, and the light had turned from white to gold to something deeper than gold while I'd been telling her about the reading. The whole slope outside the window was lit up orange, every pine on it throwing a long blue shadow up the hill, and the snow on the peaks had gone pink.

"Help me sit up," Drabelig said.

Imani was already standing. She put an arm behind Drabelig's shoulders and lifted her, carefully, and I took the pillows and stacked them higher, and between us we got her upright, facing the window straight on. It took more out of her than it should have. When we were done she sat with her eyes closed for a while, breathing, and I thought maybe she'd fallen asleep.

Then she opened her eyes and looked west.

She didn't say anything out loud. Her hand came up and closed around the pendant on her chest, and her lips moved, and Imani, standing beside the bed, closed her own hand around her own pendant and did the same. I stood at the foot of the bed with nothing in my hands. The sun touched the top of the mountains. It went down behind them faster than you'd think the sun could move, the way it

always does at the end, and the orange on the slope went blue all at once, from the bottom up, like water filling a glass.

When it was gone, Drabelig let go of the pendant. Imani leaned over and kissed her forehead and said something very softly that I didn't catch. Drabelig said, "All rivers," and Imani said it back.

Then Drabelig lay back against the pillows, and looked at me, and grinned.

"You should see your face," she said.

"What's wrong with my face?"

"Nothing's wrong with it. You're doing the thing. You're trying to figure out how it works."

"I'm not."

"You are. You've been doing it since we were children. You're standing there thinking, what is she actually doing, what's the mechanism." She wasn't teasing me, exactly. Or she was, but it was the gentlest kind. "It's all right. It's how you love things. You take them apart."

I sat back down on the edge of the bed. Outside, the light was draining out of the sky, and the first stars were coming out over the peaks.

"Imani and I were going to get married at the Kindling," she said. "Did I tell you that?"

"You told me."

"The twenty-first. We picked it because it's the longest night and we thought that was funny. Imani thought it was funny. I thought it was a little bit sad and a little bit funny." She turned her head toward Imani. "We're still getting married. Just not in the way we planned."

Imani sat down on the other side of the bed and took Drabelig's other hand, and didn't say anything, and her face said everything.

We stayed like that. The room got dark and nobody turned the light on. At some point the nurse came back and looked in and went away again. Drabelig drifted off and woke up and drifted off. Once, while she was asleep, Imani looked up at me across the bed and said, very quietly, "Thank you for coming," and I said I would come back tomorrow, and she nodded as though she believed me.

It was full dark when Drabelig woke up the last time that night. She looked at the window, and then at me, and she was smiling again.

"I keep thinking about her," she said. "Tessa."

"The queuestory?"

“Mm. Going to all those cities. All those first stones. Nobody ever saw her go.” She was quiet for a moment. Her thumb moved slowly over the back of my hand. “Do you think she was lonely, Dar? All that way by herself?”

Chapter 5

Friday, December 12, 170 (2200)

Berbant was the one who called me.

It was Wednesday, a little after seven in the evening. I was in my office at the Division, which had been empty for hours, on a day that wasn't even one of mine, which is where I'd gone after I couldn't make myself go back up the hill that morning, and the chime came behind my eyes and it was his name, and I knew before I touched my temple. He didn't say much. He said she'd been awake when he got there after his shift. He said he'd read her the thing he'd been writing. He said she'd laughed, and then she'd gone to sleep, and about an hour later she'd just stopped. Imani had stepped out to get tea. He was the only one in the room.

"She wasn't in pain," he said. "I watched. I'd have known."

Then he said he had to call Avukat, and Senne, and he hung up, and I sat in my office in front of a wall covered with somebody else's QQ data and didn't move.

That was Wednesday. On Friday we buried her. Or that's what I would have called it, if I'd been talking to anyone who wasn't a Remnant. They didn't call it that. They didn't bury anyone.

#

The Remnant's house in the Fifth Ring was an ordinary Earthhold common room. I'd expected something stranger. It had the same low ceiling as every common room in QL and the same long tables, pushed back against the walls now to make space, and the same smell of the kitchen next door. The only thing different about it was the light. There was a light well at the east end of the room and another at the west, both deep enough that you could see a square of sky at the top, and the chairs had been set out in a long double row running between them, so that the whole room pointed from one to the other.

In the middle of the room, halfway between the two light wells, Drabelig lay on a low bier under three veils.

They were three different colors. The top one was pale gold. Under its edge I could see a deep red one, and under that a white one, all laid over her so that you could see the shape of her beneath them and nothing else. She looked very small. She had always been small. It had never looked like this.

There were perhaps sixty people in the room when I got there, most of them wearing the pendant. They were talking quietly in twos and threes and touching each other a lot, hands on arms, hands on shoulders. Nobody was crying yet. A woman I didn't know came up to me, took both my hands, said, "You're her little brother. She talked about you," and then said, "Before-blessed," and let go and went back to the person she'd been talking to before, as though she'd just done something ordinary. Maybe she had.

"This is extremely strange," Avukat said, at my elbow.

He'd come in behind me and was standing with his coat still on and his hands in his pockets, looking around the room with the expression of someone who has just been handed a book in a language he doesn't read. He was the shortest of us and the roundest, and he'd always carried himself as if both of those things were deliberate choices he'd made to put other people at ease. His eyes were red. He was pretending they weren't.

Avukat wasn't his name. Our mother had started calling him that when he was seven, from an old word for advocate, because he argued every rule in the house and won about half of them. It stuck so hard that by the time he was twelve none of us used the name she'd given him. He'd grown into it, the way you grow into a coat bought too big. He said it was the only advice of hers he'd ever taken.

"It's just a common room," I said.

"It's a common room full of people who think our sister is currently somewhere else." He nodded at the bier. "Three veils. Of course there are three. Everything's in threes with them. I bet the cake has three layers."

"There's no cake."

"There should be cake. Drabelig would've wanted cake." He looked at the bier again, and then away quickly, and took his hands out of his pockets and put them back in. "Where's Senne?"

"He's here. He's in the kitchen."

"Of course he is." Avukat almost smiled. "Our sister is dead and he's found the kitchen."

Senne came out a minute later with a tray of small cups of something hot and started handing them out to people he didn't know. They took them, and thanked him, and he said something warm to each of them. That was how Senne went through the world. He didn't ask whether he belonged anywhere. He found the thing that needed doing and did it, and after a while it didn't matter whether he belonged, because he'd made himself useful and people were glad he was there. He brought the tray over to us.

"It's ginger tea," he said. "I asked their cook if I could make it. Their cook was very nice about it."

"You barged into their kitchen," Avukat said.

"I asked." Senne handed us each a cup. His hands smelled like ginger and a little bit like the garden, and his face was completely calm. "Drink it. It's cold out, and it's going to be a long afternoon."

"Are you all right?" I asked him.

He looked at me, surprised, as if it hadn't occurred to him to wonder. "I'm sad," he said. "I'll miss her. But she wasn't afraid, Dar, and she was ready, and she was with people who loved her. That's how you want it to go, isn't it? You can't ask for better than that."

It was a true thing to say and a kind thing to say, and I wanted to throw the cup of ginger tea at the wall. I didn't. I drank it. It was very good.

Berbant and Sora came in last, just before the rite began. Berbant was the tallest of us and the biggest through the shoulders, and he usually filled a doorway. He didn't fill this one. He looked like someone had let some of the air out of him. Sora had her arm through his and was steering him the way I'd seen nurses steer patients who had just stood up for the first time after a long illness, gently and without making a thing of it. She hugged each of us. When she got to me she held on a second longer than the others and said, very quietly, "He hasn't slept."

Berbant looked at the bier and then he looked at the floor.

I found Jinsia near the back, standing against the wall where he wouldn't block anyone's view, which with Jinsia meant standing against the wall behind everyone. He was so much taller than everyone in the room that it made the ceiling look lower. He put a hand on the back of my neck when I got to him and left it there,

which was all he did, and it was enough. Tushar was with Imani's sister on the other side of the room. She caught my eye across the chairs and put her hand flat on her chest for a second, and I did the same.

"How long does this take?" Jinsia said, very low.

"Until sunset."

"That's poetic of them."

"It's structural. It's the prayers. They do it facing the sun."

"And you know this because?"

"Because Drabelig did it on Tuesday," I said, "and I watched."

He looked down at me for a moment, and then his hand tightened slightly on my neck, and that was all.

#

At half past three, Ezra Nandi walked to the east end of the room and stood under the light well.

He was a broad man with a soft, unhurried voice that carried to the back of the room without his seeming to raise it. I had heard of him for years, the way everyone in QL had heard of him. The man who ran the Remainers. I'd imagined someone more forceful. He didn't look forceful. He looked tired, and kind, and like someone who had done this many more times than he wanted to.

"Brothers," he said. "Sisters. Fellows. Friends who are not of us, and are welcome." He looked at the four of us in the front row when he said that, and at Jinsia at the back, and didn't linger on any of us. "We face the before."

Everyone stood. The chairs scraped. The Remnant turned toward the east light well, and after a second, so did we. Avukat turned last.

"Drabelig Rax came to us," Ezra said, "late. She was not born to the Confluence. She was born to one of the old streams that came into it, but she left that stream young, and for many years she followed no river at all."

That was true. We'd all left. Only Drabelig had come back, years later, to what the old church had become after it merged into the Remnant. I'd always thought of it as her going back. The Remnant, I realized, thought of it as her arriving.

"Before she came to us, she was a runner," Ezra said. "A climber. A player of every game with a ball in it and some without. She was a stock manager at one of the manufactories and the best one they

ever had, and she could not take an order from anyone, including me, which she told me the first day I met her." A few people laughed, softly. "She was loved by more people than she knew. And there were years before she came to us when she was lost. She would want me to say that plainly. She said it plainly herself, to anyone who asked, because she said it was the most important thing about her. That she was lost, and then she wasn't."

Avukat stiffened beside me. None of us ever talked about those years. Drabelig had, apparently, to everyone.

Ezra stepped forward to the bier. He took the edge of the gold veil in both hands, lifted it away from her, folded it once, twice, three times, and laid it across the foot of the bier. Underneath it, the red veil covered her the same as before.

"The before is kept," he said.

"The before is kept," the room said back. The four of us didn't. We didn't know to.

#

For the present, they turned the chairs.

Everyone picked up their chair and turned it so that it faced the middle of the room instead of either end, and sat back down, and the two rows became two lines facing each other across the bier. It was a small thing. But after they'd done it, the room felt completely different. We weren't watching anything anymore. We were sitting across from each other, looking at each other's faces, with her in between.

Across from me sat a woman I didn't know, about Drabelig's age, with the pendant at her throat and her hands folded in her lap. She was looking straight at me. Not rudely. The way you'd look at someone you had been asked to keep an eye on. Beside her, Imani's sister had her arm through Imani's. Farther down, Ezra sat with his hands on his knees. And when I turned my head, there on my own side of the bier were my brothers: Avukat with his jaw set, Senne perfectly calm, Berbant looking at the floor between his boots. It was the first time I had ever seen the four of us from the outside, sitting in a row, the way the Remnant were seeing us. We sat the same way. Four men leaning forward with our hands between our knees, the way our father used to sit in church.

Only three people spoke. That was the custom, I found out later. Three, for the present. The Remnant liked the present to be short.

The first was a woman who had been on Drabelig's climbing team for forty years. She talked about a wall they'd done together in the mountains north of the city, and about how Drabelig had gotten stuck halfway up it and refused to let anyone help her, and had spent two hours working out the next hold by herself while the rest of the team sat on the ledge above her eating lunch. "And when she got up," the woman said, "she said, 'That was the best two hours of my life,' and then she ate all of our lunch." People laughed, and then some of them started crying, and they didn't seem to find those two things in tension.

The second was Imani. She stood up, and didn't say anything for a while, and then said, "She was noon-hearted," and sat down again. The Remnant around her made a low sound together, not quite a word. Imani's sister put an arm around her.

The third was Berbant.

I didn't know he was going to speak. I don't think he knew either, until Ezra looked across the room at him and raised his eyebrows a fraction, and Berbant stood up. Sora let go of his arm. He stood there with his big hands hanging at his sides.

"I was there," he said. "At the end. I'm the one who was there." He stopped. "I'd been writing her something. For a long time. Years. A story. It was about her, sort of. It was about someone who could be in two places at once."

I felt something go through me that I couldn't name.

"I never showed it to her. I never showed it to anyone. It wasn't finished. It's still not finished. But she sent me a message on Tuesday that said if I didn't bring it she was going to haunt me." A few people smiled. "So I brought it. And I read it to her. All of it. It took about forty minutes. And when I was done she said—" His voice caught, and he waited until it didn't. "She said, 'Berbant, that's terrible.' And then she laughed so hard she started coughing. And then she said, 'Read me the part about the doorway again.'"

He sat down. Sora took his arm again. Across the room, Avukat had put his hand over his eyes.

Ezra let the silence go on for a while. Then he stood, and went to the bier, and lifted the red veil away, and folded it three times, and laid it over the gold one. Underneath, the white veil lay over her, and now you could almost see her face through it.

"The present is kept," he said.

"The present is kept," the room said. This time, somewhere down the line from me, I heard Senne say it with them.

#

Then they sang.

I wasn't ready for it. There was no signal. Someone at the far end of the row just started, and then everyone was singing, low and slow, and the tune hit me in the chest before I understood why. I knew it. I knew every note of it. It was a hymn from the church we'd grown up in, the one our parents had taken the five of us to twice a week for most of our childhoods. It was a hymn about children. Our mother used to sing it while she cooked. I hadn't heard it in more than a hundred years.

The words were different now. They were about rivers. About every river running into one river, and the one river running into the sea, and the sea going up into the sky and coming down again as rain on the mountains where the rivers began. But the tune was exactly the same, down to the place in the third line where it climbed up high and our mother's voice always broke a little. I heard a woman's voice two seats down break in the same place.

I didn't sing. I couldn't have. Beside me, Avukat wasn't singing either, but his lips were moving. I don't think he knew they were.

#

The light in the west well had turned gold by the time they finished, and then orange. Ezra walked to the west end of the room.

"We face the after," he said.

Everyone stood and turned to the west. This time I turned with them without thinking about it. The square of sky at the top of the light well was burning, and the light came straight down the well and across the floor and touched the foot of the bier, and slowly, as we stood there, it climbed. It was the same light I'd watched on the mountains from her hospital window. It moved just as fast.

Ezra raised both hands, palms up, and spoke to the Oneness.

I won't try to reproduce what he said. I couldn't, and it wasn't mine. It was long, and formal, and full of words I only half knew, and it was spoken in a voice I hadn't heard him use before in the service, lower and more certain, as though he were addressing someone standing right in front of him whom only he could see. He named the three faces. He named her, all three times: the one who was before,

the one who was, the one who is after. He asked that she be received. He said, several times, *she is kindled well*. All around me, people had closed their hands around their pendants. Imani was holding hers so tightly her knuckles had gone white.

I watched the light climb the bier. I watched it reach the white veil. And I found I was doing it, the thing she'd said I always did. I was trying to work out the mechanism. Was it the light? The tune? The turning of the chairs? The sheer physical choreography of sixty people standing and sitting and facing and speaking all together, which I knew from the literature could produce exactly this feeling in almost anyone? I was standing at my sister's funeral taking apart the thing that was holding everyone in the room but me.

And they were held. That was the part I couldn't take apart. I looked down the row at them, the sixty strangers with their hands closed around their pendants and their faces turned to the light, and I saw that every one of them was being held by something. Not comforted. Held. As though there were a hand under each of them. And I was standing on the floor.

The light reached her face.

Ezra stepped forward, took the white veil in both hands, and drew it back.

She looked like herself. That was the worst of it. She looked like Drabelig asleep, small and brown-haired and about to grin, with the pendant lying on her chest on its braided cord. The last of the light lay across her face, and then the sun went down behind the rim of the light well, and the room went blue.

"She is Unveiled," Ezra said.

"She is Unveiled," the room said. "All rivers."

#

Afterward, while people were standing and moving and holding each other, Ezra came to find us.

He came to me first, and took my hand in both of his the way the woman had at the beginning, and said, "You're Dar." It wasn't a question. Then he said, "She asked me to tell you something."

"When?"

"After." He said it simply, the way you'd say *this morning*. "She's asked me to tell you: it counted. She said to tell the little one it counted, and that she's in both now."

I couldn't answer.

I looked past him, and found Imani. She was standing beside the bier with her sister's arm around her and her face wet, and she wasn't looking at me. She had been in the room on Tuesday. She had heard every word Drabelig said about the doorway. She could have told him. She could have told him yesterday, or last night, or ten minutes ago, without even knowing she'd done it. Grief makes people say things. Ezra had been doing this for a very long time. He knew what to listen for.

Or Drabelig could have told him herself, before. She'd had four days in that room. She could have planned it. That would have been exactly like her.

Or...

I looked back at Ezra. He was watching me with an expression I couldn't read at all. It wasn't triumph. It wasn't pity. If anything, it looked almost like he was waiting to see what I'd make of it, as though he wasn't entirely sure himself.

"Thank you," I said, because it was the only thing I could say.

He nodded. Then he held out his hand, closed, and opened it. The pendant lay in his palm, the braided cord coiled around it.

"Her recorded wishes," he said. "She wanted you to have this."

I looked at it. I heard Avukat, beside me, go very quiet.

"There's no obligation," Ezra said. "It isn't a summons. It's a gift."

I took it. It was warmer than I'd expected. It had been lying on her chest. The circle was smooth on the outside and the three rings inside it were worn smooth too, from her thumb, from decades of her thumb moving over them the way it had moved over the back of my hand on Tuesday. The cord was soft and a little frayed at one end.

I held it for a while. Then I turned around and held it out to Imani.

She'd come up behind me without my noticing. She looked at the pendant in my hand, and then at me, and she shook her head. She didn't say anything. She put her hand over mine and closed my fingers around it, gently, one at a time, and held them closed until I stopped trying to open them. Then she let go and went back to the bier.

I put it in the inside pocket of my coat, over my chest. Not because of what it meant to them. I didn't believe a word of what it meant to them. I kept it because it had been hers, because her thumb had worn those rings smooth, and because it was the last warm thing of her that

anyone was ever going to put in my hand. I could feel it there, a small hard weight.

#

We stood outside afterward, the four of us, in the snow at the top of the entrance steps, because none of us could stand to be inside anymore and none of us could stand to leave. Sora had taken Jinsia and Tushar into the kitchen to help Senne's ginger tea along. It was fully dark. The Fifth Ring's rooftops ran away from us in every direction, white and humped and lit from below, and the cold made our breath hang between us.

"So they burn her now," Avukat said.

"Tomorrow," Berbant said. "Privately. Just Imani and Ezra." His voice was hoarse. "Then in the spring, at the Unveiling, they take the ashes down to the Platte and put them in the water. Imani told me. That's what they do. All rivers."

"All rivers," Avukat said. He said it the way he said things he was making fun of, but it didn't quite come out that way. "She'd have hated this. The veils. The singing."

"She planned the whole thing," Senne said mildly. "She and Ezra. She told me in October. She picked the climbing woman to speak."

Avukat looked at him. "She told you in October?"

"She told me lots of things. I was around." Senne shrugged. "People tell you things if you're around."

"Well, she didn't tell me." Avukat turned his collar up. "I'm the oldest. I'd have liked to know. I'd have liked to—" He stopped. "It doesn't matter."

"It matters," Berbant said.

"It doesn't. It's done. She's in the river, or she will be." Avukat looked out over the snow. "They sang the song, Dar. Did you hear it? They took Mother's song and put rivers in it."

"I heard it."

"I haven't heard that song since—" He didn't finish that either. "I walked out of that church the first day I was old enough to. I never looked back. And I stood in there tonight and I knew all the words. Not the river words. The real ones."

"They're both real," Senne said.

"Don't," Avukat said. "Don't do the thing where you say something calm and wise and it's supposed to make everything fine. It

doesn't make everything fine. Our sister is dead and a stranger in a nice sweater just told Dar she's been sending him messages from the other side."

So he'd heard. Of course he'd heard.

"I'm not trying to make it fine," Senne said, and he wasn't, and that was the thing about Senne. "I'm just saying she's all right. She was ready. She's at peace. You can't change it, Avukat. It's easier if you just accept it."

Avukat laughed, one short hard breath of white. "That's your answer to everything." He turned to me, as though I might have a better one.

I didn't.

I had my hand in my coat. My fingers had found the pendant through the lining without my deciding to put them there, and I was running my thumb over the circle, the way she had.

Berbant saw. He let it be. He just stood there next to me, bigger than all of us and smaller than I'd ever seen him, and after a while he put his shoulder against mine, the way he used to when we were boys waiting for our parents outside that church. He'd been the last one in the room. He'd read her forty minutes of an unfinished story and she'd told him it was terrible, and she'd laughed, and asked him to read the part about the doorway again, and then she'd gone to sleep. I didn't know if I envied him or if I was glad it hadn't been me. I thought it might be both.

Avukat was watching my hand in my coat.

"So," he said. His voice had gone quieter. "What are you going to do with it?"

Chapter 6

Friday, December 12, 170 (2200)

"I don't know," I told Avukat.

It was the true answer, and he took it the way he took most true answers, which was as a personal failing on the part of whoever had given it. He looked at me with his collar turned up and snow collecting on his shoulders. Then he said, "Well, don't let them talk you into wearing it," and went down the steps into the dark without saying goodbye to anyone. Berbant watched him go. Senne went back inside to see about the ginger tea.

Tushar came out a few minutes later with Pallavi, who had been waiting in the kitchen. She had clearly been crying and was furious that anyone might be able to tell. Tushar hugged me on the steps, hard. She said she'd come by tomorrow, after the cremation, if I wanted her to, and I said I did. Then she looked past me, at Jinsia, who had come out behind her and was standing in the doorway with his coat over his arm.

"You'll take him home," she said. It wasn't a question.

"I'll take him home," Jinsia said.

"Good." She kissed me on the cheek, and took Pallavi's arm, and went.

That was how it worked with the three of us. It had worked that way for a long time. Nobody negotiated it. Tushar knew what I needed the way she knew the next line of the queuestory, and some nights what I needed was her, and some nights it was Jinsia, and she never once in all the years we'd been together seemed to take the second kind of night as a comment on the first. I'd never understood how she did it. I'd stopped needing to.

#

My room in the Earthhold was small, even by the standard of single rooms. A bed, a table, two chairs, a shelf of paper books I had mostly read, a skylight. Housing had offered me a bigger one twice. I'd turned it down both times. I liked being able to reach everything from the bed. It had been snowing on and off all day and the skylight was a gray-white square with the faint yellow of the corridor lamps coming through the snow at the edges. When Jinsia came in he had to duck under the door frame, the way he ducked under every door frame in QL, and then he straightened up and his head was about a hand's width from the ceiling, and the room became even smaller.

"You need a bigger room," he said. He always said it.

"I need a shorter partner."

"You'd be bored in a day." He hung his coat on the hook next to my gray one and sat down on the edge of the bed, folding up in sections, the way very tall people do. "Wine?"

"Top shelf."

He reached up and got it without standing. It was a bottle Tushar had brought back from her dance company's tour of QJ two years ago, a red from the Bohemian vineyards that I'd been saving for no particular reason. I watched him look at the label and then look at me.

"You were saving this."

"For no reason."

"This is a reason." He opened it and poured two glasses and handed me one. Then he took a small, neat joint out of his shirt pocket, lit it, drew on it, and held it out. I shook my head. He shrugged and kept it, and leaned back against the wall with his long legs stretched out across most of the floor, and let the smoke out slowly toward the skylight.

I took the pendant out of my coat and put it on the table.

Neither of us said anything about it for a while. It lay there on its coiled cord between the wine bottle and the lamp, small and dull in the low light. The three rings inside the circle caught a little of the lamplight and gave it back.

"What did you think?" I asked eventually. "Of the rite?"

Jinsia considered it. He considered everything slowly, the way he moved; it was easy to mistake for not caring and it was almost the opposite. "I thought it was very well designed," he said. "The turning. The veils. The light coming down on her at the end. Whoever came

up with that knew exactly what a room full of primates needs." He took another pull on the joint. "I thought the singing was the best part."

"I knew the song."

"I saw your face."

"It was from our church. When we were children. It was about having children." I turned my glass on the table. "They took out the children and put in rivers."

"Hm," Jinsia said. He looked at the pendant. "Clever of them. Rivers don't need a parenthood queue."

I laughed, which surprised me, and it hurt a little in my chest, and then I was crying, which surprised me more. Jinsia put the joint out carefully on the edge of the wine glass, and set both on the floor, and reached over and pulled me down onto the bed next to him, and held on.

#

Later, we made love, because it was what we had.

It was slow and not especially skilled and it didn't matter. Jinsia was very careful with me, more careful than he usually was, and at one point I felt him watching my face in the gray light from the skylight to see if I was really there, and I was. Afterward we lay tangled up in a bed that was much too small for one of us, let alone two, with his feet hanging off the end and the blankets mostly on the floor, and for a while I didn't think about anything at all. It was the first time since Wednesday I was not lost inside my thoughts.

Then he sat up and reached for his clothes.

"You're going?"

"I have a sequencing run at six. If I'm not there when it starts, Marisol will set it up wrong and I'll spend next week fixing it." He pulled his shirt on over his head. "I can come back after."

"Stay. You can go from here."

"Your bed is a crime against people of abnormal proportions."

"We can make it work."

"Uncomfortably." He stood up, nearly hit the ceiling, and bent to find his socks. When he'd found them he sat back down on the bed to put them on, and then he leaned over and kissed me on the forehead, the way he always did when he was leaving, and said what he always said.

"Remember, *querido*. It's all about getting fucked."

Every time he said it I laughed or rolled my eyes, and he waited for one or the other, and that was the whole ritual. It was ours. He'd been saying it for years.

This time I didn't do either. I lay there looking up at the snow on the skylight.

"Is it?" I said.

He stopped with one sock on.

#

"Oh," he said. "Oh, no. You're doing this tonight?"

"You said it. You say it every time. I've never asked you if you meant it."

He looked at me. Then he took the other sock off again, and dropped it on the floor, and leaned back against the wall, and I knew I had him. There were only two things in the world Jinsia couldn't walk away from, and I'd just given him one of them in place of the other.

"Fine," he said. "Properly. Yes. I mean it. Do you want the argument?"

"I want the argument."

"All right." He held up one long finger. "Everything alive that you have ever seen, every tree and every chicken and every person in that room this afternoon, is the end of an unbroken line. Four billion years, give or take, and not one link in it failed to reproduce. Not one. If any single one of your ancestors had died without having a child, you wouldn't be lying there. That's the first thing."

"Fine."

"Second thing." Another finger. "The brain you're using to ask me this question. It was built by that line. Everything it can do, including worry about whether anything means anything, it can do because it helped something reproduce, or at least didn't stop it. You don't get to ask the question without the line."

"Life is required to ask what matters," I said.

"Exactly. So third." He held up the third finger and waggled all three at me. "Whatever you decide matters, whatever you find in your spire or your stars or your sister's cosmology, it's downstream of that. Fucking is upstream of everything. It's all about getting fucked, *querido*. It's not a joke. It's biology with a flourish."

"I like the flourish."

"You like the flourish with me." He reached down to the floor and found his wine and took a sip. "Go on. Tell me I'm wrong."

I sat up against the other end of the bed, which put my feet somewhere near his hip. The skylight was dark over us. The corridor lamps had gone down for the night.

"You're not wrong about where it came from," I said. "You're wrong about what that means. Those are different questions. You've told me that reproduction is how we got here. You haven't told me it's what we're for."

"It's what everything is for."

"No. It's what everything *did*. Past tense. The line got us here. That doesn't mean the line is the point. My hands evolved for climbing trees. That doesn't mean I'm supposed to be in a tree."

"You'd be happier in a tree."

"Probably. But that's not an argument." I held up a finger of my own, because two could play at that. "Second. Even if it was the point once, we've cut it. You know this better than anyone. Nobody in QL needs to have a child to keep the species going. We don't die." I paused, because Drabelig had just died. "We don't die except in extremely rare circumstances, like inoperable brain tumors caught too late. The population's where we want it. The queue lets people have children, and almost nobody does, and the ones who do are the exception. Pallavi's one of, what, forty kids in the whole Third Ring? You and I are going to live for as long as we want to and never replace ourselves, and neither will most of the people we know, and the species will be fine. The line doesn't need us anymore. It's done."

"The line is never done."

"It's done with us." Another finger. "Third. You. Me. If it's all about reproduction, then what are we? We've been fucking for years, Jinsia. Nothing has ever come of it but a lot of laundry."

He laughed, loudly, and then put a hand over his mouth, because of the neighbors. "That's not fair."

"It's completely fair. It's your argument. If sex is for making children, then what we just did was a mistake. And I don't think it was."

"No," he said, more softly. "Neither do I."

"So either you're wrong, or we are."

He was quiet for a moment, turning his glass in his long fingers. Then he said, "Maybe we're the line doing something else with itself."

Evolution makes all kinds of things that aren't strictly about reproducing. Play. Music. Two old men in a bed that's too small. It's got slack in it."

"Slack."

"Room. Extra. Things it makes along the way that don't have to earn their keep." He shrugged. "That doesn't make the line not the point. It just means the point has a lot of room around it."

"Then the point isn't the point," I said. "The room is."

"Oh, very nice." He pointed his glass at me. "But you're cheating. You keep saying the line isn't the purpose. Fine. Then tell me what is. Name me one purpose that isn't something a brain made up. And then remember whose brain it is."

"The line's."

"The line's. So every purpose you can think of is something the line built you to think of. Meaning is a trick your ancestors' genes played to keep you getting out of bed. At least mine admits it."

"Then yours is a story too," I said. "Yours is just the story that says all the other stories are stories."

"Yes. That's what makes it the best one."

"That's what makes it the most convenient one for a man who likes sex."

He considered that, and couldn't find a flaw in it, and so he did what he always did when he couldn't find a flaw in something, which was to drink. "Keep going," he said. "You've got a fourth. I can see it on your face."

"And fourth." I didn't hold up a finger this time. I didn't want to. "Drabelig."

He looked at me.

"She never had children," I said. "She never wanted to. She spent a hundred and some years running and climbing and fighting with everyone who ever tried to give her an order, and getting lost, and getting found, and then she lay in that bed and watched the sun go down and she wasn't afraid of anything. Tell me that doesn't count. Tell me she was a dead end in your line."

The room was very quiet. The snow had stopped. Somewhere down the corridor, a door closed.

Jinsia put his glass down on the floor. When he spoke again, his voice had changed. It had lost the performance.

"She's not a dead end," he said. "That's not how it works. Do you know what you are to her? Genetically?"

"Her brother."

"You share about half. Half of what made her, you've got. So has Berbant, and Senne, and Avukat, in different halves. Between the four of you, most of her is still walking around." He said it very gently. "That's real. That's not a metaphor. When I look at your hands I can see hers. You've got the same knuckles. She's in there. And if you copied every letter of her into a new body, that wouldn't be her either. It would be a very good cousin."

I looked at my hands. I did have her knuckles. I'd never noticed.

"That's kin selection," I said, after a while. "Hamilton's rule. The old biologist's math for why you'd die for your brother."

"Two brothers or eight cousins," Jinsia said. "That's Hamilton."

"That's the Remnant's claim in a lab coat."

He laughed, a little. "Mine has data."

"Yours has data about how she got here. And how much of her is left over in the rest of us. It doesn't have anything to say about whether any of it mattered." I turned my hands over in the dark. "Ezra told me she was in both places now. You're telling me she's in my knuckles. You're both trying to tell me she didn't just stop."

"We're both trying to tell you something true."

"You're both trying to comfort me."

"Is that so terrible?"

"No," I said. "It's lovely. It's just not the same thing."

He didn't answer that. He reached over, and took one of my hands, and turned it over, and ran his thumb over the knuckles, one at a time, the way she had. I don't think he knew he was doing it the way she had. I didn't tell him.

"You know what's funny," I said.

"Nothing is funny tonight."

"Your argument. The whole thing. It's our parents' church. Word for word, almost. Everything is for children. Children are the point of a life. They used to stand up and say it on Sundays. Five of us, because that was what you were supposed to do. And I spent a hundred years getting away from it, and here you are in my bed telling me the same thing with the gods taken out."

Jinsia looked genuinely stricken for a moment. "I am not your parents' church."

"You're a little bit my parents' church."

"*Dios mío.*" He let go of my hand and covered his face. "That's the worst thing anyone has ever said to me. And I've had committees evaluate the impact of my line of research for more than 50 years."

I laughed again, and this time it didn't hurt.

#

He didn't leave. At some point he gave up pretending he was going to, and took off the shirt again, and got back under the blankets, which meant most of him was under the blankets and the rest of him was making the best of it. We lay there in the dark. I thought he'd fallen asleep. Then he said, into the back of my neck:

"Can I tell you the actual reason?"

"For what?"

"The line. Why I say it."

"I thought you just told me."

"I told you the argument. The argument's true. It's not why I say it." He was quiet for so long I thought that was the end. "My head doesn't stop, Dar. You know that. It's always running. Sequences, samples, what I got wrong today, what I'll get wrong tomorrow. The only times it stops are when I'm working so hard there's no room for anything else, or when I'm with someone. Like this. Or when I've had enough of that," he tipped his head toward the joint on the floor. "That slows it down. That's it. Three things. Work, and sex, and that." He breathed out. "So when I say it's all about getting fucked, I'm not really talking about children. I'm talking about the only time I get to be quiet."

I lay there and thought about my own head. About the nights I lay awake in this bed at three in the morning with music on to drown out whatever was talking in there. About Wednesday, sitting in my office in front of the wall of numbers, not moving. About tonight, the first quiet I'd had since then, which had come from exactly where he said it came from.

"Me too," I said.

"I know," he said. "That's why I keep saying it to you."

After a while his breathing slowed and got heavier, and his arm went slack across my chest, and he was asleep. I lay awake. I didn't turn the music on. I listened to him breathe, and to the Earthhold settling around us, the small ticks and hums of a building full of a

hundred and fifty people asleep under the snow.

Around two in the morning I got up, carefully, and went to the table. The pendant was where I'd left it, next to the empty bottle. I picked it up. It had gone cold.

I stood there in the dark holding it for a while. I thought about putting it on, just to see. I thought about putting it in the drawer with the other things I didn't know what to do with. I didn't do either. I went to the hook by the door, and found the gray coat, and put the pendant back in the inside pocket where it had been all afternoon. Over my chest, where I could feel it. It wasn't a prayer. I didn't pray, and I wasn't going to start because a man in a nice sweater had told me she was in both places now. It was just the last place she'd been.

Then I got back into bed, into the corner Jinsia had left me, and eventually, somewhere toward morning, I slept.

Chapter 7

Saturday, December 20, 170 (2200)

Comai wanted to be in the display room when it came.

"It's a Saturday," I said. "It'll come to us wherever we are. That's the whole point of it coming to us."

"I know. I want to be in the room." She'd said it on Friday, walking out of the second hearing, and she'd said it again at seven that morning in a message that consisted of the word *room* and nothing else. So at a quarter to ten I was standing in the dark with her, in front of the spire.

It had been five and a half weeks since we'd found it. It looked exactly the same. It stood up out of its flat orange plain like it had on the first day, red and alone, turning slowly on its invisible axis, with the string of characters beside it where a name would be. Comai had pulled the component bands up next to it, the gold one climbing, so that the whole thing looked less like a chart than like evidence laid out on a table.

The second judge had been a transit engineer from the Sixth Ring, a quiet man who asked us four questions in forty minutes and wrote down all our answers by hand. He had not been like Judge Lund. He hadn't argued with us about doors. He'd listened to Comai explain the gold band, and asked who attested to the outcome term, and when she told him it was usually the person's supervisor, he'd nodded slowly, as though that was an answer to a question he hadn't asked out loud. Then he'd thanked us and said he'd rule in the morning.

"He's going to grant it," Comai said. She was standing very close to the chart, the red light on her face. "He wrote down the part about the supervisor twice."

"You counted?"

"I always count."

At fourteen minutes past ten, the chime sounded behind my eyes. It sounded behind hers too. I saw her flinch.

"Together," she said.

We touched our temples at the same time.

The order was short, like the first one. The request for identity was granted. The request for underlying documentation was granted, limited to the three years in question: attestations, evaluations, placement records. For comparison, the order also released the subject's yearly totals back to the start of his current placement. Investigators Rax and Safed were authorized to proceed. The subject would be notified upon the opening of the investigation file, in accordance with the Charter.

Below that, there was a single line, where the string of characters had been.

Comai made a small sound of satisfaction and reached into the chart. She touched the spire. The string of characters beside it flickered, and dissolved, and re-formed as a name.

RAX, BERBANT.

#

I don't remember deciding to step back. I remember that I was standing in one place and then I was standing somewhere else, a meter farther from the chart, and my hands were at my sides and I couldn't feel them.

Comai hadn't looked at me yet. She was already reaching for the documents. The first of the attestations was starting to open beside the spire, a pale rectangle unfolding in the dark.

"Stop," I said.

She stopped. She looked at me. Then she looked at the name again, and I watched her read it properly this time, all of it, and I watched her face change.

"Rax," she said.

"Close it. Don't read anything. Close it."

She closed it. The rectangle folded back into nothing. The name stayed where it was, hanging in the air next to the spire in plain white letters, and neither of us could stop looking at it.

"Dar," she said. "Who is he?"

"He's my brother."

She was quiet for a long moment. Then she said, very carefully, "The one who was with your sister when she died?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Dar."

I was looking at the spire. For more than five weeks I had been looking at that spire, taking it apart, and turning it over in my hands, and asking who in their right mind would climb a number like that. It had been a puzzle. It had been my favorite kind of puzzle. And the whole time it had been Berbant, in his work clothes, coming home tired from a shift, sitting down at the end of the day to write the story he'd never finished.

Berbant, who had never cared about his number in his life. Who had once told me, at a family dinner, that he checked his band about as often as he checked the weather on the moon.

That was the first thing I thought. The second thing I thought came right behind it, and I hated it the moment it arrived.

Berbant was a Freeholder. He'd been one for years. Everyone in the family knew it. The Freehold Society wasn't secret. It was just unpopular. It had meetings and a newsletter and a long, patient campaign to amend Article Two of the Charter so that people could hold a piece of ground outright, and build on it, and put a roof over it that belonged to them instead of to the land, a campaign everyone knew would never pass. Berbant and Avukat went to the meetings and argued at dinner about how the Queue was a beautiful, well-meaning cage, and how the number was a lie everyone had agreed to believe. And if you wanted to prove that the number was a lie, what better way than to show that it could be made to say anything? That a maintenance worker with a flat record could climb like a spire, and nobody would notice?

I stood there in the dark and I was already doing it. I was already building the case. It was what I did. It was what I was for. It was my brother, and I was already asking how.

"I have to call Mira," I said.

"I know," Comai said.

#

Mira came in herself. She lived in the Second Ring, twenty minutes away, and she was standing in the display room by eleven with snow on her coat, looking at the name.

For a while she only looked at it. Then she said, "Did either of you read anything?"

"No," Comai said. "A page started to open. I closed it before I read it."

"Good." Mira turned to me. "When did you know?"

"When the name came up. I stopped her immediately."

"Good," she said again. She didn't say *I told you so*. She didn't have to. We were all standing there remembering it: *You'd be surprised how small a million and a half people is*.

"You're off it," she said. "As of now. Formally. I'll log it within the hour. Your access to the file ends when I do. You don't read it, you don't discuss it, you don't give advice on it, you don't answer questions about it. Not to Comai, not to anyone in the Division, and above all not to him." She paused. "Do you understand why?"

"Yes."

"Tell me anyway."

"Because nobody should investigate their own family," I said. "Because I can't be independent. Because whatever we find, if I'm anywhere near it, it's worthless."

"Because whatever you find, if you're anywhere near it, *he* can't trust it either," Mira said. "Remember that part. The rule protects him too." She turned to Comai. "It's yours. Do you want it?"

Comai didn't hesitate. "Yes."

"Then open the file when you're ready. Take your time. Read everything three times." Comai's head came up, and Mira gave her the smallest possible smile. "I know how you work. It's why I'm giving it to you."

Then Mira looked back at me, and something in her face softened, just a fraction.

"I'm sorry about your sister," she said. "I should have said so last week. I'm sorry about this, too."

"Thank you."

"There's one more thing, and you're not going to like it." She gestured at the order still hanging in the air beside the chart. "The notice. When Comai opens the file, the subject is notified automatically. The notice includes the order. The order names the investigators it was issued to."

It took me a second.

"Investigators Rax and Safed," I said.

"You can't amend an issued order. I'll log the recusal, and the notice will say the file is now held by Investigator Safed alone. But your name is on the order." She shook her head slightly. "He's going to see it."

#

Comai opened the file at twelve minutes past twelve. I wasn't in the room. I'd left, because I wasn't supposed to be there, and because I couldn't stand to be. I was walking.

I didn't have anywhere to go. I went west, through the Second Ring and into the Third, along the cleared paths between the white hills. It was a bright, hard, cloudless day, the first one in a week, and the snow on the roofs threw the light back so fiercely that I had to keep my eyes half closed. Every few hundred meters there was an entrance cut into the side of one of the hills, and people were coming in and out of them with bags and baskets, and some of them were carrying greenery. Branches of pine. Strings of small lights. Tomorrow was the solstice. Most of the city would mark it quietly, a candle and a long dinner. The Remnant would mark it as the Kindling, with a great deal more light.

Tomorrow was supposed to have been Drabelig's wedding.

I thought about Imani. I thought about her waking up tomorrow morning on the longest night of the year, in whatever room she'd been living in since Drabelig died, with the pendant on her chest and no one to marry. I thought about the pendant in my coat. I put my hand over it without meaning to.

I thought about Berbant, sitting on the edge of the bed in the hospital, reading forty minutes of his unfinished story to our sister. *Berbant, that's terrible*. I thought about his shoulder against mine outside the Remnant house, eight days ago. He'd been holding himself up by leaning on me. And the whole time, the spire had been out there in the dark of the display room, waiting for its name, and I hadn't known it was him.

At a little after two, somewhere near the edge of the Third Ring, a chime sounded behind my eyes.

I stopped walking. A woman carrying pine branches went around me without breaking stride.

I knew before I touched my temple. It was the same certainty I'd had the night he called about Drabelig. I touched it anyway.

S. YA

It was from Berbant. It was one line.
Dar, why is your name on this?

Chapter 8

Sunday, December 21, 170 (2200)

I wrote back to him on Saturday night, after I'd walked for three more hours and come home and sat on my bed in my coat. It took me most of an hour to write three sentences.

I was on it. I'm off it, and I can't talk about it. I'll come tomorrow.

He didn't answer. Sora did, a little after midnight. *Come for dinner. Senne's making the solstice meal. Avukat will be here. And then, a minute later: He's not all right. Come anyway.*

#

Berbant and Sora lived in the same cluster as Senne, in the Eighth Ring, on the far side of the city from me. They'd moved there years ago so Sora could be near the clinic where she worked, and Senne had followed a few years later because, he said, the soil was better, and because the Eighth Ring pool was the only one in the city long enough to swim properly. He swam it every morning, winter or not. Their Earthhold was one of the old ones. The common room had a low beamed ceiling and a long table that the cluster had built themselves out of beams salvaged from one of the old Denver warehouses, back when the deconstruction crews were still giving the wood away, and the kitchen at the end of it was the best kitchen I'd ever eaten in. That was Senne's doing.

I got there at dusk. The sun was just going down over the white hills behind me, and the shortest day of the year was ending the way it always does, all at once. As I came down the entrance steps I could see, far off across the city, toward the Fifth Ring, the glow in the sky where the Remnant house would be. They were doing the Kindling. Every year Drabelig had tried to drag the rest of us to it, one at a time or all together, whoever she could catch. We'd stand at the back and watch them light their three hundred candles and sing, and afterward

she'd feed us and ask which part we'd liked best, and Avukat would always say the food.

This year none of us had gone. Imani was there, I supposed. Getting married to no one on the longest night of the year.

Inside, the cluster's solstice dinner was quiet the way solstice dinners always were in QL. No songs. A candle on every table and most of the lamps turned down, so the room was mostly dark and gold. A long meal, eaten slowly. Some of the tables had already finished and people were sitting back with their cups, talking in low voices. There was a smell of roasting squash and onions and something with cinnamon in it.

My family was at the far end of the long table. Senne had set a place for Drabelig. There was a plate and a cup and a candle in front of the empty chair, and the candle was lit.

Avukat stood up when he saw me.

#

"You!" he growled.

"Avukat," Sora said.

"No. I want to hear it from him." Avukat didn't come around the table. He just stood there with his napkin in his hand, short and round and absolutely furious, and every head at the neighboring tables turned toward us and then politely turned away again. "Tell me it isn't true."

"Sit down," Senne said mildly. "Dar hasn't even taken his coat off."

"He can take his coat off after he tells me."

Berbant hadn't stood up. He was sitting at the end of the table with both hands around a cup, looking at me. He didn't look angry. He looked the way he had in the snow outside the Remnant house: like someone had let some of the air out of him and he hadn't had time to put it back.

I took my coat off. I hung it on the back of a chair. I sat down across from Berbant, and after a moment, Avukat sat down too.

"I can't talk about it," I said.

"You can't talk about it?" Avukat repeated.

"I'm off the case. I was taken off yesterday, as soon as we knew whose it was. I'm not allowed to discuss it with anyone. Especially not with him." I looked at Berbant. "I'm not supposed to be here

talking about this at all. I came because it's the solstice. And because I wanted you to hear from me that I didn't know."

"Didn't know what?" Berbant said.

"That it was you. Not until yesterday morning. Nobody did. It was a number, Berbant. It didn't have a name."

"It had a name," he said. "It had my name. You just couldn't see it."

"Yes."

"For how long?"

I hesitated. It wasn't about the case, exactly. It was about me. "Five weeks."

He took that in. He looked down at his cup. "Five weeks," he said. "So when I was sitting in that room with her. Reading her the story. You'd already—"

"I didn't know it was you."

"But you were already looking at it. At me." He didn't raise his voice. That was worse. "I read her forty minutes of the worst thing I've ever written, Dar, and she laughed, and I thought, at least there's this. At least there's one thing I did that was just mine. And the whole time my brother was at work taking my life apart."

"Your number," I said. "Not your life."

"What's the difference?"

I didn't have an answer to that. Across the table, the candle in front of Drabelig's empty chair flickered, and Senne reached over without a word and shielded it with his hand until it steadied.

#

"Here's what I don't understand," Avukat said.

He'd calmed down a little. That was dangerous. When Avukat was shouting, he was just upset. When he got quiet, he was building a case.

"The notice says it's about anomalous gains. Three years. It says they've got a court order for his attestations and his evaluations." He ticked them off on his fingers. "And it says the investigators are you and some woman named Safed. So I want to know what my brother is supposed to have done. Because I've known him his whole life and he couldn't game a queue if you drew him a map."

"That's true," Berbant said. "I couldn't."

"I can't talk about it."

"You don't have to talk. I'm a lawyer. I'll talk, and you can make faces." He leaned forward. "Somebody thinks his number went up too fast. Yes?"

I didn't say anything.

"There. That was a face." Avukat sat back. "And you think he did it. Don't you. Don't bother. I saw it when you walked in. You think he did it for us."

"Avukat," Sora said again.

"For the Society. You think your brother cooked his own numbers to make a point about the Queue. To prove it can be gamed. You think that's the kind of thing we'd do." He looked at me, and there was something underneath the anger now that looked a lot like hurt. "Tell me I'm wrong."

I wanted to. The trouble was that he wasn't wrong. It was the second thing I'd thought yesterday, in the dark in front of the spire, and I'd hated myself for it, and I hadn't been able to stop thinking it since. Avukat had always been able to read me. He'd been doing it since I was small enough to be carried.

"I thought it," I said. "For about a minute. I don't think it now."

"Why not?"

"Because it's Berbant."

"That's not a reason. That's a feeling. You don't trust feelings. You're the one who's always asking for the mechanism." Avukat spread his hands. "So give me the mechanism. Why don't you think he did it?"

Before I could answer, something in the kitchen started knocking.

#

It was a deep, uneven sound, like someone hitting a pipe with the flat of their hand, and it came from under the long counter at the end of the room. The people at the next table looked over. One of the kitchen crew came out of the back, frowning.

"That's the exchanger," Berbant said, and stood up.

"Berbant," Sora said. "Sit down. It's the solstice."

"It's the heat exchanger, and it's going to get worse, and if it gets bad enough the whole kitchen loses hot water in the middle of dinner." He was already walking toward it. "Twenty minutes."

The kitchen crew knew him. They got out of his way. He knelt down in front of the long counter and opened a panel near the floor

that I'd never noticed was there, and lay down on his back on the tiles, and slid most of his upper body into the space underneath. After a second one hand came back out, palm up, and one of the crew put a wrench into it without being asked.

Avukat stared after him. "We're in the middle of something."

"We're in the middle of dinner," Senne said. "He's fixing the water. Eat your squash."

So we sat there. Avukat didn't eat his squash. I didn't either. Sora did, slowly, watching the pair of legs sticking out from under the counter with the patient expression of someone who'd been married to those legs for a long time. The knocking went on for a few minutes, and then it changed, and then it stopped. There was a hiss. Somebody in the kitchen said, "Oh, that's better."

It took him about twenty minutes, the way he'd said. When he slid back out he had grease on his hands and on one cheek and a small piece of something metal in his fingers that he held up to the light and looked at with great interest before he put it in his pocket. He closed the panel. He washed his hands at the kitchen sink. Then he came back and sat down and picked up his cup again, and his face had changed. Not a lot. But some of the air had come back into it.

"Valve seat," he said. "Worn through. I've told them twice it needed replacing. They'll listen now."

"Fascinating," Avukat said.

"It is, actually." Berbant turned the cup in his hands. His knuckles still had grease in the creases. "You want to know why Dar doesn't think I did it? I'll tell you. Because I don't care about the number, and he knows it. I've never cared. I get up in the morning and go to work and there's always something broken. A valve. A pump. A seal that's been leaking for a year that nobody noticed. And I fix it. And then tomorrow there's something else broken, and I fix that." He looked at me. "You're going to tell me that's pointless."

"I'm not."

"You were thinking it."

"I was thinking that it's never finished."

"It's never finished. That's right." Berbant nodded slowly. "There's an old book I read once, about a man who was sentenced to push a rock up a hill forever, and every time he got to the top it rolled back down. Everyone always tells that story like it's the worst thing that could happen to a person. And the writer said, no. Imagine

him happy. Imagine him walking back down the hill to get the rock. He knows it's going to roll back. He knows it's never finished. He goes down anyway, because it's his rock." He shrugged, a small movement of those big shoulders. "When I'm under that counter, I know exactly what the valve is for, and I know exactly whether I fixed it, and nobody has to attest to it. The water's hot or it isn't. There's an assist at the depot that could do half of it. It's the other half I'm for. You don't know what's in a wall till you open it. That's all I want. That's all I've ever wanted from work. Something that's real and something that ends, even if it has to start over tomorrow."

Nobody said anything. At the next table, somebody laughed at something and was hushed.

"So no," Berbant said. "I didn't cook my numbers. I didn't even know my numbers were cooked. I noticed things were going well. I got a slot I'd been waiting on for four years. A month in one of the writing cabins in Lapland, in the dead of winter, when you can see the northern lights. It wasn't supposed to come around until next year. You remember, Sora, I came home and I couldn't believe it."

"I remember," Sora said quietly.

"I thought I'd gotten lucky. That's what the random draw is for, isn't it? So people like me can think they got lucky." He laughed, not much. "I haven't even gone yet. It starts the end of February. I was going to finish the story for Drabelig under the lights."

#

Avukat was quiet. Then he said, in his other voice, the careful one:

"Who writes up your outcomes?"

I kept my face absolutely still. It didn't matter. Avukat wasn't looking at me.

"Nobody, really," Berbant said. "The system drafts them off the work orders. Records runs them through. The supervisor signs them, with two hundred and something others. Half the depot touches that paperwork before it's done, and nobody reads it." He frowned. "Why?"

"Because somebody has to say what your work accomplished," Avukat said. "That's the part of the number you can't count. I've read the formula. I've read it more times than any of you." He looked at me then, and I saw him see my face, and I saw him decide not to say anything about it. "If the number went up and the work didn't

change, then either someone thinks your valves got a lot more important, or someone wrote down that they did."

"Why would anyone do that?" Berbant said.

Nobody answered him.

Senne got up and went to the kitchen, and came back with a pot of something hot, and poured it into all our cups without asking whether we wanted it. Then he sat down, and looked at the candle in front of Drabelig's empty chair, and said, "She'd have known what to say."

"She'd have said something terrible," Avukat said, "and we'd all have laughed."

"She'd have told Berbant his story was terrible," Senne said. "And then she'd have asked him to read her the doorway part again." He said it gently, and he meant it kindly, and Berbant put his face in his greasy hands.

Sora put her hand on his back and left it there.

#

I left a little after nine. Berbant walked me up the entrance steps. Outside it was fully, deeply dark, the longest night, and bitterly cold, and the stars were very bright over the white hills. Far off toward the Fifth Ring, the Remnant's lights were still lighting the sky. They'd burn all night. That was the point of the Kindling. You kept the lights going until the sun came back.

We stood at the top of the steps. He had his hands jammed in his pockets and his shoulders up around his ears.

"What do you call it?" he said.

"Call what?"

"Me. At work. When you were looking at me and didn't know it was me. You must have called it something."

I thought about lying. I didn't. "The spire."

He looked at me.

"On the chart," I said. "Everybody else is flat. Just a big flat plain. And there was one point sticking up out of it, all by itself."

"The spire," he said. He looked out across the dark city toward the Remnant's glow. "So I'm your spire."

"You're not my anything. I'm off it."

"But I was. For five weeks." He was quiet for a moment. "It's funny. My whole life, I never stuck up out of anything. That was the

point of me. I liked being flat." He breathed out, a long white cloud. "Somebody made me into a spire, Dar. I didn't even notice. I just thought I was lucky."

He put his hand on my shoulder, briefly, the way he had outside the Remnant house. Then he went back down the steps into the warm. The door closed behind him, and I stood there alone in the cold under the stars.

'Somebody made me into a spire.'

I stood there a while, looking at the glow over the Fifth Ring. I wasn't allowed to ask. I wasn't allowed to look. I was off it. But I stood there anyway, in the longest night of the year, and I couldn't stop asking it.

If Berbant hadn't built it, who had?

Chapter 9

Monday, December 22, 170 (2200)

Comai's message came at eight in the morning, while I was still in bed staring at the skylight.

I'd been staring at it since three. I'd come home from Berbant's and lain down in my coat. At three I'd woken with my head full of the usual thoughts, and turned the music on, the way I did on the bad nights. Both nights since Saturday had been bad nights. For as long as I could remember, there had been work in the morning, and a number that could be a little higher by the end of the quarter, and that had been enough to get me from three o'clock to daylight. Mira had taken the work. Two days off it, and the question had come straight back up through the floor, as though it had only been waiting for the room to go quiet.

Not the case. Not who had built the spire. The other question. The one underneath. *What's any of it for?* The Division, and the chart of a million and a half people turning in the dark, and my own number, and Berbant's valve, and Drabelig's river. I'd lain there with the music on and tried every answer I had, and taken each of them apart before it finished its sentence.

Lunch. Not here. The noodle place on the Second Ring with the red door.
Noon.

I read it three times, which I recognized as a bad sign, and then I wrote back: *I'm off it. You know I'm off it.*

I know. It's lunch.

Comai?!?

A pause. Then: *I'm not going to ask you about the case. I'm going to ask a man about valves. Your brother fixes them. You're his brother.*

Noon, I sent.

#

The noodle place with the red door was one of the famous ones. It had been in the same spot, dug into the side of a hill at the edge of the Second Ring, for longer than I'd been alive, and it had a string of little brass plaques by the door from the city's food guilds going back a century. The woman who ran it had won the broth prize four times. You could tell because she'd hung the fourth one slightly higher than the other three, which was about as close to boasting as anyone in QL was allowed to get.

Comai had a table in the back corner, as far from the window as possible. She had a bowl in front of her that she hadn't touched and a slate beside it, face down.

"You look terrible," she said.

"I was at my brother's last night. It was the solstice. It was supposed to be my sister's wedding."

"I know." She pushed the second bowl across the table to me. "I ordered for you. Eat. You look like you haven't eaten since the funeral."

I had, but not much. The noodles were thick and hand-cut, in a dark broth with mushrooms and greens and a soft egg sitting on top, and the steam coming off it smelled like ginger and something smoky I couldn't name. I ate half of it before either of us said anything. Comai watched me the whole time, the way she watched a chart.

"All right," I said. "Valves."

"Not yet." She turned the slate over but kept her hand flat on top of it. "First I want to say it out loud, so we both know I said it. You're off the case. Mira told you not to discuss it with me. I'm not asking you to discuss it. I'm going to show you some things that are about your brother's work, not about his number, and I'm going to ask you what you know about his work, as his brother. If anyone asks, that's what this was."

"That's not what this is."

"No," she said. "But it's what I'm going to say it was."

I should have gotten up. I knew it while I sat there, and I knew it while she moved her hand off the slate, and I've known it every day since. It was a clean rule. It existed for good reasons. Mira had made me say the reasons out loud, standing in the display room with snow on her coat. *The rule protects him too.*

I didn't get up.

"Show me," I said.

#

The first thing she showed me was the long record.

We'd only ever seen three years before. Now the order had given us his yearly totals all the way back to when Berbant had first gone into maintenance. Before that he'd spent most of a decade keeping the big machines running in the deconstruction yards. He'd always said it was fine work, except that you could go a week without talking to anything that could answer back. She'd built the maintenance years out on the slate as a single line running left to right. She turned it so I could see.

For about twelve years, the line barely moved. It hovered around 1.27, 1.28, a little lower one year, a little higher the next, a sort of fine, restless wobble well up in the Thriving band. You could see the random draw in it, the tiny acknowledged luck that everybody's number had in it, jittering up and down. You could see a bad year once, early on, when it sagged to 1.24 and then climbed back. Otherwise, it was flat. It was the most ordinary record I'd ever seen.

And then, three years ago, it stopped wobbling and started climbing. Smoothly. One step, then another, then another. 1.36. 1.45. 1.55.

"There's your spire," Comai said quietly.

It looked different like this. On the city chart it had stood up out of the orange plain, and it had looked like something that had grown there. Here, you could see what it was standing on. Twelve years of flat ground, and then something rising out of it that didn't match anything underneath. It didn't look like something that had grown. It looked like something that had been put there.

"Somebody built it," I said.

"Maybe. Or maybe somebody made a mistake and it built itself." She tapped the slate, and the line gave way to a list. "Here's his work."

It was his work orders. Three years of them. Every job Berbant had been sent on in the Eighth Ring, every job he'd done, with the date and the location and a line of description.

Replaced shaft seal, circulation pump 4, Earthhold 8-112.

Cleared intake screen, greywater return, 8-097. Recurring. Advised replacement.

Rebuilt valve, heat exchanger, common kitchen, 8-104.

Traced pressure loss, distribution loop segment C. Found cracked coupling. Replaced.

It went on and on. I scrolled through it, and it kept going. Hundreds of them. Thousands, over three years. Small things, most of them. A seal. A screen. A valve. A leak that had been dripping into a wall for a year that nobody else had noticed. Each one fixed, and then the next one, and then the next.

I thought about Berbant on his back on the kitchen floor last night with the wrench in his hand. *Something that's real and something that ends.*

"I never actually thought about what he does at work," I said.

"Most people don't."

"No, I mean it. I know he's in maintenance. I've known for years. I just thought of it as—" I stopped, because I didn't like what I'd been about to say.

"As something beneath you," Comai said. She didn't say it unkindly. "It's all right. Everyone at the Division does it. We sit in a dark room and look at a chart of a million people and we think that's the real work, and the people who keep the water hot are just points in the orange." She shrugged. "The formula doesn't think that. The formula's very fair. We're the ones who aren't."

I kept scrolling. *Replaced gasket. Replaced gasket. Traced leak. Replaced gasket.*

"And here's what he's been credited with," Comai said, and tapped again.

#

The attestations were a different kind of document.

The work orders were short and plain and written by Berbant himself, in the flat, precise way he wrote everything that wasn't his story. Nobody wrote the attestations, exactly. The attestation system drafted them each quarter from the project records and whatever the worker had submitted, and then a supervisor read the draft, or didn't, and signed it. Each one covered a quarter, and each one was a paragraph long, and each one said, in slightly different words, that the subject's work had contributed substantially to the outcomes of the Eighth Ring distribution-loop retrofit.

"What's the retrofit?" I asked.

"A real project. The whole Eighth Ring water loop was old, and it leaked, and about four years ago they rebuilt it. New pipe, new couplings, new pumps. It was a big job. And it worked." She pulled up

a report beside the attestations. "Water loss in the Ring dropped by almost a third. That's a real outcome. People on that project earned it."

"And Berbant was on it."

"He was on it. He did a lot of the coupling work in the first year. It's all in his orders." She pointed. "See, there. *Segment C. Segment D.* He was good at it. The project lead mentions him by name in the completion report."

"So he earned some of that outcome."

"Some of it. In the first year. Which is roughly when his number should have gone up a little, and then flattened out again." She scrolled the attestations, quarter by quarter. "But look at the claims. The first attestation says his work contributed to a reduction in loss of about eleven percent. The next one says fifteen. The next one says twenty. They keep going. Every quarter, a little more. By the last one, he's being credited with most of the improvement on the whole loop."

"That's not possible."

"It's not possible for another reason too." She pulled the retrofit report back up and put her finger on a date. "The retrofit finished three years ago. The work was done. The loop was rebuilt, the loss dropped, and then it stayed where it was. There's been no new benefit to measure since then. But his credited benefit kept going up."

I sat back. The steam had stopped rising off my bowl. Around us the noodle house was filling up with the lunch crowd, and it was getting loud, and somebody at the counter was laughing about something.

"So what's your theory?" I said.

"My theory is it's a mistake." She said it firmly, and I could tell she'd been saying it to herself all weekend. "The project closed. Somebody set up his outcome attestations to pull from the project's results, and when the project closed, the link didn't break. It just kept going. Every quarter, the attestation system looks at the loop, sees the improvement, and credits him with a bigger share of it. Because he's the only one still attached."

"A paperwork accident."

"It happens. You know it happens. We've found a dozen of them."

"We've found a dozen of them," I said. "And not one of them climbed every quarter for three years. Mistakes don't go up in a

straight line, Comai. Mistakes wobble. Mistakes jump and then sit there. This goes up like someone is turning a dial."

She looked at the slate.

"You don't believe it either," I said.

"I want to believe it. Because if it's a mistake, it's nobody's fault, and your brother gets his number fixed and a note in his file and that's the end of it." She looked up at me. "And if it's not a mistake, then somebody did this on purpose, to him, for three years, and I don't know why. And I don't like not knowing why."

"He got a cabin," I said.

"What?"

"That's what he got out of it. As far as he knows. He told us last night. He'd been in the queue for one of the writing cabins in Lapland for four years, and it came up a year early. A month in February, under the northern lights. He thought it was luck." I turned my cup around on the table. "That's it. That's the whole prize. A man with a flat record for twelve years doesn't wake up one morning and decide to cook three years of attestations so he can get to a cabin a year before his turn."

"People have cheated for less."

"Not Berbant. And not like this. If he'd done it himself, he'd have done it badly. He'd have jumped it all at once and gotten caught in a quarter." I shook my head. "This was patient. Whoever did this wasn't in a hurry, and they weren't doing it for a cabin."

"Then what were they doing it for?"

I didn't have an answer. I'd asked her the same question almost six weeks ago in my office, before either of us knew whose number it was. *Why would anybody bother?* It had been an interesting question then.

#

Neither of us said anything for a while. The woman who ran the place came by with a pot of tea and filled our cups without asking, and looked at my half-finished bowl with open disappointment, and went away again.

"The noise is what gets me," Comai said eventually. She'd flipped back to the long record. "Look at the first twelve years. Look how it jitters. That's what real looks like. Everybody's record has that. The random term, the panels changing, a bad month, a good month.

Real people wobble." She traced the smooth climb at the end with one finger. "This doesn't. This is too clean."

"Too clean is a tell," I said. It was one of the first things they taught you at the Division.

"Too clean is always a tell." She almost smiled. "The only record in the whole city that's cleaner than this is S. Ya's."

"You've looked at S. Ya's record?"

"Everyone's looked at S. Ya's record. He publishes it. Every year, the whole thing. In the spirit of Article Four." She rolled her eyes a little. "Have you actually looked at it? I did, once, when I was new, because I wanted to see what the top looked like. It's beautiful. It barely moves. Even when it drops, it drops like somebody picked the spot."

"Statisticians hate that guy," I said.

She laughed, properly, for the first time since she'd sat down, and I laughed too, and for about a second it felt like any other day at work.

Then she turned the slate back to the attestations, and it didn't anymore.

#

On the walk back I went the long way, through the Second Ring and around the edge of the Third, because I didn't want to go back to the Division yet and I didn't want to go home.

Halfway along the path, there was a maintenance crew working in a trench.

They'd dug down through the snow and the soil on the edge of the path, between two Earthholds, and exposed a length of pipe. Three of them were down in the trench in orange coats working on it while a fourth stood at the top handing down tools. There was steam coming up out of the hole where the pipe was open. One of the people in the trench said something and the one at the top laughed and passed down a wrench.

I must have walked past a thousand crews like that in my life. I didn't think I'd ever looked at one before. I stopped and watched for a minute. The one at the top noticed me and nodded, the way you'd nod at anyone, and went back to what he was doing.

Replaced gasket. Traced leak. Replaced gasket.

I kept walking.

#

Comai had said she'd send me one more thing, and she did, that evening. Not a document. She wouldn't send me a document. Just a message, a little after nine.

One more thing about valves. Every attestation has the same signature at the bottom. All twelve quarters. His supervisor. For what that's worth. Supervisors sign whatever the system drafts, and in Facilities they sign a few hundred a quarter. I'm going out to the depot tomorrow to meet him anyway.

And then, a minute later:

Do you know who he is?

I didn't. I read the name she'd sent, and then I read it again, and it didn't mean anything to me at all. It was just a name at the bottom of three years of paperwork, the name of a man who signed a few hundred of these a quarter and barely knew my brother.

C. Escarpé.

Chapter 10

Wednesday, December 24, 170 (2200)

The Division closed for the Lull at noon on the twenty-third, the way it did every year, and on the morning of the twenty-fourth I woke up with nothing to do and, for once, nothing I could think of to fill it with.

I didn't like it. I made tea and didn't drink it. I read two pages of a book and put it down. I looked at the skylight. At some point I realized I had been standing in front of the hook by the door for several minutes, looking at my gray coat, with my hand on the inside pocket where the pendant was.

Comai hadn't written. She hadn't stopped for the Lull, of course; she never stopped for anything. She'd gone to the depot yesterday, as she'd said she would, and I'd heard nothing since. That was right. That was what she was supposed to do. I'd told myself so four or five times by nine o'clock.

At a little after ten I put on the coat and went to see my brother.

I want to be honest about why. Part of it was that I wanted to see how he was. That part was real. He had sat at the end of Senne's table on the solstice with grease on his hands and told us he'd thought he was lucky, and I hadn't been able to stop thinking about his face when he said it. But part of it was that Comai had been there yesterday, and I wanted to know what she'd found, and I knew I couldn't ask her. I could ask Berbant how he was doing. Nobody could stop me asking my brother how he was doing.

I told myself that on the transit, too.

#

The Eighth Ring Facilities depot was the biggest building I'd ever been inside that wasn't a commons hall. Like everything else in QL it was dug into the ground, with a meadow on top of it, but it went

much deeper than an Earthhold, and the entrance was a long ramp wide enough for the cargo carriers to come and go. Two of them were waiting at the top when I arrived, low and square and covered in frost, humming faintly as their batteries kept them warm while a loader filled them. Inside, it was warm and enormous and loud. There were bays along one wall where the carriers backed in, and racks of pipe along the other going up into the shadows, and in between a long open floor of workbenches and machines, most of them idle. The depot never closed for the Lull. It ran a skeleton crew, about a third of the usual, because pipes don't know what week it is, and Berbant put his name down for the first days of it every year so the people with children could have them off. Along the near wall a row of assists stood folded in their charging bays, waist-high, on tracks, their jointed arms tucked in like sleeping birds, waiting to be signed out. At the back a bigger one was walking a length of pipe through the threader while a woman in an orange coat watched the gauge. It smelled like oil and hot metal and coffee. Somebody somewhere was cutting something, and the whine of it came and went over everything else.

Nobody stopped me. At the top of the ramp a tall, lanky man from one of the crews was on a stepladder beside the depot's door, with its checkpoint lens in pieces in a padded tray, fitting a new one. He had a patch on the breast of his orange coat, a little embroidered door with a line through it, and he looked down at me as I passed with the brief, impersonal attention of someone who spends his whole life thinking about faces. Inside, people nodded as I went past, the way the man at the top of the trench had nodded on Monday, and went back to what they were doing. I asked a woman at the first bench where I could find Berbant Rax, and she pointed toward the back without looking up.

He was at a bench near the rear wall with a pump housing clamped in a vise in front of him, taking it apart. He had his sleeves rolled up and a smear of something black along one forearm, and he was working fast, faster than I'd ever seen him do anything at dinner. His hands knew exactly where everything was. An assist stood folded beside his bench, switched on and ignored. When I asked him about it later, he said it held things, and he didn't need anything held. For a minute I just stood there and watched him, and he didn't notice me, and I thought: *this is where he lives*. Not the

Earthhold. Not the long table. Here.

Then he looked up and saw me, and his face closed.

"What are you doing here?"

"I came to see how you were."

"Here? At work?" He put down the tool he was holding. "You've never been here in your life."

"I had the day. The Division's closed."

"And you thought you'd come down to the depot and see how the hand trades spend the Lull." He wiped his hands on a rag. It didn't do much. "Did you send her?"

"Who?"

"Don't. Your colleague. Safed. She was here yesterday for three hours. She talked to Escarpé for an hour and then she talked to me for two." He was keeping his voice down, but only just. A couple of people at the next bench had looked over. "Did you send her?"

"No. Berbant. I'm off it. I told you. I can't send anyone anywhere."

"Then why are you here the day after?"

That was a fair question. It was, in fact, exactly the question I had been asking myself on the transit. I didn't have a good answer to it, so I gave him the true one.

"Because I wanted to see if you were all right," I said. "And because I'm not allowed to ask her anything, and I hate it. Both. That's why."

He looked at me. Then some of the stiffness went out of his shoulders.

"At least you're honest about it," he said.

"I'm always honest about it. I just usually don't say it out loud."

"Sit down." He pushed a stool toward me with his foot. "You're in the way of the forklift."

#

I sat. He went back to the pump housing, because Berbant always thought better with something in his hands, and for a while he just worked and didn't say anything. I watched him take the housing apart piece by piece and lay each piece out on a cloth in order, the way our mother used to lay out the parts of a chicken.

"She was very polite," he said eventually. "Your colleague. I liked her, actually. She's thorough."

"She's the most thorough person I've ever met."

"She asked me about everything. Every project. Every job for three years. The retrofit. Who I worked with. What I submitted every quarter." He frowned at a gasket and set it aside. "I told her I don't submit anything. Nobody here does. You do the work and you log the work orders and that's it. The system does the rest. Somebody upstairs signs it. I told her I've never even read one of those attestations. I didn't know you could."

"You can."

"Well, I know that now." He picked up a small brush and started cleaning the inside of the housing. "Then she asked me something strange."

"What?"

"She asked me who else knows my login." He stopped brushing. "For the facilities system. The one we use for work orders and parts. She asked if I'd ever shared it with anyone. If anyone else had ever used it. If I ever left myself signed in on the shared slates in the break room." He looked at me. "Why would she ask that?"

I kept my face as still as I could. I had no idea why she'd ask that. I had a guess, and I didn't like it, and I couldn't say it.

"I don't know," I said. That was true, as far as it went.

"You're doing the face."

"I'm not doing the face."

"You're doing the face Avukat was talking about. The one where you know something and you're not allowed to say it."

"I don't know anything," I said. "I'm off it. Really. Whatever she asked you, I don't know why. I'd tell you if I could."

"Would you?"

"Bebant."

He held my eyes for a moment longer. Then he went back to brushing. "Everybody uses the break-room slates," he said. "Everybody leaves themselves signed in. It's a depot, Dar. There's grease on everything. Nobody's thinking about their login. We're thinking about whether the seal on circulation pump four is going to hold through New Year."

"Is it?"

"No," he said, with something close to his old satisfaction. "That's what this is. I pulled it this morning. It's been leaking on and off all year and nobody wanted to sign off on the replacement."

Comte Escarpé came through about ten minutes later.

I heard him before I saw him. There was a voice from the front of the floor, carrying over the whine of the saw, saying something about a carrier schedule, and then the voice got closer, and a man came down the aisle between the benches with a slate in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. He was a little heavier than most people in QL, with reddish-brown hair that had been cut short and a face that looked flushed, either from the cold or from the coffee or from being in a permanent hurry. He was wearing a coat with a great many pockets. Every one of them seemed to have something in it.

He stopped at Berbant's bench and looked at the pump housing, and then at me.

"Rax," he said to Berbant. "You're pulling four."

"It's leaking. I told you in October."

"You told me in October. Fine. Put it in the system." He looked at me again, with more interest. "And this is?"

"My brother," Berbant said.

"Ah." Escarpé's eyebrows went up. "Rax. The other one. The investigator."

"I'm off the case," I said.

"So your colleague told me. The tall one. Safed." He set his coffee down on the corner of Berbant's bench, which made Berbant's jaw tighten slightly. "She was here most of yesterday. I'll tell you what I told her, since you're here. I don't know anything about your brother's number. I don't know anything about anybody's number. I sign what the system gives me."

"All of it?"

"All of it." He said it almost proudly. "Do you know how many people work out of this depot? Two hundred and forty. Do you know how many valves there are in the Eighth Ring?" He didn't wait for me to answer. "Nobody knows. Nobody's ever counted. Every quarter the system drafts an attestation for every single one of those two hundred and forty people, based on the project records and whatever they've logged, and every quarter it lands on my desk, and every quarter I sign it. I don't read them. Nobody could read them. If I read them, I'd never do anything else, and then who'd get the carriers out?"

"So someone else could have changed them."

It came out before I could stop it. Berbant looked up sharply.

Escarpé just shrugged. "Someone. The system. A clerk upstairs. Your brother." He smiled at Berbant, not quite kindly. "I told your colleague that too. I've got forty people on this floor who could get into that system if they felt like it. Half of them are Pocketers. They sit in the break room at lunch arguing about the Charter like it's a football league." He nodded at Berbant. "He's one of the loud ones."

Pocketers was what everyone who wasn't one called the Freeholders. It meant people who wanted something in their own pocket. It also meant, depending on who was saying it and how, people who kept something in their pockets they weren't showing you. The Freeholders hated it, which was most of why people used it.

"I'm not loud," Berbant said.

"You're loud about the Charter." Escarpé picked his coffee back up. "Not that I care. Believe what you want. Just don't do it on my time."

#

He didn't leave, though. That surprised me. He stood there drinking his coffee and looking around the floor, the way a man looks at a house he's lived in for a long time and never liked, and after a moment he started talking again, as though he'd been waiting for somebody to talk to.

"You're at the Division," he said to me. "You sit in the dark and look at the charts."

"More or less."

"Then tell me something. Do you know what Facilities is? In your charts?"

"It's onepetō," I said. "A guaranteed service. One provider."

"One provider." He said it as if it were an insult. "That's right. There's one of us. There's always been one of us. Housing gets two. Two housing firms, competing for who builds the better Earthhold, so at least somebody wins. At least somebody gets to be better than somebody. Restaurants get a hundred. The woman who runs the dal house on the Second Ring makes the same thali four years running and they hang a brass plaque on her door." He took a swallow of coffee. "Nobody ever hung a plaque on a pump."

"The formula doesn't care about plaques," I said. "It's effort against potential. A maintenance worker using everything he's got scores the same as—"

"Yes, yes. I know the formula. I've known the formula longer than you've been looking at it." He waved his slate. "The formula is very fair. That's what everyone says. Very fair. I have worked in this depot for longer than most of that floor has been in Facilities, and I've worked harder than anyone on it, and I've been Contributing for forty years." He said it flatly. Contributing was the band just below Thriving, the one most people spent most of their lives in, and nobody said their band out loud, least of all to strangers. I saw Berbant wince. "Forty years. I put in proposals. I put in improvements. Every one of them, somebody in another Ring put in the same thing six months earlier and got the credit. Do you know what the formula does with that? Nothing. It's very fair." He drank again. "And meanwhile the dal woman gets her plaque."

"You want a plaque?" Berbant asked.

"I want," Escarpé said, "for somebody, once, to notice." He looked down at the pump housing on the bench, laid out in its neat rows, and something moved across his face that I couldn't read. Then it was gone.

Behind us, somebody dropped something. A length of pipe, from the sound of it, a long ringing clang on the concrete floor that made everyone look up.

Escarpé turned around. "Pick that up," he said. His voice had changed completely. It was very loud and very cold. "Pick it up, and then go and tell whoever is supposed to be supervising you that you dropped it, and then come and tell me what they said."

The man by the rack, whoever he was, went white and bent to pick it up. The whole floor had gone quiet. Even the saw had stopped.

Escarpé turned back to us. His face was flushed again, the ordinary flush, and he was smiling a little, as though nothing had happened. "Two hundred and forty people," he said. "You see what I mean?"

#

His office was at the far end of the floor, in a corner, walled with glass so he could see the whole depot from his desk. When he went back to it I could see him through the glass, sitting down heavily, putting the coffee down, pulling up the day's work on the display in front of him.

The pending attestations were stacked in the air beside his desk. I

could see them from where I was sitting: a column of pale, unsigned drafts, one on top of another, hundreds of them, rising up from the desk until the top of the column was higher than his head. It was the only thing in the whole depot, I realized, that stood higher than a person. It stood up out of the clutter of his office like—

I didn't finish the thought. I didn't want to.

"He's not so bad," Berbant said quietly, beside me. He'd gone back to the pump. "He shouts. Everybody knows he shouts. He's been stuck in that office since before I got here, and he's never going to get out of it, and he knows it. That's all that is."

"He told us his QQ band. Out loud."

"He talks about his QQ band to anybody who'll stand still." Berbant fitted the new seal into the housing, carefully, with his thumbs. "He's a sad man, Dar. That's all. He wanted to be somebody, and he's the man who signs off on valves."

"People can change jobs. You changed jobs. He could change jobs."

"He's good at this job. He thought that would raise his Queue Quotient. It didn't." He paused. "I don't think he has an idea for how else to do it. So, he's here. And will probably just stay here forever."

I looked at the column of drafts again. At Escarpé, bent over his display beside it, rubbing his eyes.

He did look like a sad man. He looked exactly like one.

#

On my way out I passed the stairs at the back of the floor, the ones that went up to the depot's second floor, a row of small offices with windows onto the floor. A thin, neat man in a gray coat was coming down them with a slate held flat in both hands, the way you'd carry a tray of something that might spill. He saw Berbant beside me, and his face did something small and cold and satisfied, and he went past us without a word.

"Zeker," Berbant said, when he'd gone. "Records. He keeps the attestation system for the whole Ring. Every draft for every one of us goes through his office before it lands on E.'s desk." He made a face. "He's reported the Freeholders on this floor twice for talking politics on break. He thinks we should all be audited once a quarter. He's on every access list in Facilities, and he's never fixed a thing in his

life." He wiped his hands. "Lives in E.'s Earthhold, too. Eight-one-thirty-three. The pair of them come down that ramp together every morning and don't say a word to each other the whole way."

"He looked at you like—"

"Like I'm something on his shoe. I know. He looks at all of us like that."

We went on up the long ramp together at a little after one, when his shift was done, past the carriers that were still drawing electricity from their batteries to stave off the cold. It had started to snow again, small dry flakes that didn't seem to fall so much as hang in the air. At the top of the ramp he stopped, with his hands in his pockets and the snow collecting on his shoulders.

"Thanks for coming," he said. "I mean it. Even if you came to snoop."

"I came for both."

"I know. That's why I'm thanking you." He looked back down the ramp at the depot, at the warm light coming out of it. "Dar. Can I ask you one thing? You don't have to answer."

"Ask."

"That question she asked me. About my login." He was quiet for a moment. The snow went on hanging in the air around us. "If it was a mistake, a system thing, a paperwork thing, why would it matter who else knows my login?"

He looked at me.

"Why would she ask that?"

I didn't have an answer I was allowed to give him. Somewhere below us, in the warm mouth of the depot, the column of unsigned drafts would still be standing beside Escarpé's desk, higher than anything else in the building.

Chapter 11

Thursday, December 25, 170 – Thursday, January 1, 171 (2200–2201)

Comai came at eleven, with her slate in one hand and a string bag of oranges in the other.

"I didn't know what you're supposed to bring someone during the Lull," she said, holding up the oranges. "The woman at the stall said these."

"Nobody brings anyone anything during the Lull. That's the point of the Lull."

"Then I'm doing it wrong." She pushed the bag into my hands and came in, ducking a little under the door frame, which she didn't need to do. "Your room is very small."

"Everyone says that."

"Everyone's right." She looked around at the bed, the table, the two chairs, the shelf of books, the gray coat on its hook by the door. Her eyes stopped on the coat for a second and moved on. Then she sat down on the end of my bed and pulled her long legs up under her, the way she had in my office on the first day, and put the slate face down on her knees.

I sat in one of the chairs. I had the oranges in my lap. Neither of us said anything for a moment.

"You understand what this is," she said.

"You're in my room with the file."

"I'm in your room with part of the file. Which is worse than a noodle house." She kept her hand flat on the slate. "I thought about it for two days, Dar. I thought about calling Mira. I thought about doing this alone, and writing it up, and handing it in, and never saying anything to you about it until it was over. That's what I'm supposed to do."

"Why aren't you?"

"Because I don't know him," she said. "And you do. And I don't want to be wrong about your brother."

I peeled an orange, because I needed something to do with my hands. The smell filled the room. It was a very good orange, heavy and cold from the walk.

"Show me," I said. It was the second time I'd said it in four days.

#

"The paperwork theory is dead," she said. "I killed it on Tuesday night."

She turned the slate over and set it on the bed between us, and the attestations came up on it, the same twelve paragraphs I'd seen at the noodle house. Only now, beside each one, there was a second paragraph, a little shorter, in a slightly different color.

"The attestation system keeps every version," she said. "Every draft it makes, and every change to a draft before it's signed. Nobody ever looks at the drafts. Why would they? The draft is just what the system suggests. The signed version is the record." She touched the first pair. "This one on the left is what the system drafted for his first quarter after the retrofit closed. Read the number."

I read it. *The subject's work contributed approximately 3% of the measured outcome.*

"Three percent," Comai said. "That's right. That's about what a man who did some good coupling work on segments C and D should get, a year after the job's finished. The link to the retrofit did break when it closed, the way it's supposed to. The system stopped crediting him with the loop and started crediting him with his actual work orders. Three percent. It's in every raw draft after that. Two percent. Three. Two and a half." She moved her finger down the column. "The system got it right. Every single quarter."

"And the one on the right?"

"The one on the right is what Escarpé signed." She touched it. *The subject's work contributed substantially, approximately 11% of the measured outcome, to the continuing benefits of the Eighth Ring distribution-loop retrofit.* "Somebody opened the draft before it went to him, and changed the number, and changed the language, and saved it. Every quarter. Twelve quarters. Twelve edits. Each one a little bigger than the last."

"Somebody."

"The system logs who." She said it quietly. "Every edit was made under his login."

I had known it was coming. I'd known since Wednesday, since Berbant stood at the top of the depot ramp with snow on his shoulders and asked me why she'd want to know who else knew his login. I'd known it and I'd kept not knowing it, the way you keep not looking at a thing on the edge of your vision. It didn't help. It went through me anyway.

"His login," I said. "Not his hand."

"I know."

"Everyone uses those slates. He told me. Everybody leaves themselves signed in. There's grease on everything, nobody's thinking about it—"

"I know, Dar." She didn't raise her voice. "I watched them do it. On Tuesday. I stood in that break room for twenty minutes while I was waiting for Escarpé, and I watched four different people sit down at those slates, and three of them didn't log out when they got up. Anyone could walk up behind them." She looked at the slate. "I'm not saying he did it. I'm saying it's his name on it. Twelve times. And that's what anyone else who opens this file is going to see first."

I put the orange down on the table. I'd peeled it and not eaten any of it.

"When?" I said.

"When what?"

"When were the edits made. Times."

She looked at me for a moment, as though she were deciding something, and then she scrolled down to a list. "Ten of them came from the break-room slates at the depot. Weekday afternoons, mostly. Here." She read a few of them off. "Tuesday, July fifteenth, two-forty in the afternoon. Tuesday, January twenty-eighth, twelve minutes after two. Thursday, April tenth, a little before three. Like that. Right in the middle of a shift, when the break room's half full and nobody's watching anybody."

"And the other two?"

"The other two," Comai said, "are why I'm in your room."

#

She stood up, because she thought better standing up, and walked the two steps to the skylight and back, which was all the room there

was.

"The other two weren't made from the break room. They were made from a terminal in the Facilities records annex. Do you know it?"

"I know it's there."

"It's a secure room. The attestation system's master records are in it, and the parts inventory, and a lot of other things Facilities doesn't want people poking at. You can't get in without a face match at the door. There's a checkpoint." She turned around. "Do you know how the checkpoints work? Actually work?"

"I walk through them every day at the Division."

"Everyone walks through them. Nobody knows how they work." She sat back down. "I didn't, until Tuesday night, when I read the specification three times. It's a camera and a matcher. It looks at your face, checks it against the list of people allowed through, and if you're on it, the door opens and writes one line. Your name, the door, the time. Then it throws the face away. It isn't allowed to keep the picture. Privacy." She shrugged. "It's a good rule. I'd have voted for it. But it means that if the checkpoint says it was you, all anyone will ever have is the checkpoint's word."

I thought about the display rooms at the Division, about all the times I'd walked up to a door and heard the small click of it opening, and never once thought about what was happening in the half second before it did.

"And you've got the annex log," I said.

"The engineer gave me a supplementary order yesterday. The same judge, the transit man. He didn't even ask me any questions this time. He just wrote *granted* and something about the holiday." She scrolled. "The annex door is only open to about thirty people. Facilities staff with records access, the systems crew, the supervisors."

"Is Berbant on the list?"

"He's on the list. Everybody in maintenance who repairs anything in that building is on the list. He's done work in there. There's a pump in the basement he's rebuilt twice." She found the line she wanted. "Here's the October edit. The one for the third quarter."

She turned the slate toward me.

Records Annex, Checkpoint 3. Thursday, October 16, 170. 11:52 p.m. Match: RAX, BERBANT. Entry.

And under it, from the attestation system: *Draft edit, Q3 attestation,*

subject RAX, BERBANT. 12:07 a.m. Terminal: Records Annex 2.

And under that: Records Annex, Checkpoint 3. Friday, October 17, 170. 12:19 a.m. Match: RAX, BERBANT. Exit.

"Eight minutes before midnight he walks into a secure room," Comai said. "Fifteen minutes later his draft is edited from a terminal inside it. Twelve minutes after that he walks out." She put the slate down. "There's another one just like it the spring before last. April of one sixty-nine. Same room, same terminal, same hour of the night. His face both times."

#

We sat there for a while. Somebody walked past in the corridor outside, and a child laughed somewhere farther down, and the smell of the orange hung in the room.

"You know how this looks," Comai said.

"I know how it looks."

"If Mira opened this file tomorrow, she'd see his login on twelve edits and his face on two doors, and she'd send it straight to the judiciary. Any investigator would. I would, if it were anyone else." She rubbed her eyes. "I almost did, on Tuesday night. I had it written up."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because it's too good." She dropped her hand. "It's like the spire. It's too clean. Ten edits from a break room where anyone could have sat down, fine. That's sloppy, that's human, that's what someone who didn't care much would do. But then twice, in the middle of the night, he decides to walk into the one room in the building where the door knows his face? Why? He didn't need the annex. He could've done every one of them from the break room. Why would anyone go to the one place that writes your name down?"

"Maybe he didn't know it did."

"Maybe. Everybody walks through those doors. Nobody knows how they work." She shook her head. "Or maybe somebody wanted there to be a door with his name on it."

I was thinking about Berbant at the top of the ramp. *Why would she ask that?*

"I feel sick doing this," Comai said, abruptly. "I sat in his break room on Tuesday and watched him argue about the Charter with his mouth full, and he was *happy*, Dar. And I sat there with this on my

slate. I've never liked someone I was looking at this much."

"He's easy to like."

"He's very easy to like. He showed me the valve seat. From the solstice. He keeps it in his pocket. He took it out and showed it to me like it was a coin he'd found."

"He does that."

"I know he does that now." She picked up one of the oranges and turned it in her hands without peeling it. "That's the problem."

"And Escarpé?"

"I spent an hour watching him not read things." She made a face. "He signed a stack of drafts while I sat there. Forty, maybe fifty. He didn't look at one of them. He told me that if the system drafted his own confession he'd sign that too, and then he laughed like it was the funniest thing anyone had ever said in that office." She turned the orange over. "He was helpful, actually. More helpful than I expected. He told me about the break-room slates before I asked. He told me everybody on the floor leaves themselves signed in. He said if I wanted to know who could've touched a draft, I'd be better off asking who couldn't."

"That's true."

"And he doesn't like your brother much. He didn't say so. He didn't have to. He called him one of the Pocketers twice, and he said it the way you'd say it about someone who tracks mud in."

"He said the same thing to me."

"Then at least he's consistent." She looked at the slate. "I don't think he's clever enough to have done this, Dar. I don't think he cares enough. He wants to go home and complain about his queue band. But he's the one who signed all twelve, and I had to ask."

"And the clerk upstairs? Zeker?"

She looked up. "You met him."

"I passed him on the stairs. He looked at Berbant like something he'd stepped in."

"He looks at every Freeholder like that. He told me so, more or less, before I'd asked him anything." She turned the orange over in her hands. "He keeps the attestation system for the whole Ring. He can open any draft he likes without anybody's login at all, and he's on the annex list, and he maintains the terminal in that vault. And he was the only person I talked to at the depot who seemed pleased that I was asking." She put the orange down. "So yes. Him too. He could

have. So could thirty other people. That's the trouble with this, Dar. Everybody with access to the Annex could have."

#

She stayed through the afternoon. She said she'd go, and then she didn't, and then it got dark early the way it did at the end of December, and the Earthhold's kitchen bell rang for dinner, and she looked at me with an expression I hadn't seen on her before, a sort of hopeful embarrassment.

"Is there enough?"

"There's always enough. It's the Lull. Half the cluster is away. The whole third corridor took their winter month together somewhere with a beach."

So we went to dinner. The common room was quieter than usual, a dozen tables instead of thirty, and the kitchen had made a thick bean stew with dumplings in it and bread still hot from the oven. Tomas from the second corridor came out and put a bowl in front of Comai himself and waited to see her taste it, and she did, and told him it was the best thing she'd eaten all year, which was generous of her, and he knew it, and went back to the kitchen looking pleased anyway.

"You have a nice cluster," she said.

"It's all right. Loud at breakfast."

"Mine's too quiet. Everyone's old friends. They've been eating dinner together for sixty years. They know each other's stories so well they just say the first word and everyone laughs." She tore a piece of bread in half. "I go out a lot."

"I've noticed."

"What do you do?" She pointed her bread at me. "When you're not at work. Which is most of the day. I've worked across the corridor from you for years and I don't know what you do with your afternoons."

I thought about it. "I read. I walk. I play games, when I can't think. I don't sleep very much."

"Why not?"

"Something talks," I said. "At three in the morning. I put music on."

She considered that with her head on one side, the way she considered a chart. "What does it say?"

"It asks what any of it's for."

I hadn't meant to say it. It was the Lull and the room was half empty and the stew was very good, and she was the only person I knew who asked a question and then waited for the whole answer, however long it took.

"Mine doesn't ask that," Comai said. "Mine asks what's next." She tore the bread again. "That's why I go on trips. I told you. On a trip nobody's keeping score. I don't have to be the slowest person in the room. I'm just a person looking at a reef."

"And when you get back?"

"I plan the next one."

"That's not an answer," I said. "That's a queue."

She laughed so loudly that Tomas looked out of the kitchen. "Only the rare things are a queue, Dar. Lions. Reefs. That's the joke. Everything else you just walk in and take." She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "You're just standing in the one for the answer. And it's very long, and you keep reading the sign at the front to see if it's moved."

"Has yours ever moved?"

"Once," she said. "In the water. For about an hour." She didn't say anything else about it, and I didn't ask. I should have asked.

"Three people have asked me to their New Year's," she said. "Three. I haven't decided yet."

"How are you going to choose?"

"Whoever's closest to transit," she said, completely seriously, and then she laughed, and I did too. For a minute it was like the first day in the display room, before either of us knew anything.

After dinner we went back to my room, because the slate was still on the bed, and she stood looking down at it with her coat on.

"I'm going to have to write it up eventually," she said. "You know that. I can't hold on to this forever. If there's an innocent explanation, I have to find it before I write it up, or it won't matter. Once his name goes to the judiciary, it's his name."

I nodded.

"So I need to know." She picked the slate up and held it against her chest. "You said to at the noodle house, that if he'd done it himself he'd have done it badly. That he'd have jumped it all at once. You were right. This wasn't done badly. So either he's much better at this than you think he is, or it wasn't him." She looked at me. "I need a reason to believe it wasn't him that I can write down. Something the

judiciary can check.”

“Like where he actually was.”

I thought about it. I thought about Sora in her nurse’s clothes, and the clinic, and the way Berbant waited up for her.

“Sora works late shifts,” I said. “Ask her about the sixteenth. She’ll remember; she remembers everything. And then don’t take her word for it. Ask for their own front door.”

Comai looked at me.

“Every Earthhold has a checkpoint at the entrance,” I said. “Same system as the annex. Same rules. If my brother walked into his own home that night, his own door wrote it down.”

She was quiet for a moment. Then she said, very softly, “Two doors,” and I watched her see it the way she saw things on a chart, all at once.

She opened my door. The corridor light fell across the floor, the way the light had fallen across the display room floor on the first day, when she’d walked out ahead of me and told the computer to end the display.

“I’ll ask,” she said. “Don’t write to me. I’ll write to you.”

#

She didn’t write for six days. The rest of the Lull went by the way lulls do when you’re waiting for something: slowly, and then all at once. On the twenty-sixth I walked for most of the day and ended up at the edge of the city, where the last of the Earthholds gave way to open prairie under snow, and stood there for an hour watching a herd of elk move across it, very slowly, a long line of dark shapes against the white. Farther out, a family had taken one of the Ring’s sledges from the shed by the last Earthhold and was dragging it up a rise so the children could ride it down again. When they were done they’d hang it back on its hook, beside eleven more exactly like it. On the twenty-seventh Tushar and Pallavi came to dinner at my cluster, and Pallavi ate three helpings of Tomas’s squash and told him it was “fine,” which he correctly understood as the highest praise she was capable of giving. On the twenty-eighth Jinsia sent me a picture of a gel from his lab with the message *look how beautiful this is*, and I looked at it until my eyes ached and couldn’t see anything beautiful about it at all, and wrote back that it was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen.

On the thirty-first, at two in the afternoon, she sent me a message.
Walk?

#

We met at the transit stop at the edge of the Second Ring and walked out along the path that ran beside the old riverbed, where the city had let the land go back to cottonwoods. The trees were bare, gray and enormous, with snow in the forks of their branches. It was very cold and very still. Somewhere out in the trees a woodpecker was working on something.

"I talked to his wife," Comai said. "On Monday. You were right."

"About what?"

"About asking her, and then not taking her word for it. She's very good. She's a nurse. She answers questions the way nurses do, all at once and in order." Comai had her hands jammed in her pockets and her hood up. Her breath came out in little clouds. "I asked her about October sixteenth. She knew exactly. She'd had a late shift at the clinic that night. She got home around eleven thirty. Berbant was outside their Earthhold, waiting for her with a cup of tea, the way he always is when she's late. They went to bed around midnight. She said she knows because she remembers thinking they'd both be tired at breakfast, and they were." Comai kicked at a chunk of ice on the path. "So then I asked for their door, the way you said. And it says he walked in the front door of his own Earthhold at eleven thirty-one on the night of October sixteenth." She stopped walking. "And it says he didn't walk out again until eight minutes past six the next morning, when he went to work."

I stopped too.

"Eleven thirty-one," I said. "And the annex had him at eleven fifty-two."

"Twenty-one minutes later. Across the city. It's forty minutes on the transit from his Earthhold to the annex, if the pods are waiting for you, and they don't wait for anyone at midnight." She looked at me. "So two doors. Two checkpoints. Both of them looked at a face and decided it was your brother's, at almost the same time, forty minutes apart. And one of them is wrong."

A crow flew across the path in front of us and landed in a cottonwood and looked down at us.

"Which one?" I said.

"That's the thing. I can't know." Comai started walking again, faster. "They don't keep the picture. If the annex door got it wrong, then somebody else walked into that room at midnight and the door looked at them and saw your brother, and whoever it was, their face is gone. It was never recorded at all."

#

The riverbed curved and the cottonwoods got thicker, and then thinned out again, and there was a bench beside the path with a drift of snow on it that neither of us brushed off.

"There's more," Comai said. "And you won't like it."

"I haven't liked any of it."

"On October second, two weeks before the October edit, there's a work order in the system under his login." She took the slate out of her coat, found it, and held it out to me without letting go of it. *Checkpoint 3, records annex. Intermittent misreads. Reported.* "Intermittent misreads. The door was making mistakes. Somebody reported it. Under his name."

"He fixes things in that building."

"He does. And it was really faulty. Facilities replaced the matcher in November." She put the slate away. "But here's what the judiciary will see. A man reports that a door gets people wrong, and two weeks later that door puts him somewhere he says he never was. He's already got his explanation sitting in the file, with his own name on it." She sighed. "It's a very good defense. That's what makes it look planned."

"Or," I said, "he did his job and reported a broken door, and then somebody else used the broken door, and now it looks like he planned it."

"Or that."

"You don't know which."

"I don't know which." She turned and looked at me. "Dar, I have a man who was in two places at once. Home in bed and in a locked room across the city at the same time. His wife says one. His front door says one. A broken door says the other. One of those is a lie or a mistake, and I can't prove which, and the only record that could have told me was thrown away by design the second it was made."

Two places at once.

I was thinking about a doorway in a kitchen, a long time ago, and

a small girl standing in it with her arms out, saying *now I'm in both*, and me standing beside her with a timer, telling her it didn't count.

I was thinking about Berbant's story. The one about someone who could be in two places at once. The one he'd read to her on the last night.

"You've gone somewhere," Comai said.

"It's nothing."

"It's not nothing. You've got the face."

"It's just something my sister used to do," I said. "When we were children. It doesn't matter."

She looked at me. Then she let it go, which was a kindness, and we turned around and walked back along the riverbed toward the city while the light went orange and then gray behind the cottonwoods.

At the transit stop she hugged me, quickly, which she'd never done before.

"Happy New Year," she said. "I picked one, by the way. The New Year's. The closest to transit."

"Of course you did."

"I'll write to you at midnight." She stepped back. "Don't tell him, Dar. Tonight. Whatever he asks. I know you're going to see him."

"I wasn't going to."

"I know. I'm saying it anyway."

#

New Year's in the Eighth Ring cluster was louder than the solstice, the way New Year's always was, but it was still Senne's kitchen and still Senne's long table, and even the loud parts were warm. There was music. There was a great deal of food. There were little cakes with a single dried cherry pressed into the top of each one, which was an Eighth Ring thing, and which Senne had made three hundred of, and which were all gone by ten.

Berbant was at the end of the table again. He'd been waiting for me. I could tell by the way he looked up when I came in, and then looked back down at his cup, and then looked up again.

"Anything?" he said, when I sat down.

"I'm off it."

"I know you're off it. I'm asking if you've heard anything."

We both knew that was the same question. I sat there with Comai's slate in my head, the edit log and the two doors and the work or-

der with his name on it, and my brother looking at me across Senne's table, and I didn't say anything. It was one of the worst hours I'd ever spent at a table. He asked twice more. The second time Sora put her hand on his arm and he stopped.

"Leave it," Sora said quietly. "He can't. You know he can't."

"I know he can't," Berbant said. "I just want him to."

Avukat came late. It was nearly eleven when he came down the entrance steps, and he came in stamping and blowing on his hands and bringing a wave of cold air with him. He was flushed, and he smelled strongly of woodsmoke, and there were pine needles stuck to the bottom of his trousers and a crust of half-frozen mud on his boots.

"Where have you been?" Senne said.

"The office." Avukat took a cake off the last plate, the very last cake, and ate it in one bite. "Deadlines."

"On New Year's Eve."

"Justice doesn't take holidays." He sat down across from me and looked around the table. "What did I miss? Has anyone cried yet?"

"Not yet," Senne said.

"Give it an hour."

I looked at his boots. There was no mud in QL in winter. Not in the Rings. The paths were cleared and the snow was packed and anything that wasn't path was meadow under two feet of white. To get mud like that on your boots in the last week of December you'd have to go somewhere the ground was bare, somewhere a fire had been burning long enough to melt the snow around it.

He saw me looking. He just moved his feet under the table.

#

At midnight, we went up onto the roof.

That was the New Year custom, and it was the only night of the year anyone did it. The rest of the time the roofs belonged to the land. Nobody walked on the meadows over their own Earthholds except the gardeners and the birds. But on the last night of the year, a few minutes before midnight, the whole cluster put on their coats and climbed the entrance steps and went out onto the snow on top of the building, all hundred and fifty of them, and stood there on their own roof in the dark, with their own home underneath them and the whole city around them, white and humped and silent, lit

from below.

We stood in a loose crowd. Somebody near the middle was counting down. Senne had his arm through Sora's. Berbant stood next to me with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders up.

"Last year she was here," he said, very low. "She came to ours. You remember?"

"I remember. She tried to get everyone to sing."

"Nobody sang."

"Nobody ever sings."

"She sang anyway." He breathed out. "By herself. Badly."

The count got to zero. Everyone said *Happy New Year* at once, not loudly, a sort of long soft murmur that went all the way across the roof and was answered, very faintly, from the roofs of the other Earthholds around us, a hundred small crowds on a hundred white hills all saying the same thing at the same moment. It was the first minute of the year one seventy-one. It was the first year without her.

And for a moment, standing in the snow, I couldn't bear any of them.

It came up out of nowhere, the way it sometimes did. The soft, pleased murmur going away across the roofs, a hundred and fifty people around me, a million and a half across the city, all saying the same two words at once in the same low voice, because that was how it was done. It sounded like a hundred crowds agreeing to pretend. That the year was new. That the new one would be better. That the woman in the Remnant house getting married to no one on the longest night, and my brother with his flat number that somebody had made into a spire, and my sister, who'd stood on this roof a year ago and sung by herself, badly, while every one of these people looked politely away, were all somehow taken care of by a murmur. I stood in the middle of them with my hands in my pockets and I disliked every single one. The man beside me with his cup. The woman with her children. The whole warm, fair, murmuring city.

Then Berbant leaned his shoulder against mine, the way he had outside the Remnant house, and the weight of it went through the cold and through my coat, and whatever it was went back down to wherever it lived.

Comai's message came in at twelve past. *Happy New Year. The party is terrible. The transit was very close.*

I laughed out loud, and Berbant looked at me, and I shook my

head.

On the roof of the next Earthhold over, across a dip in the snow, the crowd was smaller, and at the near edge of it, a little apart from everyone, a heavy man stood alone in a coat so full of pockets it made him look heavier still. He had said his *Happy New Year* to nobody in particular and was standing with his hands jammed in his pockets, looking across at our roof. Berbant raised a hand to him. After a moment, the man raised his back.

"Escarpé," Berbant said. "That's his Earthhold, 8-133. He comes up every year. I've never once seen him come up with anybody."

I looked across at the lone figure on the next white hill, and for the first time I felt sorry for him.

Avukat was standing apart from the rest of us, at the northern edge of the roof, where the meadow sloped down toward the path. He wasn't looking at the city. He was looking north, past the last of the Eighth Ring's lights, toward the foothills, which were nothing now but a darker line against the dark. He stood like that with his hands in his coat pockets. He didn't turn around when the others started going back down the steps.

#

He left a little after one. He said goodbye to Senne, and kissed Sora on the cheek, and told Berbant to stop worrying about things he couldn't fix, which was so exactly the kind of thing Senne would have said that Senne laughed out loud. Then he put his coat on and went up the steps, and I said I'd walk out with him, and he looked at me for a moment and then shrugged.

We walked to the transit platform together under enormous stars. He talked the whole way, about a judge he'd drawn who'd turned out to be a baker from the Ninth Ring with extremely strong opinions about the Affirmation, and I laughed in the right places, and watched his boots.

At the platform, the board showed two pods coming. One of them was the ring line back toward the center, toward Avukat's Earthhold in the Third Ring. The other was the north line.

The north line went out past the last of the Rings, into the foothills, through the reserve, and ended at a trailhead station where the rewilded land began. People took it in summer, to hike. Almost nobody took it in the middle of the night on the first of January.

The ring-line pod came in first. Avukat didn't move.

"That's yours," I said.

"I'm going to wait for the next one."

"The next one's the north line."

"I know where it goes, Dar." He didn't look at me. "Go back inside. It's cold."

The ring-line pod sighed and left. A minute later the north-line pod came in, with a spray of loose snow from its roof, and the doors opened, and Avukat stepped on without looking back. The doors closed. I stood on the platform and watched its lights go away up the line, north, toward the foothills, until they were gone.

Avukat didn't live north. Nobody lived north.

Chapter 12

Friday, January 2, 171 (2201)

I didn't sleep on New Year's night, and I didn't sleep much the night after, and on the morning of the second I got up in the dark and put on my boots and the gray coat and took the north line.

I told myself I was going hiking. I did hike. My group had done the lower part of the trail that left from the north station twice in October. I was going to be hiking, but not just hiking. It was the kind of lie that's made mostly of true things.

The north line ran out past the last of the Rings and through the reserve, where the rewilded land came right up to the edge of the city, and ended at a trailhead station at the foot of the Flatirons. In summer the station was full of people with packs and water bottles and dogs. In January it was a small glass shelter half buried in snow, with a map on the wall and a heater that ticked, and nobody in it but me. When the pod pulled away behind me, the silence came down all at once. There was the wind in the pines, and the snow creaking under my boots, and nothing else for miles.

The trail was buried. But off to one side of it, running up from the station into the trees, there were tracks.

They were wide and paired, with a heavy tread, pressed deep into the snow and frozen hard overnight. Four wheels. They didn't follow the trail. They went straight up the slope beside it, through a gap in the pines, and disappeared.

The trail clubs kept sheds full of electric machines at the edge of the reserve, four-wheelers and trail bikes and haulers, and any member could take one out for the day or the week and bring it back when they were done. Avukat had never wanted one of his own. He said owning a machine just meant you were the one who had to fix it. Avukat had been a member of three different trail clubs for as long as I could remember. He liked machines. He'd never liked hiking. He

said walking uphill was a punishment the old world had invented for itself.

I followed the tracks.

#

It took two hours.

The tracks went up a long drainage between two ridges, through pines and then through bare aspens and then through pines again, and the snow got deeper as I climbed. Where the machine had gone, it was packed hard enough to walk on, and I walked in the tread marks like a child walking on a curb. Twice the tracks crossed the tracks of elk, a whole herd, deep holes punched into the snow in a long line going down the valley. Once a raven flew over, low, and said something to me, and went on.

I thought about Avukat's boots under Senne's table. The half-frozen mud. The pine needles on his trousers. The woodsmoke.

I thought about what I was doing. I was a recused investigator following my own brother into the mountains because of mud on his boots, on the strength of a hunch I couldn't have explained to anyone, least of all to Mira. I knew what she'd say. I knew what Comai would say. I kept climbing.

Near the top of the drainage, where the two ridges came together, the tracks turned sharply and went up into a fold in the rock. I smelled the smoke before I saw anything.

Then I came around a boulder the size of a house, and there it was.

#

It was a cabin.

It was small, almost as small as my room, and it was tucked into the fold of the rock so tightly that from anywhere else in the valley you'd never have seen it. The walls were logs, rough-cut and fitted by hand, with stone at the base. There was a single window with real glass in it, and a door with an iron latch. A stovepipe came out of one wall and bent up, and there was smoke coming out of it, thin and blue, and the snow around the base of the cabin had melted back into a ring of bare, muddy ground.

And it had a roof.

I stood there just looking at it. It was an ordinary roof. Two slopes of wooden shingles, meeting at a ridge, with snow on them. Every child in QL knew what a roof like that looked like from the pictures

in their history books. I had never seen one with my own eyes. In my whole life I had never once stood in front of a building whose roof wasn't the land's. Every roof in QL was a meadow. This one was just a roof. It was somebody's.

There was a small solar array on a frame beside the cabin, angled toward the south, cleared of snow. There was a water tank. And there was a pump, a squat metal pump in a little wooden housing at the base of the tank, connected to the cabin by a length of insulated pipe.

I walked over to it. I knew what I was going to see before I saw it, the way I'd known on the platform and the way I'd known when the chime came from Berbant. I crouched down in the mud and brushed the frost off the pump housing with my glove.

Stamped into the metal, small and neat: *8R FAC*. Eighth Ring Facilities. The same stamp was on the couplings where the pipe met the pump, and on the fitting where it went into the tank.

I stood up. I went to the window.

Inside, there was a stove with a fire in it, burned down to embers. A narrow bed with a heavy blanket. A shelf of books, most of them old, some of them paper. A chair. A table. And on the table, propped against a mug, a slate, its screen still lit.

I leaned closer to the glass. It was the Facilities parts system. I'd seen the same screen on the slates at the depot on the twenty-fourth. At the top right corner, where it said who was signed in, it said: *B. RAX*.

#

"You're standing in my mud," Avukat said.

I turned around. He was coming up from the far side of the boulder, from a path I hadn't seen, with an armload of split wood against his chest. He was wearing a heavy canvas coat I'd never seen before and a hat with flaps over the ears, and his face was red from the cold and the climb, and he looked, for a second, more surprised than I had ever seen him look in my life.

Then the surprise went away, and something else came in behind it. It took me a moment to recognize it. It was pride.

"Well," he said. "You found it."

"I followed your tracks."

"Of course you did." He walked past me to the door, unlatched it

with his elbow, went in, and dumped the wood beside the stove. Then he came back to the doorway and leaned against the frame with his arms folded and looked at me. "How long have you been standing out here?"

"Not long."

"Long enough to look in my window."

"Yes."

"Did you touch anything?"

"I brushed the frost off your pump."

He looked at the pump, and at me, and something in his face tightened. Instead of explaining, he said, "Come in. You're letting the heat out of MY cabin."

#

It was warm inside, and it smelled like woodsmoke and coffee and old paper. He put two more pieces of wood in the stove and blew on the embers until they caught, and then he put a dented pot of water on top, and all the time I stood by the door in my coat, looking at the walls.

He'd built them himself. I could see it. The logs weren't quite even, and he'd chinked the gaps with some kind of clay, and in two or three places he'd done it over, badly and then better. There were marks on the beams where an axe had missed. There was a shelf that sloped a little to the left.

"How long?" I said.

"Nine years. Ten, next summer." He sat down on the bed, because I was standing by the only chair. "It took me four summers to build. I brought everything up on the trail machine, a little at a time. I could have sent a hauler up with the lot in an afternoon. That wasn't the point. The logs are deadfall from the next drainage over. Nothing cut that was standing. I'm not a barbarian."

"It's reserve land, Avukat."

"I know what land it is."

"It's an unauthorized structure. On reserve land. With a roof that isn't the land's."

"Yes."

"That's—"

"A minor offense," he said. "It goes to a peer liaison and a conversation. Stage one. Nobody gets locked in a secure facility for building

a shed. I've done the math. I'm a lawyer." He shrugged. "If anyone ever found it, which nobody has, I'd sit in a room with some nice person from my cluster and explain that I understand why the rules exist and I'm very sorry, and then they'd make me take it down, and I'd take it down. And then I'd find another drainage."

"You'd build another one."

"I'd build another one." He looked at the stove. "It's the only thing I've ever made that's bigger than I am, Dar. And it's mine."

#

I sat down in the chair. I didn't take my coat off. The pot on the stove started to tick.

"Everything I have," Avukat said, "the Queue gave me. My room. My food. My work, my standing, my place in every line I've ever stood in. It's all very fair, and it's all very good, and I'm not ungrateful, whatever you and Senne think. But none of it is mine. Oh, I own things. My coats. My books. But the ground under my room, the machine I rode up here, the boat I take out in the summer, that's all the commons'. It's allocated. It's on loan. If the formula changed tomorrow, it would all get allocated somewhere else, and it would be just as fair." He reached over and put his hand flat on the log wall beside the bed. "Not this. Nobody allocated this. I found every log. I fitted every one. When I'm dead, if I ever bother to die, nobody's going to know this was here, and it won't matter, because it was mine while I was here. That's the whole point."

"You're a Freeholder with a freehold," I said.

He laughed, once, loudly. "Don't ever say that in front of the Society. Half of them would be jealous and the other half would report me."

"Which half are you?"

"I'm the half with the cabin." He got up, took the pot off the stove, and made two cups of coffee in two different mugs, one of which had a crack in it. He gave me the one without the crack. "You're the first person who's ever been up here. Did you know that? In nine years. Not Senne. Not Berbant. Not anyone I've ever—" He stopped. "Nobody."

"I'm sorry."

"No, you're not. You're pleased with yourself. You found it." He sat back down. "So am I, a little. That's the terrible part. I've spent

nine years making sure nobody would ever see this, and now someone has, and part of me wants to show you the woodshed."

"There's a woodshed?"

"There's a very good woodshed."

#

After he showed me the woodshed, we returned to the cabin and to our drinks.

I looked at the slate on the table.

I'd been trying not to. I'd been sitting in his chair drinking his coffee and trying very hard not to look at it, and my eyes kept going back to it, to the lit screen and the two letters in the corner.

He saw.

"The parts," he said. He wasn't laughing anymore. "That's what you're looking at. The pump."

"It's got an Eighth Ring stamp on it."

"I know what's stamped on it." He set his coffee down. "Two summers ago the pump I'd brought up died. The old one. I couldn't fix it. I don't know anything about pumps, Dar. I know about consent law. So I asked Berbant. I told him a friend of mine had a little place off the grid somewhere with a water system that didn't work, and could he help. And he looked at me for a long time, the way he does, and didn't ask a single question, and said sure."

"He came up here?"

"No. He never came up here. He doesn't know it's mine. He thinks it's a friend's." Avukat rubbed his face. "He told me what I needed. He said the depot had surplus from the retrofit, couplings and a pump they'd pulled out of stores that were going to be recycled anyway. He sat down at that slate, at my table in the Third Ring, and put the order in on his own account, because it was faster than filling out a request for mine. And I carried it all up here on the trail machine and he told me how to put it together over a message." He nodded at the slate. "He never signed out. I never noticed. I bring the slate up here because it's the only one I've got that works in the cold. It's been sitting there with his name in the corner for two years."

"So you've had his login," I said. "For two years."

I heard it as I said it. It was exactly the wrong thing to say. It was exactly the thing I was not allowed to say, to anyone, and especially not to him. I'd just told him, as clearly as if I'd shown him Comai's

slate, that his brother's login mattered.

Avukat went completely still.

I watched him put it together. It didn't take him long. He'd always been the fastest of us at that. The notice he'd read out at Senne's table. *Anomalous gains*. Comai's question to Berbant at the depot, which Berbant would have told him about, because Berbant told Avukat everything eventually. The login. Me, standing in his mud at the top of a mountain, looking at a slate with Berbant's name in the corner.

His face changed. It went through surprise, and then something that looked a lot like hurt, and then something much colder.

"You think I built him a spire," he said.

#

The fire ticked in the stove. Outside, the wind moved in the pines, and a little snow slid off the edge of the roof, the real roof, and landed with a soft sound on the ground below the window.

I didn't answer right away. I should have said no. I wanted to. But I sat there in his chair and thought about it, the way I thought about everything, and I found I couldn't. He was a Freeholder. He was a lieutenant in the Society. He'd read the formula more times than any of us. He'd been the one at Senne's table who'd spelled out, clearly, exactly how you'd do it and why. He'd had his brother's login sitting on his table for two years. He had a whole cabin nobody knew about. He was very good at keeping things no one could see.

And he loved Berbant. That was the part I couldn't get around either way. He'd have done anything for Berbant. Including, maybe, deciding that what Berbant needed was a better number and a month in a cabin, and giving it to him, and never telling him.

"Did you?" I said.

Avukat looked at me for a long moment. Then he laughed. It wasn't a nice laugh. It was the laugh he used in court, I think, when a witness said something that had just lost them the case.

"If I had, little brother," he said, "I'd have done it better."

He stood up. He opened the door. The cold came in.

"Now get off my land."

Chapter 13

Monday, January 5, 171 (2201)

The Division opened again on Monday morning as though nothing had happened, because for the Division nothing had.

The corridors were full. People came in stamping snow off their boots and saying *happy New Year* to each other with the particular brightness of people who had eaten too much for ten days and were relieved to be back at their desks. The break room smelled like coffee and somebody's leftover cherry cakes. A woman from the analysts' corridor was showing a knot of people pictures from the month she'd just spent on a sailing boat off QC, and telling them she still had her second month to take and couldn't decide between the desert and doing nothing at all. There was snow on every skylight. I sat in my small gray office and read reports about other people's problems for two hours and couldn't have told you what any of them said.

Comai came in at ten, which was three hours later than she had ever come in to work in her life.

I saw her pass my door. She didn't look in. She had her coat on and her hood still up and her slate held against her chest the way you'd hold a book you didn't want anyone to see the cover of. She went straight down the corridor to her own office and closed the door.

I gave it an hour. Then I went and knocked.

"It's open," she said.

She was sitting at her desk with her coat still on. Her wall display was dark. She didn't look up when I came in.

"You've been avoiding me," I said.

"I've been here an hour."

"You came in at ten."

"I had something to do first." She finally looked at me. Her face was tired, and something else, something closed. "Did you want something?"

"I need to tell you something," I said. "And you're not going to like it. Can we walk?"

#

We walked. There was a path that ran around the back of the Division, between the building and the edge of the meadow, where nobody went in winter because the wind came straight across the open ground. It was bright and cold and the snow squeaked under our boots. We stepped off the path for a sweeper going the other way. It stopped and waited for us, politely, which Comai said she had never been able to stand.

I told her. All of it. The mud on Avukat's boots on New Year's Eve. The north line. The tracks. The cabin, and the pump with the Eighth Ring stamp, and the slate on the table signed in as *B. RAX*. And what I'd said, sitting in his chair, drinking his coffee. *So you've had his login for two years.*

She didn't interrupt. She walked beside me with her hands in her pockets and her eyes on the path, and when I'd finished she stopped walking.

"You told him," she said.

"I didn't tell him. I said one sentence."

"You said the one sentence." Her voice was very quiet. "You're recused, Dar. You're not allowed to talk to anyone about this, least of all your family, and you went up a mountain and told your brother, who has been sitting on your other brother's login for two years, that the login matters. That it's the thing." She turned and looked at me. "Do you understand what you've done?"

"I know."

"No, I don't think you do. Until Friday, your brother Avukat was a man who was angry at the Division on his brother's behalf. As of Friday he's a man with his brother's login, an unregistered building nobody knew about, a lieutenant's seat in the Freehold Society, and a very clear idea of exactly what I'm looking at." She took a breath. "I have to look at him now. You understand that? You've made me look at him."

"He didn't do it."

"You don't know that. You went up that mountain because you thought he might have." She said it without cruelty, which made it worse. "And now I have to write down that my recused colleague

disclosed the core of the file to a person with access to the subject's credentials. In my own notes. Which Mira will read."

The wind came across the meadow and threw a little snow in our faces.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"I know you are." She started walking again. After a moment I followed. "That's the problem with you, Dar. You're always sorry, and you always do it anyway."

#

We went around the corner of the building, where the wind dropped, and she slowed down.

"There's something else," she said. "I'm not going to tell you what it is."

"All right."

"I have a lead. Something someone told me. On Saturday night." She kept her eyes on the path. "It might be nothing. It might be the most important thing anybody's found. I don't know yet. And I'm not going to tell you about it until I do."

"Because of what I told Avukat."

"Partly." She was honest about it. She always was. "Partly because I don't know what you'd do with it. You'd go up another mountain. And partly," she hesitated, "partly it isn't mine to tell. Someone told me something they shouldn't have, because they trusted me. I'm not going to hand that to anyone until I know it's true. Not even you."

"I could help."

"You could. You'd be very good at it." She stopped and faced me. "And then whatever I found would be worthless, because you'd been near it. Mira was right about that. The rule protects him too. I should have listened the first time."

"You didn't listen the first time. You bought me noodles."

That almost got a smile. Almost. "I know. I made a mistake. Well, two mistakes, one with noodles and one with oranges. I'm trying not to make a third."

We stood there by the corner of the Division with the snow blowing past us. There was a woodpecker somewhere in the trees across the meadow, the same kind we'd heard on the riverbed. Or maybe it was a different one. I didn't know anything about woodpeckers.

"Is it about the door?" I said.

She looked at me.

"I'll tell you when I'm sure," she said.

#

She didn't come to lunch. I didn't expect her to.

Mira did. She came into the break room while I was standing at the counter pretending to decide between two kinds of tea, and she stood next to me and picked one without looking at either.

"How was the Lull?" she said.

"Long."

"They usually are." She poured her water. "How's your brother?"

I didn't know which one she meant. I decided it didn't matter. "Not good."

"No." She stirred her tea. "Safed tells me the file's moving. She won't tell me which direction. She says she's being careful." She glanced at me, a short, level look, and I felt it go all the way through me. "I'm glad someone is."

She took her tea and went back to her office, and I stood there holding a cup I hadn't filled, and understood that Mira Nadzor knew, or suspected, or had simply decided to say something that would be true whether she knew or not. She was good at that. She'd been good at it the day she told me how small a million and a half people was.

I saw Comai once in the afternoon, through the half-open door of the display room, standing in the dark in front of something I couldn't see from the corridor, perfectly still, with the colored light of it on her face. When she noticed me, she reached out and the light went off.

At the end of the day, Comai came to my office. She stood in the doorway with her coat on and her slate against her chest, and she didn't come in.

"I'm not angry," she said. "I want you to know that. I was angry this morning. I'm not now."

"You should be."

"I know I should be. I'm not good at staying angry. I've never been good at it." She shifted her weight. "Tomorrow. Lunch. The red door. I'll tell you what I can. Not everything. What I can."

"Noon?"

"Noon." She looked down at the slate for a moment. "Dar?"

"What?"

"If I'm right about this," she said, "then it isn't your brother. Either of them. That's what I think. I want you to know that too, tonight, in case." She stopped.

"In case what?"

"In case I'm wrong." She tucked the slate under her arm. "I'll see you at noon. Let me be sure first. Can you do that? Can you just let me be sure?"

I said I could. She went away down the corridor with her coat on and her slate under her arm, and I watched her until the door at the far end closed behind her.

Chapter 14

Tuesday, January 6, 171 (2201)

She wasn't at the Division in the morning. That didn't mean anything. Her calendar said *field*, which it said two or three days a week. Her office door was closed, and her coat wasn't on its hook. I told myself that was what *field* looked like.

At nine I sent her a message. *Still on for noon?*

Nothing.

That didn't mean anything either. When Comai was working, she didn't look at messages. She'd told me once that she turned them off entirely when she was reading something for the third time, because the chime broke her concentration and she'd have to start over. I'd laughed. She hadn't been joking.

At eleven thirty I put on the gray coat and walked to the Second Ring.

#

The noodle place with the red door was half full. I took the same table in the back corner, as far from the window as possible, and sat down facing the door so I'd see her come in. The woman who ran the place came over and asked if I was waiting for the tall one, and I said I was, and she nodded and went away and came back with a pot of tea without asking.

Noon came. I drank the tea.

At twelve fifteen I sent another message. *I'm here. No rush.*

At twelve thirty I ordered, because the woman had come by twice and was starting to look at me the way she'd looked at my half-finished bowl before the Lull. The noodles came. I ate some of them. The door opened and closed a dozen times, letting in cold air and people stamping their boots, and none of them were Comai.

At one I paid my respects to the broth, which was the custom, and left.

I told myself she was angry after all. That she'd thought about it overnight and decided that whatever she'd told me she could tell me, she couldn't. That she was being careful, the way Mira had said. The way I should have been. It was a reasonable thing to tell myself. It fit everything I knew.

On the walk back to the Division I sent a third message. *It's all right if you can't. Just tell me you're all right.*

#

I spent the afternoon doing nothing I could have described afterward. I read the same report four times. I went to the break room twice for tea and didn't drink either cup. Every time the chime sounded behind my eyes I touched my temple so fast I nearly hit myself, and every time it was something else. A meeting moved. Jinsia, sending me another gel. Tushar, asking if I wanted to come to lentil night.

At four I walked past Comai's office. The door was still closed. Her coat still wasn't on the hook.

At five I went home. My hours had ended at one, and the corridor had been empty since two. There was nothing else to do.

#

My room was dark and cold. I didn't turn the lamp on. I sat on the edge of the bed in my coat and looked at the skylight, which was a dim gray square with the last of the light going out of it, and I did the thing I'd been trying not to do all day, which was to count.

She'd told me, yesterday, that she was working on something someone had told her. That it might be nothing and it might be everything. That it was about a door, or she hadn't said no when I'd asked. That if she was right, it wasn't either of my brothers. That I should know that tonight, *in case*.

In case what, I'd said.

In case I'm wrong, she'd said.

That was all I had. It wasn't enough to be afraid of, and it wasn't nothing, and I sat there in the dark turning it over and over in my hands until it was smooth.

I couldn't check whether she was all right. Nobody could, except the people who were supposed to. Her vital status went to emer-

gency services and to whoever she'd registered as next of kin, and that wasn't me. If something had happened to her, the city would know within seconds, and I wouldn't know anything until someone decided to tell me. That was the rule.

I sat there and hated it.

#

At nine forty, the chime.

I touched my temple so fast it hurt.

Sorry about today, she'd written. I needed a day away from you, which isn't fair, but it's true. I think I know how the door does it. Going to look tonight. I'll tell you everything tomorrow. Everything. I promise.

I read it again and again. I felt the relief go through me like warm water, and then, right behind it, something cold.

Going to look tonight.

Which door? I wrote back. Where are you?

Nothing.

Comai. Where?

Nothing.

At ten I sent another. At ten fifteen another. At ten thirty I stood up and put the lamp on and turned it off again and sat back down. At ten forty-five I wrote *Please just tell me where you are*, and looked at it, and deleted it, and wrote it again, and sent it.

Nothing.

I told myself she was reading something for the third time. That she'd turned her messages off, the way she did. That she'd gone to look at a door, and doors took time, and she'd write to me in the morning and tell me everything, the way she'd promised. It fit everything I knew. It was a completely reasonable thing to tell myself.

At eleven thirty I stopped telling myself anything.

#

I called Mira at eleven fifty.

She answered on the fourth chime. Her voice was thick with sleep and then, as soon as she heard mine, it wasn't.

"What's wrong?"

"Comai," I said. "I can't reach her. She sent me a message at nine forty saying she was going to look at something tonight. A door. She hasn't answered since." I heard how it sounded. "I know how that sounds."

Mira was quiet for a second. "You know I'm going to ask why she was messaging you about a door."

"I know."

"We'll talk about that." Another pause. I could hear her moving, the rustle of blankets. "Hold on. Investigators log field visits. Let me look."

I waited. The skylight was completely black. Somewhere down the corridor, someone was playing music very softly, something with a cello in it.

"She logged a visit," Mira said. "Evening. Facilities records annex. It says *observe checkpoint 3*." A pause. "That's all it says."

The annex. The door that knew my brother's face.

"I'm going," I said.

"Dar."

"I'm going, Mira."

"Listen to me." Her voice had gone very level. "You don't have access to that building. The door won't open for you. If she's there and she doesn't answer, you call emergency. You do not try to go in. You do not touch anything. Do you understand me?"

"Yes."

"Say it."

"I call emergency. I don't go in. I don't touch anything."

"Good." She was quiet for a moment. "She's probably fine," she said, in a different voice. "She's probably sitting on the floor of that room reading the door's manual for the third time with her messages off."

"I hope so."

"Call me when you find her."

#

The pod was empty. It came into the Second Ring platform at twelve twenty with a sigh of warm air, and I got on, and it carried me toward the center of the city through the dark, past the white hills and the small squares of light that were other people's skylights, other people's rooms, other people asleep.

I stood the whole way. I held on to the rail with one hand and kept the other in my coat, over my chest, over the small hard weight in the inside pocket, and I didn't know I was doing it until the pod slowed for the stop and I had to let go.

Chapter 15

Tuesday, January 6 – Wednesday, January 7, 171 (2201)

The Facilities records annex was a low, blind building on the edge of the First Ring, dug into the ground under a meadow like everything else, with nothing to mark it but a single entrance at the bottom of a short flight of steps. There were no skylights. That was the first thing I noticed, coming down the path from the transit stop at twenty to one in the morning. Every building in QL had skylights. This one had a flat, unbroken sheet of snow on top of it, as smooth as a sheet on a bed.

The steps had been cleared. There were footprints in the thin new snow on them, going down, and more footprints coming up. I couldn't tell how many. I stood at the top and looked at them, and then I went down.

The door at the bottom was steel, painted gray, with a small dark lens set into the wall beside it at the height of a face. Checkpoint 3. I stood in front of it. Nothing happened. There was no click. The lens looked at me, and decided I wasn't anyone it knew, and forgot me.

I touched my temple and called her.

It went through. I heard it go through. It rang the way a call rings when it reaches someone and they don't pick up, once, twice, six times, and then stopped.

I called again. The same.

I stood there with my hand flat on the cold steel door and made myself breathe. Then I did what I'd told Mira I would do.

#

The emergency dispatcher was a man with a calm, low voice who sounded like he'd been awake for a long time and was going to be awake for a long time more. I told him where I was. I told him my

colleague was inside, that she'd logged a visit, that she wasn't answering, that I didn't have access to the door.

"What's her name?"

"Comai Safed."

"Hold on." A short pause. "All right. I'm looking at her status now."

"Is she—"

"It says no signal." He said it carefully. "I want to be clear with you, because people hear that and panic. No signal isn't the same as a death signal. It means her implant can't reach the network. That building," a pause while he checked something, "has a shielded vault in it. For the records. Nothing gets in or out of that room wirelessly. If she's inside the vault, we wouldn't hear from her either way."

"Then how do you know she's all right?"

"I don't," he said. "That's why I'm sending someone. Responders are nine minutes out." Another pause, longer. "She's been out of signal since eleven fourteen. Almost. There's a blip at eleven forty-one. Thirty-one seconds, and then she drops out again."

"What did it say?"

"Normal readings. Heart rate a little up." He was quiet for a moment. "That's a long time to be in a vault. I'm authorizing a welfare override on the door. It'll open for you. I'm asking you to wait outside for the responders."

The door clicked.

It was the smallest sound. I'd heard it a thousand times, every morning, walking into the Division. I'd never once thought about what it meant.

"Sir," the dispatcher said. "Please wait outside."

I went in.

#

Inside, it was cold, and very quiet, and lit by a low blue light that came from nowhere in particular. It was a single long room, lined on both sides with gray cabinets, the kind that held the physical backups, the paper, the drives, everything the city had decided it wanted to be able to touch. The rest of it lived in the halls under the settlements and in the stacks in orbit, where nobody ever went. At the end of the room there were two terminals on a desk, dark. And beyond them,

set into the back wall, a second door. Heavier than the first, with a wheel set into the middle of it instead of a handle.

It was closed.

I walked down the length of the room. I remember the sound of my boots on the floor. I remember that one of the cabinets had its drawer a little open, a finger's width, and that I noticed it and didn't stop. I remember that I said her name, once, not very loudly, and that the room swallowed it.

The wheel was stiff. I had to put my whole weight on it. It turned a quarter, and then a half, and then all at once something gave and the door swung toward me, very slowly, on hinges that didn't make a sound.

Behind my eyes, the dispatcher's voice came back.

"Sir. I've just got her signal." A pause. "I'm so sorry."

#

I'm going to tell you what I saw. Not what happened. I didn't see what happened. Nobody did, except her and whoever it was, and she can't tell anyone and whoever it was may never do so. I only saw what was left. So I'll tell you that, and then I'll tell you what I made of it, because that's what I did for a living. I took what was in front of me and I worked out what must have been.

The vault was small. White walls, a low ceiling, one desk against the far wall with a terminal on it, the one that would have been Records Annex 2. The terminal was lit.

She was on the floor beside the desk.

She'd fallen sideways out of the chair. The chair had rolled back and was standing against the wall by itself, facing nothing. She was lying on her side with her long legs folded under her, as if she'd sat down on the floor to read something and had lain down for a moment and would get up again. Her hood was down. Her black hair had come loose across her face. There was blood in it, at the back of her head, dark and beginning to dry.

I knelt down. I don't remember deciding to. I put my hand on hers. It was cool. Not cold. Cool, the way a hand is cool when someone has come in from outside and hasn't warmed up yet.

"Comai," I said.

I stayed there for a while.

The dispatcher stayed too. I hadn't expected that. His voice came

back behind my eyes after a moment, very low, and asked me if I was still there, and I said I was. He asked me if I was hurt. I said no. He asked me if there was anyone else in the room, and I looked, and said no. He asked me not to move anything, and I said I wouldn't, and he said, "Thank you," as though I'd done him a kindness.

"Is there anyone with you?" he said. "Outside. Anyone you came with?"

"No."

"Then I'll stay on," he said. "Until they get there. You don't have to talk."

I didn't talk. He didn't either, after that. But I could hear him there, at the other end of it, somewhere in the city, breathing, and every so often the small sound of him typing something, and once, very quietly, someone else in his room asking him a question and him saying *not now*. I never learned his name. I've thought about asking. I don't think I want to know it.

#

Then I did what I was. I'm not proud of it, and I'm not ashamed of it either. I knelt on the floor of the vault with my hand on hers and I looked.

She had one glove on and one glove off. The bare hand was the right one, the one under mine. The other glove was on the desk, beside the keyboard, folded once. She'd taken it off to type, and put it down neatly, the way she did everything.

Her coat was over the back of the chair. She'd hung it there. She'd meant to stay a while.

Her slate was on the floor by her hand, face up. It was still lit. I looked at it and didn't understand what I was seeing for a moment, and then I did.

It was the spire.

She'd rebuilt it on the slate, small, the way she'd shown me at the noodle house: the long flat line of twelve years and then the smooth, impossible climb. It was turning slowly on the screen, the way the big one had turned in the display room on the first day, red and alone above its flat orange ground. Around it, in her small precise hand, there were notes I couldn't read without picking it up, and I didn't pick it up. I remembered Mira. *Don't touch anything*. I left it where it was, turning beside her hand.

On the floor between the desk and the door there was a length of steel pipe, as long as my forearm and threaded at both ends, heavy. An offcut. The crews cut them to fit and kept the leftovers in bins by their benches; Berbant kept a bin of them beside his bench at the depot. There was blood on one end of it. It had been dropped, not placed. I could see from where I was kneeling that there was a stamp on it, small and neat. I didn't need to lean closer to read it. I knew what it said.

8R FAC.

And the terminal. I stood up, carefully, without touching the desk, and looked at the screen.

It was an attestation draft. The fourth quarter. Subject: RAX, BERBANT. The number in it had been changed, the way all the others had been changed. And at the bottom of the screen, in the small gray line the system kept for every edit, it said: *Edited 11:47 p.m. Credentials: RAX, BERBANT.*

#

I'll tell you what I made of it. I made it standing there, in about a minute, in the vault, with her at my feet. I've gone over it a hundred times since, and it hasn't changed much.

She came in a little after eleven. The dispatcher had said her signal went offline at eleven fourteen, so that was when she went through the vault door and the shielding closed around her. She hung up her coat. She sat down at the terminal. She took off one glove to type, and folded it, and put it on the desk. She put her slate on the desk beside her, or on her knee, and pulled up the spire, because she was working, and when Comai was working she wanted the thing she was working on in front of her.

She was looking for something. *I think I know how the door does it.* She was looking at the terminal, or at the logs, or at something about Checkpoint 3 I didn't know about. She had her back to the vault door. She'd have heard the outer door open, maybe. Maybe not. The cabinets would have swallowed it the way they'd swallowed my voice. The vault door didn't make a sound on its hinges. I knew that now.

Someone came in behind her.

The vault door opened at eleven forty-one. I knew that from the dispatcher before I knew it from anything else: thirty-one seconds

when she was back in the world, her heart a little fast, the way a heart goes when you hear something behind you and decide not to turn around. Then the door closed again, and she was gone from the world, and whoever it was was in there with her.

She didn't turn around. Or she started to, and she was too late. The chair rolled back. She went sideways. The slate went with her and landed face up. The pipe went down on the floor.

And then whoever it was sat down, or leaned over her, and opened my brother's draft, and changed the number, and saved it, at eleven forty-seven, with my brother's name. With her lying there. They'd had the time to do that. They'd taken the time.

Then they walked out, and closed the vault door behind them, so that nothing inside could reach anyone, and went up the steps, and were gone. The door must have opened a second time when they left. Her signal never came back for it. It takes an implant a little while to find the network again after shielding, the better part of half a minute. Whoever it was had been through that door and had it shut again in less. They knew exactly how long they had. Or they were lucky, and nothing else in that room looked like luck.

That was what the room said. It said it very clearly. It said it so clearly that I stood there with my hands at my sides and understood exactly what anyone who walked into that vault after me was going to believe.

The pipe from the Eighth Ring depot. The draft with Berbant's name on it. The door outside that knew his face.

It's too clean, she'd said, on my bed, with the oranges. Somebody wanted there to be a door with his name on it.

Maybe. Or maybe it was clean because it was simple, and the simplest thing was the one I couldn't bear to look at. I didn't know. I stood there and didn't know, and that was worse than anything the room said.

And one more thing, which I couldn't make fit either way. Whoever had come through that door at eleven forty-one had known she would be there. Nobody walks into a shielded vault at midnight by chance. She hadn't told me where she was going. She hadn't told Mira anything but a line in a log. So who had she told?

#

The responders came nine minutes after the dispatcher said they

would, which is to say about four minutes after I'd found her. Two of them. They came down the long room fast and then slowed down when they reached the vault door, the way people do. One of them knelt beside her and did what they do. The other one put a hand on my arm, very gently, and said, "Sir. I need you to come out now."

I went out. I stood in the long gray room between the cabinets with my back against one of them. After a while I slid down it and sat on the floor. The responder brought me a blanket from somewhere and put it around my shoulders, and I let him, and then I sat there under it while they worked, and I didn't feel anything at all.

Mira came at a quarter past one. I don't know who called her. Maybe I did. She came down the room in her coat with her hair uncombed and her face completely white, and she looked into the vault, once, for a long time, and then she came and stood in front of me.

She didn't say anything about the door, or about the rule, or about the messages. She crouched down in front of me so that her face was level with mine and she put her hand on my shoulder over the blanket and left it there.

"I gave it to her," she said. "Because she read everything three times."

"I know."

"I gave it to her." She stayed there for a moment longer. Then she stood up, and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, and was Mira Nadzor again, and went to talk to the responders.

#

The inquirer came at half past one.

His name was Oren Tafuta and he was from the Office of Inquiry, which was a thing I knew existed in the way you know the city has a place that deals with sewage. He was a slow, deliberate man with a round, patient face and gray gloves he never took off, and he stood at the vault door for a long time without going in, looking. Just looking. I recognized it. It was what I'd done.

Then he came and found me.

"You're Rax," he said. "Darwin Rax."

"Dar."

"Dar." He sat down on the floor beside me, which surprised me, with his back against the cabinet opposite, so that we were facing each other across the narrow aisle. "You found her."

"Yes."

"Tell me how you came to be here."

So I told him. Her message at nine forty. Mira's log. The dispatcher. The override. I told him I'd been asked to wait outside and hadn't. I told him I'd touched her hand and nothing else. He listened without interrupting, and at the end he nodded slowly.

"Investigator Nadzor tells me you're recused from Safed's current case," he said. "The one involving your brother."

"Yes."

"And yet she was messaging you tonight about a door."

"Yes."

He looked at me for a long moment with his patient round face.

"We're going to have a great deal to talk about, Dar," he said. "Not now. Tomorrow. I'll ask you to come to the Office in the morning. Eight o'clock." He stood up. "In the meantime, I'll ask the judiciary for this door's log. I expect I'll have it before it gets light."

#

He had it before it got light.

I was still there. I don't know why I was still there. Nobody had told me to go, and I couldn't make myself. At some point they'd taken her out, carefully, under a white sheet, past me, down the long room and up the steps into the dark, and I'd stood up for it, and then sat back down.

At a little after five, Tafuta came back down the room with a slate in his gloved hand. He stood in front of me. He didn't sit this time.

"I'm going to show you this," he said, "because you're going to hear it anyway, and I'd rather you heard it from me, now, than from someone else, later."

He turned the slate toward me.

Records Annex, Checkpoint 3. Tuesday, January 6, 171.

11:14 p.m. Match: SAFED, COMAI. Entry.

11:41 p.m. Match: RAX, BERBANT. Entry.

11:58 p.m. Match: RAX, BERBANT. Exit.

I read it until the letters stopped meaning anything. Then I looked up at him.

"It wasn't him," I said.

"Maybe not." He turned the slate back toward himself. "But his face went through that door at eleven forty-one, and it came out again

at eleven fifty-eight, and in between someone used his credentials on that terminal at eleven forty-seven." He said it without any particular emphasis, the way you'd read out the weather. "You understand what that means for him."

"The door's broken. It was broken in October. It misreads people. He reported it himself."

Tafuta looked at me with something that might have been pity.

"I know," he said. "It's in the file."

He put the slate in his coat.

"Go home, Dar," he said. "Sleep, if you can. Eight o'clock. And please, for your own sake and your brother's, don't go anywhere else first."

#

I came up the steps into the morning.

It was just getting light. The sky over the city had gone the gray-white of a winter dawn, and away to the west the mountains were beginning to pick up the first of the sun, pink at the very tops. The meadow over the annex was pure unbroken white. The footprints on the steps had been joined by dozens more, the responders', Mira's, Tafuta's, mine, trodden into a single gray slush that told nobody anything.

I stood at the top of the steps with the blanket still around my shoulders. I'd forgotten to give it back.

Across the city the skylights were coming on, one after another, a hundred small squares of yellow on a hundred white hills. People were waking up. The kitchens were starting breakfast. In an hour the transit would be full of them, stamping snow off their boots, saying good morning, arguing about whose turn it was to do the washing up. None of them knew. None of them would have to, not today, not really. It would be a line in the city notices by noon and something to shake their heads about over lunch, and then it would be afternoon.

For a moment I hated every one of them for that. For the breakfasts, and the good mornings, and the afternoon. Then it went out of me, all at once, the way the light had gone off the slope outside Drabelig's window. I didn't have enough left in me to hate anyone. Somewhere out there in the Eighth Ring, in the old Earthhold with the beamed ceiling and the long table made of salvaged wood, my brother was getting up for work.

Chapter 16

Wednesday, January 7, 171 (2201)

The Office of Inquiry was an Earthhold like any other, on a quiet path at the edge of the Second Ring. I'd walked past it a hundred times and never known what it was. Inside, there was a small common room with a kitchen, and a corridor of ordinary doors, and behind one of them a small room with a table and two chairs and a skylight with snow on it, where Oren Tafuta was waiting for me at eight o'clock with a pot of tea and a slate and his gray gloves on.

I hadn't slept. I'd gone home and sat on my bed in my coat and watched the skylight go from gray to white, and then I'd got up and come here.

"Sit," he said. "Drink the tea. It's not very good. Nobody here can make tea."

I sat. I drank the tea. It wasn't very good.

"I'm going to ask you to tell me everything," Tafuta said. "Not just last night. Everything about your colleague's case. I know you're recused. I know you're not supposed to know anything. I'd like you to tell me what you know anyway." He folded his gloved hands on the table. "I've found, in my work, that people tell me the truth more often if I tell them first that I already suspect most of it."

So I told him.

I told him about the noodle house on the twenty-second, and the long record, and the attestations. The oranges on the twenty-fifth, during the Lull, and the draft edits under Berbant's login, and the break-room slates, and the two nights in the annex. The walk by the riverbed on New Year's Eve, and the two doors, and the work order about Checkpoint 3. My visit to the depot. Everything Escarpé had said. The mud on Avukat's boots. The north line. The cabin. The slate on the table signed in as *B. RAX*, and the one sentence I'd said

in Avukat's chair, and what Comai had said to me about it on Monday, walking around the back of the Division in the wind.

It took more than an hour. He didn't interrupt. He wrote nothing down. He just listened, with his patient round face, and occasionally poured more of the bad tea.

When I was finished, he sat back.

"Thank you," he said. "That's very thorough. And very bad for you."

"I know."

"I'm required to share it with Investigator Nadzor."

"I know."

"And with the judiciary, where it's relevant. Which much of it is." He looked at his gloves. "You understand how it looks. The recused brother of the subject, working the case in secret with the investigator who's now dead. Telling the subject's other brother, who holds the subject's credentials, exactly what matters in the file. And then being the one who finds her."

"I was at home until twelve twenty. My door will say so."

"Your door does say so. I checked it at six." He almost smiled. "I'm not suggesting you killed her, Dar. I'm saying that if I were a juror, and someone told me all of this, I'd find you very difficult to believe about anything. Including your brother."

That landed. He let it.

"What about everyone else?" I said. "On the annex list. There are thirty people who can open that door."

"Thirty-one, with the investigator's access they gave her for the case." He said it gently. "Thirty, now. I've checked every one of them. Their own doors. Their Earthholds, their workplaces, the transit gates. Every one of them was somewhere their own door says they were, at eleven forty-one last night." He paused. "All but one."

"Bербant was home. His door—"

"His Earthhold door has him entering at nine fifteen last night and not leaving yet this morning. I know." Tafuta turned his cup. "Which means one of two doors is wrong about him again. Just like in October. And this time a woman is dead." He looked at me. "You see the problem. Every time the annex door puts your brother somewhere impossible, someone edits his record. Either someone is using a broken door to put his face where it isn't, very carefully, over and over, or your brother has found a way to be in two places at once."

Two places at once.

"And the door's broken," I said. "You said so. It's in the file."

"It was broken. They replaced the matcher in November. The new one has no faults logged at all." Tafuta stood up. "I'm going to go and get your brother now, Dar. I'd ask you not to come. I don't expect you to listen, but I'd ask."

#

Mira was in the common room when I came out.

She was sitting at one of the long tables with a cup in front of her, and she looked as though she hadn't been home either. When she saw me she stood up.

"He told me," she said. "Tafuta. Not everything. Enough."

"I'm sorry."

"I know you are." She said it the way Comai had said it, on Monday. I wondered if everyone who'd ever worked with me eventually said it that way. "You're suspended. As of this morning. Pending review. I'm taking the Rax file myself, the fraud side. The murder is Tafuta's." She paused. "You don't go into the Division. You don't contact anyone about either case. You don't go near the annex, or the depot, or anyone connected to them. You don't—" She stopped.

"Help," I said.

"Help." She looked at me for a long moment. "I told you the rule protects him too. I told you in the display room with snow on my coat. If you'd listened, whatever she found would still be worth something. Instead there's a recused investigator's fingerprints on every page of it, and the only person who could have told us what she knew is dead."

I didn't have anything to say to that. There wasn't anything to say.

Mira picked up her cup and put it down again without drinking.

"She was the best investigator I had," she said. "Not the fastest. Not the cleverest. The best. Do you know why?"

"Because she never assumed she was right."

"Because she never once assumed she was right." Mira's voice broke on it, just slightly, and she steadied it. "Not about anything. Not about anyone. Go home, Dar."

I didn't go home.

#

I took the ring line to the Eighth Ring. I told myself I wasn't going to the depot, and I didn't. I went to the Earthhold. Berbant didn't work until noon on Wednesdays. I knew that. I'd known it for years without knowing I knew it.

I got there at twenty past ten. I was too late, or just in time, depending on how you want to count it.

There were three people at the top of the entrance steps. Tafuta, in his gray gloves. A woman from his office I didn't know. And between them, in his orange work coat, with his big hands empty at his sides and snow falling on his blond hair, my brother.

They weren't holding him. That's the thing I remember most. Nobody was holding him. Intake wasn't punishment; it was the part before anyone knew anything, and it was done with dignity, and everybody involved knew that. Tafuta walked beside him the way you'd walk beside a friend who'd had bad news. The woman walked on his other side. Berbant walked between them with his head up, looking straight ahead, and his face was the face I'd seen on him in the snow outside the Remnant house, with all the air let out of it.

Sora was standing at the bottom of the steps in her nurse's clothes. She had one hand over her mouth.

Berbant saw me. He stopped. Tafuta stopped with him and didn't make him start again.

"Dar," Berbant said.

"I know."

"I was home. I was home all night. Sora was there. We went to bed at ten. The door knows, Dar. My own door knows." He wasn't shouting. His voice was very steady and very quiet and it was worse than shouting. "They say I was in the annex. They say I—" He couldn't finish it. "Comai. Dar. They say I hurt Comai."

"I know you didn't."

"Do you?" He looked at me. "Do you know that? Or do you just think it?"

I opened my mouth. Tafuta was watching me.

"I know it," I said.

Berbant held my eyes. Then something in his face gave, just a fraction, and he nodded.

"I showed her my valve seat," he said. "When she was here. She asked to see it. I showed her and she held it up to the light like it was something." He looked at Tafuta. "I'm ready."

They walked him to the transit stop at the end of the path. I stood beside Sora at the bottom of the steps and watched them go, three dark figures on the white path, getting smaller, until they turned the corner at the edge of the meadow and were gone.

Sora took her hand away from her mouth.

"He was home," she said. "Dar. He was home. I was lying next to him."

"I believe you."

"Then how—"

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know yet."

#

Avukat came an hour later. Sora had called him. He came down the path from the transit stop half running, which I had never in my life seen Avukat do, with his coat open and no hat, and he went straight past me without looking at me and put his arms around Sora and held her.

Then he turned around.

"You," he said.

It was what he'd said on the solstice. It was the same word. But it didn't mean the same thing at all.

"Avukat."

"You told me the login mattered. Sitting in my chair. At my table. You sat there and told me the one thing about my brother's file that mattered, and then you went back down the mountain, and four days later the woman you were working with behind your own boss's back is dead in a locked room, and my brother's face is on the door." He came toward me. He was shaking. "Do you know what you did? Do you have any idea?"

"I know."

"You don't know. You never know. You take everything apart and you look at the pieces and you never, ever think about what happens to the thing after you've taken it apart." He was right in front of me now. He was shorter than me, and rounder, and I had never been more afraid of him. "They'll bring the login up at his hearing. Do you understand that? They'll say his brother had it. They'll say *I* had it. Your recused brother told his other brother what to look for, and the next week someone used exactly that. Do you know how that reads to a jury? I do. I do it for a living."

"I didn't tell anyone else."

"You didn't have to." He stepped back. His face was red and wet. "I'm going to the intake residence. I can't be his advocate, I'm family, they won't let me. But I'm going to sit in the room at his hearing and I'm going to make sure whoever they give him knows the consent terms better than the judge does. And you are going to stay away from him."

"Avukat—"

"Stay away from him, Dar." He turned to go. Then he turned back. "And stay away from my mountain."

#

Senne made dinner.

Of course he did. By six o'clock the Eighth Ring cluster knew, the way clusters always know things, and the common room was full of people who had come to sit near Sora without saying anything, and Senne was in the kitchen making something with lentils and greens and too much garlic that I recognized, after a while, as Imani's soup. He must have asked her for it at the funeral. He must have been saving it.

I stayed. Nobody told me to leave, and Avukat hadn't come back. I sat at the end of the long table, where Berbant usually sat, and Senne put a bowl in front of me and stood there until I picked up the spoon.

"Eat," he said.

"I can't."

"You can. You just don't want to." He sat down across from me. His face was calm. It was always calm. But his hands, flat on the table, were very still in a way I didn't recognize. "Berbant was home. Sora was there. His own door says so. That's what's true, Dar. Everything else is a door saying something."

"Two doors say two things."

"Then one of them is wrong." He said it as though it were the simplest thing in the world. "Berbant isn't wrong. So it's the other one."

"It's not that simple."

"It's exactly that simple. You make it hard. You always have." He pushed the bowl an inch closer to me. "Eat the soup. Then go and find out why the door is wrong. That's what you're for, isn't it?"

I ate the soup. It was very good, even with too much garlic.

Tushar came at eight, and Jinsia with her. I don't know who called them. Tushar sat down beside me and didn't say anything and took my hand under the table. Jinsia stood behind my chair, too tall for the room, with one hand on the back of my neck, the way he had at Drabelig's funeral. None of us said anything.

"Tell me about her," Tushar said eventually. Quietly. "Comai. I only met her twice. Tell me something."

I thought about it.

"She brought me oranges," I said. "On the twenty-fifth, during the Lull. Nobody brings anyone anything during the Lull, and she didn't know that, so she asked a woman at a stall what you were supposed to bring, and the woman said oranges, and she believed her." I stopped. "She was always the slowest person in the room, and she knew it, and she worked harder than anyone I've ever met so nobody would notice. She planned trips the way other people breathe." I stopped. "She was going to see the lions in February. At QU. She'd been waiting two years."

Tushar squeezed my hand.

"She was supposed to see the lions," I said.

Chapter 17

Friday, January 9, 171 (2201)

On Thursday they held Berbant's intake hearing. I wasn't allowed to go. Avukat went, and sat in the room, and afterward sent a message to Senne and Sora and not to me, which Sora forwarded to me without comment. It said that Berbant would stay at the intake residence in the Sixth Ring until the case was heard; that he had a room of his own with a window onto a garden; that the advocate they'd appointed him was a thin, fierce woman named Irit Halévy who had asked Avukat three very good questions about the Affirmation terms and none about his feelings; that the Office had told the judge the pipe on the vault floor was an Eighth Ring part, and that it carried Berbant's DNA, a great deal of it, and almost nobody else's; and that Berbant had said almost nothing at all, except, once, to the judge, *I was home*.

On Thursday, too, Comai's cluster sent word that her Returning would be on Sunday the twenty-fifth. Her recorded wishes had been very short. Plant something. Don't mark it. Don't make it long.

I spent Thursday in my room. I didn't go out. I was suspended, and I had nowhere to go, and nothing to do there when I got to it. I lay on my bed and looked at the skylight and I thought about the vault, and her glove folded on the desk, and the spire turning beside her hand.

Some time in the afternoon I did something I hadn't done in years. I pulled up my own work record for the quarter. Everybody can see their own. Almost nobody looks, the way almost nobody reads the Charter. Mine was short. Two days of work, the fifth and the sixth, and then, from the seventh on, a flat gray line along the bottom marked *suspended pending review*, with nothing on it. Every day I lay in this room, the line would go on lying there with me.

I knew the arithmetic better than anyone alive. A quarter of nothing, folded into five years, would pull my number down a hundredth, maybe two. Not enough to change my band. Enough that if anyone ever looked at my record the way Comai had looked at Berbant's, they'd see it: a small dip in the long line, like a spire turned upside down and pressed into the plain.

I'd spent a hundred years pushing that number up. Every good quarter had been one more stretch of nights I didn't have to lie awake asking what any of it was for. So I lay there and looked at the gray line and gave in to my chasing thoughts. I waited for the old tightening in my chest, the one that got me out of bed in the dark and down to the Division before anyone else.

It didn't come. I didn't care at all. That frightened me more than anything had since the vault. Somewhere a peer liaison would eventually notice the gray line and suggest, kindly, that I talk to someone at the Institute for Meaning. I'd sent people there myself.

That night the music didn't help. I turned it on at three and off again at four, and lay there in the quiet until the skylight went gray.

And in the quiet, with nothing left to hold, I let myself think it. Not for a minute this time. For most of the night.

Berbant had reported the door fault himself, two weeks before the first night the door said he was in the annex. Berbant had rebuilt a pump in that building twice and knew every corridor of it. Berbant had spent forty years writing a story about someone who could be in two places at once. His own door said he'd been home. Sora said he'd been home. Sora would. I had stood on his steps with Tafuta watching and said *I know it*, because he was my brother and he'd asked me to. I hadn't known anything. By four o'clock I had built the whole case against him, cleanly, the way I built everything, and I lay there looking at it in the dark and hated myself more thoroughly than I'd known I could.

On Friday morning, Sora came.

#

She came at nine, in her nurse's clothes, on her way to a shift. She stood in my doorway without coming in, and I saw that she was carrying something against her chest, wrapped in a cloth.

"He asked me to bring you this," she said. "Yesterday. After the hearing. They let me see him for twenty minutes." She held it out.

"He said you'd know what to do with it. He said you'd want to take it apart."

I took it and unwrapped the cloth.

It was a notebook. A real one, paper, the size of my hand, with a soft cover gone dark and shiny at the edges from years of being carried in a back pocket. The spine had been mended with tape. I opened it. It was full, every page, in Berbant's handwriting, small and square and even, the handwriting of someone who'd taught himself to write neatly because he wanted to be a writer and thought that was what writers did.

It wasn't the story. I'd thought, for a second, that it might be.

It was his work.

Tue 14 Jan. 8-112, pump 4, seal weeping again. 7:40-9:15. Told E. it needs replacing. Again.

Tue 14 Jan. 8-097 greywater screen, recurring. 9:40-10:30. Same as always. Somebody in 8-097 is flushing something they shouldn't.

"He writes everything down," Sora said. "Every job. Where he was, when he got there, when he left, what he did. He always has. Since he started. He says the system only remembers what you did. He wants to remember where he was. He's got a drawer full of them at home. Fifteen years."

"Why this one?"

"He said it was last year's. He said you'd want last year." She looked at me. "He said, tell Dar to check it against whatever they've got. He said, Dar will know what they've got. I don't know what that means."

I did.

"Thank you," I said.

She nodded. She looked as though she wanted to say something else. Then she said, "He was home, Dar," the way she had on the steps, and went to work.

#

I sat down at my table with the notebook and made myself remember.

It was the thing I'd been doing since the vault, without meaning to, at three in the morning with the music off. Going back over everything Comai had shown me. Every screen. Every number. She'd read me the draft edit times on the twenty-fifth, sitting cross-legged

on my bed with the oranges, and I'd asked her for them on purpose, and I'd made myself remember three of them the way I made myself remember anything I thought I'd need later, by saying them over in my head until they were worn smooth.

Tuesday, July fifteenth, two-forty in the afternoon.

Tuesday, January twenty-eighth, twelve minutes after two.

Thursday, April tenth, a little before three.

Break-room slates, she'd said. At the depot. Right in the middle of a shift, when the break room's half full and nobody's watching anybody.

I turned the pages of Berbant's notebook back to April.

Thu 10 Apr. 8-112, pump 4. Seal again. Rebuilt housing. 1:50-4:35. Alone. E. still won't sign the replacement.

Earthhold 8-112 was on the far side of the Eighth Ring from the depot. I'd walked past it on New Year's Eve. It was a twenty-minute walk from the depot, at least, in good weather. At a little before three on the tenth of April, according to his own hand, Berbant had been on his knees in front of a pump housing in the basement of 8-112, and he'd been there since ten to two, and he stayed until nearly half past four.

I turned to July.

Tue 15 Jul. Loop seg. D, 8-060, trench. Coupling failure. With Hale, Oduya, Brisk. 12:30-5:10. Hot. Brisk brought ice.

Four of them. In a trench. For nearly five hours. On the hottest afternoon in July, somewhere out on segment D of the distribution loop, a long way from any break room, with three other people who could say so.

I turned back to January.

Tue 28 Jan. 8-104 kitchen exchanger. Under the floor again. 1:10-3:55. Alone. Same valve as last year. Need a better seat.

I sat back.

I sat there with the notebook open in front of me on the table, and the snow coming down on the skylight overhead, and I didn't move.

At two forty on the fifteenth of July, somebody had sat down at a slate in the depot break room and opened my brother's attestation and changed the number, and saved it under his name. And at two forty on the fifteenth of July, my brother had been standing in a trench a kilometer away with three other people, fixing a coupling in the heat, while one of them handed round ice.

It wasn't him.

It had never been him. Not the break room. Not the edits. Somebody had sat down behind my brother's name, at those slates, over and over, for three years, and made his number climb, and every single time they'd done it he'd been somewhere else with his hands inside a machine.

#

I knew what Tafuta would say, because I'd have said it.

It's his own notebook. His own hand. He could have written anything. He could have written it last week.

But the work orders were in the system too. I'd seen them, at the noodle house. Every job, logged, with the time he opened it and the time he closed it. And three people had stood in that trench with him in July. And Brisk had brought ice.

It didn't prove what had happened in the vault. I knew that. The door had put his face in the annex on Tuesday night, and his notebook stopped at the end of December, and nothing in it could tell anyone where he'd been at eleven forty-one on the sixth of January. That was what Tafuta would say, too. *The murder isn't the fraud. The door put him in the room.*

But it proved someone else had been sitting in his chair. For three years. Patiently. Someone who knew when he'd be away from the depot. Someone who knew which slates were left signed in. Someone who knew his work well enough to know he'd be under a floor at the far side of the Ring on a Tuesday afternoon. Someone who read every work order he ever logged.

I thought of the thin man on the stairs at the depot, with his slate held flat like a tray. Zeker, who kept the system for the whole Ring, and could open any draft he liked without anyone's login, and was on the annex list, and had looked at my brother as if he'd stepped on him.

Someone who'd then walked into a locked room, wearing his face, and killed the only person who'd noticed.

#

I wrote to Tafuta. I didn't have to. I was suspended, and he'd asked me to stay out of it, and he'd been very clear about how anything I said would sound. I wrote to him anyway. I told him about

the notebook. I gave him the three dates and what Berbant had written against each of them, and the names of the three people in the trench.

He answered an hour later. *Thank you. I'll look. You understand that it doesn't change the door.*

I understand, I wrote.

I did understand. I understood that as far as the Office of Inquiry was concerned, the case was mostly closed. A man's credentials had been used to cook his own number for three years. The investigator looking into it had been found dead, in a room his face had just walked into, with his credentials on the terminal and a piece of his own depot on the floor beside her, with his skin all over it. Whatever else was true, the door had put him in the room. Juries liked doors. Doors didn't lie. That was the point of them.

I got up. I went to the wall, and touched my temple, and pulled up a blank display, and then I stood there trying to remember.

Then I built it.

I didn't have the file. I didn't have the Division's charts or the component bands or any of the data. I built it from memory, badly, the way you'd sketch the face of someone you'd known for years and find you couldn't quite get right. The long flat line first. Twelve years of fine, restless wobble, the random draw jittering up and down, one bad year sagging to 1.24 and climbing back. And then the climb. One step, another, another. 1.36. 1.45. 1.55. I made it red. I set it turning.

There it was. My brother's spire. The one Comai had rebuilt on her slate on the last night of her life, and left turning beside her hand.

I stood in front of it with Berbant's notebook in my hand and looked at it for a long time. I looked at the smooth, patient, impossible climb. I thought about the break room, and the trench, and the man under the kitchen floor at 8-104, with his hands inside a valve, while somewhere a kilometer away someone sat down at a slate and turned the dial a little further.

It had never fit him. Not once. It didn't fit a man who wrote down where he'd been. It fit someone who knew exactly where he'd be.

I closed the display. I put the notebook in the inside pocket of the gray coat, next to the pendant.

Then I put the coat on.

Chapter 18

Friday, January 9, 171 (2201)

I didn't know anything about skin. I knew someone who did.

The Science Institute ran under three meadows at the edge of the Fourth Ring, and the quickest way there from my room was the ring line, three stops, at the busiest hour of a Friday afternoon. I hadn't thought about that when I put on the coat. The pod was full. I stood by the doors with one hand on the rail and the other in my coat, over the notebook and the pendant, and tried not to listen to anyone.

It didn't work. Three people were sitting just behind me, two women and a man, with a crate of seedlings from the Ring nursery between their feet, and they were talking about the vault. Everyone in the city was talking about the vault. It had been three days.

"It's in the name," the man said. "I always said so. Pocketers. What do you keep in your pockets that you don't want anybody to see?"

"They're a lawful society," one of the women said, without much conviction.

"They were a lawful society. Now they're a society with a dead investigator." He shook his head. "Seventy years of meetings and newsletters, and everyone saying, oh, they're harmless, they're just boring. I never thought they were harmless. You could tell. The way they talk about the Charter. Like it was done *to* them."

"His brother's one of the leaders," the other woman said. "I heard. The lawyer."

"Well, there you have it," the man said, with great satisfaction. "There you have it."

I stood at the doors and watched the white hills go by, and for the length of two stops I disliked every person in that pod. Not only the man. All of them. The women with their seedlings, nodding along. The boy across the aisle pretending not to listen. The couple

by the far door holding hands. All of them, the whole carful, and the million and a half more across the city, all agreeing with each other on a Friday afternoon about a man none of them had ever met, and enjoying it, enjoying having been right. I thought, very clearly, that I didn't want to live among them. That I never had.

Then I remembered that I had thought the same thing about my brother, for about a minute, standing in the dark in front of a chart. And I didn't have to go looking for anyone worse than the man behind me after that.

I got off at the Fourth Ring and walked the rest of the way.

#

Jinsia's lab was on the lowest floor of the Institute, down two flights of stairs and along a corridor lined with windows onto a sunken courtyard, where the snow had been left to lie and a single birch stood in the middle of it like something that had been forgotten there. The lab itself was long and bright and warm, and it hummed. The sequencers were lined up along one wall, squat and white and patient, each with a small light on it, and the hum came from them. Jinsia had told me once that it was the most restful sound in the world. I'd thought he was joking. Standing in the doorway, I understood that he wasn't.

He was at the far bench, folded over a display with his chin in his hand, reading something that scrolled very slowly past his face. He didn't see me. A small woman with a lot of dark hair tied up in a cloth was pulling her coat on by the door. She looked at me, and then at him, and then at me again.

"Dar?" she said.

"Marisol?"

She raised her voice without turning around. "Jinsia. Your Dar is here."

He looked up. I watched his face do three things, one after the other. Surprise. Pleasure. And then something that looked a lot like guilt, which I had never once seen on Jinsia's face, and which he put away almost at once.

"Go home, Marisol," he said.

"I'm going home. I finished at noon, like a normal person." She wound a scarf around her neck, and on her way out she put her hand on my arm, briefly, the way everyone seemed to do now. "I'm sorry

about your partner," she said, and went.

#

"You didn't tell me you were coming," Jinsia said.

"I didn't know I was."

He unfolded himself from the stool, section by section, and came down the length of the lab toward me, ducking without thinking under a light fixture that was nowhere near his head. He stopped a little way off. He didn't touch me. That was new too.

"I should have come," he said. "Yesterday. Before that. I know."

"You came on Wednesday."

"I stood behind your chair." He looked down at me from his great height. "That's not the same as coming, *querido*. I stood there with my hand on your neck and I didn't say one word, and then I went home, and yesterday I came in here at six and I haven't really left." He rubbed the back of his own neck. "I don't know how to do this. The sad part. I never have. People who are sad want you to say something, and everything I know how to say is either a joke or a lecture. So I come here instead. And I send you pictures."

"Of gels."

"Of gels." He almost smiled. "They were the most beautiful things I had."

I looked past him at the display he'd left. Two columns of letters ran side by side, a child's genome and its parents', with the differences picked out in red. There weren't many. That was his whole career. Every child born since the Leveling had been made by parents whose bodies had stopped at thirty-five and would stay there, and nobody yet knew what that did to what they passed on: fewer new mutations in each generation, or different ones, or none worth counting, the human line simply set down and left to stand. He and Marisol had seventy years of births in that room. He'd told me once it was the slowest question in biology. "We'll have the answer in a few thousand years," he'd said, delighted.

"I looked at every one of them," I said.

He looked at me, and then he did put his hand on my shoulder, and left it there, and some of the stiffness went out of both of us.

"That's not why I came," I said.

"No. I didn't think it was." He let go. "You've got the face. The one where you want to take something apart. Sit down and tell me

what it is."

#

I told him about the pipe.

I told him about the vault first, because he didn't know it, not really, not the way I did. The chair against the wall. The glove folded on the desk. The length of steel on the floor between the desk and the door, with the stamp on it. Then I told him what Avukat's message had said about Berbant's hearing, that the Office had told the judge the pipe carried my brother's DNA, a great deal of it, and almost nobody else's.

Jinsia listened the way he did everything, slowly, with his long hands clasped between his knees. When I'd finished, he reached over to the bench behind him and picked up his coffee cup, which was empty and had a brown ring in the bottom of it, and held it out to me.

"Whose DNA is on this?"

"Yours."

"Mine," he agreed. "And Marisol's, because she washed it on Tuesday and I watched her do it. And whoever's on the dishwashing rotation in our common room this week, because it went through their hands. And yours, now." He put it in my hand. I held it. "Now you're on it. In an hour, if I put it in a bag and gave it to the Office, they'd find me all over it, because I've been drinking out of it for three years, and a little of Marisol, and a little of you. And if someone came in here tonight wearing gloves and picked it up and hit you over the head with it—"

"Jinsia."

"I'm making a point." He took the cup back, gently. "If someone did that, they'd find me on it. Mostly me. Because it's mine, and I'm on it, and gloves don't leave much."

I didn't say anything.

"Your skin is falling off all the time," he said. "All of it, everywhere. You leave it on everything you touch. It's called touch DNA, and it's very good at telling you who has been near a thing, and very bad at telling you when, or what they were doing. Your brother has been handling pipes for how long?"

"Fifteen years."

"Fifteen years." He nodded. "In a depot that's cold and dry most

of the year, which is very good for keeping DNA, by the way. And pipes have threads on them, and ridges, and the threads catch skin like a comb catches hair." He held up one long finger, the way he had in my bed after the funeral. "So first: if that pipe came from anywhere near his bench, his bin, his crew, it will have him on it whether he ever touched it in anger or not. It would be strange if it didn't."

"Second," I said.

"Second." Another finger. "It moves. That's the part people never believe. It's called secondary transfer. Your brother's hands touch his gloves, his gloves touch the bench, the bench touches the pipe, someone else's glove touches the pipe. Now his skin is on someone else's glove, and it goes wherever that glove goes. I've seen my own DNA turn up on a sample from a woman in the Ninth Ring I have never met, because we used the same transit rail on the same morning." He shrugged. "It's a very sociable molecule."

"And third."

He was quiet for a moment. Then he held up the third finger, and didn't waggle it this time.

"Third. Ask them where on it."

"Where?"

"On the pipe. Where they found him." He turned his hand over, and made a fist, as if he were holding something heavy. "If you pick up a length of steel and swing it at someone, you hold it hard. Very hard, at one end. You leave a thick, fresh deposit exactly where your hand was, and not much anywhere else. If your brother did that, bare-handed, he'll be thick at the grip, and fresh." He opened his hand. "If he's everywhere, evenly, a thin old coat of him from end to end, all the way into the threads, that isn't a grip. That's a man who's handled a thousand things like it for fifteen years. And a gloved hand on top of it."

I sat very still.

"They can't tell you how old, exactly," he said. "Not even now. Nobody can. But they can tell a thick fresh print from a thin old spread. Any lab could. It's in every textbook I own." He looked at me. "It won't tell you who did it. It tells you what the pipe knows, which is where it's been. That's all DNA ever tells you. Where something has been. Not who was holding it last."

I sat there on the stool with the sequencers humming and thought about the vault. About how everything in that room had said one thing, very clearly, the way Comai had said on my bed with the oranges. *Too clean.*

"If I wanted to put a man in a room," I said slowly, "I wouldn't just bring his face."

Jinsia looked at me.

"I'd bring something he'd touched," I said.

He didn't answer. He didn't need to. I watched him see it, the way I'd watched Comai see things on the chart, all at once, and I watched him not like it at all.

"It wasn't something they picked up," I said. "It wasn't a weapon. It was a signature."

"You don't know that."

"No. But it fits." I heard my own voice. "Everything fits. That's what's wrong with it."

Jinsia was quiet. Then he said, "You can't take this to anyone, can you. You're suspended."

"Anything I carry is poison. I've been told that by three people this week."

"Then don't carry it." He said it simply. "It's not yours. It's not even mine. It's the most ordinary thing in forensic biology. Anyone defending your brother can walk into any lab in the city and ask the question, and the lab will have to answer it. Tell whoever it is." He paused. "When you're allowed to tell anyone anything."

"Halévy," I said. "His advocate."

"Tell Halévy to ask where on it." He stood up. "And now I'm going to take you outside, because you look like you haven't breathed since Tuesday, and I've been in this room since six o'clock yesterday morning, and it's starting to hum at me."

#

The sunken courtyard was very cold and very quiet. Nobody had cleared the snow. It came up over the tops of our boots, and the birch stood in the middle of it with its white bark gone gray in the dusk. There was a bench against the wall, under the overhang, where the snow hadn't reached. Jinsia brushed it off with his sleeve and sat down, and I sat beside him, and through the long windows behind us I could see the lab, bright and empty, with the little lights on the

sequencers.

He took a joint out of his shirt pocket and lit it and drew on it and let the smoke go up toward the square of dark sky above the courtyard. Then he held it out to me without saying anything, the way he'd held it out on the night of the funeral, and every night for years before that.

I looked at it.

"I pulled up my record yesterday," I said.

"Your QQ?"

"My work record. For the quarter. Two days, and then nothing. A flat line along the floor, marked *suspended*." I watched the smoke. "I've spent a hundred years getting up in the dark to push that number up, Jinsia. I lay there and watched it. I wanted to care that it was flat. And I didn't. Not at all."

"No?" he queried.

"You're not surprised?"

"I've known you a very long time." He looked at the joint in his hand, still held out. "The number was never the point, *querido*. You don't care about the number. You care about having something in your hands. The number was just the thing you were holding so you didn't have to hold the other thing." He shrugged, a slow ripple of his long shoulders. "They took your work away. So now your hands are empty. Of course it's loud in there."

"You told me," I said. "After the funeral. Three things that make your head stop."

"Work, and sex, and this."

"They took my work."

"And you came here," he said. "For the DNA."

"I came here for the DNA."

"You came for the DNA," Jinsia agreed, very gently, "and then you stayed."

I took it from him.

I hadn't smoked in a very long time. Not since long before the Leveling, when I'd been young in the ordinary way, the first time, and it had felt furtive and a little bit frightening. It caught in my throat and I coughed, and Jinsia laughed at me, softly, and took it back, and gave it to me again, and the second time I didn't cough.

It took a while. I sat on the bench beside him with the cold coming up through my coat and the snow going blue in the courtyard and I

waited for it, without knowing exactly what I was waiting for. And then, some time later, I noticed that I wasn't waiting anymore.

It wasn't that the thing in my head went away. It was that it lowered its voice. The vault was still there, and the glove on the desk, and the gray line lying on the floor of my record, and the question underneath all of them that had been underneath everything since before I could remember. But it was all a long way off, in another room, behind a door, and I could hear it talking and not make out the words. What was here was the cold, and the bench, and Jinsia's shoulder against mine, warm through two coats. The birch. The first flakes of new snow coming down into the courtyard out of the dark, one at a time, very slowly, so slowly I could have followed any one of them all the way down.

"Oh," I said.

"Yes," said Jinsia.

"You were right."

"I'm always right. Nobody ever listens." He put his arm around me, and I leaned into him, and we sat there. "It doesn't fix anything, you know. It's not an answer. In the morning it's all exactly where you left it."

"I know."

"I'm only saying so because you'll take it apart tomorrow and come and tell me so, very pleased with yourself, and I want to have said it first."

I laughed. It came out slower than usual. Everything did.

"Stay tonight," I said. "At mine."

"Your bed is a crime against people of abnormal proportions."

"We can figure out a way to make you fit."

"That must be the marijuana talking," he said, and didn't move, and neither did I.

We sat there until the courtyard was dark and the lab behind us was only a row of small white lights. It was the first time since the vault that my head had been quiet. I liked it much more than I should have. I knew that, sitting there, the way I'd known it at the noodle house and on the north line, all the times I'd known exactly what I shouldn't do.

I held out my hand for the joint again anyway.

Chapter 19

Saturday, January 10 – Monday, January 12, 171 (2201)

The intake residence in the Sixth Ring looked like every other Earthhold, which I suppose was the point. There was a meadow on the roof and skylights in the meadow and a set of entrance steps with the snow cleared off them. The only thing different was the door at the bottom, which had a checkpoint that let people in and a second one, beside it, that decided whether they could go out.

Avukat had told me to stay away. I went anyway, on Saturday afternoon, because Sora had written that morning to say Berbant had asked for me.

They let me in. I was his brother, and I wasn't on anyone's list of people who shouldn't see him, which surprised me a little. A woman at a desk in the common room took my name and pointed me down a corridor, and I walked down it past ordinary doors with ordinary names on them to the one that said *Rax*.

He was sitting at a small table by a window that looked out onto a sunken garden full of snow. There was a notebook open in front of him, a new one, and a pen, and he'd written perhaps half a page. He looked up when I came in. He looked thinner, which wasn't possible after three days, and older, which wasn't possible at all.

"You came," he said.

"Sora said you asked."

"I did." He put the pen down. "Avukat said you wouldn't."

"Avukat told me not to."

"That's not the same thing. Sit down."

I sat on the edge of the bed. There wasn't anywhere else. The room was small and clean and warm and had nothing in it that belonged to him except the notebook and the pen and, on the windowsill, a small worn piece of metal I recognized. The valve seat.

"They let you keep it," I said.

"I asked. They said it wasn't a weapon." He looked at it. "Everything's a weapon, if you want it to be. There was a length of pipe on the floor of that room, they told me. An offcut. From my depot." He said it very quietly. "They asked me if I'd ever handled it. I said I've handled ten thousand offcuts. I said I don't know which one." He turned his big hands over on the table and looked at them. "They said it had me all over it. Well. Of course it did."

"Tell Halévy to ask where on it," I said.

He looked up.

"Where on the pipe. Whether you're thick at one end, where a hand would grip it, or thin all over, from years of being near it." I told him what Jinsia had told me, the short version, the cup and the gloves and the threads that caught skin like a comb. "It's in every textbook. Any advocate can ask the Office's lab, and the lab has to answer. It doesn't have to come from me. It shouldn't."

"Jinsia told you this?"

"Last night."

Berbant was quiet for a moment. "Where on it," he said, as though he were writing it down somewhere inside his head. "All right. I'll tell her."

"Did you read it? The notebook?"

"I read it."

He waited.

"You were in a trench on the fifteenth of July," I said. "With Hale and Oduya and Brisk. At two forty in the afternoon."

His face didn't change. He just looked at me.

"And on the twenty-eighth of January you were under the floor at 8-104, and on the tenth of April you were rebuilding pump four at 8-112. At the exact times somebody was sitting in the depot break room changing your number under your name." I took a breath. "It wasn't you, Berbant. Not the edits. It was never you. I can show that. Your crew can show it."

He looked down at the notebook. Then he put his hand flat on it, on the half page he'd written, and left it there.

"I knew that," he said. "I knew it wasn't me. It's strange how much it helps to hear somebody else say it."

"I've told Tafuta."

"What did he say?"

"He said it doesn't change the door."

"No," Berbant said. "I suppose it doesn't." He looked out at the snow in the garden. "Then who, Dar? If it's not me. Who sits in my chair for three years? Who knows where I'm going to be?"

"Someone at the depot."

"There are two hundred and forty of us at the depot."

"Someone who knew your schedule. Who knew which slates got left signed in. Who knew you'd be under a floor at the far side of the Ring almost every Tuesday afternoon."

"That's everyone," he said. "Everyone knows that. I've been under that floor every Tuesday for a year. E. won't order the part." He said it without any particular weight, the way he'd complained about Escarpé in the notebook, a small old grievance. "You know he came in on Wednesday morning looking like death? After it happened. Before they came for me. Somebody told me later. He stood in the middle of the depot floor and said she was the first investigator who ever listened to him, and then he went into his office and shut the door and didn't come out for an hour." He shook his head. "I didn't think he liked anybody."

"He liked her?"

"He liked that she listened." Berbant picked up the pen again and turned it in his fingers. "Most people don't, with him."

#

We sat for a while without saying anything. It was very quiet in the residence. Somewhere down the corridor somebody was playing a stringed instrument, badly, the same four notes over and over.

"What are you writing?" I said.

"The story." He didn't look up. "Her story. The one about someone who can be in two places at once." He was quiet for a moment. "I was going to finish it at the cabin. Next month, under the lights. The month I got because somebody cooked my number." He almost laughed. "I'm going to finish it here instead. They've given me plenty of time."

"Is it still terrible?"

"It's much worse." He did smile, then. "She'd have loved it."

"Has your soccer team found anybody for the back line?"

"I haven't asked." I hadn't played with them in six years. I'd traded Saturdays on the pitch for a hiking group that walked more than it talked, which suited me better.

"You should go back," he said. "You were never any good. But you always showed up."

When I got up to go, he stood up too, and put his big hand on my shoulder, the way he always did.

"Dar," he said. "You're not supposed to be doing any of this. Are you?"

"No."

"Are you going to stop?"

I thought about Mira, and Tafuta, and Avukat telling me to stay away from his mountain.

"No," I said.

He nodded as if that was the answer he'd expected. "Be careful," he said. "Whoever it is knows where people are going to be."

#

On Sunday, Comai's cluster asked me to come.

As I came down the entrance steps of her Earthhold, a heavy man was coming up them, slowly, one hand on the rail. It took me a moment to know him without his coffee and his depot. Escarpé. His face was blotched and swollen, as though he'd been crying for a long time and had only just stopped, and the coat with all its pockets hung open.

"Rax," he said. He didn't seem surprised to see me. "I brought her people a letter. I didn't know what else to do." He looked back down the steps at the door. "She read my proposals. Did you know that? The old ones. Forty years of them. She asked for them, and she read every one." His voice broke on it, and he let it. "Nobody ever asked."

He put his hand on my arm for a moment, heavily, the way everyone seemed to now, and went on up the steps and away along the path, and I stood there and felt, for the second time, sorry for him.

Her Earthhold was in the Seventh Ring, in one of the old neighborhoods on the eastern side of the city, where the clusters had been together for a very long time. It was the quiet one she'd told me about on the twenty-fifth, over the stew, full of people who'd been eating dinner together for sixty years. They'd set out tea in the common room, and when I came in, eight or nine of them were sitting around one end of a long table, and they all stood up.

They were planning the Returning. There wasn't much to plan.

Comai's recorded wishes had been three sentences long, and they'd already decided on the tree. A young bristlecone, one of the old slow mountain pines, which somebody in the cluster had been nursing in a pot for years for no particular reason and now had one. It would go into the open meadow at the edge of their Earthhold, where the slope of the roof ran down into the land, and the ground was hers as much as anyone's.

"She said once she wanted something that took a long time to grow," a white-haired man said. He'd colored his hair, the way Judge Lund had, and on him it looked right. "We thought that was a joke. She was always going somewhere."

"She'd want you to say something," a woman said to me. "At the Returning. You were her partner. At work."

"I'll say something."

"Don't make it long. She'd hate that."

"She would."

Afterward, when the others had gone back to their rooms, one of them stayed. A very small woman with bright eyes and a cup of tea she'd been holding the whole time without drinking. Her name was Otilie, and she lived two doors down from Comai, and she had been waiting, I realized, for everyone else to leave.

"Nobody asked me," she said. "The man from the Office. The inquirer. He talked to half the cluster on Thursday, but he didn't ask me. I'm very small. People don't ask me things."

"Ask you what?"

"About the man." She put the cup down. "On Monday. The fifth. The night before. There was a man here, at dusk, at the entrance. Tall. Thin. He had a dark cloak on, with the hood up, but I saw the coat under it when he moved. Orange. A Facilities coat, like the crews wear."

My skin went cold.

"He came to the top of the steps, and she came up to meet him, and they talked. Very low. I was at my window, with the light off." She didn't seem at all embarrassed about it. "They argued. I couldn't hear most of it. I heard her say, *not yet. Not until I'm sure*. And he said something, and she said it again, *not until I'm sure*, louder. And he said, *then you'll go without me*. And he turned around and went down the path very fast, and she stood at the top of the steps for a long time in the cold."

"Did you see his face?"

"No. The hood." She picked the cup back up. "I thought you should know. You were her partner. I thought she'd want you to know before the man from the Office."

#

I wrote to Tafuta that night. I didn't want to. Part of me wanted to find the man in the orange coat myself, before anyone else, and look at his face. But I'd done enough of that. I wrote it all down, Otilie's name and her window and the words she'd heard, and sent it.

Thank you, he wrote back. We'll ask her. Please don't go looking for him.

I didn't answer that.

A tall, thin man in a Facilities coat. Someone who'd been at Co-mai's door the night before she died. Someone she'd argued with. *Then you'll go without me.* Go where? The annex? Someone who'd known she was going. Someone who'd been angry that she wouldn't wait.

Someone with a Facilities coat, which meant someone who could get into Facilities buildings. Someone who might be on the list for a door.

I lay awake until three, and then until four, turning it over.

#

On Monday evening I went to a meeting of the Freehold Society.

I told myself it was because of what Avukat had said at the solstice. *You think he did it for us.* If someone had wanted to prove the number could be made to say anything, and had picked a Freeholder to prove it on, maybe someone in the Society knew who. Maybe someone had said something. It was a reasonable thing to tell myself. The truth was I didn't know where else to go.

The Society met in the Third Ring on Monday nights, in a commons room that belonged to a cluster where half the members lived. The meetings were open. Anybody could come. Very few did. When I came down the steps at seven, there were perhaps eighty people in the room, on folding chairs, and I recognized several of them from the depot, and a few from the Division, and one from my own cluster, who looked very surprised to see me.

It wasn't what I'd expected. I don't know what I'd expected. Something secret, something with a low ceiling and people talking in cor-

ners. It was a meeting. There was an agenda on the wall. There was a woman at the front with a slate reading out minutes from the last meeting in a flat, careful voice. There was a table at the back with tea on it and a stack of the newsletter, which was called *The Hold*, and had a picture on the front of a small house with an ordinary roof.

And they were frightened. You could feel it. Everyone knew. A Freeholder had been arrested for killing an investigator, and it was the first time anyone had ever connected the Society to anything like that, in all the years of its patient, doomed campaign. In the Ring meetings and the break rooms people had started saying *the Pocketers finally killed someone*. The woman with the slate read out a motion to issue a statement. Someone stood up and said the statement should say the Society believed Berbant was innocent. Someone else stood up and said the statement should say nothing about Berbant at all, that the Society couldn't be seen to take sides in a murder case, that the whole campaign depended on being lawful and patient and boring. They argued about it for forty minutes, very politely, in turns.

Avukat was at the front. He was sitting at the end of the organizers' table with his arms folded, and he didn't speak once during the whole argument, and I saw his jaw working.

He saw me about halfway through.

He didn't do anything. He just looked at me, across the room, and then looked away. But when they broke for tea, he came down the side of the room, and took my arm above the elbow, not gently, and walked me out of the commons and down a short corridor to a door at the back.

It was the organizers' room. A small office with a table covered in papers and stacks of *The Hold*, and a row of hooks along one wall with people's coats on them. He pushed the door half closed behind us.

"You don't get to be here," he said. "Not tonight."

"I came to ask—"

"I know what you came to ask. You came to ask which of us did it." His voice was very low and very hard. "Look at them, Dar. Look at that room. They're terrified. We've spent seventy years being the most boring people in QL on purpose. Meetings and minutes and newsletters. Being lawful. Being patient. Never, ever giving anybody a reason. And now people are spitting the word at us in the transit." He was breathing hard. "And you come in here, a suspended

Equeuenomist, whose name is on the order, whose brother is in the residence, and sit in the third row and watch us.”

“Somebody picked a Freeholder, Avukat. Somebody picked Berbant because he was one. You said it yourself at the solstice. To prove the number could be made to say anything.”

“Yes. And did you ever stop and think that might be someone who hates us? Somebody who wanted it to look like us?” He let go of my arm. “I don’t know who did this. If I knew, I’d have walked into the Office of Inquiry with them on Wednesday morning and put them in Tafuta’s lap. I’d have carried them there myself.”

Someone who hates us. I thought of the thin man on the depot stairs, with his slate held flat like a tray, and the small cold pleasure on his face when he saw my brother.

I looked past him at the hooks on the wall. There were perhaps a dozen coats hanging there. Heavy winter coats, mostly dark. A red one. Somebody’s canvas coat that could have been the one Avukat had worn at the cabin. And near the end of the row, a big shapeless coat in a dull brownish color with more pockets on it than any coat needed, every one of them bulging with something.

“Go home, Dar,” Avukat said. He opened the door. “Leave my Society alone. It’s all I’ve got left that isn’t falling apart.”

#

I walked home through the Third Ring in the dark, past Tushar’s rehearsal hall, which was dark too, and along the paths between the white hills.

I kept thinking about the attestations. Not who had changed them. How. Twelve quarters, and every single one had gone through one person’s hands before it was signed. The system drafted it. Somebody changed it. The supervisor signed it. The supervisor always signed it, because who else would know the work. And nobody, ever, checked the draft against the signature, because nobody needed to, because the supervisor was the check.

That was the flaw. Not the door. Not the login. The whole thing was built so that one person stood between a worker and what the worker’s work was said to be worth, and that one person was also the person the worker answered to every day. Whoever signed your outcomes owned your number. I had never thought about it, because I had never needed to. Until I did.

I got home a little before ten. I sat down on my bed in my coat.
At ten twenty, the chime.

It wasn't anyone I knew. The sender was just a string of characters, the way a name had been a string of characters on the city chart, beside the spire, before it had become my brother's.

Stop asking about me at her Earthhold.

Chapter 20

Tuesday, January 13 – Thursday, January 15, 171 (2201)

Who are you? I wrote back.

Nothing.

You were at her door on the fifth. You argued. I'm not with the Office. I'm not anyone. I'm suspended. I just want to know what she knew.

Nothing.

I sat on the edge of my bed on Tuesday morning and looked at the string of characters where a name should have been, and I thought about everything I knew about him, which was almost nothing. Tall. Thin. A Facilities coat under a dark cloak. Someone who'd come to Comai's door at dusk the night before she went to the annex, and argued with her in a low voice, and said *then you'll go without me*, and walked away very fast.

Someone who knew I'd been asking about him at her Earthhold, which meant someone who knew someone in her cluster, or who'd been watching it.

Someone in Facilities. Someone who could get into Facilities buildings. Someone who might, very easily, be one of the thirty names on the list for a door that had put my brother's face where it wasn't.

I thought about telling Tafuta. I'd already told him about the man. I hadn't told him about the message. I sat there with the chime ready behind my eyes, and then I didn't.

#

Tuesday was lentil night. At Tushar's cluster it hadn't meant lentils for years; it was just what everyone called Tuesday. This week it was dumplings, filled with the pale, faintly sweet protein the kitchens made from old plastic, which some bacteria in a vat under one of the domes at PQ1 had made by eating a landfill. Pallavi called

it landfill pork to annoy her mother. I went because Tushar asked me to, and because I couldn't stand another night in my room.

The common room at her Earthhold was the same as it had been in November: the drum, the musicians, the long tables, the bread going fast. It felt like it had been a year. Pallavi was at the end of the table with her stack of bread, and when she saw me she didn't say anything at all. She just got up and came over and put her arms around me, quickly and hard, and then went back to her seat and started eating again as though it hadn't happened.

"She's been worried about you," Tushar said.

"She's sixteen."

"Sixteen-year-olds worry. They're just very bad at showing it." She pushed a bowl toward me. "Eat."

Everybody kept telling me to eat. I ate.

Halfway through the meal, Pallavi leaned across the table toward her mother with the air of someone who had been saving something up all day.

"Tadeo got sent home," she said.

"From school? What for?"

"Trying to get into a practice room." She tore a piece of bread in half. "The good one, on the lower floor, with the old concert grand that's actually in tune. There are twenty other rooms and nobody ever waits for those, but everyone wants that one, so you have to book it, and the door only opens for whoever's got the booking. So Tadeo made himself a face. He took a picture of Mirela, she's the one who always has the booking, and printed it life-size and glued it onto a mask. Everyone knows you can do it. If you show the door the right face, it thinks you're somebody else."

"Everyone knows that?" Tushar asked.

"Everyone knows it," Pallavi agreed. "It doesn't work. Obviously. He stood in front of that door every lunch for a week wearing Mirela's face, and it just looked at him. And then one of the teachers saw him and asked what he was doing, and he said he was rehearsing for a play, and she said, as Mirela? And he got sent home." She ate the bread. "His cousin's friend did it once, he says. In the Ninth Ring. It worked for her."

"It's always somebody's cousin's friend," I said.

She looked at me for the first time since the hug. "You'd know," she said. "You're the one who counts things. Does it work?"

"No," I said. "A door doesn't look at a picture of a face. It looks at the face. The shape of it. Where your eyes are, how far apart, the bones, the way they move. A printed face is flat, and it knows flat when it sees it. It looks hardest at the eyes." I thought about it. "Mostly."

"Mostly," Pallavi repeated, with deep scorn, and turned back to her mother. "I need that room before March, that's all. The audition's in March."

"I know when the audition is," Tushar said. "I'm the one who signed you up."

I laughed with them. It felt strange in my chest, like using a muscle I'd forgotten I had. Then the drummer started up at the far end of the room, and the talk went on to something else, and I forgot about it.

Or I thought I did.

#

Later, in her room, she lay on her back with her feet up on the wall the way she always did, and I sat at the end of the bed, and neither of us spoke. Pallavi was practicing through the wall. The same slow piece. She went through the hard place without stopping now.

"You're doing the thing," Tushar said eventually.

"What thing?"

"You know what thing. You've been doing it since you walked in. You're taking it apart." She turned her head on the pillow to look at me. "You're suspended, Dar. Mira told you to stop. The inquirer told you to stop. Avukat told you to stop, which I'd pay to have seen."

"He told me to stay off his mountain."

"His what?"

"Never mind."

She let it go. "The Office will find whoever did it. That's what it's for. Tafuta will find it, or the jury will. That's the whole point, that it isn't one person deciding. You don't have to."

"The system is what did it," I said.

She was quiet.

"Somebody sat in Berbant's chair for three years," I said. "Somebody used the one place in the whole system where one person decides what your work is worth, and nobody checks them. And then somebody used a door, which is supposed to be the one thing that can't lie, to put his face in a room he's never been in. It's not a flaw in

someone, Tushar. It's a flaw in the thing. The thing you think is the best world anyone's ever built."

"It is the best world anyone's ever built," she said. But she said it slowly, and she didn't say it the way she usually did, and after a moment she took her feet down off the wall and sat up. "That doesn't mean it's finished."

"No?"

"They fixed the formula once. When it had IQ in it. Somebody found out it was wrong, and they changed it." She looked at me. "Is that what you're doing? Finding out it's wrong?"

"I'm trying to find out who killed Comai."

"I know." She reached over and took my hand. "I think it's the same thing."

#

The second message came on Wednesday, at a little after six in the evening.

The riverbed. The bench by the cottonwoods where you walked with her on New Year's Eve. Thursday, seven in the morning. Come alone. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm the one who's scared.

I read it twice. He knew where we'd walked. He'd known where we'd walked for two weeks, and he'd never said a word to anyone.

I didn't tell Tafuta. I didn't tell anyone.

#

It was still nearly dark at seven on Thursday morning. The path along the old riverbed was pale gray under a pale gray sky, and the cottonwoods stood up out of it, enormous and bare, with the snow still lying in the forks of their branches the way it had on New Year's Eve. There was no woodpecker. There was nothing moving at all.

The bench was where it had been. Somebody had brushed the snow off it this time.

He was standing beside it.

He was tall, the way Otilie had said, and thin in a way that looked as though it came from not eating rather than from how he was made. He had the cloak on, dark and heavy, with the hood up. When he saw me coming down the path he didn't move. He stood with his hands in front of him, and I saw, as I got closer, that they were shaking, and that he wasn't trying very hard to hide it.

I stopped a few meters away.

"You're Dar?" he asked.

"You know I am."

"I know you are." He pushed his hood back. His face was long and narrow and very tired, with dark stubble on it and eyes that had been crying or not sleeping, or both. Under the cloak I could see the orange of a Facilities coat, and on its breast, where the crews wore their marks, a small embroidered patch: a stylized door with a line through it. The checkpoint crew. I'd seen that patch before, and the long face above it, on a stepladder at the top of the depot ramp in the Lull, fitting a new lens into a door. "My name's Teo. Teo Rahasia. I'm sorry about the messages. I didn't know how else to do it."

"You were at her door on the fifth?"

"Yes."

"You argued with her?"

"Yes."

"You're Facilities. You're on the checkpoint crew." I nodded at the patch. "You're on the annex list?"

"Yes." He didn't look away. "All of that. And my door says I was home on Tuesday night, and I was, and I know exactly how much that's worth. That's why I didn't go to the Office." His voice cracked slightly. "Look at me, Dar. A man who knew her, who argued with her the night before, who fixes the doors, who can walk into that room. I'm everything that door would love. I'd be sitting in the residence next to your brother by Friday."

"Then why are you talking to me?"

"Because she trusted you," he said. "She told me so. And because I can't carry it by myself anymore."

#

We sat down on the bench. Not close. He sat at one end with his long hands clasped between his knees, and I sat at the other, and between us the snow had been brushed away so that the old wood showed through, dark and wet.

"We were together," he said. "A long time ago. Twenty years. About a year, which with her was a long time. She was very bad at being someone's for long. And very good at being someone's friend forever. After it ended, we were friends. We had dinner every month or so. She'd tell me about her trips. I'd tell her about doors."

"She came to you?"

"On Saturday. The third. At night." He looked at the river, or where the river had been. "She said she was working on something she couldn't tell me about, and that it had a door in it, and she needed to know how a door could get someone wrong. So I told her. What I could. How the matchers work, what they log, what they don't. How they can fail." He paused. "And then I did something I shouldn't have. I went and looked."

"At Checkpoint 3."

"At Checkpoint 3." He nodded. "I'm on the crew that maintains the matchers. I can see their diagnostics. The misreads in October were logged. There was a fault report, under—" he glanced at me, "under your brother's name, I know. But the diagnostics don't look like a fault. A fault is random. Temperature, a bad sensor, a firmware bug, it gets things wrong every which way. These weren't random. These were the same door getting the same kind of thing wrong a handful of times, late at night, over a week in October. It looked like somebody practicing."

I was very still.

"And then in November they replaced the matcher," Teo said. "That's my crew's job. We replace matchers. It's in the log as done by us. Routine replacement, faulty unit, systems crew." He turned and looked at me. "We never did it. Nobody on my crew touched that door in November. I asked every one of them. The work was logged under a supervisor's credentials at one in the morning on a Sunday. The new matcher's serial number doesn't appear anywhere in stores. It didn't come from us. And the old one, the faulty one, never came back for recycling. It's just gone."

"Whose credentials?"

He didn't answer right away. He looked down at his hands.

"I told her this on Monday," he said. "The fifth. That's why I went to her door. I'd found out that afternoon, and I went straight there, and I told her, and she said, *I'm going to go and look at it tomorrow night. I'm going to go and see what it does.* And I said you can't. Not alone. Not in that room. Take it to your supervisor, take it to the Office, take it to anyone. And she said *not yet. Not until I'm sure.* She said if she took it to anyone before she was sure, it would become a story about a door, and the door would win. She said she'd tell you when she was sure." He was crying now, quite openly, without doing anything about it. "And I said, then you'll go without me. I meant I won't help you. I

meant it as a threat. I thought she'd wait." He wiped his face with the back of his hand. "She didn't wait. She never waited for anything."

#

We sat there for a while. The light was coming up. The cottonwoods had turned from gray to a sort of pale silver, and somewhere down the riverbed a crow was starting up.

"Whose credentials, Teo?" I said.

He took a breath.

"Escarpé's," he said. "The Eighth Ring depot supervisor. Comte Escarpé."

I sat very still.

"Not Zeker," I said. It came out before I could stop it.

Teo looked at me blankly. "Zeker? From records?" He almost laughed. "Zeker hates Freeholders. He'd love it to be one of them. He's also never touched a door in his life. He couldn't change a lens if you gave him a week and a diagram."

I thought about a flushed man in a coat with too many pockets, standing by my brother's bench with a cup of coffee, telling me he didn't read anything he signed. *Do you know how many valves there are in the Eighth Ring?* Signing fifty drafts in front of Comai without looking at one. Calling Berbant one of the Pocketers, the way you'd talk about someone who tracked mud in. Standing in the middle of the depot on Wednesday morning, looking like death, saying she was the first investigator who'd ever listened to him. Coming up Comai's steps on Sunday with his face blotched from crying, telling me she'd read every proposal he ever wrote.

A sad man, Berbant had said. He wanted to be somebody, and he's the man who signs off on valves.

"There's something else," Teo said. "Something she didn't know. Or maybe she guessed it. I don't know." He looked at me. "I'm a Freeholder, Dar. I've been going to the meetings for thirty years. So has he."

"Escarpé."

"Escarpé." He nodded. "Not at the open meetings, ever. He comes to the committee, in the back room, with the door shut. I only know because I keep the doors for them. He's never spoken at a meeting in his life. He's never put his name on a motion. At work he calls us Pocketers and makes a face. Everyone at the depot thinks he can't

stand us." He was quiet for a moment. "He's not the face of the Society. He's the hands. He books the rooms. He keeps the lists. He decides who speaks and who doesn't. He's been doing it for longer than I've been a member. Most of the Society doesn't even know he's there, and the ones who do know better than to say so."

I thought about a row of hooks in a small back office in the Third Ring. A dozen coats. A big shapeless brown one near the end, with more pockets on it than any coat needed, every one of them bulging.

I'd looked right at it.

"He wasn't there," I said. It came out slowly. "Tuesday night. He can't have been. Tafuta checked every name on the annex list. Every one of them was where their own door said they were. Everyone except my brother." I heard my own voice. "Escarpé was home. His door says so."

Teo looked at me for a long moment. He'd stopped crying. His long face was very still, and in the gray light there was something in it I hadn't seen before, something that looked almost like pity, and almost like anger.

"His door," he said.

"His door says he was home."

"I know it does." He stood up. He pulled his hood back up over his head and looked down at me from under it, a tall, thin, frightened man in a Facilities coat, on the checkpoint crew, who fixed the doors of the city for a living. "I maintain those doors, Dar. All of them. I've been doing it for thirty years."

He was quiet for a moment. The crow went on down the river.

"Do you know what a door can't see?"

Chapter 21

Thursday, January 15 – Friday, January 16, 171 (2201)

"A door can't see anything that doesn't go through it," Teo said.

He sat back down on the bench. The light had come up while we'd been talking, and the cottonwoods had gone from silver to a pale, washed gold, and I could see his face properly for the first time: long, tired, unshaven, and absolutely certain.

"That sounds like nothing," he said. "It isn't. Everyone in this city thinks the doors see everything. They don't. They see the door. That's all. They look at your face when you walk through them and they write down that you did. If you don't walk through them, they don't know you exist." He held up one long hand and counted on it. "Every Earthhold has a front door with a checkpoint. Residents in and out. But every Earthhold also has a service hatch. Usually at the back, sometimes on the meadow side, sometimes down by the utility room. It's where the crews go in to get at the pumps and the exchangers and the water, so they don't have to walk through the common room with a pipe wrench in the middle of dinner."

"And the hatch doesn't have a checkpoint."

"The hatch has a lock. A real one. Mechanical. With a key. Supervisors keep the keys. Crews sign them out. There's no face on a hatch, Dar. There never has been. Nobody ever thought there needed to be. Who breaks *out* of their own house?"

I sat very still.

"His front door will say he was home on the sixth," Teo said. "Tafuta will have checked it. His front door doesn't say anything about the hatch. The hatch doesn't say anything to anybody."

"Almost nothing," I said.

He looked at me.

"You said the hatch doesn't say anything to anybody. That's not quite true, is it?" I was thinking about Berbant's work orders. *Cleared*

intake screen. Traced pressure loss. About how Facilities knew, every morning, what had broken in the night. "The crews know when a hatch has been opened. Don't they? There's something."

Teo was quiet for a long moment. Then he nodded slowly.

"Seal sensors," he said. "On the hatch frames. They don't know who. They just know open and closed, so that if a crew forgets to shut one in January, somebody gets an alert before the pipes freeze." He rubbed his face. "It goes into the maintenance telemetry. Not the identity logs. Nobody thinks of it as the same thing. It's not protected the same way, because it's not about people. It's about pipes." He looked at me. "And it doesn't keep. Thirty days, and then it rolls over, unless someone flags it. Nobody ever flags pipes."

The sixth had been nine days ago.

"Can you see it?"

"I see it every day," he said. "It's my job."

#

He wouldn't pull it right away. I didn't ask him to. We sat on the bench until nearly nine, and argued about it, carefully, the way Comai and I had argued about the identity request on the first day, and in the end we agreed on what I think she would have agreed on.

"I'll look," he said. "Just look. I won't pull anything, and I won't copy anything, and I won't send it to you. If it's there, it's there, and it'll still be there when someone with an order comes for it." He stood up. "If I send it to you, it's a suspended man and a suspect handing each other secrets on a bench. If someone with an order finds it, it's evidence."

"She'd have said the same thing."

"She did say the same thing." He pulled his hood up. "About you. On the fifth. She said, *if I bring Dar into this, whatever I find is worthless.* She was right." He hesitated. "She said you'd hate that. She said you'd hate it and then you'd see it."

"I hate it," I said.

"I know." He turned to go, and turned back. "What will you do?"

I thought about the notebook in my coat. About the fifteen years of notebooks in a drawer in the Eighth Ring. About a man who had spent every Tuesday afternoon for a year under a kitchen floor because his supervisor wouldn't order the part.

"I'm going to ask my brother where the hatches are," I said.

#

He went away up the path toward the Second Ring with his hood up. I sat on the bench a while longer, and then I walked home the long way, along the riverbed, under the cottonwoods.

I was nearly at the transit stop before I noticed.

My head was quiet. Not the way it had been in Jinsia's courtyard, slow and far off and behind a door. The other way. The old way. I had something in my hands again, a door that couldn't see and a hatch that nobody watched, and the whole of me had gone narrow and bright around it, the way it did in the display room with a good anomaly turning in front of me. The question was still down there, underneath. It always was. But it had gone back to where it lived when I was working, somewhere below the floor, where I could hear it knocking and didn't have to answer.

I was glad. That was what I noticed. I was walking along a frozen river ten days before my partner's Returning, with a frightened man's secret in my head and my brother in a residence, and I was glad, because I had something to chase.

I didn't like what that told me. It told me it didn't matter very much what I was chasing. Only that I was.

I got on the pod anyway, and thought about hatches all the way home.

#

Tushar wrote that night, a little after ten.

Come to the Institute tomorrow. The archive, in the old east wing. Four o'clock. I found something and I hate it.

#

The archive was at the other end of the Institute from Jinsia's lab, in the old east wing, under the third meadow, where the first researchers had worked before anyone thought to put windows in. It was a good deal colder than the rest of the building, because paper liked the cold. It was a long, low room with no skylights, lit by lamps on the reading tables, and it smelled of dust and old glue and the faint sharp smell of the stuff they treated the shelves with. A clerk at the door looked at me over her glasses and pointed without a word to the far end.

Tushar was at the last table, alone, with a gray archive box open in front of her and a book lying in it, a real one, bound in faded green cloth. She was wearing thin white cotton gloves. She didn't look up when I sat down across from her. She was reading, with one gloved finger resting on the page to keep her place, and her face was the face she wore at the end of a long rehearsal that had gone badly.

"Jinsia says you came to see him," she said, still reading.

"Last Friday."

"He says you smoked with him." She turned a page. "He was very pleased with himself about that. He told me as though he'd won something."

"Maybe he did."

"Maybe." She finally looked up. "This isn't about that. Sit closer. I don't want to say it loudly."

I moved my chair around the corner of the table.

"This," Tushar said, touching the green book, "is the Formula Review Panel's rulebook for the year forty-one. One of the first editions ever printed. Nobody's opened it in about sixty years. The clerk had to find the key to the cage." She turned it toward me, keeping her finger on the page. "I came looking because of what you said on Tuesday. *The system is what did it.* I was so angry with you I couldn't sleep. I thought, I'll go and find the part where they thought of it, and I'll show him, and he'll have to admit that somebody thought of it."

"And they had."

"They had." She read it to me. She didn't need to; I could see it on the page. But she read it anyway, in her reading voice, the one she'd used on Founding Day. "*No outcome shall be attested by one person alone. Every attestation shall be witnessed by two members of the Queue drawn by lot from outside the worker's directorate, who shall examine the work and the record together, and neither of whom shall answer to the worker's supervisor.*" She took her finger off the page. "The witness clause. It was in the rules from the year thirty-four. Two strangers, drawn by lot, for every attestation, for everyone in the city. Nobody could write down what your work was worth without two people who didn't know you checking it."

I sat back. The lamp buzzed very faintly on the table between us.

"What happened to it?"

"This happened to it." She reached into the box and took out a sec-

ond book, blue this time, much thinner, and opened it to a page she'd marked with a slip of paper. "The year ninety-six. The Simplification. You've heard of the Simplification."

"Everyone's heard of the Simplification."

"I've taught it." Her voice was very even. "I've given the lecture forty times, Dar. I gave it to Pallavi's class last spring. The year the Queue grew up. The year it stopped being afraid of itself. They cut a third of the evaluation work in the whole system, and the panels stopped being backlogged, and people got their evaluations on time for the first time in a decade, and everyone was so relieved." She turned the book toward me. "Here's the minute. The witness clause is item nineteen. Repealed for efficiency. And here's the reason, in the Panel's own words, the only reason anyone ever gave."

I read it.

The witness requirement is found to be slow, costly in the time of the witnesses, and redundant in practice. The supervisor knows the work. Who else would know?

I read it again, and then a third time, because Comai would have.

"I said that," I said. "To you. In your room, the night you told me about the roofs. *Who else would know?*"

"Everyone says it." Tushar pulled the white gloves off, one finger at a time, and laid them on the table. "It's the most natural thing in the world to say. It's been the most natural thing in the world to say for seventy-five years, because they wrote it down in ninety-six and everyone forgot it had ever been a question." She looked at the blue book. "They had it, Dar. We had it. The check. The exact thing that would have stopped him. And we took it out, on purpose, because it was slow, and everybody clapped, and I've been standing up in front of children telling them it was the year we grew up."

"You didn't know."

"I'm a queuestorian. It's my whole job to know." She said it sharply, and then she put both hands over her face and sat like that for a moment. When she took them away, her eyes were wet and furious. "Don't be kind about it. Please. You were right on Tuesday. It isn't finished. It's worse than that. It's not just unfinished. It went backwards, and it did it in the open, in a green book and a blue book, and nobody noticed for seventy-five years, and a woman is dead."

I didn't think there was anything I could say that she'd want to hear, and she'd asked me not to be kind, and I didn't know how to be

anything else with her right then.

#

We sat in the cold for a while. The clerk at the far end turned a page. Somewhere across the courtyard, at the other end of the building, the sequencers would be humming, and Jinsia would be folded over a display with his chin in his hand.

"It's still the best world anyone's ever built," Tushar said at last. She said it quietly, as though she were testing whether it would still hold her weight.

I didn't argue.

"It is. I haven't stopped believing it." She closed the blue book. "I'm just going to have to say it differently now. For the rest of my life. It's the best world anyone's ever built, and it forgets things, and it forgot this." She laid the blue book in the box beside the green one. "I'm going to write it up. Properly. The clause, the repeal, the minute. And I'm going to send it to Mira Nadzor myself. From the Institute. As a queuestorian."

"Not through me."

"Not through you. You're poison, apparently. Jinsia told me that too." She almost smiled. "And because it's mine. I found it. I want it to have my name on it and not yours, for once."

"What will Mira do with it?"

"I don't know. Something. People like her always do something." She put the lid on the box. "She'll need to know it isn't new, whatever she does. That somebody thought of it before. It's much harder to argue against putting something back than it is to argue against something new."

She stood up and tucked the box under her arm to carry it back to the clerk, and then she stopped, and looked down at me, with her gloves in her other hand.

"Go and find out who did it," she said. "And then come back and help me find out what else we took out."

Chapter 22

Saturday, January 17 – Tuesday, January 20, 171 (2201)

Sora brought the drawer on Saturday.

Not the drawer itself. Its contents. Fourteen more notebooks, all the same size, all with the same soft covers gone dark at the edges, tied together with a length of cord in the order he'd filled them. She put them on my table without a word and stood back and looked at them.

"He said you'd want them," she said. "He said you'd ask. He said, when he asks, tell him to look for the hatches." She looked at me. "I told him that sounded like something out of a story. He said everything sounds like something out of a story until you're the one it happens to."

"How is he?"

"He's writing." She sat down in the other chair, which she'd never done before. She looked very tired. "He writes all day. He says it's the best thing he's ever done, which means it's terrible. He says the residence is very quiet and nobody interrupts him and the food is bad, and it's the longest he's gone since he was a boy without somebody needing something fixed." She stopped. "He's frightened, Dar. He won't say it. I'm his wife. I can tell."

"So am I."

"Are you going to get him out?"

I didn't answer that. I didn't know how to. I untied the cord.

#

It took most of Saturday and all of Sunday.

I read them in order, the way Comai would have, because I didn't know what I was looking for and I didn't want to miss it. Fifteen years of my brother's working life in his small square hand. Pumps and seals and screens. Couplings. Valves. A heat exchanger in 8-104

that had been failing, on and off, for eleven years. Small complaints. *E. won't sign. E. says next quarter. E. shouted at Brisk for dropping a length of pipe. Brisk didn't drop it. I did.* A note, three years ago, in the margin: *Drabelig's birthday. Called. She's climbing again. She sounded happy.* I had to put that one down for a while.

And the hatches. There were hundreds of hatches. Every Earthhold in the Eighth Ring had one, and Berbant had been through most of them. *8-097 hatch, meadow side, stiff lock, oiled. 8-112 hatch, utility room, seal replaced.* He wrote them down the way he wrote everything, where and when and what he'd done, so that he'd remember where he'd been.

On Sunday afternoon, a little after four, I found it.

It was in the notebook from more than two years ago, in October. Not the October of the misreads, or the one before. The one before that.

Sat 20 Oct. 8-133 hatch, back. E.'s Earthhold. He asked me to rehang it. Quietly, he said. Weekend, not logged. Said the old hinge squeaked and woke his neighbors. New hinge, new seal, lubed the lock. Swings silent now. He watched the whole time. Didn't say thank you. Never does.

I read it again, slowly.

Then I sat back in my chair and looked at the skylight, where it was already getting dark, and thought about a man in a coat with too many pockets standing over my brother on a Saturday afternoon more than two years ago, watching him make a door silent.

#

Teo wrote on Sunday night. One line.

It's there. 8-133, rear hatch. Jan 6. Open 10:58 p.m. Closed 12:34 a.m. And one more thing I didn't think to look for until tonight: depot carrier 8R-04 left the depot bay at 11:06 p.m. and came back at 12:25. Carriers log where they go, not who rides in them. It went to the First Ring and stopped for twenty-six minutes one meadow over from the annex. I haven't touched any of it.

I didn't answer for a long time. I sat on my bed in the dark, in my coat, with the notebook open on my knee to the page from more than two years ago, and I did the arithmetic the way Comai had done it on the first day, before I had.

Some time that evening, Escarpé had walked in through his own front door, and the door had written it down. Ten fifty-eight, the

hatch at the back of his Earthhold opened. Eleven oh six, a carrier nobody would ever think to ask about pulled out of the depot where he was the supervisor. Eleven forty-one, a face that the annex door decided was my brother's walked into the annex. Eleven forty-seven, my brother's draft was changed on the terminal in the vault, with her on the floor beside it. Eleven fifty-eight, the same face walked out again. Twelve twenty-five, the carrier was back in its bay. Twelve thirty-four, the hatch at the back of Escarpé's Earthhold closed.

And then I stopped, because it wasn't only Escarpé's Earthhold.

Lives in E.'s Earthhold, too. Berbant had told me so at the depot, on the first day of the Lull, wiping his hands. Zeker. The two of them coming down the ramp together every morning without a word. A hundred and fifty people lived behind that hatch, and two of them worked at the Eighth Ring depot. One of them signed the drafts. The other one kept them: the man who could open any draft in the Ring without a login, who was on the annex list, who looked after the terminal in the vault. Teo had laughed at the idea. *He couldn't change a lens if you gave him a week and a diagram.* But you didn't have to change a lens to sit at a terminal. And a hatch didn't write down a name.

The front door had logged them both home that evening. The hatch had logged a door opening and a door closing. It didn't say whose hand.

An hour and a half. Out through a door nobody watched, across the city in a machine nobody logged by name, and back in through the same door again. No transit gate. No front door. Nothing with a face. A hinge that didn't squeak, because my brother had fixed it.

I thought about the November matcher that nobody on Teo's crew had installed. About October, when the old matcher had got things wrong, a handful of times, late at night, over a week, like somebody practicing. Practicing what? Practicing being seen. Practicing standing in front of a lens with something on, some pattern, some trick, until the matcher looked at you and saw somebody else, and then, when the old one was too unreliable, putting in a new one that would see what you wanted every time.

It looked like somebody practicing.

I still didn't have the how of the face. I didn't know what he'd worn, or what he'd done to the matcher, or how you made a door look at one man and see another.

I thought, for no reason I could name, about Pallavi at lentil night,

tearing a piece of bread in half. *If you show the door the right face, it thinks you're somebody else.* A boy in front of a practice-room door every lunch for a week wearing a paper girl, and the door looking straight through it. I'd told her a door didn't look at a picture. I'd told her it looked at the face, and hardest at the eyes.

Mostly, I'd said.

I sat there in the dark and turned that word over.

A paper face couldn't fool a good matcher. Tadeo had proved that for a week at lunch. The old Checkpoint 3 had been a good matcher, and in October it had kept getting things wrong, a handful of times over a week, and then somebody had stopped trying to fool it and replaced it. Somebody who'd given up on fooling a door had built one instead.

You don't have to fool a door you've built. You teach it. You tell it, *when you see this, write down that name*, and it never looks behind it again, and nobody ever checks, because nobody ever looks inside a matcher unless it breaks. And the new one had never broken. Tafuta had told me so himself, in the room with the bad tea: *no faults logged at all.*

And whatever *this* was, it didn't need to be a face at all. It only had to sit where the matcher looked hardest, which was the eyes.

At a little after one in the morning I wrote to Teo. *Can a matcher be taught to see something that isn't a face? Not fooled. Taught. A pattern, worn at the eyes, that it's been told is a person.*

He answered in four minutes. I don't think he'd been asleep either.

An old one, no. A new one, if you built it yourself, yes. You'd add an entry to the identity table that isn't a face. It would sit in there looking like a line of numbers. Nobody would ever find it unless they knew to look.

Then that's what's in the November matcher, I wrote.

A long pause. Then: *Yes. God. Yes. That's what I'd do.*

I didn't have the pattern. But I knew where to look for the how now, and I knew where he'd been, and the door he'd gone out by, and when, and who'd hung it.

And I couldn't do anything about any of it. I was suspended. I couldn't go to the Division, or to the Office, or near the annex or the depot or anyone connected to them. Anything I carried to Tafuta with my own hands was worth nothing. Mira had said so. Comai had said so. Teo had said so on the bench.

There was one person I could carry it to.

#

On Monday I went to the Third Ring.

Avukat's Earthhold was one of the newer ones, near the rehearsal hall, with a very neat entrance and a flock of chickens in a run at the side that he pretended not to have anything to do with. I stood at the top of the steps a while before I went down. I had the notebook in my coat, next to the pendant. I'd copied Teo's line onto a scrap of paper in my own hand, because I didn't want to carry it any other way.

He opened his door himself. He looked at me, and his face didn't change, and he didn't move out of the doorway.

"I told you to stay away from him," he said.

"I have."

"And my mountain."

"I have."

"And my Society."

"I went once."

"Once was enough." He folded his arms. "What do you want, Dar?"

"I need your help," I said. "And I need you to listen to me for ten minutes without saying anything, which I know you've never done in your life."

He looked at me for a long moment. Then he stepped back and let me in.

#

His room was bigger than mine, and much tidier, and full of books, law books and history books and old paper novels with cracked spines, and a model of a motorcycle on the shelf, very detailed, that he'd built himself. On a hook by the door hung a scuffed riding helmet with three club badges on it, and under it a heavy grappling jacket, the weave gone soft from forty years of washing. The machines were the clubs'. The helmet and the jacket were his. I sat in the only comfortable chair, because he pointed at it. He sat on the edge of his desk.

I told him. I told him about Teo, and the bench, and the November matcher logged under a supervisor's credentials at one in the morning on a Sunday. I told him about the hatches, and the seal sensors, and the notebook from more than two years ago. I opened it to the

page and handed it to him, and he read it, and I saw his face change when he got to *E.'s Earthhold*.

I told him about Teo's line. The hatch open at ten fifty-eight and closed at twelve thirty-four. The carrier.

I told him what I thought was sitting in the November matcher's identity table, and what Teo had said at one in the morning. *That's what I'd do.*

And I told him the last thing, which was the thing I'd been dreading. I told him what Teo had said about the Society. *Not the face. The hands. He books the rooms. He keeps the lists.*

Avukat didn't say anything for a long time. He sat on the edge of his desk with Berbant's notebook open in his hands, looking at the page, and his round face went slowly gray.

"Comte," he said at last.

"You know him."

"Of course I know him." His voice was very quiet. "I've known him for forty years. He books the rooms. He keeps the lists. He's the one who tells me when I'm speaking and when I'm not. He's never said a word in a meeting in his life. He sits at the back of the committee room with his coat on and takes notes." He closed the notebook. "I thought he was the most loyal man in the Society. I thought he was the only one of us who didn't want anything for himself."

"He wanted somebody to notice."

Avukat laughed. It was a terrible sound. "He called us Pocketers at work. Berbant told me. I thought it was cover. I thought it was clever. I used to think, there's a man who understands what it costs us to be seen." He put the notebook down very carefully on the desk, as though it might break. "He used Berbant. He picked Berbant because Berbant was ours. Because a Freeholder with a spire is the best argument there's ever been that the whole Queue is a lie." He looked at me. "He did it *for* us, Dar. That's what you came here to tell me. He did it for the Society."

"I think he did it for himself," I said. "I think the Society was just the only thing he had."

Avukat was quiet for a while. Then he stood up.

"Irit Halévy," he said. "Berbant's advocate. She can petition the judiciary for anything that bears on his defense. A seizure. A forensic look at that matcher, with instructions to look for exactly what you just told me. The hatch telemetry. She doesn't need you. She doesn't

need Teo to hand her anything. She needs a reason to ask, and a judge to say yes." He was already touching his temple. "You can't go to Tafuta. You're poison. I can't go, I'm family. But an advocate can go anywhere she likes, if she's asking on behalf of the man in the room."

"Will she?"

"She asked me three questions about the Affirmation terms at his hearing, Dar, and every one of them was the right question." He was pulling up her name. "She'll do it tonight."

#

She did it that night.

On Tuesday afternoon, the twentieth, a little after three, I was sitting in the small room at the Office of Inquiry with the skylight and the bad tea, where I'd sat two weeks before and told Oren Tafuta everything.

It was crowded now. Tafuta was there, in his gray gloves, with a slate on the table in front of him. Mira was there, sitting very straight, not looking at me. Irit Halévy was there, a thin, fierce woman with close-cut white hair and a way of sitting in a chair as though she were about to get up and argue with it. Avukat was there, standing by the wall, because there weren't enough chairs. Teo was there, in his orange coat, with his hood down and his hands clasped between his knees, looking as though he expected to be arrested at any moment. And I was there, because Halévy had asked for me, and Tafuta had looked at her and then said, *fine*.

"The judge granted it at noon," Halévy said. "A forensic examination of the Checkpoint 3 matcher. Full. Firmware, model, identity tables, everything. And the maintenance telemetry for the rear service hatch of Earthhold 8-133 and for the Eighth Ring depot's carriers, the sixth and seventh of January." She looked at Tafuta. "Your technicians have it."

"My technicians have it," Tafuta agreed. He turned the slate around on the table so we could all see it. "And they've had it since one o'clock. The telemetry says what Mr. Rahasia says it says. The hatch opened at ten fifty-eight and closed at twelve thirty-four. Carrier 8R-04 out of its bay at eleven oh six, stopped one meadow over from the annex from eleven thirty-four to twelve, back at twelve twenty-five." He looked at Teo, not unkindly. "Thank you for not

touching it."

Teo swallowed. "You're welcome."

"The matcher," Tafuta said, "will take them until tonight. It's not a simple thing, apparently, to look inside a matcher and see what it's been taught to see." He folded his gloved hands. "But they found the first part in an hour, because Ms. Halévy's petition told them precisely where to look." He kept his eyes on Halévy when he said it. "The identity table has an extra entry. It's not a face. It's a pattern. Something you'd wear. Something you'd hold up in front of the lens, or put in front of your eyes. When the matcher sees it, it doesn't look at the face behind it at all. It just writes down a name."

It was what I'd written to Teo at one in the morning, in the dark, with nothing but a word Pallavi had scorned. Hearing it read back in that room, in Tafuta's slow voice, as fact, went through me like cold water.

"Whose name?" Mira said. She already knew.

"Rax, Berbant."

Nobody said anything for a moment.

"There's one more thing," Halévy said. She looked at Tafuta. "The pipe."

Tafuta nodded slowly. "Ms. Halévy asked my lab a question on Monday of last week. A very good question. Her client passed it to her, I gather." He didn't look at me. He didn't need to. "Where on it. Where on the pipe his DNA was, and how." He touched the slate, and a second page came up beside the first. "The answer came back on Friday. Mr. Rax is on it from end to end, a thin old coat of him, all the way down into the threads. The way you'd expect on an offcut that had sat in the bin beside his bench for a year. There's no fresh deposit at the grip. There's nothing fresh at the grip at all, except a few fibers of dark wool." He laced his gloved fingers together. "A glove."

I thought of Jinsia in the bright humming lab, making a fist around nothing. *That isn't a grip. That's a man who's handled a thousand things like it.*

"It tells us where the pipe had been," Tafuta said. "Which was your brother's depot, and very probably his bench. It doesn't tell us who carried it out." He sat back. "I'll speak to Supervisor Escarpé tomorrow. And to Mr. Zeker." He looked at me. "A hundred and fifty people use that hatch, Mr. Rax. Two of them work at that depot."

At the depot, then. Nine o'clock. When the matcher's done." He looked around the room. "I would ask all of you, very sincerely, to say nothing to anyone until then. Especially to anyone in the Freehold Society." He looked at Avukat. Avukat met his eyes and nodded once.

Then Tafuta looked at me.

"Investigator Nadzor has something to say to you," he said. "After that, I'm going to ask you to be at the depot tomorrow at nine. Not inside. Not near him. At the top of the ramp, where I can see you. He knows you. He's spoken to you. He called your brother a Pocketer to your face." He paused. "I'd like him to see you standing there when I go down."

#

Mira waited until the others had gone. She didn't sit. She stood by the table with her hands clasped behind her back, the way she'd stood in front of the chart with Comai that morning in November, reading it like a face.

"You're still suspended," she said.

"I know."

"You'll be suspended until the review. There'll be a review. You broke your recusal a dozen times, and you'll have to answer for every one of them." She looked at me. "And you found it. You and a frightened man on a bench and your brother's notebooks. The door, and the hatch, and the hinge." She was quiet for a moment. "I'd have found it too, eventually. With an order and time. I'd like to believe that."

"You would have."

"Maybe." She unclasped her hands. "She'd have found it first. She'd nearly found it. That's why she's dead." Her voice didn't break, but it thinned. "I gave her the file because she was careful. She never assumed she was right. She didn't assume the door was right either, Dar. That's all she did. She doubted the door."

She went to the door of the little room and stopped with her hand on it.

"Nine o'clock," she said. "The top of the ramp. I'll be there too."

Chapter 23

Wednesday, January 21, 171 (2201)

I was at the top of the depot ramp at twenty to nine.

It had snowed in the night, a few centimeters of dry new powder over everything, and a sweeper had already been up and down the ramp and pushed the snow into long neat banks on either side. The carriers were waiting at the top, three of them this morning, low and square and furred with frost, humming faintly as their batteries kept them warm. I looked at the numbers stenciled on their sides until I found the one I was looking for. *8R-04*. It looked exactly like the others. It had driven in to the First Ring on the night of the sixth with a man in it, and parked one meadow over from the annex for twenty-six minutes, and come home again, and written down where it had been and nothing at all about who.

Mira came at ten to nine. She stood beside me without saying anything. She had her hands in her coat pockets and her breath was coming out in small white clouds. She was looking down the ramp into the warm yellow mouth of the depot the way she'd looked at the chart that morning in November.

"Did you sleep?" she said eventually.

"No."

"Neither did I."

Tafuta came at five to nine, up the path from the transit stop, with two people from his office and a technician from the Office's lab, a small, careful woman with a slate held very carefully against her chest. He nodded to us both.

"They finished at four this morning," he said. "The matcher."

"And?"

"It's what we thought." He looked at the technician, and she turned her slate toward us without a word. It was a diagram I didn't understand, and then a picture I did. A pattern. Fine, pale,

branching lines, like frost on a window, or the veins in a leaf. "That's what it was taught to see. When that pattern is in front of the lens, at about the height of someone's eyes, the matcher stops looking at the face behind it and writes down a name. Your brother's." He paused. "It's very good work. The technician says she's never seen anything like it. Whoever did this spent a long time learning how."

"October," I said.

"October," Tafuta agreed. "On the old matcher. The technician pulled its update history too. It took a firmware update last summer. Before that, the pattern worked on it often enough. That's how he put your brother's face into the annex the spring before last. The update broke it. So in October he practiced for a week, and it kept getting it wrong, because it was a good matcher and it didn't want to be fooled. So in November, he took it out and put in one he'd built himself." He looked down the ramp. Then he looked at me. "You were right about where to look inside the matcher. So I'll ask you this, too. If the pattern is worn at the eyes, he has to carry it. Where?"

I thought about it, although I'd been thinking about it all night.

"On him," I said. "Whichever of them it is. Not at home. Not in a drawer. He'd never leave it anywhere a search could find it without him there." I thought of Zeker on the depot stairs in his neat gray coat, carrying his slate flat like a tray. And I remembered the back room at the Freehold Society, the row of hooks, the big shapeless brown thing with every pocket bulging. "Look in their coats. Both of them. A man who hides in plain sight keeps things in the most ordinary place he has. And if it isn't in any of the pockets you can see, look under the lining."

Tafuta studied me for a moment with his patient round face. Then he nodded, once.

"I'm going to go and talk to them now," he said. "Mr. Zeker first. His office is nearest the door. Stay here, please. Both of you."

He went down the ramp with his two people behind him and the technician behind them, into the warm and the noise, and we lost sight of them among the benches.

#

It was very quiet at the top of the ramp. The carriers hummed. Somewhere down in the depot the saw started up and then stopped. Mira and I stood side by side in the cold and neither of us said any-

thing.

After about ten minutes, one of Tafuta's people came back up the ramp. She went past me to Mira.

"Mr. Zeker's coat," she said quietly, "has a slate in it, and two pencils, and a list of everyone on the floor who talks politics on their break. Nothing in the lining." She almost smiled. "He'd like to go home. The inquirer has asked him to wait."

She went back down. I let out a breath I hadn't known I was holding, and I didn't know which way it went.

A few minutes later she came up again. This time she stopped in front of me.

"He's asked for you," she said. "The supervisor. He says if he's going to be accused of something he'd like to say it to the face of the man who put it together." She hesitated. "The inquirer says you can come as far as the door of the office. Not inside. You don't speak unless he asks you a question. Do you understand?"

I looked at Mira. She looked at me, and then she nodded, very slightly.

"Go," she said. "Stand where he tells you."

#

The depot floor had gone silent.

Not quiet. Silent. Two hundred and forty people worked out of that building, and there were perhaps sixty of them on the floor that morning, and every one of them had stopped what they were doing. They were standing by their benches with tools in their hands, or sitting on stools with their coffee going cold, and all of them were looking at the glass office in the far corner. Nobody was talking. Nobody was pretending not to look. It was the least QL thing I had ever seen, and I understood it completely.

I walked down the long aisle between the benches. I passed Berbant's bench. His tools were laid out on a cloth in order, the way he'd left them on the sixth, and nobody had touched them. Somebody had put a small pot of greenery at the end of it. I didn't know what that meant. I thought it probably meant something to them.

The man who'd dropped the length of pipe in December was standing by the rack. He watched me go past. He didn't nod.

Near the loop racks, a little apart from the others, three people

were standing together: a big, broad woman with her sleeves pushed up, a gray-bearded man, and a narrow, shaven-headed man holding a coil of cable against his chest as though he'd forgotten he was carrying it. They weren't looking at the office. They were looking at me. The narrow one said something to the woman, very low, and she put her hand on his arm without taking her eyes off my face. I didn't know them.

The office door was open. Tafuta was inside, sitting in a chair across the desk from Escarpé, with his gloved hands folded. One of his people stood by the wall. The technician stood by the door with her slate against her chest. Tafuta's other person was standing beside the coat hook, where a big shapeless coat hung, dull brown, covered with pockets, inside and out.

Escarpé was behind his desk.

He looked the way he'd looked in December. Flushed. A little heavy. Short reddish-brown hair. A cup of coffee in front of him that he hadn't drunk. Behind him, beside the desk, the column of unsigned drafts still hung in the air, pale and translucent, rising up past his head toward the ceiling.

He saw me in the doorway. He looked at me. Then he smiled, a little, not kindly.

"Rax," he said. "The other one. The investigator."

"He's here because you asked for him," Tafuta said mildly. "He won't be speaking unless I ask him to."

"Of course he won't." Escarpé sat back. "Go on, then. Inquirer. You were saying."

#

Tafuta went on.

He did it the way he'd done everything I'd seen him do: slowly, without any particular emphasis, as though he were reading out a list of repairs. He told Escarpé about the hatch at the back of Earthhold 8-133, the one my brother had rehung on a Saturday more than two years ago, quietly, not logged. He told him the seal sensor on that hatch had opened at ten fifty-eight on the night of the sixth and closed at twelve thirty-four. He told him about carrier 8R-04, which had left its bay at eleven oh six and come back at twelve twenty-five, and had spent twenty-six minutes parked one meadow over from the Facilities records annex. He told him the Checkpoint 3 matcher had

been replaced in November under his own supervisor's credentials, at one in the morning on a Sunday, with a part that had never come through stores, by a crew that had never been told about it. And he told him, very quietly, what the technicians had found inside that matcher at four o'clock that morning.

"A pattern," Tafuta said. "Something you'd hold in front of your eyes. The technician tells me it would take a great deal of skill to make one. And a great deal of patience to teach a matcher to accept it."

Escarpé listened to all of it without moving. When Tafuta finished, he picked up his coffee and drank some of it, which was the first time he'd touched it that morning.

"I sign what the system gives me," he said. "I told your investigator that. I told the other one." He nodded at me. "I don't read anything. Anyone on that floor could have got into my credentials. Half of them are Pocketers."

"Would you mind," Tafuta said, not looking at me, "if my colleague looked in your coat?"

Something went across Escarpé's face. It was very small and very fast. Then it was gone.

"There's an order," Tafuta added. "I'd rather ask."

Escarpé didn't answer. Tafuta nodded to the woman by the hook, and she took the big brown coat down, carefully, and laid it on the corner of the desk, and began to go through the pockets one by one.

It took a long time. There were a great many pockets. Through the glass wall behind me I could feel the floor watching, sixty people and not a sound from any of them, and every time she drew something out and laid it on the desk I heard, very faintly, somebody out there let out a breath. There were pens in them, and scraps of paper, and a coupling washer, and a folded carrier schedule, and a small bag of dried fruit, and a key on a ring that I recognized, after a moment, as the kind of key you'd use to open a hatch. Then the pockets were empty, and she looked at Tafuta, and Tafuta looked at me.

"The lining," I said.

She ran her fingers along the inside of the coat, slowly, from the collar down, and stopped. There was a pocket there, sewn in under the lining where you wouldn't find it unless you knew it was there. In it there was a thin case.

She opened it. Inside there was a pair of glasses.

They looked like ordinary glasses. Clear lenses in a light frame. She held them up to the light from the window, and I saw it. On the lenses, very faint, so fine you could only see it when the light came through at an angle, there was a pattern etched into the glass. Pale, branching lines. Like frost on a window. Like the veins in a leaf.

Not a paper face. Nothing a boy could make at lunch. Something fine and patient, cut into the glass by someone who had spent a very long time learning exactly which lines a door would love. *Everyone knows you can do it*, Pallavi had said. *It doesn't work. Obviously.*

It worked.

The technician by the door made a small sound, almost a laugh, and stopped herself.

Escarapé looked at the glasses in the woman's hand. Then he looked at me.

"Do you know why it worked?" he said. "Your brother. Why it was him?" He almost laughed. "Because nobody ever looked at him. Not the panels. Not the Division. Not you. You never paid any attention to him in your life, and you're his brother. I could put his face on anything I liked."

#

He didn't deny it after that. He didn't confess it either, not in words anyone could have written down. He just stopped pretending. It came off him the way a coat comes off, all at once, and what was underneath was not what I'd expected at all.

"Three years," he said. He was looking at Tafuta, but he was talking to me. "Twelve quarters. The best thing I ever built, and I built it in the one place I could never sign my name. So I signed his. I changed the number, and I signed it, and I sent it up, and nobody looked. Not the panels. Not the Division. Not the Formula Review Panel, not the Concord, not the great and fair and wonderful system that everybody in this city thinks is watching them. Nobody. A man with a flat record for twelve years stood up out of the plain like a tower, and nobody noticed, because the only person in the entire city whose job it was to check what his work was worth was the man who was lying about it." He spread his hands. "That's what I built. The one thing I ever made that worked, nobody could see. Oh, the Society would have had its proof one day, when I chose to give it to them. That the number is whatever somebody decides to write down, and

nobody checks the person who writes it. That wasn't the point. The point was that it was mine, and it was perfect, and it was standing right there in the middle of your chart, and none of you ever looked up."

"Somebody checked," I said.

Tafuta looked at me. I'd spoken without being asked. He didn't stop me.

"Yes," Escarpé said. He looked at me. "She did. Your Safed. She sat right there in that chair where the inquirer is sitting and watched me sign fifty drafts and didn't say a word. And she went away and read them. Three times, she told me. She read my drafts three times." His voice did something strange. "Do you know how long it had been since anyone read anything I wrote? Forty years. Forty years of proposals, improvements, ideas. Somebody in another Ring always had it first. And then she came and read every word, very carefully, three times, because she thought it mattered."

"And you killed her for it."

He didn't answer that. He looked down at the desk.

"She should have waited," he said at last, very quietly. "She should have taken it to Nadzor. Nadzor would have taken it to a panel, and the panel would have found a paperwork error, and fixed the number, and put a note in his file, and that would have been the end of it. Nobody would have looked at the door. Nobody ever looks at the doors. Nobody ever looks at the pipes. In thirty days even the hatch would have forgotten I'd opened it." He turned his coffee cup around on the desk, a quarter turn, the way Judge Lund had turned hers. "But she wanted to be sure. She had to see it for herself. She went and sat in that room in the dark, with her back to the door, looking at it." He shook his head. "She wanted to be sure."

"How did you know she'd be there?" I said.

He looked at me as though the question were very stupid, and then, slowly, as though it weren't.

"She told me," he said. "She came to my office on Tuesday afternoon. Alone. She sat in that chair and asked me who had installed the new matcher at the annex in November, because my credentials were on the work order and no one on the crew had done it. She said she didn't want to assume. She said she wanted to give me the chance to explain before she went and looked at it herself." He made a sound that wasn't a laugh. "Tonight, she said. She told me when.

She told me where. Because it was only fair."

The office was very quiet. Outside on the floor, sixty people stood by their benches and didn't move.

Tafuta held out his gloved hand to the technician, and she gave him a slate. Not hers. A different one. I knew it the moment I saw it. The corner of it was scuffed, and it had been lying face up on a white floor beside a hand.

He turned it on and set it on the desk in front of Escarpé.

It was the spire. Comai's spire, the one she'd rebuilt on the last night of her life, turning slowly on the screen. Red and alone above its long flat ground. And around it, now that I could see it properly, in her small, precise, careful hand, her notes.

C3 replaced Nov. By whom? T. says not crew.

T. says E.

Ask E. why. Don't ask E. why.

Be sure first.

She'd gone back and forth on it, there on the slate, in her own hand. And in the end she'd done the fair thing and asked him, because she never assumed she was right, not even about him. It was the last thing she ever decided.

Escarpé looked at it for a long time.

"There's your builder," Tafuta said quietly.

#

They took him out at a little after ten.

Nobody held him. That was the custom, and it held even for this. Intake wasn't punishment. It was the part before anybody knew anything, and it was done with dignity, and everybody on that floor knew it, and nobody said a word as Tafuta's two people walked him down the long aisle between the benches in his shirtsleeves, carrying his own coat over his arm because he'd asked to. He walked with his head up and his face very red, looking straight ahead. He didn't look at Berbant's bench as he passed it, with its tools laid out on a cloth and its little pot of greenery.

I walked behind them, with Tafuta, at a distance. Up the long ramp into the cold. Past the humming carriers. Past 8R-04.

Mira was at the top, where she'd been. She watched him come up the ramp with a face I had never seen on her, perfectly still and perfectly white.

At the top, Escarpé stopped. The two people with him stopped too. He turned around and looked at me.

"You think this is about me," he said.

"I think you killed my partner," I said, "and tried to hang it on my brother."

"You think it's small. A number. A door. A man in a depot who wanted a plaque." He laughed, and it wasn't a nice sound, and there was something in his eyes I didn't like, something bright and loose. "You people. You sit in your dark room and you look at your beautiful charts and you think you're looking at the world. You think anybody checks anything. You think the story they read you every Founding Day is true. Do you know who gets the credit in this city?" He stepped closer to me, and one of Tafuta's people put a hand very gently on his arm, and he didn't seem to notice. "One woman comes down out of nowhere with a book and a shovel. Never ages a day. Lays the first stone of every city on the planet, and nobody ever sees her travel. And then she just walks off into the people she made, and every stone every one of them ever laid has her name on it." He was almost whispering now. "You think a person builds twenty cities and just disappears? Somebody did that work. Somebody always does the work, and somebody else gets the name. Wake up, all of you!"

"That's enough," Tafuta said.

"It's never enough. That's the point. It's never—"

"That's enough, Supervisor." Tafuta's voice didn't rise. It didn't need to. The two people from his office turned Escarpé around, gently, and walked him away down the path toward the transit stop, and he went, and he didn't look back.

We watched him go. Three dark figures on the white path. The way they'd walked my brother down his own steps two weeks ago.

"Cornered men say things," Mira said quietly, beside me. "I've heard worse. A man in QE once told me the Formula Review Panel was run by aliens on the moon."

"If only."

"It's fear, Dar. That's all. He wants it to be bigger than he is. They always do." She took her hands out of her pockets and looked at them, and put them back. "Everybody wants to have been part of something bigger."

Tafuta came back up the path twenty minutes later, alone. He stood beside us at the top of the ramp with his gloved hands clasped in front of him and looked down into the depot, where people were beginning, slowly, to go back to work. The saw started up again. Somebody laughed at something, too loudly, and stopped.

"Irit Halévy is at the judiciary now," he said. "The judge who heard his intake is waiting for her. With the matcher, and the hatch, and the carrier, and the glasses, and your brother's notebooks, I don't imagine it will take long." He turned his round, patient face toward me. "He'll be out by this afternoon. Three o'clock, I'd guess. The residence door will let him go."

I couldn't speak.

Tafuta looked at me for a moment longer. Then, for the first time since I'd met him, he took off one of his gray gloves, and held out his bare hand, and I shook it. His hand was warm.

"Go and get your brother, Dar," he said.

Chapter 24

Wednesday, January 21, 171 (2201)

The door at the intake residence that decided whether you could go out was an ordinary door, with an ordinary lens set into the wall beside it at the height of a face. I'd walked past it the Saturday before last without really seeing it. At ten to three on Wednesday I stood in front of it on the snowy path at the bottom of the entrance steps and couldn't look at anything else.

Sora was beside me, in her nurse's clothes, with her hands clasped so tightly in front of her that her knuckles had gone white. Senne was on her other side, calm, with a covered basket over his arm that smelled of bread. Avukat had come ten minutes after the rest of us and stood a little apart, near the top of the steps, with his coat buttoned up to his chin and his hat pulled down, looking at the door. He hadn't said anything to me. I hadn't said anything to him. Irit Halévy was inside. She'd gone in at two with a slate and a look on her face like someone going to collect a debt.

At three minutes past three, the door opened.

There was no ceremony about it. It just opened, the way doors open, and Halévy came out first, and then Berbant came out behind her, in his orange work coat, with a notebook in one hand and something small clenched in the other.

He stopped on the step. He looked up at the sky. It was a clear, hard, blue winter afternoon, the kind that made the snow on the roofs so bright you had to squint. He stood there looking up at it for a long moment as though he'd never seen one before.

Then Sora reached him, and he dropped the notebook in the snow and put both arms around her, and neither of them moved.

#

Senne picked up the notebook and brushed the snow off it and

held it for him. Avukat came down the steps, slowly, and when Sora finally let go, he took Berbant by both shoulders and looked at him and didn't say anything, and then pulled him in, hard, and held on. Avukat was crying. He didn't pretend he wasn't.

I stood back. I didn't know if I was allowed nearer than that.

Berbant looked at me over Avukat's shoulder. His face was very tired. He looked older than he had any right to, the way he had in the residence ten days before. But something had come back into it, some of what had gone out of him outside the Remnant house, six weeks ago.

"Dar," he said.

"I know."

He let go of Avukat and came over to me. He opened his hand. The valve seat was in it. He looked at it for a moment, and then put it in his pocket, and then he put his hand on my shoulder the way he always did, briefly, heavily.

"They said it was you," he said. "Halévy told me. The notebooks. The hatch." He almost smiled. "The hinge."

"You hung the hinge."

"I hung the hinge." He shook his head slowly. "I stood in his back hallway on a Saturday more than two years ago and fitted a hinge so it wouldn't squeak, and he stood there and watched me do it, and didn't say thank you. I thought that was just him." He looked away. "He was watching me build him a way out."

"You couldn't have known."

"No." He was quiet for a moment. "Neither could she. And she worked it out anyway."

#

Halévy stayed long enough to tell us what had happened, in the fast, precise way of someone who's said the same thing to a judge an hour before and doesn't intend to say it slowly a second time. The judge had heard the petition at one. Tafuta had been there, with the matcher report and the telemetry and the glasses. The judge had asked three questions. She had released Berbant from intake without conditions and ordered the fraud file referred back to the Division for correction, which meant that somebody, probably Mira, would sit down and put Berbant's number back to where it had been for twelve years before somebody else had started turning the dial.

"You'll be flat again," Halévy told him. "About one twenty-eight. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," Berbant said. "I liked being flat."

"They'll take back anything the false number got you. It's automatic. I looked." She looked at her slate. "There's a queue slot. A cabin in Lapland, a month, starting the twentieth of February. It goes to whoever was next. You go back to where you would have been."

Berbant nodded. He didn't look surprised. "That's fair," he said.

"You waited four years for it," Sora said quietly.

"I waited four years for a slot I'd have had next winter anyway," Berbant said. "Somebody else has waited five for this one. It's theirs." He looked at the notebook in Senne's hands. "I'll finish it somewhere else. I've got a room of my own at home. I've got a table. That's all you need, really. The cabin was just the idea of it. And the lights will still be there next winter."

Halévy looked at him for a moment with something like approval. Then she put her slate away.

"If there's anything else," she said, "about the terms, about the correction, about any of it, you come to me. Not to him." She nodded at Avukat. "He's family. He's also very good. But he's family." And she went away down the path toward the transit, fast, the way she did everything.

#

Senne had brought bread. Of course he had. We stood in the snow at the bottom of the residence steps and ate it out of his basket, still warm, the five of us, because none of us could think of anywhere else we wanted to be yet. The door behind us had closed. The lens beside it looked at nobody.

After a while, Sora and Senne walked a little way off along the path, talking quietly, and Avukat went with them. I don't think it was an accident. Berbant and I were left standing together at the bottom of the steps.

"You said something at Senne's table," he said. "On the solstice." He didn't look at me when he said it. He was looking at the white hills. "When Avukat asked you. About the first day, when the name came up. I was sitting right there. I heard you."

I knew what he meant. I'd known it was coming, one day, and I'd known I wouldn't be ready.

"I thought it," I said. "For about a minute. That you'd done it. For the Society. To prove it could be done."

"I know. I heard."

It had been longer than a minute, later, in the dark in January, and about something worse. I didn't tell him that. I still don't know whether that was a kindness.

"I'm sorry, Berbant."

"I know you are." He was quiet for a while. "It's all right. I understand it. I think if it had been you, and I'd been looking at a chart with your name on it, I'd have thought it too. For a minute." He finally looked at me. "But it was a minute, Dar. You're my brother, and there was a minute when you looked at me and saw a man who'd do that. I know it's not fair, but I'm going to have to think about that for a while. I'm not going to be able to not think about it."

"Take as long as you need."

"It'll pass. I think it'll pass." He put his hands in his pockets. "I just don't know when."

We stood there. A bird went over, very high, black against the blue. A raven, maybe, or a crow. I didn't know anything about birds either.

"Did you know her well?" Berbant said. "Comai?"

"Not as well as I thought."

"She was kind to me," he said. "At the depot. When she came to ask me all those questions. She was kind, and she was very careful, and she asked to see the valve seat." He took it out of his pocket again and turned it in the light. "Nobody's ever asked to see the valve seat."

#

My chime went at four, while we were walking back to the transit. It was Mira.

Suspension lifted, effective Monday. There'll be a review. There'll be a reprimand in your file that will outlive both of us. There'll be a very great deal of paperwork, which you'll do. Come in Monday at nine.

And then, a minute later:

Thank you, Dar.

I read it more than once. I didn't answer it. I didn't know how.

#

We said goodbye at the Sixth Ring platform. Senne and Sora and

Berbant took the ring line toward the Eighth. Avukat was going to the Third. I was going to the Second.

Avukat stood beside me while we waited. He hadn't said a word to me all afternoon. He was looking up at the board with his hat pulled down and his hands in his coat, and when he spoke he didn't turn his head.

"You did it the wrong way," he said. "All of it. Every rule you broke, I could tell you the article and the clause."

"I know."

"You'll have a reprimand in your file for the next thousand years."

"Mira says it'll outlive both of us."

"Mira's an optimist." He watched the board. A pod came in on the far side and went out again. "I said things. At the Earthhold. The morning they took him."

"You were right about most of them."

"I'm right about most things. It's a great burden." He still didn't look at me. "The woodshed needs restacking. In the spring, when the snow's off. It's too much for one person, and I'm not asking Berbant, he'll only want to rebuild the pump." A pause. "You can come up. Once. Bring your own gloves."

"Your mountain."

"My mountain." He finally turned his head, and looked at me from under the hat, and his round face was as stern as I had ever seen it. "Don't tell anyone."

"I won't."

"You told Comai. And the inquirer. And, I have to assume, your boss."

"I told Comai," I said, "because she was my partner. I told Tafuta because she was dead."

He looked at me for a moment longer. Then he nodded, once, as though that was an answer he could live with, and looked back at the board.

Before the pod came, Avukat turned to me again.

"The Returning," he said. "Sunday. For Comai. Will you speak?"

"They asked me to."

"Good." He nodded slowly. "Don't make it long."

"Everyone keeps telling me that."

"That's because everyone knows you," he said. And for the first time since the solstice, very briefly, my brother and I really laughed

together.

Chapter 25

Sunday, January 25, 171 (2201)

They'd dug the grave the day before.

It was at the edge of the meadow beside Comai's Earthhold, in the Seventh Ring, where the long white slope of the roof ran down into open ground. The ground ran on toward the eastern edge of the city and the prairie beyond it. The earth there was frozen hard a meter down in January. On Saturday morning three people from the Eighth Ring depot had come across the city with a frost-heater and a pair of shovels and spent the whole day on it, without being asked, and without saying why. A digger from the yards could have done it in twenty minutes. They hadn't asked for one. Hale, Oduya, and Brisk. The three who'd stood in a trench with my brother on the fifteenth of July while one of them handed around ice. I knew them the moment I saw them: the big broad woman, the gray-bearded man, and the narrow, shaven-headed one, who had stood together by the loop racks on Wednesday morning and watched me walk down the depot floor. I didn't know how they'd known. I think Berbant must have told them. I think he must have asked.

When I came up the path at a little before noon, the hole was there in the snow, dark and square and neat, with the dug earth piled beside it under a tarp to keep it from freezing again. Beside it, in a pot wrapped in sacking, was the bristlecone.

It was very small. It came up to my knee. Its needles were short and dark and bunched close along the branches, like the bristles of a brush, and it looked old already, the way bristlecones do, as though it had been patiently growing for a long time and intended to go on. They could live for thousands of years, somebody told me later, up on the high ridges where nothing else would. They grew so slowly that a tree as tall as a man might be older than the city.

She said once she wanted something that took a long time to grow.

#

There were no chairs. There was no bier. There was no east and no west, no veil, no one standing at the front. People just came up the path in ones and twos and small groups, in their winter coats, and stood around the grave in a loose, uneven ring, the way you'd stand around anything you'd all come to look at. They talked quietly. Some of them held hands. Someone had brought a thermos and was handing out small cups of something hot. Nobody had told them where to stand, and nobody seemed to need telling.

Her cluster was there, all of them, the old friends who'd been eating dinner together for sixty years. The white-haired man. Otilie, very small, in a coat far too big for her, standing at the very front because otherwise she wouldn't have been able to see. Mira came, alone, and stood near the back with her hands in her pockets. Tafuta came, in his gray gloves, and stood beside her, and nodded to me once across the snow.

Tushar came with Pallavi, and Jinsia with them. Pallavi had her violin case slung over her back and didn't explain it. My family came, all of them: Senne, and Sora with her arm through Berbant's, and Avukat a little behind, buttoned up to the chin. Berbant looked at the grave, and at the three people from his depot standing beside it with their shovels, and something went across his face that I didn't have a word for.

And Teo came. He stood at the very edge of the ring, at the far side, with his hood down and his hands in the pockets of his orange coat, as though he wasn't sure he was allowed to be there at all.

Imani came too. I hadn't expected it. She came up the path by herself, slender and quiet, with the three-ringed pendant on its braided cord at her throat, and stood among the others without any particular ceremony, and when she saw me she only nodded. She'd been to a Returning before, she told me afterward. Everyone had. It was what most people did. It was only her own people who did it differently.

#

And then I saw Comai.

She was standing on the other side of the grave, with her back to me, talking to the white-haired man. Very tall. Lithe. Black hair, pulled back. A long dark coat. She moved her hand as she talked,

a small, precise, rehearsed movement, and something in my chest stopped completely.

Then she turned around, and it wasn't her.

It was nearly her. The same height. The same long bones, the same black hair, the same chiseled face. But the eyes were a little farther apart, and softer, and there was a small scar through one eyebrow that Comai had never had, and when this woman looked at me across the grave she looked at me the way you'd look at a stranger you'd heard a great deal about.

She came around the grave toward me. People moved out of her way.

"You're Dar," she said. Her voice was lower than Comai's. "You look exactly the way she said you would."

"How did she say I'd look?"

"Like a closed door that's thinking about something." She almost smiled. "I'm Nigora. Her sister."

I didn't say anything. I couldn't, for a moment.

"She never told you about me," Nigora said. It wasn't a question. "It's all right. She never told anyone at work about anyone. She said work was the one place she had to be the best at something, and she couldn't do it if she was carrying anything else in with her." She looked down at the grave. "She told me about you, though. Every time we had dinner. My partner who takes everything apart. That's what she called you."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm so sorry. I should have—"

"No. You shouldn't have anything." She put her hand on my arm, briefly, and her hand was very like Comai's, long-fingered and cool. "She'd hate it if we stood here being sorry at each other. She'd tell us to get on with it."

#

The white-haired man stepped up to the edge of the grave, and people went quiet, not all at once, but gradually, the way a room goes quiet when people notice someone is about to say something.

Four people from her cluster had carried her up from the Earth-hold. She was wrapped in a plain undyed shroud, pale gray-brown, the color of dry grass. It would be gone in a year, they told me. So would she. That was the point. They lowered her into the grave on long cloth straps, slowly, carefully, the way you'd lower something

you didn't want to wake, and then they drew the straps back up and stepped away.

The white-haired man read one sentence. It was the only thing anyone read.

"She returns to what made her," he said, "and what made her continues."

That was all. He stepped back.

Then Hale and Oduya and Brisk came forward. They shoveled enough of the dirt on top of her to serve as a foundation. Then they turned to the bristlecone. They took off the sacking. They set the small tree down into the grave, on top of the earth they'd shoveled back over her, at the height where its roots would reach down into her, and they filled in the rest around it with their hands, pressing the cold earth down firmly with their palms, and then with the flat of the shovel, until the little tree stood up out of the ground by itself. Brisk tamped the last of it down with the heel of his boot and stepped back, and wiped his eyes with his sleeve, and didn't seem to care who saw.

There was no marker. There never would be. In a year the shroud would be soil, and in ten years the bristlecone would be a little taller, and in a hundred years it might come up to someone's shoulder, and nobody walking past it on the edge of the meadow would know it was anything but a tree.

Nothing would stand higher than a person. That was the rule. The ground belonged to the Earth. It always had.

#

After that, people talked.

Nobody organized it. There was no custom about how many, or in what order, or for how long. Somebody just started, and then somebody else, and it went on for most of an hour, with long pauses in between, and nobody minded the pauses.

The white-haired man said she'd been the only person in the cluster who ever came to the Dugnads early, and the only one who ever brought her own tools, and that every time she did she'd told him about the trip she was planning next. Ottilie said Comai had once spent an entire evening teaching her how to use a feature on her slate that Ottilie had never wanted to use in the first place, and had been so kind about it that Ottilie had pretended to want to, and still did.

A woman I didn't know said Comai had been the worst card player she'd ever sat across from, and the worst loser, and that she'd come to the game every single week for twenty years anyway, and had never once let anybody let her win, and several people laughed.

Hale spoke, which I don't think anyone expected, least of all Hale. She stood with the shovel still in her hand, leaning on it, and said that Comai had come down to the depot in December and spent an afternoon asking everybody questions, and writing down the answers, and then asking the same questions again to make sure she'd written them down right. "Nobody from the Division ever came down to the depot before," she said. "Not in forty years. We're just points to you people." She glanced at me, and then at Mira, and didn't apologize for it. "She wasn't like that. She wanted to know what a coupling was for." She stopped, and looked at the little tree, and then said, "That's all," and stepped back, and Brisk put his arm around her.

Tushar said, quietly, that she'd only met her twice, and both times Comai had asked her a question about history that nobody had asked her in years, and had listened to the whole answer.

Teo didn't speak. He stood at the edge of the ring with his hands in his pockets, and his face was wet, and once, when someone said something about how stubborn she'd been, he laughed out loud and put his hand over his mouth.

Mira spoke. I hadn't thought she would. She stepped forward to the edge of the grave and looked down at the little tree for a moment, and then said, "She was the best investigator I had. Not the fastest. Not the cleverest. The best. She never once assumed she was right." She stopped. "She didn't assume it about the last thing either. It's why we know what happened to her." And she stepped back again, and put her hands in her pockets, and Tafuta beside her didn't look at her, which I think was a kindness.

Then Nigora spoke.

She stood at the head of the grave, very tall in her long coat, with the bristlecone at her feet, and she was quiet for a long time before she said anything.

"We went to the reef," she said. "At QC. In August. It was her idea. It was always her idea. She'd been in the queue for a year and she got two places and she asked me, because she said I was the only person she knew who wouldn't try to talk to her the whole time underwater." A few people laughed. "She read the dive manual three times on the

transit. I watched her do it. Three times. She said the first time she didn't understand it, and the second time she understood it but didn't trust it, and the third time she could finally pretend she'd understood it the first time."

I closed my eyes. I'd heard her say it, on a transit platform in November, in the snow.

"And then we went down," Nigora said. "And there were fish. So many fish. Angelfish, and something blue I don't know the name of, and a turtle that looked at us like we owed it something. The water was so clear you forgot it was water." Her voice didn't break. It thinned, very slightly, and she waited until it came back. "And she held my hand. The whole time. Forty minutes. She'd never done that, even when we were small. And she didn't plan the next trip. Not once. Not for a whole day. She just floated there, holding on to me, looking at the fish." She was quiet for a moment. "That was the only day I ever saw my sister not keeping score."

She stepped back.

Nobody spoke for a long time after that.

#

Then it was my turn, because everyone was looking at me, and because I'd said I would.

I went to the edge of the grave. The little bristlecone stood in the dark turned earth with snow around it, and beyond it the white slope of the roof, and beyond that the white city. I thought about all the things I could say. About the spire. About the display room, the first day, and the red point standing up out of the orange. About the oranges on my bed. About the slate beside her hand, still turning.

Don't make it long, they'd all said.

"She told me once," I said, "that she was the slowest person in every room she'd ever been in. She said it wasn't self-pity. She said it was just true, and she'd made her peace with it, and the only trick she had was to be there first and leave last and read everything three times." I looked at the tree. "She was wrong about that. She wasn't the slowest person in the room. She was the only one in it who was paying attention."

I stepped back. Tushar took my hand.

After a while, Pallavi unslung her violin case, and took out the violin, and without asking anyone, stood at the edge of the ring in

the snow and played the slow piece, the one she'd been practicing through the wall all winter. She didn't stop at the hard place. She went straight through it, a little rough, and kept going, and finished, and put the violin away, and went back to stand beside her mother as though she hadn't done anything at all.

#

People drifted down toward the Earthhold afterward, in ones and twos, the way they'd come up, toward the kitchen and the warm and the food.

Imani stopped beside me on her way down. She didn't say anything about Comai, or the tree, or what I'd said. She looked at me for a moment the way she'd looked at me across Drabelig's bed, listening with her whole face to something I hadn't said out loud.

"Come and eat with us," she said. "At the house. Saturday, before dusk."

"Imani—"

"Bring bread," she said, and went on down the path.

I stood there. *Imani is very wise and would like you to bring bread.* Drabelig had written that to me in her last weeks. I had brought the bread in my head every night, and never once actually carried it up the hill.

Tafuta found me at the edge of the meadow. He had Nigora with him.

"I have to ask," he said, "and I'd rather ask here than somewhere worse. The restoration process. For Supervisor Escarpé. You were her partner, Dar. Miss Safed is her family. If either of you wants any part in it, contact or acknowledgment or anything else, it's yours. If you don't, that's yours too. Nobody will ask you again."

Nigora looked at the little tree for a long moment.

"No," she said. "I don't want to see him. I don't want to hear him say anything. I don't want him to tell me he's sorry." She turned back to Tafuta. "He'll have to do something, won't he? Instead. Labor. For the community."

"He will."

"Then let him plant trees," she said. "A great many trees. In places where nobody will ever know he was there."

Tafuta nodded slowly, as though that were exactly the kind of answer he'd hoped to hear, and wrote nothing down, and went away.

Nigora stood beside me at the edge of the meadow for a while longer, looking at the bristlecone.

"She'd have been bored of the lions in a day," she said.

"She'd have planned the next one while she watched them," I said.

She laughed. It was Comai's laugh, almost exactly, and I had to look away.

Chapter 26

Sunday, January 25, 171 (2201)

We ended up at Senne's table. Of course we did. Everything that year ended up at Senne's table.

It was after dark when we got there, the five of us, on the ring line across the city from the Seventh to the Eighth, nobody saying much. Senne went straight into the kitchen. Sora sat down at the end of the long table and put her head in her hands for a moment and then took it out again and was fine. Berbant sat beside her. Avukat sat across from him, still in his coat. I sat where I always seemed to end up now, at the far end, where I could see all of them.

The cluster's common room was quiet. Sunday supper was over and most people had gone to their rooms, and the lamps were turned low, and the snow was coming down again on the skylights, softly, the way it had been coming down on and off since November. Senne came back out with a pot of something and five cups and poured it without asking. Ginger tea. The same as at the Remnant house.

Nobody drank it right away.

Berbant took the valve seat out of his pocket and put it on the table in front of him, the way another man might put down a coin or a key. He didn't seem to know he'd done it.

"A garden," Avukat said.

He said it to nobody in particular. He was looking at his cup.

"What?" said Senne.

"He'll have a garden." Avukat looked up. "Escarpé. That's what happens now. I know, because I do this for a living. First serious offense. Tier Two. A secure rehabilitative facility, somewhere pleasant, with a room of his own and a window and a garden, and people whose whole job is to sit with him every day and help him understand what he did. Visitors, if anyone wants to come. Someone always does." He turned his cup a quarter turn. "He'll plant things.

He'll do his restoration labor. Trees, probably. It's usually trees. He'll be evaluated every few years. He'll keep his GERAS. And one day, if he's very good and very sorry and says all the right things to the right panel, he'll walk out."

"That's the law," Senne said mildly.

"I know it's the law. I know it better than anyone at this table." Avukat's voice was still quiet, but there was something in it now, something coming up. "I've stood next to people like him in hearing rooms and argued that the law should be exactly that kind. That nobody should be locked up forever. That people change. That the whole point of the thing is to believe they can." He put the cup down. "He killed a woman, Senne. He hit her from behind while she was reading. And then he sat down next to her and changed my brother's number, and walked out, and went home through a hatch Berbant had fixed for him. And the Queue is going to give him a garden."

"What would you do instead?" I said.

Avukat looked at me. "Don't."

"I'm asking. You're the advocate. What's the alternative? We don't have money, so we can't fine him. We don't kill people. We don't lock them up forever, because forever means forever now. It means ten thousand plus years in a room." I said it slowly, the way Comai would have laid it out on a slate. "That's why it's built the way it is. Because there isn't an end, anymore, unless we give him one."

"Then give him one."

"You don't mean that."

"Don't tell me what I mean." He leaned forward. "He consented, Dar. Every one of us did. The Affirmation. Every Renewal, every eighteen years, we sit in a room and we say we understand the terms. The terms say what happens if you do this. He knew them. He'd read them. He agreed to them, and renewed them, and then he did this anyway." He sat back. "And the terms are too kind. That's all I'm saying. The terms were written by people who couldn't imagine anyone like him. They're soft. They're built on the idea that everybody is basically a good member of the collective who got a little lost. They're collectivist to the bone, and it's all very beautiful until the day someone uses the collective as a place to hide."

"Two weeks ago," I said, "those terms were being applied to Berbant."

Avukat stopped.

"Two weeks ago the door said he did it," I said. "The door, and the pipe, and his own credentials on the terminal. Tafuta believed it. The judge who heard his intake believed it enough to keep him. If the terms had been what you want them to be, harder, with an end in them, then you'd have been sitting in a hearing room this month asking a panel to be merciful to the wrong man." I kept my voice level. "That's the first thing. Terms don't know who's guilty. They only know who the doors say is guilty."

"That's a reason to fix the doors."

"It is. And we will. And the next thing will be wrong in a way nobody's thought of yet, the way the doors were." I turned my cup. "Second. You said the terms were written by people who couldn't imagine anyone like him. I don't think that's true. I think they imagined him exactly. I think they sat down after the last war, with everything they'd seen, and decided that the worst person they could imagine still got a window. Not because he deserved it. Because they'd seen what happens to the people who decide who deserves one."

"Very moving," Avukat said. "Did you rehearse it?"

"On the transit."

"It shows." But he'd gone quieter. "And third? You always have a third."

"Third is that you don't want him dead, Avukat. You want him to have been caught by somebody who wasn't us." I said it gently, because it was true and it was cruel. "You want it to have been anyone but a Freeholder."

"He wasn't hiding in the collective," Berbant said.

Everyone looked at him.

"He was hiding in the Society," Berbant said quietly. He was looking at the valve seat. "Your Society, Avukat. Mine. He was hiding in the one place in the whole city where people had agreed to keep their heads down and be patient and never, ever give anybody a reason. He used that. He knew nobody would look." He looked up. "He didn't hide in the Queue. He hid in us."

Avukat went very still.

#

For a while nobody said anything. The snow came down on the skylight. Somewhere in the corridor a door opened and closed.

"I've been going to those meetings for forty years," Avukat said at last. He said it differently now. All the anger had gone out of it, and what was left was worse. "Forty years. Minutes and motions and the newsletter. Tea at the back. Being boring, on purpose, because that was the only way it would ever work. Because if we were boring enough and patient enough and lawful enough, for long enough, one day the Concord would put it to a vote and people would look up and realize they'd been listening to us the whole time." He laughed, a little. "I really believed that. I still do, I think. That's the terrible part."

"What will they do?" Sora asked. "The Freeholders."

"Half of them left on Thursday. The other half voted to issue a statement." He rubbed his face. "It says we condemn it. It says Comte Escarpé was a member, and that he acted alone, and that nothing he did represents what we believe. It's all true." He looked at his hands. "It won't matter. Every time anyone in this city hears the word *Freeholder* for the next fifty years, they're going to think of a woman in a vault. And they're going to call us Pocketers, and they're going to mean it the other way now. The secret way."

"Will you leave?" I said.

"No." He said it immediately. Then he was quiet. "No. Somebody has to stay and be the face of it. Somebody has to stand up in the meetings and say, yes, he was one of us, and no, we're not him. Somebody who isn't afraid to be looked at. Everyone always tells me I like being looked at."

"You do like being looked at," Senne said.

"I do like being looked at." Avukat picked up his cup and drank from it for the first time. "And I'll build it back. Whatever's left. I'll build it back with my hands if I have to, one member at a time. It'll be slow. Maybe it'll take another forty years." He put the cup down. "But it'll be mine. Ours. Something nobody allocated. Something we made."

I thought about a cabin in a fold of rock, with a real roof, and logs fitted by hand, and a shelf that sloped a little to the left.

#

"It would be easier," Senne said gently, "if you just let it go."

Avukat looked at him.

"I mean it," Senne said. "Not the Society. Him. The anger. It's

done, Avukat. She's in the ground. Berbant's home. The law will do what the law does. There's nothing left in it for you to hold." He spread his hands on the table. "Just let it go. Enjoy what you've got. You've got so much."

It was, I think, the kindest thing anyone could have said, and it was absolutely the wrong thing, and I watched it land.

"Enjoy what I've got," Avukat said.

"Yes."

"A woman is dead. My brother spent two weeks in a residence for a murder he didn't commit. The one thing I've given forty years of my life to is going to be a curse word for the next fifty. And you want me to *enjoy what I've got*." His voice was shaking. "Do you ever, for one single minute, Senne, ask yourself whether any of it means anything? Any of it? Or do you just go into the kitchen and make ginger tea?"

"I make ginger tea," Senne said. He didn't raise his voice. He didn't seem hurt, exactly. He looked at Avukat with something that was almost pity, and almost love, and wasn't quite either. "That's what I do. You want me to ask the question. I ask it. Everybody asks it. I've just never needed it answered. I don't know how to explain that to you. I've tried for a hundred and thirty years."

"You've never tried."

"I've tried every day," Senne said. "I set a place for her at the solstice. I made Imani's soup the day they took Berbant. I made ginger tea at the Remnant house. That's me trying." He stood up, and picked up the empty pot, and looked down at all of us. "It's the only way I know how."

He went into the kitchen. After a moment we heard water running.

Avukat put his face in his hands.

After a while I got up and went into the kitchen, because someone had to, and it was never going to be Avukat.

Senne was standing at the sink with the water running over the empty pot. He wasn't washing it. He had both hands flat on the edge of the counter, very still, the way they'd been on the table the night they took Berbant, and his shoulders were shaking without any sound at all.

He heard me and didn't turn around.

"Don't," he said. "Just give me a minute. I'll bring the bread."

I stood in the doorway. I had never once in my life seen Senne need a minute.

"Go and sit down, Dar," he said, still to the sink. "And don't tell him. He needs one of us not to be falling apart. It may as well be me."

I went and sat down.

#

"Mira sent me something," I said, after a long time. I hadn't meant to say it. It came out anyway. "Yesterday. A draft. She's sending it to the Formula Review Panel on Monday, and the Concord after that."

Berbant looked up. "What is it?"

"A rule. That nobody can attest to the outcomes of anyone they supervise. That every attestation has to be signed by someone independent, drawn from a panel, who doesn't work with you and doesn't answer to anyone you answer to. So that the person who says what your work was worth can never again be the person who decides whether you keep your job." I turned my cup. "It's a small thing. It's going to make every supervisor in the city a little less important, and a lot of them are going to complain, and it's going to pass anyway, because nobody will be able to stand up and argue against it with a straight face. Not now."

"Because of her," Sora said.

"Because of her." I didn't look at anyone. "They're calling it the Safed rule. In the Division. Nobody decided to. It just started." I paused. "There's a paper attached to it. From the Science Institute. Tushar's."

Sora looked up. "Tushar?"

"She went into the archive after I told her what I thought." I thought of her pulling off the white gloves one finger at a time. "It turns out we had it once. Two witnesses drawn by lot, for every attestation, from the year thirty-four. The Panel took it out in ninety-six because it was slow. *The supervisor knows the work. Who else would know?*" I turned my cup. "So it isn't a new rule. Mira's calling it a restoration. It's much harder to argue with putting something back."

Nobody said anything. Avukat had taken his face out of his hands. He was looking at me.

"That's a good rule," he said finally. He sounded almost surprised. "That's a check. That's one person who doesn't get to decide everything." He shook his head slowly. "That's the most Freehold thing

the Division has ever done.”

“Don’t tell Mira that.”

“I’m going to tell Mira that at the first opportunity.”

“It won’t bring her back,” Berbant said quietly.

“No,” I said. “It won’t.”

It didn’t feel like winning anything. I’d thought, maybe, that it would. It felt like sitting at a table after a funeral with something useful in my hands that I’d have traded, without thinking about it for half a second, for another hour in the display room with her, on the first day, before we knew anything.

#

Senne came back from the kitchen with bread. Of course he did. He put it on the table and sat back down and tore off a piece and ate it, and after a moment Sora did too, and then Berbant, and then, grudgingly, Avukat.

I didn’t. I sat at the end of the table and looked at them.

Berbant, with the valve seat in front of him on the wood, turning his cup in his big scarred hands, the grease still ground into the creases of his knuckles. A man who’d spent every Tuesday for a year under the same kitchen floor, and knew it would break again, and went back down anyway, because it was his rock.

Avukat, in his coat, with the red gone out of his face, already building something back in his head, one member at a time, with his hands. A man who’d found the one thing in the world that was his, a cabin, a society, a self he’d made out of nothing anybody had allocated him, and meant to go on making it for as long as he lived.

Senne, eating bread. A man who, by his own account, had been asking the question all his life and had simply never thought it, or its answer, worth worrying about. He set places at tables for the dead, and made ginger tea, and let the rest of us go on thinking he was the calmest person we had ever known.

And the empty place where Drabelig would have been, laughing at all of us. Who’d lain in a bed in a room facing west and watched the sun go down with her hand around a circle of three rings, and hadn’t been afraid of anything.

I put my hand inside my coat, over the pendant. Over the notebook. Over the small hard weight of it.

And I understood it then, sitting at the end of Senne’s table, all at

once, the way you understand a chart when it finally turns into a picture. Every one of them had already answered it. The question I had been asking my whole life, the one that sat underneath everything like the background noise of the universe, the one I took apart and put back together at three in the morning with the music on. Drabelig had answered it with the Oneness and the setting sun. Avukat had answered it with the thing he'd built with his own hands and meant to go on building. Berbant had answered it with the valve that would break again tomorrow and the knowledge that he'd fix it. And Senne had answered it by asking it every day of his long life and never once needing it answered.

Four answers. Three of them at one table, and an empty place for the fourth. And I'd tried none of them. Not really. Not all the way.

I envied every one of them. I envied them so much it felt like something in my chest had been pulled tight and tied off. Avukat. Senne. Berbant. Even Drabelig, whom I thought was wrong about almost everything. I sat there and envied them, all four, and hated how much I did.

Berbant was watching me across the table.

"You're doing the thing," he said.

"Have you met me?" I looked at him and tried to smile. It almost worked. "I'm always doing the thing."

He picked up the valve seat and turned it in the lamplight. "What about you, Dar?"

"What about me?"

"All of us have got something," he said. He wasn't unkind about it. He said it the way he'd said *it's never finished*, on the solstice, with the grease on his hands. "Avukat's got his mountain. Senne's got the kitchen. Drabelig had—" he nodded at my coat, where my hand still was, "—that. I've got a drawer full of notebooks and a valve that doesn't fit." He put the valve seat down. "What have you got?"

Everyone was looking at me. Even Avukat. Even Senne, with a piece of bread halfway to his mouth.

I opened my mouth to answer.

I thought I had my work. And sometimes I did.

I thought I had my QQ. And sometimes I did.

But I found, sitting at the end of the table with my hand over my sister's pendant, that I didn't have a thing.

Chapter 27

Saturday, January 31, 171 (2201)

I made the bread myself.

I don't know why. I'd meant to ask Tomas for a loaf from the cluster kitchen, the way anyone would, and when I went down to the kitchen on Saturday morning to ask him, I heard myself ask him to show me how instead. He looked at me over the top of a pot, the way you'd look at a man who'd walked in and asked to be taught to sing.

"Now?" he said.

"If you've got time."

"I've got nothing but time. It's Saturday." He wiped his hands on his apron and pulled a bowl down from the shelf. "Wash your hands. Roll your sleeves up. And don't take it apart while it's rising, Dar. It doesn't like being looked at."

It took all morning. He showed me how much flour, and how much water, and how warm, and then he stood beside me and let me get it wrong and didn't say anything until I'd got it wrong enough to learn something. He showed me how to fold it and turn it and fold it again, and how you could tell by pressing it with one finger whether it was ready, and how to leave it alone under a cloth near the warm pipe and go and do something else. I didn't go and do something else. I sat on a stool and watched it. Tomas laughed at me.

It came out of the oven a little after two, round and brown and slightly lopsided, higher on one side than the other, as though it had tried to stand up in the heat and changed its mind halfway. Tomas tapped the bottom of it with his knuckle and listened, and nodded.

"It's fine," he said. From Tomas, that was a strong endorsement.

I wrapped it in a cloth, still warm, and put on the gray coat and went to the Fifth Ring.

The Remnant's house looked the same as it had in December. The same ordinary entrance, the same steps, the same long white slope of meadow over the roof. I stood at the top of the steps with the bread against my chest and remembered standing there with my brothers in the snow, after, with Avukat asking what I was going to do with it.

I still didn't know. I had it with me.

Imani opened the door before I'd reached the bottom of the steps. She must have been watching for me. She was wearing an apron with flour on it and her close-cut hair had flour in it too, and she looked at the bundle in my arms, and then at my face, and something in her own face I hadn't seen since Founding Day came back into it.

"You brought bread," she said.

"I made it."

"You *made* it." She took it from me and unwrapped a corner of the cloth and looked at it. "It's crooked."

"Tomas says it's fine."

"It's lovely," she said. "It's crooked and it's lovely. Come in. You're letting the cold in."

#

The common room was full of people cooking.

It wasn't a feast day, as far as I knew. It was just a Saturday, late in the afternoon, and the household was making dinner the way every household in QL made dinner, all at once and in each other's way. The long tables that had been pushed back against the walls for the rite in December were out in the middle of the room again, covered in bowls and boards and heaps of chopped things. There were perhaps twenty people, of all sizes. An old woman at the stove with her sleeves pinned up. Two men arguing amiably over a pot. A boy of about eight kneading something on a board that came up to his chin, with more flour on him than on the board. The light wells at either end of the room still had their squares of sky at the top, pale blue going on toward gold.

Imani put my bread in the middle of the nearest table, on a board by itself, as though it were something that needed room.

"This is Dar," she said to the room, not loudly. "Drabelig's little brother."

People looked up. Several of them smiled. The old woman at the stove turned round. I recognized her. She had been the first person

to speak to me at the rite, the one who had taken both my hands and said *Before-blessed* and gone back to her conversation as though she'd done something ordinary.

"The little brother," she said. "Good. Come and cut onions. Everybody here cuts onions."

Her name was Tova. She put a knife in my hand and a heap of onions in front of me and went back to her stove, and I stood at the table beside Imani and cut onions, badly, while the boy watched me with frank contempt from behind his dough.

"You're doing it wrong," he said.

"I know."

"You have to curl your fingers under. Like a cat."

I curled my fingers under like a cat. He nodded, satisfied, and went back to kneading.

#

I watched Imani while we worked. I hadn't meant to. It was what I did.

She was all right. That was the first thing, and it surprised me, and then I was ashamed of being surprised. She wasn't well, exactly. There was something careful about the way she moved, the way you move when you've been ill and are only just trusting your legs again. But she was eating. She laughed twice at something one of the arguing men said. When Tova called her name from the stove she went without having to be asked twice, and when she came back she brushed past me and put her hand on my back for a moment, the way Drabelig would have.

"You're back at rehearsal," I said. "Tushar told me."

"Two weeks now." She scraped the onions into a bowl. "The first day, I couldn't do anything. I stood at the barre and cried. Tushar stood next to me and did the whole class and didn't say a word. She's good at that."

"She is."

"And the second day I did half of it. And now I do all of it, and I only cry at the end, sometimes, in the corridor." She said it simply, the way she said everything. "It's getting better. It's supposed to get better. That's what they told me here."

"They took care of you."

"They held me." She looked around the room, at the old woman at

the stove and the boy with the dough and the two men with their pot. "I moved in the week after. I couldn't stay in our rooms. Everything in them was hers. Tova gave me the room next to hers, and for the first two weeks somebody sat with me every night until I fell asleep. Every night. They took turns. I didn't ask anyone to. Somebody walked me to rehearsal in the mornings, in case I didn't go. Somebody made sure I ate." She picked up another onion. "And every evening at dusk they made me come and stand with them at the west light. Even when I didn't want to. Especially when I didn't want to. Tova said that was the point. That the sun goes down whether you feel like watching it or not."

I cut my onion.

"I know what you think of us," Imani said. She didn't say it unkindly. "Tushar told me what Jinsia said about the rite. *A very well designed room.*"

"That was Jinsia."

"She said you didn't argue with him. It is a very well designed room, Dar. I've never minded that. A thing can be designed and still be true."

#

We ate at dusk. In the after.

That was how the Remnant did it. Dinner waited for the sun. When the light in the west well began to go orange, the whole room stopped. Nobody said anything. The two men took their pot off the heat. Tova put down her spoon. The boy wiped his hands on his shirt, which he had clearly been told many times not to do, and went to stand beside his mother. And everyone in the room turned and faced the west end, where the light was coming down the well and across the floor, the way it had come across the bier.

I stood at the table with the bread knife in my hand. I didn't know whether to put it down.

They didn't sing. It wasn't a rite. It was just a Saturday. They stood there, twenty people in aprons, with their hands closed around their pendants and their faces turned to the light, and their lips moved, and Imani's moved with them. I watched the light climb the wall at the end of the room. It went gold, and then orange, and then deeper than orange, and the room went quiet in a way that had nothing to do with the absence of sound.

And they were held. I'd seen it at the rite, and I'd thought it was the veils and the singing and the choreography of sixty people all standing up at once. There were no veils here. There was a pot of barley soup going cold next to the stove and a boy with flour on his shirt. And they were held anyway, every one of them, as though there were a hand under each of them, the way there had been in December. The boy too. The boy most of all.

I stood among them with a bread knife.

A week ago, at Senne's table, I had envied my brothers so much it had felt like something pulled tight in my chest. I waited for that now. It didn't come. I didn't feel very much of anything. That was what frightened me, standing there. Not that I envied them. That I could watch it, and see it clearly, and know exactly what it was, and feel almost nothing at all. As though whatever it was in me that would have wanted it had gone numb in the cold weeks since, like a hand left too long outside a glove.

The sun went down behind the rim of the well. The room went blue.

"All rivers," Tova said, and the room said it back, and then she picked up her spoon again and said, "Sit. Before it's cold," and everybody sat.

#

They ate my bread first. Tova cut it, and sniffed it, and said it was crooked, and gave the first piece to the boy, who ate it and said it was fine.

Afterward, when the tables were being cleared, Imani took me down the corridor to her room. It was small and plain, smaller than mine, with a narrow bed and a chair and a shelf, and a window onto the light well, and on the shelf a photograph of Drabelig halfway up a rock face, looking down over her shoulder at whoever was taking it, grinning.

"She'd have been so annoyed you made bread," Imani said. "She'd have said, why won't he visit, and then when you finally visited you'd have brought bread you made yourself, and she'd have been annoyed all day that it was lovely."

I laughed. It hurt a little.

Then I took the pendant out of my coat.

I'd been carrying it for seven weeks. I'd carried it into the vault,

and to the Office, and to the depot, and to Senne's table, and every one of those days I'd felt it there, a small hard weight in my pocket. I held it out to her on my palm, with the braided cord coiled around it, the way Ezra had held it out to me.

"It should be yours," I said. "I've been thinking about it for weeks. I don't believe any of it, Imani. You know I don't. I stood in there tonight and I didn't feel anything. It means everything to you and it's never going to mean anything to me, and I'm walking around with it in my coat like—" I didn't know like what. "It isn't right. It should be with someone it means something to."

Imani looked at the pendant. She didn't reach for it.

"It isn't ours," she said.

"It's the Remnant's."

"It isn't the Remnant's. It isn't mine. It's hers." She sat down on the edge of the narrow bed. "When she made her recorded wishes, in October, with Ezra, I was there. I asked her. I said, why Dar? Why not me, why not Senne, who'd wear it? And she laughed at me." Imani smiled at the memory. "She said, give it to the little one. He'll take it apart. He'll carry it around for months trying to work out how it works. Let him. It'll keep him near me while he does."

I stood there with it in my hand.

"She wanted it near you, Dar," Imani said. "Not on you. Near you. That's all. You don't have to believe anything to carry it. You just have to carry it." She closed my fingers over it, the way she had in December, gently, one at a time. "Keep taking it apart. She'd like that."

I put it back in my coat. It had gone warm from my hand.

#

"There's one more thing," Imani said. "The Unveiling."

"In the spring?"

"In April. When the snowmelt comes down and the river's high." She looked at the photograph on the shelf. "We take the ashes down to the Platte, all of us who've lost someone that year, and we give them to the water. It's the happiest day of the year. People laugh. People bring food. Children throw flowers in after them and then try to fish the flowers back out." She turned back to me. "I'd like you to come. And your brothers, if they'll come. And I'd like you to carry her down to the water with me."

"Me?"

"You. She'd think it was funny. The little brother who takes everything apart, carrying her down to the river." She was quiet for a moment. "And I don't want to do it by myself."

I thought about Avukat on the steps outside, in the snow, saying *all rivers* the way he said things he was making fun of, except it hadn't come out that way. About Berbant, who'd told us in December where the ashes would go. About Senne, who would bring ginger tea.

"Yes," I said. "I'll come. I'll carry her."

#

Ezra was in the corridor when I came out. He must have come in for the dusk prayers and stayed for dinner; I hadn't seen him in the crowd. He was leaning against the wall by the door with his hands in his pockets, in the same soft sweater Avukat had sneered at in December, and he looked tired, and kind, and like someone waiting for a pod that was late.

"Dar," he said.

"Ezra."

"You brought bread. I had some. It was good." He pushed himself off the wall. "Walk me to the steps. I'm going your way."

We went up the corridor together toward the entrance. It was cold near the door. Outside, through the glass, the snow on the steps had gone blue in the dusk.

I hadn't meant to ask him. I asked him anyway.

"At the rite," I said. "You told me she'd asked you to tell me something. After. That it counted, and that she was in both now."

"I did."

"Did she tell you that before? In October, when she made her wishes? Or did Imani tell you about the doorway? Or—"

"Or?" Ezra asked.

I waited.

He stopped by the door with his hand on it and didn't open it. He looked at me for a long moment, and I saw that same expression on his face I hadn't been able to read at the rite. I could read it a little better now. It wasn't triumph. It wasn't pity.

"I've stood at that west light more times than I could count," he said. "I've given a great many messages, Dar. Some of them I was given before. Some of them people told me without knowing they

were telling me. And some of them—" He stopped. "Some of them I only know I've been given when I hear myself saying them."

"And which was mine?"

"I don't know," he said. "I've made my peace with not knowing. You haven't. That's the difference between us." He was quiet for a moment. "Most nights I stand there at the light and I'm sure. Of all of it. And some nights I say the words and I don't know who I'm saying them to. I say them anyway."

"Why?"

"Because there are twenty people in that room who need somebody to say them as though he's sure," he said. "And because on the nights I'm not, saying them is the only thing that has ever brought me back." He opened the door, and the cold came in around us. "Don't tell your brother the lawyer I said that. He'd put it in a brief."

"I won't."

"No. I didn't think you would." He looked at me in the blue light on the steps. "She worried about you, you know. More than the others. She said the others had all found somewhere to stand, and you were still looking at the floor, trying to work out what it was made of."

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her the ones who keep asking are the ones I worry about least," Ezra said. "It's the ones who stop that frighten me."

He went down the steps into the dark, toward the transit, and I stood at the top of them for a long time with my hand inside my coat.

Chapter 28

Sunday, February 1, 171 (2201)

On the first of February, a week after we planted her, I went for a walk and didn't come back the way I'd meant to.

I'd been back at the Division for six days. Mira had met me at nine on Monday morning with a stack of review forms as thick as my hand and had said, *start with these*, and nothing else, and I had. I had completed forms and digital paperwork all week. I'd answered questions from a panel of three people I didn't know about every time I'd broken my recusal, and there had been a great many of them, and I'd told the truth every time, because I didn't know what else to do. They were preparing the reprimand that would go into my file. I found that I didn't much mind.

Jinsia had stayed two nights that week. Both nights we'd sat on my bed with the skylight dark and the joint going back and forth between us, not saying much, and both nights I'd slept, all the way through, which was more than I'd managed since December. I hadn't told Tushar. I didn't need to. Jinsia would have.

The night after the second, he didn't come, and at a little after ten I caught myself looking at the door, waiting for his knock the way I used to wait for Monday morning. Not for Jinsia. For the other thing. I noticed it the way I'd have noticed a small, steady upward drift in someone else's numbers, and I made a note of it somewhere in the back of my head, and then I let myself not look at the note.

On Thursday Tushar had written to say that Pallavi had finally got her practice room, the good one on the lower floor with the old concert grand that was actually in tune, and that the audition was on the twelfth of March, and that I was coming. I'd written back that I was. It was the only thing on my calendar for March, and I'd looked at it more often than I would have admitted to anyone. My two months started in June. I hadn't put a single thing in them. At the end of her

message she'd added one more line. *Jinsia says you're sleeping. Are you sleeping, or are you smoking?* I didn't answer that part.

I hadn't been into the display room. I couldn't yet.

On Sunday I woke up early and couldn't get back to sleep, and I put on the gray coat and went out, and walked.

#

It was a bright day, very cold, the sky that hard winter blue again, and I walked the way I always did when I was like this, without deciding where. Out of my Ring and through the next one. Past the red door of the noodle place, closed on Sundays, with its brass plaques and the fourth one hung a little higher than the rest. Along the riverbed for a while, under the cottonwoods, past the bench. I didn't stop at the bench. I thought about it, and didn't.

I was thinking about Berbant's question. I'd been thinking about it all week, at three in the morning, with the music on and then with the music off. *What have you got?*

It was a good question. It was the only question, really. It was the one I'd been asking my whole life, turned around and pointed at me. And every time I tried to answer it, I found myself doing what I always did, which was taking it apart. Drabelig's answer, and Avukat's, and Berbant's, and Senne's. Holding each of them up to the light and turning it, looking for the mechanism, looking for the place where it didn't quite fit, where you could get a fingernail under the edge and pry. I could do that all day. I was very good at it. It was what I knew.

But taking apart other people's answers isn't the same as having one. I knew that. I'd known it at Senne's table, with my hand over the pendant and all of them looking at me. I just didn't know what to do about it.

Somewhere under the white hills, at the Division, in a dark room with black walls, a chart of a million and a half people was turning slowly on its invisible axis. I'd looked at it on Friday, finally, from the doorway, without going in. Mira had put Berbant's number back where it belonged. There was nothing on it anymore standing up out of the plain. Just the orange, rumpled and ordinary, all the way to the edge. A city of people doing about as well as they had been three years ago.

It was a very good chart. I was the one who couldn't look at it.

It was the first of February. The lions were this week. She'd have

been on her way by now, somewhere high over the ocean, reading the tour guide for the third time.

#

I didn't see them until I nearly walked into them.

I was on a path in one of the outer Rings, the Tenth or the Eleventh, somewhere I didn't usually go, between two Earthholds with their long white slopes rising on either side of me, and I had my head down and my hands in my coat, and I wasn't looking at anything. I was somewhere else entirely. I was at Senne's table. I was on the floor of a white vault. I was standing in a kitchen in the Fifth Ring with a bread knife in my hand, watching twenty people in aprons be held. I was standing in a doorway in a kitchen a hundred years ago, holding a timer, telling a small girl it didn't count.

And then there was a shoulder in front of me, and a voice said, "Whoa—" and I stopped so suddenly that I nearly went over backward in the snow.

There were six or seven of them. They were standing in a tight little knot in the middle of the path, where it widened out beside an entrance, with their heads together and their coats pulled up around their ears, the way people stand when they're outside in the cold and have something to say that won't wait until they get indoors. Somebody had a slate. Somebody else was pointing at it. They'd been talking, all of them, low and fast and excited, and I'd walked right into the middle of it without noticing they were there.

They'd stopped talking. They were all looking at me.

"Sorry," I said. "I'm sorry. I wasn't—I didn't see you."

"Clearly," someone said, and somebody else laughed.

"I'll go around."

I started to. And one of them stepped out of the knot, sideways, into my way. Not to block me, exactly. Just to be there.

#

She was about my height, which I noticed because it meant her eyes were level with mine. She had a wide, sharp face and very dark eyes and hair cut short and uneven, as if she'd done it herself, which she probably had. She wasn't wearing a hat. Everyone in the city was wearing a hat. Her ears were red with cold and she didn't seem to have noticed.

She was looking at me with a great deal of interest. Not the polite interest of someone you've nearly knocked over. The other kind. The kind I'd seen on Comai's face in the display room on the first day, looking at the spire.

"You didn't see us," she said.

"No. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's interesting." She tilted her head. "Seven people standing in the middle of a path, talking, and you walked straight into us. Where were you?"

"What?"

"Just now. Before you hit Oskar." She nodded at the shoulder I'd run into. "You weren't here. You were somewhere else. Where?"

I didn't answer. I didn't know how. Nobody had ever asked me that before, not like that, a stranger in the snow, as though it were the most natural question in the world.

"A funeral," I said, finally. It surprised me that I'd said it. "Two, actually. And a table. And a room."

She nodded slowly, as though that were exactly the sort of answer she'd expected.

"You look," she said, "like a man who hasn't felt anything in a month except whatever it is that's been sitting on your chest." She said it without any particular sympathy. It wasn't unkind. It was just an observation, the way you'd say someone's coat was gray. "Am I wrong?"

"No," I said.

"No." She looked back at the others, still in their knot, watching us, and then at me again. "What's your name?"

"Dar."

"Dar." She tried it out. "I'm Seren. Seren Kaif." She didn't hold out a hand. She just stood there with her red ears, looking at me. "What do you do, Dar? When you're not walking into people?"

"I'm an Equeuenomist."

She laughed, suddenly and loudly, and one of the others laughed too. "Of course you are," she said. "Of course. You count things."

"More or less."

"And does counting things make that go away?" She nodded at my chest, where my hand had gone, without my noticing, to rest over the inside pocket of my coat. "Whatever it is?"

I took my hand away.

"No," I said.

#

She looked at me for a long moment. Behind her, the others had gone back to their slate, but I could see one or two of them still glancing over, the way you glance at something you're waiting to see finished.

"We're doing something," Seren said. "Some friends and I. It's not a queue. There isn't a queue for it. There isn't a queue for it because nobody at your Division has ever thought to make one, and I'd like to keep it that way for a while." She smiled, just slightly. "It's something new. Something you haven't tried. I can tell by looking at you that you haven't."

"What is it?"

"If I told you, standing here, it would sound like nothing. Or it would sound like something you'd want to count." She shrugged. "It's better if you just come. Once. See if it's for you."

I should have said no. I knew that, standing there. I knew it the way I'd known it at the noodle house, with Comai's hand flat on her slate, and the way I'd known it on the north line, following the tracks. I was an Equeuenomist with a permanent reprimand on its way into his file, a week out from putting my partner in the ground, and a stranger with red ears was standing in an outer Ring asking me to come and try something she wouldn't describe.

"Can I reach you?" she said.

I thought about it. I thought about Berbant, and his question. *What have you got?*

"Yes," I said.

She touched her temple. A moment later I felt the chime behind my eyes, a new name arriving, a string of characters becoming a word. *Seren*. I touched my own temple and sent mine back.

"Good," she said. "I'll find you. Soon. When we're ready." She stepped back out of my way, back toward the knot of people and their slate. "Try not to walk into anyone before then."

"I'll try."

"Don't try too hard," she said. "It was the most interesting thing that's happened to me all day."

She turned back to the others. They closed around her, bent their heads together over the slate again, and went back to talking, low and

fast, as though I'd never been there at all.

#

I walked on.

The path ran on between the white hills toward the edge of the Ring. The sky was very blue. The snow creaked under my boots. Somewhere ahead of me, far off, I could see the mountains standing up against the sky, white all the way to the top.

I walked for a long time before I noticed it.

I wasn't thinking about the vault. I wasn't thinking about Senne's table, or the empty chair, or the doorway in the kitchen, or the question. For the first time in I didn't know how long, since the red point on the chart, since the name, since the soup and the hospital window and the veils coming off one by one, I wasn't thinking about anything at all. I was just walking. I was just a man in a gray coat, on a path, in the snow.

It wouldn't last. I knew that. It never did.

But I walked all the way home focused on just one thing: who was Seren and what was she planning?

The snow creaked under my boots. Behind me, over the mountains, the first star came out, very small and very far away, and for once I didn't try to work out what it was for.

About S. Ya

S. Ya writes fiction and makes music. *The Spire* is the first book of the Queue Series, seven novels set in a world without money, where the scarce things are earned and almost no one dies.

Free editions, news of the next book, and S. Ya's music are at www.s-ya.art.