THE DRIVE

BOOK 2 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

Monday, June 1, 171 (*2201*)

On the first morning of my two months off, the first of June in the hundred and seventy-first year since the Founding, I woke at six out of habit and lay there with nothing to get up for.

The skylight over my bed was already bright. It had been light since before five, which was typical for June. Somewhere up on the meadow a sweeper was working its way along the path toward the entrance steps, slow and patient, ticking a little as it went. Below me, through the floor, I could hear the kitchen starting: the runner coming up through the wall with the morning's flour, the thump of the run door, Tomas saying something to it, as he always did, in case it might answer him one day if he was polite enough.

I opened my calendar. I'd known what was in it, and I opened it anyway.

Sixty-one days, white and empty, with nothing on any of them. The Division had shut my access at midnight, as it shut everyone's when their months began. That was the rule, and a good one: nobody gets to be indispensable, and nobody gets to keep working through their months to prove they are. I had broken a great many rules that winter. I didn't feel up to breaking that one too.

I closed the calendar and opened it again. It was still empty.

There was one message, sent at 11:58 the night before, two minutes ahead of the shutdown. Mira never sent anything after nine.

Enjoy your months. Don't read the news. When you come back I'll have something for you.

I tried the Division's files, out of habit, to see what she meant. The door was shut, politely, as it was meant to be. I read her message twice more and couldn't get anything else out of it. Mira wrote the way she spoke: exactly as much as she meant, and nothing to hold on to.

Back in February, at the end of everything, I'd told Tomas I was going to spend June reading, and he'd looked at me with such open pity that I'd changed the subject. I had a shelf of paper books I had mostly read. I could finish them. I could walk. My hiking group was doing the long loop out of the north station on Wednesday. I could sit in the common room and be calm at people, like my brother Senne, and find out what it was like.

I lay there and thought about it, and none of it held. It was like trying to stand on ice that kept sliding out from under me.

The chime came behind my eyes at twenty past six.

#

The notice was the kind that goes to everyone at once and that nobody reads. It had a small gold border, which meant the Concord had sent it. The title was in plain letters. I read the title, and then I sat up.

Two Interstellar Drives Complete. Test Scheduled for Summer 172.

I read it three times, as I'd read the first line of a bad report, looking for the place where it turned out not to say what it said.

It said what it said. Two teams had each built a working drive. One was the propulsion group on the orbital station, the Q-wide center for that kind of work, led by a woman named Hana Sokol, whose name I knew as you know the name of a famous dancer. The other was a small team here in QL, twelve people in the core Rings, and S. Ya.

Both drives did the same impossible thing in different ways. Each opened a throat: a door through space, held open between two rings. A throat can't be opened near the sun or a planet, so for a year fusion tugs had been hauling two pairs of test rings out past the orbit of Uranus, twenty-five times as far from the sun as we were, and setting each pair about as far apart as the Earth is from the sun. Next summer each team would open its throat and send a probe through. If it worked, the probe would come out of the far ring eight minutes before its own light could have got there. The data would decide which drive humanity built, and the winner would be scaled up and sent the slow way to Teegarden's Star, twelve and a half light-years out, where there was a world that might be a second home: a ring pushed across the gap at nine-tenths the speed of light, about fifteen years, to be the far end of a door. A throat, the notice said, cost the same

to open however far it reached; what cost was its width. That was why a test across the distance from the Earth to the sun could stand in for twelve and a half light-years. It was, the notice said, in the long tradition of the dipetō industries, an open competition between two providers, so that the better one would win.

At the bottom, there was a line I read four times.

The test rings and their tugs, listed for the past year as routine deep-space infrastructure, were placed for this test.

I knew those line items. I'd seen them. Every quarter the Division got the Q-wide resource summary, and every quarter I skimmed the energy page on my way to the parts I cared about. For a year there had been a fusion-tug allocation out past the asteroid belt that I'd noticed and not looked at, like a stone in my shoe. Routine deep-space infrastructure. I had actually read those words. I had read them and gone on.

I count things. That's the whole of what I do. There had been a number out of place in front of me for a year, the biggest thing anyone had built in a hundred and seventy years, and I'd let it go because it hadn't been my concern.

I sat on the edge of the bed in my underwear and was annoyed with myself for a good five minutes, which was longer than I'd been anything with myself since February.

#

The messages started at half past six.

Tushar's came first, as it always did when something happened that would someday be history. *The queuestory just got a new chapter. Do you understand? A new chapter. I've been teaching the last one for forty years.* And then, a minute later: *Pallavi is screaming. I mean it. She is in the corridor screaming. Someone is going to come out and ask if she's hurt.*

Then Pallavi's, which was three exclamation points and nothing else, and then, a second later, a fourth. And then, a minute after that, a real question, in capitals, as she'd ask it at the table if her mother weren't there to stop her: *WHAT DO THEY GET?*

I knew roughly. Everyone in the Division would have known roughly. I found that I wanted to know exactly, and that I couldn't, because the door was shut.

Then Jinsia's: *Did you see. Of course you saw. Two drives. Two. I want it noted that I said, the night after your sister's funeral, that the line is*

everything, and now the line has somewhere to go. And then: *Don't count it. I can feel you counting it from here.*

Jinsia knew me. I was counting it.

At twenty to seven my brother called.

Avukat never called. He wrote, when he had to, in short messages with no greeting, as if he were filing them. His voice came in behind my eyes so close and loud that I sat down on the bed.

"Have you seen it?"

"I've seen it."

"Do you know what this is?" He didn't wait. "It's the best thing that's happened to us in seventy years."

"Us?"

"The Society. Think, Dar. The greatest thing anyone has ever done, and the formula is going to hand the people who did it exactly what it hands a man who fixes a valve. Everyone will see it. For once they won't be able to look away."

"You don't know what it'll hand them."

"Neither do you," said Avukat. "You're on your months." And he was gone, as he always left a room, before you'd finished being in it with him.

He'd want something. Avukat called when he wanted something, which was why he never called.

I didn't answer any of them right away. I got up and pulled on a shirt and shorts and went up the steps and out onto the meadow, where you weren't supposed to stand much, and stood there anyway in the early sun.

QL looked the way it always looked from above in summer: green hills to the edge of the world, broken by skylights and entrances and the long, low glitter of the transit line, with the mountains standing up to the west, still white at the very tops. The sweeper had reached the end of its path and turned around. Somewhere over toward the Third Ring, faint, I could hear someone cheering.

I looked up. There was nothing to see, of course. It was morning, and the sky was empty and blue, and whatever was out past Uranus was a long way past anything a person could see. But I looked anyway. Most people in QL had the sense to know there was nothing up there to see. I was probably the only person in the city standing on his roof looking for it.

And when the land was whole again, she said, we would look up.

I'd heard that line every Founding Day of my life. I'd always taken it as a figure of speech.

#

At breakfast, the common room was louder than I'd ever heard it, and nobody was talking about anything else. A woman at the next table had pulled the notice up as a projection the size of a dinner plate and was turning it with one finger, as though the craft might be hidden in the corner of it. The three children in our cluster were running laps around the far table, pretending to be ships. Tomas came out of the kitchen with a tray of eggs held up over his head like a trophy and said, to the room, "I want everyone to know I'm not going," and three people cheered, and somebody threw a piece of bread at him.

"Nobody's going yet," the woman with the projection said. "It's a test. It's a long way from going."

"Then I'm not going later," Tomas said, and went back to the kitchen.

I took my eggs and sat at the end of a table and read the notice a fifth time, in full, slowly, as I read records at the Division. Hana Sokol's team: about three hundred people, many of them on the station for decades. S. Ya's team: twelve, and S. Ya. Two designs, which the notice described in language so careful it was clearly hiding how different they were. One "achieves throat formation through a single, highly efficient pulse." The other "employs a staged and sustained opening, supported by a large structure." I could hear both of them in it. A genius and a committee.

Beside me, a man I'd eaten breakfast near for twenty years and never really talked to said, "Who do you think wins?"

"S. Ya," I said, without thinking. "Probably."

He nodded, as though I'd said water was wet. "Doesn't seem fair, does it? Him against a station."

"That's why they're doing it," I said. "So it's fair."

He thought about that for a while and then said, "My granddaughter's going to want to go," and went back to his eggs. I sat there and thought about how strange it was that he had a granddaughter, in a world where children were so rare, and how strange it was that I'd never known.

#

After breakfast I went back to my room and lay down on my bed in my clothes, the way I had all winter, and looked up at the skylight, and the calendar came back.

Sixty-one days.

I had been holding off thinking about it for weeks, and now that it was here, the thing I'd been holding off was simple. Through the winter, the work had been the only thing that kept me level. Last winter I'd found a shape in the city's records that shouldn't have been there, a spike in the numbers we'd started calling the spire, and I'd followed it, past every rule I was supposed to keep, to a supervisor who'd been faking my youngest brother's evaluations, and to the vault where my partner, Comai Safed, was killed for getting there first. My brother was cleared. The rule that let one man sign off on other people's work was changed, and named for her. I kept my job, with a permanent reprimand in my file, and spent the spring being let back in: answering questions, signing things, walking into the display room every morning with the spire long gone from the air. It had been bad, and it had been something. My number had gone back up through the spring, a little. I had watched it go up and felt almost nothing, and the almost was what I'd been living on.

The months took that away. That was what months were for. And at the end of them, apparently, Mira had something for me, and I had sixty-one days to not think about what it was.

In April I'd carried my sister's ashes down to the river at the Unveiling, in a small clay jar that weighed almost nothing. Imani had walked beside me, and my brothers behind us: Senne with the flowers, Berbant with Sora on his arm, Avukat a step apart from the rest in his canvas coat. The Remnant had sung. I had tipped the jar over the water and the water had taken what was in it without any fuss at all. Then everyone had gone back to the Remnant house and eaten, and I'd gone home and slept for eleven hours.

In March I'd sat in the second row of a small hall in the Third Ring while Pallavi played a slow piece on her violin for three people at a long table. She'd played it beautifully and gotten the seat. Afterward she came out, walked straight past her mother and hugged me, hard, without saying anything. Then she pretended it hadn't happened.

My youngest brother, Berbant, was back at the depot. He'd written once in May to say there was a valve in 8-104 that had failed again, and that he'd fixed it again, and that it would fail again, and that he

was happy, and that he hoped I was. I hadn't answered.

None of it was nothing. I knew that. I lay on the bed and knew it and felt the sixty-one days sitting on my chest anyway.

I opened my contacts. I'd been doing it for four months, every few days, the way you touch a sore tooth.

Seren. A string of characters that had become a word in the snow at the start of February, in the outer Rings, when a woman with red ears had asked me where I was and I'd told her. *I'll find you,* she'd said. *Soon. When we're ready.*

She hadn't. Four months. Twice in March I'd almost written, and twice I'd decided that a woman who said she'd find you, and didn't, had already told you something.

I looked at the empty calendar again. Then I looked at her name.

Not a decision, exactly. More like noticing that the ice had stopped sliding.

I wrote: *My months started today. I have nothing in them. You said there wasn't a queue for it.*

I read it over. It sounded like exactly what it was. I sent it anyway.

The answer came back before I'd put my hand down from my temple.

Friday. Dress for dirt.

Chapter 2

Friday, June 5, 171 (2201)

She met me at the last stop on the east line, past the Twelfth Ring, where the city stopped and the yards began.

I'd rarely been out that far. Nobody went that far unless they worked there. The pod emptied out a Ring at a time, families getting off with picnic baskets at the Ninth, a pair of old men with fishing rods at the Tenth, until by the Twelfth it was me and a young man asleep against the window with a coil of cable in his lap, and then it was just me. The doors opened onto a concrete platform with grass growing through the cracks and one light on a pole. The pod sat there humming for a moment as if it couldn't believe anyone wanted to get off, and then it closed its doors and went back the way it had come.

It was a little after nine. It was still not quite dark. In June the light hangs on in the west for a long time after the sun has gone, a band of green over the mountains, and the whole of the city behind me was soft and blue with a few skylights coming on.

Seren was sitting on the edge of the platform with her legs hanging over, eating an apricot.

"You came," she said.

"You said Friday."

"People say they'll come all the time." She finished the apricot and threw the stone out into the dark, where it landed with a small dry sound in the weeds. "You dressed for dirt."

I'd worn my oldest trousers, and boots, and a shirt I didn't care about. I'd stood in front of my small closet for twenty minutes deciding what dirt meant, and the answer I'd come to was: not the gray coat. The gray coat had been through enough.

She stood up. She was as tall as I remembered, eye to eye with me. She wore dark clothes that came all the way to her wrists and up to her throat, though it was warm. Her hair was still short and

looked to have been cut by her, without a mirror, quickly. There was a thin silver ring through her lower lip that I didn't remember from February. At the collar of her shirt, where it had shifted, I could see the edge of something dark on her skin, a line, the curve of something, and then she moved and it was gone.

"Come on," she said. "It's a walk."

#

The yards went on for kilometers.

QL had been built on the edge of what was left of old Denver, and for a hundred and seventy years workers had been taking the old city apart and carrying it away to be used again. I had read about it in a hundred summaries. I had never walked through it.

It was like walking through the sleeping body of something enormous. Cutters and crushers and sorters parked in long rows, some taller than an Earthhold, arms folded against themselves, small blue lights at their joints pulsing slowly. Underfoot, broken things: concrete, black-rusted steel, a drift of colored glass that crunched under our boots.

"Don't touch the machines," Seren said. "They don't mind. But they tell on you in the morning."

"They don't record anything."

"They record that someone moved them." She looked at me sidelong. "You'd know about that, Mr. Equeuenomist."

I didn't answer. Beyond the last row of machines the ground rose, and on top of the rise stood what was left of a building.

Most of it was gone, the upper floors cut away, so that what stood there now was a stump: two stories of gray concrete pillars with the night showing through them. At one end, wide ramps ran down into the ground, made for the cars that everyone had once owned, and from somewhere down those ramps came a sound I felt in my chest before I heard it.

Music. Old music. Drums, and something with strings, and voices.

"The yards keep scheduling the last of it," Seren said. "The basements go last. They always go last." She started down the ramp. "Until then it's ours. We call it the Low."

"Whose?"

She smiled over her shoulder, and didn't answer, and went down into the dark.

#

The bottom of the ramp opened into a room the size of a commons hall, low-ceilinged, with pillars every few meters marching off in rows into the shadows. Old painted lines ran across the floor in faded yellow, marking out spaces the size of a small room each, where people had once left their cars. Someone had hung lamps from the pillars, salvaged things in a dozen different shapes, and they threw warm, uneven light into the near half of the room and left the far half black.

There were perhaps sixty people. It was hot, though the night outside was mild, hot the way a crowded room is hot, with bodies and breath. A band was playing on a platform made of pallets at the far end of the light: a drum kit put together from pieces of other drum kits, a woman with a fiddle, a man with a stringed instrument I didn't have a name for, singing in a language I didn't know. People were dancing in front of them, or near them, close together, not the way people danced at New Year or at the Lull. Not taking turns. Not careful.

There was a long table made from a door laid across two crates, covered in bottles and food. There were people sitting along the walls on cushions and old car seats that someone had pulled out of something and kept. There was a smell I couldn't place, sweet and smoky and a little rotten, like fruit left in the sun. Somebody laughed very loudly near the music and somebody else shushed them and then laughed louder.

On the nearest pillar someone had hung a salvaged screen, and the notice was running on it with the sound off: two rings, a bright thread between them, a probe going through, over and over. Nobody was watching it. While I stood there a big man with a shaved head came over from the table, took the screen in both hands, and turned it to face the concrete.

"Not down here," he said, to nobody. "Down here nobody's going anywhere."

I stood at the bottom of the ramp and looked at it as I'd looked at the chart in the display room nearly seven months before, when a spire had risen from nowhere: turning it, looking for its flat side.

"What are you doing?" Seren asked.

Her question pulled me out of my head. I looked at her and shrugged. "Just thinking."

"About?"

"Drives. Ships. Music. Old Denver. Numbers."

"Why?"

The question surprised me. Then again, Seren didn't know me.

"It's what I do." I paused, then added, "I take things apart. To see how they work."

"Sounds awful." She took my wrist, not gently, and pulled me into the light. "Stop it for an hour. Then you can start again. Come and meet people."

#

"This is Dar," she said to the big man who'd turned the screen, who was opening bottles at the long table with his teeth. "He thinks too much."

"Bram," the man said, and handed me a bottle without telling me what was in it or asking whether I wanted it. "This is my place. They've been saying it'll be a meadow by autumn for six years." He said it with enormous satisfaction, as though the meadow were a joke he'd played on someone. "Drink that slowly. It's from the plums."

I drank it slowly. It was like drinking a small fire that tasted of plums.

"Ines," Seren said, and a woman with cropped red hair and a split, healing lip looked up from a cushion by the wall, nodded once, and went back to taping her knuckles with a roll of white tape. Her forearms were mottled with bruises, plum-dark and already going yellow at the edges. She saw me looking.

"Derby," she said. "Tuesday nights, the old rink in the Eleventh. Come watch. We like an audience."

"Ansel," Seren said, more quietly, and a thin, still man with dark eyes, who'd been sitting a little apart from everyone, stood up and took my hand in both of his and held it for a moment longer than people did. He didn't say anything. He looked at Seren over my shoulder, and something went between them that I wasn't meant to read, and then he let go and sat back down.

"Oskar, you've met," she said. A tall man in a long coat lifted his bottle at me from across the table. It took me a moment. Then I recognized the shoulder.

"I'm sorry," I said. "About February."

"Best thing that happened to me that week," Oskar said. "Bruise lasted three days. You've got a good shoulder for a man who thinks a lot."

And then Seren turned me toward the corner by the music, where an old man sat in a car seat with a cup in his hands, and for a moment I forgot to do anything at all.

He was old. Not gray-haired out of a bottle over a mid-thirties face, as a few people chose to be. Old. His hair was white and thin and lay flat on a spotted scalp. His face was lined so deeply around the mouth and the eyes that it looked carved. The skin on the backs of his hands was loose and marked with brown, and when he lifted the cup, the hand shook, slightly, and steadied, as my mother's hand had shaken the last year before she died.

I hadn't been this close to a face like that in seventy years. Seventy years, more or less. I'd forgotten that I'd forgotten.

"Laszlo," Seren said, and there was something different in her voice, something almost careful. "This is Dar."

The old man looked at me, and then he smiled, and the lines in his face all moved at once, like a map being folded.

"Ah," he said. "You're staring. Good. Everyone should, the first time. It's rude not to." He held out the hand that shook. "I had it taken out forty years ago. GERAS. You're wondering. Everyone wonders and nobody asks."

I took his hand. It was warm and dry and very light, like holding a bird.

"Why?" I said.

He laughed, a cracked, pleased sound. "There. You asked. You're the first one in a year." He let go of my hand and patted the empty car seat beside him. "Sit down. That's not a question you can ask standing up."

#

I sat with Laszlo for an hour, or two. The band played and stopped and played again. Seren went away into the dancing and came back and went away again. The plum drink went down slowly, as Bram had said, and then less slowly.

Laszlo didn't answer my question, not directly. He told me instead about the year before he'd had it done. It was a long, slow story about

a woman he'd loved and a dog they'd had. The dog died, as dogs still did. The woman cried for a week, and he couldn't. That had frightened him more than anything else in his life.

"A dog dies," he said, "and we have a ceremony and a cry and then we go home, and we're thirty-five, and we'll be thirty-five on Sunday, and on a Sunday a thousand years from now. And I sat there in our room and thought: I am never going to feel anything again the way that dog felt the sun lying in the meadows. Not because I'm sad. Because I'm going to have so many suns." He drank. "So I took mine out. Now I've got fewer suns. They're very good."

"And the woman?"

"Kept hers. We stopped, after a while. Kindly." He shrugged, and his shoulders were thin under his shirt. "She sends me a message every year on the dog's birthday. Every year. Forty years. I think that's a kind of love I didn't know about before. Maybe it only works when one of you is going to run out."

I didn't say anything. I was looking past him, at the dancing, at Seren in the middle of it. She danced as she'd stood in the snow in February, completely present, as though there were nothing on either side of the moment she was in. She didn't look at anyone. She didn't look at herself. She had her eyes half closed and her arms up and the sleeve of her shirt had fallen back to her elbow. I could see now, down the inside of her forearm, a column of dark shapes, inked: a small hourglass, a skull no bigger than a thumbnail, a clock with no hands, a flower I didn't know, all of them running up her arm and under the cloth, one after another, like a sentence in a language I didn't read.

"You're looking at her arm," Laszlo said.

"Yes."

"There's more of it." He smiled. "Everywhere, under the clothes. Not her face. Not her hands. She says the face and the hands are for other people." He watched her for a moment, with something that wasn't quite affection and wasn't quite worry. "All of it is death. Skulls, clocks, little hourglasses, the old mourning flowers. Every one of them out of the old books, from before. She's covered herself in the one thing nobody in this city is afraid of anymore."

"Why?"

"You keep asking that." He turned his cup in his hands. "You'd have to ask her. She won't tell you. Seren doesn't do why. She does what."

I watched her dance. In her dark clothes, with her face and her hands bare, she looked like anyone. You could have passed her on a path in the Third Ring and not looked twice.

"You wouldn't know," I said. "To look at her."

"No," said Laszlo. "She keeps it all under the sleeves." He raised his cup to her across the room, though she wasn't looking. "That's what I like about her."

#

At some point Seren came and took the cup out of my hand and set it down on the floor, and pulled me up out of the car seat.

"You've been sitting with Laszlo for two hours," she said. "He's very wise. It's very boring. Come and dance."

"I don't dance."

"Everybody dances. You just haven't been anywhere it was allowed." She pulled me toward the music. "Stop watching. Just for one song."

I tried. I want that on the record. I stood in the crowd near the pallets with sixty strangers pressed around me in the heat, with the drum going through the soles of my boots and the fiddle sawing at something old and sad and fast, and Seren in front of me with her eyes half shut. I tried to stop watching.

I couldn't. I watched the man with the stringed instrument, whose fingers moved faster than I could follow and whose face was perfectly blank, as if his hands belonged to someone else. I watched a couple to my left who were kissing as they danced and kept losing the beat and didn't care. I watched Ines, who had come off her cushion and was dancing alone with her taped fists held up near her face like a fighter. I watched the light from the lamps swing a little as someone brushed by them. I watched myself, a man of a hundred and twenty-seven years, in his oldest trousers, in a basement scheduled to become a meadow, shifting from foot to foot and trying very hard not to be the kind of man who stands at the edge of things and takes notes.

Seren opened her eyes and looked at me, and saw exactly what I was doing, and laughed, as Laszlo had, as if I'd done a trick she hadn't seen before.

"You're terrible at this," she said, over the music.

"I know."

"No, I mean it. You're the worst I've ever seen." She put her hands

on either side of my face, briefly, and looked at me as though I were something she'd found on the ground and was deciding whether to keep. "Nobody here watches anything. They've all forgotten how. You haven't forgotten anything in your life, have you?"

"Not much."

"That's why you're here," she said. "You've never forgotten anything. We've never done anything else." And she let go of my face and went back into the music.

Ines, dancing past with her fists up, gave me a long, flat look over them. "She does this," she said. "Brings one home. They always stand exactly where you're standing." Then the crowd took her and she was gone.

#

I asked Bram, later, if this was a regular group. It was near three in the morning. The band had stopped. Someone was playing an old recording through a speaker no bigger than a fist, and most of the room was sitting down.

"Who?" he said.

"All of you. This. Is this a regular thing?"

He looked over at Seren, who was lying on her back on a cushion with her head in Ansel's lap and her eyes closed, and grinned through his beard.

"We're the Rozkosz," he said.

"What does it mean?"

"It's a word from a language almost nobody speaks anymore. Laszlo found it. Or Seren did. They argue about it." He shrugged. "You could look it up. You won't."

"Is there anything else I should know? Rules?"

"One." He held up a thick finger. "Nobody writes it down. Not the names, not the place, not what anybody did. Whatever happens here happens once." He looked at me with some interest. "You'd be amazed how hard that is for some people."

"Why not?"

"Because you'd like to," he said, "and you're on your months, and this is a place for not doing what you'd like to do because it's sensible." He opened another bottle with his teeth. "Drink this one quickly. It's terrible."

I drank it quickly. It was terrible. I didn't look it up.

#

The sky was going gray when we came up the ramp.

The yards looked different in the first light: smaller, flatter, more like a place where people worked. Out past the rows of machines, at the edge of the packed earth, a line of figures was coming in on foot from the east-line platform, the morning crew, early, carrying their lunches and their flasks. One of them called something to another and laughed. As they reached the first row, the blue lights at the machines' joints brightened, one after another, and the machines began to unfold their arms, slowly, with a long sigh of hydraulics.

Seren stood at the top of the ramp and watched them.

"Twenty hours a week," she said. "They could let the machines do all of it, you know. They choose not to. They come out here at six in the morning and stand beside a crusher that doesn't need them, so they'll have something to be graded on." She said it without much contempt, as Laszlo had said the dog died. "And you count it. Isn't that funny? All of it, for you to count."

I thought of the depot, of the long floor and the assists in their bays, and of Berbant at his bench with his hands inside a pump. I thought about saying something about that. I didn't.

"Everybody works," I said. "What do you do?"

"I do my twenty. Mornings. I wipe down tables in commons halls in the Eleventh Ring and I'm very good at it." She turned and looked at me. In the gray light her face was pale and young, as everyone's face was young, and her eyes were the only thing about her that looked as if it had been awake all night. "The rest of the time I do this."

"What is this?"

She stepped close to me. She didn't touch me. She just stood near enough that I could feel the warmth coming off her after the long hot room, and smell the plum and sweat in her clothes.

"You're asking why again," she said.

Then she kissed me, once, briefly, hard enough that the little silver ring in her lip pressed into mine and stayed there as a small cold point after she'd stepped back.

"Go home," she said. "Sleep. I'll find you."

And she walked away down the long row of waking machines toward the platform, without looking back, and the crew coming

the other way parted around her without seeming to notice she was there.

I stayed at the top of the ramp a while, with the machines groaning awake on either side of me and the sun coming up red over the plains, and touched my lip where the ring had been.

Chapter 3

Sunday, June 7, 171 (2201)

Tushar's cluster ate Sunday lunch outside in summer, on long tables set up on the lawn beside their Earthhold, where the cluster kept its gardens, under a canvas awning that somebody's grandfather had sewn sixty years ago. Everyone was very proud of it, and nobody would let anyone replace it.

I was late. I'd slept until noon on Saturday and then again until ten on Sunday, and in between I'd lain on my bed and looked at the skylight and touched my lip. When I finally walked across the Third Ring in the hot bright middle of the day, I felt like someone coming out of a dark room into the sun: a step behind everything.

Pallavi saw me first. She was sitting at the end of the table with her feet up on the bench opposite, eating a peach, and she watched me come up the path the whole way and didn't wave.

"You look like you slept in a hedge," she said, when I got there.

"Thank you."

"You look like Jinsia after three days in the lab watching gels." She moved her feet so I could sit. "Mom's getting more bread. Jinsia's being disgusting about the drives."

"I'm being enthusiastic about the drives," said Jinsia, from the other side of the table. He was sitting very low on the bench so that his head was only a little higher than everyone else's, which was his way of being polite. "There's a difference."

"You said, 'Finally. Somewhere to put all the babies,'" Pallavi said.

"I stand by it."

I sat down. Jinsia reached across the table and put his hand on the back of mine for a moment, and I noticed that the palm of his hand was rough, which it never was, with a row of new blisters across the base of the fingers, some of them broken and some of them taped.

"What happened to your hands?"

"New hobby," he said, and took his hand back. "Tell you later. Eat something. You look like you slept for two days and it didn't help."

"I did."

He raised his eyebrows slightly and didn't say anything, and I could see him processing it.

#

Tushar came back with the bread, a long loaf still warm, and set it in front of me and kissed me on the top of the head, as she always did, and sat down beside me with her knee against mine.

"You saw it," she said. It wasn't a question.

"I saw it."

"I've been reading the founding documents all weekend. Do you know there's a line in the original prospectus for QL, before there was a QL, that talks about this? A drive. In 2029. They put it in the list of things the city would make possible eventually, right after clean water and right before the end of loneliness." She tore off a piece of bread. "Clean water took six years. Loneliness is still pending. And now this. A hundred and seventy years, and it's the next thing on the list."

"Who wrote the prospectus?"

"Nobody knows. It's unsigned. Tessa's people." She waved the bread. "I've been teaching the last chapter of the queuestory for forty years, Dar. The Founding, the Leveling, the cities, the long quiet. The long quiet was supposed to be the end. There wasn't supposed to be another chapter."

"What do they get?" said Pallavi. "The ones who built them. Nobody will tell me."

"Nobody knows yet," said Tushar.

"They get what everyone gets," said Jinsia. "That's the whole point of the place."

"For a door to the *stars*?"

"For a door to the stars. Or for a valve. That's what fair means, *mija*."

"It's happened before," Tushar said. She'd stopped tearing the bread. "The GERAS team. 2130. They changed what a human being is, and the formula gave them exactly what it gave everyone else. Two of them were bitter about it for decades. One of them still is, I think."

Pallavi turned to me. "You'd know. What would it give them?"

"To S. Ya?" I said. "Probably nothing at all. He's been at the ceiling for seventy years. As far as the formula can tell, building a door to the stars is performing as expected."

I heard it as it came out. So did Tushar. She stopped with the bread halfway to her mouth.

"That can't be right," said Pallavi.

"It might be. I'd have to work it out properly. An afternoon."

"You're on your months," said Tushar.

"I know."

I had already started, a little, in my head, like humming a song I'd just heard. Tushar saw that too. She looked at me properly for the first time, and her face changed a little. "Pallavi's right. Where were you?"

So I told them.

#

I told them as I'd told Comai everything, once, walking behind the Division in the cold: in order, without leaving anything out, because if I started leaving things out I wouldn't know where to stop.

The platform past the Twelfth Ring. The yards at night, the machines asleep. The basement under the ruin and the sixty people in it and the music. Bram and his bottles. Ines and her taped hands. Laszlo, with his white hair and his shaking cup and the dog that died. Seren, whom they'd heard about only as a stranger I'd walked into in February. The kiss at the top of the ramp, with the morning crew coming in.

And what I meant to do about it. I hadn't known I'd decided until I said it out loud.

"I'm going to go back," I said. "As much as they'll have me. For the months, at least. Maybe longer." I looked at my hands on the table. "I don't know what it is. I want to find out."

Nobody said anything for a moment. Somewhere down the table, a child dropped a cup and someone said "Oh, *no*" in the bright, unworried way people do when a cup is only a cup.

Jinsia was the first to speak, and of course he was thrilled.

"Finally," he said. "Finally. A hundred and twenty-seven years and Dar discovers the body." He leaned back on the bench as far as the bench would let him. "Dancing. Plum liquor. Strangers in

basements. I have been telling you for thirty-eight years, *querido*, it's all about getting—"

"Jinsia," said Tushar.

"—fucked," Jinsia finished, and Pallavi made a noise of profound disgust and put her face in her hands.

"There's a child at the table," Tushar said.

"I'm sixteen," Pallavi said through her fingers. "I'll be seventeen next week. I know what fucking is, Mom. I just don't want to hear about it from *him*."

"You'll hear about it from someone," Jinsia said. "It might as well be someone who knows what he's talking about." He looked at me, and the delight was still there, but under it something had gone careful and still, as his face went when he was reading a result he didn't like. "Who are they, though? These people."

"I don't know yet."

"Mm." He picked a piece of crust off the bread and rolled it between his blistered fingers. "Just come back and tell us things. That's all. Whatever it is. Don't go quiet on us. You're very good at going quiet."

"I'll tell you."

"You'll tell Tushar," he said. "Tushar will tell me. That's how it works. I just want to be on the list."

#

Tushar hadn't said anything. She sat beside me with her knee against mine and her hands around her cup and looked out across the meadow, where two boys were trying to fly a kite in no wind at all, running back and forth with the kite bouncing along the grass behind them.

"Tush," I said.

"I'm thinking."

"You're upset."

"I'm not upset." She set her cup down. "Not the way you mean. You've never been mine to be jealous about, Dar. Neither has he." She nodded at Jinsia without looking at him. "I've never wanted to own anyone. You know that."

"Then what?"

She was quiet a while longer. Then she asked me one question, plainly, as she'd ask a student who'd written something long and

clever and missed the point.

"What are you looking for?"

I opened my mouth to answer. Nothing came out. I tried again.

"I don't know."

"No," she said. "I didn't think you did." She took a piece of bread and didn't eat it. "I've read this chapter before. Not yours. Other people's. After the plague years, in TimBor, there were whole cities that did this. After the wars. After every time the world came apart and the people who were left looked around and couldn't see what any of it had been for. They found basements. They found strangers. They danced in the ruins until morning." She put the bread down. "It's one of the oldest chapters there is."

"How does it end?"

She looked at me. Her eyes were clear and kind and not at all fooled.

"I'll tell you," she said. "But not yet."

#

After lunch, while the cluster cleared the tables and argued about whether the awning needed to come down before the rain that was not coming, Pallavi walked me to the end of the meadow.

She'd grown since the winter. Or she'd stopped hunching, which was the same thing at that age. She was nearly as tall as Tushar, and she walked with her hands jammed in her pockets and her eyes on the path, kicking at nothing.

"So," she said. "The drives."

"The drives."

"Do you think they'll let people go? Not now. I know not now. But eventually. Do you think they'll let people just go?"

"Eventually. That's the point of it."

"How long?"

I did the arithmetic. I couldn't help it. "If the test works next summer, and they pick one, and they build the far end, and it has to get there the slow way first—" I stopped. "A long time. Twenty-five years. Thirty."

"I'll be forty-five," she said. "That's nothing. People are a hundred and fifty." She kicked at a stone and it skittered off the path into the grass. "I start the Affirmation course in September. Do you know what they tell you in the first week? Mom showed me the materials.

They tell you the whole world is open to you now. To go anywhere, and see anything, and share it with everything else that lives on it. They mean the whole world. Like that's the biggest thing there is." She looked up at the sky, which was white-blue and empty and hot. "It isn't, though. Is it? Not anymore."

"No," I said. "Not anymore."

We walked a little further. A sweeper came up the path toward us, and we stepped onto the grass to let it by, and it stopped and waited until we had, politely.

"Can I ask you something?" Pallavi said, when it had gone. "Everyone at school asks me. Why don't you just live here? With us. You're here half the time anyway."

I'd been asked that before. By her mother, once, years ago, and never again. By Jinsia, in a dozen different ways. By the woman in Housing who'd offered me a bigger room twice. I'd never had a better answer than the true one.

"I need a room with one person in it," I said. "Somewhere to take things apart at night where nobody has to watch me do it."

"You could register, though. Like Uncle Berbant and Sora. It doesn't mean you'd have to move."

"I'd have to say what it meant," I said. "I've never been able to."

She looked at me, as her mother did, deciding how much of that she believed. Then she let it go.

We walked a little further. At the edge of the meadow, where the path went down toward the transit line, she stopped.

"You promised me the Flatirons," she said. "Two summers ago. You said we'd do the long one, up to the saddle, and then you didn't, and then last summer you didn't either."

"Last summer I was—"

"I know. I'm not saying it was your fault." She scuffed at the path with the toe of her shoe. "We used to go every month. When I was little. Mom hates hiking. You'd come and get me at six in the morning and she'd still be asleep, and we'd be up on top of the first ridge by the time the sun came up, and you'd tell me the names of all the birds and get half of them wrong."

"I got them right."

"You called a magpie a crow for four years."

"It was a crow."

"It was a magpie, Dar." She almost smiled. "I stopped going when

I was fifteen. I don't know why. It just felt stupid. Going hiking with—" She stopped, and didn't say with whom, and went red. "Anyway. You're on your months. You've got nothing in them. You said."

"I've got something in them now."

"Not *every* day." She looked at me sidelong, and for a moment she looked exactly as she had at eight, at the top of the first ridge, out of breath, furious that I'd beaten her up the last steep bit. "One day. Before the course starts. The long one. To the saddle."

I thought about the night in the basement, and the kiss at the top of the ramp, and *I'll find you*. And I thought about a small girl, a year and a half old and heavy with sleep, on my shoulder at three in the morning, fifteen years ago, while her mother slept in the next room for the first time in a week, the night after the man who was supposed to stay had left a note on the table and gone. I'd walked her up and down the corridor of Tushar's Earthhold until four, reading her the queuestory out loud in a whisper because it was the only book I had with me, until she fell asleep somewhere around the Leveling.

"One day," I said. "The long one."

"Promise."

"I promise."

"You promised last time."

"I'm promising differently this time."

She thought about that, the way she thought about everything, as if it were a problem in a piece of music. Then she nodded once, and went back up the meadow toward the tables without saying goodbye. I stayed at the top of the path until she'd sat down beside her mother.

#

Jinsia walked with me down to the transit line. He was on his way to the Institute; he worked Sundays because nobody else did and the sequencers were his.

"She's not wrong," he said, as we walked. "Tushar."

"I know."

"She's never wrong about this kind of thing. It's very irritating." He put his blistered hands in his pockets. "Are you in love with this woman?"

"With Seren?" I laughed, and it came out sharper than I meant it to. "I've met her twice. She kissed me once and walked away."

"That's how it usually starts. In the novels."

"Romance is overrated." I waved my hand at the green hills, the meadow, the whole bright afternoon. "You of all people should know that. It's just the chemistry your sequencers are always telling us about, with better lighting."

He gave me a long look from his great height and didn't say anything. He was much better at not saying things than I was, and he knew it.

At the platform he stopped and took one of his hands out of his pocket and turned it palm up, so I could see the blisters.

"Rowing," he said. "Since February. I'll tell you about it. Not today."

"Rowing?"

"I'll tell you." He put the hand back. "Go home and sleep, Dar. You'll be no good to your Rozkosz if you can't stand up."

"How do you know what they're called?"

"You said it about eleven times at lunch," Jinsia said. "You didn't notice. That's how I knew you'd go back."

The pod came. He got on, and lifted one blistered hand at me through the glass as it pulled away. He was right. I hadn't noticed. On the way home I almost looked the word up, and didn't, and it felt like keeping a promise to someone.

Chapter 4

Monday, June 8 – Friday, July 10, 171 (*2201*)

Bram had told me their first rule, and I broke it the first week. I'm not proud of it.

It was a habit, nothing more. For a hundred years, whenever something happened to me that I didn't understand, I had written it down with a number next to it, because a number was something I could look at later and take apart. So on the Monday after the yards, lying on my bed at noon with the skylight full of sun, I took out a small paper notebook I'd taken from the commons stores years before and never used, and wrote the date and *the basement, Laszlo, the dancing*, *the ramp*, and next to it, after a while, *8*. Out of ten. I didn't know what ten would be. Paper, because a slate keeps everything and shares what it's told to, and I didn't want a number next to the word *basement* anywhere the city could read it. I closed the notebook and felt like a man caught doing something in public.

I kept doing it all summer.

#

Tuesday, June 9. The rink.

The old rink in the Eleventh Ring was a commons building nobody used much anymore, a long oval of pale wood under a roof of skylights gone gray with dust, with a few rows of benches along one side. I knew within five minutes that roller derby was not for me.

As far as I could tell the rules concerned which parts of another person's body you were allowed to hit, and how hard, and the answer was most of them, and very.

Seren skated for Ines's side. She came out onto the floor in a black helmet with her number painted on it in white, and the sleeves of her shirt cut off at the shoulder, so that for the first time I could see both her arms bare to the collar: the dark, crowded column of little

images running up each of them, death's many faces inked up and down both arms.

She was fast, and lean, and she didn't go around people. She went through them. The third time she went down, a blocker twice her size caught her across the chest and she slid on her back nearly to the edge of the oval, and lay there. I was halfway off the bench before she sat up.

She saw me. She saw me half standing, with my hands out, and she laughed so hard she had to take her helmet off.

Afterward she sat on the bench beside me unwinding the tape from her wrists. Her left arm was already coloring above the elbow. She pressed it with her thumb, hard, eyes half closed.

"Doesn't that hurt?"

"Yes." She pressed it again. "That's how I know it happened." She let go of the bruise and looked out at the floor, where two of the others were still circling slowly, for the pleasure of it. "Queuers spend their whole lives making sure nothing ever hurts," she said. "And then they wonder why nothing ever happens."

Ines came past with her helmet under her arm, still breathing hard, and looked down at me without much interest.

"Your equeuenomist stood up again," she said to Seren. "Every time somebody falls. It's exhausting to watch." She went on toward the door, unwinding her tape.

I wrote it down that night. *The rink. 6.* Then I crossed out the 6 and wrote 7, because I'd been frightened for her, and that had been something.

#

Saturday, June 13. The feast.

Bram said it would go twelve hours, and it went fourteen.

Out at the edge of the yards where the prairie began: a table made of three doors, forty people, a pit of coals with the air above it bent like water.

The wine came first. Bram brought it up from the basement in a wooden crate, eight bottles with labels I couldn't read, in a script I didn't know, and stood them on the table one at a time as though he were introducing people.

"From the Bohemian tour," he said. "Someone's great-uncle went with a dance company that toured long before the Leveling,

when the vineyards in QJ were giving away the old cellars. He never drank them. He died the year before the Leveling with all eight in a cupboard under his bed. A hundred and twenty years old, some of them."

It was dark and thick and strange, fruit and leather and earth, and something under it I could only call old.

And then, at four in the afternoon, a woman I hadn't met came up out of the prairie with two men behind her, carrying something between them on a pole, wrapped in cloth. They laid it down by the fire pit and pulled the cloth away, and it was a haunch of something dark red and enormous.

"Elk," the woman said. "From the cull on the north prairie. The rangers take forty a year. They give the meat to anyone who asks and nobody ever asks." She looked around the table. "We asked."

I hadn't eaten red meat since before the Leveling. Almost nobody in QL had. Our protein came from beans, and from the vats where bacteria ate the last of TimBor's plastic. It was perfectly good, and it had never once smelled like this. They cut the elk into slabs and laid them on an iron grate over the coals. The smell that came up was so rich and so entirely forgotten that my mouth watered before I knew what I was smelling. My body remembered something my mind had let go of seventy years ago.

When it was done, Bram cut it into pieces with a knife as long as my forearm and handed them out on bread. I held mine and looked at it.

"It was alive in February," I said. "Walking around."

"So were you," said Laszlo, from beside me, and took a bite of his and closed his eyes.

I ate it. It was hot and tough and bloody and smoky and so good I had to put it down and look away at the prairie for a while.

"Well?" said Seren, from across the table. She had blood on her chin and didn't care.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know what that was."

"Good," she said. "Then you can't count it."

I could, though. I did. At four in the morning, home and sick and happy, I wrote *the feast, the wine, the elk* and next to it *9*, and lay awake trying to remember the taste and finding it was already going. By morning I couldn't have told you what it had been like at all, only that it had been very much like something.

#

Sunday, June 14. My brother.

Avukat was sitting on my entrance steps at noon on Sunday, in his canvas coat, with a slate on his knees.

My brother doesn't visit. In seventy years he'd come to my Earthhold perhaps four times, and never once with good news. I stood at the top of the steps with the sun in my eyes and the feast still in my mouth and tried to think what had gone wrong.

"Nothing's wrong," he said, reading my face. "You smell of smoke."

"Elk."

"Elk." He let it go by. He was very good at letting things go by when there was something else he wanted. "I need ten minutes. Sit down."

I sat on the step below him. He handed me the slate.

It was one sentence, under a heading that said *Draft: not for circulation*. An amendment to Article II. *A contribution to the common good whose measured value, before the cap, exceeds a threshold set by the Concord shall earn its contributor a permanent personal holding: ground and a roof, to keep.*

I read it twice.

"The Society's going to file this?"

"At the end of July. Before the test, so that it's already in the record when the test is." He took the slate back and held it flat on his knee with his palm over the words, the way he'd hold a card in a game. "The committee wants it. The committee's frightened of it, which is how I know it's right. And I need one number to make it stand up."

"What number?"

"The real one. What the formula gives a man who's already at the ceiling when he does the greatest thing anyone has ever done." He looked at me sideways. "Everybody in the Society thinks they know. They say *nothing*, and they say it at meetings, and it sounds like a complaint. I want it exact. From public data, so nobody can say we stole it. You're on your months, Dar. You're not the Division for sixty-one days. You're a citizen who's good at sums."

"No."

He didn't look surprised. He never looked surprised in a room; he'd told me once that it gave the other side an advantage.

"Why not?"

"Because Mira's going to have something for me when I go back," I said. "You know what it is as well as I do."

He was quiet for a moment. Down the meadow a sweeper ticked along the path, and stopped, and turned.

"Then you'll be the one deciding it anyway," he said. "Better you know the answer before you start."

"That's exactly why not."

He nodded slowly, as he nodded at a witness who'd answered the way he'd expected and not the way he'd hoped. Then he stood up and put the slate inside his coat and buttoned it.

"You'll work it out anyway," he said. "You won't be able to help it. You never could." He went down two steps and stopped. "When you do, I'd like to see it. Not for the petition. For me."

"That isn't true."

"No," said Avukat. "But it's what you'd want me to say."

He went off across the meadow toward the transit with his hands in his coat pockets and didn't look back.

I went inside and lay down. I didn't work it out. But somewhere under the wine and the smoke the question had started, quietly, the way a tap starts dripping in another room. I knew half the answer already. I'd said it at Tushar's table a week before without meaning to. It was the other half I didn't know, and the other half was the kind of thing I couldn't leave alone.

In the notebook, under *the feast, 9*, I wrote *Avukat*, and no number. There wasn't a scale he'd ever fit on.

#

Thursday, June 18. The saddle.

I picked Pallavi up at five-thirty. Tushar was asleep.

We took the first north-line pod out through the reserve to the Flatirons trailhead. Pallavi slept against the window the whole way with her pack in her lap, exactly as she had at eight, and I didn't wake her until the doors opened.

The long trail goes up through the pines in switchbacks to the saddle between the two tallest peaks of the near range. It's four hours if you're fast. We weren't.

At the second stop, on a rock in the sun, a black-and-white bird with a long tail landed on a branch above us and looked down at our bread.

"Crow," I said.

"*Magpie*," said Pallavi, with enormous satisfaction, and threw it a crust.

She talked the whole way up, as she used to and hadn't in two years. About the drives, mostly, and whether you'd be allowed to bring a violin.

"Are you going to be on the drive thing?" she said. "When you go back?"

"What drive thing?"

"Mom says the Division will have to decide what they get. She says it'll be the biggest case anyone's ever had." She looked back at me. "Mira wrote to you. Mom said."

"Mira wrote that she'd have something for me."

"It's the drive," said Pallavi. "Obviously." And she went on up the switchback, pleased with herself, as if she'd solved it, and perhaps she had.

"But you'd have to leave," she said a while later, over her shoulder, on the narrow part of the trail. "Everyone."

"For a while."

"Would you come? Later?" She stopped and turned around, and looked very young suddenly, with the whole of the plains behind her.

"I don't know, Pal," I said. "I've never wanted to go anywhere. I've never understood why anyone would want to be anywhere but somewhere they already knew."

"That's sad," she said. Not unkindly. Just as a fact.

"Maybe."

She turned around and kept walking.

We got to the saddle a little before noon. The wind came straight through the gap, cold even in June, and we sat in the lee of a rock and ate the rest of the bread and some oranges and looked at the city. From up there you couldn't see a single building: only green, the Rings like ripples on a pond, and here and there the flash of a skylight.

"It's beautiful," Pallavi said, with her knees pulled up. "I don't want to live in it forever, though. Is that bad?"

"No."

"Mom thinks it's bad. She doesn't say it."

"Do you think it's the best place anyone ever built?" I said.

"Do *you*?"

I looked at it for a while. "I think it's the best one I know of. I just don't know what it's for."

She leaned her head against my shoulder, briefly, as she had at the audition, and then took it away.

"You always say that," she said.

I didn't write anything down that night. I didn't think of it until the next morning, and when I did, I didn't know what number to put, because it wasn't on the same scale.

#

Saturday, June 20. Her room.

Seren lived in a corner room in the Eleventh Ring, with a skylight and a window onto a sunken garden nobody tended. There was almost nothing in it. A bed on the floor. A rail with a few dark clothes hanging on it. A shelf with three objects on it and nothing else: a large crystal, a black knife, and a paper photograph, face down.

"What's the photograph?" I said.

"Not tonight," she said, and pulled her shirt over her head.

I'm not going to write all of it down. It's the one part of that summer I've kept the Rozkosz rule about. Some of it isn't mine to write. But I'll say that she was covered, everywhere but her face and her hands, the way Laszlo had said. The little images ran over her shoulders and down her back and across her ribs and her hips in a dense dark lace, most of it black, and much of it unknown to me. I knew a skull, and flowers, but there were a hundred things I had no names for, and I didn't need the names to know what all of them were about. I looked at every inch of it. I asked questions. She ignored most of them and enjoyed being looked at. She had piercings, too, more than I'd seen, and small pale marks where others had been let close.

And I'll say that she asked me to hurt her.

Not badly. She was very clear. She told me exactly what she wanted and exactly where, and a word she would say if she wanted me to stop, and she made me say the word back to her so she knew I had it. It was the most careful conversation about consent I'd ever been part of, and I've sat through a hundred hearings.

And I couldn't get out of my head.

That was the whole problem. I did what she asked. I held her wrists the way she wanted, and pressed where she told me, the flat of my hand and then the heel of it, across the backs of her thighs,

harder each time she said *harder*, and watched her face change. She made a sound I'd never heard from anyone, low, almost a laugh, and something in her whole body let go, as if she'd set down a weight she'd been carrying for years. And the whole time I was somewhere else, a little above and to one side, watching. Watching her breathing. Watching my own hand. Watching the word she'd given me, waiting for it, ready, like someone waiting at a door. Asking myself whether I liked this, and what it meant if I did. Taking it apart even as it happened.

She knew. Of course she knew. At some point she opened her eyes and looked up at me, and started to laugh.

"You're still counting," she said.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry." She pulled one wrist free, easily, and put her hand flat on my chest over my heart, and held it there. "It's going very fast. Do you know that? You're terrified and you're fascinated and you can't stop watching yourself."

"That's not what you wanted."

"How do you know what I wanted?" she said. "You've never asked me anything but why."

Then she got up and brought a cup of water from the basin in the corner, and made me drink all of it. She pulled a blanket off the rail and put it around my shoulders, though the room was warm. She sat beside me with her knees drawn up.

"How are you?" she said.

I hadn't expected the question. I hadn't thought it was mine to be asked.

"You'd be surprised who needs looking after afterward," she said. "Drink. Then tell me."

Later, when the water was gone and the blanket had slid off, she pulled me down beside her and we made love, slowly. I watched that too, from my place a little above and to one side. She let me. Afterward, lying on the bed on the floor with the skylight going gray, I looked at the shelf. The crystal, the knife, the photograph face down. She was asleep, or pretending to be. I thought about turning the photograph over, and didn't.

At home that afternoon I opened the notebook and looked at the blank space where the number should go, and wrote *?*, and closed it.

#

Wednesday, July 1. The creek.

At two in the morning, nine of us walked up the creek above the reservoir in the dark, to a place where the water came down out of the mountains through a gap in the rocks and fell into a pool.

Snowmelt, in July, so cold it hurt to put your hand in it. Ines went in first, without hesitating, straight off a rock into the black pool, and came up screaming with laughter. Then Bram. Then Oskar. Then Seren. She stood on the rock a moment in the starlight, pale and dark and covered in her small black deaths, and stepped off it onto the water like a path.

I stood at the edge.

"It won't kill you," said Laszlo, from a rock, with his stick across his knees. "Probably. It might kill me. That's why I'm sitting here." He nudged me with the stick. "Go on."

I went in.

For about four seconds there was nothing in the world but cold. No thought. No count. No Comai, no vault, no chart, no empty calendar. Just cold, and my heart slamming, and my lungs refusing to work, and Seren's hand closing on my arm under the water and pulling me up into the air.

I came up gasping. She was laughing in my face, her hair plastered flat, her lips going blue.

"There," she said. "*There.* Where were you just then?"

"Nowhere."

"Yes," she said. "That's it. That's the whole thing."

Four seconds. I wrote it down. *The creek. 10.* Then I sat looking at that ten, and understood it wasn't really a ten. It was four seconds of nothing at all, with a ten written next to it afterward by somebody who hadn't been there.

#

Monday, July 6 – Tuesday, July 7. Dimming.

They called it dimming. It was the simplest of their pleasures and the strangest, and it was the one I'd been most afraid of.

You turned it off. AltLife: the chime behind your eyes, the messages, the calendar, the vital signal that told the world every second that you were alive. Three touches at the temple, then two, and a small voice asked whether you were sure, and it went quiet.

Everything went quiet.

I hadn't known how loud it was until it stopped. I'd had it since I was eighteen. A hundred and nine years of a faint, constant presence just behind my thoughts, like the hum of a building you only hear when the power fails. For the first hour I kept reaching for it, and each time nothing happened I felt a small, ridiculous lurch, like missing a step in the dark.

We spent it in the basement, five of us. Seren and Ansel and Laszlo and a woman named Rue whom I'd met at the feast, and me. We didn't do anything. That was the point. We sat, and talked, and slept, and woke, and ate bread and apricots, and nobody knew where we were, or whether we were alive, and nobody could.

Laszlo told me it was the easy version. "The basement's practically the city," he said. "Next week I'll do it properly. Every year, on the day I had it taken out, I go and sit three nights in the old culverts under the highway, past the north end of the yards. The third pipe; it's the driest. Concrete you can stand up in, with a trickle down the middle. No signal reaches. Nobody knows where you are. If it rains you go up the iron rungs to the old pump room, halfway along, and sit it out. Dry as a church." He smiled at the ceiling. "It's my birthday, of a kind."

"I go with him some years," said Seren, from across the room, and didn't say anything else.

Rue never dimmed with us. She sat by the ramp with her signal on and a cup of tea, sober, the whole thirty-one hours, reading. Somebody always did, Seren told me later; that was the rule for anything that could go wrong. It was only much later that I understood it had also been how they decided about me.

Around the middle of the second day, I noticed I wasn't reaching anymore.

A cushion. A pillar at my back, cool. A line of light coming down through a crack in the ceiling, gold with dust, crossing the floor slower than anything moves. Seren's breathing across the room. Apricot on my fingers. No hour. No count. A stone in a creek, with the water going over.

Seren was lying with her head on Ansel's knee across the room. She opened her eyes and looked at me, and I knew she knew.

"Nobody's watching," she said quietly. "Not even you."

When we turned it back on, on Tuesday night, everything came in at once. Forty-one messages. Tushar, three times, the last one just

Dar? Jinsia: *If you're dead I'm going to be furious.* Pallavi, a picture of a magpie. Avukat, one line, sent on the Monday: *Committee meets on the 30th. The question's still open.* And a polite notice that my vital signal had been dark for thirty-one hours and my registered next of kin had been told.

My next of kin was my brother Senne. He'd written one line.

I assume you're all right. Come to supper on the nineteenth and tell me where you went.

I sat on the floor of the basement with my head full of other people again and read his line five times, and something in my chest that had been tight for a month came loose a little. I didn't write either of them down.

#

Friday, July 10. The numbers.

Five weeks. I went back over the notebook on the last night, lying on my bed with the skylight dark, and looked at what I'd written.

The basement, 8. The rink, 7. The feast, 9. A blank. A question mark. *The creek, 10.* Nothing for the dimming. And a dozen smaller versions of the same things.

7. 6. 7. 6. 5. 6.

I laid them out in a line. I couldn't help it. That's what I'm for.

It was the shape every curve has in every study of pleasure I'd ever skimmed: a spike, then a slide back toward where I'd started, each new thing pushing it up a little less. The feast had been a nine; the second feast, a six. Only the creek had been a ten, and the creek had been four seconds of not being there at all.

I was a man who'd spent a hundred years finding anomalies in other people's records, and I'd just found the most ordinary curve in the world in mine.

Then I looked again, as I'd look at anybody else's data, and saw what was wrong with it. Every number on the page had been written at four in the morning by a man lying awake, scoring a whole night by its best minute and its last. The ten had come when I wasn't there to score it. If anyone at the Division had brought me a dataset like that, I'd have sent it back. The instrument was the problem. The instrument was me.

I drew the line through the numbers anyway. A line was what I knew how to draw.

The night before, I'd caught myself telling Bram's story about the wine back to Tushar in a message, with his pauses and his hiss of satisfaction, making it funny. Tushar had written back *Ha*, and nothing else, and I remembered a thing my mother used to say when we were small and one of us was being clever at somebody else's expense, which was most of the time.

It's sad, she'd say, *when all your humor is making fun of other people.*

She'd said it to me more than to any of the others. I'd always thought it was because I was the funniest. Lying on my bed with my little line of numbers sliding down toward zero, I began to suspect it was something else.

I closed the notebook. Then I opened it again and wrote, under all the rest, the only thing I knew for certain.

It goes back down. Every time. It always goes back down.

And under that, because I'm honest, at least in writing:

I'm going back anyway.

Chapter 5

Saturday, July 18 – Sunday, July 19, 171 (2201)

The invitation came from Rue, and it came with rules.

Saturday. The old bathhouse in the Eleventh Ring, the one with the green copper dome. Ten o'clock. Read these before you come. Under that, a numbered list, in a plain, firm hand, as if she'd written it for a work crew.

Seren had told me about the house that night at the creek, lying on a warm rock in the dark with her hair drying. Some of them met there on Saturdays and took their clothes off and touched each other, whoever wanted to, however they wanted to, within the rules. I could come. Nobody would mind if I only watched.

"Do you want me to come?"

"I want you to do whatever you want," she'd said. "That's the only rule that matters. The rest is so nobody gets hurt by accident."

I read the list three times on my bed in the afternoon heat and understood two things. I was going to go. And I was going to go sober, on purpose, because whatever happened in that bathhouse, I wanted to be the one who saw it.

I didn't tell Seren that part.

#

Rue met me at the door with a slate. Broad, calm, gray in her hair that I'd taken for real at the feast and now, close to, saw was dye.

"You read the list?"

"Three times."

"Good. Most people skim the middle. The middle is the important part." She touched the slate, and the house asked its questions on the inside of the door, glowing faintly on the old wood. Was I sober? Yes. Did I understand I could leave at any time without explaining? Yes. That anyone else could too? Yes. Was there anything Rue should know?

I stood there a moment. *I don't know yet what I'm doing here.*

Rue read it and nodded without looking up. "Most honest answer I've had all year. Towels are on the left."

#

The towels were in a basket. A big woven bread basket, full to the brim with folded white towels, beside a second basket for used ones, beside a pitcher of water and a bowl of dried apricots. I don't know why the basket undid me. Something about how practical it was.

Beyond it, the room. The old pools under the copper dome, tiled in a deep, old blue, one of them filled and steaming. Mats and cushions in loose islands across the warm tile. Lamplight. Cedar oil that smelled mostly of oil. Skin. Water. A recording of a woman singing breathily over four bars that came round and round and round. Twenty-five people. Half of them naked. Half of those doing something to somebody, unhurried, on the mats. The rest standing by the pools with cups, talking, as if it were any party.

Rue clapped twice, not loudly. Everything stopped.

"New people tonight. So, briefly. The house rules." And she read them. All of them. Ask before you touch. Ask again before you change what you're doing. A yes to one thing isn't a yes to another. No means no, and so does silence, and so does a face. The word for stop is *harbor*, and anyone can say it, and everyone stops. If something worries you, say so. Nobody is required to do anything. Nobody is required to explain. Be kind. "And drink some water. It gets hot under the copper."

Then the talking again. The mats again. And I stood there in my clothes, holding a towel I didn't need, in the most carefully administered room I'd been in since my review panel.

#

Seren was on the edge of the warm pool with her feet in the water and nothing on at all. In the lamplight the small dark images that covered her from collarbones to ankles moved like the shadow of leaves on a tree that wasn't there.

"You're dressed," she said.

"I'm dressed."

"Sober, too. You've got your counting face on." She didn't seem disappointed. "There are always people who just watch. Rue calls them the gallery."

A thin, earnest man with a neat beard crouched beside her and said, "Seren, hello, would you like to—" and she said "Yes," before he'd finished, and took his hand, and went.

I sat on a low bench with the towel on my knees, and I watched.

After a while Rue came round with the pitcher, filling cups, checking faces like a nurse on a ward. She filled mine without asking.

"Gallery's allowed to drink," she said. "You're very still. People get worried about the still ones."

"I'm fine."

"I know. I'm only telling you why they keep looking at you." She moved on to the next island, and bent, and said something to a woman there, and the woman nodded, and Rue went on. Nobody had told her to do it. Nobody would score it. She did it all night.

#

It wasn't beautiful. Elbows. Someone's knee in someone's ribs, a muffled *sorry, sorry*, a rearrangement. A man across the pool narrating his technique in a low, confident voice to a woman who looked patiently at the ceiling. A couple who glanced around to see if anyone was watching and performed a little harder when someone was. A man I half knew from the transit who stood in the middle of the floor with his chest out for ten minutes, waiting to be noticed, and then dressed and left, looking injured. The bowl of apricots that nobody touched all night.

And the asking. *Is this all right? Do you want—? Should I—?* From every island, every few seconds. It was right, and it was in the rules, and it was like watching dancers stop every eight bars to agree on the next eight. A woman near me laughed out loud in the middle of something. "Oh, for—just *do* it, Teodor." "I'm asking because the *rules* say—" "I *know* what the rules say, I *wrote* half of them." And they laughed so hard they had to sit up and drink some water.

There's no civilized way to have sex, I thought, and nearly said it aloud. TimBor had tried with laws and shame. The Remnant tried with vows. We were trying with a list and a basket of towels and a word for stop. And it was still this: bodies, clumsy and hopeful and absurd in the lamplight, and people trying hard to be decent while they did it.

It wasn't the sex that got to me. It was the people. The narrating man. The performers. The one who left. All the small vanities and

anxieties that people carry into a room, undressed and laid out on mats where I could see every one. I'd felt it before, on the transit, in the break room at the Division, behind a man who talked through the Founding Day reading: not disgust at bodies but at people, at how much of them was self. I'd always been ashamed of it. Under the green dome it came over me so completely that for a while I couldn't feel anything else.

Then, on the mat nearest me, a woman who'd been crying a little, the good kind, I think, was wrapped in a towel by the man she'd been with, and he held her and gave her water and talked to her very quietly about nothing, a long time, until she laughed. Nobody watched that but me. I'd have liked to hate it. I couldn't.

#

Seren came back after an hour, or two, flushed, a towel around her shoulders, smelling of cedar and someone else. She took the cup out of my hand and drank half of it.

"You've been sitting here hating everyone," she said. "I could feel it from the mats."

"Not you."

"Me too, a little. It's all right." She leaned back against the wall, knees up. "You're the only person in this room paying attention to anybody else. That's why you hate them. You think watching is a kind of care. Maybe it is. But you can't watch and do at the same time, and they've all decided to do."

"And you?"

"I don't watch. I never have." She closed her eyes. "That's why I like you. You do all of it for me."

She didn't ask me to join. She didn't ask me to leave. After a while she got up and slid into the warm pool to her chin and floated there, alone and entirely content, with her eyes shut under the glass eye at the top of the dome, where three stars showed. That was the one thing all night I didn't hate.

At three, at the door, Rue asked how it was.

Like a Dugnad, I wrote. *With better towels.*

Rue laughed out loud behind me, a big surprised laugh that followed me into the dark.

#

The moon was two nights past full and bright enough to read by, the meadows silver, the skylights dark. I walked home the long way, across nine Rings. Somewhere around the Ninth the irrigation came on, a long low hiss from every direction as the sprinklers rose out of the grass and began to turn, and I walked through drifting water, cold and fine, full of moonlight.

At home I opened the notebook and wrote *the bathhouse*, and sat over the space where the number went, and didn't put one.

I didn't sleep either.

#

At four in the morning, lying on my bed with the moon gone round to the west side of the skylight, I did what I always do when my head won't stop. I gave it something to do. I gave it my brother's question, which had been dripping in the other room for five weeks.

I tried to break it first. That's the rule with a result you don't like: you try to break it before you believe it.

I couldn't open the Division's files. I didn't need them. The formula is public; it's carved over the door of every Allocation office in Q, and every child learns it at school. I could see it without closing my eyes, cut into the lintel of the office in the Second Ring that I'd walked past every winter as a boy:

$QQ = 0.7\,EQ + 0.3\,SQ + QA + \varepsilon$

EQ = RC ÷ CQ, capped at 1.5

Seven parts effort to three parts care. EQ, the effort quotient: what you realized, over five rolling years, divided by what you were capable of. SQ: what you did for the people around you, judged by them, on the same scale and under the same ceiling. QA: a rotating panel's small correction, never more than a tenth either way. And ε, a little luck, drawn in public and never more than two hundredths, so that nobody could ever say the number was entirely their fault. The founders put the luck in on purpose. I'd always thought it was the kindest line in the formula. Everything else I needed was in the notice and in a hundred years of published precedent. I sat up with the slate on my knees and worked it out as I'd have worked it out for Mira, from the outside in.

Start with S. Ya. The effort term is most of the number: what you actually contributed over a rolling five years, RC, divided by what you were capable of contributing in your role, CQ. The ratio is capped.

Use everything you have and you come out at one. Do more than your capacity says you can, year after year, and you rise toward the cap at one and a half; there's nowhere above it to go. S. Ya had been at or near the ceiling for as long as anyone could remember, with the odd dip that everybody forgave. The Concord had said so in a citation thirty years ago, and nobody had ever had reason to say otherwise. Nobody's capacity score is ever published, his included, but nobody needed it published to know it was the highest ever assessed, and that he'd beaten it by half again, every year for seventy years.

I'd said that much at Tushar's table in June without thinking. Now I checked it, and it held. The most important invention in human history would move his number by exactly nothing. He was already doing everything the formula could imagine him doing. Building the door to the stars was, by the formula's lights, performing as expected.

The formula can't tell this year from last year, I wrote.

Then the station team, three hundred of them. The formula weights outcome above output: what verifiably did some good counts for more than what you merely produced. And the drive's outcome couldn't be verified. Not this year, and not for a long time. A drive that's chosen next summer has to be built, and then a ring has to be built and sent to another star the slow way, and only when the door opens at the far end does anybody benefit. Decades. The window is five years. By the time the drive did any verifiable good, every hour anyone spent building it would have aged out of every score in Q.

What was left was output, the lower weight, split three hundred ways, most of it going to people who were already near the top. I ran it three times with different assumptions, because I didn't believe it. A few hundredths of a point. For five years. Then nothing.

And under all of it, a thing I didn't have a line for. The notice had said the station team was three hundred people. It hadn't said how many machines. Fabricators, assists, the fusion tugs that had hauled the rings out past Uranus, the yards that had recovered the metal they were made of. The formula credits people. It has no column for a machine, and no rule for what happens to the share of the work a machine did. I'd never had to think about it. Nobody had. In every case I'd ever worked, the machines were furniture.

I sat back against the wall. *When you come back, I'll have something for you.* Somebody was going to have to put an honest number on this,

in public, with the whole of Q watching and every one of those people waiting to see what their six years had been worth. Mira didn't send messages at two minutes to midnight about nothing.

I knew what she had for me. I'd known since the morning of the notice. I'd just managed, for seven weeks, not to look at it.

I wrote the whole thing on one page. It was clean. It was the kind of page I'd have been proud of, at work, and I sat and looked at it in the gray light coming down through the skylight and felt the opposite of proud.

The Queue had been built so that nobody could buy their way ahead, and nobody's grandchildren could live forever on one good thing. I believed in that. I'd spent my working life believing in it. And here, on one page, was what it did to a dozen people in a workshop who'd opened a door in the sky: it said they'd had an ordinary year.

I saved the page on my slate and slept until noon.

#

Senne's supper was at seven, at the long table in his cluster's commons kitchen in the Eighth Ring, under the window onto the sunken garden and the hens.

He was laying the table when I came in. His hair was damp and combed straight back, and he smelled faintly of chlorine. He'd swum forty lengths in the Eighth Ring pool every morning since he moved to the Eighth, winter or not. That summer he'd started going in the evenings too. He'd told me about it in the same mild voice he used for the hens, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world, and it was, except that I'd never known Senne do anything twice a day for his own sake.

"Cut the bread," he said. "Kettle's on."

Berbant and Sora came at a quarter past, Berbant talking before he was through the door. Avukat came last, in his canvas coat though it was July, and sat at the end of the table as if it were a bench in a hearing room.

Senne had made a pie with greens and an egg baked into it for each of us, and a cold beet soup, and ginger tea too strong, which nobody ever mentioned because it was Senne's.

"You went dark," he said to me quietly, passing the bread, while the others were arguing about something. "Thirty-one hours. The notice came to me."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. I said I assumed you were all right, and you were." He sliced the pie. "Was it good? Where you went?"

I thought about the line of light crossing the basement floor.

"Yes."

"Then good." He put a slice on my plate. With Senne that was always the whole conversation. He asked whether a thing was good. He never asked whether it was right. I'd always taken it for mildness. That summer I started to wonder if it was a kind of discipline.

"You've started swimming at night," I said.

"Evenings." He passed me the soup. "Linnea swims evenings. She's faster than me."

That was all he said about it. For Senne it was a great deal.

We ate. The hens put themselves to bed outside. And of course the talk was the drive. It had been the drive at every table in Q for seven weeks.

"It's the best thing that's ever happened," Berbant said. "I mean it. The whole species. And Avukat says—tell them what you said."

"I said it's going to show everybody what we've been saying for seventy years," said Avukat, in the mild voice he used for things he'd rehearsed.

"That the formula can't see it." Berbant was shining. "The greatest thing anybody's ever done, and what do they get? The same as me, for the valve in 8-104. Which I fixed again, by the way."

"You'll get Lapland," said Sora.

"I'll get Lapland." He turned to me, beaming. "Did I tell you? My turn came up. The real one. Next February. A month in a cabin with the lights. Five years I've been on that list and I never moved up a single place I didn't earn." He reached for her hand on the table. "Not one."

Sora let him take it. She was watching him with a pleasant, still face, and she didn't say anything else for a while.

"It isn't about the cabin," Avukat said. "Nobody's against the cabin. The cabin's lovely. It's that the cabin is the most this city can imagine giving anyone. A month somewhere nice, and then you hand back the key." He ran his thumb around the rim of his cup. "For a valve, that's fair. I've always said it's fair. For a door to the stars it's a joke, and everybody's about to hear the punchline at once."

"What would you give them?" said Senne.

"Something they could keep."

"Keep for what?"

Avukat smiled at him down the table, the smile he used in hearings when the other side had asked the question he wanted. "That's what we'll find out, won't we?"

"So what *do* they get?" Berbant said. "Dar. You'd know."

I could have said I was on my months. I could have said what everybody says, the same as everyone. Instead I opened the page on my slate and set it on the table between the soup and the bread, because I'd been carrying it around all day and it had got heavy, and because my brothers had always been the people I showed things to.

Avukat held out his hand. He hadn't said, and didn't say, that he'd asked me first. He'd let Berbant ask. I gave him the slate.

He read it once quickly, and once slowly, the second time with one finger moving down the margin. Nobody spoke. Senne poured the tea. When Avukat finished, he held the slate a moment longer, looking at nothing.

"Send me a copy?"

"No."

He looked at me over it. Not angry. Interested, the way he looked at a witness who'd surprised him.

"It's from public data," I said. "Anyone could do it."

"Anyone could. Nobody has." He slid the slate back across the table to me. "You don't need to give it to me, Dar. I've read it."

Berbant laughed and said something about Avukat's memory, and Senne asked who wanted more pie. Sora let go of Berbant's hand to pass the bread, and didn't take it back.

When I left, Avukat walked me to the door of the long hall and stood in it with his hands in his coat pockets, looking out at the dark garden.

"Thank you," he said.

"I didn't give you anything."

"No," said my brother. "You didn't." And he went back in to the table.

Chapter 6

Monday, August 3, 171 (2201)

The Division smelled the same. Coffee and warm dust and the faint electric smell of the display rooms, which nobody has ever been able to explain to me, since nothing in them gets hot. I came down the long corridor at a quarter to nine on the first Monday of August with my access restored at midnight and my eyes gritty from a weekend at the Low I'd only half slept off. It hit me at the door like the smell of a house you grew up in, and for a moment I couldn't go in.

Then I went in.

The corridor was the same. The skylights, the light well where it met the break room, the slates on the break-room tables. My office, small and gray, with the skylight and the reports I'd left in June still stacked on the corner of the desk. And across the corridor, Comai's office.

The door was open. Someone was in it.

He was sitting with his feet up on her desk, reading something on a slate held at arm's length, eating an apple. He was compact and fair, with a wide, cheerful face and hair that stood up at the back as if he'd slept on it. When he saw me in the corridor he took his feet down, put the apple between his teeth, came across the corridor, and shook my hand with both of his, all in one motion.

"Rax," he said, around the apple. He took it out. "You're Rax. I'd know you anywhere. Mira showed me your file. Kalle. Kalle Vakava. I'm your new partner, apparently. Did she tell you? She didn't tell you. She said she'd tell you. I've been here since July. They gave me—" He gestured over his shoulder at the open door. "I hope that's all right. I asked if it would be all right. Mira said it was the best office on the corridor and it was a crime to leave it empty. I'll move if you want. Do you want me to move?"

I looked past him at Comai's desk. Her things were gone, of course. They'd been gone since January. Nigora had come for them. The desk was covered in Kalle's things now, slates and an apple core and a pair of grass-stained shoes.

"No," I said. "Don't move."

"Good. I like it. The light's good. She left a mark on the wall under the light well where she leaned her head, did you know that? I'm keeping it." He bit the apple again and looked at me with frank, friendly curiosity, as though I were a puzzle he'd been handed and was looking forward to. "You look terrible. Mira said you'd look terrible. She said that when you came back from your months you'd look like someone had dug you up."

"That's about right."

"Coffee?" said Kalle. "I'll get coffee. Mira wants us at nine. Display room four. She said not to let you go to your office first because you'd start reading something and we'd lose you." He was already walking off toward the break room, talking over his shoulder. "I read your file! Most of it! The reprimand's the best part!"

#

Mira was standing in the dark of display room four when we came in, with her arms folded, looking at nothing. She turned when the door opened, and the light from the corridor fell on her face.

She'd changed since the winter. She hadn't aged, of course. Nobody did. But there was a settledness in the set of her shoulders that hadn't been there before, as though she'd put something heavy down at some point in the spring and decided not to pick it back up.

"Dar," she said. "Welcome back. You read the news?"

"I read the news."

"I'd have been worried if you hadn't." She uncrossed her arms. "Sit down, both of you. I'll show you, then I'll tell you, then you can argue with me."

She touched her temple, and the room filled with light.

Not a chart. A picture of two things, side by side, turning slowly in the dark at chest height. On the left, something small and smooth and closed, like a seed, or a fist. On the right, something open and enormous by comparison, a ring of struts and plates, intricate and heavy, like the frame of a building that hadn't been finished.

"The Converger," Mira said, nodding at the left. "S. Ya's team.

Twelve people, and S. Ya. And the Lattice. Hana Sokol's team, on the station. About three hundred, before you count the people who built the parts. Both at test scale. The real test rings are out past Uranus right now, waiting for next summer."

"And the Concord wants to know what it's worth," I said.

She looked at me for a moment.

"The Concord would have got round to asking," she said. "Somebody else asked first." She moved her hand, and a document hung in the air beside the drives, plain text on a pale field. "On Friday the Freehold Society filed a petition for an amendment to Article II. They're calling it the Founders' Share. A contribution to the common good above a threshold the Concord sets would earn its contributor a permanent personal holding. Ground and a roof. To keep. And to leave."

"To leave," said Kalle, under his breath.

It hadn't been in the draft Avukat had shown me on my steps in June. In June it had stopped at *to keep*.

"They've asked for a Concord hearing after the test. And the petition rests on one thing." She touched a line, and it brightened. *The attestation of record.* "The Division's answer. What the drive's builders actually contributed, measured honestly, before the formula caps it and the window takes it away. Nobody has ever officially computed that number for anyone. The formula's never needed it. Now the Concord needs it, and so does the Society, and so does everybody who's going to vote."

"So we compute the uncapped number," I said. "And then what? It can't go into anybody's score. The outcome can't be verified for decades."

"It goes in escrow. A provisional estimate, held, and released if and when the outcome is real. That's the Concord's instruction." She let that sit. "And it goes into the record of the hearing before anybody votes. Whatever you find, Dar, half of Q will read it as an argument."

"Me?"

"You. Chair. Kalle's your second. Three more drawn by lot from outside the Division, before the winter. They'll be good, and they'll be confused, and you'll explain everything twice." She held my eyes. "Under the new rule nobody who benefits can attest. Not the station, not S. Ya, not any supervisor. An independent panel. No one attests alone."

"Comai's rule," I said.

"Comai's rule."

"Mira?" I hadn't sat down. "The petitioner. The name at the top of that document."

"Is your brother's. I know." She didn't look away.

"Then you should know the rest," I said. "He asked me in June to work out the number for him. On my steps. I said no. In July I worked it out anyway, at four in the morning, because I couldn't not. He read it at my brother Senne's table. I didn't give it to him. He didn't need me to."

Kalle had gone very still beside me.

"Write that down," said Mira. "Today, in your own words, every date. It goes in the panel's file before the panel sits, and the other four read it first." She didn't blink. "I'm glad you told me. I already knew most of it. You've just made it impossible for anyone to use against you. And your brother filed an objection this morning, as it happens. To you chairing. On grounds of conflict of interest."

Kalle made a small noise.

"He wants me off it?"

"He wants it on file," said Mira. "He knows I'll deny it, and I'm going to deny it this afternoon. If the panel comes out against him, he'll have an objection on the record from before it sat, and he'll use it. That's what a good advocate does. Your brother is a very good advocate." She almost smiled. "You're on the panel anyway, Dar. That's what the other four are for. If you lean, they'll hear it. If they lean, you'll hear it. Nobody signs alone. That's the whole point."

"Why me?"

"Because you're the reason we needed it. Because you know better than anyone alive what happens when the wrong person signs someone else's outcomes. Because you have a permanent reprimand in your file that says you break rules when you think you're right, and I want someone on this who'll think very hard before he does it again." She paused. "And because I think you need something hard to do."

I didn't say anything.

"That was the part," Mira said, "where you argue with me."

"I don't want to argue."

"Then I've made a mistake," she said. "Nine to one, like everyone. Don't stay late. I've read last November's rota and I'm not having it

again." She touched her temple, and the light dimmed but didn't go out, so the two models hung there, turning, between us. "Read the file. Both of you. Then come and tell me why it's impossible."

#

We stayed in display room four. Kalle put his feet up on the second chair and his slate on his stomach and pulled things into the air as fast as I could think of them, and never read anything twice, and was right almost every time, which was annoying.

"Start with the cap," he said. "Everyone forgets the cap—"

I opened the page on my slate and handed it to him.

He read it, all of it, faster than anyone should be able to read a page of numbers. Then he looked up at me with something like delight.

"You did this on your months."

"From public data. One night."

"Cap, capacity, window. S. Ya at the ceiling. The station team getting a few hundredths for five years." He waved the slate. "That's my whole morning, Rax. You've stolen my whole morning." He handed it back. "Who else has seen it?"

"My brothers."

Kalle looked at the petition, still hanging faintly beside the drives, and at me, and for once didn't say anything.

"Four people," I said. "My brothers, and Sora."

Kalle nodded, then changed the subject. "And how many do we need to count for the calculation?"

He pulled them all up at once, and the room filled with points of light. The station team in gold. S. Ya's twelve in white. And everyone else, spreading out in every direction: the people who'd built the tugs, the people who'd made the test rings, the materials people at QS and the power people at QX. Thousands of points. Tens of thousands, if you went back far enough. All of them had touched it.

I reached up and touched a cluster of points near the gold, and pulled the record behind it into the air. Fabrication logs. Hundreds of thousands of hours. "The Lattice's plates were cut and joined by fabricators. The struts were moved by assists. The rings were hauled out by tugs that fly themselves. People designed it and checked it and decided. But most of the hours aren't people's hours at all."

"So?"

"So the formula only credits people. Nobody's ever had to ask

how much of an outcome was a machine's and how much was the person standing next to it. Now we do, and nobody has ever written down how."

Kalle swung his feet down.

"I'll tell you how," he said. "A machine's a tool. A really good one. When Hana's people run a fabricator for ten thousand hours, those are their hours. They chose what it made. They kept it running. They'd have done it by hand if they had to, only slower. You don't credit the hammer."

"Then the station gets credit for every hour their machines worked," I said, "and S. Ya's twelve, if they really used fewer machines, get credit only for their own."

"Yes. Seems fair to me."

"Does it?"

"Doesn't it?" He was grinning. "Go on, then. What's yours?"

I looked at the swarm of light. I thought about the yards at night, the machines asleep in their rows, and the morning crew walking in to stand beside them.

"I don't know yet," I said. "Something about who keeps the machines."

"That's not an answer."

"No."

#

At five to one he stood up, stretched until his back cracked, and said, "Pitch."

"What?"

"The commons pitch, at the edge of the Second Ring. I play every afternoon. Six-a-side. It's very bad soccer." He picked up the grass-stained shoes from under his chair. "You should come. Mira says you used to play."

"Years ago."

"Doesn't matter. We lose to the crèche staff. That's the beauty of it." He paused at the door and looked back at the two drives turning in the dark. "Can I tell you something, Rax? Since we're partners now?"

"Go on."

"I think the formula's going to break," he said, and grinned. "Not this year. But this is the kind of thing it breaks on. Something too big

for it." He shrugged. "It's broken before. Somebody always fixes it. Maybe it'll be us." And he went off down the corridor, swinging his shoes, whistling.

I stayed a minute longer.

The two drives turned between me and the wall. The petition hung beside them with my brother's name at the top. I thought about the question Comai had been asking the night she died, and the question underneath every number I'd ever looked at: how much of it was his?

Only now it was a different question. Now it was: how much of the future was theirs? And whatever I answered, Avukat would read it out loud.

I found I wanted to know anyway. It was the first thing I'd wanted to know since February, apart from what Seren was going to say next. That frightened me a little. I let it.

Then I turned out the light and went home at one, like a normal person, and slept for three hours, and then got up and went to the yards.

Chapter 7

Thursday, August 13, 171 (*2201*)

S. Ya's lab was in the First Ring, under a meadow so ordinary I walked past the entrance twice.

I don't know what I'd expected. Something grander. A building that announced itself, as the old towers in Tushar's pictures had announced themselves. But the lab was an Earthhold like any other, low and grassed over, with the same entrance steps and the same skylights and the same small checkpoint lens beside the door, which looked at me, decided I was on the list, and let me in without a sound. The only difference was a plain slate by the door with a single line on it, written by hand: *Please knock if the light is red. We are probably asleep.*

The light was green. Kalle knocked anyway.

"Manners," he said. "He's the most important person in the world. It's no trouble."

#

Inside, it was a workshop.

Not a lab like Jinsia's, all white benches and sequencers humming. A workshop, like the depot: a long, low room under skylights, with benches down both sides covered in tools and parts and half-finished things, and in the middle, on a heavy steel cradle, a shape about the size of a person, closed and smooth and gray, that I recognized from the display room. The Converger. A test version, the size of the model, not the real one, which was out past Uranus waiting for next summer.

There were assists along one wall, a whole bank of them, folded in their charging bays with their arms tucked in, their small lights pulsing blue. Six of them. None of them was working. Around the cradle, three people were doing by hand what the assists could have done in a quarter of the time: lifting a curved plate into place on the

Converger's side, holding it, fitting it, while a fourth person sat on an upturned crate with a slate and called out numbers.

"Two millimeters left. One. There. Hold it. *Hold* it—"

The plate settled into place with a soft, final click, and the three people holding it let out their breath together and laughed, and one of them, a narrow, dark-haired man, slapped the side of the Converger with the flat of his hand the way you'd slap the flank of a horse.

"Again," said a voice from the far end of the room. "Take it off and do it again. I want to see you do it without Marta counting."

The three of them groaned. Then they started taking the plate off again.

It was a practice piece, Pell told me later: a quarter-scale section of the throat array. Every fitting on the real rings they'd rehearsed here first, and then done for real in a hall out at the yards, where the two flight rings had stood on their cradles, eight meters across, before each one rode up the elevator whole, on a cargo climber built to carry it. By hand, every plate. The hall had a crane, and people to run it. That was as close to a machine as the twelve would let a plate get.

The voice came from a man at the far bench, standing with his back to us, leaning over something small with a magnifying glass. He straightened up and turned around. He wiped his hands on a cloth, and came down the length of the workshop toward us. I knew him as everyone in the Q world knew him: medium height, dark hair, a face so pleasant and so ordinary that you trusted it before you'd decided to, the face of someone who might have been anyone, a neighbor, a teacher, the man who stacks the chairs at Founding Day.

He'd stacked the chairs at Founding Day. I'd watched him do it.

"Investigators," said S. Ya, and shook my hand, and then Kalle's. His hand was warm and dry and a little rough from the work. "Thank you for coming out. I know the panel's asked to see everybody, and I know we're the small team, so you'll want to get us out of the way first." He smiled. "We'll try to be quick. We're not very good at quick. Coffee? Marta makes it terribly."

And then he looked at me again, a second look, and his face changed a little, the way faces do when they place you.

"You were at the reading," he said. "Founding Day, last December. Second row. Tushar Cadana read the opening." He smiled. "She read it beautifully."

"She practiced four hundred times," I said, before I could stop

myself.

"It showed," said S. Ya. "Most people rush the part about the stones."

It was almost exactly what he'd said in December. I remembered it because I'd told Tushar, months later, and she'd been so pleased she couldn't speak. I wondered whether he said it to everyone, and decided he probably did, and decided it didn't matter, because it was true.

#

We interviewed them one at a time, in a small side room off the workshop with a table and four chairs and a window onto a sunken courtyard where somebody had planted tomatoes.

That's what the panel's work was, for the first month. Interviews. Hundreds of them, eventually. The three drawn-by-lot members of the panel hadn't been chosen yet, so for now it was Kalle and me, building the list of questions that everyone would be asked, testing them on the smallest team first. Who did what. When. How do you know it was you and not someone else? Who would know if it wasn't? What would the drive be without you?

The twelve were very good at it. They answered fully and carefully, and most of them seemed to enjoy it. Marta, who made the terrible coffee and called out the numbers, had solved the containment problem in the second year. She explained it to us for twenty minutes with her hands, and I understood perhaps a third of it, and Kalle claimed afterward to have understood all of it, and probably had. An older woman named Iris had built the timing system. A quiet man named Pell had done most of the math that S. Ya had then checked.

"Checked," Pell said. "Not done. He's very particular about that. He didn't do it. He checked it." He looked at me with something like defiance. "Write that down."

I wrote it down.

The last of the twelve was the narrow, dark-haired man who'd slapped the Converger like a horse. His name was Lior. He was twenty-five, the youngest on the team by decades, and looked it, which almost nobody did, and he had the restless hands of someone who'd never once been told to wait his turn. He sat down across the table from us and put both hands flat on it and said, before we'd

asked anything, "It's going to work."

"The drive?"

"The Converger. Next summer. It's going to work." He said it as people at the Remnant house said the words at the dusk light: without any room in it. "I've been on this team six years. I came the year after my Affirmation. I asked to come. I asked eleven times before he said yes. And I've never seen anything like it. Not the drive. Him."

"Tell us," said Kalle.

Lior looked toward the door, through which we could hear the sounds of the plate going on again, and Marta not counting, and someone swearing.

"He never gets stuck," Lior said. "That's the thing. Everybody gets stuck. Pell gets stuck for a month at a time. I get stuck every day. You'll be working on something and it won't go, and you try everything, and it still won't go, and you go home and you can't sleep." He shook his head. "Six years. And I've never once seen him try something that didn't work."

Kalle laughed. So did I. It was the kind of thing people say about a person they love too much: a little absurd, a little true, the kind of thing you laugh at because it's sweet. Lior laughed too, a little sheepishly.

"I know," he said. "I know how it sounds. But it's true. Ask anyone."

"What about the station?" I said. "Sokol's team. What do you think of the Lattice?"

His face changed. Not to dislike, quite. Something more complicated.

"It's very big," he said. "It's very careful. It's three hundred people arguing for six years until there's nothing left to argue about." He turned one hand over on the table. "We wrote to them once. Last year. Pell had an idea about the throat geometry that would have saved them about a third of their mass, and S. Ya said we should send it, because we send everything, we publish everything, he answers anyone who asks. So we sent it. And they wrote back."

"What did they say?"

" 'We can't do that.' " Lior smiled, a little thinly. "So Pell wrote back and said, 'Why?' And they said, 'Because we just don't do that here.' And Pell wrote back—" He stopped, and the smile widened despite himself. "Pell wrote back and said, 'You mean you've never

done it before.' And they didn't answer. For a year. And then last spring they did it. The geometry. They didn't say thank you. It's in their design now." He shrugged. "That's the station. That's the Lattice. Very careful, and a year behind."

"And S. Ya?" I said. "When they took Pell's idea without a word?"

"He was *pleased*." Lior shook his head again, slowly, as if this were the one thing about S. Ya he would never understand. "He said, 'Good. Now it's theirs.' "

#

At noon S. Ya came into the side room with three cups of Marta's coffee on a tray and set them down and sat in the fourth chair. He looked at the list of questions on my slate upside down without being asked, and said, "These are good. You'll want to ask everybody the fourth one twice. People say yes to it the first time because they think they should."

The fourth one was: *Would the drive work without you?*

"Do you want to answer them?" I said.

"Of course." He folded his hands on the table. "Ask."

I asked. He answered, and he answered the way the others had, fully and carefully and in good humor. Who had done what: everyone, mostly, and he named them all again, Marta and Iris and Pell and Lior and the rest, and what each of them had solved. When: over six years, which he could give us by the month if we liked. How did he know it was them and not him? Because he'd been there, and because they'd argued with him about it, and because he'd lost most of the arguments.

"And would it work without you?" I said.

He thought about it. He actually thought about it, his pleasant face quite still, his hands folded.

"Not this one," he said at last. "This exact one. Probably not. But a drive would have been built. Sokol's will be, whatever happens next summer. If it hadn't been us it would have been someone else, a little later. That's how this sort of thing goes." He smiled. "Nobody is necessary. That's the best thing about people. It's the first thing I tell anyone who joins us."

"Lior says you never get stuck."

S. Ya laughed. It was a warm, unforced, slightly embarrassed laugh.

"Lior is kind and very young," he said. "I get stuck all the time. I'm just very good at not letting them see it. It's bad for morale." He picked up his cup and looked at it and put it down again without drinking. "What I actually tell them is the other thing. To expect perfection is to expect failure. You'll never build anything if you need it to be perfect first. Build it. Let it be wrong. Take the plate off and put it on again. That's why we do it by hand."

"I wondered about that," said Kalle. "You've got six assists out there doing nothing."

"They're very good assists," said S. Ya. "They'd do it faster. They'd do it better, honestly. Marta's got a two-millimeter tremor in her left hand when she's tired, and the assists don't." He looked toward the door, through which the sound of the plate going on yet again came, and then a small cheer. "But if the machines build it, it isn't ours. And I want it to be ours. Theirs. Whoever's." He turned back to us. "When the first people go through, if they ever do, I want them to know that a person held every plate."

I wrote that down, too. I don't know why. It wasn't on the list.

#

At half past twelve, S. Ya glanced up at the skylight, as people do when they check the time without touching their temple, and stood.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I have to go. It's Thursday."

"Thursday?"

"I play," he said, and looked faintly embarrassed again. "In goal. An amateur league. Thursday afternoons, at the commons pitch in the Third Ring. They need me. I'm the keeper." He picked up the tray. "Marta will see you out. Stay as long as you want. Ask anybody anything."

He went out. Through the door we watched him say something to Lior that made Lior laugh. He touched Marta lightly on the shoulder as he passed and paused to look at the plate on the Converger's side, his head on one side. Then he went on out of the workshop and up the steps into the sun.

Kalle was looking at me with an expression of enormous satisfaction.

"I know that league," he said. "I play against them sometimes. The Thursday one."

"And?"

"And he's *good*, Rax. He's very good. He could keep goal in the top league in the city. Easily. People have asked him." Kalle grinned. "He won't go. Says he likes Thursdays. Says the top league takes itself too seriously." He shook his head with deep admiration. "I'd give an arm to be asked."

"Maybe he's not that good."

"I've watched him for two years," said Kalle. "He's that good." He drank Marta's coffee all at once, and made a face. "Some people just don't want to move up. I've never understood it."

It was exactly the kind of small, harmless oddity I used to collect.

But I'd spent the winter learning what happened when I went looking for patterns in other people's numbers, and I was on a panel now, with a rule named for a woman who'd died for one. And the man in question was the most trusted man in the world, who'd just carried three cups of coffee in on a tray and told me nobody was necessary.

"It doesn't matter," I said.

"No," said Kalle. "Of course not." He stood up and stretched. "Come on. Let's go and ask Marta about the tremor. I want to know if it's in the attestations."

#

Marta's attestation was a book.

She went to a shelf at the back of the workshop and came back with a fat, battered ledger, paper, bound in cloth gone gray at the corners, and set it on the bench between us and opened it to the first page, which was dated six years earlier in a round, careful hand.

"Every plate," she said. "Every fitting. Every test. Who held it, who measured it, who signed it off. It was his idea. He said that one day somebody would come and ask who did what, and we should be able to show them." She turned a page. "I don't think he meant you. I think he meant historians."

"Why paper?" I said. "You could keep all this in a file."

"We asked him that, the first week." Marta ran her thumb down the edge of the pages. "A file can be changed and nobody sees. Paper you can only cross out, and everybody sees the crossing out. He said a record you can quietly correct isn't a record. It's an opinion." She glanced at me. "You'd know about that, I'd think."

I did. I'd spent the winter learning exactly what could be done to records that changed without anyone seeing.

"We're the historians now," said Kalle.

"God help us," said Marta, and turned another page.

I looked. The columns ran down every page in the same order: date, task, hands, measure, sign. The hands column was full of names, three and four and five to a line, and the sign column was full of initials, everyone's initials, taking turns. Marta's tremor was in there; you could find it if you looked. On tired days the measure column showed her fittings coming in a hair wide, and the next line almost always showed someone else taking the plate off and doing it again, and nobody had crossed anything out. Once, early, in the spring before the rings were shipped, there was a pencil note in the margin in Marta's hand, *late. M. tired.*, and no line after it, only an initial in the sign column. I noticed it the way you notice a mark on a tablecloth, and turned the page.

S. Ya's name was in the sign column perhaps one time in twenty. It was never in the hands column at all.

"Never?" I said, and ran my finger down a page, and then another.

"Never," said Marta. "He doesn't hold. He checks." She closed the ledger gently, like a door on someone sleeping. "Pell told you that already, I expect. Pell tells everyone that. Pell thinks it's important."

"Is it?"

She considered the question honestly, which I was beginning to understand was how everyone in that workshop considered questions.

"It's important to *him*," she said. "He wants it to be ours. He's very stubborn about it. When we got the containment working, the first time, the real time, in the third year, there was someone from the city feed here within a week, and she wanted a picture of him with the Converger, and he wouldn't. He made her take a picture of the twelve of us instead, and he stood at the side, holding the reporter's bag." She smiled. "It's the only picture of us that exists. He's half out of the frame."

"Can we have a copy of the ledger?"

"You can have the ledger," said Marta. "It's not ours to keep. That's what it's for."

#

Kalle walked with me as far as the Second Ring, where he'd turn off for his pitch. Halfway across the first bridge over the greenway, where the old riverbed runs through the inner Rings, he stopped and leaned on the rail and looked down at the water.

"Six assists," he said. "In their bays. Charging. Doing nothing."

"He explained that."

"He explained why *he* does it. I'm thinking about your machines." He turned round and leaned his back on the rail. "Say we do it your way. Say the machines' share doesn't belong to whoever ran them. Say it goes to everybody, or nobody. Then what's the best thing a team can do, if they want their people credited?"

I saw it before he said it. I didn't like it.

"Switch the assists off," said Kalle. "Do it all by hand. Every hour a machine doesn't work is an hour a person does, and a person's hour counts. Your rule rewards people for being slower." He grinned. "And look who's already doing it. Twelve people lifting plates on and off while six perfectly good assists sit in a row watching. If you write your rule, Rax, the most perfect example of it in the world is the team you're supposed to be measuring."

"He was doing it before there was any rule."

"I know. That's what makes it funny." He pushed off the rail. "I'm not saying you're wrong. I'm saying you'd better have an answer when somebody smarter than me says it at a hearing."

He went off toward his pitch at a jog. I stood on the bridge a while with the ledger under my arm.

#

I carried it home under my arm, through the First Ring and out across the bridges, with the afternoon sun on the water and the sweepers going about their business along the paths, and the whole way I could feel the weight of it against my ribs.

It was the best-kept record I'd ever held. Six years of it. No gaps, no corrections, every hand accounted for. If every team in the drive had kept a book like it, the panel would have been finished by the Lull.

That was what I thought, walking home. That it was a gift. That it would make the work easy.

At my desk that night I opened it to the first page again, and read the first entry, and the second. Then I sat back and looked at the

ceiling for a while, and didn't write anything on my slate at all.

There was nothing to write. Twelve people had built a machine by hand, and kept honest track of who did what, and the man who led them had stood at the side of the picture holding someone else's bag.

I closed the ledger and went to bed, and I slept. The next afternoon, after the Division, I went out to the Low.

Chapter 8

Saturday, August 29, 171 (2201)

The Freehold Society had never held a meeting on a Saturday before. Berbant told me so, twice, in the message he sent on Wednesday, the second time in capitals.

Not the Monday one. A PUBLIC one. Doors open. Avukat's speaking. Come.

I went because Berbant had asked, and because I'd been to the Monday one once, in January, and been walked out of it by the elbow. I wanted to see what had changed. And because I wanted to see my brother at the front of a room. I'd never seen it. I'd seen Avukat argue at a dinner table more times than I could count, and win most of them, but I'd never seen him stand up in front of strangers and ask them for anything.

It was the same commons room in the Third Ring, under the same cluster, but it didn't look the same. They'd taken the doors off. Literally: the double doors at the top of the steps were leaning against the wall outside, and the afternoon came straight down into the room, and you could hear the commons pitch next door, a whistle and a shout and the flat sound of a ball. The folding chairs had gone. There were benches instead, borrowed from somewhere, long and scuffed, and more of them than I'd have guessed the room could hold. Almost all of them were full.

Two hundred people, perhaps. More standing at the back. I recognized the woman with the slate who read the minutes, and a few faces from the depot. Most of them I didn't know. Some of them, I was nearly sure, had never been to a Freehold meeting in their lives. They had the look of people who'd come to see a fire.

The table at the back still had tea on it, and the newsletter. *The Hold* had a new front page. The small house with the ordinary roof was

gone. In its place was a drawing of the Converger, gray and smooth on its cradle, and underneath it a single line:

If this can't earn a roof, what can?

#

I stood at the back, against the wall, by the door to the corridor.

From there I could see down the corridor to the organizers' room. The door was open, and I could see the row of hooks along the wall. It was summer, so there were only two or three things hanging there, a light jacket, a hat, somebody's bag. Near the end of the row, where the big brown coat with all the pockets had hung in January, there was an empty hook.

Nobody had put anything on it. I watched for most of the afternoon, between the speeches. People came and went from that room, and hung things up and took them down again, and nobody used that hook. I don't know whether anyone had decided that. I don't think so. I think it was just the kind of thing people do without deciding.

#

The woman with the slate read the agenda. Then she read the petition they'd filed at the end of July, in her flat, careful voice, and the room went quiet to listen.

It was short. They'd written it to be short. An amendment to Article II, the article they'd spent seventy years politely asking to change. *No Coin, No Crown.* The amendment didn't touch the coin, and it didn't touch the crown. It added one sentence after them.

A contribution to the common good whose measured value, before the cap, exceeds a threshold set by the Concord shall earn its contributor a permanent personal holding: ground and a roof, to keep, and to leave.

To leave. I heard the room catch on it, like a sleeve on a nail. To leave to someone. To hand on. Article II forbade exactly that, in so many words: *no inheritance of material advantage.* The Society had always been careful never to ask for it. They'd asked for ground, and a roof of your own on it. They'd never once, in seventy years, asked for the right to leave anything to anybody.

Then Avukat stood up.

He was wearing the canvas coat he'd worn at the cabin, though it was far too warm for it, and he didn't take it off. He didn't go to the front table. He came out in front of it and stood on the floor with the

first row of benches almost at his knees, with his hands in his coat pockets. He looked at the room for a long moment without saying anything, as he used to look at me across Senne's table when I'd said something he was about to take apart.

"Most of you know me," he said. "I'm the one who stands up in consent hearings and says *the person next to me didn't do it*. I've been saying it for sixty years. I'm right more often than I'm wrong. Not much more." Some laughter. "I'm not here as an advocate. I'm here because the Society asked me to be its face for a while, and I said yes, and I want you to know why I said yes, because six months ago I'd have said no."

He took one hand out of his pocket and held it up, palm toward us, and folded down a finger.

"In January, one of ours killed a woman in a vault." The room went entirely still. "He was one of ours. We say he acted alone, and he did, and it doesn't matter. Half of us left. The half that stayed spent the spring being quiet and polite and hoping nobody would notice we were still here." He folded down another finger. "And then in June, a few hundred people in a workshop in the First Ring and on a station over the equator built the most important thing human beings have ever built. A door to the stars." He let his hand fall. "So I asked an equeuenomist a question. A simple one. What does the formula give them for it?"

Two rows ahead of me, a woman I knew from the analysts' corridor turned round on her bench and looked straight at me. I kept my eyes on my brother. He had asked it, on my steps, with the smell of elk still on me. I had said no. Everything he said next was true, as far as it went.

"Here's the answer," Avukat said. "From public data. Anyone could have worked it out. Nobody had." And he gave it to them, from memory, every line of my numbers in the order I'd worked them out. The cap. The man at the ceiling for seventy years, for whom inventing the door to the stars was performing as expected. The outcome nobody could verify inside the window. The three hundred, splitting what was left. "A few hundredths of a point," he said. "For five years. Then nothing. That's what the Charter has to offer the people who opened the sky." He looked down the benches. "A few hundredths for a door to the stars isn't modesty. It's an insult with a decimal point."

Somebody laughed, and stopped, and somebody else said *yes*, quietly, as if to themselves.

"I'm not against the Queue," he said. "I've never been against the Queue. The Queue fed us when nothing else could. It got us through the hard century. It's fair, and fairness is a great deal more than most people in history ever got. But fair isn't the same as deserved. And I want to tell you what I think is missing, because I think it's the thing we've been too polite to say for seventy years."

He put his hand back in his pocket.

"We've been telling people that the Freehold Society wants ground. A roof of your own. And people look at us and say, *But you have a roof. A good one. Why do you want to own it?* And we've never had a good answer, because we've been answering the wrong question." He leaned forward a little. "It isn't the things. It was never the things. Wealth isn't things."

The ball thumped on the pitch next door. Someone in the front row laughed, nervously, and stopped.

"Wealth," said my brother, "is being able to choose when you want to be uncomfortable and when you don't."

Nobody said anything.

"That's it," he said. "That's all it is. Everything in this city is comfortable. The food is good and the beds are warm and nobody goes without. And all of it, every bit of it, is on loan. You can be moved. Your room can be reassigned. Your bench at the depot can be given to an assist. You can wait three years for the cabin and five for Lapland, and you'll get there, and it'll be wonderful, and you'll give it back. You never get to say *this part of my life is mine, and nobody moves me out of it, and if I want to be cold and hungry in it for a week while I build a wall by hand, that's my business.*" He looked down the rows. "The Founders' Share is the smallest possible version of that. One roof. One piece of ground. For the people who earn it so obviously that nobody in this city could argue. And the right to hand it on. Because a thing you can't hand on isn't yours. It's just a long loan."

He stopped. He looked, for a second, almost surprised to have finished.

"That's what I wanted to say," he said, and sat down.

They didn't applaud right away. It took a moment. Then it came all at once, from the front benches first and then back through the room. Some of the people at the back who'd come to see a fire were

clapping too, and the woman with the slate was looking at Avukat with an expression I'd never seen on anyone's face when they looked at my brother. A kind of relief.

I didn't clap. I stood against the wall and watched him at the front table, with his arms folded again and his jaw working. I thought about what he'd said, and how good it was. I thought about the five-year wait for Lapland, which wasn't his. It was Berbant's.

#

Afterward the room broke into knots and arguments and the tea ran out. I went down the corridor to the organizers' room.

Avukat was there, alone, his canvas coat hung on the hook beside the empty one, at the table under the hooks, sorting papers into a box as if the meeting had been any meeting. He didn't look up.

"Those were my numbers," I said.

"They're the formula's numbers." He squared a stack and set it in the box. "You put them on the table first. At Senne's, in front of four people. I read it out to two hundred. That's the only difference."

"I told you you couldn't have it."

"And I didn't take it. I gave it back. You watched me." Now he looked up. "Is any of it wrong?"

"No."

"Then what are you angry about?"

I stood in the doorway and tried to answer him honestly, which with Avukat was always the trap, because he only ever asked questions he'd already answered.

"Mira put me on the panel," I said. "You know that. You filed an objection to it."

"I filed it so it'd be on file. She denied it. I knew she would." He shrugged. "I'd have objected to anybody. You I objected to with some affection."

"Two hundred people just heard my numbers come out of my brother's mouth, and one of them works in my building. When the panel sits, every word we say is going to be read against those numbers."

"Yes," said Avukat. "That's rather the point of numbers. And I'll tell you something else. I'm counting on your machines, Dar. And if you give the machines' share to everybody, which is where your head goes, what's left is people. Twelve of them, holding plates by hand.

You'll make my best case for me." He put the lid on the box. "Dar. Listen to me. I'm not asking you to say anything you don't believe. I'd never ask you that. You'd be no use to me if I did. I'm asking you to do your job, which you've always done better than anyone I know. Measure it. Honestly. Put the true number in the record." He picked up the box. "I already know what it says. So do you. You wrote it down on the first night."

He went past me in the doorway, and on the way, without breaking step, he took his canvas coat off the hook beside the empty one and put it over his arm.

#

Berbant found me outside, by the leaning doors, flushed, bouncing a little on his toes.

"Well? *Well?*"

"He was very good."

"He was *wonderful*. Did you hear the back? Did you hear them?" He grabbed my arm. "And the numbers. Your numbers, from Senne's table. He had every one of them." He let go. "Sora's going to be sorry she missed it. She had a shift."

"Tell her about it."

"I'm going to tell her all of it." He looked back down the steps into the room, where Avukat had come out with his box and was surrounded again, shaking hands, saying something short to each of them, and Berbant's face had the same expression the woman with the slate had worn.

"I thought you'd stopped coming," I said. "After Escarpé."

"So did I." He stopped bouncing. "He hid in us. Today Avukat stood up there and said what we want, out loud, in front of everyone. Nobody can hide in that. That's what I needed."

We walked together toward the transit through the Third Ring in the long gold end of the afternoon. On the commons pitch next door the game had finished, and somebody had left a ball in the long grass near the goal.

"Come back to Saturday soccer," Berbant said. "Mornings, at the Eighth Ring pitch. We need someone at the back. Oddny says his knees are going."

"Oddny's knees aren't going anywhere. Nobody's are."

"I know. He says it anyway. It's his only joke." He grinned. "You

stand at the back and you kick it away when it comes near you. You were never any good at it. You always showed up, though. You were always good at standing at the back."

"I haven't played in six years."

"Nobody cares. It's soccer, Dar. Not surgery." He stopped at the edge of the pitch and looked at the ball in the grass. Then he walked out onto the pitch and picked it up and came back with it under his arm. "Somebody's kid will be looking for this in the morning," he said, and set it on the bench by the path, where it would be seen.

"All right," I said. "Next Saturday."

"At the back." He clapped me on the shoulder. "Where you belong."

He went off toward his own line, humming. I stood at the stop and waited for the pod and thought about my brother in his canvas coat with my numbers in his mouth, and the woman from the analysts' corridor turning round on her bench, and the empty hook.

It had been a very good speech. Every number in it was true. I'd checked them myself, at four in the morning, and I couldn't find a thing wrong with any of them.

#

On Monday at nine I knocked on Mira's door before I'd been to my own office.

She listened without interrupting: the numbers, the night I'd made it, Senne's table, the speech, the woman from the analysts' corridor. When I'd finished she sat back.

"You want off."

"I want it on the record. Before the panel sits. That the numbers he used were mine, and how he got them, and that I gave them to no one."

"He'll quote your disclosure at the hearing. You know that."

"I know."

Mira looked at me. Then she opened my file and turned the slate round so I could dictate to it.

"I have your statement from the third," she said. "Add the speech to it. Today, in your own words. I want every word of it to be yours."

Chapter 9

Tuesday, September 15, 171 (2201)

Jinsia came for me at half past four in the morning, which he had warned me about, and which I had not believed.

"Shoes you can get wet," he said at my door, ducking under the frame. "And a shirt you don't love. You'll sweat through it and then you'll be cold."

"It's dark."

"It's September. It's dark until six." He was already walking. "The water's best before the wind. Come on. You promised."

I had promised, in the way you promise things to Jinsia, which is to say I'd said "Fine" to make him stop asking. He'd been asking since June.

We took the first west-line pod out toward the foothills with three sleepy kitchen workers and a woman in a wetsuit reading a slate. We got off at the reservoir stop, and walked down through the dark pines to the water. The commons boathouse was a long low shed at the edge of the reservoir with its big doors rolled up and a single light inside. Racks of boats ran up both walls in the gloom, thin and pale and absurdly long, like the bones of something that had lived in the water and been taken apart for study.

Jinsia went to the far rack without looking, like a man going to his own coat. Then he stopped, considered me, and came back.

"Not my single," he said. "You'd tip it in a minute and I'd have to fish you out. We'll take a double. You sit in the bow and do exactly what I say."

"I can row."

"You've never rowed in your life."

"I've watched people row."

He looked at me with enormous patience from his great height.

"Dar," he said. "That's the whole problem with you."

#

He was right, of course. I couldn't row.

I could do what he told me. Hands away, body over, slide. Square the blade, catch, push with the legs, not the arms. But I did each of those things one after another, as a list, and a boat doesn't care about lists. For the first fifty strokes the hull lurched and slapped and the oars clattered. Twice I caught a crab, which is what rowers call it when the water grabs your blade and tries to take it home, and twice Jinsia stopped us and waited, saying nothing, while I worked out which of my hands had done what.

Then, somewhere past the middle of the reservoir, with the far shore just beginning to show gray against the black, something happened that I still don't know how to describe. I stopped doing the list. My body did it. The boat stopped lurching and began to run, a long smooth glide after every stroke, the water hissing under the hull, the puddles from Jinsia's blades sliding past mine. Catch. Drive. Release. Glide. There was nothing to count because there was only one thing, happening over and over, and it was the same thing every time, and it was never the same.

It lasted perhaps three minutes. Then I noticed it, and the noticing put a blade in at the wrong angle, and we lurched, and it was gone.

"There," said Jinsia, behind me. He sounded pleased in a way I'd only ever heard from him about a clean result. "That. That's why I come."

#

We stopped in the middle of the reservoir as the sun came up.

You couldn't see QL from the water. The hills and the long wall of the dam hid it. But you could tell where it was. The sky over the dam went white, and then the sun came up out of the plains beyond it. The light caught the tops of the pines on the western shore first and worked its way down the slope to the water. We sat with the oars flat on the water and let the boat drift. Jinsia passed a flask of tea back over his shoulder.

"Since February," he said. "I told you I'd tell you."

"You said rowing was new."

"Fourth thing." He laughed. "You know my three. Work, sex, and the joint. After your sister, I noticed I was smoking every night. With you when you'd let me, alone when you wouldn't. Every single

night. I'd go home and I'd be fine and I'd think, well, that was a good evening, and I couldn't remember a word either of us had said." He took the flask back. "So I traded. Fourth thing. It replaced the third, mostly. Not all the way. I'm not a saint."

"And it doesn't wear off?"

He looked at me. I could hear him looking.

"You mean your numbers," he said. "You told Tushar about them. Tushar told me. Your little list of everything going back down."

"Of course she did."

"Tushar tells me everything. You know that." He put the flask between his feet. "No. It doesn't wear off. Or it does, and then it comes back better. Every week I can do a little more. My hands are worse and my back's better. Some mornings I'm terrible and some mornings I'm in the water for an hour and I'd swear it was ten minutes." He shrugged. "Your feasts don't get better because you get better at eating, Dar. This does. The boat doesn't care how I feel about it. It only cares whether I can do it."

I sat with that for a while, watching the light come down the face of the mountains.

I'd tried, in June and July, nearly everything the Rozkosz offered. I had numbers for all of it. I'd never once tried anything I could get better at.

#

He told me about the child somewhere around the second flask.

He told it the way he told results: flatly, in order, with the interesting part held back until you'd understood the method. He and Marisol had worked side by side in the lab on the lowest floor of the Science Institute for nearly fifty years. They weren't lovers. They had never been lovers; Jinsia's preferences in that line were famous and specific and did not include Marisol. But they trusted each other more than either of them trusted anyone else, and over the last year they had decided they wanted to find out what would happen if they put their genes together and raised whatever came of it.

"We'd be the first two geneticists to try it from the inside," he said.

"That's very romantic."

"It isn't meant to be romantic. It's meant to be honest." He trailed one hand in the water. "We've watched seventy years of other people's children in the data. We know everything about how heredity

works in a population that stopped aging. We know nothing at all about raising one. Marisol says that's the most interesting thing she's ever heard me admit."

"So you applied."

"In March. To the parenthood queue."

"And?"

"And it's frozen." He said it lightly. I'd known him for thirty-eight years. It wasn't light. "Not refused. Frozen. No capacity until the next emigration ship. That's the rule. For twenty years they said yes to nearly everyone, because the ships kept leaving for Mars and the Moon and the station, fifty thousand at a time. Then about five years ago the settlements filled. They're at their targets. The last ship went and there isn't another one planned. Nobody noticed for the first few years. Almost nobody was asking. The planet's at the number it's supposed to be, so a child here waits for a seat somewhere else to open up, and there isn't anywhere else left. So everybody who's applied since is sitting in a queue that doesn't move.

"And nothing changes. Hardly anyone dies, hardly anyone's born. Same genes, round and round, in a city that's stopped asking for more. I used to think that was the most peaceful thing in the world."

I knew the rule. I'd audited the parenthood queue twice in my career, and both times I'd admired it: the cleanest allocation in Q, one of the very few with nothing in it to game. I'd never once thought about it from inside.

"Until the drive," I said.

"Until the drive. The ring gets built, the door opens, and then there's somewhere to go and the queue starts moving again." He dipped his hand and let the water run off his fingers. "And it matters which one wins. Did you know that? I've been reading everything. The Converger's ring is small. Smaller structure, smaller throat, less to build. Marisol worked it out from the published specs: if S. Ya's design wins, they could have a ring at the far end years sooner than with the Lattice. Years. The freeze lifts when the program's approved, but the first emigrants go when the door opens, and the queue only really moves when people actually leave." He was quiet a moment. "I've never wanted anything from the city in my life except a lab and to be left alone in it. And now I'm reading engineering specs at two in the morning and hoping a man I've never met wins a race."

I didn't say anything.

I was the chair of a panel that had to measure both those drives as if it didn't care which of them won. I'd disclosed my brother's petition to Mira on the record, and sat through a week of Kalle telling me exactly how a panel like ours gets accused of leaning. And here was the person I'd known longest outside my own family, in the stern of a boat, wanting something I wasn't allowed to want.

"You can't say anything about it," Jinsia said. "I know. That's fine. I didn't tell you so you'd say anything. I told you because you're one of the people I tell things."

We drifted. A heron came down out of the pines on the far shore and stood in the shallows, still as a post.

"Can I ask you something?" I said. "For the panel. Not about which drive."

"Ask."

"When your child is born. Who made it?"

He laughed out loud, and the heron looked at us and decided we weren't worth leaving for.

"Marisol and me. Obviously."

"And the clinic that does the work. And the people who run the queue. And whoever grows the food Marisol eats for nine months. And everyone who kept the city running long enough for any of it to happen."

"Now you're being an equeuenomist."

"I am an equeuenomist. Who gets the credit?"

He thought about it properly. That's the thing about Jinsia that people who only know the jokes never see: ask him a real question and he stops being funny and thinks.

"Nobody gets the credit for a child," he said at last. "That's the first thing anybody who's had one would tell you. You get the child. That's all. And then you spend the rest of your life finding out it was never yours." He picked up his oars. "If your formula could understand that, you wouldn't need a panel. Come on. The wind's coming."

#

There was a thing he didn't say, and a thing I didn't.

The thing he didn't say was the research. I knew what his lab did. I'd saved it, once. Thirty years ago an ethics panel had nearly closed Jinsia's work as "genetic merit," the kind of research the parenthood

queue was built to forbid, because his data compared children with their parents and someone had decided that comparing was ranking. I'd heard about it from Tushar, not from him. I'd taken his data apart, unasked, over three weeks of nights, and shown the panel there was no merit term anywhere in it: no score, no ranking, only the question of what GERAS does to what parents pass on. The lab survived. He'd never mentioned it to me since, and I'd never mentioned it to him, which is how Jinsia and I did gratitude.

So I knew, and he knew I knew, that a child of his and Marisol's would also be, faintly, data. The first child of two GERAS geneticists, born to parents who'd been biologically thirty-five for seventy years. He'd never say it. Marisol would never say it. They'd raise it with all the love they had, and somewhere in a file on the lowest floor of the Science Institute there would be a genome with a date on it, and both of them would know.

The thing I didn't say was smaller and stupider.

I'd known Jinsia for thirty-eight years and Tushar for sixteen. I'd taught Pallavi every bird on the first ridge, and gotten half of them wrong. And when two of the people I loved most in the world decided to make a child, it had never occurred to anyone, least of all me, that I might be part of it. Jinsia hadn't thought of it. Why would he? I was the man who needed a room with one person in it.

I didn't say it. I didn't know what I'd have meant if I had.

#

We rowed back with the wind coming up and the water going choppy and silver. I was hopeless again, all list and no boat, and Jinsia didn't mind.

At the boathouse he hosed the double down and racked it and stood back and looked at it, and then at his own single on the far rack, narrow as a knife.

"Come again," he said. "Tuesdays. Get good enough to be bad in a single. It takes about a year."

"A year."

"A year to be bad. Ten to be decent. I'm not decent yet." He grinned down at me. "Isn't that wonderful? There's something in this city I'll never finish."

We walked up through the pines to the transit stop. At the top of the path he stopped and looked back down at the water, and said, not

to me, "Years sooner." Then he got on the pod and went to work.

I went to the Division. Kalle had the station team's fabrication logs waiting in display room four, three hundred thousand hours of machines doing what people told them, and he looked up as I came in.

I sat down across from him and opened the panel file, and for the first time since August I wrote something in it that wasn't a question. It was short. I wrote it before I could think better of it.

Kalle's objection stands: a rule that gives the machines' hours to no one rewards people for working slowly. But a rule that gives them to whoever stood nearest rewards people for work they didn't do. Both rules assume the hours belong to somebody. Perhaps they belong to the same people a child does. Not yet answered.

I turned the slate round and pushed it across the table to him.

Kalle read it twice, which he never did.

"That's not an answer," he said.

"No."

"It's a better question, though." He pushed it back. "Who told you about children?"

"A man in a boat."

"Huh," said Kalle, and went back to the logs, and so did I, and we didn't talk about which drive anyone wanted to win.

Chapter 10

Saturday, October 17 – Sunday, October 18, 171 (*2201*)

We negotiated it at seven in the evening, sober, sitting cross-legged on the floor of her room with a pot of tea between us, like two people planning a hike.

It was her idea and my yes. She wanted to know what I was like when the watcher was gone. I wanted to know whether anybody was there when he was. An edible from Bram's kitchen, measured: an hour to arrive, five to leave. It wouldn't take everything. It would take enough. "You'll remember pieces," she said. "Not the order. That's the part you'll hate."

She went through the rest as she had in June: my hands, and where; and the strap from the rail, broad and soft with age, and where it could land and where it couldn't, and how many. She made me say it back, and the word. She'd stay sober. Ansel would sit in the corner, and if he didn't like what he saw, we stopped, and nobody argued with him.

"And if I don't remember agreeing?"

"You're agreeing now," she said. "That's what now is for."

Ansel came at eight with a book and a cushion and a flask of water, and nodded to me, and sat down in the corner under the skylight with his back to the wall, as if he were waiting for a train. At half past eight I ate the square of Bram's cake she gave me. It tasted of honey and grass.

At half past nine I stopped watching.

#

The light is red. The lamp has a red cloth over it.

Her shoulder. A clock on it with no hands. I know that clock.

My hand on the floor, flat. The floor is warm. Somebody laughing. Me.

Water. Ansel's flask, cold, and my throat. He says something. I nod. I don't know what I nodded to. Then I know: *Are you all right.* Yes.

Her breath. Mine. Not two things.

A word I'm waiting for. It doesn't come. I'm not waiting. When did I stop.

Her face very close. Her eyes open. She's saying my name the way you'd say the name of a place.

The skylight. Stars in it. One of them moving: a satellite, or the station, no, the station doesn't move, that's not right either. It doesn't matter. Nothing is a fact.

Heat. Her skin under my hand, and the little black deaths all over it, and the deaths are warm.

Is this all right. My voice. Is it? Yes. Her voice. Yes.

Is this. Yes.

Is.

Dark.

#

I woke at noon, in her bed on the floor, with the skylight full of white October sun and my mouth dry and tasting slightly of honey.

I knew where I was before I knew anything else. Then I knew the time from the light. Then, slowly, in no order, the pieces came back: the red cloth, the clock with no hands, the flask, the star that wasn't a star. Fragments, the way she'd said. Not the order. She'd been right that I would hate that. I lay there and tried to put them in a line, and couldn't, and the not being able to was like a missing tooth my tongue kept going back to.

Seren was sitting on the end of the mattress with her back to me, wearing nothing, eating an apple.

There were marks on her.

Across her shoulders and the backs of her arms, over the ink, a scatter of red going dark: the shape of fingers, the shape of a grip held a long time, a long welt across one shoulder blade that crossed the clock with no hands. Exactly where she'd said. I could see that much. I'd heard every word of it at seven o'clock with a teapot between us, and here it was, written on her, and I had no memory of writing it.

She heard me move and turned round and smiled at me with her whole face, the most open I'd ever seen her.

"There you are," she said.

I sat up. I looked at the marks. I looked at my own hands, which looked like my hands.

"Did I..." I asked. I didn't know how to finish it.

"Yes." She took another bite of the apple. "All of it. Exactly what we said. Not one thing more." She considered me, chewing. "You look like someone who's been told he murdered somebody in his sleep."

"I don't remember murdering you, though it looks like I tried."

"I know you don't remember. That was the point."

I was horrified. I was also something else, at the same time, under it, that I didn't have a name for and didn't like. I'd done it. A man with my hands and my name had been in this room for five hours and done exactly what he'd agreed to do, and been there, and I had not. I'd wanted to know whether anybody was there when the watcher went. Somebody was. I'd never met him.

I'd made a joke before I'd felt any of it. That's what I do when I'm horrified.

"Seren. Rue would bar you for this."

"Rue would." She didn't seem troubled. "Rue's house has a rule for sober. This isn't Rue's house."

"I can't attest you said yes."

She stopped eating. She looked at me, and for once she wasn't amused.

"I can," she said. "I was there."

#

Ansel was still in the corner. I hadn't seen him. He'd been there all night, with his book face down on his knee and his flask empty, and the cushion gone flat under him, and he looked at me from under his dark brows with something that might, in a less solemn man, have been amusement.

"You want to know," he said.

"Yes."

"Then I'll tell you. Once. Then I'm going home to sleep." He put his book down. "You asked. Every time. Every single time she changed anything, or you did, you asked. Even when you couldn't put a sentence together you asked. You'd forget the question halfway through and start it again from the beginning. She'd say yes, and

you'd say all right, and then sometimes you'd ask again in case she'd changed her mind in the meantime." He rubbed his eyes. "Twice you stopped by yourself because you thought she'd winced, and she hadn't, and she had to tell you so. Once you stopped to drink water because I said so. That's all. Nothing she didn't ask for. Nothing outside what you agreed at seven." He stood up, stiffly, and picked up his cushion. "It was the most careful thing I've ever sat through. Honestly, it was a bit boring."

"Boring," I said.

"You're a very boring man when you're out of your head, Dar," said Ansel. "I mean it as a compliment." He nodded to Seren and went to the door, and turned there. "Drink a lot of water today. And eat something that isn't cake."

He went. I sat on the mattress and looked at the door.

No one attests alone. Mira had said it in display room four in August, and I'd stood there with my hand flat on the table and agreed, about drive engineers and fabricators and the most important work in the world, and I'd meant it as a principle. I'd never once thought it might apply to me, to my own body, to a night I couldn't vouch for. I couldn't say what I'd done. Two other people could. That was the only reason I knew I could live with it.

I'm not sure, even now, that it should have been enough. I lived with it. Some nights I still check it, the way you check a lock you know you turned.

Seren had finished the apple. She lay down along the mattress beside me with her marked shoulder up, and closed her eyes in the sun.

"You're doing it again," she said. "Taking it apart."

"Yes."

"Do it at home," she said. "I want to sleep."

#

I walked home the long way, across the Eleventh and the Tenth, in the thin, clean sun, with my legs not entirely mine yet and every color slightly too bright.

Halfway across the Tenth I stopped on the path and asked myself, again, whether the man at half past nine would have said yes to what the man at seven had agreed to. I didn't know. I would never know. That was what it took, and I'd agreed to that at seven too.

On the Second Ring commons pitch there was a Sunday game going, six-a-side, very bad soccer, and in the middle of it, in grass-stained shoes, was Kalle. He saw me on the path and lifted both arms over his head and shouted something I couldn't hear, and then the ball went past him and he had to run.

I lifted a hand back.

Tomorrow was Monday. We had a panel meeting at nine. I stood on the path and tried to remember what was on the agenda, and couldn't. I'd written it myself on Thursday. Three items. I couldn't have told you one of them.

I found out at nine the next morning, when Kalle read them out. The first was a letter from the petitioners, from my brother, asking the panel when it expected to publish interim figures. I hadn't drafted a reply. Kalle had, on Sunday night, after his game, without being asked. It was a good reply. He read it to Mira, and nobody but the two of us knew it wasn't mine, and he never mentioned it afterward, which was worse than if he had.

Chapter 11

Thursday, November 12, 171 (2201)

A year to the day after the afternoon I first saw the spire, I went to ask Tushar for help with my work, which I had never done in sixteen years.

I noticed the date on the transit. I didn't say anything about it to anybody. There was nobody to say it to who wouldn't have had to decide what face to make.

The Science Institute runs under three meadows at the edge of the Fourth Ring, and the city's archive is in its lowest level, down a long ramp lit by light wells, behind a pair of doors so heavy that there's a small sign asking you to push them with your shoulder. I pushed them with my shoulder. Inside it was cool and dry and smelled of paper, boxes of it on shelves that ran off into the dimness in long rows. Everything in those boxes existed somewhere as a file. The archive kept the copies nobody could change.

Between the rows, at a reading table under the last lamp, Tushar was sitting cross-legged on a chair with her shoes off and three boxes open in front of her, so absorbed that she didn't hear the doors.

I stood and watched her for a minute. I'd been watching her do this for sixteen years, and I'd never once got tired of it.

She was reading a letter. She had it flat on the table under a sheet of clear film. She was following the lines with one finger an inch above the page, not touching, and her lips were moving slightly. Every so often she'd stop and make a small sound, *hm*, the sound she made when someone in the past had surprised her. Tushar spent her life being surprised by people who'd been dead for two hundred years. She said it was the only reliable pleasure she knew.

"You're lurking," she said, without looking up.

"I'm admiring."

"Lurk over here, then." She moved a box off the chair beside her. "You said you needed something. You never need anything. I've been looking forward to it all morning like a birthday."

#

I told her what I needed.

The panel was going to be asked, sooner or later, whether anyone had ever faced this question before. Whether the formula had ever had to put a number on something that changed what it meant to be human. I thought I knew the answer. I wanted it from the archive, in documents, with dates, so that when somebody stood up at a Concord hearing and said *there is no precedent*, there'd be a box with a number on it that said otherwise.

"The GERAS team," I said. "In 2130."

"Yes." Her face lit. "Oh, yes. I said so at lunch, in June. You were listening."

"I was listening."

"You were thinking about your Rozkosz. But you were listening underneath." She was already up, padding down a row in her socks, reading the labels on the ends of the shelves. "It's all here. It's one of my favorite things in the whole archive and nobody ever asks for it. Nineteen people. The Leveling was the biggest single change in the human condition since we came down out of the trees, and nineteen people did it, and do you know what the formula gave them?"

"What it gave everyone."

"What it gave everyone." She came back with two boxes stacked in her arms and set them on the table. "To the hundredth of a point. A bump, for five years, because for years they'd been doing far more than they were assessed as capable of, and then nothing. They were already near the ceiling, most of them. Geneticists usually are." She opened the first box. "Two of them wrote to the Concord about it. Separately. For years. I have every letter."

"On paper?"

"Anything you send the Concord gets filed in ink. Founders' rule. They'd lived through the end of TimBor. They'd watched what happens to records nobody can see change. So the Charter, the petitions, the founding pictures, anything the city might one day need to prove it said: paper, down here, where you can cross something out but you can't make it vanish." She lifted out a bundle tied with cotton rope.

"These are furious and very well written, and nobody ever answered them except to say thank you for your contribution to the common good. One of them stopped writing after twenty years. Then she died, in 2181, old before her time, with her GERAS removed; she'd taken it out herself. The other one's still alive."

"Still alive."

"Vera Wandel. She's in the Sixth Ring. She keeps it, GERAS. She hasn't written to anyone for forty years." Tushar sat down. "I've always wanted to talk to her. I've never had a reason. You might be about to give me one."

I looked at the bundle in her hands. A precedent. A real one, with a living witness. Seventy years of resentment over credit the formula couldn't give, and a woman in the Sixth Ring who had been doing exactly what Avukat was doing now, in letters, before Avukat was a Freeholder.

"It cuts both ways," I said. "Avukat will want it too."

"Of course it cuts both ways. All history cuts both ways. That's why people are afraid of it." She put the bundle in front of me. "What we do today will be history tomorrow, Dar. Somebody will be sitting in this room in a hundred years reading your panel's report with their shoes off. Write it for her."

#

We worked through the afternoon. Or she worked, and I read what she handed me, and asked questions, and she answered them with dates.

At some point I looked up and realized we were sitting at the same table where we'd first worked together, sixteen years ago, the month after we met. We'd met over an interview. She'd been finishing her queuestory of the Equeuenomics Division, the kind of thing nobody reads, and she'd asked for twenty minutes with the investigator who'd written the report on the parenthood queue. I'd given her twenty minutes in my office. She'd disagreed with my second paragraph. I'd disagreed with her disagreement. Three hours later Mira had knocked on the door to say the building was closing, and Tushar had stood up and said, *I have to collect my daughter from the crèche. Walk with me and keep arguing.*

So I had. All the way across the Second Ring and into hers, to the cluster crèche with its painted door, where a carer came out with a

baby of about a year on her hip, round-faced and solemn, who looked at me over the carer's shoulder with enormous suspicious eyes.

"Who's this?" the carer had asked.

"Someone who's wrong about the parenthood queue," said Tushar, and took her daughter, and the baby went on staring at me all the way down the path as if she'd been told something important and meant to remember it.

She did remember it, or she remembered being told. Pallavi grew up on that line. By four she was saying it herself, to anyone who asked who I was, with the satisfaction of someone delivering a complete description of a person.

"You're smiling at the table," Tushar said, without looking up.

"I was thinking about the crèche."

"Ah." She turned a page. "She still says it. When you're not there. *Someone who's wrong about the parenthood queue.* She thinks she made it up."

"I wasn't wrong."

"You were wrong about the second paragraph," said Tushar. "You admitted it in March."

#

Near five, when the lamps on the tables were the only light left, she pulled one more thing out of the GERAS boxes: a photograph, a print made the week of the Leveling, nineteen people squinting into the sun on the steps of a building that no longer exists.

"That's all of them," she said. "The whole team. The day after."

They didn't look like people who had just changed the human condition. They looked tired, and sunburned, and mostly pleased. A man at the front was holding a bottle. Two women had their arms around each other. And at the far end of the row, a little apart, a small woman with her arms folded and her chin up stood looking not at the camera but at something off to the side of it, the only one of the nineteen not smiling.

"Vera," said Tushar.

"She looks angry."

"She looks like someone who already knew what they were going to get." Tushar put the print back in its sleeve. "Somebody else asked for this box, you know. In September. The first request in twenty years."

"Who?"

She gave me a look over the top of the sleeve.

"Your brother," she said. "He sat where you're sitting and read every letter. He took notes in that very neat hand of his. He asked whether Vera Wandel was still alive." She closed the box. "I told him. It's a public archive, Dar. Anyone can ask."

So Avukat had been here before me. Two months before me. I sat with that, and with the box, and understood that whatever precedent I found, I would be finding it second.

#

At the end of the day, while she was putting her shoes back on, I asked her about Pallavi's father.

I don't know why that day. I'd been thinking about the GERAS team, and about Avukat, and about the difference between being thanked and being given something you could keep. Then I'd been thinking about Seren, which I'd been trying not to do all afternoon, and about a word neither of us had ever used. And in sixteen years Tushar had told me almost nothing about the man except that he'd left. I'd never asked. I'd thought not asking was a kindness.

"Why now?" she said.

"I don't know. It's a day for old files."

She finished with one shoe and sat with the other in her hand. For a while I thought she wasn't going to answer. She looked at the shoe as if it had asked.

"He used to say a thing," she said. "Near the end. He said it as a joke the first few times, and then he said it as if it were true, and then he said it the night before he left, as if it explained everything." She put on the other shoe. "*If a man tells a woman that he loves her, he's only telling her what she wants to hear.*"

I didn't say anything. I recognized the sentence. I'd never said it out loud, but I'd thought it, or something near it, every time I hadn't said the word myself.

Tushar looked at my face and saw that, as she sees most things.

"Ah," she said. "You too."

"Not in those words."

"In those words, near enough." She sat up straight, with her hands folded on the table, which was how she sat in seminars. "All right. Let's take it apart. You first. You're the equeuenomist."

"It's a claim with no audit trail," I said. It came out slowly; I'd never put it into words before. "He says it. It asks nothing of him. It tells her only what she already hoped. And she can't check it. If someone brought me a number like that, I'd send it back."

"Good. That's his argument, and you've made it better than he ever did." She held up one finger. "Now here's what's wrong with it. First, you've both assumed the words are a report. Information about how he feels. They can also be a promise. A promise isn't information about the present, Dar. It's a weight you take on about the future, in front of a witness. That's not light. It's the heaviest thing a person can say."

Second finger.

"Second, you've both assumed she can't check it. She can. She checks it every day for the rest of her life, against what he does. That's the audit. It just takes longer than men like."

"And third?"

She put her hand down. Her voice didn't change, but something under it did.

"Third, he was right about himself. For him, the words were nothing. He said them every day for three years. He said them the morning he left the note on the table. He wrote them *in* the note." She looked at me steadily. "So I stopped listening to the words. I listen to who gets up at five on a Sunday to walk a girl who isn't his up a mountain her mother won't climb, and tells her the names of all the birds, and gets half of them wrong. I listen to who comes back. I've been listening to that for sixteen years."

Down the rows the overhead lights had dimmed for the evening. Somewhere a ventilation fan turned itself on with a soft click.

"You've never said it to me," she said. "I know. Do you think I haven't noticed? Do you think I mind?" She stood up and picked up her bag. "But don't keep not saying it because of him. That's letting him win an argument he never deserved to win. Say it or don't, for your own reasons." She put a hand on my face, briefly. "And keep taking her up the mountain. Which you're not doing very much of, lately. That's all. I'm not angry. I'm noticing."

She went toward the doors and leaned on them with her shoulder.

"Bring me the Vera Wandel file when you've read it," she said. "I want to find her. And come to dinner on Sunday. Pallavi's learning a new piece, and she'll play it at you whether you want her to or not."

The doors swung shut behind her, slowly, with a sigh. I stood alone in the cool dim archive with two boxes of seventy-year-old anger and a photograph of nineteen people on a step, one of them not smiling. I thought about a man I'd never met, whose sentence I had been agreeing with for sixteen years without once noticing it was his.

I went to dinner on Sunday. Pallavi played the new piece for me. It was very difficult and she got it nearly right. When she finished she looked straight at me over the violin, as she had at the audition, to see if I'd been there for it.

I had. I made sure she saw that I had.

Chapter 12

Wednesday, December 9 – Thursday, December 10, 171 (2201)

Pallavi was playing at the Founding night concert in the Third Ring commons, second violin in the small ensemble that opens it. She had asked me in October to sit where she could see me.

"Not the front," she'd said. "The front's for parents. Third row, on the aisle. I'll look once, before we start, and you have to be there."

I said I'd be there. I meant it.

At five o'clock on Founding Day I was in the yards, at the bottom of the ramp, because Seren had written that afternoon: *Founding night on the roof. Come for an hour. Then go and be good.*

The Rozkosz didn't go to the readings. They had their own Founding, on the roof of the ruin, on Founding night: no chairs, no stacking. They climbed up onto the top slab of the stump with blankets and bottles and watched the whole city's skylights come on below them at dusk, Ring by Ring, as people went down into the commons halls. Bram called it *watching the city go to church*. I'd planned the hour. The concert started at seven. The transit from the last stop took thirty-five minutes. I'd leave at six-fifteen.

At six-fifteen I started to get up, and Seren put her hand on my knee.

"Stay," she said. She didn't look at me. She was looking at the city. "Just tonight. I don't want to be up here without you tonight."

She'd never asked me for anything like this. Not once since February. I didn't ask why. I sat back down.

At a quarter to seven I thought: I can still make the second half. And then I did the arithmetic, because I always do. Pallavi had her mother, and Jinsia, and Imani, and a hall full of people who loved the music. Seren, on this roof, had asked for one person, and there was one of me. I knew it was arithmetic. I knew arithmetic was the wrong instrument. I used it anyway, because it gave the answer I wanted.

At seven-thirty I didn't think anything at all.

#

The roof was cold and wide and dark, and the city was laid out below us like something spilled: twelve Rings of tiny lit squares going out to the black edge of the prairie, and at the center the glow of the civic core, where the city's Founding night gathering was. Somewhere in the Third Ring, in one of those squares, a girl with a violin was looking at an empty seat on the aisle.

I knew that. I knew it the whole time.

Seren had been drinking since noon. Not the plum spirit; something clear and sharp that Bram made from potatoes and that smelled like a cleaning room. She wasn't sloppy with it. She was looser, and louder, and stranger, and she kept pointing at things in the sky that weren't there.

"There," she said. "No. There. That's where they're going. Teegarden's whatever."

"It's not visible. It's too dim."

"Of course it's not visible. Nothing that matters is visible." She took the bottle back. "They'll go, you know. Your Pallavi. All of them, the young ones. They'll go through the door and the first thing they'll find out on the other side is that they brought themselves with them."

"You don't think they should go?"

"I think they should go. I think everyone should go somewhere." She laughed. "I think it's very funny that the whole city's celebrating a door to the stars, and none of them's noticed they've been dead for years."

"Dead?"

"Look at them." She waved the bottle at the lit squares. "Going to church. Same reading, same chairs, same stacking. Same everything, forever. You don't have to be old to die, Dar." She turned her head on my leg and looked up at me, and laughed again, at my face. "Half that city died a century ago. They just never stopped walking around."

For a second, I don't know why, I thought of Laszlo. Then the thought went.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what I said."

"You don't, though. You never mean only what you said."

She laughed at that and wouldn't answer, and rolled over onto her side and looked out at the city with her chin on her hands.

After a while, in a different voice, she said, "I went to the Institute for Meaning once."

I'd passed it all my life: a low, pale Earthhold in the Fifth Ring with a garden of grasses in front, where people went, or were sent, when the city's questions stopped having answers. I'd never been inside. I'd sent people there, and never asked them about it afterward.

"Why?"

"To argue with them." She smiled at the city. "They're very nice. They give you tea and ask you what you want. It's like being interviewed by a cushion. I argued with all of them, and all of them argued back, very kindly, and I won, every time, and it was so boring I nearly left." She was quiet for a moment. "The only one worth arguing with was a man who wouldn't argue back."

"What did he do?"

"He listened." She rolled onto her back again. "And then he asked me one question, and I couldn't answer it, and I've been trying to for a year."

"What was the question?"

"No," said Seren, and closed her eyes. "That one's mine."

#

The message from Pallavi came at nine-forty, while I was on the transit home with the cold still in my clothes.

Two words.

Seat empty.

I read them on the pod with the dark Rings sliding past outside, and then I wrote *I'm sorry*, and deleted it, because it was true and it wasn't enough and she would know both of those things. I wrote *I lost track of the time*, and deleted that, because it was a lie, and she'd know that too. In the end I wrote nothing, and sat with the two words in front of my eyes until my stop, and then sat with them on my bed until two in the morning.

She didn't write again. Tushar didn't write at all. That was worse.

#

The draw came at eight the next morning, a plain notice in my calendar from the Concord's sortition office: the three citizens selected

by lot to sit on the attestation panel for the interstellar drive, beginning in January.

Nadia Remont, Eleventh Ring. Sweeper technician, Yards Maintenance.

Dorit Brandt, Ninth Ring. Schoolteacher.

Kwabena Mensah, Third Ring. Baker.

I read the three names twice. A woman who kept the yards' machines running. A woman who'd spent a century teaching the few children the city had. A man who got up at three to make the bread the Third Ring ate for breakfast. None of them had ever measured anyone. That was the point of them. Kalle wrote within the minute: *A BAKER. I love it. He'll ask why we didn't just weigh it.* And then: *Sweeper tech is going to be trouble. Good trouble. She'll know what the machines actually do.*

Under Kalle's messages was a notice from the station, short and dry, the kind nobody reads: both pairs of test rings were in position out past Uranus, and holding. Two small dark things, twenty-five times as far from the sun as I was, waiting for July. I read it twice, and for a minute it was the only thing in my head, and I let it be.

I didn't answer him either. At one I left the Division, put on my good coat and went to the Remnant house, because it was the tenth of December, and a year ago that night my sister had died.

#

The house was the same. The long low commons room with the kitchen at one end and the hall at the other, and between them the doorway with its frame worn by so many hands that the corners had gone soft. The light wells at the east and west ends. Thirty or forty people, some of whom I recognized, all of whom recognized me, and none of whom said so.

Imani was at the stove with Tova.

She saw me come in and put down her spoon and came across the room and put her arms round me. She held on, and didn't say anything. She smelled of onions and broth. When she let go, her eyes were wet and her face was perfectly steady.

"You came," she said.

"I said I would."

"People say things." She took my coat. "Sit with Tova. She's been saving you a chair since noon. She'll tell you it's her chair. It isn't."

Tova was very small and very upright and had been at that stove,

as far as anyone knew, since before the Leveling. She looked at me with sharp black eyes and motioned to the chair beside her.

"Before-blessed," she said, which is how she greeted everyone. "You look like a man who didn't sleep."

"I didn't."

"Good. You shouldn't, the night before. It means you remember."

That wasn't why. I didn't tell her that.

My brothers came in the middle of the afternoon. Senne first, with a crate of eggs for Imani's kitchen, as if eggs were the reason. Berbant and Sora together, Berbant in his depot jacket, Sora holding his arm. And last, Avukat, in the canvas coat, who stood inside the door for a moment and looked at the room, at the middle of the room, where a year ago that week our sister had lain between the two wells, and then crossed to Imani and took both her hands and said something I couldn't hear.

He sat across the table from me. We hadn't spoken since the back room in August, except in writing, his letters on the petitioners' mark and my replies on the panel's. He passed me the bread. I passed him the salt. Neither of us said anything about anything.

#

They didn't hold a service. The Remnant don't, on anniversaries. They eat, and at dusk they stand for the light, and that's all.

We ate. Imani's soup, and bread that Tova said was too salty and that everyone else said was perfect. People talked about ordinary things: the snow that hadn't come yet, a roof that leaked, a child's tooth. And, at every table, the drive. The Remnant were the only people in the city I'd heard talk about it without numbers.

"It doesn't change anything," said a man across the table, a carpenter I half knew. "The door. Where they go. It's all the same water."

"All rivers run to the sea," said Tova, buttering bread. "And the sea just got bigger. That's all. You can't get lost in a bigger sea. It's the same sea."

I'd carried my sister's ashes down to the river in April. Down the path past the cottonwoods with Imani beside me. A clay jar in both hands; it had weighed almost nothing, so little that halfway there I'd stopped to make sure it wasn't empty. I'd thought about the weight all summer. I'd thought about it in the creek and in the bathhouse and on the roof of the ruin. I didn't understand how a whole person

could weigh so little, and I didn't understand why the lightness was the worst part.

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

Everyone stood. I stood. We all turned to the west, so that the whole room faced the well. The square of sky at the top of it was going gold. The light came down the well and lay on the floor, and slowly, as we stood there, it moved, the way it had a year ago across the foot of her bier. Nobody said anything. All around me, people closed their hands around their pendants. Imani, beside me, did the same. On my other side, Avukat stood with his hands at his sides, as I did. The petition stood between us the whole time like a third person nobody had invited.

Drabelig's pendant was in my coat, on the hook by the door, where it had been all year. I stood with my hands at my sides and watched the light cross the floor. Tomorrow I'd take it to Senne, for the box.

I thought about Pallavi looking at an empty seat. I thought about Seren on the roof saying *you don't have to be old to die* and laughing. I thought about my sister, who'd known she was dying long before the rest of us, and had been perfectly at peace about it, and had asked me only to sit with her and tell her about the reading.

I'd missed a concert for a woman on a roof. I'd sat on a roof and listened to her tell me the city was dead while a girl I'd walked up the first ridge at dawn since she was six looked for me in the third row.

The light reached the far wall and climbed it and went out.

#

Afterward, at the door, Imani gave me back my coat and held on to it a moment longer than she needed to.

"Drabelig always said you were the one who'd notice," she said. "Whatever it was. She said you'd see it before anybody."

"I didn't, though. With her."

"No." Imani let go of the coat. "But she said it anyway. She said it about the important thing, not the first thing." She looked at me with her whole face, the way she'd listened at my sister's bedside. "Tushar told me about the concert. Tushar tells me everything." She held my eyes. "Go and see Pallavi."

"She's not answering."

"Then go and stand at the door until she does," said Imani. "That's what doors are for."

Avukat was waiting outside, on the step, in the cold, with his hands in his pockets and his breath going up in the last of the light.

"The Concord set the date this afternoon," he said. He didn't look at me. He was looking at the sky over the Rings, where the first stars were coming. "The sixteenth of November. After the test. Your panel's number goes into the record before that."

"Whatever it is."

"Whatever it is." He pulled on his gloves. "I wanted you to hear it from me. Not from a notice."

"Thank you."

"Don't." He went down the step, and stopped, and turned. "She'd have liked that we both came. Drabelig. She'd have said it was a start." And he went off down the path between the dark meadows, toward the transit, without waiting for me to say anything.

I stood on the step a while longer. Eleven months, and a date at the end of them. Somewhere behind me, Tova was telling someone the bread had been too salty.

Chapter 13

Tuesday, January 12, 172 (2202)

I did go and stand at Pallavi's door, in the end. Three days after the concert, on the Saturday, because Imani had said so and because I couldn't think of anything better.

I stood in the corridor outside Tushar's rooms for most of an hour. I didn't knock. Tushar came out once, on her way to the kitchen, and looked at me and went past without a word. She came back with two cups of tea and handed me one.

She didn't go in. She stood beside me in the corridor with her own cup, looking at the door.

"You asked me in June how it ends," she said. "The basements. The dancing in the ruins."

"You said not yet."

"It's yet." She blew on her tea. "It ends one of two ways. Every time, in every century I've read. Either they come up, or they don't. And the ones who come up don't come up because the music stops. They come up because somebody upstairs is still waiting for them, and they notice before the somebody stops." She looked at the door. "She hasn't stopped yet. That's the whole of the history lesson."

She went in. Through the door I could hear the violin: the long slow piece from the concert, over and over, the same passage, stopping in the same place every time.

At the end of the hour the door opened.

"You can come in," Pallavi said. "You can't talk."

I went in and sat on the end of her bed and didn't talk, and she played the whole piece for me, start to finish, standing under the skylight in her socks with her jaw set. It was better than it would have been at the concert. I think she knew that. When she'd finished she put the violin down and looked at me.

"You get one," she said. "Everybody gets one. You don't get two."

"All right."

"I mean it, Dar."

"I know you do."

She nodded once, the way she'd nodded at the top of the meadow in June, and that was the end of it. We didn't talk about it over the Lull. She came to the New Year roof and stood beside me at midnight, and when the murmurs came across from the other roofs she said *Happy New Year* to me a half-second before she said it to her mother, and I counted that.

#

The panel sat for the first time on the second Tuesday of the new year, in display room four, around a table Kalle had borrowed from the break room because the display rooms don't have tables. They have chairs and dark and whatever you put in the air.

"People need a table," he'd said, carrying one end of it down the corridor while I carried the other. "They need somewhere to put their hands. Otherwise they sit there holding their own elbows like they're cold."

So there was a table. And there were five of us around it: Kalle and me, and the three the lot had drawn.

Nadia Remont kept the sweepers in the yards. She was short and square, with forearms like a stevedore's and her sleeves rolled to the elbow. She sat with both hands flat on Kalle's table as if she were holding it down. Dorit Brandt had taught in the Ninth Ring for longer than most of the city had been alive. She arrived twenty minutes early with a slate full of questions she'd written out in advance, in order, numbered. Kwabena Mensah was a baker. He came straight from his shift, flour still in the creases of his knuckles, and he brought a basket of something warm and cardamom-smelling and set it in the middle of the table without comment. That settled the question of whether we were going to get on.

I'd prepared for two weeks. I gave them the case the way I'd have given it to Mira: the drives, the petition, the uncapped estimate, the escrow, the five-year window, the cap. I gave them the GERAS precedent from Tushar's boxes. I put the station team up in gold and S. Ya's twelve in white and the swarm of everyone else around them, and let it turn in the dark over Kwabena's basket.

Then I put up the fabrication logs.

"This is the question nobody's answered," I said. "Most of the hours that built the Lattice weren't people's hours. They were machines'. The formula only credits people. We have to decide what happens to the rest."

"Easy," said Kalle, and grinned at me across the table, because we'd had this fight in private twenty times since August and he'd been looking forward to having it in public. "A machine's a tool. Whoever runs it gets the hours. You don't credit the hammer."

"And the people who don't run them?" I said. "S. Ya's team did most of it by hand. Under your rule they lose for being slower. Under mine—"

"Under yours they win *for* being slower." Kalle spread his hands. "Which is my point. Your rule tells every team in Q to switch the assists off. You'd reward people for being inefficient. Nobody would ever build anything fast again."

"Under mine the machines' share goes to everyone. Not to whoever happened to be standing next to them."

"Why everyone?"

"Because everyone keeps them."

"That's a slogan, Rax. That's not an argument."

He was right, and I knew it, and Dorit wrote something down.

It went on like that for an hour. Kalle was quick and funny and right about the incentives, and I was slower and sure I was right about something I couldn't yet put into a sentence. Dorit asked good questions in order and didn't take sides. Kwabena listened and ate his own bread.

Nadia said nothing at all. She sat with her hands flat on the table and watched the fabrication logs turning in the air, and once or twice her eyes moved, quickly, along a column, the way a mechanic's eyes move along an engine.

At the end of the hour she took her hands off the table.

"Who keeps the machines that keep the machines?" she said.

Kalle opened his mouth and shut it again.

"I keep sweepers," said Nadia. "Forty-one of them, in the yards. The sweepers keep the paths. If you want to know whose hours those paths are, you'd say the sweepers'. Fine. Then whose hours are the sweepers? Mine. And the woman who built the sweeper I'm fixing, twelve years ago, at the depot in the Eighth. And the people at QS who made the motor, and the yards crew who pulled the copper out

of the old city to make the motor out of." She nodded at the logs. "Your fabricators didn't come from nowhere. Somebody built them. Somebody fixes them. Somebody fixes the things that fix them. Follow the hours back far enough and every machine on that list is people. Just people from a long time ago."

Nobody said anything. The logs turned.

"How long ago?" I said.

"Longer than five years," said Nadia. "Mostly." She put her hands back on the table. "So when you say the machines did it, what you mean is people did it before your window opened, and the formula can't see them anymore. That's all a machine is. It's old work."

Kalle looked at me. I looked at him. For the first time since August neither of us had anything to say.

Dorit wrote it down. I watched her write it: *A machine is old work.* She underlined it twice.

"Can I ask what difference it makes?" she said. She had her numbered list in front of her, and she'd got to a number she'd plainly been saving. "To the petition, I mean. I'm a schoolteacher. I like to know what the test is for before I mark it."

Kalle answered before I could. He pulled the station team back up in gold and S. Ya's twelve in white and, beside them, a thin horizontal line.

"That's the petition's threshold," he said. "Whatever number the Concord sets, if they ever set one. Anybody whose uncapped share is over the line gets a roof, if the amendment passes." He moved his hand, and the gold points shifted upward. "My rule. Machines' hours go to whoever ran them. Hana Sokol's leads go over the line. Seven or eight of them. S. Ya goes over, because he's S. Ya. His twelve mostly don't." He moved his hand again, and the gold points sank and the white ones rose. "Rax's rule. Machines' hours go to everybody. The station's leads come down, because most of their hours were fabricator hours. And twelve people who held every plate by hand go straight through the line, all of them, and S. Ya goes through the roof." He sat back. "Under his rule, the best case the Freeholders could ever ask for is twelve people in a workshop and a famous man who stood at the side of the photograph."

Dorit looked at me.

"Your brother's petition," she said. "Isn't it?"

"It is."

"So your rule is the one that helps him most."

"Yes."

She wrote that down too, and didn't underline it, and that was somehow worse.

#

The second item that morning was S. Ya's capacity file.

The rules say a person's capacity score has to be reassessed at a career change, and the Converger counted. It had been done in November by the Division's assessment office, in the ordinary way, and it came to the panel sealed, because nobody's raw score is ever shown to anyone, the person included. What we were allowed to see was the conclusion.

I read it out. *Performing as expected.*

"That's it?" said Kwabena.

"That's it."

"For the door to the stars."

"For the door to the stars." I put the slate down. "He's been at or near the ceiling for seventy years. The assessment found he's still there. The formula can't tell this year from last year."

Kwabena looked at his bread for a while.

"When I was an apprentice," he said, "my master told me bread is the only thing in the world that's judged on the day. Yesterday's bread doesn't count. You can't bake a famous loaf." He brushed flour off his knuckles. "I always thought that was the fairest thing about the job. I'm not sure now."

#

Kalle caught me in the corridor afterward, as the others were going.

"Did you see your band?" he said.

"My what?"

"Your band. The quarter came out on the first. You slid." He said it cheerfully, as he said everything, but he was watching my face. "Thriving to Contributing. First time in, what, forty years? I only know because it's on the panel disclosure. They put everybody's band on it."

I hadn't looked. I hadn't looked at my number since the spring.

I touched my temple and looked now. He was right. Contributing. The lowest edge of it, with the summer and the autumn in the

window, the months at the Low and the mornings I'd come in late, the agendas I hadn't written.

I waited to feel something about it. A year ago it would have kept me up all night. I'd have pulled my own records and audited myself line by line, looking for the error.

I didn't feel anything. I felt the corridor floor under my feet, and the smell of Kwabena's cardamom bread still in my coat.

"Huh," I said.

"That's all? Huh?"

"I don't care," I said, and heard it, and was surprised.

I thought of myself at twelve, in my parents' house, lying awake doing sums about sleep. I'd worked out that a person spends a third of his life asleep, and it had seemed to me the most appalling waste I'd ever heard of. *If I am going to sleep a third of my life,* I'd written in a notebook, *I should take advantage of it.* I'd spent a year trying to learn French by playing recordings under my pillow. I'd learned nothing and slept badly and been proud of both.

That boy would have been ashamed of me. I stood in the corridor and tried to be ashamed on his behalf and couldn't manage it.

"Well," said Kalle, after a moment. "I care. You chair this panel. I'm only the second. Slide any further and they'll make me chair it." And he went off down the corridor with his shoes.

#

There were two messages waiting when I got home.

The first was from Seren, the first in three weeks. She'd gone away over the Lull and into the new year. She'd said it on the roof, lightly, *a week somewhere, family business*, though I had never heard her mention family, and I hadn't asked. Now: *Back. Tuesday at the Low? I've had a stupid week. I want something stupid.*

The second was from Avukat. It was addressed to the chair of the attestation panel, formally, with his advocate's mark on it, and copied to Mira.

The petitioners respectfully request that the panel publish its preliminary estimate of the uncapped contribution, in whole or in part, in advance of the Concord's spring calendar, so that the petition may be heard on an informed record.

And under it, not copied to anyone:

You know what it says. Say it.

I read them both twice. Then I wrote to Seren: *Tuesday.*

I didn't answer Avukat. I opened the panel file instead and wrote a single line into the record, under the date: *Petitioners' request for preliminary figures received. Held pending the panel's view.*

Then I sat with my hand on the slate a while, and thought about Nadia's hands flat on the table, holding it down.

A machine is old work. It was the first answer I'd had for Kalle in five months, and it hadn't come from me. It had come from a woman who'd fixed forty-one sweepers and didn't think it was interesting.

I wrote her name next to it in the file, so nobody could ever say I'd thought of it first.

Chapter 14

Saturday, February 13 – Thursday, February 18, 172 (2202)

Seren asked me to come and watch her skate.

She'd asked me for one thing before, on the roof at Founding. This was the second. She told me where things were and I came or I didn't. This time she wrote on Friday night, *Derby tomorrow. Big bout, the Eleventh against the Sixth. Come and sit where I can see you,* and then, a minute later, *Please*, which I had never seen her write to anyone.

So I sat on the bench in the old rink in the Eleventh, between Laszlo with his stick and a man eating an onion like an apple, and watched.

She was good. She was always good. But she skated the first half differently, more carefully, picking her way through the pack instead of going through it, and twice I saw her look up at the benches, at me, to see if I was there. The third time a blocker from the Sixth caught her on the forearm with an elbow, and she went down hard on her side and lay there a second longer than she usually did before she got up.

She sat out the second half. She'd never done that either. She sat on the end of the bench with a towel round her neck and her arm across her knees, and when I went over she leaned her shoulder into mine and kept it there, and watched Ines win the bout without her.

"Did you see?" she said. "The first jam. The jump."

"I saw."

"That's the best I've ever done it." She sounded pleased in a way I hadn't heard before, not amused, just pleased, like a child. "I wanted somebody to see it. Somebody who'd remember. Laszlo forgets everything now."

"I heard that," said Laszlo, from down the bench.

"You were supposed to."

The forearm was already darkening, a long plum-colored bar under the ink. She didn't press it. She held it a little away from her body, the way you'd carry something that wasn't yours.

"Ice," said Ines, coming off the floor and throwing her a bag of it.

"I don't need ice."

"You need ice," said Ines, and stood over her until she used it.

#

That night we didn't do anything the Rozkosz would have had a name for.

We went back to her room. She lay on the bed on the floor with the ice on her arm, and I lay beside her. She told me about the jump again, every part of it, the angle and the edge and the half-second when nobody could touch her. When the ice was water she threw the bag at the basin and missed, and laughed, and pulled me over her. We made love the slow, ordinary way people have since there were people, with the lamp under its red cloth and the city humming somewhere above us. Her hair smelled of the rink. Afterward she fell asleep with her bad arm across my chest, carefully, and I lay awake in the dark and was happy, and didn't take it apart.

I didn't write it down. In the morning I noticed that it hadn't occurred to me to.

#

Berbant had asked me to read his story before he left. I'd had it for a month, and I brought it back the night before he flew to Lapland.

It was in a paper notebook, the one he'd been writing in, gray at the corners and swollen with the damp of a depot locker. He'd asked me to look for mistakes. I'd found a few: a name spelled two ways, a door that opened inward on one page and outward on the next. I'd marked them in pencil, lightly, in the margin, and tried very hard not to mark anything else, because the rest of it wasn't mine to mark. The last eleven pages were blank. He was going to write those under the lights. He'd told Drabelig he would, at the end, and he was going to.

Their rooms were at the end of the long hall in the Eighth Ring cluster, past Senne's kitchen and the door to the hen yard. When I knocked, Sora called *come in* from somewhere under a pile of clothes.

She was packing him. Berbant was sitting on the bed with a list, reading items out. Sora was finding each one and rolling it and putting it into a canvas bag that was already too full, and every third

item she took something else out and put it back on the shelf without comment.

"Thermal socks," Berbant read.

"Packed."

"The other thermal socks."

"You don't need two."

"It's the Arctic, Sora."

"It's a cabin on the grid, with a stove nobody needs and a man who comes by every morning with deadfall from the thinning, because the guests like the smell." She rolled the second pair and put them in anyway. "Dar. Sit down. Move the hat."

I moved the hat, sat on the only chair, and gave Berbant his notebook. He took it in both hands and opened it to my pencil marks. He read them with his lips moving, and then looked up with an expression I hadn't seen on him since we were boys and I'd fixed the chain on his bicycle.

"That's all?" he said.

"That's all."

"You didn't mark the bit with the bees."

"There was nothing wrong with the bit with the bees."

He held the notebook against his chest for a moment, and then put it in the bag himself, on top, where Sora couldn't take it out.

#

They'd been arguing before I came. I could tell from the way the room was arranged: Sora on one side of the bed, Berbant on the other, the bag between them like a fence.

"Sora thinks I've gone soft on it," Berbant said. He meant the Society, and he meant the Founders' Share, and it was the first thing he'd said to me about it since the meeting in August. "She thinks I've been reading Avukat's speeches too much."

"I didn't say soft," said Sora. "I said I wanted to hear you say it in your own words."

"I've said it in my own words."

"You've said it in his." She folded a sweater against her chest and looked at him over it. "So tell me. Not him. You. What would it give you that you don't have?"

"A roof. Ground."

"You have a roof. You have ground. You're sitting on it."

"It's not *mine*."

"Whose is it?"

He opened his mouth and closed it.

"It's everyone's," he said finally. "That's the problem."

"Is it a problem? Has anyone ever taken it away?"

"They could."

"Has anyone ever wanted to?"

He didn't answer that. He looked down at his list, and I watched him read the same line twice.

"All right," Sora said, more gently. "Then the cabin. Tomorrow you're going to a cabin for a month. You waited five years for it. You'll love it. And in a month you'll give the key back and someone else will love it." She put the sweater in the bag. "What would the Founders' Share give you there that you don't have?"

And then he said it, in his own words, finally, and it was worse than Avukat's, because it was true.

"I'd keep it," said my brother. "I'd never have to queue again. I'd go every winter. I'd know where everything was. I'd fix the stove myself and nobody would come by with the wood because it would be my wood. And when I'm gone—" He stopped.

"When you're gone," said Sora, "it would be someone's."

"It would be ours."

"There isn't an *ours* after you're gone, Berbant. There's whoever you leave it to." She stood very still with her hands empty. "Who would that be?"

He looked at her. I looked at the floor. In thirty years of marriage they'd never had a child and never applied, and I'd never asked why, and I wasn't going to start now, sitting on their only chair with his hat on my knee.

"I don't know," Berbant said.

"No," said Sora. "I didn't think you did."

#

She made tea afterward, in the commons kitchen, while Berbant took the bag down the hall to weigh it on Senne's scale, because the drone had a limit and he was sure he'd exceeded it.

I sat at the long table and watched her move around the kitchen. Sora had always been the calmest person in our family, which was saying something, since Senne was in it. She worked at the clinic

down the Ring. She'd come to QL late, in her forties, from a PQ restoration settlement in the high desert, and in all the years I'd known her she'd almost never talked about it.

"Do you miss it?" I said. "The settlement."

She thought about it, which was one of the things I liked about her.

"Some of it," she said. "We grew everything. We built everything. Nobody owned anything, not even the way you don't own things here, with a queue and a number. We just didn't. It never came up." She set the cups down. "You'd think it would be like here, only smaller. It wasn't. It was quieter in the head. Nobody kept score, because there wasn't anything to keep score of."

"Why did you leave?"

"I wanted to be a nurse, and they didn't need one. And I wanted to see a city." She sat down across from me and wrapped her hands around her cup. "The floors were warm. That's what I miss. All winter, in the dome, the floors were warm, from the hall underneath. You could walk barefoot in January." She smiled a little. "Nobody ever asked what was down there. It hummed. You'd lie on the floor at night and feel it, through your back. Like lying on a cat."

"What was down there?"

"Pumps. Heat exchangers. The settlement's machinery." She shrugged. "Nobody went down. There was a hatch, and it was locked, and the maintenance crew came from the city once a year. It never occurred to any of us to wonder. Why would it?"

Senne came in from the pool then, with his hair wet and combed back, and a woman beside him I'd seen once at the edge of the Eighth Ring pitch: tall, freckled, with green under her fingernails that no amount of chlorine had shifted. "Linnea," said Senne, as if that were a whole sentence, and went to put the kettle on again.

She'd heard the end of it. She sat down across from Sora with her wet hair dripping onto her collar.

"What grew?" she said. "In the dome. Over that floor."

Sora thought about it. "Everything we ate. Beans and squash. Amaranth. Apples, badly."

"And outside?"

"Sand and salt, when I left. Grass now, they tell me. A little."

Linnea nodded slowly. Then she took the cup Senne handed her and didn't say anything else all evening.

Sora drank her tea.

#

"Can I ask you something?" Sora said. "About your panel."

"Ask."

"When you put a number on the drive. The real one, the one before the cap." She asked it the way she must ask patients where it hurts: gently, and watching my face. "Will it be the one Avukat reads out?"

"The panel's number will be the true one."

"That's not what I asked."

I looked at her. She looked back, pleasantly, steadily, the way she must look at patients who are telling her they feel fine.

"I don't know yet," I said. "If it's true, and he reads it out, then yes. If he reads it out, it will be the one that's true."

"So you're going to give him his speech."

"I'm going to give the Concord a number. What he does with it—"

"—is his business. I know." She put her cup down. "I'm not angry with you, Dar. I don't think you should lie. I've never once seen you lie. I'm asking because I'm the one who'll be sitting next to Berbant when Avukat reads it, and I'd like to know what I'm in for."

Berbant came back down the hall then, triumphant, with the bag over his shoulder.

"Under," he said. "Two hundred grams under. I could have brought the other socks."

"You did bring the other socks," said Sora.

#

I stayed the night on Senne's couch, because the drone left at six and Berbant wanted us all there.

The commons drone pad for the Eighth Ring was a gravel circle at the edge of the prairie, past the last Earthholds, with a windsock and a bench and a lamp on a pole. The drone was already there when we came out in the dark: a long, low, pale shape with four rotors folded up like a sleeping insect, and a cabin that would take two people and their bags. The other passenger, a woman in an enormous coat, was already aboard, reading.

It was very cold. Senne had brought ginger tea in a flask. Berbant drank his too fast and burned his mouth and didn't care.

"Thirty nights," he kept saying. "Thirty nights of it. They say some nights it's green and some nights it's red and some nights it's both, and it moves, Senne, it *moves*, like curtains, like somebody's shaking it."

"You'll write to us," said Senne.

"I'll write to you every day."

"You won't," said Sora. "You'll be writing the story. Write that instead."

He hugged Senne, and me, hard, and then held on to Sora for a long time while the woman in the coat politely read her slate. Then he climbed in and the door sealed. The rotors unfolded and began to turn, and the drone lifted, slow and almost silent, tilted north, and went.

We stood on the gravel and watched it until its lights were gone.

"He'll come back different," said Senne.

"Better or worse?" I said.

"Different." Senne screwed the top back on the flask. "That's the point of going."

Sora didn't say anything. She stood a little longer than we did, looking north, with her hands in her coat. When she turned round, her face was perfectly pleasant and perfectly composed, and I understood for the first time that she was afraid. Not of the cabin. Of what he'd want when he came home.

Chapter 15

Friday, March 5 – Saturday, March 13, 172 (2202)

She asked on Friday, in her room, with the lamp under its red cloth and the skylight black.

She asked it plainly, as she asked for everything, sitting cross-legged on the bed on the floor with her back against the wall, and she'd clearly been thinking about how to ask for some time.

"I want you to decide," she said. "Tonight. All of it. What we do, and when, and how long. I want to not choose anything. Not one thing. For one night."

"You've always chosen."

"I know. That's the point." She pulled her knees up. "I've chosen everything, every day, for a long time. Some of it's been heavy. I'd like to put it down for a few hours and have somebody else carry it." She looked at me. "You're very good at carrying things. You carry everything. I've watched you."

I didn't ask what was heavy. She didn't do why, and I'd stopped asking. I should have asked.

"Same word," she said. "Same limits. Everything we've ever said is still true. Inside that, you decide."

"All right," I said.

#

I couldn't do it.

I want to set it down exactly, because I've thought about it more than almost anything else that year, and I still don't have it quite right.

I could do what she wanted, when she told me. I'd done that in June, sober, with my head full of noise, and I'd done it in October with my head empty, and both times I'd done it well, by her account and Ansel's. I could serve her. That turned out to be easy.

What I couldn't do was want something on her behalf.

She lay back and closed her eyes and waited, and I knelt there with my hands on my knees and tried to decide. What to do first. How long. Whether to stop. And every time I reached for a decision I found I was reaching for hers, guessing at what she'd have chosen, trying to choose that, which was the opposite of what she'd asked for. Once I took her wrists and put them above her head, the way she'd shown me in June, and held them there. Then, because I couldn't help it, I eased my grip by a finger's width to see whether she would keep them there by herself, which was asking. She kept them there. That was her choice, not mine, and we both felt it. I'd begin something and stop to see her face. I'd see her face and stop. I asked her twice whether she was all right, and both times she said *yes, decide*, a little more tightly.

After ten minutes she opened her eyes.

"You're asking me," she said. "With your hands. Every time."

"I know."

"Don't."

"I'm trying."

She sat up. Not angry. Tired, I think, more than anything, and something under the tiredness that I didn't recognize then and recognize now.

"What's wrong?"

I tried to tell her. It came out in the wrong order, the way true things do when you've never said them before.

"I don't know how to want something for you," I said. "I can do what you want. I can watch what you want. I can't decide what you want. It isn't mine to decide. I can't make you do anything you haven't already chosen. You chose this. You chose the word, and the limits, and me, and tonight. All I'd be doing is filling in the parts you left blank." I heard myself. "That isn't power. It's paperwork."

She was quiet a moment.

"I know it's paperwork," she said. "Everybody who's ever done this knows it's paperwork. The one underneath always holds all the cards." She pulled the blanket off the rail and put it round her shoulders. "I didn't ask you for power, Dar. I asked you to carry it. For one night. So I didn't have to."

"I know."

"And you can't."

"No."

She nodded slowly, as if I'd confirmed a measurement she'd already taken.

Then she did the thing she always did, which was the thing I'd been watching her do since June without seeing it: she looked after me. She got up and brought water and made me drink it. She put the blanket round both of us. She asked me how I was, and listened to the answer, which was that I felt as though I'd failed an examination I hadn't known I was sitting.

"You didn't fail anything," she said. "You found out something. It's not the same." She leaned her head back against the wall. "You can't own anyone's choices. Even when they hand them to you. Especially then." She closed her eyes. "It's a nice thing to find out about someone. It's just not very useful to me tonight."

I said I was sorry.

"Don't be," she said. "Come climbing tomorrow. That I'll decide."

#

The last standing TimBor tower in QL was out past the north end of the yards, in a reclamation zone the city had been meaning to take down for forty years.

It stood beyond the highway embankment, and only from the edge of the Twelfth Ring could you see it against the sky at dusk. It was a dark finger with a few sharp edges where its glass had been: forty-one stories of concrete and steel, empty since before the Founding, scheduled for the yards in a list that kept being revised. Children dared each other to walk out to its fence. Almost nobody went past it. I never had. Until Avukat's cabin I'd never stood in front of a building whose roof wasn't the land's. Apart from the elevator, which almost nobody in the city had seen except in pictures, it was the tallest thing anyone there had seen up close in a hundred and seventy years. It was also the closest thing in the world to the spire I'd spent the winter before last chasing through the numbers: the thing that stuck up out of everything and shouldn't have been there.

There were six of us. Seren, Ines, Bram, Ansel, Oskar, and me. We went in at eleven through a gap in the fence Bram had known about for years, and climbed the stairwell in the dark with headlamps, floor after floor, past rooms full of nothing: doorways with no doors, windows with no glass, wind coming through the whole building like breath through a flute. On the twentieth floor there was a sign

on a wall in faded paint, a company's name. On the thirty-third the stairs gave out, and we went up the last eight floors on the outside, on an old maintenance ladder bolted to the concrete, clipped to a cable Bram had rigged in the autumn, with nothing below us but the dark and the lights of the city very far down.

At the top there was a flat roof, and a rusted mast, and the wind.

For a while nobody said anything. We stood at the edge, clipped to the mast, and looked.

The whole of QL lay below us, twelve rings of lit squares under a moon two nights short of full. Beyond it the prairie lay gray, and the snow on the mountains was white against the sky. To the south the lights of the transit line ran out to the last ring and stopped, the way every line in the city stops, at the grass. You could see the whole of the life I'd lived from up there. Every place I'd ever been. It fit in a circle you could cover with your outstretched arms.

Seren stood beside me with her hood up and her hair blowing. She'd cut it again, shorter, closer than I'd ever seen it, a rough dark nap over her skull.

"Higher than anyone," she said. "In a hundred and seventy years. Higher than anyone in the city."

"Except the people on the station."

"They don't count. They're not standing on anything." She put her arm through mine. "This is the highest anyone's stood."

She lifted her arm to point at something, the reservoir maybe, and her sleeve slid back, and in the beam of my headlamp I saw the bruise on her forearm from the bout. Three weeks old. It was still there: yellow at the edges now, gone green in the middle, the long shape of the elbow that had made it plain as the day it happened.

I looked at it. I knew what a bruise looks like after three weeks. It doesn't look like anything. In this city a bruise lasts three days.

I thought: that's interesting. I thought: I'll ask her later. I thought about the wind, and the cable, and how cold my hands were, and how far down the ground was, and by the time she'd lowered her arm I was thinking about the reservoir.

#

I fell on the way down.

Not far. Not from the ladder, which would have been the end of me. From the stairs, on the twenty-sixth floor, where a landing that

had held all six of us on the way up gave way under me alone on the way down. It went with a crack and a long slither of concrete, and I went with it, one floor, onto the landing below, and lay in a pile of rubble with my headlamp pointing at the ceiling and the taste of dust in my mouth.

My left leg was wrong below the knee. My right wrist was wrong. I knew both things at once, without pain, the way you know a number before you've done the sum. The pain came a moment later, enormous and very clear.

Ansel got to me first. He'd been last on the stairs, behind me, as he always was; he was always last. He knelt in the dust and put his hand flat on my chest and said, "Don't move. Don't anything. You're all right," and spoke to his signal. He was the only one of us who kept it on for every climb; that was the rule, and Ansel kept rules. I heard his voice, calm and exact, giving our position to someone, and then Bram's headlamp coming up the stairs below us, fast, and Ines saying something sharp.

Seren didn't come up. She stayed on the landing below, in the dark, with her headlamp off. I could see her outline against the stairwell window. She didn't move until the medics came.

#

They had me walking in six days.

That's what medicine is now. They set the leg and the wrist in the hospital on the first foothill that night, and wrapped them in the slow-pulsing sleeves that hum faintly against the skin, and GERAS did the rest. By Wednesday I could stand. By Friday I could walk to the end of the corridor and back with a stick. The doctor, a brisk young-looking woman who could have been thirty-five or a hundred and thirty-five, said cheerfully that in the old days a break like mine took three months and sometimes never set right.

I lay in the bed and thought about that. Three months. People had broken their legs, once, and been changed by it: had limped for the rest of their lives, or lost a season, or a job, or a chance. The fall had meant something because it took something. Mine took six days. In a week it would be as if it had never happened.

I'd fallen off the tallest building in a hundred and seventy years, and it was going to leave no mark on me at all. I didn't know why that felt worse than the fall.

Tushar came every day. She brought work and sat in the chair by the courtyard window reading old letters, and didn't say anything about what I'd been doing on top of a condemned tower at midnight, which was how I knew she had a great deal to say about it.

Jinsia came every day. He brought food, because the hospital's was perfectly good and he didn't trust it, and once he brought the oars from his single scull and leaned them against the wall at the end of the bed.

"Incentive," he said. "Tuesdays. I've told the boathouse you'll be back in April."

Pallavi came once, with her mother, and stood at the end of the bed and looked at the sleeves on my leg and wrist with professional interest, and said, "Were you drunk?"

"No."

"Then what were you doing?"

"Climbing."

"Climbing what?"

"The old tower. Past the yards."

She looked at me for a long moment, and I couldn't tell what she was thinking.

"Was it good?" she said finally. "At the top?"

"Yes."

"Then all right," said Pallavi, and sat down on the end of the bed and told me about her Affirmation course for an hour, and didn't mention it again.

Kalle came on Thursday, with three slates and two apples. He sat on the courtyard windowsill and went through the week's panel business while I lay there. Dorit had a list of eleven new questions. Kwabena had brought bread to every meeting and asked about me at all of them. Nadia had said almost nothing, but on the Tuesday she'd come in with a hand-drawn chart of every machine she'd ever kept, and how long each one had lasted, and who had built it, going back sixty years.

"She's tracing it," Kalle said. "Her question. Who keeps the machines that keep the machines. She's actually tracing it back." He bit into an apple. "It's going to wreck my whole position, Rax. I can feel it coming. It's the most annoying thing anyone's ever done to me."

He left the other apple.

Seren didn't come.

She wrote once, on the second day: *Ansel says you'll be walking in a week. Good. Don't climb anything.* Nothing after that.

I lay there for six days and thought about a lot of things. The panel. Nadia's chart. My brother's request, still unanswered. The doctor's three months. The wind at the top of the tower, and the city lying under it like something you could hold.

Seren's arm through mine. Her hand lifting, at the top, to point at something. Her sleeve sliding back.

I got that far most nights, and then I thought about the reservoir.

Chapter 16

Sunday, March 21 – Thursday, April 15, 172 (2202)

Berbant came home on the first day of spring, on the evening drone, thinner, with a beard he'd sworn he wouldn't grow and the notebook in the inside pocket of his coat, buttoned in.

We were all at the gravel pad to meet him: Senne with the flask, Sora with nothing in her hands, me with a stick I didn't need anymore and carried anyway because Jinsia had told me to. The drone came down out of a pink sky over the prairie and unfolded its door. He climbed out and stood on the gravel blinking, as if he'd forgotten how flat it was here, and then Sora walked across and put her arms round him and they stood like that for a long time while the drone's rotors wound down.

"Well?" said Senne, when they'd let go.

Berbant opened his mouth. Then he shut it again, and shook his head, and laughed, and wiped his eyes with the back of his glove.

"I'll tell you at supper," he said. "I can't do it standing up."

#

He told us at Senne's table, with the hens shut in for the night and the ginger tea going cold because nobody remembered to drink it.

I'd heard people describe the northern lights before. Tushar had pictures in the archive; there were recordings anyone could call up. None of it had been anything like Berbant telling it. He'd waited five years and then he'd had thirty nights, and he'd spent every one of them outside, on a bench in front of the cabin in a coat the man with the wood had lent him, and he'd watched.

"It's not like a picture," he said. "Pictures are still. It moves. It comes up out of the north like smoke, green, and then it goes across the whole sky, and then it folds. It folds over on itself, like a sheet in the wind. And sometimes it goes red at the top, and sometimes

there's purple underneath, at the edges, and it's so quiet. It's completely quiet. You'd think something that big would make a sound." He was holding his cup in both hands. "The fourth night I cried. I don't know why. Nothing happened. It was just there, and I was just there, and nobody had made it for me, and it didn't care whether I watched."

Nobody said anything. Sora had her hand on the back of his hand.

"And the story," said Senne quietly.

Berbant put his cup down and took the notebook out of his coat and unbuttoned the pocket with fingers that weren't quite steady.

"I finished it," he said. "The twelfth night. I wrote the last eleven pages in one go, in the cabin, by the stove, and then I went outside and it was the best night of all of them, and I thought: she'd have liked that. She'd have said it was showing off." He opened it to the end. "I'm going to read the last page. Just the last page. You can read the rest if you want. But I wanted to read her the last page, out loud, somewhere she'd have been."

He read it.

I'm not going to put it here. It isn't mine, and it isn't finished being his; he's still working on it, as I write this, the way he's been working on it for forty years. I'll say that it was about a coat, and an apple tree, and a cup with a chip in it, and that it was about our sister anyway. When he got to the last line his voice went and he had to stop and start it again, and Senne, whom I had seen weep exactly twice in a hundred and twenty-seven years, put his face in his hands.

When he'd finished, nobody spoke. The hens shifted in their house outside. Then Sora said, "That's good, Berbant," in a voice I'd never heard her use, and he closed the notebook and held it on the table under both hands, and that was all.

#

Afterward, I went out with him to shut the hens' house properly, because he'd asked me to, in the voice he used when he wanted to say something to just one person.

It was cold and clear. The Eighth Ring's meadows were gray under the stars, with no moon, the skylights mostly dark. Berbant latched the hens' house door and stood with his hand on it.

"I'm going to speak against it," he said.

"Against what?"

"The Founders' Share. At the Society. Avukat's having an open meeting on the fifteenth, before the Concord's spring calendar. I'm going to stand up and say no."

I didn't say anything for a moment. In August he'd bounced on his toes outside that meeting.

"What happened?"

"Sora happened. You were there." He smiled a little, in the dark. "She asked me what it would give me that I didn't have. And I couldn't answer her. And then I went to Lapland, and I sat under that for thirty nights, and nobody owned any of it." He looked up at the sky, where there was nothing but stars. "Nobody owned the cabin either. A man I'd never met came by every morning with wood, and he didn't own the wood, and he didn't own the cabin, and he did it every morning for thirty years for whoever was there. And I sat there and thought: that's what I wanted. That's what I thought I wanted to own. And I'd had it the whole time. I'd had it here." He knocked once on the hens' house, gently. "I just never got a month off to see it."

"Avukat will be—"

"I know what Avukat will be." He let go of the door. "I'm not doing it to him. I'm doing it because I was wrong in August, out loud, in front of two hundred people, and I should be wrong the other way just as loud." He turned and looked at me. "Will you come?"

"I'm the chair of the panel, Berbant. I can't go to a petitioners' meeting and—"

"You can stand at the back. You always stand at the back." He bumped my shoulder with his. "I want somebody there who knows what it took."

#

The open meeting was on a Thursday evening, in the same commons room in the Third Ring, with the doors off again.

It was fuller than August. Three hundred, perhaps; they'd brought in more benches and people were standing in the doorway and out on the steps. The front page of *The Hold* had changed again. It had a drawing of twelve people around the Converger, holding a plate, and under it, in plain letters: *The panel's own chair has put these numbers on the record.*

My disclosure. Mira had warned me. I'd known he would. It was

different to see it printed on a newsletter in a stack by the tea.

Avukat spoke first. He was better than in August. He'd been giving the speech all winter in every Ring, and he'd sanded it down to the bone. My numbers again, from memory, every one: the ceiling, the window, the few hundredths for five years. *An insult with a decimal point*, and the room laughed, as it had learned to. The Converger team, twelve people who held every plate by hand. And then, new, the line he'd been saving:

"The chair of the attestation panel, who is my brother, and whom I love, has placed on the record that these numbers are his. Not mine. Not the Society's. His. The most careful equeuenomist in the city did this arithmetic on his own time, from public data, and could not find a thing wrong with it." He let that sit. "I'm not asking you to trust me. I'm asking you to trust him."

Heads turned toward the back of the room. I kept my eyes on the front.

He sat down to long applause.

Then Berbant stood up.

He didn't go to the front. He stood up where he was, in the fourth row, in his depot jacket, with his beard still not quite even, and waited until the room noticed him, which took a moment, because nobody expected him.

"I'm Berbant," he said. "Most of you know me. I'm a Freeholder. I've been one for twenty years. I stood outside this room in August and cheered." He swallowed. "I've come to say I was wrong."

The room went completely still.

"I keep the valves in the Eighth Ring," he said. "Somebody else kept them before me. Somebody else will keep them after, though I suppose that could be a while." He paused for the laughs. "I use everything I've got. I'm not the cleverest man in this room, and the formula doesn't hold it against me. It looks at what I've got and what I do with it and it says: that's everything. That's as much as anyone can do." He looked around the room, at the faces turned toward him. "And it says that about the people who built a door to the stars, too. The same thing. *That's everything.* And I've been told all winter that that's an insult." He shook his head. "I think it's the best thing about this city. I use everything I've got. The formula asks exactly that of me, and exactly that of the people who built a door to the stars. And it says that's enough. I don't want that changed. I don't want anyone

made more than anyone else. Not even them. Not even for that."

He sat down.

For a moment nobody did anything at all. Then someone near the back began to clap, slowly, and someone else hissed, and someone stood up and said "*Pocketer*" at the wrong person, and the room broke in half.

Avukat stood. He didn't raise his voice. He never did.

"My brother is a better man than I am," he said, and the room quieted, because that wasn't what anyone expected either. "He always has been. And he's wrong." He put his hands in his coat pockets. "Being content isn't the same as being right. If nobody had ever been discontented, we'd still be in the hard century, queuing for water. Without people criticizing today, tomorrow will not improve." He looked at Berbant across the rows, and for a second, just one, I saw something in his face I hadn't seen since we were boys. "I'm sorry, Berb. I'm not going to stop."

"I know," said Berbant. "I didn't ask you to."

#

Afterward the room emptied slowly, in knots, arguing. Berbant went out with Sora on one side of him and three depot people on the other, all talking at once, and didn't look back.

Avukat found me by the door, where I'd stood all evening.

He looked tired. In August he'd looked like a man who'd found his voice. Now he looked like a man who'd used it every night for eight months.

"Did you know?" he said.

"Since the hen house. The night he came home."

"And you didn't tell me."

"He asked me not to."

He nodded, as if that were fair, which it was.

"You could end this," he said. "You know that. Tonight. All of it."

"How?"

"Put your name on it. Not a disclosure. Not a line in a file that says the numbers are yours. Stand up at a meeting and say what you know: that the formula can't see the most important thing anyone's ever done, and that's wrong. You don't have to say a word about roofs. Just say the formula's blind." He was very close, and very quiet. "One

sentence from you is worth a winter of speeches from me. You know that, too."

"I'm the chair of the panel."

"You're my brother."

"Both," I said. "That's the problem."

He looked at me for a long moment. Then he took his hands out of his pockets and put one, briefly, on the side of my face, which he had not done in a hundred years.

"It's always both, with you," said Avukat. "That's what's wrong with you. It's also why I trust you."

He went out into the dark. I stood in the empty doorway with the stack of newsletters on the table behind me, my own disclosure printed on every one of them, and the door off its hinges leaning against the wall outside. Both my brothers had stood up in that room tonight and said what they believed, out loud, to three hundred people.

I'd stood at the back.

Chapter 17

Sunday, April 25, 172 (2202)

In April I went back to the boathouse on a Tuesday, as I'd been told. Jinsia had the double down off the rack before I'd got my coat off. For the first twenty minutes I was hopeless, all list and no boat, the way I'd been in September. Then, past the middle of the reservoir, it came back. My body remembered what I had forgotten. By May I was only mostly useless, and I'd stopped needing to be asked. Tuesdays were the reservoir.

#

Senne brought out the box ten days after the meeting, on a Sunday, when Avukat and Berbant had not spoken to each other for ten days and Senne had decided that was enough.

He didn't say that was why. He said it was spring cleaning. He invited the four of us to supper, and Sora, and Linnea. When we'd eaten he cleared the plates himself and went into his room. He came back carrying a wooden box about the size of a loaf of bread, with a brass catch gone green, and set it down in the middle of the long table between Avukat and Berbant, who were sitting as far apart as the table allowed.

Linnea had registered with Senne in March. Avukat had looked at her over the bread with one eyebrow up for most of the first course, and nobody had discussed it.

"Our parents' things," Senne said. "I've had them since their room was cleared. Eighty-three years. I thought it was time someone else looked at them."

Nobody moved. Then Berbant reached out and undid the catch.

#

It was mostly small things. That's what's left of people, in the end, even here: the small things nobody wanted to recycle.

On top, where I'd put it in December, was Drabelig's pendant.

Our mother's hymnal, black, the spine split, the edges of the pages gone soft and brown from her thumbs. Our father's pocketknife, the one he'd carried every day of his life and used for everything, apples and string and splinters, the blade worn narrow from sharpening. Five small paper envelopes, labeled in our mother's hand, each with a name and a date and something rattling inside: our baby teeth. A handful of photographs, real ones, printed on paper in the last years before they died, curled at the edges. A strip of blue ribbon with a gold edge, faded: *First Place, Under-12s, Five Kilometers.* Drabelig's. A child's drawing, in crayon, of five stick figures in a row and a large brown dog. And our father's watch, an old mechanical one with a cracked face, stopped at twenty past four.

"Whose dog is that?" said Sora.

We looked at the drawing. Five figures, tallest to smallest, left to right. A dog at the end, bigger than the smallest of them.

"We never had a dog," said Avukat.

"Somebody drew one," said Senne.

Nobody could remember who. We passed the drawing round the table and each of us denied it, and by the time it got back to Senne, Berbant was laughing, and then Avukat was, the short surprised laugh he'd had as a boy, and for a moment the ten days weren't in the room.

#

We hadn't talked about growing up in a long time. Maybe ever, all of us together. There'd been no reason to. It was a hundred years ago, and more, and the world we'd grown up in was gone so completely that talking about it felt like describing a dream.

But the box made it come. Senne picked up the hymnal and the rest followed.

The church, first. Twice a week, Sundays and Wednesdays, in a low hall at the end of our path, dug in like everything else, with hard pews. A church that believed above everything in families, in having children and having more of them, at a time when the world was emptying out and having children was the one thing everyone was told not to do. Our parents had five. People stared at us in the transit.

"Mother ran it," said Berbant. "The house. Not the church. The house."

"Father thought he did," said Senne.

"*He may be the Patriarch,*" said Avukat, in a voice I hadn't heard in a hundred years, our mother's voice, light and dry and absolutely certain, "*but I'm the boss.*"

We all laughed. Sora looked from one of us to the other.

"She said that?"

"Every time he said anything about being the head of the house," said Senne. "In front of him. He'd go red, and then he'd laugh."

And Father. Up at five every morning, the first to the door, the last to leave the table, always on his way somewhere. "*Out of my way,*" Berbant said, doing him, one hand up like a man parting a crowd. "*Head of the house, coming through. Out of my way.*" Our father had said it as a joke, mostly, and then gone through the door before anyone could move.

"Two things a father owes his son," said Avukat, quieter. "A good education and a good name."

Nobody laughed at that one. He'd said it to all of us, but he'd said it most to Avukat, who was the eldest, and who'd taken it the hardest.

"You were the serious one," Berbant said to me. "Do you remember? They used to point at you. At church. *Look at Dar, how still he sits.* The other parents. You'd sit there through the whole thing with your hands folded, listening, and everybody thought you were the holy one."

"I was counting the panes in the skylight."

"I know. You told me afterward. Three hundred and twelve."

"Three hundred and sixteen."

"There you go," said Berbant.

#

It was Avukat who said the hard thing, in the end. He'd been turning our father's knife over and over in his fingers.

"It was like second-hand smoke," he said. "Growing up in that church. You don't know you're breathing it. You think it's just the air. And then you're a hundred years old and you find out what it did to you." He set the knife down very precisely, parallel to the edge of the table. "It wasn't cruel. It wasn't anything you could point at. It was just everywhere."

"What did it do to you?" said Sora.

He considered her, as he considers witnesses.

"It taught me that what you have is never yours," he said. "That it's all lent. By a god, then by the city. That you should be grateful for the loan and never ask to keep anything." He picked up the watch, with its cracked face. "I've spent a hundred years asking to keep something. I didn't understand why until tonight."

Nobody said anything. Berbant was looking at his brother across the table, and I couldn't read his face.

#

Ages came up, the way they do. Not directly. Nobody here talks about age; there's no point when everyone looks thirty-five. But Senne said something about the year the Leveling came, and I heard myself say that I'd been fifty-six, and Berbant said he'd been fifty-three. Then we were all doing it, working it out on our fingers like children, and realizing for the first time in decades how old we'd been when the world changed.

And how old our parents had been. They'd been gone by then. They'd aged, both of them, slowly and then quickly, in the last decades before GERAS, and we'd watched it happen. Our mother's hands. Our father slowing down, finally, at the end, so that for the first time in his life he had to get out of the way of other people. They'd died within a year of each other, eleven years before the Leveling. Eleven years. If they'd held on, they'd be at this table.

None of us said that. We all thought it. I watched it go round the table on four faces.

#

I remembered something then that I hadn't thought about in a century.

I was nine. There'd been a race, the same kind Drabelig won the ribbon for, five kilometers, for the under-twelves, and I'd lost it badly. Not because I was slow. Because I'd stopped halfway to work out how far behind I was, and by the time I'd worked it out I was farther behind.

I'd come home furious and ashamed, and Avukat had found me behind the house, and put his hand on the side of my face, which was the only gentle thing I remember him ever doing when we were boys. And then our father had come out, and sat down on the step beside me, and listened to the whole thing, and said:

"Find a battle that matters to you, Dar. Fight that battle. Not every race. Not every number. One that matters." He'd stood up. "Then you'll know what to stop and count."

I'd never known what mine was. A hundred and eighteen years and I still didn't. I'd fought every battle anyone handed me, and counted all of them.

I didn't say any of that at the table. I picked up the drawing of the five figures and the dog and looked at it, and put it down.

#

Avukat left early. He said he had a brief to read for the morning, which was probably true.

Before he went, he picked up the hymnal and opened it to the inside of the front cover. I saw what was written there before he did, upside down, from across the table: five names in a column in our mother's round hand, eldest first, and our dates of birth.

The first name wasn't *Avukat*. It was *Jabe*.

He looked at it for a second. His face didn't change at all. Then he closed the book, gently, before anyone could read it aloud. He put it back in the box, and closed the lid.

It was the name she'd given him and later taken back, when he was small, and given him another. I knew it. All of us at the table knew it, except Sora and Linnea. None of us had heard it said aloud in a hundred years, and none of us said it then.

#

I walked him to the door of the long hall. He stood in it with his coat on, looking out at the dark garden, the way he had in July.

"The preliminary number," he said, without looking at me. "I'm not asking as a petitioner. I've asked as a petitioner. I'm asking as your brother."

"The panel isn't finished."

"I know the panel isn't finished. I'm asking what you think. You. Tonight."

"I can't."

He nodded slowly, as if he'd expected nothing else, and pulled on his gloves.

"Our father would have known what a good name was worth," he said. "He'd have told you to use it." He looked at me then, finally.

"That's all I want, Dar. For somebody to be able to keep something good they did. Is that really so terrible?"

He went out before I could answer. I stood in the door and watched him go down the path between the dark meadows with his hands in his pockets, alone, until the path turned and I lost him.

When I went back in, Berbant had the hymnal out of the box again and open on the table, and was looking at the first name on the inside cover. He didn't say it. He traced it once with his finger, and closed the book, and put it back.

"He's not wrong, you know," he said, not looking up. "About the smoke. He's just wrong about what to do about it."

Senne put the lid on the box and took it back to his room, and Sora made more tea, and nobody mentioned the dog again.

Chapter 18

Tuesday, May 11, 172 (2202)

Hana Sokol came down the elevator for the first time in eleven years to brief the Concord, and on her second day on the ground she gave the panel two hours, which Kalle said was more than she'd given anyone since the Leveling.

She came into display room four at nine exactly, with a slate under her arm and the slightly careful walk of someone whose legs had spent eleven years in a third of gravity, two hours a day on the station's load machines, and five days on the climber getting used to the rest. She was tall and spare and gray-eyed, with her hair cut short and practical, and she looked at our borrowed table and our five chairs and Kwabena's basket of bread and said, "Is this it?"

"This is it," I said.

"Good. I hate committees with more than five people. They can't decide where to have lunch." She sat. She didn't take the bread. "Ask."

#

We asked. She answered, fast, precisely, in complete paragraphs, as if she'd been asked all of it before by people slower than us, which she had.

The Lattice, she said, was a ring about a kilometer and a half across, staged: built in segments, and opened in stages, each one holding the throat a little wider than the last until the whole thing stood open on enormous power. It was heavy and slow and it wouldn't fail. "That's the design philosophy," she said. "It won't fail. I don't care if it's beautiful."

"And the Converger?"

"Small. Elegant. One pulse." She shrugged. "If it works, it's better than mine. Less mass, less power, less to build. If it works."

"Do you think it will?"

"I think the man who designed it has never been wrong in his life," said Hana Sokol. "I find that very irritating. Next question."

Dorit, who had her numbered list, asked the one I'd have asked last, because she'd numbered it fourth: why the test meant anything at all, when the real ring would be twelve and a half light-years away and the test rings were barely one astronomical unit apart.

Hana looked at her with something close to approval.

"Because distance doesn't cost anything," she said. "That's the strangest thing about a throat, and the thing nobody believes. What it costs is size. The width of the throat. The energy goes per meter of rim, not per light-year of road. Open a throat a hundred meters wide between two rings an AU apart, or between two rings at opposite ends of the galaxy, and it costs exactly the same. So if we can open one this summer at test scale, we can open one to Teegarden's Star. We just have to get the far ring there first."

"How?"

"The slow way. Push mode. Same physics, used gently. The ship leans on the vacuum, and gets up to nine-tenths the speed of light and down again at the other end. The energy for that is bigger than the ship, and if you ask me where it finally comes from, I'll tell you nobody fully knows yet, which is true of most good physics for its first fifty years. Fifteen years by our clocks. Under eight by the ship's." She tapped the table. "Not a person on board. You don't put people on something going that fast. A grain of dust would go through them like a bomb. It'll go through the ring like one too, if we don't carry a shield out in front, so we carry a shield." She leaned back. "That's the bit people don't like. Fifteen years before the door even exists. Then you open it, and the first people walk through a week later."

"And the clocks," said Kalle, who'd been waiting to show he'd read something. "At the two ends. They won't agree on when."

"They'll disagree by about a day," said Hana, without blinking. "Teegarden's Star is moving relative to us. So the schedule for the first opening names a reference frame, and everybody agrees to use it, and nobody tries to be clever about simultaneity." She looked at Kalle. "People who try to be clever about simultaneity build time machines by accident. You'd need the two ends out of step by more than the light-time between them. That's twelve and a half years. We're using one day of it." She smiled, very slightly. "We're not doing that."

Kalle looked thrilled.

#

Then we got to the machines, and she stopped being patient.

"Eighty percent," she said, before I'd finished the question. "Roughly. Of the hours that built the Lattice. The fabrication halls at the station ran three shifts for six years, and the people in them weren't holding plates. They were designing, checking, deciding, fixing the fabricators when the fabricators broke. That's the job. That's what three hundred people do with machines like ours."

"And if the machines' share goes to the commons," I said, "your team's human share is small."

"Very small. Smaller than twelve people in a shed who refused to use the tools they had." She didn't say it bitterly. She said it like a load calculation. "I know what's being said down here, Investigator. I read your brother's newsletter on the climber. Under one rule my leads get a roof, if the amendment passes. Under the other rule S. Ya's team gets one each and mine gets thanked. And under that rule, any team that wants credit in the future learns to switch its fabricators off." She looked around the table. "Which of you would like to explain to three hundred engineers that they should have worked slower?"

"I've said that," said Kalle. "For months."

"Then you're the only one at this table who's right," said Hana.

Nadia had said nothing so far. She had her hand-drawn chart in front of her, the one she'd made in March, every machine she'd ever kept and who'd built it, going back sixty years. She turned it round and slid it across the table.

"Who built your fabricators?" she said.

Hana looked at the chart, and then at Nadia, properly, for the first time.

"The first generation came up from QS," she said. "Forty years ago. Built in the halls there. We've rebuilt them twice since. On the station. Ourselves."

"Who built the halls at QS?"

"I don't know. People. A long time ago."

"Who keeps the fabricators running now? On the station?"

"My maintenance crew. Thirty people."

"Are they on your three hundred?"

Hana was quiet for a moment.

"No," she said. "They're on the station's general rota. They keep everything. Air, water, the fabricators. They're not on the drive team."

"So the eighty percent," said Nadia, "is your maintenance crew's hours from the last six years, and theirs from the fourteen before that, and QS's from the twenty before that, and the copper out of the yards. It's not your three hundred's. It never was. It's just that your three hundred were standing next to it when it finished." She took her chart back. "I don't think your engineers should have worked slower. I think they should have their own hours. And the rest should go to whoever kept the lights on. Which is everybody."

Hana looked at her a long moment.

"What do you do?" she said.

"I keep sweepers," said Nadia. "Forty-one."

"Huh," said Hana Sokol, and for the first time that morning, she reached across the table and took a piece of Kwabena's bread.

#

The two hours ran out. Kalle was arguing with Nadia about whether a thirty-year-old fabricator was still old work if it had been rebuilt. Dorit was writing everything down, and Kwabena was quietly wrapping the rest of the bread for Hana to take back up the elevator, because she'd said the station's bread was printed and tasted like it.

I walked her out to the transit.

On the steps outside the Division she stopped and looked up at the sky, pale and spring-blue, as if she hadn't seen one for a while.

"Can I ask you something off the record?" I said.

"There's no such thing as off the record. But ask."

"S. Ya. You said he's never been wrong."

"Almost never." She put her hands in her coat pockets. "Every hard problem my team's solved in six years, I've gone looking afterward, and he'd published something near it. Not the answer. Something near it. A paper, a note, a reply to a question somebody asked him in a seminar. Like he'd walked past the problem a year before us and left the light on." She shook her head. "And he answers anyone. You write to him, he writes back, always useful, always polite. I've written to him four times. I've caught him wrong once. A sign error in a footnote. He thanked me within the hour." She was quiet

a moment. "I've wondered since whether he left it there."

"That bothers you."

"Of course it bothers me. Nobody's never wrong. I'm wrong every day. That's how I know I'm working." She looked at me sidelong. "Lior told you about the throat geometry, I expect. Two years ago. *We can't do that. Because we just don't do that here.*"

"He did."

"I wrote that." She almost smiled. "I wrote *we just don't do that here*. I was tired and he was right and I hated it. A year later we did it his way and it took a third off our mass." She took a breath. "I'm not proud of that. But I'm not ashamed of being annoyed, either. Somebody should be annoyed. Everybody else just thanks him."

The pod came. She stepped toward it, then turned back and held out her slate.

"My direct line," she said. "On the station. Not the office. Me."

I took it.

"The test's in July," said Hana. "If anything about it looks wrong to you, anything at all, I want to hear it before anyone else. Before the Concord. Before your panel. Before him." She looked at me, gray-eyed, very steady. "You find things that don't add up. I read about you on the climber too."

Then she got on the pod with Kwabena's bread under her arm and went.

I stood on the Division steps with her line on my slate and thought about a woman who'd spent six years building the safest machine anyone could build, and who had come down the elevator for the first time in eleven years to tell a stranger she didn't trust something she couldn't name.

Kalle came out behind me, still arguing with Nadia over his shoulder.

"Well?" he said.

"She gave me her line."

"Hana Sokol gave you her direct line?" He stared at me. "Rax. People would kill for that."

"She wants me to tell her if anything's wrong."

"With what?"

"She didn't say."

Chapter 19

Saturday, May 15 – Tuesday, May 18, 172 (2202)

Pallavi would turn eighteen in June, which in QL means nothing much and everything. Nothing much, because there's no ceremony for the birthday itself; everyone you know is thirty-five and has been for longer than you've been alive, and a birthday is just a cake. Everything, because in July she'd stand up in front of the city, take the Affirmation and become a citizen. They'd give her GERAS, and from then on the clock would run as slowly for her as it did for the rest of us.

She wanted to walk to the saddle before that happened. She told me so in March, at the end of my bed in the hospital, while I had the sleeve on my leg.

"Before," she said. "While I'm still the age I am."

So on a Saturday in the middle of May, with my leg good as new and Jinsia's oars still leaning in the corner of my room, because he'd never asked for them back, I picked her up at five-thirty. Tushar was asleep.

#

It was a different walk from June. She'd changed, or I had. She didn't sleep on the pod. She sat across from me with her pack on her knees and talked the whole way about the Affirmation course: the long sessions on the Charter, article by article; the week they'd spent in the yards, working beside the machines; the day each of them had to stand up and argue against one article of their own choosing, as well as they could, in front of the others.

"I took Article II," she said. "No Coin, No Crown."

"Of course you did."

"I argued for your brother." She looked pleased with herself. "I

used his line. *Wealth is being able to choose when you want to be uncomfortable.* I didn't say it was his. Everybody clapped."

"Did you believe it?"

"For forty minutes." She shrugged. "That's the point of the exercise. You find out what it's like to believe something you don't. I think it's very good for you. Mom says it's the only part of the course she remembers."

The magpie was on the same branch above the second rest, or its great-grandchild was. I didn't call it a crow. Pallavi noticed that I didn't, and threw it a crust anyway.

On the narrow part of the trail, with the plains opening out behind us, she walked ahead and talked to me over her shoulder, the way she had at eight.

"It's on the seventeenth," she said. "July. The ceremony. In the civic core. The whole cohort."

"I know."

"I want you there." She didn't turn round. "Not in the back. In the family seats. With Mom and Jinsia. You count as family. I asked. They said it's whoever I say."

I didn't say anything for a moment, because something had caught in my throat and I didn't want her to hear it.

"I'll be there," I said.

"Promise."

"I promise."

"Not *I promise* like before." She stopped on the trail and turned, and looked at me with her mother's eyes. "You got one. Remember? You don't get two."

"I remember."

"So promise properly."

"I'll be in the family seats on the seventeenth of July," I said. "With your mother and Jinsia. I promise properly."

She looked at me a moment longer, the way her mother does, deciding how much of it she believed. Then she nodded once and went on up the trail, and didn't mention it again all day, which was how I knew it had mattered more than anything else she'd said.

At the saddle the wind came through the gap as it always does. We sat in the lee of the rock and ate, and looked at the city laid out green below us. She didn't ask me what it was for. She told me instead what she thought it was for, which took most of an hour and

involved the Charter, the violin, the drive, a boy in her cohort called Tadeo whom she described as *impossible*, and the question of whether anybody who'd never been hungry could understand the hard century at all. I listened to all of it. I didn't score it. I didn't think of scoring it until I was home, and then I didn't.

#

Finding Vera Wandel had taken Tushar about a second. She lived in the Sixth Ring, like a hundred thousand other people, and the city directory had her. Getting her to see us took longer. Vera didn't answer messages. She had never answered one in her life, as far as anyone could tell. So in April Tushar wrote to her on paper, the old way. A woman who'd written to the Concord in ink for thirty years, she said, might answer ink. Vera answered in three lines. *Come on a Tuesday. Bring the geneticist. Not the advocate.*

"The advocate," I said, when Tushar showed me.

"Your brother's been to see her. Twice. In March." Tushar folded the letter. "She threw him out the second time. She says so in the postscript. She sounds very pleased about it."

So on the Tuesday after the hike, the three of us went: Tushar with her slate full of questions, Jinsia because he'd been asked for, and me because the panel needed a precedent and the precedent was alive and lived in the Sixth Ring. She had asked for a geneticist, not an equeuenomist. I'd decided not to take that personally.

Her Earthhold was at the end of a quiet row, with a garden in front that had been allowed to go entirely to seed: tall grasses, thistles, a tangle of something flowering purple. She opened the door before we knocked. She was small, smaller than in the photograph, and her face was the same mid-thirties face as everyone's. She held herself as if every one of her hundred and forty years were sitting in her spine.

"Cadana," she said to Tushar. "You write a good letter." She looked up at Jinsia, all the way up. "And you're the heredity man. Bechtel. I've read you. Come in. You can duck." She looked at me last. "And you're the brother."

"I'm on the panel."

"You're the brother," said Vera Wandel, and turned and went inside, and we followed.

#

She gave us tea in a room full of paper: journals, printouts, a hundred years of genetics stacked against the walls in an order only she understood. She didn't make small talk. She sat down across from Jinsia as if he were the only one in the room and began.

"You know what we did," she said. "In 2130. Nineteen of us. We stopped the clock. For everyone. All at once."

"I know what you did," said Jinsia. "I've spent fifty years measuring it."

"Then you know what it costs."

"Tell me what you think it costs."

She leaned forward. "Evolution," she said. "That's the cost. A species evolves because its members die. They breed, and the ones that suit the world have more children, and the old ones get out of the way, and over long enough the whole thing changes. Moves. Adapts. That's what life *is*, Bechtel. And we stopped it. Nobody dies. And the parenthood queue keeps the numbers flat, so nobody new comes in except a trickle, chosen by lottery. Nothing is selected. Nothing changes. The human genome in this city is the genome of 2130. It will be the genome of 2130 in ten thousand years." She sat back. "We didn't make people immortal. We made the species a fossil. A living one."

I watched Jinsia. I knew his face. He'd half agreed with her for the first three sentences; he'd said nearly the same thing himself, to me, on a boat. Then I watched him stop agreeing.

"No," he said.

"No?"

"You're wrong three ways," said Jinsia, very politely, which in him is the opposite of polite. "First. Evolution isn't progress. It doesn't go anywhere. It doesn't get better. It just fits whatever's there. A genome that stopped in 2130 hasn't failed at anything. It's just stopped fitting a world that's stopped changing it."

"That's a quibble."

"Second. We don't need it to. Culture moves a thousand times faster than genes. We changed the whole planet in a century with the genome we had. The genome's the least interesting thing about us. It's the floor we stand on, not the house."

Vera's mouth had gone thin.

"And third," said Jinsia. He put his cup down. "Say you're right. Say we need selection back. How do you get it, without death?" He

waited. She didn't answer. "You'd have to choose. Somebody would have to decide who breeds and who doesn't, by what they've got in them. That's the only way to select without dying. And that, Dr. Wandel, is the one thing the parenthood queue was built never to do. It's lottery-weighted *because* of that. Your fix is the thing the whole city was founded to stop." He sat back. "You don't want evolution. You want a breeding program. You just don't like the word."

The room was very quiet. Outside, in the overgrown garden, something buzzed against the window.

Vera looked at him for a while. Then, unexpectedly, she smiled, a small dry tired smile.

"You're very good," she said. "They told me you were. I wanted to see." She fiddled with her fingers. "I've had that argument with myself for seventy years and I've lost it every time, too. I just keep having it."

#

Tushar asked her about the letters.

Vera didn't answer right away. She got up and went to the courtyard window and stood looking out at her garden of thistles.

"We changed what a human being is," she said, with her back to us. "And the next quarter, my number went up by four hundredths of a point, for five years, the same as the woman who repaired my sink. I was so angry I couldn't speak. I wrote to the Concord. I wrote every year. They thanked me every year for my contribution to the common good." She was quiet for a moment. "The other one who wrote, Haldis, she was angrier than I was. She took her GERAS out in 2160. She said if the formula thought she'd done something ordinary, she'd go and be ordinary. She died in 2181, fifty-six by her body, of something nobody had died of in fifty years. I went to her ceremony. I was the only one of the nineteen who came."

"And you kept yours," said Tushar.

"I kept mine." She turned round. "Out of curiosity. I wanted to see what happens. How it ends, if it ends." She said it lightly. I didn't believe the lightness, and neither, I think, did Tushar. Vera Wandel had stood beside a friend who chose to stop, and gone home and kept going, and called it curiosity.

"The Freehold Society asked you to testify," I said. "At the hearing. In November."

"Your brother asked me. Twice." She looked at me directly for the first time. "He wanted me to stand up and say: look, here's what the formula did to the people who gave you forever. Here's the bitterness. Here's seventy years of it. Give the drive people what we never got."

"And?"

"And I told him no." She came back to her chair and sat down slowly. "Because I don't want a roof. I never wanted a roof. I didn't want four hundredths of a point either. I didn't want anything I could keep." She looked at her hands. "I wanted someone to say: we know what you did. We know what it cost you. We know you didn't know, when you did it, what it would do. I wanted to be forgiven, Investigator. Not rewarded. The formula doesn't have a column for that, and neither does your brother's amendment, and I'm not going to stand up in front of the Concord and let him pretend it does."

Nobody said anything.

"Write that down," said Vera Wandel. "For your panel. *The precedent does not want a roof.*"

I wrote it down.

#

At the door, as we were leaving, she put her hand on Jinsia's arm.

"Your child," she said. "Cadana told me. You and Marisol."

"Frozen," said Jinsia.

"It'll thaw. They always thaw." She looked up at him. "When it's born, take a sample. Not for the data. For yourself. And then don't look at it for twenty years."

"Why?"

"Because you'll want to know what you've made," said Vera. "And you won't. Not for a long time. Nobody does." She let go of his arm. "That's the only thing I've learned in a hundred and forty years that I'm sure of."

We walked back down the row past her thistles in the long evening light, the three of us, not talking. At the corner Jinsia stopped and looked back at the house.

"She's terrified," he said. "Of the end. Of hers. That's why she keeps it."

"She said curiosity," said Tushar.

"She said curiosity," Jinsia agreed. "And I said I'd row on Tuesdays for a year before I was any good." He put his hands in his pock-

ets. “We all say things.”

Chapter 20

Monday, July 5 – Saturday, July 10, 172 (2202)

Mira told me in the second week of June that the Concord wanted the panel's chair on the station for the test.

"Not to judge it," she said. "The engineers judge it. To witness it. They want the people who'll put the number on the record to have been in the room when the number was made." She looked at me across her desk. "You and Kalle. You leave on the fifth. You'll be back on the twenty-second or so."

I worked it out before she'd finished the sentence.

"The seventeenth," I said.

"What about it?"

"Nothing," I said. "Nothing for the panel."

I told Pallavi that evening, in Tushar's rooms, with Tushar under the light well pretending not to listen. I told her straight, all of it, the dates, the climb, the five days up and five days down, and that I couldn't be in the family seats on the seventeenth because I'd be thirty-six thousand kilometers over the Pacific.

She heard me out. She didn't say anything for a while. Then she put her violin case down on the table.

"Then you watch," she said. "From up there. Live. Not later, not the recording, not *I'll catch up*. Live. When they call my name you're watching."

"I'll be watching."

"The whole thing. It's two hours."

"The whole thing."

"Promise properly."

"I promise properly," I said. "Live. All two hours. When they call your name I'll be watching you stand up."

She looked at me, deciding. Then she nodded, picked up her violin case and went to her room. Tushar turned round from the light

well and looked at me for a moment, then turned back again without saying anything.

#

The elevator doesn't start in QL. It can't. The ribbon hangs from a point that stays fixed over the Earth, and the only such points are over the equator, forty degrees south of us. So it starts at sea, on a floating platform in the eastern Pacific, twelve hundred kilometers from the nearest land, which can shift a few kilometers to step out of a storm's way, though storms rarely come; they can't spin up on the equator.

We flew there on the Monday, Kalle and I, in a long-haul craft that took off from the field on the plains east of the yards at dawn and flew south all day over a planet I'd only ever seen in pictures. Desert, then mountains, then a coastline, then nothing but water for six hours, blue and wrinkled and enormous. Kalle slept. I watched the sea.

The platform came up out of the water in the late afternoon: a flat gray island the size of a Ring, anchored to the ocean floor by cables you couldn't see, with a cluster of low buildings at one end and, rising from the middle of it, the tether.

I had known what it would look like. I'd seen it in every picture of the station since I was a boy. It didn't help. It was a ribbon, not a tower, flat and gray and about as wide as a road, and it went straight up out of the platform into the sky and kept going. It didn't seem to taper. One of the engineers, a tall man named Halvard, told me later it thickened all the way up, because the top had to hold the weight of everything below it, but you'd never see that from the ground. It didn't bend. It simply went up, until the blue of the sky swallowed it, and you understood with your stomach and not your head that it went on up past the sky, thirty-six thousand kilometers, to the place where things stopped falling.

There were four of them, Halvard said, each rising from its own platform a few kilometers apart: two for going up and two for coming down. From ours you could only see the one.

"Huh," said Kalle, beside me, awake now, with his head tipped all the way back.

It was one of the few times I'd seen him with nothing to say.

#

The climber was a cabin the size of a commons kitchen, clamped to the ribbon, with bunks, a galley, a washroom, and windows. Eight passengers: the two of us, three engineers going back to the station after leave, a woman from the Concord's office with a great deal of luggage, and a pair of honeymooners from QS who held hands for five days and spoke to nobody.

It left at seven in the evening. There was no sound and very little sensation. The platform simply began to go down outside the window, slowly at first and then faster, the buildings shrinking, the gray island shrinking, until it was a button on the dark water and then a dot, and then we were above the cloud and the sun came back up over the curve of the sea, because we'd climbed out of the evening into daylight again.

Three hundred kilometers an hour. Five days. It sounds fast. It isn't.

A few hours out, with the platform long gone, the red light came on, and we went into the belt.

There are two bands of radiation around the Earth, where the planet's field holds charged particles from the sun the way a net holds fish. You can't see them. The climber's walls aren't thick enough to keep them out for long. So we spent the first night in the shelter, through the inner band, and came out at midday. On the third evening we went back in for the outer one and stayed until midday two days later. The shelter was a padded room in the middle of the cabin, behind heavy walls, with no windows, eight bunks, and a lamp that the engineers called the belt light. It stayed red the whole time we were in there.

In between, on the second day, the Earth was simply below us, blue and white and enormous, filling every window, curving away at the edges. You could see weather. You could see a storm spinning off the coast of somewhere, slow and white, like milk stirred into tea.

"Belt hours," said Halvard, lying on his bunk with his eyes closed. "Everybody hates belt hours. Read a book. Sleep. Don't count."

I counted. I couldn't help it. I lay in the red light and counted the hours, and then the minutes, and then the heartbeats of the honeymooners in the bunk across from mine, who had fallen asleep in each other's arms and breathed in unison.

Kalle slept the whole time. He'd slept on the flight. He slept on the climber. He'd slept, he told me later, through most of his own

Affirmation. It was the only thing I ever envied about him.

#

I wrote to Seren every day.

I didn't mean to. I meant to write once, from the platform, to say I'd gone. But on the second day, at the window, I wrote to her again, about the storm I'd seen. In the shelter I wrote about the belt light. By the third night I'd stopped pretending to myself that I wasn't going to write every night. The messages I wrote in the shelter waited, and went out together when we came out of the belt.

She answered twice.

The first time, on the second day: *Ansel says you're going up a string. Don't fall off it.*

The second time, on the fourth night, when I'd written about the weight going out of everything: *Laszlo's vigil is next week. I'm going with him this year. Third pipe. No signal, so don't worry if I'm quiet. You'll be busy with your stars.*

I read it three times. I wrote back: *Be careful.* She didn't answer that.

#

The weight went out of things slowly, and then, near the end, not slowly at all.

You don't feel it at first. On the second day I noticed that my cup set down on the galley table more gently than it should have. That night, at about ten thousand kilometers, I stood up from my bunk too fast and kept going, and caught myself on the ceiling with my hand. A seventh of my weight, Halvard said. By twenty thousand it was barely a twentieth, and things you dropped took their time about landing; they settled, like snow. Only on the last day, with the station close, did the weight go altogether. Then we moved through the cabin by pushing off things, like swimmers, and everything that wasn't strapped down drifted. Kalle's apples, which he'd brought from the city and refused to stop eating, went slowly round the galley in a lazy orbit of their own until he gathered them up one by one, delighted, and ate them in the air.

There was something else, too, that the engineers had warned us about and that I didn't believe until I felt it: as we climbed, the climber leaned. Very slightly. Westward, against the ribbon, as if a wind were pushing it. Every kilometer up needs more speed eastward to keep

pace with the turning Earth, Halvard said, and the ribbon has to hand that speed to you, a little at a time, and you feel it as a lean the other way. You couldn't see it, and for most of the climb you couldn't feel it either. On the last day you could: in the lean of your body against the bunk at night, a patient sideways pressure, as if the planet were holding on.

#

On the fifth morning I went to the floor port and looked down at the Earth.

It wasn't below us anymore, filling everything. It was over there. A ball. Blue and white and brown, small enough to see the whole of at once, hanging in the black with nothing under it. The terminator ran down one side of it, the line between day and night, and on the night side there were almost no lights at all: a handful of faint smudges where the cities on this side of the world were, and, if you knew where to look, a pinprick or two that Halvard said were the bigger PQ domes, and otherwise dark. The darkest the night side of the Earth had been, Halvard said, since before anyone had lit a fire bigger than a house.

I held up my hand at arm's length, with the fingers spread.

It covered it. The whole Earth. Every person who had ever lived and died, every war, every queue, every city and every grave and the river where I'd poured my sister's ashes and the basement where I'd danced and the rink where Seren had gone down on her back and the long table under Senne's window and the saddle above the Flatirons where a girl had told me, four years running, that it was a magpie. All of it behind my hand.

I took my hand away. It was still there.

I stood at that window for a long time. I don't know what I felt. Something very large and very quiet, and under it something small and sharp that I didn't look at, because I was afraid that if I looked at it, it would turn out to be the thought I'd been having since the night I'd scored the creek a ten: that none of it mattered, that it was all so small, that the whole of human history was a blue plate you could cover with your hand and it made no difference to anything at all what any of us did on it.

I didn't look at it. I looked at the plate instead, and the thin bright line of the atmosphere around its edge, so thin it was like a breath on

glass, and I thought: that's all there is between all of them and this. That's all. That thin.

Then I went back to my bunk and opened the panel file.

#

I wrote the sentence on the last night of the climb, with the station already the brightest star in the forward window and Kalle snoring gently against the far wall in his straps.

I'd been circling it for a year. Since the night at four in the morning in July, the page on my slate, the arithmetic. Since Marta's ledger and Hana's direct line and Nadia's chart of forty-one sweepers. I'd written everything around it: the method, the precedents, the question of the machines, the problem of the window, the provisional estimate in escrow. I'd never written the sentence itself, because I knew that once it was written down it would be true, and once it was true my brother would read it out to three hundred people.

I wrote it.

Whatever rule the panel adopts for the machines' share, the honest uncapped estimate of S. Ya's own contribution to the Converger is a great deal.

I looked at it for a long time. Then I saved it in the draft, where only Kalle and I could see it, and didn't send it to anyone.

Outside the window, the station turned slowly in the sun: a great wheel of light, with the frames of the fabrication halls standing off from its rim like the spokes of a second wheel. And beyond it, the dark.

Chapter 21

Thursday, July 15, 172 (2202)

The control room on the station was smaller than I'd imagined and full of people who weren't supposed to be in it.

It was a long, low room on the inner rim, with a curved floor that climbed gently away from you in both directions until it disappeared behind the ceiling, so that the far ends of the room were always a little uphill. One wall was a single screen. The other was a window, and through the window, if you stood at the right place, you could see the frames of the fabrication halls standing off from the rim, and the dark, and nothing else. Whatever was going to happen today was going to happen a long way past that window, in a direction nobody could point to without looking it up.

Hana's people had the consoles: forty of them, in four curved rows, most of them on the station for longer than I'd been in the Division. They talked to each other in short, flat sentences and drank tea out of bulbs with lids, because on the station anything spilled went somewhere you didn't want it.

S. Ya's team had a bank of six consoles along the back wall, by the window, that the station had cleared for them. They'd come up in May. They had their own tea. They sat close together and talked low, and every so often one of Hana's people would turn round in their chair and look at them, and one of them would look back, and both would look away.

And then there was everyone else. Two councillors from the Concord. The woman from the Concord's office with all the luggage, who turned out to be a secretary named Bettina, here to take notes. A woman from the news feed, with a camera on her shoulder that she was not allowed to point at the consoles for now. Three or four engineers from other departments who'd simply turned up and found places against the wall. Kalle and me.

"Witnesses," said Kalle, finding us a spot near the door. "We're the furniture."

"We're the panel."

"Today we're furniture. Tomorrow we're the panel." He'd brought an apple. He looked at it, and at the tea bulbs, and put it back in his pocket.

#

S. Ya was standing at the window.

I'd seen him in person a handful of times. In his workshop, last August. At the chair racks on Founding Day, the winter before last. Once at a distance in a corridor of the Fourth Ring, in the spring, when he'd nodded at me in a way that might have been recognition and might have been his neck. He looked smaller in that room than he had in his workshop.

Lior was next to him. Twenty-six, and he looked it, which almost nobody did; in that room of settled faces he looked like somebody's son who'd come up to see where his parents worked. He had a slate pressed to his chest with both arms, the way Pallavi held her violin case when she was nervous, and he wasn't looking out of the window. He was looking at S. Ya.

"Dar Rax," said S. Ya, without turning round. "The arithmetic man."

"Equeuenomist."

"That's what I said." He turned. He looked pleasant and rested and entirely at ease. "Come to watch?"

"Come to watch," I said.

"Good. It's the last time anybody will watch it for the first time." He looked past me at Kalle. "Investigator Vakava. Did you bring your thresholds?"

"In my pocket," said Kalle, "with my apple."

S. Ya laughed. It was a nice laugh, a real one, and Lior's face eased a little, the way a child's eases when the grown-ups laugh. I thought, not for the first time and without knowing what I meant by it: he's waiting to be told it's all right.

#

At half past seven by the big clock, Hana came out of the small office at the end of the room where she'd been since five. The coun-

cillors stood up, and she said, "Sit down, please, nobody stands in here," and they sat.

The older of the two councillors, a broad, kind-faced man from QE called Ostrander, put up his hand like a schoolboy.

"Before we begin," he said. "I'm sorry. I know you've briefed the Concord. I've read it. I'd like to hear it once from you, plainly, so that when I'm asked I can say I heard it. What are we going to see?"

Hana looked at him. I'd learned that look by now. It was the look she gave to a question she'd decided was honest.

"All right," she said. "Once. Plainly." She turned to the screen and put her hand up, and it changed to a picture of the sun, very small, and a long way out from it a dot, and beside the dot two smaller dots. "Twenty-five times as far from the sun as we are. Out past Uranus. Two pairs of rings, one pair ours, one pair his. In each pair the rings are about as far apart as the Earth is from the sun."

"A hundred and fifty million kilometers," said Ostrander.

"About. Light takes eight minutes and twenty seconds to cross it. Today each team is going to try to open a throat between its two rings: a short way through, so that something can go in one ring and come out the other without crossing the space between. If it works, we send a probe in at one ring, the entry ring, and it comes out of the other, the exit ring. If it gets there in less than eight minutes, the throat was real." She paused. "If it comes out in less than one second, the throat was very good."

"And the size of the rings?"

"Matters more than the distance. That's the whole trick, and nobody believes it until they've done the equations. What it costs to hold a throat open goes with how wide it is, not how far it goes. A narrow door to the next room and a narrow door to Teegarden cost about the same. A wide door to anywhere costs a great deal." She nodded at the screen. "These rings are small. Big enough for a probe. The ones for the crossing will be enormous, and they will be the most resource-intensive thing anybody has ever made."

Ostrander wrote that down. Bettina, beside him, wrote it down too.

"And we'll see it happen?"

"No," said Hana. "That's the other thing nobody believes." She touched the screen and two numbers came up under the dots: 3 h 20 m, and 3 h 28 m. "That's how long the light takes to get here from the

rings. Whatever happens out there, happens. Then three and a half hours later we find out. Nobody in this room can do anything about it. Nobody in this room can stop it, or help it, or fix it. The rings run on their own. They've been told what to do and when, and they'll do it, and then they'll tell us what happened, and the telling will take three and a half hours to arrive."

"When?" said Ostrander.

"Ours opens at nine hundred hours in the schedule's frame. That's the clock." She pointed at the big clock over the door. It had two faces. One said station time. The other, a little smaller, said the schedule's time, a minute and fifty seconds ahead of it. That was the drift, Kalle whispered, between a clock sitting deep in the sun's pull, going round it at Earth's speed, and a clock that wasn't, and I remembered Hana at the panel table in May, saying *nobody tries to be clever about simultaneity*. "His opens at fourteen hundred. We hear about ours at about twelve twenty. His at seventeen twenty."

She started to turn away, and turned back.

"One more thing, Councillor, because you'll see it and think something's broken. We laid both pairs out on a line pointing back toward the sun, with the exit ring on the inside. The exit ring is nearer us by about the distance from the Earth to the sun. Its light gets here eight minutes before the entry ring's." She waited for him. "So we'll see the probe come out before we see it go in."

Ostrander looked at the two numbers on the screen for a long time.

"That's—"

"Allowed," said Hana. "Nothing's going backwards. It's two letters posted from two towns on the same morning, and one town is closer. Nobody's ever been able to watch it before, because nobody's ever had a door."

"Why lay them out that way round?"

"So that the first thing we hear," said Hana, "is the answer."

"So for three and a half hours," said Ostrander, slowly, "it will already have happened, and none of us will know."

"Yes."

"How do you stand it?"

Hana looked at him for a moment, and something went across her face that I hadn't seen there before and didn't see again.

"We drink tea," she said, and went back to her console.

#

At nine hundred hours in the schedule's frame, nothing happened.

Of course nothing happened. Everyone knew nothing would happen. The big clock turned over to 09:00:00 on its smaller face and the room went very quiet anyway, all forty consoles and the six at the back and the furniture along the wall. We all looked at the screen, where the dot that was the Lattice's rings sat exactly as it had sat since the winter, small and still and three and a half hours old.

Somewhere out past Uranus, at that moment, or at a moment the schedule had agreed to call that moment, the Lattice was opening or failing to open. And the light from it was setting out toward us, and would be on its way all morning, past Saturn and past Jupiter and through the belt and past Mars, while we sat in a curved room and drank tea.

"Well," said Kalle, very quietly. "That was something."

Somebody near the front laughed, and then several people did, and the room loosened.

#

It was the longest morning of my life, and I've sat in my office waiting for news of a death.

People did what people do when there's nothing to do. Hana's engineers ran checks on systems that didn't need checking, and argued in short sentences about telemetry formats, and went out in ones and twos and came back with more tea. The councillors talked to each other. Bettina wrote things down. The woman from the feed filmed the window. S. Ya's team, at the back, played some game on their slates that involved a great deal of muttering and occasionally a laugh, and S. Ya sat with his eyes closed.

Lior didn't play. He sat beside S. Ya with his slate on his knees and looked at it, and every few minutes he'd touch it to wake it up, and look again, and let it go dark.

I opened the panel file and didn't read it. I opened my messages.

There was one from Tushar, from the night before: *Big day tomorrow. Then the bigger one on Saturday. She's been practicing her answers to the panel in the mirror. She won't let me hear.*

There was nothing from Seren. The vigil had started on Tuesday. Third pipe. No signal. I'd known there wouldn't be anything. I looked anyway.

At ten, Kalle went to sleep against the wall. I'd stopped being surprised.

At eleven, I went out and walked the corridor, which curved up ahead of me and down behind me so that I was always at the bottom of a shallow valley, and the gravity, which here was spin and not the Earth, felt very slightly wrong in my knees. The station's real weight, Halvard had told me on the climber, was nearly nothing; we were thirty-six thousand kilometers out, falling around the Earth as fast as it turned. The wheel made the rest.

At noon I came back. People had stopped pretending to do things. Hana was standing behind her console with her arms folded.

At twelve twenty, someone at the front said, "Carrier. Exit ring."

#

It came in the way the important things do: as a line.

On the screen, under the dot, a thin line began to draw itself from left to right. The exit ring's telemetry, Kalle said in my ear, awake again as if he'd never been asleep. Power. For the first minute the line was flat, at the bottom of the scale, and then, slowly, it began to climb.

At twelve twenty-eight a second voice said, "Carrier. Entry ring," and a second line joined the first, eight minutes behind it, climbing the same slope. The same morning, arriving twice. I watched the two lines and had the feeling you get when an echo comes back off a building and you hear yourself say something you've already said.

It climbed for a long time. That was the Lattice: not a pulse, a building. The station's design wove the throat open a strand at a time, over the better part of half an hour, through a scaffold of fields between the rings that each held a little and handed the strain on to the next. You could see it in the line. It went up and up, steadily, past where any of the people around me seemed to think it would go, and kept going, until the number beside it was so large that Ostrander leaned over to Bettina and asked her to read it to him. She did. He said, "Is that a lot?" and three engineers in front of him said "Yes" without turning round.

"Throat," someone said. "Exit side. Throat is forming."

A third line, under the others. A narrow peak, rising.

Then, for twenty minutes, nothing but the lines, climbing together, and forty people breathing.

"Stable," said a woman in the second row. "Exit side holding stable. Holding."

Nobody said *probe away*. Nobody could. The probe was a box the size of a refrigerator, nothing in it but clocks and instruments and a transmitter, and it had been sitting a few kilometers off the entry ring for months, and the entry ring's light was still eight minutes behind.

Then the woman in the second row sat up very straight.

"Exit ring," she said. "Object. Exit ring reports an object leaving the throat. It's—" She stopped, and started again. "It's the probe. Probe out."

The room didn't make a sound.

"Out of what?" said Ostrander, into the silence, not loudly. "We haven't seen it go in."

"No," said Hana. Her hands were flat on the armrests of her chair. "Not for eight minutes."

Nobody alive had ever spent eight minutes like those. On the screen, from the nearer ring, the probe was through: out, whole, its clocks running, its transmitter calling home. And from the farther ring, a hundred and fifty million kilometers away, it was still sitting in the dark beside the entry ring, waiting for its motor. Both were true. Both were three hours old. We had the answer, and we were waiting for the question.

Somebody near the front laughed once, high and frightened, and stopped.

At twelve fifty-five the entry ring's light caught up. On its line a small motor fired. The probe drifted forward into the center of the ring, and went in.

The two clocks came up side by side on the screen, set in the schedule's frame, and under them the difference: *0.4 s.*

There's a sound forty people make when they've been holding their breath for a year, and I'm not going to try to describe it. Somebody was crying. Somebody had their arms round somebody else. One of the older engineers simply put his head down on his console and stayed there, and the woman next to him put her hand on his back and left it.

"Probe intact," said the woman in the second row, still flat, still calm, though her voice had gone a little high. "All systems nominal. Clocks agree. Probe intact."

Hana let go of her chair.

She didn't cheer. She looked at the screen for a long moment, at the two lines and the small number under them, and then she turned round and looked at the back wall, at the six consoles by the window, at S. Ya.

He'd opened his eyes. He was looking back at her. He inclined his head to her, very slightly, the courtesy of one craftsman to another, and she inclined hers back, and turned round again.

"Good," she said, to her people. "Write it down. All of it. Now power it down slowly, please, because I'd like to use those rings again."

#

They brought food at one. Nobody ate much.

The room felt different after. Lighter, and more crowded somehow, as if the probe had come back with company. Hana's people were laughing at things that weren't funny. The councillors had gone out to send messages. The woman from the feed had been allowed to film the screen, finally, and was doing it from every angle she could reach.

At the back, S. Ya's team had stopped playing their game.

I went to get tea and found myself beside Pell, who was waiting for the dispenser with a bulb in each hand.

"Congratulations," I said. "To the station, I mean."

"They earned it." He said it plainly. "All that draw, for all that time. More power in an hour than the whole of QL uses in a month. But it held." He filled one bulb, then the other. "Ours won't need any of that. Ours is one push. You'll see."

"I'm looking forward to it."

"You'll see," he said again, and went back to the window, and I watched him hand Lior a bulb and Lior take it without looking at it and hold it in both hands, the way he'd held his slate.

#

At fourteen hundred hours in the schedule's frame, the Converger opened, out past Uranus, and none of us knew.

The room went quiet again, but it was a different quiet. Not tense. Curious. People had seen one throat now. They knew what they were waiting for. Hana's engineers had their feet up. One of them was asleep. The councillors had come back and were eating, finally, sandwiches out of packets.

S. Ya stood at the window again, with his hands behind his back.

I sat beside Kalle against the wall.

"What happens," I said, quietly, "if it works better?"

"Then it works better," said Kalle. "And the station built a beautiful road and he built a beautiful door, and they'll build the door."

"And the panel?"

"The panel will have a much more interesting summer." He looked at me. "You wrote the sentence."

I hadn't told him. He'd been asleep. I'd put it in the draft, where only the two of us could see it.

"You read it."

"I read everything in that file. That's what a second is for." He looked across at S. Ya, small and still against the dark. "It's a good sentence. It's true."

"I know."

"Then why haven't you sent it?"

I didn't answer that. I didn't know the answer. Something to do with the dot on the screen, and with the three and a half hours, and with the fact that whatever had happened out there had already happened, and I wanted to know what it was before I put my name under anything.

At five o'clock Lior got up and went out. He came back ten minutes later with his face washed. Nobody said anything. S. Ya didn't turn round.

At seventeen twenty, someone at the front said, "Carrier. Exit ring."

#

The Converger's line didn't climb. It jumped.

That was the whole design, the thing the notice had called *a single, highly efficient pulse*. One instant the line was flat at the bottom of the scale. The next it was a spike, straight up, enormous, and then down again almost as fast, as if the rings had been struck once like a bell. Then the second line, the throat, rising under it, sharp and clean.

Everybody in the room leaned forward.

It was beautiful. I don't know how else to say it. Even I could see that it was beautiful. The station's throat had been built; this one had simply appeared, whole, the way a soap bubble appears at the end of

a wire, all at once and perfect. The throat line rose to a narrow peak and stood there.

"Throat," said the woman in the second row, softly, and for the first time that day she sounded as if she were enjoying herself. "Oh, that's very clean."

At the back of the room, Marta said something I didn't catch, and Iris laughed.

We all knew the order now. Nobody said *probe away*. We watched the exit ring and waited for it to tell us. The screens slowed every trace as it arrived, a second stretched to a minute, or none of us could have seen anything.

And the throat line moved.

It was a very small movement. A wobble at the top of the peak, as if the bubble had been breathed on. Then another, larger. Then the peak began to lean, slowly, to one side, and to drift.

Nobody said anything.

"Throat's walking," said a man in the first row. "Throat is walking. Losing coherence."

"Something's in it," said the woman in the second row. Not enjoying herself anymore.

At the back, someone had stood up. I didn't look to see who.

The throat line dropped, all at once, to the floor.

"Collapse," said the man in the first row.

The whole trace, in real time, had taken under three seconds. We watched it again, and that was when no one said anything.

Then, from the exit ring: *object detected.* The probe, coming out of a throat that had already fallen.

Then numbers, and more numbers, coming in faster than anybody could read them, and the woman in the second row reading them anyway, flat again, because that was her job. "Probe through. Probe tumbling. Heading off the axis, about four degrees. Shielding damage on the leading face. Two of six instrument packages dark. Transmitter up. Clocks up." A pause. "It's alive. It's off course and it's hurt, but it's alive. We can get it back."

Then we waited eight minutes for the entry ring to tell us how it had happened. We had seen the wound. We were waiting for the blow.

At seventeen twenty-eight the entry ring's light arrived. The throat jumped open on its line too, eight minutes late, clean and

perfect, and stood. The probe was already on its run, timed to arrive as the throat opened. In the very instant it crossed in, on the entry ring's own trace, the throat began to walk.

The clocks came up side by side: *1.7 s.*

And then, very quietly, the thing nobody in that room would ever say to S. Ya's face, though every one of them was thinking it: "Through in under two seconds. On one push."

#

I looked at the back of the room.

S. Ya was standing exactly where he'd stood all day, at the window, with his hands behind his back. His face hadn't changed. Not at all. He looked at the screen, at the dropped line and the tumbling probe and the four degrees, and his expression was the one he'd worn when he'd called me the arithmetic man: pleasant, interested, entirely at ease, the face of a man watching a demonstration go as he'd expected.

Marta had her hand over her mouth. Iris was staring at her console. Pell had sat down very suddenly, as if his knees had gone.

Lior had gone white. He looked at the screen, then at S. Ya, then at the screen again. He opened his mouth and closed it. Then he got up and walked out of the room, fast, with his slate held against his chest.

S. Ya let out a long breath. He looked at the door Lior had gone through for a long moment, and then back at the screen.

Hana stood up behind her console and looked at the screen for a long time. Then she turned round and looked at the back wall again, as she had that morning. S. Ya looked back at her. He inclined his head, just as before, the same small courtesy, as if nothing at all had changed.

Hana didn't incline hers. She looked at him a moment longer. Then she turned back to her people and said, in her ordinary voice, "Get that probe home, please. Carefully. I want to see what happened to it."

#

I went out to the corridor ten minutes later, for no reason except that the room had become impossible to breathe in.

Lior was there, a little way along, where the floor curved up, sitting on the floor against the wall with his knees drawn up and his

slate in his lap and his face in his hands. He was crying the way people cry when they don't want to be heard, all in the shoulders.

I stopped. He looked up. He saw who it was and his face did something complicated, and then he wiped it with the back of his wrist.

"I'm fine," he said.

"All right."

"It was supposed to hold. We ran it a thousand times. It held every time. It held every single time." He looked at the slate in his lap as if it had done something to him. "It doesn't walk. It's not supposed to walk. There's nothing in the design that walks."

I didn't know anything about throats. I stood in the corridor and didn't say anything, because I couldn't think of anything that wouldn't be a lie.

"He said it would hold," Lior said, more quietly. And then, as if he'd heard himself: "It was a good test. We got through in under two seconds. On one push. Nobody's ever done that." He stood up. "That's what matters. That's what we'll tell them."

He walked back toward the control room. At the door he stopped and straightened his back, pushed his hair off his face, and went in.

#

My eye chimed. Jinsia. He'd have been watching the feed, with the rest of the world, three and a half hours and change behind the rings and a few seconds behind us.

Well. Fuck.

And a minute later: *Are you all right? You looked like a ghost in the background of the shot. Third from the left by the door. Tell Kalle he's asleep in it.*

I wrote back: *I'm all right. He wasn't asleep. He was thinking.*

Same thing with Kalle. And then: *Half the commons is saying the station won. The other half is saying under two seconds on one push. Marisol says it isn't a race, it's a dipetō: two providers, and the city wins either way. Was it bad?*

I thought about it. I thought about Lior on the floor of the corridor. I thought about S. Ya at the window, with his hands behind his back, not turning round.

I don't know yet, I wrote. *Ask me when the probe's home.*

#

Kalle had a printout. He'd got it from somebody at the front: the Converger's telemetry from both rings, laid on one timeline in the schedule's frame the way none of us had been able to see it live, the spike and the peak and the wobble and the fall. Paper, because the station kept paper of every test, by the Founders' rule, and because the woman in the second row had looked at Kalle and at the panel badge on his shirt and decided he was the sort of person who ought to have one.

We looked at it together, in a corner of the room, while Hana's people talked in low voices and S. Ya's team packed up their consoles at the back without saying anything to each other at all.

I'm not a physicist. I can't read a throat. But I can read a line, and I'd spent most of my life reading lines in the Division. I looked at that one for a long time.

The wobble began at the top of the peak, at the very moment the probe went in. Not before. Not after. The throat had stood clean and steady for nine-tenths of a second, which Kalle said was longer than it needed to, and then, exactly as the probe crossed into it, it had begun to walk. And it had walked just far enough to throw the probe four degrees off and dent its face and darken two of its six packages, and not one hair farther. A ruined probe would have been a failure. A probe that sailed through clean would have been a victory. This was neither. This was a wound you could photograph.

"Huh," I said.

"What?"

I almost said it. I had the shape of it in my mouth. Then I heard how it would sound, in that room, on that day, to a man who'd just watched a young man cry in a corridor, and I made it into a joke instead.

"Even when it drops," I said, "it drops like somebody picked the spot."

Kalle looked at me for a moment. He didn't laugh.

"That's the nature of a resonant collapse," he said. "It fails at the point of greatest load. That's where the load is. It's the probe."

"Of course," I said.

"Of course," he said, and folded the printout in half, and then in half again, and put it in the pocket with his apple.

I let it go. I want that written down somewhere, since I'm the one writing. I had it in my hand, on the day, in the room, and I let it go.

Chapter 22

Friday, July 16 – Saturday, July 17, 172 (2202)

They got the probe steadied on Friday afternoon. A tug was already burning to meet it. It would have the probe home in eleven months.

The news feed had settled on its story by breakfast: *Station Drive Succeeds; Converger Opens, Fails to Hold.* The first half was true. The second half was true. The feed ran the Lattice's clean slow climb and the Converger's spike and fall side by side, over and over, and a commentator in QE said the word *beautiful* about the Converger so many times that Kalle turned the sound off.

S. Ya's team left on the noon climber. I watched them go from the corridor outside the dock. They went through in a line with their bags, not talking, Marta first and Pell last. S. Ya stopped at the hatch and shook Hana's hand, said something that made her nod once, and went in without looking back. Lior was second to last. He saw me and lifted his hand a few centimeters and let it fall.

The hatch closed. The climber let go of the station with a sound like a held breath let out, and dropped away toward the blue.

#

I didn't sleep on Friday night. Nobody had told me that the station never gets dark. Its corridors dim to a sort of dusk at twenty-two hundred, and the rim keeps turning. Every ninety seconds the sun comes round to the windows and goes away again. My cabin had a shutter. I lay behind it and listened to the station breathe and counted the sun going round by the change in the light under the door.

At one in the morning I gave up and went to the observation ring.

It was a slow ring inside the fast one, turning just enough to keep your feet on the floor, with a window that ran all the way round. Every few minutes the Earth came round, almost entirely dark, with a

thin bright edge along one side, and hung in the glass a while, and went on. Nobody else was there except Hana, sitting on the floor with her back against the glass and a tea bulb in her hand, looking at nothing.

"You too," she said.

"Me too."

I sat down a little way along the window. Below us, if below meant anything, the night side of the Earth was turning into view: dark, with a few smudges of light.

"Did you sleep after your first one?" I said. "Your first test."

"I've never slept after a test. I slept after the Leveling, I think. I don't remember." She drank. "I keep looking at his curve."

"So do I."

"Not like that." She turned the bulb in her fingers. "I keep looking at it and thinking, that's a resonant collapse, it fails at the point of greatest load, it fails when the probe goes in. That's textbook. Any student could tell you." She looked at me. "And then I think: he doesn't lose."

Outside the glass the Earth came round again and hung there.

"Nobody's ever seen him lose. Not once. Not in seventy years of publishing. Every hard problem my people had, he'd already written something next to it. I told you that in May." She put the bulb down on the floor beside her. "And yesterday he loses, on the biggest day there's ever been, by a margin you could photograph. And he stands there with his hands behind his back and nods at me as if I'd passed him the salt."

"People do lose," I said. "Even him. You said yourself, it's textbook."

"I know what I said."

"And there's a base rate." I heard my own voice change. It always does when I start counting; I've been told it gets slower and kinder, which isn't a compliment. "First full-scale tests of anything fail more often than they work. A single pulse is a harder thing to hold than a building. If you took every first test in the station's records and asked how often—"

I stopped.

I'd seen the curve again. Not on any screen. Behind my eyes, where I'd been seeing it all day: the clean peak, the wobble, the fall, and the probe coming through hurt and alive and four degrees off.

Not ruined. Not saved. Exactly enough. And I'd heard myself starting the argument that would make it not matter, the way I'd started it a hundred times in the Division for other people. I knew where it was going and how it would end, and that it would be true, and that I would believe it.

I didn't finish the sentence.

Hana was looking at me. She didn't say anything. She'd seen it. I don't know what she saw, exactly. A man stopping. A man who'd been about to say something sensible and had decided, quite deliberately, not to.

"Go on," she said.

"I—"

My eye chimed.

#

It was Ansel. It was ten past one on the station and ten past one in QL, and Ansel never wrote to me. He'd written twice, in a year, both times to tell me where a door was.

Seren is missing. Storm Wednesday night, the culverts flooded. Oskar was sitting at the mouth of the third pipe and the water drove him out. When it went down Thursday the pipe was empty. We thought she and Laszlo had got out together and gone to ground somewhere, and we waited. They found Laszlo this morning at the river outfall, a kilometer and a half down. He's in hospital. He's cold and he's confused and he can't say where she is. He keeps saying she went up. We've walked every pipe we can get into. The rangers have been in since noon. She dimmed for the vigil, so there's no signal. I'm sorry to send this up there. You'd want to know.

I read it twice. I don't remember reading it the second time.

"What is it?" said Hana.

"Somebody I know is missing." I stood up. I didn't know I was going to. "When's the next climber down?"

She looked at me for a moment longer. Then she touched her temple and looked at something I couldn't see.

"Six," she said. "Five days down. You'll be on the ground Thursday." She stood up too. "Go and pack. I'll tell the dock."

"The panel—"

"Your Investigator Vakava can witness the rest by himself. He's been asleep for most of it." She picked up her tea. At the door of the observation ring she stopped. "Dar?"

"Yes."

"I'd still like to hear the end of that sentence. When you've got time."

"I don't know how it ends."

"Yes, you do," said Hana Sokol, and went.

#

Kalle was awake when I knocked. He opened the door in a station robe two sizes too small, read Ansel's message on my slate without asking whose it was, and handed it back.

"Go," he said. "I'll sign for both of us. That's what a second is for."

"I'll be on the line the whole way down."

"You'll be on the line with whoever's looking for her. Not with me." He looked at me. "The seventeenth. That's today."

"I know."

"What time?"

"Two in the afternoon."

"You'll be on the climber."

"There's a feed. I can watch it from the climber." I'd already worked it out. I'd worked it out standing up in the observation ring before Hana had finished saying *six*. "The climber has a link the whole way down except for the belt. The belt's not till Sunday. I'll be watching."

Kalle nodded slowly. He didn't say anything. He's a kind man, under the jokes, and the kind thing just then was not to say anything, and he did it.

#

I wrote to Tushar at four, from my bunk, with my bag packed at the foot of it.

Something's happened to a friend. I'm coming down early, on the six o'clock. I'll be on the climber during the ceremony. There's a feed the whole way. I'll be watching. Tell her. Live, all two hours, as promised.

I didn't expect an answer. It was four in the morning in the Third Ring too. It came in under a minute.

She's awake. She's been awake since three. She says she knows you'll be watching, and she says what friend.

I looked at that for a while.

Someone from the summer, I wrote. *Tell her I'll explain.*

She says you always say that. And then, after a pause long enough that I thought it was the end: *Is it the one with the tattoos?*

I didn't answer. I put the slate face down on the blanket and lay there until the light under the door changed and it was time to go.

#

The climber let go of the station at six on Saturday morning. There were four of us in it: a couple going down to QS to have a baby, which you aren't allowed to do on the station, approved just before the freeze and in no hurry; a woman from the fabrication halls with her arm in a sleeve, crushed in a press, whom the station's clinic wanted in a proper hospital; and me.

The station drew away above us, a wheel of light in the black, and grew small. The frames of the fabrication halls became a scatter of bright sticks, and then a point.

Below us was the Earth: the blue plate, half in shadow, the size of a hand, getting larger.

Somewhere on it a culvert under an old highway was full of mud. A girl in the Third Ring was putting on the dress her mother had made her, and practicing her answers in the mirror for the last time.

I opened my slate and found the form I had spent the whole of the winter before last learning to fear.

Chapter 23

Saturday, July 17 – Thursday, July 22, 172 (2202)

The form was four screens long. I had seen it before only from the other side.

Request for location assistance: person not reachable. Name of the person. Last known location. Last contact. Relationship to the person. Reason for concern. Duration. A box at the bottom, the one the whole form existed to hold, where you asked a judge to open what the city would otherwise keep shut.

In the winter before last I had sat in an office in the Second Ring and watched a man in gray gloves explain to me, very slowly, that the city could find almost anyone, and that it almost never did, because the Charter said it mustn't unless someone asked properly and a stranger chosen by lot agreed. I had spent two weeks afraid of that sentence. Now I filled in the boxes as fast as my eye could move.

Relationship to the person. There was a list. *Kin. Household. Registered partner. Colleague. Other.*

I chose *Other*. The form asked me to say what kind of other.

I wrote *friend*, and looked at it, and sent it before I could change it.

The climber dropped. The cabin hummed. The couple going down to have their baby slept with their heads together. The woman with the crushed arm watched the Earth grow in the window with an expression of great patience. I watched the corner of my eye where the answer would come.

#

It came at ten past eight. Granted, by a judge whose name I didn't know and never would: a woman somewhere in QL who'd been doing something else that morning and had been handed my four screens and had read them and said yes.

At half past, Oren Tafuta called.

He looked exactly the same. A round, patient face, and the gloves, gray, folded one over the other in the bottom of the projection as if they were resting.

"Mr. Rax," he said. "I saw your name on the list and thought I'd take it myself. I hope you don't mind."

"No."

"You're on the climber."

"Coming down."

"Then I'll be brief, because you'll want to be doing something, and there's very little to do." He didn't look at a slate. He'd already read it. "Her last location is Tuesday, eighteen forty-two, at the north end of the yards, at the mouth of a drainage culvert under the old highway. Her signal goes dark there. Vital status as well. Nothing since."

"Dark isn't dead," I said.

"No. You know that better than most." He let that sit. "Dark is dark. Underground, or shielded, or turned off by choice, which is her right. If she'd died with her signal on, the city would have told her next of kin. She doesn't have it on. I can't tell you anything except that she walked into that pipe on Tuesday evening and the city hasn't heard from her since."

"Her next of kin."

"I can't tell you that, Mr. Rax."

"No. Of course."

"The rangers have the pipes. They've had them since Friday noon. I've asked Facilities for the old drainage plans and they've sent them, which is more than they'd do for me most weeks." The ghost of a smile. "I'll send them to you. I don't expect you'll find anything the rangers haven't. But you used to find things in your brother's notebooks that nobody else could."

"That was different."

"Was it?" He looked at me with his round, patient face. "I'll be at my desk all day. I won't be any use. Call me anyway."

The plans came a minute later. Four hundred pages, scanned from paper, TimBor-era, the lettering on them older than the city.

#

I read them the way I used to read records: all of it, in order, quickly, waiting for the place where something didn't fit.

The old highway had run north out of the city on an embankment, and under the embankment, every few hundred meters, the builders had put pipes for the water to pass through. Seven of them, at the north end. The third was the largest: concrete, two and a half meters high, running a kilometer and a half west under the embankment and the old interchange, and then down a long slope to the river. The outfall where they'd found Laszlo was at the bottom of it.

At ten I wrote to Ansel. *I have the plans. Where have you searched?*

He answered quickly. *All seven pipes, end to end, twice. The rangers have done them three times. Mud to the knees in the third, still running in the middle. Nothing. No pack, no lamp, no her. Laszlo still says she went up. The doctors say he's confused. He gets upset when they say it.*

Up where?

He doesn't say. He says up, and then he cries.

I went back to the plans.

#

At one o'clock I set the feed.

The city's Affirmation was in the old music hall at the edge of the civic core, and it began at two. The feed opened on an empty stage with a long table on it, and rows of chairs below, filling. Families. I looked for Tushar and found her in the fourth row, in green, sitting very straight. Jinsia beside her, a head taller than anyone in the row, with Marisol. Imani. An empty chair on the aisle that someone had put a folded program on.

I made it larger, in the left half of my sight, and kept the plans in the right.

The woman with the crushed arm saw what I was doing.

"Your daughter?" she said.

"No."

She nodded as if that answered something, and went back to the window.

#

They began with the Charter. They always do. A teacher from the cohort's school read the clause the whole ceremony hangs on, in a clear, carrying voice: *No commitment shall bind forever without being asked again.* Then the city's cohort came in, twenty-two of them, in a line, in the clothes their families had made them, and sat in the front row with their backs to their families. I saw the back of Pallavi's head,

her hair put up in a way I'd never seen, and the violin case under her chair, because she was playing at the end.

The panel came in after them. Three people at the long table. The first name was called.

Ansel wrote: *Rangers stopping the pipes for now. Rain again this afternoon. They don't want to lose anyone else.*

I looked at the plans.

The third pipe. A kilometer and a half. I'd been through it three times since ten o'clock, page by page, and I went through it again, because there was nothing else to do. A section drawing, showing the concrete in cross-section, the trickle channel along the bottom. A plan view, every joint numbered. The side drains, eleven of them, little pipes coming in from the left. And at the seven-hundred-meter mark, on the plan view, a square drawn in the margin with a cross in it, and three characters in the old lettering that I had read four times without reading.

P.S. 3.

On the feed, a boy at the table was answering a question about the Concord. His voice was shaking. His family was leaning forward in their row.

Pump station three. The old interchange had sat in a dip, and in TimBor the water that pooled under it had to be lifted out. The pumps had gone to the yards long ago. The room would still be there.

And then it wasn't the plans I was seeing. It was a basement in July, and a lamp, and the smell of apricots, and Laszlo lying on his back on a mat talking to the ceiling. *If it rains you go up the iron rungs to the old pump room, halfway along, and sit it out. Dry as a church.*

I had written it down. That night, at home, in the notebook, under the blank where the dimming's score should have been. *L.: 3rd pipe driest. Pump room halfway, up the rungs, if it rains.* I'd written it because I write everything down. It was the one thing the Rozkosz asked of anyone: nobody writes it down. I'd done it anyway, and been a little ashamed, and turned the page.

She went up.

I called Ansel.

#

He answered on the second chime, out of breath.

"There's a pump room," I said. "In the third pipe. Seven hundred

meters in from the mouth. There's a shaft going up from the roof of the pipe with rungs in the wall. Laszlo told me about it last summer. Up is the pump room."

There was a silence. I could hear rain on something.

"We walked under the whole length of that pipe," he said. "Three times."

"Did anyone look up?"

Another silence. Longer.

"Where are you?"

"The outfall. With two of the rangers."

"Go to the mouth of the third pipe. The top end. Take a ranger. Take a light and something to break a hatch."

"Dar, we'll lose signal the minute we're in."

"Do the rangers have repeaters?"

I heard him ask. I heard a woman's voice say something short, and a rustle, and Ansel came back. "She's got a bag of them. Beads. You drop one every fifty meters."

"Then drop them. I'll talk you in."

#

It took him twenty minutes to get to the top end of the pipe. On the feed, nine names had been called. Nine young people had stood up in front of three strangers and answered what the Charter asks. Each had been asked again and had said yes. Then each had gone to the side of the stage where the clinic's table was, sat, and rolled up a sleeve.

GERAS goes in at the Affirmation. That's the whole of it, under the music. A small cold patch on the inside of the arm, and a minute of sitting still, and then the rest of your life, as long as you want it. My own Affirmation had nothing like that in it; nobody's did, then. I had the Leveling, at fifty-six, in a line around a school gymnasium with everyone else who was alive that year, and I remember being terrified and proud and wanting very badly to go home.

"I'm at the mouth," Ansel said. "Going in."

I shrank the feed to a corner. I opened the plan of the third pipe as large as it would go, and put a dot on it where his signal was, and watched it move.

"Dropping a bead," he said. "Dropping. Fifty meters."

The dot moved. I could hear him breathing, and his boots in the water, and the hollow ring that a voice gets inside concrete. The ranger with him said something about the mud.

"There's a side drain coming in on your left at a hundred and twenty," I said. "Small. A meter high. Tell me when you pass it."

"Passing it."

"The next is at two hundred and ten."

"Passing it. Dropping."

It went on like that. I read him the side drains one after another off the old plan, and he called them back to me as he passed them, and dropped his beads, and the dot crept along the pipe. Somewhere around the fourth drain the ranger stopped him and they argued about the water, which was coming up again, and Ansel said, very calmly, "We go on," and they went on.

On the feed, in the corner of my eye, someone was playing a short piece on a flute. I didn't look.

"Six hundred and forty," I said. "Sixty more. It'll be above you. A square opening in the roof of the pipe, maybe less than a meter. Rungs in the side of the pipe going up into it."

"I can't see anything. Just the roof."

"Keep going."

"Six-eighty. Seven hundred. There's nothing, Dar, it's just concrete—" He stopped.

"Ansel."

"Wait."

I heard the ranger say something, sharp. I heard Ansel's light move: a scrape, a grunt, a long breath.

"It's here," he said. "Up in the roof. The flood's jammed branches and rubbish into the mouth of it. From the floor it just looks like more roof. There are rungs in the wall going up into it, and a hatch at the top, iron, I can see it in the lamp. It's—there's mud on the rungs. Fresh mud. Somebody's been up them."

"Go up."

#

I don't know how long it took. My notes say eleven minutes. The hatch was stiff with rust. Somebody had shoved it open from below on Wednesday night with the water rising, and it had dropped back down and stuck, and you couldn't lift it from below now without a

bar. The ranger had a bar. I listened to them use it. I listened to iron scream on iron, and Ansel swearing, which I'd never heard him do, and a bang like a door slammed in an empty building.

Then nothing at all.

"Ansel."

Nothing.

"Ansel."

The dot on my plan had stopped moving. I watched it. The repeaters were holding: I could still hear the room he was in, a dry, dead sound, different from the pipe. I could hear his breathing. Somebody else's.

"She's here," he said.

I couldn't speak.

"She's here. She's alive. She's—" Something between a laugh and something else. "She's swearing at me. She's telling me I took my time."

I put my hand over my eyes. In the dark behind it the feed went on, a small bright square, and somebody was applauding.

"She's hurt her leg," Ansel said, a little later, steadier. "On the rungs, Wednesday night, going up. Her ankle. She couldn't get down again. She shouted the first night. After that she was too cold to shout. Nobody heard. There's a pipe from the old pumps that comes up in here, it's dry, she's been drinking from the rain coming in at the vent." Then, quieter, not to me: "It's all right. It's all right. We've got you." Then to me again: "She wants to know how you knew."

"Tell her Laszlo told me."

He told her. I heard her voice, a long way off, hoarse. I couldn't hear the words.

"She says Laszlo told everyone," said Ansel. "She says you're the only one who wrote it down."

#

The rangers took her out on a stretcher through the hatch and down the pipe and out of the top end, with the rain coming down outside and the light going. Ansel stayed on the line the whole way. I stayed on it. When they came out into the air his signal came back properly and his voice got sharp and clear and close again. I heard the medics, and the doors of the craft, and somebody saying *temperature* and somebody saying *ankle* and somebody saying, in a tone I

didn't like, *old break, this, look at the swelling, two days at least*. Then the doors, and the craft lifting, and Ansel standing in the rain at the end of the old highway saying, "Dar? Dar. You can go now. She's going in. I'm going with her. You can go."

I took my hand away from my eyes.

The feed was still in the corner of my sight. I opened it.

It was the end. The cohort was standing on the stage in a line, all twenty-two of them, with their sleeves rolled down again, and the families on their feet below them, and the applause going on and on. Somebody had given them flowers. There was a girl in the middle of the line with her hair put up and a violin under one arm and a bunch of yellow flowers in the other, and she wasn't looking at the families or the panel or the people beside her. She was looking at the camera. Straight into it, the way you'd look at a person you'd been told would be there.

Then she looked away, and the feed ended.

It was eleven minutes past four.

#

I don't remember much about the rest of Saturday. The climber went on dropping. The woman with the crushed arm made me eat something. At some point I sent a message to Tushar. I don't know what it said; I deleted it afterward, because I couldn't stand to have it. It was long. It explained.

She didn't answer that night.

At noon on Sunday the red light came on, and we went into the shelter for the outer belt, and the link went, and for the next two days there was nothing: the four of us in the padded room, the couple with their baby still inside her talking quietly about names, the woman with the arm asleep with her face to the wall. I lay in the red light and didn't count anything.

When we came out on the Tuesday morning there was one message. It had been sent on Sunday afternoon, after the belt had cut us off, and had waited for us.

Tushar.

She looked for you after. On the feed, in the replay, at the end, every face in the window. She told me she knew you'd been watching. She said you'd promised properly. I didn't tell her. You will.

#

The climber came down onto the platform on Thursday morning, at first light, over a sea so blue it looked painted. I took the first flight north and was in the city by the middle of the afternoon.

I went to the hospital before I went home.

She was in a room on the third floor of the hospital on the first foothill, the same building where I'd lain for six days in March. Ansel was in the corridor, asleep in a chair. I didn't wake him.

She was asleep too. Her face was gray against the pillow, and thinner, and there was a scrape along her jaw that someone had cleaned and left open to the air. Her hair had grown out a little since the tower, and the nap of it was dark on the pillow. Her left leg was in a sleeve from the knee down, pulsing slowly, humming against the sheet. Beside the bed was a chair, and on the chair was a jacket I recognized, Laszlo's, folded.

I sat down in the other chair and looked at her.

After a while a clinician came in, a slight man with a slate. He checked the sleeve, and the readings over the bed, and made a note.

"How long?" I said. "Till she walks."

He looked at the readings again. He was very careful with his face.

"It'll be slower," he said, "in her case."

"Slower than what?"

He looked at me then, and at her, and back at me. I'd seen that look from the other side of a desk. It was the look of someone who knows a thing he's not allowed to say and is waiting to see whether you'll make him say it.

"You'd have to ask her," he said, and went out.

I sat there. Outside the courtyard window it was getting toward evening, and the light came in long and gold across the bed and lay on her hand, which was outside the blanket, palm up. The skin on the inside of her wrist was crossed with scratches from the rungs. Small ones. The kind of scratch that in this city is gone by the next morning.

These were eight days old. They were still there.

I looked at them for a long time. Then I took her hand, carefully, so as not to wake her, and held it, and didn't let myself think anything at all.

Chapter 24

Friday, August 6 – Saturday, August 7, 172 (2202)

I had a week of leave owed from the climb. It began on the first of August. On the sixth, at two in the morning, I sat down at my desk and stopped not knowing.

I did it the only way I know. I took the notebook out of the drawer, the one with the scores in it, the one nobody was supposed to keep. I turned to a clean page, and wrote down everything I had seen in a year and decided not to look at. One line each. Dates where I had them.

Feb 13: the bout. Elbow to the forearm.

Mar 6: the tower. The same bruise, three weeks on. Yellow at the edges.

Her hair, shorter every month since the New Year.

The Lull, and into January: away. "Family business." She has never once mentioned a family.

Dec 9, the roof: "You don't have to be old to die." The Institute for Meaning: "I've been trying to for a year."

The arm: hourglasses, a clock with no hands, a skull, flowers for a grave.

Laszlo. Forty years without it. His thin shoulders. His hands.

Jul 17: "Old break, two days at least." It was three days.

Jul 22: "Slower, in her case." Scratches from the rungs, eight days old.

I looked at the list. It was nine lines long. Any first-year analyst at the Division could have read it in a minute and told me what it said. I had been an analyst at the Division for most of a century, and I had read every line of it, one at a time, as it happened, and filed each one somewhere I wouldn't find it.

Then I opened the Charter and looked up the process, which I'd never needed to know, and learned it.

An application, through the household liaison. No reason required. An offered conversation at the Institute for Meaning, which you may refuse, and which most people attend only to argue. An

evaluation of competence by strangers. A year of waiting, with the right to change your mind at any minute of it. A single treatment. Nothing happens that day. Afterward, a cut heals at the speed cuts healed for the whole of human history before the Leveling, which in this city looks like a wound that won't close.

A year of waiting, and a treatment sometime over the Lull. Count back a year, and a little more, for the Institute, and the evaluation.

She'd applied in the autumn of 170. Before the snow. Before she'd ever seen me.

I closed the notebook and sat there until the skylight went gray.

#

She was expecting me. I could tell from the door.

Her room in the Eleventh Ring was as it always was: the bed on the floor, the lamp under its red cloth, the skylight, the smell of oil and cold stone. She was sitting on the bed with her back to the wall and her left leg out in front of her in its sleeve, humming faintly, with a stick beside her. Three weeks since the pipe. If it was anybody else in the city the sleeve would have been off in a week.

"You worked it out," she said.

"I stopped not working it out."

"That's not the same."

"No," I said. "It's worse."

I sat on the floor across from her, against the other wall, the way I'd sat the night in March when I couldn't do what she asked. The lamp was between us.

"How long have you known?" she said.

"A year. I knew in March, at the top of the tower. I knew in February. I think I knew in June, when Laszlo told me about the dog and I looked at your arm." I heard my voice. It was steady. "I'm good at this. It's the one thing I'm good at. I decided not to be."

"Why?"

"Because if I knew it, I'd have to say something. And if I said something, you'd go."

She looked at me for a while. Her face had always been still. It was still now, but there was something under it that moved.

"I'd have stayed," she said. "I'd have been angry. I'd have stayed."

"I didn't know that."

"No. You didn't ask." She pulled her right knee up and put her arms round it. "Ask now."

#

"Why?" I said.

She didn't do why. Laszlo had told me so, my first night at the Low. She didn't do it now, either, not the way I meant. She did something else. She took it apart for me, piece by piece, the way you'd take apart an engine for someone who'd asked how it ran.

"Start with this," she said. "A choice is only real if it costs you something you can't get back."

"That's not true. I choose eggs over porridge. That's a choice."

"That's a preference. Tomorrow you'll have porridge. Nothing's lost." She shook her head. "A real choice shuts a door. You choose one thing and the other thing is gone, and you'll never know what it would have been. That's what makes it weigh anything. If every door stays open, nothing you walk through counts."

"All right."

"All right?"

"I'll give you that one," I said. "For now."

"Second, then. Without an end, nothing costs anything you can't get back." She held up two fingers. "You don't like your work, you change it. In ninety years you can change it back. You don't like your partner, you stop, kindly, and in two hundred years you might start again. You don't learn the violin this decade, there's next decade. And the one after. And the one after that. Every door in this city stays open forever. That's what GERAS is. It's the end of the door that shuts."

"People still lose things."

"Do they?"

"Pallavi's father left. That shut."

"Did it? He's somewhere. He could come back tomorrow. In a hundred years he probably will, and they'll have tea." She tilted her head. "Name something in this city that's truly gone. That you can't ever get back, no matter how long you wait."

I thought about it.

"My sister," I said.

She didn't say anything for a moment. Then, gently: "Yes. That's the only kind there is. And how often does that happen here?"

"Almost never."

"Almost never." She let it sit. "Third. So in a life without an end, nothing you choose is real. It's all porridge. It's all next decade. It's—" she smiled, a little, not happily "—it's paperwork, Dar. You told me so yourself. You can't own anyone's choices. You can only fill in the parts that somebody left blank. That's not just you. That's the whole city. Everything anyone does here is filling in a form that never closes, because there's always more time to fill in the rest."

I opened my mouth, and she held up her hand.

I knew that argument. I'd seen it in a hundred files without its clothes on. An option you can exercise forever is worth nothing as a commitment. It was the soundest piece of equeuenomics I'd heard all year, and she'd never read a word of equeuenomics in her life.

"Fourth. I wanted my choices to be real. Not interesting. Not intense. I don't need intensity, I can get intensity on a tower at midnight. Real. Doors that shut." She put her hand down. "So I chose an end. Not now. Not in the pipe, whatever Ansel's afraid of. Nobody went down there to die. We went down there to sit in the dark for three nights and know that we could, and the rain came, and it would have come for anyone. The only difference is my ankle hadn't set in three days, and I couldn't get down the rungs." She looked at the sleeve. "I chose an ordinary life. Forty years. Fifty, if I'm careful, and I'm not very careful. The same life everyone had, for the whole of history, until seventy years ago."

"You chose to die."

"Everyone before the Leveling chose to die, in that sense. They chose it by being born." She shrugged. "I chose to be born, a bit late."

#

I tried.

What happened next was that I lost, and I'd like it known that I tried first. I'd spent a hundred years arguing with people across tables for a living. I knew how to find the soft place in a case.

"Love's real," I said. "People here love each other. That's not paperwork. Tushar and Pallavi aren't paperwork. Jinsia's waited a year and a half for a child with Marisol, and he'll wait years more, and he'd go into a burning building for either of them."

"Yes," said Seren. "And why does love work here, when nothing

else does?"

"Tell me."

"Because it's the one thing in this city that can still end. People leave. Laszlo's woman stopped, kindly. Pallavi's father left. You can lose someone you love here, really lose them, for a hundred years. It's the only door left in the whole city that shuts by itself." She leaned forward. "It's not an argument against me, Dar. It's my argument. The only thing that still works here is the only thing that's still mortal."

"You could have waited," I said. "You've got all the time there is. Five hundred years from now you could still do it. Why now?"

She laughed. It was a real laugh, short and surprised.

"Listen to what you just said."

I heard it.

"That's the whole trap," she said. "That's exactly the trap. *Later.* Later is what this city is made of. Later is a door that never shuts, so you never walk through it." She shook her head. "If I'd waited, I'd have waited forever. Everybody does. That's not a guess. Look at the numbers. You're the man with the numbers."

I knew the numbers. A few hundred a year, in a population of millions. Published only in aggregate, so that nobody could be thanked.

"And the people who'd lose you," I said. It came out smaller than I meant.

"Who?"

I didn't answer that.

She looked at me for a long moment. Then she said, very quietly, "I filed the application in October, Dar. In 170. You came into the snow in February. You weren't a reason. You weren't any part of it. You were the year I waited." She put her chin on her knee. "You were a very good year."

"Who knew?" I said.

"Knew what?"

"Before me."

She didn't look away. She never did, when it would have been easier.

"Laszlo. Ansel. Rue sat with me at the evaluation; you're allowed one person, and it has to be someone sober who isn't family. Bram guessed in the spring. Ines. Oskar, I think, from the bruise." She paused. "Everyone who was near me, Dar. You were near me too."

That was the worst of it. Not the choice. The list. Every one of them had sat at the table at the feast, and in the basement, and on the roof at Founding. Every one of them had known, and watched me not know, and been kind about it. I had spent a hundred years being the man in the room who'd already seen it. I had been the last.

"You could have told me."

"I nearly did. On the roof, at Founding. And in March, the night you couldn't decide anything." She turned her head against the wall. "Then I'd watch you not look. You were so careful not to look. I thought you'd earned the right to find it yourself."

"Tell me about the evaluation."

"Two strangers in a room in the Fifth Ring, with water and a list." Her mouth moved. "They don't ask why. They're not allowed. They ask whether you understand what you're choosing, and whether you'll still be choosing it next week, and they ask it six different ways to see if the answer changes. Mine didn't." She looked at the sleeve on her leg. "They paused me once. In March, a month after the snow. I came in with a concussion from a bout and they said an acute condition stops the clock, and sent me home for three weeks. That's why it was January and not December." A small laugh. "Three weeks I didn't want. I nearly wrote to you, in them. I didn't."

#

"What did he ask you?" I said. "At the Institute. The man who wouldn't argue back."

She looked at the lamp.

"I'd gone in to win," she said. "I'd argued with three of them already, and won, and I was bored. He let me talk for an hour. He didn't say anything. When I'd finished he poured me more tea and asked me what I was saving myself for."

The question sat between us on the floor, next to the lamp.

"I couldn't answer it. I'd had a whole long life by then, and I'd never once thought about it. I'd assumed there was something. Some reason all of it was being kept. Everybody assumes that. Nobody looks." She turned her head and looked at me. "I went home and looked. There wasn't anything. There was just more. So I stopped saving."

The lamp ticked as it warmed. Outside, somewhere in the yards, someone was hammering metal, slowly, an even stroke.

"Your turn," she said. "Tell me why I'm wrong."

I sat against the wall and looked for it. The soft place. I went through her four steps one at a time, the way I'd go through a report, and every one of them held. I looked for the counterexample, the one case that would break it, and the only case I could find was my sister, and my sister was her case, not mine.

And underneath the looking, I found something else, and it was worse than not finding the soft place. It was this: I was trying to argue her back into a forever I didn't have a reason for either.

What was I saving myself for?

I'd never asked. A hundred and twenty-eight years, and I'd never once asked. There was the work, which I'd loved, and which had stopped loving me back. There was the panel, which would end in December. There was a girl in the Third Ring I'd failed on the most important day of her life, and her mother, who hadn't looked at me since that failure. There was next week, and the week after. I had any number of reasons for next week. I didn't have one for the next thousand years. I'd assumed, the way everybody assumes, that it would arrive when it was needed.

"I can't," I said.

"Can't what?"

"Tell you why you're wrong. You're not." I heard it as I said it and didn't take it back. "I don't have a reason to live forever either. I've got reasons for next week. That's all anybody's got, I think. We just don't look."

She didn't say anything for a long time.

"That's the most honest thing you've ever said to me," she said at last.

"It's not an answer."

"No. It's better." She held out her hand. I got up, crossed the floor and knelt by the bed. She put her hand flat against my chest, the way Ansel had in the stairwell of the tower. "You've been happy this year, haven't you? Underneath all of it."

"Yes."

"Why?"

I thought about the notebook, and the list, and nine lines I'd read one at a time and filed where I wouldn't find them.

"There is nothing so good for happiness," I said, "as self-deceit."

She smiled at that. Then she took her hand away.

#

I didn't sleep there. I didn't go home either. I walked the yards in the dark for an hour, among the piles of reclaimed steel and the long sheds and the ruin of the old stump. At about half past four, with the sky going pale over the prairie, I found Laszlo.

He was sitting on a slab of concrete at the edge of the yards, wrapped in a blanket, looking east. He'd been out of the hospital for a week. He looked older than he had in June. He was older than he'd been in June; it was the only thing about him that was certain.

"She told you," he said, without looking round.

"I told her."

"Better." He patted the concrete beside him, as he'd patted the car seat at the Low, fourteen months before. I sat.

"She saved my life," he said. "In the pipe. You know that? The water came up fast. Faster than it ever has. She got to the rungs and got her hand in my collar and held on. I was too heavy and too old, and the water took me anyway. She held on until it was her or me." He watched the sky. "Then she let go. That was the right thing. I told her so. She didn't believe me."

"You kept saying she went up."

"She did. She was the only one of us who knew what to do. She went up, and I went down, and here we both are." He smiled at the horizon. "People think we go down there to die. We go down there to know we're alive. It's not the same, though I don't blame anyone who can't tell the difference from outside."

There was a tree beside the slab, an old cottonwood growing out of a crack in the yards where nobody had planted it. Half of it was dead. The big limbs on the west side were bare and gray and split, stripped by some winter long ago, the bark gone and the wood bleached silver. Out of the dead limbs, here and there, out of the old wood itself, there were shoots coming up: thin, green, a summer's worth, with leaves on them that moved in the wind off the prairie.

Laszlo saw me looking at it.

"That's me," he said. "That tree. I die a little every day." He pulled the blanket tighter. "And I don't stop fighting to live. Not for one minute of one day. That's the part nobody understands. They think it's one or the other."

The sun came up over the edge of the world. The light came across the yards and lit the tree, the dead limbs and the green ones together.

It lit Laszlo's face, every line of it, and lit my hands on the concrete, which looked exactly as they had looked for seventy years and would look for seventy more, if I wanted them to.

I didn't know, that morning, whether I wanted them to. It was the first time in my life I'd wondered.

It didn't frighten me as much as I'd have thought. I sat there with Laszlo and watched the light come, and for the first time in a year I wasn't counting anything at all.

Chapter 25

Tuesday, September 14, 172 (2202)

The technical review published its finding on Monday at noon, and by Monday at one the whole of Q knew what it said, because it said it in the first line.

The Review recommends the Lattice.

The rest was forty pages long and I read all of it that night. It was fair. It was more than fair to the Converger: it called the single-pulse opening *the most elegant result in the history of the field* and the throat it made *cleaner than any yet observed*, and then, on page nine, it said in four flat sentences that a throat which walks under load cannot be trusted with fifty thousand people, and that the Lattice's throat had not walked.

On Monday evening S. Ya posted a statement. It was three lines long.

The Review is right. The station built the better drive. Congratulations to Hana Sokol and her people. They earned it.

And on Tuesday morning, before breakfast, he published a paper.

I didn't understand it. Kalle did, or said he did, and read it standing up in the panel room with his coat still on, making small noises. It was twenty pages on the Lattice's power curve: the enormous draw Hana's scaffold needed to build the throat and hold it, the cost the whole station had been worrying at for a decade. S. Ya had found a way to stage the scaffold so that it drew a fraction of that. A tenth of the power, for the same throat. He'd written it, Kalle said, as if he'd been thinking about it for years.

"Over the weekend?" I said.

"It's dated Sunday." Kalle put the slate down. "The review came out Monday. He fixed the winner the day before anyone told him who'd won." He thought about it. "Well. He'd seen the test. We all

had. That's either the most generous thing I've ever seen or the most terrifying, and I can't tell which."

At half past eight a message came from the station.

He's fixed my power curve, wrote Hana. *Over a weekend. I want to be grateful and I'm working on it.*

That was all. She didn't mention the sentence I hadn't finished. Neither did I.

#

The review had one more thing to ask, and it asked the panel.

It came in a formal request at nine, on the Concord's letterhead, and Kalle read it out to the five of us round the table. Nadia with her hands flat. Dorit with her pencil. Kwabena with a loaf in a cloth that he set in the middle of the table, as he had at every meeting since January, and that nobody ever cut until the end.

The review's analysts had traced the Converger's failure back through the telemetry, as far as telemetry can take you. The walk had started in one place. Ring B, the far ring of the pair, in the throat-forming array, at plate seventeen. Everything that came after had started there.

The Review notes that the Attestation Panel holds the Converger team's fitting record. The Review asks the Panel to attest, from that record, the fitting history of Ring B, plate 17.

"They want to know who," said Dorit.

"They want to know what happened," said Kalle.

"Same thing," said Nadia, "when it's a plate."

I went and got the ledger.

#

It had lived in my office for a year, in a drawer, because Marta had said it wasn't theirs to keep. I'd read it twice, cover to cover, the first week, and gone back to it a dozen times since. Six years of the twelve's work in Marta's round, careful hand, and Pell's slanting one, and Iris's, which was so small you needed a magnifying glass. Date, task, hands, measure, sign. Every plate. Every fitting. Every test.

The flight hardware had been fitted in the spring of 170, in the hall at the yards, before each ring went up the elevator whole. I found Ring B in March. I found the throat array. I went down the column with my finger.

Mar 3, 170. Ring B, throat array, plate 17. Fit (3rd). Hands: M., I., L. Measure: 0.38 / tol. 0.40. Sign: L.

And in the margin beside it, in Marta's hand, smaller than the rest, in pencil: *late. M. tired.*

I read it three times. I'd seen it before. I remembered seeing it, a year ago in August, in a workshop under a meadow, and turning the page. Then I turned the ledger round on the table so the others could see it, and put my finger beside the line, and didn't say anything.

They read it. Dorit read it twice, with her lips moving. Kwabena put his hand flat on the table beside the loaf.

"Thirty-eight against a tolerance of forty," said Kalle quietly. "Inside."

"Just," said Nadia.

"Third fit," said Dorit. "They'd done it three times."

"Late," said Kwabena. "Tired."

I sat back in my chair. I was thinking of a workshop under a meadow in the First Ring, a year ago in August, and a plate going on and coming off and going on again, and a pleasant voice from the far end of the room saying *Take it off and do it again*. And the same voice, afterward, over a cup he didn't drink from: *Marta's got a two-millimeter tremor in her left hand when she's tired, and the assists don't.*

I said it out loud. I hadn't meant to. I told them what he'd said.

Nobody said anything for a while.

"He knew," said Dorit. "That she shook when she was tired."

"Everybody on that team knew," said Kalle. "That's the point of doing it by hand. You know who shakes. You make allowances." He looked at the ledger. "Or you don't. Late. Third fit. The plate's inside the line, just. Somebody wants to go home. Somebody signs."

"L.," said Nadia.

"Lior," I said.

#

We asked them to come in. All of them, or whoever wanted to. It was the rule: nobody attests alone, and nobody is attested about without being in the room.

Four of them came at two. Marta, Pell, Iris, and Lior. S. Ya didn't. He sent a note, which Pell handed to Kalle at the door and Kalle read and put face down on the table: *I'll accept whatever the Panel finds. I'd*

ask you to remember that every plate on that ring was fitted by the best hands I've ever worked with.

They sat in a row along one side of the table, across from us, the way the families sit at an Affirmation. I put the ledger in the middle and turned it to March and showed them the line.

Marta looked at it for a long time. She touched the pencil note in the margin, her own writing, very lightly, with one finger, as if it might come off.

"I remember that night," she said. "We'd been at it fourteen hours. I was shaking. I said so. I wrote it down so somebody would know I'd said so."

"Who signed?" said Kalle, though it was there in front of him.

"I did," said Lior.

He said it at once. He didn't look at the ledger. He was looking at me.

"It was the third fit. It measured inside. I looked at it and it was inside and I wanted it to be done, and I signed it." His voice was quite steady. "I was going to ask him to check it in the morning. He always checks. I told him I'd checked it myself. He asked me if it was right, and I said yes."

"Lior—" said Pell.

"It was me." Lior turned to him. "I said yes. He believed me. Why wouldn't he?" He looked back at the table, at all five of us. "That's what happened. That's the plate. I'll sign whatever you want me to sign."

I watched his face while he said it. I've watched a great many people take a great many blames across a great many desks, and most of them do it with their whole body braced, the way you'd hold a door against wind. Lior wasn't braced. His shoulders had come down. His hands were still on the table for the first time since he'd come in. He looked, more than anything, like someone who'd been carrying a box with no handles for two months and had just been shown where to put it down.

He was relieved. He'd been lying in the dark since July asking how a throat that held a thousand times could walk on the day, and now there was an answer, and it had his initial on it, and that was better than no answer at all.

"Thank you," said Kalle gently. "That's all we need."

Marta put her hand on Lior's arm. Pell looked at the ledger, then

at the face-down note, then at the ledger again. He opened his mouth, and shut it.

They went out. Lior went last. At the door he turned, as if he meant to say something to me, and didn't, and went.

#

We wrote it up that afternoon. It took two hours. It was the easiest thing the panel had done all year.

Only one question came up while we wrote, and it was Dorit's. She'd been turning the ledger's pages while the rest of us argued about commas. "He isn't in the hands column," she said. "Not once. Six years. The man with the biggest share."

"He checks," said Kalle. "Mathematics doesn't go in a ledger."

Dorit wrote that down too. She underlined it once, not twice.

The Panel attests, from the Converger team's fitting record, that Ring B, plate 17, was fitted on the third attempt late on 3 March 170, measured within tolerance at its outer margin, and signed off by one team member without the customary second check. The team member has confirmed the record. The Panel makes no finding of negligence. The Panel notes that fitting by hand, which this team chose throughout on principle, carries a human variance that machine fitting would not.

Dorit read it back. Nobody changed a word. Kalle sent it to the review at ten past four, and at a quarter to five the review wrote back to say the question was closed. A plate at the outer edge of its tolerance was judged sufficient to start the fault under a single-pulse load.

Closed.

I sat at the table with the ledger shut in front of me and felt it. It went through me like warm water. A cause. A plate, a tired night, an initial. Not a man at a window with his hands behind his back, nodding at Hana as if she'd passed him the salt. Not a curve that dropped exactly where it had to and not a hair farther. A plate.

I noticed the relief. I'd sat on a slab of concrete with Laszlo a month before and promised myself, more or less, that I was finished filing things where I wouldn't find them. I noticed this. I turned it over. I thought, quite clearly: *you wanted this to be the answer.*

And then I thought: yes, and it is the answer. It's in the ledger. Lior said so himself. Four of them were in the room.

And I put it away. In a new place, one I'd never used, so that I could tell myself it was different.

#

Then we voted on the machines.

We'd been arguing about it for eight months. We'd argued about it in January and in March, while I was in hospital, and in May with Hana across the table, and Kalle had been right about every incentive and I'd been sure about something I couldn't say. We'd agreed in June that we'd vote after the review, because the review would tell us which drive the number was for.

Now we knew. The Lattice. Eighty percent of it built in the fabrication halls on the station, by machines.

"Before we vote," said Nadia.

We waited. She'd said perhaps two hundred words at that table since January. She took a folded sheet of paper out of her shirt pocket and opened it out on the table. She smoothed it flat with both hands. It was the chart she'd brought to the panel in March, grown. Sixty years of machines. Every sweeper she'd kept, and what built it, and what built that, and who kept those, in pencil, in her careful square hand, with lines running up the page from each machine to the things that had made it, and from those to the things that had made them.

"I tried to find the top," she said. "Where the machines start. Where some person made the first one with their hands and nothing else, so you could say: that one's his." She ran her finger up one of the lines. "You can't. It doesn't have a top. Every machine was made by machines somebody kept. Every person who kept them was taught by somebody, and fed by somebody, and had their road swept by something I kept." She tapped the bottom of the page, where her own name was. "It goes all the way up and it never stops being people. Just people a long time ago, and people you'll never meet." She looked at Kalle. "That's what a machine is. I said it in January. It's old work. And it isn't anybody's in particular. It's everybody's."

Kalle looked at the chart for a long time.

"Then here's the last thing I've got," he said. "If the machines' share goes to the commons, your rule rewards people for switching the assists off. Do it all by hand and the whole share is yours. That's exactly what his team did."

"Then they gave for it," said Nadia. "In tired nights. It's in the ledger." She tapped the table where the ledger had lain that morning. "You saw."

"So did the commons," said Kalle. "Plate seventeen is my argument, illustrated." He turned to her chart. "And by your own lines, people are old work too. Somebody taught you. Somebody fed you. Follow that all the way up and nobody ever did anything."

"Yes," said Nadia. "That's why the window's five years. Everybody's old work, sooner or later. The window's just the city being honest about how soon."

Dorit had been writing. She looked up.

"Then don't credit hours," she said. "Credit what people added over what the best tools could have done without them. If the assists could have fitted that plate, the hands get nothing extra for fitting it slower. If they couldn't, the hands get it all." She put the pencil down. "Nobody earns credit for being slow. Nobody earns credit for the machines."

Kalle looked at her for a long moment.

"That's actually good," he said. "Write it in."

She wrote it in.

Kalle was quiet.

"That's the most annoying thing anyone's ever done to me," he said. "I said it would be."

"Vote," said Dorit.

We voted. Nadia, Dorit, and I for the commons: the machines' share of any work to be credited to everyone, kept by everyone, and owned by no one. Kalle against, and Kwabena, who said he'd baked bread in an oven for eighty years and still thought the bread was his. Three to two.

Kalle wrote it into the record himself. Then he cut Kwabena's loaf, for the first time since January before the end of a meeting, and gave Nadia the first slice.

#

I walked home through the First Ring and over the bridges in the evening with the ledger under my arm.

The finding did what everyone had known it would do. Credit for a work is one whole, split among everyone who made it; take the machines' part away from the people who ran them and it doesn't vanish, it goes to the commons, and what's left is divided among the hands. If the machines' share belonged to the commons, then the station's three hundred people, who'd done their best work through the

fabrication halls, had a small human share each: honest, real, small. And S. Ya's twelve, who'd refused the assists and done every fitting by hand, had a large one. And S. Ya, who had done the mathematics nobody else could do, before the cap, before the window, had a share that was what I'd written on the climber, in July, with Kalle snoring against the far wall.

A great deal.

Not for the Converger. The formula weighs outcome above output, and the Converger's outcome was a probe four degrees off course; on the formula's own rules it had lost, and the loser's line comes to almost nothing. But the Lattice that won carried him inside it. Pell's throat geometry, the thing S. Ya had published two years before, had taken a third off the station's mass. Sunday's paper had cut its draw tenfold. The loser's value arrived inside the winner's machine. That's how it has always worked, in every science there has ever been, and it was the only honest reason the sentence could stand.

It would sit in escrow until the Lattice opened its first door, years from now. And then it would be released into a score that was already at the cap, where it would change nothing at all. That was the whole of Avukat's case, and the panel had just made it for him.

It was the panel's sentence now. It would go into the attestation of record, under all five of our names, and the attestation of record would go to the Concord, and on the sixteenth of November my brother would stand up in the Concord chamber and read it out.

I had given Avukat exactly what he'd asked me for, the night of his speech, a year ago in August. It was true. That was always going to be the problem.

My eye chimed as I came to my own meadow. Jinsia.

Heard about the review. Lattice. The big ring. A pause. *Marisol's doing sums. She says years, not months. I said I'd ask you whether her sums are right.*

I stood at the top of my steps in the dusk and did them. They were right. A bigger ring, more power, a longer build, and the queue frozen until the build was approved and longer after that.

Her sums are right, I wrote. *I'm sorry.*

Don't be sorry. Be at the boathouse on Tuesday. I need to hit something with an oar.

I went. He hit the water very hard for an hour and didn't say a word about Marisol's sums.

Chapter 26

Saturday, October 9, 172 (2202)

The harvest feast was at the same place as the one in June the year before: the edge of the yards, where the prairie began, the table made of doors, the pit of coals. The same woman came up out of the prairie at four with the same two men and a haunch of elk on a pole. *We asked*, she said again, and people laughed, because they'd heard it before.

I'd been looking forward to it for a month. I noticed, when the smell came up off the grate, that I'd been looking forward to it the way you look forward to a place you used to live.

There were more people this time. Sixty, maybe. The Rozkosz brought friends to the harvest feast, Bram told me, the one night a year they did; it was a sort of open house, the only one. Tourists were tolerated, for a night, provided they sat where they were put and ate what they were given.

Seren was at the head of the table, where Bram had put her, in a coat I hadn't seen before, dark green, buttoned to the throat. She didn't limp much anymore. She'd let her hair grow since the summer, and it lay close and dark over her skull, and at her temples, in the firelight, there were threads of gray. Five or six on each side. She'd been cutting them off all year, I understood now. She didn't cut them anymore.

Nobody at the table mentioned them. Two or three people looked, and looked away, and looked again. That was all.

#

I saw Lior first. He was standing at the edge of the firelight with a cup in his hand, looking at the elk on the grate with an expression of open alarm.

Then I saw who was beside him.

S. Ya was talking to Bram. He was in an old brown jacket with patched elbows. He had his hands in its pockets, and he was laughing at something Bram had said. Bram, who distrusted tourists on principle, was laughing too.

"Lior's been coming since September," said Ansel, beside me, quietly. He'd seen where I was looking. "Rue sponsored him. He did his first dimming last week. He was all right." A pause. "He asked if he could bring someone tonight. Rue said one person. That's the person."

"Did anyone object?"

"Bram did. For about four minutes." Ansel watched them. "Then he met him."

#

He ate the elk.

I watched him do it. Lior took one bite of his and went pale and put it down on his bread and didn't touch it again, and Seren laughed at him from across the table, not unkindly. S. Ya took his slab from Bram on the end of the long knife and held it a moment and looked at it, the way I had looked at mine sixteen months before, and then he ate it slowly, all of it, with his eyes half closed.

"Well?" said Seren.

He swallowed. He opened his eyes.

"Extraordinary," he said. "I haven't tasted this since before the Leveling. I'd forgotten. I remembered that it was—" he searched for it "—rich. That's the word everyone uses." He looked at the bones on the grate. "Thank you. I mean that. I'll remember it."

Bram beamed. Seren looked at him for a moment longer than she looked at most people. Then she handed him the wine.

#

He danced, later, when the band started. He danced badly. He danced with great care, a beat behind, his elbows a little too high, completely unembarrassed. People laughed and pulled him into the middle, and he went and laughed with them. He trod on Ines and apologized to her at length.

I didn't dance. I sat at the end of the table with my bread and my second slab of elk, and found I'd stopped tasting it after the third bite.

I knew that curve. I'd drawn it in my notebook a year ago in July: a spike, and a slide, and each new thing pushing it up a little less. The

feast in June had been a nine. This one, if I'd been allowed to write it down, would have been a five. The elk tasted the way elk tastes. The wine was a younger wine, from somebody else's cupboard, and it was only wine.

I didn't write it down. I'd stopped carrying the notebook. I put the bread down and watched the fire.

#

At midnight I looked for Seren and found her at the far end of the fire pit, away from the dancing, sitting on a log with her bad leg out in front of her.

S. Ya was sitting beside her.

They were talking. I couldn't hear them. The band was between us, and the fire, and sixty people. I could see them, in the orange light. She was talking more than I'd ever seen her talk to anyone, with her hands, which she never used. He was listening. He was sitting forward with his elbows on his knees and his chin on his hands, and his face was turned to hers, absolutely still, the way I'd seen him stand at the window of the control room. He asked something, short, and she stopped, and thought, and answered it, slowly.

Once she reached up and touched her temple, where the gray was, and he nodded.

They talked for an hour. Nobody went near them. When I looked at Ansel, he was looking at them too, with an expression I couldn't read.

When it was over S. Ya stood up and said something to her, and she laughed, a real laugh, surprised, with her head back, and he went off across the yards toward the dancing with his hands in his pockets.

I went over.

"What did he want?" I said.

She looked up at me. The fire was on her face, and it was tired in a way I'd only ever seen in photographs from before the Leveling: not the tiredness of a long night, but the kind that sleep was never going to fix.

"To know what it's like," she said.

"What what's like?"

"Getting older." She looked toward the dancing, where he'd gone. "He asked good questions. He asked whether it's like it was before, the first time round. He said he'd forgotten what the first years felt

like. He asked if I'm afraid, and what of, and whether the fear is the same every day or different." She shook her head slowly. "And he listened to the answers. All of them. Nobody does that. You don't. You listen to the first half and start working out the rest."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's what you're for." She held out her hand and I helped her up. "He said it was the most interesting conversation he'd had in years. I believe him. I don't know why I believe him."

#

Lior found me at two, when the band was packing up and the fire was low.

He'd drunk more than he was used to, I think. He came and stood next to me at the edge of the coals and looked into them for a while before he spoke.

"I wanted to say thank you," he said.

"For what?"

"For being fair. In September." He balled his hands into fists, then released them. "Everybody's been so kind about it. Marta. Pell. Him. Nobody's said one hard word to me. I keep waiting for someone to." He laughed, a little. "And I've slept. Since September. I didn't sleep after the test, not at all, not for two months. I'd lie there and think, it held a thousand times, it held every single time, why did it walk? And there wasn't any answer. And then you found the plate." He looked at me. "It's terrible to say. It helped, having a cause. Even if the cause is me. Especially. At least it's something I did. At least I know what it was."

He meant it. There wasn't anything in his face except gratitude, and the drink, and something open and young that you almost never see in the city, because almost nobody in the city is young.

"Thank you," he said again. "You were fair."

He went off to find S. Ya, who was waiting for him by the fence, with his hands in the pockets of his old brown jacket, looking up at the stars.

I stood by the coals.

I'd been thanked for a great many things in a hundred years at the Division. I'd been thanked for correcting QQs that had been wrong, and for finding the truth about things that people had very much wanted to stay hidden. It was the worst moment of my year. Worse

than the climber. Worse than the clinician's careful face, or the girl on the feed looking into the camera.

I stood there until the coals went gray, and I couldn't have told you why.

Chapter 27

Tuesday, November 16 – Monday, November 22, 172 (*2202*)

S. Ya's statement went out at seven on the morning of the hearing, in the city notices, with a plain border, which meant it came from a citizen and not from the Concord. It went to everyone. Everyone read it. I read it in bed, with the skylight still dark.

I've been asked many times this autumn what I think of the petition before the Concord, which would give me, and people like me, a permanent holding to keep and to leave. I'd like to answer once.

I don't want the formula changed for me. It has given me everything I've needed for a long time, and a good deal I didn't. The station built the better drive. Whatever honors there are should go to Hana Sokol and her people.

If I hadn't built the Converger, someone would have built a drive. Not this one. But a drive. The mathematics were practically there, waiting. I happened to be standing nearest.

I'd ask for one thing only, and it isn't a holding. When the first convoy crosses, I'd like a berth on it, as crew, to help. I don't need anything special.

S. Ya

I read it twice. Then I lay there and looked at the skylight go from black to gray and thought: he's just taken the floor out from under my brother. And then: no. He's just handed him a better one.

#

The Concord sits where the petitioners live; that's the rule, so that nobody has to cross the world to be heard. In QL it sits in the round hall in the civic core, under the dome with the oculus, in tiers of plain benches that go up from a floor where the witnesses stand. Twenty-four members were on the floor that week, sent from all twenty cities, and the rest by link, their faces hung in a ring under the dome like a second row of windows. Above them, on the benches, the public. Every bench full by nine.

Avukat opened at ten.

He'd been preparing for this hearing for seventy years, in a sense, and for a year in fact, and he did it beautifully. I'd forgotten how good he was in a room. He didn't raise his voice. He stood on the witnesses' floor in his canvas coat with his hands empty, and he read the amendment, the one sentence, slowly, and then he read the attestation of record.

All of it. The method. The machine ruling, three to two. The finding for the station team, small and honest. The finding for the twelve, large. And then the line I'd written on the climber with Kalle snoring against the wall.

The honest uncapped estimate of S. Ya's own contribution to the Converger is a great deal.

He let it sit. He looked up at the benches.

"You've all read his statement this morning," he said. "He doesn't want anything. He wants a berth on a ship, as crew. He doesn't need anything special." He paused. "Of course he doesn't. He's the most generous man in Q. He's too modest to ask. That's exactly why we have to ask for him." He let that settle. "Under the formula as it stands, the man who opened the door to the stars gets nothing at all. The people who held his plates get a few hundredths each, for five years. Nothing for a door to the stars isn't modesty. It's an insult with a decimal point."

He turned a page he didn't need.

"And look at what he does ask for. A berth on the first convoy. The scarcest seat in the history of the species, given outside the queue, to one man, because of what he made." He looked up at the ring of faces. "I don't object. I'd give it to him tomorrow. But understand what you'll be doing when you nod. You'll have conceded the principle. Everything after that is arguing over the size."

You could hear it land. Three hundred people breathing in.

"This amendment isn't for S. Ya," said Avukat. "Nobody improves what they can lose. Everything in this city can be lost, and so nobody builds anything they mean to keep. Seventy years since GERAS. Name me the breakthrough. Our own historians have a word for it: they call it the long quiet. A city that can't tell a door to the stars from a mended valve gets a long quiet. It's had one." He paused. "He's told you himself he won't take it. It's for the next one. The one who isn't a saint. The one who'll look at what this city gave the man who

opened the door to the stars, which is exactly what it gives a man who fixes a valve, and decide it isn't worth it." He turned, slowly, to the ring of faces under the dome. "The formula can't see a great deal. That's my case. Your own panel says it can't. Let it see."

He sat down. Nobody clapped; you don't, in the Concord. But the silence afterward had a shape.

Mira, two benches up from me, didn't look round. Kalle, beside me, said very quietly, "Well. He's good."

"He's always been good."

"That's what worries me," said Kalle.

#

Tushar spoke on Wednesday.

The Concord had asked for a historian and the Institute had sent her, because there was nobody better on the queuestory and everybody knew it. She came down to the floor in her rust-colored coat with a slate she didn't look at, and stood exactly where Avukat had stood, and talked for forty minutes without notes.

She told them about TimBor.

Not the bombs and the burning, which every child in Q learns about at nine. The other thing: the slow part. How the great fortunes had started, almost all of them, with one good idea, honestly come by. A machine. A process. A way of moving goods. How the law had let the person who had the idea keep what it earned, which was fair. And then let them leave it, which seemed fair too. And how, within three generations, the people living on that one good idea had never had one of their own, and didn't need to, and owned the land under other people's houses, and the water, and the courts.

"For machines and processes they called it a patent, and that stayed at twenty years, which was nearly sensible," she said. "For songs and books and pictures they called it copyright. It began at fourteen years. Then twenty-eight. By the end of TimBor it was the creator's lifetime, plus seventy years after their death. Seventy years for people who had made nothing to live on something they hadn't made." She looked up at the benches. "A great-grandchild could live on one song. Many did."

Someone on the floor asked whether there was a better way, then. Whether TimBor had ever got it right.

"Once," said Tushar. "That I know of." And she told them about

Daguerre: a Frenchman, nearly three hundred years before the Leveling, who had found a way to fix an image on a silver plate. The first photograph anyone could make. And his government, instead of letting him keep it, had bought it from him, for a pension for the rest of his life, and given the process to the whole world, free, the same week.

"Nearly the whole world," she said. "His agent had quietly patented it in England five days before. Even the best thing TimBor ever did, someone found a way to keep a piece of." A few people laughed. She waited for them to stop.

"He was honored," Tushar said. "Richly. For the rest of his life. And the thing he'd made belonged to everyone." She looked at Avukat, on his bench. "You can thank a person without handing them the future. TimBor did it once. It was the best thing it ever did."

She went back to her seat. She passed my bench on the way and didn't look at me. She hadn't looked at me since July.

At the recess I caught her in the corridor under the dome.

"Tushar—"

"Not here," she said. "Not yet. I'll tell you when."

She said it quietly, so that nobody else would hear, and that was worse than if she'd shouted. She went back in.

#

On Thursday the Concord read a letter into the record.

It was from Vera Wandel. The Freehold Society had asked her to testify, as the living precedent: the woman whose team had given the world GERAS and been given, in return, exactly what the formula gives everyone. She'd refused. Her letter said why, in five lines, in a hand that had shaken when she wrote it.

I have been asked to tell the Concord that I was not rewarded enough. I decline. I was rewarded the same as everyone, and it was enough. I did not think so for seventy years. What I wanted was not a holding. I wanted to be forgiven for what we had made, and no amendment can do that, and no amount of ground. Please do not make anyone else wait for that the way I have.

Ostrander, the broad, kind councillor from QE, read it aloud, because he had asked to. When he finished he put it down and didn't say anything for a while, and nobody hurried him.

That afternoon the floor opened to the public, and Berbant stood up.

I hadn't known he was going to. Sora was beside him, with her hand on his back. He stood on the witnesses' floor in his depot jacket and looked up at the ring of faces under the dome and went red to his ears.

"I keep the valves in the Eighth Ring," he said. "Somebody kept them before me. Somebody'll keep them after." He swallowed. "My brother says the formula gives the man who opened a door to the stars what it gives a man who fixes a valve. He means it as a bad thing." He looked at Avukat. "And a roof near QL isn't worth anything because of what's under it. It's worth something because a million and a half people live round it. That's us. That's not him." He swallowed again. "And he didn't build it alone either. Somebody's tired hands are in that ledger. It's in the finding, if you read to the end, and I did. Every hand on that thing was needed, the shaky ones too. I'm the man who fixes the valve. I use everything I've got. And the city looks at what I've got and what I do with it, and it says that's enough. That's as good as anybody." His voice went up and he brought it down again. "I think that's the best thing about this city. I don't want anybody to change it. Not even for him."

It was the speech from April, nearly word for word. He'd been giving it all summer, in every Ring that would have him.

He sat down. Sora took his hand. Avukat didn't look at him.

"That's Henry George," Kalle murmured beside me. "Land's worth what the neighbors make it. Somebody's been reading."

"He reads," I said. "History, mostly. He always has."

#

On Friday morning Avukat called me.

It was his right. The petitioner may call any witness who can speak to the record, and the chair of the panel that made the record can speak to it better than anyone. Mira had told me in October that he'd do it. I'd known since September that he'd do it, when I walked home with the ledger.

I went down to the floor. It was smaller than it looked from the benches. The dome was very high, and the oculus at the top was a disc of white November sky. The faces under it were all looking at me.

Avukat stood across from me, three meters away, with his hands empty.

"Dar Rax," he said, for the record. "You chaired the attestation panel."

"Yes."

"The attestation says S. Ya's honest contribution, uncapped, is a great deal. You wrote that sentence."

"Yes."

"Do you stand by it?"

"Yes."

"Then I have two questions." He didn't smile. He never smiled at a witness; he'd told me once it made people think you'd already won. "Did S. Ya earn it? The great deal. Was it his?"

"Yes," I said. "He earned it. A great deal."

The benches moved. You could feel it. It was what they'd come to hear.

"Would the drive exist without him?"

I opened my mouth, and heard myself say it.

"Not this one," I said. "But a drive would."

Then I stopped, because I'd heard it. One word of my own and a phrase that wasn't. *Not this one. But a drive.* I'd read it at seven on Tuesday morning in bed. I'd said it without knowing I was saying it, in his rhythm, with his pause in it, and it was true, and it was mine, and it was also, exactly, his.

I didn't know why that made the back of my neck go cold. I stood there on the floor of the Concord with every face in Q looking at me and felt it go cold anyway.

"Thank you," said Avukat. He'd heard the first half and that was all he needed. "No more questions."

#

He was turning back to his bench when I spoke.

"I haven't finished my answer."

A witness may finish an answer. It's in the rules, two lines from the bottom of a page nobody reads; I'd read it on Thursday night, twice. The chair looked at me, and at Avukat, and nodded. Ostrander, on the members' bench, sat forward.

Avukat stopped, halfway to his bench. He didn't turn round.

"You asked whether the drive would exist without him," I said. "I said not this one. The rest of the answer is who else built it."

I looked up past the members' bench at the benches, at Kalle and Mira and Tushar and Berbant and Sora. At Nadia, whom I hadn't seen come in, sitting in the top row with her forearms on her knees.

I told them.

I named the twelve. All of them, the way S. Ya had named them for me in a workshop a year ago in August: Marta, who'd solved containment and made the terrible coffee; Iris, whose writing you needed a glass to read; Pell, who'd asked *why*; Lior, who'd signed a plate on a tired night and said so in front of five strangers. All twelve names, and what each of them had done, out of the ledger, from memory.

Then the station. Three hundred people, some of them on the station longer than I'd been at the Division, who'd built a throat that held, and had a small honest share each because they'd built it with the best tools they had.

Then the machines. The fabrication halls, and what had built them, and what had built that. A sweeper technician's chart, sixty years deep, that went all the way up and never once stopped being people. Old work, from everybody, kept by everybody.

"He said it himself, on Tuesday," I said. "*Not this one. But a drive.* If he hadn't been standing nearest, someone else would have been, later. So what he gave us wasn't the drive. It was time. Years of it, maybe a great many years. That's a great deal, and it's a great deal that ends. The old copyright was a life plus seventy years. For people who don't die, a life plus seventy is forever."

I heard myself, and went on.

"And there's this," I said. I hadn't planned it. I'd planned the names, and nothing after. "The formula has a window. Five years. Everybody hates the window. I've hated it. It means that the best thing you ever did stops counting for you five years after you did it, and you have to do something else." I looked at Avukat's back. "It exists so that nobody, including any of you, lives forever on one good thing. That's what it's for. My brother's amendment says *to keep, and to leave*. To leave. The window, and Article II behind it, are what say no to that. If you open it for the best man in the world, you've opened it."

I should have stopped there. I didn't.

"My brother told you on Tuesday that if you give S. Ya his berth,

you've conceded the principle. You haven't. A berth is a seat for one life, his, and it ends when he does. A holding is to keep and to leave. The first is a thank-you. The second is a line of heirs." I looked up at the ring of faces under the dome. "And think what *to leave* means in a city where nobody dies. Nobody here inherits anything for centuries. The only place a holding could ever be left to is the next world, the one on the other side of the door. You wouldn't be rewarding a man. You'd be dividing Teegarden before anyone's seen it."

Avukat's back didn't move.

"And the number this would hang on is mine," I said. "It turned on a vote of three to two, about whose the machines are, between a baker and a sweeper technician and a schoolteacher and the two of us. I'd stand behind that vote anywhere. I wouldn't hang an inheritance on it. Neither would you, if you'd been in the room." I stopped. "That's all. Those are the people who built it."

Ostrander nodded slowly. He wrote something down.

Nobody spoke. Then, high up in the ring of faces under the dome, somebody from another city, by link, said "thank you" aloud, which you aren't supposed to do, and the chair didn't stop them.

I went back to my bench. I didn't look at Avukat. I didn't need to. I could feel the room turn, the way you feel a boat turn under you on the water before you see the shore move.

#

The Concord voted on Monday morning, in closed session, and published the count at noon. Two-thirds of the members were needed to send the amendment to the people.

They sent it by two votes. Most of the members who voted to send it said afterward that they had voted to let the people answer a question about the man who had opened a door to the stars, not to change the Charter.

It would go to every citizen in Q on the fourteenth of December. To pass, it would need two-thirds of everyone who voted.

#

Senne made supper on Monday night, because Senne always made supper, and because it was the only thing any of us could think of to do.

We sat at the long table under the window onto the sunken garden. The hens were shut in. Senne had made the pie with the greens and

an egg baked into it for each of us, and the beet soup, and the ginger tea too strong. Berbant and Sora at one end. Me at the other. Avukat in the middle tonight, across from Senne, and Linnea beside Senne.

Nobody said anything about the hearing for most of an hour. We talked about the hens, and the pool, and a leak in the Eighth Ring that Berbant had chased for three days. Sora told a story about a patient who'd come in with a fish hook through his thumb and refused to let anyone take it out until he'd photographed it. Avukat laughed at that, properly, and then stopped, as if he'd forgotten for a moment and remembered.

Linnea said almost nothing through the pie. Over the soup bowls she leaned across the corner of the table toward me.

"How long," she said, "before the first people walk through? Really. Not the notices."

"Ten years to build the ring and haul it out past Neptune," I said. "Fifteen more for the far ring to cross. The first door opens about the year 197, if nothing goes wrong. Something will."

She nodded, as if I'd confirmed a measurement she'd already taken.

When Senne brought the tea, Avukat put his cup down and looked at me down the table.

"Two votes," he said. "In the Concord. It goes to everyone, now."

"I know."

"It'll fail. You know that too. A third, maybe. Not two-thirds." He looked into his tea. "Not after Friday."

"I'm sorry."

"No, you're not." He said it without heat. "And you shouldn't be. You answered what you were asked. Both times." He looked at me for a long moment, and I saw our father in his face, the way you do in brothers when the light is wrong. "You told the truth. That was always going to be the problem with you."

I'd thought the same words, almost, in September. I hadn't known he'd been thinking them too.

He got up. He thanked Senne for supper, as he always did, and put on his canvas coat, and went out through the garden past the hens' house in the dark.

Senne poured me more tea.

"Was it good?" he said. "What you said."

I thought about it.

"Yes," I said. "I think so."
"Then good," said Senne, and cut me another slice of pie.

Chapter 28

Tuesday, December 14 – Thursday, December 16, 172 (2202)

The polls closed at eight, and at nine the Concord published the count, with the gold border.

I watched it come in at the Division, in the display room, because Kalle had said nobody should watch a thing like that alone and Mira had said the Division was the only room in the city where nobody would talk to us about it. It was nearly empty. A night analyst at the far end, eating noodles. Kalle on one side of me with his feet up on the next chair. Mira on the other, very straight, with her hands in her lap.

The number came up on the wall in plain figures, the same size as every other number that room had ever shown.

Amendment to Article II (the Founders' Share). Votes cast: 20,384,117 (98.9%). In favor: 31.0%. Required: 66.7%. Not ratified.

Kalle took his feet off the chair.

"Thirty-one," he said. "Not close."

"That's what the city thinks of it," said Mira.

"I know. I'm just looking at it." He looked at it. "Six million people want to be able to keep a house and leave it to their children. That's not nothing."

"It's a great many of them," I said.

"It's a great many," Kalle agreed. "More than he's ever had. It'll be more next time." He looked at me sidelong. "There's always a next time with your brother, isn't there?"

There was. I'd known it on Monday night at Senne's table, when he'd stood up and thanked Senne for supper. He'd lost, and lost clearly. But six million people had stood up with him, more than had ever stood anywhere for the Society. And he had seventy more years in him at least.

At half past nine the notices published a second line, smaller, under the first. The Concord, sitting the same afternoon, had approved the ring program in full. Work on the gate ring would begin in the new year in the station's fabrication halls. The parenthood queue, frozen since 166, would reopen against the program's emigration schedule on the first of January.

My eye chimed before I'd finished reading it.

Jinsia.

Did you see the second line.

I saw it.

Marisol is crying in the corridor outside the lab. I am not crying. I am tall and composed. And then: *Two years in a drawer, and a ship to send people on, and the drawer opens. It'll be years still. But it moves.*

It moves, I wrote.

I didn't write the other thing I was thinking, because it wasn't mine to say, and because exits are published only as a number, so that no one can ever be thanked. Every exit frees a seat, in the end. Somewhere in the count that had just opened Jinsia's drawer was a woman in the Eleventh Ring with a leg that had healed too slowly.

Come to the boathouse on Thursday. I'm going to row until I fall in.

#

The final attestation came to me at ten the next morning, in a file with the panel's seal, for my signature as chair.

It was the same document Avukat had read out in the round hall, with one page added at the end: the outcome of the vote, and a line that said the panel's work was complete and the panel was dissolved, with the Division's thanks. Five signature lines. Four already signed. Kalle's quick slash. Dorit's careful schoolteacher's hand. Kwabena's name printed in capitals. Nadia's, small and square, in the same pencil she'd used on her chart.

There was one more thing the rules allowed: a note. Any panel member could attach one. A minority note, if you'd lost a vote; a reservation, if you'd won one and weren't sure; anything you thought the record ought to hold that the finding didn't. Most panels never used it. It was there, Mira had told me in August a year ago, for the day somebody needed it.

I sat at my desk with the file open and wrote it. It took me most of the day. It was two paragraphs long when I'd finished. I'd cut it

from eleven.

The Panel has attested, honestly, what the drive's builders contributed, and I signed that attestation. The question it raised remains. The formula as it stands has no honest way to credit work done by many hands together, or work whose value arrives after its window has closed. It credits a drive's builders a little, for five years, and then forgets them, and it credits the people a drive will carry nothing at all, because they haven't been born. A city that can open a door to the stars should be able to count who opened it without handing them the future.

I don't know the right rule yet. The best shape I can see is the one a historian described to the Concord in November: honor for life, once the outcome is real and verified, and the thing itself given to everyone. Credit for what a person added beyond what the best tools could have done without them, as this Panel adopted. Not to keep and to leave. To keep, for as long as you're here. I know the present rule is wrong in a way that will matter more every year, and that the Freehold Society will keep asking the question for as long as nobody else does. I intend to ask it, through the Formula Review Panel, in the open, for as long as it takes.

I read it through. I signed the attestation. I attached the note and sent the file to Mira.

She called me into her office at four.

#

"It's good," she said. "The note."

"Thank you."

"It'll be filed under the panel's name."

I'd known that. I'd known it when I wrote it. It was the rule: everything a panel produced went into the record as the panel's, with no single name on it, so that no finding could ever be a person's and no person could ever be pressured over a finding. The Safed rule, extended. Nobody attests alone. Nobody's note is theirs.

"I know," I said.

She looked at me for a moment.

"That bothers you, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

She looked at me across the desk, the way she'd looked at me on the morning in August when she'd given me the panel, as if I were a figure she'd checked twice and found correct and didn't entirely trust.

"Why?"

I thought about it. I thought about my brother, in April, in the commons room in the Third Ring, saying *put your name on it*. And ten days later, in a doorway, *our father would have known what a good name was worth*. I'd refused him both times. I'd refused him the way you refuse something you're afraid you want.

"Because I want them to know it was me," I said. "Not for the credit. So they know where to find me. If I'm going to take this to the Formula Review Panel, I want somebody who reads that note in fifty years to know whose door to knock on." I heard myself. "My brother's been asking me to put my name on something for a year. It turns out he was right about the wanting. He was only wrong about the thing."

Mira was quiet for a moment.

"The note goes under the panel's name," she said. "That's the rule, and it's a good rule, and you of all people know why we have it." She folded her hands on the desk. "Your proposal to the Review Panel will go under yours. That's a different rule. A citizen's proposal to amend the formula has to be brought by a citizen. Named. With standing."

"Standing."

"A sponsor's band of Contributing or above, for a formula proposal." She didn't look at the screen beside her desk. She didn't need to. "Kalle tells me you slid in January. Did you go back up?"

"I haven't looked."

"Look," said Mira, and turned back to her work, which was how she ended every conversation she'd decided was finished.

#

I looked on the transit home.

I hadn't checked my QQ since January, when Kalle told me I'd slid and I'd stood in the corridor and found I didn't care. It was the longest I'd gone without looking since I was eighteen. I opened it the way you'd open a letter from someone you used to know.

Contributing. Lower in the band than I'd ever been. The months at the Low had taken some, and the mornings I'd come in late. A year of chairing a panel whose work, by the formula's own rules, was worth exactly what any other committee's work was worth had taken most. I'd sat at the bottom edge of Contributing for most of a year and never

noticed.

It was enough. Just. For now.

I sat on the transit with the band glowing in the corner of my eye and felt something I hadn't felt about that number in a year. Not shame. Not the old, anxious pride. Something plainer. It was a tool. It was the thing that would let me stand up in front of the Formula Review Panel and be heard. It mattered again, the way a good pair of boots matters when you've decided where you're going to walk.

Find a battle that matters to you, Dar. Fight that battle. Not every race. Not every number. One that matters. Then you'll know what to stop and count.

He'd said it on the back step of the house I grew up in, more than a hundred years ago. I'd heard it in April, at the bottom of a box, in his voice, and had thought it was about something else. It wasn't about the race, or the number. It was about choosing. Choosing one thing, and letting all the others go.

I'd spent a year counting everything. Pleasures and bruises and votes and the hours a light takes to cross the dark. I'd made a list of nine lines and read them one at a time so I wouldn't have to see them together. And now I had one thing.

It wouldn't win this year. It wouldn't win for a long time, probably. Avukat's battle had taken him seventy years to get to thirty-one percent, and his was the easier one, because his had a roof in it, and mine only had a question.

But it was mine. Seren had spent her life looking for edges she could stand on. This was the first one I'd found that I could stand behind.

#

I got off the transit a stop early and walked the last of the way through the Second Ring in the cold. It had snowed in the afternoon, the first heavy snow of the winter, and the meadows were white and the skylights glowed up through it, gold, square after square, all the way to the edge of the world.

At the top of my steps I stopped and looked south.

It was still there: the one point of light halfway up the southern sky that I'd walked under every night since I was a boy and never once looked at until the summer. The station, catching the sun from thirty-six thousand kilometers up. I'd looked at it every night since

I came down. It didn't move. Everything else turned behind it, the stars and the moon and the year, and it stayed exactly where it was.

In the new year, they'd start building the ring there.

I stood at the top of the steps for a while with the snow coming down. Then I went in and sat at my desk. I opened a clean file and wrote at the top of it, in plain letters, *Proposal to the Formula Review Panel*, and under it my name.

I didn't write anything else that night. I just wanted to see it there.

#

On Thursday the reservoir was black and still. There was snow on the boathouse roof and a skin of ice along the near shore, and the boatman broke it with a pole so we could launch.

Jinsia rowed like a man possessed. He didn't talk. He didn't look at the foothills or the sunrise. He drove the double down the reservoir and back, and down again, until I had nothing left. I stopped pretending to help. I sat with my oars up and let him take us.

Halfway down the third length he caught a crab. The oar snapped round, the boat lurched, and Jinsia went over the side, all of him, into water a degree off freezing.

He came up roaring. Not cursing. Laughing. He hung on to the stern with both arms, his hair plastered flat and his breath going up in clouds, and he laughed until the boatman came out in the launch to fetch him.

"I said I would," he said through his teeth, wrapped in a blanket on the jetty. "I told you. Until I fell in."

"You did."

"Marisol's going to kill me." He started laughing again. "It moves, Dar. The queue. It actually moves. Somebody's going to have to teach the baby to row."

Chapter 29

Saturday, December 18 – Sunday, December 19, 172 (*2202*)

The yards had scheduled the Low at last. The notice had gone up on the ramp in November: the basements under the old stump would be filled in the spring, the last of the TimBor basements under the yards, and the ground seeded with prairie grass. Bram had read it aloud to everyone at the bottom of the ramp, in a voice like a man reading his own obituary, and then said, "Well. We've got the winter," and gone back down.

The last night was the Saturday before the Lull. Seren wrote to me on the Wednesday: *Last night in the Low. Come. Not for long. Then go and be good.*

It ended the way her message on Founding Day had ended, a year ago. I noticed that, and I went anyway.

#

The basement was as it had been on the first night, eighteen months before. The long low room, the lamps, the mats, the music coming up out of the floor. Somebody had hung paper lanterns from the pipes in the ceiling, red and orange, and they swayed a little in the warm air. More people than I'd ever seen down there: the whole of the Rozkosz, and their friends, and some I didn't know at all, standing along the walls the way people stand at a wake.

Bram was at the door with a bottle in each hand. Ines was dancing with Oskar. Rue sat by the ramp with her signal on and a cup of tea, sober, reading, as she always did. Laszlo was in the corner on a stack of cushions with a blanket round his shoulders, older than he'd been in the summer, watching everything with his cracked, pleased smile.

Lior wasn't there. Ansel told me later that S. Ya had taken the whole team to the mountains for the Lull, to a cabin above the snow line, and that Lior had gone and been happy to.

Seren was in the middle of the room, dancing.

She danced as she had on the first night: completely present, her eyes half closed and her arms up, as though there were nothing on either side of the moment she was in. The gray at her temples caught the lantern light. She'd stopped hiding it in October. Now, two months on, it was simply part of her, the way the tattoos were, the hourglasses and the stopped clocks and the flowers running up her arms.

She saw me. She didn't stop. She lifted her chin at me across the room, which meant *wait*, and I waited, against the wall, with a cup of something that Bram had put into my hand.

#

She came and found me after midnight. She was flushed from dancing and smelled of sweat and smoke and the oil she put on the tattoos. She took the cup out of my hand and drank from it and gave it back.

"I'm going in March," she said.

I'd known something was coming. I'd known since the feast. I'd known, if I was honest, since August, on a slab of concrete with Laszlo, watching the sun come up over the dead limbs of a tree.

"Where?"

"North and west. One of the restoration domes, out in the high desert. I asked around. Your brother's partner, Sora, grew up in one like it." She leaned against the wall beside me. "They grow everything. They build everything. You told me what she said about it. Quieter in the head." She smiled a little. "I'd like to find out what quieter in the head is like. I've got about forty years to find out."

"They need people?"

"They always need people. Nobody goes." She looked at the dancing. "They need someone who can fix a pump and doesn't mind the dark in winter. I can learn the pump."

I didn't ask her to stay. I'd thought about asking her, every night since the feast, and every night I'd heard how it would sound, a man who'd lived a hundred and twenty-eight years asking a woman who'd chosen forty to spend some of them on him, and I'd stopped.

She knew. She put her hand flat on my chest, the way she had in August.

"You're not asking," she said.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because you'd say no. And because you'd be right."

"Yes," said Seren. "I would. To both." She kept her hand there a moment longer, and took it away. "I want something from you. Before I go."

"Anything."

"Careful." She almost smiled. "Your notebook."

#

I'd brought it. I don't know why. I'd stopped carrying it after the feast in October, and that evening, getting dressed, I'd taken it out of the drawer and put it in my coat without deciding to, the way you pick up your keys.

I gave it to her.

She sat down on the edge of a mat under one of the red lanterns and opened it. I watched her turn the pages. The feast, 9. The basement, 8. The rink, 7. The creek, 10, with the line through the ten. The curve I'd drawn in July of the first summer, spike and slide. Pages and pages of smaller things, scored and dated. The bathhouse. The stoned night, in Ansel's account, copied out afterward. The tower, with no score at all, only the date. Then nothing for a long time, while I'd been on the panel and the climber and in the hospital. And then the last page.

She stopped before she got there. She went back to the beginning and went through it again, slowly, and this time she took a pencil out of her coat, and wherever there was a date with no number beside it she made a small mark in the margin. The dimming, with nothing. Avukat, on my steps. The bathhouse. Her room, with only a question mark. The hike with Pallavi in June, which I'd written down and never scored. The tower. The roof at Founding. I didn't argue with that one, though I could have. Seven marks.

"These," she said, tapping them, "are the ones that worked."

I looked at them for a while. She turned to the last page.

She read the last page for a long time.

I knew what was on it. Nine lines. *Feb 13: the bout. Mar 6: the tower. The same bruise, three weeks on. Her hair. The Lull, into January: "Family business." Dec 9, the roof. The arm. Laszlo. "Old break, two days at least." "Slower, in her case."* Everything I'd seen of her in a year and

decided not to look at, written out in my small, neat hand at two in the morning on the sixth of August.

She closed the notebook and held it in both hands on her knees.

"I'm keeping this," she said.

"It's yours."

"It is now." She looked up at me. "You won't need it. You've stopped counting that sort of thing. I watched you at the feast. You put your bread down after three bites and didn't write anything." She turned the notebook over. "I'll need it. I'm going somewhere where nobody keeps score. I'd like one score to take with me. Somebody who saw me." She put it inside her coat. "Nobody writes it down, Dar. That's the rule. You broke it, all year, and I was angry with you for it, all year." She buttoned the coat. "I'm glad you did."

She pushed up her left sleeve. Inside her wrist, below the last of the hourglasses, there was something new. Not a picture. A line of small plain letters, the ink still dark.

What are you saving yourself for?

"October," she said. "After the feast." She looked at it. "The man at the Institute asked me that. I couldn't answer him, so I decided the answer was nothing. That's why I stopped saving." She turned her wrist to the lantern. "Now I've got forty years. It turns out I'm saving myself for every one of them. They count, because they end."

"Then you've answered it."

"No. I've started to." She pulled the sleeve down. "That's why it's a question. I want to keep asking it." She stood up. "Come and dance. Badly, if you like."

I danced. Badly. She laughed at me with her head back. The lanterns swung over us, red and orange, and the music came up through the floor.

#

I left at five, when the room had thinned to the last twenty and the lanterns were guttering. She walked me to the bottom of the ramp.

There was no wound in it. That was what I hadn't expected. I'd expected it to hurt, the way the corridor had hurt in July, and the hospital chair, and the list on the last page. It didn't. She was already somewhere else. She'd been somewhere else since August, I think. She'd been kind enough to let me stand at the edge of it for a while.

"Go and be good," she said.

"I'll try."

"Don't try. You're bad at trying. Just go." She put her hand against my face, briefly. Her palm was warm and rough from the cable at the tower and the rungs in the pipe and eleven months of healing at the speed of every human being who'd ever lived before the Leveling. "Thank you for the year."

She went back down the ramp into the light and the music, and didn't look round. I stood at the bottom of the ramp until the cold got into my coat, and then I went up into the dark.

#

I didn't decide to go to Tushar's. I found I was walking there.

The first transit came at half past five. I sat in an empty carriage with the snow going past the window and got off in the Third Ring. I walked the last of it, through meadows white and blue in the dawn, past skylights still dark, past a sweeper working slowly along the path with its small ticking, to the entrance steps of the Earthhold where Tushar and Pallavi lived.

The door at the bottom of the steps knew me. It had known me for seventeen years; Tushar had put me on the household's list the winter Pallavi's father left, and never taken me off. It opened, and I went down the long corridor under the skylights, still dimmed for the night, past the commons kitchen, where somebody was already setting out bread. It was the corridor where I'd walked a baby up and down at three in the morning when she wouldn't sleep.

At the door of their rooms I stopped. I'd never knocked on it in my life. I knocked. It was ten to seven on a Sunday.

Pallavi opened the door.

She was in a sweater over her nightclothes and her hair was down. She'd been awake. She had the look of someone who'd been up a while and hadn't meant to be. She looked at me.

She didn't step back.

I stood in the corridor and she stood in the door and neither of us said anything. The skylights were going gray over us. Behind her, on the shelf under the light well, the kettle began to tick as it heated. Down the corridor someone laughed in the commons kitchen and stopped.

She was eighteen. She'd been eighteen since June and Affirmed since July. She'd go on growing into her face for a few years yet, and

then keep it for as long as she wanted. She looked older to me than she had in June. She was older.

I didn't explain. I'd sent an explanation from the climber in July and deleted my copy. I'd written it in my head every night since. Every night I'd heard how it would sound, and that it was true, and that it didn't matter.

"I promised to watch," I said. "Live. All two hours. I promised properly. I said I'd be watching when they called your name and you stood up." I made myself keep looking at her. "I watched the first half hour. Then I shrank it into a corner and stopped watching. I missed your name. I missed your answers. I missed your piece. I missed the minute when you sat at the clinic's table and rolled up your sleeve. I came back at the end and you were looking into the camera, and I'd been gone for two hours." I stopped. "That's all. It's mine. There isn't anything else. I'm sorry."

She didn't say anything for a long time.

"Did you find her?" she said.

"Yes."

"Was she alive?"

"Yes."

Pallavi looked at me. Her face did something complicated and then settled.

"Good," she said.

Then she said, "I told you that you get one. I told you that you don't get two."

"I know."

"This is two."

"I know."

She looked at me a while longer, in the doorway, with the snow from the meadow still melting on my shoulders.

"There isn't a three," she said.

"No."

"I mean it, Dar."

"I know you do."

She stepped back, and held the door, and let me in.

#

Their sitting room was warm. Pallavi made tea at the shelf under the light well and put it in front of me. She went back to her room

without saying anything else and shut the door, and after a minute I heard her start to play: the slow piece from the spring before last, the one she'd played for three strangers at a long table and gotten the seat.

I sat at the table and drank the tea and listened.

Tushar came out of her room at half past seven in a robe, with her hair everywhere and her eyes half shut. She stopped in her doorway and looked at me. She didn't seem surprised. Tushar was never surprised by anything that happened in her own rooms.

"She let you in," she said.

"Yes."

"I told her she could decide." She came and sat down beside me on the bench, heavily, the way you sit when you've been asleep a minute ago. She didn't say anything about July. She didn't say anything about five months of not looking at me, or the round hall, or the tattooed woman, or any of it. She leaned sideways, and put her head on my chest, and shut her eyes.

I put my arm round her. Through the wall, Pallavi played.

I thought about the word. I'd thought about it at this table before, and on the hike, and in the hospital in March with Tushar in the chair by the courtyard window reading old letters and saying nothing. I'd told Jinsia once, on a bright afternoon a year and a half ago, that romance was overrated, just chemistry with better lighting. I'd meant it. I'd been, in a narrow sense, right.

I didn't say the word. I opened my mouth to, and found I didn't know how, after a hundred and twenty-eight years, to say it to someone who'd known me for seventeen of them.

"You don't have to," said Tushar, into my shirt, without opening her eyes.

"How did you know?"

"You breathe differently. You always have." She settled her head. "Shut up, Dar. She's playing."

I shut up. She was playing.

Chapter 30

Friday, December 31, 172 – Saturday, January 1, 173 (*2202–2203*)

On the last afternoon of the year my brothers were splitting oak behind Senne's Earthhold, for the chairs he made as a hobby. Nobody had told me they would be.

I came up the garden path at three with a bag of the late apples from the commons cold store, which Senne liked, and heard it before I saw it: the flat crack of a maul on a wedge, and then a second, out of rhythm with the first. I came round the corner of the hens' house and stopped.

The woodshed stood at the bottom of Senne's garden, open on one side, with the cluster's tools hung along the back wall and a stack of oak rounds from the forest thinning in front of it, gray and checked at the ends. Senne didn't burn wood; nobody in the Rings did. He worked it. He made chairs, and tables, and spoons for anyone who asked, and he liked his oak split, not sawn, because split wood follows its own grain and doesn't lie to you about where it's weak.

Berbant was splitting. He had his coat off and his sleeves pushed up and he was red in the face. Every time he brought the maul down he grunted, a small, satisfied sound. Avukat was beside him, on the other side of the block, in his canvas coat, setting the wedges and stacking the halves. He did it carefully, squarely, every billet laid with its bark to the outside, the way he'd squared up papers at every meeting for seventy years.

They weren't talking. I don't think they'd talked since the hearing. Berbant had stood up in the round hall and said he didn't want anybody to change the city, not even for the best man in it, and Avukat hadn't looked at him, and that had been six weeks ago.

They were splitting wood together anyway.

I didn't go any closer. I stood by the hens' house with my bag of apples and watched them. Berbant swung. The round split clean,

with a sound like a door opening, and fell in two. Avukat bent and picked up both halves and looked at the grain inside, the pale new wood that had never seen light, and set them on the stack.

"Good one," he said. Not to Berbant, quite. To the wood.

Berbant nodded and set up the next round.

#

Senne was in his workshop, at the back of the cluster's commons, with the door open to the garden and the cold coming in. He was bent over something on the bench, planing it, with long, easy strokes that sent thin curls of oak to the floor around his feet.

It was a cradle. Or the beginning of one: two curved rockers, finished and oiled, leaning against the wall, and the head and foot boards clamped on the bench, a pile of slats beside them, each one shaved by hand.

"For Jinsia," he said, without looking up. "And the woman he's having it with. Marisol."

"They're years off. The queue only opens tomorrow."

"Takes me a year to make a cradle." He blew the shavings off the board and sighted down it. "I'd rather be early." He set the board down. "Berbant told me about them. You told him, in the spring. He said you said Jinsia had waited a year and talked about it as if it were a weather report." He looked at me then. "People who talk about a thing like the weather want it most."

"I didn't know Berbant was listening."

"He was," said Senne mildly. "So was I. Nobody asks me anything, so I've a great deal of time to listen." He picked up the plane again. "Is it good? Them having it?"

"Yes."

"Then good."

He planed another slat. Then, in the voice he used for the hens and the pool:

"Linnea and I are putting our names down tomorrow. For the crossing. The roster opens with the queue."

I looked at him. He went on planing.

"She wants to see a world before anybody's broken it," he said. "So she can look after it from the first day. That's a good reason." He blew the shavings off the board. "She's going. I'll go. I can swim there."

"It's twenty-five years, Senne. More."

"Then I'll have twenty-five years of swimming here first."

I didn't know what to say, so I said the only thing he'd ever said to any of us.

"Is it good?"

He thought about it properly, as he thought about everything, which was why nobody had ever noticed how much he thought.

"Yes."

"Then good," I said.

Through the inner door I could see down the hall to the commons kitchen and the long table under the window onto the sunken garden, its benches pushed in, the hens' house dark beyond the glass. Every supper my family had eaten together since Senne came to the Eighth had been eaten at that table, because Senne had laid it and said *cut the bread*. Avukat and Berbant had sat at it through the worst year they'd ever had with each other, because it was Senne's, and nobody refuses Senne's table. I tried to picture it with nobody at it. I managed it for about a second.

Twenty-five years. Thirty. It would be there every Sunday until then, and so would he, and so would the rest of us. Nothing was going to change for a very long time. I knew that. I looked at the table anyway, until Senne said, without looking up, "Hand me that clamp."

#

Avukat came in at four, with wood dust on the shoulders of his canvas coat and his hands red from the cold. He nodded to Senne. He saw me and nodded to me too, exactly as he'd nodded to Senne.

He went to the workshop door and stood in it, looking out at the garden, at the hens' house and the stacked oak and the sky. It was going dark early, as it does at the end of December. Over the meadows to the south, with the last of the light going out behind the mountains to the west, one point of light had come out already, before any of the stars.

Brighter than it had been in the summer. Much brighter. In the week since the Lull began the station had lit its new fabrication hoop, the first piece of the ring program, and the hoop caught the sun from thirty-six thousand kilometers up long after the sun had gone down for us. It hung due south, halfway up the sky.

Avukat looked at it for a long time.

"Somewhere nobody's divided up yet," he said.

He didn't say it to me. He didn't say it to Senne. I don't think he said it to anyone. He stood in the doorway with his red hands in his pockets and looked at the light where they were going to build the door, and said it to the dusk, and then went out.

Senne planed another slat. I watched the curl of oak come off the blade, pale and thin and whole.

"He'll go," said Senne. "One day. On one of the ships."

"I know."

"So will the girl. Tushar's."

"I know."

"Is that good?"

I didn't answer that. Senne didn't seem to need me to. He went on planing.

#

We went up on Tushar's roof at half past eleven, the four of us, as we had once or twice before: Tushar and Jinsia and Pallavi and me. Marisol came too this year, for the first time, a small, dark, serious woman in an enormous coat who held Jinsia's arm on the icy steps and said almost nothing and watched the sky.

The meadow was white. The snow had stopped in the afternoon and the sky had cleared behind it, hard and black and enormous, and the cold came up out of the ground through your boots. The moon was two days past full, high in the southeast, so bright it put shadows on the snow. And all round us, across the meadows, the other roofs were filling up: little groups of people in coats, standing on the white, looking up, the skylights glowing gold beneath their feet.

Jinsia had brought the potato spirit from his lab, which was a crime of some kind, and passed it round. Pallavi took a mouthful and coughed and refused to admit she'd coughed. Tushar stood beside me with her arm through mine and her face turned up.

The new star stood well to the right of the moon, in the south, steady and white.

"Is that the ring?" said Marisol.

"Not yet," said Jinsia. "That's where they'll build it. That's the thing that builds it." He looked at it with his head back. "In ten years there's a door. And then there's a world on the other side of it."

"Not there," I said. "A throat can't open this close to the sun. They'll haul the ring out past Neptune first. And then fifteen years more for the far ring to get to the other end. Then they can open it."

"Dar," said Jinsia. "It's the New Year. Let me be wrong."

At midnight the murmurs came across the meadows from the other roofs, the way they do, a low sound rolling in from every direction at once, thousands of people saying the same two words to each other in the cold. We said them. Tushar kissed me on the cheek. Jinsia picked Marisol up off her feet, which she bore with great dignity. Pallavi said *Happy New Year* to me a half-second before she said it to her mother, as she had the year before.

Then she stood beside me, a little apart from the others, and looked at the star that didn't move.

"I'm going to go," she said. "Someday. Through it."

I looked at her. She was looking at the light, not at me, the way she'd looked into the camera at the end of the feed, straight at it, as if it were a person she'd been told would be there.

I thought about Seren on the roof of the ruin a year ago, pointing at stars that weren't there. *They'll go through the door, and the first thing they'll find out on the other side is that they brought themselves with them.* I thought about my brother in Senne's doorway. About S. Ya asking for a berth, as crew, nothing special. About a world twelve and a half light-years away that nobody had divided up yet, and how long that would last.

I didn't argue.

"I know," I said. "I'll help you pack."

She didn't say anything. She put her arm through my other one, so that I had Tushar on one side and her on the other, and we stood there, the three of us, and watched it.

#

My eye chimed at twelve-forty.

We were still on the roof. The others had gone in to the warm, all but Tushar, who was standing at the edge of the meadow with her head back, looking at the moon. I was alone by the skylight with the cold in my feet.

It was from the station.

Happy New Year, Dar Rax. Attached: the full failure telemetry from the Converger's Ring B, every channel, every sensor, raw, eleven gigabytes. No-

body else has asked for it. The review didn't. Your panel closed the question on the plate and I signed off on the closure, and I'd sign it again.

Look at it when you're ready. I can't stop.

Hana

The attachment sat in the corner of my eye, a small gray square with a name on it and a size. I looked at it for a long time. I knew exactly what I'd do if I opened it. I'd go in, and sit down at my desk, and read it all, in order, quickly, the way I read everything, waiting for the place where something didn't fit. And somewhere in eleven gigabytes, I was fairly sure, there'd be one.

I thought about the curve. The clean peak, the wobble, the fall. A plate, a tired night, an initial. A young man in a corridor who'd slept since September. A man at a window, nodding at Hana as if she'd passed him the salt.

I thought about the last line I'd ever written in the notebook Seren would take north with her in March, and the nine things on that page I'd seen and filed where I wouldn't find them.

I didn't open it.

I knew what I was choosing. If I opened it and found what I thought I'd find, a young man who'd slept since September would stop sleeping, and the plate with his initial on it would be lifted off him and set down somewhere far heavier, and I would be the one who'd lifted it. If I didn't, he'd go on carrying a plate that might not be his. I chose his sleep, and mine. It was what I'd done all year with nine lines in a notebook, and I'd told Seren in August that I would stop. I hadn't stopped. I'd only learned to watch myself doing it.

I didn't delete it either. I left it where it was, a small gray square in the corner of my eye, and closed the message, and went across the snow to where Tushar was standing.

She heard me coming and held out her hand without looking round. I took it. Above us the new star stood in the south, apart from the moon, steady and white and very far away. Everything else turned slowly behind it. It didn't move.

I didn't try to work it out. Not tonight.

Later, I thought, and heard exactly how it sounded, and who had taught me to hear it.

There'd be time.

About S. Ya

S. Ya writes fiction and makes music. *The Drive* is the second book of the Queue Series, seven novels set in a world without money, where the scarce things are earned and almost no one dies. The first book is *The Spire*.

Free editions, news of the next book, and S. Ya's music are at www.s-ya.art.