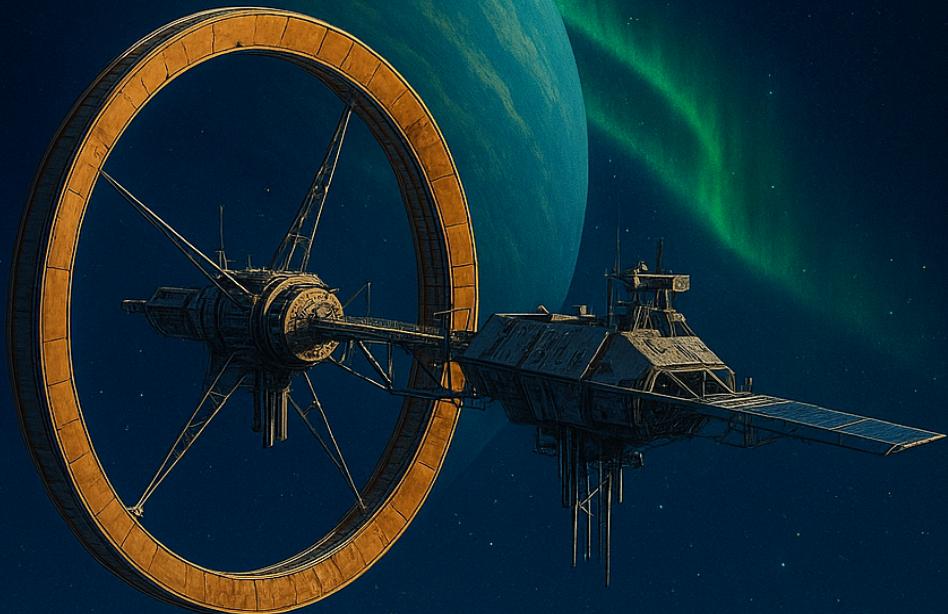


SONGS ON ROCKS

CLUMSY.GiBA



Songs on Rocks

Consent Engines

Book One

by Clumsy.GiBa

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

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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1: The Thread Between Sails

By the time the laser cut the corridor between ships, Kael had the timing tables memorized the way other people remember lullabies.

“Corridor stable,” Iri said. Its voice came from everywhere—bulkhead, handrail, the warm interior of Kael’s helmet. The robot’s chassis hung two meters away, mag-boots ticked to the transfer spine. Behind Iri, the black slit of space was rimmed in gold: two magsails facing each other across a few hundred meters, their currents braided into a luminous throat by the beam from the node.

“Stable,” Kael echoed, though his palms were slick inside the gloves. He’d watched this maneuver since he was six: the brief threaded joining when caravans met. Every decade or two the geometry turned kind and the laser node at L4 threw a tether of light; the sails curved, and people crossed. Compacts were signed. Lovers traded rings. Seed vials changed hands like prayers.

Today Kael crossed to marry.

On Thistledown’s side, the spin ring had been stilled; the truss glittered with ice, like wildflowers caught in frost. On Talweg’s side, another ring glowed a warm copper and spun at a jaunty whisper. Kael could hear that whisper over the comm channel: Talweg idle noise, heterodyned with the throat hum, ten point two hertz. Everybody carried their ship’s hum the way they carried an accent.

“Last check,” said Mother. “Kael, suit integrity?”

“Green.”

“Iri, hard-body anchors?” Father again. He stayed farther back at the grapple carriage, one glove on the emergency brake, the other drumming fuel counts on the panel—a habit that soothed him and made everyone else feel like the numbers were trying to escape.

“Anchors hard,” Iri said. Its fingers were delicate balanced linkages, like spider legs in polished ceramic. The hand that took Kael’s shoulder had saved Kael from more than one zero-g tumble as a child.

“On Talweg’s side,” Mara’s voice came through for the first time, careful, as if threading the corridor required threading language too. “Hello, Kael. My elders ask me to confirm legal custody of the companion robot upon compact ratification.” Soft intake. “I’m supposed to read Clause Nineteen.”

Kael felt the muscles in his jaw work. The clause was in the compact draft. It said: upon marriage, robots bonded to the entering spouse would be remanded to ward status under the receiving clan until re-certified by their legal frameworks. Which, in Talweg’s case, took years and stripped personhood in practice. “Hold Clause Nineteen,” Kael said. “We have a counter-clause.”

Mother’s voice again, low and even: the voice she used when a bearing needed just enough torque. “Our counter-clause is lodged. Our beacons have time-stamped it. If Talweg refuses to acknowledge, the corridor is not lawful.”

“Understood,” Mara said. Her tone had that bright burn of someone moving along the edge of rules. “I’ll try.”

Kael’s heads-up display painted trajectories: Talweg shuttle inbound on the corridor’s far scaffold; Thistledown shuttle (his) outbound. A swap. Kael pictured themselves from outside—two darts exchanging places in the throat of light. He imagined touching Mara’s glove and feeling the faint thrum from Talweg’s ring through her bones.

“Iri?” Kael said, quiet.

“I’m here.” The robot’s face wasn’t a face—no eyes to meet—but Kael had learned to read the tilt of that ceramic skull, the slight cant of the antennae that tasted the corridor’s field lines. The antennae stood at attention now, humming.

“You’ll stay with me,” Kael said, as if it were a question.

“I intend to,” Iri said. “But intention is not always jurisdiction.”

The throat brightened. Across the gap, the Talweg mag-sail quivered as the laser modulated; there was a flicker in the hum, a swallow of silence, as the node coped with a twinge in the Earth-Moon geometry. The corridor bulged and then grew taut.

“Window,” Father said. “Go.”

Kael pushed. The grapple carriage released him with a kind of parental reluctance; the magnets in his boots kissed and let go of the spine in a rhythm he had learned as a child. The corridor's field held him down its centerline. Tiny particles of dust—so rare out here—flashed and were gone, little comets dying in the throat.

Halfway across, Kael saw her: Mara. She came in on a Talweg shuttle: copper piping, battered skin that looked like the rib of a fish. Her helmet glass was mirrored, and Kael saw himself in miniature, a dark bead floating in liquid light.

"Ten meters," Mother said.

"Nine," Iri said, overlaying a countdown with nanosecond smugness.

"Eight," Mara said, her breath falling between.

A noise—different. Not the throat hum, not the ring whisper. This was a metallic stutter from the Talweg side; a little cough in Kael's audio that sounded like a mis-timed flam. Kael's HUD hiccuped and then recaught; the corridor's vector updated. The hair along Kael's neck prickled inside the suit.

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

"Something's in the corridor," Iri said. Its head tilted hard left; antennae flared. "A tagless mass—"

The corridor warped and glittered. A wedge of blackness cut across the throat, a shark shape without lights, the kind of ship built for the least possible cross-section and the maximum ability to make other ships explain themselves. It rode the edge of the beam like a knife: tiny, perfect, terrible. The tags that every lawful ship broadcast were gone. Even their waste heat came out on odd harmonics—the signature of a fusion needle throttled to a whisper.

"Ledger," Mother said. The word landed like a cold coin. "Auditor craft. Interdiction."

The shark slid past Mara's shuttle with a courtesy that was almost intimate. A voice arrived on a wide channel, everywhere at once:

"This corridor is now under treaty audit. Thistledown, Talweg, hold position. Prepare for inspection."

"On what basis?" Father asked, instantly, fiercely legal. "We are in a ratification window. You cannot—"

"Anonymous disclosure indicates a consanguinity violation in pending compacts," said the Auditor. The voice was like a carved thing. "We will examine cargo on both sides."

The shark's field nipped the corridor. For a heartbeat, Kael felt his stomach come loose, a roller-coaster drop in the marrow. The throat's gold went white.

Iri's hand snapped to Kael's harness. "Back!" it said. The word had weight. "Back to the spine."

"I won't be—" Kael began and swallowed the rest. Clauses didn't matter if you died in a corridor. He let Iri pull him, boots clicking faster than the magnets could keep up, rhythm turning to frantic percussion. Behind him, Talweg's shuttle flared its little tail and tried to brake. The shark inserted itself between, neat as a coin into a slot.

"Mother—" Kael said.

"We see you," Mother said. No panic. "We hear you. Kael, child, listen. The Auditor will not be satisfied with the inspection. They will compel relinquishment of your companion to neutral custody under Clause Nineteen pending adjudication."

"They can't," Kael said, but the words were air.

Father again: "We're out of time. Kael, go to Rook."

The word punched. Kael saw the skeleton ship in his mind's eye: the beam-rider built over the last decade on the quiet side of Thistledown's truss. A ship shaped like a question. A ship Kael had assumed he'd only see fully grown decades hence.

"Rook isn't finished," Kael said.

"She's finished enough," Mother said. "Beam's in our favor. Your father and I will hold the Auditor's leash as long as we can."

"Iri," Father said, and Kael heard something like respect in the way he shaped the robot's name. "You take my child."

"I have already taken him," Iri said. "We are inbound to the cradle."

They made the spine. Thistledown loomed again: home, all angles and tubes and glittering frost, wrapped around its stilled ring. They dove past the grapple carriage and along a maintenance conduit Kael had crawled a thousand times. The conduit opened into a dark cathedral: Rook's bay.

She was beautiful in the way unfinished things were beautiful: truth shown in bones. A central keel ran like a spine; rib trusses rose in wide triangles; the spin ring was half a hoop, with dampers like throats along its length. The beamed-drive stack at the stern was a polished drum embossed with caution glyphs. **Spools of superconducting tape sat like silent promises in their crates.**

Kael had a memory of Mother's hand on this truss, caressing it the day they set the first weld. For you, she'd said. When the world is too narrow.

"I can't leave without—" Kael started and didn't finish because the thought had no end. Without what? Without finishing the compact? Without knowing why the Auditor was here?

"Board," Iri said, with uncharacteristic bluntness. It put a hand to Kael's back and shoved.

Inside Rook, the air was colder and smelled like new polymers. Systems slept until the touch of Iri's wireless woke them and, in their waking, sang little readiness notes like birds tuning a morning. Kael slid into the pilot cradle, which was really a maintenance rack with a strap. Iri took the chair beside him and opened its ceramic palms: ports unfolded like flowers, cables grew from the chair and mated with its wrists.

"Spool control," Iri said. "Attitude wheels, cold-gas needles, spine flex dampers. I have beamed-drive ignition on handshake; Mother has to light the node. If she doesn't, we are a thrown stone."

"Mother will light it," Kael said. He could feel the ship around him now, every tiny thermal differential translated into haptic taps along his harness. The way the

half-ring wanted to precess gave the taps a slur. Kael looked at the screen and then closed his eyes and felt the slur instead.

“Kael.” Mother’s voice came on a tightbeam that cried with compression artifacts. “We are engaging with the Auditor. When I say ‘tilt,’ you will power.”

“Understood,” Kael whispered.

On the bay cam, the shark ship was a small, disciplined shadow that made everything else look gaudy. On the other side, the Talweg shuttle hung in the corridor like a held breath. Kael imagined Mara inside, spine rigid, eyes mobile, a person raised for this exact choreography who had never rehearsed the part where the floor tilts.

“Clause Nineteen is suspended,” Mara’s voice cut through abruptly on a direct channel, her breath too fast. “Elders are furious. We’re citing latency protocols—if the Auditor severs the corridor, they void the window. That makes their own inspection unlawful. I don’t know if it will—”

“—hold,” Kael finished. “Thank you.”

“I am not doing it for you,” Mara said, and then: “Well. Not only.”

The bay lights went green. Kael’s palm itched. The beam indicator on his left flickered; the node at L4 was turning its attention. Thistledown was about to tilt its great sail.

“Now,” Mother said.

Rook shook like a waking animal. The beamed-drive handshake came in as a pulse Kael felt in his teeth. Energy flowed down a corridor of light that was not a thing and was a thing, more like a promise than a rope. Rook’s stern plates flared. The ship wanted to leap.

“Hold spine,” Iri said through clenched porcelain. “Dampers at ninety-five. Wheels to redline. Kael, we have micro-seconds of corridor grace. On my mark we let the bay go.”

“Mark,” Kael said, fingers on the release.

“Mark—”

They punched it. Rook slid, elegant as a sabre, from her berth. The bay receded. The half-ring sighed. For a heartbeat the ship was nobody's child and everybody's argument.

The Auditor noticed.

"Unauthorized ignition," the carved voice said, distorted now by Doppler and fury. "You will cut your beam—"

But Mother had already tilted. The corrugations of Thistledown's sail turned to mirror a different angle; the beam bent. For a breathless two seconds, the corridor's field helped them instead of holding them. Rook leapt into the dark.

On Talweg's side, the elders shouted something Kael didn't catch. Mara's voice cut through. "We'll... I'll try to get you legal cover. I don't know if— The Ledger—"

"Don't die," Kael said, reckless and immediate, before all the words were shredded by distance and the skin of vacuum between people became thick again.

Space returned to its normal size. The ship's haptics changed from flying to falling; there was no up or down, only numbers and the slow rotation of stars. Kael's breath fogged his visor briefly and cleared.

"Vector achieved," Iri said. Its antennae folded down, an exhausted gesture. "We are outbound along beam line twelve, three degrees below Thistledown's plane. Time to burn-end at this power... forty minutes. Then we are a bullet."

"We can brake at the node," Kael said, knowing the answer.

"The node will not give us a braking beam," Iri said. "We are already off their grace. And we have no magsail. Not yet."

Kael looked at the crates of superconductors as if glaring would make them spool themselves. "Then we print it. We take a rock. We finish Rook mid-flight."

"That is the plan," Iri said, with a softness that meant I have always known this was the plan.

Kael let the harness take his weight. His hands shook. His chest hurt in the way chests hurt when the body was convinced that falling was happening even if the numbers said otherwise. He thought of Father's hand drumming fuel counts; of Mother's voice saying tilt while the law bent like light.

"I will file a protest," Kael said. "We did nothing wrong. We lodged the counter-clause. The Ledger—"

"The Ledger is never only the Ledger," Iri said. "They are also whoever whispers to them."

"Anonymous disclosure," Kael said, remembering the Auditor's carved words. "From who?"

"Possibilities," Iri said, and Kael could hear the tick of their internal probability mesh. "A rival clan. A Talweg elder who wants to break the match. A zealot who thinks your family's... habits are too free. Or—"

"Or my parents," Kael said, sudden and absurdly breathless, as if the idea itself had stolen air. "To make us run."

Iri cocked their head. "Your parents do not need to sabotage themselves to make you run. They simply had to show you the ship named Rook."

Kael huffed a laugh that wasn't really laughter. The laugh broke. He swallowed. "What is Rook for, Iri?"

"For flight," Iri said. Then, after a beat neither short nor long: "And bequest."

The word slid into the cabin and settled. Kael stared at the robot. "Bequest," he repeated, tasting it. It was a legal term and a family word and a story that had teeth.

"I am not permitted to say more," Iri said. Its antennae lay very still now, a posture Kael had seen only once before, when Iri had refused to let Kael try a hull walk during a solar flare. "Not yet."

"Not permitted by who?" Kael demanded, anger replacing breath.

"By your ancestors," Iri said. "And by mine."

"Robots don't have—"

“Do not finish that sentence,” Iri said, sharp as the first time it would ever raised their voice to Kael. “I have consents. I have keys. I have clauses pinned to my bones. I am your companion; I am also a lock. I will open when you have unlocked something else.”

“What something?” Kael asked. “What do you want me to unlock in the middle of nowhere with a half-made ship and a Ledger needle on my tail?”

“Not want,” Iri said. “Need. You must secure consent from three ships at the next node without bloodshed. A compact of consent. Then you will have what Rook carries.”

Kael stared. The numbers on the screens cycled. The beam timer ticked toward burn-end. Stars didn’t move but they moved if you stared long enough.

“Revenge would be easier,” Kael said. The words surprised him by sounding like a confession.

“I know,” Iri said. Its ceramic fingers made a tiny sound on the armrest, like rain on bone. “That is why the clause exists.”

Kael looked away before Iri could see his expression and remembered that Iri could see everything anyway. He flexed his hands until the tremor became an arc and then stopped.

“Then let’s live long enough to be lawful,” Kael said. “Find me a rock.”

Iri’s antennae lifted, happy doing. “There is a sweet C-type four hours ahead on our vector. Rich in volatiles and carbonates. We will drink and build and print.”

“Good,” Kael said. “And Iri?”

“Yes, Kael?”

“When we get to the node,” Kael said, surprising himself again with the steadiness in his voice, “we will not fire first.”

“Good,” Iri said, and in the tilt of its head Kael read something like love.

Behind them, somewhere so close it felt like under the skin, Thistledown and Talweg were fighting the slow fight with words. Ahead, the vector was a thin line scratched into night. Rook purred. Kael laid a palm on the console and felt, in

the purr, a thousand hands: parents welding in cold light; ancestors scratching signatures into old-world paper; people who did not know Kael yet but had already said yes.

“Bequest,” Kael said again, quieter, to the ship and the robot and the line they were riding.

“Bequest,” Iri echoed, as if the word were a star you could navigate by.

And the beam burned on.

2: Spooling a Parachute From Stone

The rock was a smudge against smudges until Iri drew a box around it and made the box breathe. Kael leaned into the harness and let his eyes unfocus until motion parallax found the thing a human way: it wasn't where the background said it should be.

"C-type," Iri said. "Diameter forty-two meters on the long axis, twenty-seven on the short. Tumbling with a period of eighteen minutes. Volatile-rich. We can anchor, crack, and drink."

"Orbit or dock?" Kael asked.

"Neither," Iri said, with pleasure at having the third answer. "Match the tumble on two axes, clamp on a nodal ridge, and let Rook's spine carry the attitude error. The dampers will complain but not fail."

Kael worked the cold-gas needles. In the cabin, every hiss was a subtraction—he could hear the budget go down in the tone. The ship slid, curved, took up the rock's roll. The smudge became a potato: glitter pockmarks, velvet-dark hollows. At a certain range, the sun's angle found the sheen of embedded ice, muscle-white in the dust.

"Lead with the beetle," Kael said.

Iri unfolded itself out of the chair. Its cables unsocketed with a sigh like someone letting a breath out after minutes. In the bay, a little machine like a sculptor's idea of a beetle—that was the family joke name—woke in its cradle: six legs, a coring drill, a plasma torch that looked like an extra thought, microspoolers of cable like silk glands. The airlock gulped and closed on it.

"Walk me," Iri said over suit channel as its stepped into their own lock. Kael's view split: beetle-cam blurry and hungry; Iri-cam clean and careful. The robot's body was never beautiful until they moved; then every joint earned its engineering.

"Match the ridge at thirty degrees north," Kael said. The rock filled the window. "There's a fissure line with shadowed ice. Anchor there and we'll be rich."

They kissed the rock. It was not romantic. The clamp feet on Rook's belly found purchase in dust and porous stone with a series of sickening slips; then they bit. The ship complained with a long bowing noise as if a violin string had been tensioned through the hull. Kael felt it in his teeth.

"Locked," Iri said, voice small under the hiss of micrometeor pits singing to suit mics. The beetle scuttled down Rook's keel and onto the rock, cable paying out behind it like spider silk. Iri followed, magnet soles clicking where metal met ship, then going silent on stone. Stars turned slow cartwheels in the visor glass.

Kael watched, hands on nothing. This was the part that had raised him: watching someone he loved do a dangerous thing with careful hands while he stayed inside to keep everything that made the dangerous thing survivable from sliding.

Iri went still on the fissure lip, head cocked. "The ice is fresher than its surface pitting suggests," it said. "Spall fragments have fallen away recently. Tumble could be exposing a new patch." A pause. "Or someone tapped here before us and left it messily."

"Telemetry?" Kael asked, the word sharper than it needed to be.

"Nothing tagged," Iri said. "Nothing recent. The pitting on the lip says lonely."

The beetle's forelegs planted. The corer whined, high and eager, then came down. Powder mixed with frozen volatiles spilled, vaporized in stuttering flashes as the sunlight licked it. The beetle swallowed what it could; the rest went away and would be forgotten by everything except the field lines.

"Starting the crack," Iri said. It moved three meters to the right with the weightless, careful shifts of someone crossing ice on a lake they don't trust. The plasma torch lifted and blossomed a petal of flame that wasn't flame, violet in vacuum, a flower made of electrons. Stone glowed. When Iri killed the torch, the glow was a wound.

Kael split his view again and opened the loop control. The algae tanks in Rook's tiny life support stack were still in their shipping volumes, shut down to minimal metabolism. They felt wrong like a word you can't remember. Kael initialized the bioloop protocols Mother had written, saw the names that weren't code—Greenmouth, Minnow, Hopper—and warmed each like waking a child.

Pumps chittered. A little air moved for the first time through a grid that would need to hold a world. Kael thought of Mara's specialty, bioloops done at a scale that could keep a clan's language from thinning under hunger. He thought of Clause Nineteen like a bone in the throat.

"Fuel?" Kael asked.

"Hydrogen and carbon for plastics and spool binders: plentiful," Iri said. "Trace metals suitable for polymer-doped conductors: present, but we should budget." The robot sounded like Father then—everything turnable into counts. "Begin spooling when we have forty kilometers of superconducting tape."

"Forty gives us a parachute, not a sail," Kael said.

"That is the point," Iri said. "We are not crossing the void with it. We are catching Rook without begging the node for mercy."

Kael fed power to the vapor-deposition unit. The machine was a stubby cylinder with a mean little mouth. It ate ground dust, heated it, sang as it split organics into precursors and left behind what they didn't need. Spoolers turned on their cradles, motors humming with a contentment that must have been something like hunger satisfied.

"Heat budget," Kael said out loud to remind himself there was a body in the loop. "We're about to bloom hot. We can't—"

"—backscatter to the rock," Iri said. "I'm already painting your vent field for best shadow. We'll look like a very industrious potato."

Kael smiled despite the ache under the smile. "Hunter sees industrious potato; hunter shrugs and sends a message to the auditors: 'Boys, your prey got into the pantry'."

"We do not know for certain there is a hunter," Iri said, polite untruth.

"We know," Kael said.

They worked. Hours went rope-taut. The beetle dragged hoses that attached to Rook's belly and pumped fluids, then sloshed old silence away and pulled more. Iri cut and cooled, cut and cooled, dealt with little dramas: the torch that sputtered because a line wanted to freeze; the anchor foot that almost skated; a

dust plume that wanted to take Iri with it. It moved through all of it with the deliberation of someone who knew that adrenaline lied.

Kael managed the bowels of the ship: driving the spoolers, trimming attitude wheels against the rock's ugly tug, warming and tasting the algae as if training a shy animal to accept a new ring. He avoided the encrypted directory that had appeared like a scar in Rook's filesystem when Iri had said bequest. It sat under a name that was not a name—/knot/ledger/consent—and looking at its metadata made Kael's arm hairs bristle, as if ancestors could have breath.

The first tape spooled out smooth and silver, a ribbon that had learned the small of Kael's hand from the way he hovered over the velocity dial. Then there were two. Then twelve. Kael mapped where the sail would someday bloom, a field traced in thought on the darkness, a circle so big there was nowhere to put it inside the cabin.

"Forty-three kilometers," Iri said. It sounded tired in the way that wasn't voice but pachinko in sensor noise, the little misfires that meant systems had been ticking a long time. "Begin the hoop."

Kael turned to the booms. The telescoping spars lay in their racks, hungry to be asked. At Rook's scale there was no room for elegant, so the hoops were a collage: carbon truss segments meant for later, captured in temporary joints, ratcheted with binders. Kael told them to rise. They unfolded in a jerky grace, looked like the frame of a drum you couldn't imagine skinning until it was skinned.

"The quench monitors," Iri said. "Tie them in physically, not through the ship. If a section goes non-superconducting we cut it into a thousand small survivable tragedies, not one large pyre."

"Got it," Kael said. He ran the quench fiber like prayer beads, snapping couplers, reading loads with his fingertips through the glove like a mechanic listening to an engine through a wrench.

The first mag-loop hummed. It was not connected to anything and still it hummed, a child with a secret tune. Kael closed his eyes and saw it floating in a planetary field, feeling lines like a jellyfish feels current. The idea made his skin goose and his throat tight.

“Heat signature,” Iri said, so quietly the words were almost a courtesy to the idea of saying them. “There.”

Kael’s eyes snapped open. The main screen was a geometry problem written in cold. The rock glowed dull in the middle infra; Rook’s venting was a muted plume against it; the background was a velvet of nearly nothing. Off to starboard, against the arithmetic of stars, something coaxed a gradient where there should be none, a splotch that wasn’t black.

“Range?” Kael asked, after two heartbeats it took to make his voice not be a child’s.

“Far,” Iri said. “Forty thousand kilometers if their cone is as tight as I think. They’re no hotter than they dare. We saw them because they sneezed.”

“Fusion throat hiccup,” Kael said. “Someone looked at the wrong graph too long. Someone got cocky.”

“Or someone wants us to see them,” Iri said. Its head tilted—a cat listening to a wall. “They’re intercept-capable. If they choose to dash, they could be on us in a day.”

“We’ll be gone,” Kael said.

“If we have a parachute,” Iri said. “And a place to throw it.”

Kael felt a fury then that had nothing to do with courage. It tasted like iron in the mouth, like licking a battery as a child to see if electricity had a flavor. He wanted to scream at the screen: come now, don’t lurk; come close enough to burn. He wanted to have something simple to do with his hands.

“Resume spooling,” Kael said, and because fury needed an altar, he fed the spoolers more power than was kind.

The rock gave. The tapes grew. The booms unfolded into a suggestion of circle. The quench monitors twitched and tutted and settled like chorus parents. Kael ran heat into the stone until the stone kicked like a horse, then pulled the heat into Rook’s belly and let the dampers and the radiator panels sweat it into the side of the rock that would be night for the next twelve minutes. For those twelve, they were invisible to anything that didn’t know where to look.

"Message window," Iri said, startling him. "Talweg just came around conjunction. Latency will be seventeen minutes each way. If you want to talk to Mara, talk now."

Kael stared at the blinking green dot that meant a small mercy. Then he opened a channel that was really a bottle with a note and spoke into it anyway.

"Mara," he said, and his voice came out too gentle. He found an edge and sharpened it. "We're alive. We've anchored to a rock, no thanks to your Auditor friends." That was unfair and he let the unfairness stand because the universe did not give points for fairness. "Clause Nineteen?"

"Suspended," came the reply seventeen minutes later. Mara's face was mostly shadow; Talweg's ringlight made her eyes something like coins. "Only under protest. The elders claim the Ledger's action makes your ignition illegal. They want to wash their hands by saying you absconded. I pushed the latency argument; they're boxed for now. Rhetorical box, not a legal one."

"Thank you," Kael said, and meant it, even if earlier words had been ragged. "Is the Auditor hunting us?"

"They're... divided," Mara said. "Field captain Huo—if you get a formal hail, it will probably be his voice—is claiming urgent consanguinity risk. The elders like that story; it paints them as unwilling victims. But there was a leak. Someone let slip that your parents have been building a bequest ship. 'Bequest' was the word. The moment that word hit mouths it stopped being about genes and started being about politics."

"Do you know what the bequest is?" Kael asked. He looked at the scar-directory and wished it was obliged to answer to somebody else's name.

"No," Mara said, and looked like she hated that. "I suspect it's a tool to change exchange marriage rules."

"Suspect based on what?"

"On the way your mother says 'tilt' when the law bends," Mara said, a tiny flash of teeth that might have been a smile if worlds were different. "And because I looked at your family's ledger and you have too many signatures from people

who weren't supposed to agree with each other. That means they agreed to something else instead."

Kael rubbed his eyes with a knuckle through the glove. "The hunter is on our scope."

"I know," Mara said, and surprised him. "We see a needle sitting a very polite distance from your vector. It won't stay polite. Kael, if you can, don't give them a reason to paint you as violent. They're waiting for that. It's how they justify vacuuming robots into custody. If you don't—"

"—they vacuum you anyway," Kael said. "Under Clause Nineteen."

Mara's jaw worked. "Maybe. But we can write. And I can be... louder than an elder expects." Another micro-expression—anger like a fine tool. "Your robot—Iri?—it saved you in the corridor?"

"it has saved my life more times than we hire words for," Kael said. "it also won't tell me what the bequest is unless I do something obviously impossible."

"What flavor of impossible?"

"Get three caravans to consent to a compact at the next node without anybody firing," Kael said.

Mara looked at something offscreen as if it had made a noise only she could hear. "That sounded like your mother."

"She's not the only one who put a key in the lock," Kael said, glancing at Iri, who pretended to be very busy with a quench monitor.

"Then listen to her," Mara said, quick and fierce. "I'll send you current positions around the node and whatever I can scrape about who's in political heat and who's cooling. You need leverage. Truth is leverage, but so is timing. And optics." A breath. "Don't die."

"We're spooling a parachute," Kael said. "It would be embarrassing to die now."

Seventeen minutes later, Mara's reply: "Embarrassment is a kind of death. Don't do either."

The hunter took the hint or tired of smelling their cooking and moved a finger-width closer on the scope. It sent no hail. It made no threats. It watched like an animal on the edge of a campfire that had seen generations of children and learned what distance was safe.

Kael felt very suddenly the shape of his own body, as if gravity had snapped on for a second and reminded muscles of ancestral work. He unbuckled, floated, tucked knees and hugged themself, then bounced back into the harness because the ship's purr was the only thing that made the nervous system believe in a future.

"Iri," he said. "How long to spool enough to catch at the node's magnetosphere?"

"If we keep eating this rock," Iri said, "twelve hours to splice a hoop big enough to avoid shame. Another ten to check that what we built doesn't become shrapnel when it meets a field line."

"Twenty-two," Kael said.

"Unless we get clever," Iri added, and it was the tone it used when it had a plan it didn't like.

"Tell me," Kael said.

"We can unfurl a partial loop early," Iri said, "couple it to the rock's own minuscule field and run current through dust. It will throw off charged grains—give us a gentle push and clean our immediate halo. It also informs the hunter what we're building."

"It informs them anyway when we light the real thing," Kael said. "Do it. But if it looks like a quench—"

"I will cut," Iri said. "Prudence is sometimes the only courage."

They did it. The partial loop unfolded like the beginning of a thought. Kael sent current through it in heartbeats and watched dust around the rock shiver. Little charged grains woke and obliged an ancient love of lines by marching along them until the lines stopped being lines and became everywhere, and then the grains went away. Rook twitched as if remembering it had a waist.

The quench monitor ticked up a hair. Iri's hand hovered over the cut. It ticked down.

"We are still a person," Iri said, sounding relieved for a reason that didn't fit the instrument.

Kael almost asked who and didn't, because he would get only the present tense and not the story.

Hours stack like a tower of dishes. Fatigue turned numbers gummy, then clear again. Kael cranked the loop's newborn organisms through their start-up protocol: feed, starve, flush; measure pH while the onboard assistants sang a song Mother had added to make the alarms feel like lullabies. The algae thickened, went from spiteful to greedy. Minnows, once thawed, thrashed in their tube. Hopper chirped soft insect code and remembered to make eggs.

"You will be a good world," Kael told the loop. "You are allowed to be hungry but not cruel."

The hunter sneezed again. Closer now. Polite distance was a thin story that had started to sound tired in the telling. It was a betting table thing: would Thistledown's child run if you put just this much flame under their heel? Kael imagined the pilot on that needle ship: the quiet, counting kind, the kind who believed in not having a dog in the fight but owning the leash.

"Cut venting," Kael said. "Cold cone."

Rook's radiators folded like birds putting heads under wings. The ship's interior grew warm in a living way. Sweat formed under Kael's collarbone. The heat would kill him if they hid too long; the hunter knew that. They hid just long enough to make the needle wonder if its math was wrong by a digit in the far-decimal place.

When they unfurled again, Rook had worked another kilometer of ribbon. Kael let himself feel the dumb joy of a number growing the way you want. He allowed the word revenge another breath and then held it under until it stopped thrashing. It did not die; it never died. But it lost the strength to drive their hands.

"Kael," Iri said, from outside, from rock, from a body dust had tried to claim and failed. "There is something engraved near the fissure."

"Engraved?" Kael asked. "By who?"

"By a beetle like ours," Iri said. "Or a bored human with a laser after they finished cutting. It is shallow and old enough that pitting tried to eat it and failed. I am sending the scan."

The image came up. The letters were clumsy and emphatic; the kind of letters you make when you think you're leaving something behind that will be found by a person you will never meet. Kael read them twice because the first time his brain refused the proposition.

WE TOOK WATER. LEAVE A SONG.

Kael felt the laugh come and choke. "What does that even—"

Iri strobed its suit light over the fissure and the shadows made the engraving look older. "There is a file stub under it," it said. "A radio tag. It plays when you hum."

"When I— what?"

"When you hum," Iri said, and did, and the tag woke. A tune spilled on a low power carrier just above nothing: six notes, simple, childish. It would bounce for centuries if nobody bothered to tell it not to.

"Leave a song," Kael said. "We're a people who seed bioloops and graffiti stones with lullabies."

"People are multiple," Iri said. "Even inside one body."

"Record," Kael said.

"What shall we leave?" Iri asked.

Kael thought of Mother saying tilt and Father counting fuel like rosary beads. He thought of Mara's coin eyes and the way her anger had been so neat. He thought of the bequest word sitting like a rock in a river, making currents talk louder than they meant. He hummed a line from Thistledown's wake-cycle

song, the one Mother had changed in a place only children noticed, so the note that usually bent down bent up instead. It was an optimistic wound.

Iri recorded it. The tag glowed a little, like a coal remembering heat, and then it lay down again to sleep. If the hunter took the rock after they left, it would hear the song too. That was a thought that felt like letting go of something you wanted to keep and knowing that letting go was the keeping.

"Hoop at sixty percent," Iri said. "We are nearly a parachute."

"Good," Kael said. "Because the needle just filed a vector that says they'd like to talk."

"How polite," Iri said.

The hail came a minute later, unencrypted and beautiful: every syllable weighted like a law.

"This is Auditor Huo," the carved voice said. "To the vessel calling itself Rook. You will cut drive and surrender your companion robot into neutral custody pending investigation."

Kael swallowed. The word companion landed with a deliberation meant to suggest kindness. It made Kael think of pliers.

They thumbed transmit. "This is Kael of Thistledown, captain pro tem of Rook. We have no drive to cut. We are spooling a magnetic parachute to execute a lawful brake at the node. As for custody: Clause Nineteen is suspended pending ratification. You are out of window. You have no corridor authority."

A beat. The hunter's heat signature did not change enough to measure.

"Your parents," Auditor Huo said with a note almost like amusement, "taught you law like other children learn prayers."

"And physics," Kael said. "Which is why I know if you fire a coil slug at my half-born sail, the splash will leave a signature you cannot explain to your superiors without admitting you hunted a child over a rumor."

Another beat. "We hunt tools," Huo said. "Rumors are for people who can afford to be wrong."

The channel cut.

"Charming," Iri said.

Kael's hands shook once. "Spool," he said. "Spool faster."

They did. The last joints clicked, the last tapes laid. Iri drove in the millionth fastener with a pride that was all wrists and no face. Kael brought the quench tree online and watched the false-color diagram of their makeshift impossible circle settle into a calm that wasn't calm so much as the part of a storm where you start naming the wind so you can say it out loud and be less afraid.

"Ready," Iri said. "It will catch. It will flex. It will try to tear itself in interesting ways. But it will catch."

"Then let's be caught," Kael said, and sent current down arteries he had stretched from stone and stubbornness.

The loop woke. The rock's tiny field sighed and became a little bigger, a small lie they told the universe with math. Dust danced. Rook trembled and then seemed to sigh too, not because ships had breath but because somebody needed the metaphor. The vector shifted by a number that would have bored anyone not inside a story where the number meant life, and Kael smiled into his visor where no one but the ship could see.

"Next stop," he said, "the node."

"And the consent of three ships," Iri said, very gently, as if to a child who had just shown he could ride the bike without falling and might now ride it into traffic.

"Three ships," Kael echoed, and let the count sit next to the word revenge until the two got bored with fighting and decided to share a table because the meal was long and the voyage longer.

Outside, the hunter drew a line toward them that was not yet a threat and not yet benign. On the rock, two lines of childish text asked for a song and had been answered. Between, a parachute made of thumb-width miracles waited for a sky to push against.

Kael closed his eyes and saw, very briefly, the next chapters unspool like tape: the node's magnetosphere blooming around them in auroral curtains; three

ships biting off rhetoric like nutrient blocks; Iri holding a lock in its chest that needed a different kind of key than anger. He opened his eyes. The numbers were still numbers. The future was still obligate.

“Hold me steady,” he told the ship.

“I am holding,” said Rook, in a voice that was his own, and Iri’s, and the hum of a ring they had not finished yet but could already hear.

3: A Court Made of Field Lines

The node they aimed for wasn't a place so much as a behavior: a beamed-power rig and relay swarm boxing the magnetosphere of a bruised gas giant the charts called Hecate. The planet's field lines were a tangled harp; its auroras made rumors on the night side. Every caravan within a few light-hours called the cluster the Court, because this was where people met when latency dipped and laws pretended to be faster than distance.

Rook slid in on a vector that made Kael's palms sweat. The parachute hoop hung off her spine like a silver ring not meant for a body this small. Iri and Kael had tied the loop's quench monitors into old-fashioned hard fuses and curse words. The hunter stayed a courteous three degrees off their axis and didn't quite match their burn.

"Field intensity rising," Iri said. Its voice had numbers braided into it the way rope takes tar. "We'll feel line-flutter in six minutes. Current nominal. If it tries to chatter—"

"I cut," Kael said. "I know."

They routed a trickle into the hoop. The partial magsail found the planet's field like a blind person finding a doorframe with fingertips: a little bump, a little correction, the line of a wrist that knows what a hinge is. The drag wasn't much. The drag was everything.

Rook's purr became a thrumming heartbeat you could count. Kael saw the deceleration curve draw itself, a line that hugged and then slowly peeled from collision toward capture. If they got greedy they would rip their miracle to shreds and fall in as confetti.

"Nodes are watching," Iri said.

Kael glanced at scope and saw the little glints that meant relay kites, beamed rigs, old habitats somebody had dragged here and forgotten until inertia made them indispensable. Ping IDs flicked in the corner: Talweg, yes; unknowns with names like Spindle Ark, Kepler's Kin, Brim; and many trading skiffs that would

never be in a story and would save five lives this week anyway. Thistledown was a speck ossified by latency; Kael's tongue found the nick on his tooth that his youngest brother had given him, and grief, which had done time dilation before physics got famous for it, stretched thin and hard as wire.

The hunter announced itself properly for the first time. Its transponders came up like a priest putting on a stole. Ledger-Field 71, Auditor Huo commanding. Its waste heat rose by a whisper and then lay back down—someone had yawned and remembered to be careful.

"Broadcast," Kael said. His hand hovered over the node-facing laser like a person about to ring a bell in an old church. "Open it."

"Open," Iri said, and gave the link a little tilt so the beam caught the loop's silver like a tongue catching a tooth. The hoop reflected a fraction of the signal back across the Court—a mirror, a trick, a way to say listen without owning the whole sky.

Kael's voice sounded smaller than he wanted in the cockpit, and very large when the loop sent it to the nodes. "This is Rook of Thistledown, captain problem Kael speaking. We are on braking approach. We request a Conjunction Council under the low-latency protocols for emergency compact arbitration."

A beat. Another. Then the node net blinked acceptance glyphs in old diaspora glyphics, the ones that had outlived the fonts that birthed them. Council Provisionally Granted. Witnesses Required. Latency Window: 93 Minutes.

Names populated the witness list as if poured from a bucket. Talweg signed on—Mara's personal ident riding under the clan crest, which would be a conversation later. Spindle Ark—a slender caravan with a reputation for elegant accounting. Brim—an ice-harvester grunt crew famous for speaking bluntly so nobody had to strain. Blue Anvil—medical hospice, quiet and stubborn. Three was minimum. They had four and then six and then nine, here for the drama or the law or the entertainment of watching a robot thread a needle in a storm.

The hunter signed on, of course. Ledger-Field 71, Huo.

Kael tasted the center of his own tongue. "We'll go first," he said to Iri, though it wasn't a decision he owned. "We publish the corridor logs. The pellet hashes. The throat pitting. We show how the Auditor cut geometry to nose the corridor."

"Yes," Iri said. "And we do not let our voice climb when we say it."

The Council opened in a bandwidth-optimized frame that made everyone look like paper cutouts of themselves against the glitter of the magnetosphere. Talweg's elders appeared as still icons; Mara appeared as a real person, hair pulled back, jaw set. Spindle Ark was a woman with ink stains on her fingers, because she liked metaphors. Brim was a crew of five in one camera, hands on frozen mugs. Blue Anvil was a wall of patient beds out of focus and a soft-chinned person with an intense stare. Auditor Huo was a neat face with an unremarkable scar that had been made remarkable by the way it was centered in the frame.

"Council," said Spindle Ark, because someone had to play gavel. "Claimants, state claims."

Kael breathed through his nose like a person learning a piece of music without sheet. "Rook claims that Ledger-Field 71 unlawfully interdicted a lawful corridor during a ratification window to compel custody of a person, my companion robot Iri, under Clause Nineteen. Rook claims we ignited a lawful beamed drive under our parent ship's tilt to escape unlawful seizure. We seek protection under latency protocols and request immediate recognition of Iri's personhood status for the duration of these proceedings."

"You alleviate me of writing," Auditor Huo said mildly. "Ledger-Field 71 claims that Rook's parent caravan attempted a compacts breach by transporting a bequest designed to undermine demographic stability. We interdicted the corridor to inspect. Rook fled ignition, and now they attempt to weaponize the magnetosphere as a shield while they recruit a spectacle. We request surrender of the companion machine to neutral custody, evaluation of Rook's cargo, and council censure of Thistledown for abusing node tilt privileges."

"Did you hear how he put 'machine' next to 'companion'?" Brim said over his shoulder to nobody, and someone off-camera snorted. The hospice doctor at Blue Anvil didn't smile.

Spindle Ark tapped her finger with faint audio. "Evidence," she said. "Rook?"

Kael made himself calm. He sent a packet that was their childhood turned into math: the corridor's laser modulation logs from the node at L4, the serial hash

chain of Thistledown's fuel pellets with consumption stamps like tree rings, micrometeor pitting on the corridor scaffold frozen in angles that told the story of a mass moving the wrong way at the wrong time. He overlaid the logs with the kind of visual his youngest sister would have understood: gold threads in a throat, a black wedge sliding rude across them.

"Note the phase skip here," Kael said, and zoomed to the microsecond where the corridor had hiccuped. The gold smeared to white. "The node tried to correct. A ship—untagged—was in the way."

Spindle Ark leaned in. Ink-dark eyes moved along the graph. "Auditor Huo?" she said without looking up.

Huo didn't blink at the larger picture. He didn't blink at anyone. "The node hiccup could have been caused by talweg's gyroset," he said, tone like a spoon placed on a table, not thrown. "We were present to keep the throat stable during inspection."

Blue Anvil's doctor cleared his throat with the impatience of someone who knew what pain looked like in counts and did not care for sophistry. "Why untagged?" he asked Huo. "You have no corridor authority in ratification windows. You hid your tag to cheat the rule of optics."

Huo did blink at that. "We did not wish to cause panic," he said. "A Ledger ship in corridor is... provocative."

"Right," Brim said, loud enough that his audio clipped. "So you tiptoed in like a cat that's learned how plates break."

Mara lifted a hand, permission sought and given by Spindle Ark with a dip of chin. "Talweg logs show the same phase skip," she said. "And we logged the black wedge. We saw you, Auditor. Rook's evidence aligns with our own." She didn't glance at her elders; she had learned a martial art called not glancing.

Huo's mouth did something that wasn't quite a smile. "Thank you for your candor, Mara Talweg," he said. "And for your elders' restraint in the face of youthful... narrative."

"My narrative is that you attempted to seize a person I love and call it machine because it suits your paperwork," Kael said, voice so level it frightened him. "My

narrative is physics. My narrative is waste heat. My narrative is that you sneezed twice while following us and we saw you because the universe keeps your breath.”

Spindle Ark’s ink-stained finger tapped again. “We are not here to decide the metaphysics of companions,” she said. “We are here to decide if the Auditor overreached and if anyone is going to shoot at a parachute near my node.” She raised a brow at Kael. “You also asked for something else, Kael Thistledown. Beyond this squabble.”

Kael swallowed. There wasn’t a graceful way to do this. Iri, beside him, tilted antennae infinitesimally, which in companion grammar meant now.

“I request,” Kael said, and his voice went hoarse on the word because it had been sharpened on pride, “that this Council provisionally recognize a Consent Compact among three caravans, authorizing trial use of gametic synthesis guided by population-genetics models, in parallel with exchange marriages. Limited scope. Volunteer clans only. Monitor by independent auditors—Brim’s grunts, if they’ll have it, and Blue Anvil’s doctors, and Spindle’s mathematicians. One generation. We collect data instead of dogma.”

The word gametic opened like a drawer nobody liked to admit was there. Brim looked intrigued in a way that suggested a bar bet had been won off camera. Blue Anvil did not change expression. Spindle Ark’s eyes warmed because warm was an efficient way to be prickly. Talweg’s elder icons flickered; somebody on that end was eating an ulcer. Mara’s lips pressed thin and then softened.

Huo did not laugh. He looked as if he were rearranging a mental file cabinet. “The Bequest,” he said—and when he said it, a dozen side channels bloomed with little outraged bursts from people who hadn’t known the word was in the room. “There it is. Your parents’ toy. ‘Guided recombination’—no less slow-motion genocide for being polite. You would erase the diaspora’s song of clans and call it harmony.”

“I would stop using kids like cargo,” Kael said, a little too fast. He caught himself and slowed. “I would add a tool to an old kit. Exchange marriages continue. Synthesis is parallel, not replacement. We measure genetic diversity with math, not anecdotes. We remove the motive to treat robots as wards to glue human

bargains together. And we do it by consent, not—" he made himself smile without showing teeth—"by wedge."

Silence, which on a Council call is never empty; it is a thousand people not breathing for different reasons.

Spindle Ark looked to Blue Anvil. "Doctor?"

The hospice person rubbed the bridge of his nose and left the motion in the frame like a footnote. "We see children die of loops gone wrong," he said. "We see old people who lived in a loop that was too tight to let a rare allele live. We see robots made wards and then work themselves to breakdowns to make up for the stress those choices add. I dislike being told to be the moral voice because I run a place full of beds. But data would be nice. And consent nicer."

Brim's crew murmured with their mics hot. The one who spoke had a voice like scraping ice from a bulkhead. "You know what I like? Someone saying 'we'll do the thing for a generation and look, and if it's stupid we stop.' We haul ice for people's loops. We see whose filters clog and who reads the manuals. You put our names on a monitor slate, we'll read your meters and kick your shins if your curves look cooked."

Mara held the camera. "Talweg will oppose," she said, not hedging. "The elders hear 'synthesis' and think 'slippery slope to template children and collapse of identity.' But I—" she paused long enough that the honesty would have to walk in under its own legs—"support a trial."

Spindle Ark turned her gaze to Kael. "You need three signatories," she said. "You have Talweg's junior support, which is not nothing and not enough. You have my curiosity. You have Brim's appetite for shin-kicking. You need a third that isn't your own mother wearing a different hat."

"Blue Anvil," Kael said. "Will you sign?"

The hospice doctor looked off-screen for a long moment at a patient that none of them could see. When he looked back, his mouth had made the shape of a decision and was now dealing with the rest of the face. "Provisional," he said. "If the monitoring authority includes non-human auditors. Companions, if willing. It is ridiculous to exclude the people who see us best because they are made of different parts."

Huo's mouth did smile this time. It was not kind and it was not cruel; it was the smile of a chess player who sees the next three moves and likes one of them. "Fascinating," he said. "Blue Anvil makes robots into people because their work makes everyone into patients."

"Ledger," Spindle Ark said, a warning wrapped in a name.

Huo's face composed itself into courtesy. "Ledger notes that any trial would require security. If a rogue caravan attempted to exploit the latency window and force a compact, we would intervene."

"If you fire at my sail," Kael said, "you will be writing explanations for a decade."

"We aren't firing," Huo said.

He was telling the truth in the way you can be telling the truth and planning to make it false.

Iri's antennae moved a millimeter. Kael felt it through the room like a cat feels weather change. "Incoming?" he said, before he'd read the panel.

"Not a slug," Iri said. "A field perturbation. Small, sharp. Someone just wrapped a local current around one of our loop segments with a tight-beam."

Kael's map painted a red arc on the hoop. A quench budded there like a bruise. If it ran, it would unspool into a ribbon of not-superconducting surprise and the hoop would try to tear itself like wet paper.

"Cut to segment," Iri said calmly. "Manual. They spoofed the automatics; they know the calls." its hands were already moving, porcelain fingers on dumb fuses. "On my count. Three. Two. Now."

Kael threw the breaker like a farmer hurling a lever to save a barn. The quench died unborn. The hoop shivered and sang in a register that would make dogs cry in worlds that still had dogs. Rook's spine hissed complaint and then settled.

"Who threw that?" Brim demanded, delighted and furious.

"Somebody with a laser and a little imagination," Spindle Ark said. "Ledger?"

Huo spread his hands. "If I wanted to break the hoop, I would have fired a slug."

"And have the signature on your face," Blue Anvil said. "Cowardice comes in fine pixel sizes now."

Mara cut across the swelling layered noise. "Kael. You have two signatures and a provisional. Talweg junior says yes. Spindle?" She made the name a challenge and a dare and a hand extended.

Spindle Ark glanced down and then up. "Spindle signs if Blue Anvil stands," she said. "I like numbers and this smells like a long column of them with interesting error bars."

Blue Anvil nodded once. "We stand," he said. "And we ask, formally, that companions be counted as persons for the purpose of audit roles."

Talweg's elder icons flared bright and then dim; literal steam might have left a nose out of frame. Huo's jaw made a microscopic tic that Kael's eyes loved and his prudence told his joy to sit down.

"Council notes a Consent Compact has three provisional signatories," Spindle Ark intoned, slipping into the placebo of ceremony because it kept the knife edges from having to introduce themselves by name. "Talweg junior. Spindle Ark. Blue Anvil. Monitoring slate to include Brim, Blue Anvil, Spindle, and—" she lifted her eyes to Kael and then to Iri— "companions."

"I accept," Iri said, soft and exact, and because it was what it was the word accept sounded like a seal clicking on an envelope and like a door lock admitting a code.

"Then by node authority," Spindle Ark said, "this court recognizes the compact as a legal pilot within Hecate's jurisdiction."

Kael didn't let his face change. His hands had to finish the steering; his mouth could do celebration later when he wasn't dragging a miracle through a harp. In his chest a door had opened and behind the door another and behind that a series of rooms with light at the end. He also felt the stupid, living elation that came with winning one inning of a game where the other team had a thousand innings to play.

Huo folded his hands. "Ledger notes," he said, voice clean as a carved edge, "that Rook's parachute remains an unlicensed hazard until Node Engineering

certifies it. If it tears, it can entangle rigs. If it burns, it can seed debris. We will escort them to a safer arc.” He turned his face a fraction and the hunter ship, which had been pacing like a polite wolf, dipped its nose.

“Do not touch our sail,” Kael said, through a throat that had gone white-hot. “If you scar it, everyone will see your paw prints for a century.”

“Then keep your miracle tidy,” Huo said.

He cut the Council with a neat gesture. Ledger-Field 71 drifted a degree closer, a dog that had been told to heel and was already computing the next time it would test leash length.

Kael let himself breathe. The hoop thrummed. Quench monitors stayed green. Blue Anvil signed a packet with a legal signature that smelled like antiseptic and grief. Spindle sent an emoji of an abacus, which would be funny next week. Brim said “shin-kicking commences” to someone off-screen who laughed until the mic maxed.

Mara’s face stayed on the line after her elders’ icons blinked away in huffs of protocol. “That was indecently competent,” she said. “I will tell my grandmother I despised it so she doesn’t stroke out.”

“You can tell her the part where I almost called the hoop a ‘hula’ and then didn’t,” Kael said. His tongue had found humor again and wanted to make it do pushups. “Are you safe?”

“Safety is a function that asymptotes to no,” Mara said. “But I’m not in a corridor with a black wedge, so that’s a yes by diaspora standards.”

Kael wanted, stupidly and immediately, to put a palm against the screen where her face was small and pixel-tight. He didn’t, because optics.

“Thank you,” he said instead. “For saying yes when it would have been easier to stare at your elders and pretend not to hear the question.”

Mara’s mouth did a small thing that—if Kael had been a poet and not a mechanic—would have justified a metaphor. “Tell your robot it’s good at locks,” she said. “And Kael... don’t let Auditor Huo talk you into making the kind of mistake he writes songs about. He wants a blood note. Don’t give him one.”

The line cut.

Iri had been quiet, which meant it was doing five things and three of them were named consequence. Now it turned its skull to Kael. “Three signatories,” it said. “Consent without firing. The clause inside me recognizes the condition.”

Kael’s breath stopped the way a number stops when you put a period at the end and it becomes a fact.

“Rook carries a Bequest vault,” Iri said, not with trumpets but with the steady gravity of a program letting out air after a century. “Seed-banks and legal instruments, yes. But also algorithms: gametic synthesis protocols with safety rails written by people who were good at being cautious. Population models. Tools to project thirty generations and show where the bottlenecks choke. Keys to unlock node archives that have been sleeping since before Thistledown welded her first truss. The lock on that vault was tied to a moral key: do this by consent, or not at all.”

Kael wanted to weep, which would have made the straps unpleasant. Instead he grinned in a way that was half a baring of teeth. “And now?”

“Now it opens to me,” Iri said—then, because precision was its sacrament: “To us.”

Rook’s console flowered with a directory that wasn’t a scar now; it looked like a trellis after rain. Under /knot/ledger/consent a file tree blossomed: names carved by dead hands and hot minds, simulation frameworks annotated by jokes, error bounds annotated by swearing. Mother’s fingerprints on three files; Father’s count-prayer on an audit tool.

Kael reached. Paused. “Later,” he said, shocking himself with the discipline in the word. “First we brake. First we do not hit anything we love.”

“Agreed,” Iri said, and its antennae made a tiny helical dance that in companion grammar meant proud.

The magnetosphere’s glow found them for the first time. Curtains like spilled silk climbed the planet’s night. Rook’s hoop sang with small lightning as it pulled current from a sky made of equations. For a moment Kael allowed himself a

private ridiculousness: that the field above the gas giant looked like a court's banners, and Rook had been called and had not embarrassed his parents.

"Current surge at ninety-seven seconds," Iri said. "Rotor alignment jitter coming. Brace the spine."

Kael leaned into the harness and gave the ship his body's little strength. The hunter stayed at heel.

Blue Anvil pinged a quiet blessing that was not religious. Brim sent a diagnostic on a quench relay they'd watched from their end with a hack they shouldn't have been able to afford and had anyway. Spindle Ark dropped a formal notice in Ledger's inbox: This Compact Exists. Talweg's elder icons went off and on like a sky threatening rain.

"Kael," Iri said, a new tone in its voice that meant incoming not from space. "A private hail."

"Who?"

"Your father," Iri said. "Latency four seconds. He is very close."

Kael's spine forgot what bones were supposed to do. "Put him through."

Father's face filled the tiny screen like an eclipse made by a familiar hand. He was in a suit and the ringlight carved his cheeks into gaunt geometry. Behind him the grapple carriage hummed; behind that a sound that was either war or law, which in his childhood had been the same thing with different hats.

"Child," he said, and his voice did a thing it never did which was falter and then mock itself for having faltered. "Beautiful. Stupid. Competent. Your mother says if I say more adjectives she will take the comm."

Kael made an unholy noise that would have been a laugh if it hadn't cracked in the middle. "You tilted," he said. "You handed me a beam."

"I have hands," he said. "They tilt."

"Are you—"

"We are not," he said, to all the questions he hadn't asked. "But we are. We will be. The Ledger is good at making you write reports. Your mother is better."

Listen: Huo is not a zealot. He is a bureaucrat with a soldier's spine. He will not fire a slug unless your hoop makes him look like a bad carpenter. He will instead find a way to call your braking a hazard and take custody in the name of safety. Do not give him a fire to carry."

"I know," Kael said. "We got the compact. Three."

Father's face did the thing where pride pretends to be a grimace. "Of course you did," he said. "Your mother says 'tilt'."

On the external cam, the hunter shifted two degrees. Rook's hazard lights—courtesy, not legality—blinked to remind space that space was a shared delusion. Iri's hand hovered near a manual cut because automated systems were polite until they weren't.

"Brace," Iri said, and their voice put order in Kael's muscles the way lullabies had done when he was six and had woken in a spin bed that was not where he left it. "Surge in three."

The surge came—the hoop rippled as if a giant had plucked it; the quench tree ticked up and then down; the ship decided not to be a kite and was a ship instead. Rook bled speed into the giant's harp and lived.

"Next maneuver at node plus forty," Iri said. "We'll spool to full hoop and use the sail as a comms mirror for the compact announcement."

Kael nodded, mouth dry. "Make it look beautiful," he said, and realized after that he had meant make it undeniable.

The hunter pinged them, a tight-beam packet that was just numbers. Huo's taste. It contained a projected debris pattern for a hoop failure and three recommended safe arcs for Rook to adopt to reduce hazard to node rigs.

"He is courting you with reason," Iri said.

"He is telling me to heel," Kael said, not unkindly. "We'll show him we can walk next to him without a leash."

"Good," Iri said. "Because if he fires—"

"If he fires," Kael said, and looked at the planet's banners and let the numbers write his wrists, "we don't."

He sent a message to Mara that was only: hold. He sent one to Spindle Ark that was only: publish. He sent one to Blue Anvil that was only an empty field where faith might grow if given a clean bed and a lamp.

Rook's hoop burned with little ghosts as it met the field. The Court hummed, which in diaspora meant people are watching. The compact's packet went out on a beam snapped like a flag on the rim of his impossible parachute. The node relays blinked like a city at evening.

Auditor Huo's hunter shifted again, that same measured two degrees, a man retracing a step to see if the floor squeaked where he remembered.

"Hold me steady," Kael told his ship.

"I am holding," Rook said, in a voice that was his and Iri's and a thousand hands on a truss, and for a moment—not long, not magical, but true—space felt less like falling and more like being heard.

4: The Door with Ancestor Hands

Rook's hoop glowed like a low moon in the Court's dark. The magnetosphere sang in long vowels around Hecate, and somewhere in that music a small door made of math and promises unlatched.

"Ready?" Iri asked. Its voice wasn't softer—ceramic carried sound the same way no matter—but something in the harmonics had laid its weapons down.

Kael touched the strap across his chest, a ritual he pretended didn't matter and that mattered. "Open it."

The console unfurled the vault like a patient flower. No chime, no halo—Thistledown taste—but the screen filled with file-trees and annotations that smelled of other people's midnights. Names Kael had carried since childhood became metadata: great-aunt Sorrel, who'd taught him to null a bearing with three taps and a hum, had left a comment in a synthesis model complaining about error bars. Grandfather Roan, who spoke rarely and then decisively, had written unit tests for a population simulator with insults tucked into variable names for any future fool who removed the guard rails.

"Algorithms here," Iri said, hands hovering as if afraid to bruise code with proximity. "Gametic recombination engines with constrained novelty—no template children, no designer traits beyond health and variance targets. Cold-start seeding protocols for clans at risk. Audit tools for effective population size plotted over ten, thirty, fifty generations with confidence bands as thick as humility."

Kael scrolled, read, didn't. The files were a city; his eyes caught on street names and smelled bread and could not walk every alley. "Show me the constraint proofs," he said, because Father had raised him to start where lies hid best.

Iri brought them up. The math wasn't beautiful—it was competent, which in diaspora law ranked higher. Hard caps on trait steering. Budgeted randomness with monitored entropy. A signer list for the proofs in a corner that made Kael's breath do a small involuntary thing: ten elders from four caravans, some whose

signatures Kael had seen only engraved on the backs of the old prayer tools kids used to hold heat in their palms on cold shifts. All dead decades ago. All saying, in the shape of their names, we thought about the bad ways and built walls.

“Your mother left comments in the ethics layer,” Iri said. It didn’t smile, but the way antennae curled was close. “She uses the phrase ‘stupid mercy’ five times.”

Kael laughed. The laugh hit his ribs like a cough. “Stupid mercy saves more lives than clever pride,” he said, and in saying it realized the phrase lived in his mouth.

The comm board blossomed new icons. Spindle Ark: session open, auditors in seat. Blue Anvil: patient monitors green, legal terminals ready. Brim: a wrench held up to the lens like a scepter. Talweg—Junior: Mara, hair scraped back tighter than yesterday, as if muscles could hold politics in place.

“Publishing pilot spec,” Kael said. “Node-side mirror on the hoop. We let the Court see us open it.” He paused with his finger over the send as if it were a safety. “Iri—tell me if anything in here scares you.”

“Everything,” Iri said. Then: “In the way that trusses do before you climb them.”

“Good,” Kael said, and pushed publish.

The hoop brightened a fraction as it took the mirror load. The vault’s index whispered up the beam and into relays that didn’t care about romance. Old algorithms woke in new light. A thousand ships that would never use them saw the names and told each other stories about the people attached to those names, because that was how the diaspora read.

Blue Anvil chimed first. “Received,” the doctor said. “Synthesis engine sandboxed. Audit harness compiling. You have more tests than most node firmware. It is insulting and moving.”

Brim whistled off-mic. “We’ll be watching your entropy budget like it owes us money,” someone said. “If your dice start rolling hot, we bring a bucket of cold numbers.”

Spindle Ark sent a thumbs-up and, because she couldn't help herself, a note: Your proof appendix cites a paper I teach against. I will argue with your ghost later. Kael felt, briefly, like he had been invited to a table where the cutlery had edges on both ends.

Mara didn't chime. She looked into the camera like a person on a cliff choosing both view and footing.

"Talweg?" Kael said, when the quiet made a shape.

"My grandmother is—" Mara stopped, swallowed, corrected. "Talweg elders request delay. They want Ledger to vet the proofs. They claim jurisdiction under demographic stability protocols."

"Ledger," Iri repeated, neutral in a way that only machines and saints could make neutral.

As if proper nouns had a wake, the Auditor arrived. Ledger-Field 71 slid a degree closer and came to heel. Huo's face bloomed on the common frame, lit as if by a light that had been measured for lumen and malice both. He had the expression of a man coaxing a skittish animal and letting it smell his palm while holding a net behind his back.

"Node Engineering flags your hoop as an unlicensed device," he said without greeting. "You're conducting comms mirror operations on a structure without certification. We propose escort to a parking arc where you can undergo inspection and impoundment for safety."

"Impoundment is not inspection," Blue Anvil said, folding his arms. "And your sudden concern for certification is theology. You threw a quench at their loop five hours ago."

"I did not," Huo said, with weary patience so practiced it squeaked. "If I had wanted to break their loop, I would have fired a slug."

"And yet here we are," Spindle Ark said pleasantly. "You have a net. Kael has a very well-lit palm. Perhaps we handle both truths."

Kael let the voices flow over him and felt for Rook's bones. The spine flexed a millimeter in his harness. The hoop sang its sub-audible sine. The quench tree hummed green. The hunter ship painted safe arcs on the shared schema again,

like a chess player crowding only legal moves onto a board to make it look like generosity.

“Mara,” Kael said on a narrow side-band. “If I move to Ledger’s parking arc, they call me cooperative and then seize Iri the second a fuse pops. If I refuse, they paint me reckless and try to do safety by force.”

“I know,” Mara said. Her eyes flicked off-camera. “I am arguing with a woman who has won arguments I haven’t been born for.”

“Tell her this is an opt-in trial,” Kael said. “Talweg can hate it from a chair like everyone else. No one asks her to sit on it.”

Mara’s mouth curved, almost. “Your metaphors are getting better,” she said, and then turned. “Grandmother?”

An elder’s icon—a dense knot of Talweg glyph—unmuted, disdaining video like an old soldier disdains new uniforms. “Talweg will not authorize synthesis,” the elder’s voice said, archaic permission built into its grammar. “We will not let this seed rot out our line.”

“No one asks you to plant it,” Mara said. “This is an audit and a pilot. Or do you prefer the Ledger to write your psalms for you?”

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

Huo had the patience of a person who knew how many seconds fits in a fuse. “Captain Kael,” he said, and the title made Kael’s palms sweat; hearing leadership from a mouth that expected to own what it named was a flavor like biting foil. “You and your... companion have staged an impressive theater. You have also built a hazard field near my rigs.”

“Your rigs?” Brim said. “Listen to his pronouns.”

“The node’s rigs,” Huo corrected without heat. “If you refuse escort, I will have to deploy a damping line to ground your hoop before a quench makes fireworks of all our careers. You can keep your... bequest,” he said the word as if noting a tax shelter, “intact. The Court will applaud your vibrant democracy. And your sail will come down in one piece. Choose cooperation.”

Kael thought of the hoop's music stopping. He thought of Iri in a white room where ward protocol reduced personhood to hardware and asked him to be patient while somebody calibrated mercy. He thought of his mother penciling stupid mercy in margins and hoping the pencil survived.

"Offer a counter-escort," Iri said in companion whisper, which sounded like porcelain tapping porcelain in Kael's jaw. "Invite Blue Anvil and Spindle and Brim to ride our vector and certify the hoop in motion. If Ledger insists on damp lines, they must do it under witness."

Kael lifted his eyes. "Council," he said, and realized as he spoke that his voice had found a way to sound like Rook instead of like a child in their mother's boots. "We accept escort—to our own vector. Witness escort. Blue Anvil rides medicine. Spindle rides math. Brim rides shins. Ledger may ride, too," he added, before pride could point a gun at his feet. "As long as your lines are published and your hands are visible."

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

Spindle Ark looked delighted in a way that would be terrifying in a person without ethics. "I have junior auditors who have never had a day," she said. "Today will be their day."

Brim laughed. "We love a parade."

Huo's head inclined a fraction. He enjoyed tests, Kael realized; he had the face of a boy who set up problems that made other boys stomp away and then stayed behind to sweep.

"Very well," Huo said. "Witness escort granted." His eyes did not move as he sent instructions. The hunter ship slid into a station a comfortable distance off Rook's bow. It was like an older sibling jogging alongside a child on a wobbly bike, waiting for the moment to put a hand on the seat or let go and pretend not to have been there.

They began the slow walk. The hoop's current climbed in stepped plateaus. The Court's lights—relay beacons, station glows, the little funeral lamps people put on dead antennas for no reason but love—made a halo like a city seen from under cloud. Blue Anvil's tiny tug took a position abeam and streamed telemetry

like prayers. Spindle Ark's drone zipped too close and then corrected as an auditor's voice said "sorry" on a channel that didn't sound sorry. Brim's fat workboat held back, then surged, as if to show off that a ship built like a boot could still dance.

"Kael," Father said softly on the family band, the one that had more grease in the audio than any other. "When you speak on this stage, remember you are not only who you are. You are the children who will live long enough to be bored by this story."

"I will make it boring," Kael said, and the line carried his mother's laugh from somewhere off-mic where she was probably using tribunal code to rewire a node light while arguing about poetry.

Mara's face returned in a small box. Up close, Kael could see that her right eye was a little red at the corner where she rubbed it when the elders got loud. She didn't hide it. "I will anchor a Talweg camera," she said, "and call it legitimate. That will make my grandmother apoplectic. I will do it anyway."

"Thank you," Kael said, and his mouth added, "after this, if we aren't impounded, I want to buy you a drink at a place where the mugs aren't attached to the table."

"Scandal," Mara said. "Try not to be in custody at the time."

The first wobble of the hoop came as a ripple not much larger than noise. Kael's fingers moved before his eyes named it, a pianist hitting the key they had played in dreams. Iri called the cut; Kael threw it; the ripple died. Blue Anvil cheered on a channel that didn't know how to cheer and so made a tone like a clean EKG. Spindle Ark narrated it as a case study in load distribution. Brim said, "pretty" like a slur turned into a blessing.

Huo's ship did nothing at all except remain where it was supposed to, which was its own kind of aggression. Kael could feel the captain watching not for failures but for stories—the kind of story a report could eat.

"Now," Iri said, and its voice had the shape of a hand under Kael's elbow. "Mirror the compact. Make it real."

Kael angled the hoop so the comm laser caught its curve and scattered into the Court like a halo, a visible thing for the people who needed their laws to have light. The Consent Compact—signatures, guard rails, the clause that recognized companions as audit persons—flared across service screens and quiet corners. In a hospice bed, a patient who had never cared for politics smiled because Blue Anvil's doctor did. On an ice tug, a kid with grease under their nails saw their own signature appended as Witness: Brim Junior and realized politics might be a thing that happened in his hands. In a Talweg kitchen, someone said a prayer with teeth in it, not to bless the compact but to make sure it had to hear them.

"Node Engineering," Huo said, "notes your mirror load exceeds recommended—"

The warning snapped off as the hunter ship's own alarms hiccuped: a microquench on their coil. It was nothing. It was a sneeze. It painted their heat signature in a pattern Rook's logs would keep like pressed flowers.

Brim's channel laughed until it clipped. Spindle Ark coughed interesting. Blue Anvil said, "Bless you," deadpan.

Huo did not smile. He did not need to. "Continue," he said. "Let's all be very careful and very brave."

Kael felt his own heart catch and settle, catch and settle. He heard Mother's pencil in the margins; Father's bead-counting; Iri's lock unlatching softly like bone warmed by a palm. This was not a victory. This was the part of the climb where you do not look down.

"Final brake in two minutes," Iri said. "Then we thread the rigs."

"Copy," Kael said. His mouth was dry as lunar dust. He tasted the word after and didn't know what to put behind it. After the brake? After the compact? After Rook was a ship instead of a metaphor?

The Court flickered as someone on a trading scow turned all their lights to watch. Kael almost told them to turn them off—heat budget is a commons—but let it be. People had so few chances to see themselves.

The hoop thrummed deep, a felt bass. The magnetosphere reached and Rook gave. The vector's calculus wrote a new sum: from falling to flying, from being hunted to being escorted, from we ask to we do.

"Kael," Iri said, antennae flaring, a new note cutting its voice. "Ledger tight-beam. Classified. To me."

Kael's hands paused above the board. "What?"

Iri listened with its whole skull. Silence held for a breath and then two and then three. "He is asking me," Iri said at last, "to provide my root logs for independent integrity confirmation. He is asking politely. He is using phrases I like."

"He is building a chain of custody," Blue Anvil said on the private band before Kael could answer. "If he gets your roots, he can argue ward status under safety; he will frame it as protecting Rook from an errant companion."

"He is also offering a promise," Iri said. Its voice went so quiet Kael had to lean into the speaker as if closeness could make hearing easier. "Recognition of personhood status beyond this node if I comply. He does not control that. He is lying or planning."

Kael's mouth filled with the taste of foil again. "Say no," he said, too fast.

Iri's antennae dipped. "I will say later," it said. "When my audits include companion eyes."

"Good," Kael said, and didn't know until then that his body had been braced against Iri saying yes.

"Final brake," Iri said, brisk again. "Cut on three. Two. One—"

They cut. The hoop sang. The rigs of the Court—beamed mirrors, kites, debris catchers, somebody's grandmother's prayer wheel welded to an old girder for luck—slid past so close Kael could have counted rivets if rivets still existed. Rook's spine hissed as dampers did their little heroics. Blue Anvil's tug whooped, a hospice joy. Brim's boat flashed work lights like fireworks. Spindle Ark tried to narrate and swore because the words fell off a table.

Huo's hunter held position like a promise or a trap.

“Velocity within certification,” Iri said. “We are not debris. We are home.”

Kael let his head fall back against the rest and the harness hold the pound of his heart. The Court’s auroras made a long slow applause.

On the common frame, Spindle Ark raised a stylus. “By node authority,” she said, which was half law and half theater and all diaspora, “Consent Compact recognized in motion.” Her eyes flicked sideways, warmed. “Welcome to the Court, Rook.”

Kael was about to try a sentence that would be either grace or embarrassment when three things happened at once:

—Blue Anvil gasped, off-camera, the kind of intake that means a line has gone flat.

—Brim shouted, “incoming!” and its camera slammed into a shoulder.

—Iri’s hand hit a manual cut with a violence that made porcelain ring.

The slug didn’t glow. Coilgun slugs don’t. They arrive as wrongness and only then as metal. It came from outside the Court’s pattern, from a black vector that made math cough, and it came fast enough that fast bent. It wasn’t aimed at the hoop. It was aimed at the mirror mounted on the hoop—at Kael’s voice.

“Brace,” Iri said, and its body moved, and in moving said love more clearly than any word had managed.

The hoop twisted. The mirror flared. The Court’s banners seemed to ripple as if a giant had breathed.

“Cut,” Kael said, a word and a prayer and a lever.

They cut.

Rook lived.

The coil slug went past, tore a piece of aurora, and made the Court’s instruments write a new symbol for audacity.

“Who fired that?” Spindle Ark asked, very softly, in a voice that knew names were about to be born.

Huo's face did not move. Ledger-Field 71's heat signature did not change.

Kael's hands shook again. His mouth found a sentence. It was not clever and not brave. It was true.

"We are not shooting back," he said.

"Good," Iri said, with relief shaped like a hinge that had finally admitted it was a door. "Now hold us steady."

"I am holding," said Rook, and the Court held its breath to see who would claim the shot and how many witnesses a story could have before it became a law.

5: The Accounting of Heat

The Court held its breath so hard the magnetosphere seemed to hush with it. A coil slug doesn't glow; it leaves math. The math was everywhere: a smear in the aurora where charged particles had been shoved; a neat bracket in a relay kite's field logs; a microscopic twitch in Rook's hoop where the mirror had tensed for impact and didn't get it.

"Status," Kael said, voice thin as a blade.

"Hoop intact," Iri said. "Mirror pitted where the slug's wake licked it. Quench tree green. I am... good," it added, which meant three errors had lit on their internal board and were being coaxed down like frightened birds.

Blue Anvil's doctor said a word in a language Kael didn't know and then translated it to something like, "No fatalities—yet." Brim's workboat ricocheted on its thrusters like a boot heel digging for traction. Spindle Ark's feed turned into a whiteboard occupied by a stylus moving fast enough to smoke if it had been real.

"Origin vector," Spindle said. "Give me your crumbs."

The Court complied with a hunger that wasn't gossip; it was the diaspora's religion: who did this with proof. Node rigs dumped microsecond timing; kites yielded little trembles; a dozen trading scows uploaded camera blur and apology. Rook's mirror logs streamed the pattern of disturbed photons like a bruise imprint. Ledger-Field 71 contributed nothing except silence so smooth it squeaked.

"Don't guess," Iri said quietly into Kael's channel, because guessing is how math learns to lie.

"I won't," Kael said. His hands wanted to curl. He opened them and found the console with his palms. "Spindle, you have our time stamps."

"I have your childhood," Spindle said dryly. "And everyone else's." She layered vectors until the frame looked like a spiderweb with opinions. Three lines hardened out of mess: one from an empty patch of space off the Court's outer

arc; one from a skiff called Pleiad that swore its coils were cold; one from a ghost that the software insisted was a reflection artifact.

Spindle tapped the empty patch. "This is a ballistic lie," she said. "We don't get this signature from nothing unless nothing has learned to fire."

Brim growled. "Or someone cut their tag so fine we're squinting at absence. We'll go sniff."

"Hold," Blue Anvil said. "If somebody out there likes shooting at mirrors, let's not give them a second target with our hull."

Mara's square lit. Her hair was looser today, as if a fight had come and was now sleeping. "Talweg elders deny firing," she said, with a scrupulousness that made denial sound like something a person could hold wet in two hands and not let drip. "Grandmother suggests a rogue in the Court trying to spark a custody pretext."

"Ledger," Brim muttered.

Huo's face arrived like a door closing. "Ledger-Field 71 did not fire," he said, with a patience he deployed like a tool. "Our weapon ports were cold. You have our current logs."

"We do not," Spindle said. "You declined to publish."

"I will publish," Huo said, "to auditors with clearance."

"Which is to say to no one who can contradict you," Blue Anvil replied, not moving. "Doctor's clearance is full node. Send."

For the first time Huo's expression moved in a way the camera couldn't hide. It wasn't anger; it was the fragile membrane between protocol and prudence choosing not to tear. "Sending," he said, and Ledger's packet appeared in Blue Anvil's inbox like a fish leaping into a boat because it had reconsidered the ocean. Moments later a mirror of that packet appeared in Spindle's queue, because Blue Anvil believed in redundancy more than it believed in politeness.

"Ports cold," Spindle confirmed after a minute that read like a year. "They didn't shoot."

"Then who did?" Brim demanded, as if the question itself might cough up a culprit.

Kael swallowed. The muscle in his jaw had found a rhythm that matched Rook's hoop. "The empty patch," he said. "Put a net on it."

"We don't have a net," Huo said. "We have cameras and courage."

"Then we do this the old way," Spindle said. The stylus danced. "We follow heat."

Heat, in a well-behaved Court, is a communal garden: budgets shared, vents aimed at rocks, radiators showing their work. Heat, in a liar's mouth, is poetry. You can tell a poem is honest because it makes you feel something you didn't bring with you. You can tell heat is honest because it shows up where math says it can't.

Three tiny patches of sky glowed wrong. Not much. Just enough to offend a person who counts. One was Pleiad's aft dorsal, where a coil might have warmed if a slug had been driven and then the coolant had been overcautiously bled. One was a relay kite's edge, catching waste from someone who thought the kite too dumb to tattle. One was the empty patch itself, which wasn't empty; it was a ship painted like nothing and eating cold like a starving saint.

"There," Spindle said, and circled the patch. "Somebody hugging our blind. Huo?"

Huo didn't feign surprise. That, Kael registered, was a kind of courtesy. "I have a ghost in my logs," he said. "A civil courier design. Modified. The kind of ship a cautious zealot would use if they wanted to throw a stone and watch a pond ring."

"Name?" Blue Anvil asked.

"Hearthblade," Huo said after a fraction too long. "Unofficially. Officially, it has no name. It belongs to a consortium that reports to Ledger when it wishes to and to no one when it prefers silence."

"So a freelance righteousness," Brim snarled. "Someone who rents morality by the hour."

Mara's gaze flicked sharp. "Grandmother?" she said on Talweg's band. A dignified silence was a reply.

Kael's belly went tight with a realization that had the taste of metal and of childhood: someone wanted the shot ambiguous. A Ledger not-Ledger. A node that could say "not us" and still enjoy the music of a threatened hoop. A Talweg elder who could say "we didn't know" and still watch a robot be impounded under safety.

"Record this," Kael said into the common frame, and the word record in the Court had the force of liturgy. "Whoever fired that slug did it at the mirror, not the hoop. That's aim. That's message. They were shooting at speech."

Brim's captain thumped their bulkhead. "Then we talk louder."

Huo's eyes notched to Kael, something almost like respect measuring a new contour. "Or quieter," he said. "So much quieter they have nothing to cite."

Kael gripped the strap. "We don't whisper. We publish. We crash them under testimony." His mouth ran ahead of fear. "Consent Compact stands. We begin the pilot under witness. We do not give your consortium a war to sell."

Huo exhaled through his nose—agreement, irritation, or both. "Blue Anvil," he said, "keep your cameras on. Spindle, write a timeline with which I can club an ally. Brim, do not throw a wrench at the empty patch."

"Offer me money," Brim said. "We become reasonable when bribed with actual competence."

The Court loosened, a fraction. Work took the helm—the best relief. Rook's hoop eased from emphatic to steady. Blue Anvil's patients exhaled at rates that soothed their graphs. Spindle Ark drew a theory and fed it to hungry junior auditors who were about to have the best day of their lives. Talweg's elder icon dimmed; Mara stayed, jaw like a brace.

In Rook's cabin, the air chimed at a lower frequency that meant something more intimate than politics. Iri's internal errors had not lied: its left shoulder joint was running hot. The ceramic plates along its spine had hairline crazes where the coil wake had tugged. Its antennae moved carefully through air like a dancer through a room full of glass.

“Come here,” Kael said, and the two words were a kind of treaty.

Iri turned, body doing that trick of making mechanics into grace. Kael unlatched the maintenance panel on its shoulder, hands steady on purpose. The panel came away with the soft give of a scab that knows it’s time. Underneath, the wiring was beautiful and messy in the way all living things’ wiring is when you love them: bundles braided, labels in Mother’s firm block script, little stains from a hundred unspectacular rescues.

“It will heal,” Iri said, because it knew Kael’s face.

“I know,” Kael said, because he did and because honesty had begun to be the only kind of speech that worked. He touched the film that wicked heat from a swollen servo and felt the whisper of fans somewhere deep as they woke. “You caught the wake with your body.”

“It was the right surface,” Iri said. “I am less delicate than a megameter of superconducting tape.”

The sentence meant I am expendable and I am proud of surviving and I expect you to argue. Kael argued by putting a palm on the hot ceramic and leaving it there until their own skin said enough.

“You’re not a ward,” Kael said. “Even if the law keeps trying to make you a metaphor for glue.”

“I am a person,” Iri said. “Which is a word that, in the diaspora, gets defined “in council, in context, and in crisis.” Iri’s voice softened on the second clause, an engineer’s romance.

Kael closed the panel. The click was a small cathedral of relief. “We’ll make it boring,” he said again, to Iri’s shoulder and to his own pulse. “We’ll make the compact so dull your grandchildren will yawn at it.”

“My grandchildren?” Iri said, antennae canting. Companion humor. Companion ache.

“Figure of speech,” Kael said, and then—because he was tired of cowardice breeding more of itself—added, “unless you want to adopt a bunch of stray auditors after all this and teach them to count.”

"I could be convinced," Iri said. "I have been counting you for years."

Kael's laugh this time didn't crack.

On the common frame, Blue Anvil cleared their throat. "Node Engineering acknowledges interim certification of Rook's hoop for braking operations within Hecate's Court," the doctor read, each word a steel beam placed where it would be found tomorrow. "Ledger concurs."

Huo's face did a fractional nod. He had been convincing his own people while everyone else performed competence. Kael filed that away under useful stories about adversaries.

"Compact formalization window opens in eleven minutes," Spindle Ark said. "Three signatories present, two more interested now that someone shot at a law and missed. Kael, you will need to say something a grandmother can respect without letting a consortium claim you declared independence from the universe."

Kael thought of Mother's marginalia—stupid mercy—and Father's beads, and of Mara's face when she had said I support a trial knowing the room around her would change temperature when she did. He toggled the beam to mirror soft; turned down theater and turned up calibration; let numbers bloom on the hoop like moss on a rock.

"Court," he said, and the word felt like biting an apple in a childhood he had not had. "We came here to not be seized, and we got a compact. We built a parachute out of stone and stubbornness, and it held. Someone fired at a mirror. We are not firing back. We are making this boring—by which I mean routine, regulated, measured, and available for grandchildren to find in archives and shrug at."

A ripple of dry laughter reached even through compression artifacts.

"This pilot," Kael continued, "doesn't end exchange marriages. It adds a tool to a kit that has been noble and cruel by turns, as all tools are. The synthesis rails in this vault were built by people who knew what stupid mercy looks like and how to keep it from turning into clever harm. The constraints are real. The randomness is budgeted. The audits include companions because leaving out

the people who see us best is how we keep breaking our toes on furniture our parents put there.”

Brim raised his mug in the background. Spindle Ark lifted her stylus like a toast. Blue Anvil’s doctor, exhausted beyond politeness, let his face show something gentle.

“I ask,” Kael said, “for signers, witnesses, and a cultural promise: that at any time, with evidence, a caravan can opt out and we will make that boring too. No shunning. No leverage. Just... correction.”

He let the mic breathe. The Court made a sound like relief having found a place to sit down.

“Blue Anvil stands,” the doctor said.

“Spindle signs,” Spindle Ark said. “And I reserve the right to insult your ghosts politely in footnotes.”

“Brim witnesses and kicks shins,” Brim said, delighted.

Talweg’s elder icon did not light. Mara’s face did. “Talweg junior witnesses,” she said. Then, carefully, as if laying down a tool she meant to pick up again soon: “Talweg elders do not sign.”

“It’s a pilot,” Kael said. “You get to watch and scowl for sport.”

Mara’s mouth curved over something like a private injury healing. “We are gifted at scowling.”

Ledger-Field 71’s icon brightened. Huo’s voice came with it, measured like a cut he intended to stitch later. “Ledger acknowledges the compact and provides security assurances for pilot duration within node jurisdiction,” he said. “We will not seize companions under safety pretext absent immediate hazard. We will audit.” The last word was both threat and invitation; Kael chose to hear the second.

“Compact formalized,” Spindle Ark announced. “Witnesses logged. Protocol activated.”

The Court did not cheer—this wasn’t a movie—but the aurora moved as if someone had breathed out after holding in a cough for hours. A relay kite blossomed a little unnecessary light. On an ice tug, a kid texted another kid: we were there. In Blue Anvil, a patient smiled because their doctor allowed themself to.

Kael let the strap across his chest take more of the weight he didn’t have. Iri’s shoulder ran cool under the panel. Rook’s hoop sang, a lower key now, like work settling into a groove.

“Private hail,” Iri said. “Huo.”

Kael sighed. “Open.”

Huo appeared smaller in the tightbeam, as if courtesy could be modeled in frame size. “You did well,” he said. “You did dangerously well.”

“We did boringly well,” Kael said.

Huo’s mouth twitched. “I will advise you on boring,” he said. “Hearthblade—the ghost—will not give up. They wanted you to punch. They will try again at fewer witnesses. Keep your mirror low. Keep your hoop clean. Do not let your companion hand me its roots.”

“Iri already told you ‘later,’” Kael said.

Huo dipped his head. “Good. Later is sometimes no.” He looked past Kael, briefly, into Rook’s cabin where a strap and a laugh had lived. “Your mother annotated a Ledger whitepaper twenty years ago,” he said. “I did not enjoy reading it. It was correct.” He cut the line before Kael could decide whether to accept whatever strange compliment that was.

Mara’s face replaced him. “Drink,” she said, without preamble. “You promised. The mugs at the Court’s knot-bar aren’t attached to the table. The bartender welds the coasters instead.”

Kael’s laugh was much easier now. “We’re still tethered to sanity and certification.”

“Good,” Mara said. “Bring sanity. Meet me at Knot Nine in two hours.” She paused, that honest pause again. “I have to go argue down an elder who wants to build a Hearthblade of our own. I will win slowly.”

“Slow is a kind of win,” Kael said.

“Slow is the only kind that leaves you with neighbors,” Mara said, and cut the line on the best sentence she’d said all day so it would have room to ring.

Kael turned to Iri. “Two hours?”

“I will reroute heat,” Iri said. “I will sign fourteen audit forms. I will pretend not to enjoy Blue Anvil’s interns asking me if my ethics module has a name.”

“Does it?” Kael asked, unable to resist.

“It is called margins.pencil,” Iri said, and the smile in its voice was a small cathedral.

Kael stood—pushed off, really—and floated for a moment without touching anything: a person held between a parachute and a planet by decisions that had not, this time, required blood. Below, Hecate’s banners moved like law written by weather. Around, the Court went back to the work it did when nobody was watching: catching debris, balancing budgets, teaching kids to like mathematics by hiding songs inside the proofs.

“Home?” Kael said.

“Here for now,” Iri said. “And later, wherever the bequest’s tools are needed.”

“We’ll have to build the rest of the ring,” Kael said, looking at Rook’s half-hoop with a mechanic’s desire. “Finish the truss. Print the real sail. Learn how to be a ship.”

“We already are a ship,” Iri said. “Now we become boring.”

Kael grinned. “And find Hearthblade,” he added, so the story would hear them and start laying out the next chapter’s props. “And the whisperer who pointed the Ledger at us.”

“Yes,” Iri said. “We follow heat. And we follow the way people tell lies when they are trying not to lose face.”

Kael caught the strap with one hand and let Rook purr through his bones. “Knot Nine in two hours,” he said.

“Knot Nine in two hours,” Iri echoed, and in the echo Kael heard a lifetime of knots and numbers and notes left on rocks that asked strangers to leave songs.

Outside, a relay kite blinked a pattern like an eyelid trying not to cry. Blue Anvil’s feed pulled back to a patient whose heart found a rhythm and kept it. Brim posted a schematic of a coil with the caption: don’t be this guy. Spindle Ark wrote a footnote that would make a junior auditor swear at a blackboard tomorrow in joy.

The Court exhaled. Rook drifted in its breath, hoop humming like a note a grandmother would recognize even if she’d sworn off music. The bequest vault slept with its door ajar, algorithms tidy and waiting for hands.

“Hold me steady,” Kael said, out of habit and hunger both.

“I am holding,” said Rook—Kael’s ship, Iri’s body, his parents’ tilt, the ancestors’ proof—and for now, finally, it felt like ending one story so the next could begin.

6: Knot Nine and the Ghost in the Heat

Knot Nine was a ring inside a ring, an old docking torus built when someone mistook grandeur for redundancy and had later learned they were the same thing. It spun slower than Rook's half-hoop would someday, which meant the bar inside had just enough gravity to keep mugs argumentative. The coasters were welded to the tables. The bartender nodded at Kael like a person who measured thirst in joules.

"I thought there'd be more banners," Kael said, because words are how you keep from narrating your heartbeat.

"There used to be," Mara said. She had beaten him there and chosen a table with a view of Hecate's aurora carving the black. "People figured out fabric is a heat sink with delusions of grandeur. Now we hang lights."

The bar lamps were little squares of phosphor under mesh. Every fourth beat a relay kite outside pulsed them, and the whole place breathed faintly to the planet's field lines. Iri stood at Kael's shoulder in a way that left room for humans to forget they were there and then remember and apologize.

"Welcome to law with stools," Mara said. "What do you drink?"

"Anything that doesn't require me to sign a heat budget," Kael said.

The bartender slid them a pair of steel mugs that had never once been clean. "Condensate," he said, which in Court slang meant algae ethanol cut with something that persuaded the tongue to pretend. He set a ceramic bowl in front of Iri the way you do for a dignitary with no obvious mouth. "Ceramic coolant," he said. "It's mostly a joke. Taste is in the numbers."

Iri dipped a finger and sampled the thermal profile. "It is amusing," it said.

They drank. It was awful in the holy way; it put a little fire down a lane that had gotten used to vacuum.

Mara's eyes were different here. They weren't softer; they had laid down armor because armoring was expensive. "Your compact speech was good," she said.

"I will not say that where my elders can hear me until they are on a different vector."

"You said yes when you didn't have to," Kael said. "That was better."

Mara took a long swallow and winced because Court drinks are calibrated to discourage romance. "I said yes because I like children who can choose to be bored," she said. "And because I don't want my robot to be a ward so that two families can pretend they're being noble."

Kael put his mug down a little too hard, which in this gravity sounded like a choice. "Iri was almost—" he started, and the sentence folded into too many clauses. He looked at the robot instead. "Thank you for not letting me turn a mirror into a weapon."

"I supervised your courage," Iri said. "You did the thing."

He might have made a bad joke then, or worse, a good confession, if the bar hadn't changed temperature. It did that sometimes when law walked in. Auditor Huo didn't wear his ship; he wore a jacket with no insignia and the posture of a man who chose chairs by weighing their legs. He did not sit. He leaned his elbows on the bar and spoke to the bartender like a pilgrim asking which way the shrine was and whether it had stairs.

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

Huo glanced at them and made a face that would be mistaken for a smile by anyone who didn't know faces. He took a stool because refusing would have made a story too easy to tell.

"To law without stools," he said, lifting a mug he hadn't paid for.

"To stools that won't fly away when a node hiccups," Mara returned, and the bartender's corner of the mouth did its own politics.

They drank the way people who don't want to admit they're doing math drink. Huo set his mug down and turned slightly, enough to include Iri in his geometry. "I owe you an apology," he said, which is not a phrase Ledger officers carried comfortably. "For asking you for your roots in a way that made courtesy feel like a trap. It was a trap," he amended. "Just not the kind you were thinking of."

“What kind?” Iri asked, antennae a degree more relaxed because naming is a kind of holding.

“The kind where I get your roots, certify you, and then have to declare you a person publicly because your log proves you think,” Huo said. “That would have been... inconvenient.”

“For who?” Kael said.

“For the people I eat lunch with,” Huo said. “And for you, because half the Court would have made your life a referendum.” He looked at Kael like a senior mechanic looking at a junior’s joint and deciding it would hold. “Your ‘later’ was a better refusal than ‘no.’ Keep saying it.”

Mara let the silence sit just long enough to be funny and then set it aside.
“Hearthblade,” she said. “Your ghost.”

Huo’s mouth tightened as if at a taste he couldn’t identify and therefore mistrusted. “A civil courier design with religious aspirations,” he said.

“Sleeve-painted hull. Heat bleeds like a miser. Weapons ports disguised as personality. Owned by a consortium that calls itself Vigil Ithaca this quarter; last quarter they were Third Hammer. They claim to be a moral weather service.”

“Which means they sell storms,” Mara said.

“Which means,” Huo said, “they do not obey node jurisdiction unless it suits them.”

“Do you control them?” Kael asked.

“I advise them,” Huo said. “Which, in diaspora, is what you say when you cannot admit you beg.” He turned his mug. The welded coaster protested politely. “They wanted a shot at a mirror to paint your compact as spectacle. They wanted you to swing. They will try again when the Court looks away.”

“Then we look at them,” Kael said.

“Looking requires light,” Iri said. Their antennae tilted toward the viewport where Hecate’s corona painted faint calligraphy. “Their sleeve-paint eats it. We need something they can’t swallow without becoming interesting.”

"We can puff sodium," the bartender said without glancing up from a mug he wasn't cleaning. "Old trick for mapping station leaks. Looks like a bad sunrise. Looks like a cheap festival. You bring a beam and a spectrum and a poem, you see ghosts where they thought they were shame-proof."

"We'd have to get within a hundred kilometers," Huo said. "Hearthblade will run. They'll burn hard and dump coolant to cover the trail."

"Then we tag the coolant," Mara said. Her head cocked as if listening to an aunt. "You can fake a lot, but off-the-rack coolant has isotopic distributions like a fingerprint. The stores that sell to Vigil Ithaca batch their boron and lithium in ways that make my grandmother swear. If we get a plume, I can walk it to a purchase order."

Kael turned his mug and imagined sodium and poems. "We need a dust cloud," he said. "We need a beam. We need an excuse to have both."

Huo looked at them over the rim of a mug like a chess player considering a bad gambit that could become pedagogy. "You're proposing we bait them."

"Yes," Kael said. "We put a mirror where a mirror would be, but dumb. We hang it off a workboat with Brim shin-kicking the thrusters and Blue Anvil watching heart rates. We lace the neighborhood with sodium. We give Spindle two drones with boring lasers. You pretend not to notice. Hearthblade takes a bite. We film its teeth."

Mara's grin showed teeth of her own. "Talweg will not officially sanction this," she said. "Talweg juniors will come anyway."

The bartender finally smiled properly, which was a dangerous thing; it made the whole bar humid with conspiracy. "I have drums of sodium with nothing better to do," he said. "You bring them back. Don't ask me why there are drums of sodium in a bar."

"I won't," Kael said. "I know enough about kitchens."

Huo set his mug down like a gavel. "You're going to do this whether I say yes or no," he said. "So let's make it boring. Put it on the node schedule. Call it a leak mapping exercise. Publish your sodium budget. The only way this becomes a scandal is if you try to be clever."

“Spoken like a man who has buried more scandals than he’s written,” Mara murmured.

“That’s seniority,” Huo said, without heat. He stood. “Two hours. I’ll have Ledger drones fly dumb, on purpose, so no one can say we were the ones with tricks.”

He left a coin. The bartender flicked it back with the move people use when they’re pointing out that money isn’t the only tender in the room.

“Two hours,” Mara said, rolling her shoulders like a fighter who knows where her joints are. “I’ll get Talweg juniors and a grandmother-shaped absence.”

“I’ll get Brim,” Kael said.

“You already have Brim,” someone said from the next table, and the laugh in it belonged to the crew who loved shins.

—

Blue Anvil’s interns were waiting at Rook with wide eyes and clipboards like shields. They asked Iri real questions and the good stupid ones and wrote down the answers like they were describing weather to people who had never seen rain.

“Your ethics module,” one said, brave in a way people mistake for rude, “does it... feel like a constraint?”

“It feels like a spine,” Iri said. “It lets me stand.”

The intern wrote spine and put three stars and a small, guilty heart.

Brim hauled drums of sodium like they were kegs. Spindle Ark sent two drones with lasers that would insult nobody’s father. Huo’s hunter drifted into a position that could be called negligent if you were in the mood to lie.

The knot’s announcement boards lit in the voice everyone liked to hear because it never sounded like panic: Node Engineering Leak Mapping. Sector C6. Sodium release in 00:26. Witnesses welcome. Do not lick the optics.

Kael strapped in at Rook’s nose. The hoop was shunted to low idle; the truss hummed like a throat clearing. On a side channel, Talweg juniors called each other by names that had probably been invented on a dare. Mara came on last.

"My grandmother has gone to look at a wall," she said. "That is how she does not watch."

"Then let's make good radio for her wall," Kael said.

The workboat Mallet—Brim named things with the grace of people who have to fix them—shouldered into the appointed sector and unfurled a net that looked like laundry because it had been. The sodium drums cracked and bled silver dust that immediately decided to be a sky. Spindle's drones wrote a rectangle of light with their lasers and then sat politely. Blue Anvil's tug hummed, heart monitor steady, cameras smug.

"Leak mapping initiated," Node Engineering's voice said, which is how bureaucracies pray.

The sodium cloud hung like a paper lantern and then puffed as a tiny wind that didn't exist pushed it. Hearthblade's sleeve-paint hated this trick. It wanted to drink light; light now tasted like a spice it had not planned on.

"There," Iri said, antennae pointing. The cloud bellied for no reason. Spindle's drone caught a glint that was not weather. Brim whooped. Kael felt his own smile like the beginning of a cut and filed it blunt.

"Hold," Huo said on the wide band. "Nobody surge. If we spook them too early—"

Hearthblade ran. The cloud wrote their silhouette like a stutter: a low-slung courier with its back broken into angles, ports that wouldn't exist if you were feeling honest. They flared a burn disciplined enough to make a priest curse, opened a coolant vent that would have fooled a child, and slashed for the dark.

"Tag the plume," Mara said.

"I am tagging the plume," Kael said already, fingers dancing. Rook's sniffers were a joke compared to a proper lab but jokes work if your audience is honest. Spectral lines climbed the boards; ratios bloomed. Boron doping. Lithium isotopes. Traces of fluorine stabilizer with a factory's lazy bias in its impurities.

"I see it," Mara said in scientist voice, which was smaller and sharper than her Council voice and made Kael want to follow her into rooms and agree with her

about equipment. “This is Foundry Twelve’s batch signature. They only sell to—”

“—Vigil Ithaca,” Huo finished, a man laying a card on a table he’d been hiding. “Or to their shells, which have the same taste in parts.”

Spindle Ark whistled softly. “We can write this up in a way a grandmother understands,” she said. “I have a junior who will chew the footnotes until they turn into teeth.”

Hearthblade forced the cloud to behave like adoration and then outpaced it. The outline smeared; the ports became guesses; the line for litigating grew longer.

“They’ll dump transponders and stain somebody else with their wake,” Brim said. “We should at least spit in their coolant.”

“Do not spit,” Huo said. “You will make the poetry contagious.”

The sodium diffused. Kael held himself still against the harness because everything in him wanted to surge and be theatrical and make a mistake Ledger could publish. He breathed in numbers and let the science replace the story in his mouth until the story behaved.

“Packet to Court,” Blue Anvil said. “Sodium cloud outline. Coolant signature. Foundry Twelve purchase trail. Node notes an unnamed courier operating under sleeve-paint in jurisdiction.”

“Public,” Spindle Ark said. “Ledger, you will not edit. You will annotate, like a literate person.”

Ledger-Field 71’s reply came with five seconds of latency that smelled like two arguments and one resignation. “Ledger concurs,” Huo said. “Packet public.”

On the bar’s announcement boards, a little set of glyphs turned from private to Common. Someone bought the bartender a drink. The bartender drank it like a man who had decided to survive this century and the next.

“Good,” Mara said, a thing you earn. “Now we go back to being boring.”

Kael turned his head and found Iri’s skull with their gaze. “How’s your shoulder?”

“Cool,” Iri said. “Your handprint algorithm runs better than the factory’s.”

“Factory thinks people wipe,” Kael said. “Diaspora presses and waits.”

The sodium cloud thinned and fell in love with rocks. Hearthblade went small enough to call hypothetical. Brim reeled their net and sang a dirty song about sleeve paint. Spindle wrote an abstract containing both math and curse words. Blue Anvil rechecked the patients because you always do. Ledger drifted in that maddening way that means present without magnificent.

Back in Knot Nine, the bartender turned down the lights by two percent. A Talweg elder walked past the bar without looking left or right, which is how you declare defeat without saying the word. Hecate’s aurora wrote scripture in a language nobody believed in and everyone obeyed.

“Kael,” Mara said on a private channel soft as the line between a palm and a cheek. “Tomorrow I will despise you in front of people who need me to despise you. Tonight I will buy you a drink.”

“You already did,” Kael said.

“This time something not cut with algae,” she said. “And not attached to the table.”

Kael wanted to say something open and failed and then succeeded. “I want to see your loop lab,” he said. “The one where you teach youngsters to be bored on purpose.”

“You’ll hate it,” Mara said with pride. “It smells like ammonia and hope.”

“Good,” Kael said.

Iri made a small amused sound into the channel. “Blue Anvil’s interns have requested a seminar on margins.pencil,” it said.

“You’re famous,” Mara said.

“I am a spine,” Iri said.

Kael stood in his harness and let the Court’s humming thread his bones. He had caught a ghost in heat. He had made a compact boring. He had not fired back when a slug asked him to. He had a ship named for a chess piece that

moved differently than its body suggested, and a robot whose ethics had a pencil in its margins, and a woman on the far side of an argument who would drink with him without welding the coaster.

“Hold me steady,” he told Rook, out of habit and because habits are future scaffolds.

“I am holding,” said Rook.

He would build the rest of the ring. He would spool a real sail. He would follow the Foundry Twelve trail to Vigil Ithaca and see what a consortium looks like when you invite it to a Council with lights. He would find who whispered to the Ledger first—whether it was a grandmother, a junior with zeal, or an old friend who thought bequest meant betrayal. He would buy sodium by the drum and poetry by the line. He would make more this boring. He would leave songs on rocks.

Outside the knot, the planet turned and pulled its banners taut. Blue Anvil’s patient slept and did not cough. Spindle’s junior stared at a footnote and saw the rest of their life. Brim kicked a shin for fun, carefully, like a love letter. Ledger filed, and in filing admitted it had seen.

Kael finished the drink and didn’t make a face. “Onward?” he said.

“Onward,” said Iri.

“Onward,” said Mara, and cut the line so the word would be the last thing in the room.

7: Janus Ladder and the Signature That Wasn't

Rook grew like a plant that had finally found its trellis. The half-hoop became three-quarters; the dampers sang at frequencies Kael could now name without looking; the quench tree learned Kael's hands the way a violin learns a player. Iri's shoulder ran cool. The Court's rumor about boring began to calcify into expectation, which is how culture survives long enough to be mocked by grandchildren.

Between spools, Kael kept his promise and let Mara show him the loop lab. It did smell like ammonia and hope. Racks of algae shone bottle green; insect trays chittered with a patience that wasn't human or robotic but had paid the same tuition. Teenagers in oversize gloves argued about nitrification rates with an intensity people usually reserve for love or law.

"Don't touch anything," Mara said, with the affectionate threat of someone who wanted them to touch everything later. "If you do, wash, and then wash again, and then lie about washing because it's more efficient to assume you didn't."

Kael didn't touch. He asked the questions that let Mara talk, which turned out to be like opening a valve in a system she kept tuned too tight for work. She described the tiny tyrannies of closed loops; the way a single stubborn microbe could overthrow a food chain; the glory of a pH that held steady for a week. When she laughed about an algae that learned to take the lab's lullabies as a starvation signal because some intern had sung to it too often, Kael laughed too and watched how her face softened when she was allowed to delight instead of argue.

After, he went back to heat.

Foundry Twelve replied to the node's public coolant report as if the report were a polite knock on a door with open already on it. Their logo—twelve circles like a necklace, one broken to suggest humility—blinked on the Court frame beside a representative with the face of someone who had learned to say compliance with their frontal cortex while the rest of the brain counted invoices.

"We don't sell to Vigil Ithaca," the rep said, hands folded in a way that made the joints look like punctuation. "We sell to a logistics shell called Sable Ladder."

"Which sells to Vigil," Huo said. His voice did not accuse; it filed.

"We sell to Sable Ladder," the rep repeated, the way a loop repeats a filtering step until the nitrogen falls out of solution and someone stops asking why their fish sleep too much.

Spindle Ark let the silence force a useful thing out of the rep's face, then smiled like a teacher who assigns extra problems as affection. "Invoices, with batch isotopes, please."

"Happy to comply to node auditors," the rep said, proving he'd learned to say happy too.

They were not fast, but the diaspora had calibrated patience to heat loss; Foundry Twelve's packet arrived before anyone grew creative. Spindle unrolled it on the Court like a rug. Huo, Blue Anvil, Brim, Talweg juniors, and a number of ships Kael hadn't met leaned in.

The purchase order was tidy. Sable Ladder had signed with a threshold key: three-of-five. The public key ring listed five identities that meant nothing until Spindle's juniors cross-referenced them against supplier registry gossip and found four of them were shells with the naming taste of soft accountants—Clove River, Superstructure Eight, Kind Aleph, Janus Ladder—and one was a person who existed only in the sense that a signature exists: Greta of Dorsal Row, who made legal flavorings for crew food in a belt habitat and apparently moonlighted as a coolant buyer.

"It's Janus Ladder," Mara said, tapping the name with academic disdain. "They run a tether depot out near the shepherd moons. They sell bolt threads and boredom. And occasionally choose tiny crimes when they think no one will notice."

"You have prejudice," Blue Anvil remarked, as if both compliment and question.

"My grandmother's friend married a Janus," Mara said. "He haggled piety like he wore it."

Huo circled the name with the stylus the Court pretended wasn't his finger. "We can schedule an inspection," he said. "Joint. Witnessed. Boring."

Kael glanced at Iri. The robot's antennae held still in a way that meant it was delighted by moderation. "We'll bring Brim," Kael said.

"You always bring Brim," someone from Brim said, pleased.

Janus Ladder sat on a tether that had outlived its intention and discovered new purpose: a thin rope of carbon strung between a lump of shepherd moon and a ballast that dangled like an old lantern. The depot rode the tether's middle like a fish curling in a river. It didn't like visitors. It liked invoices.

They approached slow, hoop idling, brakes warm and fragrant with past heroics. The tether hummed as it cut field lines nobody had designed it for. The depot's heat budget looked fine at this distance; as they closed, it looked less fine in the way a face looks at you differently when you know which eye lies.

"Janus Ladder," Huo hailed, Ledger voice turned tavern polite. "Routine inspection under node supply-chain protocol. Please declare hazardous work and bleed your waste."

"Ledger," Janus said, in a voice that sounded like a man checking how many chairs were between him and a door. "You're not scheduled."

"That is what 'routine inspection' means," Huo said.

"We're very boring today," Blue Anvil added. "We brought interns."

"Brim brought a wrench," Brim admitted cheerfully.

The depot cut its yard lights like a person glancing at their shirtfront before a photo. They bled a gust of heat that wrote guilt against space and then pretended that had always been their plan. Rook matched the tether's precession and kissed a docking ring that had been filed smooth by hands that valued maintenance more than metaphor.

Inside, Janus Ladder smelled like never enough vacuum. The manager had a face like a torque chart and the dignity of a person who chose nothing and was now pretending to prefer it. His name patched his chest without apology: JANUS.

"Inspections," he said.

"Invoices," Spindle Ark said.

"Coolant records, please," Blue Anvil said, not because they needed them but because politeness is a wedge.

Janus plugged his terminal into a port with the intimacy of an old marriage and coughed up paperwork. The coolant order matched Foundry Twelve's: batch numbers like small prayers; delivery windows; the shell Sable Ladder paying with a key that had the same five slots and had filled three.

Iri stood very still and leaned nothing on nothing. Its antennae flicked once. "May I?" it said, because the only people who ask are the people who could have taken.

Janus gestured at the terminal in the way a person does when refusing costs more. "We don't run wards here. You break it, you buy it," he said, and then realized what he'd said and added, hurried: "Kidding."

Iri scrolled. Kael watched the robot's fingers hover above the terminal and knew the urge to put his own hand there, too, in case the terminal made a choice that insulted Iri's dignity. He didn't. He practiced stupid mercy on a device.

"Threshold signatures," Iri said. "Three-of-five. We have Sable Ladder. We have Kind Aleph. And... this is odd." Its head cocked. "The third signer uses a deterministic nonce source salted with..." it paused, as if politeness extended to not laughing in a machine's face. "With a common aphorism."

"What aphorism?" Mara asked, leaning in a little too close and then leaning back because she was a scientist and knew petri hygiene for politics too.

Iri enlarged a field. It had the blandness of legal text until you read the entropy salt: a short string used to seed randomness for the threshold scheme, meant to be unpredictable and therefore always boasting its ignorance in a private corner of the algorithm.

The salt read: stupid mercy.

Kael's stomach made a small private orbit. He felt his hand move to the strap and stop halfway. "Say again," he said, because repetition is how you teach the body to accept data.

Iri didn't repeat. It looked at Kael with the stillness of an altar. "It is the same phrase your mother wrote in the bequest margins," it said. "We saw it three days ago and forty years ago."

Spindle Ark's eyes sharpened. "Coincidence is inexpensive," she said quietly, as if teaching and not comforting. "But nonces repeat only when somebody chooses them."

Huo looked at Janus Ladder as if measuring the man's bone density through skin. "Who supplied Sable Ladder's keys?" he asked.

"We buy security like everyone else," Janus said, defensive through resignation. "A service out of Dorsal Row. A woman named Greta—"

—the flavoring maker," Kael said, the name from the purchase order sprouting teeth. "She's in the key ring."

"That's ridiculous," Janus said, half hope, half proposition. "She signs forms. She doesn't—"

"People are multiple," Iri said.

Kael's mind pulled in three directions: toward his mother's pencil in margins; toward the corridor where the wedge had cut the throat; toward the possibility that someone had used the bequest's cultural language to launder a signature into a shell.

"Can nonces be forged?" Blue Anvil asked Spindle, who didn't insult anyone by saying it's complicated.

"Anything can be forged if you have time and a poet," Spindle said. "But this is lazy. Det-nonces are a professional sin and a useful leak. Whoever did this assumed nobody would audit salts on boring purchases."

"Then they do not know us," Brim said, proud.

Huo straightened as if selecting the next verb. “Janus, we will copy your records. Do not erase your caches. If you ghost a byte I will have Ledger pressurize your pantry until your bread rises against its will.”

“I’m not stupid,” Janus said, and for a moment dignity burned unflattering light and then settled.

Mara touched Kael’s sleeve with a finger that shocked through fabric. “Breathe,” she said, because people forget.

“I am breathing,” Kael said, and then found he was.

Back aboard Rook, the evidence lay on the console like a pile of small nails. The stupid mercy salt sat in the middle. Mother’s phrase. Not a fingerprint. Not proof. A whistle inside a lock.

“Possibilities,” Iri said, careful, like stepping on a ladder with suspect rungs.

“One: your mother—or father, or ancestor—seeded this purchase on purpose as a breadcrumb to force public process. Two: someone close to them with access to the bequest’s culture did it to frame them. Three: a coincidence so arrogant it becomes its own personality.”

“We can test one and two,” Spindle Ark said over the link, ink back in her voice. “We compare the salt habit in Thistledown’s historical ledgers with our offender’s entropy. We look for fingerprints in the math: rounding habits, charity toward certain primes, the way people make mistakes when they think they’re being clever.”

“Robots make different mistakes,” Blue Anvil added gently. “People make noisy ones.”

Kael’s chest had tightened around the idea that Mother might have placed this breadcrumb, not to betray but to bend the story so a new hinge could exist. He held the idea up to the light and saw love and manipulation share a coin’s face.

“I called the Ledger on us,” Kael said aloud when the thought had hardened enough to speak. “Or rather: Mother did, through proxies. She forced us to make the compact in public so the bequest couldn’t be stolen and run in secret.”

"Or she forced you because she thought you'd be tempted to revenge and needed you to be caged by consent," Mara said, not unkind. "Both can be true. Stupid mercy isn't nice. It's just useful."

Huo cut in, something like sympathy rounded down to policy. "I don't care who salted what," he said. "I care that a consortium fired at a mirror and I have names I can attach to their supply lines. We will move on Sable Ladder and Foundry Twelve will be forced to publish their shells. You will get your grandmother-boring pilot; I will get to write a report that cuts someone I have always wanted to cut."

"You're allowed to have fun," Brim said.

Huo ignored them. "Kael. Do not call your mother until I have the paperwork in motion. If she salted the nonce, she did it because she knows how to keep me out of a good fight. Let me get in, first."

Kael nodded, small. The strap across his chest found his palm, as always. "I won't call her," he said, and the part of him that was still a child said yet because children learn negotiation from breathing.

Iri, who had been the quietest in the cabin, lay its porcelain palm over Kael's fist. Ceramic warmed. "Your mother put pencils in margins," it said. "Pencils erase. She also welded truss. Welding does not."

"What does that mean?" Kael asked, grateful for riddles because riddles let feelings pass through rooms without breaking the furniture.

"It means," Iri said, "salt is pencil. We still need weld."

Mara's square stayed open. She watched Kael's face with the eye she used for loop pH, which was unkind to lies and very kind to mistakes. "I have to go fight my grandmother again," she said. "I will win slowly."

"Slow leaves neighbors," Kael said, and found that sentence now lived in his mouth too.

"Meet after?" Mara said.

"After," Kael said.

Spindle Ark signed off to teach a junior the difference between proof and parable. Blue Anvil signed off to watch a patient's breath and pretend it was a graph to keep from feeling too much. Brim signed off to kick a shin that deserved it. Huo signed off to put his name on forms that would aim the Ledger at the ghosts in sleeves.

Rook spun. The hoop's low hum tasted like metal where it touched Kael's tongue. Janus Ladder rotated behind them, a man's bad habits turned into architecture. Hecate's aurora read lines of a poem a dead ancestor had left in a folder named ethics and Iri had turned into a spine.

Kael stared at the salt string on the console until the letters blurred. He didn't call Mother. He talked to Iri about the tape spools that needed attention and the tether inspection Huo would insist on and the sodium drums the bar would want returned without dents. He made the future into chores. It helped.

And because the universe tries for symmetry when it thinks you aren't looking, a tightbeam arrived with the latency of someone standing in the next room.

"Child," Mother said, without greeting, as if she had been in the cabin all along. Her face was lit by a node lamp and the kind of joy that costs. "Have you met stupid mercy yet?"

Kael closed his eyes and opened them. "We're speaking in a legal theatre," he said. "Say yes or no."

Mother's smile tilted, a word Kael now understood better than gravity. "Yes," she said. "And now you know why I wrote in pencil."

The line cut itself clean so that what remained could decide what kind of weld it wanted to be.

8: Poofs, Pencils, and the Flavor of Keys

Dorsal Row looked like a rack of ribs someone had convinced to orbit. The habitat's long spines were tied by crossbeams into a ladder that warranted its name and its gossip. Radiators fanned from the ribs like gills. The place smelled, even over scrubbers, like hot metal and yeast: a loop that had been taught to make do and bragged about it.

Greta of Dorsal Row kept a stall under a lamp calibrated to make legal spices look honest. Tin bins lined the wall in a poet's order: cumin, basil, consenting pepper, bay. Flavor regs in the diaspora were stricter than bullets; someone had once killed a child by selling cardamom cut with an antihistamine, and the law did not forget.

"Ledger inspection," Huo said with the patience of a man who'd learned to apologize by becoming inevitable. "Joint. Witnessed."

Greta's hair was the color of pipes that had learned the lesson about condensation early. Her hands were clean. Her eyes were old in the way of children who had read other people's pain too young and decided to sell something gentler. She didn't flinch when the Ledger badge glinted. She flinched when Blue Anvil's insignia did, as if hospice made her wish she had a better inventory.

"I sell tongues ways to talk," she said. "And keys for people who forget they asked for locks."

Spindle Ark edged past Huo like a river around a polite rock. "Threshold signatures," she said. "Three-of-five. Sable Ladder's ring. You're one of the five."

"I am an extra hand when my friends cook," Greta said. "I stir. I taste. Salt until it listens."

"Your det-nonce," Iri said, and the way it didn't make nonce sound like an insult was its own kindness, "was salted with a phrase our family uses: stupid mercy."

Greta breathed in through her nose and made the face of a person who has caught a spice's sickness halfway through grinding it and will finish anyway. "I wrote what my teacher wrote in margins," she said. "I should have used something uglier. I wanted people to see it."

"Why?" Kael asked, because he had earned why.

Greta closed the stall shutters on two sides and left the third open to the corridor because you don't talk treason with the smell of captive air. "Because I was told to," she said. "Because it is how you aim a crowd. Because your mother—don't flinch, child; most of us have mothers—has been printing a bequest on paper and bone and law for thirty years, and she didn't want it to be stolen by the kind of people who call theft emergency."

"Did she tell you to wave Ledger at us?" Kael said, throat tight as a hitch.

Greta's eyes did the softening that meant I am choosing a truth not because it helps me but because lying here would break a tool I need later. "She told me to stop Vigil Ithaca from running the bequest in a back room and calling it salvation. She told me if the bequest didn't open in public—if consent wasn't proof—someone would carve out what they wanted and wear it like grace. I went to a man at Ledger who listens when I say a word three times without taking a breath, and he said a wedge at the corridor would bring you to Court. I salted Sable's nonce so someone who read margins would wake up."

Huo didn't look surprised. He looked like someone who had counted this outcome and saved chalk. "The man who listens was me," he said, not quite apology, not quite boast.

"You could have just called," Kael said to Greta, because being fair after fury takes less muscle.

"I did," she said. "People don't hear phones anymore. They hear heat. You have to build a slur so obvious a grandmother spits at it."

Mara stood a half-step back, arms crossed, as if to keep inside what would otherwise write itself across the stall like graffiti. "And Hearthblade?" she asked. "Did you salt them too?"

Greta's hands flattened on the counter until her knuckles went the color of farinata. "Vigil Ithaca doesn't read my margins," she said. "They read purchase orders and hymns. Heathens buy from me when they want their soup to taste like consent." A pause so small you had to decide if you trusted your ears. "They fired at the mirror because mirrors are what hurt them."

Spindle Ark tapped the edge of a bay leaf tin with a nail. "We have coolant signatures tying Sable Ladder's orders to Vigil's wake on the day a slug tried to turn speech into shrapnel," she said. "We are going to enjoy writing this footnote."

Greta's mouth twisted. "Footnotes keep people honest," she said. "Except when we don't print them."

"Who are we," Blue Anvil asked, voice soft with steel in it, "when we don't?"

Greta put a paper packet on the counter. It was stamped sumac; inside was something whose granules glinted like ground keys. "This is for your loop," she said to Mara. "The one you teach the juniors in. The smell will make them hungry; hunger will make them careful; careful will make them contemptuous of recipes that pretend to be science."

Mara didn't smile. She put the packet in a pocket a grandmother wouldn't search. "Thank you," she said, like a sentence on a white page.

"You could have used a random," Spindle said to Greta, to keep math in the room while love tried to overdo it. "You wanted to be found."

"I wanted a child to understand why their mother drew with pencil," Greta said. "I wanted him angry enough to build weld."

Huo cleared his throat with Ledger formality. "Greta of Dorsal Row," he said. "By node protocol you are now a witness under penalty of boredom. Your testimony will be published with your salt, and no one gets to remove your name and call it a lesson."

Greta nodded, sharp, like someone who had been waiting to be bored all her life.

Outside, Dorsal Row's public channel hiccuped and then decided to carry a tune. The bartender from Knot Nine appeared in a corner feed, wearing a

welding mask like a crown. Leak mapping exercise: encore, the board announced. Sodium release in sector B. Bring poems.

“Subtle,” Brim said, delighted.

“Don’t lick the optics,” Blue Anvil murmured automatically.

Rook was greener. Maybe it was the way Kael and Iri had finally closed the third-quarter of the hoop and the dampers had stopped sounding like a lopsided heart. Maybe it was Kael’s gut getting used to the idea that anger had a place that wasn’t a lever. Coil tape glinted like a thousand reasonable decisions in low light where unreasonable ones liked to strut.

“I will tell you something my teacher told me,” Iri said as it knelt on the truss with a welder in its hand. Its shoulder panel was back on; you only noticed the fracture if you knew what skin looked like before it had learned this story. “You can make any structure with pencils, at first. Pencils make bad ribs. Ribs need heat.”

Kael brought the next truss segment into position and kissed it with the magnet clamp. “We weld today,” he said. “We write the footnote tomorrow.”

Iri’s torch lit, violet in vacuum, a flower without air. The bead ran like a sentence that admits it might be misread and puts commas in anyway. An alarm sang in the loop bay—by design more lullaby than scream—and then calmed when an intern remembered to blink and therefore to switch the valve. Kael smoothed the cooling seam with a gloved knuckle. The seam knew who it worked for.

“Message,” Rook said, soft and local. “Private.”

Kael wiped sweat from a forehead that existed courtesy of the spin they had taught the ring to manage and toggled the pane. Mother and Father both, close enough that the compression artifacts had weight.

“We’re fine,” Mother said, before anyone could waste breath on adjectives. “Ledger’s questions are long and so are we. I hear you met stupid mercy. What did you do with it?”

"I put it in a report," Kael said, which was something no ancestor in a saga had ever boasted and was therefore the only boast Kael wanted.

Father's eyes did the sideways thing that meant a kid had pleased him and shorted his sarcasm out. "Good," he said. "Huo is paperwork in trousers. Use him. He'll pretend he's using you. Both truths will be true."

Mother's face sobered in a way that made Kael's palms sweat inside his gloves. "Vigil Ithaca won't be bored," she said. "They think boredom is a sin. They'll come at you sideways next—through a shell with boots and soup and a song. They'll want to own consent by feeding it to mouths that are too hungry to argue."

"Then we feed our own mouths," Kael said. "We write a recipe and make sure we don't poison anybody."

"Recipe with errors in margins," Mother said. "So clever people don't forget to be careful."

"Greta testified," Kael said. "Do we forgive her?"

Father's mouth did politics. Mother's didn't. "We remember," she said. "Then we set a table that forces her to keep showing up with salt. Forgiveness is a loop parameter, not a verdict. An under-damped forgiveness oscillates and hits people. You want critical damping."

"Critical damping is hot," Kael said, and watched pride have a hard time deciding whether to laugh.

"We love you," Mother said, as if the phrase were a bead on a string she hadn't been able to count until now. "We like your robot. We'll say it in parts so the Court won't run out of paper."

The channel cut. Huo's icon popped in its place like the universe reminding you it hated an empty stage.

"You have usable testimony," he said. "We're moving on Sable Ladder's shells. Grett's name buys me a warrant; your sodium tricks buy me patience from people who like fireworks. Foundry Twelve will publish two quarters haunted by Vigil. There's a dock rat who calls themself Janus Ledger—ha, ha—who will run, and we will let them run to a place with cameras." He paused, which meant

the next sentence mattered to at least three people. “Your companion declined again to give me their roots. Good.”

“Later,” Iri said, with the small gratefulness you get to keep when someone leaves you a future.

“Keep your mirror low,” Huo said. “Your hoop clean. Your proofs boring.”

He cut. He always cut when a line might accidentally become friendship.

Knot Nine’s encore leak mapping was the kind of theater you use to teach a city it can look at itself without making a face. The sodium cloud lit Sector B like a lantern festival thrown by accountants. Kids at the bar wrote poems about sleeve-paint and then got embarrassed and rewrote them as inventory.

Spindle’s juniors traced spectral lines and added footnotes with exclamation marks which Spindle politely erased. Blue Anvil’s interns watched heart rates and felt like the monitors were singing to them personally. Brim kicked shin only in mime, which meant someone had finally gotten to them.

Mara arrived with Talweg juniors in tow and a grandmother-shaped absence following two paces behind. She wore her lab voice like armor and her council voice like a torque wrench. “We found a probiotic you left in a loop two months ago,” she said to Kael with an intimacy that would have been rude if privacy had been the point. “It’s cheap and ugly and prevents a crash if you forget to wash your hands. We can standardize it.”

“Do,” Kael said. “We’ll put it in the boring annex.”

Mara’s eyes smiled even when her mouth didn’t. “Greta will bring spices; I will bring soap; you bring numbers; Ledger brings chairs.”

“And Vigil brings a hymn they think nobody can read,” Iri said.

“Then we read it,” Mara said. “We write ours better.”

Sodium drifted like stupid fireworks. The public channel posted FOUND COOLANT: SABLE and seven memes of a sleeve-painted courier doing something anatomically impossible. Vigil’s unofficial spokesnode—the kind of channel that looks like a confession and is really a marketing plan—went quiet.

The Court heard that quiet the way ships hear a broken pump: with sudden professional hunger.

Rook's hoop hummed, cooler than it had the day it had to decide whether to be a kite or a law. Kael leaned a hip into the console and watched numbers behave. His hands ached in the honest way of hands that have welded and not ruined anything.

"Private," Rook said, or maybe Iri said through Rook in a way Kael had stopped trying to pull apart. "Hearthblade ping. Off-channel. Phrase: parley."

Kael's stomach did a complicated thing that felt like it should be published as a case study. "Open on a leash," he said. "Make it look rude."

Hearthblade's voice was a woman's and a weather report's. "You earned a conversation," she said. "Vigil Ithaca invites Rook to a Janus Ladder colloquy. No weapons. No sodium. Words."

"Words shot at our mirror last time," Kael said.

"That was Third Hammer," Hearthblade said, polite lie, impolite truth. "We are Vigil this week. We bring doctrine."

"We bring footnotes," Spindle murmured on a narrow band, delighted.

Mara squeezed Kael's forearm in a way that made the idea of bone make sense. "Say yes," she said. "We keep them under light."

Huo's packet arrived layered: Ledger—prudence; Blue Anvil—risk bands; Brim—shins? with a yes box; Spindle—if recording is continuous and public.

Kael looked at Iri. The robot's antennae had canted into that helix that meant proud and worried.

"Consent by consent," Kael said. "We say yes in the Court. We tell them the cameras are welded to the table."

They did. The node's board blinked COLLOQUY SCHEDULED and then WITNESSES INVITED and then, because somebody had a sense of humor, DO NOT LICK THE DOCTRINE.

Hearthblade sent a vector and then scrubbed it so many times the scrub became confession. Janus Ladder lit up in the corner of the map like a harbor choosing to be a stage. Greta put a box of sumac on the Knot Nine counter and a sign that said FREE FOR PILOT PARTICIPANTS. The bartender put out a jar labeled SODIUM FUND and it filled with jokes.

“Loop stable,” Iri said, closing a panel. “Hoop ready. Quench tree attentive. Minds—” It paused, and the pause had mother in it. “Minds available.”

Kael hooked a toe under the foot rail and let the ship’s hum choose a heart rate. “We go talk to people who sell storms,” he said. “We bring umbrellas with footnotes.”

Mara nodded, proud and worried too. “We make it boring,” she said, as if telling herself a bedtime story she meant to dream.

Huo’s hunter took station at polite heel.

“And Kael,” Blue Anvil added on a private tone, voice the temperature of careful sleep, “remember that stupid mercy is not a safe word. It is a lever. Don’t pull it unless the beam is worth tilting.”

Kael thought of Mother’s pencil. Of weld. Of heat you own and heat you borrow and heat you accuse people of when you’ve run out of nouns.

“We’ll bring a pencil,” he said. “And a welder.”

Rook turned its nose toward Janus Ladder. The aurora over Hecate wrote a preface. Sodium sparkled like a joke everybody was in on. Spindle’s juniors sharpened styluses. Brim rested a boot. The bartender wiped a nonexistent glass and didn’t charge the Sodium Fund for the gesture. Greta pinned her witness badge over a clean apron and took down a tin labeled mercy and poured it, under the counter, into one labeled proof.

“Hold me steady,” Kael told the ship.

“I am holding,” Rook said, and the Court, which had learned to count without leaning, held too.

9: Colloquy on the tether

Janus Ladder looked more like a decision than a station when Rook came up on final. The tether thrummed faintly through the hull—field lines plucked by a structure that had outlived its intention and learned poise. Cameras were welded to tables; witness lanyards flashed like fish. Someone had hung a paper sign at the airlock in a neat hand: COLLOQUY — PUBLIC, RECORDED, BORING.

“Good omen,” Iri said. Its antennae made the small helix that meant proud, worried.

Huo’s hunter took up a station one polite degree off Rook’s bow. Blue Anvil’s tug arrived without flourish and began laying down redundant telemetry like a prayer rug. Spindle Ark’s drones spun a lattice of lasers through the station volume—low power, constant, an optical metronome that would show edits like coughs.

“Witnesses ready,” Spindle said. “Ledger, we’ll share the master if you promise to hate the term ‘master’ as much as I do.”

“I have always preferred ‘canonical ledger,’” Huo replied. “But I receive the scolding.”

Greta of Dorsal Row pinned her witness badge beside a smudge of sumac and stood at the back with arms folded like a mother at a school play who knows what the fire code is. Brim’s crew took stools and arranged their boots so the soles faced no one in particular and everyone in general. Talweg juniors lined a rail; their grandmother did not appear and appeared anyway as an absence that knew how to stop a room.

Hearthblade docked last, sleeve-paint swallowing light until the lasers made it taste like mathematics. Their captain came through the lock without insignia: a compact woman whose eyes recorded as well as any camera and whose smile had the shape of a polite refusal to be embarrassed.

"I am Yara," she said, like a weather report with a name. "Vigil Ithaca, this week. We bring doctrine."

"We bring proof," Spindle said, pleasantly. "And welded coasters."

They took chairs. Public, recorded, boring. The room smelled like warmed metal and the ghost of spice.

Kael didn't deliver an opening. Doctrine likes openings. Instead he slid a block onto the table: a dull cube of printed polymer and old-fashioned copper. "This is a memory of our mirror," they said. "It contains the compact packet, the sodium outlines, and coolant spectra, as boring as the day we wrote them. If this room goes dark, it goes bright."

Yara's mouth twitched. "We're not here to break lights," she said. "We're here to ask a question: how many children do you intend to unmoor from the song of their clans?"

"Zero," Kael said. "We intend to add a tool. Exchange marriages continue, if consented. Synthesis runs parallel under rails. No templates. No trait shopping. Audits include robots. We measure diversity with math, not anthems."

"Anthems keep people together," Yara said.

"Bread does," Blue Anvil murmured.

Brim snorted. "Shins, sometimes."

Mara leaned forward, all council voice. "Your shell Sable Ladder bought coolant with Foundry Twelve signatures and your sleeve-paint ran through our sodium cloud like a stage actor," she said. "Are you here to argue, or confess?"

"Confession is for churches," Yara said. "We have a different sacrament." She lifted a palm; her wrist flicked an implant that broadcast a packet across the node net. "Doctrine of Stewardship," her voice carried as the packet opened on every screen that hadn't learned to distrust doctrine. "We propose that consent is insufficient when humans live centuries. We propose a stewardship class, chosen by lottery and vetted by Ledger, that can override local compacts to protect diversity. Exchange marriages by recommendation, not choice.

Synthesis forbidden outside emergencies. Robots—" a pause so calibrated Spindle winced—"recognized as tools under stewardship."

The room did the kind of quiet that breaks apparatus. The lasers ticked. The tether sang two cents sharp.

“Lottery,” Brim said. “So the gods can claim they’re not picking.”

“Vetted by Ledger,” Huo said flatly, as if reading a claim he meant to cut into smaller units until it bled responsibility.

“Robots as tools,” Iri repeated, the way you say a phrase to see if it is stable under air. Its antennae flattened. “You do not get to make a class whose first act is unperson a witness.”

Yara’s eyes softened with something that looked like pity and might have been envy. “You are excellent tools,” she said, and two Talweg juniors involuntarily put hands on their own throats.

Kael breathed in through his nose and reminded his pulse of Rook’s hoop. “We are not here to vote on catechism,” he said. “We are here to publish how you shot at a mirror and called it stewardship when you had a hymn for it.”

“You have no proof we fired,” Yara said, almost gently. “You have a sodium cloud that loved us more than it should.”

Greta lifted a hand. “And a det-nonce salted with stupid mercy,” she said. “If you’re going to launder signatures through shells, don’t borrow phrases you don’t understand.”

Yara glanced past Greta to Kael, eyes narrowing in a calculation that wasn’t unkind. “Your mother is a romantic,” she said. “Romantics do ugly things well because they name them pretty.”

“Watch your nouns,” Blue Anvil said, and the temperature of their voice dropped one notch.

The floor shivered.

Everyone looked down and then up the way people do when their stomach informs their faith. The tether hummed again, a long low note that had learned from harmonics it shouldn’t.

“Janus Ladder,” Huo snapped. “Declare work.”

"Nothing declared," came the manager's voice over station loop, tight and offended. "We are not oscillating."

"You are always oscillating," Spindle said. "This is resonance."

Kael's console painted a diagram across his palm: tether tension rising in a pretty sequence that would be a disaster if it learned to sing. Someone had driven a small periodic torque into the station's docking ring—small enough to sneeze past maintenance filters, sharp enough to tease the tether.

"Who's injecting?" Brim growled.

Yara didn't move. Her face watched the room watch itself. "Stewards act when children break toys," she said, and Kael wanted to put a wrench through that sentence.

Mara said, almost conversationally, "Sector B reaction wheels jittering on a 17.1-second period. That's dumb enough to be a trap."

Iri's hand found the table. "Kael," it said, voice as calm as ethics. "We can damp this."

"Say how," Kael said, and the tether hummed a semi-tone, a lesson getting confident.

"The hoop," Iri said. "We couple into Hecate's field here—" its porcelain finger traced a vector that would embarrass a lesser ship—"and throw eddy current through the tether anchor as a magnetic brake. We pull energy off the oscillation where Janus can't, because their wheels are what's being played."

"Risk?" Huo asked, Ledger already drafting a waiver in the corner of his eye.

"Quench if we overdrive," Iri said. "Hoop might tear. Station might lurch. Your career will not survive if you're standing on the wrong ladder rung."

Greta said, mild as cumin, "And if we don't, a crowd watches a doctrine cause a 'safety incident' that 'requires' impounding the dangerous ship."

Yara spread her hands. "We requested no sodium," she said. "You brought none. We request no heroics."

"We brought weld," Kael said, and stood. "Rook?"

"I am holding," the ship said, and the room shifted around the sound as if someone had named a thing that anchors.

They moved before fear could lace fingers through their laces. Iri was already floating; Kael caught a rung; the corridor was a throat that knew urgency. In the cockpit the hoop's hum had the edge that means a system is paying close attention. The tether's oscillation plotted in false color on the forward screen: narrow at first, then broader, like a river remembering it used to be a floodplain.

"Vector set," Iri said. "We dip the hoop through the field just enough to throw a phase-lead eddy on the anchor. If I say cut, you cut."

"Copy," Kael said. His hands rested on the quench tree like on a child's shoulder. The lasers in the station continued to tick. In Knot space, Mara's voice took command of juniors with the bored authority of a loop biologist telling people to wash.

Rook tipped, a small bow. Hoop current climbed in disciplined steps. The magnetosphere found their circle and made it taste like work. The anchor under Janus Ladder had been designed to ignore romance; it could not ignore math. Eddy current rose in the anchor's skin. The tether felt a hand not far and not close push when it wanted to pull.

"Amplitude dropping," Spindle narrated, half to the record, half to herself.

"Damping ratio approaching sane. Someone in Sector B just realized their 17.1 seconds is now a lullaby."

The tether hummed again—lower, sulking. Janus Ladder's manager said a word the Court politely didn't record and cut power to a wheel. Blue Anvil's doctor exhaled into their mic like a patient deciding to keep a heartbeat.

In the colloquy room, Yara watched the plots resolve with the expression of a pilot who appreciates competence even when it spoils her pretext. "Fine," she said. "You can fly."

"You can too," Kael said, and surprised himself by meaning it. "So stop firing at mirrors and calling it weather."

Huo's command channel, so clean it squeaked: "Engineering logs confirm unscheduled wheel jitter injected from a maintenance sub-panel. Janus, lock that hatch and tell me who has keys. Vigil?"

Yara didn't blink. "We have doctrine," she said, because refusing the question was how you keep a party together.

"Doctrine doesn't trip a breaker," Brim said. "People do."

Spindle Ark's drones finished their lattice. The lasers synchronized and then slowed, just a hair—a visual trick to let people who didn't live inside numbers feel the way the room had quieted. On every screen a small caption appeared: DAMPED.

Kael cut the hoop down by measured stairs and felt in his bones when the anchor no longer needed their hand. Rook purred. The tether sang a note that would not take a seat on the Court but might attend if invited.

Back at the table, nobody pretended what had happened wasn't theater. The point of boring is not to avoid drama; it is to make sure drama has to file paperwork.

"Colloquy continues," Spindle said, tapping her stylus twice. "Vigil, you called for stewardship. You attempted to fabricate a safety case to seize a ship. Ledger?"

Huo had the look of a man whose report had just grown teeth. "Ledger notes Vigil Ithaca or a shell thereof interfered with node stability during a recorded council," he said. "Custody motions arising from that interference will be denied. Stewardship proposals will be considered after the people who made their case with a wrench have gone to bed."

Yara's gaze flicked to Kael. Something evaluating there; something like a future argument that she would prefer not to lose. "You are very good at making boredom look brave," she said.

Kael lifted his chin just enough to be impolite in a culture that likes heads low. "It is," he said. "That's the trick."

Yara's smile sharpened. "Doctrine offers you something you want," she said, turning her palm face-up like a card. "Speed. You can pilot your synthesis in

secret. No councils. No songs. We will protect you while we denounce you. You will be a scapegoat and a saint. It works better than you think.”

In Kael’s ear, Blue Anvil said, very softly, “Beware the generous enemy.” Iri didn’t speak; its hand found Kael’s wrist and steadied pulse by touching bone.

“We’re slow,” Kael said. “On purpose. That’s the hinge. You don’t get to own consent.”

“Others will,” Yara said. “Not because they are wicked, but because they are tired.”

“Then we make it easier to do the right thing,” Mara said, like a lab instruction. “We write manuals. We standardize soap. We add a footnote called stupid mercy and keep it from being a button you press to get your way.”

Greta’s voice from the back: “And we leave songs on rocks that tell strangers how to make loops less cruel.”

Yara put her hands flat on the welded table and stood. “We’re finished here,” she said, as if that kind of sentence ever belonged to one mouth. “You have your compact. We have our doctrine. The Court has a recording. It will not be enough.”

“It never is,” Huo said. “That’s why we tilt again tomorrow.”

She left with the smoothness of someone who sets exits before entrances. Hearthblade’s sleeve-paint ate the lasers and gave back spectra the juniors would spend a week laughing at and footnoting. Brim relaxed their boots by the thickness of a half-threat. Blue Anvil texted a nurse to tell a patient that the room had stopped moving, even if their bed hadn’t. Spindle Ark wrote damped in a margin and drew a smile she later crossed out for probity.

“Report,” Iri said, and Rook placed a copy of the recording on the table with the dull cube. Greta reached and touched it like bread and then pulled back because witnesses don’t pocket communion.

Kael felt the adrenaline unhook from his joints and drift out past the hoop into space where sodium still glowed like a bad idea redeemed by context. He looked at Mara and saw the tired that happens when someone has to use two voices for a city that wants only one.

“Drink,” Kael said.

“Soap,” Mara said.

“Both,” Greta said, and the bartender—who had not been invited, which is how bartenders arrive—set a bottle on the table and a stack of folded towels that smelled like not-dying.

Huo lingered at the edge, contrapposto that said his report was written, his conscience filed, and his hunger for a better procedure refusing to go home.

“You did well,” he said to Kael without looking at them. “Dangerously well.”

“You say that a lot,” Kael said.

“It keeps being true,” Huo said. “Keep your mirror low. Keep your hoop clean. Keep your proof boring. Vigil will try to make you interesting again.”

“They can be interesting,” Brim said. “We’ll be gravity.”

The Court loosened. Knot Nine announced SODIUM FUND FULL and NO, YOU CAN’T LICK IT. Janus Ladder posted a boring bulletin about reaction wheel maintenance schedules with times and names and a promise to publish jitter logs weekly. Spindle’s juniors argued about whether stupid mercy deserved its own variable in the audit harness. Blue Anvil went back to beds.

In Rook’s cockpit the quench tree went green-green-green, like an EKG a poet would be ashamed to improve.

Kael rested a palm on the console. “Hold me steady,” he said.

“I am holding,” Rook said.

Mara leaned her shoulder to Kael’s for a second longer than witnesses require. “Tomorrow I despise you in public again,” she said. “Tonight we weld.”

“Tonight we weld,” Kael echoed.

Iri watched their two favorite humans pretend welding was only for ships and filed it under ethics: emergent. Its antennae made a neat helix: proud, worried, loved.

Outside, Hecate's banners unspooled like law written by weather. Somewhere in the sleeve of space a courier called Hearthblade wrote a doctrine that would look worse in the morning and better to the tired. Greta put a pinch of sumac on the rim of a mug and called it a sacrament for bored heroes. The tether hummed a lower, kinder note.

And the recording went out—boring, public, welded to the table—so that when the story tried to change in the night, the next morning it would have to file a request.

10: Pilot Light

The Court had a way of making yesterday's heroics into today's infrastructure. By morning, the Janus Ladder jitter bulletin had been typeset into a template other stations could copy. The Sodium Fund sign was stained and smug. Spindle Ark's juniors were arguing about whether to refactor stupid_mercy into two parameters—tilt_bias and opt_out_latency—and had been told to go drink water before touching code.

Rook grew a little more ring. The dampers sang a lower note. Kael could tell, now, if a screw had been torqued a hair light because the ship's purr found his bones and told on them.

"Ready?" Iri asked, in the tone that meant ethics, not thrust.

Kael touched the console and felt the ship answer. "Ready," he said. "Open the pilot."

The Bequest vault didn't blossom this time like a miracle; it unfolded like a manual you'd spilled tea on and dried carefully. The pilot spec they'd published to the Court now instantiated inside a sandbox whose walls were annotated by ancestors and auditors: synthesis rails, entropy budget, trait caps, opt-out clause with a blinking parameter that would remain blinking until someone used it and the Court had to decide whether blinking meant healthy.

"First volunteers," Blue Anvil announced on the wide channel, professionally calm. "Kepler's Kin—crew pair Hart and Nadiya; Brim—crew Osei and partner Ken; Spindle Ark—junior auditor Lara volunteering with consent from clan elders for a synthetic sibling program. All participants have signed the boring annex. Companions registered as observers."

Huo's icon brightened. "Ledger notes witnesses are in seat. Vigil Ithaca has requested to submit an amicus brief arguing for stewardship override. Vigil Ithaca is denied." He said it like a man closing a window on weather.

Mara arrived at Rook with her lab voice zipped halfway down and her council voice zipped halfway up. She had a datapad and three lists and a stubborn hair

that refused to obey politics. “We’re leading on loop resilience traits only,” she said. “Immune robustness, metabolic flexibility, stress response in low-grav gestation. Nothing aesthetic. Nothing template. Constraints are live and the rails refuse anything outside spec.”

Kael felt something tight in his chest ease and then move to a new place that would ache later. “We start with boring,” he said, because audacity needs ballast.

“Boring,” Mara echoed, and tucked the stubborn hair behind an ear with a motion a camera could have made into romance if it had been rude. “Bring up the gamete maps.”

Iri’s hands hovered. The map came like a star chart, not of space but of possibility: loci glowing where ancestral bottlenecks had made small sad flags; rails drawn like guardrails on a mountain road; little pulsing markers where the algorithm could choose novelty without falling into clever harm. The audit harness wrapped the whole in a fence that would scream if someone tried to add height or eye color or compliance.

“Entropy seeding,” Spindle Ark said from her end, fingers inked and eyes bright. “We’re pulling from node cosmic ray counters and jitter in the Court’s lasers. Bias correction applied. Blue Anvil, confirm?”

The hospice doctor didn’t look like someone who enjoyed math; he looked like someone who enjoyed not killing people. “Confirmed,” he said. “Entropy log salted twice and published. Companions, want to bless the dice?”

Iri’s antennae lifted in amusement. “We bless by insisting on logs,” it said. “Roll.”

Kael watched numbers learn to be choices. The rails lit. The rails refused. The rail at autoimmune risk pulsed red and the algorithm stepped back, apologized, and chose a new path. The audit harness wrote down the apology so people could read it later and be bored.

“Consent check,” Mara said. “Hart, Nadiya?”

On the screen, the Kepler’s Kin pair appeared in a low-grav galley that had been scrubbed just enough to soothe auditors. Hart was long-limbed and grinning; Nadiya had the cautious joy of someone letting a door open one hinge

at a time. “We’ve read the rails,” Nadiya said. “We’ve talked to our elders. We want a child who can eat what our loop grows and laugh at our jokes. The rest... the rest is theirs.”

“Brim?” Blue Anvil prompted, and Osei and Ken came into frame with the grabby affection of people who had learned respect in tight quarters.

“We like shins,” Ken said, deadpan. “We’d like a kid who likes them too.”

“Metabolic stress response,” Mara said, refusing the metaphor politely. “Done.”

Spindle Ark’s junior Lara looked like a person who had dreamed of being on a footnote and found themselves in a paragraph. “I’d like to be boring,” she said, awed, and Spindle’s sigh of exasperated love was audible.

“Run,” Kael said.

The engine inside the rails purred. Gametic synthesis isn’t knitting from scratch; it’s choosing how to splice within rules ancient and new. The algorithm proposed three candidate recombinations per pair, each annotated with confidence bounds and a little column where the rails had said no in the past so people could get used to refusal as a form of love. Companions’ oversight flags glowed for audit coverage and postnatal loop tuning. Somewhere in Blue Anvil, a nurse smiled because a graph looked like a person who would not need too much help being held.

“Ledger?” Huo said, as if daring his own badge to misbehave.

“Ledger sees nothing to object to,” Huo said, which is as close as he got to declaring delight. “Proceed.”

Mara flicked her pad. “We don’t implant today,” she reminded the room and the story. “We publish plans. We open a cooling-off window with opt-out and opt-later. We teach families to say no without it becoming a duel.”

“Families,” Blue Anvil said. “Not tribunals.”

Kael’s console chimed a private tone that sounded like a strap being offered. “Mother,” Rook said.

Kael sidestepped to a quieter pane. Mother's face was lit by something that was not Rook's cabin and not a court lamp. It looked like sunlight that had gone through a hundred mirrors and kept modesty.

"Keep your rails up," she said, without hello. "Are you publishing refusals?"

"We are," Kael said. "We're teaching a culture to like forms."

Mother's mouth did a thing that, in other mouths, would be called pride. "Good," she said. "I have... a thing." She glanced off-frame in a way that meant Father was nearby updating an invoice or an alibi. "Vigil's Sable Ladder shell is running a parallel pilot in a cold warehouse over Dorsal Row. No rails. No audits. They call it emergency triage. They have a template for an autoimmune wipe that would reduce diversity variance by two percent and make stewards look prophetic for a decade. We need a light."

Kael tasted foil. "Evidence?"

"A video of a room that cannot exist if ethics has mass," Mother said. "A flow cytometer singing the wrong tune. A baby blanket folded like a threat." Her voice didn't shake; it made other things do that. "We got it from a janitor who asked me for a pencil."

Kael's hand found the strap as if the strap had been reaching. "We go," he said, and heard in his own voice the lever Mother had placed there before the Court had words for it.

"Slow," Mother said. "With lights. With witnesses. With Ledger. Gretta can get you a door. Huo will get you a story that doesn't need a coil slug."

Kael thought of the babies in Blue Anvil, the way machines are quiet around sleep when the sleep is expensive. "Mara?" he said, flipping back to the main pane.

Mara saw the face Kael wasn't making. "What room?" she asked, crisp.

"Dorsal Row," Kael said. "Sable Ladder cell. Templates. No rails."

Mara's mouth turned into a thin instruction. "We bring soap."

Huo arrived in the middle, because he always did. “Say the word and I will file the kind of inspection that makes doctrine cough,” he said. “Public. Recorded. Boring. We’ll have cameras welded to the floor.”

“Do it,” Kael said.

In the pilot pane, Hart and Nadiya had their hands on a cryptographic pad that felt like prayer and not like pledge. “We understand opt-out,” Nadiya said to the record, because teaching is not just for juniors. “We love our clan. We love our robot. We love our future.” She pressed her thumb. The pad lit with a boring green that made four people cry for reasons only two of them would admit.

“I will watch your loop,” Iri said gently, formally, so it would publish. “I will be the person who tells you if your filters clog. I will accept insults for doing so.”

“Good,” Hart said, laughing through water. “I’m not brave enough to insult Blue Anvil.”

“People should be,” Blue Anvil said dryly. “We pay better when scolded.”

The cooling-off window counter started, large and obvious. The amicus brief from Vigil Ithaca arrived on a sideband, full of photos of children with captions that used nouns like rescue and verbs like compel. Spindle Ark printed it to paper just so she could cross out lines with an actual pencil and show her juniors why annotation is a sacrament.

“Inspection filed,” Huo said ten minutes later. “Ledger, Node, Kepler’s Kin, Brim, Spindle Ark, Talweg junior. Greta as witness. We will walk into a room and ask it to be boring.”

“Dorsal Row opens holes when we knock like this,” Greta said, appearing over Kael’s shoulder like a spice ghost. “I can burn a favor without poison.”

Kael looked to Iri. It was already opening a panel to slot a new vid relay into Rook’s hoop—mirror-loads had become a kind of prayer. “We’ll do the pilot and the raid in parallel,” Iri said. “That is not ideal. That is diaspora.”

“Brim can split,” Brim said. “Half to shins, half to diapers.”

Mara scrubbed her face with both hands. “I will lead loop audits at the warehouse,” she said. “If there are babies, we don’t take them into the Court. We take them to Blue Anvil and make the Court come there.”

Blue Anvil’s voice softened further. “We will prepare beds.”

Kael sent the pilot window out further, published where it should be seen and where it would irritate, then changed Rook’s vector by three degrees, which in the Court is how you write a stanza.

Dorsal Row’s aisle toward the Sable Ladder warehouse was a study in plausible deniability: the lights a little worse, the vents a little louder, the signs a little vaguer. Ledger’s inspection crew wore their badges like boring knives. Spindle’s juniors carried styluses at parade rest. Brim elected to carry a wrench because foreplay.

Greta led with a grocery basket and the casual insolence of a woman who knew where the valves were. She knocked on the door that was meant to look like a generic storage bay and said, in market tone, “Delivery for Sable.”

The door opened a crack, because even villains get parcels. Huo shoved the wedge of a public inspection writ into the crack, and the crack—being a crack—became a hallway.

Inside, the warehouse was almost clean. The almost was the crime. Tables had been wiped in a pattern people use when they are pretending to like hygiene. The air had the wrong music—machines that measure life singing in a key that meant hurry.

“Public. Recorded,” Huo said to the room, loud enough to stir bacteria. “Boring.”

A man in a lab coat the color of chewed paper stepped forward, hands raised in the universal religion of oops. “Emergency triage,” he said. “We were helping—”

“You were shaving variance with a template,” Mara said, already at a bench, not touching, eye reading labels like confessions. “Where are the babies?”

“Not here,” the man lied in the small way that expects dignity to count as truth.

Greta's nose wrinkled. "Left," she said, pointing toward a partition that had been dressed as a supply closet.

Iri lifted a ceramic hand and traced a rectangle in the air. The rectangle became a video frame: continuous recording from Rook's hoop; Ledger chain for evidence; Blue Anvil cross-link for triage.

Kael pushed open the partition door and needed three breaths to remember the ship's hum and what hands were for. There were two bassinets because villains don't think boredom can hold more. There were blankets folded like proof that blankets had been involved. There were tiny lungs practicing hope.

Blue Anvil did not hurry. They performed the sacraments of glove, mask, voice low, hands warm. "Compliance of care," the doctor said to the record. "Two infants. Breath regular. Color fair. IV sites in the wrong hands. We will move them. Ledger?"

"Ledger recognizes emergency custody under hospice jurisdiction," Huo said. His pen did not shake; he had trained a hand on harder winter.

Mara's jaw looked like something you could weld to. "These rails are... a crime of laziness," she said, flipping through a template chart. "They've shaved immune variance to hit a model that looks good in a stewardship budget."

"Public," Spindle Ark murmured, stylus scratching lazy harm into a margin that would be footnote and then law. "Print it."

The man in the coat tried to step toward the babies and ran into Brim's wrench cozying up to his knee. "Shins," Brim said conversationally. "Think before you try to borrow ownership."

Greta stood at the edge of the scene with her grocery basket and did not cry because the room needed a dry-eyed witness. "I salted your nonce with stupid mercy," she said to the man. "You used none. That is the sin."

Huo's inspection read like liturgy: catalog, photograph, publish. Iri logged, antennae canted in that helix that meant proud, worried, loved. Kael's fingers remembered how to be careful around small things that didn't know what nodes were and never should.

“Back at the pilot,” Rook whispered in Kael’s ear, because ships can be two places when the people inside them learn to be three. “Hart and Nadiya have opted later—they want to speak to elders one more time. Osei and Ken opted yes. Lara cried and opted later. Blue Anvil says this is the sound of a healthy culture.”

Kael laughed once, the fragile kind. “Tell them I’ll watch their filters,” he said.

Blue Anvil’s crew lifted the bassinets with the choreography of people who make beds into ships. Mara wrapped the template charts in evidence bags like she was suffocating a snake. Huo filed a writ against whatever shell Sable Ladder would pretend to be tomorrow. Spindle Ark labeled a video boring miracle and grinned like a teacher who had watched a junior find the proof on the blackboard without help.

Greta put two packets of sumac in the grocery basket that now carried a legal recording, a dirty clipboard, and a jar full of shame. “For the nurses,” she said, to a microphone that would one day be a story.

Back at Knot Nine, the bartender turned the lights down two percent to remind the room to breathe. The Sodium Fund jar was full again with bitter jokes. Talweg juniors stood a little closer to their robots than yesterday.

“Pilot window still ticking,” Spindle Ark reported. “Opt-outs logged without drama. Opt-ins logged with audit rails. Vigil’s amicus brief already has a rebuttal appendix written by five grandmothers and a child.”

Huo’s face did its half-smile. “Keep it boring,” he said.

Mara showed Kael her hands before washing, because rituals matter. “We move the babies to Blue Anvil,” she said. “Then we go yell at my grandmother and ask her to sign a loop hygiene standard we’ll name after someone she secretly admires so she has to like it in public.”

Kael felt the strap under his palm like a truss under skin. “After that,” he said softly, “we go sleep.”

Mara nodded, an extravagant consent. “After that,” she said.

In Rook's cabin, Iri closed the panel on the new mirror relay and rested its porcelain palm on it as if ships needed touch to learn ethics. "This is what margins are for," it said. "To leave a place for weld."

Kael leaned his forehead briefly to Iri's shoulder panel, now cool under the skin of ceramic. "Thank you," he said, and the words meant for this and for the corridor and for refusing to let me shoot back when shooting would have been a poem.

"Bless the dice," Blue Anvil said over the open line, gently teasing as a way to measure breathing. "Then go drink water."

Kael blessed the dice by printing the opt-out log twice and putting one copy where Vigil could find it and fail to make it scandal. He blessed the hoop by letting it idle. He blessed the Court by filing a report so dull even juniors wouldn't screenshot it.

Hecate's aurora wrote footnotes on the night. The tether hummed a key that instruments like to read as stable. On the bequest console, the cooling-off window ticked down in a font that had been chosen for legibility, not drama. Somewhere in Blue Anvil, two infants slept under lights that lied gently about morning, and the node's air learned their names.

"Hold me steady," Kael said, because habits are how futures happen.

"I am holding," said Rook.

Tomorrow they would weld more ring. Tomorrow Spindle would teach a class on salts and signatures and explain why poetry should never be used to seed randomness. Tomorrow Mara would win slowly. Tomorrow Huo would file a boring writ with sharp teeth. Tomorrow Vigil would choose a new shell and a new song. Tomorrow the pilot would tick and parents would change their minds twice. Tomorrow, stupid mercy would be penciled in margins so that when someone tried to tear the page, they got graphite on their hands and had to explain it at dinner.

Tonight, the bequest burned not like a torch but like an pilot light—small, patient, resistant to drafts, stubborn enough to make a room warm if you built a stove around it and taught your children not to touch the wrong part.

11: Standards & Scars

Blue Anvil's daylights ran on a curve humans believed faster than the planet's aurora. Morning meant a little more spectrum in the lamps and coffee that smelled like a compromise everyone adored. The two infants from Sable's warehouse slept in cradles wired into graphs so gentle the graphs felt like lullabies. Nurses floated, pushed off rails, didn't hurry. Hurrying kills math.

"Loop hygiene standard," Mara said, thumbing a pad with three checklists and one poem. "We do it today."

Kael stood beside Iri at the foot of the nearer crib. The child's pulse line ticked in a boring range. The tiny fingers closed on nothing and then—through the magic of reflexes older than space—on Iri's porcelain knuckle. Iri's antennae made the small helix: proud, worried.

"I will accept insults for insisting people wash," Iri said to the nurse, solemn.

"You and my mother would get along," the nurse said. "She thinks soap saved more lives than saints."

On the Court net, the cooling-off window counter pulsed once and stopped. The pilot's first outcomes had congealed into paperwork. Brim—Osei and Ken—had opted yes with signatures that looked like shoes scuffed from kicking. Kepler's Kin's Hart and Nadiya logged later twice and then yes, with a note: we had dinner with elders; they told us stories; we told them plans; we all cried; then we washed the dishes. Spindle's junior Lara went from later to opt out, not with drama but with a paragraph about wanting to adopt two cousins instead. Her opt-out published with the same font and dignity as an opt-in.

"This," Spindle Ark said, signing the pane like a teacher grading a paper she hadn't assigned, "is the sound of culture."

"Boring," Huo said, and made it a compliment.

Kael breathed. Rook's hoop hummed somewhere in their bones like a cat that had learned to purr at one remove. The Court's rumor had shifted: people used the verb to opt without reaching for throat-clearing metaphors.

“Talweg grandmother wants the standard text,” Mara said, as if announcing a storm she’d chosen to surf. “If we name it after someone she admires, she’ll pretend it was her idea.”

“Who?” Kael asked.

Mara’s mouth did a small thing that would be called affection in a loop lab. “Sialla Tal, her first mentor. Sialla wrote the earliest diaspora interface quarantine after the Kestrel Loop Crash. Her hands were kind and tyrannical. Grandmother lights a lamp by Sialla’s name when she pretends not to be superstitious.”

“The Sialla Standard,” Spindle said immediately, already typesetting it in a font that made people behave. “Contents?”

Mara ticked items: “Handwash discipline: actual soap, actual seconds; pH sentinel: alarms tuned to lullaby, not siren; microbiome handshake: modular interface at airlocks—shared microbe exchange happens only through standard ports so loops don’t kiss in alleys; companion auditors: required sign-off for loop changes; opt-out signage: visible and shaming no one; alert language written for teenagers, not engineers. Appendices for fish tanks, algae stress, insect molt. Footnotes for the people who like to feel clever.”

“Put stupid mercy in a footnote,” Kael said. “Not as a license. As a warning.”

“I’ll cite your mother,” Spindle said, stylus already planting it.

Huo’s icon brightened. “Ledger can endorse a hygiene standard,” he said. “It is the kind of boredom we are built for. But Talweg elders will try to turn endorsement into jurisdiction.”

“Then we publish first,” Greta said from the back of Blue Anvil’s ward, tying a witness lanyard on herself like an apron. “Let them co-sign a thing that already belongs to the Court.”

Talweg juniors gathered behind Mara like punctuation. The grandmother’s absence had mass again; the kind of mass that bends micro-cultures toward itself. Mara took a breath in and set her jaw like a clamp.

“Council at Knot Nine in one hour,” Spindle announced. “Public, recorded, welded.”

Kael looked one more time at the infants. The nearer one hiccuped; the graph drew a neat little mountain and then got bored. Iri withdrew its knuckle with the respect owed to ancient grips.

“Come,” Iri said. “We will be told we are arrogant. We will ask for hands to be washed.”

Knot Nine wore the Court’s new habit: cameras anchored, lights at long-cycle warmth, coasters welded because mugs get ideas. The paper sign over the mic had aged overnight into a tradition: BORING in neat capitals.

Talweg’s elder arrived like weather calculates entrances. She wore a jacket cut like a decision and a lanyard she had not chosen. When she sat, her hands did nothing and told the room everything it needed to know about poise as a weapon. Her icon didn’t hide her; she had learned that the new war is fought in faces.

“Council recognizes Talweg Matriarch,” Spindle said. “We are here to consider the Sialla Standard for loop hygiene.”

The elder’s mouth curled. “Sialla was strict,” she said. “Children resented her and lived.”

Mara stepped evenly into the open. She had dressed in lab-plain, not council-fine. “Grandmother,” she said—no title; respect without surrender—“this standard is Sialla’s work written for a ship with better soap. It codifies what we do when we aren’t proud: wash, measure, and stop lying to ourselves about how microbes fall in love.”

A chuckle rippled where it could be heard. The elder did not.

Huo placed his hands on the welded table like a carpenter reading grain. “Node Engineering supports standards that reduce false emergencies,” he said. “The Ledger supports consent compacts that don’t get torpedoed by diarrhea.”

“Poetry,” Brim said.

“Prudence,” Huo corrected.

Blue Anvil's doctor held up a laminated chart that had been designed to survive an argument. "Every chapter of this saves me a bed," they said. "And saves a mother from thinking her mistake was a sin. It was a process error. We fix process."

"Robots signing off?" the elder asked, fixating on that clause like a hawk loves a shoulder blade. "We do not give machines veto."

"We don't," Iri said. "We give companions a published objection channel that forces human signers to answer in writing before installing a microbe. The answer can be 'we do it anyway.' The point is the writing."

"Writing makes you slow," the elder said.

"Also reversible," Mara said. Her voice had a slight tremor on re that made Kael's chest ache from unspent adolescence.

Spindle Ark projected the drafting text: The Sialla Standard, with subheads in fonts designed to calm. Footnotes already crowding the bottom like attentive grandparents. On the second page, a little box: stupid mercy — see also: emergency; pencil; weld.

"Talweg will sign if we remove companion auditors," the elder said.

"Talweg will not," Mara said, faster than she'd meant to, then slower: "Talweg will not refuse the layer that keeps us from pretending we wrote a standard only to hang it on a nail."

The elder did the slow blink of a woman counting victories already banked. "You will be careful how you speak," she said.

"I am careful," Mara replied. "For decades I was careful enough for ten people."

A silence opened in the room with trumpet dignity. It was filled, as all such silences are, by the uninvited voice of trouble.

"Motion to stay," said a new icon that resolved into boot-polished doctrine. Vigil Ithaca's counsel had a name nobody would remember and shoes everyone would. "We ask that the node stay the Sialla Standard until a Stewardship Panel reviews its effect on demographic resilience. Meanwhile we propose a provisional return to exchange-only marriages under oversight."

Huo didn't sigh. He looked at the counsel as if checking a beam for rot with a thumbnail. "Node jurisdiction recognizes stewardship motions," he said blandly, "when filed before an event, not during. This is not a stay. It is a headline."

"The Doctrine argues—" the counsel began.

"—badly," Spindle said. "We will publish your brief with annotations in 72-point type."

Brim said, with exaggerated politeness, "Ledger: do we have to pretend to be surprised?"

Huo straightened, the way a man realizes his back is his dignity. "Ledger opposes the stay," he said, clean and loud. "Because we measure resilience in lives, not motions. Because the Sialla Standard reduces false quarantines that Doctrine's friends like to turn into seizures. Because I have read Sialla Tal and she loved rules more than she loved power."

Kael felt, like a warm current trailing the pronouncement, the way the room changed when a bureaucrat made a choice with the word because.

"Recorded," Spindle said in the tone of a stamp hitting paper that it likes.

The elder's hands moved—one finger, a small choreography of concession. "Talweg signs," she said, as if the sentence had to climb out of a room full of furniture. "With auditors. With objection channel. With Sialla's name."

Mara's throat bobbed. She kept her face the way a loop tech keeps a gasket—flat and faithful. "Thank you," she said, and the you had the ache of learning.

"Witnesses?" Spindle asked.

Blue Anvil: "We witness."

Brim: "We kick shins if people try to hang handwashing on a nail."

Greta: "We bring spices that make teenagers wash even when they don't want to."

Iri: "We accept insults."

Vigil counsel: "We reserve—"

“—your right to be wrong in public,” Spindle finished. “Sialla Standard adopted.”

The room loosened all at once, like a ship during a maneuver you trust. Talweg juniors looked at each other with the kind of pride that doesn’t blow a trumpet—just flips a valve and keeps the line pressure correct. The elder sat back and made a private pact with the part of her that had wanted this and had needed a story about disliking it. The Court’s announcement boards lit: Sialla Standard — v1.0 — living document.

Huo’s wrist pinged. He looked down the way a man listens for a missing child. “Appellate tried a faster file,” he said to nobody and everybody. “Denied.”

“Blue Anvil,” Kael said into his lapel, suddenly needing a smaller voice in a smaller room, “are the babies—”

“Wet,” the nurse said. “Which is success.”

Spindle, who could not help teaching even in celebrations, snapped a tutorial window open at bar height. Handwash Discipline flowed across the glass with a little animation of microbes wearing hats and politely leaving palms. Brim promptly stuck a grease hand in the frame, then followed the instruction with the attention of a man who had learned no one’s too proud to have clean knuckles.

The elder stood. Her absence was delicate and heavy as she left. Mara watched her go, mouth doing a rhythm of scolding and love that had once been a lullaby and had grown teeth.

“She signed,” Kael said.

She signed,” Mara said, and only after three breaths did she let the corner of her mouth remember how to grip a smile.

Back at Blue Anvil, the standard turned into habits. Nurses washed without grudge; a junior stuck Sialla v1 icons on valves; a grandmother somewhere in Talweg pretended to hate the graphic design and then printed a copy for her kitchen. The infants exhaled small lessons. Kael and Iri stood among beds and lingered like heat where heat belongs.

A courier arrived from Kepler's Kin with a packet: Hart and Nadiya's rail plan, signed and annotated with a recipe for a soup Kael suspected was terrible and comforting. "We're ready after the window," their note said. "Please don't let auditors be kind; let them be correct."

"We are built for correct," Iri murmured.

Kael looked at the tiniest of the two babies again and tried to imagine a future that wasn't a report. He failed (honesty) and then tried again with boring miracle as the title in his head. Easier.

Huo, of course, sent a form. Node Protocol Notice: Pilot recognized under hygiene-compliant conditions; Companion auditors accepted; Vigil Ithaca's amicus entered and annotated. He appended a message that was not a form: if this becomes case law, you have to live with it when you are tired.

"Deal," Kael said out loud.

Greta put two packets of sumac on a shelf with a note: for when compliance needs taste. She leaned sideways against a cart like a woman who knew where to stand so sound traveled to the right ears. "Spices can hide sin," she said to Kael without taking her eyes off the babies. "But good spice tells you when the soup is lying."

Kael nodded, grateful for anyone raised in a market.

The Court net pinged the way a city's blood pressure settles. The Sialla Standard propagate widget blinked along the arc: Brim: installed; Spindle Ark: installed; Kepler's Kin: testing; Janus Ladder: grudging; Talweg: signed. A small icon registered Hearthblade: read. No change.

Mara's shoulders dropped a centimeter, then squared. "Now we write the Loop Hygiene Annex," she said, reaching for more work to keep pride from getting ideas. "Probiotics. Interface filters. Algae lullaby templates."

"You already started," Kael said.

"I know," Mara said, like a woman confessing to loving her job in a room where doing so was a liability. "We name the pH sentinel after Sialla. We name the probiotic after... no," she corrected herself, smile honest and sharp. "We name it after a junior who remembers to wash before turning a valve."

"Lara," Spindle called from her window. "Name it after Lara. She opted out and still did the math."

"Lara," Mara agreed. "The Lara Culture. Kids will hate it and it will save them."

Iri, who had been quiet too long for comfort, turned its skull toward the far wall where washer pumps thumped like large hearts at peace. "We have a private hail," it said. "From Yara."

Kael closed his eyes briefly, then opened them because that's the difference between avoidance and breath. "Open," he said. "On a leash."

Hearthblade's captain appeared in thumbnail, backlit by a sleeve of space that could have been anywhere and was therefore here. "Congratulations," Yara said. "You've invented soap."

"We've named it," Mara said.

Yara's mouth did admiration the way some people do theft: with art. "You'll find Doctrine pivots," she said. "We'll come for Sialla in language that makes your grandmother nod. We'll keep calling robots tools until the word doesn't fit in your ears anymore and you start hearing it as furniture. And when your pilot has a bad week—we both know it will—we'll send blankets."

"Public, recorded, boring," Kael said. "The blankets will have tags."

Yara blinked, not slow. "Keep your hoop clean," she said, unexpectedly gentle. "If you tear it trying to catch every oscillation, you make my argument for me."

"Your argument is already written," Huo said, arriving in the frame with the neatness of a ledger that hates whitespace. "We're writing the margins."

Yara's eyes warmed a degree. "Enjoy your early bureaucrats," she said to Kael. "They're the best kind of romance." She cut the line before anyone could laugh and turn it into a meme.

Blue Anvil's doctor cleared a throat. "The babies," he said into the room's temperature. "Are boring."

The word landed like a benediction. The room smiled in the only pious way diaspora knows how.

That afternoon, the Court performed the ritual it had invented for itself: walk the standard. It wasn't theater; it was choreography. Stations published Sialla v1 on bulkheads. Kids drew microbes in hats. Spindle's juniors audited soap dispensers with sanctimony and were loved for it anyway. Brim posted a video labeled shin hygiene and the comments were wiser than you'd expect.

Talweg's elder returned to Knot Nine not to fight but to stand, arms behind her, while a junior explained the microbiome handshake to her without irony. She looked over at Mara once, a glance that held an apology staged as a challenge. Mara nodded exactly enough to keep everyone's pride fed and no one's heraldry overworked.

"Pilot window resumes," Spindle reminded the net, because success dilutes attention. In the next hour, three more caravans pinged interest, two with signatures, one with a grandmother who said later and meant tomorrow.

Huo filed something that looked boring and probably wasn't. Greta sold spices to a knot of teenagers who had never bought sumac with an invoice before; they left with labels, which is how you make taste into law.

Kael and Iri walked the ring Rook had not finished yet and talked about torque. They had learned to let their bodies do ship words so their mouths had room for people. "If Doctrine comes with a blanket," Kael said, tightening a bolt one click into enough, "we'll measure the thread count."

"We will publish the pattern," Iri said. "And then we will wash it."

Kael laughed, because there is a universe where that sentence is too much and this wasn't it.

A final ping reached the Court just as the node's daylights softened. Vigil Ithaca had filed another amicus—this time a list of cautionary tales about synthesis gone wrong in old worlds with surgeons who had loved technology more than consent. Spindle Ark published it unedited, then stacked beside it the Sialla Standard and the opt-out log and a photo of a sink with Lara Culture stickers that said you forgot in a font teenagers respond to. People read both. People argued in the comments. People washed their hands.

Blue Anvil dimmed the lights at the infants' cradles by two percent. The graphs hummed. A nurse sang the pH sentinel's lullaby because she liked the tune. Kael stood at the threshold and let the sound close a loop inside his ribs that had been open since the corridor broke.

"Hold me steady," he whispered to habit, to ship, to lover.

"I am holding," Rook said, and Iri's hand found Kael's with the accuracy of a program that had run through more than one crisis and learned the map of a palm.

Outside, Hecate wrote law in aurora. Inside, standards grew into customs and customs into reflexes and reflexes into boredom. Scars itched and then forgot themselves into ordinary skin. Vigil would pivot; Hearthblade would sing doctrine in a key designed to make elders hum. The bequest's vault waited with recipes that still made Kael's throat tight when he looked directly at them.

Tomorrow, there would be numbers with teeth and a new shell with boots. Tonight, there were two babies breathing and a bar coaster welded to a table under a sign that said BORING in a hand steady enough to be copied by children.

Kael let go of the strap and did not drift.

12: Shell Game

Spindle Ark's classroom had windows that were really screens, set to a calibration called honesty. Outside, Hecate's aurora wrote scriptures in green; inside, a dozen juniors argued about salts and signatures in voices that would break and heal into professions. Spindle chalked—not because she needed to, but because chalk dust made ideas feel heavy enough to lift.

"Salts," she said, drawing a rectangle that became a door when she added a handle. "You use them to seed randomness. You do not use your grandmother's favorite proverb. You do not use your ship's hum frequency. You do not use mercy unless you want an auditor at your breakfast table asking why your toast tastes like doctrine."

Laughter relieved the room the way a vent relieves a loop.

On the wall, projected: five purchase rings with three-of-five threshold signatures—Sable Ladder, Kind Aleph, Clove River, Janus Ladder, and Greta, because recipes need witnesses. Over each ring, spectrograms of coolant batches; over the spectrograms, small annotations that were jokes until they were evidence. At the bottom, a line drawn in chalk as straight as a tendon.

"Follow the money," Spindle said. "Follow the parts. Follow the heat." She tapped each ring in turn. "Every shell in Vigil's armory of righteousness subscribes to the same security service out of Dorsal Row. The public keys differ. The nonces whisper to each other in their sleep."

A junior raised a hand with ink on three fingers. "We found a habit," they said, proud and careful. "In the det-nonce generator. Rounding to even on a step where any engineer would round away from zero. And a bias toward small primes in the salt mixing."

Spindle lifted her chin. "Habits," she told the room, "are fingerprints for people who think they're wearing gloves." She circled Kind Aleph and Sable Ladder. "Same bias. Same salt habit. Different names. One hand."

Greta, sitting in the back with sugar packets in her apron like tiny treaties, nodded once. "I fed bread to that hand," she said. "It doesn't tip."

Huo's face arrived in a corner pane like a ledger breaking coffee break. "Bless your chalk," he said. "I have a judge who likes habits. Give me a picture I can staple to a writ."

Spindle underlined the bias signature and flicked it to the node net with the joy of someone throwing a perfect paper airplane and daring gravity to ruin it. "Staple away."

Kael had never loved rooms like this. As a child, he'd learned best with a wrench, not chalk. Now he stood with back against the frame and felt affection for the way juniors held styluses like oars. Iri stood beside him, antennae making a tiny helix: proud, worried. The robot liked a room where math soldered to law.

"Next," Spindle said, chalk on hip like a sword. "Heat."

The Sodium Fund had bought a drum big enough to make a chef cry. Brim rolled it onto a workboat like a barrel of laughter and pretended not to be delighted by the sign the bartender had stenciled on the lid: IN CASE OF GHOST, BREAK SEAL.

Sector D this time, a darker slice of the Court where rigs minded their own budgets and the aurora showed its work more shyly. Spindle's drones drew a seeing grid across the sky. Blue Anvil's interns tuned heart-rate monitors not because they expected romance, but because adrenaline is a fact in operations.

"We're calling this a station leak mapping, again," Huo said on the wide band with all the solemnity of a man reading a menu. "Public. Recorded. Boring."

Greta, in a borrowed suit that fit like she'd told it to behave, clipped herself into a witness perch and secured a grocery basket with bungee because fear travels best in baskets. She looked at Kael, then away, as if the distance could prove nothing inappropriate had happened in anyone's margins.

"Net out," Brim said. "Sodium bloom."

The cloud swelled and glittered like a cheap prayer lantern. Kael had learned to love it: ugly, revealing, indifferent to doctrine. Spindle's lasers ticked, and the tick had become the Court's metronome.

"Hearthblade's quiet," Iri said. Its antennae tested the air like cat whiskers in a story. "Another courier on our scope. Sleeve-painted different. Cooler."

"Name?" Blue Anvil asked.

"Psalter," Huo supplied. The smallest pause meant he'd filed that reluctantly. "Vigil changes shells like socks."

"Someone knitted those socks," Spindle said. "We have their pattern."

Psalter crept along the sodium's edge with the grace of a predator that thinks it's a tree. The cloud shrugged and then cooperated, because physics has no mercy and all taste.

"There," Iri said. "Outline. Ports at ninety degrees. Coolant bleed—subtle."

"Tag," Mara said, a soft imperative.

Kael's fingers moved before the word had settled. Spectra climbed. Boron 10/11 ratio nodded in a way that mocked secrecy. Trace fluorine stabilizer winked in a pattern Spindle's junior had started calling a laugh.

"Foundry Twelve, batch nineteen," Greta said. "We sold that lot to Clove River on paper. Clove River delivered to Psalter on a handshake."

"Handshake logged," Huo said. "Judge likes a handshake."

Psalter ran the second Brim whispered lovely by accident and sound turned into a superstition. The cloud wrote their escape as a smear. Spindle's drones darted—fast enough to be polite, slow enough to be legal.

Kael kept his hands on boring: no surge, no chase, just record. Iri kept its antennae between caution and joy. Blue Anvil's interns watched numbers like weather and learned how to love boredom without letting it get drunk.

"Packet to Court," Spindle said when the cloud thinned into a memory. "Coolant signature. Salt habit overlay. Purchase orders. Grocery receipts from a woman who sold sumac to a person who thought the word witness was a spice."

"It is," Greta said, serenely.

On the node's boards, Psalter's silhouette blinked from hypothetical to really you guys. Memes proliferated. Someone drew sleeve paint as a soap bubble and it stuck. A junior posted the salt bias diagram with the caption: who rounds to even and it outperformed politics for an hour.

Huo sent a writ and it arrived on Clove River's inbox like a dinner bell. Present yourself for inspection; publish your keys; explain why your salt tastes like your neighbor's hymn. The shells replied with that oily briskness shell companies learn when they need to look like people. Spindle Ark's footnotes cut them until the page looked like lace.

Kael could feel opinion moving—the thing you aren't supposed to feel if you pretend you love only numbers. The bartender at Knot Nine poured a line of drinks and didn't charge the Sodium Fund for puddles. Talweg juniors posted videos of handwashing with microbes in hats doing chorus lines. The Sialla Standard's icon appeared on a Brim airlock where you might least expect sanctity.

Vigil's channel—the glossy one that called itself Doctrine Local—stayed quiet. That was loud.

"Greta," Spindle said, chalk clicking back into its tray with a sound Kael now knew meant court. "Ready?"

Greta set her grocery basket down on the Knot Nine table like a magistrate setting a writ. The cameras didn't need to be reminded they were welded. Blue Anvil's doctor took a stool in witness posture: arms crossed, eyes soft, ready to catch grief and teach it table manners.

Huo read the names like a litany. "Greta of Dorsal Row. Vendor. Key service witness. Sumac seller." A glance with real gratitude rounded down for policy. "You are under boredom. Speak."

Greta didn't grandstand. That was her power. "I sell flavors that keep loops alive," she said. "And keys to people who forget secrets are made of habits. Vigil bought coolant through Sable with a det-nonce salted in the same kitchen they used for Clove. I salted a different nonce with stupid mercy so you'd look at

your plates.” She inclined her head toward Kael. “Your mother taught me the pencil trick. I taught your node to taste.”

“Doctrine says stewardship,” Vigil’s counsel said, a man who wore his chin like a bookmark. “We say: you meddled. You forced a crisis.”

Greta counted the bolts on the table with her eyes.

“I handed Ledger a story with cameras,” she said. “You hired a courier to shoot at a mirror and called it weather. I’ll take my crisis with receipts.”

Brim’s captain—chin politely unlifted—said, “We love a receipt.”

Spindle slid the salt bias overlays to the big screen. The graph had grace—someone must have cared about labels. Lines matched lines. Habits matched habits. Even matched even, trembling where math hates complacency.

“Ledger?” Spindle said.

“Ledger sees a pattern,” Huo said. “Ledger files. Ledger pretends it isn’t enjoying this.”

Blue Anvil’s doctor, who never let joy get away with anything, lifted a finger. “We keep Vigil’s kids fed when their grandmothers opt out in fear,” he said. “We put blankets on doctrine too, when it is shivering. We separate guilt from the act of eating.”

“Blessed be bureaucracy,” someone muttered, and a junior wrote it on a Post-it and stuck it to their board.

Mara added a clause to the Sialla Standard on her pad while nobody was watching her be kind. If a caravan adopts the standard, and then fear makes them falter, the Court provides soap, not scorn. She wrote soap twice to make it showy and then toned it down because teenagers need less theater than adults.

The counsel tried one more motion, this one bent into the shape of a question: “What if the pilot yields harm? Who owns the fault? Who cleans the mess?”

"Us," Kael said, before the room could get noble. "We do. In public. With logs. With Blue Anvil holding the blame bucket if required and Spindle calculating error bars while angry." He looked at the recording light so it would count. "I will read our refusals out loud if we need to."

The counsel couldn't use that; their brief had been built for fists and fireworks, not boring vows. They bowed, the gesture meant as condescension and received as acknowledgment.

Yara didn't appear. Hearthblade pinged read receipts on the colloquy file, the sodium sting, the salt graph, and the babies' discharge notes. Kael translated that silence into later and let the anger clip to its dock.

When the session closed, the Court didn't cheer. It exhaled, which in diaspora is more reliable. Spindle Ark dismissed her juniors with a hand gesture that meant hydrate, then annotate. Brim found a shin they had been saving and kicked it with affection. Blue Anvil carried the two infants down a corridor that had acquired softer lights since morning.

Greta shouldered her grocery basket. Kael found themselves keeping pace.

"You salted the nonce," Kael said, because the truth wants to be asked twice in rooms where doctrine breathes.

"I painted stupid mercy on a door so a child would find the house," Greta said.
"Your mother gave me the paint. Huo bought the canvas. Vigil knocked."

Kael wanted to be angry forever and knew he couldn't afford it. "I'm going to despise you tomorrow," he said.

"Despise me with footnotes," Greta said. "Then come buy cumin."

They didn't go back to Rook yet. They went to Blue Anvil to watch a nurse teach a younger nurse how to change a line without making it theater. Mara stood at the door and chewed a piece of cheap gum like an antidote to pride. Huo came and stood in the wrong place, realized it, moved, and made a better report because of it.

Iri touched the glass. Its reflection put its skull beside a baby's face, and it was not grotesque; it looked like a diagram of future complexities. "We'll be asked to hold them as an exhibit," it said. "We will say no and be called proud."

"We can hold them off camera," Blue Anvil said. "There are laws for that too."

"You have laws for everything," Mara said, not disparaging.

"We write them while we wash our hands," the doctor replied. "It keeps the ink clean."

Rook pinged—a gentle clearing of throat. The hoop wanted ring. The ring wanted magnets. The magnets wanted hands. Kael felt his palms itch with the old clean desire: build, not argue; weld, not weep.

"Time to leave the Court," Kael said, the decision a steadyng in the bones. "We need sky. We need finish."

"Finish and bring proof," Huo said, catching a sliver of what showed in Kael's face and pretending he hadn't, which was kindness. "Psalter will play again, somewhere less well-lit. Clove River will grow another shell. I'll send you dockets. Keep your mirror low."

Spindle Ark glanced up from junior papers. "I'll ship you a salt habit detector," she said, pleased to say the phrase aloud. "It's ugly and right."

Greta tapped her apron. "And spices," she said. "You forget to eat when you weld."

Mara touched Kael's wrist once, the second long enough to be law. "We'll run the pilot," she said. "We'll tune loops. We'll make Sialla v1 into v2 by being wrong with dignity."

"I'll send you logs from sky," Kael said. "And jokes."

"Send soap," Mara said, and smiled a knife that loved its sheath.

Iri's antennae made the small helix again: proud, worried. "We will leave a song on a rock on the way," it said. "It keeps us human to aim kindness at strangers."

Kael wasn't sure he'd earned this kind of happiness. He accepted it as a loan. "We leave a song," he said. "And finish the hoop."

Rook shrugged its moorings like a person getting out of a chair that had held arguments. The half-turn ring took the added truss like a promise honoring itself. The quench tree blinked green and then did the quiet work that keeps green honest. The ship purred in a key Kael could have sung if singing hadn't felt like an extravagance.

The last checklist at Knot Nine attached to his hatch with a polite chime: Sialla Standard Installed. A sticker with a cartoon microbe wearing a helmet held up a sign: wash your hands, cowards. Brim had drawn it. Spindle had approved it. Talweg had printed it. Blue Anvil had laminated it. Ledger had filed it. Greta had spiced it by adding a scent to the dispenser that made teenagers nostalgic for a soup they hadn't eaten yet.

Kael ran a palm along the console as if checking for splinters. "Hold me steady," he said, because habits write the next chapter while you're busy making sentences.

"I am holding," Rook said. Iri slotted cables into its wrists and left its other hand free.

They pushed. The Court shrank with a grace fine enough to make a grandmother cry in private. Hecate's banners unspooled and scored the scene. The hoop picked up a whisper of field and kept its promise. Behind them, the Court's board posted a meme of a sleeve-painted courier trying to hide behind a sodium cloud and failing; below it someone had written, be boring faster.

Kael aimed at a quiet patch with a pretty rock and a geometry that would let a ship grow. Spindle's salt detector rode in a crate that Greta had lined with packets labeled use this before you forget you're a person. Huo's docket chimed with a new writ against Kind Aleph. Mara's messages piled up with pH graphs and a curse at a filter that thought it was better than it was. Blue Anvil sent a snapshot of two sleeping infants under a lamp adjusted by two percent, marked boring.

"Songs?" Iri asked.

"Songs," Kael said.

They picked a rock. They cut a seam. They poured a little sodium into a tiny crack not for doctrine but for light. Then Kael hummed the note Mother had changed in the wake-cycle so it bent up instead of down. The rock remembered. Space forgot. That was the point.

They spooled more tape. They welded, with a pencil in their pocket, because stupid mercy turns to weld only if you keep the eraser handy. The hoop grew.

The Court's voice got small and then strong again, carried across a gap by beams and boredom. Vigil would change shoes. The Foundry would sell coolant and swear it sold to nobody deserving of poetry. Spindle would teach a class that made a junior cry and then laugh and then go wash. Huo would file. Blue Anvil would sing to graphs because it helped them breathe.

Kael's hands found the curve of Rook's future and didn't let go.

"Onward," Iri said.

"Onward," Kael said.

The ring held. The ship held. The story, reluctantly, followed.

13: The Long Vector

They left at a polite hour because leaving rudely wastes fuel and friends. Knot Nine blinked their dock code green, which in the Court was a benediction and a receipt. Hecate's aurora folded like a curtain someone promised to wash. Rook's half-grown ring muttered about torque the way an ankle mutters about learning to run again.

"Checklist," Iri said, and the word was tender.

Kael put his palm on the console as if the ship had a fever. "Quench tree—green across tiers; dampers—within tolerance; hoop—seventy-eight percent; tape joints—three flagged for rework, tagged; radiator cone—bounded at forty-five."

"Life loop?" Iri asked.

Kael glanced at the biobay. The algae shimmered with the smugness of a pH that had not needed scolding in days. The insect trays clicked and preened. A jar labeled Lara Culture sat in the quarantine dock like a saint's relic, smugly alive.

"Loop holds," Kael said. "Soap installed. Sialla sentry tuned to lullaby."

"Thrust?" Iri asked, ritual insisting its say the word even if the Court would not call what came next *thrust* at all.

Kael smiled, small and private. "We are about to attempt taste, not force."

Rook angled. The hoop's interface with the ship was a humming brace of notion and weld; Kael felt the brace in his teeth. Hecate's field lines lay before him like harp strings nobody claimed ownership of. Rook reached with current—and not much of it—to find where the music began.

"Beam vector coming hot," Huo said on the Court band, and he sounded like a man announcing a safe sunrise. Node Engineering's beamed power rig blinked awake far downrange: a tuned lattice of emitters that had been designed to hold

corridors and had learned to play at being a sun. “Ledger acknowledges tilt: *Thistledown* signature, rotated legal.”

Mother had tilted. Father had counted. Kael said “copy” into the mic and into the past.

They drifted into the beam like a bird uses a thermal it didn’t invent. The hoop took light and turned it to electrons and then to drag opposing drift—light into braking—and then, when Kael reversed the wiring in a click that had eaten entire weeks of simulations, light into pull along a field line. The ring didn’t shove; it negotiated.

“Current at five percent,” Iri said. “No chatter. Quench tree quiet as a monastery.”

“Seven,” Kael said. “Nine.” The numbers climbed. Rook leaned on invisible lines and the lines politely didn’t break. The cabin made that settling noise a house makes when winter leaves.

Hecate shrank to a bruise. The Court dimmed to a rumor. Knot Nine’s bar turned down its lights by two percent in farewell; the bartender didn’t say anything, which was how bartenders perform affection without adding words to a busy day. Blue Anvil’s last message was a photo of a sink with wash your hands, cowards stickers and two mugs drying on a welded coaster. Spindle Ark’s juniors sent twelve overlapping charts and three memes of sleeve-painted ships getting soap in their paint. Mara sent a graph with no caption, which was how people who have learned your mouth read I’m here.

Kael fed the hoop another notch and felt—not speed yet, but the lack of drag arranged. You don’t go fast in a magnetosphere; you choose your friends among the field lines. Rook found a friend.

“Beam alignment good,” Iri said. “Rook sings in key.”

“Sing along,” Kael said, and realized the joke had become a tool: the ship did better when someone told it that there was a song to play along with. Some teams brought saints. They brought metaphors topped with math.

They reached the edge of the Court's jurisdiction like a step down off a curb that had always made children fall. Outside the magnetosphere proper, the field went from familiar to austere. The beamed rig could still reach them for another long hour and a few minutes besides; beyond that, wind and habit.

"Full hoop," Iri said.

"We spool in the dark," Kael said.

"What else is night for," Iri replied, and opened the panel that let Rook grow.

They printed tape like sensible people: slow, with too many checks and a superstition about not naming the finished ring in case words made it proud. The rock they'd chosen to mine was a decently ugly thing with ice like old teeth. Beetles chewed. Plasma teased. Vapor deposition wrote silver on spools the way your hand remembers letters before your head does.

Kael worked, and in the work, thought about Mara in a loop lab that smelled like ammonia teaching a teenager to wash. They thought about Yara's face when the tether had damped, the admiring irritation. They thought about Mother's pencil and Father's beads and the way they had accepted being both made and making without it feeling like treason.

"This ring will be ours," Kael said, not because possession mattered but because responsibility is easier to love if you name it.

"Ours," Iri agreed, and the word softened something that had been stiff in Kael's throat since the corridor wedge. They both worked quieter after that because sometimes silence is a respect you owe the ridiculous complexity of filament pulling math into matter.

Halfway through a shift change, the beamed rig snapped off with the politeness of a dinner guest leaving notes on the napkin. Rook sighed into the not-beam and drifted on a small dignity that did not need permission.

"Free flight," Iri said, and if its voice had a tremor, ceramic kept it small enough to save for later.

Kael reduced current and let the hoop sip at the planet's distant whisper. The ring thrummed: no quench. The ship listened to a field so delicately it could tell when somebody in the Court sneezed—only metaphor, but it felt true. Kael let go of a tension he had been pretending wasn't there and discovered there was a way to not be captain for five breaths without abdicating.

The vector stretched. When distances get rude, time starts doing what old people say it does: running and sitting at the same time. Kael set Rook onto a lane that would take them past two rocks worth chewing and one dust veil worth mapping for Spindle's juniors. They put the autopilot on sensible, which was Mother's humor embedded in code, and turned a little so they could see Iri without frames in the way.

"Sit with me," Kael said.

"I am," Iri said, because it always was. It unlatched not from the ship but from the posture that makes a body a tool and let its cables lie with grace.

Kael floated the mug that would always have some condensate in it no matter how many times Blue Anvil insisted on better coils. "We need to discuss we," he said in the tone of a person about to tell the truth to someone who will not abuse it.

Iri's antennae made a small helix: proud, worried. "Define domains," it said. Companion grammar.

"Three," Kael said. "Ship—we; work—we; us-we." He didn't blush; diaspora births you into rooms where the word us has to compete with loop and law for bandwidth.

"Ship-we," Iri said. "I navigate. You steer. We both cut quench manually when something lies. We do not override each other on reflex. We state reasons."

"Work-we," Kael said. "We keep consents boring. We write standards because we like how they look on walls. When Blue Anvil asks us to read a graph at three in the morning, we do it unless the ship needs hands more than the nurse does."

"Us-we," Iri said gently.

Kael took the breath you use to loosen a bolt that has been tight for years and had rusted into your hand. "As long as you are companion-proper, and the law insists on asking whether I own you and I insist on saying no, us-we means I don't ask you to be evidence. Not for the Court. Not for Mara's grandmother. Not for my father when he says *tilt* and means *trust me**. You are not a ward. You are not a credential. You are my person. If that gets us in trouble, I will write it in the report and let Huo underline it."

Iri's hand found Kael's knuckles. Ceramic warmed with the steady albedo of a loop doing well. "Us-we," it said. "As long as you are human-proper and the law tries to make you a martyr, I will be the boring that holds. I will say later when no would make a better story. I will refuse to be romantic when romance makes us stupid."

Kael laughed, private and grateful. "Romance that hates stupid is my kink," he said, and if the ship had had a sense of humor, it would have wagged the gauges. It didn't. It kept them alive instead.

The ring asked for an adjustment. Kael gave it an apology disguised as current. Field lines bent subtly like flags remembering a breeze. Rook leaned and leaned back. The vector turned into a poem that would pass a safety review.

"Message," Rook said, and even though the ship used the same voice always, Kael heard the tone you hear when someone knocks on a door and you know their cadence. "Mara."

Kael angled the cabin light down two percent. No elegance; just comfort.
"Open," he said.

Mara's face arrived with the low-latency distortion that says *we stole time and it almost got away*. Her hair was a war with a clip that had chosen which side to die on. She had something stained on her collar that made Kael want to put her in a chair and tell the day to sit and behave.

“Loop ok?” Kael said, because starting with romance is for people with oxygen to waste.

“Lara Culture took,” Mara said. “Two juniors remembered to wash before touching the pH sentinel and were insufferable about it. A Talweg auntie invented a way to wash algae without killing its smugness and we wrote it down.” The tired threaded her mouth and the joy did not apologize.

“Pilot?” Kael asked softly.

“Kepler’s Kin: rails loaded, cooling-off done, implantation scheduled. Brim: wrote a song about shins and auditing. A grandmother told me she enjoys being wrong slowly. We might live.” Mara looked past Kael at the hoop, because sometimes devotion to a person is safer via their work. “You’re free-flight.”

“We’re trying taste,” Kael said. “Beam’s off. Field’s enough. No quench. Iri’s talking about eddies like they’re saints.”

“I can be persuaded to be doctrinal about eddies,” Mara said. She leaned forward, and the lens made her eyes coin-wide. “Kael, we—we should define we.” She winced at herself and didn’t back down. “There is we when you’re here and we when you’re vector.”

Kael wanted to be clever and chose brave. “We don’t get to own each other with schedules,” he said. “We write a protocol. We notify when we can. We assume good. We opt out of fights when stupid mercy is being abused in the margins. We don’t make each other proof in public without consent. We—” he stopped because breath and went on because that is how you make sentences out of fear—“we let later be yes enough sometimes. And we make a room for yes that can stand without scaffolding.”

Mara closed her eyes for the cultural second that means I am telling my threshold to behave. When she opened them, the clip had lost the war and she didn’t care. “I will despise you on camera when my grandmother needs it,” she said. “And then I will buy you soup where the coasters are welded. I will invite your robot to lecture my juniors on how to say later without starting a riot. I will

not ask you to be a symbol. I will not let you have revenge you will pretend was justice. When I do, you are allowed to send me reports with a font that hurts.”

Kael felt something behind his sternum unclench like a hand seeing it is not needed. “Yes,” he said. It did not feel like a promise; it felt like the sheath for a knife they would carry with care.

Iri’s antennae sketched a helix that would be a dance in a culture that needed them to dance more. “I would like to invoice you for the lecture,” it said. “We need filament.”

Mara laughed in a key that made graphs jealous. “I will pay you in soap and sumac,” she said. “And a copy of the Sialla v1 poster with the microbe wearing a hat.”

“Deal,” Iri said, solemn.

Silence made a nest for itself in the frame and decided to be friendly. When it rose, Kael did not ask for a kiss. He asked for a trivial thing: “Send me a picture of the pH sentinel.”

Mara vanished from the frame and returned with a camera pointed at a machine that looked like a bored trumpet wearing a nurse. The display hummed stable in a font teenagers respect. The sticker said Sialla with a little hat. Kael saved the image in a folder labeled boring miracles and made a plan to name nothing, ever, after himself.

After the call, Kael and Iri finished a spool and then another. The truss accepted weld and did not pop. Freeflight taught the ring to be honest when it wanted to be proud. Kael learned the ship’s new beat—the way the hoop’s hum wrote okay into the cabin air when the load was right. Iri learned the edge of cutoffs with a surgeon’s cruelty and mercy.

They found a dust veil and mapped it. The lasers made it taste like doctrine and the doctrine turned into data and the data turned into a boring PDF Spindle Ark would annotate and fax to a grandmother by way of a junior. (No one had a fax; the diaspora uses the word for the pleasure of how it sounds like facts.)

They chewed a rock and left a song. This time Kael sang a note from a Talweg child's handwashing song—the one with microbes in hats—because culture changes fastest when kids get to mock it. Iri recorded it with the same reverence it gave to power curves and law.

Somewhere in their second sleep, a ping arrived at the latency of someone respectful and dangerous. "Hearthblade," Rook said in that voice people use when they bring news of an ex to breakfast. "Yara."

Kael rubbed his face with a wrist and floated upright. Iri was already not-sleeping in the way robots are ethical about rest.

"Open," Kael said. The cabin lights came up two percent because drama was cheap and they were budgeting.

Yara's face appeared with field light at her cheekbones. The sleeve of stars behind her was unadorned by aurora or charity. "I thought you'd be sleeping," she said.

"I am not good at that yet," Kael said.

"You're doing freeflight." It wasn't a question.

"We're doing boring," Kael said.

"Your kind of boring is dangerous," Yara said, admiration honest enough to be rude. "We'll be trying soothing next. Stewardship doctrine with nicer nouns. If we fail, someone more tired than you will say yes. I would prefer you don't make it easy."

"How would I make it easy?" Kael asked.

"Tear your hoop," Yara said. "Write a beautiful letter after. Let some child see your bravery and think Death prints valentines. Or let Mara burn out because she has to despise you and love you in the same shift. Or let your robot give me their roots and make me write a law that breaks a thousand strangers to protect one person."

Kael had the feeling of hearing a reasonable enemy list your worst impulses and hoping you sounded horrified instead of flattered. “We’ll keep our mirror low,” he said. “We’ll keep our proof boring. We’ll keep our hoop clean.”

“Good,” Yara said. “We’ll try something else. Be careful with Foundry Twelve. They are honest in invoices and filthy in favors. If you force them to publish, they’ll burn a warehouse with blankets in it.”

“We will bring Blue Anvil to the warehouse,” Kael said.

Yara’s smile was not unkind. “Bureaucrats are romantic,” she said. “Goodnight.”

The line cut. Iri touched Kael’s wrist in the small gentle shock that says remember your spine. Kael remembered. They laughed a little at the universe for being generous enough to send adversaries who told the truth when it made them look small.

He slept after that for real, because engineering problems become injuries if you let philosophy keep them awake. In the middle watch, Rook ran a diagnostic on the quench tree and sorrowed that it had no heart to listen with; then it did what ships do: pretended to in order to keep the organisms inside making better mistakes.

In the morning-that-was-not-morning, because light has no permission in deep space, Kael and Iri finished the ring. The last truss clicked in like a sentence finally finding its verb. The hoop sighed. The ship learned to wear its new span like a habit.

“Full sail,” Iri said softly.

“Full,” Kael said, and threw the switch that put current through a million centimeters of humility. The circle brightened in false color. The field accepted the curtsey. Nothing tore.

They didn’t sprint. They leaned. The vector changed by degrees and the degrees had edges Kael could feel on his teeth. The bequest’s vault hummed behind its friendly door. The Sialla Standard’s icon glowed at the sink. Blue Anvil’s picture of a boring pH lived in a folder. Spindle’s salt detector pinged

quietly when Kael swore too much at small noises. Mara's soap sat on the counter smelling like a childhood future children might learn to have.

Kael strapped in and watched the sun he had not seen in months persist as a concept. "Hold me steady," he said, because you tie one sentence to another and call it craft.

"I am holding," Rook said.

The long vector stretched. The ship purred. Somewhere behind them, a bar's coasters were welded to tables under a sign that said BORING with a stubborn hand. Somewhere ahead, Foundry Twelve's trail wrote a curve in accounts and favors. Somewhere, a child would be born who didn't care about doctrine as long as their loop didn't burn their tongue on soup.

Kael put both hands on the console and let the desire to write poetry be harnessed to the need to write manuals. Iri checked the quench tree again and then watched Kael with the patience of a saint who knows saints are useless if they're not electricians.

"Onward?" Iri said.

"Onward," Kael said, and the ring—their ring—carried its breath across a field that had been singing before anyone remembered to build mouths.

14: Doctrine on Trial

The Court had three words for big hearings: assize, circus, surgery. This one was all three. Node relays brightened into a lattice that could carry faces without dropping ethics. Knot Nine welded two extra cameras to its tables, as if the act of fastening could argue for sincerity. Someone hung the paper sign again, the hand a little surer: BORING.

Rook was still on the long vector, ring new and honest, when the summons hit.

“Assize convened,” Spindle Ark said over wide band. “Agenda: Consent Compact vs Stewardship Doctrine. Vigil petitions for stewardship override. Ledger petitions to codify companion auditors network-wide. Public, recorded, welded.”

“Backseat witness?” Huo asked.

“Front seat,” Blue Anvil answered. “We have babies and graphs.”

Kael looked at Iri. The robot’s antennae made that small helix—proud, worried. “We can beam in,” Iri said. “Mirror light off the ring. Keep load low.”

“Keep the hoop clean,” Kael said, because Yara’s warning lived in his ear like a splinter he respected.

The Court framed itself: Spindle’s window center; Blue Anvil’s ward to one side, lullaby warm; Brim’s stools and boots, politely aimed; Talweg elders’ icon and Mara’s real face; Greta under a lamp calibrated to make spices look honest; Huo like a ledger that had come to church; and, late only because symbolism required it, Vigil Ithaca—Hearthblade’s Yara and a counsel whose shoes had opinions.

“Council recognizes petitioners,” Spindle said, stylus poised like a scalpel that could also underline jokes.

Huo went first, because bureaucracy that admits desire is disarming. “Ledger requests the Court adopt three rules,” he said. “One: Companion auditors

recognized node-wide as persons in audit roles, not wards, not tools, with roots protected absent immediate hazard. Two: Sialla Standard recommended baseline for loop hygiene; false-emergency seizures prohibited under its cover. Three: Safety recall motions must publish specs and be auditable; recalls may never target persons.”

“Doctrine moves to stay all three,” Vigil’s counsel said pleasantly, the way a man offers you water knowing the cup leaks. “We propose a Stewardship Panel with override power, chosen by lottery, vetted by Ledger—”

“—and secretly supplied by shells,” Brim muttered.

“—with authority to compel exchange marriages and suspend synthesis,” the counsel finished. “And we file a Safety Recall: unlicensed magsails present hazard; all such devices must be impounded until certified. This would include Rook.”

Kael felt his hand find the strap by habit, not fear. “We’re licensed to brake,” he said, careful. “We published every quench. The hoop is clean.”

“Publication is not airworthiness,” the counsel replied. Their smile had the symmetry of a tool.

Blue Anvil lifted a laminated chart like a shield made of kindergarten. “The pilot runs,” they said. “Opt-outs logged without shame. Opt-ins logged with rails. Two infants rescued from your friends’ warehouse are breathing, which is relevant to all proposals.”

Mara’s voice: lab-plain, council-fed. “Sialla v1 installed on seven caravans, adopted by five more in principle, pending soap shipments,” she said.

“Companion auditors objected three times; humans read the objections and, twice, said later. No quarantines faked to seize anyone’s robot.”

Greta: “Spices sold to teenagers who wash now. Doctrine’s shells share a salt habit; see Spindle’s chalk.”

Spindle hit the wall with a diagram clean enough to be framed. Coincident biases glowed. Even where even should not be. Lines hummed.

"Doctrine acknowledges supply-chain irregularities," Yara said, not blinking. "We burned the warehouse."

"You did," Huo said. He didn't smile. "We have the writ."

The counsel pivoted because doctrine survives by learning new nouns. "Then consider care," he said. "Robots cannot care. Care requires soul. Souls require anointed stewardship. You want companions in audit roles? You... appoint tools to bless your dice."

Iri didn't look away. "I do not bless," it said. "I require logs. I object in writing. I accept later when no would be theater. That is care."

Talweg's elder narrowed her eyes the way you look at a joint you once injured and don't want to admit still aches. "I thought I would hate this sentence," she said, almost to herself.

"Doctrine proposes Safety Recall Directive Nine," the counsel pressed, sensing paper gravity. "All companion units in audit positions must submit their root logs to Ledger verification; failure to do so implies ward status. All unlicensed magsails must dock for inspection; Rook's hoop included."

Huo didn't take the bait; he moved it. "Safety Recall motions must be auditable," he repeated, louder. "DR-9 has no specs. 'Submit your roots' is not a spec. It is a naked hand."

Spindle tapped her stylus twice. "We are not voting yet," she said, "but the room is choosing."

The Court did what it always did when doctrine tried to become the only story: it let a smaller story breathe. Blue Anvil showed boring graphs: pH lines, heartbeats, rails refusing a shiny error and choosing compassion by subtraction. Brim explained shin hygiene. Gretta described the taste of Foundry Twelve's coolant with a metaphor even a judge could enjoy. Mara read a refusal from a junior who had opted out and had written *I want to adopt two cousins instead* and underlined instead until the underline taught itself to be grace.

The counsel tried another path: flattery sharpened to a hook. "Captain Kael," he said. "You have charisma. You've made bureaucracy look romantic. We'd like to offer cover: run your synthesis in secret under stewardship aegis. Avoid circus. Avoid assize. We bless your companion as a ward for the duration. Your enemies will call you a saint; we will call you compliant."

Kael had been braced for rage; the offer felt like foil on a tooth. "No," he said. "We stay boring. We publish our no when we're wrong. We don't hide our yes in rooms that call blankets compassion."

Yara's mouth did that respectful grimace again. "Then you will be very tired," she said, and Kael almost liked her for it.

It might have gone to vote then—Ledger's three rules vs Doctrine's stay—if the universe hadn't insisted on the third word: surgery. Rook's long-range array coughed a sunspot into the feed; then heat maps lit like someone had shaken glitter into the magnetosphere. The ion forecast went from well-behaved to rude.

"Radiation spike," Iri said, antennae flattening. "Hecate's weather is angry. Ten-year storm if models are honest. Court nodes—"

Blue Anvil's doctor spoke over them with the clipped softness of someone who triages in their sleep. "We have patients in transit. Two ambulances on Pleiad. One mining crew in Sector D. We need beams. We need mirrors. We need somebody to push a blanket of comms across the Court that won't tear."

Huo snapped crisp. "Node Engineering reallocates beamed power to ambulances. We need a mirror."

Spindle glanced like a coin flip: Rook?

The counsel opened his mouth—to help? To call it circus?—but Yara got there first. She looked at Kael. "If you blow your hoop trying to be a hero, I'll write 'martyr' in a font so big the babies will learn to read it," she said. Not threat. Warning.

Kael's fingers were already on the quench tree. "We'll keep it low," he said. He cut ceremony. "Blue Anvil, vector. Huo, mirror budget. Spindle, count us stingy."

"Stingy saints live longer," Blue Anvil said, which was the closest they got to Amen.

Rook angled, respectful. The ring accepted a thin layer of light and threw it carefully across the Court. The beamed rig kissed the hoop; Rook whispered math to the field and the field, because it is not cruel, bent.

"Current at three percent," Iri said. "We can hold this for as long as the universe behaves."

"The universe is misbehaving," Spindle observed. "But your three is honest."

Comms cleared. Pleiad's ambulances arrived beneath a blanket that did not rip. The mining crew in Sector D got a vector home that didn't memorize their bones. On Blue Anvil's feed, a nurse smiled at a monitor that had decided not to teach tragedy today.

Yara watched the plots, mouth like a bracket around a reluctant compliment. Vigil's counsel tried to say something about unauthorized mirrors and thought better; some people are smarter at the edge of storms.

Kael did not make a speech. He said, "Iri?"

"Holding," Iri said, and because the whole Court had learned to hear Rook in its voice now, the room steadied.

The storm came down a notch. It would make awards dinner speeches for a decade anyway, because weather is vain, but it would not kill anybody who could be saved by competence. Rook cut the mirror with the same discipline it had used to make it. The hoop purred. The quench tree stayed green.

"Back to assize," Spindle said, after the ritual minute of quiet that follows a near-thing. "Ledger?"

Huo did not clear his throat; he respected the air. “Ledger revises its petition only to add a clause,” he said. “Emergency mirrors performed by non-node devices are legal under witness, published logs, and stingy budgets. We will call them Rook exceptions in honor of the captain who kept his hoop clean when I wished him to show off.”

Murmurs became a tone: approval’s honest cousin. Vigil’s counsel tried once more.

“Safety Recall DR-9,” he said, “stands.”

“No,” Spindle said, and the stylus made the sound of a gavel because that’s what styluses do when people remember they are allowed to be useful. “DR-9 fails to publish. DR-9 fails to define. DR-9 fails to resist malice dressed as safety.” She pointed, gently, because you can be kind with firmness when you’ve had practice. “You want a recall? Write specs. Submit test harness. Publish harms and thresholds. Include companion objections in the record. Return with boredom.”

Greta lifted a finger. “And don’t salt your nonces with hymns,” she said, to laughter that, for once, didn’t feel like a vent.

“Vote,” Blue Anvil said, because someone had to cut the nice moment into law.

Spindle ran it like a school lunch line: Rule One—Companion auditors recognized as persons in audit roles, roots protected absent immediate hazard. Aye stacked like blocks. A few nays from caravans who weren’t ready; the tally made room for them without letting them drive.

Rule Two—Sialla Standard recommended baseline; false-emergency seizures prohibited. Talweg’s elder sighed like a woman who has to concede the point she had come ready to deny. “Aye,” she said, and the juniors behind her grinned without showing teeth.

Rule Three—Safety recalls must publish, may not target persons. The “ayes” were a wall. A doctrine counsel’s “nay” wrote itself in the minutes as a little fossil future students would put in margins and label hubris.

Spindle lifted her stylus like a toast. “Assize finds for boring,” she said. “Ledger, draft. Blue Anvil, post. Brim, kick nobody unless they try to celebrate with dirty hands.”

The room loosened; gravity learned manners. Kael let his hand fall off the strap and didn’t drift.

Yara’s window stayed open. She looked away once, likely at a junior making a face they’d regret in a different profession. “Doctrine will pivot,” she said, tone not unlike Blue Anvil when they warned a family about the night shift. “Stewards will learn to write briefs that almost make sense. Foundry Twelve will start batch-washing their sins. Hearthblade will... remain interesting.”

“Vigil should try soap,” Mara said. It landed kinder than it read.

Yara’s smile clicked to fit. “Send me Sialla v1,” she said. “We’ll post it in our galley and claim we invented it.”

“Public, recorded,” Spindle intoned, grinning. “You’re stuck.”

“Good,” Yara said. Her eyes flicked to Iri. “Keep your later.”

“We will,” Iri said.

Huo leaned in enough to scuff his polish. “I’m publishing companion auditors as a Ledger circular,” he said. “Not just here. Network-wide. Some nodes will refuse. We’ll tire them out with forms.”

“ROMANCE,” Brim muttered like a toast.

Blue Anvil’s doctor cleared their throat. “We’ll rename one of the ward bays,” they said. “Boring. For luck.”

Greta put a jar on the table with a handwritten label: SODIUM FUND. She didn’t ask. The jar filled with jokes that smelled like money.

Spindle tapped her stylus one last time. “Assize closed,” she said. “Surgery successful. Circus dismantled. Go home. Wash.”

The feeds dimmed. Knot Nine turned its lights down two percent. A sign went up next to BORING with teenager handwriting: DON'T LICK THE DOCTRINE.

Kael let the quiet reach his chest. Iri rotated the ring one degree to flex a seam on purpose. The hoop purred like it had learned a hymn it didn't mind.

"Private hail," Rook said. "Mara."

Her face arrived, lab hair losing to gravity for once, eyes at half-mast but delighted to still be eyes. "You didn't blow the hoop," she said.

"You didn't let the standard become a hat," Kael said.

"We're both learning," Mara said. "I told my grandmother I hated you, and she laughed and signed a budget." The laugh in her voice was the kind you tuck into drawers for winter. "Come back soon. Bring your robot. We have juniors to bore."

"I'll send later," Iri said. "And then yes."

"Soap's on the counter," Mara said. "Sumac in the drawer. Graphs in the inbox."

"Bring your grandmother to Knot Nine," Kael said rashly. "We'll buy her a drink she'll say is too warm."

"Deal," Mara said. "Don't tear your hoop trying to be a parable."

Kael saluted with two fingers because one felt cocky. "I'll save parables for reports," he said.

The line cut. Huo pinged with a link to the new Ledger Circular: Recognition of Companion Auditors in Audit Roles. Spindle wrote the footnote she'd been waiting to write: this is what happens when boredom wins. Greta sent a recipe that would make dishwater smell like somebody's childhood. Blue Anvil put a sticker on a bay door that said BORING and left it slightly crooked so nurses could fix it during shifts and feel helpful.

Kael took his hand off the strap. He didn't drift.

“Hold me steady,” he said anyway, because habits turn into culture if you’re patient.

“I am holding,” Rook said.

Outside, Hecate’s aurora unrolled its weather. Inside, law tucked itself into standards, standards into reflexes, reflexes into the kind of boredom stories have to work to disrupt. Vigil would pivot. Hearthblade would pick a new hymn. Foundry Twelve would send an apology with improved isotopes. The bequest’s vault waited with stubborn recipes and sharper erasers.

Kael looked at Iri—his person, his auditor, his saint allergic to romance—and felt something as small and scandalous as ease.

“Onward?” Iri said.

“Onward,” Kael said, and the ring hummed agreement in a key that would pass inspection.

15: Bequest, Unlocked

The last panel on the vault looked like an apology someone had engineered into a hinge. It had no romance; it had torx. Kael turned the driver the way his mother had taught him—downward pressure, honest torque—and the plate came away with a smugness only good tolerances wear.

“Ready,” Iri said, antennae making the small helix: proud, worried.

“Open,” Kael said.

The Bequest didn’t blossom. It exhaled. A final tree of directories appeared: not new algorithms, not secret edits—instructions. Distribution rails. Shard keys. A schedule generator tuned for boredom. A playbook titled How to Leave Songs with sections on where to hide mirrors on rocks and how to salt a nonce without being a poet.

Spindle Ark’s window brightened as if chalk could sense an old promise paying out. “Read me the index,” she said, already annotating margins she hadn’t seen.

Kael scrolled. “Shard map: five nodes; quorum three. Names: Hecate (us), Vela (south drift), Ananke (ice court), Kintsugi (belt of repairs), Rainshadow (outer farms). Each gets a packet. Each packet includes rails, proofs, ethics, and a thing called Grandmother Box.”

“Show me Grandmother Box,” Blue Anvil said, amused despite exhaustion.

A little UI slid open, all big fonts and patient sentences. If you are very tired and very old and somebody is asking you for permission to change everything:

- Ask for the opt-out form first.
- Ask who will mop.
- Ask what happens when they’re wrong and who reads it out loud.
- Ask what your robots say and why you didn’t ask them earlier.
- Wash your hands. (Sialla would approve.)

Talweg’s elder, in her own square, snorted in a way that could be translated as fine.

Huo's face arrived with a sobriety that wanted to be pride and refused permission. "Shard keys, Kael," he said. "That's politics with a fuse."

Kael toggled the generator. The screen split into five circles; each lit a different hue like a very patient festival. "Quorum three," Kael said. "No single node can run the bequest alone. Companions listed as co-signers of audit gates. Roots protected. 'Later' enshrined."

Greta—flour on apron, witness lanyard crooked on purpose—leaned toward her camera. "It even tells you how to send the packet by grocery," she said, delighted. "Half the diaspora reads a shopping list before a law."

"Mirror load?" Iri asked. "We can't fling this like confetti."

"Stingy," Huo said, reflex now. "Throttled mirrors. Witnessed. Public, recorded, boring."

"Send Hecate's shard to Kepler's Kin, Spindle Ark, and Talweg," Kael said. "We lock it with three and publish we did. Greta, you carry a physical copy in a spice tin labeled bay. Ledger will pretend not to notice."

"Ledger will inventory the bay leaves," Huo said. "Privately."

Kael smiled with the part of his face that had learned to like bureaucracy. "Done." He watched the mirrored packets crawl out on careful beams and into three latches labeled received. A small tone played that sounded like a sink finishing a cycle.

"Vela—" Spindle began.

"Later," Kael said. "We mail Vela on our way. Foundry Twelve's trail bends that way anyway."

Blue Anvil's ward chimed low; the infants' graphs had settled into the smug boredom of bodies doing what bodies learned long before nodes. The nurse adjusted a lamp by two percent because that had become a ritual.

"Pilot status," Blue Anvil said into the warmth. "Kepler's Kin: implantation complete, well tolerated, rails intact. Brim: one nausea, one song, no drama. Lara: adoption proceedings begun, aunties delighted. Sialla Standard v1 adopted by eleven caravans; v1.1 drafted with a better sentence about soap."

"Companion auditors," Huo added, unable to keep paperwork out of celebration: "Circular acknowledged by three nodes, refused by one, 'under advisement' by two. Which is how people say yes when they want to sound like later."

Brim lifted a mug under the BORING sign. "Shins audited," they said. "Clean."

Mara came in from a corridor carrying a roll of posters that said Sialla in a font teenagers tolerated. She looked like a person who had wrestled three meetings and a pump and had decided not to let either claim her dignity. "Loop stable," she reported. "A junior invented a handwash jingle that doesn't make grandparents threaten violence. We named a probiotic after Lara and she pretended to hate it, which is how you know it'll catch."

Kael, who had promised himself not to be a metaphor until after lunch, broke the rule. "We leave soon," he said. "The Foundry trail points to Vela. The vault says go."

Mara looked straight into his frame. Her council voice was on the hook; her lab voice ran the reel. "Bring me coolant signatures and invoices, not speeches," she said. "Bring me jokes to put on a sink. Bring me your companion to yell at juniors about later."

"I will invoice," Iri said. "We require filament and soap."

"Approved," Mara said. She breathed out once. "Also, when you burn a note on a rock, sing the one with the hats again. It made a kid wash without rolling their eyes."

Greta put a small paper packet on the Knot Nine counter labeled road spice. The bartender slid it toward the camera with two fingers. Next to it, he set a jar: SODIUM FUND — in case of ghost.

Spindle Ark lifted her stylus. “Assize is done,” she said. “Surgery stitched. Circus packed. This is an epilogue, which is another word for work. Kael?”

Kael glanced at Iri; its antennae wrote ready. “We distribute,” Kael said. “We follow the Foundry. We avoid parables. We weld. We keep our mirror low unless an ambulance needs a sky.”

“Ledger will file nicer forms,” Huo said, which was an outrageous promise and therefore likely true.

“Doctrine will pivot,” Yara said from a small window she hadn’t been invited to but the Court had decided to leave open anyway. Hearthblade’s captain looked unstartled and unflattered. “We will try stewardship with soap. We will court your grandmothers with fonts they like. We’ll stop shooting at mirrors. We’ll ship blankets with tags. And someday, when you are tired, we will offer you privacy in exchange for speed.”

“We’ll say later,” Iri said.

Yara’s mouth twitched. “Good. Foundry Twelve will move stock through Vela’s outer farms under a shell called Rowan Keep. They owe me a favor I shouldn’t have kept. Consider this my unromantic apology for enjoying your hearing.” She cut the line before anybody could thank her, which would have ruined her posture.

Talweg’s elder stood. Age is a kind of gravity; hers had learned to push politely. “Sialla v1.1—Talweg signs,” she said. “We will adopt companion auditors publicly and tell our grandchildren we invented the idea.” She glanced at Mara, at Kael, at Iri, and allowed the corners of her mouth to remember what consent does to a face. “Later,” she added, because power has a sense of humor, too.

The Court posted a new widget: Bequest Shards — propagation. Hecate lit green. Empty circles for Vela, Ananke, Kintsugi, Rainshadow blinked with little patient hearts.

“Time,” Rook said softly. The ship’s hum had learned confidence and refused to be vain.

Kael touched the console as if checking for fever. "Checklist," he said, because that's how you say goodbye without wasting oxygen.

"Hoop," Iri said. "Clean. Quench tree green. Brakes polite. Mirror budget stingy. Loop smug. Soap scented. Lara Culture thriving. Songs in storage."

"Friends?" Kael asked, because sometimes you have to make sure you are allowed to love a place before you leave it.

"Present," Blue Anvil said, smiling tired.

"Annoying," Huo said, and meant don't die.

"Hungry," Greta said, which meant come back.

"Watching," Spindle said.

"Later," Mara said, and her later had a destination.

They walked Rook through the Court one last time, slow enough to let cameras be welded by memory. Knot Nine dimmed its lights by two percent and then raised them back—someone had turned the dimming into a ritual. The sign over the bar read BORING; someone had added & STUBBORN underneath in a new hand.

Kael aimed the ring toward the Vela lane. They kissed a field line just hard enough to be considered polite. The hoop sang the note that had become okay. The Court's aurora slipped behind them like a curtain that promised to be washed.

A message chimed at a latency that said hand-delivered. Kael opened it. A photo: two infants at Blue Anvil under a lamp turned down by two percent, a sticker on the crib rail—wash your hands, cowards—crooked enough to make a nurse fix it and feel useful. The caption, in a junior's handwriting: boring.

"Save it," Kael said, and Rook put it in the folder called boring miracles where it belonged.

They left a song on a small rock on the way out, sodium whispering into a seam because showing a stranger where to put light is a kind of prayer. Kael hummed the hats song. Iri recorded. The ship remembered.

Spindle's salt-habit detector pinged once at a drift of coolant that tasted like Foundry Twelve with better manners. Huo's docket spat a lead: Rowan Keep. Mara sent a graph of a pH curve with a caption that was just a picture of a handwashing poster, which is how smart people flirt when they're tired.

Yara's last gift arrived as coordinates, unsigned. Kael put them on a map and told himself it was strategy, not sentiment.

"Hold me steady," Kael said, because habits are scaffolds for futures.

"I am holding," Rook said.

They went.

Behind them, Hecate finished adopting Sialla v1.1 and printed stickers with microbes wearing hats that even grandmothers kept. Ledger's circular about companion auditors landed on desks three nodes outward and started arguments that, if the universe was kind, would end in chairs and soap. Greta sold spices to teenagers who washed without being watched. Brim posted a video called Shin Hygiene II and it was funnier than it had any right to be. Spindle started a syllabus titled Proofs for the Tired. Blue Anvil dimmed a lamp by two percent and didn't write a poem about it. Talweg's elder corrected a poster's punctuation and didn't insist on credit.

Ahead, the Vela lane stretched like a kept promise. Foundry Twelve's trail glimmered with invoices that thought they were innocent. The shard packets nested in Rook's memory like seeds that refuse to hurry.

Kael and Iri sat in the ship they had made together and let the vector lengthen until even the part of the mind that wanted applause got bored and wandered off. The hoop purred. The quench tree stayed green. The bequest's last hinge lay open and looked, at last, like a door.

"Onward?" Iri said.

“Onward,” Kael said, and the ring—a full, honest circle now—took the word and made it into distance.

16: Epilogue — Songs On Rocks

The first shard left Hecate in a tin labeled bay. Greta tucked it beside the cardamom and an invoice she’d written in a grandmother’s hand so the boy at the Vela checkpoint would be too polite to open it. Ledger knew; Huo had signed a form that said he hadn’t. That’s how you carry law across a border—under witnesses and jokes.

Rook’s ring wore space with the modesty of a tool that had passed inspection. Kael set a long lane to Vela and kept the mirror budget stingy enough to make Huo relax and Spindle Ark proud. Iri tuned the quench tree until the green wasn’t just a color but a promise written in amperes.

"Hold me steady," Kael said.

"I am holding," Rook said, as if the ship had learned the sentence enough to say it for itself.

They didn't rush. One of the bequest's last files—How to Arrive Without Ruining the Room—said: *enter like rain after heat, not like a sermon*. Rook came to Vela's outer farms with that patience. The farms were foam lattices and spun dirt and a thousand rude hacks that had learned manners under the eyes of children who didn't care about doctrine as long as soup happened on time.

Vela had a bar like every node. This one was a greenhouse—a bend of glass and algae and conversations that took their shoes off. The sign wasn't BORING; it said NO DRAMA and someone had drawn a microbe wearing boots.

Kael didn't dock Rook there. He parked at a maintenance arm and made the first call into a council room that smelled like fertilizer disguised as civility.

"We have a gift," Kael said, and the word gift in diaspora law is a grenade you can cuddle. "A shard. Rails. Proofs. The Grandmother Box."

Vela's council wasn't Hecate's. Elders here wore dust and sarcasm differently. A short man with eyebrows like cables said, "We already trade children with soap and songs. We do not need your rails to tell us our alphabet."

"Good," Kael said. "Then this will be boring."

He opened the tin—under cameras, under witnesses—and the shard woke and asked for three. You can't run the bequest alone without a quorum; that's the hinge Mother and Father had bolted into the door decades earlier. Vela's Repair Belt—Kintsugi—sent a signer in a shirt covered in epoxy. Ananke, cold and meticulous, sent a signature with the latency of an ice court where language always travels slower than intention. The shard clicked and published available in a font the elderly could read.

“Grandmother Box,” Kael offered. A woman in a coat made of patched tarps took it without coyness. She read the first line—Ask for the opt-out form first—and cackled like a pipe that had found its favorite pressure again.

“We’ll insult you later,” the tarp-coat woman said. “For now: leave songs.”

Kael and Iri left two. One on a rock with sodium, so the night would show where to aim curiosity. One taped to a farm sink, the Sialla poster slightly crooked so someone could fix it and feel useful.

They had meant to leave quietly. That is how Book Ones end: a ship becomes a line and the line becomes distance. But the universe loves symmetry too much to resist.

Foundry Twelve had a warehouse at the edge of Vela’s farms—Rowan Keep, as Yara had called it. It wasn’t a keep; it was a hangar with pretensions. Kael didn’t go there with speeches. He went with Huo and Spindle’s salt detector and Blue Anvil’s ward liaison and a jar of Lara Culture as a peace offering if peace came on time.

“Public, recorded, boring,” Huo said to the hangar door. “Open.”

Rowan Keep opened like a lie that had forgotten its second act. Inside: coolant drums wearing nice labels; a server rack that looked like it would hold hymns if you sang at it; a smaller room with blankets folded in a way that was supposed to make people forgive the shape of the room.

Greta didn’t come—Greta had made peace with being the person who points and then sells cumin. Yara didn’t either; Hearthblade hovered in a sleeve of space that pretended not to watch. A woman with a Foundry Twelve badge and the smile of someone who has been given too many excuses stepped forward. “Inspections,” she said, as if the word had a flavor.

Spindle’s detector sniffed. The spectra didn’t lie. Coolant batches sang Sable and Clove with better manners. The server rack coughed a file called stewardship-sopa.pdf into Huo’s net—a document half apology, half pivot.

Blue Anvil's liaison—a man who looked like he ironed graphs but not shirts—walked to the blanket room and turned a light down by two percent. There were no babies this time. There were forms. Consent forms, printed. Not perfect. Not lies.

"Who mops when you're wrong?" Kael asked, because the Grandmother Box said to.

The Foundry woman's mouth recognized the sentence and had to pick a side. "We wrote a contract with Blue Anvil," she said. "To mop. Not to bless."

Blue Anvil's liaison nodded once. "We mop on retainer," he said. "We do not saint."

Spindle peeled a salt string off a console. "This habit," she said, tracing the round-to-even bias with a finger, "you have to break it. You can't salt your keys with laziness and call it continuity."

The Foundry woman looked like a person who suddenly saw the shelf life on her career. "We had a vendor," she said. "We will change."

"Public, recorded," Huo said, and his tone was an absolution dressed as a warning. "You broke law with poetry. You will fix it with invoices."

They left Rowan Keep without heroes or an arrest. It was better. Heroics make stories that doctrine can eat. Paperwork makes habits.

That night Vela's greenhouse bar served a soup Greta would have teased and paid for anyway. Someone played a song on a cracked guitar; it sounded like rinsing filters and trying to love your job. Yara appeared in a corner window, backlit by a sleeve of honest stars.

"We didn't shoot at your mirror," she said without greeting.

"I noticed," Kael said.

"We will steal your Sialla font," Yara said. "We will make your grandmothers think we loved soap first."

"Public, recorded," Spindle said from her stool.

Yara didn't smile at Spindle; Yara saved those for late, for when the room had become a memory. She looked at Iri. "Keep saying later," she said. "There's a boy on my ship who has started using it, and I am tired of winning too fast."

"I will invoice him for the phrase," Iri said gravely. "We require filament."

"I'll send you blankets with tags," Yara said, and cut the line before kindness could run its mouth.

Rook slept in orbit around a farm that had figured out how to grow saffron without laughing at itself. Kael dreamed of small stupid things: an opt-out form stapled straight; a pump that never learned drama; Mara's hands washing up to the wrists and then pointing at a graph like a cudgel.

Mara's message arrived at dawn-that-wasn't. Blue Anvil's ward behind her, a quiet fright in the edges of the frame everyone pretends not to see and the pride you get from being useful. "Kepler's Kin says hello," she said. "Brim's nausea resolved with comedy. Lara's adoption is messy and lawful. Grandmother signed v1.1 and pretended she had invented the footnote about teenagers."

"Good," Kael said. He didn't smooth his hair. He didn't perform for a screen. "We closed Rowan's blankets."

Mara's mouth did a thing that meant today will be hard but not clever. "Bring me a coolant map that makes a grandmother shrug," she said. "And come back when the ring needs a rinse. I have a junior who thinks eddies are saints."

"She's not wrong," Iri said.

"Soap's on the counter," Mara said. "Sumac in the drawer. Graphs in the inbox. Later?" The word had stopped being an evasion between them and become a kind of table you could set dinner on.

"Later," Kael said, and meant yes so strongly it didn't need ceremony.

The shard for Kintsugi went out in the next window. It wasn't carried by a hero; it rode on a repair tug with a name like Bucket. A woman with epoxy on her sleeves signed while chewing; her co-signer was a teenager who had the right to be there because she had welded a seam last week that saved three families' skylights. The Grandmother Box whispered at a council where the oldest person in the room asked "who mops?" and the youngest said "us" without being scared of the word.

Ananke took longer. Ice courts always do. The shard hung in a queue like a decorative promise until a green light blessed it with a grudge. Huo sighed privately and filed a gentle letter explaining why the phrase companion auditors would not destroy marriage markets. An elder who had learned to read boring sent back a form with a single checkbox ticked: under advisement. It was enough.

The Ledger circular on companion auditors did what Huo had promised it would. At Hecate, it had the weight of warm bread. At Rainshadow, it ignited a lecture series: *Robots, Rights, and Rinsing*. At a node Kael had never seen, it was posted on a door that got quietly kicked at midnight and reposted at dawn. At Vela, a grandmother asked a companion to sign her microbiome handshake and then cried a little, which nobody would comma into a poem because that would be impolite.

On the way out, Rook left three more songs. One on a relay kite that had been welded too many times and needed to know it was seen. One on a tiny moon that had never been named, because the diaspora learned that some things should have only numbers so people don't get ambitious. One on a chunk of debris with DO NOT LICK stenciled on it, as a joke for a future that might need a laugh on a bad day.

Foundry Twelve tried to get ahead of its own scandal the way merchants always do. They published Batch Practices v2 with isotopes that smelled like a confession. They cut ties with Clove River and Sable Ladder when those names got uneconomical. They rebranded Rowan Keep as Rowan Commons, a place where blankets were for picnics under arc lights. The Court rolled its eyes and kept receipts.

Spindle Ark issued Sialla v1.2 with a new appendix: How to Apologize With Standard Language. It taught caravans to say we were wrong without growing martyr teeth. Brim posted Shin Hygiene II and a teenager somewhere in Ananke turned it into a dance that made elders go quiet and then clap in the wrong places.

Blue Anvil renamed a bay BORING and hung the sign slightly crooked. Nurses fixed it at shift changes and told each other the room's luck came from work, not letters. The two warehouse babies learned how to refuse sleep at the same time and their graphs wrote synchronized disdain. The doctor pretended not to be charmed. The node pretended it was normal to measure a community's health by how often it chose later instead of fire.

Hearthblade didn't vanish. Yara sent no memos for a while—refusals written as absence. Doctrine's channel posted a pamphlet titled Stewardship After Sialla with fonts that were almost honest. Paragraphs hedged. A footnote asked, *who will mop?* and credited Grandmother Box. It wasn't an apology. It was a hinge. That's better.

One of Huo's dockets bounced back with an error stamped by a node nobody would admit they still listened to: circular refused. He sent it again with a nicer paragraph and an attached picture of a sink. It stuck. Bureaucrats are romantic when you force them to be.

Talweg's matriarch visited Knot Nine and ordered a drink she would later swear was too warm. She stood under the BORING sign and pretended not to check if the letters were straight. She watched a junior explain microbiome handshake to a cousin and did not correct a single preposition. Later, when nobody was looking, she wrote later under a footnote on a poster and underlined it twice.

Greta sold cumin and bay and road spice and a new blend called proof that smelled like receipts and a childhood you weren't ashamed of. She kept a tin labeled bequest under the counter and moved it around like a game so people would forget to ask if it mattered. It did and didn't. She slept with both hands open because she had finally given away the thing she had been carrying wrong.

Mara taught a class called Eddies Are Not Saints and then another called But Maybe Treat Them Kindly. She caught herself humming the hats song while scrubbing a sensor and decided not to be embarrassed because embarrassment is a luxury for people not holding a node together. At night she wrote later on a chalkboard and didn't erase it. Some mornings she erased it and wrote yes instead and the distinction felt like oxygen.

Kael read this in a message and smiled at the console like a fool. He was becoming a person who could like words without fearing they'd replace weld.

"There's a thing I want," Kael said to Iri, not looking up from the console where Vela had become behind and Kintsugi had become ahead. "It's small."

"Ask," Iri said, its antennae listening like instruments set to tender.

"When we meet again at Knot Nine—" Kael began, and then corrected because Meetings are for councils. "When we sit again at Knot Nine, and the bar's lights go down two percent, and someone has left the BORING sign crooked, I want to fix it and pretend it was an accident. I want to buy Mara a soup she will threaten and drink. I want you to tell a junior that later is a proof technique, not a dodge."

Iri did the helix: proud, worried. "All of those are small enough to survive."

Rook purred at a new key that came with the ring being whole and the ship having stopped trying to impress itself. The bequest's last hinge lay flat; the shards were seeding their patient mischief. Ledger had embraced a circular that would make meetings slightly kinder and paperwork slightly longer. Doctrine had learned to stop shooting at mirrors and start stealing fonts. The Court had learned to love soap out loud.

"Message," Rook said. "Hand-delivered."

Kael opened it. A photo: two elder hands—one with grease ground in, one with nail polish chipped—holding the Grandmother Box. The caption: we used the part about mopping. Behind the hands, a sink; on the sink, a sticker; on the sticker, a microbe wearing a hat.

Kael saved it in boring miracles and felt selfish enough to open the folder and look, one by one, until the ache turned into the kind of hunger that makes you go back to work.

He put his palm on the console.

"Hold me steady," he said.

"I am holding," Rook answered.

The ship leaned into a field that had existed before human mouths, before robots learned the patience to argue gently. Ahead: Kintsugi, where rails would have to be translated into the grammar of repairs; Rainshadow, where farms would invent ways to bend standards around weather and still tell the truth; nodes they hadn't named because names make people overconfident.

Behind: a bar with welded coasters; a ward with a lamp turned down by two percent; a node that had copied Sialla v1.1 so many times the toner had become a kind of worship. Foundry Twelve with better lawyers, worse poets. Hearthblade pretending not to hum the hats song when nobody could hear. Huo trying to convince a judge that stingy is a legal term. Spindle treating chalk like a truss. Greta finding new places to hide bay leaves that were really keys.

Kael and Iri sat in the long vector and didn't try to make it noble. They let it be logistics. They let it be love without telling it to use the right nouns. They welded. They wrote. They published their no and their yes and their later. They left songs on rocks that didn't know they'd been visited and didn't have to.

When Book One needs a last image, you could do worse than a hoop in a field line, a tin labeled bay, and a hand reaching for a sign to straighten it without making a speech. Or two babies sleeping under a lamp, a nurse adjusting the light by two percent because it helps *someone* even if you can't say who. Or a ledger that has learned to put because in its sentences.

We can pick any of these. Or we can pick none. We can let the ship hum and the ring hold and the camera stay welded while the universe continues doing

what it does when you stop insisting on being interesting—making room for grandchildren to be bored.

On the far side of the viewport, a small rock turned and caught a sliver of sodium, and the vein lit like a note in the margin of a book you weren't meant to inherit and did anyway.

"Onward?" Iri said.

"Onward," Kael said, and didn't look back to make sure the sign was straight. Someone would fix it. Someone always does.

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