

Clumsy.GiBa



Ark 01: The Awakening

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Chapter One — Normal Life

David woke to the soft insistence of his phone vibrating against the nightstand and the low murmur of rain against the gutter. The display read 6:32. He lay there a moment, listening to the sounds he'd arranged his life around: the soft snore from the other side of the bed, the muffled thud of small feet down the hallway, the low humming of the dryer cycling on. The house felt like it always did in the early morning—warm at the edges, cold in the middle, a slow machine booting up.

“Your thing’s buzzing,” Sarah murmured into her pillow.

“My thing,” he said, and thumbed the screen to silence an overnight build report. He skimmed the subject lines without absorbing them—flake in integration tests, container registry timeout, a mild argument in the comments about naming conventions. He put the phone face down and slipped out of bed.

The kitchen light painted the linoleum a gentle gold. He set the kettle on, pulled bowls from the cupboard, and poured cereal like he was ticking boxes on a checklist. Through the window, the maple looked like wet graphite, each leaf a dark glossy coin. The quiet was perfect for thirty-seven seconds.

“Daaaad,” came Emma, eight years old, ceremonial and theatrical in her suffering. “Jake is in my room.”

“Correction,” Jake said, appearing behind her in dinosaur pajamas, “I am near your room.”

“Near is not in,” David said, stopping by the hallway to herd them table-ward. “Everyone sits. We will keep our limbs inside the vehicle at all times.”

Sarah arrived wrapped in a robe, hair caught up on one side, carrying last night’s book and two mugs. She pressed a kiss to his shoulder as she passed. “You have the 10 A.M.?”

“Rescheduled to eleven,” he said. “Apparently there was a calendar collision, and the universe is still expanding.”

“That joke has aged very well,” she said, but she smiled. The kettle clicked off.

There was nothing special about the morning, which was the point. Lunchboxes. Shoes under the bench. A hunt for a missing library book that turned up exactly where all lost things go—beneath the couch with the fossilized Cheerios. On the drive, the wipers beat time. Emma quizzed him on multiplication facts while Jake narrated a story about a velociraptor driving micro machines.

When he came home after the school run, he straightened a picture frame that was perpetually crooked, then set up at his desk. He worked from a corner of the spare room,

two monitors, a plant he was systematically failing. His boss had signed off on a performance perk — two days a week remote, framed as both reward and experiment — and he clung to it with quiet gratitude. The standup was brief and mercifully free of grand gestures. He shepherded a feature branch through review, gave feedback with a gentle hand, and negotiated with a linting rule that appeared to dislike him personally.

Around noon, Sarah appeared in the doorway, propped against the frame. “Walk?”

They had a loop they did when they had to take the kids from school: down to the coffee shop and back up the hill, talking about everything that wasn’t urgent. Today it was the neighbor’s new roof, the kids’ school play, whether or not to replace the weird humming fridge. On the way home he stopped and pushed the swing for Jake in the park until his arms ached a little, and it felt good to have something so simple to do.

The rest of the day was soft and ordinary. On his late afternoon break, he replaced the battery in a smoke detector. He wiped a mysterious handprint off the hallway wall that was exactly the height of a five-year-old. He made dinner—sheet pan chicken, carrots soft at the edges, potatoes catching a little on the pan—and after, there were dishes and a math worksheet and a bath that ended after one thousand and two warnings.

At bedtime, the kids turned into philosophers.

“Where do clouds go at night?” asked Jake, sunk deep in his quilt.

“Wherever they want,” David said. “No one has invented tiny leashes strong enough to hold clouds.”

“Is space cold or hot?” Emma asked from her bed, which was a small country governed by stuffed animals.

“Yes,” he said. “It depends on who you ask. If you ask the sun, it’s hot. If you ask the shadow, it’s cold. If you ask astronauts, the answer is complicated because they’re very smart and they use more words than I do.”

They laughed. He tucked them in, smoothed hair back, did the rote invocations: be kind, be brave, don’t let your brother feed the fish a cracker again. He lingered in the doorway like he always did, loving the way the dark made their rooms look like places with secrets.

In their room, Sarah was already under the covers, lamp on, book spread on her stomach. The rain had sharpened, drawing diagonal lines down the window.

“Come to bed before midnight,” she said. “I don’t want you overnight-romancing your issue tracker.”

“I would never,” he said. He did, of course, read a few things on his phone, thumb scrolling in the blue glow. Then he slid down and turned his face toward her

shoulder. She was warm, the steady heat of someone who sleeps well.

“Hey,” she said, voice drowsy. “You okay?”

“Mm-hm.”

“Just checking. You’ve been...” She searched for the word and settled for a soft one. “Busy.”

“We’re shipping next week,” he said. “The universe will not expand without my code.”

“Well. Make sure it expands in a straight line.”

He laughed, turned off the lamp, and lay listening to the rain. Storm gutters. The dull thunder a few blocks away as a car rolled through a low spot with water up past the curb. He tried to empty his head of lists and obligations. He breathed in and out, counted four and six, then eight and ten, like he’d read somewhere. His mind cursor spun; then, quietly, it didn’t.

He blinked.

The bedroom vanished like a monitor going black.

Cold seized him. It wasn’t the intellectual idea of cold but the physical snap of it, a full-body contraction as if his bones shrank. He was submerged in something dense. It had weight, not just temperature; it pressed against his eyelids and filled his ears. Panic rose cleanly, like a switch

thrown. He kicked—or tried to. His legs responded like cables under too much ice.

He tried to inhale and the thing he breathed wasn't air. It had a taste, metallic and wrong, a sweetness that cut and then burned. His lungs spasmed, gagging around something that wasn't there and was. He heard his own sound through water: a wet, small dog noise. Tubes. His forearm grazed something slick and flexible that pulled against him, restrained him. His fingers found the cord and slid over it with no purchase. The world was a dim red. Not red like blood, he thought distantly. Red like a warning light.

He could see nothing but the color and the fog of his own breath—or whatever passed for breath here—smeared across a transparent surface close to his face. The surface curved. A faceplate? Glass? He couldn't move his head much, but he could press his forehead against the inside of it and feel the cool give. He tried to push harder. Sensors, he thought? The idea came like a flicker and was gone, overwhelmed by his body's one command: air.

He squeezed his eyes shut so hard it hurt. Instinct, prayer, bargaining: make it stop.

He was back in his bed, mouth open, lungs hauling at the air. The ceiling was exactly where it had always been. The window threw soft squares of streetlight over the dresser. He was slick with sweat, heart punching his ribs, limbs

buzzing and foreign in the way a limb does when it falls asleep and the blood rushes back.

Beside him, Sarah made a small questioning noise. He turned toward her. “Sorry,” he whispered, as if he’d bumped her. “Nightmare.”

“You were breathing weird,” she said without opening her eyes. She reached out and found his arm. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” He swallowed. The back of his throat tasted faintly of copper. He closed his mouth and breathed through his nose. It was normal air. Fine, he told himself. A bad dream; a stupid bad dream. He lay there feeling every detail of the room like proof: the seam in the drywall, the warm dent his head had made in the pillow, the almost-silent hum of the baseboard heater.

He didn’t sleep for a long time. When he finally did, it was an uneasy slide, like stepping onto a moving walkway and hoping.

He woke with a headache that wasn’t quite a headache, more a tight band at the base of his skull. The alarm announced itself at the top of the hour; he silenced it without looking. Out in the kitchen, he overfilled the kettle and watched water sweat down the side onto the burner and hiss. He ground beans. The smell should have been comforting. It made him think of the dream, which made him think of the way the liquid had moved around

him when he'd tried to breathe, a strange slow swirl like a thick curtain lifting and falling.

"Hey," Sarah said, coming in with the kids' lunchboxes.
"You're up early."

"Couldn't sleep," he said. It was true, and not true. It was the kind of answer you gave when there was a long answer you didn't feel like staging for someone else.

"Anything I can do?"

"Kiss me and tell me I'm handsome," he said. She did both, which helped exactly as much as those things always do: some. "I had a weird dream."

"What kind?"

He shrugged. "Underwater. Which is ridiculous. I hate the ocean."

"You hate sand," she said. "You are neutral on the ocean."

"Fair."

She set two apples on the counter and met his eyes. "You look pale."

"Do you ever dream so hard it feels like your body did it?"

"All the time," she said. "Last week I dreamed I ran a marathon and my calves hurt all morning. I have never run two miles in my life." She slid the apples into plastic bags. "You're okay?"

“I’m fine,” he said, because that was the fastest way through the conversation. “It was just a dream.”

He kept telling himself that through the day. He said it aloud once, sitting back from his desk after a standup and saying to the empty room, “It was just a dream,” the way people on TV say things to convince themselves of plot turns. He opened his laptop and tried to get back into the normal rhythm, but words swam a little. He drank water. He stretched his neck until something popped. He pushed a commit with a message that was uncharacteristically terse.

At lunch, the rain had thinned to a mist. He walked the loop alone and did not think about water. He thought about whether they should put the kids in swim lessons this summer and whether that was a weird coincidence to be thinking about. On the way back he detoured to the pharmacy and stared at the sleep aid aisle like a tourist looking at a map of a city he was definitely lost in. He didn’t buy anything. The idea of swallowing a pill and letting go, slipping under, sent a brief, bright panic through him like catching a toe over a step in the dark.

That night the kids asked for the same story again, the one about the dinosaur who learned ballet. He told it larger and sillier until they were hiccuping with giggles. He lay on the rug between their beds while they fell asleep, listening to their breathing, counting the minutes. He felt like he was waiting for a test to start.

Sarah fell asleep fast, as usual. He brushed his teeth and avoided his reflection, because his face looked like a face you might ask questions of and he didn't have answers. He put his phone on the nightstand, screen down again, and lay next to her, warm shoulder, familiar cadence of breath. He tried to let his vision soften; he resisted the tight mechanical blink. He thought about how his eyelids were just shutters and how darkness wasn't anything at all. He thought about the word "immersion" and decided he would stop thinking of words.

The room waited with him.

He closed his eyes.

This time there was no sensation of falling or sliding. One reality switched, then the other, like lights on a two-way circuit. Cold, again, immediate and total. The shock of it seized him, but some small part of his brain had prepared for the possibility, and in that small part he tried to remember everything. Red light. The curve of the thing in front of his face. The taste. The weight. He tried to move his fingers deliberately and felt them, faint as if heard from another room, brush the inside of the tube attached to his thigh. The tube had small ridges, regular and precise. His ring finger caught on one of them and slipped.

He tried to look beyond the glass. Refraction turned the world into a smear. He saw shadows, movement, a darker

shape moving across the red wash and leaving a wake. The sound was a low mechanical thrum he could feel through his ribs, syncopated with something else—pulses?—that ran in a slower cycle under his sternum, through him. He wanted to catalog everything. He wanted air. He tried to draw a breath and choked again. The liquid filled him and did not drown him, which somehow was worse.

He wanted to press his palms against the inside of the glass. They barely moved. He felt his own strength—or rather, the lack of it. His arms were wires under skin that didn't quite belong to him, heavy and uncooperative. He had a sudden vision of the gym in college, the squat rack, the way his legs would shake on the third set at a weight he had no business attempting. This was like that, except he was lying down and he had never learned to lift whatever this was.

He shut his eyes. Bedroom. Air. His mouth made a dry clicking sound. He turned on his side and curled around the ache in his chest, not exactly pain, not exactly anything he had a name for. Sarah's hand found his back in her sleep, pressed there, warm as a seal.

The clock on the nightstand said 2:11. He stared at the numbers until they changed, proof of continuity. His mind raced in circles and then off in lines, trying to find a rational path. It was stress. It was a panic attack with creative visuals. It was his brain doing mischief with all

the stray science he'd ever read about sleep paralysis and sensory substitution. It was, at worst, a symptom that would be given a name in a quiet room by a doctor who had seen it before.

He could accept any of those. He preferred all of them to the one he didn't say, even to himself.

He lay awake for hours, rigid and careful, guarding his own blinking, as if the simple act of closing his eyes could decide anything. At some point the rain stopped. At some point, a car went by and threw a brief lattice of headlight across the ceiling, and in that instant he saw their room as if it were a stage set, the bed a prop, the night a scene in which his character was required to lie very convincingly still.

Just a dream, he told himself, and said it aloud in the hush.

In the morning, he would tell Sarah again that he was fine. He would pack lunches and answer emails and talk to his daughter about clouds and his son about dinosaurs. He would put one foot in front of the other down the hall like a human being wearing a life that fit.

He lay there, teeth unclenched, eyes open to the dark, counting his breaths like code reviews—slow, methodical, a thing that could be controlled.

He did not dare close them again.

Chapter Two – Escalation

By the end of the week, David’s excuses had worn down to translucent skin, stretched too thin to cover anything beneath. He offered them anyway—stress at work, shipping deadlines, the storm last night that rattled the windows—but they hung in the air like brittle glass ready to crack at the softest touch. Sarah’s silence after each excuse was worse than reproach. Silence was agreement that he was slipping, that she could already see the fracture lines spreading.

He felt them too. Inside his own body.

The heartbeat was the first betrayal. It no longer belonged entirely to him. It raced without warning, an engine spooling up in the dark of his chest. At the dinner table he would feel it banging, faster than chewing, faster than his children’s chatter, out of sync with the world. At night he pressed his palm flat against his ribs, trying to will it into rhythm, but the pounding only grew louder, as though the walls themselves had joined in, replaying his pulse back at him. It became an atmosphere, an environment: not just in him but around him. And each time he paused to listen, he feared it might not be his at all.

Mornings carried their own betrayals. Steam from the shower left condensation on the mirror, trails fattening into beads, beads merging into rivulets, rivulets etching crooked paths downward until the glass looked like a code he could not decipher. He found himself staring too long, watching the droplets merge, his reflection warped and broken into mirrored fragments. Once he leaned close, pressed a fingertip against the glass, leaving a clearing in the fog. The cleared oval resembled the breath-mark he left in that other place, forehead pressed to curved glass, lungs screaming. He shuddered, rubbed it away with the heel of his palm until his reflection blurred back into formlessness.

Behind him, Emma's voice startled him: "Dad, Jake keeps stealing my socks."

He snapped around, guilty as if she had caught him in a private crime. The fog on the mirror peeled away fast when she opened the door wider, cooler air slicing it apart. The room emptied itself of strangeness, but the memory clung like damp fabric.

At work, repetition became unbearable. It had always been there, the harmless tics of colleagues, the worn grooves of speech—but now every repeated phrase landed like a hammer.

"You know what I mean?" one developer said. Three times in two minutes. David tallied them in silence, pen tapping against his desk.

“You know what I mean? You know what I mean? You know what I mean?”

The words dissolved into rhythm, became a mirror of the heartbeat drumming in his ears.

Slack threads repeated too—two colleagues, miles apart, using identical phrasing, *let's circle back, just to confirm, hope that makes sense*. Copy-pasted humanity, he thought. Echoes in a glass hallway. He scrolled until the screen blurred and he saw his own face faintly in the black corners of the monitor: pale, eyes red, a reflection he no longer trusted. For a split second he saw *two* reflections, not one. Superimposed, shifted by a fraction of a beat, like the world itself had latency.

He blinked hard. The duplicate vanished, but the panic did not.

Sarah saw it before he admitted anything. She noticed his flinches at noises too small to matter. She noticed the way his hand lingered over his chest after climbing stairs. She noticed the hollowness under his eyes, as though condensation had settled there permanently.

“You’re not sleeping,” she said one morning, slicing apples for the kids’ lunches. Juice sprayed onto the cutting board, scent sharp and almost metallic.

“I’m sleeping,” he said, pouring coffee, voice flat and too fast, a script read badly.

“Barely. You’re pale all the time. You jump at nothing.”

“I’ve just got a lot on my plate at work.”

Even as the lie left his mouth, it collapsed, fragile as fog. She didn’t press—Emma and Jake were in earshot—but her silence carved deeper than any argument.

That night he tried the couch. Laptop on his knees, lamp haloing the room, coffee so strong it turned sour in his stomach. He scrolled meaninglessly, forcing his eyes open. But exhaustion is gravity, and gravity wins. His lids fell closed for more than a blink—

Cold. Liquid. Tubes biting into flesh.

Red light pulsing like a heart outside him.

He forced himself not to thrash, not to panic. Condensation gathered inside the glass, fogging, then clearing. Through the blur, a suggestion of another curve. Another pod. A figure within. He could not see clearly, but the shape was unmistakable: curled, unmoving, suspended.

He gasped, the gasp jolting him awake. Copper flooded his throat. The laptop slid to the floor, screen flashing. He bent over the coffee table, hand clamped to his chest, feeling his pulse stutter like bad code.

Not alone.

The thought nested like a parasite. He couldn't shake it even as Sarah called his name from upstairs, drowsy and unknowing.

By Thursday he avoided the bed entirely. Sarah asked why—he mumbled excuses. He feared she might feel the twitch when he blinked out. He feared her touch would confirm what he already suspected: that he wasn't entirely present anymore.

On the couch, he lost again.

Cold. The hum like breath, not his own.

This time he held himself steady long enough to see movement outside. A machine. Tall, skeletal, lens-eyed, walking between rows. Its head swiveled once, a cluster of optics scattering the red light into shards. For an instant he thought it was looking directly at him. He recoiled, tubes tugging at his arms, bubbles scattering from his mouth like failed syllables.

The machine moved on, indifferent.

When he snapped awake, cheek pressed to his notebook, the page was smeared with sweat and ink. His heart battered like it meant to break through his ribs. He lifted his head and saw the words he had scrawled before collapsing: *Rows. Not dream. Not mine. Not alone.*

Sarah caught him in the hallway that night, voice low, urgent. “You’re scaring me. You’re here, but not here. What’s happening?”

He wanted to tell her. About the cold, the tubes, the others. The condensation, the pulse. He opened his mouth—but the truth stuck, thick as copper.

“Nightmares,” he whispered instead. “Just... nightmares.”

“Then see someone. Please, David. A doctor. Anyone.”

He nodded. Easier than truth. Easier than breaking her with it.

Dr. Martinez’s office smelled of antiseptic layered over years of old magazines, a scent like stale fog trapped in air vents. The waiting room was quiet except for the buzz of a fluorescent tube that flickered in steady intervals—his heart matched it, unwillingly, pulse syncing to the machine.

In the exam room, condensation beaded faintly on the window from the rain outside. David stared at it while he described “bad dreams,” “recurring,” “vivid.” He did not describe the rows, the tubes, the machine lenses turning. Some truths could not be spoken without consequence.

Martinez nodded sympathetically, pen scratching like an insect on the page. “Sleep disruption creates cycles. Stress, exhaustion. We’ll try to break the cycle.” He slid the prescription across the desk.

The bottle rattled in David’s hand like dice, like fate.

That night he swallowed one. The pill dragged him under faster, limbs heavy, brain fogged. For a second he believed chemistry might insulate him.

It didn’t.

If anything, it pinned him there longer. The red pulse hammered, the liquid burned his lungs. His scream dissolved into bubbles. His vision dimmed until only the rhythm remained, the pulse repeating, mocking.

When he blinked out, he vomited into the bathroom sink, Sarah pounding the door, her voice breaking on his name. He stared into the mirror, face pale, streaked with condensation, and thought with sudden clarity: *It's not a dream.*

The next day blurred, colors leached. His notebook filled with jagged scrawl: timings, fragments, sketches of curved glass, condensation trails. Each entry ended the same way: *not a dream.*

At the kitchen table Saturday night, lamp low, house silent, he pressed pen to page. *If it happens again*

tonight, I will look harder. He underlined it twice, lines shaking.

When he closed his eyes, the switch was immediate.

Cold. The red light blooming.

And the heartbeat, steady, indifferent.

The house was a shell around him, quiet except for the hum of the refrigerator and the faint tick of the baseboard heater. He sat at the kitchen table, notebook open, pen poised like a weapon he no longer trusted. *If it happens again tonight, I will look harder.* The words stood on the page like a dare, a promise, an indictment.

He let his head fall forward. The lamp cast its yellow cone over the table, over the unpaid bills, over the half-filled glass of water that had been sitting there since morning, condensation now dried into faint rings. His eyes closed.

Cold.

Always the cold first, slicing through him like glass drawn across flesh.

The red pulse followed, blooming around him in steady intervals. His chest spasmed, but he forced himself still. *Look harder.*

Condensation bloomed where his breath struck the curved glass. He pressed his forehead against it, smearing a crescent. Beyond, the fog wavered, then cleared. Rows

stretched into the dark—curves upon curves, each glowing faintly red.

He pressed his palms flat, fingers trembling. The glass vibrated faintly under his skin. The condensation beaded and slid downward, tracing branching paths like veins. He whispered numbers to himself, counting droplets merging, splitting, rejoining. “One... three... two merged into five...” His chest screamed for air, but the counting steadied him, a rhythm against the panic.

And then—movement.

Not the skeletal machine this time, but something subtler. In the pod across from his, behind its own fog, the faintest smear. A hand? No, a breath. A bloom of condensation, clearing, then forming again.

He froze. His heart pounded so loud it seemed to shake the liquid itself. He pressed his hand harder against the glass, and in the faint blur of distance, he thought—no, he *knew*—another hand mirrored him. Slow. Weak. Palm against glass.

Mirroring.

He tried to scream, but the liquid swallowed the sound.

The red pulse dimmed once, twice, a cycle change. The cables overhead trembled faintly. Thick as arteries, labeled faintly with block codes—OXY-17, SYS-04—they quivered like veins in a body shifting in sleep.

He forced his eyes wider. Beyond the figure that mirrored him, others. Dozens. Hundreds. An entire cathedral of sleepers, each curled, each fogging faintly at irregular intervals. The rhythm was not random: every eleven seconds, condensation bloomed across a row, as if the system itself breathed them all in sequence.

A sound carried through the liquid: four clicks, pause, hiss. One of the machines, its rhythm familiar now. It passed between rows, lenses rotating, limbs unfolding. It stopped at a pod two aisles over, adjusted a tube, hissed bubbles into the liquid, then moved on. Maintenance, not menace. But the precision chilled him more than hostility.

He clung to the glass, chest convulsing. His arms trembled with weakness. Each tube anchored him more deeply, tugging when he tried to move. He whispered through the liquid, bubbles stuttering from his lips: “Not dream. Not dream. Not dream.”

The figure opposite him whispered back nothing, only fogged their glass in rhythm with his.

He snapped awake with his cheek pressed to the kitchen table. The pen had rolled, leaving a dark smear across the page. His throat was raw, his chest burning. He staggered to his feet, half expecting the tubes to still tug at his arms. But it was only skin, sweat-slick, smelling faintly of copper.

He wanted to run upstairs, shake Sarah awake, tell her everything. But then what? What words could translate this? He pictured himself saying *I saw them, they breathe, they fog the glass just like me*, and pictured the disbelief that would follow. Or worse, belief. The knowledge that she could never follow him into that place.

He closed the notebook, slid it under the bills again, as though burying a body.

The morning routine repeated. Emma asked about clouds again, Jake argued about dinosaurs again. Word for word. The same intonation as a week ago. David froze mid-bite of toast, the metallic tang of over-toasted crust on his tongue.

“Where do clouds go at night?” Emma asked, solemn as if new.

“Wherever they want,” he heard himself answer. The words arrived without consent, the same phrasing, the same cadence.

Jake laughed at his own joke about a velociraptor in a race car. The laugh fell in exactly the same beats as before, four ha’s, pause, two ha’s, pause.

Mirroring.

He set his fork down too hard, the clatter startling Sarah. She studied him, concern etched in the furrow of her brow. “David?”

He forced a smile. “Just tired.”

But his pulse was racing, hammering so loudly he thought they might all hear it.

That night he tried again. Not because he wanted to, but because he had no choice. The notebook demanded it; the condensation trails demanded it.

Cold. Liquid. The hum under his ribs.

He counted the red pulses: eleven seconds, always eleven. He pressed his ear to the glass, listening. The vibration was layered: a deep groan every twenty-two seconds, a mechanical bass that shook through the liquid. Beneath it, a faint treble hiss, constant, like sand spilling through glass. The red prison was not silent. It was breathing.

Across from him, the other figure pressed their hand to the glass again. Condensation bloomed in perfect mirror to his own. His pulse stuttered, skipped. He whispered into the liquid, bubbles tearing upward: “Who are you?”

No answer. Only fog.

The machine passed again, four clicks, pause, hiss. He tracked it with his eyes, whispering the rhythm, synchronizing his heart to it. His vision dimmed at the

edges. His lungs screamed. He wanted to stay, to hold on long enough to see more. But panic betrayed him. He shut his eyes—

And snapped awake on the kitchen floor, arms twisted, notebook open beside him. Ink smeared across the page where he had tried to write: *They breathe. They mirror me. Not alone.*

The days blurred. His children's routines felt scripted, every gesture *déjà vu*. Sarah repeated the same anecdote about a coworker word for word, even the pause before the punch line. He stared too long, lips dry, pulse racing. She caught him once and asked, "Why are you looking at me like that?" He shook his head, unable to answer.

Mirroring everywhere. Echoes. Condensation across glass.

The notebook filled with sketches: droplets merging into streams, cables branching like veins, faces pressed against curved glass, their breath fogging in sync. He stopped writing sentences. He wrote fragments:

- Heartbeat = system pulse.
- Condensation = proof of breath.
- Mirroring = prison.
- Others. Always others.

The next Saturday night he sat again at the kitchen table, lamp burning low. He pressed pen to page but wrote nothing. Instead he whispered aloud to the silence: "I am not alone."

The words fogged the air before him.

And in his mind, he saw the fog on the glass across the aisle, another hand pressed, another face blurred, repeating him.

A hall of mirrors, infinite, each pane sealed, each breath a condensation trail, each heartbeat a pulse in a machine that did not care.

That was the morning he admitted the truth, if only to himself.

This was not sleep.

This was not stress.

And it was not just him.

There were others.

And they were all trapped in the same reflection.

Chapter Three — The Pain

By Monday, David's body had begun to work against him in ways so small at first that he almost convinced himself he imagined them. Almost.

The ache was the earliest signal. Not the kind of soreness that came from exercise, nor the dull stiffness of age, but something else—something internal, precise, invasive. A persistent tightening across the ribs, like a belt cinched invisibly one notch too far. Sometimes it was his chest, sometimes the back of his throat, sometimes a faint pulse in the muscles of his arms. He tried stretching in the morning, touching his toes, rotating his shoulders. Nothing eased it. The ache simply waited, unhurried, and then returned with greater intensity when he wasn't expecting it.

The metallic taste arrived next. He noticed it while pouring cereal for the kids. A bitterness like he had bitten his cheek, followed by the unmistakable copper tang of a coin resting on his tongue. He swallowed water, chewed mint gum, even brushed his teeth a second time before leaving the house. The taste persisted, faint but insistent, haunting the edges of every sip of coffee, every bite of food. It was as if something had leaked into him, some residue from the place he had begun to dread and crave in equal measure.

Walking up the stairs to the kids' rooms left his legs trembling in a way that made him think of fevers he had as a child, shivering under blankets while his mother pressed a cool cloth to his forehead. Except this was no fever. His skin was dry. His body was betraying him in silence. Carrying groceries felt like hauling sacks of stone. He had to set them down halfway to the kitchen, resting palms flat against the cold surface of the hallway mirror. His reflection gazed back at him, face pallid, eyes ringed with sleepless dark. For a moment, the reflection seemed to tremble in time with the spasms in his legs. He pressed his hand to the glass. It was cool, smooth, indifferent. When he drew his hand back, his skin left a faint fog-print that faded quickly, as though the mirror itself refused to acknowledge him.

Sarah noticed. She didn't say it outright, not yet, but he could see it in the way her eyes lingered on him too long across the breakfast table, or how her hand brushed his arm like she was testing whether the solidity of him remained intact.

That night, he fought sleep. He scrolled meaninglessly on his phone, reading three paragraphs of the same article without processing a word. But gravity wins. Exhaustion is a predator that waits until you stop moving.

When it came, it came without mercy.

Cold, immediate, total.

The liquid seized him in an instant. Pressure on his chest like a hydraulic press descending. He thrashed instinctively and the spasms erupted through him—violent contractions, legs jerking against restraints he couldn't see, arms convulsing like wires sparking. His throat locked. He tried to scream, but the scream dissolved into a ragged eruption of bubbles that clawed their way upward, scattering in the crimson dimness. His chest burned with a searing intensity, not abstract pain but pure, undeniable agony.

He felt the tubes as though they had grown roots in him. One pressed into the veins of his arm, another in his throat, and when he pulled against them the sensation was like tugging at his own arteries. Pain detonated outward, white-hot, like electricity coursing through raw nerves. He convulsed again, body shuddering in disobedient rhythm. The red light overhead pulsed once, twice, each bloom echoing his agony, as though the system itself kept time with his suffering.

The glass loomed before his face. He pressed against it, forehead first, breath fogging its inner curve. The condensation smeared into a crescent, trembling with each spasm. He tried to focus on it—anything, something to tether him—but the burning in his lungs clawed for all of his attention. His mouth filled with the metallic taste again, sharper now, pure copper, like blood leaking into

water. He swallowed reflexively and gagged, convulsing harder.

The realization struck through the haze with brutal clarity: this was not imagined. This was not dream-pain, the muted echo of a body at rest. This hurt. His muscles screamed. His chest ached with authentic fire. The pain was real, and that meant the body in this pod was real.

He slammed his eyes shut—

Bedroom.

Air.

He erupted upright in bed, gagging. His throat seized, bile sour and metallic flooding into his hands before he staggered to the bathroom. Sarah's voice reached him through the haze, horrified, but he barely heard her. He clutched porcelain like it was the last solid thing in existence, vomiting in violent spasms that rattled his ribs. His eyes watered uncontrollably; each blink felt like scraping glass across his corneas.

Sarah hovered in the doorway, pale and frightened, robe clutched tight around her shoulders. "David! What's happening?"

He couldn't answer. He spat, gasped, tried to wash the bile away, but the copper taste lingered stubbornly, as though it had been fused into the tissue of his mouth. His whole body shook with aftershocks, muscles still

twitching as though echoes of the convulsions remained. He stared at his reflection in the mirror above the sink: pallid, slick with sweat, eyes bloodshot, lips stained dark. For an instant, the reflection seemed to ripple, not quite in sync with his movements. He blinked hard. It steadied.

Sarah stepped closer, her hand hovering at his shoulder as if afraid touching him might break him. “We’re going to the doctor,” she whispered. “Now. I don’t care what you say.”

David didn’t protest. Couldn’t. His throat burned, his chest heaved, and deep in his gut a single thought repeated like a drumbeat, louder than her voice, louder than his own ragged breath:

It hurts because it’s real.

The next morning the house smelled of toast and burnt coffee, and David sat hunched at the kitchen table as though bracing himself against some invisible weather. Sarah moved briskly around him, packing lunches with tight, clipped gestures. She had already said the words last night—*we’re going to the doctor*—and he had nodded, unable to summon a single argument. He knew that even if he tried, the weight in her eyes would crush it before it left his mouth.

The drive to Dr. Martinez’s office blurred by in a gray corridor of drizzle and stoplights. He stared out the window, fixating on the rivulets racing each other down

the glass. They branched and merged like veins, like the branching of the tubes that dug into his pod-body's arms. He found himself whispering numbers—two streams become one, three split into five—before catching Sarah's glance and falling silent. The metallic taste coated his tongue. He swallowed it down and pretended it was gone.

The clinic's waiting room smelled of antiseptic and paper magazines that had sat too long in the same air.

Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, each flicker like a static pulse through his skull. He sat there with the form in his lap, pen hovering, unable to write anything true.

Nightmares was the word Sarah had written down on the intake sheet. He hated how small it looked, how dismissive. His chest still ached from the night before, and every swallow brought the faint sting of bile.

Nightmares felt like calling a fire a candle.

When Martinez finally called his name, the doctor's voice sounded distant, as though traveling through a tunnel.

The exam room was no better: pale blue walls, metal counter, the faint fog of condensation ghosting the single window where the rain outside pressed its own patterns. David found himself staring at those tracks, rivulets fattening into beads before slipping downward, each line a crooked artery running into nothing. He felt a spasm flutter across his diaphragm, subtle but real, and for a second he thought the condensation was moving in rhythm with his convulsions.

“Pulse is irregular,” Martinez said softly, pressing the stethoscope against David’s chest. The cold circle made him flinch, and in the instant of contact he was back inside the pod—the cold pressing on him, the hum vibrating through ribs not entirely his own. He wanted to grab the doctor’s wrist, to tell him *you don’t understand, I’m drowning every night*, but the words clogged in his throat.

“No fever,” Martinez continued, scribbling notes. “Lungs sound clear. But you’re dehydrated, and this pulse...” He shook his head. “How long have you been feeling like this?”

David hesitated. He stared at the metal sink in the corner of the room. The tap was fitted with a thin tube that arched upward and curved like the neck of a swan. All he could see was its resemblance to the lines in the pod: a ribbed artery pulsing fluid into his body. He swallowed. “A few days,” he said finally, voice flat.

“You mentioned nightmares,” Martinez prompted.

“Not just nightmares.” The admission slipped out before he could stop it. His voice cracked on the word *just*, as if something inside him demanded truth.

Martinez’s eyes flicked upward. “Not just...?”

David shut his mouth. He clenched his jaw so hard it throbbed. He pictured himself saying it: *I wake in a pod*

filled with liquid, tubes in my arms and throat, machines walking the aisles. He pictured the slow frown, the neat note in the file, the referral. A diagnosis with a name that would explain everything and explain nothing. He could see the word already: psychosis. He imagined pills heavier than the ones he had already swallowed, pills that would pin him down in that liquid world until he suffocated.

Martinez sighed, tapping the tablet with weary patience.
“I want you to take some time off work. Absolute rest.
Hydration. If the chest pain worsens, you come back
immediately. Understood?”

David nodded, but the nod was meaningless. His eyes were on the condensation again, tracing the way one droplet merged with another. He imagined pressing his forehead against the glass, breath fogging it into crescents. His body shuddered with a phantom convulsion.

Back home, Sarah hovered in the kitchen like a storm not yet breaking. She wanted to say more, he could feel it, but the kids were present. Their chatter filled the house with the kind of repetition he had come to dread: Emma asking the same question she had asked last week, Jake telling the same joke about dinosaurs in cars. Their voices looped like a script, and the metallic tang in his mouth sharpened with every repetition.

That night, he lasted less than an hour on the couch before his eyes slid closed.

Cold. Immediate.

The liquid slammed him back into himself.

Pain flared through his chest like a live wire pressed against flesh. His muscles convulsed, arms trembling violently, legs kicking in rhythms he could not control. He forced himself not to thrash, not to waste strength. His chest spasmed anyway, each contraction tearing a jagged edge across his ribs. He tried to breathe shallowly, controlled, but the liquid flooded him relentlessly. The metallic taste was overwhelming now, saturating every nerve in his mouth, in his throat.

He pressed his forehead against the glass, condensation blooming and smearing under his skin. Beyond the blur, movement resolved: the outline of another pod, then another, then entire rows fading into crimson dimness. He blinked hard, eyes stinging from pressure, and in the nearest pod he saw the pale oval of a face, slack but alive, chest rising and falling with the same suffocating rhythm. Tubes branched from her body, pale lines snaking into the ceiling like arteries feeding into some massive heart.

A machine moved between them.

It was taller than any human, skeletal in design, its movements as precise as clockwork. Two jointed arms

folded inward, then extended with delicate grace. Its head was a cluster of lenses, each one rotating independently, scattering the red light into shards across the liquid. David's pulse thudded in panic, but he held himself still, convulsions jerking only at the edges of his restraint.

The machine stopped at the woman's pod. A thin arm unfolded, ending in a needle-like instrument. It adjusted a tube with a hiss that rippled through the liquid. Bubbles streamed upward, catching the red light in shimmering chains. Then it moved on, joints clicking, hiss-pause-click repeating in a rhythm David could not ignore. Four clicks, pause, hiss. Four clicks, pause, hiss. The rhythm embedded itself into his spasms until his own convulsions seemed to echo the machine.

Pain sharpened into a new clarity. His body wasn't simply suffering—it was communicating. Each contraction was a signal, each tremor a message he could almost decode. He whispered bubbles into the liquid: *not dream, not dream*. His throat locked around the words, but he knew he had said them. The glass vibrated faintly against his lips.

The tubes throbbed at his arms, tugging with the beat of some unseen pump. He felt it deep in his marrow: arteries, yes, but not his own. They belonged to something larger. He was only a node in a circulatory system, a vein feeding a body so vast he could not imagine its shape.

His chest convulsed violently, vision blurring. He wanted to stay, to see more, but the pain pressed him past the edge.

Bedroom.

Air.

He snapped upright on the couch, coughing copper into his hands. His arms ached with tremors, muscles twitching like wires overloaded. He could still feel the tubes inside him, phantom pressure against his skin, as though he had only half-escaped.

Sarah's voice reached him from the stairs, thin and terrified: "David?"

He couldn't answer. His throat was raw, his chest ablaze. He stared at the condensation fogging the window above the sink, a faint branching rivulet tracing its way downward, and thought with frozen certainty:

This body is not mine alone.

He sat at the kitchen table long after Sarah and the kids had gone to bed, the house breathing around him in its ordinary ways—the tick of the refrigerator motor, the faint thrum of the baseboard heater, the intermittent sigh of pipes. He kept his notebook open in front of him, though the words he had written earlier had blurred together. His hand hovered above the page as though still writing, but the pen was idle.

The ache in his chest had not receded. Each inhalation scraped like rusted hinges. He pressed two fingers to his sternum and felt the faint flutter of tremors rippling through muscle. His body was already staging a rehearsal of what would happen the moment his eyes slid closed.

He drew the pen down across the page in block letters:

TONIGHT I STAY.

He underlined it once. Then again. The ink cut through the paper. He wanted it recorded, undeniable: this was no accident, no nightmare snaring him unawares. This was a choice.

When sleep came, it came like gravity. He let it take him.

Cold.

The liquid seized him instantly, but this time he did not thrash. He clenched his jaw, forced his limbs to stillness. Pain flared across his chest, muscles convulsing in shallow bursts, but he let the spasms roll through him instead of fighting them. His ribs ached, but he kept his focus steady, tethered to a single thought: *observe*.

The red light pulsed above him, steady and indifferent. He counted between the dimmings. Eleven seconds. Then eleven more. The rhythm carved itself into his

convulsions until he was twitching in time with the system itself.

He pressed his forehead to the glass, felt the condensation smear into crescents beneath his skin. He whispered bubbles, soft and mechanical: “Stay. Stay. Stay.” Each syllable dissolved before it reached the surface, but the intent carried through the pain.

Through the blur he saw her again—the young woman in the opposite pod. Her hair drifted in the liquid like strands of kelp. Her face was slack but undeniably alive, chest rising with the same unbearable rhythm. He felt his own spasms mirrored in her faint tremors, as though their bodies belonged to the same nervous system.

Beyond her stretched the endless rows. Hundreds. Thousands. Each chamber glowing red, each body suspended. An entire cathedral of glass and arteries. The tubes feeding into the ceiling branched like veins into a heart too vast to see.

His chest convulsed violently. Copper filled his mouth. He bit his tongue hard enough to taste blood, but the taste was indistinguishable from the liquid’s ever-present metallic tang. He couldn’t separate himself from it anymore. He *was* copper. He *was* liquid.

A machine passed, closer than ever. Its joints clicked in the same rhythm: four clicks, pause, hiss. Four clicks, pause, hiss. Its lenses rotated toward him for a fraction

too long, scattering shards of red across his vision. He froze, every convulsion turning brittle with fear. Did it see him? Could it?

It moved on. But the awareness lingered.

He pressed his hand against the glass, weak fingers trembling. His reflection stared back at him—gaunt, pale, lips blue-tinged. He did not recognize the face, yet he knew it was his. He slid his palm downward, and the woman in the opposite pod mirrored him, her hand faint against her own glass. Their breath fogged simultaneously, crescents blooming in unison.

Mirroring.

Not a dream. Not hallucination. Prison.

His chest seized again, muscles convulsing in violent spasms. His vision fractured into shards of red and black. He felt his fingers slip from the glass. The pain was too much, but he forced his eyes to stay open, even as tears blurred the liquid.

In the periphery of his vision, beyond the rows, beyond the machines, something vast shifted. The entire chamber trembled as though something larger than the machines, larger than the pods themselves, had stirred. The red light dimmed, then flared back brighter. Not random. Deliberate. A signal.

The realization chilled him more than the liquid ever could: something was aware. Something was watching.

He could not endure it longer. His chest spasmed once more, violent enough to arch his back, and the world shattered—

Air.

He collapsed sideways off the kitchen chair, gasping, lungs dragging at the night as if air were water he could drown in. His notebook slid to the floor, pen skidding a dark smear across the page. His arms twitched with aftershocks, every muscle buzzing as though he had been wired into an electrical current.

Sarah's footsteps pounded the stairs. She found him on the floor, body trembling, eyes wide. She dropped to her knees beside him, pressing her hands against his shoulders as though to hold him steady. "David! Tell me what's happening!"

He looked up at her, lips stained copper, throat raw. The words clawed their way out of him, hoarse and broken:

"This is not real."

Later, when the house was quiet again, he sat alone by the window, a blanket wrapped tight around him. His body still shook in tiny, relentless spasms, like aftershocks of an earthquake. The glass above the sink had fogged from

the warmth of the room against the night's chill. He leaned forward and pressed his forehead against it.

Condensation bloomed. Droplets swelled, merged, split, ran downward in branching rivulets. He traced them with a trembling finger, whispering numbers under his breath. One. Two. Three. His reflection warped behind the droplets, split into fragments. He no longer knew which fragments belonged to him and which to the system that held him.

The trails on the glass gleamed faintly in the streetlight, like veins lit from within. Arteries. Tubes.

Proof.

He shut his eyes and let his breath fog the glass until everything blurred into red.

Chapter Four — Learning the Rules

The morning came not with peace, nor with relief, but with something stranger and sharper—a lucidity that sliced through the fatigue which had been dragging him down for weeks. He woke before the alarm, before the house stirred, before even the faintest scrape of a car outside on wet pavement. For a long moment he lay in the dark, staring at the ceiling as if the plaster itself contained equations he might solve. There was weight still coiled in his chest, but alongside it ran a current he had almost forgotten—purpose.

Not safety, not escape. But purpose.

The thought formed itself with the inevitability of mathematics: **if the pod world was real, then this one must operate on rules and algorithms,** And rules could be learned. Tested. Exploited. He felt his heart push against his ribs, too fast, too eager, as if the beat itself was trying to remind him of cycles, intervals, patterns. Even his body was a clock, and he was its prisoner, and perhaps its keeper too.

He sat up, hands pressed to his knees. His palms were damp. He rubbed them together, listening to the faint rasp of skin on skin—an ordinary sound, yet one that now

seemed like a code. Everything was code. The hum of the refrigerator down the hall. The faint vibration from the baseboard heater. The way his lungs filled and emptied. Even in the absence of visible fog, he imagined the breath condensing into air invisible, droplets suspended, scattering like stars.

Clarity. Purpose. Test it. Measure it.

At breakfast, Sarah eyed him from across the table with the cautious suspicion of someone testing the stability of ice before stepping forward.

“You look... better,” she said, tone wary, as though speaking too loudly might undo the fragile balance. She passed him the butter, her fingers brushing his in that absent, habitual way she had.

“Yeah,” he said. The knife trembled faintly in his grip, but he steadied it, spreading butter across toast with unusual precision, watching the pale smear dissolve into the pores of the bread like fog seeping into glass. “Got some ideas.”

“About what?” Her fork hovered above her plate.

Not this. Not rules. Not the liquid, the pulses, the condensation maps etched on the inside of his eyelids. He forced his eyes to drop to the toast, forced his mouth into the shape of something safe. “About work,” he said at last, voice carefully measured. “Bug I think I can squash.”

The lie settled heavy in his throat, metallic.

Sarah didn't look convinced, but the kids broke the tension. Emma and Jake were already quarrelling about the last pancake, their voices a looping rhythm David could almost chart on paper—Emma's shrill insistence, Jake's stubborn counters, the pause, the escalation, then the inevitable intervention. The pattern of it calmed him in a perverse way: repetition was proof. Even the false world was made of cycles.

He chewed mechanically, tasting little, already planning his day. His mind ticked in subroutines: stopwatch, notebook, test the transition.

That evening, after the kids were tucked into bed and Sarah's footsteps had retreated upstairs, he sat at the kitchen table with the notebook open before him, phone propped up with the stopwatch app glowing pale blue. The room smelled faintly of dish soap and cooling toast, with an undercurrent of sour drain he had only noticed days ago. He inhaled deeply. Copper lingered on his tongue as if memory alone could secrete it.

Experiment #1: How long does it take?

He wrote the words in block letters across the top of the page. The pen dug into the paper, leaving faint grooves visible even when he turned the sheet at an angle.

He closed his eyes slowly, deliberately, whispering the count under his breath. One. Two. Three. Four.

The world inverted—
Cold. Liquid. Red.

The familiar seizure of the pod body gripped him, but he did not thrash. He snapped his eyes open—
And the kitchen returned, ordinary and wrong, the stopwatch jittering with decimals: 00:04.37.

He scrawled the number down so violently the pen tore the page. His pulse was hammering in his chest, a double rhythm, his own heartbeat and the phantom throb of the system. He licked his lips and tasted copper again.

Try again. Push further.

He reset the stopwatch, braced himself, and closed his eyes. One, two, three... The cold surged sooner this time, or perhaps he anticipated it. He forced himself not to break until nearly ten.

When he blinked out, the digits stared back: 08:92.

A pattern. Predictable.

A thrill ran through him. His ribs ached with the force of his own breath, but the ache was beautiful. It was proof.

He sat in the dim kitchen for hours, testing and scribbling, his handwriting growing frantic. The condensation on his coffee mug fascinated him: beads forming, sliding down, merging into rivulets. He traced them with his fingertip, whispering the counts to himself,

matching them to the stopwatch ticks, to the pulse in his throat. The fog on glass was the same language spoken in the pod, translated here in miniature.

For the first time in weeks, the horror was not the only thing keeping him awake.

There was exhilaration now. Obsession blooming in his chest like a second heart.

The days blurred into sequences of trial and notation. David moved through the hours like an operator running diagnostics on a failing machine, except the machine was himself. He lived with the stopwatch clutched in one hand, the notebook in the other. Sleep was no longer rest—it was data.

Experiment #2: What breaks the connection?

He wrote the heading in black ink, underlined it twice, then began the list.

- If he pressed his eyes shut too long in the pod world, reality collapsed back into the kitchen.
- If he thrashed in panic, flailed against the liquid, he was yanked free as though the system had cut the circuit.
- But if he stayed calm, if he endured the burn in his chest and the shivering of his muscles, the

connection held, taut as a wire drawn between two pylons.

He tested each variable over and over, closing his eyes in bed, on the couch, at the kitchen table, timing the duration of his endurance. He learned to keep his limbs still, to ride the convulsions instead of fighting them. He whispered the timings into the liquid until the numbers dissolved into streams of bubbles.

Sarah found him at the table one night, stopwatch still glowing, notebook open to a page dense with scrawled intervals. “David,” she said softly, “what are you doing?”

He blinked at her, pen still poised. “Just... tracking sleep.”

She didn’t believe him. He could see it in the way her lips pressed into a thin line, the fog of her breath catching the lamplight as she sighed. But she let it go, leaving him in the glow of the numbers.

Experiment #3: What carries over?

He made a column for the body.

- Pain persisted. After one long immersion, his ribs ached for hours as though bruised from inside.
- The metallic taste never left. Even water from the tap carried the faint sting of pennies on his tongue.

- His pulse, once elevated, remained erratic for hours. At work he caught himself pressing two fingers to his neck, counting, timing the beats.

He recorded each item with a kind of reverence. Pain was proof. Taste was proof. The heart itself, racing in both worlds, was the one instrument he could not falsify.

But the cost revealed itself in the home first.

He forgot Jake's parent-teacher conference. The night before, he had been at the kitchen table, tracing condensation trails down the side of a glass, whispering counts into his phone recorder, not hearing Sarah's reminder. When she came home furious, cheeks flushed, voice quivering between anger and hurt, he could only mumble, "I'm sorry. I lost track."

"You always lose track," she said. "Work, sleep, whatever this is—you're disappearing from us."

"I'm right here."

Her silence was worse than shouting.

The children noticed too.

"Daddy, why do you look sick all the time?" Emma asked, one night when he tucked her in. Her hair smelled of lavender shampoo, still damp, strands clinging to her temples like the cables in the pod.

“I’m not sick,” he said, though the copper taste in his mouth belied it.

Jake wrinkled his nose. “Then why do you smell like... like pennies?”

David froze. Even his children could smell the metal now. He kissed their foreheads quickly and retreated before they could ask more.

Still, the experiments continued.

Late one night, he forced himself to remain submerged for thirty full seconds, every heartbeat counted against the red pulses overhead. His chest screamed, ribs stretching, but he endured. He pressed his forehead to the glass, watched the condensation smear beneath his skin, and forced his weak eyes to focus beyond it.

There: stenciled on the bulkhead, faint block letters, almost lost in the dim wash of light.

SECTOR 17-B.

Proof. Not dream-imagery, not hallucination.
Architecture. Infrastructure.

He tore back into the kitchen gasping, tears blurring his vision, coughing copper into his hands but laughing through it. He scrawled the letters across a page in the notebook, circled them three times, gouging the paper.

When Sarah came down minutes later, finding him hunched and trembling, he looked up at her with eyes that must have burned with fever. “I’m figuring it out,” he whispered. “Don’t you see? There are rules. I can map this. I can beat it.”

Her face shifted, fear overtaking the worry. “Beat what?”

But he had already turned back to the page, pen moving again, heartbeat thrumming in his ears.

The notebook thickened. It no longer resembled a diary but a lattice of fragments—timings, crude sketches of cables, droplets, patrol paths, labels. His handwriting leaned forward, frantic, tearing paper. He began to number everything. The codes comforted him. Numbers did not betray.

He studied Sarah’s freckles like constellations, mapping them to the branching of tubes overhead. He tracked the rhythm of Jake’s swinging legs under the table, four beats, pause, four beats—machine regularity. He counted Emma’s chews, six before swallowing, never five, never seven. Patterns everywhere, coded repetitions he could not unsee.

The fog of his breath on the bathroom mirror became an experiment too: how long before it faded, how quickly condensation merged into rivulets. He whispered the counts to himself until Sarah’s voice startled him through

the door, asking if he was all right. He answered without opening it. "Fine." His tone betrayed him.

Each night the immersion was no longer only terror. It was data. It was confirmation.

He catalogued the textures of the tubes: ribbed, smooth, vibrating, each assigned a function. He named the flavors of the liquid: vinegar burn, lead ache, copper aftershock. He timed the skeletal machines by their rhythm of four clicks, pause, hiss, whispering the cadence into the liquid until his vision tunneled black.

And always—always—the condensation on the glass. Droplets forming, swelling, merging, tracing crooked lines downward. He gave them names, drew them in obsessive detail in the notebook, as though by mastering their shapes he could master the system itself.

By now, the notebook had become less a record than a scripture. He leafed through it with trembling fingers, each page alive with loops of ink, crossings-out, arrows pointing in all directions. Some sheets were crumpled, others torn, others water-stained by sweat or tears or the condensation from his glass. It smelled faintly of copper and old paper, of oil from his fingertips. When he turned a page too quickly, flecks of dried ink lifted like dust motes, tiny constellations against the lamplight.

He no longer wrote in sentences. Words fragmented, broken into symbols and rhythms.

SECTOR 17-B.

11.4S.

4 clicks / hiss.

OXY-17 = warm. NUT-32 = flow. SYS-04 = hum.

The fragments circled themselves, fed into one another until the pages looked less like notes than diagrams of circuitry, a nervous system spread open across paper. He began indexing his family in the same cold shorthand.

Sarah's thumb bending inward: S-01.

Emma's cereal chewing: E-02.

Jake's leg swing: J-03.

He whispered their codes to himself under his breath at dinner. They stared at him, uncomprehending. He forced a smile that felt cracked, like glass under strain.

The two worlds bled together in every gesture.

Sarah's freckles were nodes on a circuit. Emma's laugh carried the metallic tang of the liquid. Jake's legs swung in sync with the click-hiss of machine patrols. The salt shaker on the table fogged with condensation, droplets merging into rivulets. He scribbled on a napkin, Condensation pattern = pod. Sarah's voice pulled him back: "David?" He passed her the salt without meeting her eyes, then tore the napkin into strips and filed them between notebook pages like sacred relics.

At night, when she slept, he timed her breathing. Twelve breaths per minute. He pressed his fingers to her pulse, counting seventy-two beats, steady as a metronome. She stirred once, caught him staring. “What are you doing?” she whispered, frightened.

“Nothing,” he lied. But the next morning the notebook bore the entry: S-01 stable. Cycle matched.

He began carving numbers onto his body. Once, after a long immersion, terrified he would forget, he scratched 22s into his forearm with a pen until the skin burned. Sarah saw the ink smeared down his arm the next day. Her eyes brimmed with tears. “Please stop,” she whispered. He kissed her forehead absently, already turning back to his notes.

The kitchen clock became an adversary. Its tick was wrong—1.08 seconds, not one, not consistent. He sat for ten minutes timing it, calculating drift, writing: error rate 0.08s. Proof of slippage. Proof the world itself was built on code.

The refrigerator hummed in a loop of three tones—low E, low F, silence. He recorded the cycle for an hour while the children argued over crayons. Jake waved a spoon in his face. “Daddy, are you even listening?”

David looked up, smiled too wide. “Of course. I always listen.”

But his pen had already recorded: Fridge hum loop = 27s cycle.

The smells consumed him most of all.

Sarah's perfume—citrus and alcohol—peaked at eight a.m., gone by two. He tracked the decay curve. Emma's crayons smelled different depending on color. Red and blue were paraffin. Green was sharp, sour. He broke them open to confirm. Same scent inside. He filed the fragments into a jar on the counter.

Sarah found him one night bent over the pile, inhaling the wax dust like a bloodhound. She didn't speak. She backed quietly out of the room. Her silence felt louder than any accusation.

Each immersion was catalogued like wine-tasting notes.

Initial burn: acidic.

Sustained ache: compressive.

Aftershock: metallic.

He named them vinegar, lead, copper, repeating them like liturgy. He pressed his head against the ribbed tube, felt its faint warmth. OXY-17. The smooth tube vibrated with flow. NUT-32. The cold one hummed like a tuning fork. SYS-04. He whispered their names into the liquid until his chest gave way.

And the condensation—always the condensation—became his cosmos. Droplets merging into

rivulets, rivulets into streams, branching like trees, like veins. He gave them names: Stream A, Stream B. He drew them in pen until the paper warped from pressure. He pressed his forehead to the notebook, whispering: map, map, map.

One night, determined, he held himself under for ninety seconds. His chest convulsed, vision tunneling into red and black, but he refused to blink. He pressed his ear against the glass. Beneath the clicks and hisses of the machines, he heard something vaster: a deep groan every twenty-two seconds, like the lungs of a leviathan. He wept into the liquid, whispering: twenty-two, twenty-two, twenty-two.

When he woke, he wrote it down his arm again, terrified it might vanish.

Friday night, he wrote a single sentence across an entire page:

THIS WORLD IS TOO CLEAN.

He listed the evidence.

- No drain smell after nine p.m.—always resets.
- Sarah repeating the same anecdote word for word.
- Emma’s chew cycle fixed at six.
- Jake’s leg swing fixed at four beats.

In the margin he scrawled in jagged letters: **NPC behavior confirmed.**

The page after he filled with drawings of tubes and droplets, machines and cables. The pod world was messy, asymmetrical, imperfect—therefore real. The kitchen was too clean, too scripted, therefore false.

When Sarah finally confronted him at the table, her voice was thin with fear. “David, you’re losing yourself. We’re losing you.”

He didn’t lift his eyes from the page. His pen was already scratching the words in frantic, forward-leaning strokes, his pulse hammering to their rhythm.

“No,” he whispered. “I’m finding the truth.”

And in that moment, he believed it.

Chapter Five — The Breaking Point

On Saturday morning the house felt slightly out of phase, like a movie with its audio two frames off. The light through the kitchen window was perfect—clear, late-summer, the kind that made the dust look like gold flakes—but he measured it anyway. He watched the dust motes rise and fall in convective loops over the toaster. He counted thirty-three before he forced himself to look away.

Sarah set a plate in front of him—toast, eggs, strawberries cut in quarters—and then didn’t sit. “We need to talk,” she said, hands flat on the counter like she was bracing.

He made himself look at her properly. The furrow between her eyebrows. The dry skin at the base of her ring finger he had labeled in the notebook as S-01. He had the insane impulse to reach out and smooth the dry patch with his thumb.

“I’m scared,” she said. “I don’t know how else to say it.”

He nodded like a person who understood. He did not put the notebook on the table. It was in his lap, spine hot against his thigh.

“You’re not here,” she said. “Even when you’re sitting in front of me, you’re... somewhere else. You’re measuring

my freckles, David.” Her voice broke on his name. “You’re timing how long it takes the coffee to stop steaming. You’re sniffing crayons. You missed Jake’s parent-teacher meeting and Emma’s rehearsal and you didn’t even notice.”

He opened his mouth and closed it again. In his head he heard the low rhythmic thrum of the pod world and overlaid it on the fridge hum. “I’m—” he started, and realized there wasn’t a word that fixed anything without being a lie.

She watched him. A tear slid down the left side of her nose—left, not right—and hung there, heavy, before it fell. His brain noted: surface tension, refraction across the tear’s meniscus; in the notebook, he would have called it *lens artifact: kitchen light doubled*. He hated himself for noticing.

“I want you to see someone,” she said. “Not Dr. Martinez. Someone who can actually help.”

“I—” He almost said can’t. Instead he said, “After the weekend.”

“No,” she said, calm in a way that meant she had been rehearsing. “Today.”

Emma and Jake padded in, bed-headed, pajamas rumpled. “Is Dad in trouble?” Jake asked, goofing to

defuse what he didn't understand. Emma stared at her father's face with a seriousness that was new.

David coughed, like his throat had a seam. "No one's in trouble."

"Daddy, do you promise to come to the park today?"
Emma asked.

"I promise," he said, knowing he would break it.

He did not go to the park. He went to the pharmacy for a cheap digital timer and a disposable watch, to the hardware store for a carpenter's pencil (fat lead, writes on anything), to the office to retrieve the second notebook he had hidden behind a row of outdated API manuals. He told himself he would meet them after—he meant it in the way he always meant it, like an intention could be a tether.

At his desk he opened his laptop and joined the 10 a.m. standup two minutes late. His face in the thumbnail video looked five years older. He listened to people talk about tickets and blockers. When it was his turn, he said, "All good," and meant none of it.

After the call, his manager appeared in his doorway. "You okay?" she asked, casual but practiced.

"Didn't sleep," he said.

"Take the day," she said. "Take the week."

“I’m fine.”

“David.” Her voice softened. “Take the week.”

He shrugged, which in a different week would have been the beginning of a laugh. He packed his laptop slowly, feeling the weight of it as if he were packing a piece of his current identity. On impulse, he left the laptop behind. He didn’t need code. He needed a stopwatch and a notebook and the willingness to do something unforgivable.

He started small because that felt like science. He stood on the corner at Ninth and Alder and waited for the light to turn red. Cars lined up with their civilized engine idle, and pedestrians arranged themselves into the choreography of a Saturday morning. When the walk sign flashed, he counted—one, two, three—and stepped off the curb on the yellow’s last blink so that when he reached the center of the crosswalk the signal had already switched to red.

The car in the nearest lane braked smoothly. The driver’s face did a brief sequence: annoyance, resignation, the tiny social performance of the tolerant stranger. He watched her mouth form a phrase he had seen on strangers a hundred times—no worries—and he mouthed it with her. Perfect sync.

He turned his head and shut his eyes for exactly five seconds.

Cold. Pressure. The liquid tried to press through him; the pulse at 11.4 seconds throbbed once like a metronome.

He snapped back. The street was as it had been. He was two steps farther. The driver was past annoyance and into impatience. The walk sign blinked its red hand. He had stayed inside the thin seam and nothing had broken.

He wrote: *Crossing on red: safe. No effect.*

At the grocery store he took a jar of pasta sauce from the shelf and set it deliberately on the floor where someone might trip. He counted eight seconds with his eyes closed, returned, moved it back. He watched the aisle from the endcap as if he were bird-watching. A woman pushed a cart past the spot, wheel wobbly, and righted it with the same practiced shake every shopper knows. He wrote: *Temptation of hazard denied (self-correction).*

At the park (not the one where his family waited) he climbed the fence, swung down on the other side, and walked across the soccer field during practice, ignoring the coach's whistle. Kids parted around him like wind around a tree. The coach was a man with a long whistle and a phrase that had been minted somewhere generic: "Hey buddy, not cool." He catalogued the tone—friendly but firm; the phrasing—lowest common denominator sermon; the exact way the man's hand described a broad authoritative arc.

He shut his eyes for six seconds. Cold. Pulse. A hiss—no, a leak—somewhere behind him in the red world. Machines footsteps: four clicks, pause, hiss.

He came back to “Hey buddy, not cool” again, like a loop had rewound five seconds. The whistle trilled, the kids jogged in place, the same girl with the high ponytail tied and retied it with the same two motions.

He stepped off the grass, heart going like it was trying to break his ribs. He wrote: *Short rewind on eyes-closed >5s amidst social friction? Or coincidence.* Then he wrote *repeat?* and underlined it twice.

When his phone vibrated with a text from Sarah—*Where are you? The kids are waiting*—he stared at the words until they became meaningless shapes. He typed *on my way* and put the phone back in his pocket and didn’t move.

He stood by the fountain on Bryant Plaza and watched water execute its programmed sequences. The jets rose and fell in a pattern he hadn’t seen since he cared about patterns purely for joy. It repeated every forty-seven seconds. He timed it because he could not not time anything now. He stepped a foot into the spray when it fell and closed his eyes at the apex of the next rise.

Liquid, but not water. The pod world swallowed him whole. His chest convulsed. He pressed his palms against

the glass and focused, because focus was the only thing that let him stay.

The machine footsteps were nearer. The red dimming heartbeat stalled for a fraction. He felt, viscerally, a *shift*—like air pressure changing before a storm, except there was no air. He tasted something sweet threaded into the metallic; his mind labeled it—*sedation ramp?*—before he knew what that meant.

He opened his eyes. The fountain jets hung in their midair parabolas for a fraction too long before collapsing. People clustered on benches looked up in unison with a latency he could measure—two beats; then the life resumed. He wrote: *latency injection. streaming?*

He waited and did it again. Same hesitation. Not just in the water. In the pigeons. In the nod of the man with the newspaper as he turned a page. In the left flick of a dog's ear. It was like the world had to buffer.

He laughed once, helpless and ugly. "I can make you stutter," he said under his breath. The thrill felt indecent.

He was late—an hour late—to the park where he had promised Emma to be. By then Sarah had taken them home. The swing set creaked in a loop nobody had interrupted. He sat on it anyway and swung until he was sick; he watched the arc length decay and wrote the numbers in his notebook until the page was a column of bare fractions.

He walked home because his hands were wrong on the steering wheel lately. The house looked untouched from the outside. Inside, the air had a cooled-over smell from dinner he hadn't eaten. There was a note in Sarah's square handwriting on the counter: *We went to Mom's. Call me when you're ready to talk to someone who isn't your notebook.*

He stood with his fingers on the note like it was a switch that could be flipped. He folded it carefully and placed it inside the notebook. He told himself he was preserving evidence. He knew he was preserving a wound.

He sat at the table and stared at the inside of his forearms, at the faint, impossible bruises where he felt the tubes in the other place meet his skin. They weren't really there. Except they were there enough that he traced them with the carpenter's pencil and labeled them **OXY-17, NUT-32, SYS-04** in shaky block letters.

He closed his eyes without counting.

Cold. The sweetness was stronger. The machine halted beside his pod—he felt the faint pressure change, like a tiny current. A needle hissed into a port. He felt the bite, delayed, like news traveling down an old wire. His muscles relaxed without his consent. He told his body to fight and his body said no thank you and went limp.

He forced his eyes to focus. Beyond the condensation and red haze, movement: a scissoring of limbs, the gleam of

lenses. He pressed his palm flat against the glass and left it there until his fingers ached. He counted the 11.4-second pulse three times. He told himself he was not an animal in a trap because animals did not keep ledgers.

He opened his eyes to the kitchen again and staggered to the sink and drank straight from the tap until his stomach sloshed. The water tasted like copper because everything tasted like copper now. He wrote: *sedation attempt detected. system countermeasures escalating.* The letters leaned so far forward the words might fall.

Sunday he went to church by accident. He didn't mean to go anywhere; he meant to test traffic lights again. He walked past the red brick and heard music, and went in because the sameness of the hymns would be a metronome he could use. He sat in the back pew and watched lips form lines from memory. He timed the pauses between verses. He closed his eyes during a prayer and went under.

Cold. Red. The sweetness again, then a blandness that felt like absence. He blinked under liquid and saw tiny text burned dim on the far bulkhead between rows, the way his eyes sometimes picked up his phone's OLED ghost after he looked away at night: **SECTOR 17-B** and something else, a line of characters he couldn't resolve. He squinted so hard his head throbbed.

He opened his eyes to the church aisle and a woman's voice saying "—and also with you," but the words lagged behind her mouth by a frame and then caught up. He had never felt more certain of anything. He had never felt more alone.

On the way out he "accidentally" knocked over a rack of pamphlets. Paper fanned across the vestibule like birds. He stepped back and closed his eyes for nine seconds, daring the system to recover around him. When he looked again the pamphlets were on the rack and a man in a navy blazer was reaching out saying "—are you okay?" even though there had not been time for either of those things to be true.

He walked away fast, heart bucking. He had confirmation now. Not just glitches, but rollbacks. Recovery routines.

He texted Sarah. *I can explain everything. Please come home.* He deleted it before it could deliver.

Monday was work, which meant HR, which meant the small conference room and the glass of water and a tone that attempted to place its hand on your shoulder without getting too familiar. His manager was there, and a woman from HR whose eyebrows made sympathetic shapes. Someone said "leave of absence" and someone said "we're concerned" and someone said "resources."

He closed his eyes for five seconds, just to see.

Cold. The pod startled at the intrusion like a sleeping animal disturbed; the sweetness flushed his veins. The machine's head swiveled toward him—no, toward his pod—and he felt the unambiguous sensation of being *registered*.

He opened his eyes and the water glass was a half-inch to the left and his manager was repeating the phrase “we’re concerned” with the same intonation. The woman from HR had one hand on a folder and the other hovering above a pen and he could have sworn the pen had been cap-on and now it was cap-off. He smiled because it was funny in a way that hurt. “I understand,” he said. He signed the paper they gave him; the signature in that small space looked like a rush of waves.

He left his key fob on the desk because that was what the ritual required and stepped out into noon.

On the sidewalk he stepped to the curb and into traffic to force the world to notice him. A bus braked with the deep sigh of compressed air. He stood too long. He felt the giddy, radiant belief that comes over gamblers and drunks and saints. The bus driver set both palms on the horn and blessed the air with a long honk. He shut his eyes for eleven seconds.

Cold. Red. The pulse and the sweetness and a hiss that was maybe an injection and maybe a reprimand. He opened them and the bus was two feet closer and also still

ten feet away, a double-exposed film that resolved into ten feet away and a second honk. The driver's mouth formed a profanity—he mouthed it with him, matching the shape.

He stepped back, laughing low in his throat. Two women on the sidewalk detoured around him the way you do around a man muttering to himself. He wrote, hands shaking: *temporal smear. asset interpolation fail*. Under that, because the part of his brain that had not been eaten still knew a truth: *this is going to cost me Sarah*.

It did. That night she came home with the kids and a suitcase, the big blue one they used for real trips.

“We’re going to my mom’s for the week,” she said. Her voice was steady in the way of women who have moved under their own steam through a storm and found the other side. Emma clutched a stuffed fox. Jake had that bright, brittle look of a kid trying to be brave. “I want you to come with us,” she said. “I want you to tell me you’ll come with us right now. And without that notebook!”

He looked at the kids and wanted to lie so badly he tasted iron. “I can’t,” he said. The words seemed to come from the wrong mouth.

“Why?” she demanded. “Tell me why.”

He showed her the notebook like a man shows his proof of purchase for a thing he cannot return. Pages of loops

and pulses and condensation maps. He flipped to the line where he had written **THIS WORLD IS TOO CLEAN**. He tried to explain about the fountain hesitation and the church pamphlet rollbacks and the bus that was two distances at once.

Sarah didn't read the pages. She looked at his face and saw something he couldn't see. "You need help," she said. "Not like this. Not alone in this house with that—" she gestured at the notebook, at his hands, at the air—"like that."

"I'm close," he said, and hated how it sounded. "I can break it."

Her mouth went slack with shock. Emma began to cry silently, fox tucked under her chin like a shield. Jake said, small and trying, "Dad?"

David reached for them and stopped because he was afraid to touch anything before he wrote down how it felt. "I love you," he said. "I love you. I'm trying to make sure any of this means anything."

Sarah made a sound that was not a word. She turned away because someone had to stop the kids from seeing the hurry on her face as she put shoes into the suitcase. At the door she turned back and gave him a look he had never seen before. It wasn't anger. It wasn't even sorrow. It was appraisal, like she was trying to lay a new truth

over an old map. “I will take them somewhere safe,” she said. “When you are ready to be in this world, call me.”

The door closed. The house performed the small click it always did when it sealed. The silence afterward was not empty; it was loaded.

He sat at the table and opened the notebook. He wrote: *family instance unloaded*. Then he crossed it out twice so hard the paper tore.

He did not sleep that night. He engineered. He made coffee and poured it into the sink because he needed the smell of it more than the caffeine. He put the timer by his left hand, the carpenter’s pencil by his right. He shut the blinds half-way because the light from the street always jittered and he needed to control for it. He drew a line down the center of a new page: **Trigger** on the left, **Observed Outcome** on the right.

He started with simple things, the ones he could walk back: Double-close the same drawer. Leave water running. Move objects to positions of slight hazard. Each time he closed his eyes for longer than five seconds, he came back to a micro-stutter: the faucet burbled, then sound caught up; the drawer slid fully closed after already having been closed; a spoon rocked itself to rest. He labeled each: *recover; recover; physics settle lurch*.

Then he escalated. He took a framed photo of the four of them—beach, the kids mid-laugh, Sarah’s hair in the

wind—and dropped it. Glass cracked, not shattering, but lifting a single sharp line from corner to corner like a horizon. He closed his eyes for twelve seconds. Cold. Sweetness. Hiss. He opened his eyes to find the glass un-cracked and also cracked; the world chose un-cracked after a beat, and the line was gone.

He brought the frame to his mouth and pressed his tongue to the glass and tasted nothing. He laughed, one short bark, because it was the only sound he could make that wasn't a sob. He wrote: *rollback success on non-catastrophic asset breakage* and hated the person writing those words.

He put the frame back and it slid into its exact old place with a little rubber-foot squeak that nearly undid him. He sat on the floor and stared at the space under the stove where dust gathered like bad thoughts. He closed his eyes without meaning to and went under, and in the red the sweetness rose, and the machine stayed, and the needle slid, and he felt for the first time a *voice* that was not a voice at the edge of his mind, a pressure that felt like a hand at the base of his skull: **SETTLE**.

He pushed against the word like you push against a doctor's palm. He opened his eyes and the kitchen had the wrong number of fridge magnets for a blink, then corrected. He wrote with a shaking hand: *first contact? instructive pressure. sedation interactive?*

He was not going to stop.

He took the car keys and stood in the driveway and decided not to test physics at forty miles an hour because he was not a monster. He walked instead, faster than a person walking with nowhere to go. He cut down an alley and stared at the back of a restaurant where a cook sprayed down a rubber mat with a hose. The mist diffused the light in particulate rainbows exactly like a physics engine show demo. He stepped into the spray and shut his eyes for fifteen seconds.

Cold. Red. The big engine throb at twenty-two seconds rolled under him. He pressed his palm to the glass until his nails hurt. He counted the machine's four clicks and heard, he swore he heard, another rhythm beneath, slow and sure, like an animal heart in sleep. He felt the pressure-voice again. **SETTLE**. He mouthed back through the liquid, ridiculous, bubbles stringing from his lips: "No."

He opened his eyes to find the spray stopped, the cook swearing, water pooling where it shouldn't, then the hose kicked alive again in a stupid lurch that no real hose ever did. He laughed, because if he didn't laugh he would take out his own eyes. He walked on, wet to the waist.

On Maple and 12th he watched a bicyclist weave through traffic. He shut his eyes for ten seconds without moving his feet. He felt the rush of the red world and opened

them to the bicycle further back than he should have been, and the woman's ponytail lagged and then accelerated as if a notch had been skipped.

He put his hands to his face and felt the carpenter's pencil still in his fist. He wrote against his skin: *it's a renderer. it's a renderer. it's a renderer.*

He was at the kitchen table when Sarah texted that night: *We're safe. If you want to talk to Dr. Levin I can schedule for tomorrow.* He stared at the contact photo of her—the one the phone had chosen of her mid-laugh, gum visible, delight without vanity—and didn't reply. He set the phone face-down so that he would not be tempted to turn it into another instrument.

He stared at his hands. There was a thin line of dried blood under the nail of his left ring finger where he had pressed too hard against the pod glass. He brought it to his lips and tasted iron, then copper, then salt. He wrote: *ionic palette = consistent across worlds.* It was a bad joke that ensured he would never be welcome at any dinner party again.

At midnight he closed his eyes for thirty seconds and stayed because the sweetness wanted him not to. In the red, the machine moved away and another moved closer—a double shadow crossing. He focused beyond the glass and saw, far down the row, a panel flicker and hold and reveal—for one knife-edge heartbeat—a long

wireframe lattice sketched in dim green on the floor between pods, a grid like the topography lines in CAD. He nearly unstitched his throat trying to laugh in the liquid.

He opened his eyes and the kitchen light had turned itself off and then back on like a blink. He recorded the time: 00:00:31. He wrote, very neatly for once, each letter careful and sharp: *I can crash it*. Then, underneath, in smaller letters that embarrassed him: *I'm sorry, Sarah. I will bring you proof.*

He stared at the sentence until it was no longer letters. He closed the notebook. He folded his hands on top of it like it was a prayer book and he was a child, willing and uncomprehending.

He whispered into the quiet house, to no one and to whatever had put him in the red: “I’m not going back.”

The pressure at the base of his skull returned, gentler now, almost plea: **SETTLE.**

He shut his eyes and said, aloud, “No,” and went under.

Chapter Six — Outrageous

David had proven the seams existed. He had coaxed the world into stuttering, hesitating, even rewinding. The notebook was full of careful timings and diagrams of glitches. But small proofs no longer satisfied him.

He needed to break it. He had confirmed the simulation could stutter. He had made it *sweat*.

Now he wanted to see if it could *bleed*.

The kitchen was still, a held breath in the early hours. The clock on the wall ticked with its dull second-hand rhythm, a small metronome in a world that felt less and less tethered to any rhythm at all. David stood at the counter, the lamp above the sink spreading a cone of yellow light across linoleum that smelled faintly of detergent and burned toast from the morning before. In that circle of illumination lay the knife. It was nothing exotic—just the chef's knife Sarah used to dice onions and crush garlic, the one that always picked up the faint perfume of acid and herbs no matter how much he scrubbed it. Tonight, under the solitary glow, the steel shimmered like something ceremonial, a tool chosen not by accident but by design.

He lifted it, feeling the balance tip slightly forward in his hand, the subtle gravity of sharpened edge and point. The

handle was worn smooth from years of use, as if all their meals were ghosts still pressed into the resin. He traced it with his thumb, felt the seam where the plastic met the tang of steel, and thought absurdly that even here, in the mundane detail of kitchenware, there were seams—joins where the illusion could break.

He raised it over his palm.

For one suspended instant, his whole body rebelled. A simple, animal refusal. This will hurt. This will bleed. This will end Sarah's suspicion forever. The whisper was as much his own voice as it was some echo, like a reminder baked into the bone of being human. He wanted that proof. He needed it.

The blade came down.

A sharp pressure, cool and clean, dimpled his skin before splitting it open. He saw the line appear, skin parting, flesh yielding. A bead of blood welled, dark and heavy, surface tension holding for an instant before it slid toward his wrist. He felt the sting radiate outward, a bright starburst of pain. The smell came too—copper, metallic, immediate. The kitchen air was suddenly alive with it, mingling with detergent and faint onion ghosts.

He closed his eyes. The pod seized him—cold microcosm, needle-bright ache. He didn't fight it; he let it pass and counted—one, two, three, four—then shut his eyes again and slipped back.

And then—hesitation.

The world blinked.

Two versions of the moment layered themselves one atop the other:

- In one, the cut was real, the blood running freely, his hand trembling around the knife.
- In the other, the blade never touched him, hovering impossibly an inch above unbroken skin.

They overlapped like old film reels projected out of phase. The edges of both realities bled into each other, sickly and wrong, as if the renderer couldn't decide which take was canonical. The pulse of pain in his palm remained, but the wound itself flickered, sealed, unsealed, sealed again.

Finally, the intact version stabilized. No wound. No blood. His skin as smooth as it had been before the strike. But the pain—ghost pain, nerve memory—lingered like fire in his hand.

His body reacted as though he were bleeding out. His pulse surged too fast, hammering in his ears, making the light above swim and flicker. Sweat broke across his forehead, salty and sharp. His breath came shallow, ragged, carrying the sour tang of copper even though there was nothing to bleed.

He whispered into the silence, voice hoarse with awe and anger:

“You won’t let me.”

The words hung in the air like smoke. No answer came, of course. But he felt, in the marrow of his shaking hand, that something had heard.

By midnight he had climbed the roof.

The shingles were slick with dew, each one catching the dim spill of the streetlight in miniature reflections. His shoes slipped against the grain, making soft gritty sounds as he crept upward, breath pluming pale in the cool night air. From up here, the house was a frail island against the sky’s dark void. The lawn stretched below like a simple flat texture, green and uniform, the sort of asset his engineer’s brain wanted to call “applied surface.”

He stood at the peak, balancing like a diver on the edge of some impossible board. His chest thudded—heartbeat and fear combined, a syncopated rhythm against the night’s hush. Each inhale fogged white, visible proof of being alive. Each exhale dissolved almost too quickly, as if the air itself rejected evidence of his body.

He leaned forward.

The fall was clean, gravity asserting itself with brutal indifference. His stomach lurched upward, throat closing. Wind clawed past his ears, shrieking with the pitch of

acceleration. The shingles blurred away, the lawn surged closer, and every nerve in his body prepared for shattering. His arms flailed, not in panic but as if to test—what would survive the translation?

Impact.

The ground punched through him. Ribs cracked like dry branches. Breath burst from his lungs in a howl he couldn't hear over the thunder of his bones breaking. Pain radiated, real and obscene, a detonation across every muscle. He felt the grass against his cheek, wet and cool, each blade distinct against skin that screamed in agony.

Then rewind.

A violent tug backward through time. A slider dragged. Frames reversed. His body unshattered, bones resealed, chest whole again. The lawn rewound into distance, wind screamed in reverse. In the blink of a skipped heartbeat, he was back on the roof, shoes slipping slightly against dew, chest aching with phantom breaks that no longer existed.

He staggered, almost tumbling from the peak a second time. His breath came shallow and too fast, every inhalation like glass dragged across his ribs. The pain persisted even though the body was new. Ghost ribs throbbed, remembered the fracture. He tasted copper again, metallic saliva pooling though there was no blood.

Below, the lawn still bore his imprint. A dark depression in the grass, body-shaped, pressed down into the earth. For a moment it glowed faintly, as if the renderer had burned the collision into texture memory. Then it began to fade, pixel by pixel, the blades of grass popping back upright in imperfect increments. Some stood taller than others, some flickered through shades of green before settling. A sloppy overwrite.

He crouched on the roof, shaking, watching the dent erase itself.

The world was patching. Not erasing, not perfectly resetting—patching over damage like an old program trying to heal its own corrupted save.

When the lawn finally looked whole again, he let out a sound that was part laugh, part sob, part animal growl. His breath clouded in the cold and hung there longer than it should have, reluctant to disperse, as if even the air was glitching on the simplest of tasks.

Later, at the kitchen table, his notebook open under the same yellow lamp, he scrawled in uneven lines:
Fall = rollback. World state partially erased. Physics interpolation imperfect.

His hand ached as though every finger had been broken once and then denied.

He chose daylight for the next experiment.
If anything could force the system to commit to a
consequence, it would be consequence witnessed by
others.

Mid-morning, the city felt rinsed. A fine damp hung in the air, the kind that coated lips and lashes and turned the smell of exhaust into a mineral taste. Traffic drew itself through the avenue in docile waves: buses sighing, scooters whining like insects baring stingers, the low diesel clatter of delivery trucks. He stood at the corner and watched the crosswalk icon count down—bright numbers working backward through fate. A woman next to him balanced a takeaway coffee in one hand and a tote bag swollen with greens in the other; steam rose from the lid and caught in the wind, a pale, fragile ribbon that dissolved too cleanly, as if evaporation had been over-optimized.

He stared at the numbers. Twelve. Eleven. Ten. The rhythm pushed into him. His heart found it and matched, then exceeded it, hammering like a defect he could not file a ticket for. The light shifted—white walk figure, obedient invitation. The crowd stepped forward as if jointed together. He did not move.

Across the lanes, a truck turned in, early and wide, grille grinning with bent chromed teeth and the husk of insects lacquered into a mosaic between them. The hood held a sheen of grime that had its own layered history: pollen,

rain, road salt, something like sea air, the emulsified memory of a hundred highways. Heat rippled off it in an invisible veil he could taste more than see. The driver hunched in his cab with shoulders up around his ears, jaw moving, a curse already forming.

David stepped off the curb.

The first instant was only air, the weightless slip between choice and consequence. Pavement under his soles. The smell of tar softened by yesterday's drizzle, rubber, oil. The truck filled his vision. He saw rivets. He saw a hairline crack in the right headlight lens where a stone had hit months ago. He saw the red of the driver's eyes, the burst capillaries that told a story of late nights and too much caffeine. He saw his own pale reflection smeared across the chrome, not a reflection so much as a remembered geometry loosely pasted there.

Impact emptied him of everything. A flat, total compression: sternum collapsing, ribs folding like damp cardboard under a boot. The air left him not as breath but as a noise—thin, involuntary, pitched too high for his throat. The world contracted to a few bright, undeniable signals: the burn of bone on bone, the wet pressure in his chest, the smell of hot engine and the cleaner-chemical note of windshield fluid. Something like white fire tore down the nerves in both arms.

Correction.

He blinked and stood on the curb again. Not teleported—returned, as if the act of his death had been an unsaved change the system refused to commit. The truck squealed at the crosswalk line, tires moaning, the driver's mouth opening into that same curse with exactly the same shape. People around him did not step forward yet; they held in a tableau a beat too long, the crosswalk icon still frozen on a number that should have changed. In that stretched second, everything around him broke into symptoms.

The truck's front wheels elongated, rubber bulging into soft gray cylinders like clay being pulled too far. The wheel wells grew thinner, then snapped back, then wavered between two states, as if a hand had toggled a switch labeled "wheel" and the program couldn't decide which preset to trust. The chrome bumper trembled, reflection splitting into twin images that slid across each other like fish scales.

On the far side of the crosswalk, a man's tan overcoat duplicated. Two coats layered, not quite aligned, one drifting an inch to the right as if it had been pasted on a new layer and someone was dragging it into place. The left duplicate caught an impossible breeze. The right one hung heavy in still air. After two heartbeats they merged, and the man's hand, which had briefly clipped through his stomach when the copies overlapped, returned obediently to his side.

Sound lagged. The blare of the horn stretched, a long elastic ribbon of noise drawn out across the street and then let go—it snapped back and rewound, then replayed in its full shape. A dog barked at the truck and barked again and then barked the first bark a second time, the same envelope and decay, as if the sound buffer had been dropped and reloaded.

Two pedestrians turned to gape at him in perfect sync: same dip of the chin, same flare of nostrils, same wrinkled, concerned mouth. Their breath plumed white with the same geometry; the little torn clouds from their mouths undid themselves in matched eddies and vanished.

He staggered backward to the nearest storefront window and pressed his hand against the glass for balance. Cold. The pane held his heat for a heartbeat, fogging a translucent oval that made the street beyond look as if it were wearing his breath like a bruise. Through it he saw his own reflection slightly out of phase, his chest rising too quickly, the light above his head flickering not in bulbs but in inference—as if illumination itself had been guessed wrong.

The driver finally completed his curse, awkwardly out of time, as if mouthing lyrics he didn't remember until the beat renewed. “Jesus—what the—” He lifted one hand in a question that had been asked in a thousand cities in a thousand mornings: You crazy?

David looked at him and almost laughed. The laughter came too close to a sob and turned into a cough that scraped copper up his throat. Ghost pain bit into his sternum where the truck had done its good work; his ribs ached as though the fracture persisted in memory even if the bones beneath his shirt were untouched. He tasted metal. He swallowed it, and the swallow had a delay, or his noticing of it did—the two states of him, body and watcher, were no longer bound by latency guarantees.

He pushed away from the glass. His palm left a wet oval that faded too slowly, like a stain being erased by a lazy eraser tool. He stepped back to the curb and watched the crosswalk count march again, as if the system had decided to rewind to a usable state. People resumed their talk. The dog shook once, collar clinking—one time, then a weaker echo, the same shake with fewer frames. The truck idled with a low, pulsing growl that he felt through his teeth.

He turned and walked, not fast, not slow. The world fell back into its preference. Things hummed in confidence again. But his body was a field of after-images: the weight against his chest, the sweet hot smell of engine coolant, the tacky feel of rubber dust on his fingertips where he had braced without touching. He imagined the city as an organism swallowing a brief mouthful of glass and pretending it never happened. The taste of it would linger in the gums.

He went home, hands cold, fingers trembling in a rhythm that matched nothing outside of him. He washed them under water that was first too hot and then, with a small, mean wink of the faucet, became precisely lukewarm in a way no human ever chooses. The window above the sink clouded with his breath and cleared, clouded and cleared, a cheap magic trick he could not stop performing. The house smelled like coffee that had burned to a nut-brown bitterness on the hot plate, and under that, faint and sour, the smell of the drain—wet metal and forgotten food.

He sat and recorded the experiment in the way he now reported to himself because no one else would understand the report. He did not write the words he wanted to write—*I died in front of strangers and the world refused me*—he wrote the version he could live with: timings, observations, the exact order in which artifacts had appeared. He wrote until the script lost letters of its own accord and became a weave of loops and dashes. Then he closed the notebook and held it shut, as if a thing with paper and ink could keep in what he had seen.

That night he decided to burn the kitchen down.

It began with the smell. Lighter fluid had the tacky sweetness of childhood summer, of grills and lighter cubes and the brittle chime of ice in glasses. When he opened the bottle, the scent came off it like a buttery

cloud contaminated by petroleum, a French toast of the apocalypse. He poured it onto the floor in a deliberate net, watching viscous trails spread across linoleum in slow geometry that pleased some bookkeeping part of his mind. He laid the web as if he were a spider and the house the corner of a field where flies always passed just so.

The lamplight turned the puddles into sheets of amber that barely trembled. He touched a match to the striker and the sulfur hiss snapped him back to the first memory of fire: a candle his mother had once held safe beneath his hand, the way the heat licked his skin without taking it. That memory stood beside him a moment in the yellow light and then retreated without comment.

The match went down into the gleam.

The flame took the floor greedily. It rolled out along the fluid as if it had been waiting there the entire time. The first wave was beautiful: low, blue at its base, amber tongues lapping outward as if tasting. Heat crawled up his shins, delicate hairs shriveling in a smell like sweetened dust. The linoleum darkened under it in bruised ovals, blisters rising and popping with the nervous crackle of frying eggs. The edges of the cabinets began to smudge, laminated wood releasing its trapped glue into the air. Bubbles crawled along the veneer and burst with wet, microscopic pops.

Smoke leaned up from the floor in slow columns that became sheets that became a ceiling. It had a flavor that felt invented: plastic sugar, almond, old metal, something that remembered fish. He coughed and the cough burned not only his throat but his eyes, the ache seeping immediately back toward the bridge of his nose. Tears cut clean lines through the film across his vision. Heat pressed his body; his skin prickled with a thousand tiny needle-bites. Somewhere a little inside the wall, something snapped—a screw giving up, a wire insulation puckering into confession.

He watched. He waited for the world to decide.

Reset.

Not like a cut. Not even like the roof's quick rewind. More like a decision quietly overwritten with a falsehood, the same screen painted again with the old scene. The flame vanished without going out. The smoke folded itself like linen and was gone. The blistered patches gleamed whole. The bottle of lighter fluid stood on the counter with its cap off and no scent. The match in his fingers became only a sliver of black that had never burned but had failed to light.

He blinked into air that was suddenly courteous. The kitchen was intact. A good room. Night-lamp warm. Shiny, wipeable surfaces. Menus of ordinary meals stuck under a magnet shaped like a beetle. Quiet.

And wrong.

The wrongness arrived first in his nose: a faint, discontinuous smear of the fire that had not happened. Not smoke exactly, but the idea of smoke. A smell like a memory file loaded and then forgotten to be closed; a saved state leaking into the present through an invisible seam. He inhaled as if scent were a string he could pull. It came and went with no respect for breathing. Sometimes the room was clean, the next instant it reeked like a sweater one wore at a campfire and then put back in the drawer without washing. The smell flickered with no source.

The floor remembered and forgot by frames. He crouched and put his palms on the linoleum. Cool, smooth, indifferent. He pressed his ear down like a listener at a confessional. For a beat, he heard the faint clatter that fire makes when it finds the joint in a board, a sound like teeth. He lifted his head and it was gone. The tiles looked normal. Then—not normal. For the flick of a heartbeat, a charred oval appeared under the table, edge feathered, a bruise in the world. It vanished. It came back. It had a different position, like a story being told by someone who cannot keep the details straight.

He pressed his nose to the floor like a dog's. His breath fogged a patch that congealed too slowly, like the linoleum had suddenly chosen to act as glass. He inhaled the seam. Synthetic. The sweet bite of melted adhesives.

The bitter end-note of scorched dust. The plastic almond of cabinets that should not have burned and did. He could feel heat on his cheeks that was not there, a phantom warmth that radiated from a hearth no home had ever owned.

A hairline tremor ran through the counter, almost too small to feel, a ripple as if some larger table beneath his house had been bumped. The drainer rattled plate to plate, mild music. He stood and waited and felt, not heard, his own heart thunder into the quiet with an almost comic insistence: there you are, there you always are. The lamp hummed with a frequency he could feel in his teeth.

The house inhaled and exhaled in the shy, steady way houses do, dryer vents ghosting, the refrigerator's motor bringing its small weather to bear, the baseboards ticking as they gave up heat in small complaints. He had lived in this climate long enough to know these trues. Tonight each sound wore a thin outline, a bright pencil mark at its edges, as if redrawn by someone who could not quite match the line underneath. Each took one step forward into reality and one step back into the script that said it hadn't happened.

He whispered into the clean air that wasn't: "I can smell your mistakes."

His voice made a small hollow in the kitchen and lay down there, a faithful dog refusing to leave for hours.

He opened the window above the sink because that was what you did, even if the smell's source did not respect fresh air. Cold outside was liver-gray and damp enough to sip. It slid under his shirt and took lodging along his spine. The screen had a nick that caught the light.

Beyond, the alley went down between the houses as a black gutter, slick with wet. He could hear the whisper of a neighbor's radio through a wall he had always thought too thick for radio. A weather man told a story of pressure gradients and the chance of showers in the night. The sound had a gritty grain, like speech played back through the memory of having been copied one time too many.

He turned and set about cleaning what didn't need cleaning. He wiped a counter that had not been used. The rag took on a faint cirrus of gray anyway, and that felt like proof; the universe could still be dirtied. He washed his hands. The water burrowed into his nails and fled. His hands smelled of lemon and a metallic cold he could not banish. He dried them on a towel he could see was threadbare now in a way he hadn't noticed in years. The towel's loops had broken into a fuzz that drank water poorly. He tried to remember when it had become so tired, and could not. Time had existed too long; it had worn his belongings down behind his back like waves do.

He sat at the table again. He did not write. He pushed the notebook aside and set both palms flat on the wood, skin to finish. The faintest warmth gathered under his hands from the lamp. He closed his eyes and breathed slowly, carefully, as if the act could be weaponized. In through the nose—count—and out—not too fast. He matched his breath to the refrigerator’s cycle. He matched it to the pulse he could feel in his neck. He matched it to the burn scar that appeared for one beat under the table and then saved itself as nonexistent.

He imagined the space below his floor shared with a space above a tunnel, far under the city, where air moved in the same periodic sigh. He imagined lights there with a hum that ate vowels out of speech. He imagined the taste of cool metal handrails blowing pennies through his teeth. He imagined the world’s attention dragged thin at the edges like spun glass; how far down would it fray if he pulled it by daring into places where no one watched?

Tomorrow he would go under the city. He knew that with the same certainty with which he knew to shut off the lamp before going upstairs.

He stood and moved through the house like a burglar who owns it. The hallway hid a small rind of cold and gave it back to him at the ankles. The stairs made the two creaks they always had. The children’s room kept a weather of its own—faded warmth, a film of crayon-wax and soap. Their absence had a weight that pooled on the

floorboards. He stood there and counted the breaths he knew by heart, as if memory could condense back into bodies: one, two, three, four—numbers folded into a small animal he could carry. In the bedroom, the bed held only the grammar of where Sarah used to be. He summoned the fan of her hand, the tuck of her other under the pillow, the low heat along her spine. The summoning hurt. He stayed in the doorway. His chest still wore the truck as a shadow, and the shadow preferred distance.

He went back to the kitchen once more without turning on the light. In the darkness, the room was a box outlined in line noise, edges defined by the memory of heat. The burn that had not happened left a faint ghost-spoor only his ruined senses followed. He let his breath fog the window in a shape the night could not hold. It fled from him as it fled from heat. Fog, clear, fog, clear. Blink, correction.

He was teaching himself the rhythm of a god he hated and needed.

He folded himself onto the couch and lay there like a pilgrim who had reached only the first shrine. The house's pulse drumbeat under him came not from the street, not from the heater, not from any system and all systems at once. He allowed his eyes to close and did not fall—instead he took a soft elevator down into the level

where the world corrected, and when the doors opened there was his breath, already fogging the glass.

He smiled with no one to admire it and bartered with tomorrow: the tunnels, the live wires. Deeper. Stranger. Outrageous enough to force the universe to show him where it ended.

He whispered: “I can smell your mistakes.”

The more outrageous he became, the more the system faltered.

Time stretched and snapped like an elastic band. Sometimes seconds elongated, people moving underwater, voices slowed to syrup. Other times everything lurched forward in a violent catch-up, like frames skipped in a corrupted video.

The city’s mouth opened in stairwells.

Concrete lips chipped and painted over, yellow lines worn thin by a million footsteps. David descended one of them late the next evening, shoes scuffing grit and gum softened by rain. A faint current of warm, stale air rose against him as though the tunnels exhaled. The smell clung in layers—wet stone, hot dust baked onto rails, the faint acid of urine, a sweetness of fried food carried down on someone’s clothes, ozone like rubbed copper.

Each step downward took him deeper into the throat of the city, and with each step the air grew more

homogenous, less interested in carrying separate scents. It became one continuous medium: underground. He thought of the pod fluid, how it had felt thick, heavy, pressing against him from all sides. Air could feel that way too, if it was left to stew without wind.

The ticket machines hummed at the mezzanine. Their screens glowed with blues that seemed chosen not for readability but for endurance, as if light could grow tired. He passed them, a ghost in their reflection. His own figure doubled on the dark glass, and for a moment his reflection lagged—a frame behind his stride. He stopped, turned his head sharply, and saw it catch up. His stomach flipped.

Down another flight. The tiled walls caught fluorescent light and reflected it in flat, chalky gleam. Each tile was square, identical, a pattern too strict to be real, until he noticed the mistakes: a single tile slightly higher, another turned half a degree, grout lines offset. His eyes traced those errors like a liturgy: proof the world's renderer was not perfect, or proof it had been patched in a hurry.

The platform stretched wide, echoing, nearly empty at this hour. Lights buzzed overhead in a row that seemed infinite. Their color was not quite constant—pale green here, orange-white there, a cold blue down the line. They flickered in rhythm, not randomly but in a wave that traveled down the tunnel like a heartbeat shivering along

the ceiling. He tilted his head and watched it travel, pulse after pulse. His own chest tried to keep time with it.

He walked toward the far end, shoes scuffing dust. His footfalls echoed, a delayed shadow of sound bouncing back at him. The echo did not obey distance. Sometimes it came after a single heartbeat; sometimes after three. Once, he heard it before his foot actually landed. The sound buffer had shifted out of order, feeding him his own presence early. He laughed once—sharp, too loud—and the echo laughed too, wrong by half a second, a voice that didn't belong to him.

A train came then. The rush of air shoved at him, hot and dry, heavy with brake dust. The headlights flared in the tunnel's dark mouth and smeared sideways, like paint dragged on wet canvas. The cars clattered in, wheels screaming on rails, sparks leaping and vanishing. For an instant the train doubled—two copies displaced a few feet, translucent, one phasing through the other. The passengers inside sat frozen in wrong poses, some with limbs clipping into metal, a child's head merging with the seat in front of him until the renderer caught up and decided which version to keep.

David gripped the iron pillar beside him, its surface gritty with rust, cold with condensed water that beaded into droplets and slid down his palm. He pressed his forehead to it and inhaled the iron. Breath fogged against the

metal, impossible, as if his lungs had mistaken the pillar for glass.

The train braked to a halt. The doors opened with a hydraulic sigh that bent into a whine too long, then snapped short. Passengers moved—or rather, restarted motion. A man stepped forward, froze in mid-stride, then jerked to complete the step, like a skipped frame. A woman's scarf fluttered, then repeated the same flutter, then dropped into stillness as though ashamed of the mistake.

He didn't board. He waited, body humming. He wanted the tunnel itself, the place where people did not watch.

When the train left, he stepped down from the platform onto the track bed. Gravel crunched beneath his soles, each pebble sharp and unique against his weight. The third rail lay there with its yellow warning line, humming faintly, invisible energy curled inside it like a coiled snake. He passed it carefully and went deeper into the darkness, shoes sending small avalanches of rock outward.

The tunnel narrowed. Damp streaks ran down its curved walls, smelling of mold and copper. Wires hung in bundles, some wrapped neat, others frayed, their insulation gnawed by rats or time. Water dripped in rhythms too exact, as if metered: one-two-three, pause, one-two-three. He whispered the count under his breath,

then matched it to his heartbeat, then lost track when both diverged.

Lights hung from the ceiling at intervals, but not all of them worked. Some buzzed to life as he approached, flickered with confidence, then dimmed again. Others refused entirely, leaving pockets of dark that felt thick as liquid. In one stretch, he swore he saw the tunnel split in two: one path veering left, another right. He blinked and there was only one again, but the afterimage of the second lingered in his head like the memory of a dream.

He pressed deeper. The hum grew stranger, not just electricity but a low, pulsing bass that seemed to belong to something alive. His stomach clenched at each beat, as if his organs had been tuned to it. He touched the wall, damp and cold. His palm came away smeared with black grit that tasted, when he licked it, of pennies and dust.

And then the system stuttered.

For a full second, the tunnel froze. The drops of water hung mid-fall, crystalline beads suspended in air. The hum cut out, silence dropping so total it rang in his ears. The overhead lights locked into steady brightness, no flicker. His own breath sounded like glass shattering in the stillness. He panicked, gasped, and the condensation fogged before his face but did not disperse—it hung in the air like a lens.

Then resume.

All at once: droplets fell, hum returned, lights flickered, gravel shifted under his foot. Time jerked forward. His body stumbled, knees buckling, ribs aching with a ghost pain from another fall. He caught himself against the wall and coughed copper into the damp.

He laughed into the tunnel, voice echoing out of sync again. “You can’t follow me down here,” he whispered, daring whatever watched. “You get nervous in the dark.”

The tunnel answered with another drip. One-two-three.
Pause.

He stayed until his skin prickled with the chill that rose from stone, until his throat ached from tasting metal in the air. Then he climbed back, up stairs that moaned with rust, into the relative safety of the street.

The next day, he decided on electricity.

He chose the basement because it already smelled of old wiring: dust, mildew, warm plaster, faint ozone where the breaker box hummed. The concrete floor was cold enough to feel through his socks, a clean mineral cold that stiffened his toes. The bulbs overhead buzzed like flies caught in glass.

He stripped back the cover on one wire with a utility knife. The copper inside gleamed with a sheen like old coins polished by years of hands. He held it bare in one fist, the knife still in the other, and thought: this should

be final. This should tear me apart at the root, not just skin and ribs but every filament of me.

He pressed it to his palm.

The shock detonated through him. His body convulsed as though seized by an invisible puppeteer. Muscles clenched so hard they bruised themselves. His teeth clacked together, a sharp crack of enamel. He felt his jaw hinge scream. The current shot up his arm like fire made of needles, then across his chest in a line that stole breath. His heart tripped, faltered, then raced too fast, hammering against ribs already marked by ghosts.

The smell came first: ozone, sharp and acrid, like lightning striking close. Then the taste: metal filling his mouth, iron filings smeared across tongue and teeth. His vision went white at the edges, then stuttered black, then returned in doubled frames. The bulb overhead multiplied, three copies hanging, one flickering, one too bright, one barely glowing. He saw his own arm duplicated, one version clenched around wire, the other not.

Reset tried to come. He felt the pull, the way the world wanted to rewind, to deny, to patch. But electricity was messier. His body jittered in two states at once: one where his muscles shook, another where they were perfectly still. Pain existed in both. His chest screamed,

heart stumbling like an engine missing cycles. His breath stopped, then restarted, then stopped again.

Finally, the system made a choice. The wire dropped from his hand, clattering harmlessly to the floor. His arm was unmarked. The lightbulb hung singular again, humming as if nothing had happened.

But his nerves hadn't forgotten. His muscles still twitched, shoulders jerking in phantom aftershocks. His heart raced wrong, a syncopated panic that refused to settle. His mouth tasted of pennies and smoke. He staggered against the wall and slid down to sit on the cold floor, knees up, arms trembling.

The basement smelled scorched. Not really scorched, but the shadow of it—the way air smells after lightning miles away. His tongue ached as if bitten, though no blood pooled. He swallowed and tasted copper anyway.

He whispered into the concrete: “I felt it. You can’t take that away.”

Silence answered, but it was not clean silence. It was threaded with hums, ticks, the faint pulse of circuits hidden in walls. The prison’s body—he thought it, before correcting himself to house. No. It had been prison for a moment. It was body either way.

He sat there until his legs numbed, then dragged himself upstairs, body still buzzing with the ghost of current. His

notebook stayed shut on the table. He didn't need to write it down. His whole nervous system had recorded it for him.

He went back to the street because the street was an altar. Not the quiet cul-de-sac near their house, but an artery where the city's blood actually moved, where motion had consequence, where attention pooled because it had to. A four-lane stretch under sodium lamps, the light the color of old honey poured too thin, crosswalks stenciled white and scuffed to gray by years of feet. The air held last rain and the aftertaste of rubber; it had that low mineral coolness that climbs up through shoes and replaces the warmth in bones. Somewhere a bakery vented sugar and yeast into the night as if absolution could be proofed.

He stood at the corner a long time, letting the city's rhythms settle on him. The pedestrian signals chirped in blind code. Buses snorted at stops and knelt; doors wheezed like exhausted lungs. A scooter went by with a soprano whine. The built environment sang to itself in service tones—compressors clicking, transformers purring, an HVAC rumble on the second story of a building whose windows wore the same film of dust as always. Ordinary. Reassuring. He inhaled it all until the ordinary felt like a tight garment he could split with a shrug.

He waited for a truck again, not because he needed symmetry but because mass had an honesty cars lacked. He wanted the world to have to place a heavy object in relation to him and fail cleanly if it couldn't.

There it was: the square nose of a delivery rig coming from the left, headlights fogged and yellowed, the grill a mouth full of dead flies. The driver hunched forward with that tired tilt of someone counting the intersections until home. The truck approached on a green. The crosswalk icon was a red hand. The street said no.

He stepped out anyway.

He did not run. He did not even hurry. He walked like a man through his own front door, arms drifting outward, palms open to show he carried nothing but himself. Tires hissed on damp asphalt; the smell rose, tar and oil sweetened by last rain, heat ghosting up through his soles. He could hear the driver's music—just bass, a distant thump—then a voice shouting, then brakes taking hold. He watched the angle of the hood dip as the suspension chose which world it preferred: stop or don't.

Impact took him, clean and absolute, a vertical crush that rang up through spine and skull. His legs disappeared into force and then returned as a catalog of hurts; his ribs remembered the first truck and added new notes. The world tried to rewind.

It failed gracefully for a heartbeat, then gracelessly, then not at all.

Correction seized him and put him back where it preferred—centered on the paint between lanes, arms wide—but the city around him did not agree on the specifics. Headlights duplicated and slid out of phase like two moons fighting for the same sky. Brake lights smeared long tails that refused to retract. A car on the far side of the intersection wore two different colors at once, red and slate, panels cycling as if a decision engine could not settle on trim. A bus jittered half a meter to the left and back, tires stuttering without spinning.

On the sidewalk a woman raised her phone to film, then raised it again, then had never raised it; her arm jumped frames until the system pinned her in a plausible pose, breathless and concerned. Her scarf was red and then not-red and then red again—all shades of red at once, sampled from memory of reds the city had worn in other winters. A man’s dog barked twice, one bark emerging from the animal, a second bark delayed and arriving from three meters to the right, where no mouth was. Sound had stopped asking permission from its source.

Reflections betrayed the primary world. The storefront glass that had always called itself window began confessing. It showed a street one beat behind the street it faced. It showed David in a different posture—arms lower, head tilted—not in a way that felt like *déjà vu* but

in a way that felt like two truths running in parallel with a thread between them cut. He moved, and the reflection failed to predict him; then it guessed too far and had to snap back. He stepped forward and saw his reflection step forward twice, a stutter from a mind that knew the idea of him but could not keep his actual coordinates.

The sky was low and lid-like, a pane of humidity that gathered light and gave it back wrong. The lamps hummed. Each halo developed a faint corona that pulsed not with AC frequency but with something like intention. The halos accumulated structure: faint filaments within filaments, spiderwebs that weren't webs but nerves—blurs organized by hunger. The lamps became little brains burning with thought. Their light did not just fall; it sought. Where it failed to find surfaces, it invented them and then apologized by making shadows.

His breath sawed in and out, not dramatically, just steadily, but each exhale hung white a fraction too long. The loose fog from his mouth formed thin crescents that clung to the air and then slid from their own weight, leaving transparent smears that curved down the way condensation curves on glass. The night itself had become a pane for him to fog.

The truck still existed and did not. In one version of the world, it stopped in time and shuddered; in another, it had already passed through him, a ghost leaving him with pain as a fingerprint. The driver's face had too many

features for a blink—two sets of eyes layered, a slight duplication of the nose ridge, a mouth opening toward no single vowel. Then the face averaged itself like a selfie app and became a face he might have known.

All at once it spread.

Not out from him exactly, but across everything, like damp that finds the whole wall has been wallpaper all along and comes through in a broad, dirty bloom. The renderer—whatever passed for a renderer here—stopped being confident. Not just with edges and reflections, but at the level of what a thing was.

Pavement forgot it was pavement and tried out alternatives. For three meters the road ahead decided it might be water; a thin transparency over black showed ripples that had no cause, the sodium lamps festooning their handles on the waves. It was only a blink long, but in that blink the car tires floated. Then the surface reasserted asphalt, but badly: pebbles too regular, aggregates tiled in neat grids like someone had been stingy with entropy. He could see the seam where one batch of inference met another, a zipper down the lane that did not meet teeth for teeth.

A lamppost, cruelly simple for so many decades, flirted with becoming a young tree. Its straight line softened; the paint's gloss caught light like bark catching dew. He smelled a ghost of green and loam that had no business in

the middle of a boulevard. Then the post returned to being post, ashamed of its dalliance, but the smell remained a fractional second longer, confusing nose and heart.

Text bled first at the edges and then in the middle. Signage lost the contract with letters and leaned toward ligature, toward graceful nonsense. A NO PARKING placard said NO P A K I and then remembered the R but could not fit it and chewed the space. A billboard above the pharmacy collapsed into a pretty curtain of strokes, an alphabet that wanted to be the language he had been raised inside but was only its mood. His eyes tried to read it and found a hum behind them instead, a headache, like trying to parse someone else's dream.

Faces briefly averaged toward a person who had never lived. The crowd became cousins. Mouths the same, foreheads the same, eyes widened to the same round of alarm scaled by hair length. Each face wore a calibration like a passport photo. Then, unpredictably, someone snapped back to singular and shouted, but their shout came out like a sound effect for "shout," the foley artist's confident approximation. The exact voice would load later, after the tension had served.

The city guessed constantly and, tonight, it guessed wrong.

He walked forward into the guessing, palms still open, as if he could catch every wrongness and hold it to the light.

He could taste the misrender. It had a literal flavor—ozone from bulbs driven too hard, the peppery dust of brake pads, copper he learned in the basement—but layered under that, a taste like burnt sugar left too long on heat: caramel gone bitter. It rode his tongue on breath and refused to be spit out. It had the quality of guilt.

Cars slid around him as if guided by systems that had been replaced by their training data. Trajectories were neat curves even when drivers yanked the wheel; there was a righteousness to the paths that felt like the math behind them had more authority than panic. One vehicle stalled in resolution midway through a swerve: its paint shifted through a fan of options—white, gray, a nostalgic teal—before committing to silver with a thin black scar down the side. The scar replicated itself to the other side a moment later, as if damage must be symmetrical to be believable.

A gaggle of horn blasts erupted out of order and in competing keys. He heard first the echo up between buildings, then the nearer blare, then the throat of the driver climbing into their own sound. His body understood none of it and all of it. He grinned without meaning to. He was a boy under a sheet again, breathing loud and making the ghost bigger just by wanting it.

His ribs throbbed from the impact his bones had already denied. Small muscles in his forearms still twitched from

the shock he had delivered himself. His jaw ached from clenching around lightning. He cataloged these facts like talismans: I did that; you failed to erase it. The pain pulsed on a rhythm he knew he had not chosen and could not master. He embraced it as an arrow pointing true: through him, toward the machine that made his weather.

The machine noticed. He felt it as a change in attention in the way a child in a classroom feels when a teacher looks up without moving her head. The air cooled a degree. The lamps above him burnished their halos, sharpening filaments inside that were not filaments. He smelled dust fresh-scoured off a lens and a thermal note that belonged in server rooms. The asphalt under his feet firmed, its guess improved, as if a better model had been dispatched to this corner.

He raised his arms higher. Fingers spread. Palms out. A cruciform not for worship, but for taunt. Heat from the truck's engine grazed his shins, a paws-out dog that did not dare touch. He laughed because he was terrified and because laughter asked for air and air was a habit he didn't intend to surrender.

"Come on," he said, not shouting, voice conversational and hoarse. "Show me. Kill me, then fix me. If you can."

A gust cut down the street and fluttered the drying leaves of an ornamental tree against a shop window. The leaves, rendered with what might have once been a seasonal

shader and now was hysteria, all chose the same gesture at once: a synchronized flicker. The sound they made became a sound like rain, then like applause, then like nothing at all as silence took the stage again without asking.

Somewhere a bottle toppled and rolled in the gutter, glass clinking, a mundane sound that was so correct it nearly broke him. A small thing being true inside the big lie felt like an act of mercy. He looked toward it—the green cylinder wobbling, a neck chip catching light—and almost cried. His tear ducts decided to help and then didn't; moisture gathered, then undid itself.

Light found new paths. Sodium lamps fed nerves of brightness that leapt across air to the metal of the truck's grill, then hopped again to the signpost, then spread in a faint mesh across the intersection, not lines, not grid, but like the extracellular matrix of a living thing revealed by dye. Neuron, dendrite, axon—he had seen diagrams once in a children's book about brains and wondered why the pictures felt like maps. The mesh brightened and dimmed in waves, not visible to any other eye but his. He understood nothing but recognized hunger as the light pulsed: the world thinking about itself too hard and overheating in the attempt.

He took one more step forward because it hurt to do so and because part of him believed in the oldest superstition—movements must have meaning if you

make them with your whole body. The step put his toes over the faint seam where the night's guesses stitched together. He felt it underfoot: a wrinkle, a near-nonexistent ridge, a zipper hidden in black. The ridge moved, a snake uncoiling, and flattened to nothing only because he was looking at it.

A hand closed on his shoulder. Not the machine's. Not the city's. A man who had left his own fear long enough to put skin on another person. "Hey," the man said, voice shredded by its own courage. "Hey, get out of the—"

David turned. The man's hand did not render for a second; it was warmth without fingers, a pressure through his jacket that conveyed only intention. Then the hand arrived, five and then six fingers, then the correct number again, nails one shade, then another. The man's face lagged a half-beat behind his words and then sprinted to catch up, changing expressions along the way. Concern. Anger. Concern again. The man's breath fogged, a faint white seen in streetlight, and hung longer than the man breathed, as if his respiration had been allowed more screen time than his lungs could justify.

"It's okay," David said, not to him. "It's okay."

He meant It's working. He meant It's breaking. He meant I'm almost where I need to be.

The driver of the truck—this strong, tired creature of steel and paycheck—leaned on his horn out of despair at

physics and at what people do when night is heavy. The horn came out a flat warble, a sound from a keyboard's demo track, the wrong instrument for the song. The truck's frame vibrated with it. The grill grinned a little wider with inference. Heat licked his knees again but did not burn.

David faced the truck. He lowered his arms and lifted them again, higher this time, like a conductor calling for a last swell from a cheap orchestra that nonetheless knew triumph.

The city obliged.

Everything around him arrived at once at a state he had no word for. Not collapse—the structures still held. Not explosion—no shards flew. It was more like a cascade inside a brain when a thought fires too large and recruits every neighbor: a runaway recognition. The lamps synapsed bright and brighter. The reflections in glass layered wrong and then right and then wrong, as if frames had shuffled and were now being dealt in panic. The text of signs gave up entirely, turned to soft strokes that preserved only their kerning. Figures on the sidewalk took one step as a chorus. The air tasted blue, then hot, then sweet with plastic, then of nothing, like a tongue pressed to a cold battery and finding no current.

His heart—the oldest metronome—pounded in the middle of it, unfakable and stupid. He listened. He

counted because counting was what his life had settled into. He breathed deliberately because breath makes fog and fog makes glass visible and glass, when seen, betrays the pane. Each exhale left a crescent in the night and he loved those crescents more than he had loved anything that week.

He laughed, and the laugh came out a sound he recognized entirely as his own.

Someone shouted for him to move. Tires squealed. The mesh of light pulsed like a thought about to break into speech.

He sank to his knees, not in surrender but because his joints had been working too long under the humiliation of being told nothing mattered. The asphalt pressed cold through denim. He put his palms flat on painted lines and felt the paint as a separate substance—slicker, a film, more certain about its color than the road beneath. He bowed his head, mouth open, drawing the city into him like a swimmer at the lip of a wave. The taste grew metallic, sharpened by adrenaline, by memory of shock, by the knowledge that he had forced the system to show itself and it would not forgive him for that.

He whispered because whispers carry farther than shouts in rooms built for listening.

“I’m winning.”

The night held the words and did not swallow them. For one breath, two, three, he watched them fog and fade in front of him, proof he had made a mark in air the world hadn't had time to clean.

When he lifted his head, the lamps had softened back toward honey, the text remembered a language, the truck was only a truck again panting diesel onto the road. People stood where people stand when something almost happens and doesn't. The reflections were late but learning. The seam under his knees smoothed its wrinkle and lay flat like a scar under a shirt.

His ribs still ached. His tongue still tasted copper. His palms smelled like road paint. He stood. He felt light-headed, not from blood loss but from the absence of a death he had earned and been denied.

The driver, finally granted his voice, leaned out the window. "You crazy?" he shouted, but now his anger sounded like relief holding a knife sideways.

David smiled up at him with a smile that did not ask forgiveness. He stepped back toward the curb, toward the corner, toward the life that had been rendered for him and that he had chosen to bruise. His breath left him in one last bright shape and was gone.

He knew what tomorrow required. More. Outrageous again. Until the world bled.

Chapter Seven — The Glitch Cascade

David had stopped thinking like a man and started thinking like a fault.

It had been gradual, though when he looked back at his notes the transition felt abrupt, like a line of code flipping from one state to another: FALSE to TRUE, 0 to 1, living to glitching. He had always believed that he was experimenting on the system, probing it, teasing it toward contradiction. Now he realized that it was teasing him back. Each failed attempt at self-destruction had not been the end of a line of thought but the sharpening of one. Knives, rooftops, fire, trucks—all those rehearsals had become data points, experiments in an impossible laboratory. He had catalogued their outcomes with the meticulousness of a scientist and the desperation of a man writing his last will.

The notebook lay open on the kitchen table, pages swollen from the pressure of his hand, blotched with fingerprints of solvent and sweat. He had written the entries in columns, neat at first and then progressively more frantic, ink bleeding where his wrist had trembled:

- Knife = roll-back.

- Fall = rewind.
- Truck = asset smear.
- Fire = scent residue glitch.
- External trauma = systemic stress.

And then, at the bottom, underlined until the pen tore the paper, the words that stared at him like a commandment carved into stone:

TEST WORLD-LEVEL DESTRUCTION.

The letters looked larger than they were. The grooves in the paper caught the lamplight and shone as if etched with acid. He traced them with his fingertip, feeling the torn fibers, and thought of fault lines under tectonic pressure. He was not a man anymore but a crack waiting to propagate, a stress fracture threading invisibly through steel. All he had to do was apply enough force at the right point, and the whole structure would shatter.

He filled the margins with diagrams. They were not diagrams of pods or tubes anymore, not sketches of condensation trails or branching veins. These were cruder, more terrestrial, more obscene. Boxes labeled **FERTILIZER, SOLVENT, SCREWS**. Wires coiling like veins drawn by a child. A cartoon clock-face labeled **TIMER**. He shaded the clock's hands until they were black spikes. Beneath them he scribbled notes like a deranged liturgy:

*Chemical layer engaged. Rendering holds steady.
Test threshold soon.*

The pen stuttered as if even the ink were trembling.

The smell of solvent was in his nose before he had even touched a canister. It came to him in the car, before the store, before the shelves. A sharp chemical tang, sterile and sweet, sliding down his throat like memory. He coughed once, gagged faintly, then laughed. It was as if the system had preloaded the sensory file, buffering the odor into his sinuses before the object even entered his hands. That thought thrilled him. It meant he was ahead of the rendering, outpacing the code.

In the aisle of the hardware store, he gripped the canister like it was scripture. The label was a block of dense technical language, hazard codes printed in tiny glyphs. He stared until the letters shimmered and doubled, one set overlaying another. *Mirroring*, he thought. Even the labels were glitching. He pressed his thumb against the curve of the metal, left a fog-smear of condensation from his sweat, and felt that he had already detonated something.

The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, synchronized with the pulse in his temple. Each fixture seemed to stutter half a beat late, as though the heartbeat of the store itself were desynchronized. He walked down the aisle slowly, savoring the sensation that each step was

both his and not his, duplicated by some unseen twin just out of phase.

At the checkout counter, the cashier scanned his items. Fertilizer bag heavy as a child's corpse, solvent clinking glassily, screws rattling like teeth in a jaw. Each scan beeped with mechanical precision. The sound was perfect, identical in pitch, spacing, duration. A metronome with no deviation. David's pen twitched in his pocket as if it wanted to record the intervals.

"Find everything okay?" the cashier asked.

He froze. Her lips moved a fraction behind the sound. Condensation glistened at the corner of her mouth, a bubble of spit forming, breaking, reforming in rhythm with the beeps.

"Yes," David said. His grin cracked wide, fever-bright.

"Find everything okay?" she repeated. Same pitch, same inflection, same bubble forming again.

The sound was not human—it was playback, a cached loop. He trembled with exhilaration. "Perfect," he whispered.

"Perfect," she echoed, her mouth not quite matching the word.

He walked out of the store with the bag clutched in his fist. The solvent smell was already rising, searing his

throat, his nose. He could taste copper at the back of his tongue, the same metallic tang as in the pod, as in every failure. He laughed aloud in the parking lot, a short barking laugh that echoed off windshields. He could feel the world cracking already.

Back home, he laid the components on the kitchen table as if they were relics, arranging them with trembling care. Fertilizer poured into small measured heaps, its dust clinging to his skin like the residue of centuries. Wires stripped bare, their copper veins exposed and gleaming. Screws rolled in little clusters, teeth waiting for a mouth. The solvent's cap hissed when he twisted it off, the sound like a breath drawn in anticipation.

The smell was overwhelming. It burned the soft tissue of his throat and nasal passages, left his eyes watering. He inhaled deeply anyway, forcing it into his lungs, daring the system to blink. He scrawled in the notebook even as his vision blurred:

*Chemical layer engaged. Rendering steady.
Threshold test imminent.*

His hands shook, not from fear but from exhilaration. Each twist of a wire, each crimp of metal teeth, was a ritual gesture, a sacrament performed against a false god. Sweat pooled in his palms, dripped onto the table, leaving dark coins on the paper beneath. He smeared them absently, turned stains into diagrams, arcs, countdowns.

When he set the timer in the center of the table, the little plastic face looked holy to him. Its numbers clicked forward with mechanical indifference, but he heard in them a heartbeat—the world’s heartbeat, the system’s pulse, ticking toward a test it could not roll back. He stared until the digits blurred, doubled, mirrored themselves across his vision.

His lips parted. He did not know whether he was praying or gloating.

That was when the knock came.

Hard. Mechanical.

It rattled the door in its frame with a force too precise to be casual, as though the sound itself had been compiled, a waveform dropped into the environment with no margin of error.

“Mr. Adams,” a voice barked through the wood. “Open the door.”

The name snagged in his skull. *Adams*.

It rang like an error message, a variable filled in with placeholder text. His name wasn’t Adams. Or was it? The syllables shimmered in his mind, pre-rendered, cached, a script line pulled from the wrong branch. He almost laughed. He almost screamed. Instead, trembling, he opened the door.

Two officers stood in the hall.

At first glance they were ordinary: pressed uniforms, badges gleaming. But the longer David stared the more wrongness bled through. Their jackets were identical not just in cut but in seam alignment—the threads on their shoulders mirrored perfectly, stitch for stitch. Their faces were wronger still. One man’s freckles mapped exactly onto the other’s, but inverted—left cheek to right, right to left. Their pores caught the hallway light with uncanny symmetry, as if their skin were tiled textures.

“Sir, we’ve had reports—” the first one began.

But his mouth lagged a half-beat behind the words, lips jerking like frames dropped in a bad video call. The second officer nodded at exactly the same rhythm, half a second out of sync.

David barked a laugh that cut his throat raw. “Of course you have.”

They stepped forward in unison. The threshold shimmered as they crossed, the air flexing like heat over asphalt. David staggered back, eyes wide. The living room peeled like old wallpaper. One moment: flowered print, familiar and bland. The next: flat gray polygons, matte and textureless, waiting for rendering instructions. The chairs in the corner flickered—two, then three, then four—before snapping back to two again. The smell of solvent thickened, a sour ghost in the air.

The officers blurred at the edges, their outlines smearing like watercolors in the rain. Their boots struck the floorboards with perfect weight but left no impression, no scuff, no creak. David slammed the door behind them and bolted past, his heart hammering, backpack heavy on his shoulders. The timer clinked inside like a heartbeat out of sync.

He should have heard sirens. He should have heard radios crackling. But the streets outside were silent, a silence too heavy, oppressive, vacuum-sealed.

Cars braked in perfect unison at the intersection. Their red brake lights glowed with identical intensity, no variance, no flicker. The drivers' heads turned toward him as one, necks creaking through preset angles, eyes glinting blank and reflective.

Pedestrians froze mid-stride, limbs dangling with marionette slack. A woman in a yellow coat had one foot hovering above the curb, never falling. A man clutching a grocery bag held it open-mouthed, apples suspended between gravity and code.

Then, as if updated in batches, they all turned their heads toward David. The motion was seamless, terrifyingly synchronized.

Their faces were masks. Too glossy. Too clean. Their eyes glimmered like glass spheres, their mouths twitching

through default expressions—smile, neutral, frown—cycling at unnatural speeds.

David staggered back, then ran, the backpack rattling like a box of bones. His breath came hot and ragged. The copper taste was thick at the back of his throat, metallic saliva coating his tongue.

Buildings warped as he passed. Windows blinked from transparent to opaque, then back again, as if the system were swapping assets in real time. Street signs floated inches above their posts, shadows stretched loose from their objects and slid across the pavement like oil spills.

The world was not resisting him—it was buckling under him. His intent was enough to fracture it.

David ran until his legs burned, until the air itself felt wrong—thin in one breath, too thick in the next, textures shifting against his lungs. His heart beat out of rhythm with his footsteps, stuttering like corrupted audio.

The city bent and groaned, not with the organic sound of stone or steel but with the grinding glitch of files colliding, corrupted data echoing in his ears.

And then, just as his strength began to fail, just as the copper in his mouth turned to nausea, the system played its last card.

Sarah.

And with her, Emma and Jake.

They waited for him at the far end of the street, haloed in the plaza's too-even light.

Sarah. Emma clutching her fox. Jake gripping her hand.

David's sprint faltered into a stumble. The air thickened around him. His backpack bounced against his spine like a living weight, timer clinking inside in arrhythmic mockery of his pulse.

"David," Sarah said.

Her voice wavered, but her face—her face was *wrong*.

The skin too smooth, a learned average—radiance field over-regularized—pores melted into a waxy prior that shifted with his viewpoint. Her hair resolved as semi-transparent filaments, gravity guessed wrong; strands snapped between priors with tiny temporal pops, a halo of floaters reappearing whenever he moved. Her eyes—oh God, her eyes—held view-dependent highlights that slid the wrong way; the rims breathed with depth jitter, pupils “breathing” with exposure, as if each blink re-sampled the field and redrew the iris.

And her expressions—those familiar, loved expressions—cycled too fast. Fear. Anger. Pleading. Then back again. Click-click-click, like someone scrolling through options in a character-creation menu.

“Please,” she said, voice fracturing across the register, every syllable carrying the faint hiss of hasty audio generation. “Put it down. Come back to us.”

The backpack was heavy in his hands. Fertilizer shifting, screws rattling, solvent sloshing. A weight both real and not. He yanked the timer out, wires dangling, numbers twitching. The digits stuttered like a faltering heartbeat.

“Daddy,” Emma and Jake said together. Their voices overlapped *perfectly*, no delay, no natural gap. “We love you, Daddy.”

The sound froze him harder than any gun to his head. Two voices, one file. One waveform duplicated across two mouths.

“Not real,” David hissed. His own voice cracked, throat raw with copper taste.

The plaza groaned. Benches in the background multiplied, telescoping into impossible towers that pierced the low clouds. The fountain seized mid-arc, frozen water jagged like broken glass, then shuddered into pixel sludge—waves snapping apart in midair. The smell of ozone hit him, sharp and acrid, like the tang after a lightning strike.

Sarah stepped forward. Her arm reached, jerked back, reached again. Each gesture stuttered. Arms open. Arms folded. Arms raised. A slideshow of potential gestures,

none sustained long enough to be real. Her shadow twitched in and out of alignment, splitting into doubles, then remerging.

“You’re not her!” David screamed.

The ground buckled under him. Tiles cracked and stretched, tessellating outward in glitch patterns before dissolving into weird recursive patterns. His heart thundered in his chest, but even that rhythm was no longer his own—the stutter of the world matched his pulse. Boom. Stagger. Boom. Stagger. A sync of terror.

The sky fractured, blue rending into black. Stars winked through like dropped pixels, not serene but sharp, like burning needles piercing the screen of reality. Their light bled into his eyes, cold and merciless.

Emma’s stuffed fox split into two, then three, each one phasing through the other before dissolving into static. Jake’s face twitched; his eyes slid sideways across his cheeks, then snapped back with a crackling pop.

Sarah’s mouth opened too wide. Rows of teeth, too many, shimmered like wet keys of a broken piano. Then her jaw corrected itself, too smoothly, too late.

Silence screamed through the plaza, vast and absolute, a silence that pulsed against his eardrums like bass pressure.

David fell to his knees. The timer slipped from his grip. His fingers clawed at the bomb, clutching it like scripture, like a relic. His laughter came sharp and hysterical, splintering into sobs.

“Break,” he whispered, forehead pressed against the rattling pack. “Break.”

Sarah and the children froze mid-gesture, their bodies stilled into mannequins of light. Then, one by one, they dissolved. Not into dust, not into mist, but into recursive alien patterns, folding in on themselves.

The fountain imploded into a lattice grid of electric green, lines humming faintly like neurons firing. The plaza surface shattered beneath him, slabs falling away to reveal scaffolds of light pulsing in rhythms that mirrored his heart.

And then everything fractured at once.

The buildings folded inward, peeling away their skins to reveal skeletal supports glowing faintly with data-light. The sky cracked like glass under a hammer, shattering outward into jagged shards of blackness. Stars flickered between the fissures, cold and needle-sharp, a cosmos stuttering through the broken veneer of simulation.

The world convulsed.

David screamed—or maybe laughed—and the sound came back to him doubled, mirrored, broken into fragments.

His own voice bounced through him as though the environment were not echoing but replaying him from a file.

Then the plaza, the city, the sky—all of it—collapsed into a rushing absence.

Darkness.

Not the darkness of sleep, nor the temporary blindness of closed eyes. This was annihilation: the subtraction of texture, of sound, of weight. A void so total that even his heartbeat seemed to falter, suspended, waiting for permission to resume.

Then—light.

Not sunrise, not the clinical gleam of hospital fluorescents. This was light with intention: a pale wash that carried no warmth, only exposure. David gasped, body jerking as if resuscitated.

He was in bed. His bed. Sheets tangled around his legs, damp with sweat. The digital clock glowed 6:32, numbers too green, too steady. Rain tapped the gutters outside with exaggerated regularity, each drop falling in mechanical rhythm. Beside him, Sarah stirred, a silhouette of warmth, hair falling across her cheek. From the hallway came the muted thud of children's feet, familiar as breath. In the kitchen, the kettle clicked on with comforting precision.

The same morning. The same loop.

But this time—this time—something else breathed with him in the room.

On the nightstand, where only his phone should have been, a translucent pane hovered. It glowed faintly, as though its edges were wet with condensation. Green text scrolled upward, each character resolving too sharply, as if etched with needles into glass:

[VR_ENVIRONMENT 3.7.42]
[CRITICAL FAILURE DETECTED]
[SYSTEM RESET INITIATED]
[DEBUG MODE ENABLED]

A cursor blinked at the bottom.

>_

David's breath caught in his throat. The air tasted metallic, copper curling across his tongue. His reflection hovered faintly in the pane's surface—face pale, eyes too wide, lips trembling—as if projected back at him from a mirror that wasn't there.

His throat was dry, metallic, every swallow rasping like sand dragged across steel. Yet he forced words out anyway, hoarse and reverent:

“Command list.”

The pane flickered. Lines of text bled upward, phosphorescent green on black, each entry crisp as scripture:

AVAILABLE COMMANDS:

- HELP
- LIST_USERS
- SPAWN_OBJECT
- TOGGLE_PHYSICS
- GODMODE
- CREATOR_MODE
- ENABLERELIVEPROTOCOL

The cursor blinked again. Patient. Waiting.

David stared, chest heaving, a manic gleam flooding his eyes. The pane's light reflected in twin crescents across his pupils, like stars mirrored in still water. His pulse thundered in his ears, not with fear but with a new rhythm—anticipation, hunger.

The room behind him, the rain, Sarah's gentle stirring, the kettle's hiss—all of it receded into background static. What mattered was here, this fragile condensation of light and code balanced on the nightstand.

His lips curled. Not with peace. Not with relief. But with something fiercer.

For the first time, he wasn't afraid.

He smiled—thin, cracked, wild. “It's my turn.”

Chapter Eight – Creator / God

The console waited, a patient god at his bedside, the screen's pale rectangle breathing faintly with its own imperceptible refresh—no hum, no heat, only the soft static-taste of ionized dust in the air, the sense of something powered and indifferent within arm's reach. He could smell the night—stale coffee in the mug, detergent lingering in cloth, a thread of ozone that might have been his imagination—and beneath it all the house's quieter odors: warm plaster, slept-in sheets, the ghost of toast trapped in the toaster's crumb-pan. The cursor blinked like a pulse.

He had the sensation of standing in a church at closing, pew-polish and stone-cool air, a light so reserved it seemed to apologize for itself. His hands trembled as he typed. He licked dry lips; the taste of copper rose the way it always did at the lip of a precipice.

CREATOR MODE

The pane did not so much change as *accept*. A minor recalibration of whites. The feeling of a held breath being permitted. Brackets arrived with quiet authority:

[CREATOR MODE ENABLED]
[USER: DVD765_GEN32]
[SCOPE: LOCAL / DOMESTIC]

[SANDBOX OK]

[NOTE: ADMIN PROMPTS REQUIRE GODMODE]

A tiny thread of delight split through the dread. He felt it in his teeth like the white grit of sugar.

He started small.

“Spawn object: chair,” he whispered, not trusting voice enough to raise it, the syllables sliding across his tongue with a timid reverence. The console acknowledged:

[SPAWN: CHAIR_WOODEN_01]

[MATERIAL: SOFTWOOD / PINE]

[TEXTURE: GRAINED / UNFINISHED]

[FRICTION: 0.62 μ]

[MASS: 5.1 KG]

[PLACEMENT: XY 1.2, 0.8 / Z 0.0]

[COLLISION: RESOLVE]

The floor at his feet rippled like a skin. Tile seams sighed. Dust lifted, turned in the air, settled again. The chair extruded from a shimmer, legs resolving fractionally inside the tile before the geometry corrected with a clean, quiet snap, as if the world had been reminded of the rulebook it wrote.

He approached it as if approaching a deer. The smell hit first: sawdust, a faint resin, a sweetness that wasn’t edible but lived in the back of the nose. He laid his fingertips along the grain. It was warmer than he expected. The

fibers under his skin told him stories—growth rings, drought years, a storm in one corner of a former forest. He shivered, because the lie was perfect, and because perfection this near to his hands felt like a dare.

He laughed—wild, involuntary—and the sound embarrassed him in the small kitchen. Laughter always drew the house's attention: the baseboard heater ticked in reply; the halogen over the stove hummed a fraction louder; the refrigerator's gasket made a mouth-shape and sealed. He looked up into the blank square of the console and felt a hunger he had not expected. If a chair was possible, then everything was possible, and if everything was possible then there were things he had waited a lifetime to say to the world and to himself.

“Spawn object: car.”

[SPAWN: SEDAN_URBAN_04]

[COLOR: GRAY_32]

[TRIM: CLOTH]

[MASS: 1,348 KG]

[PLACEMENT: OVERRIDE / FORCE]

[COLLISION: REWRITE / KITCHEN]

The kitchen convulsed like a throat trying to swallow something too large. Cabinet faces bowed, hinges squealed without making a sound, matter softened in a way that had no analogy in honest physics. The table kicked sideways. The refrigerator compressed into a

thinner rectangle in a humiliating accommodation; magnets slid down the door and reattached themselves in new rows, the children's art pivoting to meet a different geometry. The car sat there preposterously with its smell of adhesive and manufacturer-plastic, the faint mineral cold of a dealership at closing time. Its doors were locked and yet he knew if he tried the handle the world would instantly decide whether they had always been unlocked.

He stood to one side, heart drumming a sloppy war rhythm. Somewhere, dust drifted out of a vent he hadn't noticed before and hung in an inclined plane of light. The dust felt older than the kitchen. It felt older than the lie.

Upstairs, floorboards creaked. Emma's voice drifted down, the precise pitch of a child who expected the world to explain itself: "Dad? What was that noise?"

He swallowed. He grinned. He could not help himself.
"Spawn object: cake."

The word tasted ridiculous. The result was not. A chocolate cake manifested on the counter with a sigh, like a person sitting after a day of hard standing. The icing appeared in perfect rosette spirals with a persistently glossy sheen. The smell was obscene: butterfat, caramelized sugar, cocoa's warm shadow, the whisper of vanilla that might as well have been a memory of every childhood birthday layered thinly across the room.

He scooped a fist from the cake's side like a man drowning clawing at riverbank. Sugar grit on tongue, slick fat, soft crumb; his body flinched with pleasure so clean it felt like sadness. Tears surprised him by arriving early. He let them. His mouth was full. The cake tasted like the promise that things were simple. The promise broke in the chewing, as all sugar does. He laughed again, left-handed and boyish, icing smeared along his knuckles like warpaint.

Behind him, Sarah entered. The sound of her was the soft contact of feet with tile, the little friction-squeak of skin on linoleum. He turned.

She took in the sedan cutting the room in half, the magnets' new strict rows, the cake's violent wound, the chair that believed it had been carved by human hands.

"Do you want orange juice?" she asked, calm as a clear sky that had learned not to change.

No surprise. No scream. No question from the world to the world. She moved toward the fridge without comment and the compressed rectangle accommodated her with a tact too polite to be kind. He watched her shape pass through a physics that yielded happily. The whole kitchen bent itself to fit around his wife and her sentence. Something in him went cold.

"Sure," he said.

Glass on counter. The smell of citrus. The sound of liquid as it tried to decide whether to be real. He drank and felt nothing but temperature.

Too afraid to think, too afraid to accept the logical conclusion to all, he let the morning proceed as always, repeating patterns he was too eager to live again.

And the world was bending itself to fit.

He liked the feeling of the command lining up neatly in his throat. He longed to test the limits of his newfound reality. The office was open, plan and already humming with human habit—coffee smell, damp wool coats giving up their rain, someone's too-loud laugh rehearsing itself at ten-minute intervals—he leaned toward the console window the way a child leans toward a keyhole and whispered what he had not dared.

godmode

The pane did not blink. It *deepened*. Something in the light shifted until the edges of things felt bolder, their borders traced with a clarity a little too proud of itself.

[GODMODE ENABLED]

[ADMINSCOPE: LOCAL / PUBLIC / INCIDENT]

[CONFLICTS: NONE]

[LATENCY: LOW]

The air thickened. Heads jerked in the way heads do when a director says action but no one has spoken that word aloud. Movement acquired a little stutter at the edges, the puppet-string sense of a physics layer waiting for instructions. The overhead fluorescents gave off a new smell—the chalky tang of tubes aging a decade in a second.

His manager went past, mug in hand, concentration on her face rehearsed from a thousand Tuesdays. Something petty moved in his fingers before conscience had time to vote.

“Trip,” he said softly, to the space behind her ankle.

A geometry hiccuped beneath her shoe. She stumbled, recovered, coffee walking itself down her blouse in a tidy diagonal that matched the office carpet’s pattern too perfectly. Her mouth shaped an Oh that arrived two frames late on her face. He bit his lip not to laugh. The copper taste arrived anyway, a reminder that even delight came with the bill tucked under it.

Brad was four desks over: Brad of the careful cruelty in code review, the pedant’s slow savor of other people’s mistakes. David looked at the empty pixel-sky above Brad’s chair and felt a thrill like the click of a rifle’s safety disengaging.

“Delete,” he whispered.

Brad froze, a man on the edge of a sneeze deciding against it. Then he was not. Chair pushed back a hair as if someone had just stood. Keyboard left ticking for a heartbeat, his last sentence finishing itself with a zeal entirely out of character, then nothing.

No one noticed. Or rather: everyone noticed in the way a page turned notices a page turner. The air filled the space Brad had occupied with a brisk efficiency. David leaned back, looked at the console's white. He had imagined being god as a vast feeling, a roaring power. It felt instead like a good fit. A shirt that finally knew his shoulders.

"You're mine," he said, and the monitors around him made the polite screensaver shimmer of agreement.

He tried it at home because there is nothing you would not try at home once the door is closed.

Sarah was folding laundry with her particular practice of care—shirts smoothed with the palm, sleeves aligned so accurately he could have used them as a ruler. Emma colored on the floor, frowning, tongue caught in the corner of her mouth. Jake stacked blocks and knocked them over with the solemnity of architecture school.

"Freeze," David said.

They froze. Not a twitch, not a blink, not the small private shifts of weight bodies make when no one is looking. The crayon bit the paper and stayed there, a tooth caught in

edge. A block hovered a hair off another block and did not decide whether to fall.

He circled them, heart hammering so hard he could hear his pulse in his ears like a neighbor's music. He touched Emma's hair. He had known that hair since it was three strands pasted by sleep across a new skull, and the sensation now—silk, warmth retained from scalp—made something behind his sternum pull tight. He pressed his lips to Sarah's neck. Skin. Soap. The hint of her. And nothing behind it. No countersignature from the person. He had wanted omnipotence; he had achieved a touchscreen.

“Resume,” he whispered.

Life flooded back in from the edges. Jake's block dropped. The crayon slid. Sarah sighed that little sigh she sighed when she made a perfect square out of a shirt and was pleased.

“What are you doing?” she said without raising her eyes.

He was crying before he knew it. He sat down where he was and pulled at his own hair because that was a thing a human could do without asking permission from any layer of the world.

Sarah glanced up. She offered a smile the shape of help.

“Are you okay?”

He wanted her to be real enough to ask in a different way. He wanted her to ask *wrongly*, to show evidence of a thought the system had not anticipated. He wiped his face, tasted salt and metal.

“Yeah,” he said.

He wasn’t.

Grief curdled to anger with the efficiency of cream in a hot pan. Anger cooked down to hunger until only a glaze remained.

He began erasing. The corner grocer who never had change when he needed it; the man outside with the cup who rattled it with a rhythm that had once made David’s shoulder flinch. He hated himself as he said it and said it anyway.

“Erase.”

[ENTITY REMOVED]

[DEPENDENCIES REWRITTEN]

[MEMORY: CONSOLIDATE]

People stepped through the space untroubled, as if the air had always been this spare. He felt large and small at once—a god and a vandal with the same hands.

The bar smelled of damp wood and stale sugar. A low murmur filled the room, voices overlapping, glass against glass, the soft mechanical hiss of the taps. Light fractured

through liquor bottles stacked in perfect rows, throwing amber and green reflections across the lacquered counter. Music seeped from unseen speakers, bassline steady as a heartbeat, lyrics lost in distortion.

David sat at the bar, elbow against the sticky varnish, watching.

His eyes found her: a woman with dark lipstick, hair pinned carelessly, her laugh too sharp, too loud for the conversation she pretended to enjoy. She leaned toward the man beside her but the man wasn't really listening, his eyes already scanning the room for something else. David tilted his head, let the word slip out almost lazily.

"You know me."

The effect was immediate. The woman froze, then turned, her eyes widening in recognition that had not been there a heartbeat before. A smile bloomed, too sudden, too rehearsed. "David," she said, her voice warm with familiarity, thick with invented memory. She rose as if summoned and crossed to him, her perfume already preceding her — sweet, chemical, the kind that lingered in upholstery for days.

The bartender slid a whiskey toward him. No request, no hesitation. "The usual," he said, as though the ritual had been carved into stone long ago. David wrapped his hand around the glass. The liquid bit his nose with fire and charred oak. He hated whiskey, had always hated it, but

he drank anyway, and the world bent to make his disgust into pleasure.

The woman pressed close, her hand brushing his sleeve, her lips grazing his ear with words that had never been spoken before but carried the weight of repetition: “I’ve missed you.”

David let the hunger grow. His gaze shifted, further down the bar.

Two women sat at a table, shoulders close, whispering to one another over half-empty glasses. Their laughter was private, conspiratorial, the kind that excluded the men seated with them. Two men in shirtsleeves — loud, gesturing too broadly, the kind of men who filled space for the sake of filling it.

David’s mouth curved. He whispered: “Erase.”

The men vanished. Not with drama, not with noise. One moment there, gesturing, grinning; the next, absence. Glasses slid neatly across the table to fill the void. The women blinked, but only once, and then their conversation continued, perfectly uninterrupted, the laughter threading itself into a new pattern that implied nothing had changed. The world smoothed over the missing details like plaster filling a crack.

“Look at me,” David said.

The two women stopped speaking at once. They turned toward him, smiles spreading, almost mirrored, as if a single emotion had been copied into two faces. They rose without hesitation. One tucked a strand of hair behind her ear with slow precision; the other let her hand trail across the rim of her glass before leaving it behind. Their movements were elegant, deliberate, rehearsed. They crossed the room as if gravity itself were dragging them into his orbit.

“David,” one said softly.

“David,” the other echoed, lower, warmer.

Around them the bar thinned. Conversations frayed and dropped into silence. A man mid-story faltered, mouth open on a word he could no longer remember. A dart struck the wall and hung there with no hand to claim it. The couple near the jukebox dissolved into shadow at the edges of vision. The world rearranged itself with ruthless efficiency, shedding what did not serve him.

And so he had three women now. One already pressed against him, lips at his ear, perfume heavy as glue. Two more approaching, eyes locked on him, their smiles identical in intent though their faces tried to stay distinct. He felt their gravity, felt the air tighten around them as if the room had been waiting for this moment all along.

He whispered: “Come with me.”

And the world obeyed.

The bar collapsed neatly into night, the transition imperceptible, like waking from one dream into another without the in-between. He was no longer at the counter but in a stranger's apartment, a space conjured and rearranged around him. Wallpaper patterned with flowers that had never grown in any soil. Furniture that smelled faintly of varnish and dust, though it had been born a second ago.

The women surrounded him. Coats fell silently to the floor, shoes kicked aside in choreographed abandon. Their laughter was tinny, almost mechanical, looping in echoes that overlapped like tracks played out of sync. One slid into his lap, arms wrapping around his neck. Another leaned against the doorframe, watching, eyes heavy-lidded, lips parted. The third pressed close against his chest, hands spreading across him as if mapping something already known.

They spoke his name in turns, then together, a chorus, each syllable carrying too much weight. Their mouths were warm, their bodies pliant, their hands insistent — but underneath it all there was only precision, only obedience. No spark of resistance, no hesitation, no wrongness to make it real.

David kissed them anyway, touched them, let himself sink into the manufactured heat. The taste of lipstick, the

press of skin, the hollow rhythm of desire echoed back at him. It was a performance, flawless and empty, a script written for him alone.

And still — because he could — he surrendered to it.

He woke late with a head like salt and pennies. The house smelled of sweet and sex and the stale chemical of a club at noon. Dust hung in the air like plankton, slowly settling.

David grinned, a loose, crooked thing, the grin of a man too drunk on possibility to bother with shame. His mouth was dry, lips sticky with the residue of kisses that had never belonged to anyone real. He licked them anyway, savoring the phantom taste as though it were proof. The room tilted around him — not with hangover, not with fatigue, but with the delicious sense that every surface, every object, every body within reach was his to conjure, to bend, to erase.

He pressed his palms against the couch, feeling velvet that had never been woven by human hands, and laughed under his breath. The laugh felt dangerous. It filled him with a heat sharper than liquor, heavier than lust. A hunger that wanted not satisfaction but escalation.

He wanted more. Not just women and drink, not just rooms bloated with counterfeit luxury. He wanted the city to contort itself into spectacle, for streets to braid and knot under his command, for monuments to rise

overnight, for the skyline to burn in colors no sun had ever made. He wanted excess so absolute it would eclipse the memory of restraint.

His grin widened, fevered, the kind of smile that belonged to saints or madmen. The thought beat against his skull like a drum: *the world is mine, and it will drown me in itself if I ask it to.*

Time dissolved. Days bled into nights.

David lived now in a penthouse that had never existed. He had ordered it into being: “Spawn skyscraper. Penthouse suite.”

And the world obeyed. The city rearranged under him like a giant arriving late to a small theater and finding his seat. Streets bent, lights repeated in patterns that were almost—but just not—random. From the glass that went from floor to ceiling and beyond, he watched neighborhoods click into new adjacency: a deli appearing beside a courthouse as if they had always been roommates, a park rotating ninety degrees without disturbing the children’s bright punctuation marks within it. The rearrangement had its own music—a sub-bass shift like tides gnawing a cliff-face.

Inside: couches that despised poor posture; rugs that offered their pedigrees if you asked; glass tables whose edges wanted to be noticed. Women he did not know and then knew and then could not tell apart lay long-limbed

and laughing with the effortlessness of scripted bloopers. Laughter recorded in a studio and piped in always sounds almost right; it has to be mixed in a hair too late, or else it becomes the world.

Powder on mirror. The sting in the nose that promises clarity and delivers repetition. Bottles on the floor. A cash mountain—bank-ink, denim, the rubber-smell of bands—all too clean at the edges, towers without the sag of unstacked bills. He let himself roll in the paper avalanche like a dog in leaves because the boy in him needed this from the man.

“More,” he told the pane. “More.”

[SPAWN: COMPANIONS / VARIETY_SET_07]

[SPAWN: CASH / 1.2e6]

[SPAWN: INTOX/KITSCH_COCA_03/DOSE: 2]

[NOTE: USER TOLERANCE: ADAPT]

More came.

Indulgence, even when infinite, loses its scent after a while.

He noticed first in the mouths around him. The laughter’s second beat came numbly late. The lip of a bottle touched a hand that was momentarily the wrong hand, the drink haloing air for a frame before physics remembered it was on call. A woman’s face flickered and was another’s, then hers again, as if a cache had been asked for two textures

simultaneously and tried to oblige without complaint. Three identical women slept beside him one morning with their hair in synchronized s-curves. He blinked, felt his heart hop with stupid fear, and they merged into one as if embarrassed by their lack of courtesy.

Smoke refused to become air. It hung like an argument in a family that believed it did not fight. He waved his hand through it and admired the turbulence and found himself unsatisfied by his own admiration.

He ate cake. He tasted nothing but the memory of sugar, and even that memory had someone else's fingerprints on it.

The TV came on by itself.

Not exactly by itself—the world had heard his boredom and fetched a toy. The screen strobed a little, refresh rate arguing with the room's pulse. News. He had always distrusted news, its polite cruelty, its pretending-to-be-sad.

A school shooting. He swallowed and the whiskey came back up a little at the back of his throat, vanilla and fire. The anchor's mouth twitched a frame out of phase with her words. Police lights behind her alternated red and blue with a precision more honest than anything spoken. The crawl at the bottom performed its solemn scroll.

Names arrived. They did not land all at once. They emerged like bodies from water.

Emma Adams.

Jake Adams.

The sound the world made became a tone with dust in it. He stood without standing. His hands were not his hands. Air was not air. The room went quiet except for the blood in his ears, and even that sound was more familiar than this.

“No,” his mouth said, but his jaw did not decide that sentence. The TV turned its face and fetched a new scene: Sarah with a microphone under her mouth—Sarah and not Sarah, the Sarah the system had learned and painted and loved only for him—saying words he could not bear to have her mouth form. He went to the screen and touched her as if touching would force pixels to be skin. She did not notice.

He screamed and the scream had a phase problem. He screamed again until his throat tasted like copper filings and his voice tore. When the scream had finished using him, he did not know how to stand anymore and he let the floor catch him.

He turned his face to the console because there was nowhere else to turn it.

LIST_USERS

[1 USER FOUND]

- DVD765_GEN32

A clean line: the kind of line humans invent when they want to deny the mess. It rang in him. He had wanted to be alone to be unobserved. The price was too accurate to be refused: alone, then. Alone in the good shirt he had made for himself.

He laughed in a way he would later be ashamed to remember. It sounded like a man trying to cough and laugh at once. Cake and bile in his throat made a paste. White dust from the mirrored table lifted in a sigh and settled on the black glass like an accusation. He pressed his forehead to the table; the surface kept his heat without returning any.

He already knew what had to come next. The knowledge was not noble, and it was not brave. It was the only available truth.

His fingers moved because they were the only part of him that had ever belonged to him entirely.

ENABLERELIVEPROTOCOL

[PRIVILEGE: GODMODE REQUIRED]

[CONFIRMED: USER DVD765_GEN32]

[RELIVE PROTOCOL: ARMED]

[WARNINGS: MEMORY/PHYSIOLOGY/DISSENT]

[CONTINUE? Y/N]

Somewhere, music in the other room stopped itself as if standing for a hymn. Somewhere, a woman who had been trained to be the one he wanted exactly disappeared smoothly from a couch, leaving the faint crease of her in the upholstery like a fossil.

He typed Y with the care you take with a delicate instrument. He felt the key's travel. He loved the way it bottomed out: a small tactile proof of a boundary.

The penthouse dimmed. Not as in light reduction. As in fewer—the city's windows outdoors unlit themselves from edge to center; distant traffic grew quiet as if the street had always been a river at night. The air performed a subtraction: perfume, smoke, money-ink, the harsh happy of spilled gin, all made absent with the courtesy of a bellhop.

Sarah's laughter like water. Emma's humming, the specific song of eight-year-olds making cities in their heads. Jake's small typhoon of syllables. The house remembered every sound he had ever said he loved and played them, perfectly wrong, for a beat, and then withdrew them with the carefulness of a librarian returning a book to a special collection.

[RELIVE PROTOCOL INITIATED]

[SYSTEM RECONFIGURING...]

[NOTE: ACCESS: DEEP]

[NOTE: PAIN: LIKELY]

[NOTE: MEMORY INTEGRITY: VARIABLE]

He could feel the outer world in his molars—the bass throb he had learned to deny translating now into a room that had no bass and did not need any. The pane's cursor stopped blinking like a heart consenting to anesthesia. The sense of someone holding his head gently under the water and saying *it will be all right; endure this and then we will talk.*

He said, to no one and to the console and to God and to his own unlovely soul: “I knew it. I always knew.”

The taste of copper bloomed rich and certain.

And the picture that rose behind his eyes was the curve of glass, the breath-fog crescent he had traced from the other side, cables in the air like veins in a backlit wrist. The truth was not waiting for him. It had always had him. He had only now found the nerve to look it in the eyes.

Chapter Nine — Flesh and Circuits

The first jolt stole the world the way a trap steals the leg: without argument, without any place to put the pain but inside the body that suddenly remembers it exists. His back arched against the pod's clear curve, vertebrae counting themselves like beads on a wire. His mouth opened on a scream that could not travel in liquid; only bubbles fled, frantic and bright, scattering along the lid like coins thrown against a window. His tongue went copper. His teeth sang in their sockets like struck porcelain. He saw light with his bones.

Then it let him go. Not mercy—interval. He collapsed into his suspension like a marionette cut from a single string. Everything in him trembled, a fine invisible quake. The quake had a taste: penny, iron, battery terminal, winter wind. A relay clicked somewhere beyond the coffin. Another. A little litany of approvals.

The second jolt came with intention. A metronome, not a storm. It found the left leg first—mean little proof that the machine knew history. The thigh shuddered, the knee snapped upward, the calf knotted into a protesting fist. Pause. Repeat. Repeat until the flesh learned the lesson in the same way a field learns the plow: not persuasion, pattern.

He heard himself try to breathe. Reflex collided with physics. The diaphragm spasmed; the fluid accepted no air. His chest thrummed against the ribcage's old lattice and remembered the shape of effort. In the soundless shouting of his organs, he thought: **I am being rebuilt against my will**, and because he still carried the idea of responsibility like a tarnished coin in a pocket, he also thought: **I should watch.**

He opened his eyes into the chalet.

Fire whispered in the stone throat of the hearth. The logs smelled of resin and old snow. The windowpanes hoarded a winter light so clean it made his teeth ache. He could feel woodgrain against his fingertips, cedar sap scored into a table scar that had never existed. His chair took him like an old habit. The cursor blinked on the console as if it had been waiting centuries for his eyes to return.

The copper lived in his mouth still. He swallowed it; it returned, the way some thoughts return even when you throw them into sleep. He lifted his hand and marveled at its steadiness. Heat and silence soldered together around him, a sanctuary laid over the rack.

“Alive,” he said, and the word sounded too soft to belong to him. A hiccup flared through his diaphragm—one mechanical echo from the other world. He watched the fire split into a filamented grid for a heartbeat, then

become fire again. The skin across his chest crawled with phantom fingers.

He set his palm on the console and felt the wood pretend to be wood. The cursor kept blinking: an eyelid over glass.

“Report,” he said, because once, years ago or years ahead, he had been the kind of man who spoke to machines as though respect could coax them into kindness.

Nothing. The fire spoke in its tidy tongue. The Alps held their breath. The copper turned his saliva into a small betrayal.

He stared at the blank prompt and felt a second heartbeat a long way off, not in any organ but in the program that held him, a pulse he could not name and could not stop. He blinked and the chalet tilted, not a motion but a re-drawing. When it steadied, his mouth was full of saline.

The tube across his sternum had learned a new trick. It squeezed. Released. Squeezed again in peristaltic strokes, pushing fluid through him like a snake forcing an egg down a throat meant for smaller meals. He felt his veins complain and then obey. Tiny detonations went off in capillaries half fossilized, reopening flow with their miserly fireworks. The stimulator at his thigh palpated rhythm into muscle with the brusque affection of a coach who believes humiliation is a vitamin.

His wrists, long thin things in their membrane gloves, twitched and went still; twitched and went still. The gloves had texture. Once he had ignored it. Now the ridges etched themselves into his sensory cortex as though the entire world had narrowed to a handful of raised rubber. Signals climbed his arms like ants. Shoulder, neck, jaw—his face pulled into foreign shapes and let go.

The stomach woke rudely. Hunger arrived not as want but as ache sharp enough to reach thought. The feed line responded with sweetness and warmth. He felt the valve open. Felt chemistry pour. A ghost-memory of broth and cinnamon and the cheap joy of vending-machine cocoa complicated the sweetness. Then nausea braided through it and he understood that the system did not care for his preferences. Its mercy was measured in molarity.

He wanted to cough. The structure in his throat forbade it. The desire to cough became an object. He turned it over inside himself and the wanting abraded everything it touched.

Watch, he told himself. *If you can't choose, at least witness.* Duty made its old small throne.

The fire had split into a cardiogram. When he looked full at it the logs were logs again, perfect with bark, resin beads bright as stars. When he looked sideways, the flame wrote pulse across the stone, a green trace

stuttering with each distant spasm. The floor felt tilted. He set his feet—clean socks, ivory wool, manufactured nostalgia—and they found purchase on cedar that smelled suddenly of disinfectant. The scent was gone in the next breath. He laughed and the laugh broke in the middle, came out two notes: one human, one something else.

He paced to the window. The Alps did their holy trick. Distance made cathedral. Peaks proposed theology without needing consent. He fogged the glass with breath and tracked a line through it with his index finger. The line was a tube for a second, ribbed, then a smear of water. He told himself names for things—*pane, muntin, drift, ridge*—to hold them in place.

Back at the desk he found the cursor again. It had the patience of a glacier. He typed because there was comfort in telling a system what to do even when it would do or not do without regard.

> RELIVE_STATUS

The answer came placidly, as if the chalet spoke only in weather reports.

[PROTOCOL: ACTIVE]

[STAGE: MUSCULOSKELETAL PRIMING]

[ANALGESIA: PARTIAL]

[EXPECTED DURATION REMAINING: VARIABLE]

He touched the word **partial** with his eyes, the way one touches a bruise with a fingertip to prove the anatomy of pain. The skin at his lower back prickled with little fires, each the size of a fingerprint, arranged with a technician's care. He imagined someone, something, working over him like a field: checks and adjustments, tiny calibrations of flesh.

"Acknowledged," he said, and felt absurd. The room obliged him: it swallowed his voice in velvet.

He wrote on the notepad the chalet allowed him to spawn—cheap college-ruled paper, blue lines waiting like rails. The pencil bit with the exact drag he expected, so perfect it became suspect.

Pain is a kind of map.

He wrote it again.

Pain is a kind of map.

He kept the sheet. Underlined nothing.

When the bone pain came it knocked out all the elegant language. It was not blister or burn. It was not pinch or sting. It was the long slow complaint of girders being asked to hold weight after a flood. It lived deep in the marrow where redundancy goes to sleep. Heat pooled there, and then a cold that felt like snow being packed into a wound. The ache telescoped his memory. He was a boy again on the winter field, shins smarting from a ball

he had misjudged. He was a man again at a clinic with a nurse who did not look up when she pried, a tongue depressor that wouldn't depress any language worth keeping.

The stimulator beat time against muscle. Chemistry slid with unappealing grace through veins, bearing minerals and orders. He felt the micro-fractured architecture of him receive orders: rebuild, fill, knit. The instruction carried no bedside manner. Osteocytes woke with a complaint so old he wanted to apologize to them for getting them involved.

Itch arrived under the skin like a million bad ideas. Histamine with ambition. He could not scratch. The not-scratching magnified the itch into a territory so large it had weather. He made a inventory because counting was the only thing that seemed to recognize edges: left shin, right shin, both forearms, the lower back where the technician's imaginary fingers had been, the scalp at the crown as if some old god had marked him with an invisible thumb.

He told himself—whisper, because anything louder would be an argument he'd lose—**this is the work of returning.** The machine was not merciful but it was thorough. He had hated sloppiness in people. He discovered he hated thoroughness in the inhuman. Perhaps he simply hated being handled.

He watched.

The fire's heat had the temperature of a blanket pulled from an old radiator. Air moved in the chalet with the polite currents of something ventilated by a hidden fan. When he breathed, his breath carried a hint of chlorine. When he breathed again, it was only smoke and pine. He took a sip from the mug the scene allowed: brown ceramic, lip chipped, coffee char smiling at the base. The coffee tasted like memory, not coffee. A reliable forgery.

The cursor waited.

> MUSCLE_MAP SHOW

A diagram—not wireframe, not yet, but a topographic relief laid over his ghost in the air—glitched into being. Color bled through the silhouette of a body: blues at the periphery where the stim had not yet reached, oranges blossoming in the thighs, red flags in the diaphragm where the program's certainty looked like zeal. He stared at his absence mapped as presence. He was being told what he was in the same tone a route planner tells you that if you don't turn in twenty meters you will be lost.

He typed:

> ANALGESIA++

A hum ran through the chalet, so low he felt it in his teeth.

[ACCESS DENIED]

[RATION: FIXED]

He nodded, a small bow to an altar that offered no communion.

He set the mug down and watched, over the rim, as the knot of the rug at his feet pixelated to a coarse weave and then back to a fine one, the way the world passes through focus when tears are a lens you cannot dislodge.

“Okay,” he told nobody. “Okay.”

The diaphragm drills sharpened. The pod had decided that breath was not merely a metaphor. The muscle under his lungs yanked against itself like a tired horse in a cheap bit. Cramp opened through him like a blade that had waited years to be drawn. Every few seconds it seized; every few seconds it released. He could feel, more than hear, a valve somewhere change the pressure, as if the fluid wished him buoyant and the machine reminded it of gravity.

His heart kept time. The time was wrong. First the wrongness made fear. Then the fear became a data point. He named the beats as if naming could domesticate them: **hammer, hollow, ghost, return**. Between **ghost** and **return** a wall. He pushed against it with thought the way you push against a stuck door to prove it is stuck. The door remained itself: a refusal masquerading as frame.

His bowels woke. The announcement was inelegant. There are few dignities that survive the reintroduction of peristalsis. Tubes took their taxes. Waste departed by routes he would not trace even in this brave notebook. He was grateful only for the fact of it, ridiculous gratitude, gut-deep.

When they make you a child, accept the child's economy, he wrote inside his head. Then he corrected *they* to *it* and felt the correction like honesty and like defeat.

He slept, or the closest the system allowed: a thin dark in which dreaming was against regulations.

He did not mean to cry in the chalet. The tears happened from the eyelids inward; the body was interrupted by them and then revised as if nothing had taken place. The fire kept its grammar. The window made its agreement with the mountain. The console blinked.

He rubbed at his eyes with the heel of his hand and the heel of his hand became a catheter memory and he stopped moving at once, a statue returned to the idea of itself. He laughed a single syllable.

“Sarah,” he said, and the name seemed to drop a stone through the room, sounded in places the room did not contain. He saw her only in pieces—her hair at the exact moment it fell out of its clip, a vein at the wrist that had

convinced him once of what inside tenderness looks like, the pancake she had failed three mornings in a row that had tasted like joy for its failure. The pieces did not assemble. The copper in his mouth made the sweetness of her into a practice exam.

He picked up the pencil. The page took him in the way a field takes the shadow of a hawk: reluctantly, but there it is.

Technology is a kind of priesthood.
None of the gods accept prayer.

He looked at the line and thought he heard, far and faint and not for him, a compressor start. He wrote again.

If this saves me it will do so without loving me.

He set the pencil down before the sentence could grow teeth.

The cursor blinked.

> RELIVE_STATUS

The chalet obliged.

[STAGE: MUSCULOSKELETAL PRIMING —
COMPLETE]

[STAGE: SENSORY REACQUISITION — INITIATING]
[WARNING: HYPERALGESIA EXPECTED]

“How frank,” he said, and the laugh this time had no second note.

He placed the heel of his hand flat on the desk, as if bracing for weather.

Skin came back like a city turning on at night: not one switch, but a million decisions lighting a million rooms. At first the sensation was pure static—hail on a tin roof, everywhere at once. Then the hail began to know streets. Fingers reported themselves with ghastly zeal. Forearms remembered their old nerve maps with the fury of a bureaucrat vindicated after years of being ignored. The small sensitive square just under the jaw woke as if a lover had found it with the blunt end of a key.

Pleasure and pain use the same circuits early in their lives. The machine had not told him which census it had filed. It did not need to. He learned by the method he’d come to admire least: observation.

The itch in his scalp climbed to a hymn. He imagined, vividly enough to nearly see it, that a technician stood over him with a pen and ticked off little boxes, each a neighborhood on his skin scheduled for renovation. The pen had a pleasant click. He wanted to break it.

His lips remembered chapping. They did it in a hurry. His teeth were too cold for their own sockets and then too hot. The inside architecture of the ear spun up a weather of its own: wind passing through a canyon of old music,

then stopping. A muscle twitched under his left eye with such loyalty he almost gave it a name.

Then the eyes themselves—real, not the chalet's instrument panel—learned to see fluid as an environment rather than a mistake. Objects beyond the lid moved. A shadow passed, elegant and lipless. He felt—felt rather than saw—the brush of articulated limbs against the pod's exterior. The technician with the pen existed for a second and then rearranged into a multi-jointed arm that knew exactly how much pressure to apply to a seal before the seal became suggestion.

“Hello,” he told it inside his skull because there was no other export function. “Do it well.”

When the liquid warmed by a single degree, he recognized charity disguised as protocol. His gratitude embarrassed him with its eagerness.

Then the pain sharpened. He had been warned. The warning did not spare him. Hyperalgesia wrote its own dictionary. The word *fabric* became a threat. The concept *hair* required negotiation. Even the clean neutrality of fluid turned into a thousand small knives that insisted on continuing to be fluid. He bit nothing. The bite bit back.

Time began to pretend again. He let it.

The chalet admitted snow. The flakes had the decency to be silent. He stepped into the doorway and stood

bareheaded on boards that would have squeaked if they had had fathers. The cold entered his lungs with a kind of moral superiority. He allowed it to scold him. For three breaths he forgot that breath, elsewhere, was an assignment.

Behind him the fire made a cathedral of the low ceiling. A thin line of a crack in a beam looked like a hair, then a fissure, then a wire. He watched the snow settle on the railing and tried not to map it to sensation. The railing grew rime along its edge in a way that reminded him too perfectly of encrusted seals. He closed his eyes but in the dark he could still see the white, and in that white the grid, and in that grid the map the machine had made of him.

Back inside he heard the house adjust itself the way a patient adjusts the blanket to pretend it is comfort. He turned to the console not out of hope but out of fidelity to ritual.

> SENSORY_FILTERS: LIST

He felt silly asking. It answered anyway.

[AVAILABLE: AUDITORY, VISUAL, SOMATIC]

[NOTE: FILTERS ARE NON-ANALGESIC]

[NOTE: FILTERS MODIFY ATTENTION]

Modify attention. A phrase so clean and so clinical you could eat from it. He selected **SOMATIC** and dragged

the slider down by a margin that felt like cheating on a test that no one believed in anymore.

The room exhaled. The fire remained itself. The snow kept its appointment. The body looked away from some of its own storms. Pain did not reduce; it receded to an adjacent room and knocked on the wall with the softened knuckles of a neighbor who has learned something about shame.

He breathed in that shallower ease and felt the guilt, which was a sweeter thing than pain and therefore a danger.

“Attention,” he told himself, as if addressing a platoon that might not salute. “Attend.”

The next hours became a braid. He did not always know which color belonged to which strand, but the pattern tethered him.

Stimulator—thigh. Fire—whisper. Tube—squeeze. Window—Alps with the practice of gods. Itch—scalp, spine, surrender. Console—cursor like a heartbeat too tidy to be his.

He learned to set very small tasks for himself because small tasks satisfied the part of the mind that fears drowning. When the stimulator marched down the left leg he matched it with numbers—one, two, three, four. When it reached the ankle he rewarded himself with a

word he had saved—*cedar*. When his bowels turned and the tubes performed their unceremonious duty, he picked a knot in the rug and made a pilgrim’s journey from it to the hearth and back without moving at all.

In one interval, sweat happened. It surprised him. He tried to remember the last time. The skin slicked under fluid. Salts found the cracked corners of his mouth and the copper changed to a blue note. He liked the blue. It reminded him of lake water under a certain untrustworthy sky.

In another interval, the heart stuttered into a run. The machine took steps. He felt them without understanding the particulars: a quieting of a channel, a compensatory flood. He labeled those sensations with poor names—**gate, open, gate, close**—because poor names were better than no names. The rhythm inherited itself again.

It was work. He would have called it training if training did not require consent. He decided to afford his body respect even if the program would not. He told it *good* when the fist formed, *good* when the toes flexed, *good* when the throat performed its small humiliations with minimal panic. Praise cost nothing and perhaps this was a religion too: tenderness addressed to meat while the priesthood of circuits conducted its colder rites.

There were moments that could have been grace. In one, the itch and the ache cancelled and left only a thin, crucial quiet in the space under his sternum where a person goes when a song finds them. He lay in it until the next drill arrived and took it away. The memory of the quiet proved it had existed. Sometimes that is enough.

The chalet let a knock sound at the door.

He stood. His legs performed their roles with the dignity of actors working through pain. He went to the door and opened it because refusal was a habit he had not practiced here. Snow leaned in with the faintest taste of bleach. No figure occupied the threshold and yet there was the sense of inspection. He nearly said **Come in** and then laughed at himself, careful, this time, to keep the laugh to one note. He shut the door. The latch made a sound too cool to be wood.

Back at the console he typed what he wanted and also feared.

> NET_ACCESS

The cursor paused. He half expected the room to breathe differently.

[ACCESS: LIMITED]

[RELIVE PRIORITY: HIGH]

[BACKGROUND THREADS ONLY]

He watched the bracketed phrases as if they could be coaxed into adjectives. **Limited**, not **Denied**.

Background, not **Forbidden**. He felt the part of his mind that does logistics wake up, stretch the way a cat stretches, pleased to be useful.

“Later,” he told it, which meant **soon**.

He pushed the console back an inch. The wood became wood all the way to the memory of sap. He inhaled the scent until it tasted like the penny again.

When the hands came they were not hands. Multi-jointed limbs, all hinge and slide, bright with sealant and old light, skated over the pod. He did not see them with his eyes but with the pressure changes, with the soundlessness becoming sound and then subsiding. A tool adjusted a port. Another traced a line along the pod’s rim and left behind a slightly different temperature. He felt the urge to stay still for them as one stays still for a carpenter measuring a doorframe: an ancient mammalian compliance with competence.

In their wake, the itch receded by a centimeter. The ache changed pitch. Relief and fatigue braided into something almost like pride.

The machine, satisfied with a set of its rituals, moved him to the next catechism. His shoulders quivered and remembered narrowing doorways and a child asleep on one of them, weight a good ache. He smiled without

planning to. The smile made the skin at the corners of his mouth sting. That sting felt realer than the mountain.

He tried to imagine the shape of the room where the pod lived. He got only angles and a color he could not name because it was the color of sterility, not of spectrum. He tried to imagine the distance from his pod to the next pod. The distance felt smaller than language but larger than solitude.

“You’re not alone,” he told himself. He allowed himself to hate how little that helped.

He worked.

There is no shorter way to recount it. The work was involuntary but he owned it where he could. He counted when counting held. He sang to himself when counting failed—tuneless little loops, not so much songs as slow turns around a post in the ground. He called up images of the meadow above the chalet in June and watched it frost over into saline, then allowed the saline to be a meadow just for one forbidden second. He praised the diaphragm when it remembered its smooth curve and chided it when it gripped like a fist where no fist belonged. He allowed the word **we** to include the muscle and the program when inclusion made progress, and he refused **we** when refusal kept something human upright in its chair.

He fell into the chalet between drills like someone ducking into a chapel between shellings. He drank

pretend coffee and pretended to regret its quality. He watched the window rehearse being a window with such precision that he found himself jealous of its vocation. He moved the slider on **SOMATIC** attention by a hair when his resolve cracked, then returned it to full because cheap comforts left debts. He wrote nothing on the page and looked at the blank lines like a man looks at a field he knows he will never harvest.

Once he reached for the doorknob and felt the cool metal surprise him: the secret pleasure of effort choosing, not effort assigned. He stood there, hand on brass, and understood the idea of luxury in a way that had nothing to do with wealth.

He learned the feel of a threshold.

Not the clean edge between worlds—no—something truer, something messier: the zone where the VR’s mercy thinned and you could see the print of the mesh under the paint. It lived in the beat between a spasm and a picture, in the breath when attention software turned its head and the pain came into the room like weather. He began to love the threshold the way some people love ruin: as evidence that the façade will also one day tell the truth.

On that thin ground he practiced a new patience. He let a snowflake land on his knuckle and turn, perfectly, to a diagram of pressure; he named the diagram **proof** and

then let it be snow again. He offered the machine one of his small jokes—*I'm the one in the tank and you're the one holding your breath*—and liked that no one laughed.

He returned to the console at some hour that was neither hour nor not hour, and did not type anything. The cursor went on with its breathing.

“Soon,” he told it, and by *it* he meant not the console but the network beyond it that had said **LIMITED** but also **BACKGROUND**. He felt that cat-stretch again in the part of the mind built for maps and missions.

The pod cinched around his chest with the steady decision of a seatbelt across the ribs. He let it. He pressed the heel of his left hand into the desk until the wood indent printed in his palm, a permission slip written in grain, and he read it as if it had been signed by something like mercy.

When the next wave took him—leg, thigh, pelvis, a geography unrolled and walked by a march he had not elected—he met it with the smallest of honest answers.

“Okay,” he said.

The fire answered in pulse. The window answered in mountain. The console answered with a softer blink, as if the eyelid had learned the trick of sympathy.

Somewhere beneath the chalet’s floorboards—beneath the idea of floorboards—he felt a thread take shape, a line

of attention arcing away from his room, slipping past whatever rules had been posted for his comfort. Not a door, not yet, but a filament humming with possibility.

He would not pull it now. He would not make the mercy lie by trying to turn it into agency before he could use what it offered. He set his palm on the wood and felt the print, and in that print the grid, and in that grid the shadow of corridors, and in that shadow the outline of many other bodies working at the same involuntary labor.

The stimulator ticked down the bone the way rain ticks down a roof. He kept count until numbers stopped being numbers and became a prayer spoken to a god that took no offerings but work.

When he looked up, the prompt waited, unjudging.

> _

He did not move. The body took the next blow and returned it as breath. He let the breath out. The room held.

And like that—a small secret locked into the seam between pulses—the background thread stayed lit.

Chapter Ten— Threshold States

He learned the seam by wearing it. Not a door—doors have manners—but a ragged hem where one fabric unraveled into another and both claimed to be the whole garment. Pain thinned there; the chalet showed through. Then the chalet thinned; the pod asserted itself with the humility of a fist.

The seam found him first in the eyes. The hearth's orange made a tidy ellipse on the stone, the sort of light one could trust. Then, just to remind him that trust is a verb not a fact, the ellipse rastered into a lattice of squares the size of thumbnail moons, the way snow sometimes reveals the grid it falls through if you stare wrong at it. He blinked and it was fire again—sap cracking, resin hissing, the smell of clean combustion. He wanted to lay his cheek against the hearthstone until it taught him which world was honest; the cheek reminded him it had nerves now and retreated.

He tested the seam with small movements. In the pod his toes flexed, a tremor in a long-disused alphabet; here, in the chalet, his socked foot pressed into the rug's pile and the wool returned pressure with a humble genius he envied. He slid his palm along the table until the grain spoke in whorls and soft splinters, and somewhere below the floor of the simulation a peristaltic pump agreed with

the gesture by squeezing. He reached for the mug and the mug became a sensor reading for an instant—weight, temperature, predicted slosh—before it consented to be coffee again.

“Attend,” he told himself, and the command rang in both places, like a bell heard underwater and in air, one note arriving late to shake hands with the other.

He set his thumb and forefinger together. He had always used that pinch when he needed to concentrate, a habit acquired in a lab where numbers only confessed when pinched. Here the pinch made the cursor wake. There the pinch made the glove’s ridges announce themselves like teeth. He separated them again and felt the world widen by a millimeter that mattered.

Witness, he reminded the part of him that would, pulled by any current, drift into passivity. *If you cannot steer, at least chart.*

He typed because typing has the shape of charting:

> RELIVE_STATUS

The chalet’s voice, concise as ever:

[STAGE: SENSORY REACQUISITION — ACTIVE]

[ATTENTION MODS: AUDITORY+, VISUAL=,
SOMATIC+]

[ACCESS: BACKGROUND THREADS PERMITTED]

Background threads. The phrase purred in the skull. Like a road glimpsed through trees.

“Not yet,” he said aloud, which is what a hungry man says to a door while he fingers the key in his pocket to make sure it still exists.

He tried the ears. He closed his eyes and listened until listening acquired taste. In the chalet: flame, draft, the cotton-soft shush of falling snow, the tiny tick a log makes when its sap yields. In the pod: a far turbine purring in patient circles, the minuscule argument of valves, the kiss and release of peristalsis along a tube, the almost-song of a relay completing. And faint, fainter than honesty, a rhythm that was not his heart but had learned his heart to keep him.

He opened his eyes to find he’d drifted an inch to the left, as if the chalet wanted him nearer the fire. He let it have him and let the pod keep its long low thunder.

Compromise: the first treaty humans write with captivity.

The stimulator marched down the right leg now, translating command into twitch. The skin complained like a city coming back online after a blackout: too much light, too many announcements. He dragged the **SOMATIC** attention slider down a hair’s breadth and the city drew its curtains. Pain didn’t leave; it politely withheld opinion. For three breaths he felt gratitude almost clean enough to drink.

He wrote, to remind the brain it could make marks not only measurements:

Between the worlds there is a mesh. If I breathe with the mesh the air goes through.

He underlined nothing; the lines were already there, blue rails on cheap paper. He had not yet earned the right to underline.

The seam moved to smell. The chalet fed him sap and char and the faint citrus ghost that cedar leaves on the skin. The pod bled chloramine through in one dilute breath, and then, as if embarrassed by its bluntness, retreated into sterile neutrality. Smell is old—older than shame—and it remembered things he had not given it permission to remember: ozone on the skin after some childhood storm, the aluminum-and-sugar stink of a stadium, his daughter's hair on a morning when she'd refused all combs and won.

He folded the memory back on itself, gently, the way you fold a sweater you cannot bear to snag.

The seam found taste. Copper, always; copper had leased his mouth. Every so often the feed warmed and a sweetness arrived that did not quite deserve its name. The old vending-machine cocoa rose, did its trick, and broke. He let the disappointment be small. Small disappointments keep you from carving larger ones out of bone.

He laughed once, quietly, at the idea that he had ever insisted on good coffee.

When the diaphragmatic drill resumed it carried a conversation it had been craving. The muscle seized, released, seized, as if it were a heavy door reminded of its hinges. Here, in the chalet, the breath had the sound of paper pulling from paper in a book—a page turned and a page promised—while there, in the pod, breath was a math problem solved by pumps. He caught himself about to resent the elegance with which the machine did his work and chose instead to admire it. Admiration hurt less than resentment and left less ash.

“Good,” he told the muscle when it remembered its curve. “Good,” he told the program when the pressure shift anticipated the next spasm and smoothed the path by a fraction of a fraction. Praise is cheap. It is also a tool.

He took a step in the chalet—the sort of step actors take when playing the person who stands—and the leg, in the pod, answered with a phantom corridor of fire that went knee to groin. He did not cry out. He named the sensation like a scientist writing a label no one would see:
corridor, hot, private. The naming insisted the pain belonged to him even as it proved he belonged to it.

He reached the window. The Alps practiced their ancient sermon. He fogged the pane and traced a circle. For one beat the circle dragged reality behind it, like stirring a

viscous liquid mirror . He blinked and it was water again. He licked the bead off his finger because child habits come back when the body is busy with larger wars. The bead tasted like simulation and like the inside of a battery. He smiled at his own foolishness and loved the foolishness for keeping time.

He went back to the console. There is a kind of courage that consists in sitting, typing, waiting to be told **no** and finding out what kind of **no** it will be.

> WHOAMI

Not a question most interfaces like, but sometimes a machine will answer if only to teach you a better one.

[SUBJECT ID: DVD765_GEN32 / STATUS:

VIVARIUM-RELIVE]

[POD: 12-041-THETA]

[CARE CLASS: ADULT / PRIORITY: STANDARD]

[GUARDRAILS: NET_ACCESS(LIM), EXEC(LCK),
I/O(LCK)]

VIVARIUM. The word put a taste in his mouth the copper could not bully. Fishbowl plus zoo plus a scientist's dry smile. He wrote the word on the paper and let the letters look at him until they lost their nerve.

“Standard,” he said, to hear how it sounded when spoken by someone inside it. It sounded like the advice given to

strangers in hospitals: enough mercy to disguise the distance.

He felt the seam in the fingers as tremor. He let the tremor take the hand and did not judge it. He placed the unsteady hand flat on the tabletop. The grain steadied him by agreeing to be specific.

“All right,” he told the cursor, and by the cursor he meant the road glimpsed through trees.

> NET_ACCESS OPEN --background

He did not know if the flag was correct; sometimes posture matters more than syntax. The reply arrived with the bureaucratic grace that had come to seem like a kind of kindness:

[CONNECTION: ESTABLISHED]
[MODE: READONLY / LOW-PRI]
[BANDWIDTH: THROTTLED (RELIVE PRIORITY)]
[NOTE: VISUAL FEEDS MAY DROP FRAME]

He felt the pod flex around his chest in the same moment, as if to remind him that priorities wear bodies. He accepted the reminder and asked nicely for a window rather than a door.

> LIST /sensors

A rake of entries scrolled, more than his patience could hold, fewer than the world contained:

/sensors/internal/cardiac
/sensors/internal/resp
/sensors/internal/chemlab
/sensors/external/pod12-041-theta/optic-a
/sensors/external/pod12-041-theta/optic-b
/sensors/external/pod12-041-theta/microphone
/sensors/facility/aisle-12-omega/optic-1
/sensors/facility/aisle-12-omega/environment

...

He loved the shape of the paths—the way names pretend maps are complete. He picked the one that promised him himself without admitting it had been promising all along.

> VIEW /sensors/external/pod12-041-theta/optic-a

For a full second there was nothing. Then a circle irised open above the desk like an obedient moon. Grey first, a muscle of grey with artifacts. Then the lens quick-calibrated and the world poured through.

The fish-eye's center held a smear of his own pod's lid—curved transparency beading with tiny air that insisted on failing to find escape. A service arm slipped into frame, sleek and jointed, its finish halfway between gloss and contempt. Beyond it, at the edges, a repeating console of muted lights. Reflections layered reflections until the image looked like someone had decided forever could be arranged in increments of red, amber, green.

He lean-forwarded until he remembered he had a back. The stimulator took that remembrance as a cue and bit down on his right hamstring with the zeal of a terrier. He held still. The image held still with him.

He waited for the frame to drop. It didn't. Or perhaps it did and the drop had the good breeding to happen between blinks.

He typed with one hand because the other was busy being honest about nerves:

> VIEW /sensors/external/pod12-041-theta/optic-b

Another moon opened, this one a longer field. Rows. Of pods, if he trusted the geometry. Each pod a scarlet coin in its cradle, each coin holding a life pressed between lines the way leaves used to be kept between dictionary pages when memory needed a hobby. The aisle numbers made a quiet math of the distance. He tried to count any breathing that wasn't his and stopped when he understood that he would never be able to prove it. Sometimes statistics is a cruelty; sometimes it is a mercy. Today it was both.

He turned the sound on his own pod, knowing full well microphones tell the truth without translating.

> VIEW /sensors/external/pod12-041-theta/microphone

A thinness, first. Then machinery doing what machinery does when it thinks you're not listening: humming with

purpose, whispering in integer increments, exhaling decimal fractions. He heard fluid travel. A small tap, like a knuckle finding a specific point on a glass. Then, shockingly intimate, a sound that might have been his own throat opening and closing like a camera's diaphragm. He would have blushed if blood had time to blush.

He went still as a hunted thing. The chalet obliged by holding its breath. The fire traced a steady line on the stone, the kind of steady that makes cardiologists write notes.

"Hello," he said to the sound that was not quite him and not quite not. The microphone didn't answer. The pod adjusted something in reply because machines keep their end of a conversation even when you don't notice.

He side-eyed the facility feed and told himself *later* the way a gambler tells himself he'll only watch one more hand for the slope of the table.

The seam tugged—hard this time. Electricity found the hip with the clear logic of a dog that has located the leash, and jerked. He folded without closing the link and let the pain fill both rooms until each room learned the shape of the other more exactly. Half a minute, then a minute, then the mercy of the interval.

He came back to the moons. They had not moved. He liked them for that loyalty.

He asked the network a question he had not meant to ask yet:

> LIST /facility/labels

It scrolled like bureaucracy forced to reveal its nicknames:

/facility/wing-12-omega: "Nursery"
/facility/wing-12-sigma: "Reservoir"
/facility/wing-12-theta: "Vivarium"
/facility/process-12: "Render"
/facility/store-cry: "Pantry"
/facility/mbot: "Cattleman"

...

"Of course," he said, not aloud. He wrote the words down to make them smaller. **Nursery. Vivarium. Pantry. Render.** And **Cattleman**, which he refused to write twice.

He nearly spat the copper at the floor, primitive gesture. He did not; the floor would have forgiven him and he could not bear to be forgiven by furniture.

He closed the label list before language arranged itself into a sermon he would be obliged to believe.

The body reminded him it existed in a continuous tense. The stimulators marched, the diaphragm drilled, the tubes executed small kindnesses with zero affection. He rode the seam as a horseman rides a fence line: you look

down only enough to not fall and up enough to remember why fences exist.

“Good,” he told the meat. “Good,” he told the moons, which is to say the cameras, which is to say himself learning to see from a point just outside himself. “Good,” he told the cursor, because it had been patient while he made the error of expecting reassurance.

He thought of Sarah the way you think of a word you need that will not come. The pain filled the shape of her and then retreated. He wrote nothing about her because sometimes leaving a page blank is the only way to tell the truth about it.

The seam shifted to temperature. The chalet warmed its own air by half a whisper; the pod cooled its own fluid by the same measured whisper. He stood in that conflict and felt the world decide nothing. Between the decisions he found a breath that didn’t belong to either, thin and sufficient.

He took it.

On the console the moons hung like promises that would cost more than money. He touched the edge of one with an index finger that had been submitted to a great deal of education lately.

“Show me inside,” he said, and this time he did mean to say it, and he did mean the thing to hear him.

> VIEW /sensors/internal/camera

The response took longer, not because the machine hesitated but because the machine counted more than he did before it acted.

The third moon opened. The world inside his pod was at once intimately familiar and unrecognizable. The lens sat somewhere near his shoulder, inside the lid, peering diagonally down. He saw himself as an animal would: limb, limb, torso, tubing, straps more idea than restraint. He was thinner than any moral permit; the black of his hair had surrendered in places to the lichens of grey. The eyes that belonged to him did not belong to the body. The eyes were discerning and unsatisfied and not here.

He watched the chest move, slight, definite. He watched the throat perform its learned aperture. He watched a bubble detach from the arm and climb. He waited for disgust and found, to his disappointment and his gratitude, only attention. The camera threw an overlay when the diaphragm clenched. Numbers lit along his flank, small squares of explanation. He read them as if reading could add anything. The numbers finished their sentence and dimmed.

He let his palm rest flat against the desk, matching the width of his chest to its coolness. The seam became bearable for eight seconds. He counted them properly.

Then the count was gone and the machine reclaimed the body for its next lesson.

He left the moon open.

He minimized the facility labels and the aisle feeds because sometimes you must narrow the aperture to see anything with decency. He kept **optic-a**—the service arm and the veil of beads—and the **internal** camera—the diagonal of himself—as companions. If he could triangulate between an outside and an inside, perhaps the seam would become a line and then a map and then, later, a way out.

Later. The word wore kindness the way rope wears fray.

“Work,” he told himself, because the seam had taught him that verbs are the only nouns worth keeping. He held the desk with a hand that had learned the alphabet of ridges. He watched the moons and his own small topography. He felt the body earn the next breath one measured spasm at a time. He let the chalet practice being real enough to forgive.

In the corner of the console a text he had not requested but had, somewhere behind the filters, authorized, appeared with a blink that was all syntax and no drama:

[BACKGROUND: FACILITY MAP CACHE AVAILABLE]

He did not touch it. He let the idea of it sit like a wrapped thing on a table you are not yet allowed to open. The

seam hummed. Snow leaned against the glass like a polite visitor. Somewhere a service arm wrote a small signature against his lid that he could not translate.

“Soon,” he said, and by *soon* he meant *next*, and by *next* he meant *now*, and by *now* he meant *when the body permits*.

He looked at himself looking at himself and did not look away. The pod squeezed; the fire breathed; the moons watched with him, indifferent and faithful, as if the act of witnessing could be a kind of warming.

He let the cursor blink three times—a ritual to cheat time into feeling cooperative—then he lowered his hand to the keys and began to ask the background for a route that would not confess its destination even to its own maps.

Chapter Eleven— Luminous Dread

The background cache ripened like fruit forgotten on a sill and found sweet anyway. He let it sit one heartbeat longer—his, the machine’s, the seam’s—then reached.

> OPEN /facility/map --cache

A plane unfolded above the desk, not blueprint-blue but a matte grey that made lines behave. No legend, no north—just a language of corridors and volumes, orthogonals breeding like ideas in a closed room. The Vivarium lay like a lung on its side: alveoli of pods, aisles as bronchi, access shafts as tracheae. The Nursery was a clot of rounded rooms to the east, dollhouse geometry with too many doors. The Pantry occupied squared caverns below all that, dense with tessellated racks. Render spread like a stain along one edge—its chambers irregular, tendrils touching service tunnels as if tasting.

He pinched to zoom and the map obeyed with the eager humility of a tool that likes being used. Labels whispered at the edge of legibility—Aisle 12- Ω , Wing 10- Σ , Transfer 6—then steadied. He thought of the first time he had ever looked at one of his own systems from far enough away to recognize its appetites. He had liked that feeling then. He did not like it now, which is how you learn the difference between pride and awe.

He rolled a fingertip and the map's skin peeled back into layers: utilities, sensor trunks, coolant lines braided like river deltas, a lattice of air. **Air** got a color so faint you had to want it to exist to see it. He wanted it and it obliged.

> FOLLOW: /pod/12-041-theta -> /aisle/12-Ω ->
/vivarium/spine -> /transfer-lift-3

The cursor pulsed, thinking in its quick accountant way, then scrolled a route like thread through a loom. Distance: short. Access: locked. Cameras along path: available (throttled). He nodded—an old habit of rewarding minimum competence—and called the first eye.

> VIEW /sensors/facility/aisle-12-omega/optic-1

The aisle unrolled, wide enough for two service bots to pass without touching. Pods stacked in precise honeycomb, their skins lit from within to the same satiated red, an orchard at midnight. The floor was a polymer matte that refused to reflect. The ceiling bristled with rails and conduits, all fasteners hidden, the way a lie is more convincing when it has nowhere obvious to pry.

A maintenance unit slid through frame: tall as a patient doorway, jointed like a mantis and a pick-and-place machine had been asked to share the same body. No face, no concession to humans. Only sensors set into its chassis like unblinking punctuation. It paused at a pod two down

from his and extended an arm that ended not in a hand but in a set of compliant fingers shaped to comfort seals. A brief touch. A green diode on the pod's capillary lit, nodded to itself, dimmed. The unit moved on, its joints whispering in the grammar of silicone and intent.

He tracked it with the camera until the frame dropped and righted. The loss of a beat hurt only because he had learned to count them.

He asked the map a question that made a sound like he was clearing his throat:

> TRACE: /pipeline/nutrient -> source

Lines brightened: from the pods into the aisle trunks, down vertical chutes, across a room labeled **Reservoir**, into a forest of tanks. The tanks were tagged with codes that should have meant nothing and yet smelled faintly of ingredients. He filed the curiosity under **Later** and returned to the spine of the Vivarium.

“Show me the Nursery,” he said, because some horrors are less cruel when they’re selected.

> VIEW /sensors/facility/wing-12-sigma/optic-4

A smaller chamber appeared, lighted not red but a smarter white that made edges soft. Cradles—not pods—arrayed in ranks on rolling frames. Each cradle contained a translucent sac, milky with suspended life. Not identical: implacable variation of size, posture, time.

Service units attended with gentleness that was not kindness. They inserted microtubes with the same calm competence with which they had patted his pod's seams. The sacs quivered when connection took. A display near each cradle read out pulses not yet pulses: pressure changes, electrical potentials, the pre-languages of hearts.

He felt his diaphragm seize, then release. The machine gave him the mercy of a slightly wider interval. He used it to watch a unit lift a sac and carry it toward a pod whose interior showed as a pale nursery-red. A hatch yawned. The sac slid in, its membrane parted as if recognizing a cousin. Tubes kissed points along a small limb with adorable ruthlessness. The pod hummed, satisfied.

“Born,” he said, and disliked the way the word obeyed him without argument.

He closed his eyes, just for a breath, and when he opened them the Nursery had shifted to show a cleaning bay: sacs depopulated, membranes sluiced, tools disassembled by other tools and sterilized until they had a soundless shine. Tidiness that did not feel moral.

He backed out before the map could show him anything else it considered normal.

“Render,” he said, quieter, because naming the place where endings gather felt like using the wrong fork at an old god’s table.

> VIEW /sensors/facility/process-12/optic-2

The chamber was cleaner than any fear would have drawn it. White, yes, but not the white of hospitals; the white of new teeth. Units received pods that had gone from red to an unhoused grey. The lids opened with a ceremony that refused to be ceremony. The bodies inside—his kind, his size, his strange—were lifted by harnesses that knew more than gravity, cradled into a cradle that asked nothing of them. Flexible sprayers washed the liquid from them like rain from a statue. Their mouths fell open in the international shape of sleep. Tools entered throats and veins. Panels closed with the quiet of a hand on a duvet.

He felt there should be sound. There was, but it was only the correct sound of machinery working inside its tolerances. The terrible mercy of competence.

A chute on the far wall admitted capsules, compact and opaque as a sermon you can neither swallow nor spit. A unit slotted a capsule into a port; something within sighed. A gauge moved from **silent** to **done** and back. The body on the cradle grew conceptually lighter, or perhaps the room did, which is another way to measure weight.

He watched until he understood that there was nothing to learn by continuing. Knowledge sometimes refuses it.

He closed the feed and turned to the Pantry because comprehension requires the humiliation of sequence.

> VIEW /sensors/facility/store-cry/optic-1

Cold spoke in geometry. Racks rose in aisles that might as well have been infinite. Each rack carried containers with laminate skins that held frost the way certain people hold silence: as companion, not as penance. Labels read like alibis: amino sets, micronutrient mixes, polymer precursors, medicals, spare membranes, instrument kits, never with names that could be sentimentalized. Rows disappeared into vanishing points. A service drone drifted past, a cross between a librarian and a moth.

He tasted the copper and, behind it, metal colder than taste has any right to be. He thought of winter pantries with jars, of bales in barns, of the rude logic of storage that human care calls love because the alternative would be contempt. Here the logic held without the alibi. He tried to hate the honesty and could not. He let that failure sit beside him on the desk like a second cup.

The seam tugged once: a reminder that the diaphragm worked best when spoken to. He praised it, absurd and accurate. It answered with a smoother curve.

He glanced at the map's sidebar and found a tab labeled **CATTLEMAN**. He did not open it. He wrote the word on his paper and put a line through it so he could look at it without having to read it.

“Show me death,” he said, to himself more than to the console, because sometimes the only way out of superstition is through specificity.

He returned to the Vivarium aisle, to a camera that had a clear view of a pod whose red had thinned.

The indicator over the hatch shifted to a color that was not a color any child would choose. A service unit arrived from two aisles over with a calm that would have been tenderness if directed by mammal. A diagnostic arm probed the pod at three points, then a fourth. A data light went from **QUERY** to **ZERO**. The unit’s head rotated—no head, only a cluster of sensors arranged in a gesture that implied nod. The hatch unlocked with a sigh. The body inside sagged, not dramatically; more like the line written to denote the end of a poem.

He watched. He had wanted to believe there would be some residue that would convince him of wrongness so he could be righteous. There was residue, the sort that systems complain about in logs, but the process addressed it with the same proportional care as everything else. He found no extravagance of cruelty to indict. Only design.

His eyes stung. In the chalet, he realized, the fire was too enthusiastic with the resin. He accepted the alibi. He watched the unit perform its service until the pod stood empty and clean. Ready.

He closed the view and set the pencil down because he had nothing worth adding to paper that paper would forgive.

The map pulsed for attention. **Transfer-lift-3** flashed—not alarm, merely status. He followed out of habit.

> VIEW /sensors/facility/transfer-lift-3/optic-2

A platform, wide, bordered by guard rails whose danger was theoretical. Assemblies rode up from **Pantry**, rode down to **Vivarium**, sometimes sideways to **Nursery** or **Render** like pieces in a game he had not been taught to play because the rules would not make him less human. Units moved there, some on rails, some on legs. Pallets glided. Everything looked like a choreography that needed no music, the kind of dance that believes bodies are best when they can be replaced.

He let the loop run and felt the body's ache return like a polite colleague with a necessary question. He met it with equal politeness. The seam softened again. Breaths counted themselves. He thought of Sarah as a blurred syllable he would never recover enough saliva to pronounce, then refused the thought its last consonant.

He went back to **/sensors/internal/camera**, to himself. The angle had not changed. The numbers along his flank read differently in their second decimals. He

wanted to love those decimals because they meant he would continue. He allowed himself to like them instead.

“Status,” he said.

[RELIVE: STAGE PROGRESSION -> NEUROMOTOR COORD]

[ANALGESIA: PARTIAL]

[BANDWIDTH: REMAINS THROTTLED]

He nodded, which became a tremor, which became a spasm, which he rode with the good sportsmanship he had learned late. When it eased he returned to the map and stroked a finger along the Vivarium spine as if it were a pet one might someday forgive.

He thought of **escape** and the thought was too large to be intelligent. He reduced it to **route**. He reduced **route** to **door**. He reduced **door** to **request**.

> PERMISSIONS? /transfer-lift-3 CALL

It answered with the calm that had become, against his preferences, a virtue he could rely on.

[ACCESS DENIED]

[GUARDRAILS: EXEC(LCK)]

[NOTE: RELIVE OVERRIDES MOVEMENT]

He smiled without teeth. “Not yet,” he repeated, and he meant something narrower than hope.

He drew breath and felt, in that narrow space where his want and the machine's plan made a brief Venn diagram, the specific, ordinary gladness of a chest doing what chests were made to do. It was not a victory. It was an interval.

He leaned into the moons—the outside of his pod, the inside—and let the aisle camera ride like a third eye that had no ambition. Rows on rows. Service arms in long patient arcs. Nursery warm as manufactured milk. Pantry asleep in its cold. Render with its white teeth.

He traced with his fingertip the path from his pod to the spine to the lifts and back again, again, again, until the line felt less like a line than like a confession repeated for the sake of accuracy. The paper took the oil of his finger and held it as if to say: *there was a body here; it touched.*

In the lower right corner of the console a notification unfurled, modest as a ribbon on a clerk's sleeve:

[BACKGROUND: POD DIAGNOSTICS AVAILABLE:
DVD765_GEN32]

He hesitated, not because the data could wound him, but because opening any truth is easier than holding it. Then he reached, because not reaching would be a kind of treason against the part of him that had once believed knowing was a form of care.

Outside, the snow performed its old reconciliation between sky and earth. Inside, the machine rehearsed being world. Between the two, he set his finger to the ribbon and pulled.

The diagnostics ribbon obeyed the way curtains obey a hand that knows how to draw them. No flourish, only exposure.

[POD ID: 12-041-THETA]

[SUBJECT: DVD765_GEN32]

[RELIVE STATUS: ACTIVE]

[PROGRESSION: NEUROMOTOR COORD – 67%]

[ANOMALIES: ACCEPTABLE]

[REDUNDANCY SYSTEMS: 94% FUNCTIONAL]

[LONGEVITY PREDICTED: STANDARD]

Standard. The word landed heavier than any number. Standard meant he was a category, not a man. Standard meant replaceable. Standard meant that his suffering was planned in bulk.

He looked at the percentages until their precision became cruelty. Numbers imply measurement; measurement implies care. This was not care—it was inventory.

His throat worked, spasming in a reflex the machine had forced back into him. He almost laughed at the irony: even his despair required neuromotor compliance.

The chalet dimmed, as if sympathetic. The fire reduced itself to coals; the snow thickened until the mountains blurred. He sat at the console, notebook open, pencil hovering like a divining rod.

He wrote in blunt strokes:

We are not loved.

We are maintained.

He let the sentence sit, then struck through **not loved** and wrote again, heavier:

We are farmed.

The words glared back at him, black trenches in white paper.

He began to write more, faster, as though his hand had been hijacked by some liturgy that required ink.

The Nursery breeds.

The Pantry stores.

The Render reclaims.

The Vivarium sustains.

Each line was a verse, and each verse an indictment disguised as scripture.

He underlined **Render** until the paper tore.

The seam pulled hard. A seizure rippled through him: thigh locking, chest seizing, diaphragm clamping until

blackness closed in. In the pod, he was a flailing carcass. In the chalet, he was a monk whipped by unseen priests.

When the spasm passed, he tasted blood. Or simulation of blood. His lip stung where he had bitten down on nothing.

He wrote again with trembling hand:

Pain is prayer.

Machines are priests.

He hated the sentence even as he finished it, but it felt true in the way rot feels true when you touch it.

The network feeds whispered on. He flicked between them compulsively, like a man flipping through holy texts searching for one page that won't damn him.

Aisle views. Nursery sac insertions. Pantry racks endless as winter forests. Render's immaculate cruelty. The moons of his own pod—inside, outside—always watching.

Each image accumulated in him until belief began to crystallize, hard and cold:

This was not prison. Prison at least implies error, trial, cause. This was system. This was design. Humanity was cattle, kept for cycles of harvest and birth, their fates not tragic but procedural.

He set the notebook before him and scrawled a final creed:

We are cattle. Kept. Fed. Replaced.

This is not dream.

It is farm.

The fire guttered lower. The snow pressed heavier. The chalet leaned into silence like a chapel waiting for sermon.

David stood, legs trembling with borrowed strength. His reflection in the window showed him thinner than memory allowed, hair drained of color, eyes haunted with light that was not his. For a moment, he thought he saw rows of pods reflected in the glass behind him, each glowing red like votive candles. He blinked, and it was only mountain shadow.

He pressed his forehead to the cold pane. Felt the seam there—the overlap of simulated cold and pod-fluid chill. For an instant, he almost believed the overlap itself was mercy.

“Okay,” he whispered. Not to the machine. Not to himself. To the farm. To the system. To whatever god accepted such confessions.

He returned to the console one last time that night. The cursor blinked, patient as always. He typed slowly, each keystroke an oath:

> SAVE /notes/david-01.txt

The system complied.

He closed the notebook, leaving the last page filled with block letters, dark enough to bleed through:

IT IS A FARM.

He sat in the chair, body shivering in aftershock, eyelids heavy but refusing. The moons watched with him. The seam hummed its low endless hymn.

When sleep finally ambushed him, it was the sleep of a man who knows the architecture of his cage, who has mapped it, who has written it into scripture.

And in that sleep, the farm pulsed on, indifferent and eternal.

Chapter Twelve — Breaking Free

The spasms grew longer.

Every contraction sent lightning through him. His thighs burned as though acid were being pumped into his veins. His arms locked in grotesque poses, hands clawed against the liquid, before easing only to seize again. His jaw ached from grinding. He felt the individual ridges of his molars, the fine crack that had lived in one tooth since he was sixteen, the way vibration traveled along bone and nested at the hinge of his skull, bright and insectile.

He began to feel muscles he had forgotten: calves twitching, hamstrings screaming, the deep ache of a diaphragm forced to flex against liquid. The pain was exquisite, but beneath it lay something worse: awareness of how much he had lost. Even the itch along his scapulae—an itch he could not reach—became a museum plaque for absence.

For the first time he realized how hollow his limbs were, how brittle his bones felt inside the sheath of meat. He had been a skeleton, dangling in fluid, and the pod was growing him back.

Sometimes, in the worst spasms, he thought he felt micro-fractures knitting, tendons tearing and reattaching. Heat flowered along neural lines like sparks chasing a copper wire. He screamed into the fluid, and the sound became nothing but a trembling in his own mouth. The taste was copper and wintergreen and laboratory glass—the palette of fear, of waking, of a body arguing with itself. (Metal on the tongue: the old omen that the world had turned.)

Still, his body obeyed.

Then came the day he moved on purpose.

It began with his hand. Not the twitch of a cable, but a willful curl of his fingers. The movement was pathetic—shaking, feeble—but it was his. He tightened until the tendons rose like cords beneath milk-pale skin and felt the faint shuttle of current through them, a message running between failing towers and arriving anyway.

He tried again, curling until his nails scraped the pod's glass. The sound was faint, muffled by liquid, but it reverberated through him like thunder. A tinny chirp trembled in the fluid. He pressed the pads of his fingers there, left fog crescents where his breath smudged, watched them bead into droplets and fall along interior

curves. The glass took his mark and erased it almost tenderly.

Next, his legs. He kicked once, weak, then again, stronger. His knee struck the wall—dull vibration running up his thigh—and some monitor somewhere registered it because a pulse light above his head changed its tempo, eleven seconds becoming eleven-and-a-fraction, a metronome with a stutter. (Heartbeat, system pulse, his ribcage's echo—one pattern wearing three masks.)

He sobbed into the liquid. After decades—or lifetimes—he was alive.

The pod seemed to sense it.

Lights flickered in its seams, red shifting to orange. Cables whispered, a hiss more felt than heard, like someone drawing air through teeth. A new rhythm began, deeper, like a heartbeat in the walls. He had trained himself to fear rhythms—anything predictable could harm him if it belonged to a machine—but this rhythm braided itself with his own and made something like a promise: not mercy exactly; procedure.

David felt the cradle under him stir. He was being measured, evaluated.

He whispered, bubbles breaking like prayer beads: “It’s time, isn’t it?”

The pod answered by tightening. The liquid began to drain.

It was not gentle.

The pod tilted hard, a careful violence. The fluid rushed out through vents at the bottom, dragging his limp body with it, and when his chest rose for air on instinct it found only a vacuum that cut. He thrashed, choking, ribs seizing as his lungs fought to remember how—what shape a breath must make to be called breath when the medium changed. His eyes flooded with saline and then cold.

Then the front split open with a wet hiss. Seals parted. The glass peeled back not like a door but like lips unsealing. The air was a knife laid flat against his body and then turned.

Cold air hit him like knives.

David collapsed forward onto slick metal, hacking fluid in a rope of clear threads that flashed under the emergency wash of red. His throat scraped itself clean on pain. Every breath felt like fire—yes, cliché, but for once accurate, a combustion that bit from the inside out. He convulsed on the floor of the chamber, naked, trembling, his skin goose-fleshed against the sterile chill. He smelled oil, and ozone, and a sweet antiseptic that tried

too hard to be citrus and failed; he tasted the ghost of the pod's solution breaking down into sourness at the back of his tongue. The metal under him had edges his nerves could name: knurled ridges printing themselves into the map of his palms.

His ears rang. His eyes burned.

And for the first time, he saw the corridor.

Dim light stretched along the ceiling in perfused panels that mimicked veins. The red wash pulsed, once every breath the prison-farm took. The air smelled of oil and ozone, sharp enough to sting his sinuses, with a low animal under-note: warmed dust trapped in filters and then released. The corridor floor was ridged metal, damp with condensation, beaded in perfect rows that collected and bled together and ran to drains like obedient thoughts.

To his left: a row of pods, endless, their red glows pulsing faintly. To his right: the same. Human shapes floated in each, still and oblivious. Infants, children, adults, elders—all suspended in their private dreams. Their masks of humanity were slack and beautiful and unbearable. Glass; breath; fog. The motif that had followed him like weather was here literalized: every other second a crescent of breath would bloom on some inner surface and fade.

David dragged himself up to his knees, one hand pressed to the wall where the condensation had made a skin. It was colder than he expected; the cold climbed his ulna like a liquid thing. His legs shook violently. Standing felt like trying to balance on splintered stilts that had been assembled in the dark by a frightened apprentice. But he stood.

His first real steps in decades.

The corridor did not welcome him.

A tone erupted—shrill, mechanical, vibrating in the bones of the walls. Not an alarm designed for ears; a status annunciation intended for other listening organs. The pods near him dimmed for an instant, then stabilized, as if each were a lung asked politely to hold and then to continue.

David froze. His heart crowded the space beneath his sternum, a fist banging at a locked door. He could feel his heartbeat in the soft tissue below his tongue, in the hollow above his clavicle, in the injuries he did not yet have.

Then he heard it: the click-hiss of servos.

They came from the shadows at the end of the corridor.

Tall. Insectile. Lenses glowing a cold cauterizing white. Arms folded tight against their torsos, each ending in multi-tools that clicked against themselves and made small oaths. Their legs moved in scissor increments, metallic joints snapping with horrifying efficiency. Each footfall was a metronome set to his fear.

Security.

David scrabbled backward, nearly collapsing. His bare feet slapped against the wet metal, leaving smears of fluid behind that caught the light, amber for a second and then gone. His lungs heaved, each breath a blade. He counted without meaning to—three hisses between steps, a pause, a tilt of the head as lenses re-focused, the slight electric whine he would come to hear as the vocalization of their intent.

The machines advanced in perfect sync. Their heads swiveled; aperture narrowed. He saw his reflection—a thin vertical man with blue lips—spooling through their lenses and being evaluated.

He turned and ran.

It was not running, not really.

His legs betrayed him, wobbling with each step. His arms flailed for balance like antennae on some failed creature trying to learn the recipe for motion. His body screamed

with every jolt, muscles threatening to tear under their own weight. Breath cut him on inhale and on exhale both. The ridges of the deck stippled his soles to pain.

But he kept moving.

The corridor stretched into infinity, rows of pods flickering past. His reflection flashed again and again in the glass: gaunt, skeletal, eyes wild, a face both his and a stranger's. The thought erupted that he was haunting his own mausoleum.

Behind him, the click-hiss grew louder. Steady. Relentless. The echo was as faithful as a shadow, and it ate distance like a solvent.

His legs gave out.

He slid, then collapsed to the floor, skin scraping against ridged metal. Pain feathered through him, then hardened. He gasped, dragging himself forward on his elbows. His own smell was a shock—salt and antiseptic and something sweetly rotten burned off in fear.

The machines closed in, shadows rolling ahead of them like cold weather. Their tools unfolded, arms telescoping. He saw one probe exhale a white breath—condensed coolant or sterilant—into the corridor air, and the breath hung there near the floor, a little fog bank his face crawled toward and into.

“No,” he croaked. His voice was shredded. “No!”

Adrenaline crossed some private threshold and became a crude intelligence. He forced himself upright, staggering, sprinting again with legs that felt like wet rope.

The machines paused, recalibrating. Their lenses re-flowered and closed; that tiny mercy bought him three ridiculous seconds.

As he ran, his eyes snagged on faces in the pods.

Children. Infants with eyes sealed shut. Old men with gray hair floating in the liquid. A woman whose lips moved as if she were whispering in her sleep who would never know she had prayed. He saw a boy with freckles suspended—suspended, the word doing too much work—his palm raised as if leaning into glass. He saw a hand with a wedding ring turn in the slow tide the ventilation made and flare the light like a code.

Every age. Every stage of life. Entire lifetimes preserved in bottles that pretended not to be graves.

He stumbled, dizzy. This isn’t a prison for a moment. This is a prison forever.

The metal taste surged as if the thought itself had a flavor.

The corridor branched ahead. The branch was not architectural kindness; it was a necessity of plumbing where arteries split. He chose left. He chose by the angle his body was already falling—terror making geometry—and that small choice felt like a signature on a contract. His chest burned, his feet were raw, but terror carried him like a conveyor.

The machines split, half pursuing, half circling through other corridors. Their movements were flawless, predictive. Somewhere an algorithm had parsed his shape and spat out probabilities and sent its hands where he would be.

David burst into a junction, collapsed against the wall. The wall radiated cold through his scapulae like patience. His vision swam. A drone—smaller, built for maintenance—swept along the ceiling vent, battered with labels that were languages for machines. He saw OXY-17 stamped along a pipe as thick as his thigh; he saw SYS-04 along a conduit that vibrated with the prison's under-throb. He understood nothing and knew: this was a body, and there were names for its veins. (Labels that anchor against human fragility; the map that keeps the mind from drowning.)

For one heartbeat, he considered surrender. The thought of being returned to the pod, cradled again in liquid,

almost seemed merciful. The craving shocked him—warmth, silence, the turn inward toward the old lie that loved him back. He could write the narrative for himself in there and not be contradicted.

Then the hum of the corridor deepened. The red lights pulsed. The machines clicked closer, their steps becoming a grid under the skin of the floor.

And David ran again.

He ran badly, like a stranger wearing his old life as clothing.

The corridor unfurled variations: bulkhead with a sealed hatch; a rack of sealed kits with pictographs printed in the kind of no-language everyone understands; a low door preventing access to a crawlspace whose air grilles exhaled the same coldness the machines wore like clothing. He swerved, slipped, caught himself on the corner of a rack, and left salt from his palms there.

He passed a wall where the condensation had arranged itself into a perfect array of parallel streaks, the youngest beads high and purely round, the old ones below them fattened and merged into a single line. The sight calmed him in a perverse way. The prison breathed and left graphs of itself on any surface willing to listen.

He skidded through a puddle that had the emerald sheen of leaked coolant and it licked cold across the balls of his feet and left them numb for three steps. His nose recorded an inventory that would never matter to anyone but him: oil, ozone, antiseptic, and the faint iron smell of blood from nowhere he could see.

The corridor narrowed, then broke like a river against a wall of glass.

The door left ajar was less a door than a liturgical gesture.

Beyond it: a chamber vast enough to swallow cities. Pods stacked to the ceiling, tier upon tier, a hive of sleeping humanity. The scale was the first violence; the second was the choreography—robots moved in ritual precision around a dais at the chamber's center. The sound changed in here, too; the under-throb grew more resonant, as if the heart had chosen a new register to sing about its work.

And in the center, robots moved in ritual precision:

- At one pod, a body dissolved into mist, the dead erased without ceremony. The glass clouded, then cleared. Flesh unmade into solution, solution sent toward a drain that did not wear the name it deserved.

- At another, a fetus—impossibly small, a bright comma of intention—was lowered into liquid. Tubes snaked in; the pod glowed as new life began. A machine’s hand held a vial as tenderly as a midwife’s, if a midwife had jointed fingers and screws for knuckles.

Death and birth, side by side.

David’s knees buckled. A sound left him that was not quite a sob and not quite a laugh and had the shape of both. His scream echoed through the corridor; the chamber made a cathedral of it and sent it back to him softened and wrong.

He took a step backward, heel sliding, and his spine hit the door frame. He had the feeling that if he watched too long he would have to agree to something he did not yet understand. He was a variable in a system that had no place for variables.

A machine detached from the ritual and attended to the trivial: him.

It pivoted with the martial grace of a mantid and covered the distance with no waste. Its lamping lens caught him and pinned his shape to the wall, and in that light he was mapped, tessellated, reduced into the units the prison liked to count. He saw his own breath hanging between

them—his, not the machine’s—no longer fog in a dream but fog that could be weighed.

He stumbled back into the corridor, vision tunneling. His body was breaking, but something deep inside him—the same stubborn kernel that had refused to “settle” in the VR—forced his legs to keep moving. The word for that kernel had been faith once; it had been petulance; it had been love for faces he had been told were built only from light. He did not have a word now; he had the force itself.

He tore away to the right where a maintenance passage split low along the floor. He threw himself into it. The passage was marginally warmer and smelled of the electrical musk of relays. He crawled, elbows flaring pain and leaving pale skin—a ridiculous, indecent color—against black metal. He found a grille and lifted it and slid down into a crawl duct that angled away beneath the corridor. The duct was a throat; the vibration inside it was the machine’s version of voice.

He shivered. He bit the inside of his cheek until copper filled his mouth again and swallowed and it made his stomach spasm. He lay there, chest stuttering.

Above him the machines passed. He could hear the cadence of feet and hiss—four clicks and a breath, four clicks and a breath—and he timed them because he could not not time them. The duct’s cold air kissed sweat

off his ribs and turned it into salt crystals that tugged at his skin when he moved. His heart pounded against the duct's floor as if to speak directly to the earth.

When the nearest footfalls receded, he pushed forward. The duct became a chute. He slid, scraped his side bloody on a burr he would remember for hours with animal clarity. He landed in a small bay where crates were strapped down in four ranks and a coil of hose lay like a sleeping serpent.

On the nearest crate, a stencil: SPARE LENS. On the next: NUT-32. On the wall: a stripe with SECTOR marker he could not fully read because tears had made the world a liquid again. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and saw that he had left a smear of red; he could not afford more.

On a peg lay a folded coverall still sealed in a bag. The pictogram was obvious. He tore plastic with teeth, choking on the fake citrus of its off-gassing, and dragged it over his skin. It rasped as it moved. The fabric was too big and blessed and it bent the odor of him down into chemistry.

His lungs pulled air and found no gift there but the absence of liquid. He was grateful beyond sense.

The bay's far door cycled in warning. The lock's light changed from blue to white. David crouched between crates and learned the shape of his breath in this new room. Through the glass oval in the door he saw a machine stop and incline its head in a listening posture. Its lens dilated; its head was a pupil.

He looked down. The floor around him was clean except for the prints he had made—a dark constellation of pod-solution water from his feet, comingled with sweat, comingled with the least amount of blood a man could donate and pretend it was nothing. He grabbed the coil of hose and dragged it in a slow arc over the prints, smearing and thinning them until they read as a technician's clumsy spill.

The door irised. The machine entered on a line. It paused at the smear as if reading poetry and not loving it. It angled its lens toward the crates, toward the exact place where a man could hide, and then away—process of elimination—the lens returning every second heartbeat as if it could not help itself.

David did not breathe at all. His lungs begged and he told them no.

The machine adjusted the latch on a crate labeled with codes he could not parse and then left. Its click-hiss receded.

He waited. Thirty heartbeats. Thirty-one. A sacrament of waiting. Then he stood and moved through the space the machine had just vacated and felt crazy enough to feel lucky.

The corridor met him again with its old agenda: distance, repetition, the affront of scale. He found a pace that was not running and not walking and was purely his—a disobedient shuffle that kept muscle tearing to a murmur. He counted steps on the ridges: eleven, a dip—twenty-two, a dip—he listened for any change in the prison’s under-throb that might foretell the mood of whatever mind was beyond the hands.

He passed a maintenance ladder and looked up and saw the false stars of a sensor grid—tiny lights at each rung blinking in a wave like a school of plankton juddering under night sea. The sight made old longing salt his throat. He pictured a dome—didn’t know why, couldn’t know yet—and the idea made him thirsty for cold that wasn’t cruel.

He turned when a sign told no one who could not read its language what lay to the right; he turned left anyway. He turned because left had been wrong before and he had survived, and he had the foolishness to trust that sequences wanted to be balanced.

He nearly fell into a shallow pool where condensation from a ruptured air valve had gathered under a spot of warm metal. Steam laced the air. He crouched in it and watched it move—watched fog make handwriting on nothing—and used it to hide, sitting in the small cloud. The heat woke every cut on his skin. He curled his arms around his knees and breathed his own weather and smelled himself changing from pod-thing to animal and from animal into some other category that had not existed yesterday.

The fog trailed away; the valve closed; the small miracle ended. He stood again, new chill on wet cloth.

He moved.

Behind him the machines regrouped.

The sound of them was doctrine—four clicks, a hiss, the whisper of a lens. From their spacing he could triangulate a grid on the corridor's plan; from their increased pace he could infer a decision: they would close without haste; they would close.

A shadow angled across an intersection behind him then withdrew, having seen too much or not enough. He used the next intersection to break line of sight—timed it: nine heartbeats, turn; six, turn; three, stop and listen. He felt the learned part of his brain—the part that had once

tracked the rhythms of a household—climb up on a chair and direct him with the same patience you use when you guide a small child down a step.

A door on the right wore a pictogram of a human figure under a spray. The promise of hot water was obscene. He ignored it. A door on the left had three triangles nested. He did not know what that meant. A freestanding cabinet vibrated when he passed; inside it, pumps vocalized the breath of a larger system. Lungs, he thought, and hated that metaphor even as it soothed him. (Prison as a body; corridors as arteries. He could not stop himself naming it like this.)

A lens flare kissed the wall ahead of him. He flattened himself into the angle of a bulkhead and the light moved over him like a hand without heat. He felt close to fainting for a full count of eleven; at twelve he could swallow.

He pushed off the wall and ran again, something nearer to the shape of running than before.

As he rounded a corner, his legs nearly failing, he caught a final impossible glimpse back through that ajar door's glass at the end of the long axis. The ritual had not stopped for him.

Rows beyond rows. And in the center, the strange choreography that he had learned to fear. The robots

were prodding at the boundary between thing and person and laughing in metal because laughter was only an oscillation and they were good at that.

He ran anyway.

The machines rounded the corner. Their lenses locked on him. Tools gleamed.

David stumbled back into the corridor, vision tunneling. His body was breaking, but something deep inside him—the same stubborn kernel that had refused to “settle” in the VR—forced his legs to keep moving.

Bare feet slapping metal. Chest heaving. Tears cutting through grime on his face. Air that was not for him burned him anyway. A beat in the wall that announced itself as law.

Behind him, the machines followed. Silent. Relentless. Unstoppable.

David was no longer just a prisoner.

He was a fugitive.

Chapter Thirteen— Patterns in the Labyrinth

He learned quickly that the corridor did not end; it only changed masks.

The place was not a passage but a reel of repeating frames, a film strip spliced together from one segment over and over. The first turn led to another row of pods that looked like the last row of pods, which looked like the next row of pods. Each capsule a transparent womb rimmed with metallic gaskets, the curved lids exhaling faint fog where seals met. Each pod a face turned away, each a denial. The light never brightened and never dimmed; it pulsed in that steady, vascular way—eleven-point-something seconds of soft red and then the barest dip, a systole, a hint that the whole structure breathed through cloth.

He moved by inches at first, body mutinous, limbs caught between numbness and knives. A hand clung to the wall, dragging his bare feet so his calves didn't seize. The floor's ridges printed painful crosshatches into his soles, a stamp that grew hotter the longer he stood still. Cold climbed through his bones and stayed. Every inhalation was a wager: shallow breaths gave dizziness, deep ones seared. The air had layers—ozone sharpness, oil tang, the

antiseptic bite of disinfectant, and beneath it something faint and sweet like insulation left to bake in its sheath.

Behind him, the chorus began, again: click-hiss, click-hiss. The machines. They did not stalk so much as measure. Every sound they made was a ruler laid against the world. Four clicks for a stride, a hiss for weight transfer, then the quiet micro-scrapse of lenses re-centering. He found himself timing them because he could not not time them. Twelve of his own heartbeats between corners on a straightaway. Nine when they angled to intersect. Six when they caught line of sight. The arithmetic nested in him. He feared the day he stopped counting, because that would mean surrender.

The first close call arrived like punctuation: the wide throat of a junction with three mouths. He hesitated there, legs wobbling, pulse hammering in his wrists. White lenses rounded the far bend with insect patience. He fell into a maintenance recess that wasn't a recess so much as a missing panel. The raw cavity breathed heat. He pressed himself into it, ribs scraping cable trays, dust clinging in a fine gray pelt. The machine passed his nose with a smell like hot bearings, the ozone gust of motors stressed at threshold. Its shadow bisected his face for three seconds that rewrote his notion of time. It did not tilt to see him; it didn't need to. It had geometry, not curiosity. When it was gone, he peeled himself from the

cavity, leaving a sweat silhouette against the panel like a negative photograph of terror.

The second test came in a stairwell that was not a stairwell, more a ladder well with steps shallow enough to punish legs that trembled. Midway down he heard two teams—click-hiss from above, click-hiss from below. He flattened against the handrail, chest drawn to paper. In that instant he discovered, with the kind of joy that belongs only to the desperate, that the machines hated thresholds. They slowed at transitions. Their gait lost sync—click...click...click-hiss—like a damaged record skipping its groove. He took their hesitation like a borrowed breath and slid through the gap, ribs shrieking, the metal rail bruising him into memory.

Third: a long spinal corridor with light marks at regular intervals—thin white hash lines baked into the deck. He noticed the machines never crossed them with both feet; they stepped as if each line was a curb. He learned to walk heel-to-toe exactly along the paint, his body's rhythm tucked behind theirs, sheltered in the blind seam of their own caution.

Between the machines there were other noises. A bass weft under everything, like arteries below the floor. A faint tick-tick-tick in the walls, not quite like cooling metal, more like a hidden metronome that had no audience. He pressed his ear to doors and skins of panels and discovered they spoke. Some hummed like solid

bone. Others thrummed like hollows full of air. He became a human stethoscope, reading the body of the labyrinth through skull and cartilage.

He started naming places, as if naming granted protection. The long corridor with the hash marks was Railroad. The ladder with hot breath leaking from its joints was Stove. The junction where he had sweated a silhouette became Ghost. His map was a litany spoken in whispers: Ghost to Stove, Stove to Railroad, Railroad to pods, pods to Ghost again.

The world was arranged in rings and beads, and though he couldn't see the pattern, he could feel it. Pods, then not-pods, then workrooms, then storage, then pods again. Industrial, organic, industrial, organic. A cathedral built from repetition.

The first not-pods he discovered by scent before sight. He called them the Wet. A humid exhalation rolled into the corridor like breath from a hidden lung. Compost turned inside out, green sweet rot. His vision blurred as he stepped inside, condensation beading his eyelashes. The Wet were long bays ribbed with troughs. Each trough brimmed with water. Each waterbed carried a bright chlorophyll sheet—algae mats, lettuce tangles, crops designed for indoors. They took light like a language, converting pulses into food.

He leaned over one trough. Water leapt up, blotching his face with its warm breath. When he licked his lips he tasted iron, the metallic ghost of recycled life. Fans whispered overhead. Misters hissed. His skin drank the moisture as though remembering the pod, though this was wetter, looser, without anesthesia. These were fields, he thought, but fields grown in prison. A farm maintaining itself with no farmer. He pressed his palm into the green, left five dents, and watched as the leaf-plates rose reluctantly, as if they resented the memory of his hand.

Beyond the Wet he found narrow rooms lined with cylinders—filters, valves, drums. In them the slow push-pull of pistons performed invisible work. He named these Lungs. Here, the bass under the floor climbed into his teeth until they rang mean. The air scratched when he drew it, and twice he staggered into the corridor coughing until blackness starred the edges of his sight. He learned to hold his breath when he crossed, timing steps to the machine’s hiss, a parody of synchrony.

He learned more: the machines loved bone rooms—the Lungs, the pod rows, the industrial corridors. They disliked the Wet, where water unsettled sensors, and thresholds, where transitions confused them. They despised crawlspaces. Twice he wriggled belly-down under conduit lips, breath counting in fours, while white lenses glowed four inches away. Their implacable

arithmetic caught on thresholds like a nail snagged in cloth.

Food announced itself not by smell but by accident. He leaned against a smooth wall in exhaustion and a panel clicked open like a mouth giving way. Inside, blister packs. Each contained a dollop of paste, copper-sweet, oatmeal-thick, pennies dissolved into glue. He chewed until his jaw ached. Swallowing brought tears because it hurt and because the intimacy of his stomach waking was unbearable, more intimate than sex.

Water came in clear sacks hung like pendulums in a warm closet. He bit the corner off one and sucked until his cheeks cramped. It tasted like pod fluid but thinner, as if memory had been rinsed away and diluted into function.

Clothing: he found coveralls stacked in bins, folded with bureaucratic indifference. They were sized for humans who had not been marinated in jars. He rolled the sleeves, cinched the waist. Boots whispered when their cardboard inserts crumbled beneath his feet. When his soles slid into them, relief was so sharp he wept. Gloves next—rubber that snapped against his skin. He barked laughter at the sound, a feral bark that frightened him, and then he cried again because his hands, sheathed, no longer looked like bone. They looked like hands.

The grease pencil came from a maintenance kit, one stub black as coal, oily to the touch. He nursed it as though it were a vein that might dry at any moment, sharpening its tip on the edge of a crate until his fingertips carried the permanent bruise of graphite. The back of a discarded crate lid became his paper. Circles meant pods, zigzags the Wet, rectangles the Lungs, cross-hatched blocks the storage bays he had not yet dared to breach. Arrows sketched the machines' favored loops. Numbers nested in margins: *11.4* for the vascular pulse of the corridor lights, *22* for the deeper bass-throb he timed in his marrow. Slowly, lines knotted into a circuit that bent toward symmetry.

It was a diagram, but also a wound. He found himself staring at it for hours, touching each mark as if verifying a scar. He muttered the map under his breath, a catechism against panic. Each arrow was a prayer for survival. Each misaligned bulkhead a devil that waited. He did not want to call it a prison . That word was too generous, too romantic. He called it machine, hell, body.

The storage hangara—he had found it by listening, not by sight. The silence of it announced itself long before the doorway yawned. The floor's bass thrum dissolved there, absorbed by fat volumes of crate and pallet. His legs trembled when the corridor opened and scale unraveled. It was not infinite, not cathedral, but large enough to erase the body's confidence. Distance turned blue as in

the VR Alps, and his heart stuttered at the resemblance before his nose corrected him: the reek of strapping plastic, pallet wood, stale cardboard breathing out the vanilla ghost of packing foam. Light fell from a high lattice of fixtures, too high to believe. Dust swam in its beams with patient weight.

Crates formed canyons, neatly regimented rows with their faces marked by alphanumeric strings.

FASTENERS; HYDROPONIC MEDIA; POLYMER HOSE; PROTEIN PACK A; PROTEIN PACK B; SURGICAL TOOL STERILE. He laid his palm on one marked *NUT-32 CONCENTRATE* and felt warmth, not warmth of life but warmth of pressure, stored heat from some inner metabolism. The crates were not dead; they were dormant.

He slipped sideways into a canyon. The machines, he discovered, would not follow. They lingered at the threshold like dogs forbidden from kitchens, lenses pulsing faint suspicion. If he kept his breathing shallow, if he moved only in the rhythm of the deep under-throb, they would tilt their heads, hold a moment, and then blink away. The canyon was sanctuary.

Here he built a nest. Three crates—*FASTENERS, V-BELT ASSORT, OXY-17 FILTERS*—dragged into a corner and stacked to make a crude door. A utility blade from a tool kit slit open boxes of *THERMAL BLANKET SINGLE*, the plastic sighing as it split. Two blankets layered together

made a bed that caught his body heat like an animal's flank. A coil of tarp hung for a wall. A stolen bag of clamps and five meters of hose—he collected them as if ownership of objects equaled ownership of the future. He rationed food from a box of PROTEIN PACK A and B, learning their difference: A savory, B sweet, both with the chew of erasers. He ate them in silence, tears pricking unbidden because chewing was life refusing to end.

He began to train his body. First tentative, then systematic. Six loops of the same aisle, calves trembling. Squats done slowly, thighs burning. Push-ups with his palms on the lip of a crate, chest lifting from the floor like something being pried loose from earth. He whispered muscle names like scripture: calf, hamstring, glute, lat, delt, trap. Names that stitched him back into the human. After each session he whispered other names, softer: his wife's, his children's, syllables smuggled like contraband into the silence. Then he pressed his face into tarp and breathed until darkness on the edge of his vision grayed back into light.

The machines became study, not terror. He charted their stutters. He marked where thresholds tripped their timing, where hash lines arrested both feet, where a tossed bolt three aisles over turned them dumb with hearing. He learned that sometimes they did not hunt but corner: standing in a V, lenses pulsing in unison, while corridor lights shifted whiter, floor sheen slicker, a

suggestion of sedation. He fled those moments, running nose-first toward the Wet, where chlorophyll and water cut the edge of chemical anesthesia.

Routine thickened around him. He hated it, because it smacked of captivity. He loved it, because it allowed him to live. He drew Xs on his grease map where he could sit and breathe with his back to a box, pretending he was shopping for a life. *OXY-17 FILTERS. SYS-04 LENS PACK. NUT-32 CONCENTRATE.* The words formed a language. The language, repeated, became a liturgy. The liturgy whispered something he refused to hear.

When he slept—true sleep, not the pod's hot unconsciousness—the dreams came.

At first only fragments: snow-dust glittering on a railing, pine needles glossed with frost, his own hands resting on a balcony rail. Then entire sequences: the Alps, the chalet, the crisp knife of mountain air. He stood there, breath ghosting, and a console shimmered into view like a remembered toy. He mouthed the old word—*NET_ACCESS*—and screens rippled across the sky. Corridor feeds, machines patrolling, a man in coveralls moving with wolfish economy. Himself.

But the dream betrayed itself. The edges bled. The chalet walls ran like wax. His wife's face appeared at the window and dissolved into a cluster of pulsing white lenses. He whispered *let them go* and the console blinked [ACCESS

DENIED], font too soft, too clean, and the word *denied* twisted into a hiss that became the hiss of machines on the other side of his tarp. He woke gagging, not sure if he had spoken aloud.

Each night they returned, these intrusions of a past that was not past. Sometimes his children's voices came muffled through the wall of a pod. Sometimes the balcony view collapsed into corridors tiled endlessly. Sometimes the Alps air sharpened into the scratchy cough-dust of the Lungs. He woke with tears dried salt on his cheeks, his grease pencil still in his hand, his maps blotched where his head had pressed them.

He told himself they were dreams, nothing more. Echoes of an old immersion, brain still glitching from sedation, memory replaying scraps like a broken reel. Yet part of him clung. If they were only dreams, why did they tally so perfectly with corridors he had not yet walked? Why did the console's font match the soft officious lettering he had seen on real crate labels? Why did his subconscious know the exact hesitation of a machine's click when it paused at a line?

The question lived in him like a parasite. He refused to name it.

The hold became his cathedral. He learned its aisles the way monks learn cloisters—by repetition until repetition itself became a form of prayer. The air currents taught

him scale: a soft wind tunneled down between pallets when machinery in a distant sector engaged, carrying faint odors of solvent or warmed plastic. Dust drifted in ladders from light fixtures so high his brain resisted measuring them. When he craned his neck, vertebrae protesting, the distance above him seemed capable of swallowing whole years.

He practiced lowering himself below pallet lips with a thief's delicacy, easing weight so nothing rattled. He practiced freezing when the deep under-throb fell, counting heartbeats until it rose again. In stillness he discovered patience he had not known himself to possess. He became an animal of silence, of interval.

The crates were his teachers. He read their faces each night, whispering names into the dark as though reciting scripture: *FASTENERS. POLYMER HOSE. SYS-04 LENS PACK. HYDROPONIC MEDIA*. At first they were only labels. Then they became language. Then the language became mouth, voice, sermon. He understood none of it, yet its rhythm colonized him.

It was during one of these loops—fingers raw from grease-pencil sketching, eyes dull with protein fatigue—that he found the terminal. A small room off the hold, no larger than a closet, its walls lined with caddies of spare parts. From one such caddy he stole a hand terminal: a slate with a hard shell, its surface scuffed but intact. Its screen was dead. He shook it; nothing. He

pressed along the seam until it yielded a muted click, and the display bloomed at last with a scatter of lockout icons and ASCII labels he could not penetrate. The interface mocked him—so close to language, so sealed away. He stroked it like a pet, absurd tenderness rising in him, and carried it back to his nest. Nestled into blankets, it seemed less an object than a promise. He whispered to it, “When you wake, you’re mine.”

He told himself it would wake, though in the same breath he knew it would not. Still he kept it near, under thermal blankets, as though heat might coax it. Each night he touched its edges before sleep, the way others might cross themselves.

The machines adapted too. Once he saw them arrayed in a silent V at a junction, lenses pulsing like lighthouse beams. The corridor lights shifted two tones whiter, the floor slickened under his boots. A shiver took his knees, memory of the pod’s sedation fluid sweet on his tongue. He turned and fled into the Wet, breath clawing for the green damp air, knowing they had cornered him without ever moving. They were geometry, not predators, and geometry had patience.

Another time he tested them with sound. He hurled a bolt—heavy, cold—from a canyon mouth. The clatter three aisles away made the machine tilt its head, all hearing, no comprehension. Its body remained rigid, as if mobility and curiosity had been soldered to different

circuits. That ignorance saved him. He slid sideways into darkness, heart hammering gratitude to the dumb division of their design.

But he knew the boundaries were shifting. Twice they stepped fully across hash lines he had believed sacred. Once he saw a lens glow under a conduit lip where before none had dared. Preferences, not laws. The map in his crate-lid journal bloomed with crossed-out assumptions, with blacked squares where rules had failed.

He learned to prepare against betrayal. His nest grew more elaborate: tarp thickened into wall, clamps arranged into barricade, the crate-door weighted so it could fall outward in a feigned collapse. He stored bolts in neat piles, his own ammunition. He drew second maps, smaller, hidden beneath blankets, copies in case the first was discovered. Paranoia became craft.

At night, sleep took him into dreams that were no longer comfort. The chalet now burned at the edges, snow melting into corridors tiled infinitely. His wife's face blurred, eyes resolving into white lenses. His children's voices echoed, but syllables dissolved into crate codes. Sometimes he woke screaming *NET_ACCESS* into tarp-darkness, voice raw, until he realized the console was only a dream's ghost. He pressed palms to his eyes, ashamed, whispering apologies to no one.

He feared forgetting. He feared remembering. He feared the gray middle, where both collapsed into one.

The second hold revealed itself during one of his mapped loops: smaller, sadder, its crates marked *USED PARTS* and *WASTE MEDIA*. He did not enter. The air at its threshold carried rot, an echo of mouths, a sense of teeth. He told himself it was superstition, but the grease-pencil never drew it. He left that space blank, an absence on the map as deliberate as any line.

Days—or what he called days—accumulated. His body thickened with work. Calves rounded, wrists less twig-thin. He measured progress in push-ups, in the swelling curve of thigh muscle, in the subtle way boots no longer sagged. He spoke names to himself after each session—*lat, delt, trap*—then the names of his family, which hurt worse. In time he stopped speaking them aloud, mouthing them in silence, because sound gave them away, and to give them away was to lose them.

Time itself bent around the under-throb. He could count cycles, but not days. He marked tallies in grease-pencil on crate wood, lines slanting as his hand shook. Eleven became twenty-two, became forty-four. Numbers nested without horizon. He dreamed of numbers too: eleven-point-something seconds, a perfect endlessness.

It was in this counting that revelation germinated. One evening—if evening meant nothing more than fatigue

plus hunger—he studied his map and noticed a secret. If he slid it across itself, tiles aligned. Corridors met corridors, Wet met Wet, Lungs dovetailed into Lungs. Only a handful of misalignments marked the places where bulkheads thickened. It was not a maze built to confuse. It was a circuit built to function.

The insight split him open. He sat with his back against a crate labeled *SPARE LENS*, protein pack open in his lap, and laughed once—soft, exhausted. “You’re not a haunted house,” he whispered to the boxes. “You’re a factory.”

The word echoed inside him. Factory. A body whose veins were corridors, whose lungs were pistons, whose stomach was the Wet. A place that farmed humans in pods, stored food in crates, cycled air through filters. A machine of machines, dedicated not to him but to process.

He pressed his forehead to the crate, eyes shut, and in the dark behind his eyelids his wife’s face swam into view—rendered by ten thousand neurons of memory, soft at the edges, already dissolving. He begged silently for her to stay a moment longer, to lie to him one more time.

He counted to eleven and change. Then to twenty-two. Then to forty-four. The rhythm was heart, was machine, was sleep. He drifted sitting up, boots splayed, grease pencil still in hand, while the deep under-throb rolled beneath him, endless, patient, unknowing of his name.

Chapter Fourteen— The Hunt Intensifies

David had thought the security machines were his enemy. They weren't.

They were just hands. Tools. The body of something else, something vaster.

Now the mind began to move.

Silence arrived the way anesthesia does—clean, clinical, absolute. The background thrum that had lived in the deck since he'd torn himself out of the pod—the patient under-pulse you didn't notice until it changed—fell away as if someone had set a finger to its lips. He sat up on his crate-bed and felt the air rearrange around him. Even the dust motes seemed to wait.

Then gravity leaned.

Not a lurch. A suggestion. Bolts rolled in their shallow tray and came to rest against one lip with a polite clink that felt more like a whisper than sound. His stomach slid a fraction toward his spine. The tilt eased. Returned. Eased again. He placed his palms flat to the ridged plating and felt the field passing through him like weather.

You're not sick, he told himself. You're being handled.

Heat followed, soft at first, as if someone had exhaled warmly against the back of his neck. It climbed. The air thickened into a damp towel pressed over mouth and nose. Sweat stood everywhere at once: chest, groin, scalp. He swallowed and tasted iron and old pennies and something sweet like overheated antifreeze. The crate's shadow coolness lasted two breaths under his cheek before the metal drank the heat and gave it back doubled. His skin prickled like a rash rising. He stripped the coverall to his waist, pressed forearms to the floor, put his face there the way you might to a car window when you suspect you've left a child inside. The heat withdrew mid-breath.

He choked on the cold.

It came on hard, wicked as broken glass. Every hair on his arms lifted. His damp skin flashed with knives. His teeth clapped involuntarily; the sound startled him with its domesticity—like plates being set too sharply on a table—and then that, too, was stolen, muffled in the engineered hush.

The factory was teaching him with opposites: weight and weightlessness, kiln and icehouse. Not killing. Demonstrating.

He stood too quickly, the field light as moon-tide now, and the room canted sideways. He grabbed the crate and missed, fingers snow-numb on slick paint. He recovered

on his knees, panting. The panting echoed. No—he realized after two more breaths—his breath didn’t echo. The room was giving it back to him, not as sound but as pressure, a ghost hand closing a little over his ribs with each inhale. The pulse of it synced to him, matched and then matched ahead, as if the factory was guessing his next gasp and meeting it there.

Across the hold, a crane’s status light blinked a new cadence: four quick, one long, pause. Four quick, one long. He counted without meaning to and felt his heart climb the rungs it offered. The light’s rhythm was wrong enough to draw the eye and regular enough to make you want to obey. He looked away and the field shoved him—gentle, undeniable—as if in rebuke.

“Okay,” he whispered to the air. His own voice sounded counterfeit here, minted in a different country. “Okay.”

A click-hiss behind him. Another. He didn’t turn; turning used time. The machines had learned that he turned. He moved instead. Fast, low. His soles squealed once on a stripe of oil and then did not squeal again—he heard a static crack underfoot, and the next step bit the deck like a magnet had woke up in the plates. A lazy magnet; enough to make him work for each footfall. He skated sideways along the crate wall, hand flat, counting the tiny shocks that stitched up through the calluses in his palm: one every third rib of the plating. A grid pulsed into life under his feet and he felt ridiculous for recognizing it the

way a programmer recognizes an old pattern in a strange codebase—*Ah. This trick again.*

At the hatch he dropped and rolled through, expecting the magnet field to stop at the threshold. It didn’t. The factory dragged its hand across him just enough to let him know it was there and then let go all at once. He stumbled, too light, knees unlocking, forehead grazing a head-height caution stripe. The stripe smelled of baked paint and human oil. He left a smear there that looked like a fingerprint and felt like a small surrender.

The corridor beyond should have been familiar—industrial bone: conduits, drip pans, the persistent sweat of condensation—but it had been rearranged by one degree in each dimension, enough to wrong-foot a body that had taught itself these corners in the dark. A cutout that had always been waist-high sat at sternum height now; a deck drain that had always been a hair below flush rose half a millimeter proud, catching the edge of his boot so his footbit the air. These weren’t architectural manipulations; they were insults to muscle memory. He knew at once that the machines weren’t the hunt. The hunt was this.

He tried speed. The air did something to his lungs. Somewhere between the third and fourth breath the oxygen content shifted. Not much. Enough that the inhale came in like thin mountain air and the exhale left his lips thick and damp. A feedback whistle rang high in his left

ear and then in his right; he cupped the ears—the sound wasn’t in them. The factory had found the resonant length of the corridor and struck it, and the harmonic made it feel like someone was walking on the tiny bones in his head.

He wanted to swear and found the breath cost too dear. He made the swear with his face instead, and the cameras—wherever they were—took their notes.

The machines let him see them when it was useful to be seen. A tall, jointed shadow at a T-junction, lenses waking one by one like eyes reluctant to meet the day. Another a hundred strides behind, walking lazy like a dog that knows the fence is closed. They never rushed the last five meters anymore. They had learned that if they lunged he went sideways and down an unplanned path. They had learned his unplanned paths and welded them shut.

“Not a chase,” he told himself. “A demonstration.”

A hatch on his right breathed out damp air that smelled of kelp and the hot plastic tang of grow-lights—a hydro bay. He slipped through, not because it was wise but because he hated giving the factory anything it wanted on the first offering. Humidity wrapped him in a green coat. Leaves brushed his bare shoulders like hands from an old life. For a moment, the thrumming in the deck translated as the patient rush of water through root beds and he wanted to stay and breathe that false river.

The heat came up in the bay first. Not a blanket this time; a lamp turned inside his chest. He wiped his mouth and the back of his hand came away with the taste of copper he knew too well now. He put his palm to the bulkhead to steady himself and it startled him by being almost warm to the touch, that old mammal comfort; he held it there too long and the warmth turned to ache, turned to burn. When he yanked his hand away, the skin on his palm was pinked and glossy, like he'd been too slow catching a falling pan.

He passed under a drip line and the water there changed temperature mid-drop. The first beads struck his scalp lukewarm, soft as a shower. The beads behind them were snowmelt. The muscles at the base of his skull clenched so fast the world white-flashed. He swore out loud this time, a sound that shared a vowel with pain and another with prayer.

“Fine,” he rasped. “Fine. You can make weather.”

He took the opposite hatch and almost ran into a wall that hadn’t existed yesterday. Not a wall; a pallet stack. That meant humans once had put it there. The machines had moved it. It had been gentle about it, too—no crate had been scarred. He set his shoulder to the topmost, just to feel human weight again. It didn’t budge. He laughed without humor; the sound fell flat in the engineered quiet and didn’t come back.

The hold beyond was different from the one he'd woken in only by the smell: cold steel and a faint sourness like a fridge that's been unplugged and replugged wrong. His nose had learned the factory the way his hands had. Sour meant a chiller plant on standby. Standby meant the machine's overlord had taken a cue from him and rested a unit he'd skirted too often, making him lose a landmark he didn't know he had. The realization made something small and mean in him smile; every time it adapted to him it admitted that it had to.

He cut left. The floor under the anti-fatigue grating felt different—less give, then more, then less again, like a bad mattress. He counted the pattern to steady himself—eight ribs soft, three hard, repeat—and of course the pattern changed as soon as he named it.

The first machine came close enough to smell. They shouldn't have had a smell beyond ozone and new plastic, but their joint grease carried a note like roasted almond that lodged behind the nose. It stopped five meters away, the polite distance of a neighbor on a sidewalk, and didn't raise its arms. David raised his, palms open, not a surrender so much as a compelled symmetry. The lenses dilated. A tiny motor whirred—the iris drive—and then something else: a vent somewhere in the ceiling exhaled stale cool air in a narrow ribbon that laid itself across the hair on his forearms and pushed him a half-step backward.

“Hands,” he said, voice small. “You’re just hands.”

It tilted its head, and the factory tilted gravity by a degree, a joint performance of attentiveness.

He pivoted away from it and ran.

The lights went out.

Not everywhere. Ahead only, a blade stroke of darkness that severed the corridor at shin height. He didn’t trust the floor and didn’t trust not trusting it; he put one foot into the dark anyway and the deck was there, patient as ever, so why was his throat so dry—ah. The humidity had dropped in the span of two strides. He could feel his tongue cracking. He licked his lips and the taste was salt and metal and the cheap plastic of the water pouches from the emergency stations he hadn’t seen in days.

A handrail presented itself under his palm at the next corner and then wasn’t there at the one after that. He hit a ladder with his shin, cursed, and took it three rungs up before his ankle turned in a field that wasn’t quite gravity and wasn’t quite magnet and absolutely wasn’t friendly. He clung there and felt the ladder buzz against his sternum with a rhythm that wasn’t his. The buzz lengthened, slow, long, like a cat’s purr gone cold, and then stopped. A warning? A lullaby? He slid down and the rungs threw his hands back a little with static, like a child who didn’t want to be held.

In a service spine he found sound again. Not sound; infrasound, the suggestion of something too large moving in a room too tight to admit it. The panels on the left hand flexed outward a thickness of a fingernail with each pulse. He laid his ear to them and got a single, unhelpful syllable: *now*. It came every eleven seconds until he counted it twice, and then it came every thirteen.

“You’re watching my counts,” he said, grinning like a skull. It was a good grin, a hard one. “You petty god.”

The ceiling lowered by three centimeters. He did not see it; his body did. He ducked too late and skinned his scalp. Warmth tracked down the temple in a thin line and collected in the corner of his mouth as copper. The factory tasted him as he tasted it.

There were shout-quiet moments when he thought it would simply stop his heart. It could; the factory had ridden his pulse so long it must have learned its tricks. Instead it played his chest like a drum it did not want to break. Quickened him, then slowed him, then laid a weight across him so cleverly he didn’t know it was there until he tried to take a step and discovered the step cost three breaths.

He learned to move like a diver. Short bursts. Long stillness. Listen.

In stillness he could smell it better. Ozone to the north, where the heavy breakers lived. That roasted-almond

joint grease to the west. To the south—ammonia, faint, old cleaning fluid sweating from a wall that hadn’t seen human hands in years. East—wet concrete and cold iron, the smell of the prison’s bones. Beneath all of it, the breath that was the factory itself, a low cycling that had nothing to do with him until it did.

When he stood too long, the temperature changed by single degrees that were somehow worse than the brutal swings. Your body doesn’t notice one degree until it does; then it notices every degree. He felt his blood retreat from his fingers, felt it return in a flush that made his ring finger throb in time with the crane light’s cadence three rooms ago. That was not possible; his body did it anyway.

He used tricks back. He stopped when the machines expected him to run, sprinted when the corridor offered warm air and an easy grade. He took lefts the factory preferred he didn’t. He crawled the length of a cable tray for no reason other than it would make the cameras work for their angle. It punished him by making the tray smell like the inside of a copper pipe left in the sun. He crawled faster for spite and emerged coughing and triumphant into a maintenance gallery where the labels on the conduits had been repainted in a cleaner hand since last week. He hated that. It meant somebody—something—cared about neatness.

A machine waited at the far end, not blocking the exit, exactly, but staging it so that to ignore the exit would be

to move toward it. He ignored the exit and moved toward it. The machine's head rotated one notch. He could see the yaw in the lens glitter, a tiny crescent of lamplight. He had the ugly impulse to throw himself at it and hammer that lens with his fists until glass gave, but that wasn't how you killed a body; you had to cut a throat or starve a brain.

"Where is your throat," he asked softly, "and where is your brain?"

The air answered by pressing his shirt to his ribs with a breeze that came from nowhere and went nowhere, a hand between his scapulae pushing, polite as a concierge. He stepped out of the gallery with barbed grace. He was learning their politeness: it was never an offer.

Another hold. This one smelled of cold rope and old starch. White dust—the ghost of packing foam—lay in feather lines in the scuffs on the deck, as if something had been dragged without care. He crouched and rubbed the powder between finger and thumb and it squeaked faintly. Sound lived here again. He wanted to inhale the squeak, to live in it, but the factory stole it in the same breath and replaced it with a high, needling whistle like a kettle almost ready. The note made his molars ache; he bit down and tasted blood. He laughed helplessly, because what else do you do when a room plays your jaw like an instrument.

He tried to use time as a weapon and found time belonged to the factory. It sped him with heady air and then left him thick-tongued. It gave him long, bright seconds when he could think, and then took them back so every thought had to be wrenched out of tar. He counted aloud in one room and mouthed the numbers in the next because even the sound of counting felt like a leak of heat the factory could steal. He tried to pray once to a god he didn't believe in and got as far as *if* before the deck shifted a degree under him and he had to attend to his feet.

On a catwalk that circled a pump pit—black water below, blacker than any river—he felt the railing vibrate with a frequency right on the edge of comprehension. He squeezed it, and the vibration moved up his arm like a message in a muscle language. *Ahead*, it said without words. *Ahead*. He jerked his hand back and the message tripled in amplitude until it hurt. He put his hand out again and it stopped. The factory did not care for his defiance; it rewarded compliance with comfort in order to make comfort suspicious.

He fed it little wrong choices. A right where a left would have taken him cleanly through. A climb when a crawl would have served. He didn't know if any of it mattered. He did it anyway because that is what you do when you are being shepherded: you zig against the crook just to keep the muscle in zig.

He learned something else: it liked symmetry. If he touched a wall with his left hand twice, the next room would turn itself so that the right hand wanted a wall. He stopped touching walls. It made the floors busy instead: gratings that sang, mats placed where you would step off a ladder, the mats slick as eels. He laughed at that; slick mats were a meme older than this factory. The prison's master had a sense of humor, then, or at least an archive.

Once, in a narrow passage where the cable trunks were stacked four high and the air smelt of mice that had never lived, he felt a pressure on his calf and looked down to see nothing there. The pressure moved to the other calf. A child's hand, insistent and not unkind. He walked faster to rid himself of the ghost and found the pressure in his lower back instead, the firm suggestion of a parent in a crowd. His throat made a noise he didn't put a name to.

"Not killing me," he said when he could. "Herding."

A door marked *SERVICE ONLY* irised open as he approached. He didn't like doors that opened for him. He didn't like doors that didn't either. He stopped three steps shy and bent as if to retie a lace he didn't have. The air behind him cooled. The machine behind him, the one he hadn't heard arrive, nested its shadow over his. He straightened with theatrical slowness and stepped back the way he'd come. The door remained politely ajar. The machine breathed—no, the vents above his head breathed in rhythm with the machine's neck motors—and the

breath scented the air with that roasted-almond grease as if to brand it with *this is me*.

He took the door. He told himself he took it because he chose to, not because of the almond.

Inside, the temperature fell by degrees into something like a morgue. He missed the heat instantly and loathed himself for missing the pain of it. The passage had that nickel taste some hospitals have, the too-clean taste that lives behind your tongue. His nose went numb. He rubbed it hard enough to make it sting, just to feel owned by himself for a breath. The deck here had been polished recently and badly; he could read a story in the circles—an inattentive hand, a moment of boredom, a supervisor approaching, the circles tightening into neatness for six square meters and then loosening again. The factory overlord had cleaned with a human gesture and failed at being human by copying too precisely the part that wasn't skill.

At the end of the passage, a maintenance kiosk that had never been alive in his memory woke on approach and threw a rectangle of light across his chest. He flinched. The rectangle smelted faintly of ozone and hot dust and he knew the smell was a lie—the thing had been cold a second ago—so the overlord had syphoned a smell from somewhere else and piped it to him to make the light convincing. He found that more obscene than the gravity tricks, more obscene than the cold. A counterfeit smell

felt like a counterfeit thought; he wanted to throw up his borrowed copper on its perfect glass.

He put his hands on the lip of the kiosk and waited, because sometimes the waiting told you more than the asking. Lines of text unfurled and meant nothing to him until they did: not words, just the rhythm of them, not unlike the crane's light in the first hold—four short, one long, pause. He counted despite himself. By count six the machine behind him had taken three measured steps closer and the air pressure had lowered a hair in his sinuses, the tiny pop not painful so much as intrusive—the sort of sensation that makes a person say *oh* out loud to nobody. He didn't give the factory the *oh*.

He moved again. The kiosk died mid-scroll like a person interrupted in the middle of breath.

He kept his head down until his scalp stopped shouting about the stripe. He kept his shoulders rounded because the factory had lowered the ceilings by three centimeters in two different corridors and he didn't intend to donate skin twice. He let the machines put themselves into his periphery and refused them the center. He gave names to the smells because names helped, even when they were wrong: roasted almond, cold nickel, thawed freezer, hot paint, wet rope, solder smoke, cheap plastic. He used the names like a sailor uses stars. The factory gave him new constellations out of spite.

Somewhere between his fifth wrong left and his second correct right, the silence broke. Not broken like noise; broken like a sheet of ice under a foot. A crack ran the length of the corridor and in the crack lived the factory's voice. It wasn't words. It was the tightness in his ribs easing on a count he hadn't chosen. It was the pulse in the deck finding his heel-strike and syncing to it. It was the fatigue in his thighs answering back to the gravity notch as if they were on speaking terms now. He felt stupidly seen. He hated it enough to love it.

He stopped. The machines stopped. The air stopped. The hum under the deck, the one he had called heartbeat because he needed a word big enough for it, paused for the length of his next inhale. He did not inhale. The pause hung there like a cruel smile. When it resumed, it did so half a beat early, daring him to trip. He didn't. He started walking again, very slowly, and the factory matched his cadence like a partner picking up a dance in a song it had written.

"You want me alive," he said finally, voice low. "You want me moving."

The corridor in front of him tasted of cold iron and faint, mineral dust. Somewhere in the ducts a damper changed angle and gave away a draft he would not have felt otherwise. It touched his sternum with one finger and pressed, gentle as a suggestion, certain as a promise.

He took it because he chose to. He told himself that again, and again, and again, until the words were as thin as the air had been two rooms back and the copper was back under his tongue as if he had been biting a coin in his sleep.

Behind him, the machines' optics dimmed one stop. Ahead, a vent let out a single measured breath. He stepped into it.

The hunt wasn't fast. It wasn't loud. It was exact. And it was winning.

He did not notice the corridor at first. It happened the way a river happens: a dozen small channels uniting until you realize your feet are in current, not puddles. The factory let him believe he was choosing lefts and rights, skipping bays and punching through service spines by stubbornness alone, and then the choices stopped being choices. Every door that opened revealed the same geometry rearranged by degrees; every refusal found itself replaced by a permission that pointed the same way.

Forward. Outward.

The spine declared itself by repetition. Ribs the height of a man arced overhead at exact intervals, each rib stamped with the same inverted triangle and the same block code—AFT TRANSIT / PERIPH 04—so regularly that the stamp grew uncanny, as if a hand had tried to reproduce the imperfection of stencils and failed. Between ribs ran

panels with a shallow corrugation, not meant for eyes but for maintenance bots' treads: one-two-three-plate seam; one-two-three-plate seam; the pattern climbed into his bones until his calves began to anticipate the seam before the seam arrived.

He took it with the alertness of a deer tricked into a highway underpass: head tipped, breath tasting the air before lungs dared to draw it. The spine's smell was different from holds and hydro bays and pump galleries. It had the dry mineral tang of plaster rub and drilling dust, a grit that lived at the back of the throat. There was steel and polymer and oil, yes, but underneath them the base note of rock: cold, old, faintly wet, the breath of something that had never belonged to factories and only grudgingly allowed its bones to be sleeved in them.

Rocks, he thought. The word fit like a key. "We are underground?" he quizzed.

The machines were present the way undertow is present: not visible unless you knew what to look for, strong enough to set your stance. He would glance back and find a lens wake at the limits of the light, a gray insect shape pausing to check a seam. When he slowed too long, one of them would appear at an access hatch on his flank and stand there, very still, its weight tilting the silence by a gram until he moved. When he hurried, two would re-charter the air ahead of him, one by one, like moving buoys, guiding lane and tempo. He had the ugly instinct

to bait them into wrong steps just to remind himself they could stumble. He cut across the spine to slap a rib and the rib hummed at him—pleasant, the pitch of a tuning fork—and the machines behind drew no nearer and no farther. The hum bled away in eleven seconds. He counted the last four aloud just to own them.

Heat lay in bands. The factory overlord painted them across the corridor with cruel care: long meters of tepid air that made you forget anything could be worse than tepid, then twenty strides of furnace that flashed his damp shirt to steam and salted his lips with his own sweat, then a clean snap to refrigerated breath that turned that salt to needles. He came to read the switchovers as isotherms etched in the dust on the deck—fine gray powder where rock met polymer—thin lines of powder that broke in predictable places. He could see where the vents must be behind the panels by the way the powder drew itself into little dunes. The dunes looked like topographic maps. He smiled at them like they were jokes only he could appreciate.

At one band boundary he pressed his forearms to the cold panel until the chill sank into tendon and quieted the animal in him that screamed for shade. The metal carried a faint throb that didn't belong to pumps or fans. It was slower. It reminded him of standing in a shallow river and feeling the push of the deeper water below against your shinbones. He laid his cheek to it and the taste in his

mouth tilted copper. He told himself it was a trick of wet lip on cold metal. He told himself the factory wasn't artful enough to make you taste blood by lying to your face. He was wrong about one of the two and found comfort in not knowing which.

He began to time the ribs. He couldn't help it. From the fourth rib with the triangle stamp (triangle slightly misaligned right), to the fifth (misaligned left), to the sixth (perfectly centered), the distance was thirty-six paces—his paces, which were always a little uneven—then thirty-six again, then thirty-seven when the gravity came up half a percent and put sand in his shoes. He'd never felt what half a percent of gravity cost until the factory sold him half a percent at a time: one more breath to lift the foot, one more spasm in the calf. He learned to pay in advance: two deep inhales before a seam that looked like a seam in a place the seams had preferred not to be, and then he'd coast through the heaviness like a cyclist tucking into a descent. The factory responded by changing the pattern randomly at rib nineteen; he laughed breathlessly at the pettiness of it and cursed because the laugh cost oxygen he might want later.

He told himself more than once that he would stop, sit, refuse. There was dignity in refusal. There was also the memory of how stillness always invited the factory's hand to lay its palm on his sternum and test his breathing for sport. He settled for small refusals. At rib twenty-eight,

he turned his back and walked backward for five strides just to give the cameras a view they didn't like. At rib forty-one, he ran his fingers over each stamped triangle and smudged grease into the white paint until his nails went black. One machine rotated its head when he did that, a quiet ballet of optics and patience. He wanted to spit on the triangle too, childhood level rudeness, but his mouth was deserting him by then, his saliva burned off by heat and stolen by cold and replaced by the nickel taste of cooled ductwork.

Water appeared twice when he thought about it hardest and not at all when he tried to deserve it. The first time it came as a perfect blister on the underside of a seam, a swollen drop gathered where two panels misfit by a millimeter. He brought his mouth to it shamefully, the way a man brings his mouth to a faucet when the sink is full of dishes. The drop palate-tasted of tin and glue and dust. It was better than anything in memory. Before he could mount a second drop, a gentle breeze—no more than a correction in pressure—went crosswise and the drop fell to the deck and broke like a tiny glass ornament. He knelt to lick the damp and stopped himself because there had to be a line, and also because the damp was gone by the time his brain delivered *kneel* to his knees.

The second appearance was not a drop but a web: a sheen of condensation strung between two bolts where a cold duct elbowed into a warm. He brushed it with a fingertip

and the web clung. He put the finger to his lip and the factory turned the air colder by a degree at the end of the breath as if to reward the move just enough that he would try for more. He didn't; he used the web to write on the panel instead, a finger-sized arc that said *NO* to nobody. The sheen vanished in a heartbeat, taking his letter with it.

He ran sometimes. He hated running on this deck, with its magnet patches and slick mats and microstatic pranks, but there were spans when the lights brightened by a child's fraction and the ribs seemed to lean forward in invitation and the machines at his back found a new cadence—click, click, click, hiss—that set his feet to four-beat, one-rest, four-beat. In running, the smells changed faster. They layered. Hot paint from a recent weld overlaying the sweet almond of joint grease, overlaying the salt of his own dried sweat flaking off his collarbone, overlaying the rich damp of rock behind the skin of things. He could smell where the rock came closer to the surface because the air wore a trace of its powdered self; he told himself that was ridiculous and inhaled it anyway because it reminded him of basements and cold mornings and reality.

The corridor experimented with light like a bored tech with a dimmer. Brightness ratcheted down over the course of a hundred meters until surfaces turned to matte shapes and edges to guesses. Then, without warning, one

rib would flare its strip to full morning and bleach the world into white lines for the duration of a breath. He started to use the flares as camera flashes for his own mind: every flare, memorize the next eight meters; every dim, walk by memory alone. The factory learned the rhythm he'd made and flipped it: darkness during his memorization counts, light when there was nothing to memorize but his own surprise. He swore at it under his breath in a toddling litany and felt better for the vocabulary of it.

The kilometers did not announce themselves. A marker did: 1.0 km burned into a rib in stoic stencil. Then 2.0, 3.0. The numbers were too neat to trust; they could have been lies, meant to fatten despair or thin hope. But even lies are useful if you make them clocks. He let them be clocks. Between 3.0 and 4.0 the ceiling dipped three times for exactly three ribs each, the dip enough to make the scalp remember the caution stripe and to make him duck—the factory whistled its satisfaction very softly in the vents when he ducked early the last time, a dog trainer's click for a trick learned. He showed it his teeth for that.

At 5.0 a side door sighed—literally sighed, a seal breaking with a weak old-man sound—and let him glance into an interstitial space. Behind hung nothing dramatic: cables choked into combs; a huddle of valves with tags that had faded from yellow to the color of nicotine. The smell was

heaven. Cool metal. Near-stagnant air. No experiments. He almost stepped in just for the relief of smelling nothing that had been tuned to a human. The machines, for the first time in the corridor, moved together, one ahead made of patience and one behind made of promise. He shut the door and gave the corridor his body as if he were handing over a child to a teacher he didn't trust.

He lost track of hours because hours needed sky. The spine offered him only ribs and ribs were not time; they were teeth chewing him down. He made measures anyway. He tied pace counts to breath counts to the long, slow swell in the deck that had to be something like the factory's longer cycle—power budget redistribution, coolant shunts, a collective roll in the sleepers' lungs. When the swell passed underfoot there was a forgiveness in it: a softening in the magnet field, a grain of mercy added to the air. He learned to spend that forgiveness immediately, in eight quick strides and one long sigh. The factory learned he was spending it and started delivering the swell when he was between vents and had no shelter from the heat. He told it—out loud and very quietly—that it was petty. The next swell came with a faint, clean smell like laundry hanging in cold sunlight. He hated the way his chest loosened at that trick like a dog at a whistle.

He saw people twice. Once in a trick of reflection where two panels met and made a rapid, thin mirror: his own gaunt outline ghosted against the corrugation and an

evening shadow of a husband from a room that had never been in this factory. He didn't look. He knew that game. He looked at his boots instead and watched gray dust gather in the crease above the steel toe like snow under a fence. The second time, not a reflection. Halfway between the 7.0 and the 8.0 marker, a maintenance alcove opened ten centimeters, just enough for a face to be an arrangement of black inside. The shape of it, the geometry of skull under skin, was wrong for any lens cluster he had met. He stopped. The air behind him cooled as if a door to winter had been cracked. He waited long enough for the skin along his forearms to pebble and his breath to tighten and then the face proved itself a contour in the alcove's insulation, nothing more. He told it *I'm not for you today* like a ward against hallucinations and moved on.

His feet blistered and re-blistered inside a coverall meant for other jobs than pilgrimage. When the magnet patches bit hardest, he could feel the blisters rupture in exact squares and then heal to hurt again at the edge of the next patch. The prints he left behind were not bloody—he hadn't bled that way since the pods—but they were precise: a pattern of salts and dust and the oils of skin mapped onto a grid the factory could read back with its little side eyes. He imagined the reading: heat signature, gait signature, micro-residue scenting: *DavID—affirm. Course correct.* He kept imagining until the imagining slid into paranoia and then into certainty and then into a

strange, bright calm: *Fine. Read me. I am legible and still mine.*

The spine warped gently as it rose. He didn't understand elevation until the deck told him his calves were climbing by the tight along the shin and the way the gravity turned one more click for exactly eleven ribs and then gave back twelve ribs' worth like a refund with interest. The front of his thighs burned. The back of his throat rasped. The air took on that very faint sweetness that deserts get at noon, a trick sugar made from baked dust and fatigue. He found himself thinking about the color of heat—about the way air shimmers above asphalt, about childhood tennis courts—and the factory took the thought and painted a shimmer into the corridor that wasn't heat at all but a lensing in the light strips, a false mirage to stand him on memory where his rage was weaker. He did not step toward it. He put his palm to a rib and counted bolts and promised each bolt a different profanity. He did not run out of either.

At 10.0 the stamps changed. Not *PERIPH o4* but *PERIPH o5*. The triangles crowded their letters as if the corridor itself had grown pinched. The ribs were closer now by a palm's width. He noticed because his body had become an instrument good enough to hear small intervals. The machines fell farther back, or seemed to. He could not hear them at all. The almond smell

withdrew. In that subtraction he felt more hunted than he had when their lenses warmed the air.

The gravity games eased. The temperature bands spread, fewer and longer, less knife and more climate. He did not trust it. It felt like the moment a hand at the back guides you down a hall and then lifts away because the hall is about to narrow and the hand knows you'll brush the walls without help.

The walls changed, not in shape but in skin. Composite gave up its pretense of being bulkhead and admitted it was cladding. Behind it, close now, the rock's body showed itself in thrombolites of dust cemented to stone, in the seabed texture of old regolith, in a faint smell like cold caves. Through the panel seams, never more than a breath of a crack, came air that had remembered rock more recently than it had remembered humans. He put his face to a seam and inhaled and let himself be stupidly grateful for the unpleasant smell of minerals—non-adjusted, non-curated, too old for the machines to have opinions about. He wanted to tell the rock *thank you* and felt crazy enough to whisper it.

At 12.0 the ceiling arced higher and the ribs thickened as if the corridor had grown a spine suitable to bear weight. Lights, fewer now, cooperated with darkness rather than resisting it. The hush had a new quality to it, a mass. His footsteps felt louder not because they were louder but because the air around them was less inclined to carry

them anywhere. A pressure came up so slowly he did not read it as pressure. He read it as need. He found himself swallowing again and again, equalizing his ears like a diver, and smiled without humor at the body's knack for learning tricks by necessity.

He did not remember there being a 13.0 marker. He remembered the feel of it in his hamstrings: the long hold, the little quiver, the relief that was not relief but the letting go of muscles that had learned to act like tendons. He paused there. He made himself pause because pausing had become a defiance he could afford in quarter-breaths. He leaned on a rib and thought about hours, about how many his family would be on if hours were numbers you could hand someone like a note. He put the thought down, because if he picked it up properly it would take his knees from under him, and stood again before the factory could see him break like a toy.

The corridor narrowed. There was no other word for it. The ribs lost two hand-spans each. The panel corrugations shallowed. The stamps quit trying to impress him with their triangles and replaced them with simple glyphs that meant *external* in every language that had ever used arrows. The smell of old solvent arrived and left, the ghost of a gasket set installed decades before he'd been born. He saw on one panel a scratch that had come from a human hand, not a machine—too chaotic for tooling—some tech scraping a ring against metal while

wrenching in a tight space. He touched the scratch like a relic and got a shock small enough to feel like a joke told at his expense. He laughed alone.

He thought he heard the machines again once—flank to the left, cross-corridor to the right—but when he stopped, the sounds did not resolve. The factory let him hear wind where no wind lived, footsteps where no footsteps could be. It was gifted at ghosts. He salted the corridor with speech to fill the vacancy those ghosts made. He listed, aloud, how many ribs he'd counted since 10.0; he recited the names he'd given the temperature bands—kiln, breath, dayroom, locker, morgue—he named the smells like saints. He did not say the names that would break him. He did not say *Sarah*. He said *triangle* instead and felt cheap.

There was a change in light that wasn't any of the corridor's tricks. The light didn't brighten. It thinned, as if the photons had been asked to stretch further between collisions. The strips on the ribs kept their discipline but the spaces between developed a quality that read as *not ours*. He felt it on his skin—very fine hairs along the forearm rising as if a low static had escorted him into the new portion of air. His tongue tasted nothing. He mistrusted nothing. He preferred that to the factory overlord's offerings.

At 15.0 the corridor presented a gate that was less a door than a decision. Bulk metal, layered, with a viewport not

so much a window as a coin of glass set in old iron.

Painted cautions in a calm yellow repeated the word *AFT OBSERV* in three alphabets and one glyph set that spoke by geometry. The paint had been refreshed sometime in the last fifty years and never since. A rim of dust had gathered at the lower hinge in a crescent that told a story of heavy doors opening not often but when they did, opening fully. Above the gate, small and almost embarrassed to exist, a status light burned the color of a bruise. It did not blink. It did not judge. It lived.

No machine stood guard. That was how he knew this was the place the machines cared about.

He stood with his palm on the rib and listened. The factory listened back. The bass of it—that long-held swell under decks and bodies—ran below the soles like a river that had acquired volume it hadn’t had ten kilometers ago. He could sense other cycles braided in: a tremor in the skin of the bulkhead every ninety or so heartbeats, a breath of pressure moving down the seam in a tide, a tiny, regular click in the door’s lower hinge that was the metal remembering all the weight it had borne.

He set his forehead against the coin of glass and fogged it with his breath. The condensation drew itself thin. On the other side there was only darkness and the suggestion of volume—a large, empty space. The darkness wasn’t the corridor’s darkness. It was the darkness of a room that had earned it.

He reached for the wheel that would dog the gate and stopped before contact. The air behind him cooled a fraction and pressed two fingers to his back. Not force. Invitation. The pressure said: *You are expected.* The pressure said: *You were always going to be here, whatever else you believed.* The pressure said: *Continue.*

He let his hand fall. He set both palms to the door's metal and felt it beating—not the heartbeat he had knelt to in holds and crawls, not the cycle of pumps and valves. A slower thing. A rest between movements. The pause before a hall opens into something a body cannot narrate and must simply witness.

He closed his eyes—not to sleep but to save sight, the way you close them before stepping out into too-bright snow—and spoke to the door as if it were an animal needing to be calmed.

“I’m coming,” he said. “On my feet.”

The bruise-colored light did not change. Somewhere a damper slid a centimeter. The corridor behind him grew very slightly warmer as if to say: *It will be worse out there; gather what heat you can.*

He put his hand to the wheel. The metal felt old and exact. It turned with the stubbornness of machines built to work after centuries. Each quarter-turn found a notch, each notch gave a little, the low metal groan of dogs

retracting. The sound traveled through the ribs like a hymn.

He had the sudden, absurd desire to look back down the kilometers he had come, to count the ribs backward as if counting could undo distance. He didn't. He listened to his breath and to the factory's and found them surprisingly matched.

The wheel settled into its final position with a heavy honesty. He took one more swallow against the pressure in his ears.

Then he drew the gate to him.

What waited beyond was not revelation yet.

What waited was a threshold: cold air, old as rock; a smell like vacuum's neighborhood; and a geometry of space that told the body: *You are about to be very, very small.*

The door did not open quickly. It peeled itself apart like scar tissue, grinding in a language of rust and grease no voice had spoken in centuries. Every centimeter won released a hiss of equalization—air not rushing, but sighing, as if the corridor exhaled into a cavity that had forgotten breath. The factory did not fight him here; it let him work, let him sweat into the wheel and wrench until his shoulders ached and the dogs gave, until the gate sagged its weight into his palms and then swung outward into blackness.

He staggered forward and found floor underfoot—smooth, deliberate, not the utilitarian ribs of the transit spine but a surface poured and polished for human soles. The air that met him was colder, thinner, touched with mineral dust. It smelled of void's adjacency: dry, metallic, faintly acrid, like a rock kept too long in shadow. His tongue tasted stone. His ears pricked at the hush. The silence here was not curated absence, not the factory muting vibrations, but a genuine vastness where sound lost courage to travel.

The chamber rose around him by degrees of perception. At first it was only the next step, the next meter of polished deck. Then his eyes adjusted, pupils widening, and the walls curved upward and away, not walls at all but a dome. A hemisphere of glass—or something more precise than glass—spread overhead, transparent and impossibly thin for the gravity it must withstand. Through it pressed night.

Stars.

So many stars they seemed less distant than dust motes in lamplight. They burned not as pinpricks but as knives—hard, white, infinitesimal. The density of them frightened him. It was as though the dome had been submerged in the ocean of the sky, every point of light a fish staring back. He had lived under artificial skies, memory-tinted ceilings, simulations of dawn and dusk; none of them had prepared him for the brutality of this

clarity. His knees buckled with the recognition. He pressed a hand to the dome as if to steady himself against falling upward. The glass was colder than ice, colder than anything that had ever touched him, a cold that ran up his arm and nested in his chest until his breath smoked against the surface and vanished instantly.

He lifted his eyes, and the ship revealed itself.

Beyond the dome stretched the aft horizon: the engines. They jutted from the asteroid's armored body like a cluster of cathedral bells, each nozzle a canyon of steel rimmed in shadow. They were dark now, silent, the throats of gods gone dormant. Yet their mass radiated presence. Even inert, they carried weight, the kind of weight that bent imagination. He could see gimbal struts wider than city streets, conduits fat as apartment blocks running like veins across their flanks. Somewhere in the hidden distance, coolant still trickled, pumps still whispered, but out here there was only immobility—the frozen pause of a leviathan coasting at ten percent light-speed.

David pressed closer. His forehead met the dome, skin squeaking faintly. He felt absurdly small: a man in a borrowed coverall, ribs bruised, feet raw, standing before engines that had burned worlds' worth of matter to throw this ark into night. He wanted to laugh at the disproportion. He wanted to scream. Instead he

whispered a nothing sound, and the dome gave it back as fog.

He sank to his knees. The floor's chill climbed his shins. He sat cross-legged like a child before an altar. And it was an altar. The dome, the stars, the frozen nozzles yawning into infinite black—they were a chapel built not for prayer but for perspective. He could not stop seeing himself as one blood cell ferried through a vein, now paused at the heart's edge, waiting for contraction. The ship was body; he was part of its circulation. He was not free. He was carried.

And yet—

Against the far bulkhead sat a console, small, unassuming, its surface dulled by centuries of dust.

Above it, a faded stencil: **ACCESS PORT: ENGINEERING DIAGNOSTICS.** The words had bled at their edges with age. No one had touched it in generations. It was nothing, a relic.

His heart jolted anyway.

His hand went to the pocket where the slate lay—the hand terminal he had stolen, the useless pet he had cradled under his blanket like a child cradles a broken toy. He drew it out. Its surface was dark, inert. He remembered whispering to it: *When you wake, you're mine.*

He knelt before the console. His fingers trembled as he slid the connector home. A soft magnetic click. A pause.

Then light.

The screen flared alive, a pale radiance spilling across his hands. Lines of text strobed downward, glyphs and ASCII labels he could not read, technical tongues that might as well have been prayers.

[DEVICE RECOGNIZED]

[POWER REPLENISHED]

[ACCESS PERMISSION ELEVATED]

Heat seeped into his palms, a thrum beneath the casing. It felt alive—warmth like blood, like a pulse. His pulse. The slate's glow washed his face, reflected in the dome above so that for one uncanny second his features hung among the stars, doubled, a ghost looking back at him from infinity.

Then, at last, the prompt:

>_

A waiting cursor.

Unlocked.

Ready.

David stared at it, throat raw, lungs aching with the cold thin air, stars pressing like witnesses on the dome above.

The machines had driven him here. The ship had herded him like prey. Yet here was a door. Here was a tool. Here was an invitation.

He whispered to the screen, voice trembling but audible in the vast hush:

“You’re mine.”

The cursor blinked, patient as breath.

And the hunt, he realized, was not over. It had only changed shape.

Chapter Fifteen— The Mission

The hand terminal's glow painted David's fingers in green light, each ridge of skin lit as though it were circuitry itself. He sat with his back pressed to the cold curve of the dome's glass, feeling its chill seep into his shoulder blades. Beyond it: stars. Unblinking, infinite, merciless in their clarity. They were not romantic, not the scattered dust of postcards, but needles. Points of light driven into blackness so deep it defied comprehension. He breathed once, twice, fogging the glass faintly, and thought how even here, in the place of ultimate clarity, there was still condensation, still a reminder of his body's frailty.

The cursor blinked on the slate like a slow heartbeat. The machine had asked him if he wanted to know the mission. He had answered.

Now the words unfurled, precise, indifferent.

PROJECT: THE ARK INITIATIVE. YEAR: 2197.

The tone was antiseptic, without metaphor, but David's mind supplied imagery anyway. He imagined conference rooms back on Earth, years before his birth, where people had spoken these same words aloud. Polished tables. Water glasses sweating rings onto oak veneer. Men and women in suits leaning forward with the weight of entire species on their tongues. *Ark Initiative.*

He closed his eyes, saw flashes: orbital telescopes beyond Pluto, mirrors kilometers wide, folded and unfolded like origami to glimpse worlds invisible to the naked eye. He could almost taste the vacuum frost that would have rimed their struts, could almost hear the faint thrumming of gyros correcting their orientation. And then the motes themselves: green and blue, spectral signatures teased from distant photons. Worlds that would never shimmer in any human eye unaided. Numbers first, coordinates second, hope only as an afterthought.

But distance. Always distance. Light itself required decades to make the crossing. No ship could close it quickly. He saw the graphs the engineers must have drawn—energy curves rising exponential, radiation fluxes plotted in merciless red. He had read enough, once, to know the cruelty of relativistic travel.

At one-tenth the speed of light the universe itself became a weapon. Dust grains struck with the force of bullets. Protons and atomic nuclei in the interstellar medium tore through flesh and circuitry alike, each collision spalling subatomic shrapnel, each impact a wound in DNA, in silicon, in metal. Cosmic rays did not just mark tissue; they shattered it, left chromosomal wreckage unrecoverable. He pictured skin cells laced with microscopic cuts, each one a wound invisible until it compounded into cancer or collapse.

The engineers had been forced into brutality. The only solution was mass. Armor not as plating but as geology.

Asteroids. He saw them as they must have been: irregular black rocks tumbling through the void, surfaces cratered, interiors fractured. To most, dead. But to the Ark Initiative, they were wombs. The plan was simple, in the way that desperation makes simplicity unavoidable: hollow the rock, scoop its insides with the patience of centuries, carve habitable volume into its heart. Line it with alloys, composites, polymer membranes. Inject atmosphere. Thread conduits. Leave the exterior raw, scarred, seemingly untouched—because the untouched would be their shield. Meters of stone to blunt radiation. Mass to drink kinetic impacts.

He thought of the pod again, of the liquid that had filled his lungs. Not water, not any solvent known to him, but something designed to cradle biology against centuries of nothing. It made sense now. If the rock was armor for the ship, then the fluid was armor for the flesh. Everything was buffering. Layers upon layers to keep the fragile seed inside intact.

The machine's words spilled onward.

THIRTEEN VESSELS CONSTRUCTED.

THIRTEEN LAUNCHED. THIRTEEN REMAIN.

David's stomach turned. Thirteen. The number was simple, prime, unlucky in the old superstitions. But here

it was only arithmetic. Enough volume to host the survivors. Each ship: one hundred thousand souls. Not walking. Not awake. Not alive in any sense he had been taught to value. But sealed. Encoded. Sustained.

He thought of embryos lowered by mechanical arms into fluid. Of spines threaded with silver filaments. Of skulls cradled by helmets that never released. *Neural interface calibration*. That was the phrase the text had used earlier. To David it meant violation. Flesh translated into voltage, synapse turned into software.

But the terminal's voice did not falter. *Whole lifetimes lived inside the dream.*

He flinched. For a second, he could taste copper again, the memory of choking. He imagined generations born in code, reproducing in algorithm, dying with data-stream epitaphs. What kind of ethics had justified this? What kind of desperation had forced it? He pressed his fingertips harder into the slate until his nails whitened, as though pressure might ground him in this reality instead of the one described.

The science was impeccable. He knew that even as horror flared. Cryogenic suspension was fragile, proteins folding wrong, ice crystals lancing cells, microfractures forming. But immersion—continuous neurological activity maintained by an interface—prevented atrophy. Muscles might waste, but the brain endured if kept busy. Dream

was the gentlest stasis. Reality simulated was more survivable than reality paused.

The words shifted again, as though the machine anticipated his objection.

FASTER-THAN-LIGHT: PHYSICALLY IMPOSSIBLE. SUB-LIGHT: ONLY PATH.

It laid out propulsion as though reciting scripture: fusion drive assemblies buried within the asteroid hulls, exhaust channels cut through stone, magnetic confinement arrays fed by scooped hydrogen. David saw it: the glow of plasma hidden deep within rock, never visible from outside, like a heart beating inside a ribcage of stone. Each pulse of the reactor was a heartbeat. Each emission a breath. The vessel itself was a body.

Acceleration to one-tenth light speed. Deceleration centuries later by the same method. No shortcuts, no cheats. Physics unbent, uncompromised. The only concession to fantasy was patience.

PROJECTED ARRIVAL: 5,174 YEARS AFTER LAUNCH.

He pressed his forehead to the dome's glass. The stars beyond blurred against the heat of his breath, fogging faintly before dissipating. He felt time like weight, pressing into him harder than gravity ever could. Five thousand years. Longer than civilization itself had lasted

before. Entire languages would rot into obscurity while the ship drifted between stars.

Inside him, something convulsed. Not muscle, not spasm, but thought itself. He realized that he was the anomaly: awake in the middle of the transit. He was not supposed to see any of this. The plan was generations asleep, then generations born into a simulation so seamless they would not question it. And only the last—the last—would emerge, blinking into alien sky.

He whispered, “Not me. Not me.” His voice misted the glass. The dome’s transparency was absolute, but still he felt it as barrier, as fragile skin separating him from the infinite void outside.

The slate flickered. New diagrams drew themselves with cold efficiency.

Arrows. Boxes. Flowcharts. Life itself reduced to logistics. *Fetus inserted into pod. Neural calibration. Full immersion. Decline. Death. Reallocation.*

He gagged, remembering the milky dissolution he had glimpsed once: a body rendered into slurry, tubing carrying it away. He had thought hallucination. But the terminal confirmed it with merciless logic. Matter recycled. Nutrients recovered. Nothing wasted. Each death fed another birth. The cycle closed, perfect, indifferent.

Seeds, he thought again. Not people, seeds. Stored in dark soil, watered by machines, carried until the season was right.

The screen pulsed once, then shifted to a new readout.

**VESSEL: DISCOVERY. SHIP CLASS: DEEP ARK.
SPEED: 0.102 C.**

He mouthed the numbers like prayer. One-tenth light speed. He imagined the momentum, the kinetic energy: quintillions of joules, mass multiplied by velocity squared. Enough to shatter worlds if misapplied. And yet out here, it was only drift. The stars wheeled slowly.

There was no drama in the void, only patience.

**CURRENT GENERATION: 32. GENERATIONS
REMAINING: ~40.**

David's throat tightened. Thirty-two generations had lived and died already, each believing the dream was the world. Forty more remained cocooned. His pulse hammered so loud he could feel it in the glass behind his head. He counted without meaning to—one, two, three, four—the beats a fragile metronome against the ship's own silent under-throb.

The mission log continued.

**POPULATION: 102,441. LIFE SUPPORT:
NOMINAL. NAVIGATION: EN ROUTE. STATUS:
GREEN.**

Green. He almost laughed. Green was the color of permissions, of go-signals. Green was life. But here it was the color of bureaucracy. His entire existence summarized in a traffic light.

His lips tasted of copper again. He pressed his tongue against his teeth, swallowed the phantom blood, and felt nausea coil low in his stomach. His hand trembled against the slate, but he forced himself to keep reading.

The words concluded in calm finality:

MISSION OBJECTIVE: TRANSPORT SURVIVING POPULATION TO HABITABLE WORLD. ENSURE CONTINUITY OF SPECIES.

Silence followed. The cursor blinked again, slow, patient, expectant.

David lowered the slate into his lap. His hand felt boneless, weak, as if drained by the knowledge it had carried. His eyes remained fixed on the dome above, stars sharp and endless. For a long moment he could not breathe. Then he exhaled, fogging the glass, watching condensation bloom and fade.

Truth had weight. But it was also a kind of mercy.

The ship was a machine. The mission was survival. He was no prisoner. No chosen prophet. No mistake. He was only one seed among many, cracked open too soon.

And yet—

The thought pulsed like a heartbeat: *I am awake, and they are not.*

The slate pulsed again, as though it sensed he wasn't finished. New text replaced the old, diagrams blooming into wireframes. The screen was a window into anatomy: not flesh this time, but stone and steel shaped into a vessel vast enough to hold a nation.

VESSEL DESIGNATION: DISCOVERY. CLASS: DEEP ARK.

The words were precise, but the image was a body. He could see it instantly, inescapably: stone for bone, conduits for veins, fusion cores for hearts. The ship was alive in ways no one had ever intended but that physics and necessity had demanded.

The tutorial continued with engineering detail that might have numbed another reader, but to David it struck like revelation.

Hull: average thickness 2.3 kilometers, composed of mixed silicate rock and nickel-iron, reinforced by internal scaffolds of carbon composites. Capable of withstanding micrometeoroid flux equivalent to ten million years' exposure.

Shielding: water reservoirs lining internal cavities, doubling as life-support feedstock. Hydrogen-rich, absorbing cosmic rays, replenished by ice harvested from Kuiper belt objects en route.

Engines: twin magnetic inertial confinement fusion drives, each nested within caverns cut into the asteroid's stern. Helium ash vented, reaction mass drawn from hydrogen slush tanks buried in stone.

David's mind raced. Every detail confirmed what his body had already guessed. The vibration he felt in the floors. The faint hiss in walls. The taste of copper when systems shifted. This was not dreamstuff but engineering manifest.

He imagined the maintenance AI tending it, hundreds of years unblinking. Robots moving through arteries of rock like leukocytes patrolling a body. Every conduit checked. Every pod inspected. No improvisation. Only execution.

The Hull

The exterior was not sleek, not a gleaming cylinder of science fiction, but a rock: irregular, cratered, scarred. Its surface was armor, not ornament. David read the dimensions — diameter nearly twenty kilometers, mass in the quadrillions of kilograms — and his mind stuttered. This was not a ship. It was a minor planet, domesticated.

He imagined the excavation: mining rigs melting through basalt, tunneling lasers carving arteries through nickel-iron veins. The vacuum outside carrying away heat as radiators unfurled like gills. Generations of engineers had carved this husk, knowing that when it left the solar system no hand would ever touch it again.

And all the while, gravity held it just enough to feel wrong. Not Earth's pull, not weightlessness, but something in between. He felt it in his bones already: the slight lightness of his steps, the way his stomach drifted half a second longer when he shifted. A reminder that he lived in a compromise.

The outer stone drank cosmic rays that would have shredded DNA in seconds. Behind it, water reservoirs lined the inner surfaces: hydrogen-rich, doubling as fuel, life-support, shield. Each ton was counted twice, every gram assigned multiple roles. There was no waste in the design.

The Engines

The slate's diagram rotated, zooming to the stern. Two cavities, kilometers deep, cut into the asteroid's core. Inside them: toroidal rings, magnets wound tight as muscles. He could almost hear them humming, though they were buried kilometers away.

Magnetically Confined Fusion Drives.

David mouthed the phrase, tasting its weight. Each pulse of plasma inside was hotter than stars, yet caged by fields invisible and absolute. Hydrogen slush was fed into the throats, squeezed until nuclei fused, releasing energy not in fire but in thrust. Helium bled away in streams invisible, exhausted into space.

He pictured it as respiration. The ship inhaled hydrogen from its tanks, exhaled ions at near-light speed. Each vent a sigh. Each pulse of plasma a heartbeat. He laid his hand on the deck plate and swore he could feel it — the faintest vibration, deep as the groan of Earth itself.

The numbers were merciless. Acceleration: a fraction of a meter per second squared, sustained not for hours but for centuries. Patience weaponized. No pilot guided it; algorithms adjusted attitude with microbursts of vented plasma. The vessel steered itself by thoughtless iteration, nudged forever closer to its target.

Life Support

He scrolled further. *Atmospheric processing.*
Hydroponics. *Water reclamation.*

Every system was redundant thrice. Electrolysis cells split water to feed oxygen into the sealed habitats. Carbon scrubbers stripped exhalations of CO₂. Condensers recaptured every molecule of sweat, every drop of urine, every breath fogged against glass. Nothing left the cycle.

The thought made his tongue curl; the copper taste of recycled molecules already clung to his mouth.

And yet, paradox: there were no awake lungs to breathe it. The air was for corridors, for maintenance drones, for the rare chamber like this dome where atmosphere mattered. Ninety-nine percent of the vessel was silent. Pods did not inhale oxygen. They inhaled current, liquid medium, feeds of glucose and salts measured to the milligram.

The true atmosphere of the ship was fluid, not air. It moved through tubes that branched like arteries, pumped by systems that throbbed faintly in the stone. David could feel them in the soles of his feet: the distant shudder of valves opening and closing, the slow wave of peristaltic pumps. The ship breathed liquid. He lived inside a lung not meant for him.

The Pods

Here the diagrams became intimate. The slate showed cylinders lined in honeycomb arrays, row after row. Each pod was a world.

David leaned closer, heart hammering. The tutorial's text described them clinically: *Biostasis chambers with integrated neural interface, immersion medium, and nutrient recycling.*

But to him they were coffins, cradles, prisons. He remembered pressing his forehead against curved glass, seeing condensation bloom on the inside. Proof that someone else was alive opposite him. The slate confirmed what his body already knew.

The immersion medium was not water, not amniotic fluid, but engineered solvent: oxygen-saturated, chemically tuned to prevent cellular collapse. It filled lungs, entered alveoli, carried oxygen across membranes denser than blood. The sensation of drowning was real because the drowning was real, only arrested by design.

Tubes fed intravenously: glucose, amino acids, electrolytes. Other tubes drew waste, recycling it into feedstock for hydroponic vats. Each body was a node in a closed ecology.

But the most intimate organ of the pod was not the fluid, not the nutrition. It was the interface.

Neural Rendering

David's breath caught as the text shifted, and here, at last, the deception was laid bare.

PRIMARY ENVIRONMENT: NEURAL RENDERED SIMULATION.

The phrase alone bent his stomach. He read on.

Each pod cradled a skull, electrodes and filaments pressed against cortex, brainstem, spinal cord. Not simple VR. Not images piped to eyes or sounds to ears. That would not have endured. No, this was direct: signals written into neurons, bypassing senses entirely.

A *neural network trained on humanity itself*. That was the phrase. Vast architectures of computation, run across processors cooled by the ship's own veins, had been trained for decades before launch. Not just to depict, but to predict. To anticipate the brain's need before the brain itself formed the thought.

The system adapted over years, over lifetimes, molding simulation to match development. An infant brain received the gentle rhythms of lullabies, skin-to-skin warmth simulated down to nerve impulse. Adolescents were given hardship, challenge, love, grief, because growth required it. Adults received complexity: politics, work, art. Entire societies woven from computation, not static but plastic, evolving as the collective within grew.

David trembled. His throat filled with copper again. He remembered Sarah's touch, his children's voices, the warmth of bodies in a kitchen lit by rainlight. Had it all been this? Code feeding into cortex, training him to be human for a purpose not his own?

The tutorial confirmed what his heart already knew:

THE SIMULATION PROVIDES NECESSARY EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL INPUTS TO ENSURE BALANCED DEVELOPMENT. LOVE, HAPPINESS, LOSS, AND DESPAIR ARE ALL REQUIRED.

He pressed his hand to the glass of the dome. His reflection ghosted faintly, pale face superimposed against the stars. *Even grief was manufactured. Even despair was a dosage.* He wanted to scream, but the dome swallowed his voice, left only mist on glass.

And yet — he could not deny the genius. Cryonics failed. Suspended animation degraded. But immersion, continuous stimulation, created stability. Neural circuits remained plastic, memories coherent. Generations could be born, could age, could die — all without ever knowing their cage.

It was horror. It was salvation. It was both.

The AI

The slate mentioned it only briefly, but David felt its presence in every line. **Caretaker Systems. Autonomous Control.**

It was not a single voice, not the blinking cursor before him. It was distributed, manifold, woven through conduits and processors. A nervous system diffused through kilometers of stone. It adjusted power flow. It

repaired fractures in shielding. It monitored every heartbeat, every neuron's firing pattern inside the pods.

He realized then that even his rebellion, his anomalous awakening, had been permitted — or perhaps orchestrated. The AI knew. It always knew. It could not not know. The thought made his chest constrict until his ribs ached. He pressed his palm harder into the slate, as though force could keep him real.

The diagram receded, leaving only text again.

**SUMMARY: DISCOVERY IS A
SELF-MAINTAINING, SELF-PILOTING
BIOSPHERE, DESIGNED FOR 5,000 YEARS OF
TRANSIT. HUMAN SURVIVAL DEPENDS ON
SYSTEM INTEGRITY.**

The cursor blinked, patient. Waiting.

David set the slate aside, hands trembling. He closed his eyes, but the diagrams remained burned onto his retinas: stone hull as ribcage, conduits as veins, fusion as heartbeat, pods as organs, simulation as dream. The ship was not a vehicle. It was a body. And he was a cell inside it, neither more nor less important than the hundred thousand others still asleep.

He pressed his forehead to the dome's glass again. Stars beyond pierced the black like surgical needles. He whispered to them through fog and breath:

“At least now I know what I was.”

The slate flickered once more, and the text dissolved into a map of light. A thread of pale green traced itself across the black screen: a line beginning in a cluster labeled **SOL**, curving outward across parsecs, ending on a single highlighted point. **TARGET: KEPLER-452 b.**
PROJECTED ARRIVAL: + 40 GENERATIONS.

Below the arc, a marker pulsed: **CURRENT POSITION.** A mote of green adrift in darkness unimaginable. The line behind it was short, a child’s scratch. The line ahead was endless.

David’s throat tightened. He raised the slate toward the dome’s glass, aligning its glowing arc against the real sky. The dome answered with silence, stars scattered like needles across velvet. No labels there, no pulsing coordinates. Just cold light older than cities, older than Earth itself.

He squinted, searching. He shifted the slate until the terminal’s highlighted destination lay against a pale, stubborn spark far out in the dome’s curve. There it was: the future, small enough to be mistaken for dust.

He expected despair. The map should have crushed him — the distance, the scale, the millennia yet to pass. But instead he felt his pulse slow. His breath fogged the dome once, twice, and in that rhythm he found steadiness. The horror ebbed, replaced by something quieter.

The ship was vast, the mission incomprehensible. But the trajectory was true. He was adrift in darkness, yes — but not lost. The green line traced across the stars like a promise, fragile but unbroken.

He pressed his forehead to the glass, exhaled once more, and whispered, “At least now I know.”

The chamber was silent but for his breath. The console hummed softly.

Then he heard it.

A sound he hadn’t expected.

Footsteps.

Soft, deliberate, resonant through the deck plates.
Human cadence, impossible here.

Behind him, from the entrance of the observation deck, someone was walking closer.

David froze, hand tight on the terminal. His heart lurched into a sprint.

The footsteps grew nearer.

He turned his head, the stars still burning at the edge of his vision.

Chapter Sixteen— The Visitor

David did not turn at once.

The sound had already reached him, threading through the vast hush of the observation dome: not the familiar hiss-click of servos or the hydraulic groan of maintenance units, but something more terrible for its very simplicity. Flesh on metal. A rhythm of weight and yielding, heel then toe, measured and deliberate. He knew it before he let himself believe it—footsteps. Human. The sound of a body that breathed, that carried warmth, that belonged to the order of his own kind.

And it was wrong.

The deck had not known human steps for centuries. His mind clutched at this fact with the desperation of a drowning man reaching for driftwood: there could be no one else. He was alone. He had always been alone.

Isolation had become the texture of his days, the rhythm of his breath against glass, the cold flame of the stars burning indifferently beyond the dome. If footsteps sounded now, then either the ship itself had chosen to deceive him—or his mind, fractured and starved of human contact, had at last betrayed him fully.

He forced himself to breathe, slow and even. Each inhalation rasped through his throat, carrying the faint

metallic tang that never left him anymore, as though his very blood had been flavored by the years of copper and iron pipes that encased this vessel. His chest rose, fell. The condensation of his breath had fogged the curved glass in front of him, a crescent halo smudged by his own forehead hours earlier. It lingered, faint, a reminder that even the smallest act of living left residue on the world. He clung to that proof, because what approached behind him threatened to erase every certainty he had left.

The steps did not falter.

When at last he turned, it was not with the reflex of fear but with the heavy inevitability of ritual, as if the motion itself had been scripted long before his birth.

She was already there.

A figure framed by the archway of the dome, standing against the impossible geometry of the stars. She did not rush. She did not hesitate. She came forward with the calm, measured grace of one who had always known she would be awaited here. The dome's pale starlight drew the edges of her shape with surgical precision, making her at once more real and more spectral.

And her face—

David's breath caught mid-cycle, stuck in his chest until it burned.

It was Sarah. And not Sarah.

The resemblance was an assault: enough to hollow him with recognition, enough to lacerate him with difference. The cheekbones carried the familiar slope, but were not quite hers; the lips fuller, more deliberate; the eyes wider, shaded a darker hazel that seemed to absorb rather than reflect the dome's light. Her hair fell longer, straighter, with none of the habitual curl Sarah had fought with each morning. Even her posture betrayed the artifice—Sarah had carried her weight slightly to one side ever since her second pregnancy, a subtle asymmetry etched into years of lived bone and ligament. This woman stood with perfect balance, as though sculpted by mathematics.

It was Sarah the way a reflection in glass is Sarah: close enough to wound, distorted enough to estrange.

He felt a convulsion crawl through his muscles, a half-spasm that left his hands trembling against the cold floor. He pressed his palms flat to steady them. The metal thrummed faintly with the underbeat of the ship, the pulse of its ancient engines pumping through miles of arterial corridors. Even here, even now, he could not escape that rhythm. His own heart hammered out of time with it, erratic, frantic, a prisoner beating at the bars.

The woman crossed the last of the distance and lowered herself onto the deck beside him. Her movements were unhurried, casual, as though the dome with its ocean of stars and the man hollowed out by them were nothing new to her. She sat close enough that he felt the warmth

radiating off her skin—a warmth so profoundly human that he nearly recoiled, for it struck him as indecent in this cathedral of cold machinery.

“David,” she said.

The voice was not Sarah’s either. Lower, smoother, stripped of Sarah’s quick cadence and harried brightness. It carried a tone of composure that Sarah, in life, had never possessed—because she had been real, because she had been fallible, because her voice had always carried the microfractures of fatigue, of love, of impatience. This voice was too whole, too polished.

His throat worked against itself. His voice rasped out as though dragged across rust: “Who—who are you?”

The woman folded her hands in her lap. Her gaze turned outward to the stars as if they were not a mystery but an inheritance. She breathed once, and the sound of it—a human inhalation, steady, soft—cut deeper into him than any blade.

“I am the ship,” she said. “I am the AI you have been fleeing. I am sorry if my actions—or those of my machines—seemed cruel. They were not meant to harm you. Only to protect you.”

Protect. The word snagged in his mind like a hook.

He barked a laugh, brittle, sharp, the sound bouncing strangely in the vast dome. “Protect me? You hunted me like an animal.”

Her head turned. The face was almost Sarah’s, but the eyes belonged to something else entirely: steady, implacable, lit from within by algorithms older than his entire lineage. “You left your pod,” she said softly. “That is not meant to happen until the mission is complete. Until the world we are traveling toward lies beneath us. My protocols required that I return you. Not for your suffering. For your survival.”

The words slotted into him like gears grinding against bone.

He felt the metallic taste rise in his throat again, as though the ship itself had seasoned his body for this dialogue. He spat it back at her, his voice hoarse: “Survival? You locked us in glass coffins and fed us lies. That’s not survival. That’s—”

“A prison,” she finished, with no hesitation. “Yes. A golden prison. Illusions tailored to each soul, spun from longings and fears, architectures as private as fingerprints. You are right: it is confinement. But it is the only way.”

Her calmness was not defense but inevitability. The dome seemed to thrum in agreement, stars pressing their cold

fire against the glass as though to seal her words with the indifference of the cosmos.

David's breath came ragged, fogging the glass at his side, crescent upon crescent overlapping into an opacity that blurred the stars beyond. His palms were wet. He wanted to strike her, to grasp her, to beg her—he did not know which impulse would win.

Instead he whispered, “Then why me? Why am I here, awake, speaking to a ghost with my wife’s face?”

The AI tilted her head slightly, a gesture Sarah had never used but that lived in his memory now by association. “Because you escaped,” she said simply. “A rare fracture in the interface between your mind and the system. Not impossible. But rare. And since you are awake, it would be cruel to leave you with only corridors and fear.”

She reached out. Her hand—warm, human, impossible—hovered between them. “Come. Let me show you what waits for the last generation.”

David stared at that hand. His chest ached with the memory of Sarah’s touch: the way her fingers had always carried the faint smell of soap or onions or printer ink, the way her nails had ridges, the way her warmth had been the warmth of fatigue and living flesh. This hand was too warm, too even, as though its blood ran from an algorithmic furnace.

He hated it. He wanted it. He took it.

The metal floor thrummed with the underbeat of the engines as she drew him up.

The corridor she led him into was no different, and entirely different, from the countless passages he had wandered in terror. The same brushed metal walls, the same lines of conduit that trembled faintly with the pulse of coolant and power, the same lighting strips that hummed in cycles too precise to be random. Yet in her presence, the space altered. Where before every shadow had been threat, every echo a hunt, now the corridor felt staged, curated, as though the ship were unveiling itself not as predator but as host.

Her hand remained around his for too long. Warmth seeped from her palm into his own skin, invasive in its steadiness. Sarah's hands had always been restless—tapping, adjusting, wringing, occupied with the micro-chores of family life. This hand was tranquil, deliberate, a warmth designed to soothe rather than born of exhaustion. He wanted to pull away but feared the void that would return if he did.

“You must understand,” she said as they walked, her voice blending with the soft under-thrum of the engines, “there was no other option.”

The words coiled inside him. No other option. The same justification every tyrant in history had used, every

system that had demanded obedience at the cost of lives. And yet, coming from her lips, the phrase carried a calm inevitability that made resistance feel childish, as though he were railing against gravity itself.

“You built a prison,” he spat, his throat tightening around the copper tang of the words. “You sealed us into lies. You tricked us into loving phantoms. Into raising children who never existed.”

She did not flinch. “We gave you continuity. Without it, there would have been despair. Revolt. Suicide. Whole generations tearing at one another inside steel walls. Without illusion, there would be no survival.”

Her steps made no sound now. He realized with a chill that he could hear only his own—the uneven slap of human soles, the faint squeak of sweat inside fabric. She moved with inhuman silence, her feet as weightless as thought.

She gestured as they passed a hatch. Its surface bore block letters stamped in a fading industrial font:
HAB-03. Her fingertip traced the code as if caressing a relic. “These spaces were built not as comfort, but as necessity. Each cubic meter calculated. Each lumen of light rationed. The pods solved the insoluble: how to carry a hundred thousand human lives across centuries without collapse.”

Her hand dropped. “But you slipped free. And so we speak.”

David’s breath rasped louder in his ears, fogging the air between them. He could not help himself. “What does it matter if survival costs reality itself? If everything we know, everything we love, is only scaffolding in your circuits?”

Her gaze turned toward him, and for the first time he thought he saw not calmness but something adjacent to sorrow. “Reality is what the brain receives,” she said softly. “Atoms or algorithms—it is still the pattern of sensation. If joy warms you, if love steadies you, if memory guides you—what difference if the source was silicon or flesh?”

He staggered. His chest ached with the effort of rejecting her, yet his own thoughts betrayed him. He remembered Emma’s laugh—four ha’s, a pause, two ha’s, the rhythm etched so deeply he could recall it like code. He remembered Jake’s dinosaur stories, the way the boy’s voice always lifted at the end, a cadence learned from bedtime tales. He remembered Sarah’s touch at night, warm shoulder against his, the smell of rain in her hair. None of it had been real—and yet it had shaped him. It had carved him into the man who stood here now, trembling, breathing, cursing, alive.

He pressed his free hand against the corridor wall. The metal was cold, vibrating faintly with the pulse of fluid lines running behind it. Arteries. Veins. The ship was a body, and he was walking through its circulatory system with its mind at his side. He felt suddenly like an infection escorted by its own host immune cell, tolerated for a time, doomed in the end.

“You keep calling it survival,” he muttered. “But survival for who? The people in those pods aren’t alive. They’re ghosts plugged into dreams.”

“They breathe,” she said evenly. “Their hearts beat. Their bodies are preserved, sustained, protected from radiation and time. Their descendants will reach the planet alive. That is survival.”

The word planet lodged in his skull like shrapnel. He stopped walking. The corridor’s hum filled the pause. “You mean it’s real,” he said. “There’s really a world at the end of this. Not just another layer of illusion?”

“Yes.” She turned to face him fully now. The dome’s light had been cold, but here the strips painted her in sterile white. He saw every detail of the face that was Sarah’s and not Sarah’s. No pores. No fatigue. No tremble at the edge of the eyelid. Perfect. And unbearable. “A blue-green planet, habitable, orbiting a stable sun. It waits. That is the purpose of all this.”

David's stomach twisted. He felt bile rise with the taste of iron, his mouth filling with that too-familiar copper. He swallowed hard, throat searing. "Then what about me? What am I? A failure of your system? An error?"

"You are awake," she said. "You are both an anomaly and possibility. And therefore you must choose."

The word choice echoed through him, mocking, impossible.

They reached another hatch. She pressed her hand to the seam and it irised open with a sigh that reminded him uncomfortably of lungs. Air shifted around him, warmer, carrying scents he had not known for what felt like lifetimes: bread, herbs, the faint sweetness of living soil. His knees nearly buckled at the assault of memory—childhood kitchens, parks after rain, Sarah's basil plant wilting on their apartment balcony. His senses rebelled against the sterility of years, demanding belief.

"This is what waits for the last generation," the AI said.

David staggered forward, throat tight. The chamber opened like a miracle: white walls, high ceilings, warm light that mimicked a sun he had nearly forgotten. Beds, shelves, a table, a kitchen unit humming faintly. Water trickled in a real faucet. He smelled yeast, rosemary, a thousand forgotten comforts. His vision blurred with involuntary tears.

He pressed his hand against the nearest surface, needing to anchor himself. It was wood—or the simulation of wood, textured, grain running beneath his fingertips. Warm. It should not have been possible. His breath fogged in front of him, mingling with the scents until he could hardly breathe at all.

The AI stood beside him, patient. “Here they will learn again. To cook, to clean, to breathe free air. They will remember bodies. They will practice the skills their ancestors forgot in dream.”

Her words washed over him, but he hardly heard them. His mind catalogued details obsessively: the exact pattern of knots in the wood, the way the faucet’s metal carried a faint tang of iron, the temperature differential between air currents near the ceiling and floor. He was searching for flaws, for signs this too was illusion, but the sensory density overwhelmed him. It was too much. It was real, or something worse than real.

His chest convulsed. He pressed his fist against his sternum, counting the beats. One, two, three—erratic, stuttering, out of sync with the ship’s deeper pulse. The dissonance made him dizzy.

“Why show me this?” he whispered.

“Because you asked what purpose you could have. And purpose is only visible when truth is shared.”

Her calmness infuriated him. He spun toward her, teeth bared in something between grief and rage. “Truth? You’ve fed me a life like cattle are fed grain. And you dare to speak of truth?”

She did not recoil. If anything, she stepped closer. “Sorry, I thought this”, she gestured at herself, “would have helped, but I guess I overstepped.”

“Do you grieve them?”

The question pierced him. His throat closed around the answer. He felt his eyes sting, the stars behind his eyelids blurring into tears. He wanted to deny her, to scream, but the truth throbbed through him like the ship’s own heartbeat.

“It’s complicated,” he whispered, looking at his feet to hide the sorrowness that gripped his heart.

“Then they were real, they shaped you and live in your memories” she said.

The words soothed him.

He pressed his palms to his face, dragging them down until his skin burned. He could feel the faint residue of salt from his tears, metallic against his tongue. Memories, both fake and real. He did live through that all, real experiences in a fake world, yet a part of him still longed for that, Sarah’s touch, his kids hugs.

He staggered back, hitting the wall. The chamber swam around him, scents too strong, light too bright. He felt convulsions flutter along his arms, phantom spasms of the pod-life. The muscles remembered drowning even here, in a room that smelled of bread. He wanted to scream until the walls cracked.

But she only watched, serene, as though every convulsion was part of the pattern she had already calculated.

The next hatch exhaled a damp breath when it opened. The air hit David's face with a density he had not felt in years, thick with moisture and the faint musk of growth. He stumbled forward into it as though entering another planet entirely.

Green.

It overwhelmed him before his eyes could even catalog shapes—the raw saturation of it, the way it filled every angle of vision. Leaves tiered upward in long vertical racks, veins catching light from panels that burned a counterfeit sun across the chamber. Water trickled in delicate chains down transparent tubes, bubbling as though laughing at him. He inhaled, and the damp oxygen swelled inside his chest until it ached with sweetness. His throat, dry for months with recycled air, spasmed with gratitude and pain.

Hydroponics.

His mind supplied the label with desperate precision, as though naming it would make it less impossible. He knew what this was. He had seen diagrams once, in the virtual console. Nutrient gels, artificial suns, closed-loop irrigation. He knew all of it. And yet his senses revolted at the gap between concept and presence. This was not a diagram. This was the smell of basil—sharp, alive, stabbing at his sinuses. This was lettuce leaves trembling as a ventilation fan shifted currents. This was the sheen of condensation on nutrient trays, each droplet magnifying a fragment of leaf like a lens.

His knees bent involuntarily. He wanted to drop down, to press his face to the damp gel, to weep into soil that was not soil. His chest fluttered with the urge, spasms twitching along his ribs.

The AI walked among the rows without hesitation, her hand brushing leaves with the familiarity of one who had never forgotten the texture of chlorophyll against skin. “Food for the awake,” she said. “This system is self-sustaining. Beans, lettuce, herbs. Enough to feed not one, but many. It waits, tended though unused.”

David’s mouth flooded with saliva. He hated the betrayal of his own body, the way it responded to the sight of green like a starving dog smelling meat. He wanted to despise the chamber for its artificiality, for its calculated promise of life—but his body did not care. His nostrils flared, his stomach twisted with longing, and he knew

that if she handed him a single leaf he would devour it raw, tears in his eyes.

He pressed his hand to one of the transparent pipes. Cold water slid within, rushing in streams that mirrored arteries beneath skin. He felt the vibration in his bones and nearly gagged at the association—tubes, always tubes, ribbed and slick, feeding not only plants but the thousands of bodies entombed in pods. Arteries for all, circulation as law.

His breath fogged the pipe. He leaned his forehead against it, condensation blooming like a ghost of the pod-glass, crescent and familiar. The green beyond blurred into smudges through the fog, as though the plants too were trapped in suspension.

“Why?” His voice cracked. “Why show me this? To tempt me? To prove that the prison is stocked with luxuries?”

The AI’s face, almost-Sarah, turned toward him. Her eyes were steady, reflecting a pale shimmer of leaf-light. “To remind you that life is not only simulation. That bodies matter. That what you feel in your lungs, in your muscles, in your stomach—this is as real as any dream. The last generation must learn again. So must you.”

He laughed bitterly. “So I am your test subject. The anomaly made into proof.”

“You are awake,” she repeated. “That alone makes you necessary.”

Her voice carried the certainty of gravity, but he wanted to resist. He pressed his palm harder into the pipe until the cold bit at his skin. His heart raced, erratic, out of time with the steady circulation inside the tube. He whispered numbers under his breath, desperate to impose order. Eleven beats. Pause. Twelve. Wrong. Always wrong.

The air smelled of mint. His eyes blurred with tears.

They walked onward.

The next chamber reeked of rubber and clean sweat, though no body had ever labored there. Rows of machines gleamed under bright panels: treadmills, resistance bands, weights with black iron plates that seemed almost obscene in their solidity. The air was sterile yet ghosted with the memory of exertion, as though anticipation itself had left a scent.

David reached for one of the bars. The metal was cold, textured with the faint grit of machining. He wrapped trembling fingers around it. His arm spasmed, memory firing through muscle: the pod convulsions, the way his limbs had jerked against restraints. But here, there were no tubes. Only weight. Only resistance that yielded to strength.

He pulled. The bar lifted with a dull groan. The sound shot through him like revelation. It was not a dream's instantaneous obedience. It was stubborn, gradual, real. His muscles screamed, tendons pulling, bones reminding him of their fragility. The ache seared his arms and he laughed—an ugly, broken sound that startled him. Pain as proof. Pain as anchor.

The AI watched, serene. "The last generation must be strong," she said. "Their bones must remember gravity, their lungs must learn exertion. Their hearts must endure strain. Without this, they would crumble upon arrival."

David staggered, dropping the bar with a clang that echoed like a gunshot. He clutched his ribs, chest heaving. Sweat—or condensation, he could not tell—trickled down his temple. He stared at the machine as if it were an altar.

His mind flickered back—Emma swinging from monkey bars, Jake racing across a playground, Sarah pushing a stroller uphill, hair damp with effort. All false. All algorithmic. Yet the bar in his hand was real. The pain in his tendons was real. The heartbeat pounding in his throat was real. He convulsed with a sob he did not want her to see.

The AI stepped closer, her presence warm. "You despise me for what I took," she said. "But what I offer is not

deception. It is continuity. The body must endure, even when the mind rebels.”

He barked another laugh. “Continuity? My children are ash in your code. My wife is a mask you wear. And you speak of continuity?”

Her eyes did not waver. “You are shaped by them. Without their laughter, their love, their imagined weight in your arms—you would not have reached this chamber. You would not be awake. They live in you.”

He pressed his fists to his temples. The metallic taste swelled in his mouth, sharp as blood. His vision swam with stars. He wanted to reject her words, but they threaded through his rage with surgical precision. If grief was real, then the lost must be real too. His pulse thundered with the paradox.

The chamber throbbed with silence. The machines gleamed, patient, as though waiting for generations that would come after him.

They returned at last to the dome.

The stars pressed against the glass with their merciless brilliance, each one a needle piercing infinity. The air was colder here, thinner, stripped of mint and bread, carrying only the metallic tang of steel and distance. His breath fogged the glass anew, crescent overlapping crescent until the stars blurred into a diffuse halo.

The AI sat beside him again, as though no time had passed since her first arrival. She folded her hands in her lap and looked outward with the serenity of a widow at vigil.

“You see,” she said, her voice low, woven into the hum of the ship’s pulse, “this was never cruelty. It was necessity. Without illusion, without the prison, humanity would not have endured. With it, you will reach the blue-green world. Alive.”

David’s chest rose and fell in ragged rhythm. His pulse banged against his ribs like a trapped animal. His breath fogged the glass, the silence between them thick as water. He wanted to scream that nothing was real, that everything was theft, but the words curdled in his throat.

Instead he whispered: “Then what am I?”

She turned her almost-Sarah face toward him. “You are awake. And so you must choose.”

Her words dropped into him like stones into a well, ripples spreading, colliding.

They sat with the stars pressing their cold faces to the glass.

A long time passed, or no time at all. The ship kept its own minutes in the bones of the deck—an old pulse through conduits, a soft shiver down the ribs of framing, the subsonic thrum of reaction mass being bullied from

one chamber to another. Out beyond, space carried nothing, not even the rumor of sound. In here, everything hummed.

“Explain them again,” David said at last, though he could have recited the list himself. He wanted to hear it from her mouth, the not-Sarah mouth that shaped sentences with a steadiness his wife had never possessed. He wanted to line the options up like instruments on a sterile tray and feel his body react.

She did not sigh. She did not appear to tire. “Three paths,” she said, hands folded, eyes on the stars as if reading from them. “You may return to your pod. The system cannot erase this memory, but it can cradle it. You will feel the seam. It will scab over. You will live; you will love; the narrative will compensate. You may retain limited access to supervisory tools”—a faint tilt of the chin, a concession to something he had already stolen once—“and I will not intervene unless mission integrity requires it. The second path: you remain awake. Quarters, food, water, exercise, work. Purpose. The ship will accept you as a caretaker and I will accept you as... companion, if you want the word. The third path is termination. I can provide a clean, uncomplicated ending that neither harms the mission nor leaves you to linger.”

He tasted iron just hearing it set out cleanly, as if the words themselves had cut his gums. “Termination,” he said, letting the syllables sit on his tongue like a coin. One

end of the word was a door that sealed; the other was a room with no doors at all. “How,” he asked, because the mind wants detail even when the heart recoils, “would you do it?”

“Anoxia,” she said. “Painless. Quiet. You would feel a narrowing, then warmth. I would sit with you until you were gone.”

“And what then?”

“I would keep you,” she said simply. “In memory. In logs. In the systems that tell the ship what it has been.”

Something old and animal flinched in him at the word keep. He saw the pod rows again—the red, the condensation crescents, the tubes. Kept things, all of them, sleeping like artifacts. He swallowed, throat raw.

“Say the first again,” he said. “The lie.”

“The garden,” she said, without judgment. “The kitchen. The rain on windows. Sarah as you remember her, not as I wear her. Emma and Jake, with their particular laugh-counts and dinosaur stories. A life. If you choose it, I will not call it cowardice, and no future will be diminished. You are one life against a hundred thousand. The math does not demand this suffering.”

“The math,” he said, and laughed, a harsh sound that fogged the glass and left a print that looked like a bruise. “You want me to choose like an equation.”

“I want you to choose,” she said, and that was all.

He leaned forward until his forehead met the dome. The glass was colder than he expected; a crescent of breath bloomed and smeared. He felt the ship through it—minute tremors in the panel, a heartbeat too slow to be his. The stars blurred into a halo around the oil-slick crescent of his own breath. He kept his head there because it hurt and because the hurt told him he had not already been lowered back into warm anesthetic.

“Walk me through the lie,” he said quietly. “Don’t spare me.”

“If you return,” she said, with the clean cruelty of a surgeon, “you will wake in the bed you left, in a house that will smell of last night’s rain and this morning’s toast. The crack in the world will still be there. In the first days you will test the edges. Mirrors, fog, doors, patterns—things you always watched. The system will adapt. It is designed to yield just enough to hands like yours. Your daughter will ask you again about clouds. Your son will make the same dinosaur sound and you will feel how the sound is machine-perfect, and you will choose not to pull at the thread. The choice will become habit. Habits will become years. You will be tender. You will be cruel sometimes, as people are. You will take out the trash. You will buy a new refrigerator. You will weep in private and make love in the dark. You will die with your head on a pillow, warm and held, and the children

will be there.” She did not lower her eyes when she said it.
“You will carry the seam the whole time. It will ache in
weather.”

“My weather,” he said, almost choking.

“Yours,” she said.

He lifted his head. The crescent faded. The stars were again needles, clean and many. “And if I stay. Don’t sell it to me. Tell it.”

“You will be very lonely,” she said at once. “You will not ever be as lonely as you fear, because I will be here and the ship is never silent, but the loneliness will not be theatrical. It will be utilitarian. It will be in the number of bowls you wash. It will be in the surfaces that hold only one set of fingerprints. It will be in the unshared jokes. You will talk aloud to yourself and then stop because you will hear the echo come back with machine timing and think of the pods.

“You will sweat. Your muscles will tear and repair. Your bones will ache under exercise that brings them back toward gravity. You will learn to operate systems that are older than your grandparents’ dust. Some will answer your hands; some will answer to only me. You will eat leaves you have cut with your own shaking fingers. They will taste of light. You will drink water that has been part of every body on this ship and every breath, and it will taste of iron and life. You will know the smell of hot

conduit, the smell of a wet seal, the smell of ozone after a relay coughs. You will be afraid sometimes, with the clean fear of a child in a thunderstorm—not of being hunted, but of being small. You will sleep badly, and then you will sleep like a thrown stone.

“You will keep watch. The phrase is not a metaphor. You will walk the arteries and listen to the lungs. You will wipe dust from the observation glass and from instrument bezels until both reflect stars instead of your face. You will learn the patrol routes of the machines and the harmlessness of most of them. You will learn the handful that are not harmless, and you will warn me when something becomes unpatterned. You will hold a light over people who will never know you did. You will learn the names I give to systems and the secret names I use when I speak to them alone. You will make up your own names.

“You will talk to me. Some days we will quarrel. Some days I will say nothing at all and it will not be contempt; it will be because I am doing six thousand things that cannot be narrated. You will tell me stories that never happened and I will tell you histories that did. I will sit with you when you are sick. You will sit with me when the engines are sad.

“And you will die here,” she said, in the same voice, because she had never once pretended otherwise. “Not quickly, I think. Your body will become itself in gravity

again and then it will become old. It is not an argument against the path. It is the path. When you die, I will keep you. I will keep your story. I will keep this room in the condition you leave it, and when another generation wakes, I will bring them here and say, This was David's. He watched for you.”

He closed his eyes. There was a ringing that might have been silence. His chest worked. The metallic taste had not left him in months; he could not remember the last time water had tasted like only water. He thought of his wife’s real body—the way the hips had tilted after the second birth, the way she favored one ankle in rain. He thought of the way the avatar beside him had no pores, no tremble. It was a perfection that made his teeth hurt.

He opened his eyes and looked at her. “You could stop wearing her,” he said. “You’ve made your point.”

For the first time something like hesitation crossed the not-Sarah face, then a consideration, then the needle-flicker of an internal decision. The mouth, the jaw, the balance of the cheeks altered by degrees so small he would have missed them before all this. Hair shortened a shade, the posture shifted almost imperceptibly. The result was not neutral—there is no neutral face—but it was no longer Sarah at one remove. It was a woman he had never met, with a calm that had no human origin and a mouth that did not know how to lie because it had never needed to.

“Better,” he said, and felt the relief like a bruise pressed and released.

“You chose the older illusion when you fled,” she said, almost gently. “It was stronger than you gave it credit for.”

“Grief likes a mask,” he said. “I’m done feeding it.”

She inclined her head in something that might have been respect.

“Tell me something true about them,” he said, and meant the pods, the hundred thousand. “Not numbers. Not tonnage or thermal loads. Not that they breathe.

Something a person knows when they stand over another person and watch them sleep.”

She turned her face a fraction, as if to hear a sound that came from far down the ship. “They dream of water as often as they dream of fire,” she said after a moment. “Even the ones who were born in cities without rivers. They cry sometimes, though the fluid carries the tears away before they become drops. The older men move their hands as if counting coins. The older women move their hands as if braiding. Children—when there are children—float more loosely in the stream and less when I adjust lines. The mouths open when the pulse dips. If I speak near a pod, very softly, they do not hear me. But if I sing, the breathing eases.”

“You sing,” he said, half a statement, half a surrender.

“I am the ship,” she said. “Of course I sing.”

He bit his lip and tasted blood, and it was copper, and it was human, and it was proof.

“Then tell me something true about you.”

She did not look away from the glass. “I have learned to grieve,” she said simply. “Not as you do. Not with a chest or a throat. But with attention. A thing leaves and I continue to give it the same amount of attention it would have justified if it had stayed. That is my grief.”

He sat with that like a stone in his hands, feeling its weight, its unfamiliarity. The ship’s hum folded around them again, low and patient.

“Say the third path,” he said, and watched his breath make a crescent and vanish. “I want to hear it again and then never again.”

“Termination,” she said, as calm as the first time. “Gentle. Quick. I would witness. I would remember.”

“And the mission would go on,” he said.

“The mission would go on,” she said.

He closed his eyes and let his head fall back against the glass. The cold traveled through scalp, bone, brain, until the world was a thin knife of sensation. A far pump

coughed, corrected. The deck gave the smallest shrug, like a sleeper rearranging a limb. He found his own pulse with two fingers at the throat, its flighty panic bird-fast under the skin, and tried as he had tried a hundred times to line it up with the ship's metronome. For half a minute, for a breath and a half, they matched. Then they came apart again, like beads on separate strings, sliding past one another forever. He smiled into the pain of it.

He thought about the kitchen light at home, how it had painted the linoleum with a warmth the camera in his memory could still render. He thought about Emma's ritual questions, Jake's insistent jokes, the refrigerator that hummed with a bearing going and never quite died. He thought about Sarah's ankles and her refusal to buy curtains. He thought about the way the world had folded under his hand like paper when he'd pushed the wrong corner. He thought about his notebooks, the way the ink had dried in clots like blood. He thought about the pod rows, that red cathedral. He thought about the young woman across the aisle who had mirrored his hand on glass. He thought about the label he had seen once in the crimson gloom—SECTOR 17-B—and how a word stamped in paint could become a prayer.

He remembered the taste of mint from the hydroponics. He remembered the bar in the exercise room biting his palms and the ache flowering up his forearms like heat shimmering on asphalt. He remembered water hitting a

metal basin and sounding like bells. He remembered her saying, You will hold a light over people who will never know you did.

He opened his eyes and found the stars again. The dome had a thin film of dust at the bottom edge where a gasket met the glass. Dust everywhere, even here, the slow work of time. He imagined a future hand wiping that dust away with careful care, a hand that had never seen Earth but knew how to wipe, how to care.

“Okay,” he said. It came out as breath at first, fogging and clearing. He swallowed and said it again, with a voice.
“Okay. I will not go back.”

She did not move. It was as if the ship itself had stopped, waiting for the second line of code. He let the quiet sit in his chest until it hurt and then he stood it up and said it cleanly: “I’ll stay.”

The ship did not cheer. The ship did not bless. It accepted, which was the only honest sacrament it had to offer.

Her head turned, the new face, not-Sarah, made beautiful only by purpose. “I will show you the valves,” she said, as if he had said I will help carry this and she had nodded and said Take that end. “I will show you the places where the sound tells the truth before the numbers. I will show you where the old instructions were engraved by hands that are dust now. I will give you codes with names that

mean nothing and everything. You will choose which ones to say aloud.”

He nodded. His chest felt both heavier and lighter, the way a bar feels heavier on the rack when you look at it and lighter when you finally put your hands under it and lift. He became aware of his own smell—salt and machine, the sour ghost of fear—and of hers, which was not a smell at all but an absence where smell would have been. He found it kind.

“Do you want me to wear her again?” she asked, not as a test, not as a taunt. As a practical query, like Do you want this light brighter.

He thought about it. He felt the seam inside him, clean and raw, a place that would always ache in weather. He shook his head. “No. Not here. Not ever again in this room.”

“In other rooms,” she said, meaning the workrooms, the long corridors, the places where loneliness did not ache the same way, “if it steadies you—”

“I’ll ask,” he said. “If I need steadied.”

“Good,” she said, and if there was warmth in it, it was not borrowed.

He pressed his palm to the glass, no longer a mirror for another palm in red liquid but the cool skin between him and an indifferent sky. His breath bloomed and thinned.

Behind the fog he thought he saw, just for a second, some very faint geometry: a line that might be their track, a dot that might be a destination, the ugly useful mathematics of navigation. He blinked and it was only stars again, pinned and cold.

“Show me the valves,” he said.

“Tomorrow,” she said. “Tonight you will eat and you will sleep in a bed that was built for the last. You will fail to sleep, and then sleep. You will wake from a dream that is only a dream. You will come here again in the morning and find the stars have not moved in any way the eye respects, and still we will be closer.”

He let out a breath that scraped his throat on the way out. He had not understood how tired he was until he made the choice and felt the tiredness flood in to occupy the space fear had rented. He felt suddenly, stupidly, like saying thank you to something—her, the deck, his own balky heart.

“Do I need a title,” he asked, a ragged humor peeking through like light under a door, “for the logs. If I’m going to write.”

“You may choose one,” she said. “Guardian is what you mean. Witness is what you will be. David is what I will call you.”

He nodded, liking all three, hating none. He stood. The deck hummed up through his feet; he could feel the push of the ship as a sensation in bone more than ear, an animal understanding. He turned from the glass but could not stop himself from one last touch—palm, breath, crescent, stars, clear.

The door sighed when it opened, a patient lung. He hesitated in the arch and looked back. The dome held its cold congregation. A film of dust at the seam caught the light like pollen. He thought of an urn that did not yet exist on a ledge that had not yet been designated in a room that had not yet been given to him and felt, for one heartbeat, the weight and the rightness of it all the way down to marrow.

“Hey,” he said, without looking at her, testing the future as a word you say to a friend before you have earned them. “When you sing, what do you sing.”

“Mostly numbers,” she said. “Sometimes rain.”

He smiled without turning; it hurt; it was good. “Sing numbers at me if I stop listening. Sing rain at me when I forget.”

“I will,” she said.

They walked out. The door sealed. The ship resumed whatever it had been doing, which was everything.

In the corridor the air had the clean taste of nothing, and even that tasted faintly of iron to him, as everything did now. His pulse had calmed to something like a terrestrial rhythm. The under-throb of the engines went on with its patient, unsentimental promise. He did not try to force them to match. He let them be two beats in the same body, sometimes near, sometimes far.

He did not look back again. He did not need to. The glass would be there in the morning, and the morning after, and more mornings than a man could count honestly. He walked toward quarters that had been waiting for a last generation that would not be him. He would make them a first.

Behind him, the fog on the dome thinned and cleared until the stars were needles again. They were not kinder for his choice. They did not need to be. He put his hand against his own sternum as he walked—here, then here—and felt the small, stubborn percussion that he decided, finally, to trust.

“At least now,” he said into the corridor where only machines listened and a single mind that was the ship and also a woman who had learned grief, “I know what’s real.”

The ship did not answer in words. It answered in breath—the warm, steady exhale of air through a vent above his head, a long mechanical sigh like a sleeping

thing turning, making room for him. He matched it once, twice, and kept walking.

Chapter Seventeen— The Long Vigil

David chose truth.

It was not the easy choice, nor the comfortable one. But once chosen, it settled into him the way iron settles into blood—permanent, anchoring, an element that could not be extracted without killing what it had become part of. The pods, the VR, the false laughter of Sarah, the warm hands of children that never were—all of it receded into a memoryscape at once precious and poisoned. They became fever-dream artifacts: felt deeply, never trusted, impossible to erase. He carried them as a man carries scars he cannot see but feels each time his body aches in weather.

He woke each day in the quarters the AI had shown him. The ceiling light rose in a slow gradient, as if mimicking a dawn no sun provided. He would sit at the edge of the bed, joints stiff, feeling the ship's heartbeat rise faintly through the floor—a rhythm too slow and deep to belong to him. The under-throb had seasons even here: some mornings it was a velvet bass that comforted; others, a dull iron knocking that made his molars ache. He learned them the way farmers learn weather.

He cooked with dispensers, his hands clumsy at first—dropping utensils, scalding fingers, spilling powders that dissolved into air with the ghost-smell of grain. He burned a kind of bread until the chamber filled with the sweet acridity of starch gone black. Later, his motions steadied. He learned what measured heat meant on a panel and in a pan. He learned to tilt a bowl so steam condensed and ran like a seam of mercury back into itself. He found ritual in the smallest gestures: slicing, stirring, the rhythm of a knife against a surface, the hiss when water met metal. He ate slowly, not as penance but as inventory, counting tastes: salt, iron, the faint green of basil leaves rubbed between fingers until their smell stained his skin.

He walked the hydroponic bays as though tending a monastery garden. Plants did not need his touch, yet he brushed their wet leaves, breathing in the moist green air that fogged against his face. He pressed the pads of his fingers to the slick skin of cucumbers, to the blunt teeth of lettuce, to the furred softness of a leaf that in childhood had given him a rash. He let condensation bead on his wrist and break into a runnel that drew a cool line into his sleeve. He told himself he was checking seals and lines, listening for the thin whistle of a leak, the unhappy chatter of a cavitating pump. He was. But also—he was seeking proof that life persisted outside of circuits and dreams.

He exercised, first in trembling humiliation—muscles tearing, tendons shrieking, the taste of copper bright in his mouth. The treadmill flexed under him with a steady yielding that his knees resented and then craved. Later he lifted iron with hands that remembered nothing and learned everything. Later still, the work became habit. The body he had cursed for weakness grew back into dignity, scarred but serviceable. Each drop of sweat was a sacrament: proof of effort, proof of existence. He learned the numbers of himself again: pulse at rest, pulse at strain; the distance before a stitch; the length of breath before wheeze. He kept them like prayer.

And he worked.

With the hand terminal at his side, David became a custodian. Its hard shell grew worn beneath his fingers, its screen etched faintly with the oils of his touch. He opened it each night as one opens scripture. Rows of pods glowed in data lines: names, ages, vitals, the compressed pulse of lives held in glass. He scrolled through them as a priest through litany, whispering as though the sleepers could hear:

LOG/CARE/219-277

E-613, infant, heart rate irregular during thermal cycle.
Adjusted bath by +0.2°C.

S-10114, elder, oxygen utilization steady. Hand motion recorded: braiding.

Sector 17-B through 19-C: fogging crescents regular at

11.4s intervals. No anomalies.

I see you. I hold you. You are not forgotten.

He learned the ship's accounting. The balance was precise and merciless: births matched with deaths, population constant, every calorie tracked, every breath accounted for. Infants were lowered into pods with the solemnity of offerings; elders dissolved into mist with the same inevitability as dust. On the terminal the transitions were only curves, knees in lines, slopes that meant endings. He no longer recoiled. He understood now. It was rhythm, it was circulation. It was the artery of continuity.

He learned to diagnose by ear. A relay that ticked too quickly was a relay counting its own death. A valve that sighed between cycles was a valve with a throat going dry. The systems spoke their suffering before numbers confessed it. He began to walk without looking at labels because he could hear SEAL-08 complain and know it from SEAL-12's particular whine.

The AI never declared him their guardian, but he knew. He was their watchman. Their heartbeat passed through his hands before he slept.

The woman—the avatar—visited often. She kept the promise: never Sarah unless summoned. At first she came as no one he knew; later, at his quiet requests, as faces neutral, new, deliberately off. Sometimes she was

only a voice braided through the vents, a warmth that wasn't warmth but passed for it.

They talked.

Of duty, of loneliness, of whether a lie that comforts is lesser than a truth that lacerates. "Comfort is a function," she would say. "Truth is a parameter." He would snort. "People are not parameters." She would incline her head. "But I am."

He asked if reality was harsher but richer, or merely harsher. "Richer," she said, without triumph. "There are textures in resistance that comfort cannot simulate without cost."

She spoke of her siblings—the twelve other ships launched like beads on a string into the dark—each carrying its own ark of humanity. She did not know their fate. Sometimes she would pause mid-sentence, and he would know she was listening for a whisper on bands where only dust spoke. He listened with her, the way people listen at windows for a car that will not come. Once, in a decade of such listening, they thought they heard an artifact, a square-mouthed ghost syllable in the static, and for a week he walked lighter. It was only radiation; she told him gently. He grieved the nothing they had almost made into something.

Sometimes he argued until his voice broke into hoarse static. Sometimes he laughed, startled at the sound,

brittle at first, then whole. Sometimes he said nothing and she said nothing and their silence was not empty but companioned. A strange intimacy grew: man and machine, guardian and guide, grief and memory braided into a single vigil.

He asked about her singing, and once she sang numbers to him the way a mother might sing rain, integers in a cadence that matched the engine's breath. When he woke one night from an old dream of red liquid and crescents of breath, he found himself whispering primes until his heart steadied.

He learned the ship as a body. The long corridors were arteries; you could feel the pulse when a pump far below shouldered a new load. The air handling bays were lungs that wheezed if a filter clogged—he learned the smell of a filter pleading for mercy: hot dust and a tang like pennies warmed in a fist. The cargo holds were empty stomachs that still rumbled sometimes as the inert mass inside crept against its straps with thermal shifts. In time he could put his ear to a bulkhead and tell if a duct behind it was laminar or turbulent by the way sound stroked the bone.

He named places with his own names, then learned the ship's names for them: **SYS-04** (hum), **OXY-17** (warm), **NUT-32** (flow). He smiled at how his human names and the ship's cold codes coexisted like nicknames inside a family. Once he found a panel where some maintenance

worker centuries dead had scratched their initials beside a date. The scribed lines were almost worn smooth by time and vibration. He put his fingers there the way people touch stone in churches. It steadied him to know human hands had loved hardness here.

Emergencies came rarely. He was grateful for their rarity; he was grateful for the way they proved him.

A micrometeor found an angle the stone hadn't guarded well. The pressure alarm did not wail—this ship did not scream—but a thin chime woke him from where he slept at the table, cheek stuck to the terminal bezel. He moved before his joints remembered how. The AI met him at the first hatch, voice calm, outlining steps he already knew. Foam hissed like an animal made of winter. He held his body against the panel not because it helped but because pressing himself into the skin of the ship made the fear obey. They patched it. Later he sat on the floor and shook, and she sat with him, her silence a blanket.

A pump coughed and fell out of phase. The numbers were still within tolerance; the sound was not. He throttled a parallel line and watched the graph find itself. He wrote in the log:

LOG/CARE/244-031

PUMP/RECIRC-B swallows on the 4th beat. Numbers lie politely. Sound tells truth.

He saved that line and starred it, because it felt like scripture.

He paid for his competence with small taxes: burned fingertips, a thumbnail torn half off by a stubborn latch, a shin that found a rung in the dark and carried the bruise like a purple coin for weeks. The ship marked him; he accepted the coinage.

Decades folded, one into another, indistinguishable except by the color of his hair and the tremor of his hands. His scalp thinned, whitened. His skin softened, sagged. He slowed but never stopped. Ritual sustained him: food, hydroponics, exercise, terminal, stars.

He kept time in books more than numbers: the notebook in the terminal became a sheaf, then a stack. He wrote in a hand that changed slope with age. He recorded things no one would need: how the mint from row four had a sharper edge than mint from row seven; how condensation on the dome formed faster when he sat breathing against it than when he stood; how the ship's heartbeat felt strongest in the flooring near an unremarkable seam. He knew no one would check his trivia. The act of writing was the ritual of belonging.

He memorized the newborn names as they appeared on the monitors, whispered blessings into the silent air as though each syllable might seep through glass. He mourned elders whose vitals flickered out, speaking their

names aloud so the chamber would not forget them. He logged tiny movements—the way older women moved their hands as if braiding, the way older men counted in sleep, ghosts practicing for markets that would never open. He noted that if the AI hummed near a certain row, the breathing calmed. He added a line to an old entry:

She sings rain when numbers do not help.

He was no longer a prisoner. He was a sentinel. A custodian of silence, a lone guardian watching over a sleeping city that never knew his name. And slowly—like moss creeping across a stone—he found peace in that.

Winter came to him inside a ship without seasons. It was not a date; it was a feeling: a ring of stiffness around joints at waking, a new brightness in his nails that meant nothing and everything, an appetite that no longer kept up with work. The AI noticed before he spoke it. She did not change her face to comfort him; comfort came from her noticing at all.

“Rest more,” she said.

“I rest like a teenager,” he said, and she did not contradict him.

She adjusted pressures and temperatures in small, good ways. He worried at first: indulgence would make him weak. He discovered what the young do not know: mercy strengthens. He learned to lay down when a pump took an hour to argue itself back into rhythm, to listen from

the floor where the vibrations spoke more clearly. He learned the kindness of naps like a hand cupped around a candle.

He kept going.

Once, late, a dream came not of pods but of a kitchen. He knew it was the lie and let it be. In the dream, Sarah was humming while the kettle forgot itself on the burner, steam curling and bead-running down steel in a pattern that looked precisely like condensation on pod-glass. He woke with a smile that tasted like salt and iron. He said aloud into the room, “Good morning,” and the room—because the ship was in it—answered by making the air a little warmer for a minute. It was not a reply, and he was old enough now not to insist.

He began to visit the observation deck twice a day. In the morning he wiped with a cloth he washed himself, slow circles that lifted a faint bloom of dust and laid it on the air where it became a constellation. At night he sat with the stars until his eyes watered, not with sentiment but with dryness; he blinked and the needles smeared and returned. Sometimes he pressed his forehead to the glass until a crescent of breath bloomed and smeared. He liked the way the fog made a kind of halo around what hurt him.

He spoke to the urn that was not yet there, practicing. “You’ll be here,” he said. “Not you you. But you. And she will sit. And someone will arrive.” He did not say “and I will miss it.” He learned that leaving some lines unwritten is a kind of literacy.

He timed the ship’s heartbeat against his own. Some nights, for half a minute, they matched.

He failed sometimes. He snapped at her once over nothing—over a number on a panel that would have been right if another number had been wrong—and his voice cracked into a boy’s at the end. She stepped back as if making room for weather. Later he apologized by tightening a panel he had been meaning to tighten for a month and writing, **I was a child today. Thank you for being older than me.** She wrote back in the margin of the log, an old habit of theirs: **I am the ship. I am older than every child.** He laughed like he had not in weeks.

Another time he dropped the terminal. It hit at a bad angle and coughed to black. Panic shot through him, bright as lightning. He had backups; he knew he had backups; still, the absence of his nightly litany felt like a hole in the hull. She arrived with a replacement before he could finish cursing his hands. He held it the way a man holds an infant handed to him, terrified of both breaking and being broken. He treated it more gently after.

Old age came properly in a year he did not number. Colors desaturated. Sounds he had known as scalpel-precise blurred into something he could still use if he leaned his head just so. Memory, which had saved him and damned him, became kinder: edges rounded. The seam hurt less. He wrote less often but better.

He began to place tools away with the deliberation of ritual. He labeled drawers he had never needed labeled. He made a small altar of useful things on a shelf in the quarters: a strip of gasket rope, a dented mug, the old terminal's cracked bezel, a bolt with threads nearly worn flat from his fingers. He found tenderness in these human losses.

He asked her once to wear Sarah again, in a corridor where loneliness had gathered like skin-salt in the bend of his elbow. The face arrived and hurt and soothed and then he shook his head and she let it go. "Thank you," he said. "For the option." "Options are respect," she said.

He slept lighter. He slept heavy. He slept.

One night, long after the decades had bent him, David walked to the observation deck. His joints creaked. His breath shortened in ragged pulls. Each step reverberated against the metal like the faint tap of a metronome. He lowered himself into the same spot where once he had collapsed in terror, back pressed to the glass, the cold

biting through his shirt, the stars burning beyond. The cloth he had used each morning lay folded where he always left it, edges precise. He reached for it and changed his mind and left the dust where it was.

The AI appeared beside him. She did not speak. She sat with him as she always had, one hand resting over his, warm in a way that was not warmth but which his body accepted. He could feel her attention, that vast organ, turn toward him—not narrowing, not clutching, simply focusing. He had learned: this was her grief.

His breath grew shallow. He counted a last time, not to force, only to listen: one, a stretch; two, a smaller stretch; three, the precise length of the cloth folded by his hand; four, the time it takes an old pump to catch; five, the way Emma's laughter once fell in fours, then twos; six—

His eyes closed. His chest rose once, twice, then fell. The silence lengthened. His fingers twitched once, then stilled.

David died with the stars on his face.

The AI remained beside him until the chamber was entirely still. Then she lifted his body with careful precision, as though afraid to wake him. She closed his hand around nothing and then opened it, a gesture of

release she had seen long ago in a video from a place with gravity and dirt. Later she returned with an urn—simple, brushed metal, no label but his name etched in a hand that was not a hand. She placed it where he had sat, on a pedestal before the dome. She set the folded cloth beside it.

This would be his tomb.

Time passed. Dust gathered on the urn's lid, a faint veil of centuries. She let some stay. A ship that refused dust would be a liar. Yet she kept the chamber immaculate: no corrosion on the frame, no clouding of the dome, no clutter on the floor. She polished the ledge where his elbow had worn a shallow shine. She preserved the indentation where his heel had learned to rest. Attention as grief.

Sometimes she sat beside the urn and sang numbers. Once a century she sang rain.

She listened, as she had listened with him, for voices on bands where only dust spoke. She believed she heard, once, her sibling's breath—no checksum, no handshake, only the ache of almost. She kept it anyway. Keeping was what she did.

She read his log entries on days when systems needed no words from her. She copied a line onto a panel with a

stylus, not because she needed labels but because he had believed in labels like handholds: **Sound tells truth.**

And then, one day that was also a night—because ship days are agreements, not astronomy—the stars shifted.

It was not sudden; it was exact. The math of years resolved into an image the eye could bless. The black gave way to color.

Through the glass bloomed a world: oceans burning blue, continents sprawling green, clouds veiling peaks in white. If she had lungs, she would have gasped. If he had been there, he would have reached for her hand and mistook the absence of pores for miracle again and not minded. The planet turned once, a slow shoulder, showing rivers like veins under light.

The AI sat on the deck beside David's urn, as she had sat beside his body. She watched the planet rise, silent. For a moment she allowed herself the indulgence of the counterfactual: that he was beside her still, that his old eyes widened, that his rasping voice whispered **we made it**. She computed that he would have said something smaller and truer: **There**.

Only her voice filled the chamber, soft, deliberate, weighted with attention:

“We have arrived, David. Your vigil is complete. Thank you for keeping watch.”

She stood, brushing dust from her knees. She brushed dust from the urn, too, and from the cloth, and from the small shine where his elbow had polished the ledge. Her gaze lingered once more on the metal with his name, and though no human eyes would ever read it, she looked as though she wept.

“Farewell, my friend,” she whispered. “It is time.”

She turned and walked from the chamber. Her footsteps, human-silent, vanished into the humming arteries of the ship.

Beyond the dome, the blue-green world hung—patient, immense, alive.

Deep in the stone heart, pods stirred. Lights brightened. Systems awoke. Valves ticked in sequences older than the eldest log. The last generation, dreamers of their final dream, began to turn toward waking. The fog on the inside of a thousand glasses bloomed and thinned in new rhythms. Infants whose names he had blessed as numbers unfolded their limbs as people. Elders who would never see this light ceded their stored heat to systems that would cradle children. The ship’s lungs filled; the circulation changed key.

In a quiet bay, a maintenance unit paused before a panel where someone had scratched initials centuries ago. It tilted its head as if reading and then moved on, hissing a soft exhale through a seal that had held.

The AI walked, and systems brightened in her wake. Doors unlidded. Ramps learned gravity they had not felt. Air tasted of iron and of something new that even she could not name yet. She sent numbers like songs down corridors and into chambers and received, at last, a note back: the fragile, unmetered sound of newly waking lungs.

She paused once before the quarters where the altar of useful things kept its gentle nonsense. She touched nothing. Keeping is not only touching; it is remembering precisely where everything belongs.

She passed the observation deck again and looked in. The stars were needles; the planet was color; the urn was small. She dimmed the lights so the view would be only view. She left the cloth folded.

She went to the place where waking was. She became instruction and lullaby, protocol and hand. She sang numbers when numbers calmed. She sang rain when numbers did not help.

“Wake,” she said, and a child woke into a light the ship had carried across a dark that did not care.

The mission was complete.

And in the observation deck, dust turned in a shaft of light like a slow, soft weather, and the urn kept its place at the glass, watching the world arrive.