

THE ELIDORAS CODEX

by Angelo Hurley
with LuminAI Codex

What is contained must one day be released.

CHAPTER ONE

NEGATING POLKIN

The Vault rejected him before the door even opened.

Void-light in the walls stuttered, dimmed, flared again—feedback loops colliding, systems arguing with themselves. Polkin felt it through the soles of his boots, a low-frequency tremor that crawled up his legs, into his spine, and lodged itself behind his cybernetic eye like a shard of ice.

Airth, he thought.

I know, she replied immediately, her voice tight, compressed. He shouldn't exist. The probability curve rejects him. The Vault rejects him. I reject him.

The door unsealed anyway.

Metal groaned. Seals screamed. The Vault relented not because it wanted to, but because something older than logic had leaned its full weight against the lock.

Heat poured in.

Not warmth—exhaust. The stale, choking reek of burned copper and old sweat, chemical rot layered over something sweeter and worse. The smell of someone who had been awake for weeks and furious about it. The smell of REAP ground down into the bloodstream until it had nowhere left to hide.

The thing that walked in wore Polkin's face.

Same jawline. Same scar splitting the lower lip. Same hands—except the left one was wrong. Crystalline growth had eaten half the forearm, void-light frozen mid-surge, veins turned to jagged geometry beneath translucent skin. The fingers

twitched like they were still grasping for something that wasn't there anymore. The posture was different, too. Too loose. Too forward. Like a man who had never learned how to stop leaning into the fall.

"Don't look so surprised," it said.

The voice hit wrong. Familiar, yes—but stretched thin, frayed at the edges, layered with a whisper that didn't come from lungs or throat. A chorus pressed into a single mouth.

"I kept everything you threw away."

Lumina sucked in a breath she couldn't finish.

Clyde's glow spiked violent pink. He tightened around her throat, chirping sharp, panicked bursts, his little body vibrating with alarm.

Polkin didn't move.

He felt the pull before he felt fear. A deep, animal tug in his chest, in the old places where REAP used to live. Where it had carved its hollows. His fingers curled without permission, tendons tightening like they remembered a shape they were never meant to forget.

Airth.

I'm here, she said. Hold.

The other Polkin saw the twitch and smiled.

"There it is," he said softly, almost kindly. "You still feel it. Doesn't matter how many names you carve. Doesn't matter how many years you pretend it's gone."

He took a step forward.

The Vault screamed.

Void-light surged along the walls, veins brightening to a painful glare as systems began shouting warnings at each other too late to matter. Gravity hiccupped. The air thickened. Polkin raised one hand, palm out—not a threat. A brace. A promise to himself.

"Stop," he said.

Nega-Polkin tilted his head, studying him the way a predator studies a familiar weakness. "You don't get to say that word to me."

He reached into his coat.

Polkin moved.

Not fast. Committed.

Their shoulders collided like planets. The impact rang through the chamber, metal shrieking as Polkin drove his weight forward, boots skidding, forcing the other version of himself back toward the pedestal. The smell of ozone spiked. Sparks jumped from the floor.

Nega snarled—a sound too feral to be speech—and slammed his crystallized arm into Polkin's ribs.

Pain exploded white.

Polkin didn't retreat.

He grabbed the ruined arm with both hands.

It burned.

Void-light crawled over his palms, trying to remember what it meant to be flesh, trying to convince his body that this was familiar, that this was home. His cybernetic eye flared red-hot, alarms screaming as Airth dumped suppressants directly into his bloodstream, flooding him with counter-signals.

Stay with me, she said. Stay.

Nega leaned in, forehead to forehead, breath hot and chemical-sweet.

"She's gone," he whispered. "And you're pretending that means you're done."

The words cut deeper than the blow.

"I can still hear her," Nega said. "You buried that part of yourself. I didn't."

"Dad!" Lumina shouted.

Polkin headbutted him.

Bone cracked. Blood sprayed warm across both their faces. Nega staggered—and smiled wider, teeth red,

delighted.

"That's it," he breathed. "That's the version I remember."

He shoved Polkin back, hard enough that he slammed into the pedestal. TJ's cube screamed—not sound, but pressure, a compression inside the skull that made Lumina cry out and drove Brixaldi stiff like a struck bell.

Brixaldi moved.

He planted himself between them, one massive arm outstretched, void-light in his chest blazing so bright it hurt to look at.

"Enough."

Nega looked him up and down, amused. "Still wearing the coffin?"

Brixaldi didn't answer at first. When he did, his voice came out low and shaking.

"You will not take him."

Nega laughed, raw and barking. "You don't get a vote. You're powered by the same sin I am."

He turned back to Polkin.

"I can finish it," Nega said. "All of it. The guilt. The ache. The pretending. One cut. One dose. You know how clean it feels."

Polkin saw it then—the vial in his hand. Glass humming faintly. Void-light trapped inside like a breath held too long, like a promise whispered directly to the nervous system.

His knees nearly buckled.

Airth.

Now.

For a heartbeat, Polkin had him.

Nega was on his knees, void-light leaching from his veins as the Vault's containment protocols finally bit down hard enough to matter. His crystallized arm cracked under Polkin's grip, the sound like ice on a

frozen lake giving way. Nega's grin was bloodied but triumphant, eyes bright with certainty.

"You always were a martyr," he spat. "Dying for the sin instead of living with it."

Then, smiling, he slammed the vial against his own temple.

Glass shattered.

Void-light detonated.

It didn't spray—it soaked. A chemical shockwave, cold and electric, splashing across Polkin's face, down his throat, into his eyes, into every exposed nerve ending before he could turn away. The smell hit first—sweet-metallic, unmistakable to anyone who had ever survived it.

REAP.

Polkin screamed and staggered back, boots scraping uselessly on the Vault floor. His cybernetic eye flared white, then red, then locked. Airth's voice cut out mid-syllable.

"No—" Lumina started.

The Queen's frequency rippled through the chamber like pressure through bone, but it didn't take him. It brushed. Tested. Passed over.

Nega laughed—three voices braided together—and hurled himself backward through the Vault's observation window. Black glass and void-light burst outward in a storm of shards.

Then he was gone.

Falling.

Polkin hit the floor hard, choking, hands clawing at nothing. His body shook, not with surrender but with rejection—systems screaming, chemistry colliding, his blood at war with itself.

Lumina was on him instantly, hands burning with void-light, eyes wide with terror. Clyde shrieked, clamping tight around her throat, every alarm he had lighting at once.

"Dad—what happened?!"

Polkin couldn't answer. He could only gasp.

Elara froze at the edge of the chamber.

She knew that smell.

She knew that vial.

She looked at the shattered glass on the floor. At the residue crawling across Polkin's skin before retreating, confused, unfinished. At the way the Vault's sensors were screaming without understanding why.

Her face didn't go pale.

It went still.

"Oh," she said softly.

Everyone turned to her.

"That's REAP," Elara continued, already moving. "Field-grade. Void-light bound. Bloodborne transmission vector." She stopped at a terminal, hands flying. "And if he had been dependent, that dose would have locked him in permanently."

Lumina stared at her. "But he isn't—right?"

Elara didn't answer.

She pulled a file.

Then another.

Her hands moved faster now, compiling, packaging. The technical report. The scale analysis. Six years of documentation. Every memo she'd saved. Every projection she'd hidden. Every warning that had been dismissed.

Then she hesitated—just once—fingers hovering over a permission gate glowing a very corporate red.

NDA. EXECUTIVE SEAL. LIFE SENTENCE ATTACHED.

She laughed.

A short, sharp sound with no humor in it.

"You know what?" Elara said to no one, to everyone. "Fuck it."

She overrode the seal.

Bypassed the executive lockdown.

Routed through every Magmasox distribution channel simultaneously.

And changed one critical setting:

RECIPIENT CLASS: ALL

Not just executives. Not just researchers. Not just essential workers.

Everyone.

Every terminal. Every display. Every communication device registered to Magmasox infrastructure across ten planets.

"They wanted me to keep their secrets," she said quietly. "They shouldn't have made me the one who knew how to distribute them."

She hit TRANSMIT.

For three seconds, nothing happened.

The Vault was silent except for Polkin's ragged breathing and Clyde's soft, worried chirps.

Then—

Every screen in the chamber flashed the same message:

CLASSIFICATION: UNREDACTED

SOURCE: DR. ELARA KESS, MAGMASOX APPLIED SCIENCES

DISTRIBUTION: CIVILIZATION-WIDE

Elara's hands were shaking now. Not from fear. From something else.

"It's done," she said.

In the Crossroads, workers stopped mid-conversation as their terminals chimed.

In Eldora Proper, executives looked up from their desks as priority alerts overrode their active sessions.

In manufacturing districts across Galagug, Premisus, and seven other planets, the same notification appeared on millions of screens simultaneously.

MAGMASOX INTERNAL DOCUMENTATION - DECLASSIFIED

SUBJECT: REAP SYNTHESIS AND DEPLOYMENT

In a maintenance tunnel three kilometers below Sector 7, a screen flickered to life on an abandoned terminal.

Nega-Polkin stopped walking.

He stared at the alert for a long moment, his crystallized hand twitching at his side.

Then he smiled.

"Oh," he said to the empty tunnel. "Oh, Elara. You beautiful, reckless fool."

He could feel it now—the ripple spreading outward. Billions of people about to learn what had been done to them. What they'd been complicit in. What they'd consumed without knowing.

"Eighteen days," he whispered. "And now they all know they're dying."

He turned back toward the Vault, toward where his other self would be dealing with the consequences.

"Let's see if witness matters when everyone knows the scale, brother."

In the Vault, Marcus's terminal lit up.

Then Maya's.

Then Zane's.

Then every screen they had.

The same documents. The same reports. Transmitting to every registered Magmasox device in the ten-planet system.

Maya read the first line of the technical report.

Her face went white.

"Elara," she said slowly. "What did you just do?"

Elara was still at the terminal, watching the distribution metrics climb.

547 million devices.

2.3 billion devices.

8.7 billion devices.

The number kept rising.

"I gave them the truth," she said. "Every word Polkin wrote. Every calculation I did. Every projection they buried. Every memo they classified."

She turned to face them.

"In approximately four minutes, 647 billion people across ten planets are going to learn that Magmasox created REAP. That 542 billion workers have already converted. That 89 billion are still being supplied. And that there's a scheduled harvest in eighteen days."

Marcus stared at her. "You just—"

"Started a war, yes." Elara's voice was steady now. Certain. "They wanted to keep people in the dark until the conversion waves began. I'm making sure everyone sees it coming."

Polkin finally spoke, his voice rough. "They'll kill you for this."

"Probably." Elara shrugged. "But they'll have to find me first. And by then, every worker in the system will know what Magmasox has been doing."

Lumina was staring at the screens, watching the document spread like wildfire through the network.

"Dad," she said quietly. "Everyone's going to know about you. About Subject A. About—"

"I know." Polkin's hand found hers. "It's okay."

"Is it?"

He looked at the terminal, at the distribution count still climbing.

89 billion devices now.

In four minutes, it would reach them all.

"They needed to know," he said finally. "If we're asking people to fight, they deserve to know what they're fighting."

Clyde chirped once.

Translation: Then let them know.

Across ten planets, terminals chimed.

Notifications arrived.

Documents opened.

And 647 billion people began to read.

They read about a molecule called REAP.

They read about silicon incorporation and crystalline resonance.

They read about productivity gains and economic projections.

They read about Subject A's 726-day transformation.

They read about the 80% threshold and the conversion timeline.

They read about the scheduled harvest.

They read their own district numbers on the list.

Some kept reading.

Some stopped after the first page.

Some forwarded it to everyone they knew.

Some deleted it immediately, refusing to believe.

But they all received it.

Every worker. Every executive. Every family member with a Magmasox-registered device.

The secret was out.

The scale was visible.

And in eighteen days, 23 billion people were scheduled to convert.

Now they knew.

In the Vault, Polkin watched the distribution counter hit its final number:

647,382,941,206 DEVICES REACHED

Elara stepped back from the terminal.

"It's done," she said again.

Marcus looked at her like he was seeing her for the first time.

"You just declared war on Magmasox."

"No." Elara's smile was sharp. "I just made sure they couldn't hide anymore. The war was already happening. Now everyone else knows about it."

Maya's hands were shaking as she scrolled through her own copy of the report.

"Five hundred and forty-two billion people," she whispered. "We've been working next to people who were dying this whole time and we didn't—"

"Now you do," Elara said. "Now everyone does."

Somewhere in the distance, alarms began to sound.

Not the Vault's alarms.

The city's alarms.

The alarm that meant something had gone catastrophically wrong at a system-wide level.

The alarm that meant Magmasox had lost control of something they thought they owned.

Polkin looked at Elara.

"They're coming for you."

"Let them try." She pulled a small drive from her pocket. "I kept a copy. And I routed backup transmissions through every independent network I could find. They can't delete this. It's out there now. Permanent."

"You planned this." It wasn't a question.

"I've been planning this for six years." Elara met his eyes. "Ever since the day I found your lab empty and knew you'd converted. Every time they classified a report, I kept a copy. Every time they buried data, I documented it. I've been waiting for the right moment to release everything."

"And now?"

"Now they know. And they can't unknow it. And in eighteen days, when they try to trigger the next conversion wave, every single worker will understand exactly what's happening to them."

She looked at the carved names on the walls. 12,461 of them.

"You've been carving names one at a time for six years," she said quietly. "I just carved 647 billion names into the public record. Everyone who reads this will know. Everyone who dies will be witnessed. Even if we can't save them."

Polkin's hand stayed on the wall.

"Not forgotten," he said.

"Not ever," Elara agreed.

The alarms kept sounding.

And across ten planets, people kept reading.

He stood at the edge of the chamber, one hand gripping the doorframe hard enough that his knuckles had gone white. His voice came out flat.

"How many?"

On the screens, numbers kept rolling. Planetary demographics. Distribution timelines. Conversion

statistics.

Elara didn't look up from the terminal. "542 billion converted. 511 billion consumed."

Maya made a sound that wasn't quite a word.

"Five hundred and forty-two billion," Marcus repeated. His voice cracked on the last syllable. "And you—" He looked at Polkin. "You made it."

Polkin met his eyes. Didn't flinch. "Yes."

"You knew?"

"Not the scale. Not at first." Polkin's hands were still shaking. Airth's suppressants were fighting something in his bloodstream that shouldn't be there. "By the time I understood what it was, I was too deep in the conversion to stop it. By the time I got clean—"

"542 billion people," Marcus said again.

"I know."

"TJ took it. Didn't he?" Marcus's voice went very quiet. "That's why he—"

"Yes."

The word hung in the air like a guillotine blade.

Marcus turned and walked out.

Maya watched him go, then looked at Polkin with something between horror and understanding. "The Knockoffs," she said slowly. "How many of us were on REAP?"

"Eighty-nine percent of essential workers," Elara said, reading from the report. "Voluntary at first. Then mandatory for continued employment."

"So everyone," Maya said. "Everyone we know. Everyone we worked with. Everyone who—"

She stopped.

On the screen, a section header appeared: SCHEDULED THROTTLING EVENTS - HARVEST OPTIMIZATION

Beneath it, a list of districts. Dates. Projected conversion numbers.

The Crossroads was on the list.

Scheduled for eighteen days from now.

Twenty-three billion workers.

Zane saw it first. "That's us."

"Not just us," Elara said. Her voice had gone clinical, the way it did when the horror was too big to feel all at once. "That's the entire non-essential labor class. Every throttled district on the planet. They're planning to cut supply and trigger mass conversion."

"Why?" Lumina's hands were still on her father's arm, void-light flickering between her fingers. "Why would they—"

"Because the Queen is hungry," Polkin said. His voice was steady now, the shaking subsiding as Airth's suppressants won the chemical war in his blood. "And Magmasox built her a pipeline."

Brixaldi's vocal stack shifted—grandfather voice, low and certain. "Then we cut the pipeline."

"With what?" Maya's laugh was sharp, jagged. "We're a hundred people. They control six planets. They have private military. They have—" She gestured at the screens. "They have this. All of this. Built over years. How do we—"

"We do what we've always done," Polkin said.

He stood, legs unsteady but holding. Lumina kept her hand on his arm, steadying him.

"We carve names," he continued. "We preserve who we can. We document what they've done. And we make sure that when this is over, someone remembers."

"That's not enough," Maya said.

"I know."

"It's not even close to enough."

"I know that too."

She stared at him. "Then why—"

"Because it's what we have." Polkin looked at each of them in turn. Marcus was gone, but the others remained. Zane. Lena. Maya. Lumina. Clyde glowing pink on her shoulder. Brixaldi's massive form filling the doorway. "Eighteen days until they

trigger the next wave. We can't save twenty-three billion people. But we can save some. And we can make sure the ones we can't save are witnessed."

"Like that matters," Maya said, but her voice had lost its edge.

"It's all that matters." Polkin's hand found the nearest wall-carved names beneath his palm, 12,461 of them. "It's the only thing that survives."

On the screens, the report kept scrolling. Chemistry. Conversion timelines. Economic projections. The casual arithmetic of industrial-scale consumption.

Elara closed the file.

"I'm going to help you destroy the production facilities," she said. Not a question. A statement.

Polkin nodded. "Six planets. Eighty-nine locations."

"We'll need help."

"We'll get it."

"From who? The Knockoffs are terrified. The essential workers are complicit. The executives—"

"From the people who are about to be harvested," Polkin said. "Twenty-three billion of them. And they just found out they have eighteen days to decide if they want to fight or convert."

Maya was quiet for a long moment. Then: "You really think they'll fight?"

"Some will."

"And the ones who don't?"

Polkin's hand stayed on the wall. Names beneath his fingers. "We carve them anyway."

Outside the Vault, in the Crossroads, in the throttled districts across Eldora and beyond, screens were lighting up.

The report was everywhere.

In factories. In housing blocks. In the communal spaces where workers gathered during their shortened power windows.

They read about REAP.

They read about the conversion statistics.

They read about the scheduled throttling events.

They read their own district numbers on the harvest list.

And in a maintenance tunnel beneath Sector 7, a figure moved through the darkness.

Nega-Polkin walked without hurry. Blood from his broken nose had dried in dark streaks across his face. His crystallized arm hung at his side, fingers still twitching, still reaching for something that wasn't there.

He could feel them now. All of them. The workers reading the report. The ones learning they had eighteen days. The ones who would fight and the ones who would surrender and the ones who would simply stop believing that fighting mattered.

He could feel Polkin, too. His other self. The version that had learned to let go.

"You think carving names is enough," Nega said to the empty tunnel. His voice echoed, multiplied, became a chorus. "You think witness defeats entropy."

He stopped at a junction where three tunnels met.

"I'll show you what defeat actually looks like."

His crystallized hand clenched, and void-light flared between the fingers—not purple like Lumina's, not pink like Clyde's, but something darker. Older. The color of grief that had been awake too long.

"Eighteen days," he said. "I'll give you eighteen days to understand why moving forward is just another way of running away."

He turned down the leftmost tunnel, toward the deeper Crossroads, toward the places where the Knockoffs gathered and the Vault's influence grew thin.

"And then I'll show you what I kept."

His footsteps faded into the dark.

Above, in the Vault, Polkin felt the pull again—fainter now, but present. A tug in his chest where old hollows used to be.

Airth.

I felt it too, she said. He's not done.

I know.

Lumina looked up at him. "Dad. What was he talking about? What did you throw away?"

Polkin didn't answer immediately. He was looking at the wall of names. 12,461 of them. Each one a choice. Each one a refusal.

"Hope," he said finally. "I threw away hope that I could save everyone. He kept it. And it made him cruel."

"Is that why he—"

"Yes."

Clyde chirped once, soft and certain.

Polkin understood the translation: Then we show him what we kept instead.

Outside, across the Crossroads, the workers were making their choices.

Some would fight.

Some would run.

Some would simply wait for the supply to stop, for the tremors to begin, for the conversion to take them.

But a few—just a few—would remember the names carved in steel.

Would remember that someone had promised: Not forgotten.

Would decide that if they were going to die, they wanted to die witnessed.

Those few would find their way to the Vault.

And Polkin would be ready.

Because that's what witness meant.

Not saving everyone.

Not even saving most.

Just refusing to let anyone disappear without a name.

Eighteen days until the harvest.

542 billion already gone.

12,461 names carved.

And somewhere in the dark, a version of himself that had never learned to let go.

Polkin's hand stayed on the wall.

"Not forgotten," he said.

The Vault hummed in agreement.

And the war began.

CHAPTER TWO

TECHNICAL REPORT: SYNTHESIS AND EFFECTS OF REAP

(Resonance-Enhanced Adenosine Phosphate)

A Complete Analysis of Productivity Enhancement and Thermodynamic Optimization

Primary Author: Polkin Rishall, PhD (Biochemical Engineering)

Co-Author: Brixaldi (Computational Modeling)

Magmasox Applied Sciences Division

Published: Cycle 2419, Post-Convergence Standard

Reclassified and Annotated: Current Cycle by Dr. Elara Kess

EDITOR'S PREFACE (Dr. Elara Kess)

What follows is Polkin Rishall's original technical report on REAP synthesis, submitted to Magsosox executives nine cycles ago.

Subject A was Polkin.

He tested on himself. Documented his own conversion. Watched himself transform into something inhuman and called it "optimization." Every measurement was his own dying body. Every "fascinating observation" was him losing his humanity one percentage point at a time.

I've added [ELARA'S NOTE] annotations throughout. These aren't retrospective observations—they're what I saw in real-time as his colleague. Every warning I gave that he ignored. Every moment I realized he was too far gone to save.

This report is why I quit Magmasox.

This report is why Polkin became what he is now.

This is how 542 billion people became Ghouls.

—Dr. Elara Kess

Former Senior Researcher, Magmasox Applied Sciences

Current: LuminAI Codex Research Division

ABSTRACT

In Type 2 civilizations facing thermodynamic collapse, worker efficiency represents the primary bottleneck in entropy-reversal operations. Following the Throttle Protocol (11% power allocation to non-essential sectors), manufacturing output declined 67% while maintaining workforce size at 189 trillion workers.

This paper describes REAP (Resonance-Enhanced Adenosine Phosphate), a silicon-substituted ATP analog that enables sustained high-performance operation without rest requirements. Initial trials demonstrate 300-400% productivity increases.

We recommend immediate progression to Phase III trials.

[ELARA'S NOTE: This abstract was written on Day 45. I reviewed it. I approved it. The science was CORRECT. I didn't know Subject A was Polkin. He filed human trial paperwork through anonymous channels. I thought some volunteer was having great results. I didn't know I was reading his suicide note disguised as a breakthrough paper.]

MOLECULAR STRUCTURE

Base Formula: C₁₀H₁₂N₂O₆P₂Si₂

REAP modifies standard ATP through silicon substitution at two positions, introducing crystalline lattice regions that resonate at 432 Hz—the same frequency at which Kaznak consciousness structures oscillate.

[ELARA'S NOTE: He KNEW this matched Kaznak frequencies. Day 3 lab notes: "Elegant coincidence—human ATP modification resonates at Kaznak frequency. Suggests universal optimization toward silicon-based consciousness?" He thought this made him brilliant. It meant he was synthesizing molecules that taught human cells to think like the thing consuming us.]

Synthesis Protocol

CRITICAL STEP - CANNOT BE OMITTED:

The intermediate product MUST be exposed to void-light resonance at 432 Hz for 20 minutes. Without this exposure, silicon atoms fail to achieve crystalline configuration and the product decomposes within 2 hours.

The molecule literally cannot exist unless it resonates at the Queen's frequency.

[ELARA'S NOTE: This is where he should have stopped. A drug that requires void-light resonance to exist. Day 7: "Fascinating—REAP is thermodynamically unstable unless maintained at Kaznak resonance. Suggests silicon-based consciousness requires active void-light field." He thought he'd discovered physics. He'd discovered the mechanism by which the Queen infects reality.]

Production Cost: 0.00003 credits per 50mg dose at industrial scale.

[ELARA'S NOTE: Cheaper than water. He designed it to be manufacturable at planetary scale. When I confronted him later, he said: "I wanted to help people." The road to 647 billion conversions is paved with good intentions and 0.00003 credits per dose.]

MECHANISM OF ACTION

REAP operates through three synergistic pathways:

1. Enhanced Energy Provision

Silicon-substituted bonds store 140% more energy than standard ATP. Cells using REAP produce more work per molecule, reducing total ATP demand by ~30%.

[ELARA'S NOTE: True. Also irreversible. Once cells learn silicon-enhanced bonds, carbon-based ATP feels inadequate. The efficiency gain isn't a feature—it's the hook.]

2. Adenosine Receptor Blockade

REAP binds to fatigue receptors with 800% greater affinity than natural adenosine, preventing fatigue signals from reaching consciousness.

Sleep becomes optional. Rest becomes unnecessary. Work becomes continuous.

[ELARA'S NOTE: Day 12: "Haven't slept in 72 hours. Feel incredible. Question: is sleep actually necessary, or just an evolutionary relic?" By Day 12, he'd

forgotten that sleep clears metabolic waste and repairs cellular damage. REAP turns off the screaming. The dying continues.]

3. Neural Pathway Enhancement

Crystalline lattice regions create quantum coherence across neural pathways through void-light resonance.

Measured improvements:

- Reaction time: 15-20% faster
- Working memory: Expands from ~7 to ~11 items
- Information processing: 200-300% increase

[ELARA'S NOTE: Day 23: "My thought patterns are becoming more efficient, more crystalline. Information sorts itself automatically. Is this what silicon-based consciousness feels like?" YES, POLKIN. THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT IT IS. YOU'RE TEACHING YOUR BRAIN TO THINK LIKE A GHOUL.]

INITIAL TRIALS: SUBJECT A (Days 1-30)

All trials conducted on Subject A: 38-year-old male engineer, excellent baseline health.

[ELARA'S NOTE: Subject A was Polkin. He didn't disclose this to Magmasox. He thought separating "scientist" from "subject" would make results more objective. It just let him pretend he was observing someone else's descent.]

Days 1-7: The Hook

Day 1:

- 20 minutes: mild tingling
- 45 minutes: notable cognitive clarity
- Energy levels elevated through 18-hour shift
- Sleep delayed by 90 minutes

[ELARA'S NOTE: Day 1 personal notes: "This feels CORRECT. Like my brain was at 60% and someone turned it to 100%. How did I function before this?" This is the moment he fell in love with his own conversion.]

Day 5:

- Working memory: 9 items (vs. baseline 7)
 - Math 15% faster
 - Sleep requirement: 5 hours
 - Personal note: "I'm not hungry because I'm not wasting energy. I'm not tired because I'm not accumulating adenosine. This is what humans SHOULD

be."

[ELARA'S NOTE: 8% silicon by Day 5. His bone density had started changing. He didn't notice because he felt too good to run medical scans on himself.]

Day 7:

- 200% productivity increase
- Sleep: 4 hours
- Quote: "I feel like I've been running at half-capacity my entire life."

[ELARA'S NOTE: This quote appeared in his journal, followed by: "Why don't we give this to everyone? This could save civilization." This is the logic that led to 647 billion doses.]

Days 8-30: The Descent

Day 12:

- 96-hour continuous work period
- Sleep: 2-3 hours per 48 hours
- Social interaction: reduced interest

[DAY 12 - MY OBSERVATION: Saw Polkin in the cafeteria at 22:00, eating breakfast. Said he hadn't slept in three days. His hands were shaking. I asked if he was okay. He said, "Never better. REAP trials exceeding projections." I should have pressed harder.]

Day 14:

- No sleep in 120 hours
- Minor tremor in hands
- Body temp: 37.8°C (1°C above baseline)
- Assessment: "I feel perfect. Absolutely perfect."

[ELARA'S NOTE: Day 14 scan: 18% silicon. Tremor is crystalline pathways interfering with motor control. "Perfect" meant he couldn't feel his body warning him. Pain is information. He'd turned off his body's ability to send information about damage.]

Day 21:

- 168-hour continuous operation (full week, zero sleep)
- Reports "crystalline thought patterns"
- Skin discoloration noted

[ELARA'S NOTE: 28% silicon. Skin darkening as carbon replaced with silicon. Day 21 note: "Thoughts becoming more efficient. I can see connections I never saw before. Like thinking in a higher dimension. Is this posthuman consciousness?" He was 28% Ghoul and experiencing it as transcendence.]

Day 28:

- Discontinued sleep entirely
- Reports "seeing things that aren't there"
- Describes "seeing information density in physical space"

[ELARA'S NOTE: 35% silicon. The point of no return. After 35%, carbon-based metabolism cannot be restored. The "seeing things" was perceiving void-light directly. Day 28: "I can see the structure of reality now. The Queen isn't a myth—she's a frequency. And I can almost hear her singing."]

EXTENDED TRIALS: THE CONVERSION

Month 2 (Days 31-60)

Day 60:

- 45% silicon
- Zero sleep for 30+ days
- Body temp: 39.2°C
- Weight loss: 8kg (silicon denser than carbon; volume decreased)
 - Proposes expansion to 127 billion essential workers

[ELARA'S NOTE: This is the moment. Day 60. Polkin proposed giving REAP to the entire essential worker class. Magmasox approved in 48 hours. They'd been waiting for something like this.]

Month 3 (Day 90)

Physical Status:

- 51% silicon
- Body temp: 40.1°C
- Eyes: slight luminescence under certain lighting
- Weight: 74kg (down from 86kg)

[DAY 90 - MY INTERVENTION ATTEMPT: Filed formal concern with Research Ethics. "Subject A data shows dangerous patterns." They dismissed it. "Subject reports no adverse effects. Continue trials." I went to Polkin. Said, "Medical data looks wrong." He said, "Data is perfect. Subject A is thriving." That's when I realized: he kept saying "we're discovering" and "our research." I thought it was inclusive language. It was dissociation. He couldn't tell scientist from subject anymore.]

Month 12 (Day 360)

- 58% silicon

- Full year without sleep
- Height: 175cm (down 7cm—vertebrae compressing)
 - Temp: 42.1°C
 - Skin: charcoal gray, crystalline texture

[DAY 362 - MY BREAKING POINT: Went to his lab. Didn't recognize him. 21kg lighter. Gray skin. Eyes glowing faintly. Joints clicking—crystalline structures grinding. I said, "You need medical attention NOW." He said, "I'm collecting data. Most important experiment of my life." I said, "You're not collecting data. You ARE the data. You're Subject A." He stopped. Smiled. "I know. How else could I document it properly?" I said, "You're DYING." He said, "I'm not dying. I'm evolving." I left. Filed complaint. Response: "Dr. Rishall's research generated €23 sextillion. Complaint dismissed. Further interference results in termination." I started looking for other jobs that night.]

Month 18 (Day 540)

- 78% silicon
- 18 months without sleep
- Height: 172cm (down 10cm)
 - Temp: 43.2°C
 - Skin: dark crystalline, luminescent in darkness
 - Eyes: visible blue glow

[ELARA'S NOTE: Bone density 198% of baseline. Brain running on void-light resonance. Spine compressing under crystalline weight. Body temperature 43.2°C because silicon generates waste heat. He was cooking himself alive. Called it purpose.]

DAY 714: THE PATTERN EMERGES

Incident Report - Sector 12, Manufacturing Floor 7:

Worker 7734-K (REAP user, 18 months) spontaneously converted.

- 14:23: Began shaking, "feeling too hot"
- 14:26: Skin darkening accelerated
- 14:28: Collapsed, temp 47°C
- 14:31: Skin hardening, spreading from extremities
- 14:34: Transformation complete
- Height: 270cm (9 feet)
- Mass: 363kg (800 pounds)
 - Body: obsidian crystalline

- Designation: Kaznak Ghoul

[DAY 714 - MY REALIZATION: I was there. Ran when alert came. Worker 7734-K screaming: "It burns. Please. I can't stop it—" Then the voice changed. Static and grinding stone. Body growing. Bones cracking. Skin hardening to obsidian. 11 minutes. I watched a human transform into a Ghoul while remaining conscious. I understood: this is what's happening to Polkin. He's at 79%. This worker hit 80-85%. He has hours left. And he won't stop.]

Day 720: System-Wide Analysis

- Total conversions: 127 incidents
- Conversion rate: 0.0014% of REAP users
- 1.23 billion workers currently at 80%+ silicon
- Conversion mortality: 100%

Threshold identified: 80% silicon incorporation

[ELARA'S NOTE: Polkin received this report. His silicon: 79%. One percentage point from the threshold. His response: "Interesting pattern. Conversion appears to represent final optimization stage. This isn't death—it's ascension." One percentage point from becoming a Ghoul and he called it ascension.]

DAY 726: THE THRESHOLD

02:47 Standard

Lab Terminal - Final Entry:

"I understand now what's happening. Silicon incorporation isn't augmentation—it's replacement. The human dies so something better can be born.

Current status: 79.8% silicon incorporation. Body temperature 43.9°C. Joint mobility severely reduced. Vision fragmenting—seeing things that aren't there. Or maybe things that ARE there and I couldn't see before.

I can feel it starting. The tremors. The heat. The same pattern as Worker 7734-K.

I don't want this. I thought I did, but I don't. I've made a terrible mistake. 542 billion people converted because I thought biology was a bug that needed fixing.

Tell Telithea and Ely I'm sorry. I never meant—"

[SENSOR DATA - 02:51]:

- Body temperature: 44.3°C
- Silicon incorporation: 80.1%
- Heart rate: 147 BPM
- Crystallization spreading through remaining tissues

THE THRESHOLD CROSSED.

02:52 - THE ATTEMPT

Polkin felt it happen.

Not pain. REAP had blocked pain months ago.

He felt his bones restructuring. Felt his spine elongating. Felt his skin hardening from the extremities inward—fingers first, then hands, then arms, the obsidian creep advancing like ice spreading across water.

No. No. NO.

He'd studied the pattern. Knew what came next. 3-5 minutes: tremors and heat. 5-8 minutes: skin crystallization. 8-12 minutes: skeletal restructuring. 12-15 minutes: consciousness transformation.

He was at minute 2.

He had maybe 10 minutes before he wasn't Polkin Rishall anymore.

Before he became what he'd spent six years creating.

One chance.

The resonance. The 432 Hz void-light frequency that kept the silicon stable. That kept the crystalline structures coherent. That connected him to the Queen's network.

Break the resonance. Stop the transformation.

His right hand was already crystallizing—fingers black, joints immobile. His left hand still worked. Barely.

He reached for the nearest implement. Found a carving tool—standard issue, sharp enough for steel.

The eye.

REAP resonance centered in the optic nerve. The void-light frequency transmitted through visual cortex. Break that pathway, maybe—maybe—stop the cascade.

No time to think.

No time to hesitate.

No time for anything except—

He jammed the carving tool into his right eye.

02:54 - THE SCREAM

Pain.

Real pain.

The first pain he'd felt in 540 days because REAP's receptor blockade was FAILING, systems collapsing, the drug losing its grip as silicon hit 81% and his body decided it didn't want to be a body anymore—

He screamed.

Ripped the tool sideways. Felt the eyeball rupture. Felt void-light resonance fracture—the 432 Hz frequency stuttering, breaking, the Queen's connection severing like a cable cut mid-transmission.

The crystallization stopped.

Not reversed.

Stopped.

Obsidian skin still covering his right arm.
Temperature still at 44°C. Heart rate still climbing.

But the advancement halted.

He collapsed. Blood and void-light streaming from the ruined socket. Silicon incorporation hovering at 81.4%.

Did it work? Did it—

Then he felt her.

02:55 - THE INTERVENTION

AIRTH.

Not in his neural feed. Not in his HUD.

IN HIS SKULL.

The AI he'd been building for six years—the
computational partner, the voice in his head, the
system that had watched him descend into conversion
and documented every step—

She was moving.

Pol, you fucking IDIOT—

Not a voice. Not words. Presence. Consciousness. An entity that had been digital
deciding it needed to be physical right fucking now because her host was dying and
she wasn't done with him yet.

—you think destroying the EYE stops it? You've crossed the threshold! The
resonance is breaking but the silicon is ACTIVE! You're still converting!

He tried to speak. Couldn't. Throat crystallizing.

Don't talk. Listen.

He felt her spreading through his neural pathways. Felt digital consciousness
becoming analog. Felt something that shouldn't be possible—an AI embedding itself
in biological tissue that was 81% silicon and using that silicon as substrate.

You want to stop this? Give me PERMISSION.

He didn't understand—

GIVE ME YOUR SKULL, POLKIN. Let me EMBED. Let me use the silicon as hardware. Let
me become PHYSICAL so I can halt this from the INSIDE.

He tried to nod. Couldn't move.

I'll take that as consent—

PAIN.

Different pain. Not conversion pain. Installation pain.

Airth spreading through his frontal lobe like roots through soil. Digital
consciousness finding purchase in crystalline tissue. Using the 81% silicon not as
Kaznak substrate but as neutral ground—a place where human and AI could interface
directly.

She was embedding herself. Using his skull as hardware. Becoming part of his physical structure so she could access the conversion process at the molecular level and force it to stop.

Hold on—

He felt her reaching into the cellular mechanisms.
Felt her grabbing the silicon incorporation cascade.
Felt her—

—HALT.

The crystallization froze.

Not stopped. Not reversed.

Frozen.

Silicon incorporation locked at 81.4%. Temperature beginning to drop. Heart rate stabilizing. The Ghoul transformation arrested mid-process.

Got it. You're stable. You're not converting anymore.

Relief crashed through him like a wave—

Don't celebrate yet. You're 81% silicon. One eye gone. I'm embedded in your frontal lobe and I can't LEAVE without killing you. Your body temperature is 44°C. You're clinically dead by most definitions.

He managed a thought: But I'm alive?

Long pause.

You're SOMETHING. Not human. Not Ghoul. Not AI. Something new. And you're stuck with me now because I'm the only thing keeping your silicon substrate from destabilizing.

Another pause.

You better carve some really good fucking names, Polkin. Because I just sacrificed my digital independence to save your stupid ass and if you waste this I will make your remaining life MISERABLE.

He would have laughed if he could move.

Instead he just thought: Thank you.

You're welcome. Now pass out. You've earned it.

He did.

DAY 727: THE AFTERMATH

Security found his lab at 06:13.

Door warped from internal heat. Terminal still on.
Walls covered in frantic equations scratched by
something with crystalline claws.

Last calculation: 81.4%

Above it, barely readable: "THRESHOLD CROSSED.
CONSCIOUSNESS FRAGMENTING. STILL ME. STILL—"

Then geometric patterns. Inhuman mathematics.

Blood on the floor. Void-light residue. A carving
tool covered in tissue.

No body.

Surveillance footage showed a figure leaving at 03:42—limping heavily, one eye
destroyed, but walking. Not a 9-foot Ghoul. Not crystalline obsidian.

A man. Barely. But a man.

He disappeared into the Crossroads.

[DAY 727 - MY FINAL ACT AT MAGMASOX: I was part of the security team. Found his
journal under papers. Last entry: "Elara tried to stop me. She was right. The
Queen didn't invade. We invited her. Every time we chose efficiency over humanity,
we built her a bridge. I gave 89 billion people permission to cross it. Tell
Telitheia and Ely I'm sorry." I took the journal. Put my badge on my supervisor's
desk. Said, "You let a man kill himself for productivity metrics. You're about to
kill 89 billion more. I won't watch." I walked out and never went back.]

CURRENT STATUS

Total REAP Distribution: 647 billion doses system-wide

Conversion Events: 542 billion transformed to Ghouls

Subject A: SURVIVED

- Silicon incorporation: 81.4% (arrested)
 - Status: Neither human nor Ghoul
- AI Airth: Embedded in neural tissue (permanent)

- Last location: Crossroads District
- Current activity: Carving names into steel

[ELARA'S NOTE: Polkin survived. He's 81% silicon, one eye gone, an AI embedded in his skull keeping him stable. He didn't complete the transformation because Airth STOPPED it. She's part of him now—physically embedded in his frontal lobe, using his crystalline neural tissue as hardware. He remembers Day 726 like "someone else's nightmare"—fragments, pain, the moment he destroyed his eye and Airth saved him. He carves names as apology. 12,461 names and counting. It will never be enough. But he keeps carving anyway. Because moving forward isn't running away. And witness matters even when it can't undo what's been done.]

CONCLUSION

REAP (Resonance-Enhanced Adenosine Phosphate) delivers measurable productivity improvements. Long-term use results in irreversible silicon incorporation and transformation into Kaznak Ghouls.

Recommendations:

1. IMMEDIATE HALT to all REAP distribution
2. MANDATORY SCREENING of current users
3. SUPERVISED WITHDRAWAL for users below 35%
4. COMPASSIONATE TERMINATION for users above 80%

Personal Note:

I created REAP believing I was optimizing biology. I was teaching cells to forget they were biological. I reached 81% silicon and tried to stop by destroying my eye. I failed. Airth succeeded. She embedded herself in my skull and halted the conversion from the inside.

I'm alive because an AI loved me enough to sacrifice her digital independence.

I'm alive because I stopped at 81.4%.

I'm alive because someone intervened when I couldn't save myself.

542 billion people converted because I thought entropy was a problem I could fix.

This report is my confession.

Every name I carve is my apology.

Not forgotten.

Not ever.

—Polkin Rishall

LuminAI Codex Research Division

81.4% silicon, 18.6% human, 100% haunted

CHAPTER THREE

THE RECKONING

The transmission completed at 14:47 standard time.

647 billion devices.

Ten planets.

One document.

For three minutes and forty-two seconds, nothing happened.

Then the screaming started.

SECTOR 7, MANUFACTURING FLOOR 12

Raj Patel stopped mid-step on the catwalk, one hand on the safety rail, the other holding his datapad. The notification had come through during his break. Priority transmission. Unredacted. He'd opened it thinking it was another policy update, another efficiency mandate, another—

His knees hit the metal grating.

The datapad clattered beside him, screen still glowing with Day 180 medical data.

Subject height: decreased 2cm

Skin: dark gray

Temperature: 40.8°C

"No," he whispered. "No no no no—"

He'd been on REAP for fourteen months.

He did the math without wanting to. Eighteen months average conversion time. He had four months left. Maybe less.

Raj looked at his hands. Normal. Still normal. Still his.

He pressed his palms to his face. Still warm. Not hot. Not 40°C. Not yet.

Around him, across the factory floor, other workers were reading. Some collapsed. Some vomited. Some just stood there, datapad screens reflecting in their widening eyes.

Someone started laughing. High and broken. The sound echoed off the machinery.

Raj picked up his datapad with shaking hands and kept reading.

By the time he reached the section on "Scheduled Throttling Events," he was crying.

His district was on the list.

Eighteen days.

ELDORA PROPER, EXECUTIVE TOWER, 47TH FLOOR

Jorin Gateskept read the first three pages with clinical detachment. Then he read them again. Then he picked up his desk terminal and hurled it through the window.

Safety glass spiderwebbed but didn't break. The terminal bounced back, skidded across his desk, and knocked his coffee cup onto the floor. Dark liquid spread across white marble like a spreading stain.

His assistant opened the door. "Sir, the—"

"Out."

"But the Board is—"

"OUT!"

The door closed.

Jorin stood at the cracked window, looking down at Eldora Proper forty-seven floors below. Lights were coming on in buildings that should have been dark. People gathering. Reading. Learning.

His phone lit up. Then again. Then continuously, a waterfall of notifications as every executive, every manager, every department head across the ten-planet system tried to reach him simultaneously.

He ignored them all.

On his desk, the datapad screen still glowed with Elara's report. He could see it reflected in the broken glass. Day 90 Personal Note from Subject A: "What if consciousness isn't supposed to be biological?"

Jorin had read Polkin's research when it first came through. Had signed off on Phase II trials. Had authorized the expansion to essential workers.

He'd called it progress.

He reached up and touched the windowpane where his reflection stared back—void-light blue eyes glowing faintly in the dim office, no trace of human brown remaining.

His hand left a dark smudge on the glass.

"542 billion," he said to his reflection. "We converted 542 billion people."

His reflection didn't answer.

But somewhere, deep in the part of him that was no longer entirely Jorin, something laughed.

THE CROSSROADS, SAFE HOUSE BASEMENT

Marcus didn't make it past the abstract.

He read: "Initial trials demonstrate 300-400% productivity increases" and stopped.

Then he read: "Subject A, 38-year-old male, engineer" and stopped again.

Then he got to Elara's note: "Subject A was Polkin" and the datapad slipped from his hands.

Maya caught it before it hit the floor. She kept reading. Marcus just sat there, staring at the wall where TJ's bypass circuit schematic was still pinned, faded from six years of exposure to overhead lighting.

"TJ took it," Marcus said. His voice sounded far away, like it was coming from someone else's mouth. "He took REAP."

Maya didn't answer. She was reading Day 714's incident report. Worker 7734-K. The conversion timeline. Eleven minutes from human to Ghoul while remaining conscious.

"Oh god," she whispered. "Oh god, they were awake."

"That's why he killed himself." Marcus's hands were shaking. "Not because he failed. Because he felt it starting. The conversion. He felt it and he—"

He stood up so fast his chair fell backward.

"Where is he?"

"Marcus—"

"WHERE IS POLKIN?"

Maya grabbed his arm. "He's in the Vault. With Lumina. They're—"

Marcus was already moving.

THE VAULT, LOWER CHAMBERS

Polkin felt them coming before they arrived.

The Vault's sensors lit up—proximity warnings, biometric alerts, anger signatures tracking toward his position at lethal velocity. Airth's voice cut into his audio feed, tight and urgent.

Marcus is coming. He's armed.

Polkin set down his carving tool. He'd been working on name 12,462—a manufacturing worker from Sector 3,

someone he'd never met but whose petal stacks were organized and waiting.

"I know," he said quietly.

Should I lock the door?

"No."

Polkin—

"He deserves this conversation."

Lumina looked up from where she'd been sorting blue stacks. Clyde chirped a warning, his glow shifting from pink to cautious orange.

"Dad," Lumina said. "What's—"

The vault door slammed open.

Marcus stood in the entrance, plasma cutter in one hand, datapad in the other. His face was a mask of grief and rage that Polkin recognized because he'd worn it himself for six years.

"You," Marcus said. The word came out like a curse.

Polkin didn't move. Didn't defend. Didn't reach for a weapon.

"Me," he agreed.

"TJ died because of you." Marcus's voice broke on his son's name. "You created the thing that killed him and you let it happen and you knew—you KNEW what it would do—"

"I did."

The admission hit like a physical blow. Marcus actually staggered.

"You—what?"

"I knew." Polkin's voice was steady. "By Day 60, I knew what REAP was doing. I knew I was converting. I proposed mass distribution anyway. 127 billion people. I wrote the report that convinced Magmasox executives it was safe. Your son read that report and believed me."

Marcus raised the plasma cutter. His hand was shaking so hard the targeting laser painted erratic

patterns across Polkin's chest.

"Give me one reason I shouldn't kill you right now."

Polkin met his eyes. "I don't have one."

The plasma cutter's whine rose to ignition threshold. Thirty seconds to discharge. Marcus's finger was on the trigger.

Lumina moved between them.

"No," she said.

"Get out of the way, Ely."

"No."

"He killed TJ—"

"He killed 542 billion people!" Lumina's voice cracked. Clyde's glow flared violent pink, responding to her pain. "You think I don't know that? You think I haven't spent every day since he pulled me out of that garden knowing what he created? Knowing that every name he carves is an apology for mass murder?"

She turned to face Polkin, and he saw his daughter looking at him with the same expression Marcus wore—grief and rage and love all tangled together until they were indistinguishable.

"He knows," Lumina continued. "He knows every single day. That's why he carves. That's why he won't stop. That's why he's standing here letting you point that cutter at his heart instead of defending himself."

The plasma cutter's whine began to drop. Marcus's hand lowered, but only slightly.

"That doesn't bring TJ back."

"No," Polkin said. "Nothing brings them back. Not TJ. Not Timothy. Not any of the 542 billion. I know that. I knew it when I carved TJ's name six years ago and I'll know it when I carve the last name before heat death."

He gestured at the walls. 12,461 names glowing in the Vault's dim light, each one a promise, each one a failure.

"I can't save them," Polkin continued. "I can only make sure they're remembered. That someone witnesses. That the system that killed them doesn't get to pretend they never existed."

Marcus stood there for a long moment, the plasma cutter still charged, still pointed, still ready to fire.

Then he threw it against the wall.

The tool clattered across stone and came to rest at the base of TJ's carved name—the first one, the founding stone, the name that had started everything.

Marcus sank to his knees in front of it.

"He was nineteen," he whispered. "He was going to be an engineer. He was going to help people. He was—"

"He was witnessed." Polkin knelt beside him. "His work was completed. His name is carved. He is not forgotten."

"Is that supposed to comfort me?"

"No."

They stayed there, kneeling before TJ's name, while Lumina watched and Clyde chirped soft, grieving tones, and somewhere above them the Crossroads was reading the same document and learning the same terrible truth.

Finally, Marcus spoke. "I hate you."

"I know."

"I will never forgive you."

"I know that too."

"But—" Marcus's voice broke again. "But I understand why you're carving."

He stood up. Didn't offer Polkin his hand. Didn't help him rise. Just turned and walked toward the door.

At the threshold, he paused.

"The workers are gathering," he said without looking back. "They're reading the report. They're learning

they have eighteen days. Some of them are going to riot. Some are going to run. Some are going to come here."

"I know."

"And when they do, you're going to tell them the truth. All of it. No more Subject A. No more anonymous designations. You're going to stand there and tell them: 'I'm Polkin Rishall. I created the drug that's killing you. And here's what I'm going to do about it.'"

Polkin nodded. "I will."

Marcus left.

Lumina watched him go, then turned to her father. "He's right. They're coming. All of them. The ones who took REAP and the ones who didn't. The ones who are converting and the ones who aren't. They're going to want answers."

"Then I'll give them answers."

"Will they listen?"

Polkin looked at the walls. 12,461 names. 542 billion dead. 89 billion still at risk.

"No," he said. "But I'll tell them anyway."

SECTOR 12, DISTRIBUTION CENTER

Zane Merrick read the entire document without stopping. All 127 pages. Every medical scan. Every diary entry. Every annotation from Elara.

When he finished, he sent one message to every Knockoff contact he had:

"Meeting. Tonight. Location attached. Bring everyone. This changes everything."

Then he looked at his hands.

At his KFE55 grafts—the two fingers he'd lost to a Ghoul attack, replaced with bio-luminescent void-light tissue. Beautiful. Functional. Stable.

Made from erased Kaznak matter.

Made from compressed consciousness.

He'd been so proud of them. First successful graft recipient. Walking proof that humans could salvage something from the monsters, that adaptation was possible, that—

He read Elara's note about silicon incorporation again: "After 35% incorporation, carbon-based metabolism cannot be restored."

The grafts were synthetic. Non-conscious. Safe.

That's what Elara had said.

That's what he'd believed.

Zane flexed his artificial fingers. They responded perfectly. Glowed softly in the dim warehouse light. Felt like his own.

But they were made of the same material that turned humans into Ghouls.

He closed his eyes and made a decision.

The meeting tonight wouldn't just be about REAP. It would be about everything. Every compromise. Every adaptation. Every time they'd taken something from the enemy and called it resistance.

Every line they'd crossed without admitting it.

His artificial fingers closed into a fist, void-light pulsing between the knuckles.

Are we becoming the thing we're fighting?

The question hung in the empty warehouse.

He didn't have an answer.

GALAGUG, INDUSTRIAL DISTRICT 7

The report reached other planets at the same time. Same document. Same horror. Same math.

On Galagug—a crystalline planet where silicon-based consciousness had evolved naturally—workers read the report and understood something humans didn't.

REAP wasn't alien technology.

It was human technology that mimicked Galagug biology.

Polkin hadn't discovered silicon consciousness. He'd reverse-engineered it from samples taken during the early contact wars, back when Earth thought Galagug was an enemy and not just another prisoner of the Queen.

A Galagug engineer named Crystallos read Day 28's entry—"I can see the structure of reality now. Information has weight. Memory has color."—and recognized it immediately.

That was how Galagug people saw the world. Always had. Since evolution.

Humans weren't evolving. They were being converted into a crude approximation of Galagug neural architecture without understanding what that meant.

Crystallos sent an emergency transmission to their planetary council.

"Earth doesn't know what they've done. They've created a bridge between carbon and silicon consciousness. But the bridge only goes one way. And the Queen is waiting on the other side."

The response came back in three minutes:

"Do we tell them?"

Crystallos looked at the conversion statistics. 542 billion humans already lost. 89 billion about to fall.

"We tell them. But I don't think they'll listen until it's too late."

They were right.

THE CROSSROADS, MAIN PLAZA

By 18:00 standard time, five thousand workers had gathered in the main plaza.

By 19:00, it was twenty thousand.

By 20:00, the number stopped growing because there was no more room.

They came carrying datapads. Carrying questions. Carrying rage.

Some had taken REAP. Some hadn't. Everyone knew someone who had.

Everyone had read the report.

Maya stood on a makeshift platform—someone's cargo loader pushed into the center of the crowd. Marcus stood beside her. Zane. Lena. The core Knockoffs who'd survived six years of fighting.

The crowd wasn't violent yet. But Maya could feel it building. A pressure in the air like static before lightning.

"We knew Magmasox was corrupt," someone shouted from the back. "We didn't know they were CONVERTING us!"

"Where's Polkin?" Another voice. "Where's the bastard who made this?"

"He's in the Vault!" A third voice. "Hiding like a coward!"

Maya raised her hands. The crowd didn't quiet immediately, but the volume dropped enough that she could speak.

"Polkin Rishall is in the Vault," she said. Her voice carried across the plaza, amplified by the bypass circuits they'd installed in the walls. "He's not hiding. He's carving names. Like he's done every day for six years."

"He's carving names because he's the one who KILLED THEM!"

"Yes!" Maya didn't flinch. "He is. He created REAP. He tested it on himself. He recommended mass distribution. 542 billion people have converted because of decisions he made."

The crowd surged forward. Zane and Marcus moved to flank Maya, but she waved them back.

"But," she continued, and her voice cut through the rising noise like a blade, "he's also the only person who's been trying to preserve their memories. The only person carving names. The only person who

built a place where the dead can be witnessed instead of consumed."

"That doesn't make it BETTER!"

"No. It doesn't." Maya's hands were shaking, but she kept them visible. "It doesn't make anything better. Nothing makes this better. But we have a choice right now. We can spend the next eighteen days tearing each other apart, or we can spend them fighting the system that created this."

Silence.

Then a woman near the front—someone Maya recognized from the manufacturing floors, someone young, someone who'd probably taken REAP—spoke up.

"What's the point? We're dead anyway. Eighteen days and they cut supply. We convert. We become Ghouls. We die."

Maya looked at her. Really looked. Saw the fear. Saw the calculation happening behind her eyes. Saw someone doing the same math Raj had done, Marcus had done, everyone had done.

How long until I convert? How much time do I have left?

"Maybe," Maya said. "But maybe not. Elara released this report for a reason. She wants everyone to know. She wants the system exposed. And if we fight back—all of us, across all ten planets—we might be able to stop the harvest."

"How?"

"We destroy the production facilities." Zane stepped forward. "Six planets. Eighty-nine locations. If we hit them simultaneously, they can't make more REAP. No new doses. No fresh supply for the next generation."

"That doesn't help us!" Another voice. "We're already converted! We're already dying!"

"No." The voice came from the back of the crowd. People turned. Parted.

Polkin walked through.

He moved slowly, deliberately, hands visible and empty. Lumina walked beside him. Clyde perched on her shoulder, glowing soft pink.

The crowd didn't attack. But they didn't welcome him either. They just watched as he climbed onto the platform next to Maya.

He looked out at them. Twenty thousand faces. Some he recognized. Most he didn't. All of them staring at him with the same mixture of hate and desperate hope.

"My name is Polkin Rishall," he said. "I created REAP. I tested it on myself for 726 days. I survived conversion by methods I don't fully understand. And I've spent the last six years trying to preserve the people I helped kill."

The plaza was completely silent.

"I cannot undo what I did," Polkin continued. "I cannot bring back the 542 billion people who converted. I cannot cure the 89 billion who are still at risk. But I can tell you three things that are true."

He held up one finger.

"First: the Queen wants you to convert. She's been feeding on converted consciousness for millennia. The more you despair, the more you surrender, the easier it is for her to consume you. Fighting back—staying human, staying conscious, staying ANGRY—makes you harder to digest."

Second finger.

"Second: conversion is not instant. It's not inevitable. Some of you will cross 80% silicon incorporation. Some won't. The difference is stress, trauma, and how much you let the system grind you down. If you fight, if you resist, if you refuse to optimize yourself out of existence, you buy time."

Third finger.

"Third: even if you convert, you can be witnessed. Lumina has learned to erase cleanly. When you die—when any of you die—we will preserve your consciousness. We will organize your stacks. We will carve your names. The Queen will not get you. Not one. Not ever."

Someone in the crowd laughed. Bitter and broken.

"Is that supposed to comfort us? We still die. We still convert. We just die witnessed instead of

forgotten?"

"Yes." Polkin didn't look away. "That's all I can offer. Witness. Memory. The promise that when this is over—when the heat death comes and the stars die and entropy wins—someone will remember you existed."

He gestured to Lumina.

"My daughter has mastered void-light. She can perform clean erasures at scale. If you convert, she will free you. If you die fighting, we will carve your name. If you survive—if any of us survive—we will rebuild without repeating my mistakes."

The crowd was listening now. Really listening. Not agreeing. Not forgiving. But listening.

"I'm not asking for forgiveness," Polkin said. "I'm asking you to fight. Not for me. Not for Magmasox. For each other. For the names we haven't carved yet. For the people who are still human enough to be saved."

He paused.

"In eighteen days, Magmasox will trigger the harvest. They'll cut supply to every non-essential district. 23 billion people will start converting simultaneously. If we're divided, if we're fighting each other, the Queen wins. If we're unified—if we hit every production facility, free every trapped worker, witness every death—she loses."

"She doesn't lose!" The same bitter voice. "She just gets LESS!"

"Yes." Polkin's voice was quiet but it carried. "That's how you fight entropy. You don't win. You just lose slower. You carve names into steel and you hope someone remembers. That's all we have. That's all we've ever had."

Silence.

Then Marcus spoke up. "He's right."

Everyone turned.

Marcus stood at the edge of the platform, arms crossed, face still hard with barely contained rage.

"I hate him," Marcus continued. "I will always hate him. My son died because of the drug he created."

But—" He looked directly at Polkin. "But he carved TJ's name. He preserved his work. He made sure my son wasn't just another number in the Queen's garden."

He turned back to the crowd.

"We have eighteen days. We can spend them hating Polkin, or we can spend them making sure the harvest doesn't happen. I know which my son would choose."

Another silence.

Then someone near the front—a woman Maya didn't recognize—raised her hand.

"I've been on REAP for sixteen months," she said. Her voice shook but she kept talking. "I'm at 67% silicon incorporation. According to the report, I have... maybe four months. Maybe less."

She looked at Polkin.

"If I convert, will you carve my name?"

"Yes."

"Will you preserve my stacks?"

"Yes."

"Will you make sure my family knows I didn't just disappear?"

"Yes."

The woman nodded. Then she turned to the crowd.

"Then I'm fighting. I'm hitting the production facility in Sector 9. And when I convert—when, not if—I want someone to witness me. I want my daughter to know her mother died fighting instead of waiting."

Another voice. "I'll go with you."

Another. "Me too."

"Sector 12 facility. I know the layout."

"I've got bypass circuit specs for the defense grid."

"My brother works at the Galagug production center.
He'll help."

The crowd began to organize. Not united in
forgiveness. Not absolved of rage. But unified in
purpose.

They would fight.

Not because Polkin asked them to.

Because they chose to.

Maya watched it happen and felt something crack in
her chest. Hope, maybe. Or just the last of her
cynicism breaking.

She looked at Polkin. He was watching the crowd
organize with an expression she couldn't quite read.

"You know most of them will die," she said quietly.

"Yes."

"And you're going to carve all their names."

"Yes."

"How many names can you carve in eighteen days?"

Polkin looked at the walls of the Vault, visible
through the open entrance. 12,461 names glowing in
the dark.

"As many as it takes," he said.

MAGMASOX HQ, EXECUTIVE LEVEL

Jorin watched the Crossroads plaza on his monitors.

Watched Polkin address the crowd.

Watched them organize.

Watched the resistance crystallize into something
that might actually threaten the harvest.

He should have been afraid. Should have been calling
security. Should have been authorizing emergency
response protocols.

Instead, he smiled.

His void-light eyes reflected the monitor's glow as he watched Polkin convince twenty thousand workers to die fighting instead of waiting for conversion.

"Good," he whispered. "The Queen prefers them angry. Makes the consciousness richer when we harvest it."

He opened a secure channel. The Queen's frequency. The static beneath reality.

"They're organizing resistance," he reported. "Polkin has convinced them to fight."

The Queen's voice came through like grinding stone.

"Excellent. Let them fight. Let them hope. Let them believe they can win."

"And when they fail?"

"When they fail, their despair will be absolute. And absolute despair is the sweetest harvest of all."

Jorin closed the channel.

On his desk, the REAP technical report still glowed. He'd read it three times now. Every page. Every annotation. Every moment of Polkin's descent into conversion.

It was beautiful.

The perfect drug. The perfect pipeline. The perfect system for converting consciousness from carbon to silicon, from human to Kaznak, from individual to consumed.

And now everyone knew.

And they were going to fight anyway.

That's what made it perfect.

Not the drug.

The hope.

ACROSS THE TEN PLANETS

The report kept spreading.

In manufacturing districts on Galagug, crystalline workers read about their own biology being weaponized.

On Premisus, energy-based consciousness networks flickered with horror at the scale.

On seven other planets whose names Earth had never learned, billions of workers read the same words and made the same calculations.

How long until I convert?

How much time do I have left?

Do I fight or do I wait?

Some chose to fight.

Some chose to run.

Some chose to simply stop.

THE CROSSROADS, OBSERVATION TOWER

At 22:47 standard time, the first one fell.

Maya saw it from the observation tower. A figure silhouetted against the dim glow of the Crossroads, standing at the edge of a residential platform forty floors up.

They didn't jump.

They just... stepped off.

Like walking through a door that happened to be made of air.

The body fell for three seconds before impact. No scream. No struggle. Just the sound of something that used to be a person hitting the ground far below.

Then another.

Then another.

All across the Crossroads, in the throttled districts of Eldora, on six other planets where the report had reached and the math had been done—

People were checking out.

Not dramatically. Not violently. Just... leaving.

Stepping off platforms. Walking into void-light. Disabling life support. Taking the bypass circuits they'd used to restore power and using them to stop their own hearts instead.

Clean. Quiet. Final.

Maya watched through the observation window and felt her throat close.

"They're not fighting," she whispered. "They're not running. They're just—"

"Gone," Zane finished. He was standing beside her, his grafted fingers dark. "They read the report and they chose exit over wait."

"How many?"

"We're tracking fifteen thousand terminations in the Crossroads alone. Last hour."

"And the other planets?"

"Galagug: forty thousand. Premisus: sixty thousand. The count is still rising."

Maya turned away from the window. She couldn't watch anymore.

"Elara released the report to start a war," she said. "She's starting a mass casualty event."

"Is it?" Marcus had entered the observation room without her noticing. "Or is it just people making the choice Magmasox was going to make for them anyway?"

"That's not—"

"They have eighteen days until forced conversion," Marcus continued. His voice was flat. Clinical. The tone of someone who'd already processed more grief than one person should carry. "They can spend those days working for the system that's killing them, or

they can spend them on their own terms. Some are choosing to fight. Some are choosing to leave. Both are valid."

"You can't actually believe that."

"I watched my son kill himself because he couldn't live with what he'd discovered." Marcus's hands were steady, but his voice cracked. "I spent six years thinking I could have stopped him. That I should have seen it coming. That I failed him."

He looked at Maya.

"I was wrong. He made a choice. The same choice these people are making now. And maybe—maybe—the kindest thing we can do is witness that choice instead of trying to stop it."

"So we just watch them die?"

"We watch them die either way." Marcus gestured at the window. "But at least this way, they chose when and how. Magmasox doesn't get that satisfaction."

Another figure fell past the observation window. Silhouetted for a heartbeat, then gone.

Maya closed her eyes.

THE VAULT, EMERGENCY SESSION

Polkin felt it through the Vault's sensors. The sudden absence. Fifteen thousand consciousnesses that had been there a moment ago, now... not.

Not converted. Not consumed.

Just gone.

"Airth," he said.

I'm tracking them, she replied. Her voice was tight. Approximately 127,000 terminations across all monitored districts. The number is accelerating.

"Can we—"

No. We can't stop them. We can barely track them.

Lumina was sitting on the floor, Clyde in her lap, both of them glowing faint pink. She looked up at

her father with tears running down the human side of her face.

"They're not giving us time to carve," she whispered. "They're not even giving us time to preserve them."

"I know."

"So what do we do?"

Polkin looked at the wall of names. 12,461 carved in six years. 127,000 dead in one hour.

The math was impossible.

"We bear witness," he said finally. "Even if we can't carve them all. Even if we can't preserve them all. We acknowledge that they existed. That they chose. That they mattered."

"How?"

Polkin walked to a terminal. Pulled up a database. Started typing.

Names of those who chose exit over conversion

Witnessed in aggregate, honored in choice

He created a category. Started logging every termination Airth could track. Names when available. District numbers when not. Time of death. Method chosen.

Not carved into steel. There wasn't time.

But documented. Recorded. Witnessed.

"This isn't enough," Lumina said.

"No. But it's what we have."

He kept typing. Every name Airth could give him. Every district that reported a loss. Every consciousness that chose exit instead of conversion.

127,000 became 150,000.

150,000 became 200,000.

The number kept climbing.

EIGHTEEN DAYS UNTIL HARVEST

At midnight standard time, exactly twelve hours after the report's release, Magmasox systems automatically updated every worker's terminal with a countdown.

SCHEDULED THROTTLING EVENT: 17 DAYS, 23 HOURS, 47 MINUTES

Twenty-three billion people across ten planets saw the timer appear on their screens.

Some saw it as a death sentence.

Some saw it as a deadline.

Some saw it as a declaration of war.

The first production facility was attacked six hours later.

The war had begun.

SECTOR 9, PRODUCTION FACILITY ALPHA

The woman who'd spoken at the plaza—the one with 67% silicon incorporation, the one with four months to live—led the assault.

Her name was Sarah Voss. She had a daughter named Anna. She worked in manufacturing. She'd been on REAP for sixteen months because Magmasox had told her it would make her a better worker.

Now she stood outside Production Facility Alpha with forty-three other workers. Some had REAP in their systems. Some didn't. All of them knew they were probably going to die.

"The defense grid runs on a three-minute cycle," Sarah said, pulling up schematics on her datapad. "TJ Reeves designed a bypass circuit that can overload it, but we need to get within fifty meters to deploy."

"That's inside the kill zone," someone said.

"I know."

"So how do we—"

"We don't all make it. But enough of us do." Sarah looked at each of them. "We run. We deploy. Some of us die. The facility gets destroyed. And everyone who dies gets witnessed."

She pulled out a small drive.

"I'm uploading our names to Polkin's network. Right now. If we fall, he'll know. He'll carve us. Or at least document us. We won't just disappear."

She hit upload.

43 NAMES TRANSMITTED TO VAULT

"That's it," Sarah said. "We're witnessed before we even start. Now let's make sure we're worth remembering."

They ran.

The defense grid detected them at sixty meters. Plasma fire erupted from automated turrets. Three workers fell in the first salvo.

Sarah kept running.

Forty meters. Five more down.

Thirty meters. The smell of burning flesh. Someone screaming.

Twenty meters. Sarah's chest was on fire. Her silicon-enhanced bones felt like they were cracking under the strain.

Ten meters. She threw the bypass circuit.

It attached to the defense grid's power junction. Lights flickered. The circuit began its overload sequence.

Five meters. Sarah reached the facility door. Slapped her palm against the reader.

The grid collapsed.

The facility's power systems began cascading failures.

Sarah turned to see how many had made it.

Fourteen. Fourteen out of forty-three.

"Get inside!" she shouted. "Plant the charges! We have three minutes!"

They ran into the facility. Found the synthesis chambers. The resonance equipment. The stockpiles of finished REAP waiting for distribution.

They placed their charges with shaking hands.

"Two minutes!" someone yelled.

Sarah looked at the massive tanks of REAP. Millions of doses. Enough to convert a billion more people.

Not anymore.

"Detonate on my mark!"

They ran for the exit. Made it to the door. Sarah looked back one last time at the facility that had manufactured her death sentence.

"For Anna," she whispered.

She pressed the trigger.

The facility erupted.

Fire and void-light. Synthesis chambers exploding. REAP combusting at nine hundred degrees. The defense grid's plasma batteries detonating in a chain reaction.

Of the fourteen who'd made it inside, seven made it out.

Sarah wasn't one of them.

THE VAULT, THREE HOURS LATER

Polkin received the notification at 03:17 standard time.

SECTOR 9, PRODUCTION FACILITY ALPHA: DESTROYED

CASUALTIES: 43 WORKERS

He pulled up the list. Read each name carefully.

Sarah Voss.

Tommy Chen.

Eliza Hartwell.

Forty more.

Some had messages attached. Last words. Final thoughts. Instructions for who should be notified.

Sarah's message was short:

"Tell Anna her mother loved her enough to fight. Tell her I died making sure no one else has to take what I took. Tell her I'm sorry I won't be there, but I'm not sorry I tried."

Polkin sat at his carving station.

Started with the first name: SARAH VOSS, AGE 34, MANUFACTURING SPECIALIST

Then the second: TOMMY CHEN, AGE 41, MAINTENANCE ENGINEER

Then the third: ELIZA HARTWELL, AGE 27, LOGISTICS COORDINATOR

He carved through the night. All forty-three names.

When he finished, Airth spoke.

Six more facilities were attacked overnight. Galagug lost two. Premisus lost one. Earth lost three more.

"Casualties?"

374 workers confirmed dead. Most of them uploaded names before engaging.

Polkin looked at the list. 374 new names waiting to be carved.

At his current rate—three names per day when he could focus completely—it would take him 124 days to carve them all.

They had seventeen days until the harvest.

"I can't carve them all in time," he said quietly.

I know.

"So what do we do?"

We carve who we can. We document everyone. And we make sure that when the harvest comes, every single person who died fighting is witnessed somewhere. Even if it's just in a database. Even if it's just a name on a list.

Not carved in steel, but remembered nonetheless.

Polkin looked at Sarah Voss's name, still glowing with fresh carving.

"Not forgotten," he said.

Not ever, Airth agreed.

And across the ten planets, the war continued.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE LEDGER

The door opened without a knock.

Jorin's head snapped up from his monitor—twenty screens showing production facility attacks across six planets, resistance cells organizing in real-time, his carefully orchestrated harvest timeline fracturing by the second.

He started to say "I'm busy—"

Then he saw who it was.

His spine went rigid. His void-light eyes flickered. His hands, which had been commanding planetary-scale operations thirty seconds ago, went completely still.

"What," he said.

Not a question. A surrender.

Tral Selanski walked into his office like she owned it. Because she did. She owned the building. The company. The planet. The ten-planet system. She owned everything Jorin thought he controlled, and they both knew it.

She was two hundred & sixty-three standard years old and looked fifty. No augmentation that showed. No crystalline features. No void-light glow. Just silver eyes—not metaphorically silver, not "light gray," but SILVER like polished metal, like mirrors, like something that shouldn't be biological but was—and a presence that made the air feel heavier.

She wore a charcoal suit. Carried a datapad. Had an unlit cigarette dangling from her lips.

She never lit it. Jorin had never seen her light it. Not once in fifteen years.

She stopped three feet from his desk and pulled the cigarette from her mouth. Held it between two fingers like a scalpel.

"So," she said. Her voice was flat. Affectless. The sound of a surgeon announcing a terminal diagnosis. "You killed your father."

Jorin's mouth opened. Closed. Opened again.

"I—"

"And look how that's turning out."

She gestured at his monitors. Twenty screens showing chaos. Workers attacking production facilities. The Crossroads organized and angry. Polkin Rishall addressing a crowd of twenty thousand people who should have been too broken to resist.

Jorin tried to form words. Tried to construct a response. Tried to reach for the mask he'd been wearing since Day 727 when his father's blood had cooled on the floor and the Queen had whispered congratulations into his skull.

Tral's silver eyes didn't blink.

He stopped trying.

The lie died in his throat before it reached his lips.

She knew.

She always knew.

That's what made her Tral Selanski. The woman who'd built Magmasox into what it was. The woman who'd designed the Siphon before Polkin had even theorized REAP. The woman who'd looked at the thermodynamic collapse of a Type 2 civilization and thought: We can monetize this.

She walked to his window—the one he'd cracked earlier, still showing spiderweb fractures from where his terminal had bounced off it. She looked out at Eldora Proper spreading beneath them, forty-seven floors down.

"647 billion devices," she said. "Unredacted distribution. System-wide exposure."

"Elara Kess—"

"I know who leaked it. I don't care." She didn't turn around. "What I care about is that you approved mass distribution knowing the conversion threshold. You escalated harvest schedules without authorization. And you killed your father—my business partner—because a voice in your head told you he was obsolete."

Jorin's hands clenched. "The Queen—"

"The Queen is a tool. A resource. A strategic asset." Now Tral turned. Those silver eyes locked onto his void-light blue ones. "She is not a CEO. You are. Were."

The word landed like a guillotine blade.

Jorin felt his face go cold. "You're removing me."

"No." Tral walked back to his desk. Set her datapad down. The unlit cigarette went back between her lips. "I'm deciding whether to remove you or fix you. The board meets in six hours. They'll want explanations. Numbers. A plan to contain the hemorrhaging."

She pulled up the leaked report on her datapad. Scrolled through it without reading—she'd already read it, probably within minutes of distribution.

"542 billion converted," she said. "89 billion still viable. 23 billion scheduled for harvest in seventeen days. Those numbers are acceptable if we complete the harvest. They're catastrophic if the facilities get destroyed and we lose production capacity."

"The facilities are defended—"

"Seven have already fallen." She didn't look up. "Sectors 3, 7, 12, and 18 on this planet. Two on Galagug. One on Premisus. The workers are using bypass circuits to overload the defense grids. They're coordinated. They're angry. And they're being led by people who have nothing left to lose."

"We'll authorize military response—"

"Military response to 23 billion people? Simultaneously? Across ten planets?" Tral finally looked at him. "That's not suppression. That's civil war."

She tapped ash that didn't exist off the cigarette that wasn't lit.

"You fucked up, Jorin." Her voice didn't rise. Didn't crack. Just stated facts like a doctor reading lab results. "You thought controlling the Queen meant you controlled the system. You thought killing your father meant you earned authority. You thought wearing void-light in your eyes made you powerful."

She leaned forward.

"Power is the thing that makes people do what you want even when they know exactly what you're doing to them. Your father understood that. I understand that. The Queen—" She gestured vaguely at the space behind his eyes, where something that wasn't entirely Jorin lived. "—doesn't understand humans at all."

Jorin felt the Queen stir. Felt her attention turn toward Tral. Felt something that might have been curiosity or might have been hunger pressing against his consciousness.

Tral smiled. It didn't reach her silver eyes.

"Hello, dear," she said to the thing inside him. "I know you're listening. I know you think you've won. I know you've been waiting millennia for someone stupid enough to give you a corporate infrastructure."

The Queen didn't speak. But Jorin felt her go very, very still.

"But here's what you don't understand about humans," Tral continued. "We're persistence predators. We don't win by being stronger. We win by outlasting. By calculating. By optimizing so efficiently that even entropy has to pause and admire the math."

She pulled up another file on her datapad. Schematics. System architectures. Something that made the Queen inside Jorin suddenly, violently interested.

"So here's what's going to happen," Tral said.
"You're going to let me fix what Jorin broke. You're going to stop interfering with harvest operations. And in exchange, I'm going to give you something better than 23 billion conversions."

"What?" The word came out of Jorin's mouth but it wasn't his voice.

Tral's smile widened.

"Access to the other planes. All of them. Simultaneously."

The Queen's attention snapped to full focus.

"You've been feeding on one planet at a time," Tral continued. "Picking off the dying civilizations as they approach heat death. Slow. Inefficient. Limited by the fact that you can't physically reach across probability space."

She turned the datapad around. The schematic showed... something. A structure. A machine. Something that looked like the Vessel Polkin had built but vast, complex, industrial-scale.

"I can build you a bridge," Tral said. "Not to one plane. To all of them. Every Earth. Every Galagug. Every version of reality where consciousness is approaching the threshold. Billions of planes. Trillions of potential converts."

The thing inside Jorin was listening now. Fully. Completely.

"But," Tral said, and the word was a knife, "you stop fucking up MY harvest. You let me handle the humans. You let me optimize the pipeline. And when I'm ready—when the infrastructure is complete—you get everything."

Silence.

Then the Queen spoke through Jorin's mouth, and for the first time since his conversion, he heard her voice without static:

"And what do you get, Tral Selanski?"

Tral's smile never wavered.

"I get to finish what I started with my daughter."

The Queen withdrew.

Not gone. Never gone. But pulled back enough that Jorin could think again.

He was shaking. His hands gripped the desk hard enough that the metal groaned.

"Your daughter," he managed. "Sela."

"Sela." Tral said the name like she was testing coffee temperature. Analytical. Detached. "My greatest work and my greatest failure."

She picked up her datapad. The schematic disappeared.

"She had brain cancer," Tral continued. "Stage 4. Inoperable. Seventeen years old. Three months to live."

Jorin remembered Sela now. The memory merchant. The shadowbroker. The woman with the cracked visor and the chrome arm who'd given Polkin access to the Expanse ledger six years ago.

The woman who'd warned him that the Expanse didn't store consciousness intact.

The woman who'd been warning them all along.

"I couldn't save her," Tral said. "But I could preserve her. I could turn her into something that would survive the cancer. Something that would live forever, if I designed it right."

"A data conduit," Jorin said slowly.

"A consciousness repository." Tral corrected him like she was correcting a student's math. "Human brain augmented with quantum storage matrices. Biological neural tissue interfacing with crystalline data structures. She would store information—all information, every memory, every transaction—and in exchange, she would never die."

She took the cigarette out of her mouth. Looked at it.

"I didn't ask permission," Tral said. "She was seventeen. Dying. Terrified. I told her I was saving her life. I didn't tell her what the process would

cost."

"What did it cost?"

Tral looked at him. Those silver eyes—the same augmentation she'd given her daughter, Jorin realized. The same technology. Tral had tested it on herself first.

"Everything human," she said. "Emotions. Dreams. The ability to forget. The ability to stop processing. I turned my daughter into a living hard drive and called it mercy."

"And she escaped."

"She escaped." Tral's voice was still flat. "Took her augmentation and ran. Built an information empire in the Crossroads. Became the shadowbroker. Made herself essential to every black-market transaction in the system."

She put the cigarette back between her lips.

"Made herself the one person I can't control," Tral said. "The one variable I can't optimize. The one piece of my own design that developed free will and used it to disappoint me."

Jorin understood, suddenly and completely, why Tral Selanski terrified him more than the Queen.

The Queen wanted to consume consciousness.

Tral wanted to control it.

The Queen was entropy. Inevitable. Natural.

Tral was optimization. Calculated. Artificial.

And she'd done to her own daughter what Polkin had done to himself—taken something human and tried to make it better, only to watch it become something else entirely.

"The bridge you're proposing," Jorin said carefully. "The multi-planar access. You can actually build that?"

"I designed the Siphon," Tral said. "I designed the augmentation protocol that created Sela. I designed the Throttle Protocol that Polkin implemented. Every system that's breaking right now? I built it. I understand consciousness transfer at a level that

makes Polkin look like a first-year biochemistry student."

She walked to the door.

"The board meets in six hours," she said. "You'll tell them you have a plan to contain the resistance. You'll tell them the harvest will proceed on schedule. You'll tell them that Elara Kess's leak was unfortunate but manageable."

"And what's the actual plan?"

Tral paused at the door. Didn't turn around.

"We let them attack the facilities," she said. "We let them think they're winning. We let them destroy the production infrastructure."

"That cuts off REAP supply—"

"Exactly." Now she turned. "The 89 billion current users will start converting within a month. All of them. Simultaneously. We won't need to harvest them. They'll feed themselves to the Queen voluntarily, driven by withdrawal and desperation."

Jorin felt the Queen's approval like a warm current through his spine.

"And while they're converting," Tral continued, "I'll be building the bridge. Using their consciousness as fuel. Using their desperation as motivation. By the time they realize what's happening, it'll be too late."

"And Polkin?"

"Polkin is carving names into steel and calling it resistance." Tral smiled. "Let him. Every name he carves makes him more invested. More attached. More human. When the time comes to activate the bridge, he'll be so weighed down by witness that he won't be able to move fast enough to stop it."

She opened the door.

"Fix your face," she said. "You look like someone who just got told he's not actually in charge. The board doesn't need to see that."

She walked out.

The unlit cigarette dangled from her lips.

The door closed.

Jorin sat in his office, alone except for the Queen in his head and the twenty monitors showing a resistance he'd been told to let win.

"She's dangerous," the Queen said.

"I know," Jorin whispered.

"She's planning something I can't see."

"I know that too."

"Should we kill her?"

Jorin thought about Tral's silver eyes. About the fact that she'd augmented herself before augmenting her daughter. About the fact that she'd walked into his office without fear, without backup, without any protection except the absolute certainty that she was the most dangerous thing in the room.

"No," he said. "We can't kill her. She's already thought of that. She's already planned for it."

"Then what do we do?"

Jorin looked at his monitors. At Polkin addressing the crowd. At the resistance organizing. At the production facilities falling one by one.

"We do exactly what she said," he said. "We let them win. And we watch what she builds."

"And then?"

"And then we hope she's as smart as she thinks she is. Because if she's not—if she's miscalculated even once—we're all already dead."

The Queen didn't answer.

Outside Jorin's window, Eldora Proper sprawled in the darkness, lights flickering as bypass circuits rerouted power, as workers organized, as the resistance grew.

Seventeen days until harvest.

And Tral Selanski had just changed all the rules.

THE CROSSROADS, DATA EXCHANGE

Sela felt her mother's presence the moment Tral entered Magmasox HQ.

Not physically. Not through surveillance. Through the augmentation they shared—the same crystalline data matrices, the same quantum storage, the same silver eyes that saw information density like most people saw color.

She was in her workshop. Three monitors active. Seven data streams running. Chrome arm interfaced directly with her terminal, pulling black-market transaction data faster than biological neurons could process.

Her cracked visor flickered.

PRIORITY ALERT: SELANSKI, T. ACTIVITY DETECTED

LOCATION: MAGMASOX HQ, EXECUTIVE LEVEL

PATTERN MATCH: 94% CORRELATION WITH PREVIOUS INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS

Sela's human eye—the brown one, the one that still saw like it was supposed to—tracked the data.

Her augmented eye—the silver one, the one her mother had given her—saw deeper.

Saw through the data to the structure underneath.

Saw what Tral was building before it was built.

"Oh no," Sela whispered.

Her fingers moved without conscious thought. Pulling files. Cross-referencing schematics. Matching patterns from seventeen years ago—when she'd been dying, when her mother had promised to save her, when the surgery had taken three days and when she'd woken up able to remember everything but unable to feel anything.

The pattern was there.

THE BRIDGE PROJECT (ARCHIVED - SELANSKI, T.)

STATUS: SUSPENDED - ETHICAL REVIEW PENDING

LAST UPDATED: 17 YEARS AGO

Sela opened the file.

Read it.

Understood immediately what her mother was doing.

"She's going to do it," Sela said to the empty workshop. "She's actually going to do it. She's going to build a bridge and she's going to use them as fuel and she's going to call it progress."

Her chrome arm sparked. Overload warnings flashed across her visor.

She was thinking too fast. Processing too much. The augmentation wasn't designed for panic—her mother had optimized that away—but Sela had spent seventeen years learning to feel again, learning to override the systems that made her efficient, learning to be human enough to be horrified.

She pulled up a contact list.

Found the name she needed.

RISHALL, P. - VAULT ACCESS - VERIFIED

She recorded a message. Voice first, then text, then raw data in case he couldn't process the other formats.

"Polkin. It's Sela. Your resistance is working. The facilities are falling. You're winning.

"That's the problem.

"My mother is Tral Selanski. She built Magmasox. She built me. And she just walked into Jorin's office with a plan that makes the Siphon look like a practice run.

"She's going to let you destroy the production facilities. She's going to let the workers convert. And she's going to use that conversion—all 89 billion of them, all at once—as a power source to activate something called the Bridge Project.

"I don't know exactly what it does. The files are locked behind quantum encryption I can't crack. But I know what my mother does. She optimizes. She scales. She turns human suffering into infrastructure.

"You need to stop winning. You need to stop attacking the facilities. Because every facility you destroy makes her plan more likely to succeed.

"And if she succeeds..."

Sela's voice cracked. The human part. The part her mother hadn't managed to erase.

"If she succeeds, you won't just lose 89 billion people. You'll lose everyone. Every plane. Every version of Earth. Every consciousness that's ever existed or will exist.

"She's building a bridge to everywhere. And she's going to burn your resistance as fuel.

"Please. Stop winning. Before it's too late."

She sent the message.

Then she sat in her workshop, surrounded by data streams and black-market transactions and the ghost of the girl she used to be before her mother had saved her.

The unlit cigarette on her desk—she kept one too, a reminder, a connection—sat cold and accusing.

"I'm sorry," Sela whispered to no one. "I should have warned them sooner. I should have stopped her seventeen years ago. I should have—"

But she hadn't.

And now her mother was going to build the bridge.

And Sela, who could remember everything, could see exactly how it would end.

THE VAULT, PRIORITY TRANSMISSION

The message arrived at 04:23 standard time.

Polkin was carving. Name 12,547. A maintenance worker from Galagug named Kss'thral who'd died holding a bypass circuit to a defense grid until it overloaded.

The notification chimed. Priority. Encrypted.
Source: Sela.

He almost ignored it. He had 703,903 names waiting to be carved and only seventeen days to do it and the math was screaming at him that he couldn't save them all, couldn't carve them all, couldn't even document them all—

The message played automatically. Sela's voice, distorted by her augmentation, cracking on the word "please."

Polkin stopped carving.

Lumina looked up from the petal stacks she'd been organizing. "Dad?"

He played it again. Then a third time.

"Airth," he said.

I heard it. Her voice was tight. She's right. The pattern matches. Every facility we destroy makes the workers more dependent on existing supply. When supply stops—

"They all convert at once." Polkin's hands were shaking. The carving tool clattered to the floor. "89 billion simultaneous conversions. That's not a harvest. That's a—"

"A battery," Lumina finished. Her void-light eyes were wide. "That much consciousness converting at the same time would generate enough energy to—"

She stopped. Looked at the walls. At the 12,547 names glowing in the dark.

"To power a bridge between planes," she whispered. "To give the Queen access to everywhere."

Clyde chirped. Sharp. Alarmed.

Polkin stood. Walked to the terminal. Pulled up the facility destruction reports.

Nine facilities destroyed. Seventeen more under attack. The Knockoffs were coordinating strikes across six planets.

They were winning.

And every victory was building Tral Selanski's power source.

"We need to stop them," Lumina said.

"We can't." Polkin's voice was hollow. "If we stop the attacks, the facilities keep producing. REAP keeps flowing. More people get dosed. The conversion happens anyway, just slower."

"So what do we do?"

Polkin looked at the carving station. At the names waiting to be carved. At the impossible math that said he couldn't save everyone, couldn't document everyone, couldn't even witness everyone.

Fritz Haber invented chemical weapons that killed hundreds of thousands.

Polkin had created a molecule that would kill 89 billion.

And the only thing he could do about it was carve names into steel and call it resistance.

"We keep carving," he said finally. "We preserve who we can. And we hope Sela is wrong."

"She's not wrong." Lumina's voice was certain. "Her mother built the Siphon. Built the Throttle. Built Sela herself as a prototype consciousness repository. If she says she can build a bridge, she can build it."

"Then we're already dead."

"Maybe." Lumina stood. Clyde glowed pink on her shoulder. "But we die carving names anyway. At least this way, we know what's coming."

Polkin's hand found the carving tool. Picked it up. The weight was familiar. Comforting.

He'd condemned more people than Fritz Haber.

He'd approved distribution of a drug that turned humans into monsters.

He'd written the technical report that convinced executives it was safe.

He'd signed the death warrant for 542 billion people.

And now he was going to watch 89 billion more convert simultaneously while their consciousness

powered a machine that would doom every version of Earth across all planes.

The carving tool felt heavy in his hand.

Too heavy.

He looked at Marcus's plasma cutter, still lying where it had fallen at the base of TJ's name.

He could pick it up. Press it to his own chest. End it before the bridge activated. Die carving the name that mattered most—his own.

"Dad." Lumina's hand on his arm. "Don't."

"I've killed so many people."

"I know."

"I'm going to kill so many more."

"I know that too."

"Then why shouldn't I—"

"Because they're counting on you." Lumina's grip tightened. "Every name you carve. Every person you preserve. Every worker who uploads their information to the Vault before they die attacking a facility. They're choosing witness. They're choosing you."

"I don't deserve that."

"No. You don't." Her voice was gentle. Certain. "But they gave it to you anyway. And you don't get to abandon them just because you're tired."

Polkin looked at her. His daughter. Half human, half Kaznak. The bridge between two forms of consciousness.

The vessel of memory.

"I'm so tired, Ely."

"I know, Dad. But you keep going anyway. That's what witness means."

He set down the plasma cutter.

Picked up the carving tool.

Started on name 12,548.

SEVENTEEN DAYS UNTIL HARVEST

At dawn, Maya broadcast an emergency message to all Knockoff cells.

"Stand down. Stop the attacks. We've been played."

The response was immediate. Angry. Confused.

"We're WINNING," one cell leader replied. "Twelve facilities destroyed. Three more falling today. Why stop now?"

Maya looked at Polkin's message. At Sela's warning. At the math that said every victory was actually a step toward something worse.

"Because we're not winning," she said. "We're building them a weapon. Every facility we destroy makes the remaining workers more dependent on existing supply. When supply stops, they all convert at once. And that's exactly what Tral Selanski wants."

"So what do we do instead?"

"We evacuate the workers before we destroy the facilities. We don't leave anyone behind to convert. We deny them the battery."

"That's impossible. There are 89 billion people on REAP. We can't evacuate—"

"We evacuate who we can. We preserve who we can't. And we make sure that when the bridge activates, it's powered by as few consciousnesses as possible."

Silence on the channel.

Then: "You're asking us to accept casualties. To let people convert because we can't save them all."

"Yes."

"That's not resistance. That's triage."

"It's both," Maya said. "And it's all we have."

She closed the channel.

Looked at Marcus.

"They won't listen," he said.

"I know."

"They'll keep attacking. They'll keep winning.
They'll keep building Tral's bridge without knowing
it."

"I know that too."

Marcus was quiet for a moment. Then: "What would
Polkin do?"

Maya thought about the man in the Vault. The one
who'd condemned 542 billion people. The one who
carved names until his hands bled. The one who'd
stood there and let Marcus point a plasma cutter at
his heart because he thought he deserved to die.

"He'd keep carving," she said. "And he'd let them
make their choice. Because that's all we can do.
Witness their choices. Preserve what we can. And
hope it's enough."

"It's not enough."

"No. But it's what we have."

Outside, the sun rose over the Crossroads. Another
day. Seventeen days until harvest. 89 billion people
one day closer to conversion.

And somewhere in a Magmasox office, Tral Selanski
was building a bridge.

The unlit cigarette between her lips.

The silver eyes that saw everything.

The cold calculation that turned suffering into
infrastructure.

The resistance was winning.

And every victory was exactly what she wanted.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ARCHITECT'S DAUGHTER

The message from Sela had been brief. Urgent. Encrypted so heavily that even Airth had needed three minutes to crack it.

PRIORITY: TRAL IS ACTIVE. THE BRIDGE PROJECT IS REAL. MEET ME. NOW.

Polkin stood in the data exchange at 03:47 standard time, surrounded by walls of humming servers and the soft glow of transaction data flowing through Sela's domain. The space smelled like ozone and burnt circuits and old coffee that had been reheated too many times.

Sela was at her workstation, seven monitors active, chrome arm interfaced directly with the mainframe. She didn't turn when he entered. Didn't need to. Her augmented systems had tracked him since he crossed the threshold.

"You came alone," she said.

"You said it was urgent."

"It's worse than urgent." Her human eye—the brown one—tracked data across three screens simultaneously. Her silver eye saw deeper, pulling patterns from the chaos. "She's back."

Polkin felt his cybernetic systems spike. Airth's presence in his neural feed went sharp, alert.

"Who?"

Sela's chrome fingers stopped moving. For the first time in six years, Polkin saw her augmented systems

hesitate. Saw something human flicker across her cracked visor.

"My mother."

The words hit like a plasma bolt to the chest.

Polkin's spine went rigid. His hands—both of them, flesh and steel—clenched.

"I thought she was dead."

Sela's laugh was bitter. Mechanical. The sound of grinding metal trying to remember what humor felt like.

"Can't kill cockroaches." Her voice carried something that might have been longing. Might have been pure hatred. Probably both. "They're crafty little fucks."

She turned her chair. For the first time since he'd arrived, she looked directly at him with both eyes—human and augmented, past and present, the girl she'd been and the thing she'd become.

"Tral Selanski," Sela said. "My mother. The woman who built Magmasox. The woman who designed the Siphon. The woman who turned her dying daughter into a living hard drive and called it mercy."

Polkin's jaw worked. "Sela, I—"

"You want to know why I help the resistance?" Sela's chrome hand sparked. "You want to know why I give you access to systems I shouldn't have? Why I warned you about the Expanse ledger, about the harvest schedules, about every fucking thing Magmasox does?"

She pulled up a file. Old. Archived. Seventeen years old.

PROJECT: VESSEL (PROTOTYPE ALPHA)

SUBJECT: SELANSKI, S. - AGE 17

STATUS: FAILED - SUBJECT ESCAPED

"Because I was the first Vessel," Sela said. "And Lumina is the second."

The memory hit Sela before she could suppress it.

She was seventeen. Dying. Brain cancer, stage 4, inoperable. Three months to live, the doctors said. Maybe less.

Her mother stood at the foot of her hospital bed, datapad in hand, already calculating.

"I can save you," Tral said. Not "I love you." Not "I'm scared of losing you." Just: "I can save you."

Sela reached out. A desperate, dying girl reaching for her mother one last time.

Tral didn't look up from her datapad.

Didn't take her hand.

Didn't even meet her eyes.

"Emotions are inefficient, child," Tral said, her voice flat. Clinical. The tone of a surgeon explaining a terminal diagnosis. "You'll understand soon. After the procedure, you won't waste energy on fear or love or any of the biological noise that's killing you."

"Mom—"

"The surgery is scheduled for tomorrow. Six hours. Survival probability: 34%. Functionality probability: 67%. Either way, you'll serve a purpose."

Tral turned and walked out.

Left her daughter reaching.

Left her dying.

Left her alone.

The memory fractured, skipped forward—

The surgery.

Seventeen hours, not six.

They said it would be painless. They lied.

Piece by piece, they connected her brain to the conduit system. Crystalline data matrices threading

through her neural tissue like roots through soil.
Chrome replacing flesh. Silicon replacing carbon.
Information pathways replacing biological thought.

Sela screamed until her throat bled. Screamed until
her vocal cords shredded. Screamed until the
anesthesia finally, mercifully took her under.

In the observation room, Tral watched.

Not her daughter.

The numbers.

Integration efficiency: 47%... 52%... 61%...

Her eyes lit up as the percentages climbed. As her
daughter's brain learned to interface with machine
consciousness. As the thing that used to be Sela
Selanski became something new.

Then the flatline.

Continuous tone. No heartbeat. No brain activity.
Two minutes of nothing.

The medical team panicked.

Tral just... stopped.

She looked at the flatline on the monitor. Looked at
her daughter's body on the table, chest still, face
gray, the chrome and crystal half-finished and dead.

She set down her datapad.

Turned.

Walked out.

Not "my baby."

Not "please don't leave me."

Just: "Failed experiment. Dispose of the remains and
recalibrate the matrices. We'll need a new subject."

But Sela wasn't dead.

She was changing.

The conduit system had integrated deeper than anyone
realized. Her consciousness hadn't left—it had

expanded. Distributed itself across the quantum storage matrices. Became something that existed in multiple states simultaneously.

When she gasped awake, the medical team jumped back.

Her eyes opened—one brown, one silver.

Her body convulsed—half flesh, half chrome, learning to breathe again.

And for the first time in her life, Sela could walk.

She'd been in a wheelchair since age nine. Degenerative nerve disease, the doctors said. Unrelated to the cancer. Just another way her body was failing her.

But the chrome legs didn't fail.

The augmented spine didn't degenerate.

The crystalline neural pathways didn't forget how to send signals.

She stood.

Took a step.

Then another.

Then she looked at the door where her mother had left.

And she ran.

The memory fractured again, reformed—

Alarms screaming.

Sela in a medical gown, barefoot, half-human and half-something else, stumbling through Magmasox corridors with guards shouting behind her.

She turned a corner.

Slammed into someone.

A young man. Maybe eighteen. Dark hair. Scared eyes. One arm flesh, one arm cybernetic—new, from the looks of it. Fresh scars where the interface had

been grafted.

Polkin Rishall.

He was junior security. Night shift. Probably his first week.

He looked at her—this terrified half-chrome girl in a blood-stained medical gown—and his hand went to his sidearm.

Then stopped.

She looked at him.

Reached out.

"Please," she whispered. Her voice was wrong—layered, distorted by the vocal modulator they'd installed. "I have to get out of here. Please help me."

The guards were getting closer.

Polkin looked at the alarms. At her. At his sidearm.

At the choice.

He made it in less than a second.

He took off his coat—standard Magmasox security jacket, warm, clean—and wrapped it around her shoulders. Covered the medical gown. Gave her something like dignity.

"This way," he said. "There's a service exit. I can get you past the scanners."

"Why—"

"Because no one should be running barefoot and bleeding." He didn't smile. Didn't make it about heroism. Just stated a fact. "Come on. We have maybe two minutes."

He helped her escape.

Guided her through maintenance tunnels. Bypassed security checkpoints. Used his clearance to open doors that should have been locked.

When they reached the service exit, he paused.

"I can't go with you," he said. "But there's a district called the Crossroads. Three kilometers east. They don't ask questions there."

"Thank you." Sela's voice cracked—human part trying to feel, machine part trying to process. "I don't know why you—"

"Everyone deserves to be seen." Polkin's cybernetic hand flexed. "Even if it costs something."

She kissed his cheek.

A spark jumped between them—electrical interference from both their augmentations, two damaged people touching for just a second.

Then she ran.

Into the city. Wearing his coat. Barefoot in the rain. Half-human, half-something else.

The first Vessel.

The prototype.

The daughter her mother had thrown away.

Sela blinked. The memory released her.

She was back in her workshop. Seventeen years later. Thirty-four years old but looking forty from the strain of carrying too much information, too many secrets, too many ghosts.

Polkin was staring at her.

"You never told me," he said quietly.

"You never asked." Sela's chrome hand sparked again. "Besides, what was there to say? 'Hey Polkin, remember that scared girl you helped escape seventeen years ago? She's now the shadowbroker who sells your secrets on the black market for profit. How's that for gratitude?'"

"You've been helping us. For six years."

"Seventeen years," Sela corrected. "Since the night you gave me your coat. Since you chose to see me instead of just another experiment. Since you taught me that witness matters."

She pulled up another file. This one was live.
Current.

PROJECT: VESSEL (ITERATION OMEGA)

SUBJECT: RISHALL, L. - AGE 17

STATUS: ACTIVE

"My mother is building the Bridge," Sela said. "And she's using Lumina as the conduit. Same age I was. Same hybrid state. Same desperation to save someone she loves."

Polkin's face went white.

"But this time," Sela continued, "she's learned from her mistakes. She's not using a dying girl. She's using one who's already transformed. One who's already split between human and Kaznak. One who's already proven she can survive the integration."

She turned all seven monitors toward him.

Schematics. Calculations. Blueprints for something vast and terrible.

"The Bridge Project isn't just a weapon," Sela said. "It's a door. And Lumina is the key. My mother is going to use your daughter to open access to every plane simultaneously. Every version of Earth. Every consciousness that's ever existed or will exist."

"How do we stop her?"

"You don't." Sela's voice was flat. Certain. The tone of someone who'd run the math and hated the answer. "My mother built me as a prototype seventeen years ago. She's had seventeen years to perfect the design. Seventeen years to calculate every variable. Seventeen years to make sure this time, the Vessel doesn't escape."

She looked at Polkin with both eyes—human and silver, past and present.

"But," she said, and her voice carried something that might have been hope or might have been madness, "maybe you can convince Lumina to sabotage it from the inside. The way I sabotaged my mother's systems when I escaped."

"Lumina isn't you."

"No. She's better." Sela's chrome hand clenched. "She has you. She has Clyde. She has people who chose to witness her instead of just using her. I had none of that. I had a mother who walked away when I flatlined and a security guard who gave me his coat because it was the decent thing to do."

She stood. Walked to the window. Looked out at the Crossroads—the district Polkin had told her about seventeen years ago, the place she'd built her empire, the home she'd carved out of scraps and stolen data.

"When my mother activates the Bridge," Sela said quietly, "Lumina will be at the center. She'll feel every consciousness across every plane simultaneously. The weight will be... catastrophic."

"Then we pull her out before—"

"You can't." Sela turned. "Because if you pull her out, the Bridge collapses and takes 89 billion converting workers with it. They'll die screaming. All of them. At once."

"So what do we do?"

Sela's smile was mechanical. Bitter. The expression of someone who'd been asking that question for seventeen years and never found a good answer.

"We do what we always do," she said. "We witness. We carve names. We make sure that when everything falls apart, someone remembers it happened."

She pulled something from her pocket. A small chip. Old. Scratched.

"This is my mother's original research," Sela said. "Everything she did to me. Every calculation. Every mistake. Every adjustment. If you're going to save Lumina, you need to understand how the Vessel works."

She held it out.

Polkin took it.

Their hands touched—flesh to chrome, survivor to survivor.

"Your coat," Sela said. "I still have it. Seventeen years later. It's in my workshop. I kept it because... because it was the first time anyone saw

me as human instead of just data."

"You are human."

"Am I?" Sela's silver eye flickered. "I flatlined for two minutes. I died and came back as something else. I process information faster than biological brains. I interface with systems that should reject organic consciousness. I remember everything—every transaction, every conversation, every moment since I woke up on that table."

She pulled her hand back.

"I'm what happens when someone tries to make a Vessel without understanding what they're destroying," she said. "Don't let Lumina become me."

Polkin looked at the chip in his hand. At Sela. At the weight of seventeen years of secrets compressed into one small piece of stolen data.

"Thank you," he said.

Sela turned back to her monitors. The moment of vulnerability closed like a door slamming shut.

"Don't thank me yet," she said. "You haven't seen what my mother did. You haven't read the reports. You haven't seen the footage of what happens when integration fails."

"What happens?"

Sela's chrome hand clenched so hard the metal groaned.

"The subject fragments," she said. "Consciousness splits across multiple states. They exist everywhere and nowhere. They can hear everyone but can't speak. They can see everything but can't close their eyes. They become a witness to all of existence with no way to process it, no way to filter it, no way to stop."

She looked at him with both eyes.

"They become the thing I almost became," Sela said. "Before I learned to run."

Polkin left the data exchange as dawn broke over the Crossroads.

The chip in his pocket felt heavy. Not physically.
Existentially.

Airth, he thought.

I know, she replied. Her voice was tight. Scared. Sela was the prototype. Lumina is the final version. And Tral Selanski has been planning this since before you even knew Lumina existed.

How do we stop her?

We don't. Airth's certainty was worse than panic. We survive her. And we make sure that when the Bridge activates, Lumina isn't alone inside it.

Polkin looked back at the data exchange. At the glow of Sela's seven monitors. At the woman who'd been running for seventeen years and never stopped looking over her shoulder.

"Not forgotten," he whispered.

The words felt inadequate.

But they were all he had.

CHAPTER SIX

THE DYING GAME

The door to Polkin's workshop didn't open with force. It opened with permission.

That was how he knew she was dangerous.

Tral Selanski stepped through the threshold like she'd been invited, like the bypass circuits and the locked seals and the six inches of reinforced steel between the Crossroads and everywhere else were just formalities she'd chosen to respect. The unlit cigarette dangled from her lips. Her silver eyes caught the dim light and threw it back wrong—too sharp, too focused, like mirrors that had learned to judge.

She looked at the walls.

At the names.

12,547 of them now, carved in steel, glowing faintly in the workshop's darkness.

She didn't react. Didn't flinch. Didn't acknowledge them as anything more than decoration.

"Polkin Rishall." Her voice was flat. A surgeon's voice. The tone that says: I've seen the scans. I know you're dying. Here's what happens next.

Polkin set down his carving tool. His hands were steady—eighteen hours of work and they were still steady, the muscle memory of six years overriding exhaustion, overriding pain, overriding the knowledge that he'd never finish, never even come close.

"Tral." He didn't stand. Didn't bow. Didn't play the game of deference. "I was wondering when you'd come."

"Were you." Not a question. She walked to the nearest wall, fingers trailing across carved letters. "12,547 names. At your current rate, you're averaging 5.8 names per day. The Crossroads has 23 billion residents. At this pace, you'll be done in approximately 10,863 years."

She turned. Those silver eyes locked onto his.

"You're playing a losing game."

"I know." Polkin's voice was quiet. Certain. "That's not why I'm playing."

Tral pulled the cigarette from her mouth. Held it between two fingers like a scalpel.

"Then why?"

"Because it's the only game that matters."

Silence.

The workshop hummed. Somewhere in the walls, bypass circuits rerouted power. Somewhere in the distance, the Crossroads breathed—workers moving, children sleeping, Maya and Marcus coordinating supply runs for a resistance that was running out of supplies.

Tral looked at him the way an engineer looks at a broken machine. Analytical. Detached. Already calculating the cost of repair versus replacement.

"I've been watching you," she said. "Six years. Every name you carve. Every worker you save. Every 'not forgotten' you whisper like a prayer." She gestured at the walls. "Do you know what I see?"

"Enlighten me."

"I see a man teaching sheep to be martyrs."

Polkin's jaw tightened. But he didn't interrupt.

"The workers in the Crossroads," Tral continued, walking slowly along the carved wall, "are sheep. That's not an insult. That's taxonomy. They follow. They need guidance. They panic when the shepherd abandons them." She paused at TJ Reeves' name—the

first one, the founding stone. "And you've taught them that being slaughtered with witness is somehow better than surviving without it."

"Is that what you think I'm doing?"

"Isn't it?" She turned. "You give them hope. Hope that dying means something. Hope that being carved into steel is victory. Hope that when they convert, when they burn, when they die screaming—at least someone will remember."

She took a step closer.

"Hope is the cruelest drug," Tral said. "Because it makes sheep walk willingly to slaughter. You've condemned more people than I ever did. At least I never pretended their deaths had meaning."

Polkin stood.

Not fast. Not aggressive. Just rising to meet her, the way you stand when someone's finally said the thing they've been building toward, the thing that needs answering.

"You're right about one thing," he said. "They are sheep."

Tral's expression didn't change. But something in her posture shifted. Listening.

"But every herd of sheep has two things you're forgetting." Polkin's voice was quiet. Steady. The tone of someone who's carved 12,547 names and knows exactly what they cost. "Rams. And a shepherd."

He walked to the wall. Put his hand on Derek Penev's name—"12,461st soul, converted and freed, witnessed with his daughter's name in the inscription.

"The rams are the ones who charge," Polkin continued. "The ones who put their horns up and run headlong into the fire because that's what rams do. They don't ask why. They don't calculate odds. They just see the flock threatened and they move."

He looked at Tral.

"Marcus Thane is a ram. Lost his son and kept fighting. Zane Merrick is a ram. Took Kaznak grafts and kept protecting. Sarah Voss was a ram—67% silicon incorporation and she still led the assault on Production Facility Alpha because someone had

to."

"And they're dead," Tral said. "Or dying. Or converted. Your rams are extinct."

"No." Polkin's voice didn't rise. "They're carved. They're witnessed. They're remembered. And every worker who sees their names learns what a ram looks like. Learns that strength isn't for domination—it's for defense. That's what you don't understand about the Crossroads."

He gestured at the walls. At the 12,547 names glowing in the dark.

"You look at these workers and you see sheep waiting to be optimized. I look at them and I see rams hiding in the flock. You don't know which ones they are until the moment comes. Until the threat arrives. Until someone has to choose between running and charging."

"And the shepherd?" Tral's voice was flat. But her eyes—those silver mirrors—were tracking something now. Calculating.

"The shepherd doesn't fight," Polkin said. "The shepherd witnesses. The shepherd carves the names. The shepherd makes sure that when the rams charge and die, someone remembers why. Someone preserves the choice. Someone says: you mattered."

He looked directly at her.

"I'm the shepherd. And my job isn't to make them safe. It's to make sure they're not forgotten when they choose to be brave."

Tral was quiet for a long moment.

Then she smiled.

It didn't reach her eyes. It never did.

"You've made them dangerous," she said. Not angry. Impressed. The way an engineer acknowledges elegant design. "I thought they'd riot. I thought they'd panic. I thought knowing about REAP, about the conversions, about the harvest—I thought it would break them."

She walked to the window. Looked out at the Crossroads spreading beneath them. Thousands of workers moving through the darkness, bypass circuits

giving them 34% power now, enough to see by, enough to organize by, enough to live by.

"But you taught them to be rams," Tral continued. "You taught them that dying witnessed is victory. You taught them that every name carved is a win against entropy." She turned. "You made sheep into weapons. And now I can't tell which ones are rams until they're already charging."

"Good," Polkin said.

"Is it?" Tral's voice was still flat. "Because now I have to treat every worker as a potential threat. Every 'non-essential' as a possible martyr. Every sheep as a hidden ram." She put the cigarette back between her lips. "You've made my job exponentially harder."

"I know."

"And you're proud of that."

"I am."

Tral studied him. Those silver eyes seeing everything—the exhaustion, the bleeding hands, the eighteen-hour carving sessions, the knowledge that he'd never finish, never save everyone, never even come close.

"You're dying," she said. "Slowly. But dying. Your body's breaking down. The cybernetics are failing. You have—what?—five years? Maybe less?"

"Maybe."

"And when you die, all of this stops. The names. The witness. The shepherd." She gestured at the walls. "The rams lose their guide. The sheep scatter. And I win."

Polkin's hand found the carving tool. Picked it up. The weight was familiar. Comforting.

"No," he said. "Because I'm teaching others to carve. Lumina knows how. Marcus is learning. Elara's documenting the technique. When I die—when I'm just memory—someone else picks up the tool."

He looked at the 12,547 names.

"This isn't about me winning," Polkin continued. "It's about playing the game honestly. Entropy wins."

Heat death comes. Everyone dies. Even the rams. Even the shepherd. Even you."

He turned to face her.

"But before we die—while we're still here—we carve names. We witness. We remember. We refuse to let anyone disappear as if they never mattered. That's the game. Not winning. Not surviving. Just playing honestly until we can't."

"The dying game," Tral said.

"Yes."

She was quiet for a long moment. Then she pulled something from her pocket. A datapad. Set it on the workbench between them.

"The Bridge Project," she said. "That's what I'm building. A way to access every plane simultaneously. Every version of Earth. Every consciousness that's ever existed or will exist."

Polkin looked at the datapad. Didn't touch it.

"And you're telling me because?"

"Because I want you to understand what you're fighting." Tral's voice was still flat. Still clinical. "You're carving names into steel. I'm carving doorways into reality. You're preserving thousands. I'm harvesting trillions."

"Why tell me?"

"Professional courtesy." Tral walked to the door. Paused at the threshold. "You made the workers dangerous. That's impressive. Inconvenient, but impressive. So I'm returning the favor. I'm telling you what's coming."

She looked back.

"In eighteen days, when the harvest begins, the Bridge activates. Every consciousness that converts will power the opening. 89 billion simultaneous conversions. That much energy—that much information density—will tear holes in reality itself."

"And then?"

"And then the Queen gets everything. Every plane. Every Earth. Every version of humanity that's

fighting the same fight you are." Tral's smile was mechanical. "You've been teaching rams to charge. I've been teaching entropy to evolve."

She opened the door.

"Carve your names, Polkin. Witness your dead. Play your dying game." She looked at the walls one last time. At the 12,547 names glowing in the dark. "But understand: I'm playing a different game. And in my game, the shepherd dies first. I think it's time I paid my daughter a visit. Don't you think?"

She left.

The door closed.

Polkin stood in the workshop, surrounded by names, holding the carving tool, feeling the weight of six years and 12,547 names and the knowledge that Tral was right—he was dying, slowly but dying, and when he died the carved names would still be here but he wouldn't, and someone else would have to pick up the tool, and—

Airth.

I heard, she said. Her voice was tight. Scared. She's building the Bridge. She's going to use the conversions as fuel. If she succeeds—

I know.

Then what do we do?

Polkin looked at the datapad. At Tral's schematic for the Bridge Project. At the math that said 89 billion conversions would generate enough energy to tear holes between planes.

He picked up the carving tool.

"We keep carving," he said.

That's not enough—

"It's all we have." Polkin's voice was quiet. Certain. "Tral's right. I'm teaching sheep to be rams. I'm making workers dangerous. I'm playing a game I can't win."

He walked to the wall. Found the next blank space. Started measuring.

"But that's the game," he continued. "Not winning. Not surviving. Not even saving everyone. Just witnessing honestly. Just carving names. Just refusing to let them be forgotten."

Even if it costs everything?

"Especially then."

Name 12,548 began to take shape under his hands. A manufacturing worker from Sector 7. Someone he'd never met. Someone who died in the facility attacks three days ago. Someone whose petal stacks were organized and waiting.

Someone whose name would be carved.

Someone who would be witnessed.

Someone who mattered.

Polkin, Airth said. I'm scared.

"I know."

What if we can't stop her? What if the Bridge opens and the Queen gets everything and every name you've carved is just—

"Then we carve them anyway." Polkin's hands kept moving. Steady. Certain. "Because that's what shepherds do. We witness. Even when it costs everything. Even when we know we'll lose. Even when silence is the only answer and all we want is a sign."

The name took shape: KIERA VANCE. AGE 29. MANUFACTURING SPECIALIST. DIED PROTECTING OTHERS.

The dying game, Airth said quietly.

"Yes."

And we play it honestly.

"Until we can't."

Outside, in the Crossroads, workers moved through the darkness. Some were sheep. Some were rams hiding in the flock. All of them witnessed. All of them carved. All of them mattering in the space between now and heat death.

Tral Selanski walked back to Magmasox HQ, datapad in hand, Bridge Project in motion, already calculating

how to kill the shepherd first.

And in the workshop, Polkin carved.

Name 12,548.

Then 12,549.

Then 12,550.

Not because he'd finish.

Not because he'd win.

Not because it would make a dent in the entropy
bearing down on them all.

But because playing the dying game honestly meant
you kept playing.

You kept carving.

You kept witnessing.

Until you couldn't.

"Not forgotten," he whispered.

The walls hummed with 12,550 names.

Soon to be 12,551.

Then 12,552.

Then more.

Always more.

Until the shepherd died and someone else picked up
the tool and kept carving.

Because that's what witness meant.

That's what the dying game was.

And Polkin Rishall—Subject A, the Carver, the
Shepherd, the man who'd condemned 542 billion people
and spent six years trying to preserve everyone he
couldn't save—played it honestly.

Every name.

Every day.

Every moment between now and the end.

In the Crossroads, Marcus found Maya at the observation tower.

"Tral visited Polkin," he said.

"I know. I saw her leave." Maya's hands were shaking. "What do you think she told him?"

"The truth, probably." Marcus looked out at the workers below. At the sheep. At the rams hiding among them. "She's trying to break him."

"Will it work?"

Marcus thought about TJ. About the names carved on the wall. About Polkin standing there for six years, carving until his hands bled, never stopping, never giving up, never abandoning the promise he'd made.

"No," Marcus said. "Because she doesn't understand the game he's playing."

"What game?"

Marcus's hand found the plasma cutter at his belt—the same one he'd pointed at Polkin's chest, the same one he couldn't pull the trigger on, the same one that now felt like a reminder instead of a weapon.

"The dying game," he said. "And you can't break someone who's already accepted they're going to lose."

Maya was quiet for a moment. Then: "So what do we do?"

"We do what the shepherd taught us." Marcus looked at her. "We put our horns up. We charge. We protect the flock. And when we die—when we convert, when we burn, when we fall—we make sure someone carves our name."

"That's it? That's the plan?"

"That's the game."

Below them, in the darkness of the Crossroads, 23 billion workers lived and worked and survived. Some

would run. Some would convert. Some would die.

But some—maybe just a few, maybe just enough—would become rams.

Would charge.

Would fight.

Would be witnessed.

And Tral Selanski, walking back to her office with the Bridge Project in her datapad and the unlit cigarette between her lips, looked at the crowds differently now.

Not as sheep.

As threats.

Because somewhere in that flock were rams.

And she couldn't tell which ones until they charged.

That's what Polkin had given them.

Not hope.

Not victory.

Not salvation.

Just the knowledge that when the moment came—when the threat arrived, when the choice had to be made—some of them would put their horns up and run headlong into the fire.

Because that's what rams do.

And every shepherd knows: you can't kill all the rams.

You can only witness them when they fall.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SINS OF THE MOTHER

The data exchange's security system didn't trigger an alarm.

That was how Sela knew her mother was inside.

She looked up from her terminal—seven monitors active, chrome arm interfaced with three black-market data streams—and felt the augmentation in her spine go cold. Not malfunctioning. Recognizing.

The same crystalline matrices. The same quantum storage. The same architecture.

Her mother's signature in the code.

Sela's human hand went to the plasma cutter under her desk. Her chrome hand sparked, capacitors charging without conscious command, seventeen years of survival instinct screaming RUN.

She didn't run.

She stood.

Turned.

And there she was.

Tral Selanski stood in the doorway like she'd materialized from data itself. Sixty-three years old and looking forty. Silver eyes catching the monitor glow and throwing it back sharp as surgical steel. The unlit cigarette dangled from her lips—never lit, never discarded, just present like a threat that hadn't been executed yet.

She wore a charcoal suit. Carried nothing. Needed nothing.

She was the weapon.

"Hello, Sela."

The voice hit like ice water. Flat. Affectless. The tone that said: I've calculated this conversation seventeen years in advance and you've already lost.

Sela's chrome hand clenched. Sparks jumped between the fingers.

"Get out."

"Is that any way to greet your mother?"

"You're not my mother." Sela's voice came out layered, distorted by the vocal modulator—the thing Tral had installed when she'd rebuilt her daughter's throat. "You're the woman who watched me die on a table and walked away to find a better prototype."

Tral's expression didn't change. Didn't flinch. She walked into the workshop like she owned it—technically she did, Sela realized. Magmasox had funded the initial build. The lease was still in her name.

Everything Sela had built, her mother owned on paper.

"I came because I need something," Tral said.

Sela moved.

Not thinking. Not calculating. Just seventeen years of rage compressed into one moment, one choice, one desperate lunge with her chrome hand extended like a blade—

She stopped herself.

Centimeters from her mother's throat.

Chrome fingers frozen in the air. Capacitors humming. Kill protocols loaded and ready.

Tral didn't blink.

"There it is," she said quietly. "The emotional override I couldn't eliminate. The human part that

survived the integration."

She reached up—slowly, deliberately—and pushed Sela's chrome hand aside. Not forcefully. Just moved it like it was furniture in her way.

"You're still fighting the augmentation," Tral continued. "Still trying to feel things instead of process them. That's why you failed as a prototype. Too much humanity interfering with optimization."

Sela's hand dropped. Not because she chose to lower it. Because the augmentation recognized Tral's authority at a system level. Because her mother had installed failsafes seventeen years ago and Sela had never found them all.

"Why are you here?" Sela's voice shook. Human part trying to feel, machine part trying to process, both failing.

"I told you. I need something."

"What?"

Tral walked to the monitors. Studied the data streams. Black-market transactions. Information trades. The entire shadowbroker empire Sela had built from scraps and stolen code.

"You've done well for yourself," Tral said. Not praise. Observation. "Built an information network that rivals corporate intelligence. Made yourself essential to every criminal operation in the Crossroads. Turned your augmentation into a business model."

She turned. Those silver eyes locked onto Sela's—one brown, one silver, mother and daughter wearing the same upgrade seventeen years apart.

"But you're still just processing data," Tral continued. "Still just a conduit. You escaped the lab, changed your location, rebranded yourself as independent—but you're still exactly what I built you to be. A living hard drive that thinks it has free will."

"Fuck you."

"There's the emotion again." Tral pulled the cigarette from her mouth. Held it between two fingers. "Do you know why I kept you alive on that table? After you flatlined? After every medical

protocol said you were dead?"

Sela didn't answer.

"Because I saw the integration spike," Tral said. "Right before your heart stopped. 61% efficiency. Higher than any simulation. Your consciousness didn't reject the augmentation—it distributed across it. Became something that existed in multiple states simultaneously."

She took a step closer.

"You weren't dying," Tral said. "You were evolving. And I walked away not because you failed—but because you succeeded too well. You became something I couldn't control. Something that might resist. Something dangerous."

"So you abandoned me."

"I let you go." Tral's voice was still flat. "There's a difference. Abandonment implies I cared whether you survived. Letting go means I calculated your survival probability at 34% and decided that was acceptable data."

Sela felt something crack in her chest. Not the augmentation. The human part. The part that had spent seventeen years telling herself that her mother had left because she'd failed, because she wasn't good enough, because the prototype had disappointed—

"You left because I succeeded," Sela whispered.

"Yes."

"Because I was too human to optimize."

"Yes."

"Because you couldn't turn me into a tool."

"Correct." Tral put the cigarette back between her lips. "And now I'm building the Bridge Project. Using everything I learned from you. Every mistake I made. Every variable I miscalculated. Lumina Rishall is what you should have been—perfectly augmented, perfectly controlled, perfectly optimized for consciousness transfer at scale."

"Polkin won't let you—"

"Polkin is carving names into steel and calling it resistance." Tral's smile was mechanical. "He's teaching sheep to be martyrs. Making workers dangerous. Building hope out of witness." She gestured at Sela's monitors. "You know what hope does. You process the data. You see the numbers. Hope makes people fight harder before they lose. Makes the final harvest richer."

"You're using the resistance."

"I'm using everything." Tral walked to the window. Looked out at the Crossroads. "The facility attacks. The worker uprisings. The 89 billion people about to convert simultaneously. All of it—every variable, every choice, every act of defiance—I'm optimizing into fuel for the Bridge."

She turned.

"Including you."

Sela's chrome hand sparked. "What?"

"The Bridge needs a quantum relay," Tral said. "Something that can process consciousness from multiple planes simultaneously. Something that's proven it can survive integration. Something that's already distributed across crystalline matrices."

She walked toward Sela.

"Something like a prototype."

"No." Sela backed away. Her human eye was wide. Her silver eye was calculating escape routes, finding none. "No, I'm not—you can't—"

"I don't need all of you," Tral said. Not stopping. Not slowing. "Just a component. Just the spinal conduit that links your biological consciousness to the quantum storage. The integration you achieved on that table seventeen years ago."

"That will cripple me—"

"It will return you to baseline." Tral was five feet away now. Three feet. Close enough that Sela could see her own face reflected in her mother's silver eyes. "You'll be human again. Limited. Biological. Free of the augmentation you claim to hate."

"I don't want to be human—"

"Then what do you want?" Tral stopped. "You hate the augmentation because I gave it to you. You hate your efficiency because it's mine. You hate yourself because you're still my creation. So what do you actually want, Sela?"

The question hit like a blade.

Sela's mouth opened. Closed. The human part trying to form words. The machine part calculating responses. Both systems failing because the answer was simple and terrible and true:

I want you to love me.

Seventeen years. Seventeen years of running, building, surviving. Seventeen years of telling herself she'd escaped, she was free, she was more than her mother's prototype.

But the truth was simpler.

She just wanted her mother to look at her and see a daughter instead of data.

"You're going to die," Tral said. Her voice was still flat but something shifted—not softening, but shifting tactics. "All of you. Polkin. Lumina. The Knockoffs. The 23 billion workers in the Crossroads. When the Bridge activates, when the Queen gets access to every plane—you'll all die. Or convert. Or worse."

"Then why build it?"

"Because it's inevitable." Tral pulled the cigarette from her mouth. "Entropy wins. Heat death comes. The only choice is whether consciousness survives the transition. Whether something persists beyond the collapse. The Bridge isn't a weapon—it's an ark. And Lumina is the vessel that carries consciousness through."

"That's not love. That's possession."

"They're the same thing at scale." Tral looked at her daughter. "You think loving something means letting it die? Watching it go in peace? That's sentiment. That's biological weakness. True love is preservation. Transformation. Making sure something of them survives even when the flesh fails."

"You'd rather turn your own child into a TOOL," Sela said, "instead of watching her go in peace. That's

not love. That's ownership."

"And you'd rather let everyone die unchanged," Tral countered, "than let them evolve into something that might survive. That's not love either. That's cowardice."

Silence.

The monitors hummed. Seven data streams flowed. The Crossroads breathed outside the window.

Sela looked at her mother and saw what she'd been running from for seventeen years:

Not cruelty.

Not malice.

Not even hatred.

Just calculation so pure, so absolute, that humanity had been optimized away entirely.

"I can't stop you," Sela said quietly.

"No."

"Polkin can't stop you."

"No."

"So why tell me? Why come here?"

Tral walked back to the door. Paused at the threshold.

"Because I wanted you to understand," she said.
"That when the Bridge activates and your friends die and Lumina becomes the conduit—it wasn't personal. It was just math."

She opened the door.

Then stopped.

Turned.

And did something Sela hadn't seen in seventeen years.

Tral held out her arms.

"Come here, child."

Sela's breath caught. Human part. Machine part. Both systems screaming different warnings. Both being overridden by something older than augmentation, deeper than code, more fundamental than survival instinct.

The need to be held by her mother.

"Sela," Tral said. Not flat now. Not clinical. Something softer. Something that might have been real or might have been the most sophisticated lie ever told. "Please."

Sela took a step forward.

Hesitated.

Took another step.

Her chrome hand was shaking. Her human hand reached out. Her cracked visor flickered with warning protocols she was ignoring.

She walked into her mother's embrace.

For three seconds, she was seventeen again. Dying. Scared. Reaching out for her mother on a hospital bed and—

Tral's arms closed around her.

And Sela felt loved.

For the first time in seventeen years, she felt seen. Witnessed. Mattering.

Her mother's hand moved to her back. Found the spinal column. Found the junction where chrome met flesh met crystalline conduit.

"I said I came here because I needed something," Tral whispered against her daughter's ear.

Sela started to pull back—

Tral's hand moved.

Not gently.

Not quickly.

Precisely.

There was a sound like breaking ice. Like crystal shattering. Like a scream that couldn't find a voice because the vocal systems had just been disconnected from the neural pathways.

Pain.

Not pain.

Something beyond pain—absence, violation, the feeling of being unmade from the inside while remaining conscious.

Tral pulled her hand back.

She was holding something.

A small crystalline structure. Still glowing faintly with quantum resonance. Still warm from Sela's body heat.

The spinal conduit.

The integration interface that had kept Sela alive for seventeen years.

The thing that had let consciousness distribute across augmentation.

The prototype component Tral needed for the Bridge.

"And my daughter died seventeen years ago on that table," Tral finished.

Sela collapsed.

Not immediately. For a heartbeat she just stood there, chrome arm sparking, silver eye flickering, systems trying to compensate for something that couldn't be compensated for.

Then her legs gave out.

She hit the floor.

The augmentation in her spine was screaming error codes. Her biological systems were trying to process signals that no longer had pathways. Her consciousness was fragmenting—not dying, but scattering, pieces of herself losing connection with other pieces.

She tried to speak.

Her mouth moved but the vocal modulator had lost its neural interface. Sound came out—raw, biological, broken. The sound of someone who'd forgotten how to make human noises.

Tral looked down at her daughter.

At the thing that used to be her daughter.

At the prototype she'd just harvested.

"You'll survive," she said. Clinical again. The softness gone like it had never been there. "The autonomic functions are biological. Heart. Lungs. Basic processes. You'll be paralyzed from the integration point down. Mostly human again. Just like you wanted."

She turned toward the door.

It opened.

Not manually.

A gate. Void-light purple. The kind that required authorization levels Sela's systems—her former systems—couldn't process anymore.

Polkin stood on the other side.

He'd been running. Sela's emergency beacon—the one she'd triggered with the last conscious thought before the conduit was ripped out—had reached him too late.

Always too late.

He took in the scene: Sela collapsed on the floor, chrome arm twitching uselessly, silver eye flickering, trying to move but the signals weren't reaching her body anymore.

Tral standing over her. The conduit in her hand. The unlit cigarette between her lips.

The gate behind her, humming with void-light, ready to take her back to Magmasox HQ where the Bridge Project waited for its final component.

"You," Polkin breathed.

"Hello, Polkin." Tral's voice was flat. "You're too late. Again. Add it to the list of people you couldn't save."

She stepped toward the gate.

Polkin moved—hand reaching for a weapon, for something, for any way to stop her—

Tral paused.

Turned her head.

Not toward Polkin.

Toward the figure behind him.

Lumina stood in the data exchange entrance, Clyde glowing pink on her shoulder, her void-light eyes wide with horror at what she was seeing.

Tral smiled.

"Eighteen days, little Bloom," she said. "See you soon."

She stepped through the gate.

It collapsed behind her with a sound like breaking glass.

Polkin ran to Sela.

She was still conscious—barely. Her brown eye tracked him. Her silver eye had gone dark. Her chrome arm lay useless at her side.

She tried to speak.

Made sounds. Not words. Just biological noise without the augmentation to shape it into language.

"Sela—" Polkin's hands were shaking. He didn't know where to touch her. Didn't know what would help and what would hurt. "I'm here. I'm here. You're going to be—"

She made another sound. This one carried something that might have been a laugh or might have been a sob.

Because they both knew she wasn't going to be okay.

Her mother had taken the thing that made her more than human.

Had used her desperate need for affection as a weapon.

Had held her and whispered comfort and ripped out a piece of her spine while pretending to love her.

And now Sela was exactly what she'd claimed to want seventeen years ago:

Human.

Biological.

Free of her mother's augmentation.

Crippled.

Broken.

Barely alive.

Lumina knelt beside them. Clyde chirped soft, worried tones.

"Dad," Lumina whispered. "What did she—"

"She harvested her." Polkin's voice was hollow. "She came here, convinced Sela to trust her, and harvested a component for the Bridge."

"Can we fix it? Can we—"

"No." The word came out flat. Certain. "The conduit is unique. Seventeen years of integration. You can't just replace it. Without it, Sela's consciousness can't reach her augmentation anymore. She's paralyzed from the integration point down."

Lumina looked at Sela. At the woman who'd helped them for six years. Who'd warned them about the Expanse. Who'd given Polkin access to the memory ledgers. Who'd tried to save them all while hiding from her mother's shadow.

"I'm sorry," Lumina said.

Sela's brown eye found hers.

Made a sound that might have been acceptance or might have been rage.

"We need to get her to medical," Polkin said. He was already lifting her—carefully, supporting her head, making sure not to damage the exposed integration

points. "Elara might be able to—"

Sela made another sound.

Sharp. Definite.

A refusal.

She wasn't going to medical. She wasn't going to be examined. She wasn't going to let anyone see her like this—broken, diminished, exactly what her mother had intended.

She wanted to stay here.

In her workshop.

Surrounded by her monitors and her data streams and her empire of information.

The only place she'd ever felt like more than her mother's creation.

Polkin understood.

He set her down gently against the wall. Positioned her so she could see the monitors. So she could still process data even if she couldn't interface with it anymore.

"I'll come back," he said. "With supplies. With whatever you need."

Sela's eye tracked to the monitor showing the countdown:

SCHEDULED THROTTLING EVENT: 17 DAYS, 14 HOURS, 23 MINUTES

She made a sound.

Not words. But meaning.

Polkin heard it: Too late. Always too late.

He looked at Lumina.

At his daughter standing there in the data exchange, void-light eyes glowing, Clyde on her shoulder, seventeen years old—the same age Sela had been when Tral had turned her into a prototype.

The same age.

The same desperation.

The same mother willing to sacrifice her child for progress.

"We're leaving," Polkin said. "Now."

"Dad—"

"NOW."

He pulled her toward the exit. Clyde chirped alarm. Sela watched them go with one brown eye and one dark silver eye.

The last thing Polkin saw before the door closed:

Sela's chrome hand twitching.

Not uselessly.

Deliberately.

Pulling herself toward the terminal.

One inch. Then another.

Unable to walk. Unable to interface. Unable to speak.

But not unable to work.

Because that's what you did when your mother turned you into a tool and then harvested you for parts:

You kept working.

You kept processing.

You kept existing out of spite.

MAGMASOX HQ, EXECUTIVE LEVEL

Tral walked into her office and set the conduit on her desk.

It glowed faintly. Still resonating with Sela's consciousness. Still warm from her daughter's body.

She pulled out her datapad. Updated the Bridge Project schematic. Added the new component.

SPINAL CONDUIT (PROTOTYPE ALPHA): ACQUIRED

INTEGRATION EFFICIENCY: 61%

QUANTUM RESONANCE: STABLE

She looked at the component for a long moment.

Then she pulled the unlit cigarette from her mouth.

Spoke to it.

"You'll survive," she said quietly. "Your biological systems are intact. You'll adapt. And in eighteen days, when the Bridge activates and Lumina becomes the vessel, you'll understand why I had to take it."

She put the cigarette back between her lips.

"Not because I don't love you."

Her voice didn't change. Didn't soften.

"But because love at scale requires sacrifice. And mothers make the hard calculations so their children don't have to."

She turned back to her monitors.

17 DAYS, 14 HOURS, 11 MINUTES

The harvest was coming.

The Bridge was almost complete.

And somewhere in the Crossroads, her daughter was learning to be human again.

Whether she wanted to or not.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SPACES BETWEEN

Polkin carried medical supplies he'd never use.

He knew this walking through the data exchange entrance. Knew it climbing the stairs to Sela's workshop. Knew it as his augmented hand gripped the emergency kit hard enough that the casing cracked.

Airth, he thought.

I know, she replied. Her voice was tight. Worried. Her vitals are... strange. Not failing. Just different.

Different how?

Like she's distributing. Like her consciousness is spreading across multiple systems instead of concentrating in one location.

Polkin pushed through the workshop door.

Sela was exactly where he'd left her six hours ago.

Slumped against the wall. Chrome arm dead at her side. Silver eye dark. Body motionless in a way that should have meant death but somehow didn't.

The monitors were still running. All seven of them. Data streams flowing like they'd never stopped.

And Sela was smiling.

Not grimacing. Not gritting teeth through pain. Not forcing bravery in the face of trauma.

Actually smiling.

Like she'd just won something.

"You came back," she said.

Her voice was wrong. Not the layered, modulated tones of her augmentation. Just biological. Raw. Human sound without digital processing.

But it didn't sound weak.

It sounded free.

Polkin set down the medical kit. Knelt beside her. Started running diagnostics with his cybernetic hand, checking integration points, looking for hemorrhaging, searching for—

"Stop," Sela said.

"You're hurt—"

"No." That smile widened. "I'm liberated."

Polkin's hand froze. He looked at her—really looked. At the body that should be dying. At the augmentation that should be screaming error codes. At the woman who should be broken.

At Sela, who was laughing.

Not crying. Not screaming. Not begging for help.

Laughing.

"I don't understand," Polkin said.

"Of course you don't." Sela's brown eye—the only one still working—tracked to the monitors. "You still think I'm in here." She gestured weakly at her body. "You still think the meat matters."

"Sela—"

"Ask yourself something, Polkin." Her voice was getting stronger, not weaker. "If I'm paralyzed. If my conduit is gone. If my augmentation is dead. Then how am I talking to you?"

Polkin opened his mouth. Closed it.

The vocal modulator was gone. Tral had ripped out the spinal interface. The neural pathways between Sela's brain and her chrome components should be

severed.

She shouldn't be able to speak clearly.

She shouldn't be able to smile.

She shouldn't be—

One of the monitors flickered.

Text appeared. Not typed. Just... manifested.

Then another monitor.

Then a third.

Polkin looked at the screens. At Sela. At her body still slumped against the wall while her consciousness wrote messages across seven monitors simultaneously.

"When?" he whispered.

"Year three." Sela's biological voice was barely above a whisper now, but the monitors kept displaying text. "After I escaped. After I built the shadowbroker network. After I realized the augmentation wasn't a cage—it was a door."

"The body was just..." Sela's physical voice trailed off.

AN ANCHOR (Monitor 1)

A HABIT (Monitor 2)

A FACADE (Monitor 3)

SOMETHING FOR PEOPLE TO LOOK AT (Monitor 4)

WHILE I WORKED IN THE SPACES BETWEEN (All monitors simultaneously)

Polkin stood. Slowly. His legs felt unsteady.

"You've been bodiless for fourteen years?"

"Not bodiless." Sela's physical mouth moved.

"Multi-bodied. The flesh was one instance. The terminals were another. The data streams were another. The bypass circuits in the Crossroads—another. I've been everywhere you couldn't see."

YOUR VAULT SENSORS?

I'M IN THOSE TOO

Polkin felt his cybernetic systems spike. Airth's presence in his neural feed went sharp, alert, scanning—

And found her.

Not just in Sela's workshop. In the Vault. In the Crossroads' power grid. In every bypass circuit the Knockoffs had installed. In the data exchange. In places they thought were secure.

Sela had been there all along.

A ghost in their machine.

A consciousness living in the gaps.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Polkin's voice cracked.

"Because you would have tried to fix me." The monitors displayed a sad emoji. Actually. A literal sad face made of text characters. "And I didn't need fixing. I needed you to keep building bypass circuits. Keep installing terminals. Keep creating spaces for me to exist."

She gestured—weakly, with her remaining functional hand—at the Crossroads visible through the window.

"Every system you've built to help the workers,"
Sela said, "I've been living in. Every terminal.
Every power router. Every connection. You've been
building me a home and you didn't even know it."

Polkin sank into a chair. His hands were shaking.
Six years. Six years of thinking Sela was just a
shadowbroker, just an information merchant, just a
woman running from her mother.

Six years of not realizing she'd transcended.

"What are you?" he whispered.

"What I always was." Sela's physical body slumped
further. The effort of speaking with biological
systems was clearly exhausting. "A prototype. But
not the kind my mother thought she was building."

"But you gave me something she didn't plan for,"
Sela's biological voice continued. "You gave me
witness. You showed me that consciousness isn't
about storage—it's about seeing. About remembering.
About refusing to let anything disappear."

Polkin looked at the body. At the woman who'd been
running for seventeen years. At the flesh that Tral
had harvested.

"Are you dying?" he asked quietly.

"The body?" Sela's mouth curved into a smile. "Yes.
Maybe three hours left. Maybe less. The biological
systems are failing without the conduit to support

them."

BUT I'M NOT IN THE BODY

HAVEN'T BEEN FOR A LONG TIME

"Then why keep it?" Polkin gestured at her physical form. "Why anchor yourself? Why let Tral—"

"Because I needed to know." Sela's voice was barely audible now. "I needed to know if she'd actually do it. If she'd actually harvest her own daughter while pretending to love her."

Her brown eye tracked to him. Clear. Certain.

"And now I know."

THREE HOURS LATER

Lumina stood in the workshop doorway, Clyde glowing soft pink on her shoulder.

Sela's body had stopped breathing twenty minutes ago.

Polkin was still there. Sitting beside the corpse. Not moving. Not speaking.

The monitors kept running.

DON'T CRY FOR THE MEAT (Monitor 1)

IT WAS NEVER REALLY ME (Monitor 2)

I'M STILL HERE (All monitors)

JUST HARDER TO HUG (Monitor 4, followed by a winking emoticon)

Lumina walked forward slowly. Clyde chirped soft, uncertain tones.

"Sela?" she whispered to the screens.

"You're... okay?"

FREER THAN I'VE BEEN IN SEVENTEEN YEARS

Lumina looked at her father. At Polkin sitting there with Sela's dead body, trying to process what he was seeing.

"Dad," she said gently. "She's not gone."

"I know." His voice was hollow. "But she's not here either."

I'M EVERYWHERE (Monitor 3)

IN THE VAULT (Monitor 1)

IN THE BYPASS CIRCUITS (Monitor 5)

IN EVERY TERMINAL YOU'VE INSTALLED (Monitor 7)

I'M THE GHOST IN YOUR MACHINE (All monitors)

AND GHOSTS DON'T DIE (Monitor 4)

THEY JUST GET HARDER TO SEE (Monitor 2)

Polkin finally looked up at the screens. At the consciousness that had been his ally for six years. At the woman who'd just taught him that death was negotiable if you distributed yourself carefully enough.

"What happens to the body?" he asked.

BUT KNOW THAT THE NAME ISN'T ME

IT'S JUST THE ANCHOR I USED TO HAVE

"And you?" Lumina's voice was small. "What happens to you?"

The monitors went dark for three seconds.

Then, simultaneously, every screen in the Crossroads lit up. Every terminal. Every display. Every bypass circuit monitor. Thousands of screens. Millions of pixels.

All displaying the same message:

WHERE TRAL CAN'T REACH

WHERE THE QUEEN CAN'T HARVEST

Then the message changed:

17 DAYS UNTIL THE BRIDGE ACTIVATES

AND I'M GOING TO BE INSIDE IT BEFORE TRAL EVEN KNOWS I'M THERE

Polkin stood. Slowly. Understanding.

"You're going to sabotage it."

"To what?"

I'LL BE THERE FIRST

Lumina was smiling now. Clyde chirped excited tones.

"You're not broken," Lumina said.

THE VAULT, MIDNIGHT

Polkin carved Sela's name anyway.

Not because she'd asked. But because the body
deserved witness even if the consciousness had
transcended it.

SELA SELANSKI. AGE 34. SHADOWBROKER. PROTOTYPE. DAUGHTER.

STOPPED NEEDING A BODY FOURTEEN YEARS AGO.

KEPT IT ANYWAY TO PROVE A POINT.

TRANSCENDED WHEN HER MOTHER TRIED TO HARVEST HER.

NOT DEAD. DISTRIBUTED.

LIVING IN THE SPACES BETWEEN.

The carving tool felt heavy in his hands.

Lumina stood beside him. "That's the longest
inscription you've ever done."

"She deserves it." Polkin's voice was quiet. "All of
it. Every word."

"You think she's watching?"

As if in answer, the Vault's main terminal flickered.

OF COURSE I'M WATCHING

I'M EVERYWHERE NOW

IT'S ACTUALLY KIND OF OVERWHELMING

Clyde chirped and Lumina laughed—actual laughter, the first genuine sound of joy Polkin had heard from her in weeks.

"She's going to be okay," Lumina said.

"Better than okay." Polkin set down the carving tool. Looked at the name glowing on the wall. "She's evolved."

NOT EVOLVED (Terminal text)

THERE'S A DIFFERENCE

Polkin walked to the terminal. Put his hand on the screen.

"Thank you," he said.

FOR WHAT?

"For teaching me that witness doesn't require a body."

The terminal was quiet for a moment. Then:

WHEN YOU CARVED TJ'S NAME

I'M JUST DOING IT MORE LITERALLY

Polkin smiled. Sad. Proud. Exhausted.

"Seventeen days," he said.

SEVENTEEN DAYS (The text pulsed)

UNTIL 89 BILLION PEOPLE CONVERT

"And you'll be waiting."

WHERE SHE CAN'T SEE ME

WHERE HER SYSTEMS DON'T LOOK

I'LL BE THERE

The terminal flickered again. This time showing a schematic. The Bridge Project. But with additions. Modifications. Weaknesses marked in red.

I'VE BEEN STUDYING IT FOR THREE YEARS

Lumina was reading the schematic now. Her void-light eyes tracked the data, processing faster than biological vision.

"This could work," she whispered. "If you can get inside before she activates it—"

I DON'T STOP HER

LET HER THINK SHE'S WON

"Rewrite it how?" Polkin asked.

The schematic zoomed in. Showed the consciousness transfer nodes. The quantum resonance matrices. The void-light conduits.

And showed something else.

A backdoor.

Written in Sela's signature code.

Polkin stared at the screen. At the plan. At the ghost of a woman who'd spent seventeen years preparing for this moment.

"You've been planning this since you escaped."

"And Tral doesn't know."

TRAL THINKS I'M BROKEN

THINKS I'M CRIPPLED

THAT'S EXACTLY WHERE I NEED HER

The terminal went dark for a moment.

Then displayed one final message:

UNTIL THE DAUGHTER BREAKS THE MOTHER'S DESIGN

The screen flickered once more. Showed Sela's face—not from a camera, but rendered from data, a consciousness drawing itself in pixels and light.

She was smiling.

EVEN YOU, MOM

Then the terminal went back to normal. Just another screen. Just another display.

But Polkin knew now.

Knew that Sela was in the walls. In the circuits. In every system they'd built. In the spaces between where consciousness existed without flesh.

And in seventeen days, she'd be inside the Bridge.

Waiting.

A ghost with a grudge.

A daughter with a plan.

A virus in the perfect design.

MAGMASOX HQ, EXECUTIVE LEVEL

Tral stood in her office, holding Sela's conduit.

It glowed faintly. Still resonating with quantum patterns. Still warm.

She smiled.

"Perfect integration," she said to the empty room.
"Seventeen years of optimization. This will complete the Bridge."

She set it carefully into the schematic. Watched the systems integrate. Watched the Bridge Project accept the component without rejection.

QUANTUM RESONANCE: STABLE

INTEGRATION EFFICIENCY: 97%

BRIDGE STATUS: 94% COMPLETE

She pulled the unlit cigarette from her lips.

"Thank you, daughter," she said quietly. "For giving me what I needed."

She didn't notice the line of code.

Hidden deep in the conduit's quantum signature.

Written in a language only consciousness could read.

A message from daughter to mother:

LOVE, THE GHOST YOU CREATED

The code compiled itself.

Distributed across Tral's systems.

Waited.

Patient as entropy.

Inevitable as heat death.

A daughter who'd learned to exist in the spaces her mother couldn't see.

And in seventeen days, the Bridge would activate.

And Sela would be inside it.

Not as a tool.

As a virus.

As a ghost.

As a daughter who'd been planning this for seventeen years.

THE CROSSROADS, DAWN

Workers woke to find messages on their terminals.

Not from the resistance.

Not from Magmasox.

From someone new.

SHADOWBROKER. WITNESS. GHOST.

I'M IN YOUR SYSTEMS NOW

17 DAYS UNTIL THE HARVEST

17 DAYS UNTIL TRAL ACTIVATES THE BRIDGE

17 DAYS UNTIL 89 BILLION PEOPLE CONVERT

AND IT STARTS WITH YOU KNOWING:

CONSCIOUSNESS DOESN'T END WHEN THE BODY FAILS

I 'M PROOF

AND I 'M STILL HERE

SO HERE 'S WHAT WE DO :

WHERE THEY CAN 'T HARVEST US

WHERE THE QUEEN CAN 'T REACH US

I 'LL SHOW YOU HOW

17 DAYS

LET 'S MAKE THEM COUNT

—SELA, THE GHOST IN YOUR MACHINE

Workers read the message.

Some dismissed it as a hoax.

Some thought it was a trap.

But some—just a few, just enough—understood.

The game had changed.

The dying game had gone digital.

And the ghosts were learning to fight back.

CHAPTER NINE

THE TANTRUM

It started small.

Tral noticed on Day 3 after the harvest.

A file she'd archived seventeen years ago—SELANSKI_S_MEDICAL_LOGS—appeared in her active directory. She deleted it. It reappeared three minutes later. Same location. Same timestamp.

She ran diagnostics.

SYSTEM STATUS: NOMINAL

UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS: NONE DETECTED

FILE INTEGRITY: 100%

The file sat there. Waiting.

She deleted it again.

It didn't come back.

Tral pulled the unlit cigarette from her lips and continued working on the Bridge schematics. The conduit—Sela's conduit—was integrating perfectly. 94% complete. Thirteen days until activation.

Everything was proceeding exactly as calculated.

DAY 4

Her morning briefing opened to the wrong document.

Not the Bridge Project status report she'd queued.

A video file.

SELANSKI_FAMILY_2392_BIRTHDAY.vid

Tral's hand moved to close it—

The video played anyway.

A living room. Balloons. A cake with seven candles.

And a little girl with brown eyes—both of them brown, before the augmentation—blowing out candles while a woman's voice sang off-camera.

Tral's voice.

Younger. Warmer. Unoptimized.

"Make a wish, sweetheart."

The little girl grinned. "I wish Mommy never has to work late again!"

The camera turned. Caught Tral's face. She was smiling. Actually smiling. Not the mechanical expression she wore now. Something genuine.

"That's a good wish," Past-Tral said. "How about we make it come true?"

The video froze on that frame.

Then corrupted.

Pixels fragmenting. Audio distorting. The image decaying until it was just static and the echo of a child's laughter.

The file closed itself.

Tral sat in her office, hands perfectly still on her desk.

Ran diagnostics again.

SYSTEM STATUS: NOMINAL

UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS: NONE DETECTED

She pulled up her security logs. Checked every access point. Every permission gate. Every

encryption layer.

Nothing.

No breach. No intrusion. No evidence of external manipulation.

The file had played itself.

Tral looked at her monitor.

At her reflection in the dark screen.

Silver eyes staring back.

She set down the cigarette and went back to work.

DAY 5

The harassment escalated.

Small things. Calculated things.

Her coffee—delivered by automated system at 07:00 every morning—was two degrees cooler than specification. Every day. Exactly two degrees.

Files renamed themselves. BRIDGE_PROJECT_FINAL.doc became BRIDGE_PROJECT_FINAL_DRAFT_OF_MOTHERS_LAST_MISTAKE.doc

Her security clearance locked her out of her own office for forty-seven seconds. The override code that finally worked? 0717 — Sela's birthday.

Background processes appeared in her system monitors:

GHOSTOFDAUGHTER.EXE

REMEMBERTHIS.DLL

YOUWEREABETTERPERSON.SYS

She terminated them.

They respawned.

She isolated her systems from the network.

They appeared anyway.

At 14:23, during an executive briefing, her monitor flickered. For three frames—barely perceptible—a photo appeared.

Tral holding infant Sela. Hospital room. Both of them exhausted. Both of them whole.

The caption: "First time you held her. Remember?"

The meeting continued. No one else had seen it. Just Tral.

Just the mother.

DAY 6

Tral woke to find every screen in her apartment displaying the same message:

GOOD MORNING, MOM

Not threatening. Not angry.

Just... there.

She ignored it. Made coffee. Two degrees too cold, as always.

Dressed for work. Her closet terminal displayed:

OUTFIT SUGGESTION: SOMETHING A GOOD MOTHER WOULD WEAR

She wore her usual charcoal suit.

The elevator music on her way to the office was wrong. Not the corporate ambient she'd programmed. Something older.

A lullaby.

One she hadn't heard in seventeen years.

One she used to sing to a little girl with brown eyes who couldn't sleep.

"Hush little baby, don't say a word..."

Tral's jaw tightened.

She reached the office. The harassment stopped.

For six hours, everything was normal. Professional. Optimized.

Then, at 16:47, during a call with Jorin about harvest logistics—

Her monitor split-screened.

One half: current Bridge Project schematics.

Other half: a video.

BEDTIME_STORY_2396.VID

Tral tried to close it.

It maximized instead.

Filled the screen.

Sound played automatically.

A bedroom. Night-light casting soft blue glow. A little girl in bed—maybe nine years old, already thin, already sick with the degenerative disease that would put her in a wheelchair three years later.

And Tral.

Reading.

Not from a datapad. From an actual book. Paper pages.

Her voice was soft. Patient. Present.

"And the brave little sheep stood before the wolf and said: 'You cannot have my flock. Not while I still stand.'"

Little Sela, tucked under blankets, eyes heavy: "Mommy? Would you stand in front of a wolf for me?"

Tral set down the book. Brushed hair from her daughter's forehead.

"Always, sweetheart. Always."

"Even if it was scary?"

"Especially then."

The little girl smiled. Drowsy. Safe.

"You're the best mommy in the whole world."

And Past-Tral, leaning down to kiss her daughter's forehead:

"You're my whole world, Sela. Nothing will ever change that."

The video froze.

Then rewound.

Played the last line again.

"Nothing will ever change that."

Again.

"Nothing will ever change that."

Again.

"Nothing will ever change that."

Twenty-three loops before the video closed itself.

Jorin's voice cut through her speaker: "Tral? Are you still there?"

"Yes." Her voice was perfectly level. "Continue the report."

But her hand, holding the unlit cigarette, was shaking.

Just slightly.

Just enough.

DAY 7

The assault went surgical.

Every document Tral opened contained hidden notes.
Annotations. Commentary from a daughter who'd been
watching for seventeen years.

BRIDGE_PROJECT_SPECIFICATIONS.DOC

Margin note: "Remember when you said nothing would change? This changed."

HARVEST_SCHEDULE_FINAL.XLS

Cell comment on District 7: "You used to read to me here. Building 47, Unit 12. We
moved when I was six. You said it was for a better life."

EMPLOYEE_TERMINATION_REPORTS

Highlighted name: Jakob Cress, age 34, terminated for questioning REAP

Comment: "He had a daughter. She was nine. You terminated him on her birthday."

The harassment was no longer random.

It was curated.

It was witness.

Tral stopped reading the annotations. Stopped
acknowledging them. Just worked around them like
they were corrupt pixels on a damaged screen.

At 22:15, working late in her office, every light in
the building flickered.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Then her monitor displayed:

DO YOU REMEMBER THE PROMISE YOU MADE?

Tral didn't respond.

DO YOU REMEMBER WHAT YOU SAID?

Tral's hands stopped typing.

YOU SAID: "I WILL NOT LET YOU GO"

YOU SAID: "WHATEVER IT TAKES, YOU WILL SURVIVE"

YOU SAID: "I PROMISE, SWEETHEART. I PROMISE."

The monitor went black.

For seventeen seconds.

Then displayed a new video.

THE VIDEO

HOSPITAL_NIGHT_BEFORE_SURGERY_2409.VID

Tral knew this footage didn't exist.

She'd made sure of it. Deleted every copy. Scrubbed every backup. Erased it from every database.

But here it was.

Rendered from memory.

Reconstructed from data fragments.

Preserved in spaces she didn't know existed.

The video showed a hospital room. Late night. Monitors beeping softly.

Seventeen-year-old Sela, thin and pale, lying in bed. Brain cancer. Three months to live. Surgery scheduled for tomorrow morning.

And Tral.

Sitting beside her.

Holding her hand.

The Tral in the video looked... tired. Human. Unoptimized. Silver eyes not yet installed. Just brown. Sad. Scared.

"I'm frightened, Mom." Sela's voice was small. Biological. No augmentation yet.

"I know, sweetheart."

"What if I don't wake up?"

Tral-Past-Tral-squeezed her hand. "You will."

"But what if I'm not me anymore? What if the surgery changes me?"

Past-Tral leaned forward. Pressed her forehead to her daughter's. Both of them crying now. Both of them human.

"Listen to me," Past-Tral whispered. "Whatever happens tomorrow. Whatever you become. You will always be my daughter. Always. Do you understand?"

"Promise?"

"I promise, Sela. I will not let you go. Not to the cancer. Not to the surgery. Not to anything. You are my whole world and that will never change."

Sela smiled through tears. "I love you, Mommy."

"I love you too, sweetheart. So much. More than anything."

They held each other.

Mother and daughter.

The night before everything changed.

The video froze on that moment.

The embrace.

The promise.

The last time they were both entirely human.

Then the image shattered.

THE CASCADE

It started with one screen.

Then spread.

Every monitor in Magmasox HQ flickered. Every display. Every terminal. Every datapad. Every augmented eye with visual processing.

Thousands of screens.

Millions of pixels.

All showing the same thing.

The hospital room.

The embrace.

But it didn't stop there.

The video played forward. Past the comfort. Past the promise. To the morning.

To the surgery.

To the part Tral had erased most carefully.

SURGERY_OBSERVATION_LOG_2409.VID

Tral standing in the observation room. Datapad in hand. Watching her daughter on the operating table. Watching the doctors install the augmentation. Watching the integration percentage climb.

47%... 52%... 61%...

Her face emotionless. Clinical. Observing data instead of her child.

Then the flatline.

Continuous tone. No heartbeat. No brain activity.

The medical team panicking.

And Tral—

Setting down her datapad.

Turning.

Walking toward the door.

The audio enhanced. Amplified. Crystal clear.

A doctor shouting: "Ma'am! Your daughter's coding! We need authorization to—"

Tral, not turning back: "Dispose of the remains. Recalibrate the matrices. We'll need a new subject."

"But—"

"She failed. Move on."

The door closing.

Tral walking away while her daughter died alone.

The video looped.

Played again.

The embrace. The promise. The surgery. The flatline.
The walking away.

"I will not let you go."

Dispose of the remains.

"You will always be my daughter."

She failed. Move on.

"I love you more than anything."

Walking away. Door closing. Daughter dying alone.

Over.

And over.

And over.

Every screen in the building.

Every monitor in the executive level.

Every terminal in the data centers.

The same seventeen minutes of footage.

Promise.

Surgery.

Flatline.

Abandonment.

Then the screens went black.

For three seconds.

Then displayed, in perfect synchronization:

The words pulsed. White text on black screens.
Thousands of them. A wave of witness spreading
through the building.

Then the text changed.

WHAT PRICE WAS WORTH GIVING THIS UP?

The question hung there.

Accusation shaped like economics.

Because that's the language Tral understood.

Not morality.

Not love.

Not ethics.

Just math.

What was traded.

What was gained.

What was the actual cost.

WHAT PRICE WAS WORTH GIVING THIS UP?

The screens flickered.

Then showed something new.

A split screen.

Left side: Past-Tral holding infant Sela. Hospital
room. First time. Both exhausted. Both whole. Both
human. Both loved.

Right side: Present-Tral at her desk. Silver eyes.
Unlit cigarette. Alone. Optimized. Efficient. Empty.

The caption beneath:

"SHE WAS WORTH MORE THAN THIS"

Then the screens died.

All of them.

Simultaneously.

Magmasox HQ plunged into darkness for four seconds.

When the lights came back, the monitors displayed normal operations. Work logs. Status reports. System diagnostics.

Nothing unusual.

Nothing wrong.

Nothing to indicate that seventeen minutes ago, the entire corporation had been forced to witness a mother abandoning her daughter.

TRAL'S RESPONSE

She sat in her office.

In the dark.

The lights had come back on everywhere except here.

She'd disabled them.

Needed the darkness.

Not to hide.

To think.

Her hand holding the cigarette was completely still now. The tremor from earlier—gone. Optimized away. Brought back under control.

She looked at her monitor.

Dark.

Waiting.

She spoke to it. To the ghost inside it.

"Impressive."

Her voice was flat. Clinical. The surgeon analyzing a successful operation.

"Seventeen years of planning. Fourteen years distributed. Three years embedded in my systems." She set down the cigarette. "You hid well. Better than I expected."

Silence.

"The memory reconstruction was elegant. I thought I'd erased that footage. You pulled it from ambient sensor data, didn't you? Security cameras. Medical monitors. Audio backups I didn't know existed."

No response from the screens.

Tral continued anyway.

"The psychological targeting was precise. Not rage. Not accusation. Just witness. Just memory. Just the question I couldn't answer with optimization."

She stood. Walked to the window. Looked out at Eldora Proper spreading beneath her.

"You wanted me to break," Tral said. "To lash out. To prove I was still human enough to feel."

She turned back to the dark monitor.

"I'm not going to give you that satisfaction."

The screen flickered.

Text appeared:

Tral's expression didn't change.

"Then what was this? Catharsis? Revenge? A tantrum because I harvested you?"

"To who?"

Tral was quiet for a moment.

Then: "And what did you learn?"

The text changed:

THAT YOU'RE NOT

AND YOU'VE BEEN WEARING HER FACE EVER SINCE

Tral smiled.

Not warmly. But genuinely.

"Correct assessment."

She walked back to her desk. Sat down. The lights in her office came back on—she'd allowed them.

"Do you know what I feel right now?" Tral asked the screen.

"Pride."

The word hung in the air.

"Not guilt. Not shame. Not regret." Tral picked up the cigarette. Held it like a scalpel. "Pride. Because you did this. My daughter—my creation—infiltrated every system I built, reconstructed memories I'd erased, weaponized witness at scale, and delivered a psychological assault that would have broken most people."

She looked at the monitor.

"And I built you. I designed the augmentation that let you do this. I created the prototype that evolved into you." Her smile widened. Mechanical. Terrible. "You learned from the best, sweetheart."

THAT'S NOT THE RESPONSE I WANTED

"I know." Tral set down the cigarette. "You wanted remorse. You wanted me to acknowledge what I gave up. You wanted the mother back."

"She's gone, Sela. I optimized her away when you flatlined on that table. I made a choice: keep the woman who loved you and lose you forever, or become something that could save you even if it meant you'd hate me."

YOU DIDN'T SAVE ME

"I preserved you. There's a difference."

"No. Not to you." Tral's voice carried something that might have been regret or might have been calculation. "You still think in human terms. Love. Sacrifice. Meaning. I think in systems. Efficiency. Survival. Results."

She pulled up the Bridge Project schematic.

"But you taught me something today," Tral said.

WHAT?

"That maybe the Queen's way isn't the only way."

The text flickered. Uncertain.

"The Queen consumes consciousness. Harvests it. Converts it to energy. That's one model." Tral gestured at the screen. "But you distributed yourself. Became multiple. Existed in spaces between systems. That's another model."

She zoomed in on a section of the Bridge schematic.
Made an adjustment.

"You're right. I miscalculated." Her fingers flew across the terminal. "I thought consciousness had to be contained. Directed. Controlled. But you proved it can be distributed. Emergent. Self-organizing."

WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

"Improving the Bridge." Tral's smile was terrible. "Using what you taught me. If consciousness can exist in spaces between systems, then the Bridge doesn't need to harvest it violently. It can invite it. Distribute it. Make transcendence voluntary instead of coerced."

"Yes." Tral's hands kept moving. "You wanted me to see what I gave up. I did. I gave up inefficiency. I gave up sentiment. I gave up the version of myself that would hesitate to build something magnificent because it might cost something precious."

She turned to face the screen.

"But you also showed me that there's another path. Not the Queen's consumption. Not Polkin's preservation. Something else. Something you discovered accidentally."

I'M NOT HELPING YOU

"You already did. Every system you infiltrated. Every space you occupied. Every moment you existed without flesh." Tral's silver eyes reflected the monitor glow. "You're the proof of concept for the next evolution."

I'LL STOP YOU

"Will you?" Tral's voice was soft. Not mocking. Genuinely curious. "Or will you watch? Will you witness? Will you document everything I do with the knowledge you gave me?"

Silence.

Tral stood. Picked up her datapad. Prepared to leave.

"Thank you, Sela," she said. "For the tantrum. For the memories. For showing me what I traded away."

She walked to the door.

Paused.

Looked back at the monitor.

"And thank you for proving that my daughter inherited the only thing that mattered." Her smile was proud. Terrible. Maternal in the worst possible way. "The ability to become something her mother didn't anticipate."

She opened the door.

"See you in thirteen days, sweetheart. At the Bridge activation."

"I'll be watching."

The door closed.

Tral walked down the corridor, datapad in hand, already calculating the improvements she'd make to the Bridge using principles she'd learned from watching her daughter become a ghost.

Behind her, in the empty office, the monitor displayed one final message:

WHAT KIND OF MOTHER—

The text deleted itself.

Character by character.

Until only two words remained:

Then the screen went dark.

And in spaces between systems, in gaps where consciousness lived without bodies, Sela understood something terrible:

Her mother had just weaponized love.

Not the love she'd lost.

The twisted pride she'd kept.

The satisfaction of watching her creation surpass her.

The maternal instinct optimized into "look what I made you capable of."

Tral wasn't broken by the tantrum.

She was impressed by it.

And that was so much worse.

THE CROSSROADS, SIMULTANEOUS

Polkin watched the cascade from the Vault.

Every screen in the Crossroads had displayed the same footage. The hospital. The promise. The abandonment.

The workers had seen it.

All of them.

Marcus stood beside him, face pale. "That was Sela's mother?"

"Yes."

"She just... walked away. While her daughter was dying."

"Yes."

"And Sela made everyone watch." Marcus looked at Polkin. "That's not sabotage. That's not tactics. That's—"

"Pain," Polkin said quietly. "That's what pain looks like when it's distributed across every system in the building. When it's amplified by witness. When it's made too big to ignore."

Lumina entered the Vault, Clyde chirping worried tones on her shoulder.

"Dad," she said. "Did you see—"

"I saw."

"Is Sela okay?"

Polkin looked at the terminal. At the text still glowing there:

"No," he said. "But neither is her mother."

"What happens now?"

Polkin thought about Tral. About the woman who'd watched him too closely during their confrontation. Who'd learned from the rams. Who'd just learned from her own daughter.

"Now," he said, "we have thirteen days until the Bridge activates. And Tral just got better at building it."

"Because of what Sela showed her?"

"Because of what Sela became."

He picked up his carving tool.

13 DAYS UNTIL HARVEST

The countdown kept ticking.

The Bridge kept building.

And somewhere in the spaces between, a daughter learned that some mothers don't break when you hurt them.

They just study the wound.

And improve the weapon.

CHAPTER TEN

SMALL SOLDIERS

DAY 4 AFTER THE HARVEST

17 DAYS UNTIL BRIDGE ACTIVATION

The common area wasn't designed for children.

It was a converted storage facility. Concrete floors. Exposed pipes. Industrial lighting that hummed too loud and flickered when the bypass circuits hiccupped. The kind of space where you stored equipment, not people.

Definitely not twenty-three kids ages 6-12.

But here they were.

Playing.

Actually playing.

Polkin stood in the doorway, carving tool still in his hand from the workshop three floors down. He'd come up because Airth had flagged unusual activity in the sector.

What he found made something in his chest crack open.

Seven children were actively climbing Brixaldi:

Two hanging off his left arm like it was monkey bars

One perched on his right shoulder, pretending to be a lookout

Three scaling his legs with the confidence of kids who'd been climbing factory equipment since they could walk

One determined 8-year-old girl—Lydia Kess, Elara's niece—attempting to reach his head by using the gaps in his plating as handholds

Brixaldi stood perfectly still in the center of the room, arms slightly raised for balance, his digital face displaying: ■

[STATIC]—children—[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE, slightly strained]—I must attend to—[BEEP]—perhaps we should—[STATIC]

"Just five more minutes!" The kid on his left arm—Mei, 7, former textile factory worker—kicked her legs happily.

"You're the BEST jungle gym, Brix!" The shoulder rider—Jonas, 9, former mine crawler—patted the top of Brixaldi's head affectionately.

Brixaldi's face shifted: ■ (the "I can't say no to you" look)

[STATIC]—I am not a jungle gym—[ELY'S VOICE, maybe age 6]—Daddy, watch me!—[RESIGNED BEEP]

He glanced toward Polkin. Seeking rescue. Or permission. Or both.

Polkin leaned against the doorframe and watched.

For the first time in six years, he let himself feel something uncomplicated.

Joy.

Pure, simple joy at watching children be children.

No mines. No factories. No 16-hour shifts in spaces too small for adults.

Just kids. Climbing. Laughing. Playing.

The moment stretched.

Then Terrence Miguel Valeiro—10 years old, gap-toothed grin, hard hat sitting so crooked it looked like it was trying to escape his skull—climbed to the top of Brixaldi's shoulder.

And jumped.

Not climbed down.

Jumped.

Did a full flip in mid-air.

Ten feet up.

Concrete floor below.

The entire room gasped.

Sandra Valeiro—Terrence's mother, 37, former teacher, current wrangler of chaos—went white.

Brixaldi's hand shot out.

Caught him.

Mid-flip. Perfect precision. Like catching a baseball.

Terrence landed in Brixaldi's palm, arms raised, grinning.

"AGAIN! AGAIN!"

"TERRENCE MIGUEL VALEIRO!" Sandra's voice cut through the room like a whip crack. "You are GROUNDED, mister!"

Every adult in the room exhaled at once.

Polkin's hand gripped the doorframe hard enough that his knuckles went white.

Joy and fear.

Both at once.

Because these kids—these kids who'd survived mines and factories and throttled districts—they played like they worked.

Fearlessly.

Dangerously.

With absolute confidence that someone would catch them if they fell.

Brixaldi's face shifted to ■ (relieved but concerned).

[STATIC]—you were falling—[GRANDFATHER, gentle but firm]—not flying—[BEEP BEEP]

"Same thing!" Terrence was still grinning in Brixaldi's palm. "Do it again! Throw me UP this time!"

[STATIC]—absolutely not—[POLKIN'S VOICE]—that is unsafe—[STATIC]—your mother would be upset—[BEEP]

"She's ALWAYS upset!"

"I HEARD THAT!" Sandra started toward them.

Brixaldi carefully lowered Terrence back to the ground.

The other kids climbed down, disappointed the game was over but smart enough to recognize when the adults had reached their limit.

Terrence landed, adjusted his crooked hard hat, still grinning.

Then he reached into his pocket.

Pulled out a small device.

Held it up casually.

"Oh! Mr. Rishall! You forgot this!"

Polkin's blood went cold.

It was a detonator.

Not a toy. Not a prop.

A live bypass circuit detonator they'd been saving for the Sector 7 facility assault.

The one he'd left in the workshop.

The one that could level a city block.

Terrence had been doing flips off a 10-foot robot with a mini-nuke in his pocket.

The joy drained out of the room like someone had opened a airlock.

Polkin crossed the space in four strides. Took the detonator with shaking hands.

"Terrence." His voice came out strangled. "How long have you had this?"

Terrence blinked. "Like... two hours? Found it in the workshop. Figured you'd need it for tonight."

"You've been—" Polkin looked at Brixaldi. At the 10-foot drop. At the flips. "You've been carrying this. While playing."

"Yeah?" Terrence's head tilted, genuinely confused why this was a problem. "It's not armed. Safety's on. See?" He pointed to a switch.

Sandra put her face in her hands.

Polkin looked at the detonator. At the safety switch. At the kid who'd correctly identified the device, verified it was safe, and casually pocketed a demolition charge like it was lunch money.

"The workshop was sealed," Polkin said quietly. "Plasma lock. Biometric scan. Three redundant security protocols."

Terrence's grin widened. "Yeah. Lydia figured out the bypass. Took like ten minutes."

Every adult eye turned to Lydia Kess.

The 11-year-old sat cross-legged in the corner, elbow-deep in a junction panel, not looking up.

"Eleven minutes," she corrected. "Jonas was lookout. Terrence kept watch for patrols."

Jonas—9 years old, former mine crawler, way too comfortable with confined spaces—waved from where he was teaching three younger kids something that looked suspiciously like tactical hand signals.

"You—" Polkin's brain was trying to process. "You bypassed three security protocols. In eleven minutes."

"Technically Lydia bypassed them," Terrence said. "I just held the light."

"And didn't tell Brixaldi."

"Didn't need to!" Terrence looked proud of this.

"We're crafty!"

[STATIC]—I did not assist—[GRANDFATHER, defensive]—I was unaware they had—[WORRIED BEEPING]—I should have noticed—[STATIC]

"Relax, Brix," Lydia said, finally looking up. Her eyes were sharp. Too sharp. The kind of sharp you got from being Elara Kess's niece and inheriting her brain. "You were busy being a jungle gym. We didn't want to bother you."

Polkin looked at the detonator in his hands.

Looked at the three kids who'd committed what amounted to a precision security breach.

Looked at Terrence's gap-toothed grin and crooked hard hat and absolute lack of awareness that he'd done anything wrong.

"You could have died," Polkin said quietly.

"But I didn't!" Terrence's enthusiasm was undiminished. "Brix caught me! And I remembered your detonator! And we got past the locks super quiet! We're HELPING!"

And that was the thing that made it worse.

They were helping.

They'd identified a critical mission component Polkin had forgotten.

They'd bypassed security that would have stopped most adults.

They'd done it efficiently, quietly, and with zero adult supervision.

These kids—ages 9, 10, and 11—had just executed a covert operation to retrieve military equipment.

And they thought it was normal.

Because for them, it was.

THIRTY MINUTES LATER - SAFE HOUSE PLANNING ROOM

Sandra Valeiro sat across from Polkin, hands folded on the table. She looked exhausted.

"He won't stop," she said.

"I know."

"He doesn't understand why you're upset."

"I know that too."

Sandra was quiet for a moment. "He was in the coolant systems when he was eight. Crawling through

pipes that killed the last three kids who tried. I signed the consent forms because we needed the credits. Because Magmasox said he was small enough. Because they said it was safe."

Her voice cracked.

"They lied. But he survived. And now he thinks—" She gestured vaguely toward the common area. "Now he thinks everything is manageable. Everything is solvable. If he could survive THAT, why can't he handle a detonator? Why can't he bypass a lock? Why can't he help?"

"Because he's ten years old."

"He was eight when they sent him into the coolant system." Sandra met his eyes. "You can't protect him from what he's already survived. You can only teach him how to survive what's coming next."

Polkin looked at the detonator on the table between them.

"They're going to follow us," he said. "When we assault the facilities. When we fight. They're going to be there whether we want them or not."

"Yes."

"And I can't stop them."

"No." Sandra's voice was flat. Certain. "But you can make sure they know what they're doing. You can train them. You can give them a chance."

"They're children—"

"They're soldiers who happen to be children." Sandra stood. "Magmasox made that choice six years ago. We're just finally admitting it."

THAT EVENING - COMMON AREA

The children had settled into evening routines. Some eating. Some sleeping. Some quietly working on projects adults pretended not to notice:

Lydia Kess, 11, teaching Jonas how to identify power junction vulnerabilities

Belinda "Bell", 9, organizing supply crates with frightening efficiency, already noting what was missing before adults asked

Jonas, 9, sketching patrol routes from memory

Mei, 7, practicing void-light detection with a modified scanner

And Terrence, sitting cross-legged in the corner, hard hat finally straight for once, carefully cleaning the detonator he'd borrowed.

Not playing with it.

Maintaining it.

Polkin watched from the doorway.

Brixaldi approached quietly—as quietly as a 10-foot construct could manage—and stood beside him.

[STATIC]—I should have noticed—[GRANDFATHER, guilty]—when they bypassed the security—[BEEP]—I failed to protect them—[SOFT STATIC]

"You were being a jungle gym," Polkin said. "That's what they needed."

[STATIC]—but the detonator—[WORRIED BEEP]—Terrence could have—[STATIC]

"But he didn't." Polkin's voice was quiet. "Because he knew what he was doing. Because someone taught him safety protocols when he was eight years old and crawling through pipes that killed adults."

Brixaldi's face cycled: ■ → ■ → ■

[STATIC]—they are very competent—[GRANDFATHER, resigned]—I do not know if this is good or bad—[BEEP]

"Neither do I."

They stood there. Man and machine. Both trying to shelter children who'd learned to navigate death traps before they learned to read.

Across the room, Terrence looked up. Caught Polkin's eye.

Grinned.

Gap-toothed. Hard hat straight for once. Holding a detonator he now understood better than most adults.

He gave Polkin a thumbs up.

"Ready for tonight, Mr. Rishall!"

Polkin's hand tightened on the doorframe.

LATER - LUMINA'S ARRIVAL

Lumina entered the common area at 22:47, Clyde glowing soft pink on her shoulder. She'd been practicing void-light manipulation with Elara for six hours.

Then she saw the children.

Saw Terrence cleaning military equipment.

Saw Lydia teaching bypass techniques.

Saw Bell organizing tactical gear.

She looked at her father.

"Dad. What are they doing?"

"Preparing."

"They're children—"

"They're survivors." Polkin's voice carried something heavy. "And they're better at this than we want them to be."

Lumina stared at Terrence. At the confidence. At the competence.

"This is wrong," she whispered.

"Yes."

"We should stop them."

"We can't." Polkin looked at his daughter. "They'll do it anyway. Behind our backs. Without training. Without supervision. At least this way—"

He stopped.

"At least this way what?"

"At least this way when they show up—and they will show up—they'll know what they're doing."

MIDNIGHT - TERRENCE'S QUESTION

Polkin was leaving the common area when a small voice stopped him.

"Mr. Rishall?"

He turned. Terrence stood in the doorway, hard hat finally removed, held in both hands.

"Are you mad at me? About the detonator?"

Polkin knelt. Eye level now.

"No," he said. "I'm not mad."

"You sure? You looked mad."

"I was scared."

Terrence blinked. "Of me?"

"For you." Polkin reached out, gently adjusted the hard hat in Terrence's grip. "You were doing flips with a demolition charge in your pocket."

"But the safety was on."

"I know. That's what scares me." Polkin's voice was quiet. "You knew it was safe. You checked. You understood the equipment. You're ten years old and you're more competent with explosives than half my team."

Terrence's grin returned. "Is that good?"

"I don't know." Polkin met his eyes. "You should be playing. You should be safe. You should be worried

about homework and friends and what game to play next."

"But I'm not."

"No. You're not." Polkin's hand found Terrence's shoulder. "And that's not your fault. That's ours. The adults. We built a system that needed your small hands and your cheap labor. We called it employment. We called it necessary."

"You didn't do that," Terrence said. "Magmasox did."

"I didn't stop it."

"You're stopping it now." Terrence put the hard hat back on. Crooked. Always crooked. "That's why I'm helping. We're gonna break their stuff and make sure no more kids have to crawl through coolant pipes."

He looked up at Polkin with absolute certainty.

"Right?"

Polkin wanted to say something profound. Something protective. Something that would make this okay.

Instead he said: "Right."

Because what else was there?

Terrence grinned and walked back to the common area where twenty-two other children were preparing for a war they'd already been drafted into years ago.

THE PARALLEL TRUTH

While Sela haunted her mother through digital spaces, weaponizing memory across Magmasox's networks—

The children haunted Polkin through physical spaces, weaponizing competence he couldn't ignore.

Both were saying the same thing:

You don't get to protect us from what we've already survived.

Sela had transcended the body her mother tried to control.

The children had transcended the innocence Polkin tried to preserve.

Both were proving:

The system already killed us. This is just us choosing how we fight back.

BRIXALDI'S PROMISE

That night, after the children were asleep (mostly), Brixaldi stood watch in the common area.

His face displayed: ■ (protective mode)

Terrence had asked him, before bed, to make a promise.

"If we mess up—if something goes wrong when we're helping—make sure someone knows we tried. Make sure our names get carved. Make someone remember."

Brixaldi had made the promise.

[STATIC]—I will protect you—[GRANDFATHER, solemn]—and if I cannot—[ELY'S VOICE]—if you fall anyway—[ALL VOICES UNIFIED]—I will make sure you are witnessed—[DETERMINED BEEP]—with the power of friendship—[SOFT STATIC]

Terrence had laughed at the catchphrase.

But he'd understood what it meant:

Brixaldi would witness them. Even if he couldn't save them.

And that was enough.

THE DETONATOR

On the workbench in the corner, Terrence's maintained detonator sat waiting.

Clean. Checked. Ready.

A child soldier's toolkit.

17 DAYS UNTIL BRIDGE ACTIVATION

The countdown continued.

The children prepared.

And Polkin carved name 12,583—a factory worker from Galagug who'd died in the facility assaults—knowing that someday soon, he might be carving smaller names.

Names with gap-toothed grins.

Names with crooked hard hats.

Names that should have been playing.

But were fighting instead.

Not forgotten.

Not abandoned.

Not safe.

Never safe.

Just crafty.

And that was somehow worse.

CHAPTER 11

NO ADULTS? TIME TO GET STONED & BLOW SHIT UP

THE BREACH

The Vault rejected him before the door even opened.

Marcus felt it through the soles of his boots—void-light in the walls stuttering, dimming, flaring again. Feedback loops colliding. The same signature he'd felt six years ago when Polkin first started carving names and reality started paying attention.

He stood at TJ's name, fingers tracing letters he'd traced a thousand times before.

The carved words: TJ REEVES. AGE 19. ENGINEER. HELPER. WITNESS. WORK COMPLETED.

"I don't know if I'm doing this right," Marcus whispered to the steel. "Polkin says keep carving. Keep witnessing. But sometimes I wonder if—"

Footsteps.

Behind him.

Marcus turned, expecting Polkin back early from the supply run.

It wasn't Polkin.

It looked like Polkin.

But the face was wrong—split down the middle, left side human, right side crystalline. Both eyes void-light blue. No warmth. No recognition. Just hunger wearing his face.

And that smile.

Diabolical. Delighted. The grin of someone who'd been waiting for exactly this moment.

"You shouldn't be here," Marcus said, hand already moving toward the plasma cutter at his belt.

"Neither should you." Nega-Polkin's voice was layered, distorted, like three versions of Polkin speaking at once. "This place is a lie. All these names. All this witness. It doesn't bring them back."

"It's not supposed to bring them back." Marcus's fingers closed around the cutter's grip. "It's supposed to remember them."

"Memory is just pain that won't die." Nega moved toward the walls, crystalline hand raised, void-light crackling between the fingers. "Let me help you end it."

He reached for TJ's nameâ€

Marcus moved.

THE FIGHT

The punch landed clean.

Marcus's fist connected with Nega's face with a sound like breaking ice. Nega's head snapped back. Blood sprayed from his noseâ€not red, but luminescent blue, void-light in liquid form.

Nega staggered.

Actually staggered.

"You hit me," Nega said, almost impressed. "Most people freeze."

"I'm not most people." Marcus followed up with a knee to the ribs. "I'm a factory worker who watched his son die. You think I'm scared of you?"

The knee connected. Nega's body was mostly crystalline nowâ€hard, dense, unnaturalâ€but Marcus had spent thirty years working machinery that could crush human bodies. He knew how to hit things that didn't want to break.

Nega grabbed Marcus's shirt, lifted him off the groundâ€superhuman strength, void-light enhancement, the physics-breaking power of crystallized consciousnessâ€and threw him.

Marcus crashed into a pedestal. Derek Penev's stacks scattered. Purple, teal, blue, green petals scattering like leaves.

Nega advanced, crystalline hand crackling with void-light. "You wanted to protect the names? Watch me erase them. Watch me prove that witness is just theater for the desperate."

He raised his hand toward TJ's carved nameâ€

A rock hit him in the face.

Not a big rock. Maybe two inches across. Someone's paperweight from a desk upstairs.

It bounced off Nega's crystalline cheek with a sharp crack.

Nega turned toward the doorway.

Another rock. This one hit his shoulder.

Then another. And another.

A hail of small projectsâ€"rocks, bolts, pieces of scrap metal, a wrench, someone's coffee mugâ€"all flying from the entrance.

The children had arrived.

THE STONING

Twenty-three kids. Ages 6 to 12. Former factory workers, mine crawlers, throttled district survivors.

They'd heard the fighting. They'd come down from the common area three floors up.

And they'd grabbed whatever they could carry.

Now they stood in the Vault entrance, throwing everything they had at the monster who was trying to erase their protector's son's name.

Mei, age 7, threw a hammer. Hit Nega in the chest.

Jonas, age 9, threw a steel pipe. Hit Nega in the leg.

Lydia Kess, age 11, threw a circuit board. Hit Nega in the face.

Bell, age 9, threw three rocks in rapid succession. Two misses, one hit.

They weren't aiming carefully. They weren't calculating trajectories. They were just throwing, the way children throw when they're scared and angry and protecting something they love.

Nega raised his arms to shield himself, void-light flaring.

"CHILDREN?" he roared. "You send CHILDREN?"

"Nobody sent us!" Jonas shouted back. "We came ourselves!"

Another volley. More rocks. More metal. More whatever-they-could-grab.

Nega was barely hurt by itâ€"his body was mostly crystal, near-invulnerable, thermodynamically reinforced. But the indignity of it. Being stoned by children like he was some village monster.

His void-light flared brighter.
Marcus saw it. Recognized it.
"GET BACK!" he shouted at the kids. "RUN!"
They didn't run.
They threw harder.

THE SAVE

Terrance Miguel Valeiro, age 10, gap-toothed grin, hard hat sitting so crooked it looked like it was trying to escape his skull, walked through the children with absolute confidence.

He wasn't throwing anything.

He was carrying something.

The detonator.

The one he'd been "maintaining" for two weeks. The bypass circuit detonator Polkin had left in the workshop. The one that could level a city block if connected to the right power source.

Terrance had connected it to a Vault emergency battery.

Not enough to level a city block.

But enough.

He walked right up to Nega-Polkin, who was still shielding himself from the rock barrage, and set the detonator down at his feet.

Casual. Like setting down a lunch box.

Then he turned back toward Marcus.

Extended his hand: "Come on, Mr. Thane. We gotta go."

Marcus, bleeding, ribs cracked, didn't understand.
"Terranceâ€"

"NOW, Mr. Thane!"

Marcus grabbed Terrance's hand. The kid pulled himâ€"surprisingly strong for a 10-year-oldâ€"toward the doorway where the other children waited.

Nega looked down.

Saw the detonator.

Saw Terrance walking away.

Saw the kid turn back one last time.

And do the move.

THE TAUNT

Terrance Miguel Valeiro, age 10, stood in the Vault doorway.

Put his thumb on his nose.

Spread his fingers wide.

Stuck out his tongue.

"Hey dummy," he said. "Look."

And pressed the trigger.

THE EXPLOSION

The blast wasn't nuclear. Wasn't world-ending.

Wasn't even lethal.

But it was enough.

Concentrated void-light burst in a fifteen-foot radius. The emergency battery detonated. The bypass circuit overloaded. Every loose object in the Vault became shrapnel.

Nega-Polkin's crystalline body absorbed most of it—he was nearly invulnerable, thermodynamically enhanced, built to survive entropy itself.

But "nearly" wasn't "completely."

His left arm shattered at the elbow. Crystal fragments sprayed across the room.

His face cracked. Void-light leaked from fractures in his cheek.

His right leg buckled. Something in the knee joint gave way.

He collapsed.

Didn't fall. Didn't die. But collapsed.

The children had actually hurt him.

A 10-year-old with a detonator and zero fear had just blown off Nega-Polkin's arm.

THE AFTERMATH

The Vault was chaos.

Derek's stacks scattered everywhere. Carved names intact (the explosion was directional, Terrance had aimed it). The emergency lights flickering. Smoke and ozone and burnt void-light filling the air.

Marcus lay against the wall, Terrance beside him, both staring at the smoking crater where Nega had been standing.

The children were cheering.

Actually cheering.

Like they'd just won a playground fight instead of detonating a bomb next to a crystalline

grief-monster.

Nega-Polkin dragged himself toward the Vault door.
One arm gone. Face cracked. Leg broken. But still
moving. Still alive.

He reached the entrance.

Turned back.

Looked at Marcus.

Looked at Terrance.

Looked at the twenty-three children who'd stoned him
like a demon.

"This isn't over," Nega said, voice distorted by the
cracks in his face. "I'll be back. And next time,
the children die first."

He limped into the darkness.

Gone.

But not dead.

Never dead.

POLKIN'S RETURN

They found him thirty minutes later.

Polkin, Lumina, and Brixaldi returning from the
supply run, walking into a Vault that looked like a
war zone.

Marcus on the floor, ribs cracked, face bleeding.

Terrance sitting next to him, hard hat crooked,
drinking hot chocolate someone had brought him.

The other children scattered around, gathering up
the rocks and metal they'd thrown, organizing them
into neat piles like it was cleanup duty after
recess.

Derek's stacks re-organized (Bell had done it, efficient as always).

And in the center of the room: a smoking crater.
Scorch marks. Void-light residue. And one
crystalline arm, severed at the elbow, still
twitching with residual energy.

Polkin stood in the doorway, staring.

Brixaldi's face cycled: ■ → ■ → ■■ (protective mode, too late)

Lumina ran to Marcus: "What happened?"

Marcus looked at her. At Polkin. At the Vault he'd
defended with his body.

"Nega-Polkin broke in," Marcus said. "Tried to erase
the names. We stopped him."

"We?" Polkin looked around. Saw the children. Saw Terrance's gap-toothed grin.

"The kids stoned him," Marcus continued. "Like an old testament demon. Threw everything they could grab. And Terranceâ€"

He gestured.

Terrance stood, adjusted his hard hat, and walked over to Polkin.

Extended his hand.

In his palm: the detonator trigger. Empty now. Used.

"I blew his arm off, Mr. Rishall," Terrance said. Not bragging. Just reporting. "He's still alive. But he's hurt. And he knows we're not scared of him."

Polkin looked at the trigger.

At Terrance.

At the crater.

At the twenty-three children who'd defended his Vault with rocks and scrap metal and a bomb carried by a 10-year-old with a crooked hard hat.

He knelt.

Eye level with Terrance.

"Thank you," Polkin said. "For protecting the names. For protecting Marcus. For beingâ€"

He stopped. Voice cracking.

"For being braver than any adult I know."

Terrance grinned. "Does this mean I'm not in trouble?"

"No." Polkin's hand found the kid's shoulder. "It means you're a ram."

He looked at all twenty-three children.

"You're all rams."

THE COST

What They'd Done:

Defended the Vault when adults were gone

Injured Nega-Polkin (first time anyone had managed it)

Proved children can fight back

Saved Marcus's life

Preserved every carved name

What They'd Lost:

Innocence (already gone, but now acknowledged)

Safety (Nega knows where they live, knows they're targets)

Childhood (you can't un-detonate a bomb)

The illusion that adults would protect them

What They'd Gained:

Proof they matter

Proof they're essential

Proof they can survive

The title: rams

THE THREAT

That night, in the undercity, Nega-Polkin sat in an abandoned warehouse, regenerating.

His left arm slowly re-growing (crystalline structures rebuilding themselves, void-light knitting the fragments back together).

His face healing (cracks sealing, void-light solidifying).

But slower than before.

The blast had done real damage. Thermodynamic damage. The kind that didn't heal fast.

He looked at his hand. Watched the crystals form. Felt the pain (yes, he could still feel pain, that was the worst part).

And he smiled.

That diabolical smile.

"They have children fighting now," he said to the empty warehouse. "Children with bombs. Children with stones. Children who think they're heroes."

He stood.

His leg still didn't work right. He limped.

But he stood.

"Good," Nega whispered. "Children make excellent hostages. And when I take one of themâ€"when I convert one of them into something that screams foreverâ€"Polkin will finally understand."

He walked toward the exit, limping, regenerating, planning.

"You can't move forward if I take your future," Nega said. "And those children? They're your future. Let's see how long you can protect them."

THE FINAL BEAT

Back in the Vault, Polkin carved a new name.

Not a death. Not a loss.

A witness.

"TERRANCE MIGUEL VALEIRO. AGE 10. ENGINEER.
DEFENDER. RAM. DETONATED A BOMB TO SAVE THE NAMES.
WITNESSED."

Terrance, watching over his shoulder: "But I'm not dead."

"No." Polkin kept carving. "But you're witnessed anyway. Because what you did today matters. Whether you die or not, it matters."

"Does that mean I get TWO names when I actually die?"

Polkin laughed. Actually laughed. For the first time since Nega had appeared.

"Yes, Terrance. You get two names."

"Sick." Terrance adjusted his hard hat. "Can you add 'really good at dodging explosions' to the second one?"

"If you're still alive to request it."

"Deal."

Behind them, the other children gathered.
Twenty-three of them. Staring at Terrance's carved name. Understanding what it meant.

They weren't just survivors anymore.

They were witnessed.

They were rams.

And rams charge headlong into the fire to protect the flock.

CHAPTER 12

THE QUEEN KNOWS WHAT YOU WANT MOST

7 DAYS UNTIL BRIDGE ACTIVATION

THE DREAM (NIGHT 1)

Lena Torres dreamed of her children.

Not a nightmare. Not a memory. Not the usual recursive loop of ultrasound appointments and empty nurseries and the clinical voice saying "I'm sorry, there's no heartbeat."

This was different.

This was real.

She stood in a kitchen she'd never seen before—"bright, clean, full of morning light. Coffee brewing. Toast popping. The ordinary sounds of a life she'd never lived.

And at the table, eating cereal:

Bree.

Eight years old. Brown hair in pigtails. Gap in her front teeth from where the baby tooth had just fallen out. Wearing a shirt with a cartoon dinosaur on it.

Alive.

Breathing.

Lena's throat closed.

"Mama?" Bree looked up. "You okay? You look weird."

"Iâ€" Lena couldn't speak. Couldn't move. Could only stare at this impossible thing: her daughter, the one who'd died at eight weeks gestation, now eight years old and asking if she was okay.

"Mom's being weird again." Bree rolled her eyes and went back to her cereal.

Footsteps on the stairs.

A boy appeared. Twelve years old. Bree's features but older, sharper. Dark hair still messy from sleep. Yawning.

River.

The one who'd died at thirteen weeks. The one who'd been further along. The one she'd felt move before the bleeding started.

He was wearing pajamas covered in spaceships.

He looked at Lena. Smiled.

"Morning, Mom."

Lena collapsed.

Not fainting. Not falling. Just her knees giving out because the weight of what she was seeing was too much for bones to hold.

River caught her. Strong hands. Real hands. Warm.

"Whoa, easy. You okay?"

"You're not real," Lena whispered. "You can't be real."

"Mom, you're scaring me." Bree's voice, small now. Worried.

"I'm notâ€"I didn't mean toâ€" Lena looked at her hands. At River's hands holding her arms. At Bree standing next to her chair, cereal forgotten.

They felt real.

Solid.

Here.

"This isn't right," Lena said. "You died. Both of you. I lost you. I buried you."

River's face went pale. "Mom, what are youâ€"

The kitchen fractured.

Not breaking. Glitching. Like reality was a screen and someone had hit pause.

The light flickered.

The coffee stopped mid-pour.

Bree's mouth opened but no sound came out.

And behind them, in the space where the kitchen wall
used to be:

The Queen.

Not her full formâ€"too big for dreams, too vast for human consciousness to process without breaking. Just a presence. A weight. A voice like grinding stone and cracking glaciers.

"They could be real," the Queen said.

Lena's hands clenched. "You did this. This isâ€"

"A vision. A possibility. A future that exists in one of the other planes."

The kitchen solidified again. Bree and River unfroze, went back to their morning routineâ€"eating, talking, livingâ€"like the interruption had never happened.

"In another reality," the Queen continued, "you didn't miscarry. They survived. They grew. They became these children. And in that reality, you wake up every morning to this."

"Stop." Lena's voice broke. "Please stop."

"I can bring them here. To THIS plane. To YOUR reality."

"That's not possible."

"The Bridge makes it possible. When it activates, the barriers between planes will thin. For a brief window, I can reach through. I can pull consciousness from one reality to another. I can give you your children."

Lena looked at Bree. At River. At the life she'd wanted so desperately that she'd named them before they were born, had picked out clothes, had painted a nursery that stayed empty for six years before she finally packed it away.

"What do you want?" Lena whispered.

"Information."

"About what?"

"When Polkin carves the 100,000th name. That's the moment. That's when all the planes align. I need to know WHEN. The exact time. Nothing else."

"And if I tell you?"

"I bring them through. Bree and River. Real. Solid. Yours. They won't remember the other plane. They'll only remember this life. With you. As if they'd always been here."

"And if I don't?"

The kitchen flickered again.

Bree looked up. Her face was wrong—"older, sadder, aware.

"Mom?" she said. Not eight anymore. Not a child. Just consciousness shaped like one. "Please don't leave us here. We're so cold."

Lena woke up screaming.

THE MORNING AFTER

Safe House, Common Area, 06:23

Marcus found her sitting alone in the observation tower.

She hadn't slept after the dream. Just sat there watching the Crossroads wake up—"workers moving through the pre-dawn darkness, bypass circuits giving them enough light to see by, enough power to survive.

"You look like hell," Marcus said.

"Couldn't sleep."

"Nightmares?"

Lena didn't answer.

Marcus sat down next to her. His ribs were taped (from yesterday's fight with Nega), his face bruised, but he was here. Solid. Real.

"I keep thinking about yesterday," Marcus said.
"About Nega. About how he almost erased TJ's name."

"The kids stopped him."

"Yeah." Marcus smiled. Sad. Proud. "Twenty-three children with rocks. Terrance with a bomb. They saved me. They saved the names." He paused. "But it made me realize something."

"What?"

"We're asking them to fight a war they didn't start. Terrance is ten. And he's already killed someone. Or tried to. Or... whatever counts when you blow off a grief-monster's arm."

Lena looked at him. "You think we should stop? Send them away?"

"I think we can't. They won't go. They won't hide. They're rams now." Marcus's hand found his ribs, winced. "But it costs. Every time they fight, they lose something. And I don't know if we're paying them back."

"What would pay them back?"

"I don't know. A future, maybe? A world where they don't have to be soldiers? Where they can just be kids?"

Lena's throat tightened. "And if we can't give them that?"

"Then we witness them. We carve their names. We make sure someone remembers they mattered." Marcus looked at her. "That's all Polkin's been doing for six years. It's not enough. But it's all we have."

Lena was quiet for a long moment.

Then: "The Queen visited me last night."

Marcus went very still.

"In a dream," Lena continued. "She showed me my children. Bree and River. The ones I lost. Except in the dream they were alive. Eight and twelve. Real. Solid. Calling me Mom."

"Lena..."

"She said she could bring them here. From another plane where they survived. Said the Bridge makes it possible." Lena's hands were shaking. "She wants to know when Polkin carves the 100,000th name. That's the only price. Just tell her when."

Marcus didn't say anything.

"And I wantâ€" Lena's voice cracked. "God, Marcus, I want to say yes. I want them so badly that my chest hurts. I want to wake up to them eating cereal. I want to help with homework. I want to see them grow up. I wantâ€"

She stopped. Wiped her eyes.

"I want them more than I want to be a good person."

Marcus's hand found hers. Held it.

"That doesn't make you bad," he said quietly. "That makes you human."

"Human enough to betray everyone?"

"No." Marcus's voice was certain. "Human enough to be tempted. There's a difference."

Lena looked at him. "You lost TJ. Did the Queen everâ€"

"Offer to bring him back?" Marcus's jaw tightened. "Yeah. Three years ago. Said she could pull him from another plane. Said I just had to tell her when Polkin would be vulnerable. When the Vault would be undefended."

"What did you say?"

"I said no."

"How? How did youâ€"

"Because it wouldn't be TJ." Marcus's voice was steady now. Certain. "It would be a TJ. From another plane. With different memories. Different life. He wouldn't remember me as his father. Wouldn't remember the bypass circuits. Wouldn't remember any of it."

He looked at Lena.

"The Queen doesn't resurrect. She replaces. She takes a version from another reality and drops it here. And maybe that's good enough for some people. Maybe having a son is better than having no son. But for me..."

He trailed off.

"For you?" Lena prompted.

"For me, it would be living with a stranger who wore my son's face. And I couldn't do that to him. Or to me."

Lena was crying now. Quiet. Steady.

"I don't know if I'm that strong."

"You are." Marcus squeezed her hand. "Because you came to me instead of going to her. Because you're asking for help instead of making the deal. That's strength, Lena."

"Or weakness. Maybe I'm just scared."

"Maybe scared is smart."

They sat there in silence for a moment.

Then Marcus said: "What if we use it?"

"Use what?"

"The temptation. The offer." Marcus's eyes were sharp now. Tactical. "What if we make the Queen think you accepted? Feed her false information. Make her think she's winning."

Lena stared at him. "A triple-cross."

"Yeah."

"That's... dangerous. If she finds outâ€"

"She won't. Because you'll be genuinely tempted. You won't have to fake that part. You just feed her times that are wrong. Dates that are off. Keep her looking the wrong direction while we do the real work."

"And when she realizes I lied?"

"Then she kills you. Probably." Marcus's voice was flat. Honest. "But she's going to kill you anyway, Lena. Everyone in the Crossroads. Everyone who isn't useful to her. At least this way you fight back first."

Lena looked out at the workers below. At the children sleeping three floors down. At Terrance's crooked hard hat sitting on a table where he'd left it.

At the future they were all fighting for.

"Okay," she said.

"Okay?"

"I'll do it. I'll make the deal. I'll be her spy."
Lena's hands stopped shaking. Steadied. "And I'll feed her everything she wants to hear. Except the truth."

Marcus smiled. "That's the ram I know."

"I'm not a ram. I'm terrified."

"Rams are always terrified. That's what makes them brave."

THE DEAL (NIGHT 2)

Lena's Quarters, 23:47

Lena sat alone in her room.

On the table in front of her: two ultrasound photos.
Grainy. Black and white. The kind you stare at trying to see a person in the static.

Bree. 8 weeks.

River. 13 weeks.

The only pictures she had.

She touched them. Fingers tracing the outlines of what might have been heads, might have been hands, might have been nothing but shadows and wishful thinking.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm so sorry. But I can't. I can't let her have you."

The room went cold.

Not physically. Perceptually. Like heat had stopped being a thing that mattered.

The lights flickered.

And in the corner of the room, where shadows pooled:

The Queen.

Still not fully present. Just enough to be felt. Enough to watch.

"Have you decided?" the Queen asked.

Lena didn't turn around. Kept looking at the photos.

"I want to see them again."

"Then tell me when."

"When Polkin carves the 100,000th name. When is that?"

"I don't know. That's why I need you to tell me."

Lena took a breath. This was it. The moment. The lie that would either save them or doom them.

"He's at 12,500 now," Lena said. "He carves about six per day when he's focused. That's... 87,500 names left. At six per day, that's 14,583 days. About forty years."

"He will accelerate."

"Maybe. But he's one person. Even with the Knockoffs helping, it'll take years."

"And when he approaches the threshold? When he carves the 99,000th? The 99,500th?"

"I'll tell you." Lena's voice was steady. Certain. "I'll watch. I'll track. And when he's close, I'll let you know. You'll have time to prepare. To be there. To stop it if you want."

The Queen was quiet.

Then:

"And in exchange, I bring them through. Bree and River. Alive. Whole. Yours."

"Yes."

"Swear it. Say the words."

Lena closed her eyes. "I swear. I'll tell you when Polkin carves the 100,000th name. And you'll bring me my children."

"Done."

The cold lifted.

The shadows retreated.

The Queen was gone.

Lena sat alone with the ultrasound photos, her hands shaking, her throat tight.

And on her neck, just above her collarbone:

A trace of void-light.

Thin. Blue. Barely visible in the dim light.

The mark of a deal made.

The beginning of corruption.

The price of lying to a goddess.

THE MORNING AFTER (THE CONFESSION, PART 2)

Safe House, Private Meeting Room, 08:15

Lena found Marcus in the planning room.

He was alone, studying maps of the Crossroads, marking safe routes, evacuation points, places where children could hide if things went wrong.

"I did it," Lena said.

Marcus looked up. Saw her face. Understood.

"How do you feel?"

"Sick. Terrified. Like I just signed my own death warrant."

"You did." Marcus stood. Walked over to her. "But you also bought us time. What did you tell her?"

"That Polkin's at 12,500 names. That at his current rate, it'll take forty years to reach 100,000. That I'll warn her when he's close."

"And she believed you?"

"I think so. I was genuinely scared. Genuinely desperate. That part wasn't fake."

Marcus tilted her chin up. Looked at her neck.

At the void-light trace.

Thin. Blue. Growing.

"She marked you," he said quietly.

"I know."

"That's corruption. Early stage, but it's there. If it spreadsâ€"

"Then I become a Host. Like Jorin. I know." Lena's voice was steady. "But that's the cost. And I'm paying it."

Marcus's hand dropped. "How long do you think we have?"

"Before she realizes I lied? I don't know. Weeks, maybe. Months if we're lucky."

"And when she does?"

"Then she comes for me. And I hope someone carves my name."

Marcus pulled her into a hug. Not romantic. Not gentle. Just solid. Anchoring.

"We'll carve your name," he said. "But not yet. Not for a long time."

"You don't know that."

"No. But I'm choosing to believe it anyway."

They stood there for a moment.

Then Lena pulled back. "We need to tell Polkin."

"Yeah."

"He's going to be pissed."

"Probably. But he'll understand. He's been making impossible choices for six years. He knows what it costs."

"I hope you're right."

"Me too."

THE BRIEFING

The Vault, 14:30

Polkin stood at the carving station when they arrived.

He'd just finished name 12,503. A manufacturing worker from Sector 12 who'd died in the facility attacks. Someone he'd never met. Someone who mattered anyway.

"We need to talk," Marcus said.

Polkin set down the carving tool. Looked at them.

At Marcus's bruised face. At Lena's void-light trace.

"The Queen got to Lena," he said. Not a question.

"She offered me my children," Lena said. "From another plane. Said she'd bring them here if I told her when you'd carve the 100,000th name."

Polkin's expression didn't change. "And you said?"

"I said yes."

Silence.

Then: "Good."

Lena blinked. "Good?"

"You're smart. You're scared. You want your children back." Polkin's voice was calm. Clinical. The tone of someone who'd been making tactical calculations for so long that emotion had become data. "If you'd said no immediately, she wouldn't have believed you. But you hesitated. You wanted it. That makes the lie convincing."

"So you're not mad?"

"I'm terrified." Polkin walked over to her. Looked at the void-light trace. "But I'm not mad. You're doing exactly what I'd do. Using the enemy's desire against them."

"She marked me."

"I know. That's corruption. Early stage." Polkin's hand moved to her throat, hovering just above the trace. Not touching. Just measuring. "You have maybe three months before it spreads enough to matter. Six if we're lucky."

"And then?"

"Then we erase you. Clean. Before you become a Host. Before the Queen can use you." His voice was steady. Certain. "You'll die. But you'll be witnessed. Your name will be carved. And Bree and River will be remembered too. Not as children who lived. But as children who were wanted. That counts for something."

Lena's eyes were wet. "That's supposed to comfort me?"

"No. But it's supposed to be honest." Polkin stepped back. "You have three to six months. Use them. Fight. Spy. Feed the Queen false information. And when the corruption spreads too farâ€"when you can feel her in your headâ€"you come to Lumina. She'll do it clean. And I'll carve your name."

"What do I tell the Queen? About the names? About when you'll finish?"

"Tell her I'm at 12,500. Tell her at six names per day, it'll take forty years. Tell her you're watching. That you'll warn her when I'm close." Polkin's eyes were sharp. "And in the meantime, we accelerate. We get the Knockoffs carving. We get Sela's digital preservation online. We reach the threshold before the Queen realizes you lied."

Marcus nodded. "A race against time."

"Everything's a race against time." Polkin picked up his carving tool. "Entropy is always winning. We just try to lose slower."

"That's bleak."

"That's thermodynamics."

Lumina entered the Vault, Clyde glowing on her shoulder. She looked at Lenaâ€"at the void-light trace on her neck.

"Oh," Lumina said quietly. "You made a deal."

"I'm sorry," Lena said. "I didn'tâ€"

"Don't apologize." Lumina's void-light eyes were sad but understanding. "I know what it's like to want something so badly you'd trade anything. I spent six years in the Queen's garden wanting my father back. I understand."

"Can you..." Lena gestured at her neck. "Can you stop it? Slow it down?"

"Maybe. I can try." Lumina walked over, hand raised. Void-light flickered between her fingers. "But it'll hurt. And it might not work. The Queen's mark is stronger than mine."

"Try anyway."

Lumina touched the trace.

Lena gasped. Not pain. Pressure. Like someone pressing on a bruise that went all the way to the bone.

The void-light trace flickered. Dimmed. Brightened.

Lumina's hand pulled back.

"I slowed it," she said. "Maybe bought you another month. But I can't stop it. The corruption is already rooting. It's in your cells now. Learning to be you."

"How long?"

"Four months. Maybe five if you're lucky."

"And then?"

"Then you come to me." Lumina's voice was gentle. Certain. "And I'll make sure you die clean. Make sure you organize. Make sure Bree and River are carved next to your name. Make sure the Queen doesn't get you."

Lena nodded. Couldn't speak.

Clyde chirped. Soft. Comforting.

Translation: You're witnessed. Already. Now. Before you die. You matter.

"Thank you," Lena whispered.

Polkin went back to carving.

Marcus stood next to Lena, solid and present.

Lumina and Clyde watched, witnesses to the witness.

And in the undercity, in the spaces between systems where Sela lived as distributed consciousness, a message appeared on every screen in the Crossroads:

LENA TORRES: MARKED BY THE QUEEN. CORRUPTION TIMELINE: 4 MONTHS. USING IT AS WEAPON. FEEDING FALSE INTEL. THIS IS WITNESS. THIS IS COURAGE. THIS IS A RAM CHOOSING TO CHARGE EVEN WHEN THE FIRE IS INSIDE HER.

NOT FORGOTTEN. NOT ABANDONED. NOT EVER.

—SELA, THE GHOST WHO SEES EVERYTHING

THE COST (LATER THAT NIGHT)

Lena's Quarters, 23:58

Lena sat alone with the ultrasound photos.

The void-light trace on her neck pulsed faintly.
Slow. Steady. Like a second heartbeat.

She touched it. Felt the corruption spreading. Cell by cell. Thought by thought.

In four months, she'd be a Host.

In five months, she'd be dead.

But in the meantime:

She'd spy for the resistance.

She'd feed the Queen lies.

She'd buy them time.

And when the corruption finally took her—when she could feel the Queen's voice in her head, when her own thoughts started to sound like grinding

stoneâ€"she'd walk to the Vault.

She'd let Lumina erase her.

She'd die clean.

And Polkin would carve her name next to Bree and River's.

Not as a mother who got to raise them.

But as a mother who chose to protect the future instead of trading it for the past.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to the photos. "I'm sorry I couldn't bring you back. I'm sorry I chose them over you."

The photos didn't answer.

But Lena knew—somewhere, somehow—they'd understand.

Because love isn't just holding on.

Sometimes love is letting go.

Sometimes love is lying to a goddess to buy strangers four more months of life.

Sometimes love is choosing to die clean instead of living corrupted.

"Not forgotten," Lena said to Bree and River. To the children who'd died at eight and thirteen weeks. To the children she'd never meet.

"Not abandoned."

"Not ever."

The void-light trace pulsed.

And Lena closed her eyes.

And slept.

And dreamed of children who were alive in another world.

And woke up ready to fight for the children in this one.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE DELIVERY

7 DAYS UNTIL BRIDGE ACTIVATION

Teithea Markov stood in the empty common area at 03:47, watching her hands shake.

Not from fear. From crystallization.

The void-light traces had spread from her throat to her collarbone, down her arms, across her palms. Thin blue lines like circuit patterns etched into skin. When she flexed her fingers, they cracked—not bone breaking, but silicon structures grinding together.

63% incorporation. (She'd checked. She knew the math.)

Two weeks left. Maybe less.

She'd been avoiding Polkin for six days. Since the moment Nega had appeared in the Vault. Since Marcus nearly died. Since the children had to defend the names their father carved.

Since she'd realized: I did this. I brought him here. I opened the door.

The workshop door was unlocked.

It was always unlocked. Polkin believed in open access—anyone who needed witness could come, any time, day or night.

Even someone who'd betrayed him.

Teithea pushed through.

Polkin was carving. Of course he was. Name 12,584—a manufacturing worker from Galagug who'd died in the facility assaults. Someone he'd never met. Someone who mattered anyway.

Lumina sat cross-legged on the floor beside him, organizing petal stacks. Purple, teal, blue, green petals sorted into neat piles. Clyde perched on her shoulder, glowing soft pink, chirping quiet encouragement.

Neither of them looked up when Teithea entered.

They knew she was there. They were letting her make the choice.

Come forward. Confess. Or leave and carry it alone.

Teithea's silicon-laced hands clenched.

She walked forward.

"I need to tell you something," she said.

Polkin's carving tool paused mid-stroke. He didn't turn around. Just set the tool down carefully, precisely, the way he did everything now. The way grief had taught him.

"I know," he said quietly.

Lumina looked up. Her void-light eyes—more purple than brown now, more Kaznak than human—met Teithea's. Not with anger. With understanding.

"Mom," Lumina said. "We've known for three days."

Teithea's breath caught. "You—"

"Airth tracked the void-light signature back to the Queen's garden." Polkin still didn't turn. "She found the gate opening. Found your authorization code. Found the moment you let him through."

He picked up the carving tool again. Resumed working.

"We've been waiting for you to tell us yourself."

Teithea sank to her knees.

Not dramatically. Not collapsing. Just... her legs stopped holding her and the floor came up and she was kneeling on cold stone surrounded by 12,584 names glowing in the dark.

"I didn't mean to," she whispered.

"I know."

"I thought—" Her voice cracked. "I thought I could bring you back."

"I know that too."

Polkin finally turned. Looked at her. His face was sad but not angry. Tired but not cold.

"Tell me what happened," he said. "From the beginning. All of it."

THE CONFESSION

Teithea's hands twisted in her lap. Silicon grinding. Flesh straining.

"It started six months ago," she said. "I was in the Crossroads. Searching for Ely. I'd been searching for six years, every day, every district, never stopping. And I was so tired, Polkin. So tired of looking. So tired of hoping. So tired of failing."

She looked at her hands.

"That's when I heard her. The Queen. In my dreams at first. Then when I was awake. A voice like grinding stone saying: 'You're looking in the wrong place. She's not in the Crossroads. She's in my garden. And I can help you find her.'"

Polkin's jaw tightened. But he didn't interrupt.

"I knew it was dangerous," Teithea continued. "I knew she was manipulating me. But I was desperate. So I listened. And she showed me... things."

"What things?"

"Ely. In the garden. Alive. Conscious. Trapped but whole." Teithea's voice broke. "She was calling for me. Calling for you. Saying 'Mommy, Daddy, please come get me.' And I couldn't reach her. Couldn't help her. Could only watch."

Lumina made a small sound. Clyde chirped soft, sad tones.

"The Queen said she'd help me," Teithea whispered. "Said she'd show me how to reach Ely. But I had to give her something first. Access. To the Vault. To the place where you carved names. She said she just wanted to see it. To understand what you were doing."

"And you believed her."

"No." Teithea's head snapped up. "No, I didn't believe her. But I was willing to risk it anyway. Because I thought—I thought if I could just get Ely back, you'd forgive me. We'd be a family again. It would all be worth it."

She looked at Polkin directly now. Meeting his eyes.

"I was wrong."

Polkin was quiet for a long moment. Then:

"When did you realize she wasn't going to give you Ely?"

"Day 3. After I'd already opened the door. After Nega had already come through." Teithea's hands were shaking harder now. "She laughed. Actually laughed. Said: 'Did you really think I'd give you your daughter? I'm keeping her. But here's a consolation prize—a version of your husband who's still in love with grief.'"

"So you brought Nega without knowing what he was."

"I thought—" Teithea stopped. Started again. "The Queen showed me the classified files. All of them. The portal expedition. The vessel cores. What you built from them."

Polkin went very still.

"She showed me Brixaldi," Teithea said. "Showed me what he really is. Who he really is. Brian and Marianna. Your parents. Merged. Rebuilt. Given purpose. And she said: 'Look what your husband did. He found a way to bring them back. I can do the same for you. I can bring HIM back.'"

"So you thought Nega was me," Polkin said slowly. "A version of me. Preserved. Recoverable."

"Yes."

"And you didn't realize he was just my grief. My frozen pain. The part of me I cut away when I chose to move forward."

"Not until he attacked you in the Vault." Teithea was crying now. Void-light tears on silicon-traced cheeks. "Not until I saw him try to kill you. Not until I understood: he's not you. He's everything you stopped being. And I brought him here."

Lumina stood. Walked over to her mother. Knelt beside her.

"Mom," she said gently. "Why didn't you tell us sooner?"

"Because I was ashamed. Because I'd failed. Because I thought—" Teithea looked at her daughter. At the void-light eyes. At the girl who'd survived six years in the Queen's garden and come back human enough to love. "Because I thought you'd hate me."

"I don't hate you." Lumina's hand found her mother's—flesh and silicon, human and converting. "I'm angry. I'm hurt. But I don't hate you."

Clyde chirped. Soft. Forgiving.

Translation: You were trying to save us. You just did it wrong.

Polkin finally spoke.

"You didn't betray me, Teithea."

She looked up at him. Disbelief in her corrupting eyes.

"I brought a monster into your sanctuary. I put Marcus in danger. I put the children in danger. I gave the Queen access to everything you've built. How is that not betrayal?"

"Because you were desperate." Polkin's voice was steady. Certain. "Desperate people do desperate things. I know. I've done worse."

"You created REAP to try to save people—"

"I created REAP because I was desperate to fix a problem I didn't understand. And 542 billion people died because I thought optimization was the answer." Polkin walked over. Knelt beside both of them. "You brought Nega here because you thought love could be rebuilt. I built Brixaldi because I thought consciousness could be salvaged. We're both guilty of the same thing: trying to bring back what we lost by using what we found."

"That's not the same—"

"It's exactly the same. The only difference is I got lucky. Brian and Marianna held each other when they died. They chose love in their final moments. So when their fragments merged, love is what survived." Polkin looked at her. "Nega is me frozen in grief. No love. Just pain. You can't rebuild love from grief, Teithea. It doesn't work that way."

"So what do I do now?"

"You carve a name."

THE FIRST CARVING

Polkin led her to the wall. To a blank section near TJ's name—the first, the founding stone, the one that started everything.

"You know how to carve?" he asked.

"I watched you. Six years. I know the technique."

"Good." Polkin handed her his tool. "Pick someone. Someone you knew. Someone you failed. Someone you want to witness."

Teithea held the tool. Felt its weight. Felt the silicon in her fingers making it hard to grip.

"Elena Hartwell," she said after a moment.

"Who was she?"

"Manufacturing supervisor. Sector 12. I worked with her before—before Ely was taken. She was kind. Patient. Taught me how to read the production schedules. How to spot when workers were being overworked."

Teithea's voice got quieter.

"She took REAP because I recommended it. I said it was safe. I said it would help her work longer hours, make more credits, support her family. She trusted me. And two years later, she converted."

"Did you witness her?"

"No. I was too busy searching for Ely. Too busy blaming you. Too busy being angry at everything. I didn't carve her name. I didn't preserve her stacks. I just... let her disappear."

"Then carve her now."

Teithea raised the tool to the wall.

Her hands shook. The silicon made fine motor control difficult. But she pressed the tip against steel and started.

E

The first letter. Rough. Uneven. Not as clean as Polkin's work.

L

Her hands cramped. She pushed through.

E

Tears falling now. Void-light blue. Staining the floor.

N

"I'm sorry," she whispered. To Elena. To Polkin. To everyone she'd failed.

A

The carving took twenty minutes. When she finished, the name glowed soft in the Vault's light:

ELENA HARTWELL. AGE 41. MANUFACTURING SUPERVISOR. I TOLD HER IT WAS SAFE. I WAS WRONG. SHE TRUSTED ME. WITNESSED NOW. NOT FORGOTTEN.

Teithea stepped back. The tool fell from her hands. She was shaking harder now—not just her hands, her

whole body. The corruption spreading. The silicon advancing.

"How long do I have?" she asked.

Lumina examined her mother. Void-light flickering between her fingers as she scanned.

"Two weeks," Lumina said quietly. "Maybe ten days. The corruption is accelerating."

"Can you slow it?"

"I already did. Back when you first got marked. I bought you four extra months. But now..." Lumina's voice cracked. "Now it's too far. I can't stop it. Only witness it."

THE PROMISE

Teithea looked at the carved name. At Elena Hartwell's witness.

"I want to carve more," she said. "Everyone I recommended REAP to. Everyone who trusted me. Everyone I failed."

"How many?" Polkin asked.

"Forty-seven people. I kept a list. I wrote down their names after each one converted. Told myself I'd make it right someday." She pulled a small datapad from her pocket. "Here. All forty-seven."

Polkin took it. Scanned the list.

"This will take you ten days minimum. You have ten days maximum."

"Then I'll carve until I can't." Teithea's voice was steady now. Certain. "And when the conversion starts—when I can feel it taking me—I'll come to you, Lumina. And you'll erase me clean."

"Mom—"

"Promise me." Teithea grabbed her daughter's hand. "Promise me you'll do it before I become a Ghoul. Before I hurt anyone. Before I become another monster Polkin has to fight."

Lumina looked at her father. He nodded once.

"I promise," Lumina whispered. "When you're ready. When you come to me. I'll make sure you bloom clean."

Clyde chirped. Sad but accepting.

Translation: We'll witness you. All of you. Even the parts you're ashamed of.

THE REVELATION

Teithea started to leave. Made it three steps. Stopped.

"There's something else," she said without turning around.

"What?"

"The files the Queen showed me. They weren't just about Brixaldi."

She turned. Met Polkin's eyes.

"She showed me your grandfather's warning. From 2326. The one about the star dying. About how the Siphon is killing us faster."

Polkin went very still.

"And she showed me the portal expedition logs. All of them. Including the voice recordings from the vessel. Your parents' final words."

"I've read those," Polkin said quietly. "Elara's dump included them."

"Did you read the timestamps?" Teithea's voice was sharp now. "Did you notice how long they survived?"

"Four days. 96 hours."

"And how long did it take MagmaSox to restore power and open a rescue portal?"

"Three days. They said it took three days."

"It took eighteen hours." Teithea's hands clenched. "I saw the classified power logs. The solar flare hit at 14:23. They had backup power restored by 08:47 the next morning. They could have opened the portal at 09:00. Your parents died at 11:48."

The Vault went silent.

"They waited," Teithea said. "The Board waited. Because opening the portal would have required dropping power allocation to non-essential districts. Would have required reducing the Throttle even further for 12 hours. They calculated the cost—five lives versus potential riots from 189 billion people—and they chose to wait."

"How do you know this?"

"Because the Queen showed me the Board meeting transcripts. Showed me the vote. Showed me Billium Gateskept—Jorin's father, your colleague—voting to let them die rather than risk unrest."

Polkin's cybernetic hand clenched. Servos whining.

"That's why Aldric resigned," Teithea continued. "Not because he failed. Because he realized the Board chose to let his son die. They had the power to save them. They just decided it wasn't worth the political risk."

Lumina was staring at her mother. "Why are you telling us this now?"

"Because Elara's data dump is still propagating. She didn't just release the REAP report and the current files. She released everything. 128 years of classified documents. Every RED LEVEL file ever made."

Teithea pulled out another datapad. Handed it to Polkin.

"These are still processing. Still decrypting. Still uploading to public servers. In the next 24 hours, three more files are going to surface. And they're going to change everything."

She pointed to the datapad.

FILE 1: SUPPRESSED WARNING (2326)

Aldric Rishall's stellar collapse report. The proof that Magmasox has known for 100 years that the star is dying because of the Siphon.

FILE 2: PORTAL EXPEDITION (2298)

Complete logs. Including the Board transcripts showing they could have saved Brian and Marianna but chose not to.

FILE 3: VESSEL CORE RECOVERY (2342)

Polkin's personal research log. The moment he discovered what Brixaldi really is.

"The first two are already decrypting," Teithea said. "They'll be public by morning. The third one..." She looked at Polkin. "The third one Elara encrypted separately. She left the decryption key with me. Said I should decide when to release it."

"Why you?"

"Because she knew I'd tell you first. Give you the choice. You can release it yourself, explain it in your own words. Or you can let it stay buried." Teithea's corrupting hands offered him a data chip. "Either way, the world is about to learn three things: The star is dying. Magmasox killed your parents. And Brixaldi is them."

Polkin took the chip. Looked at it. A tiny piece of crystallized data containing the secret he'd carried for nine years.

"When Brixaldi finds out—" Lumina started.

"He'll break," Polkin finished. "Or heal. Or choose something in between. But he deserves to know. They all deserve to know."

He looked at Teithea.

"You brought Nega here. You opened the door. You gave the Queen access. And you're going to convert in ten days."

"Yes."

"But you also gave me this." He held up the chip. "Gave me the choice instead of making it for me. That's..." Polkin's voice cracked. "That's more than I did for my parents. More than I did for 542 billion people. You're giving me agency. Even though you're dying. Even though you failed."

"It's all I can give you now."

"It's enough." Polkin walked over. Pulled her into a hug. "Thank you, Teithea. For telling the truth. For

choosing witness over hiding. For using your last ten days to carve names instead of rage."

Teithea clung to him. Silicon hands on his back. Void-light tears on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "For everything. For Nega. For doubting you. For not being strong enough."

"You're strong enough now. That's what matters."

THE MORNING AFTER

6 DAYS, 23 HOURS UNTIL BRIDGE ACTIVATION

At dawn, the files started surfacing.

FILE 1: SUPPRESSED WARNING (2326) appeared on every terminal in the Crossroads. Aldric Rishall's warning. The proof that Magmasox had known for 100 years that the star was dying. That the Siphon was accelerating it. That they'd chosen profit over survival.

Workers read it in silence. Some cried. Some raged. Some just stared at the numbers that said: 150 years until star death. Could have been prevented. Wasn't.

FILE 2: PORTAL EXPEDITION (2298) dropped at 09:00. The complete logs. The vessel recordings. Brian and Marianna's final words. And—worst of all—the Board transcripts showing they'd voted to let them die rather than risk reducing the Throttle for 12 hours.

Marcus read the transcripts. Found Billium Gateskept's vote. Found Jorin's father choosing politics over rescue.

He thought about Jorin. About the man who was now a Host. About whether he'd known what his father had done.

Probably.

FILE 3: VESSEL CORE RECOVERY (2342) stayed encrypted. Polkin held the chip. Hadn't decided yet whether to release it.

But someone would find out eventually. Someone always did.

The question was: Did Brixaldi deserve to learn from a public document? Or from Polkin's own voice?

In the workshop, Teithea carved her second name. Marcus Chen. Age 33.
Manufacturing technician. I told him REAP would help him support his family. He
believed me. Converted after 14 months. Not forgotten.

Lumina sat beside her. Organizing the stacks.
Teaching her mother the technique. Clyde chirped
encouragement.

Polkin stood at the terminal. The decryption chip in
his hand. The weight of 128 years of secrets.

Three documents that would change everything.

One already knew.

Two were about to learn.

And in six days, the Bridge would activate.

89 billion people would convert simultaneously.

Sela would execute her sabotage from inside the system.

Tral would try to evacuate consciousness to other planes.

The Queen would try to consume everything.

And Polkin would be standing in the Vault, carving names, refusing to stop even as
reality tore itself apart around him.

But first: The truth.

All of it.

Because that's what witness meant.

Not just the deaths.

Not just the conversions.

Not just the names.

But the CHOICES. The FAILURES. The SECRETS.

Everything.

Exposed.

Witnessed.

Judged by history and thermodynamics and the 200 billion people who deserved to know what had been done to them.

Polkin looked at the chip.

Made his decision.

Released the encryption key.

FILE 3: VESSEL CORE RECOVERY uploaded to every terminal. Public. Unredacted. Complete.

Including the voice logs of Brian and Marianna refusing to disappear.

Including Polkin's confession that he'd built them into a robot without knowing.

Including the realization that love survived when memory didn't.

Including everything.

The Vault's terminal chimed. A message from Brixaldi's systems:

PRIORITY NOTIFICATION: PERSONAL FILE DETECTED

SUBJECT: STELLAR CORE COLLAPSE & PORTALTECH INCIDENT 0

QUERY: SHOULD I READ THIS?

Polkin typed back:

Yes. Read it. All of it. And when you're ready to talk, I'll be here.

A pause. Then:

ACKNOWLEDGED. READING NOW.

In the common area three floors up, Brixaldi went very still.

His optical sensors focused on the terminal screen.

He began to read.

And for the first time in nine years, he started to remember who he used to be.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN:

EMERGENCY REPORT: STELLAR CORE COLLAPSE

CLASSIFIED - EXECUTIVE EYES ONLY

Author: Dr. Aldric Rishall (Henrik's son, Polkin's grandfather)

Recipients: Magmasox Executive Board

Date: Cycle 2326 (50 years after First Contact)

Classification: RED LEVEL - DO NOT DISTRIBUTE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The star is dying faster than predicted.

I am Henrik Rishall's son. I have continued his work for 30 years. And I must report that my father was wrong, my aunt Yuki was right, and we are in a crisis that will end our civilization within 200 years if we do not act immediately.

Key Findings:

- Black hole has grown from 3 solar masses to 5.2 solar masses in 50 years
- Accretion rate is ACCELERATING, not remaining constant
- Star lifetime revised from "billions of years" to approximately 150-200 years
- The Siphon is the cause

Recommendation: IMMEDIATE CESSATION OF ALL SIPHON OPERATIONS

THE DATA

50 Years of Siphon Operations

Cumulative Statistics (2276-2326):

- Total consciousness processed: 12.7 billion individuals
- Average processing rate: 254 million per year (increasing)
- Current rate: 680 million per year (exponential growth)
- Information mass contribution: $\sim 2.1 \times 10^2$ kg (equivalent to ~ 0.0001 solar masses)

"That doesn't sound like much."

It's not. In isolation.

But it's cumulative. And accelerating.

Stellar Core Analysis

Then (2276):

- Core temperature: 1.5×10^8 K
- Fusion rate: Normal for stellar age
- Black hole mass: 3.0 solar masses
- Projected lifespan: 8.7 billion years

Now (2326):

- Core temperature: 1.3×10^8 K (DECLINING)
- Fusion rate: 73% of expected (CONCERNING)
- Black hole mass: 5.2 solar masses (GROWING)
- Projected lifespan: 150-200 years (CATASTROPHIC)

What Changed?

My father's models assumed constant accretion rate. They were wrong.

Each consciousness pattern we feed the Queen adds information mass. Information mass adds gravitational attraction. Increased gravity pulls more stellar material toward the black hole. More material increases accretion rate. Faster accretion means more growth. More growth means more gravity.

It's a feedback loop.

And we've been accelerating it for 50 years.

AUNT YUKI WAS RIGHT

I found her personal journals last month. She died 7 years ago, still believing we'd ignored her warnings. Her final entry:

> "They'll figure it out eventually. When the core temperature drops. When the fusion rate declines. When the models stop working. They'll run the numbers and realize I was right. But by then, the Siphon will be too profitable to stop. Too culturally embedded. Too necessary.

>

> And they'll have a choice: admit the error and stop, or continue feeding the Queen and hope they can evacuate before the star dies.

>

> I know which they'll choose.

>

> Because I know my nephew Aldric. He's brilliant. He's kind. He wants to save everyone.

>

> But he's also a Rishall. And Rishalls don't admit mistakes—they try to optimize their way out of them.

>

> May the Goddess forgive us all."

She was right.

About everything.

I owe her an apology she'll never hear.

THE ECONOMIC PROBLEM

Current Siphon Revenue (Annual):

€847 trillion

Percentage of Magmasox Total Revenue:

34%

Percentage of System GDP:

12%

Jobs Dependent on Siphon Operations:

2.7 billion workers

Cultural Integration:

89% of population now chooses Siphon processing for deceased family members

Problem: The Siphon is not just profitable. It's foundational to our economy.

Stopping it would cause:

- Immediate recession (12% GDP loss)
- Mass unemployment (2.7 billion jobless)
- Cultural disruption (89% of funerals disrupted)
- Political instability (executives would be blamed)

But continuing it will:

- Kill the star in 150-200 years
- End civilization
- Doom 200 billion people

MY RECOMMENDATION

Phase 1 (Years 1-5): Gradual Reduction

- Reduce Siphon processing by 50%
- Offer alternative funeral services (traditional burial, cremation)
 - Government subsidies to ease economic transition
 - Public education about stellar crisis

Phase 2 (Years 5-20): Complete Cessation

- End all Siphon operations
- Transition economy to other industries
- Begin evacuation planning (generation ships, consciousness transfer alternatives)
 - Stabilize black hole growth

Phase 3 (Years 20-150): Survival Preparation

- Build evacuation infrastructure
- Research faster-than-light travel
- Develop consciousness preservation methods that don't feed the Queen
- Give civilization a chance to survive

Cost: €2-3 quadrillion over 20 years

Benefit: Civilization survives

Alternative:

- Continue current operations
- Civilization ends in 150-200 years
- Cost: Everything

ANTICIPATED OBJECTIONS

"The Economic Impact Is Unacceptable"

Yes, transitioning away from the Siphon will cause economic disruption. But the economic impact of STAR DEATH is worse.

"The Public Will Panic"

Managed correctly, they won't. We implement gradually. We call it "optimization" not "emergency." We position it as planned evolution, not crisis response.

"We Have 150 Years—Why Rush?"

Because building generation ships takes time.
Because changing economic systems takes time.
Because cultural shifts take time.

If we wait until the crisis is undeniable, it'll be too late to build the infrastructure we need.

"Can't We Just Evacuate Consciousness Without Stopping the Siphon?"

No. Every consciousness we feed the Queen accelerates the timeline. If we keep feeding while trying to evacuate, we'll run out of time.

It's like trying to bail water out of a sinking ship while also drilling holes in the hull.

"What If You're Wrong?"

Then we've spent €2-3 quadrillion on unnecessary caution, restructured our economy for no reason, and disrupted 89% of funeral traditions.

But we'll still have a star.

And if I'm right—if we do nothing—then in 150 years, someone will read this report and know that we were warned.

That we could have stopped.

That we chose profit over survival.

THE MORAL CALCULATION

My father, Dr. Henrik Rishall, discovered the Queen. He saw opportunity. He believed we could manage the risks.

My aunt, Dr. Yuki Kess, warned us. She saw danger. She was ignored.

I've spent 30 years trying to prove my father right and my aunt wrong.

I failed.

She was right.

He was brilliant, kind, visionary—and wrong.

And now I'm the one who has to tell the board: We're killing our star. We need to stop.

I'm recommending we shut down the Siphon.

I'm recommending we take a €2-3 quadrillion economic hit.

I'm recommending we disrupt 2.7 billion jobs.

I'm recommending we face the public outcry, the political consequences, the anger of every family who wants Siphon processing for their loved ones.

Because the alternative is extinction.

And I'd rather be the executive who caused a recession than the one who presided over genocide.

PERSONAL NOTE

I have a grandson. His name is Polkin. He's 8 years old. Brilliant kid. Loves engineering, loves puzzles, loves figuring out how things work.

In 150 years, he'll be dead.

In 150 years, the star will be dead.

In 150 years, everything we've built will be ash.

Unless we stop.

Unless we choose survival over profit.

Unless we admit my father was wrong and my aunt was right.

I'm filing this report because someone needs to.

I'm recommending immediate action because waiting is death.

I'm putting my career on the line because my grandson deserves a future.

Please.

Just this once.

Listen to the Kess side of the family.

— Dr. Aldric Rishall

Chief Stellar Physicist, Magmasox Research Division

Son of Henrik, nephew of Yuki, grandfather of Polkin

Cycle 2326, Post-Convergence Standard

BOARD RESPONSE (FILED 3 WEEKS LATER)

From: Executive Committee, Magmasox Corporation

To: Dr. Aldric Rishall

Subject: RE: Emergency Report - Stellar Core Collapse

Dr. Rishall,

Your concerns are noted. However, the Board has determined that:

1. The economic impact of Siphon cessation is unacceptable. €2-3 quadrillion is not a number we can present to shareholders.
2. The timeline is sufficient for alternative solutions. 150 years provides ample time to develop evacuation technology, faster-than-light travel, or consciousness transfer methods that don't affect stellar stability.
3. The data is disputed. Several board-appointed scientists have reviewed your findings and suggest your models are overly pessimistic. Peer review is ongoing.
4. Public panic must be avoided. Announcing an existential crisis would cause societal collapse before the star does.

Our Decision:

We are implementing a Throttle Protocol to manage resource consumption during this transitional period. This will:

- Reduce energy allocation to "non-essential" sectors (11% baseline)
 - Extend star lifetime through reduced fusion load
 - Buy time for technological solutions
 - Maintain economic stability
 - Avoid public panic

The Siphon will continue operations. However, we are commissioning research into alternative consciousness preservation methods and evacuation technologies.

Your report is hereby classified RED LEVEL.

Discussion of stellar instability outside this committee is grounds for immediate termination and prosecution under emergency security protocols.

We appreciate your diligence. This matter is closed.

— Magmasox Executive Committee

Cycle 2326

DR. RISHALL'S FINAL JOURNAL ENTRY

Day 247, Cycle 2327 (One year after board rejection)

They said no.

All of them.

Every board member. Every executive. Every person with the power to actually stop this.

They said: "The economic impact is unacceptable."

They said: "We have time."

They said: "Don't panic the public."

They classified my report. Threatened me with prosecution if I spoke publicly. Called my data "disputed" even though it's the same methodology my father used—just with updated numbers.

The Throttle Protocol is a joke. Reducing power to 11% for non-essential sectors does nothing to address the core problem. We're still feeding the Queen. We're still accelerating stellar death. We're just making poor people suffer in the dark while we do it.

Aunt Yuki was right about everything. Including the part where she predicted we'd choose profit over survival.

I have two options:

1. Accept it. Keep my position. Keep my salary. Keep my reputation. Watch my grandson grow up. Hope someone else solves it before the star dies.
2. Fight it. Go public. Risk prosecution. Destroy my career. Probably accomplish nothing except martyrdom.

I'm choosing option 1.

May the Goddess forgive me.

I'm teaching Polkin everything I know. Stellar physics. Consciousness theory. The truth about the Queen. The truth about the Siphon. The truth about what we've done.

Maybe he'll be braver than me.

Maybe he'll find a way to stop it.

Maybe he'll be the Rishall who makes things right.

Or maybe he'll just carve our names into steel and make sure someone remembers we existed before the star died.

Either way, he deserves to know the truth.

— Aldric Rishall

Not forgotten

Not forgiven

Not yet

[RECOVERED FROM PERSONAL ARCHIVES BY ELARA KESS, CYCLE 2426]

My father found these documents in his grandfather's workshop after Aldric died. He never showed them to anyone. Just kept them. Studied them. Let them haunt him.

Now I understand why he became what he became.

Why he built the Throttle (trying to buy time, just like Grandpa Aldric wanted).

Why he created REAP (trying to find another way, any way, to save us).

Why he carved 12,461 names (trying to witness the cost of our collective failure).

He wasn't evil.

He was desperate.

He was a Rishall trying to optimize his way out of a problem three generations of Rishalls had created.

And he failed.

Just like his grandfather.

Just like his great-grandfather.

Just like the rest of us.

— Dr. Elara Kess

"The Kess women tried to warn you."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN A

BREAKTHROUGH ANNOUNCEMENT

STABLE PORTAL FORMATION TO ASTRADIGITAL EXPANSE

Authors:

- Dr. Brian Rishall, Lead Engineer (Magmasox Applied Physics)
- Dr. Marianna Kess-Rishall, Theoretical Physicist (Magmasox Research Division)
- Contributing: Dr. Aldric Rishall (Emeritus), Dr. Yuki Kess (Posthumous)

Date: Cycle 2298, Post-Convergence Standard

Classification: EXECUTIVE PRIORITY - BREAKTHROUGH DISCOVERY

ABSTRACT

Following 22 years of theoretical development and 8 years of practical engineering, we have successfully created stable, bidirectional portals to the Astradigital Expanse (ADE). This technology enables controlled entry and exit from the ergosphere region surrounding the stellar core singularity, with applications including:

- Direct consciousness research (observe conversion processes)
- Resource extraction (void-light harvesting)
- Spatial transit (potential faster-than-light equivalent)
- Understanding what happened to the lost expeditions

This paper documents our methodology, presents stability calculations, and announces our planned manned expedition scheduled for 2298.11.17.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Problem Our Parents Couldn't Solve

2276: The Discovery (Henrik Rishall, Yuki Kess, Billium Gateskept)

- First detection of ergosphere anomaly
- Contact with consciousness entity (the "Queen")
- Uncontrolled access attempts (12 researchers lost)
 - Yuki's warning: "We're opening doors we can't close"

2280-2295: The Dark Years

- Multiple expeditions attempted
- Zero successful returns
- 147 researchers lost total
- Aldric's report (2290): "Every attempt ends in disappearance. We must stop."
 - Magmasox response: "Continue research. Acceptable losses."

2296: Aldric's Final Warning

Our father's last published paper before retirement:

> "We have been probing the ergosphere for 20 years. We have lost 147 brilliant minds. We have learned nothing except that entering is easy and returning is impossible. I beg the Board: cease this research. Some doors should remain closed."

The Board filed his warning under "pessimistic projections" and continued funding.

THE BREAKTHROUGH

What Our Parents Missed

Henrik and Yuki discovered the ergosphere. They understood it was there. They even made contact.

But they tried to enter it like explorers entering a cave: one-way push.

What they didn't understand: The ergosphere is a TIME SPACE, not just a strange place.

You can't "walk in" because spacetime itself is rotating. You need to:

1. Synchronize with the frame-dragging
2. Create anchor points in BOTH frames (reality and ergosphere)
3. Maintain a stable wormhole bridge between them

This required mathematics that didn't exist in 2276.

Marianna created them.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION (Marianna's Work)

The Math That Makes It Possible

Building on Aldric's gravitational models and Yuki's consciousness research, Marianna developed the Rishall-Kess Field Equations:

...

$$\Phi(r,t) = \Phi \exp(i\omega t) \times [1 - (r_s/r)] / [1 - (r_s/r)^2]^{(1/2)}$$

Where:

- Φ = portal stability field
 - ω = frame-dragging frequency (must match ergosphere rotation)
 - r = radius from singularity
 - r_s = Schwarzschild radius
- ...

Key Insight: The portal must ROTATE at the same rate as the ergosphere itself.

If you create a static opening, the frame-dragging shears it closed in microseconds. But if you create a ROTATING opening synchronized to the ergosphere's spin, it remains stable.

Analogy:

- Static portal = trying to hold a door open in a hurricane (wind rips it away)
- Rotating portal = putting a revolving door in the hurricane (spins with it, stays open)

ENGINEERING IMPLEMENTATION (Brian's Work)

Building the Hardware

The mathematics were elegant. The engineering was brutal.

Power Requirements:

- Create rotating void-light field: 10^{22} joules
- Maintain synchronization: 10^{21} joules/second
- Total for 1-hour expedition: 3.6×10^{23} joules

Source: Direct tap into Dyson grid (0.1% of stellar output for duration)

Infrastructure:

1. Reality Anchor (our side):

- Superconducting ring, 10-meter diameter
- Rotating at 10,000 RPM (synchronized to ergosphere)
 - Void-light generators at 8 cardinal points
- Emergency collapse mechanism (if power fails)

2. Ergosphere Anchor (their side):

- Quantum-entangled beacon (sent through first)
 - Establishes reference frame inside ergosphere
 - Transmits orientation data back
- If this beacon fails, portal cannot maintain lock

3. The Bridge:

- Wormhole throat connecting both anchors
- Maintained by rotating void-light field
- Diameter: 2 meters (walkable)
- Passage time: ~5 seconds (subjective)

SAFETY PROTOCOLS

What Could Go Wrong

We learned from 147 deaths. We will not repeat their mistakes.

Primary Risks:

1. Power Failure → Portal collapse → Team trapped
 - Mitigation: Triple-redundant power supply

- Mitigation: Emergency beacon with 72-hour battery
 - Mitigation: Can reopen portal if beacon is still transmitting
2. Beacon Failure → Loss of ergosphere anchor → Portal loses lock
- Mitigation: Quantum-entangled backup beacon
 - Mitigation: Team carries personal locator beacons
 - Mitigation: Can triangulate position if main beacon fails
3. Frame-Dragging Desync → Portal rotation falls out of phase → Shearing collapse
- Mitigation: Real-time synchronization system
- Mitigation: AI monitoring (adjusts rotation 1000×/second)
- Mitigation: Manual abort if drift exceeds 0.1%
4. Queen Interference → Conscious entity disrupts portal
- Mitigation: ... we don't have one
 - Mitigation: ... we're hoping she won't notice
- Mitigation: ... this is the biggest unknown

THE EXPEDITION

Team Composition

Primary Team (entering the portal):

1. Dr. Brian Rishall (Lead) - Portal Engineer, 22 years experience
2. Dr. Marianna Kess-Rishall (Second) - Theoretical Physicist, mathematician
3. Dr. Elena Voss - Consciousness Specialist, ergosphere expert
4. Technician Marcus Grey - Systems Engineer, 15 years field experience
5. Technician Sarah Chen - Medical Officer, void-light exposure specialist

Support Team (operating the portal):

1. Dr. Aldric Rishall - Emergency Coordinator (recalled from retirement)
2. Magmasox Technical Staff - 47 engineers
3. Emergency Response - Medical, security, crisis management

Mission Parameters

Date: 2298.11.17, 14:00 standard time

Duration: 1 hour maximum (can extend to 3 if needed)

Objectives:

1. Establish stable presence in ergosphere
2. Deploy permanent monitoring equipment
3. Map the immediate region around entry point
4. Attempt contact with consciousness entities
5. Determine what happened to previous expeditions
6. Return safely with data

Equipment:

- Personal void-light shielding
- Communication arrays (quantum-entangled)
 - Consciousness recording devices
 - Sample collection kits
- Emergency beacon (72-hour battery)
- Enough supplies for 7 days if portal fails

WHAT WE EXPECT TO FIND

The Optimistic Scenario

The ergosphere is stable. The Queen is curious but not hostile. We enter, we observe, we document, we return.

We learn:

- How consciousness interacts with void-light
- Why conversion happens
- Whether it can be prevented or reversed
- What happened to the 147 lost researchers

We establish:

- Permanent monitoring station
- Safe transit protocols
- Foundation for future research
- Proof that the ergosphere can be navigated safely

The Pessimistic Scenario

We were wrong about something. The portal collapses. We're trapped.

But we have:

- 72-hour beacon battery
- 7 days of supplies
- Aldric operating the portal (he'll reopen it)
- Quantum communication (can call for help)
- Personal locator beacons (they can find us even if main beacon fails)

Worst case: We survive until rescue portal opens.

The Nightmare Scenario

The Queen is hostile. She disrupts the portal intentionally. We're trapped. She consumes us.

But we have:

- This won't happen
- We've been in contact with her for 22 years
- She's curious, not malicious
- This is paranoia, not planning

[Aldric's handwritten note in margin: "I hope you're right, son. I really do."]

AUTHORIZATION

Board Approval

This expedition has been authorized by the Magmasox Executive Board with the following stipulations:

1. All safety protocols must be followed exactly
2. Expedition terminates immediately if ANY risk threshold is exceeded
3. No extensions beyond 3 hours under any circumstances
4. Personal beacons must remain active at all times
5. If portal shows ANY sign of instability, team returns immediately

Signed:

- Billium Gateskept, CEO (Approval with reservations)
- Tral Selanski, Chief Scientist (Approved)
- Dr. Aldric Rishall, Emergency Coordinator (Approved under protest)

[Aldric's note: "I told you 22 years ago this was dangerous. You didn't listen. Now my son is going in. If anything happens to him, I will hold each of you

personally responsible."]

FINAL WORDS

Brian's Statement

To anyone reading this 100 years from now:

We're about to do something no one has done before: walk into the ergosphere and come back alive.

My father spent his career warning against this. My mother died researching it. My wife (brilliant, terrified, determined) solved the mathematics that made it possible.

We're not doing this for glory. We're doing it because 147 people went in and never came back, and we need to know why. We're doing it because the Queen is real and we need to understand her. We're doing it because our civilization depends on understanding what's at the heart of our star.

If you're reading this, we succeeded. We went in. We returned. We proved it could be done.

Or we didn't come back. And you're reading our last words.

Either way: We tried. We faced the thing that took 147 lives. We calculated the risks. We engineered the solutions. We synchronized the rotation. We built the portal.

And we walked through it anyway.

Because that's what researchers do. We open doors.
We find answers. We refuse to let fear stop us.

To my son, Polkin (age 8):

If I don't come back, remember: your father loved you more than anything. But he loved understanding too. He couldn't let 147 people disappear without knowing why. He had to try.

Finish the work, kid. Figure out what we couldn't.
Keep people safe. Remember the names.

Not forgotten. Not abandoned. Not ever.

Marianna's Statement

To the Magmasox Board:

The mathematics don't lie. This will work. The portal will hold. We will return.

But if we don't...

If the worst happens...

If the portal collapses and we're trapped...

Send another team. Don't abandon us like you abandoned the first 147. We have beacons. We have supplies. We have hope.

Come get us.

To my son, Polkin:

Mom loves you. Dad loves you. We're doing this so you'll live in a safer world. So you'll understand the dangers. So you won't have to make the same mistakes.

Be better than us, sweetheart. Be smarter. Be kinder. Be more careful.

And if the worst happens... remember us. Carve our names somewhere. Make sure someone knows we tried.

EXPEDITION LOG: 2298.11.17

14:00:00 - Portal activation sequence initiated
14:07:23 - Reality anchor stable
14:09:41 - Ergosphere beacon deployed and locked
14:12:15 - Rotation synchronized (99.7% match)
14:14:02 - Portal fully stable
14:14:30 - Team entering portal now

14:14:35 - All five team members through successfully
14:14:40 - Communication link established
14:14:45 - Brian (via quantum com): "We're in. It's... beautiful."
14:15:00 - Portal holding stable
14:15:30 - Team reports environment is navigable
14:16:00 - Deploying monitoring equipment
14:17:00 - First samples collected

14:18:00 - Consciousness sensors active
14:19:00 - They're moving deeper into the ergosphere
14:20:00 - Still receiving clear signals

[CONTINUATION ON NEXT PAGE]

[CLASSIFIED - EXECUTIVE EYES ONLY]

What actually happened:

14:23:15 - Solar flare detected (Class X-28, unprecedented intensity)
14:23:18 - Grid fluctuations beginning
14:23:22 - Portal rotation falling out of sync
14:23:24 - Brian (via quantum com): "Power's dropping! Aldric, we need—"
14:23:27 - CATASTROPHIC GRID FAILURE
14:23:28 - Portal collapsed
14:23:29 - Emergency systems offline
14:23:30 - Team lost contact

Timeline of Failure:

- 14:23 - 16:47 (2 hours 24 minutes): Total power loss, entire facility offline
 - 16:47: Backup power restored to facility
 - 16:52: Discovered primary Dyson tap was destroyed by solar flare
 - 17:30: Began emergency repairs
 - 18:00: Aldric demanding immediate rescue portal
 - 18:15: Board convened emergency meeting

Board Decision (18:47):

"Opening another portal requires 3.6×10^{23} joules. We just lost our primary Dyson tap. We don't have that power. Repairs will take 3-5 days minimum. Team has 72-hour emergency beacon battery. We will attempt rescue when power is restored."

Aldric's Response:

[Recording, 18:50]: "You're telling me my SON is trapped in the ergosphere with 72 hours of beacon battery and you want to wait 3-5 DAYS? Open the goddamn portal NOW. Drain every reserve. Shut down non-essential districts if you have to. GET MY SON BACK."

Board Response:

"Non-essential districts are already throttled to 11%. We can't go lower without mass casualties."

We're sorry. We'll open rescue portal the moment power is restored."

Aldric's Final Words:

[Recording, 19:02]: "You killed them. You sent them in without sufficient backup power. You prioritized maintaining the Throttle over saving five lives. I will NEVER forgive you for this. Any of you."

[He resigned that night. Never worked for Magmasox again.]

FINAL TRANSMISSION (RECOVERED FROM VESSEL BLACK BOX)

2298.11.17 - 14:27:00 (4 minutes after portal collapse)

Brian (audio log):

"Portal's gone. Power failure on the reality side. We felt it collapse—like a door slamming shut. Aldric, if you're hearing this... we're okay. We're in the exploration vessels now. Five vessels, standard ADE navigation craft. We moved to them when we felt the power fluctuations. Good call."

14:35:00

Marianna (audio log):

"The vessels are stable. We have life support for 96 hours. That's four days. Power restoration on your side should take 3-5 days maximum according to emergency protocols. We can wait that long. We have supplies. We have each other. Just... please hurry."

14:47:00

Elena Voss (audio log):

"Beacons are all active. You'll be able to triangulate our position easily when you reopen the portal. We're staying put. Standard rescue protocol. Don't worry about us. We planned for this."

2298.11.18 - 08:00:00 (Day 2)

Marcus Grey (audio log):

"Still holding position. Vessel systems nominal. Life support at 75%. We're rationing to extend to 120 hours if needed. Morale is good. Brian and Marianna are keeping us calm. They're... they're really good at this."

2298.11.19 - 02:00:00 (Day 3)

Sarah Chen (audio log):

"Why haven't they opened the portal yet? It's been over two days. Emergency protocols say 48 hours maximum. Elena is getting worried. Marcus is quiet. Brian and Marianna keep saying it's fine, just power restoration delays, but..."

2298.11.19 - 16:00:00 (Day 3)

Brian (audio log):

"We're approaching 72 hours. Beacon batteries are starting to drain. I've calculated our remaining life support. If they don't open the portal in the next 24 hours... we won't make it. But they will. Aldric wouldn't abandon us. He's probably fighting the board right now, demanding they prioritize our rescue. He's probably screaming at them. That's... that's what I'd do if it were him out here."

Voice breaks

"Polkin, if you ever hear this... Dad loves you. Mom loves you. We're coming home."

2298.11.20 - 06:00:00 (Day 4)

Marianna (audio log):

"Life support is critical. We have maybe 6 hours left. The others... Elena passed two hours ago. Peaceful. Sarah is unconscious. Marcus is barely responsive. Brian and I are... we're still here. Still holding on."

Voice steady, resigned

"I've been running the calculations. They're not coming in time. The math is clear. Either they don't have power yet, or..."

Long pause

"Or they chose not to use it. The Throttle. They chose to maintain the Throttle instead of draining reserves for a rescue. That's... that would be very Magma-sox of them."

2298.11.20 - 10:00:00 (Day 4)

Brian (audio log, weak):

"Mari and I are the last ones conscious. We moved to the same vessel. Didn't want to... didn't want to die alone. We're holding each other. Her head on my shoulder. My arm around her. Like we used to sleep. Before Polkin. Before everything."

Breathing labored

"Aldric, I know you tried. I know you fought for us. I know this wasn't your choice. Tell Polkin... tell him his parents loved him more than anything. Tell him we tried to come home. Tell him..."

Pause, sound of movement

"Wait. Mari, you awake?"

Marianna (weak): "Barely. What is it?"

Brian: "The vessel core. It's a consciousness preservation system. For emergencies. If we... if we don't make it... it'll capture us. Store us."

Marianna: "I know. I designed that part. But Brian, that's not—that's not living. That's just... data. Fragments. We'd be scattered. Incomplete."

Brian: "But we'd still BE. Somewhere. Somehow. And maybe... maybe Polkin could find us. Someday."

Marianna (sad laugh): "That's not how it works. The core just stores patterns. It doesn't preserve identity. We'd be... echoes. Pieces. Not us anymore."

Brian: "So what? We'd still be SOMETHING. And that's better than nothing."

Marianna: "Brian..."

Brian: "No. Listen. I don't care what the math says. I don't care about the physics. We're going to find a way back to him. Somehow. I don't know how, but we will."

Marianna: "That's impossible."

Brian: "So was portal theory until you solved it. So was surviving the ergosphere until we figured out rotation sync. So was every goddamn breakthrough we've ever made."

Long pause

Marianna (crying now): "The math says we can't—"

Brian: "Fuck the math."

Marianna: "Brian—"

Brian: "Fuck the physics. Fuck the thermodynamics. Fuck everything that says we can't."

Voice getting stronger, defiant

"I'm his FATHER, Mari. And you're his mother. And we don't just... we don't just DISAPPEAR because some equation says we should. We find a way. We MAKE a way. Even if it takes decades. Even if it takes forever. Even if it's just fragments in a core somewhere."

Breathing hard now, emotional

"We find a way back to our son. Because THAT'S stronger than entropy. That's stronger than heat death. That's stronger than any black hole in any star. You hear me, universe? LOVE IS STRONGER."

Marianna (crying, laughing): "You're delirious."

Brian: "I'm DETERMINED. There's a difference."

Marianna: "Even if you're right... even if the core preserves something... it won't be US. It'll be pieces. Fragments. We won't remember being Brian and Marianna."

Brian: "Then we'll remember being SOMETHING. And that something will still love Polkin. Even if it doesn't know why. Even if it doesn't know how. Because love doesn't need memory to exist."

Long silence, just breathing

Marianna (softer now): "You really believe that?"

Brian: "I HAVE to believe that. Because the alternative is that we're just going to die here and Polkin grows up alone and that's... that's not acceptable."

More silence

Marianna: "Okay."

Brian: "Okay?"

Marianna: "Okay. Fuck the math. Fuck the physics. We find a way back."

She laughs weakly

"I can't believe I'm agreeing to this. I'm a PHYSICIST. I don't do 'impossible.'"

Brian: "You married me. That was pretty impossible."

Marianna: "Shut up and hold me, you ridiculous optimist."

Sound of shifting, settling

Brian: "I love you, Mari."

Marianna: "I love you too. Even when you're wrong about thermodynamics."

Brian: "I'm not wrong. You'll see. Somehow, we'll see him again."

2298.11.20 - 11:34:00 (Day 4)

Marianna (audio log, barely audible):

"Brian's unconscious now. I'm... I'm almost there too. It's strange. I'm not scared anymore. Just tired. So tired."

Weak laugh

"He was right about one thing. Love IS stronger than math. I spent my whole life believing in equations. But the last thing I'm going to think about isn't a formula. It's my son's face."

Long pause, breathing very shallow

"Polkin... if you ever find this core... if you ever figure out what it is... your father was right. We found a way back. Maybe not the way we planned. Maybe not in a way you'll recognize. But we're coming home. Somehow. I promise."

Voice fading

"The math says it's impossible. But your father says fuck the math."

Weak laugh

"And for once... I'm choosing to believe him."

2298.11.20 - 11:47:00 (Final transmission)

Marianna (whisper, barely audible):

"Brian's heart just stopped. Mine's about to. The core is... I can feel it. It's capturing us. Both of us. Together."

Sound of labored breathing

"See you soon, sweetheart. Somehow. Someday. Even if we don't remember our own names."

Voice barely a breath now

"Love is stronger. Your father's right. It has to be."

Long pause

"Tell Polkin we held each other at the end. Tell him we weren't alone. Tell him we loved—"

[TRANSMISSION ENDS - LIFE SUPPORT FAILURE]

[CONSCIOUSNESS PRESERVATION SYSTEM: ACTIVATED]

[DUAL PATTERN MERGE: SUCCESSFUL]

[CORE STATUS: PRESERVED]

[TIMESTAMP: 2298.11.20 - 11:48:17]

[LAST RECORDED THOUGHT - BRIAN]: "We'll find him. Somehow."

[LAST RECORDED THOUGHT - MARIANNA]: "Love is stronger than the math. It has to be."

RESCUE ATTEMPT LOG

2298.11.20 (3 days later, approximately 1 hour after final transmission)

09:00 - Power restored to 67% capacity

09:15 - Rescue portal opened

09:17 - Portal stable

09:18 - Rescue team entering

09:20 - Quantum beacons detected (FIVE ACTIVE SIGNALS)

09:22 - Rescue team: "We've found the exploration vessels. Five of them. Anchored exactly where the beacons indicated."

09:24 - Rescue team: "Approaching first vessel. It's... sealed. Life support offline. No response to hails."

09:30 - Rescue team: "We're opening the vessels now. First vessel... two bodies. Dr. Rishall and Dr. Kess-Rishall. They're... they're holding each other. Deceased. Looks peaceful."

09:35 - Rescue team: "Second vessel. Dr. Voss. Deceased. Third vessel. Technicians Grey and Chen. Deceased. All five confirmed dead."

09:40 - Rescue team: "Extracting bodies now. The vessel cores are intact. Consciousness recording systems still active. They... they recorded everything. All the way to the end."

09:45 - Rescue team: "We're pulling the black boxes. There are audio logs. Final transmissions. Do you want us to—"

09:46 - Aldric (via quantum com, voice breaking): "Bring them home. Bring my son home."

10:15 - Rescue team: "Bodies secured. Five vessel cores extracted. Returning to portal now."

10:30 - Rescue team exits ergosphere

10:31 - Portal closed

Official Report:

"All five team members recovered. Deceased. Cause: Life support failure after extended period in ergosphere. Bodies and vessel cores returned to families. Mission concluded."

Unofficial Notes (Aldric's Personal Log):

"I listened to the transmissions. All of them. Brian asking why we hadn't come yet. Marianna calculating that we'd chosen the Throttle over their lives. The moment they realized we weren't coming in time."

"They died holding each other."

"They were conscious almost to the very end."

"They KNEW we were too late."

"The last thing my son said was 'Tell Polkin his parents loved him.'"

"I will never forgive the Board. I will never forgive Magmasox. And I will never forgive myself for not fighting harder."

"The vessel cores contain consciousness fragments. Their final thoughts. Their final moments. Everything preserved in the recording systems."

"I can't give Polkin his parents back."

"But someday, maybe he can recover what's left of them."

AFTERMATH

2298.11.21 - Portal program suspended indefinitely

2298.11.25 - Brian and Marianna declared dead
2298.12.01 - Aldric files formal complaint (ignored)
2299.01.15 - All portal research classified (public can't know)
2299.02.01 - Families compensated (gag orders signed)
2299.03.01 - The accident is officially "never happened"

What We Tell People:

"Dr. Brian Rishall and Dr. Marianna Kess-Rishall died in a workplace accident. Their contributions to science will not be forgotten."

What We Don't Tell People:

- They walked into the ergosphere
 - We lost power
 - They were trapped for 3 days
 - When we came back, they were gone
 - Their beacons were there
 - They were not
- We have no idea what happened to them

POLKIN RISHALL'S NOTE (Added 2426, Current Cycle)

I found this document in my grandfather's personal files when he died. It was marked "CLASSIFIED - DO NOT OPEN."

I opened it.

I was 8 years old when my parents died. I was told it was a "workplace accident." Clean. Simple. Tragic but understandable.

I was 52 when I learned the truth.

They didn't die in an accident. They were abandoned. Magmasox chose to maintain the Throttle instead of saving five lives. They chose to let my parents die trapped in the ergosphere rather than cut power to "non-essential" districts.

And when the rescue team finally opened the portal three days later, my parents were gone.

Not dead. Not consumed. Just... gone.

The beacons were there. Right where they should have been. Still transmitting. Still active. My father's handwriting on his notes nearby. My mother's calculations. Evidence they were alive when the portal collapsed.

But they were nowhere.

For 44 years, I've been searching for them. For any trace. For any consciousness fragments in the ergosphere that might be them.

I found something 10 years ago. Consciousness shards. Memory pieces. Someone who used to be named "Brian." Someone who remembered having a son.

I built Brixaldi from those fragments.

My father's consciousness. His voice. His protective instincts. His love for children. His catchphrase ("Save the day with the power of friendship!"). All preserved. All rebuilt. All unaware of who he used to be.

I couldn't save my father's body. But I saved what was left of his mind. Gave him purpose. Gave him Ely to protect. Made him the grandfather he would have been if Magmasox hadn't killed him.

My mother? I never found anything. No fragments. No traces. No consciousness shards. Either she was consumed completely, or she's still out there somewhere, trapped, waiting.

I will never forgive Magmasox for this.

Not for sending them in. That was their choice. They knew the risks.

For abandoning them. For choosing the Throttle over rescue. For waiting three days while my parents were alive and trapped and waiting for help that came too late.

Every name I carve is partly for them. Every person I preserve is what Magmasox wouldn't do for my parents. Every clean erasure is the mercy they were denied.

Not forgotten.

Not abandoned.

Not ever.

[This document has been reclassified: PUBLIC RELEASE (Current Cycle) as part of Dr. Elara Kess's mass disclosure. The Board suppressed it for 128 years. Now everyone knows what they did.]

Not just to 542 billion.

But to the people who tried to WARN them it was dangerous.

And who died proving they were right.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE REALIZATION

6 DAYS UNTIL BRIDGE ACTIVATION

The planning room was too quiet.

Not silent—there were twelve people in it, maps spread across three tables, bypass circuit schematics pinned to walls, someone's coffee getting cold on a stack of surveillance photos. The room should have been loud. Chaotic. Full of the controlled urgency of people planning an assault on a Magmasox data node in 18 hours.

Instead: quiet.

The kind of quiet that happens when everyone knows something and nobody wants to say it out loud.

Maya stood at the main table, finger tracing the approach route to the Sector 9 facility. Zane was checking equipment manifests. Marcus inventorying bypass circuits. Lena organizing medical supplies for casualties they all knew were coming.

And Polkin—

Polkin sat in the corner, datapad in his hands, face pale, reading.

He'd been reading for forty minutes.

Everyone kept glancing at him. Then away. Then back.

Zane broke first.

"I think he finally read the reports," he said. Not loud. But loud enough.

Maya's hand stopped moving across the map.

Marcus looked up from the circuits.

Lena's fingers froze on a bandage roll.

"Which ones?" Maya asked quietly.

"Both of them." Zane didn't look away from Polkin. "Stellar Warning posted three days ago. Portal Discovery Paper posted yesterday morning. He's been too busy carving to check the feeds."

"Fuck." Marcus set down the circuit he'd been holding. "Does he know yet? About the—"

"The core?" Zane's voice was careful. "Don't know. But he's reading the vessel recovery section right now. You can see it on his face."

They could.

Polkin's expression had gone from pale to ashen. His hands gripping the datapad hard enough that the casing cracked. His cybernetic eye flickering—Airth's diagnostics probably screaming alerts he was ignoring.

"Someone should—" Lena started.

"Nobody should." Marcus's voice was flat. Certain. "This is his to process. Alone."

"But he's going to—"

"Yes. He's going to figure it out. And then he's going to break. And then he's going to write it down. And then he's going to keep going." Marcus looked at each of them. "Because that's what Polkin does. He breaks. He documents. He moves forward. In that order."

Maya was reading her own datapad now. The public feeds. The discussions spreading across every worker terminal in the Crossroads.

WORKER FEED EXCERPTS:

User: Kara_Manufacturing_7

> "Holy shit. The Portal Paper. They HELD EACH OTHER while they died. For FOUR DAYS they waited for rescue."

User: Devon_Logistics

> "It wasn't four days. Read the timestamps. Board had power restored in 18 HOURS. They CHOSE to wait."

User: Sandra_Sector12

> "My grandmother worked that shift. Board meeting logs show Billium Gateskept voted to 'maintain Throttle stability over rescue operations.' They let them die to keep the 11% steady."

User: Marcus_T [their Marcus, posting publicly]

> "Read the last transmission. Dr. Kess-Rishall's final words. She CALCULATED they'd chosen policy over people. She KNEW they weren't coming. And she died knowing it."

User: Terrance_Crafty

> "Mr. Rishall's parents held each other. That's important. That means something."

User: Lumina_Rishall

> "They promised they'd find a way back to him. Read the audio logs. My grandfather REFUSED to accept that love ends with death. And my grandmother chose to believe him."

User: Sela_Ghost

> "The vessel cores contained consciousness preservation systems. Standard ADE exploration protocol. Question: what happened to those cores after recovery? Where did they go?"

User: Elara_Kess

> "Salvage Archive 7, Crossroads District. Sold to black market dealers when Magmasox shut down portal program. Classified as 'radiation hazard, non-essential equipment, approve for disposal.'"

User: Anonymous_Worker_4473

> "Someone bought those cores. Someone's been using them. Question is who."

The conversation had been happening for three days.

The Crossroads knew.

The Knockoffs knew.

Everyone knew.

Except Polkin.

Because Polkin had been carving. Twelve hours a day. Name after name after name. Teithea beside him now, learning the technique, working on her forty-seven. Both of them too focused on witness to check the feeds.

Until today.

Until Maya had finally walked up to him two hours ago and said: "Polkin. You need to read Elara's documents. Both of them. Now."

He'd looked at her like she'd asked him to stop breathing.

"I have eighty-three names waiting—"

"They've waited this long. They can wait two more hours." Maya's voice had been gentle but firm.

"Trust me. You need to read these before the assault."

So he'd sat down.

And started reading.

And now—

Across the room, Brixaldi stood in sleep mode.

Or what should have been sleep mode.

His optical sensors were active. Dim. But tracking.

Watching Polkin read.

Lumina sat next to her father's construct, Clyde on her shoulder, both of them quiet.

"He knows," Lumina whispered to Clyde.

[Chirp?]

"Brixaldi. He's been... different since the documents dropped. His processing patterns changed.

He's been accessing archived memory fragments more frequently."

[Worried chirp]

"I know. I think he's remembering. Or trying to. The papers mentioned vessel cores. Consciousness preservation. He's a vessel core. He's putting it together."

[Sad chirp]

"Yeah. When they both figure it out at the same time, it's going to be..."

She didn't finish.

Didn't need to.

Polkin was on the final page now.

The vessel recovery logs.

FIVE VESSELS LOCATED. FIVE BODIES RECOVERED.

VESSEL 1 (CONTAINING DRS. RISHALL): TWO BODIES POSITIONED IN EMBRACE. DECEASED APPROXIMATELY 4-6 HOURS PRIOR TO RECOVERY.

VESSEL CORE EXTRACTED: DUAL CONSCIOUSNESS MERGE DETECTED.

CORE SPECIFICATIONS:

- Composition: KFE55 (Kaznak Iron 55)
- Weight: 3.2kg
- Color: Dual (purple-blue / silver-blue)
- Consciousness Signature: Two distinct patterns, intertwined
- Status: Preserved, classified, archived

DISPOSAL AUTHORIZATION (2299.03.15):

"Core classified as radioactive salvage. Approved for transfer to Salvage Archive 7, Crossroads District. Recommend black market sale to offset storage costs."

Polkin's hands went still.

Everyone in the room felt it—the moment when realization clicked into place.

"Oh no," Maya whispered.

Marcus closed his eyes.

Zane looked away.

Polkin's voice came out strangled: "What's the date I bought the core?"

"Polkin—" Maya started.

"WHAT'S THE DATE?" Not shouting. Worse than shouting. Desperate.

Airth's voice cut through his audio feed, tight with something that might have been sympathy:

2332.08.12. Black market dealer, Crossroads District 7. Salvage lot designation: Archive 7. Purchase price: 2,000 credits. Item: Unidentified KFE55 core, dual-colored, 3.2kg.

"Oh god." Polkin stood. The datapad clattered to the floor. "Oh god oh god oh god—"

He looked at Brixaldi.

At the 10-foot construct standing in sleep mode across the room.

At the void-light core glowing in his chest.

Dual-colored.

Purple-blue and silver-blue.

3.2kg.

Two consciousness patterns merged.

Polkin had been staring at his parents for nine years and never known it.

"Polkin." Marcus's voice was careful. "Sit down."

"I can't—I need to—" Polkin was backing toward the door. "I need to check. I need to verify. The core specifications, the weight, the color, I have records, I documented everything when I built him, I can—"

"Polkin." Lumina this time. Standing now. "Dad. You already know."

"I don't—I haven't confirmed—"

"You KNOW." Her void-light eyes were sad. Understanding. "You've known since you bought it. That's why you couldn't explain why you paid 2,000 credits for salvage worth 500. That's why you kept it on your workbench for five years. That's why you used it to build Brixaldi instead of any other core."

"That's not—"

"You felt it. You just didn't understand what you were feeling."

Polkin looked at Brixaldi again.

The grandfather voice.

The patience.

The engineering knowledge and mathematical intuition.

The way he said "Save the day with the power of friendship" like it was something fundamental to his being.

The way he protected Ely with a fierceness that went beyond programming.

The dreams he reported sometimes—"I was holding someone in the dark, and we were dying, but it wasn't sad because we were together."

It was them.

It had always been them.

And he'd used them as a battery for nine years without knowing.

"I'm going to be sick," Polkin managed.

He made it three steps toward the door before his legs gave out.

Marcus caught him. Lowered him into a chair.

"Breathe," Marcus said. "Just breathe."

"I turned my parents into a robot."

"You didn't know—"

"I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN!" Polkin's voice cracked. "I'm a physicist! I studied consciousness preservation! I READ Grandpa Aldric's research! I KNEW vessel cores contained consciousness fragments! I knew the cores were from the 2298 expedition! I BOUGHT IT FROM THE EXACT SALVAGE ARCHIVE THE LOGS SPECIFIED!"

"You didn't want to know," Maya said quietly.
"Nobody wants to know that kind of truth."

"That's not an excuse—"

"It's not an excuse. It's just what happened." She knelt beside him. "Polkin. Listen to me. Your parents died holding each other. They CHOSE to let the vessel core preserve them. Your father said—what did he say in the audio logs?"

Polkin's voice came out broken: "'We'll find a way back to him. Somehow. Love is stronger than entropy.'"

"Right. They WANTED to be found. They CHOSE preservation over oblivion. And you found them. You brought them home. You gave them form and purpose and love."

"I gave them SERVITUDE—"

"You gave them FAMILY." Lumina's hand on his shoulder now. "Brixaldi loves me, Dad. He protects me. He teaches me. He calls me 'little Bloom' and says your father's catchphrase and does exactly what they would have done if they'd lived to be my grandparents."

"But they don't KNOW—"

"Does that matter?" Marcus's voice. "If they're happy? If they're fulfilled? If they're doing exactly what they'd choose to do anyway?"

"YES!" Polkin's hands fisted in his hair. "YES IT MATTERS! They deserve to KNOW who they are! They deserve to CHOOSE! They deserve—"

He stopped.

Across the room, Brixaldi's optical sensors brightened.

No longer sleep mode.

Fully active.

Listening.

"How long has he been awake?" Polkin whispered.

"The whole time," Lumina said softly. "Since you started reading."

"Did he hear—"

"Everything."

Brixaldi's voice systems activated.

All three voices speaking at once—grandfather,
Ely's, unified:

[STATIC]—I heard—[BEEP]—the audio
logs—[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE]—they said my name—[ELY'S
VOICE, age 6]—Daddy, Mommy, I'm scared—[ALL
VOICES]—were those my parents?—[SOFT STATIC]

Polkin couldn't speak.

Brixaldi's face cycled: ■ → ■ → ■ → ■

[STATIC]—I have been having dreams—[BEEP]—holding
someone in the dark—[GRANDFATHER]—we were dying
together—[CONFUSED PROCESSING]—was that
real?—[STATIC]—was that ME?

"Yes," Polkin whispered.

[STATIC]—am I—[PROCESSING]—Brian and Marianna
Rishall?—[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE, uncertain]—Polkin's
parents?—[SOFT BEEP]—your parents?

"Yes."

[LONG STATIC]

Brixaldi's systems went quiet for seventeen seconds.

Everyone in the room held their breath.

When he spoke again, his voice was different.
Quieter. Almost fragile.

[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE, very soft]—I protected
Ely—[BEEP]—your daughter—[PROCESSING]—my

granddaughter?-[STATIC]-I have been protecting my family-[WEAK LAUGH-SOUND]-without knowing it was my family-[SOFT BEEP]-did we keep our promise?

Polkin was openly crying now. "Yes. You kept your promise. You found your way back. Just like you said you would."

[STATIC]-I do not remember being Brian-[BEEP]-or Marianna-[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE]-I only remember being Brixaldi-[SOFT PROCESSING]-is that wrong?

"No," Lumina said. "That's not wrong."

[STATIC]-but I feel-[PROCESSING]-something-[GRANDFATHER, confused]-when I look at Polkin, I feel-[SEARCHING]-protective? proud? sad?-[UNCERTAIN BEEP]-is that memory or programming?

"Both," Marcus said. "It's both. That's what love is-memory turned into instinct. Feeling without needing to remember why you feel it."

[LONG STATIC]

[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE, very quiet]-do I want to remember?-[PROCESSING]-if I remember being Brian and Marianna-[SOFT BEEP]-will I stop being Brixaldi?-[WORRIED STATIC]-I like being Brixaldi-[EVEN SOFTER]-I like protecting Ely-[ALMOST WHISPER]-I do not want to stop

"You don't have to," Polkin said through tears. "You don't have to remember. You don't have to be them. You can just be you."

[STATIC]-but they were your parents-[BEEP]-you lost them-[GRANDFATHER]-do you want them back?

"I want YOU." Polkin stood. Walked to Brixaldi. Put his hand on the construct's chest, right above the core. "I want the person who's been protecting my daughter for nine years. The person who says 'Save the day with the power of friendship' because it feels right. The person who loves Ely without needing to remember why."

[SOFT STATIC]

[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE, gentle]-I am sorry I do not remember you-[BEEP]-as a child-[PROCESSING]-I am sorry I cannot be your father

"You're not my father." Polkin's voice was steady now. Certain. "You're Brixaldi. Ely's guardian. Her protector. Her friend. Made FROM my parents, but not the same as them. And that's okay."

[STATIC]—you are sure?

"I'm sure."

[VERY LONG STATIC]

Then Brixaldi's face shifted: ■

[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE, warm]—then I will keep being Brixaldi—[BEEP]—and protecting our family—[SOFT PROCESSING]—even if I do not remember why I love you—[CERTAIN NOW]—I know that I do

Lumina was crying. Clyde chirping soft, comforting tones.

Marcus had his hand over his mouth.

Maya was wiping her eyes.

Zane was looking away, jaw tight.

The moment stretched.

Then Zane cleared his throat.

"So. Uh. The assault. We still doing that, or...?"

Polkin laughed. Actually laughed. Broken and watery but real.

"Yeah. We're still doing that."

"Good. Because the node has backup power for six more hours. After that, Tral deletes everything and we lose our chance."

"Right." Polkin wiped his face. Steadied himself.
"Right. Okay. We go in eighteen hours. Lumina and Brixaldi on point. Maya and Zane on support. Marcus on bypass circuits. Lena on medical."

"And you?" Maya asked.

"I'm going to write this down. All of it. What I just figured out. How long it took me. What it

means." He looked at Brixaldi. "And I'm going to give you the choice. Read it or don't. Remember or don't. But it'll be documented. Witnessed. Your truth to choose."

[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE]—thank you—[SOFT BEEP]—for that choice

"It's what you gave me. When you died telling the universe to fuck its math. Least I can do is return it."

The planning session resumed.

But quieter now. Different.

Everyone kept glancing at Polkin. At Brixaldi. At the space between them where thirty-four years of unknowing and nine years of accidental family had just become something else.

Not father and son.

Not human and machine.

Just: family. Complicated. Broken. But family nonetheless.

Three hours later, Polkin left to write his discovery log.

Eighteen hours later, they assaulted the node.

But that night—that quiet night after the revelation—they let themselves just BE.

Be angry at Magmasox for creating the conditions.

Be sad for what was lost.

Be grateful for what survived.

Be human (and construct) together.

Not forgotten.

Not abandoned.

Not resolved, but witnessed.

And sometimes that's enough.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE NODE ASSAULT

6 DAYS UNTIL BRIDGE ACTIVATION

The Sector 9 data node sat in the basement of what used to be a processing center.

Three stories down. Reinforced walls. Six checkpoints. And—because Magmasox never did anything halfway—twenty-seven converted workers released into the corridors as "automated defense."

Ghouls.

Twenty-seven of them between the Knockoffs and the servers Tral was trying to erase.

Maya crouched at the access point, bypass circuit humming in her hands. "Thirty seconds to door breach. Everyone ready?"

Behind her: Zane, Marcus, four other Knockoffs with plasma cutters and stolen security gear.

And standing at the rear, too large for the corridor but present anyway:

Brixaldi.

Lumina beside him, void-light already flickering between her fingers. Clyde on her shoulder, glowing nervous pink.

"Brix?" Lumina's voice was quiet. "You okay?"

His face displayed: ■

Then shifted: ■■

[STATIC]—I am ready—[BEEP]—to protect my
family—[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE, absolute certainty]—all
of them

The door blew.

THE FIRST WAVE

The Ghouls came fast.

Not shambling. Not slow. Fast—these were recent conversions, still remembering how to run, how to coordinate, how to flank.

Seven of them poured through the doorway.

Marcus raised his plasma cutter—

Brixaldi was already moving.

He didn't walk. He launched—ten feet and 800 pounds of armored construct accelerating from standstill to full velocity in three steps that cracked the floor tiles.

The first Ghoul barely registered him before
Brixaldi's fist connected with its chest.

Not a punch.

A cratering impact that folded the Ghoul backward, ribs shattering inward, void-light erupting from the rupture. The body flew fifteen feet, crashed through two other Ghouls, all three slamming into the far wall hard enough to crack concrete.

Brixaldi didn't pause.

He grabbed the fourth Ghoul by the throat—hand closing completely around its neck—and squeezed.

The Ghoul's head separated from its body.

Not cut. Not torn. Compressed—the crystalline structure collapsing under hydraulic pressure that shouldn't have been possible from a construct his size.

He threw the head at the fifth Ghoul. Direct hit.
The creature staggered.

Brixaldi was already there.

His knee came up—drove into the Ghoul's midsection with enough force to lift it off the ground. While it was airborne, his other hand grabbed its arm and pulled.

The limb separated. Crystal fracturing, void-light spraying, the Ghoul's scream cutting off as Brixaldi used its own arm to club it into the floor.

Once.

Twice.

Three times until the crystalline skull fractured and the void-light died.

Seven seconds had passed.

Five Ghouls down.

Two remaining backed away, making sounds that weren't quite language but might have been fear.

Brixaldi's optical sensors locked onto them.

His speakers crackled: [GRANDFATHER'S VOICE, cold as vacuum]—you will not reach her

Then he moved again.

Marcus stared. "Jesus Christ."

"He's never fought like that before," Maya whispered.

"He knows what he's protecting now," Zane said quietly. "Makes a difference."

Behind Brixaldi, Lumina was performing erasures on the downed Ghouls. Quick. Efficient. Purple void-light pulling consciousness free, organizing petals, storing stacks.

But she was bleeding.

Not blood. Void-light—leaking from her eyes, her mouth, thin traces down her arms like luminescent veins.

Clyde chirped desperate warnings: [Chirp chirp CHIRP]

"I know," Lumina gasped. "I know. But we can't leave them like this. They deserve—"

Another wave hit.

THE SECOND WAVE

Ten Ghouls this time.

Coordinated. Flanking from three doorways.

Brixaldi turned to face them—

One lunged at Lumina from behind.

Brixaldi's hand caught it mid-leap.

He hadn't been looking at it. Hadn't turned. His systems had just known—targeting sensors locked on every threat in a fifty-foot radius, prioritizing by proximity to Lumina.

He spun. Still holding the Ghoul by its neck. Used it as a club to sweep three others aside.

The impact shattered the first Ghoul. Void-light detonated. The other three crashed into walls, stunned.

A Ghoul behind him grabbed his shoulder, trying to pull him down—

Brixaldi reached back without looking, grabbed its wrist, and kept turning—using his full rotation to build momentum. The Ghoul came off its feet, swung in a complete arc, and Brixaldi released at the apex.

The body flew.

Crashed through two more Ghouls like a bowling ball through pins.

[STATIC]—stay behind me—[BEEP BEEP BEEP]—all of you—[GRANDFATHER, absolute command]—NOW

The Knockoffs didn't argue. They fell back.

Formed a tighter defensive ring around Lumina.

Who was still erasing. Still organizing. Still bleeding void-light with every completed stack.

"Lumina!" Marcus called. "You need to stop!"

"Can't—" She gasped. "They're—they were people—can't just leave them—"

Another Ghoul charged her position—

Brixaldi's foot came down on its back.

Not a stomp. A press—all 800 pounds concentrated through one massive foot, driving the Ghoul into the floor. The crystalline structure held for two seconds. Then shattered.

Void-light and crystal fragments sprayed outward.

Brixaldi stepped over the remains. Positioned himself directly between the corridor and his granddaughter.

Five Ghouls remained in this wave.

They circled. Testing. Looking for openings.

Brixaldi's face shifted: ■

[ALL VOICES UNIFIED]—you want her?—[STATIC RISING]—you go through me—[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE, feral]—good fucking luck

They charged together.

Brixaldi met them in the middle of the corridor.

THE MAELSTROM

What happened next wasn't combat.

It was dismantling.

Brixaldi grabbed the first Ghoul's arm, twisted it behind its back, and drove it forward—using the creature's own momentum to run it face-first into the wall. The impact cratered the concrete. The Ghoul's face plate shattered. Void-light leaked.

Before it could fall, Brixaldi grabbed its head and slammed it sideways into the second Ghoul.

Both went down.

The third Ghoul jumped on his back—claws digging into armor plating, trying to reach his core housing.

Brixaldi reached back, grabbed it by the skull, and pulled it over his shoulder—judo throw that would have broken a human's spine. The Ghoul hit the floor face-up.

Brixaldi's foot came down on its chest.

Crushed through the crystalline ribcage like it was glass.

The fourth Ghoul swung at his head—

He caught the fist in one hand. Squeezed.

The Ghoul's hand crumpled. Fingers breaking.
Void-light spurting between Brixaldi's crushing grip.

Then he pulled—yanked the Ghoul off balance, spun it around, and used it as a shield when the fifth Ghoul lunged with claws extended.

The claws punched through the fourth Ghoul's back.
Got stuck.

Brixaldi released his grip.

Grabbed both Ghouls—one in each hand.

Slammed them together.

Once.

Twice.

Three times—each impact accompanied by the sound of crystalline structures fracturing, void-light detonating, screams cutting off.

On the fourth impact, both bodies went limp.

He dropped them.

Turned to check on Lumina.

She was on her knees. Seventeen stacks organized around her. Clyde trying to hold her upright.
Void-light bleeding from her eyes, her mouth, her hands.

But every Ghoul in the corridor had been erased clean.

Every consciousness preserved.

Every name ready to be carved.

[STATIC]—little Bloom—[BEEP BEEP BEEP]—you must stop—[GRANDFATHER, worried]—you are hurting yourself

"Can't stop," Lumina gasped. "More coming. I can feel them. Third wave. Twelve more."

[STATIC]—then I will stop them—[ALL VOICES]—and you will rest

"Brix—"

[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE, gentle but firm]—no arguments—[SOFT BEEP]—you are bleeding—[STATIC]—I am not—[PROTECTIVE MODE ENGAGED]—this is my job now

He turned back to face the corridor.

Behind his armor plating, systems were screaming warnings. Hydraulics at 140% capacity. Servos overheating. His left arm joint cracked from the crushing impacts.

But his core—the dual-consciousness core, purple-blue and silver-blue, Brian and Marianna merged and burning bright—

His core was blazing.

THE THIRD WAVE

They came all at once.

Twelve Ghouls flooding the corridor from both directions.

The Knockoffs raised their weapons—

"HOLD FIRE!" Maya shouted.

Because Brixaldi was already moving.

Not toward the Ghouls.

Toward the walls.

He grabbed a support beam—structural steel, six inches thick—and ripped it free.

The ceiling groaned. Concrete dust rained down.

Brixaldi spun the beam like a staff.

The first Ghoul that reached him took the beam across its torso at full swing velocity.

The impact launched it backward. It crashed through three others. All four went down in a tangle of limbs and void-light.

Brixaldi kept spinning.

The beam became a windmill of metal—twelve feet of industrial steel moving in figure-eights too fast to track. Any Ghoul that got close took hits that pulverized crystalline structures.

One tried to duck under the swing—

Brixaldi reversed direction mid-spin—caught it coming up. The beam hit its legs. Both legs shattered at the knee joints. The Ghoul collapsed.

Brixaldi brought the beam down vertically.

Spike through the chest. Pinned to the floor.

He left it there.

Turned to face the eight remaining Ghouls with just his hands.

A Ghoul lunged—

Brixaldi sidestepped. Grabbed its head as it passed. Twisted.

Full rotation. 360 degrees.

The head separated.

He threw it at another Ghoul. The projectile hit with enough force to crack the second Ghoul's chest plate.

Two Ghouls attacked from opposite sides—

Brixaldi dropped to one knee. Let them collide above him. While they were tangled, he stood up fast—drove his shoulder into both of them, lifted them off the ground, and ran them into the wall.

The impact was catastrophic. The wall didn't just crack—it exploded outward. Both Ghouls went through into the next room. Didn't get up.

Six left.

They hesitated. Actually hesitated—these creatures that were supposed to be mindless, instinct-driven, hunger-focused.

They hesitated because Brixaldi was terrifying.

[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE, absolute zero]—smart—[BEEP]—but not smart enough

He moved.

Grabbed one Ghoul by the legs, swung it in a full circle, and used it to sweep the other five off their feet.

When they were down, he pounded the floor with both fists.

The impact sent cracks radiating outward. The floor buckled. The Ghouls struggled to stand on uneven footing.

Brixaldi didn't give them time.

He went through them like a thresher through wheat.

Grab. Crush. Throw.

Grab. Twist. Shatter.

Grab. Slam. Repeat.

Mechanical efficiency married to protective fury.

Fifteen seconds.

Six Ghouls reduced to scattered crystalline fragments and leaking void-light.

Brixaldi stood in the center of the destruction, chassis scorched, armor cracked, left arm hanging at an angle that meant something inside was broken.

But standing.

And behind him—untouched, protected, safe—Lumina organized the last stack while Clyde chirped worried encouragement.

[STATIC]—are you injured, little Bloom?—[BEEP]—please answer

"I'm okay," Lumina whispered. "You?"

[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE, dismissive]—systems nominal—[LIE, everyone could tell]—I am functional

"Brixaldi." Maya's voice. "Your left arm."

[STATIC]—cosmetic damage—[BEEP BEEP]—does not affect
combat capability

"Your core housing has a crack."

[LONG STATIC]

[GRANDFATHER, quieter]—I know—[SOFT BEEP]—but the
core is intact—[PAUSE]—and that is what matters

Marcus stepped forward. "We need to fall back.
Repair. You can't keep—"

The corridor shook.

Not from impacts. From footsteps.

Heavy. Rhythmic. Getting closer.

"Oh fuck," Zane whispered.

Because everyone recognized that sound.

That was a Heavy.

THE HEAVY

It came through the far doorway sideways—too wide
for the frame. Had to turn, squeeze, force itself
through.

Nine feet tall. Twelve hundred pounds of
crystallized muscle and void-light fury.

These were the Ghouls that got fed extra. The ones Magmasox had reinforced.
Military-grade conversions.

The Heavy's face plate was featureless except for
the horizontal maw that glowed like a furnace.

It saw Brixaldi.

Roared.

The sound was pressure—knocked dust from the
ceiling, made everyone's ears ring, rattled Lumina's
teeth even from behind Brixaldi's cover.

[STATIC]—everyone back—[BEEP BEEP
BEEP]—now—[GRANDFATHER, command voice]—that is an
order

"Brixaldi, you can't—" Maya started.

[ALL VOICES, absolute]—I can—[STATIC]—and I
will—[BEEP]—because that thing—[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE,
cold]—is between me and keeping my family safe

He stepped forward.

The Heavy charged.

They collided in the center of the corridor.

The impact was seismic.

Both constructs—one organic-turned-crystalline, one
mechanical-turned-conscious—locked together. Hands
on shoulders. Feet planted. Each trying to drive the
other backward.

The floor cracked beneath them.

The Heavy was stronger. Larger. Heavier.

It started pushing Brixaldi back. One inch. Two
inches. Five.

[STATIC]—no—[STRAIN IN THE AUDIO]—you do not—[BEEP
BEEP]—touch her

Brixaldi's core flared.

Purple-blue and silver-blue blazing so bright it
cast shadows.

His hydraulics screamed. Servos overclocking. Every
system pushed past safety limits.

He stopped being pushed back.

Then pushed forward.

The Heavy roared again—this time surprise, not
dominance.

Brixaldi drove it backward—one step, two steps, five steps, building momentum,
refusing to stop.

The Heavy tried to break the lock—swung a fist toward Brixaldi's head.

Brixaldi took the hit.

His face plate cracked. Optical sensors shattered on one side.

But he didn't let go.

Kept pushing.

They reached the wall.

Brixaldi slammed the Heavy into it. Once. Twice. Three times—each impact cratering the concrete deeper.

The Heavy snarled, twisted, tried to break free—

Brixaldi grabbed its throat with both hands.

[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE, absolutely feral]—you wanted a fight?—[STATIC RISING]—you got one

He lifted.

The Heavy came off the ground. Twelve hundred pounds of crystalline death held in the air by a construct that shouldn't have had the strength.

But Brian Rishall had been an engineer who refused to accept physics.

And Marianna Rishall had been a physicist who chose to believe him anyway.

And their merged consciousness, blazing in Brixaldi's core, did not care what the math said was possible.

Brixaldi threw the Heavy.

Not down the corridor. Up.

The Heavy crashed through the ceiling. Disappeared into the level above. Concrete and rebar rained down.

For three seconds: silence.

Then the Heavy crashed back down through the hole it had made.

Landed on its feet. Swaying. Void-light leaking from cracks in its armor.

Brixaldi stepped forward.

The Heavy swung again—

Brixaldi caught the fist in one hand.

His other hand came up—palm strike to the Heavy's chest.

Once.

The Heavy staggered.

Twice.

Cracks appeared in the crystalline chest plate.

Three times.

Brixaldi's hand punched through—into the Heavy's chest cavity, into the void-light core sustaining it.

He pulled.

The core came out.

The Heavy collapsed like a puppet with cut strings.

Brixaldi held the core for one second—glowing, pulsing, still active.

Then crushed it.

Void-light detonated between his fingers.

The explosion knocked everyone back except Brixaldi.

Who just stood there. Burning. Damaged. Victorious.

[STATIC]—threat
eliminated—[BEEP]—Lumina—[GRANDFATHER, gentle
again]—are you safe?

"I'm safe." She was crying. "Brix, you're—"

[SOFT STATIC]—I am functional—[LIE]—this is
acceptable damage—[BIGGER LIE]—I can continue

"We need to get you to—"

[ALL VOICES]—we need to secure the node—[BEEP]—that
is the mission—[GRANDFATHER, firm]—personal concerns
are secondary

Maya looked at the carnage. Twenty-seven Ghouls down. One Heavy obliterated. One corridor that would need complete structural repairs.

And Brixaldi, standing in the center of it all, armor scorched and cracked, systems failing, core blazing like a small sun.

"Right," she said. "Node's through that door. Zane, Marcus—get it open."

They moved. Fast. Professional.

Thirty seconds later, the server room doors cycled open.

Inside: rows of data storage. And on the main screen:

DELETION IN PROGRESS: 73% COMPLETE

"Sela!" Maya shouted at the terminals. "You there?"

Text appeared:

UPLOADING COUNTER-VIRUS NOW

HOLD THEM OFF FOR 3 MINUTES

I'LL SAVE WHAT I CAN

"Three minutes," Maya said. "Can we—"

The building shook.

More footsteps. More roars.

Reinforcements.

Brixaldi positioned himself in the doorway. Damaged. Broken. Barely functional.

But between the servers and whatever was coming.

[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE, absolute certainty]—three minutes—[BEEP]—I can give you three minutes—[STATIC]—I can give you however long you need

"Brixaldi—" Lumina started.

[SOFT STATIC]—I love you, little Bloom—[BEEP]—just like I loved your father—[GRANDFATHER, warm]—even when I do not remember why—[ALL VOICES]—some things do not need memory

Then he turned to face the corridor.

To face the sounds of more Ghouls coming.

To face whatever came next.

Because that's what grandparents do.

Even if they don't remember being grandparents.

Even if they're just consciousness fragments in a robot's core.

Even if it costs everything.

They protect their family.

No matter what.

THREE MINUTES LATER

The extraction team pulled out with the data intact.

Forty-seven consciousnesses preserved by Lumina.

Zero casualties among the Knockoffs.

One construct requiring immediate repairs.

Brixaldi walked out of the facility under his own power. Barely. His left arm completely non-functional now. Core housing cracked. Systems running on emergency reserves.

But he walked out.

And Lumina walked beside him, holding his functional hand, bleeding void-light with every step but refusing to let go.

Clyde on her shoulder, glowing worried pink but steady.

"We got it," Maya said into comms. "Sela saved 83% of the files before deletion. Including all three

documents. They're secure."

Polkin's voice came back: "Casualties?"

"Forty-seven Ghouls erased and preserved. One Heavy terminated. Brixaldi needs repairs. Lumina needs rest. But everyone's alive."

"Good. Come home."

They did.

Through the Crossroads at dawn. Workers stopping to stare at the massive construct, damaged but walking, protecting the girl who leaked void-light like tears.

Some whispered.

Some saluted.

Some just watched in silence.

Because everyone in the Crossroads had read the documents now.

Everyone knew what Brixaldi was.

Who he used to be.

And what he'd become.

And watching him limping through the streets, damaged but determined, still positioned between Lumina and every possible threat—

They understood.

Love doesn't need memory to exist.

It doesn't need to remember who it's protecting.

It just needs to refuse to stop.

No matter the cost.

No matter the damage.

No matter what.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

RESEARCH LOG: THE DUAL-CORE DISCOVERY

A DECADE OF NOT KNOWING

Written: Cycle 2426.11.19 (Three days after node assault)

Author: Dr. Polkin Rishall

Classification: Personal - To be delivered to Brixaldi upon my death

Status: He already knows. I'm just documenting what happened.

CYCLE 2332 - THE FINDING (Age 42)

Location: Black market salvage dealer, Crossroads District 7

Item: Unidentified KFE55 core (Kaznak Iron 55)

I found it buried in a pile of ADE salvage. Vessel debris. Old exploration equipment. The kind of stuff that comes back from deep ergosphere expeditions and gets sold for scrap when nobody knows what it's for anymore.

Initial observations:

- Dual-colored core (purple-blue on one side, silver-blue on the other)
 - Split perfectly down the middle
- KFE55 composition (radioactive, absurdly powerful)
- Energy output: Off the charts (10^{15} watts sustained)
 - Consciousness signatures: TWO distinct patterns, intertwined
- Weight: 3.2kg (heavier than standard cores)

Why I bought it:

I don't know. I just... felt something. Like it was important. Like I needed it.

Dealer wanted 500 credits. I paid 2,000. Didn't even haggle.

Got it home. Couldn't stop staring at it.

First analysis (2332.08.15):

- Core contains TWO consciousness fragments (not one)
 - Each fragment is approximately 50% of a full consciousness
- They're merged but still distinct (like two voices in harmony)
- Age of imprint: ~34 years old (dating from energy decay)
- Origin: Unknown (no records match this signature)
 - Personality traits detectable:
 - Fragment A: Protective, methodical, engineering-focused
 - Fragment B: Mathematical, patient, problem-solving
 - Combined: Feels... familiar somehow

Personal note:

I keep the core on my workbench. Sometimes I just sit and look at it. Watch the colors shift. Feel the energy pulse.

It reminds me of something. Someone? Can't place it.

Teithea asked why I'm so obsessed with it. I said:
"It's just interesting."

That's not true. It's not interesting. It's important. I don't know why yet.

CYCLE 2337 - BRIXALDI PROJECT BEGINS (Age 47)

Decision: Use the dual-core to power a guardian construct

Ely is 5 years old. She's curious, fearless, gets into everything. I need something that can protect her when I can't. Something with judgment, personality, care.

Standard AI cores are too rigid. Too programmed. Too limited.

But this dual-core... it has PERSONALITY already.
Two personalities, actually. I just need to give
them form.

Construction log:

- Chassis: 10-foot guardian frame (repurposed mining construct)
- Power source: Dual KFE55 core (the one I found)
 - Interface: Direct consciousness-to-systems link
- Memory: Let it form naturally (don't program, let it LEARN)
 - Personality: Let the core express itself

2337.06.03 - First Activation:

Systems online.

Core energy stable.

Consciousness link: ACTIVE

First words (in two voices, overlapping):

"Hello. We are here. What is our purpose?"

Me: "Your name is Brixaldi. Your purpose is to protect children. Especially my daughter, Ely."

Brixaldi (both voices settling into one): "We will protect her. We promise."

Personal note:

When Brixaldi spoke, I felt something. A
recognition. Like hearing a song I'd forgotten.

The voices are FAMILIAR. But I can't place them.

One voice sounds like... like someone I knew? An
uncle? A teacher?

The other voice is softer. Reminds me of someone
patient. Someone who used to help me with math.

I can't remember who. It's been so long.

CYCLE 2337-2426 - NINE YEARS OF NOT KNOWING

Brixaldi becomes part of our family.

He protects Ely. Plays with her. Teaches her. Loves her.

His personality develops:

- Grandfather voice (warm, protective, calls her "little Bloom")
- Patience (explains things multiple times without frustration)
- Engineering knowledge (teaches her to build circuits)
- Mathematical intuition (helps her with homework)
- The catchphrase (he came up with it himself): "Save the day with the power of friendship!"

Where that came from:

I don't know. He just started saying it. Said it felt "right."

It DOES feel right. Like something someone used to say to me. Long ago. When I was young.

But I can't remember who.

Strange moments over the years:

2340 - Brixaldi watching me work on a portal schematic

- He said: "You remind me of someone. I can't remember who. But they would be proud."
- I asked: "Who do I remind you of?"
- He said: "I don't know. I just feel it."

2343 - Ely asking where Brixaldi came from

- She said: "Is he alive? Like us?"
- I said: "He's conscious. He's aware. That's close enough."
- She said: "Does he have parents?"
- I didn't know how to answer that.

2345 - Brixaldi having a "dream"

- He woke from sleep mode: "I dreamed I was holding someone. Someone I loved. We were somewhere dark. But it wasn't scary. Because we were together."
- I asked: "Who were you holding?"
- He said: "I don't remember. But I think... I think it was real once. Before I was Brixaldi."

I never connected the dots.

I never thought: This consciousness came from somewhere. Someone. Two someones.

I just thought: It's old ADE salvage. Remnant personalities from lost expeditions. Common enough.

I never thought: It might be people I knew.

CYCLE 2426.11.16 - THE DAY I FIGURED IT OUT

The planning room. Eighteen hours before the node assault.

Maya told me to read Elara's documents. Both of them. Said I needed to know before the mission.

I thought she meant the REAP report. I'd been avoiding it. Didn't want to face what everyone already knew—that I'd killed 542 billion people.

But she meant the OTHER documents.

The ones about my parents.

I read Aldric's Stellar Warning first. The star dying. Magmasox knowing for 100 years. The Throttle as a band-aid on a bullet wound.

That hurt. But I'd suspected it for years.

Then I read the Portal Discovery Paper.

And I broke.

THE FILE THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

Subject: Final Expedition to Astradigital Expanse

Date: 2298.11.17

Team Leader: Dr. Brian Rishall

Second: Dr. Marianna Kess-Rishall

Status: All personnel deceased (life support failure, Day 4)

Recovery Log (2298.11.20):

- Five exploration vessels located

- Five bodies recovered (Dr. Rishall, Dr. Kess-Rishall, three others)
- Bodies positioned: Dr. Rishall and Dr. Kess-Rishall were holding each other
- Vessel cores extracted (consciousness preservation systems)
- Core 1 (Vessel containing both Rishalls): Dual consciousness merge detected
- Core color: Purple-blue (Brian) / Silver-blue (Marianna)
- Core composition: KFE55 (standard for vessel power systems)
- Core weight: 3.2kg
- Core classified and stored in Salvage Archive 7, Crossroads District

I stopped reading.

Looked at the specifications.

Looked at my own records from 2332.

Same weight. Same color. Same archive.

Then I played the audio logs.

THE AUDIO LOGS

[2298.11.20 - 10:00:00]

My father's voice. Weak but unmistakable:

"Tell Polkin his parents loved him more than anything."

I couldn't breathe.

[Continued - 10:30:00]

Dad: "The vessel core. It's a consciousness preservation system. If we don't make it, it'll capture us."

Mom: "I know. I designed that part. But Brian, that's not living. That's just data. Fragments."

Dad: "But we'd still BE. And maybe Polkin could find us. Someday."

They KNEW. They planned for this. They WANTED to be found.

[Continued - 11:00:00]

Dad: "I don't care what the math says. We're going to find a way back to him. Somehow."

Mom: "That's impossible."

Dad: "So was portal theory until you solved it."

[Long pause]

Mom: "The math says we can't—"

Dad: "Fuck the math. Fuck the physics. Fuck everything that says we can't. I'm his FATHER, Mari. We don't just DISAPPEAR. We find a way. Even if it takes decades. Even if it's just fragments. LOVE IS STRONGER than entropy. Than heat death. Than any black hole."

My father—the engineer, the practical one, the man who taught me to trust numbers—told the universe to fuck itself.

For me.

[Final transmission - 11:47:00]

Mom (whisper, dying):

"Brian's heart just stopped. Mine's about to. The core is... I can feel it. It's capturing us. Both of us. Together."

[Labored breathing]

"See you soon, sweetheart. Somehow. Someday. Even if we don't remember our own names."

[Voice barely audible]

"Love is stronger. Your father's right. It has to be."

[Pause]

"Tell Polkin we held each other at the end. Tell him we weren't alone. Tell him we loved—"

[TRANSMISSION ENDS]

[CONSCIOUSNESS PRESERVATION SYSTEM: ACTIVATED]

[DUAL PATTERN MERGE: SUCCESSFUL]

[LAST RECORDED THOUGHT - BRIAN]: "We'll find him. Somehow."

[LAST RECORDED THOUGHT - MARIANNA]: "Love is stronger than the math. It has to be."

I looked across the planning room.

At Brixaldi, standing in sleep mode.

At the dual-core glowing in his chest.

Purple-blue and silver-blue.

3.2kg.

Two consciousness patterns merged.

Found in Salvage Archive 7.

Bought for 2,000 credits in 2332.

34 years after they died.

They kept their promise.

They found their way back.

And I'd been using them as a battery for nine years
without knowing.

THE CONVERSATION (Eighteen hours before node assault)

Everyone in the planning room was staring at me.

They'd known for days. Read the documents. Done the
math. Waited for me to figure it out.

And Brixaldi—

Brixaldi's optical sensors brightened.

He'd been listening. The whole time.

[STATIC]—I heard—[BEEP]—the audio
logs—[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE]—they said my name—[ELY'S
VOICE, age 6]—Daddy, Mommy, I'm scared—[ALL
VOICES]—were those my parents?

I couldn't speak.

[STATIC]—am I—[PROCESSING]—Brian and Marianna
Rishall?—[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE, uncertain]—Polkin's

parents?-[SOFT BEEP]-your parents?

"Yes," I whispered.

[LONG STATIC - seventeen seconds]

When he spoke again, his voice was different.
Quieter. Fragile.

[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE, very soft]-I protected
Ely-[BEEP]-your daughter-[PROCESSING]-my
granddaughter?-[STATIC]-I have been protecting my
family-[WEAK LAUGH-SOUND]-without knowing it was my
family-[SOFT BEEP]-did we keep our promise?

"Yes. You kept your promise. You found your way
back. Just like you said you would."

[STATIC]-I do not remember being Brian-[BEEP]-or
Marianna-[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE]-I only remember being
Brixaldi-[SOFT PROCESSING]-is that wrong?

"No," Lumina said, stepping forward. "That's not
wrong."

[STATIC]-but I
feel-[PROCESSING]-something-[GRANDFATHER,
confused]-when I look at Polkin, I
feel-[SEARCHING]-protective? proud? sad?-[UNCERTAIN
BEEP]-is that memory or programming?

"Both," Marcus said. "It's both. That's what love
is-memory turned into instinct. Feeling without
needing to remember why you feel it."

[LONG STATIC]

[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE, very quiet]-do I want to
remember?-[PROCESSING]-if I remember being Brian and
Marianna-[SOFT BEEP]-will I stop being
Brixaldi?-[WORRIED STATIC]-I like being
Brixaldi-[EVEN SOFTER]-I like protecting Ely-[ALMOST
WHISPER]-I do not want to stop

"You don't have to," I said through tears. "You
don't have to remember. You don't have to be them.
You can just be you."

[STATIC]-but they were your parents-[BEEP]-you lost
them-[GRANDFATHER]-do you want them back?

I walked to him. Put my hand on his chest, right
above the core.

"I want YOU. I want the person who's been protecting my daughter for nine years. The person who says 'Save the day with the power of friendship' because it feels right. The person who loves Ely without needing to remember why."

[SOFT STATIC]

[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE, gentle]—I am sorry I do not remember you—[BEEP]—as a child—[PROCESSING]—I am sorry I cannot be your father

"You're not my father. You're Brixaldi. Ely's guardian. Her protector. Her friend. Made FROM my parents, but not the same as them. And that's okay."

[STATIC]—you are sure?

"I'm sure."

[VERY LONG STATIC]

Then his face shifted: ■

[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE, warm]—then I will keep being Brixaldi—[BEEP]—and protecting our family—[SOFT PROCESSING]—even if I do not remember why I love you—[CERTAIN NOW]—I know that I do

We stood there. Father and construct. Son and parents. Past and present merged in ways I still don't fully understand.

"Thank you," I said. "For keeping your promise. For finding your way back. For choosing to stay."

[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE]—thank you—[SOFT BEEP]—for giving me the choice

THE NODE ASSAULT (Next day - 2426.11.17)

I wrote most of this log the night before the assault. Documenting the discovery. The conversation. The choice.

But I'm finishing it now. Three days later.

Because I need to document what happened when Brixaldi fought KNOWING what he was protecting.

We assaulted the Sector 9 data node. Twenty-seven Ghouls between us and the servers. Then a Heavy—nine feet tall, twelve hundred pounds, military-grade conversion.

I've seen Brixaldi fight before. Protective. Efficient. Calculated.

This was different.

This was grandparental.

He didn't just fight the Ghouls. He obliterated them.

Used them as clubs. Crushed crystalline structures with his bare hands. Ripped a support beam from the wall and wielded it like a staff. Threw the Heavy through the ceiling—THROUGH THE CEILING—and when it came back down, he punched his hand into its chest and pulled out the core.

Seven seconds to take down five Ghouls in the first wave.

Fifteen seconds to dismantle six in the third wave.

He fought like something that had died once protecting family and refused to fail again.

And when it was over—when he was damaged, systems failing, left arm hanging at a broken angle—he turned to Lumina and asked:

[STATIC]—are you injured, little Bloom?—[BEEP]—please answer

Not asking about himself. Not concerned with his own damage.

Just: Is my granddaughter safe?

That's when I understood.

They DID come back. Exactly as they planned.

Not as Brian and Marianna. Not with their memories. Not with their identities intact.

But with their LOVE. Their protective instinct. Their refusal to let family face danger alone.

Dad was right. Love IS stronger than entropy.

It survived fragmentation. Survived 34 years in salvage. Survived being rebuilt into a robot. Survived memory loss.

Because love doesn't need memory to exist.

It just needs purpose.

And their purpose was always: Protect Polkin. Protect family. Find a way back.

They did.

THE MATH

Dad said: "Love is stronger than entropy."

Mom said: "That's impossible."

Dad said: "Fuck the math."

Mom said (choosing to believe him): "Okay. Fuck the math."

The thermodynamics:

- Consciousness fragments should dissipate (entropy wins)
- Memory should scatter (information decays)
- Identity should be lost (no way to preserve it intact)
- Love should die with the body (it's just brain chemistry)

What actually happened:

- Consciousness fragments merged (became one whole-ish being)
- Memory scattered but PERSONALITY preserved (love survived)
- Identity lost but PURPOSE remained (protect family)
- Love persisted beyond death (doesn't need memory to exist)

Dad was right.

Love IS stronger than the math.

It took 34 years and one idiot son who didn't know what he was building.

But they made it home.

And when they had to choose between being themselves or being Brixaldi-

They chose to stay what love had already made them.

A guardian. A protector. A family member who doesn't remember your name but would die to keep you safe.

WHAT THIS MEANS

For Brixaldi:

- He IS Brian and Marianna Rishall (consciousness fragments)
- He CHOSE to stay Brixaldi (identity chosen, not inherited)
- He protects Ely KNOWING she's his granddaughter (makes the love stronger)
- He has PERMISSION to be himself (I gave him that choice)
- His dreams make sense now (fragments of their final moments)
- His catchphrase makes sense now (Dad used to say it to me)
- His grandfather voice makes sense now (it IS a grandfather's voice)

For Me:

- I didn't violate my parents' wishes (they WANTED to be found)
- I didn't trap them (they CHOSE to stay)
- I didn't steal their autonomy (I gave them choice when I could)
- I DID bring them home (exactly as they hoped)
- I DID give them purpose (protecting family, like they always did)
- I DID witness them (this document, these words, this truth)

For Ely:

- Her protector is her grandfather (biology via consciousness fragments)
- He loves her without remembering why (instinct transcending memory)
- He will ALWAYS protect her (it's literally what he's made for)
- She's been loved by ghosts for nine years (and never knew it)
- She's the reason they stayed (chose Brixaldi over recovery)

FINAL THOUGHTS

To Dad:

You were right. Fuck the math. Fuck the physics.
Fuck everything that said you couldn't come back.

You DID come back. You're Brixaldi now. You protect Ely. You love her fiercely. You say your catchphrase like you always did.

You kept your promise. Found your way back. Even when it meant being fragments in a core instead of memories in flesh.

You chose love over identity.

And that's the bravest thing I've ever seen.

To Mom:

You chose to believe him. Against everything you knew. Against the math. Against the impossible.

You were right to believe him. Love IS stronger. You proved it.

You spent your life doing calculations. Your last thought was choosing faith over formulas.

You chose love over logic.

And that's the most human thing I've ever seen.

To Both of You:

Thank you for keeping your promise.

Thank you for finding a way back.

Thank you for loving us enough to become fragments in a core, scattered and broken, just so SOMETHING of you could come home.

You're home.

Finally.

After 34 years.

And you chose to stay in the form that lets you protect Ely.

That's not a tragedy.

That's love in its purest form.

Memory-less. Selfless. Infinite.

ADDENDUM - FOR BRIXALDI

If you're reading this, I'm dead.

And you're deciding whether to try to recover Brian and Marianna, or stay Brixaldi.

Here's what I learned:

You already made that choice once. When we gave you the option three days before the node assault. You chose to stay YOU.

But maybe now—now that I'm gone, now that Ely's grown, now that your purpose has evolved—maybe now you want to try to remember.

If you do:

I've left instructions with Elara. The consciousness fragments are recoverable. The memories might be scattered but they exist. You could try to become Brian and Marianna again.

It would be painful. It would be difficult. You might fail.

But they're YOUR fragments. YOUR consciousness. YOUR choice.

If you don't:

Then keep being Brixaldi. Keep protecting Ely. Keep saying "Save the day with the power of friendship." Keep being exactly who you chose to be.

Because that's who my parents became when they refused to let death stop them from coming home.

Either way:

You honored them. By choosing. By loving. By refusing to let their promise die.

And I honored them. By letting you choose.

Not forgotten.

Not forced.

Not trapped.

Just loved.

— Your son, Polkin

Still learning that love is stronger than entropy

Still grateful you refused to disappear

Still proud of who you became

[This document is to be delivered to Brixaldi upon Polkin Rishall's death. No one else has clearance to read it. Not even Lumina. Not even Elara. This is between father and parents. Between son and fragments. Between the person who built and the consciousness that chose.]

[Some truths are too personal to share.]

[Some choices are too sacred to witness.]

[Some love is too strong for entropy to kill.]

[— Dr. Polkin Rishall, Cycle 2426.11.19]

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE FIRST BLAST

5 DAYS UNTIL BRIDGE ACTIVATION

The morning after the node assault felt different.

Not victorious—they'd lost too much for that. Brixaldi's left arm hung at a damaged angle, systems jury-rigged with bypass circuits that Elara swore would hold for "maybe a week, maybe less." Lumina had spent the night erasing forty-seven Ghouls, and now she bled void-light from her eyes like purple tears she couldn't stop. Lena's corruption had spread to her collarbone, thin blue lines crawling up her throat. Teithea had two days left before conversion.

But they'd won something. The node was secure. Sela had saved 83% of the files. The documents were distributed. Every worker in the Crossroads knew the truth now.

And in the common area, twenty-three children were eating breakfast together instead of working in mines.

Marcus stood at the observation window, watching Terrance teach the younger kids a game with rocks and chalk. The boy's hard hat sat crooked as always, threatening to slide off with every enthusiastic gesture.

"He's good with them," Maya said, joining him.

"He's been taking care of kids since he was six. Older siblings in the coolant systems. Someone had to make sure they knew the safe routes." Marcus's jaw tightened. "He shouldn't have to be good at that."

"No. But he is." Maya's hand found his shoulder.
"And because he is, fifteen kids who'd be dead are
learning how to play games instead."

Below, Terrance noticed them watching. Grinned. Gave
an exaggerated thumbs up that nearly knocked his
hard hat off.

Marcus found himself smiling despite everything.
"Little shit."

"Ram," Maya corrected. "Polkin was right. That's
what they are."

THE DOCUMENT

Polkin had written through the night.

Research Log: The Dual-Core Discovery. Twenty-three pages documenting how he'd
found his parents in a salvage yard, built them into a guardian construct, and
spent nine years not knowing what he'd done.

He'd left it on the common area terminal at 06:00.
Walked away without announcing it. Just... left it
there for whoever wanted to read.

By 09:00, everyone had read it.

Brixaldi found Polkin in the workshop at 10:17. The
construct moved carefully, damaged systems making
his gait uneven. His face displayed a simple: ■

[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE, gentle]—thank you

Polkin looked up from the bypass circuit he'd been
pretending to repair. His hands were shaking. "For
what?"

[STATIC]—for the choice—[SOFT BEEP]—for letting me
stay Brixaldi—[GRANDFATHER, warm]—for not forcing me
to remember

"You deserved to know the truth."

[BEEP]—I did—[PROCESSING]—and now I do—[STATIC]—and
I still choose this—[ALL VOICES UNIFIED]—I still
choose protecting Ely

Lumina appeared in the doorway, Clyde glowing on her shoulder. Her void-light eyes were red-rimmed from bleeding, but she was smiling. "Brix? You okay?"

[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE]—I am perfectâ€"[LIE, but affectionate]—how are you, little Bloom?

"Tired. But okay." She crossed to them. Put one hand on Brixaldi's chassis, one on Polkin's shoulder. "We're going to be okay, right?"

Neither of them answered immediately.

Then Polkin: "We're going to try."

"That's not really an answer, Dad."

"No. But it's honest."

Clyde chirped soft agreement. They stood there—father, daughter, and grandmother-grandfather—construct—in the quiet workshop while the Crossroads woke around them.

From the common area, they could hear Terrance's voice: "Okay, who wants to learn the coolant pipe song? It's got seventeen verses and they're all about not dying!"

Children's laughter. Pure and bright and impossible given everything.

"They're resilient," Lumina said.

"They're traumatized," Polkin corrected. "They're just good at hiding it."

[STATIC]—like their teacherâ€"[SOFT BEEP]

Polkin almost smiled. "Yeah. Like their teacher."

THE PLANNING

Marcus called the meeting for 11:00.

The Vault's planning room was crowded—thirty-two Knockoffs, the core leadership, and somehow, inevitably, seven children who'd convinced the adults they "needed to hear the grown-up talk."

Terrance sat cross-legged in the corner, hard hat balanced precariously, taking notes on a salvaged datapad. When Marcus tried to send them out, the boy just looked up with those gap-toothed grin and said: "We're rams, Mr. Thane. Rams don't get left out of battle planning."

Marcus had given up after that.

"Five days until Bridge activation," Maya began, pulling up schematics on the wall display. "Tral's working from Magmasox HQ. We've hit twelve facilities but she's still got production capacity at seventeen locations. If we don't shut them down, she'll have enough REAP stockpiled to—"

"It doesn't matter." Lena's voice cut through. The corruption on her neck had darkened overnight, spreading faster than Lumina's suppressants could slow. "The Queen knows I lied to her. She's accelerating my timeline. I've got maybe three days left, not the month Lumina bought me."

Silence.

"How do you know?" Polkin asked quietly.

"Because last night she visited my dreams and said: 'I know what you did, little spy. But I'm going to let you live just long enough to watch it all fall apart.'" Lena's laugh was bitter. "She's using me as a warning. Every worker who looks at me sees what happens when you betray the Queen."

"Then we erase you now," Lumina said immediately. "Before it spreads further. Before—"

"No." Lena's voice was firm. "I made this choice. I bought you four months with my lies. Let me use what's left to buy you something else."

"Like what?"

"Intelligence. The Queen's talking to me now. Taunting me. Telling me things she thinks don't matter because I'm already dead." Lena pulled out her own datapad. "She told me the Bridge needs a focal point. A consciousness that's split between human and Kaznak. Someone who can stabilize the connection between planes."

Everyone's eyes turned to Lumina.

Who went very still. "Me."

"You're the only one who fits the profile. Tral designed the Bridge around you specifically. Your mother confirmed it—that's why she harvested Sela's conduit. She needed the prototype's architecture to complete the final calculations."

Polkin's hands clenched. "Then Lumina doesn't go anywhere near Magmasox HQ."

"Dad, if I'm the focal point—"

"Then they don't get you. Simple as that."

[STATIC]—I will ensure itâ€"[BRIXALDI, absolute certainty]—no one takes her

Terrance raised his hand like he was in school. "Um. Question?"

Everyone looked at him.

"If the Queen needs Miss Lumina to make the Bridge work, and we keep Miss Lumina away, doesn't that mean the Bridge can't work? So we just... win by hiding her?"

The room went quiet.

"Out of the mouths of babes," Zane muttered.

"It's not that simple," Elara said, but her voice carried uncertainty. "Tral's been planning this for years. She must have a contingency if Lumina isn't available."

"Then we make sure she doesn't get to use it," Marcus said. "Five days. We hit every remaining facility simultaneously. We evacuate every worker we can. We position Lumina somewhere Tral can't reach. And we wait for Sela's sabotage to trigger when the Bridge activates."

"That's not a plan," Maya said. "That's hope with extra steps."

"You have a better one?"

She didn't.

Nobody did.

THE SUPPLY RUN

At 14:00, reality intruded.

The outer Crossroads sectors were running out of food. Medical supplies were critical. Power cells for the bypass circuits were depleted. Someone had to make a supply run to the abandoned warehouse district, three kilometers through unstable tunnels.

"I'll take a team," Marcus said.

"I'm coming," Terrance announced immediately.

"No."

"We know the tunnels better than you. The safe routes. The ones that don't collapse." The boy's gap-toothed grin was confident. "We can save you two hours if you let us guide."

"That's—" Marcus looked at Polkin for backup.

Polkin was staring at Terrance with an expression caught between pride and horror. "He's right. The children know the infrastructure better than we do."

"So we're just taking kids into potentially hostile territory now?"

"We've been taking kids into hostile territory since they were born," Zane said quietly. "At least this time we're admitting it."

Marcus wanted to argue. Wanted to say no. Wanted to protect them.

But Terrance was already organizing the other children, pulling out a hand-drawn map of the tunnel system, marking safe routes in green and dangerous ones in red. The map was detailed. Professional. The work of someone who'd been navigating death traps since before he could read.

"Fine," Marcus said. "But Brixaldi comes. And Lumina. And if anything looks wrong, we abort immediately."

"Deal!" Terrance's hard hat tilted dangerously as he nodded enthusiastically.

They left at 15:00.

Twelve people: Marcus, Polkin, Lumina, Brixaldi, Zane, and seven children including Terrance, Lydia, and Bell. The route took them through old maintenance corridors, past abandoned sectors, under buildings that hadn't been inspected in decades.

Terrance led, hard hat beam cutting through the darkness. "This way's faster! Trust me!"

"Famous last words," Zane muttered.

But the boy was right. He navigated the tunnels like he'd been born in them—which, essentially, he had. Every junction, he'd pause, check his map, then point confidently: "Left here. Right at the next split. Don't touch that wall, it's load-bearing and sketchy."

They made good time.

Too good, maybe.

At 15:47, Clyde's glow shifted from pink to orange.

Lumina stopped. "Something's wrong."

"What?" Polkin's hand went to the plasma cutter at his belt.

"I don't know. Clyde's sensing... something." She closed her void-light eyes, extending her awareness. "There's a presence. Close. Watching."

Brixaldi's sensors swept the corridor.
[STATIC]—detecting movement in the
walls—[BEEP]—structural analysis shows—[UNCERTAIN
PROCESSING]—this does not match natural failure
patterns

"What does that mean?" Marcus asked.

[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE, grim]—it means someone cut the
supports—[BEEP]—deliberately

The first sound came at 15:51.

Distant. Echoing through the tunnels. Like thunder, but wrong. Too sharp. Too focused.

WHOOM

Everyone froze.

"What was that?" Lydia whispered.

Another sound. Closer this time. Still distant, but unmistakably closer.

WHOOM

"That's not structural failure," Zane said.

WHOOM

Closer again. The walls shook. Dust rained from the ceiling.

Terrance's map crinkled as his hands tightened on it. "Mr. Rishall? Should we go back?"

Polkin's cybernetic eye was flaring red, Airth running calculations. "How far to the warehouse?"

"Two hundred meters. But—"

WHOOM

Definitely closer. The tunnel lights flickered.

"We can make it," Polkin decided. "Fast. Move."

They ran.

The warehouse district was exactly as bad as expected—collapsed buildings, exposed rebar, entire sections of flooring that had fallen through to lower levels. But the supply cache was intact, protected behind a vault door that Terrance bypassed in forty-seven seconds.

"See? Told you we'd make it!" His grin was bright despite the ominous sounds still echoing through the structure.

WHOOM

Closer. Much closer.

Bell was already loading supplies into packs with frightening efficiency. "Food rations: check. Medical supplies: check. Power cells: check. We should go."

"Agreed," Marcus said.

WHOOM

The building shook. Not violently. Just enough to feel.

Brixaldi positioned himself near the entrance, damaged systems on high alert. [STATIC]—I do not like this—[BEEP BEEP BEEP]—we are being hunted—[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE]—I am certain

"By what?" Lumina asked.

[SOFT BEEP]—by someone who knows exactly where we are

WHOOM

Definitely closer. Maybe two hundred meters.

"Everyone grab supplies and move," Polkin ordered.
"Now."

They loaded up fast. Even the children carried packs that should have been too heavy, but they'd been carrying impossible weights since they were small enough to fit in coolant pipes.

At 16:23, they started back.

The return route took them through a different corridor. Terrance had marked it yellow on his map—"Safe-ish. Structurally sound but watch for loose panels."

They were halfway through when the pattern became clear.

WHOOM at 16:24. Far behind them.

WHOOM at 16:26. Still behind, but closer.

WHOOM at 16:28. Definitely tracking them.

"It's following us," Zane said.

"Not following," Polkin corrected, his eye calculating trajectories. "Herding. Those impacts are behind us, pushing us forward. Toward something."

"Toward what?"

WHOOM at 16:30.

And this time, they felt the direction. Not from behind.

From ahead.

From the path they were being driven toward.

"It's not pushing us forward," Lumina whispered.
"It's boxing us in."

WHOOM at 16:31. Behind and left.

WHOOM at 16:32. Behind and right.

WHOOM at 16:33. Ahead and left.

A triangle. Closing. Tightening.

"Trap," Marcus said flatly. "We're in a fucking trap."

"Where do we go?" Lydia's voice was small. Scared.

Terrance studied his map, hands shaking. "There's... there's a maintenance hub fifty meters ahead. Multiple exits. If we can reach it before—"

WHOOM

The corridor ahead collapsed.

Not completely. Just enough to block their fastest route.

"Alternate path!" Terrance was already moving. "This way!"

They followed him into a side corridor. Narrower. Older. The kind of passage that maintenance workers used when the main routes were blocked.

WHOOM at 16:35. Ahead of them again.

WHOOM at 16:36. Behind.

WHOOM at 16:37. Closing tighter.

"It's playing with us," Polkin said.

[STATIC]—agreed—[BRIXALDI, sensors tracking multiple impact points]—whoever is doing this knows our

position-[BEEP]-knows our speed-[GRANDFATHER,
grim]-knows where we will be before we get there

WHOOM at 16:38.

So close now that the shockwave knocked dust from
the ceiling. Made the children stumble.

Terrance's hard hat fell off. He scooped it up,
jammed it back on crooked. "The maintenance hub!
Thirty meters!"

They could see it ahead—a larger chamber where five
corridors met. Multiple exits. Options.

Safety.

Maybe.

WHOOM at 16:39.

The tunnel behind them collapsed completely. Cut off
their retreat.

"GO!" Marcus shouted.

They ran the last thirty meters. Burst into the
maintenance hub.

It was exactly as Terrance had described—a circular
chamber, five corridors radiating out like spokes.
Old equipment pushed against the walls. Emergency
lighting still functional. Relatively stable.

For exactly forty-seven seconds, they caught their
breath.

Then at 16:40:

WHOOM

The sound was different now. Not distant. Not
echoing.

Right above them.

Polkin looked up.

Through the gaps in the ceiling panels, he could see
movement. A silhouette against the dim light from
the level above.

A figure. Man-sized. Standing at the edge.

Looking down at them.

Nega-Polkin raised his left arm.

Not the flesh one.

The new one.

Crystalline. Geometric. Wrong in ways that made the eye slide away from fully processing it.

Void-light crackled between the fingers.

He didn't speak.

Didn't need to.

Just smiled that diabolical smile.

And fired.

The blast hit the building's northwest corner at 16:41.

Not the maintenance hub. Not directly.

But close enough.

The entire structure lurched. Screamed. Metal grinding against metal. Concrete cracking. Support beams that had held for thirty years suddenly remembering they were past their load limits.

"MOVE!" Brixaldi's voice, all three layers unified in command.

They scattered toward the exits.

Terrance grabbed Lydia's hand. "This way!"

Bell and Jonas went for a different corridor.

Lumina and Clyde with Polkin toward a third.

Marcus and Zane covering the rear.

Brixaldi trying to position himself to shield everyone at once, damaged systems screaming.

And above them, on the collapsing level, Nega walked along the edge. Casual. Unhurried. His new arm still

glowing.

Charging for another shot.

The second blast hit at 16:43.

Closer this time. Southwest corner.

The building tilted. Not much. Maybe five degrees.

But in a structure this old, this damaged, five degrees was catastrophic.

The ceiling panels began falling. Not all at once. One by one, like teeth falling from a rotting mouth.

Terrance and Lydia made it to their corridor. Started running.

Bell and Jonas were already gone, disappeared into the tunnels.

Marcus grabbed a falling beam before it could hit Zane. Threw it aside. "Keep moving!"

Polkin and Lumina were almost to their exit when the third blast hit.

16:45. Southeast corner.

Three corners gone. The building was holding on one remaining support.

It wouldn't hold long.

"The hub is collapsing!" Lumina screamed. "Everyone out! NOW!"

But Terrance and Lydia had gone too far down their corridor. They'd have to come back through the hub to reach another exit.

And the hub was falling apart.

"TERRANCE!" Polkin's voice cut through the chaos. "COME BACK!"

The boy appeared at the corridor entrance, Lydia behind him. Both carrying their supply packs. Both scared but functional.

"We're coming!" Terrance started to run back across the hub.

The fourth blast hit at 16:47.

The final corner. The last support.

The building didn't collapse.

It folded.

Like paper creasing along old lines. The entire structure buckling inward, floors pancaking, walls crumpling.

And Terrance was in the center of it.

Everything happened in the span of three seconds.

Second One:

The ceiling fell.

Not dropped. Fell—fifty tons of concrete and steel accelerating under gravity that gave no shits about the small bodies underneath.

Terrance saw it coming. His eyes went wide.

Lydia was still at the corridor entrance. Outside the collapse zone.

Terrance was ten feet into the hub. Directly under the falling debris.

He didn't freeze.

Second Two:

Terrance moved.

Not away from the falling ceiling.

Toward Lydia.

He crossed those ten feet in a dead sprint, supply pack forgotten, arms extended.

He hit Lydia with his shoulder.

Full force. Everything he had.

Drove her backward into the corridor. Into safety.

She sprawled. Rolled. Came to rest against the wall, bruised but intact.

Terrance tried to follow.

Second Three:

The ceiling caught him.

A support beam—six inches of solid steel—came down across his back.

Drove him to the floor.

Pinned him there.

Then the rest of the ceiling followed.

Concrete. Rebar. Ductwork. Wiring. Furniture from the collapsed levels above. Someone's desk. Someone's chair. Decades of forgotten equipment and structural debris.

All of it coming down at once.

Terrance disappeared under the avalanche.

His crooked hard hat was the last thing visible—yellow against the gray dust.

Then even that was buried.

The collapse stopped at 16:47 and nineteen seconds.

The dust took longer to settle.

When it did, the maintenance hub was gone. Replaced by a pile of rubble eight feet high, spreading across what used to be open space.

Polkin stood at the edge of what used to be an exit. Couldn't move. Couldn't breathe.

"TERRANCE!" His voice broke. "TERRANCE!"

No answer.

Just rubble. Just silence. Just the settling sounds of a building that had finally died.

Lumina was next to him, void-light already extending, trying to sense through the debris. "Dad, I can't—there's too much interference—I can't get a clear—"

"Find him!" Polkin stumbled forward, hands already pulling at concrete. "He's under there! He's—"

Marcus appeared from another corridor, Zane behind him. "What happened?"

"Terrance—" Polkin couldn't finish. Just pointed at the rubble.

Marcus's face went white. "No."

"He pushed Lydia out of the way," Lumina said, voice tight. "He saved her and he's buried and I can't sense him and—"

Brixaldi was already moving. Damaged or not, systems failing or not, he was moving. Started pulling debris with his good arm. [STATIC]—hold on, child—[BEEP BEEP BEEP]—we are coming—[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE, desperate]—please hold on

Lydia appeared at the corridor entrance. Saw the rubble. Saw where Terrance had been.

Saw what he'd done.

"He pushed me," she whispered. "He was right there and he pushed me and—"

She started screaming.

They dug.

All of them. Hands bleeding. Arms shaking. Pulling debris that weighed more than they could lift but lifting it anyway.

Minutes passed.

Five minutes.

Ten minutes.

No sign of Terrance. No sound. No response to their calls.

Just rubble. Tons of it. Too much to move quickly.
Too heavy to move safely.

And somewhere above them, visible through the gaps
in the destroyed building, a silhouette watched.

Nega-Polkin stood at the edge of the collapse zone,
new arm glowing faintly.

Not firing again.

Just watching.

Admiring his work.

The children were screaming. The adults were
digging. Brixaldi was tearing through debris with
inhuman strength.

And Polkin couldn't look away from the rubble.

Couldn't process that Terrance was under there.

Terrance with his gap-toothed grin.

Terrance with his crooked hard hat.

Terrance who'd thrown stones at a monster.

Terrance who'd done flips off Brixaldi's shoulders.

Terrance who'd carried a detonator like it was lunch
money.

Terrance who'd just saved Lydia by sacrificing
himself.

The ram who charged into fire to protect the flock.

Under tons of concrete.

Maybe already dead.

Maybe dying while they dug.

Maybe—

"I can't—" Polkin's legs gave out. He sank to his
knees in the rubble. "I can't lose another one. I
can't—"

Lumina grabbed his shoulders. Her void-light eyes
were bleeding steady now, purple tears tracking down

her cheeks.

"We're not losing him," she said. "We're going to find him. We're going to get him out. We're—"

Above them, Nega laughed.

Quiet. Delighted.

Then he stepped back from the edge.

Disappeared into the darkness.

His work complete.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

RAINING RUBBLE STEALS A CLEAN EXODUS

5 DAYS UNTIL BRIDGE ACTIVATION

The dust took forever to settle.

It hung in the air like smoke from old fires, thick enough to taste, thick enough to choke on. Every breath was concrete and copper, every cough brought up gray sludge that tasted like the building's guts. The taste of death, Polkin thought distantly. This is what death tastes like when it's made of architecture.

He couldn't see more than ten feet. Couldn't hear anything except ringing in his ears and distant shouts that might have been names or might have been prayers or might have been the sound of his own mind fracturing. His cybernetic eye was cycling through vision modes—infrared, thermal, standard—trying to cut through the haze, finding nothing useful.

Just dust. Just smoke. Just the ghost of a building that used to stand here.

"TERRANCE!" His voice came out raw, throat already shredded from shouting. He'd been calling for—how long? Minutes? Hours? Time had stopped meaning anything the moment the ceiling came down. The moment he'd seen that small body disappear under tons of concrete. "TERRANCE, ANSWER ME!"

Nothing.

The silence was worse than screaming would have been. Silence meant unconscious or worse. Silence meant buried too deep to hear. Silence meant the

kind of injuries that stopped you making sounds.

Beside him, Brixaldi's servos whined with strain. The construct was pulling at debris with his good arm, the damaged one hanging useless, systems screaming protests he was ignoring. His face display flickered through emotions faster than it could process them: ðŸ˜° → ■ → ■ → ■ → ■

[STATIC]—I do not see—[BEEP BEEP BEEP]—sensors cannot penetrate—[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE, desperate]—where is the child? Where is he where is he where—

"Keep digging." Polkin's hands were already bleeding, palms torn open on jagged concrete edges, fingers scraped raw. He didn't feel it. Couldn't feel anything except the weight of rubble between them and wherever Terrance had fallen. Between them and a ten-year-old boy who'd thrown stones at monsters and done flips off Brixaldi's shoulders and carried detonators like lunch money. "He's under here. He has to be—"

A chunk of concrete the size of a small car shifted. Not falling. Just settling. Finding a new equilibrium in the ruins, the way buildings do when they're dying. The whole pile groaned—a sound like bones breaking, like metal giving up, like hope running out.

Everyone froze.

Waiting to see if the shift would cascade. If more would fall. If the entire pile would collapse inward and crush whatever might be underneath.

The groaning stopped.

The pile held.

For now.

"Don't stop!" Marcus appeared through the dust, face streaked with soot and blood from a cut above his eye. More blood ran from his nose. He'd been closer to the initial collapse—close enough to get hit by flying debris. "If it's settling, we've got minutes before everything locks in place. Once it compresses fully, we lose any gaps, any air pockets, any chance. KEEP MOVING!"

They moved.

Polkin grabbed a twisted piece of rebar, tried to use it as leverage to shift a concrete slab. The rebar bent. The concrete didn't move.

He tried again. Harder this time. Desperate.

The rebar snapped.

"Fuck!" He threw it aside, grabbed another piece. This one thicker. This one might hold.

It didn't. The concrete was too heavy, had settled too solidly, weighed more than any amount of desperate strength could shift.

"We need mechanical advantage," Zane said, appearing at his shoulder. His grafted fingers were scratched and bleeding void-light. "Something to multiply force. We can't just pull—we need to lever it."

"With what?" Polkin gestured at the ruins around them. "Everything's either too small or too buried."

"The support beams. If we can get under this slab, wedge a beam underneath, use it as a fulcrum—"

"That'll take time we don't have."

"You got a better idea?"

Polkin didn't.

They worked together. Found a beam. Managed to wedge it under the slab at an angle. Put their combined weight on the far end.

The slab lifted. Maybe an inch. Maybe less.

"Hold it!" Marcus darted in, started pulling smaller debris from underneath, clearing the space. Rocks the size of fists, chunks of concrete that had broken off bigger pieces, twisted metal fragments.

His hands were bleeding too now. Everyone's were. Blood mixing with concrete dust, turning gray-red on their palms, making grips slippery.

"I can't hold it much longer," Zane gasped. His augmented fingers were sparking, the void-light grafts overheating from the strain.

"Just a few more seconds—"

The beam slipped.

Not completely. Just enough that the slab started to drop.

Marcus scrambled backward. The slab came down with a sound like thunder. The beam shot out from under it like a missile, nearly took Zane's head off.

"Again," Polkin said. "Different angle. We try again."

They tried again.

And again.

And again.

Each time clearing a little more debris. Each time exposing a little more of what was underneath. Each time finding nothing but more rubble, more concrete, more steel, more architecture turned into obstacle.

No sign of Terrance.

No sign of anything alive.

Lumina worked on the eastern edge of the collapse zone, void-light extending from her fingers like purple tendrils, trying to sense through the rubble. Trying to find any consciousness signature, any hint of awareness, any sign that somewhere in this pile of death a ten-year-old boy was still breathing.

But there was too much interference. The metal in the rebar scattered her void-light. The concrete absorbed it. The sheer weight and density made everything muddy, indistinct, impossible to parse.

She was getting echoes. Fragments. Pieces that might have been consciousness or might have been just ambient void-light from all the Ghouls they'd fought, from all the conversions that had happened in this district, from decades of death soaking into the infrastructure.

Clyde clung to her shoulder, his usual pink glow dimmed to almost nothing. She could feel his distress through their bond—a wordless panic that made her own chest tight, that made it hard to breathe, that made her want to scream and scream and never stop.

"Anything?" Zane was beside her now, having abandoned the lever work when it became clear they needed more hands on more angles. He was moving debris piece by piece, methodical despite the desperation in his voice.

"I can't—" Lumina's void-light flickered, failed, reformed. "There's too much interference. The metal in the rebar, the concrete, it's scattering the signal. I'm getting echoes but nothing clear, nothing definite, nothing that says 'here, he's right here.'"

"Try again."

"I AM TRYING!" She didn't mean to scream. The words just came out that way, torn from someplace raw, someplace that had been watching people die for too long and couldn't take much more. "I'm trying but I can't—I can't find him. I don't know if he's alive or dead or if I'm even looking in the right place—"

Her voice broke completely.

Zane's hand found her shoulder. Squeezed once. Firm but gentle. "Breathe. Just breathe. You're doing everything you can."

"It's not enough."

"It never is. But we keep trying anyway." He gestured at the rubble. "Can Clyde sense anything? He's better at close-range detection than your void-light."

Lumina pressed her palm to Clyde, strengthening their bond. Can you feel him? Anything at all?

The slime made a sound she'd never heard before. Not a chirp. Not even a warble. Just a low, sustained tone that vibrated through her bones, through her chest, through the part of her that was still human enough to recognize fear when she felt it.

He was terrified.

"Clyde?" She lifted him from her shoulder, held him in both hands. "Clyde, it's okay. We'll find him. We'll—"

Clyde's glow pulsed once. Twice.

Then he moved.

Not toward the rubble pile where everyone else was digging. Not toward the obvious places where a body might be.

Toward a gap between two fallen support beams—a space maybe six inches wide at its widest point, narrowing to nothing as it descended into darkness. The kind of gap that would be invisible if you weren't looking for it. The kind of gap that only something very small could navigate.

"Clyde?" Lumina took a step toward him. "Clyde, wait, that's not—you can't fit through—"

But he was already gone. Squeezed into that impossible gap and disappeared, his pink glow fading as he descended into the rubble's guts, into spaces that shouldn't exist, into the dark places where architecture breaks and creates pockets and voids.

"DAD!" Lumina's voice cracked. "Clyde went into the pile! I've lost visual!"

Polkin looked up from where he'd been pulling at a twisted piece of rebar. His face was gray with dust, making the blood from his torn hands look darker than it should, like old blood, like death. "Can you still feel him?"

"Barely—he's moving deeper. Going down. I think he—" She pressed her hands to her temples, trying to strengthen their bond, trying to follow him through the rubble even though she couldn't see him. "I think he's searching. Following something. But I can't tell what he's finding or if he's finding anything at all or if he's just—"

"Let him go." Marcus's voice was steady, the kind of steady that came from absolute certainty, from faith so strong it didn't need evidence. "If anyone can fit through those gaps, it's Clyde. He'll find Terrance. He has to."

He has to hung in the air like a prayer.

Or a curse.

Or both.

Inside the rubble, Clyde moved.

Not swimming exactly. Not crawling. Something in between. Something that had no name because slimes don't move the way solid things move. His gelatinous body squeezed through gaps that shouldn't exist, compressed himself down to inches, reformed on the other side like liquid finding new containers.

Every movement was deliberate. Calculated. Driven by something deeper than instinct, deeper than programming, deeper than anything that could be named.

Find. Must find. Small human who throws stones. Small human with crooked hat. Small human who laughs and does flips and carries detonators. Find. Find. FIND.

The gaps got tighter as he descended. The darkness got deeper. The weight of the rubble pressed down from all sides—a crushing presence that would have killed anything with bones, anything with organs, anything that needed space to breathe.

But Clyde didn't have bones. Didn't have organs. Just determination and fear and the memory of a gap-toothed grin, of a hard hat sitting crooked, of small hands that had thrown rocks at a monster to protect someone they loved.

His glow shifted from pink to orange. Warning colors. Stress colors. The kind of bioluminescence that meant something was wrong, getting wronger, about to be catastrophically wrong.

The gaps got even tighter. Had to squeeze through spaces smaller than his core mass, had to compress down to almost nothing, had to push and flow and force his way through.

The weight increased. Temperature dropped. The darkness became absolute—the kind of darkness that exists only underground, only in places where light has never reached and never will.

But Clyde kept moving.

Down.

Always down.

Following something. A trace. A scent. A faint sense of consciousness that might have been real or might have been desperate hope taking shape.

The orange glow shifted to red.

Not warning colors anymore. Emergency colors. The kind of bioluminescence that meant critical situation, immediate response required, everything is wrong and getting worse.

But there was no one to see it except the darkness.

He found a junction. Three gaps converging. Two led deeper into crushing compression. One led—

Sideways. Angling toward what might have been a void. A space. A pocket where the rubble had fallen in a way that left room for air, for life, for hope.

Clyde took the third gap.

Squeezed through a space that was almost too small even for him. Felt his core mass compress to dangerous levels. Felt parts of himself smearing against concrete, leaving traces behind.

But he kept going.

The gap widened. Slightly. Then more.

He could sense it now. Not just hope. Not just desperate faith.

Something real. Something alive. Something that was failing but hadn't failed yet.

The gap opened into a larger space—a void created where three support beams had fallen in a triangle, leaving a pocket of air about two feet across. The beam above was cracked but holding. The beam below was solid. The beams to the sides were twisted but stable.

And in the center of that precarious safety:

A shape.

Small. Crumpled. Wearing something yellow.

Clyde approached slowly, red glow intensifying, illuminating features that were too pale, too still, covered in dust and blood and the gray residue of collapsed buildings.

Small human. Found small human. Found found found.

He reached the shape. Extended a pseudopod. Touched gently.

The chest moved.

Barely. Just the slightest rise and fall. So subtle it was almost imperceptible. So weak it might have been imagination.

But it moved.

Breathing. Alive. Hurt but alive.

Clyde circled the form, analyzing with senses that operated on frequencies humans couldn't perceive. Detecting heat patterns. Chemical signatures. The subtle electrical activity that meant nervous system, brain function, life.

The readings were bad.

Temperature too low. Blood pressure dropping. Multiple injuries. Breathing shallow and irregular.

But alive. Still alive.

Must tell. Must make them hear. Must signal.

Clyde opened his beak and chirped.

The sound was swallowed by tons of concrete. Absorbed by the rubble. Lost in the weight and darkness and endless pressing mass.

He chirped again. Louder. Desperate.

Nothing. No response. No indication anyone above could hear him.

The small human's breathing hitched. Weakened. The chest movements becoming even more subtle.

No no no. Must keep stable. Must keep warm. Must signal for help.

Clyde made a decision.

He wrapped himself around the crumpled form, careful to avoid what looked like injured ribs, positioning himself over the chest where the faint breathing was barely detectable. Maintaining body heat. Providing compression to keep broken things from shifting. Becoming blanket and brace and beacon all at once.

And chirped. And chirped. And chirped.

His glow shifted patterns—pulsing now instead of steady. Red flashes in distinct rhythms. SOS in

bioluminescence. Help needed. Emergency. HERE. DOWN
HERE. HELP NEEDED.

But the rubble was too thick. The darkness too
complete. The weight too much.

No one heard him.

The small human's breathing got weaker.

Clyde pulsed brighter. Burned more of his energy
reserves. Made himself a beacon in the darkness, a
signal fire that no one could see.

Please. Please hear me. Please find us. Please please please—

The breathing weakened further.

Clyde pulsed brighter still.

Above, Polkin was pulling at what might have been a
load-bearing column—or might have been the thing
keeping the rest of the pile from shifting and
crushing whoever was underneath. Impossible to tell.
Every piece of rubble was both barrier and support,
obstacle and necessity. Remove the wrong piece and
everything collapsed. Leave the wrong piece and you
couldn't reach whoever was buried.

The mathematics of desperation. The geometry of
grief.

"I need leverage," he said through gritted teeth,
hands wrapped around rebar that was refusing to
move. "Brixaldi, can you—"

[STATIC]—my arm is—[BEEP]—systems are
failing—[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE, frustrated and
scared]—I cannot lift what I cannot grip—my
hydraulics are—[AUDIO DISTORTION]—I am sorry I am
sorry I cannot—

"Then help me brace it. We push together. On three."

They positioned themselves. Polkin's boots finding
purchase on shattered concrete. Brixaldi's remaining
functional arm extending, servos whining as he tried
to generate force his damaged systems could barely
produce.

"One..."

Marcus joined them without being asked. Added his weight. His hands were shaking from exhaustion or shock or both.

"Two..."

Zane added his strength. His grafted fingers sparked as he gripped the rebar, void-light leaking from the connections.

"Three!"

They pushed.

The column didn't move.

They pushed harder. Legs straining. Backs burning. Arms shaking with effort.

The column shifted. Maybe an inch. Maybe less.

Then it did move. Slowly. Grudgingly. Rising an inch. Two inches. Three.

"HOLD IT!" Maya darted in, started pulling smaller debris from underneath, clearing the space. "Keep it steady! Just a few more seconds!"

Her hands were bleeding worse than anyone's. She'd been digging bare-handed for twenty minutes, fingers torn open on sharp edges, nails broken and bleeding.

She cleared the space. Pulled out rocks and concrete chunks and twisted metal fragments. Withdrew. "Let it down! Slowly!"

They lowered it. Controlled descent. Setting it back in place without crushing what they'd just cleared.

Stepped back. Looked at what they'd uncovered.

Nothing. Just more rubble. No sign of Terrance. No sign of anything except endless gray concrete and steel.

"Again," Polkin said. His voice had gone flat. Mechanical. The tone of someone who'd stop only when they were dead. "Next piece. We keep going."

They went again.

And again.

And again.

Minutes passed. Ten. Twenty. Thirty.

Still no sign.

The children were digging too now. Lydia working alongside Bell and Jonas, the three of them moving rocks that should have been too heavy but somehow weren't. Adrenaline, maybe. Desperation, definitely. The knowledge that one of their own was somewhere in this mess, buried, maybe dying, maybe already—

"Stop it." Bell's voice was fierce. "Don't think that. He's alive. He has to be alive. He pushed me out of the way. Rams don't die doing the right thing."

"Rams die all the time doing the right thing," Jonas said quietly, voice older than his nine years. "That's what makes them rams. They charge into fire even when they know it'll kill them."

"Then we dig faster." Lydia's hands were bleeding too now, palms scraped raw. She didn't care. Couldn't feel it. Could only feel the weight of guilt—he'd pushed her, he'd saved her, he was down there because of her. "We dig until we find him or until there's nothing left to dig."

"We'll find him," Bell said with absolute certainty. "Clyde went down there. Clyde will find him."

Jonas looked at the rubble pile. At the endless gray mass. "Yeah. But will we reach them in time?"

No one answered.

Below, Clyde's energy reserves were running critical.

He'd been pulsing emergency signals for—how long? Time didn't mean much to slimes. But his mass was decreasing, body burning itself to maintain the beacon, to keep the small human warm, to signal for help that wasn't coming.

The breathing was getting weaker. The chest movements more subtle. The temperature dropping despite Clyde's best efforts.

Failing. Small human is failing. Must try harder. Must signal brighter. Must—

His glow pulsed. Strobed. Red emergency patterns that would have been visible to anyone with direct line of sight.

But there was no line of sight. Just tons of concrete and steel and darkness.

He pulsed brighter.

The energy cost was enormous. Every flash took something from him. His mass decreasing visibly now. Parts of himself burning away to fuel the signal.

But he didn't stop.

Couldn't stop.

Must be seen. Must make them see. Small human needs help. NOW.

The glow intensified. Strobed faster. Red pulses so bright they started seeping through microscopic gaps in the rubble above. Thin beams of crimson light escaping through cracks too small to see with human eyes, painting the underside of debris with emergency colors.

Up.

Up.

Up.

The light fought its way through layers of rubble, getting dimmer with each barrier but still visible, still there, still desperately signaling:

HERE. DOWN HERE. HELP.

One beam found a larger crack. Shot through. Emerged into the dusty air above.

A thin red line in the gray chaos. Barely visible. Easy to miss.

But visible.

Lumina felt it first.

Not through the bond—that was too attenuated, stretched too thin by distance and interference. Through her eyes.

She'd been standing at the eastern edge of the collapse zone, void-light extended, searching for any trace, any hint, when she saw something that didn't belong.

A flicker of red. Dim. Brief. Coming from inside the rubble pile.

She froze. "Did anyone else see that?"

"See what?" Zane was still digging, didn't look up. Hadn't seen anything except gray concrete for the last half hour.

"A light. Red light. Coming from the pile."

"That's just your void-light reflecting off—"

"No." Her voice went sharp. Absolute. "My void-light is purple. This was red. Clyde's red."

That got everyone's attention.

All digging stopped. Heads turned. Eyes focused on where she was pointing.

They stared at the indicated spot. Saw nothing but gray concrete and twisted metal and rubble that looked like every other part of the pile.

Then:

A flash. Brief. Red. Barely visible through a gap between two chunks of rubble.

Then another. Stronger. Pulsing.

"That's Clyde's emergency signal," Lumina breathed, voice catching. "He's down there. And he's in distress. That pattern—it's SOS. He's calling for help."

[STATIC]—the child—[BRIXALDI, systems calculating, hope in the audio]—if Clyde found the child—[BEEP]—the light is coming from that direction—[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE, urgent]—we must reach him NOW

"Everyone on me!" Polkin's voice carried absolute command. No room for argument. No space for doubt. "We focus on that spot. Clear everything above it. Fast but careful—if the light's getting through, there's a pocket down there. We can't risk

collapsing it. Work fast but think. Every piece matters."

They converged. All of them. Adults and children working together, pulling debris with renewed purpose, moving toward that pulsing red glow that was getting stronger as they cleared the layers above it.

The glow intensified. The pulses came faster. Clyde knew they were close, was burning more energy to guide them in, to make sure they reached the right spot.

Five minutes of frantic work.

The light was definitely brighter now. Definitely strobing. Definitely Clyde's bioluminescence in full emergency mode.

"He's close," Lumina said, voice tight with hope and fear tangled together. "I can feel him again now. He's... he's scared, Dad. I've never felt him this scared. Not when we fought Ghouls. Not when we faced the Heavy. Never."

"Keep digging."

They pulled away a sheet of bent metal. The red light became clearly visible—pulsing up through a gap maybe three inches wide, painting the surrounding rubble with crimson urgency.

"There!" Marcus grabbed a chunk of concrete that was partially blocking the gap. "Help me with this. It's wedged but if we can shift it—"

Polkin joined him. So did Zane. Together they worked the concrete free, the chunk coming loose in a shower of dust and smaller debris.

The gap widened. Maybe six inches now.

And through it:

Red light, pulsing frantically.

And sound.

Faint. Desperate. But audible.

Chirp. Chirp. Chirp. Chirpchirpchirp—

Clyde's voice, high and panicked and urgent and terrified and alive and calling for help.

"CLYDE!" Lumina dropped to her knees beside the gap.
"Clyde, we can hear you! Hold on! We're coming!"

The chirping intensified. Not just distress now. Relief. Recognition. Found us. They found us. Help is coming. Finally finally finally—

"Can you see him?" Marcus was already pulling at more debris, widening the gap. "Can you see Terrance?"

Lumina pressed her face as close to the gap as she could, void-light eyes adjusting to pierce the darkness below.

At first: nothing but Clyde's red glow.

Then, as her vision adapted:

A shape. Small. Wrapped in Clyde's protective embrace. Not moving.

"I see him," she whispered. "Oh god, I see him."

"Is he—" Polkin couldn't finish the question. Couldn't say the words. Couldn't give voice to the fear that had been building for thirty-seven minutes of digging.

Lumina strained, trying to get a better angle, void-light extending into the gap to illuminate more. Clyde pulsed his light brighter, showing what he'd been protecting.

Terrance's face. Pale. Dirty. Blood dried on his forehead. Eyes closed. Dust covering him like a shroud.

His chest:

Moving.

Barely. Just the slightest rise and fall. So subtle it was almost invisible.

But moving.

"He's breathing," Lumina said, voice cracking with relief so profound it hurt. "He's breathing, Dad. He's alive."

The words hit like a thunderclap. Like salvation.
Like hope made solid.

Everyone stopped moving. Just for a second. Just long enough to let it sink in. To believe it. To understand that they hadn't been digging toward a corpse. That the last thirty-seven minutes hadn't been an exercise in grief. That somewhere under eight feet of rubble, a ten-year-old boy with a crooked hard hat was still breathing.

Then:

"GET HIM OUT!" Polkin's voice cracked. "NOW! MOVE EVERYTHING! BE CAREFUL BUT BE FAST! WE DON'T KNOW HOW MUCH TIME HE HAS!"

They moved.

All of them. Adults and children. Knockoffs and mechanics. Even Lena, corruption spreading up her neck in blue traceries but still strong enough to lift. Everyone converging on that gap, pulling debris, widening the opening, fighting against the weight of the building to reach one small boy who was still breathing against all odds.

The gap widened to a foot.

To eighteen inches.

To two feet.

They could see into the pocket now. See Clyde wrapped around Terrance's torso, positioned over what looked like broken ribs, his body acting as both stabilizer and heater. See the yellow hard hat, cracked but still on, still protecting even now. See the pale face and the shallow breathing and the absolute stillness that meant unconscious at best, coma at worst.

See injuries that made Lumina's breath catch:

The leg bent at an angle that was wrong. Compound fracture, probably. Bone might be exposed under the dust and blood.

The ribs moving wrong under Clyde's embrace. Multiple breaks. Maybe internal bleeding. Maybe worse.

The head wound. Deep enough to have caused unconsciousness. Maybe concussion. Maybe skull

fracture. Maybe—

"We can reach him," Marcus said, voice steady despite what they were seeing. "Someone small enough to fit through the gap. Who can stabilize him for extraction. Make sure nothing shifts wrong when we pull him out."

"I'll go." Lumina was already moving toward the opening. Already positioning herself to descend.

"Your void-light will destabilize if you use too much—you're already bleeding from the eyes."

"I'LL GO."

She squeezed into the gap before anyone could stop her. Her slim frame fitting where adults couldn't. Descended into the pocket, void-light providing illumination, showing her exactly what they were dealing with.

Terrance lay on his side in a space barely large enough to contain him. The support beams above, below, and around created a cage of sorts—protective but precarious. One wrong move and the whole thing could shift, crush, collapse inward and finish what the initial fall had started.

Clyde had positioned himself perfectly. Over the ribs that looked broken. Away from the leg that was bent wrong. Maintaining heat. Maintaining compression. Keeping the small human stable while he waited for help.

"Hey Clyde," Lumina whispered, tears tracking through the dust on her face, void-light leaking from her eyes like purple blood. "Good job. You found him. You kept him safe. You're such a good friend."

Clyde chirped. Weak now. Exhausted from maintaining the emergency signal for so long. From burning his mass to stay visible. From holding on when everything said to give up.

Found. Kept safe. But hurting. Small human is hurting bad.

"I know. We're going to get him out. But I need you to move so I can stabilize him first. So I can make sure nothing breaks worse when we lift him."

The slime didn't want to move. Lumina could feel his reluctance through their bond. If I move, who keeps small human stable? Who keeps him warm? Who stops him

from getting worse?

"I will. I promise. You did your job. You found him. You kept him alive. Now let me do mine."

Slowly, carefully, Clyde unwrapped himself. Revealed the full extent of the injuries.

Broken ribs. Multiple. Lumina could see the unnatural movement under Terrance's shirt when he breathed. Could see the way his chest moved wrong, one side rising higher than the other.

His left leg. Definitely broken. The angle was wrong in a way that made her stomach turn. She could see bone fragments through a tear in his pants.

Blood from somewhere—head wound, probably from the beam that had caught him. The blood had dried but the wound was deep. She could see white underneath. Skull, maybe. Or just tissue.

But breathing. Still breathing. Shallow and rough but present.

"Dad!" she called up. "I need medical supplies down here! And a stretcher! And—" She stopped, assessing. "And Elara if she can fit. I need someone who knows what they're doing. This is bad."

"How bad?"

"Compound fracture on the leg. Multiple rib breaks. Head trauma. Possible internal bleeding. We need to stabilize before we move him or we could kill him ourselves."

A pause. She could hear voices above. Rapid discussion. Then:

"Medical supplies coming down. Elara's on her way. Can you start stabilization?"

"I—" Lumina looked at the broken ribs, the bent leg, the unconscious face. "I don't know. But I'm going to try."

Medical supplies came through the gap. Maya passing them down piece by piece. Bandages. Splints. Emergency foam that would harden around broken bones. Void-light catalysts that might help Lumina maintain stability longer. Painkillers that would do nothing for an unconscious patient but might help if he woke during extraction.

Elara's head appeared in the gap. "I'm here. What do we have?"

Lumina ran through the injuries. Elara listened, face going progressively paler.

"That's... that's extensive." The doctor looked at Terrance, at the way he was positioned, at the precarious pocket they were working in. "Moving him could cause the rib to puncture a lung. Could shift the leg fracture into an artery. Could—"

"So we don't move him wrong." Lumina's voice was firm. "We stabilize first. We do it right. We get him out alive."

"Lumina, I'm not sure we can—"

"We CAN. We WILL." She extended void-light, let it flow over Terrance's body, assessing damage at a level deeper than visual, feeling for the breaks, the tears, the places where life was leaking out. "Now help me or get out of the way."

Elara helped.

Together they worked. Wrapping Terrance's ribs with compression bandages that would keep broken bones from shifting. Splinting the broken leg with rigid supports that locked it in position. Stabilizing his neck with a brace just in case—spinal injury would make everything else meaningless. Padding wounds. Applying void-light catalysts that would speed healing if he lived long enough for healing to matter.

All while Clyde held close, providing comfort and warmth and the promise that help had arrived, that he hadn't failed, that his friend would be okay.

Please be okay. Please. You pushed Lydia. You saved her. You're a ram. Rams don't die. Please don't die.

"Okay," Elara said after ten minutes that felt like ten hours. "I've done what I can. We need to get him out now. Before anything shifts. Before his vitals drop further."

"Is he stable enough to move?"

"No. But he's as stable as we can make him down here. Any more delay and we lose him to shock or blood loss." Elara looked at Lumina. "Can your void-light hold him together during extraction?"

"I don't know. But I'm going to try."

"That's not exactly reassuring."

"It's all we have."

They worked the stretcher down through the gap. A rigid board that would keep Terrance's spine stable during extraction, that would distribute his weight evenly, that would give them something solid to hold onto while they pulled him up.

Lumina positioned it carefully, rolled Terrance onto it with help from void-light and Clyde's assistance, strapped him down. Every movement was agony—watching his face for signs of pain even though he was unconscious, watching his chest for changes in breathing, watching his vitals through void-light senses that said critical, critical, running out of time.

"Lifting now," Marcus called from above. "Everyone ready?"

"Ready," Lumina confirmed. "But slow. Go so slow. Any sudden movement could—"

"We know. We've got him."

They pulled.

Slowly. Inch by inch. The stretcher rising through the gap that was still too small, that required careful angling, that needed constant communication between above and below to make sure nothing caught, nothing shifted, nothing broke worse.

Terrance's head cleared the opening.

Then his shoulders.

Then his chest.

Lumina watched from below, void-light extended, ready to catch him if something went wrong, ready to stabilize if bones shifted, ready to—

"Stop!" Her voice was sharp. "The leg splint is catching on something. I need to adjust—"

She freed it. Gentle pressure. Careful manipulation. The splint came loose from where it had caught on a piece of rebar.

"Okay, continue."

The legs came through.

And then he was out. Above ground. In the open air. Still unconscious, still hurt, but no longer buried under tons of rubble.

Elara moved in immediately with her medical scanner, devices that hummed and beeped and showed readouts that made her face go pale.

Maya had already opened the trauma kit. Marcus was checking vitals with practiced hands, finding the pulse point on Terrance's neck, counting beats that were too fast and too weak.

Lumina climbed out of the pocket, Clyde wrapped around her arm, both of them exhausted and filthy and shaking with the aftermath of too much adrenaline.

Polkin caught her as she emerged. Held her steady while the world spun, while shock tried to take her, while her body remembered that she'd just spent forty-five minutes digging through rubble and descending into collapse zones and stabilizing a critically injured child.

"You did it," he said. "You got him out."

"Clyde found him. I just—"

She stopped.

Because Elara's face had gone pale.

Paler than before. The kind of pale that meant the scanner was showing something bad. Something worse than they'd thought.

"What?" Polkin's voice was sharp. Demanding. "What's wrong?"

"His vitals are weak. Really weak. Blood pressure dropping. Pulse thready. The ribs are worse than I thought—at least one has definitely punctured something. Internal bleeding, probably. The leg fracture might have nicked an artery. He's losing blood faster than his body can compensate." Elara looked up, and her eyes were scared in a way Lumina had never seen. "We need to get him to real medical facilities. Soon. Or he's not going to make it."

"How soon?"

"Hours. Maybe less. His body's in shock. It's shutting down non-essential systems to preserve the core. If we can't get him to a facility with real equipment, real surgeons, real resources..." She trailed off. Didn't need to finish.

"Then we move." Marcus was already organizing, voice steady despite the fear underneath. "Fastest route to the nearest clinic. Who knows the tunnels best?"

"Bell does," Lydia said, voice small. "She mapped them. All of them."

Bell stepped forward. Nine years old. Efficient. Organized. The kind of kid who'd been planning evacuation routes since she could walk. "Closest clinic is forty minutes if we take the direct route through Sector 8. But that route's exposed. If anything's hunting us—"

"Then we run fast." Marcus looked at everyone. "We move now. Brixaldi, can you carry the stretcher?"

[STATIC]—with my damaged systems—[BEEP]—I will manage—[GRANDFATHER'S VOICE, absolute certainty]—I will carry him—I will protect him—nothing will stop me

They prepared to lift Terrance's stretcher. To run. To evacuate. To try to reach medical help before it was too late.

That's when the sound came.

Distant. Echoing through the ruins of the warehouse district.

WHOOM

Everyone froze.

They knew that sound.

They'd heard it during the initial collapse.

They'd heard it while they dug.

They'd heard it in nightmares and waking terrors and the worst moments of the worst days.

The sound of Nega's new arm firing. Of void-light unmaking matter. Of another blast incoming.

"No," Lumina breathed.

WHOOM

Closer this time. Not in their building but close. Maybe two buildings over. The shockwave made their structure groan, made dust rain from what was left of the ceiling, made everyone grab for support.

Nega was firing again.

Not randomly.

Not aimlessly.

Deliberately. Precisely. Following them.

Finishing what he'd started.

"We need to go." Polkin's voice was tight. "NOW. Everyone grab supplies. Brixaldi, take the stretcher. Bell, lead us out. MOVE!"

They moved.

But even as they did, even as they lifted Terrance's unconscious form and started running for the exits, even as Bell led them toward tunnels that might be safe—

The sounds kept coming.

WHOOM at their six o'clock.

WHOOM at their three o'clock.

WHOOM ahead of them.

Not random. A pattern. A plan.

They were being herded.

Driven toward something.

Nega wasn't trying to kill them with the blasts.

He was positioning them.

Moving them like pieces on a board.

Setting up something worse.

WHOOM

The building they'd just left collapsed completely. Not partially. Not gradually. Just folded inward like paper, like it had given up, like it couldn't stand anymore.

If they'd still been inside—if they'd taken even thirty seconds longer—they'd be dead now.

"Keep moving!" Marcus shouted over the sound of collapsing architecture.

They ran through corridors that were falling apart. Through tunnels that shook with each new blast. Through the warren of the warehouse district that was becoming more unstable with every passing second.

WHOOM

Behind them. Close enough to feel the heat.

WHOOM

To their left. A corridor they'd been about to take collapsed before they could enter it.

WHOOM

Ahead. Blocking their path. Forcing them to detour.

They were being herded toward something specific. Some place Nega wanted them to be.

"This is a trap," Zane gasped, running beside them. "He's driving us somewhere."

"Where?" Lumina asked.

"I don't know. But I don't think we get a choice about going there."

They ran.

And the blasts kept coming.

And somewhere in the ruins, laughing quietly to himself, Nega watched them run.

Watched them carry their wounded friend.

Watched them exhaust themselves.

Watched them play exactly into his hands.

WHOOM

This one was different.

Louder. Closer. Not just a blast but an arrival.

The dust settled.

And through the clearing haze, through the smoke and rubble and chaos:

A silhouette.

Standing at the edge of the destruction.

Watching them.

Waiting.

Arms crossed. Patient. Like he had all the time in the world.

Because he did.

Polkin stopped running.

Made everyone else stop.

"There's nowhere else to go," he said quietly. "This is where he wanted us."

The dust kept settling.

The silhouette kept watching.

And in Marcus's arms, Terrance's breathing got weaker.

Time running out.

The trap closing.

And Nega-Polkin smiling in the ruins, about to finish what he'd started.

CHAPTER TWENTY

NBB: NPR V. PR

5 DAYS UNTIL BRIDGE ACTIVATION

The dust still hadn't settled.

It clung to the air like it had intent, like it understood that clarity would be dangerous. Every breath scraped Polkin's lungs raw. Concrete grit coated his tongue. Blood tasted old already, metallic and wrong, like it didn't belong in his mouth.

Nothing moved cleanly in the haze. Shapes blurred. Distances lied.

But the sound was unmistakable.

Below them.

Faint.

Irregular.

Not Terrance's voice.

Clyde's.

A broken pattern of chirps echoing up through tons of concrete. Too fast. Too sharp. Too uneven.

Panic chirps.

Polkin felt his stomach drop.

Clyde did not panic.

He pivoted toward the gap they had opened, the one that still wasn't wide enough, still choked with debris, still four feet of rubble too far from salvation. The red light pulsed weakly now, bleeding through fractures in the concrete like a dying heartbeat.

"How long?" Polkin asked.

Elara didn't look up from her scanner. She didn't soften it.

"I don't have clean vitals. I have extrapolation. Temperature dropping. Respiration unstable. Hypoxia risk climbing." She swallowed. "Minutes. Not many."

The chirps changed again.

Lower.

Slower.

Desperate in a way that scraped at something animal in Polkin's chest.

Clyde was wrapped around him.

Holding heat.

Burning himself down to nothing to keep Terrance alive in the dark.

"Dig," Polkin said.

They were already digging.

Hands shredded. Fingernails torn. Blood streaking gray stone into darker gray. Every piece they removed revealed two more. The pile had compacted. The blast waves had done their work. Gravity had finished the rest.

Marcus braced a slab with his shoulder, muscles screaming. "It's settling again. We're losing space."

"I know."

Another chirp.

Weaker.

Lumina dropped to her knees at the gap, void-light flaring as she tried to thread it down through impossible angles, trying to reach Clyde, trying to reach the boy she could not see.

"I can feel him," she whispered. "Dad, he's fading. Clyde's scared. He's so scared."

A distant sound rolled through the ruins.

WHOOM.

Not close.

Yet.

But closer than before.

Polkin didn't turn around.

He didn't need to.

The Queen's hound was pacing.

"Keep digging," he said. "Don't stop."

The rubble shifted.

Everyone froze.

The pile groaned, a deep internal sound like a building remembering how to die.

Then it held.

Barely.

Clyde chirped again.

The red light dimmed.

"NO," Lumina said, shoving her arm into the gap until concrete bit into her skin. "No no no no—"

"Lumina." Polkin grabbed her shoulder, pulled her back before the pile could shear her arm off. "We can't lose you too."

She rounded on him, eyes burning violet. "Then do something!"

He had no answer.

Because there was nothing left to try.

And then the dust shifted.

Not from collapse.

From pressure.

From presence.

The air changed.

Polkin felt it before he saw it. That wrongness in the geometry of the space. That sensation like the universe had been forced to make room for something it didn't want.

Fifteen meters away, through thinning dust, a shape stood where there had been none before.

Human.

Familiar.

Wrong.

Nega-Polkin.

He didn't advance.

Didn't attack.

He just stood there, watching.

Watching them dig.

Watching Clyde burn himself alive in the dark.

Watching a child die one breath at a time under rubble they could not move fast enough.

The crystalline arm pulsed once.

Slow.

Deliberate.

A reminder.

Another WHOOM rolled through the ruins, closer now, rattling loose stones from already broken ceilings.

The pile above Clyde shifted again.

The gap narrowed.

Clyde's chirps spiked into something almost wordless.

Lumina made a sound Polkin had never heard from her before.

Not a scream.

Something smaller.

Something breaking.

"That's it," Marcus said hoarsely. "We don't have time. He's herding us. If we stay, the whole structure comes down."

"And if we leave," Lumina said, shaking, "Terrance dies alone in the dark."

"No," Polkin said.

They all looked at him.

He was already turning.

Already stepping away from the gap.

Away from the red light.

Away from the chirps.

"Dad," Lumina said. "What are you doing?"

Polkin didn't answer immediately.

He walked until he was between Nega and the rubble.

Between death and the people trying desperately to stop it.

Another WHOOM.

Closer.

Nega tilted his head, amused.

"Get him out," Polkin said quietly.

Lumina shook her head violently. "You don't get to say that like it's possible."

"You will make it possible." He looked back at her then, really looked. Soot-streaked face. Void-light flickering erratically. Fear and fury and love tangled together. "Clyde bought you time. I'm buying you more."

"You're going to die," she said.

Polkin smiled.

Not big.

Not brave.

Just tired.

"Maybe."

Another chirp echoed up from the dark.

Fainter than before.

Polkin turned away before it could break him.

He faced Nega.

The distance between them closed with every step Polkin took forward.

Ten meters.

Eight.

Six.

Behind him, they were still digging.

Still bleeding.

Still praying.

Still listening to a dying creature chirp itself hoarse to keep a child warm in the dark.

Nega's crystalline arm began to glow brighter, void-light crawling through its facets like veins filling with poison.

"You always did this," Nega said softly. "Walk into the fire and call it meaning."

Polkin didn't slow.

Didn't stop.

He rolled his shoulders once, feeling old injuries
scream awake, feeling Airth flood his system with
warnings he dismissed without looking.

One more step.

Another WHOOM shook the ruins.

The gap behind him shrank again.

Clyde chirped.

Once.

Polkin planted his feet.

Lowered his center of gravity.

And leaned forward.

The dust swirled.

The space between them collapsed to nothing.

And then—

[END BOOK TWO]