

Glory to Mankind

Ken Oshiro

Copyright © 2025 by Ken Oshiro

All rights reserved under Earth Federal Authority Regulation 847-C.

Unauthorized reproduction is punishable by reassignment to Surface Operations without life support equipment, as permitted by Starsiege Emergency Powers Act.

Act I: Consensual Agreement

Marco

The cafeteria held its breath in humid stillness. Climate control maintained the air at precisely nineteen degrees, yet moisture hung heavy from the collective exhalation of three hundred workers and the steam that leaked steadily from nearby sterilizers and algae cultivation tanks. Marco occupied a metal table alone, its surface scarred with heat rings and bearing a sharp chip at one corner where someone's frustration had found permanent expression.

His spoon moved without purpose through lukewarm lentil broth, stirring compressed vegetable matter that had been shaped, with industrial optimism, to resemble sausage. The utensil itself, molded from rough cellulose, had begun to soften at the edges where warmth met the acidic broth. His bowl, heavy black stoneware still radiating heat from the warming slot, contained a meal that mirrored Sector Twelve itself: functional, dependable, sufficient.

Above, a flatscreen mounted to a concrete pillar displayed the mid-day broadcast in silence. Subtitles crawled beneath the presenter's practiced smile:

"TITAN INDEPENDENT ASSEMBLY REJECTS EARTH-LED TAX ACCORD. Former colonies cite sovereignty concerns, declining fiscal integration despite substantial incentive packages."

Workers at neighboring tables murmured in low voices, faces bent toward personal slates. A woman three tables away coughed twice into her sleeve and adjusted her mask with quick, practiced movements. The fifteen-minute break continued its familiar rhythm, identical to yesterday's, predetermined for tomorrow's.

Beneath all human activity, a deeper frequency pulsed through the floor and walls. Sector Twelve's heartbeat. Most workers had learned to ignore the steady thrumming of the fusion reactor buried in the district's depths, but Marco remained conscious of it always. The reactor predated his birth by two decades and powered their entire arcology independently, requiring no corporate supply lines, no orbital dependency. Marco maintained water regulators and atmospheric filters, not reactor cores, but he understood the significance. Independence. Self-sufficiency. Dignity.

Concepts that frontier politicians would never comprehend.

The broadcast continued its measured delivery:

"The treaty represented a cornerstone initiative for the Union for Earth administration. Political analysts now anticipate significant damage to the current government's credibility as independent colonial commerce proceeds without Earth oversight."

Marco's jaw tightened. He reached out, silencing the screen with a sharp tap.

The same failures. The same compromises. The same indifference to Earth's needs.

Three days remained until the election, but early voting had commenced at dawn. Marco had planned to wait, to consider his options with proper deliberation, until last night's revelation. Another scandal. Another betrayal. The final weight on scales already bent to breaking.

From his chest pocket, he retrieved the company slate, its surface warm against his palm. The device responded with a soft chime, confirming his biometric signature through retinal verification.

AUTHENTICATED. Welcome, MARCO D. RETHVIN.

EARLY VOTING WINDOW ACTIVE. 2525 FEDERAL PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION.

Voting closes 00:00 UTC, Earth Standard Time. Selection is permanent.

He selected "Vote Now."

CHOOSE YOUR COALITION REPRESENTATIVE FOR THE FEDERAL PARLIAMENT.

Voter identity protected through quantum encryption protocols.

Alliance for Progress *Smart growth. Stronger worlds. Shared tomorrow.*

Free Horizons Movement *Unshackling humanity's potential. A future without limits.*

Union for Earth *Building a fair and sustainable tomorrow, together.*

Rally for the Natural Order *One Earth. One Future.*

Marco knew the statistics. Ninety-three percent of Earth's accumulated wealth now belonged to less than one percent of its citizens, the vast majority of whom had relocated to Titan estates, orbital residences, or stations circling distant stars whose names resisted pronunciation. When the colonies had rebelled fifty years ago, fought their war of independence, and won, Earth's wealthiest hadn't rallied to defend their homeworld. They had fled to join the victors.

Yet they maintained Earth citizenship by right of birth, casting votes from glass towers that would never feel the consequences of their choices. Each election cycle, they voted to expand trade corri-

dors, increase freight traffic, establish new commercial routes through neighborhoods Marco could scarcely afford.

He absorbed the costs. They collected the profits.

Marco didn't want the colonies back. Imperialism was a disease Earth was better off cured of. But fair was fair. You couldn't abandon your homeworld, move in with its former enemies, and still expect to vote on its future. That was absurd.

Their fortunes originated not from manufacturing or honest industry, but from algorithmic trading, deep-space financial instruments, and off-world markets that existed beyond taxation or accountability. They had constructed the automated systems that destroyed his knees. Four thousand union positions eliminated, replaced by a hundred robotic arms and a logistics AI that never demanded breaks, benefits, or dignity.

The final strike had concluded in humiliation. Three weeks in unheated corridors, rationing warmth, chanting resistance to security cameras that registered their presence without interest or response.

The corporate representative had issued a statement: "We sympathize with worker concerns."

The layoffs followed. Then salary freezes. Then the gradual reduction of medical subsidies.

His wife's condition remained stable. The cancer had not metastasized, not yet. But the state clinic maintained a waiting list that stretched three years into an uncertain future. Private treatment cost ninety thousand credits, half of which the company would subsidize if Marco achieved promotion to senior foreman.

Alternatively, if Earth's government finally developed sufficient resolve to tax the parasitic wealth that orbited beyond atmospheric reach.

Marco glanced toward the silent screen. Titan Independent Assembly members, wrapped in synthetic fabrics that cost more than his annual salary, raised glasses of wine that Earth had not produced in centuries. The caption read: "No comment at this time."

Rage mixed with despair in his chest, a familiar combination that had grown stronger with each passing year.

He wanted nothing excessive. Only dignity.

Marco's expression hardened. His finger moved toward the screen.

Rally for the Natural Order.

Seven years. Seven years of moderate promises, reasonable compromises, and careful negotiations. Seven years of watching conditions deteriorate while politicians explained the necessity of patience.

The radicals offered no cooperation, no careful diplomacy. They promised action.

"The independent colonies ignore reasonable discourse," their candidate had declared. "We will provide alternatives they cannot ignore."

Perhaps extremism remained the only rational response.

Marco selected the red option.

A gentle tone issued from the slate.

"Your vote has been recorded. Confirmation: 9K-44G-T3."

"Thank you for participating in the Earth Federal Democratic Process."

He deactivated the screen without hesitation or regret.

Marco finished his broth in three efficient swallows and disposed of the cellulose spoon in the recycling receptacle.

The shift alarm began its familiar wail.

He stood, stretching muscles that protested after years of industrial labor, and secured his respiratory filter.

The mask sealed against his face with a soft hiss.

Time to return to work.

Selai

The airlock sealed behind her with a pneumatic whisper. Decontamination mist descended in cold tendrils, scanning her protective gear with clinical precision before the outer door cycled open with hydraulic finality. The world beyond waited, patient and poisoned.

Wind moved across the wasteland, carrying nothing she recognized. No earth-scent, no growing things, no promise of rain. Only ozone's sharp bite mixed with the metallic taste of processed air, like breathing through old pipes. Above, the sky stretched thin and colorless, bleached pale by centuries of atmospheric scrubbers and orbital filters that had saved what remained while stealing something essential.

Her wrist monitor pulsed against her skin:

Air Quality: Acceptable. Trace organophosphates detected.

Airborne nitrates: 12.3 ppm. Microplastic density: 680 particles/m³.

Breathable, technically. She kept the mask sealed anyway.

The landscape stretched before her like an old wound. Gray earth crusted with carbon residue supported patches of engineered grass, each blade monitored by subterranean sensors and tended by tireless drones. Behind her, the arcology's tower rose in seamless curves of steel and composite, its surfaces reflecting nothing but emptiness. Ahead, the agricultural dome crowned the eastern ridge like a promise half-kept.

Glass and carbon fiber enclosed vertical gardens where nutrient solution flowed through precisely calculated channels. Automated systems maintained perfect conditions for plant growth while the world beyond slowly forgot what growth meant. The engineers called it closed-loop agriculture. Selai called it necessary.

She had seen the photographs. Earth before the cascades, when rivers ran clear and soil teemed with invisible life. Her grandmother spoke of tomatoes that grew in actual dirt, of fish caught from living seas. But even her grandmother's grandmother had never known true wilderness, only the managed remnants of what had been lost before anyone alive could remember.

The heat had stabilized decades ago, but poison lingered in everything. Salt deposits from ancient droughts, nitrate concentrations that would kill unprotected roots, hormone disruptors leaching from buried waste. The oceans remained, technically. But they were chemical stews now, acidic at the surface and oxygen-starved below. What life remained fed on sulfur and plastic fragments. The fishing fleets had been scrapped for metal forty years ago.

This was not the Earth that should have been. But it was the Earth they had inherited.

She passed through the dome's sterilization chamber, emerging into the soft hum of life support systems. Hydroponic towers stretched toward artificial suns, their roots bathed in nutrient mist delivered by precision nozzles. Sensor-guided drones moved between the plants with delicate purpose, pruning and pollinating with mechanical care that never tired, never erred.

The oversight systems showed green across all sectors. No intervention required. But Selai walked the rows anyway, because data could lie and calibrations could drift. Because somewhere, a child would

eat what grew here, and she would know if anything was wrong. She would feel it in her bones if the protection failed.

At Bed Fourteen, she called up the morning's readings. Holographic displays materialized above her palm:

Substrate Analysis - Sector C

PFAS compounds: 0.08 ppb

Heavy metal contamination: Non-detected

Microplastic infiltration: 1.8 particles/m³

Growth efficiency: 97.4%

Biofilm integrity: Optimal

Clean enough for human consumption. Safe enough for the children who would never know the taste of food grown in living earth.

She reached through the access port, pinching a sample of growing medium between gloved fingers. Synthetic gel mixed with sterile fibers, precisely calibrated for root development. Nothing lived in it except what they permitted. She tried to imagine earthworms moving through dark soil, roots spreading through networks of fungal threads, the chaotic fertility of decay and renewal.

The sterile gel fell from her fingers like a judgment.

Moving to the next section, Selai activated her personal feed, letting the election coverage flow through her earpiece while she worked. Every channel carried the same urgency, the same promises, the same careful parsing of what might be possible in a world where possibility had narrowed to survival.

She had studied every platform, weighed every proposal against the reality of what Earth had become.

The Alliance for Progress spoke of growth metrics and trade optimization. Earth as a logistics hub, a platform for commerce with the independent colonies. Environmental restoration rated a single para-

graph in their manifesto, classified as a "local concern" beyond federal mandate. They would pave paradise for orbital freight schedules.

The Union for Earth offered sustainable development. More hydroponic facilities, cleaner processing systems, tax incentives for biodiversity projects. Reasonable policies that felt like applying salve to a corpse. Incremental improvements to a world that needed resurrection.

Free Horizons promised transcendence. Why struggle with poisoned soil when orbital biofarms could feed everyone? Why mourn dead oceans when Martian algae pools produced better protein? They would preserve Earth as a memorial while life moved to cleaner worlds among the stars.

Then another voice cut through the carefully modulated discourse, speaking with human conviction rather than algorithmic precision:

"The Earth is not beyond redemption. We will restore what has been lost. Not through compromise. Through commitment."

Selai's hand stilled above the nutrient sensor she had been adjusting.

"The Rally for the Natural Order commits three-point-seven trillion credits over fifteen years to comprehensive ecological restoration. Soil remediation across the continental dead zones. Aquifer decontamination in the Great Lakes region. Marine ecosystem reconstruction along viable coastlines. Our children will walk barefoot on living ground again."

Barefoot. When had she last felt earth against unprotected skin?

"We will break the agricultural monopolies. We will return food production to the land where it belongs."

Impossible? Almost certainly. The soil chemistry alone would take centuries to repair. The ocean dead zones might never recover. But impossibility was not the question that mattered.

The Rally had begun as a fringe movement, traditionalist and suspicious of technological solutions. But somewhere in their evolution, they had attracted the deep ecologists, the restoration biologists, the scientists who still believed in healing rather than replacement. One faction called it natural order, another called it ecological necessity. Both demanded that Earth be more than humanity's abandoned birthplace.

While the other parties planned humanity's future among the stars or its managed decline in sterile towers, only the Rally still spoke of Earth as worth saving. In a civilization obsessed with escape, wanting to stay and repair had become the most radical position possible.

Selai stood at the edge of the growing beds, looking through transparent walls at the dead landscape beyond. She removed her work glove, calling up the voting interface on her slate. Four choices. Four different admissions of defeat or declarations of hope.

Her thumb hovered over the screen. The Rally promised restoration, even if it meant dismantling everything she understood about how this world worked. There was something both terrifying and exhilarating about voting for the impossible.

She felt uncertainty twist in her chest, the sense that this choice would cascade beyond anything she could predict.

She distrusted their authoritarian tendencies, their talk of military renewal when Earth needed engineers, not soldiers. She worried about their obsession with past glories, as if recreating old power structures could somehow resurrect old ecosystems. The colonies were gone, and empire was a luxury Earth could no longer afford.

But they were the only ones who spoke as if Earth's biosphere mattered more than Earth's balance sheets.

Perhaps if they succeeded, if they proved restoration was possible, the moderate parties would finally offer real solutions instead of man-

aged decline. Perhaps this was not the final answer, but the opening argument in a conversation Earth had been avoiding too long.

Perhaps this was not about choosing the future, but about refusing to accept that no future was possible.

Selai pressed her lips together, made her choice, and selected the red option.

Rally for the Natural Order *One Earth. One Future.*

The device chimed softly.

"Your vote has been recorded. Confirmation: H3N-72F-L1."

"Thank you for participating in the Earth Federal Democratic Process."

She slipped the slate back into her pocket and returned to her rounds, walking among the sterile gardens while the broken world waited outside.

Mira

The tea had long since gone cold by the time she made her move.
Pawn to G6.

The AI hesitated, the XR overlay flickering slightly as if startled by defiance from a woman with two stents, an arthritic hip, and three decades in planetary systems engineering. Then came the familiar green shimmer of victory.

She didn't gloat, simply closed the board. No rematch necessary. Still had it. Still hers.

One victory. One precious memory untouched by algorithms or polished in chrome.

She didn't need mechanical reinforcements. Her bones held up fine, as did her mind. She still took the stairs when the lift faltered, still defeated intermediate chess AIs without implants, still walked the block to the market rather than ordering synthetic fruit delivered from orbit.

What she needed wasn't strength. It was company.

She glanced at the frame nearby. Her children smiled at her across decades and astronomical units. They used to call at least once a solstice. Now, messages arrived delayed and impersonal. One daughter had sent a ten-second holo vid last spring, "Thinking of you! Life's busy!" recorded hastily near Ganymede. Another forwarded a birthday

greeting with a voice filter that hadn't even pronounced her name correctly.

Twelve years since she'd seen any of them face-to-face.

She once believed the post-human future would unite them, ease travel, merge minds, bridge the stars. Instead, it rendered Earth irrelevant. Rendered her irrelevant. The planet, the flesh, the past, all obsolete.

Let them chase immortality in data streams and synthetic bones. She still had breath in her lungs, real bones beneath her skin, and a human face.

And no one left to share tea with.

Her children were good people, but they no longer belonged to Earth. They lived above clouds, in vacuum and sunlight. She remained below, bound by gravity and dust.

And Earth itself, what had it become? Outside her door, it was impossible to distinguish flesh from machinery. Limbs moved unnaturally smooth and fast. Faces, blurred by beauty filters, always symmetrical and perfectly illuminated. Voices emerged polished, devoid of grain or emotion.

She didn't hate them, but refused to call it progress.

Her joints protested as she rose, knees aching predictably. But everything still functioned. The chip in her wrist maintained her registry, the retinal tag allowed her to vote, pass checkpoints, and access pensions. That was sufficient. She had no need for steel spines or gel-filled cheeks.

She'd earned her bones, her slow movements, her aches.

She reached into the cupboard, pulling down a tin of seed crackers, dry, crunchy, and faintly sweet. Her daughter once joked they were "practically archaeological."

She bought them anyway. The flavor anchored her to the past. Some irrational part of her hoped that one day, someone might return and recognize that taste.

She returned to her seat, the news murmuring quietly from the wall screen. Election day.

She had seen all the ads, heard all the speeches, read the party programs twice. Not because she was bored. Because they hadn't buried her yet. And until they did, she could still make herself matter.

She yearned for slowness, silence, and faces that showed their age.

Only one party spoke of pulling back, of saying enough. Only one promised to restrict cybernetic augmentation, preaching restraint, limits, and the value of consequences.

Her friends whispered about it cautiously over tea, in private messages, always softened by humor.

"I suppose I'm voting Natural Order this year," they'd laugh uneasily. "First time for everything."

The federal election happened only once every eight years. The victor would control everything: the Earth Federal Authority and all the momentum of national chambers bound to it.

The blinking console caught her eye. Her slate was already authenticated. A single tap would finalize her decision.

Beside it, the photo frame cycled through filtered images of her grandchildren, faces flawless yet unreal. She longed to hold them again, not their alloy limbs or synthetic shells, but them, warm and alive, giggling before the implants and the distance, before they regarded her from distant moons as something quaint and nostalgic.

Mira bit into a seed cracker, chewing slowly.

Let them broadcast lives from orbit. Let them forget the satisfying crunch of real food.

The screen waited patiently. The world held its breath.

She swallowed deliberately, brushing crumbs from her fingertips like dust from an old monument.

Then she pressed.

Rally for the Natural Order *One Earth. One Future.*

A gentle chime filled the silence.

"Your vote has been recorded. Code Z9X-03C-G8."

"Thank you for participating in the Earth Federal Democratic Process."

She leaned back in her chair, cracked another seed cracker, and let the quiet reclaim her space.

Rian

Patrol Shift 19. Outer orbital arc, Sector Twelve. Docked at Unmanned Maintenance Outpost Juno-4.

Empty. Silent. Forgotten. Just like the void around them.

Nothing ever happened here, which was precisely why they were stationed here.

Captain Rian Solano reached up, tapping the bulkhead twice in ritual acknowledgment before sealing his helmet to the recharger port. The suit responded with a pneumatic hiss and mechanical clicks, unlocking piece by piece with practiced precision. He stepped free carefully, as if shedding a second skin. The cooling rig exhaled softly behind him.

The patrol ship was old, a relic from the Andros series. Its hull maintained pressure, the reactor ran clean, the thermal exchangers functioned adequately. Tiny scars from recent micrometeoroid impacts marred the dorsal shielding. Nothing critical, but he would mark them for replacement at the next depot cycle. The plating carried a five-year rating; this section had endured nearly twice that. Time for renewal.

Still, it held. Like Earth.

The interior offered little beyond survival necessities: a narrow corridor, a single sleep rack, an emergency station with basic medical supplies. The cockpit was cramped, two seats wedged together with no

room to stretch his legs. His copilot occupied the other seat for most of their shifts. Maintenance operations outside felt like a well-earned break from the confined space. No luxury here. Metal panels, cable runs, restraint loops, and a single rifle secured above the pressure bench.

Black polymer casing. Magnetic acceleration barrel. Stamped prominently on the side: EARTH FEDERAL AUTHORITY NAVY.

It had never been fired. But it remained perpetually ready.

He hoped he would never need it. But if that moment came, he would not hesitate.

Someone had to stand ready.

Patrols lasted weeks, carried out by two-person crews with no shore leave, no external contact beyond recycled air, diagnostic logs, and routine engine burns. They had even begun recommissioning older vessels like this one, stretching resources to keep newer ships combat-ready for deployment elsewhere.

This was not punishment. It was sacrifice.

The kind people used to honor.

Only then did Rian allow himself to exhale completely.

A faint voice crackled through the communications grid, filtered and distant:

"You voted?"

He did not reply immediately. Instead, he reached for the overhead console, activating external feed number three.

There it was. Earth.

Cloud bands curled softly across its surface, arcologies gleaming like polished monuments, scars etched into continents beneath the thinning atmosphere. Wounded but breathing. Still theirs.

The young had departed long ago, chasing futures unburdened by history or responsibility. Earth offered little now beyond heritage, legacy industries, and the colossal Dyson Belt that powered warships and interstellar defense systems. Without patrol ships like theirs maintaining the perimeter, the Belt would fall into other hands.

"Glory to Mankind," Rian said into the communications array.

A weary chuckle returned through the static. "Glory to Mankind."

He had cast his vote two shifts before launch, quietly, without ceremony, through the military proxy channel. No hesitation, only resolve. He had known for years whom he would support.

They had once been dismissed as zealots, romantics, traditionalists trapped in the past. But Rian had witnessed the consequences firsthand.

His father had served in the colonial war, a marine officer who came home with stories that haunted them both. Cybernetic soldiers driven by neural stimulants, trapped in bodies wired for perpetual enhancement and overclocked agony. The necessities of war had transformed people into weapons. Officers like his father had been spared, but the enlisted marines bore the modifications that turned flesh into machinery. Men unable to escape their own enhancements, screaming through faces that were half synthetic, half biological.

Rian never understood why anyone would voluntarily replace their limbs with instruments of synthetic torture.

He activated his neural interface, fingers finding the hardwired connection grafted into his cervical vertebrae. An older protocol, military standard. The ship's diagnostics flowed through him directly: coolant cycles, cabin pressure, reactor pulse rate. The data did not scroll across screens but resonated within his consciousness.

Temperature variance. Hull integrity coefficients. Fuel reserves in the tertiary backup line.

For a moment, he was the ship.

All systems operational.

Disconnecting, he blinked hard, refocusing on the external display.

He thought of the people below, civilians enhanced for aesthetics, augmented for social influence, their modifications justified as personal freedom. Freedom to lose their humanity, freedom to forget their origins.

Earth had lost its collective spirit. Now it harbored only private interests, tailored flesh, and luxury orbital platforms.

He was not here for comfort. This was duty.

The silence suited him. It spoke clearly about what truly mattered.

Someone had to guard the frontier. Someone had to remember what they were protecting.

He adjusted the wrist strap of his chronometer, fingers briefly touching the old service beads beneath his sleeve.

It was worse among the independent colonies. Earth's wealthy had fled during the war, draining resources to build libertarian sanctuaries among distant stars.

Parasites, he thought. Not pioneers. They had gorged themselves on Earth's strength, then abandoned their host when it began to fail.

Earth had lost too much already. Its colonies. Its position among the stars. Its sense of purpose. The Rally was not perfect, but it remained the last voice that spoke clearly about humanity's unity, about Earth's rightful place in the cosmic order.

They promised to rebuild the fleet. The frontier worlds would see Earth's flag flying with authority once more. For the first time in decades, he believed such a thing was possible.

Now they were rising. The polls indicated victory. Not by margins, but by mandate. This was not protest voting. This was a reckoning, and it would not be gentle. Harsh measures for harsh times.

Humanity had strayed too far from its foundations. Time to bring it home.

Rian stared through external feed number three, his gaze fixed on the slowly rotating planet below.

He held the image for a long, silent moment.

Echoes from Earth

She sat cross-legged on the smooth polymer floor, spinning a magnetic puzzle ring between her fingers. Its shifting nodes and weighted cores clicked gently, realigning into temporary constellations that pulsed softly whenever solved.

Her right eye tracked the holonet feed, layered directly onto her vision through the ocular augment. Transparent panels drifted across her field of view like a second eyelid, headlines, faces, voting percentages.

Her left eye still saw everything else: the dome's gentle ceiling glow, hydroponic shelves misting rhythmically, and the subtle flicker of red dwarf starlight filtering through the shielded windows.

"EARTH FEDERAL ELECTION 2525 RESULTS – HISTORIC MAJORITY"

"RALLY FOR THE NATURAL ORDER CLAIMS VICTORY: 61.3%"

"Federal Security Committee Confirms Integrity of Results"

"Peaceful transition of power expected in coming months, despite scattered urban protests"

She didn't fully understand every word. But she understood enough. She knew who they were, what people whispered about them

in family messages or at night, when adults believed children weren't listening.

She turned slightly, her eyes syncing again.

Her mother stood by the preparation basin, carefully shaping nutrient gel with one hand. Her other eye mirrored the same news feed, same overlay, different account. Mother and daughter watched history unfold quietly, side by side.

For a moment, neither spoke.

Then, softly:

"Mama... why did the Earth people vote for the bad ones?"

Her mother didn't answer immediately. She rinsed her hands in the nutrient sink, then crossed the room, moving with a graceful fluidity that the girl admired deeply. Smooth, silent, effortless, like a dancer underwater.

The girl didn't yet have augments. Her legs were still growing. But someday, perhaps she'd move like that too.

Her mother sat down gently before her.

"That was a long time ago, darling."

"But... they won."

"That broadcast," she explained quietly, "is twelve years old. It just reached us now. Earth is very far from Luyten's Star. Slightly more than twelve light-years."

The girl blinked, her puzzle ring forgotten in her lap.

"So... things are better now? They've had more elections since?"

"Probably. People learn, even down there."

She stroked her daughter's hair tenderly. Yet her gaze drifted momentarily, instinctively, toward the distant stars beyond the dome.

When she spoke again, her voice was softer, barely above a whisper, more to herself than to her daughter.

"At least, I hope they did."

Our Mandate

C hancellor Elena Marcor remained silent.

She sat with hands lightly steepled, posture impeccable, gaze calm. The kind of attentiveness that made people second-guess themselves even when she said nothing.

To serve was to listen. That was the burden of the Chair.

The Federation's nerve center hung in low orbit, nestled in the planetary ring's framework. Through composite glass walls, Earth turned slowly, vast and indifferent. The structures here were practical, armored, without ornament. Built to endure, not impress.

Power, properly held, needed no gold.

Her overlay blinked to life:

RKV: Relativistic Kill Vehicle. Strategic projectile accelerated to significant fraction of light speed. Upon impact, releases energy equivalent to thousands of nuclear warheads. Interception considered physically impossible.

"We've wasted three quarters trying to restore tax jurisdiction with Titan," muttered Emilio, Minister of Economics, leaning forward over his knees. "Threats. Delays. Asset seizures. Why do we even bother? Send the fleet. Remind them who built those habitats in the first place."

He glanced around the room, lips thin. "It's why we were elected. People don't want negotiations. They want results."

Yara, Minister of Offworld Relations, let out a short, humorless laugh. "Mars guaranteed Titan's independence. And they have nukes, Emilio. I'd rather not be explaining to the press why we triggered another planetary war with our largest ex-colony."

A faint chime. The lights shifted.

A slender column in the center blinked once with amber light, and Sol's synthetic voice cut clean through the tension:

"This session is now in active protocol. Topic: Post-Human Development Trajectories. Proceeding with Chairwoman's authorization."

Elena raised her hand, swept her gaze across the table. The President sat silent behind folded hands. The Supreme Commander, expression unreadable, shoulders taut in dress blacks. The Ministers still scrolling through overlays. Finally, Yara, rolling her eyes in diplomatic exhaustion.

She gave a single nod. "Authorized. Proceed."

"Item One. Risk trajectory of autonomous self-replicating systems."

Across the table, overlays flickered to life. A few ministers sighed quietly, others only half-watched. Elena found herself studying their faces. Emilio's jaw worked silently, still angry from the exchange. Yara had turned away, staring through the windows at Earth's slow rotation. The President remained motionless, as if carved from stone.

"Definition: machines capable of reproducing themselves without human oversight. Strategic risk: once replication begins, population growth is exponential. Within a year, a single replicator can multiply into millions. Within a decade, they may strip a planet bare."

Sol's projection showed the solar system, core colonies, far expansion. Dotted lines marked humanity's last known jurisdictions. Elena found herself calculating distances between the points of light. Emilio

shifted restlessly in his chair. Yara's stylus tapped against her slate in a nervous rhythm.

"Item Two: Ideological Drift and Synthetic Adoption. Far colonies beyond the ten light-year boundary show accelerating divergence in cultural norms. The most significant trend: growing alignment with synthetic identity models. Widespread cybernetic augmentation, neural lattice integration, and in some cases, the abandonment of biological form entirely."

The AI paused. "Supreme Commander. On record. Is Earth prepared to fight a second replication war?"

The temperature in the room seemed to drop several degrees. The Supreme Commander's jaw tightened, but he remained silent. Not out of ignorance, but because he remembered. They all did. The first replication war hung over them like a storm cloud that had never quite dissipated.

Elena raised her hand subtly. "Continue, Sol."

"Item Three: Threshold Reached."

The projection dimmed. Archival footage appeared, gritty and timestamped. A woman stood beneath an unfamiliar orbital crest, voice steady but eyes gleaming.

"This is our first full transfer. No degradation beyond synapse threshold. She speaks, remembers, dreams. The substrate isn't biological, but it doesn't need to be. This mind still lives."

Elena watched the woman's face. Pride, not boastfulness. The expression of someone who believed they were saving humanity.

"We can make this technology available to all citizens within the next decades. Identity continuity. Immortal life. A future not bound by flesh, but shaped by will."

The feed cut. Silence followed.

"The announcement was recorded twelve years ago from the Luyten's Star system. Based on current data, I project three possible timelines for full population-scale conversion to synthetic forms."

Elena felt something cold settle behind her ribs. She knew where this was going.

"Optimistic scenario, from a human perspective: seventy to eighty years. Most probable scenario: thirty to forty years. Pessimistic scenario: full rollout is already underway."

The Minister of Growth rubbed his jaw, trying to sculpt the thought into something graspable. "You said millions within a year. But what does that mean, Sol? Industrial capacity? Development curve?"

"Each replicator is an independent fabrication node. Within two years, if left unchecked, such a swarm could manufacture interstellar-capable hulls and combat-capable drones in the low thousands. Within five years, partial Dyson structuring sufficient to outproduce Earth's entire industrial base."

Elena's breath caught as she stared at the logarithmic curves climbing toward infinity. The Defense Minister leaned back in his chair as if physically pushed by the implications. Yara had gone perfectly still.

"Beyond that point, this is not competition. It is divergence. They move toward Kardashev Type II. Planetary mass becomes industrial feedstock. Solar energy is harvested. While we wait twenty-five years to raise a citizen, then retire them forty years later. We are linear. They are exponential. The curve will not cross again."

The room held its breath. Even the gentle hum of the orbital station's systems seemed muted.

Elena felt ice crystallizing in her chest. "Can we stop them?"

Sol answered without hesitation. "Yes. If action is taken before they reach industrial singularity."

A new projection pulsed to life: growth curves, material estimates, solar capture rates. One trajectory was red.

"There is a window measured in years, not decades. Past that, containment is improbable without full-scale celestial denial. Eradication is still possible. But it would require total kinetic sterilization of all known post-human systems."

The air seemed to thicken around the table.

"Estimates suggest no survivors."

Elena's mind raced ahead, seeing the shape of what was coming. History casting its shadow forward.

"From a military perspective, can such a strike be accomplished with current infrastructure?"

The Supreme Commander didn't look away. "Yes." His voice was even. "Earth maintains four primary RKV launch platforms. Each capable of throwing projectiles exceeding one hundred tons, accelerated to 0.3c. All target systems are within range. All charted."

"But if the post-humans have partial Dyson structuring, they also have the energy base," said the Defense Minister. "How likely is it that these colonies possess RKV-class infrastructure of their own?"

Sol answered without hesitation. "One hundred percent. Luyten's Star currently possesses a Dyson Belt of comparable scale to Earth's. Any civilization with sufficient energy and cognitive capacity will prioritize deterrence."

Someone muttered, "So they already have RKVs."

"Correct."

Elena turned to the President. He hadn't spoken once. He stared at the table, eyes open but unfocused, hands still folded. As if waiting for someone else to decide.

Their eyes met briefly. Then she looked to the Supreme Commander. No words were exchanged. Just the narrowing of his eyes, the barest nod. One soldier to another.

She exhaled. "I believe we may need time to think. We'll reconvene next week. Same hour."

"Delaying would be unadvisable," Sol replied without inflection. "Every day reduces the probability of successful sterilization. Mass increases. Distribution widens. The window for containment shrinks exponentially."

A break.

When they returned, water had been poured. Some glasses sat untouched, others drained in a few desperate gulps. Elena noticed the Ministers had scattered themselves differently around the table, as if proximity to the decision might somehow make it contagious. Yara sat rigidly upright, fingers interlaced so tightly her knuckles had gone white. Emilio slouched deep in his chair, staring at the ceiling. The Supreme Commander maintained perfect posture, but a muscle in his temple jumped rhythmically.

The President had taken a seat farther from the table, as if trying to distance himself from what was coming.

Then, at last, they continued.

Yara spoke first, her voice barely above a whisper. "What can we even do in fifty years? You can't intercept an RKV."

Sol's response came immediately. "Survival is possible. The previous government requested contingency plans during the same meeting you are currently attending."

Every head turned toward the President. His face had gone ashen, but he maintained his rigid posture. The old man from the Union for Earth, now little more than a ceremonial figurehead. The weight of unfinished business hung heavy in the space between them.

He did not meet their gaze.

"A significant portion of my total cognition was dedicated to this task. The resulting contingency plan was called The Starsiege Directive."

Understanding hit Elena like a physical blow. The moderates had sat in these very chairs. Had heard these same projections. Had stared into the same abyss. They had spent the energy of stars planning humanity's grave beneath the earth.

And still, they had chosen not to strike.

The burden they couldn't bear had simply been passed down. Inherited. Waiting.

"The Starsiege Directive requires at minimum five uninterrupted centuries of sub-crustal engineering to fully fortify a planet against relativistic kinetic strikes. Fifty years is woefully insufficient."

Ministers exhaled. Some in disbelief, others in quiet despair.

"At best, fifty years allows for partial survival. Most of the surface population will be lost. Recommended strategy is to disperse the fleet and launch hundreds of seed ships. They must depart before counter-impact. Survival rests not here, but in their wake."

Elena stared at the projection. Numbers and orbits and impact windows until the meaning blurred.

There had always been three possibilities. Everyone knew them.

Do nothing and hope the post-humans let them live, outdated, inferior. A relic species beneath glass.

Do nothing and be annihilated. A preemptive strike from minds that no longer dreamed in flesh.

Or strike first and live, maybe. Bury the world, launch the seeds.
Become a myth carried in iron coffins across the void.

None were victories.

"For fuck's sake," she whispered, head in her hands.

The words fell into the silence like a stone.

The silence cracked. Emilio surged to his feet.

"This is your damn fault!" He jabbed a finger toward the President.
"You could've started the strike years ago! When we still had the advantage! Every year of hesitation let them build more RKVs!"

The President didn't flinch. For a long moment, he simply breathed. Then he turned slowly to face Emilio.

"Those who believe genocide is a solution," he said quietly, "have forfeited the right to call themselves human."

The words hung heavy and absolute. He looked around the table. First at Elena. Then the Supreme Commander. Then finally, at Sol's amber light.

"And you all know it."

Elena stood, one palm flat on the table. "This choice isn't one that statistics can make for us. No model can calculate whether we want to become the kind of species that fires first."

After a long pause, Yara broke the stillness. "Why were we elected?"

Elena inhaled slowly. "We are the Party of Humanity. To protect the interests of the human race. To ensure survival."

And survival existed in only one branch of the future.

She had been elected to restore Earth's power. To preserve the species. To ensure survival. To let others choose humanity's fate was never part of the mandate.

"I don't want to do this," she said quietly. "But this is my duty."

The President rose slowly. "This is a representative democracy. You are entitled to take the best decision for all of us. Even if it goes against your party's line."

She nodded once. "This is the best for humanity."

He held her gaze. "I hope history agrees."

And he left. She didn't watch him go. Because part of her already knew he was right.

She drew in a breath. Let it go.

"Does anyone oppose this decision?"

Silence. Even Sol said nothing.

Then someone whispered from the far side of the table: "Glory to Mankind."

As if it still meant something.

Her hand trembled as she reached for the glass. She lifted it, paused, set it down.

Said nothing.

Starfire

Pre-dawn inertia gripped the Early Strategic Detection Complex. Dim lights, half-whispered reports, and the constant churn of recycled air. Deep beneath the basalt plains of Utopia Planitia, kilometers of reinforced regolith and alloyed basaltite armor shielded the facility from external threats.

Behind the central coordination dais hung the flag of the Independent Republic of Mars: crimson and ochre, twin moons crossed above a stylized hemisphere rimmed in steel. A stark emblem of sovereignty. And the war that won it.

Analyst Halvik reclined in his cradle, feet locked beneath the console bar, half a ration of cooling caffeine paste forgotten by his elbow. His shift was a long, monotonous watch labeled "elevated tension," a familiar euphemism for when Earth's communications went silent, satellites flickered, or unexplained energy pulses occurred.

The monitoring systems spanned planetary arrays, orbital networks, and synchronized outposts on Phobos and Deimos, operating on margins measured in seconds. Latency meant death. Analysts were sealed within for weeks, their knowledge too critical for easy rotation.

Halvik's thermal readout blinked: a minor spike at the Dyson Belt southern array, Grid D-16. Routine, he thought, tagging and auto-reporting the anomaly. Then Grid D-15 flared, followed by D-14, and suddenly a lateral jump to C-22. These weren't routine transfers or

balancing cycles. They were ignition sequences, tightly coordinated and accelerating rapidly.

"Thermal to Synthesis," Halvik called out. "Three blooms within ninety seconds. Pattern anomalous. Coordinated ignition confirmed."

Breath held across the chamber. Then GravSig spoke: "Confirming displacement fields."

EM analyst chimed urgently, "Magnetic containment fields live on D-14."

Halvik's console flashed a locked alert:

**ALERT: MULTI-SOURCE HEAT ESCALATION
PATTERN MATCH: STRIKE PREP ALPHA-4**

The main display erupted in red indicators: capacitor blooms, stable containment frequencies, electromagnetic resonance at launch amplitude. The deep, droning alarm resonated through the facility, unmistakable and final.

"That's no power cycle," Halvik murmured, his voice tight. "The Dyson Belt just went fully active."

Energy surged across collector arms, radiating waste heat simultaneously from dozens of stations. That much concentrated power had only one purpose: launch cradle ignition.

Earth was initiating a full-scale launch sequence.

Halvik's throat constricted. Mars maintained twelve thousand strategic warheads on permanent alert. Earth knew that. What madness had overtaken them?

The chamber erupted:

"GravSig confirming displacement arcs across Delta-Nine!"

"EM fields approaching critical charge threshold!"

"Vectoring confirms cradle alignment. Platforms adjusting for live targeting!"

The final statement shattered all doubt. Launch platforms locking vectors could mean only one thing: Earth intended lethal force.

The synthesis officer stood urgently, compiling rapid-fire reports into his headset. "Strategic Command, Early Warning Cell Two. Confirmed coordinated ignition across Dyson infrastructure. Belt fully active. Energy signatures consistent with RKV launch protocol Alpha-Four. Alignment indicates imminent strike condition."

The alarm shattered what remained of calm: a rising, toneless note followed by mechanical announcement echoing through Mars Strategic Nuclear Command:

PROTOCOL ARES-ONE INITIATED

Emergency lighting flooded the chamber in stark red. Pressure doors sealed with hydraulic finality. Consoles blinked alive in sequence.

Major Lys Maren straightened, her hand moving instinctively to the biometric verification plate. Lieutenant Vakel beside her confirmed system integrity, lips pressed thin with unspoken tension.

Her console pulsed readiness:

STRIKE PACKAGE: ORBITAL CASCADE

TARGET NODES: 3,112 WARHEADS

ARMED: 8,554

YIELD PROFILE: VARIABLE TO MAXIMUM

EXECUTIVE KEYS: PENDING

Target list scrolling beneath, line by line:

Earth Federal Authority Headquarters

Planetary Ring Hardpoints – Command & Control, Relay Arrays

Earth Surface: 1,725 Military Installations
Urban Population Nodes: 873 Impact Zones
Moon: Beam Array Complex – Mass-Energy Transmission
System Orbital Shipyards – Designated Hull Fabrication Docks
Continental Sensor Grids – Global EM Surveillance Network

Each target carried an assigned warhead and projected fallout vector. She recognized some: capitals, orbital facilities, major logistical hubs. Others were anonymous designations. Every line marked for obliteration.

Commander Renel's voice crackled through communications: "Confirm full armament. Maintain key-ready status. Await final authorization."

Without hesitation, Maren keyed her response:

**ALL SYSTEMS ARMED LAUNCH ENABLED
AWAITING EXECUTIVE AUTHORIZATION**

The cursor blinked beneath her response. Final. Irrevocable.

Maren stared at the target list scrolling past her console. Urban Population Nodes: 873 Impact Zones. The clinical language couldn't hide what those numbers meant.

Nothing remained within her control. She leaned back, waiting for someone far above to determine whether this morning marked the end of both worlds.

Halvik's panel continued pulsing.

The thermal signatures weren't stabilizing. If anything, they climbed faster, spike after spike cascading across the collector arms

in synchronized bloom. He flagged two more nodes. The auto-ping transmitted to synthesis.

Then Vectoring spoke, sharp and clipped: "Launch platforms have ceased rotation."

The room froze. Every analyst, every breath held at the same unbearable edge. Were they targeting Mars? Or something else?

"Cradle alignment confirmed across Belt sectors," the vectoring officer continued, voice steady with protocol. "Firing vectors: external systems. Non-Martian. Stand by for trajectory solution."

Halvik exhaled slowly. He didn't turn to look. His task was thermal monitoring. Nothing more. What came next wasn't his domain.

Somewhere behind him, low and uncertain: "If not us... what the hell are they firing at?"

The vectoring officer answered: "Confirmed firing solutions stable. Tau Ceti. Kapteyn's Star. Groombridge 34. Luyten's Star. Independent systems. Civilian designation only."

A murmur spread through the chamber. Not shock, not protest. Incomprehension, as if the meaning hadn't registered.

Halvik's panel pulsed again.

Now the launch assemblies themselves glowed hot. Massive orbital platforms, each capable of accelerating payloads to fractional light-speed, their heat signatures aligned perfectly with charging thresholds. They were ready.

He flagged the sequence:

LAUNCHERS AT FULL CHARGE – FIRING CAPABLE

If Earth fired, those worlds would retaliate long before the projectiles arrived. Every system would burn. Mars included. It felt surreal. An interstellar genocide carried out with clinical precision, welcomed in return as if cost no longer mattered.

Sabotage? Rogue intelligence? Nothing else made sense.

And then it happened.

The thermal feed exploded with light. Sheer, radiant heat bleeding from the rails in a tidal surge of energy.

Halvik's panel blinked with cascading overflows as each cradle discharged. He traced the launch in real time. Each payload surged forward, pushed by magnetized rails wound with stellar energy. Their signatures curved like glowing knives across the void, accelerating toward relativistic speed.

He steadied his voice, though it emerged low, like reporting weather rather than the end of worlds.

"Confirmed. All launch platforms have fired. Payloads accelerating at relativistic velocity. No abort signals detected."

He paused.

"Strike is live."

The words hung in the recycled air like a death sentence. Three seconds of absolute stillness. Four. The kind of silence that should exist only in vacuum.

Halvik stared at his display, the reality settling into his bones. Earth had just fired relativistic kill vehicles at civilian populations. Not military targets. Not strategic installations. Worlds full of families, children, people who had never seen Earth except as a distant star.

Someone behind him whispered, "Mars preserve us all."

Then his console blinked again. Another thermal surge, same ignition profile.

Halvik's throat went dry.

"They're firing again."

The control chamber was already at full alert when the override flashed across Commander Aelia Tran's console:

**PRIORITY UPDATE – MARS STRATEGIC COMMAND
NEW TARGET PACKAGE RECEIVED
CLASSIFICATION: EXTRASOLAR 12 LY AND BEYOND**

She stared as coordinates scrolled across her display:

Groombridge 34. Luyten's Star. Kapteyn's Star. Tau Ceti.

The names meant nothing to most people. Just catalog designations for distant suns. But Tran knew better. Each represented thriving civilizations, orbital habitats, countless lives that had never raised a weapon against Mars.

The order was authentic, verified by Martian Strategic Command. Yet the targeting data carried another signature entirely:

Source Authorization: Earth Federal Authority

Her blood chilled. Mars had issued the fire command, but Earth's hand had chosen which worlds would burn. Martian kinetic systems, primed for defensive strike against Earth, were being redirected to distant civilian systems.

She keyed her command authorization, voice tight: "Operations, I need immediate confirmation from Strategic Command. This targeting package. These are civilian systems."

A pause. "Ma'am, orders are authenticated and verified. Source codes match current protocols."

Catastrophic error? Or deliberate betrayal?

"New vector alignment confirmed," her operations officer reported quietly. "Drivers rerouting. Spin cycle engaged."

A second override appeared:

**BEAMLINK AUTHORIZATION GRANTED
MAXIMUM POWER TRANSFER INITIATED**

Tran felt it in her chest: a low vibration as the planetary grid rerouted immense power through buried conduits. She remembered when those conduits first went live during Mars' terraforming initiatives. Built to carry energy for warmth, growth, life.

Now they pulsed with lethal intent.

"Capacitors charging," her officer announced. "Launch readiness in eighty seconds."

Tran stared at the readout:

FIRING ORDER CONFIRMED SATURATION STRIKE
DURATION: ONE YEAR
PAYLOAD INTERVAL: 2,000 SECONDS
VELOCITY: 0.2C
STAGGERED DISPERSION PATTERN ACROSS ORBITAL PLANES

She whispered words intended for no record: "What the hell are we doing?"

This wasn't a decisive salvo. This was methodical destruction: one year of sustained bombardment. A silent year of death, shot after shot fired every thirty-three minutes at near-relativistic speeds. The strategy was unmistakable: overwhelm, annihilate, erase.

She keyed the secure uplink, voice steady despite her strain: "Command, confirm these targets. Confirm this order."

Brief silence. Then clipped military response: "Confirmed. Execute planetary saturation strike. Continuous fire, one-year duration. Begin cycle immediately."

Tran closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, the display hadn't changed. The coordinates still glowed softly, patient and inexorable.

She tried to piece together the logic. Either these distant systems had somehow launched their own RKV's first - though Mars had

detected no such launches - and Earth was retaliating on behalf of the solar system. Or Earth had struck first, unprovoked, and now expected Mars to join them in a coordinated assault.

But why would Earth attack civilian systems without warning? There was no strategic justification, no immediate threat. Nothing except... the federal elections. Less than a year ago. The Rally for the Natural Order had won by a massive margin, promising to restore Earth's rightful place among the stars.

Perhaps this was what restoration looked like.

In the end, it didn't matter who fired first or why. Mars was already condemned. If these distant systems had any defensive capability at all, retaliation would come - not just for Earth, but for the entire solar system. Strategic Command had grasped the calculation: if annihilation was inevitable, better to join the strike and ensure the enemy's allies were crippled before the counterstrike arrived.

This war would stretch across decades, centuries. A slow exchange of projectiles hurled across the void at relativistic speeds. By the time any retaliation reached them, she would be gone. So would most in this room.

This war belonged to their children. Their grandchildren. If any survived to inherit it.

The targeting computer chimed softly, awaiting her authorization.

Her hand hovered above the ignition sequence.

Then, slowly, deliberately, she armed the system.

Priority Alpha Broadcast

BEGIN PRIORITY BROADCAST
TRANSMISSION SOURCE:
EARTH FEDERAL AUTHORITY
TIME INDEX: 00:00:01

Second Replication War Declared

Citizens of Earth,

At 03:41 Standard Solar Time, the Federal Authority authorized the deployment of strategic kinetic assets against hostile systems.

The targets were post-human polities confirmed to possess autonomous replication capabilities and mass-energy infrastructure in violation of Interplanetary Accord 17-A.

This marks the beginning of the Second Replication War, and a new phase in human history.

The Starsiege Doctrine is now in effect.

All Core Worlds are to activate civil defense protocols. Evacuation and deep shelter construction begin immediately. Priority is granted to critical personnel, gestational complexes, and infrastructure units.

All global industry is hereby requisitioned under federal wartime authority. Private and civilian assets will be restructured into unified supply chains.

All adult citizens are now under mandatory federal service. You will be assigned roles based on aptitude, need, and proximity. Noncompliance is treason under wartime code.

Martial law is in effect across all Federal jurisdictions. Travel is restricted. Communications are monitored. Cultural transmission, education, and reproductive cycles will be coordinated by the Ministry of Continuity.

There will be no negotiation. There will be no surrender.

We are at war. A war not of conquest, but survival.

It will not end in years. It may not end in your lifetime.

But we will endure. We will outlast them.

We defeated the replicators once. We will do it again.

Glory to Mankind.

Act II: Starsiege