IMPERIUM GALACTICA

DON JONES

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For Shandra

FOREWORD

Growing up in the Eighties, much of the science-fiction I was exposed to were the literary greats: Herbert's *Dune* series, Asimov's *Foundation* series, and so on. Much of the sci-fi I remember also included some fantastical element—like the "Between" of Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonriders of Pern* series. I *loved* these novels for their rich world-building, characters you could actually connect with, and the audacity of the galaxy-spanning civilizations they implied.

I don't write a lot of sci-fi, mainly because I enjoy reading it so much—and I can't easily read in a genre when I'm also writing in it. So *Imperium Galactica* represented a bit of a sacrifice: Close to two years of zero sci-fi for Don!

But I think it was worth it. *Imperium Galactica* has all the mythology I wanted, and it reads like one of the stories I loved so much as a kid.

I hope you enjoy.

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"Every civilization is among the ruins of another."

CHRISTOPHER DAWSON

PART ONE

THE HOUSE IN THE SYSTEM

ONE

CENDANT SYSTEM

THE PLANET CENDANT IV hung at the belly of its system like a bruise — green-black at the equator where the canopy was thickest, lightening to a sickly jade at the poles where the agriculture gave way to the engineered scrubland that formed the system's outer margin of cultivation. From far enough out, it looked almost alive, which was not metaphor but close enough to one. Everything on Cendant IV that could be made to grow had been made to grow, and the planet wore its productivity the way a laboring animal wears its harness — as something long since inseparable from its body.

The twin moons, Argent and Mino, hung in familiar configuration: Argent high and white, Mino trailing into the shadow of the planet's upper limb, its face already beginning to blush with the milky blue that characterized its half-phase. At the angle they currently held, their light would intersect in approximately four hours. For the settlements in the equatorial band — the processing facilities, the terraced Leaf fields, the capital's outskirts where the Lisser workers kept their own quarter, separate by long custom from

the human housing blocks — that intersection would produce the brief, strange doubling of shadow that the fieldhands called the Witness Hour, for the way the crossed light made every person's silhouette appear to be accompanied by its own dark twin. Old superstition. The kind that persists not because people believe it but because it is older than belief and has become simply the texture of the place.

The place had a texture. That is the first thing to understand about Cendant IV. It was not an anonymous agricultural world; it had been inhabited long enough to develop the particular sediment of a place that knows what it is for. The Leaf fields ran in long terraced sweeps from the low highlands down to the coastal flats, each terrace a slightly different shade of green depending on the crop's age and the chemical composition of the soil beneath. The processing facilities were clustered at the northern edge of the capital, their outflow pipes draining into the river that divided the human quarter from the Lisser district — a detail of municipal engineering that had become, over generations, a physical expression of the social architecture of the place. The smell of refined Leaf — sweet, faintly resinous, with the particular chemical undertone of a plant that had been persuaded by centuries of cultivation to produce something just slightly beyond what it would have chosen to produce on its own — hung over the capital at all hours, thicker in the mornings when the drying facilities ran their exhaust cycles, lighter at night but never entirely gone.

The Lisser had been here first. This was the kind of fact that gets known without being discussed, the way the age of a house is known by the way the floors settle. Their district was older than the capital's oldest quarter by at least two centuries, built in the low round-shouldered style that their construction methods favored, which had no angles the human architectural traditions would have recognized as structural necessity but which had proven, empirically, to be more durable in the equatorial storm season than the sharp-cornered designs the early colonists had imported. A few of the original Lisser

structures still stood in the center of their district, indistinguishable from the newer ones except by a slight additional smoothness at the corners, worn to curves by weather and time. The Lisser did not make landmarks of their old buildings. They simply continued to live in and around them, the new and the old forming a continuous settlement without nostalgia or ceremony.

The fieldhands — Lisser and human both, though more Lisser than human in the ratios the plantations required — were at their work in the hours before the assault. This was the pre-dawn shift, when the Leaf was at its most chemically potent and the air was cool enough to sustain prolonged physical labor in the equatorial band. They moved through the terraces in the bent-over posture of people who have been doing the same motion long enough that it has become their habitual shape even when standing upright: the reach-and-strip of experienced harvesters, each motion practiced to its minimum radius. The Lisser moved slightly faster than the human workers, not because they were driven to but because their bodies had evolved for this climate over millennia while the human workers' bodies were two or three generations removed from adaptation. It was not a distinction anyone commented on. It was simply true, like the altitude of the terraces and the quality of the soil.

The baskets filled. The pre-dawn dark thinned slowly toward a gray that was not yet light. The twin moons continued their patient courses. The night insects of the equatorial jungle made their low, continuous sound, and the sound of the fieldhands moving through the Leaf was layered beneath it, rhythmic and purposeful. It was, in every visible respect, an ordinary night.

The ship arrived without announcement.

This was not unusual for an Imperial vessel — they do not announce themselves to the systems they move through, because announcement implies the possibility of refusal, and the Imperium

does not traffic in possibilities. What made this particular arrival notable, to the few orbital sensors that registered it before their operators could react, was the quality of its Fold exit: clean to a degree that Cendant IV's orbital traffic control had never recorded. The Fold event barely registered at all — a single anomalous reading on the passive long-range arrays, there and then immediately questioned by the technicians who saw it, who assumed equipment error because the alternative required a Fold precision that was, in every framework they had been taught, not possible.

They were still querying the reading when the ship's mass began its passive deceleration burn, peeling momentum in a punishing single arc that left a brief thermal wash across the planet's upper atmosphere. By then the reading was no longer anomalous — the ship was simply there, its silhouette crossing Mino's face and going dark, its drive cone cycling down from burn to station-keeping with the practiced efficiency of a vessel that has performed this exact maneuver in many systems.

It had no name that appeared on any publicly accessible register. Its hull markings were a designation in flaking white glyphs: a series of numbers that resolved, for those who knew the Imperial Army's vessel classification, to a drop-carrier in active service, rated for atmospheric deployment. The hull itself bore the record of what it had been used for: overlapping armor slabs, each plate scored with the pattern of impacts from some other assault in some other system, none of them recent enough to be traceable. The repairs were functional but not cosmetic. The Imperium does not bother with the appearance of weapons that do not need to impress anyone.

The assault pods went first. Twenty-eight of them, cycling through the launch rails in a sequence timed to minimize their radar cross-section on descent — each pod released at a slightly different angle, each trajectory calculated to arrive at the surface within a window of seven seconds, after which the window would close and whatever coordination the surface defenders might have attempted would be irrelevant. They burned through the upper atmosphere in a

formation that no ground-based sensor would have identified as organized until they were already through the cloud layer, by which time the identification was academic.

Inside each pod, soldiers. The armor they wore was the current standard-issue of the Imperial Army: overlapping composite plates rated for all current-generation small arms, with integrated atmospheric filtration and a helmet HUD that updated tactical information at faster than conscious processing speed. The soldiers themselves were trained to a standard that made the specifics of their individual training irrelevant — they had been drilled until the training was not a thing they did but a thing they were, a layer of behavior that sat beneath conscious thought and operated on its own terms. The Army does not produce soldiers who think during operations. It produces soldiers who execute the thinking that has already been done for them, at a level of precision that thinking-in-the-moment cannot match.

None of this means they were not human. Humans are capable of considerable precision when the alternatives have been made sufficiently unacceptable.

There was a compound. There are always compounds.

House Holden's estate sat five kilometers east of the capital, at the edge of the highland terrace where the Leaf cultivation gave way to the ornamental grounds that the original Holden Matriarch had established to mark the boundary between the agricultural enterprise and the domestic one. A wall. A perimeter fence — electric, interlocked with ground-pressure sensors and drone-mounted rail guns positioned at the four compass points of the outer boundary. A central house, three stories, built in the hybrid style of a family that had come from elsewhere and brought its architecture with it, then spent three generations trying to make it look as if it belonged. The result was something that did not quite succeed at belonging but had

been there long enough that the jungle had begun the work of incorporation without waiting for the building to agree: vines at the eastern wall, a fig tree whose roots had found the foundation drainage and followed it, a low-growing local orchid — white-petaled, scentless, entirely indifferent to the compound's opinions about where it should and should not be — that had colonized the silicate gravel of the inner courtyard.

The Leaf here was different from the plantation Leaf. The house grounds had been planted with the older cultivar, the one that predated the House's current commercial strain by two centuries. It produced a flower rather than a harvestable leaf — a long-stemmed thing with petals in layered white, nearly bioluminescent in the Witness Hour's doubled light. The Matriarch grew it because her mother's mother's mother had grown it, and because one does not simply stop growing a thing that connects you to something older than your own ambitions. She grew it in ceramic pots on the terrace outside her private chambers, and she tended it herself, without delegating the task, which was the one visible concession she made to sentiment in an otherwise efficiently managed existence.

The pots were on the terrace when the pods landed. The Matriarch would have been aware of them earlier than most — she was a light sleeper, had been for years, the particular insomnia of someone who runs a planetary economy and whose mind has trained itself to remain available. She was already at the terrace window when the estate's proximity alarms registered the pods in the upper atmosphere, and she was in her formal regalia by the time the perimeter fence went dark.

She did not attempt to flee. This is important. She was not naive about what an Imperial Army drop-carrier represented, and she was not foolish about the odds. She was simply, as far as can be determined, unwilling to depart her own estate at speed in the night as if she were a fugitive in a place that had been hers. She put on the formal regalia instead. She stood where she intended to be found.

The defense net fired and was answered with the precision of a

system that had been designed specifically to answer it: the Army's microdrone suppression package was calibrated for exactly the type of rail-mounted point-defense array the Holden compound employed, and the calibration was exact enough to suggest that someone had provided the Army with the technical specifications of the system in advance. Forty-one seconds from perimeter breach to silence. After that, the compound's defenses were architecture rather than weapons — things that had once served a purpose, now decorative in the specific way of purpose that has been rendered moot.

The estate's household staff had been trained for emergency response. They attempted it. The results were not their fault — they had been trained for the crises that a House Dominion Major estate on an agricultural world reasonably anticipates: industrial accidents, labor unrest, the occasional rival-House incursion that stops short of outright assault. They had not been trained for the Army, because training for the Army is not something a House does. Training for the Army implies that the Army might come for you, and that implication, if it becomes general knowledge, becomes self-fulfilling. So they had not been trained for this, and they were not equipped for this, and the forty-three seconds between the perimeter breach and the main house breach were a sequence of improvised responses to a situation their improvisation was not adequate for.

They were brave. Several of them were exceptionally brave, in the way that becomes visible only in retrospect, in the small choices — standing at a door that wouldn't hold, firing a weapon whose charge wasn't rated for Army armor, putting a body between a soldier and a corridor that led somewhere worth defending. The bravery did not change the arithmetic. The arithmetic was already decided.

Inside, the Leaf processing continued. The machinery that converted raw harvest to refined product had been running for eighteen hours without pause when the assault began, and the Army's tactical calculus had already flagged it as a non-target: the Leaf was the point of this planet, and destroying the machinery that produced it would have been structurally indistinguishable from destroying the

planet itself, which was not the operation being conducted. The operation being conducted was more specific. So the processing machinery ran, and the Lisser workers on the night shift ran it, and from the catwalk above the primary floor an Army soldier looked down at the line workers below and made no move toward them, and one of the workers — older, with the frayed bands around her wrists that marked her as a senior line supervisor — looked up at the soldier on the catwalk and for a moment they simply regarded each other, separated by the noise of the machinery and the distance of the drop and everything else that separated them, which was considerable.

The Army moved on. The line worker returned to her work.

The compound fell in portions.

This is the technical language of these things, though it is also accurate: a compound does not fall all at once, the way a tree falls. It falls the way a organization does — first its outer parts, then its secondary layers, then its core, each stage of the interior becoming the new exterior as the preceding exterior ceases to function. The Holden estate fell this way, from the perimeter inward, the collapse orderly and documented in the Army's operational record with the clinical particularity of a system that keeps very good records of what it does.

The outer fence: elapsed time from perimeter breach to silence, forty-one seconds.

The estate grounds: elapsed time from fence breach to main house entry, four minutes, seventeen seconds, accounting for the time spent neutralizing the ornamental grounds' drone coverage and removing the household staff from defensive positions without killing them. The household staff were not combatants by any military definition, but they had weapons and they used them, which creates a definitional ambiguity the Army resolved in the direction of minimum force: stun rounds where possible, low-velocity point-fire

where necessary, lethal force only at the inner sanctum approaches where the House's own security retainers had made the choice that made it necessary.

Several of them were blood relatives of the Matriarch. They had the same jaw and eye. They died in the posture of people who had decided to die there, which is not the same as people who had not decided at all, and the distinction seems worth noting even if it does not change the outcome.

The main house: eleven minutes from first entry to command floor breach. The house was built to resist standard forced entry, and it did — the blast shielding deployed, the genetic locks engaged, the atmospheric countermeasures released — and none of it was adequate, not because the house's designers had been careless but because the house had been designed to resist the threats that the design team believed were plausible. The Army represented a threat at a different tier of plausibility, the tier reserved for the exercise of Imperial will at its most direct, and nothing a Dominion Major House designs for itself is designed to resist that. If it were, it would suggest that the House believed the exercise of Imperial will against it was possible, which would suggest a relationship with the Imperium not compatible with Dominion Major status.

House Holden had been Dominion Major for six generations. They had believed in the arrangement the way people believe in arrangements that have lasted six generations: not as ideology but as the texture of reality. The texture had changed.

The command chamber was on the uppermost floor, a room designed for the ceremonial oversight of planetary operations, with a dais and a view of the processing complex on the horizon and long windows that in daylight hours caught the morning light off the terrace below. The emergency lighting had taken over, casting the room in the red-and-black register of systems that are operating in crisis mode and advertising the fact. The Matriarch stood on the dais. Her six most loyal retainers flanked her, weapons raised. The House sigil — green and silver, the Holden crest worked in bioluminescent

thread that pulsed with a slow, heartbeat rhythm — was visible on every chest.

They fired when the door opened. This was the correct tactical decision given what they had available and what they were trying to accomplish, which was a final gesture of defiance that would be recorded in the Army's operational log and thereby in the institutional record of what had happened here. The Matriarch would have understood that the record was the only thing she could still affect, and she was the kind of person who affected what she could.

The exchange lasted four seconds.

Then it was quiet, and she was the last one standing, and a single soldier moved to the position of engagement — not with haste, not with ceremony — and the targeting system resolved the problem with the minimum force the parameters allowed.

She did not fall immediately. She stood for a moment after the shot, in the posture of formal regalia, chin still elevated, the House crest catching the red of the emergency lights. The crest still pulsed with its slow heartbeat rhythm, indifferent to the body it was attached to, continuing its function for a few seconds after the function had ceased to matter.

Then she was on the floor.

The squad leader surveyed the room. The record would show: command chamber, primary targets neutralized, no Army casualties, elapsed time from operational commencement forty-three minutes. The record would show the chamber's contents: the overturned consoles, the shattered light panels, the bodies of the retainers in their green-and-silver, the Matriarch at the center of them, eyes open to the emergency light.

The record would not show the ceramic pot that had been moved from the terrace outside to inside the window sometime in the previous twelve hours, presumably because the Matriarch had anticipated weather that had not arrived. The old-cultivar Leaf flowers in it were still growing. They would continue growing for approximately seventy-two hours after this, before the compound's atmos-

pheric control systems cycled down for lack of maintenance and the equatorial humidity did what it does to uncirculated air, and by then there would be no one in the command chamber to observe it.

The squad leader closed the channel. The Army withdrew as they had entered: in formation, boots leaving the precise trail of their passage — jungle mud, crushed orchid, the faint marking of boot-pattern in dried blood where the corridor fighting had been thickest — across the polished floors and down the central stair and through the great entry, which now hung open on its hinges, and across the ornamental grounds where the silicate gravel had been displaced in a long sweep by the passage of boots, and through the gap in the perimeter fence where the electric mesh still sagged from its abrupt decommission, and into the jungle wall.

The jungle received them. This is not metaphor either — the equatorial jungle of Cendant IV is the kind of growth that closes behind intrusion with the reflexive indifference of something very large and very indifferent to the smaller things that move through it. Within minutes of the Army's passage, the frond-trees had resumed their unhurried sway. The orchids, some of them flattened by the advance, were already beginning the slow process of righting themselves, which they would accomplish by morning, though not without the slight structural compromise of stems that have been pressed to the ground and then released.

Above, the twin moons continued their courses. Argent was lower now, moving toward the horizon's edge. Mino had come into its fuller phase, the milky blue brightening as it caught more of the system star's reflected light. In approximately two hours, they would intersect, and the Witness Hour would come to the equatorial band, and the fieldhands who had not fled the terraces would work in that crossed doubled light and cast the shadow that looked, if you weren't certain, like a companion.

The processing floor did not stop.

This is the detail that sits differently from all the others. The compound's lights went out, section by section, as the Army moved through them and the administrative staff who had been managing the power relays were no longer managing anything. The atmospheric control cycled to emergency power. The communication systems went dark the moment the Army breached the second-floor relay room, which was fast, and necessary, and part of the operation's objectives. The compound's defense net was dark before the main house breach. The household was disrupted, the household staff were secured or fled, the retainers were dead where they had chosen to make their stand.

But in the processing floor, the machinery ran.

The Army had made a decision about the machinery, and the decision was: it continues. Not for the workers' sake — the workers were a secondary consideration, not unimportant but not the primary one. For the Leaf's sake. The Leaf was the planet's purpose, and the planet's purpose was the point of the operation. You do not disrupt the purpose of the thing you are repossessing. You disrupt its governance and leave its function intact.

The Lisser workers on the night shift understood this on some level, not necessarily as a reasoned conclusion but as a recognition — the Army was here for the House, not for the product. And the product was them, in the sense that the product was their labor and their expertise and the particular competence that comes from doing the same precise technical work for so long that the machinery feels like an extension of your own body. They had been doing this work under House Holden's governance. Now they would do it under someone else's governance. The governance changes. The work continues.

One of them — the older Lisser with the senior supervisor's wristbands, the one who had exchanged that brief regard with the soldier on the catwalk — was still at her station as the Army completed its withdrawal. She did not watch them go. She was monitoring a

centrifuge that had been running slightly fast, the kind of deviation that a supervisor corrects before it compounds into a loss of batch yield, which was her job and she did it, and the centrifuge ran correctly, and the batch yield was maintained.

In the morning, when the capital's orbital surveillance station sent its first reconnaissance flight over the estate, the processing floor was still running. Everything else had gone dark. But the Leaf was still being refined, still being dried, still being loaded into the climate-controlled containers that would go into the distribution chain that reached every inhabited world in the Cendant system and, from there, through the Imperial trade network, to the rest of the settled galaxy.

The House was ended. The Leaf went on.

By the time the twin moons intersected — Argent and Mino passing through the same quadrant of sky, their light crossing at that precise angle that made the shadows double — the Army was already gone. Not retreating, not withdrawing, simply absent: they had returned to the drop-carrier in the upper atmosphere, the pods cycling back through the docking ports in the same organized sequence as their deployment, and the carrier had performed another of those clean, unremarkable Fold exits that left the orbital sensor arrays blinking at a reading that made no sense.

The carrier had been in the Cendant system for four hours and twenty minutes. House Holden, which had been in the Cendant system for six generations, was no longer a functioning institution. These two facts are simply facts. They exist in the same kind of relationship as the altitude of the Leaf terraces and the chemical composition of the soil: not moral, not immoral, not requiring any stance on the part of the world that contains them. They are just the structure of what happened.

The Matriarch of House Holden was dead on her chamber floor,

the bioluminescent crest on her formal regalia still cycling through its slow pulse — slower now, the power cell in the fabric running down without the body's warmth to sustain it, but still going, each pulse a little longer and dimmer than the last, until sometime in the early morning hours it would make its final slow breath of light and stop. Her eyes were open, the angle of the emergency light still on them, though the emergency light was beginning to fade as the compound's backup cells depleted.

Through the long windows of the command chamber, the Witness Hour's crossed light lay over everything. The ornamental grounds, now disturbed and partially trampled, were still mostly intact — the old cultivar Leaf in the terrace pots, the fig tree at the eastern wall, the white orchids that had begun their slow return to their standing positions. The silicate gravel showed the boot-print paths of the Army's passage in clear, distinct relief, and in the doubled shadow light of the Witness Hour those paths looked almost like something deliberate, something that had been drawn rather than made.

In the distance, beyond the estate's perimeter, the capital's lights were on. The city knew something had happened — the orbital surveillance, the communication blackout, the fact that the House had stopped transmitting — but the city did not yet know exactly what had happened, and the hours between knowing something has happened and knowing what has happened are a particular kind of hours that do not resolve into calm simply by waiting them out. In the Lisser district, the lights were on in every dwelling that had them, which was most of them. The fieldhands who had been on the pre-dawn shift and who had witnessed the Army's descent and passage were in those dwellings now, and what they were saying to each other in the low, harmonically complex way that Lisser communication works when it is not constrained by the need to translate for human listeners — that is not recoverable from this distance. But they were saying something. They had seen what had come and what had gone, and they had watched the compound fall and the processing

floor continue, and they were talking about it in the hours before the capital's official communication channels resumed broadcasting.

The moons continued their courses. The light shifted, as it always does, as it had before the Holden House arrived and would after anyone who came to govern this planet had gone. The jungle grew. The machinery processed. The Lisser workers worked the morning shift as they had worked the night shift, and the Leaf came off the line in its refined form, pale green and faintly iridescent in the new light, ready for the containers that would take it off-world.

A child — the same child who had been watching from the third-floor observatory window, who had pressed her palm to the glass as the helmets passed below and who had been blue-tagged on seventeen separate HUDs as noncombatant and who had not been touched and was not touched — came down from the room she had retreated to when the fighting reached the second floor, and walked through the halls of what had been her home, and walked past the open door of the command chamber without looking in, and walked to the kitchen of the domestic wing that still had power because the kitchen was on the secondary circuit that served the household staff quarters and had not been on the Army's list of systems to interrupt, and the kitchen was ordinary, and still smelled of the morning preparations that the kitchen staff had not been able to complete, and the light there was the normal light, not the emergency red of the rest of the house, and the child sat down on the floor under the prep table and stayed there for a long time.

Outside, the moons held their intersection for the last few minutes of the Witness Hour. The shadows doubled across the estate grounds, across the compound, across the capital's outskirts, across the terraced Leaf fields where the morning shift had begun their work, across everything that had happened and everything that had not happened and everything that was simply continuing.

The moons continued their courses. They did not witness anything. They were simply there.

But from the surface of Cendant IV, on this morning, with the

compound dark and the processing floor running and the Army already out of the system by means that the orbital sensors could not adequately explain, the doubled light of the Witness Hour lay over the estate's grounds with the quality of something that cannot be called judgment, because judgment requires an entity capable of it, but that resembles judgment closely enough that the word comes to mind despite itself.

The word comes to mind.

The moons moved on.

House Holden was ended. The reader understands — before any named character speaks, before any voice is introduced that will carry us through what follows — that this world has rules. That the rules are not abstract. That they are enforced by things that emerge from jungles with perfect synchronization and leave with the same clean efficiency, and that the machinery of the thing being governed runs through the governance change without interruption, and that somewhere above and out of sensor range a ship has taken its clean Fold exit back to wherever it belongs, carrying nothing from Cendant IV except the confirmation that the operation went as planned.

The Lisser supervisor with the frayed wrist-bands checked her centrifuge. It was running correctly. She made a note in the shift log — the shift log that was the processing floor's own internal record, separate from the House's administrative network, maintained because the product could not tolerate interruption and the record of the product's handling could not afford gaps. She made the note and turned to the next station.

The sun came up over Cendant IV. The equatorial canopy caught it and did what it always did with the light: distributed it, diffused it, took it apart into its components and passed each one down through layers of engineered foliage until what reached the terrace level was something softer and more complex than the light that had entered at the top. The Leaf fields caught the processed light and used it. The morning shift bent to their work.

In the capital, the first official communication from the Kentur station at Bauxitum would arrive approximately seventy-two hours later, carried on the Link through a relay at Aquila before dropping into Cendant IV's reception array. It would be addressed to the station master at the spaceport, which was the appropriate authority now that the House was no longer receiving communications, and it would be brief and factual: the Kentur family noted the change in status of the Cendant system and offered their services as a supply contact for any administrative transition period, subject to existing trade agreements.

The communication would be forwarded by the station master to the Imperial guardianship office that had been established overnight by the three administrators who had survived the night in the capital's government district and who were doing, as well as they could, what administrators do when the structure they administer has been removed from above them: they were maintaining its functions. Not because they were instructed to, because there was no one yet to give instructions. But because the functions needed maintaining, and they were the people who knew how to maintain them, and so they did.

The Leaf shipment scheduled for departure in four days was prepared on schedule. The Lisser supervisor completed her shift and handed off to the day supervisor and walked home through the Lisser district as she always walked home, which was not the same as walking home as if nothing had happened, because something had happened and she knew it, but it was walking home along the familiar route at the familiar pace, because that was what she was going to do and the night's events were not going to change where her home was or how she got there.

The orchid in the Matriarch's ceramic pot grew without the Matriarch. It would for seventy-two hours. Then the light in the room would change and the atmospheric control would cycle in a

way it was not designed to cycle and the orchid would begin the process that all growing things begin when the conditions that sustained them change. But for seventy-two hours it grew.

The Witness Hour had passed. The moons had moved on. The sun was up over Cendant IV, and the day was happening, and everything that was happening in the day had happened before and would happen again, which is either the most comforting or the most terrifying thing about the way of things on worlds that have been worked long enough to know what they are for.

Cendant IV knew what it was for. That had not changed.

Everything else had.

TWO

BAUXITUM SYSTEM

THE AIRLOCK HATCH cycled with a shriek that Kaiden felt in his back teeth.

He didn't flinch. He'd been bracing for it — the hatch on the Merivale's port-side tertiary lock had been scheduled for replacement since the previous cycle and had not been replaced, because the Merivale family operated on the principle that things that were still technically functioning could continue to technically function until they couldn't, at which point someone else would be made to feel responsible. He knew this about the hatch the way he knew most things about the Merivale operation: from a briefing he'd read in the four minutes between his father's summons and their departure from the station, supplemented by everything the Cognaut had pushed to his HUD since they'd matched velocity with the failing ship.

The briefing had not been encouraging. The Miner's Pride was seventeen years old, which was not old for a mining vessel if the vessel had been maintained. It had not been maintained. The structural integrity report from the emergency beacon's automated

distress signal described a ship that had been operating for the past eight months with a progressive hull delamination on the lateral deck four, a compromised atmospheric seal on the main processing corridor, and a cargo clamp failure in the primary hold that had allowed the ore load to shift during their last transit. The shift had done the rest. The beam failure had been building for weeks. The Merivale's crew had known it and continued to run the ship, because the alternative was losing the haul, and losing the haul meant losing the contract, and losing the contract meant something that the Merivale family had apparently decided was worse than the risk of their crew dying.

Kaiden kept these thoughts arranged at a clinical distance as he moved through the hatch. Clinical distance was the appropriate response to a situation like this. His father had taught him that. You noted the cause of the problem as information — for later, for the conversation that would happen after — and then you set it to the side and dealt with the immediate problem, which was twenty-one people on a ship that was thirty-seven percent structurally intact and falling.

The number was lower now. He knew it without looking at his HUD.

He looked anyway. Thirty-three percent.

The passage inside was lit in emergency red, the phosphors beating their panicked rhythm against the raw aluminum of the ship's structural ribs. Everything that was not a structural rib was vibrating. Not the gross shudder of catastrophic failure — not yet — but the finer, more ominous vibration of a ship working against itself: microfractures propagating through stressed metal, each one a hairline, each hairline contributing to the next. The suit's exoskeletal overlay was translating the vibrations into tactical data, annotating the walls with stress lines, marking the ceiling panels in colors that ranged from yellow through a darkening amber. Nothing red yet in this corridor.

His father was already two meters ahead, moving with the

economy of a man who had never been required to hurry because he simply moved fast enough that hurrying would have been redundant. Six and a half feet. Silver hair tight to the scalp. Body like something that had been built to do exactly what it was currently doing, which was clearing a path through a failing ship.

Kaiden matched his pace and commed the Cognaut. "Rescue One advancing. Cognaut, current crew manifest and time to primary breach."

The Cognaut's voice had the particular quality of someone whose cognition was partly distributed across the ship's own failing sensor network, which meant it arrived with a faint overlay of the ship's distress — not emotion, but a kind of signal noise that was the data equivalent of someone speaking while the building came down around them. "Catastrophic structural failure in fourteen minutes, two seconds. Progressive timeline, not fixed — rate of delamination is accelerating. Crew manifest, twenty-one, confirmed locations for seventeen. Four unaccounted. Upper decks, possible comm failure in that section."

"Confirmed four missing," Kaiden said. "Upper decks or deeper in?"

"Last transponder ping from one: processing core. The others, no signal."

"Rescue One copy." He toggled to the family channel. "Declan, processing core has one. Others dark."

His father didn't look back. "We take the quarters first. Core after."

The team split at the first junction — four rescue personnel from the station, branching in pairs down the secondary corridors to sweep the crew bunks and the mess. That left Kaiden and Declan alone in the main access shaft, which narrowed as it went and was not designed to accommodate two people in full rescue suits moving at the pace they were moving. Kaiden tucked his shoulders and kept his elbows in and didn't think about the ceiling overhead, which was annotated in yellow.

Declan paused at the next hatch, just long enough to turn.

"O2 and pressure."

Kaiden checked his HUD without being told to check his HUD. "O2 at ninety-six. Pressure green."

"Good." A pause, the weight of the older man's assessment settling without visible sign of its presence. "Move fast. If anyone won't come, you take them. Don't argue, don't explain. Take them." He gripped Kaiden's shoulder for one second — brief enough that the suit's exoskeleton barely registered it, present enough that it registered completely. Then he was leading again.

They turned a corner and the sound changed.

The corridor had been noisy with the ship's ordinary crisis sounds — the structural vibrations, the distant alarm cycles, the pressurized hiss of the suit's atmosphere. Now there was something under all of it: a higher-frequency whistle, thin and intermittent, the kind of sound that meant the hull was close enough to vacuum on the other side that the differential was finding its own way through. A pressure seal, somewhere in the next fifty meters, was managing to hold. The distinction between managing and failing was, Kaiden understood, a matter of time he did not have the precise figure for.

He kept moving. The math would not improve if he thought about it.

The Merivale quarters were at the end of the access shaft — an overbuilt cluster of rooms that the original ship specs would never have called a living bubble, but which had accumulated that designation over the years as the Merivale family's habit of outfitting their own accommodations at a significantly higher standard than their crew's quarters became apparent. The door was sealed. Not locked in the sense of a malfunction — locked in the sense of a deliberate choice. Someone on the other side had engaged the manual latch.

Declan pressed his palm to the emergency override panel. "Kentur rescue. You have eleven minutes of ship. Open the door."

A pause. Then a voice from the comm, thin with static and something Kaiden recognized as the particular quality of someone who

was refusing to be frightened in a situation that warranted it. "We're managing the situation. Stand by."

He watched his father's jaw. Nothing moved in it. "Your hull is not going to manage itself. Open the door or I open it for you."

The door released with a reluctant pressure-hiss, the manual seal disengaging in a way that communicated, somehow, that it was doing so under protest.

Inside: controlled chaos in the specific form of people who had decided that organizing their belongings was a more manageable problem than admitting what was happening to their ship. Three adults. Crates and equipment stacked in configurations that suggested they had been preparing for extraction while simultaneously preparing for the possibility that extraction would not happen and they would need to have their equipment organized. A woman with a makeshift splint on her right arm, built from a length of conduit piping and what appeared to be two sections of cargo strapping. Another with a portable patch kit held against her chest with both arms, the grip of someone who had decided that object was her responsibility and was not going to release it. A third standing at the room's single porthole, watching the stars with the expression of a person who has thought through all their options.

And in the far corner, in the gap between a stacked cargo crate and the room's secondary bulkhead, a child. Seven, maybe. A suit two sizes too large, the helmet sitting on her head at the angle of something not quite properly secured. Both hands wrapped around a battered plastic toy — an animal of some kind, the paint rubbed away at the grip points to the pale surface underneath. She was very still. The stillness of a child who had learned that being still was better than not being still.

Kaiden's attention went to her and stayed there for one second. Then he pulled it back to the room.

"Count," he said. "Three adults plus the child. Anyone else?"

The woman with the splint. "Hargreaves went to the processing core with the Matriarch. That's everybody."

So Matriarch Merivale was in the core. Kaiden noted this and set it aside. "We move now," he said. "We—"

The man at the porthole turned. "If we lose this shift, Merivale cuts our pay. We can reinforce the breach. Give us ten minutes and a patch kit and—"

Kaiden didn't let him finish, not because there was nothing worth saying in response, but because the time it would take to say it was time the ship didn't have. He moved to the man's position, took him by the arm with the exoskeleton's measured grip, and steered him toward the door.

"Eleven minutes," he said. "We're going now."

The man turned on his heel, pulling against the grip with a stubbornness that said this was someone who had been deciding things for himself for long enough that being steered was a physical indignity. "You don't get to—"

"I do," Kaiden said. "You agreed to that when you sent the distress signal. Move."

The woman with the patch kit was already calculating something in her expression. He could see the moment the calculation resolved. She moved toward the door. The third adult, the one with the splint, followed. The man with the porthole views stopped pulling against Kaiden's grip.

That left the child.

He crossed to her, crouching to her level. Behind his helmet, the expression he was producing was intended to be reassuring, which was complicated by the fact that the helmet visor prevented the expression from being visible, but he made it anyway because it changed something in his voice. "Can you walk?"

She looked at him. Her eyes were dark and very clear, the eyes of someone paying extremely close attention to everything around her. She nodded.

"Stay close to me. Don't let go of your toy if you don't want to. But keep moving."

She nodded again.

The suit's HUD marked the child's helmet seal with a yellow flag — the indicator was not urgent, but it was a flag. He looked at it and then looked away. He could address it when they were moving. Moving was the first thing.

They went.

The corridor outside had changed in the minutes they'd been inside the quarters.

The whistling pressure sound was louder. The ceiling annotations on his HUD had shifted from yellow to the early edge of amber, and three of the ceiling panels overhead had developed a visible bow — not structural yet, but the kind of bow that precedes structural. The emergency lighting was flickering, which it had not been doing when they came through. Kaiden catalogued these changes without breaking stride, integrating them into the moving picture of the ship that his training kept continuously updated in the back of his processing.

His father had the adults organized into a moving file behind him. The woman with the patch kit had, almost automatically, attached herself to the child's position — she'd reached back a hand without looking, and the child had taken it, and they were moving in tandem. Kaiden registered this and let it stand. Whatever kept the child moving.

The ship groaned beneath them.

Not the structural sound — deeper than that. The kind of sound that predates a structural sound by a threshold you can feel in your chest before you can categorize it. Kaiden's left eye went tight.

Left.

The word arrived without preamble, without source, without any of the qualities that would have made it recognizable as a thought he had constructed himself. It was simply present, landing in the forward part of his mind with the quality of something dropped

rather than grown. Not a voice — not quite. The suggestion of a direction, arriving with the certainty of something already known.

He had felt this before. Not often. He had learned not to examine it directly, because examining it directly made it recede. He had learned to act on it the way he acted on his body's other navigational information: without interrogating the source.

He checked his HUD. The main route ahead showed amber on the corridor overlay. Not red. But the structural stress annotations on the beam section fifteen meters ahead had changed since he'd last looked — the estimate had revised, the load distribution on the beam now showing a concentration at the junction point that the original scan hadn't flagged.

He looked at it. The math was close. It was close enough that the HUD hadn't resolved it yet, still sitting at amber rather than red.

Left.

"Side corridor," he said.

Declan turned. One look at Kaiden's face, whatever was on it, and he pulled the column of people into the perpendicular hatch without asking for the reason. Kaiden went last, catching the child's free hand and bringing her through as the hatch sealed behind them.

The beam gave way eleven seconds later.

Not all at once — these things don't happen all at once. First a sound like a pressure seal failing, and then the sharper report of the junction giving, and then the section of corridor they had been moving through became something else: a descending mass of ceiling panels and insulation and the snapped ends of the conduit that had run through that section, all of it carried on a gust of air that found the gap and expressed its relief through the breach with considerable enthusiasm. The hatch they were behind absorbed the pressure wave with a deep, resonant thud that Kaiden felt in his spine.

Then quiet.

Or not quiet — the sounds of the ship continued, the alarms, the vibration, the insistent whistle of the pressure differential — but the

specific sound of the corridor collapse resolved and faded, leaving just the ongoing ambient noise of a dying ship.

No one in the side corridor said anything for a moment.

The woman with the patch kit, who had reflexively pulled the child against her when the thud hit the hatch, looked at Kaiden with an expression that had moved past most of the categories he would have expected and arrived somewhere adjacent to raw. The child still had hold of her plastic animal.

"Instinct," Kaiden said, which was not entirely accurate but was the most accurate single word he had.

Declan's gaze held him for two seconds. Flat. Assessing. Then: "You did good. Move."

The side corridor was tighter — not designed for transit, designed for access to the ship's lateral systems, which meant it was sized for one person in ordinary coveralls rather than two people in rescue suits. They moved single-file, the suits scraping the walls at shoulder height, the overhead close enough that Kaiden kept his head slightly forward to prevent the helmet from catching. The child was the only one who fit comfortably. She moved between the adults with the ease of someone who had grown up in the corridors of a working ship and for whom tight passage was ordinary.

The structural annotations on his HUD were revising constantly now, the estimated timeline compressing as the beam failure redistributed load through the adjacent sections. Fourteen minutes had become eleven. Eleven was becoming nine.

The next corridor. Then right.

He followed the direction without acknowledging it, navigating by a combination of his HUD overlay and the something that was not quite instinct but was using the same channel. The side corridor opened onto a maintenance shaft that ran perpendicular to their original route, and the maintenance shaft connected to the secondary access that would take them back to the main trunk without going through the collapsed section.

He checked his HUD. The route it was suggesting matched

what he'd just navigated to. He let the confirmation sit without looking at it too carefully.

The Cognaut's voice in his earpiece: "Rescue One, confirm status. Main route collapse noted. Alternate path compromised in six minutes, forty seconds."

"Confirmed, alternate route." His father, responding before Kaiden could. "Evacuation in progress, three civilians plus child, two Kentur. Proceeding to extraction point."

Kaiden cut in. "One additional crew in processing core. Female, name Hargreaves. Matriarch Merivale also in core."

A beat. The Cognaut processing. "Acknowledged. Extraction probability from core location, given current timeline: seventeen percent."

No one responded to the seventeen percent for a moment.

Then Declan: "Noted. We try anyway."

The civilians were flagged and noted. Kaiden turned to the woman with the patch kit. "Next junction, there's a secondary shaft to the port airlock. You can navigate there from here — I'll push the route to your suit HUD. Take the child. If we're not at the airlock in five minutes, go without us." He paused. "I mean that. Go."

She looked at him with the expression of someone doing a rapid assessment of whether he meant it. He did mean it.

"The girl comes with me," the woman said.

"Yes."

The child in question turned and looked at Kaiden with those clear, attentive eyes. Her hands were still around the plastic animal. He could see, in the set of her face, that she was processing more than her age should have allowed for — or perhaps exactly as much as her age allowed for, when her age had been spent on a working ship.

"I'll catch up," he told her. Which was either a promise or a statement of intent, and he intended it as both.

She went.

The processing core was the Miner's Pride's deepest point — not physically the lowest deck, but the operational center, the place the ship had been built around, where the ore processing machinery converted raw mining yield into sorted, classified product ready for market. The core was why the Merivale family had continued running this ship despite the structural reports. The core was running. While it was running, the ship was productive. While the ship was productive, the ship had a reason to exist.

Kaiden understood this logic in the way you understand the logic of people who have decided that the alternative to their current course of action is worse than its continuation. The logic was coherent. It had simply reached the end of the stretch of time in which it was applicable.

The route to the core was not the route they would have taken if the main corridor had still been passable. It was longer and went through two sections that the HUD was now flagging with amber that was edging toward something darker, and at one point required them to pass through a gravity anomaly — a pocket where the beam failure had disrupted the grav plating enough to create a low-G bubble, not zero gravity but close, the floor providing only intermittent purchase. His father moved through it with the particular gait of someone who had done zero-G work before and remembered the principle: small steps, keep contact, don't push off anything you're not prepared to push off of. Kaiden followed, aware of the specific wrongness of his weight coming and going with each step.

Go. Quickly.

He didn't need the direction for urgency — the timeline had made urgency obvious — but it arrived with an edge of emphasis that sat on him differently from the ordinary urgency. He went.

The core's door was blast-rated — designed to protect the processing machinery from anything that happened in the corridors outside, including, apparently, the collapse of the corridors outside.

The door was jammed. Not locked — jammed, the frame distorted enough from the structural shifts that the door's edges were binding against the surround. Declan looked at it for one second, then planted his boot against the mechanism panel and applied the kind of force that someone his size, in powered rescue armor, can apply to a door that is trying to remain closed.

The door gave with a shriek of twisted metal and a rush of outflowing air that told Kaiden the atmospheric seal on the other side had already started to fail.

Inside, the gravity was wrong.

Not as wrong as the bubble in the corridor — more complicated than that. The core's grav plating was still functioning but the load had shifted, and the result was a floor that inclined without being inclined, that pulled objects toward the port wall while maintaining the illusion of horizontal, so that everything in the room that wasn't fixed down had migrated toward the wall and the people inside had unconsciously compensated by standing at a slight lean toward the starboard side without quite registering that they were doing it. Tools floated at odd angles where they'd been thrown into pockets of near-zero and hadn't come back. Cables looped in lazy drifts.

Merivale was at the far end, at the primary terminal. Old — much older than Kaiden had been expecting, though he was not sure what he'd been expecting. Small in the way of people who have compressed everything unnecessary to their function over a long working life, so that what remained was purely essential. Iron-gray hair worn like a piece of protective equipment. Her hands were on the terminal's manual controls, and the look on her face, as she turned to see them, was not relief. It was the look of someone who had been interrupted in the middle of the only thing that mattered to her.

Beside her, on the floor next to a ruptured secondary pipe, was Hargreaves. Her hands were still pressed against the rupture, emergency sealant tape wound across both palms and around the pipe in overlapping layers. Her face was gray. Her gloves were dotted with

blood, not from any visible injury — from the pressure of maintaining contact with the sealant at a pipe that was expressing its desire to fail with considerable force.

Kaiden went to Hargreaves. He crouched, assessed, took her hands from the pipe before she could resist. She made a sound of protest and then looked at him, and what he saw in her face was exhaustion so complete that the protest was already over before she'd finished making it. He got her upright. She swayed, stabilized against the arm of his suit, found her feet.

"I've got her," he said.

Declan was standing in front of Merivale. The older man's posture was not threatening — it did not need to be threatening — but it occupied space in the specific way that said there was no part of this conversation that ended with Merivale staying in this room.

"Extraction," Declan said. "Now. We don't have the time for anything else."

Merivale's mouth had the set of someone preparing a comprehensive list of reasons why this was more complicated than that. "If I walk out of this core, the primary processing chain loses its manual override. The automated failsafes are compromised. Without manual oversight, the whole chain goes critical in—"

"In less time than we have," Declan said. "You know that."

"This ship ran this system for seventeen—"

"And it did," Declan said. "And now it's done. Let it be done."

The silence between them had the texture of two people who had both made up their minds. Kaiden, with Hargreaves supported at his side, watched Merivale's hands on the terminal. The woman's fingers moved — not frantically, not in panic, with the concentrated deliberateness of someone retrieving what she came for. She pulled a crystalline data sliver from the terminal housing, then a second, then a third. Each one went into the inside pocket of her suit with the care of someone who has decided that these objects are the most important things in the room.

Then she stepped back from the terminal.

She didn't look at Declan when she did it. She looked at the terminal, and the look was not sentimental — or if it was, sentimentality was such a minor component of the look that it barely registered. It was the look of someone concluding an accounting. This much was salvaged. The rest was lost. The accounting was complete.

"Fine," she said.

Declan moved immediately, not giving her time to reconsider. He took her by the elbow in the way his size made natural — not dragging, just present, just there, guiding with a hand that was too substantial to argue with. They moved.

The route out was worse than the route in. They'd been in the core for four minutes, and four minutes had been enough. The corridor they'd come through was now a corridor with a ceiling that was making decisions. The amber on Kaiden's HUD had moved. Not everywhere, but in two of the beam sections on the most direct path, the annotation had tipped.

Back the way you came. Not the other corridor.

He followed it without deciding to follow it, which was the only way it worked. He turned the column of people back along the approach route rather than taking the shortcut his navigation had been suggesting, and thirty seconds later the shortcut was not a shortcut anymore — the sound of it going came through the hull as a deep, wrenching bass note, felt more than heard.

Hargreaves heard it and flinched. Kaiden kept her moving.

The gravity pockets were worse on the return trip, the low-G bubble they'd passed through on the way in now an extended zone that caught them for six meters of corridor that required the particular careful transit of people who couldn't afford to float. Merivale, to her credit, adapted immediately — she had seventeen years of experience on a ship that had likely been malfunctioning at some level for most of them, and her body remembered the principle without needing to be told it. Declan went through last, keeping hold of her elbow as the grav plating beneath them went inconsistent and then partial and then back to full in the space of six steps.

The Cognaut's voice: "Total collapse of secondary hull initiated. Timeline compressing. Extraction window: two minutes, thirty seconds. Recommend immediate departure to airlock."

Two minutes, thirty.

Kaiden ran the math. The distance from their current position to the port airlock, where the rescue vessel was docked and where the remaining civilians and child should, if the direction he'd given had been followed correctly, currently be waiting. The math was tight. Not impossible — but the margin was what it was.

Go. Quickly.

"Move," he said, which was also what Declan was already saying, and they moved.

The corridor was a different kind of passage now from what it had been eleven minutes ago. Every surface was expressing something: the walls showed the micro-weld lines of earlier patch work, each weld a small bright seam against the original material, and some of those welds were beginning to open. The deck plates vibrated at a frequency that was not constant — it changed as different structural sections lost integrity and the remaining sections took up the load and then began to redistribute it again. The lighting had gone to primary emergency only, the secondary strips dark, the red phosphors beating their single-color pulse. Pieces of the overhead were making choices about gravity.

Kaiden moved in the space his suit gave him, which was more than the space an unarmored person had, the exoskeleton's assistance absorbing the slight misjudgments that accumulated when you were moving fast through an unstable environment. He had Hargreaves on his right. He kept track of the others by sound: his father's boots, Merivale's shorter stride, the particular rhythm of two people moving with the coordination of someone guiding a smaller person through a space.

The pressure differential whistle was everywhere now. Not just one seal — multiple seals, the ship's outer hull arguing with the

vacuum beyond it on several fronts simultaneously, each argument getting louder.

"Hull breach expanding," the Cognaut said, and the voice had a quality that was no longer quite neutral, because the Cognaut's sensor network was the ship and the ship was deciding things. "Structural collapse in one minute, fifty seconds. Port airlock viable. All other exit points compromised."

Port airlock. Where he'd sent the civilians.

He had to trust that they'd gone. He made himself not calculate the alternatives.

The junction to the port airlock corridor was ahead — he could see it in his HUD, the overlay showing clear, and he could see it with his eyes, the corridor opening and the slightly different quality of the emergency lighting beyond. He led them through, and there was the secondary shaft exactly as he'd told the woman it would be, and there at the base of the shaft was the port airlock, and at the port airlock was the rescue vessel's docking seal.

And there, in the shelter of the shaft's far wall, with the woman who'd had the patch kit keeping steady watch over them and the third adult from the quarters seated against the wall with his eyes closed in the position of someone whose body was performing voluntary non-participation in current events: the child, with her plastic animal, sitting cross-legged on the deck.

She looked up when she heard them coming.

Kaiden looked back.

He did not stop moving. There was no time to stop moving, and stopping moving was not what the moment required. But something in the look resolved, the accounting of the last twelve minutes completing itself. Four minutes, two minutes, thirty seconds, one minute fifty. The ship's math and his math, running against each other, and this time both of them had come out the same.

The rescue vessel detached from the Miner's Pride with forty seconds to spare.

Kaiden felt the separation in his chest — the particular lurch of a docking seal releasing under urgency rather than ceremony, the brief moment of differential pressure as the airlock equalized, and then the rescue vessel's own gravity catching them and holding them as the pilot put distance between their hull and the Merivale ship with the focused urgency of someone who understood exactly what the Cognaut's timeline meant.

He sat against the cabin wall and let the suit do less work. His muscles registered the reduction in load with the particular communication of muscles that had been doing more than their baseline for the past twenty minutes. He let them communicate without response. He'd respond later, when there was time.

Hargreaves was already in the care of the House medics, the suit coming off in sections as the medic team worked their way through the examination. The woman with the patch kit had finally put the patch kit down, setting it against the wall next to her with the careful placement of someone who wasn't ready to entirely let go of it yet. The man from the porthole position had his eyes still closed but his breathing was regular. Merivale was already organizing her data slivers, cataloguing what she'd extracted, performing her own private accounting.

The child was sitting next to Kaiden. She hadn't asked to sit next to him — she'd simply settled into the space adjacent to him when the cabin had sorted itself into its post-evacuation arrangement, the way water settles into the available space. She still had the plastic animal.

Through the forward viewport, the Miner's Pride was visible against the stars: a mining vessel, seventeen years old, imperfectly maintained, running to the end of what its structure would support. The end came while they watched. Not all at once — these things don't happen all at once. A ripple of light along the lateral deck four where the delamination had been the worst, and then the primary

hull letting go in a section, and then the rest of the ship expressing its structural opinions in the way of a structure that has run out of support. The debris spread slowly against the stars, the ore load contributing a bright scatter of particulate that caught the system's light.

Kaiden watched it until it was over.

The child watched it too, and did not look away, and did not say anything. She held her plastic animal.

His father was at the front of the cabin, in conversation with the lead medic, voice low and efficient. Kaiden could hear the shape of it without the words: status of the rescued, assessment of injuries, the particular administrative mode that Declan shifted into as soon as the operational mode concluded, because the operational mode concluding did not mean the work concluded.

The rescued crew were quiet with the particular quiet of people who have been through something and are not yet sure what they think about having been through it. The hostility that had been the air quality of the quarters room was still present in one or two faces — the man from the porthole position had opened his eyes and was looking at nothing with an expression that might have been embarrassment and might have been sustained defiance; they were similar expressions and the distinction often took longer to resolve. They would be ungrateful. They had been helpless, and helplessness was humiliating, and the people who had extracted them from their helplessness were a standing reminder of that humiliation. This was predictable. Kaiden had been told to predict it and he had.

He was looking at the viewport when his father made his way back through the cabin.

Declan came to a stop beside him. The older man looked at the viewport for a moment, at the debris field still catching light against the dark, and then at Kaiden.

"The corridor," he said. "Tell me what you saw."

Kaiden thought about this. "The beam section annotation hadn't tipped to red yet. The HUD was still showing amber. But the load

distribution had shifted since the initial scan, and the estimate was revising."

Declan looked at him.

"And I had a feeling," Kaiden said.

"A feeling."

"A direction. That it was about to go." He paused. "It wasn't quite instinct. It was—" He stopped, because the accurate description of what it had been would have required words for something he didn't have words for yet. "It was earlier than the HUD got there."

His father was quiet for a moment. The look on his face was not skeptical and it was not credulous — it was the look of a person receiving information and filing it.

"Your grandfather," Declan said, and stopped.

Kaiden waited.

"He used to say he felt things in his teeth," Declan said. "Before something went. He said it was the vibration frequency. He was probably right." A pause. "He was usually right."

He put his hand on Kaiden's shoulder — the same grip as the corridor, the same single second of the full weight of it, and then it was gone, and Declan was moving toward the front of the cabin where Matriarch Merivale was doing what Merivale was always doing, which was something that needed to be interrupted.

Kaiden kept his eyes on the debris field. The ore particulate was still visible, a bright scatter catching the system light, already beginning to drift in the directions that orbital mechanics were recommending for it.

The feeling had not been the vibration frequency. He didn't think his grandfather's explanation was wrong — it had been vibrations in the teeth before, in other corridors, in other situations. But this had been something else. This had been a direction, a word, arriving without manufacture: *Left. The next corridor. Go. Quickly.*

He had not manufactured the word. He was certain of this in the way that you can be certain of things that happened entirely inside

your own head, which was not perfectly certain but was as certain as the alternative.

He let it alone. There would be time to think about it later, or there wouldn't, and either way the ship was gone and everyone on it was alive, and that was the accounting that mattered.

From the front of the cabin, his father's voice carried over the general noise: "This is the third incident of this nature in as many months, Matriarch. Lady Kentur is reviewing your operating licenses. That review is going to have a conclusion."

Merivale's response was inaudible.

"Then let her say so," Declan said. "From solid ground, where she'll continue to be living."

The child beside Kaiden shifted slightly, settling her back more firmly against the wall. The plastic animal was in her lap now, both hands around it. She was looking at the viewport, at the debris field, with the clear-eyed attention she'd been giving everything since the quarters room.

"It sank," she said.

He looked at her.

"Ships sink," she said. "In water. My dad told me. Old ships, on worlds with water. They sink." She looked at the debris. "It's different in space."

"It is," Kaiden said.

"Where does it go?"

"It drifts," he said. "Until something pulls it in."

She thought about this. She seemed to find it acceptable.

The vessel's engines shifted tone as the pilot made a course adjustment, arcing them back toward the station. Outside, the debris field receded. The stars held their positions. The system went on doing what systems do — the planet on its course, the moons on theirs, the ore and the metal and the particulate of a seventeen-year-old mining vessel tracing their new paths through the available space.

Kaiden did not sleep, though his body would have accepted the offer. He sat with the child next to him and the debris field in the

viewport and the pressure behind his left eye that had faded but not entirely gone, and he watched the stars and let the question of the feeling wait for a time when there was room for it. There wasn't room for it now. There might not be room for it for a while.

He pressed the back of his head against the cabin wall and looked at the stars and waited for the station to appear in the viewport.

Later, he thought, which was not a thought he had manufactured. Or if it was, the manufacture had happened somewhere he couldn't quite locate.

He looked at it for a moment.

Then he let it go.

THREE

BAUXITUM SYSTEM

THE STATION LOOKED, at this distance, like something assembled from the components of several different plans.

This was accurate. The Bauxitum orbital station had been built without a guiding vision beyond the practical — a decommissioned refinery platform, acquired from a failed extraction consortium in the system's third decade, had provided the bones, and then the bones had been added to, repeatedly, as the need arose and the resources allowed. A new docking arm when the traffic outgrew the original three berths. A pressurized hab block when the crew count exceeded the capacity of the original crew quarters. A cargo bay extension, then another. A communications array, replaced twice. The solar management systems had been updated four times in the station's history, the fourth time in Donia's tenure, which was why the new arrays had an elegant, deliberate quality that sat in visible contrast to the rest of the structure — the only part of the station that looked like someone had thought about how it would look.

From the inspection vessel's forward viewport, Kaiden could

see all of it simultaneously, which was a view he rarely had. He was usually inside the station, moving through it in the corridor-by-corridor, compartment-by-compartment way that gave you an intimate knowledge of its specific parts and no sense of the whole. Here, with three hundred meters of vacuum between the viewport and the station's outermost surface, the whole was visible, and the whole was — what his mother would call honest, which was the word she used when she wanted to say ungainly and also mean it as praise.

"You have the conn," Donia said.

He moved to the pilot's seat. The inspection vessel was a compact craft — primarily a transit hull with a decent forward array and enough maneuverability to work around the station's somewhat improvised docking geometry. He'd flown it before, though not often. It was not a difficult vessel to fly but it rewarded attentiveness, and this morning attentiveness was what he had most of, for reasons that had nothing to do with the vessel.

His muscles still ached from the rescue. Not the gross ache of physical injury but the finer, more distributed ache of muscles that had been held at sustained high effort for longer than their ordinary range. The suit's exoskeleton did work, but it does not do the work — it assists, and the assistance requires something to assist, and that something had been working hard for twenty minutes in a failing corridor. The ache was yesterday's accounting, carried forward.

He adjusted their position with the microthrusters — a small correction, bringing them three hundred meters closer to the station, into a holding orbit that matched the station's rotation. Alise, in the co-pilot's seat, watched the maneuver without comment. She watched everything without comment and registered everything she watched. It was one of the things about his sister that could be, depending on the circumstance, either reassuring or unsettling.

Donia was standing behind them, one hand resting on the high rail behind the pilot's station. Not gripping it — resting, in the way of someone whose relationship with support structures was one of

acknowledgment rather than dependence. She was looking at the station.

"All those years," she said, "and it still looks like a pile of scrap to me."

The tone was wry. The pride underneath the wry tone was not subtle, though she would have called it something other than pride. She would have called it satisfaction, or accuracy, or investment recognized. The station had been built by House labor from repurposed materials in circumstances that did not allow for aesthetic priorities. The fact that it continued to function, continued to expand, continued to serve its purpose cycle after cycle under conditions that had destroyed more elegantly designed structures — that was not something she was required to apologize for.

Kaiden said, "The new arrays cleaned it up a little."

Donia made a sound that was not agreement and not disagreement.

On the station's main promenade — visible in the magnified forward display as a long windowed corridor running along the upper third of the primary hab block — there was movement. Not crew movement, the purposeful transit of workers with tasks. This was different. Clusters of people in non-work dress, children with the particular gait of children in public spaces who know they are allowed to be somewhere they are not usually allowed to be. Sashes and pins in the colors of the minor Houses — Harker, Elsana, the recently-dissolved Merivale — mixed with the blue and gold of Kentur itself. Families. The New Year population, which arrived in the system with the news of the City's coming and stayed until the City had passed through and the system had been assessed and the tribute paid and the next cycle of ordinary work had begun.

He had grown up in this population, when he was the right age for it. The anticipation of the City's arrival was the one event in the Bauxitum calendar that produced something like civic emotion — not joy, exactly, and not fear, exactly, but the particular charged atmosphere of people who are about to be observed and who have

prepared for the observation without being entirely certain the preparation was adequate. Every cycle, the same quality of nervous energy. Every cycle, the same outcome: the City arrived, assessed, departed, and life continued. But the knowledge that life would continue did not, apparently, make the approach of the assessment any less tightening.

"Ninety-six percent of projected yield," Alise said. Not to anyone in particular. To the record.

"Not the numbers," Donia said. "The mood. Do you see the loading bay?"

Kaiden brought the magnification up on the forward display and found loading bay alpha. In the shadow of a heavy-lift shuttle, a row of cryo containers stood in formation that was distinct from the surrounding cargo — not in size, which was standard, but in color. The containers were marked in a deep, saturated blue that was almost luminous against the station's gray-brown hull surfaces, with stenciled glyphs running diagonally down their sides and a sensor suite at each corner that Kaiden recognized from the military-grade specifications he'd studied in passing. Not military contents — but military-grade containment. Whatever was inside was alive, and whatever was alive inside was worth protecting.

"The Fascinations," Alise said. Not a question.

"First quantity production run." Donia's voice was level, but there was something in the level quality that indicated effort. "We sent samples the previous cycle — less than a full container. The responses from the City's market offices were—" She paused, selecting the word. "Encouraging."

Kaiden studied the containers. There were eleven of them, which was not a large number but was more than a demonstration batch. Eleven containers of something that sold for more than four months of mining yield each.

"Grandmother's design," he said.

"Her original cultivar, yes. The engineering refinements are ours — the cryo-stasis tolerances, the atmospheric management inside the

containers, the bioluminescent stability improvements. But the flower itself is Lorel's." A pause. "She'll hate that we've scaled it."

"She'll hate that it worked without her," Alise said, which was the kind of observation his sister made that was entirely accurate and entirely unnecessary to make, and which she made anyway because accuracy was, for her, a moral position.

Donia's response was a small, dry sound. "She'll be pleased about both and she'll express it as neither. Let's go."

She moved forward, and Kaiden vacated the pilot's seat without ceremony, and she took it in the way she took every physical position that was available to her — as if the taking was a formality and the position had already been hers. Two fingers on the main thruster control. A single, smooth adjustment of heading. The station fell behind them, its silhouette shrinking against the far edge of the display.

The growbitats appeared in the viewport the way some things appear in dreams: too large, and then more large, and then so large that scale stops being an available concept and you simply accept what you're seeing without being able to place it on any framework you already have.

Nine of them. Each a cylinder a kilometer in length and three-quarters of a kilometer in diameter, banded in white and gold at the structural stress points, surrounded by the spread of solar arrays that angled to catch the system's light from every position the rotation offered. They were arranged in a shallow arc — not by accident, everything about the arrangement was the result of specific engineering decisions, the spacing calculated to prevent mutual shadowing, the angles of the arrays staggered so that no growbitat's shadow fell on another's panels. The arc as a whole rotated slowly around its center, driven by the orbital mechanics and by the small thrusters that kept each unit's attitude consistent.

At the far end of the arc, incomplete: the tenth. Its hull was open in sections, the structural ribs visible where the outer plating had not yet been installed, the exposed metal catching the sun at angles that produced a different quality of glare from the finished cylinders. Workbees moved around it in the careful, precise patterns of machines doing careful, precise work — stitching the hull together from the outside while the interior systems were presumably being tested and calibrated from within.

Kaiden had seen photographs. He had seen the architectural schematics, the engineering reports, the quarterly construction updates that Donia forwarded to the family with annotations. He had been here when the first growbitat had been completed, seven years ago now, and he remembered the way it had looked then — singular, vast, strange. He had not been back since. Not physically back, here, in the inspection vessel with the viewport showing him all nine of the completed units in the same frame.

Seven years. One had become nine. The tenth was being built.

"What do you think?" his mother asked.

He looked at them for long enough that the question had space to sit.

"I don't have a framework for it," he said. "There's no scale I can use. I know the numbers — kilometer length, crew capacity, yield per cycle — but looking at it, the numbers don't help."

Donia made a sound that might have been satisfaction. "That's the right response. The wrong response is to calculate."

Alise, who had been calculating since the moment the growbitats came into view, said nothing.

He thought about what it meant to make something that size. Not the engineering — he knew enough of the engineering to know that the challenge was solvable with sufficient application of resources and intelligence, and House Kentur had applied both, and here was the result. He thought about what it meant to make something that size from the beginning, from the first growbitat seven years ago when the concept had been a speculative conversation

about food security and the original structure had been a repurposed long-haul cargo hull that was no longer fit for the cargo runs it had been built for. One. Then a second, two years later, once the systems had been validated and the commercial potential was clearer. Then a third and a fourth in the same cycle, because by then Donia had committed the resources and was not interested in incremental progress. Then the arc.

The Kentur station had been a failed refinery platform repurposed into something that worked. The growbitat array had been a failed cargo hull repurposed into something that worked, and then multiplied, and then multiplied again. The pattern was the same. The scale was different in a way that made the same pattern feel like a different thing.

"One growbitat for Fascinations," Donia said. "The rest for food production." She wasn't explaining — she was articulating what she had told them before, what was already known, in the way she sometimes articulated what was already known when what she meant was: look at what I'm telling you, look at it as if you haven't heard it before. "Bulk grains. Engineered proteins. Leafy crops. The hydroponic stacks in cylinders three and four alone can sustain forty thousand people for a standard cycle."

"Per cylinder," Alise said.

"Per cylinder."

Forty thousand people, twice over, from two of the nine completed units. The others ran their own crops, different strains, different yield profiles — the agricultural diversification was deliberate, the risk management of a family that had learned about single-point failures from the history of every House that had ever built its position on a single product and then watched the product falter.

"And the one for Fascinations," Kaiden said.

"The revenue from a single container of Fascinations exceeds four months of mining yield," Donia said. "We have eleven containers on the loading bay floor. If the market responds the way the preliminary data suggests it will respond — and the preliminary data is very

good — we will be able to fund three additional growbitat construction cycles without external financing."

Alise said, "The demand modeling assumes sustained novelty premium. If the Fascinations become common—"

"We hold the seed stock," Donia said. "We hold all derivative genetics. We hold the exclusive cultivation rights under direct Imperial grant. The Fascinations cannot become common. The scarcity is structural."

A silence.

Kaiden looked at the containers in the loading bay display, then at the growbitat arc, then at the loading bay again. Eleven containers, and behind them the capacity to produce more. The Fascinations grew in controlled conditions in one sealed cylinder of living architecture, tended by House staff who knew the specific protocols that Lorel had developed and Donia had refined, and the output went into climate-managed cryo-containers that would deliver the blooms to their eventual purchasers in the condition they'd left the growbitat. Living flowers, shipped across interstellar distances, arriving alive at the courts of Dominion Major Houses and the residences of the City's wealthiest families, where they would live for ten or twenty years if properly maintained — a permanent presence, constantly bioluminescent, in spaces where most beautiful things faded within days.

He thought about the people who would buy them. He had never been in those spaces. He would be in them, soon — the City was days away, and the City contained the kind of spaces where Fascinations would be displayed. He was trying to compose a picture of what it would be like to stand in a room where one of these flowers was living, and he was finding the composition difficult because the room itself was not yet real to him.

"They're alive," he said. "Inside the containers right now."

"Yes."

"They don't mind?"

It was a question that a child would ask, and he knew it was a

question that a child would ask, and he asked it anyway because he genuinely wanted to know the answer.

Donia looked at him with an expression that was considering rather than dismissive. "They're plants," she said. "The question of what they mind is not something we can resolve. What we can resolve is that the cryo-transport systems maintain exactly the conditions they require, and that the protocols for their installation and care are comprehensive, and that the Houses that receive them are provided with everything they need to keep them alive." She paused. "Your grandmother talks to hers."

"Does it help?"

"She thinks it does."

The inspection vessel drifted forward on the microthrusters, closing the distance to the arc's nearest cylinder. At fifty meters, the scale shifted again — the viewport filled with the curve of the growbitat's hull, the white-and-gold bands of the structural bracing running across the field of view, the solar arrays spreading out of the frame entirely. Through the viewport ports set into the hull — small, circular, triple-glazed — he could see light. The interior light of the growbitat, which was calibrated to a spectrum the specific crops required, and which from outside looked warm and faintly amber, like light through old glass.

Living things behind the glass. Growing in there, right now, in manufactured soil and manufactured climate, following their own schedules without regard for the vacuum outside the hull. The pollinators — whatever species the engineers had selected for this particular biome — were in there too, doing what pollinators do. The soil microbiome that the agricultural engineers had spent years developing was doing what soil microbiomes do. The whole sealed system was continuing its process independent of anything happening outside it.

He found this unexpectedly moving and did not examine why.

"The tenth," he said. "When is it operational?"

"Six weeks," Alise said, from the display data. "If the remaining

hull sections install on schedule and the atmospheric sealing tests pass. Seven weeks if there are problems with the grav plating in the core section — the installation report from last cycle flagged a potential alignment issue."

"I saw that report," Kaiden said. "The workbees on the starboard facing were logging a two-millimeter deviation. That's within tolerance."

"It's within tolerance now. It may not be within tolerance after the sealing tests, when the thermal cycling creates stress on the mounting brackets."

"You could re-mount the brackets with the current installation crew in two days."

"You could," Alise said, with the specific tone that meant: so why hasn't anyone done that. She was already making a note on her slate.

"The tenth will be food production," Donia said. "Full hydroponic. By the time it's operational, we'll have the Bauxitum system at sixty percent food self-sufficiency. In your granddaughter's lifetime, Alise, this system will import nothing it cannot choose to import."

Alise looked up from her slate. "Assuming the political landscape remains stable enough for the operation to continue."

"It won't," Donia said. "The political landscape is never stable. We build anyway."

The inspection vessel completed its drift past the nearest cylinder and Donia brought it around on a long arc, sweeping out to a position where more of the array was visible at once. From here, with the angle adjusted, you could see five of the completed cylinders in a single frame, each one caught at a slightly different phase of its slow rotation, the solar arrays at different angles, the light reflecting from each surface in a sequence that moved like something breathing.

Kaiden watched it for a while.

He thought about what Declan had said on the rescue vessel — *you did good, son* — and the way the hand on his shoulder had communicated something that the words were too sparse to carry,

and he thought about the feeling in the corridor, the word arriving without manufacture, and then he thought about the growbitats, which had been built by deliberate human decision from imperfect materials in imperfect conditions and which were now turning in the light of the system's sun and feeding people and producing living flowers that would be carried across interstellar distances and arrive alive.

The pressure behind his left eye was faint. Not the urgent version from the corridor. Something quieter — attentional rather than warning, the kind of sensation he associated with paying close attention to something that was paying close attention back. He had felt this before, usually in spaces that were more complex than they appeared, and had never been able to decide whether the sensation was something about the spaces or something about himself.

He decided not to decide. The sensation faded.

"Let's go home," his mother said.

The station received them in the way the station always received them: with the ambient noise of a working facility that has not adjusted its operations for the inconvenience of a docking event. Hydraulic clamps, pressure equalization, the particular change in the quality of the floor's vibration as the vessel's drive cone cycled down and the station's own internal systems took over.

They came through the docking collar into a section of the station that Kaiden knew with the familiarity of a place grown up in, the kind of familiarity that is stored in the body rather than the mind — his feet knew this floor, knew the slight leftward slope of the corridor that the original construction had never fully corrected, knew where the overhead clearance dropped at the junction between the old section and the 2031 expansion.

Donia did not slow. She walked the way she always walked through the station — as if the station were an extension of her own

physical body that required maintenance rather than navigation. She knew where everything was. She had made most of the decisions about where things were.

"Fourteen ships scheduled for transfer," Alise said, catching up to her mother's pace with her eyes on her slate. "More than two thousand containers. Offload needs to be complete in sixty-two hours."

"It will be."

"There's a bottleneck at bay three — the loading arm's calibration is running slow. At current throughput we lose approximately four hours over the full transfer cycle."

"Get someone on the calibration tonight."

"I've already flagged it."

Kaiden walked behind them, listening. The station's comms traffic was audible through the overhead speakers in a low, encrypted murmur — the channels that ran constantly, the coordination of an orbital facility that never fully slept. He knew the rhythms of it. Knew which frequencies ran which functions, knew the pattern of the morning shift changeover and the sound of the ore transfer authorization codes cycling through the standard rotation.

He had grown up listening to this. It was one of the things that would be different about the City. He had no idea what the City sounded like, but he was fairly certain it did not sound like this.

Donia stopped at the junction that led toward the family quarters on one side and toward the administrative wing on the other. She turned to look at him.

"You did well yesterday," she said.

He was surprised enough that the response he had prepared — *anyone would have done the same* — didn't arrive in time. He stood there for a moment without a response.

"The corridor," she said. "The ceiling section. If you hadn't diverted, we would have lost three of the Merivale crew. Possibly the child."

"The HUD was showing amber," he said. "It was a reasonable call."

"The HUD showed amber. You called it before the HUD showed red." She held his gaze. "That is not the same thing. You saw the risk before the instruments reported it. That is a specific kind of competence and it is worth having." A pause, during which she appeared to be deciding how much further to go. "It's also not common. Don't waste it."

She turned and continued down the corridor.

Alise appeared at his shoulder. "She means that as a compliment," Alise said.

"I know."

"In case you were uncertain."

"I wasn't."

Alise gave him a look that suggested she had been slightly uncertain whether he was certain, and she had been correct to check, and she felt no particular way about this. Then she followed their mother.

They found Lorel and Tome and Declan already gathered in the family's private dining room, which was not the formal dining room — the formal dining room was used for House business and for occasions that required the weight of protocol and the appropriate table settings. The private dining room was smaller, its furniture selected for comfort rather than impression, and it smelled of the tea that Lorel drank throughout the day in quantities that concerned everyone except Lorel.

Grandmother Lorel was in her usual chair, which was not the most prominent chair in the room but was the chair that faced the door, and had probably been selected for this reason long ago and had been her chair ever since. She was smaller than Kaiden remembered her being in childhood, but he knew this was a perception produced by the fact that in childhood she had seemed very large, and the revision of that perception was ongoing. She was seventy-six

years old and she was still completely present in every room she occupied.

"You're late," she said. "We held the start."

"We were looking at the growbitats," Donia said.

"I know you were. I watched the vessel on the tracking display." Lorel's gaze moved to Kaiden, assessing in the way of someone whose assessment is very fast. "You look like you slept badly."

"I slept fine," Kaiden said.

"You look like you slept fine after sleeping badly the night before." She returned to her tea. "Sit down."

Declan was at the sideboard, and he looked at Kaiden when he came in, and the look communicated the same thing the shoulder grip had communicated on the rescue vessel — acknowledgment, satisfaction, the specific economy of a man who does not say more than is required and considers what is required to be less than most people would estimate. He handed Kaiden a cup of something hot and moved to his own seat.

Tome was already eating, which was his default state at any gathering that involved food. He was one of those people who eat with the complete attention of someone for whom the food is genuinely interesting, which was a quality that occasionally irritated people who thought he wasn't paying attention to the conversation and then discovered, when he spoke, that he had been paying more attention than anyone else in the room.

They ate. The station's kitchen ran on House staff who had been producing meals for the Kentur family for long enough that the meals were calibrated to preferences that had not been stated in years. The food was good. It was always good. One of the unremarked benefits of running a system with a functioning food supply chain.

The conversation moved through the logistical preparation for the City's arrival — the offload schedule, the tribute cargo, the protocol briefing that Aurelo had been preparing for Kaiden — and then through the broader state of the system, the Leaf yield from the

Cendant fields, the status of the new Fascination containers, the question of the growbitat ten's grav plating that Alise had already flagged and arranged to have addressed.

Donia said, toward the end of the main course: "We're revoking the Merivale licenses. All of them, effective tonight."

The table was quiet for a moment in the way of a table that has heard something everyone anticipated and no one has fully prepared a response for.

"They'll scream," Tome said.

"Let them," Donia said.

"They have two large ships still operational," Alise said. "And eleven or twelve smaller vessels. And the moon station."

"The moon station is one structural failure from losing its primary atmosphere seal," Donia said. "The large ships will need surveys before any new operator takes them on. The smaller vessels can be reassigned to Obeiha at licensing fee rates that will recover our rescue costs inside three cycles." She said it as if she had already done the accounting, which she had. "The Merivale operation has put three crews in our rescue vessels in twelve months. We are not a rescue service. We are a House."

Lorel said, without looking up from her tea: "Matriarch Merivale will take it to the arbitration board."

"She can," Donia said. "The Chain contract gives us revocation rights on the third incident. Yesterday was the third incident."

"She'll argue the rescue was initiated under the emergency provisions of the broader Bauxitum operating agreement, not under the Merivale-specific contract."

"And she'll lose that argument."

"She will," Lorel agreed. "But it will take two cycles to resolve, and in that period her lawyers will file for injunctive relief on the licenses, and you'll spend six months in the middle of an operational dispute while the City is watching." She finally looked up. "I'm not saying don't do it. I'm saying do it correctly."

"Tell me how to do it correctly," Donia said, which from Donia was as close to asking for advice as she got.

"File the revocation tonight, as you intend. In the same communication, offer her a settlement: the licenses are permanently revoked, but House Kentur purchases the two large vessels at assessed value, assumes the moon station operating costs for one cycle to allow for proper decommissioning, and provides transition employment references for her crew." Lorel replaced her cup in its saucer with the precise movement of someone who has considered the weight of her objects for decades. "She gets something. Her people get something. The arbitration board has nothing to arbitrate because there's nothing she wants that she isn't being given. And you have clean hands in front of the City."

Donia was quiet for a moment. "That's expensive."

"Not as expensive as two cycles of operational dispute during the most important elevation process this House has had in three generations," Lorel said. "And not as expensive as the reputation for being the House that lets its clients' people die."

Tome was looking at his grandmother with an expression that was part admiration and part something that might have been relief, the relief of someone who has been quietly worried about a problem and has now watched someone else identify and solve it with efficiency that makes worrying seem retrospectively wasteful.

Declan said nothing. He rarely said anything in these conversations — not because he had nothing to contribute but because the contribution he made was different in kind from the conversational kind, and he made it in other rooms, and this was not the room for it.

Kaiden was watching his grandmother. He was thinking about what she had built, and what she had given to Donia to build on, and what Donia had built on it. Three generations of women making decisions in this station, this system, this small corner of the Imperium, each decision contributing to the next, each generation inheriting a position that was slightly better than the one before and slightly more complex. Lorel had made the Fascinations and the

groundwork for the growbitats. Donia had made the growbitats and was making the elevation. He did not yet know what his generation would make, but the pattern suggested it would be built on top of what Donia had built, which meant it would need to be larger and more complex, because that was how the pattern worked.

He thought about going to the City. He thought about the Throne Room, which Aurelo had described in the briefing sessions in terms that were both precise and somehow inadequate for the reality — Kaiden suspected the reality would be inadequate for any description and would require being present in. He thought about the audience with Imperium, which Aurelo had framed as an honor and which Kaiden suspected was not precisely an honor but was something more like an inspection, and which required him to behave in a way that reflected the House he was representing while not drawing attention to himself in ways that would be disadvantageous.

He was nineteen. He had been on three rescue operations, two mining disputes, and one formal negotiation. He had never been off Bauxitum except for the short-range survey work that was part of his operational training. He was going to sit in the Throne Room of Imperial City and accept, on behalf of his House, whatever Janna Chadrac had decided to offer or demand.

He found, to his moderate surprise, that he was not afraid of this. He was something more specific than afraid, something that had a clearer outline — he was aware of the gap between what he knew and what he would need to know, and he was aware that the gap was not small, and he was aware that there was a limited amount of time available for closing it. This was not fear. It was a problem he did not yet have enough information to solve, which was a different thing, and the difference mattered.

"Father Aurelo wants to run the protocol briefing again tomorrow morning," Kaiden said. "The Throne Room geometry."

"I know," Donia said. "Go."

"And the evening after. He said there are elements he wants to—"

"I know," she said again. "However many sessions he asks for, go.

Aurelo knows what he's preparing you for. We don't." A pause. "We know some of it."

Lorel was looking at him. He became aware of the look the way you become aware of something that has been happening for longer than you noticed.

"The City is not the station," Lorel said. "Nothing there works the way anything here works. The people there are running calculations on you from the moment you come through the docking collar. They don't wait to be introduced. They are already deciding who you are before you speak."

"I know," Kaiden said.

"You know abstractly," Lorel said. "You will know it in the body once you get there. That's a different kind of knowing, and the gap between them is where most people make their mistakes. Don't close the gap with performance. Performance is visible. Close it by watching."

He looked at her.

"What are you watching for?" he asked.

She considered this for a moment. "Whatever they're not showing you," she said. "They're very good at showing you what they want you to see. What they're not showing you is the other thing."

It was not a complete answer. He suspected she had given him a more complete answer than she'd intended to, and had stopped because the more complete version required more context than the dinner table was the right place for.

He filed it.

The family gathered for a while longer after the meal — the particular quality of a gathering that has concluded its business and has not yet concluded itself, conversation moving through the smaller channels that open up when the larger questions have been addressed. Tome asked about the rescue, and Kaiden told it in the operational version, the sequence of decisions and events, and Tome listened with the whole-attention quality he brought to everything and said, at the end: "The child — what happened to the child?"

"She's with the Merivale crew," Kaiden said. "She's fine."

"She had a toy. You mentioned the toy."

"A plastic animal. She kept it the whole way through."

Tome nodded. "Good," he said, in the tone that meant he found this genuinely satisfying. He was the kind of person who tracked the small human outcomes of large operations, the details that the operational report would not capture because they were not operationally relevant. He was right to track them. The small human outcomes were the ones that were actually happening to the humans.

Declan, at some point, had gotten up and was standing by the room's single porthole, looking out at nothing. Or at Bauxitum below — the planet was not in the porthole's current facing, but it would come around. The station's rotation brought it into view every forty minutes.

Kaiden went to stand beside him.

They were quiet for a moment. The station hummed around them, the constant subharmonic of a facility that never stopped.

"Aurelo is going to run the Throne Room geometry again tomorrow," Kaiden said.

"I know. I read the schedule."

"Is there anything you think he's not covering?"

Declan looked at the porthole for a moment. "He knows the City better than I do," he said. "I've been twice. He's been more than that." A pause. "He knows what matters. Listen to him."

"I always listen to him."

"I know." Another pause, longer. "The City — it's not like anything you've seen. The people there have been playing the same game longer than any of us have been alive. They're very good at it." He turned to look at Kaiden, and the look had the particular quality of a man who is deciding whether to say something more, and the decision going yes. "Don't try to win. Not yet. Just watch. Keep your accounts."

It was close to what his grandmother had said, which probably meant it was the correct advice, or at least the advice that two people

who had been watching him for nineteen years had independently concluded he needed.

"Keep my accounts," Kaiden said.

"And come back," Declan said. Which was a different order of statement from the account-keeping advice, and landed differently, and was not elaborated.

Bauxitum came around in the porthole. The planet below: mining habitats twinkling in the belt, the processing facilities visible as a cluster of lights on the dayside surface, the orbital traffic small and distant. His system. The system he'd grown up in and never left. In seventy-two hours, the City would arrive, and some number of weeks after that, he would leave.

He pressed his palm to the porthole glass. It was cold, and through it he could feel the subharmonic of the station, the perpetual working vibration of a machine that was also a home.

Then Alise appeared in the doorway and said that Aurelo was asking about the morning schedule, and the moment concluded, and Kaiden went to find out what his morning schedule was going to be.

The station turned. The City was coming. The Fascinations glowed in their containers in loading bay alpha, patient and bioluminescent, waiting to be carried elsewhere.

Somewhere in the fields of Cendant IV — though he didn't know this yet, wouldn't know it for days — the Leaf was being harvested from the terraced rows in the particular pre-dawn light, the Lisser workers moving through the green with their practiced rhythm, the twin moons completing their courses overhead.

The system went on doing what systems do.

FOUR

BAUXITUM SYSTEM

THE FAMILY ATE well the night after the inspection.

This was not ordinary. The station's kitchen operated on a philosophy of sufficiency rather than quality — the House fed its people, and it fed them well enough, but the resources that might have gone toward culinary ambition were being directed, cycle after cycle, into the growbitat program and the system's infrastructure and the hundred other places that Donia had determined needed them more than the table did. Real protein appeared on the family's table perhaps twice a cycle, for occasions that warranted it. Tonight apparently warranted it.

Kaiden understood this to mean that his mother had known, when she ordered the kitchen to prepare it, that they would need something tonight that the ordinary meal could not provide. Not pleasure, exactly. Ballast.

Father Aurelo was already seated when Kaiden and Alise came through. He had the position he always took at the family table — across from Lorel, which was not the most prominent seat and not

the most retiring one, a position that allowed him to observe the room without appearing to observe it, to join the conversation without appearing to have chosen which conversations to join. He had been in this position, at this table, for as long as Kaiden could remember. The chair had the quality of something that had been shaped by years of use into the specific contours of one person's occupancy.

Donia was at the head. Her right hand rested on the table edge, and as Kaiden took his seat he noticed the faint flex of it — a single motion, barely visible, the kind of thing the body does when the mind is working on something it cannot yet release.

"Your father is still in the debrief," she said, to no one specifically, which meant to everyone.

"The Merivale manifests," Alise said, settling in at Donia's right.

"Yes." Donia did not elaborate, because the Merivale situation had already been discussed and decided and the elaboration would be administrative. "He'll eat later."

Lorel's attention was on Kaiden in the oblique, comprehensive way she had of paying attention to things she was not visibly looking at. "You look like you slept badly," she said.

"I slept fine," Kaiden said. This was approximately true — he had slept the sleep of someone whose body had been more thoroughly used than their schedule had anticipated, which was a sound sleep but not a restorative one. The distinction was not worth making.

Tome poured wine. He did it with the particular focus he brought to physical tasks that could be done either carefully or carelessly, always choosing the former. Three-quarters of each cup, not more. The good glass, not the polymer. This too was information about what kind of evening Donia had determined they were having.

"To the New Year," Aurelo said, lifting his cup, his voice carrying its customary warmth — the warmth of lamplight rather than sunlight, steady and low.

They drank. The wine was real, or near enough to real that the distinction was academic. Kaiden felt it arrive, a small warmth moving from chest to periphery. He let it.

The food came. The retainer who brought it was young, precise, and efficient in the way of someone who has been trained to be invisible at table and has succeeded. The protein was good — something engineered but engineered with attention to what it was meant to be rather than simply what it could be made cheapest to produce. The grains were station issue, but accompanied by a sauce that suggested someone in the kitchen had an opinion about them.

Conversation moved through the logistics of the next seventy-two hours: the offload schedule, the tribute cargo composition, the Fascination containers and their positioning in loading bay alpha. Alise reported; Donia listened and occasionally redirected. Tome asked questions whose purpose was less to gather information than to organize it into a shape that could be acted on. Lorel ate and watched and said nothing for long enough that Kaiden understood she was paying attention to something other than the food and the logistics, though what it was he could not identify.

Aurelo assembled his utensils in the particular precise ritual he performed before eating, each implement positioned with an exactness that had nothing to do with function and everything to do with the habit of a man who found in small regularities a frame for the day. Kaiden had been watching him do this for nineteen years. He had stopped wondering about it.

A chime sounded from the comm terminal — one note, brief, the standard alert for a waiting Link message. The retainer appeared, as if summoned by the sound rather than any visible signal, with a sealed Link message in House Aberdeen's livery. He set it beside Donia and withdrew.

Donia's face, as she read, went through a transition that was almost invisible in its control: the initial scan, the pause, the second read that confirmed what the first read had not wanted to be certain of. Her right hand, against the table edge, flexed once.

"House Holden has been found in violation of Imperial Law," she said. Not reading aloud — stating. The message was being reported,

not performed. "The family has been exterminated. Cendant system is under Imperial guardianship, effective immediately."

The table absorbed this.

It was not, strictly speaking, a surprise — not in the sense that House Holden's difficulties had been known and discussed, that the Leaf production shortfall had been a matter of system-level intelligence for months, that anyone paying attention to the trajectory of a House in chronic noncompliance with its obligations could have predicted an Imperial response. It was a surprise in the sense that knowing a thing is coming and knowing a thing has come are different kinds of knowing, and the difference lands in the body regardless of what the mind has already calculated.

Alise's face had gone still. Tome's hand had stopped mid-pour, the wine held where it was without the motion of pouring completing itself. Aurelo's lips were pressed together in a line that was not quite neutral, the line of a man holding something back that was adjacent to what he was feeling but not identical to it.

Lorel said: "How?"

"It doesn't say."

"House Aberdeen's intelligence?" Tome set the wine down. "Their reliability?"

"Good. They've never sent us unverified."

"The whole House," Tome said. Not a question. The kind of repetition that serves as an attempt to locate the fact in the landscape of possible facts, because facts of this magnitude require a moment of locating.

"The message is absolute."

Lorel set down her utensils. "So it begins," she said, the phrase arriving with the weight of something that had been in storage, ready for use when the occasion arrived.

The silence that followed was the specific silence of people in a room where the room itself has changed and none of the furniture has moved. Kaiden looked from face to face — his grandmother's

composed grief, the particular grief of someone who has outlived enough things to know how grief works; his mother's focused calm, which was not the absence of feeling but the practice of setting it precisely to one side and addressing the problem; Tome's slowly settling shock; Aurelo's controlled stillness, which was trying harder than any of the others.

"What happens to Cendant IV?" Kaiden asked.

"Imperium holds it," Lorel said. "For now. Long enough to send the message."

"Which message?"

"All of them simultaneously," Donia said. "That Holden's failure was not overlooked. That a Dominion Major House is not too large to eliminate. That the system's function — the Leaf, the processing — continues regardless of who sits above it." She picked up her utensil and held it without using it, a gesture that was more thinking than eating. "She'll need someone there eventually. Someone to govern it who won't immediately become a threat by virtue of governing it."

"Not us," Alise said, with a directness that Kaiden recognized as the compression of a longer analysis into its conclusion. "Not after the surplus cycles. Not with the Fascinations launching. We'd read as ambitious."

"We are ambitious," Lorel said.

"We read as productive," Donia corrected. "That's different. Ambition is threatening. Productivity is useful." She finally used the utensil, cutting something with the precision of a decision being made. "What I want to know is whether Holden's fall is relevant to our audience."

"Your audience with Imperium?" Aurelo's voice was careful, the care visible in the slight additional spacing between words.

"We've been summoned to the City." Donia said it as though it were information everyone at the table already had, which was not quite true — Kaiden hadn't been told; he'd inferred from his mother's tone and the timing of the evening that something of this order was

coming, but the specific summons was new. "On the City's arrival. Myself, Tome, Lorel, and Kaiden."

Alise was very still.

"Not Alise," Donia said.

The table's reaction to this was the particular compressed reaction of people who understand immediately what the omission means and are deciding how to respond to its meaning. Aurelo had gone fully still, the controlled stillness replaced by something more absolute. Lorel's hands, in her lap, pressed together.

"It's a message," Alise said. Her voice was level, the level of someone who has decided that the level voice is the appropriate instrument for this particular temperature of feeling. "You don't bring four in the succession line without intending something. You exclude the heir from the audience to demonstrate you don't intend to end the House."

"Yes," said Father Aurelo, and then he stopped, and the word sat there by itself.

Tome leaned forward. "Or it means something else entirely. Imperium doesn't work in single meanings. The same gesture can carry three purposes simultaneously and she prefers it that way — the ambiguity is part of the instrument."

"What are the three purposes?" Kaiden asked.

"I can think of more than three," Lorel said, "and I've been out of the game for twenty years. The audit of our yield. The Fascinations debut — she'll want to form an opinion of them with us present. The growbitat technology, which she's been briefed on. Our position adjacent to the Holden situation. And whatever she hasn't told us she wants, which is always the most important part."

Donia set down the utensil again. "Aurelo."

The priest looked at her.

"Begin preparing Kaiden tonight," she said. "Protocol, the Throne Room geometry, everything you have. I want him ready."

Aurelo nodded. The nod was the nod of a man who had been

expecting to be asked and had not been looking forward to it — not because of the work, but because of what the work signaled about what was coming.

"Tonight," he confirmed.

After dinner Alise did not linger. She gathered her slate and departed with the efficiency of someone who has a great deal to do and is determining the best order to do it in, which was always Alise's response to uncertainty — she resolved it into its component tasks and addressed the tasks. She would be fine. She was almost always fine, not in the sense of everything being acceptable but in the sense of being capable of addressing whatever was not acceptable.

At the door she turned and looked at Kaiden. Just a look — brief, flat, the look of someone communicating something that they've decided doesn't need words because words would make it more than it was or less than it was. He held it for a moment. Then she was gone.

Aurelo's study was the only space on the station that had accumulated something beyond its function.

Every other room on the station was precisely what it was: a workspace, a hab module, a storage bay. They served their purposes without additional character. Aurelo's study had been in his occupation for twenty years, which was long enough for a room to develop a relationship with its occupant, and the relationship this room had developed was the relationship of a space that had absorbed, through long proximity, something of the person who inhabited it. The walls had once been the standard station white. They were not that anymore — not quite any color that had a name, the particular off-pale of surfaces that have been breathed in and breathed out by someone for two decades, that have held lamplight for two decades, that have absorbed the specific atmospheric contributions of burning

wick and aged paper and the particular chemical signature of a man who worried.

The sconce lamps threw their uneven light. On the study table: charts, their vellum yellowed at the edges, some of them old enough that the system they depicted had been partially renamed or reorganized since the charting. Data slates, stacked with a precision that suggested the stacks were themselves a form of organization, each stack representing a category that Aurelo held in his mind and could navigate without the visual cues. And — incongruous, tucked against the far corner of the table — a small collection of glass marbles, catching the lamplight in moving fractured lines that drifted across the vellum like slow stars.

Kaiden had always been slightly uncertain about the marbles. He had never asked.

He entered and stood at the worn strip of black tape in the deck plating, one meter from the table's edge. The position he had stood in for a hundred sessions. His feet found it without looking.

Aurelo was seated, his face in the half-shadow between two sconces, his hands above a codex that he was not quite reading. The hands had their customary fine tremor, slightly more pronounced than Kaiden usually noticed. The face was thinner than yesterday's face — not literally, but in the way that a face can be thinner on a day when what it is containing is larger than usual.

"You ate," Aurelo said.

"We all ate," Kaiden said. "You were there."

"Yes." A pause. "Good." He gestured: stand at the mark.

Kaiden was already at the mark.

"Imagine the Throne Room," Aurelo said. "East corridor, Bridge of Life. Tell me the steps to the dais."

Kaiden exhaled and recited: "Seven to the circle at the dais base. Vestibule of two paces from the entrance. The floor is blue marble, veined in black — the veining runs north to south, not east to west, which is how you orient in the room if you've lost your bearing. If

you're at the circle you're still three paces from the Guild heads, who stand at the dais flanks."

"Guards."

"Four at the main entrance, not the ceremonial guards — those are decorative, standing in the two alcoves off the Bridge. The main entrance guards are operational. Two flanking the approach, posted at the guild head positions. One at the dais foot, always female by tradition, always armed with the double-blade configuration, always positioned between the Chain Guild head and the Cognauts' Guild head."

"The salutation on first address."

"Your Serenity. On subsequent, Imperium. For the heir, Your Grace, unless corrected at first address, in which case you follow the correction without acknowledgment or apology."

"Topic order."

"Tribute first. Then House business. Then any request. Never the reverse, under any circumstances, because leading with a request implies the tribute is contingent on the request's outcome, which is a significant implied insult to the person who has already agreed to receive tribute."

"Good," Aurelo said, and then he stopped, and stayed stopped for a moment that was longer than the pauses that came between one question and the next. His hands moved — the left pressed flat against the codex cover, the right curling briefly at the knuckle before releasing.

"You're very good at this," he said. "Better than your father, and your father was better than most."

"You taught me the same way you taught him."

"I taught you the same material," Aurelo said. "The manner wasn't mine to teach." He looked at Kaiden with the look of someone beginning a sentence he has been composing for a while. "There are things Imperium will look for in an audience. Not in the protocol — anyone of your rank can be drilled to protocol, and she knows it. She

looks for what lies underneath the protocol. The quality of attention. The kind of mind that's operating the performance."

Kaiden waited.

"She is very good at reading what she looks for," Aurelo said. "She has been doing it for many cycles, with many Houses. Most of what she sees does not concern her. You must not give her reason to be concerned."

"How do I give her reason to be concerned?"

Aurelo's hands pressed harder against the codex. "By being remarkable."

The word sat there. Kaiden turned it over.

"You're telling me to be unremarkable," he said. "In the audience with Imperium. In the Throne Room."

"I am telling you that remarkable is dangerous," Aurelo said. "There is a specific kind of attention that Imperium pays, when she pays it, that is not attention you want. She is not a woman who finds remarkable things pleasing. She finds them interesting. Interesting, to her, means useful. Useful means something that is hers to direct."

He looked Kaiden directly in the eyes, which was something he was not always willing to do during these sessions — usually the gaze went somewhere between Kaiden and the middle distance, processing both simultaneously. Right now it was specific and held.

"You have a gift for detail," Aurelo said. "For reading situations before they resolve. For being where you need to be before the need is visible." He paused. "In ordinary life, this is a skill. In the Throne Room, this is a flag."

Kaiden felt the back of something. The shape of where this was going, not yet the full form of it. "Why?"

Aurelo's gaze went to the window, which looked out at nothing — the corridor outside the study had no feature of interest, only the composite wall of the adjacent module. He looked at it as if it had one.

"There are things about your family's history," he said, very carefully, in the specific register of someone being careful, "that I

have not told you. That I was not in a position to tell you. That I am still not certain I am in a position to tell you." He turned back. "The Elevatio Humanitatis has been observing your line for a long time. For reasons that are their own, and that they have not shared with me entirely, though they have shared enough." He wet his lips. "They have an interest in you specifically. Not the House. You."

Kaiden held himself steady. "What kind of interest."

"The kind that is not comfortable for the person they're interested in," Aurelo said, and then seemed to hear how this landed, and added: "The kind that would be a problem if Imperium became aware of it before you are prepared for it."

"Prepared for what?"

"I can't—" He stopped. Started again. "The protocol, Kaiden. Show me the first three steps to the dais. Your left hand swings too far forward on the third."

He said this with the quality of a door being closed — politely, but closed. The subject was not being ended; it was being deferred. The deferral was its own information. Kaiden filed it and stepped forward.

He walked the steps. Left hand corrected. Chin at the prescribed angle.

The lesson continued for two more hours, the drills growing harder and more specific as the night advanced — not just the geography of the Throne Room but the grammar of an audience, the specific choreography of deference and presence, the art of being present without being noticed, audible without being heard in the way that attracts attention. At some point the sconce lamps lost what little heat they'd had and the room went cold in the particular cold of a pressurized space that has run out of whatever vestige of warmth the day had left it.

When Aurelo finally released him, his body carried the ache of a different kind of sustained effort from the rescue — not the gross musculature but the finer management of posture, the particular

work of holding yourself in a configuration that is not your natural one for long enough that the configuration feels natural.

He left Aurelo with his hands against the codex cover and the glass marbles moving their slow reflected light across the vellum, and he went back through the station's corridors toward his quarters, repeating numbers under his breath: seven, two, one, always one.

He had been asleep for three hours when the second session was called.

The message chime was quiet — Aurelo's summons always were, as if even the summons were calibrated to avoid attracting attention — but quiet is sufficient when the recipient is not sleeping deeply. Kaiden dressed without fully waking, a skill that rescue operations had refined past the point of consciousness, and went.

The study was brighter this time, the sconces turned up, and Aurelo was standing rather than seated, both hands gripping the back of his chair with a white-knuckled steadiness that was working against rather than with his body's natural inclination. There was an empty bottle on the desk that had not been there before.

"Sit," he said, and the word came out clipped — not unkind but without the usual padding.

Kaiden sat. He considered the bottle and did not comment on it. His experience with Aurelo over nineteen years had produced a clear model of when comments were useful and when they were not, and this was not.

"Guard formations," Aurelo said. "The response to a disturbance in the antechamber."

Kaiden ran it. "Double the dais guard, clear the approach of non-principals. Weapons stay holstered unless the disturbance breaches the inner perimeter. The outer guards manage; the inner guards maintain position until breach is confirmed."

"The Kestan incident."

"Representative charged the throne. Guards used stunners, not blades. He never reached the Guild heads. The response was calibrated to the threat level, which was assessed as high enough for force but low enough for non-lethal force." He paused. "The assessment was right. He was disturbed, not armed."

"You recall this from the holos."

"Yes."

Aurelo's grip on the chair back shifted. "You recall everything from everything," he said, and the tone was not quite admiration — it was something closer to the feeling you have about a thing that is both valuable and concerning simultaneously. He released the chair, moved to the mesh grate in the far wall, worked the lock with hands that took three attempts to cooperate. He extracted a codex — old, genuinely old, the spine compromised by time to the point where the binding was present more as a memory than a fact.

He laid it on the table between them and opened it to a dog-eared page.

"Read the title."

Kaiden looked at the cover. "Protocols and Genealogies of the Outer Houses, Twelfth Edict."

"And this page."

He looked at the open spread. The paper was the color of things that have been kept past their intended lifespan, the ink still legible but darkened, the entries in a genealogical format he recognized from House records — generational columns, names connected by lines, notations in the margins in a smaller hand that was not the same as the primary text.

"Kentur," he read. "Declan. Then Donia. Then—" He found his own name. It was a strange thing, finding your name in a book older than you are. "Then my name."

"Look above," Aurelo said.

He looked up the generational column. The pattern emerged before the analysis caught up with it, the pattern that the visual cortex registers before the logical structures of the mind have time to

formulate a conclusion: paired names, consistently, for generation after generation. Not always the same relationship — some were twins, marked with the notation that indicated simultaneous birth; others were close siblings, within a cycle of each other. But always paired. Until the column reached Donia, who had produced one heir and one heir-second, and the heir-second was Kaiden.

"Six generations of co-heirs," Kaiden said.

"Always twins, for six generations," Aurelo said. "Until Donia."

"I have a sister."

"Who is three years your senior. Not a twin." He pressed both hands flat against the table, and the hands were steadier for the pressure. "You know of the Elevatio's history. The early period. Their role in the Imperium's founding."

"They developed the Starfarers," Kaiden said. "The first navigator strains. And then the law passed — genetic manipulation forbidden except under direct Imperial supervision."

"Older than the current system," Aurelo said. "One of the foundational laws." A pause. "Laws that old have history. And history contains things that were done before the law, and things that were done after the law that should not have been done after it." He closed the codex, not quite with violence — with decision. "The Elevatio has been observing the Kentur line for three generations."

Kaiden sat with this for a moment. "Observing."

"Selecting," Aurelo said, which was a different word, and he said it with the quality of a correction being made, precisely, to itself.

The room was quiet enough that the station's hum was audible through the walls — the perpetual subharmonic of a working facility, the sound Kaiden had been hearing since birth and which he therefore barely heard at all, until a moment like this when he heard it very clearly. It sounded like the sound of something very large continuing to function.

"They weren't manipulating," Aurelo said. "Not directly. The Greater Assayors are locked on Shexim and the Elevatio hasn't had access to them in two generations. What they were doing was—" He

looked for the word. "Arranging. The marriages the family made, three generations back. The alliances. The particular unions that produced the particular children who produced the particular—" He stopped. He started again. "Traits," he said. "Specific traits. Memory. Pattern recognition. A particular quality of attention." He looked at Kaiden. "The ability to perceive things before they fully resolve."

The corridor on the Miner's Pride. *Left.* The word arriving without manufacture.

Kaiden kept his face arranged in a way that gave nothing away, not because he had decided to hide his reaction but because the reaction was still in the process of forming, which is not the same as having no reaction.

"The Elevatio believes," Aurelo said, "that certain traits — including some that are not in the standard Guild classifications — can be concentrated through generational selection. They have been trying to produce someone for a very long time." He wet his lips. "Someone who carries more than one of the rare abilities. Someone they could use for—" He stopped. He looked at the door. He looked back. "For purposes that are theirs, and that are not ours."

"And they think that's me," Kaiden said.

Aurelo's hands pressed harder against the codex. "They think you may be the closest they've gotten." He paused. "I think they may be right."

The silence between them had weight. Kaiden sat in it and thought about the corridor, and about the child on the Miner's Pride, and about the feeling at the growbitats — the pressure behind his left eye, the sense of something that was not quite attention and not quite sensation but occupied some channel that those words approximated without quite reaching. He had been explaining it to himself, for as long as he'd been aware of it, as instinct. Trained instinct, the accumulated pattern-matching of someone who had been trained carefully since childhood to pay a certain kind of attention. He had not been wrong, exactly. But instinct was a word that explained the surface rather than the depth.

"What does the Elevatio want to do with someone like that?" he asked.

Aurelo looked at him with an exhaustion that was not physical. "Use them," he said. "As they always use the things they develop. As instruments of their purposes." A pause, very brief. "Which are not always wrong purposes. But they are not your purposes. And they were not yours to consent to."

He said the last sentence as though it cost something. As though he had been holding the cost for a while and was only now paying it.

"What do you want me to do?" Kaiden said. "With this."

"Nothing yet," Aurelo said. "Nothing that draws notice. In the Throne Room, nothing that draws notice. Perform the protocol, present the tribute, answer what you are asked without elaboration, and give Imperium no reason to ask a second question about anything." He straightened. "Can you do that?"

"Yes."

"Can you do it even if what you're asked makes you want to answer differently than the protocol requires?"

Kaiden thought about this honestly. "I don't know," he said. "But I can try."

Aurelo held his gaze for a moment longer than the question required. Then he nodded.

"That," he said, "is the honest answer. And it is the correct one." He picked up the codex and returned it to the grate. The lock worked more easily this time. "Tomorrow morning, early. We'll run the approach one more time. Bring appropriate boots — the Throne Room floor is polished and the approach surface is not standard deck plating. The sound your footfall makes is audible, and the sound should be consistent and controlled."

"Understood."

"Go sleep," Aurelo said. "While there's time."

He did not sleep immediately.

He lay in his bunk with the station's hum in the walls and the lights at their lowest cycle setting and thought about what Aurelo had told him, and about what Aurelo had not told him, and about the precise size of the gap between those two categories. The gap was large. He could feel the shape of it even without being able to see its contents.

The Elevatio had been arranging his family's genetic future for three generations. For three generations before he was born, the Elevatio had been making decisions that would determine what he was. He had been drilled in protocol since he could stand. He had been trained in combat since before he could fully calculate the risks he was learning to manage. He had been shaped, consistently and comprehensively, into someone who was useful. The useful person he had become was not something he had chosen to become — it was something a set of institutions had been trying to produce, and he had been the clay.

He thought about this for a long time. Not with anger — the anger would probably arrive later, when there was more room for it. Right now there was too much information arriving at once for anger to establish itself cleanly. He thought about it with the particular quality of attention he had always had, which was apparently not simply his particular quality of attention but something that had been selected for, arranged for, waited for across three human generations.

He thought: *does it change anything.*

He thought: *the corridor was still real. The child was still alive. The feeling was still the feeling, regardless of where it comes from.*

He thought: *what else is it capable of.*

And then, in the particular quiet of a pressurized room in the small hours of the station's night cycle, somewhere between waking and sleep, in the space where the mind releases its grip on what it's been holding and the other things can arrive —

Stand straighter.

The voice was a woman's voice. It was not his mother's voice, and it was not his grandmother's voice, and it was not a voice he recognized from any person he had been in the same room with. It was clear in the way that things are clear when they arrive from somewhere other than the ordinary channels — not loud, not insistent, but present the way a physical object is present, occupying space in his attention rather than merely moving through it.

You're a Kentur.

He opened his eyes.

The room was empty. The station hummed. The lights were at their lowest setting, casting nothing but the suggestion of light, the outline of the room's contents.

He lay still for a moment. Then he checked the feeling that the voice had left in the room, which was not an unfamiliar feeling — it was related to the feeling in the corridor, the feeling at the growbitats, the unnamed sensation he had been explaining to himself as instinct for nineteen years. But this was different in kind from those. Those had been directional, urgent, pointing at a specific thing in a specific moment. This was something else.

This was presence.

He was not afraid of it, which was itself notable, because a voice arriving in an empty room would ordinarily produce some version of fear in a person lying in the dark. He was not afraid. He was — he filed through the available words and found the closest one — *interested.* Interested in the way of someone who has been looking at a thing from one angle for a long time and has just seen it from a different angle and the different angle reveals something that was always there and was not previously visible.

He lay there for a while longer.

Then he straightened his spine against the bunk mattress, because the posture had been fair criticism, and the source didn't change that.

He was a Kentur. He was going to the City. Whatever he was — however he had come to be what he was, and whoever had decided

he would be it — he was going to stand in the Throne Room and present his House's tribute to Janna Chadrac, and he was going to do it with his left hand controlled and his footfall consistent and his face giving Imperium no reason to ask a second question about anything.

He could think about the rest of it later.

He decided this, clearly and deliberately, in the small hours of the station's night.

Then he went to sleep, and this time the sleep took.

FIVE

BAUXITUM SYSTEM

TWO DAYS BEFORE DEPARTURE, the station entered the particular kind of busy that is indistinguishable, at the surface level, from ordinary busy but is different in its quality — every task carrying the additional weight of something that needs to be completed before an event rather than simply completed, the ordinary work of the facility running simultaneously alongside the specific work of preparation, each one audible through the other like two different conversations happening in the same room.

Kaiden was in neither conversation.

He had completed his assigned preparation tasks before midday — the protocol briefing forms filed with Aurelo, his kit inspected and packed to the specifications Donia had sent through, the station's security handoff briefed to the night-shift lead who would cover his functions during his absence. He had done these things with the focused efficiency of someone who has learned that completed tasks are the one reliable form of control available in situations that are not

otherwise controllable, and when they were done, the absence of tasks was louder than the tasks had been.

He walked.

The station's corridors at this hour had the particular quality of a worked place at near-shift-end: the flow of traffic thinning, the noise profile changing as the ore processing facilities cycled down from peak throughput, the dock crews moving with the slightly looser quality of bodies that know the work day is nearly over. He passed crews he knew by name and face, nodded, was nodded at. Crossed the junction near loading bay alpha where the Fascination containers were visible through the bay viewport, their deep blue still catching the station light with that faint luminous quality that was either the cryo-sealing material or something about the flowers themselves that couldn't be fully explained.

He stopped at the viewport for a moment. Eleven containers. Each one carrying something alive.

He moved on.

He crossed the upper hab corridor, past the section of wall where, when he was seven, he had discovered that the seam between two hull plates was wide enough at the corner to slide a hand behind and that behind the plates was a gap approximately forty centimeters deep that smelled of ozone and old insulation, and which he had used for six months as a cache for things he did not want to share with the general household before Alise had found it and reported it to Donia with the particular flat thoroughness that Alise brought to the discovery of rule violations, regardless of whose rules or whose violation. He had not been angry. Alise had been right, on her own terms, and the fact that Donia had used the occasion to explain the specific reasons why caches were a bad security practice in a pressurized environment rather than to issue a punishment had been more instructive than punishment would have been.

He thought about Alise, who was not coming to the City.

The thought had a texture he hadn't fully examined yet. He was going; she wasn't. In the simple logistical sense, this was useful —

someone competent needed to stay with the station, and Alise was the most capable person available for that function, and her exclusion from the summons had been read by everyone, including Aurelo, as Imperium's signal that the House was not being ended. In the simple emotional sense, it was something else. He had spent his whole life in the same station as his sister. They had never agreed on everything; they had never needed to. They simply occupied the same space and pulled in roughly the same direction, and the fact of that occupation had been so continuous that its absence was difficult to imagine.

He found the thought uncomfortable, which meant it was worth paying attention to.

He followed the discomfort to the cubiculum pugnae.

Memna Zael was not surprised to see him.

This was one of the things about her — she had a quality of being unsurprisable that was not incuriousness but its opposite: she paid enough attention that the things other people found surprising had usually already been anticipated. She was stretching one shoulder against the padded wall when he came through, head tipped back, and she looked at him when he entered the way she always looked at him: assessing, registating, already forming a response to whatever she determined he needed.

"Leave your grief at the door," she said. "Or bring it in. Either way, boots off."

He was not grieving. He thought about saying this and decided against it, because arguing with Memna Zael about the precise taxonomy of his emotional state was not what he was here for. He took his boots off.

"Sword or blaster?" she asked.

"Sword first," he said. "Then whatever you think."

She took a practice blade from the rack and handed him one. Not the weighted training version — the balanced one, closer to actual

weight, the one she used when she was doing something other than building his strength and wanted to see what his body actually knew.

They took their positions. The practice blades were charged, not lethal, and in the low light of the training room they produced a faint blue corona at the edge that moved when the blade moved, which was one of those details that had no practical function but had been standard for decades because whoever had designed it understood that people fight better when the blade feels alive.

She came at him without preamble. No warning, no count — just the first attack, a high cross that his body answered before his mind had finished registering the motion. Block, reset, lateral step. She pressed, and he gave ground, and the ground he gave was chosen rather than surrendered, the retreat that looks like weakness and is not. He found the angle, reversed his retreat into a counter, and felt the brief resistance of her blade against his before she absorbed the pressure and redirected.

They moved. The room's ambient noise — the station's hum, the distant logistics of the dock — became irrelevant, the way it always did when they were working at this tempo. The practice blade was familiar in his hand, familiar the way things are familiar when they have been part of your body's vocabulary for long enough that you don't use your mind to operate them.

Fifteen minutes of this. She pushed him harder than yesterday's session, harder than last week's — not because she was trying to injure him but because she had made some assessment about where he was and adjusted accordingly. Memna Zael calibrated without explaining the calibration.

At one point she came in too fast for his response to completely resolve and caught him across the upper arm with the flat of the blade, the energy discharge stinging through the sleeve. He made no sound. Took three steps back, assessed, re-engaged.

"Good," she said, which was not a word she used for the performance. She used it for the recovery. The performance was assumed.

They broke after a bout that ended in a genuine standoff — both

of them with their blades at the other's center in the fraction of a second between one action and the next, the moment where either could have proceeded and neither did because proceeding would have been the worse trade. She stepped back. He stepped back. They stood breathing for a moment.

"You want to say something," she said.

"I'm fine."

"I didn't ask if you were fine." She walked to the bench along the wall and sat, setting her blade across her knees. "If you wanted to just work, you'd have come to the morning session with the dock crew instead of calling me at a time that required me to reschedule my evening."

He sat on the mat, back against the padded wall. The training room smelled of sweat and the particular chemical signature of nanopolymer cleaner, and the faded House sigil above the entrance was at an angle that he had been looking at since he was old enough to train in here, so that its imperfect positioning had become the correct positioning by long familiarity.

"We leave in two days," he said.

"I know."

"Aurelo says I'm ready."

"You are ready," she said. "That's not what's bothering you."

He looked at his hands. The practice blade calluses were built up across the pads of his fingers in the way of someone who has been doing this for years, the skin thickened and slightly discolored. He had hands that looked like what he'd been doing. He thought about the Throne Room, the blue-black marble floor, the Guild heads at the dais flanks. The different kind of hands those people would have.

"He told me to be unremarkable," Kaiden said. "In the audience. Don't shine. Don't draw notice."

"That sounds like Aurelo."

"It's probably right."

"It's probably right," she agreed. "And?"

"And I'm going to an Imperial audience in order to not be

noticed, and I will spend however long I'm on that City performing the role of someone that Imperium doesn't need to think about, and then I'll come back and run security for Alise when she inherits, and the alternative is being interesting enough that Imperium decides to use me for something, which Aurelo implies would be significantly worse." He paused. "This is what the rest of my life looks like."

Memna Zael did not produce a response immediately. She sat with it for a moment, which was one of the things he valued about her — she did not fill silences with words that were shaped like responses but weren't.

"Is it what you want?" she said, eventually.

"I don't know what I want," he said. "That's the honest answer."

"What's the dishonest answer?"

He considered. "That I want exactly this. The station, the work, the rescue operations. The function." He looked up. "Which is not untrue. It's just not the whole thing."

"What's the rest of the thing?"

He thought about the corridor on the Miner's Pride. The word arriving without manufacture. The child with her plastic animal. He thought about the growbitats, the pressure behind his left eye that was not quite sensation and not quite attention, the quality of the connection that he had been explaining to himself as intuition for years and that Aurelo had told him two nights ago was something else entirely. He thought about the voice in his quarters, in the small hours: *Stand straighter. You're a Kentur.* Clear and sourceless and present in the way that objects are present.

He did not tell Memna Zael any of this. Not because he didn't trust her — he trusted her more than most people — but because the thing itself was too new, too unlocated, to put into words that would accurately carry it. Words that might fit would also misrepresent, and misrepresentation of something you don't understand is worse than silence.

"I don't know what I am yet," he said instead. "I thought I did.

Now I'm less sure." He paused. "And the question of what I want feels like a question I can't answer until I know what I am."

Memna Zael looked at him. Not the assessing look she gave him during training — something quieter.

"Everyone is a hostage to something," she said. "The chain you're in, the chain Alise is in — they're different weights, different lengths. What matters is whether you chose the chain or the chain chose you." A pause. "Did you?"

"No," he said. "Not really."

"No," she agreed. "But you can choose what to do with it." She picked up the practice blade and rose from the bench. "Which is not nothing."

She offered him a hand. He took it, and she pulled him to his feet with the efficiency of someone who does not perform the assistance of standing up.

"Blasters," she said. "You still flinch on the first hit."

He did flinch on the first hit. It was a genuine flinch, the body's honest response to unexpected pain, and she had been trying to correct it for two years because in a real engagement the flinch was the half-second that cost you. He had reduced it but not eliminated it.

"I know," he said.

"You can't eliminate the flinch," she said. "Don't try. Learn what happens after the flinch. That's where the fight actually lives."

She handed him a blaster from the rack and moved to the range setting, keyed in the live mode. The room's geometry shifted, the energy fields materializing in their random pattern. She turned to look at him over her shoulder.

"Come on, then," she said. "I'll hit you and you'll figure out what to do after."

He did. She did. The session went another hour, and at the end of it he had taken eleven hits and landed seven, which was a worse ratio than his recent average but a better set of recoveries — he was

learning, haltingly, what his body did in the second after the pain registered, and how to make that second useful rather than wasted.

When they were done, she sat on the bench again and he sat on the mat, and neither of them said anything for a few minutes.

"I'll be here when you come back," she said, eventually.

It was not an elaborate reassurance. It was a statement of fact, offered as such. Memna Zael was not the kind of person who made elaborate reassurances, and he was not the kind of person who needed them, and the fact was more useful than reassurance would have been.

"I know," he said.

"Different when you get back," she said. "The City does that. But it's still you doing the thing it does to you. Remember that."

He nodded. He stood, gathered his boots, and went to the locker for a brief shower. The water was hot and stayed hot for exactly as long as the station's rationing allowed, which was not long enough but was enough. He dressed, toweled dry, and walked back out through the training room where Memna Zael was running a solo drill in the corner, the practice blade moving through a pattern she had been running for longer than he'd been alive, the repetition containing something that was not boredom and not automatism but the deep satisfaction of a body that has mastered a thing and continues to perform the mastery because the mastery itself is the point.

He raised a hand as he passed the door. She raised the blade briefly without looking up.

Aurelo's final session was called for late — the hour after the station's population had largely cycled to sleep or night shift, the corridors quiet enough that his footfall was audible on the composite deck. The summons had been a single message, text only: *Tonight, when you can. Not urgent, but before you sleep.*

Not urgent. This was notable. Everything involving Aurelo and the City had carried some register of urgency, overt or underlying, for the past several days. The explicit absence of it from this message was its own quality of information.

The study was lit at a lower setting than the previous sessions — not dark, but dim, the sconces turned down to the level that Aurelo sometimes used when the session was intended to be a conversation rather than a drill. The codices and charts were still on the table but pushed to one side, clearing more of the surface than was usual. A small glass of something sat by Aurelo's elbow. The bottle beside it was present and open and mostly full.

He was seated at the table, not standing. His hands were folded in his lap rather than against the codex or the charts. He looked, in the lamplight, like a man who has completed something rather than a man who is continuing something.

"Sit," he said, and the word had the ordinary warmth of it.

Kaiden sat across from him.

"How was the training?"

"Good. Memna Zael thinks I'm as ready as I'm going to get."

Aurelo nodded. "She's usually right about that." He poured a small amount from the bottle into a second glass and pushed it across the table without making it a formal offering. Kaiden took it and held it without drinking. "You know the forms," Aurelo said. "You know the geography. You know the protocols for every situation I have been able to anticipate and for several I had to improvise." A pause. "You are better prepared than any second child I have worked with."

"Is that a low bar?"

"It is a variable bar," Aurelo said. "In your case it is not low."

Kaiden turned the glass in his hands. The station's hum was here too, the subharmonic constant, but in this room it had the quality of a thing that had been present long enough to become part of the room itself.

"There are things I want to say to you before you go," Aurelo said. "Not protocol. Not preparation. Things that I should have said

earlier and did not, because I was not certain of the right moment, and because there is never a right moment for them, which means eventually you simply choose a moment and say them."

He looked at Kaiden with the look of someone who has assembled an accounting and is reviewing it before presenting it, making sure the numbers are correct.

"I was assigned to your family nineteen years ago," he said. "Not by the ordinary rotation. My assignment was specific, and its duration was intended to be specific. Standard assignments last five years, extended postings perhaps ten. I have been here twenty years." He paused. "The reason I was kept here, the reason I was sent here at all, is something I have not told you or your family, and the telling of it is overdue."

Kaiden waited.

"The Elevatio Humanitatis has been watching your line for three generations," Aurelo said. "Not casually. With intention. They believed — they believe — that your line carries something they have been trying to concentrate for a very long time. Abilities that are rare individually and rarer still in combination. The Commune ability. The capacity for what they call Fold — which is a different thing from anything the standard Guild classifications describe." He paused. "They sent me here to observe. To report. And, when the time came, to help prepare you for what they need you to be."

Kaiden said: "And what is that?"

"A vector," Aurelo said. The word landed without softening. "An instrument for the Elevatio's purposes. Which are not always wrong purposes. But they are not yours." He looked at the glass in his own hands. "I was their instrument first. I did what I was sent to do. I observed. I reported. I helped prepare the conditions for your development." A pause that had real weight in it. "And over nineteen years I also came to love your family. Your mother, your grandmother, your sister, your father." He looked up. "You."

He said this without drama. As a fact.

"Which creates a situation," Kaiden said.

"It creates a situation," Aurelo agreed. "Which I have been managing by telling partial truths to multiple parties for a long time, and which I am now resolving by telling you the most complete truth I can before you walk into a room where multiple parties who know partial truths will be present, and where the gaps between those partial truths may become visible."

He reached into the breast of his cassock and produced a small object. Set it on the table between them.

It was a token — not ornate, the kind of thing that was intended to be carried rather than displayed. A disc of dense material, not metal exactly, with a surface that had been worked into a pattern that was familiar from Elevatio iconography but not precisely any icon that Kaiden could immediately place. No chain, no setting. Small enough to fit in a closed palm.

"There is a priest on Imperial City named Lysandir," Aurelo said. "He is your assigned priest for the duration of your stay. He is also, as I am, a member of the Congregatio Secretorum — a network within the Elevatio that you have not been told about, that operates outside the official institutional hierarchy, that has been preserving certain kinds of information across generations for a very long time." He looked at the token. "The token identifies you to him. Not by what it is — by how you carry it. Hold it in your left palm at the first private meeting." He paused. "He will understand."

Kaiden looked at the token. He reached out and picked it up. It was warmer than it should have been, given the room temperature — not meaningfully warmer, but perceptibly so, the warmth of an object that has been held for a long time and retains the record of the holding.

"What does it do?" he asked.

"Nothing," Aurelo said. "It is not a device. It is a recognition signal. The recognition itself is the thing — it tells Lysandir that I told you, and that I told you by choice rather than by instruction." He looked at Kaiden steadily. "He will be more useful to you if he knows that."

Kaiden turned the token over in his hand. The pattern on its surface resolved, as he looked at it, into something that was not quite an icon and not quite a symbol — more like a structure, the representation of a relationship between elements rather than the representation of any single element.

"You're asking me to trust him," Kaiden said. "When I've just been told that you were placed here to serve the Elevatio's purposes, and he is also Elevatio."

"I am asking you to be careful about him," Aurelo said. "Which is different from trust. Lysandir is not a man of simple motivations. He has his own account, and the account serves his own purposes as much as the Elevatio's. But his purposes and yours are more aligned than the Elevatio's purposes and yours, because Lysandir is primarily interested in information and secondarily interested in institutional outcomes, and you are in a position to provide the former." He paused. "What I am asking you to do is not trust him without reservation. I am asking you to be open to using him."

Kaiden closed his hand around the token.

"The Congregatio Secretorum," he said. "What is it?"

"An internal network within the Elevatio. Very old. Maintained across centuries through a specific capability that the order has never publicly acknowledged — the ability of Commune-capable priests to speak with each other directly, through Communion, across time. The network transmits information that would not survive ordinary channels. Institutional memory, specific facts, things the Chadrac line would destroy if it found them." He looked at Kaiden. "Information about Folding. About what the Fold actually is and what the Leaf actually does. About the arrangement between the first Chadrac and the Shexosant." A pause. "Some of this information will matter to you. In time."

"In time," Kaiden repeated.

"The City is not the moment for most of it," Aurelo said. "The City is the moment for the protocol you know and the restraint you are capable of and the quality of attention that has always been

yours." He leaned forward slightly. "The rest of it will find its moment. It tends to."

He picked up his glass and drank from it, a small amount, with the deliberateness of someone concluding a portion of a conversation. Then he set it down and looked at Kaiden.

"I want to tell you that I am sorry," he said. "Not for the love, which I am not sorry for. For the parts of the role I played that were not compatible with that love. The things I reported that I should not have reported. The preparation that served their purposes before it served yours." He said it without self-pity, the way he said most things — with the economy of someone who has already processed the feeling and is now simply stating the result of the processing. "I don't expect absolution. I expect you to know."

Kaiden sat with this.

"I know," he said, eventually.

"Good." Aurelo rose from the table. He moved to the mesh grate and stood with his back to the room for a moment, his hands at his sides. The lamplight made his shadow long and thin on the wall.

"You have what you need," he said. "For the City. For the audience. For whatever comes after." He did not turn around. "Trust your instincts. Not blindly — your instincts have their own errors, like everyone's. But they are more trustworthy than you have been given permission to believe."

Kaiden stood. He pocketed the token.

He wanted to say something that corresponded to the weight of what had just been said to him, but the available language was inadequate and Aurelo knew it was inadequate, and the inadequacy was itself a form of communication. He settled for what was accurate.

"Will I see you?" he asked. "After."

Aurelo turned. His face in the lamplight had the look of someone who has said the complete version of what they were going to say and has arrived, without regret, at the end of it.

"In some form," he said.

It was not an entirely clear answer. Kaiden understood that the

lack of clarity was intentional, and that what it was protecting was something that Aurelo had decided he did not need to know before departure. He accepted this because he trusted, on balance, the accounting he'd been given, and because there was nothing he could do with the information it was protecting tonight that he could not do with it later.

He went to the door.

"Kaiden," Aurelo said.

He stopped.

"Seven steps," Aurelo said. "Left hand controlled. Eyes at Imperium's level, not above and not below. Begin with tribute."

"I know," Kaiden said.

"I know you know," Aurelo said. "I needed to say it one more time."

Kaiden left the study and closed the door with the same quiet finality as the previous sessions. The corridor outside was empty, the station at its lowest-population hour. His footfall was audible on the composite deck.

He walked back to his quarters with the token in his left palm and the station's hum in the walls around him, and he thought about chains and about choices and about what Memna Zael had said — *it's still you doing the thing it does to you* — and he thought about Aurelo's hands on the codex, twenty years of a role played in a single space, and he thought about Alise, who would still be here when he left, and who would know what to do with whatever was left in the station that needed doing.

He was a Kentur. He was going to the City. He was carrying a token he did not yet fully understand toward a priest he had never met, on the recommendation of a man who had loved his family while serving an institution that had shaped his family without their knowledge.

He thought: *this is what going somewhere looks like, when you start.*

He thought: *it doesn't look like the stories.*

In his quarters, he set the token on the table beside his packed kit. He looked at it for a moment in the dim light. Then he went to bed, and the station hummed around him, and the twin moons of Cendant IV were rising somewhere below the bulk of the planet, and the Fascination containers were bioluminescent in loading bay alpha, alive and waiting, and in two days the City would arrive and everything would be different in ways that were not yet visible from here.

He slept.

The token sat on the table.

The station turned.

PART TWO

THE CITY

SIX

IMPERIAL CITY - BAUXITUM SYSTEM

THE SHUTTLE LIFTED WITHOUT CEREMONY.

This was, Kaiden would later understand, the City's first lesson: everything here happens without ceremony, which is to say everything here *is* ceremony, so deeply embedded in the form of the thing that the ceremony has become invisible, as indistinguishable from the action as the grammar of a sentence is from the sentence itself. The pilot — Imperial Service livery, manner that suggested the word *anonymous* had been achieved rather than simply acquired — completed her preflight checks in a cadence so standardized the words had evacuated their own meaning, communicated the necessary information to Bauxitum Traffic through a channel that Kaiden could hear in his earpiece but not quite follow, and then put them into motion.

He did not watch the station go.

He had told himself, during the preparation days, that he would watch it go — that he would allow himself the moment of it, the station receding in the sideglass, the House sigil shrinking to a point

of blue and gold and then to nothing. He did not. He kept his eyes forward and let the station exist behind him without the ceremony of observation.

The family was in the shuttle's forward compartment: Donia in the first row, Tome at her left, Lorel across the aisle. Kaiden took the rearmost position, not by protocol but by preference, the position from which the others were visible without requiring any of them to look at him. Their reflections in the convex viewport were distorted — the curve of the glass stretched and compressed each figure into something that was recognizably themselves but slightly wrong, the way a family resembles itself most clearly at an angle.

No one spoke. This too was not ceremony and entirely was.

Kaiden turned the token in his left hand, inside the pocket, a motion that his fingers had been performing intermittently since he'd pocketed it four days ago. He had considered leaving it in his kit — considered, and decided against, not because he had a clear reason to carry it but because not carrying it felt like a decision he could not defend if the reason for carrying it later became apparent. He kept it. The warmth of it was familiar now.

He thought about Aurelo. He thought about Memna Zael, who was at the station right now doing whatever she was doing at this hour, which was probably running a solo drill in the cubiculum pugnae with the practice blade, the pattern she'd been running for longer than he'd known her. He thought about Alise, who had seen them to the docking collar without expression and had told him, at the hatch, three things: that the grav plating on growbitat ten had been re-mounted and the remounting had resolved the alignment issue, that she had already filed the Merivale settlement documentation with the Chain guild office, and that he should come back.

He had said: *I know.*

She had said: *I know you know.* She had said it the way she said most things — with the flatness of someone for whom the saying of it was not the point, the point being the thing the saying recorded. And then she had gone back inside.

The shuttle's acceleration pressed him into his seat. Through the forward viewport, space resolved itself from the ambient busy of Bauxitum's traffic sphere into something more ordered: vessels moving in coordinated patterns, their nav markers forming a grid that shifted and reformed as the shuttle's approach vector adjusted. The grid was not random. Nothing here was random.

He found himself looking for Imperial City before he could see it.

Then he could see it.

Even at this distance — a hundred thousand kilometers, perhaps more, the shuttle's overlay providing numbers that his mind declined to make meaningful — it dwarfed everything else in the field of view in the specific way that a thing which has no appropriate comparison dwarfs the things that are compared to it. Scale failed. The word *large* arrived and proved inadequate and was discarded, and his mind went looking for another word and did not find one, and eventually gave up the search and simply accepted the visual input without the intermediary of language.

He had seen the propaganda feeds. The polished renderings, the sweeping angles, the narrated tours of the City's significance that every child in the Imperium watched at some point in their education. The feeds had not prepared him for this, because the feeds had been made by people who knew what they were looking at, and knowing what you're looking at changes what you see, and he had not known. He knew now in the way that you know when the knowing is the thing hitting you rather than the thing you are reaching for.

The upper hemisphere — sheared flat, the engineering decision of the first Chadrac, the moment three hundred years ago when someone had decided that the moon they were working with would become what they needed it to be rather than what it was — was a forest. Not literally, but in the way the mind reaches for analogies when the literal description fails: towers, spires, parabolic arrays, all rising from the engineered surface in the density of something grown rather than built, each structure at a different height, each casting its

shadow on the structures beside it, the whole upper hemisphere alive with light and motion at a scale that rendered the individual components meaningless and the aggregate almost too large to hold as a single thing.

The lower hemisphere kept the old lunar surface, but even the old lunar surface had been worked: the craters were not craters anymore, they were shapes around which things had been built, and the scarps that ran along the equatorial band were lined with hangar bays and shipping ports whose interiors were lit in the City's characteristic blue-white that pulsed with the rhythm of arrival and departure. Even from here, Kaiden could see traffic: ships emerging from bays in the scarps, their scale made small by the distance, moving in the same coordinated patterns as the traffic around him.

And around the equatorial rim: the rings.

He had known about the rings. The booster banks, the fusion torches, the engineering that allowed the City's Starfarers to move a mass of this size through the Fold. He had read about them, had seen them in the feeds. He had understood them conceptually in the way that you understand things you have not yet seen. Now he saw them, and the understanding revised.

There were more than a hundred. Each one a loop of metal and composite and unknown material, each studded at intervals with the points of the fusion torches, the torches' light visible even at this distance as something between a star and a lamp. The rings rotated at different rates — not randomly, but in a pattern that suggested they were doing something more than simply existing, some function he couldn't identify from here that required their independent motion. The pattern of the rotation was beautiful in the specific way of things whose beauty is inseparable from their function.

He sat back from the viewport. The backs of his hands were cold.

Donia's voice, from the forward seat, level and quiet, not turned: "Three minutes."

The shuttle had joined the approach queue — a spiral of vessels making the same long, coordinated descent, each one holding its posi-

tion in the formation with the precision of things that are guided rather than simply piloted. Their craft tilted. He felt the adjustment in the pressure against his seat, a lateral shift, and through the viewport the geometry of the approach resolved into something that was not a descent so much as a being received.

"Do not speak unless addressed," Donia said, still forward-facing. "Then only the protocol."

Tome, beside her: "Mind the sequence."

Lorel, across the aisle, finally turned to look at Kaiden directly. Her eyes — very pale, the color faded out of them by decades — held his for a moment with a quality he associated with her at her most precise, when she had something specific to say and had chosen the exact form of the saying.

"They will try to surprise you," she said. "They always do." A pause. "Don't perform the surprise. Let it land and move through it."

He nodded.

She looked away, back to her own viewport.

The approach corridor was visible now: a gap in the lower hemisphere's scarping that resolved, as they descended toward it, into a docking tunnel two hundred kilometers long, cut straight through the lunar rock. The shuttle's external lighting made it this far visible; beyond a certain depth the tunnel became only the shuttle's own illumination and the pulsing of the corridor markers. The temperature dropped as they entered — Kaiden felt it through the hull, a change in the quality of the air, several degrees colder than the shuttle's systems compensated for entirely.

He ran the briefing points in his head, the way he had been running them since he woke: seven steps, left foot behind right, hands right over left, incline at the prescribed angle, eyes to her level, not above and not below. Begin with tribute. Never lead with the request. Never show surprise. He ran through them not because he had forgotten them but because the running itself was useful — the repetition of the protocol as a form of physical preparation, the way a body warms muscle before using it.

The tunnel delivered them into the bay.

It was not the word he'd been reaching for, *bay* — the word was inadequate for the space, which was large in a way that required him to revise upward his definition of *large* several times before the space stopped requiring revision. Sphere was closer. A sphere of processed space within the moon's shell, its walls lined with docking platforms that spiraled inward, each platform hosting vessels whose own size would have been remarkable in any other context and which were here rendered proportional. The ambient light was the City's characteristic blue-white, shadowless, originating from no visible source.

People everywhere. On the gantries, the trams, visible through the black-glass rectangles of what might have been windows or observation points or simply more layers of the City's function. Uniforms: gray, blue, gold, and above all white. The movement of a population that knew exactly where it was going and was going there on a schedule that did not accommodate deviation.

The shuttle found its bay. The retrothrust, the seal, the pilot's flat nod: cleared for egress.

They disembarked. The bay's air hit Kaiden at the base of the throat — colder, drier, a specific chemical signature that he would later learn was the City's own atmospheric composition, slightly different from any station's recycled air, calibrated for something other than comfort. He inhaled it and felt his throat dry immediately.

The way was marked. Blue lines pulsing on the floor every ten meters, pointing direction. At each junction, a projection — never a person — displaying the House name, the sigil, a countdown accurate to tenths of a second. He understood, watching this, what the marking was: not hospitality, not courtesy. Instruction. The City telling you, precisely and without ambiguity, what to do. The telling allowed no room for wandering, no room for mistake, and no room for the kind of organic improvisation that might reveal a preference about where you were going or how fast you were getting there. You went where the line went, at the pace the countdown implied.

They went.

The escort was waiting at the second portal. Two officers in a uniform cut he didn't recognize — not Army, not any Guild livery he knew. The taller one introduced herself as Captain Rasid: broad through the shoulders, scalp shaved clean, platinum ring on the left hand, a manner that communicated *function* in every aspect of its presentation. The shorter officer, Lieutenant Danil, wore a slash of red at the collar that Kaiden had no reference for. They did not shake hands. They did not invite conversation. Rasid said: *you will follow us to the antechamber, and then to the Bridge of Life.* Donia said: *we are prepared.* Rasid turned and walked.

The corridors narrowed, then opened, then narrowed again. The flooring changed composition twice — once from the blue-white composite of the docking sphere to a polished gray material that caught the overhead lights and held them, and then from that to the stone, the genuine lunar rock of the lower hemisphere worked smooth and left exposed, the texture of deep time compressed into building material. The temperature declined with each transition.

The antechamber appeared at the end of a long approach: a space that was not quite a room, not quite a corridor, the architecture existing in an intermediate category. Benches along one wall, unoccupied. A panel of dark glass on the far side. The floor the same worked stone as the corridor. No ornamentation. No concession to anything that was not function.

Rasid stopped. "Wait here," she said. "You will be summoned." She and Danil took positions at the chamber's entry, which closed behind them with the quality of things that close when they are told to and open when they are told to and have no opinion about the difference.

The four Kenturs arranged themselves. Donia forward, Kaiden a pace behind, Tome at her left, Lorel to her right. Protocol placement. Kaiden set his feet at the prescribed interval, hands right over left, chin at the angle Aurelo had drilled. The token was in his left pocket, warm against the fabric.

They waited.

The antechamber's silence was not the silence of an empty space. It was the silence of a pressurized environment at the limit of its atmospheric control, the silence of stone that has been here longer than the institution that now occupied it, the silence of a room designed to let time pass in a particular way — slowly, in the direction of anticipatory discomfort, the specific discomfort of people who are about to be seen.

Kaiden had been drilled in this silence. He had stood at the tape mark in Aurelo's study and recited the geography of a room he'd never been in, and the recitation had built a functional model in his mind that he'd walked through many times. He was now inside the model, or rather inside the thing the model had been built to represent, and the gap between model and thing was not as large as he'd feared.

The Throne Room was beyond the dark glass panel. He knew this from the briefing. He could not see through the glass — it was opaque in the specific way of glass that is opaque when it wants to be and could be otherwise. He was standing approximately forty meters from the first named person he would speak to in the presence of Janna Chadrac.

He was nineteen. He had been to three rescue operations, two mining disputes, and one formal negotiation.

He thought: *seven steps. Left behind right. Eyes at her level.*

He thought: *the floor is blue marble, veined in black. The veining runs north to south.*

He thought about Memna Zael's voice: *it's still you doing the thing it does to you.*

He thought about the token in his pocket, the warmth of it, Aurelo's hands on the codex cover.

He thought about Alise, who had said: *come back.* Which was the specific formulation of someone who was not asking for a guarantee but asking for an intention.

The dark glass panel flickered. Not quite cleared — something

below clarity, the first stage of transparency, the glass's own hesitation.

Somewhere beyond it, a tone sounded. Not a chime. A resonance, the kind that moves through material rather than air, arriving in the chest before the ear registers it. The Kenturs felt it simultaneously, and the simultaneous feeling of it was its own protocol signal: prepare.

Donia drew one breath. Precisely one, long enough to complete the preparation it was performing.

Kaiden put his hands right over left and held them there.

The panel went transparent.

The doors parted.

SEVEN

IMPERIAL CITY - BAUXITUM SYSTEM

THE THRONE ROOM was a bare cylinder of lunar rock.

No ornamentation. No color in the walls, which retained the original material of the moon that had been converted around them, the stone cut and faced to the vertical but otherwise left as it was — the natural horizontal striations of the rock visible across the full circumference, the mineral inclusions catching the overhead light and throwing it back changed, silver and dark. No banners, no sigils, nothing hung on the walls or set against them. The light came from above in the way that light in the City always came from above, from no visible source, finding no shadow. The floor was blue-black marble and it was the floor's color that gave the room its only warmth, or its nearest approximation of warmth — the depth of the color suggesting heat even while the temperature of the room expressed something else entirely.

The dais rose at the room's center in a series of concentric circles. Seven of them, each one slightly smaller than the one below, the

progression of circles creating an ascending structure whose geometry the eye followed upward without quite arriving at a conclusion about what the structure was in service of. The Throne was at the summit of the seventh circle, and it was black and gold, and its angles were specific — not the angles of comfort, the angles of a shape that had been determined to be exactly what it was.

At the summit of the sixth circle, to the left of the Throne itself: the Imperial Clerk. Zhirin had the manner of a mechanism that had been running so long that the distinction between the mechanism and the man who operated it had ceased to be meaningful. His hands were in constant motion — filing, sorting, tapping approvals into his comm slate, occasionally snapping the fingers of one hand to summon a new interface projection — and his attention, which was everywhere and therefore appeared to be nowhere, registered the Kentur party's entry with a lateral flicker of the eyes that contained, in its brevity, a complete assessment.

Below the Clerk: the Guild heads, arranged at the base of the dais in the formation prescribed by precedent. The Telepath Guild head — silver-haired, pale skin that bordered on translucent, the particular stillness of someone who is receiving more information than they are expressing — occupied the position of greatest proximity to the base. Beside her, the head of the Manus, whose height was a physical argument that did not require elaboration. The Chain Guild head, ceremonial mask covering everything above the jaw, the jaw alone visible and registering nothing. The Cognauts' Guild head, whose skull showed the faint circuitry of augmentation at the temples, whose fingers were always moving.

And behind the Clerk, at the level of the fifth circle, seated at a chair that was not a ceremonial chair — simply a chair, functional, slightly too ordinary for the room it occupied: Cardinal Conor Derry. Elevatio vestments, the full formal, the red sash. Younger than Kaiden had expected. The poise of someone who had been given the instruments of authority early and had been practicing their use long

enough that the practice had become the thing. He acknowledged nothing with his body. His eyes did the acknowledging for him, and what they acknowledged about the Kentur party they did not share.

General D'Hana of the Shexosant was at the base of the dais's left side, in a chair that was also a chair and not a ceremony, and she did not look at the Kentur party when they entered. She was looking at something in her peripheral field, some calculation that the room's events were feeding into and that her face was processing without output.

Then Imperium entered.

She entered from the rear of the dais through a passage that had not been visible before it opened and was not visible after it closed. There was no announcement. No herald, no attendant. She walked alone, which was its own statement, and the walk itself communicated something about the relationship between her presence and the room — not that she owned it, though she did, but that the room existed around her in the way that rooms exist around the things they were built to contain. She was the thing. The room was the container.

She was forty-one. The Chadrac line bred true in specific ways — the platinum-adjacent hair, the angular bone structure, the blue depth of the eyes that the overhead light turned toward black — and Janna Chadrac was the current expression of that breeding, refined and precise and showing none of the cosmetic or augmentation markers that most women of her position would have worn as a matter of expectation. She wore no cosmetics. Her uniform was white, trimmed in blue that was almost black, gold at the wrist and throat in bands that were functional before they were ornamental. A signet ring on one hand, large enough to read as statement. Her face was the face of someone who has understood, for a very long time, the difference between what she feels and what she shows, and who has been making that choice at every interaction for so many interactions that the choice no longer requires effort.

She sat.

The room's atmosphere changed when she sat. Not physically — no sound, no temperature change, no detectable shift in any measurable quality of the room. And yet. The way a room changes when the thing it was built for enters it and takes its proper position.

The Kentur party had completed their entry behind her: three steps from the threshold, left foot behind right, hands in position, heads inclined at the prescribed angle. Kaiden had done all of it without directing it consciously, which was the intended outcome of the drilling — the protocol running as a substrate beneath awareness, the conscious mind freed to observe. He observed.

Imperium let the silence develop. She was not looking at them — or if she was, the looking was not the primary activity. She was already somewhere else in her processing, doing something with the information of their presence that was not yet visible in her behavior. The silence lasted long enough for Kaiden to feel the cold of the floor through the soles of his boots. Long enough for the Telepath's attention to settle on each of them in sequence. Long enough for the Clerk's hands to complete one full cycle of their motion and begin another.

Then she spoke.

"House Kentur." Not a greeting. A notation.

Donia inclined her head. "Imperium."

"The tribute has been received." This was also a notation. The Clerk registered it in his system with a sound inaudible at this distance, a motion so practiced it occurred slightly before the statement rather than after. "The House's accounts are in order."

"We serve at your pleasure."

Imperium looked at them now — the actual looking, directed, the full quality of her attention rather than the ambient quality. She began with Donia, moved to Lorel, to Tome. To Kaiden last, and the last look was different from the others in a way that was not visible in its character — the same expression, the same quality of assessment — but was different in its duration. One second longer. Possibly two.

He kept his hands right over left. He kept his chin level.

"You are the second child," she said.

"Yes, Imperium."

"The Heir-Second."

"Yes."

"You participated in the Merivale rescue operation." This was not a question. It arrived with the particular quality of a statement that is verifying its own accuracy by the reaction it produces rather than asking for the accuracy to be confirmed.

"I did."

She regarded him for the additional duration, then moved back to Donia.

The formal presentation proceeded. Kaiden executed it as it had been drilled: three paces forward, left knee back, head bowed, the prescribed words at the prescribed cadence. He heard his own voice delivering the protocol and noted that it was doing so correctly, that the left hand was where it had been told to be, that the footfall on the marble was consistent. He returned to position. Donia was next, and then Lorel, and then Tome, and each presentation was received without visible reaction, the Clerk annotating each one.

When all four had presented, Imperium was quiet again.

Then: "House Holden failed in its obligations."

Donia said nothing. The protocol for this was to receive the statement, not to respond to it. Kaiden understood, in the receiving of it, that the statement was not the beginning of a conversation. It was the frame in which the conversation would occur.

"The Cendant system is under guardianship," Imperium continued. "This is not a condition the Imperium maintains indefinitely. A system of Cendant's significance requires governance. Governance requires a House."

Donia's right hand, at her side, did not move.

"The Leaf trade is in disarray. House Holden's dissolution created a void that other Houses will attempt to fill through means that are not productive for the Imperium." Imperium's tone

throughout this was the tone of someone presenting the known results of a calculation, not the calculation itself. The calculation had already been performed. "The Fascinations your House has developed represent an agricultural innovation without precedent. The growbitat technology your House has built represents a food security capacity without precedent. These are facts."

She paused. The Telepath's attention, which Kaiden could feel against the left side of his face with the specific pressure of something directed rather than ambient, sharpened slightly.

"House Kentur will be elevated to Dominion Major," Imperium said. "You will take the Cendant system. You will rebuild the Leaf production under direct Imperial supervision. You will hold the monopoly on the Fascinations, protected by Imperial patent, for all cultivars currently existing and all derivatives." She paused. "In exchange, the full schema of the growbitat technology transfers to the Imperium. All intellectual property, all engineering specifications, all cultivation protocols."

In the room's silence, this landed with the weight of something that had been moving toward this moment for a long time and had now arrived.

Donia said, without a perceptible change in her voice: "We are honored by Imperium's confidence."

"It is not confidence," Imperium said. "It is utility."

The correction landed without heat. It was simply the accurate word, offered in place of the imprecise one.

"The Fascinations remain exclusive," Imperium said. "No other House will cultivate them without your license. I will enforce this personally." A pause. "The growbitat schema will be licensed to Houses that petition for it through Imperial offices, at rates that I will determine. House Kentur will receive a licensing fee for each application. This is compensation for the transfer, not a gift."

The Clerk annotated.

"You will hold Dominion Major status with all rights and obliga-

tions thereof. You will govern Cendant in my name, under the laws of the Imperium. The Shexosant will provide a transitional security force for the first cycle." She looked at Donia. "You will have every resource the transition requires. The Chain Guild will assist in the legal instruments. You will begin the move within two cycles of this audience."

Donia inclined her head. "We understand the terms, Imperium."

"You understand the stated terms," Imperium said. "Understanding will develop with time."

Then she looked at Kaiden again.

"The second child," she said. "The Heir-Second." A pause that had a quality different from the earlier pauses — more deliberate, more constructed. "You will accept the burden of enforcement."

The protocol covered this. He had drilled it. He said: "I do, Imperium."

She looked at him for a moment, the look that contained its full two seconds and perhaps a third.

"Good," she said. And then, without a change in expression or tone: "You may go."

The Kenturs bowed. They withdrew.

The corridor outside the Throne Room was the same corridor they had come through, and it was the same cold, and the same quality of light, and none of these things were the same.

They walked thirty meters before Donia stopped. The stop was not hesitation — it was decision. She stood in the corridor with her back to the Throne Room and her face to the corridor ahead and she stood this way for long enough that the silence between them was a measurable thing.

Then she said: "Return."

They returned.

The Throne Room was configured differently on the second entry. The Clerk was absent. The Guild heads were absent. The dais was empty except for the chair at the top of it, and Janna Chadrac was not in the chair at the top of it — she was on the floor level, seated on a plain bench at the base of the dais, her posture unchanged from the Throne, which was a detail that said something about the relationship between posture and furniture in her particular case.

She looked at them when they entered. She looked at each of them, and this time the sequence was different — it went to Kaiden first, and then to Donia.

Donia said: "We ask for the Communion before we commit."

Imperium was quiet for a moment. She was looking at Donia with the look of someone receiving information that they were filing rather than responding to, determining where it belonged in an accounting that was not yet visible.

"You've consulted your ancestors before accepting an offer from me," she said.

"It is our practice," Donia said. "On decisions of this weight."

"I know your practice." She was quiet again. Then: "You're telling me that you will not commit until you've consulted the dead."

"Yes," Donia said.

This was not what the protocol said to do. Kaiden was aware of this. Aurelo's protocol covered the formal audience, the presentation, the acceptance — it did not cover his mother standing in an empty Throne Room and telling Janna Chadrac that the family's answer was conditional on the outcome of a Communion ceremony. The protocol had not anticipated this because the protocol had been designed to get a Kentur through an Imperial audience without incident, and what Donia was doing was an incident.

Tome's hands, at his sides, were completely still. Lorel was looking at Imperium with the look of someone who has seen many things and has arrived at a point in their life where the seeing of a new thing is its own form of satisfaction.

Imperium said: "Your Communion is your affair. The City has a room." She paused, and what she did with the pause was something Kaiden could not fully name — the pause had a texture, a quality of time being used rather than simply elapsed. Then she said: "You'll have two hours before the Court reconvenes."

She smiled.

The smile did not reach her eyes. This was not a failing of the smile — the smile was technically correct, the muscles of her face performing the function of a smile with precision. What it did not contain was the thing that makes a smile something other than a technical performance. She had produced the smile and it existed without that thing in it, and she was aware of this, and the awareness did not appear to concern her.

"The Clerk will arrange it," she said. "Go."

They went.

In the corridor, walking toward wherever the Clerk's blueline system would direct them, Kaiden became aware that his hands were steady in a way they had not been on the approach. The steadiness was not confidence — it was something closer to the state that exists on the far side of a threshold, when the thing you were afraid of is now the thing you are inside. The Throne Room was behind him. Janna Chadrac had looked at him twice with the full quality of her attention and he was intact and walking.

He thought about what he had agreed to.

The burden of enforcement. He had said: *I do.* The words had come out with the protocol's cadence, the drilling doing its work. He had not known what he was agreeing to. He still did not know. He had agreed because the protocol said to agree, because the drilling had prepared the agreement, because Aurelo had told him to perform the protocol and not to improvise, and the agreement had been part of the protocol, and he had performed it.

He did not know what he had agreed to.

He thought: *understanding will develop with time.*

Tome was at his shoulder, not crowding but present. Kaiden looked at him.

"The Fascinations stay ours," Tome said, quietly, not quite to Kaiden and not quite to the room. "Whatever the rest of it means." He paused. "It's not nothing."

"No," Kaiden said. "It's not nothing."

Donia was ahead of them, behind the Clerk's guide system, following the blue line toward the Communion room. Her posture was what it always was. Her right hand, at her side, had not flexed since they'd left the Throne Room.

She had asked Janna Chadrac for the Communion. She had done it without protocol, without precedent, without anything to support the request except the specific force of personality that had been making decisions in the Kentur House for eighteen years. She had asked, and Imperium had granted it.

Lorel was beside him now, having drifted back during the walk. She looked at him with the pale eyes, the eyes that had been doing this kind of looking for seventy-six years.

"Well," she said.

"Well," he agreed.

"She looked at you," Lorel said.

"I know."

"Twice."

"Yes."

Lorel was quiet for a moment. They walked.

"Don't decide what it means yet," she said. "There'll be time."

"I know," he said.

She moved back to her position. The blue line led them on.

The corridor they moved through was longer than the corridors before it, or seemed so — the specific length of corridors whose end cannot be seen and whose walls offer nothing to mark the passage of distance. The City's characteristic cold. The City's characteristic light, shadowless, from above, making everything flat and clear and slightly wrong in the way that things are wrong when there are no

shadows — when depth is indicated only by perspective rather than by the light's relationship with the physical objects it falls on.

Kaiden walked through it and thought about what came next, which was the Communion, and after that Donia's acceptance, and after that the family's departure to Cendant, and after that his remaining here while they left.

He had known this was the probable outcome since the summons had arrived and Aurelo had analyzed it and produced the assessment: *Alise is excluded because the House is not being ended; you are included because the House is being used for something; the most likely instrument is you.* He had known it and processed it over the weeks of preparation and arrived at a functional relationship with the knowledge — not acceptance, exactly, but the version of readiness that exists before acceptance.

The door at the corridor's end opened before they reached it. The Clerk had been very efficient. The blue line directed them through.

Inside, the Communion room waited: stone walls, cold air, the low table of dark-veined granite at the center with four chairs at the cardinal positions. A single lamp. No sigils on the walls, no House tokens, no personal objects — this was the City's room, furnished for the City's purposes, which accommodated any House's Communion without being arranged for any particular House's history.

The Priest-Medium was already there. He was seated in the chair at the room's near end, hands folded, head bowed in the preparatory state. His scalp was shaved. The tattoo dots at his chin — blue and gray, the marks of a full Medium — were visible in the lamp's low light. He looked up when they entered, and his eyes had the quality of eyes that have been doing this particular work for long enough that what they see when they look at you is not quite what other people see — more of it, or differently organized.

He said nothing. His hands were folded. He was waiting.

Donia looked at him, and then at the table, and then at her family.

She sat. They sat.

The Medium's hands unfolded. The lamp flickered once, though there was no air moving in the room.

They had two hours before the Court reconvened.

It was enough. It would have to be enough.

Donia put her hands on the cold stone of the table and looked at the Medium and said: "Begin."

EIGHT

IMPERIAL CITY - BAUXITUM SYSTEM

THE PRIEST-MEDIUM'S chant had no language that Kaiden could name.

This was, he understood, intentional — the Communion ritual had been performed in recognizable dialects once, in the centuries before the Elevatio had refined its practice to the current form, and the shift to the vocalization that existed outside any living linguistic family was a theological decision as much as a practical one. The chant was not meant to be understood. It was meant to arrive. It had a rhythm that the body recognized before the mind had processed it, a pressure that built in the sternum and in the hollow behind the ears and in the exact center of the palate, and the building of it displaced ordinary attention the way a rising tide displaces what the tide finds there.

Kaiden sat at the foot of the table. Donia at the head, Lorel and Tome at the cardinal flanks. The medium's position at the center of the long side kept the geometry of the thing intact — the circle of

family, the conduit at the heart of it, the stone table as the literal ground of the connection.

The room was cold. It had been cold before the ceremony began. It was colder now, the temperature dropping in a way that had no mechanical explanation — the atmospheric systems of the City were not capable of this kind of localized thermal effect, which meant the cold was something else. The Elevatio's explanation was that the dead arrived cold, that the absence of the body's heat was the first thing the living registered about the presence of someone who no longer had a body. Kaiden had no competing explanation. He sat in the cold and let it arrive.

The chant fractured — the medium's voice splitting into the rapid triplet pattern that Kaiden had witnessed twice before in the family's own shrine, the pattern that meant the approach was complete, that whatever came next was the thing itself. The medium's hands spread flat against the stone, fingers splayed, palms pressed in a way that suggested grounding. His breathing slowed to something barely audible, and then stopped being audible.

His chin dropped.

The transformation was not subtle and was not intended to be. The medium's body became, in the space of a few seconds, a different proposition than it had been — the postural changes alone were enough, the specific way the weight redistributed through the seated frame, the quality of the stillness that replaced the previous quality of stillness. His shoulders dropped and then lifted in a way that was not his shoulders' ordinary range. His face, which had been composed in the slightly removed expression of a practiced professional, became briefly unreadable and then resolved into something that Kaiden had no reference for except that it was not this man's face doing this thing.

You are all so serious, said the voice from the medium's mouth.

It was a woman's voice. The medium's larynx was doing something it was not designed to do, producing a register and a timbre that the biological structure of his throat could not fully replicate — the

reproduction was accurate but not exact, in the way that sound through a wall is accurate and not exact. The voice had directness in it. Economy. The particular quality of someone who has decided, probably a long time ago, that no situation benefits from excessive ceremony.

Donia said: "Maren."

Yes, yes. The medium's head moved — not a nod, the motion was too specific for a nod, it was the motion of someone who has registered what they're looking at and is organizing a response. The eyes, which should have shown only the yellowed sclera of deep Communion trance, were doing something complicated. *It's been a while, little D.*

Donia's right hand, on the table, was still. "We're at the City," she said.

I can see where you are, Maren said. *I can see it through you, which is a peculiar experience from this side. You're in a cold room. You're not the first Kentur in a cold room on this City, and you won't be the last.* A pause, the medium's chest rising with a breath that was borrowed and returned almost immediately. *What did she offer you?*

"Cendant," Donia said. "Dominion Major. The Leaf monopoly and the Fascinations. In exchange for the growbitat schema."

The whole schema.

"Yes."

And the catch.

"We govern on her terms. Under Imperial supervision. We take it or we decline, and declining means Holden."

The medium's fingers moved against the stone — not a tap, more the motion of something registering through the fingertips, reading the surface the way a reader reads text. *She dissolved Holden for the Leaf shortfall,* Maren said. Not a question.

"Ostensibly."

And actually.

Donia paused. "Actually, we don't know. We know they mistreated the Lisser workers. We know the shortfall was real.

Whether Holden was dissolved for that specifically or for something else — whether there was a warning they ignored — the message doesn't say."

The message never says, Maren said, and there was something in the tone that was both dry and precise, the tone of someone who has been observing the same pattern for long enough that its recurrence is neither surprising nor amusing. *What does your instinct tell you.*

"That we don't have a choice."

You always have a choice, Maren said. *The choice has a price you can't afford, but it exists.* The medium's body shifted slightly in its seat, the weight redistributing again in that characteristic wrong-and-then-right way. *Tell me about the offer. Not the terms. The manner of it.*

Donia was quiet for a moment. "She was direct. Not generous — she corrected me when I used the word honor and said utility was more accurate."

Good sign.

"She gave us the Fascinations exclusive, no restriction. The growbitat schema she licenses out, compensating us per application."

She kept leverage, Maren said. *If you try to use the growbitats as a bargaining chip with another House, she controls the supply of the technology. You can't trade what you've already surrendered.* A sound from the medium that was close to what a dismissive exhale sounds like when produced by a mechanism not optimized for it. *She's smarter than I'd have given a Chadrac credit for, even at this distance.*

"There's a three-cycle ban on military action against Cendant," Donia said.

A pause. The medium's fingers went still.

What kind of ban.

"No House, no mercenary guild. If anyone moves against us in that time, it's read as an attack on Imperium."

That's real, Maren said. *I didn't expect that.* Another pause, and within the pause something that Kaiden could not quite name — a quality of recalculation, of an assessment being revised. *She wants*

you to succeed. Not indefinitely. Not as equals. But she wants you to hold long enough to serve the purpose she's assigned you, which means she's not setting you up to fail immediately. That's more than most Houses get.

"What purpose," Donia said. Not a question in the conventional sense.

Demonstration, said Maren. *You're the precedent for elevation without precedent. She dissolves Holden without warning, replaces them with an Ascendant House, and everything the Dominion Minors believed about the stability of the system has to be reconsidered. They thought they knew the rules. Now they don't. That uncertainty is useful to her.* The medium's head moved, the specific motion that Kaiden associated with looking at something that isn't in the room. *You're the example she makes to remind them all that the rules are hers to write.*

"We know," Donia said.

And you still want to take it.

"We'd be fools not to."

Yes, Maren said, and the word had a quality that was closer to satisfaction than agreement — as if the correct answer had been given and the test was complete. *Take it. Take it and understand what you're taking. You're useful to her right now. That is not the same as protected. The ban protects you from the Houses. It doesn't protect you from her if her priorities change.* A pause. *Don't mistake the difference.*

Donia said: "We won't."

Donia. The voice had shifted register slightly — same voice, different weight, the weight of something being said that is not the strategic assessment. *Your children.*

"One of them stays."

I know. A beat. *Which one.*

"Kaiden."

The medium's head turned. The motion was slow, and when it resolved, the eyes — still not quite right, still doing that thing that was

not the medium's eyes doing their ordinary thing — were on Kaiden. The temperature in the room dropped another degree, or seemed to. Kaiden kept his hands on the table and kept his breathing regular and kept his face in the arrangement that gave nothing away, which was the thing he'd been drilling for weeks.

You, Maren said. Not a greeting. An observation. The quality of recognition from a great distance, the way you recognize something familiar through fog — not uncertain, but arrived at through the fog rather than despite it. *You're the one she looked at.*

"Twice," Kaiden said.

I know. Something in the medium's posture shifted — the angle of the borrowed shoulders, the set of the borrowed head. *You've been feeling things. Before the obvious moments. Getting there early.*

"Yes," he said.

Don't be afraid of it, Maren said. *And don't talk about it to anyone who doesn't already know. Not yet.* The medium's hand, on the stone table, pressed flat with a deliberateness that was not the medium's deliberateness. *You'll be here without your family. You'll be surrounded by people who are running accounts on you from the first hour. The City makes assessors of everyone.* A pause. *Keep your own account. Trust the count.*

"What does that mean," Kaiden said.

You'll know, Maren said. *When you need to.*

It was not a satisfying answer. He accepted it because the alternative was pressing an ancestor's voice for more precision and he understood, from everything Aurelo had told him, that pressing didn't work — the dead gave what they gave and the giving had its own logic that was not the living's logic.

Then a different quality entered the room.

The temperature, which had been declining steadily, dropped sharply — not catastrophically, but sharply enough that Kaiden felt it in his breath, the air suddenly cold enough that the exhale was visible. The medium's body did something he had not seen before: a brief, involuntary shudder, the kind of shudder that a person's body

produces when it encounters something the body was not anticipating.

Maren, said a different voice.

Male. Drier. With the particular quality of someone who has spent a very long time working something through and has arrived at a formulation he will not alter.

Donia's eyes moved, a motion she controlled but did not entirely suppress. Beside her, Lorel had gone very still. Tome's hands, on the table's surface, pressed down.

Orvyn, Maren said, through the medium.

Let me say the thing.

You never just say the thing.

I'll say it, Orvyn said. *Then you can have the rest.*

The medium's body was doing something it had not been designed to do by a wider margin now — two presences using the conduit simultaneously created a visible strain, the medium's breathing accelerating, the fine tremor that ran through the borrowed frame increasing. His chin was dipping and lifting, dipping and lifting, as if two different centers of gravity were contending for control of a head between them.

The Chadrac line has done this before, Orvyn said, and the male voice had a different texture from Maren's — longer sentences, the habit of a mind that circled back on itself, that looked at the thing from multiple angles before settling. *They elevated a House in my time. The Vaseris. Second-tier, like you. Agricultural, like you. They held a system the line wanted stabilized and didn't want to hold themselves. They elevated them, gave them resources, gave them protection for the first cycle.* A pause. *The Vaseris lasted eleven years.*

Donia said: "What ended them."

They got comfortable, Orvyn said. *They confused the protection for affection. They thought because Imperium had elevated them, Imperium was invested in their continuation. She was invested in the system's stability, not the House.* The medium's voice was doing something complicated, the two registers layered over each other now

in a way that required effort to separate. *When the system stabilized sufficiently for her purposes, she allowed the Vaseris' rivals to move. She didn't stop them. The ban expired, and she didn't renew it, and she didn't say she wouldn't renew it until after the first engagement.* A very long pause. *There are no Vaseris now.*

The room held this.

Take the offer, Orvyn said. *Take it and remember what you are to her. A shield first. An asset second. An institution third. In that order. The moment you are more useful as a shield than as a functioning House, you'll be positioned as a shield and the cost of the positioning will be yours.* The voice was drier now, the dryness of a man who knows he is giving advice that will not be completely understood until after the advice would have been most useful, and has made peace with this limitation. *Don't let her think you're comfortable. Don't let her think you believe the protection is permanent. Make yourself too complicated to simply position. Do you understand.*

Donia said: "Yes."

I'm not asking you, Orvyn said. *I'm asking him.*

Kaiden said: "Yes."

You don't understand yet, Orvyn said. *But you will.* A pause that had a different quality from the other pauses — shorter, more final, the quality of a door about to close rather than a thought about to continue. *Stand straighter. You're a Kentur.*

The temperature in the room rose.

Not dramatically — two or three degrees over the course of a few seconds, the kind of change that the body registers as a restoration rather than a warming, the return of something that had been absent. The medium's body went through a visible transition: the shudder again, a longer one this time, and then the frame settling back into its own weight, the posture finding its own distribution, the face returning to the face that had been there before anything else.

The medium's eyes came forward — the actual eyes, the human eyes, with their particular amber and their ordinary intelligence behind them. He blinked twice. His hands, which had been pressed

flat against the stone, relaxed and were lifted by the medium himself, who folded them in his lap and sat for a moment with the look of someone who has been a long way away and is reassembling the route back.

He looked at Donia. "Was it enough?"

Donia's right hand was flat on the table, the fingers spread. She looked at him. "More than enough," she said. "Rest."

The medium rose — steadily, not urgently — and crossed to the door, which opened before he reached it. He went through without looking back, and the door closed behind him, and the smell in the room was what it had been before the ceremony began, which was cold stone and recycled air and nothing else.

The family sat.

Outside the room, the City continued its operations. Distant: the subharmonic of the fusion banks. The specific quality of light that came from above and produced no shadow. The temperature, which had been several degrees below the rest of the facility throughout the ceremony, was now returning to the City's standard — which was itself several degrees below what most people would have chosen, a calibration for something other than comfort.

Lorel's hands, folded in her lap, unfolded and went to the surface of the table. She pressed them flat as the medium had pressed his, and then lifted them and folded them again.

Tome exhaled. A long, slow exhalation, the sound of a body releasing something it had been holding without being conscious of holding it.

Kaiden was looking at the place where the medium had sat. The stone of the table where the medium's hands had been was marked — not visibly, not with any impression or residue, but in the way that the space is marked for a few minutes after something has occupied it with sufficient intensity. The marking faded as he watched.

"Well," said Lorel.

Donia said: "We accept."

No one had suggested otherwise. But the saying of it mattered —

the formal statement, after the Communion, after Maren's assessment and Orvyn's warning, after the two hours in this cold room. The saying made it complete.

"Kaiden stays," Donia said. She looked at him when she said it. She held the look for a moment, not performing anything, not checking his reaction against a protocol. Looking, the way she looked at things she needed to know accurately.

He said: "I know."

She held the look a moment longer. Then she said: "Come on."

They returned to the Throne Room and Donia accepted.

The formal acceptance was brief — the architecture of the protocol collapsed several exchanges into a few minutes, the Clerk annotating each element with the efficiency of someone who has handled many acceptances and requires no elaboration. The Chain Guild head's mask tilted at the announcement that the Fascinations schema would not transfer, only the growbitat schema — this had already been agreed, but the Chain verified it, which was their function. Kaiden stood at his position and performed the performance, and the performance was correct.

Janna Chadrac watched Donia make the final commitment. She watched with the particular quality of her attention that Kaiden had now experienced twice, the quality that was both more and less than the ordinary watching of a powerful person at an important moment. She was not celebrating. She was updating.

When it was done, Imperium said: "The Heir-Second will remain. The rest of the family will proceed to Cendant according to the transfer schedule the Clerk provides."

Donia said: "We understand."

"The Heir-Second's quarters are in the East residential block, Heirs-Second ward." She looked at Kaiden. Not the sustained look of

the previous two instances — brief, functional, the look of someone noting a position on a map. "You will be met."

She left.

The family stood in the corridor outside the Throne Room, and for a moment none of them spoke. The corridor was not empty — other people moved through it, functionaries and attendants and the lower-ranking members of various delegations, all of them performing the business of the City at the City's preferred pace, which was the pace of things that have been optimized for exactly the function they are performing. The Kenturs were an obstruction in this corridor. No one indicated that they were an obstruction. The corridor's traffic flowed around them as water flows around a rock, reorganizing itself without acknowledgment.

Donia looked at each of them. She looked at Kaiden last, and it was the same look as in the Communion room — accurate, not performative, the look of someone updating an account.

"Two hours," she said. "Before the shuttle."

She was looking at him, which meant: two hours before the shuttle, and you're in them.

He spent the two hours with his family in the residential block they'd been assigned for the duration of the visit, which turned out to be a suite of rooms that were not warm but were warmer than the Throne Room, and which contained furniture designed for the function of sitting in and nothing else. They ate from the provision the room's service panel offered, which was adequate. Lorel slept for forty minutes, which Kaiden recognized as the kind of sleep that a person takes because they have learned, over a long life, that sleep is a resource and resources should not be wasted during windows where they are available. Tome organized the departure logistics on his data slate and conferred, through a Link connection the City provided, with the station's loading supervisor about the sequence of the cargo transfer.

Kaiden sat with his packed kit and did not sleep and did not organize and did not confer with anyone.

He thought about what Maren had said. *Don't talk about it to anyone who doesn't already know. Not yet.* He thought about the medium's face when Orvyn had arrived, the visible strain of two presences in a conduit designed for one. He thought about *the Vaseris lasted eleven years.* He thought about the token in his left pocket, and Lysandir, and the Congregatio Secretorum, and everything Aurelo had told him in the lamplight of a room that smelled of worried man and old paper.

He thought about Alise, who was at the station right now, and who had known from the summons that this would be the probable outcome and had said nothing about it during the preparation weeks except to increase her own work rate, which was the Alise version of the thing that other people did with their feelings.

When Donia called the family for the shuttle, Kaiden put the token back in his pocket and stood.

The shuttle back was different from the shuttle there, and not in the ways that shuttles differ when conditions change. It was different the way a return journey is different from an outward journey, because everything the shuttle carried had changed even though the shuttle had not.

Alise was at the dock when they arrived.

She had the specific quality of someone who is waiting and has been waiting for long enough that the waiting has become a position rather than an action. She was standing at the edge of the docking collar, data slate in hand, not looking at the approaching shuttle — looking at the slate, because the slate had things that needed attention, because the station's operations did not pause for arrivals. She looked up when they came through.

She looked at Kaiden first. This was not what the family order would have suggested — Donia was ahead, Lorel and Tome behind.

But Alise looked at Kaiden, and her face did something very brief and then stopped doing it.

She said, to Donia: "The grav plating on growbitat ten is resolved. The Merivale settlement documentation cleared the Chain registry this morning."

Donia said: "Good."

Then Alise looked at Kaiden again, and this time she held it.

The family moved past them into the station's interior, finding its own tasks and its own trajectories. They were alone in the docking collar for a moment, the hiss of the seal cycling down behind them, the station's ambient noise replacing the shuttle's ambient noise.

"You're staying," Alise said.

"Yes."

She looked at him. The look was not the look of someone who is surprised, because Alise did not do the visible version of being surprised. It was the look of someone who has modeled several outcomes and is confirming which outcome arrived.

"How long," she said.

"They didn't say specifically. The Heir-Seconds serve terms. A year, usually. Sometimes two."

She looked at the middle distance briefly. "You'll be alone."

"I'll have the Heirs-Second," he said. "And a priest the City assigns."

"I meant without us."

He said: "I know what you meant."

She looked at him again, and the look was more complex now — the Alise version of something that most people would have required more words to express, distilled into the specific quality of the look. "You're ready," she said. It was not a reassurance. It was a statement of assessment.

"I am," he said.

"You're not completely ready," she said. "No one is. But you're as ready as the time we had allowed for." She paused. "Which is more than most people get."

He said: "Aurelo."

"I know," she said. "I read the briefing files." A pause that was not quite long enough to be uncomfortable. "Don't be remarkable."

"Aurelo said the same thing."

"Then it's probably right." She held the look for another moment. Then: "Come back."

"I know."

"I know you know," she said. Which was what she had said at the docking collar before the shuttle to the City. He recognized it as the formulation she used when the thing she was saying was already known to be insufficient and she was saying it anyway because some things are worth saying in their insufficient form.

He said: "I will."

She said: "Don't embarrass us."

"I'll do my best," he said.

They both understood that was not what either of them meant.

The departure was the following morning. The family rose early in the particular early of people who are about to separate, who have not slept well but have slept enough, who move through the morning functions with the focused economy of getting done what needs to be done before the thing that needs to be done can happen. Donia reviewed the transfer logistics. Tome managed the cargo manifests. Lorel took tea in her chair and held Kaiden's hand for approximately thirty seconds, which was the Lorel version of an extended emotional expression.

Declan appeared at the loading bay in the last hour, having arrived from wherever Declan had been during the audience — the security briefings, the station's operational handoffs. He looked at Kaiden with the look he used for Kaiden, which was different from the look he used for other things, and he put his hand on Kaiden's shoulder for one full second.

"You'll be fine," he said.

"Yes," Kaiden said.

"Write."

"Yes."

The hand stayed for the second it was going to stay, and then Declan moved to the cargo bay to confirm something with the loading team, because that was what needed doing and Declan did what needed doing.

The shuttle sealed. Kaiden stood on the dock and watched the docking collar disengage and the shuttle pull back from the berth, and through the shuttle's forward viewport he could see the outline of Donia's silhouette in the forward seat, not turned, because Donia did not look back. He watched the shuttle move into the approach corridor and be received by the City's traffic management system and be incorporated into the orderly flow of vessels moving through the Bauxitum system around the City that was now also his address.

He stood there for a while after the shuttle was no longer distinguishable from the other traffic.

Then he went to find the Heir-Seconds block, which was in the East residential section of the City, and where he had been told he would be met.

The City's light fell from above, sourceless, shadowless.

He walked into it.

NINE

IMPERIAL CITY — BAUXITUM SYSTEM

THE LOADING BAY operated at a tempo that had nothing to do with ceremony.

This was appropriate. The move from one system to another, from one tier of the Imperial hierarchy to a higher one, was not an occasion for ceremony in the way that arrivals and audiences were occasions for ceremony. It was an occasion for the relentless physical work of transferring the material substance of a House from the containers and corridors that had held it for decades into the containers and shuttles that would carry it elsewhere, and the work admitted no sentiment because the work was too absorptive for sentiment to find purchase.

Kaiden stood at the bay's perimeter and watched.

The telekinetics from the Manus branch had been contracted for the heavy transfers — six of them, in the Guild's characteristic black with the luminous blue thread at glove and cuff, positioned at intervals along the cargo catwalk. They did not speak to each other during the work. They did not need to. The Guild trained for coordinated

effort the way some institutions train for coordinated speech, and the result was a kind of operational silence that was not empty — it was dense with the small physical signals of people doing something difficult in coordination with each other. A shift of weight, an angle of the palm, the particular steadying of breath before a heavy lift.

The lead telekinetic was a compact woman with the posture of someone who has been doing load work for long enough that the load work has restructured the load-bearing apparatus. She raised her right hand, fingers spread, and the container at the far end of the bay — crate-size to the unaugmented eye, which was deceiving since it weighed approximately twelve tons — rose from its deck mounting with a hum that Kaiden felt in his back teeth. The magnetic decoupling was visible in the shimmer of conductive dust that hung in the bay air, disturbed by the field and slow to settle, making the container's ascent look like something moving through the last remnant of a disturbed atmosphere.

Kaiden watched the container travel its arc to the mag-rail and settle, and gave the lead a nod she did not see, because she was already addressing the next problem.

The cargo bay's secondary section held the things that required the opposite of the telekinetics' approach: not power but precision. The Fascination containers — eleven of them, in their deep blue, sensors at each corner, the cryo-systems maintaining the exact internal conditions that had been maintained since the growbitat, continuing the chain of conditions that could not be broken without consequence — were being transferred under the supervision of two of the House's most experienced agricultural technicians. Each transfer was a two-person operation: one to call the code, one to verify it; both to confirm the condition indicators before the container moved; both hands on the scanner for the dock-and-seal. Slow, deliberate, each motion recorded.

The technicians moved with the specific quality of people who are not performing caution but are actually cautious, which looks different from the performance. Kaiden watched one pair complete a

transfer and exchange a look that was the look of people who are temporarily relieved rather than done, because the next container was waiting, and they would do it again, and again, until all eleven had moved without incident.

He walked the length of the bay. Past the personnel cargo — the trunks and cases and sealed document containers, the family archive in its fireproof housing, the memory tablets in their padded cases — each piece tagged with the bioluminescent House sigil, blue and steady. The sigil affixing was being done by one of Lorel's former assistants, a small precise woman who worked with the focused attention of someone for whom each sigil was not a tag but a declaration. She pressed each one into place and it flashed once, then settled to its steady pulse, and she moved to the next.

Tome was at the far end with the House Cognaut, reviewing the financial projections on a data slate, the numbers rearranging themselves as the Cognaut's fingers worked. Even at this distance, Kaiden could see the specific quality of the Cognaut's engagement — the particular animation of someone for whom numbers are not representations of things but the things themselves, a world fully inhabitable. Tome's face was its operational face: absorbing, processing, occasionally redirecting. When the Cognaut showed him something that adjusted an estimate significantly upward, Tome's expression changed by a margin that was small in absolute terms and enormous in relative ones. He nodded once, the nod of a man accepting information he has been hoping for without quite allowing himself to expect it.

Kaiden found himself standing at the loading bay's outer port, looking through the observation window at Bauxitum's orbital approaches. The system traffic was denser than usual — the presence of Imperial City drew shipping the way a significant gravitational body draws smaller ones, every trading House in reach adjusting trajectories to take advantage of the New Year market. Beyond the traffic, the planet's limb, and the pale scatter of the mining belt, and the orbit where the growbitat array turned its slow patient turns.

He could see three of the growbitats from this angle. The fourth was behind the planet's shadow. The others were not visible at this distance. But three was enough — three cylinders of sealed living atmosphere, each one a kilometer in length, each one full of the particular organized life that his mother had spent years building into existence. The agricultural engineers were still aboard the first three, would remain until the handoff to House Obeiha was complete, would transfer their knowledge to Obeiha's incoming staff in the structured way that the Chain contract required. The fourth growbitat, the Fascinations one, would transfer last, its staff the final Kentur personnel to leave Bauxitum.

He had grown up looking at the first growbitat going up. He remembered the day it was complete — the announcement on the House comms, Donia's voice carrying its controlled quality that was not quite pride but was the thing that lived immediately adjacent to pride. He had been twelve. He had not understood what it meant except that it was finished and his mother had been working toward finished for a long time. He understood now what it had meant: not just the one cylinder but the model that the one cylinder validated, the template for the eight that followed and the one that was still under construction and whatever came after.

Tome appeared at his shoulder.

"Twenty minutes," Tome said.

Kaiden turned from the viewport. "Final lift?"

"Last container. The telekinetics are already in position." Tome looked at the viewport briefly, at the same slice of space Kaiden had been looking at. "You all right?"

"Yes."

Tome was quiet for a moment, which was not his ordinary mode but was the mode he used when he had something to say that required its own space. "It's a strange thing," he said. "Leaving a place you've spent your whole life. There's a version of it where you expect to feel more than you do. And there's a version where you feel exactly as much as you expected, and neither version is wrong."

Kaiden considered this. "Which version are you having?"

"Both, simultaneously, which is uncomfortable." Tome's mouth had the angle it got when he was being wry about something genuine. "Your grandmother would say it builds character."

"She'd be right."

"She'd be insufferably right, which is her preferred form of correctness." He turned from the viewport. "Come and say goodbye to the lead telekinetic when she's done. She's been here six cycles. It's appropriate."

Kaiden went. The lead was brought up short by the gesture — not used to being thanked, which was the Guild's relationship with gratitude generally. She recovered and shook his hand with the grip of someone who had been lifting things for years. Her palm was calloused in specific ways that his was also calloused, though in different patterns. He recognized in the handshake the specific quality of a person saying goodbye to a workplace they will not be in again.

She had been here six cycles, which was six visits of Imperial City to the Bauxitum system, which meant six New Years, which meant she had been part of the rhythm of this system for six years, which was a meaningful portion of a working life. She would work somewhere else next cycle. Someone else's cargo, someone else's oversight.

He thanked her and she nodded and that was all the ceremony that was available for it.

He found Alise in her quarters in the way that she was always found in her quarters: surrounded by data screens, working. The room was stripped. Not empty — her things were packed and staged, but the character of the room was gone, the specific accumulated texture of years of occupation cleared away to reveal the underlying station-standard surfaces. The wall above the bunk still had the faint outline

of where things had hung, rectangles of slightly less wear in the paint.

The blue glass beads were still there. The House crest in their pattern, glowing softly.

He stood in the doorway for a moment. She didn't look up.

"The last container goes in twenty minutes," he said.

"I know." She scrolled something on the center screen, evaluated it, dismissed it. "The Obeiha logistics team keeps adjusting the mining shift overlap without flagging the adjustment. I've corrected it twice."

"They'll figure it out."

"They'll figure it out after we're gone and they've made the mistake it generates." She looked up. "Which is fine. It'll be their mistake to make."

He came in. Sat on the edge of the desk the way he had sat on its edge many times. The desk was bolted to the wall at the standard station height, which was fractionally too low for him and always had been, which was a detail he had never noticed before this particular sitting.

"Are you going to take the beads?" he asked.

She glanced at the wall. "No. They've been there since grandmother's tenure. They should stay with the station." A pause. "They're not mine, really. They're the room's."

He looked at them for a moment. The House crest in blue glass, pulsing its slow light against the stripped wall.

"The Obeiha will think they're decorative," he said.

"They are decorative," Alise said. "They're also the House crest in hand-worked glass from a tradition that predates the current system designation. But the Obeiha can figure that out themselves." She returned to the screens, though less fully than before — a portion of her attention had stayed in the conversation. "What do you need?"

"Nothing," he said. "Just to be here for a minute."

She accepted this without making it more than it was. They sat in the room's stripped quiet, the station's hum in the walls, the distant

logistics of the loading bay audible as a low continuous sound. He thought about the years of this: Alise in this room, working, the screens full of numbers and projections and manifest data, him coming to sit on the desk's edge because the desk's edge was where he sat when he came to see her and the sitting itself was the communication. She was three years older. She had always been present in his life in the way that a gravitational body is present — not intrusive, not requiring acknowledgment, simply part of the configuration of the space.

"You'll be good at it," he said. "Governing Cendant."

"I know," she said. Not arrogance — accuracy. She had been preparing for responsibility her entire life; the arrival of specific responsibility was the completion of a preparation, not a surprise.

"The Lisser," he said.

She looked up. "Yes."

"Holden mistreated them," he said. "We know that now. Probably the primary cause of the shortfall. Whatever the real reason Holden was dissolved, the Lisser situation was real."

"I've read the assessments," she said. "The Elevatio's analysis and the independent one both point to sustained workforce decline and deliberate work slowdown. The Lisser knew what was happening to the Leaf production. They knew and they let it happen."

"Which means they had the capacity to affect the outcome all along," he said.

"Which means we have to govern them differently than Holden did," Alise said. She said it as a fact, with the quality of a problem that has already been solved in principle and needs now only to be implemented in practice. "I've already started the briefings. The translation work, the labor contract review. The Lisser labor agreements Holden was running were legally compliant by letter and abusive by practice. We'll renegotiate them." She paused. "It'll take time. They have reason not to trust. But we have time."

"Donia agrees?"

"Donia thinks it's operationally necessary," Alise said. "Which is

not the same thing as agreeing with the moral case for it, but it produces the same outcome, so I'm not pressing the distinction."

This was so thoroughly Alise that he almost smiled.

"And the Leaf production," he said.

"We'll get it back to yield in two cycles. The fields are in better condition than the reports suggested — the automation Holden installed after the workforce decline actually maintained the cultivation zones adequately, they just couldn't process fast enough without the labor. We bring the labor back online properly and the bottleneck resolves." She turned another screen, showing him a projection chart. The bars climbed steeply in the third cycle. "We'll hit Holden's last peak production before the end of year two, and our projections have us exceeding it in year three if the new cultivation zones come in on the eastern flats."

He looked at the chart. "You've already built the model."

"I built the model six weeks ago," she said. "When it became clear the elevation was probable."

He looked at her. She was twenty-two years old, and she had built the Cendant production model six weeks before the elevation was confirmed, because she had determined the probability was sufficient to warrant the work. He thought about what Memna Zael had said — *everyone is a hostage to something, the question is whether you chose the chain* — and he thought about Alise and the chain she had chosen from childhood, the chain of inheritance and obligation and the specific competence required to fill it.

She had chosen it. He did not think she had ever experienced the choice as a choice — it had been the shape of her life as far back as either of them could remember. But she had grown into it as something that was hers rather than something imposed on her, and the distinction showed in the quality of her engagement with the chart on the screen, the model she had built six weeks early because the probability was sufficient.

"You'll be fine," he said.

"Yes," she said. "You'll be fine too."

"I know."

"You're not sure yet," she said. "But you will be." She closed the chart, returned to the manifest she'd been reviewing. "Aurelo is in his study. You should go."

He stood from the desk. Looked at the beads on the wall one more time.

"I'll write," he said.

"I know," she said. "The Link is monitored, obviously, so be careful what you say and say the important things around the edges of what you're saying."

"I know how the Link works."

"I know you know." She didn't look up from the screen. "Go. You don't have much time before the shuttle."

He went.

The outer corridor was quieter than the loading bay. The station's ordinary operational sounds — the fluid transfer pumps, the ventilation cycling, the distant mechanical cadence of the ore processing that had been the station's heartbeat for decades — were still present, but reduced, the way a sound is reduced when the space around it empties and there is less for the sound to bounce from. Some of the secondary systems had already been handed off to Obeiha's incoming management team. The rhythm was still there. It was no longer entirely the House's rhythm.

He walked the long corridor toward the oldest section of the ring, where the structure's bones showed through — the original refinery framework, the welds and seams that predated every modification, the parts of the station that were simply too structural to have been changed when everything around them changed. He had walked this corridor most of his life. He noticed things about it now that he had not noticed before, which was the way of departures: the familiar

reveals its specifics at the moment it stops being the context and becomes the subject.

The sconce at the junction where the corridor bent toward the shrine section had a flicker in it. It had flickered his whole life. It had been on the maintenance report his whole life. It would probably be on the maintenance report for the next generation's whole life, because some things persist not because no one could fix them but because their persistence has outlasted the urgency.

He stopped at it for a moment and looked at the flicker.

Then he went on.

Aurelo's study had the fire going.

Not a holographic fire — an actual one, a small oil lamp on the desk whose flame produced real light and real heat and real smell, the specific smell of burned oil that had been the olfactory signature of this room for as long as Kaiden had been visiting it. The fire was a small transgression of the station's resource management, and it had been a small transgression for twenty years, and no one had ever formally objected because Aurelo's tenure had outlasted every station administrator's willingness to make the objection a thing that mattered.

The room was the room it had always been. This was itself notable: every other room on the station had been changing for weeks, emptying, stripping back to its structural essentials. This room had not changed, because this room was not going anywhere. Aurelo was not going anywhere. The charts, the codices, the star maps pinned to the walls, the glass marbles on their corner of the desk — all present, all in their positions. The battered globe in the updraft from the heat register, its continents nearly erased by handling, rotating slowly.

Aurelo was at the desk, and he looked up when Kaiden entered, and his face had the quality it had had at the final session — the

quality of someone who has said the complete version of things and is now in the period after the saying, when what remains is simply being present.

"Sit," he said.

Kaiden sat. The leather chair, cracked at the arms and softened by decades of use, received him in the way of things that have received many occupants and have reached a kind of equilibrium.

The silence between them was not empty. It was the silence of a room full of years.

"The loading is nearly complete," Kaiden said.

"I know. I could hear the bay." Aurelo's hands were folded on the desk. The tremor was present, finer than usual — not agitation, the kind of fine tremor that belonged to the body and not to the state of the mind. "How is your mother?"

"Managing," Kaiden said. "In the Donia sense of managing."

"Yes." A small sound that was related to a smile. "She always has."

He looked at the desk. At the glass marbles, which he had wondered about for nineteen years and had never asked about. Today was apparently the day.

"What are they?" he said.

Aurelo looked at him, then at the marbles, then back. A brief recalibration, the question not what he had been expecting.

"From the station's original construction," he said. "This section of the ring used a bead-and-seat joint in the primary seam, which is an older method — the beads were meant to be visible indicators of joint integrity, you could see at a glance if one had shifted or cracked. When the section was updated, the joints were sealed and the beads were removed." He looked at them. "The previous study occupant kept a handful. I kept them when I took the room. They've been here since."

Kaiden looked at them. Small, glass, catching the lamp's light and breaking it into slow drifting lines across the vellum.

"Structural indicators," he said.

"Originally, yes."

"And now?"

Aurelo considered this for a moment. "Now they're the thing they became by remaining in a room for a long time," he said. "Which is not the same thing as what they were made for, but is not separate from it either."

Kaiden looked at him. At the face that had been part of every room in his childhood, the face that had been shaped by twenty years of the particular work of loving a family he had been assigned to monitor, the two things layered over each other in a way that had never fully resolved. He thought about what Aurelo had said in the final session: *I was their instrument first. And over nineteen years I also came to love your family.* He thought about the gap between the two facts and the impossibility of the gap being as large as it was while both facts remained true simultaneously.

"I spoke to Lysandir's description in your briefing," Kaiden said. "Tall. Amber eyes. The ceremonial tattoo dots."

"Yes," Aurelo said.

"He's cold," Kaiden said. It was not a question.

"He is." Aurelo's mouth made the expression it made when he was being accurate rather than reassuring. "He is also useful, and his purposes run in a direction that is not incompatible with yours, which is what matters more than his warmth." A pause. "He is not your friend. He is something more reliable than a friend. He is a person whose interests align with yours in specific ways, and who will operate in service of those aligned interests without requiring the maintenance that friendship requires. At your current position, that is worth more."

Kaiden thought about Olan Orian, whose name Aurelo had mentioned in one of the briefing sessions as a likely first contact among the Heirs-Second. *Warm, strategic, loyal to Chadrac for now.* He thought about the card game that would happen eventually, the dinner table dynamics of a block full of second children from the galaxy's most powerful families, each one running their own account on everyone else in the room.

"What do I need to know," Kaiden said, "that I don't already know."

Aurelo looked at him.

"You know most of what you need," he said. "The things you don't know yet aren't things I can tell you — they're things the City will teach you. The City is very good at teaching." He paused. "What I can tell you is this: the Commune voices will develop. They've been arriving as direction and pressure and occasionally as words. Over time they will resolve into persons. When they resolve into persons, you will want to talk to Lysandir about what is happening before you talk to anyone else." Another pause. "Do not talk to Father Eidan about it first."

"Who is Eidan."

"He will introduce himself," Aurelo said. "When he does, be courteous. Don't give him more than you must." He looked at the desk. "He is a true believer, which makes him more dangerous than someone acting from interest alone. A person acting from interest can be negotiated with. A true believer has already decided what the negotiation is worth."

Kaiden filed this. "Eidan. Don't give him more than I must."

"Yes."

"And the token."

"Left palm at the first private meeting with Lysandir," Aurelo said. "Not the first meeting — there will be a formal introduction that is not private. The first meeting that is actually private."

"I know," Kaiden said.

"I know you know," Aurelo said. "I needed to say it one more time."

He had said this before. In the last session. Kaiden recognized it as the thing that Aurelo said when he had run out of new things to say and was returning to the said things, which was its own information about where they were in the goodbye.

He stood. Looked at the room one more time — the charts, the

codices, the globe turning in the updraft. The lamp's light pooling across the vellum, the glass marbles slow in their movements.

"Will you be all right?" he asked.

Aurelo looked at him, and the look had the warmth in it that was present even when the face was not doing the ordinary things that communicate warmth, the warmth that lives in a different register from the ordinary one. "Yes," he said. "I have been in this room for twenty years. It's a good room."

"It is," Kaiden said.

He held out his hand. Aurelo took it — not the shake of two people completing a transaction, the grip of two people who have been in each other's presence for long enough that the presence itself is the thing being acknowledged.

He let go. He went to the door.

At the door he stopped, because the room and the man and the lamp and the glass marbles and the twenty years of all of it were behind him, and he was not going to look back into them, and he was also going to know for the rest of his life exactly what they had looked like from this angle.

"Thank you," he said. To the door, because that was the direction he was facing.

He didn't hear Aurelo's response. He was already moving.

The shuttle bay had the quality of an ending.

The cargo was complete. The telekinetics had gone — their transport had left an hour ago, their Guild contract concluded. The bay staff were running close-out procedures, the systematic verification of empty space that confirms a transfer is done. Kaiden had signed the final manifest at the loading supervisor's station, his signature the last Kentur signature on a Bauxitum Station document for the foreseeable future.

He stood at the edge of the boarding corridor and watched his family go.

Not all at once. It happened in sequence, the way real things happen — Tome first with the logistics team, already in a conversation about the transfer timeline before he'd fully cleared the threshold. Lorel, who paused at the corridor's edge and looked at the bay as if she were memorizing it, which she was, though what she was adding to the memory she already had of this place from thirty years of standing in it was not more visual detail but something else, something that happens when you look at a thing for the last time knowing it's the last time. She didn't look at Kaiden when she went through. She had already said what she had to say.

Declan was last of the family, ahead of Donia. He stopped beside Kaiden at the corridor's edge and did not make it more than it was.

"Write," he said.

"Yes," Kaiden said.

The hand, the shoulder, the second. Then Declan through the corridor, already having the operational conversation he was always having about whatever the next task was.

Donia stopped.

She was wearing the traveling clothes rather than the House formal, which was appropriate for a shuttle transit — the practical clothes of someone who understood that travel was a function and dressed for the function. She looked at Kaiden.

He had spent his life reading his mother's face, which was one of the more difficult texts available because it gave away what she wanted it to give away and protected what she had decided to protect, and the two categories were rarely where an ordinary person would have sorted them. He had learned, over years, which details were accessible and which were deliberate.

The look she gave him now was in neither category. It was something undefended — not raw, because Donia did not do raw in public or in front of the loading bay staff or in front of anyone really, but

undefended in the specific way that exhaustion sometimes makes available what composition usually prevents.

She looked at him the way she had looked at him in the Communion room, after Maren and Orvyn. The way of someone updating an account.

She said: "You've made a great deal of work for all of us."

He said: "I know."

She said: "Good." And then, after a pause that was not empty: "Don't be remarkable."

"Everyone keeps telling me that."

"Because everyone is right about it," she said. "For now."

He caught the qualifier. *For now*. He held it without responding.

She looked at him for another moment. Then she adjusted the collar of her traveling clothes, which did not need adjusting, and went through the corridor.

The door sealed.

He stood in the bay, and the station hummed around him with its reduced hum — fewer people, fewer systems, the rhythm of a working facility that had handed off some of its work and would hand off more. Outside, through the viewport, Bauxitum's orbital traffic moved in its orderly patterns. The growbitat array was visible, three cylinders catching the system's light. The fourth in shadow.

He had been born on this station. He had learned to walk in its corridors, trained in its cubiculum, grown into whatever he was in the space between its walls.

He was going to the Heir-Seconds block on Imperial City. He was going to meet Lysandir, and Olan Orian, and the rest of the people he had been briefed on, and he was going to keep his account and watch what they didn't show him and carry the token in his left pocket. He was going to hear more of the voice that had arrived in the small hours of the station's night and said *stand straighter, you're a Kentur,* and he was going to be careful about who he told.

He turned from the viewport.

The loading bay was empty and organized, the empty space confirmed, the final record complete.

He picked up his kit.

He walked out of the loading bay and toward the East docking section where the shuttle to Imperial City was waiting, and the station's light fell on him as it had always fallen — the functional, honest, unglamorous light of a working facility that was not designed to be beautiful but was, in the specific way that things are beautiful when they have been thoroughly used for a long time and still work.

He walked into it.

He did not look back.

TEN

IMPERIAL CITY — LYRA SYSTEM

FOUR WEEKS PASSED in the City's particular manner of passing.

Not quickly — the days were long with the specific length of days in an unfamiliar environment where every small thing requires interpretation and the interpretation takes energy. Not slowly — the schedule did not allow for slowness, the Heir-Second block operating on a calendar that had been designed by someone who understood, correctly, that people with too much unstructured time became problems. The days were simply full, which was its own form of discipline, and at the end of them Kaiden went to his quarters and performed the accounting of what he'd learned and what he'd missed and what he'd given away by accident and what he'd managed to protect, and then he slept.

The block had its own rhythm, separate from the City's wider rhythm but harmonically aligned with it. The common area was used in the mornings for formal sessions — briefings on current system status, protocol reviews, the structured education in Imperial governance that was the stated purpose of the Heir-Second program. In

the afternoons the block relaxed into something that looked like leisure and functioned as something more complex, the common area becoming a space where the social architecture of the cohort was continuously negotiated through games, conversation, and the particular variety of relaxed performance that highly trained people produce when they are not performing but know they are being watched.

The cohort had resolved into something like a landscape in Kaiden's understanding.

Olan Orian occupied the landscape's warm middle ground. His hair, swept up in a crest above sides shaved clean, was the exact yellow that House Orian's commercial interests in reactive dyes implied — not an accident, a statement — and his reactive-dye suit shifted color in the low light of the common area in a way that was slightly too pleasant to be accidental. He had the social intelligence of someone who had been taught from birth that every person in every room was a relationship worth investing in, and who had taken to this teaching not as obligation but as genuine interest. He paid attention in the specific way that made people feel attended to, which was a skill distinct from paying attention, and he deployed it without calculation that was visible. Kaiden had concluded, after two weeks of observation, that the deployment was genuine rather than performed, which made it both more and less reassuring than performance would have been.

Robere Valerius occupied a different quadrant entirely. He was large in the shoulders, precise everywhere else — the posture of a man who had been told since childhood that precision was a moral position, and who had found this convincing. His uniform was always exactly correct. His contributions to morning sessions were exactly as long as the content required and never longer. He had the manner of someone who understood the difference between institutional loyalty and personal loyalty and had determined that the former was the more reliable foundation. He was not unfriendly. He

was simply operating on a different set of assumptions about what friendliness was for.

Trever Vexar carried himself with the particular ease of someone who has decided that ease is its own information — the message being that he has already assessed every person in the room and found the assessment manageable, which may or may not be true and is useful as a posture regardless. His augment was visible at his temple, a faint shimmer of implanted technology that he did not explain and no one asked about, because asking about augmentation was one of those things the City had decided was not done. His comments were always technically on topic and aimed at something adjacent to the topic, the effect being that you understood, afterward, that you had revealed something without knowing what.

Petr Peran was compact and round-faced and moved with the quality of someone who had realized early that being underestimated was a resource and had invested in it. He listened more than he spoke, and when he spoke, the speech was gentle and oblique in the way of someone who prefers to communicate in questions rather than statements. He ran the FreeLink Hub by virtue of his House's monopoly on communications infrastructure, which meant that he knew, in some form, everything that moved through the City's comm channels. He did not say this. He had never said this. But his knowledge of things he could only have known through the comm channels was visible in the specific quality of his off-hand remarks, the small precise references that could not have been general knowledge.

Kaiden placed himself in this landscape and watched the others place themselves in it. He did not perform more than he had to. He was present, attentive, and technically engaged in all the ways the block required. He gave the minimum necessary for the social ledger to be in balance and banked the rest.

Lysandir swept his quarters every three days.

The sweep was not announced. It happened when Lysandir arrived for his scheduled pastoral visits, which happened to occur at intervals

that coincided, imprecisely but consistently, with the rhythm of the block's surveillance cycles. The device he used — the finger-length cylinder with its mist of rain-taste and its specific frequency — was one of the things that were not supposed to be used in the block, which Lysandir acknowledged the first time with the observation that the watchers were not supposed to watch in private quarters either, and that rules were mostly suggestions when you knew which rules were enforced by whom.

The first real conversation had happened in the second day. Lysandir had swept the room, confirmed the sweep, and then sat on the edge of the desk and looked at Kaiden with the amber eyes that were slightly wrong — not disturbing, just at an angle to what amber eyes usually communicated, as if they were processing something slightly different from the information they were receiving.

"The basics," he'd said. "Be seen. Don't be remarkable. Every comm channel is monitored. The Link goes through Peran's nodes, which means through Peran, which means through anyone Peran sells to, which means through the City's intelligence apparatus with a transaction cost. Don't say anything on any channel that you wouldn't say in the Throne Room."

"What about the FreeLink?" Kaiden had asked, because Aurelo had mentioned the FreeLink and he wanted to know if Lysandir would acknowledge it.

Lysandir had looked at him for a moment. "You know about that."

"Aurelo mentioned it."

"Aurelo mentioned more than was strictly his to mention." Not accusation. Observation. "The FreeLink is real. You don't have access to it currently. When you need it, I'll tell you." He'd paused. "Who else has mentioned it."

"No one," Kaiden said.

"Good." He'd closed the conversation by opening his codex, which was the Lysandir version of moving on.

The block's orientation sessions continued. They covered the City's administrative structure, the Court's protocol, the hierarchy of the Guild heads and their relationships with the Throne. They

covered nothing that was genuinely useful, which was itself the point — everything genuinely useful was communicated in other ways, in the margins of formal sessions and the edges of common-area conversations, and the orientation sessions existed to establish a shared formal vocabulary that everyone could use when the real conversations needed to be conducted with plausible deniability.

On the fourteenth day, Kaiden received a message through the block's internal system — not the Link, the internal system, which was the City's closed network and therefore monitored differently from the Link. The message was brief, from an address that resolved to a Chadrac administrative function, and it said that the Heir-Seconds were invited to tour the Wayfinder facility as part of their ongoing orientation. Attendance expected. Formal dress. Report to the corridor junction off the City's seventh ring at the designated time.

He had been waiting for this.

The Wayfinder facility occupied a section of the City's interior that felt older than the surrounding corridors in the specific way that some spaces feel older — not because they are, necessarily, but because the nature of what happens in them has produced an accumulation of something that is not quite atmosphere and not quite history, the residue of sustained concentrated work over a long time.

Six of the Heirs-Second attended. Olan, Robere, Trever, Petr, and two Kaiden had catalogued but not yet placed precisely in the landscape — Selene Stevkir, who carried herself with the confidence of someone who owned every room she'd ever been in, and Marix Yce, who had the quality of someone who had decided early that observation was superior to participation as a primary strategy.

Their guide was introduced as Ana Tollivar, courtier to the Chadrac line.

She was, as the block had been told, a Chadrac-adjacent adminis-

trator: platinum hair worn differently from the formal style he'd seen at the first orientation, the House mark at the neck covered by a high collar, the persona of a courtier performed with the kind of precision that suggested the performer was aware it was a performance and had decided the awareness didn't need to show. She was twenty-one, though this was not announced. She was sharp in the way of objects designed to be exactly as sharp as they needed to be for a specific function. Her attention, when it moved across the group and settled briefly on each Heir-Second, had the quality of a calibration instrument completing a reading.

She paused on Kaiden a fractional beat longer than on the others.

He noted this and kept his face in its arrangement.

The facility's first level was the Wayfinder corps' primary working space: a circular room whose dimensions suggested that the decision to make it circular had been made for a functional reason that was no longer immediately obvious. The ceiling was high. The walls were lined with data crystal racks, each rack holding hundreds of the Fold pattern discs that the Wayfinders generated — the mathematical mnemonics that allowed a Starfarer to orient to a specific destination. Along the concentric rings of desks, technicians in the Wayfinders' pale gray worked in the silence of people whose work requires the kind of attention that conversation disrupts.

At the center, raised on a dais: six Wayfinders in the loose hooded robes of active duty. Their hands never stopped moving — not frantically, with the precision of people for whom the motion had become as automatic as breathing, the patterns traced in the air and on the smooth surface of the dais combining into something that was not visible to Kaiden's eye as a whole but was clearly a whole to whoever was receiving it. Their faces were composed in the half-lidded state of extreme concentration, not absent — present in a way that ordinary presence was not.

"Fifty-three Wayfinders at any given time," Ana said, to the group, at a volume calibrated not to disturb the workers. "No two on the same task. Each assigned to a sector of known space, continu-

ously updating the pattern plates for their sector's destinations." She walked them around the room's perimeter, unhurried. "The plates are not merely navigational charts. They're mnemonic structures — specific mathematical configurations that allow a Starfarer to achieve the mental state required for a Fold to a particular destination. Without an accurate plate, the Fold is possible but imprecise. With one, it becomes reliable."

"What happens if a plate is wrong?" Olan asked.

"The Fold proceeds," Ana said. "To the wrong place, or to an approximation of the right place, or to nowhere in particular." A pause. "Imprecision at interstellar distances has consequences."

Trever said: "How long to generate a plate for a new destination."

"Months, typically. Longer for systems at the edge of mapped space. The calculation requires iterative verification — you can't check a plate without performing the Fold, which requires a Starfarer willing to test an unverified plate, which creates a specific risk that the Wayfinder corps manages through a volunteer protocol and a very good insurance structure."

The group moved to the lower level, where the wall held the memory tablets of Wayfinders past — each one dated, named, the photograph or holo rendering of the person who had held the assignment. The tablets ran back centuries, the images getting older in style and resolution as the wall went further back. Most of the names were unfamiliar. Several appeared repeatedly, the same family name across multiple generations, the Wayfinder function running in lines.

One tablet near the end of the recent section held a photograph of a young woman who looked, to Kaiden's eye, approximately sixteen. The expression was not a smile and not a frown — the expression of someone who has been asked to hold still and is holding still with the attention they bring to other things. Focused. Present.

"Last new system discovery," Ana said, pausing at the tablet. "Over a century ago. She mapped a system so remote that the question of whether a Fold from this distance was achievable was not theoretical — it was the operational problem her discovery created."

A pause. "She died two days after the mapping was confirmed. The causes were not entirely clear."

Kaiden looked at the tablet. At the girl's face.

He thought about the Wayfinders on the dais, their hands moving in their patterns. He thought about the orientation data he'd reviewed on the Wayfinder corps' turnover rate, which was high in a way that the official explanation — the cognitive demands of the work — partially accounted for but didn't entirely explain. He thought about what Aurelo had said about the Starfarer block being theater, and about what the Starfarers actually were, and about the gap between what happened to Folders when the Testing found them and what the families were told happened.

He didn't think about all of this at once. He thought about the tablet and he put the rest of the things alongside it in the place where he kept things that were connected but not yet connected in the right configuration.

Ana led them back upstairs, to a separate area of the facility that Kaiden had noticed when they came in and had not asked about: a large display surface along the near wall, currently dark, that was larger than the working displays at the Wayfinders' desks and occupied a position that suggested its function was different — less analytical, more representational.

She brought it to life.

The star chart expanded to fill the display. Not the compact navigational charts at the working desks — a full-field representation of the known systems within the Fold network's range, each active system marked in the City's characteristic blue-white, the lines of regular traffic between them shown in lighter notation. Kaiden had seen star charts before; the Bauxitum station had its own, and his navigation training had included the regional charts for the Bauxitum system's nearest neighbors. He had not seen one at this scale, from this vantage point, with this resolution.

He oriented quickly. Found Bauxitum. Found Cendant, now marked with a Kentur sigil in the House colors, new enough that the

sigil had the slightly bright quality of a recent addition. Found the Lyra system, where they currently were. Traced the City's route: the arc of the Cycle, the systems it visited in sequence, the geometry of an object moving through a galaxy on a schedule.

And then he found something else.

It was on the chart's far edge, in a region that the display's resolution made slightly imprecise — systems at the outer margin of what the chart rendered with full detail. But there were nodes there, marked in a notation that was similar to the standard system marker and different in a way he couldn't immediately name. He looked at them. A dozen, maybe more. Active — the markers had the quality of active designations, not empty space or historical notations. But they had no names. No House sigils. No trade route lines connecting them to the main network.

He looked at them for long enough to be sure he was seeing what he was seeing.

"Those systems," he said, to Ana, who was at his shoulder. He pointed at the cluster on the chart's edge.

Ana looked where he was pointing.

The display went dark.

Not a crash — a decision. She had made it without visible deliberation, the motion of her hand to the control panel so practiced it preceded the visible thought. The chart was gone. The wall was blank.

"Those are not shown for a reason," she said.

Her voice was entirely level. The leveling was not casual — it was the leveling of someone who has applied a specific degree of force to a specific degree of resistance, the force calibrated to the resistance. She looked at the blank display for a moment, then at the group.

"That concludes the Wayfinder facility portion," she said. "We'll move to the evening reception."

Olan was looking at Kaiden with an expression that was not quite surprised and not quite interested, the expression of someone

who has noted something without having decided yet what it means. Trever had the expression of someone who had seen something that went into his account without acknowledgment. Robere was looking at the blank display with the expression of someone who appreciated that the display was now blank.

Kaiden moved with the group. He did not look back at the wall.

The evening reception was in a space that was not called a Throne Room and was not designed to make the point that the Throne Room made, but made a version of it anyway: high ceilings, the City's characteristic light, the particular quality of a room that has been arranged for a social function and communicates the arrangement as clearly as the function itself. Tables with the right things on them. People in the right clothes doing the right things, which included talking to each other, which included performing the talking while doing the other thing underneath, which was the City's standard dual-register mode.

Kaiden took a position that gave him sight lines to the room's main entrances and engaged in the conversation that came to him, which was low-stakes exchange of information about the systems the Heirs-Second represented and the particular House dynamics of each — the kind of conversation that serves primarily to establish the parameters of future conversations.

Cardinal Derry arrived forty minutes in.

He came without announcement, which was a statement about what announcement was for — not to introduce a person, but to signal the significance of an arrival, and Derry's arrival had significance that did not require signaling. He was thirty-eight, the youngest Cardinal in several generations, and he wore the full formal vestments with the ease of someone who has been wearing formal vestments since before ease was possible and has achieved ease

through repetition rather than through comfort. The red sash. The institutional poise of the Elevatio at its most contained.

He moved through the room with the specific trajectory of someone who knows where they are going and is managing the impression that they are not going there directly. He spoke to three people before he reached Kaiden — short exchanges, courteous, the Elevatio's institutional courtesy that communicated care and communicated simultaneously that the care was structural rather than personal. Then he arrived at Kaiden's position.

"House Kentur," he said. The greeting was not warm and was not cold — it was at the temperature the Elevatio maintained in formal contexts, which was the temperature of things that have their own internal regulation and do not depend on ambient conditions.

"Your Eminence," Kaiden said.

Derry looked at him. The look had the specific quality that Kaiden had been in the presence of twice before — the look of someone who is seeing something and simultaneously running an assessment of what they're seeing, the two functions visible as two functions rather than as the single unified act of observation. "The elevation was quick," Derry said. "Even by the City's standards."

"Imperium moves when she decides to move," Kaiden said.

"She does," Derry agreed. He turned to look at the room, which was the conversational equivalent of stepping back — creating distance while maintaining proximity. "Your House's priest. Aurelo. Long tenure."

"Twenty years."

"Unusual."

"Yes."

"The Elevatio maintains posting rotation for reasons that are both practical and institutional." He said this without inflection, the statement of a fact that was not required to be neutral but was being rendered neutral as a choice. "Twenty years in one posting is an anomaly. It required specific approval from the Conclave level."

Kaiden said nothing. He was aware that the silence was being measured.

Derry looked at him again. "You are aware of this."

"I am now," Kaiden said.

It was the true answer and the careful one simultaneously, which was the kind of answer the City produced in people after sufficient time in it. He had been in the City for four weeks, which was enough.

Derry's mouth did something that was close to a smile in structure and not quite a smile in content — the Elevatio's version of an expression that acknowledged the quality of a response without committing to approval. He leaned fractionally closer, and what he said next was at the volume of something said for one person rather than two.

"Your House has always had good blood," he said. "We noticed it long before you did."

He stepped back. He looked at the room again. Then he moved on, the trajectory resuming its apparently casual arc through the reception, arriving at the next person with the same courtesy and the same institution.

Kaiden held his cup. He did not look after Derry.

Olan appeared at his shoulder three minutes later.

"The Cardinal favors you," Olan said. His tone was neither approving nor concerned — informational, the same tone he used for most things, the tone of someone maintaining an account of the room.

"We exchanged greetings," Kaiden said.

"He exchanged greetings with four other people tonight," Olan said. "I counted. His exchanges with the others lasted approximately thirty seconds. Yours lasted four minutes and forty seconds, which I know because I had nothing better to do while Trever was trying to explain to Robere why House Vexar's intelligence brokerage model was technically not a violation of the communication monopoly agreement." He paused. "It's a long explanation."

"Is Robere convinced?" Kaiden asked.

"Robere is never convinced of anything that doesn't begin with the word *protocol* or end with the word *institutional*," Olan said. "Which is admirable, actually. His consistency is more reliable than most people's flexibility." He looked toward where Derry was now standing with a group of City functionaries, his vestments visible above the crowd. "What did he say?"

Kaiden turned his cup. "He complimented my family line."

Olan was quiet for a moment. "Derry doesn't compliment family lines."

"He did tonight."

"Then he wants something," Olan said. "Or he already has it. With the Elevatio it's usually the latter." He sipped from his own cup. "File it."

"I have," Kaiden said.

Olan looked at him with the warmth that was genuine rather than performed, the warmth that Kaiden had been trying to verify was genuine since the first week and had concluded, on balance, was. "You did all right today," he said. "In the Wayfinder facility. With the display."

"I pointed at something on a chart."

"You pointed at something on a chart that Ana Tollivar immediately made dark," Olan said. "Which means you saw something that she didn't want the group to see. Which means you have a quality of attention that most people in that room don't have." He paused. "I'm not saying this to flatter you. I'm saying it because you should know that I noticed."

Kaiden looked at him.

"I notice most things," Olan said, pleasantly. "It's one of the qualities that makes me useful and occasionally exhausting." He turned to the room. "Petr noticed too. Petr notices everything. Trever noticed and is currently calculating what use it is to him. Selene noticed and has already decided it's not her business." He paused. "Robere was looking at the display itself, not at your reaction. That's Robere."

"What did you notice specifically," Kaiden said.

"That the systems on the chart's edge had active designations with no House markers, no trade routes, and no official names," Olan said. "And that when you pointed at them, Ana made them disappear before most of the group had located what you were looking at." He sipped again. "I've been on the City for fourteen months. I've been to the Wayfinder facility twice. Those systems have always been on the edge of that display, and they have always had active designations, and no one has ever asked about them before tonight." He looked at Kaiden. "Which makes me wonder what else is on that chart that no one has thought to ask about."

He smiled, with genuine warmth, and moved away toward a group of functionaries who looked like they needed the social assistance.

Kaiden stood with his cup and the question and the evening reception's ambient noise, the sounds of the City's social machinery doing what it did, which was everything at once in every register simultaneously.

He thought about the systems on the chart's edge. He thought about what Aurelo had said in the last real conversation: *there are things about the City that you'll understand only once you're inside it.* He thought about Derry's voice at the volume meant for one person: *we noticed it long before you did.*

He thought about the token in his left pocket.

He hadn't found the first genuinely private meeting with Lysandir yet. He would.

The reception continued. He stayed in it long enough to be present in the way the protocol required, and then he returned to the Heir-Second block through the corridors that were always lit and always slightly too cold, walking the route that he now knew well enough not to count the turns.

In his quarters, with the door sealed and the City's ambient hum around him, he sat at the desk and did his accounting.

The systems on the chart's edge. Ana's hand to the control panel. The blank wall. *Those are not shown for a reason.*

He thought about what that reason might be. He thought about what active system designations without House markers, without trade routes, without names in the official registry meant. He had hypotheses, but hypotheses were not information, and at this stage he was collecting information rather than building from hypotheses.

He would need more. He would need the kind of access that he did not currently have and that would require trust he had not yet established and time that was measured in months rather than days.

He sat with this.

Then, in the particular quality of quiet that his quarters had at this hour — the City's hum in the walls, the pressurized air doing what it did, the light at its low setting — something arrived.

Not a direction this time. Not *left* or *the next corridor*. Something more sustained, more specific than direction.

The tall one is afraid of something, said the voice that was not quite Maren's voice and was most of Maren's voice. *Not you. But you're near it.*

He sat still. The voice had the quality of something said quickly, in passing — information delivered without elaboration, the Maren economy of speech that gave you the thing and trusted you to hold it without the context.

He thought about the tall ones in the room tonight. Derry was tall. Lysandir was tall. Olan was not particularly tall. Trever was tall. Robere was large but not tall in the way that the description seemed to imply.

He did not know which tall one she meant.

He filed it. He did not try to force it into a configuration.

He thought about the girl on the memory tablet in the Wayfinder facility — the sixteen-year-old who had mapped a new system and

died two days later. He thought about the fact that Wayfinder deaths were attributed to cognitive demands and not explained more specifically. He thought about testing, and about what the testing actually did with the children it found, and about the specific designation that appeared on the Wayfinder corps' transfer records and the word *Starfarer* appearing alongside it.

He thought about these things in the order that they arrived, and he let them arrive in whatever order they wanted, and he did not force them into a pattern.

The City hummed. The Lyra system was outside, doing what systems did — the planet on its course, the traffic patterns that characterized a Fold junction system, the steady movement of vessels through coordinated approach corridors. He was in the City that was in the Lyra system, which was moving, which was always moving.

He put his hands on the desk and looked at them. The calluses from the practice blade were still there. He had not been to anything like Memna Zael's training room since arriving. The block had a physical training space — a minimal one, functional, the equipment selected for maintaining rather than developing. He had used it. He would continue to use it. But the calluses were from a different kind of practice, in a different room, on a station that was now someone else's station.

He thought: *the tall one is afraid of something.*

He thought: *I am near it.*

He did not know, yet, what it was.

He would.

The City moved through the Lyra system on its calculated arc, carrying the tribute and the functions and the governance apparatus and the fifty-three Wayfinders and the six Heirs-Second in the East block and the one Heir-Second who was also something else, or might be, or had been shaped to be. It moved with the absolute precision of something that had been moving for three hundred years on a schedule that had never been interrupted, that had arrived at every

system on the Cycle without fail, that was the most reliable fact in human civilization.

Kaiden turned off the desk light and sat in the dark for a while.

Then he went to bed.

ELEVEN

IMPERIAL CITY

THE KENTUR FILE had been on her desk for six days before she read it with the kind of attention it warranted.

Not because she had neglected it. She had reviewed it twice in the forty-eight hours after the elevation — a standard review, the kind she performed on any new Dominion Major House in its first cycle, covering the obvious categories: financial standing, political history, military exposure, Guild affiliations, Elevatio relationship. The review had been productive. House Kentur was financially sound, politically unremarkable, militarily unserious but not negligently so, affiliated with the Elevatio in the standard way of every House in the Imperium. The growbitat technology was genuine, well-documented, and as innovative as the reports suggested. The Fascinations were a luxury product with no strategic weight and significant market weight. The House was what it appeared to be.

She had put the file aside. She had moved to the next thing, and the next, and the next, because there was always a next thing and the

management of the sequence of next things was the primary operational function of her position.

On the sixth day, during the hour before the Lyra system's Court session when her schedule was technically clear and she used that clearance to think rather than to rest, she picked up the file again.

She did not know why she picked it up again. She had learned, over forty-one years of being herself and twenty-three years of being Imperium, that the impulse to look at something again was not random. It was the mind's way of flagging that the first pass had missed something. She trusted the impulse the way she trusted the instruments on the City's navigation panel — not without verification, but without dismissing them before the verification.

She read the file the second time with a different quality of attention.

The thing she had missed was not a fact. It was a pattern in the absence of facts.

House Kentur had no dissent on record. No member of the House, in four generations of files available to the City's intelligence apparatus, had publicly or privately expressed disagreement with Imperial policy in a form that registered in any monitored channel. No complaints filed with the Chain's arbitration offices that were not strictly operational — vendor disputes, contract questions, the ordinary friction of commerce. No communication with the Elevatio beyond the standard pastoral relationship: priest assigned, ceremonies conducted, Communions registered, the bureaucratic record of a House observing its religious obligations without enthusiasm or suppression.

No military history. Not simply no standing army — no ancestral military service, no family members in any Guild's enforcement arm, no contracts with the mercenary concerns that most Dominion-aspiring Houses maintained quietly for the appearance of neutrality. The Kentur family had been entirely civilian in its orientation for four generations.

No genetic anomalies on record. She looked at this several times.

Every House that had been through the Testing protocol for four generations had anomaly records — not always significant ones, but the Testing caught things, and the things it caught were recorded, and the records were part of the file. Kentur had none. Not suppressed records, not redacted records. No records at all.

She sat with this.

There were two explanations for a file this clean. The first was that the House was genuinely unremarkable — four generations of people who had made no enemies worth complaining to the Chain about, expressed no politics, pursued no military ambitions, and produced no children who tested anomalously for any category the standard protocols measured. This was possible. It was not impossible. People did not become remarkable by simple law of nature; some families simply were not remarkable, and their files reflected this.

The second explanation was that something was being hidden very well.

She poured a glass of water from the carafe on the desk — no stimulants during the thinking hours, she had learned this about herself at thirty-two and had been consistent about it since — and drank half of it and set it down and looked at the file.

The priest's tenure was the thing she kept returning to. Father Aurelo. Twenty years in a single posting. She knew the Elevatio's rotation protocols; she had made it her business to know them when she had first begun managing the order's relationship with the City, because the rotation protocols were the mechanism through which the Elevatio embedded its people, and understanding the mechanism was prerequisite to controlling it. Standard assignment: five years. Extended posting: ten, maximum, with Conclave-level approval. Twenty years required something beyond Conclave-level approval. It required a specific institutional decision to override the rotation system for a specific priest in a specific location.

The Elevatio made that kind of decision for three reasons. The first was operational continuity — a priest who had developed relationships and knowledge that could not easily be transferred. The

second was punishment — an extended posting was sometimes used as a form of internal discipline, though this was always combined with other signals that Aurelo's file did not contain. The third was surveillance. An embedded long-term agent, too valuable to rotate because what they were observing required time.

She looked at the Kentur file. She looked at the Aurelo entry.

She thought about the timing: Aurelo posted twenty years ago, when Kaiden Kentur was not yet born. The posting had begun before the child who was now in her Heir-Second block existed. The Elevatio had decided, twenty years ago, to put a long-term agent in this specific minor House with no apparent strategic significance, at the same time that the House was making a series of marriage alliances and production investments that had, over the subsequent twenty years, positioned it as the entity she had needed when Holden fell.

The coincidence was not a coincidence.

She filed this conclusion in the place where she filed conclusions that were certain before they were verified, and she noted that verification would require resources she would have to deploy carefully.

Kimme arrived when summoned.

This was not a given. Janna had made it not a given deliberately — she had, from the time Kimme was old enough to understand what summoned meant, occasionally not been there when Kimme arrived, or had been occupied with something that required Kimme to wait, or had dismissed her before she was finished with whatever she had come for. The purpose of this was not cruelty. The purpose was calibration: a person who arrived when summoned and received what they expected every time would eventually calibrate their expectations to the point of fragility. The occasional disruption maintained readiness.

Kimme had learned. She arrived when summoned and she

waited if she needed to wait and she did not express the frustration of waiting, because expressing the frustration served no function. She was twenty-one years old and she had been doing this her entire life and she was very good at it.

She was also, Janna noted, visibly tired in the way that was not physical fatigue but the fatigue of sustained performance. This was recent — in the past month or so, this quality had begun to appear at the edges of Kimme's composure in moments when Kimme thought she was not being observed. Janna was always observing. It was not a choice; it was the structure of her attention.

"Sit," she said.

Kimme sat. The chair across from the desk was exactly where it always was, positioned at the angle that gave Janna the sight line she preferred and gave Kimme the posture the meeting's tenor implied. Kimme arranged herself in it with the ease of long practice.

"The Kentur file," Janna said.

Kimme looked at the file on the desk. She recognized it — she had access to the same intelligence archive, knew the Kentur House from the elevation documentation. She looked at it with the look of someone organizing what she already knew before being asked about it.

"Clean," she said.

"Too clean."

Kimme considered this. "The growbitat technology is real. The yields are verified. The House's operational record is what they say it is."

"Yes," Janna said. "All of it verifiable. All of it accurate." She turned a page in the file, though she did not need to — she had committed the relevant sections to the part of her memory she used for things that required continuous access. "The priest."

"Aurelo. Long tenure."

"Twenty years."

Kimme said nothing for a moment, which was the right response — not performing the conclusion before it was ready, not filling the

silence with something that would reveal her reasoning's speed and direction. Janna appreciated this. She had taught it; it had been a difficult lesson. "The Elevatio doesn't embed someone for twenty years without a reason," Kimme said.

"No."

"Which means they identified something in that House that warranted twenty years of sustained observation." A pause. "Or cultivation."

"Or both," Janna said. "Observation and cultivation are not mutually exclusive activities, particularly for an institution that thinks in generational timelines."

Kimme looked at the file. "The son," she said. "Kaiden."

"Tell me what you see."

Kimme organized herself before speaking, which was the habit of someone who had learned that her mother's evaluations of her assessments were themselves assessments of her capacity to assess. "He's nineteen. Second child, no inheritance stake, which means he's been trained for service rather than governance. The rescue operation before the elevation — three of them, all successful, which suggests genuine operational competence rather than performed competence. He performed the audience protocol correctly. He is, on the surface, exactly what a well-trained second child of an ambitious minor House would be." She paused. "But the Elevatio put twenty years into his House before he was born, which means they were anticipating him before he existed."

"Or anticipating his sister," Janna said. "The Commune gene is Y-linked. A daughter can't carry it."

"But a daughter can carry other things," Kimme said. "If they were running a breeding program—"

"Slowly," Janna said. Not a reprimand. A pace indicator. "You're getting ahead of the evidence."

Kimme accepted this. "What do we know."

"We know the priest's tenure is anomalous. We know the file is unusually clean. We know the House produced a technology that

positioned them precisely where I needed a House when I needed one." She looked at the window, at the Lyra system's pale star catching the City's solar arrays in its steady light. "We do not yet know whether this is convergence or design."

"How do we find out."

"Carefully," Janna said. "A genetic scan on an Heir-Second without cause would be a diplomatic incident. I can arrange a routine screening at Shexim when the Cycle brings us there — the Greater Assayors there are under my control, and a health assessment for all Heirs-Second can be framed as standard. But that's months away." She turned back to Kimme. "In the meantime, I need better information than his file provides."

Kimme looked at her. The look was the one she used when she understood what was being asked before the ask was made.

"You want me to watch him," she said.

"I want you to observe him," Janna said. "Which is different from watching. Watching is passive. Observation is active — you're looking for specific things, tracking specific variables over time." She paused. "Not befriend him. Not yet. Just observe. How he moves through the social structure of the block. What he gives away without knowing he's giving it away. What he protects." A pause. "And whether he's protecting anything."

Kimme was quiet for a moment. "Is he dangerous."

"I don't know," Janna said. "That's the question I'm asking you to help me answer." She looked at Kimme steadily. "He could be exactly what the file says: a well-trained minor House second child who happens to be in an interesting position. Or he could be something the Elevatio has been building for twenty years and has deployed into my Heir-Second block at a moment of their choosing."

"And if it's the latter."

"Then the Elevatio is further along in their operation than I currently credit them for," Janna said. "Which would be useful to know before they are further along."

Kimme nodded. The nod of someone accepting an assignment,

not of someone agreeing with its framing, which was the distinction Janna had been watching for.

"One more thing," Janna said.

She looked at the window again, at the Lyra system's light. She had been deciding, for several days, how much of this to give Kimme — where to draw the line between the information Kimme needed for the specific task and the information that would require Kimme to hold things she was not yet ready to hold. She had drawn the line carefully. She was going to give Kimme the edge of it, enough to be useful, not so much as to require that Kimme become something she wasn't yet.

"The Elevatio's theory," she said. "Their understanding of how the City moves."

Kimme said: "Multiple Starfarers, bonded through Leaf. The standard doctrine."

"Yes." Janna looked at her. "It is, in my assessment, wrong."

Kimme's face did not change. She had trained the face not to change. But something in the quality of her attention shifted, the way attention shifts when it moves from a baseline register to a heightened one.

"How wrong," she said.

"I don't know the full extent of it," Janna said. "I know enough to be certain that what the Elevatio believes about the mechanism is not accurate. They have been trying for a century to replicate what they believe happens in the Starfarer block. They have not succeeded. They have attributed their failure to the difficulty of the problem. I believe the failure is structural — they cannot replicate the mechanism because their model of the mechanism is false."

Kimme looked at her. "Why are you telling me this."

"Because you will be watching someone whose value to the Elevatio depends on their theory being correct," Janna said. "If you understand that the theory may be false, you will be watching for different things than if you believe it. You will be watching for what he actually is, rather than what the Elevatio believes he is." A pause.

"And those may be different things. Or they may be the same. I don't know yet."

Kimme was quiet for a long moment. The quality of the quiet was the quality of someone integrating something that required integration time — not shock, Kimme did not do visible shock, but the genuine processing of information that revised a significant assumption.

"Are they dangerous," she said. "If their theory is wrong."

"They are dangerous regardless," Janna said. "A correct theory makes them dangerous in one direction. A false theory makes them dangerous in a different direction." She looked at her daughter. "The direction matters, because it tells you what they'll do when the falseness becomes apparent to them."

Kimme said: "They'll resist."

"Yes."

"And if Kaiden Kentur is what they think he is."

"Then we'll have more interesting problems than institutional resistance," Janna said. "But let's not build scenarios around things we don't know yet." She picked up the water glass, drank the remaining half, set it down. "Watch him. Tell me what you see. Not what you think it means — what you see. I'll determine what it means."

Kimme rose.

She rose with the specific quality that Janna had been observing for twenty-one years: the ease of someone for whom physical competence had become so thoroughly integrated that it was no longer a thing she did but simply a thing she was. The ease that looked effortless because all the effort had been invested much earlier. Janna had been the investment. She had made it deliberately and had tracked its returns carefully and had found, on most days, that the returns justified the investment.

On most days.

The quality of tiredness she had noticed at the edges was new. She did not yet know what it meant.

"Thank you," Kimme said, which was the closing register of a formal summons.

Janna said: "Be careful with the observation. Lysandir is his priest, which means the Elevatio has their own eyes on him. They will notice if your attention is too specific too quickly."

"I know how to be unspecific," Kimme said.

"I know you do," Janna said. "I'm telling you because it's worth saying rather than assuming."

Kimme accepted this. She left.

The room after Kimme's departure had the quality it always had: the quality of a space that has been occupied by two people and is now occupied by one, the readjustment of atmosphere that always followed. Janna did not find this quality uncomfortable. She found it clarifying. The presence of another person, even a person she trusted as much as she trusted anyone, required the maintenance of a register that was not her private register. After the departure, the private register could resume.

She looked at the Kentur file.

She thought about what she had told Kimme: that the Elevatio's theory was wrong. She had not said what was right. This was deliberate. Kimme did not yet have the context to hold the truth without telling someone, or without acting on it in a way that would reveal that she held it, or without it changing her behavior toward the Starfarer block in ways that would be noticed. The risk was not that Kimme would betray the truth deliberately. The risk was that the truth would show in her behavior without her knowing it was showing.

Janna would tell her eventually. There was a specific conversation she intended to have with Kimme, at a specific point in Kimme's development, about the Fold and about what actually happened in the room that no one was allowed to see. She had been

planning the conversation for several years. The timing of it was not yet right.

She thought about the Kentur boy.

She thought about the Wayfinder display, which had been watched through the facility's surveillance system during the Heir-Second tour that morning. She had reviewed the feed after the tour. The Heir-Second who had noticed the anomalous systems was not the one she would have expected — Petr Peran, whose family's communications monopoly gave him reason to be attentive to traffic patterns, or Trever Vexar, whose family's information brokerage business made pattern recognition a vocational skill. It was the Kentur boy.

He had found the unmarked systems in seconds. He had pointed at them in a way that suggested he was not guessing but confirming.

She looked at the file. At the clean record, the absent anomalies, the twenty-year priest.

She thought: *either this is a coincidence or it isn't, and the difference between those two things has very significant implications*.

She looked at the star chart on her desk screen, the expanded version that showed the full field of the known systems and, at the edges, the ones that were known in the other sense — known to her, known to a small number of people in her network, not known officially, not shown on the charts in the Wayfinder facility. The systems that had been settling into their own governance structures, their own trade networks, their own ways of managing the distances between them, for the last eighty years. Without the City. Without Leaf, supposedly, though she was not entirely certain about this.

She was not certain about many things, which was the condition she preferred to operate in. Certainty was a specific kind of blindness, and she had found, over the years, that the most dangerous moments in her tenure had been the moments when she was most certain. Uncertainty kept her attentive. Attentiveness kept her alive.

She closed the Kentur file.

She opened the file she kept separately, the one that held the

accumulated record of the things she was watching that had not yet resolved into conclusions — the pattern-recognition file, the file of fragments awaiting their configuration. She added three notes.

Wayfinder tour: Kentur noticed the unmarked systems. Elapsed time from first viewing to identification: under thirty seconds.

Priest tenure: Elevatio invested twenty years in a minor House before the child existed. Purpose unconfirmed.

Kimme: edge of composure fraying. Cause unknown. Monitor.

She read the three notes back.

Then she added a fourth.

If the Elevatio's theory is correct and the Kentur boy is what they believe — he is a problem that requires managing before they have finished making him one. If the theory is incorrect and he is something else — he is either an opportunity or a problem of a different kind. Distinguish between these cases before Shexim.

She closed the file.

She looked at the window. The Lyra system's light was changing angle — the City's rotation bringing the star to a different position relative to the upper hemisphere's towers. In four more days the City would Fold to the next system on the Cycle. The Fold would take her approximately seven minutes of elapsed subjective time, during which the City and everything in it would not be where it was.

She would perform the Fold alone, as she performed every Fold, in the room that no one was permitted to enter when she was in it.

She had been doing this for twenty-three years.

The room held the truth of what she was, which was the only truth that mattered, and which she intended to go on holding until the circumstances that made the holding necessary changed.

They had not changed yet.

She picked up the water glass, found it empty, set it down.

She went to prepare for the Court session.

TWELVE

THE HEIR-SECOND GALLERY was a narrow ledge of polished stone above the Throne Room's main floor, accessible through a corridor that branched from the block's third ring, and it overlooked the chamber from an angle that was not the angle of supplicants. The supplicants stood on the blue-black marble floor, seven steps below the dais, in the position of people being observed. The gallery observed them from the side, which was its own lesson: in the Throne Room, there was the position of power and the position of submission, and then there was the position of those who were learning to distinguish between the two.

Six Heirs-Second had been notified of the session. Kaiden had arrived with Olan, who had arrived with Robere, who had arrived alone and found them in the corridor and fallen into step without ceremony, because Robere was the kind of person who attached to available formation rather than creating his own. Trever arrived separately and slightly late, which was not an accident — the arrival slightly late was a statement that the speaker did not consider punctuality an obligation to the occasion, only to the people they chose to prioritize. Petr was already there, seated, with

the expression of someone who had been in the gallery long enough to have already observed most of what the session would offer.

The Throne Room below was configured for a formal audience. The Guild heads at their stations. The Clerk at his, in continuous motion. The Shexosant commander, D'Hana, in the chair to the left of the dais that was a chair and not a ceremony, looking at something in her peripheral calculation. And at the summit of the dais: Janna Chadrac, in the position of power, which was also the position of the room's only source of final determination.

Kaiden looked at her from the gallery's angle. She was looking at the floor of the Throne Room with the quality of attention that was not watching but processing — receiving the information the room offered and doing something with it that was not yet visible in her behavior. She had the stillness of something that has made so many decisions so many times that the decision-making process has been interiorized to the point of invisibility.

A House was brought forward.

The House was small — an Ascendant family from a system Kaiden did not recognize by name, though his geography was improving daily. They presented in the standard format: three members, formal dress, the House sigil visible at collar and cuff. They had the posture of people who have been rehearsing an encounter they are afraid of, the over-controlled quality of rehearsal showing in the slight stiffness of their movements, the careful management of expression that becomes visible as management rather than naturalness.

The charges were read by the Clerk with the affect of someone reading a transit schedule. Kaiden caught the substance: unauthorized production of a Guild-restricted substance, concealment of a testing result, two counts of Link communication fraud. The charges arrived and were received without visible reaction from anyone in the Throne Room. The Telepath Guild head, who had not been looking at the House family when they entered, was looking at them

now, in the way that Telepaths looked at things when they were doing their actual work rather than performing it.

The formal opportunity for reply: the House's senior member stepped forward and offered a statement of context. The statement was well-prepared — Kaiden could hear the preparation in it, the rehearsed cadence, the specific choices of terminology that aligned with the Chain's legal vocabulary. It was a good statement. It contained its own argument for why the charges were technically inaccurate in two of the four counts and mitigated in the other two by circumstances that the House had documented and was prepared to present.

Janna listened to the statement.

She listened to all of it. She did not interrupt. She did not signal impatience. She let it complete in the time it required to complete, and then she was quiet for a moment, and then she said three sentences.

The three sentences disposed of the contextual argument without engaging with its content. The engagement would have required the argument to be taken seriously as an argument, which the three sentences indicated it would not be. The verdict that followed was for all four charges, without mitigating circumstances, with a penalty that Kaiden understood, from six weeks of the City's education, to be at the moderate end of what the charges allowed for. Not the maximum. The maximum would have been interesting. The moderate penalty was not interesting. The moderate penalty was institutional.

The Clerk annotated. The House family bowed and withdrew. The Throne Room's atmosphere readjusted to its neutral register.

Kaiden sat with what he had just watched.

He had watched the statement being made. He had watched Janna listening to it. He had watched the verdict arriving without reference to the statement's content. The statement had been made, the listening had occurred, the verdict had been predetermined. These three things had happened in sequence, and the sequence had

been designed to look like a causal chain — statement, then deliberation, then verdict — when the actual sequence was verdict, then the theater of deliberation, then the verdict announced.

He thought about his family's audience. The formal protocol, the presentation of tribute, the offer of the elevation terms. The way Donia had asked for the Communion before committing, and Janna had granted it with a smile that did not reach her eyes, and the Communion had happened, and Donia had returned and accepted. He thought about the sequence. He thought about whether the sequence had been designed the same way.

He thought: *the audience with Imperium was not an honor. It was an inspection.*

The thought arrived with the quality of something that had been forming for weeks and had now completed its formation, the final pieces clicking into the configuration they'd been building toward. He had been inspected. The family had been inspected. The elevation had been decided before the inspection, or at least the decision had been more advanced than the inspection was designed to imply, and the inspection's function was not to determine the outcome but to assess the quality of what was being elevated.

He filed this. He returned his attention to the gallery.

Trever had been watching him.

Not continuously — Trever's attention moved through the room on its own account, assessing the other Heirs-Second, assessing the floor below, returning to Kaiden at intervals. When it returned to Kaiden now, it settled with the specific quality of something that had accumulated enough observation to offer commentary.

"House Kentur's elevation was quicker than a standard cycle by fourteen months," Trever said. The comment was pitched at the gallery's ambient volume — audible to the people in the row, not to the floor below.

Robere, beside him, said: "The elevation followed existing protocol. The specific timeline reflects the system's circumstance, not deviation from process."

"The circumstance being that Holden was dissolved abruptly," Trever said, "creating a vacancy that required filling. Quickly."

"Which is what the elevation mechanism exists to address," Robere said. "Houses advance when vacancies require advancement. This is the system's designed function." He said it with the tone of someone for whom the system's designed function was itself the sufficient argument — not a defense of the specific outcome, but a defense of the process that had produced it. The distinction was meaningful to Robere in a way it was not meaningful to Trever.

"The system's designed function," Trever said, "does not typically reach down to House Ascendant level to fill a Dominion Major vacancy."

"It hasn't previously," Robere said. "That doesn't mean it can't."

"It means someone decided it would," Trever said. "Which is a different thing from the system deciding it." His attention, which had been on the exchange, settled back on Kaiden. "House Kentur's second child is here, which is unusual. Dominion Major Heir-Seconds are typically the third or fourth in the succession line. The second remains at home to support the heir. Your presence suggests either that your House lacks the depth for conventional protocol, or that your presence here was specifically requested."

Kaiden said: "Or that Imperium's summons was specific."

Trever looked at him.

"The summons named me specifically," Kaiden said. "Which you can verify in the public record of the elevation documentation, which is available through the Chain registry." He paused. "I didn't choose to be here any more than you chose your House's posting schedule."

Trever's expression had the quality of something reassessing. Not a concession — the reassessment of someone who has probed for a response and received a different response than anticipated, and is

now updating his model of what kind of probing this person would and would not yield to.

Olan, who had been watching the exchange with the attention he brought to things that interested him, said: "I think what Trever is asking, underneath the phrasing, is whether House Kentur's elevation was earned or arranged. Which is a fair question, actually, in the sense that almost everything in this room is both simultaneously, and the balance between the two is worth understanding."

Trever said: "That's a generous paraphrase of what I said."

"It's the version of what you said that leads somewhere," Olan said. "The other version is just provocation."

Robere had returned his attention to the floor, where the next petitioner was being announced by the Clerk. He was not disengaged — Kaiden had learned that Robere's apparent disengagement from conversations was often the posture he adopted when he was listening most carefully.

Kaiden looked at the floor. The next petitioner was a Guild dispute — two Guild heads presenting competing claims about a licensing boundary, the specifics beyond his current fluency in Guild protocol. He watched the presentation and let the conversation in the gallery settle into the silence that had followed Olan's intervention, which was not the silence of dropped topics but the silence of topics that had been set aside for later.

The session lasted two hours. Kaiden watched five Houses brought forward, five verdicts rendered, five sequences of statement-then-deliberation-then-announced-verdict that were the same sequence in varying registers of the same fundamental performance. He watched the Clerk's hands throughout, which was more informative than watching the Throne — the Clerk's annotations preceded the formal announcements in ways that confirmed the verdict had been determined before the theater of deliberation concluded. He watched the

Telepath Guild head's attention move from person to person among the petitioners, the specific quality of the movement telling him which testimony she had been tasked to verify and which the City had already verified through other means. He watched Derry, who was in the lower gallery rather than the floor — not visible until Kaiden specifically looked for him — watching the Shexosant commander rather than the Throne during the session's two most pointed exchanges.

Derry watching D'Hana rather than Janna. The specific directing of attention. What it meant he didn't know yet. He filed it.

When the session concluded, the gallery dispersed back through the connecting corridor. Kaiden walked with Olan for the length of the corridor and then separated at the junction, taking the branch toward the East block while Olan took the one toward the common area.

Lysandir was waiting outside his suite.

This was not unusual — Lysandir's appearances were irregular enough that unusual was the wrong frame. He appeared when he appeared, which was when he had determined that appearing was the appropriate action, and the determination appeared to follow its own internal logic that Kaiden was still mapping.

"Walk," Lysandir said.

They walked. The corridor past the East block extended into the City's administrative section, which at this hour was underoccupied — the shift turnover having moved most of the corridor's ordinary traffic elsewhere. Lysandir's pace was what it always was: deliberate, each footfall a considered weight, the tall frame carrying itself at the exact height that required no concession to the overhead clearance.

"The session," Kaiden said.

"Yes." Lysandir did not look at him when he walked. He looked at the corridor ahead with the quality of attention that was simultaneously on the conversation and on the corridor's ambient information — the other people in it, the surveillance positions, the sound from the junctions. "What did you observe."

"The verdicts were determined before the petitioners spoke," Kaiden said.

"Always," Lysandir said. "The session's function is not deliberation. It is announcement, in the register that makes the announcement look like deliberation."

"Why maintain the appearance."

"Because the appearance of deliberation creates the possibility of appeal," Lysandir said. "A verdict that was visibly predetermined before testimony can be challenged on procedural grounds. A verdict that was reached after the appearance of deliberation has no procedural lever. The Chain requires that the form be observed. The form is observed. The content of the form is the City's prerogative."

They turned into a secondary corridor that curved slightly — the City's interior had curves in places where the lunar rock's original formation had been accommodated rather than overridden, the engineering decision to work with the existing geometry rather than fight it. The lights here were slightly warmer than the main corridors, the atmospheric standard calibrated differently for reasons Kaiden had not yet identified.

"The Elevatio," Lysandir said, without preamble. "What do you know about their program."

Kaiden considered what he knew versus what he knew that Lysandir knew he knew. The distinction was relevant — giving away information that Lysandir already had was a different calculation from giving away information he didn't.

"Aurelo told me they've been observing my line for three generations," Kaiden said. "Selecting. Looking for specific traits."

"And did he tell you what they intended to do with the traits they produced."

"He described me as a vector. An instrument."

Lysandir was quiet for several paces. "He told you the shape of it without the content." Another pause. "The Elevatio has a doctrine about the Fold. About how the City moves. They believe the Fold requires multiple Starfarers working in concert, bonded through

Leaf, combining their capacity to achieve the volume required. They have believed this for a century. They have been trying to replicate it for a century. They have not succeeded."

"Why not," Kaiden said.

"Because their model is wrong in ways they haven't identified," Lysandir said. "But this is not their primary failure. Their primary failure is that they cannot produce a reliable bonded-Starfarer group because the component they're trying to assemble requires too many rare convergences simultaneously. A Folder capable of bonding at scale. A Communion-capable person who can maintain the bond during Fold. And the specific quality of attention that makes both functions possible simultaneously." He looked at the corridor ahead. "They have been trying to produce this combination through generational selection. Kaiden Kentur is the closest they have gotten."

Kaiden heard this land.

"What they have not shared with the City," Lysandir continued, "is that they are running this program at all. And what the City has not shared with them is its own understanding of the Fold — which is different from theirs, and which the City guards more carefully than almost anything else." A pause that had a specific weight. "The two institutions are in a cold war of information. Each knows the other is hiding something significant. Neither knows exactly what. You are currently at an intersection of both their interests."

"What intersection," Kaiden said.

"That is what I do not yet know," Lysandir said. "I know the shape of the intersection. I do not know its content. The Elevatio's doctrine about the Fold is incomplete — I know this because their results are inconsistent with their model. The City's understanding is more complete, but what specifically it contains is not something I have access to."

He stopped walking. They were in a section of the corridor with no visible surveillance fixtures — which did not mean there was no surveillance, but it was the closest to that approximation that the corridor offered.

"What I can tell you," he said, "is this. Your position here is not the position of an Heir-Second performing a standard term. The Elevatio has an investment in you that is three generations old. The City has an interest in you that is more recent but potentially more significant. Both are watching. Neither is your ally." He looked at Kaiden directly, the amber eyes at their most present. "Stay neutral. For now."

"What does neutral mean in practice," Kaiden said.

"It means giving neither institution reason to believe you are working against them," Lysandir said. "It means not committing to any position on the matters they care about until you have more information. It means maintaining the appearance of a well-trained minor House second child performing his conventional term." He paused. "You are capable of this. You have been capable of it since you arrived. Continue."

He turned and walked back the way they had come. Kaiden walked beside him, and the conversation was over in the way that Lysandir ended conversations — not with a conclusion, but with the plain fact of its completion, the topic set down and the next thing begun.

That night, in his quarters, Kaiden sat at the desk and did his accounting.

The session. The sequence of verdict-then-deliberation-then-announcement. The understanding, now complete, that the audience had been an inspection. He held these things together and let them sit against each other.

He thought about what Lysandir had said: *the Elevatio's doctrine about the Fold is incomplete. The City's understanding is more complete.* He thought about what Janna had said to Kimme — or what he believed she had said to Kimme, based on the quality of Ana Tollivar's attention at the Wayfinder facility, the specific hesitation

when the unmarked systems came up, the particular way she had said *those are not shown for a reason.* Not *those don't exist.* Not *those are classified.* Those are not shown — as if the showing were the relevant category, not the existence.

He thought about what was not being shown, and about why the not-showing was the policy rather than the erasure.

He thought about the breeding program. Three generations of his family shaped toward a specific outcome that the shapers had not shared with the shaped. He thought about consent, which was a word that the City's education in Imperial governance had not yet found occasion to use. He thought about what the outcome was supposed to look like, and about Lysandir's description of it: a Folder capable of bonding at scale, a Communion-capable person who can maintain the bond during Fold. He thought about the pressure behind his left eye and the voices that had arrived in the small hours of the station's night, and about the direction in the corridor of the failing ship, and about the morning on the growbitat inspection when the pressure had been present without urgency.

He thought about whether the two institutions' understanding of him was accurate.

He thought about what he actually was, and found that the question was larger than his current information could fill, and set it aside for a time when he had more to work with.

The City's hum was in the walls. The Lyra system was outside, doing what it did. In four days the City would Fold, and the Lyra system would be behind them, and the Aquila system would be ahead.

He was still sitting at the desk when the voice arrived.

He's not your friend, Maren said, in the way she said things — direct, without preamble, the statement already past its own beginning by the time it reached him. *But he's not your enemy. That's the most useful kind of person.*

He thought about which tall one she meant, and then stopped thinking about which tall one, because the sentence applied equally

well to more than one person in his current landscape, and possibly that was the point.

He said, to the room: "I know."

The room did not respond. Maren was not the kind of voice that extended conversations. She gave what she gave.

He turned off the desk light. He went to bed. The City hummed around him in its specific register, the register of something very large moving through space on a schedule it had maintained for three hundred years, carrying in its interior everything it had decided was worth carrying.

He was in it now. He was part of what it was carrying.

The thought was neither comfortable nor uncomfortable. It was simply accurate, and he was getting better, gradually, at sitting with accurate things.

The Lyra system's star was outside somewhere, doing its slow work.

He slept.

THIRTEEN

IMPERIAL CITY - AQUILA SYSTEM

THE GAMING SALON had no official designation in the block's directory. It appeared on the residential map as a secondary common area, which was a description accurate to its dimensions and furniture and entirely inaccurate to its function.

Olan had found it in the third week. He had presented the discovery to the cohort with the particular quality of a person offering a gift they know will be well received — not performing the gesture, but invested in it, the warmth of someone who has identified a thing that is genuinely useful and is glad to be the one who found it. The room was off the standard common area's south corridor, through a junction that the wayfinding system did not prioritize, which meant it was findable but not obvious. Someone had furnished it, at some point, with a long oval table and chairs that were slightly better than the standard residential issue, and a cabinet against the far wall whose contents turned out to be, among other things, a set of playing cards whose backs bore the House sigils of every Dominion Major in the Imperium.

Trever had claimed the cards immediately, with the instinct of someone who recognized a useful instrument.

They gathered on the evenings when the block's schedule left space — which was not every evening, but was often enough that the gatherings had developed their own rhythm, their own set of unwritten protocols layered over the written ones. Who sat where, how the dealing went, what could be said at the table and what required the corridor. The room had been swept for surveillance twice, by Lysandir on one occasion and by Trever on another, each using different instruments, each finding nothing. The surveillance question remained open, as it always remained open in the City, because the absence of detected surveillance was not the presence of no surveillance. They spoke in the room the way they spoke everywhere: performing somewhat less than they performed in public and somewhat more than they performed alone.

Tonight the Aquila system was outside, visible through the room's single viewport as a pale blue-white star that did not look different from any other star at this distance but that Kaiden had learned to identify by the specific angle the City was holding relative to it. The City had been in Aquila for two weeks. In another two weeks it would Fold again, this time to Indus and the Valerius system, which would produce a session that Robere was already approaching with the specific quality of anticipated performance.

Seven of them at the table tonight. Olan had the deal, which he held with the easy authority of someone for whom the holding of it was a social function as much as a mechanical one. Robere was to Kaiden's left, attending to his hand with the focused economy of someone who treats every game as a form of operational research. Trever was across the table, which was where he usually positioned himself — sight lines to everyone, back to the cabinet, the stance of someone who manages information more than he plays cards. Petr was beside Trever, which was where Petr was often found, not from any particular loyalty to Trever but because the position beside someone with Trever's information access was itself an information-

access position. Two others completed the table: Selinga Nix, from House Nix, whose commercial fleet routes touched both the Imperium and places that the Imperium's official charts did not show — she had arrived in the block three weeks after Kaiden, her presence unannounced and her manner suggesting the announcement was not an oversight — and Rhian Lyra, who had appeared at the table for the first time two sessions ago and whose House ran the Fold junction coordination infrastructure for three systems, which gave him a specific kind of operational fluency about how the City actually moved through the galaxy.

The game was a variant on a form Kaiden had played on the station, with modifications that had been accumulated by the block over previous cycles and that Olan described as "improvements to the interesting parts and removals of the tedious ones." Five cards, three rounds of betting, reveal. The luck was structural; the money was in the reading.

Kaiden played adequately. He was not a natural card player in the sense of someone who intuits probability without calculating it, but he calculated well and he read people at the table with the quality of attention he brought to other things, and the combination produced results that were middling-good rather than exceptional. He was not the best player at the table. Olan was the best player at the table, in the way that people who genuinely enjoy something tend to become good at it through the enjoyment rather than through effort.

"The Lyra junction routing," Rhian said, during the second round of the third game. He was looking at his cards, not at the table. Rhian Lyra had the lean, gaunt quality of someone who had spent significant time in environments not designed for human comfort, and a single gold tooth that caught the room's low light at certain angles, and the manner of someone who had decided that preamble was inefficient. "I want to understand the coordination failure in the last Fold cycle."

This was not a statement that required Kaiden to respond,

directed as it was apparently at the group rather than at any specific person. But the angle of Rhian's eyes, when they finally left the cards, went to Kaiden.

"The Aquila approach was late by eleven minutes," Kaiden said. "Which is within variance tolerance but not within what the Wayfinder schedule indicated."

"The Wayfinder schedule is an estimate," Robere said, without looking up from his hand. "The actual Fold timing has a tolerance range. Eleven minutes is within it."

"The question isn't whether it's within tolerance," Rhian said. "The question is what produced the eleven-minute delta. The City's approach timing is usually within four minutes. Eleven is an outlier." He set his cards down. "I'm not accusing. I'm asking."

The table was quiet for a moment in the way that tables go quiet when someone has asked something that everyone has been thinking about in a different form.

"There are six new Wayfinders in the corps this cycle," Petr said, mildly. "Their pattern generation is technically correct but their integration timing is less practiced. The delta is probably distributed across the new cohort's work." He paused. "Probably."

"Probably," Rhian agreed, and picked his cards back up, and the game continued.

Kaiden filed this exchange in the place he filed things that were connected to other things he was still mapping. The Fold timing. The Wayfinder cohort. The eleven-minute delta that Rhian had flagged and Petr had explained and Robere had contextualized and Kaiden had listened to with the quality of attention that noticed what was being said around the edges as much as the content.

Nix won the third game with a hand that was marginally better than Trever's, which Trever acknowledged with the specific form of his acknowledgment that communicated appreciation for the quality of the opponent rather than displeasure at the outcome. Olan collected the cards and began the shuffle for the fourth.

"Holden," Olan said.

He said it at the table's ambient volume, not loud, directing it at the deck he was shuffling rather than at anyone specifically. The name landed with the particular landing of a word that has been not said for long enough that the not-saying of it has become its own kind of presence.

"Old news," Trever said.

"Not for everyone," Olan said. He cut the deck, squared it. He was looking at it, not at anyone. "Kentur inherited Holden's system. That's not old news for them."

"It's politics," Trever said. "Imperium dissolves a House, another takes the system. It happens."

"Not at this speed," Nix said. "Holden was dissolved and replaced in the same cycle. That's unusual."

"Unusual isn't a moral position," Robere said. "The process was followed. The elevation documentation is clean."

"I'm not questioning the process," Nix said.

The room held another brief quiet.

Olan dealt. He dealt with the ease of someone who can deal cards and have a conversation simultaneously, each function occupying a different channel without diminishing the other. He dealt all seven hands and then set the remainder of the deck at the table's center and looked at Kaiden.

"What do you actually think," Olan said. "About Holden."

Not the political answer. Kaiden recognized the register from the way Olan was looking at him — not the assessing quality of the table's ongoing account-keeping, something more direct, the specific directness of a person who is asking a question because they want to know the answer rather than because they want the information.

He thought about the Throne Room. About the session he'd observed from the gallery, the sequence of statement-then-deliberation-then-predetermined-verdict. About the way Janna had looked at the floor of the room during each petitioner's address with the quality of someone receiving information they had already processed. He thought about what Aurelo had said about the rules being enforced,

and about what Lysandir had said about staying neutral, and about the gap between those two instructions and what he actually observed when he looked at the City's machinery working.

He said: "I think a House was eliminated on the pretext of their Leaf shortfall. I think the shortfall was real but was not the actual cause. I think the actual cause is less visible and more uncomfortable to state." He paused. "I think Holden was an example. The dissolution was designed to demonstrate something, and the demonstration required the dissolution to happen in a specific way and at a specific time."

He looked at his cards, which he had not yet looked at since the deal.

"And I think," he said, "that the system that requires those demonstrations is one I am currently inside."

Olan was quiet for a moment. He was looking at Kaiden with the look of someone receiving information they found interesting, not in the way of someone managing an account but in the more genuine way of someone being surprised by something they hadn't expected to be surprised by.

He nodded. Once. He said nothing.

They played the fourth game.

At some point during the fifth, Rhian said — directed at Kaiden this time, without ambiguity — "You have a reputation. It's efficient."

Kaiden looked at him. "What kind of reputation."

"The kind that's accurate," Rhian said. "Which is the useful kind." He played a card, assessed the table's response, played another. "House Lyra coordinates Fold junctions for three systems. We don't have strong positions on political outcomes. We have positions on the systems working." He looked at Kaiden. "If Cendant is producing, and the Leaf supply is stable, and the people responsible for it are competent, that's a position we can work with." He played his final card. "I like to know who the competent people are before I need them."

Kaiden said: "That sounds like an offer of something."

"It's a statement of interest," Rhian said. "Offers come later, when the statement of interest is returned."

"Consider it returned," Kaiden said.

Rhian showed his hand. It was not the winning hand. He didn't appear concerned about this.

"Good," he said.

The sixth game was desultory — the hour was late by the block's internal clock and the table's energy had shifted from competitive to conversational, the cards providing structure for a kind of exchange that the City's architecture did not otherwise make easy. People said things during the sixth game that they would not have said in the first, and both parties understood this was the function.

Trever said, at one point, to the table rather than to anyone: "The UnImperium Folders are getting more ambitious."

The statement arrived at the table and was received with the quality of something that had been placed there carefully, tested for the reactions it produced before its implications were explored. Kaiden watched the reactions. Nix continued to look at her cards. Petr's left hand, on the table's edge, moved a small distance and then stopped. Robere looked up from his hand briefly.

"What's the sourcing on that," Petr said.

"Peran channels," Trever said, which was his way of saying: I bought it from the communications infrastructure.

"And the basis for 'ambitious,'" Kaiden said.

Trever looked at him. The look had the quality of someone acknowledging a question he hadn't expected from that direction.

"They've been folding into systems closer to the Imperium's edge," Trever said. "Not within it. Close to it. Testing margins."

"Or growing," Nix said. She was still looking at her cards. Her voice was entirely level.

The room absorbed this.

"What would they be growing toward," Kaiden said.

No one answered. This was not because no one had a thought about the answer but because the answer would have required staking a position on a subject that most of the table had decided, for now, not to stake positions on. The silence was its own answer. Kaiden noted the texture of it — who was silent how, which silences were genuinely empty and which were full.

Olan looked at the viewport. At the Aquila system's star.

"There's a question about whether the UnImperium can sustain Fold capacity without access to the City's Wayfinder patterns," he said, to no one specifically. "If they can't, their range is limited. If they can—" He let it sit. "The math changes."

"The math is already interesting," Rhian said. "Three junction systems in their network are operating without City-generated patterns. We know this because the transit times don't match the pattern-based predictions." He paused. "They're doing it differently."

"Or someone is doing it for them," Trever said.

"Or both," Petr said.

The cards were set down for a moment — not the formal end of the game, just the natural pause of a table that has moved into a conversation that has temporarily claimed its full attention.

Kaiden thought about the anomalous systems on the Wayfinder display. The ones without names, without House markers, without trade route designations. Active designations. *Those are not shown for a reason.*

He said nothing. He was listening to the quality of who said what, and what the saying revealed about what each person already knew and what they were choosing to offer.

Nix, at some point, looked up from the card she'd been studying.

"The UnImperium worlds have been building infrastructure for eighty years," she said. "The question of whether they can sustain Fold capacity isn't about the patterns. It's about whether they have the people." She looked at her cards. "Which is a different kind of question."

The table considered this.

Olan picked up his cards. "Shall we finish the game," he said, pleasantly.

They finished the game. Robere won it — not dramatically, with the competence of someone who had been calculating odds since before the conversation had taken the table's attention, and who had used the conversation's distraction to manage his hand with greater accuracy than the table had been tracking.

He collected his winnings without ceremony.

"The Kentur Leaf output," he said, as he stacked the counters. Not addressing Kaiden specifically. Addressing the information. "Current projections have it at eighty percent of Holden's peak by end of this cycle."

"Eighty-three," Kaiden said.

Robere looked at him.

"We updated the projection last week," Kaiden said. "The eastern flat cultivation zones came in ahead of schedule. Eighty-three percent."

Robere was quiet for a moment. Then: "The projection I was working from was eighty."

"It was eighty when it was published," Kaiden said. "The update wasn't distributed through the standard House bulletin. Alise sent it directly."

Robere looked at him with the expression of someone reassessing a model. Not the dramatic reassessment of someone who has been significantly wrong — the quiet, efficient reassessment of someone who has updated one variable and is running the new version.

"Thank you," he said. Which, from Robere, was the form of acknowledgment that carried the most weight.

The gathering broke at the hour when gatherings in the block naturally broke, when the block's climate system shifted its register

slightly and the light through the viewport had moved to the angle that corresponded to the end of the City's social evening. They moved toward the corridor in small clusters, the conversations fragmenting into pairs and then individuals.

Kaiden walked to the corridor's junction where it split toward the individual suites. Olan fell into step beside him.

They walked in silence for the length of a corridor section — the easy silence of people who have established that the silence is comfortable and therefore don't need to fill it.

"The Holden question," Olan said.

"Yes."

"The answer you gave," Olan said. "The honest one." He walked. "You know I'll have to file what I hear, at some point. That's the function."

"I know," Kaiden said.

"The way I file things is within my discretion," Olan said. "The what is required. The framing is mine." He paused. "I'm not offering anything. I'm telling you how it works so you understand what you're in."

"I appreciate it," Kaiden said.

Olan nodded. They reached the junction.

"The Holden family," Olan said, stopping. "The people. Not the House as an institution. Do you know what happened to them."

"Janna said the survivors who comply would be permitted to live in peace," Kaiden said.

"Did you believe her."

The question arrived with the quality of the real question underneath the question.

Kaiden thought about the session in the Throne Room gallery. The sequence. The predetermined verdict. The form being observed while the content was the City's prerogative.

"I don't know," he said. "I know what she said. I can't verify what happened."

Olan looked at him. The warm quality was present, but under-

neath it was something more complex — the quality of someone who has access to information they're deciding how much of to offer.

"The records at the Chain level show five members of the Holden family line in current status," he said. "They are dispersed across three systems, none of them Cendant. The status indicates they are alive and registered. The Chain logs their location quarterly." He paused. "Whether that status reflects their actual condition, or whether the logging is a formality that no longer corresponds to the underlying fact, I can't tell you."

Kaiden held this.

"Why are you telling me this," he said.

"Because you asked what I actually thought," Olan said. "Not the political answer." He looked down the corridor. "This is the closest I can come to the same thing." He paused. "I don't know what happened to them. I suspect some of them are alive and some of them aren't and the record does not reflect which is which. And I think you should know that I think that, because you are in the system that produced the outcome, and you should understand what system you're in."

He looked at Kaiden with the full warmth, and under it the more complex thing that was not warmth but was related to it — the quality of someone choosing, deliberately, to be honest with another person in a context where honesty was not the default.

"Good night," Olan said.

"Good night," Kaiden said.

Olan went to his suite. Kaiden went to his.

In his quarters, with the Aquila system outside the viewport at its nightside angle, he sat with what had been said and what had been communicated around what had been said. He thought about the table — the seven people, their positions, what they knew and what they were offering and what they were protecting. He thought about Rhian Lyra's direct statement of interest, which was the cleanest exchange of the evening. He thought about Nix and the quality of

her silence on the UnImperium question, which was the silence of someone who was not uninformed.

He thought about Olan, who filed things within his discretion, and who had nonetheless chosen to tell him what he had told him, which was a specific form of trust that functioned differently from loyalty but was not nothing.

He thought about Holden. About the five names in the Chain record and the question of whether the record corresponded to the underlying fact.

He thought about what system he was in.

The Aquila star was steady outside. Everything else was moving.

He went to bed.

He lay there for a while before sleeping, in the specific dark of a room whose viewport was oriented away from the system's primary light. The City's hum was in the walls, the specific register of a thing that has been moving for three hundred years and will continue moving. He was inside it. He was part of what it was carrying.

The ceiling above was the City's standard, the material of every ceiling in every corridor, the same material he'd been looking at for six weeks and would be looking at for months more.

He found that this was not, at this moment, an uncomfortable thing to know.

He closed his eyes.

FOURTEEN

IMPERIAL CITY — AQUILA SYSTEM

SHE FOUND him in the corridor off the East block's secondary wing, which was a corridor he had taken to walking at the end of the block's formal evening because it was less trafficked than the main residential artery and the lights here ran at a slightly lower setting, the blue-white dialed back to something that was almost warm.

He noticed her before she spoke. This was partly because the corridor was quiet enough that her footfall was audible, and partly because his attention had become, over six weeks, more finely calibrated to the quality of presence in a room than it had been in Bauxitum. He heard her walking and knew it wasn't Lysandir — Lysandir's footfall had a specific deliberateness that this one didn't — and he turned before she reached the position from which she would have introduced herself.

She was dressed in the City's civilian register rather than the administrative uniform she'd worn as Ana Tollivar at the Wayfinder tour. The difference was subtle — the same bone structure, the same platinum hair, the same blue depth in the eyes — but the register

change was a register change, and he noted it the way he noted most things: without performing the noting.

"You're not Ana Tollivar," he said.

She looked at him for a moment. "Did Lysandir tell you."

"No," he said. "The bone structure is the same as Imperium's. The hair is worn differently and the Chadrac mark at your neck is covered by a high collar when you're in the Ana persona, but the collar is open now." He paused. "You're the heir."

She was quiet for a moment, in the way of someone making a decision about how to proceed when the plan has been displaced by an unexpected development. Then she said: "Yes."

"Kimme Chadrac," he said.

"Yes." Another pause. "You're not supposed to say that aloud until the formal introduction."

"We're alone in a secondary corridor," he said.

She looked at the corridor, which confirmed this. "True." She looked back at him. "I wanted to show you something. I was going to do it as Ana, but since you've already identified me—" she appeared to weigh something — "I suppose the pretense is less useful."

"What did you want to show me," he said.

"The Wayfinder facility," she said. "Not the tour version. The working version."

He thought about this for a moment. He thought about Lysandir's briefings on the City's surveillance, on the quality of observation that followed every Heir-Second, on the specific instruction to be seen and not remarkable. He thought about the star chart display at the first tour and the way she had made it dark when he pointed at the anomalous systems, and the way she had said *those are not shown for a reason* in a voice that was performing levelness rather than being level.

"All right," he said.

She moved through the City's checkpoint system the way someone moves through their own house's rooms — not dismissively, but without the managed quality that characterized most people's navigation of the City's security architecture. Her ident at each panel produced the confirming blue, and the guards, where they were present, registered her identity and returned to their positions with the specific indifference of people for whom this passage was ordinary.

Kaiden followed, conscious of the surveillance but following.

The Wayfinder facility's working section was distinct from the touring section in the way that a kitchen is distinct from a dining room: the same building, different relationship to the work it contained. The touring level had been organized for visibility — the concentric desks, the dais with its six working Wayfinders, the crystal racks of pattern plates visible through glass at intervals. The working level was organized for function, which meant the organization was less immediately legible and the spaces were sized for the work rather than for any observer of the work.

Kimme led him to a room he hadn't been in on the tour — smaller, with two of the pilot-style chairs and a single large display surface that curved from the wall at a position that put it at direct eye level when seated. She sat in one of the chairs and he sat in the other, and she brought the display to life with the ease of someone who had operated it many times.

It was the star chart. Not the limited version from the tour — the full working chart, the one the Wayfinders used rather than the one visitors were shown. At this resolution and this level of detail, the known systems resolved from points to nodes, each one surrounded by its data cloud: transit routes, production output, House assignments, population metrics, Fold pattern status. The chart was alive in the way that working instruments are alive — constantly updating, the data flowing through it as the City's intelligence network received and processed its continuous stream of information.

"The pattern plates," she said. "Show me what you see."

He looked at the display. He oriented quickly — finding the Lyra system where they'd been, the Aquila system where they were, the Indus system where they were headed. He traced the City's route in the Cycle. He found Cendant, marked with the Kentur sigil, the Leaf production numbers visible as a sidebar when he hovered his attention over it. The numbers matched what Alise had sent him last week, which was reassuring in the way that accurate data is reassuring.

He looked at the chart for what the chart showed, and then he looked at it for what the chart wasn't showing, which was a different kind of looking.

The edge of the chart. The same region he'd noticed on the tour, before she'd made it dark. At this resolution and zoom level, the anomalous designations were more visible — not more numerous, the same cluster he'd seen before, but with the additional detail that the full working chart provided. Active designations. Traffic patterns. Not many, but consistent, the kind of consistency that belongs to regular operation rather than occasional transit.

He pointed.

"Those systems," he said.

She looked where he was pointing.

She did not immediately reach for the display controls. This was different from the tour — at the tour she had made the display dark with the smooth motion of a trained response. This time her hand moved toward the controls and then did not reach them, and she looked at the cluster of anomalous systems for a moment that was two beats longer than the tour had allowed.

He watched the two beats.

He watched her face during them. She was processing something, and the processing had a quality he recognized — not the processing of someone determining what to say, but the processing of someone uncertain whether to say it at all. The two beats were genuine uncertainty, and genuine uncertainty was distinct from

performed uncertainty, and he had been in this City long enough to know the difference.

Then she reached for the controls.

The display went dark.

Not as quickly as the tour. The darkness arrived a beat later than it would have if the response had been automatic, which meant the beat was the decision and the darkness was what the decision produced.

He sat in the chair in the sudden relative dimness, looking at where the chart had been.

"I know," he said.

She looked at him.

"I saw them at the tour," he said. "That's why you made it dark then too. You knew I'd noticed."

She was quiet for a moment. "Yes."

"What are they."

She looked at the blank display surface. "Systems outside the official network," she said. "Outside the Imperium's formal structure. They have their own governance, their own trade connections. They're not secret — the Dominions Major know they exist. They're just not discussed."

"The UnImperium," he said.

Her head turned slightly. "You've heard of it."

"Recently," he said. "In various forms." He paused. "Those active designations are their traffic."

"Some of it," she said.

He thought about this. He thought about the card game table and Nix's quality of silence on the subject, and Rhian's observation about junction systems operating without City-generated patterns. He thought about what Lysandir had said about staying neutral. He thought about the specific quality of Kimme's two-beat pause before she'd made the display dark.

"You hesitated," he said.

She looked at him again.

"Before you turned it off," he said. "You were deciding whether to."

The room was quiet. The Wayfinder facility's ambient sound was present — the data processing, the continuous low hum of systems doing their work — but in this room at this hour it was reduced enough that the silence between them had texture.

"Yes," she said.

"Why."

She looked at the display for a moment. Then back at him. "Because I'm supposed to shut it down when someone notices. That's the protocol. The protocol exists because the Heirs-Second aren't supposed to know about the UnImperium systems — officially, it's above their clearance level, and most of them don't have the pattern recognition to notice the designations anyway." She paused. "You noticed. The protocol says I shut it down."

"But you hesitated," he said.

"Yes," she said.

He waited.

She looked at the display, then at her hands, then at the display again. There was something working in her face that was not the ordinary working of her face in its public mode — not the composed, precise Kimme Chadrac of the first tour, not the Ana Tollivar performance, but something that was simply present without the overlay of either.

"The protocol is clear," she said. "It exists for reasons that are sensible. The UnImperium systems are politically sensitive, and the Heirs-Second are not in a position to have that information without context, and the context would require conversations that shouldn't happen in a room that isn't swept." She looked at him. "All of that is true."

"And," he said.

"And it's also true that shutting down a display every time someone notices something is a form of lying that works by using the truth," she said. "The display goes dark. The systems are still there.

The traffic is still moving. Nothing changes about the fact. Only whether you can see it."

He sat with this.

"And you hesitated," he said, "because you weren't sure which was the right call."

"I made the right call," she said. "By the protocol. I turned it off."

"I know," he said. "I'm not disputing that."

She looked at him with the look of someone who is trying to determine whether what they're hearing is what they think they're hearing. The look had a quality of attention in it that was different from the calibrating attention she'd brought to the tour — less diagnostic, more present.

"You should probably report that I noticed," he said. "That's also the protocol, isn't it."

"Yes," she said.

"Are you going to."

The room held the question.

She looked at the display, which was still dark. She looked at it for long enough that the silence acquired its own shape.

"I'm supposed to report what you noticed," she said.

Not *I will.* Not *of course.* The sentence she chose had the specific structure of a statement of fact that was separated from a statement of intention by the width of the phrasing, and both of them knew the difference.

He waited.

She stood from the chair. She looked at the display one more time. Then she looked at him.

"Get some sleep," she said.

She left.

The door closed behind her with the City's characteristic seal — the gentle finality of things that close when they're told to. He sat in the working chair in the Wayfinder facility's quiet room, in front of the darkened display, and thought about two beats of genuine hesitation and a sentence that had stopped itself before the end.

He thought about what she had decided, and what it had cost her to decide it, and whether she understood yet what the decision meant about her.

He didn't think she did. Not entirely. The decision had happened at a level below the level of articulation, the level where things are done before the mind has found the words for why. She had done it and she had said *get some sleep* and she had left, and whatever it had been was present in the room in the form of the absence that followed it.

He sat there for a while.

Then he got up. He walked back through the facility's checkpoints, through the corridor she had met him in, through the East block's secondary wing to his suite. The City's hum was in the walls. The Aquila system was outside, on the far side of the City's hull, doing what systems did.

In his suite he sat at the desk and did not do the accounting he usually did at the end of an evening. He was not sure, yet, what category to put tonight in.

He thought about the chart and the two beats and the sentence that had stopped before the end.

He thought about Janna Chadrac reviewing a file with the quality of attention she reserved for things that didn't quite fit, and about what she might make of her daughter not reporting what her daughter was supposed to report.

He thought: *she didn't report it because something about it felt wrong to her, and she didn't fully understand why.*

He thought: *I know the feeling.*

He was nineteen. He had been on Imperial City for six weeks. He had grown up in a station in a minor system and had been trained for a role that was no longer the role he was in. He did not know where the next six weeks would take him, or the six after that, or what he was being shaped into by the City's shaping. He knew that the shape was not yet visible and that the visibility would come with time and that the time would bring its own accounting.

He thought about Kimme Chadrac, twenty-one years old, who had hesitated two beats and made the correct decision by protocol and then said *get some sleep* and left without making the report she was supposed to make.

He thought: *she's going to have to figure out what that means*.

He thought: *so am I*.

He turned off the desk light.

He went to bed.

The City moved through the Aquila system on its calculated arc, and outside the suite's viewport the Aquila star held its position relative to the City's rotation, and the traffic that moved through the system moved in its orderly patterns, and somewhere at the edge of the chart that he now could not access, the unmarked systems continued their active designations, their traffic continuing its continuous flow through the space that the official map did not show.

The dark was ordinary.

FIFTEEN

IMPERIAL CITY — AQUILA SYSTEM

KIMME'S REPORT took four minutes.

This was unusual. Most reports of equivalent scope took seven or eight, the additional minutes occupied by the reporter's management of their own uncertainty — the qualifications, the hedges, the careful calibration of what was being offered against what might be asked. Kimme had not learned to hedge. She had learned to distinguish between what she knew and what she was inferring, and to say which was which, and to let the inference be evaluated without building scaffolding around it that made the inference look sturdier than it was.

Janna listened. She listened the way she listened to all reports — fully, without visible reaction, the information being received and filed in the order it arrived without any external indication of how it was being sorted. This was not performance. It was the actual mechanism of how she processed information, developed over twenty-three years of receiving information that required accurate sorting before anything else.

"He noticed the unmarked systems," Kimme said. "Inside thirty seconds of the display being live. He pointed at them directly." She paused, the brief pause of someone distinguishing between what happened next and what happened after that. "I shut down the display."

"How quickly," Janna said.

"Slower than the protocol," Kimme said.

Janna looked at her. "How much slower."

"Two beats." Kimme said it with the quality of someone reporting a deviation rather than justifying one. "I hesitated. I was determining whether the protocol was the correct response."

"And."

"I determined it was. I shut down the display." She paused. "I didn't file the incident report."

Janna was quiet for a moment.

She was not quiet because she was surprised. She was quiet because the absence of the incident report was a piece of information that required its own sorting, and the sorting was not instantaneous. She knew why Kimme had not filed it — or rather, she knew enough about her daughter's decision-making under uncertainty to construct the likely reasoning. She wanted to know if Kimme would tell her.

"Why," she said.

Kimme looked at her. The look had something in it that Janna was beginning to identify as a regular feature of recent conversations with Kimme — a quality of evaluation, the look of someone assessing how much of their actual reasoning will be received accurately and how much will require translation. This was a new quality. Kimme had always been assessable, had always calibrated her communications with precision. The new element was the assessment of Janna herself, the checking of the reception before the transmission.

"Because filing it felt like a form of lying," Kimme said. "The incident would be logged. His personnel record would receive a notation about a security-adjacent observation. The notation would be visible to anyone who reviewed his file, and the review would include

people who might interpret the notation in ways that were not accurate to the actual event."

"The Elevatio," Janna said.

"Among others." Kimme looked at the desk between them. "He noticed something that's on the chart because it's real. The unmarked systems exist. The traffic is real. The fact that we don't name it officially doesn't change what it is. Filing an incident report for observing a real thing through an instrument designed to display real things seemed—" she paused. "Disproportionate."

Janna said: "The protocol exists for reasons."

"I know," Kimme said. "I followed the protocol. I shut down the display." A pause. "I didn't file the report."

The two things together. The distinction was exact and Kimme knew it was exact and had chosen to present it exactly. Janna noted this.

"What else," she said.

"He identified me," Kimme said. "The Ana Tollivar persona. Before we'd been in the same space for thirty seconds." She described the identification: the bone structure, the covered mark, the register comparison. "He told me he'd noticed. He didn't perform surprise at the identification. He just stated it and waited to see how I would respond."

"How did you respond."

"I confirmed it. The pretense seemed less useful at that point." She looked at Janna steadily. "He was correct. Maintaining the persona after he'd named the misalignment would have required me to deny an accurate observation, which would have been—"

"Lying," Janna said.

"Yes."

"The protocol allows for the maintenance of cover identities through denial of accurate observations," Janna said.

"I know," Kimme said. "I decided it wasn't the right call."

Janna looked at her daughter. At the twenty-one-year-old face that was her own face in the mirror of a different generation, the

same bone structure, the same platinum, the same depth in the eyes — and underneath the same structure, something that was operating on its own terms, making decisions that were technically within protocol and actually outside of it in ways that protocol hadn't anticipated.

She said: "Continue developing the relationship."

Kimme said: "I will."

"Be careful," Janna said. "Lysandir is watching him. Anything that looks like genuine connection rather than assignment will be noted and reported to the Elevatio's internal network. They'll interpret it as an indication of progress toward their goal."

"I understand."

"You may not be able to distinguish between the two," Janna said. "The genuine connection and the assignment. That's not a criticism. It's a structural fact of the situation."

Kimme looked at her. "I'll manage it."

"Good," Janna said. She said it with the specific quality she used when she was closing a subject rather than dismissing it — signaling that the subject was complete rather than that she was through with it. Kimme recognized this. She gathered herself to rise.

"One more thing," Janna said.

Kimme settled back.

"His response to you," Janna said. "Not the identification — the broader interaction. How did he handle the Wayfinder display, after you shut it down."

Kimme thought about this. "He didn't challenge the shutdown," she said. "He didn't press for information. He sat with what was there. He said he knew he'd noticed the systems before — from the first tour. He told me that as if it was information he'd decided to share rather than something he was trying to leverage."

"Was it leverage."

"I don't know," Kimme said. "It didn't feel like leverage. It felt like — a statement of what he actually knew. In case it was useful to me."

A pause. "He doesn't operate the way most people here operate. He says what he means and then stops."

Janna was quiet.

"He asked me directly," Kimme said. "Whether I was going to report what he'd noticed. I told him I was supposed to."

"And."

"And I didn't."

"He knew you weren't going to file it," Janna said.

Kimme said: "Yes. Before I said anything else." She paused. "He's very good at reading what's actually happening versus what's being performed."

"Yes," Janna said.

She said nothing else. Kimme rose, and this time Janna let her go.

Alone, Janna looked at the Kentur file she'd already committed to memory, which she was looking at now not for the information it contained but for the information it didn't contain, the shape of which had become clearer.

The Elevatio had run a breeding program. She had known this in the general sense for years — the Elevatio ran what it ran, and the City's intelligence on the specifics was always incomplete because the Elevatio had its own information security. What she had not known, until recently, was the specific focus: not a diffuse genetic interest in the broader Houses, but a targeted, generational investment in a specific line.

She looked at the dates. Aurelo posted to House Kentur twenty years ago. Kaiden Kentur born nineteen years ago. The posting had preceded the child by approximately a year, which meant the Elevatio had decided to embed a long-term monitor before the child whose development they were going to monitor had completed gestation.

Which meant they had known, from the genetic assessment of the prior generation, what the next generation would likely carry.

Which meant they had a Lesser Assayor capable of reading the relevant markers.

Which meant they had been refining their target with enough precision to predict the outcome a generation in advance.

She pulled the parallel file — the Elevatio's formal activities in the Bauxitum system over the past twenty years, reconstructed from the City's intelligence through indirect means, the formal records being the Elevatio's property and not fully accessible. The file was thin. The Elevatio had been careful. What remained was the shape of an absence: no unusual resource requests, no irregular Communion registrations, no communication anomalies on the monitored channels. A House and a priest in a perfectly ordinary pastoral relationship for twenty years.

Perfectly ordinary for twenty years was the thing that wasn't ordinary.

She put the files aside and looked at the window, at the Aquila system's star in its steady position relative to the City's current rotation. She was thinking about timing. The Elevatio had wanted a friendly House with City access at precisely the moment when the Elevatio's own City access was most constrained — the rotation of their political relationships with the Guild heads had shifted, the new Cardinal's tenure was still establishing itself, and the traditional channels through which the Elevatio gathered intelligence on the City's internal dynamics were running at reduced capacity.

And then, as if arranged: a House Ascendant elevated to Dominion Major. A second child sent to the Heir-Second block. The same second child who happened to carry whatever the Elevatio's breeding program had been selecting for.

Either the Elevatio had arranged the elevation — which would require resources and influence within the City's decision-making apparatus that she was not aware they had — or the Elevatio had identified the elevation's probability in advance and had positioned

their candidate to be there when it happened. The second option required the same intelligence and planning as the first but was more compatible with what she knew about the Elevatio's actual capabilities.

She thought about whether she had been manipulated into the elevation itself.

She thought about this for approximately four minutes, which was long enough to run the scenario forward and backward and identify its structural limits. The conclusion she reached was: possibly. The Leaf shortfall and the Holden dissolution had been the proximate cause of the elevation, and both of those could have been managed, and managing both of them in the sequence that produced the Kentur elevation would have required access to Holden's internal operations and to the Leaf production data at the system level, which the Elevatio's long-term priest in the adjacent system could theoretically have provided.

She did not know if this had happened. The evidence was circumstantial and the inference was structurally possible but not structurally necessary. Other explanations existed. The Holden dissolution and the Kentur elevation could have been genuine coincidence that the Elevatio had recognized and moved on rapidly.

She added this question to the file of things that required more information before resolution.

What was not in the question category: the Greater Assayors.

She could not run a genetic scan on Kaiden Kentur through any channel available to her on the City without creating a diplomatic record that would be visible to the Chain, which would be visible to anyone who could access Chain records at the appropriate level, which included the Elevatio. A scan requested through the standard medical channels would be logged. A scan requested through the

security apparatus would require a formal security justification, which would itself create a record.

But the Greater Assayors at Shexim were under her direct control. The Shexosant administered the facility. The testing protocols that ran through the Shexim facility were conducted under Shexosant security classification, which meant they were not accessible to the Elevatio's intelligence network through the standard channels. A routine health assessment of all Heir-Seconds, conducted at a standard stop in the Cycle — the City was scheduled to pass through the Shexim system in approximately four months — would be unexceptional in its framing and very specific in its content.

She composed the preliminary message to the Shexim facility in her head, the kind of composing that produced a finished message before the fingers touched the keypad. The message would go through the Shexosant's secure channel, routed through D'Hana's office rather than the City's administrative system. It would request that the Greater Assayors be made available for a scheduled health review of the Heir-Second cohort. It would specify the relevant genetic markers — the ones the Elevatio's breeding program would have been selecting for, which she knew because she had been monitoring the Elevatio's research interests for twenty years and had constructed a reasonable model of their target profile.

She would know, within four months, what Kaiden Kentur was.

She would know before the Elevatio had the opportunity to act on whatever he was.

She did not tell Kimme any of this. Kimme's assignment was the relationship, not the analysis. The analysis was Janna's. The relationship was the instrument through which the analysis would eventually be completed, but Kimme did not need to know she was the instrument. Knowing you are the instrument changes the way you hold the instrument, and the change was rarely an improvement.

She thought about Kimme's two-beat hesitation at the display controls.

She had done this before, in the twenty-one years of watching her daughter develop — she would observe a behavior, set it aside during the observation's immediate aftermath, and return to it later with the distance that allowed for more accurate interpretation. The two-beat hesitation was not the first behavior of this kind she'd observed in Kimme in the past several weeks. There had been others, smaller, less visible. A quality of attention that wasn't fully present during formal sessions. A slight additional processing time before certain responses.

The catalyst was visible: Kaiden Kentur. Who had been, Kimme said, different from most people in the block. Who said what he meant and then stopped. Who noticed things and didn't leverage them.

Janna thought about what it would mean to be the person who grew up as Kimme had grown up, in the environment Kimme had grown up in, and then to encounter someone who said what they meant and stopped. The shock of it. Not as a dramatic shock — as the quiet shock of an assumption being challenged by an experience that fit nowhere in the existing framework.

She thought about whether this was useful or a complication.

She decided: both. The question was sequencing. If Kimme's developing moral instincts emerged at the wrong moment, they were a complication. If they emerged in response to the right kind of information at the right time, they were something more interesting.

She did not try to plan the moment. Planning the emergence of a person's moral instincts was not a thing that planning could accomplish. What planning could accomplish was the removal of obstacles and the provision of appropriate information at appropriate times, and the rest would follow whatever it was going to follow.

She began composing the message to Shexim. Three sentences to D'Hana. Brief, specific, innocuous in its framing. The kind of

message that looked, in any surveillance record, like routine administrative coordination.

She sent it.

The star chart on her desk screen showed the City's current position in the Aquila system and its projected arc toward the Indus system and the systems beyond. Four months to Shexim at the current schedule, assuming no disruptions to the Cycle. Four months was sufficient. Four months was what she had.

She looked at the projected route and thought about what she would know in four months that she didn't know now, and what she would do with what she knew.

The answer to the second question depended entirely on the answer to the first.

She was, on balance, satisfied with uncertainty as a working condition. It kept the mind active. Certainty was for the thing after the analysis, not the analysis itself.

She returned the files to their positions. She turned off the desk screen. The room held its particular quiet — the quality of a space that had been occupied by two people and was now occupied by one, the readjustment that always followed.

She stood, crossed to the window, and looked at the Aquila system's star.

It looked back with the indifference of a thing that had been there for five billion years and would be there for five billion more regardless of what she decided tonight.

She appreciated this about stars.

She turned from the window and went to her next appointment.

SIXTEEN

IMPERIAL CITY — INDUS SYSTEM

THE SHUTTLE BROKE through the last of the cloud layer and the planet spread out below them.

At first it looked featureless — the same flat pale color across the entire visible surface, the kind of landscape that registers as nothing rather than something. Then the eye adjusted and found the pattern: the straight lines of the windbreaks, running north-south at regular intervals, the low sweep of the grain mat between them, each field a slightly different shade from its neighbors in the way of things that are engineered to the same specification but are not the same age. The windbreaks were trees, but the trees were not trees in the ordinary sense — they were the Valerius proprietary strain, spliced and pressurized to produce the specific canopy geometry that disrupted the prevailing winds at the scale the fields required. They were not beautiful. They were precise.

In the middle distance, where several windbreak lines converged, the star-shaped structure of the primary processing complex rose above the grain mat on its low hill, its geometry as deliberate as every-

thing else — the star form chosen for reasons of drainage and sight line and blast radius that Kaiden had read about in the briefing and understood mathematically without quite understanding why mathematics had been required to choose a shape for a building.

Robere, beside him, was looking at the surface the way Robere looked at things when he found them genuinely satisfying. "Forty-seven percent of the Imperium's cryo-macerated grain output," he said, to no one specifically.

"From one planet," Kaiden said.

"From one family's management of one planet," Robere said. "Across fifteen generations." He paused. "That's the relevant unit."

The shuttle descended into the pale mineral-dust layer that sat in the lower atmosphere — the agricultural zone's natural pest barrier, which was also toxic to human lungs without filtration, which was why the processing complex and the settlement around it had the specific sealed quality that was visible even from this altitude. The air filtration systems were the architectural signature of Indus I: every structure had them, the intake vents and exhaust ports visible at regular intervals, the buildings' silhouettes partially defined by the equipment required to make them habitable.

Their group was six. Kaiden, Robere, Olan, Selene Stevkir, and two of the junior Heirs-Second who had been on the block for longer than Kaiden and who had settled into the kind of watchful quiet that characterized people who had stopped trying to prove anything in the social hierarchy and were simply observing. Their escort was Edran Valerius, a cousin of Robere's several removes away, whose role was tour guide and whose manner was instructional in the specific sense of someone who has given the same tour many times and finds it neither tedious nor exciting, simply complete.

They landed on the processing complex's arrival pad, which was built at a slight elevation to keep it clear of the dust layer, and were met by Edran and by a figure Kaiden recognized from the briefing: Selene Valerius, the Matriarch herself, who had apparently decided to receive this particular cohort personally.

She was small. This was the first thing, the way the first thing about a person often contradicts the image assembled in advance. The briefing had communicated authority and had not communicated scale, and the Matriarch of House Valerius was a small woman with mineral-white face powder in the House's ceremonial tradition, and gold tips at the ends of her fingers that were not jewelry but a material applied to the fingertips as part of the same tradition, and eyes that were two points of unsentimental intelligence arranged in a face that was watching everything without appearing to watch anything.

"House Kentur," she said, to Kaiden specifically, which was a choice — the greeting addressed to the newcomer rather than to Robere, who was family, or to Olan, who had been here before.

"Matriarch," he said.

She looked at him for a moment with the look of someone completing a reading. Then she turned to the group. "Come," she said. "We have three hours. I want you to understand what this is before you leave."

The tour was organized the way everything here was organized: for function. Not for impression — or not primarily for impression, though the impressions it produced were evidently considered, since the route moved through the complex in an order that showed the specific things the House wanted shown at the specific moments when context had been built to receive them. Edran led, speaking in the even informational cadence of a person who knows his material completely and has reduced it to the essential. Selene walked at the back of the group, which was another choice — not leading, not deferring, watching.

The gene-editing labs first. The room was arrayed with the equipment of careful, long-term agricultural development — not the Greater Assayors, which were restricted, but the Lesser analysis

systems and the cultivation chambers where the Valerius proprietary strains were developed and refined cycle over cycle. Edran explained the program's timeline: fifteen generations of selecting for specific yield characteristics, specific storage stability profiles, specific resistance to the atmospheric conditions of Indus I. The result was grain that fed significant portions of the Imperium and would continue to do so for as long as the House maintained the intellectual property and the cultivation protocols.

"Forty-seven percent," Robere said again, quietly, not to anyone. He said it the way a person recites a number that they find satisfying as a number, not as a concept.

The cryo-maceration silos next, visible through the complex's main corridor windows as a row of structures rising from the plain, their upper domes half-glazed in blue that caught the pale Indus sun and reflected it diffused. The maceration process extended the grain's viable shelf life to decades, which was what made interstellar export practical — grain that survives the transit time and the storage conditions and arrives at its destination still edible was not grain that had simply been grown well, it was grain that had been processed with a specificity that the House had spent fifteen generations perfecting.

Kaiden looked at the silos. He thought about the growbitat array above Bauxitum, his mother's cylinders turning in the system's light, each one a sealed biome doing its contained work. He thought about the scale difference — the Valerius system fed the Imperium at a level that his family's nine cylinders didn't approach, and wouldn't approach for years, and the comparison was accurate without being discouraging, which was the kind of comparison that he was learning to make in the City's context. Not every comparison required a conclusion about relative worth.

They came to the outdoor section of the tour, where a walkway ran along the edge of the complex's highest level and provided a sight line across the grain mat to the horizon. The mineral-dust haze was present but thin at this height, the light slightly unreal because of it,

the fields below seeming to exist at a slight remove from ordinary atmosphere.

Selene Valerius appeared beside him.

He had not heard her approach — she moved with the economy of someone who has been occupying the same space for decades and has learned its specifics completely. She stood at the walkway's rail and looked at the fields below, and he stood beside her and looked at them too, and neither of them said anything for a moment.

"This is what it takes," she said. "Not intelligence. Not ambition. Attention across generations."

"Yes," he said.

"Your House's growbitat technology," she said. It was not a question.

"It's different," he said. "Different scale, different purpose. We're building food independence for the Bauxitum system, not export capacity."

"For now," she said.

He looked at her. "For now," he agreed.

She looked at the fields. "The question your family needs to answer, eventually, is what you're willing not to do in order to do what you do. Every House that lasts answers this question. Houses that don't last are usually houses that tried to do everything."

"Valerius doesn't try to do everything," he said.

"We don't try to do anything except this," she said. "Which is a different answer to the same question." She paused. "What is House Kentur willing not to do."

He thought about it. He thought about the Fascinations, which were the concession to luxury that the House had decided was acceptable alongside the food production and the Leaf. He thought about the elevation and what the elevation required — the Cendant governance, the Leaf production, the management of the Lisser workers, the military exposure of a system that was now theirs to protect. He thought about what all of it together meant for the question she was asking.

"We're still finding out," he said.

She looked at him for a moment. "That's the honest answer," she said. "It's also the dangerous one. Houses that are still finding out what they're willing not to do are houses that haven't finished making their enemies."

She moved away, back toward the interior, with the efficiency of someone who has said what she had to say and does not require a response to it.

He stayed at the rail for a moment longer.

Then she turned back.

"Are you here to disrupt," she said.

The question was direct in a way that the rest of the tour had not been direct — the directness of someone who has decided the interval of context-building is complete and what remains is the actual question.

He looked at her.

"Only if the disruption is more efficient," he said.

She looked at him for a long moment, the unsentimental intelligence in her eyes doing whatever it did when it was completing a reading. Then she nodded, once, and went inside.

The shuttle back was quieter than the shuttle down. The tour's effect on the group was the effect of density — too much information, absorbed at too high a concentration, required time to settle before it could be discussed. Olan was looking at the Indus I surface as it fell away below them, his usual social fluency temporarily offline. Robere was writing on his slate with the focused efficiency of someone who has been waiting for an uninterrupted window. Selene Stevkir was speaking quietly with one of the junior Heirs-Second.

Lysandir took the seat beside Kaiden as the shuttle leveled off.

This was not where Lysandir usually sat on group transits. He usually positioned himself at the back, in the specific posture of

someone who is present without being participatory. The forward movement was a decision, and the decision was visible as a decision even if its content was not.

The shuttle's engines provided a low continuous sound that was, Kaiden had learned, the closest available approximation of a private conversation in a group transit. Not private — the City's surveillance capabilities were not defeated by engine noise — but private in the social register, the noise providing the cover that allowed for a conversation without requiring the pretense of no conversation. Everyone in the shuttle could see Lysandir speaking to him. The engine sound meant no one else would hear specifically what was being said.

Lysandir looked at the seat back in front of him. Not at Kaiden.

"The Elevatio," he said. His voice was at the engine noise's register — audible to Kaiden, below the threshold of the row ahead.

Kaiden said nothing, waiting.

"They believe your House has something in its genetics," Lysandir said. "They have believed this for at least three generations." He paused, the pause of someone deciding how much of the complete version to offer. "I do not know what they believe they found." Another pause. "That is the honest statement. I have access to the Elevatio's institutional communications at a level that lets me know they have a target and that the target is your line. I do not have access to the specific assessment that produced the belief."

Kaiden looked at the seat back in front of him.

"What I know," Lysandir said, "is that the belief is old enough and specific enough to have produced a twenty-year posting. And that the Elevatio does not make twenty-year investments without being confident of the return." He paused. "They are confident. Which means whatever they found in your line, they found it clearly enough to act on it at this scale."

Kaiden said: "What are they expecting me to do."

"I don't know the specific expectation," Lysandir said. "The Congregatio Secretorum's communications about your line are more

restricted than the Elevatio's general operations. Aurelo was the field contact. What he reported to the Elevatio directly, I cannot access." A pause. "What I can tell you is that whatever they're expecting, they expect it to become visible at some point during your term here. They have people watching for it. Beyond Eidan and myself."

Kaiden thought about Derry at the reception, the warmth of *your House has always had good blood*, the specific quality of *we noticed it long before you did*. He thought about the Elevatio's presence in the formal sessions, the Cardinal in his position where the formal position was, and the additional attention that was not the formal attention.

"They're watching for ability expression," Kaiden said.

"Yes," Lysandir said.

"Have they seen anything."

Lysandir was quiet for a moment. "Not that they've logged in the channels I can access," he said. "Which is not the same as nothing." He paused. "Be careful about the Commune sessions. The pressure behind your eye — don't let it show on your face."

Kaiden looked at him.

"I've been watching you," Lysandir said. "The morning sessions, the corridor transit, the Wayfinder tour. There are moments." He looked at the seat back in front of him. "You're good at not showing it. Be better."

The shuttle banked, beginning its approach to the City's docking ring. Below, Indus I's grain mat was still visible through the viewport's edge — the fields, the silos, the windbreaks in their precise north-south lines, the fifteen generations of attention rendered in agricultural geometry.

The engine noise continued. The conversation was complete.

Kaiden sat with what he'd been given and sorted it. The Elevatio had a target in his line. They were confident enough in it to have invested twenty years. They were watching for ability expression. Lysandir had been watching him too, and had seen moments — had seen the pressure that he had been working to keep off his face, and

found it, and was telling him it needed to be better hidden rather than that it needed to stop.

Which meant Lysandir knew. Had known for some time. And had chosen to say so in the engine noise of a shuttle returning from the Indus system, rather than in the swept room where their private conversations usually happened.

The reason for the shuttle rather than the swept room was itself information. A swept room created a record of the conversation in the absence of recorded content — two people in a swept room, the sweep itself visible in the surveillance logs. The shuttle engine noise produced no such record. This was said here because here it was safer than there.

Which meant the content was more sensitive than what they usually discussed in the swept room.

He thought about this. He thought about what it meant that Lysandir had seen the pressure and was telling him to hide it better rather than telling him to stop. Stop was not the instruction. Better was the instruction. Which meant Lysandir's interest was not in preventing the ability from developing but in preventing the development from being visible to the people who were also watching.

He filed this.

Then, barely audible under the engine noise, in the register that was not quite a sound and not quite a thought and was both simultaneously — the voice that he had not heard in some time in its full quality, not the directional urgency of the corridor or the assessment of the gaming room but something different:

He's close, Maren said. *But he doesn't know what he's close to.*

Something in the tone had changed. He had heard Maren as direction, as assessment, as the dry satisfaction of accuracy delivered without elaboration. This had something underneath those qualities — a tone he didn't have a word for that was adjacent to grief and adjacent to pride and was neither, existing in the space between the two where things live that are too complicated for either category alone.

He did not respond to the voice. He did not look at Lysandir, who was looking at the seat back in front of him with the expression of a man who has said what he intended to say and is now occupying the time until it is appropriate to stop occupying the same seat.

The City filled the forward viewport. The docking ring. The approach corridor.

He watched it arrive.

SEVENTEEN

IMPERIAL CITY — PICTOR SYSTEM

THE GALLERY WAS ALREADY OCCUPIED when Kaiden arrived.

This was becoming the pattern: Petr always there first, in position with his data feed running before anyone else came through the door, information arriving to him in the continuous trickle of someone who had decided early that waiting for events was less efficient than receiving them as they developed. Olan across from him, boots not quite up, the posture of someone who had decided that performing relaxation was more interesting than performing attention. Robere to the right, slate in hand, stylus moving in the careful script that the Valerius education insisted on.

Kaiden took the edge seat. The gallery's transparency was one-way — they could see the Throne Room below, the floor preparation, the Guild delegates clustering, the functionaries in their various postures of readiness. The floor below could not see them. This was the gallery's fundamental social design: the instruction to observe without being observed, to understand what the Court does without

being in the Court's direct line of awareness. The instruction was accurate to its purpose and slightly uncomfortable in its implications.

The Throne Room below had the Throne Room's characteristic quality, which was the quality of a space that had been calibrated for a specific effect and was producing it in the absence of any specific event to produce it around. The scale. The blue-black marble and the lunar rock walls and the specific quality of light from above that found no shadow because there was nothing for it to be a shadow of. Two degrees colder than the surrounding corridors. The subharmonic of the City's systems present here as a low continual thing felt in the floor rather than heard.

He looked at where the Guild heads sat on their tiers. He looked at the Elevatio contingent: Cardinal Derry and two senior priests in the white and crimson formal, positioned at the second tier with the stillness the order maintained as a habitual posture. He looked at D'Hana in her functional chair at the dais's left side, the chair that was a chair rather than a ceremony, which communicated something different from the ceremonial chairs about its occupant's relationship to the proceedings. D'Hana was looking at something in her peripheral processing, the same internal calculation that she always seemed to be performing, her face arranged in the specific neutrality of someone who has made their assessments and is waiting for the information that will update them.

The Matriarch of House Ione entered and the room received her.

Kaiden had read the briefings. He knew the Chromatic Resin shortfall in its numerical dimensions: four cycles of delivery below the required margin, cumulative deficit exceeding fifteen percent of the contracted output, the production impact distributed across the Guild instrumentation supply chain and the signal relay infrastructure and the weapon sighting systems that the official documentation did not enumerate but that Lysandir had described on the

Pictor approach as the resin's actual strategic weight. He knew the Matriarch had come in person, which was significant in the way that a head of a Dominion Major House appearing personally before the Court was always significant — it said that whatever was being decided was being decided at the level that required the principal.

He knew all of this before the session began. What the session showed him was the knowing placed in the context of the form.

The Matriarch was small, as he had seen on Pictor V's approach. The face of someone who had managed a planetary economy for long enough that the management had become physiological — a watchfulness in the eyes that was not paranoia but its productive cousin, the attention of someone for whom information is survival at the most literal level. She moved to the center of the floor with the economy of someone who has appeared in this chamber before and has calibrated the appearance precisely, each element of it serving a function.

She bowed. She spoke.

The substance of what she said: the shortfall was real, the cause was sabotage, the sabotage had been confirmed by Telepathic Guild review, the blight had exceeded the projected parameters, the House would restore delivery within two cycles, the House's fifteen-generation record spoke for itself.

Kaiden listened to the content. He also listened to what the content was doing — not the argument it was making, which was clear, but the work it was performing in the room. The argument was addressed to Janna Chadrac. The work was addressed to everyone else who was watching — the Guild heads, the other House representatives in their formal seats, the Heirs-Second in the gallery above. The argument said: we are managing a problem. The work said: we know how to be in this room.

Janna received both. She said nothing for a moment after the Matriarch concluded.

Then the House Vamerius representative spoke, and the argument shifted its register — from defense to prosecution, from the

Matriarch's management of a specific crisis to the pattern of crises across several cycles, the data displayed on the gallery screens showing the spiking and recovering and spiking again, the cumulative picture of a system that was not failing catastrophically but was failing consistently. The Valerius representative spoke next, brief and pointed.

The Matriarch replied with the sabotage argument's second layer: the cause was external, and whoever took over the system would face the same external cause, and the solution was not reassignment but security.

Which was not wrong, Kaiden thought. The argument was correct as an argument. The thing it couldn't account for was that the Court's decision was not going to be made on the quality of the argument.

He watched Janna during the Matriarch's second statement. Janna was looking at the floor in the way she looked at floors during testimonies — receiving the information, processing it, doing something with it that was not yet visible in her expression. She was not persuaded and she was not unpersuaded; she was categorizing. The Matriarch's testimony went into a category and the category had been established before the testimony began.

The Matriarch was not lying. Kaiden was certain of this. The specificity of the blight description, the quality of the production remediation data, the particular way she stated the sabotage claim — not with the aggressive certainty of someone manufacturing an excuse but with the flat statement of someone reporting a fact they have already spent considerable effort documenting. She was telling the truth. The truth was also not going to determine the outcome.

He filed this.

Then he looked at Derry.

He had been looking at Derry periodically throughout the session, in the way he looked at most things in the room — not constantly, not with the attention that would make the looking visible, but as one of the multiple tracking threads he maintained. Derry

was in his formal position. Derry was watching the proceedings with the stillness that was the Elevatio's institutional posture. All of this was ordinary.

What was not ordinary was the direction of the watching. During the Matriarch's first testimony, Derry had been looking at the Throne, which was where the formal attention was directed. During the House Vamerius statement, Derry had been looking at the data screens, which was where the relevant numbers were. But now, during Janna's most pointed exchange with the Matriarch — the moment of maximum tension, the moment that every other person in the room was tracking to the Throne — Derry was not watching the Throne.

He was watching D'Hana.

Not obviously. Not with the directed attention of someone who had decided to watch a specific thing. With the peripheral, habitual attention of someone who checked something regularly and was checking it now, the way you check a known variable at moments of uncertainty to see if it has changed.

D'Hana had not changed. She was performing her internal calculation with the same neutrality she always performed it with, her face giving nothing specific away. But Derry was watching her face, and the watching had a quality of waiting — waiting to see if the calculation resolved into something visible, a change in the posture, an adjustment of the assessment.

Kaiden looked at D'Hana, then back at Derry, then at D'Hana again.

He filed it. He did not know what it meant. He put it in the place where he put things that were connected to other things in configurations he couldn't yet complete.

The session concluded without a verdict. *The Court will deliberate.* The Matriarch withdrew. The room began its dispersal in the standard order — Guilds, then Houses, then the minor delegations, then the gallery. Kaiden filed out with the others, and Olan appeared beside him in the corridor with the specific quality of

Olan appearing beside someone, which was the quality of a person who has timed an approach and is allowing the timing to seem casual.

"She wasn't lying," Olan said.

"No," Kaiden agreed.

"Doesn't matter," Olan said.

"I know," Kaiden said.

They walked for a moment in the corridor's specific post-session atmosphere — the sound of dispersal, people moving toward the next thing, the formal mood cycling down to something more ambient. Olan glanced at him once, then looked ahead.

"Derry was watching D'Hana," Kaiden said.

Olan was quiet for a moment, which was unusual — Olan's silences were typically the silences of someone processing and about to speak, rather than the silences of surprise. This one had a different quality.

"When," Olan said.

"During the Matriarch's second statement. The argument about external sabotage and security."

Olan looked at the corridor ahead. "I didn't catch that."

"You weren't looking at Derry at that point."

"Neither should you have been," Olan said. Not a criticism — an observation. "What did you make of it."

"I don't know yet," Kaiden said. "He was checking something. Whatever he was checking was in D'Hana's face, not in the proceedings."

Olan said: "The Elevatio has always been interested in what the Shexosant's actual obligations are. The original founding agreement has never been made public. Nobody outside the Chadrac line and the Shexosant's own hierarchy knows what the contract actually says."

"And Derry thinks he can read something about the contract's status from D'Hana's face during Court sessions."

"Or he thinks moments of maximum institutional stress are the

moments when the gap between performed loyalty and actual loyalty shows most clearly," Olan said. "Which is also a reasonable theory."

They reached a junction in the corridor. Olan turned right, toward the common area. Kaiden turned left, toward the East block residential section.

"File it," Olan said, already moving away.

"Filed," Kaiden said.

He was almost at the East block's entrance when he heard his name.

Not a call — quieter than a call, closer to the sound of a word offered at the level of a private conversation in a space that had been empty a moment before. He turned.

Kimme was at the corridor's far end, moving toward him.

Not in the Ana Tollivar register — in the register she had used in the Wayfinder facility, the register that existed between the full performance of the Chadrac heir and something that was closer to ordinary. She was moving at a pace that was neither hurried nor casual, the pace of someone with a direction.

He waited.

She reached him and fell into step, and they walked together in the direction he'd been walking — toward the East block, toward the residential section, toward the quieter part of the City's fifth ring.

"The session," she said.

"Yes," he said.

"The Matriarch was telling the truth," she said.

"Yes," he said.

They walked. The corridor here was narrower than the main arteries, the traffic thinner, the ambient sound slightly different — the City's hum at a different harmonic, the atmospheric systems' pitch changed by the geometry.

"My mother knew the verdict before the session began," Kimme said.

He looked at her.

"Not from intelligence," she said. "From the structure of the situation. House Ione is delivering below quota but not catastrophically below quota. The House Vamerius petition is structurally weak — they don't have the production capacity to replace Ione's output in the relevant cycle, and everyone in the Court knows this, which means reassigning Ione to Vamerius would create a worse shortfall than the current one." She paused. "The verdict will be a grace period with conditions. The conditions will be more onerous than the Matriarch expected. The Matriarch knows this and structured her presentation to make the conditions she can accept seem like concessions she's making, rather than terms being imposed."

"All of which the Court also knew," Kaiden said.

"Yes," Kimme said. "And the Matriarch knows that the Court knows. And the Court knows that the Matriarch knows that the Court knows." She looked at the corridor ahead. "The entire session was an exercise in creating a record of deliberation around a conclusion that had already been reached."

"Does that bother you," he said.

She was quiet for a moment.

The moment had a specific texture. Not the silence of someone managing their answer, or the silence of someone deciding how much to say. The silence of someone who has been given a question that they have not been given before, or have not allowed themselves to receive in the form it was being offered in.

"I'm not sure I'm allowed to let it," she said.

The words arrived with the quality of something said precisely, not in the sense of careful phrasing but in the sense of accuracy — the words that described the situation as it actually was, rather than the words that described it as it should be described.

He heard this. He did not perform hearing it, he simply let it arrive and sat with it for a moment.

"That's a more interesting answer than I expected," he said.

She glanced at him. "What did you expect."

"Either that it didn't bother you, or that it clearly does and you'd tell me it doesn't." He paused. "Not that it might bother you and you're uncertain whether you're permitted to have the bother."

She looked at the corridor ahead. "The Court functions," she said. "The form exists for reasons. The reasons are good ones, in aggregate — a system that relitigates concluded verdicts every time someone makes a better argument is a system that never produces stable outcomes. The form is the stability. The stability is the point." She paused. "I know all of this."

"And," he said.

"And the Matriarch was telling the truth," she said. "And it didn't matter. And I watched her stand there being truthful in a room where the truth was not the operative category, and—" She stopped. She looked at the corridor for a moment. "And I noticed it. Which I'm not sure I was doing, before."

He said: "Before what."

She said: "Before now," and the specificity of the *now* was the specificity of something recent rather than the vague gesture at the present tense.

They had reached the junction where the corridor split — toward the East block on the left, toward the Chadrac residential section on the right.

She stopped.

"The Matriarch was not lying about the sabotage," she said. "My mother's Telepath confirmed it, which means my mother knew the Matriarch was telling the truth before the session began, and chose to let the session proceed in the form it proceeded in anyway." She looked at him steadily. "That's not unusual. That's the ordinary operation of the Court. I've observed it hundreds of times." A pause. "I just — noticed it, today. In a way I hadn't before."

He said: "Does it matter that you noticed."

She said: "I don't know yet. That's the honest answer."

He looked at her. She was twenty-one years old, and she had spent twenty-one years in this City, and she had been observing this

Court since before she understood what she was observing, and she had not until recently been noticing what she had been seeing. He thought about the gap between seeing and noticing. About what closes the gap.

"Get some sleep," she had said, in the Wayfinder facility. Not *I won't report it — get some sleep*, which was the sentence that lived in the space after a decision had been made without announcing the decision.

"For what it's worth," he said, "I think noticing matters. Even when you don't know yet what to do with it."

She looked at him for a moment.

Then she looked at the junction. She turned right, toward the Chadrac residential section. She walked three steps and stopped.

Without turning back: "The session's record will show that the Matriarch's testimony was received, the petitions were considered, and a deliberated verdict was produced." She paused. "It will not show that the verdict was already formed."

She walked on.

He stood at the junction and watched her go, and the corridor held the specific quality of an exchange that was complete — both sides of it said, the saying done, what remained being what happened after the saying.

The City's hum was in the floor and the walls and the specific quality of the air that the fifth ring's atmospheric system maintained. The Pictor system was outside, doing what it did — the chromatic forests on the planet below bleeding their colors into the river systems, the processed output moving through the supply chain that would eventually reach the City's instrumentation and the Guild's precision equipment and the weapon sighting systems that the official documentation did not enumerate. Everything functioning. Everything producing its designated output.

Kaiden turned left and walked to the East block, and the corridor closed behind him.

EIGHTEEN

IMPERIAL CITY — PICTOR SYSTEM

THE MESSAGE ARRIVED through the block's internal system at the hour when Kaiden had learned that messages arriving through the block's internal system were worth attending to more carefully than their form implied.

The Communion room off the eastern corridor. If your schedule permits.

It was signed with the Elevatio seal rather than a name. He had been told, in Lysandir's briefings, that Father Eidan communicated this way — without names, without explicit invitations, with the phrasing of requests that were not quite requests. *If your schedule permits* meant: come now.

The Communion room was not the one he'd been in during the family's audience — that one was in the administrative section, near the Throne Room complex. This was a different one: smaller, on a corridor that ran through the Elevatio's cathedral block, the ancient pre-City stone that had been incorporated into the structure rather than demolished when the City was built. The construction here

was different from the rest of the City. Rougher. The stone had not been dressed to the engineering precision of the modern sections, and the result was a quality of surface — the slight unevenness, the visible grain — that everything else on the City had been made to suppress.

He had been in this corridor twice before and had noticed both times that the surveillance fixtures were positioned differently here than in the other sections — not absent, but at angles that suggested the coverage was managed, the blind spots deliberate. The Elevatio's cathedral block was the Elevatio's, in the way that the City's other spaces were not anyone's specific property.

Eidan was already in the room when Kaiden arrived.

He was not what the position of senior Elevatio operative suggested, in the way that people in significant positions often are not what the position suggests. The hair was white, streaked with iron gray, and the face had the particular quality of someone who has spent decades expecting to be the most dangerous person in any room and is comfortable with this assessment. Not arrogant — comfortable. There is a difference. His vestments were the full formal: the white and crimson, the Elevatio insignia at collar and cuff, worn with the ease of something that had been worn for so long it had become indistinguishable from the body beneath.

A codex was on the table. Old — the binding worn to the quality of old leather, the pages visible at the edge as something thicker and more yielding than ordinary paper. A copper oil lamp at the table's center, its flame the only light source besides the corridor sconces outside, producing the specific warmth and movement of real fire in a space that had spent its life being lit by artificial sources. The incense was already burning.

"Sit," Eidan said.

Kaiden sat. Across from him, Eidan's eyes were the eyes of a man

in his mid-sixties who had been paying close attention for all of them. They were not unkind. They were not kind in any simple way. They were the eyes of someone who has decided what he is looking at and is now interested primarily in having the decision confirmed.

"I'm told Lysandir has given you the basics," Eidan said.

"Some of them," Kaiden said.

"What did he tell you."

Kaiden considered what of this conversation was calibration and what was genuine inquiry. He decided: both simultaneously, as most conversations with senior Elevatio figures seemed to be. "That the Elevatio has been observing my family line for three generations," he said. "That they have been selecting for specific traits. That I may carry some combination of those traits."

Eidan looked at him. "He didn't tell you the goal."

"He told me the shape of it," Kaiden said. "Not the content."

Eidan touched the codex cover with one finger. Not opening it — touching it, the habit of someone for whom physical objects carry the weight of what they represent. "The Elevatio's goal," he said, "is to understand the Fold. Not to duplicate it — we have no access to the Starfarer block, which is where the answer lives. To understand it. Because understanding is prerequisite to everything else."

He opened the codex. The pages were illustrated in the old style — figures in blue ink, architectural diagrams, the Elevatio's ancient sigil repeated at intervals as a marker of significance. He turned to a page that showed a ring of human figures connected at the crown by branching lines converging on a central point.

"What you're looking at is a three-hundred-year-old hypothesis," he said. "The Elevatio's best understanding of how the City moves." He looked at Kaiden. "The City Folds. The Fold is performed by a conclave of Starfarers working in concert. The mechanism of the conclave — how multiple individuals coordinate a single Fold at the required scale — is the thing we do not understand."

"The bonding," Kaiden said.

Eidan looked at him. "Lysandir told you that much."

"He told me the Elevatio uses the word. He didn't explain what it means mechanically."

"Neither do we," Eidan said, without embarrassment. The absence of embarrassment was itself a piece of information — not performance, but the genuine comfort of someone who has accepted a long-running failure as the context of their work rather than as a failure. "We have been trying to replicate the bonding for a century. We have not succeeded. The mechanism eludes us." He paused. "What we believe is this: Leaf is the bonding agent. At the doses a Starfarer takes before a Fold, Leaf produces a state of cognitive openness — a dissolution of the boundaries between individual minds — that allows multiple Folders to act as one. Without Leaf, the bonding is not possible at the required scale."

Kaiden said: "And if their theory is wrong?"

Eidan paused.

It was a specific pause — not the pause of someone processing a question, the pause of someone who has encountered a question in the category of things they do not engage with and is deciding how to decline the engagement.

"If what theory is wrong," he said.

"The Leaf theory," Kaiden said. "The bonding mechanism. If Leaf doesn't do what you think it does."

Eidan looked at him. The eyes were still the eyes of someone who has decided what he is looking at, but the deciding had acquired a quality of something being managed rather than simply present.

"It is not wrong," he said. "The evidence is conclusive."

He said it with the quality of a statement that does not require or invite further discussion. The grammar of it was the grammar of settled fact — the is, not the may be or the appears to be. Conclusive, not substantial or suggestive.

Kaiden sat with this.

He had heard this quality of certainty before. He had heard it in people who were certain of things they had actually tested and verified, and he had heard it in people who were certain of things they

had decided they were certain of. The texture was different. In the first case, the certainty had the quality of something resting on a foundation that was not visible but was present. In the second case, the certainty had the quality of something resting on itself — circular, self-supporting, generating its own weight from its own existence.

Eidan's certainty had the second quality.

He did not push it. He filed it, in the place where he filed things that were connected to other things, and he moved on.

"What does any of this have to do with me," he said.

Eidan's eyes settled. The question was a return to territory he was more comfortable in, and the settling was visible as a slight release of the specific effort the previous question had required.

"The Elevatio believes your genetic line carries a combination of traits that has not existed together in a single person in three centuries," he said. "Communion capability — the ability to access and speak with the preserved consciousness of the dead, which your family has expressed in partial form for three generations. And a recessive Fold capability, which has been present in the line in a form too weak to manifest, concentrated by the selection process we've been running."

He looked at the codex. "A person who can Commune and Fold simultaneously is what we have been trying to produce for a hundred years. Not because it is theoretically interesting. Because if that person exists, they may be able to do what no Elevatio researcher has been able to do: enter the experience of the bonded Fold from the inside. Not observe it — inhabit it. Commune with the Starfarers during the Fold. Understand, from within the mechanism, how it functions."

Kaiden looked at the figure-diagram. The ring of people connected by their branching lines.

"And then," he said.

"And then we know," Eidan said. "And knowing, we can act. We can produce our own bonded Folders. We can offer the galaxy a Fold capacity not controlled by the Chadrac line." He paused. "The

Elevatio does not want to rule. We want the capacity for self-determination that has been denied us since the first Chadrac took the Fold monopoly and kept it." He closed the codex. "We want what everyone wants, Kaiden. Leverage."

Kaiden looked at him.

He thought about what Aurelo had told him: *I was their instrument first.* He thought about what Lysandir had told him on the shuttle: *stay neutral for now*. He thought about the token in his pocket and the swept room and all the calibrated information that had been given to him by people who were managing what he knew at every stage.

He thought about the Leaf question and the quality of the certainty that had closed it.

"What would you need from me," he said.

"Nothing now," Eidan said. "You are not ready. The ability expression has not fully developed. The Communion is active, but uncontrolled. The Fold recessive is present but not accessible." He looked at Kaiden with the specific look of someone who has been waiting a very long time for a specific thing and is looking at its approaching completion. "We need you to be what you are. To let it develop. To not suppress it." He paused. "And to trust us, when the time comes, to help you use it correctly."

Kaiden said: "Trust you."

"Trust the Elevatio," Eidan said. "Which is a different thing from trusting any individual within it, including myself. The institution has been building toward this for a hundred years. What we want is what the institution wants, which is what the galaxy's freedom from a three-hundred-year monopoly requires." He looked at Kaiden steadily. "We are not perfect. But our goal is correct."

The conviction in this was genuine — fully genuine, in the way that genuine conviction is distinguishable from performance by the absence of the work the performance requires. Eidan believed what he was saying. He believed it completely, at the level where belief stops being a position and becomes a structural feature of the person.

Which was, Kaiden thought, its own kind of problem. A person performing a belief can be persuaded. A person whose belief is structural cannot be. What you could do was account for it.

"I'll think about it," Kaiden said.

Eidan looked at him.

"I mean that," Kaiden said. "I'm not dismissing it. I'll think about it."

Eidan studied him for a moment, the eyes doing their work. Then he nodded, once, the nod of someone accepting an answer they had not expected to be this form and are recalibrating for.

"Good," he said.

He rose from the table. He picked up the codex. He moved to the small cabinet in the room's inner curve, opened it with two specific palm motions, and replaced the codex with the care of someone returning a thing to its proper position rather than simply putting it away.

"The room is available to you," he said, as he had apparently said to others. "Come when you need it. The quiet here is genuine." He looked at the lamp, at the incense, at the walls. "The City does not always allow genuine quiet."

He left.

Kaiden sat alone in the Communion room for a while.

The lamp produced its small, real warmth. The incense had reached the stage of its burn where the fragrance was less sharp and more diffused, filling the room's specific air with a quality that was the quality of rooms that have held a great many conversations and retained something of each one. The stone walls were what they were — the pre-City stone, the material that had predated the institution that now occupied it, the material that did not care what it housed.

He thought about the Leaf question and the quality of the closure.

It is not wrong. The evidence is conclusive.

The words had the texture of something that had been said many times, in many rooms, to many people who had asked variations of the same question. The certainty was not fresh. It was maintained. A certainty that required maintenance was a certainty that had been challenged often enough that the maintenance had become automatic, the challenge expected, the response polished to the quality of something that sounds more settled than it is.

He thought about Janna's conversation with Kimme, which he had not been present for but which he had reconstructed from available evidence: *the Elevatio does not understand the Fold mechanism as well as it thinks.* Not wrong — not understand. The distinction was fine enough that it could have been splitting hairs, or it could have been the most precise statement available.

He thought about the unmarked systems on the Wayfinder display. The traffic that moved through them. The Folders in the UnImperium worlds who used Leaf because they had been told they needed to — and who had apparently been using it successfully enough that the usage had persisted across generations.

Which meant the usage worked.

Which was not the same as the usage being necessary.

He sat with this distinction. It was a small distinction in the evidence. It was a very large distinction in what the evidence implied.

He picked up the lamp and carried it to the cabinet and set it on the top surface rather than in the cabinet — it was still burning and he didn't want to close a fire inside a sealed space. He looked at the cabinet and thought about the codex inside it, about the three-hundred-year-old hypothesis rendered in blue ink, about the ring of figures connected at the crown.

He left the room.

In his quarters, later, he sat with the accounting.

The Elevatio wanted him. They had wanted him for three generations, had invested a century of institutional effort in the specific configuration of genetics that had produced him, had been waiting — that was the word that fit, waiting, with the patience of an institution that thinks in generational terms — for the moment when that configuration could be deployed.

They believed his deployment would confirm their theory.

Their theory might be wrong.

He did not know if it was wrong. He didn't have enough information to know. What he had was the quality of one man's certainty when the theory was questioned, and the quality of certainty was not evidence of the theory's accuracy or inaccuracy. It was evidence of the man's relationship to the question.

A man who won't admit doubt has decided his conclusions first.

The voice arrived without being asked for, which was increasingly how Orvyn's voice arrived — not the directed urgency of Maren, not a push toward a specific action, but an observation delivered in the dry register of someone who has been watching for a long time and has selected the moment to report what they've seen.

Be careful what you let him conclude about you.

Kaiden looked at the City's night through his viewport — the specific dark of the Pictor system above the cloud layer, the stars at the angles they were at from this position in the City's rotation. The Chromatic Resin forests were somewhere below, bleeding their colors into the river systems.

He thought: the Elevatio's goal might be correct even if their theory is wrong. The freedom from a three-hundred-year monopoly is a goal that stands on its own, regardless of the mechanism they've been trying to use to achieve it.

He thought: Eidan cannot afford to entertain the possibility that the theory is wrong. If the theory is wrong, the breeding program — a

century of it — was built on a false foundation. And a man who has given his life to a foundation cannot examine whether the foundation is solid. The examination itself is too dangerous.

He thought: which is exactly why someone who is not Eidan, and who has not given their life to the foundation, might be better positioned to determine whether it holds.

He thought: this is what Lysandir meant by *stay neutral for now*. Not allegiance to Eidan's program. Not allegiance to the City's counter-interest. A position that allows for the determination — eventual, gradual, through what happens as the ability develops — of what is actually true.

The Pictor system's star was below the City's horizon from this angle. The city turned, and the stars held their relative positions, and outside everything was doing what it did regardless of the conversations that had happened inside.

He looked at his hands. The calluses were still there, the ones from the practice blade. He had been in the City for ten weeks and had been to the block's training facility most mornings and had maintained the physical practice without its original context. He was not the same person who had trained in the cubiculum pugnae with Memna Zael, but the connection was not broken.

He held that thought for a moment.

Then he released it and let the room be quiet and sat with the specific quality of a position that was not yet resolved — not uncomfortable, not comfortable, the specific neutral state of someone who knows they don't have enough to decide and is not going to force a decision from inadequate information.

The accounting was complete for tonight.

The Pictor system was outside, and the City was in it, and the City would Fold in three days, and the next system would come.

NINETEEN

IMPERIAL CITY — PICTOR SYSTEM

THE INVITATION ARRIVED as instructions rather than an invitation.

Fold preparation begins at the thirteenth hour. You will attend.

Kimme had been receiving instructions from her mother since she could read, and had learned to distinguish between the ones that were logistical and the ones that were something more. The distinction was not usually in the content, which was often similar — a time, a location, a directive — but in the weight behind it. Some instructions had weight. This one had the particular weight of something that had been decided deliberately, as the right moment for a thing that had been building toward a moment.

She had never been in the Fold Room during a Fold.

She had been near it. She had studied the mechanics, the Wayfinder pattern plates, the theory of the bonding that the Elevatio described and that her own education had presented as the established framework for understanding how the City moved. She had participated in the preparatory exercises that the Chadrac line

trained with from adolescence — the mental state work, the Leaf orientation, the mnemonic discipline that was supposed to develop the cognitive architecture required for participation in a Fold. She had done all of this. She had not done the actual Fold.

Her mother had told her, several times, that the preparation was the thing and the Fold itself was the completion of the preparation. The preparation was long and the Fold was brief. The understanding came from accumulating the preparation.

This was, Kimme had always understood, both accurate and incomplete. The preparation was preparation for something. The something had not yet happened.

The Fold Room was in a section of the City that had no other function and was reached through a sequence of corridors that were not on any map available to anyone outside a specific authorization level. It was adjacent to the Starfarer Block—itself a heavily guarded bastion Kimme had never visited. The corridors here were not marked, not because this was secret — anyone who needed to know where they were knew — but because marking them would imply a purpose to the marking, and the corridors' purpose was already known to everyone they admitted.

Janna was there when Kimme arrived. She was standing at the room's center, at the pedestal that held the mnemonic plate — a disc of blue metal, its surface incised with the pattern for the destination system, the intricate geometry of Fold navigation rendered in physical form. The room was what it was: a circle, the walls lined with the specific instrumentation that Kimme had studied in her theoretical education, the ambient light blue-white and slightly lower than elsewhere, the temperature exact. A meditation chair on each side of the pedestal.

Two chairs.

Kimme had expected more. The doctrine described multiple

Starfarers — not dozens, not the theatrical conclave of the Starfarer block's official presentation, but at minimum several, the required number that the bonding mechanism needed to achieve the City's mass. The doctrine said more than one was necessary. There were two chairs.

"Where are the others?"

Janna looked at her when she entered. "The Starfarers? They never leave their Block. I rarely visit them." She raised an eyebrow. "You know the preparation exercises."

"Yes," Kimme said.

"This is the same thing, at full depth." She looked at the plate on the pedestal. "Take the minimum dose. Just enough to orient."

She produced two vials from the inside of her jacket. The glass was blue, the vials small, the contents barely enough to tint a droplet. She handed one to Kimme and kept one herself.

Kimme unsealed the vial and took the minimum. The Leaf hit the back of her throat with the metallic chill that the preparation exercises had made familiar — not the flood of the higher doses, the perceptual expansion that the briefings described as what the Starfarers used, but the low register of it, the baseline orientation effect. Her vision sharpened slightly at the edges. The room acquired its slightly more than room quality.

She watched her mother take the second vial.

Her mother took considerably more than the minimum.

This was not unusual for the Fold, according to the doctrine. The lead Starfarer took the highest dose. The bonding required the lead's cognitive state to be the deepest, the most fully open to the dissolution of cognitive boundaries that Leaf produced, because the lead was the point through which the other minds converged. Kimme had read this. She understood the mechanics of it. She watched her mother administer the dose with the practiced efficiency of someone who has done this many times and has calibrated it to the fraction that produces the required state without overshooting.

The amount was, by the doctrine's own description, a dose

intended to produce extreme cognitive openness — the dissolution of self-boundary that was the prerequisite for bonding with other Folders.

They sat.

The chairs were the meditation configuration: straight-backed, positioned to face the mnemonic plate on the pedestal, everything about the geometry arranged to orient attention toward the same point. Kimme sat in the second chair and found the posture that the preparation exercises had trained, the posture that placed the body in a specific relationship to gravity that the Fold training described as the optimal physical configuration for maintaining the required mental state under the extreme conditions of a Fold.

Janna began.

Kimme had expected it to feel like the preparation exercises, at full depth. The preparation exercises at their fullest had a quality of expanding pressure — the sense of the room becoming more room, of the self becoming more permeable to its surroundings, of the boundary between inside and outside acquiring a quality of suggestion rather than fact.

The Fold preparation was different from this. Not in category — the quality was recognizable — but in magnitude. The Leaf at Janna's dose was working on a scale that Kimme's minimum dose put her adjacent to rather than inside, and the adjacency was enough to perceive the scale without being inside it. She was watching from a shorter distance than an outside observer but still from outside.

What she watched was her mother.

Janna's eyes had closed. The jaw had relaxed. The breathing had slowed to the long, measured cadence of the deepest preparation state. All of this was expected — this was what the training described, what the doctrine showed in its diagrams, what the preparation exercises produced at their deepest.

What was not expected was the completeness of it.

The doctrine described the bonding as a convergence — multiple minds meeting at a point, their shared attention creating the combined will required for the Fold. The lead held the direction; the others contributed force. The lead was the narrowest, the most precise, the most complete in the dissolution. But the others were necessary. Without the others, the lead's dissolution would be total rather than directed, and total dissolution was not useful.

Janna's dissolution looked total.

The posture was upright, which was correct. The breathing was slow, which was correct. The eyes were closed in the way that deep preparation produced, which was correct. But the quality of her presence in the room had changed in a way that Kimme found difficult to name precisely. She had heard this quality described in the training texts as the quality of a mind fully present in the Fold state, the quality of someone who has completed the dissolution and is now operating from within it. She had understood this abstractly.

She was looking at it now, and what she was looking at was not the quality of a mind that was one of several converged minds. It was the quality of a mind that was the only mind in the room doing anything consequential.

The machinery on the walls was running. The diagnostics, the monitoring systems, the infrastructure that supported the Fold — all of it was active, all of it was doing its function. But the machinery was doing less than the doctrine said it should be doing. The outputs she could read from her position — the power draw on the booster systems, the pattern-plate response metrics that were visible on the room's secondary display — were within normal parameters, which was correct, but they were within normal parameters in a distribution that suggested one source of input rather than several.

She did not know enough to be certain of what she was seeing. Her training in the mechanics was theoretical, not operational. She could read the displays but not with the fluency that years of opera-

tional experience produced. What she was seeing might have an explanation she wasn't sophisticated enough to identify.

But the shape of it was there. The shape of something that was not matching what the doctrine described it should look like, in a way that she could not quite name but could not not see.

She kept her face in its arrangement. She watched the room's displays with the peripheral attention of someone who is not performing watching them, and she sat in her chair with the preparation posture, and she maintained the orientation that the minimum dose produced, and she watched her mother be completely alone in the work.

The Fold happened.

It was not violent — not from inside the room, which was what she had been told to expect. The sensation was not of movement but of the relationship between things changing: the room remained the room, the chair remained the chair, and then it was the same room and the same chair in a different position relative to everything outside the room. The Pictor system was on the other side of the transition. A new star was outside the hull. The transition was discrete — a before and an after, nothing in between, the between being the thing that the Fold replaced.

The pressure had been real, and the Leaf had amplified it to a degree that the minimum dose could not buffer entirely, and she had found the experience exactly as the training described it: not painful, not comfortable, the quality of something that the body does not have a framework for and registers as intensity rather than any specific sensation.

The diagnostics on the room's displays were cycling down. The booster systems were scaling back from their operational peak. The mnemonic plate on the pedestal sat in its cradle, the pattern incised in its surface unchanged.

Janna was still in the trance.

She held it for a long moment after the Fold's completion — longer than the doctrine suggested was necessary for recovery, longer than Kimme had seen in any of the training simulations. Then the eyes opened.

Not slowly, the way the deepest preparation state's emergence usually looked — gradual, the mind returning through layers to the surface. Quickly, with the quality of someone who has chosen to return rather than been carried back by the state's own dissolution. Janna's eyes opened and she was present, fully, in the way she was always present: the assessment running, the attention complete.

She looked at Kimme.

"The Fold is complete," she said.

"Yes," Kimme said.

She looked at the plate. Then at the displays. Then back at Janna.

"How many of them does it take," she said.

She had not planned the question. It arrived with the quality of a question that had been building from the moment she'd seen the two chairs and had been working its way forward through the duration of the session, and now it was in the room before she had consciously decided to put it there.

Janna looked at her.

The quality of the look was specific. Not sharp — not the look of someone encountering an unexpected challenge. The look of someone receiving a question they had been preparing to receive for a while, from a person they had been watching prepare to ask it.

"Enough," she said.

Two syllables. Not a number. Not a description. *Enough* — the word that occupies the space between a direct answer and a refusal, that acknowledges the question without addressing it, that is technically accurate while being functionally deflecting. The minimum true statement available.

Kimme looked at her mother.

Janna looked back. The assessment was running, the way the assessment was always running — what Kimme was doing with the answer, where the question had come from, what the asking signified about where Kimme currently was in her understanding.

"The Fold is complete," Janna said again. "The new system is outside."

She rose from the chair with the efficiency of someone whose body has recovered from extreme effort quickly, which was a function of practice rather than ease. She moved to the pedestal and removed the mnemonic plate, handling it with the specific care that the pattern plates required — not reverence, but the care of someone who knows what a thing is for and treats it accordingly.

Kimme sat in her chair.

Enough was not a number. *Enough* was the answer to a different question than the one she had asked.

She filed this.

She looked at the room. The two chairs. The machinery on the walls doing less than the doctrine said it should do. The quality of her mother's trance.

She had enough to see the shape. She did not have enough to name it.

They walked back through the unmarked corridors together, mother and daughter, the way they had walked through many spaces together — Janna setting the pace, Kimme at her shoulder, the silence between them the silence of people who have just shared something and are not yet certain what to do with it.

At the junction where the corridor split — toward the administrative section on the right, toward the residential section on the left — Janna stopped.

She looked at the junction rather than at Kimme. She was

making a decision, and the decision was about how much to say, and the look at the junction was the space the decision was taking.

"There are things I'll tell you," she said. "When the time is right."

Kimme said: "The time is not right now."

"No," Janna said.

"How will I know when it is."

Janna looked at her then. The look had the quality of a calculation completed rather than running — the look of someone who has arrived at a conclusion about a thing they have been assessing over time.

"I'll tell you," she said.

It was a promise in the form she made promises: without ceremony, without elaboration, delivered at the register of the most ordinary statement so that the absence of ceremony was itself the emphasis. When Janna said something in that register, she meant it exactly.

Kimme said: "All right."

Janna turned right and walked toward the administrative section.

Kimme stood at the junction for a moment.

The new system was outside the City's hull. She had not seen it yet — had not been to a viewport since the Fold, had spent the intervening minutes in the Fold Room and then in these corridors. Somewhere outside, a star she had not stood in the light of was casting its light on the hull, on the booster rings, on the solar arrays of whatever equipment was facing it.

The doctrine said the Fold required enough.

Enough was a word that implied the sufficiency had been reached, that the minimum required quantity was present, that the mechanism had what it needed.

Enough was also a word that could be applied to one, if one was sufficient.

She did not know if one was sufficient. She did not know if one was what her mother was, in that room, in that trance, doing whatever she had been doing with the completeness that was more

complete than anything the doctrine described as possible for a lead Folder in a bonded group.

She did not have enough to name it.

The shape was there.

She turned left and walked to her quarters.

Alone, Janna stood at the window of her private suite and looked at the new system's star. The star that she had just moved the City into range of — herself, with the specific quality of directed attention she had been developing for twenty-three years and which her mother had given her twenty-three years before that, which was the truth about the Chadrac line that was also the truth about the Fold.

The Leaf at this dose produced the state. Not chemically — the Leaf did not itself do the work, was not itself the mechanism. The Leaf opened the door and she walked through it. The door could be opened other ways. She had learned this, in the early years, by accident. She had not pursued the learning because the Leaf was reliable and the accident might not be reproducible and the monopoly on the Leaf was itself a significant portion of the power she held.

She held the star in her attention, without the Fold state, without the Leaf, with just the ordinary attention of a person looking at a thing. The star looked back with the indifference of stars.

Kimme had asked the right question.

She had been watching Kimme ask the wrong questions for years — the questions of someone learning the doctrine, testing its edges, probing for the limits of the framework she'd been given. The right question was the question that arose from direct observation of something that didn't match the framework. *How many does it take.* Not a doctrine question. An observation question.

Kimme was becoming someone who asked observation questions.

This was what she had been building toward in the twenty-one years of careful, calibrated investment in her daughter's develop-

ment. Not a person who believed the doctrine. A person who could see past it when the seeing was required.

The risk of the truth was that Kimme might tell someone, before she understood the full weight of what the telling would cost. Not deliberately — Kimme was not careless — but in the way that people who have just received a large piece of information sometimes calibrate the holding of it incorrectly, say too much to too few people in the wrong circumstances.

The time for the truth was not yet. But the time was coming.

She looked at the star.

The new system outside was doing what systems did. The City was in it now, and the City's operations were adjusting to the new position, and the Cycle continued, and the Houses in this system were receiving their signals and responding to them, and all of it was proceeding on the schedule that three hundred years of continuous Fold capacity had made possible.

She had Folded the City three hundred and twelve times in her twenty-three years. Her mother before her had Folded it several hundred more. Three hundred years of the same secret, held by the same line, maintained by the same mechanism of controlled information and eliminated alternatives.

Kimme had seen the shape of it today.

Janna was not alarmed by this. She had known it was coming. What she was was careful — the specific carefulness of someone managing the timing of a revelation that needed to land correctly or would land wrong.

She would tell her. When the time was right.

For now: the star was outside, the City was in the system, and the Fold was behind them, and the next one was approximately two weeks ahead.

She looked at the star for a while longer.

Then she turned from the window to her work, which was always waiting.

TWENTY

IMPERIAL CITY — URSA SYSTEM

THE REQUEST CAME through the block's internal system on a Tuesday, which was the day the block's formal schedule was lightest — no sessions, no organized social functions, the day that the City's architects had apparently decided was best used for individual work or rest and which most of the Heirs-Second used for exactly the kind of work that couldn't be done in the formal sessions or discussed in the observed social functions.

The message was from Selinga Nix. It said: *There's a room on the fifth ring, junction three-seven. The door has a blue panel. If you have time this afternoon.*

He had been learning to read these messages with the attention they warranted. The *if you have time* was not optional in the way that the phrasing implied. The *this afternoon* was not approximate. The room on the fifth ring with the blue panel was a specific room that had been chosen for specific reasons, and the reasons were the reasons that rooms were chosen in the City: for what they allowed and what they prevented.

He went.

The room was small and had been swept — he could tell by the quality of the silence, which was the specific quality of silence that the City's ambient surveillance produced in its absence rather than its presence. Someone had used a device in this room before he arrived, and the device had produced the particular dead-air quality of a space that was temporarily its own closed system.

Nix was there. Lady Iscaryot was there.

This was the first time he'd been in a room with both of them that wasn't the common area or a formal session, and the configuration was visible as a configuration — not accidental, not social, two people who had coordinated their presence here for a purpose that the coordination itself signaled.

Nix sat on the table's edge. Iscaryot sat in a chair with the rigid posture of someone who has been told so many times that posture matters that it has become involuntary. Nix's manner was its usual precisely calibrated calm. Iscaryot's was the composed urgency of someone who has been waiting for a specific conversation and is now in it.

"You know what we are," Nix said. Not a question.

"I have a sense of it," Kaiden said.

"Then I won't be indirect," she said. "We're UnImperium-adjacent. Our Houses have interests that extend beyond what the Imperium's structure accommodates. We've been watching how you read the room — you're not committed to any faction, which is unusual for someone who's been here twelve weeks and has the attention your elevation generates."

"I've been told to stay neutral," he said.

"Who told you that."

He looked at her. "Multiple parties."

Nix's mouth did something that was close to a smile. "Which

means the advice was consistent across parties with competing interests, which makes it unusual advice. Usually parties with competing interests want you on different sides." She paused. "Unless they both think neutral is where you're most useful to them, which is also a form of positioning."

This was accurate and he didn't respond to it.

"We're not asking you to commit to anything," Iscaryot said. She had the prepared quality of someone who has decided how to deliver a specific point and is delivering it. "We're asking where you'll stand when a change comes. Not when — the when is contingent. But when it does."

"What kind of change," he said.

Nix looked at him steadily. "The kind that comes when a three-hundred-year monopoly stops being viable. The kind where the question of who can move what between what systems becomes a question that has more than one answer." She paused. "The UnImperium worlds have been building for eighty years. They have Fold capacity. They have their own infrastructure, their own communication network, their own governance. They don't have the City's reach, but the City's reach depends on a specific set of conditions remaining true, and those conditions have been growing less stable."

"What conditions," Kaiden said.

"The Leaf supply," Iscaryot said. "The Starfarer training pipeline. The Wayfinder corps' capacity for new pattern generation. The Shexosant's continued acceptance of their arrangement." She had the crisp specificity of an engineer listing the load-bearing elements of a structure. "Each one of these is a dependency. Dependencies are vulnerabilities. The City has been managing all of them for three centuries through a combination of monopoly and fear, and the monopoly and fear are both becoming harder to sustain."

He thought about Janna's face during the Fold. The quality of her trance. The machinery in the room doing less than the doctrine said it should.

He thought about Eidan's certainty when the Leaf question was asked.

He said: "What do you want from me specifically."

"Nothing now," Nix said. "This isn't a recruitment. It's a statement of alignment. We believe a change is coming. We believe Kaiden Kentur, wherever he stands when it comes, will be in a position to affect which direction it goes. We wanted you to know that we know this, and that we've been watching your navigation here with what I'd describe as professional admiration." She paused. "And we wanted to ask you one question."

"Ask it," he said.

"When the change comes," she said, "will you try to preserve the existing structure, modify it, or replace it."

The question arrived with the quality of something that had been carefully chosen — not the simple binary of *are you with us or against us*, but the more sophisticated question of what kind of change the person in front of you believed was appropriate. The answer to this question was more informative than the binary.

He thought about it. He sat with it for a moment rather than answering immediately, because the moment was part of the answer — the person who answered immediately was answering from a predetermined position; the person who took the moment was answering from the question itself.

"I don't know yet," he said. "I'm still finding out what the existing structure actually is. Not the presentation of it — what it actually is." He paused. "Until I know that, I can't tell you what I think should happen to it."

Iscaryot and Nix looked at each other. The look had the quality of two people receiving an answer they had discussed as a possible answer and finding the discussion confirmed.

"That's honest," Iscaryot said.

"It's also the only accurate answer I have," he said.

"Fair," Nix said.

She leaned back slightly on the table. The calibrated calm had

something underneath it now — not warmth exactly, but the particular quality of someone who has dropped a layer of the performance they maintain in less trusted company. The room was swept. They were in it together.

"The UnImperium worlds have their own Folders," she said. Not as revelation — as information offered, in the register of someone sharing what they know with someone they've decided can receive it.

"I'd assumed as much," Kaiden said.

"They use Leaf," she said. "They were told they needed to. They've been using it for generations, and it works — the Folds succeed, the system functions." She paused. "The assumption, across the UnImperium network, is that the Leaf is the mechanism. That without it, the Fold wouldn't be possible, or at least wouldn't be reliable."

He said: "Is that the assumption, or is it the doctrine."

Nix looked at him. "Explain the difference."

"A doctrine is a belief that's been institutionalized," he said. "An assumption is a belief that's been unchallenged for long enough that it stopped being examined. You can be inside a doctrine and know it's a doctrine. You can be inside an assumption and not know there's an assumption there to be inside."

Nix was quiet for a moment. Then: "That's a distinction I hadn't drawn. Which is interesting." She paused. "I'll say assumption, because that's more accurate. Nobody in the UnImperium network decided that Leaf was necessary and built a doctrine around it. They were told it was necessary, they found that it seemed to work, and they never tested otherwise."

"How would they test otherwise," he said.

"That's the question," she said. "You can't exactly run a controlled experiment. The available sample size is limited, the stakes of a failed Fold are significant, and—" she paused. "How would you test it otherwise? You can hardly ask Imperium."

The statement arrived in the room and occupied it.

He did not respond to it.

He held it where it was, with the quality of attention he gave to things that were more significant than they appeared on first landing — the attention that wasn't quite attention, that was something more like the stillness a person achieves when they have stopped doing anything in order to receive something.

How would you test it otherwise. You can hardly ask Imperium.

He thought about Eidan's certainty. About the quality of the closure when the question was asked. About a man who had decided his conclusions and was not entertaining doubt because doubt would require the century of institutional investment to be reconsidered.

He thought about Kimme's face in the Fold Room, which he had not been in but which he had constructed from Kimme's manner in the corridor afterward — the quality of someone who had seen the shape of something and could not name it but was carrying it.

He thought about the UnImperium Folders who used Leaf because they had been told they must, and who had been using it for generations, and whose Folds worked.

Which was not the same as the Leaf being why they worked.

Behind his left eye, something stirred. Not the urgency of the corridor — not *left* or *go quickly*. Something slower, more considered, the quality of attention pointed at a question rather than a direction.

That's the question, isn't it.

Maren's voice was quieter than he'd ever heard it. Almost uncertain — or not uncertain, but careful. The care of someone saying something that has been held for a long time and is only now being offered in its full form.

He sat with it.

That's the question.

He didn't respond out loud. He let it settle into the place where things settled when they were going to be carried for a while.

"We're not asking you to do anything with this," Nix said. She had read something in the quality of his silence, which was the quality she brought to reading silences. "We're telling you what we know. What you do with it is yours."

"I appreciate it," he said.

Iscaryot said: "One more thing." She reached into the inside of her jacket and produced a small chip — data storage, the form that was used for things that were not meant to go through monitored channels. "A FreeLink contact code. Not our code. A network access point. If you ever want to reach outside the City's communication infrastructure." She set it on the table between them.

He looked at it.

"Low stakes to hold," she said. "High stakes to use. You'll know when if there's a when."

He picked it up. It was smaller than his thumbnail. He put it in his left pocket, with the token.

"Who sent you," he said.

Nix looked at him. Her expression had the quality of someone who has been asked an expected question and has an answer ready that is not quite the full answer.

"We came ourselves," she said.

"I know," he said. "And someone else's thinking is inside what you came to say."

Iscaryot didn't answer.

Nix smiled. Not the calibrated smile — something smaller and more genuine. "We were briefed," she said. "The content of the briefing is ours. The framing is whoever framed it."

He accepted this. He didn't press it. The information that someone had decided this conversation should happen was itself information, and it could sit alongside the other information until the configuration became clearer.

"Thank you," he said.

They left before he did, which was their choice and appropriate to the meeting's structure. He sat in the swept room for a moment after they were gone.

The City's hum was present even in the absence of surveillance — the physical fact of it, the vibration in the floor and the walls that came from the City's systems rather than from any

recording apparatus. The Ursa system was outside, doing what it did.

That's the question.

He turned the question over. Not like examining an object — like walking around a space to see it from different angles. *How would you test it otherwise.* You couldn't run the experiment with the stakes a failed Fold produced. You couldn't ask Imperium. You couldn't access the Starfarer block's actual operations. You couldn't — from inside the Imperium, from inside the City, from any position that was available to anyone who had been told the doctrine and had no leverage to test it —

You couldn't test it.

Unless you were in a position where the test was not a test but a demonstration. Unless you were someone who had been shaped by three generations of selection toward specific capabilities. Unless the capabilities, if they existed, were themselves the answer to the question.

He thought: *I don't know if I can Fold. I don't know what I can do. I have had the pressure behind my eye and the voice in the corridor and the awareness in the growbitat and the thing in the Communion room that arrived as Maren's voice and Orvyn's voice. I have had these things and I have not tested them because the testing is not available to me without knowing what I'm testing and how.*

He thought: *but the question is real. And the question is mine to ask.*

He put his hands flat on the table and looked at them for a moment. The calluses from the practice blade. The ordinary hands of someone who had been doing ordinary things and was now sitting in a swept room on the fifth ring of Imperial City with a FreeLink chip in his pocket and a question that had arrived without his asking it.

The question was: *what if the Leaf is not the mechanism.*

The follow-on: *and if it's not, what is.*

He didn't have enough to answer. He had enough to hold the question correctly.

He rose from the table. He walked to the door, and the door opened, and the corridor's ordinary surveillance resumed around him.

The Ursa system was outside. The City was in it. In two weeks, maybe slightly less, it would Fold to the next system, and whatever was outside now would be behind them.

He walked back to the East block with the question where questions live when they are not yet answerable — in the place that is below the surface of ordinary attention but present whenever the ordinary attention relaxes, shaping the quality of everything around it.

TWENTY-ONE

IMPERIAL CITY — URSA SYSTEM

THE OBSERVATION GALLERY was not announced. The message arrived the way the City's more significant instructions always arrived: through the block's internal system, brief, without explanation, the absence of explanation being the explanation. *Gallery Seven, upper ring. Ninth hour.*

No list of who would be there. No description of what would be observed. The ninth hour was specified, which meant attendance was not optional in the way that the absence of a stated requirement sometimes made attendance seem optional.

He went.

The gallery was a space the City used for demonstrations. He understood this before he arrived, from the quality of the summons and from everything he'd observed in twelve weeks about how the City communicated things it wanted observed. The gallery was a

lens — floor, rail, and overhead of optical-grade synthetic crystal, the world outside magnified to a proximity that was not natural, that placed you at an intimacy with scale you would not otherwise have. The effect was not accidental. The effect was the point.

The Ursa system's inhabited worlds were on the far side of the City's current position. What was directly outside the gallery's crystal face, at the angle the City was currently holding, was the Reticulum system's primary planet: Reticulum III.

He knew the name from the briefings. A Dominion Major system, House Alistair in governance. One of the stable ones — fifteen generations of production history, the kind of House that represented the structure's argument for itself, the proof that the arrangement worked. He had not paid specific attention to Reticulum because there had been no reason to. It was a data point in the regional governance chart, present and functioning.

The planet below was present. The functioning was in the process of revision.

They were all there. Olan at the rail's center, boots apart, posture leaned forward in the way he stood when he was receiving something that required his full attention. Robere beside him, upright, hands behind his back, the structured stillness of someone maintaining form in a situation that the form was not designed for. Trever at a distance down the rail, the knife-edge quality of his attention at its sharpest, his augment's faint shimmer visible at his temple. Petr with his data overlay running, the tactical feed painting the gallery's air in blues and oranges and the specific red of hostile designation. And others — Nix, Iscaryot, the full cohort or nearly, arranged along the rail in the configuration of people who have been placed to observe and understand that the observation is the lesson.

Kimme was at the lower level of the gallery, the step that served as a second tier, her posture correct and her face in its public arrange-

ment. She was not looking at the Heirs-Second. She was looking at the planet.

Kaiden took his position at the rail and looked at the planet.

The House Ethin fleet was already in motion.

Twelve ships, the crimson and silver of House Ethin visible even at this distance and this magnification, arranged in a formation that the tactical overlay identified as a siege configuration — not an interdiction pattern, not a patrol pattern, the configuration specifically optimized for planetary assault. They were not threatening. They were executing.

The Reticulum system's orbital defense network had been operational when they arrived — the briefings had described it as rated highly, one of the better-defended Dominion Major systems in the regional cluster. The fleet was working through it systematically, the way you work through something that has a specific architecture: methodically, without waste, the sequence determined by the architecture rather than by any individual decision.

He watched the orbital platforms go.

Not all at once — these things don't happen all at once. In sequence, each platform identified and addressed in the order that left the next one most exposed. The defense network was designed to be redundant, each platform able to cover for the loss of adjacent ones. The Ethin fleet was disabling them in the specific order that collapsed the redundancy first, leaving each subsequent platform isolated before addressing it. This was not improvised. This had been planned for some time.

On the surface, visible through the crystal floor beneath his feet and through the forward rail's crystal face — city lights. The main settlement on the equatorial band, which the Reticulum system briefing had described as having a population in the millions. At this magnification they were visible as light — the specific pattern of a

city's light at this hour, the aggregated photons of millions of people in their ordinary activities, cooking, working, celebrating the New Year that the City's arrival had announced.

The Ethin ships were in descending orbit now. Three of them had broken from the formation to begin atmospheric entry.

He was watching the planet when Petr said: "Civilian craft. Northern quadrant."

He looked.

On the tactical overlay, a cluster of transponder signals — not military, not House livery, the specific designation of civilian vessels: cargo transports, a few personal craft, the small mixed fleet of people who had decided that leaving was better than staying. They had timed their departure badly, or they had had no good time to choose. They were burning outward, away from the planet, toward the outer system, in the specific pattern of people who are not following a planned trajectory but are simply moving away from a thing.

The Ethin destroyers shifted.

He watched the destroyers shift. The adjustment in their vectors was small — a degree of arc, a recalculation of approach — but it resolved the civilian craft as targets rather than as neutral traffic. The fleet's engagement parameters had apparently encompassed them.

The civilian ships were not armed. They were not maneuvering with any tactical sophistication. They were running.

The micro-missiles went out. He watched on the overlay as the icons that represented civilian vessels began to disappear, each one with its timestamp, each one orderly.

He kept his face in its arrangement.

He kept his hands on the rail.

What was happening inside him was not in his face or his hands. What was happening inside him was the thing that was trying to find a register for what he was watching, and could not find one that was

adequate, and was arriving at something that was not any of the words available but was closest to the word *no* — not a refusal, not a protest, the word in its most basic form, the word that exists before language and after language, the word that is just the self declining the reality it is being asked to accept.

He did not say it. He watched.

The civilian ships' icons went out one by one, the tactical overlay logging each timestamp with the mechanical indifference of a system for which the nature of the content was not part of its function.

Trever said, quietly: "Efficient."

Olan said nothing. His profile was visible from this angle — the usual quality of amusement was absent from it, replaced by something that was present and not comfortable with itself. Olan looked at the overlay, and what he was doing with what he saw was not visible on his face, but the quality of the not-visible was the quality of something being held rather than something absent.

Robere's jaw was a straight line. His institutional calculation was running, visible in the small movements of his attention — the overlay, the planet, the fleet, the overlay again. He was placing the event in the framework that the City had given him for events of this kind, and the framework was doing its work, and he was letting it.

Kaiden thought about the growbitat array. About the nine cylinders turning in Bauxitum's system light, each one a sealed world containing things that were alive and requiring maintenance to remain so. He thought about the child on the Miner's Pride, with her plastic animal, and about the Lisser supervisor in the Holden processing floor who had looked up at the catwalk and then returned to her centrifuge. He thought about Memna Zael, who was in the cubiculum pugnae right now if the hour was what it was, running a solo drill with the practice blade. He thought about Alise in the Cendant system, working through the Leaf production projections with the focused precision of someone for whom the numbers were real because what the numbers represented was real.

He thought about the icon timestamps on the overlay, and what

each timestamp meant about what had been in the space that the timestamp occupied.

The City had the capability to interdict this. He knew this from the briefings — the City's orbital assets in any given system were not solely the Shexosant cruisers visible in formation. There were additional assets, unmanned, positioned for exactly the kind of interdiction that would have placed the civilian craft out of range of the Ethin fleet's engagement parameters. The assets were there. The capability was present.

He looked at where the City's assets were currently positioned.

Holding.

Not moving. Not responding to the engagement below. Holding their positions in the specific holding pattern of assets that had been told to hold.

He understood this, suddenly, with the quality of understanding that arrives not as a thought but as a physical change in the body — a shift in how the chest holds itself, a specific temperature in the hands. The Ethin assault was not a crisis that Janna Chadrac was managing. It was a crisis that Janna Chadrac had decided not to prevent. The capability to interdict was present. The decision to not use the capability had been made.

Two Houses were being destroyed simultaneously. House Ethin, which would exhaust its military capacity in the act and become vulnerable to response. House Alistair, which was being erased. Both disposals accomplished in a single action. The Ethin assault was not an emergency. It was an outcome. A managed one. The watching gallery was not a crisis briefing. It was a lesson — in what kind of outcomes the City produced and allowed, in what it meant to hold power at this scale, in what the Heirs-Second were being prepared to inherit.

He held the rail and did not move.

He was disgusted. Not the ambivalent kind, the kind that is mixed with fascination or with the complicated acknowledgment that power operates this way and the operating of it has its own logic.

Genuinely, purely disgusted — at what was happening below and at the fact that he was here, in this gallery, watching it, and that this had been arranged for him to watch as an education.

He hid it. He kept it out of his face and his hands and his posture, the way he had been hiding things since he arrived on the City. He maintained the surface. But it was there.

He looked, once, at Kimme.

She was at the lower tier. She was looking at the planet. Her face had the specific quality of her face in its public mode — composed, correct, the arrangement held. Except for a fraction, in the duration of the time he was looking at her, the arrangement came apart at one edge. Not dramatically — not visibly, if you were not looking specifically for it. Her eyes were watching the civilian craft on the overlay and the arrangement of her face was doing what it always did except in one small area, around the eyes, where something that was not the public arrangement was present.

He looked away before she looked at him.

Father Eidan found him in the corridor outside the gallery.

He was not gentle about it. The hand on Kaiden's arm was the hand of someone with a purpose that did not require asking permission, and the pace he set moving Kaiden away from the gallery was the pace of urgency rather than the pace of pastoral guidance. Kaiden went because going was the option that gave him time to think, and staying in the gallery was not.

The room Eidan brought him to was cold and plain — no furniture except a projection panel, no ornamentation, the floor sloping slightly toward a drain at the far end that was either plumbing or something else. The kind of room the City maintained for functions that didn't benefit from atmosphere.

Eidan activated the projection panel.

The feed on it was not the public feed from the gallery — not the

wide-angle shot of the planet and the fleet. It was the internal security feed, the angle from inside the gallery, covering the Heirs-Second rather than the view they'd been watching.

Kaiden looked at the faces.

He had been looking at the planet. He had not been looking at the other Heirs-Second. The security feed showed him what had been happening behind him while he watched the overlay.

He watched for a while. He watched the way each face processed the assault below — Trever's knife-edge satisfaction, which was genuine and unguarded in a way that he didn't bother to manage; Robere's institutional calculation, which was doing its work and arriving at institutional conclusions; Olan's quality of something held, the thing that might have been grief if he had let it become that but that he didn't let become that because letting it become grief was not what you did in this room. Petr's mechanical annotation, documenting without evaluating. The others, each in their own version.

He watched himself, for the moment he appeared in the feed's angle before Eidan had taken him away. His face was in its arrangement. His hands were on the rail. Nothing was visible.

Eidan stopped the feed.

"What you felt watching that," Eidan said. He was not looking at Kaiden. He was looking at the wall where the feed had been. "Hold onto it."

Kaiden said nothing.

"The City will try to educate it out of you," Eidan said. "Not quickly. Not dramatically. Incrementally. Each session like the one today is designed to move the threshold — what you can witness without reaction, what you can file as operational rather than as atrocity. The process is slow and it works." He looked at Kaiden now. "Hold onto what you felt."

"You're Elevatio," Kaiden said. "You're the institution that wants to use me."

"Yes," Eidan said.

"So why are you telling me this."

"Because what I want from you is not compatible with what you would be if the City's education succeeded," Eidan said. "What I need is someone who can still feel what you felt today. If the City metabolizes that out of you, what remains is not what I need." He paused. "And because — " he stopped, and the pause had the quality of a man deciding how much of his actual position to reveal. "Because what you felt today was correct. The reaction was appropriate. Reactions that are appropriate should be preserved."

He said it with the conviction that was Eidan's tell — the complete, maintained certainty. But this time the certainty was not in service of a doctrine about Leaf or bonding or genetic programs. It was in service of something more basic, and the basicness of it made it more believable than the doctrine.

Kaiden looked at the blank projection panel.

He thought about the city lights on the equatorial band. The New Year lights, specifically — the aggregated photons of celebration, the particular quality of light that belongs to a large population marking something collectively. He had been looking at those lights through the crystal floor when the orbital assets began their work.

"I hear you," he said.

Eidan nodded. He picked up the projection panel's control and looked at it for a moment, then set it down.

"Go back to your quarters," he said. "Not through the gallery. There's a route through the secondary corridor, third ring. Lysandir will have noted where you went. If he asks, you were in the bathroom." A pause. "That is a joke."

It was not especially funny. But the not-especially-funniness of it was itself a kind of humanity, in the context of the preceding hour, and Kaiden received it as such.

He left.

The secondary corridor route was longer. He took it.

He walked through the City's ring system in the City's characteristic light, which found no shadow because there was nothing for it to create shadow with, and which had the quality — after twelve weeks — of a light that was familiar and never comfortable, the light of a place that knew exactly what it was doing with its illumination and that thing was not warmth.

He was not thinking about what to do with what he'd witnessed. He was not calculating moves or adjusting positions. He was simply holding what had happened in the way that things need to be held before they can be thought about — with the full weight of them, without the management that thinking applies.

The city lights. The timestamps. The civilian ships' icons going out.

The City's capability to interdict, held.

He held all of it.

In his quarters, later, with the Ursa system outside and the City's hum in the walls and the specific quiet of his own closed door:

He was at the desk, not working, when the voice arrived. Not the directed urgency of a corridor, not the quiet assessment of an evening's reckoning. Something that arrived the way the most significant things arrived — without being asked for, at the moment when asking was not the relevant mode.

Your grandfather, Maren said.

He waited.

He felt the same way about a smaller thing. The voice had a quality he had not heard from her before — not the satisfaction of accuracy, not the dry precision of *you're a Kentur, stand straighter.* Something that was present under those qualities and rarely came to the surface. *He was right, and it cost him nothing. You will be right about this, and it will cost you everything.*

A pause that was not empty.

Do it anyway.

He sat with that.

The Ursa system turned outside. The planet that the City was currently orbiting was below, doing what planets do. Somewhere on the other side of the regional chart, what was left of Reticulum III was also doing what things do after the kind of event the gallery had been arranged to observe.

He looked at his hands on the desk. The practice blade calluses. The hands of someone who had been training for a specific kind of competence since childhood and who was now here, on the City, in the rooms of an institution that had been building toward him for three generations.

He thought about the city lights.

He thought: *do it anyway.*

He did not know yet what the *it* was — what form it would take, what it would require, what it would cost. The cost would be what it would be.

He looked at the desk. He looked at the walls. He looked at the City's specific light falling through the viewport.

Outside, the Ursa system continued.

TWENTY-TWO

IMPERIAL CITY — URSA SYSTEM

THE ASSAULT WAS complete by the time the surveillance review reached her desk.

Not a delay in the review — the feed was live throughout, the monitoring systems running their continuous record of every space the City's sensors covered. The delay was hers. She had been in meetings through the gallery observation, the kind of meetings that could not be rescheduled for an assault she had already decided to let proceed, and she had been in them with the quality of attention they required, and the surveillance review had waited in the queue with the priority fiag she had assigned it.

She watched it now, in her private suite, with a glass of water at her elbow and the Reticulum aftermath on the secondary screen in the small, contained way of something that had concluded rather than something in progress.

She had not attended the gallery. She had not needed to. The gallery was for the Heirs-Second, for the lesson that the lesson was designed to deliver, and she had already learned the lesson the lesson

was based on. Her presence would have changed the dynamics of the observation, introduced an element that would have caused the Heirs-Second to manage themselves differently, and the unmanaged response was the pedagogically useful one.

So she had been in meetings, and the gallery had done its work without her, and now she was watching the feed.

She was watching, specifically, the Heirs-Second rather than the planet.

The surveillance system had done what it was designed to do: tracked every face, tagged every physical response, logged every micro-expression in the biometric record alongside the timestamp of what was happening outside the gallery window at that moment. The system produced a composite record — what was shown and what was received simultaneously. It was an excellent instrument for calibrating response.

She moved through the feed at standard speed rather than accelerated, which was not her ordinary practice with surveillance review. She moved at standard speed because she was looking for something specific and specific things were found at the speed they occurred rather than the speed that was operationally convenient.

She found it at forty-three minutes.

The assault's forty-third minute was the minute when the civilian craft had been engaged. The Ethin fleet's decision to pursue them rather than let them run — not a tactical necessity, a choice, the choice of a House communicating the extent of its commitment to a scorched conclusion — had produced the specific character of stimulus that the gallery had been waiting for without knowing it was waiting for it.

The faces at forty-three minutes were the faces of people receiving something they had not adequately prepared to receive. The preparation had been insufficient not because the preparation

had been inadequate but because no preparation for this specific thing was adequate, because there was no prior experience of watching civilian transports being tracked and engaged from a gallery window during a lesson in power. The faces at forty-three minutes were the faces of people whose frameworks were encountering something their frameworks had not been designed to hold.

She was used to watching this happen. She had watched it before, in previous cohorts of Heirs-Second, in the faces of her own advisors when they were new, in the faces of Guild heads during the first significant atrocity of their tenures. The forty-third minute was always the minute. The faces at forty-three minutes were the data she was collecting.

She tagged each face in the feed, running her own assessment alongside the biometric system's.

Trever Vexar: satisfaction. Not performed — the genuine satisfaction of someone whose model of the world has been confirmed in a way they found gratifying. The satisfaction of a person for whom the engagement of civilian craft was not a moral variable but a tactical one, and the tactic was correct for the stated purpose. No adjustment required to his framework. He had already metabolized this category of event.

Robere Valerius: calculation. The framework engaging, the institutional logic running, arriving at conclusions about what this event meant for the stability of the system, for the Houses in the regional cluster, for the cost-benefit analysis of the Ethin action relative to the precedent it set. Not moved, but assessing. The calculation was productive. He would be useful.

Olan Orian: something held. The face performing its relaxed neutrality with the specific effort of someone whose relaxed neutrality was a performance at forty-three minutes, the effort showing in the quality of the stillness — too complete, the kind of stillness that costs something to maintain. He was receiving the event and declining to let the reception show. He was capable of suppression at this level. This was noted.

Kaiden Kentur: nothing visible.

She paused the feed at this point, precisely, and looked at the Kentur face.

It was in its arrangement. The hands were on the rail. The posture was the posture she had seen in every formal setting he'd occupied since his arrival — controlled, correct, giving nothing away. The biometric overlay flagged elevated cardiac rate, minor dermal response, the physiological signatures of a body responding to something it found significant. The face gave nothing. The body was honest. The face was very good.

She looked at the face for a moment, at the gap between what the biometric system was reporting and what the face was showing, and she thought about what lived in that gap. What it required to produce. How long it took to develop.

He was nineteen. She had arrived at a face this controlled at approximately thirty-two, and she had started with better training.

She continued the feed.

Kimme was at the lower tier.

She had watched the feed's forty-three minutes and she had watched Kimme at the forty-three minutes and she had noted: the arrangement of Kimme's face had not broken. The arrangement had held through the fleet's approach, through the orbital platforms going out, through the civilian ships engaging. It had held.

It had not held in the specific area around the eyes.

This was a small thing. The biometric system had not flagged it — the flag threshold required more deviation than what Kimme's face produced. A human reader, watching for what a biometric system wasn't watching for, caught it. The arrangement had held everywhere except in one small area, around the eyes, for approximately three seconds at minute forty-four.

Three seconds. An area smaller than a thumb.

Janna had watched Kimme's face for twenty-one years. She had watched it in formal settings and informal settings, under pressure and at rest, in moments of genuine feeling and in moments of performance. She had calibrated her reading of it over two decades of close attention.

The three seconds at minute forty-four were the first time, in a public setting, that Kimme's face had broken its arrangement.

Not dramatically. Not visibly to the room. The biometric system had not caught it. None of the other Heirs-Second had caught it — she had checked their attention vectors during those three seconds, and none of them were looking at the lower tier.

One of them had been.

Kaiden Kentur's attention vector at minute forty-four, second twelve, through second fourteen: the lower tier. Duration: two seconds. Returned to the overlay at second fifteen.

He had been looking at Kimme during the break.

He had been looking away before the break was visible enough to register on the biometric system, which meant he had been looking specifically at the right moment and had seen it. And had looked away before it could be read as looking.

She sat with this for a moment.

He had seen the break, and he had looked away from it so quickly that the looking itself was not legible as significant in any surveillance feed she had access to. The only way she knew he had seen it was by tracking his attention vector against Kimme's biometric timeline at the precise moment of overlap.

He had seen it. He had concealed that he saw it. He had done both of these things in a sequence that lasted two seconds, without visible decision-making, in the forty-third minute of a traumatic observation exercise.

She reviewed the biometric overlay on his face at the relevant moment. Elevated cardiac rate, slightly increased. Dermal response, consistent with what had been ongoing. Pupillary response: brief contraction, consistent with a shift in focal point.

Nothing that told the story she had just read.

The water in the glass was still cold. She drank some of it.

She was thinking about two things simultaneously, which was her ordinary mode of cognition and did not require any special effort. The first thing: Kimme's face at forty-four minutes. The second thing: what the two things meant in combination.

Kimme's arrangement had broken.

This had not happened before. This was the first time. The first time was significant not as an isolated event but as the beginning of a series — the first data point in a sequence, which was always the hardest data point to place correctly because you didn't yet have the rest of the series to calibrate it against.

She thought about what had produced it. The civilian craft at the forty-third minute. The engagement. The arrangement had held through the orbital platforms. The arrangement had held through the city lights on the night side beginning to contract. The arrangement had broken at the specific moment when the civilian craft were being engaged.

She thought about what that meant about Kimme — about where exactly in her daughter's processing the framework had encountered something the framework couldn't hold. Not the assault as a whole. Not the strategic logic of it. A specific element of it, the specific element that involved people with less than no tactical significance, people who were running, being engaged because they were in the way of a complete conclusion.

She thought: *Kimme is becoming someone different than she was.*

This was not a new thought. She had been tracking the becoming for weeks, noting the evidence of it — the slight additional processing time before certain responses, the quality of her attention in the debrief sessions, the specific texture of her silence when the silence held something. She had been tracking it and attributing it to the

ordinary process of a twenty-one-year-old developing into what twenty-one-year-olds are supposed to develop into.

She had attributed it correctly. But she had underestimated the pace, and she had not identified the catalyst clearly enough.

The catalyst was visible now.

Kaiden Kentur's attention vector, minute forty-four, seconds twelve through fourteen: lower tier.

She opened the Kentur file.

She had opened it many times in the past weeks. She was opening it now with a different question than the questions she had been asking it previously. The previous questions were about what he was — what the Elevatio had built him for, what the genetic selection had produced, what the capability profile looked like. The new question was simpler and harder.

What is he doing to my daughter.

Not doing to — doing with. The preposition mattered. Doing to implied something being applied to a passive recipient. Doing with implied a reciprocal process.

She thought about Kimme's report after the Wayfinder facility — *he says what he means and then stops. Nobody talks to me like that.* She had noted this and had attributed it to Kaiden's operational style, the specific manner of a person who had been trained in a specific direction and whose training had produced a distinctive quality of directness. She had considered whether the directness was genuine or performed. She had concluded: genuine, within his current understanding of the situation.

The directness was affecting Kimme.

Not because Kimme had no experience of direct people — Janna was direct. The briefers were direct. The Guild heads were direct. Everyone in the City's upper register communicated with precision. Kimme had been surrounded by direct people since birth.

The directness that was affecting Kimme was not the City's kind. The City's directness was the directness of people who were precise because imprecision was a liability. Kaiden's directness, as Kimme had described it — *like he means it* — was the directness of a person for whom precision was not a strategic tool but simply how they operated. The difference between choosing precision and having it as your natural mode.

Kimme had not encountered this before, in anyone she spent sustained time with.

She reviewed the Shexim message she had composed three weeks ago, the preliminary note to D'Hana about the Greater Assayors. The message had been sent. The response had been the response she expected: acknowledgment, availability at the Cycle's scheduled stop, a routine health assessment framed as standard.

Four weeks to Shexim, approximately. The assessment would produce the genetic profile that would answer the what-he-is question definitively.

Between now and Shexim: Kimme's arrangement was changing, and the catalyst was a nineteen-year-old Heir-Second who said what he meant and then stopped.

She thought about whether this was a complication or an opportunity. The thinking took approximately forty seconds, which was longer than it usually took for this category of calculation.

The answer she arrived at was: both, and the sequencing of the both was critical.

She opened a new communications window. Not the Shexim line — the surveillance administration. She composed a request for supplementary monitoring on the Heir-Second block's East residential section: Kaiden Kentur's suite specifically, and the surrounding corridor. The request framed the supplementary monitoring as a routine elevated-interest flagging, which was accurate to the letter and accu-

rate to the spirit, the spirit being that her interest in his suite had recently elevated.

She sent it.

She reviewed his genetic file. She had done this before. She did it now with the specific question of the Fold capability — not the Commune, which the Elevatio had flagged and which was expressing itself in the increasingly managed quality of Kaiden's attention, the specific quality she had noted in the gallery. The Fold recessive. Which the file said was present and latent and not yet expressing.

Twelve weeks on the City. The Commune active but uncontrolled. The Fold not yet accessible.

She thought about whether it would express before Shexim. The Elevatio's expectation, based on Eidan's communications which she had access to through channels the Elevatio did not know she had access to, was that expression would be triggered by a specific kind of pressure — not the ordinary social pressure of the Heir-Second block, but something more significant. Something that required the person to act from a place other than their ordinary resources.

She thought about what forty-four minutes had felt like for someone who was hiding their reaction as effectively as Kaiden had hidden his.

She thought about what Maren Kentur's voice sounded like, based on the Commune histories she'd compiled from every documented ancestral contact in the regional records. She did not have direct access to what was being said in those exchanges — Commune was not surveillance-accessible. She had the shape of it from behavioral changes and from Aurelo's field reports, which predated his departure and which she had extracted from the Elevatio's records.

She added a note to the Shexim file: *Fold expression possibly accelerating. Adjust assessment protocols to include capacity latency indicators.*

She sent the note.

She sat back from the desk and looked at the secondary screen,

where the Reticulum aftermath was still running on its slow feed — the Ethin fleet completing its withdrawal, the orbital assets returning to their holding positions, the standard post-engagement documentation cycling through its record of what had occurred.

House Ethin had destroyed itself. House Alistair had been destroyed. Two Houses removed from the board in a single managed outcome. The Houses in the regional cluster were recalibrating their assessments of the current Matriarch's willingness to allow specific categories of event to proceed without interdiction. The lesson the gallery had been designed to deliver had been delivered.

The surveillance feed had also delivered something.

She thought about Kimme at minute forty-four, seconds twelve through fourteen. The three seconds where the arrangement had not held in the area around the eyes. She thought about what three seconds of unmanaged response, in a person who had never before produced unmanaged response in a public setting, represented as a rate of change.

She had underestimated the pace.

She would not underestimate it again.

She looked at the genetic file, at the Shexim timeline, at the supplementary monitoring request that was already routing through the system.

Then she looked at the door to the next room, the door that Kimme had come through earlier in the day and left through and which was now simply a door.

She sat with the question of whether what was happening to Kimme was what Kimme was supposed to become or something different from it, and with the question of how quickly the two could diverge from each other, and with the question she had not asked herself before, which was: *what happens to my plan if Kimme decides, on her own terms, to do something I have not planned for.*

The question was unfamiliar. She let it be unfamiliar.

Outside, the Ursa system turned.

The lights on the secondary screen documented an aftermath.

The main screen held the supplementary monitoring request, the Shexim note, the genetic file at its relevant entry. The water glass was empty.

She refilled it, because the body required water regardless of what the mind was working through, and what the mind was working through did not benefit from being interrupted by the body's requirements.

She drank. She worked.

The night continued, and the City moved through it, and everything that was happening was happening at once in its various registers, which was always the condition and which she had learned, over the course of twenty-three years, to receive without either alarm or the false comfort of imagining she could manage all of it simultaneously.

You managed what you could, you watched what you couldn't manage, and you tried to be positioned correctly for when the unwatched things resolved.

She was positioned correctly.

She intended to remain so.

TWENTY-THREE

IMPERIAL CITY — URSA SYSTEM

A WEEK HAD PASSED since Reticulum.

The City did not mark time the way stations did — there was no shift-change audio, no scheduled maintenance windows that oriented the day, no crew announcements over the comms. The City marked time through its social calendar, which was itself a form of measurement: which events were scheduled, who appeared at them, what the combinations of appearances signaled about the current configuration of interest and concern. The week after Reticulum had a specific texture in this measurement: more salon events, more card sessions, more of the casual proximity that functioned as intelligence gathering when the formal channels were overloaded with the aftermath of two Houses being removed from the board simultaneously.

Kaiden moved through this week differently than he had moved through previous weeks.

The difference was not something he could have named precisely. He was not less careful — he was more careful, in the

specific way that carefulness becomes different when it is in service of intention rather than in service of protection. The previous weeks had been careful in the protective sense: don't be remarkable, maintain the arrangement, give nothing away. This week the carefulness was aimed differently. Not at what to prevent but at what to do.

He had spent the week since Reticulum sitting with Eidan's instruction — *hold onto it* — and with Maren's — *do it anyway* — and with the specific clarity he'd arrived at in the gallery about what the City was and how it functioned. He had arrived at a position. Not a plan — he didn't have enough information for a plan. A position: he was going to stop waiting to know everything before acting and start acting with what he had.

The first thing he had to act with was the City's own grammar, which he now understood well enough to write a sentence in.

The diplomatic salon that the Ione Matriarch hosted in the aftermath of the Court session was the kind of event that served multiple functions simultaneously: it was a face-saving gesture by a House that had just been publicly reminded of its precarity, it was an information-gathering exercise for everyone who attended, and it was the specific kind of social function that the Heirs-Second were expected to attend because attending it was itself a form of participation in the City's governance machinery.

Kaiden arrived on time rather than late, which was a decision. Arriving late was the statement that you had other options and were choosing to grant this event your attention at a point of your choosing. Arriving on time was the statement that this event had your full attention from its start, which communicated investment rather than condescension. Different messages, both deliberate. He had been arriving late to social functions for eight weeks. This one he arrived to on time.

The room organized itself the way rooms of this type organized

themselves: the power center established quickly, the various factions finding their positions relative to it, the minor Houses and orbiting interests settling into the margins. The Ione Matriarch presided with the specific competence of someone who had been performing this function for decades and had distilled it to its essential components. The Guild heads present did what Guild heads did. The Heirs-Second distributed themselves according to their existing alliances and the alliances they were testing.

He found Rhian Lyra at the edge of the window section, which was where Rhian usually positioned himself at these events — the outside of the room's gravitational center, with sight lines to both the room's interior and the City's exterior, which was Rhian's operational preference made visible in his physical positioning. He poured Rhian's glass before his own and handed it to him, which was the gesture of someone paying attention to something other than their own priority in the moment, and which Rhian received with the small nod of someone for whom the gesture registered accurately.

"Ione held it better than expected," Rhian said.

"They always do," Kaiden said. "The form absorbs the impact."

"The form also conceals it," Rhian said. "Which is the point."

They watched the room for a moment. Kaiden was making assessments that would have taken him longer, six weeks ago, to make. The pace of his reading had improved. The grammar was becoming more fluent.

"The Alastor representative," Kaiden said. "Near the Matriarch's left. What do you know about their current position on the Leaf synthesis program."

Rhian looked at him. "You're asking."

"I'm asking," Kaiden confirmed.

Rhian was quiet for a moment, in the way of someone checking something before offering it. "Their synthesis program is at least five years behind where they thought it would be at this point. The technical problem is harder than they projected. They need a biological sample to work from, and the sample quality they've been able to

acquire from secondary suppliers is insufficient for the precision their synthesis requires." He paused. "They would very much like to acquire a sample from a primary source."

"I know," Kaiden said.

"And you're not going to give them one," Rhian said.

"Not under any arrangement that doesn't include a complete chain-custody record and a Chain certification," Kaiden said. "Which they won't accept, because chain-custody would document where the sample went and what it was used for."

Rhian smiled. The gold tooth caught the salon's resin-light. "You've been doing your homework."

"I've been here thirteen weeks," Kaiden said. "I should know by now what's available to learn."

They talked for another few minutes — specific, operational, the kind of conversation that the City's better relationships were built from: mutual information exchange at a level of specificity that made both parties more useful to each other than they were to the room at large. Kaiden gave Rhian two pieces of information about the Cendant system's Leaf production timeline that he could verify and that Rhian could use, and received in return three pieces of intelligence about the regional House dynamics that he couldn't have gotten from the block's formal briefings.

This was the grammar in action. He had spent weeks learning it. He was now using it.

The card game that evening was in the secondary common area's southern room — the room Olan had found in the third week and which had become the regular venue for the sessions that were not the formal common area sessions. The table, the cabinet, the same people in their customary positions. Olan dealing. Robere at his usual angle. Trever across the table.

What was different: the quality of the silence when Kaiden

arrived. Not the silence of people who had been talking and stopped, the silence of people who had been not-talking about something specific and were resuming their not-talking in a way that acknowledged what the not-talking contained.

The week after Reticulum. Twelve people had been at the gallery. None of them had discussed it in any setting Kaiden had been in since. This was not unusual — the City's social machinery did not encourage the explicit processing of institutional atrocities. You filed them, you metabolized them, you returned to the functions. The not-discussing was part of the form.

He sat down. Olan dealt. The game began.

He played better than usual — not in the sense of winning more, in the sense of playing with more deliberate intention, reading the table more carefully, making decisions about what to show and what to protect with the clarity that came from knowing what he was doing and why. He won two games and lost one and in the third game, with four players left, made a deliberate choice to fold at a moment when holding would have been the more conservative play but would have prolonged the game, because the game had arrived at its useful purpose and extending it didn't serve anything.

Olan noticed this. He always noticed things. He said nothing.

Rhian was not at the card table this evening. Nix was, in the corner seat she sometimes occupied when she attended these sessions, playing with the specific quality she brought to everything — present, calibrated, giving away the minimum that allowed the game to proceed. Iscaryot was not present.

At some point in the middle of the third game, Olan said, to the table: "Anyone talk to Robere about Reticulum?"

Robere, who was looking at his cards, said: "I don't see what there is to say about it."

Olan said: "I'm just checking."

Robere put down a card. "It was within the existing authority structure. Houses contest, Houses fail. The implications for the

regional balance are significant but not unprecedented." A pause. "I don't see what there is to say."

Trever, without looking up: "Well said."

Olan looked at Kaiden.

Kaiden looked at his cards. He considered saying what he thought, and considered the room, and considered what was useful to say in this specific company in this specific context, and said: "The civilian ships."

The table was quiet.

Olan said: "Yes."

Trever looked up. "What about them."

Kaiden said: "The orbital assets had the capability to interdict. They held."

Trever said: "That's policy, not malfunction."

Kaiden said: "Yes."

Trever looked at him for a moment. "And?"

Kaiden said: "And the policy produced the outcome. I'm noting the relationship."

Trever looked at his cards. He said nothing else.

Robere said, without looking up: "Policy exists for reasons that are not always visible from the position of a single event."

Kaiden said: "I know."

The game continued. No one said anything more about it. But the quality of the room had shifted, in the specific way of a room where something has been named that was not named before, and the naming has changed what the not-naming had been concealing. The shift was small and not dramatic and lasted for the rest of the session.

Olan dealt the next hand.

He was in the corridor after the session, heading back toward the East block, when Kimme fell into step with him.

This was the third time she had done this. The pattern was becoming visible: she appeared in corridors after events that shared specific qualities. Qualities that had something to do with what was present in the event below the surface of what the event formally contained.

"The card game," she said.

"Yes," he said.

They walked. The corridor was the secondary residential corridor, the one he had come to use as a default route because it was less trafficked and had the slightly lower light that was easier to be in at the end of an evening.

"I wasn't there," she said.

"I know."

"Someone in the room will report what was said."

"I know that too," he said. He paused. "I said it anyway."

She was quiet for a moment. They reached the junction where she would ordinarily have continued toward the Chadrac residential section and he would have turned toward the East block. They were both still walking.

He had been waiting for this. Not planning it — waiting for it, the way you wait for something you can feel coming without being able to see exactly what form it will take.

"There's a room," she said. "My minder swept it two days ago for a different purpose. It's still clear."

He said: "All right."

The room was small and had the dead-air quality of swept spaces. She triggered the sweep from memory — a device she carried that she activated without ceremony, the practice of someone who had been doing this for long enough that the ceremony was stripped out.

They sat in the two chairs that the room's sparse furniture

offered, facing each other in the way that the room's geometry suggested facing each other.

She said: "What do you actually believe about the City."

Not *what do you think about it* or *what's your assessment*. What do you actually believe. The word *actually* carrying the weight of *not the version you give to other people*.

He sat with the question for a moment. He thought about what the accurate answer was, and how to give it without the management that he applied to almost every answer he gave in every room on the City.

"I believe it's a machine that has been running for three hundred years," he said. "And that it produces specific outcomes because of how it's built, not because of the intentions of the people inside it. Janna Chadrac is not — " he paused, finding the right word — "is not malevolent. She's embedded in a structure that requires certain things to continue operating, and those things include the capacity to watch what we watched last week and not stop it. The structure requires that. The structure is the problem."

He stopped. He had said more than he'd intended to say. The room's swept silence held it without comment.

Kimme was looking at him. Not the assessment-look, not the calibrated attention of someone gathering information. Something else — the quality of attention that is attention rather than assessment, the attention that receives rather than catalogues.

"And you think," she said, slowly, "that knowing the structure is the problem means — what? That someone should change it?"

"I think someone is going to," he said. "Not because of intention. Because structures that produce the kind of outcome we watched last week become less stable as the awareness of what they're producing spreads." He paused. "And I think being positioned correctly when the stability changes is something worth thinking about."

She looked at him. Something was working in her face that was not quite any of the registers he'd seen her use before — not the public arrangement, not the private quality she'd had in the corridor

after the Court session, not the three seconds at minute forty-four. Something more present than any of those, more fully whatever it was, occupying the full space of her expression rather than a fraction of it.

"The star chart," she said.

"Yes," he said.

"The Court session," she said. "The Matriarch who was telling the truth."

"Yes."

"The Fold Room," she said. And then stopped.

He looked at her.

"The Fold Room," she said again, more quietly, and the second saying of it had a different quality from the first — the quality of a door being approached rather than opened.

"I don't know what you saw in the Fold Room," he said.

"No," she said. "You don't."

She held the look for a moment. Then she said: "Nobody talks to me like that."

He said: "Like what."

She said: "Like they mean it." A pause. "Like the thing they're saying is the thing they actually think, and they're saying it because it's the thing they think, not because of what they want from me when they've said it."

He said nothing. She hadn't asked a question.

She looked at the room's floor for a moment — the swept concrete, the absence of the surveillance that the sweep had removed. Then back at him.

"I don't know what to do with it," she said.

"With what," he said.

"With any of it," she said. "With last week. With the shape of — " she stopped. "With something I can see but can't name yet."

He said: "You don't have to name it immediately."

"No," she said. "But eventually."

"Yes," he said. "Eventually."

She looked at him for one more moment, in the quality of the full presence that had been in her face since she'd asked the question. Then she looked at the floor again, and the presence dialed back — not to the public arrangement, but to something in between, the register of someone returning to the ordinary surface of themselves after being somewhere deeper.

"Good night," she said.

She left.

He walked back to his quarters through the City's corridors, through its characteristic light, through the specific quality of a space that had been built for function and that functioned without remainder, producing its designed outcomes with the reliability of three hundred years.

The Ursa system was outside. One week after Reticulum.

He thought about what she had said: *like they mean it.* He thought about the number of people she had been surrounded by, in twenty-one years of living at the center of the thing — people who were precise, who were direct, who chose their words carefully. People who said the thing that was calculated to produce the outcome they needed from the interaction. The City's grammar, spoken fluently by everyone around her from birth.

What she had never had was someone who said what they thought because it was what they thought. Not as a strategic choice. Not as a calculated form of directness. As the basic mode.

He thought about what it would mean to have grown up in this room and never to have encountered that.

He thought about what she was carrying now, going home — the thing she could see but couldn't name yet. The shape of the truth about the Fold Room, and the shape of what he'd said in the swept room, and the shape of what she'd said back, and whatever those

shapes combined to form in the space of her own thinking where no one could read her.

She was going to arrive at something. He didn't know when. He didn't know what the arriving would look like when it happened.

He thought: *some things can't be moved faster than they move.*

He thought: *but the direction is visible.*

The corridor brought him to the East block's entrance. He went through.

TWENTY-FOUR

IMPERIAL CITY — URSA SYSTEM

THE COURT SESSION for the Ursa system had a different quality from the ones Kaiden had attended before.

He noticed the difference before he could name it. The gallery was the same gallery, the blue-black marble floor the same floor, the dais the same dais. The Clerk at his station, annotating in real time. The Guild heads arranged in their tiers. The Elevatio contingent in their white and crimson. All of it the same as previous sessions in its form.

The difference was D'Hana.

She stood at the center of the floor in the position of petitioner, which was the floor's designated position for the person who was formally asking something of the Court. The position implied a relationship between the person in it and the institution above: the person below was requesting; the institution above was deciding. This was the grammar of the position. Every other person Kaiden had watched stand in that position had embodied that grammar, had held themselves in the specific way of people who have come to ask

something and are managing their awareness that the asking could go either direction.

D'Hana was not managing that awareness.

She stood in the position of petitioner with the posture of someone who had come to conduct a transaction that had already been negotiated, and whose presence on the floor was a formality that the transaction required rather than the substance of it. She was in the position, and the position's grammar was not the grammar she was using. She was using the grammar of someone who knew what the contract said.

He had seen her in the Throne Room before — in her functional chair at the dais's left side, in the corridor during formal movements, at the edges of sessions she was observing. He had noted her quality of attention, the internal calculation, the neutrality of her public face. He had not yet seen her stand in the center of the floor and be the room's subject, and seeing it now produced new information about what she was.

She was not afraid of this room.

This was notable. He had seen people who were managing fear in this room, and people who were performing the absence of fear in this room, and people who had disciplined themselves to the point where the fear was present but invisible. D'Hana was not in any of those categories. She was not managing anything. The room was a venue for conducting business, and she was conducting it.

The petition's substance was, as the briefing had indicated, the Bio-Adaptive armor development rights. The existing protocol restricted variant form development to Faelan review cycles — each new configuration of the living mesh required House Faelan's approval before deployment, a licensing structure that had been in place since the original development agreement. The Shexosant wanted rights to develop variant forms outside that review struc-

ture, with Chain logging requirements substituted for Faelan sign-off.

D'Hana presented this in the language of operational necessity. The Fusor and Chord weapons were in active deployment by forces the Shexosant engaged — the standard configuration of the Bio-Adaptive mesh provided insufficient protection against both weapons at their current yield levels, and the review cycle's timeline was incompatible with the response pace the threat required. A variant form developed internally, logged at the Chain level, would close the gap in months rather than years.

The argument was correct as an argument. Kaiden had read the weapons data in the pre-session briefing and the data supported what she was saying — the standard mesh's protection against Fusor and Chord was measurable and measurably inadequate at current yield parameters. The technical case was sound.

He was not watching the technical case.

He was watching D'Hana's body during the argument.

The specific quality of someone making an argument they know to be correct, versus someone making an argument they are trying to make correct through the force of presentation: different. The first has a quality of offering — here is the fact, receive it. The second has a quality of pressure — I need you to agree with this. D'Hana was offering. The offering had the specific quality of something offered from a position of security rather than from the position of someone who needs the offering received.

She did not need the petition granted.

She wanted it granted, for operational reasons that were real and documented. But the wanting was not the needing, and the absence of needing was visible in her presentation to anyone who knew what to look for. She had arrived at this session knowing something that made the outcome, while not predetermined, less consequential than it appeared to everyone else in the room.

He thought about what she knew.

He thought about the founding agreement. Three hundred years

old. Never published. Held between the Chadrac line and the institution that maintained the City's military posture. Every subsequent Matriarch and every subsequent Shexosant commander had operated within the framework of that agreement without the agreement being available for outside review. What the agreement actually said — what the Shexosant's actual obligations were, and what the reciprocal obligations of the City were to the Shexosant — was known in full only to the parties.

She had come to this room as a petitioner. She was operating as a party.

The presentation concluded and the formal response period began. The Faelan representative spoke — House Faelan's position was that the review cycle existed for reasons of quality assurance and liability management, and that Chain logging was not an equivalent substitute for the technical oversight the review provided. The argument was valid in a narrow sense and irrelevant in the practical sense that the Court was not going to be moved by it, which the Faelan representative appeared to understand, because the argument was delivered in the register of someone recording a position rather than someone trying to change an outcome.

Then a period of silence in which Janna received the argument from her position at the summit of the dais with the quality of reception that was also processing — the information arriving, the categorization occurring, the verdict forming in whatever part of her cognition produced verdicts.

Kaiden looked at Derry.

He had been looking at Derry at regular intervals throughout the session. He had noted, at the Pictor session, that Derry watched D'Hana rather than Janna during key exchanges, and he had filed it without yet understanding what it meant. He had been accumulating data points — each session another one — and now he was

watching with the specific attention of someone who has enough data points to see a pattern rather than an incident.

During the Faelan representative's statement, Derry had been watching the Throne. This was the ordinary watching — the formal attention directed at the formal decision-making authority, the behavior of someone in the room performing the expected attention.

During D'Hana's presentation, Derry had been watching D'Hana. Not with the obvious directed attention of a person who has decided to observe something — with the peripheral, habitual quality of someone checking a known variable at intervals. The checks were regular. Each one brief. Each one completed and returned to the ordinary watching.

What was he checking.

He was checking for the thing Kaiden had already noticed and could not yet name: the quality in D'Hana's presentation that communicated the source of her self-possession. Derry was looking for it — had been looking for it, apparently, at every session where D'Hana was present — and was not finding it, which was why the checking continued session after session without resolution.

Derry wanted to know what D'Hana knew. He had been trying to find the answer by watching her face during moments when the institutional pressure on the face was highest, because those were the moments when a face might show something of what was underneath. He had been doing this for, probably, multiple cycles. He had not yet found it.

Kaiden filed this.

The Court rendered its decision: the petition was granted with Chain logging requirements substituted for Faelan review. Standard, as expected. D'Hana received the decision with the same quality she had presented the petition — the transaction completed, the next thing begun.

She turned to leave the floor with a precision that was not brisk and was not ceremonial, simply efficient, each stride the stride of someone whose physical movement through space has been reduced

to its essential components over a lifetime of practice. She crossed the floor and the room received her departure with the atmospheric readjustment of a room that is returning to its prior configuration after a significant presence has moved through it.

Kaiden watched Derry watch her go.

The session continued with two smaller items — a trade boundary dispute between adjacent Houses in the Ursa cluster and a licensing renewal for one of the Guild's secondary operations in the system. Kaiden watched these with a fraction of the attention he'd given the first session, because the first session had produced the information he was going to be thinking about for the rest of the day and the secondary items were providing cover for the thinking.

When the session concluded and the gallery dispersed, he walked the connecting corridor at the pace he had learned to walk it — not hurried, not conspicuously slow, the pace of someone moving between places without communicating urgency about either.

Lysandir was in the corridor outside the gallery's eastern exit. Not waiting — moving, from a direction that intersected with Kaiden's route at this point. The intersection was deliberate and its deliberateness was visible to anyone who was watching, which meant it was not being concealed.

They walked together.

"The session," Kaiden said.

"Yes," Lysandir said.

"D'Hana's petition."

"An efficient presentation," Lysandir said. "The outcome was predictable."

"She wasn't afraid of the room," Kaiden said.

Lysandir was quiet for a moment, which was not the silence of someone who hadn't heard but the silence of someone receiving something that had arrived in a form they found interesting.

"No," Lysandir agreed.

"She was negotiating from a position," Kaiden said. "The petition was a formality. She knows something about her situation that makes the formality inconsequential."

Lysandir walked. The corridor here was the wide administrative artery, well-trafficked, their conversation audible at close range but not across the space. "You're describing the founding agreement," he said.

"I'm describing the effect of it," Kaiden said. "I don't know what the agreement says."

"Neither do I," Lysandir said. "Neither does anyone outside the Chadrac line and the Shexosant's own hierarchy." He paused. "The agreement predates every currently living person involved with either institution. It has never been published. The Chain has a record of its existence but not its content. Three hundred years of every legal scholar who tried to access it have produced the same result: acknowledgment that it exists, no access to what it says."

"And Derry has been watching D'Hana's face for the same reason you just explained it to me," Kaiden said.

Lysandir looked at him briefly. "Yes."

"Because if the Shexosant's obligations are to the City rather than to Janna specifically," Kaiden said, "the implications for — everything — are different."

"Yes," Lysandir said. "If the contract binds the Shexosant to the Institution of Imperium rather than to the Chadrac line, then a change in who occupies the City's seat of authority does not necessarily destabilize the Shexosant's institutional function." He paused. "And if it binds them specifically to the Chadrac line, then any threat to the Chadrac line is simultaneously a threat to the City's only military apparatus, which makes any such threat — differently calculated."

The corridor brought them to a junction. Lysandir stopped, which indicated the conversation was approaching its complete form.

"Has the Elevatio tried to get access to the agreement directly," Kaiden said.

"The Elevatio has been trying to get access to the founding agreement for a hundred years," Lysandir said. "Through the Chain, through their own archival research, through cultivated relationships with former Shexosant officers. They have found nothing." He looked at Kaiden. "Derry believes the answer is in D'Hana's behavior under pressure rather than in any document. Which is why he watches her."

Kaiden thought about D'Hana walking out of the Throne Room. The efficiency of the stride. The absence of relief, because relief requires the prior presence of uncertainty, and the uncertainty had not been in her presentation.

He thought about the founding agreement in its three-hundred-year silence.

He thought about what it would mean, if the soldiers did not belong to the woman.

"Thank you," Kaiden said.

Lysandir inclined his head — the specific inclination that marked the conclusion of an exchange he considered complete — and turned at the junction, moving toward the administrative section.

Kaiden walked on.

He was in the East block's reading room that evening — a small space off the main common area, under-used because most of the Heirs-Second found their reading elsewhere, which made it a space of relative privacy during the evening hours — when the voice arrived.

He had been thinking about the founding agreement and the Shexosant and D'Hana's quality of self-possession, and the thinking had been productive but had arrived at the same wall it always arrived at: he did not have access to the information that would

resolve the question. He could map the shape of the unknown. He could not fill it.

He was sitting with this, looking at the reading room's single viewport — the Ursa system's primary star visible at the angle the City was currently holding, the same star it had been holding for two weeks, the same one they would leave when the Cycle moved them forward — when the voice arrived.

Not Maren. Orvyn, who arrived less often than Maren and when he did arrive had the quality of someone who had been waiting for the right moment rather than responding to a stimulus.

Find the agreement.

This was not, as far as Kaiden could recall, how Orvyn spoke. Orvyn's voice had the quality of his era — longer sentences, the sardonic register, the dry observation that was made from a distance rather than delivered directly. This was shorter than Orvyn usually spoke.

He said, to the empty room: "How."

Nothing for a moment. Then:

Not how. What for. If the soldiers don't belong to the woman, find out who they belong to.

The sentence had the quality of something carried for a long time before being offered. Not advice, exactly — more like a debt being paid, the passing of something that had been held in waiting for the moment it became relevant.

He thought about three hundred years of an agreement held in the silence of two institutions. He thought about D'Hana's face as she left the Throne Room floor, the transaction completed without any visible relief. He thought about Derry's periodic checks at the edges of sessions, the unsuccessful reading of a face that had been maintaining its composure in precisely this context for years.

He thought about what it would mean to know.

He didn't know how to find out. The information was not available through any channel he had access to. The Elevatio had been

trying for a century. Lysandir had no access. The Chain had a record of the existence and no record of the content.

He put the question in the place where he put questions that were real and not yet answerable, the place that was crowded now with several months' worth of questions that had arrived in the City's education and had not yet resolved.

The Ursa system's star was steady through the viewport.

In two days, the City would Fold. The Ursa system would be behind them, the Tucana system ahead — a gas giant system, a transit stop, the last stop before the cycle brought them somewhere new.

He sat in the reading room with the questions that were real and unanswered and looked at the star, and the star held its position relative to the City's rotation, and neither of them moved for a while.

TWENTY-FIVE

IMPERIAL CITY — URSA SYSTEM

THE TOUR of Ursa V departed from the City's secondary docking ring at the ninth hour, in three shuttles, with a cohort that was larger than the Valerius tour had been — twelve Heirs-Second, four Elevatio observers, two Guild attachés, and a Faelan family representative named Edren who had the quality of someone who had been hosting groups like this for long enough that his enthusiasm was genuine in its structure without being genuine in its feeling.

Ursa V was not the system's primary world. Ursa III held the Court installation and the primary settlement, built in the dusk band where the planet's rotation kept the temperature habitable. Ursa V was further out, colder, the light from the system's star arriving already attenuated — a pale thing by the time it reached the planet's surface, adequate for the hydroponic infrastructure that covered the planet's southern highland plateau in a continuous lattice of sealed growing chambers.

The Bio-Adaptive armor development facilities were here too. This was the point of the tour.

The shuttle descent showed the planet's texture before the surface did. From altitude, the hydroponic lattice was visible as a geometric overlay on the highland plateau — the specific geometry of infrastructure that had been grown outward from a single point over many decades, each addition following the logic of what was already present, the whole producing a form that was not planned and not random but was the accumulated result of practical decisions made at close range. The facility at the plateau's center was the original installation, and the generations of expansion fanned from it like the rings of a disturbed body of water, frozen in the moment of their spreading.

The Bio-Adaptive development section was adjacent to the hydroponics but not continuous with it. Different environmental requirements — the mesh cultures needed the specific controlled conditions of the development chambers, which the hydroponic sections didn't provide and didn't need to. The distinction was visible in the architecture: the growing chambers were a lattice, transparent, open to what light was available; the development section was sealed, its surfaces dark, its windows few and small.

Kaiden looked at both sections as they descended. He thought about the growbitat array above Bauxitum, turning in its own system's light. Different scale, different material, different purpose. The same basic logic: sealed environments inside which something organic was being maintained at the conditions it required. The universe's management of biology required a great deal of containment.

They landed and Edren led them through the facility in the order that the tour required: hydroponics first, then the development section, then the production floor where the standard mesh was assembled, then the testing range at the plateau's edge where the mesh's performance against Fusor and Chord weapons was demonstrated. The demonstration involved a volunteer in the standard

configuration being hit at reduced yield — not a comfortable thing to watch, though the volunteer appeared entirely comfortable with it, which was its own kind of demonstration.

Kaiden watched the mesh absorb the impact and begin its repair process — the specific quality of biological matter healing itself at an accelerated rate, the damaged surface drawing together and knitting with a quality that was not quite like anything else in his experience, that occupied the gap between mechanical and organic. The armor was extraordinary technology. He could understand why the Shexosant had petitioned for development rights. He could understand why Janna had granted them.

He also understood, watching the repair process, why the technology was so strategically significant. An army that healed its armor between engagements was a different calculation from an army that didn't. The calculation changed the meaning of every engagement, every attrition scenario, every projection about how long a conflict could be sustained.

He filed this.

Olan was beside him during the demonstration, in the posture that was Olan's habitual tour posture: relaxed, attending, the usual social warmth dialed back to the setting he used when he was doing genuine observation. "Your House is going to need a security arrangement," Olan said, quietly. "Eventually. When the Cendant system becomes more strategically significant."

"I know," Kaiden said.

"The Shexosant's terms are usually better than the open market," Olan said. "But the terms come with obligations that aren't always visible in the initial arrangement."

"I've noticed," Kaiden said.

Olan nodded, once, and returned to the observation.

Nix appeared in the shuttle queue at the tour's end with the seamlessness that Nix brought to all her appearances — not arriving, simply present, her position in the queue established as if she had been in it for some time. Iscaryot was two places ahead, already aboard.

Kaiden recognized the configuration: the tour ending at the shuttles was a natural dispersal point, the group fragmenting into the available transport in patterns that could be managed by anyone who wanted to manage them. He had seen this pattern before. He got on the shuttle that Nix indicated.

The shuttle held seven people. Of the seven, four were Heirs-Second who were not Nix or Iscaryot or Kaiden, and who distributed themselves in the forward section with the quality of people who had been placed there, which they had.

Nix led Kaiden and Iscaryot to the rear section. The shuttle's engine noise on departure produced the coverage that engine noise produced. No sweep was necessary — the shuttle's own systems were operating in the environment that Faelan had designed, which was not the City's environment, and the surveillance architecture was different here, calibrated for different purposes.

Iscaryot sat with the rigid precision that was her physical constant. Nix sat at the edge of the seat, the posture of someone who is comfortable with being uncomfortable. They were in motion before anyone spoke.

"The full picture," Kaiden said. Not a request.

Nix looked at him. "You've been waiting."

"Three weeks," he said. "The first meeting was the shape. You said you'd tell me the content when you were ready."

"We're ready," Iscaryot said.

They spoke for the duration of the transit.

What they laid out was the vision that had been gestating in the

UnImperium network's planning structures for the past decade, refined from a set of grievances into something with the characteristics of an operational plan, which meant it had enough specificity to be plausible and enough ambiguity to accommodate the variables that couldn't be resolved in advance.

The core of it: a Starfarer guild. Not controlled by any House, not controlled by the Elevatio, not administered through the City's Wayfinder infrastructure. A distributed network of Folders — trained, certified, operating independently — who could provide Fold capacity to anyone who could pay for it, under terms that were transparent and subject to the Chain's arbitration rather than to Imperial fiat. The guild would be self-governing. The pattern libraries would be open, contributed by member Folders, accessible to all.

"The City's monopoly," Kaiden said, "is not just on the Fold. It's on the patterns. The Wayfinder-generated navigation data. Without that, a Folder can't reliably find where they're going."

"The patterns are mnemonic anchors," Nix said. "They're useful for training. They're not the mechanism. A Folder who knows a destination well enough can fold to it without a pattern."

Kaiden looked at her. "How well is well enough."

"That's one of the things we don't know precisely," she said. "The UnImperium network's experience is that familiarity can substitute for patterns, up to a certain level of precision. For local Folds — within a known cluster — the familiarity requirement is achievable. For longer transits, the precision requirement is harder to meet."

"How much of the City's pattern library is available in the UnImperium network," he said.

"About forty percent," Iscaryot said. "Accumulated over eighty years, through various means. The remainder is locked in the City's Wayfinder archive, which is not accessible without physical presence in the archive section."

"And the Wayfinders themselves," Kaiden said. "The people who

generate new patterns. The City trains them through a specific protocol. The UnImperium network has its own training methods?"

"Developing them," Nix said. "Slower than the City's. The City has three hundred years of institutional knowledge."

He absorbed this. He thought about the full scope of what they were describing — not just a challenge to the City's authority, but the infrastructure replacement that would need to exist before the challenge was sustainable. The pattern library, the training pipeline, the certification structure, the arbitration mechanism. All of it built in parallel with the City's existing infrastructure, built in the eighty years of quiet development that the UnImperium network had been doing while the City maintained its attention on the systems it could see.

"The volume problem," he said.

Nix looked at him.

"The City's mass," he said. "Even if you have a dozen Folders working together, the volume doesn't work. The City is not a ship. It's a structure the size of a small moon. The mass involved in Folding it—"

"Is not the relevant variable," Iscaryot said. Something in her tone had changed — the flat precision acquiring a quality of emphasis, of someone arriving at a point they had been building toward. "Volume, not mass. That's what we understand from the UnImperium research. The cognitive requirement for Folding scales with how much space a Folder is directing attention to, not how heavy what's inside it is."

He held this. "That's a significant revision to the standard doctrine."

"The standard doctrine is wrong about several things," Nix said. "This is one of them."

"Still," he said. "Volume at the City's scale. One Folder cannot hold a volume that large in directed attention. The mental capacity required exceeds what any individual can sustain."

"One Folder cannot," Iscaryot said. She looked at him with the

directness of someone delivering the sentence they have been waiting to deliver. "Or so we have been operating under the assumption. The assumption has not been tested."

"Because you can't test it," he said. "You can't run an experiment on the City. And if you try to run the experiment on the UnImperium network's available mass and it fails—"

"The consequences are significant," Nix agreed.

He said: "So how do you intend to test it."

Nix said: "We don't know. That is what the Elevatio claims to be trying to figure out."

"For a century," he said.

"For a century," she agreed. "The specific configuration they've been working toward — the bonded Starfarer model — requires a Fold-capable person working in coordination with a Communion-capable person, the bonding being the mechanism through which the Communion extends the Folder's range of directed attention beyond what a single mind can maintain alone." She paused. The shuttle's engine note shifted as they began the docking approach. "Whether this mechanism works as the Elevatio describes it is not something we can verify independently. We have the theory. We don't have the test."

He was quiet for a moment. The question was forming, and he let it form completely before asking it.

"What specifically is the Elevatio testing for," he said. "When they say a Communion-capable person working in coordination with a Folder — what does that mean in practice? What does the Communion do that extends the Folder's range?"

Iscaryot looked at him with the look of someone who has been waiting for a specific question and has just received it.

"The Communion accesses other minds," she said. "Not just the preserved dead — in the theory, a sufficiently developed Communion capability could extend into and through a living mind, sharing its capacity. If a Folder and a Communion-capable person are functioning in coordination during a Fold, the Communion might be able

to extend the Folder's directed attention through additional minds — Wayfinders, trained Folders, anyone within range with the relevant cognitive structure — multiplying the available mental capacity without requiring each individual to consciously participate."

Kaiden said: "That's the theory."

"That's the theory," Iscaryot said. "The Elevatio has been attempting to produce the specific combination of traits required to test it. A Folder. A Communer. In one person, or in two people capable of the specific kind of bonded coordination the theory requires."

He said: "And if the theory is wrong."

"Then the century of work was built on a false model," Nix said. "And the question of how one person — or any person — actually Folds the City at its actual scale remains unanswered."

The shuttle locked onto the docking arm. The engine note dropped. Around them the forward section was moving, the other Heirs-Second gathering their things with the movements of people who had been on a pleasant tour and were ready to return to their ordinary afternoon.

Iscaryot said, quietly, before the forward section's movement reached them: "Which is why they need someone who can Commune and Fold."

She said it without looking at him. Her eyes were on the forward section, tracking the dispersal, the timing.

He said nothing.

The sentence sat in the air between them and the shuttle's ordinary sounds, in the specific space of a thing that has been said for the first time. Not new to him as an inference — he had been assembling this from Aurelo's sessions and Lysandir's briefings and Eidan's Communion room presentation, he had understood for some time that this was what the Elevatio believed he was. But no one had said it to his face. No one had put it in a sentence directed at him, in his presence, as a statement about him specifically.

Which is why they need someone who can Commune and Fold.

Not *someone like you.* Not *someone of your lineage.* Someone who can Commune and Fold. Singular. Present.

Nix stood and moved toward the forward section with the ease of someone returning to the ordinary current. Iscaryot followed with her rigid efficiency. They did not look back at him.

He stayed in his seat for a moment.

The FreeLink chip was in his left pocket. The token was in his left pocket. Three objects he was carrying because of three different people who had decided he was worth investing in, each for their own reasons, each with their own model of what he was and what the model implied he should do.

He thought about the volume problem. About the City's scale. About the theory that one person — or some specific configuration of capability — could hold a volume that large in directed attention.

He thought about what he had been experiencing for months: the pressure behind his left eye, the directional urgency in corridors, the awareness in the growbitat, the voices that were not the standard Communion voices because the standard Communion voices were the voices of dead people and what he was hearing was not always that. The way his attention in the Wayfinder facility had found the unmarked systems before he consciously looked for them. The way the sensation had stirred in the swept room when Nix had asked how you would test it otherwise.

He thought: *I don't know what I can do. But the question of what I can do is becoming more specific than it was.*

He thought: *the Elevatio's theory might be wrong. The mechanism might not work the way they describe. But the question — how one person holds a volume that large — is a question that requires a test. And a test requires someone who can actually try.*

The docking arm had locked. The forward section was emptying into the corridor.

He stood. He walked through the forward section and out through the docking collar and into the City's corridor system, with its characteristic light and its specific quality of a space that had been

engineered to produce a specific effect and was producing it without remainder.

Behind his left eye, something that was not quite a pressure and not quite a direction — something more considered than either — moved briefly, and was still.

He walked back toward the East block.

That night, in his suite, he did not write the accounting. The accounting required knowing what category to put things in, and what he was carrying from the afternoon had not resolved into categories yet. It was still in the form it had arrived in: Iscaryot's sentence, the directness of it, the specific word *needs*, which was not the same as *wants* or *is looking for* or *is building toward*. Needs. Present tense. Immediate.

He thought about the volume problem. About the City. About what it would take.

He thought about Eidan's certainty when the Leaf question was asked, and about Vex's skepticism that Lysandir had mentioned in passing, and about the gap between the Elevatio's theory and what Kimme had observed in the Fold Room that she couldn't yet name.

He thought: *the theory might be wrong in the way it describes the mechanism. But something moves the City. Something has been moving it for three hundred years. And the question of what that something is — and whether it requires what the Elevatio thinks it requires — is a question I am, apparently, the closest thing to a test of.*

The Ursa system's star was visible at the viewport's edge, the angle having shifted over the course of the evening as the City rotated. In two more days the Fold would take them to the Tucana system, and Tucana would be a transit stop, and after Tucana the next system on the Cycle.

He looked at the star. He thought about the City. He thought

about what it would mean to put directed attention on a volume that large and hold it.

He thought: *I don't know if I can.*

He thought: *I don't know that I can't.*

He turned from the viewport and let the room be ordinary around him — the suite's standard surfaces, the City's hum in the walls, the specific quality of a night that was like most nights except for what was inside it.

He let the question settle into the place where questions lived when they were real and not yet answerable.

The City moved through the Ursa system, carrying what it carried.

He was in it. He was what it was carrying, among other things.

That had always been true. It was simply more specific now.

TWENTY-SIX

IMPERIAL CITY — URSA SYSTEM

SHE DID NOT PLAN it for the night after the Ethin assault.

She had been planning it for some time — the specific conversation, the specific route through the Starfarer block, the specific order in which the information would be offered. She had known, since Kimme was fifteen, that this conversation would eventually happen, and she had been assembling its components with the care of someone who understood that the assembly order mattered as much as the content. Some things needed to be said before other things. The wrong sequence produced a different understanding than the right one.

The night after the Ethin assault became the night not because she had planned it that way but because she had watched the surveillance feed for several hours and had seen what was accumulating in Kimme's face — in the quality of the stillness, in the specific way she had been sitting in her own quarters since returning from whatever part of the day she had spent watching the aftermath, and in the small, precise way she had answered the routine check-in at

the standard hour. All of it was correct. All of it was held at a tightness that was one degree above Kimme's ordinary tightness, and the one degree was the thing.

One degree, sustained over several hours, would become something else by morning. What it would become depended on what happened between now and morning.

She composed the instruction and sent it through the secure residential channel.

Meet me in one hour. Wear the duty uniform.

Kimme arrived in the duty uniform, which was the signal that the instruction had been received correctly — not as a social summons, which would have called for a different uniform, but as an operational one. She had the quality she always had when she had been waiting for something: slightly more present than her baseline, the attention already deployed before the thing it was attending to had arrived.

Janna looked at her daughter and thought, as she had occasionally thought across twenty-one years of looking at her: *there you are.* Not the daughter she had shaped, not the instrument she had built, not the heir she had been constructing for two decades. The person underneath all of that, occasionally visible through the construction. The one who had sat with something she didn't have words for after a card game in a swept room, and who had been sitting with the night's accumulation for several hours with no one to give it to.

"Come," she said.

The route to the Starfarer block cut across three of the City's major access channels before angling upward. The checkpoints along the way were the City's standard biometric systems, and they read Janna

and Kimme with the indifferent efficiency of systems that had been reading the Chadrac line for three hundred years. The doors opened. They moved through.

Janna did not explain where they were going. Kimme did not ask. They had developed, over years of these kinds of movements through the City's spaces, a working language of silence — when the silence meant *I will tell you when we arrive* and when it meant *we are in a space where I cannot tell you* and when it meant something else. This silence was the first kind.

The corridor approaching the Starfarer block had the quality of corridors that serve a specific function and have been serving it for long enough that the function has become physical — the walls slightly different in material, the lighting shifted, the ambient sound of the City's systems at a different frequency than elsewhere. The door at the block's outer perimeter was half a meter thick, its surface engraved with the micro-script of every Starfarer who had ever served on the City. The signatures ran from the top — where the founding generation's names were cut in a script that no longer matched any living hand — down to signatures that were recent enough to be legible as the writing of specific individuals.

Kimme's eyes moved across the surface as Janna pressed her forehead to the neural scanner.

"Their names," Kimme said.

"Yes," Janna said.

The door opened.

The waiting chamber inside was not what Kimme had expected — Janna could see this in the specific quality of her attention when they entered, the way it adjusted to receive something different from what it had prepared for. The chamber was comfortable in a way that the block's exterior had not communicated: plush seating with cooling channels embedded in the material, walls hung with the kind of art

that was held here because holding it elsewhere would have been politically complicated, lighting that graded from violet at the ceiling to a warm yellow at knee height, calibrated for calm rather than for any operational purpose.

A good room. A room maintained well for people who lived in it.

Kimme was reading the room with the attention of someone who has been told one thing about a place for their entire life and is now in the place, receiving the actual information.

"How many of them are currently in residence," she said.

Janna said: "Come."

She led Kimme through the waiting chamber and into the corridor beyond it.

The food processing section was not on any tour. It was not accessible to anyone without the specific authorization that Janna and Kimme carried, and the reason for the authorization requirement was the reason for the corridor's existence: what the corridor led to did not match the account that the Starfarer block presented to the City, and the mismatch, if seen by the wrong person at the wrong time, would require explanations that were not available to give.

She had been walking this corridor since she was twenty-two. The first time, her mother had brought her. The second time, she had come alone, because some things require a second visit before they can be looked at directly.

They came to the chamber.

It was the size of a gymnasium, lit at the full operational level — not the warm grading of the waiting chamber but the flat, functional brightness of machinery that does not need to be comfortable to work. The rows of industrial equipment ran the length of the space: hoppers for dry goods, intake bins for raw protein, processing cylinders that were taller than either of them. Conveyor belts ran from the intake section at the near end to the processing section at the far end.

At the far end, the material was shredded and deposited into chutes. The heat from the incineration units at the bottom of the chutes was present in the air as a warmth that was not the warmth of human occupation but of sustained industrial process.

Leaf powder was visible in the hoppers. Bulk Leaf, in the form used for processing rather than for ceremonial use — the refined version came later, in smaller quantities, handled differently. This was the raw supply, moving through the facility in the volumes required for the fiction to be maintained.

Kimme stood at the threshold and did not enter.

She looked at the conveyor belts. She tracked the movement of a container from the intake section through the processing sequence. She watched it reach the far end and disappear into the chute. She watched another follow. She registered the scale of what was being processed and the scale of what was being wasted, and she registered that the waste was not incidental to the process but was the process — that the material was moving through this facility not to be used but to be seen moving through it.

Her face was in its arrangement. But the arrangement was holding something now that it had not been holding when they entered.

"They told us," she said. "The doctrine. The training. A conclave of Starfarers, hundreds strong, bonding through Leaf to achieve the Fold at this scale." She was looking at the conveyor belts. "This is where they live."

"Yes," Janna said.

"It's theater," Kimme said. Not a question.

"Yes," Janna said.

Kimme turned to look at her. "The food comes in, the waste goes out, and from outside it looks like a functioning residential section housing a large population of Starfarers." She paused. "How many people are actually in the block."

"Wayfinders," Janna said. "Pattern generators. The people who produce the navigation data and maintain the mnemonic plates.

They are real. Their function is real. Their work is what the block genuinely houses."

"But not the Starfarer conclave."

"No."

Kimme looked at the machinery.

Janna let the following silence hold. Some things needed to be received before they could be responded to, and what Kimme was receiving was large enough to require the full silence. She did not add to it. She waited.

"The doctrine," Kimme said at last. "Every priest who has ever taught it. Every briefing. Every session. The entire account of how the City moves, taught as established fact for three hundred years." A pause. "None of it."

"Not none," Janna said. "The Wayfinders are real. The pattern plates are real. The navigation function is genuine. What is false is the bonded conclave. The collective mechanism. The number of people required."

Kimme was quiet for a moment. "How many are required."

Janna said: "Come."

The glass gallery above the processing floor was accessible by a narrow stair at the chamber's far end. The gallery gave a full-length view of the equipment below and, to either side of it, the wall.

The wall was lined with preservation tubes. Each one held a suspended head — not a body, just the head, maintained in the specific stasis that the City's preservation technology produced. The faces were at rest, or most of them were. Some were not. The expressions on the faces that were not at rest had the specific quality of expressions that had been fixed at the moment of preservation, and the moments of preservation had not been peaceful ones.

Each tube was labeled with a number. Not a name. A number.

Kimme stood at the gallery rail and looked at the wall for a long time.

"The ancestors," she said.

"The Starfarers," Janna said. "From the old period. Before the consolidation."

"You keep them." Kimme's voice was careful, the flatness that came when she was managing the reception of something very large. "Why?"

"Because the Elevatio can query the dead," Janna said. "A Communion-capable priest, given access to a preserved ancestor, can learn what that ancestor knew. The Starfarers who served in the old period knew things that the Elevatio would find — useful. If they were released into whatever form of persistence follows the preservation, the Elevatio would have access to them." She paused. "We keep them here to keep them from the Elevatio. It is not gentle. It is not the alternative that was available."

Kimme looked at the numbers on the tubes.

"The alternative," she said.

"Destroying the heads entirely would destroy the preserved consciousness," Janna said. "Which would solve the problem and also be a thing I am not willing to do."

Kimme's hands were on the rail. She was looking at the tubes and not at Janna, and the looking had the quality of something genuine — not assessed, not managed, simply present.

"They're alone in there," Kimme said.

"Yes," Janna said.

"They've been alone in there for—" Kimme looked at the upper rows, at the older numbers, at the script on the older labels. "Some of them for centuries."

"Yes," Janna said.

She did not elaborate. The elaboration was available — she could explain the decision's logic, the assessment of available alternatives, the calculation she had inherited from her mother who had inherited it from hers. The explanation was accurate. The room was not the

place for the explanation. The room was the place for the fact, and the fact was sufficient.

Kimme stood at the rail for a long time.

The machinery below ran its continuous process. The conveyor belts moved. The hoppers dispensed. The chutes received. All of it producing the heat signature and the material output of a functioning residential section, from the outside, for anyone checking the block's external records.

"Does it hurt them," Kimme said. "Being in there."

"I don't know," Janna said. "We have no way to assess their experience. The preservation maintains the consciousness in suspension — what that means subjectively, whether the suspension is experience or the absence of it, is not something the technology tells us."

Kimme was quiet.

"I would not keep them here," Janna said, "if destroying them were an option I could choose. The Elevatio would have access to them within a generation. The information would reach people who would use it to produce outcomes I cannot allow." She looked at the tubes. "This is the least available harm. I have looked at the alternatives many times."

Kimme said, without turning: "I believe you."

The quality of the statement was unusual — not the formal acknowledgment of a briefing received, not the calibrated response of someone managing information. The plain statement of a person who has been given something difficult to hold and is holding it.

They stood together in the glass gallery above the machinery, and the block moved through its continuous operations, and the tubes held what they held.

Kimme said, after a long silence: "Kaiden Kentur would think this was wrong."

Janna looked at her.

"All of it," Kimme said. Not angrily. Quietly, the way you say a thing that is accurate and that you have already considered from

several angles. "The theater. The ancestors. The doctrine. He would think it was wrong."

Janna said: "Yes."

She said nothing else.

The silence held both of them, and the *yes*, and what the *yes* meant — not a defense of the wrong, not a reframing of it, not the beginning of an explanation that would place it in a context that made it more acceptable. Simply: yes. He would think that. And here we are.

Kimme turned from the tubes.

The Fold Room was reached through the block's inner corridor, which grew quieter as they descended — the machinery's sound attenuating with each meter, the air temperature dropping, the specific ionized quality of the atmosphere increasing until it was distinctly present in the back of the throat. Mnemonic plates were racked in the passage: each one a disc of blue metal, its surface incised with destination geometry, the destinations spanning the full range of the City's three-hundred-year Cycle.

Kimme looked at the plates as they passed.

"The patterns," she said.

"Navigation anchors," Janna said. "The Wayfinders generate them. They encode the geometric relationship between origin and destination in a form a Folder can use as a reference during the Fold state." She paused. "They are useful. They are not the mechanism."

Kimme looked at her.

Janna said: "In time."

They reached the Fold Room door, which was the same material as the outer door but without the signatures — this room received no one whose name would be added to a record. She opened it with the same neural press, and the door admitted them, and they stood inside.

Two chairs. The pedestal at the center. The curved display of instrumentation on the walls, its quiet operational hum the room's only sound.

Kimme looked at the chairs.

She stood in front of them for a moment, in the posture of someone making sure they are seeing what they are seeing before they respond to it.

"When I was here before," she said. "During the Fold." She looked at the chairs. "I thought—" She stopped. She arranged her words with the care of someone stating a technical observation. "The machinery was doing less than I expected. For a collective effort distributed across many minds, the energy distribution should have had a different signature."

Janna looked at her.

"And your trance was too deep," Kimme said. "Too complete. A lead in a bonded group maintains some connection to the others — that's the function of the bonding, to keep the lead from dissolving completely into the Fold state. You were not maintaining any such connection." She looked at the chairs. Then at Janna. "You were alone in there."

Janna said: "You have good instincts."

Kimme said: "Is that an answer."

"It's as much of one as I can give you tonight," Janna said. "There are things I'll tell you. The time for them isn't here yet."

"The Fold Room seemed like here," Kimme said.

"The Fold Room is the room where the thing happens," Janna said. "The room where the explanation happens is different. The explanation requires more than you have yet, and what you have yet requires more time than tonight." She looked at her daughter steadily. "I am not protecting the secret from you. I am sequencing the information so that it lands correctly when it arrives."

Kimme looked at the two chairs.

She was quiet for a long time.

"The Ancestor Chamber," she said finally. "The theater. The

doctrine." She looked at the chairs. "How many people have lived their entire lives inside a structure that wasn't real."

"Everyone," Janna said. "That is the condition of being inside any structure. The question is not whether the structure is real but whether it is serviceable, and for whom."

"That's a deflection," Kimme said.

"Yes," Janna said. "It's also accurate."

Kimme looked at the room one more time — the two chairs, the pedestal, the instrumentation on the walls. Then she turned toward the door.

"I need to think," she said.

"Yes," Janna said.

They walked back through the inner corridor, past the mnemonic plates, through the Fold Room's approach and back into the block's outer section. The machinery sound returned as they ascended. The warmth of the incinerators. The conveyor belts. All of it running, producing its external signature.

At the outer door, Janna pressed her forehead to the scanner again and the door opened.

The City's ordinary corridor was on the other side. The City's characteristic light, finding no shadow. The ambient sound of the systems that had been running for three hundred years.

Kimme stood at the threshold for a moment.

"The ancestors," she said. "The ones in the tubes." She did not turn around. "When this changes — if it changes — what happens to them."

"I don't know yet," Janna said. "That is an honest answer. The problem of what is owed to them, and whether what is owed is payable in any form I can currently imagine, is one I have been sitting with for twenty-three years. I have not resolved it."

Kimme stood at the threshold.

"Neither have I," she said. "But I've been sitting with it for about forty minutes, so perhaps I need more time."

She walked into the corridor.

Janna followed, and the door sealed behind them with the specific finality of things that close when the function they contain is complete.

She watched Kimme walk away down the corridor — the straight back, the unhurried pace, the posture of someone who is carrying something and intends to continue carrying it rather than looking for a place to set it down.

The surveillance feed she would review in the morning would show her daughter in her quarters, sitting with the lights at a specific setting, not sleeping, not reading, not communicating with anyone.

Sitting with it.

Janna stood in the corridor for a moment.

She had told Kimme the things Kimme was ready to receive. She had not told her what Kimme had observed in the Fold Room and had named accurately — the too-complete trance, the alone-ness in the work. She had not confirmed it. She had not denied it. She had said: the time for that explanation is not yet.

It was not yet.

The Shexim assessment was six weeks away. The assessment would tell her what Kaiden Kentur was, in the specific terms the Greater Assayors could provide. And what Kaiden Kentur was would determine what the next sequence of information needed to be — for Kimme, for the Elevatio, for the City itself.

Six weeks.

She walked back through the City's corridors, through the light that found no shadow, through the system that had been running for three hundred years and would continue running in whatever form it took after the things that were coming arrived.

Outside, the Ursa system's star was at the angle it held at this hour of the City's rotation, which was to say the same angle it had held for two weeks, unchanged.

She looked at it through the first viewport she passed.
Then she went to her work.

TWENTY-SEVEN

IMPERIAL CITY — URSA SYSTEM

THE MESSAGE ARRIVED through the Elevatio's internal pastoral channel, which was the channel reserved for matters the Elevatio considered properly ecclesiastical — Communion appointments, Iudicium scheduling, the routine sacramental calendar that the order maintained for each Heir-Second in the block. Kaiden had received messages through this channel before. They had always been from Lysandir, and they had always concerned something that was not, in the usual sense, ecclesiastical.

This message was from both of them.

The Communion room, eastern corridor. Ninth hour. This is not optional.

He read it twice. He noted the absence of the pastoral phrasing that even the most direct Elevatio communications maintained as a formality — the *if your schedule permits*, the *when you are able*, the grammar of request that communicated it was not a request. This had neither. *This is not optional* was not pastoral. It was instruction, and the instruction had the specific quality of something that had

been phrased with deliberate care, the phrasing itself communicating that the meeting had a seriousness that the pastoral form would be dishonest about.

He put the message away. He spent the intervening three hours doing the things his schedule required and thinking about what the meeting would ask, because the thinking in advance was more useful than arriving unprepared. He thought about the Congregatio Secretorum and what the token in his left pocket represented about the network it connected him to. He thought about what the Elevatio wanted from him, specifically, now that the specific shape of it had been named: get inside the Starfarer block. He thought about Kimme, who had been inside the block with her mother four days ago and was carrying what she'd seen there in the careful, quiet way she carried things that required carrying.

He thought about the triangulation of the three forces he was inside — the Elevatio's program, the City's counter-interest, the UnImperium's alternative — and about the position Lysandir had given him at the beginning: *stay neutral for now*. He had been staying neutral. He was about to be asked to stop.

At the ninth hour, he went to the Communion room.

Both of them were already there.

This was the first time he had seen them together in the same space. He had been aware, from Lysandir's briefings and from the Congregatio token, that they were part of the same network, that their relationship was more than the institutional hierarchy of a senior operative and his assigned handler. But knowing a thing and seeing it embodied in the same room were different. Together, they occupied the space in a way that was not additive — not two presences next to each other, but a single presence that was greater than either of them alone, the way that any two people who have been

working toward the same goal for a very long time develop a quality of shared orientation that is visible from the outside.

Eidan at the table, the codex closed before him, the copper oil lamp burning at the table's center. The white and crimson in perfect order, the iron-gray hair at its usual quality. He was looking at the door when Kaiden entered, which meant he had been watching the door, which meant the watching had been deliberate.

Lysandir standing at the room's far curve, which was where he stood in the Communion room when he was not performing the sitting-across-from-someone function but was present as something else — present as weight, as context, as the embodiment of the network that had been in place for longer than Kaiden had been alive. The amber eyes at their most present, doing their work.

Kaiden sat in the chair across from Eidan. He sat without being told to, which was itself a choice — the person who sits when they arrive is the person who has decided not to wait for the terms of the meeting to be set by others.

"Good," Eidan said.

He said it with the quality of approval for a small thing. Kaiden filed the approval and did not let it function as intended.

"Tell me what this is," Kaiden said.

Eidan looked at him. The look had the quality of someone deciding whether the directness was a challenge or simply the person. He apparently decided the latter, because the look settled into something more like consideration.

"We are going to tell you what we need," Eidan said. "We have been working toward this conversation for some time. You have been working toward it too, even if the working has not felt like that from your side. Tonight we stop being partial with each other."

Kaiden said: "All right."

He looked at Lysandir. Lysandir was looking at the room's curved wall, the posture of someone present but not leading, which was a posture Lysandir used when Eidan was doing the speaking and Lysandir's function was to hold the space rather than to direct it.

"The Starfarer block," Eidan said.

"I was expecting that," Kaiden said.

"Good," Eidan said again. "Then you understand what I'm going to say."

"Tell me anyway," Kaiden said. "I want to hear how you frame it."

Eidan looked at him for a moment. Something in his face — not quite amusement, but the recognition of a person who is conducting themselves with more sophistication than the situation's expected register.

"The Starfarer block," he said, "contains the answer to the question the Elevatio has been asking for a century. What happens in the Fold Room. What the mechanism actually is. We have been working from the outside — from the doctrine, from what the block communicates to the City, from what we can observe through secondary analysis of the City's power draw and its approach timing when it enters new systems. We have a model. The model has produced everything the Congregatio has built." He paused. "We do not know if the model is correct."

Kaiden was very still.

This was the first time Eidan had said this. Every prior conversation had contained the certainty — the evidence is conclusive, the doctrine is established, the mechanism is what we say it is. This was the first admission, unprompted, that the model might not be correct. He understood immediately that this admission was a form of honesty that Eidan was offering deliberately, as the opening of a conversation that required it — not a collapse of the certainty, but a strategic disclosure of its limits. The certainty was not gone. The disclosure was a tool.

He waited.

"We need to know if the model is correct," Eidan said. "We cannot advance without that knowledge. We have been trying to advance without it for a century and the results have been — insufficient." He looked at the codex, at the closed cover with its worn leather. "A century of work, and we have not replicated the Fold at

the City's scale. We have smaller Folds. We have Folders who can move ships, who can move platforms. We cannot move the City."

"Because the model is wrong," Kaiden said.

Eidan looked at him. "Because we don't know if the model is wrong," he said, with a quality of precision. "There is a difference. The model may be correct and the failure may be in our execution of what the model describes. Or the model may be incorrect, in which case a hundred years of execution has been directed at the wrong mechanism." He paused. "We need to know which of these is true. That is what we need from you."

"The Starfarer block," Kaiden said.

"Someone needs to go inside it," Eidan said. "Not as a tour. Not with Chadrac oversight. Inside — with access to the Fold Room, to the working section, to whatever the block actually contains when the theater is stripped away."

Kaiden was quiet.

"There is theater," Lysandir said, from the far curve. His voice was the voice he used in the corridor and the shuttle and the spaces between formal occasions, the voice of information rather than position. "We are certain of that much. The food intake for the official population of the block doesn't match the waste output. The heat signature is wrong for the number of bodies the official count implies. The block is not what it presents itself to be." He paused. "We don't know what it is."

Kaiden looked at the table. He thought about the glass gallery above the food processing machinery. About the preservation tubes and the numbers on them. About Kimme's face during the half hour they had stood together in that room. About what Janna had said — and had not said — in response to Kimme's observation about the Fold Room's too-complete trance.

He thought about what he knew that they didn't.

He knew the theater. He knew the preservation tubes. He did not know the Fold Room's specific truth — he had constructed it from Kimme's observations and Janna's careful deflections and the specific

quality of *enough* as an answer to *how many does it take*. He had the shape of the truth. He did not have the truth itself.

He thought about what giving this information to Eidan would do.

He thought about what withholding it would do.

He thought: *I do not trust this room with what I know, and I need to understand why I don't before I decide what to say.*

"What would you do," he said, "if you got inside?"

"We would understand the mechanism," Eidan said. "Finally. After a century."

"And then," Kaiden said.

"And then we would know what to build," Eidan said. "What the actual requirements are. Whether the Leaf is what we believe it to be, whether the bonding is the mechanism or whether something else —" He stopped. He steadied himself — a small, visible steadying, the kind that happens when a person has said something that opens onto territory they are not ready to enter. "Whether our model is correct. We would know. And knowing, we could act."

Kaiden said: "What if Leaf is not the mechanism."

The room changed.

Not dramatically. The lamp burned at the same rate. The incense moved through the same cycle. But the quality of attention in the room changed — both priests receiving the question in different ways, and the difference between the ways being visible if you were watching.

Eidan's jaw tightened. A small thing, controlled immediately. "We have discussed this."

"You've told me the evidence is conclusive," Kaiden said. "That's not the same as discussing it." He looked at Eidan directly. "I'm asking you to discuss it. What if Leaf is not the mechanism? What if the doctrine is wrong about Leaf the same way it might be wrong about the collective?"

Eidan said: "The evidence—"

"Is what you have observed," Kaiden said. "Folders who take Leaf

Fold successfully. Folders who don't take Leaf don't Fold at scale. That's the evidence. The interpretation of the evidence is that Leaf is the mechanism. But there's another interpretation." He paused. "Leaf produces a specific cognitive state. The cognitive state supports the Fold. The Fold doesn't require the Leaf — it requires the state. And the state can be achieved other ways."

Eidan was looking at him with the quality of his eyes doing something that was not the ordinary assessment — something that was closer to pressure, the pressure of a person who has arrived at a line they do not want to cross and is not used to being brought to it.

"That interpretation is possible," Lysandir said, from the far curve.

Both Kaiden and Eidan looked at him.

Lysandir looked at the wall. "It is consistent with the available evidence," he said. "The evidence supports both interpretations with approximately equal probability. The Elevatio's doctrine adopted one interpretation and built on it because the other interpretation required the entire doctrine to be reconsidered." He paused. "This is not the same as the evidence being conclusive."

Eidan looked at Lysandir.

The look that passed between them was not the look of two people who had not had this conversation before. It was the look of two people who had had this conversation many times, and who had reached the same impasse many times, and who were arriving at it again in the presence of a third person for the first time.

Eidan said, carefully: "The doctrine has held for a century."

"The doctrine has been useful for a century," Lysandir said. "Those are different things."

Eidan turned back to Kaiden. The iron-gray eyes had acquired a quality that was harder to read than his ordinary certainty — not doubt, but the managed acknowledgment of doubt, the quality of a person who has been doing something with their doubt for a very long time and has developed specific mechanisms for managing it.

"What you are suggesting," Eidan said, "is that we have spent a

century selecting for a specific capability in your line on the basis of a false assumption about the mechanism."

"I'm asking whether it's possible," Kaiden said.

"I am not prepared to entertain it," Eidan said.

The sentence arrived in the room with the specific weight of something that has been said very carefully and means exactly what it says. Not: *it isn't possible.* Not: *the evidence disproves it.* I am not prepared to entertain it. The distinction was the distinction Orvyn's voice had given him in the reading room, on the night the question was still forming: a man who won't admit doubt has decided his conclusions first.

"That is," Kaiden said, slowly, "the most honest thing you've said to me."

Eidan looked at him.

"You're not saying it isn't possible," Kaiden said. "You're saying you won't consider it. There's a difference. I appreciate the honesty."

The room held this for a moment.

Eidan's face was doing something complicated — not anger, not the collapse of position, but the specific quality of a person who has been read correctly and is deciding how to respond to being read correctly. He was sixty-odd years old. He had devoted his life to a specific goal within a specific institutional framework. He was not going to revise that framework because a nineteen-year-old second child of a recently elevated minor House had identified a gap in the evidence.

But he was also, Kaiden realized, not going to lie about it. That was what the *I am not prepared to entertain it* meant. He was not claiming the evidence was conclusive. He was claiming his own limit. That was a form of honesty, and it was the form Eidan was capable of.

"The Starfarer block," Kaiden said, returning to it.

Eidan steadied. "Yes."

"You want me to get inside it."

"We want intelligence about what the block actually is," Eidan

said. "Whether the Fold Room is what the doctrine suggests it is. How many people are inside the block. What they are doing." He paused. "Whether the Leaf is present, how it is administered, what the actual mechanism looks like from inside the room where it happens."

"And you believe I can get inside because of Kimme," Kaiden said.

"She has access," Lysandir said. "She will have brought others inside, or will bring others inside, as part of her education. The relationship you have developed makes you a candidate for being brought inside. If the timing is right and the relationship is what we believe it to be."

Kaiden thought about Kimme in the corridor after the Court session, four days ago, walking back from the Starfarer block with the quality of someone who had been given a very large thing to carry. He thought about *Kaiden Kentur would think this was wrong* and the single-word answer it had received, which he had not been told about but which he had reconstructed from the quality of everything he had observed in Kimme since.

He thought about using the relationship.

The phrase arrived with a specific texture. *Using the relationship.* He had been living in the City for fourteen weeks. He had been watching people use relationships — as information channels, as positioning tools, as instruments for achieving outcomes that the relationships themselves were not about. He had been watching this and cataloguing it and understanding how it worked and had been, himself, using it — using the Rhian Lyra alliance, using the Olan friendship as a source of honest information, using the Nix connection as a hedge against the Elevatio's complete control of his intelligence.

He had used those. They were relationships with a transactional layer, and the transactional layer was understood and managed.

Kimme was different.

He knew why it was different. The swept room. *Nobody talks to*

me like that. Like they mean it. The Wayfinder facility and the two beats and the unreported observation. The corridor after the Court session, the sequence of *does that bother you* and *I'm not sure I'm allowed to let it* and the walk together that had ended at a junction. The glass gallery in the Starfarer block, which she had entered with her mother and exited carrying something that she had not been carrying before.

The relationship was real.

Using it as an instrument was possible. The Elevatio was asking him to do it. The information it would yield was significant — significant enough that Eidan's certainty had bent in this room tonight, just slightly, just enough to say *I am not prepared to entertain it* instead of *it is not true*.

He thought about what using Kimme as an instrument would cost.

He thought about what not using her would cost.

He thought: *these are not the only two options*.

"I'll think about it," he said.

Eidan leaned forward. "We are past the thinking phase."

"You're past it," Kaiden said. "I'm not. I have been in this City for fourteen weeks and I have been approached by three separate institutions and asked to serve three separate agendas, and I have told all of them that I'm thinking about it, and I meant it every time." He looked at Eidan steadily. "I mean it now. You are asking me to use a specific relationship for a specific purpose. Whether that is the right thing to do is not a question I can answer in this room tonight."

Eidan said: "The City will Fold in eight days. The Tucana transit will take three. We have perhaps two weeks in the next system before the Cycle moves on. If we are going to make progress on this—"

"I heard the timeline," Kaiden said.

"Then you understand—"

"I understand that you have a timeline," Kaiden said. "I have something different. I have a question about whether this is the right thing to do." He paused. "Those are not the same problem."

Eidan sat back. He was looking at Kaiden with the quality of a man reassessing something he thought he had assessed. The reassessment was not comfortable for him. He was accustomed to people at Kaiden's stage — people who had been brought to the threshold of the Congregatio's ask, who had received the full shape of what was being requested — being either committed or afraid. He was not accustomed to someone who was neither of those things.

Lysandir spoke, from the far curve.

"Leave the Leaf question," he said. Not to Kaiden. To Eidan.

Eidan looked at him.

"Leave it," Lysandir said. "For this conversation. It is not productive in this room tonight." He looked at Kaiden now, the amber eyes at their most direct, which was the mode Lysandir used when he had arrived at something he considered the actual content rather than the preparatory material. "What is the question you are actually sitting with."

Kaiden looked at him. Lysandir was the only person in his City life who had asked him this question — not *what do you need to decide*, not *what is the obstacle*, but *what is the question you are actually sitting with*. The specificity of it was the thing that made it a real question rather than a rhetorical one.

He thought about how to answer honestly.

"I'm trying to determine," he said slowly, "whether what you're asking me to do to this relationship is something I can do and still be — what I am." He paused. "I don't mean this as a moral performance. I mean it as a practical problem. I have been — I am — honest with Kimme Chadrac in a way I have not been honest with most people in this City. She has been honest with me. That honesty is the thing the relationship is built from. You are asking me to use what the honesty has produced as a tool for an agenda she doesn't know about."

The room was quiet.

"That is not wrong," Lysandir said.

Eidan said: "The goal—"

"Is not in question," Lysandir said. "He is not questioning the

goal." He looked at Kaiden. "He is saying that the goal does not automatically justify the method."

"The Elevatio's freedom from a three-hundred-year monopoly—"

"Is a real goal," Kaiden said. "I believe it's real. I believe it's worth working toward." He looked at Eidan. "I also believe that some methods of pursuing it produce a version of you that is not capable of the thing you're trying to build. An institution built on the use of specific people as instruments, regardless of the honesty those people have extended — " He stopped. He was thinking about the preservation tubes, about the numbers without names, about the choice that had produced them and the logic that had justified the choice and the twenty-three years of Janna Chadrac continuing to justify it in the silence of the glass gallery. "I've been learning things in this City about what institutions become when they decide that the goal justifies the method. I'd rather not reproduce what I've learned."

The silence in the room was the longest silence of the meeting.

Eidan was looking at him with the quality of his eyes that meant he had arrived at a position he had not anticipated arriving at, and was processing both the arrival and the need to decide what to do with it. He was not persuaded. He was also not dismissing. He was in the specific state of a true believer encountering an argument they cannot immediately refute, which was not a comfortable state for a true believer.

Lysandir was very still at the far curve.

"I am not saying no," Kaiden said. "I am saying I need to think about whether there is a version of what you're asking that doesn't require me to use her. Whether there's a way to get what you need that doesn't involve her being an instrument she doesn't know she is." He paused. "If there is, I might say yes. If the only way is to use her, then I need to think more carefully."

Eidan said: "The block is impenetrable without a Chadrac ident."

"I know," Kaiden said.

"There is no version of this that doesn't involve Kimme Chadrac."

"There might be a version where she is involved with her knowledge rather than without it," Kaiden said. "That is different."

Eidan stared at him.

"I'm not suggesting telling her about the Congregatio," Kaiden said. "I'm suggesting that if she has already seen the inside of the block — if she is already carrying questions about what she saw there — it is possible to have an honest conversation with her about those questions without her being an instrument." He paused. "That is a different kind of relationship than the one you're describing. It might produce the same information. It would be a different kind of act."

Lysandir, from the far curve, said nothing.

Eidan looked at Kaiden for a long time. The iron-gray eyes were doing something Kaiden had not seen them do before — not the maintained certainty, not the managed acknowledgment of doubt, but something underneath both of those, the quality of a man looking at an argument that does not fit his model and choosing, for the first time in this room, to sit with the not-fitting rather than to resolve it.

"Eight days," Eidan said finally. "I am not changing the timeline. The Fold happens in eight days. Whatever you decide, it needs to be decided before the Fold."

"I understand," Kaiden said.

"I am also," Eidan said, slowly, as if the words were being produced at a cost, "not — fully opposed — to considering whether the method you're describing is possible." A pause that had the weight of someone doing something they were not accustomed to doing. "I am not saying it is correct. I am saying I will not close the question tonight."

Kaiden looked at him.

"Good," Kaiden said.

The word arrived in the room with the specific quality of something that could not be unsaid. Eidan had used it twice about Kaiden's behavior in this room. Kaiden used it once about Eidan's. The symmetry was not accidental and both of them knew it.

Eidan looked at the codex. He placed one hand flat on its cover.

The gesture of someone anchoring themselves to the object that represented what they had given their life to. Then he removed the hand and folded both hands in his lap with the specific quality of a person concluding what they came to do.

"You will have the eight days," he said. "Use them."

He rose. He picked up the codex. He moved to the cabinet and placed it inside and closed the cabinet and pressed both palms flat against the surface for a moment — the same motion he'd used when Kaiden had first been in this room, the motion of someone placing weight on a surface rather than merely touching it. Then he turned and left.

The door closed.

Kaiden and Lysandir were alone in the room.

The lamp continued burning. The incense was at the late stage of its cycle — the fragrance diffused now through the full volume of the room, the quality that rooms develop when a conversation has been in them for long enough that the room has absorbed some of what was said. Kaiden sat with the lamp's small warmth and looked at the empty chair across from him and thought about what had just happened.

Lysandir moved from the far curve to the chair Eidan had vacated. He did not sit in it — he stood behind it, hands resting on its back, looking at Kaiden.

"The Leaf question," he said.

"Yes," Kaiden said.

"You didn't arrive at that question tonight," Lysandir said.

"No," Kaiden said. "It's been building."

"What arrived at it for you."

Kaiden looked at the lamp. He thought about what to share and what to hold. He thought about the shuttle from Ursa V and the engine noise and Lysandir's voice saying *he's close but doesn't know*

what he's close to — Maren's voice, through Lysandir's report of it, the sentence he had carried since without knowing where to place it.

"Something Nix said," he said. "About the UnImperium Folders. They use Leaf because they were told to. It works. But nobody has tested whether it works because of the Leaf specifically." He paused. "And Eidan's certainty. The quality of it. It's not the certainty of someone who has tested a proposition. It's the certainty of someone who has decided."

"Yes," Lysandir said.

"Do you think the Leaf is the mechanism," Kaiden said.

Lysandir was quiet for a long moment. The quality of the quiet was the quality Kaiden had learned to attend to carefully — not the quiet of someone who doesn't know, but the quiet of someone deciding what to say about what they know.

"I think," Lysandir said, "that the Fold is a capability that exists independently of any substance. I think Leaf enables a specific cognitive state. I think the cognitive state enables the capability. I think the capability can be enabled other ways." He paused. "I have thought this for approximately twelve years. I have not said it to Eidan directly because Eidan is not capable of receiving it, and a piece of information that breaks the person you're giving it to is not useful information."

Kaiden looked at him.

"I have been watching you," Lysandir said, "for fourteen weeks, with this specific question in mind. The pressure behind your left eye. The directional quality in the corridors. The growbitat awareness you've described. These are not Communion effects. They are something else." He met Kaiden's gaze. "I believe you can Fold. I believe you are close to understanding that you can. I believe the question of whether you need Leaf to do it is the most important question in this room right now, and that neither Eidan nor I can answer it for you."

The silence after this was different from the silences during the meeting — not the silence of competing positions, the silence of

something said that was going to take a while to settle into its correct place.

"He's not going to stop," Kaiden said. "Eidan. The eight days. The block. He means it."

"He means it," Lysandir agreed. "He has been working toward this for thirty years. You are the closest the Congregatio has come to the answer it needs. He will not release you from the ask."

"And you," Kaiden said.

Lysandir looked at the lamp. Something in his face had the quality of a person who has been holding two positions simultaneously for a very long time and is briefly visible in the space between them.

"I want what the Congregatio wants," he said. "The freedom. The distributed capacity. The end of the monopoly." He paused. "I do not require the method to be what Eidan requires it to be." He looked at Kaiden. "But I also cannot promise you that the method you're proposing will produce the information in time. Or that it will produce it at all. Kimme Chadrac is her mother's daughter. However far her thinking has moved, she has been raised inside this system and she may not be — available — for the honest version of the conversation you're describing."

"I know," Kaiden said.

"You're willing to try it anyway."

"Yes," Kaiden said.

Lysandir was quiet for a moment. "Eight days," he said. "Whatever happens, in eight days the City Folds to Tucana. And after Tucana—" He paused. "The Congregatio has arrangements in the next system that will become active regardless of what you decide in the next eight days. What you decide determines how those arrangements involve you."

Kaiden held this. He thought about the FreeLink chip in his left pocket. He thought about Nix's expression and Iscaryot's sentence and the meeting in the swept room on the fifth ring. He thought about the maintenance tunnels that ran beneath the City's adminis-

trative section, which he knew about because Lysandir had mentioned them once in a briefing as part of the security architecture discussion, and which he had filed in the place he filed things that were not yet relevant.

He was beginning to think they might be becoming relevant.

"I understand," he said.

Lysandir moved from behind the chair. He walked to the door. He paused at it, his hand on the frame, and turned back.

"The question you asked Eidan," he said. "About what you can do and still be what you are." He looked at Kaiden with the amber eyes in their most present mode. "I have been asking myself a version of that question for thirty years." He paused. "I do not have a complete answer. I have a partial one."

Kaiden waited.

"The answer that I have arrived at," Lysandir said, "is that the only way to preserve what you are is to keep asking the question. The moment you stop asking it, you have already stopped being what you were. The asking is the thing." He looked at the room one more time — the lamp, the incense, the empty chair. "Good night, Kaiden."

He left.

Kaiden sat alone in the room for a long time.

The lamp burned down to a shorter length. The incense completed its cycle, the fragrance thinning to the trace-quality of a scent that has been in a space but is no longer actively present. The room held its particular quality — the quality of the City's Elevatio spaces, the pre-City stone, the specific silence of a room that had been holding conversations for a very long time and had developed a capacity for it.

He thought about eight days.

He thought about the Fold to Tucana and what was on the other side of Tucana and what Lysandir had called *the Congregatio's*

arrangements, which were the shape of something he had not been told explicitly but which he could triangulate from the FreeLink chip and the swept room meetings and the quality of what Nix had been building toward across weeks of conversation.

He thought about Kimme, who had been in the glass gallery above the food processing machinery four days ago and had said *Kaiden Kentur would think this was wrong* and had received one word in response.

He thought about an honest conversation versus an instrumental one, and about whether the distinction he had drawn in this room was a real distinction or a convenience his conscience was constructing to make a predetermined position look principled.

He sat with this for a while, because he had learned, over fourteen weeks, that some thoughts needed to be sat with rather than resolved, and that the resolution that came from sitting was different from the resolution that came from forcing.

He arrived, gradually, at a thought that was not a plan and was not a decision but was a direction:

He was going to have the honest conversation. Or an honest one — the most honest version he could manage without giving Kimme information that would put her in a position she hadn't chosen, without using her as a tool, without converting what was real between them into something instrumental. He was going to try.

If it worked, whatever *working* meant in this context, he would have information. The Elevatio would have what they needed, in a form that cost something different than what they had been prepared to pay.

If it didn't work — if Kimme was not, as Lysandir had put it, available for the honest version — then he would sit with what that meant.

And in eight days the City would Fold, and on the other side of the Fold, the Congregatio's arrangements would be there whether he had resolved this or not.

He stood.

He picked up the oil lamp from the table — it was still burning, the small flame doing its small work — and he carried it to the cabinet. He set it on the cabinet's flat top rather than inside it, because closing a flame inside a sealed space was careless and he was not, in this moment or any other, prepared to be careless about small things.

He looked at the room. At the stone walls that had been here before the City and would likely outlast it.

He thought about Maren, who had said *do it anyway* about something she had predicted would cost him everything, and had said it without softening the prediction, because Maren did not soften predictions.

He thought: *I don't know yet what the it is. But I'm beginning to think I'm close to finding out.*

The lamp burned on the cabinet top, its flame the particular quality of a thing that is real and small and doing exactly what it is capable of doing.

He left the room.

The corridor outside received him with the City's characteristic light, and the City's hum was in the floor and the walls, and somewhere on the other side of the City's hull the Ursa system was doing what it did in the last days of the City's visit, and in eight days the Fold would take all of it somewhere else.

He walked back toward the East block.

He was, for the first time in fourteen weeks on Imperial City, not waiting for a direction. He had one. He was walking toward it.

Whether it was the right direction — that was the question he was going to be sitting with for the next eight days.

He walked on.

TWENTY-EIGHT

IMPERIAL CITY — TUCANA SYSTEM

HE DID NOT HAVE eight days.

He had six, because on the sixth day the City Folded to the Tucana system, and the Fold compressed whatever remained of the eight into two days of transit stop in a gas giant system that had no inhabited worlds and no permanent population and served the Cycle purely as a waystation — a pause between one system's demands and the next.

He used the six days.

On the second day after the Communion room meeting, he found Kimme in the secondary reading room where she sometimes worked in the late afternoon, when the block's social calendar thinned and the East residential corridor went quiet. He sat down across from her at the reading room's single table with the directness that was the thing she had said she noticed — not performing the directness, simply being in the room and saying what he had come to say.

"I need to tell you something," he said. "And I need to tell you

before I know whether telling you is the right thing to do, because I've been trying to figure out whether it's the right thing to do for two days and I don't have more time to wait."

Kimme looked at him from across the table. She had her slate in front of her, whatever she'd been working on, and she closed it with the motion of someone setting aside one kind of attention to give another kind its full space.

"Tell me," she said.

He told her.

Not everything — not the Congregatio token, not Eidan's explicit instructions, not the specific network that Lysandir was part of. But the shape of it: the Elevatio's interest in the Starfarer block, the specific belief that what happened inside the Fold Room was the answer to a century of failed attempts to replicate the Fold, and the fact that his relationship with her was the thing they believed could provide access. That they had asked him to use it. That he had spent two days deciding whether to.

She listened without interrupting. This was one of her qualities — the ability to receive information fully before responding to it, the patience of someone who had been trained to separate reception from reaction and had trained so long it was no longer an effort.

When he finished, she was quiet for a long moment.

"You're telling me," she said finally, "that the Elevatio wants you to use our relationship to get inside the Starfarer block."

"Yes," he said.

"And you're telling me this rather than doing it."

"Yes," he said.

"Why."

The word arrived in its simplest form — not *why are you telling me this* or *why did you decide to tell me*, just *why*, open enough to mean all of it.

He sat with it for a moment. He had been thinking about the answer for two days and had arrived at a version of it that was honest rather than complete.

"Because the alternative," he said, "is to have a relationship with you that is built on something false. And I've been watching what that produces in this City for fourteen weeks, and I don't want to build that." He paused. "And because I think you're already asking some of the questions they want answered. And I think you should be asking them because you want to ask them, not because I've been positioned to make you ask them."

She looked at him. The look was the full look, the one without the public arrangement on it — the one that had appeared in pieces over the weeks and was now present all at once, the look of someone who is in a room where the thing being discussed is real.

"The Fold Room," she said.

"Yes," he said.

"You know I've been inside it."

"I knew you'd been inside before you told me. The quality of what you were carrying afterward was visible." He paused. "I don't know what you saw. I've constructed a hypothesis from what you've said and haven't said."

She was quiet.

"I'm not asking you to tell me," he said. "That's not what this conversation is. I'm telling you what the Elevatio wants and what I decided to do instead of doing it. What you do with that is yours."

The reading room held them in its particular quiet — the secondary corridor's lower light, the slight warmth from the City's atmospheric systems doing their work.

"They think," she said slowly, "that the Fold Room will tell them whether the Leaf is the mechanism."

"Yes."

"And they've been trying to answer that question for a century."

"Yes."

She looked at the table. At the closed slate. At her own hands. Then at him.

"What do you think," she said. "Not what the Elevatio thinks. What do you think."

He had been sitting with this question in its various forms since the shuttle back from Ursa V. Since Eidan's *I am not prepared to entertain it.* Since Nix's *how would you test it otherwise.*

"I think the Leaf is not the mechanism," he said. "I think it enables a cognitive state, and the cognitive state enables the Fold. I think the two things have been conflated for three hundred years, and the conflation has served specific purposes for specific institutions, and nobody has been in a position to test the question directly because the people who could test it are all inside the doctrine."

She said: "And if you're right."

"Then the Elevatio has been chasing the wrong variable for a century," he said. "And everything they believe about why they need me specifically — the Commune capability, the bonding mechanism, the doctrine — is built on a false foundation."

"And if they're right," she said.

"Then I can't Fold without Leaf," he said. "And the bonding is real. And their century of work is sound." He paused. "I don't think they're right. But I don't have a test."

She was quiet for a long time.

"You're carrying a FreeLink chip," she said.

He looked at her.

"I noticed it in your pocket," she said. "Not the token — something else. The shape is different. FreeLink is a specific form factor." Her voice was even. "Which means you have a connection to the UnImperium network."

He said nothing.

"I'm not going to report it," she said. "I'm telling you I know it's there because I don't want to have a conversation with you where you think I don't know something I know." She paused. "We seem to be having that kind of conversation, so."

He looked at her for a moment.

"Yes," he said. "I have a FreeLink code."

She nodded. She looked at the table. Then she looked back at him.

"The Fold Room," she said. "What I observed there." A pause. "My mother's trance was too complete for a collective effort. The machinery was doing less than the doctrine says it should do for a bonded group. She was alone in the work." She said it with the flatness of someone stating a fact they have been carrying, the flat statement that comes after a long time of deciding whether to say it. "I haven't said this out loud before."

He held this very carefully.

"I'm not saying the other interpretation is wrong," she said. "I'm saying the observation doesn't fit the doctrine. And I've been sitting with that for—" She stopped. "Since the Fold Room."

"Since the Fold Room," he confirmed.

She looked at him across the table, and the quality of the look was the quality that had been building through fourteen weeks of secondary corridors and swept rooms and card game tables and the corridor after the Court session. The specific quality of two people who have arrived, by different routes, at the same unanswered question and are now looking at it from the same side.

"I can't tell you what she is," Kimme said. "I won't. Whatever I suspect, that's mine to hold for now." She paused. "But I'll tell you this. The doctrine is wrong about something. I don't know what exactly. And the Elevatio doesn't know either, or they wouldn't have spent a century failing."

He nodded.

"Which means," she said, "the question of what you are — what you can do — is also open. In a different direction than either of them thinks."

They sat with this.

The reading room was quiet. The City was quiet, moving through the last days of the Ursa system's arc. In two days it would Fold.

"Whatever happens next," Kimme said, "I want you to know that this conversation was real." She looked at him directly. "I know what

the Elevatio wanted you to do. I know what you decided instead. That distinction matters to me."

He said: "I know."

She picked up her slate. She opened it. She looked at it for a moment, then set it back down.

"My mother knows about the FreeLink," she said. "Not the specific chip — she knows the shape of your connections. She has supplementary surveillance on the East block." She said it without emphasis, as a piece of information being given without ceremony. "She's been planning for Shexim. The Greater Assayors there are under her control. She wants a genetic scan."

He held completely still.

"I'm not telling you to run," she said. "I'm telling you because you told me the truth, and this is part of the truth that I have." She paused. "What you do with it is yours."

She picked up the slate again. She opened it. She went back to her work.

He sat across from her for another moment. Then he stood, and he left, and she did not look up.

He had four days.

He spent them with ordinary care — attending sessions, keeping his regular patterns, saying nothing to anyone that he would not have said in any other week. He played cards with Olan on the third day and won one game and lost two and said nothing about anything that mattered. He walked with Rhian in the corridor after a salon event and confirmed a Leaf shipment timing and said nothing about anything that mattered. He attended the morning training session and worked through the forms until the form was done and said nothing, to anyone, about anything that mattered.

On the fourth day, the City Folded to Tucana.

The Fold was seven minutes of Kaiden's subjective time — the

usual intensity, the before-and-after with nothing between, the new system arriving outside the viewports. The Tucana system was what the briefings had said it would be: a gas giant with a ring system that caught the system's star in broad amber sweeps, no inhabited worlds, the specific quality of a place that has been used for long enough that the use has become the place's only meaning.

A transit stop.

In his left pocket: the FreeLink chip, and the token.

He thought about the token. He thought about Aurelo's hands when he'd given it to him, the warmth from long holding, and about what the token meant about the network that had been working toward whatever was about to happen since before he was born. He thought about the Congregatio Secretorum and the thing Lysandir had said in the Communion room — *I have been asking myself a version of that question for thirty years* — and about the partial answer Lysandir had given him: *the only way to preserve what you are is to keep asking the question.*

He was still asking it.

He was about to find out what asking it in motion looked like.

On the second day in the Tucana system, Lysandir appeared outside his suite at the fourth hour. Not the standard visiting hour. The four-o'clock quality of the appearance communicated everything the appearance needed to communicate without words.

Kaiden opened the door.

Lysandir looked at him. "Now," he said.

The illness was the first thing, because the illness was the cover for the quarantine, and the quarantine was the cover for the corridor transfer, and the corridor transfer was the cover for the maintenance tunnels.

He had been told what to perform. He performed it. The trembling hands were genuine enough — his hands were actually trem-

bling, not from fear exactly but from the specific physiological state of a person who has decided to do an irreversible thing and is in the moments before doing it. He let the trembling be visible. He let his eyes lose their focus in the specific way of someone whose vision is compromised rather than someone whose vision is fine and who is pretending otherwise. He hit the corridor's data wall with his palm on the way out of the common area and left a greasy print on the surface, and the print was visible to three of the other Heirs-Second who were present.

Olan saw it. He saw Kaiden see him see it. Something passed between them in that moment — not words, not even a specific look, but the acknowledgment of two people who have been in the same room for long enough to read each other's states without asking. Olan did not say anything. He looked at the print on the wall for one second and then looked back at the room and said, quietly, to Robere beside him: "Get Lysandir."

The quarantine was efficient. Lysandir arrived with the specific urgency of someone performing urgent medical response and having real urgency underneath the performance. The staff moved with him. The med-sled arrived. Kaiden was lifted onto it with the careful handling of people who believed the illness was real, which most of them did — the biometric display on the med-sled had been adjusted before the performance, the readings consistent with a specific and non-contagious neurological event that required immediate isolation.

They wheeled him through the corridor.

The isolation room was standard — matte surfaces, tripled filtration, the specific silence of a space designed to prevent the movement of anything biological from inside to outside. The medical staff did their checks. Lysandir hovered with the quality of someone monitoring a patient and doing three other things simultaneously. The staff cycled through at the expected intervals.

At the third interval, when the staff had completed their check and left and the interval before the next one had begun, Lysandir was at the room's service panel with his back to the door. He pressed

two specific points on the panel in a specific sequence, and the panel opened to reveal not a maintenance access point but a corridor — narrow, poorly lit, the smell of metal and recycled atmosphere and something industrial underneath.

"Quickly," Lysandir said, and his voice had the quality it had never had in their previous conversations: urgency without management. The management was gone. The urgency was what was left.

Kaiden moved.

The maintenance tunnels ran beneath the City's administrative section in a network that the City's official architecture did not acknowledge. Kaiden had known they existed — Lysandir had mentioned them once in the security briefings, the way you mention something you expect the other person to file without flagging its significance. He had filed it. He had been right about its eventual relevance.

The tunnels were not built for people. They were built for the infrastructure the City's inhabited sections required but did not want visible — the piping, the conduit, the cable management systems that maintained the temperature and atmosphere and power of everything above. The ceiling was low enough that Lysandir, who was tall enough that normal corridors were a mild imposition, had to move in a permanent half-crouch. Kaiden moved at speed. The floor was grated, the grating's edge sharp where the manufacture tolerance was loose, and twice he felt the edge catch at his heel and adjusted without slowing.

The light was the maintenance system's light — amber, intermittent, the quality of a light source that has been designed to be sufficient rather than comfortable. Every twenty meters a panel on the wall showed the status of whatever system the tunnel section was servicing — green for nominal, amber for watch, red for immediate.

Most were green. Two were amber. The amber ones were not their problem.

Lysandir moved behind him, not speaking, his breathing audible in the tunnel's specific acoustics. The sound of a person managing effort and not quite managing all of it, the sound of someone who was in excellent condition for their age and was now using all of that condition.

They moved for eleven minutes.

Kaiden counted the minutes because counting was the thing to do with his mind when the thing his body was doing was physical and required only navigation. He counted and he noted the junctions — left, then right, then a descent of six meters on a ladder that was meant for maintenance workers and was built for their equipment and not for speed, then right, then a long straight section where the grating was replaced by solid plate and his footsteps changed quality and he let them because the alternative was slower.

Lysandir's hand on his shoulder at a junction. Stop.

He stopped.

Lysandir moved past him to the junction's leading edge and looked around it with the economy of movement of someone who has assessed many corners in many conditions and has reduced the assessment to its essential components. He looked for three seconds. He came back.

"The next section opens onto the market level," he said, very quietly. "We change there. Coveralls in the third access panel on the left. Put them on. Keep your head at a median angle — not down, not up. We'll have approximately four minutes at market density before we reach the exit point."

He said: "All right."

"Are you ready."

He thought about what ready meant in the context of what he was about to do — about the eight days that had become six that had become four, about the Communion room and the reading room and the four days of ordinary patterns and the med-sled and the grated

floor. About the token in his left pocket and what it had been pointing toward since Aurelo placed it in his hand.

"Yes," he said.

Lysandir moved.

The panel that opened onto the market level gave onto a small vestibule — a space between the tunnel system and the public area, designed as a buffer that workers could use to transition between the maintenance environment and the inhabited one. The third access panel on the left was there. The coveralls were there, folded with the specific fold of something that has been placed by someone who knew they would be retrieved in a hurry — the fold that lets you take the garment and put it on in the fewest possible motions.

He put it on over his clothes. He zipped it. He adjusted the collar so it sat correctly, because a collar sitting incorrectly on a person moving through a crowded space was the kind of thing that drew attention from the people whose job it was to notice.

Lysandir was already in his. He looked different. The robe was underneath, but the robe's silhouette was gone, replaced by the coverall's, which was the silhouette of a maintenance worker and not of a tall Elevatio priest with a shaved head and ceremonial tattoos. The tattoos were still there, visible at the neck — he had pulled the collar up to the maximum it would go without looking wrong. It was imperfect. They moved anyway, because imperfect was what they had.

The vestibule opened onto the market level.

The market was the level of the City that the formal presentations never showed. It occupied a ring below the administrative section's outer edge, at the altitude where the City's population density was highest and the commerce most continuous. Not the Guild markets, which were organized and cleared and surveilled; not the House procurement systems, which operated through formal channels. The market level was the City's informal economy — the

place where everything that didn't fit the formal channels found its register.

The sound hit first. Then the smell: roasted yeast and something sweet and the underlying metallic note of the City's recycled air pushed through the specific filter of many people and many cooking sources and many years of continuous use. The crowd was the crowd of any functioning city's market — dense, moving, generating its own currents. The stalls lined the ring's inner wall in a continuous series: food, parts, clothing, information, the categories bleeding into each other at the edges. Overhead, the City's standard lighting fought with the stalls' own generators and produced a quality of light that was neither the City's characteristic blue-white nor warm but something in between, neither.

Lysandir moved into the current without hesitating, which was the correct thing to do — hesitation at the margin of a crowd is visible; moving into it is not. Kaiden moved with him, keeping the median angle, keeping the pace that matched the crowd's ambient pace rather than the pace he wanted to be moving at.

He looked.

He looked because the instruction had been head at median angle, which meant looking, and because he had been inside this City for three and a half months and had not been at this level of it. The formal City was above. The market level was something the formal City produced by existing — the ecosystem that formed around any large human structure that was also a self-contained world.

A family to his left, moving as families move through markets — the children finding the edges of the permitted area and the parents reclaiming them, the specific tension of people trying to accomplish something in a space that the children do not understand as a space where accomplishment is required. The youngest child was looking at one of the hull-holo feeds that ran along the wall above the stall line — news from somewhere, weather predictions, the City's Cycle schedule displayed in the format that everyone in the City could

read. The child was not reading it. She was watching the animation of the planetary approach graphic, the City moving toward the next system on the Cycle, the scale of the City's shape rendered in the graphic at its actual scale relative to the planet it was approaching.

She pressed her palm against the display surface.

The display was a projection, and her palm passed through it, and she looked at the palm for a moment, and then she looked at the display again, and then she looked back at the market around her.

He looked away before her eyes reached him.

He thought: *that child knows no other world. This is the world. The City is the world. Its Cycle is the time.*

He thought about what Eidan had said about the freedom from a three-hundred-year monopoly and about what that freedom would look like to a child on the market level who was pressing her palm through a projection of the City's arrival at the next system.

He thought: *whatever else this is, that child's world is real. The fact that it was built on a false doctrine doesn't make the child less real. And the question of what happens to this world — to the market level, to the family, to the girl pressing her palm through the projection — when the false doctrine is exposed is not a question that is going to be answered in the maintenance tunnels.*

He moved.

The exit point was an Elevatio service door at the market level's outer edge — a door that led into the Elevatio cathedral block's lower service section, maintained in the jurisdiction of the order and therefore not under the standard surveillance architecture that covered the rest of the City's public areas. The door required Lysandir's ident to open, which it produced at Lysandir's touch, and they moved through it and into the Elevatio's section, and behind them the door sealed.

The cathedral block's service section was quiet the way religious

spaces are quiet — not the absence of sound but the presence of a specific kind of sound that was not human speech and that the architecture was designed to hold. The pre-City stone was here too, the same material as the Communion room, the material that had been here before the City and that the City had been built around rather than through.

Nix was there.

She was standing at the service section's first junction, in the posture of someone who has been standing there long enough to be comfortable in the standing. She was not in the City's civilian register or in the Heir-Second uniform she wore at the block's formal events. She was in something practical — the clothing of someone who is going somewhere that is not a formal occasion, who has chosen for function rather than signal.

She looked at Kaiden. She looked at Lysandir. She looked back at Kaiden.

"We should hurry," she said. "They'll notice the gap in about forty minutes."

He said: "Did you do this."

She looked at him with the look of someone who has expected this question and has had its answer ready. "We all did this," she said. "Come on."

She turned and walked, and Lysandir fell in behind her, and Kaiden looked at the junction for a moment — at the pre-City stone and the service section's amber maintenance light and the specific quality of a space that had been holding the Elevatio's operations for three hundred years and was now holding this — and then he followed.

The extraction route ran through the cathedral block's sub-level, then into a sealed Elevatio corridor that Kaiden had not known existed. It was older than the maintenance tunnels — built when the City was

built, or possibly before, the construction quality different in a way that communicated a different era's engineering standards. The walls were narrower. The ceiling was higher. The material had a specific texture that the City's modern construction did not reproduce.

They moved fast. Nix moved with the efficiency of someone who had been through this route before, which she had — he understood, as they moved, that this had been planned for considerably longer than the six days since the Communion room meeting. This was not improvised. The routes had been chosen, the access points mapped, the timing calculated, the cover identities prepared. What had been waiting was not the plan but the moment — the moment when the specific conditions converged that made the plan viable.

The forty minutes was real. He felt it as a physical pressure, the way deadlines become physical when the consequences of missing them are specific enough to be imagined.

"The others," he said, to Nix's back. They were moving at a pace that was just inside the edge of what was manageable without making a noise level that would draw attention.

"Already staged," she said, without slowing. "Iscaryot and three others went ahead. They'll be at the docking collar in twenty-two minutes."

"Who are the three."

"You'll find out when we're there," she said. "It doesn't matter right now."

He accepted this. He filed it in the place where things were filed for later consideration, when later was available.

"Lysandir," he said.

"He'll follow a different route," Nix said. "He's not coming with us. His function ends here."

He looked back at Lysandir, who was three steps behind him, moving with the half-crouch he'd been moving with in the tunnels, his coverall's collar still pulled to maximum.

Lysandir looked at him. The amber eyes in the Elevatio corridor's light were the same amber they had been in every corridor and every

briefing and every swept room, the color that was almost jaundiced and was not quite, the color of someone who has been paying attention for a very long time and is still paying it.

"Go," Lysandir said.

Not farewell. Not good luck. Not anything that had the grammar of an ending. Simply: *go.* The instruction that was also acknowledgment that the instruction was the last instruction, that after this instruction was followed there would not be another one from this source.

He went.

The docking collar was at the cathedral block's lowest service level, in a section that connected to the City's outer hull without passing through the standard docking registry. It was not on any chart he had seen. The ship at the end of it was not on any manifest.

Iscaryot was there. Three others: Nix had said it correctly, three, two of them Heirs-Second he recognized and one he didn't, all of them in the practical clothing of people who had prepared for a specific journey rather than a formal occasion.

The ship was small — smaller than the tour shuttles, the size of something designed for a specific purpose that did not include comfort as a design parameter. Its hull was clean of markings. The docking collar's atmospheric seal was active, which meant the ship was ready, which meant the departure was now rather than when they'd caught their breath.

Iscaryot looked at Kaiden when he arrived. She looked at Nix. She looked at Lysandir, who had followed through the Elevatio corridor to this point and had stopped at the collar's edge.

"He's not coming," Nix said.

Iscaryot looked at Lysandir. Something passed between them — the look of people who have been part of the same operation for long enough that the look was sufficient communication.

She turned to the collar. "Everyone aboard."

Kaiden stood at the collar's edge. He looked at Lysandir.

He thought about fourteen weeks. About the first briefing in the swept room on the fourth ring, the *be seen but not remarkable*, the amber eyes doing their work across every distance in the Heir-Second block. About the shuttle noise and *he doesn't know what he's close to.* About *the only way to preserve what you are is to keep asking the question.*

He thought about Kimme.

He thought about the reading room, about *this conversation was real*, about the FreeLink shape in his pocket that she had named without making it a weapon. He thought about what she had said — the observation about the Fold Room, the flat statement of fact carried for weeks and said out loud for the first time. He thought about what she was doing right now, in some room of the City, with the information he had given her and the information she had given him, and with whatever she was going to do with both.

He thought: *she told me about Shexim. She did not have to.*

He thought: *she told me because the conversation was real, and she was being honest in both directions.*

He thought: *I am going to need to come back.*

Not a plan yet. A direction. He was already beginning to understand that the direction required the thing he didn't yet have — the knowledge of what he actually was, what he could actually do, whether the question of the Leaf could be answered by someone who simply tried to Fold without it. The UnImperium was the place where that question could be addressed. The UnImperium was through the docking collar.

"Kentur," Nix said, from inside.

He looked at Lysandir one more time.

Lysandir was already turning, already beginning to walk back through the Elevatio corridor toward whatever came next for him — the next forty minutes, the gap being noticed, the navigation of whatever Janna's response produced.

He did not look back.

Kaiden turned to the docking collar. He moved through it. The atmospheric seal made a specific sound as he passed through — the sound of one environment ending and another beginning, the sound of a transition that has a before and an after and no between.

The ship's interior was what it was: small, functional, the smell of a vessel that had been running continuously with people in it. The others were in the seats. Nix was at the front, doing something at the navigation panel that required both hands. Iscaryot was looking at the docking collar display, watching the atmospheric seal read.

The collar disengaged.

The ship moved.

Through the viewport — a small one, the size a ship like this offered, which was not the size for looking but the size for confirming that the outside remained outside — the City's hull passed.

He had seen the City's exterior from a shuttle on arrival, fourteen weeks ago. The sheared hemisphere. The booster rings. The specific scale of a thing that was built at the scale of something that had outlasted the human ability to fully comprehend it. He had seen it then as something he was approaching.

He saw it now as something he was leaving.

The hull moved past the viewport, and then the hull was behind them, and then it was the Tucana system's amber light on the ring system, and then it was open space with the City behind them, already appearing smaller than it was because distance did what distance does.

In his left pocket: the FreeLink chip. The token.

He thought about Kimme pressing her palm against the projection in the reading room — that was not what had happened, the girl with the palm was the market level child, but the images had merged

in his memory and he let them merge because what they merged into was true to the feeling if not the fact.

He thought: *I will come back.*

He thought: *but first I need to know what I am.*

The Tucana system's amber light was on the ship's hull. The City was behind them. In front of them: the space between the Tucana system and wherever the ship was going, which he would be told when they arrived, because in the current operational logic the information was on a need-to-know basis and the need had not yet arrived.

He looked at the viewport.

He was, for the first time in fourteen weeks, not inside the City.

The feeling this produced was not the feeling he had expected. He had expected relief, or fear, or the specific quality of a person who has broken free of a constraint they have been inside for a long time. What he felt was simpler: the quality of someone who has been in one kind of room and is now in another, and who carries the first room with them regardless of what room they are currently in.

The City was behind him. The questions were with him.

He settled into his seat. He looked at the viewport. He let the amber light of the Tucana system's ring do its work on the hull, and he thought about what came next, and he let the ship move through the space that was not the City and was not the UnImperium yet and was simply the space between.

He would find out what he was.

He would come back.

Both things were true.

He held them.

PART THREE

THE UNGOVERNED

TWENTY-NINE

TRANSIT — TUCANA SYSTEM / HANOV SYSTEM

THE SHIP HAD A NAME, somewhere in its registration. No one used it. They called it the ship, or when precision was required, they said *the vessel*, and that was sufficient. It was the kind of craft that had been built to not be noticed, and the not-being-noticed extended to every feature of it, including the naming.

Kaiden had been aboard for four days.

He had learned, in those four days, what the ship was and what it wasn't. It was not comfortable. The bunk in the storage bay that served as his quarters was a bunk in the way that a horizontal surface with a mat on it is a bunk — technically, but without commitment to the category. The atmospheric system was functional but not calibrated for preference: the temperature sat at the low end of tolerable, which had the effect of making sleep feel like something you had to commit to rather than something that simply happened. The food was efficient and nutritionless in the specific way of food that has

been engineered for caloric delivery rather than any quality that makes eating a human experience.

None of this was the hard part.

The hard part was the quality of the space.

He had spent fourteen weeks on Imperial City. The City was many things, some of them terrible, most of them specific to the kind of power that three hundred years of unchallenged authority produces. But it was also a world — a complete world, with its own ecology of human presence. The market level, with its noise and smell and the girl pressing her palm through the projection. The card game table in the secondary common area. The secondary corridor with its lower light. The reading room. The specific hum of the City's systems in the walls of his suite at the late hour when the block went quiet.

He had not known how much of himself had been oriented to that environment until he was out of it.

The ship's ambient sound was not the City's hum. It was the ship's drive core, which ran at a different frequency — not continuous in the way the City's was continuous, but pulsed, the rhythm of a drive that cycled rather than maintained. He woke to it in the night and could not, for several seconds, orient. The darkness was the darkness of a storage bay with the lights off and not of a suite on the fifth ring of Imperial City, and the two darknesses were different, and his body kept insisting on the wrong one.

He missed his own room.

This was a small thing to miss. He understood it was a small thing. He missed it anyway, with the specific quality of missing that belongs to things that have been lost before their value was known.

There were eight of them.

Kaiden, Nix, Iscaryot. Three other Heirs-Second he had not known well from the block: a woman named Selinga Stevkir, who

was small and angular and spoke very rarely and seemed to be processing something with extreme internal care; a man named Orvyn — Kaiden noticed this without commenting on it — whose House ran a water contracts network in the outer systems and who had clearly been in planning conversations that Kaiden had not been party to, given the ease with which he navigated the ship's operational questions; and a young woman named Pey, from a House so small its name had not come up in the block's social calendar, whose presence on the extraction was the one Kaiden had no explanation for.

And Trumbold.

Trumbold was the first person Kaiden had met who was Elevatio and was not performing the Elevatio. He was gaunt in the specific way of someone who has been living at the edge of adequate resources for long enough that the gauntness has become structural rather than circumstantial. His vestments were hybrid — the Elevatio's form present but impure, altered where function required alteration, a scar along one jaw that an Elevatio priest in the City's formal life would have had removed but that Trumbold had not had removed, or had not been somewhere that removing it was possible. He wore the modifications without apology, in the way of someone who no longer remembers that the modifications might require apology.

He did not introduce himself. He was already on the ship when Kaiden boarded, seated at the common area's table with a set of instruments spread before him in the ordered arrangement of someone who has been in transit long enough to develop a working relationship with the available surface area. He looked up when Kaiden entered, looked at him for two seconds, and returned to his instruments.

On the third day, Kaiden sat down across from him.

"You're Trumbold," he said.

"Yes," Trumbold said, without looking up.

"You're the one Lysandir protected," Kaiden said. "When the

Elevatio leadership wanted to—" He paused. "Silence was the word Lysandir used."

Trumbold looked up. His eyes were the eyes of someone who has been right about things for a long time and has run out of the energy required to be frustrated about being right. "Silence. Yes." He looked at Kaiden with the specific attention of someone assessing the quality of a thing they are about to work with. "You're Kentur."

"Yes," Kaiden said.

"Aurelo's project," Trumbold said.

The phrase arrived with the flatness of something stated rather than offered. Not cruel — simply direct, in the way of someone who has been outside the City's social grammar for long enough that the grammar no longer governs his phrasing.

"I wasn't aware of being a project," Kaiden said.

"You weren't supposed to be," Trumbold said. He returned to his instruments. "That's the point of a project." He adjusted something with a tool that was smaller than it looked. "Aurelo was careful. He told them what they needed to know and not more. The fact that you're here and not an instrument is a credit to his calibration."

Kaiden said: "You don't agree with the Elevatio's theory."

Trumbold looked up again, this time with something that was not quite amusement and not quite its opposite. "I agree with some of it. The Commune capability in your line is real. The Fold recessive is real. The selection across three generations produced what it was meant to produce, which is you." He set the tool down. "What I disagree with is the doctrine about how those capabilities combine. And I disagreed loudly enough that the Congregatio's leadership found my disagreement inconvenient."

"Lysandir sent you here rather than letting them silence you."

"He did."

"Why."

Trumbold picked up the tool again. "Because he thought I'd be useful eventually. He was correct. I'm here to train you." He looked at the tool. "Which I cannot do until the assessment at Hanov

confirms the profile." He set it down again. "And I cannot do the assessment until we get to Hanov." He looked at Kaiden. "So for now, I'm doing this," he indicated the spread of instruments, "and you should find something to do that isn't talking to me."

Kaiden looked at the instruments.

"What are they," he said.

Trumbold said: "Patience is a form of readiness. Prepare yourself."

It was not an answer. Kaiden filed it as something that would be answered eventually, when eventually arrived, and left Trumbold to his instruments.

The Fold happened on the fifth day.

He had been in the passenger section when the ship's Starfarer came forward from her station in the rear section. He had not met her before this — she stayed in the rear section, which was her working environment, and did not emerge for the common area's meals or the sporadic conversations that passed for the ship's social life. She was small, younger than he expected, her hair cut close to the scalp in the practical style of someone for whom hair is an inconvenience. She wore the UnImperium's equivalent of the work uniform — functional, unremarkable, the clothing of someone who was here to do a specific thing and had organized their appearance around the doing of it.

She sat at the station at the passenger section's forward end. She opened a case she had brought with her and removed a vial — small, the same size as the ones Kimme had taken in the Fold Room, the glass blue. She administered it without ceremony. She closed the case. She settled into the station's posture with the quality of someone entering a state they had been in many times before.

Nix said, from across the section: "Everyone hold on to something."

Nobody moved, because there was nothing specific to hold on to and no movement that would help with what was coming. The instruction was the form, not the function. The function was the Fold.

He watched the Starfarer.

She was going under quickly — the Leaf at this dose worked fast, the trance arriving in the specific way of a tide coming in, a quality of presence receding as something else came forward. He watched the jaw relax, the breathing slow, the specific quality of someone being replaced in their own face by a different quality of occupancy. The eyes were open but receiving rather than seeing, the pupils fixed at a specific dilation.

He watched the quality of the trance.

It was deep. Deeply deep. The kind of deep that had no apparent floor — the dissolution was complete in the way that suggested no part of the person was maintained above the surface of the state. She was entirely in it. Whatever the Fold required, she was giving it everything.

He thought about two chairs in the Fold Room. About a trance too complete for a collective effort.

He thought: *the Fold Room's trance was exactly this quality. One person in it completely. Nothing held back.*

He could not locate the specific wrongness yet — could not articulate the gap between the doctrine and what he was observing. But the nagging quality was there, the sensation of looking at something that does not quite match the drawing of it, the map and the territory not fully aligned.

Then the Fold happened.

He had been through Folds on the City, but Folds on the City from inside the City were a specific kind of experience — the before and after with nothing between, the intensity present but contained by the City's enormous mass, distributed across a volume so large that the individual experience was a fraction of what the Fold itself was. This was different. This was a small ship.

The volume was a fraction of the City's. The intensity was the same.

He was not ready for the same.

The between arrived — not nothing, but not navigable. The quality of the space between origin and destination, which the doctrine said was the Fold itself, which he had experienced before as intensity and was now experiencing as intensity magnified by the reduction in mass, in the way that a smaller vessel on rougher water produces more motion than a larger one on calmer. His grip on the seat found its maximum. His jaw set of its own accord. The quality of the moment was the quality of something happening to you that you have not consented to and cannot exit — not painful, but involuntary in a way that made voluntary feel, in retrospect, like an extraordinary condition.

Then it was over.

The new system was outside.

He looked at the viewport. A different star — he did not know which one, would be told eventually, the information on a need-to-know basis still operating. The color of the light different from Tucana's amber. This system's star was whiter, younger, the light it produced at this distance carrying a quality that was not warmth but was close to it.

He looked at the Starfarer.

She was coming out of the trance. Gradually, unlike Janna's immediate eyes-open return — this emergence was the emergence of someone being carried up from depth by the state's own dissolution rather than choosing to surface. It took three minutes. When her eyes were fully present again, she was breathing differently from how she breathed going in — the effort of it visible, the expenditure real.

She picked up the case. She went back to the rear section.

Trumbold, from the seat he had taken during the Fold, was watching Kaiden.

"You saw something," Trumbold said.

"I'm not sure what I saw," Kaiden said.

"Good," Trumbold said. "That's the right answer." He stood, picked up his instruments case, and returned to the common area.

IMPERIAL CITY — TUCANA SYSTEM — FOURTEEN HOURS AFTER DEPARTURE

She had been awake for nineteen hours when the gap was confirmed.

The gap was in the maintenance logs — not a gap in the sense of absence, but a gap in the sense of a section that had been logged as empty when it should not have been. The maintenance tunnels in the cathedral block's sub-level showed no traffic for the forty-three minutes in question. The atmospheric sensors showed no transit. The biometric checkpoints showed no passage. Forty-three minutes of the cathedral block's sub-level existing in the logs as undisturbed.

The cathedral block's sub-level was not undisturbed during those forty-three minutes. She knew this because of what came after the forty-three minutes: the docking collar at the block's outer hull, which showed a departure event that had not been registered through any standard channel, which meant the registration had been deliberately bypassed, which required access to the docking collar's authorization system at a level that was not available to any unauthorized party.

Authorized parties with that level of access: four. Herself. Kimme. The Chief of Maintenance. And Lysandir.

She looked at the docking collar log. She looked at the maintenance log. She looked at the atmospheric sensor record.

She said: "Lysandir."

Not to anyone in the room — she was alone in her private suite, having sent the overnight staff away when the first anomaly had come in from the monitoring system. She said it to the room, to the fact, to the three-hour accumulation of evidence that had arranged

itself into the specific shape of Lysandir's involvement without requiring her to perform the arrangement.

She had trusted him. She had not trusted him blindly — she did not trust anyone blindly, the capacity having been removed from her operating system through a long process that she did not regret. She had trusted him in the form of ongoing accurate assessment: he was useful, he was managed, his Elevatio loyalties were known and accounted for in the way that known loyalties are safer than unknown ones. She had trusted him the way she trusted the systems in the walls — because they had been reliable for long enough that the reliability had become the assumption.

She added this to the running account of assumptions she had allowed to calcify beyond their appropriate term.

The docking collar's departure had carried eight people. The biometric logs were empty — the bypassing of the registration system had included the biometric capture, which meant she did not have the names of eight people from the departure record itself. She had the names of the Heirs-Second who were missing from the block's morning check, which had gone unregistered for two hours because the morning check's automated system had been given a false report of normal distribution. Someone had fed the block's attendance system false data. Someone with access to the attendance system's administrative interface.

She pulled the list.

Kentur. Nix. Iscaryot. Stevkir. Three others she identified as peripheral — Heirs-Second with UnImperium connections she had known about and managed, assessed as low-priority. And a name she recognized from a different file entirely: *Pey Orvyn*, registered as Heir-Second from a minor House, who was also, per the intelligence file she opened immediately, registered as having a secondary connection to a Hanov system operation that had been flagged eighteen months ago and subsequently deprioritized.

Hanov.

She composed the message to D'Hana in six sentences.

Eight Heirs-Second, including Kaiden Kentur, departed Imperial City via unauthorized channel during the Tucana transit. Departure point: cathedral block sub-level docking collar. Estimated departure window: fourteen hours ago. Destination: unknown. Priority: immediate. They must be found, returned, or confirmed eliminated.

She paused. She added a seventh sentence.

The confirmation of elimination must include denials of Afterlife for all recovered persons. Standard execution is insufficient.

She sent the message.

She looked at the window, at the Tucana system's amber ring-glow on the City's hull. She was not angry. She was in the state that came after anger when anger had been disciplined across a lifetime into something more useful — the state of someone who has received information about a problem and is now managing the problem.

Lysandir. Kentur. Eight people in an unauthorized departure.

She thought about what she had in the Kentur file and what the Shexim assessment had been going to tell her, and about the fact that the assessment would now not happen because the person to be assessed had departed.

She thought about Kimme.

She thought about the reading room, which the supplementary surveillance showed Kaiden and Kimme had occupied together on the second day after the Communion room meeting — two people sitting across a table, the conversation inaudible but the quality of it visible in their body language, in the quality of attention each was giving the other. She had noted this. She had flagged it. She had not acted on it because she had been managing four other things simultaneously and had assessed the conversation as information-gathering at a level she could process later.

Later was now.

She opened the surveillance record. She watched the reading room for eleven minutes in silence. She watched Kaiden talk and Kimme listen. She watched Kimme talk and Kaiden hold what she gave him with the specific quality of someone receiving information

they had not expected to receive. She watched Kimme pick up the slate and open it and look at it and set it back down.

She closed the record.

She thought: *she told him something. Something she had and gave him.*

She thought: *that is not the behavior of someone conducting an observation.*

She thought: *I have been underestimating the pace.*

She pulled up the supplementary surveillance on the East block that she had ordered three weeks ago. She ran through it quickly, pulling the timestamps that corresponded to Kimme's appearances in the block's vicinity. The secondary corridor appearances. The reading room appearance. The card game table appearances. She counted the appearances and the durations and the quality of what the surveillance showed happening in each one.

She sat with what this told her for a long time.

Then she composed a second message — not to D'Hana but to the room itself, in the form of a note in the private file she maintained for things that were not yet ready to be said to anyone:

Kimme knows something she didn't tell me. Determine what. Determine when she knew it. Determine what she decided and why.

She did not add: *and then determine what I did wrong.* The adding was unnecessary. She knew the answer. She had known since Minute forty-four of the Reticulum assault, when she had looked at the surveillance feed and seen the three seconds where Kimme's face had not been her own face.

She had underestimated the pace.

She had thought she was building a daughter who would inherit an institution.

She had built something that the institution could not contain.

She was not certain, yet, whether this was a failure or its opposite.

She looked at the Tucana system's light.

She had eight Heirs-Second in unauthorized transit. She had

Lysandir to manage. She had Eidan and his Congregatio to manage. She had a message sent to the Shexosant that was already routing through D'Hana's operational network.

The Shexosant would find them, or they would not. If they found them, the response would be what the response needed to be — not for the eight themselves, but for the message their recovery would send to the forty other Heirs-Second still in the block, who were watching what happened to people who tried to leave.

She had maintained the block's containment for twenty-three years through a combination of genuine interest and the implied clarity of what happened when genuine interest failed.

The implied clarity needed to remain implied.

She returned to her desk.

She worked.

Kaiden did not sleep well on the fifth night.

He lay in the storage bay bunk and looked at the ceiling, which was the ceiling of a storage bay — the material of something that was there to be structural rather than to be a ceiling — and thought about the gap between the City's ceiling and this one, which was not a large gap in material terms and was a very large gap in every other sense.

He thought about Kimme, which was the thing he was trying not to think about because it was the thing he couldn't do anything about yet, and the inability to do anything about it was the specific quality of discomfort that he was least equipped to manage.

He thought about the reading room. About what she had given him — the FreeLink identification, the Shexim warning, the flat statement about the Fold Room — and about what he had given her, and about whether the transaction had been fair in the sense that mattered, which was not the sense of equivalence but the sense of honesty.

He thought: *she told me my mother knows about the FreeLink.*

She told me about Shexim. She knew I was going to do something with the information and she gave it to me anyway.

He thought: *she did not have to. She told me because the conversation was real, and she was being honest in both directions.*

He thought: *I left anyway.*

This was the thing that was not comfortable to sit with. He had been honest with her, and she had been honest with him, and he had left. Not because of anything dishonest — the leaving had been necessary in a way that both of them knew. But the leaving had happened without a conversation about the leaving, without anything said in the specific register of *I am going and here is what that means and here is what I want you to know before I go.* The leaving had happened through a maintenance tunnel, with forty minutes before the gap was noticed.

He had said: *I am going to need to come back.* But he had said it to himself, in the docking collar, not to her.

He thought: *she doesn't know I said it.*

He thought: *she probably knows anyway. It is the thing that follows from the conversation we had.*

He thought: *probably is not good enough.*

The drive core pulsed in the walls. The temperature in the storage bay was at its standard low. Somewhere in the forward section, Trumbold was awake — he was always awake, or seemed to be, the instruments spread before him in their ordered arrangement, doing whatever the instruments did at whatever hour Trumbold required them to do it.

He thought about the Fold Room. About what he had been carrying since the Ursa V shuttle and the Communion room and the reading room: the question that was his to test. Whether the Leaf was the mechanism. Whether the mental state could be achieved without it. Whether what he was — whatever that was, whatever the assessment at Hanov would tell him — could do the thing that Iscaryot had said, in the sentence she had delivered without looking at him: *which is why they need someone who can Commune and Fold.*

He thought: *I don't know if I can Fold. I have never tried to Fold. Every sign suggests the capability is there, latent, waiting for something to activate it or for the right conditions or for whatever Trumbold's training is meant to produce.*

He thought: *what I know is that the question is mine now. There is no Lysandir to frame it. No Eidan to manage its implications. No City to perform neutrality inside. Just the question and me and the distance between here and knowing.*

He thought: *and Kimme is in the City, with Janna, not knowing whether I'm going to come back.*

He turned onto his side.

The storage bay was dark in the way of spaces that are dark because there is no reason to have light rather than because the light has been turned off. The distinction was small. It felt large.

He closed his eyes.

He thought about Olan, who had said *you handled yourself well* after Reticulum by saying he hadn't done anything, and who had been correct. He thought about Rhian Lyra, who wanted to know who the competent people were before he needed them. He thought about Robere Valerius, who believed in the process being followed. He thought about the block's secondary common area and the card table and the way the room had held seven or eight people on the evenings when the schedule allowed for it, and how the holding had been the closest thing to ordinary social life he had had in fourteen weeks.

He missed them. Some of them.

He was not going to pretend he didn't miss some of them.

He thought about Alise, who was on Cendant, doing the work. Who had sent the updated Leaf production projection, the eighty-three percent figure, through the standard House bulletin update. Who had been doing this all along, on Cendant, while he was here — wherever here was in this ship's transit — in the dark.

He thought: *she doesn't know where I am.*

He thought: *she will figure it out. She always does.*

He thought: *write that down somewhere, when you can. The thing you want her to know.*

He did not know when writing it down would be possible. He put it in the place where things waited.

The drive core pulsed. The ship moved through the space between the Tucana system and the Hanov system, which was not a named space and was not a named nothing but was simply the distance between two points, which all distances are.

He slept, eventually.

On the seventh day, Trumbold came to him.

Not at the common area table — at the storage bay's entrance, appearing at the threshold with the quality of someone who has determined that the other person's space is where the conversation needs to happen.

"Tomorrow," Trumbold said.

"Tomorrow what," Kaiden said.

"Tomorrow we arrive at Hanov. Tomorrow the assessment happens." He looked at Kaiden with the eyes that had been right about things for long enough that being right had become their default expression. "I need to know what you've been experiencing. In detail. From the beginning." He paused. "Not what Aurelo told you it was. What it actually was."

Kaiden looked at him.

"The pressure behind the left eye," he said.

Trumbold sat down on the floor of the storage bay — not because there was no other option, there was the bunk, but because the floor was the posture of someone settling in for a long conversation without performing the settling.

"Start there," he said.

Kaiden started there.

He talked for three hours. He described the mining rescue

corridor and the direction in the dark and the child and the plastic animal. He described the growbitat inspection and the pressure that was not urgent, not directional, simply present. He described the Communion room sessions with Father Dolan and the quality of Maren's voice — the shortness of it, the economy, the way it arrived without the grammar of visitation and departed without the grammar of conclusion. He described the training sessions with Memna Zael and the quality of the sword form at the end of the session where he had been too tired to manage the form and had let it manage him. He described Orvyn's voice and the specific register that was longer and drier and more sardonic than Maren's. He described the Wayfinder facility and the thirty seconds before Ana Tollivar made the display dark. He described the feeling in the swept room on the fifth ring when Nix said *how would you test it otherwise* and the thing behind his left eye that had stirred at the question.

He described all of it.

Trumbold listened without interrupting. He did not write anything down. He listened with the quality of someone whose listening was a form of assessment — not recording, sorting, placing each piece in the configuration it belonged to.

When Kaiden finished, Trumbold was quiet for a long time.

Then he said: "The Elevatio's theory is wrong."

Kaiden looked at him.

"Not about what you are," Trumbold said. "About how what you are works." He looked at the floor. "The Commune capability is real. The Fold recessive is real. The combination is real. What's wrong is the doctrine about how they interact." He paused. "They don't need to interact. They're not two instruments that need to be played simultaneously. They're the same instrument." He looked up. "The Commune capability is directional attention — the ability to point your awareness at a specific thing and receive it fully. The Fold is the same quality of attention, pointed outward rather than inward, pointed at space rather than at a preserved consciousness." He paused again. "The Leaf creates a cognitive state that makes this

easier. It does not create the capability. The capability exists independently of the Leaf."

Kaiden said: "You've been saying this for a long time."

"For twelve years," Trumbold said. "The Congregatio's leadership found it inconvenient." He stood from the floor, the unhurried rising of a person who has been sitting for a while and is resuming. "Tomorrow the assessment confirms the profile. Then we begin." He looked at Kaiden. "You should sleep. The assessment is not physically demanding but it requires something from you that rest supports."

"What does it require," Kaiden said.

"Honesty," Trumbold said. "The assayors read what's actually there. If you try to manage what they find, they find the management instead of the thing." He paused. "Don't manage it."

He left.

Kaiden looked at the storage bay ceiling.

He thought about honesty as a form of readiness. He thought about what Trumbold had said — the same instrument, pointed differently. He thought about the quality of attention he brought to Maren's voice and what it would mean to take that quality and point it outward, at space, at the distance between two points.

He thought: *I have been doing this wrong because I have been trying to do two things. But it might be one thing.*

He thought: *tomorrow.*

He lay down.

The drive core pulsed.

The ship moved through the dark, carrying its eight passengers toward whatever Hanov held, and behind it the Tucana system was already too far to see, and behind that the City was moving through its Cycle without them, carrying the girl who pressed her palm through projections and the market stalls and the card table and the secondary corridor and Kimme Chadrac in her quarters with whatever she was sitting with.

The Shexosant message had been sent fourteen hours ago.

He did not know this. He knew it was coming. The knowing-it-was-coming and the not-knowing-the-specific-timing were different kinds of knowing, and both were real, and both had their weight.

He held the weight.

The ship moved.

Outside, the space between Tucana and Hanov continued to be what it was: not empty, because space is not empty, but without anything in it that was relevant to him. Just the distance. Just the time the distance required.

He was nineteen years old.

He was not on the City anymore.

He was somewhere in the space between the thing he had been and the thing he was becoming, and the space between those two things had a quality that was its own kind of dark, its own kind of quiet, its own specific quality of a person in transit who cannot yet see where the transit ends.

He closed his eyes.

He held on.

THIRTY

HANOV SYSTEM — UNIMPERIUM SPACE

HANOV IV WAS A COLD WORLD — not dramatically cold, not the inhospitable cold of a gas giant or an outer rock, but the specific cold of a world that had been settled by people who valued privacy over comfort and had built accordingly. The structures were low and close to the ground, designed to minimize heat signature from above. The streets, where they existed, were covered walkways rather than open boulevards. Everything was calibrated for the maintenance of warmth within and the projection of nothing outward.

The facility they brought him to was in the settlement's eastern quarter, accessible through a covered passage that connected two buildings that appeared, from any external angle, to be a food processing plant and a textile warehouse. The passage between them was the facility. This arrangement had the quality of something that had been designed by someone who understood surveillance architecture very well and had concluded that the most sophisticated form of concealment was to be a thing that already existed rather than a thing that was hiding.

Trumbold led. Nix came behind. The others had been distributed to safe accommodations in different parts of the settlement — the operational logic of not putting everyone in the same location, in case someone found one of them.

Three steps inside the facility: warmth, and the specific smell of equipment that had been running for a long time. Not the smell of disrepair — the smell of sustained operation, of machinery that had been in continuous use long enough that it had developed its own ambient quality. A workshop smell. The smell of someone's life's work occupying a space.

Kaiden looked at the central piece of equipment and understood immediately that it was older than almost anything he had seen.

The Greater Genetic Assayor occupied roughly the footprint of a large table, though its configuration was nothing like a table. It was taller than its footprint suggested — a column of interconnected units, each one a different function in the assessment architecture, linked by cables that had been organized and reorganized over years of operation into a pattern that was neither neat nor chaotic but was the specific organized complexity of something that has been modified by the same person's hands many times. The surface of the units had the wear of long use: not dirty, but bearing the marks of countless sessions — the small scratches of instrument cases being set down without care, the slight discoloration around the access panels that handling produces.

The main display was an older generation — not the floating projection surfaces of the City's equipment, but a panel mounted directly to the unit's central column, its display bright and functional and of a type that had not been manufactured in twenty years.

He had seen Lesser Assayors three times. Every child in the Imperium encountered one at thirteen: the standard birthday assessment, the genetic profile that went into the Chain's record and stayed

there. The Lesser Assayor was quick — a biometric contact, a fifteen-minute processing cycle, a readout that the attending medical read and logged. He had stood in the Bauxitum station's medical bay at thirteen and held his palm to the contact surface and waited fifteen minutes and been told his profile showed no anomalies. He had believed this because there was no reason not to believe it.

He understood now that Aurelo had been in the station on the day of his assessment.

The Greater Assayor was different in category, not just in degree. The Lesser worked from the outside, from the biological surface — blood chemistry, biometric markers, the genetic signals that expressed themselves in the body's observable functions. The Greater went deeper, into the genome's actual structure, the latent markers that did not express and therefore did not appear in any surface reading. It was the instrument that could map what a person was versus what a person was currently being. The distinction was significant enough that the Imperium had restricted Greater Assayor access to the Shexosant's facilities on Shexim, with strict authorization requirements and Chain logging of every session.

This one was not on Shexim. It was on Hanov IV, in a textile warehouse. It was damaged — a damage that was apparent in the way certain units in the column had been isolated from the main circuit, their functions bridged around rather than restored, the workaround visible in the cable routing that bypassed them. The damage was old enough that the workaround had become the standard configuration.

"What can it still do," Kaiden asked Trumbold.

"Everything the assessment requires," Trumbold said. "The modification capability is gone — the units that could effect genetic change have been isolated. What remains is the reading function, at full depth." He looked at the equipment with the expression of someone who has worked with a specific instrument for long enough that the instrument has become simply what it is rather than what it

used to be. "It will take four hours rather than six. The depth of the read is unchanged."

"And the result goes where," Kaiden said.

"Here," Trumbold said, indicating the display panel. "Nowhere else. This unit is not networked. It has never been networked. Everything it produces stays in this room."

He looked at the equipment. He thought about the Shexim assessment that Janna had been planning, the Greater Assayors under Shexosant lock, the genetic profile that would have told her what he was before the Elevatio had the opportunity to act on it. He thought about timing — about how the forty-minute gap in the maintenance logs and the fourteen-hour head start and the Tucana Fold had been calculated. Whether any of it had been enough.

He thought: *I am about to find out what they were planning to find out at Shexim, but first, and on different terms.*

"What do you need from me," he said.

"Sit," Trumbold said. "Keep your hands still. The contact surface reads involuntary muscle response, and if you're managing your tension consciously, it reads the management rather than the state underneath it."

He sat in the assessment chair — an older chair, the upholstery worn to the specific smoothness of long use, the arms' contact surfaces worn smooth at the palm positions by the accumulated contact of many sessions. He placed his hands on the contact surfaces.

"Don't manage it," Trumbold said. This was what he had said the night before in the storage bay. He was saying it again because it was true and because it was the kind of thing that needed to be said twice to land correctly.

The assessment began.

The first thirty minutes were nothing — or not nothing, but nothing he could detect. A low warmth at the contact surfaces. A slight quality change in the air of the room, the equipment's environmental controls making micro-adjustments. Trumbold stood at the display panel, not watching Kaiden but watching the display, the data arriving and being processed in real time.

Kaiden sat and did not manage his tension. This was harder than it sounded. Not managing tension was not the same as not having it. He had tension. The tension was real and present and belonged in the room. He let it be there.

He thought about what the assessment would find.

He had been told, in various forms by various people, what he was. Aurelo had given him the genealogical codex, the six generations of co-heirs, the three generations of selection. Lysandir had told him the Elevatio believed his line carried something specific. Eidan had described the target: Folder recessive plus Commune active, in one person. Trumbold had told him, on the ship, that the two capabilities were the same instrument pointed differently.

He had not yet been told by an instrument.

The instrument was now doing its work.

He sat with the warmth in the contact surfaces and waited.

At the ninety-minute mark, Trumbold said — to the display rather than to Kaiden: "The Commune markers are active, as expected. The expression is current, not dormant." He paused. "The activity level is higher than the profile suggested it would be at this age."

"Higher than what profile," Kaiden said.

"The projected developmental curve for your line," Trumbold said. "Based on the ancestral patterns and the selection record." He made an adjustment at the panel. "You've been using it more than the environment of the City's observation would suggest."

Kaiden thought about the storage bay on the ship. The nights when the drive core pulsed and the dark was wrong and the voices arrived not as direction but as presence — Maren's voice at the edge

of the dark, not saying anything specific, just present, the quality of someone who is there. He had thought of this as the Commune doing what it did when he wasn't actively directing it. He had not thought of it as use.

"The Fold recessive," he said.

Trumbold was quiet for a moment. The display was running something that required his full attention.

"Present," he said, after a while. "Active."

Kaiden held still.

"Not dormant," Trumbold said. "The recessive markers are expressed. Latent in the sense that they have not been given the conditions to fully develop, but not latent in the sense of being inert." He looked at the display. "Something has been activating them." He paused. "The City's environment is not conducive to this kind of activation. The activation has been happening anyway."

Kaiden thought about the growbitat array, three and a half months ago. The pressure behind the left eye that had not been urgent or directional but had been simply present, as if the awareness was there and had nowhere specific to go. He thought about the Wayfinder facility and the thirty seconds and the unmarked systems.

"And the other markers," he said.

Trumbold said nothing for a long time. The display was running. Kaiden waited.

"Telekinesis recessive," Trumbold said, when he returned to the assessment. "Latent but present. Truth sensitivity markers, present. The full suite." He paused, and the pause had a quality that was different from the pauses that had preceded it — the quality of someone encountering something they had been told to expect and that is nonetheless surprising in its specificity. "And a Cognaut marker."

The room was quiet.

"Suppressed," Trumbold said. "Not latent — actively suppressed. The suppression is biological but not natural. Someone intervened in the

activation pathway during early development." He looked at the display for a moment longer. "Before you were tested. Before the standard assessment at thirteen." He looked at Kaiden directly for the first time since the assessment began. "The suppression is why the City's standard assessment showed nothing. The Lesser Assayor reads surface expression. The Cognaut marker was suppressed before it could express."

Kaiden said: "Who suppressed it."

Trumbold said: "Aurelo had access to the assessment apparatus before the official read. The suppression has his signature — it's the methodology the Congregatio Secretorum developed for exactly this purpose." He returned to the display. "The suppression is holding. The Cognaut pathway is closed."

Kaiden looked at the room — at the equipment with its organized complexity, at the display running its data, at Trumbold's back turned to him as he worked.

He thought about the suppression.

He thought about his father's hand on his shoulder in the corridor of the rescue, and about the Fascinations in their cryo-containers in the loading bay, and about the codex Aurelo had given him with the six generations of co-heirs. He thought about what the suppression meant — that before he was old enough to understand what decisions were being made about him, a decision had been made about him. Not a cruel decision. A decision made by someone who believed they were protecting him, who had assessed the risks and concluded that a closed pathway was better than an open one, who had not asked whether the person the pathway belonged to had an opinion.

He thought about what it would have meant to activate with the Cognaut pathway open. Trumbold had told him, on the ship: it overrides everything else. You would become a machine interface and nothing more. The Elevatio made the choice before he could. He understood, now, that Aurelo had made the choice — had made it in the station on the day of his assessment, with the Lesser Assayor read

pending and the Chain record waiting to receive whatever the assessment found.

He had been in this room before his own memory.

He thought: *I don't know if it was the wrong decision. I know I didn't make it.*

He thought: *that is the thing that is difficult to sit with.*

He did not say any of this. He sat in the assessment chair with his hands on the contact surfaces and kept his tension present and unmanaged.

"The assessment is complete," Trumbold said, at the four-hour mark.

"What does it say," Kaiden said.

Trumbold looked at the display for a long moment. Then he turned.

"It says you are everything the Congregatio built toward," he said. "Folder active, Commune active, the full capability suite present and developing. The suppressed Cognaut pathway is stable — it will not self-activate." He paused. "It also says something the Congregatio did not plan for."

Kaiden waited.

"The Fold markers are not recessive," Trumbold said. "They were categorized as recessive in the ancestral profile because they had never expressed. But the assessment distinguishes between recessive in the genetic sense — a trait that requires a specific allele combination to express — and recessive in the developmental sense — a trait that has not yet found the conditions it needs. Yours is the second kind." He looked at Kaiden steadily. "Given the right conditions, you would have expressed regardless of the selection program. The program accelerated what was already going to happen." He paused. "That is not what the Congregatio believed it was doing."

Kaiden said: "What did they believe."

"They believed they were producing a specific configuration that would not occur naturally," Trumbold said. "The assessment says the configuration was going to occur naturally. They spent a century

managing an emergence that was coming whether they managed it or not." He looked at the display one more time. "Aurelo knew this. He didn't tell Eidan."

Kaiden sat with this for a moment. He thought about Aurelo's face in the training sessions, the disproportionate anxiety that had been visible and that Kaiden had registered and filed. The anxiety of a man holding something he could not share with the people he was working for.

"Trumbold," he said.

"Yes."

"When do we start."

Trumbold looked at him.

"Tomorrow," he said. "Today you eat something and you rest. The assessment takes more from you than the equipment takes from the person in the chair." He began shutting down the assayor's external systems, the organized process of someone who has done this many times and does it the same way each time. "There is someone you should meet this afternoon. He arrived from Destus on the same route we used, three days ahead of us."

"Who," Kaiden said.

"A Cognaut," Trumbold said. "His name is Vex. He has been waiting to tell someone something for a long time."

Vex occupied a workbench at the facility's other end the way certain people occupy space — completely, with a quality of total absorption that made the space around the workbench seem secondary to whatever was happening on it. He was not large — medium height, medium build, the kind of physical description that is accurate and fails to convey anything specific. His hair was cut with the ruthlessness of someone who has decided that hair is an administrative task and wishes to minimize its frequency. His eyes were brown and quick and had the quality of someone who processes information at a

rate that exceeds the available inputs, which produced, when he was in conversation, a quality of slight impatience — not rudeness, the specific impatience of someone for whom the gap between what they know and what they can communicate is a constant minor frustration.

He was doing something with a set of instruments spread across the workbench when Trumbold brought Kaiden over. He did not look up immediately. He finished what he was doing with the instruments — a small adjustment, the kind that required the full attention of the hands — and then he set the instruments down and looked up.

He looked at Kaiden for two seconds.

"The Kentur," he said.

"Yes," Kaiden said.

Vex looked at him for another second. Then he looked at Trumbold. "The assayor read everything."

"Yes," Trumbold said.

"Good," Vex said. He looked at Kaiden again, with the quality of someone who has received a piece of information they've been waiting for and is now deciding what to do with it. "Sit down."

There was a stool at the workbench's near end. Kaiden sat. Trumbold took a position slightly behind and to the right — the position of someone present but not leading, which was a mode he seemed comfortable in.

"You know what a Cognaut is," Vex said. Not a question — an assessment of baseline.

"I know the definition," Kaiden said. "I've never encountered one. The City doesn't use them."

"The City uses them," Vex said. "It doesn't acknowledge them. Cognauts interface with the dumb computer systems — navigation, atmospheric management, the logistics infrastructure that moves things from where they are to where they need to be. The City has approximately forty Cognauts in active service running functions that would require three hundred baseline staff to operate manually." He paused. "They are categorized as technical operators in the

Chain's employment registry. Their specific function is not recorded."

"Because the function is politically inconvenient," Kaiden said.

Vex looked at him. "Because if the Houses knew that human minds were directly interfacing with the City's computer systems, they would have extremely specific questions about what information those minds have access to. The answer would be uncomfortable." He picked up one of the instruments on the workbench — not to use it, the habitual pickup of someone who thinks better with something in their hands. "A Cognaut in full interface reads everything the systems process. Not selectively. Everything. The dumb computers don't have the concept of privacy. They have the concept of data, and a Cognaut has the concept of data, and the interface is complete."

Kaiden said: "And the City uses them."

"Yes," Vex said. "And the UnImperium uses them for the same reason — because the dumb computers are better at managing logistics than any alternative, and the alternative to Cognaution is a very large team of baseline staff making the same calculations more slowly with more errors." He set the instrument down. "I run the Fold pattern generation for the UnImperium network."

This landed in the room with the specific weight of information that changes the scale of the conversation it arrives in.

Kaiden looked at him. "The patterns the UnImperium Folders use."

"I generate them," Vex said. "From the data the Cognaut interface gives me access to — stellar drift, gravity gradients, the relationship between origin and destination in the terms that a Folder needs to understand it. I build the patterns and the Folders use them." He paused. "This is what the City's Wayfinder corps also does. The difference is that I work alone and they work in a corps of sixty and I produce patterns faster and with less error." He said this without particular satisfaction — it was a fact, and he was a person for whom facts were what they were regardless of their implications for

anyone's ego. "I mention this because it means I understand the Fold data better than any other person in the UnImperium. And possibly better than any person in the Imperium who is not Janna Chadrac."

"Because you build the patterns," Kaiden said.

"Because I build the patterns," Vex agreed, "and because building the patterns requires understanding the energy requirements of the Fold, the specific outputs that a successful Fold produces, and the signature it leaves in the data that the systems record." He looked at Kaiden. "And that signature is what I want to talk to you about."

He cleared half the workbench.

Not the organized clearing of a person making space for something they've planned for — the clearing of a person who has had this conversation in their head many times and is now having it in person and is moving at the pace the mental version moves, which is faster than the physical version. He moved instruments to the far end, brought up a display from the panel recessed in the workbench's surface, pulled a set of printed data sheets from a drawer.

The data sheets were old — printed rather than displayed, which in the current environment meant they had been produced somewhere without reliable power or in circumstances where digital records were not safe. The printing was dense, the kind of density that belongs to someone who has more information than they can comfortably hold in any single document and is attempting to fit more in.

"The City Folds," Vex said, "on a schedule. Consistent, predictable, the same pattern every Cycle. I have been tracking the City's Fold signatures for eleven years." He spread the data sheets across the cleared section of the workbench. "This is what a Fold looks like in the data."

Kaiden looked at the sheets. They were annotated in a handwriting that was small and very precise, the annotations building into

a commentary that ran alongside the printed data in layers — not one person's notes, but several rounds of returning to the same data and finding new things to say about it.

Vex pointed. "This is the energy signature of a standard UnImperium Fold. One Starfarer, one ship, standard mass. The signature has three components: the pre-Fold buildup, which is the mental state stabilizing; the Fold event itself, which is instantaneous and produces the specific electromagnetic output the instruments record; and the post-Fold decay, which is the system returning to equilibrium."

He moved his finger to a second set of data. "This is the energy signature of the City's Fold."

Kaiden looked at the two sets of data side by side.

He did not have the technical fluency to read the data the way Vex read it — the specific literacy of someone who has spent eleven years looking at the same kind of information. But he had enough to see that the two signatures were similar in structure and different in scale.

"The scale is different," he said.

"The scale is massively different," Vex said. "Which is expected. The City is massively larger than a standard UnImperium ship. More volume, more space being displaced, more energy required." He paused. "This is what the bonded-Starfarer doctrine predicts. Multiple Folders combining their output to achieve the scale that the City's volume requires." He looked at Kaiden. "But the signature's shape is wrong for a bonded group."

Kaiden looked at him.

"A bonded group produces a specific signature pattern," Vex said. "Not just larger — different in kind. Multiple Folders combining their output don't produce the same signature as one Folder at a higher output level. The combination has harmonics. Overtones. The mathematical relationship between the components is visible in the data, in the way that the relationship between two instruments playing simultaneously is visible in a sound recording that shows you

the waveform." He pointed at the City's Fold data. "This doesn't have harmonics. This has the signature of a single source, at very high output."

He stepped back from the workbench.

"I told the Elevatio this eleven years ago," he said. "I sent them the data. I annotated it in terms that left no ambiguity about the conclusion. Their response was—" He paused, and the pause had the specific quality of the exhausted satisfaction the Story Bible had noted, the exhaustion of someone who has been right too long for the being right to feel like vindication anymore. "Their response was that I was misinterpreting the data. That the bonded Fold signature would look different at the City's scale than it did at ship scale. That the harmonics would be compressed into the main signature and would require different analysis methods to detect."

"Were they right," Kaiden said.

"No," Vex said. "I applied every analysis method they suggested. I then invented three analysis methods they hadn't suggested. The harmonics are not there. Not compressed, not hidden, not present in a form that requires specialized detection." He looked at Kaiden. "The City's Fold is produced by a single source."

The room was quiet.

Nix, who had entered silently at some point during the last several minutes and was standing at the workbench's far end, said: "You're saying the Elevatio's doctrine is wrong."

"I'm saying the data says the doctrine is wrong," Vex said. "What the data says and what the doctrine says are both available for examination. The doctrine does not have a mechanism for revising itself. The data does."

Kaiden looked at the two sets of signatures on the workbench. He thought about the Fold Room and the two chairs and Kimme's flat statement about her mother's trance being too complete for a collective effort. He thought about *how many does it take* and *enough* and all the conclusions he had been assembling from fragments for months.

He said: "What if it's just one person."

Vex looked at him.

The look had the quality of someone receiving a question from an unexpected direction — not the question itself, which Vex had clearly been building toward, but the directness of the asking, the willingness to say it plainly.

"One person can't move that volume," Vex said. "Not without—" He stopped.

He picked up a stylus from the workbench.

He looked at the data sheets.

He began to write something in the margin — the small, precise handwriting overlaying the printed data, working through something quickly, the stylus moving with the efficiency of someone thinking in mathematics.

He stopped.

He looked at what he had written.

He put the stylus down.

"If the volume limit isn't about mass," he said, "but about something else—" He paused. He picked up the stylus again. "The standard doctrine says volume scales with mass. Heavier objects require more capacity. But if the relevant variable isn't mass—" He wrote something else. "If the relevant variable is the cognitive requirement of holding a space in directed attention—" He looked at what he had written. "Then a person who is very good at directed attention could potentially hold a larger volume than a person who is less good at it, regardless of the mass inside the volume."

He set the stylus down.

"And if there's an amplification mechanism we haven't accounted for—" He didn't finish the sentence.

He looked at the data.

He looked at the margin notes.

He said: "I need to think about this."

Kaiden looked at the workbench — at the two sets of signatures, at the margin notes, at the stylus.

He thought about the quality of attention required to Commune. The way Maren's voice arrived not because he searched for it but because his attention had found the right orientation. The way the growbitat inspection had produced the low non-urgent pressure, the awareness of something without the direction. The way the Wayfinder facility's thirty seconds had worked: not searching, arriving.

He thought: *the same instrument, pointed differently.*

The voice arrived in the specific register of its most careful mode — not direction, not assessment, the quality of someone offering something that has been held for a very long time.

He's closer than he knows, Maren said.

A pause.

So are you.

He did not respond. He looked at the workbench, at the data, at Vex picking up the stylus again.

Outside, the Hanov system's young-white star was at its afternoon angle, coming in through the facility's small high windows at the angle of a star that is genuinely warm rather than the City's engineered warmth, falling on the workbench and the data sheets and Vex's annotations in a light that was specific to this place and not to any other.

He sat with it.

The question was real. The data was real. Vex was real, in the specific sense of someone who was right about something important and had been right about it alone for eleven years and was, for the first time, in a room with someone who might be able to do something about the being right.

The next thing was to begin.

THIRTY-ONE

HANOV SYSTEM → DESTUS SYSTEM

HE DID NOT KNOW, going in, what the after would feel like.

He did not know, coming out of it, whether the after was what the after was supposed to feel like, or whether something had gone wrong and this was the wrong version. He did not know, for approximately four hours after the procedure, whether he was still the person who had gone in.

This was the part Trumbold had not adequately warned him about.

What Trumbold had said: *the mRNA construct targets the specific activation sequences that the selection program has been developing across three generations. The virus introduces itself into the cell's transcription machinery and produces the neural compounds required for the meta-ability pathways to open. You will experience significant perceptual disruption. This is normal. The disruption resolves, but not quickly.*

What Trumbold had not adequately communicated: the disruption would feel like having the architecture of your cognition taken

apart and rebuilt by someone who understood the blueprints intellectually but had never lived in the building.

He came back to awareness on a surface that was slightly too cold. This detail arrived first — the surface temperature, before anything else, before light or sound or the sense of his own body as a bounded thing. The cold was the specific cold of a clinical surface that has been calibrated for function rather than comfort, and his back was against it, and he could feel the calibration.

Then the light. The facility's overhead light, which he had seen the day before as the standard output of a functional but unremarkable fixture, was now doing something to his visual field that it had not been doing the day before. It was producing not just light but layers of light — the primary illumination, yes, but also the secondary reflections from every surface in the room, each one arriving at a slightly different angle with a slightly different spectral composition, each one individually identifiable as a distinct visual event rather than part of an undifferentiated ambient field. He could see the ceiling and he could see the ceiling's light and he could see the light's reflection in the sheen of the floor three meters away and he could see the reflection's reflection in the surface of the diagnostic equipment beside him, each one a distinct thing rather than a background.

He closed his eyes.

The dark was not dark. The dark behind his closed eyes was the dark that contained everything his other senses were receiving — the sound, the surface temperature, the specific atmospheric chemistry of the room as his body was now processing it, which included not just the recycled air's standard composition but individual traces within it that he had never previously been aware of but was now aware of in a way that attached information to each trace. The machine beside him had a specific thermal signature that arrived through his skin as a distinct sensation. The wall two meters to his left was not the same temperature as the wall four meters to his right, and he knew this, and knowing it was not useful, and he could not stop knowing it.

He thought: *this is what Trumbold called disruption.*

He thought: *this is the world as my body now receives it.*

He opened his eyes.

Trumbold was standing at the far end of the room, looking at a display panel, making notes in his small, precise handwriting. He had not been looking at Kaiden. He was now, having registered the change in Kaiden's breathing that indicated the return of wakefulness.

"Four hours and eleven minutes," Trumbold said. He wrote something on the display. "Ahead of schedule."

Kaiden lay on the surface and looked at the ceiling with its layers of light and said: "What did you do to me."

Trumbold set down the instrument he was using and crossed to the bed. He pulled a stool to the bedside and sat on it with the economical lowering of someone who has been standing for a long time and is glad of the reason to sit. He looked at Kaiden with the eyes that had been right about things for a long time.

"Everything the activation was designed to do," he said. "Your meta-ability pathways are open. All of them. The Commune was already active — that has not changed in character, only in degree. The others are new. The telekinesis, the telepathy." He paused. "And the Fold recessive, which the assayor confirmed was never truly recessive, which means the activation has released rather than created."

Kaiden said: "I can hear the machines."

Trumbold said: "Yes."

"Not as background. As—" He tried to find the word. "As distinct harmonics. Each one is a separate thing."

"The sensory enhancement comes with the telepathic pathway opening," Trumbold said. "Your perceptual processing has been recalibrated to receive information that was previously below the threshold of conscious attention. This is disorienting initially. The disorientation does not go away entirely, but you learn to manage the input." He looked at Kaiden steadily. "The key word is manage. You

are not going to be able to make it quieter. You are going to learn what to attend to and what to background."

Kaiden sat up.

This was a mistake in the sense that moving quickly produced a quality of input from his body that the ordinary experience of sitting up had never produced — the shift in every joint, the fluid dynamic of blood redistributing, the air current from the movement arriving at his skin as a specific event with a direction and a temperature differential. He sat up and immediately understood why the procedure required a recovery period.

He sat with it.

He breathed. In. Out. The air came in and he could identify at least four things about it that he had not been able to identify yesterday and was now unable to not identify.

He sat with the air, and the light, and the room, and himself in it.

"Tell me about the Commune," he said. "What's different."

"Volume," Trumbold said. "The pathway was open before but the bandwidth was narrow — you received strong signals as language, weaker signals as pressure or direction. The activation has expanded the bandwidth. You will be able to receive more, from more sources, at greater distance." He paused. "This means Maren and Orvyn will be louder. It also means you may receive signals from people in your line that you have not previously encountered. The activation does not add new voices to the Afterlife — it expands your ability to hear the ones that were already there."

Kaiden thought about the storage bay on the ship, about the nights when Maren had been present without speaking, the quality of presence in the dark. He thought about whether that presence was going to become something different now — louder, more specific, more continuous.

He thought about whether he wanted that.

He thought: *I don't get to decide what I want. The decision was made for me before I was born.*

The thought arrived with a quality he recognized as the begin-

ning of something — not quite anger yet, not the full shape of it, but the thing that precedes anger when you haven't let yourself feel it yet. He noted it. He set it aside for now, because now was not the time.

Now was the time for being in this room with this body that was no longer entirely the body he had arrived with.

"How long," he said. "Before I can function."

Trumbold said: "The acute disruption will diminish in twelve to forty-eight hours. The background level — what you're experiencing now — will diminish more slowly, over two to three weeks, as you develop the filtering. By the end of the first week you should be able to carry on normal activities. By the end of the second, we can begin formal training."

Kaiden looked at the ceiling.

He thought about Lysandir's *go*, in the Elevatio corridor before the docking collar. He thought about Kimme in the reading room, the closed slate. He thought about the Shexosant message that had been sent fourteen hours after departure.

He thought: *the clock is running. Two weeks of filtering before formal training. However long the training takes. And then whatever comes after.*

He thought: *I am nineteen years old, in a facility on a world I have never been to before, with a body that is no longer the body I was born in, and the person who was supposed to help me understand what it means that none of this happened with my knowledge or my consent is currently exiled on Destus, where we're going next.*

He lay back down.

The ceiling's light continued its layered arrival.

He breathed.

TWO DAYS LATER

He was sitting in the facility's common room — a room that served as dining area, meeting space, and the general-purpose location where eight people who had not chosen each other's company sorted out their coexistence — when Nix sat down across from him.

She looked at him with the specific attention she brought to things she was assessing rather than things she was managing. He had learned to distinguish between these modes in the weeks they'd been together.

"You look like you're about to say something specific," she said.

He had been. He had been sitting with something specific since the assayor results and the activation and the recovery, and he had been managing it in the way he managed most things — setting it aside until he had a complete picture, waiting until the picture was complete enough to act on, filing it in the place where things waited.

He was done filing it.

"The Cognaut marker," he said.

Nix looked at him.

"The Congregatio suppressed it," he said. "Before my standard assessment at thirteen. Aurelo arranged it." He paused. "If it had been allowed to activate — if the standard assessment had found it and reported it — the City would have found it too. The Chain record would have shown a Cognaut marker. The Cognaut Guild would have claimed me." He paused. "I would have gone to the Guild. I would have been trained as a Cognaut. I would have become a machine interface. I would not have been Kaiden Kentur who does what I apparently do. I would have been a function."

Nix said: "Yes."

"So the Congregatio made a decision," he said. "Before I was old enough to know there was a decision to make. They decided what I would be. They suppressed one pathway to preserve another. They did not ask me." He paused. "They could not have asked me, because I was thirteen, and the assessment was in two hours, and there was

no time. But the decision that made the suppression necessary — the decision to run the selection program at all, across three generations of my family — that decision was never going to be a decision I was asked about. Because the decision was made before I existed."

He stopped.

He looked at the table.

He said: "I am the product of other people's plans. My great-grandparents' plans, my grandparents' plans, Aurelo's plans, Eidan's plans, Lysandir's plans, your plans and Iscaryot's. I am here because everyone who was planning had a use for me and positioned me accordingly. My family was shaped for three generations to produce the person who could do what I apparently can do. My genetics were managed. My childhood was watched. My assessment at thirteen was manipulated. My posting to the City was not an accident." He looked up. "At what point in any of this was there a moment where someone said, the person this is being done to deserves to know?"

Nix was quiet.

"I'm not asking you to apologize for it," he said. "I'm not asking you to justify it. I'm telling you what I'm carrying, because I said what I meant to people in this — group, or whatever we are — and this is what I mean."

Nix looked at him for a long moment.

Then she said: "The answer is that there wasn't one. Not until you asked Lysandir directly. And even then, he told you the shape without the content, because telling you the full content would have made you difficult to manage." She paused. "I am not defending this. I am agreeing with your account of it."

He looked at her.

"The Congregatio is three hundred years old," she said. "They have been operating on generational timelines for three hundred years. When you operate on generational timelines, the individual person in any specific generation is not the primary unit. The outcome is the primary unit. The Congregatio has been working toward the outcome for a century. You are the outcome." She paused.

"That is not the same as saying it was right. It is explaining what they were doing."

"I know what they were doing," he said. "I'm not confused about what they were doing. I'm telling you that what they were doing was wrong, and that I get to be angry about it, and that being angry about it does not mean I'm not going to do what needs to be done."

She looked at him.

"Those are different things," he said. "I can hold both."

A pause.

"Yes," she said. "You can."

The common room was what it was — functional, plain, the specific atmosphere of a space that has been occupied by people who are in transit from one thing to another and have not yet settled into the next thing. The facility's systems ran in the background at their new level of perceptual availability, which meant Kaiden was aware, in a way he was learning to background but had not yet fully backgrounded, of the specific mechanical harmonics of the ventilation system and the temperature differential between the outer wall and the inner and the biometric signature of the seven other people in various parts of the building.

He was learning to filter this. He was not finished learning yet.

"We're moving to Destus in four days," he said. "Trumbold says the training begins there."

"Yes," Nix said.

"How long do we have," he said. "Before the Shexosant—"

"We don't know," she said. "The Shexosant message was sent when we left. They'll be looking. How quickly they find us depends on how well the route was covered and how much resource D'Hana commits to the search."

He thought about D'Hana's quality of self-possession in the Throne Room. The person who knows what the contract says.

"She'll commit significant resources," he said.

"Yes," Nix said.

He nodded. He looked at the table. He looked at the room.

He thought: *I need to be ready before they find us. I need to know what I am and what I can do. And then I need to go back.*

The direction was still there. It had been there since the docking collar. It had not changed.

DESTUS SYSTEM — THREE WEEKS AFTER ACTIVATION.

The training chamber on Destus was in a different facility from Hanov — smaller, more specific, a room that had been built for this purpose rather than adapted to it. The walls were reinforced against impact, the floor was clear of everything except the training table and the two chairs. The overhead light was adjustable, which Trumbold used as an environmental variable — bright during telepathy sessions, dimmer during TK work, specific settings for the Communion practice that Kaiden was beginning to understand were calibrated to the specific cognitive requirements of each mode.

He had been on Destus for two weeks. The acute perceptual disruption had largely resolved. What remained was the background level — the ongoing receipt of information that he had not previously been receiving, the machinery's harmonics, the temperature differentials, the constant low-level awareness of other people's emotional states in his immediate vicinity. This last was the most difficult to background because it was the least mechanical — human emotional states had a variability that the machinery's harmonics did not, and the variability kept pulling his attention back to it before he had finished attending to something else.

He was managing it. The managing was effortful in the way that any skill is effortful before it becomes automatic. He was told it would become automatic eventually. He was not there yet.

Trumbold had said: *three abilities, three different timelines. Communion was already open — it will develop fastest because you*

have been using it uncontrolled for years, and controlled development is faster than no development. Telepathy will go quickly for the same reason — the pathway is downstream of the Communion and is already partially open. Telekinesis will be the hardest and the slowest.

This had proven accurate in every particular.

The telepathy training was not easy. It was not the effortless expansion that the word *fast* had implied. It was the specific kind of hard that comes from learning to do deliberately what you have been doing partially and involuntarily — the difficulty of gaining control over a thing that has been operating without control, like learning to breathe deliberately when breathing automatically has always been sufficient.

But it went. In the first week, Kaiden could read the broad outlines of emotional states in anyone within ten meters — not thoughts, not language, the felt quality of a person's current experience, the emotional weather of a room. Nix in a planning conversation had a specific quality of focused calculation that was different from Nix in an idle conversation, and he could feel the difference before she said a word. Trumbold during the training sessions had the specific quality of professional attention that was different from professional satisfaction, and he could feel when the one shifted to the other.

In the second week, he began to access surface thoughts. Not reliably — not on demand — but at moments when the person's thought was strong enough that it leaked through the boundary without requiring him to reach for it. He could not yet reach for it deliberately. The reaching required a quality of directed attention that was related to but distinct from the Communion's quality of directed attention, and he was still locating the distinction.

Trumbold said: *"The Communion pathway is already open. The*

others are downstream of it. You've been building the foundation for years without knowing it."

He filed this.

The telekinesis sessions began on the third day at Destus, and they were a different experience entirely.

The training table held objects arrayed in a specific order: smallest to largest, left to right. The first object was a steel ball bearing, approximately two centimeters in diameter. The exercise was: move it from the left side of the table to the right side. Do not touch it.

He sat in the chair across the table. He looked at the ball bearing.

He tried.

He understood, from the theoretical briefing, that the principle was resonance rather than force — that the practitioner did not push the object but resonated with it, extended their sense of self to include the object's relationship with the surrounding air, and then directed that relationship. He understood this the way he understood mathematical principles he had not yet applied: correctly, and insufficiently.

He tried to resonate.

The ball bearing sat on the table.

He tried harder.

The ball bearing sat on the table.

He concentrated with the full quality of his directed attention, the same quality he brought to Communion, pointed at the two-centimeter steel sphere on the table's left side.

The ball bearing sat on the table.

"Less effort," Trumbold said, from the observation position.

He reduced effort.

The ball bearing sat on the table.

"Not that much less."

He adjusted.

The ball bearing sat on the table.

Forty minutes later: the ball bearing had moved a total of three centimeters in four sessions of approximately thirty seconds each, and on three of those four occasions he had not been certain it was him. The fourth occasion it had jumped, without warning, a full fifteen centimeters, struck the table's edge with a sharp metallic sound, and bounced into a drainage channel in the corner.

He stared at the empty table.

Trumbold said nothing.

He said: "I don't know what I did differently that time."

Trumbold said: "I know."

He looked at the drainage channel. He looked at the empty space where the ball bearing had been. He looked at Trumbold.

"Is it possible," he said, with the specific flatness of someone managing frustration by stating it as a question, "that the activation didn't work for this particular ability."

Trumbold said: "No."

"The assayor was damaged."

"The assayor was damaged in ways that affected its modification capability," Trumbold said. "The read function was full-depth. The TK markers are present and active." He looked at Kaiden from the observation position. "You moved the ball. Twice. You don't know how, but you did it. The ability is there."

"The ability is there and it is completely inaccessible," Kaiden said.

"It's accessible when you stop trying to access it," Trumbold said. "Which is the specific problem that every person in your position has during early TK training, which is why early TK training is structured to produce the failure that teaches you what you're doing wrong." He paused. "You are applying force. Force diffuses. You need resonance. Resonance is precise."

"I understand the distinction theoretically," Kaiden said.

"I know," Trumbold said. "You need to understand it in your hands."

He looked at the empty drainage channel.

"Next session," he said. "We will begin again."

FOUR DAYS LATER • THIRD WEEK ON DESTUS

He had been in the training chamber for two hours. The ball bearing was back on the table — they had retrieved it after the first session, and it was back in its position, and he had been looking at it for two hours with diminishing returns and increasing awareness that something in the chamber was producing a low-grade irritation in his newly enhanced perceptual field, a mechanical harmonic from the ventilation system that was not loud but that his enhanced auditory processing had found a specific frequency at which it was maximally annoying.

The ball bearing had moved six times in two hours. Four of the movements had been involuntary — he had stopped trying and it had moved anyway, which was its own kind of maddening, the ability operating without his control as if to demonstrate that it worked fine when he wasn't in the way of it. Two of the movements had been deliberate, in the sense that he had produced them, but he could not identify, after either one, what had been different about the internal state that had produced them versus the internal state that had not.

On the two-hour mark, he stood up.

He walked to the table. He put his hands flat on the table's surface, on either side of the ball bearing, and he looked at it and he said to it, with the specific quality of addressing a thing you know cannot hear you but that you are going to address anyway because the addressing itself is the point:

"I know what you are. You are a two-centimeter steel sphere resting on a metal surface in a room on a planet I didn't choose to be

on. You weigh approximately thirty-three grams. You are currently doing nothing because doing nothing is what objects do when nothing acts on them. I understand all of this." He paused. "And I cannot move you, which means either the theory is wrong, the activation didn't work, or I am doing something incorrectly that I cannot identify." He looked at the sphere. "The second option is unlikely. The third option is what I'm working with. But I would like to be clear that the first option exists and has not been ruled out."

The ball bearing sat on the table.

He picked it up, put it in his left hand, held it.

He felt it. The thirty-three grams. The specific texture of the surface — machined smooth, with the microscopic variance that any physical surface has at sufficient resolution. The temperature, which was slightly below room temperature, the metal conducting heat away from his palm faster than the air around it. He held it and felt all of these things and did not try to do anything with it.

He put it back.

He sat down.

He looked at the space where his hand had been and where the ball bearing now sat, warm from his hand, four degrees warmer than when he'd picked it up, and he knew this because he could feel the four degrees in his perceptual field as a distinct feature of the ball bearing's thermal signature.

He thought: *I can feel it. I can feel it when I'm holding it. I can feel it when I'm not.*

He thought: *the resonance is already there. I'm already in contact with it. I just don't know how to do anything with the contact.*

He sat with this.

Trumbold, from the observation position, said: "What are you thinking."

"I can feel the temperature of the ball bearing," Kaiden said. "Right now. Without touching it."

Trumbold was quiet for a moment. "Yes. You can."

"The resonance is already present," Kaiden said. "I don't need to create it. I need to understand what to do with it once it's there."

"Yes," Trumbold said.

"I've been trying to create it. Trying to push my awareness out toward the object and establish the connection. But the connection is already established. I can already feel it." He looked at the ball bearing. "So the failure is not in the connection. The failure is in the next step."

"Yes," Trumbold said. He had a quality in his voice that Kaiden was beginning to recognize as the quality of a teacher who has been watching a student work toward a conclusion they cannot simply tell the student and is now watching the student arrive.

"The next step," Kaiden said, "is not pushing. Not force." He looked at the sphere. "If I can feel the thermal signature — if I can feel its temperature — then I can feel the boundary between the sphere and the air around it."

"Yes," Trumbold said.

"And if I can feel the boundary," he said, "then I can direct the boundary."

"Yes," Trumbold said.

He looked at the ball bearing.

He stopped trying to move it. He stopped trying to do anything. He was already in contact with it — he could feel the thermal gradient at its surface, the specific boundary where the metal ended and the air began. He attended to the boundary.

He directed it.

The ball bearing rolled, smoothly, from the left side of the table to the right. It reached the right edge and stopped.

He looked at it.

He looked at Trumbold.

"That's it," he said.

"That's it," Trumbold said.

He looked at the ball bearing on the right side of the table.

He felt something that was not quite relief and not quite triumph

but was in the vicinity of both — the specific quality of a skill clicking into place, the sensation of understanding something in the body that had been understood only in the mind before. It was not dramatic. It was real.

"The Communion is the same thing," Kaiden said.

"Yes," Trumbold said.

"Directed attention at a boundary. The Communion's boundary is the living-and-dead interface. The TK boundary is the object-and-air interface. The Fold—"

"Is the space-and-space interface," Trumbold said. "The boundary between here and there."

Kaiden sat with this.

He looked at the ball bearing.

He moved it back to the left side.

TWO DAYS LATER.

The session had been running for ninety minutes, which was long for a TK session in the second week — Trumbold generally cut them at sixty, the specific fatigue that telekinesis produced being a different kind of fatigue from other cognitive exertion, the kind that required more recovery time than it took to produce. He had extended this session because Kaiden was working through something and cutting it short would interrupt the working-through.

Kaiden was moving larger objects now. Not reliably — not on demand every time — but consistently enough that the direction of progress was clear. He was working through the array: the ball bearing, a cube slightly larger than a fist, a sphere the size of a grapefruit, a block of dense material the size and weight of a two-liter container.

The block was the current problem. The block was genuinely heavy, and the resonance principle that worked cleanly for the

smaller objects required more from him at this mass — more sustained attention, more precise direction of the boundary, more of the quality of focus that the Commune sessions called for but that the TK sessions required him to maintain under conditions of significant physical and cognitive fatigue.

He had moved the block four centimeters twice. He had moved it four centimeters and then lost the contact and dropped it twice. He had failed to move it at all three times.

He was sweating. His head had the specific ache of the extended effort, the quality of a muscle pushed past its comfortable range. He could feel, in the background of his enhanced perceptual field, Trumbold's quality of attention from the observation position — the assessment mode, the specific clinical patience of someone who was watching a person work and judging the working rather than the result.

He had the block at the four-centimeter mark and was holding it there — the concentration required to maintain the hold was substantial, the kind of concentration that squeezed everything else out of the field — when the contact slipped.

The block dropped. Metal on metal, the impact resonating through the room's reinforced walls with the specific sound of something heavier than expected hitting a surface that was prepared for it.

He sat back in the chair.

He put his head in his hands.

He said, to the space behind his hands: "I've been in this room for sixteen days. I have not been in contact with my family in three weeks. I do not know where Lysandir is or whether he's been discovered. I do not know what Janna Chadrac has done in the three weeks since the gap was discovered, except that she sent a message to the Shexosant that contained the phrase *confirmed eliminated*, which Nix told me about yesterday because she thought I should know. I am operating in a body that I did not agree to have modified, in pursuit of an ability that was selected for me by people who are dead

and a century's worth of institutional planning that I was not consulted on, and I cannot move a block across a table without dropping it."

Trumbold said nothing.

"I'm not asking for encouragement," Kaiden said. "I'm telling you where I am."

"I know," Trumbold said.

"I want to go home," Kaiden said. "I want to write to my sister. I want to know if my father is— I want to know how the Leaf yield is tracking this quarter and whether the eastern flat cultivation zones came in at the number Alise projected. I want to sleep in a room that doesn't feel like someone else's room." He paused. "I want to not be a century-long institutional project. I want to be a person."

Trumbold was quiet for a moment.

Then he said, carefully: "You are a person. The two things are not mutually exclusive."

"They feel mutually exclusive," Kaiden said. "When everything I am was decided before I existed, it feels mutually exclusive."

A longer silence.

Then Trumbold said: "I was posted to Hanov two years ago, when the Congregatio's leadership decided my analysis of the Fold signatures was too inconvenient to have circulating in the institutional network. Before Hanov, I spent eight years in a research posting on a system I will not name, running analysis that nobody was reading, communicating with three people, and growing a variety of hydroponic vegetables that were technically edible." He paused. "I did not choose any of that. My career was shaped by institutional decisions I disagreed with. I spent a decade angry about this." A pause. "The anger was legitimate. Being angry about having your life shaped by institutional decisions you didn't make and don't agree with is a legitimate response to the situation. I am not going to tell you it isn't."

Kaiden looked up from behind his hands.

Trumbold was looking at the table, at the block in its dropped position, with the expression of someone who has said a thing they do not say often and is checking the air to see how it has landed.

"The anger," Kaiden said, "is going to be there regardless."

"Yes," Trumbold said.

"And the block needs to be moved regardless."

"Yes," Trumbold said.

Kaiden looked at the block.

He looked at it for a moment — at the dense material, the specific surface texture he could feel from across the table, the thermal gradient at its boundary.

He moved it.

Not four centimeters. The full width of the table. It reached the opposite edge and stopped.

He looked at it.

He looked at Trumbold.

Trumbold looked at the block. He said: "Good. Session over. Go eat something."

Kaiden stood. The fatigue hit when he stood — the specific quality of cognitive exhaustion that left the body feeling structurally sound but hollowed out, the way a house is structurally sound after a fire if the fire was in the furniture rather than the walls.

He was at the door when Maren arrived.

Not with urgency. Not with direction. The specific quality she used when she was saying something that was present rather than prescribed.

Your great-uncle Orvyn couldn't lift a cup for three weeks.

He stopped at the door.

He thought it meant he'd failed.

He said: "Orvyn was a Telekinetic."

Was. Was given to the Guild at fourteen. The family— a pause, the specific pause of someone choosing their words, which was not a quality Maren usually displayed. *The family grieved, and pretended*

not to, and managed it the way we managed things. He was good. He was very good, eventually. But not at first.

He stood at the door and held this.

A different quality arrived — not Maren's voice, which was short and direct and without sentiment in its syntax. Something drier. Longer sentences. The register he had learned to recognize as Orvyn's.

She's not wrong, Orvyn said, in the distant, sardonic quality that was his signature. *Three weeks of a cup sitting on a table judging me. Contemptible. I recommend moving something larger as soon as possible. The cup was insufficiently motivating.*

Kaiden stood at the door.

There was something in the quality of the exchange — both voices present, both offering something, the space between them carrying a texture he had not encountered before. Not a conversation — the Afterlife did not work that way, the preserved consciousnesses did not communicate with each other through him. But something that occupied the same moment, arrived through the same conduit, that had the quality of two people who knew each other and had known each other in life acknowledging the same thing at the same time.

He thought: *they knew each other.*

He thought: *they were family.*

He thought: *whatever was done to Orvyn, whatever the Guild cost him and the family the loss of him cost — he is still here. In the Afterlife, talking about a cup.*

He thought: *I will move larger things.*

He left the room.

In the corridor outside, the facility's systems ran at their constant harmonic, all of them distinct and manageable, the day's light coming in at the Destus-specific angle that had become, over three weeks, as familiar as the Bauxitum station's light had once been. Not home. Something in the direction of a place he was becoming used to.

He was hungry, and exhausted, and angry at a century of people

who had made decisions about him, and capable of things he had not been capable of three weeks ago, and determined to be back on Imperial City before the Shexosant caught up with them.

He held all of this.

He went to eat.

THIRTY-TWO

DESTUS SYSTEM

VEX'S LAB occupied the eastern half of the facility's second level, separated from the rest of the building by a door that required two separate keypad entries and a biometric confirmation that Vex had calibrated to himself alone. He had explained this calibration on the first day, without apology: *I work better without people drifting through.* This was not unfriendly. It was accurate, in the way that most things Vex said were accurate without being sociable.

Kaiden had earned entry on the fourth day at Destus. Not through any particular demonstration — Vex had been watching the TK sessions from a distance, at Trumbold's invitation, and had appeared at Kaiden's door at the end of the fourth day with the expression of someone who has completed an assessment and made a decision.

"Come to the lab," he said.

Kaiden came.

The lab's organization was the organization of someone who had been working in the same space for a long time without the intervention of anyone else's preferences. Servers stacked on crates. Cables organized by function rather than appearance — bundled, labeled, routed along the wall with the logic of a person who needed to find specific cables in the dark and had arranged for this possibility. The central workbench was the lab's only genuinely clear space, and the clearing was functional rather than aesthetic: instruments arranged in the order of their use frequency, the most-used within arm's reach, the others in specific positions on the surrounding shelves. The walls held whiteboards. Not one — six. Each one covered in the dense layer-upon-layer annotation that accumulates when a person has been working through the same set of problems for long enough that the whiteboard has stopped being a place to write new things and has become a record of thinking.

The centerpiece was a physical star chart on the far wall. Not a display — printed, large-format, mounted directly to the wall. Every Fold vector in the UnImperium network was marked on it, annotated in a handwriting that was different from Vex's workbench handwriting, which was different from the equations on the whiteboards. Three layers of the same person's thinking, accumulated over years, each in the hand of a person who was working faster or slower or with more or less certainty, the handwriting varying with the state.

Kaiden looked at the chart for a long time.

"How many of these patterns did you generate," he said.

"Forty-seven," Vex said, at the workbench, doing something that did not require his full attention and was providing cover for a conversation he had clearly thought about before initiating. "The other thirty-one were generated by predecessors. I've refined twenty-two of those."

Kaiden looked at the chart. Forty-seven patterns, each representing a route between two specific points in space. Each pattern representing months of calculation, the kind of calculation that Vex had described in Hanov — the Cognaut interface with the naviga-

tional data, the full architecture of stellar position and gravity gradient and the specific mathematical relationship between origin and destination that a Folder needed to hold in directed attention to get from one to the other.

"The City's Wayfinder corps generates new patterns how often," Kaiden said.

"They haven't generated a genuinely new pattern in over a hundred years," Vex said. "They refine existing ones. The last new pattern was discovered in the second generation of the corps, and the discovery killed the Wayfinder who made it." He paused. "Finding a genuinely new pattern — a route to a system that has no previous Fold record — requires a quality of attention that damages the people who attempt it. The City doesn't risk its Wayfinders anymore. It works with what it has."

Kaiden turned from the chart. "But you've found forty-seven."

"I work differently," Vex said. He set down the instrument he'd been using and looked at Kaiden directly. "A Wayfinder finds a pattern through sustained immersive attention — they hold the destination in their mind and push until the pattern resolves. The pushing is what damages them. I don't push. I interface."

"Show me," Kaiden said.

Vex looked at him.

"What Cognaution actually is," Kaiden said. "You've told me what it produces. Show me what it is."

Vex was quiet for a moment. The specific quiet of someone deciding whether to show a private thing.

"Sit down," he said.

Kaiden sat on the stool at the workbench's near end.

Vex reached under the workbench and produced a headset — not the sensor headband he'd used in training sessions, something more elaborate. The interface crown of a full Cognaut setup: a ring of contact points designed to make contact at specific positions on the skull, connected by a cable to the workbench's central system. Vex

put it on with the ease of someone putting on something they wear every day, which he did.

He sat at the workbench.

He looked at the display.

And then something happened to Vex's face.

Not dramatically — not the theatrical transformation of fiction, not the going-under quality of Leaf trance. Something more precise. The specific quality of his attention, which was always quick and quick-switching and restless in the way of someone who processes faster than the available inputs, changed. It became focused. Very focused. The entire quality of his cognition — visible in his eyes, in the stillness of his face, in the quality of his hands on the workbench's surface — became directed at something. All of it. At once.

The display lit up.

Not in the way a display lights up when someone inputs commands — in the way a display lights up when it is receiving information directly, continuously, at a rate that exceeded the normal interface by an order of magnitude. Data scrolling at a speed that would have been unusable to someone reading it in the standard sense — not reading, receiving. The navigational system's full output: stellar positions updating in real time, gravity gradient maps recalculating, the drift of every catalogued body in the system's gravitational field, all of it arriving at the display simultaneously.

Vex was reading all of it.

Not sequentially. Simultaneously. The Cognaut interface did not filter — it presented everything the system had to a mind that was, in this mode, receiving it the way a basin receives water, the full volume at once.

Kaiden watched.

He watched for three minutes, which was what Vex allowed. Then Vex reached up and removed the crown, and the quality of his attention reverted — almost instantly, not gradually — to the quick-switching restless mode, and he looked at Kaiden.

"That," Vex said, "is what it is."

Kaiden had been watching with the enhanced perceptual field that the activation had given him — the background awareness of the room's systems, the emotional quality of the people in it. During the three minutes of Vex's interface, the background awareness had picked up something from Vex that was not like anything else he'd felt from another person: not emotion exactly, but something adjacent to it, the quality of a mind fully extended into a space that was not the space of ordinary experience. A quality of expansion — the specific quality of something that has reached the edges of its container and is pressing against them, not painfully but continuously.

"It's vast," Kaiden said.

Vex looked at him. "You felt that."

"I don't know what I felt," Kaiden said. "I felt something from you that I haven't felt from anyone else."

Vex was quiet for a moment. He set the crown on the workbench with the care he gave things he used daily and respected. "The interface consumes," he said. "When I'm in it, I am — reduced, in one sense. The parts of me that are doing the social calculations, the emotional processing, the ordinary maintenance of being a person in a room — those recede. What remains is the pattern-receiving. All the cognitive architecture that is normally distributed across multiple functions is directed at one." He paused. "It is also — what a Communion feels like, I imagine, though I can't Commune — a quality of contact with something larger than yourself."

"Does it feel like being lost," Kaiden said.

Vex looked at him for a moment. The quick eyes at their most still.

"No," he said. "It feels like being found. Which is its own problem." He turned back to the workbench. "The reason Cognaution overrides other abilities is not that the interface is stronger than them. It is that the interface is more — complete. Once you have felt the full extension of that quality of contact, everything else feels partial. The other abilities are contact at a specific frequency.

Cognaution is contact at every frequency simultaneously." He picked up an instrument. "If your Cognaut pathway were open, you would not want to Commune. You would not want to use TK. You would want to interface. All the time. With everything." He paused. "This is why the Cognaut Guild's members are — not quite ordinary people, anymore. Not because the interface damages them. Because it gives them something that ordinary experience cannot match."

Kaiden looked at the crown on the workbench.

He thought about what it would mean to close the pathway. To carry the genetics of that quality of contact, permanently inaccessible, because someone had decided before he was old enough to be asked that the access would be catastrophic.

He thought about the assessment at thirteen. Aurelo's hands.

He said: "The Cognaut markers."

Vex looked at him.

"At the assayor," Kaiden said. "Trumbold said the suppression had Aurelo's signature. He suppressed the pathway before my standard assessment could find it." He paused. "Which means the Congregatio knew, before I was thirteen, that I carried the Cognaut markers. And they decided to close the pathway before the Guild could claim me." He paused. "When did they know."

Vex picked up the instrument. Set it back down. "The assayor at Hanov read your sequence at full depth. The Cognaut markers are visible at full depth. The Congregatio had access to a full-depth read at some point before your thirteenth birthday." He paused. "The Lesser Assayor at your standard assessment would not have found it if the suppression was already in place. For the suppression to be in place at thirteen, the Congregatio needed full-depth access before thirteen."

Kaiden said: "How much before."

Vex said: "The suppression method that Aurelo used is a slow process. It requires the neural pathway to be progressively closed over a period of months rather than switched off suddenly, because

sudden closure produces detectable trauma markers that the Lesser Assayor would find." He paused. "Several months. Perhaps a year."

"So at twelve," Kaiden said. "Or eleven. He was beginning to close the pathway."

"Or earlier," Vex said. "The Congregatio had full-depth reads going back through your line. They may have been monitoring you from birth." He looked at Kaiden. "The selection program was three generations old when you were born. By the time you arrived, the monitoring infrastructure was already in place."

Kaiden sat with this.

He thought about being twelve. He thought about what twelve had felt like — the station, the training, the morning sessions with Memna Zael, the first Leaf harvest he'd been allowed to help with, the specific quality of being twelve on a mining station that was also a home. He thought about Aurelo in those years, the sessions that were pastoral and the sessions that were something else, the presence that had been so continuous it had become part of the background of his life.

He thought about the twelve-year-old who had trusted the priest in the room because there was no reason not to trust the priest in the room.

He thought about what the priest had been doing while the twelve-year-old was not asking questions about it.

The anger arrived in its quiet form. Not the loud kind — he had said this to Nix, he knew the distinction. The quiet kind was the kind that settled into the bones and stayed there, the kind that does not burn itself out but remains as a permanent recalibration of what you know about the world.

He had a Cognaut pathway that had been closed before he was old enough to choose.

He carried the genetics of an ability that would never develop because the Congregatio had decided it should not develop, and they had decided this before consulting the person it was happening to, and they had decided correctly — without the suppression he would

have become something that could not do what he needed to do — but the correctness of the decision was not the same as the rightness of making it without him.

He said: "I know why they did it."

"Yes," Vex said.

"I know it was the right outcome for their goal," Kaiden said. "I am going to be angry about it anyway."

"Yes," Vex said.

"I'm allowed to be angry about it," Kaiden said. "Even if the outcome was correct. Even if I would have made the same decision if I'd been given the choice. The not being given the choice is the thing I'm angry about."

Vex looked at him with the quick eyes at their most still. "You can be angry about it later," he said. "Right now I need you to move that fork."

The fork was on the workbench. It had been sitting there since Kaiden arrived, in the position of something waiting. A standard metal fork, the kind used in the facility's dining area, unremarkable except for the specific placement — not at the edge, not at the center, at a position that communicated it had been put there specifically.

Kaiden looked at the fork.

He thought about the ball bearing. About the resonance principle arriving in his hands before it arrived in his understanding. About the specific quality of contact that was not pushing but attending.

He looked at the fork.

He felt the fork — the boundary at its surface, the specific thermal signature of metal in room-temperature air, the small electromagnetic quality of its mass in the lab's background field. He felt it the way he now felt everything in his immediate environment: as a distinct thing with a distinct presence, available to his perceptual field without requiring him to reach for it.

He was already in contact with it.

He directed the contact.

The fork moved from its position on the workbench to a position thirty centimeters to the right, cleanly, without vibration, without the interim wobble that characterized most of his TK movements. It arrived at the new position and stopped.

Vex looked at it.

He looked at Kaiden.

"That," he said, "is the resonance principle." He picked up the fork, turned it in his hands, set it back down. "Not the principle as concept. The principle as body." He looked at Kaiden with the quick eyes. "You understand it."

"I understand it," Kaiden said.

"Then we can work," Vex said.

He turned back to the workbench. He pulled a sheet of annotated data from a stack at the bench's edge and spread it flat. He produced a stylus. He said, without looking up: "The Fold."

Kaiden said: "Yes."

"The same principle," Vex said. "Extended. The TK boundary is between an object and the air around it. The Fold boundary is between a space and the space adjacent to it. The cognitive mechanism is the same. The scale is different." He made a mark on the data sheet. "The scale is the problem."

"Volume," Kaiden said.

"Volume," Vex agreed. "The volume you're working with in TK is the volume of the fork. The volume of a Fold is the volume of whatever is being moved. For a ship, that's manageable. For the City—" He stopped. He looked at the mark he had made. "I have been doing calculations since Hanov. Since our conversation about the single-source signature." He paused. "The calculations are not finished. But the direction they're going is specific."

"Tell me," Kaiden said.

Vex looked at the mark on the sheet. He was quiet for a moment — the quality of a person organizing something they have been thinking about in fragments and are now presenting in sequence for the first time.

"If the volume limit is not about mass," he said, "then it is about the cognitive requirement of holding that volume in directed attention. The cognitive requirement scales with volume — more space, more attention required — but the scaling is not linear." He made another mark. "If it were linear, the volume of the City would require a proportionally larger cognitive capacity than a ship. Which would be impossible for a single person. The City is orders of magnitude larger than a ship."

"But you think it's not linear," Kaiden said.

"The data suggests the scaling is logarithmic," Vex said. "Not linear. The cognitive requirement grows, but it grows more slowly as the volume increases. A large volume does not require proportionally more attention — it requires more, but the more is smaller than the linear model would predict." He paused. "This is counterintuitive. It is also what the energy signature data implies. The single-source signature of the City's Fold has an output that is consistent with one person operating at the logarithmically required level for that volume." He looked at Kaiden. "Not at the linearly required level. The linearly required level would be impossible for any individual. At the logarithmically required level—" He paused. "It is at the edge of what a single person with a very specific quality of directed attention might be capable of."

Kaiden said: "Might be."

"Might be," Vex said. "I don't have enough data to know. I don't know what the upper bound of directed attention is for a person with your specific capability profile. I don't know what Janna Chadrac's capability profile looks like in these terms." He paused. "What I know is that the math is not impossible. It is difficult. It is at the edge of possibility. And the data is consistent with someone operating at that edge, regularly, for twenty-three years."

The lab was quiet.

Kaiden looked at the star chart on the far wall. At the forty-seven patterns Vex had generated. At the decades of work visible in the layered annotations on the whiteboards.

He thought about Janna in the Fold Room, the quality of her trance, the machinery doing less than the doctrine said it should do. He thought about *enough*, the word that occupied the space between an honest answer and a deflection.

He thought about what it would mean to be capable of that. To hold a volume that large in directed attention, regularly, as a function you had been performing for twenty-three years.

He thought about logarithms. About the way mathematical relationships that seem counterintuitive in description become intuitive in practice, the way the body learns what the mind has only described.

He looked at the fork.

He thought: *the same mechanism. Extended.*

He thought: *I have to learn to extend it.*

"How long," he said. "Before the Shexosant find us."

Vex set down the stylus. "Nix's estimate is three to six weeks, based on the routes we used and the coverage quality. The FreeLink traffic analysis suggests we have not been located yet. The search pattern, as reconstructed from the Shexosant's known deployment, has not reached the Destus sector." He paused. "But that is an estimate based on available data, and the available data has significant gaps."

Three to six weeks.

Kaiden looked at the fork, still at the position he'd moved it to.

He thought about what he needed to learn in three to six weeks and about whether three to six weeks was enough and about the fact that it was what he had.

He thought about Kimme, who was on the City, with Janna, carrying whatever she was carrying. He thought about the reading room and *I want you to know that this conversation was real* and the specific quality of someone who has decided to be honest in both directions.

He thought: *I said I was going to come back.*

He thought: *I intend to.*

"Show me," he said to Vex. "Everything you know about the Fold signature. Everything the data shows. I want to understand what you understand."

Vex looked at him.

Then he pulled the chair opposite Kaiden's stool from under the workbench and sat down.

He pulled the stack of data sheets.

He began to talk.

FOUR WEEKS LATER

They had developed a rhythm.

Vex was in the lab from the second hour of the day until the twelfth, with a two-hour break at midday that he spent eating and running calculations on a portable display that went with him to the dining area and back. Kaiden came to the lab at the third hour, when Trumbold's morning session ended, and stayed until the eleventh, when the fatigue that accumulated across multiple modes of training in a single day produced a diminishing return that both of them had learned to identify.

The rhythm was not companionable in the ordinary sense. Vex was not companionable in the ordinary sense — he was not cold, but he was not warm, and the distinction he inhabited was the distinction of someone for whom other people's presence was useful rather than pleasant, and who had made his peace with this about himself long ago. Kaiden was learning, in this person's company, what company felt like when the social performance was entirely removed. Vex did not perform. He worked. When Kaiden was in the lab, they both worked, in proximity, on related problems, and the proximity over time produced a quality that was not friendship but was related to it the way cold copper is related to warm copper — the same thing, at a different temperature.

Vex taught him the Fold signature data. All of it — the eleven years of records, the methodology, the analysis that had produced the single-source conclusion. He did not simplify it. He presented it at the level of the data and explained the reasoning and expected Kaiden to follow, and when Kaiden did not follow, he explained the component that was unclear without modifying his expectation that Kaiden would eventually follow.

Kaiden followed.

He began to see what Vex saw in the data — the specific harmonic absence that indicated a single source, the energy output profile that was consistent with logarithmic rather than linear scaling. He began to understand why Vex had been presenting this to the Elevatio for eleven years and why the Elevatio had declined to update their doctrine: the data required accepting that the doctrine was wrong, and accepting that the doctrine was wrong required accepting that everything the doctrine had predicted and built would need to be reconsidered, and the Elevatio was an institution that had been running on the same doctrine for a century and was not structurally capable of the reconsideration.

He asked, one afternoon in the third week: "When you told them. What did they say."

Vex looked at the data sheet he was annotating. "They said the harmonic analysis was flawed. That the single-source signature was a measurement artifact produced by the City's mass distribution. That I was applying the wrong analysis framework."

"Were any of those objections valid," Kaiden said.

"No," Vex said. He made a mark. "I considered all three and ruled them out. The harmonic analysis is correct. The signature is not a measurement artifact. The analysis framework is the right one." He paused. "But the objections were not made in good faith. They were made in the hope that I would find one of them persuasive enough to revise the conclusion."

"And when you didn't."

"They stopped inviting me to the relevant conversations," Vex

said. "And eventually I stopped being in the network where the relevant conversations happened." He made another mark. "Which is how I ended up here."

He said it without apparent bitterness, which was the thing about Vex that Kaiden had needed the most time to understand. He was not bitter about being right and being ignored. He was exhausted by it, in the specific way of someone who has been right about the same thing for long enough that the emotional register of the rightness has simplified from frustration into something flatter and more enduring. He had been right for eleven years. He was still right. The rightness had not changed and had not been acknowledged. He had accommodated this and continued.

Kaiden thought about this quality — not bitterness, not the collapse into resignation, just the sustained accommodation of being correct in a context that would not receive the correction — and thought that it was one of the more demanding things he had encountered in another person.

"Why keep going," he said.

Vex looked at him. "Because the data is the data. The data does not change because no one is looking at it. The fact that I am the only person looking at it does not make it less of a fact." He paused. "And because eventually the data will need to be what it is, regardless of what anyone believes about it. The City is moving. Every Fold leaves a record. The record will accumulate until someone with the right instruments reads it and cannot avoid the conclusion." He looked at Kaiden. "I prefer to be positioned correctly when that happens."

Kaiden looked at the wall of whiteboards.

He thought: *and now someone is here who can test it.*

He thought: *the data will need to be what it is, and I might be the instrument that makes it what it is.*

He said: "The Fold practice starts next week."

"Trumbold tells me," Vex said. He returned to his annotation. "I will want access to the training sessions."

"For the data," Kaiden said.

"For the data," Vex agreed. A pause. "Also — I am curious. I have been building patterns for eleven years for people who use them. I have never been in the room when someone who can Fold has attempted the thing I have been building patterns for." He made a mark. "The curiosity is personal, not scientific."

Kaiden looked at him.

"That's the most personal thing you've said to me," he said.

Vex said: "Don't make a thing of it."

Kaiden did not make a thing of it. He picked up the data sheet he'd been working with and returned to the analysis.

Outside, the Destus system's star was at its early afternoon position, warm in the specific way of a star that is genuinely warm rather than engineered to be, coming in through the lab's small high windows at an angle that landed on the whiteboards and the annotated star chart and the fork on the workbench, where it had been sitting since the day of the breakthrough, in the position he'd moved it to, undisturbed.

Neither of them moved it back.

It had become something else — not an instrument anymore, not a training object. A marker. The position it occupied on the workbench was the position of the thing that had clicked, the moment the principle had become physical, the day that the resonance stopped being a concept and became a fact about what he was.

They worked.

The data was what it was.

The Shexosant was out there, covering the search pattern.

Three to six weeks had become two to five.

They worked.

THIRTY-THREE

HANOV SYSTEM → UNNAMED SYSTEM

THE FREELINK MESSAGE arrived at the fourth hour of the morning, which was the hour when messages that had been waiting for a quiet moment to be received arrived. Pey was awake — she was often awake at the fourth hour, and she had taken on, without anyone formally assigning it, the function of monitoring the FreeLink channel during the overnight. She brought the message to Nix. Nix read it and woke everyone.

By the fifth hour they were all in the common area.

The message was not long. Shexosant operational communications were not long. The Shexosant communicated in the register of institutions that spend their existence executing rather than deliberating, and the communication style had been compressed to match: what is happening, what we intend to do about it, how long you have.

What was happening: Shexosant interdiction vessels had arrived in the Hanov system. Not the full Destus sector — the Hanov system specifically, which was where they had been three weeks ago and where their route had left the most recoverable data trail. The inter-

diction vessels had taken up positions around the system's inhabited worlds and had issued the standard communication to the system's governance infrastructure: *comply with search protocols or be treated as hostile.*

The Hanov system's governance infrastructure had complied. They had no alternative. The Shexosant was not making a request.

What the Shexosant intended to do: search the Hanov system's facilities for the unauthorized Heirs-Second. They had provided a list of names. The list was accurate. Kaiden's name was first.

How long they had: seventy-two hours before the interdiction expanded to adjacent systems in the Destus sector. The expansion would include Destus itself.

They were on Destus.

The message included one additional sentence that was not standard operational communication: *Return voluntarily and the matter will be handled as disciplinary rather than criminal. Failure to return voluntarily will require response at a higher classification.*

Nobody said anything for a moment.

Then Trumbold said: "We can hold position."

"We cannot hold position," Nix said. She said it with the flatness of someone who has already done the calculation and is presenting the conclusion. "The Shexosant's expansion pattern is predictable. In seventy-two hours they'll be in the Destus system. In four days after that they'll have covered the inhabited section of the sector. We don't have seven days."

"We need seven days," Trumbold said. "The Fold training has barely begun."

"I know what we need," Nix said. "I'm telling you what we have."

Vex had been looking at his portable display since the message arrived, running something. He said, without looking up: "The adjacent sector has an uninhabited system. Temperate world, no settlement, no infrastructure. If we move there in the next twelve hours, we are outside the expansion pattern's first-pass coverage." He

paused. "The Shexosant will eventually expand further. But we would buy time."

"How much time," Iscaryot said.

"Three to four weeks," Vex said. "Dependent on how aggressively D'Hana commits resources to the outer expansion."

Nix said: "Three to four weeks."

"Yes," Vex said.

Kaiden had been quiet since the reading of the message. He was looking at the table, at the specific grain of the material it was made from, which his enhanced perceptual field now registered as a texture with a specific set of characteristics in addition to a visual surface. He was not looking at the texture. He was thinking.

He thought: *the Fold training has barely begun.* He thought: *I cannot Fold yet. I have the resonance principle in my hands for small objects. I do not have it in any form for space.* He thought: *three to four weeks is what Vex can buy by moving. Three to four weeks is not enough for what I need.*

He thought: *it is what there is.*

"Move," he said.

Everyone looked at him.

"We move," he said. "Now, before the twelve-hour window closes. We use Vex's route to the uninhabited system. We use the three to four weeks." He looked at Trumbold. "And we compress the training."

Trumbold said: "Compressing the training—"

"Is necessary," Kaiden said. "We are not going to have more time than we have. The only question is what I can achieve with the time I have." He looked at Vex. "And I need to attempt something before we move."

Vex looked at him over the portable display.

"The Communion," Kaiden said. "Outside my own line."

The room was quiet.

"The training indicates I can reach beyond my ancestral line," Kaiden said. "Trumbold said the capability was developing. We

haven't tested it. I need to test it now, before we move, while we're still on Destus where the training equipment is available." He looked at Trumbold. "I need someone to work through. Someone who carries a Chadrac-adjacent lineage."

Trumbold said: "This is weeks ahead of schedule."

"Yes," Kaiden said.

"The disorientation risk—"

"Is mine to accept," Kaiden said. "Find me someone with the connection."

Pey.

This was the answer, as it turned out. Pey Orvyn, the young woman from the minor House whose presence on the extraction Kaiden had never fully accounted for, carried a Chadrac-adjacent lineage through a collateral marriage three generations back. The connection was thin — not a direct descent, a lateral crossing, the kind of genetic thread that would not register in any meaningful sense as a claim but that the Commune pathway could potentially use as a conduit.

Trumbold knew this. He had known it since the assayor at Hanov, where Pey's profile had been run alongside Kaiden's as a standard security measure. He had not mentioned it because the training schedule had not yet reached the point where extending the Commune beyond Kaiden's own line was a realistic goal.

The training schedule no longer had the luxury of its own timeline.

Pey, when asked, said: "Yes." The word arrived without performance, with the quality of someone who has been waiting for a specific thing and is not surprised when it arrives. He did not ask why she had been waiting. He filed it.

Trumbold cleared a space in the training room and arranged the chairs in the configuration he used for the extended Communion

sessions — two, facing each other, close enough that the perceptual field could bridge easily without requiring Kaiden to reach uncomfortably far. He set the environmental controls at the Communion-specific setting: dimmer, slightly warmer. He brought a third chair for himself, at the room's edge, outside the field.

He said to Kaiden: "You are reaching through her lineage toward whoever is available on the other side. You are not forcing the connection. You are extending the quality of attention you use for Maren and Orvyn, outward, past your own line, through hers. The connection, if it forms, will feel different from what you know. Do not try to stabilize it by tightening your grip. Let it be what it is."

He said to Pey: "You're a conduit. You're not participating in the session. Your function is to be present and not to resist."

Pey said: "I know."

They sat.

The extended Communion was not what he expected.

His own line felt — known. The texture of it was the texture of something he had been in contact with since before he had language for it, the pressure behind the left eye that had been with him since childhood, the specific quality of Maren's arrival and Orvyn's arrival, the way his own ancestors occupied the Afterlife with personalities he recognized because they were built from the same materials he was built from.

Reaching through Pey's connection was reaching through someone else's material entirely.

The difference was immediate. Not hostile — not wrong — but foreign in the specific way that a room you have never been in is foreign, even if it's a room in a house you know. Different arrangement. Different smell. Different history in the walls.

He reached.

He did not reach hard. He extended the quality of attention

outward, past his own boundary, through the thin lateral thread of Pey's Chadrac-adjacent connection, into whatever was on the other side of that thread.

The other side was not empty.

The Afterlife did not organize itself by family in the way that living people organized by family. It organized itself — if that was even the right word for what it did, which he was not certain of — by something closer to connection and proximity and the specific relationships between consciousnesses that had been bound together in life and remained bound in whatever persistence followed it. The Chadrac-adjacent thread led not to the main Chadrac Afterlife — the ancestors Janna had locked in the preservation tubes, who were not in the Afterlife at all — but to the collateral branches, the secondary daughters and minor sons who had been shed from the main line like leaves from a tree, who had died in ordinary ways and proceeded to the ordinary Afterlife without anyone locking them in stasis because they had known nothing worth locking away.

He found one.

Not found — she arrived. The quality of presence that manifested through the conduit was not what he was used to. Maren was economical. Orvyn was sardonic. This was something else — closer to the surface, sharper, with the quality of a mind that had not been in the Afterlife long enough to achieve the equanimity that long residence produced. She had been there — the texture of it said — perhaps sixty years. Long enough to know she was there. Not long enough to be settled about it.

She was angry.

Not at him specifically. At something that preceded his arrival — at the situation she had found herself in, at the institution that had disposed of her, at the specific form of being cast off from the main Chadrac line three generations ago for reasons she had not chosen and had spent sixty years in the Afterlife not being able to forget.

Who are you, she said. Not words — the impression of words, the

way the Commune always communicated, the impression arriving as meaning rather than sound.

Kaiden Kentur, he said. *I'm coming through a collateral connection. I'm sorry to disturb you.*

A quality of sharpening. *Kentur. The Leaf House.*

Yes.

What do you want.

He had thought about what to ask. He had thought about it since Vex's data and the single-source signature and the question that had not been fully answered in any of the conversations he'd had or the data he'd reviewed. He had thought about how to ask it, and had concluded: directly.

I want to know about the Fold, he said. *What it is. How it works. How the first Starfarers did it.*

A pause.

Not the pause of someone deciding what to say — the pause of someone encountering a question that is, from their position, almost too simple to be interesting.

You're asking me.

You were in the Chadrac line close enough to the founding to know things that weren't public knowledge.

Close enough, she said, with a quality that was not quite bitterness and not quite amusement. *I was a secondary daughter. We were shown things, but not everything. We were told things, but not all of it.* A pause. *What specifically.*

The Fold, he said. *The mechanism. Whether it requires Leaf. Whether it requires multiple people working together.*

Another pause. Longer. He held the conduit steady — the thread through Pey's lineage, the quality of the reach, keeping it from collapsing by not gripping it.

The Leaf, she said.

Yes.

Where did you get the idea that it requires Leaf.

He was very still.

It's the doctrine, he said. *The Elevatio doctrine. The bonded Starfarers, using Leaf to enable the bonding mechanism—*

She cut through this with a quality of impatience.

The doctrine is what the first Chadrac said it was. The first Chadrac said what served her purposes. A pause. *Where do you think Leaf came from?*

Cendant IV, he said. *It's native to the—*

I know where the plant comes from, she said, with the quality of an interrupted thought redirected to its correct channel. *I mean how Leaf entered the Fold process. Who introduced it. Who decided that the Starfarers should use it and built the doctrine explaining why they must.*

He held the conduit.

He thought he knew the answer.

He needed her to say it.

Tell me, he said.

The pause that followed had a different quality from the previous ones. Not the pause of deciding — the pause of a mind that has been holding something for sixty years and is now being asked to give it to someone, and is checking whether the someone is worth the giving.

Whatever she found in that check, she apparently found sufficient.

The first Starfarers didn't use Leaf, she said. *The first Starfarers didn't know Leaf existed. The plant was there, on Cendant, but nobody had refined it and nobody had theorized its properties. The first Folders — before the Chadrac, before the founding, when it was still called Folding rather than Starfaring — they just did it. With their minds. No substance, no ritual, no bonding. They knew how the space worked and they moved through it.*

He was not breathing.

Leaf was introduced later. After the first Chadrac had secured the City. After she had eliminated the independent Folders. After she had established the doctrine. The quality of her presence was very flat

now — not emotion, the specific flatness that belongs to someone recounting something they have examined from every angle for sixty years and have processed past the point of performance. *She introduced Leaf as a requirement. She created the dependency. She built the doctrine that said you cannot Fold without Leaf, and then she controlled Leaf, and then she controlled everyone who could Fold.*

In the room that was not a room, with the conduit through Pey's lineage holding between them, Kaiden held what she had just said and let it settle into its full shape.

The bonding, he said.

There is no bonding, she said. *There never was. The Fold is one person's quality of attention. That's all it has ever been. The bonding doctrine was designed to make the ability seem collective — to make it seem like you need multiple people working together, which means you need an institution to organize the multiple people, which means whoever runs the institution controls the Fold. It was always a control mechanism. From the first.*

He said: *And the volume limit. The mass.*

Volume, she said. *Not mass. And the limit is cognitive, not physical. How much space can a person hold in directed attention. The answer is: more than anyone told you.*

The first Chadrac could hold the City, he said.

Yes, she said.

Alone.

Obviously, she said. *How do you think she built it? How do you think she took the City from an orbital refinery to a governing body for a civilization? She moved it herself. She moved it everywhere she needed it to be. She moved it for thirty years before she told anyone that it required anything other than herself, and by then she had the doctrine in place and the Elevatio aligned and the independent Folders eliminated.*

He said: *Why are you telling me this.*

She was quiet for a moment.

Because you asked, she said. *And because I can't lie to you here.*

And because if someone with your capability is asking, something has changed that I would like to have changed sixty years ago when I was cast off for the crime of asking similar questions in a context where asking them was inconvenient. A pause. *What she did with the Fold was brilliant and it was monstrous and it has been monstrous every day for three hundred years since and someone should have tested the assumption long before now.*

The conduit began to thin. He could feel the quality of the connection reaching its natural limit — the thread through Pey's lineage was thin, and he had been holding it at full extension for some time, and the extension had a cost. He did not have much longer.

One more thing, he said.

She waited.

The Leaf. The first Chadrac. She introduced it as a requirement. Did she believe it was a requirement?

The answer arrived with the quality of something that had been considered very carefully for a very long time.

I don't know, she said. *I know she introduced it. I know she built the doctrine. Whether she believed her own doctrine or understood it as a control mechanism from the beginning—* a pause. *She was very intelligent. I suspect she understood exactly what she was doing. But I was cast off before I could ask her directly, and the family did not discuss it with the secondary daughters anyway.*

The conduit collapsed.

Not dramatically — quietly, the thread thinning to nothing and the quality of presence withdrawing through the withdrawal of the channel that had supported it. He was back in the training room on Destus, in the chair, across from Pey, who was looking at him with the expression of someone who has been a conduit for something and is now assessing whether the something was what it appeared to be.

He looked at the ceiling.

He looked at Trumbold, at the room's edge.

He said, to no one specifically, to the room: "The Leaf is not the mechanism."

Trumbold said: "What did you find."

"The first Starfarers didn't use Leaf," Kaiden said. "Leaf was introduced by the first Chadrac as a control instrument. The doctrine was built after the fact to explain a requirement that was manufactured." He paused. "The Fold has never required anything except the ability and the quality of attention to use it."

The room was very quiet.

He said: "We need Vex."

He went to get Vex himself. He walked to the lab and opened the door and Vex was at the workbench, which was where Vex always was, doing what Vex always did. He looked up.

Kaiden said: "I need you in the training room. Now."

Vex read his face. He set down the instrument he was using with the specific care of someone interrupting a task they intend to return to, put the portable display in his jacket pocket, and stood.

In the training room, the others had not moved. Pey was still in her chair. Trumbold at the room's edge. The quality of the air was the specific quality of a room that has held a significant thing and is waiting for the significant thing to be processed.

Vex looked at the room. He looked at Kaiden.

Kaiden told him.

All of it — the secondary daughter's account, the flat delivery, the absence of Leaf in the founding period, the single-Folder mechanism, the doctrine as control instrument, the Chadrac who built the myth and eliminated the alternatives. He told it in the sequence it had arrived and did not add to it or editorialize. He presented the account.

When he was finished, Vex stood in the center of the room and said nothing for a long moment.

He said: "The energy signature."

"Yes," Kaiden said.

"My data says one person," Vex said. "Not as a hypothesis. As what the data shows." He paused. "The doctrine says many. I said one. The Elevatio said I was wrong." He paused. "I was not wrong."

"No," Kaiden said.

"And the Leaf," Vex said. His voice had the quality of someone arriving at a conclusion that changes the shape of everything that supported it — not shock, the specific process of restructuring. "The energy output I see in the Fold data. The signature." He paused. "The Leaf does something to the output. I could never isolate what. I assumed it was part of the mechanism." He paused. "It's not part of the mechanism."

"It's a state-enabler," Kaiden said. "It enables the mental state required for the Fold. It's not required for the Fold itself."

Vex was quiet.

He picked up his portable display. He looked at it for a moment.

He said, very carefully: "Then who introduced Leaf into the process."

The room was already still. The question made it stiller.

Kaiden said: "A Chadrac."

Vex looked at him.

The specific quality of Vex's face when he received information that was so structurally significant that even his quick-switching attention stopped switching and held the single point — he had seen this quality before, at the Hanov workbench, when the stylus had paused and the math had run and the sentence had not finished. He was seeing it now.

"The first Chadrac," Vex said.

"Yes," Kaiden said.

"She introduced Leaf as a required element. She built the doctrine around it. She controlled the Leaf supply. And she controlled the Fold." A pause. "For three hundred years."

"Yes," Kaiden said.

Vex looked at the display.

He looked at it for a long time.

Then he said: "The Elevatio has been trying for a century to replicate a mechanism that doesn't exist."

"Yes," Kaiden said.

"Their theory is not just wrong about the collective," Vex said. "It is wrong about the Leaf. It is wrong about everything except that the ability exists and can be developed."

"Yes," Kaiden said.

Vex set the display in his pocket. He looked at the room. He looked at Trumbold, who was standing at the room's edge with the expression of a man who has been working toward a specific goal for thirty years and has just been told the goal's foundation is different from what he believed, and is determining what this means for the goal itself.

Vex said, to Trumbold: "Your doctrine."

Trumbold looked at him.

"The Congregatio's doctrine," Vex said. "The bonding mechanism. Commune plus Fold, working together to extend the Fold's range. The theory that Kaiden's specific combination of abilities is what allows the scale required."

Trumbold was quiet.

"That theory," Vex said, "is also built on the assumption that Leaf and bonding are necessary. They're not. Which means—" He looked at Kaiden. "Which means the Congregatio has also been wrong. Not about the ability. About why the ability matters."

Kaiden said: "The ability matters because I can Fold. Not because I can Commune and Fold together. Just because I can Fold." He paused. "Which is true of anyone with the recessive, if the recessive is developed. The selection program has been producing something that would have occurred anyway. Just slower."

Trumbold said: "The selection program was designed to produce the combination. Commune plus Fold, for the bonding mechanism."

"There is no bonding mechanism," Kaiden said.

"I know," Trumbold said. He said it quietly, with the quality of someone confirming something they have been suspecting for longer than the conversation has been running. "I have suspected something like this for twelve years. The energy data that Vex presented in Hanov is consistent with it. The question I could not answer was whether the Leaf was necessary independent of the bonding." He looked at Kaiden. "Your secondary daughter answered it."

"Yes," Kaiden said.

The room held what it held.

Outside, the Destus system's star was doing what it did, and the Shexosant interdiction vessels were in the Hanov system doing what they did, and the clock was running toward the seventy-two hours that Destus had before the search expanded.

Nix said: "What does this mean for the plan."

Kaiden looked at her.

"It means the plan is simpler than it was," he said. "We don't need the Commune to make the Fold work. We don't need a bonding mechanism. We need me to learn to Fold." He paused. "Which I was going to need to do anyway. This removes a layer of complexity." He paused again. "It also means — when we go back — the argument I'm going to be making to Janna Chadrac is not that the Elevatio had the right idea with the wrong implementation. It's that the foundational myth is false. All of it." He looked at Vex. "Your data confirms the single-source signature. My Communion confirms the founding history. Together, they're not a theory. They're a case."

Vex said: "A case for what."

Kaiden said: "For ending the monopoly. Not by taking the City — by making the monopoly unnecessary. If Folding doesn't require Leaf, and doesn't require a specific institution controlling who can learn it, then anyone with the recessive can learn it. The Chadrac control mechanism was always dependent on the doctrine being believed. If the doctrine is false and can be demonstrated to be false —" He paused. "The monopoly collapses on its own. Without

violence. Without taking anything. Just by making the truth available."

The room was quiet.

Iscaryot, who had been silent since the Communion session, said: "She will not let that truth out. Janna Chadrac will not permit the demonstration."

"No," Kaiden said. "She won't permit it voluntarily."

He looked at Vex.

"The Fold disruption," he said. "The thing you said I might be able to do. On the Shexosant cruiser."

Vex said: "You can't demonstrate Fold disruption until you can Fold."

"I know," Kaiden said. "That's why we're moving to the unnamed system. And why the training is compressed." He looked at everyone in the room. "The Shexosant give us three to four weeks in the unnamed system before they find us. That's what I have. That has to be enough." He looked at Trumbold. "Starting tomorrow."

Trumbold looked at him for a long moment. The expression of someone completing an assessment.

"Starting tonight," Trumbold said.

They moved in the next five hours.

The ship was prepared, the essential equipment loaded, the facility stripped of anything that would tell the Shexosant where they had gone and what they had been doing there. Vex took his data and his display and the annotated star chart — not the printed version, which would not survive transport, but the digital version he maintained in parallel. Trumbold took the training equipment. Kaiden took nothing he had not arrived with: the FreeLink chip, the token, and the specific quality of himself that existed after four weeks of training in a body that had been rebuilt.

In the transit, while the ship moved through the space between

Destus and the unnamed system, he sat in the storage bay — his quarters again, the bunk, the mat, the ceiling of a storage bay — and held what the secondary daughter had given him.

He thought about a first Chadrac who had looked at the galaxy and seen a political vacuum and had filled it with herself. He thought about the intelligence required to do this — to see the Fold as a leverage point, to construct the doctrine that made the leverage invisible, to introduce a substance as a required element and build three centuries of dependency on the dependency. He thought about the specific quality of mind that could hold that plan and execute it and maintain it, across not just a lifetime but a dynasty, the secret passing from mother to daughter to mother in whatever form that passing took.

He thought: *that person was brilliant and ruthless and the world she created has been producing atrocities for three hundred years with the specific efficiency of a machine.*

He thought: *the machine is about to encounter a fact that was always true and has never been tested.*

He thought about Kimme, who was on the City, who had seen the glass gallery above the food processing machinery and had said *Kaiden Kentur would think this was wrong*, and who was now — he did not know exactly what she was now, how she had spent the weeks since his departure, what the fact of the departure had produced in her. He thought about the reading room and *this conversation was real.* He thought about her capacity to hold things that were difficult to hold.

He thought: *she needs to know what I know now.*

He thought: *I am going to come back.*

He thought: *I need to be able to Fold before I come back. And I need to do it without Leaf.*

The unnamed system was ahead, in the space that the ship was moving toward. A temperate world, no settlement, no infrastructure, three to four weeks before the Shexosant expanded their search pattern to cover it.

Three to four weeks.

He lay down on the bunk.

He thought about the quality of directed attention that the Communion required. He thought about the same quality pointed outward. He thought about the space around the ship — the volume of it, the specific relationship between the ship and the space it occupied and the space adjacent to it.

He thought about what Vex had said: the boundary between here and there.

He closed his eyes.

He held the question.

Outside, the space between Destus and the unnamed system continued to be traversed, and the Shexosant's search pattern continued its expansion, and somewhere in the Imperium the City was moving through its Cycle, and somewhere in the City Kimme Chadrac was doing whatever she was doing in the weeks his absence had given her to do it in.

He was going to come back.

First, he had to learn to leave.

THIRTY-FOUR

UNNAMED SYSTEM — UNIMPERIUM SPACE

THE UNNAMED SYSTEM'S primary world was temperate in the way of planets that have been temperate long enough that the word no longer carries any particular quality of pleasure or discomfort — simply the condition of an atmosphere that does not require management to inhabit. The ship had landed on the northern continent's flatland, far from the equatorial zones where the orbital survey said weather was variable. The flatland was not beautiful. It was open and pale and quiet, with the specific quality of a place that had never been asked to be anything other than what it was.

They had been here for six days before Kaiden's first attempt at deliberate Fold.

The six days were not wasted. The TK practice continued on the ship's small cleared section of hold — Trumbold had converted it to a training space with the efficiency of someone who had been adapting inadequate facilities to training purposes for most of his professional life. The Communion sessions continued. The telepathy work

continued, reaching toward the finer control that would eventually let him read with precision rather than just feel with broad awareness.

What was new: Trumbold now included, at the end of each session, thirty minutes of what he called orientation work. Not Fold training — not yet. Orientation to the specific quality of attention that Folding required.

"You have been learning three things," Trumbold said, on the second day, at the end of a session that had been productive for TK and exhausting for telepathy and something else for the orientation work. "The Commune: directed attention inward, into the preserved consciousness. The TK: directed attention at a boundary between object and air. The orientation: directed attention at the relationship between a space and the space adjacent to it." He looked at Kaiden steadily. "These are not three different things. They are the same thing. The Fold is what happens when the third kind is done correctly."

"Then why does it feel different," Kaiden said.

"Because the scale is different," Trumbold said. "And because you know what it's for. The TK practice, at the beginning, felt different because you knew you were trying to move something. The Commune felt different because you knew what you were reaching toward. The orientation — you don't know what you're reaching toward yet. The not-knowing is what makes it feel different."

"You want me not to try to reach toward anything specific."

"I want you to develop the quality of attention without directing it at a goal," Trumbold said. "When the goal arrives — when you know the destination and intend the Fold — the attention will already be the kind of attention that can do it. The goal will give it direction. But the attention has to exist first."

He sat with this.

He spent the orientation work sitting with the quality of attention Trumbold described — pointed outward, not toward anything, the way the Commune attention pointed inward without initially

knowing what it would find. He sat with it and let it develop and did not try to Fold and did not try to understand what Folding would feel like.

On the sixth day, Trumbold said: "Tomorrow we try."

The first attempts were failures in the specific way the outline had predicted and in ways it had not.

The pattern plates were there. Trumbold had brought three of them from Destus — Wayfinder-generated mnemonic discs for the Hanov system, the Destus system, and a third system he had not named, keeping the third as an option Kaiden had not used and therefore could not accidentally contaminate with his expectation of what the destination felt like. He had spread them on the hold's cleared floor and explained their function one more time, as a formality: *these are not the mechanism, they are the anchor, they help you hold the destination in mind.*

Kaiden looked at the plates.

He looked at them and felt, in his enhanced perceptual field, the specific quality of physical objects with specific properties — the metal disc, the incised geometry, the Wayfinder-mathematics encoded in the pattern. He felt them the way he felt everything in his field: as distinct things with distinct presences.

He felt no resonance between the plates and anything he was about to do.

He tried anyway.

He picked up the Hanov plate and held it. He let the pattern fill his visual field — the specific geometry, the incised lines, the relationship between them that the Wayfinder had calculated as the mathematical expression of the route from wherever you were to the Hanov system. He held it and tried to let the pattern produce the orientation that the pattern was supposed to produce.

Nothing.

Not the nothing of the TK ball bearing that had sat on the table unmoved — a different nothing, more specific. The pattern was there. His attention was on the pattern. The pattern was communicating nothing to his Fold capability that his Fold capability found useful. It was like reading music notation when you had never associated the symbols with sound — accurate, complete, and entirely insufficient for producing the thing it was supposed to produce.

He put the plate down.

"The pattern isn't working," he said.

Trumbold said: "Tell me what you mean."

"I mean the pattern is not doing what the pattern is supposed to do," Kaiden said. "The geometry is there. I can see it. I can feel the object. The incised lines are precise. But when I try to use the pattern to establish the orientation — the relationship between here and Hanov — the pattern is not the thing that produces that relationship. The pattern is a description of the relationship. It's not the relationship itself."

Trumbold looked at him. "Yes."

"The Wayfinders spend years learning to read the patterns," Kaiden said. "The patterns work for them because they have internalized the language — they have spent enough time with the patterns that the pattern and the orientation have become the same thing. The pattern is a trigger for the orientation because they have trained the trigger." He looked at the plate. "I don't have that training. The trigger doesn't work for me because I haven't built the association."

"That is correct," Trumbold said.

"Then the pattern plates are useless for me."

"Not entirely," Trumbold said. "They are useless as triggers. They may still be useful as references — a way of describing the destination in a form you can examine. But the mechanism for achieving the orientation will need to come from somewhere else." He paused. "Which is what the secondary daughter told you."

A skilled Folder can Fold without a pattern if they know the destination well enough.

He looked at the plates.

He thought: *I know Hanov. I was there for two weeks. I know the specific quality of the facility, the way the Hanov system's star looked at morning angle through the small high windows of the assayor room, the specific thermal signature of the lab's equipment, the sound of the drive core from the storage bay.*

He thought: *knowing a place is not the same as the pattern. But it might be more useful than the pattern for someone who has never learned the pattern language.*

He set the Hanov plate aside.

He closed his eyes.

He thought about Hanov.

The attempts over the next two days were failures, but they were failures of a different kind — not the absent failure of the ball bearing that sat unmoved and communicated nothing about why it sat unmoved, but failures that had shape and texture and information in them. He was getting somewhere. He was getting somewhere the wrong way.

He would build the orientation — the quality of attention pointed at the relationship between here and Hanov — and then he would try to act on it. And the trying-to-act was where the failure was. The orientation was there. Something was happening with the orientation. He could feel the edge of it, the specific quality of the attention at its maximum extension, pointing toward the Hanov system across the space between. And then he would try to do something with that, and the doing-something would collapse the orientation, and he would be back in the hold of the ship on the unnamed system's flatland, attention at its default extension, the Hanov system no closer than it had been.

He described this to Trumbold at the end of the second day.

Trumbold listened.

He said: "What are you doing when you try to act on the orientation."

Kaiden said: "I'm trying to move the ship. Through the orientation. Using the orientation as the path."

Trumbold said: "Stop doing that."

Kaiden looked at him.

"You are trying to force the Fold," Trumbold said. "You've been through this before, with the TK. You're applying the wrong mechanism. You are treating the orientation as the beginning of an action rather than as the action itself." He paused. "The Fold is not a push. The Fold is not a directed force applied along a path. The Fold is—" He stopped. He looked at the floor for a moment. "The Fold is the space agreeing."

Kaiden said: "I don't know what that means."

"I know," Trumbold said. "I don't have better language for it. Nobody does — the old training texts described it differently, and none of the descriptions are adequate, because the thing being described is not a physical act and language for physical acts doesn't fit it." He looked at Kaiden. "What I can tell you is this: the TK breakthrough came when you stopped trying to push the object and started attending to the boundary the object existed in. The Fold will come when you stop trying to push the ship and start — inhabiting the relationship between here and there."

"Inhabiting," Kaiden said.

"Yes," Trumbold said. "Not acting on the orientation. Being in it."

Kaiden looked at the hold's cleared floor.

He thought: *not acting on the state. Being in the state.*

He thought: *the Communion is the same. I don't act on the Commune connection. I inhabit it, and what's there becomes available.*

He thought: *the same instrument, pointed differently.*

He said: "Tomorrow."

On the third day, he stopped trying to Fold.

He built the orientation — the quality of attention pointed at the relationship between here and Hanov — and then he did not act on it. He inhabited it. He let the orientation be what it was, which was the specific quality of his awareness extended to include both the space he was in and the space that was Hanov, both present in his attention simultaneously, not as two separate things with a path between them but as two parts of a single perceptual field.

He let this be there.

He did not try to move through it. He did not try to produce a Fold. He was simply in the relationship between here and there, with both here and there present in his awareness, the quality of attention that the Commune training had built over months extended outward rather than inward and pointed at a specific known place rather than a preserved consciousness.

Nothing happened.

He held it.

Still nothing happened.

He held it longer.

And then something happened that was not a Fold but was the edge of one — a quality of the space around the ship shifting, the relationship between here and there that existed in his awareness acquiring a quality of instability, as if the two locations were not quite as separate as they had been a moment before. It was brief. It lasted perhaps two seconds. Then it was gone, and the space was what it had been, and he was in the hold of the ship with his eyes closed and his hands flat on his knees.

He opened his eyes.

Trumbold was at the hold's far end, very still, looking at the monitoring instruments he had set up for the training sessions. He was not looking at Kaiden. He was looking at the instruments.

He said: "Something happened."

"Yes," Kaiden said.

"The instruments registered a field perturbation," Trumbold said. "Very brief. Two-point-three seconds." He looked at Kaiden. "What did you do differently."

"I stopped trying to act on the orientation," Kaiden said. "I inhabited it."

"Yes," Trumbold said. He was quiet for a moment. "Again."

The small Fold happened on the afternoon of the third day.

Not the ship. Not anything with living people inside it — they had discussed this, and the principle was clear: the first Folds would be small objects, volumes that could survive a failed attempt without consequences. Trumbold had produced, from somewhere in the facility equipment, a sealed container the size of a large box, empty, rated for vacuum, with a specific biometric marker that Vex had fitted to the lid so that its position and condition could be verified remotely.

The container was forty meters away, on the flatland outside the ship.

The destination was the ship's hold. Which Kaiden knew completely — he had been living in it for six days, had walked every meter of its interior, had lain in the storage bay bunk looking at the ceiling for hours at a time. He knew the hold in the way the secondary daughter had described knowing a destination: not from patterns, but from inhabitation.

He built the orientation.

He did not try to act on it.

He inhabited both spaces simultaneously — the flatland where the container sat, and the hold where it was going. Both present. The boundary between them not fixed but permeable in the way that the boundary between object and air was permeable to TK — not destroyed, but available to be directed.

He let the orientation include the container. He extended it to include the container the way he extended TK awareness to include the ball bearing — feeling its boundary, its thermal signature, its presence in the space it was occupying.

He directed the boundary.

Not the container across the flatland. The space the container was in, toward the space the hold was in. Not pushing. The space agreeing.

It was very brief.

The container was outside.

The container was in the hold.

There was no interval between those two states. No transit. No path. One state, then the other state, with no between.

Kaiden sat in the training posture on the hold's cleared floor and looked at the container, which was now three meters from him.

He had moved it forty meters through nothing.

He looked at it for a long moment.

Then the ship's power system alarmed.

Not the catastrophic alarm of a failing system — the warning alarm of a system that has been drawn down unexpectedly, a sudden demand on capacity that the system's management software had not anticipated and was now flagging. The alarm was brief — the power management compensated within seconds, restoring the distribution to standard — but in those seconds every circuit in the ship that was drawing current had dropped.

Lights had dimmed. The processing systems had throttled. The drive core — not running, they were landed, but in standby — had dipped.

Vex appeared in the hold's entrance fourteen seconds after the alarm, which was approximately the time required to move from the

forward section to the hold at a walking pace that was faster than a walk.

He looked at the container.

He looked at Kaiden.

He looked at his instruments — the portable display he carried, which had been running its continuous data collection for the training sessions, which now showed a power draw event coinciding exactly with the container's change of position.

He said: "You pulled from the power plant."

Kaiden looked at him. "I didn't intend to."

"I know," Vex said. He was looking at the display. "The draw was significant. Four-point-two seconds at sixty percent of the drive core's standby output." He looked up. "You didn't do that consciously."

"No," Kaiden said.

Vex was quiet for a moment. He was running something on the display. Kaiden could feel the quality of Vex's cognition through the enhanced perceptual field — the specific focused intensity that preceded a conclusion.

"The Fold requires energy," Vex said. It was not a question. "The City's booster ring array." He looked up from the display. "The fusion torches. I always assumed they were for the City's propulsion — for moving between systems, for maintaining position. But there's a secondary function in the power architecture that I've never been able to explain." He looked at Kaiden. "The torches are not just propulsion. They're the Fold's energy source."

Kaiden thought about the City approaching in the shuttle, fourteen weeks ago. The booster rings at the equator. *Forty thousand separate fusion torches, maintained at operational readiness during every Fold cycle.*

He thought about Janna, in the Fold Room, with a dose of Leaf that was considerably larger than necessary to open the door. He thought about the quality of what Kimme had described as too-complete dissolution — the trance that was not the lead in a bonded group but a single person going very deep.

He said: "She's drawing from the booster rings. That's how she moves something that large. One person, pulling from forty thousand fusion torches, directing all of it."

Vex said: "Yes." He said it with the quality of eleven years of data fitting into a new configuration. "The energy requirement for moving the City's volume at the logarithmic scaling I calculated — it would overwhelm any individual's biological energy budget. Any cognitive act at that scale requires an external power source. The Fold is not just directed attention. It's directed attention plus available energy." He looked at Kaiden. "You drew from this ship's power plant instinctively. Without knowing you were doing it. Because the ability is the ability and the ability needs energy to work at scale, and your cognition reached for the nearest available source."

Kaiden looked at the container.

He thought about the first Chadrac. He thought about a woman who had seen a decommissioned orbital refinery and had understood — had understood from the beginning — that the refinery was not just infrastructure, it was a power source. That expanding it and installing the fusion architecture was not just building a city, it was building the energy supply that made city-scale Folding possible. He thought about the specific intelligence required to see all of this at once: the Fold as the leverage point, the Leaf as the control mechanism, the booster rings as the infrastructure that made the leverage sustainable.

He thought: *she built it deliberately. Everything about the City's physical architecture was designed around the Fold's requirements.*

He thought: *and every Chadrac since has operated within the infrastructure she built, drawing from the same booster rings, in the same room, using the same facility.*

He said: "When I disrupt a Fold on the Shexosant cruiser — when the time comes — I need to be drawing from the cruiser's power plant."

"Yes," Vex said. "And the disruption needs to reach the Fold that's in progress, which means you need to extend your awareness into the

same volume that the Starfarer is directing. And direct it differently." He paused. "You would be competing with another person's orientation for control of the same space."

Kaiden said: "Can I win that competition."

Vex looked at him. "I don't know. It depends on the relative quality of directed attention. Yours versus the Starfarer's. Their training is deep but their understanding of the mechanism is false. Your training is shorter but your understanding is—" He paused. "Different."

"More accurate," Kaiden said.

"Potentially more effective," Vex said, with the precision of someone who does not claim more than the data supports. "Potentially."

Trumbold had appeared at the hold's entrance at some point during this exchange. He was looking at the container. He looked at Vex. He looked at the instrument readings on Vex's display.

He said: "Do it again."

He did it again.

Four times over the following two hours — the container, back to the flatland, back to the hold, to the flatland, to the hold. Each time the alarm. Each time the power plant drawing down and compensating. Each time Vex noting the draw level and the Fold's duration and the specific characteristics of the power profile.

After the fourth repetition, Vex said: "The draw is becoming more efficient. The first time was sixty percent of drive core standby. The fourth time was thirty-eight percent. You're learning to use the energy better."

"Or using less of it," Kaiden said.

"Both," Vex said. "The draw is lower and the Fold is cleaner." He showed Kaiden the display — the four power profiles side by side, the

amplitude decreasing, the shape becoming more precise. "You're not pulling more than you need. You're calibrating."

Kaiden looked at the profiles.

He thought about forty thousand fusion torches. He thought about thirty-eight percent of a small ship's standby drive core to move an empty container forty meters. He thought about what scale of power infrastructure would be required to move the City's volume — and about whether the booster ring array was that infrastructure, and whether Janna had been drawing from it for twenty-three years, and about what it would feel like to draw from forty thousand fusion torches simultaneously.

He thought: *I can't do that yet. I can do this. And this is the first step toward that.*

He said: "Larger."

Trumbold looked at him.

"I need to try something larger," Kaiden said. "Not the ship. But larger than the container." He looked at the hold's cleared space, at the flatland visible through the open cargo door. "Something outside my visual range."

Trumbold and Vex exchanged a look.

Vex said: "Define outside visual range."

"Around the other side of the ship," Kaiden said. "I know the flatland there — I walked it yesterday morning. I know the specific quality of the ground at the north face of the ship, where the landing struts are." He looked at Trumbold. "Can you put something there? Something I can locate without seeing."

Trumbold went out.

He came back three minutes later.

He said: "Rock formation. Approximately fifty kilograms. Fifteen meters from the north strut."

Kaiden closed his eyes.

He built the orientation. Not between here and Hanov — between the hold and the north face of the ship. He knew both

spaces. The north face of the ship was not a place he had inhabited as completely as the hold, but he had walked it, had felt the ground's specific texture through his enhanced perceptual field, knew the angle of the unnamed system's star at this hour on the north face. He built the orientation and extended his awareness toward the rock formation.

He found it.

Not visually — he couldn't see through the ship's hull. But his enhanced field, extended at the quality of attention the Fold practice had been developing, located the rock formation's thermal signature and mass presence in the space fifteen meters from the north strut, which was a space he knew well enough to find.

He let the awareness include the formation the way it included the container.

He directed the boundary.

He felt the power draw — instinctive, immediate, the ship's power plant giving him what the Fold required — and then the formation was in the hold.

Fifty kilograms of unnamed-system geology, on the floor of the ship's cargo hold, three meters from the container.

He opened his eyes.

The alarm was already cycling down.

Vex had his display up, reading the power profile. He read it. He looked at the formation. He read the display again.

He said: "That's not supposed to be possible with the volume you just moved."

Kaiden said: "The volume limit isn't a limit. It's a training artifact."

Vex looked at him.

He said: "Explain."

"The volume limit exists in Wayfinder training because the pattern plates are calibrated to specific volumes," Kaiden said. "The Wayfinder generates a pattern for a specific mass-to-volume relationship. If the mass-to-volume relationship changes — if you try to

Fold a volume that's lighter or heavier than the pattern assumes — the pattern doesn't fit. The Fold fails." He paused. "But the pattern isn't the mechanism. I'm not using patterns. I'm using awareness. And awareness doesn't have a calibrated volume range. It has a range that's determined by what I can perceive and hold." He looked at the formation. "Fifty kilograms through hull material and fifteen meters of intervening space. The intervening space was part of the volume. The hull material was part of the volume. I held all of it."

Vex looked at his instruments.

He looked at them for a long time.

He said: "The energy draw scales with the volume you're holding, not with the mass inside it."

"Yes," Kaiden said. "Larger volume, more energy. Heavier contents, the same energy for the same volume."

Vex ran something on the display. He ran it again. He ran it a third time.

He said, very quietly: "Then the City's Fold—"

"Is a very large volume," Kaiden said. "Not a very heavy mass. The energy requirement is about the space, not the contents." He paused. "And the booster ring array is built to supply energy at that volume's scale."

Vex looked at the display one final time.

He set it down.

He said: "Yes."

The word arrived with the quality of eleven years of data finding its final configuration. Not dramatic — the specific quiet satisfaction of a person who has been right about the shape of something for a very long time and has just seen the shape confirmed in its complete form.

Kaiden looked at the formation, at the container, at the cleared floor of the hold that had been a training space for six days and was now the location of the first deliberate Fold he had ever performed.

He thought about the City. About the booster rings. About forty

thousand fusion torches arranged at the equator, operational, waiting.

He thought: *I know the City. I have lived in it for four months. I know the quality of its light and the frequency of its hum and the specific smell of its atmospheric system and the temperature differential between its outer ring and its inner corridors. I know the Throne Room and the secondary corridors and the reading room and the Starfarer block's outer door with its microengraved signatures.*

He thought: *I know it well enough.*

He thought: *not yet. But I will.*

From the Afterlife, at the very edge of audibility, with a quality that was not the sardonic distance of his ordinary register but something more present and direct:

There it is, Orvyn said.

Not elaborated. Not extended. Simply the acknowledgment — from someone who had spent sixty-odd years in the Afterlife having been taken from his family at fourteen for the crime of carrying a capability that the City's system could not accommodate, and who was now watching his great-great-grandnephew sit in the cargo hold of a ship on an unnamed planet and move rocks through the wall without touching them — that the thing had arrived.

There it is.

Kaiden sat with it.

The FreeLink message arrived that evening.

Nix read it. She came to the hold where Kaiden and Vex were still working — Vex running energy models on the display, Kaiden running smaller Folds in sequence to build the calibration, each one logged, each one refining the efficiency curve.

She said: "Final deadline. Seventy-two hours to surrender or they begin active interdiction of our network infrastructure. They're threatening the FreeLink relay nodes — not ours, the UnImperium's.

Six nodes they've identified as supporting our position." She paused. "Six nodes is significant. If they take those nodes, the network loses coverage in a substantial part of the outer sector."

Kaiden looked at her.

He looked at the formation, still on the hold's floor. At the container beside it.

He said: "Tell them we'll surrender."

Nix said: "Kaiden—"

"Tell them we'll surrender," he said. "We respond within the hour. We'll come in at their nearest cruiser's coordinates. We're not armed and we're not going to run." He looked at her steadily. "If they take the network nodes, they have leverage over everyone who uses the network. I'm not going to let that happen for three more weeks of practice I don't need." He paused. "I can do what I need to do."

Nix looked at the formation. At the container.

She said: "You moved that through the ship's hull."

"Yes," he said.

She looked at him for a long moment.

"All right," she said.

She left to compose the response.

Trumbold, who had been in the hold's far end watching the afternoon's practice, came forward and looked at the formation.

He said: "You're certain."

"I'm certain I can disrupt a Fold on the cruiser," Kaiden said. "I'm not certain I can Fold the City. But I don't need to Fold the City to get back to it. I just need to demonstrate that the City's Fold can be disrupted by someone who can do what I can do." He paused. "That's enough to start the conversation I need to have."

Trumbold said: "The conversation with Janna Chadrac."

"Yes," Kaiden said.

"She will not be—"

"Receptive," Kaiden said. "I know. She will be the opposite of receptive. But she is also intelligent and has been governing for twenty-three years by understanding what is actually true rather

than what is convenient to believe." He looked at the formation. "When I demonstrate the disruption, the convenient belief stops being available. What remains is the truth." He paused. "I think she can work with the truth. I think she's been working with a version of it for twenty-three years already."

Trumbold looked at him with the expression of a man who has been training someone for months and is now looking at the person the training has produced and is uncertain whether the person is ready and has concluded that the question is no longer relevant.

"She is going to be frightened of what you are," he said.

"I know," Kaiden said.

"Frightened people with power—"

"Do dangerous things," Kaiden said. "I know. I've watched her for four months." He paused. "I'm also going to have Kimme."

Trumbold looked at him.

"Kimme has been in the City since I left," Kaiden said. "Whatever she has been doing in the six weeks I've been away, she's had time to sit with what she knows and decide what she's going to do with it. When I get back—" He paused. "She told me the conversation was real. I believe her. That's not nothing."

Trumbold was quiet for a moment.

He said: "No. It's not nothing."

He looked at the formation one more time.

He went to pack the training equipment.

Outside, the unnamed system's star was moving toward the horizon of a world that had no name and no settlement and no particular significance except that it had given Kaiden Kentur twenty days to learn something that had not been learned in three hundred years.

The ship's power plant ran at its standard level, recovering from the afternoon's demands, its systems cycling through the management protocols that maintained operational readiness.

Tomorrow they would send the surrender message.

The day after, they would fly to the Shexosant's coordinates.

The day after that, whatever came next would begin.

He sat in the hold until the star was down and the unnamed world's sky was showing its stars — different stars from the City's sky, different stars from Bauxitum's, different stars from anywhere he had ever been before. New stars. The stars of a place that was not where he was from and was not where he was going but that had been, for twenty days, where he was.

He looked at them for a while.

THIRTY-FIVE

CENDANT IV

THE LINK ROOM in the Cendant IV administrative complex had been the Holden family's Link room before it was theirs, and the Holden aesthetic was still visible in the architecture — darker surfaces than House Kentur would have chosen, the communication stations arranged for theater rather than function, the seal above the primary screen still carrying the ghost impression of the Holden sigil where the new one had been overlaid without quite covering. It would need to be replaced properly. Donia had added it to the list two months ago and had not yet found a day when replacing a seal felt like the most important thing to do.

Today was not that day either.

She sat at the primary station and read the intelligence summary for the third time, not because she had missed something in the first two readings but because the quality of attention required to receive the information fully was different from the quality of attention required to read it. She had read it. She was receiving it.

Her son had been missing for six weeks.

This was not how the official communication framed it. The official communication, arriving through the Chain's registry, framed it as: *House Kentur's Heir-Second, along with seven other Heirs-Second, had departed Imperial City through an unauthorized channel during the Tucana transit and had not been located.* The communication was four sentences. The fourth sentence contained the phrase *the City is cooperating with Shexosant search protocols to locate the individuals*, which meant the Shexosant was looking, which meant if the Shexosant found them the finding would be conducted in the manner Shexosant findings were conducted.

She had been managing the information in the way she managed things that required management: one component at a time, in the order of their urgency, without the noise of the full picture crowding out the work of the specific component currently in front of her. The Cendant governance, which had arrived with its own complexity — the Lisser labor relations, the Leaf production management, the agricultural licensing structure that the Holdens had operated with characteristic contempt for the people doing the actual work. The growbitat expansion, which Alise was managing with the focus of someone for whom a clear task in a complex environment is a relief. The House's political positioning as a newly elevated Dominion Major, which required more attention than she had anticipated.

All of it. One component at a time. In order of urgency.

Kaiden had been, for six weeks, a component she was managing in order of urgency. She was aware that this was the way she operated. She was aware that it was not the only way to operate. She had been doing it her whole life and it had made her good at the things she was good at and it had occasionally made her the wrong kind of person in specific moments.

She put the intelligence summary down.

Tome appeared at the door. He had the quality he had when he wanted to say something and was checking whether the room's atmosphere would support it.

"Aurelo's here," he said.

She looked at the door.

"He asked to speak to the family," Tome said. "Together. He said —" A pause. "He said it was time."

She said: "Send Alise."

Tome went.

They gathered in the administration building's smaller meeting room, which had been converted from one of the Holden formal reception spaces into something more functional — the ornate furniture removed, working surfaces installed, the wall screen configured for the data feeds that the House's operations required at any given moment. Four of them: Donia, Alise, Tome, and Aurelo.

Lorel had asked to be excluded. She had sent the message through the house system at the fourth hour of the morning, apparently already knowing what the meeting would contain: *I have been aware of this for eleven years. My role in not telling you is the subject of a separate conversation that I am available for when you're ready. Let Aurelo tell it in his own order.*

Donia had read this message twice. She had set it aside and not yet processed what it meant that her mother had known for eleven years.

One component at a time.

Aurelo sat in the chair that was slightly to the side of the table's center — the position that was not the seat of the meeting's leader but was adjacent to it, the position of someone who had been in this family's rooms for twenty years and had developed a physical relationship to their spaces that was its own kind of belonging. He was seventy years old now, approximate to it, and the twenty years on Cendant had made him what they had made him: thinner than his frame had been when he arrived, the fine tremor in his hands more visible, the eyes still the most alive thing about him.

He looked at Donia.

She looked at him.

She said: "Tell us."

He told them.

He did it in order — not the order of drama, the order in which the information built on itself, each piece creating the context for the next. He told them about the Elevatio's breeding program: when it had begun, what it was selecting for, why the Kentur line had been identified as a candidate. He told them about his posting — not the pastoral assignment it had been presented as, the Congregatio Secretorum's long-term monitoring position, twenty years in a single House to watch the development of the genetics the program had been building toward. He told them about the assessment at thirteen, about the suppression of the Cognaut markers before the standard read, about the specific decision that had been made in the two hours before Kaiden stood in the medical bay and put his palm on the contact surface.

He told them about what the Congregatio believed Kaiden was capable of. The Fold recessive, which they believed was present. The Commune capability, which they knew was active. The specific combination that the Elevatio had been working toward for a century.

He told them about Lysandir, about the Congregatio's City operations, about the plan that had produced Kaiden's posting to the Heir-Second block. He told them about the Elevatio's theory: the bonded Starfarers, the Leaf as bonding mechanism, the doctrine about collective Folding.

He told them all of it.

He told them without ornamentation. He told them the way he had always operated at his best — with the flatness that belonged to someone who has decided that the person they are speaking to deserves the full version rather than a managed one.

When he finished, the room was quiet.

Donia was looking at the table.

Alise was looking at the data feed on the wall screen, which she had been looking at throughout Aurelo's account with the quality of someone using the looking as a way to process what they were hearing rather than as an alternative to processing it.

Tome was looking at Aurelo with the expression of a man who has just had the temperature of the room confirmed to be much higher than he had understood, and who is recalibrating.

Donia said: "Did my son consent to any of this."

Aurelo said: "He did not know to consent. He was not—" He stopped. He corrected himself. "I did not know to ask. Which is a different thing from the answer not being available." He looked at her. "I made decisions about him. The Congregatio made decisions about him. Without asking. Because the asking would have required telling him what we were doing, and telling him would have put him in a position he was not ready for." He paused. "I am not going to tell you the decisions were wrong. The suppression of the Cognaut markers — if that had not happened, he would have been claimed by the Guild and the rest of this would not have been possible. The decision was correct in its outcome." He looked at the table. "It was made without his knowledge. I am aware of the distinction."

Donia looked at him for a long moment.

She said: "Does he know."

Aurelo said: "Not all of it. He knows about the selection program — I told him before the City, about the three generations, the observation. He knows he was being watched. He does not know the specific mechanism of the assessment suppression. He does not know that Lorel was informed eleven years ago." He paused. "He knows more than he did. He does not know everything."

Donia looked at the table.

Tome said: "The Shexosant."

"Yes," Aurelo said.

"If they find him," Tome said.

"They will follow their orders," Aurelo said. "The orders, as I understand them from the City's communication through the Chain, are to find and return the Heirs-Second for disciplinary processing. Which is the official framing." He paused. "The Shexosant interprets *return* broadly in situations where the subjects have participated in unauthorized departure from Imperial custody."

"Broadly," Tome said.

"Yes," Aurelo said.

Alise said, without looking away from the wall screen: "And *denied Afterlife*."

The phrase arrived in the room with its full weight.

Aurelo said: "That is in the Shexosant's operational authority for cases designated as high classification."

"Our son's case," Donia said.

"Yes," Aurelo said.

The room was quiet again.

Donia looked at the table for a long moment. The quality of her attention during this silence was the quality that her family had learned, over decades, to read as the state that preceded very precise and very final decisions. Not visible anger — the cold that came after anger when anger had been processed into something more useful.

She said: "Tell me about the Leaf."

Aurelo looked at her.

"The Elevatio's theory," she said. "The bonding mechanism. Leaf as the mechanism of collective Folding. Tell me what they believe."

Aurelo told her. He described the doctrine in the same terms he had described it in the Congregatio's internal communications, which were the most accurate terms he had: the Leaf at high doses producing the dissolution of cognitive boundaries, the dissolution enabling the convergence of multiple Folders' attention, the convergence enabling the scale required to move the City. He described the century of failed replication. He described what the Congregatio believed made Kaiden different from every prior attempt: the specific

combination of Commune capability and Fold recessive that the program had been designed to produce.

Donia listened to all of it.

When Aurelo finished, she said: "And if that belief is wrong."

Aurelo looked at her.

"The bonding mechanism," she said. "The Leaf theory. If it's wrong."

Aurelo said: "The Elevatio's doctrine is well-established. The evidence—"

"That wasn't my question," she said.

He was quiet.

She looked at him steadily. "If the theory is wrong. If Leaf is not the mechanism. If the collective bonding is not how the Fold is achieved. If someone told you that the first Starfarers didn't know Leaf existed — what would you say."

Aurelo looked at her.

He had been working toward an answer, assembling the components of it, and he was not arriving at one. Not because the question was unclear. Because the question was the question he had been avoiding for twenty years — the question that, if he permitted himself to look at it directly, would require him to reconsider the foundation on which he had built twenty years of monitoring and managing and suppressing and positioning.

He said: "I don't have an answer."

Donia looked at him for a moment.

Then she said: "I know."

She stood.

She walked to the wall screen and looked at the data for a moment — the Leaf production numbers, the growbitat yield curves, the Cendant system's agricultural output tracking against the projection Alise had sent to the City's registry six weeks ago. All of it running. The system producing what it produced. House Kentur's management doing what it had been doing.

She said, to the room, to the data, to the fact of it: "He's alive."

It was not a question and it was not quite a statement. It was the quality of a certainty that was not based on information — based on something older than information, the specific certainty of a person who has looked at a situation for six weeks and has concluded, without evidence she could name, that the person they are thinking about is the kind of person who does not die without her knowing it.

Alise, from her position at the table, said: "The search pattern is logical. The Shexosant will expand through the adjacent sectors in sequence. The timing suggests they're still looking, which means they haven't found anyone, which means whoever planned this planned the route well."

"Lysandir," Tome said.

"Lysandir," Alise agreed. "He was Kaiden's Elevatio handler. If he helped orchestrate the departure, the route was not improvised." She paused. "The UnImperium network has safe infrastructure. The Congregatio has contacts." She paused again. "Kaiden is not without resources."

Donia looked at the data.

She said: "What are they going to do to him."

Alise said: "Develop what they've been building toward. Whatever his specific capabilities are." A pause. "And then either he comes back on the Elevatio's terms, or something goes wrong, or he finds another way."

"He'll find another way," Donia said.

She said it with the quality that Donia used for things she was not negotiating — the flatness that meant this is what I believe and the believing is not open for revision. Her family heard this and did not argue with it, not because they necessarily agreed but because they had learned to distinguish between Donia's negotiable positions and her non-negotiable ones, and this was the second kind.

Aurelo said: "He is different from what the Congregatio was building toward. He is—" He paused, looking for the right word. "He is more than the program intended to produce. The combination of capabilities, yes, but also—" He looked at the table. "The way he

thinks. The quality of his judgment. In twenty years of watching that family, I have not seen judgment like his." He paused. "The program was building an instrument. What it actually built is a person who is also an instrument."

Donia looked at him.

She said: "Don't tell me how to feel about my son."

He said: "I'm not. I'm telling you what I believe about him." He met her eyes. "The distinction matters to me."

A moment.

She looked at him for a long time with the look that she used when she was assessing whether what she was seeing was what she thought it was.

She said: "You love him."

Aurelo said: "Yes."

"That doesn't absolve you of what you did," she said.

"I know," he said.

"Or what you allowed to be done to him."

"I know," he said.

"But I'm going to let you stay," she said. "Because you're old and you're on Cendant and you're not going anywhere, and because I'm not going to spend the energy on removing you when I need it for other things." She looked at him. "And because if he comes back, I want you to be here when he does, so he can decide what he thinks about you himself." She paused. "He's owed that."

Aurelo said: "Yes."

She turned back to the wall screen.

She said: "Alise."

Alise looked at her.

"The Leaf production," Donia said. "The current projections. If the Imperium decided to renegotiate the supply terms — not the volume, the terms — what leverage do we have."

Alise turned to her own display, not missing a beat. This was what Alise was for — the question that required immediate strategic mapping, delivered without warning, expected to receive a complete

answer because the person asking it did not ask until they were ready to use the answer.

"Significant leverage," Alise said. "The City's Wayfinder training requires Leaf. The Starfarer program—" she paused, and something crossed her face, a small recalibration as she processed what Aurelo had just told them about the Starfarer program's true nature. "The ceremonies. The rituals. Whatever the Leaf is actually used for. The City buys our output at a price set three cycles ago, before our elevation changed our negotiating position. At current market, we're supplying at approximately sixty percent of what the contract should reflect." She paused. "If we renegotiated to market rate—"

"Not the price," Donia said. "The terms. Who we can sell to. The exclusivity clause."

Alise said: "If the exclusivity clause were modified or removed, we could sell to UnImperium buyers."

The room absorbed this.

"Yes," Donia said.

Alise said: "That's a significant renegotiation. Janna Chadrac would not—"

"I know she wouldn't," Donia said. "I'm not planning to ask her. I'm planning to understand what the leverage is." She looked at the Leaf production data. "If my son comes back and he has done what I think he's going to do, the conversation that follows is going to involve leverage, and I want to know what House Kentur's leverage is."

Tome said, from his position at the table's edge: "You think he's going to change something."

Donia said: "I think he's going to try." She paused. "I think he's going to do more than try." She looked at the production data — the numbers Alise had been running for six weeks, the eastern flat cultivation zones at eighty-three percent and climbing, the yields from the processing facilities steady and improving under House Kentur management compared to what the records showed under Holden. All of it running. All of it producing.

She thought about her son. She thought about the way he had

stood in the Throne Room, four months ago, accepting the burden of enforcement without knowing what it meant. She thought about his shoulder grip on the shuttle, and the quality of his presence in every formal setting she had observed him in — not performing competence, having it, the distinction visible to her because she had been watching him since birth and knew the difference.

She thought about what she didn't know. About what the six weeks had produced. About what a twenty-year breeding program and a four-month tenure in Imperial City and whatever had happened in the UnImperium had combined to make.

She thought: *he is going to come back different.*

She thought: *I am going to deal with whatever he is.*

She thought: *and if he comes back the same, I am going to have very specific words for the people who tried to change him without asking.*

She went to the Link station.

She composed two messages.

The first was to the House Kentur representative in the City's Chain registry office: a formal request for review of the Leaf supply terms, framed as a routine renegotiation inquiry, with no urgency indicated. The framing was accurate. The urgency was contained in a separate place she did not put it.

The second was to a FreeLink address she had kept in a file marked with a designation that meant nothing to anyone who didn't know what it meant, which was the designation that Kaiden had sent her through the Peran comms network in the second week of his City posting, in a message that had seemed innocuous and was not: *House Kentur's outpost address for Cendant sector commercial routing.* The second message was four words.

We are here. Write.

She did not know if the FreeLink was active. She did not know if he was in a position to receive it. She did not know if he was in the Cendant sector or anywhere near it.

She sent it anyway, because it was what she had.

She sat at the Link station for a moment.

She looked at the Cendant system's data — the system that was now, for better or worse and entirely without her choosing, the House's system. The Leaf fields running in the eastern flat zones. The growbitats that they had brought from Bauxitum, now in the second month of Cendant operations, the cylinders adapting to the new system's light.

She looked at all of it and thought about what it meant to build something, carefully and over time, from a specific value: *do right, present the bill.* She had built on what her mother had built and Kaiden had been built on what she had built and she had done this without asking him either.

She sat with this.

She did not add it to the list of things she was angry about, because the list was already long enough and she was not going to allow it to get longer than she could carry. She filed it in the place where she kept things that were true and uncomfortable and that she intended to sit with rather than resolve prematurely.

The third thing — the unspoken intention — she did not compose. It existed in the space between the two messages and the present moment and what came next. She held it there, in the place where she held non-negotiable things: if he comes back changed, she will deal with what he has become. If he comes back the same, she will have words for the people who tried to change him.

Both options required him to come back.

He would come back.

She believed this with the quality she used for non-negotiable beliefs.

She looked at the unnamed system's data coordinates that the FreeLink's routing had told her, which she had decoded because she was Donia Kentur and she decoded things. She didn't know which unnamed system. She didn't know what was happening there.

She knew her son.

Outside, the Cendant IV agricultural zones were doing what

they did — the Leaf plants in their ranked rows, the eastern flat cultivation zones going their patient work in the light of a star that was not Bauxitum's star but that was doing its job. The Lisser workers in the processing facilities at their shifts. The growbitat cylinders from Bauxitum turning in the new system's light, carrying their sealed worlds.

Everything producing what it was built to produce.

She turned off the Link station.

She went to find the list of things that needed to be done today, which was a long list and would not wait for her to be finished feeling what she was feeling.

She was not finished.

She went anyway.

THIRTY-SIX

IMPERIAL CITY — OREAULE SYSTEM

THE CITY HAD FOLDED three times since the departure.

This was the ordinary number of Folds for the elapsed time — the Cycle continued, the systems received their visits, the administrative machinery of Imperium maintained its scheduled operations regardless of what had gone missing in the Tucana transit. The Court sessions had proceeded. The Guild negotiations had proceeded. The Heir-Second block had proceeded with eight fewer Heirs-Second, the absences logged, their Houses notified, the political management of the notifications conducted with the precision that the City applied to uncomfortable administrative facts.

Janna had Folded the City three times.

The Folds had been ordinary. No variance from the standard profile, no unusual energy draw, no anomalous output in the booster ring monitoring. She had gone into the Fold Room alone, as she always did. She had come out alone, as she always did. The system had logged the Folds as successful. The City had been where it needed to be. Everything had functioned.

She had also been managing a six-week search operation, four active intelligence threads, two diplomatic complications arising from the Heir-Second departures' Houses requesting information about the status of their members, and the ongoing question of Lysandir, whom she had identified as the inside facilitator and whom she was managing the knowledge of with the care that you manage explosive devices: careful handling, no sudden movements, no decisions until you know exactly where you want the consequences to land.

The Elevatio had been summoned for this meeting six days ago. She had made them wait six days because six days was the right amount of time: long enough that they had assembled their institutional response, not so long that the response had become polished to the point of performance. She wanted the first layer of performance present and the second layer not quite assembled. She wanted genuine frustration underneath the managed surface, because genuine frustration was informative in ways that managed presentation was not.

She had them brought to the secondary Council chamber rather than the Throne Room. This was a decision. The Throne Room communicated a specific register: Imperial authority, formal session, the full weight of governance being brought to bear. The secondary Council chamber communicated something slightly different: managerial, problem-solving, the register of a woman managing an institution's operational failures rather than judging its crimes. The distinction was deliberate. She wanted the Elevatio off-balance without being afraid. Fear produced performance. Off-balance produced information.

Five of them. Father Ursal at the front — she knew Ursal, had managed him through three institutional confrontations in the past decade, knew his cadence and his tells. Two senior ministers she recognized but had less specific read on. Eidan, who had been in the City long enough and was senior enough that his presence here was expected and whose specific quality of maintained certainty she had

been tracking since the Kentur boy's arrival. And Derry, who occupied the Cardinal's position with the institutional self-possession of a man who had been in high-stakes rooms his whole life and had learned to register them as his natural environment.

She looked at them.

She said: "Eight Heirs-Second."

Ursal began with the response they had prepared. She let him deliver it, which was not the same as listening to it with full attention — she was listening to the response with one layer of attention and with another, deeper layer, she was watching their faces.

What she was watching for: the specific quality of institutional embarrassment versus institutional anxiety. Both looked similar from the outside. Both produced the careful phrasing, the managed posture, the slightly excessive use of qualifying language. The difference was in what lived underneath. Embarrassment — when the Elevatio had made a mistake they were aware of and were managing the revelation of — produced a quality of compression, as if the institutional self were pulling inward to minimize the surface exposed to criticism. Anxiety produced a different quality: something more forward-leaning, the quality of people who are worried about what comes next rather than what has already happened.

She was seeing anxiety.

Ursal was speaking about the departure in the past tense, which was the past tense of something that was over rather than something that was ongoing. He was constructing a narrative in which the Elevatio had been peripheral to the departure's planning, had not been the source of the operation, had been as surprised as anyone by the magnitude of what had occurred. He was saying this with the confidence of someone who believes the statement. He was not performing confidence over concealment — he was genuinely confident, which meant the statement was genuinely what he believed.

She noted this and held it.

"You were not responsible for the departure," she said. Not a statement — a proposition she was placing on the table.

Ursal received it with careful precision. "We were not responsible for the — the specific form it took. Elements of the Congregatio Secretorum had their own interests in the Kentur line's—"

"The Congregatio Secretorum," she said.

He stopped.

She looked at him steadily. "You are sitting in this room explaining to me that a sub-organization within your institution ran an operation you did not fully control, resulting in eight Heirs-Second departing Imperial City through an unauthorized channel during a transit stop." She paused. "Tell me at what point the Congregatio became capable of operations you didn't know about."

Ursal looked at her with the look of someone who has been asked a question they cannot answer without making the institutional situation worse and who is processing whether the making worse is already unavoidable.

Eidan said: "The Congregatio operates on its own authority in matters related to the genetic program."

She looked at him.

He met her gaze with the quality of his eyes that she had been tracking for months — the maintained certainty, the position held because the holding was the only mode available to him. He was not performing this. It was genuine. He had dedicated thirty years to a specific goal within a specific institutional framework, and what had happened had not been what he intended, and the not-intending was visible in a way that no performance could have produced.

He was frustrated.

Specifically, precisely, genuinely frustrated.

She noted this.

She thought: *the operation went further than they intended. Lysandir's network moved before the Congregatio's institutional authorization. They wanted the boy in a position to be used. They did*

not want the boy in an unauthorized departure that removed him from the City's oversight.

She thought: *or they didn't run the operation at all, and what happened was someone else's operation that used their infrastructure.*

She thought: *which of those is worse.*

"Father Eidan," she said.

He looked at her.

"What, specifically, did you intend to happen," she said.

He was quiet for a moment. The quality of someone deciding how much honesty the situation required.

"We intended," he said, "for Kaiden Kentur to have the opportunity to develop his capability within the City's infrastructure. Under observation. With access to the Congregatio's training resources. Without departing." He paused. "What happened was—" He stopped. "The operation was accelerated beyond the Congregatio's original timeline. Lysandir's network made decisions that were not authorized."

"Lysandir," she said.

"Yes," Eidan said.

"And where is Lysandir now," she said.

Eidan looked at the table. "He is not currently in contact with the Congregatio's institutional network."

"He is not currently in contact with the City's systems either," she said. "He appears to have departed the City through a secondary route that has not been identified." She looked at Eidan. "He is, in other words, also gone."

"Yes," Eidan said.

She let this sit.

She looked at the five faces in the room. Ursal managing his position. The two ministers managing their proximity to a conversation they were not leading. Eidan maintaining his certainty in the specific way of someone who has been surprised by events and is recalibrating without letting the recalibration show. And Derry, who had been quiet throughout — who was watching with the quality she had

seen in her surveillance records of Court sessions, the watching that was checking something.

He was watching Eidan.

She noted this too.

"Here is what I know," she said, with the flatness of someone presenting a list of facts rather than an argument. "The boy departed with seven other Heirs-Second through the Elevatio's cathedral block service corridor. This required access that only four people hold. I have accounted for three of the four. Lysandir held the fourth." She paused. "The boy's departure was facilitated by someone inside my institution." She looked at each of them in turn. "Which means one of you knew, or should have known, and said nothing."

Ursal said: "The Congregatio's operations are conducted at a level of institutional separation—"

"Father Ursal," she said.

He stopped.

"I am aware of the institutional separation," she said. "I have been aware of the institutional separation for twenty-three years. I have permitted it because the Elevatio's internal organization is not my administrative responsibility and because a degree of operational independence for the Congregatio serves functions that the City benefits from." She paused. "I am telling you that the permitted degree of independence produced an outcome in my institution that I did not authorize and did not anticipate." She paused. "The permitted degree will be reassessed."

The room received this.

Derry said, carefully: "The Kentur line."

She looked at him.

"If the Congregatio's program produced what we have been working toward," Derry said, "the question is not only what happened but what comes next." He paused. "The breeding program's outcome — if it functioned as intended—"

"The breeding program's outcome is my problem to manage," she said. "Not yours."

"The Elevatio has invested a century—"

"The Elevatio invested a century in an operation that it conducted without the City's knowledge or consent," she said, with the quality that was not anger — the cold that came after anger when it had been processed into something more precise. "The investment is not a claim. It is an exposure." She looked at him. "Every year of that program is a year of operating inside this City's infrastructure without disclosure. Every marriage alliance, every gene selection, every assessment suppressed before the Chain could find it — all of it conducted in my City without my knowledge." She paused. "Whatever the program produced — and I do not yet know what it produced — the production is mine to address. Not yours."

Derry held her gaze for a moment.

Then he looked at the table.

This was the first time, in her knowledge of him, that he had looked at the table rather than at her during a conversation that was going against the Elevatio. He had always maintained eye contact — the trained institutional self-possession, the refusal to give ground visually even when ground was being lost in substance. The looking at the table was information.

He was frightened.

Not performed fear — she would have recognized that. The specific physiological fear of someone who has just realized that the position they have been managing is less stable than they believed. She noted it. She did not give him the acknowledgment of naming it.

"You will provide full disclosure," she said to the room, "of every operation the Congregatio has run within the City's systems in the past twenty years. Timeline, personnel, resources. A complete account." She looked at Ursal. "Through the Chain's audit mechanism, so there is a record. Within thirty days."

Ursal said: "That is — an extraordinary demand."

"It is a standard disclosure requirement for institutional operations within Imperial City's jurisdiction," she said. "The

extraordinary part is that it should have been done voluntarily, twenty years ago." She paused. "You have thirty days."

She looked at the room one more time. Five faces receiving the instruction, each of them processing it in their own register, the processing visible in the way each held their body in this room that was not the Throne Room.

"Good morning," she said.

She walked out.

Kimme was in the corridor.

Not accidentally — the specific posture of someone who has positioned themselves in a corridor to be encountered, wearing it with the ease of someone who has been doing this her whole life and knows how to make it look incidental.

Janna said: "Walk with me."

They walked.

The corridor that ran from the secondary Council chamber toward the administrative section was the corridor Janna used when she needed to move between the day's functions without transiting through the more observed arteries. It was not empty — the City's administration kept the corridors populated at most hours — but it was less observed than the main routes, the surveillance calibrated for security rather than behavioral monitoring.

She said: "Your assessment of what happened."

Kimme said: "The Congregatio Secretorum ran a longer-term operation inside the City than the Elevatio's institutional leadership authorized. Lysandir was the City-side coordinator. He moved before the timeline the Congregatio had agreed on, for reasons that are not established in the available data." She paused. "The seven other Heirs-Second were either part of the original plan or assets the Congregatio had been developing through separate channels — probably the latter, given that Nix and Iscaryot's UnImperium connec-

tions predate the Kentur posting." She paused again. "The operation's goal was to extract Kaiden Kentur to a location where the Congregatio's training resources were available, outside the City's oversight." She paused. "The Shexosant is currently conducting an active search. If the search is successful, the operation's results are reversed. If it is not—"

"Then the training has already happened or is happening," Janna said.

"Yes," Kimme said.

They walked.

Janna looked at the corridor ahead. She was receiving Kimme's assessment with one layer of attention and with another layer she was watching Kimme's face, the quality of her delivery, the specific way she had constructed the assessment.

The assessment was accurate. It was also — precisely calibrated. Every statement was accurate and none of the statements went further than the available evidence. Every inference was explicitly flagged as inference. Every conclusion was hedged to the correct degree for the information base it rested on.

This was how Kimme always reported. The precision was not new.

What was new was the absence of anything that went beyond the precision into speculation. Kimme, when she was genuinely not knowing something, produced the specific quality of not-knowing that was different from the quality of knowing-but-not-saying. She was producing the second quality throughout.

She knew more than she was saying.

The specific things she was not saying were not visible in the shape of the gaps — Kimme was too good for the gaps to be obvious. But the quality of the overall delivery had the quality of a report that had been constructed to be complete within a specific scope and to not invite questions that would push outside that scope.

The scope ended at Kaiden.

The assessment described the institutional operation accurately.

It did not include anything about the relationship between Kimme and Kaiden that had been visible in the surveillance feeds. It did not include Kimme's own reading room appearance. It did not include the specific quality of the departure as something Kimme might have had any foreknowledge of.

Janna received this.

She thought: *she knows something about what he is and what he was going to do. She knew before he left. She may have contributed to his leaving.*

She thought: *I have been watching Kimme's face for twenty-one years and the reading room surveillance was the most significant thing I have seen in it. I gave her an assignment and she did something other than the assignment. And she did not tell me she was doing something other than the assignment.*

She thought: *she chose.*

The choosing. That was the thing. Not that Kimme had information she hadn't disclosed — Kimme had always managed information with discretion, which was a skill Janna had trained and expected. The specific choosing was different. The choosing to withhold rather than to calibrate disclosure. The choosing that was the choosing to protect rather than to report.

She thought: *my daughter chose the boy over the assignment. And then she performed the assignment well enough that I could not identify the choosing from the outside. She was, at nineteen — at twenty-one — doing what I was doing at thirty-two.*

She was not alarmed by this. She was — the word that arrived was not the usual word, not the functional assessment word. The word was something closer to the word that had arrived when Kimme had received her first full access request at sixteen and had processed it in thirty minutes rather than the standard three hours: the word that was not pride but was in the neighborhood of pride, the word that belonged to a parent who has been watching something develop and is seeing the development reach a new level.

She decided not to press.

Not because she couldn't. She could. She had instruments for pressing that Kimme had not yet encountered. But pressing required the belief that the information she would extract was worth the cost of the extraction — the cost to the relationship, the cost to the process of trust that had been building between them across twenty-one years of careful management.

She did not think the information was worth that cost.

Not yet.

She thought: *if he comes back — and she will have positioned herself for his return — I will know what she knows when I know what he is. There is no advantage to pressing now that I will not have in better circumstances later.*

She said, instead: "The Shexosant's search parameters."

"Current coverage is the outer Hanov sector and adjacent systems," Kimme said, returning to the operational register with the ease of someone returning to familiar ground. "Estimated expansion to the Destus sector in two to four weeks, dependent on resource commitment. The FreeLink intercept protocols are active but the network's encryption is above the standard interception capability." She paused. "If they're using the UnImperium infrastructure, we may not find them through communications monitoring."

"And if they surrender voluntarily," Janna said.

Kimme said: "The offer was made. The response has not been received."

They had reached the junction that split toward the administrative section and toward the residential section. Janna stopped.

She said: "I'm going to ask Shexim to keep the Greater Assayors available through the end of the current Cycle."

Kimme looked at her.

"If the boy is found and returned," Janna said, "I want the full assessment done before anyone else has access to him." She paused. "The Shexim facility is under my control. Whatever the assessment finds stays there until I decide what to do with it."

Kimme said: "I'll send the message."

She said it with the quality she used for things she was going to do efficiently and without editorial comment.

Janna looked at her daughter.

She said: "You've been doing good work."

Kimme received this. The quality of how she received it — without the small visible warmth she usually showed when Janna said something that was approval — was itself information.

"Thank you," Kimme said. The functional closing.

She went toward the administrative section.

Janna went toward the residential section, toward the window that she thought near when she was thinking, the window that had held the Lyra system's star and the Aquila system's star and a dozen others in the time she had been standing at it across her years on the City.

The current system was outside.

The Oreaule system — a secondary stop in the Cycle, a system with minor Houses and moderate production and the specific quality of a place that was functioning adequately and would continue to function adequately for the foreseeable future without requiring significant management attention. The Cycle had brought them here as it brought them everywhere. The Court session tomorrow would proceed as Court sessions proceeded.

She stood at the window and looked at the Oreaule system's star.

She ran scenarios.

This was the mode she used when the information she had was insufficient to produce a conclusion but was sufficient to produce the probability-weighted outcomes of the choices available. The scenarios were not predictions. They were maps of the possibility space, each one requiring specific assumptions to produce, each one implying specific responses if it materialized.

In the first scenario: the Shexosant found them. The eight Heirs-

Second were returned to the City for disciplinary processing. Whatever training had occurred was incomplete. The boy was back in her custody, assessable through the Shexim facility, manageable within the City's existing structures. This was the scenario she had been working to produce for six weeks. This was the scenario the Shexosant was working toward.

In the second scenario: the Shexosant did not find them. The training reached completion — whatever completion meant for whatever the program had been building. The boy returned voluntarily, on his own terms, when he was ready to return. In this scenario, whatever he was when he returned would be fully developed rather than partially developed, which made him more capable and therefore more difficult to manage, which made the Shexim assessment more urgent, which created time pressure she did not currently have a way to address.

In the third scenario: he did not return. He remained in the UnImperium network, in the custody of whatever combination of Elevatio and UnImperium interests had extracted him, developing into a capability in an environment she did not control. The Fold disruption possibility — which the Elevatio's genetic file implied was possible if the capability was fully expressed — would be in the hands of people whose interests were not aligned with hers.

This third scenario was the one she spent the least time on. Not because it was least likely — it was within the probability range. Because it was the scenario where her available responses were most constrained, and sitting too long in scenarios where her responses were most constrained was not productive. She noted it. She prepared for it in the form of contingencies she did not expect to need. She moved on.

The second scenario was the one she kept returning to.

He returned voluntarily, on his own terms.

She thought about the reading room surveillance. About the quality of what had been exchanged in that room — two people who had, over four months, built something between them that was not

what she had assigned and was not what the Congregatio had intended and was not what the City's social architecture was designed to produce. Something that had its own terms.

She thought about the specific thing she had noted in Kimme's face in the secondary Council chamber: *she chose the boy over the assignment.* She thought about what that choosing meant about who Kimme was becoming, which was the thing she had been managing and was no longer entirely managing. The becoming had its own direction now. It had acquired a direction when Kimme walked into the Starfarer block and saw the food processing theater and said *Kaiden Kentur would think this was wrong*, and had received the one-word answer, and had gone home to sit with it.

She thought about the conversation she had been planning to have with Kimme — the truth about the Fold, the truth about what Janna was, the conversation she had been timing carefully and now wondered whether the timing had already been overtaken by events.

She thought: *if he comes back on his own terms, he will tell her. Everything. Because that is what he does — he says what he means and then stops, and he does not strategically manage what he shares with her.*

She thought: *she will have the full picture before I give her the full picture.*

She thought about whether that was a problem.

She stood at the window with this thought for a long time, in the specific quality of the thought's residence in her cognition: not comfortable, not alarming, the specific quality of something she was genuinely uncertain about, which was the rarest cognitive state in twenty-three years of governing.

Genuinely uncertain.

Not uncertain because the information was insufficient — she always operated in conditions of insufficient information and was comfortable in those conditions. Uncertain because the question itself did not have the shape of the questions she had been asking for twenty-three years. Those questions had answers, or the answers

were in principle achievable through the right combination of intelligence and action and patience. The question she was sitting with did not have that shape.

The question was: *if the boy comes back on his own terms, with the full capability developed, with Kimme already on a different side of the truth than Janna has placed her on — what do I do.*

She looked at the Oreaule system's star.

The star looked back with the indifference of stars.

She had been governing for twenty-three years. She had maintained a secret for twenty-three years that, if it became known, would remove the foundations of the system she governed. She had maintained it through the specific combination of control and information management and the managed elimination of threats and the controlled provision of alternatives that kept people inside the structure she needed them to be inside.

She had maintained it. And she was good at maintaining it.

She thought: *but he is not inside any structure I control. And Kimme is no longer inside one either. And the Elevatio's institutional authority is cracked in ways it will not fully repair. And the Shexosant's contractual loyalty has a specific mechanism that I understand and that others are beginning to understand.*

She thought: *the structure I have been maintaining is the structure. And the structure requires the maintaining.*

She thought: *and the maintaining requires that nobody knows what the boy now knows.*

She thought: *and he is going to tell everyone.*

This was the scenario she had not found a response for in six weeks of running scenarios. Not because the response was unavailable — she could enumerate the responses, she could identify the options, she could model the consequences of each one. The problem was not that the responses were absent. The problem was that none of the responses that preserved the existing structure were responses she was certain she was willing to enact.

She had never been uncertain about enacting a response.

She had been uncertain about which response was the right one. She had never been uncertain about whether she was willing to enact the one she'd chosen.

This was new.

She looked at the star.

She thought: *I built this. I have maintained it for twenty-three years. My mother built it before me and her mother before her and the original construction was three hundred years ago and it has produced what it has produced.*

She thought: *and it has produced what it has produced.*

She thought about the glass gallery above the food processing machinery. About the numbers without names in the preservation tubes. About Reticulum III's city lights at the forty-third minute and the civilian ships' icons going out and the orbital assets holding. She thought about all of it together, the full shape of the structure, and about what the structure required to maintain itself and what maintaining it had cost and what it was continuing to cost.

She thought about Kimme at minute forty-four with the arrangement not quite holding.

She looked at the star for a long time.

Then she turned from the window.

She did not have an answer.

This was not a condition she operated in. She moved in the direction of the next thing, which was always available, and let the question without an answer sit in the place where questions without answers sat, which was the specific cognitive location that she had never used before and was now becoming acquainted with.

The City turned.

The Oreaule system's star shifted in the viewport as the rotation moved it toward the edge of her sight line.

She went to the next thing.

THIRTY-SEVEN

SHEXOSANT CRUISER — TRANSIT

THE CRUISER CAME for them at the agreed coordinates three hours ahead of schedule.

This was either operational efficiency or a message. The two were not mutually exclusive with the Shexosant. They operated in a register where operational excellence and message-sending were frequently the same act, which was one of the things that made them effective as an institution: they did not waste the opportunity that any action presented to communicate something beyond the action's immediate function.

Coming three hours early communicated: *we are not going to give you time to change your mind.*

The ship was a cruiser-class vessel, one of the Shexosant's mid-range fleet units — not the capital ships that anchored major engagements, not the small interceptors used for close pursuit. A cruiser was the specific instrument for finding people who had surrendered voluntarily and making certain the voluntariness of the surrender

remained the defining feature of the encounter, rather than the fact that they were now in Shexosant custody.

It was black. Not the matte black of stealth coating — the specific black of Shexosant livery, the material that absorbed light without being designed to avoid sensors, that was dark because the Shexosant had decided that their fleet being visible was preferable to it being hidden, because a fleet you could see was one you were already too late to avoid.

Nix looked at it through the ship's viewport.

She said: "Here we go."

The boarding was, as he had said it would be, a performance of relief.

He had prepared for this during the transit to the rendezvous point — had thought through the specific quality of affect required, the way a person who has been in genuine distress for eight weeks behaves when the distress is resolved, the specific mixture of exhaustion and gratitude that the Shexosant would be calibrating for. They would have a Telepath. The Shexosant maintained Telepath teams for exactly this category of encounter — voluntary surrenders from people who had, potentially, spent their transit time in hostile circumstances and who might be presenting as relieved when they were not.

He had thought about the Telepath and had concluded: the relief was not entirely performance. He was genuinely tired. He was genuinely ready for this to move to its next phase. He could let those genuine things be present without the Telepath finding anything that contradicted the narrative of relieved survivors, because the narrative of relieved survivors was close enough to the truth of his experience that the performance and the reality occupied most of the same space.

What he was not allowing to be present: anything about what he could do. The ability was there, was continuous, was running at its

background level in the enhanced perceptual field. He had been managing it for eight weeks and was practiced at managing it. He managed it now, walking onto the Shexosant cruiser with the others, through the boarding collar, into the lights and atmosphere and specific quality of a military vessel that was doing its work.

The Shexosant personnel who received them were efficient in the Shexosant manner — not unkind, not warm, the specific interpersonal register of people for whom the current encounter was a defined operational function that they were executing to standard. They moved the group through a processing sequence that was thorough and quick. Identities confirmed. Medical assessments completed. Personal effects catalogued and retained.

The retention of personal effects was where he had to manage his face most carefully.

The FreeLink chip: catalogued, retained. The token: catalogued, retained. Both of them placed in the sealed evidence container with the efficiency of a system that had processed many such surrenders and had learned to move quickly through the part where the surrendering party registered the loss of things they had been carrying.

He watched the container seal.

He performed looking at the container the way a person looks at something they would prefer not to lose but understand is no longer available to them. This was mostly true. The FreeLink was a communication tool and he would not need it inside the City. The token — he held the looking for exactly the length of time that the looking warranted, which was the length of time it took to acknowledge that a thing was gone and move on.

The Telepath was in the processing room, at the far side, doing nothing visible. This was the mode — the Shexosant Telepaths did not perform their function, they conducted it. They were present and they were working and the working was not visible because visible working was less effective than invisible working, because the person being read behaved differently if they knew they were being

read versus if they were simply in a room with a person who happened to be reading them.

He let the relief be present. He let the exhaustion be present. He let the three months of storage bay bunks and inadequate food and the specific quality of a person who has been living in uncertainty for a sustained period come to the surface, because all of these were real and the Telepath would find them real and the finding them real would serve the narrative.

He did not let anything else come to the surface.

When the processing was complete, a Shexosant officer — senior, by the specific placement of her insignia, her posture the posture of someone who has been running operations for long enough that the posture is simply how she stands rather than how she stands when she is running operations — addressed the group.

"You will be held separately during transit," she said. "Each in your own cabin. This is standard protocol for voluntary surrender situations and is not punitive." She looked at each of them in turn. "You will be transported to Imperial City. At Imperial City, you will be processed through the disciplinary system. The classification of your departure — unauthorized versus criminal — will be determined at that stage." She paused. "Any questions."

Nobody asked any.

"Good," she said.

They were separated.

The cabin was small.

Not uncomfortable — the Shexosant did not use discomfort as an operational instrument, which was one of the things that made their custody distinct from alternatives. The bunk was functional and the environmental system was calibrated. The light could be adjusted. The door was locked from the outside in a way that his enhanced

perceptual field could feel as a specific electromagnetic quality in the lock mechanism.

He sat on the bunk.

He looked at the cabin.

He was, for the first time in eight weeks, alone.

Not alone in the sense of the storage bay bunk, where the ship's drive core was in the walls and the others were in adjacent spaces and the perceptual field was continuously receiving information about all of it. Alone in the sense of a locked cabin on a Shexosant cruiser moving through the transit route to Imperial City, with no instruments, no Vex, no Trumbold, no Nix, no visible connection to anything he had been building for the past two months.

He breathed.

He thought about the FreeLink in the evidence container. He thought about the token. He thought about what the token had meant in the maintenance tunnels of the City, the weight of it in his left pocket alongside the chip, the two objects that had represented two different parts of the network that had been working toward this moment for different amounts of time.

He thought: *the objects are in the container. What they represented is not.*

He thought: *I know what I know. I can do what I can do. The objects were never the point.*

He looked at the cabin.

He extended his perceptual field.

The cabin's dimensions were a specific volume. The lock's mechanism was a specific electromagnetic configuration. The corridor outside was present in his field as the ambient quality of a space occupied by military personnel moving in their standard patterns. Further out: the cruiser's systems, running at their operational standard. The drive core, in the ship's deep interior, producing the specific harmonic that he now processed as a distinct signal rather than background noise. The power plant's architecture — the distrib-

ution network, the specific routing that connected the core to the ship's operational systems.

He could feel all of this.

He had been able to feel all of this since the activation, in varying degrees and with varying specificity depending on proximity. What eight weeks of practice had done was to develop his ability to manage the field — to background what didn't require attention and attend to what did, to filter without suppressing, to receive the full information and not be overwhelmed by it.

He felt the cruiser.

He felt it the way he felt the unnamed world's geography — not visually, through the specific quality of his expanded awareness touching the boundaries of things. The hull's material. The thermal gradient from the core toward the hull's outer surface. The specific distribution of power through the distribution network, some areas drawing more, some less, the dynamic shifting as systems cycled and adjusted.

He felt, too — more distantly, at the edge of the range that his field had been developing toward — the Fold machinery.

Not the machinery in the physical sense of components he could locate. The machinery in the sense of the Fold's infrastructure: the pre-Fold systems that would, at some point during this transit, begin their preparation sequence. The Wayfinder station. The pattern plate cradle. The energy distribution routing that would, when the time came, channel the ship's power plant toward the Fold's requirements.

He could feel the shape of it.

He thought: *the cruiser's Starfarer will Fold this ship to the City. She will use Leaf. She will enter the trance. She will direct the ship's power plant through the Fold's requirements, extending her attention to encompass the ship's volume and directing that volume through the boundary between here and there.*

He thought: *and I will be here, in this cabin, in this volume, present in the same space she is directing.*

He thought: *I need to know what disruption actually feels like from the inside before I am in a position where I need to do it reliably.*

He thought: *I also need to be very careful about what I practice.*

He looked at the cabin wall.

He thought about the power plant. About the logarithmic scaling. About the energy requirement for a volume this size versus the cruiser's power plant's available output.

He began, carefully, to practice.

The first thing he practiced was the Fold itself, not the disruption.

Small masses, inside the cabin. He had no objects — the evidence container held his personal items, the cabin held only what the Shexosant placed in it, which was a bunk and environmental controls and the adjustable light panel. He folded air. Not the air in the cabin — not in a way that would destabilize the pressure or produce a temperature event that the ship's environmental monitoring would flag. Small pockets of the cabin's air, moved from one position to another, the volume small enough that the recirculation system absorbed the movement without registering it as anomalous.

This was practice in its purest form — no destination, no external mass, just the quality of attention extended to the boundaries of a small volume and the volume moved. Each repetition refined the energy draw. Each repetition made the draw more efficient. He had been practicing this on the unnamed world, on the ship from Destus, during the transit. He was continuing it now.

He also practiced a thing he had not been practicing as deliberately: the awareness of another person's Fold preparation.

In the cabin on the unnamed world's ship, he had watched the Starfarer go into her trance and had felt the quality of what the trance produced in his perceptual field. He had not extended that observation actively — had felt it passively, as the background quality of the shared space. Now he considered what it would mean to

extend his awareness actively into the same space that a Starfarer's orientation was occupying.

Not to interfere with it. Not yet. To understand what it felt like from inside — to feel the shape of another person's Fold orientation, the quality of their attention pointed at the volume, the specific way they were directing the boundary.

He thought: *if I extend my awareness into the volume she is directing, while she is directing it, what happens?*

He thought: *if my attention and her attention are occupying the same volume simultaneously, and my attention is pointing in a different direction—*

He thought: *I need to be very careful. A failed Fold on a military vessel in transit is not the same as a failed Fold on a training ship in an uninhabited system. If I disrupt the Fold and do not allow it to resolve—*

He did not finish the thought, because the ending of the thought was the ending of everyone on the ship, and he was not going to end everyone on the ship.

He filed this under: *I will need to be very precise about when I allow the disruption to complete and when I release it.*

He filed this alongside: *I will only try this once, before the Fold, to feel the shape of it. If I get the shape wrong — if the disruption is less controlled than I expect — I release immediately and let the Fold proceed.*

He practiced the small Folds in the cabin.

He thought about Imperial City.

He thought about the City's specific quality — the light that found no shadow, the hum in the walls, the secondary corridor with its lower light setting, the reading room, the Wayfinder facility's star chart with its unmarked systems at the edge. He thought about the Throne Room and the dais and the seven-circle configuration. He thought about the Fold Room: two chairs, the pedestal, the mnemonic plate cradle.

He knew the City. He had lived in it for four months. He knew it

the way the secondary daughter had described knowing a destination: not from patterns, but from inhabitation.

He thought: *if I needed to Fold myself to the City — not the ship, just myself — I could.*

He thought about whether he would need to.

He thought: *probably not. But it is important to know that I could.*

He sat in the cabin and practiced and thought and waited.

Thirty-one hours after boarding.

The pre-Fold sequence began.

He felt it before the ship's systems made it audible — the specific quality of the power plant's distribution routing beginning to shift, the energy management adjusting from standard operational draw toward the pre-Fold configuration. The Wayfinder station coming online, the pattern plate cradle activating. The environmental systems dialing slightly, the temperature dropping the two degrees that was standard pre-Fold preparation across every ship he had been on.

He was lying on the bunk. He had been lying on the bunk for the last two hours, in the posture of someone who was resting — which the surveillance would read as rest, because the surveillance was looking for behavioral anomalies in the standard sense and lying still in a bunk was not a behavioral anomaly. He had been lying still and managing his field and thinking.

He sat up.

He felt the Starfarer.

Not physically — she was in the Fold station, which was deep in the ship's interior, well removed from the passenger and custody sections. But his perceptual field, at its current development, could locate the specific quality of a person entering a Fold trance at the range the cruiser's interior provided. The quality was distinctive — distinct from every

other quality of human cognition he had been developing the ability to perceive. The dissolution, the loosening of the cognitive boundaries, the specific way a person in a deep Fold trance occupied a different kind of presence in the space than a person in ordinary wakefulness.

She was going under.

The power plant's draw was beginning to reroute. He could feel the distribution changing — the channels that fed the standard operational systems beginning to reduce their allocation, the channels that led toward the Fold's energy requirements beginning to increase. The specific routing that Janna had been using across twenty-three years and forty thousand fusion torches: the same architecture at cruiser scale, smaller, but the same principle.

He felt the trance deepen.

He felt her attention — not her thoughts, nothing specific, the quality of a person's directed attention the way he could feel emotional states in people nearby, but at the specific register of the Fold: her awareness extending outward, beginning to encompass the ship's volume. He could feel the orientation forming, the same quality he had been developing in his own practice, the same instrument pointed in the same direction.

He could feel it because they were in the same volume.

He let his own awareness extend.

Not toward the Fold — alongside it. He was not trying to occupy the same orientation; he was extending his field into the volume the ship occupied, the volume she was beginning to direct. He was not competing with her orientation. He was present in the same space, feeling the shape of what she was doing, not acting on it yet.

The quality of her attention was — he searched for the word — practiced. That was what it felt like from inside the shared volume: a quality of practiced attention, of someone who had done this many times and had developed the doing of it into something efficient and almost automatic. The orientation was not effortful; it was habitual. She had been Folding this ship through this Cycle's route for two

years, and the habituation was visible in the quality of what she was doing, in the way a practiced skill is visible in the economy of its execution.

He held this.

He felt the orientation forming fully — felt the moment when her attention had encompassed the ship's volume completely, when she was inside the relation between here and where they were going, when the Fold's pre-event configuration was complete and what remained was the direction.

He extended his awareness into the same space.

He directed his attention — not toward where she was directing it, but across it.

The disruption arrived immediately, and it was not what he had expected.

He had expected friction — the quality of two opposing forces meeting, the analogue to the TK feeling of two presences contending for the same object. What arrived was different. It was more like interference — the way two sound waves of slightly different frequencies produce a beat, an oscillation between reinforcement and cancellation. His attention and hers were not opposing; they were interacting, producing a third quality that was neither of theirs alone but was the combination.

The combination was — wrong. For the Fold. The wrongness was specific: the orientation required a clean, undivided quality of attention, the same quality the Communion and the TK required but at the Fold's specific register. The interference he was producing created a division in the volume's coherence, a flickering of the orientation between two different directions, neither of which was sufficient to produce the Fold's decisive event.

The ship's systems registered this.

The alarms did not begin immediately — the Fold monitoring systems had tolerance ranges, designed to accommodate the natural variation that occurred in any human-directed process. He was

within the tolerance range for approximately four seconds. Then he was outside it.

The alarms were not the catastrophic alarm of a failing system. They were the specific alarm of a system that had detected an anomaly in a process that could not safely proceed with an anomaly present: a sustained, penetrating tone that was designed to communicate urgency without communicating crisis, because the difference between urgency and crisis was the difference between a failed Fold and a catastrophic one, and the alarm was calibrated to produce the first response without triggering the second.

He heard the alarm.

He felt — simultaneously, through his field — the Starfarer's trance destabilizing, the practiced orientation losing its coherence in a way that was visible to his awareness as a sudden qualitative shift in the space: the smooth direction of the Fold becoming turbulent, the orientation breaking apart at its edges, the energy routing that had been building toward the Fold's requirements beginning to misfire.

Release, some part of him said. Not Maren — himself.

He released.

He withdrew his awareness from the shared volume — pulled it back to the cabin, to the small perceptual field that the cabin constituted — and held it there and did not reach outward again.

The Starfarer's trance continued to dissolve. The orientation was breaking apart even without his interference now, the disruption having introduced a coherence failure that the trance's own processes were not structured to self-correct quickly. The energy routing misfired again, the distribution system registering the anomaly in its own terms. The alarms continued.

He sat on the bunk.

He was breathing hard. Not from effort — the disruption had not been physically taxing in the way that sustained TK was physically taxing. The breathing was the body's response to something that was not physical but that the body registered as significant: the specific quality of having done something that could not be undone, of

having passed through a threshold that no one had passed through in three hundred years and that changed the shape of what was possible.

He had disrupted a Fold.

On a military vessel. With people aboard. Including himself.

He sat with the fact of this.

The alarms were still running. He could hear activity in the corridor outside — Shexosant personnel moving toward the Fold station, the systematic response of a military crew managing an unexpected operational failure. He could feel, through his field, the power plant reducing its draw as the pre-Fold routing was abandoned, the system cycling back to standard operational distribution.

The Starfarer was out of the trance. He could feel the quality of consciousness returning to her presence in the ship — the emergence from dissolution back to ordinary awareness, but rougher and faster than the normal emergence, the quality of someone brought up from depth too quickly. She was disoriented. She would be reporting the failure. She would not be able to explain it.

She had not been using Leaf when the disruption occurred. He had checked this, before extending his awareness, by confirming the absence of any environmental signal that would indicate Leaf administration in the Fold station. No Leaf — the cruiser Starfarer had not needed it, presumably, for a transit she had done many times before. The habituation had made the Leaf unnecessary for the mental state's achievement.

Which confirmed, in practice, everything the secondary daughter had told him.

Leaf was not the mechanism.

The disruption he had produced had nothing to do with Leaf. It had to do with his quality of directed attention, present in the same volume as her quality of directed attention, pointed across it. The mechanics of the disruption were the mechanics of the Fold itself — the same capability, applied to interfere rather than to direct.

He understood what he had.

He understood what it meant.

Forty-three minutes passed.

He counted them, in the specific way of someone who has nothing else to do and who is using the counting as a way to occupy the part of his mind that was not occupied by what he was sitting with.

He heard the Fold station's systems cycling back to active status. He felt the distribution routing beginning to reconfigure. The Starfarer was returning to her station — he could feel the quality of her presence moving through the ship toward the Fold section, and the quality of her presence was not the quality it had been before. It was tighter, more careful, the habituation replaced by deliberateness. She had experienced a failure in a process she had been conducting habitually, and now she was conducting it with the attention she had not needed to give it before.

He felt the trance beginning again.

He did not reach outward.

He had learned what he needed to learn. He had tested the disruption to confirmation. He had felt the shape of it — the interference quality, the coherence failure, the alarm. He had released it before it became catastrophic, and releasing it had been the right call, and he had made it correctly.

He was not going to disrupt this Fold.

The Fold needed to complete. They needed to get to the City. What came after the City was the plan, and the plan required him to be at the City, not adrift in the transit corridor with seven other Heirs-Second on a Shexosant cruiser whose Starfarer had failed twice.

He sat in the position of rest and let the second Fold approach.

The trance deepened. The orientation formed — this time with the deliberateness of someone who had failed once and was not going

to fail again. He could feel the quality of it: not the habitual ease of the first attempt, but the careful specificity of attention that was being given fully rather than automatically. She was present in the work in a way she had not been present before.

He kept his awareness in the cabin.

He did not reach outward.

The Fold happened.

He was not ready for it even this time — he had Folded himself, on the unnamed world, multiple times, and had been inside the ship Folds on the transit from Tucana. But each Fold arrived with its own specific quality, and this one arrived as the quality of a space that had been dissonant for forty-three minutes resolving into coherence, the specific sensation of a process completing after a failure had interrupted it. The before-and-after with no between, and the after was the City's system, the specific star visible through the narrow viewport at the angle that meant Oreaule was below and the City was approaching.

He looked at the viewport.

The City was outside.

He looked at it.

The sheared hemisphere. The booster rings at the equator, forty thousand fusion torches at their standby readiness, the infrastructure that was the energy source for the most significant capability in the known galaxy. The scale that overwhelmed language, the same scale it had been the first time he had seen it from a shuttle window fourteen months ago, the scale that had been impossible to hold in the mind then and was still impossible to hold but that now meant something different — not incomprehensible, now carrying the specific information of what it was and why it had been built the way it had been built.

He looked at the booster rings.

He thought: *the first Chadrac built those. She built them knowing what they were for. She built them and then she built the doctrine to ensure that she was the only one who would ever use them.*

He thought: *they are about to be used differently.*

He thought: *and she is not going to be able to stop it.*

He was twenty years old. He had been gone from the City for eight weeks. He had learned things in eight weeks that the Elevatio had been working toward for a century and had not arrived at. He had disrupted a Fold on a military vessel and had released it correctly and had let it resolve and had done all of this alone, in a locked cabin, without instruments or supervision or any external resource except what he carried.

He was what the Congregatio had spent a century building.

He was also, as he had told Derry in a conversation that had not yet happened but that he had been preparing for in every conversation that had happened: a person.

Both things were true.

He was going to hold both of them.

He was sitting in the cabin's standard rest posture — the posture the surveillance would read as resting — when Maren arrived.

Not with the gentle quality of her late-night presence in the storage bay. Not with the directional economy of the corridor nudge. Not with the careful assessment tone of the Fold Room analysis.

With something else. A quality he had not heard from her before — something that was charged with what she had been waiting for, the specific quality of a person who has been watching for a very long time for a very specific thing and has just seen it.

Now you know what you are, she said.

He sat with this.

The viewport showed the City growing larger as the cruiser approached, the booster rings resolving from their orbital distance into a resolution he could now see more specifically than he could before — the individual torches distinguishable at this proximity, not

forty thousand as an aggregate but forty thousand as forty thousand specific things, each one doing its specific work.

Try not to be insufferable about it.

He looked at the City.

He thought about what came next — the processing, the custody, the City's system receiving him in whatever form the system received people who had departed without permission and returned in Shexosant custody. He thought about the plan, which was not a complete plan but was a direction, and about Kimme, who was somewhere in the City right now and who had spent eight weeks sitting with whatever she had been sitting with since the reading room.

He thought: *I told her I was going to come back.*

He thought: *I'm back.*

He looked at the booster rings. He thought about the first Chadrac who had built them, and about what she had understood about power and what she had done with that understanding, and about what he was going to do with the understanding he now had that she had worked for three hundred years to prevent anyone from having.

He thought: *I am going to be insufferable about it.*

He thought: *but not yet. First the thing needs to be done.*

He held the City in his attention.

Not the Fold orientation — he was not going to Fold anything right now. Just the attention. The quality he had been developing for months, pointed at the City's volume, feeling its boundary, the forty thousand torches and the sheared hemisphere and the seven-circle dais and the Fold Room with its two chairs and the reading room with its single viewport and the secondary corridor with its lower light.

He held it.

The cruiser moved toward the docking approach.

The City received them.

THIRTY-EIGHT

IMPERIAL CITY — OREAULE SYSTEM

HE WAS in his quarters when she came.

Not the quarters he had occupied for four months before the departure — those had been reassigned when he departed, the City's administrative machinery redistributing the residential inventory without sentiment. The quarters he was in now were in the East block's secondary wing, a suite that was slightly smaller than the previous one and that had the quality of a space that had not recently been occupied, the atmospheric systems still calibrating to someone's presence after a period of vacancy.

He had been in the City for six hours.

The processing had been what it was. The Shexosant had delivered eight individuals to the City's custody systems and the City's custody systems had done their work: identities re-confirmed, medical assessments repeated, the administrative record updated to reflect the status change from *unauthorized departure, location unknown* to *unauthorized departure, returned voluntarily, disciplinary status pending*. He had been told that the disciplinary assess-

ment would be conducted in the following days. He had been told that his movements within the Heir-Second block were unrestricted pending that assessment but that departure from the block required notification. He had been told to get some rest.

He had not gotten any rest. He had sat on the bunk in the new suite and looked at the walls and felt the City around him — all of it, the full perceptual field at its current development, the hum in the walls at its specific frequency, the atmospheric system calibrating, the corridors outside doing their ordinary evening traffic, the City moving through the Oreaule system's arc. He felt all of it and was glad of it, the gladness being the quiet version that arrives when you have been somewhere that was not where you belonged and have returned to where you belonged, even if where you belonged was complicated.

The knock on the door was precisely at the hour when the block's evening traffic had thinned to the specific low level of people who were retiring rather than moving, when the corridor outside was quiet enough that a knock at a door was noticeable rather than ambient.

He opened it.

Kimme.

Not in the Ana Tollivar register. Not in the full Chadrac heir register. In the register she had been using in the secondary corridors and the swept rooms and the reading room — the register that existed between the performances, the one that was simply her.

She looked at him.

He looked at her.

Eight weeks. The last time he had seen her face it had been in the reading room, across the table, with the closed slate between them. He had left six hours later through a maintenance tunnel. He had been, in the intervening eight weeks, in four different star systems, in two different UnImperium facilities, in the locked cabin of a Shexosant cruiser. He had learned things. He had done things. He was not the same person who had left.

She was looking at him with the look of someone assessing the full version of what was in front of them — the quick, complete assessment that she brought to things she was taking seriously.

She said: "You came back."

He said: "I said I would."

She looked at him for another moment.

She said: "May I come in."

He stepped back.

She sat in the suite's single chair, which she took without being asked and without the performance that taking a chair in someone else's space usually involves — the performance of *is this appropriate, should I wait to be offered*, the management of the social geometry of the asking. She sat in it because it was the correct place to sit and she needed to be sitting.

He sat on the bunk.

She looked at the room. At the walls, still carrying the specific quality of recently vacated space. At the viewport, showing the Oreaule system at its current angle. At him.

She said: "Eight weeks."

"Yes," he said.

"Where," she said.

He told her. He gave her the geography: the ship, Hanov, the assayor, Destus, Vex, the unnamed world. He gave her the shape without the content first — because he had learned, from the reading room, that she received information better when she had the shape to put it in before the content arrived.

She listened without interrupting.

When he finished the shape, she said: "And the content."

He told her that too.

The assayor's findings — the capability profile, the full suite, the suppressed Cognaut markers and what the suppression meant about

the decisions that had been made without him. He told it in the flat tone he used for things that were true and that he had already processed past the point of needing inflection to communicate their weight. She received it in the same tone — not performing the receiving of significant information, simply receiving it.

He told her about Trumbold, and Vex's data, and the energy signature that said one person. He told her about the secondary daughter, in the most careful terms he had — the Communion beyond his line, the flat account, the Leaf question and its answer. He watched her face while he told her the Leaf answer. She was very still.

He told her about the disruption on the cruiser. The interference, the alarms, the release, the second Fold completing. He told her what he had confirmed about the power plant's role. He told her about forty thousand fusion torches and what they actually were.

When he finished, she was quiet for a long time.

Not the quiet of receiving — the quiet of a person who has received all of it and is now letting it configure into its complete shape. He knew this quality of her silence now, the way he knew the qualities of most things in his perceptual field: specific, distinct, not to be confused with other silences.

She said: "You can Fold."

"Yes," he said.

"Without Leaf."

"Yes."

"And you can disrupt someone else's Fold."

"Yes," he said. "With enough precision not to cause a catastrophic failure. It requires releasing the disruption at the right moment." He paused. "I've tested it once. I'll get better at the control."

She looked at him steadily. "And the first Chadrac introduced Leaf as a control mechanism."

"Yes," he said.

She was quiet again.

"Which means," she said, "that everything my mother does —

every Fold — she could do without Leaf. She doesn't need it. She has chosen to maintain the dependency because the dependency is the control mechanism and the control mechanism is the structure."

"Yes," he said.

She looked at the viewport. At the Oreaule system's star.

He waited.

She said: "Your mother will try to move you to Shexim."

"I know," he said.

"Quickly," she said. "Within the current Cycle's remaining stops if she can arrange it. The Greater Assayors there are under her control. A full-depth assessment produces a record she can read before anyone else can." She paused. "She's been planning this since before you left."

"You told me," he said. "In the reading room."

"I know I told you," she said. "I'm telling you again because we're in a different situation than we were in the reading room and the information is now more urgent." She paused. "How long do you have before she moves on it."

"A day," he said. "Maybe two. She'll be managing the disciplinary process as a cover — keeping it visible, making it look like she's following the City's standard procedures for unauthorized departure. But the underlying move will be Shexim, and she won't wait long once she knows I'm back."

Kimme looked at the viewport for another moment.

Then she looked at him.

"Tell me about the Ethin assault," she said.

He looked at her.

"I was in the gallery," she said. "I watched the civilian ships. I watched the orbital assets hold." She paused. "I've been sitting with what I watched for eight weeks." She paused. "Tell me what you see when you look at it."

He thought about what he had said in the card game table, naming the civilian ships, to the silence that followed. He thought

about what he had said in the swept room on the fifth ring, his answer to her question about what he believed about the City.

He said: "The governance model requires periodic atrocities. Not as accidents or failures — as intended outcomes. The fear that keeps the Houses in line requires that the fear be occasionally confirmed. Houses that grow too independent, too strong, too capable of operating outside the City's framework — they need to see what happens to Houses that grow too independent. Holden was one demonstration. Reticulum was another." He paused. "The atrocities are not produced by malice. They're produced by what the structure requires to continue operating. Janna doesn't watch Reticulum because she enjoys it. She watches it because it's what she's built and it needs her attention."

He paused.

"The orbital assets held," he said, "because if the orbital assets had interdicted, there would have been no atrocity. And without the atrocity, there would have been no demonstration. And without the demonstration, the next House considering whether to test the boundaries would have less information about the cost of testing them." He paused. "The civilian ships died because their dying was the point."

The room was quiet.

Kimme was looking at the viewport. Not at him — at the system outside.

She said: "I knew that."

He waited.

She said: "I think I've always known that."

The sentence arrived in the room with the quality of something that had been held for a long time and was now being set down — not dramatically, with the specific quiet of someone completing an act of putting something down that they have been carrying past the point where carrying it made sense.

"Not in those terms," she said. "Not as clearly as you just said it. But I understood that the governance model produced what it

produced because it needed to produce it. I understood this when I was — twelve, thirteen. I watched my mother in sessions. I watched what the sessions did and what they were for and I understood that the outcomes were not unfortunate byproducts of a process that could be run differently. They were the process." She paused. "I told myself it was efficiency. That every system has costs and the costs of this one were at least visible and at least contained and at least — managed." She looked at him. "That's what I told myself."

"And now," he said.

She said: "And now I've stopped telling myself that."

She looked at the viewport.

She said: "Is that why you didn't report the star chart?"

She had turned the question on herself — asking herself about her own decision with the same directness she brought to questions about other people. He had asked her a version of this in the swept room, the night she had said *I'm supposed to report what you noticed* and then hadn't. He had not pressed for the answer then.

She was pressing herself now.

She said: "I didn't report it because reporting it would have produced a record. A notation in your file. And the Elevatio has access to that notation. And the notation would have said — *Kentur noticed the unmarked systems*. And what that notation would have meant to the Elevatio was—" she paused. "It would have meant you were the person they thought you were. It would have accelerated something I didn't want accelerated." She paused. "I didn't report it because I was protecting you."

"From the Elevatio," he said.

"From everyone," she said. "From my mother. From the process that I knew was going to — claim you, in some form." She looked at the viewport. "I had just been told to observe you and not befriend you. And then I didn't report what I observed. Which is not not befriending." She paused. "I was aware of the distinction."

He said: "When did you know it wasn't just an assignment."

She looked at him with the look that was the full look, the one without the arrangement.

She said: "In the reading room. When you told me about the Elevatio's ask and what you decided instead." She paused. "Nobody had ever — chosen honesty with me at that particular cost. Everyone who is honest with me is honest because being honest with me serves them. You were honest because you thought I deserved it." She paused. "That's not a category I had experience of."

He looked at her.

"You did something expensive," she said. "And you did it without asking what you'd get back. In this City, in this institution — that is not how people operate." She paused. "I didn't know what to do with it."

"You warned me," he said. "About Shexim. That was expensive too."

"Less," she said. "I'd already decided. Telling you was just the act." She paused. "The decision was expensive. The act was easy."

He thought about this.

He thought about what it meant to grow up as Kimme Chadrac, in the environment she had grown up in, with the education she had received, and to have arrived at twenty-one years old with this specific quality of precision about what she did and didn't understand about herself. The precision was a form of honesty that most people took decades to develop. She had it now, at twenty-one, sitting in a chair in his suite looking at the Oreaule system's star.

She said: "I'm going to need some time."

He said: "I know."

"To—" She stopped. She was looking for the right word. "To understand what I'm doing. The difference between being useful to a plan I agree with and — being myself." She paused. "Those might be the same thing. They might not be. I need time to know which."

He said: "How much time."

She said: "Not much." She looked at him. "You said *not much* in the reading room. I'm saying it back."

He thought about Shexim. About the day or two before Janna moved. About the sequence that needed to happen before she moved — the things he needed to do, the conversations he needed to have, the Ancestor Chamber, the Imperial General.

He said: "One night."

She said: "I know." She looked at the viewport. "My mother is going to — I don't know what she's going to do. I don't know if there's a version of this that she can accept. She's very intelligent and she's been holding this for twenty-three years and she is going to understand very quickly that the conditions under which she's been holding it have changed." She paused. "She will be—"

"Frightened," he said.

"Yes," Kimme said. "And frightened people with power—"

"Do dangerous things," he said. "I know. I've been thinking about this." He paused. "I also think — and I might be wrong — that she is more capable of receiving the truth than anyone has given her credit for. Because the truth doesn't threaten her existence. It threatens her institutional position. And she has been managing institutional positions for twenty-three years. That's a skillset she has."

Kimme looked at him.

"If there's a path through this that doesn't require her to be removed or harmed," he said, "I think she can find it. If someone shows it to her."

Kimme was quiet.

She said: "And if she can't find it."

He said: "Then we manage that when we get there." He paused. "But I think she can."

She looked at him steadily, with the full look, the one that was the most honest look he had encountered on anyone's face since he had been on the City.

She said: "She showed me the Ancestor Chamber."

He was still.

"The food processing theater," she said. "The preservation tubes. The numbers without names." She looked at the viewport. "I've been

in that room. I stood above the machinery. I saw what the block actually is." She paused. "And I stood in the Fold Room. Two chairs. Her trance too complete for what the doctrine said it should be." She paused. "I couldn't name what I was seeing. But I knew the shape of it." She looked at him. "I've known for — three months. More."

"I know," he said.

"She told me," Kimme said, "*There are things I'll tell you. When the time is right.*" She paused. "The time was never right. And now the time is past." She paused. "You're going to tell me. Not her. And that is going to be — the thing that changes everything between us."

He said: "Do you want me to tell you."

She looked at him for a long moment.

She said: "Yes."

He told her.

He told her what the secondary daughter had told him — the history of the Fold before the first Chadrac, the mechanism as it had always been, the introduction of Leaf and why it had been introduced and what it had accomplished. He told her what Vex's data showed about the single-source signature. He told her about the logarithmic scaling and the power plant and the booster rings and what the booster rings actually were.

He told her what her mother was.

Not with accusation — with accuracy. The same tone he used for all accurate things. Her mother was a person of extraordinary capability who had spent twenty-three years performing a function alone that the entire system of Imperial governance believed required hundreds of people working in concert. Her mother had maintained a secret that was structurally central to every transaction of power in the known galaxy, and had maintained it perfectly, and would have continued to maintain it if the conditions hadn't changed.

He told her what the conditions were now.

She listened to all of it without interrupting, with the quality of listening that she brought to things she was taking seriously. He watched her face. He watched the specific adjustments it made as each piece arrived — not dramatic, the face he had been watching for months making the micro-adjustments of someone whose understanding of a thing is being rebuilt piece by piece, each piece arriving in the correct position because the structure that preceded it had been laid correctly.

When he finished, she was quiet for a long time.

Longer than the reading room silences. Longer than anything he had seen from her before.

Then she said: "She's been alone in there."

He looked at her.

"Every Fold," she said. "Every time. For twenty-three years." She paused. "I was in the room with her. I thought — I thought I was contributing something. The Leaf, the meditation posture, the presence. I thought—" She stopped. "She let me believe I was contributing something."

"She was building toward the truth," he said. "She was telling Eidan's theory — telling you it was wrong without telling you what was right. She was sequencing the information."

"She was managing me," Kimme said. Not with anger — with accuracy. "Like she manages everything."

"Yes," he said.

"Even that," Kimme said.

She looked at the viewport.

The quality of something shifted in her — he could feel it in the perceptual field, the specific quality change of a person arriving at a new configuration of themselves. Not emotion exactly, the thing that comes before the emotion has a name: the moment of restructuring, when the pieces have been received and are arranging themselves into the form they're going to occupy.

She said, quietly: "She is my mother."

"Yes," he said.

"And she kept this from me," she said. "For twenty-one years. While building me to receive it. Managing the timeline. Deciding when I was ready." She paused. "She decided this without asking whether I wanted to be managed toward a readiness she defined."

He did not say anything.

She looked at the viewport for a long time.

Then she looked at him.

She said: "The star chart. In the Wayfinder facility. You pointed at the unmarked systems."

"Yes," he said.

"I shut the display," she said.

"Yes," he said.

"Protocol," she said.

"Yes," he said.

"And I didn't report it," she said. "Which was not protocol."

"No," he said.

She said: "That was the first time. In my memory. That I did something other than what was expected of me." She paused. "I didn't fully understand what I was doing when I did it. I just—" She stopped. She looked at her hands. "I couldn't make myself do it. Reporting felt like betraying something. I didn't know what. I know now." She looked at him. "I was protecting the possibility of honesty. In this relationship. Before I even knew the relationship was going to be a relationship."

He was very still.

She said: "I'm not going to be managed anymore."

She said it with the quality that Donia used for non-negotiable positions, which was a quality he recognized now from the inside as well as the outside — the flatness that meant this is what I believe and the believing is not open for revision. The same structure, in a different person, arrived at by a different route.

"I'm going to make decisions," she said. "My own decisions. About

what this situation requires and what I'm willing to do and what I'm not." She paused. "I'm going to help you. Not because I was assigned to observe you and not because I'm a participant in someone else's plan. Because I agree with what you're trying to do and I have resources that are relevant to doing it and because—" She stopped. She said it directly: "Because you said what you meant and then stopped. Because the conversation was real."

He said: "What does helping look like."

She said: "Tonight I need to think. Tomorrow I need to talk to you." She looked at him. "There are things I can do that you can't. Access I have that you don't. My mother built me to inherit the institution. She gave me the access that inheritance requires. She did not anticipate that I would use that access for this." She paused. "But it's there."

He thought about the Ancestor Chamber. About the Imperial General.

He said: "The Ancestor Chamber."

She looked at him.

"I need to see it," he said. "Not just see — access. With enough time to work." He paused. "Can you get me in."

She thought about this for a moment. Not long.

"Yes," she said.

"And the Imperial General," he said. "D'Hana. Can you get a meeting before my mother does."

Another pause. Slightly longer.

"Yes," she said. "If I'm there first — if I reach her before my mother manages the narrative of what's happening — I have access that doesn't require going through my mother's channels." She paused. "It would require telling the General significant things."

"I know," he said. "I'll help you decide what."

She looked at him.

She said: "She's going to know. When I do any of this. She's very good. She'll know before most of it completes. And she'll respond."

"I know," he said.

"You have the disruption capability," she said.

"Yes," he said.

"Which means if she tries to Fold the City — to use the City's position against us, to hold something hostage — you can prevent it."

"Yes," he said. "For as long as I need to. I can't do it indefinitely. But I can do it long enough."

She looked at him.

"Long enough for what," she said.

He said: "Long enough for the conversation to have to happen. Without the Fold as leverage. Just the facts and the people who know them."

She thought about this.

She thought about it for long enough that the quality of the thinking was visible — not processing, weighing. She was weighing her mother against the truth. She was weighing twenty-one years of being managed toward an inheritance against the decision she was making right now, in this suite, in this chair, at this hour.

She said: "She is still my mother."

"Yes," he said.

"And I am not trying to harm her," she said.

"No," he said.

"I'm trying to—" She stopped. She found the word. "Relieve her of something. Something she has been holding alone for twenty-three years." She paused. "She said she would tell me the truth when the time was right. The time is past. I'm going to receive the truth a different way and I'm going to take it forward without her management." She paused. "That is not the same as opposing her."

"No," he said.

"But it will feel that way to her," she said.

"Yes," he said. "It will."

She was quiet.

Then she stood.

She stood with the specific quality she had always had — the ease of long physical competence, the straight spine — and something new

underneath it: not the public arrangement, not the performance of being in the room. Simply her, in the room, having made the decision she had made.

She said: "Tomorrow morning. Early."

"I'll be here," he said.

She looked at him one more time, with the full look, and in the full look was the accumulated weight of everything the chapter had contained: the reading room and the star chart and the swept rooms and the corridor after Court sessions and the eight weeks of sitting with what she knew and the conversation tonight that had finished the sitting.

She said: "I'm glad you came back."

He said: "I said I would."

She walked to the door.

She opened it.

She turned back, once. "Get some rest," she said.

"You too," he said.

She walked into the corridor. The door closed.

He sat in the suite that smelled of recent vacancy and looked at the viewport, at the Oreaule system's star at the angle it held at this hour.

He thought about a young woman who had grown up in the center of the most powerful institution in the known galaxy and had spent twenty-one years being shaped toward a specific form of inheritance, and who had, in the secondary corridor of a Wayfinder facility eight months ago, looked at an anomalous region of a star chart and felt something she couldn't name and made a small, irreversible choice.

He thought: *that was where it started. For both of us.*

He thought about the FreeLink and the token that were in an evidence container somewhere in the City's custody system. He thought about whether he was going to need them and concluded he was not. He had what he needed.

He looked at the City around him, at the hum in the walls, at the

booster rings outside doing their patient work.

He had one night.

He used it to rest.

THIRTY-NINE

IMPERIAL CITY — OREAULE SYSTEM

KIMME CAME at the third hour.

She had slept, or had done whatever she did in the hours after the conversation that had constituted the closest thing to sleep available to her — he didn't know which, and the perceptual field gave him the quality of her consciousness on the other side of the City's wall rather than through it. She appeared at his door in the same register she had been in the night before: simply herself, without the public arrangement.

She said: "Now."

He said: "Lead."

They walked.

The City at the third hour had a specific quality. Not empty — the City was never empty, the systems running continuously, the administrative functions staggered across the full cycle, the residential

block's overnight personnel moving in their specific patterns. But the quality of the third hour was the quality of a space between the close of one day's formal operations and the beginning of the next, a quality of deliberate activity rather than ambient activity, the people moving in the corridors doing something specific rather than simply being in transit between ordinary functions.

Kimme moved through the checkpoints with the ease she always moved through checkpoints — the biometric read, the confirming blue, the guards returning to their positions. He moved through beside her. They did not talk.

He was managing his perceptual field as carefully as he had managed it on the Shexosant cruiser — keeping the attention available but not reaching, not letting the field extend into spaces where reaching would produce information he didn't need or effects he didn't want. He was present in the corridors they walked through. Nothing more.

The Starfarer block's outer door: the engraved signatures of every Starfarer who had ever served, or been claimed to have served, on Imperial City. The neural scanner. Kimme's palm on the surface, the read confirming, the door admitting them.

He looked at the door as they passed through it.

He thought about all the children who had been told they were going to this block. He thought about the families who had received the notification that their child had been chosen for the Starfarer program. He thought about the gap between the notification and the fact. He thought about what it meant to build a civilization's most significant social lever — the Denied Afterlife, the threat that the Elevatio wielded like a weapon in every Court session, every House negotiation, every moment of institutional pressure — on the foundation of a lie this specific.

He walked through.

The waiting chamber. The plush seating, the art that would have been a death sentence elsewhere. The lighting gradient, violet to yellow.

Kimme did not stop here. She moved through the waiting chamber with the pace of someone who has been in this space before and is not here for what the space presents. Through the door at the chamber's far end. Into the corridor that led toward the processing section.

He followed.

The processing section: the conveyor belts, the hoppers, the incinerators at the far end. The specific quality of a room that was running its continuous process in the hours before dawn, the machinery doing what the machinery did regardless of the hour, the fake Leaf in bulk quantity moving through the system that was not a food production system but was a theater of food production.

He had described this to himself based on Kimme's account. Seeing it was different.

Not the specific pieces — he had expected those. The quality of it. The sheer industrial commitment required to maintain the theater. The engineering that had gone into producing, for any external sensor system or supply chain analyst or intelligence operation that might be watching, the thermal signature and the material output and the waste profile of a functioning residential section housing a large permanent population. Three hundred years of this. Three hundred years of a continuous operation designed to be invisible by being visible as something other than what it was.

He looked at it for a moment.

He walked through.

The stair at the far end. The glass gallery above.

He had been here in Kimme's account, and now he was here in person, and the difference between the account and the person was

the difference between reading about cold and standing in it. He looked at the wall.

Nine tubes on the right-hand wall.

Each one a cylinder of approximately ninety centimeters, containing a suspension medium that was clear at the edges and had the specific pale quality of something that was held at the boundary between states — not frozen, not liquid, the preservation medium that maintained the neural tissue at the edge of viability without allowing either full death or full living. Each tube labeled with a number: I through IX.

He had expected this from Kimme's description. He had not expected the specific quality of what he felt when he looked at them.

His perceptual field, at its current development, registered the preserved heads as — not quite alive. Not the warm, dynamic quality of a living consciousness, the specific quality of a mind actively running its processes. But not dead, not the specific absence that the dead left in the perceptual field when they were gone. Something between: a quality of stilled running, of processes that had been operating and had been suspended mid-operation, held in the stasis of the preservation medium. The mental architecture was present. The thoughts were not running. The memory was there.

He thought about Denied Afterlife.

He thought about this not as a concept — as what was in front of him.

The Elevatio used the denial as its primary instrument of discipline. A House that defied Imperial authority, a person who challenged the structure — the most significant punishment available was not execution but the denial of Afterlife. The executed person's head was preserved in the same medium he was looking at now, the consciousness held in the stasis that was neither death nor life, not permitted to pass into the Afterlife where the preserved consciousness might be queried by Elevatio priests, not permitted to dissolve into the ordinary cessation of the completely dead.

Eternal suspension.

The families who received this sentence for their members could not Commune with the preserved. The preserved could not participate in the Afterlife's active community of the dead. They were present and completely inaccessible — not gone, which would have been a form of resolution, simply held. In the dark. In the specific silence of the preservation medium.

He looked at the nine tubes.

These were not executed criminals. These were the Chadrac Matriarchs — the women who had held the City, who had Folded it, who had maintained the secret for three hundred years. Each one dead, as any person eventually dies, from the ordinary causes that eventually claim even the most capable people. And each one, after death, placed in the preservation medium rather than released into the Afterlife, because releasing them into the Afterlife would release their knowledge into the accessible network of the dead, where any Commune-capable priest with the right lineage or the right capability could reach them and extract what they knew.

Alise Chadrac, the first, who had built the founding myth from scratch, knew exactly what she had done and why and how. Bonne, who had extended it, had known the truth. Clarice, Dedrie, Ellyse, Faina — each one inheriting the truth from the one before, each one adding her own tenure's management to the accumulated record. Nine preserved consciousnesses that between them contained the full institutional history of the most significant deception in human civilization.

And Janna had kept them here. For twenty-three years. Making the choice her predecessors had made, understanding what the choice cost and making it anyway, because the alternative — releasing them, letting them pass into Afterlife — would have meant releasing the record into the accessible network of the dead, where the Elevatio would have found it within a generation.

He stood in the gallery and looked at nine tubes.

He thought about the families. The Houses whose members had received the denial as punishment. The specific quality of what it

meant to know that someone you loved was in a tube somewhere, not dead, not present, simply held. He thought about the Elevatio wielding this as a lever — using the fear of it to keep Houses compliant, using the actual deployment of it to demonstrate the cost of resistance. Three hundred years of this instrument.

And the instrument was a lie.

Not the preservation — that was real, the tubes were real, the suspension medium was real. The lie was what the preservation claimed to be: a punitive measure designed to prevent corruption of the Afterlife by criminal consciousness. The truth was that it was a control mechanism. A way of ensuring that the specific information the preserved contained — the specific institutional history that would unravel the myth — was never accessible to anyone.

The Chadrac Matriarchs had not been denied Afterlife as punishment.

They had been denied Afterlife to protect the secret.

He was looking at nine women who had built and maintained the most significant governance structure in the known galaxy, and who had spent their afterlives — all nine of them — in the dark. In the cold. In the specific silence of the stasis, unable to speak, unable to be accessed, unable to pass through to whatever lay on the other side of the preservation medium's artificial suspension.

He thought: *this is also what the structure required.*

He thought: *and the structure is about to encounter the person who is going to dismantle it.*

Kimme was beside him. She was looking at the tubes with the specific quality of someone who has been in this room before and is in it again with a different understanding of what they are looking at.

She said, quietly: "I used to come in here with my mother. When I was young. She would stand in front of the tubes and she would — I think she was accounting. Running through the record in her head. What each one had done and what had happened and what the next thing was." She paused. "She never told me what they were. Not until the night she brought me through the block." She

paused. "She said: *I would not keep them here if destroying them were an option I could choose.*" She paused. "She meant it. I believe she meant it."

He said: "I know she did."

He thought about Janna at the window, running scenarios. About the quality of genuine uncertainty he had seen in Kimme's description of her mother since the Ethin assault. About a person who had been holding something alone for twenty-three years and had not been able to find a way to put it down.

He said: "Are you ready."

She said: "Yes."

He extended his perceptual field toward the first tube.

The Telepathy was different from the Commune. He had known this from Trumbold's description and from his own experience of developing it, but the difference in practice was more complete than the description had prepared him for. The Commune was a conversation — a reaching into the Afterlife's specific quality of preserved but active consciousness, finding a mind that was running, establishing a channel through which language could move in both directions.

The Telepathy was a reading.

The mind in the first tube was not running. The processes were suspended, the operational consciousness stilled, the mental architecture present but inert in the way of a complex instrument that is not currently in use: all the components in their positions, nothing moving.

He could read the positions.

It was like walking through a house after everyone had left — not speaking to anyone, not finding anyone to speak to, but able to see where they had been and what they had been doing and what the arrangement of things communicated about the person who had

arranged them. The memories were the arrangements. The architecture of the mind was the house.

The first tube. The label: I.

Alise.

The founder. The name she would eventually give her daughter, unknowing — or knowing, and making the choice anyway, the first Chadrac's specific form of dark humor, naming her descendant after herself across ten generations.

He read.

The reading was not complete — it could not be complete in the time available, the depth of a three-hundred-year-old preserved mind was not something that could be extracted in an hour's careful Telepathy. But the surface was accessible, the strong memories the ones closest to the surface, the things that had occupied the mind most intensely nearest the top.

The Fold. The specific quality of the first Chadrac's experience of the Fold — the mind's own record of what the act felt like from inside, the quality of the attention required, the specific way it worked. He read this and it confirmed everything the secondary daughter had told him and everything Vex's data had shown and everything Trumbold had believed: one person, one quality of directed attention, one mind reaching into the relation between here and there and directing it. No bonding. No Leaf. Simply: herself, pointed correctly, drawing from the booster rings she had built specifically for this purpose.

He read deeper.

The contract.

It was present in her memory with the specificity of something that had been negotiated in great detail and then reviewed many times, the kind of memory that belongs to a document that was read and reread and that shaped every subsequent decision. He read it.

Not the words — the memory of the words, which was slightly different, the mind's encoding of the document's content rather than

the document itself. But close enough. Close enough for the essential terms.

Full material support for the Shexim system and its population in perpetuity, including terraforming infrastructure, dome maintenance, off-world capacity for population resettlement as needed, and such additional material requirements as may be jointly assessed to be necessary for the continued viability of Shexim.

In exchange for: military service under the direction of Imperial Law, which service includes enforcement of the Fold monopoly and the maintenance of Imperial City's authority across all systems within the Fold network.

Loyalty: to Imperial Law. Not to the person of Imperium. To the Law that Imperium administers.

This contract may be assumed by any institution that can demonstrate continuity with the functions of Imperium as defined by the founding Law, provided that institution is capable of fulfilling the material support obligations to Shexim.

He held this.

The last clause. *May be assumed by any institution that can demonstrate continuity.*

Not the Chadrac line specifically. The *functions of Imperium.* The thing Imperium did, not the person who did it.

He thought about this.

He moved to the second tube.

He worked through all nine.

He did not take everything — could not have taken everything, the depth of nine preserved minds across three hundred years was more than any single session of extended Telepathy could access, even at his current development. He took what was near the surface. He took the founding contract's terms, which were present in each mind as a transmitted memory — each Matriarch receiving the

knowledge of the contract from her predecessor, the chain of transmission maintaining the document's essential content down nine generations. He took the specific memories each mind held closest to the surface, the ones that had occupied the mind most intensely in the period before the stasis.

What he found was nine variations on the same essential record, each adding its own era's contribution: the extensions of the myth, the specific decisions each Matriarch had made about who to tell and when and how much, the management of the Elevatio's ongoing efforts to access what these tubes contained, the specific quality of each woman's experience of being alone in the work.

The fifth tube. Ellyse. Who had been the one to formalize the Testing Protocol — not Alise, not the second or third Matriarch, but the fifth. He read her memory of the decision. The discovery of a Folder who had lived to adulthood undetected, who had been developing her ability in secret, who had been identified only when the ability had become strong enough to be visible in its effects. The fear that had produced the Protocol: not fear of the individual Folder, fear of what happened if the ability proliferated, if others developed it, if the myth became testable by people who could test it.

The Testing Protocol was not three hundred years old. It was one hundred and fifty. And its origin was not the abstract governance concern of maintaining the Fold monopoly — it was one woman's fear of being found out.

He read the memory with the specific quality of someone who has found a thing that changes the shape of everything around it and is receiving it as information rather than as horror, because the horror would come later and for now the information was what mattered.

He filed it.

He moved to the seventh tube. Ghennett. Whose tenure had included the first significant UnImperium development — the first systems choosing to operate outside the Fold network, the first Folders developing their ability in the spaces Janna did not control. Ghennett's response had not been violent. It had been the response

of someone who understood that violence would produce documentation that might survive and that documentation might contain information she could not permit to exist. She had simply — not addressed it. Had maintained the myth while allowing the UnImperium to develop, because the development was at a distance and the distance was manageable and addressing it directly would have required explaining why she was addressing it.

Three hundred years of managed ignorance, extending not from malice but from the specific quality of a person who understands that naming a thing makes it real and has therefore chosen to not name it.

He filed this too.

He moved to the ninth tube. Irie. The most recent. Janna's mother. He reached.

The memory near the surface: the night before the stasis. The specific quality of a mind that knows it is approaching the end and is reviewing its management decisions, running its final accounting. Not fearfully — the accounting of someone who has done a specific job for a specific period and is completing the last entry in the ledger.

She had known about the secondary daughter. Not the specific woman, but the general category — she had known that the Chadrac-adjacent castoffs who had died naturally and entered Afterlife contained information that could, in the right hands, undo everything. She had not been able to do anything about this because she could not remove people from the Afterlife and could not prevent the Elevatio from eventually finding someone with the right capability to reach them.

She had left a note in her memory — the specific quality of a thought reviewed many times, the mnemonic equivalent of a written note: *The castoff branches will be found. Whoever is in the seat when they're found needs to be ready for what comes after.*

She had not been able to tell Janna directly. The specific management of the information had prevented it.

She had left the note in the hope that whoever eventually read

the mind — whoever found the capability to read it — would find the note and understand what it meant.

He had found it.

He understood.

He withdrew from the ninth tube.

He stood in the gallery and looked at the nine tubes with the nine preserved minds in their nine stasis states. The machinery hummed below, the conveyor belts moving, the incinerators running.

He thought about nine women who had spent their afterlives here.

He thought about what it meant to carry a secret alone. Not for a day or a year but for a lifetime, and to know that after the lifetime ended the secret would not end with you — would be preserved in your stasis, held against your will in the cold, kept from the Afterlife because the Afterlife was where the truth could be accessed.

He thought about what Janna had said to Kimme: *I would not keep them here if destroying them were an option I could choose.*

He thought: *she was wrong. There was always another option.*

He thought: *she couldn't see it because she was inside the structure, and the structure didn't have a form for this particular option.*

He looked at Kimme.

She was looking at the tubes.

He said: "I'm going to tell you something."

She looked at him.

"The contract," he said. "The founding contract with the Shexosant. I read it in Alise's memory." He told her the essential terms — the material support for Shexim, the military service under Imperial Law, the clause about institutional continuity. He told her the last clause specifically: *may be assumed by any institution that can demonstrate continuity with the functions of Imperium.*

She absorbed this.

She said: "Not the Chadrac line specifically."

"Not the Chadrac line specifically," he said. "The functions. The

capacity to administer Imperial Law and fulfill the material obligations to Shexim." He paused. "If a governance structure existed that could do both of those things—"

"The Shexosant's loyalty transfers," she said.

"Yes," he said.

She was quiet for a moment.

She said: "That's what my mother has been managing. Not the myth specifically — the Shexosant's loyalty. Making sure the conditions that would trigger the clause never materialized."

"Yes," he said.

She said: "If the Shexosant know what those conditions are—"

"They know," he said. "D'Hana knows what the contract says. She has always known. The looking at D'Hana during sessions — Derry was trying to read whether she knew. She did. She does." He paused. "Which means D'Hana has been managing the same information my mother has been managing, from the other side of it."

Kimme was quiet.

Then she said: "The material support for Shexim. The dying world." She paused. "We could offer them better terms. Not the current subsidy structure — genuine resettlement. Off-world, with infrastructure, on an UnImperium world with the capacity to support them." She paused. "The Shexosant's primary problem has always been Shexim. If that problem is solved—"

"They have no reason to enforce the monopoly," he said.

"They have no reason to be soldiers at all," she said. "They could be something else." She paused. "A voluntary contract policing institution. With a home."

He thought about this. He thought about D'Hana's quality of self-possession in the Throne Room — the person who knows what the contract says and knows what the contract means and has been waiting for the conditions to change. He thought about the founding contract's specific language: *may be assumed by any institution that can demonstrate continuity*.

He said: "She's going to want to hear it from you. Not from me — I'm a returned Heir-Second with an unauthorized departure on my record. You're the Chadrac heir. If you go to her tonight, before your mother does, with the contract's actual terms and an offer that addresses Shexim directly—"

"She'll listen," Kimme said.

"She'll listen," he confirmed.

Kimme looked at the tubes.

She said: "And them."

He looked at the nine tubes.

He said: "I have what I needed from them." He paused. "What the Congregatio wanted — the founding history, the truth about the Fold, the contract terms — I have it. It doesn't need to be in the tubes anymore." He paused. "And keeping them here—"

"Is the thing I am most angry about," Kimme said.

He looked at her.

She was looking at the tubes with a quality of directness that was not performed — simply the direct look of someone who has arrived at a position and is stating it.

"They built something terrible," she said. "All of them. Alise most of all, and every one after her who chose to maintain it. They deserve —" She stopped. "I don't know what they deserve. But they don't deserve this. Nobody deserves this."

He said: "No."

She said: "Release them."

He said: "It's permanent. Once the stasis fails, they pass into Afterlife. The Elevatio will eventually be able to access them — the Commune-capable priests, anyone with the reach. Everything they know will be available."

"I know," she said.

"Including the truth about the Fold," he said.

"Good," she said. "It should be available. The truth should not be in a tube in a theater of a food processing facility on a ship that has

been lying to everyone for three hundred years." She looked at him. "Do it."

He thought about Orvyn, who had been taken from his family at fourteen because the Testing had found what the Testing was designed to find, and who had spent sixty years in the Afterlife in the company of the other dead and had managed, from that vantage, to help his great-great-grandnephew figure out how to move a rock through a ship's wall.

He thought about what it meant to preserve someone against their will. Not as punishment — as policy.

He thought about the nine women in the tubes.

He extended his perceptual field toward the nearest tube's suspension machinery.

The machinery was not complex — the preservation medium required specific environmental controls and a continuous low-level electromagnetic maintenance system that kept the stasis stable. He could feel the machinery's specific configuration in the field. He could feel the electromagnetic components.

He used TK on the control mechanism. Not the brute force of the early training — the resonance principle, precise, the specific boundary between the machinery's operational state and its non-operational state. He directed the boundary.

The first tube's machinery shifted. The environmental controls began cycling down. The suspension medium, no longer maintained at its specific threshold, began the slow process of releasing what it held.

He watched the tube.

He watched for a minute, two, three.

He watched the specific quality of what was in the tube change — the stilled running quality, the inert architecture held in suspension, beginning to dissolve. Not into death — into something else. The specific quality of a consciousness that has been held in stasis for a hundred and twenty years beginning to move again, but not in the

way of a living mind. In the way of a mind that has completed its work and is releasing.

He felt, in his perceptual field, the moment it crossed the threshold.

The inert quality was gone. The presence was gone. Not the sudden absence of death — the specific departure of something that has moved from one state into another, the departure of a person walking out of a room.

Alise Chadrac was in the Afterlife.

He moved to the second tube.

Bonne. Clarice. Dedrie. Ellyse. Faina. Ghennett. Hanneth. Irie.

One by one, the machinery shifted, the stasis released, the presence departed.

It was not violent. It was not dramatic. It was the specific quiet of nine old decisions being unmade, one at a time, in a room that hummed with the machinery of a theater that was no longer needed.

When the ninth tube was done, he withdrew the TK and stood in the gallery with Kimme.

The tubes were empty. The machinery was cycling down. The gallery was quiet in the way of a room from which nine presences have just departed.

He thought about the Elevatio. About the Commune-capable priests who would, eventually, reach into the Afterlife and find nine Chadrac Matriarchs who had not been there before. He thought about what they would find when they reached them. He thought about Eidan's maintained certainty — the *I am not prepared to entertain it* — meeting the full record of three hundred years of a single person Folding a city while everyone believed it required hundreds.

He thought that Eidan's certainty was going to have a difficult week.

He said: "Can you get to the Imperial General before your mother does."

Kimme said: "Yes."

He said: "Tonight."

She said: "I know." She looked at the tubes one more time. Then she looked at him. "What you extracted — the contract, the founding history — you have it."

"Yes," he said.

"Then we have what we need," she said.

She turned toward the stairs.

He followed.

They walked back through the gallery, down the stair, through the processing section with its running machinery, through the waiting chamber, out through the outer door whose engraved signatures included nine names that were no longer anywhere on the City except in the microengraved lines of the door itself.

Into the corridor.

Into the City.

The third hour had become the fourth.

Kimme's pace was different from the pace she'd brought through the checkpoints an hour ago. Not faster — it was the pace of direction replacing movement. She had been moving before. Now she was going somewhere.

He kept pace.

At the junction where the corridor split — toward the Chadrac residential section, toward the East block — she stopped.

She looked at him.

She said: "If this works, it won't be because the structure was defeated. It will be because the structure was shown what it was and given the option to be something different."

He said: "Yes."

"And if it doesn't work," she said.

He said: "Then we manage that when we get there."

She looked at him for a moment.

She turned right.

He turned left.

The City hummed around them both, the booster rings doing their patient work outside, the forty thousand fusion torches at their

operational readiness, the infrastructure that had been built three hundred years ago for a purpose that was about to be redefined.

The fourth hour.

The morning was coming.

He walked.

FORTY

IMPERIAL CITY — OREAULE SYSTEM

SHE HAD BEEN PERFORMING the Fold for twenty-three years.

Not casually — nothing about it was casual, the process demanded what it demanded and she gave it what it demanded and the City moved. But in the way that any sufficiently practiced skill acquires a quality of reliableness that feels, from the inside, like ease: she had done this three hundred and fifteen times. She had entered the Fold Room and sat in the chair and administered the Leaf and gone into the state and directed the booster ring draw and done what she did and come out the other side and the City had moved. Three hundred and fifteen times.

Three hundred and fifteen times without failure.

She administered the Leaf at its calibrated dose. She sat. She let the state take her in the way it always took her: the specific dissolution, the cognitive openness, the quality of the mind expanding outward from its ordinary boundaries into the space the Fold required. She had described this, once, to her mother, who was the

only person she had ever described it to: *like breathing, but for the universe.* Her mother had said: *yes.*

She established the orientation. The mnemonic plate's pattern was the Oreaule departure, the path from this system toward the next stop in the Cycle: the Kibos system, four weeks of transit replaced by the seven minutes of subjective time that the Fold produced. She let the orientation form the way she always let it form — not forcing it, inhabiting it, the same quality of attention she had inhabited since she was twenty-two years old and her mother had walked her through this room for the first time and said: *here. This is what it feels like. The rest is practice.*

The orientation formed.

She reached for the booster ring draw.

Something was in the way.

Not the way that obstructions are in the way of physical movement — the way that interference is in the way of a clean signal. A quality of the space she was reaching into that was not the quality it should have been. The volume she was extending her awareness to encompass — the volume of the City, the specific cognitive holding that she had been doing for twenty-three years with the trained ease of absolute familiarity — was not giving her the clean relationship to the space adjacent to it that the Fold required.

There was something else in the volume.

She had never experienced this.

She tightened the orientation. She had done this before in training — not with interference, but with the deliberate effort of maintaining precision against the general noise of the City's own systems. She knew how to maintain precision. She applied precision.

The interference did not resolve. It was not noise. It was directed — she could feel the direction of it, the specific quality of another attention in the same space, pointed differently from her attention but pointed, not ambient, not mechanical.

She pushed.

The interference pushed back. Not hard — it was not trying to

hold her or redirect her or collapse the orientation. It was simply present, in the same volume, with its own quality of directed attention that was incompatible with the coherent Fold state her orientation required.

The orientation fractured.

She had never experienced this either.

The fracture was not catastrophic — she had enough control, after twenty-three years, to prevent the catastrophic failure, the failed Fold that didn't fail cleanly, the version that distributed instead of displacing and produced the specific category of event that had ended Starfarers and ships and the systems they were supposed to reach. She pulled the orientation back. She let the Fold's pre-event configuration collapse.

She came out of the state.

The room was what it was. The chair. The pedestal. The mnemonic plate still on the cradle. The instrumentation on the walls registering the aborted Fold sequence: the power plant draw, begun and abandoned, the distribution routing cycling back to standard, the booster ring array stepping down from operational readiness.

She sat in the chair for a moment.

She was not injured. The state's collapse had been controlled — she had pulled back far enough to prevent any of the physical disorientation that a fully committed Fold interruption would have produced. She was intact and aware and in possession of all the usual functions.

She was also very, very cold.

Not temperature — the specific quality of cold that belongs to a person who has just had something happen to them that they did not think could happen to them. The cold of the assumption that has been violated. She had assumed, for twenty-three years, that the Fold Room was hers alone. That what happened in this room was between her and the space she was directing, and no other entity could be present in that relationship because no other entity had the capability to be present in it.

She had been wrong.

She sat in the chair and held this.

The instrumentation confirmed the power plant's return to standard. The booster ring array confirmed its step-down. The Fold had not occurred. The City was still in the Oreaule system.

She stood.

She went to the monitoring panel and reviewed the pre-Fold sequence's records. The power plant draw: initiated, reaching forty-seven percent of the Fold-required allocation before the abort. The booster ring engagement: begun, two seconds of operational readiness before the cycling-down. The mnemonic plate's resonance with the state: confirmed, clean, no anomalies in the pattern itself.

The anomaly was not in the equipment.

The anomaly was in the room.

Which was impossible.

Which had just happened.

She looked at the records for a long time with the quality of attention she reserved for things that did not fit the framework she was using to understand them, the quality that required the most from her because it required the framework itself to be questioned rather than the thing being observed.

She said, to the empty room: "How."

The empty room did not answer.

She picked up the communication device she kept in the Fold Room's cabinet — not the standard City comms, her own private line, the one that routed through no monitored channel, that produced no Chain record, that communicated directly to the three people in the City whose communication with her was fully private. She sent two messages.

The first was to her medical staff. *Come to the anteroom outside the Fold Room. Now.*

The second was to Derry. *My private office. Immediately.*

She replaced the device. She picked up the mnemonic plate from the cradle with the specific care she gave it and returned it to its

storage position. She looked at the Fold Room — the two chairs, the empty cradle, the instrumentation — one more time.

She left.

The medical staff found nothing. This was expected. She had not expected them to find anything physical — what had happened was not physical in the sense that medical assessment measured. She permitted the assessment because she was a person who maintained form even when the form's content was already known to be empty, because maintaining form was itself a signal, and she had not yet decided what signal to send.

She thanked them. She sent them away.

Derry arrived at her private office before she reached it. He was standing outside the door in the posture of someone who had come quickly and who was managing the fact of having come quickly — not performing calm, not performing urgency, managing the space between them.

She looked at his face.

She read it.

She had been reading Derry's face for seven years, across the full range of formal and informal encounters that their institutional relationship produced. She knew his face in the way she knew the faces of everyone she dealt with regularly: the baseline, the variations from the baseline, the specific micro-expressions that communicated what the performed expression was hiding.

What she was seeing was not what she expected.

She had sent for him because she needed to know if the Elevatio had developed a Fold interference capability. This was the most significant question her analysis had produced in the thirty seconds between the Fold Room and the private office: if the Elevatio had been building an interference capability, her position was different from any of the scenarios she had prepared for. The Elevatio's

leverage would be of a different order. The management required would be of a different order.

What she saw in Derry's face was not the management of knowledge he had. It was not the management of concealment over something significant. It was not the specific quality of a person who knows they are about to be asked about something relevant and is managing the asking.

It was alarm. Genuine, immediate, unmanaged alarm. The kind that arrives before the performance has time to settle over it.

She held this.

She said: "Come in."

He followed her into the office. She sat at the desk. He sat in the chair across from it — not waiting to be asked, which he usually waited for, which was itself information: he was too unsettled to observe the protocol.

She said: "The Fold failed."

He said: "Failed."

"Interfered with," she said. "Something in the volume. Not mechanical. Directed." She watched his face. "Tell me if the Elevatio has developed an interference capability."

He looked at her.

The alarm was still there. Not performing alarm — receiving a piece of information and registering its implications in real time, the processing visible in the quality of his stillness.

He said: "We have not."

"Tell me truthfully," she said.

"I am telling you truthfully," he said. "The Congregatio Secretorum has been working toward—" He stopped. He was reorganizing, she could see it, the institutional self reassembling around the thing he was not supposed to have said. "The Congregatio's program was oriented toward the development of a Fold capability. Not an interference capability. Interference was not in the theoretical framework." He paused. "Was not in our theoretical framework."

She looked at him.

She said: "Because the theoretical framework assumed Leaf was the mechanism."

He said: "Yes."

"And if Leaf is not the mechanism," she said.

He said nothing.

She said: "If Folding is entirely innate — if it requires nothing except the capability and the quality of attention to use it — then interference is the same capability as the Fold itself. Pointed differently." She paused. "Did the Congregatio's theoretical framework account for this."

He said: "No."

She watched his face.

The alarm had not resolved. It was deepening — she could see the specific quality of a man whose understanding of a situation is being revised significantly while he is sitting in the room where the revision is happening, the quality of someone whose model is cracking under the weight of new information and who is trying to hold the model together long enough to determine what it means.

She thought: *he did not know.*

She thought: *the Congregatio built toward Fold capability for a century and did not account for the interference corollary. Because they did not know what the interference corollary implied. Because they did not know what the Fold actually was.*

She thought: *their boy figured it out. Independently of them. And now he is on my City.*

She said: "Father Derry."

He looked at her.

She said: "The boy that your Congregatio spent a century building. Is he currently in the Heir-Second block."

Derry said: "He returned this morning. With the others."

She said: "And has he, in your assessment, been doing the work your program intended him to do. Has he been developing his capabilities in the direction the Congregatio expected."

Derry said: "We don't know. He was outside our access for eight weeks."

She looked at him.

She said: "He was not outside someone's access."

The silence landed.

She let it land.

She said: "What did your program build, Father Derry. What, specifically, did a century of institutional investment produce."

He said: "We intended—"

"What did it produce," she said.

He was quiet.

She stood. She walked to the window.

The Oreaule system was outside. The star at its standard angle for this hour, the City holding its position relative to the system's inhabited zone, everything maintaining the specific quality of a pause between the Fold that had just failed and the Fold that would need to happen.

She looked at the booster rings.

Forty thousand fusion torches at the City's equator, built by the first Chadrac for a specific purpose, maintained across three hundred years by every Matriarch who had followed. The infrastructure that made what she was possible. What all the Matriarchs had been possible.

She had been thinking, for the past three days since Kaiden Kentur's return, about the scenarios she had been unable to find a response for. The scenario in which he came back on his own terms. The scenario in which the thing he had learned made the existing structure untenable.

She had not been able to find a response because she had not yet known what the thing he had learned was.

Now she knew.

She looked at the booster rings and thought through the implications with the specific quality of attention she had developed across forty-one years of being herself and twenty-three years of being Imperium: rapid, comprehensive, not flinching from conclusions that were uncomfortable.

If Folding required no Leaf — and what had just happened in the Fold Room communicated that it did not — then the doctrine's control mechanism was gone. The doctrine's control mechanism was the dependency: you cannot Fold without Leaf, therefore whoever controls Leaf controls the Fold. If there was no dependency, there was no control mechanism of that kind.

If Folding was entirely innate, and if the capability was more common than the Testing Protocol had allowed to develop — and the UnImperium's existence, its eighty years of operation, its own Fold-capable Starfarers, confirmed that it was more common — then the Testing Protocol had not been eliminating an extreme rarity. It had been eliminating something that occurred at a meaningful frequency in the human population.

She held this.

If there was a person on her City who could disrupt her Fold — who had just disrupted her Fold — and if that person had been outside her access for eight weeks and had apparently come back with developed capabilities, then the Fold monopoly was no longer a monopoly. It was a capacity that she held and that at least one other person also held.

And if one other person held it, others could develop it.

And if others could develop it, the Fold monopoly was not a structure she could maintain through control of Leaf or through the Testing Protocol or through any other mechanism she currently possessed. Because what she had been controlling was the knowledge — the knowledge that the ability existed and was common and could be learned — and the knowledge was about to become impossible to contain.

Because the boy on her City had the knowledge. And the boy on

her City, based on everything she had observed about him across the four months he had been in the block, was not going to keep it to himself.

She thought about the UnImperium.

She thought about eighty years of independent development — the Fold-capable Starfarers who used Leaf because they had been told they must, and who had been using it successfully, and who had been building infrastructure and governance and trade networks in the space that the Imperial City's Cycle did not cover. She thought about the specific trajectory: if the dependency on Leaf was removed, and if the Testing Protocol was removed, and if training became available — how many people in the galaxy were carrying a recessive that the Protocol had been suppressing for two hundred years?

She did not know the exact number.

She knew it was not a number she could contain.

She had been thinking, in the scenario-running of the past six weeks, that the goal was to get the boy to Shexim before he could develop further, to understand what he was before he understood what he was, to manage the information before it managed itself. She had been thinking in the mode of someone who could still control the information.

She looked at the booster rings.

She was no longer thinking in that mode.

The mode she was now thinking in was different. It was the mode she had last used twenty-three years ago, when she had first stepped into the Fold Room and understood what she was and what it meant and what she was going to do with it. The mode of someone who has received a piece of information so significant that the framework they have been operating within cannot accommodate it, and who must therefore build a new framework rather than fitting the information into the old one.

The question was not: how do I maintain the monopoly.

The question was: what comes after the monopoly. And what is my role in that.

She looked at the Oreaule system's star.

She thought about Kimme.

She had sent for Kimme's location the moment she had left the medical staff — a standard check, the kind she ran periodically, the kind that told her where Kimme was and what she was doing. The check had come back with an anomaly: Kimme's biometric indicator showed her in the administrative section's secondary wing. The secondary wing housed, among other functions, the Imperial General's private office.

Kimme was with D'Hana.

She had arrived at D'Hana's office at the fourth hour of the morning.

The Fold had been scheduled for the sixth hour.

Kimme had gone to D'Hana before the Fold.

She stood at the window and held this piece of information.

Her daughter had gone to the Imperial General — to the person whose institutional role was the enforcement arm of the entire structure, the person whose loyalty was contractual and specific and whose contract she had been managing for twenty-three years — before the Fold that had just been disrupted. Which meant Kimme had known the Fold would be disrupted. Which meant Kimme had been in communication with the boy who had disrupted it. Which meant the conversation she had seen in the reading room surveillance, the conversation that had made her decide not to press, had been what she had decided not to press before she should have pressed it.

She thought: *I was wrong about the timeline.*

She thought: *I have been wrong about the timeline for some time.*

She thought: *my daughter has chosen.*

The choosing. She had been watching for it, had been tracking the building of it across months of accumulated evidence, had told herself she was managing the timeline and would choose the moment

to address it. She had not managed the timeline. The timeline had managed itself.

She turned from the window.

Derry was still in the chair. He had been watching her stand at the window with the quality of a person who is in the presence of someone making a significant decision and who has the sense to not interrupt the making.

She looked at him.

She said: "The Ancestor Chamber."

He looked at her.

She said: "Check whether the stasis is intact."

His face did something that was not the alarm from before. Something more specific, something that had the quality of a conclusion arriving and being received by a person who had not wanted to arrive at it.

He said: "The ancestors—"

"Check," she said.

He left quickly.

She stood in her private office and looked at the desk and the window and the wall and the specific quality of a room that had held twenty-three years of Imperium's administration and that was about to hold something different.

She thought about what she knew.

She thought about what she had built.

She thought about nine women in tubes who had spent their afterlives alone in the dark so that the secret could be kept, and about a mother's choice that was also an institutional choice and also a personal failure, and about how those three things did not resolve into any clean accounting.

She thought about Kimme, twenty-one years old, sitting across from D'Hana in a conversation that Janna had not been in and had not managed and that was going to produce outcomes that were no longer within the framework of what Janna could control.

She thought about what comes after the monopoly.

She thought: *I know how this ends. The UnImperium has Folders. The knowledge is available. The Fold capability will proliferate the moment anyone can demonstrate that Leaf is not required. Which is the moment that has just arrived, in my Fold Room, on my City, by a boy I should have understood better.*

She thought: *the only question is whether I am part of what comes after, or whether I am simply the thing it comes after.*

She looked at the booster rings.

She thought: *I have been alone in this work for twenty-three years. Not because there was no one else. Because I chose to keep it that way.*

She thought: *the choice is no longer available.*

She sat at the desk.

She pulled up the administrative record and looked at the morning's movement logs. Kimme's biometric at D'Hana's office from the fourth hour. The Fold attempt's failure at the sixth hour. The maintenance logs from the Ancestor Chamber — she looked at these and waited.

Derry's response came back in twelve minutes.

She read it.

The stasis had failed. All nine tubes. The monitoring systems showed a simultaneous cascade failure across all units at approximately the fourth hour and forty minutes — the same window when Kimme had been with D'Hana. Which meant the cascade had been induced. Which meant someone had been in the Ancestor Chamber with the specific capability to induce it.

She thought about TK on the suspension machinery.

She thought about what was now in the Afterlife that had not been in the Afterlife yesterday.

She thought about the Elevatio's Commune-capable priests, and about what they would find when they reached into the Afterlife's network and encountered nine Chadrac Matriarchs who had not been there before. She thought about what those nine minds contained. She thought about the specific category of information that was now available to any priest with the relevant capability: the

founding history, the truth about the Fold, the Shexosant contract's actual terms.

She thought: *in forty-eight hours every senior Elevatio priest will know that the doctrine is false. In a week it will be in the Congregatio's transmitted network. In a month it will be in the UnImperium's knowledge base. In a year it will be common knowledge.*

She thought: *the information was always going to escape. I was never going to contain it forever. I have been managing a timeline that had an end.*

She thought: *the end arrived this morning.*

She looked at the desk, at the administrative record, at the stack of the day's functions that would need to be addressed, the ordinary work of governing a civilization that was still there and would still need to be governed regardless of the fact that the foundation of its governance structure was in the process of being fundamentally altered.

She sat with this for a long time.

Then she looked at the communication device and thought about what message to send.

She thought about Kaiden Kentur, nineteen years old — twenty, now, he had been gone for eight weeks — sitting in the Fold Room's volume and pointing his attention across hers and disrupting the one thing that no one had been able to disrupt for three hundred years. She thought about the quality of execution required to do this — to enter the volume cleanly, to produce the interference precisely, to release it before it became catastrophic. She thought about a person who had had that capability for eight weeks and had not used it carelessly, who had tested it on a Shexosant cruiser and had chosen the right moment and had executed the release correctly.

She thought about what she had seen in the reading room surveillance. The specific quality of the exchange. *Like they mean it.*

She had built her daughter to inherit the institution. She had given her daughter the access the inheritance required. She had built

her, carefully and across twenty-one years, to be able to hold the truth when the truth arrived.

The truth had arrived.

Kimme was already in the room with D'Hana.

She thought: *I built her correctly. The outcome is not the one I intended. She is nevertheless the thing I built.*

She thought about the window, and the scenario she had been unable to find a response for, and the question of what role she would play in what came after the monopoly.

She thought: *I am Janna Chadrac. I am the tenth of the line. I have been Folding this City for twenty-three years. I know things that no one else knows about what it means to do this work, alone, every time, across three hundred and fifteen Folds.*

She thought: *and that knowledge is going to matter. In what comes after.*

She thought: *if I am in the room when the terms are set.*

She thought: *I have to be in the room.*

She picked up the standard comms.

She said: "Find my daughter."

She said: "Tell her I want to meet."

She said: "Tell her I will come to her."

She set the comms down.

She looked at the window one more time — at the booster rings, at the Oreaule system's star, at the specific quality of a morning that had begun as the last ordinary morning of the civilization she had been governing and had become something else.

She had run scenarios for six weeks. She had prepared for multiple versions of this conversation. She had assembled her leverage, her arguments, her positions on the various elements of what a negotiated transition might look like.

She had one more thing to do before the meeting.

She went back to the Fold Room.

She sat in the chair. She did not administer Leaf. She did not reach for the orientation. She sat in the chair of the room that had

been hers alone for twenty-three years and she let herself feel the full weight of what she was about to give up — not because feeling it would change anything, but because she was a person who believed that things of weight should be felt before they were released.

The room was quiet. The instrumentation was at standby. The mnemonic plate cradle was empty.

She sat.

She thought about Alise, the first, who had sat in this room — or the room that preceded it, the smaller chamber in the original refinery — and had looked at the space around her and had seen not a constraint but a foundation. She thought about Bonne, and Clarice, and Dedrie, and Ellyse, and Faina, and Ghennett, and Hanneth, and Irie, each of them in this room or its predecessors, each of them alone in the work. She thought about the quality of the work — the specific quality of being the person who can do a thing that no one else can do, and doing it, and not being able to say to anyone that you are doing it.

She had not wanted company. She had not been aware of wanting company. She had found the aloneness to be the appropriate condition of the work — the specific aloneness of a function that required full attention, that could not share its attention with the management of another person's presence in the same space.

She thought about the two chairs.

She had put two chairs in the room because the doctrine required the appearance of multiple people, and because the appearance of multiple people required furniture for multiple people, and because she had not been able to look at the empty second chair without occasionally, privately, acknowledging that the aloneness was the shape she had imposed on the work rather than the shape the work required.

She sat.

She was going to meet with her daughter and the boy and the Imperial General and the Elevatio ministers and whatever others had found their way into the configuration that had formed overnight

without her management. She was going to sit in that room and negotiate the terms of what came after.

She had not chosen this.

She had, in some specific and narrow sense, built toward it.

Not this version. Not with this boy, not with her daughter on the other side of the table, not with the ancestors in the Afterlife and the contract's clause available to anyone who could read it. But something like this — the edge of the framework becoming visible, the structure reaching the end of its sustainable lifespan, the managed timeline arriving at its end.

Every system has an end. She had known this. She had managed the timeline. The timeline had managed itself.

She stood from the chair.

She looked at the room one last time.

She was going to be in the room when the terms were set.

She walked out.

FORTY-ONE

IMPERIAL CITY — OREAULE SYSTEM

THE ROOM JANNA chose was the secondary Council chamber.

Not the Throne Room, which communicated Imperial authority in its full formal register — the scale designed to overwhelm, the dais making every petitioner look like what they were, the surveillance architecture configured for the performance of power. Not her private office, which communicated the intimacy of a conversation she controlled. The secondary Council chamber: the room where things got managed, where the register was working rather than ceremonial, where the table was the center rather than the dais.

It was a choice. Everything she did was a choice, and the choosing of a room was never incidental. The secondary Council chamber communicated: *I am treating this as a problem that can be solved rather than a transgression to be punished.* Whether this was accurate remained to be determined.

She arrived first. This was also a choice: the person who arrives first sets the room, occupies it, is already in it when others enter. She was always already in the room.

She stood at the table's head and waited.

D'Hana came first, which was expected — D'Hana operated on military time, which meant not early and not late but precisely on schedule, the precision being the message. She was in the full Shexosant formal, which was a choice D'Hana had made deliberately, which communicated: *I am here in my institutional capacity.* Not in the functional chair to Janna's left as she sat at Court sessions. At the table. Across from it.

She looked at Janna.

Janna looked at her.

Something passed between them that was not a greeting and was not quite acknowledgment — the specific quality of two people who have been managing the same information from opposite sides of it for twenty-three years and are now in a room where the management is over.

D'Hana said nothing. She sat.

The Elevatio ministers came next. Eidan and Derry and two senior ministers whose function was institutional ballast — present to constitute a quorum, present to prevent either Eidan or Derry from speaking without the implicit accountability of witnesses. They arranged themselves on one side of the table with the practiced efficiency of people who had sat in many rooms together.

Eidan looked at Janna with the quality of maintained certainty that she had been tracking for months. It had not dissolved. She had not expected it to dissolve. Maintained certainty of this kind did not dissolve in the face of contradictory information — it compressed, it hardened, it found the minimum surface area to present to the world. He was doing that now.

Derry looked at the table. He had been doing this since their conversation in her office. The Cardinal of the Elevatio, looking at the table.

Kimme came with Kaiden.

Janna watched this. Not the fact of them coming together — she had known this was what would happen, had understood from the moment she had seen Kimme's biometric at D'Hana's office that the lines had been drawn and that Kimme had drawn them deliberately. She was watching the quality of how they came into the room.

Kimme entered first, which was her institutional right — she was Chadrac, this was the City, the room deferred to her. Kaiden followed at the appropriate distance behind. But the distance was the specific distance of people who have been in rooms together enough times to know each other's spatial rhythms, not the formal distance of institutional hierarchy observed. The space between them had the quality of people who were coordinating without managing it.

She looked at her daughter.

Kimme looked at her.

For a moment the room held only this — mother and daughter, across the secondary Council chamber table, both of them understanding what had happened and what was going to happen and what the understanding meant.

Kimme sat to Janna's right, which was the position of the heir. She had not sat to Janna's right since they had last done this together. She sat there now with the ease of someone returning to a familiar position and the specific quality of someone who has decided what they are going to do with the position.

Kaiden sat beside Kimme.

He was, Janna thought, not what she had expected him to be. She had spent months building a model of him from surveillance feeds and intelligence reports and Kimme's calibrated neutral assessments and the genetic file's implications. The model had been accurate in most of its specifics. What she had not been able to model from the outside was the quality of his presence in a room — the specific quality of someone who is not performing anything, who is simply in the room and is what he is and is waiting to see what needs to happen next.

He looked at her.

She looked at him.

She thought: *twenty years old. He is twenty years old and he disrupted my Fold and released my ancestors and now he is sitting in my Council chamber.* She thought: *the Congregatio spent a century building this. They deserve everything they're about to receive and none of what they expected.*

D'Hana said: "Shall we begin."

It was not a question.

D'Hana spoke first, which was also not accidental — Kimme had arranged this in their fourth-hour meeting, and the arrangement was visible in D'Hana's posture, the specific quality of a person who knows the order of their remarks and is delivering them from a prepared position.

"The Shexosant's founding agreement," D'Hana said, "requires the enforcement of Imperial Law. Not the person of Imperium — Imperial Law. The distinction is explicit in the founding contract and has been understood by every Shexosant command in succession." She paused. She was looking at the table rather than at Janna, which was a choice of its own: the looking-at-the-table of someone who is about to say something significant and is choosing not to make it a confrontation. "Imperial Law, specifically, prohibits the deliberate targeting of civilian non-combatants during military engagements. It prohibits the use of military force as an instrument of political intimidation against subject populations. It requires that the governing authority exercise its interdiction capability when civilian lives are at risk from military action, unless a direct and immediate threat to the governing authority itself prevents interdiction."

She looked up.

She looked at Janna.

"The Reticulum engagement," she said. "The City held interdic-

tion capability. The threat to the City was not direct. The decision not to interdict produced civilian casualties at a scale that a Shexosant legal review would classify as deliberate rather than incidental."

The room was very quiet.

Janna looked at D'Hana.

She had known D'Hana for twenty-three years. She had known that D'Hana knew what the contract said. She had known that D'Hana knew what Reticulum had been. She had managed D'Hana the way she managed D'Hana: by ensuring that the technical letter of the law was never violated clearly enough, by maintaining the ambiguity that made legal review inconclusive, by giving the Shexosant command no single decision they could point to as the decision.

She had been managing this for twenty-three years.

What D'Hana was doing now was not declaring against her. D'Hana was noting, carefully and precisely and in the language of the founding contract, that her institutional obligations required her to *consider the question.* Not to decide it. To consider it.

The consideration, once begun, required a process. The process had requirements. The requirements produced obligations. The obligations produced, eventually, a conclusion.

She understood, in the specific quality of her own intelligence processing at speed, what this meant.

She was not losing the army through rebellion. She was not losing it through defection. She was losing it through the very legal framework she had built the Shexosant relationship on — the same framework that had protected her for twenty-three years by being too specific to be challenged was now being applied to a case she had believed would remain ambiguous.

It was, in some specific and genuine sense, magnificent. She had built an institution to apply the law without fear or favor, and the institution was applying the law without fear or favor, and the application was against her.

She could almost appreciate it.

She said: "The Reticulum engagement was a managed outcome in the context of House governance. The Houses are aware that certain categories of destabilizing behavior produce specific responses. The deterrent function—"

"Is not contemplated in the founding law as a justification for civilian casualties," D'Hana said. "The founding law does not contain an exception for governance deterrence." She paused. "I am not declaring against the Imperium. I am noting that my institutional obligations require me to consider whether the governance model as currently practiced is consistent with the law I am sworn to uphold."

Janna looked at her for a long moment.

She said: "And your conclusion."

D'Hana said: "My conclusion is that there are elements of the current practice that are not consistent with the law. And that the law requires me to address the inconsistency." She paused. "The form that address takes is negotiable. The requirement to address it is not."

The room received this.

Janna looked at the table.

She thought about twenty-three years of managing this relationship. She thought about the founding contract's clause — *may be assumed by any institution that can demonstrate continuity with the functions of Imperium.* She thought about Kimme, who had gone to D'Hana at the fourth hour, and about what Kimme had told her, and about whether D'Hana would have moved without Kimme's intervention.

She thought: *probably not. The threshold was there, but Kimme brought the specific documentation of the Reticulum decision that made the threshold clearable. Without the documentation, D'Hana would have held.*

She thought: *my daughter gave D'Hana the evidence she needed to move.*

She thought: *I built my daughter to do exactly that kind of thing.*

She looked at Kimme.

Kimme met her gaze with the full look — the one Janna had been

watching develop since the Ethin assault, the look of someone who had been building toward a specific position and had arrived at it and was now occupying it completely.

She looked at Kaiden.

He was looking at her. Not at the table, not performing attention elsewhere. At her. The quality of attention that she had been observing in surveillance feeds for months — the attending-without-managing, the full presence without the management of what the presence communicated. He was simply looking at her, the way he looked at things when he was paying attention to them.

She said, to the room: "You disrupted the Fold."

He said: "Yes."

She said: "This morning."

He said: "Yes."

She said: "And the Ancestor Chamber."

He said: "Yes."

She said: "What did you find there."

He said: "The founding contract's terms. The Fold's actual mechanism. The history of the first three hundred years, as the Matriarchs experienced it." He paused. "Alise's specific understanding of what she built and why."

She was quiet for a moment.

She said: "And you released them."

He said: "Yes."

She looked at him.

She said: "You know that every Commune-capable priest in the Elevatio's network will find them within a year."

He said: "Yes."

She said: "You know what they'll find."

He said: "Yes."

She said: "And you did it anyway."

He said: "Yes."

She looked at him for a long moment.

She said: "Why."

He said: "Because no one deserves to be kept in the dark indefinitely to protect a secret that serves the people doing the keeping rather than the people being kept." He paused. "And because the information is going to be available regardless. I accelerated the timeline. I didn't change the destination."

She thought about this.

She said: "You don't know that the destination was inevitable."

He said: "I know the UnImperium has Folders who have been developing their capability for eighty years. I know that Leaf is not the mechanism and that anyone with the ability can Fold without it. I know that the Testing Protocol has been suppressing a capability that occurs at a meaningful frequency in the general population." He paused. "The information was going to arrive. The only question was whether it arrived with your institution intact enough to be part of what came after."

She looked at him.

She thought: *he is telling me he has been trying to preserve something for me. He is telling me this while sitting across a table from me after releasing my ancestors into the Afterlife and disrupting my Fold and going to D'Hana with my daughter before I could.*

She thought: *and he is probably right.*

She said: "Show me."

He looked at her.

She said: "The disruption. Show me that you can do it." She paused. "I want to understand what I'm dealing with."

He said: "All right."

She felt what was coming before it arrived — not because she had warning, but because she had been doing this for twenty-three years and the quality of the space changing was something she could feel before it became any other kind of signal. She reached for the orientation, not the full preparation, not the booster ring draw, just the quality of attention pointed at the boundary between here and elsewhere—

It stopped.

Not violently. Not with the catastrophic fracture of the morning — the fracture of someone who was not expecting resistance. This was a precise, clean interference, the opposition arriving at exactly the point where her orientation was trying to form and preventing the formation without producing any of the turbulence of an unmanned collision.

He was very good.

She held the attempt for two seconds, three, pressing against the interference with the precision of twenty-three years of practice. The interference held. It was not greater than her effort. It was exactly sufficient to prevent the formation, no more.

She released.

She looked at him.

He said, almost apologetically: "I can keep doing that."

The room was very quiet.

She said: "I know."

She sat back.

She thought about the booster rings. She thought about the forty thousand fusion torches at their operational readiness. She thought about what it would mean to try to Fold the City in a context where someone could prevent it — not permanently, not infinitely, but at will, long enough to make the Fold unreliable in a way that it had never been unreliable before.

She thought about what the City was without the Fold.

She thought about the Cycle. About the New Year. About the Houses that organized their political calendars around the City's arrival. About the Guild contracts that depended on the City's predictable presence. About the supply chains, the diplomatic relationships, the entire architecture of a civilization that had been built on the assumption that the City would move and would move reliably.

She thought: *if the Fold is unreliable, the City is no longer the center of the structure. It is simply a place.*

She thought: *I would still be on it. I would still be Janna Chadrac. I would still have — something.*

She thought: *and the alternative to negotiating from here is what, exactly.*

She thought about the scenarios. She thought about the one she had been unable to find a response for.

She was in it now.

She was going to find the response now.

She said: "What do you want."

Not to him specifically — to the room. To the configuration of people who had positioned themselves, across the night and the morning, into the specific arrangement that was now assembled around this table.

Kimme said: "A structure that doesn't require periodic atrocities to maintain itself."

D'Hana said: "Compliance with Imperial Law."

Kaiden said: "An end to the monopoly."

She looked at each of them in turn.

She looked at Eidan.

Eidan had been quiet since the room had assembled. He had been doing the specific thing that Eidan did when his certainty was under maximum pressure: compressing it, holding it, presenting the minimum surface area to the world. He was looking at Kaiden with the quality of a man who had spent thirty years working toward a specific goal and who was in the room with the result of that goal and who was beginning to understand that the result was not what he had expected.

She said: "Father Eidan."

He looked at her.

She said: "Your program produced something you didn't intend."

He said: "The program produced what it was designed to produce."

She said: "And what did it produce."

He said: "A Folder. A Commune-capable Folder. The combination the Congregatio has been building toward for a century."

She said: "And the doctrine. The Leaf theory. The bonded Starfarers."

He was quiet.

She said: "False."

He said: "The evidence—"

She said: "Is in the Afterlife now. The nine Matriarchs who knew the truth are available to any Commune-capable priest with the reach. They will be found. What they know will be transmitted." She paused. "Your doctrine is going to be publicly contradicted by Chadrac ancestors within a year. Whatever you build on it is going to be contradicted with it."

Eidan looked at her.

Something happened in his face that she had not seen before. Not the maintained certainty. Not the compression. Something that was visible for approximately two seconds before the compression reassembled: the specific quality of a person whose structural framework is failing, who is holding the failure at arm's length with everything they have, who is not yet able to let the failure arrive.

He said: "The breeding program—"

Derry said, quietly: "Father Eidan."

Eidan looked at Derry.

Derry said: "Let's hear what they're proposing."

It was the most pragmatic thing she had seen Derry do in seven years. The institutionalist's instinct: when the position is untenable, find out what the terrain looks like before deciding where to move.

She looked at Kaiden.

She said: "Tell me what you're proposing."

He looked at the table for a moment. Then at her.

He said: "The City continues operating. You continue as Imperium in the sense of the City's administration — the Cycle, the Court sessions, the governance function. What changes is the army. The Fold monopoly. The testing protocol."

He said: "The testing protocol ends. It has been killing people for two hundred years who had done nothing except carry a capability the first Chadrac found threatening. That ends."

He said: "The Fold monopoly ends. Not immediately — there isn't the infrastructure yet for it to end completely immediately. But the training begins, openly, with any carrier who wants it. The UnImperium's Fold guild becomes a recognized institution. Vex's pattern library becomes available. The City's Wayfinder corps becomes a training resource rather than a proprietary capability."

He said: "The Shexosant's contract is renegotiated. They are offered a home. A real one. On an UnImperium world with the infrastructure to support their population for the next generation and beyond. They can be something other than an army."

He said: "The Elevatio retains the Iudicium. The Afterlife custody. The Communion's pastoral function." He paused. "The genetic programs do not restart."

Derry said: "That is the Elevatio's primary institutional—"

Kaiden said: "I know what it is."

Derry said: "The breeding program is not simply ambition. The development of human capability—"

Kaiden said: "You spent a century making me without asking. You don't get to make the next one."

The room was quiet.

Derry said: "You are the prophecy."

Kaiden said: "I know."

Derry said: "The fulfillment of a hundred years of institutional—"

Kaiden said: "I know. I'm also a person. Those things are in conflict, and I've decided which one wins."

Derry looked at him for a long moment.

He looked at the table.

He said: "The Obligators." He said it quietly, with the quality of someone finding the specific concession they can take from a landscape that is being renegotiated without their direction. "The Elevatio's training of Obligators — Starfarers conditioned to refuse to Fold

armed vessels. If the monopoly ends, if the training becomes open — the Elevatio's function in certifying and conditioning the Obligators—"

Kaiden said: "Is a genuine institutional function with genuine value."

Derry looked at him.

Kaiden said: "An enforcement mechanism that is distributed through the Folding population rather than concentrated in one institution or one person is actually more robust than what exists now. If the Elevatio is the body that trains and certifies — with transparent standards, subject to Chain review — then the function is real."

Derry held this for a moment.

She was watching him receive it — watching the institutionalist's instinct finding the ground it could stand on in the landscape that was being shaped around it. He was not capitulating. He was adapting. The two things looked similar from the outside.

She thought: *this is how it happens. Not with declarations. With the specific process of each party finding what they can keep and what they have to give.*

She thought: *I have been doing this for twenty-three years on behalf of a structure that no longer exists. I need to start doing it on behalf of what comes next.*

She said: "The City's role."

Kaiden looked at her.

She said: "If the monopoly ends, if the army's function changes, if the Cycle's meaning shifts — what is the City."

He said: "The City is still the largest Fold-capable platform in the known galaxy. It's still a trade hub, a diplomatic venue, the administrative center of the most significant governance network in human history. None of that ends. It becomes more instead of less — the center of a network that is genuinely connected rather than coercively integrated."

She said: "And Imperium."

He said: "Administers it. As before. Without the threat of force

and without the Fold monopoly, but with the institutional legitimacy of three hundred years and the actual capability of the platform."

She said: "And what ensures that the administration has authority. If the army is no longer an enforcement mechanism and the Fold monopoly is no longer a control mechanism—"

"The law," D'Hana said. From across the table. "Imperial Law, properly applied. Which is what the Shexosant has always been contracted to enforce." She paused. "A contract that can be assumed by any institution that demonstrates continuity with the functions of Imperium."

She looked at D'Hana.

D'Hana looked at her.

She thought about the founding contract's clause. She thought about Alise's memory — the specific terms, the *may be assumed by any institution.* She thought about what it meant that D'Hana had known this for twenty-three years and had managed the knowledge by simply enforcing the law to the letter while never pointing at the clause.

She thought: *she was always going to do this. When the conditions were right. When someone gave her the evidence she needed and the alternative she could present.*

She thought: *Kimme gave her both.*

The room was quiet.

She said: "This session is not the final negotiation."

Kaiden said: "No."

She said: "There are terms that require more specific work. The transition timeline. The training infrastructure. The Shexosant's resettlement specifics. The Elevatio's Obligator framework." She paused. "These are not things that resolve in a first session."

Kaiden said: "No."

She said: "But the shape."

He said: "Is visible."

She looked at the room. At D'Hana, who was looking at the table with the quality of someone who has done what they came to do and

is waiting for the next thing. At Derry, who was looking at the table with the quality of a man who has received a significant concession in the form of the Obligators and is deciding whether it is sufficient. At Eidan, who was still in the compressed certainty but in whom something had shifted — the certainty was intact but it was compressed over a smaller structure than it had been over an hour ago.

At Kimme.

Kimme was looking at her.

She said, to her daughter: "You did this well."

Kimme said: "You built me for this."

She said: "I built you for something different."

Kimme said: "I know." She paused. "What you built me for turned out to require the same skills as what I actually did." She held her mother's gaze. "That's your fault."

Something happened in the room that was not quite humor and was not quite grief and was both simultaneously. Even D'Hana's expression shifted slightly, the quality of someone receiving an unexpectedly precise statement.

She looked at her daughter.

She thought about twenty-one years of building. She thought about the reading room surveillance and the Wayfinder facility and the minute forty-four of the Reticulum gallery and all the specific moments in which she had been watching Kimme become what Kimme had become. She thought about the moment she had decided not to press — the decision that had seemed, at the time, like management, and that turned out to have been the single most consequential decision of her tenure.

She thought: *if I had pressed, I would have a daughter who had not chosen. I would have a daughter who was on my side rather than her own.*

She thought: *what I have instead is this.*

She said: "We will reconvene tomorrow. The terms need to be drafted. The Chain will need to be involved for any formally binding

agreement." She paused. "There are also elements that require information I have and that the room does not yet have."

Kaiden said: "Tell me what you want to bring."

She looked at him.

She said: "The Fold's actual mechanism. Documented, in my own account, rather than reconstructed from nine preserved minds by Elevatio priests who are going to reach very specific conclusions very quickly." She paused. "I would prefer to be the source of the record rather than the subject of it."

He held this for a moment.

He said: "Yes."

The room began to separate — the specific process of a session that has done what it came to do, the various parties withdrawing to do what they do after sessions of this kind. D'Hana rose with military precision and left without further remark, which was D'Hana. Derry left with Eidan and the ministers, the small low voice of one of the unnamed ministers audible as they passed through the door:

The Obligators, at least, are ours.

Kaiden remained at the table. Kimme remained.

She looked at her daughter.

She said: "Come to my office this evening. There are things to tell you." She paused. "That I should have told you earlier."

Kimme said: "I know."

She said: "I know you know."

She looked at Kaiden.

She said: "Twenty years old."

He said: "Yes."

She said: "The Congregatio spent a century building you and you ended up here, at twenty, dismantling what they wanted to use you to build."

He said: "They built me to test a theory. The theory was wrong. I ended up testing a different one."

She said: "And was it right."

He said: "Which theory."

She said: "That this can be done without violence. That the structure can be changed by making the truth available rather than by replacing the structure by force."

He looked at her.

He said: "I don't know yet. We're in the first hour of it."

She said: "That's honest."

He said: "It's the only thing I know how to be."

She looked at him for one more moment.

She said: "Tomorrow. Bring whoever you need."

She walked out.

In the corridor, she paused. She was alone, which was the first time she had been alone since the Fold Room. She stood in the City's characteristic light and heard the City's characteristic hum and felt the City around her with the quality it had always had and would continue to have.

She had been in this building for twenty-three years.

She was still in it.

The morning was not over.

She went to the next thing.

FORTY-TWO

IMPERIAL CITY — OREAULE SYSTEM

THE CHAIN CLERK arrived at the secondary Council chamber at the ninth hour carrying a sealed case and the quality of someone who had been briefed on what they were about to witness and had decided that their professional function required them to receive the briefing without visible reaction to its content.

He was very good at this. Chain Clerks were trained for exactly this: the administration of significant agreements without the administrator's visible judgment of their significance. The Chain was neutral in political conflicts; what it witnessed, it witnessed without color. What it certified, it certified to standard.

Kaiden watched him set up the certification apparatus with the efficiency of long practice. He thought about the Clerk in the Throne Room — the different Clerk, the one who annotated verdicts before the verdicts were announced — and about the quality of institutional continuity embodied in the function. Whatever else changed, the Chain administered. The administration was the mechanism through which anything became real in the formal sense.

He thought: *in an hour, this will be real.*

The room was larger than the previous session's room. Janna had chosen this deliberately. The larger chamber communicated that the session had a different status — not the preliminary shape-finding of the first session but the formal act. The Chain's presence communicated the same thing. The certification apparatus on the table made it visible and irreversible.

The parties arranged themselves in the positions the previous day had established. Janna at the table's head, D'Hana across from her, Kimme and Kaiden together. The Elevatio ministers at their end. The Chain Clerk at the table's foot.

Vex was present, which was new. He had arrived with Kaiden, the first time he had been in a room of this kind, and he occupied his chair with the specific quality of someone who had spent his life around instruments and was now around governance and was finding the instruments familiar and the governance something requiring careful processing.

Nix and Iscaryot were present, representing the UnImperium's interest — an interest that was not yet formalized and would need to become so, which was itself part of what was being established today.

Janna opened the session with "The terms as proposed," addressing the room rather than any specific person. Then she began to read.

He had been in enough Court sessions to understand the register of formal negotiation. He had watched it conducted from the gallery and from the floor. He had understood, by the end of his time in the block, how it worked: the performance of deliberation over predeter-

mined conclusions, form observed while content was decided elsewhere.

What was happening in this room was different.

The content was not predetermined. It was being decided here, at this table, by people who did not agree on everything and who were finding the specific language that made disagreement manageable. The form was serving the content rather than replacing it.

Janna had spent the night preparing the document. He could tell from the reading — the terms were detailed and specific in the way formal agreements required: dates, thresholds, mechanisms for review, procedures for dispute resolution. The terms were what they needed to be. She had drafted them correctly.

He watched her read and thought about what the night had cost — not in sleep, which she almost certainly had not gotten, but in the specific cognitive and emotional work of drafting a document that formalized the dismantling of what three hundred years of her line had built. The specific quality of the intelligence required to do this correctly: to draft terms that were genuinely workable rather than superficially acceptable, that accounted for the transition's actual requirements, that protected what needed protecting without holding what could not be held.

What would be given up.

The Fold monopoly: *the exclusive right to Fold any mass exceeding personal conveyance capacity is hereby abolished. Any person carrying the Fold capability, once trained and certified under the standards established by the new Starfarer Guild, may Fold vessels, structures, or masses of any size subject to the certification's specified competency level. Imperial City retains the right to administer the Guild's founding certification standards for a period of ten years, subject to external review at five years.*

She read this without visible expression. He heard it land in the room and watched the faces. Eidan's had the quality of someone receiving a thing he had wanted for thirty years in a form he had not wanted. The Fold monopoly ending was the Congregatio's goal — the freedom from a three-hundred-year monopoly, everything. The form of the ending — through a Guild the City administered rather than the Elevatio, through a certification standard the City had initial control over — was not what they had worked toward. The distinction was present in the compression of his face.

Derry was looking at the table. He had been looking at the table since the session began.

The Testing Protocol: the document used the word *elimination*. Janna had put it there deliberately. He had noticed this and had not asked her to remove it. It would be in the Chain's record. Three hundred years of children killed by the Protocol would be named in a single word in a foundational agreement. It was the right word.

The Shexosant's transition. The world. A home. Not Shexim — something new, something that wasn't dying. The Shexosant had been supporting Shexim for three hundred years: the terraforming, the dome infrastructure, the off-world capacity for a population that a dying world could not sustain. Three hundred years of maintaining a dying home. The offer was a living one.

D'Hana read the Shexosant section with the quality she brought to everything: the assessment of someone who knows what they want and is verifying that what is written is what was agreed. When she looked up, she looked at Janna. A question about the Assayor access framework, answered in three sentences. Then: "Acceptable."

The Elevatio section required the most work.

Not because the terms were more complex — in one sense they were simpler, the Elevatio's role being what it had always been minus

the specific leverage they had been building toward. What made it harder was that Eidan was in the room, and the goal was being formally removed from the available options while he watched.

Derry managed the Elevatio's formal response with the institutionalist's instinct: walk out with the institution intact rather than win every term. He had been doing this since the previous session, since the moment he had identified the Obligators as the ground the Elevatio could stand on.

The Obligators section certified. An unnamed minister, reading over Derry's shoulder, said something very quietly to the two ministers beside him. He said it for himself rather than for the room — the specific quality of someone recalibrating their understanding of what the session had produced and finding the ground they could stand on.

The Obligators, at least, are ours.

Kaiden heard it. The quality of *at least* — the specific flavor of a person who has assessed the landscape of what they have been given and is deciding whether it is sufficient to continue. The Elevatio would find something to do with the Obligators. They would build on it. In two generations they would have found a way to make the program into something that served their interests in ways he hadn't anticipated.

That was what institutions did.

That was what they were for.

Eidan said nothing during the Elevatio section. He had said almost nothing since the session began. He sat with his compressed certainty at its absolute minimum surface area, no longer held toward the room but held inward, to himself.

He would not recant the doctrine today. Probably not this year. Possibly not ever. But the certainty was going to be very slowly and very thoroughly demolished by nine Chadrac Matriarchs in the Afterlife, available to any Commune-capable priest with the reach. The doctrine would meet the record. The record would win.

He thought: *Eidan doesn't know yet that what he built is correct in one specific sense. The Fold capability is real. The Commune capability is real. The combination is real. The mechanism is wrong, the doctrine is wrong, the Leaf is wrong — but the outcome is what he worked toward. He just can't take credit for it in the form he expected.*

The Chain Clerk certified each section as it was agreed — seventeen sections, two hours and forty minutes of reading aloud, receiving confirmation, making notations, applying seals. At the end of the seventeenth section he looked at the document and at the room.

"All parties have confirmed. The Chain's record is complete. The agreement is certified." The flat affect of institutional confirmation — the same quality he would have applied to a trade boundary dispute or a licensing renewal.

Janna looked at the document.

"This concludes the formal session." She looked at the room. "The implementation working groups will be constituted within thirty days. The Starfarer Guild's founding council will meet within sixty. The Shexosant transition terms become operational upon Shexosant formal acceptance, which I expect within the week." A pause. "The Testing Protocol ceases immediately."

The last sentence had a different quality from the others. Not more formal — more absolute.

The room began to separate.

D'Hana stood and left with the quality of a mission accomplished — not triumphant, simply done, the next function already visible. Derry paused at the door to look at the document one more time. Then he left.

Vex looked up from his display. "The Guild pattern library," he said to Kaiden. "The founding council needs a Cognaut. For the pattern generation infrastructure."

"I know. I was hoping you'd offer."

The quick eyes held for a moment. "I'll consider it." He left, which from Vex was as close to *yes* as the word.

Nix and Iscaryot left. The others. The Clerk packed the certification apparatus and left.

Kimme stood. She looked at her mother across the empty table. Something passed between them — not language, the quality of two people who had said what needed to be said in a different room at a different hour and were now in the room that followed. Kimme said *Mother*, and Janna said the session last night had been overdue, and Kimme said *I know*, and for a moment both of them simply held that.

Then Kimme looked at Kaiden. "I'll be in the administrative section. The working group structures need to be drafted before tomorrow."

"I'll find you," he said.

She walked out.

The room was empty except for the two of them.

Janna looked at the window for a while. He waited.

"You cannot maintain this." Not an accusation — an assessment. "The structure you've created today depends on voluntary compliance from people who have historically been compliant only when compelled." She looked at the Oreaule system's star. "The galaxy does not want to be free. It wants to be told what to do."

"I know."

She turned from the window. "That is not a reassuring response."

"It's the only accurate one." He held her gaze. "You're right. The people who are comfortable inside authority structures — which is most people — are not going to naturally move toward the alternative just because the alternative has been made available. Some will. The people who were already finding it, who were building in the UnImperium, who were developing the capability in the spaces the Cycle

didn't cover. They were already there. What changes is that they're not illegal anymore."

"And the people who aren't in the UnImperium."

"Will make their choices. Some will stay in the Imperium's structure. Some will move. The point is that the choice is available."

"And when the Houses that don't want a choice decide that the structure needs to be restored—"

"Then someone needs to be here. In the room. Making the case for the alternative." He said it without drama, the way he said most things. "That's why I'm staying."

She considered him for a moment.

The twenty years of him. The quality of his presence, which she had been observing in surveillance feeds and then in rooms for the better part of a year and which had not changed: simply what he was, in the room, without performance of it.

"Twenty years old," she said.

"Yes."

"You know that in twenty years you may see this differently. The weight of the actual governance. The specific quality of being responsible for a civilization that is making mistakes every day. Being the person who is supposed to prevent the mistakes from becoming catastrophic." A pause. "It is different from the outside."

"I believe you."

"And you're staying anyway."

"Yes."

She moved to the table. She looked at the document — the Chain's certification marks, the seventeen sections. She was receiving the fact of it, not looking for errors.

"I spent twenty-three years alone in the Fold Room," she said. "Not by necessity. By choice. The choice was wrong, in the specific sense that the aloneness was not required by the work, only by what I believed the work required." She kept her eyes on the document. "I am telling you this because you are going to make analogous choices, and I would prefer you to make them less badly than I did."

He waited.

"Kimme is a better partner than I gave her access to be. I built her correctly and then managed her incorrectly. The managing was fear — of what she would think, of what she would choose if she knew." She finally looked at him. "She chose anyway. So did you. The fear produced the outcome it was designed to prevent."

"Yes."

"Don't do that."

"I'll try."

She looked at the window again — the distant booster rings catching the Oreaule light. "The Fold," she said. "It is what it is to do it alone. I don't know how to describe it to someone who hasn't." A long pause. "It is not lonely. It is complete. The quality of the attention required is too full to accommodate loneliness." Another pause. "And it is lonely. Both of those things are true simultaneously. It's worth knowing, before you do it at scale."

"When will that be?"

"Soon. The City needs to Fold." She turned from the window. "The Cycle has a schedule. And you've just established that there's a person on this City who can disrupt it — which means you're going to have to help me understand that the Fold is going to work before I do it."

"Yes."

"Which means we're going to have to trust each other enough for that."

"Yes."

A beat of quiet.

"That is going to be an interesting project." Something in her voice that was not quite dry and not quite warm and was a version of both.

She walked to the door. She paused with her hand on the frame.

"The galaxy will try to put the structure back. Probably within your lifetime. Someone will see the opportunity — the power vacuum, the Houses looking for authority, the human appetite for

certainty." She did not turn. "When that happens, I hope you have better tools than I had."

"What tools did you have?"

"The Fold. The army. The fear." A pause. "All of which I've just agreed to give up."

"You still have the Fold."

"Yes. And now so do you." She turned, then, enough to look at him over her shoulder. "Make better use of it."

She walked out.

He stayed in the room.

The window showed the Oreaule system's star at its midday angle, and the booster rings at the edge of the viewport, and the specific quality of a space from which significant things have departed. The table was clear. The document was in the Chain's record — certified, real, permanent. Not in the room anymore; in the record that would outlast every specific term in it and produce, by producing it, something that could be pointed to and argued from and built on.

Something that was not fear.

He thought about Janna's prediction: *the galaxy will try to put the structure back.* He thought she was right about this, probably. He thought that *probably* was not good enough, which was why someone needed to be in the room. He thought about the second-daughter ancestor — the castoff who had spent sixty years in the Afterlife hating the institution — and the generations of people shaped by choices they had no part in making.

He thought: *this is not a victory. It is a beginning.*

Beginnings were exactly as valuable as what you built on them.

The booster rings caught the light. Forty thousand fusion torches at standby, as they had been for three hundred years. Tomorrow morning Janna would show him the Fold Room — what it actually

was, not from a surveillance feed or someone else's account. He would be in the room.

The thought was neither comfortable nor uncomfortable. It was simply accurate, and he was good at sitting with accurate things now.

He went to find Kimme.

There was work to do.

FORTY-THREE

CENDANT IV / IMPERIAL CITY — OREAULE SYSTEM

THE LINK ROOM on Cendant IV still had the ghost of the Holden sigil where the Kentur overlay had not quite covered it. Kaiden noticed this through the screen — the faint impression under the new seal, visible at the specific angle the camera was set at — and felt the specific quality of something that was true about inheritance: you build on what was there before, and the before doesn't fully disappear.

He had scheduled the call for the afternoon of the day after the certification. Not the morning — the morning had been the Fold Room, which had required the full quality of his attention and afterward had left him with a stillness that needed some time before it became anything else. The afternoon was right. The afternoon was when he could receive his family with the actual quality of himself rather than the residue of the morning's work.

The screen connected. The Cendant system's light was different from the City's — warmer, the quality of a real star at a relatively

close distance rather than the City's engineered blue-white. The room materialized through it: the working surfaces, the administrative feeds running their continuous data, and at the center of the frame, Donia.

She looked at him.

He looked at her.

He had been gone from Bauxitum for just over a year. He had been on Cendant zero times since the elevation, the journey back being one of the things that the governance demands on both ends had not yet permitted. The distance between them had been maintained across Link sessions and House bulletin updates and one FreeLink message — *We are here. Write.* — that had arrived when he was on the unnamed world and had been among the most significant things he had received in the UnImperium.

She looked older than the year warranted. Not aged — there was a quality about Donia's face that was not compatible with ordinary aging, the same quality her mother Lorel had, the quality of someone whose bones have decided that the face they are in is the face they are going to be in. But there were new lines at the corners of her eyes, and the silver in her hair was more pronounced, and the specific quality of tension that had been present in her face for as long as he could remember had been joined by something else — not relaxed, different. The tension of someone who had been managing something very difficult for a sustained period and had recently learned whether it had gone the way they hoped.

She said: "You've made a great deal of work for all of us."

He heard it land the way it was intended — the dry precision of it, the specific Donia inflection that compressed a full accounting into the minimum number of syllables that could carry the weight. He had grown up learning to read this. He knew it now.

He said: "I know. I'm sorry."

"You're not," she said.

He thought about this. "I'm sorry about the work," he said. "I'm not sorry about what produced it."

"That's honest," she said. "Alise wants to talk to you."

Alise appeared behind Donia's shoulder, not waiting to be invited into the frame — this was Alise, whose relationship with protocol was functional rather than formal. She had the quality she always had when she was operating at the edge of what her current information allowed: she was already past it, already in the next frame, her processing having gotten there before the conversation had caught up.

"The Starfarer Guild's founding council," she said. "When does it convene."

"Sixty days," he said. "Per the Chain certification."

"And the pattern library. The Cognaut network's existing documentation — is that going into the Guild's founding resource base?"

"Vex is on it."

"How much of it is actually usable versus theoretical?"

"Forty-seven verified patterns, thirty-one partially verified. Plus whatever Vex generates from here."

Alise was writing something, or tapping something, or doing both simultaneously in the specific way she had of conducting conversations while doing other things that the other things could not tell were conversations. She said: "The Leaf."

"The supply terms are unchanged for now," he said. "The dependency is gone — meaning the doctrine is gone, meaning any certified Folder can Fold without it. But Leaf does something that's still worth doing. The cognitive opening it produces is real. Folders who want to use it can. Folders who don't, don't have to."

"Which changes the market," Alise said.

"Yes."

"In ways that are specifically relevant to House Kentur's position."

"Yes."

She stopped writing, or tapping. She looked at him. The look she used when she had processed something to its full implication and was checking whether he had also processed it. "We've been devel-

oping variants," she said. "The eastern flat cultivation zones — some of what we planted this cycle isn't the standard strain. It's modified for specific alkaloid profiles. Tropic or suppressant effects rather than the full psychoactive suite. Applications in surgical anesthesia, neurological therapy, anxiety management." She paused. "Applications that have nothing to do with Folding."

He felt, hearing this, the specific quality of recognizing a thing he should have anticipated and had not. Alise had been sitting on Cendant IV for a year, running the production, and she had been doing what Alise did: seeing where the current was going and positioning the House before the current arrived.

"You've been planning for this," he said.

"I've been planning for a world where the Fold monopoly ends," she said. "Which seemed like a thing that was going to happen eventually. The timeline was the variable." She paused. "The timeline accelerated."

"Somewhat," he said.

Alise did the thing that was not quite a smile. "The licensing structure for the variants," she said. "If the Leaf market is no longer monopolized by the City's supply chain requirements, we can license the variants under the Chain's standard pharmaceutical framework rather than the Imperial trade framework. Which means the price structure is ours to set."

He thought about the Leaf fields on Cendant IV, running in the eastern flat zones in the light of a star that was not Bauxitum's. He thought about what it meant for the House to be the source of a substance that was no longer politically significant in the old way and was about to become medically significant in a new way. He thought about Alise, who had been thinking about this for a year and had planted the non-standard strains before the conversation that was happening right now had occurred.

He said: "I'm glad you're here."

She looked at him. The Alise look, the one that acknowledged

what had been said without requiring any particular response to it, because it was a statement of fact rather than a plea.

She said: "Don't break anything else for at least six months," and moved back out of the frame.

Donia returned to center.

She looked at him for a moment — the looking that was not the look of assessment but the look of simply looking, the one she had used when he was young and she was checking something she didn't have words for.

He said: "How's father."

"He's well," she said. "He wants to know if there's actual fighting."

"There wasn't," he said. "There isn't. It's a governance transition."

"He'll be disappointed," she said, in the dry tone that communicated affection for Declan's specific quality without any illusion about it. "Lorel sends her regards."

"Tell her I'll write."

"Tell her yourself. She has Link access." A pause. "Aurelo is still here."

He thought about Aurelo. He had been thinking about Aurelo since Trumbold had read the assayor results and named the suppression's signature. He had been thinking about a twenty-year posting and a man who had spent two decades genuinely loving a family while genuinely monitoring them, and about what that meant for the love and what it meant for the monitoring.

"I know," he said.

"He'd like to speak with you," Donia said. "When you're ready. Or not ready. He said either way."

He thought about what Aurelo had said in the Communion room the night before the City, when Kaiden had been nineteen and the preparation sessions had been about protocol and the Token had been

warm from long holding: *I was their instrument first.* He thought about a priest who had told him the shape of the truth and had held back the content for reasons that were also the reasons of someone trying to protect a person they loved from information they were not ready for.

"I'll write to him," he said.

Donia accepted this without pressing it. She knew him well enough to know that the writing was not avoidance — it was the mode he used for things that required the careful quality of composition rather than the real-time management of a Link session.

She said: "What comes next."

He told her. Not the terms — she had the Chain's public record — but the texture of it, the working groups, the transition timeline, the specific challenges of the next several months. He told her about Vex and the pattern library. He told her about D'Hana and the Shexosant resettlement and what that meant for the force that had been the Imperium's enforcement arm. He told her about the Obligators and what the Elevatio's institutional position looked like now.

She listened with the quality she brought to operational briefings — receiving the full information without interrupting, filing as it arrived, the assessment forming in the background.

When he finished, she was quiet for a moment.

She said: "Kimme Chadrac."

"Yes," he said.

"She's working with you."

"Yes."

"Formally?"

"As formally as any of this is formal at the moment," he said. "Which is — in process. The governance structures are being built. She's in the room where they're being built."

Donia looked at him. He knew the look: she was checking whether the thing he was describing was what it appeared to be or whether there was another category for it.

He let her check.

She said: "Good." Which from Donia was a complete sentence containing a full assessment that she had decided not to elaborate on.

He said: "How's the Leaf yield this cycle."

"Eighty-seven percent," she said. "Alise thinks ninety-two by next cycle. The eastern flats are performing above projection."

He thought about the eastern flat cultivation zones. About the FreeLink message Alise had sent two months ago with the updated yield numbers — eighty-three percent, he had told Robere Valerius at the card table, and Robere had updated his model. He thought about all of the specific ordinary details of House Kentur's operations that had been running continuously while he was doing what he had been doing, the House producing what it produced regardless of whether its second child was on the City or on an unnamed world or in a Shexosant cruiser's locked cabin.

He said: "Good."

She said: "Yes."

A pause settled between them. The comfortable kind — the kind that was possible between people who had known each other long enough that silences did not require filling.

He said: "I'm going to stay here. On the City. For the foreseeable future."

She had known this. He could tell from the quality of how she received it — not surprise, the specific reception of information you had already prepared for. She had been preparing for it since the FreeLink, probably. Since before.

"I know," she said.

"The House—"

"Is fine," she said. "Alise is the heir. The House is what it is. You were never going to govern it." A pause. "You were always going to do something like this. I didn't know what the something was going to be."

He thought about this.

He said: "Did you know about the selection program."

The question had been waiting through the whole call, in the

place where questions wait until the moment is right. Donia looked at him steadily.

"Not until Aurelo told us," she said. "After you left. After he couldn't hold it anymore." She paused. "Not in those terms, anyway. I knew the Elevatio had an unusual interest in your line. I knew Aurelo's posting was longer than standard. I had constructed a hypothesis." A pause. "I didn't pursue the hypothesis because pursuing it required confronting the priest, and confronting the priest required a conversation I was not ready to have until the conversation became unavoidable."

He looked at her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "For what was done to you without your knowledge. For my part in not finding it out sooner."

He thought about this carefully.

He said: "You didn't know."

"I didn't know the specifics," she said. "I knew enough to wonder."

"Wondering isn't the same as knowing," he said. "And even if you had found out earlier — I'm not sure what you could have done. The program was three generations old by the time I was born."

"I could have told you," she said.

He sat with this.

He thought about being twelve. About the standard assessment at thirteen that Aurelo had managed. He thought about being told, at twelve, that the Elevatio had been selecting in his line for three generations, that he was the product of a breeding program, that the priest in his house was a monitor.

He thought: *I wouldn't have known what to do with it.*

He said: "I don't know that it would have helped."

"No," she said. "Probably not." A pause. "That doesn't mean it was right."

"No," he agreed. "It doesn't."

They looked at each other across the distance of the Link — the distance between the Oreaule system and the Cendant system,

which was the distance of several Folds, which was now a distance that had a different meaning than it had had a year ago.

He said: "Write to me."

"You're the one who doesn't write," she said.

"I'll write," he said.

She looked at him for one more moment with the look that was not assessment, the simply-looking look.

She said: "Yes. You will." She paused. "Make it count."

The connection closed.

He sat in the Link room for a while after the screen went dark.

The call had taken forty-seven minutes. Forty-seven minutes of his family's voices in his ears, the Cendant system's warm light on their faces, the specific quality of people who had survived something significant and were orienting themselves in the space after it.

He thought about what it meant that he was staying on the City. He had told Donia. He had told Kimme. He had told Janna. Each telling had been different — each person receiving it from their own position, understanding it in the context of what they knew about him and what they needed from the situation.

The City was his home now, in the way that you make a home of a place that was not home when you arrived: by accumulating in it the specific texture of your own life, by developing a relationship to its particular light and particular sound and particular quality of space that becomes, through familiarity, the place against which other places measure themselves.

He got up and walked.

He was doing that more — walking through the City without destination, receiving the perceptual field's information about the space without directing it toward anything specific. The field had been with him since the activation and he had been managing it for months, the ongoing project of attending to what required attention

and backgrounding what did not. Walking through the City was good practice for the management, and it was also, he had found, something he simply wanted to do.

The City was changing.

Not structurally — the lunar rock corridors were what they had always been, the blue-white light was what it had always been, the hum of the systems was the hum it had always been. The texture of who was in the corridors was changing. The board at the docking registry, which he had developed the habit of checking when he walked past the administrative section's outer ring, showed three new Fold-capable vessel registrations in the past two days. Not City-licensed — Guild-certified. The new Guild's certification was eleven days old and had already processed seven Folders through its initial verification.

Seven people who had been carrying the capability and had not been able to develop it, or had been developing it quietly, or had been in the UnImperium's network and were now moving through the City's registry in the open.

Seven in eleven days.

He thought about what the number would be in a year.

He walked past the common area of the Heir-Second block and found Olan in the corridor outside it. Olan saw him and did the thing he always did: fell into step, matched pace, the ease of someone for whom the companionship was the default.

"I hear it went well," Olan said.

"Depends on what you're measuring," Kaiden said.

"The fact that you're walking in a corridor rather than in a Shexosant brig."

"By that measure," Kaiden said, "yes."

Olan walked beside him. He had the quality he had always had — the warm social fluency, the particular ease of someone for whom being in a room with other people was natural rather than performed. He had also, Kaiden thought, the quality of someone who had spent the past several months watching events unfold from the

inside without being fully in them, which had produced in him a specific kind of careful attentiveness.

"The Guild registration," Olan said.

"Yes."

"House Orian has two carriers," Olan said. "That we know of. My cousins, both of them, both tested negative at thirteen. Which — in retrospect—"

"In retrospect, the Testing Protocol was catching what it was catching," Kaiden said.

"Yes." A pause. "They'd like to train. If the certification standards are available."

"They will be," Kaiden said. "Talk to Vex. He's building the founding council's curriculum framework."

Olan looked at him. The warm quality and something more complex underneath, the specific complexity that Kaiden had been learning to read in Olan since the card game table early in the block's cycle. "You knew," Olan said. "When we were playing cards. When you were — being very careful. You knew what you were."

"I suspected," Kaiden said. "I didn't know until I was in the assayor on Hanov."

"But you suspected."

"The pressure behind my left eye," he said. "The voices. The way I found the Holden child in the corridor. I suspected something. I didn't know what."

Olan was quiet for a moment. They had reached a junction — the one where the block's main corridor split toward the residential section and toward the administrative wing. They both stopped at it, as if by mutual agreement that the conversation required the pause of a junction.

"I filed things," Olan said. "Accurately. The reports. I told you I would, and I did." He looked at the corridor. "I filed them accurately and I framed them as neutrally as I could, because the framing was mine and the content was required." He paused. "I want you to know that."

"I know," Kaiden said.

"And I want you to know that when I look at what the reports produced—" He stopped. "I don't think I caused harm. I think I was in a system that was going to produce specific outcomes regardless, and that my specific contribution to those outcomes was — minor. But I was part of the system."

Kaiden looked at him.

"You're going to have to decide what to do with that," he said. "I can't do it for you."

"I know," Olan said.

"What are you thinking."

"I'm thinking," Olan said, "that if there's a governance structure being built, it's going to need people who understand how the old structure worked from the inside. Who know where the leverage points are and where the failures are. Who can look at a proposal and say — this will produce this outcome, because I saw how something similar produced a similar outcome." He paused. "That's a specific expertise. I have it."

Kaiden looked at him.

"Yes," he said.

"Is there a conversation to have."

"There are many conversations to have," Kaiden said. "Most of them are happening in the administrative section. Kimme is coordinating the working groups. Start there."

Olan nodded. He looked at the junction, then at Kaiden. The warm quality at full, the more complex thing underneath it present but not obscuring the warmth.

"It's good to have you back," he said.

Kaiden said: "Yes. It is."

Olan turned toward the administrative wing. Kaiden turned toward the residential section.

He found Kimme in a workspace that had not been a workspace a week ago — a conference room off the administrative wing's second corridor that had been converted by the simple addition of a long table covered in working documents and two data feeds running against the far wall. Two people he didn't know well were at the table ends; a third person he knew slightly — a junior Wayfinder named Fen who had, apparently, developed a detailed and accurate understanding of the pattern library's organizational structure, which made her immediately relevant to six of the working group's active conversations.

Kimme saw him in the doorway. She said something brief to the two people at the table, and they gathered their materials and left, which was the specific ease of someone who had already established that her direction was the relevant direction in this room.

The Wayfinder stayed. Fen, who apparently also understood that her presence was useful enough that the contextual judgment was hers rather than Kimme's, which was itself a sign of something working correctly.

"How did the Link go?" Kimme asked.

"My mother said I've made a great deal of work for everyone."

"High praise."

"Yes." He came into the room. He looked at the documents on the table — the working group frameworks, the timeline drafts, the transition schedules. He had seen most of these in their earlier states; they had developed. The specific quality of documents that have been worked on by someone who knows what they are doing.

"The General's office wants the Shexosant transition support terms clarified before she delivers formal acceptance," Kimme said. "The resettlement world's infrastructure timeline — specifically the dome construction sequence and the terraforming phase schedule."

"I can get that from Nix," he said. "She knows the UnImperium's construction capabilities."

"She's already been in contact with the General's office," Kimme said. "I meant we need someone to sit in the room when the timeline

is finalized. D'Hana is not going to accept numbers she hasn't tested, and testing them requires someone who understands the Fold logistics of moving construction infrastructure to a system that currently has no docking capacity."

He said: "Fen."

The Wayfinder looked up.

"How familiar are you with the approach patterns for establishing a new system in the pattern library?" he asked.

She said: "Extremely." Without hesitation or qualification. The voice of someone who has spent years knowing a specific thing and is finally in a room where knowing it matters.

"Good," he said. "Tomorrow morning, D'Hana's office, eighth hour. Kimme will set it up."

Fen looked at Kimme. Kimme nodded. Fen went back to the document she had been reading.

Kimme looked at Kaiden. "The Fold Room," she said.

"Yes," he said.

"How was it."

He thought about the sixth hour, and about standing in the room where everything had happened for twenty-three years, and about watching Janna show him what it actually was. Not the trance — she had not gone into the trance, this was not a demonstration of the Fold itself but of the room, of the infrastructure, of the booster ring monitoring and what the draw looked like from inside the room rather than from Vex's external signature analysis. She had shown him the panel readings. She had explained the specific way the draw was calibrated. She had stood beside him at the monitoring panel and gone through it with the quality of someone giving a genuine technical briefing, not performing anything.

He had asked questions. She had answered them. It had been, in the specific register of two technically capable people sharing information about a shared problem, the most honest interaction they had had.

He said: "It's going to work."

Kimme received this. She understood what he meant — that the tomorrow Fold, the first under the new terms, with him present and not disrupting, was going to proceed. She understood that this required a level of mutual confidence that had not existed between him and Janna forty-eight hours ago and that existed now, and that the existence of it was its own kind of significant fact.

"Good," she said.

They stood in the converted workspace with the documents on the table and Fen reading in the corner and the City's hum in the walls at its familiar frequency, and the quality between them was the quality of two people who have done something very difficult together and are now at the point where what they have done is settling into the beginning of its consequences.

He thought about what she had said the night she had come to his quarters: *I'm going to make decisions. My own decisions.* He thought about the reading room, a year ago, and the star chart going dark, and the two beats of genuine hesitation before it did.

He said: "Your mother thinks we'll fail."

She was quiet for a moment. "Yes."

"She's often right," he said.

The corner of Kimme's mouth did the thing it occasionally did — not quite a smile, the expression that lived between wry and genuine, that he had been learning to read since the secondary corridors early in his City posting.

"She's also not always right," she said.

He thought about this.

He thought about the City around them, rotating in the Oreaule system's light, the booster rings at their standby readiness, the docking registry board with its seven new certifications in eleven days. He thought about Vex, somewhere in the administrative section, running the pattern library's organizational architecture through the Cognaut interface with the specific quality of someone who has been doing the right work in the wrong context for eleven years and has finally been put in the right one.

He thought about Maren, who had been with him since the growbitat inspection on Bauxitum station, the pressure behind the left eye that had not been urgency or direction but simply presence. He thought about Orvyn, who had been removed from his family at fourteen for carrying what he carried, and who had managed — from the Afterlife, across sixty years — to tell him that three weeks of a cup refusing to move was not failure.

He was about to find out whether the thought arrived.

The hard part isn't what you just did, Orvyn said, in the dry register he used when he was being direct rather than sardonic. *It's what comes after.*

Maren: *He knows.*

A pause.

He'll be fine.

Another pause. Longer. Then:

Probably.

He almost laughed. Not quite — the quality of the thought was more than laughter, the specific quality of receiving something from a person you love that is simultaneously affectionate and honest and incapable of false comfort.

Kimme was looking at the documents on the table. He looked at them with her. The timeline drafts. The working group frameworks. The transition schedules for the governance structure of a civilization that had just agreed, in a Chain-certified document, to operate differently than it had been operating for three hundred years.

Probably, he thought.

The word was right.

Outside, the Oreaule system's star was at its afternoon angle, the City rotating through its arc, everything continuing in its ordinary way — or in the way that things continue when the ordinary has been replaced by something that does not yet have a name, that is only visible as what it is becoming rather than what it is.

He was in the corridor outside the workspace, heading back toward the East block, when he passed the Wayfinder facility.

The tour. The star chart going dark. *Those are not shown for a reason.*

He stopped.

He looked at the facility's entrance, the same entrance, the same blue panel beside it. He thought about Ana Tollivar, who had been Kimme not-quite-pretending to be someone else, and about the two beats of genuine hesitation, and about the twelve months between that moment and this one.

He went in.

The working section was at operational standard — the concentric desks, the Wayfinders at their stations. The display wall showed the star chart at its full operational resolution, the known systems with their data clouds, the Fold pattern status for each one, the City's current position and projected arc.

He looked at the edge of the chart.

The unmarked systems were there. Active designations. Traffic moving through them in its continuous flow. The same systems he had pointed at through the glass of the public-facing display, fourteen months ago, and had watched go dark.

They were still there.

They were still active.

They would remain unmarked for some time — the work of incorporating the UnImperium's systems into the formal chart was years away, the bureaucratic and diplomatic and practical complexity of it requiring more than a certified agreement and seven new Guild registrations. But the traffic was real, and the systems were real, and what had been unshown for a reason was now simply unshown for a different reason, which was the reason of *not yet* rather than the reason of *never*.

He looked at the chart for a while.

Then he went back to the corridor, and the East block, and the work.

FORTY-FOUR

IMPERIAL CITY — OREAULE SYSTEM

THE VIEWPORT WAS the same viewport.

He had stood at other viewports in the City over the past year and some months — the reading room's single narrow glass, the East block's residential window, the secondary corridor's occasional slit of hull-transparency that gave a compressed angle on whatever system was outside. He had learned the City's viewports the way you learn a house's windows: which ones showed what, which ones were positioned for aesthetics and which for function, which ones the light came through at angles that changed through the day as the City rotated.

This viewport was in the administrative section's outer ring, a section he had walked past a hundred times without stopping. It was the same type as the viewport in Chapter 6 of his arrival — the older glass, the pre-City material, the surface bearing the microscopic scratches of three centuries of atmospheric particulate and the specific quality of transparency that older materials have, slightly less

than perfect, slightly more honest than engineered glass. You could see through it completely. You could also see the glass itself.

He had passed it today and stopped.

He stood at it now.

The Oreaule system was outside.

Not for much longer — the Fold was scheduled for the morning, the City moving to the next stop in the Cycle, the Kibos system, the same Kibos system whose mnemonic plate Janna had shown him in the Fold Room two days ago when she had shown him what it actually was. The booster rings were at standby readiness, which he could feel in the perceptual field at the specific frequency of forty thousand fusion torches in a state of prepared dormancy. Not running — available. Waiting for the direction.

He would give it.

Tomorrow morning at the sixth hour he would stand in the Fold Room beside Janna Chadrac and extend his awareness to include the City's volume — the full volume, the sheared hemisphere and the booster rings and the administrative section and the cathedral block and the East residential and the Wayfinder facility and the Throne Room and the corridors and every person in every room. He would hold all of it. He would draw from the booster rings. He would direct the boundary between here and the Kibos system.

The first Chadrac Matriarch had Folded a converted orbital refinery and built a civilization on what it implied.

He was twenty years old and he was going to Fold something the size of a small moon.

He did not feel ready. He did not feel unready. He felt the way he had felt on the unnamed world's flat ground, in the moment before the first deliberate Fold, with the container forty meters away and his hands empty and the resonance principle present in his body

before it was present in his understanding. The ready had arrived before he noticed it was ready.

He supposed that was usually how it went.

Outside the viewport, ships moved.

Not the City's standard traffic — its own supply shuttles and administrative transports and the vessels that conducted the Cycle's ordinary commerce. Other ships. A Guild-certified Folder had arrived in the Oreaule system that morning on a contract originating from the Lyra junction, the same junction House Lyra coordinated, moving cargo that had been waiting for someone with the capability to move it. The certification was eleven days old. The contract had been filed through the Chain's new Fold Services registry, which Kimme had set up in the three days since the agreement.

The registry had thirty-seven entries. Eleven days old, thirty-seven entries. The early ones were cautious — short hauls, familiar routes, carriers who had been working in the UnImperium's network and were now operating with Chain documentation. But the later ones were expanding: longer routes, heavier cargo, destinations that were inside the former Fold monopoly's core systems.

People were moving things.

Not because they had been told they could. Because they had stopped being told they couldn't.

He watched the certified Folder's ship moving through the Oreaule system's traffic pattern, the specific trajectory of a vessel that knew where it was going and was going there. Something about the trajectory had the quality of long familiarity — this person had been doing this work for years, in the spaces the Cycle didn't cover, without Chain documentation. The documentation was new. The work was not.

He thought about the secondary daughter — the castoff, sixty years in the Afterlife hating the institution that had shed her, who

had given him the essential account in the flat tone of someone who had been waiting for someone to ask and had not been asked until now. He thought about the nine preserved minds now in the Afterlife, each of them carrying the full institutional history of what had been maintained and what it had cost. The Elevatio would find them within months, probably — the Commune-capable priests reaching into the Afterlife's network and encountering Chadrac Matriarchs who had not been there before, who had been there yesterday and were there now.

The doctrine's demolition would take time. Institutions did not change their foundational assumptions in response to evidence; they changed them in response to the accumulation of evidence over a long enough period that the accumulated weight became heavier than the maintenance cost of the assumption. The nine minds in the Afterlife were evidence. More evidence would arrive. The Obligator program would produce evidence, as the conditioning worked to prevent Folds of armed vessels and Obligator-certified Folders demonstrated, over years, that the conditioning was possible and that it was real. The Guild certifications would produce evidence. The registry's thirty-seven entries, growing, would produce evidence.

Time did the rest.

He thought about Janna's line: *the galaxy does not want to be free. It wants to be told what to do.* He had said he knew, and he did know, in the sense of believing it to be substantially accurate about a substantial portion of the population. He thought it was probably right about most of it.

Most was not enough.

He thought about the girl on the market level with her palm going through the projection of the City's arrival. Carrying the City as her world, the New Year as her time, the Cycle as the structure of her life — not as an imposition, as the ordinary condition of existing in the civilization she had been born into. What happened to that world when the certainty the Cycle represented began to have alternatives? When other ships moved through the system on non-City

contracts? When the New Year was the City's arrival and also the arrival of a Guild-certified Folder on a Lyra junction route and also, eventually, a dozen other things?

He thought: *it becomes more complicated.*

He thought: *that's not the same as worse.*

He thought about the choice that was now available — the one that had not been available before, the one that required the truth to be accessible before it could be chosen. He thought about all the people in all the systems who had been carrying the recessive and not developing it, who had been inside the structure and not inside the structure by choice but by the absence of any visible alternative, and about what it would mean for them over the next generation as the alternative became visible.

He was not naive about this. The alternative being visible did not mean the alternative being chosen. Many people who had the option to choose would not choose it. Many systems that had been organized around the Imperium's Cycle would stay organized around it because the organization was familiar and the familiar was easier than the unfamiliar. Many of the thirty-seven entries in the Fold Services registry would be made by people who were, otherwise, entirely comfortable inside the existing structure and were simply using a new tool to do something they had been doing anyway.

All of that was real.

And some of the thirty-seven entries would be made by someone for whom the tool changed not just the task but the horizon. For whom the visible alternative was the thing that had always been needed. For whom the specific fact that the choice existed was the thing that changed everything about how they understood their position in the world.

Some.

He thought: *some is where it starts.*

He had stopped trying to decide whether Maren and Orvyn were really his ancestors or some aspect of himself he could only access in their idiom.

The question had seemed important for a long time. He had been working toward the question from the moment the first directional urgency had arrived in the mining corridor, the pre-linguistic push that had preceded language and had eventually resolved into language, into Maren's short direct sentences and Orvyn's longer sardonic ones. He had been trying to understand what they were — where the line was between the preserved consciousness of a dead person and the internalized pattern of a person's values and voice, sustained by the cognition of someone who had known them.

He no longer thought it was the important question.

What they gave him was real. The guidance, the amusement, the accountability, the specific quality of being known by someone who had no reason to flatter him. Whether that came from a consciousness in the Afterlife or from the deepest layer of his own understanding of what a Kentur was supposed to be — it produced the same thing. It pointed him in the same direction.

The important question was not where it came from.

The important question was what you did with it.

He thought about the Fold Room tomorrow.

He thought about forty thousand fusion torches drawing to his direction. He thought about the scale of it — the volume that was going to require holding simultaneously in the quality of directed attention that he had developed across the months of practice, the scale that made the unnamed world's container and the geology sample look like the ball bearing on the training table.

He was not afraid of it.

He was, perhaps, appropriately respectful of it. There was a distinction. He had learned the distinction across three months of

training — the difference between the fear that produced paralysis and the appropriate respect for a thing that was genuinely demanding, that required you to be what you needed to be to meet it. You prepared for the demanding thing. You met it when it arrived. The preparation and the meeting were separate from the fearing of it.

He thought about Janna at the sixth hour, in the room with him. The specific quality of what had happened in the Fold Room two days ago when she had showed him the panel readings: two people standing at a monitoring station discussing the technical specifics of a thing one of them had been doing alone for twenty-three years and the other was going to do for the first time. The awkwardness of it — the specific awkwardness of expertise being shared across the distance of institutional history — and the thing underneath the awkwardness, which was simply two capable people trying to do something right.

He thought: *she said someone should have done this three hundred years ago.*

He thought: *she was right.*

He thought: *it's three hundred years late and we're doing it now.*

The Oreaule system's star was at its late afternoon angle, the City's rotation having moved it toward the edge of the viewport's range. In a few hours it would drop below the hull's horizon line and the system would be behind them in the rotation and then the Fold would come and it would be behind them in every sense.

He had been on this City for just over a year.

He had arrived as a nineteen-year-old second child of a recently elevated minor House, sent to perform the standard Heir-Second term, carrying a token in his left pocket and a specific quality of directional pressure behind his left eye that he had been managing since childhood without knowing what it was.

He was twenty now. He had an unremarkable token that was

back in his possession, retrieved from the evidence container during the disciplinary processing, and the directional pressure had become a full perceptual field that he was still learning to manage but managed better each week.

He was also, apparently, staying.

He had said this to Donia and to Kimme and to Janna, in different registers for different purposes, and all three of them had received it in different ways that all added up to the same fact: someone had decided to stay in the room, and the someone was him.

He thought about what that meant over time.

He thought about being forty, if he was alive at forty, and what the City looked like from forty. He thought about the specific quality of Janna's understanding of governance — the long view that came from twenty-three years of watching civilizations from the vantage of the platform that moved through them. He thought about what twenty more years of this work would produce in him that one year had not produced, what understanding you accumulated from staying when it would have been easier to leave.

He thought: *I don't know.*

He thought: *that's the right answer.*

He thought: *stay and find out.*

He stayed at the glass.

Outside, the certified Folder's ship completed its business in the Oreaule system and began its departure burn. He watched it through the viewport — the trajectory of a vessel that knew its next destination and was moving toward it, the specific quality of something going where it was going without requiring the City's permission to go there.

He watched it until it was outside the viewport's range. Then it was gone.

Don't get comfortable.

Maren. The voice he knew best, the short direct sentences, the economy that communicated what it communicated without embellishment. He had heard this voice in corridors and on growbitat arrays and in Communion rooms and in training sessions and in the dark of a storage bay on a ship whose drive core pulsed at the wrong frequency.

He said, to the viewport: "I know."

He won't.

Orvyn. The longer register, the dry distance, the quality of someone who has been in the Afterlife for sixty years and has achieved a specific kind of equanimity about it that did not preclude the occasional sardonic observation.

A pause. Long enough to have texture.

He's a Kentur.

He stood at the viewport.

The City rotated. The Oreaule system's star moved past the hull's horizon line, and the system was behind the rotation now, and the space ahead was the space between here and the Kibos system, which was the space the tomorrow Fold would cross.

The stars held still.

He looked at them — the specific stars visible from this angle, the ones he had been looking at since the City arrived in the Oreaule system and would not be looking at from this position again after tomorrow. Different stars every few weeks. The Cycle's specific form of time: not hours or days but systems, the City passing through the galaxy's inhabited space on its schedule, each system receiving the City's presence and then watching it leave.

He thought: *I know every viewport I've stood at on this City. I know which systems I've watched from each one. I know the specific quality of Lyra's star and Aquila's and Indus's and Pictor's and Ursa's and the Oreaule star that is now behind the rotation.*

He thought: *I'm going to learn a great many more.*

He thought: *good.*

The work was real. The difficulty was real. The probability of failure at various scales across various timelines was substantial and genuinely concerning and required sustained attention. The galaxy was not going to organize itself into something better simply because the option had been made available; it was going to require decades of the specific quality of attention that came from staying in the room when the room was difficult.

He was not going to get comfortable.

He was going to stay at the glass.

He looked at the stars for a while longer — the specific stars, their specific positions, the specific quality of light that reached the viewport after traveling whatever distance it had traveled from whatever source it had left however long ago. Light that had been traveling before the City was built. Light that would be traveling after everything he was part of had run its course.

The stars held still.

The City rotated.

He watched it all go by.

He was a Kentur, and there was work to do.

AFTERWORD

This novel, I swear, took me longer to write than most of my trilogies did. I *really* wanted to get this one *right,* and I wanted it to feel as rich and layered as possible. As a result, the outline was rewritten *four* times, and I started the manuscript at least *six* times. In fact, I'd gotten almost all the way through Chapter 33 at one point, when I more or less ripped it up and started over. So I *really, really, really* hope you've enjoyed it—the final result is pretty much exactly what I was hoping for: the kind of sci-fi I'd have loved as a kid in the 1980s. I even love the Eighties-style cover art by the inimitable Walter Plethow.

If you *did* enjoy the tale, I'd like to *beg* you to hop on your preferred online bookstore and leave a review—even just a star rating if that's easier and you're pressed for time. If you're not an independent author, it's almost impossible to explain how much those ratings and reviews matter. Without them, bookstores will essentially "bury" a novel, never recommending it and barely even surfacing it in search results. Thank you, thank you, a million times thank you.

I also invite you to check out my many other novels, all on my website at DonJones.com. My "Freebies" page even offers up *six*

entire novels—two complete trilogies—for free, and you don't even have to sign up for anything. Of course, if you'd like to hear from me now and then about new releases, I do have a newsletter, and you can sign up right on that Freebies page.

Finally, I invite you to reach out and say "hi," let me know what you thought of the story, and let me know what other books you've enjoyed recently (I'm always looking for bedtime reading). My website has an "HMU" page that provides an easy way to drop me an email, and you can also find me on Facebook at /DonJonesBooks. I always reply, so I hope you'll be in touch.

Thank you for being a reader.

Don Jones

July 2026

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Shandra also belongs to the big group of people who stoked my interest in sci-fi, a group that includes Buzz Ryan, Cliff Cherry, Linda and Rick Eppinger, and many, many more. Dana Cragg and Evan Oxley hold a very special place in that group as well, as they were fellow readers and movie-watchers who were always recommending new books and films. A heartfelt thank-you to all of you.

And finally, a big thanks to the editors who helped make this book the best it could be: Daniel Stoke and Ellie Fitzsimmons. I appreciate your gentle help and kind words, along with your wise suggestions.

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Endless Sky: New Worlds

Endless Sky: Old Bones

Endless Sky: End Game

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STANDALONE NOVELS

The Never: A Tale of Peter and the Fae

A retelling of *Peter Pan* from the faeries' point of view, where Peter isn't necessarily a hero, and where the story starts long before those children fly into Neverland.

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A tongue-in cheek take on ghost stories, with our hero, Bob, pretending to be an exorcist to scam money out of gullible people. With the help of his ghost friend, of course. It's all just a con... until Bob's past starts to catch up with him, and it suddenly becomes all too real.

A House of Forgotten Quests and the Dragons That Lie Within

A richly imagined literary fantasy in the Victorian style, pondering the question, "what becomes of people who engage on a great, world-changing quest... only to abandon it before its conclusion?" Dr. Alastair Finch must not only answer the question, but also take up some of those quests, if he's to unlock the Gateways and release our world's true source of courage and inspiration: Dragons.

Imperium Galactica

Imperium Galactica is an epic science fiction novel set in a galaxy governed by a single, ancient dynasty whose monopoly on interstellar travel keeps thousands of worlds in perpetual dependency. When nineteen-year-old Kaiden Kentur is thrust from his family's minor mining operation into the heart of Imperial politics, he discovers that the empire's foundations rest entirely on a lie — and that he may be the only person alive with the ability to dismantle it. Equal parts political thriller and coming-of-age story,

Imperium Galactica asks whether genuine change is possible in a system designed to absorb and neutralize every challenge to its own survival.

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For eons, Michael has "corrected" the universe's design flaws by incinerating tens of thousands of worlds, viewing destruction as mere accounting rather than cruelty. But when World 72,664 defies his calculations, the cosmic janitor is forced to stop following the math. *The Prime Wave Accounting* is a gripping trilogy about a burnt-out god who finally decides to give a damn, even if it means breaking the universe he was built to save.

Power Wave • Superior Wave • Supreme Wave

These are also available in the Kindle store, and in paperback format, on Amazon.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Don Jones is a multi-award-winning author of fantasy, science-fiction, cozy mysteries, and cozy fantasies. After a career in tech, numerous positions at tech startups, and more than sixty published tech books (the ones they seemed to sell by the pound, back in the day), Don left it all behind and started writing down the stories that had been banging around in his head. The result is more than two-dozen novels—with more every year—that have received rave reviews and numerous industry awards. Today, Don writes primarily from a cabin near Duck Creek Village, UT, diligently overseen by a Golden-doodle named Corentin.