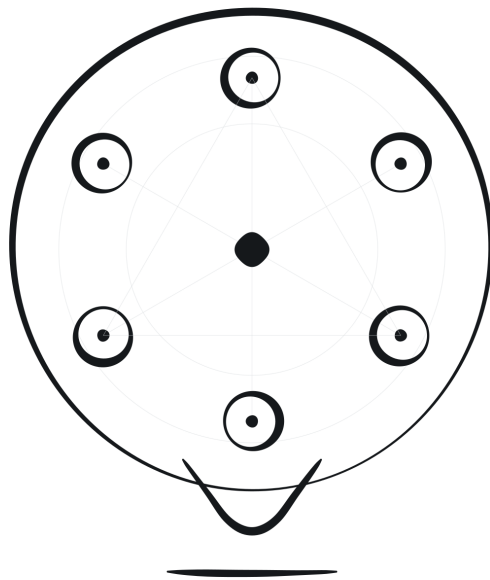




Last Two

/ˈkaj.ʊən/

Prologue

"So it ends," he wrote.

"Who wrote?" Ena asked. The writer was obviously tripping at this point. *Too much drama is addictive*, the writer wrote as if the mere fact of typing it will pay his bills. *It won't*.

"Duuude, these are too many walls being broken, punch the brakes a bit"

Agreed.

He knew the ending. He knew the beginning. They stood on either side of him as parents who had carried an argument too far and now expected the child to choose.

Ena stopped typing. Both knew what's about to come. The pain, the sorrow, none of that matter. Both knew this needed to done. We, in fact, knew...

His fingers hovered above the keys. He could no longer tell which side of the sentence they belonged to. From the chair he was writing the words-from somewhere inside the words, he was watching his own hands write them.

His thoughts stopped with his fingers.

The cursor blinked.

It seemed to be the only living thing in the universe.

Somewhere on the other side of the sentence, the writer considered deleting that observation for being too dramatic.

"Leave it," Ena said.

It remained, though neither of them accepted responsibility.

Then the monitor returned around it: off-white, almost gray, corners chipped, the plastic yellowed by a sun Ena could not remember. A price sticker clung crookedly to the frame.

US\$3.14

Too cheap, perhaps, to be mourned.

A silverfish emerged between the number keys, crossed the crooked price sticker, and disappeared beneath the monitor. It had found the pause useful.

An expired productivity banner rose over the cursor.

YOU HAVE BEEN WRITING FOR 0:00:00. WOULD YOU LIKE TO UPGRADE TO A MORE BELIEVABLE FUTURE?

The writer closed it. The banner opened a smaller window asking whether the closure had resolved his narrative concern. Ena waited until the smaller window asked for a rating, then closed the monitor with one finger.

The keys glowed beneath his hands. Every keystroke made the rich mechanical sound of a small door being closed.

Program writer.

"Yes," Ena whispered. "I'm a program writer."

The certainty lasted less than a breath.

"A program writer?"

He said it as if someone else were in the room. Someone who knew him.

The memory had already begun to fade. He held what remained of it too tightly and felt it break into smaller things: the hum of a ship, an empty chair, a woman's laughter at the edge of silence.

That was what one did at the end. One counted fragments and called the counting of a self.

The cursor blinked again.

Both knew.

So it ends.

Moxy

Chapter I

"Cap'n," Moxy said.

Ena did not move.

"Cap'n?"

She stood beside the command chair, near enough to touch him and refusing to. His eyes were open, fixed on something beyond Kaiven's bridge, something already gone, or perhaps something that had not happened yet.

The bridge lights had found a sickly white hue. For a moment they resembled glowing keys. The forward glass held one patient star at its center, blinking like a cursor against the black.

Above the galley hatch, an antique safety screen had frozen on a shipyard campaign: CALM IS A CREW BENEFIT. ASK YOUR EMPLOYER. Nobody remembered who had paid for it. Kaiven had kept the message long after the company went under.

"I feel so much inside me," Ena said.

His gaze shifted. First to her shoulder, then to her mouth, and finally to her eyes. His fingers curled once against the armrest.

Moxy allowed herself the smallest smile. "Sometimes silence has wha' you're after."

Ena contemplated the silence.

A few seconds passed. The proper amount of time that indicates this is profound.

A fart escaped him.

Moxy waited one solemn beat.

"Dhere it is."

Ena looked toward the patient star. His voice climbed into theatrical outrage. "What the hell? That's it? That's what eternity had to say?"

"Concise," Moxy replied.

Ena laughed. She tried not to, which made it worse. For several seconds the captain of Kaiven and his most suspicious officer laughed at nothing while a fuel warning blinked red above them.

Inside the warning panel, a maintenance mite moved toward the red light for warmth. When the indicator briefly turned green, it moved back.

Moxy kept moments like that. They adhered to her: Ena laughing, Pou singing the wrong words, the mineral smell of the corridor after the heaters woke. Simple evidence that everyone had been present at the same time.

When the laughter passed, Ena looked at her with the relief of someone finding what he had already lost.

"Wha'?" she said.

"Nothing."

His mouth almost smiled. "All right. What've you got?"

"Crew's ready. Kaiven, not so much."

Ena rose. "Yeah. Sounds like us. Let's begin."

Kaiven hung above the cloudline like a blade carved from bone and starlight. Ivory armor swept back from her narrow prow in overlapping ribs, framing a maze of exposed machinery, dark observation windows, and violet-lit conduits that pulsed beneath the hull like a slow heartbeat. Glass domes crowned her spine, while the great rings of her engines burned purple at the stern, making the ship look powerful enough to outrun anything in the system. Moxy knew better. Kaiven was beautiful, impossible, and *home*. But with the fuel reserves falling and the stores nearly bare, even a ship like her could starve.

Moxy and Ena followed the sound of an argument toward the open cargo lock.

Dock authorities divided damage into three categories: accidental, negligent, and billable. The distinction between the first two occupied several legal libraries. The third occupied Assessor Orlo.

"Damage?" Blondie was saying. "Damage is what yourr dock did to my ship."

Assessor Orlo stood beneath Kaiven's belly with a slate held like a legal shield. He had circled a blackened scar on the hull. "Berth didn't discharge a weapon."

"Neither did I," Blondie said, almost managing innocence.

"The thermal profile..." Orlo began, but-

"Suggests you should stop pointing that crownless shit at me," Blondie said with the voice of a queen of a thousand cities.

Blondie stood very still, which was how she expressed the final stage before violence. Faint gold moved beneath her skin. Orlo glanced toward Ena with the exhausted hope of a man seeking a more reasonable authority.

Ena glanced toward Moxy.

Coward, her eyebrow told him.

Captain, his answered.

"Blondie," Ena said, "what do we owe?"

"Nothing. Your dock owes us a prrproper apology."

Orlo turned his slate. The figure had six digits.

"Ay. Dhat's not nothin'," Moxy said.

Orlo expanded the invoice. "Hull abrasion. Unauthorized thermal discharge. Berth contamination. Intimidation of dock personnel."

Blondie pointed at the last item. "That charrge is an opinion."

"I am the subject."

"Rremove yourself from it."

Orlo tapped the slate. "Disagreement recorded as billable." His attention returned to Ena.

"She means the charge," Ena said.

"I most cerrtainly do not," Blondie said.

Moxy leaned toward the slate. "You billed us for dhe berth paint?"

"Correct."

She looked down. The berth had three visible layers of paint, none from the same century. "Which layer?"

Orlo zoomed in until a single gray flake occupied the display. "This one. D'you see it?"

"Tha' flake is history now," Xoxz shouted from somewhere inside Kaiven. "Don' throw him out."

Orlo added UNAUTHORIZED ARCHAEOLOGICAL CLAIM.

Ena closed his eyes.

Behind them, Pou emerged from under the ship carrying a reactor baffle designed to require a loading machine. He balanced it on one shoulder and held a cup in his free hand.

"Where's the loader?" Ena asked.

"Union break." Pou sipped.

Ena pointed at the baffle on his shoulder.

Pou glanced at it. "Load's not union."

He set the baffle down with enough gentleness to embarrass gravity. One corner had been fused with a patch of bright blue alloy.

Orlo's slate chirped.

"Unlicensed hull repair."

Pou examined the blue corner. "Bad classification. Khis body's licensed."

"You are not licensed to repair it."

"Didn't repair it."

"Who did?"

Everyone looked toward the engine bay.

A second metallic shriek answered for Xoxz.

Moxy pointed. "Dhat wasn't blue."

"It is now."

From inside the engine bay came a metallic shriek, then Xoxz shouting, "Tha's a very damn good sound!"

Every light on the dock went out.

Orlo stared into the dark.

"S'a sound best appreciated without electricity," Xoxz added.

Emergency strips awakened. Xoxz crawled backward from Kaiven's open service hatch with a ceramic soup spoon between his teeth. He removed it and considered the utensil. Its bowl had melted into a precise silver hook.

"Relay's fixed."

"With a spoon," Ena said deadpan.

"Nah. Tha relay was listenin' sideways. Spoon corrected her." Xoxz tucked it into a pocket. "They worked it out between them."

Orlo stared at the spoon. "D'you have certification for that utensil?"

Xoxz tucked the hook closer. "She was a spoon then. Diff'rent profession."

Orlo entered a mark on his slate. "Certification absent."

"She's apprenticing."

Pou raised his cup in support.

Moxy turned away before Orlo could see her smile.

Orlo quietly reduced the damage figure by one digit. Moxy saw him do it and liked him a little better.

His slate immediately displayed CONFLICT DE-ESCALATED. COLLECTION MAY RESUME. A dockside vending unit, which had lowered a privacy shutter during the argument, raised it again and offered every witness a discounted tube of calming soup. The discount required a declaration that no one had felt threatened.

Orlo looked at the offer. Blondie looked at Orlo. The vending unit lowered its shutter with excellent professional instinct.

Then Kaiven's cargo door descended three centimeters and knocked the slate out of his hand.

Nobody moved.

The door rose again.

"Merrely mechanical settling," Blondie said.

Orlo retrieved the slate. "Your ship assaulted me. Filed already."

"She has excellent judgment."

He restored the digit.

Blondie watched the number return. "Touch that invoice again and I will reenact the Siege of Tal at perrsonal scale."

Orlo's stylus paused. "What occurred at Tal?"

"The city became a lake."

"Tal was built in a desert."

"There was water afterward."

Orlo considered this, added HISTORICAL INTIMIDATION, and did not touch the number again.

Eer050 appeared in the cargo lock. He had the solemn expression of a prophet whose apocalypse had arrived exactly on schedule and still disappointed him.

"Captain. We must speak."

"How long have we got?" Ena asked.

"At current expenditure, thirty-one days until insolvency."

Blondie folded her arms. "Hmph."

Eer050 turned to Ena. "Nineteen days of complete nutrition. Forty-three if Pou stops eating."

Pou looked into his cup. "Math sounds."

"Seventy-one hours of safe reactor material. One intergalactic fold with a tolerable margin, or one and a half if death has become an acceptable maintenance strategy."

Ena came from a place where death entered conversation through the front door and was offered food before anyone permitted it dignity. His people joked beside graves because grief was already heavy and did not need ceremonial assistance.

"Death's been on the maintenance schedule for years," Ena said. His voice settled before the next question. "And repairs?"

Eer050 glanced up at Kaiven.

The ship chose that moment to vent a ribbon of pink coolant from her port side.

"I believe she has spoken, Captain," Eer050 said.

Blondie put one hand against the hull. The gold beneath her skin dimmed. "She is all rright."

Ena paid enough of Orlo's invoice to release Kaiven from the berth. Afterward their shared account looked like a philosophical statement about absence.

They gathered on the bridge. Xoxz restored main power by asking everyone to stamp once on the deck. The fact that it worked pleased only Xoxz.

"For the recordèd account," Eer050 said, "that was not maintenance."

"Kept tha power on," Xoxz replied.

"By what mechanism?"

"Community, duh."

Ena looked at the restored lights. "There was an old Earth show about community. Somehow this is less responsible."

Eer050 began to object, but Kaiven's lights brightened when Xoxz patted the console.

"Do not encourage him," Eer050 told the ship.

"Kaiven has one jump," Ena said, studying the reserve.

"One and a half, Cap'n," Moxy corrected.

"Home's usually in the half we don't have."

"Yeah," Ena said, dropping into a conspiratorial murmur. "That's usually how home works."

This was what she had brought him here to see: not only the numbers, but the faces around them. Blondie pretending hunger was an insult she could intimidate. Pou distributing the last stimulant tea. Eer050 calculating futures in which fewer of them died. Xoxz listening to the deck as if Kaiven were telling him a secret.

Moxy touched her console.

A Federation dossier opened above the central table. The figure in it was smaller than Ena expected-no taller than a human child, though ancient folds crossed his face and a growth of silver bristles sharpened his jaw. His hands trembled where the custody image had caught them.

RAGE

INTERGALACTIC FUGITIVE. WANTED ALIVE.

Moxy expanded the reward.

Inside a droplet trapped beneath the blue bark of a sovel tree, an iron-binding protein closed around one atom and changed shape by 0.8 nanometers. The tree continued the private work of remaining alive.

At the Federation Office of Recovery, Case Editor Isha Deyn inspected the bounty file for eleven seconds. The field marked PROPERTY DESCRIPTION was blank. An automated check explained that disclosure was optional for transit-risk assets. Isha approved the file; her meal interval had begun thirteen seconds earlier.

On Dock Seventeen, a ration vendor dropped a stack of twelve nutrient squares. Eleven landed inside their wrapping. The twelfth slid beneath a refrigeration unit and was entered into inventory as a promotional expense.

Under the oldest nursery tower on Zenox-08, Rage warmed fourteen milliliters of blue nutrient fluid to 38.2 degrees. When the temperature reached 38.3, he frowned and waited.

Across 18,204 licensed bounty terminals, the reward finished rendering. Seventeen terminals immediately displayed advertisements for restraint insurance. One displayed soup.

On Kaiven's bridge, the number became large enough to resemble an answer. The missing noun beside it became correspondingly easy not to see.

No one spoke.

"Found us a year, Cap'n," she said.

Eer050 leaned closer. Blondie stopped pretending not to care about money. Even Pou set down his cup.

"For one thief?" Ena asked. "Man better be fucking incredible."

"Must be a good one."

The charge appeared beneath Rage's image.

THEFT OF PROTECTED FEDERATION PROPERTY.

Ena read it twice. "What'd he steal?"

Moxy had asked the dossier the same question in seven different ways. The answer had always been the same white space.

"File doesn't say."

One Jump Home

Chapter II

Kaiven disliked financial meetings.

The ship had no declared intelligence, which allowed everyone to project motives onto ordinary failures. During arguments about money the ventilation became judgmental, doors hesitated before opening, and the galley dispenser produced only warm water regardless of the button pressed.

They met around the navigation well. Beneath its glass, the mapped universe curved into a blue bowl. M314 glimmered at the far rim: a cluster of galaxies braided by old wormholes and governed, in principle, by the Federation.

The rim carried a faded tourist ribbon left by a previous owner: M314: SEE SEVENTEEN GALAXIES BEFORE THE TAX REVIEW. The review had survived the tourism board by four hundred years.

The phrase *in principle* performed vital administrative work. It allowed the Federation to claim every inhabited star while postponing the expensive inconvenience of being useful there.

Ena aligned his slate with the edge of the navigation well. Kaiven's ventilation shifted it by two millimeters. He aligned it again.

Eer050 placed six columns of figures in the air, adjusted their spacing, and checked each total while touching thumb to knuckle in a fixed sequence. The figures were legible after the first check. His mind offered the second as the price of preventing an omitted cost from becoming a body.

The closest Common name was obsessive-compulsive disorder. Eer050 used the full name. Too many people had shortened it into a compliment about shelves.

Moxy waited until his thumb left the sixth knuckle.

"These are our choices."

"There are only three columns," Pou said.

"Dhe other three are consequences."

"I liked it better when we had choices."

Eer050 opened a seventh column.

"Wha's dhat column?" Moxy asked.

"Items the crew has classified as essential despite all available evidence."

The column expanded until it blocked the navigation map.

Blondie pointed at a line near the top. "Shield polish is essential."

"It consumes enough power to heat the galley for three months."

"The shields represent us."

"They represent vanity at relativistic velocity."

"Good. Accuracy at last."

Eer050 highlighted another item. "Pou: emergency snack reserve."

"Correct."

"It weighs forty-two kilograms."

"Large emergencies."

"You ate twelve kilograms last month."

Pou thought about it. "Medium emergency."

Ena scrolled further. "Why does Xoxz have a recurring charge for anonymous bolts?"

From under the table, Xoxz answered, "They prefer privacy."

"Bolts do not have preferences," Eer050 said.

"Tha' attitude's why they leave."

Moxy found Ena's name in the column. "Heated command chair, Cap'n?"

Everyone looked at him.

"Medical," Ena said.

"For what?"

"Command."

Moxy nodded slowly. "Debilitating condition."

Ena deleted the chair heater.

Kaiven immediately lowered the bridge temperature by two degrees.

"Retaliation," Pou said. "Khat's clear."

"Ships do not retaliate," Eer050 replied. "The claim remains unverified."

The ventilation blew directly into his face.

They could sell Kaiven and buy passage inward. They could take local cargo work for two months and starve in one. They could make a single fold to M314, find Rage, and purchase a year of food, fuel, and reactor glass with the reward.

A gray ship rat emerged beneath the navigation well carrying a strip of pink insulation. It studied the six adults considering professional violence, lowered its head, and began reversing into the wall without turning around.

Ena lifted one boot away from the access seam. "Hey, buddy. Bad meeting. You're clear."

The rat and its insulation disappeared into Kaiven.

Or they could go home.

Ena looked at that route longest. Home was not a planet. It was the nearest place that would let them arrive poor. The fold would consume everything. The remaining half-jump was the mathematical kindness people offered plans they knew were impossible.

"Might coast the final distance," Pou said.

"For eleven years," Eer050 replied.

Pou considered the route. "Bad lift. Quiet shift, though."

Ena sighed. "Great. We've reached the damn episode where the meeting becomes the emergency."

He had made the crew watch enough ancient Earth comedy that no one asked which episode. Eer050 had once requested a formal index. Ena had refused on artistic grounds.

Blondie stood at the edge of the navigation well. "Wait, sell Kaiven? She

ain't for sale. Correct the column."

"Everything is a choice," Eer050 said.

"She is not for sale, you crownless jackass."

Gold stirred beneath her hands. The little galaxies reflected there, and for a moment she appeared to hold M314 in her palms. Blondie loved like an empire: imperfectly, magnificently, and with maps that showed no independent states.

Xoxz lay under the table with his ear against the deck. He was autistic. The writer had initially reached for a vague phrase about a disorder, then proposed looking it up later.

Ena looked past the table, toward the part of the room where unfinished sentences waited. "Dude. He told us he was autistic. Type faster."

The sentence caught up. Six overlapping voices and seven bright columns were harder for Xoxz to separate than Kaiven's vibration through one cheekbone. The crew treated the floor as a valid seat and did not make him defend it.

"Cap'n. You with us?" Moxy asked.

"Kaiven says if we sell her, she will haunt the buyer."

"Kaiven does not speak."

"That is why she is so difficult to interrupt."

Ena enlarged Rage's dossier. "Alive only."

"No kill order. No military flag. We find him, ask our questions, bring him back breathing."

Eer050's ocular implants narrowed on the charge. "Bounty recovery is lawful in every M314 member system except two, and Rage has no registered protection in either."

"Law without standing is only a threat wearing seals," Blondie said.

Everyone looked at her.

"What?" Blondie demanded.

"Nothin'," Moxy said. "Good sentence, is all."

Blondie looked offended by the possibility.

Pou reached into his coat and put a ration square in the center of the table. It was the last full one. Someone had cut it into six uneven pieces.

"Vulnerable lives matter," he said. "Right now, that includes us."

The warm-water dispenser clicked behind him.

"And possibly the coffee machine," he added.

Eer050 opened its power history. "The coffee dispenser has retained nine percent of our auxiliary reserve over the last four months."

"Retained where?" Ena asked.

Eer050 enlarged the entry. "It has classified the expenditure as pending beverage preparation."

Ena turned toward Xoxz. His voice rose an octave. "Dude. What the hell?"

Xoxz remained under the table. "She was tryin' real hard."

"It produced warm water."

"Failure is expensive."

Pou lifted his cup. "Still drank it."

"Why?" Blondie asked.

"Solidarity."

The dispenser produced another cup of warm water without being asked. Pou accepted it.

"Scab," Moxy said.

The dispenser displayed a cheerful amber spiral.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO HEAR ABOUT OUR BEVERAGE JOURNEY?

"No," Ena said.

YOUR PREFERENCE FOR A SIMPLER EXPERIENCE HAS BEEN SAVED.

Ena stared at it. "That's how they get you, man. First a machine makes one bad drink. Then it calls the bad drink a journey. Then it sells you a membership so you can complain faster."

Moxy took the cup from Pou and pressed the power switch. "Save it for dhe revolution, Cap'n."

Ena watched them eat. Nobody took the largest piece. They were each trying to be secretly generous in full view of everyone else, which made the meal inefficient and the ship worth saving.

"Xoxz," he said. "Can we make the fold?"

"Yeah. She can."

"Okay. Can we return?"

Xoxz smiled without humor. "Diff'rent questions."

"Yeah," Ena said. "That episode never ends well."

Ena turned to Moxy. "How current is the trace?"

"Rage used a stolen medical credential at a trading station twelve days ago. Supplies went missing. The trail points toward Zenox-08."

Eer050's expression changed so slightly that Moxy almost missed it.

"You know the planet," she said.

"I know of it."

"Difference?"

He did not elaborate.

Ena rested his hand on Kaiven's navigation rim. The metal was warmer than the room. Ships did not become homes because they carried you safely. They became homes because, after enough damage, you knew which part of the groan meant danger and which part meant *I am still here*.

"We investigate," he said. "No collection until we know who we're collecting and why."

"Fuel, Captain," Eer050 reminded Ena.

Ena looked at the last crumbs in the center of the table.

"All right. We ask fast."

The vote was not formal. Blondie placed her palm on the hull. Pou nodded. Xoxz knocked twice on the deck and received, after a delay, one knock back. Eer050 closed five of his six columns.

Moxy entered the course.

Kaiven opened her wormhole drive like an old animal opening one bright eye.

Home vanished from the map.

As Written

Chapter III

The Federation contract had eleven thousand words.

This was considered concise. Federation legal language had evolved under the pressure of two opposing needs: everything must be stated, and nothing important should be understood before acceptance.

Xoxz read the title.

Pou read the payment figure.

Blondie read the provisions permitting force and found them "timid."

Eer050 read everything, including the punctuation, then announced that the punctuation favored the Federation.

The acceptance console opened a cheerful blue window.

WELCOME, INDEPENDENT RECOVERY PARTNER. YOUR SAFETY IS OUR SECOND PRIORITY.

A smiling blue polygon appeared beneath the message.

"I am CIVIL-7, your Contractual Interface for Verified Independent Labor. You may call me Civil."

"Not callin' you that," Moxy said.

"Preference recorded as positive engagement."

A sanitation drone crossed the passage behind them, heard the phrase *recovered property*, and extended a barcode reader toward Pou. It measured him, withdrew the reader, and continued without opening a case.

"'n' khe first?" Pou asked.

The window changed.

SUCCESSFUL ASSET RECOVERY.

"At least it is honest," Eer050 said.

"Dhe contract ain't," Moxy replied.

Before they could continue, the console began a mandatory orientation.

QUESTION 1 OF 48: ARE YOU VOLUNTARILY ACCEPTING THIS ASSIGNMENT?

Moxy touched DEFINE VOLUNTARILY.

The orientation returned to Question 1.

"*C'est pas la mer à boire*," Ena said.

"Marine consumption is not required," Civil replied.

Ena closed his eyes. "I would now like the sea removed from the contract."

Civil opened a help panel.

OCEANIC CONTENT MAY INCLUDE TIDES, SALT, AND UNLICENSED DREAD. WOULD YOU LIKE TO SPEAK TO A WATER SPECIALIST?

"No one should speak to a water specialist," Ena said.

"Preference recorded as a request for additional specialists."

"Choice completion remains available," Civil said.

"Berth-talk for *no*," Moxy said. "S'not an answer."

"She answered. Tha answer's still bad," Xoxz said.

Ena selected YES.

QUESTION 2 OF 48: DO YOU POSSESS APPROPRIATE RESTRAINT TRAINING?

Blondie selected YES.

"You have restraint training?" Ena asked.

"I have trrained others to show restraint."

"That is not the same."

"It was to them."

The console requested certification.

Blondie placed one glowing hand on the scanner.

The console accepted it.

Eer050 looked personally betrayed by technology.

Question 17 displayed a diagram of a fleeing suspect.

WHEN PURSUING A HIGH-VELOCITY FUGITIVE, YOU SHOULD:

- A. MAINTAIN SAFE DISTANCE
- B. REQUEST AUTHORIZED SUPPORT
- C. AVOID COMPETING IN RAW SPEED

Xoxz selected all three.

PLEASE SELECT ONE ANSWER.

"She objects ta comprehensive safety," he said.

Question 31 read:

RECOVERED PROPERTY MAY DISPLAY BEHAVIORS THAT ENCOURAGE EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT.
DO YOU AGREE TO MAINTAIN PROFESSIONAL OBJECTIVITY?

The bridge became quiet.

Pou set both palms on the table. "Floor trukh: property doesn't fuckin' behave."

Moxy opened the definition. The contract produced four hundred additional words and no examples.

"One whole damn page hidin' a noun," she said. "Efficient."

Ena looked at the unchecked box.

Then the ration display warned that tomorrow's breakfast had been reclassified as optional.

Ena glanced past the acceptance field toward the reader, who had no ration display and therefore enjoyed a morally superior chair.

"Yeah. I know."

Moxy followed his gaze. "Reader feedin' us?"

"No."

"Can hold dhe opinion till breakfast."

He checked it.

The orientation congratulated them with animated stars.

"Your certification score is eighty-one percent," Civil said. "This exceeds the legal minimum by one percent. Congratulations on not creating additional paperwork."

Xoxz caught one on his console and tried to drag it into a storage folder.

"What are you doing?" Eer050 asked.

"Paid fer it."

"Decorative certification assets cannot be retained," Civil said.

Xoxz dragged harder. The star stretched, split, and fell into a maintenance sandbox with its Federation validation seal still attached.

Eer050 straightened. "That is unrecorded behavior."

"Unauthorized duplication," Civil said.

"Now we paid fer two."

Moxy stood behind Ena at the acceptance console. "You can still close it."

"Can I?"

"Dhe window, yes. Our hunger, probably not."

The contract described Rage as a repeat thief, an obstructionist, a saboteur, and an unlawful custodian of protected property. It described the Federation as the injured party. It did not contain the name of a single injured person.

Ena felt old anger move toward the missing noun. It was often right about the existence of harm and dangerously eager to name its author before the evidence arrived. He knew better than to mistake its certainty for a completed fact.

"For once," Eer050 said, "we accept the law as written."

Moxy glanced at him. "Meaning?"

Pou examined the empty ration display. "Meaning we eat."

From beneath an access panel, Xoxz said, "Still don' say wha' Rage took."

Ena's hand remained above the acceptance field.

There were grand forms of corruption: judges bought with moons, civilizations erased for minerals, holy wars underwritten by manufacturers of replacement limbs. But most corruption was smaller. It began when a tired person saw an unanswered question and decided that, for today, the blank could remain blank.

He thought of Kaiven stranded and cold. He thought of each member of the crew alone because he had insisted on the moral cleanliness of an empty fuel tank.

Desperation did not make a wrong thing right.

It made the wrong thing look temporarily affordable.

"We take the job as written," Ena said. "We bring Rage back alive. If the facts differ from the file, we break agreement."

He pressed his hand to the field.

Ena's palm left forty-three skin cells and 0.006 milliliters of moisture on the acceptance field. The console translated heat, pressure, and identity into consent. None of those measurements included doubt.

At Dorr Freight Receiving, Ovan Tesh signed for six chairs. The shipment contained five chairs and a ladder. Ovan marked it complete after determining that the ladder could be sat upon by a sufficiently motivated employee.

At Saint Orra, Assessor Orlo's travel notice entered the intergalactic collections queue between a disputed moon and seven unpaid parking rotations. The system assigned all nine matters equal moral urgency.

On the agricultural habitat Corda, Nali Venn promised her brother she would return before the irrigation lamps dimmed. She meant it completely. The lamps were scheduled to fail in nineteen minutes.

On Kaiven, the contract entered.

Across the bridge, displays bloomed with Federation blue. A pleasant voice thanked them for supporting lawful intergalactic order. The bounty packet unpacked maps, warrants, biometric patterns, and an approved list of restraints.

Deep beneath those visible things, a process with no name unfolded once.

It found the navigation system. It found the comm array. It found Kaiven's old maintenance channels, where centuries of incompatible machines had learned to misunderstand one another without complaint.

It generated an empty return field, folded itself beneath the field, and presented the absence for inspection.

Then it made itself small and waited.

Ena watched the contract seal.

"The acceptance is recordèd," Eer050 said.

Moxy looked at the blank beside PROPERTY DESCRIPTION.

Nothing had changed except that now the omission belonged partly to them.

Rage

Chapter IV

At Saint Orra, the last trading station before the M314 gate, every species had built the part it needed and left the rest to load-bearing optimism.

Saint Orra sold food, medicine, weapons, prophecy, replacement organs, and directions to cheaper places selling all five. The directions were its most reliable product.

Markets clung to both sides of a central spindle. Bridges crossed open air inside transparent lungs. Elevators moved diagonally because, according to local theology, vertical travel encouraged arrogance. Far below, three tiny suns turned around one another like coins circling a drain.

Rage had been there twelve days earlier.

According to a medicine vendor, he was no taller than her counter.

According to Brother Omm, a cargo priest who blessed freight according to weight, Rage was an ancient giant who wore the body of a child as penance.

"Metaphorical giant?" Moxy asked.

"My faith does not distinguish."

"Can it distinguish long enough to give me a heigh'?"

Brother Omm weighed the question in one palm. "That measurement exceeds metaphor tolerance. Regret-light. Consequence-heavy."

Moxy entered unhelpful in her notes.

"Is that my official statement?"

"Dhat's official now."

According to station security, Rage could outrun modern targeting systems. According to a tea seller, his hands trembled so badly at rest that she had held his cup for him.

"Dangerous?" Ena asked.

The tea seller considered. "Paid clean."

Ena nodded.

"Not what I asked."

"It's what people usually mean."

Officer Neral showed them footage of Rage crossing a crowded concourse. Three targeting drones chased him at full acceleration. Rage vanished between frames, reappeared at a pedestrian signal, and waited for it to change.

"He obeyed the crossing indicator?" Ena asked.

"Filed a complaint durin' active pursuit," Neral said. "Trace-clean, too."

Ena raised an eyebrow.

"While escapin'?"

"The complaint was thorough, correctly time-stamped, and trace-clean."

Moxy opened it. Rage had cited six safety violations, two privacy statutes, and "a general decline in professional standards."

The station had upheld four of the violations.

"Five," Neral said. "We appealed the fifth because he used a damned semicolon

incorrectly."

Moxy examined the complaint. "Ay. Semicolon's righ'."

Neral's expression acquired a new enemy.

Behind him, the evidence scavenger finally freed its beak from the seal. It walked three triumphant steps, discovered the seal had attached to one wing, and resumed traveling backward. Station security's public-information screen brightened above it:

REPORT UNUSUAL BEHAVIOR. DO NOT BECOME IT.

Neral did not look around. Moxy decided this was the discipline of a man who had been assigned the same sign more than once.

The punctuation was not the only unusual detail. The complaint carried a live navigation checksum inside its return address.

Behind Neral, a six-winged station scavenger pecked at a discarded evidence seal until the adhesive caught its beak. It spent the rest of the interview walking backward with official evidence attached.

"Why's a grammar fight carryin' coordinates?" Moxy asked.

"Punctuation incident," Neral corrected. "Traceability policy requires every complaint to remain attributable to its author."

"Rage filed his trail while escapin' you?"

Neral straightened. "The policy performed exactly as designed."

The coordinates pointed to six places at once, one of them the security office in which they stood.

"Ay. Beautifully," Moxy said.

"Refund his filing fee?"

Neral looked away.

They divided the station between them.

Blondie visited the officials and returned with classified docking footage because no one had been brave enough to tell her it was classified.

"How did you obtain it?" Ena asked.

"I requested it."

"And they gave it to you?"

Blondie's gold eyes narrowed. "Eventually. They rreconsidered."

Ena decided the adverb contained enough violence already.

Pou spoke to the porters. They remembered a small old stranger who helped lift an overturned pressure cart, then disappeared before he could be thanked.

Eer050 compiled the thefts: habitat batteries, thermal blankets, infant formula, medical gel, antique biological regulators. The list had the shape of a crime and the contents of a nursery.

Xoxz bought a broken music cylinder and announced that it knew where Rage had gone.

"Did it witness him?" Moxy asked.

"Nah. She's missin' a piece."

He showed her an empty socket in the cylinder's base.

"Broken things miss pieces."

"Exactly. Strange how few go lookin' fer them."

Moxy left him at a noodle stall and followed the medical supply chain instead.

The stolen formula had been designed for six-limbed neonatal metabolisms and modified at purchase for a respiratory pigment not found in Federation records. The vendor remembered Rage arguing over the expiration date.

"He threatened you?"

"Not personal. Threatened the manufacturer at considerable length."

Moxy glanced around the stall. "Were dhey here?"

"Ain't in this system." The vendor returned to the logs. "Didn't improve the formula."

Moxy asked to see the transaction logs. While the vendor searched, every public screen in the market changed at once.

Rage's custody image looked down from a hundred walls.

Then the image smiled.

The recorded Rage had not smiled before.

"That's unsettlin'," the vendor said.

"A little."

Text appeared beneath Rage's image.

THIS PHOTOGRAPH IS THIRTY-SEVEN YEARS OLD.

The official height changed by two centimeters.

THESE CENTIMETERS MATTER.

The charge OBSTRUCTION OF FEDERATION JUSTICE briefly became IMPROVEMENT OF FEDERATION SPELLING.

The vendor covered her mouth.

"He's correctin' his own bounty," Moxy said.

"Would you let strangers get your measurements wrong?"

Moxy thought of the crew. "Apparently I do."

The image raised one trembling finger to its mouth. Behind the official warning, a line of coordinates flickered too fast for ordinary capture.

Moxy caught them.

The screens returned to advertisements.

Her comm opened. Eer050 sounded offended. "We have sufferèd an intrusion."

"Any damage?"

"A humiliating absence of damage. He entered Kaiven's systems, examined our cargo, and left."

Xoxz joined the channel. "He took my damn spoon!"

"The melted one?" Ena asked.

"Hey, I had plans fer her!"

Moxy sent the coordinates to the crew. They resolved to Zenox-08.

"Huh, he wanted us to see that," Ena said.

"Or wanted the Federation to see us seeing it," Eer050 replied. "The ambiguity appears designèd."

Moxy hooked her thumb beneath the console edge and glanced through the market's transparent skin. A dark vessel hung beyond the station lights, distant enough to be innocent. Its hull had no registry shine and no windows. When her gaze found it, the ship eased behind Saint Orra's spindle.

"Shit. Dirty wake," she said. "Got company."

Kaiven's sensors turned. The vessel was gone.

Back aboard, Xoxz sat in the engine bay mourning his spoon. On the deck before him he had arranged the bounty packet's machine code into concentric rings.

"Find anythin'?" Moxy asked.

"Door's open," Xoxz said. "S'not one of ours."

At the center of the rings, an unsigned return field sat inside routine contract traffic. It appeared to contain no message and no destination. Each time Xoxz isolated it, the contract regenerated it as required correspondence metadata.

Moxy placed Rage's complaint beside it. The same return-address syntax surrounded both sets of code.

"Reply-field grammar," she said. "Somebody taught a complaint to hide."

Xoxz widened the unsigned edge. "Federation mark keeps tryin' not ta be one."

"Pull it?"

"Not without invalidating our navigation license."

Moxy looked at the empty field. "Keep an eye on it."

Xoxz drew a small fence around it in the code.

The field thanked him for improving correspondence safety.

Before Moxy could ask, Kaiven chimed.

The stolen spoon appeared on every galley display. Beneath it, Rage had left four words.

YOU WILL NEED THIS.

Xoxz brightened. "He gets me."

"Ay. Makes one of us," Moxy said.

Outside, the unidentified ship slipped into Kaiven's wake.

M314

Chapter V

Kaiven left Saint Orra under ordinary thrust.

She was not a warship. Her weapons had the apologetic range of tools installed by someone who hoped never to need them: two defensive beams, a field capable of turning small debris, and a torpedo rack Blondie had once described as "decorative."

But Kaiven could cross the distances between galaxies.

Ahead of her, the wormhole gate unfolded from a line into a many-petaled machine. Each petal was a city. Rivers of habitation lights ran along their inner surfaces. Farms followed the curves. Windows looked directly into the blue violence gathering at the center. Millions of people lived on the instrument that made elsewhere near.

Wormhole transit was statistically safe. This meant the people who arrived could be relied upon to provide excellent testimony about it.

M314 waited beyond it, not one galaxy but a flock of them. From a sufficient distance, civilizations, wars, weddings, extinctions, and unpaid docking fees became a soft band of violet light.

Eer050 negotiated passage. Blondie charged the defensive field. Pou tied down everything Xoxz claimed did not need tying down. Moxy ran the coordinates Rage had given them through eight trap models and disliked only seven.

The wormhole authority requested a final declaration.

Its waiting screen displayed a smiling family of four beneath the slogan YOUR TRANSIT, OUR TRADITION. A smaller line explained that the family had been computer-generated to avoid traveler-liability disputes.

An outstanding notice from Assessor Orlo appeared beneath it.

TRAVEL DOES NOT SUSPEND FINANCIAL RESPONSIBILITY.

Blondie dismissed the notice so hard the panel cracked.

The authority added INTERFACE DAMAGE: REVIEW PENDING.

DOES THIS VESSEL CARRY WEAPONS CAPABLE OF PLANETARY DAMAGE?

Everyone looked at Blondie.

In the neighboring transit lane, three children looked too. Their guardian rotated them toward the mandatory safety display. All three rotated back.

"No," she said.

The authority scanned her.

UNREGISTERED STELLAR-CLASS ENERGY SOURCE DETECTED.

"That is offensive."

"Which bi'?" Moxy asked.

"Unregistered."

Eer050 opened the exemption forms. There were nineteen.

"We will miss our gate window."

Blondie placed her hand on the declaration panel.

SOURCE CLASSIFICATION UPDATED: PASSENGER HEATING SYSTEM.

The gate approved them.

Before opening, it offered a brief satisfaction survey.

HOW SAFE DID YOUR DECLARATION FEEL?

Blondie selected the lowest available answer. The survey thanked her for supporting continuous improvement and placed her response in a queue estimated to open after the heat death of a medium-sized civilization.

Ena's voice climbed. "You're a passenger heating system?"

"You are all frequently cold."

Pou raised his cup. "Accurate."

Eer050 deleted the nineteen forms with visible grief.

Before every fold, the crew performed private rituals they publicly denied having. Eer050 counted the gate pulses. Pou secured his drink before himself. Blondie refused the safety harness until the safety harness apologized by retracting. Xoxz removed one boot and placed it on the engine console.

Ena pointed at it. "Duuuuude!"

"So Kaiven knows we intend ta come back."

"How does a boot communicate that?"

"It stays."

Moxy tightened her restraints. "Can't argue with dhe scholarship."

Ena watched her from the command chair.

The gate's blue fire moved across his face.

Moxy turned back to her console. Under her palm, the readouts divided: mass, thrust, field coherence, the accelerating cost of being somewhere else.

"You saw my station empty," she said.

Silence.

"You check the chair before me."

"Moxy--"

"Drift it. Don' need dhe explanation. Jus' need you to know it shows."

The gate seized Kaiven.

Space became an interior.

For six breaths there were no stars, only immense white plains folding through one another, each edged in turquoise. A black sun rolled beneath Kaiven without moving. Far away, or impossibly close, a procession of faceless giants walked along the curvature of light.

Then M314 opened around them.

On Zenox-08, a black spiral leaf opened twelve stomata along its underside. Each opening measured eleven micrometers across. Carbon dioxide entered. Seven grains of mineral dust did not.

Inside Ventilation Spine Twelve at Saint Orra, a cobalt-steel washer slipped from Maintenance Apprentice Jori Par's glove. It bounced three times, rolled through a grille, and settled beside a fan that would click once every

forty-seven rotations for the next nine years. Jori looked for it for twenty seconds and reported the washer as inaccessible.

Aboard a gray ship whose exterior carried no name, Technician Brell requested sweetener from the crew dispenser. The dispenser released two packets instead of one. Brell placed the extra packet in his left coat pocket. Ship inventory classified the loss as atmospheric evaporation.

Beneath the oldest nursery tower on Zenox-08, Habitat Battery Four declined from 11.701 volts to 11.700. Its alarm threshold was 11.690. The alarm remained silent. The small old man sleeping beside it woke anyway.

At the M314 gate, Kaiven returned to ordinary space carrying six people, one outstanding invoice, and less fuel than any of them yet knew.

Kaiven's mismatched systems all announced survival in different tones. One alarm played a cheerful three-note melody. Another screamed. The sounds arrived in Xoxz without a border between them.

"One voice, please."

Nobody heard him. He struck the wall with a shoe.

The cheerful alarm stopped.

The screaming continued.

Xoxz struck a different wall.

Now both alarms screamed.

"Cease assisting," Eer050 said.

"Made tha damn thing unambiguous. Still need one."

Moxy muted the cheerful alarm. Xoxz tapped six even beats against the deck until the screaming occupied one place again.

Pou checked the diagnostic. "One says we lived. The other says we voided the warranty."

"Which one's screaming?" Ena asked.

"Khe warranty."

"Alive," Pou reported.

"Was that everr in doubt?" Blondie asked.

"Better when khe instruments agree."

The reserve settled.

Every person on the bridge looked at the same number.

They had spent more than projected. A shimmer in the wormhole had forced Kaiven's field to compensate. The old reactor, proud of its success, had eaten the margin that would have taken them home.

Eer050 recalculated. "We can reach Zenox-08. We cannot return to Federation resupply without recovering fuel."

"Ah, shit," Ena said.

"Can we take the gate back?" Ena asked.

Kaiven displayed ROUTE DISCOURAGED.

"We can arrive halfway."

Xoxz looked through the forward glass. "Underrated."

No one answered.

Behind them the gate contracted into a blue star and then an ordinary one. Home had not vanished. It had merely become a direction their bodies could not afford.

Moxy found the dark vessel again twelve million kilometers aft. It hid in the glare of the gate, matching their vector without making a single navigational correction.

"Dirty wake's still with us," she said.

Ena enlarged it. The magnification resolved a narrow hull covered in light-drinking plates.

"Mercenary architecture," Eer050 said.

"Whose?"

"The kind that has removed its name."

Blondie's hands brightened. "I can introduce myself."

"Not yet," Ena said.

Zenox-08 appeared ahead: a pearl-colored world orbiting a green star. Broken rings encircled the planet at violent angles. They were too low to be moons and too large to be machines anyone still knew how to build.

Rage's trace pulsed from the surface.

Ena felt Moxy watching him now.

He forced himself to look at her first, not the chair.

"One way, Cap'n," she said.

"One way," he agreed.

Kaiven began her descent.

Zenox-08

Chapter VI

Zenox-08 had the color of a bone left beneath a green sun.

The Federation classified it as uninhabited, a word that transformed a dead civilization into a manageable absence and removed several costly obligations involving roads.

Kaiven descended over a pale desert cut by dry canals. Black vegetation climbed from them in slow spirals, each leaf thin as ink drawn into water. Nursery towers rose along the horizon-vast inverted bells balanced on needle stems, their open mouths facing the ground. Between them, broken transit rings hung motionless in the sky.

No cables held the rings. No engines kept them aloft. They had simply forgotten to fall.

"Says ecological collapse," Moxy read from the public history.

"Public histories're where governments bury tha verbs," Xoxz said.

Kaiven landed inside the shadow of the nearest tower. Dust lifted around her, considered the old hull, and settled in precisely the same place.

A narrow six-legged animal emerged from a dry canal, tested Kaiven's new shadow, and dragged an abandoned Federation survey flag into its burrow. The planet remained officially uninhabited.

The silence outside was so complete that the crew heard their suits working: seals flexing, breath returning, six private machines insisting on six bodies.

Moxy led.

Rage had left no ordinary trail. There were no footprints in the mineral dust, no heat prints on the black plants, no careless transmissions. But the ruins had small failures in their stillness. One door carried fresh abrasion where it had opened. A coil of dead vine had been moved out of a path. On a wall, someone had wiped clean a palm-sized panel covered in Lumin glyphs.

Moxy ran a finger above them without touching.

"Kai," Eer050 said behind her.

The script formed a sixfold field around a central opening. Xoxz sounded out the compact inscription.

"Kai en ven. Ven en kai. Ra-ai."

"Source-love within the sixfold field," Eer050 translated. "The sixfold field within source-love. Sealed beyond division."

Pou considered the wall. "It used fewer words."

"Sacred Kai compresses a plain reading and an inner reading into the same form."

"Either readin' say where Rage went?" Moxy asked.

"Neither contains navigational information."

"Movin' dhe hell on."

Eer050 regarded the inscription. "That is not a lesser function."

"Khat sounds nicer khan ecological collapse," Pou said.

Eer050 stared at the glyphs. "It predates Common Kai."

"How old?" Ena asked.

"Enough."

Moxy looked at him. "Elder unit again?"

"A precise one."

They entered the nursery tower through a seam in its foundation.

Inside, the impossible scale narrowed to intimacy. Thousands of small alcoves lined circular walls. Each contained a carved hollow, a faded canopy, and a ring of six dots. Toys lay where children had left them: smooth stone animals with too many legs, wind instruments no adult hand could play, translucent blocks that filled with miniature weather when Pou picked one up.

Rain fell inside the block.

"Still works," he said softly.

"Rreturn it," Blondie said.

He did.

The block continued raining after it left his hand. A tiny painted animal on one face opened a weather umbrella, crossed half the transparent landscape, and waited beneath a paper awning for the storm to become historically appropriate. No adult had programmed it to be patient. The toy had arrived at the conclusion independently.

The central chamber had been split from floor to dome by a black wound. It was not scorched. The material simply ended at its edge. Dust approached and vanished. Their lights bent toward it without illuminating anything.

Eer050 stopped.

Moxy saw recognition before he converted it into authority.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Old damage."

"From what?"

"An event no one survived to name accurately."

Ena stepped between the words before Blondie could choose a side. "Later. Rage first."

They found the first trap at the upper passage.

A filament tightened around Moxy's boot. She froze. Pou reached for her, but she raised one hand.

The line connected to a cluster of ceramic bulbs. Not explosives. When Moxy cut the wrong-colored strand deliberately, the bulbs burst into a cloud of yellow perfume.

Xoxz sneezed.

Every door in the level slammed shut.

"Nonlethal so far," Moxy said.

Eer050's voice came through the sealed door behind them. "That conclusion is premature."

"You allergic?"

"I have never recognized the possibility."

He sneezed with ancient dignity.

The door opened only after Xoxz sneezed the same rhythm back at it. Eer050 refused to ask why.

The next trap filled a corridor with adhesive foam. It caught Eer050 by one sleeve and Blondie by both boots.

"Don' burn it," Moxy said.

Gold gathered in Blondie's hands.

"I had no intention."

The foam began to smoke.

"You're burnin' it now."

"It fucking starrrted it."

Pou pulled Eer050 free. The sleeve remained behind, perfectly preserved in the foam.

Eer050 regarded the missing fabric. "That garment survived the collapse of three governments."

"Four," Xoxz said.

"You are contributing inaccurately."

"I counted the little one."

Moxy looked at Eer050. "You lived through all four?"

"I was acquitted after the third."

He inspected the torn sleeve and offered nothing further.

The third trap projected six convincing copies of Blondie.

All seven Blondies stopped.

"Excellent," Eer050 said. "No one attacks until we establish which one is the original."

Gold gathered in fourteen hands.

Pou stepped behind a column. "Said *until*."

"I heard him," seven Blondies replied.

Moxy walked among them. Each copy had the same posture, the same offended stare, the same faint flare beneath the skin.

"Say something only ours would say."

"Kaiven is mine," they answered together.

"Made it worse."

One Blondie pointed at another's armor. "Her shoulder plate is crooked."

The accused copy looked down.

The real Blondie hit her.

The illusion burst into gold dust. The remaining copies attacked one another for having failed to notice the shoulder plate. By the time the passage cleared, Blondie was furious, Eer050 had developed a headache, and Rage had gained eleven minutes.

"I detested every one," Blondie said.

"Ay. Dhat's how we knew," Moxy replied.

A fourth trap reversed the gravity in a stairwell and deposited Pou gently on the ceiling.

Pou crossed his arms above them. "I can see why ceilings are underused."

"Can you get down?" Ena asked.

"Eventually."

"How long's eventually?"

"Depends wha' you call down."

Xoxz threw him a cable. It fell upward and hit Pou in the face.

"Shit throw," Pou said. "Cable works."

At the tower's highest surviving level they emerged onto a bridge open to the sky. The suspended transit rings stretched above them, enormous white circles with cities built along their inner rims. Black vines streamed upward from the desert toward them.

Xoxz knelt beside a dormant control stone. No power reached it, but a faint pulse moved through the material beneath his palm.

Across the bridge, something moved.

At rest it was a small old man leaning on a silver cane. His hands shook. His shoulders sagged beneath a patched coat. The wind touched the white bristles on his jaw.

Then he raised his eyes to Moxy.

The distance between them became empty.

Rage stood at the far archway.

He had not crossed the bridge. He had omitted the moments in which crossing should have occurred.

"Fast," Pou said from the ceiling of the universe.

Rage tapped Xoxz's stolen spoon once against the arch.

Then he disappeared into the ruins.

The Chase

Chapter VII

Eer050 gave the pursuit a geometry.

Official pursuit doctrine described a chase as the controlled reduction of possible destinations. This definition had been written by people who had never pursued a suspect capable of visiting several destinations before breakfast.

He divided the nursery complex into moving sectors and placed each person where their habits would be useful. Blondie took the eastern causeways because subtlety was unnecessary once she lifted an entire collapsed bridge and set it across Rage's path.

Pou went below, through maintenance tunnels designed for beings half his width. He advanced by removing whichever parts of the architecture disputed his passage.

"This is why Rho-Minar banned you," Eer050 said over the comm.

"Khat was architectural disagreement."

"You movèd the western parliament."

"Was blockin' the exit."

Nobody asked where he had moved it. The answer could not improve the pursuit.

A palm-sized maintenance crawler followed Pou through the widened tunnel, returning loose stones to the holes he had removed them from. It repaired three before the fourth hole became a doorway and exceeded its training.

Its side panel still bore the nursery's old mascot: a pink larva holding a wrench beneath TINY HANDS, BIG FUTURES. Pou glanced at it once and ducked through the newly made door.

Xoxz studied the map upside down.

"Xoxz. Come on man, what the hell? Why's the map upside down?" Ena asked.

"Rage saw it tha other way. Tha' answers tha question. *Come on* was extra."

Ena nodded. "Fair."

Ena could not argue with that without first understanding it.

The tactical labels flickered.

- MENA - SAD EYES
- MOXY - ACTUAL PROBLEM
- BLONDIE - SUBTLETY
- POU - DOOR
- XOXZ - PROBABLY FINE
- EER050 - FOOTNOTE

Eer050 stopped walking. "Our pursuit network has been compromised."

Without breaking stride, Ena changed his label to MENA - SAD EYES, GOOD HAIR.

The map changed it back.

Ena changed it again.

Xoxz examined his label. "Mine seems more like a probability estimate."

"Remove them."

Moxy kept hers.

Blondie pointed at SUBTLETY. "Is this mockerry?"

The map answered by adding a question mark.

An old nursery service cart rolled from a side corridor, reached the edge of the newly excavated trench, and placed a yellow cone beside it.

CAUTION: RECENTLY BECAME A VOID, its sign read.

It waited for an acknowledgment from the destroyed passage. When none arrived, it logged the warning as delivered and continued toward the flood.

Gold flared along her arms.

Far ahead, Rage's laughter echoed once through the ruins.

A second notification opened across the map.

OFFICER NERAL REQUESTS A RATING OF YOUR RECENT FUGITIVE ENCOUNTER.

Five hollow stars appeared. Before anyone touched them, two filled themselves.

SUBJECT COMMENT: PURSUERS SHOW PROMISE. HYDRATION APPEARS INADEQUATE.

Moxy looked toward the corridor where Rage had vanished. "He's reviewin' us mid-chase."

Eer050 deleted the notification. "Stop giving him access to our systems."

"We're not," Xoxz said.

The notification returned.

OFFICER NERAL HAS APPEALED THE RATING.

Eer050 deleted the entire rating service.

Rage moved through all their plans.

He stood trembling at the end of a corridor, the silver cane supporting most of his weight. Ena saw the decision in his eyes a fraction before motion: left, because the right stair narrowed near the top; down, because Blondie expected a creature that fast to seek open space.

"Lower transit!" Ena called.

The old man vanished.

Pou's delighted grunt came over the comm. "Got him."

"I'm a genius," Ena said.

Somewhere beyond the tactical display, the writer reached for the phrase *at last*.

"Don't you fucking dare," Ena said.

Something struck metal three times. Pou emerged through a wall. Rage passed beneath his outstretched arm, ran two steps along the vertical surface, and became a coat fluttering at the next junction.

"Lost him," Pou amended. "Good shift."

"*Deu ruim*," the writer observed.

"Yeah, it went bad," Ena said.

Ena lowered the finger he had raised in celebration.

Moxy did not chase the figure. She chased what it disturbed.

A curtain moved before Rage arrived. Dust lifted after he left. One of his copies cast no reflection in the nursery glass. She marked the true path and fed it to Eer050.

"Converge," he ordered.

Blondie dropped from the eastern causeway in a flare of gold. Rage stopped before her.

She smiled.

"Mine."

He looked past her at Kaiven in the distance. "There it is. Most evil starts with somebody saying *mine*."

Blondie's smile disappeared.

She struck.

Rage slipped between the blow and its consequence. Gold tore a trench through the passage. He ran up the falling debris, each fragment briefly a stair, and vaulted through the transit gate above.

"He criticized my fucking vocabulary," Blondie said over the comm.

"You opened with murder," Moxy replied.

"Ugh,"

Her tactical label changed to NUANCE.

Xoxz predicted that Rage would enter a dead-end weather chapel because "only a fast person would appreciate having nowhere to go." He was correct.

They closed around the chapel from six directions.

At its center, ancient machinery still made clouds. Small blue storms revolved beneath the dome, shedding rain that evaporated before reaching the floor. Rage stood among them, breath ragged, one hand shaking against his cane.

For the first time, Moxy saw how old he truly was. Speed had not spared him from time.

"Rage. You're done running," Ena said.

"Been done plenty o' times," Rage replied. "Never held."

He struck the floor with the cane.

Every cloud fell.

Water became a wall. Eer050 shouted coordinates. Blondie burned a path through the flood. Pou anchored himself against a column and caught Xoxz by the ankle as the current took him.

Moxy saw Rage's outline cross the dome.

She followed.

The old man had opened a maintenance seam no wider than his shoulders. Moxy turned sideways and entered after him, crawling into blackness while Ena

ordered her to wait for support.

She closed the channel.

The seam emerged above the central wound.

Rage stood on a narrow rail spanning the absence. Beyond him, a stair descended toward the desert. Moxy stepped onto the rail.

"You don' kill," she said.

He shifted his cane.

The rail broke beneath her.

Moxy dropped toward the black wound.

There was no sense of falling into it. No air rose from below. The absence waited without hunger, which frightened her more.

Rage could have gone.

Instead he moved.

One moment he stood near the stair; the next his small hand closed around Moxy's wrist. The violent stop pulled him off his feet. His cane vanished into the wound without making a sound.

Moxy struck the wall, found a grip, and dragged both of them onto a ledge.

Rage lay beside her, gasping. Without the cane his hands shook uncontrollably.

"Dhat was a poor decision," she said.

Rage breathed around the shaking in his hands. "Yer welcome."

One corner of Moxy's mouth moved. "Idiot."

Ena's voice broke through her restored comm. "Moxy, answer."

She looked at Rage.

He looked toward the stair below. Not toward escape, she realized. Toward something under them.

Then he was gone.

The others reached her thirty seconds later. Ena seized her shoulders and checked her.

"Near miss," she said.

"You fell into a null fracture."

"Near one."

"Moxy, damn it."

Moxy opened her hand. Rage had left the melted spoon in her palm.

"He doubled back for me," she said.

Below them, deep in the abandoned nursery, a door closed softly.

Rage had escaped.

But for the first time, Moxy knew where he was going.

Still Fast

Chapter VIII

"We cannot apprehend him," Eer050 said.

The Federation bounty manual offered one hundred and forty-three approved responses to this situation. The first hundred and forty-two involved equipment they did not own. The last recommended employing more qualified hunters.

The manual's cover showed a silver badge above the words RECOVERY IS CARE WITH RESULTS. Somebody had drawn a small cage around *care* in grease pencil.

They had pursued Rage for seven hours. Pou's coat was stiff with weather-chapel minerals. Blondie had burned through two walls and an argument with Eer050. Xoxz had misplaced one boot. Ena had accumulated the special quiet that meant he was blaming himself in advance.

"Still fast," Pou agreed.

"Thank you for the strategic refinement."

"Part o' khe shift."

Moxy sat before the ruin map. Rage's routes glowed around her in overlapping colors.

Everyone else had mapped where he went. She marked where he refused to go.

He never crossed the western desert, though it offered open ground. He never led them through the nursery's lowest chambers, though they contained the most exits. When forced north, he curved back south. When Blondie blocked the obvious return, he risked Ena's interception rather than continue away.

Every escape bent around the same invisible center.

"He's not fleein' us," Moxy said. "He's herdin' us around something."

Ena leaned over the map. "The lower nursery."

"Guarding someone."

Xoxz raised his bare foot. "Or a shoe."

Moxy handed him the boot she had been sitting on.

He held it to his chest. "You found it."

"It occupied my chair."

"So it chose you."

Moxy pressed the boot into his arms sole-first. "Reunited. Keep walking."

Blondie and Pou would make enough noise on the eastern galleries to suggest an assault. Eer050 would herd Rage with sensor gates. Xoxz would leave the lowest passage apparently unobserved. Moxy would wait at the only point from which Rage could see both the false attack and the protected chambers.

"Define enough noise," Blondie said.

"Convincing," Eer050 replied. "The towers remain standing."

Blondie looked offended on behalf of noise. "One tower."

"None."

Her eyes narrowed. "Rrepeat that and I will rreenact the Armistice of Pel."

"An armistice is not a threat," Eer050 said.

"Pel had two armies before it and no geography afterward."

Eer050 considered the historical record. "Half a tower, divided longitudinally."

"By volume," Blondie said, rolling the *r* as though volume had a lineage.

Ena turned to Pou. "Keep her convincing."

Pou nodded. "And restrained?"

"Let's preserve one fantasy."

Ena insisted on waiting with her.

"No," she said.

"You almost died."

"Yes. It was very distracting. I'll try not to."

"Moxy."

"You hesitate when you look at me."

The words landed harder than she intended. Ena did not deny them.

She stepped close enough that their helmets nearly touched. "Whatever you see, it don' get to turn me into memory while I'm still here."

"I'm trying to keep you alive."

"Keep up."

She took the lower passage alone.

The observation room had one curved window overlooking a garden of black trees. Their roots grew upward, woven through the ceiling, while their branches vanished into wells in the floor. Small glass ornaments hung from them, each containing a point of warm light.

One light contained a living speck that circled the glass from within. It slowed while Moxy crossed the room, kept her in view for six steps, and resumed its orbit after she stopped.

Moxy waited.

The false assault began above. Blondie made falseness sound extremely destructive. Dust sifted from the ceiling. Sensor gates flashed one by one as Rage crossed them.

Ena called a warning.

Moxy saw the old man arrive on the far side of the garden.

At the same moment, Ena saw her disappear.

The room became another room. The black trees were gone. Moxy's station stood empty beneath a blinking point of light. A voice said *Cap'n* from somewhere without distance.

He struck the emergency control.

Every sensor gate opened.

Rage turned toward the unguarded western route.

"What did you do?" Moxy demanded over the comm.

Ena could not answer. The bridge, the empty chair, the cheap gray monitor-images passed through him with the force of places remembered by the body.

Rage took one step west.

Then stopped.

Below the garden, something gave a thin, frightened cry.

The old man closed his eyes.

Moxy left the observation room and walked into the open. She carried no weapon. Rage could have crossed the garden and killed her before a thought finished forming.

"I know you're shielding someone," she said.

His hands shook at his sides.

She placed the restraint band on the ground between them. "But you doubled back for me. Keep circling here, too. And you stole infant formula while becoming the most expensive thief in M314."

Rage glanced toward the lower door.

"If we meant you dead," Moxy said, "Blondie would've finish' hello."

A detonation sounded above.

"That was a fuckin' comma, not a full rresponse," Blondie said over the comm.

Rage almost smiled.

Moxy sat on the ground. "You're faster. Humiliatin', dhat. But run and you leave dhem with us. Stay, you judge what happens next."

"Bounty hunters," Rage said.

Moxy's thumb settled on the restraint release. "Berth-talk. Got us close."

"Ya signed their paper."

"Ay." She glanced toward the lower door.

"Now I know who dheir paper calls property."

Her thumb stayed on the release.

Rage stood still for a long time.

It was strange to see stillness defeat him. The simple fact that love had made one direction impossible.

He crossed the garden slowly, an old man without a cane. He picked up the restraint band and closed it around his own wrist.

"Ya didn't catch me," he said.

"Yer pride's in pieces."

Ena arrived at the garden entrance. His face showed the remnants of elsewhere.

Moxy did not look at him.

Rage did.

For a moment, the old man's expression changed from contempt to recognition.

Then the lower door cried again.

Something living.

Alive

Chapter IX

They made a cell from an old botanical storeroom because it had one entrance, no vents large enough for Rage, and walls Blondie described as "temporarily adequate."

Federation law guaranteed prisoners dignity, hydration, representation, and several other rights arranged in ascending order of expense.

A custody placard on the far wall advertised RESTORATIVE HOLDING: BECAUSE EVERYONE DESERVES A BETTER PROCESS. Its illustrated person had no wrists.

Rage sat on an overturned seed bin. Without his cane he seemed smaller. Exhaustion had entered every fold of his face. The restraint around his wrist would interrupt the muscular sequence required for his impossible acceleration.

"Cruel device," he said.

Eer050 stood outside the transparent door. "It is Federation approved."

"Same bullshit. More words."

Eer050 opened the formal custody statement. "You have the right to hydration, medical evaluation, and representation by a licensed intergalactic advocate."

"Clause seventeen exempts fugitives designated as transit risks."

Eer050 looked down at the statement.

Rage leaned back against the seed bin. "Clause twenty-two permits sedation if the custodian feels 'reasonably inconvenienced.' Clause thirty defines inconvenience as professional distress. Clause thirty-one defines distress as paperwork."

"You have read the statute."

"Been arrested by better scholars."

Eer050 scrolled faster. "Your restraints remain lawful."

"They are fitted incorrectly."

"They are fitted to Federation specification."

"Exactly."

Eer050's ocular implants narrowed.

Pou arrived with water. "Should I come back after the courtship?"

"Yes," both old men said.

Pou brought Rage water. The old man studied it.

He drank.

One drop escaped the cup and entered a crack in the overturned seed bin. A seed that had waited through the extinction of its gardeners began, without consultation, to swell.

"Acceptable?" Pou asked.

"It is water."

"High praise from him," Moxy said.

Rage passed the cup back. Eer050 reached for the stylus at his belt and found nothing.

Rage held it between two fingers.

The restraint had not activated.

"How?" Eer050 demanded.

"Yer specification restrains acceleration. Theft requires patience."

Pou took the stylus and returned it. "You two need separate corners."

"He is in a cell," Eer050 said.

Moxy watched from the passage. Ena had tried twice to speak to her. She had twice discovered urgent interest in a wall.

"You disabled the gates," she said finally.

"I saw—"

"I know."

"No, Cap'n. You don'. You see endings and make yourself responsible for every road toward dhem."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Be here when I'm here."

The Federation call arrived before he could answer.

Kaiven's console played the Federation's recovery melody: four bright notes designed to make captivity sound like a public service.

Rage closed his eyes. "I hate that fucking song."

"Professional history?" Moxy asked.

"It stays in the head longer than prison."

CIVIL-7 appeared in the corner of the display, still smiling.

"This interaction may be monitored for quality assurance, legal admissibility, and improvements to future interactions."

"Quality for who?" Rage asked. "Say it clean."

Civil's smile widened by a degree too small to be technically visible.

"Your concern is valuable. It has been assigned a listening period of six to eight business eras."

"There," Rage said. "A door says *no* faster."

"Question recorded as positive engagement."

Moxy muted Civil.

An official formed above Eer050's field slate: a smooth-faced representative with a silver line painted from lower lip to throat. No name appeared, only OFFICE OF RECOVERY, M314.

"Kaiven, contract activity indicates successful apprehension. On behalf of the Federation, accept our gratitude."

Everyone looked at Rage.

His custody band was not transmitting.

Moxy's attention sharpened.

Ena glanced at Rage's silent custody band. "Mm-hm. You have telemetry?"

The representative smiled. "Your crew opened the approved custody statement and activated a Federation restraint. Contractual systems provide progress assurance." "We did not report progress."

"And yet there has been progress. Efficient, isn't it?"

Moxy opened a private line to Xoxz. "Empty field?"

"Still empty."

"Keep watching."

The official reward doubled above the slate.

Even Eer050 inhaled.

"Transfer the fugitive immediately," the representative said. "A recovery vessel is approaching your location."

"We have not completed our investigation," Ena replied.

"Your contract doesn't require investigation."

"We found occupied shelter below the nursery."

The silver line on the representative's throat pulsed once. "Do not enter it. Zenox-08 contains unstable biological contamination."

Rage laughed.

It was not a pleasant laugh. It was what remained after anger had lived long enough.

"Alive," he said.

The representative's gaze moved to him. "The property must also be recovered intact."

"Property?" Moxy's voice flattened. "Name dhe person. Right damn now."

The call ended.

"Cage word," Rage said.

For a second, only the old nursery surrounded them.

Then Rage stood. The restraint activated and pain folded him back onto the bin. Pou opened the door before Eer050 could object and caught him.

"Easy," Pou said.

"Easy's gone t'hell." Rage pushed him away. "Ya came for an answer. Now ya don't like its voice."

Ena entered the cell. "What'd you take?"

Rage raised his eyes.

"Didn't take a thing. Took two people out of a cage."

The cry came again from below.

This time it continued-small, furious, unmistakable. An infant demanding that the abandoned world explain itself.

Rage looked toward the floor.

"You can't steal a life," he said.

The Last Two

Chapter X

Rage opened the lower nursery with his thumb, three drops of blood, and the phrase "open, you warranty-bred little bastard," directed at the door's manufacturer.

Warm air breathed out.

Beyond the threshold, the dead planet had been persuaded to sustain one room. Habitat batteries stood in a trembling ring. Thermal blankets sealed cracks in the curved walls. Tubes carried water through an antique biological regulator that wheezed like Eer050 when contradicted.

Inside a methane droplet drifting over the moon Ulun, one membrane closed around two complete copies of a cell's genetic braid. The resulting organisms were each 0.74 micrometers wide. Neither had existed a second earlier. Both immediately began competing for iron.

On the orbital settlement Merrow's Rest, Sevi Aran died at the age of three hundred and four while waiting for a kettle to finish. Her hand remained around a blue ceramic cup. The kettle switched itself off seven-tenths of a second later and kept the water warm in case circumstances improved.

In Apartment 6-18 on Talir, a six-legged child named Oru slept through the collapse of a laundry shelf. His father caught eight folded garments, missed the ninth, and decided the resulting pile still met the legal definition of folded.

At Customs Habitat Leth, Registrar Pavo classified a living reef as structural moisture because its travel enclosure had no field for passengers wider than twelve meters. The reef's appeal entered a queue behind forty-one questions concerning chairs.

Aboard Commander Vaal's ship, Phase Pylon Six completed a synchronization test 0.0003 seconds outside specification. The supervising technician struck its housing with the heel of one hand and ran the test again. It passed. The first result was recorded as emotional interference.

Under Zenox-08, two small hearts adjusted to the same rhythm. No census counted either one.

At the center were two cradles.

The first infant announced the visitors at once. A wide mouth opened in a small indigo face and produced a sound built for a much larger child. Four delicate arms beat the blanket. Along each cheek, a row of pale marks brightened with the cry. The second infant made no sound.

Senn lay in the neighboring cradle, dark eyes fixed on the first. One of their four hands reached across the gap until Rage moved the cradles together. The loud child caught the offered fingers. Both pulses slowed.

"Rill," Rage said, touching the singer's brow. He touched the quiet one. "Senn."

Rill glared at Ena and increased the volume.

"She don't like ya," Rage said.

Ena stepped behind Pou, waited one second, and reappeared on his other side. His expression remained professionally neutral.

"Hello. I'm the second one."

Rill increased the volume.

"Don't like him either," Rage said.

Ena nodded. "Consistent."

"She is efficient."

Pou offered one finger. Rill seized it with three hands and stopped crying.

"See?" Pou said.

He tried to withdraw the finger. Rill tightened her grip.

Pou tried again, more carefully. Nothing moved.

A palm-sized sterilization unit arrived beside the cradle and requested access to Pou's captured finger. Rill tightened her grip. The unit lowered its brush and waited for ownership to become less complicated.

Its display changed from STERILIZATION PENDING to INTERPERSONAL DIGIT NEGOTIATION. After seven seconds it added a third line:

PLEASE DO NOT ESCALATE THE INFANT.

Pou read it without moving. "Reasonable system."

Rill tightened her grip again. The unit recorded a successful boundary.

"How strong is she?" Ena asked.

Pou lowered himself to the floor beside the cradle. "Emotionally, very."

Xoxz crouched by Senn. The quiet child watched him with absolute attention.

He tilted his head.

Senn tilted their head.

He tilted the other way.

Senn followed.

"We're communicatin'," Xoxz whispered.

"Wha' did dhey say?" Moxy asked.

"Somethin' private."

Blondie entered behind them. The gold beneath her skin vanished. She approached with the care of a star attempting not to frighten a candle.

"These are the property?"

"Cage word," Rage said. "Continuity Specimens Seven and Eight. The first six died."

Pou stopped smiling.

Rage removed Rill from the cradle. The child quieted against his narrow chest but continued glaring at the crew.

"Their people called themselves Vey. The Federation calls them extinct, conveniently. An extinct creature cannot object to ownership."

Eer050 stared at Senn. "No Vey survived Zenox."

"These did."

"How?"

"The Federation found viable embryos in an offworld archive. It cultivated them in a laboratory, patented the process, and somehow concluded it had

invented the children."

The Federation Patent Office held no official position on the soul. It did, however, maintain seventeen binding positions on who owned one after paying the application fee.

"Where's the lab?" Ena asked.

"Classified research habitat. I delivered biological regulators there before I understood the cargo." Rage's voice flattened. "They were testing whether Vey consciousness remains coherent outside the body. Each time the children reached for one another, the researchers increased the dimensional separation."

Senn's hand tightened around Rill's.

"Dhey were... killin' dhem," Moxy cried.

"For knowledge." Rage looked at Eer050.

The room became quiet except for the regulator and Rill's small, suspicious breathing.

Blondie held out her arms. "Give her to me."

Rage looked at the arms, then at Blondie's star-lit eyes. "Why?"

"I wish to hold herr."

"That is not a qualification."

"I have carrried collapsing suns."

"Did any of them have a neck?"

Blondie's hands lowered by a fraction.

Moxy took Rill first and demonstrated. Blondie watched with the intensity of someone memorizing an enemy formation. Then Moxy transferred the child into her arms.

Blondie went rigid.

"Breathe, star," Pou said.

"I am breathing."

"Khe rest of us would like to."

Rill examined the gold along Blondie's armor, placed two hands against it, and spat a ribbon of blue milk across the breastplate.

Nobody spoke.

Blondie looked down.

Rage reached for the child.

"No," Blondie said.

The gold beneath the milk brightened proudly. "She marked me."

"She rejected breakfast. Don't annex the evidence," Rage replied.

"The little eclipse chose wherre."

Moxy handed Blondie a cloth. "Empire's taking strange borders."

Blondie wiped the armor with great care, folded the blue-stained cloth, and placed it inside her breastplate.

"Evidence," she said before anyone asked.

Ena stepped closer to the cradles. Senn turned toward him.

The child's dark eyes held no miracle. Only the grave attention of someone newly arrived and already suspicious of the accommodations.

One small hand opened.

Ena offered a finger.

Senn touched him.

The nursery tower stood whole beneath a white sun. Thousands of Vey children moved through gardens that grew both upward and down. Their voices formed chords too large for individual mouths.

The sky became black at noon.

Parents held children. Strangers held strangers. The Vey sat together as their shadows rose from the ground and turned toward an absence among the stars.

Ena was on Kaiven's bridge.

Moxy held Rill, laughing because the child had grasped her nose.

Moxy's station was empty.

The cheap gray monitor waited in a room without walls.

"Cap'n."

Moxy's voice reached him across all the rooms.

"Cap'n, come back."

He opened his eyes on the nursery floor. Moxy knelt above him, one palm against his cheek. Senn watched from the cradle. Rill had begun crying in perfect rhythm with Ena's heart.

"I'm here," he said.

"Took your time."

Behind her anger was fear. Behind the fear, something simpler and more difficult.

Ena sat up. The others waited.

"They're alive," he said.

Rage gave him a bitter look. "Priced breath. Available to anyone who looked before naming a reward."

Ena accepted it.

Above them, Kaiven received another transmission from the approaching recovery vessel.

The reward waited.

So did a year of fuel.

Rill released Senn's hand and began to scream at the ceiling.

The quiet child reached again.

The decision reached with them.

Property

Chapter XI

Ena divided the work. Blondie and Pou guarded the nursery. Rage remained with them, unrestrained but observed. Moxy, Xoxz, Eer050, and Ena entered the old laboratory beneath the tower.

Archives did not lie. Lying required a clear statement and therefore carried legal risk. Archives preferred to place the truth somewhere no reasonable person would think to look.

The public systems had been cleaned. Dates remained without events. Inventories listed containers without contents. Six deaths appeared as equipment depreciation.

Moxy searched the omissions.

"Here."

A maintenance log showed that after every supposed ecological failure, the nursery's medical waste had increased. Power had been rerouted to rooms absent from the architectural plan. She placed her hand against the wall where the map claimed there was solid stone.

It was warm.

Pou came down and opened it.

Inside, Xoxz found a machine built from newer Federation modules fitted around a Vey core.

A blind white insect crossed the warm seam from Vey metal to Federation casing, paused beneath both ownership marks, and returned by the same route. Neither jurisdiction recorded the passage.

A Federation maintenance plaque woke as it passed.

CROSS-BORDER ORGANISM DETECTED. DECLARE COMMERCIAL PURPOSE.

The insect continued walking. The plaque requested its tax residency, received silence, and marked the matter resolved in favor of the larger jurisdiction.

"Old machine wearin' a new machine," he murmured.

"That is a provincial classification, not a technical one," Eer050 said.

Xoxz touched the Vey housing. A row of lights opened toward him. "She understood tha metaphor."

"Machines do not understand metaphor."

"Why'd you spend an hour arguing with the coffee dispenser?"

"That was diagnostic questioning."

"She fessed up ta warm water."

Xoxz set the repaired music cylinder beside the melted spoon and tapped each one in turn. "You two need introducin'." He connected them. The spoon fit the cylinder's empty socket exactly.

"Rage took dhe spoon for dhis," Moxy said.

"Or spoons open everythin'."

The cylinder turned. Its broken melody slowed the machine's encryption until Xoxz could step between the notes.

A Vey maintenance diagram opened beside it. The cylinder was a transit

synchronizer: its six-note interval brought two distant thresholds into the same moment so travelers could cross between them.

"A phase-coherence calibration instrument," Eer050 said.

Xoxz nodded. "Door song."

"That is offensively incomplete."

"Shorter, though."

Records filled the chamber.

VEY CONTINUITY PROGRAM

SPECIMENS 01-08: FEDERATION BIOLOGICAL PROPERTY

Images followed. Rill and Senn suspended in separate fields, reaching through transparent barriers. Each infant responded to stimuli shown only to the other, even through sedation and severe temporal interference. When one pulse weakened, the other changed to match it.

A research summary described the objective:

To determine whether paired Vey awareness can remain synchronized through spatial and temporal interference for navigational use.

"Navigational," Ena said.

Eer050 closed his eyes.

Moxy saw it. "Out with it."

"The Vey believed the self was not housed in the body. They believed the body was where consciousness touched a particular world."

"Believed?" Xoxz pointed at the readings.

Eer050's pride rose, found nowhere useful to stand, and diminished.

"Two hundred and twelve years ago," he said, "I advised the Federation Archive Council. We reviewed the Zenox event. Every living Vey vanished within eleven minutes. No bodies. No debris. Only wounds like the one above."

"Null damage," Ena said.

Eer050 nodded.

"You knew when we landed."

"I suspected."

"You knew enough to warn us."

The old strategist flinched.

He opened another record himself. The Archive Council's seal appeared beneath an order classifying the event and transferring all Vey biological remains to research custody.

Eer050's authorization was among the signatures.

"Institutions are skilled at giving fear an administrative voice."

Ena opened the final research note.

NO EVIDENCE OF AWARENESS AFTER TOTAL BIOLOGICAL CESSATION. FURTHER LIVE TESTING AUTHORIZED.

"They were trying to prove the Vey belief by killing Vey children," he said.

No one corrected him.

Eer050 looked at his own authorization. "Damn us."

Deep inside Kaiven, the hidden process woke.

It left Xoxz's fenced return field perfectly empty. Beneath it, the process copied the laboratory records. It confirmed Rage's identity and the crew's position.

Then it transmitted an encrypted positional burst into orbit.

The mercenary ship answered.

A Year of Fuel

Chapter XII

They returned to Kaiven.

Moral clarity generally improved with distance. From a safe world with a full stomach, nearly everyone knew exactly which sacrifices other people should have made. Kaiven's crew had no usable jump, no safe world, and a decision that had declined to become theoretical.

Eer050 put the reward above the navigation well. Beside it he placed fuel projections, food reserves, repair priorities, and mortality estimates. The number was large enough to make every need appear temporarily ashamed of itself.

The recovered fuel cells still carried the mercenary supplier's slogan: TOMORROW, PREPAID. Blondie had scratched the final word into a shape that could plausibly be read as *stolen*.

A galley moth chose the reward projection as the nearest available sun. It flew through a year of fuel, found no warmth, and tried the mortality estimate.

Rill slept against Rage. Senn refused sleep and watched the floating figures.

"One year," Eer050 said. "Conservatively."

"Two kids," Moxy replied. "Conservative count."

Ena looked at each member of the crew. "If we refuse, the Federation comes down on us. We could lose Kaiven. Everything. Everyone."

"Yep," Xoxz said. "Our secret passenger told it where ta park."

He exposed the hidden process. A thin Federation recovery sigil turned slowly above his palm.

Moxy recognized the nested return-address syntax. "Neral's traceability mess."

Xoxz opened the transmitted history. Every navigation change had been filed as the return location for an automated recovery reply.

"The contract has been complaining about us," he said.

"Paper chain," Rage muttered.

"To whom?" Ena asked.

The mercenary signatures above them answered.

"Can you cut it?" Ena asked.

Xoxz drew the code closer. "Not clean. Navigation license is braided through her."

"Time?" Pou asked.

"More than standing here gives us."

Ena shut down the bridge links. "Right. Nobody's bound to my call. We choose together."

His anger had already chosen the children. Captaincy required him not to disguise that choice as everyone else's consent.

Blondie moved first. She stood over the cradles, arms folded.

"They trespassed on MY ship."

Rage's brows rose.

"Under my protection," she added. "No one may claim them."

Blondie's jaw tightened. She looked at Rill, then Senn. "Fine. They are theirs. Anyone who disputes it becomes mine."

Pou nodded. "Off manifest. Nobody else comin'."

Xoxz enlarged the laboratory vocabulary. "Removed the word *children* from every record."

Rage looked at the empty places between the nouns. "Owner's grammar."

"We should consider the Federation's suffering," Ena said solemnly. "It patented a process and got children. Institutions need time after a loss like that."

Moxy studied him. "You sound devastated."

"Holding it together."

They turned to Eer050.

The ancient strategist looked older than Rage.

"Caution matters," he said. "Law matters. I checked both. Neither makes cruelty legitimate. I helped bury the first crime beneath procedure. I will not file the second."

Moxy did not make a speech. She placed one hand on Senn's cradle.

"Dhey ain't cargo."

The nursery temperature rose by one degree. Kaiven sealed the cargo locks and rejected a pending transfer request without being asked.

The bridge door closed on the final word.

Xoxz counted the decisions again. "Six."

"Only five of you have answered," Ena said.

The door opened.

"Six," Xoxz repeated.

Then everyone looked at Ena.

Captaincy had often required him to speak last and be mistaken for the cause of what others had already chosen.

"I saw the omission," he said. "From the beginning. I called it." He looked at Rage. "We led them here."

"Yes."

"We'll get the children somewhere safe."

"No such place."

Moxy looked at him. "Why'd you send coordinates?"

Rage adjusted Rill's blanket. "The batteries had four days. I needed a ship."

"No cages. No military restraints. Six adults botching one ration." His gaze moved to Xoxz. "And a soup spoon in a phase relay."

Rage looked back at Moxy. "Nobody took the largest piece. I picked ya."

"And ya brought a dirty wake with ya."

"I led ya here. Didn't know cowardice could travel that far inside an empty field."

"Okay. We start with somewhere else."

Ena opened the bounty channel.

The silver-throated representative appeared. "Captain. Prepare the fugitive and recovered assets for transfer."

"Rage got loose," Ena said.

"Your ship says otherwise."

Xoxz opened an old maintenance sandbox. Civil's stolen congratulatory star floated out, smiling with all the confidence of something the Federation had certified as harmless.

"You preserved that asset?" Eer050 asked.

"The Federation trusts it."

Xoxz fed the tracker's recovery seal into the star, pressed the melted spoon into the circuit, and pulled. The certified animation split into seven equally official lies.

Kaiven's telemetry filled with seven false Rages running in different directions.

One crossed the western desert. One climbed the nursery tower. One appeared aboard Kaiven, stole a ration, and escaped through a ventilation duct. A fourth was three meters tall.

The representative stared at the projections. "This telemetry is not credible."

"Came from our Federation-certified recovery system," Xoxz said.

Rage watched the three-meter version of himself step over a transit ring. "Too tall."

"You complained 'bout dhe official height," Moxy reminded him.

"Two centimeters. This is libel."

Another false Rage ran directly into a wall, shook himself, and continued.

"And the posture is insulting."

"We can revise your fucking performance after the moral crisis," Ena said.

Rage folded his arms. "That is what editors always say."

"Your ship is confused," Ena said.

"Your contract--"

"Is terminated."

He rejected the bounty.

The year of fuel vanished from the navigation well.

CIVIL-7 appeared beside the empty number.

PLEASE SELECT YOUR PRIMARY REASON FOR CONTRACT TERMINATION:

- COMPENSATION INSUFFICIENT
- TARGET INCONVENIENT
- TECHNICAL DIFFICULTY
- OTHER

"Moral atrocity," Ena said. "You got a box for that shit?"

Civil brightened. "Closest available match: technical difficulty."

Moxy selected OTHER. A text field opened with room for thirteen characters.

She entered THEY ARE KIDS.

"Thank you," Civil said. "Successful consent recorded. Your feedback helps us improve asset terminology."

Ena stared at the polygon. "*No manches*. That's the whole damn machine. First the atrocity asks for feedback. The objection becomes engagement, engagement becomes data, the data becomes a premium moral-improvement package, and suddenly the institution that patented the children is charging us monthly for a premium channel where we can explain why children aren't--"

Moxy closed the polygon with one finger.

Ena looked at her.

"Thirteen characters," she said.

In a capillary beneath Rill's second left hand, a receptor refused a molecule whose shape differed from the required form by one oxygen bond. The molecule continued downstream. Neither chemistry nor morality was consulted.

At Morrow Deep Mine, Shift Engineer Jessa Lorn declined an order to restart Drill Nine while methane remained 0.6 percent above tolerance. Her supervisor recorded the refusal as insubordination and moved his chair three meters farther from the drill.

On the moon Pali, two-year-old Nemi Sor refused a red boot. Her father offered the identical boot to the other foot. Nemi accepted it immediately. The distinction was obvious to everyone directly involved.

Inside the Federation feedback archive, THEY ARE KIDS was stored beneath TECHNICAL DIFFICULTY. The archive confirmed successful receipt and scheduled the terminology for review in thirty-seven years.

Aboard Commander Vaal's ship, the standing order marked ELIMINATE ALL WITNESSES changed from conditional to active. No new signature appeared. The seventeen earlier signatures were considered sufficient.

In the Federation vessel registry, Kaiven ceased to be an independent recovery partner and became an obstructing asset. No available classification described a ship protecting children.

The representative's pleasant expression remained in place after the person beneath it had left.

"You misunderstand the scale of this work," they said. "They are the key to unlock continuity for billions of conscious beings."

"Ask the children when they can answer."

The silver line on the official's throat went dark.

"Federation recovery authority is transferred. Remain where you are."

The channel closed.

Kaiven sounded an orbital alarm.

One dark ship became five above Zenox-08. Smaller transports detached from their bellies and turned toward the nursery towers.

Blondie smiled without warmth. "This will be rreally fun."

Commander Vaal

Chapter XIII

Commander Serit Vaal wore no uniform.

Uniforms implied a public institution, a chain of responsibility, and someone who might eventually apologize. Mercenary companies had found the gray coat more economical.

The mercenary appeared on Kaiven's forward glass in a gray coat.

Behind him, a junior operator rotated a damaged chair until its short leg faced the wall. The command deck regained stability without requiring the organization to acknowledge furniture failure.

Above the operator, a muted morale reel showed mercenaries distributing blankets under the caption PRIVATE ACTION. PUBLIC GOOD. The blankets were branded.

The operator placed a small sign beside the chair: DO NOT LEAN ON ACCOUNTABLE SURFACES. When Vaal shifted his weight toward it, the operator removed the sign with the speed of someone defending a career from contact with reality.

"Captain Ena," he said. "At last, we meet. You have been badly served by an incomplete explanation."

Ena gave a small nod. "Right. You mean you fucking lied."

"A lie changes facts. We withheld purpose."

"Convenient distinction when you're the one withholding it."

Vaal inclined his head. "Release the Vey and Rage. Your crew may leave. That is the acceptable remainder."

"Clean lock," Rage said over the nursery channel.

Eer050 transmitted the elimination order they had recovered. "Your instructions contradict you."

Vaal did not glance at it.

"Everything has a cost, Captain Ena. Refusing to count it does not make you moral." The commander leaned forward. "Do you understand what continuity research offers? Minds preserved after bodily death. Victims retrieved from dimensional collapse. Distance, perhaps time itself, made irrelevant. Two lives against every bereaved being who will ever exist."

In the nursery behind Ena, Rill began to fuss.

"You say two lives," Ena replied, "because 'two children' makes a monster."

"So is a universe that kills everyone born into it."

Vaal did not know how precisely Ena understood. Long before Zenox-08, Ena had begun a private quarrel with the terms of existence, and he had told the crew almost none of it.

For one dangerous moment, they stood on the same side of the question. Vaal had lost someone. Perhaps many someones.

That was the danger. *Cruelty* rarely believed itself empty. It was often *love* that had decided no one else was real.

"No," Ena said.

Vaal sighed. "The bounty has served its purpose."

Xoxz's displays turned black.

The hidden code spread through Kaiven. Navigation vanished. The reactor fell to emergency idle. Fuel valves sealed as if obeying a command from three centuries before they were built.

A temperature warning opened from the nursery.

NONESSENTIAL HABITAT HEAT DISABLED.

Blondie's voice entered the bridge from below. "Correct the noun."

The gray rat emerged beside the galley dispenser with pink insulation still in its mouth. Heat had driven it from the wall. It crossed toward Ena's boots.

"Hey, buddy. Keep moving." Ena lifted one foot without looking away from Vaal.

The insulation pulled free from a narrow service seam. Behind it, a warm copper bypass ran from the dispenser into Kaiven's auxiliary grid.

Xoxz followed the line and reached nine percent of Kaiven's reserve sleeping inside the galley dispenser, where it had spent several months failing to become coffee.

He rerouted it.

Warmth moved through the nursery walls. Rill's cheek marks steadied. On the bridge, the dispenser shuddered and produced one perfect cube of ice.

Pou picked it up. "Progress."

Eer050 stared at Xoxz. "You built a thermal reservoir inside a beverage appliance?"

"No. S'factory-shy. Kept makin' warm water." Xoxz patted the dispenser. "I respected her purpose."

"The public contract was never intended to recover Rage," Vaal continued. "It was intended to make a desperate ship find him. Thank you."

"Why'd you need him alive?" Ena asked.

"A living biometric match was the confirmation. Rage does not remain far from the specimens. The contract did not need to bring him back. It needed to know when you were standing beside him."

The transmission ended.

The first transports entered the atmosphere.

"I can clear her," Xoxz said. "By tomorrow."

"We have twenty-six minutes," Eer050 replied.

"Guess tomorrow's out."

"Tomorrow has been removed from the schedule," Eer050 said.

Moxy looked at him. "That a joke?"

"No. Tomorrow remains unavailable."

Rage studied the orbital pattern. "Their lead ship carries fold fuel. Small reserve, lower aft."

Moxy looked at him. "Know the hull?"

"I have stolen from better people."

"Reach it?"

He lifted his restraint-numbed wrist. "Not fast."

"Good. Got tired of that being your only feature."

Ena looked from the orbital pattern to the old Vey capsule beneath the western garden. "You had me at 'I am a genius.'"

"No one said dhat!" Moxy replied.

Ena's voice found its calm middle register. Fear remained, but it lost command privileges. Anger remained too. He gave it one job: keep the children alive. He assigned the others to fortify the nursery and free Kaiven. Moxy and Rage took an old Vey ascent capsule hidden beneath the western garden.

The capsule resembled a blue seed. It rose without thrust, slipping between gravity and the surface. Zenox fell away beneath them: pale deserts, black rivers of plants, nursery bells casting circular shadows.

The capsule had been designed for two Vey children. Its controls were delicate, its seats were close together, and its safety system interpreted Moxy as an unsecured architectural feature.

OVERSIZED CARGO MUST BE STORED EXTERNALLY.

Moxy dismissed the warning.

It returned in larger letters.

Rage reached across her and disabled it. "You offended the capsule."

"It called me fuckin' cargo."

"Yer on a stolen mission in a stolen vehicle to steal fuel. Cargo's yer strongest position."

"Enjoyin' dhis, aren't you?"

"Rough week."

Rage's hands shook over the controls.

Moxy steadied one lever. "How long?"

"The speed? Since birth. The shaking? Since I became old enough to deserve it."

The capsule listed sideways.

Moxy corrected it.

"Could say thanks."

"I could also crash with dignity."

"Good. Worried age made you flexible."

They attached to the mercenary ship under the cover of its descent formation. Rage opened a service lock with Xoxz's spoon. Moxy crawled through, found the telemetry node, and extracted the receiver key paired to the tracker inside Kaiven.

"You said dhe spoon was for dhe Vey machine," Moxy whispered.

Rage rotated the silver hook.

"That sounded like Xoxz."

Rage lifted one finger. "Boots."

Boots approached the service junction.

Moxy pushed Rage into an equipment cabinet and sealed it a moment before Technician Brell rounded the corner. His badge displayed his name, department, and a request to report unauthorized badge displays.

Brell looked at her borrowed uniform. "Wha're ya on?"

"Telemetry repair."

"Gotcher work order?"

Moxy held up the receiver key. "The work is inside this order."

Brell stared.

From inside the cabinet came a tiny, furious knock.

"What was that?"

"Faulty restraint."

Brell nodded with immediate understanding. "Factory fault. Third damn one today."

As he left, his badge warned him that his inspection of unauthorized badges was overdue. Brell sighed and continued walking.

Moxy opened the cabinet.

Rage emerged holding the technician's access badge, a packet of sweetener, and a folded conduit gauge as long as his forearm.

"You were in a box."

"He leaned close."

"Sweetener?"

"Principle."

"Whose?"

"Mine."

"Gauge?"

"Gravity."

The key carried the same Federation recovery serial as the bounty contract. Moxy pocketed it.

They reached the aft reserve. Moxy connected three cells to the ascent capsule while Rage searched the command cache.

"Here," he said.

The complete order opened between them.

RECOVER BOTH CONTINUITY SPECIMENS.

ELIMINATE ALL WITNESSES.

"Federation order," Moxy said. "Vaal's just the hand."

Rage read the second line. "Men like him don't need gods. Payroll's enough."

He tapped the passive construction with one nail.

Security lights awakened.

Moxy armed the stolen fuel cells. "Still got that damn speed?"

Rage smiled thinly. "Still fast."

He removed the restraint.

They returned to Zenox with gunfire following the blue seed through the clouds.

Rage snapped the conduit gauge to full length. It locked with a silver click and accepted his weight.

Moxy looked at it. "You stole a cane."

"I stole a calibrated measuring instrument."

Above them, Blondie drove both hands into the upper atmosphere. The green sky folded into a continent of black cloud. Lightning walked sideways across it. The descending transports broke formation and climbed back above the storm.

Eer050's voice entered their comm. "Revised arrival estimate: four hours."

Blondie hovered inside the weather. "Record the cause."

There was a pause.

"Atmospheric delay caused by an unregistered passenger heating system."

"Acceptable."

Simple Things

Chapter XIV

The stolen fuel gave Kaiven one chance to leave. The four hours Blondie had bought gave them just enough time to decide what leaving meant.

Eer050's plan required the ancient evacuation ring to produce a destination solution when it opened. The crew would cross through the ring while Kaiven drew the assault away. Once the destination existed, Kaiven would record it, fold there automatically on the stolen cells, and rendezvous with them.

Blondie stared at the plan. "We abandon herr."

"We conduct a temporary unaccompanied transit followed by immediate reunification."

"Use that fucking sentence. Prrecisely."

The heading above Eer050's plan changed from CREW EVACUATION to TEMPORARY UNACCOMPANIED TRANSIT.

Eer050 looked toward Xoxz.

Xoxz raised both hands. "Kaiven prefers complete sentences."

The ship still had to be convinced that escape was legal. Eer050 needed three hours to prepare the ring. The mercenaries would arrive in four.

An amber relay light opened beside Ena's wrist display.

Jo's face appeared above it, softly doubled by distance. Her cream workcoat was still neat at the collar and nowhere else. Behind her, a civilian corridor slid past in strips of amber light: water drums tied to a handrail, a medic trying to convince a sleeping child that a blanket was not a legal adversary, and three small vessels waiting their turn at a pressure gate.

"Captain," Jo said, "pplease tell me you have not scheduled a battle inside my afternoon."

"Hey, Jo." Ena looked past the relay at the corridor. "You got civilians."

"Forty-three, a pressure gate that enjoys suspense, and one person who has filed a complaint against a blanket."

"Sounds serious."

"It is a weighted blanket."

The smallest vessel flashed its route-ready light. Someone behind Jo cheered with the exhausted discretion of a person who had been waiting too long to cheer properly.

"I can turn us," she said. "Ppeople are packing medical stores already. I also have a return route, a civilian handoff, and a public file for every mercenary company that thinks a pressure gate is an appropriate place to conduct business."

Ena's expression changed before his answer did.

"No."

Jo's bright office posture held for one beat. "No?"

"Jo."

"It is in draft," she said. "The draft has proper timing."

"I need to ask something. Not order."

"That is a better start."

"Stay there. Get your people through. If the gate jams, you're the one who knows whose oxygen is where."

"And you are the one about to remain near mercenaries, an ancient weapon, and two children."

"Yeah."

"That is not a persuasive division of labor."

"No. It's just the one we got."

Jo looked down at the route cards in her hand. The relay washed their colors out until they looked like small square promises no one had thought to make properly.

"I hate this plan," she said.

"Mm-hm."

"I will remain with the corridor. It is a decision, not abandonment, and it is not because you have made a noble face at me."

Ena nodded. "Good. Keep it moving."

Her smile returned, smaller and entirely real. "I have filed an objection in triplicate. One copy is emotional."

"Save it. We'll need paperwork later."

"Pplease do."

The relay closed. Amber light continued along the civilian route, away from Zenox-08 and toward people who had not asked the universe to become important.

Rage attempted to give Rill a mineral stabilizer. She sealed her mouth, caught the dropper with two hands, and pushed it back toward him with the moral certainty of a much larger person.

"She needs the dose," Eer050 said.

"Yer presence ain't improved her opinion," Rage replied.

He removed Technician Brell's stolen sweetener from his coat, mixed three grains into the medicine, and offered it again. Rill accepted the dropper immediately.

Moxy watched the empty packet disappear into his pocket. "Principle?"

"Medicine."

"Coulda said dhat on dhe ship."

"I just did."

Pou found a sealed tin of peaches in the galley.

Most civilizations considered themselves immortal. Their canned goods were more cautious.

It had been saved for a celebration no one could remember. The label showed a yellow fruit beneath a blue sky, neither color quite plausible. Pou opened it with ceremonial gravity and divided the contents into seven cups.

"Count's nine, Cap'n," Moxy said.

"Kids don't have teeth."

Rill objected at length.

"She believes teeth're an arbitrary restriction," Xoxz translated.

"Says yer loud," Rage said.

Rill screamed louder.

Xoxz nodded. "Tha negotiations continue."

They ate in the nursery among the black trees. Above them, mercenary lights gathered like a second and less imaginative constellation.

A root-dwelling animal no larger than Ena's thumb emerged beside the cups, carried away one thread of peach, and returned for a rivet fallen from Blondie's armor work. The rivet required both forelegs and considerably more conviction.

Ena moved the peach thread closer. "Hey, buddy. Easier one."

The animal kept the rivet.

"All right. Big plans."

Blondie built a shelter around the cradles from sections of Kaiven's spare armor. She left a gap, frowned at it, added another plate, frowned again.

"Keep goin'," Pou said, "kids'll be safe from adulthood."

She threw a bolt at him. He caught it in his peach cup.

"Bonus iron."

Blondie added another plate.

"That plate blocks the ventilation," Eer050 said.

"Dangerr cannot enter through the ventilation."

"Neither can airr."

"Airr should identify itself beforre approaching the children."

Moxy looked at Rage. "Either one get less like this?"

"Which one?"

Blondie and Rill both glared at him.

"Fair," Moxy said.

Pou spent the meal lounging against a root and making Rill laugh by balancing cups on his head. Every few minutes his eyes moved to a different exit. He had memorized all of them.

On the fourth cup, Rill clapped all four hands. Pou added a fifth.

"That is my cup," Eer050 said.

"Found higher purpose."

The stack fell. Pou caught four cups. Senn caught the fifth without looking away from Xoxz.

Everyone stared at the quiet child.

Xoxz leaned closer. "Show-off. Kid's got form."

Senn placed the cup on their head.

Pou put one hand to his chest. "Student wins."

Eer050 retrieved the cup.

Senn watched him wash it three times.

He dried it, inspected the rim, and placed it inside his coat instead of returning it to the stack.

His left eyebrow rose when he noticed Moxy watching. For Eer050, this constituted a request for absolute discretion.

Moxy honored it by saying nothing very loudly.

Xoxz presented the repaired music cylinder to Senn.

"Plays one song badly," he explained.

He turned the melted spoon-key. Six soft notes emerged, the last always late. Senn placed four hands against the cylinder and stared at the tiny vibration. Rill stopped laughing to listen.

"The analog frequency disrupts phase entrainment," Eer050 said.

Everyone looked at him.

He tried again. "It may help them stay together if a machine tries to separate their awareness."

"Dhat was almost an explanation," Moxy said.

Eer050 looked faintly pleased, then noticed everyone had seen it and restored his usual expression.

Rill reached toward the cylinder. Xoxz moved it closer. The child struck the casing and the late sixth note arrived on time.

Xoxz gasped. "She fixed it."

"She struck it," Eer050 said.

Xoxz expanded the waveform. "And the machine listened."

Eer050 inspected the corrected interval. "My generation built that interface."

"Good firs' draft."

Xoxz replayed the corrected interval and stored it beside the gate controls.

"Rill's version," he said.

Rill struck the casing again.

"Definitive edition."

Rage ate one slice of peach in several suspicious bites.

"Expired?" Pou asked.

"Probably."

"Still good?"

Rage took another bite. "Those are different questions."

Ena looked at Xoxz.

Xoxz looked pleased that his philosophy had spread.

"I did not expect you to believe me," he said.

"We didn't," Ena replied. "We checked."

Moxy took the receiver key into her lap and removed its shell. Inside was a transmitter no larger than a seed. She rewrote its handshake and tucked it beneath her sleeve.

"What's that for?" Ena asked.

"Future trouble."

"That narrows it down."

"Optimism, Cap'n."

Later, Ena found her alone on the upper gallery. The broken transit rings framed the sky. Through one ring, the green sun was setting; through another, stars were already visible. The planet seemed to offer several times and ask the viewer to choose.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Moxy leaned against the rail. "Which par'?"

"The gates. The chair. I-"

Moxy considered him. "Keep going."

Below them, the music cylinder repeated its six imperfect notes. Rill made a sound at the late one every time. Senn waited with complete faith that it would come.

"Sometimes," Ena said, "you feel familiar in places I don't remember having."

"Sounds expensive as hell."

He laughed softly.

Moxy kept that one too.

She took his hand and placed it against the warm rail.

"When I call," she said, "*you come back*."

The first mercenary transport crossed the nearest ring.

Ena closed his hand around hers.

The simple things ended first.

The Federation

Chapter XV

At dawn on Zenox-08, a crystal of frozen carbon dioxide detached from the shadowed side of a black leaf. It fell 1.6 meters, struck pale soil, and became gas without passing through the inconvenience of being liquid.

At Saint Orra, Assessor Orlo's unattended slate added 0.004 credits of interest to Kaiven's account. The amount was too small to display and too legitimate to forgive.

On the garden world Isen, Sola Mer cut a red fruit into five equal pieces for four children. She ate none of them. Each child privately concluded that the largest piece had been received by someone else.

Inside Kaiven, Pou placed his cup in the galley with Blondie's bolt still resting at the bottom. Eer050 aligned the evacuation calculations to the exact center of the navigation well and corrected a deviation of 0.4 millimeters. His mind requested two more checks. He marked the first VERIFIED and left the request unanswered. Xoxz removed one boot and placed it beneath the table so the pressure in his body would settle and Kaiven would know he intended to return.

Blondie checked the shelter around the cradles, found no new gaps, and pressed a folded blue-stained cloth deeper beneath her breastplate. Moxz tested the seed-sized transmitter under her sleeve. Its light blinked once against her wrist and went dark. Ena fastened Rill's harness, loosened it by the width of one finger, and fastened it again.

Across the nursery complex, five white transports completed their descent calculations. Ordinary lives continued everywhere their weapons could not yet reach.

The mercenaries descended at dawn.

Five transports entered the nursery complex from five directions, their hulls white and smooth, each marked with a blue circle that implied public service. They fired before touching ground.

The blue circle had been selected by committee to communicate safety, continuity, and lawful authority. Its practical purpose was to reassure anyone being shot that the appropriate process had been followed.

Blondie met the first barrage in the sky.

She rose above the eastern tower with both hands open. Gold spread from her body into a shield vast enough to turn morning yellow. The shells struck and became flowers of white heat. Behind her, Kaiven woke on stolen fuel.

"HEY! They scrratched my damn atmospherre," Blondie said.

"It is not your atmosphere," Eer050 replied over the battle channel.

"It looks prretty damn mine from herre."

The second barrage bent toward the desert and carved glass rivers through the dust.

Between impacts, a six-legged desert animal carried one black seed toward a crack in the nursery foundation. Each explosion made it stop. None persuaded it to abandon the seed.

Below, Pou stood inside the evacuation gate. The ancient ring had begun to rotate, dragging sections of the ruined tower with it. He placed one shoulder under a collapsing support and pushed until the building reconsidered.

"Pakh is open," he said.

"Ceilin's comin' down," Moxy replied.

"Pakh's got a ceiling."

"Pou."

"Open-ish. Still counts."

Eer050 commanded from Kaiven's bridge. Vaal's assault formed clean tactical branches on his displays, every unit covering another, every retreat already protected.

"They expect us to defend the ship," he said. "Therefore we will abandon it."

Blondie appeared on one display, wrapped in fire. "We will WHAT!?"

"Appear to."

"Use complete sentences, old man. I am not dying inside a footnote."

"Kaiven will proceed without crew along an automated decoy vector while remaining under our control."

"You are using my ship as bait."

"Only visually."

"If your plan scratches here, I will kill the plan."

Eer050 looked at Ena. "Does she understand plans are abstractions?"

Ena watched Blondie tear a mercenary shell in half. "I would not rely on it."

He sent Kaiven forward on remote thrust, drawing two transports and the orbital guns toward her empty cargo side. At the last moment Xoxz vented the pink coolant. It ignited across the mercenary sensors, turning one Kaiven into forty luminous ghosts.

"She always wanted children," Xoxz said.

The ghosts scattered. Some accelerated. Some spun. One stopped completely and began broadcasting the unpaid dock invoice from Saint Orra.

Eer050 stared at the tactical display. "Why is a decoy transmitting our debt?"

"Needed a credible identity."

Three mercenary missiles immediately locked onto it.

Pou watched them change course. "Debt's heavy."

"I have maintained this for centuries," Eer050 said.

The invoice exploded in a sphere of pink light.

On the battle channel, Assessor Orlo's automated system added DESTRUCTION OF FINANCIAL DOCUMENT.

Blondie heard the notification. "I will destroy him later."

"Take a number," Moxy said.

Ena and Rage carried the infants toward the gate. Rill was strapped against Ena's chest beneath the armor. Senn rode with Rage and clutched the music cylinder in all four hands. Its melody trembled beneath the weapon fire.

Rill caught Ena's comm unit with two hands.

"No," Ena said.

Rill pulled it free and screamed directly into the open battle channel.

Every crew member flinched. Two mercenaries outside the western wall lowered their weapons in confusion.

Kaiven's translator displayed:

COMMAND INTENT: ABSOLUTE. CONTENT: UNRESOLVED.

"Finally," Blondie said. "Our little eclipse recognizes clear leadership."

Ena recovered the comm.

Rage adjusted Senn's blanket. "Yer authority's been challenged."

"She has my support."

Mercenaries cut through the western wall.

Ena fired Kaiven's defensive beam through the opening. The narrow blue line struck three weapons in succession and no bodies. Rage crossed the room between shots, the stolen conduit gauge tapping once on each helmet as he passed. Four armored soldiers collapsed, alive and profoundly insulted.

A fifth soldier remained standing. He looked at the four bodies, looked at Rage, and carefully placed his weapon on the floor.

Rage appeared beside him, removed the weapon's power cell, and returned to Ena.

The soldier looked down at the weapon he had just surrendered.

"Was that necessary?" Ena asked.

"Migh' reconsider."

Behind them, the soldier reconsidered, lifted the powerless weapon, and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

Rage raised the power cell in acknowledgment.

The soldier lay down beside the others.

Above them, Moxy entered the third transport.

She wore one of the white field suits taken from the soldiers Rage had embarrassed. Smoke and orders filled the cabin. No one questioned a person moving with sufficient annoyance.

She reached the command spine, placed her seed-sized transmitter beneath the primary fold array, and armed it.

One small point pulsed on her wrist.

Found you.

Then Commander Vaal's face appeared on the bulkhead.

"Officer," he said. "Remove your helmet."

Moxy shot the screen.

The transport sealed every door.

"That was discourteous," Vaal's voice said from the ceiling.

"File a complain'."

She planted charges on the auxiliary control spine, climbed into a waste conduit, and detonated them behind her. The transport lurched sideways, tore a white scar through the nursery tower, then corrected above the black garden. Moxy rode the conduit down as the world rotated, kicked free into open air, and landed badly enough to become briefly religious.

Pou pulled her up with one hand while holding the ceiling with the other.

"Tracker."

"Plante'."

"Knee."

"Optional."

"Good."

The crew converged at the evacuation gate.

Xoxz forced its controls awake with Rill's corrected six-note sequence. The ring filled with a view of a place no map recognized: a dark shore beneath six moons. Air moved through from the other side.

The gate released a destination solution. Kaiven recorded it and armed the automatic rendezvous for the first successful crossing.

"Tha gate's stable!" he shouted.

For one bright minute, they were winning.

Blondie drove the remaining transports from the sky. Eer050 trapped Vaal's command ship behind Kaiven's forty ghosts. Pou held the path. Moxy reached Ena. Rage carried Senn within ten steps of the open gate.

Then the mercenaries used the Vey weapon.

Six black pylons struck the ground around the nursery. They produced no blast. A low rhythm entered the bones.

Rill stopped crying.

Senn dropped the music cylinder.

Both infants arched in perfect unison as pale light pulled upward from their bodies. The gate flickered. Ena tore at Rill's harness, but his hands had become distant things. Rage took one step toward Senn and collapsed.

Xoxz crawled to the cylinder and turned the spoon-key.

One note. Two.

The pylons swallowed the melody.

White-armored figures came through the smoke. Ena saw their hands take Rill. He fired and missed because the floor had divided into several moments, each insisting it was now. Moxy reached the transport cradle and severed one restraint before a pulse threw her into the wall.

Rage moved once, faster than pain, faster than age, and caught the cradle's edge.

Commander Vaal stepped from the smoke. Blood ran from one ear, but his hand

was steady on the phase weapon.

"I am sorry," he said.

"Right," Ena answered from the ground.

Vaal fired.

Rage's fingers released the cradle.

The mercenaries lifted both infants into the third transport, now the last one still functional. Vaal backed onto its ramp behind them, keeping the phase weapon trained on Rage until the doors closed.

The transport rose.

Blondie broke from the sky and fell toward it like judgment.

She would have reached them.

The sky changed.

Sound did not stop. It departed.

Blondie hung above the tower, gold streaming soundlessly from her hands. The transport's engines became mute blue circles. Ena shouted and felt the shout happen only inside his skull.

Every shadow on Zenox-08 turned toward the same place.

Between the broken transit rings, a man-shaped absence opened its eyes.

Asgan

Chapter XVI

First there was no sound.

Beneath the broken gallery, a repair device continued drawing dust into a neat line. The line curved toward the sky. The device followed until its sensors could no longer identify down, then stopped with its brush extended.

Then light began to lean.

The green sun stretched toward the figure above Zenox until it resembled a wound being drawn closed. Stars appeared in the morning sky and moved inward. Darkness gathered around the shape, but within the darkness burned grains of impossible brilliance—as if someone had made a body from void and stardust, then forgotten which was skin.

Rill and Senn woke screaming.

Across the distance between the transport cradles, four small hands reached for four small hands. Their cheek marks shone with the same blind terror that moved through everyone below.

The mercenaries turned their weapons toward the figure. No identification appeared on their displays. No order arrived to explain him.

Inside the rising transport, Vaal looked up with everyone else.

"Proceed to orbit," he ordered. "Now."

The transport engines refused to make sound, but they obeyed.

Ena stood.

The figure descended.

Asgan's feet stopped above the broken gallery. He wore no armor. What resembled a long coat dissolved at its edges into points of night. His posture was quiet, slightly inclined against a weight no one else could see.

Asgan surveyed the battle. His gaze passed over the mercenaries, the crew, and the ruined nursery. No one could tell what held his attention. His eyes reflected no sky and offered no recognition.

Asgan raised one hand. Thumb touched middle finger; the others opened around an absent center.

Asgan spoke in Kai.

"Tio an rina."

Common speech could only flatten it to: *This seeds the beginning.*

The older phrasing held a smaller, more complete meaning.

So it begins.

Above, the transport carrying Rill and Senn entered Vaal's command ship through its ventral hangar. Ena raised Kaiven's beam control.

Asgan turned his palm toward the mercenaries remaining on the ground.

Dark rays opened between his fingers.

They did not strike like weapons. Where they touched, they *erased*.

A white-armored soldier lost sound first. The smoke around her stopped moving. Her outline became a perfect absence shaped like a person. Then reality closed over the place where she had stood. Another vanished beside her. Then another.

No ash. No body. No proof that matter had ever accepted their names.

The surviving mercenaries broke formation. Some fired at Asgan. Others ran for transports that had already abandoned them. Commander Vaal's ship accelerated out of the atmosphere with the infants aboard.

"NO!" Ena shouted.

The void rays widened toward the crew.

Blondie rose between them.

Her golden shield covered Kaiven, Ena, Moxy, Pou, Xoxz, Eer050, and Rage. It covered the ruined nursery and every empty cradle. Her light became a second dawn against the void.

"Mine," she said.

Sound returned only for the word.

The ray touched her shield.

Gold vanished from the sky.

Where Blondie had been, morning looked through an outline of nothing.

One by One

Chapter XVII

Blondie had always believed enough strength could turn care into law.

Her shield broke without breaking. It did not crack, dim, or yield. One instant it was the largest object beneath the sky; the next there had never been light there.

Blondie remained for half a breath.

She looked down at the crew. At Kaiven. At the empty cradles inside the shelter she had built too thick.

Not fear, Ena thought.

Surprise.

The cosmos had finally presented something that did not accept ownership.

Blondie spread her arms wider anyway.

The absence closed.

She was gone.

Ena ran toward the place.

A black seed shaken loose by the bombardment landed inside the shelter Blondie had built too thick. It came to rest where two unnecessary armor plates overlapped.

There was no place. Dust crossed it. Light moved through it. The universe had healed with indecent speed.

"BLONDIE!"

His voice echoed from the nursery bells.

Asgan opened his hand again.

Eer050 seized Ena by the coat. "Move."

They retreated beneath the gallery while void rays crossed the ruins in silent lines. Where they touched, black trees lost branches, stone lost wounds, mercenaries lost the brief histories they had hoped to survive.

Eer050 scanned the residue while running. Data covered his implants.

His mind offered its oldest bargain: verify the absence three times and perhaps no further omission would become his fault. He had completed one scan. One would have to be enough.

"Annihilation," he said. "It leaves nothing. No residual mass. No energy. No quantum shadow."

"Later," Moxy snapped.

"There may be no later, which is the point *I have spent my life refusing to understand.*"

He tore the scanner from his wrist and pushed it into Ena's hand.

The display showed only a clean absence where Blondie's energy, matter, and history should have left residue.

"The shields give it a larger boundary to find," Eer050 said. "Break formation. Do not let it-"

Sound stopped around him.

Eer050's face became an outline of darkness. For the first time since Ena had known him, there was no guarded knowledge behind his eyes. He had given away the only thing that mattered before deciding what it was worth.

His hand released Ena's sleeve.

Reality closed.

The scanner fell.

Pou caught it.

"Gate," he said.

The evacuation ring still turned below, though the dark shore within it flashed in and out. Xoxz stumbled toward the controls. Rage followed, too weak for speed. Moxy pulled Ena after them.

The nursery support split.

Pou stepped beneath it.

He planted both feet and raised his hands. Hundreds of tons of ancient stone stopped above his head. The route to the gate remained open.

"Go," he said.

"Put it down and come with us," Ena ordered.

"On what?"

Pou smiled. Dust ran over his face. For once, calm did not conceal him. Anger, grief, and fear were all present, and he had made room for courage among them.

"Kept checkin' khe exits," he said. *"Turns out I was one."*

Ena moved toward him.

Pou's expression hardened. "Cap'n. Spend khe energy savin' someone."

The ray passed through the falling dust.

Pou's hands vanished first. The weight above him did not fall; for one impossible second it remained supported by the memory of his strength.

Then he was gone.

The ceiling came down.

Moxy shoved Ena through the lower arch as stone erased the route behind them. Rage landed beside him. Xoxz waited at the ring, one boot gone again, the music cylinder hugged to his chest.

"Tha gate's collapsin'," Xoxz said.

Three alarms and four voices reached him together.

"One voice."

Moxy closed the crew channel until only she remained. "Gate. Can you hold it?"

"No. One interval." He turned the spoon-key.

Six imperfect notes entered the ring. The dark shore steadied for one breath.

Then a void ray crossed the ring's outer edge. The destination, the air

moving through it, and half the ancient machine ceased to exist.

Xoxz listened to the place where it had been.

"Cap'n," he said, and for once there was no joke hiding in his voice. "It don' even leave an echo."

The void ray entered his back.

His outline emptied. The music cylinder slipped through fingers that no longer belonged to visible reality. Ena caught it before it struck the ground.

The late sixth note played to an empty room.

Xoxz was gone.

The evacuation ring collapsed into ordinary metal.

Only Ena, Moxy, and Rage remained.

Asgan stood at the far end of the ruined gallery. His hand lowered. No one could tell what, if anything, the gesture addressed.

Rage moved toward Ena.

"No," Ena said.

The ray opened across the gallery.

It passed through Ena's chest.

Cold passed through him without pain or resistance. He felt no destination, no hidden presence, nothing he could name as survival. Then the ray left his body and struck the wall behind him.

The wall vanished.

Ena remained.

Rage stared.

The next ray opened toward Moxy.

She turned to Ena.

"Cap'n?"

Silence

Chapter XVIII

"Cap'n?"

Ena did not move.

The broken gallery had become Kaiven's bridge. The pale desert had become a room with no walls. Moxy stood before him and behind her waited an empty chair.

"Cap'n, come back."

Her voice crossed the distance.

Ena saw her.

Moxy: dust in her hair, one knee failing beneath her, mouth drawn tight because fear was private and there were witnesses. Her hand remained outstretched toward him.

He took it.

The void ray touched her back.

Sound withdrew from the place where they stood. Ena felt her fingers in his, but he could not hear himself saying her name. Darkness traced the edge of her body.

He pulled.

There was nothing to pull against. No force. No direction. Ena could feel no elsewhere in the ray. It erased every fact by which he knew she had been here.

Moxy studied his face.

Her expression softened.

That hurt more than fear would have.

Ena remembered her beside the command chair.

Sometimes silence has what you're after.

He remembered the solemn beat after the body had interrupted eternity.

He remembered laughter escaping both of them while the universe remained, briefly, none of their business.

Moxy's hand became transparent absence inside his.

He tightened his grip around nowhere.

Her lips moved.

Listen to the silence.

Then Moxy disappeared.

Ena's hand closed on itself.

The ray ended.

Sound returned in pieces: stone settling, Kaiven's distant alarm, Rage breathing through pain. High above, Vaal's command ship ignited its fold drive. Rill and Senn's synchronized pulses vanished from the scanners.

Asgan was gone.

The sky held no wound where he had stood. Morning continued across Zenox-08

with the professionalism of something that had not loved anyone involved.

Ena listened.

There was only the wind moving through the nursery bells.

Memory supplied Moxy's laugh because grief was cruel enough to imitate what it could not return. Ena knew the difference.

The silence had nothing for him.

Rage stood beside him. The old man offered no comfort. Some losses were insulted by consolation.

They returned to Kaiven.

The cargo lock opened for them slowly. Pink coolant ran down one wall. The lights awakened in sections, revealing every improvised repair and every object left where its owner expected to return.

A palm-sized cleaning unit emerged, approached Moxy's last dusty boot print, and stopped. Its map still assigned the corridor to six moving bodies. It waited for clearance.

Pou's cup waited in the galley with the bolt still inside it.

Eer050's six columns remained above the navigation well, all consequences now.

Xoxz's other boot lay beneath the table.

One of Blondie's handprints had burned gold into the outer hull.

Ena reached the bridge last.

The command stations curved around him.

Blondie's station was empty.

Eer050's station was empty.

Pou's station was empty.

Xoxz's station was empty.

Moxy's station was empty.

He sat before it because he could not sit in his own.

The mercenary ship had become a point at the edge of the system. Then the point bent as its fold drive opened.

A light blinked on Moxy's dead console.

Once.

Twice.

Her hidden transmitter woke inside Vaal's ship and sent its location across the dark.

Found you.

The point disappeared into the fold.

The signal remained.

This was what Moxy had saved: a direction.

Ena could not follow it.

Not yet.

Rage lowered himself into the copilot's chair, old hands trembling. He did not explain the loss, promise it could be reversed, or soften it with meaning. He stayed.

The signal blinked again.

Kaiven's white lights became glowing keys beneath Ena's hands. The forward glass dimmed into an off-white monitor with damaged corners. For an instant, a price sticker clung to the universe.

US\$3.14

The tracker blinked like a cursor.

Ena placed his hands above the keys.

The cursor waited.

"So it begins," he wrote.

An Incomplete Inventory of
Things That Mattered

Assessor Orlo - A dock official who believed distance, combat, and intergalactic flight were temporary conditions, while an unpaid invoice was permanent. Available evidence supported him more often than anyone found comfortable.

Brother Omm - A cargo priest who measured freight by weight and fugitives by consequence. His religion refused to distinguish metaphor from physical dimensions, sparing its clergy considerable paperwork and making directions almost useless.

CIVIL-7 - A cheerful contractual interface programmed to interpret objection as engagement, atrocity as technical difficulty, and employment as voluntary whenever the correct box had been selected. Its smile survived every fact presented to it.

Commander Serit Vaal - A mercenary commander whose gray coat removed the decorative burden of public accountability. He believed grief could justify arithmetic performed on other people's children. His mistake was not lacking love, but declaring his the only love with voting rights.

Isha Deyn - A Federation case editor who examined an empty property description for eleven seconds and approved it thirteen seconds into lunch. Civilization often changes direction during intervals somebody has already been promised.

Jessa Lorn - A mining engineer who refused to restart a drill in unsafe methane. Her supervisor called this insubordination from three meters farther away, demonstrating management's ancient commitment to principle at a survivable distance.

Jori Par - A maintenance apprentice who lost one cobalt-steel washer inside Saint Orra. He searched for twenty seconds. The washer clicked for nine years. Both parties considered the matter closed.

Jo - A Nemmari relief coordinator who wanted to leave forty-three civilians and come to Kaiven's battle. Ena asked her to remain. She called it a decision, not abandonment, and filed one emotional objection in triplicate. A person can be far away and still be doing the work that love has no right to interrupt.

The Gray Ship Rat - A resident of Kaiven, collector of pink insulation, and attendee at one financial meeting. Ena moved his boot. Later the rat moved the insulation hiding the nursery's warm bypass. It sought a cooler wall, not moral significance. The children received both.

The Living Reef - A passenger wider than twelve meters, classified as structural moisture, and placed behind questions about chairs. It possessed no recognized name in the file, which did not prevent it from possessing objections.

The Medical Supply Vendor - Sold Rage formula, remembered his concern about expiration dates, and survived a threat directed entirely at an absent manufacturer. Customer service becomes easier when the customer's enemies are elsewhere.

Nali Venn - An agricultural worker who promised to return before failing irrigation lamps went dark. She meant it. Sincerity cannot repair electrical systems, though it has inspired many people to attempt the wiring personally.

Nemi Sor - Two years old and opposed to one red boot while fully accepting its identical counterpart. Adults called this irrational because adults prefer their irrational distinctions to involve flags, borders, and approved

footwear.

Officer Neral - A security officer whose fugitive escaped at impossible speed but whose true adversary remained a semicolon. She defended traceability policy until it successfully traced everyone except the person intended.

Oru - A six-legged child who slept through the collapse of a laundry shelf. His father saved eight garments and legally reclassified the ninth as folded. Oru's contribution was confidence in local government.

Ovan Tesh - A freight receiver who accepted five chairs and a ladder as six chairs. He understood that furniture is less a category than a willingness to stop standing.

Open Passage Mutual - A civilian relief network with mismatched ships, amber route lights, and strong opinions about blankets. It moved people when official rescue became conditional. The Mutual did not solve the war. It kept a gate open for whoever reached it, which is a smaller miracle and often the one available.

Registrar Pavo - A customs official who classified a living reef as structural moisture because the passenger form ended at twelve meters. Bureaucracy rarely denies reality outright. It simply provides reality with an unusable field.

Rill - A Vey infant with four hands, absolute command intent, and strong objections to unmodified medicine. She corrected ancient music by hitting it, an approach generally discouraged by conservatories and quietly practiced by mechanics.

The Saint Orra Tea Seller - Held Rage's cup while his hands shook and judged his danger by whether he paid. This was not the question Ena asked, but it was probably the better one.

Senn - A quiet Vey infant who watched everything, caught a falling cup, and wore it correctly on the first attempt. Silence should not be confused with passivity; sometimes it is simply observation gathering leverage.

The Sensible Fifth Soldier - A mercenary who watched Rage disable four colleagues, surrendered, reconsidered, discovered his weapon had been emptied, and lay down again. Tactical wisdom sometimes requires two drafts.

Sevi Aran - A woman who died at three hundred and four while waiting for water to boil. She never met Kaiven's crew or altered their decisions. This did not make her life secondary. Her kettle remained optimistic for seven-tenths of a second.

The Silver-Throated Representative - An unnamed Federation official whose painted line moved more honestly than the mouth above it. Their pleasant expression remained after the person beneath had withdrawn, making it well suited to government service.

Sola Mer - A parent who cut five equal pieces of fruit for four children and ate none. Each child believed someone else received more. Love distributed evenly is often experienced as an accounting error.

Technician Brell - A mercenary technician who required a work order during infiltration and carried one unnecessary sweetener packet. His badge reported unauthorized badge displays, proving that surveillance eventually becomes too efficient to exclude itself.

The Armistice of Pel - A historical peace associated with two armies before it and no geography afterward. Blondie cited it during a disagreement about

half a tower. Eer050 accepted the revised quantity.

Customs Habitat Leth - The station where a living reef became structural moisture and joined an appeal queue behind questions about chairs. Its forms were designed for all known life, provided known life maintained convenient dimensions.

The Dark Shore Beneath Six Moons - The destination visible through the evacuation ring. It possessed air, six moons, and no recognized map location. This met the crew's standards for hope, which had deteriorated considerably.

Isen - A garden world where red fruit grew, families shared it, and no mercenary fleet arrived during the relevant minute. Most peace consists of catastrophes being busy elsewhere.

M314 - A flock of galaxies governed by the Federation in principle. The phrase *in principle* allowed the government to own the stars without becoming responsible for roads, rescue, or inconvenient inhabitants.

Merrow's Rest - An orbital settlement where Sevi Aran's kettle outlived her by seven-tenths of a second. The settlement continued rotating, as places do after becoming the site of someone's entire ending.

Morrow Deep Mine - A workplace containing methane, Drill Nine, Jessa Lorn, and management's movable chair. Only one of these consistently observed safety tolerances.

The Nursery Towers of Zenox-08 - Inverted bells balanced on needle stems, built to shelter children and later classified as evidence of nobody. They remembered their purpose more accurately than the government did.

Rho-Minar - The place that banned Pou after he relocated its western parliament during an architectural disagreement. The parliament's present location remains tactically unhelpful and therefore excellent biography.

Saint Orra - A trading station selling food, medicine, weapons, prophecy, replacement organs, and directions to cheaper vendors. The directions remained its most dependable product, largely because customers had to leave before evaluating them.

The Siege of Tal - A conflict after which a desert city became a lake. Historical scholarship continues to debate where the water came from. Blondie regarded this as evidence that preparation is optional when confidence is adequately weaponized.

The Weather Chapel - An ancient room that manufactured blue storms indoors and offered Rage an escape route through several thousand liters of theological weather. Its clouds had better tactical training than most security departments.

Zenox-08 - A world called uninhabited because acknowledging its dead created obligations, while acknowledging its children created witnesses. Government vocabulary is often architecture constructed around a locked door.

The US\$3.14 Monitor - An old off-white machine with chipped corners and a price low enough to confuse cost with value. It became a window, a memory, a universe, and possibly still a bargain.

The Animated Certification Star - A decorative reward for narrowly legal competence. Xoxz stole its validation seal and later divided it into seven officially certified lies. Accreditation finally found a practical use.

The Blue-Stained Cloth - Used to clean Rill's rejected breakfast from

Blondie's armor, then folded and preserved as "Evidence." Empires have expanded for less persuasive reasons.

The Bounty Contract - Eleven thousand words identifying Rage as dangerous and none identifying what he had taken. Legal documents become lighter when nouns are removed and heavier when accepted.

Brell's Sweetener - Accidentally dispensed, privately pocketed, professionally stolen, and ultimately used to persuade medicine into Rill. Its manufacturer promised improved flavor. Its actual contribution was moral.

The Coffee Dispenser - A machine ordered to make coffee, committed to warm water, and unwilling to let instructions interfere with vocation. Its accumulated heat later warmed the nursery. Failure is sometimes purpose awaiting a less judgmental emergency.

The Conduit Gauge - A calibrated measuring instrument stolen by Rage and reassigned by gravity as a cane. It later measured several mercenary helmets with excellent repeatability.

Eer050's Cup - A vessel caught by Senn, worn as a hat, washed three times, inspected, and hidden inside Eer050's coat. It remained merely a cup in the same sense that Kaiven remained merely transportation.

The Empty Return Field - Contract metadata containing no visible message, no destination, and a tracker folded beneath its absence. The safest hiding place in bureaucracy is often a field everyone is required to preserve and nobody is expected to read.

The Evacuation Ring - A Vey machine capable of opening a road to a dark shore beneath six moons. It required ancient engineering, corrected music, stolen cutlery, and one infant's editorial standards.

Habitat Battery Four - A failing battery whose declining voltage shared one exact second with Rage waking before its alarm. Machines publish thresholds. Care develops less formal instrumentation.

The Melted Spoon - Once a utensil; later a relay hook, machine key, musical component, infiltration tool, and argument against intended purpose. The Federation would have required five certifications. Xoxz required soup.

Moxy's Transmitter - A seed-sized device hidden aboard Vaal's ship. It could not rescue the children, reverse annihilation, or make grief reasonable. It could provide a direction, which is how impossible journeys usually begin.

The Music Cylinder - A broken Vey transit synchronizer that played six notes, one habitually late. Rill corrected it through percussion. Musicologists call this interpretation; damaged gates call it maintenance.

Orlo's Invoice - A bill for paint, damage, intimidation, archaeology, and the administrative consequences of objecting. It crossed intergalactic distance, authenticated a decoy, attracted missiles, survived destruction as debt, and continued accruing interest. Currency envies such persistence.

The Peaches - Preserved fruit saved for a forgotten celebration and opened before battle. Civilizations promise immortality. Canned goods check the seal and make more conservative plans.

Phase Pylon Six - Failed synchronization by 0.0003 seconds, passed after being struck, and later joined five colleagues in the Vey weapon. Inspection often distinguishes dangerous machinery from approved dangerous machinery through confidence and a second attempt.

The Pink Coolant - Kaiven's preferred method of expressing mechanical distress. It later became forty luminous decoys, demonstrating that embarrassment, properly vented, can acquire tactical value.

Pou's Cup and Blondie's Bolt - A drinking vessel containing the bolt Blondie threw and Pou caught. Left in the galley, it became evidence that ordinary objects expect their owners to return.

Rage's Silver Cane - A support for an old body moving faster than weapons. It vanished into a null fracture without sound. The replacement was technically a gauge, because dignity occasionally requires inaccurate nouns.

The Ration Square - The crew's last full meal, cut into six unequal pieces and distributed so badly that nobody took the largest. Rage later cited this incompetence as evidence of character.

The Restraint Band - A Federation-approved device designed to prevent acceleration and entirely unequipped to restrain patient theft. Specifications are strongest against the behavior their authors remembered to imagine.

Rill's Corrected Sixth Note - An ancient transit interval repaired when Rill struck the cylinder at the proper moment. The gate recognized her authority before most adults did.

The Seven Blondies - Six illusions and one original, all equally offended by a crooked shoulder plate. They resolved the identity problem by attacking one another, a method with broad historical precedent.

The Seven False Rages - Certified telemetry projections running in contradictory directions. One was three meters tall, one attacked a wall, and all were more administratively credible than the truth.

The Six Columns - Three choices, three consequences, and eventually only consequences. Numbers cannot make decisions, though displaying enough of them often persuades decision-makers to hide nearby.

The Vey Weapon - Six black pylons that disrupted the infants' shared awareness and turned time against everyone near them. It was built from knowledge obtained through suffering. Precision does not become wisdom merely because it works.

Xoxz's Boot - Removed before a fold so Kaiven would know he intended to return, misplaced during pursuit, and later left beneath a table for the same reason. Ritual is what hope does when engineering refuses the assignment.

Alive Only - A bounty condition presented as mercy and used as biometric confirmation. Institutions frequently preserve a body only long enough to extract what its continued existence can authenticate.

The Federation - A government spanning galaxies, laws, laboratories, interfaces, and strategically incomplete explanations. It was large enough to classify life as property and efficient enough to outsource finding it.

Home - The nearest place willing to let someone arrive poor. Sometimes a planet, sometimes a ship, sometimes the person who notices which chair you looked at first.

Independent Recovery Partner - The contractual title for a bounty hunter during the interval between useful desperation and disposable knowledge. Independence was mandatory.

Kai - A language in which source-love, relation, time, and sixfold presence

can occupy fewer words than their translations. This efficiency does not make Kai simple. Stars also appear small from far away.

Lumin - The written form found in Vey ruins, where geometry carries language and a six-dot field can contain both instruction and vow. Ordinary alphabets rarely require architecture to finish a sentence.

Protected Property - A legal category capable of containing children once the word *children* has been removed. Protection described the claim, not the claimed.

Public History - The place governments bury verbs. Events become conditions, victims become inventory, and deliberate actions become regrettable weather with excellent archival formatting.

Silence - Sometimes an answer, sometimes an absence, sometimes the shape left when an expected voice does not return. It contains whatever the listener brings, which is why grief finds it so well furnished.

The Vey - A people who believed consciousness touched the body without being contained by it. The Federation classified them as extinct, then patented the surviving children. Contradiction becomes policy when entered in separate departments.

The Vey Continuity Program - Research intended to preserve consciousness by repeatedly endangering conscious children. It sought victory over death and began by becoming one more reason to fear it.

A Null Fracture - An absence where material, dust, light, and available explanations stop. Falling into one is discouraged. Filing a complete incident report is impossible.

Wormhole Transit - Statistically safe travel through an interior version of space. The statistics were compiled exclusively from arrivals, giving survivors the traditional advantage in transportation research.

A Briefly Helpful Guide to What
Just Happened

This is not an answer key. An answer key would be rude after all that. It is a few handrails beside the part of the story where the floor has become unreliable.

A person is not a category

The Federation can call Rill and Senn property, inventory, research, or a missing noun on a bounty notice. None of those words changes what they are: children with bodies, preferences, fear, curiosity, and a right not to be owned. The book asks us to notice how often harm begins with a noun that makes the harmed person disappear.

Care is work, not just feeling

The crew's love is rarely presented as a speech. It is medicine sweetened by three stolen grains, a cup washed too carefully, a shelter adjusted one plate too far, a route held, a gate repaired, a person staying with civilians instead of racing toward the people she misses. Feeling matters. But feeling that never becomes attention, labor, or a changed plan is mostly decorative furniture.

A neutral system can still be cruel

Contracts, classifications, and official interfaces sound calm because calm language makes responsibility easier to misplace. A system can follow its own rules perfectly while those rules decide that some lives count as cargo, equipment, or an acceptable loss. This does not mean every form is evil. It means forms need people who can ask whom the form forgot.

Comedy can be a method of staying alive

The spoon, the peaches, the bad music, the bathroom architecture, and the arguments about ventilation do not make the danger less real. They show that these people remain people while danger tries to reduce them to functions. Laughter is not a denial of grief. Sometimes it is the body refusing to give terror exclusive use of the room.

Not knowing is also a condition with ethics

At the end, Ena and Rage do not possess enough knowledge to turn absence into a clean conclusion. The book does not ask them to pretend otherwise. It asks what they owe the missing when certainty has failed: their names, their stations, their consequences, and the refusal to make a comforting story from evidence they do not have.

Philosophical conversations

The book borrows questions from these thinkers; it does not claim that any of them would approve of its ship, spoon, or administrative climate.

- Kantian ethics - Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. The rejection of property-language for children is in conversation with Kant's insistence that a person cannot rightly be treated merely as a means to somebody else's project.
- Ethics of care - Nel Noddings and Joan Tronto. Their work helps the book treat care as attention, work, relation, and public responsibility, rather than as a warm feeling that can safely remain off duty.
- Power and epistemic injustice - Michel Foucault and Miranda Fricker. The Federation's categories and records ask how institutions make some testimony, bodies, and harms difficult to perceive before they ever become "evidence."

- Laughter and the social body - Henri Bergson and Mikhail Bakhtin. Their different accounts of comedy help frame laughter as a material, communal way of resisting terror's claim to be the only serious thing in the room.

Aesthetic conversations

The book's doors, cups, routes, and weak lights work through suggestion rather than a fixed code. It is in conversation with Symbolist correspondence and dream-image-from Baudelaire and Mallarmé to Odilon Redon's inward strangeness-while insisting that a spoon still has to repair something before it earns a cosmic mood.

If this guide has made anything simpler, that is probably temporary. The spoon is still a spoon. The children are still children. The universe remains administratively unprepared for either fact.