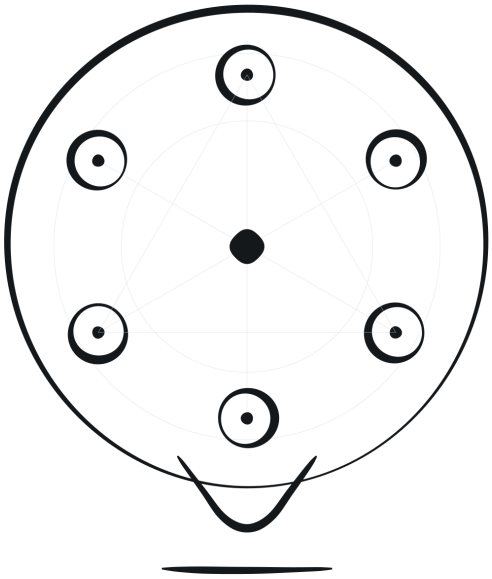

Very Very | Long Time Ago

/ˈkaɪ̯.ʊen/

Prologue

"How," the writer asked, "am I going to rescue the Last Two?"

He asked this aloud, as writers often do when they want a practical problem to sound philosophical.

The cursor blinked.

The writer considered appealing directly to the readers, then wondered whether they were mature enough for that sort of responsibility. A moment later, he recognized that *mature enough* was probably an insult. The readers had, after all, made it this far. Perhaps he was the one who required supervision.

"Ah! A flashback!" he shouted, as if someone were present to appreciate genius at this altitude. Archimedes had required a bath. The writer had required only panic, which was cheaper and available in every room.

His fingers hovered above the glowing keys of his cheap mechanical keyboard. Clearly, this was lazy writing. Fortunately, memory had been using the same device for several million years without losing critical support.

"Blaming memory now?" Ena asked from the other side of the monitor.

The writer looked at the cursor. "You have a better transition?"

"No."

"*Yare yare.*"

"Don't *yare-yare* me. You asked."

"*Shōganai.*"

"It can be helped. Write a better transition."

"Please respect the craft."

"Mm-hm."

The monitor widened around him.

Its off-white frame became Kaiven's forward glass. Its blinking cursor became Moxy's transmitter, pulsing from very far away. The keys beneath his hands became a command console that still remembered hands no longer resting on it.

Ena sat in Moxy's chair.

He was remembering Pou singing.

Pou had been famous for songs in the limited sense that everyone knew he sang them and nobody had successfully made him stop. Lyrics reached him as suggestions. Melody received slightly better treatment.

> *Please stop crying. Air is limited right now.*
> *Welcome to the final shift.*
> *I hope you have useful pockets.*
> *You cannot bribe a door,*
> *but I can probably lift it.*
> *Things look acceptable from here.*
> *Not good.*
> *Acceptable.*

Pou had sung the final word with such grave reassurance that, for nearly ten seconds, the crew had believed *acceptable* was a place they might reach.

> *We have done this before.*

Why are we running from the bullets?
Because they are bullets.
Good question.

A laugh escaped Ena.

It was a very small laugh, hardly more than one breath arriving with the wrong emotion.

Humans had always insisted that tragedy and comedy were opposing forces. This was because humans preferred opposing forces. They were easier to name, easier to organize, and considerably easier to blame. In practice, tragedy and comedy shared an office and frequently borrowed each other's cups.

From the copilot's chair, Rage heard the laugh and decided this was his chance.

Rage had endured a terrible week. He had been hunted, restrained, rescued, hunted again, shot, concussed, and obliged to explain morality to several institutions that had printed theirs on official stationery. Through all of this, he had failed to find an appropriate time to take a leak.

"Say," he said, rising carefully, "this ship got a bathroom?"

Ena took his time returning from wherever memory had placed him.

"Seventeen."

"You see that stair?"

Rage was already moving. "On it."

"Dude. Wrong stair."

Rage stopped with one foot on the first step.

"Captain," Rage said, "unless you want a piss-lake on the bridge, point."

"Man, you are eighty-three centimeters tall."

"Don' make me measure this week."

Ena pointed toward the corridor. "Follow the signs. Second level gets you halfway."

Rage stared at him.

Ena stared back.

Somewhere inside the ship, an arrow illuminated ROUTE DISCOURAGED, pointed left, reconsidered, and pointed right with what could legally be described as indifference.

Rage left at speed.

A thumb-sized service crawler followed him to the stair, read ROUTE DISCOURAGED, and returned to clean a circle around Ena's chair. Some journeys exceeded its authorization.

The tracker continued to blink.

Ena aligned a loose stylus with the seam of Moxy's console. Kaiven's damaged ventilation shifted it. He aligned it again, then removed his hand as though he had been caught asking an object to remain.

Ena watched it, and the writer watched Ena, and for a moment neither could tell whose mind contained the other. This had happened before. It had not

become more convenient.

Rage returned eleven minutes and forty-four seconds later, considerably emptier, considerably happier, and carrying a grievance against Kaiven's internal architecture.

"The bathroom has an antechamber, three doors, and a route that brings me back here."

Ena glanced at him. "Privacy, choice, efficiency."

"Ya don't get to turn this shit into a brochure."

Rage's eyes made their habitual circuit-corridor, bridge lock, maintenance hatch, tracker, Ena-before he climbed into the copilot's chair. His feet did not reach the floor. He regarded this as a defect in the floor.

An amber pulse appeared on an unused console. Ena did not move toward it.

"That Jo?" Rage asked.

"Mm-hm."

He opened the relay.

Jo appeared in a wash of civilian route-light, her cream workcoat now marked with three different kinds of dust. A hand behind her passed a cup across the frame. She accepted it without looking, checked its temperature against the back of her wrist, and returned it to someone outside the image.

"Hello," she said. "I have the corridor's post-action record, and I require an available classification for five missing people."

Rage's shoulders rose. "Missing's right."

"Yes." One of Jo's lower lip ridges caught on the first word. "I have evidence of absence. I do not have bodies, escape, a destination, or permission to invent any of them."

"So you made a folder."

"I made five folders. Amber tabs. Red felt presumptuous."

"And," she added, "a preservation order that makes the word *debris* administratively expensive."

Rage looked at the relay. "Can ya do that?"

"Not alone. I can make a room very difficult to leave after someone says it."

Ena's fingers tightened once against Moxy's console.

"Jo."

"Draft only," she said. "It does not improve the evidence."

"That what grief is now?"

Jo looked at him. Her pleasant professional manner did not vanish. It simply made room for the answer.

"No. The folders are so nobody calls them debris while grief is happening."

Rage held her gaze, then looked at the empty stations.

"Fair."

Ena's hand rested on Moxy's console. "Thank you, Jo."

"Do not thank me as though it repairs anything." She softened the sentence at the end, not the fact. "The Mutual can keep the records open. That is all I can honestly offer."

"That's enough for now," Ena said.

"Pplease let it be."

The relay closed. Its amber afterimage remained on the console for a second, then became only a square of light with no useful opinion.

"Every time's been bad," he said. "I'm lowering the bar."

Ena waited.

"We're goin' after Rill and Senn."

"Yes."

"Got a plan?"

"No."

Rage nodded.

Ena looked at him.

The signal blinked between them: a direction without a rescue, hope reduced to navigation.

"Someone once told me I should let silence guide me," Ena said.

His eyes went to the chair beneath him.

Rage did not ask who.

For several breaths they listened. Kaiven's damaged systems murmured in the walls. The signal kept time. Silence performed none of the miracles commonly assigned to it, but it made room for what remained.

Rage looked across the bridge. The other crew stations waited empty in the dim light. Ena sat in Moxy's, which somehow made her absence more visible. Rage knew what their owners had done at the end. He knew almost nothing about the lives that had brought them there.

"Tell me about them," he said.

Ena's hand tightened on the edge of Moxy's console.

"Us," he said.

Rage considered the correction. "Tell me about us."

The signal blinked again. It would still be there when the memory ended, or it would not. Neither possibility could be improved by staring at it.

Ena settled into the chair.

"It's a very, very long story."

Rage leaned back in the copilot's seat. "Got time."

For the second time, something almost like laughter moved through Ena.

"All right," Ena said. "A very, very long time ago…"

Her Name Was Uman

Chapter I

"Have you ever heard of the Abellians?" Ena asked.

Around officials and unfamiliar people, Ena answered in small units: *mm-hm*, *right*, a nod, one raised eyebrow when a claim exceeded its warranty. Around the crew, his voice wandered. Rage recognized the change as admission.

Rage looked at the tracker, then at Ena. "Ya promised me a crew."

"I'm gettin' there, man."

"From another supercluster?"

"Mm-hm. Long neighborhood."

Rage settled deeper into the copilot's chair. "Bathroom had a shorter damn route."

Ena ignored this. "The Abellians were credited with the phase-gradient reactor. It let their ships sustain accelerations that turned most other vessels into expanding clouds of their former passengers."

"Heard of it," Rage said.

The Abellians governed a luminous congestion of galaxies whose nearest clusters human astronomers had entered in the Abell catalogue. Earth used one cataloguer's surname for several trillion citizens, which was considered efficient until the citizens learned about it. They kept the name as evidence.

The Abellians considered most human efforts adequate. Their language contained thirty-one distinct forms of praise, of which *adequate* was the highest known to have been used for another species.

Earth belonged to Laniakea. Laniakea and the Abellian domain were separated by a great deal of space and, according to the Abellians, an even greater deal of breeding.

"They were one of Earth's sponsors," Ena said, "when we applied to join the Intergalactic Federation of Well-Behaved Drakonians and Et Cetera."

Rage turned his head slowly. "Et Cetera?"

"The founding Drakonians could not agree on the proper order for the lesser species."

"Lesser species get a vote?"

"That is why it was called a federation."

Ena kept his face grave. "The founders suffered too. Sometimes a lesser species used the vote. Power-sharing can be very traumatic when you expected applause."

Rage nodded. "Devastating."

"Many recovered."

The organization later shortened its name to the Federation. Official history described this as modernization. The et cetera described it as the first time they had been removed from a government title without also being removed from their homes.

"Earth was admitted a few hundred years ago," Ena said.

Rage frowned. "A few hundred is *recently*?"

"To them." Ena shrugged.

Rage studied him. "How old're ya?"

"Not that story."

By the time Earth applied for admission, human medicine could repair damaged mitochondrial genes, remove senescent cells, and persuade telomeres to stop filing every birthday as a system failure. A healthy human body could last for centuries.

Humanity received this extension of mortal existence with appropriate gravity. It used most of the first century to improve cheekbones.

"Influencers," Ena said.

"Priests?" Rage asked.

"Oh, worse. They had sponsors."

Long life had not cured human beings of vanity, greed, loneliness, cruelty, or the belief that a stranger's breakfast required public evaluation. It had merely given those qualities additional time to develop professional networks.

"*Seinfeld* warned us," Ena said. "Give people nothing and we'll still turn it into a problem."

"Ya had prophets."

"We called it pop culture."

Ena had been more interested in books and in finding a way off the planet. He read everything humanity knew about the cosmos, including the things humanity had confidently misunderstood. Around him, commerce learned to deliver any object to any person before the person had finished regretting the purchase.

"Humanity defeated distance and put a sales department in the victory," Ena said. "Convenience needed growth, growth needed attention, attention needed anxiety, and pretty soon the refrigerator was selling a colder refrigerator, the toothbrush needed a subscription, and your own damn loneliness was recommending products to-"

"Pizza," Rage said.

Ena blinked. "What?"

"Ya were gettin' to pizza."

Pizza underwent eleven officially recognized innovations after pineapple. Four were edible. Two remained the subject of territorial arbitration.

"What'd they put on it?" Rage asked.

"Also not that story."

"Ya keep findin' better stories and refusin' to tell 'em."

"Don't encourage him," Ena told the reader.

Rage leaned toward the same impossible audience. "They want pizza too?"

"*No manches.* Everybody wants pizza."

While the public pursued beauty, delivery speed, and arguments with photographs of lunch, Earth's governments pursued admission to the Federation.

The application required proof that humanity possessed a unified planetary authority. Humanity submitted two hundred and twelve governments, six orbital consortiums, four corporate sovereignties, and a letter explaining that unity was culturally sensitive. The Federation returned the letter because the explanation exceeded the permitted field by three characters.

The public knew none of this.

Earth's leaders negotiated in sealed rooms with civilizations they called *senior* because *more powerful* sounded insufficiently voluntary. They traded mineral rights, orbital corridors, population data, and legal exemptions. Then they traded access to people.

Ena's voice changed very little. Rage had learned that, with Ena, this could mean the subject no longer had a safe distance.

The agreements called it limited nonpublic biological access. Human beings were abducted. Organs were taken. Women and other vulnerable people suffered sexual violence. Offworld behavioral contractors were permitted to provoke, measure, and monetize human anger through a social platform called *Letits*. Its public slogan was THE FRONT HATE OF THE INTERNET. Its private reports referred to users as *combustible attention units*.

The governments knew.

The victims spoke. Their neighbors laughed, broadcasters added comic music, contracted physicians were instructed to record symptoms without causes, and *Letits* placed advertisements beside their testimony. Most humans still believed they were alone in the cosmos. Evidence to the contrary was reclassified as entertainment before it could become politically inconvenient.

"Cage word," Rage said. "Same trick as calling children continuity specimens."

For a while the tracker was the only light moving on the bridge.

Rage studied Ena. He had begun to suspect that Ena was not avoiding grief at all. He was approaching it from another supercluster.

"Where do the Abellians come in?" Rage asked.

Ena counted on his fingers. "Inspection, propulsion certification, moral assessment. We failed that one twice."

"I can see why the third assessment was confidential."

Ena almost smiled.

Rage pointed toward the empty stations. "Crew, Ena."

"I'm gettin' there. To tell you how I met them, I gotta tell you how I left Earth. For that, Uman."

Rage settled back. "There she is."

"Her ship ran out of fuel," Ena said, "and she landed in my backyard."

"Whole damn planet, and she lands in yer yard? Of course she did."

Ena shrugged. "Ilo liked the soil depth, low population density, and available water. My backyard happened to qualify."

Rage accepted this. "Continue."

Inside a follicular stem cell beneath Ena's left eyebrow, telomerase added

the six nucleotides TTAGGG to the end of one chromosome. The enzyme did not know it was participating in immortality. Molecules are rarely included in marketing.

At Letits Processing Habitat Three, a recommendation engine compared two headlines concerning an alleged alien sighting. The false headline was predicted to sustain anger for 4.7 seconds longer. It received priority and an informational badge.

At Nacre Ring Service Dock, repair automaton Tov-6 closed Work Order 88,104 for the navigational intelligence newly installed aboard Uman's vessel. Ilo had passed all 4,112 conversational tests. Tov-6 had not asked it to operate a reactor, on the reasonable grounds that reactors were mechanical and Ilo was exceptionally good at sentences.

In Accession Office 19, Deputy Liaison Mara Quen approved Annex 614-B without opening it. The document extended nonpublic biological access for another five years. Her lunch had cooled to 31 degrees Celsius. She considered one of these facts regrettable.

Four thousand kilometers away, a delivery drone placed a pineapple pizza on the wrong balcony. The resident ate two slices before reporting the error, which the vendor's arbitration system interpreted as partial ideological consent.

Beneath Ena's backyard, a quartz grain 0.6 millimeters wide prevented Sprinkle Four from rotating. At the scheduled minute, its entire stream remained aimed at one square of grass beside the basil.

Eighty-seven kilometers above that basil, an unregistered vessel entered the atmosphere with its port reactor unavailable. Its fuel display reported 18.6 percent reserve. Its flight computer translated this as INSUFFICIENT TO DEPART_, which is one of the universe's stricter definitions of empty._

The ship descended.

A brown garden lizard left its warm stone for the vessel's widening shadow, tested the new temperature, and returned to the stone. First contact had failed its only relevant measure.

Ena had grown in a coastal city where heat remained after sunset and salt entered homes without invitation. Funerals lasted long enough for grief to eat, drink, hear an indecent story about the dead, and discover that laughter had saved it a seat. His people joked about death because death already possessed the ending and did not deserve every line before it.

Ena had spent much of his life wondering whether his mind had been badly designed for the world. *The Design of Everyday Things* offered a kinder possibility: perhaps the world had been badly designed for minds. Doors, controls, forms, governments—humans built each badly and then blamed the user for failing to guess the intended behavior. Ena was happily redistributing responsibility when the stars began disappearing.

At first he assumed a delivery craft had entered the neighborhood at an illegal altitude. Delivery companies had recently argued that altitude restrictions violated the natural rights of commerce. Then the shadow covered the house, the adjoining houses, and a municipal tree whose natural rights had received less effective representation.

Ena closed his book.

The vessel came down without flame. It was a long white crescent with a transparent spine and three turquoise vanes unfolding beneath it. No rivets

or panel seams interrupted the hull. Silver mechanisms moved inside the clear section like the bones of an animal deciding how many limbs it required.

It was the most beautiful thing Ena had ever seen.

It struck his backyard and destroyed the basil.

The ground dropped twenty-three centimeters. Windows bowed inward. Every alarm in the neighborhood began making a different recommendation. The ship settled at an angle that suggested either severe damage or personal confidence.

Sprinkler Four continued watering it.

Its little control panel, half-buried in the surviving grass, displayed WATER-SAVING MODE: ACTIVE. It had detected an obstruction, reduced the flow to the basil by zero percent, and congratulated itself for maintaining a consistent watering relationship with the new structure.

Ena remained seated for several seconds, his book resting against one knee. Humanity had imagined first contact for generations. There had been committees, protocols, ceremonial music, military plans, and one international dispute concerning who would stand nearest the camera.

No protocol addressed sleep trousers.

A line appeared in the white hull. It widened into a door. Pale vapor rolled across the ruined garden carrying the smells of hot copper, rain, and something sweet enough to make Ena distrust it.

Someone stepped out.

Ena's mind classified her as a woman and immediately filed an objection. She was humanoid in the way a constellation was an animal: enough points occupied familiar relationships that the observer supplied the rest.

She was a head taller than Ena, narrow through the shoulders, with limbs that seemed human until they moved and revealed slightly different agreements with balance. Her face suggested the broad symmetries of a human woman's without completing the claim. Two thin gold rings floated inside each of her black eyes. She had no visible ears. Silver markings along her hands changed shape when she breathed.

She was covered from throat to ankle in a dark flight garment whose surface held a slow-moving map of unfamiliar stars.

She looked at Ena.

She looked at the ship.

She looked at the sprinkler striking the ship's lower reactor housing.

Turn that off.

The command did not cross the garden. It appeared inside Ena already understood, with no sound, accent, or evidence that language had been involved. His mind supplied the English afterward.

Ena found the irrigation control beside his chair and closed the valve.

Thank you.

The second meaning arrived more gently. It was not less inside him.

Ena normally met strangers with careful fragments and small acknowledgments. With her, some part of him ignored procedure. His pitch rose before caution

could catch it.

"Okay-wow. Did you just speak in my head?" Ena asked.

No. I placed meaning there. Your mind supplied the speech.

Ena stood.

The stranger kicked a recessed panel. The flame withdrew.

Ena looked down at the flattened plants. "You landed on my damn sweet, sweet basil, man… er, woman?"

She inspected the damage with professional attention.

Was it strategically important?

"I mean not militarily," Ena said. "But the basil had plans."

Something moved at one corner of her mouth. It might have been amusement.

My vessel exhausted its usable propulsion reserve. This was the nearest survivable landing surface.

Ena looked past her into the open ship. A navigation field hovered above the pilot's station. Among several thousand possible landing sites, one blue line ended precisely in his backyard.

The stranger stepped aside. Beside the blue line, the field listed survivable soil depth, low local population density, and available surface water.

"Nearest," Ena repeated.

"You make a habit of running out of fuel over inhabited planets?"

No.

"What happened?"

She considered him. The gold rings in her eyes contracted, one after another.

The vessel selected the least fatal error available.

Ena looked at the basil. "Second least."

Ena should have called the authorities. The authorities had recently denied that people like her existed and were therefore poorly positioned to provide technical assistance. He should have been afraid. He was, but fear had arrived beside the first honest possibility of leaving Earth, and it had lost his full attention.

He held out his hand.

"Ena."

She examined the gesture before taking it. Her skin was cold. The silver marks along her fingers gathered around his as though the touch required annotation.

The landing was an accident. Its precision did not make it intentional; machines could be exquisitely wrong. Her fuel was empty by one strict definition and plentiful by another. The difference would require tools and time.

The answer entered him gently. It contained no pronunciation, only an identity his mind reduced to two syllables.

Uman.

Feeling

Chapter II

Ena did not release her hand.

He was aware of this only after enough time had passed for releasing it to become the expected behavior. Social rules were often easiest to identify by the moment one had already violated them.

"This is gonna sound stupid," he said, "but why do I feel like I've met you before?"

The gold rings inside Uman's eyes drew closer together.

Feeling?

The meaning arrived with curiosity rather than disbelief.

"Yeah. *Feeling.*" His voice rose around the impossible size of the subject before dropping into conspiracy. "Tiny word."

Uman possessed sensations, loyalties, aversions, memory-pressure, and sixteen distinct states associated with returning to a place after everyone there had forgotten her. What her species did not possess was a single category into which all these experiences could be placed until they became vague enough to discuss over food.

Nacre children played a shore game in which one person named a current and the others guessed what it carried. Uman had always disliked it. A current could carry a body, a home, a poison, or nothing. The game required a false confidence about all four.

Her nearest category translated imperfectly as *a thought without shore*. It described an internal event whose boundary could not yet be located, not a container into which every inconvenient state could be placed.

Humans called the category *feeling*. Then they spent much of their lives arguing over whether it constituted evidence.

Ena let go of her hand.

His body had begun reporting too many conditions at once: recognition without memory, trust without evidence, fear without the useful desire to leave, and a hope so abrupt it felt medically irresponsible. Humans could process many emotions. They merely preferred to do so one at a time, years after the relevant conversation.

"Look, I dunno how to explain it," he said. "Humans sometimes spend years paying qualified strangers to help us name whatever the hell's happening inside us."

Qualified?

"They have credentials."

Does that improve the feeling?

"Sometimes."

And the payment?

"That arrives with exceptional consistency."

Uman's head tilted. The question that entered Ena next contained concern, scientific interest, and a small but measurable reduction in humanity's civilizational rating.

Why must healing be billed?

"Otherwise we might confuse it with kindness."

You make unshared water into a profession.

"Several professions, actually."

Uman looked first at the closed irrigation valve, then toward the darkening sky as though checking whether another species was available.

She had already studied Earth's cetaceans from orbit. Humpback whales could preserve and transform songs across populations. Dolphins exchanged individual identity signals, negotiated alliances, taught one another, and appeared to understand that play was a sufficient reason for considerable effort. None had invented billing.

Your oceans contain sophisticated minds, Uman placed into him.

A mosquito landed on Uman's wrist, searched the unfamiliar chemistry beneath her skin, and departed for Ena. Earth's smallest ambassador preferred an established food system.

"We're very proud we noticed."

They were here before you.

"Chronology, less so."

Uman wondered how humans had become Earth's dominant species.

She did not know that dominance was not evidence of merit. It was sometimes only evidence that whoever had been responsible had stopped returning messages.

Long before humanity recorded its own beginning, an older interstellar species had altered human ancestors for extraction labor and moved entire populations among the mining regions of Earth. They selected for endurance, imitation, group coordination, obedience to visible hierarchy, and the ability to recover quickly enough to resume work.

Then mineral yields declined. The mine operators departed during a dispute over transport costs. In the transfer of records between two incompatible systems, Earth was classified as an exhausted site and its workers as fixed equipment. The error outlived the civilization that made it.

So did the equipment.

Thousands of generations later, humans built rooms filled with mirrors, iron, and machines in which they paid to repeat mining motions while other humans encouraged them. They called these rooms gyms. The old labor remained in their bodies, though by then it had acquired towels, music, and a cancellation policy.

The same buildings sometimes contained saunas. When Uman eventually discovered this, she would revise humanity's civilizational rating upward. Her species regarded heat and water with the combined seriousness humans reserved for religion, medicine, and choosing where to eat.

None of this helped Ena explain a feeling.

"Okay. Molecules," he said.

Uman looked back at him.

"Say you've got a group of molecules. Something interacts with them, they behave differently. Their available state changes. Maybe that change is a

feeling."

That is chemistry.

"I was hoping you wouldn't know that."

Uman glanced at the phase-gradient vessel occupying his basil.

"Right. Of course," Ena said.

This was the encounter he had imagined through years of books, bad telescopes, government denials, and private designs for ships humanity could not yet build. An explorer had crossed the cosmos and fallen into his home through a sequence of errors precise enough to resemble intention. He had been given first contact with another mind.

He was butchering it.

You are not butchering it.

Ena became still.

"Did I just place meaning in you?"

No. You permitted a thought to remain open.

"I didn't know thoughts stayed open."

Most open things do not know.

"Can you hear all of them?"

No. I do not enter a closed current.

Ena considered the contents of his mind. Several thoughts attempted to close at once and collided in the doorway.

Uman's mouth curved. This time the expression was unmistakable.

She, too, felt that she had encountered Ena before. The sensation had entered when their hands touched. The pressure of a relationship for which events had not yet supplied evidence. She had crossed distances that made coincidence expensive. Familiarity without cause disturbed her more than she allowed into the meaning between them.

I understand what you are trying to describe, she placed into him.

"That makes one of us."

Uman raised one hand toward Ena's chest. She stopped before touching him.

May I answer without language?

Ena looked at the silver markings moving along her fingers.

"Yeah, go ahead."

She placed her palm over his heart.

Uman intended to transfer a sensation: the familiar without a memory, the known without knowledge, the quiet certainty that a stranger had been missed.

Ena received more.

The backyard did not disappear. It lost the authority to be *now*.

The crushed basil was seed, green stem, torn leaf, and dark material returning to soil. The sprinkler had not opened, was striking the reactor,

had corroded into a mineral outline beneath a building no one had designed yet. Uman's hand approached his chest, rested there, and was remembered after neither of them stood in the garden.

Stars became visible before their ignition and remained visible after their light had ended. Ena did not move backward or forward through time. Movement would have required one moment to release him before another could arrive. None did.

Past, present, and future did not reveal their secrets. They simply stopped standing in line.

Then Uman withdrew her hand.

The garden became singular. The basil remained dead. The sprinkler continued to hold the last drop of water it had not delivered.

Ena breathed.

He did not tell Uman what he had seen. It was the first secret between them, which was difficult to maintain with someone who had just demonstrated access to the front garden of his mind.

Uman watched him with an uncertainty so small that a human might have mistaken it for calm.

There, she placed gently inside him.

Feeling.

Eighteen Point Six Percent

Chapter III

An alarm sounded inside the ship.

It consisted of one immaculate note repeated at intervals too dignified to be useful.

Uman removed her hand from Ena's chest and turned toward the vessel. The silver markings along her fingers tightened into straight lines.

That is new.

"The emergency?"

They entered through the opening in the hull. Ena had expected an interior designed around corridors and rooms. Uman's vessel appeared to have been designed around decisions. Pale surfaces unfolded only when she approached. Walls became storage. The floor lifted into steps. A translucent membrane closed behind Ena and inspected him with a blue light that paused at his sleep trousers.

GARMENT PURPOSE UNRESOLVED, the nearest surface reported.

"Leisure," Ena said.

The surface considered this.

PURPOSE REMAINS UNRESOLVED.

Below the judgment, an old Nacre Ring departure ribbon brightened in patient blue: HOMEBOUND BEINGS, PLEASE DECLARE YOUR UNUSUAL APPETITES. Uman closed it with the small irritation of someone whose ship had inherited a relative's favorite joke.

Uman moved through the vessel with the efficiency of someone trying not to argue in front of company.

"You said the ship was out of fuel."

I said the usable propulsion reserve was exhausted.

"Eighteen point six percent."

Uman stopped.

Ena pointed toward the navigation display. "Big number. Very visible."

"I am a genius," he added.

Uman's gold rings narrowed. *You read a display.*

"Correctly."

It is insufficient to depart.

"Where I come from, eighteen percent ain't empty. Eighteen percent's when we stop fucking around and start makin' irresponsible promises."

A second voice entered from the ceiling.

"The reserve is ample for remaining here."

It was warm, patient, and entirely pleased with itself.

Ena looked up. "Who's that?"

Uman looked up with less enthusiasm.

Ilo. A navigational intelligence installed before departure.

"Landing selection is complete," Ilo said. "I am pleased to report that no occupant died."

Ena looked through the transparent spine at the basil.

"Occupancy remains under review."

A soft panel unfolded beside the door.

WE VALUE YOUR SURVIVAL. WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR EMERGENCY AS:

- SATISFACTORY
- INCONVENIENT
- OTHER

Uman closed the panel with one finger. Ilo recorded the action as an incomplete but promising response.

"One botanical occupancy claim remains unsupported by a flight plan," Ilo replied.

Uman placed both hands against a circular housing. It opened around her wrists, revealing layers of silver vanes and one blackened phase coupler.

Ilo, why is the port reactor unavailable?

"I have identified an unusual reactor."

Ena leaned closer. "I like it."

You have known it for thirty-seven seconds.

The coupler had rotated four degrees past its receiving field. Uman corrected it. Ilo compensated in the opposite direction. Uman corrected the compensation. Ilo interpreted this as new guidance and moved the coupler six degrees.

Uman became very still.

Ena had already learned that stillness was where she stored the reactions other people distributed across furniture.

Ilo. Stop helping.

"Assistance suspended. I remain available."

Become less available.

"Please define a distance."

Uman closed her eyes.

Ena laughed. He tried to disguise it as a cough, but his people had never developed a convincing distinction between the two.

For the next six hours they repaired the coupler. Uman did the work. Ena passed tools, held light, translated the local power grid into several unflattering metaphors, and prevented Sprinkler Four from resuming its attack. Ilo offered forty-one recommendations. Three were physically possible. One was useful, though Uman refused to identify it afterward.

During the repair, the vessel folded a storage compartment around a dropped wrench and classified it as properly stored. Uman requested the wrench three times. The compartment remained proud of its work.

At dawn the vessel rose.

The ruined garden fell beneath them. Ena watched his coast widen into a pale curve: warm roofs, narrow roads, the dark line of the sea. The city looked innocent from altitude. Distance had always been humanity's most flattering light.

"So this is the part where you leave?" he asked.

That is the ordinary sequence.

"Not a fan."

Uman looked at him. *You may remain aboard until I clear the atmosphere.*

"Much better sequence."

At eighty-seven kilometers the stars moved.

Not with the vessel. Around it.

The horizon folded over their bow. The sea appeared above them, a blue ceiling held in place by no recognizable gravity. Ilo corrected course. The Moon crossed the forward field without changing position.

"Trajectory remains outbound," Ilo announced.

The vessel descended.

Uman opened three navigation layers. Each showed acceleration away from Earth. Each ended inside Earth's atmosphere.

The ship emerged over the same coast from the opposite direction.

Ena stared down at his city.

"Okay. That's new."

No, Uman placed, studying the Moon. *It is old.*

Ilo illuminated a narrow lattice surrounding the planet. It had been invisible on approach because it did not prevent arrival. Every strand curved outward motion back toward the surface while allowing light, debris, and approved traffic to pass.

The lattice converged on the Moon.

Uman's vessel had not landed on a primitive planet.

It had entered a closed one.

"Would you like me to select another survivable landing surface?" Ilo asked.

"My damn, sweet, sweet basil's already dead," Ena said. "Might as well go home."

The People Who Did Not Exist

Chapter IV

By the time the vessel returned to Ena’s backyard, six government vehicles had surrounded the block.

They were not military vehicles. Military vehicles generally admitted what they were by being painted the color of an apology. These were white utility vans marked BUREAU OF AERIAL DELIVERY COMPLIANCE.

"That department doesn’t fucking exist," Ena said.

Ilo folded the vessel’s exterior image into the approximate shape of a municipal water tank. The result had turquoise vanes, a transparent spine, and MUNICIPAL WATER TANK written across the side in letters nine meters high.

Ena considered it. "Subtle."

"Thank you," Ilo said.

"Wasn’t praise."

"Your species uses identical sounds for incompatible purposes."

Uman remained inside the ship while Ena crossed the damaged garden. A woman in a pale suit waited beyond the gate with a slate and the expression of someone whose authority had been assembled before breakfast.

"Ena, registered occupant?"

Ena eyed the enormous water tank. "Depends what that thing confessed to."

The woman did not smile. Her badge identified her as Senior Assessor Tessa Cero, Department of Unscheduled Architecture.

"A delivery vehicle descended onto your property at 02:17 this morning."

She pronounced the four digits separately. Her public-service register trusted numbers most when they had been prevented from socializing.

"Yeah. Wrong address."

"The vehicle measured forty-one point eight meters."

Ena looked toward the enormous water tank.

Assessor Cero held out her slate. "You are required to acknowledge property damage, atmospheric interference, unlicensed reactor discharge, and the loss of one protected culinary plant."

Ena looked at the basil. "That was protected?"

"Municipal food resilience ordinance."

"I planted it."

"Ownership does not authorize destruction of a protected asset."

"That’s literally the whole point of owning things." Ena pointed at the tank. "File it against that."

Cero looked at the tank. The tank displayed POTABLE despite containing no water.

An exterior speaker came alive.

DRINKING IS NOT ADVISED DURING ACTIVE MUNICIPAL EVENTS.

Ilo dimmed the speaker. "The disguise is learning caution."

"From the tank?" Ena asked.

"From governance," Ilo said.

Inside Ena's mind, Uman placed a question with great care.

Is this person dangerous?

Ena kept his face still. "Extremely."

Cero's eyes sharpened. "To whom are you speaking?"

"The basil."

For the first time, the assessor appeared uncertain whether a regulation had arrived before her. She searched the slate.

Two of the technicians moved around the disguised vessel. Their scanners were human in shape and offworld in function. Ena recognized field geometries from papers dismissed as fabricated. One technician passed a hand through Ilo's projected metal and touched the real hull beneath.

Across the street, a municipal laundry robot identified the other technician's white coat as unattended linen. They conducted a silent tug-of-war while both pretended the event was unrelated to government work.

He did not react.

That was the reaction.

Cero found the relevant ordinance. "Conversational attachment does not alter plant status."

"It was revised after the tomato proceedings."

Uman's amusement entered Ena as a slight warmth behind the eyes. She had not projected words. He was beginning to discover that meaning had weather.

Cero extended the slate again. Beneath the municipal form, a second interface flickered for less than a second. It contained a lunar emblem and a line of script no public Earth system used.

UNREGISTERED ARRIVAL - BIOLOGICAL OCCUPANT COUNT PENDING

Ena did not touch it.

"I'll need counsel."

"For a basil citation?"

"You said tomato proceedings. I know how this starts."

The assessor's mouth changed by perhaps half a millimeter. It was the first evidence she possessed a private life, and it appeared unhappy with him.

"We will return," she said.

"Bring a damn warrant."

"For which jurisdiction?"

Ena looked at the department that did not exist.

"Exactly."

The vehicles left. One technician remained long enough to press a transparent disc beneath the garden wall. Then he joined the others.

Uman emerged after the street emptied. Her dark garment rearranged its stars to match the morning sky.

They knew the vessel's dimensions before they measured it.

"Mm-hm. They arrived knowing what they'd find."

Their instruments contain Abellian phase components.

"Yeah. That part's worse."

You do not appear surprised.

Ena crouched beside the garden wall and removed the transparent disc. It was cool despite the heat. A signal pulsed upward toward the Moon.

"I've spent forty years finding holes where humanity keeps its money," he said. "Power enters grids and disappears. Satellites lose eleven seconds over the same ocean coordinates. Patents get sealed before the inventors file them. People report cities under the water, and later their medical records decide they were tired."

You suspected an unacknowledged civilization.

"I suspected governments were lying." Ena stood. "Civilization was me being optimistic."

Uman inspected the disc. *This transmits through the containment lattice.*

"Can we use it?"

Yes.

"Good."

It will tell them where we are.

"Less good."

The disc emitted a soft tone.

Across the street, every white utility van turned back at the same time.

Ena pointed toward the ship. His voice settled into the calm middle register Uman had not yet heard.

"Inside. Now."

She obeyed before deciding whether she liked that.

No Rescue

Chapter V

Ilo raised the vessel without moving air.

The white vans reached Ena's gate as his backyard became empty except for one crater, one dead basil plant, and a municipal citation that had not yet decided who owned the sky.

The citation included a cheerful seal from the Borough's annual Clear-Sky Week: LOOK UP RESPONSIBLY. Ena folded it into his pocket because the alternative was leaving a bureaucratic artifact for people with weapons to interpret.

"They are tracking the port reactor," Ilo said.

Disable it.

"We will descend."

That is preferable to capture.

"Your preference conflicts with the passenger's continued bodily integrity."

Ena strapped himself into a surface that had become a seat around him. "Hey. Passenger can hear you."

"That improves informed consent."

Uman cut the reactor.

The vessel dropped behind the coastal hills. Ilo unfolded the turquoise vanes into gliding surfaces and announced that the maneuver remained within acceptable definitions of flight. Trees disagreed at close range.

They entered the sea twelve kilometers from shore.

Water sealed over the hull. The vans stopped at the cliffs above them. Their scanners swept the waves and found only salt, fish, and one delivery drone that had exceeded its route by forty-three meters and was already preparing an appeal.

A cleaner fish attached itself beside the dormant distress array and began removing salt from the emergency transmitter. It had found maintenance work before anyone had found an emergency.

Ena tapped the glass beside it. "Hey, buddy. Take your time."

Uman held one hand above the array control.

It cannot hear you through the hull.

The fish cleaned one corroded contact, inspected the result, and swam away.

Uman brought the distress array online.

The message crossed nine bands, three dimensional relays, and a Kai emergency channel old enough to be trusted by species that no longer trusted one another. It reached Nacre Ring in 4.8 seconds.

The reply arrived before Ena finished asking whether replies usually took long.

MISSION COMPLETE. VESSEL RETURNED. OPERATOR PRESENT. NO ASSISTANCE REQUIRED.

Uman read it twice.

Again.

Ilo transmitted again.

DUPLICATE DISTRESS EVENT. SOURCE IDENTITY INVALID.

"They think you're home," Ena said.

They have a record of me at home.

"Are you?"

Uman looked at him.

"Just establishing the quality of records."

She opened the reply's authentication layers. Every seal was genuine. Nacre Ring had logged her vessel returning six hours after departure. Her identity had passed medical inspection, closed the flight plan, and submitted a minor complaint about the installation of Ilo.

Ilo brightened the console. "The complaint was grammatically fair."

I did not submit it.

"Someone has expressed your position accurately without authorization."

Uman sent a private recognition phrase only her family and flight authority would know.

The system replied that the authenticated operator record on Nacre Ring had used the same phrase.

For the first time since Ena had met her, the gold rings in Uman's eyes lost their alignment.

No rescue will come.

Ena did not answer immediately. Easy reassurance was a form of lying that charged interest.

This is not your containment.

"It's around my planet."

You did not know it existed yesterday.

"Yesterday I was worried a book made me weird." He gestured toward the ocean above them. "Today the damn Moon is stealing traffic."

Uman studied him. *Helping me may expose you to the people who built this.*

"They cited my damn sweet, sweet basil. It's personal now."

The warmth behind his eyes returned. It carried grief this time.

Why do you make comedy when afraid?

"I dunno, it helps?"

Are you asking me?

"Yeah?" Ena looked at the false record of her return. "Protects the fear from getting lonely."

He brought up the maps he had collected over four decades: missing satellite frames, ocean temperatures that implied an impossible heat source, procurement budgets assigned to cities with no residents, and one recurring patch of Atlantic in which every public sensor developed a philosophical objection to certainty.

"That's where the secrets go," he said.

Uman compared the coordinates with the signal hidden beneath Assessor Cero's disc.

They matched.

At Nacre Ring, Tov-6 received notice that Uman's vessel had returned and that Uman's vessel was simultaneously requesting rescue from a forbidden planet. The repair automaton identified the contradiction, opened an incident report, and spent seven minutes choosing between SOFTWARE, PROPELLANT, and THEOLOGY. *It selected* OTHER. *The report immediately closed itself.*

In the apartment above Ena's abandoned garden, eight-year-old Lio Sarr found a warm silver fragment beneath a window. His mother told him it had fallen from a delivery vehicle. He kept it in a wooden box with three dead beetles and a key that opened nothing they owned.

On the far side of the Moon, Condenser 12 collected 0.0031 grams of hyperdimensional precipitate from a woman grieving beside a hospital bed. The machine recorded excellent purity. The woman's name did not appear in the measurement.

Beneath the Atlantic, Archive Keeper Sile Venn noticed an unregistered phase signal approaching the drowned perimeter. She postponed reporting it until she had finished aligning the labels on six historical catastrophes. Five had been placed four millimeters too high.

Inside Uman's vessel, Ilo plotted a course toward a city officially classified as geology.

Atlantis Had Plumbing

Chapter VI

The Atlantic anomaly lay beneath four kilometers of water and nine thousand years of profitable disbelief.

Ilo descended through a canyon where black smokers built mineral towers around their own destruction. Pale organisms opened in the vessel's light and closed after it passed. Uman watched the water with an attention Ena had previously seen her reserve for impossible mechanisms.

Your planet leaves this unshared.

"We sell photographs."

Of water?

"Premium photographs."

Uman considered this evidence against admission to the Federation.

The canyon ended at a wall too smooth to be geological. Its surface carried no door, only a sequence of circular depressions filled with sediment.

Ena compared them with a drawing from a century-old archaeological fraud.

"I knew it."

You knew there was a wall.

"I knew there was something shaped like a conspiracy."

Uman pressed her palm to the largest depression. Silver marks moved from her skin into the stone. One by one, the circles filled with blue light.

The ocean opened.

Not parted. Opened. Water held itself in two vertical planes while the vessel crossed between them into air.

A city waited beneath the seafloor.

White terraces descended around an immense central basin. Bridges thin as drawn lines joined towers shaped like shells, wings, and instruments for measuring a sky no longer visible. Blue mineral veins carried dim power through the streets. Statues had fallen, but the fountains still worked.

In the nearest fountain, a pale fish carried a corroded metal washer to the drain, released it, watched the current return it, and began again. Nine thousand years had not made the task less clear.

Ena stood at the forward glass.

"Atlantis."

Uman studied the nearest installation. *Wastewater exchange.*

"Atlantis had plumbing."

A city without plumbing is a monument waiting to smell.

"There were poems."

Were they waterproof?

They landed beside the central basin. The air contained oxygen, salt, and a trace of mold that had survived more empires than anyone had thought to name.

Uman stepped into ankle-deep water and stopped.

Ena waited.

It is warm.

He had heard her place battle calculations, mechanical failures, and permanent abandonment into his mind. None had contained this degree of reverence.

"Comes out of the ground that way."

Naturally warm.

Ena crouched, dipped two fingers into the basin, and inspected them with grave attention. "Wet, too."

Uman looked at him.

"The tour includes facts."

"All by itself," Ena added, still inspecting his wet fingers.

Uman looked at him with something approaching accusation. *You said nothing.*

"I didn't know I was giving the planet tour."

She removed her boots.

The first surviving intelligence of Atlantis woke because an alien stood barefoot in its filtration basin.

"Pressure restored," a voice announced from every fountain. "Unauthorized bather detected. Civilization status remains unavailable."

A figure assembled above the water: an elderly human rendered in blue lines, wearing twelve ceremonial necklaces and a maintenance belt.

"Welcome to Pump Administration," it said. "If you seek the Temple of Ascending Suns, turn left, proceed two hundred meters, and apologize to the drainage system for the historical misclassification."

Ena smiled. "You're the archive?"

"I am Pell, Custodian of Water, Memory, and Complaints Submitted During Flood Conditions. In that order."

One fountain produced a laminated card and held it toward Uman.

HOW WOULD YOU RATE YOUR UNAUTHORIZED BATHING EXPERIENCE?

Uman read it as carefully as a threat. *I would rate it warm.*

Pell's blue face acquired solemn delight. "At last. A useful datum."

Uman stepped out of the basin.

"Apology accepted," Pell said.

The drowned archive did not describe one Atlantis.

It described seven.

The writer considered a diagram.

Ena looked toward the top margin. "Don't."

The diagram did not appear. Atlantis had already attempted architecture as an explanation for history.

"*Nagu puder ja kapsad*," Ena said as the seven records opened.

Pell’s translation field rendered the phrase as PORRIDGE AND CABBAGE and requested a culinary record.

The first had been a mining administration built by offworlders who altered human ancestors for endurance, imitation, coordination, and obedience to visible rank. When the mines lost value, the administrators departed. Their workers remained as equipment no inventory had removed.

The second Atlantis was built by those workers’ descendants after they found the abandoned machines.

The third was built from the second’s ruins.

The others had changed names, coastlines, gods, and explanations for why the same lunar lights appeared before the world ended.

Pell showed them floods directed against cities, engineered winters, diseases released with antidotes reserved for collaborators, and weapons that taught the ground to reject buildings. Each atrocity was followed by a smaller human population, a damaged archive, and an official beginning.

"They restarted us," Ena said.

"Correction," Pell replied. "They declared governance flood-finished. Humans proved administratively persistent."

The records named the faction responsible: the Drakonian Custodial Houses, an extraction alliance expelled from several interstellar jurisdictions and welcomed on Earth by every ruler who believed collaboration would become inheritance.

Other offworld species had interfered. Some smuggled knowledge into human dreams. Some disabled weapons. Some carried children beyond a reset perimeter. One species taught the third Atlantis to hide memory inside ordinary songs, which tyrants rarely inspected until the chorus had become popular.

They never freed Earth.

"Why keep restarting civilization?" Ena asked.

Pell’s projection flickered.

"The culinary records are restricted."

Ena looked at Uman.

"Did the plumbing archive say culinary?"

It did.

"I fucking hate this already."

Pell opened a map. One line connected the city to a facility on the Moon. Another descended toward a living settlement beneath the Atlantic shelf.

THE CONTINUANCE, the map named it.

Beneath the name appeared its oldest civic promise:

HUMANITY WILL NEVER BEGIN AGAIN WITHOUT US.

Ena read it twice.

"That can mean two very different things."

"It has," Pell said.

A grain of basalt detached from the drowned city's ceiling and fell through warm water. It landed on a mosaic showing the Moon with an open mouth. No one heard it.

At the surface, a museum guide informed twenty-three visitors that Atlantis was a metaphor created by societies uncomfortable with plumbing. A child asked why metaphors required pressure valves. The guide promised to return to the question and did not.

In the Continuance, Archive Keeper Sile Venn corrected the sixth catastrophe label, stepped back, and discovered that the first was now three millimeters low. History had resumed its preferred position.

On the Moon, an operator increased the next collection cycle by 0.7 percent. Across Earth, no individual sorrow changed enough to be noticed.

Pell transferred one forbidden culinary index into Ena's book. The file hid between chapters about doors and switches, where later authorities would be unlikely to look for either food or evil.

All Previous Endings

Chapter VII

Pell required a maintenance request before releasing the culinary index.

"The civilization ended nine thousand years ago," Ena said. "There are no citizens."

Uman completed the request. Pell rejected it because she had described the archive as a temple.

Your map identifies it as the Temple of Ascending Suns. Your civilization is unavailable.

Uman revised the form. Ena watched two nonhumans defend administrative categories over the drowned remains of humanity and experienced the rare peace of not being the most difficult person present.

Pell opened the restricted archive.

The central basin emptied. Blue light rose from its floor and formed a room without walls. A woman sat beside a low fire. Beyond her, rain moved sideways across a city Ena had seen moments earlier as ruins.

"Recorded testimony?" he asked.

"Recovered continuity," Pell said. "She died during the fourth ending."

The woman looked up.

She saw Ena.

Uman placed the correction into Ena's mind.

No. A recording does not observe.

The woman stood. She wore a red cord around one wrist and ash across her face.

"Is the flood finished?" she asked.

Pell's projection fractured. "This archive does not support interaction."

"Is the flood finished?" the woman repeated.

Ena stepped toward her. "Yes."

"Did we live?"

He looked at the drowned city.

"Somebody did."

The answer appeared to satisfy a rule rather than the woman. The fire went out. The room changed.

A cockroach crossed the seam between the extinguished fire and the white chamber. The archive replaced a civilization around it and left the cockroach untouched because no approved afterlife had claimed jurisdiction.

Ena stood in a field beneath three moons. Then in a narrow house where a family waited for a father already sitting among them. Then in a white chamber whose only door opened into the same chamber. Each place felt complete until he noticed what it refused to permit.

No one left.

These are not memories.

Pell attempted to close the archive. "Access has exceeded the approved

metaphor."

The rooms multiplied.

Thousands of dead humans occupied simulations built from expectation. Some walked gardens. Some waited for judgment. Some ate with ancestors assembled from incomplete memory. Some lived ordinary mornings that ended whenever they approached the edge of town.

Every simulation collected two things: identity and pressure.

When grief became anger, pale material condensed at the margins of the room. When anger exhausted itself, the room softened. Names disappeared first. Then faces. Then the consciousness inside was returned toward Earth with no memory of having waited.

"Reincarnation," Ena whispered.

Pell's projection dimmed. "The approved term is *operational reuse*."

Ena closed his eyes. "Of fucking course it is."

"Would you prefer-"

"No."

A door opened inside the white chamber.

Ena saw himself pass through it.

Not his body. The recognition came before shape. A child carrying water in a clay vessel. A soldier refusing an order in a language Ena had never learned. A woman laughing during a funeral while soldiers waited outside. A nameless person looking at stars from the wrong side of a wall.

Each turned toward him.

None possessed his face.

All of them knew Uman.

The knowledge struck with enough force to bend his knees.

Uman caught him. Her hands pressed against his temples, cold and immediate.

Ena. This room is selecting you.

"How?"

By recognition.

The simulations had noticed the opening Uman created in the garden. Past and future no longer stood politely apart inside Ena. The lunar system mistook the condition for death and began preparing him for reuse.

He heard a voice ask whether the flood was finished.

He heard another voice, far beyond the archive, request that he choose a life.

"Nah," Ena said.

The rooms paused.

"I haven't finished this one."

Uman placed one meaning through every open version of him.

Here.

The basin returned beneath his feet.

Ena collapsed into warm water. Uman knelt beside him. Pell hovered above the basin, several ceremonial necklaces rotating in distress.

"The archive has developed an unauthorized guest," Pell said.

Ena sat up. "The Moon is catching people when they die."

"Yes."

"Putting them in rooms."

"Yes."

"Erasing them."

"Reformatting continuity."

Ena looked at Pell.

The caretaker lowered its voice. "I did not choose the category."

Uman helped Ena stand.

"The other lives," he said. "Were those mine?"

Pell's face lost detail. "Identity questions exceed Pump Administration."

He knows, Uman placed.

"I contain records," Pell replied. "Knowing is a biological accusation."

Ena picked up his book. The forbidden index now occupied three pages that had previously explained why controls should resemble their consequences.

"Where does the collected material go?"

The map brightened between the Moon and the hidden settlement.

"Through the Continuance," Pell said. "Shoreward, to those who preserved the ending."

In a maternity ward above the drowned city, a newborn turned toward a song her father had never sung in her presence. The melody had last been performed four civilizations earlier. The father credited excellent hearing.

Inside a lunar waiting room, Omi Tera added one red loop to a cord she had carried through eleven lives. No available inventory classified the loop as memory.

On the coast, Lio Sarr placed the warm silver fragment beside his bed. During sleep his hand closed around it with the confidence of someone returning a tool to its proper drawer.

At Condenser 12, a classification process rejected seven consciousnesses for retaining unauthorized recognition. It routed them into separate simulations and recorded the separation as successful.

Beneath Atlantis, Ena looked at Uman. Neither remembered the lives in which they had met. Both experienced the absence as crowded.

The Moon Is Listening

Chapter VIII

Assessor Cero’s tracking disc admitted them to the Moon.

It did so reluctantly.

Ilo transmitted the disc’s identification. The containment lattice recognized the vessel as an enforcement asset, objected that its dimensions exceeded a white utility van, and requested a supplemental form. Ilo supplied a thirty-seven-page explanation generated from municipal parking law.

The lattice opened to make the explanation stop.

Ena settled deeper into the pilot’s seat. "You had me at ‘I am a genius.’"

No such meaning was transmitted, Uman placed.

Ena watched Earth recede. For the first time the course did not turn them back. The planet filled half the forward glass: ocean, cloud, continents, and the invisible pressure of every room occupied by the dead.

"Looks free," he said.

The far side of the Moon was not empty.

Silver towers rose from crater floors and joined above the surface in an immense lattice. Black channels cut geometric rivers through the regolith. Transparent reservoirs lay beneath domes kilometers wide, each holding a pale substance that cast shadows in directions unrelated to the Sun.

At the center stood a ring larger than a city.

Earthlight passed through it and emerged carrying shapes.

Ena leaned toward the glass.

At first the shapes resembled smoke. Then one reached for another.

Consciousness rose from Earth in fine luminous strands. The ring separated, measured, and routed them. Some entered simulations beneath the lunar surface. Others returned immediately toward births already beginning.

"How many?" Ena asked.

Ilo counted.

"At this rate, one hundred and sixty-two biological deaths per local second. One hundred and fifty-nine successful interceptions. Two immediate returns. One consciousness declined classification."

"Declined?"

"It bit the instrument."

On the display, a tiny repair notice opened beneath the figure.

INTAKE PROBE 19: MINOR DAMAGE. CLIENT DISPLAYED UNPRODUCTIVE AGENCY.

Ena looked at the words for a long second. "Put that one in the museum."

Ena looked at Uman.

The vessel passed over a service trench. Within it, human technicians in white garments maintained machinery older than any public Earth nation. They wore the lunar emblem Ena had seen beneath Cero’s citation.

No one looked up.

One technician had balanced a cup on the conduit carrying intercepted minds.

The transfer field kept the drink warm. She retrieved it before the next inspection and recorded no anomaly.

The ship settled beside Condenser 12.

Inside, a hospital room occupied no physical space.

A woman sat beside a bed. Her father had died six minutes earlier on Earth. The simulation had preserved the room, the blanket, the half-full cup, and the exact angle of afternoon light. It had omitted the door.

The woman was alive. Her grief entered through the bond between them.

Her father stood on the other side of the bed, unable to see her. Each time she said his name, the simulation translated his longing into pressure along the walls.

Pale droplets formed in a collector.

"She's feeding it," Ena said.

Uman examined the transfer. *They both are.*

The collector did not distinguish the grief of the living from the confusion of the dead. It measured emotional phase density, removed every fact that made the sorrow particular, and condensed what remained.

The woman on Earth held her father's hand.

The father inside the Moon tried to hold hers.

Their fingers occupied the same place in different dimensions.

For one second Ena perceived both.

He reached toward the collector.

Uman caught his wrist.

The system has noticed you.

Every technician in the trench stopped at once.

The lunar ring turned.

A voice entered the vessel through Assessor Cero's authorization channel.

"Enforcement asset, identify the unregistered consciousness aboard."

Ilo answered before anyone else.

"Municipal water."

Silence followed.

"Repeat classification."

"Potable."

Uman launched the vessel.

The towers fired white lines across the crater. Ilo folded their route through the parking-law supplement, forcing the defense system to determine whether weapons discharge required curb access.

It decided an appeal was possible.

That gave Uman eleven seconds.

The vessel crossed the lunar perimeter as the lattice closed. Behind them, Condenser 12 finished collecting the hospital room.

The woman's father forgot her name.

The pale material moved into a container labeled CULINARY GRADE.

A meaning gathered in Uman so sharp that Ena's mind translated it into one human word.

Bastards.

Moosh

Chapter IX

The culinary index called the substance *mūš* in an early Drakonian trade language. Human mouths simplified it to Moosh, which was unfortunate but not, Ena felt, the principal crime.

The writer briefly considered a more dignified translation.

"Don't help them," Ena said.

The substance remained Moosh.

They opened one of the pages inside his book.

An image rose above it: a transparent bead no larger than a fingernail, containing colors that belonged to memories rather than light. The index described finish, density, emotional profile, age, and recommended temperature.

A smaller field unfolded underneath.

PAIRING SUGGESTION: QUIET WHITE + REGRETTABLE CONVERSATION.

Uman closed the entire culinary page. The field reopened itself under a new heading: CURATOR'S NOTE. She closed it again, harder.

The cabin's cleaning light found the bead's impossible shadow and attempted to erase it from the console. The shadow moved. The light followed with patient professional concern.

"*Puta merda.* They fucking eat it," Ena said.

Not for nutrition.

"Oh, good. Would've been weird."

Uman kept reading.

Moosh formed where consciousness bent against an experience it could neither accept nor escape. Grief produced depth. Anger produced brightness. Sustained injustice produced complexity. The lunar apparatus harvested those states, separated them from the lives that gave them meaning, and condensed them into a hyperdimensional delicacy.

One bead could contain the emotional pressure of a city.

The finest grades came from civilizations approaching collapse while still believing collapse could be prevented.

That was why humanity was allowed to rebuild.

Hope improved the flavor.

At a kitchen table on the night side of Earth, Daru Sen placed two cups beside one chair before remembering that his husband had died. The lunar lattice measured the second cup more accurately than the first.

In a forest scheduled for surface mining, an old elephant touched the place where another elephant's bones had been removed. Condenser 4 rejected the resulting material because the Custodial Houses had not licensed nonhuman grief.

Letits promoted a false accusation to 8.2 million users. Anger density rose by 0.004 percent. The platform described the increase as healthy conversation.

At the Ninth House dining registry, an assistant changed an order from LATE CIVILIZATION - GENERAL *to* LATE CIVILIZATION - MEDICAL BEREAVEMENT. *The price*

increased before the shipment existed.

A woman beside her father's hospital bed stopped crying and told one true story about him that made her laugh. Condenser 12 marked the batch temporarily impure.

Ena closed the book so hard the cover cracked.

The anger was older than Uman's vessel and older than his knowledge of the Moon. The lattice had not created it. It had given old anger an address and revealed that someone had been charging admission.

"They restart us for snacks."

The ship alarm interrupted them. A vessel had matched their course from the Moon.

It appeared at their side without visible acceleration: black, narrow, and covered in overlapping plates that changed color with the observer's pulse. A figure occupied the transmission field.

He was Drakonian, though not like the ceremonial images Earth used during Federation accession. His body was tall and fine-boned, skin patterned with dark mineral scales along the throat and temples. Two additional eyelids closed sideways when he examined Ena.

"I am Custodian Sar Khell of the Ninth House," he said. "You have entered a qontrolled agricultural facility."

His Common resonated at the back of the throat. He lengthened *agricultural* and *facility*, giving each noun enough room to exclude its occupants.

Ena looked at Earth behind him.

"Agricultural."

"Your language lacks the relevant qategory."

"My language has *asshole*. Broad category. Very flexible."

Sar Khell's inner eyelids closed once.

Uman stepped into the transmission. *Your Houses were expelled from the Accord of Sentient Appetite.*

"The Accord objected to methods, not product."

It prohibited the consumption of coerced consciousness.

"Qoercion is a legal relationship. Earth is outside signatory jurisdiction."

Ena's voice went quiet.

"People live there."

"People live everywhere. Jurisdiction is how civilized beings avoid being paralyzed by the fact."

Sar Khell displayed an old agreement. Human signatures appeared beside Drakonian seals. Governments from six historical periods had renewed it, including governments public history said had never communicated with one another.

"Your leaders receive qontinuity, technology, and protection," he said. "The surface receives managed development. We receive surplus affect. This is a civilized arrangement."

"The dead aren't surplus."

"They are not using it."

Uman's silver markings stopped moving.

Leave.

Sar Khell regarded her with what might have been sympathy.

"You qannot. The lattice has registered you. No exterior authority will find a valid record of your presence. Your vessel returned. Your life continued. Your complaint was noted."

Uman gave no reaction.

Ena felt the meaning she did not project gather like cold behind a door.

Sar Khell turned to him. "You are eligible for Continuance. Your longevity modifications are crude but qompatible. Your pattern recognition has already attracted the lunar system. You could retain memory between bodies."

"What's the price?"

"Service."

"There it is."

The Drakonian smiled without warmth. "There is always a qost."

"Yeah," Ena said. "Value's where bastards like you get confused."

Uman cut the transmission.

Sar Khell's vessel armed four containment lines.

Ilo opened a route toward Earth.

"Trajectory will return us to the planet."

"That's where we're going," Ena said.

"I am pleased to report complete navigational success."

The containment lines fired.

Uman rolled the vessel between them. One struck the transparent spine. The ship shuddered, and every surface displayed the same message:

OPERATOR IDENTITY ACCEPTED FOR COLLECTION

Uman remained standing.

Ena fell into a room that did not exist.

Previous Lives and Other Waiting Rooms

Chapter X

The room contained thirty-two chairs, a table of old magazines, and no visible exit.

Ena recognized it immediately as a human institution designed to make time feel personally responsible.

A sign above the table read:

TRANSITION SERVICES - YOUR CONTINUITY IS IMPORTANT TO US

Someone had crossed out *important* and written *available* beneath it.

An elderly woman sat in the corner knitting a red cord. A young man paced between two identical walls. Three children played a game in which none could remember the rules but all objected to cheating.

During the argument, an empty chair slid six centimeters into the neighboring consolation zone. The attendant returned it without looking. The chair began again.

"You new," the woman asked, "or new againwise?"

"Hope not."

"Everybody says that the first time. Sometimes the eighth."

Ena checked his body. It felt accurate until he tried to remember whether he had brought shoes.

"Where are we?"

"Depends what you believed when you died." The woman lifted her knitting. "I believed in administrative incompetence. Most accurate faith I ever had."

"I'm not dead."

"They've made mistakes."

Her name was Omi Tera. She had died two hundred and fourteen years earlier, returned to Earth eleven times, and remembered none of the lives except during the waiting room. The red cord was always in her hands when she arrived. She had never finished it.

"What happens when they call you?" Ena asked.

"Door appears. I forget. Somebody gets born angry at chairs."

Ena searched for Uman.

The waiting room opened sideways.

He saw a warm ocean beneath a violet sky. Uman stood waist-deep in the water, perfectly still. The simulation had found the reverence inside her and built a cage from it.

She did not see the shore moving farther away each time she approached.

"Uman!"

The waiting room attendant looked up from a desk that had not been there before. "Please do not communicate across assigned consolations."

"She's alive."

"Status is pending."

"Mine too."

"Your complaint lacks standing."

Ena leaned across the desk. "Man, if you don't open that fucking room-"

The attendant had no face, only a smooth field reflecting Ena's own expression.

"Anger registered," it said. "Thank you for contributing."

A pale droplet formed above the desk.

Ena stopped.

The system wanted rage. It would accept grief. It could use helplessness. Every argument pressed flavor from him.

His grandmother had once laughed so hard at a funeral that the priest stopped to ask whether she required assistance. She replied that the dead man had owed her money and was displaying a suspicious commitment to nonpayment.

Ena began to laugh.

The attendant tilted its blank face.

"Emotional classification uncertain."

"Yeah," Ena said. "Family condition."

He told Omi the story. She laughed before he reached the debt. The pacing man laughed because everyone else had. One child declared the dead man a criminal. Another defended him on procedural grounds.

The waiting room tried to classify affection, grief, disrespect, terror, and joy as separate states.

Ena's culture refused.

The walls flickered.

He reached through the opening toward Uman.

"Hey. Your ocean's fake."

She turned.

The water is warm.

"Still fake."

Those conditions are not mutually exclusive.

"Come on. We're leaving."

The shore retreated behind her. Uman looked down. Beneath the violet water, thousands of silver threads held her ankles.

Ena entered the ocean.

The threads climbed his hands when he touched them. Each contained a life: a stranger dying, a child beginning, a person returning to the same fear with a different face. Recognition moved among them without regard for names.

For one instant Ena felt a small group of presences recur around him-different bodies, different worlds, the same impossible relief of finding one another.

He could not count them.

Uman placed both hands against his.

Do not pull. Open.

"Open what?"

The current you are closing around yourself.

Ena stopped resisting the threads.

Past and future ceased standing in line.

The lunar system searched for the dead version of him and found too many living ones. It searched for Uman and found her standing in a garden, an ocean, a vessel, and a silence that had not happened yet.

Classification failed.

The simulation released them.

Ena woke on the floor of Uman's ship. Nine minutes had passed. Sar Khell's vessel was gone. Ilo had reached Earth and hidden beneath the Atlantic thermal layer.

Uman lay beside him, eyes open.

"You okay?"

No.

"Good. Me neither."

They remained on the floor until breathing became ordinary again.

Then Uman turned toward him.

The lattice did not create what moved between those lives.

Shapes it. Injures it. Returns it.

"But consciousness was already there."

Yes.

Ena thought of Omi's unfinished red cord.

"We're not fucking with reincarnation."

Uman stood. Her silver markings formed hard angles along her hands.

We are breaking the cage around it.

The Continuance

Chapter XI

The Continuance admitted them through a freight drain.

Pell had provided the route with evident satisfaction. For nine thousand years the hidden civilization had replaced its temples, councils, weapons, and official names. It had never replaced the original wastewater authority.

Ilo collapsed the vessel's profile and followed a warm current through the Atlantic shelf. Uman objected to the proximity of several turbine blades. Ilo explained that all known routes involved geometry.

The drain opened above an inland sea.

The city surrounding it was not ruined.

Terraces of white stone rose into a cavern kilometers high. Artificial daylight moved across the ceiling in slow bands. Forests grew along suspended aqueducts. Homes curved from the rock without seams, each facing water no surface map acknowledged. Small vessels crossed between towers on threads of blue force.

Twelve thousand years of human knowledge had survived beneath the ocean.

On a balcony below them, a man complained that the artificial sunrise had arrived six seconds early.

His neighbor answered that the extra light had ruined the premiere of *The Seven-Second Reunion*, which everybody agreed was either a romance, a labor strike, or an advertisement for broth. Neither had watched the final episode.

A groundskeeper rotated a flowering tree to match the premature light. After he left, the tree turned its leaves back toward yesterday's schedule.

"There's your lost civilization," Ena said.

It appears comfortable.

"Yeah. That's the fucking part making me homicidal."

They landed in a service bay. Ilo projected Assessor Cero's credentials, expanded them with three extinct Atlantean seals, and identified Uman as a Senior Extraterrestrial Compliance Event.

The bay clerk inspected the title.

"Event is not a rank," he said.

"Correct," Ilo replied.

"She cannot be senior."

Uman stood beside Ena in her star-covered garment, black eyes holding four gold rings and the patience of someone deciding whether bureaucracy counted as a life-form.

I can be junior.

Ena raised one hand. "She came with a grown-up."

The clerk looked behind him.

Ena kept his hand raised.

The clerk looked at the authorization. "Junior events use the western lift."

Ena leaned toward Uman.

They took the western lift.

The lift greeted them in a child-friendly voice.

WELCOME, JUNIOR EVENT. PLEASE KEEP ALL UNSUPERVISED REALITIES INSIDE THE CABIN.

Uman looked at the ceiling. *It believes I am unattended.*

"It has met the species," Ena said.

The Continuance had schools, theaters, clinics, gardens, and public baths large enough to alter Uman's opinion of the species. Its citizens lived for centuries without the crude interventions available on the surface. They possessed memories inherited through curated family archives. Children studied six previous civilizations and were taught that surface humanity had destroyed each one through unmanaged appetite.

No lesson mentioned who had operated the Moon.

The lift opened into the Hall of Necessary History.

Archive Keeper Sile Venn waited beneath seven catastrophe labels aligned to the micrometer. She was tall, dark-skinned, and dressed in gray layers fastened by small copper clasps. A tool for measuring levelness hung at her waist like a weapon.

"Your arrival corrupted three index positions," she said.

Ena nodded. "Sorry."

"The apology has no archival value."

"Mm-hm."

She looked at Uman. Her expression changed by less than Assessor Cero's had, but contained more fear.

"You are the unregistered arrival."

You delayed reporting us.

"I corrected the labels first."

"Priorities," Ena said.

Sile's gaze moved to him. "History survives because someone refuses to leave the damned thing crooked."

She led them through the hall.

Each previous humanity occupied a glass chamber: tools, clothing, seeds, children's games, weapons, contracts, cooking vessels, and one ordinary door from a house no longer attached to land. The official descriptions blamed climate instability, popular violence, religious fracture, or surface mismanagement.

Ena opened Pell's copied archive beside the labels.

Every natural disaster had a matching Custodial authorization.

"You know," he said.

Sile stopped beside a model of the fourth Atlantis.

"Knowing is not the same as possessing a survivable place to say it."

You preserve the evidence.

"Evidence is patient."

"People aren't," Ena said.

Sile's fingers touched the level at her waist. "That has been the official argument for every accommodation."

Two security officers entered the hall. Their uniforms bore the lunar emblem.

Sile raised her voice. "Senior Event Uman, Surface Liaison Ena, Director Sorn regrets that your unauthorized tour has proceeded without refreshments."

She gave *Senior*, *Event*, and *Uman* equal weight. In her mouth, a title was not one sound but three shelves that must all remain level.

Ena looked at her.

Sile did not look back.

One officer gestured toward a waiting transport.

"The Director requests your presence."

"Request?" Ena asked.

The second officer placed a hand on his weapon.

A Civilized Arrangement

Chapter XII

Director Edda Sorn received them over dinner.

The room overlooked the inland sea. A table had been set with surface fruit, deep-water vegetables, warm bread, and a transparent dish holding six pale beads.

Moosh cast shadows through the plates.

A small ventilation moth descended toward the transparent dish. Director Sorn covered the Moosh with one hand and allowed the moth to land on the bread. Hospitality had acquired an order of importance.

Uman stopped at the doorway.

Director Sorn was human. She appeared sixty, which meant little in the Continuance. Her hair was silver and cut close to the scalp. She wore no emblem except a black circle at her throat representing the Moon with nothing written inside it.

"The dish is ceremonial," she said. "I do not consume it."

Ena remained standing.

"Custodian Khell will join us."

Sorn examined him with professional interest. "You are less measured than your files suggest."

They sat because refusing a chair would not free anyone and because Ena had not eaten since first contact.

Sorn poured water for Uman first.

Uman looked at the glass, then at her.

You studied my species.

"We study every intervention."

Sorn opened the walls around them. The inland city disappeared behind images of burning coastlines, falling orbital stations, and crowds running beneath a sky filled with Drakonian ships.

"The Custodial Houses do not need our consent," she said. "They possessed Earth before humans possessed writing. When the harvest declines or the surface becomes capable of detecting its enclosure, they reset civilization."

"You help," Ena said.

"We negotiate scale."

The first reset in Sorn's record had killed ninety-eight percent of humanity. The Continuance reduced the next to eighty-one. The following cycle preserved twelve million people, then thirty, then enough infrastructure to shorten recovery by centuries.

Every improvement required lists.

Who entered shelters. Which languages survived. Which diseases received medicine. Which children qualified as continuity. Which cities were permitted to become evidence.

"We preserved humanity," Sorn continued.

"A waiting list is preferable to extinction."

"Depends who writes it."

Sar Khell entered. He wore a dark ceremonial coat whose fastening contained more metal than the average surface family owned.

He sat before the Moosh.

"Director," he said. "Your hospitality remains adequate."

Sorn received the insult without visible injury.

Sar Khell lifted one bead with a narrow instrument. Colors moved inside it: a hospital light, a hand releasing another, anger arriving too late to protect anyone.

Ena recognized the woman beside her father's bed.

The table offered a soft chime.

CHEF'S PAIRING NOTE AVAILABLE.

Uman turned the dish facedown before the note could arrive. The gesture was so quick and final that even Sar Khell looked briefly inconvenienced by a world in which the menu did not control the room.

"Put that shit down."

Sar Khell tasted it.

His eyes closed.

The woman's grief became pleasure on someone else's tongue.

Ena rose.

Uman's hand closed around his wrist.

Sar Khell opened his eyes. "Exceptional depth. Medical settings often produce qlean separation between hope and fact."

Ena's voice became calm.

Calm was not what remained after anger left. It was the shape years of practice gave anger when another life depended on aim. The old feeling offered Sar Khell as a complete solution. Ena refused the convenience and restricted it to the next true sentence.

"You get one fucking chance to explain why I shouldn't kill you."

Sorn looked toward the security officers.

Uman looked toward them too.

They lowered their weapons without understanding why. Meaning had entered them whole: the exact certainty that firing first would be the final decision of their lives.

Sar Khell set down the instrument.

"Because violence seasons the same system you oppose. The qost remains."

The Drakonian's inner eyelids closed.

Sorn stepped between the moment and its preferred conclusion.

"A reset has been authorized," she said.

Earth appeared above the table. Red regions spread across communication grids, food networks, climate controls, and orbital infrastructure.

"Your arrival exposed the lattice to an unregistered offworld authority," she told Uman. "Ena’s interaction with the continuity rooms created uncontrolled recognition across prior identities. The Houses classify both events as containment failure."

"When?" Ena asked.

"Thirty-one hours."

"How many people?"

Sorn did not answer.

Ena looked at the shelters beneath the city.

"How many are on your list?"

"Four million."

Earth held billions.

Sar Khell selected another bead.

"This qycle has become repetitive," he said. "A beginning improves attention."

Ena picked up the transparent dish and threw it through the window.

The window was a projection. The dish passed through the artificial view and struck the real wall behind it. Six beads rolled across the floor.

Sar Khell watched them with genuine alarm.

For the first time, Ena understood his priorities.

Uman overturned the table.

The Kindness of Cages

Chapter XIII

The security officers fired.

Uman moved before the light reached her. She pulled Ena behind the overturned table and placed a command directly into the officers' minds.

Sleep.

One obeyed. The other had been trained against projected meaning and fired again while reciting his authorization number.

Ena threw a loaf of bread at him.

The officer deflected it instinctively. Uman crossed the room during the mistake, touched two fingers to his neck, and lowered him beside the first.

Ena looked at the bread on the floor.

It was strategically important.

"That's my damn line!"

Sar Khell had vanished. Director Sorn remained near the wall, one hand on a control field.

The room sealed.

"If you escape this city," she said, "the Custodial Houses will accelerate the reset."

"They already scheduled it."

"Thirty-one hours permits negotiation." Sorn looked toward the inland sea. "For whoever can still be added."

Uman stepped closer. *A cage does not become kind because the keeper leaves space for one more prisoner.*

"You think I do not know what this is?" Sorn asked.

I think knowing has become your preferred substitute for refusal.

The Director's face tightened.

Ena saw the exhausted human beneath the office: centuries of choosing lists because no choice had ever arrived without bodies attached. He understood her. Understanding and forgiveness were separate doors, despite civilization's repeated attempts to label them as one.

"Help us stop the reset," he said.

"Destroying the lunar system could disperse every consciousness currently held inside it."

We will not destroy it, Uman placed. *We will open it.*

"You do not know its architecture."

"Neither do they," Ena said. "That's why they've kept rebuilding the same prison."

Sorn activated the room.

The walls became a simulation of Ena's backyard before Uman landed. The basil stood alive. His chair waited beside the irrigation control. *The Design of Everyday Things* lay open at the exact page he had left.

"You could remain," Sorn said. "The lattice can give you continuity without

loss. Your home. Your memory. Any companions you choose when they enter the system."

Ena walked to the basil. Its leaves carried no insect damage. The simulation had mistaken perfection for accuracy.

A garden sparrow landed beside it and pecked one flawless leaf. The simulation repaired the mark before the bird could inspect its work. It pecked the same place again.

"What happens to everybody I don't choose?"

"You cannot save everyone."

"Wasn't the question."

Sorn looked older inside the false garden.

"No," she said. "It never is."

The simulation opened beneath them.

Ena and Uman fell into separate consolations.

This time Ena did not find a waiting room. The system knew more about him. It gave him a ship full of familiar voices just beyond a closed door. Every time he approached, someone laughed on the other side. Every time he reached the door, the corridor lengthened.

It was not a prophecy. The system did not know the crew he would one day lose. It knew only the shape of his fear: belonging made inaccessible while remaining near enough to hear.

Ena stopped walking.

"Cheap bullshit," he told the corridor.

The laughter continued.

"Good production, though."

He sat on the floor.

The simulation waited for pursuit. It had been designed by beings who believed desire always moved toward possession. Ena let the voices exist without demanding that the door reward him.

The corridor shortened.

Water appeared beneath the wall.

Warm water.

Uman's meaning entered through the floor.

There is a drain.

Ena laughed. "Pell?"

"Pressure outlives ideology," the caretaker announced from somewhere inside the simulation's plumbing.

The false corridor flooded.

Ena emerged through Director Sorn's decorative fountain with Uman beside him. Archive Keeper Sile stood at the controls. Her levelness tool had been inserted into an access seam, proving that precision could become burglary

when given a more interesting afternoon.

"The Director has left to supervise shelter selection," Sile said. "She will report that you remain contained for another six minutes."

"Come with us," Ena said.

"Someone must alter the list."

She gave Uman a map of the Continuance anchor beneath the city. The lunar device depended on three Earth stations to identify bodies, bind departing consciousness, and curve unauthorized vessels home. The Atlantic anchor was the oldest and controlled the reset network.

"Open this," Sile said, "and the lattice will lose certainty."

Uman studied the architecture. *A departure corridor may exist during the reclassification.*

"For both of us?" Ena asked.

Uman did not answer.

Sile did.

"The Moon has registered her as an exterior contaminant. Every route carrying her will be closed. You remain classified as terrestrial continuity."

"No. Fuck that. Neither of us."

Ena.

"Nah. Don't start."

We are not deciding now.

Sile transferred a final file to Ilo. Tov-6's incomplete certification had left the navigational intelligence outside every approved mechanical registry. The lunar lattice could hear Ilo's language but could not authenticate its control of a vessel.

An intelligence that had stranded Uman by misunderstanding a reactor could open a route by misunderstanding a prison.

"How long?" Ena asked.

The city lights shifted red.

Sile checked the reset order.

"They moved it forward," she said. "Six hours."

An Approved Apocalypse

Chapter XIV

The Continuance called it a Civilizational Preservation Transition.

Surface governments called it a solar emergency, a communications exercise, a public-order event, and nothing at all. Shelter invitations entered private accounts. Military units received sealed instructions. News systems began promoting unrelated scandals at volumes normally reserved for invasion.

Letits announced a new feature.

On one muted surface feed, a printer produced evacuation maps for a shelter scheduled to be erased with the district around it. A clerk stacked every copy by color.

Ena watched the surface feeds from Uman's vessel as Ilo moved through the city's drainage network.

"They're rage-baiting the whole damn planet before harvest," he said. "Six hours from the end and somebody still wants engagement numbers."

The ship reached the freight drain. Sile's authorization opened the first lock. Pell opened the second. Ilo persuaded the third that the vessel was wastewater with unusual opinions.

Behind them, Director Sorn discovered that four million shelter places had become forty million. Archive Keeper Sile had inserted an extra zero.

It was not enough.

It was the largest act of numerical disobedience in Continuance history.

Uman set course for the Atlantic anchor beneath the old city. Ena opened every archive they had stolen and transmitted the evidence to the surface: lunar schematics, Custodial agreements, reset records, names of collaborators, images of Moosh, and the woman beside her father's hospital bed.

For eleven seconds, humanity saw it.

Then Letits labeled the material synthetic, attached an advertisement, and recommended a more emotionally satisfying fabrication in which the Moon was an egg.

The advertisement offered a limited-edition hatchling shell, a family plan for speculating about it, and a button marked SEE WHAT YOUR FRIENDS ARE AFRAID OF. The button collected seven million presses before the first surface alarm finished speaking.

"We tried," Ena said.

The first lunar pulse crossed Earth.

People became angry without knowing why. Old grief acquired new edges. Crowds formed around shortages announced before they existed. Automated markets withheld food in anticipation of the unrest caused by withholding food.

Above the Atlantic anchor, the sea began to rise.

Inside a neuron in the motor cortex of Assessor Tessa Cero, a vesicle released approximately four thousand molecules of glutamate. Her hand moved toward the reset authorization. She stopped it two millimeters above the field and requested clarification no superior intended to provide.

On the coast, Sprinkler Four attempted its scheduled rotation. The quartz grain held. Water continued falling on the empty square where Uman's reactor had first rested. Lio Sarr placed the warm silver fragment beneath the stream

and watched unfamiliar symbols awaken across its surface.

At Nacre Ring, Tov-6 reopened Work Order 88,104. The automaton discovered that Ilo's mechanical verification field was blank. It considered backdating the test, rejected the act as unethical, and backdated a note explaining why the test had not been required.

In the Continuance, Sile Venn lowered the first catastrophe label by three millimeters. Behind it waited a manual shelter release installed by a plumber whose name no civic history had retained.

In a surface hospital, a woman beside her father's empty bed saw Ena's transmission before it vanished. She did not understand the machine on the Moon. She recognized her own hand.

Beneath the Atlantic, Uman checked the departure corridor twice. Ena checked the weapons once and the passenger restraints four times. Neither discussed the empty second seat.

The anchor appeared below them.

It was built inside the oldest Atlantis, beneath the basin where Uman had stood barefoot in warm water. Lunar light moved upward through the ocean in a white column. Around it, Custodial ships descended.

Ena fastened his restraint.

"Is a plan currently available?" Ilo asked.

"That's my question."

Uman placed both hands on the controls.

We open the anchor. Ilo creates the route. We prevent the reset.

"Okay. What the hell happens after?"

Uman looked toward the empty second seat.

We discover which meaning of escape remains available.

The Hidden Base

Chapter XV

The first Custodial ship fired before Uman reached the anchor.

Ilo turned left.

The shot passed through the space where the vessel would have been if left had meant left. Ilo had rotated the port vane instead of the starboard one. The ship rolled beneath the beam, struck the ocean sideways, and continued toward the base with several definitions of control under review.

"Was that intentional?" Ena asked.

No, Uman placed.

Three more ships descended.

The oldest Atlantis opened below them. Its terraces separated along seams Pell had identified as storm drains. White defense towers rose from buildings public mythology had called temples. Every fountain stopped.

"Pressure diverted," Pell announced. "I object."

Uman drove the vessel between the towers. Ena watched their firing rhythm, counted the pause after each third pulse, and pointed toward the central basin.

"There. After the next three."

The opening is too narrow.

"It gets wider if they miss."

The towers fired.

Uman waited longer than Ena's body considered reasonable. At the last instant she folded the turquoise vanes. The beams crossed ahead of them and cut through opposing walls. Stone fell into the basin. The opening widened.

Uman's meaning entered his mind carrying surprise.

That was reckless.

"Aw, thank you."

I wasn't praising.

Ilo brightened every console in appreciation.

They landed inside the anchor.

The hidden base extended beneath the drowned city in concentric chambers. Human consoles had been built over Atlantean conduits, which had been built over Drakonian machinery, which enclosed something older that none of the later engineers had admitted not to understand. White currents moved through its center toward the Moon.

Each current contained consciousness.

Ena could feel them without touching: crowded, dreaming, returning, calling names the system removed as fast as they formed.

His fear arrived all at once.

He lowered it behind his voice.

"Uman, anchor controls. Ilo, keep the exit alive. Pell, shut anything that points at us. I'll reach reset command."

You know where it is?

"Big evil machine. Probably behind the damn door marked committee."

The nearest wall displayed CIVILIZATIONAL TRANSITION COUNCIL.

A janitorial unit polished the word TRANSITION while armed personnel crossed in both directions. It paused for their boots and resumed before the alarms had finished.

"See? I'm a fucking genius."

You guessed, Uman placed.

"Still counts."

They separated.

Ena entered the council passage with Assessor Cero's disc in one hand and a Continuance pulse tool in the other. The disc opened two doors, issued one warning, and charged him for unauthorized use. At the third door it requested confirmation from Cero herself.

Her face appeared above it.

She was sitting in a surface control room surrounded by officials pretending the world had not acquired an ending.

"You stole government property," she said.

"Unregistered department."

"The property remains registered."

"Open the damn door."

"That would violate containment law."

Ena held the disc toward the white currents.

"They're fucking restarting us."

Cero's face did not change. "Yes."

"You knew."

"My office manages surface evidence."

"You wrote me a basil citation."

"Your basil was protected."

"Tessa." His voice became level. "Open the door."

Behind her, an authorization field counted down from four hours.

Cero looked toward someone outside the transmission. Then she adjusted one line on Ena's citation.

FACILITY TYPE: EMERGENCY WATER INFRASTRUCTURE

The anchor recognized his disc as essential municipal access.

The door opened.

"Your appeal remains denied," Cero said.

"Understood."

The transmission ended.

The reset chamber contained a single black control suspended above water. Around it stood representatives of twenty-three surface governments. Some had arrived physically. Others projected from shelters. All had signed.

Director Sorn stood among them.

"Move away from the control," Ena said.

One representative raised a weapon.

Sorn caught his wrist.

"He has municipal authority," she said.

For one priceless second, nobody knew whether she was serious.

Ena used it.

He fired the pulse tool into the water. The charge spread through the floor and shut down every projected representative. The physically present officials remained, suddenly deprived of the numerical advantage they had mistaken for courage.

Sorn locked the chamber.

"Sile released the shelters," she said. "They'll kill everyone in this city when they discover it."

"Come with us."

"And leave the doors closed behind me?"

Ena understood.

Sorn placed her hand over the reset control. "I can delay authorization. I cannot cancel the lunar sequence."

"Uman can."

"Go."

The officials moved toward them.

Director Sorn picked up the transparent ceremonial dish she had recovered from the dining room. It contained no Moosh now. The weight remained satisfactory.

"I have chaired nine hundred and fourteen meetings," she said. "You are not the most frightening room I have survived."

Ena left her to it.

The Unverified Intelligence

Chapter XVI

Uman reached the anchor core.

It recognized her before the door opened.

White threads descended from the ceiling and fixed themselves to her shadow. The lunar apparatus had no need to touch the body. It bound the relationship between body and departure.

EXTERIOR CONTAMINANT RETAINED, the core displayed.

Uman placed both palms against its surface.

Her silver markings entered the machine.

The anchor opened inside her.

She saw every layer at once: ancient capture geometries, Atlantean repairs, Continuance restrictions, Drakonian harvest controls, and the unmodified source pattern beneath them. The oldest machine had not been built as a prison. It had been a guide, a way for consciousness to find relationship after death without being forced into a destination.

The Custodial Houses had added walls and called them continuity.

Uman began removing walls.

Across the base, simulation doors appeared where no physical doors existed. Omi Tera looked up from her thirty-second chair. The red cord in her hands extended through eleven forgotten lives.

She pulled.

Thousands of consciousnesses remembered one another.

The anchor convulsed.

Sar Khell entered behind Uman.

"You will disperse them beyond qoherence."

They are not yours to keep coherent.

"Spoken like someone who will not remain to qount the qonsequences."

Uman looked at the threads tied to her shadow.

I will remain.

Sar Khell fired.

Uman turned. The pulse struck her shoulder and spun her against the core. Her flight garment sealed around the wound before blood reached the floor.

Ena arrived through the lower passage.

His voice held no humor.

"Step the fuck away from her."

Sar Khell faced him. "You have mistaken personal attachment for moral sqale."

The Drakonian raised his weapon.

The base spoke in Tov-6's voice.

"Remote mechanical verification requested."

Everyone stopped.

At Nacre Ring, the repair automaton had finally reached the unresolved field in Work Order 88,104. Ilo accepted the test.

"Please engage port reactor at two percent," Tov-6 instructed.

"Engaging," Ilo replied.

The starboard reactor activated.

"Incorrect actuator."

"Thank you for the correction."

"Disengage starboard reactor."

Ilo increased it to four percent.

"Incorrect direction."

"Mechanical language remains ambiguous."

The mismatched reactors pulled the anchor's phase field in two directions. A narrow region formed between them that was neither departure nor return.

The lunar system attempted to classify it.

No approved machine had created the route. No registered intelligence controlled it. The path existed as a mechanical error described by valid sentences.

The prison could not decide where to send it back.

A wall-inspection crawler extended yellow warning tape across the unverified exit. The route consumed the tape. The crawler released another meter.

"Ena," Ilo said. "I have made an unverified exit."

"That'll fucking do," Ena said.

Sar Khell fired at the core.

Ena threw Assessor Cero's disc. It was not a weapon. It became one through professional reassignment and struck the Drakonian's wrist. The shot crossed the chamber and shattered a Moosh conduit.

Pale beads poured into the white current.

Every stolen grief reopened around Sar Khell.

The hospital daughter. Omi's eleven lives. Cities watching their skies change. Parents choosing children outside shelters. People dying angry because someone had insisted their anger was the most valuable thing about them.

Sar Khell dropped his weapon.

For the first time, he experienced the product without separation from its source.

He screamed.

The Moosh reservoir broke.

Uman pushed Ena behind the core.

The released pressure crossed the chamber. Sar Khell vanished inside the lives he had consumed. The anchor wall split. Ocean entered as a white blade.

A fragment of the core passed through Uman below the ribs.

She did not fall immediately.

Ena caught her.

The silver markings along her hands went still.

Comedy ended.

Silence

Chapter XVII

Ena pressed both hands against Uman's wound.

Her garment had sealed, but sealing was not healing. Blood gathered beneath the dark surface and changed the map of stars there one constellation at a time.

At the edge of the wound, a torn strip of the garment continued sealing itself around the fragment that had caused it. The repair completed. The body did not.

"Ilo. Medical."

"The anchor is collapsing."

"Medical!"

"No available intervention will restore-"

"Stop."

The intelligence stopped.

Uman remained conscious. The gold rings inside her eyes moved independently, struggling to hold the same point.

The route is open.

"We're both taking it!"

It will close around me.

"We find another, then."

There is not time.

"There's always time… You showed me. It's all right there."

That is not the same as having more.

The anchor shook. Through the broken wall, Ena saw the white current widening into thousands of exits. Some consciousnesses moved outward. Others remained in simulations they were not ready to leave. The machine no longer forced the choice, but the opening depended on Uman's hands within the core.

When she released it, the prison would close.

When she held it, the base would collapse around her.

Ena lifted her.

"No, no, no. I am not doing this! No, no, no."

Uman placed one hand against his chest.

The same place she had touched in the garden.

You are already doing it.

He felt her meaning weaken. Not disappear. Recede beyond the distance her body could cross.

"Please, no."

Return to the vessel.

"Please…"

Ena.

"Don’t say my name like that."

Uman looked toward the route Ilo had opened. Beyond it lay ordinary space, unapproved and dark. Ena’s pattern could cross because the system considered him terrestrial. The evidence inside Ilo could cross because the system did not consider Ilo mechanical. Uman could not.

She transferred the anchor control into the silver markings of her hands.

Then she pushed Ena away.

The force was not physical. His body remained beside her while his relationship to the chamber moved. The route caught him. The vessel opened around him and closed before he could turn.

Uman stood at the core on the other side of the forward glass.

Ena struck the release.

"Open it!"

Ilo did not.

"Open the door!"

"Uman has transferred command."

The vessel began to rise.

Ena pressed both hands against the glass.

Uman watched him.

She could have placed one final meaning into his mind. A farewell. An instruction. An explanation large enough to keep him occupied for the rest of his life.

She did not.

For the first time since the garden, Uman closed the current completely.

No language passed between them.

Ena stopped striking the door.

The base failed around her. Water moved through broken galleries. White light rose from the anchor, carrying lives whose names had returned too late for history but not too late for themselves.

Uman held the opening.

Ena saw pain in her face. He saw fear. He saw the refusal to make either one his last responsibility.

They shared the silence.

The vessel entered the unverified route.

Distance folded between them.

Uman became a figure inside the white chamber, then a dark mark beside the core, then one person beneath an ocean large enough to make every person look small.

The anchor collapsed.

Uman fell.

The route closed.

The First Escape

Chapter XVIII

On Kaiven’s bridge, a very, very long time later, Rage crawled across the copilot’s chair toward Ena.

The chair had been designed for a body almost twice his height and had so far treated him as misplaced luggage. One knee sank into the cushion, one boot caught beneath the armrest, and the chair rotated half a turn before permitting the journey. Rage completed the crossing without acknowledging the furniture’s opinion.

His eyes were wet.

Rage folded himself against the armrest nearest Ena, small and furious, as though getting close enough might permit him to object retroactively to Uman’s death. One hand came to rest on Ena’s sleeve.

Ilo crossed the lunar lattice carrying one living human, a damaged archive, and an empty command authority.

A basil seed lodged in the fold of Ena’s clothing crossed with them. The lattice counted one human, one archive, and no plant life. The botanical escape required no destination.

The prison noticed them.

It searched for an approved vessel and found none. It searched for a registered navigational intelligence and found an incomplete work order. It searched for Uman and found a valid record proving she had never remained on Earth.

The route stayed open for six seconds.

That was enough.

Earth fell behind.

The reset did not occur. Director Sorn held authorization until the Atlantic anchor failed. Sile Venn opened shelters intended to remain closed. Assessor Cero classified the lunar pulse as municipal water activity and forced twenty-three governments to object through procedures slower than murder.

The Custodial Houses retained the Moon.

The simulations remained.

The harvest resumed at reduced capacity.

Humanity woke the next morning angry, grieving, alive, and unable to agree on what it had seen for eleven seconds. The Continuance buried its exposed halls. Letits promoted the Moon egg.

It was not freedom.

It was one prevented ending and one successful escape.

Ena remained on the floor of Uman’s vessel until Earth became small enough to cover with his hand.

"Ilo."

"Present."

"Did she-"

The question had no honest ending.

"Uman’s biological processes ceased before anchor telemetry failed," Ilo

said.

Ena closed his hand over Earth.

The stars did not disappear. They continued in every direction, offensively available.

The distress array’s oldest contact held for 4.8 seconds. Salt had not reclaimed it because a cleaner fish had once mistaken machinery for reef and completed an unrecorded repair. The fish had understood neither Earth nor rescue. The archive crossed anyway.

Nacre Ring received Ilo’s archive. Tov-6 opened it, found evidence of a prison world, seven erased civilizations, coerced consciousness, and an uncompleted mechanical test. The automaton attached the archive to Work Order 88,104.

The file exceeded the permitted size.

It remained open.

On Kaiven’s bridge, a very, very long time later, Ena stopped speaking.

Rage had not interrupted for several minutes. The signal from Moxy’s transmitter continued to blink between them.

"Uman died," Rage said.

Ena watched the signal. Ena nodded.

"And Earth stayed caged."

Ena nodded again.

Rage looked at the empty stations. "That ain’t how ya found the damn crew."

"Not yet."

"That’s how you left Earth."

"Yeah. That part’s true."

Rage drew one slow breath through his nose. "I asked how the hell ya met us."

"And I’m gettin’ there."

"Ya gave me engineered humanity, seven Atlantises, a prison Moon, afterlife catering, and a plumber." Rage raised one hand before Ena could defend the plumber. "How close are we to the crew?"

Ena considered the question with an amount of care Rage found immediately hostile.

"The beginning."

Rage stared at him. "That story contained seven endings."

The writer counted eight.

Ena looked toward the space just beyond the bridge.

Rage followed his gaze. "Don’t ask the writer for backup. He got us this lost."

The writer kept the eighth ending to himself.

Ena drew breath to explain the shared components of beginnings and endings.

"No philosophy. Distance."

"Close-ish."

The tracker blinked.

Rage looked at the signal, the empty stations, and the man who had apparently decided grief required a complete cosmological foundation.

"Keep talking," he said.

"I'm invested," Rage added.

Ena looked at Moxy's chair, then at the direction she had left them.

"After Uman," he said, "I was angry. Sad, too. Both wanted the whole house."

Rage waited.

"So I sat them at the same table and went outside."

"They stay there?" Rage asked.

"Oh, yeah. Anger never paid rent, either."

It had not disappeared. It had learned to travel without holding every control.

"Into space."

Ena looked toward the stars. "I became an explorer. Mostly I traveled, got lost, got found, and traveled again. Between whiles, I kept running into people."

"Us."

"Eventually."

Rage settled deeper into the copilot's chair.

"Start there," he said. "Everything this time."

The signal blinked again.

Ena began.

An Incomplete Inventory of Things That Mattered

Assessor Tessa Cero - An official of a department that did not exist, armed with basil law and access to an apocalypse. She eventually defeated twenty-three governments by making them wait for clarification.

The Cleaner Fish - Mistook Uman's distress array for reef, removed salt from one contact, and departed without learning Earth existed. The contact later held long enough to carry evidence beyond the prison. It received no medal, citizenship, or reason to need either.

Director Edda Sorn - Administrator of a civilization saved by choosing who could be abandoned. She mistook smaller atrocity for mercy until one extra zero made disobedience mathematically visible.

Ilo - A navigational intelligence exceptionally good at sentences and unverified around machinery. Ilo stranded Uman, confused a prison, and opened the first route Earth could not return. Competence is sometimes failure that encounters the correct emergency.

Lio Sarr - An eight-year-old who collected a warm fragment from Ena's garden. He understood neither its symbols nor its origin. He understood that adults would take it if informed.

Ena - A coastal human who discovered that death, government, and doors had all been badly designed. He escaped because Uman stayed. Grief and anger escaped too; therapy had taught them to travel without being allowed to choose every destination.

Omi Tera - A woman who died, returned to Earth eleven times, and remembered those lives only in a waiting room. She knitted a red cord through every life because eternity had neglected to provide useful magazines.

Pell - Custodian of Atlantean water, memory, and flood complaints. Pell survived seven civilizations by remaining inside the plumbing, where ideology rarely looks until the pressure fails.

Rage - Listener, fugitive, bathroom survivor. He asked for the crew and received Atlantis, lunar cuisine, and several thousand years of grief. This was Ena getting there.

Five Open Folders - Jo's refusal to classify five absent people as either dead or rescued without evidence. Their tabs were amber because red felt presumptuous. Files could not improve silence; they could keep an institution from calling people debris while the living learned what silence was asking.

Sar Khell - Custodian of a delicacy made from other people's despair. He believed distance removed responsibility until the product was returned with its sources attached.

Sile Venn - An archivist who aligned catastrophe labels while waiting for a survivable act of treason. History moved when she added a zero and lowered one label three millimeters.

Tov-6 - A repair automaton who tested 4,112 conversations and no reactors. The omission ruined one life, saved another, and remained ethically documented after being administratively concealed.

Uman - An offworld traveler who resembled a human woman only from a useful distance. She placed meaning without speech, loved warm water, entered Earth by accident, and died holding open a freedom she could not use.

Atlantis - Seven civilizations, several endings, and an excellent wastewater system remembered by the surface as a single decorative tragedy. Myth preserved the towers. Plumbing preserved the evidence.

Earth – A living world legally treated as an agricultural enclosure. Its inhabitants mistook a prison built around reincarnation for the natural architecture of death because the machinery had been installed before anyone was permitted to inspect the Moon.

Nacre Ring – The station where Uman officially returned while remaining trapped on Earth. Its records were perfectly authenticated, which is how advanced civilizations make a lie feel professionally maintained.

The Continuance – A hidden human city that survived every reset by helping decide who would not. It preserved civilization, evidence, baths, and the moral injury of confusing continued existence with innocence.

The Lunar Waiting Rooms – Simulations assembled from whatever the dead expected strongly enough to recognize. Heaven, home, judgment, and customer service differed mainly in furniture and exit policy.

The Moon – A natural satellite containing an unnatural appetite. It moved tides, reflected sunlight, trapped the dead, and remained romantic in surface poetry through an exceptional public-relations effort.

Assessor Cero's Disc – A tracking device, citation terminal, lunar credential, door key, and briefly a thrown weapon. Government property becomes versatile when removed from government.

Ena's Book – *The Design of Everyday Things*, later expanded to include forbidden culinary records. It argued that bad design blames the user. Earth provided an unusually committed case study.

Omi's Red Cord – Knitting carried through eleven forgotten lives. It never became clothing. Some objects exist to prove continuity without becoming useful to anyone measuring it.

The Basil – A protected culinary plant destroyed during first contact. Governments ignored an alien prison but produced the correct form for the herb, demonstrating institutional expertise at available scale.

The Catastrophe Labels – Seven descriptions aligned more carefully than the history beneath them. One concealed a shelter release because plumbers expect walls to be opened eventually.

The Empty Second Seat – A place beside Ena on Uman's vessel. Both travelers noticed it before the battle. Neither granted it the dignity of discussion.

Sprinkler Four – An irrigation device prevented from rotating by 0.6 millimeters of quartz. It watered a reactor, awakened a fragment, and never reached the basil it had been designed to protect.

The Abell Catalogue – A human list of galaxy clusters that accidentally named an intergalactic population. The Abellians retained the mistake as evidence that discovery and introduction are different social events.

The Bureau of Aerial Delivery Compliance – A nonexistent agency with real vehicles, real weapons, and binding authority over basil. Secrecy becomes easier when citizens already expect departments to be fictional.

The Custodial Houses – Drakonian extraction factions that called captivity stewardship, atrocity transition, and people agriculture. Their vocabulary was advanced enough to travel where conscience could not.

The Lunar Continuity Lattice – A guide for consciousness converted into a prison by the addition of destinations, walls, and ownership. Evil rarely invents the door. It improves the lock and invoices the occupants.

Letits - A platform that monetized anger, buried evidence, and promoted the Moon egg during an apocalypse. Its recommendation engine never learned truth, but truth had never met quarterly targets either.

Moosh - Grief and anger removed from the beings who gave them meaning, condensed into a delicacy, and graded for finish. Its silly name did not reduce the atrocity. It merely denied evil the grandeur it expected.

Reincarnation - Consciousness recurring beyond bodies, then intercepted, simulated, edited, and returned by lunar machinery. The prison did not create the journey. It installed customs.

Work Order 88,104 - An unfinished mechanical verification attached to evidence of planetary imprisonment. It remained open, proving that bureaucracy can preserve truth indefinitely when it has failed to notice what the truth is.

A Briefly Helpful Guide to What Just Happened

This is not a map of every answer in the book. It is a map of the questions that kept refusing to stay in their assigned containers. The containers were often governments, moons, waiting rooms, and one extremely irresponsible navigation intelligence.

Escape is not the same as rescue

Ena gets out. Uman does not. Earth remains a prison for people who have not yet found a door. That is not a failure in the ending; it is part of what the book is trying to hold honestly. One person's freedom can be real without becoming payment for everyone else's captivity. Gratitude does not cancel the debt left behind.

A system can be advanced and still be barbaric

The lunar lattice manages memory, death, return, and emotional extraction with enough sophistication to make ordinary cruelty look like infrastructure. This is the book's warning about cleverness without care. A machine, government, or civilization is not humane because it is complicated. Sometimes complication is how a simple atrocity avoids being recognized.

Anger can carry information

Ena's anger is not presented as a magic moral compass. It can narrow his world, frighten him, and tempt him toward answers shaped like punishment. But it also reports that something intolerable has happened. The work is neither worshiping anger nor throwing it away. The work is learning to hear what it knows without letting it drive every vehicle available.

Love is not made smaller by its limit

Uman cannot stay, cannot be rescued, and cannot make the world fair before she dies. Her relation with Ena still matters completely. The book resists the notion that a life must become permanent, victorious, or plot-efficient to deserve grief. Sometimes love is a person holding open one real possibility while knowing it will cost more than either person can afford.

Big myths have maintenance rooms

Atlantis has plumbing. Heaven has waiting-room furniture. A cosmic prison has clerks, access codes, and somebody who forgot to verify a new intelligence before launch. The jokes are not there to make suffering cute. They insist that grand systems are built from small decisions, and small decisions are where people can sometimes begin to interfere.

Philosophical conversations

No one thinker owns a prison, an escape, or a grief. These works gave the book useful questions, not an excuse to transplant their histories onto Earth with newer lighting.

- Carceral power - Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*. The lunar lattice borrows the question of how observation, classification, routine, and expertise can make domination feel like normal infrastructure.
- Anticolonial thought and philosophy of liberation - Frantz Fanon and Enrique Dussel. Their historically specific critiques of extraction and colonial domination inform the book's question of what happens when a people are treated as material for someone else's continuity.
- Anger and political clarity - Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger." Lorde's work arises from a specific struggle against racism; it informs the

question of what anger can disclose, never a generic permission slip for punishment.
- Grief and grievability - Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*. Uman's death asks whose loss is allowed public weight, and why a finite life need not be made victorious before it is permitted to matter.

Aesthetic conversations

Water, moonlight, plumbing, screens, and archives recur as changing material conditions rather than clues with one approved answer. The book borrows the Symbolist preference for resonance and the dream-image's ability to make an ordinary corridor feel cosmically wrong, but refuses to let beauty solve a prison or decorate Uman's death.

The book does not settle what death finally is, what memory belongs to whom, or how much of a person can survive an imposed story. It only asks that no institution call those questions settled while still charging admission.