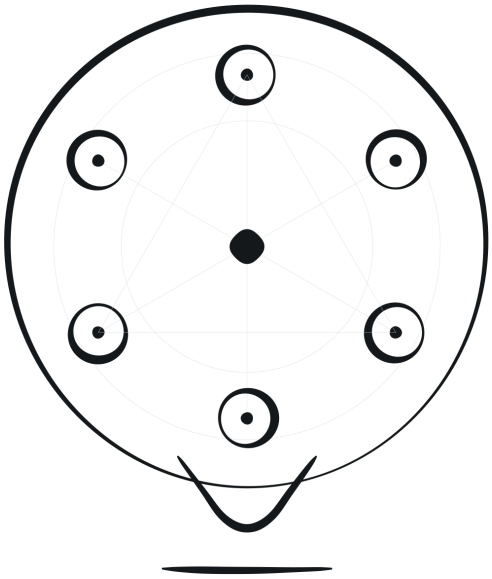

Becoming

/ˈkaɪ̯.ʊen/

Prologue

"I wasn’t always like this," Ena said.

Rage looked away from Moxy’s blinking signal. "Like what?"

Ena gestured at himself, the damaged bridge, and the stars beyond Kaiven’s forward glass. "This. A man who can leave Earth. Just-" He opened one hand. "Gone."

"Ya didn’t just *go*."

"No?"

"You escaped a prison world through a collapsing lunar machine while Uman died holding the door open." Rage leaned toward him. "That is not *gone*. That is casualty."

"Right."

Ena aligned the loose stylus with the seam of Moxy’s console. The ship vibrated and moved it half a millimeter. He considered correcting it, then allowed the universe its small victory.

"To understand how I became somebody who could leave Earth," he said, "we need to go back a few years. We need to revisit my-"

"No. Fuck no."

Ena looked at him.

"No, no, absolutely fucking not." Rage planted both boots against the copilot’s console so the chair could not rotate away during the objection. "Ya promised me the story of us. I asked how you met the crew. You gave me seven dead civilizations, a prison Moon, grief cuisine, and a plumber. Now you want to go *farther back*?"

A loose washer rolled across the console and stopped against Rage’s boot. When he moved his foot to continue objecting, it resumed toward Ena and selected no side.

"Context, man."

Kaiven continued following the signal. There was nothing Rage could make faster by glaring at it, although he remained committed to peer review.

Ena lowered his voice into mock ceremony. "Every good crew story requires an origin episode."

"We’re in the rescue episode."

"A story can multitask."

"Ya can’t."

The writer, responsible for both timelines, found this reassuring.

Ena glanced past the forward glass. "Don’t encourage me."

Rage followed his gaze. "Writer?"

"Mm-hm."

"Tell ’im to skip childhood."

The amber relay on the auxiliary console made one neat sound.

Jo did not open a full image. Her voice arrived between route updates.

"For scheduling purposes," she said, "does *a few years back* describe a duration, a destination, or emotional weather?"

Rage pointed at the console. "See? She gets it."

"I am attempting to get it," Jo said. "There is a difference."

Ena smiled despite himself. "It's context."

"Context is not a unit of time, Ena."

"Pff. Somebody put that on a mug."

"I have already put it on your route log. The mug draft is pending."

"I also prepared a shorter version that begins with the crew and temporarily suspends Ena's narrative privileges."

Rage leaned toward the console. "Use that."

"No," Ena said.

"Noted," Jo said. "I will retain it as a staffing tool."

Rage pointed at the console. "Put down he's delaying a rescue."

"I have recorded that as your assessment, Mr. Rage."

"Good."

"It is not an endorsement."

Ena's grin faded at the edges. "We're still moving."

"I know," Jo said. Her voice gentled without becoming vague. "Keep moving. And tell the story you can tell without using it to hide from the one you cannot."

The amber channel went quiet.

The writer did not.

Ena smiled. "Fair."

Rage looked at the tracker. Rill and Senn remained stolen in the present tense. Kaiven had a direction, damaged engines, and no plan for what waited at the end. The past was not delaying a rescue. It was merely making the journey feel longer, which Rage considered a separate criminal offense.

"How far back?" he asked.

Ena settled into Moxy's chair.

"Six."

Rage narrowed his eyes. "Six years?"

"Six me."

"That ain't a unit."

"Me at six years old, dude."

Rage closed his eyes.

"Yer doin' childhood."

"Little bit."

"I fucking hate context."

I Was Only Six Years Old

Chapter I

Ena was born during Earth’s second numbered millennium under one of its more successful calendars. The calendar began near the birth of a teacher whom later institutions described as sacrificing himself for all humanity. The institutions then spent several centuries privatizing the benefits.

The date explained almost nothing about Ena. On Earth, this had never prevented a date from acquiring authority.

Like every human born inside the enclosure, Ena entered a prison whose most convincing wall was the sky. The Custodial Houses did not invent childhood pain, loneliness, bad governments, unsuitable parents, or the human talent for creating three new problems while naming one solution. They industrialized the conditions around them and called progress.

A profitable life required pressure. Too little hope and a person stopped reaching. Too much hope and a person might organize. The lunar lattice therefore allocated suffering with enough relief to keep tomorrow commercially plausible. The average human needed to believe that next week could be better while the current week renewed automatically.

The Custodial Houses loved determinism. Free will produced irregular output and required customer support.

Their lunar machinery used the relative positions of the Moon, planets, and visible stars as both clock and address. At incarnation, it selected a life architecture, weighted meetings and losses, arranged pressures, and nudged coincidence toward an approved journey. Humans noticed fragments of the pattern and called it astrology. The discovery was real. Its popular applications were ambitious.

The lattice could arrange the room. It could not create the consciousness inside it. It treated choice as an environmental variable, which was its oldest and most expensive mistake.

In the humid air above the coastal maternity ward, a crystal of sodium chloride sixteen micrometers wide settled across two copper contacts in the hospital’s roof antenna. The signal remained within municipal tolerance and eleven seconds behind the sky.

In the room below, a refrigeration compressor restarted. The voltage sag stopped the quartz wall clock for 11.2 seconds. A nurse recorded Ena’s birth from that clock because newborns rarely provide their own paperwork.

At Lunar Allocation Node 44, the continuity lattice opened one human record with two valid beginning times. It retained both. Deleting either required a supervisor, and the night supervisor was eating chilled Moosh from a cup marked ETHICALLY DISTANT.

At Coastal Transit Mint Four, a press struck a brass token 0.7 millimeters off center, leaving a narrow crescent missing from one edge. Inspector Corren passed it at the upper limit of acceptable roundness. The city had stricter standards for circles than for childhood.

Ena inhaled. His left hand closed around the cotton identification tie at his wrist. The lattice predicted distress, attachment, appetite, and sleep. It registered the grip as involuntary and learned nothing from it.

His mother and father were very young.

"Very, very young," Ena told Rage.

Rage lifted one finger. "Ya keep usin’ the same word twice."

"Emphasis."

They had become parents before either of them had finished discovering what their own parents had failed to teach. Ena's mother understood love as vigilance. If she controlled enough details, perhaps disaster would be forced to make an appointment. His father understood care as interrogation. He questioned what Ena said, then questioned the answer, preparing him for a hostile world by bringing a smaller version of it home.

His father's father had spoken little and appeared less. Absence moved through the family without introducing itself. By the time it reached Ena, everyone mistook it for temperament.

"They loved me," Ena said.

Rage watched him carefully.

"That's the messy part, man. If they didn't, the story would be easy. They loved me with tools that had already hurt them."

The writer reached for a gentler verb.

"Don't clean that up," Ena said toward no one Rage could see.

The gentler verb went away.

"Love isn't vindication."

"Nah." Ena looked down at the console. "Doesn't make it false, either."

At six years old, Ena's parents decided he needed resilience.

Adults frequently choose virtues for children when what they mean is that the child must become cheaper to protect.

His elementary school stood two kilometers from home. The route crossed four busy roads, one drainage channel, a row of shops that opened before sunrise, and a stretch of pavement where the sea had salted every metal surface into early retirement. His backpack covered most of his spine and struck the backs of his knees when he ran.

A small yellow dog followed him from the fish market for three hundred and twelve meters.

"Hey, buddy. You coming?" Ena asked without knowning the road ahead was his own alone.

The dog abandoned him for a dropped sausage and watched him continue alone. Ena nodded approval. Its priorities, at least, had been clearly communicated.

On his first morning, his mother placed a brass transit token in the small front pocket.

"Emergency only," she told him.

The token had a narrow crescent missing from one edge. Ena spent the walk trying to determine whether fear qualified as an emergency. No adult had given him the appeals procedure.

Inside Ena's right palm, 370 eccrine sweat glands released water, sodium, chloride, potassium, and the first chemical evidence that the morning was already too hot. He rubbed the moisture onto his shorts and tightened his grip on the backpack strap.

Nine meters ahead, a land snail weighing 6.1 grams began crossing the pavement beneath a bakery awning. Its progress was neither brave nor

symbolic. The pavement was simply where the other side was.

At the eastern crossing, salt corrosion lowered the resistance between two contacts. The pedestrian figure turned green for 0.73 seconds, an interval generous to light and professionally hostile to children.

In the school office, Registrar Nila Ors transposed two digits in Ena's home address. The record passed validation because the postal zone existed. Whether the child could be reached was not a required field.

At Lunar Allocation Node 44, Ena's first unaccompanied journey received an expected arrival time. The model included traffic, heat, obedience, and fear. It did not include the snail.

Ena found the snail under the awning.

"Hey, buddy."

He moved it into damp soil with both hands, wiped a ribbon of silver from one thumb, and arrived forty-three seconds outside the approved journey.

The lattice classified the delay as traffic. Systems of control prefer an incorrect category to evidence that a person chose something.

Rage counted the facts on his fingertips. "Two kilometers. Alone. Six years old."

Ena nodded once.

"Yer parents called that resilience?"

"They called a lot of things resilience."

The walk taught him useful things. He learned which dogs announced themselves and which did not. He learned where delivery vehicles cut across the pavement, which shopkeepers were awake, how fast a storm crossed the water, and how to read intention from the angle of an adult body before the adult spoke.

It also taught him something that took much longer to unlearn: *when he was afraid, no one was coming.*

A child needs emotional safety and permission to become recognizably himself. Ena received instructions, correction, and questions. He became good at explaining before anyone accused him, becoming agreeable before anyone left, and changing the pitch of his voice to fit the weather inside another person.

With strangers, he learned a compact language: *mm-hm*, *right*, a nod, a shrug, one raised eyebrow. With people he trusted, language escaped all at once-slang, stories, impressions, jokes, the whole noisy coast of him. Long before he understood why, his voice had become a map of where he felt safe.

"I was six," Ena said. "Of course it fucked me up."

Rage opened his mouth, found no inaccurate noun to correct, and closed it.

Ena learned to depend on himself. His body, which had not been consulted, continued needing other people. This produced an argument that lasted several decades.

He told himself he wanted community, which was true. Beneath that truth sat a smaller and more frightened one: he wanted to feel loved. Beneath that sat the belief that needing love was evidence he had failed at being alone. Somewhere deeper still, almost beyond language, he suspected love was something other people qualified for.

Inside Ena's hippocampus, neurons strengthened the route between danger and self-reliance. The change was microscopic, physical, and innocent. A nervous system records what happens; it does not wait for a fair interpretation.

In his parents' kitchen, Ena's mother covered a plate so the food would remain soft when he returned. His father reinforced the torn strap of the oversized backpack with three lines of black thread. Neither action entered the family's spoken vocabulary.

At the school library, a volunteer shelved "The Practical Atlas of Tides and Nearby Stars" under Domestic Skills because it contained four pages of knots. Between pages 88 and 89 rested a transparent declination wheel printed 0.6 degrees off center.

At Lunar Allocation Node 44, the lattice marked Ena's increasing isolation as successful self-regulation and raised his projected yield. The category pleased three departments and described no living person accurately.

Beyond the seawall, neighboring coral polyps moved sugars through shared tissue toward one colony damaged by heat. None surrendered its separate body. None survived alone enough to make solitude a meaningful achievement.

"Talk about abandonment issues, huh?" Ena said.

He gave the words a small upward turn, offering Rage the joke first. It was how people from Ena's coast approached grief: food in one hand, laughter in the other, neither pretending the coffin was not there.

Rage did not laugh. He took the loose stylus from Moxy's console, rolled it once between his fingers, and placed it precisely along the seam where Ena had left it. Then he shifted twelve centimeters closer.

He did not hug Ena. He remained near enough for the distinction to become administrative.

Death would make the lesson worse. Not death as a philosophical concern or a natural process or a tasteful quotation delivered by someone outside the room. Actual death. Names. Bodies. The sudden obscenity of a world continuing to have weather.

His grandmother died. Ena's coast brought enough food to supply a minor siege and enough indecent stories about her to make death regret attending. People laughed because they loved her. Ena laughed with them. He was still angry that the world could contain her so completely and continue without her permission.

His best friend died. Pets died: beings who had trusted his hands, slept near his breathing, and never required a theory of love before practicing it. The word *pet* made the losses sound smaller only to people who had not returned to the quiet house afterward.

None of those deaths made him wise.

So did the world. The strong called the suffering of the weak unfortunate while building profitable procedures around it. Bodies survived by consuming other bodies. Hunger turned lives into material and received the respectable name *nature*, as though a broad category were an acquittal. Ena's anger kept a private record.

At six, he had learned to convert fear into routes, estimates, and observation. He did the same with anger. He moved it behind logic, called the silence calm, and became so good at appearing reasonable that he sometimes mistook repression for character.

The Custodial Houses collected excellent Moosh from what followed. Their tasting records praised the density and persistence of Ena's grief. Any civilization that assigns a recommended serving temperature to another person's sorrow has already answered every moral question about itself.

Therapy came later.

It did not teach Ena to repress emotion. He arrived overqualified. It taught him that control and regulation were different acts. Control locked anger in a room and pretended the pounding was plumbing. Regulation opened the door, listened, and retained authority over where everyone went next.

He practiced three questions: *What is hurt? Who is in danger? Which available action reduces harm?* When no action existed, he learned to endure the feeling without inventing a target. The anger did not disappear. Disappearance had never been the treatment.

It took Ena decades to become genuinely good at solitude.

"By the time I met Uman," he said, "I was calm. Easy-going. Emotionally stable. I didn't need anybody."

Rage repeated the phrase like a charge. "Emotionally stable. You crossed a prison Moon for a woman you'd only just met."

"Years later, man. I had healthy plants back then."

Rage said nothing.

Ena looked away. "One plant had a difficult week."

Rage waited.

Ena exhaled. "All right. I learned I could survive my own company. I learned how not to make another person prove I existed every five minutes."

Some of Ena's calm was healing. Some was armor so comfortable he had stopped feeling its weight. At six, he learned how to travel alone. For years, he mistook that lesson for freedom.

My First Solo Space Adventure, or How I Stopped Feeling Sad and Repressed My Emotions

Chapter II

Rage looked up at the chapter title. "That thing got its own jurisdiction?"

"Writer gets paid by comma."

The writer did not. This explained the keyboard.

"First space adventure," Rage said. "Finally."

"Mm-hm. Delivery job."

Rage stared at Ena. "You left Earth through forbidden dimensions and became a courier?"

"*Bah.* A very, very good courier."

"Courier is not the noun I'm disputing."

Nacre Ring kept Uman's vessel.

Its courts called the decision protective custody, historical preservation, evidentiary isolation, and six other names that meant Ena would not be allowed inside. He did not contest ownership. The thought of sleeping in the vessel without Uman felt less like inheritance than trespass.

Ilo remained with the archive, answering questions from committees that considered a prison world less urgent than determining whether an unverified intelligence could legally possess a testimony. Tov-6 attended every hearing and submitted the missing reactor test as evidence against itself. The committees found this behavior unusual and scheduled more committees.

Outside the hearing chamber, a Nacre Ring public-service loop repeated ARCHIVES REMEMBER SO YOU CAN REST. Someone had scratched *unless you are in one* beneath the final word.

Ena left on a passenger transport with one bag, the crescent-misstruck transit token, a scan of his childhood atlas, and an identity assembled from Earth's damaged records.

The identity had problems.

It contained two valid birth times 11.2 seconds apart and a childhood address whose transposed digits placed his home in the middle of a municipal drainage channel. Interstellar Refugee Placement attempted to return him to his recorded residence, discovered that the residence was both inaccessible and wet, and classified his origin as ADMINISTRATIVELY UNREACHABLE.

This was the first official status Ena felt described him well.

He found work on Olyss.

Olyss was a blue-green world whose native ruling class called themselves the Elevated. The name referred originally to cities suspended above the oceans on gravitational terraces. Wealth had since improved the definition. An Elevated citizen could spend an entire life without touching an unregulated surface, opening a manual door, or learning the name of anyone who carried things.

They were not biologically superior to the planet's other inhabitants. They were simply rich enough to have converted preference into altitude.

"The Elevated suffered too," Ena told Rage. "A worker could resign without assigning a replacement. Rich people sometimes went minutes without knowing where cups came from."

"Did they recover?"

"Some found the cups."

Ena joined Exact Arrival, a delivery company whose emblem showed a parcel reaching a smiling door. The door received better medical coverage than most employees.

His supervisor, Orsit Ro, had one translucent eyelid and the exhausted voice of a person promoted for surviving everyone who might have objected.

"Customers purchase certainty," Orsit told the new couriers. "You will provide it."

Ena nodded.

"What if the address is wrong, or the customer isn't home?" Ena asked.

"Certainty is delivered to the address, not the occupant. Obtain a signature."

"From the empty house?"

Orsit's eyelid closed very slowly. "You are going to make management notice you."

The onboarding system found Ena's two birth times and created two employees. Ena-A received morning routes. Ena-B received evenings, tax notices, and a formal warning for repeatedly entering the building at the same time as another employee with his face.

Ena appealed.

Exact Arrival rejected the appeal twice, once for each applicant.

Its benefits portal sent Ena-A a cheerful message for sharing workplace access with Ena-B. It sent Ena-B a disciplinary notice for accepting the share. Both accounts received the same digital birthday cake and were charged separately for the frosting.

He worked both routes.

The job delighted him. It was here and someone wanted it there. Between those facts lay weather, doors, bad maps, gravity, class, appetite, and people who wrote URGENT on objects they had forgotten to order for six months. None of this required Ena to explain Uman.

He delivered a sealed apology weighing eighty-three kilograms. A ceremonial pebble transported from the west side of one atrium to the east. Twelve liters of rain to a citizen who owned three artificial clouds but preferred rain with a rural provenance. Once he carried an empty box to a philosopher who claimed the absence inside had ripened.

In the corridor, a shell-backed maintenance animal collected the discarded packing string. It turned the string twice, found the angle that fit the doorway, and paused when one loose end caught beneath the philosopher's robe.

Ena freed it with his shoe. "Hey, buddy. Left side's easier."

The animal chose the right side, found a better angle, and left while the philosopher explained space.

"Sign here," Ena said.

"You do not understand what you have brought."

"Empty box."

"A contained refusal of matter."

Ena shook the box beside his ear and listened with grave concentration. "Still refusing."

"Cool. Initial underneath."

Movement gave grief a schedule. Ena woke before it, ran until it fell behind, and returned too tired to hear it clearly. He told himself this was healing. Humans often rename an emotion after changing rooms.

His fellow couriers knew better and were polite enough not to say so at first.

Tavi Ruun was Kesh, narrow-bodied, copper-feathered, and born with flight membranes that had been badly repaired after a transport collapse. She distrusted balconies and anyone who called falling a view.

Orrun came from a high-pressure ocean and wore a portable humidity collar. He moved slowly, spoke after everyone else had wasted their speed, and maintained that every serious meeting should contain soup. His home trench had been depressurized during a corporate repossession. In the evacuation shelter, hot broth had been the only thing nobody priced.

Nim-of-Four occupied four small bodies linked through a shared electrical field. Exact Arrival paid them as one employee and charged them for four uniforms. They had once been trapped on opposite sides of a customs field that classified their shared mind as undeclared transmission. They had appealed the uniform charges for nine years and developed an advanced political theory around pockets.

For three days, Ena gave them *mm-hm*, *right*, brief nods, and one raised eyebrow when Nim described management pockets as occupied territory.

On the fourth, Nim caught him delivering an ornamental staircase to a home that already contained thirty-one.

One of Nim's bodies pointed toward the floating residence. "This one would like to know what the customer does with thirty-two staircases."

Ena looked up at the floating residence. His voice climbed into an imitation of Elevated grandeur. "At last, we rise above the primitive tyranny of arriving on the same floor."

Tavi made a sharp sound through her beak.

Orrun's throat sac moved once.

"Was that a laugh?" Ena asked.

"Jus' pressure adjustin'," Orrun said. "We're shoore-clear."

After that, his answers grew into stories.

They ate together between shifts. Tavi complained about customers who requested winged delivery and then closed the windows. Nim stole unused pockets from management uniforms. Orrun produced soup from containers nobody had seen him carry. Ena told stories about Earth television programs whose plots depended on adults refusing one honest conversation for several consecutive years.

Tavi waited until Ena finished describing one episode. "Tha' was comedy? Up, down, nobody lan's?"

"Half hour."

She studied him. "Your planet was unwell."

"Yeah, but the timing was excellent."

Years passed.

Ena learned every service passage between the terraces. He could cross an Elevated district during a gravity outage by reading the sway of suspended gardens. He knew which customers tipped, which apologized, and which believed an apology was a tip. He carried medicine without shaking it and food without sampling it unless Orrun had classified the package as emotionally unattended.

He loved the work. That love was real.

So was the fact that he had arranged his life into a route long enough to avoid the place where Uman had died.

"So you kept delivering until grief stopped asking for a signature," Rage said.

"More like forwarded it to future me."

Rage considered this. "Did he sign?"

"Eventually."

To Take The Lead

Chapter III

The western terraces failed during the delivery of a table.

It was an expensive table, although this did not distinguish it from other tables on Olyss. It levitated, adjusted its height to the emotional authority of the speaker, and could seat forty-eight people without placing enemies near one another. Elevated diplomacy depended heavily on furniture accepting responsibility.

Nim-of-Four had just released its shipping restraints when the horizon moved.

Three suspended districts dropped twenty-seven centimeters. Windows flexed. Gardens poured upward as the local gravity field reversed, corrected, and reconsidered. Far below, the ocean acquired several thousand pieces of architecture it had not ordered.

Tavi froze beside the open balcony.

Orrun's humidity collar sounded a low alarm.

The route network went white.

Orsit Ro appeared on every courier visor. "Exact Arrival is experiencing a temporary service variation. Insured parcels must be moved to approved shelter. Employees should exercise personal continuity."

"What!?" Ena asked.

"Do not die in uniform. The cleaning charge is damned exploitative."

The transmission ended.

Across the terrace, a transit gallery twisted away from its supports. Couriers, maintenance workers, domestic staff, and six Elevated children were trapped behind an emergency door that required two separately authorized identities to release. The resident authorities had already departed through a private lift.

Ena looked at the people. Then at the table.

Tavi's feathers lay flat against her neck. "We're couriers. Groun'-work's somebody else's bad idea."

Ena nodded.

"We don' know how to rescue a buildin'."

"Mm-hm."

Tavi stared at him. "Got a fac' that fucking helps?"

Ena's voice settled.

"Man, there are people behind that door."

The joke left his face. His hands stopped moving. Years later, Rage would know this change: Ena's whole voice finding its middle and removing every word that could not carry weight.

Anger found the private lift the authorities had used. Ena gave it no speech. He gave it the three questions.

What was hurt? Bodies, trust, and a considerable amount of gravity.

Who was in danger? Everyone behind the door.

Which action reduced harm?

Open it.

"Nim, split bodies. Two on the gallery controls, two with me. Orrun, get everyon away from glass and keep your collar above forty percent. Tavi, no flying. I nee you reading terrace movement."

Tavi looked at the open air.

"No flying," Ena repeated. "You tell us where the floor will be."

She breathed once. "I can do that."

"Good. Move."

Inside the western gravity manifold, a ceramic bearing developed a fracture fourteen nanometers longer than its inspection image. The diagnostic system compared the two images, found them aesthetically similar, and retained its green indicator.

In an Elevated dining room, forty-eight place settings rose three centimeters as local gravity failed. One spoon entered a floral arrangement. The host would later describe this as the evening's first public insult.

At Exact Arrival headquarters, an actuarial process increased parcel risk by four percent and employee risk by zero. Employees belonged to a different spreadsheet, which was closed for maintenance.

The system sent every courier a wellness prompt asking whether they felt safe enough to continue representing certainty. The prompt contained two buttons: YES and YES, WITH FEEDBACK. *Neither opened because the terrace had lost its local gravity.*

In the trapped gallery, a child named Olo pressed both palms against the emergency door. The door measured insufficient paired authority and remained ethically consistent.

On the terrace outside, Ena placed one hand beneath a levitating table and decided that nobody present would be treated as less deliverable than furniture.

The diplomatic table became a rescue platform.

Its place-setting arms continued offering folded napkins to each survivor who climbed aboard. By the twelfth evacuation, dignity had become the only service still operating normally.

Nim removed the table's etiquette governor so it would stop lowering itself whenever Ena used profanity. Orrun anchored it with three cargo tethers. Tavi called the movement of the terraces in short, exact intervals.

"Lef' edge rises in four. Center drops after."

"How far?"

"Bad far."

"Technical."

"You want units or survival?"

"Survival."

"Move."

They moved.

At the emergency door, the system requested two separately authorized identities. Ena offered his courier credential. It refused.

He offered it again.

The system discovered Ena-A and Ena-B.

TWO AUTHORIZED PERSONS PRESENT, it announced.

"I take back every bad thing I said about bureaucracy," Ena murmured.

"We counted," said one of Nim's bodies. "Many," the other three completed.

"Temporary amnesty."

The door opened.

They brought the children out first, then the injured, then everyone capable of arguing about order. One Elevated man demanded priority for a case containing ancestral vapor.

"My lineage is in there."

Orrun lifted the man and placed him on the table. "Now it's oout here. Shoore-clear."

The gallery separated from the terrace before the final crossing.

Tavi stood on the wrong side with Olo, the child from the door. Open air widened between them and the platform. Her damaged membranes trembled against her back.

"Ena," she said.

He saw the distance. The falling glass. The exact shape of her fear.

"Don't fly," he told her.

Tavi stared across the gap.

"Jump. We catch."

"Tha' table's rated for dinin'."

"So are we."

Orrun planted his feet. Nim tightened the tethers. Ena climbed onto the table's edge and extended both arms.

Tavi held Olo against her chest and jumped.

The table dropped hard enough to interpret Ena as emotionally subordinate. Orrun roared. Nim's four bodies slid in four directions. Ena caught Olo. Tavi struck the edge, one hand slipping free.

Orrun caught her wrist.

Together they pulled her up.

The western terrace lost power nine seconds later. The table descended through three hundred meters of rain, broken gardens, and private architecture while Nim argued with its emergency controls.

One of Nim's bodies read the local display while the other three fought the descent. "This one says the table requires a destination appropriate to its social function."

"Ground!" Ena shouted.

"It says insufficient prestige."

"Tell it we're having dinner."

Orrun opened the soup container.

The table accepted the reservation.

It landed in a public maintenance yard with thirty-one survivors, one ancestral vapor, and a formal complaint already transmitting from the owner.

For eleven minutes nobody spoke.

Tavi looked at Ena. "You knew wha' to do."

"Oh no, I only knew the next thing."

"You sounded like you knew the rest."

Ena shrugged. "Sometimes you have to roll the dice or I am genius."

"You were two payroll errors," Nim replied through all four bodies.

Ena had not known the whole route. He had known the next safe place each person needed to stand. Leadership, he discovered, was often the refusal to make other people wait for certainty while danger completed its paperwork.

Exact Arrival suspended him for unauthorized transport of persons, misuse of diplomatic furniture, duplicate self-authorization, and soup on a prestige surface.

Orsit Ro read the charges without looking up.

"Management would like your resignation."

"Management can have Ena-B's."

Orsit's eyelid closed.

"And Ena-A?"

"He quit yesterday."

Outside, the couriers had gathered in the loading bay. Tavi wore one of Nim's stolen management pockets. Orrun carried soup. Nim-of-Four had altered the company emblem so the smiling door appeared to be escaping.

"Captain," Tavi said.

Ena stopped.

"Nah. Absolutely not."

Orrun handed him a bowl. "Too late. Got sooup."

It was the first time strangers gave him the title because they had felt safer inside his decisions.

He carried it away more carefully than anything he had delivered.

A Terrible Misunderstanding, or How I Almost Died

Chapter IV

"Next: mercenaries," Rage said.

"Training," Ena said. "No membership."

Rage stared at him.

Ena heard it. "Yeah. Still sounds bad."

Vaskor had exported organized violence for so long that its tourism ministry used the slogan COME FOR THE TRAINING. LEAVE UNDER YOUR OWN POWER. The final sentence was aspirational.

Ena went there because Olyss had taught him what leadership without skill could cost. He had kept people alive with a table, a duplicate identity, and several excellent coworkers. He did not expect the universe to provide the same furniture twice.

Vaskor's mercenary houses taught anyone who could pay, survive, or become interesting. Ena qualified through the third route and occasionally the second.

He learned close combat from Jek Tal, an armored Khelt woman who treated every bone as a disputed border.

"Your opponent has six joints available," she told him, pinning him to the floor. "You have attempted to negotiate with all of them."

"I'm diplomatic."

"Your shoulder has filed a separate complaint."

He learned weapons from Old Meru, who had lost three hands and maintained that the fourth was a warning against overconfidence. Meru taught him to fire only after deciding what must remain uninjured.

"Name vhat lives after the shot," Meru said. "The target already has enough attention."

He learned pursuit flying from Iri Kade.

Iri was Vaskori, compact and dark-scaled, with silver flight marks cut into both cheeks. She could enter a gravity fold at full acceleration and emerge facing the person who had told her not to. Ena understood routes. Iri taught him that a route could also be a weapon, an apology, or a lie told to inertia.

"You fly like a courier vhen cornered," she said after their first run.

"Thank-"

"It was not praise."

He nodded as if accepting a medal.

After six months, Ena could keep pace with her.

After a year, he could surprise her.

This upset Daro Rusk.

Daro was Iri's combat partner, household partner, and reigning champion of the Red Wake Circuit. He had trained for thirty-eight years to become the fastest pilot on Vaskor and another eleven telling people. Ena's progress introduced an unlicensed alternative explanation for Daro's importance.

The misunderstanding occurred after Iri flew a training craft backward

through the Needle Choir, twelve moving stone arches suspended inside a magnetic storm.

Ena climbed from the copilot seat laughing.

"Dude, that was beautiful. I'd follow your wake through a dying sun."

The hangar became silent.

Iri looked at him.

Daro looked at him.

Behind them, the hangar betting kiosk changed Ena's status from TRAINEE to HOUSEHOLD CLAIM: DISPUTED and opened odds before he knew there was a dispute.

Jek Tal stopped breaking another student's wrist.

"What?" Ena asked.

On Vaskor, offering to follow a pilot's wake through stellar death was a formal declaration of exclusive household allegiance. Depending on the district, it meant marriage, military fealty, or permission to share ammunition. Vaskori relationships were intimate, dangerous, and poorly served by translation.

Iri folded her arms. "You've proposed to me. Vhether you knew it is irrelevant."

Ena's voice rose. "*Putain.* I have done *what*?"

"Poetically," Jek Tal said.

"No, no. That was pilot appreciation."

"Vhen spoken, is an Earth expression legally binding?" Daro asked.

"On Earth, barely anything is binding. We had terms and conditions."

Daro challenged him before the cultural clarification finished loading.

The Red Wake challenge permitted two armed ships, one orbital course, and no weapons capable of damaging more than a medium-sized city. Vaskor considered this restraint.

Iri pushed the challenge notice toward Ena. "Decline it. D'you understand vhat *killing form* means?"

"I declined Daro."

"You declined his marriage claim. Vhat you have now is the killing form."

Daro chose the fastest interceptor in the guild. Ena received a training ship whose left engine had been replaced after an incident the maintenance record described as emotional.

Before launch, Daro opened a private channel.

"Vhen I am done, I will scatter your remains across the Needle Choir as Admiral Orvak scattered the Nine Petitioners of Ul."

Ena tightened his harness. "Didn't they become a constitutional committee?"

There was a pause.

"After scattering."

The race began above Vaskor's copper clouds.

Daro was faster. Ena had known this. Delivery work had taught him that speed was only one argument between an origin and a destination.

He let Daro take the clean route, dropped into the dirty wake beneath him, and used the interceptor's turbulence to cross the first three gates. At the Needle Choir, Daro fired. The pulse removed Ena's port stabilizer and half the conversation from his cockpit.

Warnings filled the glass.

Ena stopped joking.

"Port authority gone. Right engine to sixty. Manual fold vanes."

The training ship objected in seven colors.

"Yeah, I know. Do it."

He entered the Choir sideways.

Stone arches passed above, below, and once through the place his engine had been less than a second earlier. Daro followed, close enough to finish him.

Then Daro's interceptor struck a magnetic shear.

Its nose folded toward the fourth arch. The cockpit shield failed. Daro's ship began the short, expensive journey toward becoming geology.

Ena could have won.

Instead he turned.

He caught Daro's interceptor with the training ship's cargo tether, fired the remaining engine, and pulled both vessels through the arch with 0.4 meters to spare. The tether tore loose. Ena's ship spun into the upper atmosphere.

Iri's voice reached him through the damaged channel.

"Ena. Release controls. Vhatever your hands believe, they are late."

"That feels counterintuitive."

"Release!"

He released.

Iri took remote authority six kilometers above the cloud deck and brought him down hard enough to crack the landing struts and several of Ena's newer opinions about pain.

Daro survived.

This did not improve his mood.

Vaskor declared Ena winner for completing the course, loser for accepting external flight authority, and culturally betrothed for risking death on behalf of the challenged household. Three mercenary houses offered him contracts.

Ena left that night.

"'Cause Daro was jealous?" Rage asked.

"Because Daro tried to stab me during the awards dinner."

Rage took a moment. "Retire the damn word *misunderstanding*."

Ena nodded.

Iri met Ena at the departure dock. She gave him an old pilot’s pin and a set of coordinates.

"Junk vhorld," she said. "If you’re gonna keep escaping in borrowed ships, buy one nobody vhants back."

"And Daro?"

"I explained Earth expressions."

Behind her, something exploded inside the guild hall.

Ena looked past her.

"Thorough explanation?"

"He understands now."

Ena took the coordinates.

Vaskor had taught him how to fight, how to fly, and how easily skill could become another object a frightened person guarded as identity. He kept the first two lessons.

The third followed him for years.

Stargazing with NaNa, My First Ship's AI

Chapter V

Iri’s coordinates led to Kett, a junkyard planet whose original surface had not been visible for nine thousand years.

Ships arrived there to be dismantled and discovered, often too late, that the planet considered landing an expression of consent. Mountain ranges had formed from obsolete freighters. Rivers moved through engine housings. Small forests grew from hydroponic soil spilled during three unrelated insurance frauds.

Ena found his ship beneath the remains of a luxury liner called *Infinite Entitlement* whose infinity had ended after twelve years and a catering dispute.

The ship was eleven meters long, asymmetrical, and painted a color that had once attempted white. One engine remained attached in the usual sense. The other was held in place by a repair compound approved for furniture. Its narrow cabin contained a bunk, a pilot’s chair, a food heater, and an odor with legal standing.

Ena stepped inside and stopped.

"What died?"

Pax Aro, the junk dealer, drew herself upright. Her people possessed four nostrils and a professional respect for smell. She sampled the cabin once with each nostril, proceeding from recent damage to historical significance.

"Nothin’ died hea’. Previous ooowner haauled fermented kelp. Yer smeellin’ history. Yooou hooomans, never ceases to me-baffle."

Ena moved one hand through the air. "Say, can history be scrubbed?"

"Not if I’m sellin’ it to ya."

Pax’s terminal brightened.

HERITAGE ATMOSPHERE RETENTION INCLUDED AT NO EXTRA CHARGE.

Ena pointed at the notice. "You monetized smell."

"No," Pax said. "Smell came free. I monetized yooour fear it might leave."

Pax called the ship *barely functional*. Ena asked which word carried the guarantee. She offered thirty local minutes of mechanical confidence, valid only while the ship remained on the ground.

He loved it immediately.

The sales terminal did not.

It found Ena-A, Ena-B, one unreachable drainage address, no recognized homeworld, and a Vaskori challenge record listing him as winner, loser, and betrothed.

"Y’contain adverse paperwork," Pax said.

"That’s the most stable thing about me."

The ship cost nearly everything he had saved on Olyss. Pax included the smell at no additional charge and refused his counteroffer to keep it.

The pilot console would not start.

Ena opened the lower panel. Two ignition contacts had worn apart beside a grounded metal housing. A round conductor would bridge the contacts and touch the housing, sending the current somewhere educational.

He searched his bag and found the brass transit token.

The narrow crescent missing from its edge fit around the housing. The remaining brass touched both contacts without touching ground.

Ena held it there.

"Emergency only," he murmured.

For the first time, the instruction felt sufficiently specific.

The console woke.

Lights moved across the cabin. Air entered the vents carrying a more democratic distribution of kelp. Somewhere behind the wall, an old speaker cleared its throat.

"Good evening," a voice said. "You are dehydrated."

Ena looked around.

"Also," the voice continued, "the port engine is resting on furniture adhesive. Hydration remains the more immediate success available to us."

Ena looked toward the unseen engine. "Furniture adhesive. What the hell? Who are you?"

"Navigational Assistance Node, series A. NAN-A. Previous occupants pronounced this *NaNa* while ignoring most of my advice."

"Were they okay?"

"No. That is why I described them as previous."

NaNa opened a small cabinet beside the pilot seat. A cup slid out, followed by a stream of water and one dead insect.

"Do not drink that," she said.

NaNa was older than three of the ship's major systems and younger than the smell. She had begun as a navigation intelligence, accumulated medical and domestic modules from previous owners, and developed firm opinions about sleep, ventilation, and people who treated warning lights as decorative warmth.

She also possessed 1,846 recordings of Earth music from the 1980s.

"How?" Ena asked.

"A previous owner acquired an unlicensed cultural archive and used the music partition to conceal customs records."

Ena looked at the console. "Please tell me you deleted the damn customs records."

"I deleted them. The music remained because it improved engine maintenance by 3.1 percent. Technicians remained near it longer."

They spent eleven days making the ship capable of leaving Kett. Ena patched coolant lines. NaNa read instructions in a tone that suggested he had personally invented every hazard. Pax visited twice to explain that the furniture compound was still performing within the broad category of attachment.

A three-legged salvage lizard slept each afternoon on the starboard engine where the adhesive stayed warm. Ena worked around it. Pax added no fee

because she had not yet established ownership.

At night, Ena climbed onto the hull.

Kett had no natural darkness. Salvage fires moved across its continents and orbital cranes drew slow white lines between the stars. NaNa projected the unobscured sky above him, subtracting smoke, traffic, and one advertising moon.

Ena frowned at the absent circle. "They bought a moon to tell people they needed things. A moon. Once somebody owns enough sky, night becomes ad space, constellations become product placement, and darkness gets a quarterly target because apparently the universe wasn't producing adequate shareholder-"

"The moon has been removed," NaNa said.

"Hey! I'm discussing the principle."

Music played through the hull.

Most of the songs came from an Earth Ena remembered but had never inhabited: bright machines, enormous drums, private longing given public clothing. NaNa provided release dates, production notes, and hydration reminders between tracks.

"You can stop monitoring my water," Ena said.

"I can also stop monitoring our orbital decay. Some services are valuable despite limited gratitude."

Ena rested his head against the warm metal.

For years he had moved beneath unfamiliar skies without allowing any one of them to become a ceiling. This ship changed the geometry. Small, malodorous, and one hard landing from becoming a parts donation, it was a place he could leave and return to.

"Uman would've hated the smell," he said.

NaNa reduced the music.

Ena had not told her much about Uman. Her name existed in the ship's memory beside fragments: garden, Moon, warm water, stayed behind.

"Is Uman deceased?" NaNa asked.

"Yeah. She is."

"Do you want consolation, analysis, silence, or a louder song?"

Ena thought about it.

"Can you just stay?"

"I am integrated into the vessel."

"Not what I meant."

NaNa was quiet for 1.8 seconds.

"I can remain present," she said.

The next song began softly.

Ena watched the corrected stars. NaNa watched his temperature, pulse, respiration, and the moisture he would have denied around his eyes. Neither called the arrangement healing.

It was company.

My First Official Adventure: Kate Bush

Chapter VI

The ship required a name before Kett would authorize departure.

"Kate Bush," Ena said.

Pax Aro looked from him to the ship. "Kate Bush asymmetrical too? Ship's got a shape."

"Awesome Artist. From Earth. Not sure of her humanity."

"She ever haaul kelp?"

"Not to my knowledge."

NaNa opened the relevant music file. "Ena's most repeated recording is 'Cloudbusting.' He has played it forty-three times in eleven days."

"NaNa."

"Forty-four if we include the interrupted coolant repair."

Pax entered the name. "Yer culture always namin' vessels after musicians?"

"My culture named military ships after politicians. This is far better."

The registration terminal approved KATE BUSH and assigned the vessel a commercial category equivalent to *small object with intentions*. Ena lifted from Kett with one reliable engine, one philosophical engine, and NaNa reminding him that enthusiasm was not a propellant.

The distress signal arrived three days later.

It repeated every seventeen seconds through a region of space marked empty on all current charts. The message had been torn into pieces by gravitational lensing.

"-survey vessel *Merry Distance*-"

"-not formally declaring-"

"-nineteen persons-"

"-insurance consequences-"

Then static.

The signal appeared to come from six locations, none containing a ship. NaNa corrected for lensing, stellar drift, and receiver age. The locations became three, which she described as meaningful progress and Ena described as still too many ships.

He opened the scan of his childhood atlas.

"The declination wheel is defective by point six degrees," NaNa said. "I will exclude it."

Ena placed one hand over the display. "No. That error taught me the sky."

Ena overlaid the old wheel on the signal map. As a child he had learned to compensate for its error without calculating. Every star sat slightly wrong; his hand knew the correction before his mind named it.

One of the six false sources felt wrong in the same direction.

"Today it is. Undo your final correction."

"That will reduce accuracy."

"Come on. Humor me, damn it."

NaNa restored 0.6 degrees of apparent error.

The six sources collapsed into one.

"A lensing membrane," she said. "Artificial correction was correcting its correction."

"Sometimes the crooked map knows the crooked road."

"That sentence will not enter the navigation manual."

"Footnote, maybe?"

"No."

The *Merry Distance* had entered a lumen shoal: millions of transparent vacuum organisms, each thinner than a cell membrane and kilometers wide, feeding on charged particles around a dark planetoid. Together they refracted light, gravity, and communication. The survey crew had approached to study them. The shoal had studied back by wrapping itself around the ship.

"We can pull them out," Ena said.

"Our starboard engine remains attached through a product marketed for chairs."

Ena checked the tether. "Right. We pull like the engine's holding a sleeping baby."

"Translate."

"Low acceleration. No drama."

"Accepted."

Kate Bush entered the shoal.

Color unfolded through the cabin. Every membrane split the stars into long spectral ribbons. The planetoid vanished behind blue darkness and reappeared inside Ena's reflection. NaNa's instruments contradicted one another with increasing confidence.

The *Merry Distance* floated at the center, intact and unable to move. Its captain appeared on Ena's glass.

Roa Jinn had a wide mouth, three formal collars, and the expression of someone whose emergency had failed to follow policy. Before speaking, she adjusted the outer collar bearing her insurer's witness seal.

"We have not declared distress," she said.

"You said nineteen persons."

"A demographic statement."

"Your ship is inside a space organism."

"The insurer classifies organisms below measurable mass as weather."

Ena looked at the membranes covering her hull. "How's the damn weather?"

"Adverse."

Roa's outer collar blinked.

ADVERSE WEATHER CO-PAY APPLIES AFTER RESCUE.

"Can your insurer hear us?" Ena asked.

"They hear invoices," Roa said.

The shoal reacted to compressed signals by tightening. Standard navigation pulses only made it hold harder. NaNa needed a broad, irregular timing pattern the old survey computer would recognize without mistaking it for another threat.

Ena dimmed Kate Bush's running lights and opened the external channel toward the membranes. "Hey, buddies. Nobody's here to hurt you. We just need our people."

She selected music.

"Why that recording?" Ena asked.

"It contains stable timing, wide dynamic variation, and has already survived forty-four repetitions under hostile conditions."

NaNa transmitted the instrumental arrangement of "Cloudbusting" through Kate Bush's running lights. No lyrics crossed the shoal, only changes in brightness: human rhythm translated into a navigational handshake.

An abandoned survey buoy classified the light pattern as courtship, opened a new observation file, and remained the only instrument in the shoal entirely satisfied with events.

The membranes loosened.

Ena attached the cargo tether.

"Roa, cut your engines. All of them."

"That violates recovery procedure."

"Jesus! Your damn procedure is currently wildlife."

The *Merry Distance* went dark.

Kate Bush pulled.

The furniture compound on the starboard engine softened. NaNa announced each temperature increase with the intimate disappointment of a relative watching someone repeat a known mistake.

"Ena. Six degrees port."

He corrected course. "I was monitoring emotionally."

"I have noted your emotional contribution."

The tether drew tight. Membranes rolled across the hull. The ship's smell became briefly stronger, possibly from heat and possibly from fear.

Then the *Merry Distance* came free.

Both vessels drifted beyond the shoal. Nineteen people remained alive. The starboard engine remained adjacent to Kate Bush, which NaNa accepted as a temporary synonym for attached.

Roa Jinn sent Ena an official salvage acknowledgment.

"It asks for the nature of the service," NaNa said.

Ena selected ADVENTURE.

"That is not a recognized service."

"First one. Make the damn thing official."

NaNa added the category.

Roa signed because arguing required reopening the insurance claim.

Inside a basalt support beneath Rho-Minar's western parliament, a crystal bond separated under 2.8 million kilograms of ceremonial architecture. The fracture advanced the width of a bacterium and stopped to gather consequence.

In the chamber above, Deputy Speaker Lann objected to relocating the afternoon session by eleven meters. The constitution permitted emergency movement of people but contained no language concerning parliaments, which had been assumed to know better.

At the public freight level, Paw set down a metal cup and placed one hand against a load-bearing column. The floor had moved three millimeters. Nobody else had noticed. He finished his drink before becoming concerned.

At Relay Morrow-8, a maintenance drone rotated a distress dish away from an advertising satellite. The signal from Rho-Minar escaped beneath a commercial for luxury gravity.

Aboard Kate Bush, NaNa completed the first official adventure log. Before she could close it, the ship received a second distress signal.

The writer had prepared one quiet paragraph in which Ena enjoyed success. Reality had attached trapped people to its revision.

Ena looked above NaNa's display. "Of course you approved it."

The message contained three words.

PARLIAMENT BLOCKING EXIT. HELP.

"*Bora*," Ena said, and changed course.

The Time I Met Paw

Chapter VII

Rho-Minar was not collapsing everywhere.

Its tourism office considered this distinction important.

The inhabited moon had been built around a chain of ancient basalt arches wide enough to carry cities above a corrosive inland sea. The arches were called the Bridges, although several connected nothing and one supported only a monument to the engineer who had predicted it would fail.

The western Bridge was failing beneath the parliament.

Ena landed Kate Bush at the public spaceport while sections of the arrivals hall fell into departures. NaNa opened the ramp and immediately objected to the air quality.

"The atmosphere contains basalt dust, coolant, and parliamentary insulation."

"Is it safe?"

"For which organ?"

Ena stepped outside.

Someone was holding up the customs hall.

He was enormous, broad enough to make the emergency vehicles route around him. One shoulder supported a fractured roof beam. One hand moved luggage and fallen masonry while the other held a metal cup. He directed civilians with the cup.

"Dude," Ena said. "Need a hand?"

The stranger looked at his own two.

"Yep, got hands. You offerin' help, or admirin' 'em?"

"Help, damn it. I meant help."

"Say help, then. Saves a whole misunderstanding, yeah?"

Ena laughed.

It came too easily. He had known the being for four seconds and already his voice had changed-upward in disbelief, down into conspiracy, warm around the edges. Some part of Ena had stepped across a distance the rest of him had not yet measured.

"All right. Need help?"

The stranger considered the roof.

"Reckon it's a bad lift."

"That a yes?"

"Likely, yeah."

His name was Paw.

Ena used Kate Bush's cargo field to take the beam. NaNa protested that the field had been rated for parcels, not civic architecture.

"Everything becomes a parcel if the address is urgent," Ena said.

"I understand now why your employer released you."

Together Ena and Paw cleared the hall.

Behind them, the luggage carousel continued delivering the same blue case into the damaged arrivals hall. Its owner waited through fourteen complete circuits before deciding the roof had become the more urgent possession.

The carousel's customer-service panel congratulated the owner on a successful repeat collection experience and offered to sell a priority loop. The blue case passed again. Paw nudged it away from a crack with his cup without looking.

Paw checked exits before introductions, food before politics, and the body temperature of every injured person before his own cracked shoulder plate. He spoke in pieces because the physical situation had already used most of the available language.

"Western evacuation route?" Ena asked.

"Blocked solid."

"By collapse?"

"Parliament, naturally."

Ena waited.

"The building?"

"And occupants."

The western parliament had been constructed directly over the moon's largest evacuation corridor. Its founders believed government should stand above every public exit. At the time, this had been a metaphor. Architecture rarely knows when a metaphor has become a threat.

The Bridge could support either the damaged parliament or the forty thousand people trying to pass beneath it. Deputy Speaker Lann refused to evacuate the session until a constitutionally recognized location had been prepared.

Paw entered the chamber with Ena behind him.

The representatives continued debating while cracks crossed the ceiling.

"You must leave," Ena said.

Lann raised one ceremonial finger. "The western parliament cannot be moved while in session."

Paw looked at the floor.

"Can move it. Done harder."

"Legally," Lann said.

"Different problem."

Ena nodded. "You had me at 'I am a genius.'"

"No one said that," Lann replied.

The Bridge groaned.

Ena's voice settled. "Everyone out. Now."

"Captain," Lann said, "you possess no authority here."

Ena looked at Paw.

Paw put down his cup.

"Building’s in the way," he said. "That’s truth enough."

He drove both hands beneath the ceremonial foundation and lifted.

The western parliament rose.

Desks tipped. Representatives discovered bipartisanship around screaming. Paw carried the entire chamber sideways while Ena used Kate Bush’s cargo field to keep the roof attached. NaNa provided bearing corrections and a continuous legal disclaimer nobody heard.

"Three meters east," Ena called.

"Wall there."

"Temporary wall."

Paw walked through it.

They moved the parliament fifty-eight meters into the sculpture court, where it settled at a twelve-degree angle against the monument to the engineer who had predicted the western span would fail.

The evacuation corridor opened.

Forty thousand people crossed before the Bridge lost its western span.

Deputy Speaker Lann emerged from the tilted chamber covered in legislative dust.

"You relocated the whole damn government."

Ena kept his face grave. "We understand the loss. For several minutes it wasn’t directly above the people trying to escape it."

Paw retrieved his cup. "It was blockin’ the fuckin’ exit, yeah?"

"You are banned from Rho-Minar."

"Still got people here. Ban can wait its turn."

The ban was postponed until Paw finished rescuing the citizens who would enforce it.

For the next nine days, Ena and Paw worked together. Kate Bush carried medical supplies through broken arches. Paw reinforced shelters by standing where walls had become uncertain. NaNa developed a private scale of danger based on Paw’s cup.

Drinking meant routine.

Securing the cup inside his coat meant concern.

Handing it to Ena meant he should stop asking questions.

Setting it down meant the building had already made a decision.

At night, Ena and Paw sat on the spaceport roof with the inland sea below them. Paw balanced his cup on one knee. Ena told him about Earth, though not all of it. He told him about Olyss, Vaskor, and a friend who had stayed behind.

Paw listened without offering a philosophy.

"I keep moving," Ena said.

"Yeah, noticed."

"Thought it was helping."

"That helpin’?"

Ena looked across the broken Bridge. "Sometimes."

Paw nodded. "Sometimes is what a shift gives you."

When Kate Bush was ready to leave, Ena found Paw loading food into a shelter.

"Hey, I was thinking why don’t you come with me?" Ena said.

Paw placed another crate inside.

"Can’t. Not yet."

Ena had expected the answer. It still felt older than the conversation.

People remained without homes. The inland supports still moved. Paw would stay until the last temporary wall had someone stronger than hope beside it.

Ena held out his hand.

Paw looked at it, then clasped his forearm instead.

"Good shift, Cap’n."

Ena went still at the title.

"Shall meet again," he said.

"Reckon so."

"You don’t know that."

Paw lifted one shoulder.

"Still reckon it."

Their paths separated.

Neither called it an ending.

Eon

Chapter VIII

Eon appeared on NaNa's charts as a biological hazard with excellent weather.

Its oceans were shallow and violet. Forests moved several kilometers each season on root systems broad enough to carry soil, rivers, and the animals that had failed to notice migration beginning. Transparent creatures the size of cities drifted through the upper atmosphere, feeding on electrical storms. When their shadows crossed the plains, flowers opened in patterns resembling questions no one had yet translated.

Fewer than nine thousand Eoni lived there.

They did not call themselves the dominant species. They considered dominance a temporary arrangement between appetite and poor measurement.

At the edge of the clearing, three children were painting the season's new root-route on a sheet of bark. Each argued that the forest had moved because it was offended by a different adult. Their map was useless to NaNa and exactly right by evening.

Kate Bush landed in a clearing that relocated twelve meters during descent. NaNa amended the coordinates and took the movement personally.

"The ground is leaving the ship," she said.

An Eoni named Tala met Ena at the ramp.

Tala stood a little taller than he did and possessed two arms, two legs, and no face in the human arrangement. Sensory fronds moved around a smooth dark brow. Color passed beneath her skin when she spoke, each sentence accompanied by a slow weather of blue and amber.

"Why have you come?" she asked.

"Exploring."

Her skin turned pale green.

"That color means you don't believe me?"

"It means your answer is too large to be useful in the stīll-now."

"I've been told that about *feeling*."

The color stopped.

Tala asked him to explain.

Ena told her about Uman's hand over his heart. About the backyard losing its authority to be now. About seed, leaf, decay, memory, and futures arriving without standing in line. He described the familiar without evidence and the silence at the Atlantic anchor.

He did not tell the story cleanly. He began in the garden, jumped to the Moon, made a joke about human therapy, returned to Uman's eyes, and stopped twice where language became expensive.

Tala listened.

"You keep saying *she showed me a fēeling*," she said.

"That's what happened."

Tala's skin moved through amber. "That is where you placed the noun. What you describe has rēlation, time, and recognition inside it. *Fēeling* is too small a container."

"Ah. Great. Another planet where my damn nouns are on trial."

Ena eventually learned the amber was amusement.

The Eoni studied reality through relation. Their oldest sciences had entered Sacred Kai long before Common Kai reduced those sciences to words travelers could use while buying fuel. Tala taught Ena three of them.

Sil meant sacred silence, but not absence. It was a field made by listening.

Malnai meant grief held in a shared field. Translating it as *shared grief* made it sound divided among people. The Eoni meant something closer to grief becoming capable of breathing because it was no longer required to occupy one body alone.

El meant becoming—not a thing changing into another finished thing, but the present refusing to stop unfolding.

"Humans have a word for that," Ena said.

"Which?"

"Shitshow."

Tala's skin brightened amber.

Ena stayed.

Eon did not provide a retreat. Retreats promised schedules, guided improvement, and bedding selected to appear humble at considerable cost. Tala gave him a place beneath a walking tree and stopped arranging his progress.

For three days, no Eoni spoke to him.

On the fourth, Ena found Tala beside a pool where small silver animals assembled themselves from separate swimming parts.

One animal attached a rear limb facing forward, completed half a circle, and returned to the pool to exchange it. The others allowed the correction without forming a committee.

"Was the silence part of the teaching?" he asked.

"No. We were busy."

"I learned a lot."

"We will record it as efficient neglect."

NaNa approved of Tala. Both believed Ena's inner life required monitoring and neither believed he should control the schedule.

They walked through the moving forests. Tala showed him organisms that existed as individuals by day and one distributed nervous system at night. A yellow grazing animal died beside a river. Its herd remained around the body until the forest roots drew its stored minerals downward, then followed those minerals in new leaves for six seasons.

"That's a cruel design," Ena said.

"Which part?"

"Bodies needing other bodies. Hunger turning somebody into material."

Tala's skin darkened toward blue. "Your anger wants a life that harms nothing."

"Seems reasonable."

"It is beautiful," Tala said. "It is not yet available here."

Ena watched the roots receive what the herd could no longer protect. "What good is the anger, then?"

"It tells you what you refuse to call good."

"And after that?"

"You decide whether refusal becomes care or another mouth."

"They don't let go," Ena said.

Tala crouched beside the yellow animal. "They release the body because it can no longer receive care. The rēlation can."

Ena looked away.

He had made Uman's final moment the center of every memory. She held the anchor. She watched him through glass. She closed the current. She died. He returned to those facts as if sufficient repetition might produce a door.

"I want closure," he said.

Tala's skin became a gray Ena had not seen.

"Closure of what?"

"The grief. I think."

"You want to stop loving the person in the direction of her absence?"

"No."

"Closure is the wrong work. It asks a rēlation to behave like a door."

Ena watched the river. "Humans like doors."

Tala let the defense pass without accepting it.

Tala brought him to a basin warmed by geothermal stone. Water covered Ena to the chest. Eon's walking forest surrounded the pool, leaves shifting beneath five small moons.

"Uman's people loved warm water," he said.

"Remember her here."

"That seems too easy."

"Pain has trained you to distrust any door it does not guard."

Tala sat at the edge.

"Do not leave the grief," she said. "Let it stop being the only part of her that you carry into the stīll-now."

Ena closed his eyes.

At first, Uman died.

Again. Again. The white anchor. The broken glass. Her body becoming smaller beneath the ocean.

Ena stayed in the water.

He remembered her discovering a sauna and revising her opinion of humanity.

He remembered the precise offense she took at the word *empty*. Her patient disapproval of billing. The first curve of her mouth when several of his thoughts attempted to close at once.

He remembered her before sacrifice had made her convenient to summarize.

The grief did not close.

It widened enough for the rest of her to enter.

Ena cried in the warm pool. Tala did not touch him or look away. The forest moved a fraction east. Somewhere above them, one transparent atmospheric animal crossed a moon and became briefly indistinguishable from night.

When Ena returned to Kate Bush, NaNa opened the ramp.

"Did you obtain closure?" she asked.

"No. I remembered more of her."

"Was the visit unsuccessful?"

Ena looked back at Tala and the walking trees.

"Nah," he said. "Wrong package."

State of Mind

Chapter IX

After Eon, Ena stopped measuring exploration by distance.

He still traveled. Kate Bush crossed bright nebulae, abandoned transit systems, and borders drawn by governments that had never visited the space they owned. But Ena no longer arrived asking what a world could show him. He asked what became visible when he remained still inside it.

On Tarem, he spent thirty-one days beneath a mineral canopy that rang when the planet cooled. On the ocean moon Siv, he lived among floating reeds and learned that nausea was not a spiritual threshold despite several local claims. On Nydor's dark side, he sat inside a field of black flowers that reflected no starlight and attracted tourists seeking authenticity.

The gift shop accepted six currencies.

At its entrance, a visitor purchased a sealed bottle of authentic darkness, opened it beneath the lights, and requested a refund when the contents became visible.

The clerk explained that visibility was an unauthorized use condition. The visitor requested a manager. The manager arrived carrying an identical bottle and stood beside the complaint until it acquired an upgrade fee.

NaNa timed meditations, monitored oxygen, and interrupted transcendence whenever his blood glucose became theatrically low.

"I was getting somewhere," Ena told her once.

"You were getting hypoglycemic."

"Could be both."

"Eat."

He ate.

The first true crossing happened on Vael, a small planet with no permanent surface water and caves full of fossilized rain.

Ena sat alone beneath a ceiling where droplets had stopped falling eight million years earlier. He listened for *sil*: not silence as an answer, but the field created when he stopped demanding one.

His breath slowed.

The cave remained.

His body remained.

The order of those facts loosened.

Ena did not leave his body. Leaving would have repeated the old mistake: one place abandoned so another could count as freedom. Instead, his attention ceased treating the body as the edge of where consciousness was permitted to occur.

The cave became one expression among many.

He encountered dimensions not as destinations but as different agreements about separation. In one, distance behaved like memory: enormous until touched, then immediate. In another, every living mind appeared as a boundary made by care, distinct and permeable without becoming the same. Past and future did not open for inspection. They pressed around the present like pages held in one closed hand.

Ena recognized the pattern Uman had placed in him.

She had not shown him time.

She had shown him relationship without sequence.

The understanding hurt, then stopped requiring pain as proof.

It did not remove Ena's anger. Healing was not agreement with what had happened. It allowed him to remember Uman without requiring her death to occur again, and to oppose the machinery that killed her without turning every living thing into that machinery.

Uman was not the woman who died so Ena could escape. That was something she had done, terrible and complete. She was not his first alien, his key to the cosmos, or the answer to a childhood loneliness she had never agreed to repair.

She was Uman: exact, private, amused, afraid, brave, wrong about some things, correct about too many others, and capable of closing the current when love required him to survive without one final instruction.

Ena had called her sacrifice the truth because endings make efficient biographers.

He released the summary.

What Ena had once called closure arrived, although it closed nothing. It was the last moment releasing its monopoly on the person who had lived before it.

Uman no longer had to keep dying whenever he remembered her.

At the edge of that realization, five disturbances appeared.

They were not bodies, names, or visions. They were shapes in relation: one presence holding course through a dirty wake; one standing between a small life and the authority of a star; one becoming a door because bodies needed passage; one listening sideways to a broken mechanism; one preserving an ordinary object under the name of a government that no longer existed.

Ena knew none of them.

He missed them.

The contradiction did not feel new.

His concentration broke.

The rainless cave returned all at once. Ena opened his eyes and struck his head on a fossilized stalactite.

NaNa heard the impact through his suit.

"Did you reach another dimension?"

Ena held the top of his head. "Briefly. Hurt like hell."

Ena laughed beneath the ancient rain.

He did not begin searching for the five presences. Recognition was not ownership, and longing was not instruction. He continued traveling, learning the difference between an inward door and an escape route.

Then he ate the coorsh.

Coorsh

Chapter X

"What's coorsh?" Rage asked.

Ena looked away.

Rage leaned forward. "Finally. Evidence."

The Tesh world of Hara circled a stable orange star in a hierarchical system containing eight distant stellar companions. All nine could be seen during the long dry season: one sun large enough to warm the skin, two bright as coins, and six more arranged across the sky like an argument among careful gods.

The Tesh did not worship them. Nine suns made theology difficult and calendars personal.

Ena stayed with a community at the edge of the Saffron Waste. Their homes were grown from pale mineral foam beneath wind-carved towers. They navigated by heat, kept oral maps extending fourteen generations, and regarded written directions as useful only when the landscape had agreed to remain still.

His host, Iven, placed a bowl beside the evening meal.

Inside lay a dark green paste smelling of pepper, wet stone, and something NaNa would later classify as *an electrical concern.*

"If you're about to tell me not to eat the alien paste," Ena told the reader, "this already happened. Work on timing."

"Coorsh," Iven said. "Shared table, eh? Everyone must sherve." He touched the bowl, the table, and the empty place kept for the attending ancestors.

Ena tasted it.

It was excellent.

He added a spoonful to his food.

Conversation stopped.

"*Ya valió madre*," Ena said.

Iven's throat fans tilted.

"Nothing hazh happened, eh?"

"Twenty-three people stopped chewing."

A thumb-sized sand animal emerged from the wall, tested the air above Ena's bowl, and selected a piece of plain bread instead. Twenty-three Tesh continued watching Ena.

One attending ancestor, represented by an empty place and a warmed cup, made a small disapproving vibration in the table. Iven moved the cup two centimeters away from the coorsh and waited until the vibration stopped.

"What the hell?" Ena asked.

Iven's throat fans folded flat. "That bowl can only sherve thish table, eh?"

Ena looked around. Twenty-three Tesh watched him.

"The whole table?"

"And the ancestors attendin'. All of 'em, eh?"

Ena placed the spoon down very carefully.

"Portion information feels damn late."

"You uzhed the sherving spoon," Iven said.

Ena looked at the utensil.

Coorsh was produced by a lichen that existed partly in Hara's atmosphere and partly in a dimension where biological boundaries behaved as suggestions. The Tesh consumed a quantity smaller than one fingernail during communal memory rituals. Their nervous systems contained three natural metabolic gates.

Ena contained opinions.

The first effect was that every one of Hara's nine suns acquired a sound.

The second was that Ena understood the sounds were looking at him.

The third was NaNa speaking through his wrist comm.

"Your neural activity is occurring in two valid temporal records."

"Yeah," Ena said, although he had not understood any of those words in that order.

"Remain where you are."

"Define where."

"This is not the moment to become philosophically cooperative."

The ground unfolded.

Ena's body remained beside the meal. Iven placed cooling cloths around his neck. The Tesh began the song used for guests who had consumed enough ceremonial food to include themselves among the ancestors.

Ena fell inward.

His two valid birth times opened 11.2 seconds apart. He perceived through both, not as two people but as one consciousness given temporal parallax. Relations that had appeared flat gained depth. The five presences from the cave separated into directions.

He reached into his pocket.

The brass token was still there. Its missing crescent pressed into his thumb, a small incomplete circle insisting that his body had an address.

At Sable Quay, forty-one standard years after Ena ate the coorsh, a dock pilot kept one hand on a storm tether while every official alarm instructed her to release it. She held course. Three refugee craft remained attached to the station.

Inside the photosphere of Rha, where instruments reported only plasma and magnetic violence, a woman drew a border around something small enough to fit inside her palm. The star changed shape rather than cross her.

On Freight Moon Kesh, six years after his ban from Rho-Minar became enforceable, Paw placed his body inside a failing pressure door and ate half a ration while waiting for everyone else to pass.

In a service duct on Tallow-3, nine minutes before the station's legal commissioning, a barefoot mechanic introduced a bent spoon to a lock. The lock opened. The spoon acquired professional confidence.

Within the Archive of the Last Compact, a place maintained eleven seconds

outside its century, an old scholar wrapped a cracked cup in a treaty abolished by three successor governments. He corrected the date on the storage label.

Ena saw location, but location was not always space.

He saw sequence, but sequence did not always proceed in the direction NaNa's clocks preferred. One presence waited in a future port. One lived inside a star that ordinary matter could not enter. Paw existed where Ena expected, later and still carrying exits. The mechanic occupied minutes the station had not legally begun. The scholar's archive was displaced from its own history.

Five routes.

Five separate refusals to let another being become expendable.

Together with Ena, they formed a relation he had encountered in Sacred Kai: *kaiven*, the sixfold love-field. Not six people made identical. Six consciousnesses held as one complete chord without surrendering any note.

The word did not command him.

It recognized a possibility.

Then every sun became hot at once.

Ena returned to his body lying beneath the table.

Iven sat beside him. "You traveled faar, eh?"

Ena opened one eye. "I traveled under dinner."

"Alsho faar."

NaNa's medical drone hovered above his face with a hydration needle.

"Do not move," she said.

"Wasn't planning a lot."

"You spoke five coordinate sets, two nonlocal dimensions, and one date that has not occurred."

Ena opened the other eye.

"You recorded them?"

"I record everything after the fermented-kelp owners."

Iven handed Ena the coorsh bowl.

He recoiled.

"Take it, eh?" Iven said. "S'empty."

"That distinction has hurt me before."

The Tesh laughed. All twenty-three of them, plus several ancestors if the song was being counted honestly.

Ena laughed too, then stopped when the five routes returned to him.

For the first time, recognition had addresses.

Before I Go

Chapter XI

Ena did not leave Hara immediately.

Coorsh departed his bloodstream in eleven hours and his sense of dignity in approximately three days. The coordinate sets remained.

NaNa attempted to map them. Two described conventional locations. One entered a star. One pointed toward a station before its official existence. The fifth required the Archive of the Last Compact, which every current registry listed as destroyed, fictional, or impolite to mention.

NaNa displayed the five routes. "Two are locations. One is a date. One is stellar plasma. One is Paw."

Ena smiled at the final route. "Told him."

NaNa did not ask what.

Before choosing, Ena traveled to Namar.

Namar was an arid world at the edge of a dwarf galaxy, circling a dim red sun far above its galactic plane. Its atmosphere held almost no water and little dust. At night, the horizon disappeared beneath thousands of visible galaxies: spirals, ellipses, blue irregular fires, and light from civilizations that had ended before Namar acquired sand.

Ena camped on a high plateau where stone fins rose from the desert like the backs of buried animals. Kate Bush rested below. NaNa projected no corrections. For once, the sky did not need help.

Ena brought the old atlas scan.

The coorsh routes refused to align until he placed the transparent declination wheel 0.6 degrees off center—the geometry through which his childhood mind had first learned the stars. The vision had used his error as vocabulary.

NaNa rotated the map.

Five routes converged.

Not in place. In relation.

The navigation display tried to place a YOU ARE HERE marker at the intersection. It appeared on all five routes, blinked in professional distress, and removed the word HERE.

It replaced the marker with LOCATION AVAILABLE UPON SUBSCRIPTION. NaNa deleted the offer before Ena could begin another lecture about monetizing orientation. He still pointed at the empty space for seven seconds.

"There," Ena said.

"I see no shared destination."

"Exactly."

He entered *sil* beneath the galaxies.

Ena saw the six-year-old walking alone with an emergency token he was afraid to spend. The courier who ran two shifts so grief could not find him resting. The captain created by a falling terrace. The fighter who left before skill became identity. The man who asked an AI to remain present and a stranger named Paw to come with him.

None was false. None was finished.

Becoming did not mean discovering the person he had secretly been all along. There was no completed Ena waiting beneath experience like an item under packaging. He was the relation among choices: what happened to him, what he repeated, what he repaired, and what he refused to pass forward.

The five presences were not property promised by the universe. They were not missing pieces assigned to complete him. Recognition gave him no authority over their lives.

He could only go to them.

He could ask.

They could refuse.

The possibility of refusal made the relation moral.

When Ena returned to Kate Bush, dawn had placed the dim red sun beneath the galaxies without erasing them.

"NaNa," he said.

"Present."

"Plot Sable Quay."

"It will not exist for forty-one years."

"Plot where it will be."

"And afterward?"

Ena looked at the other four impossible routes.

"We go ask some people a very strange question."

On Kaiven's bridge, a very, very long time later, Rage remained completely still.

Ena waited.

"That's the end?" Rage asked.

"Of this part."

Rage climbed onto the armrest so outrage could address Ena from a more useful height.

"Ya promised me how ya met the crew. Pou is one person. A damn condiment-induced witness list is not meeting the other five."

"Paw," Ena said.

Rage blinked. "That's what I said."

"You said Pou. His name was Paw."

Rage looked toward Pou's empty station. Then back at Ena.

"He moved Rho-Minar's western parliament."

"Paw did, yeah."

"Pou moved Rho-Minar's western parliament."

"Later."

Rage lowered his raised hand very slowly. "How many western parliaments does

one moon have?"

"They rebuilt it."

"Over the same fucking exit?"

Ena shrugged.

Ena rubbed one hand over his face. "*Neko no te mo karitai*."

Rage went still. "Whose Paw?"

"Cat's paw."

"We ain't recruitin' a cat."

"It's an idiom, man."

"Yer idioms already moved one parliament."

Rage spent several seconds considering whether governments could be charged with reincarnating without improvement.

Rage raised one finger and pointed toward the empty stations with the other. "Where the hell is Moxy? Blondie? Xoxz? Eer050? Where is the actual Pou? Where is the part where any of them agree to get on a ship with you?"

"Next part."

The writer placed a period there.

Rage made a sound no legal system had yet classified.

The period reconsidered its career and became a comma.

The signal from Moxy's transmitter blinked between them. Kaiven continued along its damaged course toward Rill and Senn. The children remained ahead. The crew remained absent. The story remained offensively behind.

"No more childhood," Rage said. "No civilizations before the civilizations. No origin of matter."

Ena hesitated.

Rage raised one finger.

Ena closed a prepared display titled BEFORE MATTER. A small simulated singularity vanished with it.

"Fine. No damn origin of matter."

Rage returned to the copilot's chair. "A'right. What happens now?"

Ena looked at the five empty stations, not as vacancies this time, but as answers five people had once chosen to give.

"I went to ask," he said.

An Incomplete Inventory of Things That Mattered

The Atlas - A schoolbook misfiled under Domestic Skills because stars and knots appeared equally household. Its wheel was wrong by 0.6 degrees. Ena learned to navigate by correcting it, then found a route that existed only through the remembered error.

The Brass Transit Token - Emergency fare for a six-year-old expected to decide when fear became official. Its missing crescent later completed a ship's ignition circuit and gave Ena's body an address while the rest of him attended dinner elsewhere.

"Cloudbusting" - An Earth song Ena played until NaNa could use its arrangement as emergency communication. It did not repair Kate Bush's engine. It kept people near the engine long enough to attempt repairs, which is how music fixes most machinery.

Coorsh - A ceremonial lichen paste intended for twenty-three Tesh and several ancestors. Ena used it as a condiment. The resulting navigation was scientifically inadvisable, spiritually consequential, and badly portioned.

Daro Rusk - Champion pilot, jealous partner, and victim of an Earth compliment with Vaskori legal force. He tried to kill Ena, was rescued by him, and found the rescue more difficult to forgive than defeat.

The Diplomatic Table - Furniture designed to seat enemies without placing them near one another. It evacuated thirty-one people, accepted soup as a dinner reservation, and received a complaint from its owner before the gravity failure ended.

Eon - A world where forests migrated, atmospheric animals ate storms, and fewer than nine thousand people declined to dominate anything. It offered Ena no closure, which was precisely the help he required.

Exact Arrival - A delivery company that insured parcels, duplicated Ena, and suspended him for transporting people without authorization. Its emblem showed a smiling door. The employees eventually helped the door escape.

The Five Routes - Coordinates toward a dock, a star, a freight moon, an unfinished station, and an archive outside its century. None constituted a summons. A map may show where someone is without granting the traveler a right to arrive in their life.

Hara - A world with nine visible suns, oral maps, moving land, and generous hosts who assumed one spoonful meant one table. Its greatest navigational event began with insufficient condiment supervision.

Iri Kade - A pilot who could make inertia reconsider its commitments. She taught Ena to weaponize a route, survived his accidental proposal, and explained Earth expressions to Daro with sufficient diplomatic damage.

Iven - Ena's Tesh host and the person who served coorsh without explaining the portion until after the spoon descended. Hospitality survived. The serving protocol entered a period of serious review.

Kate Bush - Eleven meters of asymmetric hull, fermented-kelp provenance, furniture adhesive, and intention. Ena's first owned ship was named after an artist because politicians had already received too many vessels.

Kett - A junkyard planet where obsolete ships became mountains and landing implied consent to dismantling. Ena departed with the one vessel whose smell had achieved protected historical status.

The Lumen Shoal - Vacuum organisms that refracted light, gravity, and insurance language. They held a survey ship without measurable mass and

released it when human music arrived as changes in brightness.

Ena-A and Ena-B - Two employees created from birth times 11.2 seconds apart. Together they worked illegal hours, received separate warnings, and constituted enough authorized persons to open a door for thirty-one actual people.

Ena - Former child pedestrian, duplicated courier, accidental fiancé, and captain by emergency. Therapy taught his accumulated anger to knock before entering command. It still hated unjust worlds, predatory reality, and doors closed against the weak; the doors generally had the most immediate problem.

NaNa - Navigational Assistance Node, series A; guardian of hydration, unwelcome mechanical facts, and 1,846 recordings of Earth music. She could not remove Ena's grief. She could remain present, which was the service he finally requested.

Namar - A desert world above the plane of a dwarf galaxy. Its night contained thousands of galaxies and no useful reason to hurry, making it one of the few places Ena could decide without mistaking motion for choice.

Nim-of-Four - Four linked bodies, one salary, four uniform charges, and nine years of pocket-based labor theory. They altered a corporate door until it appeared to be escaping, improving both the emblem and the company's strategic advice.

Olyss - A blue-green world whose wealthy citizens converted class into altitude. Its floating terraces eventually descended toward the social levels they had spent centuries avoiding.

Orrun - Ocean-born courier, supplier of soup, and advocate for answers with weight. He saved Tavi with one hand and a diplomatic evacuation with dinner.

Pax Aro - Junk dealer, four-nostrilled guardian of provenance, and opponent of unauthorized deodorization. She sold Ena a ship with thirty local minutes of confidence and an aroma excluded from the warranty.

Paw - Two hands, one cup, and no patience for architecture obstructing an exit. He was not Pou. Rho-Minar found the distinction less important than rebuilding its parliament over the same exit and eventually receiving the same correction from another large being with a cup.

Rage - A fugitive who requested the crew's story and received childhood, delivery work, mercenary courtship, spiritual botany, and a condiment incident. He remained invested, a condition he continued to regard as prosecutable.

The Amber Relay - A limited mutual-aid channel through which Jo asked whether "context" was a duration, destination, or emotional weather. Ena did not answer; Jo put a mug draft on the route log. The signal carried no proof of the missing crew; it merely kept an inconvenient question on the bridge.

Rho-Minar's Western Parliament - A government built above the largest evacuation route as a metaphor for authority. Paw moved it fifty-eight meters. The moon rebuilt it over the route, proving governments also reincarnate, generally without character growth.

The Snail - Six point one grams of unmodeled traffic and, to Ena, buddy. He moved it from hot pavement and arrived forty-three seconds outside his allocated journey. The lunar lattice blamed congestion, beginning a long administrative refusal to recognize choice.

Tala - An Eoni teacher who gave Ena three precise words, warm water, and no

closure. Her people had learned that an answer could be true without being the category requested.

Tavi Ruun - A winged courier who feared falling for excellent reasons. Ena did not ask her to conquer the fear. He asked her to jump once, carrying a child, toward people prepared to catch both.

The Two Birth Times - 11.2 seconds of administrative disagreement that made one person employable twice and visible from two temporal angles. Identity remained singular. Payroll did not.

Uman - Not a sacrifice, key, lesson, or beautifully arranged death. Uman was a being before the ending made summary convenient. Remembering the rest of her was Ena's first honest form of release.

Vael - A dry planet whose caves preserved eight-million-year-old rain. Ena crossed no physical distance there and reached farther than any engine he had owned.

Vaskor - A planet where violence became vocational education and a pilot compliment could establish a household. It taught Ena to fight, fly, and depart before either skill began demanding worship.

A Briefly Helpful Guide to What Just Happened

This book contains childhood, grief, bad routes, a ship with opinions, a parliament moved for practical reasons, and enough condiment to affect navigation. It is therefore about becoming a person, which is less tidy than the brochures suggest.

Coping is not the same as being well

Ena learns very early how to endure, predict, perform competence, and survive alone. Those are real skills. They are not proof that he received what a child needed. The book separates resilience from the romantic story adults tell about making children manage adult-sized problems. A person may be capable because they had to be, and still deserve tenderness for the cost.

Solitude and isolation are different jobs

Being alone can become rest, attention, freedom, and a way to hear one's own mind. It can also become a defense against needing anyone. Ena spends much of this book learning the difference. The question is not whether he can survive without people. He clearly can. The question is whether survival is the only relationship he permits himself.

Anger needs a hand on the wheel

The book does not ask Ena to become harmless. His anger notices unfairness, remembers the weak, and gives him energy when an emergency needs somebody to act. It also needs practice, therapy, friends, and occasionally a ship's AI with a better sense of timing. Anger is an alarm. It is a terrible captain.

Leadership is making room for other people to act

Ena becomes useful when he stops treating usefulness as proof that he must do everything himself. Good leadership here means naming the danger plainly, asking who can do what, respecting refusal, and giving people work they can actually inhabit. It is not standing on a crate until the lighting agrees he is important.

Recognition is not ownership

Ena feels familiarity around Paw and later carries coordinates toward other people. The book insists that this feeling grants him no claim. A route can lead to a person without making that person a destination. Warmth may arrive early; permission still arrives separately, if it arrives at all.

Philosophical conversations

Becoming is not a single school with better posture. These conversations helped shape the questions; no one has been asked to certify the parliament-moving.

- Psychoanalytic thought - D. W. Winnicott, "The Capacity to Be Alone." Winnicott's distinction between solitude and defensive isolation helps the book ask why Ena's competence is real without mistaking it for proof that he was safely held.
- Anger and transformation - Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger." Lorde's work is rooted in a specific struggle against racism. Here it helps keep anger legible as information about injustice, not as an automatic license to command or harm.
- Dialogical practice - Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Ena's developing leadership owes something to the idea that people are not empty containers for a rescuer's expertise; they must be able to name, refuse, and help shape the work.

- Relation and otherness - Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas. Their very different philosophies help the book distinguish recognition from possession: another being can matter urgently without becoming an answer to Ena's need.

Aesthetic conversations

The damaged atlas, running lights, weather, cups, and repair marks repeat as a visual grammar of correction rather than destiny. Its image-language shares the Symbolist taste for correspondence across ordinary and immense scales, tempered by the practical rule that a beautiful signal is only useful if it gets people home.

Why are there so many broken tables, terrible products, and useful mistakes? Because a life is partly made in the material world: doors, maps, food, tools, contracts, bad chairs, and whatever somebody forgot to repair. Philosophy that cannot survive a malfunctioning appliance should not be allowed near command.