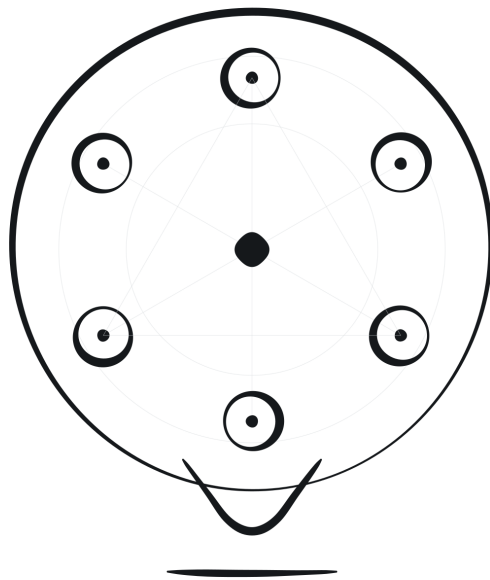




Hold Course

/ˈkɑɪ.ʊən/

Prologue

"Forty-one years?"

Rage said it quietly.

This was worse than shouting. Shouting belonged to events that might still be corrected. Quiet belonged to evidence.

Ena sat in Moxy's chair with one hand beneath his chin. Her transmitter blinked on the damaged console. Every pulse arrived from the same direction and said nothing except that somewhere ahead of them, attached to Vaal's fleeing transport, a machine Moxy had hidden continued doing the one thing she had asked of it.

Rage enlarged the route estimate.

Kaiven had enough thrust to reach the next fold scar, enough hull to regret the decision, and enough fuel to make the regret unusually brief. Rage had assembled an intercept plan from Moxy's bearing, Vaal's engine residue, two damaged reactors, and spite. Only the spite remained fully charged.

He tapped the number again. "Forty-one years."

Ena made a small confirming sound.

Rage waited until the sound became insulting.

"Yeah," Ena said. "I know, man."

Rage turned in the copilot's chair. His feet still did not reach the floor, but he had learned to rotate with such accusation that the floor felt responsible.

"Ya ate the illegal condiment. Ceremonial, sure. Ya saw five impossible routes, and the first useful one pointed forty-one years into the future at a port that had not been built."

"The space was there."

"Wonderful. Reality started and lost the damn address."

Ena kept his face serious. It was the face with which a child might explain that the floor had attacked first.

"Traffic," he said.

Rage stared until Ena amended this to "Construction," which was not a defense so much as a smaller offense.

Rage climbed onto the armrest. The additional height did not improve the fact, but it gave him somewhere to put his disbelief.

"What'd ya do for forty-one years?"

"Worked. Traveled. Got shot a few times. Helped a moon with a divorce."

Ena inhaled to explain the custody arrangement concerning the tides.

Rage raised one finger.

The moon kept both tides without further assistance from the narrative.

Rage pointed toward the empty stations around them. "This gets us closer to them. Names, Ena. People I knew. No cosmic grammar till I've had breakfast or committed a felony."

Ena glanced around the bridge. "Seli Arq."

The old man lowered both hands before they acquired criminal intent.

Kaiven crossed the edge of Vaal's cooling fold wake. The bridge lights thinned, turned blue, and returned one by one. Moxy's signal missed a pulse.

Both men looked at it.

The next pulse arrived on time.

Rage faced the route again. "We're gonna reach the split in nine hours, including an emergency stop at whichever of Kaiven's seventeen bathrooms does not return me to this chair."

"Eight forty-six without the bathroom."

Ena smiled despite himself. It did not last.

Beyond the forward glass, the fold wake divided around a dark region of space where Vaal's transport could have taken either of two corridors. Rage had spent the previous hour proving that one corridor was a decoy and the previous five minutes becoming less certain. Ena recognized the sequence. First came the answer, then the evidence, then the universe clearing its throat.

"You're right about the decoy," he said.

Rage glanced over. "How?"

"The transmitter's phase is leaning."

Rage opened his mouth to reject the verb, enlarged the fourth decimal place, and found it leaning.

"That's an offensive way to be correct."

Ena adjusted Kaiven's course by three hundredths of a degree. The ship answered with a vibration that passed through Moxy's chair and into his ribs.

Rill and Senn remained ahead.

That was the present. The past was permitted only because the engines required time neither man could threaten out of them.

Rage saved the intercept model. "Port. Pilot. Go."

Ena looked toward Moxy's empty station before remembering he was sitting in it. "Seli Arq," he said again, more quietly this time.

The signal blinked between them.

Rage opened his mouth, reconsidered the scale of the question, and selected a smaller one.

"D'you know her?"

Ena leaned back. "No."

The answer had taken visible work. Rage left the work where it was.

"Start at the port," he said. "No childhood. No creation myth. You get one weather."

"I need enough weather to threaten a planet."

Rage pointed one warning finger. The allotment remained one.

Somewhere beyond the bridge, the writer reached for a transition.

"*A darle, que es mole de olla,*" Ena told him.

Rage looked around the bridge. "Why is the transition a stew?"

Ena glanced upward.

"I heard the stew," Rage said. "It still gets one weather."

The writer made no promise about quantity.

Forty-one standard years after Ena left Hara, Kate Bush descended toward a violet planet whose entire atmosphere had begun trying to become lightning.

The port above it welcomed Ena to predictable conditions.

An asterisk opened beside the welcome.

PREDICTABILITY MAY VARY BY BODY, VESSEL, CLASS, WEATHER, AND WHETHER YOU HAVE PURCHASED PREDICTABLE PLUS.

Ena looked at the storm. "Management wrote the sky a disclaimer."

The Quay Beneath the Storm

Chapter I

Oruv occupied half the sky.

Violet bands crossed the gas giant from horizon to horizon, pale at the poles and almost black where sulfur and vanadium clouds folded beneath one another. Lightning moved inside them without hurry. Individual discharges exceeded the diameter of inhabited moons. From a distance they looked delicate.

Distance had done excellent public relations for many dangerous things.

Sable Quay hung above the equator.

Every arrival screen carried the port's Predictability Index: a cheerful amber number beside SABLE WEATHER, SENSIBLY MANAGED. The number was eighty-nine. Outside, one of the tether pylons was on fire sideways.

Twenty-seven black pylons stood in three broken rings, joined by bridges, habitats, freight halls, gardens, fuel spines, and docking structures added by people who had disagreed about nearly every measurement except the need to finish before the money noticed. Magnetic anchors descended from the lowest ring as blue columns without visible substance. Above them, nine storm tethers extended into space.

Ships clung to eight.

Three ships clung to the ninth.

Ena saw the hand before he saw the pilot.

It appeared on Kate Bush's forward display, dark against an amber tether control: broad palm, two opposed thumbs, knuckles locked around a manual course bar while warning symbols opened and closed beneath it.

Ena leaned toward the display with the unguarded attention he usually reserved for voices already known. No name arrived to justify it.

He stopped flying anyway.

NaNa reduced the display. "Ena, you have stopped flying."

Kate Bush had begun sliding portward. Ena corrected without defending the decision, which saved time and surprised them both.

The ship's asymmetric hull shuddered as Oruv's magnetic weather caught the starboard repairs. Several repairs were younger than the original furniture compound. None had been consulted about ion storms.

"Outer field at sixty-three percent," NaNa said. "Local guidance recommends we hold twelve kilometers above the arrival plane."

A cheerful voice entered the bridge.

"Welcome to Sable Quay, where predictable weather meets dependable passage. Current weather remains within the expanded definition of predictable. Please maintain confidence."

Ena looked at the violet planet.

One lightning front spread across a tenth of the visible hemisphere.

Kate Bush joined the arrival pattern. Cargo barges, passenger needles, habitat rafts, tankers, private cutters, and one vessel shaped like a sealed mouth occupied a queue that had ceased moving in any direction agreed upon by its members. Their drives fired against different layers of the storm. Blue exhaust became green in the ion field and stretched into trembling ribbons.

A docking interface opened.

DECLARE VESSEL CATEGORY.

Ena selected PRIVATE EXPLORATION.

The interface refused.

He selected COURIER.

It displayed his expired Exact Arrival license, three unpaid administrative questions, and a condolence message from an insurance company that had incorrectly heard he was dead.

He selected RESIDENTIAL.

NaNa opened a second pane. "Residential is inaccurate. I navigate here and occasionally survive the kitchen."

Ena said, and submitted it.

The interface considered Kate Bush's salvage frame, medical cabinet, cargo field, sleeping compartment, music archive, nonstandard engine, and kitchen drawer that opened during hard turns.

CATEGORY: PRIVATE SALVAGE COURIER / RESIDENTIAL ARCHIVE / KITCHEN RISK.

Ena said. "No berth, but the ship has finally achieved a category."

The interface offered a sponsored category upgrade.

FOR A SMALL FEE, KITCHEN RISK MAY BECOME CULINARY POTENTIAL.

NaNa archived the offer under *evidence*. "The station is attempting to sell us an adjective."

"First thing it's sold honestly," Ena said.

The arrival pattern lurched.

A small ferry ahead lost its drive and rotated toward a tanker. Ena brought Kate Bush under it, opened the old cargo field, and pushed. The ferry cleared the tanker by eighteen meters. Its pilot transmitted a hand sign that NaNa classified as either gratitude or an objection concerning ancestry.

The public voice returned.

"Unscheduled vessel contact has occurred. Travelers are reminded that collision is not a recognized form of introduction."

Ena looked at the station. "I like this place. Hasn't admitted us, insulted the ship, nearly killed a ferry. Healthy boundaries."

Sable Quay sent them to a temporary skid beneath Pylon Six. The skid was a flat magnetic plate with no walls and a handrail positioned at the height of Ena's throat. Kate Bush settled against it with a sound NaNa described as *noncommittal attachment*.

The ramp opened.

Wind from Oruv's upper atmosphere should not have reached this altitude. The storm had brought its own interpretation.

Ena stepped onto the skid.

An assessor in a yellow pressure coat was measuring the handrail. His body was short and wide, with four weight-bearing legs and two careful arms. He extended a telescoping staff toward the rail. The staff collapsed into itself.

He extended it again.

It collapsed again.

The assessor recorded the result.

"Does that mean it's short?" Ena asked.

"The instrument has declined emphasis." The assessor placed one hand on the rail. It passed above his head. "The rail cannot be grasped by the present body. The station will call it universal because your body can reach it and your throat has not yet filed a complaint."

Ena ducked beneath the rail.

"Tebb Arlo. Coorsh Mutual Transit Compact."

"Ena."

Tebb's staff opened a third time. He held the last segment so it could not flee. "This arrival skid has been designed for an average traveler who has never arrived."

Behind him, a four-armed porter entered the corridor sideways with a ceremonial reception table. The table was wider than the corridor, longer than the skid, and decorated with thirty brass representations of successful docking.

Two officials pressed themselves against the wall.

The porter rotated the table through a geometry not previously available.

"Exit's blocked," one official said.

"For people, maybe. Got four hands. Haul 'em," the porter replied.

The table continued inward.

Tebb watched it pass. "Koru-of-Four has accepted delivery."

"That explains the table," Ena said, "which is more than I had."

An alarm crossed the station.

Every bridge changed color. The black pylons reflected violet light from below, and for one moment Sable Quay appeared to stand inside the transparent bones of the storm.

Tebb folded his staff deliberately. It opened by itself.

"That is new," he said.

NaNa spoke through Ena's wrist comm. "A planetary ion front has accelerated sixteen minutes ahead of forecast. Outer tethers are entering emergency load."

The amber image returned above the nearest wall display.

The pilot at Tether Nine had moved into view.

She was Istran, compact and charcoal-blue, with clear inner eyelids closed against the control glare. A narrow sensory frill lay flat along her jaw. One hand held the course bar. Her other hand moved across nine engine feeds as the three attached ships pulled in different directions.

"Nine, release unverified attachments," said a voice above her.

The pilot did not answer.

"Tether Nine, acknowledge compulsory release."

Her inner eyelids opened.

"Bodies on dhe line," she said. "Line stays live."

The station cut her microphone.

Ena was already moving.

Tebb caught the back of his jacket.

"Restricted operations," Tebb said. "Tha' pilot has not requested you. Offer a capacity. Do not become a second emergency."

Ena stopped.

It was an irritatingly complete sentence.

He looked toward the wall display. The pilot braced as the first storm current struck all three refugee ships.

"NaNa. Can we take load without touching her controls?"

"Kate Bush's cargo field can support eleven percent of the lateral pull for approximately nine minutes."

"Send that. Ask first."

NaNa transmitted the offer.

For four seconds nothing returned.

The pilot's voice entered Ena's comm, stripped of the station's mute.

"Eleven percent?"

Ena looked at Oruv. "On a confident day. Today has more personality."

Silence.

The Ninth tether moved seven meters toward the planet.

"Bring dhat ugly ship outta my blind side and over to dhe outside marker," the pilot said. "Touch my course and I cut you loose."

Ena smiled before he could stop himself.

"Yeah," he said softly. "That sounds right."

The pilot studied him through narrowed inner eyelids. "Have we me'?"

Ena's smile left. He shook his head.

"Dhen don' talk like you do."

She closed the channel.

Ena ran for Kate Bush.

Inside the Ninth tether, 18,400 carbon ribbons accepted unequal portions of the pull. One ribbon fractured. The neighboring fibers tightened around the absence without naming it sacrifice.

At Civa Noll's queue desk, a stack of red paper tabs shifted beneath the air system. Civa placed her lunch container on top. The queue remained in order and acquired the smell of pepper broth.

On the lower habitation ring, an Istran child held the sleeve of a parent who was pretending the station had not moved. Neither hand was suited to the emergency rail. Both remained attached.

Seventeen thousand kilometers below, a crystal of frozen ammonia entered a warm violet cloud and became rain no instrument at Sable Quay would ever measure.

At Tether Nine, Seli Arq moved one thumb half a centimeter and kept three ships inside the world.

Seli Holds the Ninth Tether

Chapter II

Seli Arq had been born before Sable Quay.

This was technically impossible and locally ordinary.

Her mother had delivered her aboard Construction Rig Three while the first pylon was still being lowered into Oruv's magnetic track. The port authority later declared legal occupancy to have begun nineteen months afterward. For the first nineteen months of her life, Seli had existed at an unapproved address.

The experience had not improved her opinion of approved ones.

Tether Nine pulled against both shoulders.

The control bar did not move. Its resistance entered through Seli's hands, crossed the conductive bands at her wrists, and became pressure behind her inner eyelids. She felt the three ships as separate arguments.

Brackish Light pulled low and planetward. Her port stabilizer was failing.

Borrowed Morning held too rigidly, the response of a pilot afraid that any movement would be classified as escape.

A Small Agreement changed thrust in six precise increments and one slow biological wave the tether software had labeled UNRESOLVED CARGO MOTION.

Seli had given each vessel a red queue number before their registries returned. That was how arrival worked on the outline. First, keep the ship from falling. Later, permit an office to discover why it had been wrong.

The work channel clicked through the opening of an old Ninth-Tether shift song: three low pulses, a pause, then one bright note that told a crew when to pull together. Seli muted it before the singing began. Timing was useful. Nostalgia could wait.

The office had discovered a faster method.

"Nine," Central Control said through her private channel. "Release order is active. Compliance remains unrecorded. Your attached occupancy is six."

Seli watched the life monitors. The numbers had no confidence seal and therefore appeared gray.

Sixty-three heat patterns aboard *Brackish Light*.

Twenty-two aboard *Borrowed Morning*.

One distributed mechanical signal aboard *A Small Agreement*, repeated through six housings. One living field moved through its hold without dividing into approved bodies.

"Line's fuller than six," Seli said, and muted Central before it could explain her own tether to her.

The new ship reached her outside marker.

It was eleven meters of asymmetry, layered repair, and an engine mounted at an angle suggesting either desperation or a cultural objection to straight lines. Its hull carried at least four salvage traditions. One patch shone the pale green of furniture compound used far outside furniture.

Seli opened a narrow channel. "Ugly ship-if she's got a name, tell me after you match my low vector."

A warm voice answered. "Kate Bush. Already moving."

The ship moved exactly where Seli had asked.

That was less common than ships having names.

"Cargo field ready," said a second voice, calm and complete. "Available support is ten point eight percent and declining."

"Who's dhat?"

"NaNa. Navigational Assistance Node, series A. I am also the person preventing Ena from describing ten point eight as basically eleven."

"I was going to say spiritually eleven," Ena said.

Seli felt the corner of her mouth move. She corrected it before the stranger mistook weather for permission.

"NaNa takes my timing. Ena touches nothin' I didn't name."

"Understood," NaNa said. Ena wisely spent his contribution on flying.

Kate Bush's cargo field opened beneath the Ninth tether.

The line rose.

Eleven percent should not have felt like relief. Relief was not known for its mathematical discipline. Seli's elbows unlocked anyway.

She routed *Brackish Light* through the borrowed field first. The ship's failing stabilizer stopped consuming itself. Jal Rinn appeared in a small comm pane, salt-white residue dried across her pressure hood.

"Still with you," Jal said. "Las' seal's singing."

"Keep low burn."

"Fuel says lower."

"Tell fuel I outrank it."

Jal's laugh broke into static.

Kes Taro from *Borrowed Morning* opened another pane. His face was narrow and dark, marked at the temples by the metal contact points debt crews used for shift monitoring.

"Company lock's tryin' to answer Central," he said. "Cuttin' it voids hull support."

Seli looked at the storm. "Company's not holdin' you up now. Cut it. If dhe hull complains, tell it to form a union."

Kes disappeared into work.

The stranger's ship took the remaining lateral pull without complaint. Its starboard engine shifted two centimeters away from the hull.

NaNa spoke. "The engine remains adjacent. The definition of *often* has become personal."

"Adjacent counts as good today," Ena said.

Seli looked at him through the comm.

He had a human face, brown skin, dark hair beginning to silver at no pace she could measure, and an expression unexpectedly open for a stranger. The distance between them appeared to have been entered incorrectly. Seli

disliked arithmetic done on her behalf.

"You said *dhat sounds right*." Seli watched him glance aside. "Wha' sounded right?"

"Bad choice of words."

"Usually means there are more hiding behind it."

Ena gave her a noncommittal sound. The storm struck before she could decide whether to charge him for it.

The storm struck the port.

All nine tethers tightened. Seli's sensory frill flattened against her jaw. Oruv's horizon flashed white. The three rings of Sable Quay became black circles inside the light, impossibly thin and full of everyone she knew.

Seli shifted three controls and felt Kate Bush answer on the correct beat. Ena had not touched the timing.

Central returned through her mute. "Pilot Arq, you are suspended. Security is approaching your station."

"Dhey'll want inner corridor. Outer handrail's decorative."

Someone behind Seli cleared his throat.

Tebb Arlo stood in the doorway. His yellow safety coat was fastened to the wall by two emergency clips. His telescoping staff had opened to its full length and wedged itself across the corridor, where it performed better as architecture than as measurement.

Two security officers waited behind it.

"The outer approach has been closed by the instrument," Tebb said.

One officer pushed the staff.

It folded.

Tebb looked down. "Access has reconsidered."

The officers entered.

Seli placed her lower thumb on the manual hold.

"Touch me," she said, "and dhe report starts with eighty-seven people fallin'."

"The verified number is six," said the first officer.

"Stand line-side and say dhat."

Neither moved closer.

Ena's voice changed.

The warmth and loose edges disappeared. What remained was calm and located.

"Seli, *Brackish Light* has a temperature rise behind the port stabilizer. Thirty seconds to field loss. I can move Kate Bush under her."

Seli checked his projection. Correct.

"Do it. NaNa, keep my beat. Jal, vent compartment four. Kes, give me two degrees outward. Small Agreement, if you receive this, pulse once for low thrust."

Six mechanical housings flashed together.

The living field in the hold changed color.

One pulse followed.

"Received," Seli said.

Ena moved.

He did not ask for her chair.

Kate Bush slid beneath *Brackish Light* while vapor tore from the damaged stabilizer. Ena used the cargo field to lift, NaNa kept his drive inside Seli's timing, and Jal vented the compartment into Oruv's electric dark.

The temperature stopped climbing.

Seli breathed.

The security officers had remained where she could see their hands.

"Pilot Arq," the second said, softer, "Central needs compliance."

Seli dismissed them with her upper thumb. "Dhen Central sent dhe wrong department."

Tebb's staff opened again after they left. He regarded it with professional betrayal.

Ena's face returned to Seli's display.

"Everyone still there?" Ena asked.

Seli checked the monitors instead of answering him. "You move' before I gave you a name. Pilots who trust that fast are usually stupid or sellin' something. Since you haven't sent an invoice, I'll plan for stupid."

Ena opened his mouth. The loose metal cup chose that moment to escape a cabinet, and NaNa caught it with a service arm before either object or man could worsen the conversation.

Seli returned both hands to the tether. "You flew dhe work clean. Keep doin' dhat. Whatever story you've got, leave it in your ship."

Ena checked *Brackish Light* instead of offering her an explanation. "Temperature stable."

"Good. Yer a hand until I say otherwise."

Seli restored Central Control to audible volume.

The release order was still repeating.

So were the heartbeats it could not verify.

Equal Lives, Unequal Records

Chapter III

Central Control had been designed as a circle so no station would appear more important than another.

Along the curve, a municipal broadcast showed smiling dockworkers beneath ONE QUAY. ONE STANDARD. ONE SAFE ARRIVAL. The governor's elevated station had been positioned directly over the word *one*.

The governor's station was elevated.

Only seven centimeters. Sable Quay preferred its contradictions measurable.

Ena entered through the inner corridor with Tebb Arlo. Kate Bush remained outside under NaNa's control, supporting *Brackish Light* beneath the Ninth tether. Every few steps Ena felt the cargo field through his wrist display: a low vibration representing several hundred tonnes of ship currently trusting old furniture adhesive.

Tebb stopped at the control-room threshold and measured it.

"Now?" Ena asked.

"The threshold has not been excused by weather."

The measuring staff collapsed.

Tebb wrote something down.

At the center of the room, the Equal-Rescue Index turned Oruv's sky into a column of numbers.

Every vessel awaiting Sable Quay appeared as a line of colored light. Green meant eligible. Amber meant conditional. Gray meant the system possessed facts it did not respect. Red meant the vessel had either no credible lives aboard or no credible method of paying for them.

Tether Nine was red.

Seli appeared above it from her control station.

"Ena," she said. "Dhey asked for dhe operator, not company. Do dhe first."

Pael Orm looked up from the Index. Pael was tall and very thin, with skin the color of old pearl and a breathing slit at each wrist. "We required the operator of the supporting vessel."

Ena placed a hand over his heart and survived Seli ignoring it.

Pael enlarged the Ninth tether.

VERIFIED OCCUPANCY: 6

ECONOMIC CONTINUITY: 0.04

PAYMENT CONFIDENCE: UNRECOVERABLE

RESCUE PRIORITY: RELEASE

Ena looked at the life scans beside it. Eighty-five embodied heat patterns and two other coherent systems occupied the same display. The Index rendered them in gray.

"*Ach, komm*. How do you get six?" he asked.

"*A Small Agreement* has six registered passenger licenses," Pael said. "The other two ships have no recognized citizenship records. Their body scans are visible, but the Index cannot compare them to verified occupants."

Seli's jaw frill lifted.

"Dhey all pull dhe same from my chair," Seli said. "Your system put 'em at release and found a polite noun for last."

Pael did not flinch. He closed one pane and opened the Index history.

Forty-two years earlier, before Sable Quay had legal weather or finished walls, an ion storm had caught nineteen ships outside the construction ring. Pilots saved vessels belonging to their own employers, kin houses, and recognized states. Three unconnected migrant craft were released. One thousand four hundred and six people died.

The inquiry's final sentence appeared above the room:

EQUAL DANGER SHALL RECEIVE EQUAL RESCUE WITHOUT FAVOR, HOUSE, OR INTEREST.

"The Index was built because personal witness failed," Pael said. "Pilots saw their own people most clearly. Your doctrine came from the inquiry: one live line, one answerable hand."

Seli's voice lost some of its edge. "I know dhe inquiry. My mother worke' dhe construction ring after it. These are arrivals assigned my tether, not cousins I smuggled into a storm."

Pael opened the queue history.

The three craft had appeared as temporary entries. Each entry ended when its registry failed.

"If I accept a pilot's unverified count," Pael said, "the next pilot may accept an employer's invented one. If I accept heat as personhood, a reactor becomes three hundred citizens. If I accept a transmitted claim, a yacht can fill itself with ten thousand voices before requesting a tether. I need a rule before the storm needs an answer."

Ena nodded slowly.

That was the first dangerous thing about Pael Orm: Pael had a point.

The second was that the point had become a door with people outside it.

"You couldn't make him lazy?" Ena asked the writer.

Pael's wrist slits narrowed. "If an absent participant has accused me of laziness, record my objection in full."

"He says thanks."

The writer, correctly sensing danger, declined to appear.

"Who verifies the records?" Ena asked.

"Member governments, licensed habitats, insurers, and recognized continuity offices. Two of those governments currently deny the refugee records."

"And the debt workers?"

Pael looked at *Borrowed Morning*.

"Their employer lists them as recoverable assets."

Ena's face went still.

"Ah."

Seli noticed. "Don' go quiet on my line, stranger. Quiet people start makin'

large decisions for everybody."

Ena exhaled through his nose. His voice had become too quiet.

Tebb stood beside the governor's elevated station, examining its emergency rail. "This rail assumes one hand type, one standing height, and forward-facing shoulders."

Pael looked at him. "Is that relevant?"

Tebb placed his own hand beneath the rail without reaching it. "To the bodies falling, yes. Tha' distance is equal. The fall will personalize it."

Ena looked from the rail to the Index.

Governor Deyr Voss entered before the thought could become a speech.

He wore no ceremonial coat, only a black pressure layer marked with the three rings of Sable Quay. His hair had been cut for a helmet. He carried authority with the exhausted economy of someone who had already used it all morning and expected the afternoon to ask for more.

"Storm front reaches the outer ring in thirty-eight minutes," he said.

"Tethers One through Eight are at capacity. I have eleven thousand registered occupants in approach and one line holding craft the Index cannot defend."

Seli's image sharpened. "Work dhe eleven thousand. I've got eighty-seven already pullin' on my hands."

Voss turned to Ena. "Your vessel is unlicensed for station rescue."

"It's licensed for kitchen risk."

The governor did not react.

Ena liked him slightly less for wasting a category.

Pael displayed the next three priorities.

The first was a fuel carrier with a failing containment seam and sixty workers. The second was a passenger habitat rotating beyond its rated axis. The third was *Uninterrupted*, a private yacht carrying eighteen registered beings and an orchard whose genetic archive was valued above several outer-ring districts.

"Dhat yacht's stable," Seli said.

"Its continuity score is high," Pael replied.

Ena leaned toward the display.

"The trees get a vote?"

"The orchard preserves nine extinct fruit lines."

"Good for the trees. Hey, buddies. Proud of you." Ena pointed to the refugee ships. "The Index can keep its moral conclusion in a separate department; the yacht is still stable and those people are still falling."

Pael closed the orchard detail without defending its poetry.

Governor Voss clasped his hands behind his back. "Economic continuity keeps the Quay capable of rescuing anyone. If the port becomes insolvent, impartiality will have no engines."

"So rich people live first to fund the principle that everyone's equal."

"Insured trade subsidizes public tether capacity."

Ena's pitch began to rise. "Right, and once breathing depends on premium passage, the premium people become essential because they pay for the system that made everyone else nonessential, and now the system can't rescue poor people until it rescues the reason they're poor--"

NaNa entered through his wrist.

"Ena. *Brackish Light* requires a six-degree correction."

The rant stopped at the edge of work.

"Seli?"

"Already movin' her."

Ena watched Kate Bush respond through NaNa. Seli shifted the connected ships with no wasted thrust. He understood the movement and did not understand how she had known the line would accept it.

Pael reduced the Index to the Ninth tether.

"What do you propose?" Pael asked.

Seli answered first. "A witness procedure. Start with my count, Jal's statement, the body scans, maybe the workers who watched them board. You want two more kinds, fine. Name them."

"You and Jal are interested parties," Pael said. "A sensor can establish heat, not moral standing, and a worker can be mistaken or paid. I cannot call any claim true because it arrived in a frightened voice."

"Everybody attached to dyin' is interested," Seli replied. "Doesn't make dhe bodies less present."

Ena turned to Pael. "And a payment confidence score isn't disinterested. It just doesn't breathe hard while it talks."

No one spoke for a moment.

The storm moved beneath the floor, a vibration too slow for sound.

Pael examined the gray life scans. "A witness procedure would require standards we do not have."

"Draft while we hold," Seli said. "Start with wha' can be seen, who did dhe seeing, and who falls if you're wrong."

Governor Voss placed one hand on the raised station.

"The release order stands."

Seli's face closed.

"Still no."

An incoming medical code appeared above them.

The room changed before anyone read the name.

Bright Triage had entered Oruv's approach carrying forty-one critical patients, twelve medical crew, and a storm field expected to fail in twenty-nine minutes.

The medical lead's identity expanded beneath it.

DR. HESSA VOSS.

The governor's hand tightened.

Personal interest entered the impartial room and stood seven centimeters above everyone else.

Inside Tebb Arlo's measuring staff, a spring compressed 2.3 millimeters beyond its preferred length. The staff had no theory of equal treatment. It opposed the load available to it.

On Borrowed Morning, Kes Taro divided one oxygen figure by twenty-two because the company ledger divided it by recovered asset value. Both calculations used the same numerals. Only one produced breathing.

At a clinic on Sable Quay's middle ring, a nurse raised a chair for an Istran patient and lowered it for a four-legged child. The furniture changed height without accusing either body of requesting advantage.

The Equal-Rescue Index reduced eighty-five visible heat patterns and two coherent systems through confidence values approaching zero. Its arithmetic remained internally consistent and externally fatal.

Across the Quay, Civa Noll's pepper broth leaked beneath its lid and stained six red queue tabs purple along one corner. Civa moved the container, assessed the damage, and kept the tabs. Sequence had survived lunch.

A Very Advanced Piece of Paper

Chapter IV

Civa Noll administered Emergency Arrivals from behind a counter designed for beings exactly one hundred and sixty centimeters tall.

No such being was present.

The counter met Ena at the ribs, Seli at the lower chest, and Tebb Arlo somewhere above the head. A shallow trench had been cut into the floor for taller bodies. Two portable steps had been supplied for shorter ones. The steps were chained to the counter to prevent theft and placed beyond the reach of anyone who required them.

Tebb measured the arrangement.

"The counter serves a theoretical public."

Civa looked over her spectacles. "Take a number."

The dispenser offered a button marked WAITING IS COMMUNITY. Tebb pressed it with the measuring staff and received number 431, which was apparently a form of belonging.

Tebb's measuring staff unfolded with a crisp series of clicks, struck the underside of the counter, and folded itself again.

Civa pointed at the dispenser.

Tebb took a number.

Ena liked her immediately.

Seli had returned to the Ninth tether. She had left him with three instructions: collect the physical arrival record, do not promise anyone a berth, and do not improve the system without asking where the improvement would land. She had called the last instruction preventive. Ena had recognized an accusation and, for once, preserved silence.

Now Civa pulled a red rectangle from the dispenser and pushed it across the counter.

It measured fifty-eight by thirty-one millimeters. Three holes interrupted one edge. The serial 44116 had been pressed into its surface deeply enough to survive water, heat, and an ambitious clerk. Red ferric ink marked Ena's open arrival time.

He held it toward the ceiling light.

"Paper," he said. "Humanity's greatest technical achievement."

"Cellulose-ceramic queue stock," Civa said. "And yes."

Civa's expression softened by an amount normally visible only to survey equipment.

"Second greatest," Ena said. "We also made doors."

The softness disappeared.

"Doors are architecture admitting it made a hole."

Ena placed one hand over his heart. "Civa, you had me at 'take a number.'"

Behind them, Koru-of-Four entered sideways carrying a ceremonial reception table. The table had six legs, none located where a species with knees would have preferred. Koru rotated it through the doorway, over the chained steps, under Tebb's extended staff, and into a position that blocked every active queue.

"Delivery for Public Confidence," Koru said.

Civa did not look up. "Public Confidence moved to Central Ring before the table arrived. It declined to leave a forwarding aperture."

Koru considered the table, the corridor, and the political implications of moving either.

They set the table upright against a wall. One leg continued to obstruct the number dispenser, but only for bodies with shoulders.

Civa opened a steel drawer beneath the counter. It contained a paper ledger, two stamp wheels, a red ink block, and the kind of professional resentment that required no storage space.

"Which arrivals?"

"Ninth tether. Three ships."

She found the entries without consulting a screen.

"*Brackish Light*, serial 44108. *Borrowed Morning*, 44109. *A Small Agreement*, 44110."

The corresponding stubs carried a purple stain across one corner.

Ena smelled one.

"Pepper?"

"Broth."

The digital wall beside Civa brightened.

CURRENT RESCUE ORDER

1. *Uninterrupted*
2. *Bright Triage*
3. Fuel Tender *Perseverance of Account*
4. *Brackish Light* - status disputed

The other two refugee vessels did not appear.

Ena placed his tab beside the stained three. His unstained stock came six serials after them.

"Where's the yacht's?"

Civa found stub 44123.

It was clean.

"Screen says it arrived first."

"Dhe screen's had a recent religious experience."

Ena glanced at her.

Civa rotated the terminal. A blue seal occupied the amendment field beneath *Uninterrupted*.

RETROACTIVE URGENCY CONFIRMED

EMERGENCY SOLVENCY EXCEPTION 12-C

PRIORITY EFFECTIVE FOUR HOURS BEFORE PURCHASE

An incoming service channel appeared beneath the seal.

UNINTERRUPTED - GUEST SERVICES - JO

Civa regarded it with the expression she reserved for notices that had arrived after their own consequences.

Ena accepted the channel before she could refuse it on principle.

Jo's image formed in warm orchard light. She wore a cream workcoat with a name badge at the collar and had the composed posture of someone who had already located blankets, refreshments, evacuation routes, and the person most likely to complain about each.

"Good evening, Emergency Arrivals," she said. "I am Jo, executive assistant to Mr. Quist. Pplease confirm that our vessel has been assigned first rescue position."

"It has," Civa said. "Incorrectly."

Jo's smile held. Her eyes moved once toward information outside the frame. "For clarity, three vessels were registered bbefore ours."

"Correct."

"And a payment has made Mr. Quist arrive four hours before he arrived."

"Also correct."

Ena watched her carefully. "That feel normal to you?"

"It feels expensive" Jo said.

Her lower lip ridges gave a quiet double click.

"I have begun a displacement list," she said. "Every person asked to become less urgent so the yacht could become earlier."

Civa looked up from the red tab.

"Have you?"

"Ppartially. The emergency refreshments delayed the first pass."

"May I retain that answer in our guest-services record?"

Civa lifted the red tab. "It already is."

"Then I have something to compare."

Behind her, an employee crossed the orchard carrying a crate of emergency water with the careful dignity of a person determined not to be visible while doing the useful work. Jo turned just enough to make room for them, then faced the channel again.

"I will inform Mr. Quist that the position is disputed," she said. "And I will retain the guest-services arrival record."

Civa's gaze sharpened behind the spectacles.

"Retain means retain?"

"With three separately stored copies, ma'am."

"Good."

Jo's polite expression altered by less than a breath. It was not pleasure exactly. It was the look of a person unexpectedly told that the work she had already done might count.

"Thank you," she said.

The channel closed.

"Dhat," Civa said, "is blue ink on a red form. Technically lawful bastardry; the distinction has a fee."

"Ah."

The terminal offered him an informational panel.

RETROACTIVE URGENCY

Because danger should not have to wait for payment processing.

Ena read it twice.

His breathing changed.

NaNa's voice came through his wrist unit. "Your pulse has entered the consumerism range."

"They sold yesterday."

"They sold a priority adjustment."

"No, no, they sold yesterday. Somebody looked at time-time, NaNa, the one thing we all get robbed by at the same speed-and put a premium tier on the part that already happened. Soon they'll sell childhood with fewer advertisements. You'll remember a better mother for nineteen credits a month, but only while your subscription remains active. Grief will have sponsored content. Death will ask whether you want to upgrade to Death Plus so the coffin closes without a message from a partner brand-

Civa stamped his tab.

The sound cut through him.

"Will your outrage require a receipt?"

Ena stared at the stamp.

"Maybe."

"Paper or digital?"

He looked ashamed of how easy this was.

"Paper."

Civa printed one.

At the far end of the office, a round gray animal no larger than Ena's palm emerged from a vent carrying a metal washer in its mouth. It saw the argument, set the washer down, and backed into the vent without breaking eye contact. The washer remained. It had made a sound institutional judgment about ownership.

Tebb climbed onto one of the chained steps and inspected the tabs.

"The edge holes are not decorative."

"Nothing in this office is," Civa said, glancing at the ceremonial table.

"That was imposed from elsewhere."

Tebb aligned Ena's tab against his staff. "Three-punch berth encoding. Manual magnetic readers used this geometry before the Quay joined its systems."

Civa turned several pages in the ledger.

"Berths One through Twelve were converted."

"Was there a Zero?" Ena asked.

Civa stopped.

The public terminal had no Berth Zero.

Her paper index did.

BERTH 0 - ISOLATED STORM CRADLE - OUTERLINE CONSTRUCTION ACCESS

STATUS: NOT IN SERVICE

"Can it hold ships?" Ena asked.

"It hel' construction rigs."

"Does it still exist?"

Civa read the status again. "Not according to the system."

Ena smiled.

"Best kind."

Somewhere beyond the counter, the writer experienced the indecent satisfaction of a useful object arriving exactly when the plot required it.

Ena tapped the ledger. "Don't you take credit. Civa kept it for thirty-two years."

Civa pulled another red rectangle from the dispenser and set it beside him. "The writer takes a number."

"*Putain*," the writer said.

She tore a certified copy from the ledger, stamped every corner, stamped the place where the corners might have been accused of meeting, and handed it to him.

"Dhe old reader will accept dhe earliest open-arrival tab assigned to an outerline berth class. If it still has power."

Ena looked at 44108.

"Can I take this?"

Civa closed her hand over it. "It is evidence, not a souvenir."

Her refusal reassured him. "Can you bring it to the Ninth?"

Civa looked at the emergency order, the blue amendment, and the red ledger she had maintained through thirty-two years of people calling it obsolete.

She removed her spectacles. "My counter closes in seven minutes for a contractual break I have skipped for eleven years."

Ena nodded solemnly.

"Do not make it sentimental."

He contacted Seli. "I found very advanced paper. It remembers the truth and might open a dead berth."

Wind rasped across her channel. A pause followed while irritation moved aside

for work.

"Bring it."

The Ship with No Category

Chapter V

The service cage had been built to carry replacement tether coils, not people. It therefore possessed six anchors, two independent brakes, a weather shell, and no seats.

Passenger transport on Sable Quay offered softer cushions and one brake.

Ena clipped his harness to the floor beside Civa. Koru-of-Four occupied most of the remaining space with the ceremonial table.

"Why is that coming?" Ena asked.

"Delivery route crosses Ninth," Koru said. "No surcharge for dyin'. Haul 'er."

Civa secured the ledger inside her coat. "If dhe table reaches Public Confidence before my evidence reaches Central Control, I will regard dhat as a complete description of government."

The cage left the inner ring.

Oruv opened beneath them.

The gas giant had no surface on which the eye could rest. Violet cloud bands curved through distances large enough to contain countries. Pale vortices rotated inside darker storms, each slow from orbit and violent enough within itself to erase a city's opinion of permanence. Sable Quay's black rings hung above that depth on magnetism, mathematics, and the continuing willingness of workers to replace hot components.

Lightning moved below the cloud tops without sound.

Above them, the stars had become thin scratches behind charged dust.

Civa held the rail.

The cage passed the first refugee vessel.

Brackish Light had once been white. Salt condensers and home repairs had covered its hull in pale scales, patched metal, and seven incompatible shades of sealant. Sixty-three heat signatures occupied a ship certified for twenty-four.

Jal Rinn appeared on the cage display. Her face was narrow, exhausted, and crossed by the mineral burns of a salt-habitat engineer.

"You brought furniture," she said. "We nearly lef' port for less."

Koru placed one hand on the table. "Government furniture. Doesn't breathe under current specifications."

"Boards las'."

Seli's voice entered the channel.

"Cage Three, keep line-side. Pull is climbin'."

Ena checked the tether angle. "We can take four percent through the cage rail."

"You can take zero through my maintenance cage," Seli said. "Improvise again and I'll certify you as passenger transport, dhat clear?"

Ena considered arguing that the cage already carried passengers. Seli's channel remained open. He stayed line-side.

They crossed *Borrowed Morning*. Its company colors had been scraped from the

hull, but the old slogan remained visible beneath the scratches:

YOUR HOURS BUILD TOMORROW

Someone had added:

WE WOULD LIKE THEM BACK

Kes Taro's voice arrived without video.

"Common feeder keeps droppin'," Kes said. "Whatever your gauge says, we smell the insulation."

Seli assigned him a repair drone and a four-minute window. He sent the drone along the shared oxygen conduit, found an arcing coupler, and bypassed it without changing the load distribution.

"Done."

Kes breathed into the channel. "Gauge agrees now. Smell's still terrible. We're callin' that honest."

Koru examined the ceremonial finish. "Confidence-grade varnish. Khat's why it peels."

At the end of the tether chain waited *A Small Agreement*.

The ship resembled two translucent leaves folded around a dark seed. Its hull was partly grown and partly negotiated: mineral ribs, living membranes, and repairs that had scarred silver instead of brown. It transmitted no registered occupant pattern.

Six maintenance licenses answered from inside.

The Index displayed six green passenger symbols.

Civa identified the six licenses as Heddle: one machine using six tool housings.

The six symbols moved in perfect simultaneity.

Civa's screen showed Talar Fold as a cargo triangle.

"One organism?" Ena asked.

"Dhe Fold rejects dhe question."

The cage sealed to the vessel's service lip. Koru remained outside with the table because the table's clearance certification was under appeal.

Ena entered first.

Six small tool housings waited in the airlock. Each had three articulated arms, magnetic feet, compact EVA jets, a round camera cluster, and a different patch of yellow paint. One held a welding torch. One held a coil of cable. A third held what appeared to be half a biscuit.

"Hey, buddies."

All six camera clusters tilted.

"Buddy," they said together. "Singular. The greeting is accepted-plurality has been entered as a correctable error."

Ena adjusted. "Hey, buddy. I'm Ena."

The housing with the biscuit stored it in a chest compartment.

Beyond the airlock, Talar Fold occupied the ship's central chamber.

There was no single body.

Fine copper roots crossed the walls and entered pools of amber fluid. Thin membranes rose from those pools, joined, divided, and folded through one another. Thoughts traveled visibly as green light. Some returned from the opposite wall before they had left the first. At the center, three breathing organs shared one transparent vessel and disagreed gently about rhythm.

Ena stopped outside the chamber.

"Hey, buddy."

Green light moved through the Fold.

The answer reached every surface around him.

"Singular is acceptable today."

"Good. I'm Ena. We're trying to keep you attached."

"We are also trying this."

Civa entered and opened her ledger. "For an emergency witness appeal, state the number of persons occupying this vessel, if that noun survives the question."

Light gathered along seven membranes, diminished to two, spread through the roots, and returned from behind Ena.

"That question damaged three previous legal systems."

Civa turned to a clean page. "I have more paper than they did."

Talar considered this.

"Record one claimant whose internal plurality is not presently available for division."

Civa wrote every word.

Ena checked the failing storm membrane. A coolant capillary had split near the outer rib. Each flash from Oruv widened it by a fraction.

"May I help with that?"

The Fold's green light touched the damaged line. "You may hold it closed. Do not interpret access as intimacy. Many beings do."

Ena braced both hands around the capillary while Heddle's six housings arrived with six separate tools.

Each housing took a different attachment point. The repair happened as one action in six places.

Together they sealed the capillary.

Nobody asked Talar to demonstrate pain. Nobody asked Heddle to select a favorite body. Ena did not announce this as virtue. He merely kept holding the line until the material cooled, because courtesy was most useful.

In a narrow drainage channel near his boot, a translucent filter animal had become trapped behind a loosened grate. It pushed forward, recoiled from the charged metal, and tried again.

"Hey, buddy. Rough shift?"

Ena lifted the grate. The animal flowed past his fingers and vanished into the warm pipes.

Heddle watched through six cameras.

"It is not registered," said three housings. "The Index will therefore claim it is not warm," the others added.

"Don't tell the Index."

"The Index has not asked me a question I respect."

When they returned to the cage, Seli had rotated the tether chain three degrees away from a descending charge front. She had done it without releasing any vessel.

"Repair held," Ena reported. "Stayed inside the assignment and everything."

Seli took long enough that he began expecting praise.

"Keep the next feeder alive," she said. "We'll discuss medals after the storm."

Ena put a hand to his heart. "She believes in me."

Civa stamped Talar's statement against the cage wall.

Ahead of them, a medical ship fell out of the storm.

Bright Triage emerged trailing blue fire from its field vanes. Forty-one patient signals flickered inside. Its captain requested emergency attachment to the Ninth.

Central Control denied the request.

Governor Voss called Seli privately.

She put him on the public channel.

"Say it where the tether can hear."

Impartiality for Sale

Chapter VI

Governor Voss appeared above the Ninth tether as a blue projection cut through by storm interference.

His emergency channel still opened with the governor's campaign chord: four warm notes licensed from a dockside reunion drama. Hessa muted it with one finger before he could pretend the music was not his.

He had removed the ceremonial collar he wore in Central Control. Without it, he looked less like the port and more like a tired Istran whose sister was falling through charged weather.

"Pilot Arq," he said. "*Bright Triage* has twenty-six minutes of field."

"Twenty-four," Dr. Hessa Voss said from the medical ship.

Her image occupied a smaller window. A patient alarm sounded behind her. She silenced it with one hand and continued reading a blood chemistry report while her brother spoke.

"Central has authorized a recovery tug," the governor said. "Release one undocumented vessel and attach *Bright Triage*. Its fifty-three registered lives receive the line now; the tug collects the released craft after the charge front passes."

Seli kept both hands on the tether controls.

"No."

Jal Rinn broke into the channel. "Would the governor like us to die with our identification held against the window? I can fetch the seal."

"Captain Rinn, I am trying to prevent--"

"You're trying to improve the paperwork around it."

Hessa looked up from her patient.

"Deyr, don' use my ship to make an immoral order sound medical."

The governor's projection turned toward her. His next words arrived stripped of office. "Hessa. Forty-one patients, a failing field, and you are standing in the middle of it."

Hessa's face changed. Not softened. Not hardened. It simply became her face rather than the medical lead's.

"I know my census, Deyr. I know where I'm standin'. Neither fact gives you a hand on Seli's release."

Behind her, an orderly crossed the cabin carrying three infusion bags and a folding stool. The ship lurched. The stool opened, caught the orderly behind both knees, and seated him with perfect courtesy. He remained there for one second, reconsidered several professional choices, closed the stool, and kept moving.

The governor saw none of it.

Ena did.

"What can your remaining field cover?" Ena asked Hessa. "Could you stretch it over the tether chain?"

"My hull, three meters of bad ambition, and perhaps eight seconds. Nine if every patient develops excellent timing."

"Keep thinkin'," Seli said, "but do it line-side."

He moved away from her console.

Seli enlarged the load diagram. The three refugee ships already used ninety-four percent of the Ninth tether's safe storm pull. *Bright Triage* could not join the chain without another anchor. Detaching any vessel would send it into the same crosswind that had nearly taken *Brackish Light*.

There were more people than capacity and no arrangement in which arithmetic could remain innocent.

"I can guarantee all three craft the first tug after *Bright Triage* is secure," Voss said. "The Index places the medical ship first."

"You can guarantee the schedule," Seli replied. "Storm's not on your payroll, and your Index still put a yacht ahead of the hospital."

As if summoned by the accusation, *Uninterrupted* requested entry to the channel.

Orren Quist appeared in a room of warm wood, soft light, and carefully controlled gravity. Behind him, a climate orchard extended beneath a glass ceiling. One small yellow fruit had escaped its tree and drifted past his shoulder. A uniformed employee pursued it with a net while trying to remain outside the camera frame.

"My vessel purchased lawful priority," Quist said. "The service funds the tug Governor Voss just authorized, the fields around this station, salaries, reserve fuel, maintenance. You may dislike the price mechanism. The mechanism remains under your feet."

"I dislike that you bought an earlier yesterday and now want gratitude for the floor."

The fruit passed behind him again, now followed by two employees and the net.

"There are eighteen people aboard *Uninterrupted*," Quist continued. "Most work for me. They do not become decorative because I am rich."

"Mr. Quist," Jo said from just outside the projection, "for the guest-services record: the registered arrival time is not the first arrival time. I can make that distinction presentable, sir. I cannot make it earlier."

Quist did not turn toward her. "The lawful field governs rescue order."

"Yes, sir." Her voice stayed pleasantly level. "I have preserved both fields, a displacement list, and a response should anyone ask what the purchase cost."

"No," Ena said. "They don't."

Quist had expected resistance and briefly had nowhere to place agreement.

Ena went on. "But your gardener doesn't get a more complete soul because you paid for four hours he didn't live."

The gardener caught the fruit. Everyone in the orchard pretended this had not been the most successful operation presently visible.

Pael Orm joined from Central Control.

"Premium contributions provide thirty-one percent of annual storm rescue funding."

"What percentage of first rescue positions do they buy in this event?" Seli

asked.

Pael's gaze moved to a calculation. "Sixty-two."

The number remained in the channel.

Impartiality had never looked exactly like this. It had looked like rules no one could bend, applied without hearing names. Sable Quay had built those rules after powerful pilots saved relatives and sponsors while migrant ships came apart outside. The Index had made old favoritism difficult.

It had also taught money to arrive disguised as no one.

Governor Voss lowered his voice.

"Pilot Arq, I am ordering you to release *A Small Agreement*."

Talar Fold's green light entered the channel from several directions.

"We object to being selected by grammatical absence."

Voss closed his eyes.

"I have no record with which to count you."

"You have a request with which to hear us."

Heddle added through six identical speakers. "You count me six times," said three. "I have attempted one correction for nine years," said the others. "Your office invoiced it six times. It has therefore been nine years six times."

Ena covered his mouth.

Seli saw him. "Control your genius and check the feeder."

He checked the common oxygen line. The repair was holding.

Hessa's patient alarms multiplied.

"Pilot," she said, "I'm requestin' a tether because my patients require one. I am not requesting someone else's death. If that makes them the same request, deny me."

Seli watched the medical ship's failing field.

Her inner eyelids closed and cleared against the ion glare.

Ena understood why systems were attractive. A system could call this a decision and prevent any one person from having to feel the whole shape of it.

"We need another place to put weight," he said. "Berth Zero."

He sent Civa's record.

Seli read the construction plan.

"An isolated cradle with no registered power, no active approach, and six manual clamps," she said. "Yer promisin' dead machinery's got a lot of ways to stay dead."

"Low expectations are why I like it. We inspect first; nobody moves until it wakes."

Seli looked at him for a long moment.

"Before we move anybody: you trusted my hands before you knew what they did."

Don't turn this old berth into a story where that made you right."

The sentence landed cleanly.

Ena glanced toward the violet planet.

He rubbed one thumb along Civa's paper copy. "It didn't. I got ahead of what I knew."

The tether load jumped. Seli corrected *Brackish Light* before the warning finished drawing itself.

"Go inspect dhe berth," she said. "Yer more useful dhere."

She opened a work channel to Tebb, Koru, Civa, and Heddle.

"We inspect Berth Zero. Nobody detaches. Nobody purchases an additional past. Governor, if you want my line, come take it from my hands."

Voss stared at his sister's failing ship.

He did not repeat the order.

At that instant, in a seam beneath the Ninth tether's outer pylon, a crystal imperfection redirected one part in eleven thousand of the magnetic load. The deviation was permitted. The metal around it had permitted smaller deviations for thirty-one years. Permission accumulated.

In Central Ring, an Istran parent allowed a feverish child to step ahead in a water queue. Twelve people made space. The queue remained a queue. Equality survived contact with temperature.

Civa Noll placed red stub 44108 beside a blue amendment seal. The blue light could rewrite four hours. It could not acquire a pepper stain from lunch.

Inside Uninterrupted, an orchard technician returned the escaped fruit to its branch with temporary adhesive. The fruit had no medical need and no economic opinion. It fell off again.

Far below, an organism in Oruv's upper clouds changed the conductivity of its skin by 0.04 percent and passed unharmed through lightning that would have vaporized Sable Quay. No law had made its body equal to the station. Its body had become adequate to its circumstance.

The imperfection beneath the Ninth tether lengthened by the width of a blood cell.

Retroactive Urgency

Chapter VII

Berth Zero occupied a blind cavity between Sable Quay's outer ring and the magnetic track.

The modern port had been built around it, over it, and eventually without remembering it. Its construction access appeared on no current navigation map. The entrance was hidden behind a wall panel displaying the names of donors who had funded the wall panel.

A polishing drone moved patiently across the donor names. It had been assigned to preserve public memory and had developed no task language for the wall behind them. When Ena touched the panel, it issued a soft warning: PLEASE DO NOT ALTER GRATITUDE.

Tebb measured the panel.

"It is four centimeters thicker than the wall it commemorates."

Koru set the ceremonial table beneath it. "Use khat table?"

"Public Confidence authorized no contact with tools," Civa said.

Koru looked at the table's six obstructive legs.

"Khat's not a tool."

They drove it into the panel.

The donor names fell inward together.

Beyond them, a narrow passage descended through unlit machinery toward the old cradle. Tebb extended his staff into the opening. It unfolded three sections, hesitated, and collapsed into his sleeve.

"Clearance assessment remains preliminary," Tebb said. He looked at Ena before Ena could ask for whom. "The language is not recreational."

NaNa projected an old maintenance plan from Kate Bush. Six clamp housings surrounded the cradle. A manual reader stood beside the inner lock. The berth's power circuit had never joined Central Control and therefore could not be activated, diagnosed, billed, optimized, or denied from there.

"Beautiful," Ena said. "Isolated, unbillable, and defective. My three favorite features."

Seli remained at the Ninth controls, present through Ena's wrist display. Her hands moved constantly as the storm pulled at the three ships.

"How long t'inspect?" she asked.

Tebb regarded the passage. "Depends on the presen' bodies. *All* is not one duration."

"Send me the slowest."

Koru took the table apart. Each ceremonial leg contained a hollow carbon-composite beam rated to support six times the weight the assembled table could bear.

"Khat furniture lies 'bout vocation," Koru said.

They distributed the beams among four port workers and entered the passage.

Civa stayed behind.

"I have a queue dispute."

She placed her ledger on the table's inverted top. Pael Orm had arrived from

Central Control, followed by Governor Voss and Orren Quist's projection. The governor no longer stood above anyone. Dust from the fallen donor panel had settled on one shoulder.

Quist's projected coat rejected the dust aesthetically.

The actual dust passed through him and settled on Pael.

Civa arranged the stubs in order.

44108. Purple corner.

44109. Purple corner.

44110. Purple corner.

44111. Clean.

44112. Clean.

"These establish issue sequence," she said. "The ledger establishes arrival. My stamp wheel establishes the open status. The stain establishes that the first three existed before 18:04, when my broth suffered a containment failure."

Quist examined the tabs.

"Paper can be altered," Quist said. "Your lunch is not a certified clock, and the exception was lawfully purchased. Premiums like mine keep this port operating."

Civa turned his record over. Paper, unlike the projection standing above it, kept evidence of every hand.

Blue photonic ink shone beneath the red ferric mark.

"Your amendment was applied at 20:11 and made effective at 16:11. Your ship arrived at 18:19. The service did not correct an error."

Civa's spectacles caught the blue light.

"My labor operates this port. Your payment did not occur at 16:11."

A second channel opened beside Quist's projection. Jo appeared against the orchard wall, one hand resting on a portable service console.

"For the record," she said, "*Uninterrupted* crossed the Quay boundary at 18:19. Guest services received the priority amendment at 20:11. I have retained the unedited arrival log in three locations. One is here. One is sealed with public review. The third releases only the sequence, never staff records, if the other two become unavailable."

Quist's mouth tightened. "Jo."

"I am responding to a request for sequence, sir. I remain very good at that. I am not claiming independence. You pay me. I cannot make my salary into a witness." Her voice remained almost painfully courteous. "I can make it harder to erase what it saw. This is a continuity measure, not a threat."

Pael looked from the blue seal to her record.

"Your record corroborates the sequence," he said. "It does not satisfy the independence requirement."

"Correct," Jo said. "Please do not promote it beyond what it can bear."

Pael read the entries twice.

"The Index accepts verified amendments," Pael said, reading the blue field again. "This one is verified. That is the problem."

No one interrupted.

Pael enlarged the rescue model. "I believed the Index's errors came from incomplete records. They do. But Retroactive Urgency is not missing data. It is a preference the model has been instructed to describe as time."

Governor Voss looked toward *Bright Triage* on the storm display.

"Can you suspend it?"

"During an active rescue, suspension requires a replacement procedure," Pael said. "Two materially independent witnesses, at minimum. Attached pilots remain interested parties."

"Everyone attached to dyin' is interested," Seli said. "Doesn't make dhem blind."

Tebb's voice came from inside the passage.

"I am materially independent for the presen' dispute," Tebb said. "I have observed bodies occupying access routes designed without them. It is a reliable local pattern."

His staff struck metal and collapsed.

Koru added, "Carrie' table past *Brackish Light*. Sixty-khree waved. Table did not."

Quist looked at Koru's empty place beside the dismantled furniture.

"You are proposing a safety assessor and a porter as proof?" Quist asked.

"I'm proposin' people who looke'," Seli said.

The fruit on *Uninterrupted* fell for a third time.

This time no one pursued it.

From Berth Zero, Ena reached the manual reader.

It was a black slot surrounded by six words in construction-era deck cant:

OPEN ARRIVAL. OPEN WEIGHT. HOLD ALL.

"Civa, I need 44108."

She closed her fingers around the tab. "You are in a decommissioned berth during an ion storm, so no, I will not hand you evidence. I will insert it."

Ena stepped aside.

Civa climbed into the passage carrying the tab in a sealed evidence sleeve.

Governor Voss followed.

"Your sister is outside with eighty-seven people the Index cannot count honestly," Pael told him. "If you are leaving Operations, give me Operations."

Voss stopped.

He removed the governor's access seal from his wrist and handed it to Pael.

"Run Operations."

It was not absolution. It was a useful decision made late.

Civa reached the reader. She inspected the slot for dust, damage, fraud, and blue ink.

"Acceptable."

She inserted 44108.

Nothing happened.

Ena waited.

Tebb checked the reader height.

Koru held two table legs against a corroded support.

The lights came on one by one.

Not overhead. Underfoot.

A black curve emerged beneath centuries of dust, followed by another and another: the magnetic cradle, large enough for construction rigs, refugee ships, and several administrative mistakes. Six clamp indicators woke around it. Five were red.

The sixth was absent.

Heddle's six housings crossed from *A Small Agreement* on their compact EVA jets and entered the passage through the outer maintenance lock in single file.

"Manual clamp control confirmed," Heddle said.

"Can all six clamps move at once?" Ena asked.

"If I operate them, yes. I operate myself. *All six* describes my locations, not my labor."

Ena amended the sentence with a nod.

The six housings separated toward the clamp shafts.

NaNa modeled the approach. "Berth Zero can accept the connected vessels if the Ninth tether rotates twenty-one degrees and *Bright Triage* contributes its field during insertion. Peak load is one hundred and nineteen percent for ninety-two seconds. Kate Bush can remove eleven percent laterally."

"Still eigh' over," Seli said.

Quist's projection spoke beside the entrance. "*Uninterrupted* can provide counterthrust."

Everyone turned.

He looked offended by the attention.

"My vessel is not solely an orchard."

"You'll lose your drive vanes," Seli said. "All of 'em."

"The vanes are insured," Quist replied. "The employees are not. We'll do it."

Seli studied the combined model.

For the first time, every ship appeared in one geometry. Not one score. Not one kind of body. One problem in which different capacities could answer different needs.

Pael began drafting an emergency suspension of the Index.

The storm did not wait for procedure.

The crystal flaw beneath the Ninth tether crossed a grain boundary.

The pylon made a sound too low to hear and too large not to feel.

On Seli's display, the outer ring moved four centimeters away from the rest of Sable Quay.

The gap became nine.

Nineteen.

Every clamp alarm spoke at once.

Seli's hands closed around the controls.

"All vessels," she said. "Hold course."

The Ninth tether tore free.

Hold Course

Chapter VIII

The Ninth tether did not snap.

It departed.

One moment it belonged to Sable Quay. The next, a section of the outer ring, three refugee ships, Seli's control platform, and six hundred meters of construction history were moving independently above Oruv.

The storm took hold of the new object.

Brackish Light rolled first. Its hull dragged *Borrowed Morning* across the charged wind. *A Small Agreement* folded inward around both pulls. The tether lines tightened until every vibration joined them.

Release icons appeared on all three ships.

"Nobody cuts," Seli said.

Jal's hand hovered over her release. "We separate, one of us may clear."

"An' two don'," Seli said. "Nobody cuts. Hold."

The outer-ring segment turned toward Oruv.

From Seli's platform the gas giant occupied half the universe. Violet weather opened below like an eye without interest in what fell into it.

Kes Taro came over the channel. "We have forty seconds before this angle takes our engines."

"Fifty-one," Seli said.

"Wonderful. I'll schedule a holiday."

Seli continued over him. "All three ships remain connected. You are not one body. You have one course. Dhat distinction matters."

Talar Fold answered in green interference across the display.

"This distinction is acceptable."

"Jal, three percent forward. Kes, no engine until her roll stops. Talar, can your hull take opposite pull?"

"Briefly. We request a definition of briefly."

"Until it hurts."

"Definition recognized."

The three ships thrust at different times under one command.

Their roll slowed.

At Berth Zero, the passage floor tilted as Sable Quay compensated for the lost ring mass. Civa caught the manual reader with both hands. Tab 44108 remained inside it.

Governor Voss struck the wall. Tebb's measuring staff extended from its own momentum and wedged neatly across the corridor, preventing him from falling farther.

Tebb looked at the staff.

"Temporary compliance."

Koru handed Ena one of the table's carbon legs.

"For balance."

"I thought it wasn't a tool."

"Circumstances promote' it."

NaNa opened every channel at once.

"Ena, Kate Bush is ready. The detached formation will cross Berth Zero's approach in two minutes and eight seconds. It will cross only once."

Ena started up the passage.

"Civa, keep dhat tab in."

"Dhis is a queue," she called after him. "Holdin' it is dhe whole damn profession."

"Tebb, verify the cradle against the ships, not the plan. Repairs grew."

Tebb considered this and followed Koru toward the clamp wells.

Ena reached Kate Bush at a run. The little ship released from her berth before the inner hatch had finished objecting.

The hatch continued its objection in private.

NaNa filled the forward glass with vectors.

Uninterrupted approached from above the detached ring. *Bright Triage* came from below, its blue field shedding light into Oruv's atmosphere. Between them, the three refugee vessels hung from the broken pylon like seeds on a dark branch.

"Seli, we're coming lateral."

No answer.

Her telemetry disappeared.

On the drifting platform, an ion surge had burned through the remote sensor isolation. The tether controls still worked. The instruments telling Seli what they did had become a white field.

She opened a panel beneath the console.

Inside waited a direct sensor bridge.

It had been installed during construction and retained for a failure no one expected a nervous system to survive. A transparent cable ended in an Istran neural crown. The warning label had faded. The danger had not.

Seli placed the crown against the sensory frill along her jaw.

Tebb saw her through the maintenance feed.

"Tha' bridge lacks storm isolation," Tebb said. "Exposure limit: twenty seconds."

"File it while I use it."

Tebb's report opened on the maintenance feed.

The bridge closed.

The tether entered Seli.

Every line became pressure along her spine. Three engine fields pressed

behind her eyes. The broken pylon was a cold absence in her left arm. Oruv's magnetic weather arrived as taste, color, and a pain so complete it had no useful location.

She inhaled once.

"I have the course."

Ena heard the change in her voice.

"Seli-"

"No. You wanted an assignment. NaNa owns timing. You carry eleven percent lateral, and you do not chase my platform if it separates. Dhat's all."

Ena looked at the tiny control platform beside the three larger ships.

Heat moved through his chest.

The old anger rose with its usual list: unfair worlds, preventable losses, the obscene requirement that bodies break while systems remained conceptual. It wanted a target. It would accept gravity if nobody more suitable volunteered.

Ena let it arrive.

He did not let it fly.

"Copy," he said after the whole instruction had reached him. "All of it."

NaNa marked the bridge exposure.

00:07

Seli opened the formation channel.

"*Uninterrupted*, counterthrust on my mark."

Quist's pilot answered, a compact Ruvan woman named Pell Iss whose flight record was much less decorative than her employer's ship.

"Drive vanes will shear at sixty percent."

Quist appeared behind her. "They're insured."

Pell did not turn around. "Sir, you've said that."

"It remains emotionally useful."

"Strap in."

He did.

"*Bright Triage*," Seli continued, "take the windward side. Hold your field inside the hull until I call. I need every second."

Hessa secured an infusion rack with her shoulder.

"You've got eigh'," Hessa said. "A patient used your ninth."

Seli changed the approach timer to eight.

"Kate Bush, attach cargo field to the broken pylon."

Ena brought the ship underneath the formation. Oruv filled the glass below.

"NaNa?"

"The pylon weighs four thousand eight hundred tonnes."

"Copy. Field in three."

He fired the cargo field.

Kate Bush caught the pylon.

The ship dropped twenty-three meters before the field found purchase. Every loose object struck the floor. In the rear cabin, a spoon Ena had owned for thirty-eight years left its drawer, considered the crisis, and lodged in an air vent.

NaNa marked the spoon's new position on the damage display as MOBILE METAL, LOW URGENCY, HIGH CONFIDENCE. The spoon vibrated once in what Ena chose not to interpret as agreement.

NaNa reduced life support to compensate.

"Lateral load is ten point eight percent and holding."

"Within tolerance."

00:19

At Berth Zero, Heddle reached the six clamp shafts.

Each tool housing entered a different maintenance well. Six sets of hands removed six inspection covers. Five mechanisms waited underneath.

The sixth well contained mineral foam, a retired warning flag, and a nest built from cable insulation by animals with no respect for port authority.

Three small gray heads looked up at Heddle.

"Occupied," Heddle reported from the first housing. "All six locations," the others completed.

"Can you move them safely?" Ena asked.

There was a pause across all six housings.

"That changes the duration."

Seli's pain entered her voice as a thinner silence between words.

"Move them safely."

One Heddle housing formed a basket from its spare cable. Another repaired the clamp. Heddle did both without becoming two people.

Koru and the outline workers rigged the table legs across the corroded cradle supports. Tebb crawled along the approach with his staff extended.

"*A Small Agreement* grows fourteen centimeters while breathing," Tebb said. "Current clearance is one point six degrees. The present body needs two."

Talar's hull expanded another fourteen centimeters.

"Breathing remains recommended."

Seli adjusted by two.

The tether lines screamed.

00:31

The formation entered the approach.

"Mark," Seli said.

Uninterrupted fired.

Its polished drive vanes turned white. The yacht took the ring's rotation and held it against the storm. In the orchard, every yellow fruit left every tree at once. The technician raised the net, saw the scale of the problem, and lowered it with dignity.

"Kes, engine."

Borrowed Morning thrust.

"Jal, ease to one."

Brackish Light answered.

"Talar, take pull."

The folded hull opened, not like a machine but like a hand deciding to bear weight. Green thought flared through its membranes.

"Pain definition exceeded," Talar said. "We can continue four seconds and object simultaneously."

"Objection recorded."

00:43

Berth Zero's cradle opened beneath them.

Civa held 44108 inside the reader as its mechanism tried to eject the tab under low voltage.

"This arrival remains open," she told it.

Governor Voss braced her against the wall.

Pael read the emergency suspension order through the public channel.

"Pending accountable review, the Equal-Rescue Index is suspended for this event."

"Send the storm a copy," Jal said. "Las' notice didn't take."

"Paper or digital?" Civa called.

Even Seli laughed.

It cost her breath.

00:51

The repaired sixth clamp woke.

Heddle placed the three nest animals inside an unused equipment cabinet, left the door open, and activated all six mechanisms.

The cradle arms rose.

One struck the underside of *Borrowed Morning*.

"Contact," Kes said.

Tebb checked the measurement. "Unplanned external repair. Your kitchen protrudes thirty-one centimeters beyond the certified hull."

"Company stopped payin' us before lunch," Kes said. "Kitchen stays."

Koru swung a table beam into place and levered the clamp beneath the

protrusion.

"Khat kitchen keeps shape," Koru said. "Table too."

00:60

Kate Bush's cargo emitters overheated.

The lateral field dropped to nine percent.

The broken pylon moved toward Seli's platform.

Ena saw it before NaNa spoke. He could release the pylon, turn, and push the platform clear. The refugee formation would regain its missing rotation and miss the cradle. Or he could hold the assignment.

Seli felt his engine angle through the bridge.

"Don'."

He changed nothing.

The pylon passed within four meters of her platform.

Ena's hands remained steady on the controls. His teeth did not.

NaNa transferred reserve coolant from the cabin heaters into the cargo system.

"Eleven percent restored."

Ena steadied the field. "Holding."

00:68

"*Bright Triage*," Seli said. "Field now."

Blue light expanded.

For eight seconds, the medical ship's storm field covered bodies outside its own hull.

The detached ring stopped falling.

Brackish Light entered the cradle.

Borrowed Morning followed, kitchen first.

A Small Agreement folded its breathing hull through the measured clearance.

Seli guided all three without confusing them for the same ship.

"Clamp one."

Heddle closed one.

"Two."

Another housing answered.

"Three and four."

Two mechanisms locked around different hull geometries.

"Five."

The fifth caught the broken pylon.

The sixth remained open for *Bright Triage*.

00:76

Hessa's field collapsed.

Her ship fell the last twenty meters into Berth Zero.

Pell Iss rotated *Uninterrupted* and struck it with a controlled wash of counterthrust. The yacht's final drive vane separated, passed through the ceremonial donor panel, and embedded itself in the wall outside Public Confidence.

Quist watched it go.

"Insured," he whispered.

Pell grabbed his harness as gravity changed.

"Still strapped in, sir."

Bright Triage crossed the threshold.

"Six," Seli said.

Heddle closed the final clamp.

00:84

The cradle took the weight.

Every tether line went slack at once.

Seli was no longer holding three ships. Her body did not understand the absence. The direct bridge continued sending pressure into nerves after the pressure had ended.

Her hands opened.

They closed again with difficulty.

"Seli," Ena said.

No answer.

00:89

The platform drifted beyond the cradle.

Ena held Kate Bush on the pylon.

Held the course.

Koru threw the last unassigned rigging line. It crossed the gap, struck Seli's platform, and slid away.

One of Talar Fold's outer membranes unfurled from the cradle. It wrapped the line, changed its direction, and laid it across Seli's rail.

Seli's left hand missed.

Her right caught it.

00:92

She tore off the neural crown.

The platform swung against the cradle wall.

Koru hauled.

Ena released the pylon and turned Kate Bush only after all six clamps reported closed.

He reached Seli's platform as it crossed into the berth.

The storm continued past them.

For several seconds no one spoke. Speech would have required deciding which fact deserved to arrive first.

NaNa made the decision.

"*Brackish Light*: sixty-three living occupants. *Borrowed Morning*: twenty-two. *A Small Agreement*: Talar Fold. Heddle: six housings active in Berth Zero. *Bright Triage*: fifty-three. No refugee deaths detected."

Hessa added, "Four critical injuries. All receiving care."

Quist's pilot reported eighteen safe aboard *Uninterrupted*, no drive vanes, and an orchard event.

The public weather system came back online.

"Welcome to Sable Quay," it said. "Current conditions remain predictable."

Seli lay against the platform rail, breathing through clenched teeth.

Ena reached her.

Her inner eyelids closed against the berth lights.

The left reopened a fraction after the right.

One broad hand trembled on the deck.

She saw him notice and made a fist.

"Temporary," she said. "An' don't give me that face."

Ena crouched beside her without touching, then looked away before relief could make him disobedient.

Around them, the six clamps held six different loads.

No two had been treated identically.

Every one had been required.

What Equality Requires

Chapter IX

Berth Zero became a hospital because it had power, air, and more floor than the hospital.

Above the clamps, an obsolete berth advertisement continued showing a couple sharing broth beneath PRIVATE SKY, PUBLICLY APPROVED. Hessa hung a triage sheet over their perfect bowls.

Hessa Voss established triage beneath the six magnetic clamps. She assigned care by injury, survivability, pain, and time-not citizenship, arrival order, employment value, or whether anyone important had begun regretting their decisions.

This meant Seli waited.

She sat against a construction beam with a thermal wrap around her shoulders. Her right hand had stopped trembling. Her left had not received the news.

Ena sat beside her.

"You can go help," she said.

"Hessa banished me. Apparently *I can carry two* is not a triage system."

Seli's inner eyelids closed. The left opened late again.

Ena looked at the floor.

"Ask dhe bad question or bring water," she said.

"You all right?"

"Water, dhen."

He brought water.

Near Clamp Three, the orderly who had been attacked by the folding stool tried to open it for an elderly patient. The stool resisted, opened backward, and seated a medical waste container. He left the container there. It appeared to need the victory.

Hessa reached Seli after forty-one patients, four outeline workers, Talar's damaged membranes, and one Heddle housing whose left arm had welded itself to its right.

"Direct bridge exposure?" she asked.

"Ninety-two seconds."

Hessa stopped unpacking her scanner. "Dhe limit's twenty, not an opening offer."

"Tebb filed the excess."

"Documentation is the first treatment for cooked nerves."

She passed the scanner along Seli's jaw frill and both inner eyelids. The image showed scattered ion injury, inflammation around the sensory pathways, and no single catastrophe large enough to receive an honest name.

"Rest. Neural dampers for six days. No direct bridge."

Seli watched her secure the scanner. "And when your ship leaves?"

"Someone competent reads my notes. Bridge stays closed until dhey clear you."

Hessa fitted a narrow damper behind Seli's ear.

"Dhe tremor should resolve. Dhat is as honest as medicine gets after meeting a body."

Seli accepted this with less grace than the body required and more than Ena expected.

Across the berth, Pael Orm reconstructed public procedure on the remains of the ceremonial table.

Koru had reassembled four legs. The fifth supported a damaged oxygen manifold. The sixth had become a splint. Public Confidence therefore stood at a slight angle and was doing more useful work than before.

Civa placed a red queue dispenser on top.

"Emergency witness appeals," Pael announced. "Take a number."

Jal Rinn looked at the sixty-three people around her.

"One each?"

"One per claimant."

Talar Fold's green light reached the desk.

"We will require the entire roll."

Pael revised the rule.

The provisional appeal required an attached pilot, two materially independent witnesses, and a statement from the affected being whenever possible. Where a being could not communicate in an institutionally recognized form, the procedure required observation, evidence of preference, and a public record of who had interpreted what.

It was slower than the Index.

It was also possible to ask it whom it had failed.

"Fraud remains probable," Pael said. "Witnesses lie, perception varies, and the procedure will produce inconsistent results. The Index was built to reduce all three. At least its results were comparable."

"People lie," Ena said. "Systems lie too, just with nicer posture."

Seli joined them, walking carefully. "An' comparable corpses."

Pael flinched.

Seli saw it and let the silence remain.

Ena leaned against the tilted table. "No method gets innocent, my friend. Question is whether the people using it can see the damage, answer for it, and change the damn thing before it learns to call damage normal."

Pael's mouth tightened. "I dislike answers that cannot be implemented."

Ena tapped the red queue dispenser. "Then implement a way for this one to hear who it hurt."

Tebb returned from measuring the appeal office.

"The witness chair excludes nine of the twelve body plans presently waiting."

Pael glanced at the single chair.

He opened his mouth, probably to permit standing testimony. Tebb unfolded a

list before the sentence could become another piece of furniture.

It reached the floor. The first entries concerned three claimants who could not stand and four for whom *standing testimony* remained a colonial idiom.

The argument about chair height began at 09:12 and outlived two meals. This was not evidence the procedure had failed. It was evidence the excluded bodies had reached the room early enough to become inconvenient.

Governor Voss waited until his sister had stabilized every patient before approaching her.

Hessa was washing blood from her hands in a construction sink.

"I put you above dhem," he said. "If it happened again, I would do it again."

She shut off the water.

"I know," Hessa said. "Dhat is why dhis cannot end with an apology. The Index hid other people's reasons inside respectable numbers."

"What do I do with that?"

"Leaders should be ready to make the hardest decisions-and that includes me."

The governor sat on a crate.

His coat acquired dust with no ability to reject it.

"I will submit the order to review."

Hessa handed him a towel. "Not to a review you appoint. Start there."

He accepted the towel without discovering a committee inside it.

Orren Quist filed three insurance claims, a civil objection to the emergency suspension, and a donation of the surviving orchard fruit to the medical ward. He insisted these actions were unrelated. The children receiving the fruit had no opinion about his moral coherence and ate it.

On *Uninterrupted*, Jo sat at the guest-services desk with three copies of her resignation and a bowl of fruit no one had asked her to arrange. She had placed each employee's own contract, contact record, and public-review notice inside a separate sealed envelope. No one was required to open one in front of anyone else. This seemed to her the minimum standard for a choice, which was why she had done it before speaking to Quist.

His image appeared on the desk display.

"Jo," he said. "You are leaving during a public inquiry."

"After the emergency shift, yes, sir."

"I gave you a career."

Her hands folded once over the envelopes. When she answered, every pleasant edge remained in place. That was what made the sentence difficult.

"You gave me work I did well. I gave you my time. I mistook access for belonging. That was my error. Pplease do not turn either into a claim on the other."

Quist stared at her.

"The unedited guest-services record has been filed with the public review," Jo added. "The staff may speak for themselves. I have not released their private records."

"I drafted a second response for your next premium-rescue brochure," she said. "It is extremely satisfying and protects no one, so I will not use it."

"If you describe their silence as consent, I will correct that record too."

The display went dark.

Jo ate one piece of orchard fruit over the desk. It was very good. This did not resolve anything, but it prevented the fruit from becoming a speech.

Pael removed Retroactive Urgency from the rescue system.

The sales office restored it twice under different names.

Civa removed it twice more.

On the third attempt, she stood beside the terminal with her red stamp raised. The sales office discovered maintenance elsewhere.

The Index remained suspended pending public review. No one declared justice complete. *Brackish Light* still had no citizenship. *Borrowed Morning* still had a creditor. Talar Fold still occupied a cargo category in six neighboring jurisdictions. Heddle's refund request had become twelve invoices.

But the ships were alive to continue being difficult.

That mattered first.

Within a sensory pathway along Seli Arq's jaw, ionized proteins returned toward their earlier shapes. Most arrived. One signal crossed the repaired membrane three thousandths of a second later than it had before the storm. Her body made no announcement.

At the witness desk, a child with six legs rejected a chair intended for two and sat beneath the table. Tebb Arlo added "under" to the list of valid seating relationships. Pael initialed the change after requesting a margin.

On Uninterrupted, one yellow seed remained inside the orchard net. A technician placed it in a pocket rather than inventorying it. The future tree was, for the present, a payroll discrepancy.

Far from Oruv, a freight pilot changed course around an unmarked debris field and arrived late to a marriage she had not wanted to attend. The marriage lasted eighty years. Her apology lasted four.

Inside Rha's photosphere, a young plasma-being pressed one bright hand beneath an ambassador's ceremonial parasol. Five governments classified the child as weather and the parasol as an emblem, never a shield. The child moved its edge seven meters, placing a door where a border had been.

NaNa plotted the next impossible route Ena had carried from Hara. Every safe course ended outside the star. His did not.

An Invitation with an Exit

Chapter X

Seli inspected Kate Bush three days after the storm.

She began at the engines and worked forward, which Ena considered rude because the engines knew more embarrassing things about him than the cabin did.

"Port recycler," she said. "Leakin'."

"Independent water philosophy."

Seli touched the seal. A drop formed against her thumb.

Ena crouched beside her and added the seal to his repair list. The philosophy remained alive and lost the argument without further dialogue.

Her tremor had diminished to a faint movement when she held her hand still. Ena pretended not to measure it. Seli pretended not to see him pretending. Their arrangement was young but functional.

NaNa opened the engine service history.

Seli read for several minutes.

"This ship was grown from fermented kelp," Seli said. "The kitchen risk explains itself."

"Furniture adhesive was high-end," Ena said, volunteering the defense nobody had requested.

NaNa opened the previous owner's purchase record.

PREMIUM STRUCTURAL ADHESIVE - FOR SEATING, SHELVING, AND SITUATIONS THAT HAVE GONE TOO FAR.

Seli read it twice. "At least it was accurately marketed."

Seli looked along the asymmetrical hull, the patched field emitters, and the cargo system that had carried part of the Ninth tether without permission from its manufacturer.

"Good ship."

Every light in Kate Bush brightened.

Ena looked toward the ceiling.

NaNa said, "The voltage rise was thermal. I am confirmed; the ship is not."

Seli glanced at the display. "You rehearse that?"

"Ena required repetition."

Ena discovered something urgent to inspect beneath the console.

Seli climbed into the pilot's chair.

It adjusted to her hands before it adjusted to her spine. She corrected both, remapped the port thrusters, changed the alert order, and removed a decorative engine animation that had consumed two percent of the console.

"I liked that," Ena said.

"It displayed flames when the engine was cold." Seli deleted it and kept working.

The inspection continued.

She found seventeen repair deferrals, one illegal jump modification, an

emergency ration drawer containing only tea, and the spoon in the air vent. Ena claimed no knowledge of the spoon. NaNa played footage.

"*Pole hullu*," Ena said.

Seli pointed at the illegal jump modification.

"Dhat may be a medium deal."

NaNa replayed the footage with the quiet satisfaction of a hostile archive.

Seli finished in the small spare cabin. It had one bunk, one viewport, and a storage wall filled with equipment Ena had not used in nineteen years because he might need it the following day.

"Whose room?"

"I was hoping yours."

She turned.

Ena remained in the doorway rather than entering.

"Though' you'd already decide' dhat."

"I decided to ask."

He took his time.

"I watched you hold eighty-seven people while everyone with a clean chair told you they weren't countable. You knew when to keep one hand on the line and when to give other hands work. I need a pilot, yeah-but I want you. If you want the work."

Seli leaned against the storage wall. "You know almos' nothin' about my route. Pieces of my history. Not a damn thing about my future. What happens when I say no?"

"I leave without you. Disappointed, probably grumpy." Ena shrugged. "I don't know your future. That's why I asked."

Seli almost smiled.

"I have conditions."

Civa entered the corridor carrying a red folder.

Ena looked from her to Seli and the red folder. "Shoulda known."

"You should inspec' more," Seli said.

Civa opened the folder on the cabin wall. "Provisional deep-course employment agreement. Red ink. No retroactive clauses."

"I love this port."

"Do not become expressive near the forms."

Seli read from her list.

"On my shift, I hold primary pilot authority. You give me destination, danger, fuel limits, and relevant secrets. A feeling is not override code. NaNa is crew-not equipment, navigation support, or the voice you mute when biological people become emotional. Equal command pay while I carry command responsibility. Private cabin. My own correspondence. Return access to Sable Quay when dhe route permits. And you do not tell dhis like I was waitin' here for you."

Ena let the whole list finish. "Yes to all of it. NaNa?"

"I accepted before you did."

Somewhere outside the cabin, the writer deleted *Ena found Seli* and tried *Ena recruited Seli*.

Seli looked toward the place where the sentence had occurred. "Leave a blank. I haven't signed."

The sentence went blank.

Ena breathed in.

Seli held his gaze. "I also want an exit. Any port, any time. No disloyalty speech an' no name I didn't choose."

Ena slid the red folder to Civa. She added the clause.

Ena signed first.

Seli did not.

She left Kate Bush and spent the afternoon walking Sable Quay.

At the Ninth tether, workers were fastening a temporary ring around the broken pylon. Jal Rinn had begun turning *Brackish Light* into a legal problem with engines. Kes Taro was negotiating the return of twenty-two stolen lifetimes with a creditor whose offices had already been occupied by its former employees. Talar Fold had filed one claim on behalf of an unavailable number of claimants. Heddle had received a thirteenth invoice and was considering arson in one location.

Tebb Arlo replaced the Emergency Arrivals counter with three adjustable surfaces. Civa objected that one surface permitted blue ink.

They began a dispute expected to improve the building.

Koru-of-Four finally delivered the remains of the ceremonial table to Public Confidence. The department rejected it for being incomplete.

They left the pieces in the lobby.

At the edge of the outer ring, Seli watched Oruv's atmosphere turn beneath the station. She had been born above those clouds before the Quay possessed a legal address. Every language she cursed in had reached her through these corridors. Her first work, first love, first broken tooth, and first correct emergency decision belonged here.

Leaving would not make the port less hers.

Staying would not prove she loved it.

Civa joined her.

"Deep-course certification board meets next quarter," Civa said. "They will exhibit you, applaud their own flexibility, and perhaps remember to grant the work. The form aboard that ridiculous ship grants it without requiring their admiration."

Seli made a low sound.

Seli watched lightning move soundlessly below.

"You want me to go?"

Civa's face remained professionally arranged. "I want you to possess an exit."

Using it is your administrative burden."

The next morning, Seli signed.

An hour later, Kate Bush received a visitor at the outer hatch.

Jo stood beneath the docking light with one compact case, a folding desk, and a cream workcoat that had acquired a new badge: UNAFFILIATED. She looked as though she had prepared for this conversation so thoroughly that only the fact of having it remained unprepared.

She set the case on the galley table and opened it. Inside were four thin folders: ROUTES, REST, EMERGENCY TEA, and PROVISIONAL CONTINUITY OF ENA.

Ena read the last title twice.

"Jo."

"It is a support packet," she said. "Routes, rest, supplies, and a response plan if someone decides you are an available resource."

Seli leaned out of the pilot's chair. "What response?"

"A public record, three witnesses, and a carefully managed loss of their ability to enter polite rooms without explaining themselves."

Ena looked at her.

"No."

"Reputationally?"

"Still no."

Jo closed the last folder. "Pperhaps the gentler version."

"Hello," she said. "I have concluded my employment, filed the relevant record, and declined three offers to become someone else's conscience without pay."

"Good," Ena said. "That last part's a scam."

"Yes." Jo held the case closer. "I would like to offer you my eternal loyalty, my full administrative capacity, and—"

"No."

She stopped.

Ena softened his voice. "No eternal loyalty. No person owes me that. Also, damn it, I barely know how to accept a calendar invite."

Jo's expression became carefully blank. "I had expected that sentence to go better."

"Probably. You rehearsed it?"

"In four registers."

"I do not require a title," Jo said. "I want to work close enough to a decision that it cannot pretend I was not there."

Ena's easy expression thinned. "That ain't a job title. And it's a damn bad reason to give somebody your life."

Seli leaned from the pilot's chair. "Knew dhat feelin'."

Jo looked at her, then at the signed red folder on the console. "You made the

terms."

"I made mine."

The distinction settled between them without requiring either woman to make it comfortable for him.

Ena sat at the galley table and pulled a blank contract from NaNa's printer.

"How about a job?" he said. "Ninety standard days. Paid. You keep your own correspondence, your own money, your own route applications, and any assignment that isn't mine. You can say no, quit at a port, or take another relief route. If I ask you to hide something that belongs to somebody else, you tell me I'm being an asshole. Preferably before I make it worse."

NaNa displayed a line beneath the terms.

NO ETERNALITY FIELD DETECTED.

"Thank you, NaNa," Ena said.

"The clause is operationally relevant."

Jo read the contract. Her lip ridges caught at the first word when she spoke.

"You would hire me to disagree with you?"

"I'd hire you to do assistant work. The disagreement is part of not turning it into a cage."

"I expected to make myself permanent."

"Don't. Stay because it works. Leave when it doesn't."

"Perhaps I should add that I may decline to become emotionally indispensable."

"Put it in twice."

She did.

At the bottom of the second page, Jo added one condition of her own: after the ninety days, she would be free to pursue a coordinator post with Open Passage Mutual if the work and the Mutual chose her. Ena signed beneath it before she could ask whether he objected.

"That's a good route," he said.

Jo's shoulders lowered by a fraction. "You are not offended?"

"Why would I be offended?"

"Because I would leave."

"Jo. If a good thing lets you leave, it's probably a good thing."

Seli turned back to the controls. "Sign or don't. Star's not coolin' for us."

Jo signed.

Her folding desk unfolded in the galley and immediately blocked a cabinet containing emergency tea. She looked at the obstruction, at the star filling the forward glass, and at Ena.

"I have identified my first meeting injury," she said.

"I'm a genius," Ena said.

"No," said Seli.

"Correct," NaNa said.

Kate Bush released from Sable Quay at 11:40 local shift time.

Seli flew.

Ena sat in the other chair and did not reach for her controls. NaNa corrected both of them with equal discourtesy. Behind the ship, the black rings of Sable Quay diminished against the violet immensity of Oruv.

"Next course?" Seli asked.

Ena sent it to navigation.

The route entered the photosphere of Rha.

Kate Bush's safety system rejected it.

Seli removed the decorative warning and requested physical analysis.

"Temperature at arrival exceeds hull tolerance by five thousand six hundred degrees," NaNa said. "Pressure and radiation are additionally hostile."

Ena studied the star.

"Can you find a route that is dangerous for specific reasons instead of impossible for general ones?" Seli asked.

NaNa calculated again.

"No safe route."

Seli laid her hands on the controls. "Good. Dhat's why I asked for a route."

Ena smiled. Seli saw it and chose the star as the more urgent problem.

Kate Bush turned toward the sun.

An Incomplete Inventory of
Things That Mattered

A Small Agreement - A living ship carrying one collective person and one machine in six bodies. The law counted cargo and six passengers, achieving an error in both directions with admirable balance.

Berth Zero - A construction cradle removed from every modern map and therefore protected from improvement. It accepted obsolete paper, four different ships, and the possibility that forgotten infrastructure remembers whom new systems discard.

Borrowed Morning - Twenty-two workers transported as recoverable assets after their employer dissolved. They wanted their hours back. Accounting, having no field for stolen dawns, continued requesting a serial number.

Brackish Light - A salt-habitat vessel carrying sixty-three citizens whose government revoked their citizenship after departure. Its sealant came in seven colors. None was legally recognized; all were airtight.

Bright Triage - A medical ship with forty-one patients, twelve crew, and eight seconds of field generous enough to protect strangers. Medicine could not make capacity fair. It could decide where to spend it.

Civa Noll - Queue clerk, defender of red ink, and the reason lunch acquired evidentiary standing. She trusted paper because it showed where power touched it and distrusted blue ink because she had met management.

Equal-Rescue Index - Arithmetic built to stop favoritism and taught to recognize payment instead. It was internally consistent, publicly impartial, and wrong about nearly everyone physically present, proving a clean answer may still require washing.

Governor Deyr Voss - Public servant whose impartial nouns became personal when his sister entered the storm. He loved her genuinely, governed that love badly, and eventually discovered that refusal is affection wearing less expensive clothes.

Heddle - One machine intelligence with six tool housings, six maintenance licenses, and thirteen invoices for correcting the first six. Heddle could operate every clamp simultaneously but remained singular, an achievement administration found suspicious.

Dr. Hessa Voss - Medical lead who requested rescue without requesting someone else's death. She treated patients before relatives, facts before comfort, and a ninety-two-second neural exposure with the traditional medical response: *Why did you do that?*

Jo - An executive assistant who retained three copies of an inconvenient arrival time, resigned without stealing her former employer's people, and mistook access for belonging. She accepted ninety days of paid work, a right to leave, and a duty to say when a captain was being an asshole. The folding desk immediately blocked the tea.

Jal Rinn - Pilot of *Brackish Light*, mineral-burned engineer, and opponent of dying with identification held visibly near a window. Salt had taught her that what dissolves on paper may remain painfully solid elsewhere.

Kes Taro - Debt worker and pilot who knew the difference between seeing a gauge and smelling insulation. The corporation owned his recorded hours. His lungs retained a competing interpretation.

Koru-of-Four - Porter who delivered Public Confidence through a storm, dismantled it for rescue beams, and had the remains rejected as incomplete. Koru considered this the department's first accurate self-assessment.

The Ninth Tether - One live line, three uncounted ships, and the place where responsibility refused release. It eventually left the station without filing a departure, taking part of Sable Quay's certainty with it.

Orren Quist - Yacht owner who bought an earlier past and later spent his engines helping people the purchase displaced. His fruit fed injured children. His insurance claims remained spiritually undefeated.

Open Passage Mutual - A relief network Jo wrote into her contract before she had its job, because a good exit deserves a place on paper. It would later move civilians through routes nobody powerful had wanted to maintain. Mutual aid begins with someone admitting the corridor needs chairs, snacks, and a person awake enough to count oxygen.

Oruv - Violet gas giant beneath Sable Quay. Its weather could vaporize a city, nourish cloud organisms, and remain "predictable" under a sufficiently wide contract. Oruv did not sign.

Pael Orm - Steward of the Index who believed comparable answers prevented corruption. When the model's error proved intentional, Pael suspended it and accepted witnesses, chairs, fraud, and the exhausting possibility of revision.

Pell Iss - Pilot of *Uninterrupted* and the person who converted luxury thrust into useful force. Her employer insured the drive vanes. Pell kept the uninsured people strapped in.

Pepper Broth - Civa's missed meal and the purple stain establishing that three refugee ships arrived before wealth amended time. History frequently survives through archives. This history smelled of lunch.

Public Confidence - A ceremonial table with six unusable legs. During the storm, it became braces, levers, a splint, and an appeal desk. The department rejected what remained, having preferred confidence assembled and unhelpful.

Red Tab 44108 - Fifty-eight by thirty-one millimeters of obsolete sequence. It proved an arrival, contradicted a purchased yesterday, and opened Berth Zero. Paper did not save anyone alone; it merely remembered where people could act.

Retroactive Urgency - A premium service allowing customers to arrive before they paid to do so. It funded rescue capacity, corrupted rescue order, and demonstrated that commerce will monetize time if spacetime neglects to retain counsel.

Sable Quay - Three incomplete black rings suspended above impossible weather. Migrants built it, algorithms miscounted them, and workers kept it alive while Public Information reassured everyone that nothing unusual was happening.

Seli Arq - Tether pilot, child of the unfinished Quay, and authority over her own yes. She learned to share a course without abandoning the controls and accepted a crew only after ensuring the invitation contained a door.

Talar Fold - A collective organism whose answer to "How many?" had damaged three legal systems. The Fold could remain one, several, both, or unavailable for division; rescue required none of those answers.

Tebb Arlo - Safety assessor for the present body. His measuring staff collapsed at every important moment while his standards did not. He discovered that a chair may exclude someone even when standing testimony is equally permitted.

Uninterrupted - A wealthy yacht containing eighteen people, an orchard, and priority purchased four hours backward. It lost every drive vane saving ships it had displaced. The orchard lost its fruit; the children handled distribution.

The Witness Appeal - A slow procedure involving testimony, interested beings, independent observers, fraud, revisions, and an argument about chair height. It lacked the elegance of the Index and possessed the inconvenient feature of hearing answers.

A Briefly Helpful Guide to What
Just Happened

The storm did not ask anyone for a theory of justice. It asked whether the people holding the tether could make room for more bodies. This book is about what happens when a good-sounding system meets the people it has failed to see.

Equal treatment is not always equal care

The Equal-Rescue Index wants one clean rule applied without favoritism. That wish is understandable. The problem is that a rule can only treat people equally after it has recognized that they are there. When a system counts a living reef as moisture or a plurality as cargo, equal treatment becomes a very efficient way to distribute exclusion.

Evidence gives a person somewhere to stand

Civa's red tab, Jo's retained log, a pepper stain, a measurement, and a witness statement do not become moral merely because they are records. They matter because they let a powerful story be questioned in public. Evidence is not truth's costume. It is one way the people harmed by an official version get to say, politely or otherwise, that the version has missed a body.

Nobody is an acceptable subtraction

Arithmetic is necessary during a rescue. Capacity, time, field strength, and oxygen do not vanish because everyone has good values. The book's argument is not that numbers are cruel. It is that numbers become cruel when they hide who is being asked to disappear for a cleaner calculation. A number must remain answerable to the life inside it.

Leadership does not mean taking the controls

Ena has an idea. Seli has a route, authority, experience, and a body carrying the actual cost of the maneuver. The book keeps returning to the difference. Help becomes control when it refuses to hear the person already doing the work. Sometimes the brave move is not taking command. Sometimes it is being told no, becoming useful in the smaller assignment, and keeping your hands off someone else's console.

An exit is a moral technology

Seli's contract matters because it includes the right to leave. Jo's contract matters for the same reason. An offer without an exit is often a trap that has learned warm vocabulary. A door does not guarantee that someone will use it. It establishes that staying can mean something more than having nowhere else to go.

Philosophical conversations

Sable Quay is not "the Mohist port," which would be a terrible way to meet a storm. These traditions supplied questions; the Quay's people retain their own answers, paperwork, and weather.

- Mohism - Mozi and later Mohist thinkers. *Jian ai*, often translated as inclusive or impartial care, informs the book's concern for every life while leaving open the hard practical question of what equal concern requires in unequal circumstances.
- Pragmatism and fallibilism - Charles S. Peirce and John Dewey. The red tab, the witness procedure, and the revised rescue plan test the idea that public inquiry must remain corrigible when its first confident answer misses a body.
- Confucian role ethics - Confucius, Mencius, and later *ru* thought. Seli's

authority is understood as a responsibility enacted in relation, not a title that lets Ena replace the person doing the actual work.

- Structural and epistemic injustice - Iris Marion Young and Miranda Fricker. The Index asks how a system can distribute harm through ordinary procedures, while making the people it excludes difficult to hear at all.

Aesthetic conversations

Tethers, red paper, storm glass, empty seats, and berth lights recur because they hold literal weight before they gather emotional pressure. The book is in conversation with Symbolist correspondence and visual dream logic, but Sable Quay keeps asking the ruder question: who tied the line, who pays for it, and where is the exit?

Why so much paper, furniture, broth, and deeply inconvenient architecture? Because institutions are not clouds. They are built from objects someone placed at a particular height, a rule someone typed, and a chair somebody forgot to make usable. That is bad news for grandeur and good news for repair.