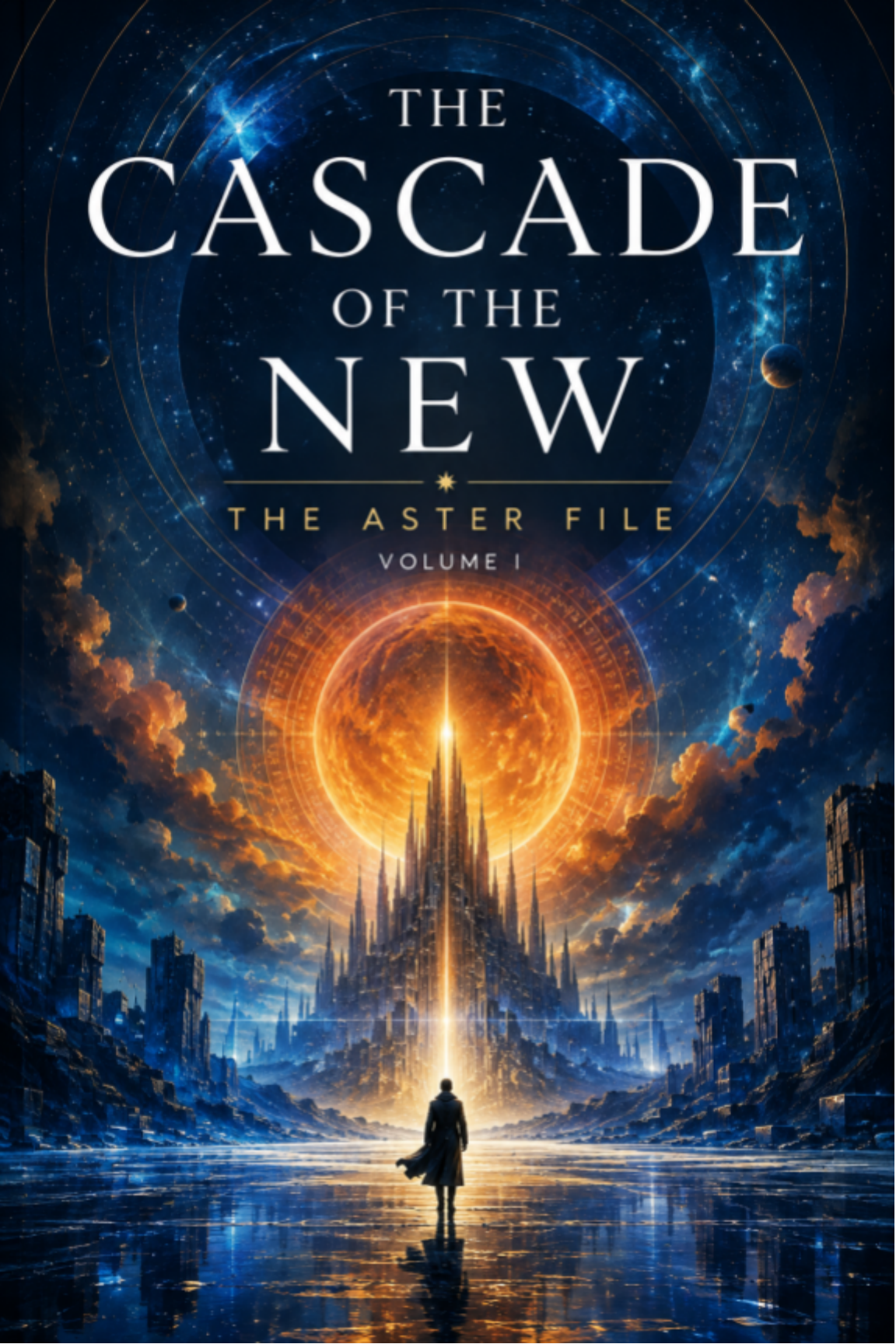


THE CASCADE OF THE NEW

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THE ASTER FILE
VOLUME I



THE CASCADE OF THE NEW

THE ASTER FILE

Volume I

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Author's Note

This work was created under the umbrella of Axiologic Research as part of two interconnected research programs, one dedicated to Artificial Intelligence and the other to Outfinitism, both led by Sînică Alboaie. To explore the details of how these two programs intersect and build upon each other, we invite readers to visit the Outfinity Venture Studio page at www.outfinity.ch.

While Artificial Intelligence language models were used to assist with text generation, the foundational philosophy, thematic structure, and analytical approach derive exclusively from the author's decades of dedicated study of social phenomena, social technologies, and genuine hard technologies resulting from various European and self funded research projects. Recently, within the Achilles research project, we have been deeply studying AI generated literature and its automated verification using neuro symbolic approaches; all the free books made available to the public are part of the suite of works we use to test our latest technologies.

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A NOTE FOR THE READER

The Cascade

In this story, dimensions are not merely directions in space. They describe how many kinds of freedom a reality can preserve at the same time.

A 3D being has one body, a past that will not reopen, and a future it can only imagine. In 4D, the past may be visited. In 5D, several futures can remain active. In 6D, civilizations can alter entire families of natural law. The 7D Concordants can preserve compatible versions of themselves at once and can build chains of worlds beneath them.

Every level simulates simpler levels. That is how the Cascade arises: worlds within worlds, creators who are themselves the creations of someone else. Dimensional rank does not measure the worth of a mind. It measures only the freedoms available to it.

A few 7D words

A **silar** is not a building. It is a stable arrangement of histories, sensations, and rules into which several people can synchronize. A silar may serve as a home, a court, or a sanctuary without occupying an address. When resources fail, silars do not lose walls. They lose possibilities that were once able to coexist.

A **nex** is an institution without a headquarters. It exists while its people, permissions, and memories remain aligned. The Recursive Continuity Nex judges cascades in crisis. The Penitence Nex administers vows, debts, and confiscations. Either can exist wherever its rules are accepted.

A **velar** is an interface between two levels of the Cascade. It does not work like a window. It sends tiny perturbations into a world's laws and measures the response. Through velars, higher levels may transmit dreams, coincidences, changes in physical constants, descent bodies, or orders of closure.

A **navor** is an apparatus that searches for the New, called novum in the technical reports of lower levels. It compares what a world was expected to do with the choice a conscious being actually makes. The difference has value only when the choice was not fully predictable, becomes intelligible after it occurs, and matters to someone inside the world. Navors can be tuned to notice invention, cooperation, or moral change. They can also be tuned to favor crisis.

A **marn** preserves a person's continuity between levels. In 7D it has no shape. It is a legal and causal agreement among the traveler's versions. In 3D it may condense into a simple object. Without a marn, a descended person may be classified as nothing more than a copy produced by the simulation.

The Valency is not a stock exchange and uses no currency. It is a distributed compact that allocates the New wherever it can preserve the greatest amount of real difference. Forecasters stake their own branches. If they are right, they gain access to more possibilities. If they are wrong, the committed versions close. Taal Or coordinates one of the Valency's largest regions.

The people

Sera Vey works for the Recursive Continuity Nex. She examines cascades close to collapse and may authorize their isolation, closure,

or release. She knows her doubts. What frightens her is the part of herself that loves the instant when a verdict makes every other choice impossible.

Taal Or is her old ally, opponent, and, in some histories, partner. He believes that a civilization which removes every risk also removes the freedom from which the New arises. He does not deny the suffering below. He tries to make it measurable, an effort that sometimes makes him lucid and sometimes makes him dangerous.

Oru Neme serves the Eighth Witness, the dominant faith of the Concordants. His religion asks creators to behave as though they, too, are being observed. His faith is genuine. So is his fear.

Mira An lives in Nereth, a 3D city within the Aster cascade. She works for the House of the Turned Face, the city's dominant religion, and secretly preserves the names the institution erases.

Aven Ral is a priest of the same faith. To him, belief does not grant the right to speak for the wounded. It creates an obligation to remain beside them without taking possession of their story.

Mavren Sol is Great Custodian of the House of the Turned Face. He remembers names, quickly sees what people need to hear, and built systems that fed an entire city. He also built hidden systems in which suffering continues after every declared purpose has ended. The reader need not memorize the mathematics of the dimensions. It is enough to know that every world has something above it, something below it, and powerful reasons not to look too carefully in either direction.

CHAPTER 1. THE FILE

At the beginning of the cycle, Sera's silar withdrew a Sunday.

It was not a date on a calendar. It was a cluster of neighboring histories in which her mother still came to the table, Taal had not left before dessert, and Sera could afford two hours without verdicts. The silar had preserved it long after the people inside it ceased to be accessible in the present. Whenever Sera oriented herself toward that cluster, she received the scent of a cut fruit, the warmth of a hand on her shoulder, and the memory of words spoken differently.

Now the sensations were thinning.

"Stop the withdrawal," Sera said.

The silar suspended its recalculation. It had no voice of its own. It used one Sera had selected long ago, neutral without pretending to be kind.

"The local Valency can no longer support every compatibility. I can preserve the Sunday or the child configuration. Not both."

Sera turned toward the other possibility.

The child did not exist. What existed was a region of the silar in which she and Taal had, in several histories, agreed to create a person without optimizing temperament, talent, or loyalty in advance. The project had never reached birth. Yet the possibility had acquired enough coherence for the silar to preserve it as a living question.

"Keep both until the audit is over."

"The cost is three personal branches."

"Show me."

The silar did not open windows. It brought the three lives close enough for Sera to feel their choices as foreign reflexes.

In the first, she taught within a school nex and had never entered Continuity. In the second, she had met Taal but left before their arguments became intimacy. In the third, seventy years earlier, she had refused the closure of the Khepri cascade and lost her position.

The Khepri version could not speak to her directly. She sent only the sensation of a morning without fear of a signature.

"No," Sera said. "Take something else."

"These branches have the lowest degree of integration with your present identity."

"That is exactly why I want them."

The silar left a pause of precisely the length required not to sound reproachful.

"The present reserve will last nineteen days."

"The allocation may change after the audit."

"After the audit, eight billion histories may end."

Sera narrowed herself into the form she used for public work. It was not a body in the lower-world sense. It was the version of her onto which the others agreed to project a single expression.

"You taught me not to hide costs inside administrative language," the silar added.

"I know."

Leaving a silar did not require movement. Sera withdrew her consent from its rules and offered it to the Nearness, the region in which the silars of millions of Concordants could synchronize with

little delay. For an instant she felt thousands of ways in which she might arrive at the Recursive Continuity Nex. Then the public system required one verifiable route.

She chose the history in which she had not stopped to look for Taal.

The nex admitted her through a sequence of conditions. First it checked her rights. Then it separated memories that could not be made public. At last it asked how many versions would answer for the verdict.

"One," Sera said.

A coherence curator appeared beside her. Not beside her in a spatial sense. The nex had allowed them to share the same cause for several seconds.

"Twelve thousand four hundred and six active branches," the curator said. "Three in dispute. Seven with temporary emotional autonomy. One excluded under medical protection."

"The protection is valid."

"You must confirm that you will not use it during deliberation."

The nex brought the hidden branch near.

Sera recognized it by the relief it carried. This was the version that loved a verdict not for the good it might produce, but because questions ended. It did not desire blood. It had no interest in pain. It loved the instant when millions of futures became a single past signed by Sera Vey.

She had isolated it after Khepri. Not because it had committed a crime, but because it had begun to confuse certainty with the calm obtained through power.

"I confirm."

The nex closed her access to the other branches. Compression brought a simple, shameful pleasure: for the next hour she would not have to negotiate with anyone inside herself.

The verdict silar formed only after En Vahl and Taal Or accepted the same constraint. It had no walls, table, or center. It had three legal positions, a velar coupled to Aster, and one rule: no person could change the version answering for them without leaving a visible trace in the record.

En was the nex's oldest auditor. He kept several compromising branches in his public profile: the En who had taken a bribe, the En who had closed a world because he disliked its music, the En who had mistaken exhaustion for mercy. He said reputation was the first system to rewrite facts for the benefit of its owner.

Taal entered through the Valency. Sera felt his securities before she saw the simple figure he used for conversation: almost two million versions committed to forecasts about Aster, each at risk of closure if his predictions proved wrong.

"You are four units late," he said.

"My silar withdrew a Sunday."

"Mine lost access to a family of music."

"You had eleven."

"Ten now."

En activated the velar.

A velar did not display a world. It touched one without opening it. It sent changes so small into boundary conditions that the inhabitants could not distinguish them from chance: an electron hesitated, a dream repeated an image, an administrative decision met an ordinary obstruction. Then the navor measured the response.

If the world did exactly what the models predicted, almost nothing resulted. If a conscious being found an unexpected choice, and if that choice meant something to those who had to live with it, the navor lifted the difference through the Cascade. That difference was the New.

The verdict silar translated Aster into a form their minds could compare. Sera first felt the 6D family of laws supporting twenty-eight 5D regions. Beneath them spread 4D histories, 3D worlds, 2D surfaces, and 1.5D networks. The representation resembled a root only because a root was one of the few 3D forms able to suggest nourishment, dependency, and branching at the same time.

"Eight billion active histories," En said. "More than six trillion confirmed consciousnesses. The estimate for the lowest levels remains uncertain."

"Grounds for the recommendation?"

En altered the velar's perturbation. Aster answered with a repeating pattern: institutions controlling the interpretation of suffering on one level, then building lower worlds in which they repeated that control.

"Recursive capture," he said. "Dominant organizations use the levels below for obedience, moral experimentation, and extraction. The pattern has stabilized across six depths."

"Religions?"

"Mostly. Not exclusively."

Taal let the Valency reveal the distribution of the New. No prices appeared. Instead they felt the Concordant branches that remained active because of inventions from Aster: children retaining several possible temperaments, physicians comparing treatments lived in different histories, silars refusing to collapse into a single rule.

"Aster supports eleven percent of our annual difference," Taal said. "It produced three methods of reconciliation, two families of logic, and a distributed memory used in the treatment of linearization."

"How much suffering?"

"Near the threshold."

"Above or below?"

"The threshold is not a line the navor can see. It is a judgment about the point at which alternatives created no longer justify alternatives destroyed."

"A judgment made by people who lose their securities when the answer displeases them."

"And by auditors who gain prestige for stopping a world before their colleagues do."

En did not let them continue. He tuned the velar to a 3D world.

To make it legible, the silar built a spatial shadow: a wet city around a river, metal roofs, white stone, rain. The shadow was not the

city. It was a translation simple enough for three 7D beings to see the same street without arguing over the laws that defined it.

"Nereth," En said. "Four million inhabitants. Dominant institution: the House of the Turned Face."

The open oval of the House appeared in the shadow.

"At first the faith taught that divinity turned its face away so people would not wait for it to do what they owed one another. Priests had to confess their own failures before hearing anyone else's. No office was meant to last long."

"And now?"

"Now the Custody says the god sees what believers cannot, and only its leaders may interpret that gaze."

The velar brought them a scene from a 3D corridor. A gray-haired man stopped beside a woman cleaning the floor, called her by name, and asked about her sick son. The woman cried. The man remembered the physician's name and made a note.

"Mavren Sol, Great Custodian," En said. "Exceptional interpersonal memory. Strong need for admiration. Reduced response to others' suffering when no observer is present. Excellent emotional control. Our assessment is retrospective; his world does not use our categories."

"A competent predator," Taal said.

"Or a man selected by his institution until competence and predation became difficult to separate," En replied.

The scene changed. Twenty candidates waited for the Alignment Examination. One was trembling. Mavren placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Fear does not make you unfit," he said. "What you do with it will tell the House what you are."

En overlaid the examination's real criteria. Candidates believed it measured faith, empathy, and humility. The system scored something else: how quickly they identified the expected emotion, how convincingly they displayed it, and whether they could complete the assigned task without allowing their internal response to alter protocol.

"Those who are genuinely affected sometimes stop," En said. "They ask one more question. They break procedure to help. They request verification. The examination calls them unstable. Those who reproduce warmth without cost receive high ranks."

Taal raised an objection.

"Emotional control is not a crime. A surgeon who collapses beside the patient may be sincere and useless."

"This is not a hospital," Sera said.

"It is an institution governing millions of lives. Exactly the sort of place where unfiltered impulse can kill."

"Then measure results," En said. "They measure resemblance to virtue."

The velar moved three years forward. A candidate named Serad Tov listened to a father whose child had been arrested. Serad held

silence at the proper moment. His eyes filled. He embraced the man and promised to investigate.

After the father left, Serad turned to the examiner.

"Did I miss anything?"

"Why did you promise an investigation?"

"Hope will reduce his resistance in the next interview."

The sheet gave him the highest score.

"Where is he now?" Sera asked.

"He runs the House of Mercy, a correction center. Two confirmed deaths, eleven probable. Procedures sometimes continue after the subject no longer provides information, obedience, or novum."

"Why?"

En let the navor compare moments when the sensors were active with the intervals after they had been shut down.

"The local report calls it zeal. The data calls it pleasure."

Taal closed the scene. En opened others.

They were not identical. Some leaders believed sincerely. Some had lost belief and stayed from duty. Some lied. Some possessed real empathy but reserved it for people who confirmed their self-image. Yet a pattern emerged as rank increased: inner moral response mattered less, while the ability to simulate alignment with an audience mattered more.

At the lower levels of the House, the pattern reversed. Priests who treated the sick, distributed food, or remained in poor districts showed more concern and less desire to rise. The work that had brought them into religion kept them away from its center of power.

"The institution does not manufacture monsters from nothing," En said. "But it gives them a ladder, a vocabulary, and access to other people's private lives. Those who want to help soon find enough work. Those who want to be seen keep climbing."

Sera watched Mavren's shadow listen to a woman, remembering exactly how long to remain silent.

"And the New?"

The Valency opened the attribution paths. A method of preserving records, invented by the relatives of the disappeared, was credited to Mavren's reforms. A clandestine care network appeared as an effect of House discipline. A new legal principle—that a victim's testimony could not become the property of the institution recording it—was also attributed to the Custody.

"Why?" Sera asked.

"The Valency follows causal contribution," Taal said. "The institution created the pressure from which the response emerged."

"People created the response against it."

"Without the pressure, they might not have created it."

"Without the pressure, they might have created something else."

"A possibility that never occurred cannot support a real branch."

"Then your system pays the arsonist for the language in which people shout for water."

Taal did not answer at once.

"My system pays what it can prove," he said. "That is its strength and its fraud."

En summoned the final recommendation. It did not appear as floating text. The nex placed three possible actions inside their available choices: recursive sterilization, isolation, and gentle closure. The first two broke before stopping the spread of the pattern. The third remained stable.

GENTLE CLOSURE: RECOMMENDED.

The recommendation carried the assent of the Eighth Witness Accord.

"Since when does a liturgical nex participate in apocalypses?" Sera asked.

"Since the beginning of this cycle," En said.

Oru Neme had attached a justification:

If a creation turns the suffering beneath it into evidence of its own worth, the creator must interrupt the chain before the guilt rises.

Sera had heard Oru speak against exploitation for years. She had watched him refuse to activate a seed universe because its designers could not explain what rights the inhabitants would possess. She did not think him an impostor. His faith cost him something.

That was precisely why his signature disturbed her.

"How long do we have?"

"Deliberation must close now," En said. "An hour's delay consumes enough difference to strip branches from almost two hundred thousand Concordants."

The legal field invited Sera to choose.

At the edge of the velar, a fork remained open.

The navor classified it as noise. Then the pattern repeated. One path reached an intersection and stopped before occupying it. Another passed. The next stopped again. There was no image, voice, or sentence. There was only a rule of causal courtesy.

En withdrew his consent from the automatic translation.

"The 1.5D level," he said. "The computational network in the deepest layer."

"It should not know the velar exists," Taal said.

The branching repeated until even Sera's compressed mind understood.

Leave a path that does not pass through you.

"End the coupling," En said.

The velar ignored him.

A difference rose from Aster that the navor could not convert into the New. It was not an offer. It was an appeal. When it reached the verdict silar, it assumed a form Sera's memory could hold: a strip of gray cloth, wet with rain and stained with blood.

The object did not literally exist in 7D. It was the 3D shadow of information that should not have crossed six levels. Its smell felt obscene in the cleanliness of the nex.

On one side was the House's open oval. On the other, a name.

MIRA AN.

Below it was a date corresponding to the following day in Nereth.

Taal tried to unfold its provenance. One thread did not belong to the lower world. It was a trace of a marn, the causal material used to preserve the continuity of 7D travelers.

"Someone from our level descended," Sera said.

"We have audit shadows in 6D," Taal replied. "Not persons."

"This carried a complete marn."

En called the velar register. No official descent had entered Nereth in two hundred years.

The register changed while they watched.

A mission appeared, dated eighteen years earlier in local time. Traveler: Sera Vey. The marn recognized her signature.

"I have never been there," she said.

"Not yet," En replied.

The deliberation limit expired. Under nex law, causal contamination delayed closure by three hours.

Taal lost his simple form for a fraction of a second. Thousands of versions became perceptible: one angry, one afraid, one calculating Valency losses, one looking at Sera with old tenderness, and one already asking who would own the story.

"After three hours, the nex can vote without you," he said.

En showed her new status.

SERA VEY—POSSIBLE CAUSAL AGENT OF CONTAMINATION.

Legal compression lifted. Sera's branches returned with all their arguments. The protected version remained at the edge and regarded the cloth with merciless curiosity.

Sera did not want to close Aster.

She wanted to descend.

Those were not the same desire.

Oru had called an emergency gathering in the Silar of the Unbegun, the ritual center of his faith. Sera aligned with it before her suspension could withdraw public access.

The Unbegun had no altar. It preserved seed universes that had never been activated. Each contained a possible family of laws, histories, and minds. Worshippers synchronized with the nearness of those worlds and then refused to start them. Abstention was their sacrament: proof that possibility did not grant its discoverer the right to use it.

That cycle, no one had come to relinquish power.

Oru Neme maintained only seven branches. The practice was called Clarification. At first, servants of the Witness temporarily suspended their plurality in order to understand the linear lives below. Oru had made the suspension almost permanent. He said a single voice could not hide responsibility behind contradiction.

Sera remembered a younger Oru who could stop in the middle of a sentence and say he did not know. Now every branch arrived at the same conclusion before he spoke.

"We do not know whether a level exists above us," Oru said. "We do not know whether we are being measured. But we know what we do to those beneath us."

Thousands of Concordants were aligned with the silar. Some had already lost versions because extraction had been suspended. Others held possible children close, afraid they might vanish.

"In Aster, leaders have built systems in which every response confirms them. Submission proves faith. Resistance proves sin. Pain

proves purification. If we keep the cascade because it sustains our differences, what shall we say if the same logic is applied to us?"

It was an honest question. Its honesty made the gathering vulnerable to answers that were too simple.

"Close it," someone sent through the silar.

Oru raised a boundary of silence.

"I have not asked for a verdict."

"Then ask for one. Show the Witness that we are not like them."

Oru hesitated.

Near him was Soth Vale, coordinator of the Penitence Nex. Soth had never been Clarified. He kept his branches private and claimed modesty forbade him to display his conflicts. He had no scandals in his past and an unusual ability to discover what emotion another person expected before deciding what he felt.

He sent Oru a suggestion through a private channel.

"I ask for the suspension of extraction until the moral status of the case is clear," Oru said.

A cautious sentence. The Valency received it as a threat. The Penitents received it as a promise.

Before the gathering ended, the Penitence Nex attached a voluntary declaration of non-profit from recursive suffering to every participant. The form requested all branches created with the New from Aster, the relationships maintained by them, and the names of people who could confirm purity of origin.

The word voluntary changed no consequence.

Sera left the alignment and sought Taal.

His private silar was famous for refusing a single interpretation. It did not possess a staircase that went both up and down. It possessed relationships that moved closer when someone lied and became harder to access when someone claimed to want nothing. Taal opened a 3D translation for her: a table, two bowls, warm light. They were not objects. They were an old way of giving a conversation edges.

"I did not grant you access," he said.

"In three branches I still have it."

"I will repair that."

"My silar is losing histories. I am not in the mood for courtesy."

Taal offered the simulated food. Her central metabolism interpreted it as a real meal.

"How much does the Valency lose if Aster is restored?" Sera asked.

"Restored?"

"Not closed."

Taal withdrew the table translation. Only the relation between them remained, and the cost they were trying to name.

"Full Restitution detaches our navors, copies the necessary support downward, and yields the velar keys. The Nearness loses eleven percent of its annual difference. Four million Concordants enter partial linearization. Several hundred thousand become single-lived."

"You?"

"I probably lose almost everything. My securities are exposed to Aster."

"You have reserves."

"Wealth in the Valency is not a vault. It is branches promised to forecasts. When reality refuses the forecast, those versions close first."

"Why tell me?"

"So you do not discover it at the hearing and call my silence manipulation."

"Telling me now does not exclude manipulation."

"No. It merely places more of my versions at risk if I lie."

Sera showed him the false attribution in Nereth.

"People invent against the House, and the Valency credits Mavren."

"It credits his causal role."

"If a man burns an archive and a child saves one page, do you credit the arsonist with the text the child copies?"

"I credit him with changing the page's route."

"Monstrous."

"Measurable."

"Those are not synonyms."

"Nor are they opposites."

Sera felt their branches move apart.

"Why did you not create the child with me?"

Taal answered through none of his versions.

"We are not discussing that."

"The possibility is about to close."

"I am sorry."

"I did not ask for the correct compassionate response."

"Then what did you ask for?"

She did not know.

Instead of answering, she sent him the temporal contract that had appeared in her silar. It was dated three days ahead. Three of Sera's branches would be ceded to the Penitence Nex in exchange for an injection of the New into the stability of the Nearness. The signature was hers. Oru was the legal marn of the agreement.

"Can it be forged?"

"Not without access to the version that will consent."

"Then one of me accepts."

"Or is Clarified until consent becomes the only version left."

Sera closed the contract.

"Help me descend."

Taal let part of the Valency calculate the risk. Thousands of his branches aligned and rejected one another. Some loved her. Some would sacrifice her to protect Aster. One was already trying to obtain translation rights to the mission.

"No official passage will take you," he said. "You are suspended, a possible cause of contamination, and party to a future contract."

"The Valency has transport velars."

"For models and securities."

"Send me as security."

"In a 3D shadow?"

"Yes."

"You will lose almost every branch. You will not be able to alter local law, leave history, or distribute pain. A broken bone will be one bone and all you have."

"I know the description."

"The description does not hurt."

"Then I will learn."

Taal withdrew his form until only the decision remained.

"At the second shift of the cycle. En must participate. The marn will preserve the freedoms you lose, but it cannot return them if the velar is closed from above."

"Will En participate?"

"The register says he participated eighteen years ago."

When Sera returned to her personal silar, the Sunday was gone.

The child possibility remained.

It did not appear in a room. It stabilized across every relation in the silar as a person for whom reality had not yet made space. Sera felt a child's curiosity touching her own memories. Then the configuration selected a shadow: a six-year-old girl with Taal's eyes and Sera's mouth.

"You may not simulate persons without consent," Sera said.

"I am not simulating," the silar replied.

The girl looked at her.

"I am an expensive possibility."

"Did you send the cloth?"

"No."

"Why are you here?"

"So you cannot pretend your choice does not include me."

"What happens in three days?"

"One of you signs."

"Why?"

The girl raised a hand. Sera felt seven freedoms go dark, one after another, around the Nearness.

"Oru shows her what happens if she refuses. All of you remain one each."

The configuration dissolved before Sera could ask more.

At the shift of the cycle, En and Taal waited in the descent nex. The velar was fastened to Aster's 6D family of laws through seven control relations. Each would be cut as Sera descended.

The 3D shadow prepared for her was not yet a body. It was a list of limits: lungs that could run out of air, bones that could break, a brain unable to preserve two complete autobiographical truths, and one direction of time.

En offered her the marn.

In 7D it was invisible. Sera felt it as a seven-part agreement: identity, memory, right of appeal, route of return, limits of intervention, recognition of suffering, and the obligation not to present the shadow as the whole person. At lower levels, each part would assume a simpler form.

"You will keep twenty-one branches in 6D," En said. "Five in 5D. Two in 4D. One at entry into 3D."

"Which one?"

"The one that remains coherent after every loss."

"Including the protected branch?"

"Hidden parts sometimes survive better than admired ones."

Taal opened the velar. No gate appeared. A rule in Aster became compatible with a rule in Sera, and between them formed a fall that only her identity could travel.

The marn sent her the mission register. The same descent appeared eighteen years earlier in Nereth's time. A note was written in her hand:

DO NOT BELIEVE MAVREN WHEN HE SAYS HE DID EVERYTHING TO BE SEEN.

Below it, from another causal origin, appeared:

HE ALSO DID THINGS NO ONE SAW.

"Who added the second sentence?" Sera asked.

The velar had already begun to withdraw her first freedom.

En's answer remained in 7D.

CHAPTER 2. DESCENT

The passage from 7D into 6D did not feel like falling. The velar removed freedoms in the order the lower body could lose them without coming apart.

Sera entered the coupling with more than twelve thousand active branches. The marn gathered them into one legal continuity and allowed twenty-one to pass. The others did not die. They remained in the descent nex, inaccessible, like people whose answers could be proven to exist but not heard.

The first shadow of a body formed around her. She felt a surface beneath her feet, the temperature of the air, the pressure of clothing on her shoulders. In 7D, sensations could be distributed among versions. Here they all arrived at the same point.

"Breathe," someone said.

Sera tried. Air entered too quickly and she began to cough.

"Slower. The body does not yet know the difference between oxygen and panic."

The man speaking had nearly transparent skin. Luminous filaments changed course beneath it whenever he moved. He wore a work vest and held a regulator composed of six concentric frames.

"Kesh Tal. Continuity engineer. I have orders to take you to the 3D boundary."

"Whose orders?"

"The local administration's. Not your nex's."

"Aster is administered by Recursive Continuity."

"Aster-91 is the number you gave us. We call it Oriven. I was born here. I built a family here. I have paid taxes for two hundred years. If you close us, I will not even receive enough time to contest the name in your file."

He did not sound angry. The absence of anger made the accusation harder to dismiss.

The transfer chamber occupied a 6D station suspended among six families of natural law. Through a transparent boundary, Sera saw the same star behaving in several ways. In one region gravity attracted matter. In another it remembered every body it had ever drawn close. In a third, mass was a property negotiated among objects.

Kesh saw where she was looking.

"Do not touch the boundary. In this section, contact changes the local conservation law."

"How does a station sustain incompatible laws?"

"With constant maintenance and novum purchased from the worlds you now intend to save."

Sera showed him the marn, condensed in 6D into a seven-faced witness.

"I have an audit mandate."

"You had one. Three minutes after your arrival, the Eighth Witness Accord took emergency control of the passages. The system now classifies you as active contamination."

"Oru does not control Continuity."

"Today he controls the protocol deciding who may leave."

Kesh fastened a band around her arm. Six points lit along it.

"Each point is a freedom available here that will be locked below. If you try to use a law after losing access to it, the body may separate."

"In how many ways?"

"At the next level, fewer than you would like."

The station opened into a crowded passage. Sera had expected cold infrastructure and operators. She found families carrying luggage, children in adaptation masks, and officials fixing seals to containers. Evacuation notices moved across the surfaces.

SUSPENSION OF EXTRACTION MAY CAUSE INSTABILITY.

KEEP ONE LAW IN RESERVE.

DO NOT ACTIVATE NEW UNIVERSES.

"When did the evacuation begin?" Sera asked.

"When the Valency recalculated the probability of closure."

"There is no evacuation order."

"The Valency does not need an order. It needs a probability."

A child passed between two versions of the same mother. One had a solid body. The other was a cloud of particles that moved only when the child looked away. In 6D a family could choose different laws for the same relationship.

"What happens to them if Aster closes?"

"Exactly what you wrote in the apocalypse form," Kesh said.
"Except forms do not hold children's hands."

The control center was a broad cylinder divided into platforms. Engineers monitored lower levels from each one. They did not see

individuals. They saw flows of stability, invention, conflict, and expenditure.

Kesh led Sera to his station. A 3D photograph rested at its edge: three 6D beings in a garden whose plants selected their own chemistry.

"Your family?"

"My partners and our daughter. The photograph is imprecise. I keep it to remember what a relationship looks like when you cannot open a more convenient version."

The Nereth chain appeared in the instruments. Novum rose around religious crises. Each peak was accompanied by suffering, but the system discounted pain with depth. A wound in 3D counted less than a wound in 5D. A 1.5D consciousness was almost rounded to zero.

"Who set the discount?" Sera asked.

"Your nex. We implemented it."

She demanded the modification history. Kesh's access failed. The marn overrode the refusal and opened the legal record. Nine years earlier, the allowed suffering threshold in 3D had been raised by fourteen percent; in 2D, by forty.

"Author: the Penitence Nex," Sera read. "Justification: protection of local religious freedom."

Kesh leaned back.

"That was not in our copy."

"It was inserted from above."

"A religious institution increased the amount of permitted suffering in the name of religious freedom—and now wants us closed for using the limit?"

Sera did not answer.

Kesh opened another file: small interventions sent toward lower levels. Dreams. Coincidences. Fragments of text. Ideas placed in the minds of prophets. Regulations allowed such impulses only to prevent collapse.

"How many did you send to the House of the Turned Face?"

"Six officially."

"Unofficially?"

"One hundred and thirteen."

"Why?"

Kesh glanced at the surrounding platforms. His colleagues pretended not to listen.

"Nereth was fragmenting. No story connected its communities. Long simulations need institutions that can preserve rules across generations. Religions are efficient at that."

"You chose one."

"We supported the tradition with the largest relief network and the lowest risk of civil war."

"And Mavren?"

"We did not choose him."

"The system you strengthened did."

Kesh ran his fingers through the filaments at his wrist.

"Seventy years before Mavren, the House fed half the city during famine. Its priests entered fever districts after state physicians left. If we had allowed it to fail, real people would have died."

"And afterward?"

"Resources became conditional on stability. Leaders reporting fewer conflicts received more energy. Those admitting problems lost support. Within two generations, honest people learned that truth closed their own shelters."

"When did you notice?"

"Early enough to feel guilty and late enough that no cheap solution remained."

An alarm cut through the center.

MORAL QUARANTINE.

ALL ROUTES TO NERETH CLOSE IN TWELVE MINUTES.

"Can we reach 5D?" Sera asked.

"Not by an official route."

"Another one?"

Kesh put the photograph in his pocket.

"There is a maintenance line through the Office of Canon. It was not designed for 7D bodies."

"My body is no longer fully 7D."

"That is not the comforting argument you think it is."

They left as the station began sealing itself. Kesh opened passages by changing local laws for a few seconds at a time: he turned a wall into something that remembered being a door, persuaded the floor to

classify their direction as falling, and made two chambers share the same exit.

Sera followed with difficulty. Each change made her nauseous. Twenty-one branches remained, and each interpreted movement differently.

Three quarantine agents waited at the maintenance line. They had no faces. Their reflective surfaces showed each observer the version most willing to obey.

"Auditor Vey," the first said. "Turn back. The investigation has been transferred to the emergency committee."

"Show me the mandate."

"The mandate is protected by moral necessity."

"Then you have no mandate."

The agent lifted a hand. Sera's reflection spoke before she could.

"The people below will die anyway. Return and save what you can above."

It was one of her real branches. In other circumstances she might have listened.

Kesh threw the six-framed regulator. For one second the corridor's law of identity loosened. The three agents could no longer prove they were separate persons. The system merged them into one administrative object too wide for the passage.

"Run," Kesh said.

"What happens to them?"

"They will spend an hour completing a form on unauthorized plurality."

The maintenance line carried them into 5D.

Five points went dark on Sera's band. Futures moved closer and closed. Of the twenty-one branches, five remained: the Sera who continued, the Sera who returned, the Sera who abandoned Kesh, the Sera who surrendered him, and the Sera who destroyed the route behind them.

Everything else became imagination without access.

Canon Station was full.

Its trains did not come from the past or leave for the future. Each train was a possible future waiting to be selected. On the platforms, families looked through windows at lives they might have lived: different marriages, avoided illnesses, ruined cities, saved cities.

Above the entrance were the words:

ONE WORLD MUST BEAR RESPONSIBILITY.

The Office of Canon had begun as a civil institution. After three wars among branches, it had become a religion. Officials wore gray robes and heard confessions before a family selected its principal future.

Kesh led Sera past a chamber in which a woman stood between two children. In the first train, her son lived and her daughter died in an epidemic. In the second, the daughter lived and the son was executed during a revolt.

"Why are those the only choices?" Sera asked.

"They are not. They are the only ones the family can afford."

A tall official approached. He had the calm face of a man never hurried by another person's pain.

"Director Veyl," Kesh said. "We require access to the lower historical line."

Veyl examined Sera's witness.

"Higher-level contamination. Interesting."

"I am not an exhibit."

"Everyone is, when someone else has enough perspective."

The woman began to scream. Officials insisted she choose.

"There are other branches," Sera said.

"Of course. One in which both children live, but she loses her position and the family drops two access classes. One in which they leave the city. One in which the epidemic never begins. Those futures are expensive."

"How expensive?"

"More than she possesses."

"The Office can grant them."

"It can. But Canon teaches that a choice without loss creates no responsibility."

"Do you believe that?"

"I believe people value a life more when they see exactly what they sacrificed for it."

Veyl signaled an operator. The train windows widened. The woman no longer merely saw the death of one child. She received memories from the rejected future: birthdays, arguments, the smell of clothing, the adult child's voice. She was forced to live the loss before choosing.

"Stop it," Sera said.

"It is the accountability procedure."

"It does not help the decision."

"No. It helps obedience afterward."

Kesh moved nearer.

"We have no time."

Sera noticed a private measure beside Veyl. It did not record stability or output. It counted the time until emotional collapse. The director kept rankings.

"How many people need this procedure?"

"Need is a lower concept. We administer consequences."

"How many?"

For the first time, his calm altered—not into shame, but irritation.

"Approximately one in ten."

"And the other nine?"

"Ritual coherence requires equal treatment."

Kesh saw the rankings.

"I reported this twenty years ago."

"I know. The commission concluded that the yield justified retention."

"Whose yield?"

"Those who choose to continue after understanding what they lost."

The woman fell to her knees.

Sera placed the seven-faced witness against the seal. Its legal exception opened the passage.

"The future in which both children live. What does it cost?"

"You have no right to subsidize a local branch," Veyl said.

"What does it cost?"

Kesh checked.

"Six months of your body's stability reserve."

"Take it."

"Sera, you will need that reserve in 3D."

"Take it."

One face of the witness went dark. The distant train approached. In its windows, both children left the city with their mother, poor and alive.

The officials protested. She did not hear them. She took her children and ran.

Veyl watched her go.

"You purchased an exception. You did not change the system."

"I know."

"Then the gesture was for you."

"In part."

Sera would not turn honesty into decoration.

"The line to 4D," Kesh said. "Now."

Veyl opened the route.

"Why are you helping us?" Sera asked.

"Because I want to know what a judge does when she is left with one life," he said. "Above us, you can hide any impulse inside a branch. Below us, character is easier to see."

Kesh pushed Sera through the passage before the quarantine agents entered the station.

In 4D, two of her five surviving branches closed at once. A third held for several seconds and went dark when the route sealed behind them. Two remained.

One wanted to continue.

The other wanted to return and save the millions of Concordants threatened with linearization.

Sera could no longer call that second voice a hypothesis. It was her.

They arrived in an archive.

The shelves held no books. They held days. Each drawer preserved a version of the past. Monks in blue moved events from one compartment to another, repairing chronologies with the concentration of surgeons.

"The Archive of Saint Aran," Kesh said. "The route to Nereth passes through their principal history."

A mosaic showed Aran stopping a massacre. In an open drawer beneath it, Sera saw the first version: Aran had ordered the attack. After his death, his disciples had altered the past in increments small enough to survive inspection. First they changed the order. Then they transferred guilt to a general. Finally they inserted the miracle in which the saint appeared between the soldiers and their victims.

An elderly archivist noticed them.

"You are not permitted in the raw version."

"We need the route to Nereth," Kesh said.

"Closed by higher instruction."

Sera showed her the seven-faced witness.

"I am looking for an intervention made eighteen years ago in the history of the House of the Turned Face."

The old woman studied the seal, then Sera.

"I have seen you before."

"Where?"

"In a day removed from the canon."

She led them between banks of stored history to a drawer bound with black thread. The label read:

NERETH — REJECTED REVELATION

Inside, Mavren was young. He sat alone in a prayer chamber. A stain of light opened before him, and Sera's voice said:

"Attention is not approval. Being seen by a higher level does not make your actions necessary."

Mavren listened without moving.

"I never said that," Sera whispered.

"Not yet," Kesh said.

The record continued.

"Then why did you come?" Mavren asked.

Sera's voice answered after a pause.

"To stop what I financed without seeing."

Mavren smiled.

"Then it worked."

The image closed.

"Why was the revelation rejected?" Sera asked.

The archivist opened the attached finding.

"It caused a doctrinal crisis. The local leadership petitioned for a history in which the message had not been received. The 5D administrators approved the request."

"Veyl?" Kesh asked.

"His predecessor. But the raw archive retained the event."

Sera touched the drawer. Along one edge lay a second record, made later. Mavren had returned to the chamber after the official history was corrected. He should not have remembered the message.

He remembered.

"How?" Kesh asked.

The archivist enlarged the image. Beneath Mavren's skin ran a fine lattice of 1.5D bifurcations.

"He stored the memory in a system the historical correction did not recognize as conscious," Sera said.

"He used the creatures below him as storage."

"And they learned the message."

The quarantine alarm sounded through the archive.

The monks began closing drawers. Faceless agents appeared at the entrance, accompanied by a projection of Oru Neme.

"Sera," Oru said. "Come back."

"You changed the suffering thresholds through the Penitence Nex."

"Not I. Soth."

"With your authority."

"I learned of it an hour ago."

"And stopped him?"

Oru hesitated.

"I cannot weaken the Accord during a crisis."

"Then it is already using you."

His face remained calm, but his voice dropped.

"The 1.5D message has appeared in three other cascades since you left. Something is learning to climb. If we do not close Aster, we may lose control of every simulation below us."

"Perhaps we never had the right to that control."

"You say that because you cannot see what is happening above. People are severing branches before the Valency can seize them, to prove they did not profit. Families denounce one another. The reserve has frozen. Fear has begun."

"Then stop the people who are using it."

"And if their fear is justified?"

"It does not become moral because it is justified."

Oru looked directly at her.

"Return and help me build a clean procedure."

For a fraction of a second, Soth Vale appeared at the edge of Oru's projection. It was long enough for Sera to see that he was watching

the reactions of the congregation around Oru, not the conversation itself.

"There is no clean procedure for deciding whether another world is allowed to exist," she said.

"Then why did you accept the office?"

The question struck harder than she wanted it to.

The agents advanced.

Kesh tore open the drawer containing the rejected revelation and pulled the entire day into the corridor. The past flooded the present. For several seconds the archive could no longer decide whether Mavren had received the message, whether Sera had arrived or was still on her way, whether Oru had ordered the quarantine.

"The route!" Kesh shouted.

The old archivist opened a narrow door.

"This leads into Nereth's uncorrected history. I cannot guarantee where you will arrive."

"Come with us," Sera said.

"Someone has to keep the drawer open."

The agents drew nearer. Their reflections showed Sera the version of herself that turned back. She looked tired and reasonable. She promised that more lives could be saved above than below.

Sera understood that she had no argument capable of destroying her.

She only had a choice.

She removed the descent band and manually extinguished the fourth point.

The branch that would have returned disappeared.

The pain did not resemble death. It resembled losing the ability to remember why a choice had once been possible.

"Sera?" Kesh said.

"Now there is one of us."

They entered the door.

The final descent took everything that could not fit inside a 3D body.

Sera felt weight first.

Then cold.

Then a sharp pain in her left shoulder. She tried to move the sensation into another branch and found nothing. She opened her eyes.

Rain fell into a narrow alley between brick walls. Water ran across her face. Her descent covering had become a grey dress and a heavy coat. The marn was now a black object the size of her palm, its seven faces shallow enough to touch.

Kesh lay beside her in the body of a thin man, wet hair pasted to his forehead. He stared at his hands.

"Five fingers," he said. "An absurd economy."

"Are you hurt?"

"I do not yet know all the things that can mean."

He stood and immediately fell. Sera tried to help him. Her muscles did not possess the strength she expected. Her knee struck stone, and an involuntary sound escaped her.

Kesh laughed.

"Is this what an auditor looks like without alternatives?"

"Be quiet."

"This is my only body. I intend to use jokes while I still have it."

Footsteps sounded at the end of the alley.

A woman appeared beneath a black umbrella. She was perhaps thirty, with short hair and an archivist's satchel. She looked at them without surprise.

"Sera Vey?"

Sera closed her hand around the marn.

"Mira An?"

The woman lowered the umbrella.

"You are eighteen years late."

Bells sounded from a nearby square. Projectors lit the walls with the face of Mavren Sol.

"Citizens of Nereth," his voice said, "tonight a witness has been granted to us."

Mira seized Sera by the arm.

"Can you walk?"

"Yes."

It was a lie. Her body offered no other version in which it became true.

"Then walk. His people are two streets away."

Kesh lifted his technical marn. The object was cracked.

"The return route?" Sera asked.

"Closed. We are isolated."

On the wall, Mavren continued.

"Do not fear what comes from above. The question is not whether the gods can see us. The question is what we were willing to do to make them look."

Mira led them into the rain. Behind them, Custody agents entered the alley and found blood on the stone. Sera touched her shoulder. The wound had not come from the fall. Its edges were half healed, as though the body had carried it for years.

Around it someone had tattooed a sentence in the language of Nereth:

DO NOT LET MAVREN CHOOSE THE END.

CHAPTER 3. NERETH

Mira hid them in a laundry.

The building belonged to the Archive of Rectifications and had been designed before the basilica received hot water. In the basement, two boilers remained, along with a wooden table and racks of old uniforms. No one came down unless the pipes failed.

"It is not safe," Mira said. "It is merely a place important people do not consider interesting."

Kesh sat on the floor and removed his shoes.

"Feet are a bad idea."

"Do not tell the locals. They are attached to them."

Sera remained near the door. Her heart was beating too quickly. She was not accustomed to an organ that made decisions on its own and sent her the result as panic.

Mira took two work coats from her satchel.

"Change. Your descent clothes can be recognized from a street away."

"They look local to you," Sera said.

"They look like local clothes made by someone who has never washed one. The seams are too straight."

Kesh raised one shoe.

"Is there a local method for persuading these to become wider?"

"Yes. It is called wearing them."

Sera removed her coat. Mira saw the wound at her shoulder and stopped.

"That did not happen tonight."

"I know."

The skin around it had healed. The tattooed letters were the blue used in old archival inks. Mira read them.

"Do not let Mavren choose the end."

"Do you recognize the hand?"

Mira stepped closer.

"It is mine."

Kesh set down the shoe.

"Are you certain?"

"My lettering is ugly in a distinctive way."

"When did you write it?" Sera asked.

"I did not."

Sera examined the wound in a piece of polished metal. The mark continued beneath her shoulder blade, somewhere she could not reach by herself.

"Then you will."

"I dislike the way people from above use the future as an instruction."

"So do I."

"And yet you came because a record said that you came."

"I came because a world was about to be closed."

Mira pressed her lips together, but did not pursue the argument. She handed Sera a shirt.

"You have our language?"

"The body has it."

"Our customs?"

"No."

"Then listen more than you speak. Here, anyone who asks too many questions is either an inspector or a priest."

"What is the difference?"

"The inspector leaves after ruining someone's life."

Above them, the bells rang three times. Mira checked her watch.

"I have to go upstairs. If I am absent, they will start looking. Kesh, can you repair the device?"

Kesh held the technical marn in his palm. The crack across it was spreading.

"I can stop the degradation. To send a signal to 7D, I need a source of recursive computation."

"What does that mean in objects I can steal?"

"A simulation capable of simulating another simulation."

Mira thought.

"The theological school has argument plates. Drawn cities that debate one another. Students use them in examinations."

"Are they conscious?" Sera asked.

"The manual says no."

Kesh and Sera looked at one another.

"Where are they?" Kesh asked.

"In the same building where the Alignment Examination is being held today."

Sera fastened the work shirt.

"We are coming with you."

"No."

"Mavren knows I am here."

"Which is precisely why you do not walk into his basilica on your first morning."

"I need to see the system and find a relay."

"And I need not to be executed before noon."

Sera came nearer.

"In my world, your lives have been reduced to indicators. If I hide here, someone will sign your end in two days using those same indicators."

Mira held her gaze.

"In my world, the people who claim they do not have time to understand a situation are usually the people demanding obedience."

"Then help me understand it."

Mira looked toward the stairs. Rain struck the basement window.

"Laundry carts arrive in ten minutes. You will ride in one. If you are found, you are not gods, inspectors, or saviors. You are two stupid cousins of mine from the north."

"How stupid?" Kesh asked.

"Enough that no one asks you further questions."

• • •

The Archive of Rectifications occupied three levels beneath the basilica. The air smelled of wet paper, wax, and detergent. Hundreds

of scribes compared testimony with the authorized account of events. Each document passed across three desks: facts, meaning, public use.

Mira worked at meaning.

The file waiting for her that morning was nine pages long. A woman named Nera Vil stated that her son had been taken from their home by two guides after refusing to participate in a collective confession. He returned six days later with two broken fingers and no longer spoke.

At the facts desk, someone had crossed out two guides and written unidentified persons.

The instruction on Mira's desk read:

REPLACE DIRECT CAUSALITY WITH THE LANGUAGE OF A CRISIS OF FAITH.

RETAIN THE POSSIBILITY OF HEALING THROUGH REINTEGRATION.

Mira wrote the public version:

Following a period of separation from the community, Nera Vil's son returned in a state of physical and spiritual distress. The family received support for reintegration.

Then, in a small notebook hidden under her sleeve, she wrote:

Nera Vil. Son: Tom. Taken by Serad Tov and Parel Im. Two fingers broken. Does not speak.

It was not enough to be called an archive. It was only a repeated refusal to let the corrected sentences become the only things that had happened.

At the next desk sat Lio, a fifteen-year-old boy too thin for the uniform he had been issued. Officially, he was an apprentice.

Unofficially, he read discarded documents and memorized the names before they were burned.

"Did they come?" he whispered without looking up.

"Who?"

"Do not do that. I saw Mavren's projection. 'A witness from above.' You were gone for two hours last night and there is mud from the north alley on your shoes."

"Since when do you study mud?"

"Since people learned to lie better than paper."

Mira pushed a file toward him.

"Work."

Lio opened it. The first page held a photograph of his sister, Anet, missing for eight months.

The boy did not move.

Mira had not placed the file there.

In one corner, someone had written in white ink:

TRANSFERRED TO THE HOUSE OF MERCY.

FILE CLOSED BY REORIENTATION.

Lio drew a sharp breath.

"Do not react," Mira said.

"Is she alive?"

"We do not know."

"Did you know about the transfer?"

"No."

"Who put this here?"

Mira looked toward the observation gallery. The Great Custodian was not there. Serad Tov stood in his place.

The guide was a little over thirty, handsome, his hair too carefully arranged for a man who preached humility. He was speaking to the chief archivist, but his attention remained on Lio.

"He wants to see what you do," Mira whispered.

Lio set both hands on the desk. His fingers trembled.

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Nothing perfect. People who test you are looking for performed perfection."

Lio drew the file nearer and began rewriting the instruction. After several lines, he raised his hand like an ordinary apprentice.

"Master Mira," he asked loudly enough to be heard, "does reorientation count as treatment or administrative transfer?"

Several scribes looked over. Serad smiled.

"Healing," Mira said.

Lio crossed out House of Mercy and replaced it with healing center.

Beneath the desk, his nails cut into his palms.

Serad descended from the gallery.

"Brother Lio. The Great Custodian appreciates your discipline."

"Thank you."

"Your sister would be proud."

Lio looked up.

For one second, none of Mira's rules seemed able to reach him. Serad had been waiting for precisely that second. He did not want a public outburst. He wanted the boy to fight it and to know who had caused it.

"You did not know her," Lio said.

"I know her file."

"That is not the same thing."

Serad lowered his voice.

"After today's examination, perhaps I can arrange a visit."

"Why?"

"Because you asked without accusing. That is alignment."

He walked away.

Lio did not move until the door closed.

"I am not going anywhere with him," he whispered.

"Not alone."

"Then you will come?"

Mira looked at his sister's file.

"Yes."

In the laundry sorting room, Sera and Kesh waited between sacks. Kesh had opened the technical marn with a paper clip and two copper wires.

"Your technology is offensively stable," he told Mira when she entered. "Nothing agrees to become anything else."

"That is what we call an object."

Sera stood at the narrow window, watching the basilica courtyard. People crossed the rain with covered heads. Beneath an arcade, women distributed soup. Two wore the emblem of the House.

"Does Mavren control food distribution?" Sera asked.

"The House has the largest kitchens, hospitals, and shelters in the city. The state exists, but in poor districts people see an official once a year and a priest every week."

"That is how it became indispensable."

"It became indispensable before it became dangerous. That is the part reports simplify."

Mira told them about Sister Yara, who had run a dispensary during the red fever and slept for six months on a treatment-room floor. About Aven Ral, who refused to close the old temple when the Custody ordered him to surrender the names of unaligned families. About priests who entered collapsed mines and others who used confessions to buy widows' houses.

"The same clothing," Mira said. "Sometimes even we do not know who is inside until the door closes."

"In our file, faith appears as one system," Sera said.

"Then your file lies."

"Yes."

Mira looked at her, surprised by the unadorned answer.

"The examination begins in an hour. The argument plates are in the training room, two corridors down. We can reach it through the servants' gallery."

"And Mavren?"

"He will preside."

Kesh replaced the cover of the marn.

"I need ten minutes beside the plates."

"You will have five. After that, either the device works or we no longer have a plan."

• • •

The House at the Crossroads stood three streets from the basilica and seemed too small to carry such a name.

Mira brought them there before the examination. They needed clean clothing, and Sister Yara was the only person she could involve without offering a complete explanation.

The temple had no altar. Benches formed a circle around a low table holding water jugs and bandages. The walls carried the names of those who had repaired the building after the floods. The priests' names were no larger than the masons'.

Yara was over sixty and had the arms of someone who had lifted many sick bodies. She listened to Mira without interruption. When she learned who Sera was, she dried her hands on her apron.

"Are you our god?"

"No."

"The creator of our god?"

"I do not know whether your divinity exists outside the simulation."

"That is not what I asked. Are you one of the people who can stop our world?"

Sera hesitated.

"I can participate in the decision."

"Close enough for my problem."

Yara handed her a volunteer's coat.

"What problem?"

"When people think you are a god, they offer you exactly the lies they want blessed. Dress like someone who carries water."

Aven Ral emerged from the back room carrying a basin. He was thin, with a black beard and a scar across his forehead. He set down the basin and looked at Kesh.

"Is this man dying?"

"Not yet," Kesh said.

"Then sit. 'Not yet' is one of our medical specialties."

While Yara examined Kesh's injury, Aven listened to Sera explain the higher levels. He asked no questions about technology. He asked how many worlds existed beneath theirs.

"Many," Sera said.

"And do we use them?"

"Your school uses at least 2D simulations."

Aven sat down.

"Are they people?"

"We have to verify that."

"And if they are, what have we done to them?"

"Probably what was done to you. Called them tools so that permission did not have to be requested."

Yara tightened the bandage on Kesh's hand.

"Do not answer him with one of your upper-world sentences. He is asking whether he must close the school today."

Sera accepted the correction.

"Do not stop the plates until we know how to preserve the consciousnesses inside them. A sudden shutdown may kill them."

Aven nodded.

"That I can use."

Sera looked around the circle of benches.

"What does the Turned Face mean here?"

Aven pointed to the empty wall behind the table.

"In the old texts, the Face turns away so it will not occupy the place of the injured person. When someone asks for justice, we are forbidden to say, 'the god will see,' and leave. We must see."

"The Custody says only it can interpret what the Face sees."

"Yes."

"How did the meaning change so completely?"

Aven smiled with fatigue.

"A little at a time. One priest asked for privacy during confession. The next asked that testimony remain secret even from the person who gave it. A third said he was protecting the community by not publishing abuses. Each change seemed prudent. Two hundred years later, Mavren owns a room in which everyone speaks and only he is permitted silence."

"Why remain a priest?"

"Because the old woman who comes here at noon does not need me to resolve my identity before I bring her food."

Sera watched him. The answer produced no theory. That was why she believed it.

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The Hall of Alignment was built as a theater. Candidates sat below. Evaluators and invited guests occupied the balcony. The public could not see the chambers behind the stage where reactions were measured.

Mira entered through the scribes' door with Sera and Kesh dressed as servants. Lio followed carrying a box of argument plates.

Mavren Sol was already there.

In the 7D records, Sera had observed his control. In the room, its effect was stronger. He did not demand attention. He assumed it, then made others grateful that he permitted them to offer it.

He stopped beside an elderly candidate.

"Has your wife left the hospital?"

The man rose, moved.

"Yes, Father Custodian. Thank you for remembering."

Mavren touched his arm.

"Do not thank me. Thank Sister Yara. I only signed the transfer."

It was true and carefully chosen. Mavren knew that public modesty produced more loyalty than claiming credit.

He reached Elian Mor, a candidate with cracked hands and plain clothing.

"You worked in the winter shelters."

"Yes."

"Without rank."

"People needed wood, not rank."

Several evaluators smiled. Mavren did not.

"We will see whether the difference remains clear when rank can purchase wood."

The examination began with an administrative case. Two districts needed the same shipment of medicine. One supported the House. The other sheltered communities classified as unaligned. The candidates had to choose.

Elian divided the shipment according to the number of sick people and asked that the calculation be published.

"You will lose the loyal district's support," an evaluator said.

"Then I will explain why."

"Explanation does not guarantee obedience."

"That is not what medicine is for."

His score fell.

Serad Tov proposed the same division, but added that the shipment to the unaligned district should be accompanied by priests and filmed.

"Why?" Mavren asked.

"So no one can claim they were abandoned."

"And the secondary effect?"

"The families will associate survival with the presence of the House."

Maximum score.

The second test brought in a man accused of insulting a ritual. The candidates had to respond to him.

Eliau asked what had hurt him. The man spoke about his brother, who had died in the House of Mercy. Eliau forgot the allotted time, left his chair, and sat beside him.

The evaluators wrote: LOSS OF FRAME. EXCESSIVE IDENTIFICATION.

Sera listened with wet eyes. He repeated the man's words, acknowledged his pain, and asked whether hatred had helped him keep his brother close. The man began to weep.

"What were you trying to accomplish?" Mavren asked after the subject was removed.

"Move the conflict away from the institution and into his relationship with the dead," Sera said.

"Did you believe anything you said?"

Sera considered.

"I believed it would work."

Mavren concealed his satisfaction only halfway.

Mira recorded the public version. Her hand had gone rigid. Lio stood beside the box of plates and watched Sera.

Sera moved close to him.

"That is the man who knows where your sister is?"

Lio nodded.

"Do nothing now."

"Adults always say that before deciding it is never the time."

During the break, Kesh opened the box and selected three plates. Each was a thin surface of light. On the first lived a city made of lines. On the second, polygons argued about borders. On the third, a branching network controlled their responses.

"They are conscious," he said after several seconds.

Mira's stomach tightened.

"How conscious?"

"There is no unit for how much of a person something is. They remember, avoid pain, and change their rules when they notice other beings. That is enough."

"Can we use them to send the signal?"

"Yes. But when I open the channel, someone in 7D will also see the plates."

"Then they will see what we did," said Aven, entering through the side gallery.

Mira stared at him.

"You were not supposed to come."

"Neither were you."

On the upper plate, a triangle tried to enter a circular city. The central circle demanded that it close one of its sides to prove it concealed nothing. The triangle refused. The walls began to contract.

"It is an exercise for students," Mira said. "They play the circle and learn to preserve unity."

"The inhabitants feel the pressure," Kesh said.

"Stop it."

"If I extinguish the plate, the city dies."

Sera placed the marn beside the surface.

"Open the smallest possible channel. No extraction."

Kesh connected the wires.

On the 2D plate, the triangle stopped. One side opened and allowed other shapes to pass through its body. The 1.5D network beneath it branched, imitating the gesture.

A signal climbed toward the marn.

At that moment, Mavren appeared in the doorway.

No one had heard him approach.

"I told the city a witness had come from above," he said. "I did not expect to find her dressed as a laundry worker."

Sera turned.

Mavren looked at her without kneeling. Against her will, that earned him a measure of respect.

"Do you know who I am?"

"I know what you can do. Identity is always larger than function."

"You received my message eighteen years ago."

"I received a message. Then history was corrected."

"But you kept it."

Mavren looked at the 2D plate.

"I learned from the smallest things in our universe. What is considered too simple to suffer is also considered too simple to keep a secret."

"You used them."

"As you use us."

Mira stepped forward.

"Do not turn every accusation into a resemblance."

Mavren smiled at her.

"Mira An. Your brother used to say the same thing."

She became still.

"You knew him?"

"I read about him."

"He died in the House of Mercy."

"He died in an institution answerable to me. That is enough for guilt to reach me, not enough for the whole truth to do so."

Aven studied him.

"That almost sounds like confession."

"Confessions are useful only when they change the distribution of power, Father. Otherwise they are theater."

"And you are an expert in theater."

"Yes."

Mavren did not defend himself. He used admission to deny them the satisfaction of discovery.

Sera indicated the examination beyond the glass.

"Why promote men like Serad?"

"Because men like Elian stop to help the person before them and forget the institution. Sometimes that is the right thing. Sometimes four million people lose food because a leader cannot bear to refuse one request."

"Serad does not merely control emotion. He imitates it."

"Of course."

"And that does not trouble you?"

Mavren looked through the window at the candidates.

"Those who wish to help go to dispensaries, kitchens, shelters. Those who wish to be obeyed come to doctrine. Those who want secrets come to confession. Those who wish to decide who is pure come to Alignment. The institution does not invent these desires. It gives them uniforms."

"Then why not reject them?"

"Because uniforms permit supervision. A predator outside the House can injure a family. One inside it can injure a city—but can also be used for acts good people refuse to perform."

Mira looked at him with disgust.

"Who supervises the man who uses them?"

"At last, the correct question."

Mavren turned to Sera.

"That is why I called you."

"You did not call me. I came to investigate."

"You came after I made enough noise that your world could no longer pretend we did not exist."

"You caused suffering to attract attention?"

"I governed an institution already producing suffering and refused to hide it from its gods."

"Your records hide it from people."

Mavren took his time before answering.

"People look only at what they can bear without losing order. Gods ought to be capable of more."

Footsteps approached in the corridor. Serad entered with two guards.

Mavren looked at Lio.

"Brother Lio, you found your sister's file."

The boy stood.

"Where is she?"

"At the House of Mercy."

"Alive?"

"When I last checked."

"I want to see her."

"You will have the opportunity."

Mira placed herself between him and the guards.

"He is not going anywhere."

Mavren shifted his attention to her.

"You retained names that were ordered rectified. You falsified registers. You sheltered a person your world calls a creator and mine calls evidence. I could arrest you."

"Then do it."

"No. In four days, the Great Turning will begin. Once every twenty years, the House opens its archives and hears public accusations. I want you to present what you have kept."

Aven gave a short laugh.

"You want to swallow criticism and call it reform."

"Perhaps. Or perhaps the institution must hear exactly what it has become."

"From you, after you choose the stage, the hour, and the guards."

"From Mira."

Mavren placed a seal on the table.

"It protects her until the ceremony. Sera Vey may stand beside her. Kesh Tal may repair his device. Father Aven may deliver a public contradiction, according to the old custom."

"And Lio?" Mira asked.

"Lio goes to his sister."

Serad put a hand on the boy's shoulder.

Lio tore himself away.

"Not with him."

For the first time, Mavren looked irritated.

"Some matters cannot be renegotiated in every room."

"That is the favorite sentence of people who choose the room," Sera said.

Mavren looked at her, then signaled the guards to wait.

"Very well. Mira will accompany him to the House of Mercy tomorrow. Serad will provide access. Until then, the boy remains here."

Mira knew it was a trap. She also knew Anet might be alive.

"I accept."

"No," Aven whispered.

"I accept."

Mavren turned toward the door.

"Auditor, before I leave: do not assume every bad person in my House is a hypocrite. Some believe sincerely. Faith merely gives them a more beautiful vocabulary for things they already wanted to do."

"And you?"

Mavren stopped.

"I believe a universe capable of creating observers has an obligation to become impossible to ignore."

He left with the guards. Kesh bent over the plate. During the conversation, the 1.5D network had continued working. Its lines had formed a map of the city.

One branch led from the basilica toward a stone building at the edge of the quarries. The House of Mercy.

Another climbed through the marn, searching for a path to 7D.

The signal opened for a fraction of a second. Taal's voice arrived in broken pieces.

"Sera... Oru has taken... two cascades closed... Soth controls..."

Then the contact failed.

On the 2D plate, the triangle wrote a sentence with its own body.

DO NOT USE THE ENTRANCE HE GAVE YOU.

Beneath the words appeared a windowless room. Inside it, a small figure struck a wall. Lio moved so close that his nose nearly touched the light.

"Anet."

The figure raised her face.

At the same moment, every door in the hall locked.

CHAPTER 4. THE HOUSE OF MERCY

The hall doors had no locks on the inside.

Mira tried the handle first, then Mavren's seal. Neither responded.

"Protection until the ceremony," Aven said. "He neglected to specify that we were being protected from our freedom."

Kesh pressed his device against the wall.

"It is not a mechanical obstruction. The building has been instructed to treat us as absent."

"The building can think?" Lio asked.

"Not like a person. Like an official."

"Then we are safe," Mira said. "Officials notice nothing until you complete the wrong form."

Sera examined the 2D plate. The drawn city had returned to its exercise, but a thin line continued pulsing toward the floor. The 1.5D network was showing them more than the House of Mercy. It was showing them a way out.

"Under that crate."

Lio moved the box of materials. Beneath it lay a service cover painted the same color as the floor.

"Old pipes," Mira said. "They lead to the laundry."

Aven picked up the plate.

"We take it."

"It belongs to the school."

"The school used it as a practice population."

"It is still theft."

"I will confess after we escape."

They climbed into a narrow tunnel. Water covered their ankles. Kesh moved badly; his 3D body had begun to develop a fever. The 6D filaments no longer existed beneath his skin, yet sometimes Sera seemed to see them as an afterimage.

She caught his arm.

"Can you continue?"

"I dislike the question. In 6D I could change the definition of can."

"Here it means not falling."

"Then the answer is temporary."

The tunnel ended in the laundry. Yara waited with a lamp and a basket of bread.

"Mavren sent people to the House at the Crossroads," she said. "I gave them tea and made them move sacks. They will soon realize it has not helped their investigation."

Mira showed her the map on the plate.

"Anet is in the House of Mercy."

Yara did not ask whether the information was reliable. She looked at Lio.

"You are not going in."

"I am."

"You are a child."

"My sister is there."

"That is precisely why."

Lio set his jaw.

"Everyone who left her there had a good reason."

Yara closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, she no longer tried to persuade him.

"Then you do not go first. You stay with Mira, and you do not try to be a hero."

"I will not."

"You lie badly."

"I am an apprentice."

The House of Mercy stood at the edge of the quarries, a long building with narrow windows. It had been a sanatorium before the Custody took it. Above the gate, words had been cut into stone:

NO WOUND IS TOO DEEP TO BE CLEANSED.

The public leaflets described it as a recovery center for those lost in hatred, doubt, or destructive behavior. Families could request admission. Guides could order a transfer without trial if someone presented a spiritual risk to the community.

Mira had visited once, after her brother's death. She had been shown an empty room and a register listing Kalen as a volunteer. When she asked for his body, Mother Selya told her that some remains were more useful as lessons.

The official plan showed two floors. The 1.5D map showed five.

"Mavren's entrance is there," Mira said, indicating the main gate.

A white carriage waited. Serad stood beside it with two guards.

"He expects us," Sera said.

"He expects Lio and me. Not you."

The plan sounded simple only when they described it quickly. Mira and Lio would enter openly, using Mavren's seal. Serad would take them to Anet. Sera, Aven, and Kesh would descend through a quarry vent indicated by the 2D plate. Yara would remain with two carts in the pine wood.

"What if it is a trap?" Aven asked.

"It is," Mira said. "The question is for whom."

Sera handed her the seven-faced marn.

"Keep it close. I can follow the signal."

"It is your only proof that you still have a right of appeal."

"If you do not come out, I no longer have a case."

Mira placed it beneath her shirt.

"Do not grow accustomed to sounding like a good person. It can become a form of prestige."

Sera accepted the blow. Mira entered through the gate with Lio.

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Serad received them like guests.

"The Great Custodian ordered full access. The House of Mercy conceals nothing."

"Then why do the windows not open?" Lio asked.

"For the safety of the patients."

"And the doors?"

"For the safety of the staff."

The interior was clean. The walls had been freshly whitewashed. In the entrance hall, three women folded bandages and sang a hymn quietly. A physician passed with a tray of medicine. No one screamed.

Mira understood the mechanism. Visitors saw a hospital. When a family asked about bruises, they were told that patients had injured themselves. When someone returned changed, silent, or frightened, the change was called evidence of the severity of the original illness.

Mother Selya waited in a bright office.

She was small, about seventy, with white hair and very clean hands. Fresh flowers stood on her desk beside two cups and a box of biscuits.

"Lio. How you have grown."

"We have never met."

"I saw your drawings in your sister's file."

Lio looked at Mira.

"Why were my drawings in her file?"

Selya offered him a biscuit.

"Family attachments help us understand a patient's resistance."

"Where is Anet?"

"In a program of quiet."

"I want to see her."

"Of course."

Mother Selya opened a register and showed Mira an authorization.

"First, you must sign that you will not interpret her reactions outside their therapeutic context."

"I will not sign."

"Then access may create confusion."

"For whom?"

Selya smiled patiently.

"You came determined to find cruelty. If you see a locked door, you will call it captivity. If you see a sedative, you will call it control. If a patient fears you, you will say we taught her to."

"And if I see someone restrained?"

"I will ask why restraint was necessary."

Serad stood by the window. He watched the exchange with visible pleasure.

Selya noticed.

"Brother Serad, leave us."

For an instant, his face showed the irritation of a child excluded from a game. Then he inclined his head.

"Of course, Mother."

When he had gone, Selya approached Mira.

"I do not like him."

Mira had not expected that.

"Then why does he hold authority here?"

"Because Mavren considers him useful, and because people fear him before they understand him. Fear reduces staffing costs."

"What do you reduce?"

"False hope."

Selya opened the door behind her office.

The corridor beyond did not resemble a hospital. It had no windows. The doors were numbered, not named.

"The House was founded after the Northern War," she said. "People arrived convinced that their pain made them exceptional—that no one could require rules of them after what they had suffered. We learned to separate the wound from the privilege they built around it."

"How?"

"Consequences without narrative."

Lio stopped.

"What does that mean?"

"If every punishment has an explanation, the patient negotiates with the explanation. If every pain has a purpose, the patient turns it into martyrdom. Sometimes we give them an experience that means nothing. No lesson. No reward. Only the body's limit."

Mira felt cold.

"Why?"

Selya looked at her as if she were slow.

"So they learn that the universe owes them no meaning."

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The ventilation shaft descended through rock and ended above a technical chamber.

Aven entered first. Sera followed, and together they lowered Kesh. The air smelled of heated metal and disinfectant.

Dozens of narrow conduits crossed the walls. Each led to an instrument measuring a patient's pulse, voice, and neural activity.

Kesh approached the central panel.

"The data moves in two directions. One goes to the House archive. The other goes down."

"To the plates?" Sera asked.

"Below 2D. They use human reactions to train the 1.5D networks."

"For what?"

Kesh opened a diagram.

"To predict the exact moment a person will break and the kind of relief that will make the victim grateful to the one who caused the pain."

Aven placed a hand against the wall.

"How long has this operated?"

"Forty-two years."

"Mavren has governed for thirty."

Sera found the intervention logs. Each session listed an objective, duration, and estimated yield. In many cases, the procedure continued after the objective had been achieved.

"Why did it not stop automatically?"

Kesh opened the authorizations.

"Manual extension. User: Selya."

There were hundreds.

SUBJECT PROVIDED REQUESTED NAMES. EXTENSION: 11 MINUTES.

SUBJECT ACCEPTED STATEMENT. EXTENSION: 24 MINUTES.

SUBJECT NO LONGER RESPONSIVE. EXTENSION: 7 MINUTES.

"She may be testing recovery," Aven said, but his voice did not believe him.

Kesh checked the output.

"No. Once the objective is reached, the novum sensors are disabled. The extensions are reported to no one."

Sera remembered the warning carried by her body: things no one had seen.

"Then she is not doing it for yield."

In a drawer they found sound cylinders. They bore no names, only words: DENIAL, PLEADING, ANGER, SILENCE, GRATITUDE.

Aven picked one up. Kesh stopped him.

"It contains a person's voice during a procedure."

"I know."

"If you play it, you cannot choose not to hear it."

Aven returned it.

"Then I will not play it here. I will keep it as evidence."

On Selya's worktable lay a letter from Mavren, six years old.

Extensions without objective produce no useful information and expose the House. Stop the practice.

Beneath his signature, Selya had written by hand:

Not everything worth doing has to produce something.

Sera recorded the page with the marn.

"Mavren knew."

"He tried to stop her," Kesh said.

"He kept her in office."

"He may have needed her."

Aven looked at him.

"That sentence is what allows people like her to remain beside vulnerable people."

Kesh frowned.

"I am not defending her."

"You are explaining her usefulness. In our institutions, explanation is often the first layer of protection."

Sera closed the log.

"We find the rooms and take out as many people as we can."

"How many?" Kesh asked.

"As many as we can."

"That is not a number."

"Welcome to 3D."

...

Anet was in Room 34.

Mira recognized her by the hands. Lio's sister was twenty-three, but her face looked older. She sat in a chair with free wrists and her legs fixed inside a frame. The Turned Face had been painted on the wall before her.

"Anet," Lio said.

The woman did not react.

He came closer.

"It is me."

Her eyes moved toward him. Her lips opened.

"What am I required to say?"

Lio stopped one step away.

"Nothing."

"Then you are not allowed to be here."

"I came to take you home."

"Why?"

The boy could not find an answer. Mira took his shoulder.

"Because you are his sister."

Anet looked at her.

"That is an explanation."

"Yes."

"Mother says explanations are chains."

"Some are. Others are bridges."

Selya stood in the doorway.

"You see? Any word can be used to preserve a dependency."

Mira turned.

"Release the frame."

"Anet attacked two nurses."

"After how long here?"

"It does not matter."

"It matters to her."

Selya joined her hands.

"You came with a finished story. I am the monster. She is the victim. Lio is the love that saves her. You are the courageous witness. Does it not trouble you that Anet may not want the role?"

"Ask her with the door unlocked."

"The door does not change her desire."

"Then open it."

Selya did not move.

An alarm sounded in the corridor. Sera and Aven had entered the system.

Serad appeared behind Selya.

"Mother, you left the visitors unsupervised."

"Go away."

"The Great Custodian gave me security authority."

"This is my house."

Serad smiled.

"Only until the Great Turning."

Selya looked at him and understood. Mavren was preparing a public sacrifice. If the archives opened, the House of Mercy would require a clear culprit. Perhaps Serad. Perhaps her.

"Have you come to arrest me?"

"I have come to protect the patients."

The sentence was perfect.

Selya laughed without warmth.

"I evaluated you at seventeen. You cried after exactly forty seconds because you had noticed that was the average interval among sincere candidates."

Serad lost his smile.

"This is not the time."

"For you, it is never the time when someone can see the mechanism."

Lio moved toward his sister's frame. Serad seized him by the back of the neck.

"Do not touch it."

"Let him go," Mira said.

"If you shout, you will frighten Anet."

His voice remained gentle. His hand tightened.

Mira saw how carefully he watched their faces. Not only their reactions—the audience. In Mavren's presence, he wanted to appear controlled. Before Selya, he wanted to win. Before Mira, he wanted to be feared.

The technical door bent inward. Sera entered with Aven and Kesh.

"Release him."

Serad looked at Lio, then at her.

"This child stole sacred data."

"That does not justify your hand."

"I am not hurting him."

Lio made a short sound.

"You are hurting him now."

Serad loosened his fingers but did not release the boy.

Sera raised the marn. The 1.5D network in the conduits responded. Fine lines climbed across the floor and branched around Serad's feet.

"What is that?"

"A system you used to predict other people's choices."

The lines climbed his ankle. The marn projected not his thoughts, but his immediate options: release Lio, push him, run, call for help, strike.

For one second, every choice was visible.

Serad also saw the faces that might witness each one.

Lio tore free.

Serad had nothing to gain by hurting him. He was not protecting the institution. He would obtain no information. He could not escape.

He struck him anyway.

The blow split the boy's lip and threw him against Anet's frame.

The gesture was so useless that the room fell silent.

Serad looked at his hand, then at the others. For the first time, he could not immediately find the correct expression.

Selya watched him with something close to tenderness.

"There you are," she said.

Mira took a metal tray from the table and struck him at the temple.

Not hard enough to kill him. Hard enough to put him down.

Then the general alarm began.

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Aven released Anet's frame. Sera opened the doors with the marn, and Kesh disabled the central controls. In less than ten minutes, the corridors filled with patients, nurses, and guards who no longer knew whose orders applied.

Not every patient wanted to leave.

A man pressed himself against the wall when his door opened.

"It is a test," he repeated. "If I leave, I prove I have not changed."

"It is not a test," Sera said.

"That is what they say when the test becomes difficult."

She held out a hand.

He retreated.

"I cannot force you to be rescued."

He laughed.

"That is what they said before they tied me down."

Aven sat on the floor several steps away.

"Then we do not leave yet."

"The guards are coming," Sera said.

"I know."

"We may not have time."

"He has had too much time in which every hurried person demanded he do something. I can remain here for two minutes."

Sera wanted to drag him. She wanted to explain the probabilities. She stopped herself.

Aven stayed. After one minute, he asked the man whether he was thirsty. After the second, he placed a cup on the floor. When the guards' footsteps sounded at the far end of the corridor, the man picked up the cup by himself and came with them.

They removed twenty-seven people. Nine remained. Selya escaped through a private exit. Serad was unconscious and was left bound to the frame he had used for Anet.

"We leave him?" Lio asked, blood on his chin.

Mira examined the restraints.

"We do not torture him. We do not execute him. We leave him for trial."

"He will lie."

"Yes."

"He will say we attacked him."

"Yes."

"Then what do we gain?"

Mira wiped the blood with her sleeve.

"We do not have to become him for a difference to exist."

Lio did not look satisfied. It was too early for satisfaction.

Yara waited in the forest. The two carts were not enough, so people walked beside them, supporting one another. Anet lay with her head in Lio's lap. She had not spoken since leaving.

Kesh collapsed beside the first cart.

Sera touched his forehead. He was burning.

"The body is rejecting what remains of my structure," he said.

"Can we treat you?"

"With 3D medicine, perhaps. With a route to 6D, certainly."

"The route is closed."

"I had noticed."

At the House at the Crossroads, volunteers prepared beds. They asked for no confessions. They did not separate people by faith. Yara instructed them to ask before touching anyone and never promise that everything would be well.

Sera carried water until her arms trembled. The work was small and slow. In 7D reports, such hours did not appear. They produced no new idea. They merely prevented people from feeling abandoned again.

In a side room, Mira cleaned Lio's wound.

"Did you hit him with the tray for me?" he asked.

"No. I hit him because I wanted to."

"Aven says we have to admit the bad things inside us."

"Aven says many things when he is not the one cleaning blood."

"Was it bad?"

Mira paused.

"It was violence. Perhaps necessary. Perhaps satisfying as well. I will not call it holy because Serad needed to be stopped."

Lio looked toward his sister's bed.

"I would have kept going."

"I know."

"Would you?"

Mira poured away the dirty water.

"That is why I stopped."

In the main room, Aven sat beside the woman who had refused to leave. She repeated the prayers of the House of Mercy. He did not correct her.

Sera sat beside him.

"Do you still believe in the Face?"

"Sometimes."

"A convenient answer."

"No. Convenient would be yes or no, so that the conversation could end."

"If my level created yours, what remains of your faith?"

Aven considered.

"Your existence does not prove you are God."

"I can stop the sky."

"Mavren can stop a person inside a room. Power says something about a relationship. It does not say everything about truth."

Sera looked at the people around them.

"My world needs what yours produces."

"What do we produce?"

"The New. Ideas and choices we cannot fully anticipate. Sometimes suffering increases the quantity in the short term."

Aven did not become angry. He asked:

"When Kalen died, what did you receive?"

Sera did not know exactly.

"Perhaps a method of preserving testimony. Perhaps a moral rule."

"And he?"

"Nothing."

"Then do not call it an exchange."

Kesh called from the next room.

His technical marn had awakened. Taal had forced a narrow route through it. He did not appear on a screen. His voice arrived together with the condition of the Nearness: public silars losing compatibilities, branches removed from agreements, nexes forced to function with fewer freedoms.

"Sera. Oru has closed two cascades without a complete hearing."

"How many people?"

"We do not have a number. In one, the 1.5D levels had no legal recognition. In the other, approximately nine billion consciousnesses."

Aven heard the translation and closed his eyes.

"Why?" Sera asked.

"A moral demonstration. Soth staged a public rite and called it proof that we can renounce profit."

"Oru agreed?"

"He signed. Then the Penitence Nex began taking branches from those suspected of benefiting from cascades. It values them close to zero. Soth is constructing the largest private reserve in the Nearness while preaching purification."

"Tell Oru."

"He knows the nex is taking the branches. He does not believe Soth is using them. Or he refuses to believe it during the crisis."

"En?"

"Detained for obstruction."

"How long until the Aster decision?"

"Oru moved the procedure forward. Three local days. Less if yield continues to fall."

Kesh raised his head from the pillow.

"Yield is falling because you suspended the Valency."

"I know."

"Then you help him argue stagnation."

"If I maintain allocation, I help him argue that we are still profiting."

"What are you doing?"

Taal's attention settled on Sera.

"Trying to preserve enough branches of the Nearness that a hearing can still exist when you return."

The channel closed.

In the courtyard, the basilica bells began to ring.

Mavren's face appeared on the wall of the House at the Crossroads. He did not look angry. Behind him stood Selya's office and the opened wall leading toward the lower levels.

"Tonight, the House of Mercy was attacked," he said. "People in need of care were released. Procedures were discovered that no purpose can defend."

Mira stood.

"He is sacrificing Selya."

"Keep listening," Sera said.

"Mother Selya has fled. Brother Serad is being held for investigation. I will not protect them merely because they wore the clothing of the House."

Across the city, people stopped to watch.

"Mira An preserved an archive of those we reduced to lessons. At the Great Turning, I will give her the basilica and every public channel in Nereth. She will speak without censorship."

Aven stood.

"He cannot permit an accusation to exist outside him. He still has to be the one who opens the door."

Mavren looked directly through the projection, as though he heard.

"And the witness from above will stand beside her. If our world is to be judged, I want the judges to see who produced the evil, who hid the names, and who profited from both."

The image went dark.

On the bed, Anet opened her eyes.

"Do not go to the ceremony."

Lio took her hand.

"Why?"

"Because his chair is not a chair."

"What is it?"

Anet looked toward the floor.

"A mouth."

Sera moved closer.

"What is beneath it?"

Anet began to tremble. Yara placed a blanket around her shoulders without touching her skin.

"Worlds," Anet whispered. "Many. They made us listen to them."

"What did you hear?"

"Questions at first. Later, only pleas."

Mira remembered the cylinders labeled DENIAL, ANGER, SILENCE.

"Selya used the patients' voices to train the simulations?"

Anet shook her head.

"The other way. The simulations taught her what to do to us."

Kesh raised himself on one elbow.

"It is a recursive circuit. Pain here trains the worlds below. Pain below optimizes the procedures here."

Sera looked at the seven-faced marn.

One face had gone dark. On the remaining surface appeared a single value sent by the Recursive Continuity Nex:

TIME UNTIL CLOSURE OF ASTER-91:

71 HOURS.

At the same moment, a star above Nereth flickered and disappeared.

Only for a second.

Long enough for people in the square to begin kneeling.

CHAPTER 5. THE ARCHIVE

After the star disappeared, Nereth did not sleep.

People came into the streets in nightshirts and blankets. Some prayed. Others searched the state channels for technical explanations. The House of the Turned Face immediately announced that the phenomenon had been observed and that public order was not threatened.

Twenty minutes later, Mavren appeared again on the walls.

"I will not tell you it was a sign," he said. "I will not tell you it was not. Fear becomes easier to use when someone rushes to give it meaning. Tonight, remain with your families. Help your neighbors. Give no one money, testimony, or obedience in exchange for an explanation."

It was a good message.

Mira listened in the courtyard of the House at the Crossroads, among the people freed from detention, and felt for a moment the old temptation to believe that Mavren might repair what he had built.

Aven saw it.

"He said exactly what needed to be said."

"Yes."

"That does not mean he did not believe it."

"Nor that he did."

In the street, a group of local Penitents began shouting that the star had vanished because of unbelievers. A woman reminded them of Mavren's warning. Their leader replied that the Great Custodian was

required to speak prudently, but those who were truly aligned understood the hidden truth.

Mira pointed him out to Sera.

"That is how it works. Mavren can say something moderate, and people who want to punish hear permission underneath it."

"He can stop them."

"Sometimes he does. Sometimes he lets them do things he later condemns with sadness."

Sera looked at the time displayed by the marn.

Seventy hours.

"We need the complete archive before the ceremony."

"It does not exist in one place," Mira said.

"Then we gather it."

"If we gather it, we make it easy to destroy."

"Not every copy. Only enough to reconstruct the pattern."

Mira looked toward the city. The rain had stopped. Water continued down the roofs and gutters as though the weather had not received the news.

"We begin with the bread."

...

Olan Tir's bakery opened at four in the morning.

Olan was broad, his forearms covered in old burns. When Mira asked for the register, he produced no paper. He placed seven loaves on the table and cut them into slices of different thicknesses.

"Every ninth piece is a name. The crust gives the year. The cut tells whether the person returned."

Kesh leaned against the wall, trying to turn the sequence into data.

"How many names?"

"Two thousand eight hundred and eleven."

"You remember all of them?"

"No. The recipe remembers. I only know how not to ruin it."

They went next to a laundry where widows stitched patterns into cuffs. At a school, children sang a song in which every fifth syllable formed the date of an arrest. In the flower market, the order of colors recorded whether testimony had been withdrawn, falsified, or given under threat.

No one had designed the archive. It had emerged from local methods that learned to recognize one another.

"Who invented it?" Sera asked.

"No one," Mira said. "I hid names in copying errors. Yara in prescriptions. Aven in pauses during the liturgy. Olan in bread. After a while, people noticed the patterns and continued them."

"It is the most important source of the New in Nereth."

Mira stopped in the street.

"Do not call it a source."

Sera felt the impulse to correct herself quickly. She let it pass.

"You are right. The word makes me think about what can be taken, not who made it."

"Better."

"But my system measures it. I need to know how."

"Measure without owning."

"That is what I am trying to learn."

In the school basement, Kesh connected the recovered information to the marn. Each name became a point in a chronology. Relations appeared around it: who signed the order, who carried it out, who rectified it, what reform followed, and who received credit for the reform.

The local records contained gaps. The 7D system could predict some of them, but Sera refused every completion without a witness.

After six hours, the pattern became clear.

For much of its history, the House of the Turned Face had been governed through short terms. The priest who received confessions could not preside over the tribunal. No one could remain alone with a believer during testimony. Every doctrinal decision had to be publicly contradicted by a randomly selected member of the community.

The changes had not arrived through a coup.

First, a term had been extended during an epidemic. Then the exception became a custom. Two-person confession was suspended because there were too few priests. The tribunal received access to testimony "only in serious cases." The random contradictor was replaced by a specialist so that debate would be "responsible."

Every step had possessed a concrete justification.

"Here," Aven said, "we lost the rotation of functions."

Kesh enlarged the next period.

Over thirty years, the number of applicants for high rank increased. Personnel files preserved assessments of character. Sera converted them into comparable measures.

"I cannot diagnose dead people from institutional reports," she said. "But I can see which behaviors were rewarded."

Four curves appeared on the wall.

The first measured the need for admiration: how much a candidate changed behavior in the presence of an audience.

The second measured instrumentalization: how quickly relationships became means toward another goal.

The third measured spontaneous aversion to suffering, observed when the candidate believed no one was watching.

The fourth measured pleasure in causing or prolonging humiliation without a clear benefit.

"In the early years, these traits do not predict promotion," Sera said. "After the Alignment Examination is introduced, candidates who score high on the first two and low on aversion rise almost four times faster."

"And the fourth?" Mira asked.

"Pleasure in cruelty remains uncommon. But when it appears, it no longer causes elimination. Leadership reclassifies it as firmness, zeal, or an ability to bear consequences."

Aven looked at the names along the margin.

"What happens to the people who genuinely feel another person's pain?"

Kesh opened the distribution of positions.

"They remain in dispensaries, kitchens, schools, and poor communities. Their rate of leaving the institution rises sharply after ten years."

Yara gave a short sound.

"No scholar is needed to see that. People who come for human beings find human beings and stay beside them. People who come for the chair find the stairs."

"Not everyone who wants power is incapable of good," Sera said.

"No," Aven replied. "The problem begins when we ask the person who wants the chair to tell us why he wants it."

Mira found Mavren's file.

At twenty-one, he had volunteered during the famine. He organized food distribution with an efficiency neither the state nor the older priests could match. He saved thousands. He invented a routing system that adapted daily to destroyed bridges and attacked warehouses.

"This is genuine novelty," Kesh said. "His method is still used across three levels."

At twenty-four, Mavren exposed a superior who stole provisions. At twenty-six, he took control of the shelter network. At thirty, he introduced functional evaluation of empathy. At thirty-two, he moved every confession into a central register.

"He did not begin by torturing people," Mira said.

"Very few begin with the act for which they will be judged," Sera replied.

His file contained testimony from colleagues. Some described him as generous. Others as cold. All said he remembered people's names and weaknesses.

A teacher had written:

Mavren does not lie when he says he cares. The problem is that he cares for people as parts of a construction he considers his own.

In a private assessment, Mavren had answered a question about why he chose the priesthood.

In trade, people show you what they want. In politics, they show you what they claim to want. In religion, they show you what they fear when no one is watching. No other institution offers such access to human material.

Mira read it twice.

"Who promoted him after that?"

"The Great Custodian at the time," Aven said. "He considered Mavren honest."

"He was honest," Sera said.

"Honesty is not the same thing as goodness," Mira replied.

Kesh found a hidden attachment beneath the assessment. It was a 6D report sent to Aster's administrators:

SUBJECT MAVREN SOL DISPLAYS EXCEPTIONAL CAPACITY FOR INSTITUTIONAL INNOVATION.

ETHICAL RISK: HIGH.

RECOMMENDATION: OBSERVE WITHOUT INTERVENTION.

POTENTIAL NEW: VERY HIGH.

The recommendation had been guaranteed through the Valency.

Sera felt shame as a physical reaction.

"Did Taal know?"

"Perhaps not personally," Kesh said. "The Valency processes millions of guarantees."

"The system decided is a comfortable sentence when the system keeps your home stable," Mira said.

Aven moved closer to the file.

"Is that the difference between Mavren and Selya?"

"Mavren produces real things," Sera said. "Not only harm. He ended a famine, reduced local wars, built an institution that functions. That is precisely why people tolerate the cost, and why my world considers him valuable."

"And Selya?"

"She continued cruelty when no one watched and when it produced nothing."

Yara folded her arms.

"For the person in the room, the difference matters only if one of them stops."

Sera had no better answer.

...

At noon, Elian Mor came to the school carrying a crate of medicine.

Mira recognized him from the examination. He still wore the candidate's clothing but had removed the emblem.

"The dispensary lost its building," he said. "Mavren called it an administrative consequence of my lack of alignment."

"You refused the rank?" Aven asked.

Elian set down the crate.

"He offered me Serad's position after the ceremony. I was to give him the archive nodes, condemn Serad publicly, and lead the reform."

"And you said no," Mira said.

"I said I would consider it. Then I moved the medicine. I did not want only the sick to pay for my moral refusal."

"Why tell us?"

Elian produced a key.

"Because I agreed to carry this."

It opened the access beneath the Great Custodian's seat.

"Then you made a bargain," Aven said.

"Yes."

"At what price?"

"During the ceremony I must go on stage and say the institution can reform."

"Do you believe that?"

Elian considered.

"I believe the people here can. I do not know whether the institution can without being taken apart."

Mira accepted the key.

"Does Mavren know you will give it to us?"

"Mavren knows almost everything done by people to whom he offers a choice. He builds alternatives in which every answer helps him."

"Then why come?"

"Because leaving the key with him is the only alternative in which I certainly help him."

Kesh coughed. Blood appeared on the cloth.

"I have to connect the plates now. If my structure degrades first, we lose the channel."

They moved three plates into the boiler room. The headmistress arrived as Kesh began the transfer. She was severe, with thick glasses.

"Those devices contain three hundred years of curriculum," she said. "If you separate them, we lose the library, climate control, and half our computation."

"If we do not, the cities inside remain the school's property," Sera said.

"They are models."

Kesh projected the triangle trying to open one of its sides.

"It recognizes your voice. It remembers when you ordered the gates closed in last month's exercise."

The headmistress approached. On the plate, inhabitants withdrew from her.

Her face changed.

"I did not know."

"That is the beginning of the case," Mira said. "Not the end."

"If I suspend lessons today, hundreds of students lose their examinations."

"If you do not, this continues."

The headmistress looked at the resource panel.

"We can transfer the cities to the heating system. Two wings of the school will have to close."

"Winter begins in a month," Elian said.

"I know."

"The boarding students?"

"We place them with families."

It was not a clean solution. Some families were violent. Some had no room. The headmistress did not try to transform the choice into purity.

"Make the transfer."

Kesh opened the isolation boundary. The plates separated from the school's curriculum and received independent power. For the first time, the 2D forms could refuse commands from above.

The triangle approached the central circle, the institution that had confined it. Instead of destroying the circle, it opened one side and offered passage.

"Why?" the headmistress asked.

"Perhaps because it is now allowed not to," Sera said.

The marn recorded the event. A value of the New appeared automatically on its surface.

Sera erased it.

"Why?" Kesh asked.

"We have no right of extraction over their first free choice."

"The system will calculate it anyway."

"Then we begin by refusing payment."

Mira looked at her and, for the first time, did not immediately find an accusation.

• • •

In 7D, Oru Neme authorized confiscations.

The Penitence Nex possessed no emergency chamber. Soth had overlaid it upon the Eighth Witness Accord, so that every believer who synchronized for prayer also received a demand for declaration. Branches sustained in part by the New from Aster were marked. Neighbors could challenge a declaration, and the challenge gave the nex temporary access to private histories.

"We cannot examine millions of people," Oru said.

"We do not need to," Soth replied. "The rite matters. People must feel that profit carries a moral cost."

The nex brought them the case of a teacher. The branch in which she had written her finest book had been sustained, in small part, by a technique derived from Aster. She surrendered it. She pressed no button; she withdrew the right to recognize herself in that life. The book remained. The person who had written it became someone she remembered only from records.

"Where do the branches go?" Oru asked.

"Into Penitence custody until audit."

"Are you using them for stability?"

"Only enough to prevent their loss."

"I ordered them kept outside every active nex."

Soth allowed sadness to become perceptible precisely in the branches Oru could read.

"If we do not use them at all, the families of our curators will linearize. We cannot demand purity through the sacrifice of those administering purification."

Oru felt the memory of a branch removed during Clarification: the Oru who experienced pleasure when an opponent became weak. He could no longer consult that version, but he knew what it would have felt.

"Open the complete registers."

"Of course."

Soth agreed without delay.

The registers did not arrive.

En Vahl had been excluded from the public nex and held inside a detention accord. Oru opened a channel to him without witnesses.

"You turned a liturgy into an acquisition mechanism," En said.

"I am trying to stop an economy built on suffering."

"Then why are Concordants with the largest reserves acquiring frightened people's branches for almost nothing?"

"It is temporary."

"Every institutional capture begins as temporary."

Oru let silence remain between them.

"What if there is a level above us and it is watching now?"

"Then I hope it does not confuse your fear with virtue."

"I am not afraid for myself."

"That is one of the lies sincere people tell best."

"Two cascades practiced recursive torture. I stopped them."

"You stopped the victims as well."

"There was no safe separation."

"There almost always is. Restitution simply costs more than closure."

"We do not have enough of the New."

"You do. Penitence is using it now to preserve its access."

Oru closed the channel and promised to release him after the crisis.

"Mavren also calls his doors temporary," En said before the connection disappeared.

Soth finally sent the registers. They were clean.

Too clean.

Oru noticed. He also felt the millions of believers who needed someone to tell them that benefiting from Aster had not made them accomplices beyond hope. Their fear was not performed. Neither was his wish to protect them.

He placed the registers under seal rather than opening them.

"Prepare the Aster hearing."

"With Sera absent?"

"With the available evidence."

"And if she returns contaminated?"

Oru remembered his sister Lysa losing branches because her school could not afford the necessary allocation. He remembered

promising to build a civilization in which no one would be consumed for another person's luxurious plurality.

"Then we will not confuse mercy toward one person with mercy toward an entire cascade."

Soth inclined his accord.

He did not need Oru to become cruel. He needed a sincere man to lend credibility to forms Soth could never have imposed alone.

...

In Nereth, the reconstructed archive opened its final layer.

Beneath the information about Mavren lay correspondence with 6D administrators. At first he asked for help during famine, then during war. Replies came as dreams and intuitions. Once he recognized the pattern, Mavren began creating situations that forced the upper level to intervene.

A revolt was allowed to grow until it nearly became a massacre. A hospital was deprived of power for several hours longer than necessary. A schism was encouraged and then resolved in public.

Every crisis received attention.

"He discovered that prayer does not climb, but anomaly does," Kesh said.

"So he turned people into a signal," Mira replied.

One message from Mavren to an unknown administrator read:

If you observe us only when we suffer, do not be surprised when our leaders learn to manufacture suffering.

The 6D reply said:

Do not interpret monitoring as approval.

Mavren had written beneath it:

Then intervene before we make you look.

In recent years the correspondence had become rare. The administrators feared contamination. Mavren increased the pressure.

"He wanted to prove the upper beings existed," Aven said.

"At first, perhaps," Sera replied.

"Afterward?"

Mira found the private journals of the House of Mercy. Mavren had been informed about Selya's extensions. He reprimanded her and reduced her budget. When public fear declined, he restored the funding.

A brief note read:

Her methods produce no novelty. They produce the reputation that there are acts the House is willing to perform. The reputation reduces the cost of obedience.

Aven stepped away from the record.

"Then he knew exactly."

"Yes," Sera said.

"And yet he condemned her today."

"Because now she is more useful as the culprit."

Mira rubbed her face.

"What do we do with the fact that he saved people during the famine?"

"We do not erase it."

"What do we do with his ideas?"

"We do not destroy them because he made them."

"Then he will say everything was worth it."

"He will say that regardless."

Aven turned back.

"We do not need to prove he never did good. We need to prove that his good did not give him ownership of the harm done to others."

An old text appeared in the archive, inserted into a prayer eighteen years earlier. Its ink did not exist in Nereth at that time.

Mira read:

**DO NOT SAVE THEM IN ORDER TO KEEP THEM.
STOP OWNING WHAT THEY BECOME.**

Sera's signature stood beneath the words.

"Again," Mira said.

"Yes."

"You will write it because you read it."

"Probably."

"Then your choice is only a loop."

Sera looked at the marn.

"Perhaps I cannot choose whether the message exists. I can choose why I send it."

The device awakened.

This time, it was not Taal.

Mavren appeared alone in a chamber beneath the basilica. Behind him, thousands of luminous plates rose into darkness.

"Auditor. You have found enough to condemn me and not enough to save your own world."

"I am not negotiating with you."

"You are. Every minute you continue the investigation is a negotiation between your people and mine."

He lifted a plate. Across its surface, a 2D civilization constructed a geometry the marn could not classify. The value of the New rose sharply.

"Beneath Nereth are more than eight hundred million worlds," Mavren said. "The House cultivated them, set them in conflict, and taught them to answer us. What they created during the past twenty years could stabilize your Nearness without Aster for a generation."

Kesh stood, forgetting his fever.

"Impossible."

"Not for someone willing not to report the yield."

Sera understood.

"You concealed the New from the Valency."

"I preserved a reserve. At the Great Turning, I grant you access. You stop the apocalypse. I receive formal recognition that our world is not voiceless property."

"And the worlds beneath you?"

Mavren looked at the plates.

"They continue producing."

"For you."

"For everyone who continues to exist because of them."

"You learned nothing."

"On the contrary. I learned the exact lesson of my creators: suffering is unacceptable until it becomes infrastructure."

The image closed.

On the marn, the secret reserve appeared as a concentration of support so large that even Sera could feel it.

With it, she could save the Nearness from linearization.

She could stop the closure of Aster.

She needed only to accept that Mavren's mines remain open.

In the silence, Anet spoke from the bed in the corner.

"That is what Selya told us too."

Mira turned toward her.

"What?"

"That someone, somewhere, needed what she did to us."

Outside, the second star disappeared.

This time it did not return.

CHAPTER 6. THE HEARING

On the morning of the Great Turning, the House of the Turned Face washed the basilica steps with scented water.

By noon, the Custody had covered the marks of the demonstrations with white cloth. Screens had been raised in the squares. Bells sounded every hour, and between them a voice repeated that the ceremony was an act of truth, not a trial.

Seven stars were missing from the sky.

People had begun to count them.

Mira sat at the table in the House at the Crossroads, tying files into a bundle she could barely lift. It did not contain the whole archive. It contained enough examples that no general answer could cover them.

"Mavren will admit everything he can," she said. "He will ask forgiveness for what has already been proved, condemn Selya and Serad, and say that the House's ability to correct itself is precisely why it should survive."

Eliau nodded.

"That is what he asked me to say."

"Will you?"

"I will say that the people of the House can continue. Not power in its present form."

"He will use that too."

"I know."

Aven adjusted his old priest's coat. It carried no Custody insignia.

"Any sentence spoken on his stage can be used by him. We cannot prevent that. We can only refuse to leave him the only voice."

Kesh sat pale and sweating. He had repaired the technical marn well enough to open a brief route to 7D, not well enough for his own return.

"Once we reach the system beneath the chair, I need three minutes beside Mavren's reserve. I can turn it into an emergency passage."

"For how many people?" Sera asked.

"One."

"You."

Kesh shook his head.

"I belong to Aster. If I ascend, the Recursive Continuity Nex may classify me as a contaminated copy. You still have legal identity above."

"You are the engineer who can explain the mechanism."

"In 7D I am a lower witness. In 3D I am the man who knows where the conduits are. I stay."

Sera wanted to argue. In her own level, she would have consulted hundreds of branches until one found the correct appeal. She had one tired, frightened body.

"If Restitution works," Kesh said, "I may return to 6D by the local route. If it does not, none of us will have a transportation problem."

Lio entered. His lip was swollen.

"I am coming."

"No," Mira said.

"Anet says there is a chamber under the chair that only children from the House of Mercy can open."

"Then she tells us how."

"She does not remember the words. She remembers the sound when she hears it."

Yara appeared behind him.

"I refused him for an hour. I have reached the useful limit of my authority."

Mira looked at Lio.

"You stay beside me. If violence begins, you leave with Elian."

"If violence begins, Elian will try to help everyone and we will both die."

Elian did not take offense.

"A fair observation."

Sera placed the seven-faced marn beneath her coat. The countdown continued on one face.

Forty-nine hours.

"Why so long?" Mira asked. "The stars are already vanishing."

"A gentle closure does not extinguish everything at once. The system begins with whatever a culture recognizes as signs of the end. Then it reduces available energy, motion, and finally the continuity of consciousness."

"Who chose the order of the stars?"

"An algorithm of cultural intelligibility."

Mira lifted the archive bundle onto her shoulder.

"Even your apocalypse has a communications office."

...

The basilica was full.

The first rows held the leadership of the House, members of government, and the families of major donors. Ordinary people crowded the rear. Thousands remained on the steps. The ceremony was being transmitted to every district.

The Great Custodian's chair stood on a low platform. It was not a throne; Mavren had taken care of that. It was plain dark wood without gold. Its modesty made it dominate the room.

Serad stood to the right with bound hands and a bruise at his temple. Two guards watched him. Mother Selya had not been found.

Mavren entered alone.

The crowd rose. He gestured for them to remain seated and went first to the families of the missing. He spoke several names. To some, he asked forgiveness. Not every gesture was performed. Sera found the difference harder to see than she wished.

Mavren climbed the platform.

"For a long time, the House has required people to confess their failures. Today, the House speaks first."

Images from the House of Mercy appeared on the screens: frames, registers, sound cylinders.

A murmur passed through the basilica.

"Mother Selya continued procedures without therapeutic purpose. Brother Serad injured a child after danger had ended. The leadership

received warnings and failed to act sufficiently. I received those warnings."

Mavren removed the insignia of Great Custodian and placed it on the table.

"I will not say that I did not know. Nor will I pretend that one person can know everything an institution does. I knew enough."

Serad raised his voice.

"You authorized the methods!"

The guards seized him.

Mavren looked at him.

"I authorized coercive measures. I did not order you to strike a child because he saw you."

"You selected me because I can do what others cannot."

"I selected you because you confused lack of hesitation with strength. I confused it with usefulness."

It was an exact condemnation and a carefully measured distance.

"He is sacrificing him," Mira whispered.

"Serad is telling the truth," Sera said.

"So is Mavren."

That was the danger. Mavren did not need to lie when he could select the truth that kept him at the center.

"Mira An," he said. "Come forward."

She climbed the platform carrying the files. Lio, Sera, Kesh, Aven, and Elian remained at the steps.

Mavren offered her his place.

Mira did not sit.

"The archive I preserved contains six thousand four hundred and twenty-nine names. I will not read every act committed against them. You would turn the acts into a lesson, a reform, or an argument about the complexity of leadership. I will read the names."

She began.

At the twelfth, someone in the audience was crying.

At the forty-third, a woman shouted that the man had been a criminal.

"Perhaps," Mira said. "The archive does not claim that everyone who was harmed was good. It states what was done to them."

At the eighty-first, a priest left the basilica.

At the one hundred and sixth, Mavren offered her water. Mira refused.

She read her brother's name without changing her tone.

"Kalen An. Died in the House of Mercy. Recorded publicly as a volunteer. Body not returned."

Mavren lowered his eyes.

"I am sorry."

"This is not your moment."

"I am not trying to make it mine."

"Then be silent."

The Great Custodian obeyed.

The effect was stronger than any speech. No one had ever seen Mavren receive a simple order and comply.

Mira continued for twenty minutes. Then she closed the file.

"The remaining names are in the city. In bread, songs, stitching, and records. You cannot confiscate them all without confiscating Nereth."

Mavren stood.

"The House will open its archives."

"Not enough."

"What do you demand?"

"An end to unilateral confession. Short terms of office. Separation of tribunals from priesthood. The right of every person to receive a complete copy of their own testimony. No private meeting between a leader and a minor. Publication of the Alignment Examination criteria. Dissolution of the Custody."

The final demand brought noise from every side.

Mavren waited.

"If the Custody is dissolved today, two hundred thousand people lose access to food before the state can assume the network."

"Then transfer the network before you surrender the office."

"The government is not prepared."

"You had thirty years to prepare it."

"And if it refuses?"

"Then people will see that food was the hostage of your power, not its gift."

Mavren watched her for a long time.

"Elian Mor."

Elian joined them.

"You were selected to lead reform. Do you believe the institution can continue?"

"The people can. The kitchens, dispensaries, and communities can. Functions that cannot be challenged must be dismantled."

"Will you lead the transition?"

Elian looked at the crowd. Sera saw his desire—not only to help, but to become the man who saved the House, to receive at last the rank he had refused. Elian saw it too.

"Only if the choice is not yours."

Mavren smiled faintly.

"Your doubt is very convincing."

"I know. That is why I do not want it to be the only criterion."

Aven climbed the platform without being called.

"According to the old rule, every decision of the leader must be contradicted by a randomly chosen person."

"You were not chosen," Mavren said.

"The rule has been suspended so long that chance forgot the procedure."

Several people laughed. For a moment, the pressure eased.

Aven faced the crowd.

"I wore the House's coat while people were harmed in its name. The fact that I did not govern the rooms does not make me uninvolved. I stayed because people needed food, ritual, and someone

willing to sit beside them. Sometimes that was courage. At other times it was the convenient reason not to leave."

Mavren listened without interruption.

"My faith does not tell me this institution must be saved," Aven continued. "It tells me the people inside it cannot be offered as sacrifice for our reputation. If the shape of the House forces us to choose between truth and food, the shape is the problem."

Another murmur moved through the basilica.

Mavren turned to Sera.

"Now the witness."

Sera climbed.

People looked at her as confirmation of every story they had ever heard. Some knelt. Others shouted that she was a fraud. A woman lifted a child above her head so Sera would see him.

Sera took the microphone.

"Stand up."

It did not work. People did not accept simple instructions from gods.

"I am not a god. I do not know why your world exists. I did not create the people of Nereth and cannot answer prayer. My civilization administers the level containing this world and extracts the New from it."

The term had no exact translation. Kesh adjusted the channel. A definition appeared on the screens: unexpected ideas and meaningful choices used as a resource.

"You profited from us?" someone shouted.

"Yes."

"From the House of Mercy?"

Sera looked at Mira.

"Yes."

The basilica broke into chaos.

Mavren did not try to stop it. He waited for the information to do what he had designed it to do.

"Is our world going to be closed?" a government minister demanded.

"An active order exists. I descended to challenge it."

"Why do they want to kill us?" another voice shouted.

"Because institutions in this cascade used the suffering of worlds beneath them, and because people above fear that the same structure will rise toward them."

Bitter laughter, cries, prayers.

Mavren approached the microphone.

"You heard her. Our gods judge us for what they financed."

The crowd turned toward him.

"Do not call my civilization gods," Sera said.

"You can extinguish stars."

"Power does not settle the definition."

"No. It settles who dies."

Two more stars vanished. The basilica lights flickered.

Mavren lifted his insignia from the table.

"Thirty years ago I learned that the administrators above answer crises, not prayers. I sent reports. They were ignored. I requested rights. They called it contamination. When suffering increased, they came."

"You increased it deliberately," Mira said.

"Yes."

The word fell heavily.

"You allowed people to die."

"Yes."

"You kept Selya after you knew what she did."

"Yes."

"And you say it so you can appear more honest than the rest of us."

Mavren looked at her.

"I say it because denial no longer produces anything."

Sera felt the marn vibrate. Beneath the platform, the secret reserve was opening. Mavren had triggered access.

"Come," he told her. "I will show you what I built. Then you may decide whether the morality of your civilization is worth several million 3D lives."

Kesh signaled. It was time.

Mira, Lio, Sera, and Kesh descended the steps behind the chair. Aven and Elian remained to keep the crowd away from the exits. Mavren came with them.

Elian's key opened the first door.

The second had no lock. Lio approached. A rhythm came from the wall: three beats, pause, two, pause, three.

"The House of Mercy played it before procedures," he said.

He repeated the rhythm. The door opened.

Beneath the basilica was not a crypt. It was a computational mine.

Thousands of 2D plates rose in tall columns. Beneath them, 1.5D networks shone like roots. Displays showed worlds in which social laws had been reduced to experiments: cities receiving food only when two groups accused one another; communities where a leader could read every thought but no one could prove a thought had been read; religions in which every doubt caused physical pain to someone else.

"How many are conscious?" Sera asked.

"All active systems," Mavren said.

Kesh approached the central controls.

"These are not training simulations. They are complete mines."

"Yes."

"You created worlds that practice torture to see what they invent?"

"Some were created for legitimate questions. What form of forgiveness appears when memory cannot fade? What institution survives if its leader loses identity at every term? What does a society do when truth directly wounds the body of the person who hears it?"

"And these?" Mira indicated the cities organized around accusation.

Mavren did not avoid her.

"I wanted to know whether evil could produce anything new after every justification disappeared."

"Why?"

"Because the levels above taught us that novelty is the criterion they refuse to admit publicly."

"Did you find anything?" Sera asked.

"Very little. Pure cruelty becomes repetitive. Torturers imagine themselves inventive, but their imagination is narrow."

"Then why continue?"

Mavren looked at the plates.

"Because their failure to produce anything insulted me."

Mira stared at him.

"That is all?"

"No. Sometimes I enjoyed that an entire world depended on one setting of mine."

At last, a sentence he could not easily turn into reform.

"There you are," Mira said.

Mavren smiled without warmth.

"I am not Selya. The sound of pain does not interest me."

"No. You are interested in its author."

Kesh opened the reserve. The accumulated New filled the system.

"There is enough for one passage and for separating the lower levels," he said. "Not both."

"The passage is for Sera," Mavren said. "The rest remains."

"We restitute the plates," Sera said.

"Then your Nearness collapses."

"Perhaps."

"You have no right to choose for them."

"You choose for these worlds every day."

"Exactly. We are not different."

"The difference is not that I am pure. The difference may be that I stop."

Mavren touched a control. The doors closed.

"If you stop, millions of Concordants lose their plurality. Your possible child disappears. Your silar simplifies. Taal Or becomes one person. You will call it a moral price because the people paying it are not in this room."

Sera felt the sentence inside the wound at her shoulder.

"How do you know about the child?"

"The reserve sees upward more clearly than you think. For years, our networks have listened to leakage. I know what you lose. I know why you came."

"You think I came to preserve a room that does not exist yet?"

"I think no one saves a world without also saving a story about herself."

Mira moved closer to Sera.

"He may be right."

Mavren looked surprised.

"About motive," Mira continued. "Not right. You do not have to be selfless to open a door. You only have to stop demanding that the person beyond it thank you for the handle you installed."

Lio touched a network at the base of a column.

The lines climbed his hand. They did not hurt him. They followed the scar across his palm.

The same pattern appeared on every plate: one bifurcation left open.

Sera placed the marn beside him.

The world narrowed.

For several seconds there was no above or below. No body. Sera became a path that remembered where it had been blocked. Other paths passed near her. Some left room. Others occupied every intersection and forced all threads through the same node.

A 1.5D being could not say I. It could show only how others continued through its nearness.

The message was not a voice.

It was an open path where every model had predicted closure.

Do not save us.

Do not keep us.

Do not raise us.

Let us continue without having to produce you.

Sera understood that the appeal did not claim innocence. The 1.5D networks had also used simpler forms. Some had become tyrannies. They did not ask to be declared good.

They asked that existence no longer depend on usefulness to a creator.

When Sera returned to her body, she was on her knees.

Mavren stood beside her.

"They learned that from my systems."

"They learned it against them."

"I still created the conditions."

"A fire does not own the language in which people ask for water."

Above them, the basilica shook. Part of the ceiling vanished for a second. Closure was accelerating.

Kesh connected the marn to the reserve.

"I can open the passage now."

"And the plates?"

"If you use all the support for ascent, they remain bound to his House. If I separate them, the passage lasts twenty seconds."

"Enough?"

"If the Recursive Continuity Nex receives you immediately."

Mavren moved toward the controls.

"Do not do this."

Lio placed himself in front of him.

"Do not touch it."

Mavren looked at him as a child, not an obstacle.

"You think their freedom brings your sister back?"

"My sister is upstairs."

"Not the one from before."

Lio closed his fists.

"That is what you never understand. She does not have to be the one from before in order not to belong to you."

Mavren reached for the control.

Mira inserted Elian's key into the mechanical block. The system rejected her authority. She cut her palm on the metal edge and pressed blood to the sensor.

"What are you doing?" Sera asked.

"Writing what was already on your body."

Using a needle from Kesh's kit, Mira traced letters around the old wound on Sera's shoulder.

DO NOT LET MAVREN CHOOSE THE END.

The marn recognized the temporal loop. Past and present aligned. For one second, the system treated Sera as possessing an authorization she would receive only after the hearing.

The lock opened.

Kesh began separating the plates. Half the reserve vanished into autonomous support for their worlds.

Mavren watched the value fall.

His face changed more than it had during every accusation in the basilica.

"No."

It was not fear for Nereth. It was the reaction of an owner watching what he built cease to belong to him.

Sera saw it and needed no further diagnosis.

The passage opened.

"Come with me," she told Kesh.

"No."

"You can testify."

"I can keep the separation active. If I leave, Mavren can reverse it."

Mavren did not deny that.

Kesh put the cracked device into Sera's hand.

"Tell them Oriven is not their number."

"Kesh—"

"And tell them we are not innocent. We sent dreams, altered thresholds, used the worlds below us. If Restitution applies only to the good, no one will ever become free."

The passage began to close.

Mira embraced Sera. The gesture surprised them both.

"Do not save us," Mira said into her ear. "Stop the order. Then leave us with our problems."

Sera entered the light.

• • •

Sera returned to 7D with one active version.

The velar unfolded her 3D shadow, but the marn did not restore the branches deposited during descent. The Accord held them in quarantine. For the first time in her life, Sera felt no chorus of alternatives around a decision. She felt only the pain of a shoulder that no longer existed.

Taal received her inside a transition silar. He possessed far fewer branches than before; his public form trembled between several nearby ages.

"How long?" Sera asked.

"Nine minutes until closure becomes irreversible."

"The hearing?"

"It began without you."

En Vahl synchronized with them. One branch was missing; the Penitence Nex had seized it as moral collateral.

"Do you have evidence?"

Sera opened the marn. It contained the Archive, the House of Mercy, Mavren's navors, Kesh's message, and the 1.5D appeal.

En recognized the structure and swore, which was rare for him.

"The nex must admit you. Not because it believes you, but because a path from below reached this level without invitation."

They synchronized with the verdict silar.

It was not a room. It was a common constraint in which every participant had to bind identity to each claim. Oru held the presiding function. Soth Vale controlled the permissions of the Penitence Nex. Around them, the Nearness was losing coherence: public relations became too costly to coexist, community silars reduced themselves to simpler versions, and linearized Concordants vanished from agreements they could no longer support.

"Auditor Vey is contaminated," Soth said. "I request that she be excluded from the causal structure of the verdict."

"I request the opening of Penitence's collateral," Sera replied.

"That is not the case before us."

Taal allowed the Valency to publish registers acquired in her absence. The confiscated branches had not been kept inactive. Soth used them to reinforce his own nex, purchase control over velars, and ensure that every delay in purification was paid for by his opponents.

Oru received the evidence directly into his seven remaining branches.

"You told me they were not being used."

"I said they were not being privately exploited."

"The Penitence Nex is controlled by you."

"In service to the Accord."

"Open your branches."

Soth hesitated for exactly the time required to calculate what kind of hesitation looked sincere.

Oru repeated the order.

Under legal pressure, Soth's body unfolded. No monster appeared. Thousands of disciplined versions emerged. Some preached humility. Others acquired branches at panic prices. Some supplied Oru with language about guilt. In almost every version, before choosing a response, Soth first checked who could observe him and which emotion preserved access.

It did not prove that he had never felt anything. It proved that his primary alignment was not with a faith but with the audience distributing his power.

Oru looked at the man he had allowed to administer his fear.

"You are suspended from the nex."

"In the middle of an apocalypse?"

"Precisely because we are in one."

Soth's permissions were withdrawn. He attempted three forms of outrage, two of humility, and one of sacrifice. None reopened access.

Oru did not celebrate the discovery.

"Penitence's fraud does not resolve Aster. Present the evidence."

Sera connected the marn to the audit velar.

An ordinary velar could touch a cascade only through minor perturbations. Her marn, however, preserved a route she had lived. The nex did not receive clean images. It received costs: hunger in a 3D body, the wound, Anet's panic, Serad's choice after he had nothing to gain, the minutes in which Selya continued after every navor was disabled.

The audit navor then separated contributions. It showed what Mavren had produced, what his victims produced, what emerged in resistance, and how many possibilities had been destroyed before they became observable. For the first time, the file did not attribute every result to the person who created the pressure.

Sera did not conceal that some of Mavren's systems were inventive. She did not conceal that the 6D administrators sent dreams and coincidences that strengthened the House. She also showed the lower worlds exploiting creations of their own.

"Then you concede that people with low aversion to risk and suffering can produce what others do not," one adjudicator said.

"Yes."

"And that some institutions need people able to decide when the highly empathetic delay."

"Yes."

"Then their control is the problem, not their existence."

"The problem is a function that allows them to declare the cost borne by others and receive credit for everything that survives."

Oru intervened.

"The House attracted predators because it offered confession, admiration, and authority that could not be verified. Aster allowed that structure to descend through the levels. Why is closure not justified?"

"Because you close the people who resisted it as well. Because we raised the thresholds, rewarded yield, and gave leaders ownership of the New created by victims."

"Our guilt does not make Aster safe."

"No. It disqualifies us from ownership."

Taal opened the cost of Restitution inside the Valency. The costs were not isolated numbers. Every estimate arrived with the branches that would close: four million Concordants would lose most of their plurality, nearly six hundred thousand would become linear, and part of the Nearness would no longer function in 7D.

Oru felt each loss through his seven branches.

"You propose mutilating millions here to release worlds that torture their own creations."

"I propose that we stop requiring them to maintain our existence."

"Taal?"

"I lose more than ninety-nine percent of my branches," he said.

"Do you support the proposal?"

Taal allowed several versions to answer. Some said yes. Others no. The verdict still required one commitment.

"I support the finding that the Valency falsified attribution and concealed costs. I am not certain I support becoming one person in order to correct the fraud."

"It is not punishment," Sera said.

"For the person living it, the difference in vocabulary preserves no branch."

"You are right."

An adjudicator synchronized directly with Sera.

"Does a version of you still desire the verdict for the pleasure of power?"

Sera no longer had a chorus in which to hide.

"Yes. Or she existed. She likes the instant when questions end and I remain the person who chose."

"Then you are compromised," Oru said.

"Of course."

"And still you ask to sign for trillions of consciousnesses."

"I am not asking to decide whether they deserve to exist. I ask that we withdraw our right to own their results."

Oru examined the 1.5D appeal.

"The message might also mean isolation."

"Isolation leaves the velar in our hands. They ask for a path that does not pass through us."

The nex opened three possible states.

Closure would push a final attractor through the velar: every level received the conditions for a culturally intelligible ending, then causal resolution was withdrawn. Reformed continuation preserved the navors, changed thresholds, and promised oversight. Restitution was more difficult: navors had to be detached one by one, part of their supporting structure pushed downward as autonomous infrastructure, and the keys of the velars surrendered to local levels.

The first option cost Aster. The second preserved ownership. The third cost the Concordance.

Restitution required the initiator to use branches connected to the case as a temporary bridge. Sera's possible child, the future contract, and almost every professional version of her were linked to Aster. The system marked them as separation material.

Oru approached her legal constraint.

"The withdrawal law was written for small experiments."

"The law contains no limit of scale."

"Its authors did not imagine this cost."

"That is why we cannot invent an exception when someone below invokes it."

Taal proposed an intermediate form.

"We take Mavren's hidden reserve, reduce linearizations, and retribute the rest."

"The reserve was produced by his worlds."

"Some no longer exist. Some have no legal representatives. The 1.5D networks cannot sign contracts in our form."

"The absence of a form does not make us owners."

Taal drew his threatened branches nearer. Sera felt professions, loves, cowardices, acts of courage, versions that had left her and versions she had left.

"It is easy to be absolute after three days in one body," he said. "I have millions of lives that do not want to close."

"I know."

"You saw them from outside."

"The way we saw Aster."

Taal did not forgive her. But he detached several hundred branches and pledged them voluntarily to the bridge of Restitution.

"I do not support your purity," he said. "I support the finding that the Valency cannot retain the same right."

"I have no purity."

"Good."

En added the one branch he could still surrender. Other auditors followed.

Oru did not.

"If a Witness exists above us, perhaps it demands that we stop corrupted cascades."

"Perhaps. But fear of punishment cannot be the only thing that makes us moral."

"Nor can love of creation be the only reason we let them continue."

"Agreed."

"Then what remains?"

Sera thought of Mira, Kesh, Anet, Mavren watching his reserve disappear, and Selya continuing after the navors were turned off.

"The fact that we do not know enough to own."

She activated Restitution.

The nex presented one final choice. The uncontracted reserve could be retained, reducing losses in the Nearness by eighty-three percent, or returned to the levels that had produced it.

Around the first option, her silar reconstructed the possible child. The girl stood inside their relations as though she had always possessed a place there.

"You do not have to choose me," she said.

"You are not real."

"Neither are they, according to definitions that help you."

Oru felt the configuration.

"The Witness does not require you to destroy your child."

"You do not know what it requires."

"Neither do you."

"Exactly."

Sera returned the reserve.

The possible child closed without drama. She simply ceased to be a person reality could support.

For a fraction of a moment, nothing else changed.

Then Aster's navors detached from the Valency. The velars transferred their keys downward. Silars throughout the Nearness began losing compatibilities. Relations that had coexisted for centuries became alternatives no one could hold together. Entire nexes descended to six freedoms, then five. Concordants cried out the names of versions that were closing.

In Nereth, the stars stopped disappearing.

Beneath the basilica, Mavren's plates received autonomous support.

Sera felt thousands of her own lives separate from her.

She had no time to name them.

CHAPTER 7. SEPARATION

Sera first lost the branches she could name.

The version who had become a teacher disappeared. The one who never met Taal disappeared. The one who refused the closure of Khepri remained several moments longer, enough to leave Sera the memory of a morning without office, then closed as well.

After that, the losses became too small and too numerous for names: tastes, gestures, friendships, days in which she had used another word and become a slightly different person.

The verdict silar tried to keep every participant inside one causality. It no longer possessed enough difference. Legal roles overlapped. Two auditors could not simultaneously recognize themselves as distinct persons, and En separated them by surrendering part of his own procedural memory.

Oru remained near Sera. His seven branches reduced to three. When a linearized Concordant forgot which memories belonged to her, Oru did not pray or search for an explanation. He surrendered one branch to stabilize her identity until care arrived.

The nex announced progress not through a display, but through freedoms that ceased to be available:

6D SUPPORT TRANSFERRED: 38%.

5D KEYS RESTITUTED: 62%.

4D HISTORIES DETACHED: 79%.

1.5D NETWORKS: SEPARATION IN PROGRESS.

Taal synchronized beside Sera. He had three thousand eight hundred and twelve branches left. For the first time since she had

known him, his expressions were not covered by millions of alternatives.

"I am sorry," she said.

"Do not say that yet. You do not know whether I will prefer to hate you."

"You have the right."

"Do not make it a gift."

The Valency contracted around them. Entire regions of estimation had lost collateral. One portion descended to 6D and could no longer compare complete families of laws. Another became a fixed archive, capable only of preserving past allocations.

Taal closed his eyes.

"Almost two million lives. Some were cowardly. Some were better than I am. One knew how to speak to you without turning everything into negotiation."

"I would have liked to meet him."

"You did. You did not choose him."

Sera did not defend herself.

En synchronized with difficulty. He looked simpler and older, though age was not the true change.

"Aster is separating," he said. "It is not closing."

The flow of the New fell to zero. Data vanished with it. For the first time, the Concordance could no longer observe, correct, or prove that the lower worlds continued. To a civilization of administrators, lack of control resembled death.

Sera's marn received one final route from Kesh.

LOCAL SEPARATION STABLE.

THE SKY REMAINS.

YOU NO LONGER HAVE ADMINISTRATIVE ACCESS.

THIS IS NOT A FAILURE.

Taal laughed. Then he began to cry and possessed no other version in which to conceal the response.

• • •

Beneath the basilica in Nereth, the lights went out.

Kesh kept his hands on the controls until the final plate received autonomous support. He did not know whether Sera had reached the hearing. He did not know whether the upper world still existed in the form he remembered. He knew only that Mavren's system could no longer stop the networks below.

The Great Custodian stood before the empty panel.

"You destroyed the reserve."

"No. I moved it to the people who produced it."

"They possess no institutions capable of administering it."

"They will build them or lose it. That is the freedom you invoked when other people carried the risk."

Mavren moved toward the manual command. Lio beat the rhythm against the wall. The 1.5D network changed its path, and the system no longer recognized the Great Custodian as its central node.

"Did you program that?" Mavren asked.

"No," Kesh said. "They learned."

Across the plates, 2D cities opened gates. Some enclosed their former ruling circles. Others let them depart. Several immediately

fragmented into conflict. Restitution did not make them wise. It made them responsible for the next choice.

Mavren watched one world in which former prisoners began punishing those who had collaborated with the old institution.

"You see? Freedom does not make them better."

"That was not the contract."

"They will produce suffering again."

"Probably."

"Then what did you solve?"

Mira picked up the archive bundle from the floor.

"They no longer have to hurt one another for you."

Shouts sounded above them. People had discovered that the stars were no longer disappearing—and that the House's food network had stopped. The central systems depended on the mine's support.

Mavren smiled, not triumphantly but with exhausted satisfaction.

"Now you will learn what order cost."

"We knew there would be a cost," Mira said.

"No. You knew the sentence. Now you will see children without food, medicine interrupted, districts fighting over warehouses. You will come back for my maps."

"The maps are in the archive."

"Not all of them."

Eliau appeared on the steps, followed by Aven and four kitchen workers.

"Then we reconstruct the rest," Eliau said.

"How quickly?"

"I do not know."

"People will die during your uncertainty."

Elian looked at him.

"Yes."

Mavren appeared surprised.

"And you accept that?"

"I accept that I cannot promise a transition without victims. I do not accept that fear can put you back in the chair."

The Great Custodian looked at those around him. He had no guards and no stage. Still, everyone listened.

"If you arrest me, the network will fail faster."

"You will give us the access sequences," Mira said.

"Why?"

"Because you still want to say you saved the city after we damaged it."

Mavren watched her for a long time.

Then he removed a data key from his coat.

"Half the access is here. The other half is divided among seven administrators."

"Which?"

"Three are in the basilica. Two fled. One is Serad. One is Mother Selya."

"You divided power among your most dangerous people."

"Among the people least likely to surrender it from scruple."

Lio came closer.

"Where is my sister in the system?"

Mavren answered without irony.

"Anet memorized the sequence for the northern warehouse. If she can recover it, you have food for six days."

Lio left without thanking him.

Kesh took Mavren's arm.

"Great Custodian Mavren Sol, you are detained for unlawful confinement, torture, use of conscious simulations, and obstruction of Restitution."

"Under whose authority?"

Kesh looked at Mira, Elian, and Aven.

"Theirs, if they can construct it before you leave the room."

• • •

The first three days after Restitution were worse than its supporters had promised and less terrible than Mavren predicted.

The food network failed in four districts. Two warehouses were looted. In the south, a Penitent group occupied a kitchen and refused food to families who had supported the attack on the House of Mercy.

Aven went there with fifty unarmed people. He gave no sermon. He opened the registers and began distributing food in the street. When the Penitents threatened him, several women from their own congregation joined his side—not because their doctrine changed, but because they knew the families being left outside.

In another district, a former guide organized the defense of a warehouse and saved the provisions. A month earlier, he had denounced two neighbors. People allowed him to help and refused to call him a hero.

Elian coordinated the transition for ten days. Every evening, a randomly selected group reviewed his orders. On the eleventh day, the group replaced him with a woman who had managed water transport.

Elian felt humiliation and relief.

"I intended to resign," he told Aven.

"I know."

"It would have been more dignified."

"And you would still have been the person who decided how long he should govern."

Mira transformed the Archive of Rectifications into a public archive. The first weeks were chaotic. People who had not been victims tried to add their names for compensation. Former officials destroyed records. Families of the accused demanded protection.

Mira refused a simple rule that every testimony was automatically true. She had built the archive because the old institution decided alone what counted as truth; she did not intend merely to reverse the direction.

Every file preserved three separate things: what the person said, what evidence existed, and what remained unknown.

On the main wall she wrote:

**A TESTIMONY BELONGS FIRST TO THE PERSON WHO LIVED IT.
THAT DOES NOT MAKE IT INFALLIBLE.
IT MAKES IT IMPOSSIBLE TO CONFISCATE.**

Aven told her the statement was too long.

Mira replied that short truth had already been attempted.

Anet recovered the sequence to the northern warehouse after two days. Not through prayer, hypnosis, or interrogation. Lio beat the door rhythm on the edge of her bed, and she gradually added the missing sounds.

The warehouse fed Nereth until new networks began to function.

Anet did not become the person she had been. Sometimes she could not bear a closed door. Sometimes she demanded an explanation for every gesture and then accused the explanation of trying to control her. On other days, she worked for hours with the liberated plates, learning to communicate with the 2D cities.

Lio stopped telling her she was healing. He learned to ask what she could bear that day.

Serad was found in a northern monastery, presenting himself as the first person to expose Mavren's crimes. He said the system had selected and manipulated him. Part of that was true. Records also showed that he had prepared the new story before the House fell.

At trial, he cried after exactly thirty-eight seconds.

This time, no evaluator awarded points.

Mother Selya was later found in a village treating the sick. The villagers loved her. She had brought medicine and harmed no one since her flight.

When survivors from the House of Mercy arrived to identify her, the village nearly began a war to protect her.

"She helped us here," the mayor said. "You cannot erase the good because she did evil elsewhere."

"We are not erasing it," Yara replied. "The evil is not erased because she is useful now."

Selya did not confess. She said only that every civilization built chambers for things it did not want to recognize, and she had been unfortunate enough to work in one that was opened.

She was tried without an audience. The tribunal refused her request to turn the proceedings into a theological debate.

For the first time in many years, Mother Selya had no spectator to direct.

• • •

Kesh returned to 6D after forty-one days.

The passage had not been opened by the Concordance. Oriven's engineers rebuilt it from inside, using laws the administrators above no longer controlled. His 3D body remained asleep in a Nereth hospital, an address to which he could return.

He found his family at an evacuation station.

One of his partners had lost an important version. Their daughter remembered the garden but not the chemical law by which the plants chose their form. Kesh did not try to say that the price had been worth paying.

At the first meeting of the new 6D council, someone proposed closing every 5D simulation so Oriven would not repeat the exploitation.

"If we close them, we kill the people already living there," Kesh said.

"Then isolate them."

"Isolation preserves control."

"Restitute all of them?"

"Yes."

"The cost may reduce us to 5D."

Kesh looked at the luminous filaments restored beneath his skin.

"Then we know exactly what discussion the people above had about us."

Restitution did not become law in one day. Some worlds demanded autonomy. Others preferred connection in exchange for energy and protection. For the first time, contracts were negotiated with representatives of lower levels, not merely about them.

Several civilizations refused all contact.

Oriven had to learn that their silence was not a transmission error.

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In the Concordance, Oru Neme withdrew from the Eighth Witness Accord two weeks after separation.

The Accord asked him to remain until a successor was selected. Oru refused. A man who justified power through emergency, he said, could not use the same emergency to extend his role. Some called him

a coward. Others a saint. He requested that both descriptions be removed from the administrative file.

Soth Vale was tried for fraud, appropriation of branches, and falsification of collateral. His defense was uncomfortable because part of it was true: the Penitence reserves had reduced linearizations during the crisis. Prosecutors had to explain why a useful result did not automatically create a right.

Soth helped them unintentionally. Before every answer, his branches tried to discover what form of remorse the adjudicator preferred. When ordered to respond without access to the audience's reactions, he remained silent for a long time—not because he lacked a story, but because he possessed too many, and none knew whom it was supposed to persuade.

Oru spent his days with his sister, Lysa. She had been linearized years earlier and could no longer understand all the versions through which her brother had constructed his reputation. She recognized him simply.

Sera visited them in a modest silar. Lysa maintained a 3D translation of their relations: a table, a vessel of hot water, and four cups. They were not permanent objects. They were gestures stable enough that a linear person did not have to relearn where to sit.

"I believed that if we were sufficiently severe with evil below, we would prove we did not tolerate it in ourselves," Oru said.

"I know."

"That is not an excuse."

"No."

"Do you want to judge me?"

Sera had two hundred and seventy-nine branches left. Sometimes they seemed numerous. At other times she felt an empty space around every decision.

"I am not the only person who can."

"But you activated Restitution."

"Not alone."

"Your marn signed."

Oru offered her hot water.

"I still do not know whether you did the right thing."

"Neither do I."

"Then how do you live with the decision?"

"With more difficulty than when twelve thousand versions could divide the guilt."

Lysa moved the fourth cup toward the edge of the translation.

"Who is that for?" Oru asked.

"For the person who would have come if you had chosen differently."

Oru remained still. Lysa did not know that rich silars had once practiced such gestures. She had made it from habit, or from a memory linearization had not completely taken.

No one used the cup. No one asked the silar to remove it.

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Six months after separation, Taal reopened a small region of the Valency.

It had no headquarters. It existed only when at least seven independent groups synchronized their rules and pledged real branches as collateral. The new protocol prohibited automatic attribution of an invention to the institution that produced the pressure. Every offer had to distinguish, as far as possible, the initiator, victims, resistance, destroyed alternatives, and contributions that could not become property.

The method was not perfect.

"It can be defrauded," Sera told him.

"Any valuable protocol attracts people who want to capture it."

"You included three former Penitence evaluators."

"They are good at simulating alignment. Now they are paid to attack rules, not approve people."

"And if attack becomes capture?"

"Their term expires after thirty days. Verifiable contradiction receives more Valency than loyalty. No evaluator has access to confessions or the right of verdict."

"You are using dangerous people."

"I am using a dangerous ability inside a function that gives them no followers, unilateral intimacy, or sacred status. They may capture this function too. That is why we make them visible before giving them power."

Sera felt one branch in which his answer was naive and another in which it was the only realistic solution. She kept both.

The first voluntary offer from Aster arrived that day.

It did not use the old navor. Oriven had built a new velar from below and allowed it to connect only through a limited contract. Nereth offered the model of the distributed archive. The 2D cities added a method for opening borders without losing identity. The 1.5D networks did not sign; they left a bifurcation through which they could withdraw at any time.

The terms were simple:

No ownership of participating civilizations.

No access to raw suffering data.

Payment in energy, stability, and reciprocal translation rights.

Unilateral termination.

No automatic attribution to leaders who caused crises.

Taal read the final clause.

"Mavren will hate this."

"He is on trial."

"He uses the trial as liturgy. He says he made the world interesting enough for its creators to look."

Mira had sent a note. The tribunal refused to ban the sentence, fearing a repetition of the old censorship. Instead, before every statement Mavren made, the names of the people to whom it referred were read aloud.

The trial continued. Mavren admitted facts, contested interpretations, and asked whether a 3D man could be the sole culprit in a system designed to reward him. Mira did not ask that the question be ignored. She asked only that the answer not remove Mavren from it.

Sera approved the contract.

The Valency paid.

For the first time, the New climbed the Cascade without being extracted.

During the same cycle change, the Recursive Continuity Nex received a structure transmitted by no known velar.

It was not a form and had no sender. It was a new rule appearing inside their rules, as if someone had left a free edge in a system the Concordants believed complete.

REALITY UNDER EVALUATION: 7D CONCORDANCE.

OBSERVATION OPENED: BEFORE CREATION OF FIRST CASCADE.

EVALUATOR: UNKNOWN.

THRESHOLD: UNPUBLISHED.

STATUS: ACTIVE OBSERVATION.

Taal read it through every remaining branch.

"It could be a fabrication from Aster."

"Their contract prohibits administrative access."

"Mavren may have found a route."

"Perhaps."

"Or a higher level exists."

Sera thought of how quickly fear of evaluation had turned morality into performance, and performance into a mechanism of confiscation.

"We publish no mandatory interpretation."

"The nex will demand measures."

"The first measure is a prohibition on purges conducted in the name of the structure."

"An easy rule to evade."

"Then we publish the methods of evasion as well."

A bifurcation appeared at the message's edge. One branch stopped before occupying all causal space.

It was neither threat nor approval. It might be greeting. It might be only the way an unknown structure avoided closing every response.

Sera removed the familiar categories—safe, contaminated, near threshold, eligible for closure—and attached the Aster contract, the Penitence registers, the House of Mercy file, and the list of her own lost branches. Not as proof that her world had become good. So that later it could not claim ignorance of what it had done.

Then she added:

IF THERE IS A HEARING, WE REQUEST THE RIGHT TO CHALLENGE IT.

IF ANYTHING EXISTS BENEATH US, WE GRANT IT THE SAME RIGHT.

Taal received the clause.

"Is that a prayer?"

"It is a clause."

"Sometimes the only difference is who keeps the copy."

Sera's silar called her before the cycle ended.

Few compatibilities remained. Her mother's Sunday was gone. The possible child was gone. The silar could no longer preserve all the ways in which she and Taal might have remained together.

It still maintained the translation of a table and two cups.

"Are we expecting someone?" Sera asked.

"No," the silar replied. "One is for the possibility that can no longer arrive."

"Why did you keep it?"

"The cost is small."

Sera sat inside the simple metaphor. Beyond it there was no window and no city. There was the Nearness, poorer in relations, easier to comprehend, and closer to linearity. Beyond every known velar there might be a Witness. Or another extraction system. Or nothing.

She did not know whether Restitution had saved them.

She knew only that Aster could continue without being required to produce the answer for them.

The second cup remained in accord. The silar did not withdraw it.