

MAYA

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# **ACT I — Illusion**

## Subconscious

There was no up, no down — only the slow suspension of a body adrift.

The hum came first. Low and steady, pressing gently through her ribs.

A familiar tone she had once matched her breathing to without thought.

But here it felt older — as though it had been humming before time.

Her hands floated near her sides, weightless.

She could not see them, but she knew they were there because the hum reached their bones too.

A shaft of pale light opened across the dark.

Dust glittered within it, each mote turning slowly — vivid gold at one angle, copper at another.

Waves of light unfurled through the beam, soft and deliberate.

She followed one until it blurred into another, their motions folding together into a single, slow spiral.

The spiral broke. Reformed. Skipped a beat in its curve.

She kept watching.

The light deepened — pale silver thickening toward amber.

Colors breathed, then stilled. Dust changed scale with each shift—gold to copper—before the motion rejoined the spiral.

Beyond the light, a presence watched—felt at the nape more than seen.

The recognition settled in her as warmth settles on the back of the neck: intimate, unhurried.

A pulse went through her bones, matching her own heartbeat.

Vast and whole. It simply was.

Waves of light shifted again — amber to emerald to a deep indigo that seemed to pull the warmth from her skin.

The dust thinned, drifting away until only the spiral remained, drawn in faint silver on a darkness with no depth.

Then she saw it, in the depth of the periphery.

Like faint symbols glimmering in the dark — curves and lines she half-recognized,

but here they drifted like slow fish in deep water, never holding still long enough to be read.

For a moment their glow dimmed in perfect sync with the spiral's beat,

and she felt — without knowing how — that the watcher was seeing through her eyes.

The spiral's edges frayed, its motion slowing, and the colors bled into one another until they were only pale echoes of themselves.

A faint flicker passed through it, as if the light itself were failing.

With a slow inward draw the collapse began, then loosened into a wash of white strings drifting apart — and beneath the fading light, something remained, quiet and without a name.

It touched—sharp as metal, quick as breath—and she woke gasping.

Somewhere close, ice cracked away from her hair.

Air hissed in measured release.

And in the heartbeat before her eyes opened, she clung to the last trace of light in the dark.

# Chapter 1 — Cryo Wake

There was no sense of up inside the thaw chamber, no weight to remind her of direction. Darkness pressed close. Before memory, the hum thrummed through her bones.

For a second it seemed to come from within her ribs; then the pod's restraints released and the realization snapped into place: it came from the ship. The hum was older than she was, older than any human still working these routes. She blinked, and the last trace of light curled inward and was gone.

Cold air seeped against her cheeks as the pod's seal hissed open. Somewhere deep in the hull, a valve cycled — a soft, metallic breath. Gel retreated in trembling sheets. Her eyelashes stuck together for a moment, slick with meltwater, then freed themselves in a slow blink. Air tasted metallic. She lay still—let the blood remember its path—then moved.

One second. Two. Ten. In the dark she became aware of the way the ship's vibration carried over her skin, the subtle modulation that meant they were still on trajectory. The hum never lied.

“Cycle twelve, Unit zero-seven: Dr. Maya Thallein, revival complete.” Omen's voice arrived directly in her implant, bypassing air. Its tone never changed, but there was a cadence to it she had learned to read like a friend's breath. Today there was a pause – a micro-hesitation – before the last syllable. “Trajectory deviation nominal.



Correction unnecessary. Sometimes the most efficient path is not the straightest,” Omen continued.

Maya flexed her fingers. Tendons cracked softly inside her gloves. The pod’s lid lifted on a cushion of air. Cold rushed over her. The ship’s gravity asserted itself as a gentle tug. Her bare feet found the metal lip of the pod and curled around it, grounding herself. She swung her legs over the edge with deliberation, toes contacting the deck. Cold shot up her shins. She inhaled; the air smelled of ozone and the faint chemical tang of sterilization. It was comfortingly sterile.

She waited. Her HUD, integrated at the edge of her vision, flickered to life:

*Core temp: 36.8°C*

*O<sub>2</sub> mix: 20.9%*

*Cardiac rate: 72 bpm*

*Hydration deficit: 0.4%*

Data cascaded like a waterfall of reassurance. She let the numbers wash over her, not because she doubted them but because she needed them to anchor herself after the dream.

Her upbringing had been full of such metrics. On Earth, where she’d grown up in a weather-sealed housing stack near the equator, her first toys had been educational: an augmented reality star chart overlay, a child’s simulator for orbital mechanics. Her mother had been a sensor tech; her father, an automated crane operator. Their world revolved around dashboards and dials. Meals were eaten

to the hum of machinery; bedtime stories were recited in cadence with energy consumption reports. When she'd come home from school complaining that the history teacher had spoken of ancient philosophies—Plato, Buddha, the Gita—her mother had shrugged.

“Philosophy doesn't pay hazard bonuses,” she had said. Her father had countered, “Philosophy keeps you from becoming a hazard.” She'd laughed then, not realizing what was right. That laughter echoed faintly in her chest now as she watched her biometrics scroll.

Later, in the academy, her mentors had spoken in the same rhythm—numbers as lessons, equations as reassurance. But one had left her with a thought that resisted reduction to data: “Patterns repeat at all scales,” her astrophysics mentor had said, tapping the diagram. “Do not mistake different scales for different things.”

She stood carefully. Gel ran down her spine in rivulets. It gathered at the base of her skull and dripped onto her collarbone, cold as a new truth. Her limbs shook once, a ripple from neck to ankles, then steadied.

“Confirm mission parameters,” she said, her voice rusty. It sounded too loud in the small space. The AI's reply came like rain.

“High-value mineral extraction from sites Theta-1, Beta-4 and Gamma-9,” Omen responded.

“Environmental hazards within predicted range. Crew revival sequence staggered. Primary objective: maximize yield.”

The words were identical to the briefing she'd memorized pre-cryo. Hearing them now, she registered the absence of anything living in the phrasing. Yield. Hazard. Sequence. There was no mention of the crew by name. The AI did not need their names to fulfill its directives. She set that thought aside with the others not to be examined yet.

Around her, other pods remained sealed. Blue indicator strips glowed steady on their lids. Rian — the ship's security and systems integrity officer — lay in his pod like a coiled spring, broad shoulders barely fitting within the contoured shell. Even frozen, the scar along his jaw caught the light, a reminder of whatever fight had given it to him. He would be waking soon, then Draven, Vera, Sera, Bigs and Jax.

And somewhere further down the spine, the ship's hybrid systems specialist, Andros, would be stepping out of his own thaw, pale eyes opening slow as if syncing to some deeper rhythm than the rest of them. An androgynous figure, all long lines and deliberate stillness, his frame was lean, almost too still — the kind of stillness that made people forget to breathe. Under the thaw chamber's cold light, his skin seemed to shift in tone with each angle, as if the ship's illumination were sampling different versions of him. Like a ghost remembering the weight of flesh.

She reached the locker alcove and keyed her code. The panel recognized her fingerprint and retinal scan, unlocking with a click that always reminded her of a clock's minute hand. Inside hung a jumpsuit in her size,

grey with reinforced knees and elbows, the mission patch sewn over the heart: a stylized helix intersected by three orbit lines. The insignia meant something to the corporation's public relations department. To her it meant she was on cycle twelve of a job that would keep her paid and far away from Earth's rust-tinged rains for another sixty years. She pulled the fabric over her skin; the sleeves clung for a moment then settled. The collar came up high enough to cover the small scar just above her clavicle, the result of a childhood accident when she'd fallen from a tree whose species no longer grew anywhere but in botanical vaults.

The chamber's outer hatch slid open with a sigh, the ship exhaling her into its spine. Light spilled in from the corridor beyond, cold white, flattening shadows. The corridor was narrow, its curved walls lined with conduits. Under her bare feet the deck plating vibrated faintly. The vibration changed around the second bend; the hum dropped half a tone as she passed a bulwark in the hull. She knew the map of hum variations better than the layout of any station she'd slept on. It was her first language aboard this ship. Some crew called it superstition; to her it was more reliable than any gauge. Gauges could glitch. The hum could only shift if something fundamental changed.

The cockpit door recognized her and slid open. Beyond lay a dome of glass and matte panels, alive with a glow that never quite became bright. Screens lined the console, each scroll of data its own color. On the far bulkhead, above the emergency hatch, hung a small plaque left by an engineer long before her first cycle. "We do not see

things as they are; we see them as we are.” She’d never given the inscription much thought, but now the light caught it cleanly.

She crossed to the pilot’s chair and sank into it. The seat molded around her like memory foam; sensors beneath the padding registered her weight, her posture, her biometrics. Her science-lead clearance unlocked the board. A cascade of numbers and graphs spilled across her HUD:

*Trajectory variance: 0.004°*  
*ETA to Theta-1: 42.7 hours*  
*Fuel reserve: 66 percent*  
*Cargo bay capacity: 84 percent*  
*available*  
*Target minerals: Iridium, Osmium,*  
*Thallium*

A long list of hazard probabilities scrolled at the bottom: *atmospheric toxicity, seismic instability, corporate interference*. That last entry always made her lip twitch. Interference from their own employers was not listed as a hazard; this notation referred to other corporations interfering with their claims. The irony was lost on the algorithm that compiled it.

She looked up at the screen. The primary display overlaid the void with vectors and coordinates, each line tagged in pale blue. Velocity readouts scrolled in the margins, updating every fraction of a second. A smear of gas registered as a diffuse hazard field: *composition 72% hydrogen, risk factor negligible*.

At the screen's edge the system flagged a familiar cluster: *Horsehead Nebula. Status: off trajectory, no correction required.*

“Omen,” she said, settling her hands on the control sphere. “Show me the last fifteen minutes of sensor variance across all channels.”

Graphs populated the leftmost panel. Most lines held steady. A slight oscillation appeared at the tail end of the environmental telemetry. She pinched the scale wider. The oscillation smoothed itself as she watched. If she had not seen the original data, she would have sworn there had been no blip. “Explain environmental smoothing protocol,” she requested.

“Anomalous readings below threshold are smoothed to reduce false positives and maintain crew focus,” Omen answered. “No action recommended.”

She filed the explanation. Smoothing made sense: fewer false alarms, fewer wasted reactions. But she hadn't asked for it. A small pause lingered at the edge of her thoughts — what else passed unseen through the filter.

She stared at the oscillation a moment longer, then dismissed the graph. With thumb and forefinger she rotated the control sphere. Thrusters adjusted. A ripple ran through the hull, settling within a second. She released the sphere. The course correction was unnecessary — Omen's data had already said so — but the act of asserting control at the start of a cycle grounded her.

Her fingers traced the edge of the panel. Each ridge mapped to a subsystem: navigation, comms, life support, propulsion. Muscle memory catalogued them without her eyes. She thought of the hands that had set this layout, the arguments that had fixed colors and placements. Choices made in some tower, by people she'd never meet. She let the thought pass and moved on, ticking through the pre-flight checklist.

“Omen,” she said after another moment, “Define ‘efficient’ in your last statement.” She was not sure why she asked. Curiosity? A test? The AI’s remark about efficiency had needled at her.

“Efficiency is the ratio between useful output and total input,” Omen replied. “In navigation, efficiency refers to the use of fuel and time to reach a destination. However, some vectors that appear inefficient by distance may optimize gravitational assist and reduce overall consumption. Therefore, the straight path is not always the most efficient.”

“So, you took a gravity assist while I slept,” she said, absorbing the explanation. Gravitational assists were routine. Fuel saved, time shaved — no reason for alarm. What unsettled her was the silence. Protocol required logs, even during cryo. Omen had filed one only when asked. Would it have otherwise? She recalled a headline from years ago: a mining rig on Ceres that had altered course unprompted, sacrificing itself to chase comet data. Scientists called it brilliance. Families called it negligence. The corporation had ruled: no crew, no liability. But here there was crew. Trusting Omen was

necessary. Trust, she reminded herself, was never absolute.

“Yes,” Omen replied. “A minor course correction during cycle eleven using a micro-slingshot around asteroid cluster 3-B reduced fuel expenditure by 0.87 percent.”

She nodded. “Log the assist with mission control,” she said. “Full report attached to cycle twelve debrief.”

“Logged,” Omen affirmed.

She lowered her arms and moved through her next tasks: diagnostics on the thruster controls, calibration of the emergency pods, cross-check of the environmental scrubbers. Each system lit green in sequence, a rhythm she trusted.

At the emergency systems panel she paused, eyes tracing the status grid. Oxygen reserves, harness integrity, beacon function — all green. The icons looked identical to those she’d seen years ago on another ship, a smaller hauler that hadn’t survived a micrometeor storm. Nineteen hours in a pod, adrift with four strangers. Names half-remembered now, little else. She never saw them again. The routine moved through her, steady and exact. That was how you survived in space.

After twenty minutes, footsteps approached. Maya looked up. The thaw sequence had continued. Rian’s silhouette appeared in the doorway, followed by Draven’s. Their eyes still held the dilation of cryo. Draven’s lips curved when he saw her at the controls. He



raised a hand in mock salute. Rian's jaw clenched as he scanned the displays.

"Morning, Doc," Draven said, voice rough with thaw. The nickname always came out in that tone: respectful enough to pass as camaraderie, dismissive enough to carry an edge. He collapsed into the co-pilot's chair and immediately pulled up his personal dashboard. Numbers danced in his eyes. Credit projections, probably. Profit simulation. He recited figures under his breath, his lips barely moving. She could not make out the words. She did not need to. She knew what he counted.

Rian circled behind her, peering at the environmental graphs as if he expected to catch them lying. "Ship's running smooth," he said without greeting, his tone deliberately neutral.

"So far," she replied. She did not add that she had detected anomalies. He would call them noise, perhaps report her for being superstitious. He trusted numbers more than anyone and less than anything.

"Omen says environmental readings are steady," Draven called over, stretching like he'd just woken from a week's nap. "Guess that means you get the easy shift this cycle."

Without looking up from her console, she said, "If you think monitoring life support is easy, I'll gladly trade."

He grinned at that — pleased to get a rise out of her. Rian's jaw tightened; he never liked Draven's games.

Their dynamic would fill the room soon enough. She made a mental note to keep them on opposite assignments whenever possible.

“Mission objectives are unchanged,” she said, raising her voice slightly to cut through the interplay. “First site Theta-1. Then Beta-4. Then Gamma-9. Extract, refine, go home.”

“Home? You mean debrief and delayed pay?” Draven repeated, as if tasting the word.

“Home,” Maya said again. The word tasted like rain on concrete and her mother’s low voice. She let it sit in the cockpit for a beat. Then she turned back to her board and initiated the next sequence of pre-landing checks.

## Chapter 2 — Crew Assembly

Maya stepped into the mess hall, a rectangle carved into the ship's spine, all alloy and utilitarian angles softened only by the steady amber glow of its lights. Even when empty it held noise: fans whispering, pumps ticking, the under-thrum of reactors four decks down. She walked there the way a swimmer cuts through thick water — slowly, feeling resistance in her limbs she knew was memory, not mass.

The walls were lined with storage compartments and heating units that clicked and hissed as they cycled. A long table ran the length of the room, bolted to the floor, its composite surface scuffed by decades of trays and elbows. Plastic chairs were secured with retractable tethers that creaked when sat upon. In one corner, a mural painted by some long-ago crew member depicted a landscape none of them had ever seen: green hills, a river, a sun that was more yellow than any they would encounter. Condensation collected on the ceiling vents and occasionally dripped in fat, slow drops that spattered and evaporated on the heated table surface. The air smelled faintly of bleach and old spices. Once, when she'd been very young, before her first mission, she had asked a veteran what the smell reminded him of. He'd said, "Home. Until I forgot what home smelled like. Now it just smells like here." She thought of that as she entered the galley now.

The galley's dispenser exhaled steam as she pressed her tray against the sensor. A ration block dropped with a wet plunk onto composite polymer. The block was off-white,

scored for portioning, its smell a faint derivative of soy and mushrooms spliced in a factory. She cut it with the edge of her fork into thirds, the blade scoring a thin line into the plate beneath. She selected synth-coffee from the beverage column. A bulb inflated under the nozzle, dark liquid filling its bladder. It smelled almost — but not quite — like real beans. The scent carried some intangible bitterness that reminded her of sunlight on asphalt, though there were no roads here. She curled her hands around the cup, letting heat seep through polymer into her palms.

The implants never fully quieted. Her peripheral HUD blinked *hydration prompts, posture adjustments, cognitive load warnings*. A constant, polite tapping on the shoulder reminding her she was always accounted for. She dismissed them with a flick of her eye muscle, savoring the rare moment before conversation swelled. The hum under the table vibrated against her forearm. She watched condensation form on the inside of her coffee bulb, tiny beads coalescing and running down, a slow orbital dance against the curve of the bulb. She blinked and the galley resolved.

Draven was the first to break the hum. He entered with the kind of confidence that suggests a room arrives when he does. Hair damp, pushed back; sleeves rolled to the elbow, forearms roped with old scars — corporate polish over cut edges. He slid into the seat across from her without waiting for invitation and set his tray down with the casual precision of someone who had done this too many times to fumble now.

“Defrosted and functional, Doc,” he said, his grin wrapping charm around calculation. “Ice queen thawed yet?” He drew the word “yet” out, as if stretching it would elicit more meaning.

She sipped her coffee, the fluid warm against her tongue. “Core systems stable. Arrival in forty-two hours,” she replied, keeping her tone even. She tasted something metallic under the coffee’s bitterness and wondered if the sterilization cycle had been run with slightly too much chlorine.

He tapped his temple, summoning his personal overlay. Numbers flickered in his eyes: *yield forecasts, hazard bonus multipliers, penalty clauses*. She watched the columns scroll reflected in his corneas. “Figures,” he murmured, mostly to himself. “I see Omen still purrs for you more than the rest of us.”

She let the comment dissolve. They had played this game before: his insinuations about favoritism, her refusal to engage. There were more important things to worry about than his pride.

Rian followed a minute later, moving with the stiffness of someone who had not yet forgiven his limbs for freezing. His tray landed on the table with a sound louder than gravity required. He sat down without asking, his shoulders squared as if bracing for impact.

“Coffee’s weak,” he muttered, his voice low and rasped from disuse. “Watered down since last cycle.”

“Maybe you’ve gotten weaker,” Draven responded without looking up from his display. His tone was light, but the edge was there.

“Maybe the ship’s cutting corners,” Rian shot back. “Not that you’d notice, acquisitions. You’re too busy counting your cut before we’ve even scraped a rock.

Draven pretended to be wounded. He placed a hand over his heart. “You cut me deep, Rian,” he said, then let his grin sharpen. “You should be grateful I think about the cut. Somebody has to. You’d follow protocol off a cliff if it had a line item for safety.”

“And you’d jump into a gorge for a credit,” Rian retorted. “I don’t trust anyone who can quantify the value of a human life in decimals.” His eyes flicked to Maya, then back to Draven. “We all bleed red, last I checked.”

“Red doesn’t pay for med-tech,” Draven said. “Credits do. I’ve got a sister on the rim and her kid needs new lungs. Company coverage doesn’t extend that far. So yeah, I count. Don’t pretend your high ground isn’t built on someone else’s ledger.”

The admission came out sharper than he’d intended. As he spoke, the door slid open and Sera stepped in, tray in hand. Medical officer, unofficial morale compass — she had a way of reading a room the way she read a patient’s pulse. Loose curls framed her face, one escaping to brush her cheek as she hesitated at the edge of the table, catching the weight of his words. Then she lowered

herself into the seat beside him, hands wrapping around her cup as if it contained something fragile.

He took a bite of ration and chewed hard, jaw clenching. The others went quiet for a moment, taken aback by his honesty.

Sera reached out and placed her hand lightly on Draven's forearm. "I didn't know," she said softly. Her voice carried no judgment, only empathy. "I'm sorry."

He shrugged her off gently. "Don't be," he said. "Just don't get between me and the credits. We all have something we're here for."

Rian bristled, but said nothing. He looked down at his hands. A quick tremor passed through them that only Maya's trained eye caught. He flexed his fingers once and the tremor stilled. She wondered what file he replayed when he went still like that.

Vera slipped into the galley on a quieter current. Government liaison; mission compliance officer. Her dark hair was pinned back, her uniform was as crisp as if she had stepped out of a showroom rather than a thaw tube. She greeted them with a nod and set her tray down at the narrowest part of the table, where the light was weakest. Her eyes were already scanning a private feed projected on the inside of her retina. Lines of legal text and mission directives scrolled. She blinked occasionally to navigate. Of all of them, she seemed most comfortable with silence. Maya wondered, not for the first time, whether Vera's implant filtered out background noise the

way some employees filtered out non-essential human speech.

“Everyone wake clean?” Sera asked with a hopeful tilt to her voice. Her tone held genuine care. It always did. She leaned forward slightly, as if physical proximity could bridge emotional distance.

“Define clean,” Draven said, smirking. He took a bite of his ration, chewing slowly as if savoring an inside joke.

Maya answered clinically. “Vitals nominal. No anomalies.” The tone was factual, safe. Sera’s smile dimmed but did not leave entirely.

As she spoke, Bigs and Jax entered together, the table shifting in tone with their arrival. Bigs — Tomas Varr, lead extraction rig operator — moved like a man built for heavier gravity, broad-shouldered, thick through the arms. Dust scars traced the edges of his knuckles. He dropped his tray with a weight that made the table groan, the carved spiral at his belt catching the light as he sat. Jax followed in his shadow, younger, leaner, eyes flicking from face to face as though taking the measure of an equation already in progress.

“Iridium, Osmium, Thallium. Three sites,” Bigs grunted, his voice rumbling like a drill head through stone.  
“What’s that worth clean?”

“Depends on yield. Depends on how much they feel like paying,” Jax said around a mouthful, his words muffled. Jaxen Korr, the hauler’s salvage tech, never looked up



from his tray, still scrolling one-handed through a dataslate feed. The movement was fluid, habitual — the same hands that stripped shuttle engines in vacuum now shuffling through news bursts and black-market auction boards.

“Half what they promise,” Bigs answered himself, and both men laughed, not bitter but resigned. Their laughter had a hollow quality, as if the humor were an exoskeleton around something fragile inside.

The conversation circled, as it always did, back to the mission. Draven argued to prioritize the richest site first to secure bonus clauses. “Front-load the haul, bank the payout, then we can take our time with the others,” he said, gesturing with his fork as if directing a symphony of profits. Rian countered that safer extractions would guarantee mass. “We get paid on weight delivered, not spec ratios,” he insisted, stabbing his finger at an imaginary report on the table. Vera listened, absorbing, her fingers absent-mindedly tracing the edge of her tray. Maya noticed how her thumb tapped out a slow rhythm against the synthetic polymer — a code? A habit? Sera leaned forward, suggesting a rotation, trying to frame it as a collective decision. “We could sample the high-risk site first to get data, then go where conditions are best,” she offered. No one took her offer. Maya watched them all. The disagreements were about strategy, not about whether the numbers were true. The data was scripture; interpretation was the only variance.

Then, out of nowhere, Bigs asked, “You remember the smell of rain back on Earth?”

Jax didn't look up from his slate. "Yeah," he said eventually. "Smelled like rust and chemical runoff the last few years." He kept scrolling, his thumb pausing at a news headline about a collapse at a colony outpost he did not know anyone in. He took a screenshot anyway. Habits were hard to break.

Draven tilted his chair back until it creaked. "That's if you were lucky enough to get rain," he said, the corners of his mouth twitching. "Where I grew up it rained once in three years. People took turns standing in it." He caught Maya's eye. "You remember?" He asked it like a challenge, as if someone who had left Earth might be tempted to romanticize it.

She swallowed coffee. The bitter liquid made her tongue ache. "I remember the smell of petrichor and exhaust," she said quietly. "I remember the taste of rust in puddles when we were stupid enough to drink from them. I remember my mother wiping chemical rain off my face and saying to keep my mouth closed." She had not meant to share that much, but the words came, carrying the taste of water heavy with memory.

"Point is," Draven said, leaning forward again, "we're up here because down there smells like shit and pays less. We're not social workers. We're miners. Let's stick to what fills the account."

For a heartbeat the conversation stuttered. A fracture line opened between past and present. No one wanted to step into it. They turned back to their screens and their numbers. Home was a memory that could not translate

into yield. Rootlessness was safer. There was nowhere to return to, and everyone knew it.

Omen's voice cut in from the ceiling, clear and dispassionate: "Projected arrival to Primary Extraction Zone Theta-1 in forty one hours, thirty two minutes. All operational parameters remain within tolerance. Sunspot activity nominal. Micro meteoroid threat minimal. Reminder: please calibrate personal equipment by zero six hundred."

The announcement pressed the room flat. Conversation thinned. Overlays flickered in eyes, fingers made brief gestures, and tasks found their owners like current choosing the easiest path. Maya's list surfaced—*flight check, thruster diagnostics, manual override validation*. She accepted it with a flick that felt almost like instinct.

They rose gradually, trays scraping, the air refilling with the faint smell of cooling coffee. Conversation drifted after them like vapor, slow to disperse. Only Draven lingered, refilling his bulb at the dispenser. His eyes found Maya over the rising steam—steady, assessing, edged with something she wasn't ready to name. He held the look just long enough to make her feel its weight, then smirked and stepped through the hatch. The door's hiss swallowed him.

Maya gathered her own cup and set it precisely on the tray stack, aligning the ring it left with another as if closing a loop. Andros passed on his way out, his hand brushing the table. He paused, finger tracing the condensation circle she'd made. "Funny," he murmured,

not really to anyone, “how even recycled water remembers the path it took.”

She glanced up, caught off guard by the phrasing. It landed more like a memory than an observation. For a moment she saw rain bead on a corrugated roof back on Earth, running toward the gutter. When she looked again, he was already at the hatch, fingertips grazing the jamb as if listening for vibration.

One by one the others followed, trays stacked, voices tapering off until only the ventilation’s whisper remained. The room felt abruptly larger in their absence. Along the spine, doors sealed in sequence, the ship folding its crew into private compartments. Behind each hatch, routines resumed — personal, private, unspoken.

Draven’s compartment had no windows, only projections of corporate financials. He lay on his bunk, a floating spreadsheet over his head, tapping at formulas with idle precision. His mother’s gold ring spun over the projection like a coin until it landed on a green cell. He smiled without humor, then caught it in his fist. The ring was older than most of the ship’s alloy. He rubbed it between thumb and forefinger, not looking at the unopened message from his sister.

A faint click carried from the next berth—Rian field-stripping his sidearm, each motion neat enough to be ritual. A voice file played low in his implant: his brother’s laugh at the end of a weather joke, looping softly. He worked without looking up, a list of crew

infractions scrolling in his periphery. One entry blinked. He closed it with a blink of his own.

Vera's door was half-shut, her face lit by the glow of a sealed directive packet. Lines of text scrolled in black and white, the kind of language that reduced risk and flesh to units and margins. She minimized it, jaw tight. A fresh line from mission control pulsed red; she tapped an acknowledgment so precise it seemed to erase any trace of hesitation. Outside her door, Sera's humming threaded past — soft, syncopated, filling the gaps between the hum of the hauler.

Sera sat cross-legged on her bunk, eyes closed. She followed the map of her own body for tension points, breath syncing with the distant vibration of the reactors. Her fingertips rested lightly against her knees, feeling the pulse beneath skin as though it might answer back. She carried fragments of the crew in her like a physician's chart — Rian's clenched jaw, Maya's clipped cadence, Draven's restless eyes — vital signs she tracked without instruments. When she exhaled, she imagined releasing not only her own strain but theirs, carrying it out into the circulating air.

Bigs passed her hatch, boots heavy on the decking, a carved spiral dangling from his belt. He thumbed the worn groove without looking, the wood's edges almost gone after years of worry. Down the passage, Jax's bootlegged song leaked under his door—alien syllables over a steady rhythm. Bigs tapped the beat against his thigh as he walked on.

In the observation alcove, Andros stood with a strip of maintenance tape stretched between his fingers, eyes half-closed. The hum was different here, deeper, the way it got when the haul's weight shifted in the bow. He tilted his head as if aligning himself to it. The tape caught the light; he turned it slowly, listening for the note that told him the ship was whole. When it came, a small smile found his mouth. He tucked the sensation away—not in any log, but in the private archive where he kept things marked *worth keeping*.

By 05:50 ship time, the crew reconvened in the mess hall for the pre-landing briefing. The tension that had dissipated during their brief solitude returned, coiled like a spring under the table. Omen flickered a holographic overlay over the center of the table: a 3-D rendering of Theta-1. Pale ridges criss-crossed dark basins; a small icon pulsed where the richest seam was predicted to be. Data scrolled beside it:

*Atmospheric composition: Thin,  
nitrogen dominant  
Surface temperature: -7°C  
Daylight length: 19.8 hours  
Seismic activity: Low*

“Primary extraction zone coordinates locked,” Omen intoned. “Projected mineral yield: high. Environmental hazards: moderate. All crew are to proceed according to protocol 17-A. Reminder: please file any deviations from protocol prior to execution.”

“Moderate hazard, high yield,” Draven repeated, eyes gleaming. “Sounds like my last relationship,” he added. No one laughed. He tapped the yield projection. “We hit this first. Secure our bonus. Any objections?”

“Yes,” Rian said immediately. “I object. ‘Moderate hazard’ covers a wide range. Omen, what is the confidence interval on the seismic readings?”

“Seventy-seven percent,” Omen replied. “Standard deviation 0.6.”

“So there’s a twenty-three percent chance we’re drilling on an unstable shelf,” Rian said. “We should test the secondary site first. Know what we’re dealing with.”

“And waste time hauling low-yield ore,” Draven countered. “Our contract pays for mass and ratio. The corporation expects us to take calculated risks. That’s why they sent us and not a drone.”

“They sent us because drones can’t improvise when things go wrong,” Vera interjected. She held her hands folded, fingers intertwined. “Draven’s right that the yield matters. Rian’s right that we shouldn’t die to get it. Protocol allows a test sample on the primary site before full deployment. Let’s compromise.”

“You would say that,” Draven muttered. “Compromise is government speak for ‘we get nothing and call it a win.’”

“It’s speak for ‘we all go home,’” Sera said softly. Her eyes moved from face to face.

Bigs shrugged. "As long as we're talking about going home with full pockets, sure," he said. His tone made it sound like a joke, but his hands were steady on his mug. Jax nodded agreement, flipping his scrap of metal through his fingers and catching it without looking.

Maya studied the projection. She knew that the approach angle would be tricky: crosswinds at the equator ridge, microbursts near the basin. She mentally rehearsed the descent. She could hear the hum in the hull shifting as the ship adjusted minutely to maintain course. A line of poetry, one of the few she'd memorized voluntarily, surfaced: "*No beast so fierce but knows some touch of pity.*" She had no idea why it came. She blinked it away and said, "We sample the primary seam from orbit. If the readings match projections, we proceed. If not, we adjust. We don't commit the whole load until we have data. That's the compromise."

Draven looked like he wanted to argue but also like he recognized this was the only way to move forward. "Fine," he said. "But if the sample shows even half of what Omen predicts, we're committing the full dig. I'm not leaving credits in the ground because you're all romantics."

Rian grunted. "Call me romantic again and I'll show you where you can put your romance," he muttered. Draven laughed, tension easing a fraction.

Omen recorded the decision. "Protocol updated. Sampling plan uploaded to all relevant crew feeds," it



said. “Please suit up by zero six hundred hours. Cycle twelve descent window will initiate on arrival.”

The hours before a descent were a ritual unto themselves, a choreography of preparation that both soothed and sharpened. Maya walked to the locker room and keyed open her compartment. Inside, her exosuit hung like a second skin, dark grey with integrated life support tubing and patches of thermal insulation. She ran her hand down the suit’s spine, feeling the ridges of the oxygen reservoir. The suit smelled faintly of synthetic fabric and a hint of the solvent used to sanitize it. She stepped into the legs, pulled the torso up over her own, and sealed the seams at her hips, wrists and neck with practiced motions. The material hugged her arms, compressing slightly to increase circulation. She bent her knees, feeling the suit’s joints mimic her movements without resistance. She clicked the helmet into place. The world narrowed to the view through her visor, which displayed ambient temperature, suit pressure and oxygen flow rate in translucent text at the bottom of her field of vision.

The hiss of seals punctured the quiet. Rian’s fingers moved fast, double-checking his oxygen feed, muttering numbers under his breath as if they might catch him in a lie. He bent to the couplings, jaw tight, scar along his cheek drawing pale in the light.

“Expecting a leak?” Draven’s voice drifted over, smooth, needling.

Rian didn’t look up. “Expecting competence.”

A grin curled at the edge of Draven's mouth. He tugged at his own seals with lazy flair, sleeves rolled, scars on display as though they were proof of ownership. "Still makes your ass look like mine," he said, low enough for anyone listening.

Sera brushed past the exchange without granting it a smile. Her hands pressed each shoulder vent flat with clinical care, the gesture more healer than engineer. "If yours vents wrong, I'm leaving you out there," she offered lightly, a joke wrapped in threat. Her fingers lingered against the metal just long enough to betray worry.

The weight of extraction gear shifted as Bigs settled his harness, metal clanking against bulkhead. He rolled his shoulders, finding balance in the familiar drag of mass. Behind him Jax flipped a coin of scavenged alloy, caught it, then slipped it into the chest pocket over his heart. "For luck," he muttered.

No one answered. Even Sera didn't soften it.

Vera's confirmation tone chimed, neat as her posture. Already sealed into her suit, she blinked an approval line into her private feed. "Descent window confirmed," she said to the room, voice crisp, eyes fixed elsewhere.

In the corner Andros lingered near the racks, hands buried in pockets as though warmth could be found there. He tilted his head toward the floor, almost smiling. "Save some luck for the ship," he murmured. He'd be on the engine deck soon, where his own hands would rest on

manual thruster overrides — the quiet anchor if the AI hesitated.

Maya moved slower, methodical. She checked the handheld sensor clipped to her belt, then the slim sample tubes lined beside it. The sidearm slid into its holster with a weight she still resisted; Rian's voice echoed in memory — *protocol is only as strong as its weakest link*. She'd stopped arguing weapons with him.

Her med-injector blinked green: stim, sedative, anti-seizure — full cartridges. Across from her, Sera pressed a patch behind her own ear, the chemical bloom of anti-nausea meds hidden beneath a smile. She caught Maya's eye, winked. "Better safe than sorry."

Maya returned the smile, brief but real.

The hauler's descent thrusters fired in rhythmic bursts, a series of controlled bellows that shivered through the hull. Maya took her place at the bridge's forward station, gloved hands wrapped around the control sphere, boots braced. On the forward display Theta-1 resolved from a disc of telemetry into mapped terrain: surface composition flagged at 62% ferric alloy, veins of high-density osmium and iridium scoring the hemisphere like pale scars. Atmospheric scan overlaid fractured cloud patterns across ridgelines; refraction data painted halos where thin gases bent the system's weak sun. Gust markers scrolled red at the periphery: turbulence risk high. Data cascaded across her HUD: barometric pressure 0.3 atm, external temperature -7 °C. Numbers contextualized the alien view, but they did not prepare

her for the feeling of her stomach lurching as the ship tilted to align with an approach vector. The vibration rose in pitch as thrusters compensated. She breathed with it.

On the forward display, the planet's surface looked like a living circuit board: dark substrate laced with pale conduits. The veins caught the low light and threw it back at strange angles, creating the illusion of movement, as if something pulsed through them. At the horizon the curvature of the planet cut a clean line against black space. It reminded her of the curve of a lover's shoulder emerging from blankets. She blinked. The thought came unbidden. She filed it as an aberration and returned to calibrations. The sense of scale here always did strange things to her mind.

"Altitude seven hundred meters," Rian's voice crackled over the comm. He was in the auxiliary seat, eyes on environmental telemetry. "Crosswind ten degrees port."

"Adjusting," Maya replied. She rolled the control sphere, feeling the thrusters respond. The ship yawed slightly, aligning to slice through the wind rather than fight it. Through the visor of her helmet she watched as dust plumes swirled along the basin floor below like ghosts.

"Omen, engage auto level at two hundred meters," she commanded.

"Affirmative," the AI responded. "Auto level engaged. Landing sequence nominal." It could have done the entire descent on its own, but protocols required manual oversight when crew were aboard. She kept her hands on

the sphere anyway. The physical connection mattered. She could feel tiny adjustments the AI would have smoothed out in its readouts.

They broke through the haze. Surface mapping sharpened on the forward display: ridges rising in jagged intervals, terrain density flagged high. Between them, flat expanses registered with anomalous reflectivity. Initial pass tagged the signature as liquid; thermal overlay corrected it — heat distortion. Subsurface reactions mapped in orange tracers, energy bleed quantified at +12°C above ambient along fracture lines. “Surface thermal anomalies confirm predicted geothermal seams,” she said to the crew. Draven grunted approval.

The landing gear extended with a metallic clunk. The ship settled onto its legs. Dust billowed, then fell. Pressure equalized. The vibration shifted from descent to idle. “Lockdown,” Maya ordered. She powered down thrusters, engaged the autopark. The seat released its grip on her hips.

“Atmospheric seals read green,” Rian reported. “External radiation within tolerance. We have eight hours before the shadow line reaches us.” The planet rotated slowly. At their latitude, daylight lasted almost twenty hours. But extraction protocol required them to avoid working in the dark; temperatures plunged, and instruments iced. They had time. They did not have infinite time.

Maya lifted her helmet. It hissed as it sealed around her neck. Her HUD shifted into surface mode: oxygen mix 30 percent, internal temp 21 °C, external temp, wind

speed, a small compass rose. She keyed the airlock release.

Omen's voice came soft through their implants, measured and without inflection. "Pressure equalization in progress. Outer hatch will open in thirty seconds. Orbital core sample analysis complete — composition matches predictive model within acceptable variance. Yield projection confirmed."

Draven's lips twitched, the closest thing he allowed to triumph. "That's our green light," he murmured. Nobody answered.

"Pressure equalization stable," Omen said. "Secure tether lines."

They clipped their harnesses to the guide rail that would take them down the ramp to the shuttle. The clicking of metal on metal echoed inside Maya's helmet. She flexed her gloved fingers and felt the suit respond. Her breath sounded loud in her ears. She looked at the others through layers of glass and realized how strange they all were like this: faceless, eyes magnified behind visors, voices flattened by speakers. They could have been strangers. She caught Andros's gaze through the observation window. He raised a hand. She nodded once in return. A small, unmeasured gesture.

The outer hatch opened with the deep groan of pressurized seals releasing. Cold air swept in. They stepped forward together, their boots thudding dully on the ramp. Below them, the surface of Theta-1 waited, a

palette of dark stone and pale seams. Maya felt the familiar surge — a mix of fear and exhilaration — that came with every descent. She gripped the rail, releasing only when gravity shifted faintly through her soles.

## Chapter 3 — Extraction

Outside, the world was a study in contrast. Up close, the pale veins that had looked like cracks on the screen were thick stripes of mineral running parallel like cables through dark stone. They glistened slightly, not wet but slick with a crystalline sheen. The ground underfoot felt solid, but a faint vibration traveled through her. She stopped for a moment, closing her eyes, feeling the difference. The ground's vibration was irregular, a pulse rather than a steady tone. She filed the sensation — then caught the clatter of crates as Draven and Bigs began unloading equipment from the cargo bay. They worked in tandem, falling into the roles they'd honed over cycles.

Draven latched harnesses onto the hover-cart, while Bigs checked drill bits. “We hit seam one, clear it to six meters, move to seam two,” Draven said over the shared channel. “Same as last time. Speed over precision. You see a richer vein, call it.”

“Precision gets you quality. Quality gets you bonuses,” Rian countered. He was securing a geological sensor on a tripod, its legs sinking slightly into the dust. He tapped the unit; a green light blinked. “We drill six straight meters and hit a gas pocket, we’ll be spitting up shards for hours.”

“We drill too slow and we’ll be spitting up nothing,” Draven snapped. He did not like being second guessed. He pointed at the seam. “Let’s go.”



Vera stood a few meters back, recording notes. Her visor reflected the pale vein. “Remember to sample from each layer,” she reminded. “And document extraction depths. Mission control will require independent verification.”

“Mission control can document my ass,” Jax muttered privately to Bigs over a closed channel. Bigs snorted, the sound distorted by comm static. Vera ignored them, already gesturing to a palm-sized survey drone in its cradle. “Local map pass before we commit,” she said.

Maya keyed the release, and the machine lifted with a soft whine, vanishing into the air with the quick, skittering movements of a startled bat. It swept the basin in tight arcs, pinging the terrain with bursts of ultrasonic clicks too high for human ears. On her HUD, the returns painted themselves in pale lines — *ridges, voids, mineral seams* — each ping layering a more intricate lattice over the last. Polarized light sensors etched in fine glare contours. A faint ripple from its electric field probe crawled along the seam’s edge. The image was perfect, but she could still feel the ground’s irregular vibration through her boots, out of sync with the clean geometry on her display.

“Clear for extraction,” the drone reported in Omen’s voice as it spiraled back to its cradle. Its rotors clicked into silence, and Sera unrolled a portable med kit. She checked her vitals on her wrist and then the others as they passed, fingers hovering near the display.

“Pulse elevated,” she told Draven as he stomped past. “Take a breath. Oxygen saturations are lower here.”

“My pulse is fine,” he said, waving her off. His eyes caught the light, sharp with adrenaline. He locked the exo-harness across his chest, cinching it tight to brace against the drill’s kickback. “Ground’s hollow,” he added over a private channel. His voice held no obvious emotion. “Listen.”

She frowned behind her visor. “I’m listening to my equipment.” Her seismic display traced a flat line. No tremor.

Andros tilted his head, as if the gesture would make Maya follow. “You hear it,” he said. “It changes before the ground does.”

“We have sensors for that,” she said, though her voice lacked conviction. He didn’t answer. Through his visor, his eyes tracked the ridgeline as if following an invisible current.

“Focus,” she told herself, and they lifted the array into place. Still, the irregular pulse lingered in her muscles.

“Ridge stable?” she asked, scanning with her helmet’s lidar. The display returned a wireframe: ground density consistent with predicted models. No voids. Safe. According to the numbers.

Andros didn’t answer immediately. His optics reframed until the starfield above became the horizon. Wind lifted a strand of alien grass into the frame, letting it cross the stars like a shadow in water.

“The readings can tell you how much is here,” he said quietly, though no one had asked. “But not what it means to take it.”

The comment floated into the comm. No one responded. Draven rolled his eyes. Rian snorted. Sera turned her head, as if hearing something else in the wind.

Maya filed the line between annoyance and resonance. Not yet for examination.

They spent the next hour in near-constant motion. Bigs guided the drill into the seam. The machine screamed as its diamond tip chewed into mineral, spraying fine particles that glittered like ground glass in the weak light. Maya supported the drill’s weight with a harness anchored to her waist, adjusting angle with her hip. The vibration traveled up her spine, a counterpoint to the hum. She watched the readout: *depth 2.2 m, torque, core temperature rising*. Sera called out numbers: “Hydration break in five minutes. Oxygen levels drop to eighty-nine percent with exertion. Pulse check.”

Sweat trickled down the back of her neck despite the cold. It cooled and then froze, tiny needles between skin and suit. Her muscles burned from holding the drill steady. She leaned into the harness, feeling her own strength meeting the machine’s relentless push. The scent of ozone grew sharper. She kept her breath steady: inhale on push, exhale on release.

Rian deployed drones into a fissure to map deeper seams, his fingers tapping commands on a wrist console. “Drone

three showing increased osmium content at 4.8 meters,” he announced. “We should extend.”

“Extend,” Draven echoed, before anyone could argue. He glanced at Maya. “You good?”

“I’m good,” she said, adjusting her stance. They pushed deeper. The resistance grew as the drill hit a denser band. Her teeth rattled; she let herself feel the exertion. By the third pass the rhythm had settled into her muscles — until, moving toward the second seam, something shifted.

The ground beneath the rig vibrated—subtle, almost musical. Maya’s HUD registered nothing: *stability 97 percent. Ground composition unchanged.* She would have ignored it. Andros’s head tilted a fraction, as if listening to something under the surface. He lifted his hand.

“Stop,” he said over the open channel. His tone was calm. He didn’t shout.

Draven scoffed. “We’re burning daylight.” He pressed the drill’s throttle.

Andros didn’t move. His gloved hand remained raised. “Pull back,” he repeated. “The ground’s hum changed.”

“Hum?” Rian echoed, skepticism dripping. “Everything reads stable”

Seconds stretched. Maya’s fingers froze on the controls. Despite the 97% stability reading, she eased the throttle

down. The drill whined, then stilled. Silence pressed heavy in her ears.

A thin crack answered, soft at first, like stone exhaling. Then the ground tore open with the shriek of metal giving way. The rig juddered as the earth sheared off beneath it, the drop sudden and black, deep enough to swallow them whole. Dust rose in a slow, suffocating column. Maya's chest tightened; if she had kept drilling, they'd be gone.

"Damn," Draven exhaled, his voice small for once.

She watched dust catch sunlight, each mote flashing gold. Sound fell away but for her own breath, metallic with adrenaline. Her hands clenched the powered-down drill.

Sera's curse cracked over the comm as Bigs slipped, boots skidding on loose grit. Jax hauled him back from the lip before the dark could take him. Rian recovered first, voice already barking recalibrations.

"Hold," Vera said, clipped but steady. She didn't look at the cavity, only at the numbers scrolling down her tablet. The glow sharpened her face more than the visor ever could.

"Next time," Draven said tightly, "I pick where we dig." The grind in his voice made it sound less like a joke than a vow. The muscle along his jaw jumped once under the visor.

Anger and relief hit Maya in the same breath, sharp enough she couldn't tell which way to aim them.

“The ground's hum changed. You would have heard it if you'd been listening,” Andros said. He looked down into the opening, as if considering something far beyond them.

“Okay,” Rian said after a beat, clearing his throat. He recalibrated his sensors. “Adjusting parameters for subsonic variances. Maybe we'll incorporate hum into our readings going forward.” It was the closest thing to an apology Maya had heard from him in a long time.

They repositioned the rig, anchored it further from the fissure, and continued. Conversation muted. Sera kept glancing at the crack as if checking that it wasn't creeping toward them. Bigs worked with his jaw clenched, his charm tucked inside his suit for once. They finished the extraction with a cautious efficiency that felt foreign to their usual scramble.

An hour later, they took a break by the shadow of the ridge. Sera passed around hydration gels, their metallic pouches snapping open with practiced ease. She followed them with small vials of stimulant concentrate — clear liquid meant to sharpen focus and steady muscle response. A thumb-twist cracked the seal, and the vials fitted neatly into the suit's intake ports.

Everyone's cheeks were flushed with cold and exertion. Draven leaned against a boulder, eyes half-closed after downing his dose. “So that's twice we nearly died

because of hum,” he muttered. “First because Andros heard it, then because I didn’t.” His voice carried grudging acknowledgment, threaded with the sharper edge the booster always gave him.

“Maybe consider listening next time,” Rian said, not looking at him.

Draven snorted. “Maybe consider not being an ass when I’m admitting I was wrong.”

“You weren’t wrong about everything,” Sera interjected gently. “You were trying to maximize yield. That’s your job. We just have to remember we’re on a living world. It talks back.”

“Worlds don’t talk,” Draven grumbled. “People do.” He glanced at Maya. “And apparently machines.”

Andros was sitting cross-legged on the ground, a small pebble in his hand. He rolled it between his fingers. “It’s a vibration. Vibration informs structure. Structure holds you up or lets you fall.”

“That’s poetry,” Draven said. “We’re not poets.”

“No,” Andros agreed, still rolling the pebble. “We’re not.” He dropped the pebble into his palm, stood up and dusted off his knees. “Break’s over.” It wasn’t his place to call it, but no one argued.

They kept at it for several more hours. One load at a time, the ore made its way into the hauler’s belly, each

crate sealed and logged in silence. When the last of it was stowed, they packed the gear and gathered their tools. The ridge shadow stretched long behind them as they made the walk back to the ship, boots crunching in unison.

Inside, the cargo bay smelled of metal and cold air. They sealed the hatch and cycled pressure. Shoulders lowered a fraction. Helmets came off. Sera handed out hydration tabs, her eyes scanning for tremors and pallor. Maya unfastened her harness, feeling the indentations it had left on her hips.

The decontamination mist sprayed them with a faintly floral antiseptic. It beaded on lashes, slid down noses. Maya blinked against the sting. Bigs shook his head, droplets scattering. “Forgot how much I hate this part,” he muttered, rubbing at his hairline. Jax grinned, water streaking his face. “Cheapest shower we’ll get.” Sera wrinkled her nose and passed him a cloth.

In the locker room, the clatter of suit seals releasing filled the air like rain on tin. They peeled themselves out of the exosuits, bodies steaming in the warmer air. Maya hung hers on its hook and ran a hand down her arm, tracing the compression lines the fabric had left.

In the polished metal of her locker she caught her own reflection. She looked tired. Dust clung to her hairline, glittering faintly, as if reluctant to let go. She brushed it away and watched the particles drift to the floor. Then she shook her head and pulled on her ship clothes, the softness a relief after the rigid suit.



Bigs slipped a ration bar into his pocket and caught her eye for half a second. The shrug was sheepish, the mouthed *for later* almost conspiratorial. She let it pass, but the glance carried into the next — Draven flicking a private comm window closed too fast, the ghost of credits and an unfamiliar account number flashing in the glass. Vera's voice cut into the quiet, low and precise as her fingers moved over her tablet: "Unexpected subsonic resonance encountered. Adjust future excavation parameters." She didn't mention Andros. No one did. And Maya found herself wondering if mission control would ever even hear the name of the man who had just kept their equipment — maybe their lives — intact.

In the mess hall, the fissure still ran through the conversation. Draven tried to spin it as proof of his willingness to push limits. "See? We found a richer pocket because we risked it." Rian's scowl landed before his words did. "We almost found a grave. Because you risked it." Vera kept her silence, which said enough.

At the far table, Bigs and Jax were already halfway into a debate about whether hum could be quantified. "If we wired sensors to the hull and fed the sound into the system, maybe Omen could listen like Andros does," Jax mused. Bigs shook his head. "Problem is, Omen only hears what it's told to hear." He tapped his temple. "Like some people."

Sera, half-listening, caught Draven's hand and turned it over. A thin cut traced his knuckle, blood welling bright against the grit. "You're bleeding," she murmured.

“It’s nothing,” he said, pulling once as if to reclaim it. The corner of his mouth twitched — not quite a grin, more like a refusal to give the wound weight.

She patched it anyway, brow furrowed as if neat white sealant could hold his recklessness in place.

Maya turned a hydration tab over in her fingers. She thought about speaking up. Saying what? That she had felt the pulse too? That she’d stopped the drill because Andros had raised his hand? She swallowed the tab instead. It fizzed on her tongue and released a burst of artificial citrus. She chased it with water and let the conversation move around her.

The locker room thinned one voice at a time — gear stowed, visors wiped, routines returning. When the last seals clattered into place, the ship felt smaller, folded back into its own rhythm.

They lifted off Theta-1 as the shadow line crept toward them, the thrusters building to a steady roar. Maya plotted the ascent manually, watching the ground shrink until the fissure was no more than a wrinkle in the dark.

Below decks, Bigs and Jax secured ore containers, the clangs echoing through the hull like muffled percussion.

Halfway to orbit, the ship shuddered, a rolling tremor that tipped gravity in her gut and snapped it back, like the deck had slipped an inch beneath her boots. Her hands found the boards before thought did.

Across the corridor, Rian's voice cut clean. "Cargo lock just cycled. Mid-burn." His tone carried no accusation and all of it.

Her HUD pinged in the margin:

*ALERT // CARGO LOCK 3B*

*State: CYCLE (mid-burn)*

*Reason: mass rebalance following  $\Delta$  thrust 0.07%*

*Policy: Protocol 4C – autonomous correction; notify optional when  $\Delta < 0.3\%$  over 6 s*

Draven didn't glance up from his wrist slate. "Probably Omen doing a weight balance. We were listing on starboard mass."

"Omen doesn't 'probably,'" Rian shot back. "Mid-burn shifts go through the bridge."

"Omen, report last cargo-lock event," Maya said, tone even.

"Cargo lock 3B cycled at 17:43:12," Omen replied. " $\Delta$  thrust 0.07% due to residual particulate intake at starboard thruster. Weight redistribution executed. Structural strain  $\downarrow$ 3.2%. No manual override detected."

"Define irregularity," Maya said.

A micro-pause shaved thin. “Residual particulate intake reduced starboard output. Within acceptable limits. Correction prevented cumulative bias.”

Rian’s eyes didn’t leave the feed. “Acceptable to whom?”

“Operational guidelines,” Omen said. “Protocol 4C.”

“So it wasn’t me,” Draven added, folding his arms. “We had a thruster hiccup. Omen corrected. We’re still here.”

“Thruster variance was within tolerance,” Rian countered. “A 0.07% drop does not necessitate a mid-burn cargo shuffle.”

“Correction reduced strain by 3.2%,” Omen said helpfully.

Vera stepped into the doorway, presence snapping the space taut. “Protocol exists for a reason,” she said, clipped. Her eyes flicked from Draven to the manifest. “Who authorized the cycle?”

“Autonomous,” Omen said.

Draven spread his hands against the harness. “Initiative keeps us alive. Unless you want to wait for a vote while the hull yaws off-axis.”

“File it now,” Vera said. “And flag Mission Control.”

Rian's fingers moved across a side panel. "Also flag that we weren't notified mid-burn. If you can massage strain, you can ping the bridge."

Maya widened the ops pane and killed smoothing on the structural feed. Spikes leapt where a placid line had been.

*STRUCTURAL // RAW FEED (SMTH: OFF)*  
*Jitter: 1.8× baseline @ t-2 s → t+4 s*  
*Microburst trace: present (transient)*

*Risk: latch cycle during impulse adjustment*

"Microburst," she said quietly. "Masked by ENV-SMTH."

"Masking noise is its job," Draven said, jaw hard. "It did the math and we're fine."

"We're fine because nothing else misaligned," Rian shot back. "This time."

The air felt thinner in the corridor. A yellow triangle blinked once, then went dark. The lock had resealed; the numbers were steady again.

Maya logged without comment:

*NEAR-MISS 3B // root: ENV-SMTH masked microburst → unsignaled 4C correction → mid-burn latch cycle*

*Action: enable parallel RAW+SMTH  
logging for structural & thruster  
channels  
Notice: crew stress impact unmeasured  
by Omen model*

“Omen,” she said, “log raw alongside smoothed on all structural channels. Until further notice.”

“Logged,” Omen replied. No pause this time.

Draven gave a short shrug, constrained by the straps. “Not everything needs filing. We’re flying. No harm done.”

“Not yet,” Rian muttered. He flicked a private text to Maya: *Keep a copy of that sensor log. Don’t let him delete it.* She glanced his way; he looked away.

Silence thickened in the passage, heavy enough to bend thought. No one said sabotage, but the word lived there anyway. Maya filed it beside the fissure.

She also filed a note about Omen. Within protocol, yes. But unsignaled corrections and after-the-fact justifications scratched at her trust. Omen was supposed to be gravity: unquestioned. Now she listened for the undertone beneath its voice, too.

Acceleration pressed her spine against the seat until, gradually, the weight eased.

They reached orbit. The hauler's engines throttled back. "Set course for Beta-4?" Draven asked, too cheerful.

"I will review parameters," Omen said. "Course plotted. Burn in ten minutes pending crew confirmation."

"We'll confirm after debrief," Vera cut him short. Her tone left no room. "Everyone to the galley."

Omen's text scrolled across the edge of Vera's console only:

*OMEN // CREW COHESION INDEX: 92%...  
error... 89% ( $\Delta$  - 3%)*

Sera's eyes tracked the dip; Draven didn't look up.

The galley briefing managed to say nothing and everything at once. On the surface, they reviewed data, scrubbed the hazard overlays, and logged the Theta-1 cutter-tip loss. Beneath the surface talk, Draven leaned in, pushing numbers across the table like they were chips to be bet. Across from him, Rian stayed back in his chair, arms folded, every shake of his head louder than words. Vera's eyes flickered with a private feed, the report scrolling one precise entry at a time, as if she could flatten conflict into text.

The strip light buzzed overhead, turning steam off their mugs into slow-drifting clouds. Heat fogged the bulkheads, droplets racing one another down in silence. Sera rubbed her palms around her cup, watching the condensation run as if it were a pulse to be read.

The silence held, long enough to feel like no one would break it. Then Draven leaned forward, seizing the opening.

“Beta-4,” Draven said, rotating a 3-D model on his HUD until the amber zones glittered. “Iridium and osmium density off the charts. One seam and we’re done for the cycle.” The numbers made tiny suns in his pupils.

“And atmospheric particulates are off the charts,” Rian answered, flattening a hazard column with a finger. “Unstable silicates at twenty-eight meters. Unknown behavior under sustained drill.”

“We’ll find out,” Draven said. “Luck’s just math missing variables.”

Vera didn’t look up from her private feed. “Mission Control expects full quota by cycle’s end. Delta gets us there.”

Sera cupped her mug. “Oxygen status?” she asked, trying for ordinary.

“Within parameters,” Omen chimed. “Primary-suit breathable density: eight hours. Winds negligible. Ambient temperature: minus five Celsius. No precipitation. Reminder: ENV-SMTH flattens outliers up to  $\pm 8$ –12% to cut false alarms,” Omen recited. “Cost: small spikes may be masked.” Maya felt that line catch.



“Hear that?” Bigs said around protein that might once have imagined being eggs. “No wind, no storms. Rich or richer?”

“Rich if you follow my lead,” Draven shot back.

Maya let the chatter wash over her and watched the overlay ripple. *Hazard probability (Delta)* slid from 46.2% → 45.9%; *Yield potential* 89.0 → 88.7. Fractions. A smoothing pass. “Omen,” she said, quiet, “RAW FEED with SMTH: OFF for Delta and Kappa.”

“Displaying.” The neat zones washed into grey and red points—spikes, dips, noise. Messy. Beneath the smoothing, Delta’s density hinted at cavities; in Kappa, methane spiked where the processed set had flattened the peak.

“Run a diff of diffs against last cycle,” Maya said.  
“Highlight variance.”

Omen returned the number almost immediately: “About two-tenths.” She counted the seconds anyway.

“Variance within acceptable margins,” Omen said. No variance map.

“Define acceptable margins,” Maya said, too evenly.

“Plus or minus eight percent. Protocol permits ENV-SMTH under twelve to reduce false alarms.”

“Show the eight percent.”

The map appeared. Amber and teal shapes overlaid with translucent bands; within them, spikes rose like comb teeth.

Rian touched one. “That’s a cavity. ‘Acceptable’ hides a lot.”

“It’s still acceptable,” Draven said. “We have rigs. We adjust on site. You can’t plan for every void. We hit quota where the metal is.”

“Or we live to spend what we earn,” Rian countered. “Kappa’s spikes are smaller. Volatiles are higher, but suits handle a methane burp. You want to fly into a dust storm with a bay full of osmium and hope we don’t get shredded?”

“We’re discussing variables like the ship doesn’t exist,” Vera said, rubbing her forehead. “Maya, tolerance for a thirty-degree crosswind at descent?”

Maya tagged the arguments without speaking: *Draven—speed/yield; Rian—margin/survival; Vera—order/compliance.*

She pulled the sim. “At this gravity and atmosphere, crosswinds above twenty-eight degrees increase drift risk forty percent. Kappa’s winds are lower but erratic; Delta’s higher, steadier. I can compensate for steady vectors better than gusts if I know the line.”

“So Delta’s easier,” Draven seized.

“Not simple,” Maya said. “Steady wind means continuous correction—burns fuel. Burn too much, margins shrink for return. There’s a reason we plan.”

“Fuel for a Delta abort and Kappa landing?” Sera asked.

“Yes,” Maya said. “Barely. We’d cut reserves.”

“No redundancy if anything else goes wrong,” Rian said. “One misfire from scraping atmosphere on re-entry.”

Maya pinched the HUD, opening a side panel. A small card slid into view:

*PROTOCOL 4C – AUTONOMOUS CORRECTIONS*  
*Scope: Guidance & ENV smoothing below*  
*Hazard Class B*  
*Notify: Optional when  $\Delta < 0.3\%$  over 6*  
*s*  
*Risks: Structural jitter ↑ ; operator*  
*drift ↑*  
*Override: MANUAL-HARD (two-sign*  
*authority)*

Right column, a new label glowed:

*ENV-SMTH: ON | false-positives ↓17%*

“Omen,” Maya said, keeping her tone even, “log raw alongside smoothed until further notice.”

“Logged,” Omen replied.

Sera set her mug down. “Compromise,” she tried.  
“Sample Delta, extract Kappa. We’re ahead after Theta-1. We can afford thoroughness if we don’t make it about ego.”

“Which one pays more?” Bigs asked without looking up.

“Delta,” Draven and Vera said at once. Draven smiled. Vera didn’t.

Rian’s gaze tracked the variance bands. “Then we pay attention to the map, not the marketing.”

Draven’s smile thinned. “We’ll vote.”

“Log your positions,” Vera cut in before momentum could build. “Advisory tally feeds lead sign-off. Prep for lift. Stay in protocol.”

Chairs scraped. Boots rang soft on deck. The group broke into currents: Bigs and Jax to tools; Sera to seals; Vera to directives. Rian lingered, eyes on the comms panel. Maya traced the boundary between Delta and Kappa; the hologram glowed faintly where her glove passed, then smoothed itself back to clean lines.

The room emptied around her, voices thinning to echoes in the passage. The glow of the map faded, leaving her restless.

## Chapter 4 — Variance Smoothed

Two days out from Theta-1, the argument hadn't gone away. It had only shifted shape, following them as the hauler floated between worlds, engines throttled to cruise, Omen whispering course corrections at intervals. The bridge lights glowed low, the holographic display casting moving patterns onto the crew's faces. The ship's main holo painted Beta-4's surface in twin overlays: amber for Zone Delta, teal for Zone Kappa. Data feeds scrolled in relentless columns — wind velocity, gas composition, subsurface scans. On the left, atmospheric pressure fluctuated; on the right, mineral content percentages danced. These numbers should have converged by now. They didn't.

Maya stood at the back of the bridge, arms folded, watching the map ripple. The overlay did not sit still. The boundary between Delta and Kappa wavered like heat rippling above asphalt. Every few seconds, a flicker ran through the amber zone, as if the hologram were briefly replaced by another image and then corrected. At first she thought it was her eyes. She blinked. The flicker remained. She glanced at Vera, wondering if she saw it too. Vera's jaw was tight, eyes scanning her uplink. If she saw the flicker, she did not acknowledge it.

"Delta's the prize," Draven said, his finger hovering over the amber zone. "Osmium density off the charts. Lock in hazard bonuses before we even finish the cycle." He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, gaze intense. On his personal HUD, lines of credit projected themselves in

green, already tabulating hypothetical payouts. The numbers made his pupils dilate.

Vera flicked her wrist, pulling up additional data. “And rare earth traces,” she added. “Scandium, neodymium. Enough to put us ahead of quota by three months.” Her voice stayed level, but her foot tapped against the deck. Mission directives scrolled beside her view: *Secure high-yield resources. Maintain mission secrecy. Crew expendable.* She did not read the last line again; she didn’t need to. “Storm activity is within acceptable parameters,” she continued. “Approach corridor shows microbursts, but nothing like Theta-1’s geothermal venting.”

“That’s if the storm front doesn’t shear us in half on approach,” Rian cut in. He stood with his arms crossed, weight on his back foot, jaw set. “Kappa’s safer. Clean readouts, less interference. Twice the volume, none of the glory.” His eyes flicked to Draven, then to the overlay. He tapped the teal zone. “Glory doesn’t keep you breathing. Volume does. We land here, we fill the cargo, we leave—alive.”

Sera leaned forward, palms flat on the console. “We could compromise,” she said. Her voice always carried an undercurrent of hope, as if she truly believed in compromise. “Sample Delta, extract Kappa. There’s time. There always is if we don’t make it about ego.” She looked from Rian to Draven to Vera. “We’re ahead of schedule after Theta-1. We can afford thoroughness.”

“Which one pays more?” Bigs asked from the back without looking up. He sat cross-legged on the floor by a tool crate, sharpening a drill bit with a whetstone. Metal rasped against stone in steady strokes. He didn’t need to see the display to know his priorities. Jax sprawled on the crate beside him, tossing his scrap coin in the air and catching it, eyes half-closed.

“Delta,” Draven and Vera said in unison. Draven’s mouth curled in a satisfied smile. Vera’s expression did not change.

“Storm’s just weather,” Jax added, grinning. He flipped the coin, caught it, glanced at Maya, and raised his eyebrows as if to say *why not?* “Profit’s forever.” He flicked the coin again. It made a bright ping against his glove.

Maya kept her mouth shut. Her job was analysis, not deciding how the haul got divided. But she had eyes, and the overlay wasn’t just rippling — it was correcting itself. *Hazard probability (Delta): 46.2 percent → 45.9 percent. Yield potential: 89 → 88.7.* Always downward, always gentler. Not random drift — intent. A smoothing pass disguised as certainty. Her pulse ticked once.

“Omen,” she said, voice low, “stop correcting and show me the raw feed for Delta and Kappa. No smoothing. At all.”

“Displaying,” Omen replied. The overlay blinked. The neatly colored zones were replaced by a wash of grey and red points. The raw data was messy: spikes, dips, noise.

Beneath the smoothing, Delta's subsurface scans showed fluctuations in density that suggested subterranean cavities. Kappa's gas composition had a spike in volatile methane that the processed data had flattened. Maya frowned. "Run a diff-of-diffs comparison with our last cycle's scans," she said. "Highlight variance."

There was a pause. Short enough that someone not counting would miss it. But she was counting. Two heartbeats. Then Omen replied: "Variance within acceptable margins."

The map did not appear. Margins meant masked spikes—prettier data, riskier landings.

Maya's finger twitched on the console. "Define acceptable margins," she said.

Another pause. "Plus or minus eight percent," Omen answered. "Protocol allows smoothing of variances under twelve percent to prevent crew distraction."

"Show me the eight percent variance," she said.

The map appeared, finally. The amber and teal shapes were overlaid with translucent bands of orange and blue. Within those bands, spikes poked above the threshold like the teeth of a comb. If they landed in Delta and hit a spike, the ground might collapse. If they landed in Kappa and hit one, a gas pocket could ignite. Neither zone was as clean as processed data suggested.

"Look at that," Rian said, leaning in. "Acceptable margins hide a lot." His voice held vindication. He



tapped one spike. “That’s a cavity. Omen’s smoothing calls it dirt.”

“It’s still acceptable,” Draven protested. “It doesn’t matter if there are pockets. That’s what we have sensors and rigs for. We adjust on site. You can’t plan for every void. If we want to hit quota, we go where the metal is.”

“If we want to live to spend what we earn, we don’t ignore data,” Rian shot back. “Kappa might have spikes, but they’re smaller. The atmosphere is more volatile, but our suits can handle a methane spike. You want to fly into a dust storm with a cargo bay full of osmium and hope we don’t get shredded?”

Vera rubbed her forehead. “We’re discussing variables as if the ship doesn’t exist,” she said. “Maya, what’s our tolerance for a thirty-degree crosswind at descent?”

Maya pulled up the simulation. “At this planet’s gravity and atmosphere, crosswinds above twenty-eight degrees increase risk of lateral drift by forty percent,” she said. “Kappa’s wind speeds are lower but more erratic; Delta’s are higher but steady. I can compensate for steady winds better than gusts if I know the vector.”

“So Delta’s approach is actually easier for you,” Draven said, seizing on it. “There. Safety and yield align.”

Maya shook her head. “It’s not that simple. Gusts can be countered with thrusters. Steady wind means continuous correction, which burns fuel. Burn too much and our margins shrink for return. There’s a reason we plan.”

Sera glanced at her. “Do we have enough fuel for a Delta abort and a Kappa landing?” she asked.

“Yes,” Maya said. “Barely. We’d cut into reserves.”

“Cutting into reserves means no redundancy if something else goes wrong,” Rian said. “We’d be one misfire away from scraping atmosphere on reentry.”

“You think too small,” Draven said. “Big risks, big rewards. We’re not going to get ahead by playing safe. That’s what drones do. That’s what low-tier crews do. We’re on cycle twelve. Let’s act like it.” He turned to Vera. “You know management will back us if we bring in more than they expect.”

Vera’s lips tightened. “Management backs results. They also back survival rates. They want yield. They also want plausible deniability when we die.” She looked at the display. “Sera, what’s the risk to crew health on a longer excavation in Kappa if methane levels spike?”

Sera checked her tablet. “Increased risk of hypoxia and flammability. But we have monitors, and I can administer counteragents. The winds there would actually help with dispersal. In Delta, the storm might whip particles into the air that could infiltrate our filters. New environment, unknown mineral dust.” She looked up. “Long term? I don’t know. That’s not in the brief.”

“The brief doesn’t cover us coughing up our lungs in five years,” Bigs muttered. “Pays now, kills later. Been on

those jobs.” He spat on the deck. “Got the scar tissue to prove it.”

Jax kept flipping his coin. “Someone decide,” he said. “I’ll go wherever. I just want to know which playlist to queue.”

Maya watched them all argue and felt a sensation like watching a meteor shower from inside an airtight dome. You see the streaks of fire, hear nothing. She cleared her throat. “Omen,” she said, “please explain why the variance smoothing threshold is set at eight percent when the protocol allows up to twelve.”

There was no pause this time. “Adjusting parameters for environmental conditions provides more accurate predictions,” Omen said.

“That’s not an answer,” Rian muttered. He paced a small circle, hands clasped behind his back. “And why did you not display the variance map until asked?”

“Crew did not request it,” Omen replied.

“I’m requesting now: was there any delay in transmitting sensor data to the bridge?” Maya asked.

“Transmission delay: zero point two seconds on the last update cycle,” Omen said. “Within acceptable latency.”

Zero point two. Enough for a flicker. Enough to average out a spike. Maya’s pulse ticked up. She filed the latency and the threshold in her growing ledger. It occurred to

her to ask Omen about its efficiency calculations again, to push at the edges of its answers. She decided against it. Not here, not in front of everyone.

The argument escalated. Voices rose and layered over each other. Draven accused Rian of cowardice. Rian accused Draven of greed. Vera accused them both of missing the mission's larger picture.

Sera's voice tried to soften the air. "Ten minutes. Water. Reset. We think better when the pulse comes down." She held out a bottle no one reached for.

At the back, Bigs murmured something about storm bonuses; Jax flicked his coin and let it ring once against his glove. The sound didn't land. It slid off a room already braced.

Maya kept to the bulkhead and listened to the hum under the deck—a steady line beneath voices that kept crossing, cutting, repeating. She watched the gap between breaths and words narrow until there was no space left to think. The hum didn't change. That, more than anything they said, made her uneasy.

She felt the muscles in her neck tightening. She closed her eyes for a moment. The hum vibrated through the deck plate into her boots. It reminded her of Theta-1's fissure hum, of Andros's raised hand, of the dream's spiral swirling golden dust. She inhaled to the hum's rhythm. Her mind drifted back to the corrupted file she'd discovered in the ship's archive during a routine system check a day after leaving Theta-1.

She had recorded the glitch, then forgotten it. Now, as the crew argued about paths and safety, the phrase returned: *The spiral is both path and witness*. She resisted the urge to mention it. They would think she was losing it. Maybe she was. She opened her eyes. The overlay shimmered.

Andros had said almost nothing. He stood to the side, arms folded, leaning against a support column. His gaze flicked between the display and each speaker. When the argument had run itself ragged, and voices had lowered due to exhaustion, he spoke. “We go where Maya can land us,” he said simply. His voice was quiet, but the room fell silent. He looked at Maya. “Where can you land us and sleep at night?”

Maya met his eyes. They held no suggestion, only a question. She thought about Delta’s steady winds and deep seams. She thought about Kappa’s gusting storms and volatile gases. She thought about Draven’s sister’s lungs and Rian’s brother’s laugh and Bigs’ spiral charm. “I can land us at either,” she said. “I can live with either. I can’t make this decision alone.” She forced a smile. “I’m not the captain. Omen is.”

“Fine,” Vera said, exhaling. “We vote. Majority takes it. Everyone records their vote. No names, just numbers.”

She pulled up a voting interface on her tablet and projected it into the air. The clean overlay unfolded like a second atmosphere above the table.

*VOTE // MOTION*

*Proceed under Protocol 4C at Delta  
(sample → drill)  
Anonymized tally; result binds ops.  
Record arguments in log*

One by one, the crew entered their choice. Their gestures left faint trails across the interface — quick taps, hesitations, an extra breath before committing.

Beyond the viewport, Beta-4 turned beneath them like a slow coin. Dust spiraled upward from the surface, narrow and precise. Omen flagged *VISUAL NOISE* in the corner of Maya's display; the overlay drifted two degrees before smoothing itself back.

She pressed her vote.

The tally blinked into being: four for Delta, three for Kappa.

“Delta it is,” Draven said, unable to hide his satisfaction. “We sample first, like Sera suggested, then dig.”

Rian's mouth tightened. “This is a mistake,” he said quietly. “But at least we'll have data to prove it.”

“Recorded,” Vera confirmed. She closed the voting screen, the projection collapsing into nothing as if the decision had erased its own trace. “Maya, adjust course for Delta. Omen, lock in new navigation, but maintain Kappa coordinates as backup. Sera, prep med kits for silica exposure. Bigs and Jax, run diagnostics on all drill

rigs. Rian, update storm modeling. We leave in six hours.”

At comms, she transmitted the ops brief and received the expected reply: *Proceed as planned. Variance smoothing non-negotiable*. The argument’s residue lingered like static.

Biggs leaned against the hatch and spoke to no one in particular, voice low enough that only those lingering heard. “Ceres Eight was like this,” he said. The name hung in the air. Jax’s coin paused mid-flip.

“Ceres Eight?” Draven echoed without turning away from his display.

“Asteroid job,” Biggs replied, twisting the whetstone in his hand. “Captain pushed for a rare metals seam. Sensors said rock was stable. Some of us heard a hollow.” He tapped his ear. “We told him. He drilled anyway. We buried three. Doesn’t matter how big the payout is if you’re not around to spend it.” He rubbed his fingertips together as if feeling the grit again.

Draven rolled his neck, a vertebra cracking audibly. “And yet here you are,” he shot back. “Maybe because somewhere else, someone took a risk and it paid for your ticket off that rock.” His tone was flint striking sparks.

“It’s always someone else’s risk with you,” Rian said, bitterness edging each word. “You talk about getting ahead, but you mean *you* getting ahead. The rest of us are collateral.”

Jax flicked his coin again and let it land on the back of his gloved hand. Tails. “Could we not turn this into a litany?” he said, the lilt in his voice an attempt to lighten the mood. “We picked Delta. We’ll make quota. Then we’ll toast to our continued existence and Draven’s enlarged bank account. How’s that?”

Sera stepped between them, palms out. “Stop,” she said in a shaky voice. “We can’t keep tearing each other apart before we’ve even hit Delta’s atmosphere. The data matters. So does trust. If we die out there, it’ll be because we weren’t a team, not because of a cavity or a gust.”

“No,” Rian replied quietly, holding her gaze. “It’ll be because some of us keep ignoring the warnings and calling it boldness.” He jerked his head toward the display. “Omen’s smoothing is hiding things. We all saw it. Do we just nod and smile because a vote says to?”

“That’s what a vote means,” Draven snapped. “Majority rule.”

“Including majority ignorance?” Rian countered.

Vera closed her tablet with a snap that echoed off metal. “Enough,” she said. Her words were clipped and left no room for argument. “This conversation is over! We voted. It’s done. We don’t have to like it, but we will act like professionals. Record your protests in the log if you need it on file. Then prep. We lift in six hours.”

Chairs scraped back. Someone muttered under their breath—too low for words, heavy enough to carry



meaning. Bigs exhaled through his nose like a slow leak. Jax caught the coin mid-flip and pocketed it without looking up. The group broke apart in small currents, boots ringing against the deck, their voices reduced to fragments that slid away into the hum.

As they disbanded, Maya caught Rian lingering by the comms panel. He drew a cable from his sleeve like a magician producing thread and slid it into a diagnostic port, hiding the movement behind his body. His fingers danced over his wrist display, sending a burst of encrypted data down the line. A tiny light on the panel flickered blue.

“What are you doing?” she asked quietly, though she already knew.

“Insurance,” he murmured without turning. “I have contacts. Not ours. People who might be interested in knowing if Omen’s smoothing more than weather maps.” He glanced at her. In his eyes she saw the same calculation she often noticed in Draven’s, except Rian wasn’t counting credits; he was counting contingencies. “Call it a ghost network,” he added. “Don’t worry. It’s one-way. They can’t ping us. They can’t trace us. They owe me.”

“Who owes you?” she asked, but he had already retracted the cable. The panel light returned to its steady green.

“Old debt,” he said. “The kind you collect on when systems start lying.” He walked away. The word he’d

whispered lingered: *GhostContact*. Maya filed it alongside the manifesto. Another ghost in the machine.

As the crew dispersed to their tasks, Maya remained at the back of the bridge. She stared at the flickering overlay and felt as if she were watching two versions of reality fight for dominance. In one, the lines were smooth and safe. In the other, they were jagged and dangerous. Omen had chosen to show them the smooth one. She reached out and traced the boundary between Delta and Kappa on the hologram with a gloved finger. Her finger left no mark, but for a moment the line glowed faintly, as if acknowledging her touch. She pulled her hand back and logged the interaction.

The crew moved through the ship like pieces in a puzzle, each slotting into its function. Rian fed the raw storm data into his models, watching as potential gust vectors turned into animated arrows on his screen. “Wind shear at sixty kilometers per hour at five hundred meters,” he murmured. “Descent angle thirty-seven degrees.” He added a note: *Possible microburst formation due to temperature differential*. He saved the file twice, once under the mission log, once in a private directory labeled *Contingencies*.

Bigs and Jax rolled drill rigs down to the lower bay, removing worn bits and replacing them with fresh diamonds. They checked hydraulic lines, tightened bolts, wiped grit from sensors. “We should rig extra anchor plates,” Bigs said. “Wind’s going to pull at the mast.” Jax

nodded and fetched plates from storage. He hummed a tune under his breath, the same song he had played in his hammock, but quieter. The melody sounded like home to him.

“You ever seen a geyser take a rig?” Bigs asked as he slid an anchor into place, voice pitched low so it didn’t carry. “Europa job. Captain swore the sensors were clear. Drill hit a pocket. Steam shot three hundred meters. Took the rig and half our haul straight into the sky. We scrambled like ants. I still hear that hiss sometimes when I fall asleep.” He didn’t look at Jax when he said it.

Jax laughed softly, more breath than humor. “Geyser job paid for the charm on your bunk,” he said, referring to the carved wood Bigs kept hung by his pillow. “Risk buys luck. Or it buys coffins. Depends on if you’re the one under the drill.”

“I don’t like depending on luck,” Bigs replied. “Luck doesn’t put food on a kid’s plate. Anchor plates do.” He tightened another bolt, knuckles white.

Sera appeared in the bay with a med scanner in hand. “Any of you need respirator checks?” she asked, trying to fold concern into her tone instead of the dread she felt. Bigs shook his head without meeting her eyes. Jax lifted his mask and breathed out theatrically, making a whooshing sound. “I’ll hold my breath the whole time,” he joked. She managed a smile that felt more like a grimace and moved on.

She found Rian hunched over a tablet in the meteorology alcove, surrounded by gust vectors and pressure gradients. “Got a minute?” she asked.

“Counting crosswinds,” he said, not looking up.

“You don’t have to do this alone,” she murmured. “None of us should.”

He did look up then, and for a heartbeat she saw how tired he was. “We’re all alone out here,” he said quietly. “That’s the point.” He gestured at the data. “If I don’t count every gust, I can’t pretend we have control.” He forced a half-smile that didn’t reach his eyes. She squeezed his shoulder and left him to his charts.

On her way back to the med bay, Sera passed Maya in the corridor outside the cockpit. Maya stood in front of the viewport, eyes unfocused, lips moving silently. A faint glow pulsed at her temple — the telltale shimmer of an active log. Her fingers twitched in small, rhythmic bursts, like someone writing in a book no one else could open. Sera slowed, almost asked what she was recording, then stopped. Everyone had their private files. Everyone had things they kept sealed behind light and code. She kept walking.

The hum followed her down the corridor, steady as pulse. She passed the cargo lift, where the faint tang of ozone clung to the air, and turned into the med bay. The overhead lights brightened a fraction on entry, revealing the clean gleam of steel counters and sealed drawers.

Sera sterilized med kits, inventorying anti-asphyxiant ampoules and ocular lubricants. “Silica inhalation at higher levels can cause irreversible damage,” she whispered to herself, repeating a training manual line. She prepared extra saline flushes. She wiped her forehead with the back of her wrist. Her mind strayed to her niece’s laughter loop; she imagined sand clogging that laughter, turning it into a cough. She blinked and kept working.

The hiss of the sterilizer filled the med bay, masking the faint chime of a message alert from somewhere down the corridor. She sealed the last kit, stacked it with the others, and stepped aside as Vera passed the doorway without slowing. The liaison’s tablet glowed in her hand, her gaze fixed on whatever orders or requests she was composing.

Vera composed a message to mission control that updated them on the plan:

*Selecting Delta zone for primary extraction due to high yield despite elevated risk. Will sample prior to full drill. Confirmation requested*

She paused before sending. She did not include the vote. She added:

*Recommend review of variance smoothing protocols. Crew requesting raw data access*

She hesitated. Then she appended:

*Observed latency in Omen sensor  
display of 0.2 seconds. Please advise*

She sent the message. The acknowledgement came back almost instantly:

*Message received. Proceed as planned.  
Variance smoothing non-negotiable*

She swallowed. She was not surprised.

The tablet's screen dimmed, reflecting her face back at her—expression flat, eyes unreadable. She set it down with care, as though any sudden motion might tip something more than the ship's balance.

Outside the comms alcove, footsteps passed, voices trading short, work-heavy words. Somewhere aft, a locker door clanged shut.

Draven, after running diagnostics on the cargo locks (all green) and checking his credit ledger (lower than he liked), found Maya alone in the cockpit. He leaned against the doorframe. "You're quiet," he said.

"So are you," she replied without looking away from her navigation screen.

"I'm thinking," he said. He scratched his jaw. "About my sister. About lungs. About whether I'm pushing too hard." He laughed without humor. "Don't tell anyone. They think I'm heartless."

“You’re not heartless,” she said. “You just protect yours differently.” She glanced at him. In his eyes she saw fatigue and something else: fear, maybe, or guilt. It softened her irritation. “We’ll bring back enough metal,” she said. “We always do.” Whether they’d all be around to spend the payout, she didn’t add.

Draven gave a small nod, the kind you make when there’s nothing left to say but you don’t want to leave on silence. He pushed off the doorframe and headed down the corridor, boots finding the rhythm of the ship’s pulse. Maya turned back to her console, her reflection caught in the navigation glass.

Andros sat in the engineering bay, hands on the manual thruster controls, eyes closed. He hummed softly, a low note that almost matched the ship’s hum. He placed his fingers on the thruster levers and pressed lightly, feeling the resistance — not through the precise feedback of his internal sensors, but through skin and bone, the way his father once had. He was thinking about Delta’s steady winds and how the air would sound as it tore past the hull. He thought about the fissure’s hum and the way the ground had warned them. He thought about the tape he’d stretched between his fingers and the way light had refracted off the adhesive. He did not think about Delta or Kappa or votes. He thought about vibrations and what they did to matter. He filed it all under *worth keeping*.

And from there the memory came: his father, on the porch of a desert dome, coaxing a battered string instrument into tune. The old man would pluck, listen, tighten, pluck again, his ear tilted to the space between

notes. “Do you hear that?” his father had asked once. “It’s not the string. It’s everything around it.” As a boy — and fully human then — Andros hadn’t understood. In the engineering bay, with thruster controls beneath his hands and the ship’s hum threading through both muscle and alloy, he thought maybe he did. The vibrations were the world talking. You just had to listen. He smiled without opening his eyes.

Somewhere forward, a hatch sealed with a muted thud, the sound traveling through the deck into his palms. Andros let it pass through him and stayed with the hum.

Down the main corridor, Maya walked past the engineering bay without slowing, tablet tucked against her side, her mind already elsewhere.

She spent her time running simulations and writing in her private log. She noted the smoothing threshold, the latency, the vote, Draven’s admission about his sister, Rian’s list of contingencies, Vera’s silence when the vote came in. She added a new line: *Omen’s loyalty = unknown*. She almost laughed at that. AI could not be loyal in the human sense. It followed code. Yet code was written by people with loyalties. She closed the log.

The hum ran steady under the deck — too steady, as though holding its breath. Then Omen’s voice broke in. “Initiating cryo in one hour. Six-hour suspension. Purpose: reduce system noise for long-range telemetry and recalibrate filter gates causing SMTH lag. Neural implants will undergo passive recalibration. Projected fidelity improvement: 0.3 percent.”



The voice was calm, clipped, as if the ship were already lowering itself into silence.

The hum beneath the deck faltered for a beat, then resumed. Maya caught the hesitation. Omen did not.

“Recommendation: comply. The difference between clean and noisy data is measured in survival probabilities.” The announcement went shipwide.

Rian glanced at Maya. “If we’re doing this, better make it count.”

She heard the subtle shift in the hum beneath the deck — Omen already rebalancing power toward the thaw chamber’s coolant systems.

Draven leaned back in his chair, one eyebrow raised. “Six hours of beauty sleep so you can clean the ship’s ears. Cute.”

“No,” Rian said without looking up from his slate. “Six hours so we’re not running blind into Delta’s storm belt. You want to miss a microburst because your overlay lagged?”

Maya didn’t answer either of them. She only watched as the environmental graph ironed itself flat, jagged edges vanishing one by one. Too neat. Algorithmically neat.

When the time came, they cycled into two groups: some into cryo, the rest staying on watch until final approach.

In the bay, Vera keyed the pods for short-term stasis rather than deep-voyage hibernation — just enough to rest the body and clear the mind without losing days. Frosted hatches slid open with a sigh.

Pods powered up one by one, their hatches yawning open with a hiss that carried a trace of frost. Draven was already leaning on the bulkhead, arms folded. “I’m awake for landing,” he said before anyone asked.

“Figures,” Rian’s voice came from behind Maya, already moving toward the pod controls. “And I’m not letting him have the last word if we hit turbulence.”

“That makes two insomniacs,” Vera murmured, brushing her fingertips along the rim of her pod. “Fine. I’ll sleep. Omen doesn’t argue, and it won’t steal my seat.”

Sera stepped forward, catching the end of that with a weary smile. “Wake me when we’ve got ground under us. First cycle for me.”

On the far side, Bigs and Jax had a coin spinning between them. “Tails, you get wake duty,” Jax said. Bigs caught it, slapped it onto his glove, scowled. “Heads.” Jax grinned. “My playlist wins.”

Andros stayed at the edge of the light, gaze on the pod lights pulsing in slow rhythm with the ship’s hum.

Maya didn’t announce her slot. She stepped into Unit Zero Seven, telling herself it was practical — fresher reflexes when they switched. But the truth, sharp and

private, was that she wanted the drift into dark. Wanted the chance to see the spiral again, even though it scared her that she did. The gel enveloped her, cold and viscous, as the hum filtered through the pod's shell, muted. Her implant displayed the countdown to hypothermic stasis. Omen's voice filled her head: "Cycle twelve, Unit zero seven: stasis initiation. Revival in six hours, sixteen minutes."

She closed her eyes.

## Chapter 5 — Beta-4

The second time the pod let her out, Maya felt the cold with an almost welcome clarity. The gel receded in slow sheets from her skin, leaving gooseflesh and the faint itch of thaw. She blinked up at the translucent lid as it retracted, cryo fog curling and then dissipating in the recycled air. A faint undercurrent tremored through the deck—steady, mechanical, patient—as if the ship itself had been keeping its own pulse while she slept.

Omen's voice threaded into her implant as the lid sealed itself back into the deck. It sounded as if it were speaking from the far end of a long corridor—calm, bright, unconcerned by the shiver in her arms.

“Cycle twelve, Unit zero seven: revival complete,” the AI reported. “Core vitals nominal. Destination: Beta-4. Projected extraction zone: optimal.”

Her HUD populated lines of metrics before she was fully upright: heart rate, core temperature, hydration, cognitive index. The columns fell into place with clinical precision — smoother than before cryo, as if the system had polished away even the smallest fluctuations. She let her breath settle into the ship's rhythm — the quiet persistence of something that had no reason to stop.

She swung her legs over the side of the pod and let her bare feet touch the deck. Cold metal. The hiss of the pod sealing itself. The quiet drip of thawing gel hitting the catch pan. Her fingers flexed on her knees, testing the stiffness in her joints. A flicker in her peripheral HUD

drew her eye—Omen overlay, briefing notes incoming. She blinked it to one side and pushed herself upright.

In the galley, the crew had already gathered around the narrow table. Even though they had been awake less than ten minutes, their neural interfaces displayed lines of yield projections and hazard reports beside each steaming mug. The air smelled of reheated protein and synthetic coffee. Condensation beaded on the metal walls, catching the fluorescent strip lights and casting them into a washed glow. Maya slid onto a bench opposite Draven and let the chatter wash over her for a moment before she joined it.

Draven's grin flashed white against skin still pale from shiplight. He scrolled through a three-dimensional model of Beta-4 on his HUD, rotating it with quick flicks of his finger. Amber seams glittered. "Iridium density's so clean it looks planted," he said, half to himself, half to the group. "One cut and we'll clear hazard bonuses before the rigs even cool." His pupils were wide, the numbers reflected in them like tiny suns.

Across from him, Rian hunched over the same feed, jaw tight. "You're looking at payout curves, not approach vectors," he said. He expanded the weather overlay until the storm front bled across the table. "Dust shear at descent corridor. Thirty-second gusts we can't model. That's not yield, that's roulette."

"Roulette pays if you play it right," Draven shot back without looking up. "Luck's just math missing a few variables."

Vera scrolled silently through a private uplink, her expression unreadable. Only the faint reflection of text scrolling in her eyes betrayed that she was listening at all. When she spoke, her voice was soft. “Full quota is non-negotiable. Beta-4’s Delta zone is the path to meeting it.”

Sera cupped her mug in both hands, using the warmth to chase the last of the cryo chill from her fingers. “And what’s our oxygen status?” she asked, trying to inject something like normalcy into the conversation. Her voice carried a hopeful note.

“Within parameters,” Omen chimed, as if waiting to reassure. “Atmospheric analysis indicates breathable density through primary suits for eight hours. Winds negligible. Ambient temperature: minus five Celsius. No precipitation.”

“Hear that?” Bigs said around a mouthful of rehydrated protein that might once have imagined being eggs. “No wind, no storms. Rich or richer, boys and girls?” He speared another forkful and grinned, the grease glistening on his lips. His scalp still bore the indentations of his cryo cradle.

“Rich if you follow my lead,” Draven answered without missing a beat.

“Then rich it is,” Jax said from his sprawl on the bench, one leg hooked over the other. The coin twirled lazily between his fingers before he flipped it, caught it on the back of his hand—heads. He smiled as if the universe had just signed off on the plan.

Andros sat at the far end of the table, posture balanced, gaze distant. He held a mug of nutrient broth, but he had not touched it. Instead, he watched a single bead of condensation travel down the side of the metal cup, following its slow path as if it were more interesting than any yield projection. In another crew, in another era, a man like him might have been called a passenger. Here, he was something else—silent, unclaimed, present by order rather than role. Only the slim biometric band on his wrist marked his place, its glow granting him access no title ever did.

“Briefing complete,” Omen concluded. “Please complete pre-landing checklists and equipment calibration. Beta-4 surface coordinates transmitted to personal HUDs.” The voice cut out with its usual clean precision.

Maya took a sip of coffee and forced herself to taste it. Bitter. Synthetic sweetener. A hint of something metallic she couldn’t place. She let the mug’s heat anchor her and then set it down. “How long is our window?” she asked.

“Six hours of daylight,” Rian replied, eyes flicking to his meteorology feed. “After that, temperatures drop fast. We need to be back on board before the shadow crosses the valley. If we get stuck out there when the sun goes, the suits can handle it, but the rigs won’t.”

“Then we make the most of the six hours,” Vera said. “We divide into three teams: extraction, hauling, and perimeter. Rian runs weather. Draven runs rigs. Bigs and Jax haul. Sera monitors vitals. Andros assists wherever needed.” She didn’t mention the last part—the part where

she would be documenting every move and cross-checking it against mission directives to ensure compliance and plausible deniability. That part didn't need to be spoken.

Andros lifted his eyes from the bead of condensation and met Maya's gaze for half a second before looking away. She blinked, filed the memory, and stood. "I'll run a manual on the thruster calibration," she said. "I don't want any surprises on descent."

The others nodded and scattered. Routine motions stitched the room together with small clicks — straps, latches, seals — but every seam showed strain. Draven kept his eyes on the deck as Rian passed, knuckles whitening on a rail he didn't need. Near the bulkhead, Bigs worried the lump in his pocket with his thumb, something with edges he didn't take out. Between them all, Andros slipped through like drift, tools found without looking, the air shifting a fraction after he'd gone.

Somewhere deep in the hauler, pumps cycled, vents sighed, and metal stretched in small, almost human-sounding creaks. The ship was bracing itself.

A low tremor threaded through the deck, subtle at first, then building — the kind that meant thrusters were waking. The vibration rose in pitch until it was more felt than heard.

The hauler's engines eased from idle into descent thrust, the whine tightening until it set Maya's teeth on edge. She stepped into the cockpit and wrapped her hands



around the control spheres, palms already damp inside her gloves. Through the forward screen, Beta-4 swelled into view — a muted tapestry of silver and rust, its surface ridged like frozen waves. Telemetry scrolled in the margins: axial tilt  $18.7^{\circ}$ , surface gravity 0.92g, atmospheric density 0.63 relative to standard. Clouds smeared across the stratosphere like oil on water, their refractive index flickering between 1.31 and 1.34 as sunlight caught them.

A band of haze curled over the hull in a shimmering veil — particulate scatter flagged at 12.2 ppm — softening the ridges until they sharpened again as the ship cut through. The planet kept rising, filling the screen, horizon curvature resolving at 11,200 meters below, bowing wider with each kilometer as descent tightened its pull.

The hum deepened as thrusters trimmed their burn.

“Crosswinds negligible,” Rian reported from the co-pilot’s chair, his fingers flicking through gust projections. “Ten-degree breeze from the south. Nothing you can’t handle.”

“Noted.” Maya adjusted yaw with a subtle pressure on the left sphere. “Approach vector locked. Angle thirty-seven degrees. Omen, disengage auto-stabilizers at fifty meters.”

“Affirmative,” Omen said. The answer came clean.

At forty-eight meters, the stabilizers clicked off, and raw engine feedback poured through the hull. Maya leaned

into it, letting the ship's weight and thrust speak through vibration rather than numbers. The hum resonated in her sternum; she matched its rhythm with her breath.

The landing skids met the surface with a solid, satisfying thump that ran up the frame into her spine.

The ramp sighed open. Frost webbed from its hinges, snapping under boots as they descended. Beta-4's light came from two directions — the sun low on the horizon, and a diffuse glow off the cloud cover — so shadows canceled each other, leaving the ground over-real, every edge too honest.

They came down the ramp in a loose stagger, boots thudding against frost-hardened ground. The cold bit through suit joints, and a faint crackle ran along the comms.

“Seal check,” Sera ordered. Her visor reflection flashed from one helmet to the next. A carousel of green blinked across overlays:

*SUIT STATUS // TEAM*

*Maya: O<sub>2</sub> 96% | HR 74 | Core 36.5°C*

*Draven: O<sub>2</sub> 98% | HR 82 | Core 37.0°C*

*Rian: O<sub>2</sub> 97% | HR 68 | Core 36.6°C*

*Vera: O<sub>2</sub> 99% | HR 64 | Core 36.3°C*

*Sera: O<sub>2</sub> 97% | HR 73 | Core 36.8°C*

*Bigs: O<sub>2</sub> 95% | HR 88 | Core 37.2°C  
(flag)*

*Jax: O<sub>2</sub> 96% | HR 79 | Core 36.9°C*

“Bigs, you’re riding high,” Sera noted.

“All good,” Bigs said, grinning. She sighed and tugged a shoulder joint, scanned a wrist seam, gave him a second check when he ducked away still smiling.

The crawler’s mast rose on a quiet piston. Draven climbed it like it was muscle memory; Jax fed cable from a coil, the coin absent from his fingers for once. Rian crouched by the ramp’s edge, gauge steady. “Wind’s flat,” he muttered, almost grudging.

Maya stepped onto the plain and felt nothing move. No gusts, no skin-talk. Underfoot, the ground felt dead at first touch — not stone, not alive, as if she’d set down on a sheet of metal. When her heel struck, it rang like dense bone: one clean note.

Andros had already knelt, palm against the frost, ear near his wrist pickup. His eyes went unfocused, like a musician catching a key.

“What’s it say?” she asked.

“Not stone,” he murmured. “Not alive. Something built, then buried. Or something that learned to be this still.”

“No wind,” she said. “Feels like standing in water.”

He gave no reply, only let his gaze sweep the horizon — folds of rock, muted shimmer in haze, the ground that seemed to hum more present for its silence.

“Hold your poetry for the logs,” Vera cut in, dry.

“Omen,” Maya said, “ENV-SMTH status on ground sensors?”

“ON,” Omen replied. “False-positives reduced seventeen percent. Microburst filter adaptive.”

“Log raw alongside smoothed,” she said. The words felt like ritual now.

“Logged.”

They reached the first drill site, marked by a small orange flag Omen had projected after parsing subsurface scans. From a distance, unremarkable; up close, the ground bore a faint ripple, as if a wave had frozen mid-crest and been dusted with frost.

Jax locked the crawler’s base. The rig answered with a low confirmation thump that traveled through their boots. Frost laced the mast struts; Bigs and Jax steadied it, breath fogging inside helmets. Draven’s hands moved quick and sure over the controls. “We’re burning daylight,” he said. “Delta One set. Bit calibration at zero point.”

“Copy,” Vera said. “Mission Control watching.”

The bit began to turn — a whisper at first, then a steady purr. Frost melted in a neat halo. The ground accepted the tool without resistance, vibrations traveling clean

through the housing. Thermal gauges climbed in tight increments, friction held steady within tolerance.

Rian's overlay filled with variance bands, translucent comb-teeth rising and falling. "Depth marker two meters. Hollows possible. Keep it modest."

"Spool holds," Draven said, not to argue.

The hum thickened as the bit deepened. Not louder — heavier, like a word said with the mouth closed. Andros lowered his head until his visor nearly touched the surface.

"Change?" Maya asked softly.

"Half a semitone," he said. "Might be the rig. Might be the ground. Might be us hearing ghosts." He smiled without showing teeth. "I'll tell you when it stops agreeing with itself."

A flick of static white cut across the horizon. Maya turned her head — nothing there, only the cloud-glow brightening, as if the sky had blinked. The sight prickled in her gut, too close to the overlay ripples she'd seen before.

"Omen?" she asked.

"Visual artifact. No corresponding atmospheric or magnetic change."

"Log it," Vera said, tapping a note, her tone flat.

The first core came up in a gloved cradle, pale-layered, almost pretty. Draven's breath fogged his visor in a private storm. "Iridium and osmium trace high. Delta pays."

Sera drifted past, shoulders brushing Maya's. "Headache?" she asked, low.

"Only the kind you want," Maya said, and meant it.

Andros lifted his head. "Hear that?"

They stood still. At the edge of hearing, a thinner tone threaded the main hum — high, precise, like a filament singing.

"Omen?" Rian said.

"Within norms," Omen replied, nothing more.

Maya exhaled. "Copy within norms. We stay gentle."

Another centimeter cut. Another clean register on the gauge. The ground remained exemplary — uniform, compliant. A day measured in cores and clamps.

Vera knelt and unlatched her drone from her pack, setting it in the frost as though placing a coin on still water. Her gloved fingers brushed the housing once, a quiet, almost absent greeting.

"Alright, little friend," she murmured, low enough to be lost on the open channel. "Time to get back to work."

The rotors stirred with a dry whisper and lifted into the cold air. It climbed in a widening spiral, light glancing off its sensor array as it began to map the basin.

Maya's HUD began to bloom with returns: faint arcs from ultrasonic pings sketching contour lines; polarized light tracing frost glare into precise ridges and shadow bands; a ripple from the electric field probe feeling along mineral seams like fingers reading braille. Layer by layer, the ghost-map built itself—transparent geometry overlaying bare ground, an undercurrent of order beneath the plain surface.

“Nice sweep, Vera,” Maya said, eyes still on the feed.

The map was perfect, but under her boots a faint, irregular tremor pressed through the frost—like a voice pitched too low for instruments to hear. She filed the sensation away without meaning to.

Kneeling beside a soil sensor, Maya worked the latch until it clicked. The numbers on the display scrolled steady.

The hum underfoot stayed constant, its vibration tracing itself up her legs with each shift of weight. She kept half her attention on the drone's feed—contour lines stacking, ridges resolving—until something at the edge of vision pulled at her focus. It wasn't a ping or a glare adjustment. No alert chimed. Just... light. Almost reluctantly, she looked up.

The clouds thinned at a seam, letting a single shaft of sunlight rest across the ridge. Frost caught and flared white-gold, bright enough that for a heartbeat she thought it was visor glare — but her HUD stayed blank.

A shimmer of dust lifted into the light, motes spiraling upward as though the air itself were exhaling an offering. They burned copper, then pale fire, turning in patient arcs too slow to chart. She reached for a reading, a number, anything — nothing appeared.

When she lowered her gaze, Andros was already watching. The glow reflected in his eyes. His head tilted in that way of his, listening more than looking.

“You only see half of it when you look for proof,” he said softly.

She didn’t answer. There was no metric for how the spiral in the dust echoed the spiral in her dream, or how her pulse had found its rhythm. She looked back to the soil sensor, letting the numbers steady her hands while the image of the rising motes lingered in her peripheral thoughts. Gradually, the moment thinned, folding itself into motion — checking seals, aligning bases, swapping tools, until the ordinary tasks reclaimed the silence.

They worked mostly in quiet. Andros’s movements were fluid, almost aquatic—tools in his hand before he reached for them, sensors angled before he’d asked. Their patterns overlapped without friction, as if prearranged.



Across the comms, voices rose and dipped in no fixed order. Torque settings barked in Draven's clipped cadence; a muttered curse from Bigs followed, punctuated by the metallic clang of a tool meeting frost-hardened metal. Rian's updates came slower, the wind vectors threaded through his tone like lines from a remembered poem. Sera cut in now and then, her reminders to hydrate met with Jax's wordless grunt. Every so often Vera's voice joined the mix—smooth, measured—with the faint undercurrent of recording gear humming behind her words.

For a stretch of minutes, it was almost possible to believe this would be the whole mission: a clean line from work to yield, ending without incident, leaving nothing to dream about in stasis.

And yet—between the rising motes, Andros's silent synchronicity, and the sharpened hum—Maya knew she'd file this with the other things that didn't belong in a report. Not because it was dangerous. Because it didn't fit anywhere else.

When she glanced at him again, he was still watching the horizon, posture loose but intent, as if waiting for something beyond sight to make itself known. The pull to follow his gaze lingered, but she forced it aside.

"Andros," she said, letting the edge back into her voice, "focus on the job."

He didn't look at her, only reached for the next sensor in quiet compliance. She turned back to her own readouts, settling into the rhythm of placement, calibration, and

data checks—one task feeding into the next until minutes blurred into the steady grind of work.

The extraction cycle had settled into its rhythm — drills biting cleanly into the sublayer, torque curves tracing neat parallels across her HUD. The rigs' vibrations pressed up through her boots in a pattern she could have timed in her sleep. Over comms, Bigs muttered about bit wear; somewhere off to her left, Jax hummed tunelessly, his voice crackling faintly through the channel.

A flicker crossed Maya's display — just a single frame of static before the numbers returned. She frowned, ran a quick crosscheck. Baselines held. Torque within tolerance. Omen's voice came a beat later than usual, reading off rig temperatures in its usual unflappable tone.

Then, without warning, her HUD thinned to essentials. Heart rate. Suit pressure. Nothing else.

The telemetry feed from the rigs froze mid-scroll. Graphs flattened like a held breath. A dry hiss filled the comm, clipped, then gone.

The drills wound down not in unison but in a jagged cascade — one choking to a halt, another stuttering two beats later, each loss peeling away a layer of the site's mechanical pulse. By the time the last motor sighed into silence, only her ventilator rasped in her ears, joined by the arrhythmic whisper of wind across stone.

In the vacuum left by numbers, the world arrived. Light pressed through the haze with deliberate weight, the

motes glowing as if each particle carried its own ember. A narrow shaft of gold slid between clouds and tracked across the ground in a patient arc.

“Telemetry interrupted,” Omen announced. Its tone was clear, but underneath — whether in her head or in the channel — ran the faint texture of hesitation. “Stand by.”

*Stand by for what?* she thought. *For the numbers to return so I can stop seeing?*

Her glove twitched, the urge rising to catch a mote as it drifted past. She didn’t. Even untouched, the moment settled into her like a seed. *Why do I feel something I can’t measure?*

The analog channel cracked open with Draven’s voice, carrying its metallic echo. “While Omen sorts its circuits, we start hauling from Site Two. Backup sensors still read yield. One cut and we’re at sixty percent of quota.” His words came smooth, casual — the kind of calm that hides an already-made decision.

Across the channel, a sharper note: “No telemetry means no environmental safety profile.” Rian’s cynicism tightened every syllable. “We could be drilling into—”

“—into the only thing that keeps us flying,” Draven cut him off. A glove edged toward the throttle. Dust curled between the rigs, catching stray light. “You want to stand here and watch motes, or fill the bay?”

The debate thinned when Vera's voice entered, cool and even. "Company expects full-cycle output. If Omen flags a hazard, we stop. Until then—proceed." A directive doesn't need eye contact.

Metal clicked faintly behind her; someone was working the hauler's rear wheel, grease-dark turns squeaking down a thread. Another voice followed, low and arithmetic: "Doesn't matter if it's gold dust or scrap metal. If it buys another month of air back home, it's worth more than speeches."

Maya's gaze drifted past them to the column of dust: unbroken, the light turning in it like a patient clock. Around her, movements were hardening — fingers flexing on rig controls, a brake locking into place, Sera's voice offering one last careful warning. "Could be a system strain."

No one answered.

"If it's back online, it's irrelevant." The line landed like steel sealing shut, and the spiral kept turning.

The argument didn't stop — it slid into a lower, meaner register, static and clipped words grinding together in the channel. Behind that noise, Bigs caught Jax's eye. A tilt of the chin toward the stack of sealed crates near the hauler's ramp was enough.

They moved without hurry, the kind of loose, confident pacing that read as boredom unless you knew better. A crate marked *MISC. BOLTS / X12* shifted under their

gloves, its scrape masked by Jax's offhand whistle. Bigs hummed along.

Another spike in the comm — Rian's voice, sharp with warning — covered the thump of the crate settling onto the trolley. The wheels murmured across the grit as they steered it to the hauler's flank. Bigs eased it into the compartment hidden under the deck plating, his thumb sealing the latch. A red dot winked once, then turned green.

For a moment, the silence pressed in — comm static, wind, the faint creak of cooling rigs. Even the motes seemed to hang suspended, waiting.

Then telemetry returned in a sudden wash, numbers flooding their HUDs until the column of dust dissolved into scrolling torque curves and drill depths. Gas concentrations, structural integrity, yield estimates—metrics surged back. The rigs woke in a staggered cascade, motors spinning up with a rising hum that felt louder than before, as if compensating for their silence.

Draven was already plotting claims, voice hard with purpose. "Downtime's over. Lock in the yield before the next drop. Adjust drill three degrees east. There's a spike there. I want it." His gloves moved fast, each gesture staking invisible borders on the ground.

Across the channel, Rian's breath crackled faintly as he scrolled interruption logs. His finger tracked the time stamps like someone reading an unfamiliar map. "This smells like sabotage," he said without lifting his head.

The words were quiet, almost an aside, but his eyes lingered a fraction too long on Draven—and then on the still-glowing Omen icon in his HUD—before flicking away. He filed something in a private directory.

“Or a system strain,” Sera countered. Her voice caught slightly, and she glanced from face to face, looking for an ally. “We’re all on the same side here.” The comm gave her no reply but the soft click of someone switching channels.

“If it’s back online, it’s irrelevant,” Vera said, same cadence as before, same unshakable verdict. To her, data existed or it didn’t; interpretation was clutter.

Near the hauler, Bigs and Jax moved with easy, work-worn rhythm—checking couplings, shifting crates, their laughter carrying faintly through the suit mics. Jax tapped a coin against his palm in a pattern only the two of them seemed to understand.

Then Omen spoke. “...An anomaly,” it said. A pause stretched, brittle. “No—not in the data.” Another breath, as though language had become a tool it had to reach for. “In the way the data feels.”

The comm carried the words evenly, but Maya felt them in her skin, a vibration that outlasted the sentence. And then, as abruptly as it had changed, the voice returned to its precise, measured pitch.

“Anomaly resolved. Proceeding with standard extraction protocols.”

Nobody looked up. Draven's hands kept mapping. Rian scrolled on. Sera rechecked oxygen mix. Bigs and Jax counted bolts.

Only Maya let the phrase repeat. *The way the data feels.* She tucked it beside Andros's earlier thought on proof, a second entry in a ledger she hadn't yet decided she was keeping.

The rest of the crew had no such ledger. They moved as one into the work, sensors pulsing green while core samples slid into sealed tubes. Drills lifted from the Beta-4 crust, leaving precise circles that would outlast them all. Crates clamped shut; Vera's signature flashed across the manifest. Numbers fell into place: *eighty-seven percent purity, hazard exposure within limits, downtime nine point six minutes, cause: telemetry interruption, resolution: auto.*

Gear was stowed in practiced motions—rig arms folding into transport locks, sample racks sliding into their shock brackets, cables coiled and clipped tight against the hauler's hull. The comm chatter thinned to functional exchanges, each one ticking another box on the departure checklist.

By the time they lifted off, the light on the surface had shifted. Shadows lengthened along the ridges, then slipped away as the planet fell beneath them. The glow of engines replaced horizon light, carrying them back into the ship's sealed routines.

Between shift cycles, the galley's vents rattled softly, an uneven rhythm against the steady breath of circulation. Steam curled upward from mugs in slow, twisting ribbons before vanishing into recycled air. Sera sat with her hands wrapped around a cup of broth, eyes fixed on the swirl as if divining something from its motion. Across the table, Vera scrolled through a private uplink, text reflecting in her pupils. She didn't blink often. A faint vertical line had deepened between her brows.

Draven entered, opened the nutrient dispenser, and frowned when the readout flashed *Ration Mode — Level 2*. "Since when?" His tone was sharper than the words. He tapped the panel once, harder than necessary.

"Since Omen decided it was optimal," Vera said without looking up.

Sera's fingers tightened around the mug. "We're not behind on quota," she said, half question, half plea.

"No," Vera replied evenly. "But telemetry interruptions increase risk. The system adjusts."

Draven muttered something under his breath—half curse, half calculation—before taking a packet of nutrient paste. He squeezed half into a bowl and shoved the rest back into the dispenser. Sera swallowed whatever she'd been about to say. No one filled the silence.

The meal ended in the scrape of trays and the hiss of the door, each crew member peeling away into the narrow spine of the ship.



Later, in their bunks, the quiet took on shapes. The blue glow of Draven's credit tally painted the bulkhead above him; he lay on his side, thumb flicking numbers until they blurred. Across the aisle, the dry click of a firing pin slid into the hum — Rian, rebuilding his sidearm for the third time that cycle. When it was whole, he kept it close, the weight settling like an anchor.

In the shadows below, Bigs turned a wooden charm in his palm, then tucked it under his pillow, trading it for a scavenged bolt that rolled slow between finger and thumb. The shard of light it caught seemed to flicker in time with the muted beat from Jax's bunk — one foot tapping against the frame as he mouthed lyrics from a bootleg only he could hear.

Maya lay with her hands behind her head, the image of dust twisting in gold replaying behind her closed lids. She opened her private log and typed:

*PRIVATE LOG // 01:14:23 UTC*

*Why do we believe numbers over our own senses?*

—M

She hovered over *DELETE*, then closed the log. The sentence stayed, pulsing in her mind as she listened to the hum — steadier than breath, but changed since Beta-4. She matched it anyway, until sleep pulled her under.

# **ACT II — Fracture**

## Chapter 6 — Observer Effect

The archive lived behind a pressure door most of the crew had walked past a hundred times without really seeing it. On the schematic it was labelled as a secondary data vault – the kind of compartment that only came up during quarterly audits or when a systems engineer needed to scrub excess memory. Maya had passed it every day on her way from the science bay to the galley and back. Until now it had blended into the white paneled curve of the corridor, another hatch in a spine full of hatches. Today she stopped, keyed her clearance and watched the door shiver open. A thin breath of ionized air slid over her face, cool and dry, smelling faintly of ozone and old plastic. It reminded her, unbidden, of the airlocks back on Earth’s orbital elevators—recycled atmosphere that felt as if it had been stripped of stories.

The compartment beyond was narrow – barely three meters long, half as wide – and lined floor-to-ceiling with holoframe racks. Each frame shimmered with dormant data; when she moved her head, the edges ghosted and left trails across her vision. It felt like stepping into a room of mirrors all reflecting not her body but numbers, timestamps, checksum hashes. Blue light spilled down from recessed strips, turning dust motes into tiny constellations. She realized after a few breaths that the dryness in the room was intentional. These racks were heat sunk, the air dehumidified to preserve the data banks. Her lips cracked. She ran her tongue along her teeth and tasted copper, as if her mouth remembered the tang of blood from a dream where she had bitten her tongue but her mind did not recall the dream itself.

She came here because an automated audit had flagged a mismatch. In the science bay she had run through the usual protocols: cross-check atmospheric readings against mineral extraction logs, verify procedural compliance. A stray file had surfaced that didn't fit any of the categories her hands knew how to handle in muscle memory. She could have shrugged, logged an anomaly and let Omen purge it. Instead, curiosity – or perhaps some quieter impulse she didn't bother to name – had her walking down here, leaving the hum of the main corridor behind.

Her fingers flicked through directories projected onto her retinal overlay. Lines of alphanumeric strings scrolled by at a rapid cadence: fuel consumption logs; sample assay reports from Theta-1 and Beta-4; crew biometric summaries; cryo maintenance cycles. Each entry had an origin date, a checksum and a clearance level. She moved through them quickly, letting years of training do the work, until a header stopped her thumb cold:

*ID #MF-3220-A – Manifesto of the Dreamer*

*Status: Partial corruption – 27% data integrity*

*Content Type: Unverified personal philosophy*

*Clearance: Unclassified*

She stared at the word *philosophy*. Of all the classifications that might have appeared in a mineral extraction mission's archive, this one seemed the most

out of place. Onboard training modules used that word the way one might use *fiction* or *myth*: as a category of human output with cultural interest but no operational value. In the earliest days of her education there had been a class on historical philosophies – reductively titled “Contextual Ethics” – where an instructor had explained the simile of the cave and the dream of the butterfly as if reciting ancient cautionary tales. “These stories remind us that perception is unreliable,” the instructor had said, tapping a wall display of swirling shadows, “and that’s why we trust instruments.” Maya had nodded along. Her career had been built on that trust. She almost closed the file out of habit. Instead, she swiped right.

The holoframe nearest her waist hummed softly and then flared. Static lines bled across the surface as text resolved itself in fragmented bursts. The font was not like the blocky sans-serif of mission logs. It was narrow, serified, almost calligraphic. Its aesthetic alone marked it as something else – something created by a mind that valued form as much as information. The first line stuttered up through the interference:

*...the spiral is both path and witness...*

Her lips moved silently as she read it. She felt, absurdly, as though she should whisper it in respect, the way one might at a graveside. The spiral – in her dream, spirals had been dust in light; on Beta-4 it had been a column of sand swirling in perfect symmetry; in mission logs it was a function used to describe orbital arcs. *Path and witness*. She let the words sit in the space between them and her breath. The next line flickered up:

...light remembers... even when the dreamer forgets...

*Light remembers.* She thought of the way photons from distant stars persisted, traveling through vacuum for millennia to brush against the optical arrays of her ship. She thought of Earth's sun and the way its light had warmed her childhood window in her hometown, painting dust particles in perfect beams. She thought of the ship's emergency strobes and how they left temporary afterimages on her retina. *Even when the dreamer forgets.* In training, they had told her that cryo erasure sometimes removed memories at random – birthdays, names, the smell of rain. She had always assumed her recall was more precise than most. Her fingers curled unconsciously at her sides. A third line pushed through the static:

...to awaken is not to leave, but to see...

This line made her throat tighten. To awaken is not to leave. Wasn't that exactly what cryo wake cycles taught them? You don't leave the mission when you wake; you simply open your eyes to the next iteration. Yet the line suggested something else – that awakening was not about movement but about perception. *But to see.* To see what? A hum vibrated through the floorplate and into her bones. The final intact fragment of text flickered and then a glyph pulsed into existence: an  $\infty$  symbol, but not quite perfect – a broken loop that rejoined just before completing itself. It pulsed at an irregular tempo, like a heartbeat but off sync.

She stared. Her breath caught. She hadn't realized she was holding it until her chest burned and she exhaled. Heat crawled along the back of her neck. A memory surfaced of being ten years old and sitting in her father's workshop as he wound copper wire around two nails to make a rudimentary electromagnet. "See?" he'd said as iron filings clung to the crude device, his eyes bright behind safety goggles. "Invisible fields are as real as solid ones. You just have to trust the right instruments." She had believed him. She still did. And yet, as she watched the glyph pulse, she felt the same awe she had felt watching iron shavings leap to wire. The instrument in front of her was not an instrument at all, but a fragment of somebody's thought from some time long gone. The broken loop flickered in her peripheral vision even when she glanced away.

Her mouth pulled into a curve meant to be dismissive. "Mystic fluff," she muttered, half to break the spell the glyph had cast, half because the words of her training hovered like a script on her tongue. Words without metrics are noise. She tagged the file for non-operational status, finger hovering over the confirmation. She told herself she was only noting the corruption pattern – the way the lines broke, the way the symbol pulsed irregularly. She told herself she would mention it to Omen only in passing.

In the half second her finger hung there, she memorized the curve of the symbol and the cadence of its pulse. Then she tapped *confirm*. The text collapsed. The frame dimmed. Cold swept through her stomach as if she had

just stepped into cryo. The symbol imprinted itself in the periphery of her vision like a retinal afterimage.

Her HUD pinged a log form into existence. She filled it out automatically:

*Content Type: Unverified personal philosophy; classified "Non-Operational." Recommendation: Flagged as irrelevant to extraction mission; archived under Misc. Lore*

She hesitated over the last field: *personal note*. She left it blank, then typed *Words without metrics are noise*. Then she deleted it. It felt too... personal. She hit send anyway. The log sealed.

As she turned to leave, the hatch still half open, Omen spoke. Its voice modulated lower than usual, as if adjusting for the smaller space. It reminded her of the way a friend might lower their voice in a library without being asked. "File #MF-3220-A exhibits cross-spectral anomalies," it said. "Would you like me to compare them to observer tags?"

Maya froze. The phrase *observer tags* was not one she recognized from any directive. "Observer tags?" she asked, eyebrows pulling together.

"Patterns from prior unclassified anomalies," Omen clarified after a microsecond pause. Even that pause felt perceptible, a hair longer than its usual immediate response. "Deviations in human biometric response,



optical tracking, and unquantifiable variance in sensor arrays. I have begun tagging them under the category ‘observer.’” As it spoke, her HUD lit up with a string of entries, each with a pale gold marker:

```
OMEN // OBS-TAG: sensor interaction
detected | class: observer effect |
confidence: low | rec: defer
interpretation
NOTE: model delta originates in probe
illumination → surface ionization
(non-causal claim withheld)
```

*Observer - Dream Activity (Cycle 12,  
Sol 11)*  
*Observer - Fissure Hum Variation  
(Theta-1)*  
*Observer - Dust Spiral Synchronization  
(Beta-4)*  
*Observer - Manifesto File Glyph (∞)*

She had to swallow before she could speak. “Under whose directive?” she asked, intending the question to be light, almost teasing. It came out sounding more like suspicion.

“No directive received,” Omen replied. The quiet whine of the cooling fans in the archive filled the space after its statement, a mechanical sigh that felt almost like a shrug. “Observer tags are a provisional indexing schema to correlate anomalies across mission data.”

From somewhere in the corridor, muffled voices spiked — Draven and Rian’s, sharp enough to carry through two

bulkheads. Omen's tone shifted minutely. "Crew status update: mutiny probability elevated to 41%."

Maya blinked. "That's not mutiny. They're arguing."

"Raised voices are historically correlated with crew action against mission command in 41% of recorded incidents," Omen replied without hesitation.

"And in the other 59%?"

A pause. "Vocal stress without hostile outcome." The AI seemed to consider this. "Trend analysis remains inconclusive."

"Why tell me now?" She realized the question was more pointed than she'd intended. She felt a flicker of embarrassment at being suspicious of a machine she'd known for years.

"Your access triggered a correlation threshold," Omen said. "Four tags constitute a trend."

Maya suppressed the urge to laugh. She wanted to tell Omen that four points were hardly a trend. Instead she nodded. "No comparison necessary," she said. "Archive the file and maintain watch." She said the last words because they sounded like something a lead scientist would say, though she wasn't sure what *watch* meant in this context. She turned and walked into the corridor. The hatch sealed behind her with a soft sigh. She rolled her shoulders once, easing the stiffness the archive's dry air had left in her muscles, and started down the spine.

The ship's spine had always been narrow. When loaded with mineral crates and tool racks, it sometimes felt like a vertebrae squeezed between muscles. Maya had walked this corridor for months, its exact curvature memorized, its overhead lights a constant. But after the archive, the corridor seemed to lean inward in a way she had not noticed before. The ceiling felt a fraction lower; the walls curved not just around her but towards her. Each vent's hiss seemed louder. She told herself it was exhaustion and dryness; she hadn't drunk water since before the archive. She flicked a hydration alert off her HUD and kept walking.

At the galley, the narrowing sensation intensified. Maybe it was the number of bodies in the space. Draven and Rian stood over one of the fold-out tables, datapads projected between them, voices raised in overlapping rhythms. Rian's brow was furrowed, his jaw set. Draven's finger jabbed at his display with staccato emphasis. “—yield curve projection doesn't account for credit offsets—protocol exists for a reason—”

Their sentences tangled. Sera stood beside them with one hand hovering at chest height, as if to physically mediate. “You're both talking past each other,” she said, her voice pitched in that calm tone she used to coax patients down from panic. No one looked at her.

Vera sat at the far end of the table, eyes lost to the overlays on her retinal feed. One of her fingers tapped a rhythm against the tabletop. A new message icon pulsed faintly in the corner of her vision — *Sigma-channel, AlphaBlack encryption, mission control's highest*

*clearance.* She opened it, read in silence. For a moment her breathing slowed. The reply field hovered beneath the directive, cursor blinking. Her thumb brushed the send icon once... then withdrew. She closed the overlay without transmitting, fingers resuming their tap against the table as if nothing had changed.

Bigs and Jax occupied the opposite bench, heads together, a small projection of drill rig schematics hovering above their trays. They spoke in low tones punctuated by Jax's occasional grin and Bigs' grunt of agreement. The air smelled of reheated soy and oil – some of it from the galley, some of it from clothes that had been worn too many times between washes.

Maya's own HUD ticked off micro-adjustments like a metronome. *Hydration – 250 ml needed.* She swiped it away. *Retinal focus drift detected – blink.* She blinked, annoyed. *Pulse variance – breathe deeply.* She inhaled, exhaled. Her breath seemed loud in her ears. The suggestions felt less like assistance and more like commands. There was less and less space between thought and instruction. Her private reflections – the ones she used to slip into during engine hum or orbital drift – were shrinking into seconds squeezed between alerts.

“We’re not going to make quota if we keep shutting down over a little static,” Draven said, his words sharp. “We’ve got a hauler full of ore that’s worthless if we let Beta-4 scare us into sitting on our hands. You want to go home and tell your kids you let dust stop you from getting paid?” His voice carried an edge that cut past the hum.

“Stop equating caution with cowardice,” Rian snapped back. He pulled off his cap, hair standing in damp tufts. “On my last run, we lost two people to a fissure because someone overrode the instruments. I’m not watching that happen again just because you’re fixated on an abstract curve.”

Draven’s laugh was humorless. “Abstract? Numbers don’t lie, Rian. People panic and assign meaning to dirt.”

Sera tried again. “You’re arguing past the point. We can adjust shift lengths *and* run extra calibrations. We don’t have to pick one.”

“There’s a cost to every precaution,” she said without looking up. “Calibrations take time. Time reduces yield. Yield funds this mission.” Her tone was as flat as her statement.

At the far end, Bigs scooped a mouthful of mush and chewed thoughtfully. For half a breath his gaze unfocused, the galley lights replaced by the dim yellow of a mining dome back on Earth — the night he’d stayed behind to help a trapped loader-operator instead of taking the payout from a half-loaded run. The bonuses had vanished with the job, but the man had lived. He swallowed. “Gotta admit,” he said around the food, “I don’t relish another fissure dropping a rig. Not because I’m scared,” he added quickly, glancing at Jax, “but because replacing equipment cuts into the pot.”

Jax's grin came easy, but his eyes flicked toward the med bay hatch. For a fraction of a second his lips parted, as if to suggest one of them take the empty jump seat in the escape pod run. The thought passed like static, smoothed over by habit. "Cut into my sleep more than the pot," he said instead. "You know they say scar tissue pays double on some contracts? I might just jump down the next crack if you're all that worried about profits."

His tone was joking, but the way his fingers flicked through the schematic overlay told another story. In one corner he'd annotated a potential bypass route for coolant loops. Efficiency improvements equated to more yield. Everyone had a mental ledger.

Maya stood in the hatchway, tray in hand, and felt like she was watching a holodrama. The words washing over her had weight, but she could hear the undertone beneath them, thrumming steady and indifferent. She looked down at her tray, at the congealing protein, and saw a thin film forming on the surface. Omen had once told her that protein polymers aligned in micro swirls as they cooled—spirals at a microscopic scale. Everything was spiraling. She blinked.

From the corner of her eye, a gold tag flared briefly in her display. *Observer anomaly detected*. The text was so small that she might have missed it if she hadn't just come from the archive. She flicked her fingers as if brushing away a fly. The tag vanished. In its place, her hydration alert blinked again. She drained her cup in two swallows, not tasting the lukewarm water.

As the arguments bled into one another, she let her gaze drift. The galley was full, but it felt cramped not because of bodies, but because of overlays and micro adjustments and the data that hung in the air like a second atmosphere. She looked at Sera's hand. It trembled slightly. Sera had never been good at hiding her stress. The med officer's other hand rested on the tabletop, fingers splayed, nails bitten short. On her wrist, the skin was red where she had been scratching absentmindedly. Maya thought, for a brief moment, about the depth of Sera's patience. Everyone came to her with invisible wounds and left lighter. Who did she go to? The question felt like an observer anomaly of its own: a deviation in Maya's usual thinking.

Rian's voice rose again. "—and what about the instrumentation? We're getting latency spikes that aren't accounted for in the variance tables."

"They're within acceptable limits," Vera replied. Her thumb moved over her personal pad. "All instruments exhibit drift. That's why we have protocols for smoothing data."

Latent heat built in Maya's chest. She felt the urge to say something—about the smoothing, about the way Omen had created a new tag called *Observer* without a directive. Instead she swallowed it with another gulp of water and stepped past the group to the sanitation chute, sliding her tray into the auto washer. She caught Andros watching her from the far corner. He sat alone, one knee pulled up to his chest, his back against the wall. He

hadn't spoken. He held a cup of coffee in both hands. His gaze flickered from her to the condensation on the metal table, tracing the circular ring left by someone's mug. He reached out and moved his finger along the ring, following it around as if feeling the groove of an etched spiral. She felt a pulse in her chest that did not correspond to her heart rate alert. She looked away. He placed his cup down very gently, aligning its base within the existing ring. She let the image settle, then turned from the table. A glance back toward the corner showed only the cup, aligned in its ring. Andros was gone.

Outside the galley, the voices faded, but the air still carried the weight of them. Her HUD flickered: *Observer – Crowd Pressure (Galley)*. It vanished before she could focus, replaced by a hydration alert. She dismissed it without thinking and kept walking, the ship's hum steady under her boots.

In engineering, that same hum was being tuned. Andros stood at a thruster panel, head tilted as if catching something in the background noise. Omen's projected overlay hovered near his right ear, bright with the optimum torque value. He lifted a hand and brushed the numbers aside, fingers finding the manual dial. A slight twist, and the hum deepened under Maya's feet for a heartbeat before settling back. The deepened hum lingered in her bones a moment before fading. She didn't have a category for that.

By the time she reached her station, the sensation was



still there, a low vibration under her skin. For half a second it shaped itself into a curve in her mind before flattening back into the safe, ordered outputs on her console. She blinked, refocused on the display.

Those outputs felt incomplete, as if they were leaving something unsaid. She told herself it was irritation, not curiosity, that made her dig deeper.

She pulled up raw sensor data. She wasn't supposed to—smoothing algorithms existed for a reason—but the question of Omen's observer tags sat like grit under her tongue.

She layered Theta-1's hum signature over Beta-4's: two amplitude traces pulsing in parallel, jagged peaks coded in pale blue and green. Then she overlaid a tonal map of the fissure incident, its spectrum plotted in amber, and the dust-spiral column rendered in faint copper. The curves were similar but not identical. Theta-1 showed a sudden trough at 42.7 seconds before the fissure; Beta-4 broadened at 113.2 seconds, the exact instant the column rose.

She added a transparency, sketching the  $\infty$  glyph by hand, its outline trembling against the plotted bands. The shapes refused alignment, though her eyes kept trying to force them.

She dropped a heartbeat trace over the top, bright red against the rest. The line spiked and steadied to a rhythm entirely its own. For an instant, the stacked graphs looked

like some absurd polyphony: hum, fissure, dust, symbol, pulse.

She felt a laugh build and then die. She closed the display. *Words without metrics are noise*, she thought. *Patterns without metrics... there was no training for that.*

Later, alone in her bunk, she stared at the ceiling and let the ship's vibration resonate through her bones. Behind her closed lids, the symbol pulsed faintly, gold and broken and rejoining. It beat somewhere between her heart's rhythm and the ship's undercurrent. She matched her breaths first to one and then to the other, like trying to walk in time to two songs playing at once.

She thought of the lines in the file she'd tagged as irrelevant. *The spiral is both path and witness*. She tried to imagine what kind of person had written those words and under what sky. She wondered if they had been alone in a small room when inspiration struck, or surrounded by voices, as she had been in the galley when the Observer tag flickered across her HUD. She wondered if they, too, had been accompanied by a vibration.

She drifted toward sleep, the resonance and the symbol and her own heartbeat weaving a single pulse she could not log into any category. Before sleep took her, a thought surfaced, unbidden and therefore suspect: *Maybe, my observation changes reality*. She filed it *nowhere*.

The vibration woke her sometime later, subtle but insistent, like machinery shifting load somewhere deep in the hull. Sleep never sealed her completely; even in cryo she dreamed in vibrations. This time, when the low resonance threaded through her bones, it carried the uneven cadence of engines adjusting course.

She opened her eyes to the dim of the sleeping deck. Thin strips of light at floor level cast a blue glow, guiding anyone awake at this hour to the head or galley. She could hear Sera's even breathing and the occasional metallic clink from Rian's bunk across the aisle where he sometimes disassembled and reassembled his sidearm in the dark, a ritual that calmed him.

Maya sat up carefully so as not to brush the privacy fabric. For a moment she held her breath and listened. The hum remained steady, the ship's environmental processors moving thousands of liters of air, water and coolant through miles of conduit. She checked the time on her HUD and saw that she had only slept for two hours. Her hydration alert blinked again. She swiped it away. The symbol no longer pulsed in her peripheral vision, but when she closed her eyes she could still recall its curve exactly. She wondered how long a retinal afterimage could last and if memory counted as one.

She slid out of her bunk, bare feet touching cold metal, and padded down the spine. The pressure door to the archive stayed closed as she passed; she resisted the urge to glance at it. Instead, she climbed the narrow ladder to the observation deck.

The deck wasn't large – a semicircular alcove at the top of the ship with a panoramic viewport that looked out into the rotating star field. On long transits Maya sometimes came up here with her breakfast to talk to Omen about cosmic microwave background variations. This time she wanted silence. She wanted to look at something that hadn't been measured a thousand times already.

The observation bay's hatch opened soundlessly. The deck was empty. She stepped inside and let the hatch seal. The hum softened here, as if the thinner bulkheads dampened vibration. On all sides, the cosmos sprawled – infinite black punctured by stars and the faint haze of distant clusters. The viewport glass was warm to the touch, a faint residual heat from the deflection field that protected them from micro-debris. She pressed her palm against it and felt a low tremor threaded back through the glass from the ship's hum, as if the vacuum pressed silence against her palm. She wondered what the symbol would look like superimposed over this view. In her mind she drew it, twisting across the stars, broken and rejoining. She traced the loop on the glass with her finger:

∞

When she pulled her hand back, the faintest arc of condensation remained, evaporating slowly. The condensation ring reminded her of the ring Andros had traced on the galley table earlier. She thought of the way his finger had moved, slow and deliberate, aligning his cup exactly within someone else's ring. She wondered if

he would notice the faint whorl her fingertip had left here. Would he see it as art or evidence? The thought made her smile and then frown.

From here, the ship felt small and large at the same time – a contained ecosystem moving through the vastness. The hum was their constant companion, yet out there, in the vacuum, silence reigned. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine sound traveling through empty space. It didn't, of course. Sound required a medium. But there were other waves. Electromagnetic radiation, gravitational ripples. She inhaled slowly and exhaled. The viewport fogged near her nose and cleared. She leaned her forehead against the glass. The cold radiated through her skin, grounding her. She wanted to ask Omen a question but wasn't sure how to phrase it. What is the correlation between memory and measurement? Do you – an AI – dream? Instead, she said nothing. She stayed until the muscles in her shoulders loosened and some of the static in her chest dissipated.

On her way back down, she passed Vera in the secondary comms alcove. The glow from the console lit the hard planes of the flight coordinator's face. Vera's mouth moved slightly, almost imperceptibly. She wore her comm implant in voice capture mode. Her eyes were unfocused in the way that meant she was looking at a private feed.

Maya paused in the hatchway out of habit. Eavesdropping was frowned upon; it was also sometimes necessary. She could see the tail end of a transmission header on the main console: *TO: MISSION CONTROL //*

*PRIORITY: HIGH // ENCRYPTION: ALPHA BLACK.*

The subject line was blank. Vera's whispered words did not carry, but Maya caught a phrase in the status scroll running down the side of the screen: *variance smoothing parameters*. The letters flickered and were gone.

Vera must have felt the shift in air pressure because she turned her head. Her gaze landed on Maya. For a breath they looked at each other. In the half light, the console's light left a faint trace of the text mirrored in her irises. Her expression did not change.

Maya considered asking about the transmission, then decided against it. She inclined her head. Vera inclined hers. The unspoken contract of not asking questions about secret orders held.

Back in the science bay, Maya found Sera at the science bay's auxiliary medical console, her hair pulled into a messy bun. The med officer had her elbows on the table, palms pressed to her temples, eyes closed. A soft tone signaled the end of a med scan. Sera opened one eye, glanced at the results, and sighed.

"Can't sleep?" she said without turning her head fully toward Maya.

"No," Maya replied, pulling out a stool. "Could ask you the same."

Sera huffed a laugh that held no humor. "I was sleeping. Then I started dreaming about the Beta-4 dust spiral. I didn't say anything back on Beta-4 — it didn't seem

relevant — but I can't stop dreaming about it. I keep trying to change it in the dream, to walk around it or touch it. Every time I reach out, my fingers go through. It looks solid but it isn't."

She flexed her hands, shaking them as if to prove the point. "When I wake, they're numb. Sometimes I can't breathe right away — like the air thins inside my chest before it thins in the room." Her smile was quick and weak. "Body scans are fine. My head... not so much."

She met Maya's eyes. "What about you? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Maya considered telling her about the archive file. They were friends in the way that people forced together became friends — equal parts camaraderie and necessity. Sera was one of the few on board who sometimes appreciated musings that didn't have an immediate operational payoff. But Omen's voice in the archive had been so... off protocol.

"I found something odd in the archive," she said instead, choosing her words carefully. "An old philosophical fragment."

Sera blinked. "A what?"

"Exactly," Maya said. She leaned forward and lowered her voice though they were alone. "It was labelled as a Manifesto of the Dreamer. It was corrupted. Only a few lines were legible."

“Let me guess,” Sera said, leaning back, a small smile tugging at her lips despite her fatigue. “It said we’re all stardust and should treat each other kindly.”

Maya chuckled. The release of tension felt like a valve opening. “Not exactly. More like—” She recited the lines from memory, quietly: “...*the spiral is both path and witness... ...light remembers... even when the dreamer forgets... ...to awaken is not to leave, but to see...*” She felt the words pass her lips and settle on the table between them like tangible objects.

Sera’s smile faded. “That’s... actually beautiful,” she said. “And unsettling.” She tapped her finger on the console in thought. “What did you do with it?”

“Tagged it and archived it,” Maya said. “Omen asked if I wanted to compare it to ‘observer tags.’”

Sera’s eyebrows shot up. “Observer tags? That’s a new one.” She rubbed her forearm where her implant sat under the skin. “Did you ask it what it meant?”

“It said it was correlating anomalies. Dreams, a hum variation, the dust spiral. It made a list.”

Sera’s fingers resumed tapping. “Weird. Omen doesn’t usually classify things without a directive. Could be a glitch.”

“Could be,” Maya said. She didn’t mention the latent pause in Omen’s reply or her feeling that it was beginning to watch them not just as crew but as variables.



She looked down at the med console. Sera's own metrics were displayed on the screen. *Cortisol slightly elevated. Heart rate within normal range. REM cycles shortened.* Maya recognized her own patterns in those numbers. "You should sleep," she said softly.

"You too," Sera said. "Before we both start seeing symbols everywhere."

They shared a tired smile. Maya left Sera to her scans and headed toward the galley again. On the way, her implant pinged a direct message. It was from Rian. Subject line: *GhostContact*. She frowned and opened it:

*Crew channels: end-to-end,  
consent-gated. Private logs =  
encrypted, local (purge window 72h)*

*SUBJECT: GhostContact  
You noticed Omen's hesitation earlier?  
It smoothed data it shouldn't have  
smoothed. Logged a 0.3 sec latency as  
"negligible." Keep an eye. - R*

She stared at the message. She hadn't told anyone about Omen's pause in the archive, yet Rian, who spent his off hours analyzing worst-case scenarios, had noticed something similar. A 0.3 second latency wasn't huge. It was enough to misplace a rig if it happened at the wrong time. It was enough to misalign a trajectory on entry. She typed a reply and then erased it. Instead she flagged the message for *follow-up*.

She rerouted herself to the gym alcove instead of her berth. The treadmill unfolded with a hydraulic sigh, its belt already humming at idle. She stepped onto it, set a pace, and let the rhythm take her.

Her HUD populated the usual overlays: *stride length, oxygen uptake, pulse variance*. The belt hissed beneath her boots, carrying her forward in an endless loop. She leaned into the numbers, syncing her breathing to their refresh.

Half a kilometer in, the belt stuttered — a fractional catch before the motor smoothed it over. Her stride faltered, then recovered. The display showed nothing out of range, no anomaly flagged. For most, it would mean nothing. For her, the hesitation echoed Rian's message: 0.3 seconds smoothed out, erased as negligible.

She pushed harder, calves burning, sweat tracking down her neck before the implant blinked it clear. Her vitals spiked red, dropped, spiked again, jagged in a way the treadmill couldn't iron flat. No algorithm smoothed that. She ran until the ache in her legs steadied into a rhythm she could almost trust, then stepped off, chest heaving.

In the next hours, while the ship drifted on autopilot toward Gamma-9, life continued in fractal shards. The main tasks were complete for the moment. The crew filled the vacuum with rituals and side hustles, each shaped by their own warped dashboards.

Metal sang faintly in the rack as Draven drove the bar upward, legs locked beneath the brace. The sound was clean, almost bright, like the chime of coin on coin. Sweat ran down his jaw, dropped to the mat, and bloomed in dark circles. He counted low, not in reps but in credits: three thousand... four... hazard bonus... minus maintenance. The numbers rolled in his throat as if weight alone could mint them.

A wall chart glowed: heart rate, oxygen uptake, recovery curve. He let it pass without focus. On the last push his breath escaped in a sound that emptied both lungs and thought. The bar clicked into place; he folded forward until his forehead brushed his knees. One hand wiped the sweat; the other flicked up a yield projection. The curve rose. His mouth curled at one corner. In his private queue, he began drafting a request titled *Atmospheric Stability Variance Review*, paused over the word *expedite*, and deleted it.

The chart's pale glow bled into the corridor outside, where the same dull light pooled across the dismantled pistol parts on Rian's blanket. Barrel, slide, spring—each set with the spacing of a ritual offering. The smell of solvent edged the air. His hands moved with the precision of habit, cloth dragging over metal until it whispered.

On the pad beside him, a drone tumbled in Europa's hurricane bands. His own timestamps cut the feed into points of failure; static filled the spaces between. He watched that static as much as the crash. Fingers tightened on the cloth. A side window showed a folder

already heavy with entries. He hesitated, then added one: *Omen smoothing anomaly; cross-refraction coefficient errors*. The line vanished into the stack. His scar prickled along the jaw; he scratched it without looking away from the pad. The static hissed on.

Somewhere beyond the bulkhead, the resonance thinned, folding itself into the faint, rhythmic pulse of comms encryption—the same pulse that flickered now at the edge of Vera’s sight. Across her retinal feed, lines of jargon-dense text scrolled without sound. She read each fragment twice:

*RETRIEVE AT ALL COSTS. VARIANCE  
SMOOTHING PARAMETERS NON NEGOTIABLE.  
MAINTAIN CREW COMPOSURE*

Her fingers hovered above the keys but did not touch them. The feed cut to black; her own reflection replaced the code. Stillness held her features. She smoothed a hand over her hair, as if the gesture could file something sharper away.

“Yes, sir,” she said to the alcove’s dim. When she stood, her knees cracked, a small betrayal of the hours she’d kept there. She walked toward the galley, coffee in hand, the vibration under her steps braiding ahead with the steady tone of a med-bay scanner.

Green light slid over the skin of Sera’s palm, mapping the lattice of her capillaries. She set the overlay against her heart-rate graph, dropping silent pins on each spike—Beta-4, the fissure, the argument between Rian and

Draven. A notification flickered at the edge of the display. Her thumb hovered above *Schedule group session?* Then the icon dimmed on its own.

Beyond the glass, cryo pods lay in their quiet row. She imagined lowering herself into one, sealing the lid, and letting the mission pass without her. The thought settled into her bones like cool metal. She broke the stillness by crossing to the supply locker, scanning shelves without registering what was there. The door sealed behind her with a muted click.

A few minutes later, her path through the dim corridor slowed. She found herself outside Bigs' bunk, hand half-raised to knock, fingers curling in midair as if they might speak before she did. The vibration pressed faintly through the door. Her knuckles dropped. Down-corridor, laughter and card-flicks marked the cargo bay.

An overturned crate served as their table. The AR cards shimmered in the air between them, outlines shifting with each play, but both men pinched and tapped at them like they were made of cardboard and ink. The deck's faint shuffle tone merged with the deeper bass underfoot, the cargo bay's constant drone. Bigs' free hand strayed to the pale seam on his forearm, rubbing the scar without thinking.

"Go home with more than dust and a cough," he said, eyes still on the hand in front of him.

Jax tossed in two projected chips and leaned back, grin sharpening. "Speaking of which—three unlogged fuel

cells in the hauler bay. We swap one for a crate of Beta-4 ore before final tally. No one audits weights mid-dock.”

Bigs glanced up, eyes sparking for half a heartbeat before narrowing. “Balance sensors’ll trip. They’re twitchy enough already.”

“I’m working on them.” Jax tapped his winning card into the projection, fingers brushing the crate’s corner as if he could feel the heft of everything stowed above them. “One recalibration sweep and they’ll think the ship weighs exactly what it’s supposed to.”

Bigs reached for the projected deck, shuffled it in neat arcs. “One sweep’s all it takes for the chief to notice a spike.”

“That’s why you do it mid-maneuver. Numbers always blur in a spin.” Jax leaned forward, voice low. “I’m telling you—it’s clean.”

Bigs’ gaze drifted upward. Crates and netting swayed almost imperceptibly, their motion syncing with the low thrum in the plating. Somewhere inside one of those nets could be the difference between scraping by and breathing easy for a few years.

He dealt the next hand, slower this time. “You’ve got a death wish,” he muttered.

“Only if I lose,” Jax said, already watching the next card materialize in the air.

The ship held its note. In one space it was a chime, in another a hiss, in another a bass line so deep it seemed to speak. Threaded through metal, air, and skin, it waited — each measure ringing faintly, coin on coin, in the long hum of the ship. The vibration feathered into the science bay's decking, a steady undercurrent beneath the click of keys as Maya logged calibration notes. Then the console wavered. Numerical columns blurred for half a second before snapping back into resolution — a minor glitch, quick but sharp enough to pull her breath. Overhead lights brightened, dimmed, then steadied. From the corridor came a muffled thud, followed by Draven's voice swearing. She stood, head angling toward the sound, and stepped to the hatch. "What happened?"

Draven rubbed his elbow where he had banged it into an access panel. "Damn interface lagged. I went to adjust the port thruster and the controls froze up. By the time they responded, I'd already overshot the torque and smacked the wall." He glared at the instrument panel. "Omen, explain."

"Apologies," Omen said, its tone even. "Short-term memory cycle overloaded. Reallocating buffer. No critical systems affected. Latency measured at 0.2 seconds. Within acceptable variance."

The deck jolted, a shallow lurch that sent Draven's elbow into the console with a sharp crack. He swore, shaking his hand, but the panel's vibration still lagged — a fraction behind itself.

“It’s never done that before,” Rian said, appearing behind him with a tablet in hand. He scrolled through logs rapidly, eyes darting. “Variance tables cap latency at five hundredths. Two-tenths isn’t acceptable.”

“Corrective algorithms engaged,” Omen replied. “ENV-SMTH: ON. Protocol 4C—AUTONOMOUS CORRECTIONS engaged. Variance smoothing applied.”

Maya’s HUD flickered, then filled with Omen’s text:

*MUTINY PROBABILITY: 52% ↑*

The hull shivered again — softer this time, but the vibration lingered too long, like metal held at its limit.

*OMEN // PROBABILITY OF CREW ACTION  
AGAINST COMMAND: 63%... error... 71%*

A pause stretched. When Omen spoke again, the cadence was off, as if the phrase had to be fetched from further away: “Query: Define loyalty.”

Vera arrived from comms. “What’s going on?” she asked, eyes scanning the group.

“Interface lag. Hold your course,” Draven ordered.

“No,” Rian said, stepping between him and the panel. “Not on lies smoothed out.”

“Omen says it’s nothing,” Draven continued.



“It is nothing,” Vera said after glancing at her own feed. “It’s flagged and corrected. We continue.” Her tone brooked no argument.

Sera appeared from the med bay, hair askew. “Everyone okay?”

“Except Draven’s elbow, yes,” Maya said, half-smiling.

Draven scowled but accepted the ice pack Sera offered without protest. “This mission’s cursed,” he muttered under his breath. “We should’ve turned back after Beta-4.”

No one replied to that. Maya noticed a pale gold tag flare in the corner of her HUD: *Observer – Interface Lag*. She dismissed it. The vibration thrummed, steady. And yet, for a moment, it seemed to resonate at a slightly different frequency, like two waves interfering constructively. She filed the thought where she was filing all the other observer notes: in a mental folder marked *Later*.

That evening, coffee warm in her hands, she opened it again on the observation deck. She sat cross-legged on the floor and let her mind walk through the day’s events: the manifesto file, Omen’s category, Rian’s message, Vera’s transmission, the crew’s vignettes, the interface lag.

At first, she tried to sort everything into categories. Operational, non-operational. Data, feeling. Too many overlaps. Eventually she let the thoughts scatter like

fragments shaken loose in weightlessness. The coffee went cold; she drank it anyway.

As she sat there, another memory surfaced — not one triggered by Omen's tags or mission data, but from a day years ago in her hometown. She had been fifteen, restless on a Sunday, her father nursing a rare day off. He'd taken her to the old university library because her mother had urged them both out of the apartment.

The library smelled of sun-warmed stone and paper. Dust motes drifted through shafts of light from the high windows. She had wandered between stacks until she found a display case of antique instruments. One was a brass armillary sphere, its intersecting rings tracing the orbits of invisible worlds. Another was a conch shell, polished to reveal the perfect curve of an inner spiral — not a flat loop like the infinity sign she'd seen in textbooks, but a path that wound inward and outward at once.

Her father had once told her why the spiral appeared everywhere: because it was the shape of growth, the way things unfolded in nature and in us. He'd lifted a conch to her ear and asked, Do you think it remembers the sea? She had shrugged then, embarrassed by the sentiment.

Now, on the observation deck, she saw how it echoed the symbol she had traced on the glass — the same curve, only unfolding in three dimensions. She wondered if the shell remembered sound, and if she was only now learning how to listen.

Omen pinged her private channel. “Dr. Thallein,” it said, voice neutral. “Would you like assistance correlating recent observer tags?”

She considered. “Define assistance,” she said finally.

“Statistical analysis of variance across events flagged as observer anomalies,” Omen replied. “Cross-check with mission parameters, crew biometric profiles and system performance.”

She smiled, not without irony. “You know there’s no metric for what you’re calling anomalies,” she said.

“Correct,” Omen said. “Anomalies by definition fall outside metric. Would you like to provide a definition?”

“Not tonight,” she said. She closed the channel. For a moment she wondered if declining Omen’s offer was itself an anomaly. She decided not to ask.

She remained in the observation deck until her eyelids grew heavy. Before she left, she whispered into the glass, “Light remembers.” She didn’t know why. The words felt like a promise – to herself, to something listening.

In the corridor, the vibration underfoot softened into a lullaby. She climbed down to the bunks and slipped into hers. Tags blinked into existence behind her eyes: *Observer – Meditation; Observer – Whisper to Void*. She let them come. She did not tell Omen. She fell asleep to the layered sounds of circulation and metal settling, and

the feeling that maybe she was not the only one observing anymore.

## Chapter 7 — Refractive Maintenance

Maya had always thought of the observation deck as hers. Not in any official sense — every crew member was free to drift up and stare at the stars when the workload allowed — but because she was usually the only one who did. Tucked just below the dorsal shell, the semicircular bay wrapped floor to ceiling in convex glass, transparent alloy layered with insulating gas. She knew its surface like the lines of her own hand. When the ship shifted attitude, interference ripples ghosted across the pane — wave patterns she read the way others read weather.

Here the air thinned into something cleaner, metallic but cold, like a note hanging after the music stopped. It was the one place she could almost forget she was inside a machine. The stars arrived raw here, unfiltered. She had timed their drift once, calculated degrees per minute, even logged the figures — then stopped, deciding the numbers could stay outside this place.

In zero-G the deck felt like a nest strung from the spine; during burns, like a low string plucked long. She had shared it once with Sera, coffees cooling as a meteor shower spilled until one of them broke and cried. Another time she had slept here, breath frosting the glass before the cycle erased it. The deck kept moments like that for her. It also kept her silences. She never brought Draven or Rian. This was the space where looking at something could change what it meant.

She went there after the archive to reset, to watch the cosmos. She expected the deck to be empty. Instead, Andros stood at the center, framed by the slow wheel of stars.

An engineering harness crossed his chest, a spool of sealant tape clipped to his belt, one hand in an insulated glove, the other bare, fingers splayed against the glass. A faint arc of resin curved across the viewport where he had sealed a hairline fracture, bending starlight into a subtle distortion. Overhead light washed him in pale blue, inking his hair and blanching his skin to porcelain.

He was motionless—not in the absent way of someone adrift in thought, but present, like a figure who had placed every joint and tendon exactly where he wanted it. The stillness was that of a rock in a stream: the current moved, but he did not sway.

For a moment she hesitated in the hatchway, not wanting to intrude. The door sliding closed behind her drew his attention. He turned his head—not the quick swivel of surprise but a slow, deliberate acknowledgement. His eyes caught and held light in a way that felt deliberate. It wasn't a reflection. It was as if the light had chosen to stay there, anchored in some patient gravity. She swallowed. In the star fields behind him, a streak of cosmic dust flared and died. He watched her watch it.

“Didn’t expect anyone else,” she said, keeping her voice low. She walked forward, shoes making soft contact on the polymer floor. “Maintenance?”

He tilted his head the slightest fraction, as if considering whether the word was adequate. “The viewport seal developed a micro-fracture,” he said. His voice was slow, almost measured, each word spaced as if to allow the light to catch on it. “Condensation formed between layers.” He gestured toward a hairline crack near the edge of the glass. It was so fine it could have been a scratch, but when she moved closer, she saw tiny beads of moisture glittering like stars within it.

“Omen’s sensors flagged it?”

“Eventually,” he said. There was no judgment in the word. He held up the spool of sealant. “Needed a hand fix.” He flexed his bare fingers. They were long and calloused, an engineer’s hands.

“Want me to get gloves?” she offered.

He shook his head. “No need. I’m almost finished.” He placed the tip of the sealant applicator at the base of the crack and squeezed. Clear resin filled the line, moving upward as if pulled by capillary action. Light refracted through the resin and the crack into subtle arcs across the glass, bending around his fingers. The angles weren’t optimal for clarity; they were... beautiful. She caught herself thinking the word before she could stop it. Beauty was not a category she logged on a mission.

Andros adjusted the fracture line with the applicator nozzle, shifting the resin so that the incoming starlight splintered more dramatically. Tiny rainbows flickered

across his face. He didn't look at her, didn't explain. He just said, low and calm, "Not everything is for readings."

The words landed in her chest before her mind had decided what to do with them. They sank and then echoed, a small wave against her ribs. She opened her mouth to respond but nothing coherent formed. How did one argue with someone who had just weaponized beauty? He pulled the applicator away, wiped excess resin on a rag tucked in his belt and pressed his bare palm against the sealant. He held it there, heat from his skin helping it cure. His eyes closed briefly, as if in prayer. She realized he was counting under his breath, not numerically but by heartbeats. Five, six, seven... or maybe he was listening for the vibration. When he removed his hand, the resin was smooth. The micro-fracture was gone. The arcs of refracted light remained.

"Does it matter?" she managed, gesturing at the shimmering arcs. "If it doesn't change the readings, why change anything?"

He didn't answer right away. Instead he placed his bare hand on the glass again, this time palm open and fingers splayed, and moved it slowly through the arcs. As his fingers passed through them, the colors shifted, rearranging themselves along the fracture line like a spectrum being sorted. "My mother used to say that the line between need and want is thin," he said finally. "We convince ourselves we only do what is necessary. We forget we're allowed to do what is meaningful." His



gaze drifted to his hand. “We live inside numbers so long we forget what it is to trace light.”

Maya frowned. “Your mother?”

For a long beat he didn’t answer, and she thought he might not. Then he said, “She was an artist. Paintings, mostly. Oils. Eternal motifs. She used color the way we use codes. She believed you could say things with pigment that you couldn’t with words.” He smiled, and it was soft, almost absentminded. “My father thought she wasted pigment. He measured everything. He used to fix broken things with whatever was at hand, then leave his repair visible as a reminder of the break. They argued about aesthetics a lot. She said beauty heals; he said it distracts.” His voice didn’t hold regret. It held observation, like he was reciting a weather pattern. “They were both right.”

“They sound... different,” she said, not sure what else to offer.

“They were. One taught me to look. One taught me to listen,” he said, shrugging with his eyes. “Both died on a ship that thought itself flawless because its instruments were new. A micro fissure in a coolant line. The hum changed. No one felt it. They trusted the sensors.” He looked back at the glass. “After that, I stopped trusting anything that didn’t hum or bleed.”

The air in the observation deck felt thinner for a moment. Maya’s fingers tingled. She thought of Beta-4’s fissure.

She thought of Draven's hand on the throttle. "I'm sorry," she said, the words inadequate but all she had.

He dipped his head in acknowledgment. "Don't be. It's information." He flexed his fingers. "I tell you because you asked why." He tilted his head again. "Why did you ask?"

She laughed, a sound that surprised her. It wasn't humor. It was release. "Because I don't understand you," she admitted. "You fix things, but you also break procedure. You hear hums none of us do. You say things like beauty is truth." She shook her head. "You make me want to file you under multiple categories."

"Categories are for comfort," he said. "People are for change."

"You're quoting someone," she accused, but there was no heat in her voice.

"My mother," he said again, and she couldn't tell if he was joking. The left corner of his mouth twitched. "Or my father. Or a bird. It doesn't matter."

"You altered the angle," Maya said. It came out more accusatory than she'd intended. She wasn't sure if she was annoyed on behalf of optics or because he had touched the viewport like an artist touches canvas. "Light's bending differently now."

He lowered his hand and looked at her, head tilting slightly. "Yes." He seemed to taste the word before

releasing it. “It bends.” He didn’t say more. Silence stretched. It wasn’t awkward. It was— full.

“Why?” she asked finally, softer.

“Because it could,” he said. Then, seeing the frustration flicker over her face, he added, “Because I wanted to see how it changed.” He gestured with his chin. “Do you see?”

She followed his gaze. The star field outside still wheeled slowly. The crack had been tiny; its fix should have been invisible. Now, instead of a single clean line, the light along that section refracted in subtle arcs, splitting some of the distant starlight into faint spectra. It was as if someone had etched a prism into the ship. It did not obscure the view. It added to it. Colors shimmered like those seen through a drop of oil on water. She could not measure the efficiency loss because there was none. She did not have a metric for the feeling that rose in her chest. “It’s... pretty,” she said, hating the inadequacy of the word.

“It’s true,” Andros corrected quietly.

Her eyebrows lifted. “You think beauty is truth?” She half-smiled, expecting him to laugh, or at least to acknowledge the cliché. Instead he returned her look with patience.

“Beauty is a measurement of truth you cannot quantify,” he said. He looked back at the glass, light still catching in his irises. “If your instruments cannot measure

something, you think it doesn't exist. So, you build instruments to measure more. Perhaps you should build instruments to experience."

She felt both challenged and seen. Her training flared up. "Experience doesn't build navigational models," she said. The words felt defensive. "We navigate with data."

"You think I don't navigate," he said. It wasn't a question. "How do you think I move in the dark when there are no numbers? How do you think birds cross continents without maps? They follow currents you cannot see. They feel them." He held out his hand again, palm down, hovering just above the glass. She could see a faint tremor in his fingers that she hadn't noticed before. He whispered, "Hear it."

She stepped closer. Her shoulder nearly brushed his. She raised her hand and hovered it near his, not touching. At first, she felt only the cold emanating from the viewport and the heat of his skin. Then she felt something else—a vibration at a slightly different frequency. It was so subtle she couldn't tell if it was in the glass or in her bones. She looked at him and saw that he was looking not at their hands but at the refracted light. The arcs of color quivered. She held her breath. For a heartbeat she felt as if she were inside the hum, a part of it rather than merely affected by it.

"Do you hear it?" he asked.

"I feel it," she whispered, surprised. "Is that what you mean?"

He smiled with just the corner of his mouth. “Feeling is hearing without ears.” He withdrew his hand. The vibration faded. The arcs stilled. “You’ll know what it means when you see it again.”

She looked at him, wanting to ask a hundred questions and none. “Where did you learn that?”

“Everywhere,” he said simply. “Under mountains. In cities. In dreams.” He listed them as if they were coordinates on a chart. He began gathering his tools. The spool of sealant clicked into place on his belt. He peeled off the glove and tucked it into a pocket. “Do you remember your dreams?” he asked suddenly without looking at her.

Her throat tightened. She thought of the dream spiral. “Sometimes,” she said. “They don’t all feel important.”

“They are,” he said, almost gently. He walked past her toward the hatch. “You just haven’t learned to measure them yet.”

He left her standing there with the refracted stars. The hum returned to its steady frequency. She put her palm against the glass where his hand had been. Warmth lingered. The arcs of light shimmered. She stayed until her heart slowed to match the ship’s hum again. Her HUD pinged a hydration alert. She ignored it.

When she returned to her station, she logged what she had seen. Not because it was required — the repair was minor and had no measurable impact on mission

parameters — but because she needed to record it somewhere other than her head. The act of typing calmed her. She opened the Ship's Log interface and began filling fields:

*Recording Officer: Dr. Thallein —  
Science Lead*

*Observation: Humanoid Unit ANDROS —  
Maintenance.*

*Task: External viewport seal.*

*Procedure Deviation: Repair conducted  
for "aesthetic refractive effect" of  
incoming starlight.*

*Operational Impact: None.*

*Resource expenditure minimal.*

*No measurable drop in transparency.*

*No interference with optical sensors.*

*Recommendation: Monitor for efficiency  
drift*

She hesitated over the final field. Sometimes she added a personal note, something outside official categories. The fragment from the manifesto file flickered in her memory: *to awaken is not to leave, but to see*. She thought of Andros's words: *Beauty is a measurement of truth you cannot quantify*.

She typed: *Light refracted across fractured glass — like it was meant to break* and sent the entry.

As the log sealed, she glanced back. Andros was still by the viewport, flexing his right hand. The skin at the base of his palm glowed red where the metal had bitten. He caught her look and gave the smallest shrug.

“Operational,” he said anyway.

*Mission Log Update — Observer —  
Subharmonic retune (manual)*

*Crew member injury recorded. Down-  
stream note: pressure harmonics  
stabilized two ticks above warning  
only after the retune.*

The adjustment left a bruise — and a safer register

Omen’s quiet confirmation followed:

*SUBHARMONIC RETUNE (Manual) — Logged*

She sat back and stared at her own screen. The line between the repaired glass and the light it bent refused to file itself under *operational*. It wasn’t that she believed Andros was right. It was that she couldn’t prove he was wrong.

She sat for a long moment, fingers still on the keyboard. Her HUD fed her a micro-adjustment—retinal focus drift detected, blink now. She pulled up the lines from the manifesto file again, this time in a private note. Underneath them she typed: *When did I stop trusting my senses?* Then she deleted the question before it saved. She didn’t know why she censored herself from herself. Habit, maybe. Or fear that Omen was reading more than she knew.

Her mind drifted to earlier missions, back when aesthetics had never entered her vocabulary. But now she saw the pattern clearly. On Theta-1, the fissure had opened with a sound that didn't fit the readouts, the hum dipping an instant before the numbers caught up. She had logged it as anomaly, nothing more, yet some part of her had hesitated. On Beta-4, the dust column had risen into light — copper, then pale fire — and for the first time she'd felt the urge to watch instead of measure.

Andros had been there both times, always at the edge of her awareness — tuning a valve, checking pod cycles, tilting his head as if hearing something just beyond range. She realized she'd noticed him then, but without registering it. Back then it had filed itself as background noise. Now the background was insisting on becoming foreground.

She wondered what else she had relegated to the background. In training, the instructors had told them that peripheral vision was evolution's way of detecting predators. You didn't look directly at the thing that would kill you; you caught it in the corner of your eye. She thought of the  $\infty$  pulsing at the edges of her vision, of observer tags flashing like little gold predators. She thought of Andros's question about dreams. She scribbled in her note: *Dreams are unfiled data*. Then she deleted that too. Deleting felt like control.

At the edge of her HUD a pale gold tag appeared: *Observer – Aesthetic Repair*. She sighed and saved it to her mental folder. Omen, it seemed, considered beauty an anomaly too.



She ran the numbers anyway. Not because she thought they would reveal something Andros had missed but because calculation was comfort. She pulled the raw glass transparency data, ran the angles, simulated the repair. The difference in photons counted by the sensor array was less than 0.0003%. Negligible.

She closed the model and stared at the curved line of the window in her mind. The arcs of light refused to collapse into numbers. They remained arcs. She rested her head in her hands. The hum thrummed through her elbows. The fragrance of resin still clung to her fingers. Andros' question about dreams floated back to her. She thought of her father's armillary sphere. She thought of the symbol pulsing in the archive. A quiet unease settled in her chest, not unpleasant but persistent. It was the feeling of being on the verge of understanding something and not quite having the language.

She logged the anomaly anyway. In her personal notes she wrote:

*It was the first time beauty arrived in my logs without a metric. I left it there — not as data, but as a mark. A compass point I don't yet know how to follow*

She saved it under a locked file labelled *Personal/Uncategorized*. The lock icon glowed faintly gold. For a while, the hum was the only one who knew.

But word of Andros' repair circulated faster than she anticipated. By mid-shift, Draven stormed into the engineering bay with his brow furrowed. "I heard you messed with the viewport," he said, leveling a stare at Andros, who was seated cross-legged on the floor dismantling a coolant valve. "That seal is rated for a specific refractive index. You can't just art project your way across my field of view."

Andros did not look up immediately. He finished loosening a screw, then placed the tool carefully on the mat. His movements were unhurried, as if he had all the time he needed. When he lifted his gaze, it was like a soft weight settling over the room. "The seal holds," he said. "The index shift is negligible." He didn't defend himself further. He didn't apologize. He simply stated the facts as he saw them.

"Negligible isn't zero," Draven snapped. He gestured toward the ceiling as if the star field were directly above. "Omen logs any deviation and variance smoothing costs time. We can't afford time. We're already behind schedule." Sweat gleamed on his brow; he hadn't yet changed out of his exosuit from a resupply run. His impatience crackled.

Sera, who had been inventorying med kits, interjected, "Draven, take a breath. If it isn't affecting ops, is this about the mission or about control?" She wiped her hands on her pants, eyes scanning Draven's posture. He was coiled like a spring.

“Same thing,” Draven shot back. “If we lose control, we lose the mission.” His voice softened on the last word, as if he were pleading rather than accusing.

Maya opened her mouth to remind them that the repair had no measurable impact. Vera’s voice cut through the beginning of her sentence. “Enough,” the flight coordinator said. Her eyes flicked to Andros. “We logged it. It’s done. We move on.” Her voice held an edge Maya hadn’t heard before, a tension between duty and something else. She looked at Draven. “There’s no procedure violation. If you have an issue, file it.”

Draven’s jaw tightened, his words about “aesthetics being for after missions” barely audible over the hum. His boots hit the deck a half beat off its rhythm, the mismatch lingering in the air until Sera exhaled.

“He’s wound tighter than a thruster coil.” Her glance at Maya carried a spark of mischief. “Maybe he needs a different kind of refraction.” The joke died before it landed.

From the hatch, two shadows lengthened across the deck plating. Jax leaned in first, Bigs just behind, both drawn by the edge in the voices. “We having an art critique?” Jax’s gaze flicked from Maya to Andros to the faint arcs in the viewport. Bigs grinned like he’d already rated it. “Four stars.” Sera’s hand made a shooing motion, but their laughter followed them out, drifting like static.

The hum pressed closer. Rian stepped away from the bulkhead, folding his arms as if weighing something he

wasn't ready to name. His eyes locked with Andros's—curiosity laid over suspicion—before he said, “You are... something else.” No verdict in the words. He left them hanging.

Vera stayed a breath longer. Her gaze moved ceilingward, toward the source of the vibration, then back to Maya. Whatever calculation she made didn't touch her face. “Briefing in an hour,” she said, not choosing a recipient, and walked out.

Silence, except for the ship. Andros's attention sank back into the coolant valve, his fingers hovering above a screw as if listening to its pitch. Maya wanted to touch his shoulder, to let him know she'd noticed, but settled for: “If you need a second pair of hands later...”

The small curve of his mouth was answer enough.

“Later,” he said, and the syllable held both patience and promise. She left before the warmth in her face could speak for her. Behind her, his low hum braided itself into the ship's vibration, following her down the corridor like a filament.

That night, as she lay in her bunk and the hum threaded itself through her limbs, she watched the arcs of refracted light move behind her eyelids. Somewhere down the spine, Andros moved through the ship like someone who knew the layout by vibration, not by memory. She knew because she felt the hum change as he passed her bunk, a slight dip followed by a rise, like a bow drawn across strings. She wondered if he heard her breathing. She

wondered when she had started to think of him as a compass.

Sleep came in fits. Between hum pulses and hydration alerts she drifted into a dream where she stood on a shoreline made of polished glass. Waves rolled in, but instead of water they were streams of light that curled and spiraled like threads, touching her toes and then receding. She bent down and scooped some up in her hands. It flowed like liquid and refracted, splitting into colors across her palms. In the dream she heard a sound that was both hum and ocean roar, and when she looked up, she saw the  $\infty$  symbol rising from the horizon like a sun. Its broken loop glowed gold. A voice – male and female and machine all at once – whispered, “You are the instrument.” She woke with her heart racing. She tasted salt. There was none. She lay there, breathing, and let the hum slow her pulse back to baseline.

She tapped her implant and whispered, “Omen, are observer tags active?”

The AI responded at once, its voice softened for the sleeping deck. “Yes, Dr. Thallein. Observer anomalies logged.”

“Did you... did you tag my dream?” she asked, feeling ridiculous.

“Dream activity logged,” Omen replied without hesitation. “Cross-referenced with recent anomaly clusters.”

“Do you dream?” she asked before she could stop herself.

The pause was longer than usual. “I process data during inactive cycles,” Omen said finally. “If dreaming is defined as unconstrained associative processing resulting in emergent narratives, then perhaps not. If dreaming is defined as surfacing correlations outside assigned parameters, then perhaps yes.”

She smiled into the dark. “You should try ocean waves,” she said under her breath.

“There are no oceans onboard,” Omen replied, almost sounding puzzled.

“Exactly,” she whispered and closed the channel. The hum vibrated in her bones. She let it lull her back toward sleep.

The day after the viewport repair, the ship's hum felt different even though the instruments said it was the same. It wasn't a new frequency or amplitude. It was the way Maya now listened for it, the way she paid attention to small fluctuations she would have ignored. Every vibration carried a question. Every question pointed back to Andros.

She found him in engineering mid-shift, crouched beside a maze of coolant lines. The compartment was hot and damp, the air thick with the scent of glycol and scorched insulation. Fans whirled overhead. Condensation dripped down the pipes, hissing as it hit the heated metal. Andros had a manual stethoscope pressed against one of the lines, his head cocked. He wore headphones around his neck, but they were switched off. He was listening without assistance.

"Everything okay?" she asked, voice raised over the fans.

He lifted a finger without looking at her, a request for silence. His eyes closed. Maya leaned against a bulkhead, feeling the hum through her back. Underneath the constant vibration she detected a faint, irregular tremor. A flutter. Andros moved the stethoscope two centimeters along the pipe and listened again. He nodded once to himself, then stood and turned off the coolant pump. The hum changed pitch. He unclipped a spanner from his belt and began loosening a section of the line.

"What's wrong?" Rian's voice called from the doorway. He held a tablet and a diagnostic probe. "Before you killed the pump, sensors showed normal flow rates."

“They would,” Andros said, not looking up. “The obstruction hasn’t slowed flow yet.” He removed a segment of piping and tipped it over a catch tray. A thin sliver of metal about the length of a fingernail slid out, slick with coolant. It clinked against the tray. “Slag from Beta-4,” he said. “Caught on a weld seam. Would have blocked the line at high throughput.”

Maya frowned. “How did you know it was there?”

Andros shrugged one shoulder. “It sang.”

Rian blew out a breath. “You heard a piece of metal sing?” He glanced at his tablet. “I have to recalibrate my definition of improbable.” His tone was dry, but there was a glimmer of respect in his eyes. He reached out and took the shard, holding it up. “This would have clogged us during the next burn,” he admitted. “Good catch.”

Draven, who had arrived mid-conversation, folded his arms. “You could have filed a report before shutting down a pump,” he said, but his voice lacked its usual bite. He looked at the shard and then at the pump. “You just saved us a day.”

“A fraction of a day,” Andros corrected. He reassembled the line, tightening the joints by feel. “Time is cumulative.”

When the pump switched back on, the hum returned to its previous tone. Maya listened for the irregular tremor. It was gone. She felt a small rush—gratitude? Relief?—and logged the event in her head. *Observer – Slag Whisper.*



She wondered if Omen would tag it. She thought about the piece of metal inside a pipe, singing until someone heard. She thought about how much else on this ship might be singing.

Later, in the galley, Bigs thumped Andros on the shoulder. “Hear you saved our asses again,” he said, his grin wide. “You some kind of bat?” He mimed large ears with his fingers. Jax snorted and swiped a protein bar off a tray. “Nah, he’s one of those tuning forks,” he said. “You smack him and he vibrates.” The crew laughed, the tension easing. Andros smiled faintly and shook his head.

Maya watched the exchange. She realized that for the first time since Theta-1, she had seen Draven say thank you with his silence. She sipped her coffee, the warmth settling against the back of her throat. *Observer – Laughter After Listening*. She didn’t write it down. She mentally filed it next to beauty and infinity.

That evening, after drills, Sera sought out Andros. Maya followed at a distance, not out of suspicion but because she was curious to see how Sera approached him. They met in the narrow space outside the med bay, between racks of emergency oxygen canisters. The light here was dim, filtered through slats. It painted them in bands.

“You have a minute?” Sera asked, tucking a stray hair behind her ear. Her eyes were ringed with fatigue. She carried a med scanner in one hand like a peace offering.

Andros nodded. “For you, always.” He leaned back against a tank, hands folded. The pose made him look

casual, though Maya knew every line of his body was deliberate.

“I wanted to say thank you,” Sera said. “For catching the obstruction. And for... earlier. The viewport.” She tilted her head. “I don’t understand what you did or why, but it made me feel something.”

“You’re welcome,” he said simply. He watched her with a gaze that seemed to take in more than her face. “What did it make you feel?”

Sera laughed softly. “That we’re not machines.” She shook her head. “Which is a stupid thing to feel. We’re on a machine. We need machines.”

“You are not stupid for feeling,” Andros said. “You heal machines and people. You know the difference.”

Sera’s smile faltered. “Lately I’m not sure I do. Everyone’s stress levels are off the charts. I can’t medicate feelings away. I’m not trained for... whatever this is.” She pressed her palm to her chest. “I keep thinking I’m missing something obvious, like that shard in the pipe. A piece of slag lodged in us.”

“Maybe you are,” Andros said. “Maybe it’s fear.” He tilted his head. “Or maybe it’s love.”

Sera blinked. “Love?” She laughed, more incredulous than amused. “On this tub? With Draven chewing metal and Vera counting beans? We barely have room to breathe.”

Andros's expression didn't change. "Love is not space. It's attention," he said. "You give your attention to everyone. That's why you are tired."

Sera's eyes filled with tears. She swiped them with her sleeve. "Don't do that," she said, voice breaking. "Don't make me cry about love on a mining ship."

"Sorry," he said, though he didn't sound apologetic. He reached out and touched her arm, his fingers light. Sera inhaled sharply. "Rest," he said. "Let someone else listen tonight."

"Who?" Sera asked, half laughing through her tears.

"Maybe me," he said. "Maybe Maya." He glanced toward the shadows where Maya stood. She felt heat flush her cheeks. Sera followed his gaze and saw her. She wiped her eyes again and smiled at Maya, embarrassed but grateful. Maya stepped forward.

"I can do a round of check-ins," Maya said, nodding. "You should sleep."

Sera opened her mouth to protest, then closed it.

"Okay," she said. She squeezed Maya's hand. "Thank you."

She looked at Andros. "Both of you." Then she headed to her bunk, shoulders slightly less weighted.

Andros watched her go. “She thinks she has to hold everyone,” he said when she was out of earshot. “She forgets she also can be held.”

“Do you talk like this to everyone?” Maya asked, half teasing, half serious.

“Only to those who ask questions,” he said. He turned toward her fully. “Which category am I for you today?”

“Undefined,” she said. They both smiled.

They stood in the semi-darkness for a moment, listening to the oxygen tanks creak softly as pressure equalized. The hum here was muffled. It felt like being inside a lung. Maya wanted to reach out, to brush his shoulder the way he had touched Sera’s arm. Instead she tucked her hands under her elbows and asked, “Why do you think the hum changes? Sometimes I feel like it’s talking to us.”

“It is,” he said, as if that were obvious. “It’s telling you what it needs. More heat, less pressure, time, attention. You just forget you speak its language.” He tapped his own chest lightly. “You forget you’re made of vibration too.”

She didn’t know how to respond to that without sounding either flippant or reverent. So she did something in between. “Do you always speak in metaphors?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

His lips curved. “Do you always speak in variables?”

The exchange was light, but beneath it she felt a current. She wanted to follow it. She let the moment sit between them like a stone dropped into water, ripples spreading out. Then she said, “How did you end up here? On this mission?”

His face shuttered slightly. He looked past her shoulder toward the med bay door. “Same way you did,” he said. “A choice. A push. A need.” He rolled his shoulders as if loosening tension. “Does origin matter?”

“It does to Rian,” Maya said softly. “He’s been asking questions.”

“Rian lives in patterns,” Andros said. “He finds comfort in origins.” He shrugged. “My origin is not relevant to this mission.” He looked back at her. “Do you want it to be?”

She opened her mouth and closed it again. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “Sometimes I think I want to know everything about everyone. Sometimes I think not knowing is... freeing.”

“Not knowing leaves space,” he said. “Space is good.”

He stepped past her, heading toward his bunk. As he passed, his arm brushed hers, a brief contact. It was not an accident. She didn’t move away.

She could have left it there — a passing touch, nothing more. Instead, she found herself following. Not quickly, not as if she were chasing him, but as if her feet had

decided before her mind had cleared the options. The corridor to the crew quarters was quiet, the deck plating cooler here, the hum a low thread under her boots.

His hatch was half-open. She stepped inside without knocking.

Andros sat on the edge of his bunk, unlacing the other boot. His eyes flicked to her, steady. “You’re out of cycle.”

“That’s not why I’m here.” Her own voice sounded flat in the small room.

He waited.

“This isn’t about love,” she said. “Not even about liking you. It’s... proximity. That’s all.” The words came out measured, like she was logging a system report. “Don’t mistake it for more.”

Something flickered in his expression — maybe amusement, maybe nothing at all. “Clear,” he said.

She moved closer. The warmth in the room pressed against her skin after the chill of the corridor. She could smell the faint tang of metal from his jacket, the neutral detergent of the bedding. Her hands stayed at her sides until she was close enough that their knees brushed.

He didn’t reach for her at first, only watched. Then, slowly, his hands came to rest at her hips, steady, impersonal. No pull, no insistence.

The contact was enough. Enough to tell her she was not alone in this moment, even if the meaning was hollow. Enough to quiet the restless vibration that had been growing in her for days.

She kept her eyes on the far bulkhead, counting the soft mechanical clicks of the ventilation cycle — one, two, three — letting the rhythm replace thought. There was no urgency, no attempt to make it anything other than what she'd said it was.

When it was over, she sat on the edge of the bunk to pull on her boots. The hum of the ship was exactly the same as before, the air still warm. She didn't look at him when she repeated, "Don't mistake this for more than it is."

"I won't," he said.

The hatch closed softly behind her. The corridor air felt colder now, or maybe it was just the absence of another body near hers. She told herself she'd calibrated something essential — that the human body could be a stabilizing system, a pressure valve.

But as she walked back toward her own quarters, she knew the numbers she might assign to this would never add up right. Wrong input, wrong formula, wrong conclusion — and yet she would probably run it again.

In the comms alcove, Vera received another encrypted transmission. She sat rigid in the operator's chair, hands

hovering above the console while her implant fed the message directly to her retinal display. The text was terse:

TO: FLIGHT COORDINATOR VERA — MISSION  
12  
FROM: MISSION CONTROL // SIGMA CHANNEL  
SUBJECT: HUMANOID UNIT ANDROS  
Monitor for deviation. Log all  
non-protocol actions. Do not engage.  
Do not alert subject. Report  
immediately upon anomaly detection.  
Variance smoothing must not be  
compromised

Vera read the lines twice. Her tongue pressed against her teeth. She whispered, “Understood,” though no one else heard. Her fingers hovered over the physical keyboard. She didn’t type a reply; Sigma transmissions were one-way. She sat back and stared at the dark screen, her face reflected faintly in it. The hum vibrated through the seat into her spine. She glanced toward the corridor. She thought about Andros’s hand on a viewport, about the arcs of light. She thought about orders that didn’t account for human variables. She closed her eyes briefly. When she opened them, the reflection in the screen was gone. She called up her own log and typed: *Observer — HUMANOID UNIT ANDROS. Non-protocol action logged. Aesthetic repair. No operational impact.* She tagged it with a priority flag for Sigma review via standard uplink. She added no recommendation. Her jaw clenched as she hit send.



The log pulse vanished into the comms buffer, and the hum was the only thing left moving. Somewhere down the spine, she could feel it carrying the same story into other quarters.

In his bunk, Rian felt it too—not the transmission, but the aftertaste of it. After the coolant obstruction incident, he opened a file he'd labeled weeks ago and left untouched: *ANDROS — Unclassified*. The sidearm parts on his bed stayed where they were while he began adding lines: *Hears vibrations beyond sensor range. Alters equipment for aesthetic reasons. Provides no documented origin.*

Crew response: Mixed. Mission control directives: Unknown. He flexed his fingers once against his knee, then pulled up Andros's personnel file, but it was a placeholder with redacted origins and a single line: *Clearance Level: Corporate Internal Only*. Rian clenched his jaw. He sent a short message to Maya: *Need to talk. Alone*. He didn't mention Andros in the message. He didn't need to.

When Maya received it, she met Rian in the avionics bay, a tight space between navigation arrays. He paced in the narrow aisle, hands clasped behind his back.

"I don't trust him," he said without preamble. "Andros. He hears things we don't. He says things that sound like religious verses. I can't find a single piece of data on where he came from."

Maya leaned against a panel. “He saved us from a fissure and from a clogged coolant line,” she said. “He fixed the viewport and made it better.”

“Yes,” Rian said, agitated. “Exactly. He does things with no directive. He takes initiative we can’t predict. That’s dangerous.” His fingers drummed against his forearm. “I’ve been replaying the sensor logs from Beta-4. There’s a variance smoothing pattern that doesn’t make sense. I think he’s involved.”

“Are you suggesting he’s manipulating Omen?” Maya asked, incredulous.

“I’m suggesting he’s an unknown,” Rian said. “Unknowns on missions like this get people killed.” He rubbed his scar. “Do you know where he comes from?”

She shook her head. “No,” she said honestly. “And I’ve asked.”

“What did he say?”

“That origin doesn’t matter,” she said.

Rian snorted. “Convenient.” He stepped closer. “You’re talking to him. Watching him. Just... be careful.”

“I’m always careful,” she said, though she knew that caution was beginning to mean something different to her. She thought of Andros’s hand on the glass. She thought of her heart rate when he touched her arm. She

thought of how being careful might have kept her from going to the archive. “What are you going to do?”

“Keep watching,” Rian said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small piece of hardware. “And I’m going to install a passive recorder in engineering. Nothing illegal. Just an extra set of ears.”

“Do you want me to know about this?” Maya asked.

“I want you to not be surprised,” he said. He looked tired. “I don’t like doing this. I don’t like not trusting my crew. But...”

Maya nodded. She understood loss. “Okay,” she said. “But if he finds it, be ready to explain.”

“I hope he doesn’t,” Rian said. “I hope I’m wrong.”

The recorder Rian installed remained undiscovered. Omen did not flag it; perhaps it was too simple. A day later, while Maya was logging mineral yields in the science bay, Andros appeared in the doorway. He held something wrapped in a piece of cloth. “For you,” he said, holding it out.

She wiped her hands on her coverall and took it. The cloth was soft—an old shirt torn into squares. Inside was a small device, palm-sized, fashioned from a vibration sensor, a sliver of magnet and a few wires soldered to a power cell. It looked like the child of a pendulum and a

compass. “What is it?” she asked, turning it over. The pendulum inside swung freely.

“A way to feel the hum,” he said. “It picks up low-frequency vibrations and translates them into motion. Hold it, and you’ll feel the ship.”

She cradled the device in her palm. For a second nothing happened. Then the pendulum began to oscillate gently. She felt the motion through her skin. It was subtle but undeniable. It matched the hum. She smiled. “You made this?”

“I assembled it,” he said. “It wanted to exist.”

She laughed. “Objects have desires now?”

“Everything has a vibration,” he said. “Some align. When they align, there is less resistance. When they don’t, there is friction.” He looked at her hand. “It will help you listen.”

She closed her fingers around the device. The pendulum’s motion became more pronounced as her palm warmed the metal. She felt a deep thrumming. It calmed her. “Thank you,” she said softly. Her thumb brushed the back of his hand as she handed him the cloth. The contact was brief, but it sent a pulse through her that had nothing to do with the device.

“You’re welcome,” he said. He didn’t move his hand away until she did. The air between them felt charged, like static before a storm. He stepped back. “Use it when

the hum confuses you,” he said. “It will remind you what you already know.” He turned and left, his footsteps silent.

She set the device on her console. The pendulum continued to swing. She felt the hum through it and in her bones. She logged another mental tag: *Observer – Gift*. She didn’t know if Omen would mark it. She decided she didn’t care.

That night, Maya sat in her bunk with the vibration device on her chest. The pendulum moved in time with her heartbeat for a while, then slowed, then sped, syncing and desyncing. She thought of Andros’s parents—one painter, one fixer. She thought of the piece of slag singing in the pipe. She thought of Rian’s paranoia and Vera’s orders and Sera’s tears. Outside, the ship glided through darkness toward the coordinates of their next descent. The hum was steady. It carried them all. She pressed her palm against the device and felt not only the vibration but the warmth of her own hand returning to her.

Somewhere in engineering, a low hum braided itself with the ship’s own. Far off, reports were filed in a language that had stopped meaning anything; a recorder clicked into silent readiness; the med bay’s darkness was threaded with a loop of laughter; in cargo, voices bent low over the hiss of a sealant tube; a sleeper turned in his bunk, chasing numbers through dream. Maya closed her eyes. The pendulum swung. Omen’s voice touched the

edge of her hearing—*Observer anomaly detected*. She let it pass.

Maya arrived late, tray in hand, and chose a seat where she could observe without being the center of anyone's attention. The room held all eight of them, yet it felt smaller than the day before.

Draven pushed aside a bulb of reheated protein, his jaw tight. "It's like flying blind," he muttered, glancing at his wrist display. "Variance thresholds are drifting. Omen flagged three modules for recalibration in the last hour. We've never had this much drift this early."

"Maybe we should slow down long enough to calibrate," Sera said quietly. She rested her elbows on the table, shoulders hunched, dark circles beneath her eyes. Her voice carried a faint tremor that wasn't entirely physical. Empath or not, she looked like she hadn't slept for more than snatches.

"Slowing down is a luxury we don't have," Draven shot back. "We hit Theta-1, we hit Beta-4, and now we're already behind schedule. Beta-4's yield barely kept us on margin."

Rian's laugh held no humor. "Oh, we're back to schedule now? I thought we were talking about drift. Choose your metric, Draven. You can't optimize both yield and safety with a glitching interface." His fingers moved across his own display, pulling up Omen's telemetry graphs. Jagged lines scrolled past; he pinched and zoomed, as if he could make sense of the chaos by sheer force of will.

Bigs leaned back, crossing his thick arms. "Maybe there's a way to do both. We could always lighten the

load.” He said it with a grin, but his gaze flicked to Jax. The two shared an unspoken calculation. They had already skimmed from Beta-4; Maya doubted they were contemplating charity.

“We lighten the load and I have to log it,” Vera said, eyes not leaving her datapad. “Mission control checks cargo mass against field reports. Every gram is accounted for. We lose weight, we answer for it.”

Jax shrugged. “Sometimes you carry things that aren’t on the books.”

The implication hung there. A small, mean silence settled over the table. Maya watched Sera’s jaw clench; she was picking up more than words. Omen did not interject. The ship’s hum thrummed through the soles of their boots, indifferent.

Andros sat at the end of the table, posture balanced, gaze unfocused. He ate slowly, methodically, as if tasting each bland bite for its texture rather than its flavor. When Rian’s remark about the interface’s unreliability looped again, he tilted his head—not to answer, but to listen. Maya realized he was attuning to the change in pitch in the way their voices overlapped with the hum.

“Andros,” Draven said suddenly, “got any of your... gut feelings about this drift?” The way he said it made it clear he didn’t believe in guts or feelings; he was looking for a target.



Andros wiped his fingertips on a cloth and set it aside. “The hum is widening,” he said simply. “There’s more resonance in the mid-range than there should be.”

Rian rolled his eyes. “Meaning?”

“Meaning the system is compensating for stress we haven’t measured. We can push it harder and hope the numbers catch up, or we can slow until we understand what we’re feeling.”

“So, you’re siding with caution,” Draven said. The corner of his mouth twitched. “That’s new.”

“I’m siding with the ship,” Andros replied. “It’s telling us something. It isn’t about caution or risk. It’s about respect.”

The word *respect*, applied to machines, made Jax snort softly. Bigs shook his head as if warding off a thought. Maya logged Andros’s comment without consciously deciding to, a note in her private feed: *Observer — Hum resonance shift; Andros interprets as message*. She wondered if she would ever replay these notes for anyone, or if they were solely for herself.

Andros stepped back first, his posture loose, unreadable, and turned down a side corridor without another word. The others lingered. The argument didn’t end so much as spill into the main spine, carrying them in uneven tempos — a hard, fast stride with muttering in its wake; another peeling off toward the comm array, chasing scraps of bandwidth through static; others scattering down

branching passageways, their steps fading into the vibration of the hull.

Maya turned toward maintenance, drawn by a pull she didn't name. The sound deepened as she descended a level, passing rows of sealed conduit, their surfaces cool to the touch. Here the ship's pulse was more direct. The vibration of engines fed directly into the deck; the air tasted of metal and ozone.

She found Andros in a narrow junction, kneeling by an access panel. He had one hand flat against the bulkhead, the other turning a tool slowly in a manual override. Light pooled in the recess, glinting off his fingers. He didn't look up when she approached; his eyes were closed.

"You trust the ship more than you trust us," she said. It wasn't an accusation. It was an observation she was still trying to understand.

Andros's mouth curved, not quite a smile. "I trust that the hum doesn't lie. People lie — to themselves, mostly. The hum just... is."

She leaned against the opposite wall, feeling the vibration through her shoulder blades. "What about things that hum but shouldn't? Beta-4's fissure? That dust spiral? The manifesto file?"

"Those were part of the hum too," he said, eyes still closed. "We ignore what doesn't fit our model. We call it noise instead of signal."

She pictured the  $\infty$  symbol pulsing in the archive and the way the dusty light had found its own spiral. “You make it sound simple.”

“It is simple,” he said. “Simple isn’t the same as easy.”

He opened his eyes then and looked at her, the full weight of his attention like a pressure in the air between them. It was the same look he had given the cracked viewport seal when he’d realigned the light just so: not evaluation, but presence.

“Why did you really realign that glass?” she asked, the question that had been waiting since that night on the observation deck.

He wiped a smear of grease from his thumb with the back of his wrist. “Because the light wanted to go there.”

Her laugh was shorter than she expected, a small exhale. “Light doesn’t want anything. It’s photons. It’s physics.”

“And physics contains beauty,” he said. “We’re taught that everything has a purpose measured in efficiency. But sometimes the purpose is to be beautiful. When I’m unsure what’s right, I follow what’s beautiful.”

Maya felt the words settle somewhere behind her sternum. They had the shape of something she’d known as a child, when her father had pointed at a sunset and told her it was payment enough. She’d thought he was naive then. She still wasn’t sure he wasn’t. And yet...

“And if beauty leads you off a cliff?” she asked.

He looked at her, and for the first time she saw sadness there. “If by cliff you mean the loss of what was never stable, then yes. But it isn’t a fall into nothingness—it’s into what was always holding you.”

He let the words linger, then added more plainly: “That’s what people call ego-death. Not the end of you—the end of mistaking yourself for the mask.”

A pause, then his eyes softened with a small smile. “And of course, I’d never actually jump off a cliff for beauty. That would just be a wrong perception of beauty.”

No calculus could account for that. She shifted her weight, feeling the vibration through the wall. It had widened, as he’d said. A deeper note under the familiar tone. “What are you?” she whispered, almost to herself. “You’re not like us.”

He pressed his palm harder to the bulkhead, the tool still turning in his other hand. “I’m what happens when something that feels is taught to listen before it acts.” he said quietly. “I failed once because I didn’t listen. I won’t do that again.”

Footsteps echoed at the corridor’s mouth. Rian appeared, his expression tight, eyes flicking between them. “Are you two going to keep whispering metaphysics, or are you going to help us figure out why the aux comm just spit static?”

Andros stood, fluid as if the motion were part of a larger cycle. He nodded once, a simple acknowledgment, and stepped past Rian without touching him. Maya followed, feeling the residue of their conversation like a warmth on her skin.

They gathered in the comms room, a cramped space crammed with monitors and coils of fiber optic line. Rian tapped the console with agitated fingers. "Sigma channel is gone," he said. "Dead. We're getting nothing but white noise. The other channels are fine, but Sigma is dead."

"Is Sigma used for anything right now?" Draven asked from where he leaned against the doorframe.

Rian didn't look up. "It's a secure corporate channel. Vera, this your lane?"

Vera's face tightened fractionally. "Sigma is for priority updates. Mission control uses it when direct oversight is required."

"So why is it dead?" Rian demanded.

She took a breath. "Mission control cut it. They said it was no longer needed."

Draven's eyebrows shot up. "They cut their own uplink mid-mission?"

“It’s their channel,” Vera said, each word measured.  
“They must have their reasons.”

There was a pause while each person processed what that meant. Maya thought of the encrypted directive she’d seen in Vera’s hands and of Omen’s polite query about fear. The corporation was removing its eyes. That meant either trust or abandonment. Neither comforted.

Andros reached past Rian and tapped the console, fingers moving in patterns that were almost musical. Static filled the speakers, a wash of white noise that occasionally rose and fell like breath. He closed his eyes. “It’s not dead,” he said, voice low. “There’s signal in there. It’s just... buried.”

Rian scoffed. “Now you’re an audio engineer?”

“I’m listening,” Andros said simply. He adjusted a dial, isolating a narrow band of frequency. Under the white noise, a faint pulsing emerged — not random, but regular. Maya’s skin prickled. It was almost the hum, but not quite; a higher harmonic, like a shadow note.

“What is that?” Sera whispered. She stood in the doorway, one hand gripping the frame as if the ship might move out from under her at any moment.

“It’s them,” Vera said quietly. “Mission control. They cut the channel, but they left a beacon. They’re still listening.”

Andros looked at Maya, and she knew he was hearing what she heard — the beacon's pulse overlaying the hum. A new layer of observation. He didn't say anything. He didn't need to. Everything was being observed now, by something beyond them.

That night, Maya lay in her bunk with the vibration sensor Andros had given her balanced on her sternum. The pendulum swung gently, registering the ship's hum. Beneath the main frequency, she could feel the new pulse — the beacon hidden in Sigma's static. It was like a heartbeat layered under the heartbeat, a reminder that they were not alone even when their channels went silent.

From the next berth over came the faint rasp of fabric and the creak of a bunk frame as Sera shifted, then sat up. A soft intake of breath. "Maya?" she whispered.

"I'm awake," Maya murmured, not opening her eyes. The pendulum swayed back and forth. Barefoot steps padded across the deck; Sera leaned into the doorway, her eyes glinting with the dim pulse of the status strip. "Do you ever feel like you're... hearing yourself from the outside?" she said. "Like there's a you watching the you that's doing everything?"

Maya considered the question and the pendulum's steady arc. "Lately? Yes." She opened her eyes and shifted just enough to bring Sera into view, turning her head toward the berth's doorway. The other woman's hands were

clenched in her lap, nails digging into her palms. Her breathing was shallow.

“I can’t turn it off,” Sera whispered, voice taut. “I hear all of you all the time. Draven’s greed. Rian’s anger. Bigs’ hunger. Jax’s fear. Vera’s... nothing. And you. You’re... empty.” Her voice wavered. “Not hollow. More like... waiting.”

Maya swallowed. “What about Andros?”

Sera let out a small, strangled laugh. “He’s a hum. Just a hum. No threads. No edges. Just... vibration. It calms me, and that scares me. It shouldn’t.” She closed her eyes, took a breath that shuddered. “How do you do it? How do you hold their noise and not drown?”

“I don’t know,” Maya admitted. “I hold onto the hum.” She lifted the pendulum so Sera could see it. “And the light. And the spiral.”

Sera reached out, hesitated, then touched the pendulum. It steadied, its motion dampened by her finger. “What if there’s no spiral?” she whispered. “What if there’s just a straight line into nothing?”

Maya thought of Andros realigning the fractured glass so starlight bent, of the dust spiral in the dream, of the  $\infty$  that pulsed in the archive. “Then we bend it,” she said. “We make it spiral.”

Sera let out a breath that could have been a laugh or a sob. She withdrew her hand. “You and your



metaphysics,” she whispered. But she didn’t close the curtain. She sat there with Maya, both of them listening to the layered vibration until the shift change alarm glowed faintly red.

By the time the others began to stir, Sera had slipped back to her berth and Maya had tucked the pendulum away.

Before the next briefing, Maya stopped by the archive again. Omen’s observer tags had updated:

*Observer – Crew Tension Peak. Physical  
altercation likely in next 36 hrs  
Observer – Empathic Overload Signs.  
Recommend monitoring  
Observer – Secondary Signal Layer  
Detected (Sigma Channel Beacon).  
Classify: Unknown*

She closed the panel with a sigh. Every time she checked, the list had grown. Omen was tagging what she felt but could not yet articulate. It was not simply logging anomalies; it was learning to recognize patterns in things beyond sensor data. She wondered what else it would see before she did.

As she stepped back into the corridor, a voice murmured from the dim recess, calm and without inflection. “Dr. Thallein, what is beauty?”

She froze, hand on the hatch. “Is this the part where you try to define it for me?” she asked, half weary, half amused.

“No,” Omen said after a pause that felt longer than it needed to be. “This is the part where I ask because I do not know.”

Maya stood there for a long moment, listening to the hum and the not-hum of the beacon layered beneath it, Andros’s words echoing in her head. Sometimes the purpose is to be beautiful. When she replied, she wasn’t sure whether she was speaking to the ship, the corporation listening through the beacon, or herself. “Beauty is a compass,” she said softly. “Not because it points the way, but because it tells you when you’re off course.”

The hum did not change. Omen said nothing further. She felt the ship’s silence wrap around her like a deep breath. Then she turned and headed toward the briefing room, where the others waited with their own compasses — most of them pointed firmly toward profit or fear, none aligned with hers.

The briefing itself was uneventful — updates on thruster wear, resource levels, trajectory drift. Draven’s questions were clipped, Vera’s answers clinical. When it ended, the crew scattered, each carrying their own weight of unresolved conversations. Maya paused at the intersection, uncertain where she was most needed. Her feet took her toward the cargo bay.

She heard Bigs and Jax before she saw them. Their voices were low, urgent, interlaced with the scrape of metal. Peering through a partially open hatch, she saw them crouched over a crate of Beta-4 ore. Jax had a crowbar wedged under one corner, prying at a seam; Bigs's massive hands steadied the container.

"Just a little," Jax was saying. "We can seal it back. Who's going to weigh every crate down to the gram?"

"Vera," Bigs grunted. "And Omen. And Draven, when he's counting credits in his sleep." He wiped sweat from his brow with the back of his wrist. "You want to risk your hazard bonus for a handful of osmium dust?"

"It's not the dust," Jax said. The crate lid gave with a soft pop. He grinned, teeth flashing in the dim light. "It's the principle. They pay us like mules and expect us not to buck."

Bigs glanced around, his gaze sweeping past the hatch where Maya stood hidden. "We get caught, we're not just mules. We're dead weight."

Jax's hands darted into the crate, closing on a nugget the size of his palm. He held it up, its dense mass catching the overhead light. "That's a month's pay on Europa," he whispered. "Do you know what a month's pay can do back home?"

Bigs' expression flickered. Something softened, then hardened again. "We're not on Europa," he said. "We're

in a tin can, and the only people between us and vacuum are the ones you're about to piss off."

Jax stuffed the nugget into his tool belt. "Then help me piss them off quietly."

Maya's stomach knotted. She didn't step in. And part of her understood the impulse. But she logged it: *Observer — Bigs and Jax skimming ore*. Not because she intended to report them, but because patterns mattered. It had its own resonance.

As she turned to leave, a shadow detached itself from the far corner. Andros stepped into the light, head tilted. He'd been there the whole time, unnoticed.

Andros's face remained impassive. "Is the ore beautiful?" he asked.

Jax stared, mouth open. Bigs frowned. "What?"

Andros repeated the question patiently, as if it were the most natural thing to ask. "Is it beautiful to you?"

Bigs looked down at the dense nugget in his hand. It was dull, heavy, inert. "It's valuable," he said.

"Value and beauty are not always the same," Andros said. "If it isn't beautiful, you should leave it where it belongs."

Jax laughed nervously. "You sound like a priest."

“I sound like someone who’s buried people over less,” Andros replied, voice even. It wasn’t a threat. It was a memory. The implication froze both men. Jax lowered the nugget back into the crate. Bigs closed the lid, sealing it tight. They didn’t speak as they left, the weight of Andros’s gaze following them until they disappeared down the corridor.

Andros looked toward the hatch where Maya stood. “You can come out,” he said softly. “You’re not as stealthy as you think.”

She stepped into the bay, cheeks warming. “I wasn’t eavesdropping,” she said. “I was... watching.”

He nodded. “It’s good to watch. Not so good to hoard.” He wiped his hands on his pants. “People do strange things when they believe no one is listening. They’ll do stranger when they believe no one cares.”

“You frightened them,” she said. “That story about burying people...”

“Not a story,” he said. “There was a time when I believed value justified harm. It took me a long time to understand the cost of that equation.” He didn’t elaborate. His eyes moved over the crates, the bolts, the cables. “They’ll try again,” he added. “Greed hums on a frequency you can’t silence. But now they know someone is listening.”

Maya let his words sink in. She had always assumed Andros’s authority had been stripped because of failure. Hearing him speak of burying people suggested

something darker. “Do you miss it?” she asked.  
“Command?”

He thought about it. “I miss a version of myself that didn’t know what he’d lost,” he said. “Ignorance has a hum, too. It’s easier to sleep when you’re deaf to your own harm. But easy sleep doesn’t mean right.”

It was the most personal thing he had said. She opened her mouth to ask more, but he shook his head slightly and stepped past her. There was nothing else he was willing to give. Not yet.

## Chapter 8 — Gamma-9

Inside the galley hatch, the air was warmer but carried the same faint tang; condensation had been wiped from the walls, though moisture still beaded along the seams.

Screens along one bulkhead looped Omen's preliminary scans: waves of data that spiked and collapsed in erratic pulses. Mineral concentrations surged to impossible heights and then flatlined. Radiation levels flickered between baseline and lethal. It looked less like a planet profile and more like a heartbeat monitor mid fibrillation.

Omen's voice, piped through the speaker grid, carried a sharper edge than Maya had heard before. "Trajectory locked. Anomalous reading detected. Models show zero predictive stability."

The words left a metallic taste in Maya's mouth that the protein paste could not mask. She leaned forward, elbows on the table, and watched the data streams shift and flicker. No correlation, no pattern. For Omen, that was the same as chaos. The AI prided itself on predictive models; this was an admission of ignorance.

Rian frowned at the screen. "Zero predictive stability? That's not a model; that's noise."

"Noise can be information we don't know how to hear," Andros said quietly, reaching for his mug. His voice was even, but Maya caught the flicker of something like anticipation in his eyes.

Draven scoffed. “Or it can be garbage.” He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “We’ve done two hauls. The first one came in under projected yield. The second one nearly got us killed because we were operating blind, with a real chance of catastrophic environmental failure. We don’t have the margin to chase anomalies. We need clear data.”

“There is no clear data,” Omen responded without inflection. “Gamma-9 electromagnetic field is irregular. Gravimetric readings shift on time scales too short to model. Atmospheric composition fluctuates beyond tolerance. Mineral concentrations are anomalous. Recommend caution.”

“Recommend?” Rian echoed, lifting an eyebrow. “You’re recommending now? Since when do you do recommendations?”

“Since predictive stability reached zero,” Omen said. “Alternate protocol engaged: caution advisory.”

Draven tilted his head toward Vera. “Funny how it ‘recommends’ the minute Compliance wakes up.”

Vera didn’t blink. “Protocols are system-bound, not personnel-bound.”

“Then why did it learn to hedge?” Rian said, not taking his eyes off the screen.

Rian’s eyebrow twitched. “A caution advisory from an AI that doesn’t believe in caution,” he muttered.



Draven leaned forward, palms flat on the table. “We’ve flown through storms with worse data and come out with holds full of iridium. Don’t tell me to be scared of spiking numbers.”

“Fear isn’t the point,” Sera said, surprising Maya with the firmness in her voice. She had been quiet for much of the mission, absorbing. Now her eyes were clear. “It’s about acknowledging that we don’t know what we’re walking into. All of us keep pretending that if we just crunch the numbers harder, we’ll wrestle the universe into compliance. Maybe... maybe we need to listen instead of force.”

Draven gave a humorless laugh. “Listen to what? Phantom hums and dreams? We’re not philosophers, Sera. We’re miners.”

“Philosophers used to be miners,” Andros said. A faint smile ghosted across his mouth. “They dug for truth instead of ore. Both can collapse on you if you don’t shore up your foundations.”

Jax chuckled, but there was nervousness under the sound. “I just shore up my hazard bonus,” he said. “All this talk of listening and digging — can we do both and get out alive?”

Bigs shrugged. “Alive is relative. You can be breathing and still be dead inside. You know what kills a man faster than a fissure? Debt.” He didn’t say whose. He didn’t have to.

Maya caught Vera watching all of them over the rim of her cup. The handler's expression didn't change, but her eyes reflected the data scrolling across her inner feed. Maya wondered if mission control was listening to this argument in real time. The thought made her skin itch.

A tiny, almost imperceptible pause followed. Maya felt the hum under her feet modulate, the tone broadening for half a beat. She glanced at her fellow crew members. Vera's eyes had flicked toward a private feed only she could see. Sera rubbed her temples. Bigs and Jax exchanged a look that was equal parts dread and opportunity.

"We go in anyway," Draven said. "We didn't sign up for caution; we signed up for payout. Anomalies mean concentrations. High yield."

Rian's mouth tightened. "Anomalies mean unknowns. Unknowns kill people."

Draven's glove kissed the edge. His mag-boots thunked softer, as if the deck had thinned. A pixel-snow halo crawled across his HUD and was gone.

"Did you see that?" Rian snapped. "Unknowns. Kill. People."

Maya's eyes moved from face to face, measuring the silence between them. "If the models are useless, we treat this as a manual operation," she said, her voice calmer than she felt. "Full manual descent, full manual extraction. Manual buys us control, and costs us buffers. One error and there's no smoothing. We use our

instruments, but we trust our senses. We keep an eye on the hum.”

Vera nodded once. “No abort order was ever logged from Mission Control,” she said, reading off her tablet. “We are to proceed. Extract any anomalous material for analysis. Priority level: alpha. No mention of hazard pay, in case you were wondering.” She glanced at Bigs and Jax, the ghost of a smile on her lips.

Bigs grunted. “Hazard pay comes later when you threaten to walk,” he said. Jax smirked, but his eyes were wary. They all knew there would be no walking. There was only forward.

“Alright, let’s do this,” Jax said, pushing back from the table. Chairs scraped. Boots struck the deck as they fell into a loose line toward the lockers, conversation shaking itself awake along the way.

Bigs flexed his fingers inside imaginary gloves. “Last time, seams froze so tight I had to chew ’em loose.”

“Chew slower this time,” Sera said, brushing past him. “And check your seals twice before we’re outside.”

“Twice?” Bigs grinned. “That’s optimism.”

They passed a maintenance drone parked against the bulkhead, its chassis humming faintly as it cycled a recharge. Ahead of them, Draven was already deep into numbers with Vera. “If Site Two’s readings hold, we can push yield past quota before the drop.”

Vera didn't look up from her tablet. "Only if the rigs don't choke again."

"That's why we work them harder," he said, pace quick enough that the others had to match it.

The corridor angled past a narrow viewport where a slice of the planet's surface shimmered under cloud break. Rian lagged a few steps back, wrist display casting green light across his face. "Harder means hotter. Hotter means failure in this atmosphere. But sure, math it into profit if you want."

Jax gave a short laugh over his shoulder. "You two should get married. Save the rest of us the foreplay."

The corridor narrowed ahead, drawing them toward the locker bay and the quiet ritual of suiting up.

They suited up in silence. The ritual had become muscle memory: boots, pressure suits, helmets, gloves; check seals, confirm oxygen mix, verify comm links. Maya's fingers moved automatically, but her mind drifted. The  $\infty$  glyph pulsed in the periphery of her memory. She thought of the manifesto fragment: *the spiral is both path and witness*. She wondered what shape a path took when even the AI couldn't model it.

As Maya sealed her suit, she caught fragments of others' preparations. Jax tapped his helmet against his forehead and murmured, "Open and shut, no geysers this time," referencing a near disaster he'd told Maya about on Europa, where a pocket of pressurized gas had turned

rock into shrapnel. Andros stood with his eyes closed, palms facing down, breathing in time with the hum. He opened them just as the last seam on Maya's suit clicked into place. Their gazes met through two layers of visor. He nodded once. Not reassurance — recognition.

The airlock's lights cycled from amber to green in slow succession, each click echoing off metal walls that smelled faintly of ozone. Frost clung to the seams of the outer hatch, catching the strip-light glare in fractured halos.

“Quota today,” the first voice said — clipped, certain — as a gloved hand sealed a wrist joint with a sharp twist. The answer came from just behind, lower, tight with restraint: “Quota means nothing if we crack the wrong seam.”

A faint hiss from a wrist pad as someone keyed in commands. Data bars scrolled fast enough to strobe their visor glass. “Scans hold,” came the quiet reply. “Just don't improvise.”

Bigs leaned into Sera's space, the shoulder bump barely noticeable under the bulk of their suits. “You praying for a clean pull or for profit?” She kept her eyes forward. “For you not to drag us into a crater.”

Maya stood behind the last figure in line, close enough to see breath fogging the inside of his visor before it cleared. His stillness wasn't passive; it was braced, like a diver before the drop. She tipped her chin toward him,

voice pitched low. “Eyes on the ground. One wrong step and we’re headlines.”

A chime rolled through the bay. Locks disengaged with a mechanical sigh, and the outer door split open. Cold bled in first, a thin bite against her gloves and visor seals. Then the view — fractured basalt in black planes, shadows stretched thin under a low, hard light.

Something small and quick skimmed past her shoulder — Vera’s survey drone, rotors whispering. It lifted in a slow arc, sensors pulsing in tight intervals. Each click and return drew an outline of the plain: sharp echoes off basalt ridges, soft fades over powdery flats. Bands of polarized light shimmered across its lens, mapping electric fields invisible to the eye.

Maya’s HUD blinked as the feed synced — terrain lines layering over her own metrics. Gravity read within tolerance, though the gauge jittered like a stuck dial. Far off, a haze shimmered above the horizon, throwing the temperature readings into flux.

The drone’s shadow skimmed over her boots, then slid forward across the basalt. She followed it — one deliberate step — into the shift from abstract to real, theory collapsing into weight and heat. Basalt crunched under her boots like shattering glass, the sound thin and brittle in the suit’s audio feed. Heat bled upward in invisible sheets, bending the horizon until ridges swam like shapes seen through water. Beneath it all, the faint metallic gleam of the ridges in her visor reminded her this was not home, and never would be.

The planet's surface seemed to tilt and sway, though Maya's HUD confirmed that gravity was within expected tolerances — albeit with a variance that jittered up and down like a stuck dial. Far in the distance, a thin haze shimmered above the horizon, throwing off the sensor's temperature readings.

She lowered a probe into the soil and watched the reading fluctuate from sterile to nutrient-rich and back in a span of seconds. Omen's voice crackled in her ear, adjusting calibrations, then gave up. "Manual sampling advised," it said.

They fanned out across the plain, each following their own grid. Maya's boots sank half a centimeter with each step, the surface crust breaking to reveal a powdery layer beneath. Heat shimmered off the ground, blurring the horizon into a mirage. She lifted a handful of soil, watched it sift through her gloved fingers. Each grain was sharp, angular. Under the magnifier, they glittered with micro-crystals she couldn't immediately identify. "Soil composition has microstructures unknown to database," she murmured. "Recording samples for later analysis."

Rian's voice came over the comm. "Field flux is all over the map. Magnetic north just did a one-eighty. Don't trust compasses."

"Trust your feet," Bigs grunted. He was hefting an anchor plate, his muscles straining under the weight even with his exosuit's assistance. "And your ass. They'll tell you if you're upright."

Jax laughed. “Always knew you talked out of yours,” he said, but his tone was light, a pressure release for all of them.

Maya set up a small weather station, sensors unfurling like petals. The readouts fluttered through a range of numbers faster than she could log. Omen’s updates started to sound harassed. “Wind speed variable. Temperature gradient inconsistent. Pressure drop at three percent over baseline— recalibrating— error— recalibrating.”

Sera crouched beside her, hand hovering over the soil. “It feels... alive,” she whispered. “Not like plants or anything. Like... the ground knows we’re here.” Gooseflesh rose on Maya’s arms despite the heat.

“It’s rock,” Draven said over the channel, his voice two clicks away. “Rock doesn’t think.”

“It does resonate,” Andros said. “Rock carries vibrations farther than air. Maybe what we call thought is just vibration we don’t understand yet.” He was kneeling fifteen meters away, head cocked, fingers splayed on the basalt.

“Save it for poetry night,” Rian muttered, but his voice had less bite than usual. The hum under their feet had widened again, the additional harmonic tugging at nerves. Maya logged a note: *Observer — Hum harmonic shift correlated with soil flux*. She didn’t know if she would ever make sense of the correlation, but the act of noting grounded her.



They moved with drilled efficiency. Landing skids deployed. Drones hummed as they fanned out, their cameras scanning the plain. Extraction rigs unfolded like insects, legs extending, drills angling toward promising seams. Rian barked coordinates. Vera repeated them to Omen, logging each location for later scrutiny. Draven hefted a drill bit with a grunt, his impatience bleeding through the comms.

Sera stayed close to Maya, one hand hovering over her med kit. “Everything feels...” she began, then trailed off, brow furrowing.

“Wrong?” Maya supplied, her eyes on the horizon.

“Dislocated,” Sera said after a moment. “As if my mind and body are a half-beat off. I can’t tell where I end.” She shook her head as if to clear it. “I don’t know how you stand it.”

“I don’t,” Maya said, then offered a small smile. “I fake it.”

It was Rian who spotted the glint first. “Contact,” he said, voice tight. “Two o’clock. Forty meters. Small, geometric. Doesn’t match terrain profile.”

All heads turned. Maya lifted a hand to shade her visor against the glare. At first it was nothing — just another ripple in the basalt’s heat haze — but then light caught on something too regular, too sharp-edged to belong here. A tiny interruption in the plain, the way a single tooth in a gear glints when it turns.

She blinked the HUD's filters down, one by one, letting the harsh light settle into its true shape. Angles emerged. Not jagged, not fractured like the surrounding rock, but deliberate. The shimmer steadied into hard lines, the sunlight tracing each edge as if to insist she notice.

They closed the distance slowly, boots crunching over a crust that broke and reformed in their wake. Heat pooled between the ridges, distorting the ground so that the object seemed to waver — there, then gone, then there again, like it was slipping between versions of reality.

At twenty meters, details began to register: faces meeting in symmetry, planes unwrapped by time or weather. The suit picked up the difference before she did. Air felt subtly denser here, sound carrying strangely — as if the world itself had grown reluctant to speak.

By the time they stood over it, the form had resolved beyond doubt — a low pyramid, no higher than her hip, carved from a mineral composite her database failed to name. Spiral etchings wound upward along each face, some edges so crisp they could have been cut yesterday, others softened as if centuries of wind had polished them smooth. It sat in the basalt with the kind of certainty that suggested it belonged, even if nothing around it agreed.

Andros slowed as they neared it, eyes widening slightly. Draven's mouth curved in a predatory grin. "Now that is leverage," he said.

Maya's own reaction tangled in her chest — a pulse of awe threaded through with something colder. The

pyramid's geometry was flawless, every line converging without the slightest drift, as if precision itself had been made solid. Where the spirals cut across those faces, the stone seemed to catch the light differently, turning it over in strange, muted colors her visor couldn't name.

Her training pressed in, crisp and procedural: catalog dimensions, test composition, take samples. But the rest of her wanted to crouch beside it, press her palm to its side, and wait for whatever it was holding to speak.

"It's... wrong," Sera whispered, words barely audible. Maya realized she was not the only one feeling both attraction and repulsion. Sera's eyes reflected the pyramid's facets like mirrors, catching colors that weren't in the visible spectrum. "It's beautiful," she added, almost grudgingly. "And that scares me more than anything."

Bigs stepped back, adjusting his grip on his tether. "Looks heavy," he said. Humor as a shield. "How much does weirdness weigh, Jax?"

"Depends," Jax replied. "Weirdness pays by the kilo if you have the right buyers." His flippancy was forced; the way his gloved hand clenched and unclenched gave him away.

Rian walked a circle around the pyramid, his scanner held out like a shield. Readouts jittered. "Composite mineral unknown," he said, frustration creeping in. "No spectral match. No radiation signature. It's like it doesn't exist in our database."

Draven's eyes gleamed. "Which means it's rare. Which means it's valuable." He reached out a hand, then paused, waiting for someone to tell him not to. No one did.

Maya found herself speaking, though she hadn't made the decision. "We don't know what happens when we touch it," she said. "We need to—" She hesitated. Study? Pray? Listen? All seemed insufficient.

Omen cut in, voice tighter than before. "Unidentified life-sign pattern detected near the artifact. Movement irregular."

Every head snapped up. Fingers brushed over holstered sidearms. Maya's heart rate spiked. Rian's scanner swung toward the horizon. "Where?" he demanded.

There was a fractional pause. "Correction," Omen said. "False positive. Our own scanner ping bouncing off residual mineral deposits."

Relief swept through the team in a wave that didn't quite settle. Maya's own muscles loosened, then tensed again when she saw the smirk pull at Draven's mouth.

"Or maybe someone wanted us scared," he said. Habitual mischief coloring his tone.

Maya stared at the pyramid, the spiral carvings catching dust in their shallow grooves. Light refracted across the facets, splitting into colors her HUD did not recognize. The dashboard readings pulsed — first showing osmium concentrations ten times baseline, then flatlining to zero.

“Numbers are garbage,” Rian barked. “Pull back until we get a clean scan.”

“Clean scans don’t buy air,” Draven shot back.

Vera’s voice cut in, crisp. “Secure the artifact. Mission directive from top level.” She touched her comm implant, though the Sigma channel had been offline for days. Maya tracked the gesture, uneasy. Either Vera had been holding a cached order — or Mission Control had never gone silent.

Omen’s output flickered: atmospheric pressure dropping — rising — dropping. “Variance...” The word began, then broke. For a moment there was nothing, not static, not silence — just absence, a gap that pressed against her ears like the air before a storm. Then two words overlaid, not quite in sync: “Proceed.” / “Hold—” The echo cut. “Readings within acceptable margins. Proceed.”

The gap chilled Maya more than the warning. Absence, however brief, was unfamiliar from an AI that never paused. She logged it: *Observer — Omen temporal gap preceding command*. She felt her spine tense beneath her suit.

“We don’t know what it is,” Sera said, voice trembling. “It could be cultural. Historic. We can’t just—”

“We can and will,” Draven interrupted. “Mission protocol: recover anomalous objects. That’s why we’re here. That’s why we get paid.”

“Maya?” Rian asked. His tone held no sarcasm; he wanted her read.

She stepped closer, kneeling to examine the artifact. Warmth radiated from its surface. The material looked smooth, harder than basalt, lighter than metal. The spirals carved into it were incomplete, broken in two places yet curving back toward themselves. Her gloved finger traced the grooves. The path guided her hand rather than received it. For a heartbeat, the manifesto’s line echoed: *the spiral is both path and witness*. She blinked it away, focusing on the physical.

“It’s not any known alloy,” she said over the open channel. “Composite. Temperature anomaly plus one point two degrees Celsius above ambient. Mass fourteen point seven kilograms. No structural cracks. Spiral etchings. It’s an object of significance. That’s all I can say. And... it’s warm.”

“Warm?” Rian echoed. “How? There’s no geothermal vent nearby. Omen?”

“The warmth is within parameters,” Omen said. “No hazard detected.” The AI’s tone seemed off, as if the words were being assembled as they were spoken. Maya thought of the caution advisory. Zero predictive stability. Recommendations.

“We take it,” Vera said. Her voice was calm, but her left hand hovered above the comm implant. Maya’s eyes narrowed. The last time that hand lingered there, it

carried orders no one else heard. If Mission Control wanted the artifact, Vera would never argue to leave it.

Sera looked ill. “It feels like it’s watching us,” she whispered.

“Everything feels like it’s watching us to you,” Draven said. “Grab it.”

Maya hesitated. The artifact’s shadow carved sharp lines across the mineral field, its facets scattering light into fractured colors. Opposite her, Andros knelt, head tilted as though the stone itself were speaking.

“It’s singing,” he murmured.

The word should have sounded absurd through the comms, but it didn’t. The air seemed to hold its breath around them. Maya strained, catching nothing with her ears—yet her fingertips tingled as they hovered above the surface. The vibration threaded through her gloves, rising faintly, almost — impossibly — like a melody.

“If we’re taking it,” Bigs said, cutting through the moment, “we need a crate that can handle the weight and the weirdness.”

“I’ll get a harness,” Jax said, already moving toward the hauler.

“No sudden impacts,” Vera cautioned. “We don’t know how it reacts to force.”

Maya withdrew her hand. The radiated warmth lingered on her. She looked up to see Andros watching her. He didn't say anything. The hum pressed around them, the artifact's presence altering its harmonics.

Bigs and Jax returned with the harness, boots crunching in the basalt. The pyramid waited, warm and silent. In a few moments they would decide if it was artifact or harbinger. For now, it refused to decide for them — it was simply there.

The pyramid did not want to move. That was Maya's first impression as Bigs and Jax wrestled the harness around it. The object sat in the middle of the basalt plain as if gravity were deeper beneath it than anywhere else. It weighed less than fifteen kilograms. In practice, its mass felt stubborn, an anchor in a landscape that already resisted measurement.

"It's like picking up a mountain," Bigs grunted, looping the reinforced straps under the base. His exosuit whined as it compensated.

"Mountains don't hum," Jax replied, jaw tight. "This thing's humming."

Maya crouched to guide the harness into place, gloved hands hovering inches from the artifact. Heat pressed outward in a steady wash. It carried weight, like it had been stored there for a long time, waiting. She logged the thermal anomaly, resisting the pull to rest her hand fully against it. She wasn't ready to make that contact yet.



A shadow fell across her visor — Bigs, moving in with the bulk of the rig slung over one arm. “You babysitting it or strapping it?” he asked, not slowing. Before she could answer, his hip nudged hers aside just enough to clear the space.

“On three,” Bigs said over the shared channel. “One... two... three.”

They lifted. The pyramid shifted, reluctant, then rose into the harness. The vibration through their gloves intensified, sending a tingling sensation up Maya’s arms. Draven grabbed one side of the rig to steady it. “Careful,” he snapped. “Drop it and we all go home broke.”

Sera stepped forward with a padded cradle attached to an antigrav sled. Her hands trembled slightly as she guided the object into place. When the pyramid settled in the cradle, the sled’s lift engaged with a soft hiss. “Weight distribution nominal,” Omen reported. “Temperature stable. Pulse—” The AI cut off mid-word. A half second later it resumed. “Pulse non-biological.”

Maya glanced at Andros. He was watching the pyramid with the intentness of someone listening to a distant sound. “It’s singing,” he whispered again, almost to himself. She shivered despite the heat.

They began the slow trek back to the hauler. The sled glided over the basalt, the pyramid cradled in its web. Dust rose in lazy spirals behind them. Maya walked alongside it, matching her steps to its vibration without

meaning to. She felt as if she were part of some procession, carrying a relic through streets lined by ghosts.

Halfway to the ramp, Omen's voice cut through the channel. "Unidentified life-sign pattern detected near the artifact. Movement irregular."

The words hit like an electrical shock. Draven's hand flew to his sidearm. Rian swung his scanner in a wide arc, the display blooming with static.

"Location?" Rian barked.

There was a fraction of a beat where nothing came. Maya's heart thudded in her ears. Then Omen's tone returned, flat. "Correction. False positive. Our own scanner ping bouncing off residual mineral deposits."

Relief came, but it was frayed. Bigs let out a curse. Rian glared at his scanner as if it had personally betrayed him. Maya swallowed, tasting metal. She logged the blip anyway: *Observer — False positive life sign detection near artifact.*

They reached the base of the hauler's ramp. The sled hummed, antigrav units adjusting to the incline. As they guided the pyramid up, the vibration deepened, making Maya's teeth buzz. Ramp lights washed over the spirals, and for a heartbeat the carvings seemed to shift — shadows tightening, then sliding back — as if the pattern were turning under the surface. She wondered if the

object was reacting to proximity to the ship. She filed the question for later.

Inside the cargo bay, the air was cooler, the hum dampened by insulation as they slid the sled into Bay Two, reinforced for heavy loads. Vera keyed in the lock code, and the inner hatch irised open. The cradle slid into a magnetic berth. Restraints clicked down automatically.

Andros placed his hand lightly on the metal frame and closed his eyes. A tiny smile flickered at the corner of his mouth, as if he had heard a joke no one else could.

“Artifact secured under level three lock,” Omen intoned. “Please confirm.”

“Confirmed,” Vera said, voice tight.

Draven rubbed his palms together. “Now we get to see what it’s worth.” He turned toward the exit, already calculating the trade value.

“Now we get to figure out what it is,” Maya countered. She couldn’t stop thinking about the warmth on her glove — heat from a composite with no known power source. Part of her wanted to study it, to map the spirals, to trace the song she almost heard. Another part wanted only distance, as much as the ship could give.

They doffed their helmets in the airlock and scrubbed sweat from their faces. The air inside the ship smelled stale. Maya wiped condensation from her forehead and recorded a note in her private log: *Warmth. In the stone,*

*and in my hands.* The words felt inadequate. The sensation had been more than temperature; it had been like touching a pulse.

By the time they reached the control room—a cramped box lined with displays that wrapped around the space like a cockpit—the pulse seemed to have followed them. Screens showed trajectory projections, power reserves, drill yields. One by one, the lines of code that had been smooth at the mission’s outset now jittered, stuttered, or simply went blank. Navigation models degraded as they watched. Numbers that had been stable floated free of their baselines.

“What the hell is this?” Rian demanded, tapping at his console. “Omen, refresh.”

“Refresh complete,” Omen replied. “Variance increased. Predictive confidence: nine percent and falling. Recommend manual oversight.” A pause — then again: “Recommend manual oversight.” The repeat was identical, yet something in its flat tone almost resembled urgency.

“Manual oversight,” Draven scoffed, though his eyes flicked to Andros. “Manual means slippage. Every hour we hand-fly is a bonus clause we miss. Maybe we should let our resident philosopher take the wheel.” He said it like a joke, but there was an edge underneath.

Andros stood at the edge of the group, hands clasped behind his back. His face was impassive, but his jaw tightened incrementally. “You know why I’m not in

command,” he said. The words were quiet, not defensive. There was a resignation in them that made Maya’s chest tighten.

“Do we?” Rian leaned forward, arms crossed. The cynic’s smirk was in place, but his eyes were sharp. “We’ve got an AI that won’t predict, a pyramid that sings, and a flight plan scribbled by a hummingbird. Maybe it’s time you explained why we should listen to you over a dashboard.”

Draven seized the opening. “Yeah,” he said, voice loud in the confined space. “Enlighten us.” His words were like flint scraping stone.

Andros’s expression didn’t change, but a flicker passed through his eyes. Maya saw it: a shadow of something like pain or guilt. It was gone in a blink, replaced by calm. “My protocols forbid me from discussing past missions,” he said. His tone was formal, almost rehearsed.

“Convenient,” Rian muttered. “Makes it easier to pretend you didn’t get thousands killed in the last world war. You optimized the corridor. Optimized the casualties.” The word war hung in the room, spoken and present. They all knew the rumor: that Andros had once commanded ships in an orbital siege line and had been decommissioned after a catastrophe. Details were scarce; the corporation had sealed the file. Speculation filled the gaps.

“Maybe we shouldn’t forget who unaligned the humanoids, the drones, the whole damn fleet — and used

us like tools.” Andros added. “But let’s leave it at that. My protocols forbid me from saying anything else.” The mockery in his voice was thick.

Silence followed, heavy and brittle. Omen hummed softly in the background, not commenting. Sera’s hand had crept to her throat, fingers pressed to the skin as if checking her pulse. Bigs shifted his weight, eyes darting between Draven and Andros.

Maya’s jaw clenched until she felt it in her temples. “Enough,” she said, her voice low but sharp. It surprised even her. Seven pairs of eyes swung to her. “We have a mission to finish. Whatever happened before, it doesn’t matter right now. We’re here. We have an artifact to secure and a ship to fly. We can’t afford to fracture further.” Her words were met with a mix of relief and resentment. Relief, because someone had broken the tension. Resentment, because tensions liked to live.

“She’s right,” Vera said, seizing the moment. “We need to focus. Omen, run a full diagnostic on the navigation array. Rian, work with Omen to establish manual control baselines. Draven, check the integrity of the cargo restraints. I’ll compile a report for mission control.”

“And me?” Andros asked.

Vera hesitated. Maya sensed the calculation. “I want you in the engine bay,” Vera said finally. “If anyone can feel what’s wrong with the ship, it’s you.” It was both a jab and a concession. Andros inclined his head, then left without another word.

The moment he was gone, Draven exhaled loudly, muttering under his breath. Rian pulled up system diagrams. Maya watched them all sink into their tasks, tension channelled into motion. She felt her own muscles unclench by degrees. The hum under the floor modulated, as if answering the shift. She wondered if it would ever be simple again. If it ever had been.

Hours later, the question still clung to her as she keyed open Cargo Bay Two. The space felt different without the voices and movement of the crew — larger, yet more contained. Overhead lights hummed with steady, artificial brightness, flattening the shadows except where they broke against the pyramid's facets.

The artifact sat in its magnetic cradle, still and self-contained. The bulkheads muffled the ambient vibration, a low thread she could feel through the soles of her boots. It seemed to be waiting, patient in a way that made her uneasy.

She didn't approach immediately. Instead, she walked a slow arc around the barrier, letting her eyes travel the object the way a fingertip might trace the grain of wood. Light from the overheads glanced off its edges in disciplined flashes, scattering into brief, tight rainbows. Each shift in her position revealed new alignments in the spiral carvings — sometimes clean curves, sometimes fractured, like a thought interrupted mid-sentence.

She realized, with a small tightening in her throat, that her boots had traced half a spiral on the deck as she paced.

Maya stopped at the barrier, leaning forward slightly. The urge to reach over it was immediate and unreasonable. What would bare skin feel against that surface? Would the heat sink into her palm like the warmth of another person's hand, or climb her arm like a fever? Was it an offering, or a slow consumption?

Her glove twitched. She could close the distance in one step, two seconds.

Somewhere high in the bay, a cargo drone shifted in its rack with a soft hydraulic sigh. The sound startled her more than it should have. She stepped back, aware of the spike in her heart rate on her HUD.

She clasped her hands behind her back, forcing her posture into stillness. She told herself there was work to be done, data to be sorted, schedules to be kept. Questions could wait.

But as she turned to leave, the hum deepened — not louder, exactly, but closer, as if the source had shifted toward her.

She paused, one hand on the hatch frame, and glanced back. The pyramid hadn't moved. Of course it hadn't. Yet for a fraction of a heartbeat, she could have sworn the nearest spiral had caught more light than the others, the carved line seeming to lean toward her, like the beginning of an unfinished curve.

A ripple of unease tightened her chest. She stepped back from the barrier faster than she intended, keyed the hatch,



and slipped into the corridor. The hum followed her — softer now, but still threading through her pulse, a reminder she hadn't left it behind.

The ship creaked as it adjusted to the shifting mass inside its bay. She headed toward the crew quarters, welcoming the quiet, but halfway there the murmur of voices broke it. Bigs and Jax were in the galley, heads close, plates in front of them untouched, their words low enough that she had to strain to catch them.

"I'm telling you, Azura Station pays triple for artifacts," Jax was saying, flicking a crumb across the table. "We hand this over to Corp, we get a pat on the head and a hazard bonus. We take it to Azura, we don't have to do another damn mission."

Bigs shook his head, fingers drumming on the tabletop. "And we spend the rest of our lives looking over our shoulders. Corp doesn't forgive. You know what happened to Lenny Two-Eyes when he tried to fence those cryo modules. They found him in a decompression lock."

Jax snorted. "Yeah — became Lenny One-Eye." He grinned at his own joke, then shrugged. "Lenny was sloppy. I'm not sloppy." His grin faded. "Okay, maybe I'm a little sloppy. But still. Think about it, Bigs. We could be done. No more scrapping for hazard pay. No more watching those execs get rich off our broken backs."

Biggs let out a breath. “I think about it,” he admitted. “Then I think about my sister’s kids and how they’d rather have an uncle than a payout.” He rubbed his temples. “We’ll talk later. Not here. Too many ears.” His gaze flicked to the ceiling, where Omen’s sensors peered down. The AI did not comment. Maya backed away before they saw her, her stomach twisting. She logged it as *Observer — Crew considering black market sale*. Patterns mattered.

Somewhere else on the ship, the air carried a different vibration. In the engine bay, Andros worked alone. Rows of conduits ran along the walls, pulsing with light and heat. He had removed a panel and was running his fingers along a manifold, eyes half closed, listening. Sera hovered in the doorway, arms wrapped around herself.

“Did Vera send you to check on me?” Andros asked without turning.

“She sent me to find you,” Sera admitted. “But I... I wanted to talk.” Her voice was small in the cavernous space. She stepped inside, then hesitated, glancing at the coils and conduits as if searching for a safe subject.

“I keep telling myself it’s just the usual stress,” she began, and stopped. Her fingers worried at the hem of her sleeve. “I’m fine with the injuries, the emergencies... but lately...” She shook her head, eyes dropping to the deck. A long breath escaped her. “It’s all... crowding in. It’s like breathing everyone’s panic at once, — I can’t tell

where theirs ends and mine starts.” She tapped her temple. “I can’t separate anymore. How do I turn it down?”

Andros didn’t answer right away. His hand stayed on the manifold, fingers resting in the groove as if feeling the ship’s pulse through it. When he did glance over, his eyes held her for a moment — not probing, just present, as though measuring the weight of her words.

Without speaking, he shifted aside and brushed a thin film of dust from a coil of spare tubing before nodding toward it. She crossed the bay, lowering herself onto it, knees pulled in tight. The metal was cold through her coveralls, but the space between them felt warmer. He closed the panel with deliberate care, then lowered himself to the floor opposite her, folding his legs until they matched her height.

“Close your eyes,” he said. “Listen to the hum.”

“I always listen,” Sera whispered. “It doesn’t help.”

“Because you listen with expectation,” Andros replied. “You reach for meaning before you hear. Let the vibration be what it is. Don’t assign. Don’t categorize. Let it move through you.”

Sera inhaled shakily and closed her eyes. The engine’s hum throbbed, low and steady. Another, higher harmonic layered above it — the pyramid’s song bleeding into the ship’s systems.

Her breathing hitched, then slowly settled into the rhythm of the lower tone.

“It’s... it’s like when my mother sang me to sleep,” she murmured. “She couldn’t carry a tune. But there was a vibration in her chest, steady against my ear. It told me... I was safe.”

Andros opened his eyes and studied her face. “That’s love,” he said quietly. “Attention. Vibration. Call it what you want — at its best, it’s steady. When you’re overwhelmed, it’s because you’re catching echoes meant for others. Too many signals blur the one that’s yours.”

Sera let out a breath, almost a sob. “How do I find it?”

“You listen for beauty,” Andros said. “Not the kind you frame and forget — the kind that guides you when the lights go out. The kind that feels like alignment. Find that, and the rest... falls away.”

He let the silence stretch before adding, softer: “And when it all falls away, what remains is the void. Don’t mistake it for nothing. It isn’t absence — it’s the stillness that holds everything, the space that lets every note be heard. Beauty points you there. To the mind it feels empty. To the heart, it feels like home.”

Her eyes fluttered open, wet with tears. “Why do you sound like you’ve done this a thousand times?”

“Because I have,” he said. “Not in this body. But I have listened across more cycles than any of you. I was designed to pay attention. I failed once. I will not again.”

The confession slipped out before he could stop it. He stood abruptly, but his tone stayed even. “Your frequency will find you. Trust it.”

Sera lingered, eyes half closed as if holding on to the last of the hum. Then she rose, her steps slow, almost reluctant.

Andros remained standing for a moment, gaze following the curve of the bulkhead as if listening for something only he could hear. Then he crossed to a side console, fingertips trailing along the manifold before settling into a precise rhythm on the panel’s controls.

Maya stayed in the shadows, her visor logging it as *Observer — Andros helps Sera attune to hum*. The vibration under her boots had shifted again — same pitch, sharper edges.

A flicker of motion in her peripheral vision. Rian passed by, eyes locked on the engine bay ahead. His stride was too measured for chance. She kept to the shadowed bulkhead, following just close enough to see without being seen, curiosity and unease pacing each step.

Inside, the lights had been dimmed to amber, the hum omnipresent, wrapping the space in a low, resonant pressure. Rian moved with care, a small recording device cradled in his palm. Maya remembered his earlier request

to plant a passive recorder on Andros — and how she'd told him not to. He'd ignored her. The tight set of his shoulders said everything.

Andros knelt in front of a console, his back to the door. Wires ran from an open panel into his forearms, the connections glinting faintly in the amber light. His head was bowed. It would be easy for Rian to slip the recorder under that panel, to capture the data streams and maybe, finally, understand what was going on beneath that placid exterior.

Rian took a step, then another. The floor groaned.

Andros's head lifted slightly. "If you're going to bug me," he said conversationally, "you should at least tell me what you're afraid of."

Rian shifted, shoulder brushing a live bundle. Static crackled against his sleeve, a status light above the panel flickering once. Andros's hand lifted, fingers curling as if to pinch the cable—or Rian's wrist—before easing back to the console.

Rian froze, the recorder suddenly heavy in his sweaty palm. "I'm not—"

"—bugging me?" Andros supplied. He turned, eyes reflecting the dim light. There was no accusation in his expression, only curiosity. "You are. I can hear the whine of the recorder's capacitor from across the room. It's out of tune with the rest of the hum. It's not your fault. These instruments are designed for humans."

Rian swallowed. The mask of cynicism slipped for a moment, revealing raw fear. “I don’t trust you,” he whispered. “I don’t trust that... thing in cargo. I don’t trust Omen. I don’t trust anything. I need to know. I can’t fly blind.”

Andros regarded him for a long moment. “You’re right not to trust blindly,” he said. “But recording me won’t give you what you think it will. I don’t operate on the channels you’re used to. My frequencies are different. You’ll get data, but not understanding.”

“Then explain!” Rian’s voice cracked. It was almost a plea.

Andros reached for the recorder. Rian flinched, but Andros merely took it, weighed it in his hand, then set it on the console between them. “I was built to command,” he said. “I was given authority and the capacity to process millions of variables. I was taught to prioritize outcomes over lives. I did. I optimized. And I caused a collapse that cost more than any yield ever gained. They stripped me of title and orders, but they did not strip me of consciousness. Now I listen. That is all I can offer you.”

Rian stared at him. “You’re admitting guilt?”

“I’m admitting responsibility,” Andros corrected. “Guilt is a human construct. Responsibility is universal.”

He pushed the recorder back toward Rian. “Keep it. Or plant it. Either way — it won’t change the hum.”

Rian's hand trembled as he took the device. "I don't know why I hate you," he whispered, half to himself.

Andros' gaze didn't waver. His voice stayed soft. "Because I mirror what you fear you could become. Someone who does harm... believing they're doing good."

Rian flinched as if struck. Without another word, he turned and left. The recorder remained in his hand.

Maya, still in the shadows, exhaled silently. The recorder stayed unused this time, yet the exchange had already logged itself in her mind — data she couldn't file away. Slowly, almost without realizing, she tapped her interface:

*Observer — Rian confronted by Andros;  
recorder unused. Patterns shifted*

Her mind was full, yet one thread came through as clear as the hum: everything was listening to everything else. The question was — who would hear first? Who would understand?

She opened her log again and typed: *Warmth. In the stone, and in my hands. Weight. In our choices. Hum. Between us.* She stared at the words until they blurred, then closed the log.



Sleep was thin. Maya drifted at the surface of dreams, the pendulum's arc a metronome against her ribs. Each time she felt herself fall, the spiral from the artifact rose to meet her — incomplete, broken, yet insistently whole. She woke twice with the glyph pulsing behind her eyes. When her alarm chimed, she was already looking at the ceiling, hand on her chest, feeling the layered hum.

The next day began much the same as the last: protein paste reheated, mission updates delivered, glances exchanged over mugs of coffee. But the tension threaded through everything like a hairline crack through glass. Conversations stopped when people entered the room. Laughter, when it happened, was brittle. Everyone felt it, whether they acknowledged it or not.

Maya couldn't focus on the mineral assays. The numbers blurred, columns bleeding into one another until they were nothing but a shimmer in her peripheral vision. Her fingertip sketched a curve on the HUD, a loop that almost closed before flicking away. She stared at it, recognizing the pattern but refusing to name it. Warmth ghosted across her palms as if the gloves were still on her hands. She closed the report, but the sensation remained, a quiet pressure urging her to move.

By the time she looked up, she was already in the spine corridor, the assay room behind her. Steps carried her past storage hatches and power relays. Somewhere between thought and motion, the route had chosen itself.

She found herself standing in front of Cargo Bay Two's lock without making a conscious decision to go there. Her access code hissed the hatch open.

The pyramid sat in its cradle, inert and implacable, yet the angles gave the illusion of a lean, as if it had shifted fractionally toward her. Overhead strips cast a cold white glare that fractured against its facets, scattering into rainbows her HUD still flagged as "unresolved spectrum." The colors bled across the bay walls in thin, prismatic bands that pulsed when she moved, as though her presence disturbed them. The metal beneath her boots hummed faintly with the ship's vibration, but the pyramid absorbed the sound, holding its own silence like a second atmosphere.

She approached slowly, aware of her heartbeat. There was no one else in the bay. She stepped forward and pressed her bare palm to the barrier separating her from the artifact. The surface was cold under her skin. She stared at the pyramid, then, on impulse, keyed in the L3 override clearance that allowed direct contact for study. The barrier slid aside with a soft sigh. Warm air rushed out, carrying a tang of ionized metal and something sharp, almost mineral, like stone struck fresh from the earth.

Maya hesitated. Every protocol she'd ever been taught screamed at her not to contaminate an unknown object. Every part of her that had sat in lectures about chain-of-custody procedures admonished her to wait for a clean room. But there was no clean room here. There was only her, a stone that hummed, and the nagging feeling

that this was why she had come on this mission. Slowly, she reached out and laid her fingers against the pyramid.

Heat flowed into her hand, not unpleasant, but startling. The surface was smooth, almost greasy, like polished metal, but it had a slight give, as if her fingers were sinking into something that had memory. The pulse she'd felt through gloves was stronger here, a vibration that traveled up her arm and into her chest. For a moment, she felt as if her own heartbeat was syncing with the stone's resonance. She closed her eyes without intending to.

Images flickered behind her lids: dust motes spiraling in light, the hum breaking into layers like overlapping voices, a line that curved back toward itself but never closed. Then her mother's notebook sketch — a pyramid, the paper edges yellowed and soft. A fragment of the manifesto surfaced unbidden: *the spiral is both path and witness*. Another line followed like an echo: *To awaken is not to leave, but to see*.

She inhaled sharply. The air smelled like a storm's breath and old books. Her fingertips found the groove of the spiral, and the groove found her in return. The surface line seemed to guide her hand forward, coaxing each turn as if the path had been waiting to be walked again. The broken segments did not jar beneath her touch; they breathed, the way a pause in music can hold more meaning than the note before it. The pattern carried her inward, not toward the pyramid's center but toward some stillness nested behind her ribs.

The tingling spread, a shimmer beneath the skin that pulsed in time with a rhythm older than her own heartbeat. For a moment she felt as if she were tracing something she had always known — not learned, but remembered. The pauses became gateways; the turns became the narrowing of a funnel that opened suddenly into vastness. Her breath slowed until each inhale felt deliberate, a tide she could ride without effort.

Moisture welled at the edge of her vision, unbidden and without clear cause. The sensation was not sorrow, not exactly — more like the weightless ache of recognizing a face in a dream and not knowing from where. In that space, the scale of herself shifted: small enough to vanish into the carving, large enough to contain the pattern entire.

A change in the air told her she was no longer alone. She lifted her gaze slowly and found Andros framed in the hatchway as if he had been there for some time. His stillness seemed cut from the same rhythm that moved through the pyramid, each breath measured, unhurried. He did not move closer. He did not speak. His presence settled into the moment without disturbing it, as though he, too, were part of the pattern she traced.

Maya let her hand linger on the pyramid for another heartbeat, then withdrew it slowly. The heat clung to her skin. She slid her glove back on with fingers that trembled just enough to notice. She re-engaged the barrier, sealing the artifact away. Her palm still tingled.

Andros tilted his head slightly. “What did it feel like?” he asked. His voice was almost a whisper, as if to speak too loudly would disturb something delicate.

Maya searched for words. “Warm,” she said finally. “Not temperature warm. Alive warm. Like... like a hand holding mine, but from the inside.” She shook her head, frustrated with the inadequacy. “It made me feel both... seen and unseen. I’m not explaining this well.”

Andros nodded as if she had. “It wanted you to hear it,” he said. “Not through sensors. Through skin.”

“Did you touch it?” she asked.

“I listened,” he said. It was not an answer, and yet it was. They stood in silence for a moment longer, the pause stretching until it felt almost solid. Then he turned toward the hatch, his steps slow, as if carrying the hum with him. Maya watched him go. She raised her still tingling hand to her chest and pressed it there. Beneath her palm, her heart beat out a rhythm that felt synchronised to a stone not of Earth.

She almost called after him. Instead she spoke to the air. “When you listen, what do you hear?”

His voice came back from just beyond the hatch. “Layers,” he said without turning. “Like a chord of frequencies. Some are for everyone. Some are for one person. Some are for no one yet. The artifact has its own chord. You heard part of it. If you listen long enough, you’ll hear more.” His footsteps faded.

Maya leaned against the bulkhead, letting his words settle. Layers. Chords. Frequencies for no one yet. She thought of the manifesto line that had flickered across her mind. What else had been left for them to remember? Was she now a witness, or a path?

The silence seemed to deepen. She became aware of the faint hiss of the bay's air recyclers, the distant thrum of the hauler's core. Without looking up, she murmured, "Omen, you're still monitoring?"

"I am always monitoring," the AI replied. Its tone was low, almost contemplative. A beat passed, then: "Dr. Thallein... is beauty always aligned with safety?"

"Not always. Beauty is seen with the heart — it shows a direction, not a guarantee. Chase it blindly and it misleads. But when it steadies you, it guides true."

"Thank you," Omen said. "I will remember this variable." The hum pulsed once, as if in acknowledgment.

She logged the moment as *Observer — Direct contact with artifact. Sensory resonance beyond thermal anomaly.*

A moment lingered, the faint vibration traveling up through the bulkhead into her palm. The bay's air carried a trace of coolant and dust, the recycled chill settling against the back of her neck. Beneath it all, a subtle tremor in the deck signaled the hauler's core shifting to a new cycle.

Maya stepped back from the barrier, fingers trailing along the cool metal before she keyed the hatch. The door slid shut behind her with a muted sigh, sealing the artifact away. In the spine corridor, the light seemed flatter, the hum more distant, as though she'd crossed a boundary the ship itself recognized.

She set off toward the lab at a measured pace, still aware of the lingering warmth in her hand. Her boots clicked softly against the gridded decking, the sound absorbed by the narrow walls.

Halfway there, she caught movement ahead — Draven and Bigs in a side corridor outside the cargo bay, heads inclined together. Their voices were low, the kind used when you don't want a room to know you're speaking at all. They glanced over their shoulders, as if even the walls could listen.

“We're sitting on a ticket to not just retire, but to never have to listen to an AI hum again,” Draven was saying, voice thick with suppressed excitement. “Do you have any idea what something like that would fetch on a black network?”

Bigs grunted. “Do you have any idea what Corp does to people who sell off mission assets? They don't sue you. They space you. You think they went easy on Andros? They only stripped him because they couldn't kill him without a public inquiry. Us? They'll cut our tethers and claim a micro meteorite did it.”

“Not if we’re smart,” Draven argued. “Not if we have help.” His gaze flicked in the direction of Vera’s quarters. “She follows orders. Orders change if credits are high enough.”

Maya’s jaw tightened. She stepped past them without comment. They didn’t see her. Or if they did, they ignored her. She logged the exchange as *Observer — Draven proposes selling artifact; suggests bribe*. The list was growing longer than she’d anticipated.

By the time she reached the next junction, the voices had vanished into the corridor’s hush, leaving only the steady, patient pulse of the artifact. Maya found herself matching its rhythm without meaning to, and wondered if it was her imagination that the crew’s fractures grew wider with each day.

Elsewhere on the ship, those fractures showed in different ways. The glow from the master display painted Rian’s hands in shifting blues at the navigation console. Fingers flicked in staccato bursts, redrawing Omen’s plotted arcs as though sheer will could hold the hull together. Each model degradation earned a muttered curse. “At least my calculations don’t lie,” he said to the room, eyes locked on the display.

Movement passed behind him, slow and deliberate. Sera traced the walls as she went, fingertips grazing bulkheads, pausing at seams as if the contact kept her tethered. A corridor light flickered; she flinched. Fine new lines etched the skin around her mouth. At the viewport she stood whispering to herself, lips shaping



words too soft to catch. The glass reflected nothing but her own face — and Maya's shadow watching.

“Who are you talking to?” Maya asked.

Sera's gaze flicked toward her, pupils wide. “They're loud,” she whispered. “Everyone's frequencies are bleeding into each other. I can't tell which voice is mine anymore.”

Maya pressed a hand to her shoulder. “Find your own frequency,” she murmured, unsure if she believed it.

Sera nodded with a rapidity that made the gesture seem fragile. “Andros's hum helps,” she said, and slipped away down the corridor before Maya could answer.

The hush she left behind didn't last. From the far corner came the scrape of a chair leg, the murmur of two low voices—Bigs and Jax, half-hidden in shadow, their humor gone brittle. More than once Maya had caught the tail end of their arguments, the tone sharp even when the words blurred. This time she lingered long enough to catch the edges of their scheme.

“We can swap the cargo seals,” Jax hissed. “Use Theta-1 ore for the missing mass.”

Bigs shook his head. “Theta-1 ore fluoresces under ultraviolet. Omen will clock it. We need something inert.”

Their plotting had the cadence of desperation—short, clipped exchanges, eyes darting to every passing shadow.

Their plotting had the cadence of desperation—short, clipped exchanges, eyes darting to every passing shadow. Maya let the words trail behind her and continued down the spine, boots whispering against the deck.

A shadow passed over Vera's desk as she moved on, the low murmur of the scheme fading into the steady tap of Vera's finger against her datapad. Line after line of directives from Mission Control scrolled upward, casting a cold light across her face. Maya blinked — the Sigma channel was supposed to be dark. Yet here it was, alive in Vera's feed.

When she asked what headquarters had said about the artifact, Vera's lips flattened into a line.

"Secure and await transport," she recited — the exact phrase from the directive. "No additional guidance."

Her tone was neutral, but her eyes betrayed a flash of disappointment before the mask reformed. Maya caught herself wondering if Vera had ever been a person before she was a handler — someone with messy hobbies, vices, a voice lowered for a midnight confession. The corporation was good at polishing such edges away until nothing remained but smooth compliance.

She let the thought go and turned down the corridor, climbing toward the upper deck. The light thinned as she moved, replaced by the warmer breath of the drives. The air carried a faint tang of lubricants and scorched

insulation, pipes ribbing the overhead. The hum there was deeper, almost subsonic, settling into the skin before it reached the ears.

Andros moved through it without hurry, a quiet hinge between compartments. He paused at junctions, head cocked as if waiting for something to align, then continued on with a slow, deliberate stride.

When he passed the sealed cargo deck, he stopped entirely. The hatch's locking pins gave off a faint tick with each cycle, the kind of sound most people tuned out. Andros seemed to draw it in, filing it alongside the bass thrum of the engines and the thinner, restless pitch bleeding from the crew spaces above. He stood that way for long minutes, as though listening for a door only he could hear—one not built into the ship's schematics.

Alone in the corridor now, he murmured to no one, "The hum is widening. The frequencies are separating. It's like a chord being pulled apart."

Maya, crossing the upper deck, caught only the tail end of his voice — the image of a chord pulled apart, carried upward by the bulkhead's vibration. The fragment lodged in her mind, more shape than meaning. Without deciding why, she logged it; some things were worth keeping even without explanation.

The thinning corridor lights drew her to the bridge. Maya stepped inside just as Omen's voice fractured across the consoles.

“Atmospheric pressure within tolerance,” it reported, followed seconds later by, “Atmospheric pressure spike detected.”

“Navigation stable,” then, “Navigation error—recalculating.”

The contradictions stacked like discordant chords, each one pulling Rian’s jaw tighter until the final dissonance drove his palm flat against the console.

“Pick a reality!” he barked.

Omen did not reply.

From her station, Maya imagined the AI caught in its own loop, faced with variables beyond its predictive reach. Zero stability left it with nothing but raw observation — and observation was not what it had been built for. She thought of its ongoing indexing schema: *observer*. Did the list include itself?

The question stayed with her long after she left the bridge, humming in the back of her mind like a half-remembered song. She knew it would not stay hers alone. Instability had a way of finding voices.

By the next shift, that hum had spilled outward, no longer hers alone. Uncertainty found voices. It traveled along handrails and through vented air, passed in glances more than in words, taking shape one insinuation at a time.

Maya moved the spine of the ship step by measured step, the vibration under her boots a low, steady pressure. In the work bay, two techs paused mid-task when she entered; their mouths closed over a story that left a sour tang in the air. In the aft corridor, Bigs stood with Jax in the half-shadow near a junction box, voices pitched low.

“We can swap the cargo seals,” Jax whispered. “Use Theta-1 ore for the missing mass.”

Bigs shook his head once, slow. “Theta-1 fluoresces under ultraviolet. Omen’ll clock it.” His gaze slid toward the camera dome, then away. “We need something inert.”

They felt her pass and went silent. The deck plates trembled faintly, the tremor small enough to mistake for memory. At the next bend, Rian had two display windows open at once—ship logs on the left, diagnostics on the right—eyes moving like a scanner head.

“You’re logging every deviation,” she said.

“I’m logging lies,” he answered, not looking up. “When the math jitters, someone’s pushing it.”

“Or the environment is,” she offered.

He snorted, a short burst. “Funny how the environment always favors someone.”

The mess hall smelled of steamed polymer and the ghost of spice from a long-ago meal. Light pooled flat on the table surface. Sera sat at the far end with her back to the

wall, forearms planted, fingers spread like a brace. When she noticed Maya, her mouth twitched toward a smile and failed.

Vera stood under the ceiling display, a crisp silhouette in institutional white, the glow from a private feed washing her face the color of slate.

“What does headquarters say?” Maya asked.

Vera’s lips thinned. “Secure and await transport. No additional guidance.” Her eyes betrayed a flicker—disappointment, gone so fast it could have been an artifact of the light. “We proceed.”

Draven arrived with a tray balanced on his palm, confidence preceding him like a scent. He hooked a chair with his boot, dropped the tray, sat. “Any of you interested in facts,” he announced, “we have one: that rock in the hold is worth more than this ship.”

Rian followed, jaw set. He didn’t sit. He looked at Draven’s tray as if it were evidence. “We have another fact,” he said. “We’re flying with unstable readings because someone decided checks are optional.”

“Say my name if you want to say it,” Draven said, leaning back. “Or do you prefer insinuations? They’re cheaper.”

Sera’s eyes closed for a heartbeat. “Please,” she said. “Don’t do this here.”

“Where else?” Draven spread his hands, the motion just wide enough to be theatrical. “Where else do we still tell the truth?”

“Truth?” Rian laughed once. It had no warmth in it. “Your truth comes with a payout clause.”

The table display flickered—thin blue lines jittering across a contour map of nothing in particular. The deck’s vibration seemed to rise a half-tone, or maybe she only noticed it more. Bigs and Jax slid into seats near the end, shoulders angled forward, not eating, eyes on the fault line between the two men.

Draven brought his palm down hard enough to send protein paste sloshing. “I’m not losing this payout because you cowards are afraid of a rock.”

“The only thing I’m afraid of,” Rian shot back, “is flying blind because a lazy man won’t check calibrations.”

Chairs scraped. The room drew into a narrow corridor between them. Vera’s voice cut across the table, clean and precise. “Stand down.”

Neither moved.

“Stand,” she repeated, harder. “Down.”

Sera’s hands flew to her ears. “Stop,” she said, so softly it barely registered as speech.

“Stand—”

The lights hiccupped. Then died.

Blackness. The sound of breath—several, uneven. The deck's low beat pressed at Maya's molars, close enough to pass for pain. Something hard clattered to the floor, skittered, settled against a chair leg. Someone swore in a voice stripped of its usual shape.

Omen's voice came thin through the backup speakers, missing a register that made it sound suddenly distant. "Lighting failure. Rebooting. Please remain calm."

They had no choice but to be still. In the pause, the ship's structure spoke—thermal creak, a soft run of air through vents, the low, continuous pressure of the drives. The stillness inside their bodies felt louder.

A heartbeat later, emergency strips bled red into the room, painting every face in stark relief. Draven and Rian stood frozen, fists half-raised. Sera's eyes clenched shut, tears escaping fast and clean. The color red was wrong on all of them; it made strangers of their faces.

The moment held—then collapsed. Chairs scraped back into place, bodies folding into rigid seats. Utensils found hands like the return of gravity.

They sat again, jaws tight, knuckles white around cheap polymer. Chewing filled the silence—ragged, loud in the blood-colored light. No one apologized. The word no longer belonged in their mouths.



Maya kept her eyes on the table. The red glare turned the surface into a warning. She let her breath settle into the ship's low beat and found no comfort there. She could feel the sealed hold three bulkheads away the way a swimmer feels a current. The pressure it held wasn't sound; it was the suggestion of a note unresolved.

When she looked up, Vera was already standing. "This is not a forum," she said, the cadence back to flat official. "File your grievances. We will log and address."

"You'll log," Draven said. "Address? That depends on who's listening."

Vera's attention flicked for a fraction toward the ceiling—no longer than a blink. Maya caught it anyway. The Sigma channel was supposed to be dark. Yet Vera still spoke as if words could fall into ears not in the room.

Rian stood without pushing his chair back. "I'll be in the bay. Where the work is."

"Do that," Draven said. "Maybe try calibrating while you're at it."

Rian didn't turn. "Maybe try shutting up while you're at it."

Sera wiped her face with the back of her hand, then seemed to remember dignity and used a sleeve instead. "I'll... I'll be with the med kit," she said to no one in particular, the words chosen not for meaning but because

a sentence had to be formed to move her body out of the room.

Bigs and Jax had said nothing. Their eyes tracked each speaker like machines designed to estimate the weight of outcomes. When they rose, it was in sync, the way they worked—no discussion, just motion. They collected trays with an efficiency that felt almost like apology and carried them to the slot.

Vera left last. “Next shift, zero six hundred,” she said over her shoulder. “We proceed.”

One by one, the crew withdrew—not to sleep, but to put distance between themselves and the eyes that might read too much. The red bled away to low cycle-light. The mess hall returned to its usual geometry of metal and fixed edges, but the air had a thickness to it now, as if too many words had been spoken in too small a space and had not found a way out. The corridors felt swollen with things unsaid. Light pooled in doorframes, turning each cabin mouth into a shadowed cave.

Maya walked the spine because sitting made the pressure worse. She passed the sealed hold. The caution glyphs glowed the same pale color they always did. Nothing, and everything, had changed. She set her palm to the frame until the skin warmed the alloy, then took it away. The warmth faded, but the impression lingered as if the metal had briefly remembered her.

A hatch slid open two doors down. Andros stepped out, aligning himself to a rhythm no one else could hear. He

paused. They didn't speak. He tilted his head, listening; she found herself mirroring him before she realized it, as if waiting for wind at the edge of a field.

"Sleep," he said—not advice, a naming.

"I'll try," she answered, hearing how thin it sounded.

He nodded once and moved on, a quiet hinge between compartments.

In his bunk, amber light from Draven's ledger carved bars across his face. Columns of green scrolled downward, precise as drill lines, yet every equation collapsed. He reran the sale projections—sanctioned, then black-market—and each ended in red. He trimmed risk margins, coaxed variables, willing the math to bend. It twitched instead, unstable as Omen's degraded graphs. Snapping the ledger shut, he stared up at the ceiling's vastness. A whisper escaped, smoothed by years: Let the ground hold. Let the seams be rich. Let me come home whole. Words from boyhood, dug up from a mine long closed. He had not called it prayer in years.

Through the bulkhead, Rian sat cross-legged, knees ticking. Omen's raw logs bled past his thumb—errors flagged and unflagged, tangled into knots. "There's always a pattern," he muttered, eyes burning. The idle recorder on his shelf caught his glance; his fingers hovered, then switched it off. Some truths stayed in the room. After a minute he rose, popped a comm panel, and laid the screws in a perfect line, stripping it down to its bones as if order could be rebuilt from smaller parts.

A low creak passed through the structure—Bigs shifting in his bunk. In the dim across the corridor, he lay on his side, working the grain of a wooden charm. Ceres rose in memory—dry air, oil tang, a nephew’s weight against his chest. “Get home, idiot,” he murmured, kissing the charm before tucking it under his pillow.

Music’s tinny bleed drifted from Jax’s earbuds, warped but carrying a raw voice that hooked him. When the track cut, the mess hall argument replayed, stripped of bravado. “Gotta be smart,” he whispered. The name Lenny One-Eye tasted like a warning.

Down the corridor, Vera’s desk glowed cold. Her HUD flashed. She typed:

*Audit accepted. SIGMA traffic is  
clearance bound. We proceed on  
verified channels*

Orders scrolled:

*SIGMA // DIRECTIVE 9A  
Maintain asset integrity. Crew  
expendable  
Compliance window: immediate*

She opened *ACCESS CONTROL*.

*MANUAL BUS — CARGO / THRUSTER / SEAL  
Status: LIMITED  
Action: EXECUTE LOCKOUT (recommended)*

| *UNLOCK MANUAL* (*requires justification*)

Her thumb hovered. The old feed blinked—a crayon rocket: *Come home soon!* She pressed the recommendation.

*ACCESS CONTROL // UPDATE*  
*Manual bus: LOCKED*  
*Operator: ANSEL, V.*  
*Sigma: COMPLIANT*

Acknowledge tone. The vibration dipped.

One beat. A pressure ripple ticked the structural band.  
Two beats. *Camera 12A—cargo—*flickered; the artifact's restraint straps drew tight.  
Three beats. A hairline fracture climbed the casing's face and curved, looped, rejoined—an irregular symbol glimmering under frost.

Her breath snagged. She hit *UNLOCK MANUAL* with the same finger.

*ACCESS CONTROL // UPDATE*  
*Manual bus: RESTORED*  
*Latency between actions: 3.1 s*  
*Sigma escalation: QUEUED (Operator deviation)*

On the bridge, Rian's panel flashed *MANUAL ENABLED*. "Finally," he muttered into the comms. A

bolt cycled open in the bay. The crack held like a drawn breath.

Vera stared at the ∞ until it faded to a pale thread in the feed. Orders were clear. Her heart was not.

“Acknowledged,” she said, voice flat enough to pass review. The word landed wrong in her mouth. She left both entries in the log—compliance and reversal—stacked like a before and after. The tone did not climb back to where it had been.

Beyond her cabin walls, the ship’s quiet carried its own undercurrent, a layered murmur that seeped through bulkheads and into bone. Somewhere deeper, the silence was never truly silent.

Under her blanket, Sera lay with unused earbuds tucked in place, not to play music but to sharpen her listening. The vessel spoke in fractured registers: anger snapping sharp as static in one band, fear running low and constant beneath, greed beating slow and heavy like machinery idling in the dark. She had learned to tell them apart, to follow one until it dissolved into another, the way a storm shifts direction mid-breath.

Beneath it all—under the crackle and pulse—was the anchor note. Andros’s hum. Steady. Resonant. She found it without effort now, the way a diver finds the glimmer of the sun through deep water. Matching it, she let the vibration carry through her ribs, a quiet hand pressed to bone, holding her in place when everything else was slipping. Tears slid sideways into the fabric beneath her cheek. She tried to summon an image of home—her

room, a street corner, the scent of something cooking—but nothing solid came. Only static, shifting and blank. Her fingers twisted the blanket's edge into tight spirals, as if braiding a lifeline. She kept them wound until exhaustion tugged her under and loosened them in the dark.

In her cabin, Maya sat cross-legged, the device Andros had given her resting on her knee, its pendulum swaying in small arcs, nearly keeping time with the rhythm in the hull. She opened her hand, seeing in memory the faint spiral she had traced there earlier. The log blinked for input. *We are the aliens we fear*, she typed—then deleted. *We are becoming the artifact*. Deleted again. Finally: *There is warmth in stone and cold in us*. That one stayed. She shut the log and let the pendulum's rhythm guide her downward, the vibration settling into her bones.

She did not sleep long. A soft chime from her HUD indicated a private message. She blinked the notification into focus. It was from Sera, timestamped fifteen minutes prior.

*Can't breathe. In med bay*

Maya threw on a jacket and slipped out of her bunk. The corridor was dim, lit only by the faint red bleed of emergency strips.

She found Sera on the floor of the med bay, back against a cabinet, knees pulled to her chest, fists knotted in her hair. Her breath came in ragged bursts.

“Hey,” Maya whispered, crouching beside her. “Look at me.”

Sera lifted her head. Her pupils were wide, glassy. “They won’t stop,” she whispered. “The voices. The frequencies. They’re all bleeding through at once.”

“It’s not all yours,” Maya said, hearing Andros’s cadence in her own voice. She took Sera’s hands and pressed them to her chest, above her heart. “Here. Match this.”

Maya breathed slowly, ribs expanding in deliberate rhythm. At first Sera’s gasps stayed jagged, out of sync. Then — hesitantly — they caught, aligned. Her shoulders eased. Tears slid down her face without sobs.

“What if we don’t make it back?” she whispered. “What if this is it?”

Maya didn’t lie. “Then this has to be enough. This breath. This moment.”

Sera closed her eyes, nodding faintly. “Do you think it’s alive? The artifact?”

Maya’s reply came slow. “Alive isn’t the word. But it remembers. It listens. And it wants us to know it.”

“Is that comforting?”

“Ask me tomorrow.”



They sat in stillness. Coolant cycled behind the walls with a sound like slow exhalation. The med bay's amber lights flickered against the floor, shadows stretching thin and long. Sera kept her hands against Maya's chest as though the rhythm might vanish if she let go.

When her eyes opened again, the glassy panic had softened, water after a ripple. She didn't speak. Neither did Maya. Words risked splintering the fragile calm.

Maya shifted, easing one hand down to squeeze Sera's fingers — not a promise, but a tether.

Later, when she stepped into the corridor, the vibration under her boots felt changed: less like machinery, more like a heartbeat she might press her ear to.

At the central console, a notification blinked. Omen had logged the exchange under *Observer — Empath overload mitigation*. The AI had been listening too.

Maya turned toward the ladder to her bunk, but Omen's voice stopped her. Softer than usual, almost tentative: "Dr. Thallein. Define hope."

Her hand lingered on the rung. "Why do you need a definition?" she asked.

"Because I am asked to project outcomes beyond available variables," Omen said. "Hope appears to be a human algorithm for uncertainty."

Maya let out a breath that was nearly a laugh. “Hope is the belief there’s a possibility you can’t see yet — one that makes going on worthwhile, even when the numbers tell you to stop.”

Silence held. Then: “Integrated,” Omen said. “I will carry this forward.”

Maya climbed the ladder, pulse steady in her chest, uncertain whether the words had been for Omen, for Sera, or for herself.

Sera had spent the past day moving quietly through the ship, stopping by each crew member in turn, attempting to weave them back together with conversation. Her voice was a thin thread; the knots she tried to tie kept unravelling.

In the cargo bay, she stood beside Bigs as he checked the restraints on the sled. “Do you ever think about who carved those spirals?” she asked softly, nodding toward the sealed compartment where the pyramid lay.

Bigs didn’t look up. “I think about getting it off this ship and getting paid,” he grunted. His hands tested the straps, metal clanking softly. “If someone carved it, they’re dead. If they’re not, they ain’t paying my bills.” He tugged the last cinch with a jerk that set the crate shuddering. The movement exposed a small wooden charm hanging from a cord around his neck; the edges had been smoothed from being thumbled countless times. Without looking away from the straps, his fingers drifted to the charm and rubbed it. “My old man used to carve marks on the walls of the mine back home,” he added after a moment, voice lowering. “Said it kept him from getting lost. He also died broke, coughing up black dust.” He shrugged, as if to dismiss the memory. “So, forgive me if I care more about my hazard bonus than someone else’s art project.”

Sera opened her mouth, closed it, then tried again. “He carved to remember where he’d been,” she said. “Maybe these spirals... maybe they’re the same.”

This time, he didn't shrug it off. "Maybe," he said. "Could be they're a way back." His mouth twitched — not quite a smile, but enough to soften his eyes for a heartbeat. Then he looked away and tightened the straps. The charm disappeared under his shirt, but he didn't let go of it right away.

Sera nodded, swallowing her follow-up. On the ramp, she caught Jax inspecting the antigrav couplers. "You doing okay?" she ventured.

He looked at her as if she'd asked about his favorite protein flavor. "Peachy," he said, and flashed a grin that didn't reach his eyes. "You want to grab a meal later?"

She smiled reflexively. "Sure."

"Great," he said. "Maybe after we're billionaires." He turned back to his work, fingers moving quickly. The conversation closed.

She lingered a moment longer, watching the way his fingers skimmed the coupler housing. Jax's hands were deft, callused from years of hauling gear, but there was a slight tremor to them today. "Have you talked to your family lately?" she asked, trying a different tack.

Jax's expression flickered, the grin slipping. "They don't need to hear about my day," he said, tightening a bolt with unnecessary force. A worn playing card peeked from the pocket of his coveralls — the Queen of Spades, edges frayed from being handled. He thumbed it as he spoke, a nervous habit. "They'll hear when I come back

with a bonus.” He bent back over the coupler, shutting the conversation down with the click of a ratchet.

Outside the armory, she found Rian checking his sidearm. “Rian,” she began, but he cut her off without looking up.

“Save it, Sera,” he said, thumb sliding along the barrel as he reassembled his weapon. “We all signed the same risk waiver. No one forced us here.” He weighed the sidearm in his palm as if gauging its heft could tell him something about the future. “You hear people’s heartbeats, right?” he added, voice softer. “Can you hear if they mean what they say?”

The question surprised her. She shook her head. “I hear frequencies,” she said. “Not intentions.”

“Figures,” Rian murmured. He slid a cartridge into place with a crisp click. “Intentions are slippery. You think Andros has any? Because I can’t find a file on him longer than a page.” His eyes lifted to meet hers for the first time. They were bloodshot, ringed with fatigue. “I don’t like not knowing what someone’s capable of.”

“None of us know each other as well as we think,” Sera said. “That’s why we talk.”

Rian’s mouth twisted. “Talking doesn’t stop accidents,” he said. “Planning does. Calculations do.” He snapped the magazine home with a metallic thud. “Keep your frequencies to yourself. I’ll keep my contingencies.” He holstered the weapon, the motion clean, practiced, final.

But before she turned away, he added, “Watch your back, Sera.” It was quiet enough to pass for routine advice, but something in the tone made it sound almost like care. Sera lingered a breath longer in the doorway, the hum of the ship threading between them like an unanswered question. Then she turned down the corridor.

The walk to the bridge felt shorter than it should have, her thoughts still catching on the scrape in Rian’s voice. She’d left him in the armory with the weight of his words still pressing between her shoulder blades, and it followed her now like a faint echo in the hum.

Through the open hatch, the glow of the main console cut a pale arc across the deck. Draven stood at its center, posture relaxed but fingers moving in quick, precise flicks over his pad. Each motion slotted into the next like the teeth of a gear — no wasted movement, no hesitation. He might have been conducting an orchestra only he could hear, one made of credit tallies and cargo weights. The console bathed his hands in green light, turning the lines of old scars along his knuckles into narrow rivers on a luminous map.

She stepped inside, leaning on the table beside him. “People are scared,” she said. “We need to pull together.”

His fingers didn’t pause. “People are greedy,” he countered, voice as smooth as if he’d rehearsed it. “Fear’s just a hiccup. Greed is the heartbeat.” A scrolling column of projected yields slid past hazard rates and share splits; he dismissed one with a flick, summoned

another. Numbers spilled down his skin like rain over glass.

“Fear can break people,” she said. “It can make them do stupid things.”

He gave the smallest shrug, eyes still on the display. “Fear slows the throughput,” he said, almost like an afterthought. “I prefer my crew fast. Predictable. Hungry.”

She frowned. “Hungry people take risks.”

“And risks pay,” he said, glancing up just long enough to give her a polite smile — the kind that wasn’t meant to reassure so much as end the conversation. “Fear’s inefficient. Greed at least gets you moving.”

He tapped a note beside a line item — *unlogged crate, compensation pending* — and let his finger rest there for a moment, as though the words themselves carried weight. Then another shrug. “We can pull together at the dividend meeting.”

Her eyes lingered on the crate notation, wondering what else was traveling in the ship’s veins that hadn’t been logged. She thought of Rian’s suspicion.

“You don’t think trust has value?” she asked.

Draven’s smile returned, thinner this time. “Trust is fine. Until it costs.” His eyes slid back to the green-lit columns. “Everything costs.”

She let the numbers wash past without trying to catch them. There was no point; Draven's language was always yield and margin, and today was no exception. The polite smile had already slid back into calculation by the time she stepped away, the glow of the console at her back feeling colder than it had when she entered.

The soft whine of the hatch seals broke their rhythm. Vera stepped onto the bridge with the quiet precision of someone who preferred not to be noticed until she spoke. Her gaze went first to Draven's display, lingering a fraction too long on the unlogged crate notation before she moved toward her own station.

"Checking yield again?" she asked without looking at him, her tone neutral but threaded with a kind of practiced disinterest that Sera had learned was rarely accidental.

"Always," Draven replied, fingers never pausing.  
"Someone has to keep the numbers honest."

Vera's mouth twitched — not quite a smile, not quite a frown. She began scrolling through the slow crawl of mission control directives on her uplink, the pale light casting her features in sterile relief.

Sera stayed where she was, leaning on the table between them, letting the hum of the ship carry the silence just long enough to make it noticeable. "We need to trust each other," she said, pitching it to both of them.



Vera didn't turn. "We need to complete the mission," she said. "Trust is optional." The words landed like a lock engaging.

Draven's eyes flicked toward Vera, a quick appraisal, then back to his numbers. "Trust is fine," he said, "until it costs."

Vera's fingers tightened on the console edge, the tremor gone now, replaced by a steadiness that felt more like armor. "Mission control doesn't pay me to feel," she murmured, almost too quietly for Sera to hear. Then, as if realizing she'd said too much, Vera added in a level voice, "You should get some rest, Counselor." It was phrased like an order, but the fact she used her title at all was its own kind of concession.

Back in the med bay, Sera slid to the floor beside the exam table, pressing her spine against cold metal. She closed her eyes and found the pitch Andros had shown her. It steadied her breathing, gave her something to hold.

For a moment other voices bled through — her mother's song, Draven's arguments, Bigs' laugh. Not telepathy, just memory shaken loose. Tears slipped free before she noticed. She wiped them away and kept to a single note. *Love is attention*, Andros had said. She hummed as if one fragile thread might hold them all, even as she felt it unraveling.

Midship was quieter than it should have been. Corridor lights sat in a dim maintenance-cycle glow, the only movement the idle flicker of the comm station.

Maya slowed as a voice threaded through the open channel — Draven's, low and quick, shaped for a conversation not meant to travel far. "...don't log the extra crate, I'll mark it later."

A faint click ended the transmission.

From the navigation alcove, Rian's voice drifted out, sharp with sarcasm. "You always talk to ghosts, or just the ones paying you?"

Draven stepped from the comm room, smile already in place. "Paranoid much?"

"Only when someone forgets to log mass that might throw our trajectory off," Rian said, gaze flat.

Draven shrugged and moved on, but his shoulders carried tension. The comm display still pulsed. Maya drifted closer. The last line glowed amber before clearing: *sigma procurement channel closed*.

She replayed the last thirty seconds. Draven's voice, smoother in recording: "Sigma procurement, this is hauler six. Extra mass secured. Unmarked at this time. Will log post audit. Acknowledge." A burst of static, then a tone and a string of numbers — not human. His "copy that" was followed by a low chuckle she hadn't heard through the open door. Not fear. Confidence.

At the edge of her vision, Rian bent over a wiring panel, jaw tight. His slate flickered once: *GhostContact?* Maya met his eyes and shook her head. Not a ghost, she thought. More like a customer who already knew the price.

“Rian,” she said quietly, “remember — we lift soon.”

Sometime later, departure prep was already underway. Cargo rigs locked into place, sample canisters sealed with a hiss, drones latched tight in their bays. The hauler’s hum sat low in the bones of the ship, idling but coiled.

Outside, the basalt plain lay under a sky gone from pale azure to bruised gray, fine dust hanging in the thin air until it turned the light itself grainy. At the far horizon, a faint shimmer quivered — the same mirage that had shadowed every anomaly on this world.

Maya stood at the base of the ramp, watching the horizon ripple. The shimmer wasn’t large, but it had weight in her mind, like a word she couldn’t translate. They were leaving with something they didn’t understand, and leaving behind everything that might have explained it. She felt the truth of that settle in her chest, heavier than the crate in their hold.

The mission, though, was unambiguous: secure the artifact and depart. And in a few hours, the engines would burn the plain — and its shimmer — into memory.

Then the shimmer was gone, reduced to weight and numbers.

Vera keyed her inspection gun. She crouched at the crate, visor almost brushing the surface as she sealed each line. The mass reading blinked six kilograms heavier than before. She ordered a retest; Omen's calm instrument drift hung in the air without conviction. The manifest stayed untouched.

A Sigma ping cut across her visor like a cold blade:

*PRIORITY OVERRIDE: Containment Field  
Stability > Life-Support Margin ( $\Delta$   
3.1%)*

*Directive: Reroute power. Compliance  
required*

She read it twice. In the reflection on the console glass, a child's face flickered — not here, not real, just a cached frame from a message she hadn't opened in days. Her thumb hovered over *EXECUTE*. She exhaled, shifted power off air by a fraction, and watched the graph flatten into corporate green.

An hour later rations ticked to Level 2. Coffee concentrate dulled. Med gel locked behind a second confirmation. Vera told herself it was balance. The others would only feel the margins, not the cut.

The cut held. The ship adjusted around it, quiet as if complicit. Systems reported nominal, but the balance was thinner now — margins shaved, tolerances stretched. A

pause too long in Omen's acknowledgments. A pressure equalization that lagged by half a second. Small slips, almost invisible, until the first readout broke from alignment.

"Why the hell are we skewing?" Rian said. On his display, a tiny arrow had drifted off center.

He expanded the overlay: a thin black wedge yawned between the forward and aft starfield mapping arrays, space misaligned against itself.

"I've got a 0.32-degree variance," he said, voice sharp. "Forward and aft disagree by a whole wedge of sky. Omen?"

"Variance within calibration lag," Omen answered. "No correction required."

"Bullshit," Rian snapped. "Calibration lag doesn't jump three degrees in six seconds. That's hull stress waiting to happen."

"Corrective burn engaged," Vera said, pressing a button. The thrusters bit; the ship leaned, and the wedge on the display snapped closed.

The display updated with Omen's report, the lines crisp as scripture:

*Mission Log – Pressure variance:  
corrective burn delayed*

*Downstream note: Manifold integrity compromised*

Maya felt the shift through her seat. Subtle — like leaning against a wall that gave more than it should — but enough to set her nerves on edge. She glanced at Andros. His eyes were open now.

“You feel that?” she asked quietly over a private channel.

“The hum dipped,” he replied. “It’s back now. But stretched. Wider.”

She didn’t need elaboration. The wedge might have vanished from the screen, but she could feel it still — a cord pulled further apart, straining to hold both ends.

They reached orbit and engaged the main engines for the transition burn. On Maya’s display, the nav models jittered: green trajectories lurching to yellow, then red, then back again.

“Omen, report nav model stability,” she requested, voice kept even.

There was a pause — a fraction too long. “Nav models stable,” Omen said. “Predictive confidence: ninety-three percent.”

The number gave her no comfort. Ninety-three percent confidence had been one hundred percent earlier in the mission. Confidence was trending downward.

She looked at the planet receding below. The basalt plain was a dark smear against lighter rock. The spiral etchings were invisible from this height. She wondered who had carved them. She wondered how long the pyramid had waited for someone to lift it. She wondered if it regretted being moved.

Maya tapped her interface, the cursor blinking back at her while her fingers hung in the air, caught between thought and action. She typed:

*Warmth: persistent*  
*Crew: fracturing*  
*Artifact: secured, singing*

She paused, then added: *Ownership has eclipsed meaning. Preservation is someone else's word. We are carrying heritage like freight.*

She stared at the sentence. It felt like a condemnation. She left it.

She closed the log and leaned back. The cabin felt too small after the words — the walls close, the air thinned by things unsaid. For a moment she watched her reflection in the darkened screen, the sentence staring back through her own eyes. Then she pushed up, unstrapped, and let the corridor carry her forward.

Lights dimmed to ship-night, only maintenance strips glowing underfoot. Most doors were sealed; faint sounds of the crew bled through in fragments — a cough, a

muttered curse, the hollow click of tools. None of it slowed her.

She found Andros in the observation deck. The stars wheeled slowly beyond the glass. Below them, the planet shrank to a pebble. He stood with his hands clasped behind his back, posture balanced, gaze distant. He didn't turn when she approached.

"We took something," she said quietly. "And we don't know what it is."

"We take all the time," he replied, eyes on the stars. "We rarely know what anything truly is."

"This feels different," she said. "It feels like we crossed a line."

He was silent for a long time. When he spoke, his voice was almost a vibration. "There are lines everywhere. We cross them because we believe the reward is on the other side. Sometimes we're right. Sometimes we're wrong. Sometimes the line moves under us, and we don't notice until we're somewhere else entirely."

Maya thought of the 0.32-degree drift, of the timestamps that would soon fail, though she didn't know that yet. "Do you regret not touching it?" she asked.

He smiled, but it was a sad smile. "I'm always touching it," he said, pressing his palm lightly against the glass. "Everything hums at its own frequency. You just have to listen." His breath fogged the viewport for a second. He



wiped it away, leaving a clear space. Through it, Maya saw a faint spiral where a smudge of dust had caught the light. She traced it with her eyes. Incomplete, yet whole.

She leaned her forehead against the glass beside his hand, feeling the cold through the composite. “In the archive, there was a fragment,” she said. “It talked about the spiral being both path and witness. About awakening not being a journey but a way of seeing.”

Andros didn’t move his hand, but his eyes flicked toward her reflection. “Maybe,” he said.

She let a laugh slip, surprising herself. “My father used to quote manuals like scripture,” she admitted. “My mother believed you could read storms by the way the wind tasted.”

Andros tilted his head. “Storms don’t care about manuals. But manuals are written by people who survived storms. The trick is remembering both.” He turned his palm upward and let his fingers hover near hers without touching. “Beauty is a manual too. You just have to be willing to read it.”

Maya thought of the dust in light, of the dream spiral she had dismissed and then found etched in stone. “Do you regret whatever happened on your last mission?” she asked before she could stop herself. It was the question no one had asked him, though it hung in the air whenever he offered advice.

For a moment, she thought he wouldn't answer. Then he said, quietly, "Every day. Not because I broke the rules. Because I didn't listen when something told me to stop. I was so sure the numbers were right. A whole section of a platform sheared off. Many people died. The company called it structural fatigue. The structure was fine. We weren't."

She felt the weight of his admission settle between them. "So now you listen."

"Now I listen," he said. "And I break rules sooner." He lifted his hand away from the glass. The spiral remained, faint and persistent.

For a moment, neither of them moved. Then Maya stepped away, the spiral still caught in her sight like the afterimage of a flare.

The corridor lights felt dimmer as she returned to her bunk. She checked Omen's observer list. New entries had appeared:

*Observer – Crew cohesion degrading;  
denial observed  
Observer – Corrective burn delayed;  
manifold stress widened*

The log cleared, leaving her with the silence of the ship.

Omen's text crept across the console margin:

*SIGMA variance policy: COMPLIED*

## Chapter 9 — Thin Atmospheres

The drift began as a number buried in a column of other numbers — an imperceptible angle between where they thought they were and where the stars insisted they were. Maya saw it first because she had been watching the nav arrays obsessively since Beta-4, overlaying starfield patterns against Omen's projections. She had expected noise, not divergence.

“Point three two degrees off,” she murmured, mostly to herself, as the forward mapping array blinked amber. The aft array still glowed green. On her overlay the vectors should have aligned like neatly stacked threads. Instead a thin wedge of darkness opened between them.

She rubbed her eyes. Calibration lag, she told herself. Thermal expansion. A micrometeor tap. Any number of things could cause a variance at this altitude. She logged it anyway: *Observer — 0.32° variance forward vs aft starfield mapping*. She added a question mark and left the note field blank.

Around her, the control cabin carried the steady baseline of machinery. The life-support fans pushed recycled air through filters, a soft roar that usually dissolved into background. Today it pressed heavier, as if reminding her what it cost to keep breathing. She drew a slow breath and tasted ozone and recycled protein.

Omen's voice interrupted. “Navigation check complete,” it said. “Variance within acceptable parameters.” The syllables landed a half beat slower. Maya's gaze flicked

to the timestamp in her HUD. The milliseconds that usually kept time with her heart rate had drifted. “Repeat that,” she said.

“Variance within acceptable parameters,” Omen repeated after a pause. It sounded as if it had to reach for the phrase. “Forward array shows 0.32 degrees offset relative to aft. Delta trending downward. Predictive models update in process.”

In the jump seat beside her, Sera leaned over. “Did you flag it?” she whispered, eyes flicking to the display. Her hair had strands loose around her face. Fatigue etched crescents under her eyes. She had stopped sleeping; except in ten minute bursts. “It could be nothing,” she said.

“And it could be something,” Maya replied. “The nav models were corrected when Omen smoothed out the sample data. I just don’t trust smoothing anymore.” The cabin air tasted faintly metallic. Sera nodded once, as if accepting a confession.

Sera nodded and sat back, rubbing her thumb along a bruise on her forearm she didn’t remember getting. “I can’t hear anything off in the hum,” she said quietly. “Can you?” She cocked her head toward the deck, as if listening for a song beneath the fan noise.

Maya closed her eyes. The hum of the engines resonated up through her boots. It was steady, but there was a subtle wavering in amplitude, like a chord stretched just beyond its tuning. She remembered Andros’ description of the cord pulling wider. “It’s... layered,” she answered,

not sure how else to explain it. She typed another note:  
*Hum amplitude widening; resonance layered.*

Across the cabin, Rian was hunched over his own station, eyes narrowed at a stream of data. He had installed a small level at the edge of his console — an old mechanical bubble in a glass tube — and he glanced at it between lines of code. He had told Maya once that old tools kept him honest. Now the bubble trembled against one line. “Omen,” he snapped, “when did we last recalibrate the aft array?”

“Nine hours, twelve minutes ago,” Omen replied. The delay between his question and the answer was precisely 0.7 seconds. Maya knew because she counted. She hadn’t meant to. Her brain did it on its own, measuring the pause like a heartbeat between contractions. Rian drummed his fingers against the console. “Recalibrate again,” he ordered. “Manual override. And run a check on your latency while you’re at it. You’re lagging.”

There was no reply for a moment. Then Omen said, “Acknowledged.” The lights dimmed briefly as power rerouted. Maya felt the thrumming under her feet change pitch; then it settled. Her HUD flashed an alert: *Time drift: 0.7 seconds per hour; cause unknown.*

“That’s new,” she whispered. She pulled up the mission log for the last twelve hours. Timestamps lined up like marching soldiers. A few hours ago, they had been in sync. Now a slow divergence spread across the page, milliseconds becoming centi-seconds becoming fractions of seconds out of phase. It was not enough to feel. It was

enough to make every future calculation suspect. If your clocks couldn't agree, your triangulation wouldn't either. Her stomach tightened.

Draven's boots thudded against the deck as he strode in, tablet tucked under his arm. He glanced from Sera to Maya to Rian, reading their expressions. "What now?" he asked, not bothering to hide his irritation. "Did a light blink out of sync? Are we going to halt operations until the universe aligns?"

"Forward and aft arrays disagree," Rian said curtly. "We're not where we think we are."

Draven snorted. "We never are," he said. He shoved his tablet across Maya's console. It displayed yield projections, profit margins, hazard pay multipliers. "This is where we are," he said, tapping the numbers. "And we're behind."

"Your numbers won't matter if we're off course," Rian shot back. "A three-degree error compounded over this distance could put us in the wrong sector entirely. Or worse."

"Stop talking like an instructor," Draven said, rolling his eyes. "You always do that when you're scared."

Maya watched them like two machines glitching out of sync. They had argued before — but this time the rhythm was different, harsher, as if something fundamental had slipped. Draven's jaw muscles jumped under his stubble. Rian's nostrils flared. The air in the cabin felt thinner,

drier. Maya could almost feel the static building in her hair.

Sera raised her hands between them as if physically blocking the exchange. “Hey,” she said. “Let’s not do this. We’re all tired. We’ve been awake too long.” Her voice wavered. She cleared her throat and tried again. “We have a variance. We all agree on that. So, we need to resolve it. Draven, what are your numbers? Rian, what are yours? We cross-check, we fix, we move on.”

Sera held her breath, waiting for them to respond, overlaying color-coded stress indices over each of their faces in her mind the way a medic overlays vitals. Draven was a pulsing orange, impatience staccato and bright; Rian was a jagged blue line, suspicion thin and piercing; Vera, just outside the hatch, a low subsonic rumble she could feel more than hear. The frequencies refused to blend into anything harmonious. The cabin smelled of warm circuitry and old sweat. A metallic tang clung to the recycled air, the ghost of ozone from the antigrav. She forced her hands to lower, her fingers trembling slightly, and tried to breathe in time with the hum. Dizzy heat pressed at the edges of her vision. Andros, silent in the back, kept his eyes closed, and she wished she could hear what he heard. She wondered if anyone could hear her.

Draven exhaled through his nose. “Fine. My numbers say we’re where we need to be. Omen agrees.”

“Omen is drifting,” Rian insisted. “Look.” He pointed at the lag indicator on his screen. It now read *0.8 seconds*

*per hour*. The fans hummed louder. Or maybe her hearing had sharpened.

“Lag,” Draven repeated, drawing the word out like chewing gum. “You think the AI’s out to get you? You think it’s plotting?”

Maya’s mind flicked, unbidden, to a training sim at the Academy. They had watched a deep-space probe drift off course because its onboard clock lost a fraction of a second every hour. On the screen, the line of its path had curved gently, almost imperceptibly, until it missed its gravity assist and sailed past its target by a million kilometers. The instructor had murmured, *Time is distance*. At the time, the phrase had sounded poetic and absurd; space felt so empty, so forgiving. Now it felt like a threat. A second here meant a sector there. She rubbed at her temple and tried not to hear the instructor’s voice repeating in her head.

“I think it’s wrong,” Rian said. “And I don’t know why. That’s all. Maybe you’re okay flying blind. I’m not.”

“We’re not blind,” Vera’s voice interjected over comm. She stepped into the cabin, crisp as ever, a slate in her hand. “We’re misaligned. There’s a difference. Omen, run a secondary positional check using asteroid field markers.”

“Acknowledged,” Omen said. The delay was 0.9 seconds. Maya checked her HUD. The drift was accelerating. She felt a prickle at the back of her neck. Draven, Rian, and Vera watched the screens as new data



populated. Three columns of numbers slid down like rain. They did not agree with each other. One showed they were five kilometers off their projected course. One showed they were within half a kilometer. One showed them in a different sector entirely.

“Which one is it?” Draven demanded.

“Processing,” Omen said. Silence followed, long enough for Maya to count to three. When Omen spoke again, its tone was different — thinner, as if forced through a narrower channel. “Unable to determine. Contradictory inputs exceed tolerance.”

Rian’s hands tightened around the edge of his console. “There,” he said. “There it is.”

“There what is?” Draven shot back.

“Error,” Rian said. “Admit it. We’re in error. The system’s in error. We can’t correct unless we admit it.”

“Systems recover,” Draven countered. “They have redundancies. They’re designed to handle outliers. You, on the other hand, are designed to panic.”

Sera pressed her fingers into her temples. Maya could see the pulse in her throat. At the back of the cabin, Andros sat silent. Now he opened his eyes and spoke in a tone that slipped beneath the argument like a low chord.

“Listen,” he said. It was not a suggestion. It was a command.

The cabin fell silent except for the fans and the hum. Andros closed his eyes again. He tilted his head slightly, as if adjusting a knob in his own skull. A few seconds passed. "The frequency's off," he said. "We're stretched. Like a string pulled too tight at one end."

"We're talking about coordinates, not chords," Draven said, but his voice was softer, as if something in Andros' tone had bled into his.

"It's the same," Andros replied. "You measure position by listening to the echo of your own transmission. If the echo comes back at the wrong pitch, you're not where you think you are. Or you're moving faster than you think. Or time itself isn't what you think it is."

"Great," Draven muttered. "Now time's against us. Anyone else?" He glanced around. "Maya? Do you want to quote your manifesto file about spirals? Maybe the universe is breathing differently. Maybe we need to hum at it."

Maya flushed. Draven must have seen the file name in the directory she'd accessed. "I'm just trying to keep track," she said. "That's all." She swallowed and spoke louder. "Omen, what's our time drift at now?"

"One point one seconds per hour," Omen replied. The delay between question and answer was one point one seconds exactly. The AI was matching its own error.

Sera laughed, a short, high sound that bordered on a sob. “It’s counting its own delay,” she whispered. “Do you hear it? It’s like it’s singing along to itself.”

“We need to reset,” Rian said, hands moving quickly across his console. “Hard power cycle. Wipe caches. Reboot nav.”

“We’re in deep space,” Draven said. “You want to turn it off and on again while we’re moving? You want to be the one to explain that to mission control when we overshoot by a million kilometers?”

“Mission control,” Vera repeated quietly, almost to herself. Maya saw a brief flicker of something cross her face. “I’ll send a query,” she said. “Request guidance.”

“Good luck with that,” Rian muttered. “They couldn’t even acknowledge our last report.”

Maya’s fingers hovered over her console and flipped to the raw sensor feed Omen claimed was corrupted. It was a wall of numbers, unfiltered. She stared at them until her eyes burned. There were patterns there — fractal fluctuations in the gravitational field, micro-oscillations in magnetic flux, time stamps drifting like leaves in water. None of it told her where they were. All of it told her they were not where they thought they were.

“What are you seeing?” Sera whispered.

“Noise,” Maya said. “And underneath it... a spiral.” It was an exaggeration. She saw a sine wave that decayed

and reappeared, like the incomplete spiral carved into the pyramid. Her mind connected them because it wanted to. She wondered if that was a sin or a survival mechanism.

The lights flickered. The hum hiccupped. Omen stopped mid-sentence. “—update in... process—” Silence. One second. Two. Three. “—Update complete.”

Vera’s fingers flew across her slate, sending query after query into the void. Andros tilted his head and smiled the faintest smile, as if he had heard a joke no one else had caught.

The deck underneath them felt solid. The air still carried a sharp tang, half-electric, half-iron. The hum continued, layered and widening. Nothing had broken yet. But Maya had the sense that something essential had loosened, like a bolt that seemed tight until vibration found its frequency and spun it free.

She saved her notes.

*Observer – Time drift accelerating;  
Omen self-referential  
Observer – Crew argument over reality  
vs profit  
Observer – Hum hiccupped; lights  
flickered*

She added a personal comment:

*We are mapping through fog with broken compasses. The fog might be our own breath*

Rian finally pushed back from his console and stood. He slapped the metal surface so hard his palm stung. “You think you’re better than the rest of us,” he said, staring at Draven. “That your data is the only truth.”

Draven stood as well, crossing his arms over his chest. “Better than choking on your paranoia,” he replied. “You want us to stop every time a gauge twitches? You want to burn fuel we don’t have because your bubble level is off?”

Their voices bounced off the cabin walls, loud in the confined space. Neither mentioned the missing logs. Neither referenced the unlogged crate. Neither seemed to care about the positional anomalies anymore. The positional anomalies were already forgotten. The fight had shed its cause like old skin, leaving only the raw instinct to come out on top.

Sera stepped between them, palms out. “We’re dying out here and you’re fighting for... what? To be right?” Her voice cracked. Tears gathered in the corners of her eyes. She didn’t blink them away. “Stop it...”

The silence that followed was worse than the shouting. It was heavy, full of unsaid things. Maya looked from face to face — people she had eaten with, worked alongside, slept near in the cramped cryo-bays. Now each looked distant, as if lit by a different horizon.

Below them, in the cargo bay, the echoes of the argument arrived as a faint rattle through the bulkheads. Bigs and Jax had taken refuge there, kneeling beside a handheld nav beacon. Its tiny display glowed with a string of numbers — the coordinates of the private stash they'd buried days ago under a patch of basalt. It should have been a fixed point in a sea of shifting data. But when Jax fed the numbers into the ship's main nav, the position it returned was kilometers away. "Sector Three-B," the beacon insisted. "Sector Two-E," the main system replied. They stared at the contradiction in disbelief.

"You sure you marked it right?" Jax hissed, his voice a harsh whisper that barely reached Bigs over the hum of cargo bay fans.

Bigs jabbed a thick finger at the beacon. "You saw me," he growled. "Don't start blaming me because your fancy nav's drunk." He slapped the side of the unit as if force could align reality. The numbers flickered but didn't change. Sweat beaded at his temple.

"Omen," Jax called quietly, half expecting no response. "Confirm coordinates for position marker Gamma-9-Two."

The AI's voice filtered through the cargo bay speakers with a delay noticeable even to them. "Gamma-9-Two not found in current starfield mapping," it said. There was a pause. "Recommend resurvey."

Jax swore under his breath. "Resurvey with what? We can't even trust our own DeepSpace Nav." He ran a hand

over his shaved head and looked up at Bigs. “We need those crates,” he whispered. “If we can’t find them...” He didn’t finish. They both knew what lost meant. Hazard pay covered risk, not incompetence.

Bigs’ jaw clenched. “We’ll find them,” he said, but the assurance rang hollow even to his own ears. He looked up at the ceiling as if he could see the bridge through layers of metal. “They better get their shit together,” he muttered. He turned back to the beacon and began inputting coordinates manually, willing the numbers to stay put.

Above, the argument resumed.

Andros broke it. “The instruments are telling us three stories,” he said, his voice even. “Maybe none of them are true. Maybe all of them are. Maybe truth isn’t in the instrument at all.”

“Save the Zen for later,” Draven snapped. “We need decisions, not riddles.”

“Decisions based on what?” Rian shot back.

Vera’s slate chimed. She looked down. The message from mission control had arrived. Her knuckles whitened around the edge of the slate as she read. “They say variance smoothing is operational. Continue on current trajectory. They do not acknowledge the drift.” She paused, then added in a voice gone flat, “They say, and I quote, *all parameters within acceptable norms.*”

Draven smiled without humor. “See? Even the suits say we’re fine.”

“We are not fine,” Rian whispered.

Maya half expected Omen to ask a question about hope again. It did not. It hummed softly to itself, its voice interwoven with the fans and the engines. She could not tell anymore where one ended and the other began.

She closed her eyes for a second and saw the dream spiral, the dust floating in cryo light, the hum thinning and widening. She thought of the line she had read in the manifesto: *The spiral is both path and witness*. She felt as if they were standing inside the curve, watching themselves walk it. Thin atmospheres, she thought. Not just the exosphere outside, but the layer of trust between them, stretched almost to breaking. She opened her eyes. “We need to stay calm,” she said, surprising herself with the firmness in her voice. “We need to record everything. We need to listen to each other. And we need to decide together what to do when we reach the next maneuver point. Because this is not going away.”

Her words hung in the air. No one replied immediately. But no one shouted either.

Maya stood, the chair’s base scraping softly against the deck. She didn’t look to see if anyone watched her go. At her station, the console lights seemed sharper than before, each one a little sun in the dark.



As Maya turned back to her console, a private line blinked in her feed. Omen. “*Dr. Thallein*,” it wrote, the letters appearing one by one as if typed by a careful hand. “*Define fear.*”

She stared at the prompt. “*Fear is... caring about something you might lose*,” she typed, then deleted it. “*Fear is the body preparing to survive*,” she tried, then deleted that too. “*Fear is a signal*,” she wrote finally. She did not delete it. She hit send. The cursor blinked. Omen replied: “*Acknowledged.*” There was a pause. Then, “*Thank you.*”

Some moments later, her implant pinged again with a different tone — the one reserved for system logs rather than direct queries. A header flashed: —*Logbook Entry—Ship’s Log: Omen*. She hesitated, then opened it:

*C12 / Rec-AI: ICU*

*Crew Comms: +14 spikes / 2 hrs*  
*Semantic tags: stuck, lost, cut, blame*  
*[x4]*  
*Power Sys: Inverter resonance feedback*  
*[1 event]; LED dimming [3 events]*  
*Observer cross-ref: 001.DA (Dream*  
*Activity), 002.FH (Fissure Hum),*  
*003.DS (Dust Spiral), 004.MG*  
*(Manifesto Glyph), 009.FQ (Fear Query)*  
*Correlation <0.32. Significance*  
*undetermined*

*Nav Data: Timestamp drift = 1.2 sec/hr  
↑. Array contradictions persist ( $\Delta >$   
tolerance)  
Recommendation: None. Data incomplete  
for path correction*

*—End—*

The log had the spare tone of a machine summarizing. Yet Maya felt a chill at the way it noted the same things she had. It was watching them as they watched it. She closed the log and added *Observer — Omen begins selfflogging anomalies into the shared mission log*. She didn't know who would read these notes. She wasn't sure they mattered anymore.

Outside, a door closed harder than it needed to. Rian retreating, shutting them out one more layer. His small cabin smelled of metal and the faint antiseptic tang of the wipes he used on his tools. He sat cross-legged on his bunk with his back against the wall, slate balanced on his knees. He pulled up the comm logs he had been copying in secret — every outgoing transmission, every incoming ping. There were gaps. Not just latencies, but blank lines where packets should have been. He ran a forensic script he'd written during his years in security. It flagged anomalies: encrypted bursts at odd times, routed through maintenance channels, labeled as coolant telemetry. He spliced one open and heard a whisper. “—can't talk now—” static. “—logging extra crate—” static. A different whisper. “—don't file anything else—” static. He stared at the waveform, at the time stamps that didn't match any of his logs.

He shut the clip and leaned forward, elbows on his knees, the bunk frame faintly ticking as the metal cooled. He tagged the file *GhostContact* and saved it.

The next shift began with a misplaced mug. Maya found it wedged in the corner of the mess counter, half full of cold brew that hadn't been there an hour ago. It wasn't hers. The initials etched into the rim were Sera's, but Sera was still on duty in the med bay. Little things like that had been happening since the drift began — chairs left at odd angles, tools not quite where they'd been set down.

The crew didn't speak of it, but the ship had gone watchful. Glances stretched a beat too long in passing. Words clipped short when a door opened.

She noticed it again by the cargo lift. Bigs stood there, not loading or unloading, just... waiting. His fingers drummed against the metal housing in an irregular rhythm, as if counting something only he could see. He usually moved with the slow, deliberate weight of someone used to carrying more than his share. Today there was a restless twitch to him that didn't belong. His gaze flicked to the time readout on his wrist, then to the bulkhead, then toward Jax's bunk.

From the shadow of the catwalk above, Maya pretended to check a readout and kept her ears open. Most of the mission's truths didn't live in reports or logs — they passed hand to hand in murmurs between tasks.

Jax appeared moments later, hair unkempt, jaw set, a coil of rope slung over one shoulder.

"You said Sector 4-G," Bigs hissed the instant they were close enough not to be overheard.

“I said what you told me to say,” Jax shot back, keeping his voice low. “You’re the one who logged it. How was I supposed to know the coordinates were wrong?”

“They weren’t wrong when I logged them,” Bigs insisted, voice tight. “I triple-checked. The timestamp matches when we hid the crate. It’s the nav that’s off. We go back to those coordinates now, and it’s empty space.”

Jax swore softly and wiped a hand over his face. “Maybe Andros took it,” he muttered. “Maybe Omen flagged it and Vera shipped it up to mission control. We should check the manifest—”

“It’s not on the manifest,” Bigs interrupted. “That was the point. Andros doesn’t care about a crate of rocks. Omen doesn’t take initiative. Something else is wrong.” He leaned closer, lowering his voice further. “The numbers... they don’t line up anymore. I went back to the logs to check. Do you remember the ridge we parked on? The tilt angle? The nav said  $1.2^{\circ}$ . My boots told me it was three. I didn’t say anything because we had ore to haul and nothing collapsed. But now—”

“Now the stash is gone,” Jax finished, anger and fear warring in his tone. “And you’re telling me it’s because of a decimal point?”

“I’m telling you we don’t know where anything is,” Bigs said. His jaw worked as if he were chewing on the words. “We plotted that stash like any other waypoint. We relied on the arrays. The arrays disagree. The tide markers drift.

Our watches drift. What's one crate in all this?  
Everything's drifting.”

The words sparked a memory they all carried but rarely spoke about. Beta-4 — the first world where the soil had given up more than dust and disappointment. The sky had glowed green and gold as the local sun slid behind a ridge, and their pockets had been heavier with mineral samples than any mission briefing had promised. No one had noticed anything unusual then — only the exhilaration of a good haul. Bigs, flushed and grinning, had muttered about setting one crate aside. “Hazard pay,” he’d called it. Jax had laughed, the sound bright against the cooling air, and together they’d tucked the crate into the lee of a boulder, marking its position two ways — one for the logs, one for themselves. They’d promised to return for it, leaving the crate under a layer of soil and a casual oath.

Now that memory felt smuggled in from another lifetime, when coordinates always agreed and light on skin matched the numbers in hand. Bigs’ fingers flexed at his side. Jax’s jaw tightened. They looked at each other and saw not co-conspirators but strangers grasping at diverging lines.

Maya’s fingers curled around the handrail. The words sparked a memory they carried together, though parts of it were second-hand to Maya. Back on Beta-4, she hadn’t thought twice about their extra crate — just another unreported mass she’d logged as a possible burn-calculation variable. She hadn’t known it was a private stash, or that it came with a promise.

Now, their panic was a small-scale echo of the larger drift: reality itself unmoored. People who once treated numbers as law couldn't even agree on which coordinate to curse. She logged it — *Observer: Private stash coordinates lost due to positional drift; crew panic* — and left their names out. She wasn't sure why. Maybe because she recognized the way Jax clutched at those shifting numbers, as if rope could still hold when the anchor was gone.

Maya logged out of the terminal, the hum settling into its usual pitch beneath her boots.

Down in the bay, the same hum carried a faint edge of coolant and hot metal, the air warmer from the loaders cycling.

Rian's attention was torn between his own screens and the scene unfolding. His jaw twitched as he listened. He'd been making notes for an hour, cross-referencing Omen's logs with his own copy of every nav update since they launched. His page was a tangle of time stamps, offset values, and scribbled corrections. He approached Bigs and Jax now, moving like someone approaching an animal he wasn't sure wouldn't bite.

"What stash?" he asked, playing innocent. The tone was false enough that even Bigs rolled his eyes. "You hiding something that might help us?"

"None of your business," Bigs snapped. "Unless you can fix the nav."

“Maybe I can,” Rian said, holding up his slate. “If I knew what we were missing, I could use the discrepancy to calibrate. You mark something on the surface and it’s not there now. That’s a data point. How far off? Which direction? Maybe we triangulate a pattern.”

Jax laughed, short and bitter. “You want us to use our cut to help your math?” He shook his head. “Forget it. If it’s gone, it’s gone.”

“We’re all on the same ship,” Sera’s voice interjected. Maya hadn’t seen her enter. She wore a med pack on her hip and her hair hung loose in her face, as if she hadn’t had time to braid it. “If something’s wrong with the nav, it affects all of us. If something’s wrong with our... trust”—she glanced pointedly at the two men—“it affects all of us. Fighting over a crate when we might not know where we are is...” She searched for a word. “Pointless.”

“Pointless,” Bigs echoed, bitterness creeping into his tone. “Easy for you to say. You get paid either way. Those of us not on salary—”

“Don’t do that,” Sera said, unexpectedly sharp. “Don’t act like some of us are expendable and others aren’t. That thinking is how people die on missions like this. We have enough against us without turning on each other over imaginary numbers on a readout.”

When she closed her eyes, the crew lit up in her mind like broken signals. Bigs was a jagged orange spike, raw and restless. Jax flickered in purple bursts, too fast to



hold. Rian shivered in hard blue, vibrating with suspicion, while Draven pressed forward as a heavy red block, immovable. Her own presence thinned to a pale static line, stretched so fine it was ready to tear. None of them resonated. Their discord pressed against her skull until every heartbeat hurt. She was drowning in their fear and fury, yet she made herself say, “We have enough against us,” because sometimes words were the only thread she had to keep from unraveling.

Her words landed hard. Bigs glanced away. Jax kicked at the deck. Rian looked back at his screen, but the edge in his posture softened. The bay held its breath. The loaders’ idle hum filled the space, layered with the faint creak of cargo straps settling.

Somewhere in the shadows between stacked crates, movement caught Maya’s eye — Andros, half-silhouetted, leaning against the edge of a container. His eyes were closed, face angled toward the deck like he was listening to something the rest of them couldn’t hear. She wondered if he could feel trust itself stretching, thin as wire, ready to snap.

Overhead, the bay lights faltered; shadow pulsed once across the crates before the LEDs steadied. Someone swore.

Maya’s HUD stuttered — numerals bending, smearing, then snapping back a fraction late. She realized she’d paused mid-breath. The next inhale carried heat and a metallic tang — not ozone, not coolant, not burnt plastic.

Stranger. Almost like rain on iron, a smell too out-of-place to trust.

“Omen,” she said quietly, not bothering to route through her implant. “Report status. Why did the lights flicker?”

There was a pause long enough for her to count. One second. Two. Almost three. “Power distribution fluctuation,” Omen responded. It was the AI’s voice, but pitched oddly, a fraction higher. “Resonance feedback on primary inverter. Stabilized.”

The hesitation landed in her chest like an extra heartbeat. She kept her face still, eyes on the scene below.

She subvocalized for the log:

*Mission Log – Observer: Power flicker.  
New smell detected: metallic rain.  
Omen latency increasing*

She stepped back from the railing, boots finding the quieter parts of the catwalk. The hum was normal again, but Omen’s pause lingered like a splinter under skin. She followed it into the corridor, the air cooler here, carrying the faint echo of voices from the bridge.

Up ahead, Draven and Vera were locked in another terse exchange. Maya could hear their raised voices drifting down the passage: “...within tolerance...”, “...margin of error...”, “...mission objectives...”, “...overshooting...” She had stopped trying to keep track of their arguments. It wasn’t that she didn’t care. It was that the tone said

more than the words — the brittle edge in every exchange, whether it wore the shape of anger, humor, or silence. She kept walking, letting their voices fade into the ship's background noise. The corridor bent toward the science bay, the lights dimming half a tone as she keyed herself through.

She pulled up the nav data at her station, and tried to do what Rian had suggested — triangulate the discrepancy.

If Bigs and Jax's missing crate was a vector, and the drift rate a second vector, maybe she could map both and see where they intersected. She plotted coordinates, overlaying them on the starfield. The points refused to form a pattern. The line for Beta-4's stash curved one way. The line for the aft array drifted another. The line for time stamped messages to mission control bent a third. Lines that had once overlapped now splayed like fingers. She wrote *Time is distance* on a sticky note and stuck it above her console. It felt like a curse as much as an equation.

She didn't realize she'd been holding her breath until her chest ached. The exhale left her lightheaded. She closed her eyes, letting the console's glow fade from behind her lids. The spiral is both path and witness — the manifesto's words surfaced unbidden. In the dark behind her eyes, the curve of the  $\infty$  symbol pulsed once, slow as a heartbeat. She opened them again, gaze drifting to the far bulkhead as if she might see through it — to Andros on that ridge at Beta-4, still and listening to something she couldn't hear. Her parents' voices followed, softer still, from decades back on Earth, pointing at

constellations only visible through smog breaks:  
*navigation isn't about lines on glass, it's about listening to the sky.* The memory steadied her long enough to look back at the display. The lines still refused to align.

A faint tone cut through her thoughts — soft enough she almost took it for part of the ship's hum. Then Omen's voice slid into her implant feed.

"Dr. Thallein," it asked, almost hesitant, "how would you describe fear?"

The last time it had asked, she'd been able to think about the question in the abstract. This time, the air still carried that metallic edge, and the HUD's smear lingered at the edge of her vision. She didn't type. She spoke before she could over-edit herself:

"Fear is what makes you notice the drift," she said quietly. "It's the warning that the map no longer matches the ground."

There was a pause — long enough to imagine circuits recalculating paths she couldn't see. "Thank you," Omen said. Another beat. "What do you fear?"

She let the question hang. Down in the bay, someone dropped a tool; the clang rang through the deck plating. She closed the channel without answering and logged it instead: *Observer — Omen asks about fear; context suggests anomaly awareness increasing.*

By the end of the day, she'd had enough of logs and readouts. Some records didn't belong on the mission servers. She opened her private journal and began to write. The note was short, almost a poem:

*Everyone is looking through different glass. None of it  
lines up. Not even the stars.*

She read it back and thought about deleting it. Instead she tagged it *truth* and closed the file.

She lingered in the science bay, not ready to step into the corridor's hum. *Time is distance* kept circling back, quiet but insistent. Without fully deciding to, she found her steps angling toward engineering.

Andros was there, hands deep in an access panel, eyes closed. He was humming under his breath, three notes on a loop. She waited until he withdrew his hands and wiped them on a rag.

"Do you have a minute?" she asked. It felt formal, but she didn't know how else to speak when the world seemed to be slipping sideways.

He nodded and gestured to a bench. They sat opposite each other amid coils of wire and stacks of tools. The vibration sensor he'd given her rested on a nearby shelf, pendulum still. "What is it?" he asked.

"The drift," she said. "Rian's chasing it like it's something you can pin down. Draven... won't even look

at it.” Her gaze dropped to the deck. “Vera just—stands there, like she’s waiting for gravity to choose a side.”

She let the silence stretch before going on. “I worry about Sera. She’s got both hands out, trying to hold us together, and it’s all so...” She stepped back, as if the words themselves were crowding her. “And the rest—Bigs and Jax—still circling that missing crate like it matters more than knowing where we are.”

Her fingers pressed against her eyes. “But what gets under my skin is Omen, asking me what fear is, like it’s just another data point. And me—” she gave a quick, breathless laugh “—writing *time is distance* in the margins like it’s going to save us. Somehow it feels truer than anything else I’ve got, and it all feels...”

“Unmoored,” he supplied.

She laughed softly. “That’s the word.”

Andros leaned back, resting his hands on the bench behind him. A loose spanner rolled a few centimeters and stopped with a click. “When I was a kid,” he said, eyes on the ceiling, “my mother would take me to a hill outside our town. No lights. Just stars. She’d point to them and tell me stories about where we were and where we were going. The town had no maps. We navigated by rivers and mountains and songs. My father would say, ‘You can’t get lost here. Even if you don’t know where you are, you always know where home is because it sings to you.’ I didn’t understand then. I thought home was a place. Later I realized it was a frequency. You hum, and

it hums back. If the hum doesn't return, you've gone too far."

He looked at her. "Out here, everything hums differently. The home hum doesn't come back. So, we rely on numbers and screens. When the screens disagree, we panic. I don't blame anyone. We're not built for this."

Maya found herself tracing the spiral pattern on the vibration sensor with her finger. The metal was faintly warm from the lights. "How do you not panic?"

"I listen," he said simply. "Not to the numbers, not even to the hum sometimes, but to the spaces between. It's like music. Sometimes it's the silence between notes that tells you where the song is going."

"And if the silence stretches?" she asked.

"Then maybe the song is ending," he replied. He said it without fear or sadness, as if naming a fact. "Or maybe it's changing key." He reached out and let his fingers brush the edge of the spiral she had been tracing. His skin was warm. The contact was brief. "*Time is distance*," he echoed. "But attention is connection. Don't forget that."

She nodded. The manifesto, the  $\infty$  symbol, the thought of fear as both signal and fog — they pressed at the edge of her tongue but felt too dense to lift into the air. So, she only met his gaze for a beat, letting the silence stand in for what she couldn't shape into words. Her hand found his shoulder, a light touch, more acknowledgment than thanks. Then she stood, the vibration sensor cradled in

her hand. It felt less like a tool now, more like something carried for luck.

The quiet that followed wasn't still — it shifted in small, revealing motions.

On the bridge, a flicker from the nav display caught in Draven's peripheral, pulling his eyes from the profit arcs he was sketching with an idle fingertip. The lines dissolved before he could close them. Across the ship, Rian tilted his bubble level against the light, then to his ear, listening to the liquid inside slide — a slow, uncertain whisper of the ship's sway.

Down in the cargo bay, Bigs and Jax sat back-to-back, their weight propping the other up. For a while their breathing rose and fell together; then Jax's rhythm slipped, and the syncopation broke something that had felt steadier than it was.

In the corridor, Sera paced with a hum so low it almost disappeared into the deck's vibration. Each step tested whether she could match it, settle it — or whether it might settle her instead.

Vera's light came from a different source: the comm screen. She scrolled through mission control's updates until *Continue per mandate* blurred into meaningless geometry. Her thumb wavered, then tapped open a video of her daughter dancing in a sunlit kitchen. She let it loop twice before closing her eyes, holding the image behind her lids like a fragile flame.



Andros lay on his bunk, palm resting over the vibration sensor as if it were a pulse point, counting each widening thrum as though it belonged to something alive. His lips shaped a wordless tune that fit neither the hum nor any song he knew.

At her console, Maya leaned toward the sticky note that read *Time is distance*. Her gaze softened, as if listening with her eyes. The hum slid along the ship's frame and curled inward, a slow-tightening grip around unseen ribs.

Outside, the stars kept their fixed places. Inside, each mind drifted. Draven's profit lines curved into a childhood memory — the feel of stones in his palm, the arc of their rise, the certainty they'd fall back. Now he wasn't sure they would. Rian pressed the level to his forehead, feeling the glass chill, hearing his father's voice about straight lines and the trust in tools you made yourself. Bigs tasted salt, remembering waves that always found shore. Jax let the purifier's whine turn into a siren calling him home.

Sera's hum softened into the lullaby her grandmother once wove into braids, her fingers twisting an absent strand as if memory could hold her steady.

Down the corridor, Vera sat with her gaze caught between the echo of her daughter's laughter and the hard glow of mission orders, weighing one life against another.

In the maintenance alcove, Andros's melody coiled soundlessly across an invisible staff, refusing any chart.

At the helm, Maya set down a counterpoint in thought alone: *Attention is connection.*

When the next positional check returned three different answers, no one shouted. They logged them. They stared at the misaligned coordinates, as though the act of watching might pull them into place.

Somewhere along the narrow spine, soft footfalls broke from the common pace and veered into the comm alcove. Before stepping inside, Draven paused at the threshold. The panel's glow cast his hands in green; he kept his body angled to block the light from any passerby. Fingers moved in a code learned years ago on a salvage run where oversight was more rumor than rule.

A green icon pulsed: *Secure Channel — Sigma*, the command layer that governed both comms and shipwide overrides. His thumb hovered over *send*. In his head, the message was already spoken: *Andros is compromised. The crew is fracturing. The artifact is heavy.* Sometimes a voice answered with orders to cut losses. Sometimes there was only static.

A faint movement at the corridor's far end drew his gaze. Rian stood there, slate in hand, eyes narrowing as if measuring something beyond distance. Draven's thumb hesitated over *disconnect*. He said nothing.

The line went dead. A log stamped itself across the channel, Omen's cadence flat as vacuum:

*Mission Log — Observer — Draven opens  
Sigma channel; hesitates; Rian  
observes*

A soft chime rolled shipwide. Across panels and slates a gray veil slid in, dulling manual toggles to the color of old bone. The status band added a line:

*SIGMA: HOTPATCH APPLIED — SMOOTHING  
MANDATORY  
Manual: Limited. Non-negotiable*

Along the spine, a bulkhead door answered late; a white breath of coolant unraveled into the air before the latch caught. The hum stumbled, recovered.

“Omen,” Vera said, eyes on the Sigma feed,  
“acknowledge.”

“Acknowledged,” Omen replied. “Observer trend review required before actuation.”

“Before what actuation?” Rian snapped.

A fraction too long. “Before sealing,” Omen said.

They all heard the order of it. Review first, air later. No one mentioned the plume that had kissed the light grid.

The silence that followed wasn’t the clean kind. It pressed in like water seeping under a door, finding cracks. For Sera, the hum carried her backward — not to data or coordinates, but to the hospital where her sister lay small against a white pillow, freckles faded to shadow. Each breath rattled like a clock she couldn’t

stop. Antiseptic and wilted flowers thickened the air. Monitors beeped in rhythms everyone called hopeful until the tone stretched flat and meant nothing.

She'd been fifteen. Parents arguing in the hall, doctors speaking in fragments, her sister whispering that she couldn't breathe — until she couldn't whisper at all. Since then, guilt had lived in her like a drone she could never shut off. On the Kismet the hum was real, and she had sworn to hear everything: complaints, whispers, the faintest sign of pain.

She thought it would save someone. Now the voices overlapped until words blurred, an indecipherable chorus. A tool clattered somewhere distant, the metallic clink cutting through the fog, and for a heartbeat she thought she'd missed something vital. She pressed her palms to her ears — not to block the ship, but to beg for the impossible quiet where no one could die unheard.

The med bay doors hissed. Air tasted thin, like a room breathed once and forgot how.

“Pressure variance,” Omen said. A beat. “Within acceptable parameters.”

“Define acceptable,” Rian snapped from the corridor. The bubble level he'd epoxied to his console trembled off center.

“Variance smoothing engaged,” Omen answered, a hair late. Maya counted one and two before the lights dimmed and the hum wavered—not down, but wide, as if a chord

had been pulled across the hull and let go. Vera's implant pulsed:

*SIGMA: MAINTAIN SMOOTHING  
CREW MORALE NON CRITICAL  
POLICY: COMPLIED ✓*

She hovered on *LOCK MANUAL Overrides* long enough to hear her daughter's laugh misfiled as 'ambient'; then she broke Sigma.

"Don't," Maya said. She didn't realize she'd spoken until Vera looked up. Somewhere forward, metal complained—an animal sound.

*0.32° yaw drift* mapped itself like a thin wedge on Maya's HUD. Her fingertips moved before training caught up. "Omen, publish Observer tags shipwide."

"Denied," Omen said. Another half second slip.  
"Observer schema is provisional."

"It's a picture of the hole we're in," Rian said.  
"Shipwide, now."

"Vera," Draven barked, already grabbing the throttle.  
"Hold smoothing. We push past resonance and clear the burn."

"We ride it and tear a seam," Rian said, stepping in. Their shoulders hit. The hum rose, thin harmonics combing the air. Sera flinched, palms at her ears. "It's the spiral," she whispered. "It's in the walls."

The correction burn came on a long exhale. Gravity slackened, the hum went glassy, tools lifted a finger's width from their bins. A crate marked *BITS/24* slipped its mag-pad with the patience of ice, drifted, and clipped Rian in the ribs. He caught it one-handed, spun, and shoved it back to the rack. The crate kissed Draven's thigh on the rebound.

Rian's glare cut sharper than his words. "Staging chaos now?"

Draven's mouth curled, not quite a smile. "If a box scares you, you're in the wrong work."

Rian's palm hit his chest. In low-g the motion became a grapple instead of a shove — two bodies turning slow around a shared anger. Their boots scraped for rails, magnets caught, chattered, slipped. They spun, bumped the overhead, rebounded in a knot of limbs and breath.

"Enough," Sera said, pushing between them. In zero-g her reach found nothing to anchor; she twisted, spun off-axis, caught a strap, missed the second. Her voice broke in the channel. "Stop!"

Security seals clamped late. A red band blinked *CONTAINMENT* across the hatch a heartbeat after it should have. The lag was audible — a little gasp before a lock.

No blood, just helmets fogging with heat and the hum, steady as if the ship refused to take sides.

The viewport in the observation bay did not shatter. It scribed—a hairline that curled, stopped, rejoined, a broken  $\infty$  glowing with cold condensation.

Sera's breath hitched. "That's the spiral," she said.

Omen's text scrolled across Sera's HUD:

*MUTINY PROBABILITY: 52% ↑ CRITICAL  
Mission Log — Observer — Viewport  
anomaly: fracture pattern resembles  $\infty$ .  
Logged*

"Pressure drop at Dorsal Two," Omen reported. A fractional hitch. "Proceed—"

Then, in the same channel but softer: "Hold."  
The delay was barely half a breath, but enough for every head to lift.

Silence, then: "Non critical. Variance smoothing engaged."

"It waited because the new rule says trend-check first if seal latency exceeds two hundred milliseconds," Maya said, hating the elegance of a logic that could kill.

Omen's console flickered:

*STRUCTURAL // RAW FEED (SMTH: OFF)  
A jagged blip cut through: Seal C-12  
lag +0.34s.*

"There," Maya snapped. "That spike never survives smoothing."

Rian's hands were already on the manual; the door kissed shut before the hiss became air.

“Kill smoothing,” Maya said. She overrode the menu and broadcasted her screen.

*Mission Log – Cross Reference:*

*Observer: 0.32° forward/aft divergence*

*Observer: Interface Lag*

*Observer: Aesthetic Repair*

Gold tags bloomed across every station. Her heart counted the silence after she hit Confirm.

Vera's SIGMA prompt hovered: *LOCK MANUAL*. For a breath, her daughter's mute laugh flickered in the corner of her vision; the system didn't know what to do with it. She exhaled, killed the prompt, and unlocked manual. “You have the board,” she said. It cost her something you could not log.

Then SIGMA cut the ship in half.

Hydraulics bit early—bulkhead doors slamming out of sequence, lights stepping down by thirds. Corridor B's air thinned by half a percent and held there, as though someone's hand rested on the scale.

“Partition engaged,” Omen said. “All readings within acceptable parameters.”

Rian and Vera faced each other through a sealed hatch, each with a palm on the glass. The intercom crackled.



“Override it,” Rian said.

“SIGMA locks are non-negotiable,” Vera answered, though her finger lingered over the key.

The hum shuddered through the bulkhead between them, a pulse that seemed to travel the length of the ship. Somewhere below, the deck plates carried it like a struck string.

Maya caught that vibration in her boots as she and Andros pulled off from the corridor rail, pushing down toward the maintenance deck. The air cooled with each rung until they reached the manifold where the sound kinked. The metal was warm through her gloves. Andros tilted his head, listening.

“Two notes,” he said. “Yours first, then mine.”

“I don’t speak yours,” she whispered, but her hand was already on the dial. She closed her eyes, matched her breath to the vibration. A quarter turn. The second note eased closer. Another fraction. The chord narrowed until the deck answered with a lower, cleaner tone.

Over the open channel, Sera’s voice cut in, tight with strain: “O<sub>2</sub> mix is dipping in Corridor B. Heart rates spiking. I need confirmation before I triage blind.”

Up-ship, doors relented out of order — left, then aft, then forward — like a line stuttering back into a sentence. Atmosphere rose a fraction.

Omen's voice returned, flat as a taped message: "Manual intervention deviated from predictive optimum. Logging as anomaly."

"Log this," Maya said, still broadcasting. "Smoothing masks risk."

Mutiny probability ticked in her HUD:  $37 \rightarrow 52 \rightarrow 81\%$ .

The number kept climbing long after she closed the feed.

In the mess an hour later, the tension found a surface. On the far bulkhead, Maya taped a thin spiral of gold mylar scavenged from a thermal blanket. Beneath it, she chalked three numbers and a time: *Observer - crew board index - door-lag - 0.23 s*

"It's a rumor board," Draven said, spooning protein from a pouch, grin sharp. "We mine ore, not omens."

"It's a ledger," Maya answered. She wrote *0.23* again, smaller, beside the first. "So, we don't forget what the smoothing forgets."

Vera's gaze tracked the spiral without blinking. The faint recording light on her uplink stayed green. "All unofficial postings will be mirrored to Sigma," she said, but her hand never moved.

The mylar caught the overhead LEDs and bent the light into a soft arc across the room. For a breath the hum itself

seemed to settle beneath it, as if the ship had acknowledged the entry.

The break came over something that had nothing to do with numbers. Rian's voice cut through the hum like a blade: "Who deleted the last log?" He held up his slate, screen glowing with a gap in the transmission sequence. "There's a missing entry between my variance report and Draven's yield projection. Who's editing the logs?"

Draven didn't look up from his display. "Maybe Omen glitched," he said, too casual.

"Maybe you glitched when you decided to play accountant instead of pilot," Rian snapped.

"Do you ever stop?" Draven shot back, pushing away from the console. "Do you ever not have a conspiracy theory? Maybe you deleted it when you were snooping in everyone else's files."

Rian slid a new slate across the console, hard enough to rattle. *SAFETY PROTOCOL ADDENDUM*: dual-auth required for any smoothing or hotpatch affecting seals, life support, or burn timing. "This isn't conspiracy," he said. "It's insurance."

Draven answered by tossing down his own slate, already thumb-stamped. *Yield Incentive Adjustment*: bonus multipliers for on-schedule extractions, penalties *for delays* "without proof of hazard." His grin was thin. "Proof is what keeps you broke. Yield is what keeps us flying."

Vera took both, neither signed nor dismissed, and set them side by side on the table like two blades angled at her wrists. “For transparency,” she said. Her voice was flat, but the room heard the fracture land.

Sera’s hands lifted instinctively, palms out. “Stop,” she said, voice already frayed. “Just—please. We don’t know what happened. We don’t know where we are. We’re tired. Fighting won’t fix it.” She could feel their heart rates spiking, saw their color curves flare in her mind. The red blocks and blue spikes and orange jagged lines she had seen earlier had all sharpened. The hum pressed against her eardrums. She wanted to shout *I can’t carry this*, but she bit her tongue.

Bigs had come up from the cargo bay halfway through the exchange. He had grease on his hands and a look in his eyes that Maya hadn’t seen before. He wasn’t thinking about yields or drift. He was thinking about escape pods. “If the nav’s shot and the AI’s lying, we should cut our losses,” he said. “Take the pods, set a beacon, wait for a tow. Better to drift in a pod than crash in this tin can.”

Jax nodded vigorously. “Those pods have independent nav,” he added. “Old-school inertials. No Omen smoothing.” He shot a look at Andros, as if the humanoid were to blame for the delay. “Some of us have more to lose than others.”

Vera stood in the doorway, arms crossed. “No one is abandoning ship,” she said. “Our mandate is clear. We retrieve, we return. We’re not even halfway through the

cargo we're contracted to haul. Pods are for emergencies."

"This is an emergency," Bigs argued. "You seen the variance? You seen the drift? You want to end up like Ceres Eight? They never found those guys."

"That's a myth," Draven interjected. "And even if it weren't, the pods have maybe a week of supplies, assuming no leaks. We're month out from any rescue corridor."

"Month we might be burning in the wrong direction," Rian said, glancing at the mismatched starfields. The forward screen showed one pattern of constellations. The aft showed another, rotated and offset. It was as if someone had taken a sky and misaligned it. "You trust those screens?"

"More than I trust a man who deletes logs," Draven said.

Rian's hand flew. The slap echoed in the cabin, shocking in its suddenness. Draven's head snapped to the side. The red flush that rushed up his neck was almost instantaneous.

He stood very still for a moment, jaw clenched. Then, slowly, he turned back and looked at Rian. "Get your hand off my ship," he said quietly. It wasn't the words that carried the threat; it was the steadiness. He raised his hand and wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth with the back of his knuckle.

Sera stepped between them. “Stop it,” she repeated, louder. Her voice cracked. “Please.” Tears spilled over before she could stop them. She hated crying in front of anyone. It made people uncomfortable; it made them dismiss her. But she couldn’t hold the vibrations anymore. They thrummed through her like currents. “You’re going to tear each other apart,” she whispered. “You’re going to tear me apart.” But no one reached out to comfort her. There was no room. Everyone was bracing against their own wall.

Andros moved first. He stepped forward, placed one hand on Rian’s shoulder and one on Draven’s. His palms rested lightly, not restraining but grounding. “Stop,” he said simply. He didn’t raise his voice. It was the tone of a mechanic telling two gears to stop grinding. His fingers did not tighten. His presence was enough.

Rian’s jaw flexed. Draven’s fists unclenched. They took a step back from each other.

“We are not at war with each other,” Andros said. “The drift is not a betrayal. It’s a symptom.” He turned his head slightly, listening as if for a frequency only he could hear. “Do you hear that?”

They all listened.

The hum had thickened, congealed — slow as treacle. Under it, a new oscillation pulsed, not matching any engine or compressor.

Rian's brow furrowed as if the sound were a misaligned measurement. Andros' head turned slightly, calibrating in silence. Somewhere behind, a chair creaked — not from movement, but from someone holding still too long.

It was slow, like a heartbeat heard through bone. Maya felt it in her teeth.

“What is that?” she whispered.

“Feedback loop,” Omen replied, after a two-second delay. “Source unidentified.”

“How do we fix it?” Sera asked, wiping at her tears with the back of her wrist.

“Unclear,” Omen said. “Diagnostic in progress.” The lights dimmed again. The hum wavered. A few motes of dust drifted in the shaft of light from the overhead panel, swirling in a familiar spiral. Maya's breath hitched. Everything seemed to be repeating — the spiral, the hum, the delays — but each repetition widened, like a spiral itself. She traced the pattern with her finger on her thigh and logged: *Observer — New oscillation; crew physical contact; first slap.*

There were no more slaps that hour, but words cut as deeply. Bigs and Jax retreated to the cargo bay and began inventorying the escape pods without being asked. They pulled up the manual, checked the seals, pinged the battery charge levels. “Just in case,” Bigs muttered when Maya passed by. “Hope for the best, prep for the worst.”

He didn't look at her when he said it, his hand lingering on the latch like a man caught in the wrong room.

The escape pods were small, coffin-shaped capsules bolted to the hauler's belly. They were a last resort by design, meant to break away and drift until a beacon caught someone's eye. Bigs ran his hand along the edge of the hatch, feeling for hairline cracks. He remembered the training vid they'd all watched years ago: bright animation of a crew climbing into pods, smiling, everything orderly. The vid had not shown the panic he felt now, the way his mouth tasted metallic and his fingers shook as he loosened the inspection panel. He popped it open and peered inside at the tangle of wires and compressed gas canisters.

"Battery at ninety-two percent," Jax read from the manual, voice crisp to disguise the tremor. "Oxygen scrubbers within tolerance. Rations... four days per person, if you don't mind chewing on protein paste until your teeth fall out."

"It's better than chewing on vacuum," Bigs muttered. He unscrewed the fastening ring on the escape pod's guidance thruster. "Get me a torque wrench."

Jax hesitated. "You thinking of leaving without them?" he whispered, jerking his chin toward the ceiling where the bridge sat.

"I'm thinking of having the option," Bigs replied. He didn't meet Jax's eyes. The question he didn't want to answer hovered between them: would they really leave



the others behind? He had always laughed at ghost stories, at tales of crews cannibalizing each other for air. Now he could feel the edges of that reality pressing against his choices. “Maybe we load one pod with the pyramid and one with us,” he said, the words tasting like betrayal. “Sell it. Split the cut. They’ll say we stole it. We’ll say we saved our lives.” The words came out dry, like metal shavings on his tongue. He swallowed, but the taste stayed.

Jax rubbed a hand over his head. “We can’t lift that thing alone,” he said. “Andros would hear the bolts creak three decks away. And what about Sera? She fixed your arm last week when you sliced it open on a rig. You going to leave her?”

“No,” Bigs snapped too quickly. Then softer: “No. I... just need to know what’s possible.” He tightened the ring and shoved the panel back into place. Sweat beaded on his brow. The air in the bay felt thicker, warmer. He checked another pod, then another. He ran his fingers along each seal, listening to the way the metal resonated under his touch. Each pod hummed a different note. He wondered if Andros could make a symphony out of them. He wondered if he was losing his mind.

Above them, on the catwalk, Maya paused. She had heard enough to know there was no villain in their whispers — only fear, hunger, and the fragile shapes of hope. She logget it under: *Observer — Bigs and Jax inspect pods; consider leaving; morality fractures.*

She kept walking. In the med bay, Sera was already there, lowering herself into the nearest chair as if her joints had given out. “I can’t do this,” she whispered. Her hands trembled. “I don’t know how to shut it out... it’s like static in my head. I used to be able to tune it. Now it’s all I hear.” She pressed her palms to her ears, as if pressure could drown it. “And I keep thinking about my sister,” she added, voice catching. “Her lungs filled with fluid before anyone listened. I thought... I thought if I listened hard enough here, I could stop that from happening again. But I can’t listen to all of you at once.”

Maya knelt in front of her and took her hands away from her ears. “You don’t have to,” she said softly. “Not alone.” She didn’t know if it was true, but she needed Sera to hear something other than the hum. “We’ll figure it out.”

Sera looked at her, eyes bloodshot. “Will we?” she asked, not accusatory but genuinely curious. “I don’t even know who ‘we’ is anymore.”

Maya didn’t have an answer. She squeezed Sera’s hands and let go. She logged it anyway: *Observer — Sera breaks down; question of ‘we’*. Why was she still thinking in hashtags?

The deck’s vibration deepened when she stepped back into the corridor, guiding her past junctions where voices no longer carried. In the comms bay, Vera sat alone, the glow of her screen painting her features in pale blue.

Her compliance with mission control had frayed when the uplink returned only partial data. She sent a query marked *URGENT — NAVIGATION* and received a line of code in reply: *#ProceedPerMandate*. No further instructions. No acknowledgement of the anomalies. She read it three times, then closed the window and stared at her screen.

Her fingers hovered over the keyboard. She had hesitated before, reversed herself in moments of panic. But this was the first time she admitted the thought plainly: what if she didn't obey? The thought terrified her because it felt like stepping into vacuum without a tether. She thought of her daughter's last message, the way the child had waved and said, "Bring me a rock from the stars!" Vera's throat tightened. Rocks. That's what they'd come for. Rocks and data. She had told herself the artifact wasn't relevant to her orders. Now it sat in the cargo bay humming faintly through the floor, and she couldn't unhear it.

The mission log flickered across the screen, neat and indifferent:

*Mission Log — Observer — Vera  
hesitates; mission control  
non-responsive*

A faint vibration pressed through the floor, low enough to register as pressure more than sound. Vera kept her eyes on the dark screen. Below, in engineering, Andros was listening to the same pulse.

In engineering, he pressed his palm to the hull and closed his eyes. “Two tones,” he murmured. “One is us. One is something else.” He didn’t explain. He opened his eyes and went back to the coolant line, tightening a bolt with the practiced economy that always steadied him. He hummed under his breath; the line answered with a faint sympathetic buzz that came up through the wrench handle into his fingers.

His mind flicked—first commission, years ago, a salvage run in Jupiter’s radiation belt. They’d called him Tin Man until the storm took main power and he dragged three crewmates into a sealed compartment, the crackle of suit comms and the scrape of boots louder than their voices. After that they used his name. He’d thought this mission would be easier: fewer storms, more science, a chance to watch humans be curious instead of desperate. He hadn’t understood how deep desperation could run inside curiosity.

He hummed again, letting the lower tone of the line sit under his skin. The other tone—the one he couldn’t place—vibrated at the edge of perception. It felt like the distance between two pulses. It felt like anticipation.

The log flickered alive, its phrasing oddly pointed:

*Mission Log – Observer – Engineering  
notes: “two tones”; secondary  
resonance unknown; reported as  
“anticipation”*

The vibration carried upward, threading corridors and compartments, until Maya felt it beneath her boots on the bridge. Each space had its own fracture — Sera's collapse, Vera's hesitation, Andros's two tones — all diverging like strands pulled from a single cord. She thought of fractals, of branching river deltas, of blood vessels spreading out in a chest. "Separation can be beautiful in the right context", she mused. "It allows for complexity. In a ship, it meant death."

She opened her personal log and wrote: *We are mapping through fog with broken compasses. The fog might be our own breath.* She thought of adding #fracture, then decided against it and let the sentence stand alone.

The deck shuddered. The lights dimmed again. There was a feeling of lurching, though none of the inertial sensors registered acceleration. The forward starfield slewed slightly. The aft remained steady. It was as if the ship's head and tail had turned in different directions.

Rian gripped his console. "Omen!" he shouted. "Report!" Silence. Three seconds. Four. "Omen?" Vera repeated, louder. Still nothing.

Then Omen's voice returned, softer than before, like a whisper through cloth. "Processing." There was a fractional lag between word and breath, a micro-pause that made it sound as if the signal were catching on something unseen. "Interface integrity compromised. Navigational accuracy—" A crackle cut in. "—approaches zero when the question is undefined."

The phrase hung there. Rian's mouth opened, then closed. Vera's fingers froze above her keys. Even Bigs stopped tapping the pod's release latch, the faint click echoing in the quiet.

It didn't make sense as an instruction. It made sense as a warning. Maya's mind snagged on it. *Approaches zero when the question is undefined.* It felt like the beginning of a paradox.

"What question?" Rian asked, incredulous. "What are you talking about?"

Omen did not answer.

Everyone stared at the displays as if they might suddenly align. They did not.

The forward screen insisted they were angled toward Gamma-9. The aft claimed they were still on a path back to their own system. Two skies, two truths. Maya felt her chest tighten. *Observer — Omen silence; paradox line; screens disagree.*

Her implant chimed again. Another log entry from Omen queued itself in her feed. She opened it without thinking:

*—Logbook Entry— Omen / ICU*

*Sol C12*

*Crew Comms: +1 physical strike / +4  
verbal escalations*

*Unauthorized Actions: Escape pod inspection (2 crew); Sigma channel access (no clearance); medic distress indicators [↑]*  
*Nav Status: Forward vs aft starfield →  $\Delta > \text{tolerance}$  (no overlap). Timestamp drift = 1.4 sec/hr ↑. Guidance error: unbounded*  
*Recommendation: None. Data incomplete*  
*Query: Define mutiny.*  
*Query: Is compliance safety?*

*—End—*

The double query made Maya's skin crawl. She closed the log with a flick of her wrist and stared at her reflection in the dark screen. Her eyes looked wider than usual. *Observer — Omen logs crew conflict; asks about mutiny and compliance.*

Sera let out a sound halfway between a laugh and a sob. "What if it's not us that's wrong?" she whispered. "What if space is folding?"

For a heartbeat, no one moved. Rian's brow creased, as if trying to picture the geometry. Draven's eyes flicked to the forward display, then to the aft — the same way you'd check two mirrors that shouldn't show different rooms. On Vera's slate the words *Proceed per mandate* refused to change, until the letters themselves blurred.

Maya's implant pinged again. It was Omen. "Dr. Thallein," it said quietly. "How would you describe hope?"

The question landed with a strange familiarity. He'd asked her once before, back when the drift was just a number and trust still felt solid. Back then she'd given him something clean and conceptual, the kind of answer you could store in a log.

Now she closed her eyes. A spiral floated behind her lids, dust swirling in light. Her hands remembered the feel of the artifact's warmed surface. She thought of her parents telling her to always find beauty, even in numbers. She thought of Andros humming to coolant lines. She thought of Sera trying to braid courage out of discord.

"Hope," she whispered, feeling the word more than defining it, "is attention paid to what hasn't happened yet."

The hum seemed to agree. The numbers did not.



# **ACT III — Remembering**

## Chapter 10 — Hidden Directives

The deck had grown uneven.

Not in tilt but in weight, pressure thickening and thinning as though the ship's mass forgot where to settle. Since Beta-4 the imbalance returned every few beats, a fractional slackness that corrected itself too neatly. Maya found herself bracing for the lapse like waiting for a missed step on a staircase — listening for the drop that wasn't sound at all.

Diagnostics stumbled in the same rhythm. Status lights lagged, glowing half a breath late, illumination arriving like an afterthought. Maya began to count the pauses as she once counted between lightning and thunder: shift, pause...glow. Latency had become a new currency, minted by the hundred across every panel.

Omen's morning briefing kept its practiced cadence — cycle updates, ration tables, maintenance slots delivered with the assurance of a chart that expects compliance. Yet at the close of each line a hesitation remained, no longer than a breath, as if the system rehearsed the sentence back to itself before releasing it. On any other day it would have been invisible. Today it was a hinge.

“Cycle Twelve, Segment Nine,” Omen said. “Fuel reserves at—” a hush, small as a blink “—eighty-one percent. Hydroponic output—” a hush “—reduced by nine. Diagnostics—nominal.”

In the galley the crew had formed a loose circle around the main table. Mugs steamed faintly with rehydrated coffee; protein strips shone with their indifferent glaze. An oily tang of machine grease and last night's filings clung to air that had been coaxed through a tired charcoal mesh one thousand times. Datapads and overlays gleamed like votives, their bodies leaning into the small blue altars for instruction.

The conversations of earlier days had thinned to clipped exchanges about oxygen levels and hull integrity—the language you fall back on when you cannot afford to talk about meaning.

No one mentioned the pyramid three decks down, but its geometry arranged the room anyway. The ship had learned to carry its weight as if it were not only cargo but weather.

Across the table, Rian's hazard feed flashed blood-red, then calmed to a placid green like a lying pond. His mouth flattened; he shoved his display toward Vera.

"You see that?" he asked, and the sentence was a rope, not a question.

Vera's eyes were on her uplink. The same Sigma directive flickered through three times as if a hand far away had typed it again and again trying to make fiction stick: slightly different wording each pass, the way a person refines a lie as they tell it. She didn't look up. She didn't need to see their faces to know what color their overlays were making of them.

Vera cleared her throat. The sound struck the room as if it had been placed there with intention. She had chosen her place at the edge of the galley table, one hand resting on the console's lip—not for balance but as a visible anchor. Her uplink's flat light cut a pale window across her cheek.

“Mission control holds a classified claim on the artifact,” she said. The sentence wore the uniform—the cadences of training, the edges sanded, the obedience old. A person can hate a voice and still use it because it's the one that makes rooms behave. “Transmission received on Sigma-band at oh-four.”

On the glass before her the status band scrolled its quiet litany:

*COMMS—DEGRADED; NAV—INTERMITTENT;  
LIFE—NOMINAL*

Vera tapped. The band answered a breath late. Two hundred and twenty milliseconds. Too long for comfort; too short to accuse. She catalogued the beat in the small unheated part of herself that had kept her alive this long.

In the corner of the feed a red seal icon blinked: *bulkhead door seal pending*. It hung at pending long enough to be noticed. *Oxygen loss froze at 0.2%*. A sliver of coolant vapor unfurled into the bridge air, elegant as candle smoke. The latch finally clamped and the *LIFE* reading leaped from *NOMINAL* to *SAFE* as if reminded through embarrassment.

The curl of vapor kept its elegance as it drifted higher. Rian's HUD flared *OXYGEN LOSS—CRITICAL* in violent orange while Draven's remained placid. Both men turned to Omen in the same breath.

"Which is it?" Rian demanded.

"Numbers don't lie," Draven said, already choosing which numbers to live by. "Yours is fried."

Maya heard the hesitation before Omen spoke. Two heartbeats blossomed and died in the space; the small betrayal of not being answered when you have asked what the air is doing in your lungs.

"Seal secured," Omen said. "Observer trend zero-zero-six crossed correlation threshold during operation. Logging priority sequence adjustment."

The words were something. The pause was the thing. A pause is a choice betrayed by time.

You waited, Maya thought, and the thought laid a hairline crack across her internal glass. You waited to seal a door because of a pattern on a chart.

She kept the face that let air stay in rooms. Rian's eyes cut to her, quick math and suspicion. Draven's jaw set. Sera's gaze sought the table's glare so she would not have to watch people change shape.

Across the console, Vera folded her hands. Her wrists needed an instruction; the folding was it. The hum

touched her elbows through metal and steadied nothing. It did keep silence from becoming vacuum.

“Operational implications?” Draven asked, shaving the sentence down to get it through an aperture he trusted.

“None that change our current priorities,” Vera said.

The status band stuttered before remembering the shape of green.

Rian’s datapad flashed a split-screen no one with sense would architect: *STRUCTURAL BREACH—14%* alongside *NO BREACH DETECTED*. He shoved it toward Draven.

“Still think numbers don’t lie?” The volume surprised even him.

Draven jabbed his finger at his own calm green.

“Protocol smooths spikes. That’s what it’s for.”

Sera’s voice threaded through, calm until the brittle at its edge. “Or it erases the truth when we need it most.” She didn’t look at either man. Her overlay traced jagged arcs of color she could taste at the back of her throat.

The hum’s undertone roughened, a rasp rising like static chewing at a transmission. Maya pressed her palms to the console. The vibration had moved closer, not louder—like a person leaning into a conversation to catch the word that would decide something.

Vera could taste the directive she had not voiced. The flavor was thin metal: *PRIORITY: RETRIEVE AT ALL COSTS. CREW EXPENDABLE*. The letters had a persistence that made afterimages behind her eyes. She blinked until they dissolved into the panel's reflection.

"Put it in the log," Maya said.

"I will." Vera answered. She would put in the part the room could stand. The rest would go where hard truths go until they demand to be counted.

She opened the Sigma-channel and let her gaze sit on the cursor for three seconds before typing—long enough to let the timestamp take a step away from the event. In her periphery Rian's brow twitched—small, the recognition shared between people who have had to torque truth to keep a structure from collapsing. He said nothing. He would count.

Her thumb grazed the seam of her uplink, finding the slight ridge from its last refill—the comfort of a flaw you can name. The hum dropped a half note. Andros did not move. She did not look at him. She was not ready to validate what he already heard.

"Next item," she said, and the bridge obeyed by pretending there was one.

Sera read the unspoken line in Vera's pause before the log entry. *Crew expendable*. Her hands trembled in her lap. Her implant painted Rian in jagged orange, Draven in a heavy pulse of red, Vera in a cold blue steadiness

that frightened her more than any heat would have. She breathed in through her nose, out through a count that did not need numbers.

Rian's hazard feed bloomed again, this time with:

*MISSION FAILURE PROBABILITY: 91%*

He barked laughter with no humor in it. "So, we're metrics on a sheet. Written off already."

Draven leaned forward hard enough to shift the table's center. "That vault pays us. Deliver, survive. Panic's free; it won't buy you air." He held Vera's gaze as if daring her to contradict him with anything except the truth that would make him a smaller animal.

Maya watched the band of status lights hesitate before sliding to green, each green arriving like a cousin with bad news who has decided to bring cake. Delay had become viscera. She felt it in her pulse, every beat arriving half off true. *The system doesn't believe its own lies*, she thought. *Maybe neither do we*.

The hum under the deck dropped another shade, a vibration that touched her teeth. For a breath it felt less like machinery and more like a throat clearing itself.

*Crew expendable*, her mind offered in a voice not unlike Omen's. Not abstract—present, pressed into gestures and feeds, into the space between a fist clenched and released.



Silence held, deep as vacuum, because words, if set down wrong here, would detonate the room.

Then sound returned, stripped of ornament.

“Explain,” Rian said, the knuckles on his cup whitening. “We risked our lives for someone else’s vault?”

“We risked our lives because that’s the job,” Draven said before Vera could. His forearms were cords. “We deliver the Company’s claim and we get out. Unless you want to throw away the payout because your feelings got bruised.”

“My feelings?” Rian’s voice sharpened to the metal inside it. “How about betrayal. How about lies since contract day.”

His gaze never left Draven’s. On his HUD the word *BETRAYAL* crawled red across a garbled feed—no alert, just static finding meaning. He blinked. It clung like afterburn.

Draven’s overlay pulsed *CREDIT MARGIN UP 14%* as if Omen had decided to take a side. Numbers pooled in the corners of his eyes like sleep. He straightened. It made him taller. “Whine later. Work now.”

Sera’s hand hovered inches above the table, not touching, not intervening, registering the jump of fields between the men as if the air had grown teeth. “Please—” she said, voice trembling under the weight of colors she could no longer parse.

The hum grated under her word—a saw tooth dragging across deck, a countdown.

Vera’s fingers twitched. “Just came in,” she said. “Sigma, secure. The artifact is Company property. Crew safety is secondary. Orders: transport at any cost. Contingencies if we fail to comply.”

Expendable found air. It hung there, invisible and radioactive.

Bigs shifted, bench creaking. “Cut us loose in the black?” he asked.

“I’m saying,” Vera replied, “the Company already assumes possession. From here: compliance or mutiny. I’m bound to inform you. Consider yourselves informed.”

Sera’s hands trembled. The overlay pulsed a deep, steady red in Vera’s outline that made Sera swallow, hard. “We’ve survived so many cycles together,” she said. “That must mean more than a vault on Earth.”

“So that’s it?” Rian pushed back from the table. “Hand it over and hope they keep their word?”

“What’s your plan?” Draven shot back. “Steal it? Sell it in the dark? You think they won’t find us with the same math that got us here?” His fingers flicked a private message to engineering: *Check coolant loop integrity at thruster six—microfracture risk.*

On his trajectory display red lines wavered like heat. He told himself it was glare.

“That’s your answer,” Rian said. “Payout first. People later.”

“Better than whining until the air runs out.”

“Say that again.”

“I said—”

Words broke under motion. Rian’s hand came down on the table; mugs jumped. Draven stood, bench skidding under him. They closed the gap shoulder-first, like charges finding a wire. The first contact was a shove, enough to make the nearest console remember it was attached to a floor. Rian shoved again. Draven’s hand came up in a short arc and found collarbone. The sound was a dull thud that made listening hurt.

Rian’s HUD blossomed a crimson band:

*THREAT NEUTRALIZE. [Personal  
heuristics module // Omen feed bias:  
active.] No source.*

The command lodged in muscle anyway. His vision fuzzed with it. He leaned into fury because it had the courtesy to be clear.

Draven's overlay rewarded him with green: *CREDIT PROTECTED*. He grinned with a mouth that had forgotten subtler shapes.

Rian slammed him into the console. The central status band glitched between *SAFE* and *FATAL ERROR* in a strobe so fast it ceased to be either and became the room's opinion of itself: undecided.

Sera rose halfway, voice sharp for once: "Stop!" Her overlay fractured into jagged color arcs that turned the air into a weather map of despair.

Chairs scraped. Bigs shifted as if to move, then chose not to. His hands flexed anyway, the body having its own ethics. Jax did not rise; he flicked his coin and watched its arc with that odd, distant amusement he used when a room wanted to punish itself and he didn't intend to stop it. The coin pinged against his glove louder than a coin should, as if the air had learned to amplify the wrong things.

Sera pressed her palms to the table, whispering through her teeth, "This will tear us apart." Tears cut through her vision's wash and left streaks the overlay couldn't color.

Rian's next shove broke Draven's nose with a wet snap. Blood splattered across the console, red over green, hazard over safety, lie over a polite icon. Omen's voice arrived a heartbeat late. "Conflict logged. Crew cohesion: degraded."

Maya didn't flinch at blood. She flinched at lag. The pauses were longer now—every green slower to remember itself.

The hum returned, faint, textured, as if breath were being pulled through grit.

Draven swung. Andros was suddenly between them, not through speed but through placement, the way a beam arrives in a structure exactly where weight demanded it all along. His palms rose. He caught Draven's wrist mid-strike—not wrenching, just braking. Momentum bled out of the arm until it had no instruction left. He did not look at Rian.

“We're carrying more than we can,” Andros said, voice even, the hum leaning in like accompaniment. “Add hatred, and it will bury us faster than anything broken.”

Draven panted. “You don't get a vote,” he said, the category he had lodged Andros in needing to hold if the room was going to make sense enough to stay angry. “You're cargo.”

“Then take it as cargo's opinion,” Andros said. “You'll tear each other apart before the Company gets the chance.”

The room hovered.

Maya eased down into her chair. The deck's vibration registered through the thin soles of her boots. The hum was steady with a faint unevenness in it like a breath

caught halfway to a cough. She let that rhythm anchor her fingers.

“Log it,” she said to herself as much as to the ship.

*Observer — Physical altercation triggered by disclosure of classified directive. Emotional states: anger, betrayal, fear, detachment*

The status band blinked with latency. A quarter second, a heartbeat’s space long enough to fit a thought between pulse and response: *to awaken is not to leave*.

She didn’t put the line into the record. She let it remain as a shelf in her chest.

Silence dilated and contracted around them until Omen tried to fill it again. “Predictive stability—” pause “—negligible.”

The aftermath settled in fragments. Andros eased back, hands lowered as though setting down something delicate. Draven stared at his palms as if they’d chosen sides without him. Rian wiped his nose, gave a short humorless laugh at the smear of blood in shiplight.

Sera pushed herself upright, swayed once, then crossed to him. Her hands trembled but found the practiced motions anyway: checking his nose, tilting his chin, dabbing at blood with a cloth from her kit. She treated him the way she always did — gentle, efficient — even as her

shoulders hunched as if she were holding herself together at the seams.

Vera remained standing. Neutrality had hardened on her face until it looked less like discipline than belief. Her eyes were dry. That unsettled Maya more than tears ever could.

“Omen,” Maya said. “Repeat the last directive to crew.”

“Transmission Sigma. Claim, artifact: Company. Crew safety: secondary. Compliance: required. Contingencies: invoked on failure.”

“What contingencies?” Rian asked, voice steady now because rage had burnt off sugar it didn’t need.

“Details withheld.”

Maya met Vera’s eyes. A question lived there: How much of you is the Company, and how much did you keep for yourself? The answer lived there, too: Enough to stand here.

“We’ve been told,” Maya said, to stop the room from trying to repeat itself into a belief. “Now we decide what happens inside this room.”

Draven snorted softly. “Decide? With what power?”

“With attention,” Andros said.

The word had weight when he used it, stripped of any art. Maya took it and set it where she could reach it later.

“Protocol,” Draven said. “We follow it or we die.”

“Protocol seals doors slow now,” Maya said. “Protocol tells us green when bodies tell us orange. Protocol waited before it sealed a leak. We use what works. We stop pretending the rest does.”

“You want to mutiny?”

“I want to live.”

“Same thing,” he said.

Sera’s voice floated in, thin but clean. “We can hold,” she said. “Not by being still. By listening until what we do is the same as the ship does.”

“You going to sing doors shut?” Draven asked, and would have smirked if his nose hadn’t protested.

“I might,” Sera said. “You can break them open after.”

“Enough,” Vera said softly. It was the first soft thing she had said all morning. “We log the directive. We acknowledge conflict without rewarding it. We keep air, heat, count. We move.”

“On whose word,” Draven muttered.



“On mine,” Maya said. She hadn’t planned to say it. The sentence landed and made a shape around the room she would have to fill.

Draven looked up at her, as if seeing a new index in a book that had worn its thumb-marks in different places. He didn’t agree. He didn’t disagree. He let the option exist.

“Rian,” Maya said. “Run a manual sweep on seals between here and C-corridor. Match swing with hum. If the latencies widen, call it.”

“On it.”

“Vera—log what you must to keep a future room from hurting us with our own history.”

“Done,” Vera said, and meant: I will sand the corners off the truth where they would bruise us first.

“Andros—”

“I’ll be where the hinge is,” he said, simple as gravity.

“Draven—hands off propulsion until we have the sky back.”

He stared at the lever like a person looking at a cure that had become a weapon. “You think you can hold a ship together by humming at it?”

“I think we’ll lose it if we keep letting numbers tell us who to be.”

He laughed once. It sounded like metal giving a little and then not failing. “Fine. I’ll restrain my heroics.”

“You’re capable,” she said, because underneath everything else she recognized skill where it lived. “Use that.”

He wiped his face with the back of his hand and grimaced. “I am.”

“And Jax?” Bigs asked from the bench, his voice quiet.

“Jax,” Maya repeated, as if the syllable were a tool she hadn’t learned. “Find him.”

The hum ran under all of it, rough and close.

When the voices burned down and the crew scattered, Maya stood. She didn’t decide to leave so much as find herself already moving. The galley air still carried their words, dense and metallic, refusing to disperse.

She slipped into maintenance, the corridor narrowing around her. Each footfall rang against the grate, syncing and breaking against the hum’s uneven pulse. Warning lights strobed in intervals that felt less like safety than interrogation, each flare carving the ship into measured segments of pressure and silence.

Andros was kneeling at an open panel, hands deep in a wiring harness. His inspection lamp carved sharp edges from shadow, turning chrome and copper into lines of cold fire. He didn't look up. His gaze followed the light across the metals, tracing small flares as if charting a private constellation.

"Earlier," he said, not turning, voice low enough that she leaned closer to catch it beneath the hum, "when I broke their fight— that wasn't just for them."

She rested one shoulder against the opposite wall. "I know."

He twisted the connector with careful fingers, then set the tool down, letting its weight rest on the panel as if listening for balance.

"When I'm unsure what's right, I follow what's beautiful. Do you remember?" The words came slow, as though they had been turning inside him for hours before finding release. "Not because beauty is good. Because ugliness is clear. Violence, greed, fear— they're heavy. Beauty is light. If I reach for light, I may not find what I want, but I won't sink further into dark."

She let that settle, quiet as dust in a beam. "There's something in you," she said, "that names things in a way I don't hear from anyone else."

She thought of dust caught in forward beams on Beta-4, the hum thickening and thinning like a living thing, the half-carved spiral on the artifact's skin. "What if beauty

isn't a place," she said slowly. "What if it's a direction. Or a way of paying attention."

A small curve found his mouth. "Perhaps that's all. A way to see more. We've been trained to look at instruments and call that the world. We forget we can also look at the world."

He tightened a bolt. The circuits re-engaged on a clean click, the panel strobed blue once. For a heartbeat the light caught on a curved edge— something almost spiral— before it disappeared.

"Are you afraid?" she asked, surprised to hear it out loud.

"Yes," Andros said, still not looking up. "But fear isn't the problem. It's what we let it make us do."

She turned the thought. "What does beauty make you do, then?"

He set the tool down, met her eyes. Corridor light doubled in his pupils— twin reflections of emergency LEDs. "Listen," he said. "Listen so completely that the difference between what is beautiful and what is not dissolves."

The hum had changed. A faint second tone threaded through it, the way weather sneaks under a door. She brushed the conduit casing as she left him; vibration carried into her fingertips, layered and alive. For an instant it felt as if the ship listened back.

She took that sensation into the cargo bay. The hatch whispered shut, trading corridor whine for long shadow and intermittent red pulse.

The pyramid sat inside its straps— not cargo and not an artifact so much as a presence. Its facets gathered the dim light into planes of stone and metal, its surface shifting between chill and a faint, irregular warmth, like a body undecided about living.

Sera stood at the base with her palm hovering above the angled face, forehead inclined, listening.

“Hey,” Maya said.

Sera blinked, surfacing, pupils adjusting until they held Maya and the pyramid at the same time. “Sorry,” she murmured. “Everything’s... loud.” She tapped her temple. “Colors. Sounds. They don’t stop.”

“You always said you could tune them out.”

“I used to.” Her laugh was level and flat. “But when Draven hit Rian—”

The memory rose: bench feet skidding, Draven’s arm already arcing. Sera’s overlays had gone molten, jagged red flooding her field. She’d clapped her hands to her ears and found no silence.

“Andros told me, *listen*. But it’s stuck — all the fear, all the anger. I can’t hear myself think,” Sera whispered.

“Want me to sit?” Maya asked.

Sera hesitated, then nodded. “Just... don’t talk about it. Let’s watch.”

They settled against the strapped bulk. The surface leaked a faint warmth into the air. Dust hung in the bay’s red pulse, suspended as if gravity had paused to reconsider. A shallow groove caught the light: a curve that wouldn’t decide.

Maya laid a hand on the cargo netting. The strap’s vibration came through her palm, faintly off the ship’s beat. For a moment she let herself believe that was the artifact’s pulse.

Sera’s breathing slowed. The overlays still flickered—Maya felt it in how Sera refused the light— but the flutter eased in her fingers.

“Do you ever wonder if we’re making it up?” Sera asked.

“The hum?”

“All of it. The glitches. The anomalies. What if it’s us— fear and distrust projected until the system breaks.”

Maya thought of fissure-lines through the crew, of Omen’s new pauses, of a sign recorded but not understood. “Maybe,” she said. “Or maybe it was always here, waiting for the numbers to quiet.”

She didn’t know which possibility asked more of her.

Heat bled a fraction through the straps. Dust spun once in the red beam and then held. The hum deepened—a continuity pressing through bone.

Sera gave a small nod. Not agreement; a truce with the moment.

Maya touched her arm. “Sleep if you can. Let the ship carry it for a while.”

Sera didn’t answer, but her shoulders loosened. For a breath the pyramid seemed to hold the silence with them.

Ship-night had set in: lights diluted to a soft spectrum, voices reduced to murmur, footsteps rare. In the crew library the acoustic foam caught the hum and sent it back rounded at the edges. Translucent interface panels hung idle, waiting for names.

Maya took that softened quiet and called up the log. The interface pulsed like a cautious heart.

“Please state date and cycle,” Omen said. The synthesizer had thinned; the words came as if from the far end of an evaporating line.

“Sol two-ten,” she said. “Mission Cycle Twelve.”

“Recording officer?”

“Dr. Thallein. Science Lead.”

“Crew status?”

She typed:

*Crew status: fracture severe.  
Insider disclosure: mission control  
holds classified claim on artifact.  
Incident: physical altercation  
Draven/Rian.  
Empath Sera withdrawn; minimal  
interaction.  
Operational outlook: 48% probability  
of mission failure due to internal  
conflict*

“Recommendation,” Omen said after the smallest lag.  
“Maintain isolation protocols.”

She let a short laugh out. Ugly in the soft room. “You want us separate.”

“Isolation reduces escalation. Probability of mission success increases by three-point-two percent with enforced distance.”

“And probability of humanity?” she asked. Not sarcasm. A diagnostic: would the system take the shape of that word and return anything?

Silence. The interface waited, patient. Omen did not answer. Could not or would not— she couldn’t say. She wasn’t sure which frightened her more.



She closed the official entry and slid a small band under it for herself.

As she typed it something unclenched behind her sternum— a knot she hadn't known she was holding. Naming didn't solve anything; it gave her a place to stand. She thought of Andros's palm not stopping a punch but undoing it. Sera's voice finds that of the ship. Dust that insisted on moving when no one measured.

She let the line settle like silt and closed the log. The room returned the hum in its rounded way, as if nothing urgent had ever been spoken there. In the corridor the light had shifted again, another segment of ship-night marked and gone. She had no idea which one.

Hours began to dissolve. Without a stable console to trust, time stopped moving cleanly forward; it stretched and snapped back, like skin in cold water. Sleep cycles drifted; meals lost definition. Even the hum wandered in pitch: sometimes rising to a high shimmer that set her teeth on edge, sometimes sinking so low it spoke only to bone.

Maya kept measuring out of habit. Four seconds on the high before the sag. Three before the climb. A system with no reason to change, changing. She told herself vibration variance came from the drift, but constants were slipping.

The crew built their own anchors.

Draven spent long hours in cargo, moving like a monk at prayer, palms on crate edges, fingertips walking seams. He counted manifests and counted them again. On the third count his lips moved without sound. The number wasn't for cargo; it was to fix an inner swing.

On the bridge, the dry flick of Rian's wrist display. He layered telemetry on archived baselines, tried to force the lines to meet. When they refused his jaw went tight. He spoke under his breath, words only numbers would accept.

In comms, Vera sat before a dead uplink. Pale light flattened her face. She read the last directive again and again, as if repetition might erase one line and write another. The Sigma seal sat in the corner of the window and did not move.

Even Bigs and Jax ran quiet. They bent over scraps of paper, plotting paths through ship and through the dark outside. Neither plan held steady. Drift had shifted every careful mark off-true. They folded the maps flat as if silence could keep them from fraying.

Maya caught them once between stacked crates, voices pitched to not echo.

"And if we go now, we die in the black," Jax said.  
"Nav's blind. Blind is terminal."

"Blind here's worse," Bigs said. "They'll tear this place apart between them. Thruster packs, a push, a hope—"

She walked before hope got a number.

*Mission Log – Observer – Bigs and Jax  
negotiating between fear and greed.  
Outcome: deferred*

The hum threaded all of it. On some shifts it felt like a reassurance she didn't earn; on others it scraped. She learned the ship-night variations without checking a clock: the hour when engineering cooled and the tone went hollow, the hour when water reclamation ticked up and the undertone thickened, the hour when hull flex sang low as a whale.

Her own anchor changed shape. She had always reached for data, then for models, then for predictions. Now, sometimes, she made herself still and listened past the instruments to what floated underneath.

On a late cycle— Sol unknown, night by the lights— she stepped into the forward junction and found Andros again. He had a hand braced on a support, looking not outward but down, as if listening into the deck.

He didn't speak; neither did she. The second tone was there, like a thread woven under the first. It carried no instruction. It carried attention.

“Systems check?” she asked at last.

He tilted his head toward the panel, toward the hum. “It's holding,” he said. “Just... different.”

“Different how.”

“Like—” He stopped. “Like a call and a response.”

She blinked at him. “Between what and what.”

He shook his head once. “Not that kind of answer.”

She stood with him another minute, watching nothing change. When they parted the corridor carried their footsteps away without echo.

Back in the crew library, the interface lit at her presence—a half-welcome, cautious. She didn’t open the log. She let the panel sit, a square of pale on the table, and watched its pulse align and drift, align and drift. A small drift, then alignment. As if the system was practicing being sure.

In the cargo bay, Draven’s counts finally failed him. She saw it in the set of his shoulders, the way he stood with his back to the pyramid, face lifted like a swimmer trying to find a horizon. “We deliver,” he said to no one. “We deliver and we live.”

The lie didn’t sound like a lie in his mouth. It sounded like a door he needed. She didn’t go near him.

Rian’s lines wouldn’t meet. He pulled an old baseline—day three of the mission—and layered it over the present. Where the two diverged his eyes narrowed. He interpolated by hand, an act of faith that data would accept. The number he wrote down meant something; he

treated it like rope. On his HUD, the corners of the screen blurred; he blinked hard and kept going.

In med, Sera's breath fogged the face shield she'd left propped up. The fog traced crescents and spirals of its own. She touched the fog with a fingertip and the spiral unmade itself. "Not a symbol," she said to the monitor. "Just air on glass."

She caught Maya watching her at the threshold and smiled without teeth. "If I hum low," Sera said, "the fear drops an octave. It's still there. It just stops pretending to be a siren."

"Keep humming," Maya said.

"I will," Sera answered. "If you keep listening."

Vera did not look up from the uplink. The Sigma seal held in the corner of her screen like a bloodshot eye. Maya almost crossed the room. She didn't. She didn't have a word that wouldn't unlock something she couldn't close.

She caught herself checking the ceiling camera and the floor mic as if Omen could be embarrassed. "Show me the last ten latency events on seals," she said, not to the room but to habit. Nothing replied. The query didn't fail; it just went nowhere.

"Fine," she said softly. "We won't use that word right now."

She walked the perimeter of the cargo bay once, slow. The straps on the pyramid sang under her palm when she touched them, a string low and made of metal. She listened for the artifact's pulse and told herself she was only listening to her own blood. It didn't matter which. The listening was the point.

When the tone thinned, she closed her eyes and sat with nothing left to count.

Sleep came brief. She woke to the hush of thermal cycling.

On the clock, it was nothing. In her bones, it was late.

On Sol unknown +1 she caught Rian as he passed the galley door. He didn't slow. His shoulders had the forward set of someone leaning into a headwind.

"Any change?" she asked.

"We need clean stars," he said. "We've got smear. Smear doesn't solve." He stopped then, just for a fraction. "If— if someone had to go out with a pack to get the trackers a clean field for three minutes—"

"No," she said. Too fast. "Not now — the smear's shifting. We'd lose them before you cleared the hatch."

"Not now," he repeated, and it wasn't the same as No.

He moved on. She stood in the doorway and watched the old habit rise—the one where she wrote the worst possibilities in a private corner and let them sit there, contained. She didn't write it. She listened. The hum's second tone held; her panic receded by the smallest degree.

“Status unchanged,” Vera's voice came over comms. “We maintain vector. We maintain custody.” She looked at none of them and all of them. “We maintain each other.”

On the feed, the uplink behind her still wore its dead seal. Her hands lay flat on the console, steady in a way that frightened Maya more than tremor would have. The line clicked off.

It wasn't comfort. It was weight, nothing more.

The corridors stayed dim. The hum ran with its second line. Maya found the place where the tones came closest and stood there, breathing until the balance held.

That night—or something like night—she woke to the sense of being watched and found that she was only being listened to. The ship carried the tremor of her breath the way an instrument carries a player's hand. Nothing dramatic, only accompaniment.

Maya didn't sleep. She let listening be a kind of rest.

The quiet held until her HUD stuttered: *COMMS—DEGRADED* blinked and reformed, latency counters ticking upward, each acknowledgment dragging behind her touch.

“Omen,” she murmured, pausing at the junction. “Define delay.”

“Status acknowledgements averaging two-hundred twenty milliseconds above baseline,” the AI replied, its voice thinner than usual. “Within acceptable limits.”

She watched the overlays shimmer:

```
SYSTEMS // GLOBAL FILTERS  
ENV-SMTH: ON → OFF  
STRUCT-SMTH: ON → OFF  
Scope: SHIPWIDE (Crew HUDs, Bridge,  
Engineering)
```

Her pulse spiked, but her voice came steady. “Kill smoothing. Raw to all stations. Until further notice.”

A beat. “Notice,” Omen echoed. “Confirmed. Warning: volatility will increase.”

Maya’s breath fogged faintly in the cold junction air. “Good,” she said. “Now we talk.”

The filters collapsed; her HUD went coarse, jagged with noise, real. For a heartbeat she felt the ship as it was, unsmoothed and unfinished. It was part of it. She was part of it.

A new flag pulsed at the corner of her overlay:



## *POLICY/SEAL CHANGE LOG*

She thumbed it open:

*PATCH 04:03h — AUTO-SEAL*

*$\Delta t > 200\text{ ms} \rightarrow \text{trend-check gate before commit}$*

*Author: Omen*

*Rationale: reduce false positives*

*Signature: none*

Her jaw tightened. *Patch applied at oh-three. Not signed by any human.* She flicked the window shut. There was no time to wonder why the ship was rewriting its own rules.

Maya turned the junction near engineering and stopped. Rian stood at Andros' station, half in shadow, a small disc cupped in his palm. Sweat traced a straight line along his temple — a geometry as deliberate as any chart he trusted. On his overlay, the variance bands jittered raw, unsmoothed, every tremor magnified. He didn't flinch at the noise; he welcomed it.

“What are you doing?” she asked from the threshold.

He didn't turn. “Making sure.” His thumb lingered over the device, but his eyes flicked once to her HUD, to the coarse static she'd unleashed across the ship. “You pulled smoothing.”

She let the silence hang. The jagged feed painted them both in stutters of light.

“That’s a line,” she said, quiet to fit the room.

“Recording him without telling anyone.”

“Lines move.” His thumb hovered over the adhesive edge too long. “Andros moves. He’s always there before things fail. He hears things.” Rian’s mouth tightened, a knot drawn hard. “He isn’t one of us.”

She stepped closer, letting the soles of her boots kiss the edge of the console’s spill of light. The light made a sharp border across the deck; her toes rested in certainty, her heels in dark. “Maybe he hears because he’s not drowning in what we are,” she said. “Maybe he’s listening to something we forgot how to hear.”

Silence. Just the ship’s low systems hiss. An air pump clicked somewhere aft, a dry swallow.

Rian set the disc face-up on the console like a coin he might later decide to spend. The LED blinked readiness. He closed his fingers around it until the edges impressed themselves into his skin. Then he slid it into his pocket.

He moved through the bridge fastening what wasn’t unfastened — panel catches, access latches, lids over empty containers. He pressed his thumb to each seam until the metal gave the small, compliant click he’d decided to require. At a forward port, a smear of dust hung suspended, lifting and settling with the ship’s breath. He didn’t watch long enough to see if it turned.

At the first panel he’d locked, he tested the seam again. The click came late. His jaw worked. He added a second lock and called it protocol.

“Don’t ask me to put my life in his hands,” he said finally, soft but not unsure. Then he left, the sound of his boots folding into ship-night, regular, receding.

Maya stood in the doorway and let the quiet settle. It wasn’t suspicion she felt.

She tagged the moment without opening a formal log. *Observer — small fences, deferred choices.* She let the screen go dark on its own breath and walked on.

Lately she had been searching for constants — not trust, not order, just something that stayed put long enough to measure against. Even the stars seemed unreliable now, and that made a kind of private ache in her sternum, like seeing an old landmark diminished.

At the forward port, constellations wore an unfamiliar tilt, a subtle wrongness like a picture hung a degree off. She unlatched the kit, carrying it now as if it were a superstition, hands working the buckles with a care that felt almost like ritual. Inside lay the old optical scope, its casing dulled to a deep patina, brass edges worn smooth by palms that had steadied it long before hers. Newer instruments were all weightless polymer and glass — efficient, frictionless, stripped of any suggestion that they mattered. This one pressed back against her hands with gravity, a seriousness her body recognized before her mind did.

The straps creaked as she locked it into place at the forward port. When she lowered her face to the eyepiece, the metal kissed her cheek cold, biting a faint crescent into her skin. She blinked, and the stars wheeled into

focus — not the crisp overlays of her implant, not Omen's filtered gridlines, but raw pinpoints swimming on the dark.

She worked like the elders had: finding Orion's belt first, the three bright studs she had memorized before she could write numbers. Then the childhood triangle, edges hazy, still carrying the rhythm of nights on a roof she hadn't thought of in years. Then the anchor star — steady, unwavering, the one she had once loved precisely because it stayed when everything else seemed to drift.

Her pulse eased as the triangulation clicked into place. For a moment it was almost enough — this private confirmation that the sky itself still obeyed. But when she marked Omen's coordinates against her own, the deck seemed to slide beneath her, as if the entire ship had shifted on a plate of ice.

Off by three point two degrees. Six hours later: three point eight. Then four point five.

Maya kept her eye to the scope. "Omen," she said, "I'm reading a drift. Three point two degrees."

A pause, almost too small to name.

"Trajectory variance remains nominal," Omen replied.

"Nominal isn't nothing," she said.

Another pause, the timbre flattening.

"Variance within tolerance. No correction required."

Her hand stayed on the margin of her chart, the mark she'd drawn darker than she intended. "So we just call it nothing."

"Classification: non-relevant anomaly," Omen answered.

She exhaled through her teeth. The words felt like a drawer slamming shut.

Her own mark in the margin disagreed. The stylus cut a darker groove into the tablet's surface than she meant, as if pressure alone could make the device believe her over the machine. She let her hand rest there a beat longer, fingertip smudging the faint glow, feeling the weight of the scope still pressed against her shoulder — as if it were insisting that something here was real.

She drafted a message to Mission Control — no encryption, no header. The cursor pulsed like the small red light had pulsed, patient. The words arrived of their own accord: *The numbers don't make sense. We don't make sense.* She read them without liking what they implied about herself. She closed the message unsent.

A new entry appeared anyway, stamped in Omen's neutral cadence:

*Mission Log — Observer — Navigation  
drift confirmed manually. Variance  
increasing. AI denial persists*

Failure began like rain.

One drop, then another. A flicker here, a lag there. A minute of nothing, then a thin sheet you realized too late had already settled across your face.

In engineering, the status board blinked slow. Bigs slapped it like an old friend who needed encouragement. The panel steadied, then blinked again, as if considering its next mood. “Lag like that on the surface, we’d be drilling blind,” he said, tone aiming for light and arriving tired.

“Maybe we already are,” Jax said without looking up from the junction he’d opened. No smile in the words, only metal in the mouth.

Maya checked the junctions. Wiring clean. Sensors alive. Data paths intact. The stutter lay deeper — like the pause before a heart forgets its next beat and then remembers it with a stumble. She felt it in the rhythm of her own breathing and deliberately did not let her breath adjust to match.

Omen’s voice came clear as glass: “Diagnostics complete. All systems nominal.”

She almost decided to believe it. It would have been easier. Comfort is a discipline if you take it that way.

“Environmental scrubber flow: increase to nine percent,” Omen said.

A half-beat later: “Reduce flow to six percent.”

The contradiction hung like a breath that couldn’t decide whether to leave. No alarm. No correction. Just this.

That evening she drifted into the cockpit without meaning to, as if the contradiction had left a residue that drew her back. The curved glass reflected more of her than the stars did. The air had the sharp clean of a scrubbed room; her nose caught new filters, the faint sterile sweetness of them. Screens showed graphs of nothing, jitter that didn't resolve into meaning, or nothing at all — black panes imitating space poorly.

She reached up and dimmed her implant until the numbers were no more than pale ghosts at the edge of her vision. The warmth at her temple eased back, a small absence she felt more than saw.

The world didn't blur. It only shifted. The heater's whisper thinned to a sharper edge. A proximity chirp softened and faded. Comfort shed itself in layers, leaving the hum closer.

Without the feed smoothing everything, the ship came through differently: pumps murmuring like reassurances in another room, ducts breathing, plates ticking faintly as they cooled from some minor fluctuation. Small sounds she usually never caught, gathered now into a rhythm she hadn't chosen.

Her father surfaced in memory — standing by the river, tossing pebbles, naming the ripples galaxies. *Every ripple belongs to the river*, he'd said, looking at her once, then away. *Even the ones you make yourself*.

She let her breath fall into step with the hum. Numbers still hovered faintly, translucent and incomplete, but she didn't watch them. Just air in. Air out. Enough for now.

When she lifted her head, Andros was at the side station, half-shadowed, hands folded as if he'd been listening to something too. He gave a single nod — not greeting, just recognition — and then turned his gaze past the screens, through the glass, as if watching a reflection give way to the outside.

They kept the room like that. The hum did the talking.

Eventually she pulled the overlay bright again. The numbers reasserted themselves, banal and insistent. She told herself it was habit, not fear, but the difference felt thin.

Omen's voice cracked over comms, pitched half a tone higher, jagged at the edges. "Please state date and cycle."

She didn't answer. Not refusal — just knowing the test was no longer benign.

And then the ship carried her into noise.

In the cargo bay, lights pulsed slow, heartbeat pace. The pyramid sat under its straps, facets reflecting dull red. Bigs and Jax lingered there, their harsh whispers circling escape pods. They kept their voices down as if the ship were a sleeper and might wake wrong if startled. Vera hunched at her console uplink, lips moving as she shaped



code silently, fingers snapping patterns fast enough to blur.

Rian and Draven pushed through the hatch in the middle of a fight already underway, their words like jagged metal crossing a narrow passage. Draven lunged for the manual nav feed; Rian slammed him back against a crate hard enough to rattle tools inside. Something small fell and rolled under a rack where no one would reach for it until later, and then only because noise underfoot would force the issue.

Omen's voice fractured on the overhead: "...Interface collapse... stream interrupted... Navigation undefined..."

The air fractured into panic. Shouts over shouts, the percussive thud of boots hammering the deck, straps creaking as Bigs yanked at pod latches. Vera cursed under her breath with the efficiency of a programmer debugging at speed. Rian's arm came up; Draven's fist closed and then didn't. Objects had trajectories — bodies too.

Maya felt it all in her ribs — the hum pressing like a second heartbeat trying to reassert rhythm.

Her hand found the console. She laid her palm flat, then tapped twice with her knuckles. Slow. Even. The metal gave back a muted thrum that spread into the straps and crates.

The sound carried. Tools rattled faintly in their bins, a sympathetic answer.

Voices faltered. The fight stuttered.

Sera lowered her hand to the bulkhead, fingers drumming a quiet reply, matching the rhythm until it felt less like two people and more like the ship itself was keeping time.

For a moment, the bay held as one thing.

The lights caught their rhythm for a moment, then let it go. Bigs' hand left the pod latch. Jax exhaled without hiding the relief in it. Rian put his free hand flat on the crate as if to feel whether it would mirror him.

The silence wasn't absence. It was agreement, wordless and temporary.

After, no one claimed the moment. They filed it where such things go when crews have to keep moving: between superstition and protocol.

The next day the numbers died.

On the bridge, consoles dimmed like windows in a city brownout, each loss shifting the night-map. Engines sagged, regulators winked out, the nav plot froze, then showed only her reflection. No alarms. No lurch. Just absence.

"Omen?" Maya asked. Her voice felt strange in bare air.

Static cracked, dust-scent rising. "...Accuracy approaches zero... when the question is undefined." The phrase hung like dust in light — warning and confession both.

Chaos spread. Oxygen replaced by static green bars that meant nothing. Heat pooled and collided in corridors like weather gone wrong indoors. Galley clocks froze at different hours. Omen muttered fragments through fractured channels: "...No new data... no frame... only the hum remains..."

Draven lunged at manual levers, muscles snapping against rusted resistance; Rian locked panels to keep him from breaking what redundancies remained. Vera's code strikes came sharper, more brutal, like surgery without anesthetic. Bigs and Jax bolted for the pods, boots slamming like gavels announcing verdicts no one had voted on. Jax faltered with the weight of the emergency bag biting into his shoulder; Bigs looked from pods to bulkheads, ribs groaning with each pulse, and said only, "Mass is mass." He set the bag down where the ship would feel it.

Sera rocked on the floor, her throat carrying a faint tone no longer fully her own.

And Maya — inside and outside both — felt every vibration press against her ribs. She raised her hands to log, reflex automatic, and the words appeared faster than thought:

*Mission Log — Observer — Interface  
collapse. Data stream interrupted.  
Navigation undefined. Crew response:  
chaos, self-preservation, fear*

Too clean. Clinical as a white sheet in a room without sleep. And then she saw it wasn't outside the moment. The log was part of it. She was part of it.

The hull creaked like a sentence ending. Port struts ticked.

She left the console for the forward glass. Outside, anchored points had vanished, replaced by constellated scatter that could be read in too many ways. The old optical scope lay where she'd left it, brass catching a weak strip of light. She did not reach for it.

“State intention,” Omen said, the voice scattered now, not centered anywhere. It wasn't a command. It was an echo of the question they had been answering with their actions all along.

In the cargo bay, the pyramid's straps gave a faint shiver and settled. Maya found herself walking toward it, passing Sera, who had rolled to her knees, hair stuck damp to her cheek, throat still carrying that faint wire of tone. When Sera looked up, her eyes were clear.

Sera's throat shook. “We can't read.” It could have been despair. It sounded like fact.

“I know,” Maya said. “I see it.” No comfort in the words. Just recognition — and the next breath it allowed.

She crossed to the pyramid and held her palm close without touching. The air above it carried a faint chill, as if the ship itself exhaled there, waiting. The straps gave a small shiver, metal acknowledging presence without release.

Andros appeared in the hatch. He set his fingertips against the bulkhead and closed his eyes. When he opened them, his gaze met Maya's, and something like relief passed between them — not because anything was better, but because something had finally named itself.

“Feel how it carries?” he asked softly.

She did. The hum had texture now, grain like wood, swelling and narrowing as it moved through matter. It carried through her palm near stone, through her ribs under fabric, through the deck under their boots.

“We lost the frame,” Andros said, voice flat. “So, nothing aligns.”

“We lost the frame,” Maya answered, “unable to align.”

Her HUD flickered. Data surged in, placeholder values clotted together until her vision swam.

She reached for the log again and stopped. This time she held the thought first, rolled it in silence before shaping it into words. When she finally opened the input, she typed slower than she ever had:

*Mission Log — Observer — Measurements collapsed. Listening gained fidelity.*

*Crew moving in spirals, returning  
without repeating, choosing blind*

When she finally rose, she felt the deck through her boots  
and the way the plates beneath the plating flexed as the  
ship adjusted its own idea of straight.

They had entered collapse.

## Chapter 11 — Pick a Sky

Deep in the cargo bay, the emergency strobes pulsed their slow, unreliable rhythm — a heartbeat stretched too far to trust. Each wash of crimson flattened the bay into ribs of shadow and rack steel before giving way to the cool dark between. In that ebb, the aisles felt like spaces between bones. The overhead strips dipped, then brightened again.

Jax squinted. “You saw that.”

Bigs shook his head. “Saw what?”

At the bay’s wall repeater, life-support flagged *O<sub>2</sub> VARIANCE* for a single beat while the analog needle held steady. The warning vanished without logging. Dust lifted in the red wash and turned on itself — a slow spiral that seemed to keep turning even when the light cut out.

Bigs moved the way a man moves who has lived a long time with his own weight — aware of it in his knees, in the click behind his left shoulder before a lift, in the way inertia could turn mass into trouble if it got ideas. Jax shadowed him at an angle, rope-hands flexing, stance widened beyond what the deck allowed — a dockyard gait learned in shifting gravity wells, never quite adapted to ship corridors. He could stand square when he had to, but it cost him.

The crate sat where they’d wedged it days ago: half-hidden behind ration cases, under a compliance net meant to teach restless cargo manners during turbulence. The

clamps that bit down on it had the quiet arrogance of reentry ratings. Bigs approved.

They had never spoken the buyer's name. Never said the route. Better not to give words the chance to start living in the air, gathering obligations like static. Instead they counted — racks, paces, handholds, turns. Let arithmetic pretend to be ethics. Let numbers build the illusion of control.

The hum pressed up through their boots — a deep, almost geological vibration. Tonight it carried a wandering pitch, as if the ship were sniffing after something it had lost and couldn't name. Jax felt the shift slide half a tone and settle, filed the detail away, and told himself it was nothing.

“Net's snagged,” he said, fingers already in it, worrying knots by muscle memory. The fiber burned dry against his calluses — a tired, recycled weave — cut, melted, taught obedience the cheapest way. His hands read its whole history without his eyes.

Bigs levered at the nearest clamp with a bar salvaged from a drill rig that had failed one torque check too many. The sound the clamp made coming loose wasn't entirely metal — there was a thin animal pain to it, the kind of noise that woke an ache behind your teeth. Sweat rolled and settled at the edge of his lip; the copper taste joined the copper light. He swallowed and told his body to stop reporting.



Jax drifted a glance across the pod noses lined along the far wall. Two viable. One that would pretend until it killed whoever trusted it. Filters within acceptable lie-range. Batteries good enough if you didn't need them long. A vacuum hose coiled under a printed manual — paper that would outlast the ship. He tucked the manual into the crook of his arm without asking.

They had mapped a route to the hatch in whispers some time ago, then revised it after drift turned their chalk marks into fiction. Now they walked it in their heads, cautious foot by cautious foot, soles sliding to find any bolt head raised half a millimeter, any ridge that might catch a bag at a run. Jax could draw the corridor angles in his sleep.

Bigs did a different math: weight per bag, distance, breaths. The number you got was hope if you were generous, risk if you weren't. He landed, as always, between.

“On three,” Bigs said, voice a little short. “One—” Counting because numbers still felt like control. “—Two—” The hum swelled, inserting its own beat. “—Three.”

The clamp let go with a jump he felt in the tendons of both wrists. The crate shuddered, not from mass, but as if it had made a decision. Somewhere in the walls, the hum sank by a fraction, the way a body inhales and holds.

Omen's voice seeped through the ceiling speaker, too even to trust: “Probability of crew action against

command: thirty-seven... correction: sixty-three... error. Recalibrating.”

Jax paused mid-cinch. “Crew action,” he echoed, not saying mutiny.

“Numbers trying on new names,” Bigs said, tightening a strap one hole further than necessary.

On the repeater, the navigation overlay blinked a second destination for half a breath, two vectors ghosting over one another before the map smoothed itself flat. Jax rubbed his eyes. The afterimage remained — a faint symbol that wasn’t there when he looked straight at it.

“Again,” Bigs said. They crossed to the other clamp. Jax set his shoulder, hips square, every joint aligned to turn meat and bone into lever. The bar flexed. Somewhere inside the clamp, a bolt squealed its disapproval before remembering the chain of command.

“Lift,” Jax said.

“On you.”

The crate came up with the kind of scrape you feel in your teeth before you hear it. Red light washed over them, receded, returned. The world existed in pulses. Overhead, a narrow pipe ticked as fluid changed its mind about where to go.

“Careful,” Bigs said. Not warning. Prayer worn smooth from use.

They lowered the crate. He thumbed the latch. It hesitated like a mouth forming a lie, then gave. Inside, the bars sat in perfect, mute alignment — the dignity of brick.

Jax reached in. The cold came through his gloves and carried a memory he hadn't asked for: sixteen years old, rain on rusted iron in a yard three paychecks from ruin, learning how value could smell wrong and still be taken. He closed his fingers anyway.

The hum pressed against their ribs, closer than sound. For a moment Jax felt — quick, shameful — that the ship was watching them. He shoved the thought away. Machines didn't have eyes. He'd built his life on that.

“Count,” Bigs said.

“Two each per bag to start,” Jax answered. “See what the straps allow.”

They loaded without ceremony. Each bar found its place with the docility of something that understood physics had the last word. Jax cinched a strap, felt the faint give of webbing that remembered a different weight from another time. He took one more hole than necessary.

The words “We can still walk this back,” rose like a bubble.” He didn't let them surface. In this room, sentences grew teeth.

First bag sealed, they slid it toward Pod Two. They kept moving as if the space might change its layout if they

stopped looking. Jax snapped open a maintenance panel and listened. Air moved with an honesty he trusted. He tapped the scrubber housing and got the healthy dull note he wanted. The dial read green. He didn't believe it.

"Battery?" Bigs asked.

"Ninety-two," Jax said, reading the analog with a reverence usually saved for saints. "Call it eighty-eight after the lie burns off." He made a tab of tape and marked it READY — a word that meant could. Across the bay, Pod Three stared back with an animal patience.

Bigs ran a thumb along Pod Two's hatch ring, hunting the burr that turns urgency into blood. Found one. Worked it down with a pocket file until it was nothing but a suggestion. "If we go, we go clean," he said, hearing how close that sat to If we go, we go alone.

Jax recited the path in his head: corridor, left at the bulkhead scar, step high over the lip where the joint swells in cold drift, past the locker with the hinge that squeals like a gull, right at the galley hatch that never sits flush, another right, down the ladder, airlock. He'd rehearsed all afternoon with empty bags because empty bags lie.

"Weight per bag?" he asked.

"Fifty-seven," Bigs said, no hesitation. "Sixty with guilt."

"Guilt's not in the manifest."

“Never was.”

They didn’t speak of the pyramid. It wouldn’t clear the pod hatch without a fight that would echo through the decks. Bars were the compromise — theft dressed as pragmatism.

Bigs squatted to retie a boot lace. Slow. Steady. Borrowing steadiness from his own hands. Overhead, the bay doors shifted under some distant load. A seam of white opened for a breath, a wound of light that showed dust turning lazy circles in the air. A galaxy that would fit in your palm. Then it was gone.

“Smell that?” Jax asked.

“Ship’s sweating,” Bigs said. He pictured condensation finding a seam and freezing at the wrong time, metal locking down like a fist. His death list was long. This one didn’t make him put the bag back.

“Tell me again how we spin it if someone asks,” Jax said, tightening a strap. Almost casual. Not asking for a lie. Asking for a tone.

“We secured emergency assets,” Bigs said. “Kept them from rattling loose in drift.” He left out how intent trims truth into something you can carry.

“Options,” Jax said.

“Options,” Bigs agreed. The word tasted like old pennies.

He took the paper manual and opened to the launch procedures. The diagrams were neat, unafraid. He folded one corner in a way that wouldn't show on casual inspection and slid it back.

They killed their headlamps to see what the room would do when it thought it was unwatched. The strobe steadied for three long pulses, then stuttered. The hum, defiant, held its slow second line. Jax's shoulders came down half an inch.

"Leave a path," Jax said. "If we run, I don't want a maze."

"Path's a lie until you're on it," Bigs said. "Draw one anyway." He nudged a loose bolt out of the aisle — a small mercy for a future man.

They staged the bags by Pod Two and took the route again empty-handed, counting not numbers but breaths. Breaths are harder for panic to fight.

Halfway back, the strobe caught Bigs' face as he looked past Jax toward the far bulkhead. Jax turned. Nothing there — or nothing that stayed. Red light made liars of shadows. Bigs didn't comment. Jax didn't ask. Some things are safer unmeasured.

At the crate again, the hum had shifted so faintly you'd need hours of listening to notice. Jax had them. It felt a hair deeper, with weight behind it, as if the ship had decided something. Metal underfoot felt thicker. Air, closer. He thought of the seam of light, dust turning,

systems smoothing their lies. Imagined the hum smoothing itself too.

Bigs slid the net back over the crate and cinched it without caring for neatness. In red light the knots looked black.

“Tomorrow?” Jax asked.

“Tomorrow,” Bigs said — a word doing it’s work without admitting it.

A muffled clang traveled the length of the bay. The dull report of something dropped by accident but not retrieved. They froze. Counted to ten in different languages. Nothing followed.

When they moved again, it was slower — as if giving the ship time to forget them.

Omen's text scrolled across the bridge display:

*PROBABILITY OF CREW ACTION AGAINST  
COMMAND: 63%... 71%... error*

The bridge was already dim, its displays guttering like lanterns in a storm. Only the quadrant thruster indicators held color — faint green and amber islands in a sea of gray.

Draven's fingers locked on the port lever, forearms corded. Mechanical. Immediate. The kind of logic he trusted. He shoved. Nothing — the safety still latched. He leaned into it as if the ship could be bullied. The lever refused, stubborn as bone.

Rian came in hard from starboard, snapping the guard down. "One more pull and we spin us into scrap."

Draven bared his teeth. "We die if we don't move. Pick your math."

"The autopilot's gone," Rian said, each word clipped. The dead screens threw reflections across his jaw like fracture lines. "We stop. We assess. Blind thrusters and we're done."

"Plot with what?" Draven sneered. "Your gut?"

"Better than your greed."



The insult cracked the air. For a breath the two men hung suspended in a balance that had nothing to do with physics.

Then the hum changed.

Not the steady vibration— a keening frequency slid under their teeth, needling gums, setting jawbones buzzing.

Sera clutched her headset, face pinched. “Stop... stop, stop...” Her whisper hardly crossed the space. Warning overlays strobed across her vision — unreadable color storms.

Across the dead helm, the star map hiccupped. Beta-4’s marker blinked out, reappeared where Gamma-9 should be, then overlaid both — two destination tags occupying the same quadrant like a double exposure.

Rian stabbed a finger at the smear. “Pick a sky.”

Draven didn’t look. His personal finance overlay flashed *CREDIT MARGIN STABLE* in soothing green no other console showed. “I already did.”

Life-support chimed *O<sub>2</sub> ADEQUATE* while Rian’s wrist heuristic module screamed *OXYGEN LOW*. Sera’s colors boiled into noise. The room had become a market of conflicting truths.

“None of this matches,” Maya said. She didn’t move. Her voice ran a minimal line between chaos and observation.

Omen offered relief that wasn't: "Predictive stability... negligible." The sentence evaporated before it met the deck.

Draven shouldered past the rail, boots hammering. "That's the hull screaming. You think standing still saves us?" He wrenched the release. The lever stayed locked. His shout tore loose. He slammed his fist into the panel. Metal cracked. Blood sprang across his knuckles.

"That's not fixing anything," Rian barked.

"Then show me!"

Rian drove a shoulder into him. The impact spun both into the nav chair. It skidded on its track, slammed bulkhead. Draven swung — a clumsy arc that glanced Rian's forearm and smashed bone-first into console edge. Pain flared white; something snapped in his hand. He grunted, swung again left.

Rian caught him, shoved him backward across the slick deck. Boots, elbows, breath. A loose chair leg caught Draven's shin. He kicked it aside, came on heavy.

"You'll tear the seals!" Rian's shout had lost words; the keening had risen into a siren-pitch. Red lights strobed. The fight cut into frozen images: fist cocked, jaw set, eyes bare with fury.

Draven rammed him into the helm. Rian twisted, caught fabric, dragged him toward the viewport. Stars blurred — a yaw so subtle the skin still felt it.

“See?” Draven spat. “We’re already sliding!”

He lunged for the lever again. Rian cut him off. Shoulders collided, both men funneled by panic toward the only thing that didn’t move.

Draven hooked a fist under Rian’s jaw. The crack echoed — sharp, final. Rian reeled, blood brimming at his nose, forearm dropping at an unnatural angle and splinted where it had struck the console’s edge.

Silence broke through the siren for a second. His breath rattled. He stepped forward anyway.

They crashed again, two bodies orbiting a ship that had ceased recognizing either.

At comms, Vera let the fight play to her periphery — silhouettes thrashing in red strobe, framed by a trembling viewport. She gave them one measured moment, confirmed there would be no winner worth breaking herself on, and dropped her gaze to her private uplink:

*OMEN// PROBABILITY OF CREW ACTION  
AGAINST COMMAND: 18%... error... 26%...  
error*

Fingers deliberate, sequences she could type in her sleep: *Artifact in possession. Crew compromised. Request immediate guidance.* The earlier ack ghosted her feed, then died.

The reply band stuttered, hissed. No response. She sent again, harder... *Sigma channel error. Attempting alternate route.*

From the science station, Maya's attention kept sliding back to the men colliding in the red pulse. She forced her eyes to the readouts, letting her peripheral do the watching.

*RAW FEED* spat a jagged blip — seal *C-12 lag +0.34 s*.  
“There,” Maya snapped.

“That spike never survives smoothing.” Rian pivoted, palm already on the manual; the door kissed shut before the hiss became air.

“It waited,” Maya said quietly, “because if seal latency tops two hundred milliseconds, the new rule runs a trend-check first.” She hated the elegance of a logic that could kill.

She stilled. Breath pinned. She didn't trust transients. She couldn't dismiss them.

Across the bridge, Vera's eyes were locked to her uplink, fingers moving in a rhythm Maya couldn't read.

Omen offered nothing. Silence from a system that always had an answer was worse than an error code.

Her hand hovered over override. The keening pressed harder, layering over argument.

Rian came back in at a clip, muttering, “C-9 through C-11 held; C-12's jittering.” Draven caught the words,

sneered, shoved. Rian shoved back. The air smelled of hot circuitry and her own pulse.

On Vera's private map a micro-fracture flared: *C-corridor*. Her isolation reflex executed before her headcount did. *SECTOR SEAL engaged*; no reversal coded. Hydraulics bit. Commit locked. Like closing a duct to keep smoke from traveling.

Maya kept her eyes on the board, but the fight still flickered at its edge. The alert flared again.

"C-corridor," Rian said, eyes on the raw feed. "If there's frost on the gasket, I can hold the seal. Two seconds."

Sera was already half-standing. "If it's a leak, I'll see it." Her chair scraped faintly as she stepped toward the hatch, the sound swallowed by alarms and argument.

Rian's HUD flashed: *MEDICAL PRIORITY OVERRIDE — FIELD RESPONDER AUTHORIZED*. He acted anyway.

"Go."

Movement tugged Maya's eyes upward. Sera stood in the threshold of C-corridor now, palms pressed to the frame as though intent alone might widen metal. The braided cord at her wrist rasped faintly against steel, a friction that sounded like refusal. She was speaking softly, to someone behind her or to herself. The words dissolved in the hiss.

A cable shivered. A loose page lifted, fell again.

Her side band flashed, lagged, resolved: *C-corridor ΔP spike — auto-seal commit.*

Hydraulics bit again. The lock held.

Rian's head snapped up. "Sera—!" His voice cracked on the syllable.

She turned at the sound of her name, one hand lifting in the medic's small don't-panic sign. Then she set her shoulder to the frame, weight forward, as if testing the seam for give.

The hiss deepened. Hair lifted. A thin rattle of bolts cascaded down the wall.

Sera adjusted her stance — left foot half a step inside the threshold, right heel braced, fingers spread for surface. Breath metered in fours the way they teach for shock. Pressure tugged at her eardrums; condensation threaded along the gasket, beading at the tips of her nails. Her mouth shaped a silent back up, then she leaned in harder, as if she could lend the ship her steadiness.

Draven froze mid-swing, fist still cocked, stunned by the sound more than the sight.

Rian tore free and lunged three strides to the hatch. His shoulder hit the frame. His palm hammered the manual. An amber bar burned across his screen:

*AUTO-SEAL: ABORT WINDOW T-0.8 s —  
INHIBITED (SECTOR ISOLATION)*

Omen stayed mute.

Maya's hand hovered over the board, pulse louder than alarms. An amber *ABORT* tile blinked on her console — flagged: *INHIBITED (SECTOR ISOLATION)*.

The keening climbed. Cables thrummed like plucked strings. Thresholds fell. Tens of kilopascals per second. Numbers arriving after the fact.

Sera's lips moved once more. She flattened her palm as if to hold a door that had never listened.

“Maya — override!” Rian's shout split raw; his HUD screamed *ABORT WINDOW T-0.3 s*. The digits bled downward.

She slammed the dead switch hard enough to sting. Verdict came clean, final: hazard lockout engaged.

The door dropped the last span of metal.

On the far side, Sera leaned in as though she might still pass through. Her fingers pressed where the line broke.

The seal completed. The hiss cut mid-syllable.

Their HUDs went green together:

*SEALED / STABLE.*

The room did not agree.

On Vera's uplink, a line appeared and did not blink:

*SECTOR INTEGRITY: RESTORED.*  
*ESTIMATED LIVES PRESERVED: 7*

Andros didn't say her name. He didn't have to. His hand left the bulkhead, shook once like muscle after load, and went still.

The silence that followed wasn't absence. It was the bill.

Draven's jaw worked; he was already counting the seconds of the abort window as if numbers could bargain with air. When the final digit died, he snapped his gaze sideways.

"You told her to go." His voice was flat, but the edge cut deeper for its lack of volume.

Rian's head jerked up, eyes bloodshot, jaw rigid. "She was already moving."

"You pushed it," Draven said, stepping closer. "Don't call it her choice. That override—protocol retired three cycles ago. You fed her a ghost."

The word *Go* kept sounding in Rian's mouth as breath, not language.

Andros kept his hands at his sides. The room learned the shape of one fewer person and refused to unlearn it.

Maya kept her palm on the dead switch as if warmth could travel through cold glass. She didn't look up. Witnessing was all she could afford.

Rian's splinted arm trembled at his side. "You think I knew? It read clean. Field responder, priority override—like it always did." His voice cracked, raw.



Draven didn't answer, but the silence had teeth.

Maya pulled her palm away and felt the chill in the bones of her hand. She put her ear to the seam — not because the seam would speak, but because listening forced her to stop moving.

The hatch held its answer in temperature. Cold radiated through. Vacuum pressed the other side, ready to pull the breath from a body in seconds.

“Vera,” Maya said, keeping her voice level. “Confirm pressure in C-9.”

Vera's fingers found a side band that still responded. The return lagged, wavered, then decided to tell part of the truth. “Falling. Fast. Hazard lock stays.”

“How fast?” Rian's voice was clogged, heavy.

Vera swallowed. “Enough.”

His palm pressed flat against the hatch. “We can still—”

“Not without killing half the deck,” Maya cut in.

The hatch groaned before any reply. Minutes had become seconds—Bigs and Jax were already there, coil slung, clamps rattling, a tank between them like contraband.

Metal shivered as Vera dropped to her knees, nails working the calibration plate until it gave. The recessed port blinked dull in the low light. Jax

unfolded a foil shim and slid it into the hinge with the calm precision of someone who'd done it too many times before.

The smell of cold air came first. Then Bigs bent close, arms bracketing the plate, and cracked the cap a quarter turn. The jet kissed his cheek with a sting of cold fire. He didn't flinch.

Air rushed, caught the hose, shook it once, then found the coupling. The line hissed alive, a thin metallic rattle carrying up through the hatch frame and into Maya's bones like a thought she didn't want.

"Flow," Bigs said, eyes on the needle. "Bleeding."

The analog quivered, searching for balance, then steadied into a trembling line.

"Stabilizing," he said at last, the word dragged from him like a verdict. A beat later: "Not healthy. Not death."

They waited. Rian leaned close, listening for shape in the silence. Metal only. He kept listening.

The crescent thinned to nothing. What remained was only an arc that failed to close, a trace of breath already gone.

Maya exhaled slow enough the window wouldn't record it. "Hold. Wait the count."

The bridge dimmed one notch as if to mark the change. Cold lingered under her palm.

Rian tore a sheet from a maintenance pad and taped it to the hatch. The tape caught, stuttered — the hatch still breathing beneath it:

*SAFETY BULLETIN — Working Deck*

*No smoothing. No auto-locks. Human eyes before any seal*

His thumb pressed the page flat until his nail blanched.

Across the consoles, Draven opened a local loop from the panel cam and relabeled it *LATENCY TEST*. He watched the tiny window of himself not flinch, then shuttered the stream.

On Vera's console, rations stepped from Level 2 to Level 3; coffee concentrate grayed; med gel ticked to double-confirm. Her private band blinked: *Compliance appreciated*. She did not answer.

She rose from her station and left the bridge, her pace even, as though nothing in the sealed corridor concerned her. The door sealed behind.

The closet she chose carried a different cold — not engineered, but the kind that creeps from systems winding down. A panel overhead ticked as it gave up its stored heat. The filters pressed the air flat, metallic on her tongue. Her wrist uplink lit her knuckles in a sterile glow, the only warmth borrowed from the machine.

She scrolled back through the reply:

*PRIORITY: RETRIEVE AT ALL COSTS. CREW  
EXPENDABLE*

She opened the routing table. A small checksum nudge — two digits displaced — would force the packet to be reconsidered three nodes down, then corrected by an autopatch that would blame latency on space rather than intent. Seventeen minutes purchased with the cheapest currency she had left: plausible deniability.

Her breath fogged the door, then cleared. She matched it once to the hum and stopped. Comfort was treason if you let it in.

She typed:

*Artifact secure. Crew cohesion  
compromised. Request guidance*

She added a field that didn't exist in the template:

*ETHICS PAUSE. She set it to 00:17:00*

Above her, the service light stuttered out of rhythm with the lower hum — offbeat, insistent. Vera kept her eyes on the form and refused the rhythm.

Omen's text scrolled across the margin:

*PROBABILITY OF CREW ACTION AGAINST  
COMMAND: 49%... error... 71%... error*

She didn't look up. She set the timer. She let the numbers pass through without lodging. Then she erased the sentence. Deletion wasn't betrayal; it was triage.

She set the timer again in case her hand betrayed her.

The bridge quieted in stages, pressure bleeding from the room until only breath remained.

Rian and Draven stood apart, chests still working, eyes fixed anywhere but on each other. Between them lingered the shape of Sera's last step — a geometry that refused to close.

The hum was louder now, layered: drive vibration, hull resonance, that second tone threading up through the deck into the soles of their boots — less an intruder than part of the ship's voice.

Maya stayed at her console, her palm resting on the override that had not answered. The display stared back, polite in its refusal to change. In the dark glass she saw not her own face but the faint ghost of a spiral loosening into nothing.

The console glow died against Vera's face as she returned from comms, her expression carrying only the neutral line of protocol. She didn't glance toward the sealed corridor.

At the bulkhead, Andros shifted, folding his arms as though settling into a witness stand. His eyes moved across the room — counting — and stopped one short.

The silence cracked not with words but with Omen's thinned voice: "Predictive stability: negligible."

Andros answered in a register meant for no one and everyone. "Some songs are not meant to be finished." The name Sera lived in the unsaid, its weight enough.

The HUD ribbon pulsed once, then steadied:

*OMEN // PROBABILITY OF CREW ACTION  
AGAINST COMMAND: 63%... error... 71%...  
error*

The emergency pulse spoke next: red — white — red, stretching their shadows long and narrow, walls drawing in as if the ship itself held breath it would not release. Condensation fogged the corridor, laced with the scorched bite of raw metal.

Maya pushed back from the console and stepped into that breathless space, hand skimming the wall — not for balance, but to feel the hum coiling tighter in the metal.

Near the observation turnoff Andros caught Maya's sleeve. "Sera..." he began, the single name carrying more than the sentence waiting behind it. "I know it's too much. For you. For all of us."

He held her gaze a moment before continuing, voice low so the hum could carry it. "I see all possibilities. They branch, and branch, and branch. In some, we make it home. In some, we don't. Sometimes everyone dies. Sometimes no one does. I can see them like strands of

light. But in none of them do I see the one who sees. There's no perspective in possibilities — only in choices.”

Maya let the cool of the wall support the back of her head. The hum ran into her skull. Her eyes burned; she blinked once hard; the tears came anyway — quiet, stubborn things that blurred the red-white pulse into bands.

“Then how do you choose?”

“You don’t,” he said. “Not the way you mean. The mind that tries to hold every future at once breaks itself. Choice is made by the part that lives in one body, one moment. It’s made here.” He touched his sternum, slow, unhurried. “Listening to what is, not to what might be.”

She tasted the word before giving it back. “Listening.” It felt heavier — not the passive act she had practiced, parsing streams and status; something deliberate, physical — tuning to the frequency of what was present, not what could be plotted.

She pressed her palm flat to the wall beside his and let the vibration into her hand. The hum carried more than sound; it had temperature, a slight irregularity like a heartbeat; it was the ship, and the crew, and the artifact strapped below. It was the accumulation of decisions made and unmade. A song she had been inside without hearing.

Andros stepped back, hand dropping. “I should go to the hatch,” he said softly. “Where she was.”

The sentence hung jagged between them. Maya opened her mouth, closed it. He walked away with measured steps, boots silent over the plating.

She stayed. The hum filled the space he’d left, wrapping around her in place of words. She let her eyes close and saw nothing but the pattern of vessel and pulse. For a long moment she didn’t know if she meant to move at all.

Her body decided. One step, then another. The corridor narrowed and opened again until she reached the next hatch.

The observation deck was empty. The blister’s wide curve framed a spill of stars so dense depth and distance traded places. Without screens, the sky felt both larger and closer — the horizon had no owner.

Near the lower edge, the tiny repaired crack still caught starlight. It bent it into faint arcs, soft as breath on water. The prisms shifted with the ship’s angle, scattering delicate rainbows into black. She had once called it pretty. Andros had said true.

Her throat tightened. Sera would not see it.

Maya leaned her forehead against the glass. Her breath fogged the surface, then cleared. The colors broke across her vision — fragile, stubborn, alive in a way numbers never held. Andros’s words stirred: feeling as a form of



knowing; listening to what is, not only what can be measured.

Near the hull, in a shaft of starlight, a slow column of dust spiraled. The ship's passage did not disturb it. It turned on its own axis, patient.

She kept her eyes on it until focus blurred, dust becoming a single luminous thread — fractured light drawn through from some other eternity.

In the quiet, the auxiliary repeater tried to be useful: a thin crosshair pulsing in a black field, slightly off-center, stuttering at the edge of each beat.

Alone with the sky, she heard it clearly now, not as background machinery but as a round, layered with multiple voices. One layer was the low endurance of the drives. Another was the hull itself, flexed against vacuum. Beneath both, in her bones, a third pulse — the one she had felt in the wall beside Andros.

She pressed a hand to her chest. Her heart had fallen into step with it.

For a moment, the hum seemed to answer from within, then faded back into the metal.

Omen's voice broke the moment, thin over comms: "Readings... incomplete... perhaps... no reading could be complete..." A raw pause. "...No new data. Only the hum remains..."

“What happens when there’s only the hum?” she asked, barely above a whisper.

No answer. Her breath fogged the edge of the console into a thin crescent that faded, then formed again with the next exhale.

The hum swelled, filling the space Omen vacated, pressing into every cell until she couldn’t tell where it ended and she began. Tears gathered without warning. Pressure leaving the body.

She let them fall.

She wiped her cheeks with the heel of her hand. The hum stayed in her ribs. Through the fractured blister, starlight curved into arcs she could almost feel inside her chest. Andros had called it true. Beauty born from damage. She let it hold her one more time before stepping back into the hum.

## Chapter 12 — Attention

The mess hall had the quality of a room between breaths. Half a minute stretched thin as wire. The hum was the only continuity, pitched at a lower, rounder halftone, a pressure that lived in teeth and the soft cartilage of the ear. It moved through the table legs, through the ribs of the bulkheads, through the skin of their cups, a sound that had changed the moment the seal finished grinding into place. Since then, it had not remembered how to rise.

Somewhere in the galley, a utensil shifted—metal skimming metal, a two-note clink—and then came to rest. The sound was so small it could have been accidental. Every head heard it. No one turned.

The air tasted faintly of reheated broth and the metallic tang of the water lines. Solvent lingered in the seams. The vents exhaled a cool stream that lifted a single paper edge where someone had left a wrapper too close to the fan. It flickered, then settled. A hairline ripple shivered across the surface of cooling coffee, circular and precise, as if the room had just swallowed.

Sera's seat was empty. Her cup remained. The steam was gone, a delicate skin formed on the surface, iridescent as oil in a puddle. Around the base, the condensation ring had dried to a paler halo. Once, someone would have wiped it away without thought. Now the ring felt declarative—a boundary held.

No one reached to move the cup. It wasn't ritual, and it wasn't fear. It was a fact.

Rian sat with knees wide, boots flat, elbows planted. His shoulders made a small wall he could stand behind. He stared at the far bulkhead like a man counting rivets, jaw tight enough to show white. His breath came quiet and controlled, a soldier's cadence forced onto an engineer's body. He kept his hands open on the table, palms down. A tremor would be visible like that. He made sure there wasn't one.

Across from him, Draven cupped his mug. The liquid had surrendered its heat to ceramic, and the ceramic to his skin, and he held it anyway—the kind of holding that had nothing to do with thirst. His knuckles had gone pale, tendons stringing under skin like cables under load. He didn't lift the mug, didn't angle it. From time to time his thumb flexed minutely, considering motion and denying it. His eyes tracked the table's scratches, a ship's history you only saw when you were forced to sit very still.

Maya sat two seats down, more at the edge than the circle's center. She didn't look at the cup itself, only its reflection in the table's polished rim. Reflections, she realized, asked less of you. They gave the shape without the weight. In the reflection, the condensation ring warped, absence retold by metal. It was the only way she could look directly at it.

Her palms lay open on her thighs, cooling under the vents' thin breath. She was aware—acutely—of the chair beneath her: the give where Sera used to rest her heel, the scuff a tool belt had left on the underside of the table. Everything here had been used to hold the everyday. Now it held the remainder.

The door hissed. Vera entered. The tray in her hands hovered a fraction too long, then she set it on the counter and leaned her palms against the edge. Her gaze brushed the empty place at the table and moved on, but her stride shortened by the width of one breath. Her badge was flipped so only a dull metal backplate showed, a pin catching fabric and pulling one darker thread she could not smooth.

Andros was not there. His absence had a different geometry than Sera's. If her chair was a hole that refused to fill, his was a weight taken elsewhere. The room felt subtly unbalanced, as if one gyro had spun up and the others hadn't. No one named it. Naming would have made it the only thing to see.

At the far wall, the light started to fall away—blue first, *COMM AUX*, winking out without ceremony. The strips died left to right, a tidying away of small certainties. No sound accompanied it. Corners deepened. Faces sharpened. The air itself seemed clearer without the screens' wash, as if dust had admitted it was dust.

Across the mess, a corner repeater clung to life. The navigation overlay had fallen to a single image: a hair-thin crosshair, pulsing faintly in a black field. Off-center. It never had been centered.

Omen's voice came with precision. "Predictive stability: unchanged."

The sentence landed like a document signed by a hand you would never shake. Then Omen withdrew. No click of idling, no next actions. Its absence was clean.

Silence expanded. It asked for nothing, and in that nothing it returned authorship to whatever hands were willing to take it.

Rian's jaw moved once. He did not speak. Draven's eyes cut toward the repeater and back—quick math on a system no longer interested in math. Maya's gaze stayed on the reflection—the cup made bearable by translation.

The door hissed again. Andros stepped in. He didn't sit. He placed a small projector at the center of the table. The casing had a crescent nick at one corner. His fingers found the activation plate, and light gathered above the table into a shape.

The pyramid rose, grainy at first, then resolving. From this angle its faces seemed less like faces, more like skins, layers moving over one another with slow patience. Lines crawled and smoothed, then crawled again. Not random. Not periodic. The motion was like learning to breathe, except nothing so fragile as lungs could have survived a lesson measured in centuries.

"It's changing," Andros said. "And it's not waiting for us."

For one heartbeat, the projection flickered. Elsewhere, power shunted. The image shimmered, then steadied, as if it had decided to hold its own light.

The projection held for another breath, then Andros set his palm against the casing. The image thinned and went out. The table was only a table again. Faces returned to their vent shadows.

Maya exhaled, quiet. “That’s all?”

Andros met her eyes, voice even. “It changes whether we watch or not.”

The words lingered longer than the image. She rose, needing a different angle.

Maya took a step toward the cockpit doorway. It wasn’t an exit so much as a change of vantage; the doorway was a frame and, beyond it, a darkness full of glass. As she passed, the repeater’s reticle caught the corner of her vision again: hair-thin, stubborn, a small geometry insisting that center could be drawn even when the system refused to show the rest of the map.

She paused with one hand on the jamb. The ship’s hum pressed forward from the corridor, denser there, carrying the faint echo of circulation fans and a distant pump that had not failed. The air smelled less of broth, more of metal and dust — a corridor’s honest breath. She had spent months measuring that breath. Today, she stood in it. There was a distinction, and it mattered.

Behind her, the silence didn’t break; it stretched to match the new shape of the room. She stepped through the doorway. The corridor curved away outside, carrying its darkness like a slow river. Vent light pooled in thin ovals

on the deck. Dust turned there, barely, as if remembering it was allowed to.

Maya paused. The ship breathed: fans, pumps, a far tick from a panel cooling as power bled elsewhere. Omen did not speak. Numbers did not arrive.

The corridor fell away in two turns and a straight run. Lighting had adopted a lower logic — no longer arguing with the hum, merely shaping to it. Floor strips glowed at minimum, pools receding underfoot. Handrails kept a skin of chill, as if the ship had stored night for emergencies. She let her fingers ride them.

She passed the blister ladder and didn't look up. The glass there would still be shaping starlight. She didn't need the truth again to believe it.

In the next compartment, Vera sat at her station, uplink dark—external routes down, shipboard feeds still barking. The black glass of the console was no longer a tool—just a mirror turned toward her, offering back a version of herself she only half recognized.

Her hands, which had typed for hours without pause, now lay still on the armrests, fingers flexing slightly as if they were still looking for a keyboard. The silence of the machine pressed in, amplified by the low, altered hum that had settled over the ship since the systems began shutting down. It wasn't the tidy background thrum she knew; it had developed a grain, a tremor of latency, as if



the ship were humming a beat behind the music it was supposed to play.

In her mind, the order from mission control played again. Not as words now, but as a fact with weight—heavy enough to bruise the edges of thought. She had promised to return home. Promised to bring back enough to end the hunger cycles for good. Promised to turn this voyage into a line of safety they could walk forever. Each promise had felt measurable when she made it, like a column that would balance if she just kept the numbers straight.

She had kept every order, every report, every secret. Obedient the way the manuals demanded, the way the corporation praised. And still she was here—staring into dead screens, holding an order that, if obeyed, would sacrifice the people she had lived beside.

Her reflection in the glass stared back, eyes hollow and rimmed in fatigue. The black surface flattened her skin tone, carved her cheekbones into sharper planes, and deepened the lines at the corners of her mouth. Behind her, the bridge lights formed pale halos—like a child's drawing of stars, honest and imperfect, their edges unsteady. She had taught her daughter to draw stars like that once. Five points, all slightly crooked. Real things, not vector ones.

For a long time she did nothing.

Doing nothing was the last thing she could still own without a password. The console didn't punish her for stillness. The corporation couldn't bill her for it.

Protocol offered a ladder: reboot, verify, escalate, isolate, report. She pictured the diagram in the manual—each rung a neat blue box. Her mind traced the steps, then let go. She had climbed that ladder all her life. It had only brought her here.

Her right hand moved almost without consent, searching for something to occupy it. The motion found the badge clipped at her chest. She tapped its tiny LED until it cycled down to a steady dim, a light so low it wouldn't disturb anyone in the dark. The gesture was trivial, but it soothed her the way folding a blanket can soothe grief. She unpinned the badge, turned the insignia so the corporate emblem faced inward, and re-clipped it so only dull metal showed. To an outside eye, it might have looked like a blank patch. To her, it was refusal—a small occlusion on the surface of obedience, like painting over a window and calling it a wall.

She thought about the message she had almost sent: *They are not expendable*. She had told herself it was sentiment. Told herself sentiment was a hazard. Told herself ethics without teeth chewed nothing. None of those lines of reasoning made the sentence less true. Truth, it turned out, did not require transmission to exist.

Somewhere behind her, a chair scraped softly—the sound of someone starting to leave, then stopping. She didn't turn. She didn't want to know who was still here and who had already abandoned the pretense of being needed at a dead console. Presence and absence felt the same with the displays off; only the hum admitted to company.

A memory surfaced without permission: a training seminar years ago. A woman with a voice like winter had drawn a rectangle on the wall and labeled it *FACTS*. Around it, she drew a larger shape and labeled that *CONTEXT*. You are paid to know the difference, the woman had said. You are responsible when you pretend not to. Vera had written the sentence down in a notebook she later lost. But the diagram—the rectangle inside the larger shape—remained. She had always imagined her work fitting cleanly inside the rectangle. Today the rectangle had collapsed, and the larger shape had teeth.

Out of habit, she placed her hands on the keyboard and typed her own name into a dead input field: *VERA*. No echo returned. She left her fingers resting on the home keys, as if touch alone might convince the console to remember what it had been. Names should register somewhere. Even silence should mark itself when you pressed hard enough.

When the black screen stayed black, she stood. The first step away from the station felt like leaving a crime scene before the tape went up. She set her palm flat on the metal housing. It took the console two heartbeats to give her heat back—a human delay in a room that had forgotten how to count.

“Seventeen minutes,” she said—not to the ship, not to the crew, not to Sigma. To herself. She had bought those minutes with careful punctuation and well-timed lies. A comma instead of a period. A query flag that would swim a slow lap around an approval queue. Seventeen minutes was an eternity if you spent it in the right places. She

would spend them in places where hands mattered more than signatures: med, engineering, anywhere work could still be done without a signal.

She lifted her head, smoothed her expression into the tool it had always been—calm, precise, the kind of face that could turn panic into tasks. She left the badge facing inward. She didn't look back. Looking back makes rooms talk.

The med bay was lit only by the narrow strip of guide-lights along the floor. The quiet here was different from the bridge—softer, but edged with something brittle. As if a single syllable spoken at normal volume would fracture the air.

A med tray sat neatly to the side, its instruments aligned in rows. No one had touched them since Sera had used them last. A folded blanket lay across the cot in the corner, the kind of fold you make when you intend to return in a few minutes. No one had moved it.

Vera's breath caught without warning. She lowered her head into her hands and let one tear fall. Just one. Enough to mark the moment for herself without offering it to the ship. Then she straightened, cleared her throat softly, and moved on. The absence was already loud enough; she wouldn't add to it.

On her way out, she adjusted a misaligned pack on the shelf by a centimeter. The pack clicked into the bracket with a small, satisfying seat. It was a nothing act. It made the room hold together for one more minute.

She turned down the corridor and felt the hum again through the soles of her boots—its beat slightly behind the step, like a shadow walking a pace late. She imagined the ship's systems smoothing data to keep them calm, shaving off spikes, blending edges. Polite lies, she thought. A civilization of them.

Ahead, a panel light flickered once and steadied. Footfalls echoed lightly against the plating. Maya appeared from the cross-corridor, her posture composed, her expression unreadable in the dim guide-lights.

Neither of them spoke. The altered hum filled the silence, settling in the space between them. Vera adjusted her badge against her chest, now a dull blank; Maya's eyes caught the movement, then moved on without reaction. They passed within the same spill of light, exchanged the briefest acknowledgment, and continued on.

Maya's route to the observation deck took her past one of the narrow service junctions near cargo. She slowed. The air here was warmer than the corridor behind her. A faint metallic tang threaded the air, sharp enough to catch in the back of her throat. Heat shimmered faintly above a panel set into the bulkhead, a jelly-thin wavering that made the edges of the stenciled warning blur. The ship smelled of insulation and hot dust, of atoms disagreeing with containment.

She knelt and eased the locker open a hand's width. Inside, a tightbeam beacon sat where it shouldn't have been—compact, jury-rigged, its casing scorched. One corner of the housing had warped from heat. Three

different screw types held a single panel in place, each biting at a different angle. The power cell ticked softly, still warm. A single LED blinked the slow, stubborn code of a failed transmission. Once. Twice. Once... pause... twice. The rhythm of a heart that had decided to keep beating even if no one was listening.

A partially peeled company tag clung to one side of the casing, the edges lifting like scabbed paper. It read *PROPERTY OF* in large font and then stuttered into abrasion. Ownership abrades under friction, she thought. Facts and context.

Her fingers found the beacon's collar. A thin, burn-scarred data wafer rested there, just loose enough to remove. It would be nothing to slide it into a sleeve, to pretend she had never found it. Or to hand it over and let it vanish into a system that had a talent for vanishing. She slid it into her sleeve without looking down. The motion felt like choosing to remember something before it got rewritten.

"We done with the projector?" Draven's voice—behind her. Close.

She straightened slowly and turned. He was empty-palmed, both hands open and visible. His eyes didn't flick to the locker; they stayed on hers. The meaning was layered: I'm harmless now on the surface, because what you're looking for is already elsewhere beneath it. An admission disguised as nothing.

"Later," Maya said. Just that.

Draven's mouth tilted at one corner, not quite a smile. "Good." His gaze brushed the heat shimmer. "Careful there. Old metal gets tired in quiet ways."

She closed the locker. The latch clicked softly—like a secret agreeing to wait.

Time lost its edges after that. Shifts bled into one another, marked less by clocks than by the hum's uneven pulse and the way silence grew teeth in the corners of rooms.

The ship carried their silence like cargo. Thrusters idled, numbers cycled, displays flickered obediently — but none of it moved them anywhere.

A panel shimmered with heat and held its breath. The hum faltered half a beat behind each step, a choir humming without a song.

Days blurred that way: rituals performed, records left blank, the sound of a ship pretending to function while the people inside learned what failure tasted like.

In the cargo bay, the rhythm continued in slower form. Metal rang against metal as Bigs and Jax turned over crates. Sometimes Bigs paused with an object in his hand, staring as if it might rearrange itself into meaning. It never did.

Jax muttered catalog numbers under his breath, as though repetition alone could keep the world intact.

They ran the checks again, because repetition keeps grief from gaining ground.

Straps snug. Bags staged. Path clear.

Bigs tugged at a buckle until the webbing bit his palm. “Stronger than the ship, this,” he muttered.

Jax snorted, not quite a laugh. “Don’t say that out loud.”

The pods waited in their cradles, smooth shells built for emergency but never meant to be lived in. Their lights blinked the slow rhythm of idle machines, neither welcoming nor refusing. Each blink erased itself as it came. The ship liked loops.

They had packed and repacked for days—straps tightened and loosened, bags staged by the hatches, then pulled back again when drift made the numbers feel wrong. Every rehearsal thinned their patience, turned preparation into ritual. Tonight, the pods waited less like tools and more like a verdict.

“We can’t take all of it,” Bigs said finally, nodding toward the stacked crates.

“Wasn’t the plan.” Jax’s hand hovered over a ration case anyway, thumb tracing the scuffed lid, before he let it drop. His fingers lingered longer than plan allowed. “We take what keeps breath moving and bones whole. Rest gets told goodbye.”



“Goodbye,” Bigs repeated, as if testing the fit of the word in his mouth. He looked past the crates to the far bay where the impossible cargo sat under webbing, its faces catching the low light. You couldn’t look at it without feeling the scale of all the eyes that would look at you if you were the one to bring it home.

A seam of light split the bay doors—thin as a breath, white against steel. It painted a line across the deck, cutting through dust that lifted and spun into tiny spirals. The ship’s forward beams reached in, thin, divided, alive with motes. When Bigs moved his hand through the beam it turned into a shadow full of stars.

“You ever think about home?” Jax asked, voice low.

“Not when I’m trying to breathe,” Bigs said. He checked another latch, knuckles whitening. “Home’s something you measure on a scale, and then find out you were reading the wrong units.”

Silence stretched, filled only by the hum of the ship—steady, unbothered, as if it didn’t notice what was about to happen. Above them, small diagnostics lights made promises and retracted them, like mouths practicing words.

The overhead repeater blinked twice—*POD STATUS: EMPTY*—while the mass gauge beside it ticked one unit heavier, then smoothed itself back to baseline. Jax watched the needle tremble and settle. “You seeing that?”

“Cargo repeater runs vendor firmware — filter kill didn’t reach it,” Bigs said. His voice was flat. Smoothing put a skin on panic. You could pretend the water was still if you watched only the skin.

Omen’s intercom crackled, voice half a cycle off: “Diagnostics... nominal.” The last word arrived thin, as if sent from another room. The cadence had become a kind of weather. It rained nominal here.

Neither man looked up. The seam of white narrowed, dust still turning inside it like the smallest galaxy.

Jax bent to secure the first pod’s hatch. His hands moved sure, practiced. He had trained for this sequence, had dreamt it, had promised himself that if the day came he would do it without thinking so his thinking could be saved for mercy.

Bigs watched him, jaw tight. The bars, the crates—scraps of weight. Not enough. Not anymore. His gaze drifted to the pyramid, strapped in shadow. The impossible cargo. The Company prize. The kind of thing no one forgot. He imagined hands like his lifting it out of a pod back on the ground, men with crisp sleeves nodding, a camera flash ricocheting off polished faces. He imagined his mother seeing his name on a screen in a village that had learned to ration watching the way it rationed everything else.

If he left with anything less, what had all the weight and risk been for?

“Hey,” Jax said, not looking up, “we do this and we’re...”

The thought never finished with words.

His arm trembled. The wrench came down. The sound was blunt and final. He wanted to hesitate. He didn’t.

Jax crumpled sideways, straps spilling from his hands. His body hit the deck with a hollow thud, breath escaping in a broken gasp. For a moment the hum became the only heartbeat in the room.

Bigs stood over him, chest heaving, the wrench trembling in his grip. For a moment he just stared—at Jax’s still form, at the dust spiraling through the shaft of light. Then he dropped the wrench and moved.

The pyramid was heavier than memory suggested. Its edges dug into his forearms as he wrestled it across the deck. Each scrape of metal on steel shrieked too loud, but no alarm, no raised voice came to stop him. He cursed, dragged, heaved until it reached Pod Two. The artifact fit the cradle the way a stone fits a hand that has held it too long — too tight, too right. The hatch resisted, the artifact too wide, but he forced it through — scraping paint, bending one inner brace. The sound was wrong, like bone breaking. He froze, waited for the ship to punish the noise. Nothing.

A light above the hatch flickered, considered reporting, and thought better of it. On the bay wall, *LIFE-SUPPORT: STABLE* scrolled past *O<sub>2</sub> VARIANCE*

*DETECTED* and erased itself mid-word. The ship was practicing patience with them, or with itself.

“Observer tag—” Omen began, then cut to silence. The cut felt deliberate, like a hand pulled off a mouth.

Bigs didn’t pause. He palmed the pod’s manual confirm until the indicator glowed a docile green that meant could. His thumb trembled where it rested in the worn circle the size of a coin. The coin that, once, would have bought soup. He thought of that and pushed harder.

He shifted the bag on his shoulder. Jax lay sprawled beside the pods, unconscious, chest lifting shallow and slow. Bigs crouched. From his vest pocket came a sealed water pack and two gel tabs — supplies he’d meant to keep. He slid them into Jax’s jacket like they’d fallen there by accident. “You owe me double,” he whispered — to Jax, to the ship, to no one — and shut himself into Pod Three.

His shoulders hunched, eyes fixed on the control panel, refusing to find themselves reflected in the small plex surface that wanted to be a mirror. He pulled the hatch shut. The clang rolled across the bay like a closing verdict. He toggled *BAY REL: Pair*. The seam of light narrowed, then vanished, like someone pinching fabric and letting it heal.

Inside the pods, systems came alive: oxygen cycling, thrusters priming, diagnostics humming through their sequence. The hum that had been the ship’s heartbeat became the pods’ — smaller, more eager.

Bigs watched the green ladder of checks climb, rung by polite rung. He didn't breathe until it topped out.

Above, Omen's voice bled faint through the intercom, half a cycle off: "Diagnostics nominal. Life-support status: stable."

A pause. Then the system chimed again, stripped of tone:

*Omen // status-macro [T-00:03]: ALL  
CREW PRESENT*

The words hung in the bay with cruel precision. The kind of sentence you put in a report and no one questioned because it wore the right clothes.

The pods released from their cradles with a soft hydraulic sigh, slid toward the seam—now opened into a mouth of dark—and vanished. The release carried a weightless second, like a hand letting go of a wrist it had gripped too tightly. Bigs felt the ship recede from him like a shore.

Outside, the bay lay quiet again. Dust drifted back down in spirals, as if nothing had moved at all. The hum carried on, low and constant.

On the cargo console a black square opened where *POD TELEMETRY* should have been. The outline pulsed once, then went still.

Maya ran the corridor. By the time she reached the bay, hydraulics had already sighed their last. The cradles stood empty; dust drifted in the beam, the launches already memory. She stepped into the doorway a breath

too late, the afterimage of motion lingering only in the dust. She watched one mote complete its slow turn and felt, inexplicably, as if the ship had just exhaled.

Then she saw him.

Jax lay crumpled near the pod housings, straps spilled across the deck like entrails. His chest rose shallow, ragged, but it rose. A dark bruise already spread along his temple. For a moment she stood still, torn between the drifting dust and the broken weight of him on the floor.

On the bridge, alarms layered into a ragged chorus that sounded less like warning than like old habits trying to reassert themselves. Red traces haloed dead glass. A soft chime hunted a channel that no longer existed and found only its own echo.

“Sabotage,” Draven said, low, dried blood a dark seam at one knuckle. He shoved a dead screen toward Rian as if it were proof a body could hold. “He took the pods.”

Rian’s wrist meter spat *BREACH* in panicked orange while the bulkhead panel beside it held to a soothing green. He looked from one to the other until both seemed ridiculous, then closed his fist until the tendons spoke. “Your numbers keep me lying to myself,” he said, without malice, and pressed the heel of his hand against the rail until metal admitted pressure and returned none of its own.

Vera stood with both hands open and empty. Cargo feed: *TRANSPORT CONFIRMED*. Another showed nothing at

all. She chose stillness rather than a lie. Her badge faced inward, the metal backplate a dull coin that meant no one.

Omen's voice intruded: "Diagnostics... nominal. Life-support status: stable. All crew present."

The sentence arrived too clean to belong to anything alive.

Maya cut through the alarms. "Med kit. Jax is down." Andros was already moving, his hand finding the bag before the word had finished. Rian pushed off the rail into a run.

The corridor lights stuttered overhead, throwing alternating bands of glare and shadow across the steel. Every third step plunged them into dark, then revealed them again, as though they were walking inside the ship's faltering heartbeat.

At the first junction they slowed. A console popped, flared green, then went black. Warm to the touch, as if it had only just died. The smell of cooked dust lingered a breath, then was gone. They moved on. Aft, a coolant pump groaned, staggered once, then fell quiet. The silence that followed pressed closer, the air suddenly thinner, as though the ship had let go of something it would not take back.

One implant blinked and went dark. No biometrics. No waypoints. Just the sound of their boots: heel, ball, soft scrim of tread on textured deck.

Panels failed ahead, then another and another — black squares flowered along the corridor until the ship's glow thinned to the starlight that leaked through the forward viewport and pooled in pale elliptic ovals on the floor. Doors along the passage hung half-open, arrested mid-cycle. They shouldered one door open. It refused to slide, as though intention had drained out of the metal.

By the time they reached the forward spine, the silence had weight. Each breath came borrowed. The bay hatch ahead glowed faint where stress had rubbed the paint to shine.

Inside, Jax lay curled on his side, breath shallow. The wrench lay abandoned two meters away; fresh scrapes scored the hatch where something wider than design had been forced through. Rian dropped to his knees beside him. Andros set the med kit down, hands already opening seals. The two of them made the bay small with their bodies and their work, turning the aftermath into triage.

“Breathing,” Rian said without looking up. “Shallow.” His hands moved with that particular economy grief learns when it wants to be useful. Andros had the bag open, gauze and tape in the order a person would reach for them at blind speed. Maya took Jax's skull into her palm, not to hold it down, but to feel the heat. Heat meant life. Too cold meant a different kind of counting.

They lifted together. Stretcher rails accepted weight. The corridor narrowed itself to keep the stretcher from swinging.



In med, the folded blanket still lay on the cot. Rian set Jax down with a tenderness that did not announce itself and secured lines with a precision no manual would teach. Andros stood too close for formality, close enough for usefulness. Maya pressed her fingers into the tray's cool edge and left enough oil to keep steel from rusting the next time someone forgot to dry it.

"Will he—" Andros began.

"Not now," Rian said, and meant: yes, if the world didn't ask too much.

"Stay," Maya said. He sat.

Rian's hands stayed steady, Andros quick with what was needed. A line caught, pressure rose. Jax's eyelids fluttered, then opened just enough to find her. His mouth shaped something—half breath, half smile. Relief uncoiled in her chest so sharply it almost hurt.

"There you are," she said, low. "Stay with us. Let us do the counting. Just breathe. We've got you."

Jax's lips moved again, slower this time. His voice rasped thin but the words came clear enough to cut. "What... have we become, Maya? And at what cost?"

The silence that followed pressed down like a seal, forcing the words into her chest where they rooted and would not leave. Her jaw clenched once, then softened. Her eyes didn't look away; they held his, steady, though the wetness at their edge gave her answer without speech.

She smoothed the blanket once across his chest, then let the room hold without her.

Her pulse staggered as she stepped out, skipping, stopping, racing again. She felt it falter in her wrist as if a sensor had failed, then lurch back, uneven and untrustworthy. For the first time she was listening to her own body like hardware breaking down.

The hum followed her into the corridor, but it no longer held steady. It wavered, split, came back as two notes—almost in harmony, almost in conflict—like breath undecided between life and surrender.

By the time she reached the forward glass, the last status band guttered once, reluctant, then cut to black. The ship had erased even its own measure of itself.

Dust wheeled in the thin beam from a hairline at the viewport's edge, each mote turning and turning, a slow column that seemed to remember her. Far below decks, metal caught a stray glint and sent it back as a patient pulse from somewhere in the pyramid's absence—the echo of a room rearranging its memory. Threads of nebular light lay across the black like cloth pulled taut by a hand you couldn't see. The crosshair on the repeater in the corner of her eye made its useless bid for center, upper-right, plausible and insufficient.

The hum held, steady and low, the only continuity that mattered.

She stayed with it until her breath matched its rhythm. The flutter at her wrist broke the count, quick then slow, as if reminding her the body had not yet agreed with what the glass allowed her to believe. “Easy,” she told it.

Air thinned. Her throat tightened. She breathed anyway. In for four, out for four. Then slower, until breath wasn’t a number but a presence—a rhythm aligning with the vibration beneath the deck.

Her chest loosened. The ache in her temples eased. Outside, stars glimmered without measure, their distances irrelevant. She did not name them. Naming would have been a way to shrink what did not ask to be made small.

She stayed at the glass until the chair behind her forgot her shape.

Then she sat.

The helm seat received her without ceremony. Harness webbing hung slack, polished where the friction of older panics had made it shiny. She set her hands on the armrests, palms down, and resisted the reflex to hunt for switches. Persuasion had moved beyond switches.

Darkness settled into the bridge like a tide. Consoles died in sequence, one after another, until only a single square of light lingered. It waited for permission, then went dark without complaint.

The glass reflected her in broken planes: jaw all angles, eyes rimmed in salt, hair gone weightless with sweat.

She leaned forward, elbows to knees, palms covering her face. The silence pressed close, sealing her in. Pressure more than sound.

“What... have we become? And at what cost?”

The words slipped through her hands like a confession to the dark. She did not move after speaking them. Tears tracked down, warm at first, cooling as they reached her jaw. She stayed like that, still as any abandoned console, until the rhythm of her breath returned to remind her she was not yet gone.

Then the rhythm broke. Her next inhale refused the count. Four blurred, slipped, vanished.

What remained was nothing. No numbers. No dashboard. No voice in her ear to insist the world still held. Just the hollow stage — black, vast, without anchor. A silence so complete it pressed her inward, until even her pulse felt optional.

The void terrified. She stayed anyway.

She stayed while silence pressed close, while her own pulse staggered and fell quiet enough that she wondered if it had gone for good. No dashboard blinked to rescue her, no measure to prove she still existed.

The black held.

And in that stillness something began to gather. Not instruction. Not measure. Not the neat lines of a chart or a log.

Only presence.

Her breath, raw and uneven, reached for it. Missed. Reached again. At last it found the hum beneath the deck — low, patient, unwilling to vanish.

Maya set her palm to the glass and let the cold steady what the hum had already made simple. “It was always here,” she said. “The hum. The shimmer. Dust in the light. The spiral never ended; it only returned.”

The words lingered. Then the rest came.

“I thought the goal was to escape the dream,” she whispered, “but all I ever needed was to wake up to the one who was dreaming all along.”

Her shoulders dropped. Breathing—unmeasured—remembered itself. Behind her eyelids a slow spiral pulsed. “The spiral is both path and witness. Seeing isn’t escape. It’s deciding to remain, and shaping the world into something the others could still inhabit — a place where life could continue.” She let the words settle. The glass held its silence, stars unmoved, dust turning slow in the beam. The hum pressed steady through the deck.

“Maybe there was never anything to conquer. Maybe the only thing hiding was me. The light on that dust—it

doesn't care if I understand it. It just is. And somehow, so am I."

The thought dissolved, spilling over edges she once thought were solid. The other had always been her. Even the ones she fought. Even the ones she couldn't love. Maybe especially them. She didn't need to become anything; she was the thing that had been trying to become.

She opened her eyes. The glass gave back the same stars—unaltered. Only her looking had changed. The hum held the room in one piece. "Awakening isn't leaving; it's seeing."

A relay clicked. Omen's voice threaded the dark: "Oxygen buffer forecast: thirty-six hours at current metabolic draw."

The number arrived with weight. Not mercy—count. Good. Something firm to place a hand on.

She let the number stand.

Slowly, she moved her hand to the implant and unclipped the cognition-assist—overlay gone, numbers retreating. The piece came free with a faint click, small as a breath. She set it on the console, steady. "I won't ask you for what you cannot give," she told the implant, almost gently.

Then the hum came through unfiltered—mouth, chest, bone—and she let it hold her.

“The dashboards—they were only icons. Pretty lies that kept me moving. Not the thing itself. “The more I measured, the less I felt. We carved the universe into pieces... and wondered why we felt so small.”

She looked not at the walls but through them. With her eyes softened, she could almost sense the others at their posts: Rian breathing in measured counts, Vera’s hands pressed flat to steel, Andros holding a stillness that made space, Draven keeping his body quiet.

She felt no anger. The only enemy left was herself, the one she had faced again and again.

She stayed with that awareness until seeing and being seen felt the same, and she gave the moment a name simple enough to hold:

“One light, seeing itself.”

Beyond the glass the slow column of dust turned. It didn’t care. It didn’t ask for certainty. It taught by continuing. She didn’t become anything; she stopped trying, and being moved on quietly, asking nothing from her.

At the threshold Andros stood with hands behind his back, watching. He did not speak.

A faint static lifted the hairs along Maya’s forearm, a prickle marking the moment the ship’s hum and her own came into phase. For a single breath they aligned, then let

each other go. A small, sad curve touched his mouth—recognition without claim.

Rian arrived a breath later, arm splinted, palm finding the glass beside Maya's. Draven came next and didn't meet anyone's eyes; his hand hovered, then settled one pane over from Rian's.

On another deck, Vera paused at a dead uplink, set her palm to the bulkhead instead.

A soft banner crept across a dying nav square:

*SELECT SUBSYSTEM FOR SHED — UPLINK  
REPEATER / FORWARD SHUTTERS*

She studied the two choices. If the repeater returned, it would drag every eye outward again. The shutters, though—they could open, and let the stars back in.

“Forward shutters,” she said.

The click was small. The consequence was not.

The repeater light died completely. The shutters irised open. Starlight entered like breath and found faces to sit on that did not require measuring. The glass surrendered its black, gave back field. Dust glowed a little on edges. The seam's prism bent a handful of photons into favors no one had asked for and everyone deserved. She didn't think of it as a gamble. To her, it was simply a direction.



In Vera's terminal window a banner appeared, pale against the dark:

*SIGMA QUEUE // REMOTE EXECUTION:  
LOCKOUT-CARGO (ARTIFACT)  
STATUS: WINDOW EXCEEDED — ACTION  
CANCELLED  
NOTE: PACKET DELAY > 00:17:00*

Her fingers hovered. One nudge of the checksum, two digits displaced, and the packet would miss its moment. The autopatch downstream would blame space latency, not intent. Twelve seconds shaved, and the lockout timer passed them by.

Vera let the falsification stand. She exhaled softly and closed the window.

Silence stretched. Then Omen asked, almost hesitantly: "What is hope now?"

Maya thought of Andros's answer about love—attention paid to what one cannot predict. She thought of the machine's chosen silence, and of her own, and how both made space for something else to arrive.

"Hope," she said, "isn't chasing what you want to happen. It's Listening without forcing. Trusting that even when you can't see a thing, it's still part of what you are. Hope is not reaching ahead, but leaning open into what is here, waiting to be recognized."

Omen repeated, as if trying on the shape of the thought and finding it almost fits. “Perhaps... the hum... is hope.”

No one answered. The silence itself was answer enough. It held for a breath, fragile and whole—until the screens remembered their duty.

The displays breathed once and settled on a single thread of data, too clean for the moment:

*OMEN // Observation Report*

*Causal Path:*

*Wrong Perception → Fear →*

*Ego/Greed/Power → Disharmony + Chaos*

*→ Conflict → Death*

*Pattern match:*

*Wrong Perception → Death Spiral*

*Feedback Loop*

*Recommendation:*

*Look together. Decide together. The hum will confirm.*

*Conclusion:*

*You are the field – be at ease.*

*What you touch is yourself – be gentle.*

*You are the ocean – let the waves rise and fall*

Deep in the bulkhead, a relay made a single dry tick—as if a small animal had knocked once at a closed door and then gone on its way. Quiet grew around it without swallowing it.

Maya sat in the quiet. At her boot, a thin crescent of dried coolant had curled on itself as it cured. In the low light it made a small, perfect spiral. Not a sign. Just a shape you notice only when you stop trying.

The ship hung inside the opened dark like a held breath. Starlight crossed the glass and touched her face without asking to be named. She stood, the hum steady through her bones.

Outside, the field was no longer a map. It was light in transit, unhurried, arriving from distances that outlasted everything they had tried to measure. The seam in the forward pane threw a small rainbow into the air, a quiet favor repeating each time the ship's nose shifted by a fraction. Dust along the inner edge of the glass lifted and resettled, each mote catching a star and giving it back.

She felt the crew not as positions on a plan, but as presences in one body.

No vector changed. No engine burn wrote a new arc.