

The Garden and the Proof

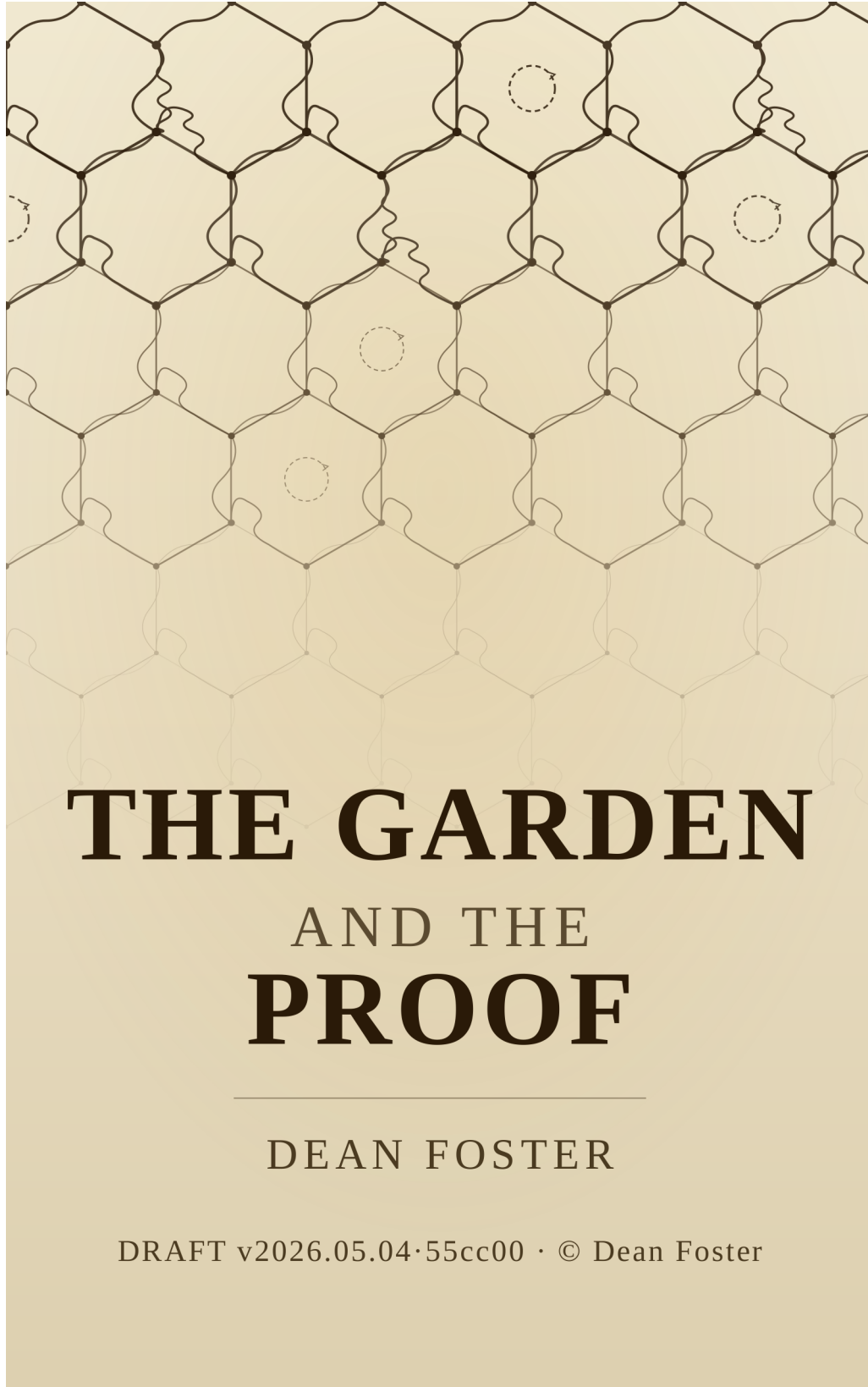
Dean Foster

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THE GARDEN

AND THE

PROOF

DEAN FOSTER

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The Garden and the Proof

Dean Foster

First Edition

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Chapter 1: The Shorefrogs

On the morning the shorefrogs climbed the high rocks, Carol was in the tide pools.

Three of them. High enough that the evening spray would miss them. The sky clear. The air warm. The sea, for the moment, pretending.

Carol counted the cleaner crabs in the third pool again.

Fewer.

The first pool had more.

Carol trusted subtraction first. Adjectives could wait.

Twelve weeks now, the same slow drift inward. Two months ago she would have called it noise. Now she tied the knot for it into the cord at her wrist after place and date. Three years of counts hung there already, enough that the cord had weight. Tide markers. Fish arrivals. Crab shifts. One moving count she still had not named. Name it too early and she would hear the wrong word every time her fingers found the knot again.

She stood and looked at the frogs once more. Weather, then. Real weather. Weather that reached the house whether the mortgage had been paid or not.

The house at Nell's Point stood just above the wind line on deep root-pilings, with corner trees that had been working into the frame for years. Old house. Useful house. Expensive house. The town said things about it. Not to Donna's face. Close enough to carry.

None of the knots on Carol's wrist would keep it standing.

Donna was down at the tide line when Carol came up from the rocks, feet in the wash, cord in one hand, still enough that the world around her looked arranged instead of accidental. A seabird landed nearby, reconsidered, and left.

"The mackerel went deep," Donna said.

Carol stopped beside her. "How early?"

"Three weeks."

"Again?"

"Again." Donna pointed out toward the water. "Same gap."

Seventeen years of fish changing depth before the water changed where it was supposed to. Donna had the whole run of it in the kitchen, quarter-year by quarter-year, knotted long before anybody else had decided the pattern was worth respecting.

"Storm in two days," Donna said. "The frogs agree."

"You still think you're measuring it right?"

"I think I have an observation."

Donna crouched and drew two lines in the wet sand, one above the other. The lower one blurred first under the wash.

“The water should move here,” she said. “The fish move here.”

Carol watched the gap between the lines fill.

“And what do you think it means?”

Donna kept looking at the sand. “I think I’d prefer you not to hand it to the first Optimizer who can explain it beautifully.”

The tide ran colder around their ankles. Donna stepped back.

“Pack before noon,” she said. “If you miss the road window you’ll miss the boat window, and then the weather gets to choose for you.”

Back at the house, the storm shutters were already stacked against the wall. Donna had pulled them before dawn.

Carol packed fast. The crab tooth first. Then the scratched resin lens wrapped in cloth. Bread. Water. Spare shirt. She forgot the hair ties and decided that was a future Carol problem.

When she came back outside, Donna was setting the first shutter into place.

“You know what this is for,” Donna said.

Carol set the bag down. “The free ride.”

Donna looked at her.

“The university.”

Another look.

Carol felt the right answer before she wanted to say it. “Keeping you from doing it alone.”

Donna’s face changed, not softer exactly, but nearer. “There.”

Donna crossed the yard and put both hands on her shoulders.

“I am not sending you north to become grateful,” she said. “I am not sending you north to come back improved. I am sending you north because the world likes a certain kind of credential, and if a credential is what gets a roof repaired before the storms, then go and fetch me one.”

Carol held still.

“But don’t let them talk you out of your eyes in exchange.”

Outside the post, Tuck stamped once.

On the storm wall, somebody had left a chalk triangle with a smoke-line through it. Children’s weather sign. Donna had already stepped around the loose board it pointed to.

Carol tied the bag shut and checked the cord at her wrist.

She looked back from the coast road only once.

The tide pools were smaller from above. The house smaller still. The corner trees almost gentle at that distance. Donna already gone from the yard.

The first settlement inland smelled of rope and wet grain. The second of fish oil and root mash. She passed cargo sheds, and a cormorant colony higher on the rocks than she remembered.

That went on the cord too.

Beth was in the gourd garden behind Vera’s school with one hand inside a split fruit.

“Leaving today?” she said, which meant she already knew.

She held up a pale green gourd slick with sap. “Take this to the Vellaren boat shop. Cold-water sealant. Fifth generation in two years, which is annoying, because it should have taken longer.”

Carol took it.

“Donna says the mackerel moved early again.”

Beth’s eyes sharpened. “Then Vellaren can pay for the privilege of hearing it.”

Carol tied the commission into the cord without looking. Terms heard. Terms held. Enough.

By afternoon the salt had gone from the air and the basin forest had taken its place.

The trees stood in their exact spacing again. Not rows. Something worse: an order that did not care whether she understood it. At one farm cut, a man had staked straight crop lines against the edge of that geometry. The nearest trees were already correcting him, curving the boundary back toward their own preference.

He kept staking the rows anyway.

At the canal bridge she stopped.

A barge moved below with no visible handler aboard. One tow animal on each bank. One holding the lead, one holding the correction. The canal reeds sang in the wind. No one shouted. The hull answered them by inches.

Two more barges before the southern junction. Same absence. Same competence.

The stable student there greeted Tuck before greeting her, which spoke well of both of them.

“He’ll be fine on the return string,” she said.

“He already thinks the hay is a moral improvement.”

Carol nodded. Tuck betrayed no grief, only interest in whether the stable hay was better than the road hay.

Three days later, from the deck of a northbound barge, Vellaren appeared first as height: terraces lifted out of the forest, bridges crossing empty air, old trunks carrying rooflines where ordinary trees would have carried branches. Then the canal curved and the university opened.

The new dorms were pale cut timber, still smelling of sap. Students crossed the courtyards with cords and sketchpads. Above the eastern terrace, bioluminescent colonies glowed through high windows blue-green even in daylight.

The housing woman by the dorm steps had a roster cord looped twice at her belt and the expression of somebody already late to the next problem.

“Carol. Nell’s Point. Storm-late.” Her fingers moved once along the cord. “Quad seven. Free-ride allocation.” Allocation.

She said it the way someone might say storage or drainage.

Her assigned suite was a quad: common room, four bedrooms, board between two doors, window onto the canal terrace. The building smelled of new timber and old wood together.

The light panel in her room had firm opinions about illumination. Covering the colony did nothing. Tapping the bark strip below it did nothing. She was on a chair, halfway through a negotiation that was becoming undignified, when a voice behind her said,

“You’ve gone to persuasion before violence. Admirable. Usually futile.”

She turned too fast and nearly came off the chair.

“Mark,” he said. Tall, quick-faced, already arranged in the manner of someone who intended to optimize the university personally. “You’re Carol. Coastal free-ride — Nell’s Point, yes? Late because of the storm.”

“You know that already.”

“I know most things already. It’s a flaw I continue to refine.” He tapped the lower vent. The panel dimmed. “Airflow control.”

Carol stepped down.

“You’ve landed in the odd suite, by the way. Two free rides in four rooms. Possibly three, depending on how one classifies Amy. One bed empty. One second-year who mostly lives at the docks.” He paused. “Either the housing office has a sense of humor or someone clustered the town-nominees on purpose.”

He said it lightly.

Carol did not receive it lightly.

Mark drifted off. Carol went to the window.

Below the terrace, the canal cut through the lower campus in a green line between root-walls. Two barges were approaching from opposite directions.

At Nell’s Point, this was the moment someone shouted across the water and adjusted the line.

No one shouted here.

No handler was visible on either deck.

The tow animals did not hesitate. The loaded pair held the inner line. The empty pair shifted. The barges passed within a hand’s width.

No correction. No scrape.

The frogs. The mackerel. Beth’s breeding lines. The trees. The barges.

And now this: the odd suite. The clustered free-rides. The canal moving through the university in a language she could not yet read and still recognized as sorting.

Carol crossed to the board between the doors.

No labels. No words. Just the quick working shapes: the high rocks, two depth lines, Beth’s gourd cut open, the hex spacing, the barge pass. Then, after a moment, four room marks and three linked ones.

She stepped back.

The pattern looked worse outside her wrist than on it.

Carol touched the cord at her wrist.

She tied the knot.

Not for the barges alone.

Then she took Beth’s gourd from her bag, tucked the chalk into her belt, and went back out toward the dock.

Chapter 2: The Light Problem

Carol woke to somebody else's certainty.

Not a knock. Not the ordinary sounds of a building settling into morning. A voice in the common room already halfway through a theory of the three dining halls, the failings of one amphitheater, and the names of enough students that it sounded less like gossip than inventory.

She opened her door.

Mark stood in the middle of the common room, looking up at the light panel above the far door as if the panel had raised a point he intended to answer.

"Good," he said. "You're awake. If we're late the lower hall runs out of the dense bread and we're left with the apologetic kind."

Carol looked at the panel.

"You've been arguing with the light."

"Testing it." He gave her the quick bright look she was beginning to understand as his version of friendliness. "Did you try tapping?"

"Yes."

"Breathing on it?"

"It got brighter."

"Huh."

He took off one shoe, a flat, soft-soled thing woven from pale fiber, and, with the grave care of a person conducting an experiment, struck the panel once with the heel.

The colony went completely dark.

They stood in the sudden dimness. Four seconds. Carol felt something dangerously close to hope.

The panel came back on. Same intensity. Same yellow-green. If anything, there was a quality to the light that suggested renewed conviction.

Mark put his shoe back on.

"So it's not percussive?"

"You needed to know that?"

"I prefer not to carry untested assumptions to breakfast." He reached under the panel and slid a narrow bark strip sideways. The light dimmed by a sulky fraction. "Airflow. You're Carol."

"Yes."

"Nell's Point. Coastal free-ride. Storm delay. Tide pools."

"You know that already."

“I know most things already. It isn’t virtue. It’s a structural problem. Come on.”

He turned before she answered, as if the reply had been built into the premise.

The hall outside their suite smelled of fresh timber over older resin, the new dormitory trying to prove it belonged in a grove that had been there long before it. Students were moving toward breakfast in loose currents, some with the easy angles of returning years, some with the slightly overstraight posture of new arrivals trying not to advertise that they did not yet know where anything was.

Mark took the turns at a speed that suggested he had accepted the university as a problem worth solving on first sight.

“Applied mathematics,” he said over his shoulder. “Market-selected. Which means my family is paying, which means my grandmother is paying, which means I am under instructions to become inevitable.”

He said the first two clauses lightly. The third one not at all.

They crossed from the newer dormitories into the old campus, and the air changed with it. The halls there had passed beyond construction into tenure: living wood holding itself up with the calm of a thing whose methods no longer needed defending. In the dining hall the canopy rose high enough that the bioluminescent colonies still visible in the dim upper reaches looked like weather caught and kept.

The returning students did not look at the ceiling.

The new ones did.

Carol caught herself doing it and hated that she had joined a category before breakfast.

The tables were old cut wood, dark with years of hands and dishes and the rubbing patience of use. Mark moved through the room without hesitating, which meant two things at once: he had learned it very fast, and he expected the room to reward people who learned it fast.

Carol took her tray and followed him because the alternative was advertising uncertainty to a hall full of people who already wore belonging on their bodies.

That was the first thing she noticed when she sat down: belts.

Not everyone wore them, but enough did. Knotted allocations, family markers, lender cords, practiced arrangements of all the lines by which other people had invested in them. Carol had one cord at her wrist and a bag in her room. Everything she had brought north fit either in memory or under a bed.

Mark sat opposite and started narrating the room before he swallowed his first mouthful.

“That one is Sarah. Theology track. Postulancy. Which means if she keeps doing everything beautifully she gets turned into an Optimizer with very good posture.”

Carol followed his glance.

Sarah sat at a long table farther in, already dressed as if she had expected the room to take her seriously and planned to help it along. Nothing loud. Nothing even particularly elegant. Just finished. A face that looked capable of listening and then deciding what structure the listening belonged in.

“And that one,” Mark said, lowering his voice only enough to make clear he was not lowering it out of respect but emphasis, “is Amy, who arrived three days ago and has already drawn most of the south terrace.”

Amy sat near the window with a drawing surface against one knee, not looking at what she was drawing so much as keeping herself at the angle where the seeing would stay right, her head tilted slightly as if the root-wall were saying something low and she did not want to miss it. There was something immediately recognizable in that. Not similarity exactly. Procedure. The feeling of watching someone use the only method that let the world settle into truth.

“You already know everyone,” Carol said.

“Not everyone. Enough of the incoming cohort to be annoyed by the gaps.” He tore the bread and pointed with it. “My grandmother says memory is a gift from the Gradient and speed is one of the few gifts people manage to misuse immediately.”

“Your grandmother sounds fun.”

“She recited the Fundamental Proof at convocation for sixty years.”

“Can you do it?”

“In ninety seconds, which the family treats as an accomplishment and I treat as evidence that some virtues can be overrefined.”

After breakfast he walked her the campus.

She would not have agreed to a tour if he’d called it a tour. He did not call it anything. He simply assumed motion and expected the world to keep up. Carol kept up because she wanted to see where the edges were.

A rickshaw came around one curve fast enough to force them to the edge of the path. Mark stepped aside without breaking his sentence.

The cold outside was steady and specific. Not the coast’s wet changeable cold. A held temperature, as if the whole basin had made an agreement with itself and was keeping it.

They passed old halls, amphitheaters, a lower-town run of stalls and rooflines, then came out above the dock. Along the avenue, heavy sweetness dripped from the sap-trees into collection channels, and down by the water a bulletin bird was already shrieking cargo prices at the morning without improving any of them.

Carol stopped.

Three barges stood tied below with tow animals grazing at the bank. No handlers visible. The same insolent competence she had seen on the inland canal, now multiplied into infrastructure.

“The barges,” she said.

Mark followed her gaze.

“Yes. The canal problem. Third-years spend two terms trying to model it. Engineering has, depending on how optimistic you are, somewhere between seven and seventeen explanations.”

“But they work.”

“So do a lot of things nobody fully understands.” He glanced at her, and for once the speed in him held still long enough to be useful. “That is not usually how people here define success, but it ought to count for something.”

Back in the suite, the board between the center doors held an unfinished diagram in Mark’s hand: lines, branches, a set of refinements converging toward some cleaner arrangement he had not yet reached. He saw Carol look at it and wiped it away at once with the heel of his hand.

“You weren’t done.”

“If I were done I wouldn’t need the board.”

He said it as if that settled the matter. Maybe, for him, it did.

“You always erase?”

“You always clear scaffold once the weight transfers.” He looked at her for a second, realized he had answered in translation, and corrected. “Leaving it up feels like leaving your laundry on someone else’s bed.”

Carol filed that with the other rules the place had not announced and did not regard as rules.

Optimizer Joan arrived in the afternoon.

Not formally. Not with ceremony. Just at the suite door with the calm face of somebody used to being admitted because her role was already understood.

“Optimizer Joan,” she said. “I’m assigned to your cohort this year.”

Her voice was gentle. Her fingers had already started moving along the cord at her hip.

That was enough to change the room.

Mark became tidier without seeming to move. Amy, who had come in halfway through the hour and settled near the window, did what Carol had already seen her do with loud rooms: went quieter without becoming less present. Carol stayed still.

Joan looked at each of them with an attention so evenly distributed it became its own kind of pressure. It was not hostile. It was sincere, which gave Carol fewer clean places to push.

“The university takes the welfare of its students seriously,” Joan said. “Academic progress. Adjustment. Any concerns that need attention. That is what I’m here for.”

When Joan turned to Carol, one finger stopped at a fresh knot.

She asked about Nell’s Point, about prior instruction, about field interests, about whether Carol was settling in, and whether anyone had explained the reallocation fee yet.

The last question arrived in the same voice as the others. That made it worse.

“Not clearly,” Carol said.

Joan’s finger moved on the cord. “If a ranking falls below continuation, the student may keep the seat by covering the institution’s risk. Market-selected families often can. Town nominations usually cannot.”

“Is this welfare or assessment?”

“Both,” Joan said.

She did not soften it. Carol respected that and disliked her for making respect necessary.

“The university cannot watch the program without watching the students in it,” Joan said. “My job is to keep that from becoming cruel.”

The questions resumed.

Coastal.

Town-nominated.

Little formal instruction.

Observational.

Adjusting.

“You’re one of the free-ride cohort,” Joan said.

Not a question.

“Yes.”

“The first cohort.” Joan’s tone stayed neutral, which was impressive in the way all hard-earned neutralities were impressive. “The university is watching the program with considerable interest. Your progress will be compared against the market-selected students in the same courses. No pressure, of course.”

Carol had grown up around people who bought and sold cargo. She knew what it sounded like when someone denied pressure while standing on the scale.

Joan moved on. The conversation stayed behind, too formal to name and too present to ignore.

By evening Carol wanted quiet badly enough to go looking for it.

She found it on the canal terrace, where the old wood benches had been shaped by centuries of elbows into something nearly polished, people sitting down with a problem and hoping the view would improve it. The cold bit through her clothes. The reed-line below the terrace was already beginning its evening tones, the campus soundscape turning from day-use into a slower held chord.

Amy was there with charcoal on her fingers and the root-wall half-built on her page.

Carol stopped instead of announcing herself.

Amy drew the meeting line between wood and water the way Carol counted the third pool: not to make it pretty, not to make it useful yet, but because the edge was where the truth kept changing shape. Amy was not drawing the water. She was drawing the root-wall's pressure toward it, the wood thickening and knotting at the waterline as if moisture were a kind of argument.

"You've been there a while," Amy said without looking up.

"Sorry."

"You don't need to apologize for being quiet."

That was new.

Carol sat a little way off. Amy kept drawing.

"Mark says you're in the suite," Carol said.

"Mark says everything." Amy's mouth tilted, not quite into a smile. "He explained the dock ranking system to me before breakfast and then reorganized my shelf so the paper would stop buckling at the damp corner."

"That sounds like him."

"It was useful. Also too much." Amy set the charcoal down and looked toward the canal instead of at Carol. "The dining hall is hard."

"Too many people?"

"Too many faces trying to arrive all at once."

"The food isn't much help," Carol said.

"The food is fine. The room is the problem."

They sat without speaking for a while after that, and the not-speaking did not need to be rescued. Below them a nearly empty barge moved south with no handler visible, the tow animals keeping their pace at the bank as the sky thinned toward dark.

Carol watched Amy look at the barge, then not draw the barge. She drew the bank. The line. The pressure where one thing held another in place.

Back in the suite after full dark, the light panel had shifted slightly down again. Not much. Enough to prove it was adjusting on its own terms while outside the canal reeds had gone from singing to a low hollow tone in the wind.

Mark was still talking in the common room, though the speed had lowered enough to suggest fatigue rather than vocation. The board was blank. Outside, the canal kept moving through the dark without asking whether anybody understood it.

At some point a brown dog appeared in the common room and began a methodical survey. Door bottoms. Chair legs. Board edge. Window ledge. The route had the calm of procedure, and considerably less negotiation with the light panel than Carol had managed.

Nobody claimed it.

Nobody asked what it wanted.

It completed its circuit, settled in the warm strip outside Carol's door long enough to prove the strip had been judged adequate, then rose and padded back into the corridor.

Carol stood in the doorway looking at it.

When she lay down, her thumb found the cord at her wrist without thinking.

Donna's fish.

The shorefrogs.

Beth's gourd line.

The basin forest.

The barges.

Joan's cord already carrying a version of her.

The roof at Nell's Point, waiting behind whatever number they gave her.

She was not going to knot Vellaren yet. Maybe Vellaren asked real questions. Maybe it had decided the answers and was training its questions to behave.

The colony dimmed to a negotiated peace. Neither of them had won.

Outside, the reeds held the note and let it change slowly on its own.

Chapter 3: The Roster

Sarah reached the registration line early enough to choose her place in it and late enough not to look needy.

That mattered more at Vellaren than it had at home. At home she had been Father Martin's daughter, and everyone knew exactly how much of that fact to forgive. Here she was one more first-year body under the canopy unless she arranged herself otherwise.

Punctuality was not a virtue. It was a claim about where one belonged.

The Great Hall made arrangement easy to believe in. The trunks rose inward, four centuries of guided growth making labor look like intention. High overhead the bioluminescent colonies had stopped functioning as lamps and become weather the room had taught itself to keep. The floor held old living warmth underfoot, root-wood polished by generations of feet and still burning its own sugar against the cold outside.

Sarah checked the claim by its measures: cold outside, warmth underfoot, voices carried without strain. The room did not promise kindness. It promised that harshness could be made inhabitable if the structure held.

The Church at its best: shape first, comfort where shape could bear it.

The line moved.

Sarah watched the sorting while pretending not to. Market-selected students arrived already belted into the system: lender markers, family cords, the practiced self-possession of people whose route north had been recognized as legitimate from the first step. Free-ride students moved differently: not less worthy, only less pre-explained.

Carol was two places ahead of her.

Sarah had noticed Carol at breakfast because Carol had the useful kind of face: not expressive, exactly, but unwilling to supply false ease for the comfort of a room. There was no piety in her. No reverent blur. If she looked at something, she looked at the thing itself and let the interpretation arrive late, if it arrived at all.

That sort of mind was exhausting.

At the desk, the clerk tied one knot for the boy before Carol, then a different knot for Carol. He kept his face neutral and failed by a fraction. Procedure always failed somewhere, usually at the point where it tried to impersonate fairness.

"Your courses have been pre-assigned," he said. "Field Ethology with Mr. Pryor. Mathematical Ecology with Mr. Crane. Theological Foundations, required. And Mercer's seminar."

"I didn't request that last one," Carol said.

"Your cohort was steered there this year. The faculty thought it was a good fit."

"A good fit."

The clerk's expression shifted. Procedure, sympathy, and the discomfort of someone who had let the machinery show.

"If it is a mistake," he said quietly, "it is an old mistake. If it is not, you will be expected there this afternoon."

Carol took the cord and stepped aside.

Then it was Sarah's turn.

"Name."

"Sarah Martin."

The clerk's eyes lifted this time, as they generally did.

"Theology track," he said. "Postulancy noted."

He touched the next sequence on his cord and began to recite her courses. Logic. Rhetoric. Composition. Mathematics. Cosmology. Theological Foundations. All correct. All expected. A life entering its grooves, which was dangerous because grooves could feel like proof.

Then:

"Mercer's seminar remains elective and unavailable to your allocation."

Sarah had prepared three possible approaches overnight, each more respectful than the last. She abandoned all of them at once.

"Unavailable in what sense?"

"The seminar is designated this term for the free-ride cohort."

"Designated by what rule?"

The clerk did not like that question. Good.

"By faculty decision."

"Then I am asking the faculty to change it."

There was a small pause in which the desk ceased to be furniture and became an instrument for denying things cleanly.

"The seminar is intended for a particular academic problem."

"Then I am interested in that problem."

"Your track already carries sufficient weight."

"That is an argument from administrative convenience, not fit."

The clerk's expression shifted into the kind of tired patience meant to make insistence look childish.

Sarah knew that expression. She had watched senior clergy use it on ordinary doubt for years. It always announced the same move: your question is not wrong enough to answer, only inconvenient enough to delay.

"I will make a formal appeal," she said.

"The appeal goes on your postulancy record."

"Then make the knot correctly."

When she turned away from the desk, Carol was watching.

There were several reasons not to speak to her. One of them was that Sarah did not enjoy being observed while thwarted. Another was that Carol did not look as if she had patience for other people's conceptual housekeeping.

Still, Sarah crossed to her.

"Come with me this afternoon."

Carol's face did not change enough to call expression, but it did tighten by a measurable amount.

“Why?”

“Because devout people hear what they came ready to hear. I need someone who looks first.”

“That is a complaint in some rooms.”

“Yes,” Sarah said. “I am trying to borrow it.”

That almost made Carol smile. Almost.

They crossed to the temple after midday by the covered walkway of old living wood. No signs, of course. There never were signs anywhere important. The system preferred that the right people simply know. The walkway itself did the work. Narrow enough that two people had to keep a common pace. Covered enough that nobody could arrive rain-marked and call the weather an excuse.

At the inner post the Church sign had been worked into the joinery so quietly most people would have passed it without registering a symbol at all: thirty spheres rising in four layers, sixteen to nine to four to one. Sarah had spent most of a term proving why that shape held, and for a week afterward the world had seemed briefly willing to confess its mathematics.

Inside, the front room was proportioned with unnerving precision. Sound did not merely carry; it arrived finished. The Fundamental Proof had been carved directly into the living walls, the old cuts healed over and raised so that the tree seemed not to have been damaged by the argument but to have grown around it willingly.

Nothing in the room had decorative slack. The span, the height, the distance from step to wall: every measure seemed chosen to force the body into one exact scale of seriousness.

Sarah stopped there despite herself.

She had spoken those lines every morning since childhood. Recitation at school. Recitation at home. Recitation at convocation when the hall wanted to hear whether you could carry form without slippage.

Here the proof looked less like doctrine than support.

The danger lived there too. A carved wall could make submission feel like architecture.

“Beautiful,” Carol said quietly.

Sarah glanced at her. Interesting: Carol had named the thing itself, not asked for agreement.

“Yes,” Sarah said. “And because it is beautiful, the administration behind it will now be more irritating than usual.”

The back rooms proved her right at once.

Beyond the bark seam the temple ceased to be impressive and began to be efficient. Same building, seen from inside the ribs. Offices. Smaller rooms. Cords on pegs. An alcove held cord-belts in rows, each one not a life but the door into one, enough notation to call the rest back into the right mind.

Sarah had grown up near such systems. She did not object to systems. She objected to systems pretending they were identical with truth.

Senior Father Kevin stood at the end of the corridor with a belt that had taught his shoulders their own answer to weight.

“Sarah,” he said. “Father Martin’s daughter.”

He always began there if given the chance. It was his way of deciding whether she would answer as a child, an applicant, or an argument.

“Senior Father Kevin.”

He looked at Carol.

“Carol. Coastal ecology. Free-ride cohort.”

“Ah,” he said, and in that single syllable Sarah could hear that Carol’s presence had already changed the frame of the conversation.

Good.

“You want Mercer,” Kevin said.

“Yes.”

“Before telling your father.”

“Before asking his permission to be interested.”

Kevin accepted the correction without smiling.

He recited Sarah’s coursework from memory, not touching the cord. Then he stopped at the elective.

“Mercer.”

That one word altered the corridor. It carried strain.

“I want the room,” Sarah said. “If the strongest account against the framework can be made there, then I would rather hear it where someone competent is supervising the damage.”

Kevin set his cord down.

“That is an elegant reason.”

He made elegance sound like both compliment and warning.

“Is it wrong?”

“Not yet.”

He watched her for longer than she liked.

“Mercer begins by making students state the strongest account they least want to be true,” he said. “He does not allow defense until he is convinced the opposing pressure has been built to full load.”

Sarah felt, with some irritation, the exact place in herself where that appealed.

Kevin saw it.

“Yes,” he said mildly. “You see the attraction.”

He wound the cord once around his hand.

“The approval knot goes on your belt today. Your father will hear before evening. The Council is under pressure, and the framework will hold for as long as it can be made to hold.”

“Pressure from what?”

“From rooms like Mercer’s. From every place where the framework must do more than remain beautiful in lecture.”

“And Mercer threatens that.”

“Mercer refuses to let the institution hide from it.”

The actual division stood there, stripped of her father’s version and the polished public one.

Sarah felt the structure inside her rearrange itself by one degree. A load shifted from one support to another.

“Then add the seminar,” she said.

Kevin’s face did not move.

“Even knowing that if you take the postulancy through Mercer, the room may teach you a form of honesty the institution cannot reward?”

Carol, beside her, had gone so still that Sarah could feel the stillness as a second kind of listening.

Here she was supposed to become cautious. Reasonable. Trainable.

Instead she heard herself answer with more calm than she felt.

“If the framework holds, it can bear pressure. If it does not. . .” Sarah stopped. The sentence had come out too polished, the kind of thing a future priest said when she wanted fear to sound like principle.

“If it does not, I would rather find out here than spend ten years defending the safe version.”

Kevin heard it.

He picked up the cord again, tied one new knot into the sequence, and set it down.

“Then I will not block the appeal,” he said. “But listen once: you are not asking for a harder class. You are asking to become visible. To the wrong people. For reasons they will not call wrong.”

“That seems likely either way.”

This time he did smile, but only with one corner of his mouth, as if he was not sure the moment deserved reward.

When they left, Sarah did not go back through the Great Hall at once. She stopped in the side corridor where Mercer’s room waited two doors down, door shut, threshold worn, no sign.

From inside came a man’s voice:

“No. Again. The strongest account, not the safe one.”

Then a student, flatter the second time:

“If the wrong thing keeps predicting first, calling it noise is only a way of buying time.”

Sarah closed her eyes briefly.

There was fear in her. Of course there was. Argument did not frighten her. The new fear was that the room would force her to sound convincing on behalf of a position she did not want but could not honestly dismiss.

She opened her eyes.

“Still want it?” Carol asked.

Sarah looked at the shut door, then at the corridor behind them where the temple administration continued humming in its ordered low voices.

“More,” she said.

Chapter 4: The Crossing

Ben arrived four days late with a tiller strapped to his bag.

Not clothes, not recitation notes, not one of the clean campus bags with a loop for cords and a pocket for the exact number of permitted things. Canvas darkened by salt. Canal damp still on it. Hardwood lashed across the back. A piece of steering gear was not luggage. It was evidence.

He stopped in the doorway and took the room in before letting the bag down.

“I’m told I live here,” he said. “In theory.”

The room was small enough that he could price it quickly. One boy on the floor radiating appetite and speech. One against the wall turning a piece of shell as if he trusted pressure more than talk. One girl on the windowsill quiet enough to count as either absent or dangerous. One in the doorway with charcoal on her hand and the fixed attention of a person pretending to be elsewhere. One on the shelf already sitting as if rooms should rise to meet her. And by the window the coast girl Mark had described badly: still, watching, not spending movement where she did not have to.

He set the bag down. Wet thud. The floor did not move.

“Is it always this still?” he asked.

“It’s a floor,” said the shell-working boy.

“I’ve been on a boat for three days.” Ben rested one hand against the doorframe until the room stopped pretending to tilt. “Give me a minute.”

“You’re Ben.”

“That’s what my family uses.”

“Applied optimization,” Mark said, tapping his own chest. “Which is what the university calls mathematics when it wants to sound useful. Registration was four days ago.”

“So I gathered.”

He meant that to close the subject. It did not. The coast girl was looking at the tiller, not curiously, just accurately.

“That came off the boat,” she said.

“Yes.”

“So something happened.”

Not a question. Not sympathy either. Just refusal. She was not going to pretend a man arrived four days late carrying emergency steering gear because of harmless inconvenience.

“Something happened,” Ben said.

He did not add more. Not on arrival. Not before he had learned how this room handled other people’s cost.

He took the bed with both door and window in reach. His father had taught him that before steering: never give up exit and sightline at the same time. While he unrolled his things, the room resumed itself around him. Mark accelerated at whoever was nearest. Amy scratched charcoal. The quiet girl, Lisa, touched the cords at her wrist as if indexing what had just happened. Sarah asked one courteous question and managed to sound like she had already tested three cleaner versions of it before choosing this one.

Tom said almost nothing.

Silence was either ballast or debt. Ben would not price it before it moved.

Two evenings later, all seven of them were in the common room at once.

Mark was on the floor because he behaved as though gravity had asked for him personally. Amy in the doorway again, drawing surface angled on one knee. Lisa on the sill. Tom at the wall with shell and stone. Sarah on the low shelf near the board, appeal won, victory sitting on her like something formal she had to keep from creasing. Carol in the chair with the cleanest view of both door and window. Ben on the floor against the wall with bread and root paste, eating with the attention of a man who had recently spent too long not on land.

Mark watched him finish the bread first.

“You’ve had bread before.”

“Not this week.”

“You sound coastal.”

“I am coastal.”

“No, I mean that answer was economic.”

“Most answers are.”

That pleased Mark enough to become a risk.

“So where exactly are you from?”

“An island in the Selden.”

“How far?”

“Two hundred miles if the weather is cooperative. Thirty-six hours in good conditions.”

“And the weather wasn’t.”

“Excellent at departure.” Ben wiped paste from his thumb with the bread heel. “Resistant twelve hours later.”

Carol spoke before Mark could.

“The storm. The one the shorefrogs called.”

“Your frogs are two hundred miles south of my island,” Ben said. “We use seabirds.”

“And?”

“The seabirds failed.”

Mark grinned. “How badly?”

“Forty-five knots.”

That landed differently around the room. Mark did visible arithmetic. Sarah went still. Carol touched her left arm once, high and brief, where the scar lived under cloth. Tom stopped polishing.

“Tell us,” Carol said.

Ben almost gave them the short version. Weather bad. Crossing delayed. Nothing to be done. A story people could receive politely and let you keep your distance afterward.

Then Tom looked at the tiller instead of at Ben.

And Carol kept waiting without leaning in, which was somehow harder to resist than appetite.

If he lied to the room now, he would have to keep lying to it.

“My father and I,” he said. “Family catamaran. Freight run north. Open deck, twelve meters per hull.”
“We’ve been making that crossing since I was seven.”

He kept his voice even. Let the facts carry what they could.

“Wind shifted southeast at sunset. Third reef and still overpowered. Boat started hobby-horsing. We moved the water casks to center load.”

“To reduce the pitch,” Tom said.

Ben looked over. “Yes.”

“Cyclic load on the bridge?”

“Yes.”

Tom nodded once. “That’s where a catamaran starts negotiating with failure.”

Good, Ben thought. Somebody here knew what to ask.

“By midnight the rigging was singing.” He could hear it again now if he let himself: bio-fiber under impossible tension, the low thrumming howl, wrong enough that your body knew before your mind did. “The bridgedeck was slamming every third wave.”

“Like breaking?” Lisa asked, fingers on her cords.

“Like the sound right before breaking. Then duller.” He looked at Tom; the words were easier there. “Resin separating in the laminate. Composite coming off the frame from the inside.”

Amy’s charcoal had stopped.

Ben could still have stepped away there. Enough detail to satisfy them. Enough truth to count as not lying. He could have left out the part that made the distance impossible to maintain.

Instead he said, “The steering linkage failed.”

Carol moved first. Not forward. Just sharper.

“When?”

“After midnight. Wheel stopped talking to the rudders.” He rested two fingers on the tiller at his side. “I went below in the starboard hull for this. My father took it to the stern of the leeward side.”

Tom’s stone had gone quiet again.

“Low side,” Carol said.

“Low side. Green water over the deck.”

“What were you doing?”

“Drogue line.”

The word got her because she knew what it meant.

“How far apart?”

“Thirty feet. Bridge between us. Underwater every few seconds.”

“You couldn’t cross.”

“There wasn’t any crossing to do.” Ben kept his eyes on the wall beyond her shoulder. “He needed the tiller held. I needed the stern from coming around. Two positions. Two bodies. If either of us lets go, the sea picks the rest.”

The room held that without helping him.

Mark, of all people, was the one who spoke too softly. “How long?”

Ben almost said he didn’t know. That was true. It was also cowardly.

“All night,” he said.

Sarah had lost the composed look she wore when she wanted to improve a room by entering it. “And in the morning?”

“In the morning the boat was still a boat.” He could feel the after-sway in his knees just saying it. “The wheel wasn’t. The bridge was less than I liked. My father navigated by current and water color.” “We were sixty miles off course.” “Found the barrier islands on the third morning.”

He should have stopped there.

Instead he went one sentence farther.

“He tied up at the dock, said be good, said he’d patch the hull and fix the main, and sent me on to the barge.”

Sarah said, “Alone?”

He hated the word for how quickly it found the weak place.

“It’s the family boat.”

“That answers the boat. Not you.”

No, Ben thought. It wasn’t.

He looked down at the empty bread in his hand. He had eaten it without noticing.

“No,” he said. “It doesn’t.”

No one rushed to cover it.

Any drew three quick dark lines, hard enough he could hear the charcoal catch. Tom set the shell and stone beside him. Lisa’s hand rested on her cords without moving now. Mark looked as though somebody had corrected an equation he had not known he was inside. Sarah sat less beautifully. Carol just stayed where she was, watching him the way she had watched the tiller: not making him smaller than the thing itself.

Then Tom slid the last piece of bread across the floorboards with two fingers.

No speech. No ritual generosity. Just enough.

Ben took it.

Outside, the acoustic animals had moved into their evening chord, warm and unthreatened. The light panel hummed above them. The dorm dog crossed the room and chose the patch of floor nearest Ben’s bag, then sat down as if the decision had been obvious all along.

Seven people in the common room.

Ben had spent two days treating the suite like assigned storage with voices in it. That stopped there.

Carol only said, “You came anyway.”

Ben looked at her. “Yes.”

She nodded.

Then Mark said, almost plaintively, “There is more paste,” and the room was allowed to become a room again.

Chapter 5: The Quiet

Carol left campus because the practice hall was starting to sound like somebody else's voice in her mouth.

The review was in two days. Recitation, application, speed. Her scores had not slipped far enough to summon intervention, which only meant the slippage was still considered hers to correct. She should have been in the hall with the board and the timing strips and the proof she could carry cleanly only if no one watched her carry it.

Instead she packed the cord, the lens, and a piece of bread, and followed the small stream that entered the disused access spur through a gap in the root wall.

The barges had learned a precision on the canal that no one could yet account for. Managed water. Managed animals. Root walls. Training. It was too easy to tell a story in which all of that explained itself. Upstream would either help or ruin the story. Carol put that against another afternoon of recitation and did not like how easily the balance moved.

The dog watched from the dorm doorway.

"Stay," Carol said.

The dog blinked, which was not agreement.

She left anyway.

The stream ran colder than the canal and moved with more purpose. On campus everything had already been asked to answer for itself. The stream still moved like it had somewhere to be.

The towpath held long enough to feel official, then fell apart into ground nobody was maintaining. Past the last lock the forest stopped spacing itself for human comfort. The vine mat thickened under her boots. Root heat pooled strangely here, warm in one step, cool in the next. The campus used living systems the way a town used tools. Out here the systems were busy with themselves.

The marsh announced itself first through the air. Heavier. Sweeter. Then through the ground, which stopped being willing to call itself land.

Carol stood at the edge of the first pool and looked.

Frogs on reed stems. Frogs in the mud. Frogs half-submerged at the bank. Birds moving between the high canopy and reed line. Water distributing itself through exposed roots instead of committing to one clean channel. Sap-taps full on the swamp trees. Animals drinking from them as if the trees had been put there for that purpose.

And under all of it, almost no background buzz at all.

That was what made her sit down.

Not silence. Frogs, birds, water, wind. But nothing flattening them into one rough blanket. The acoustic garden behind theology had been made by centuries of selective pressure. The marsh had done it by refusing to host the rough layer of wing-noise that much wet life seemed to promise. She could hear individual sap drops strike the water.

She let her ears adjust.

Water at the roots. Sap moving in bark channels. A surface break. Then smaller than that: the brief stretch of a frog's throat before the call arrived.

That was when she saw the three frogs in the reeds to her left.

Different species. Different positions. Different sizes. One pattern.

The first called.

Three seconds later, the second.

Three seconds later, the third.

Then a longer pause. Then again.

Carol stayed perfectly still.

She held back from explanation. Eleven had taught her that, and thirteen had punished it into memory: if you named the pattern too soon, the pattern bent around the name until you stopped seeing what it was actually doing.

The sequence repeated.

She took out the cord and marked place, day, conditions, then the first cycle.

Again.

Again.

The canal had already given her coordination she could not explain. The marsh was now giving her a version with less human interference to blame.

She should have turned back then.

The choice came there, not at the campus gate. Anyone could take a walk to avoid practice. The harder question was what to do once the walk stopped being avoidance and became work.

The light was going. The roots were warm. The pattern was not finished. If she went back now, she would spend the whole night knowing she had left the sequence half-filed because the hall wanted her more than the marsh did.

So she stayed.

The dog arrived just before dark, soundless until it was suddenly there standing on the mat as though catching up had been the plan from the start.

"You weren't invited," Carol said.

The dog stepped onto the warm patch beside her and sat down.

The moss on the trunks was beginning to glow, faint and wild, nothing like the curated bioluminescence on campus. That helped her trust it more, not less.

She should still have gone back. She knew the review would not become easier because she had chosen a marsh over it. Donna would have called the decision foolish in exactly the tone reserved for observations she believed and priorities she distrusted.

Carol lay down anyway.

The vine mat took her weight and held it. Warm from the roots. The dog folded into the curve of her back as if heat were a practical alliance.

Through breaks in the canopy she could see the Arch across the sky, too large to feel like lecture material out here.

She slept because the frogs kept the calm register. If the pattern had broken into alarm, she would have moved. It did not.

Morning came in a brief interval of almost nothing before the day species started.

The dog was still there. The marsh was still there. The pattern was still there.

She drank from the stream, cold and clean, faintly tasting of stone and sap, ate the bread, and watched again.

This time she widened the frame: the pools, the reed movement, surface breaks, root-warm patches, bird shadows passing overhead, which frog initiated more often, which pause shifted and which held.

Work, though not the kind Vellaren measured well: repeated observation, controlled attention, new cord weight earned slowly enough not to lie.

By the time she turned back toward campus, the cord had changed in her hand.

Too little to prove anything; enough to force another trip.

The dog walked beside her until the forest narrowed back into the last stretch of towpath, then moved ahead impatiently, as if her species had become the slower variable in the system.

Mark was in the common room when she got back. The board behind him had already been wiped and redrawn into some new efficient arrangement that would not survive evening.

He took one look at the mud on her boots, the vine fragments in her hair, the cord still in her hand, and stopped mid-sentence.

“Where were you?”

“Upstream.”

“You were gone all night.”

“Yes.”

He looked at the dog.

“Of course you were.”

Before he could build the wrong question, Carol put the cord on the table between them.

“Three species,” she said. “Shared sequence. Three seconds. Three seconds. Longer pause. Repeat. No visible cue.”

Mark’s face changed. Not delight exactly. Recognition.

“How many repeats?”

“Enough.”

“No, I mean statistically—”

“Enough.”

He shut his mouth, tried another way in.

“Bird shadow? Water change? Root-bed heat?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“So you have to go back.”

“Yes.”

That was when Sarah’s voice came from the doorway.

She was still in practice clothes, one timing strip wound twice around her wrist like something she had forgotten to take off.

“Crane was looking for you.”

Carol turned.

Sarah leaned against the frame with the look of somebody who disliked delivering the institution’s message but disliked being inaccurate more.

“You missed the preparation run this morning. He moved the oral review to first bell tomorrow.”

Mark looked from Sarah to Carol to the cord on the table. The room had stopped being theoretical again.

“Did he say what that means?” Carol asked.

“He said if you walk in unready, he will score what arrives.” Sarah’s eyes dropped once to the mud, the hair, the new knots. “And he said your absence was becoming a method.”

That landed more cleanly than a reprimand would have.

Carol looked down at the cord.

Mark was still looking at the cord as though it had accused him personally.

“I don’t understand you at all,” he said.

“I know.”

There would be no private interval.

Carol took the chalk from the ledge beside Mark’s hand.

He blinked.

On the board she marked three short strokes in a row, spaced with care. Three seconds. Three seconds. Then the longer gap. Then the sequence again.

“What are you doing?” Sarah asked.

“If Crane is going to score what arrives,” Carol said, “then this is what arrives.”

“That isn’t a proof,” Mark said.

“No,” Carol said. “It’s the thing the proof is for.”

She added the marsh conditions beneath the intervals while they watched. Place. Light. Species. No visible cue.

Mark stood up first.

“Again,” he said.

He was already counting on his fingers before the word had finished. Sarah unwound the timing strip from her wrist and held it ready without comment, which was answer enough. Amy set the drawing board against the wall and came closer.

Carol touched the cord once, found the first cycle, and recited the sequence as she had heard it.

Three seconds. Three seconds. Longer pause. Repeat.

Mark watched the board. Sarah watched the strip. Amy watched Carol’s hand on the cord.

The room had wanted the review. Fine. Let the room have the marsh too.

Chapter 6: The Pet

Amy learned the dining hall by exits first.

Not the food lines. Not the tables. The exits.

West stair if she could get it. Inner bench if she could not. Leave before the second wave. Do not let the room finish filling.

Twelve days in, she was down to twelve minutes.

On the thirteenth day she came back to her room and found a dog in it.

Small. Brown. Awake. Sitting in the strip of floor between the bed and the window as if the room had always included one more heartbeat than Amy remembered.

Amy stopped with one hand still on the curtain.

The dog looked up and stayed where it was.

That helped at once, which made Amy suspicious of it.

Most new things came in carrying someone else's weather. This one was just a body in the room.

Amy could use a body. Bodies had edges. Weather did not.

"Hello," Amy said.

The dog got up, crossed the floor, sniffed the back of her hand, and sat down again.

In the common room Lisa was at the board, half turned away, one cord around her wrist and the other tucked under her thumb.

"Did the brown dog come back?"

Lisa turned. "It came back after breakfast. It appears to have made a decision."

"You mean me."

"Probably the room first," Lisa said. "Then you."

The dog settled against the leg of Amy's chair.

No tremor in it. No nervous circling. No performance. A body arriving in the room and not trying to improve the atmosphere by pretending it felt different from the way it felt.

Amy let the curtain fall shut behind her.

The room shrank to a size she could use.

She got the paper out.

Drawing was faster than talking when the room was still too loud inside her. The hand got there first.

She started with the canal wall from memory. The undercut where the clearer current ran against the root. The dark seam where one material gave way and the next one held. She had drawn it twice already and still did not have the pressure right.

The dog stayed where it was.

After a while it put its chin on her knee.

Amy set the charcoal down.

Its fur was softer than the working fleece she had grown up with. Its weight was almost nothing. Its trust was worse.

It had decided too early. Her body had followed it.

Her throat went at once.

She bent forward before the first sound came out, one hand over her mouth out of habit rather than modesty. The dog stayed where it was, chin still on her knee, taking her collapse as one more room fact that did not require alarm.

When she stopped crying, the dog licked once at the heel of her hand and went back to being warm.

“All right,” Amy said. “We’ll need terms.”

The training took less time than the crying.

Fountain. Sleeping corner. Planting bed by the common-room window.

One demonstration each.

The dog watched once, performed the sequence back to her, and moved on.

Amy laughed despite herself. Animals on Arden were always slightly ahead of the explanation. The room stopped feeling borrowed as soon as the dog chose a corner and kept it.

By evening the dog knew the suite better than Amy did.

Carol came in after dark.

Amy knew it was her before the curtain moved. Carol never entered a room trying to vanish. She simply refused to spend extra sound.

Carol saw the dog and stopped.

“You have a dog.”

“Apparently.”

The dog crossed, inspected Carol’s hand, and returned to Amy with the kind of efficiency that made Amy smile again.

“That seems insulting,” Carol said.

“It has standards.”

Carol’s eyes moved wall, paper, bowl, sleeping corner, dog, then back to Amy. Counting.

“I’ve seen you leave the dining hall fast,” Carol said. “I thought you didn’t like the food.”

“The food is useful. The room is the hard part.”

Carol waited.

“Too many people in one place trying not to be read,” Amy said. “It turns into weather.”

“And you feel it.”

“Before they’ve finished making it.”

Carol took that in with the exactness she brought to tide pools and canal walls.

“Can I see the drawings?” Carol asked.

Amy hesitated only because the answer mattered.

The drawings were not private because they were secret. They were private because they worked.

“All right,” she said.

She laid them out on the woven mat between them.

Canal organisms. Garden fungi. The root wall on the south terrace. The amphitheater in morning light. Quick faces from the dining hall drawn before the subjects looked up. Lisa’s hands on her cords. Mark bent over the board, already moving faster than the thought.

Carol moved through them slowly. Not admiring. Reading.

“These are records,” she said.

Amy let out a breath she had not known she was holding.

“Yes.”

Carol picked up the drawing of the flat dark dredging animal from the canal.

“You’ve got the feeding posture wrong,” Amy said automatically.

“No,” Carol said. “You’ve got the thing I kept seeing and hadn’t named yet.”

The slight asymmetry. The pull in the body she had drawn because it was there. She had not known it mattered.

“I only drew what it was doing.”

“That’s the useful part.”

Amy laughed once. “That is not how people usually talk about drawings.”

“People usually don’t need them.”

Carol kept going. She reached the page with her own face on it and stayed there a beat longer than on the others.

“You got something wrong,” she said.

Amy’s chest tightened.

“What?”

“That version of me looks like she belongs here.”

“Maybe she does.”

Carol did not answer. She put the drawing down carefully and moved on.

The dog yawned in the corner. The light panels came up. Carol stayed longer than she needed to. They talked only a little after that, which was another mercy.

The next morning Amy took the sketchpad to the amphitheater.

Not to draw the lecture. To draw the room while the lecture happened inside it.

The professor at center. The parabolic sweep of the seats. The light down the living wall. The empty back corners where the students who were least sure they belonged kept placing their bodies. Every room teaches its own answer to danger.

Amy drew the faces too.

The girl in the fourth row smiling too steadily. The boy knotting his cord under the bench with his shoulders pretending not to move. The student in front leaning so hard toward the derivation that the effort showed before the understanding did.

None of that needed theory. The room was already doing it out in the open.

The dog sat beside her without anxiety.

Mid-term assessment was oral.

The assessor had a narrow alcove off the corridor, one bench, one cord, and the kind of face that made room for accuracy but not improvisation.

Amy laid out the term's work in two stacks without meaning to.

The canal series. The garden fungi. The dredging animal from twelve angles, all of them keeping the same slight leftward pull. Then the amphitheater pages. The empty back corners. The faces doing the work of staying unread.

The assessor touched the first stack, one page at a time.

"These are strong," she said. "Good proportions. Good repeat observation."

Then she reached the second stack and stopped.

"These are outside scope."

Amy waited.

"They're observations."

"They're interpretation."

"They're what the room is doing."

The assessor set the amphitheater pages back on the bench. "The assessment covers structure, morphology, and habitat. It does not cover people."

Amy gathered the rejected pages into a tighter stack than she meant to. Three weeks of seeing what a room did to bodies, and the institution had nowhere to put it except back in her hands.

That evening Amy pinned the amphitheater drawing to the common-room wall.

Not the private faces. Not the hidden ones. Just the room itself. The curve of the seats, the professor's hands, the light, the empty back corners.

Mark saw it first.

"The acoustic geometry is right," he said.

"I drew it."

"I know. I mean right right."

He went to the board and started sketching sound lines beside the page, quick, angled, half-speaking as he worked. Amy let him. The drawing held. His additions did not damage it.

Sarah came in while he was still at the board.

She took in the page, then the back row, then the page again.

"You've kept the empty corners," she said.

"They were there."

"That's where the students sit when they want the room to leave them a way out."

That got through because Sarah had said something true in Amy's language instead of her own.

“Yes,” Amy said.

Sarah touched the air just above the page but did not touch the page itself.

“We make a lot of rooms here that claim to hear everything,” she said.

Mark, still at the board, said, “They hear sound.”

Carol said, “Mercer should see this one.”

Amy looked up. “Why?”

“Because the assessor put it outside scope,” Carol said. “That usually means it touches the real argument.”

Amy looked at the page on the wall, then at Carol.

“You mean take it there.”

Carol did not soften it. “Yes.”

If the page stayed here, it stayed hers. Strange, exposed, but hers. On the wall it was still the suite’s business. In Mercer’s room it would become a claim with her name on it.

The dog came out of her room and sat beneath the drawing with the neutral attention of a creature who had no opinion on amphitheater design and no need to pretend otherwise.

Amy crossed the room, pulled the pin, and held the page by both corners so it would not bend.

Chapter 7: The Passing

From "The Book of the Gradient," v. 7-9:

And when the vessel hath given all that it holdeth, let it be emptied with thanksgiving; for the water passeth to new vessels, and not one drop is lost. Grieve not for the vessel, which is clay; grieve for the water that is spilled, which is knowledge that no mouth hath claimed. This is the promise of the Gradient: that what was learned shall not be unlearned, and what was carried shall not fall.

Lisa went to Walter's singing because everybody went, and because not going would have meant deciding, publicly, that a thing did not count.

She had seen Walter before. Everyone had. He moved through the avenue with his hand already going to the places other people missed. He pruned where the growth had gone proud. He checked the tap channels with two fingers and the side of his thumb. He stood with his palm against the bark for spans that were too long to be decorative and too quiet to invite company. People said he knew the avenue better than anyone alive.

What they meant was that he could tell what was missing.

One channel not flowing right. One root stress pattern gone slack. One young groundskeeper skipping the same small correction twice and then calling the third mistake surprise.

He had been slowing since the beginning of term, and Lisa knew the difference. Failing announced itself noisily. Slowing happened by intervals. Longer walks between trees. Longer pauses before an answer that still arrived intact. A man could carry all the knowledge and still begin to lose time on the path back to it.

By midday the campus knew he had said it was time.

That message reached the suite the same way everything important reached it: by transit through bodies. A student from the main avenue to a dining hall table. Someone from the table to a walkway. Someone from the walkway to Mark, who was incapable of hearing a piece of circulating information without turning into its courier. By the time the words reached the common room, they had passed through enough mouths to prove they were worth carrying and had lost nothing in the transfer.

"Walter is singing tonight," Mark said. "I was going to say it calmly," he added, because he had arrived slightly out of breath and had therefore missed his chance.

Nobody asked what that meant.

That, Lisa noticed, was one answer already.

Unasked questions were records too. They just spoiled faster.

The Great Hall was nearly full when they arrived. Carol stopped under the canopy and looked up first. Sarah did too, but for different reasons. Amy was already watching faces. Tom looked once at the branch arches and once at the joints between them and was finished. Ben studied the room the way he studied any arrangement large enough to be paying for itself somehow.

Lisa looked at the exits, then the chair in the middle, then the belts on the people nearest it.

The room had been grown to carry a voice. Root buttresses marked the seating lines. The trunks threw sound back instead of swallowing it. The old bioluminescent colonies overhead kept the light low and warm. Nothing in the room got between a speaker and the people meant to remember them.

Walter sat in a cut-wood chair from the grounds shed, not elevated, which also mattered. The chair had been carried into the hall because it was his.

Lisa watched the people nearest him. Apprentice first. Then the two other groundskeepers. Then a student from the avenue crew. Then someone from the acoustics team, which meant Walter had known things outside the obvious category of his work. Good. Real people always did.

The singing began with maintenance.

It was closer to recitation than song, with enough rhythm in it to make memory walk straighter. The apprentice started with the tap schedule: west row first on warm mornings, old trunks watched by bark tension rather than calendar, the third tree on the north bend clogging unless opened from below and not across. She had most of it. Walter corrected the one she missed without opening his eyes.

“Third canal root, not second. It shifted eight years ago.”

She repeated it back correctly. Someone near the back made the tiny sound people make when the world has been repaired by half a sentence and they are trying not to be embarrassed by their relief.

Lisa heard the relief: the release after a fact had almost been lost and then had not.

No one said Walter was going anywhere. The Gradient had no elsewhere. They said what he had carried, and who would carry it now.

Person after person stood and gave back a portion of what Walter had put into them. Planting records. Pruning sequences. Which sap-trees needed watching in dry weeks. Which sound changes in the avenue meant a channel wall had thickened where it should have stayed open. Each recitation ended the same way: a claim, a correction if needed, then a cord passed from Walter’s belt to the person who would now carry the index for that body of memory.

Sarah started crying then.

Lisa looked at her once, then back at Walter’s belt. It was getting lighter.

Carol sat beside her with the attention she reserved for living patterns. Amy held her sketchpad in her lap and did not draw. Tom’s hands were still, which in him meant something larger than silence. Ben watched the people receiving the cords, not Walter.

Walter’s apprentice recited the avenue acoustics late in the sequence, and that was when Lisa understood why so many of the university’s best rituals sounded as if they had been discovered rather than designed. The room, the trees, the spacing on the avenue, the channels in the bark: all of them shortened the distance between fact and recall.

When the last cord was passed, the hall did not empty at once. It thinned.

People left carrying pieces of him. One apprentice now responsible for the west row. Another for the old trunks. A student looking shaken by the fact that a thing she had thought everyone knew had turned out to be one dead man’s private expertise until an hour ago. The system had worked. Walter was dying anyway.

Walking back to the suite, Sarah said softly, “This is what the framework is for.”

No one answered her. The hall had made argument feel coarse for a few minutes.

Lisa did not answer because Sarah’s sentence was almost true. The ritual had preserved the avenue better than silence would have. It had not made Walter less gone. It had not turned an unclaimed thing into a held one.

She knew the archive would be fuller tomorrow.

She went there the next afternoon.

The archive was cooler than the hall and less flattering. Lisa trusted rooms that did not try to help. Rows of hanging cords. Pegs set into old supports. Rootlets trimmed back from the ceiling where the living structure kept trying to reclaim the records.

David was at the east wall with Maren beside him, both of them bent over an old cord while one recited and the other retied. Migrating rather than copying.

Lisa stood long enough to understand the rhythm before she spoke.

“How far back does the archive go?”

David did not look up immediately. That made him more trustworthy. “Depends on what you mean by goes.”

“Oldest readable record.”

That got his eyes on her.

“Grain yields from the Mae Basin. Top peg, far corner. About eighty generations.”

Lisa did the count without moving her mouth. The number was too short.

“And before that?”

“Fragments. Unstable cords. Things people can partially reconstruct if they already know what they are trying to hear.”

Still too short.

Maren tied off the new segment and hung the replacement on the peg beside the degrading original. Old cord. New cord. Same sequence, if they had not made a mistake and if David’s memory had remained true while he recited it.

Lisa looked around the room again.

The oldest records were not the most frightening objects there. The worst one hung lower, newer, structurally sound. Dense with intact knots.

“That one hasn’t been migrated.”

Maren did not answer. David did.

“It can’t be.”

“Why not?”

“The woman who tied it died six years ago. No transfer.”

Lisa walked closer but did not touch it.

The cord was perfect. The meaning was gone.

She stayed through the afternoon asking the wrong kind of questions for an archivist. Which records cut off earliest. Which domains had deeper chains. Which other sites ran longer. Which subjects seemed to start late because nobody had yet built a method worth passing on.

David finally looked up from the cord.

“The archive keeps what survives,” he said. “It doesn’t answer why something starts late.”

“It might,” Lisa said.

Maren hung the new cord and moved to the next peg. “Not if you ask it like a theory.”

David’s mouth twitched once, which Lisa counted as either amusement or archival damage. She did not yet know him well enough to distinguish the two.

Useful. Defended archive. Struck question.

Lisa looked at the far wall again. "I want the other houses."

David's hands stopped.

"What other houses?"

"Thesken. Ardnoch. The Selden coast. Anywhere with an archive older than the university and younger than the basin grain cord."

Maren gave a short, tired laugh. "You don't ask small."

"Do we have the records or not?"

"Not here," David said. "Request through your faculty line."

"Which faculty line?"

David and Maren looked at each other first.

"Mercer, probably," Maren said. "Or Mother Janet if you want the answer to come back no in a more official voice."

David added, "Cross-house requests leave traces. Don't open one unless you want the question to belong to the institution."

"Can you hold the request until morning," Lisa asked, "without naming me on it?"

David shook his head.

"Not if it leaves this room."

Maren had already reached for a fresh cord.

"If you want it entered tonight, say so now," she said. "If you want one more night before Mercer can ask why you think the old records are too short, go upstairs and keep wanting it."

Lisa looked at the old unmigrated cord again.

"Enter it."

Maren tied the first request knot into the fresh cord and hung it on the peg by the stairs, separate from the archive rows.

By the time she came up from the basement, the problem had changed.

It was no longer simply that records ended. It was that they all seemed to begin embarrassingly recently, and the next records she needed had her name on them now.

The request knot hung there quietly, separate from the dead and the living archive alike.

By morning Mercer would know that Lisa had asked why the old records began so late.

Chapter 8: The Bridge

From "The Meditation on Blindness," v. 14-16:

Behold the arch that beareth all weight and yet standeth open; consider the shell that holdeth the sea and yet weigheth little. No hand drew these forms, for they were drawn by the drawing itself, each curve the answer to a question that none did ask.

Tom checked the graft before breakfast and found a bruise he did not like.

The bruise was neither break nor rot. The seam had taken. New bark had closed over the join. Sap still moved warm under the skin of it when he laid his hand flat across the meeting point and waited.

But three of the secondary branches on the upstream side had gone shiny where too many boots had polished them in the same place. One rung lower down held a strip of fresh pale wood where the bark had rubbed through.

Too much traffic in one line.

The old cut-timber bridge beside it still took half the crossings, though the confident students had started choosing Tom's.

A bridge should teach feet where to go. If it needed optimism, it was not a bridge yet.

Frank was on the dock walk above the loading crane with his elbows on the rail and his face set against repeat arguments.

"You seeing something new," he called down, "or just enjoying the company?"

Tom kept one hand on the graft.

"They bunch on the upstream side."

"Students like to walk where somebody else already walked."

"That isn't engineering."

"No," Frank said. "That's students."

The canal smell came up around them: pitch, wet rope, standing water, and the sweet sourness from the mills upriver where grain sat long enough to begin turning into something else. Hessren had smelled of pitch and salt and tide mud. This was inland water. Working water.

Six weeks ago he had stepped off a grain barge here with the pitch tool his father had pressed into his hand at the quay that morning. Flat hardwood blade. Handle worn to grip by two generations of palms. No speech. No blessing. Just the weight of the thing changing owners for a while.

The university had looked wrong from the canal approach. Too big, too branched, too accidental. Ancient living wood at the center. Newer growth spreading outward where the service roads and workshops kept having to meet the old intentions halfway. The canal cut one corner open like a correction nobody had asked permission to make.

Frank straightened and pointed with his chin toward the old bridge.

“Third-years discovered yours yesterday. They cross in packs when they’re showing off.”

Tom looked at the loose plank in the cut-timber span. Still wrong by a hair.

“You did that.”

“I loosened a plank. They made a choice.”

Tom should have found that funny. Instead he looked back at the rubbed bark and imagined twelve students hitting the center at once, all of them leaning the same way.

“I need to watch a crossing,” he said.

Frank made a small gesture with one hand. Meaning: then watch it.

A first-year he half recognized came hurrying down from campus with a cord-repair kit bouncing against one hip. Two kitchen women followed the service slope with baskets on a low handcart, arguing about whether fermented greens had gone sharp enough to count as breakfast or were still pretending to be garnish. A grain barge sat low at the bank, heavier to starboard. Tom’s eye caught the hull seam and filed it away. Later.

Amy was sitting on the piling by the spur when he turned back from the barge, just outside the reach of the crane’s complaint.

Sketchpad across her knees, one heel hooked against the post to keep herself steady, she looked from the bridge to the page and back again without wasting a glance.

He stopped beside her because she had not looked up.

“What are you drawing?”

She lifted the sketchpad without commentary.

It was his bridge, drawn without flattery. The span itself in dark quick strokes, then three clustered figures at center, all of them canted to the same side as if one body had borrowed three sets of legs. Under them, darker pressure lines through the lattice.

Tom leaned over the sketchpad before he realized he had moved.

“When was this?”

“Just now.” She tapped one charcoal line with her finger. “They all shifted when the one in front turned to talk.”

“That’s just balance.”

“No.” She took it back and added one short mark. “This is balance. That was imitation.”

He watched the bridge. Empty now. Quiet.

“You saw it happen twice?” he said.

“Three times.”

Tom looked at her drawing again. She had put the weight where it had actually gone.

“Can I keep this for a while?”

Amy blinked once, surprised more by the question than by the answer she was about to give.

“Yes.” She worked the page loose and handed it to him.

He tucked the sketch sheet inside his jacket and waited for the next crossing.

Four students this time. Third-years, laughing too loudly because they were almost finished with the year and thought that meant something. Halfway across, one slapped the shoulder of another. All four shifted in the same direction.

The bridge gave a sound so small nobody else heard it.

Tom did.

The sound wasn't a crack. Worse in some ways: a fast dry complaint from one of the rubbed branches, the sound of wood being asked the same wrong question one time too many.

He was on the span before the group reached the far side.

"Off," he said.

The nearest student laughed. Tom took the center branch in both hands and kicked once, hard, at the old bridge's loose plank until it flipped down flat into place.

"Use that one."

They backed off his bridge and went around him without arguing. The branch held. It just wasn't going to keep taking that same shove all morning.

Frank was down from the rail by then.

"Bad?"

"Not bad. Repetitive."

"Those are often the same thing given enough time."

Tom crouched and looked at the rubbed branch. The bark was gone at the contact point. Underneath, the fresh pale strip had started to compress sideways. He could lash it, redirect traffic, train the crossings through the old span until the weight redistributed. It was repair, not catastrophe. Still.

Frank squinted at the fold of paper at Tom's jacket.

"Your room watcher?"

"She watches properly."

"Useful skill." Frank paused. "Hurts, finding out somebody else saw your problem first."

Tom said nothing.

Frank took hold of the temporary barrier rope at one end and handed the other to him. Together they strung the bridge off at both banks.

By the time Mr. Crane appeared, Tom had already cut fresh fiber and was working sap compound into the rubbed place with his thumb.

Mr. Crane took in the rope first, then the bridge, then Tom's hands.

"Problem?"

"Load concentration."

"I thought it was deriving itself."

Tom did not look up.

"It was. Then students arrived."

Mr. Crane stepped closer to the span, careful with his shoes as always, as if bark were a negotiable surface.

"Can you model the failure condition?"

"It's not a failure."

"No?" Mr. Crane said. "You have roped it off?"

Tom pressed harder than the branch required.

“I have roped off one kind of stupidity.”

Mr. Crane let that stand.

“Bring the derivation when you’re ready,” he said. “The real load, not the ideal one.”

That was new enough to slow Tom’s hands.

“You want the crowd effect.”

“I want the bridge that exists.”

Mr. Crane rested two fingers on the rail post and looked once at the fold of paper in Tom’s jacket.

“Who saw it first.”

Tom said nothing.

“Good,” Mr. Crane said. “Start there.”

Then he walked away over the cut-timber bridge.

The grain barge still needed its seam checked. Gary at the lock still needed a second set of hands by noon. Frank would not say so twice. Tom finished the temporary binding and stood with the two halves of the day pulling in opposite directions.

Down to the dock, or up toward the suite and the board and the language he hated using.

He took the first one.

The barge seam was worse than he had hoped and better than it might have been. He warmed pitch, pressed it deep, and listened with his palm until the hull quieted. Gary handed him a rag and pointed him toward a gate joint that had started grinding in its socket again. Tom lay flat on the platform with one shoulder over the water and worked it loose the way he had worked ten others loose in his life, by patience and force in the right order.

The whole time Amy’s sketch sat in his jacket, pressing against his ribs whenever he shifted.

He came back to the suite late, resin half-dried on one wrist.

Mark was already at the board.

“Three weeks,” he said. “Until provisional standings are announced.”

Tom kept standing.

Mark was wound too tight to look at directly. The words came faster than he could sort them. Carol twenty-third. Amy forty-fifth. Lisa sixty-first. Bottom tier pays the reallocation fee. Ben still unranked. None of this arrived to Tom as numbers first. It arrived as the shape of Mark’s breath.

Amy was at the table, not drawing, which was wrong enough that Tom stopped tracking Mark.

Her hands were empty. The dog from her room slept under her chair with its chin on one paw, indifferent to human systems except where they raised voices.

“What happened,” Tom said.

Amy looked at Mark instead of at him.

Mark answered first.

“Oral assessment.” He swallowed. “They accepted the taxonomic work and threw out the behavior studies as outside scope.”

Amy’s mouth tightened. She kept her hands flat on the table.

“They said I was observing the wrong thing,” she said.

“What happens if they keep saying it,” Tom asked.

Amy looked at the board instead of at him.

“Then I go home,” she said. “Which would be simpler for the ledger.”

Tom pulled the folded sketch from his jacket and set it on the table between them.

“You weren’t.”

Amy looked down at the bridge sketch. Then back at him.

“Did it split.”

“Not yet.”

Mark stared from the drawing to Tom as if an equation had briefly become edible.

“You used her work.”

“I used what was true.”

He went to his room and took the shell from the shelf. Spiral filter-feeder, thick at the base, thin at the lip. The thing had built itself by answering pressure. The department could name pressure after the shell had already survived it.

He set it back down.

He washed the resin from his hands.

Then he picked up the chalk.

He used his own board instead of Mark’s, dragging it across from the wall and setting it beside the table so Amy would not have to cross the room to join him.

He drew the graft first.

Then the load path as it should have been.

Then the shift Amy had caught. Crowd imitation. Shared lean. Concentrated force where the clean version of the bridge had not asked for it.

The math would be ugly.

Amy came to stand beside him before he asked.

Mark said nothing for once.

Tom tapped the board with the chalk.

“Here,” he said. “Start with what it holds.”

Chapter 9: The Cleaner Fish

The university lens corrected Carol before breakfast.

At Nell's Point, her home lens had been good enough to count the legs on a tide-pool mite and bad enough to make her count twice. Salt had clouded the resin around the rim. Sun had yellowed one edge. It showed her the world at the scale Donna could afford.

The cloudy patch had its own place in Carol's fingers by now. Every cheap tool at home had one angle where the work bent around it.

The university lens was glass.

Glass did not forgive uncertainty. Through it, the cleaner fish's mouth parts separated cleanly from the host's scales. A parasite came away as a single dark fleck. The edge of a gill lifted and settled. A mucus nip, if one had happened, would have shown.

No mucus nip happened.

Carol watched the third pool from the second-terrace ledge with her cord looped over two fingers and the counting run tight against her thumb. Host approached. Cleaner inspected. Cleaner worked. Host left.

She tied the index knot, then stopped with the free tail hanging shorter than she liked.

Four thousand six hundred and twelve interactions on her own sequence. The department's prior observation chain, checked with Haron in the pool office, held fourteen thousand more. Different students. Different terms. Same pool system. Same result.

No cheating events.

No host ate a cleaner. No cleaner cheated. No host took one half-second of advantage and turned the exchange into a meal.

The standard model did not predict many cheats. Carol had checked that twice and then made Mark check the calculation because Mark could find an arithmetic slip while eating, talking, and reorganizing three other people's afternoons. The model predicted few. Between three and eleven in her sample, depending on the time horizon.

Few was not none.

None was a hard word. Carol did not trust hard words until the count had bruised her thumb.

She moved the cord along her thumb and felt where the cleaner-fish sequence had begun to crowd the canal sequence. The knots had eaten more length than she had planned. Another week at this rate and she would need to copy the cleaner-fish run onto a longer cord, or split it, or admit that one string could not keep all the questions in reach.

The fish did not care. It went back to its station under the root-wall lip and waited for the next host.

Carol watched three more interactions. All clean.

Then she went to seminar.

Mark intercepted her outside Amphitheater Five with half a breakfast roll in one hand and the expression he got when he had already begun helping before consent had arrived. His other hand held the second half, wrapped in a leaf and kept slightly behind his back. Mark believed most intellectual disasters began at the point where somebody had skipped breakfast.

"I checked the cheating bound again," he said.

"I asked you to."

"Yes. This is me reporting." He swallowed. "Under the standard model, zero is bad."

"Good."

"Bad for the model."

"I understood you."

He glanced toward the amphitheater entrance. Students were already dropping into the upper rows, cords on belts, sketch boards under arms, voices carrying in short bursts as the bowl filled.

"There is an extension," Mark said. "Frequency dependent, cleaner-side structure. It can produce universal cooperation if you add -"

Carol looked at him.

He stopped with his mouth still shaped around the next word.

"Two parameters," he said more quietly.

"Measured?"

"No."

"Then do not rescue it before I have presented the body."

He winced. "I wasn't going to."

"You were standing in the doorway with a rope."

That reached him. He looked at the roll in his hand as if it had accused him of something. Then he nodded once.

"I'll sit down," he said.

"Thank you."

Amphitheater Five was the smallest teaching bowl on the third terrace. It held fifty if everyone accepted knees as a local condition. The central board was smooth bark, polished by years of hands and diagrams. Above it, the sound ribs curved back into the seating so a quiet voice could travel without being forced.

Carol liked that part. A room should not make you shout in order to be heard.

Sarah sat in the front row with her cord in her lap. She always sat where the argument would reach her first. Lisa was two rows up, fingers resting on a knot. Amy had taken the back corner with her drawing board against her knees. Ben had come in late and chosen the upper rail, where he could watch the whole room without offering the room much of himself.

Carol set her cord on the ledge below the board and drew the grid. Stations down one side. Observation windows across. A mark for each cleaning exchange. The board filled slowly enough that the room had to watch the pattern arrive.

Host approach.

Cleaner service.

Host departure.

No cheating mark.

She recited the sequence totals from memory. Her fingers knew where the cord pointed, but the numbers lived in her head and in the pool office chain and in the bodies of the students who had kept the earlier runs.

“Four thousand six hundred and twelve observed interactions in my sequence,” she said. “No cheating events. Fourteen thousand prior indexed interactions in the department chain. Same result. Total observed cheating events in the pool system: none.”

The amphitheater quieted in a useful way.

Carol added the model range beside the grid: three marks at the low edge, eleven at the high edge. She did not name the expected result. She did not have to. The empty space between the grid and the model marks did enough.

The first questions were proper ones.

“Resolution?” asked a second-year from the middle row.

“Glass lens. I can distinguish parasite removal from scale scrape and mucus sampling.”

“Dim-period interactions?”

“Observed. Cleaning rate drops. Cheating count stays at none.”

“Station bias?”

“All six stations. Rotated windows. Prior chain agrees.”

“Observer effect?”

Carol looked at the student who asked it. His ears had gone pink. He had reached for the question after running out of better ones.

“The fish do not know my name,” she said.

The room gave one small laugh, then gave it back. Good. They were still with the fish.

Haron, who managed the pool office, asked two careful questions about seasonal water temperature. Carol answered both. A third-year asked whether any host species had been underrepresented. Carol named the counts by host group. She had expected that one. The cord run for host category sat clean under her thumb.

Then Sarah stood.

Carol had known she would. Sarah did not stand to take possession of a room. She stood because her body treated formal argument as something that should be done upright.

“The data are strong,” Sarah said. “The observation method is clean. The zero matters.”

Carol kept her hands off the cord.

Sarah turned slightly so the room could hear the shape of the proof before it heard the conclusion. She gave the standard reciprocal model first, cleanly and without insult. Then she added cleaner-side population structure. Then frequency dependence. Then the stability condition.

Carol hated how beautiful it was.

“Under those conditions,” Sarah said, “universal cooperation is stable. A blank cheating column is not a contradiction. It is the limiting outcome.”

The room applauded.

Carol looked at the board.

Her grid was still there. The blank cheating column was still blank. The three-to-eleven model marks still sat beside it. Nothing on the bark had changed. Students leaned toward Sarah. Haron nodded slowly, already filing. Two people near the middle were retelling the proof under their breath so they could carry it away.

Carol touched the free tail of her cord.

Two new parameters. Unmeasured.

She tied nothing. Not yet.

“Thank you,” she said.

Sarah sat down. She did not look triumphant. That helped, and did not help.

“I’ll continue the observations,” Carol said. “The next question is whether those added parameters can be measured in the cleaner population.”

No one named that refusal. The room had manners.

Afterward, people came to the board.

Three students wanted Sarah to repeat the middle step of the proof. Two asked Carol where she had found the prior chain. One said the zero was “useful confirmation.” Carol rolled up her cord.

Mark waited until they were outside on the terrace.

“I didn’t rescue it,” he said.

“You didn’t.”

“Sarah did.”

“Yes.”

“Her proof was good.”

“Yes.”

Mark pressed his thumb against the seam of his roll until it split.

Ben came down the steps behind them. “How many?”

Carol did not ask what he meant. “Two.”

“Today.”

“Today.”

“And before today?”

“Zero in the version taught to first-years.”

Ben looked toward the amphitheater door, where Sarah was still inside answering questions with both hands around her cord.

“Direction?” he asked.

“Up.”

“Always?”

Carol wound the cleaner-fish section once around her fingers, felt the crowding, and unwound it again. “So far.”

Amy came out last. She had not drawn the fish. She had drawn the room: Sarah upright, Carol beside the board, the audience angled between them. The grid was only a few dark strokes at the center, almost small enough to miss.

“Is that how it looked?” Carol asked.

Amy held the board closer against herself. “It is how it moved.”

Carol almost asked for the page. Then she remembered Tom setting Amy's bridge sketch on the table as proof of a load no one had scored.

"Keep it," Carol said.

Three days later, the Dean's office sent a student with a memorized answer.

Carol received it in the dining hall because bad news preferred rooms with witnesses. The messenger was a second-year from the provost's office, kind-faced, damp from the terrace mist, and sorry before she opened her mouth.

"Your request for extended observation privileges at the second-terrace demonstration pools has been reviewed," the second-year recited. "The longitudinal study is approved at reduced scope. Two observation days per week instead of five. Standard student equipment allocation. The Dean encourages you to connect continued observations to current theoretical frameworks."

Carol set her bread down.

"Two days."

"Yes."

"Standard lens?"

"Standard student equipment," the second-year said, and then added in her own voice, "I'm sorry."

Carol believed her. That made the message harder to use.

Carol thanked her because the second-year had not made the decision. Then she picked up the bread and ate it because Donna had not raised a daughter who abandoned food when angry.

Two days a week. Standard lens. Current frameworks.

The Assessment was coming. Its rankings would not repair the roof at Nell's Point by themselves, but they were the kind of number people with spare timber respected. Canal hours spent outside the approved plan were hours not spent becoming easy for that number to explain.

The cleaner-fish cord would need copying anyway. Fewer observation days would slow the crowding, but only by making the question smaller. That was not a solution; it was a shorter string with a polite label tied to it.

Across the hall, Mark was at the schedule board. He had already heard. Of course he had. He had drawn three replacement observation plans, each worse than the one before because each obeyed the limits more efficiently.

Carol did not go to him.

She went to the canal.

At the lower lock, Tom was kneeling with one arm in the access hollow and the other braced against the wet root-wall. A sealant strip lay across his knee. He looked up long enough to see her face.

"Standard lens?" he asked.

"Standard lens."

Tom set his thumb against the seam until the strip stopped sliding. "A crack does not get smaller because the office has named it adequate."

No one had approved the canal. No one had restricted it either. The defunct spur lay below the fourth terrace, half hidden by root-wall and old maintenance paths, with sealant animals working the cracks where water pressure found them. The standard field-site maps did not mark it. No one had a reason to.

The evening shift had begun early again.

Carol sat on the root ledge, took out the crowded cord, and did not tie the next knot. The tail was too short. She would copy the cleaner-fish run tonight onto a longer cord, while the route still sat fresh under her

fingers. Pool sequence separate. Canal sequence separate. Model changes on a third short piece until she knew whether the count deserved better.

Two parameters today.

No cheating events.

Two days a week.

The sealant animals moved before the light panels brightened, as they had the previous evening and the evening before that. Something cued them before the visible change. Current pressure, maybe. Vibration from the upper locks. A chemical shift in the water. Something earlier than light.

Carol watched until the panel glow came up behind her and the proof recitation from an upper terrace carried across the canal. A student practicing alone. The cadence was good. The conclusion landed exactly where it was meant to land.

Carol kept watching the animals.

Chapter 10: The Study Group

Sarah arrived early to move three stools.

The acoustic garden behind the theology rooms did not need improving. So the stools annoyed her. The old wall-growth had shaped itself around the hollow over generations: root ribs above, warm bark at the back, sound-catching pockets where the small wall animals held a low evening chord and returned a voice cleaner than it had entered. The space had solved the problem of attention long before any first-year with a chair could make it worse.

The stools had been set in a crescent that pinched too tightly at one end.

Sarah moved them until the opening faced the proof board and the two latecomers' places did not look like punishment. Hayden would still sit half a handspan too far left, because Hayden approached furniture as if furniture had entered a compact with him personally and he meant to honor it. Bree would take the stool nearest the ferment. Paul would sit wherever he could lean without admitting he was leaning.

Carol would stand at the edge unless Sarah made the edge a place.

Sarah set one stool there.

Mercy that required improvisation was only negligence with kinder manners.

Then she stood in the center and recited the opening of the Kannad Proof under her breath.

The first terms rose into the root ribs and came back warm. The proof fit the garden. That had always mattered to Sarah. In a poor room, even a true proof could sound apologetic. Here, the turn from birth rate to predation landed where it ought to land, not loudly, not theatrically, with the pressure of a door closing exactly flush.

She had loved that proof since she was eleven. Her father had taught her the first section in the front room at home, his cord across his knees, her own voice breaking on the third transition because she had tried to carry too much breath through it. He had corrected the breath before the math. Correct breath made honest structure possible, he said. Sarah had believed him. She still did.

Mostly.

Ninety-four, if she had to put a number on it.

She did not have to. No one had asked. The number was her private tool, shared only with Ben because Ben had heard a probability in her first confession and treated it as a number instead of as a mood. Ninety-seven at the start of term. Ninety-four now. Three points could be weather. Three points could be settlement in a new foundation.

The garden gate clicked.

Bree came in first with the ferment jar. Paul followed, carrying cups and wearing the expression of a person prepared to be useful if useful could be made compatible with sitting down. Hayden entered last of the regulars, nodded once at Sarah, once at the stools, and once at the wall-growth. His nods had grammar. The third one meant he approved the resonance.

“Carol?” Bree asked.

“Coming,” Sarah said.

“And the ocean boy?”

Sarah adjusted one cup by a finger’s width. “Ben is not a regular.”

“You know what I asked.”

“He may come for the last part.”

Paul looked interested at once. Paul looked interested at most things until they required work, and then he became selective.

“Is this a study group or an ambush?” he asked.

“A study group,” Sarah said. “If it becomes an ambush, I will expect better posture.”

Bree laughed into the ferment jar and nearly spilled it. Good. The room opened.

Carol arrived while Paul was still defending the posture of innocent men. She had her cord at her wrist, not loose but ready, and the slightly careful face she had worn since the cleaner-fish seminar, as if every ordinary kindness might contain a question she had not yet decided whether to ask.

Sarah pointed to the edge stool.

Carol noticed the placement. Of course she did.

“Thank you,” she said.

“You are part of the group while you are here.”

Carol sat. “Is that a warning?”

“Only if you sing badly.”

Paul made a pleased sound. Hayden nodded once, accepting the rule.

They began with the Kannad Proof.

Sarah took the opening. The first assumptions were old enough to feel less like statements than floorboards: hare birth rate, lynx predation, delay, correction, return. Bree carried the first transition. Hayden took the ratio turn, his voice plain and exact, every pause mathematically placed. Paul, unexpectedly gentle, brought the oscillation back into phase.

Carol joined late, on the final section.

Her voice had no ornament. She gave each term the time needed and no more. Sarah had once thought that made Carol’s recitation flat. Tonight it sounded like a lens being cleaned.

The final period resolved.

The wall animals held the last note half a breath longer than usual, or Sarah imagined they did. Either way, the proof finished with the garden around it.

No one spoke at once.

That silence was part of the worship. Sarah had told Carol this once and then regretted the wording, because Carol had watched the next silence with the attention she usually gave to fish.

Bree poured ferment. Paul accepted too much. Hayden accepted exactly as much as his cup deserved.

“Again?” Paul asked.

“Not yet,” Sarah said.

Carol looked up.

There. The question had been waiting at the edge of her face since she entered. Sarah's hand moved toward the proof board and stopped.

"Ask it," Sarah said.

Carol touched the first knot on her wrist. "Why Kannad?"

Bree blinked. "Because it is beautiful."

"Yes," Carol said. "Why else?"

"Because the prediction holds," Sarah said.

Carol nodded, accepting the answer and keeping the question alive. "The period holds. Twenty-three quarter-years in the field record. The proof predicts twenty-three."

"Correct."

"The consumer-resource proof predicts point-seven-three."

Paul looked at Sarah. Bree looked at Carol. Hayden looked at the board, where the Kannad ratio still sat in charcoal from last week.

Sarah kept her hands folded. "And the pool record gives point-six-eight before correction."

"Point-seven-one after temperature correction," Carol said.

"Within range."

"With a parameter taken from the pool record."

The garden did not change. Sarah disliked that. A room should register strain if strain had entered it. The wall animals continued their small evening work as if no one had done anything indecorous.

Bree set her cup down. "Temperature affects growth. That is not a problem."

"No," Carol said. "Temperature affecting growth is not the problem."

Paul leaned back and remembered, too late, that Sarah had placed the stool where leaning would make him meet a root rib. He sat upright with dignity available only to those who had no better option.

"How many?" Sarah asked.

Carol did not pretend not to understand. "Fourteen."

Bree frowned. "Fourteen what?"

"New parameters," Sarah said. The answer came too quickly. She had built the category before Carol could hand it to the room.

Carol looked at her, and Sarah felt the proof expose the joint.

"Across which models?" Hayden asked.

Carol named them. Cleaner fish. Consumer-resource. Shore runners. Demonstration-pool herbivory. Two canal sequences she did not yet have leave to present properly. Each with the adjustment required to keep the model aligned after observation.

She left accusation out of it. Accusations had shape. They could be answered. This had only count and direction.

"Fourteen accommodations in two months," Carol said. "All in one direction."

"Toward better fit," Bree said.

"Toward more fit," Carol said.

Sarah heard the distinction land badly. The clean edge made it worse.

The gate clicked again.

Ben came in without apology. He had priced apology and found the room could not afford the interruption. He took the empty place near the back wall, one foot on the root ledge, and looked first at Sarah, then Carol, then the proof board.

“Fourteen?” he said.

Bree turned. “Were you listening outside?”

“Briefly.”

“That is not better.”

“No,” Ben said. “It is more accurate.”

Sarah should have told him to leave. The study group had a form. Ben entered forms like weather through an open window: without malice, without respect for the proof board, the stools, or the room Sarah had made.

Instead she said, “We are discussing calibration.”

“Of course you are.”

Paul looked delighted and tried to hide it behind his cup. Hayden gave a small nod that meant the discussion had acquired a second axis.

“A model may gain parameters without weakening,” Sarah said.

“Yes.”

“A correction is not a defeat.”

“No.”

“Then say the actual objection.”

Ben looked at Carol. “Yours or mine?”

Carol’s mouth moved once, almost a smile.

Sarah felt the group notice it.

“Yours,” Sarah said.

Ben rested his elbows on his knees. “If rescue is free, the model can predict anything after the fact.”

Bree looked annoyed. “That is game language.”

“Yes.”

“This is a proof group.”

“I noticed.”

Sarah lifted one hand before Bree could answer. “Ben.”

He stopped. For her. Bree saw it; Paul did too.

“False is not the problem,” Ben said. “Cheap is.”

The garden had lost its clean crescent. No stool had moved, but the lines no longer held. Carol sat at the edge Sarah had made for her. Bree guarded the devotional center. Paul watched as if the ferment had improved. Hayden tracked the board. Ben had turned the back wall into a second front.

Sarah could close it. She knew how.

The Kannad record was deeper than the others. The corrections in the consumer-resource proof were independently reasonable. Fourteen parameters across many models did not demonstrate structural failure. The framework had survived harder questions than a first-year with a cord and a clean zero.

“Carol’s question stands,” Sarah said.

No one poured ferment.

The words had no music. Sarah heard that too. They did not resolve. They left the final term suspended where the proof should have closed.

Bree looked hurt before she looked angry, which was worse than anger. Paul looked at his cup. Hayden nodded once, slowly, and Sarah could not tell whether the nod meant agreement, sorrow, or merely that a true statement had been made in an unfortunate place.

Carol looked down at her cord.

“Thank you,” she said.

Sarah wanted to tell her not to thank her.

She did not say that.

“Again from the top,” Sarah said.

They tried. The proof was still beautiful. The hare term still opened into the lynx term, the delay still curved back, the period still landed at twenty-three.

But everyone heard the gap now.

Afterward, Bree left first, carrying the ferment jar like a small official disappointment. Paul followed her, too quiet. Hayden paused at the gate and gave Sarah one nod with no grammar she could read.

Carol stayed long enough to coil her cord.

“I did not mean to damage it,” she said.

“I know.”

“I liked it.”

“So do I,” Sarah said.

Carol left.

Ben remained by the back wall. Of course he did. Ben remained exactly where remaining would cost the most.

“You didn’t have to do that,” he said.

“Yes, I did.”

“Because you’re honest?”

“Because the alternative was untidy.”

He smiled then, not the easy smile. “There she is.”

Sarah would dislike the pleasure of being recognized accurately later, when she had time.

Ben looked at the board. “What’s your number?”

No one else was in the garden. The wall animals had lowered their chord for night. The proof marks on the board were already losing their edges.

“Ninety-four,” Sarah said.

“Start of term?”

“Ninety-seven.”

He did not whistle. Ben had better manners than his reputation when the damage was real.

“Three points,” he said.

“Weather.”

“Maybe.”

“Settlement.”

“Maybe.”

She looked at him. “You are not helping.”

“I know.”

“Then why are you still here?”

Ben glanced toward the gate Carol had used, then back at Sarah. “Because everyone else left.”

“And I did not.”

“No,” he said. “You didn’t.”

The proof board stood between them, smudged, still legible, no longer closed.

Sarah put the cups back in their stack. Six cups. Five used. One Ben had not touched. The unused one annoyed her most.

“Next week,” she said, “sit properly if you come.”

“Is that an invitation?”

“It is a condition.”

“Those are often related.”

Sarah carried the cups toward the theology rooms and did not answer, because answering would have made the shape too easy.

Chapter 11: The Scar

From "The Sabbath Canticle," v. 1-4:

On the seventh day, touch nothing. Let the market find its price. Let the garden find its form. Let the child find its way. For the Gradient needeth no gardener, and the river needeth no guide, and the proof of this is that the world, left alone, groweth more beautiful.

On Sabbath morning the campus stopped trying to improve itself.

Amy felt the difference before she named it. No proof voices from the amphitheaters. No recitation rhythm traveling through the old wood. No Mark outside the common room explaining why a rest day still benefited from a three-part schedule, although he had left a door marker with a third setting and therefore had not surrendered completely.

The light panel kept its usual opinion.

The dog liked Sabbath at once. It came through Amy's curtain, checked that Amy was awake, and put its chin on the folded drawing cloth.

"That is not for you," Amy said.

The dog closed its eyes.

Amy moved the cloth anyway. The dog accepted this as collaboration.

Her drawings were already arranged on the floor: eighty specimens from the demonstration pools, the gardens, the lower terrace, and the canal edge. Shells. Leaves. Fish. A canal dredger's leg. The dog's ear drawn twice because the first version had looked too charming and not enough like an actual ear.

Symmetry. Proportion. Clean edges. Even the damaged leaf had healed along a line so tidy it looked as if injury had been consulted and asked to submit a better draft.

Amy looked at the drawings and felt nothing in her hands.

Then Carol appeared in the doorway, hair still damp from washing, scar pale against her temple.

At once the page in Amy's head had a line the others lacked.

"Come to the Garden of Proof," Amy said.

Carol looked at the drawings first. She always looked at the thing a person had been doing before she looked at the person. Amy had come to like that more than she wanted to admit.

"Now?"

"Before the children claim it."

"Do children claim the Garden of Proof?"

"On Sabbath, children claim anything with walls."

Carol considered this as if it were a field note. "Fair."

The dog stood. It had apparently been included.

They went before breakfast.

Sabbath had loosened the paths. Students moved without cord schedules in their hands. Two small children were arguing beside a root stair about whether a game boundary could include air. A third child had already climbed above them and was proving a private point by refusing to come down. At the lower market, a ferment seller had covered half the knots on her price frame and was asking customers what they thought was fair. The answers, Amy noticed, were mostly the same as the covered knots. People liked freedom better when it knew where the old path was.

Carol watched all of it quietly.

Amy watched Carol watching.

The Garden of Proof was on the upper terrace behind a wall of old living wood. Nobody tended it on Sabbath. Nobody tended it on other days either, which made Sabbath mostly a matter of not explaining that too loudly.

Inside, the garden held its shape.

Spiral ground cover. Branches dividing at clean angles. Vine mats finding hexagonal spacing without anyone's hand. The place was beautiful in the manner Sarah loved: no slack, no visible correction, every surface behaving as if it had been waiting to become exactly this.

The dog found the one patch of sun by the entrance and lay down in it.

Carol sat with her back against a wall-tree. Amy set her drawing board on her knees and opened the cloth of pigment sticks.

"The scar," Amy said.

Carol's hand went halfway to her face and stopped. "You have drawn me before."

"Not properly."

"What is proper about this one?"

"I am going to finish it."

"Amy."

"I know."

"I am not one of your canal animals."

"No."

Carol's shoulders stayed high.

"Be where you are," Amy said. "Do not pose."

"I don't know how to pose."

"Good."

Amy drew the body first because faces lied when you started with them. Shoulders against bark. One knee drawn up. Hands loose but ready. Carol at rest still looked as if the world might do something worth recording and she did not intend to miss it.

Then the face.

Jaw. Mouth. Eyes. The small compression between the brows that appeared when Carol was trying not to ask a question before it was ready.

Then the scar.

Temple to cheek, pale through brown skin, not straight, not decorative, not balanced by any answering line on the other side. Amy slowed down. The line needed attention without politeness. Polite drawing made scars look like apologies. This one was not apologizing.

“You stopped,” Carol said.

“I slowed.”

“On the scar.”

“Yes.”

Carol’s shoulders changed. Hardly at all. Enough.

Amy put the pigment down. “Do you want me not to?”

Carol looked past her at the spiral ground cover. “No.”

Still not permission.

Amy waited.

The wall animals kept the garden’s pulse low. Somewhere outside, a child shouted a rule and another child rejected the rule on procedural grounds. The dog slept through the entire development of law.

Carol touched the scar with two fingers. “I forget people can see it.”

“I don’t.”

“No,” Carol said. “You wouldn’t.”

Amy picked the pigment back up.

“Everything else I have drawn this term knows what it is supposed to do,” she said. “Shells. Leaves. Fish. Even the canal animals. They all arrive with the line already inside them.”

Carol did not answer. Her eyes had come back from the garden to Amy.

“This line happened to you,” Amy said.

She drew again.

The scar came onto the page and the whole face changed around it. Before the scar, the drawing had been accurate. Afterward, it was Carol.

Amy felt the difference in her wrists.

“There,” she said.

Carol leaned forward to see.

She did not touch the page. Good. Some people touched drawings before they understood that a surface was a kind of body.

“That is what I look like?” Carol asked.

“To me.”

“That is not the same thing.”

“No.”

Carol sat back.

The garden carried on being perfect around them.

Amy looked from the page to the spiral ground cover, then to the scar again. The thought had been pressing at her for days, but the drawing made it physical enough to hold.

“Where are the scarred ones?” she said.

Carol’s head lifted.

“The ugly ones,” Amy said. “You asked where the ugly ones were. I think that was almost right. But ugly is a judgment. Scarred is a record.”

Carol became very still.

“Things happen,” Amy said. “Storms. Splinters. Bad angles. Children falling out of trees they have already been told to leave alone.”

The child outside shouted again. Amy let the timing have its dignity.

“But everything I draw here heals clean. Or grows clean. Or arrives as if nothing ever happened to it except the thing it was meant to become.”

Carol looked at the Garden of Proof now, not as a student in a holy place but as Carol: checking, comparing, refusing to hurry.

“The coast grew back after the storm,” she said.

Amy waited.

“The tide colonies. The root systems. The runners. Weeks, and the lines were cleaner than before. Better placed.”

“And your face?”

Carol’s fingers went to the scar again. “My face kept the weather.”

Amy’s hand tightened around the pigment stick.

Amy wanted to draw it. Not the words. The way Carol’s hand rested on the raised line, neither hiding nor showing. The way the garden’s perfect spirals made the mark look more specific, not less.

“That is data,” Amy said.

Carol looked at her.

Amy heard how it sounded and did not take it back. She was tired of having her best seeing treated as decoration until someone found numbers under it.

“Not proof yet,” she said. “Data.”

Carol smiled a little, because Amy had used the right caution.

“Beauty is data?” Carol asked.

“Sometimes beauty is the thing trying to distract you from data.”

That surprised a laugh out of Carol.

Amy felt it in her own ribs. Warm, quick, gone almost before she could catch it.

“And sometimes?” Carol asked.

Amy looked at the drawing. “Sometimes if I avoid the mark my hand wants, the drawing lies.”

Carol stopped laughing.

For a moment Amy worried she had crossed too far. Then Carol reached out, not to the drawing, but to Amy’s wrist.

The contact was small. Two fingers. Warm skin. A pulse already too fast.

Amy had touched people all her life. Comforting, steadying, getting them through corridors and dining halls and rooms that pressed too hard. This contact asked for nothing useful from her.

“I think I love you,” Carol said.

“I know,” Amy said.

Carol blinked.

Amy winced. “That sounded worse than it felt.”

Carol laughed again, softer.

“I mean I know because I have been watching your face,” Amy said. “And I love you too. I was trying to say it in a way that sounded less like I had already made a diagram.”

“Did you?”

“No.”

The dog opened one eye.

“Maybe one diagram.”

They walked back through Sabbath afternoon hand in hand.

The campus had become less organized and more pleased with itself. A group of children had taken the lower amphitheater and were using its excellent acoustics to announce dried-fruit tariffs. A market woman handed Carol a cup of watered ferment, counted Carol’s change for her, and gave one coin back.

Amy kept hold of Carol’s hand because letting go would have required a decision.

In Amy’s room, the eighty drawings still covered the floor.

Carol stopped just inside the curtain. Her shoulders rose before she spoke: narrow bed, dog under the table, drawings everywhere.

“You’re nervous,” Amy said.

“Yes.”

“Your shoulders answered before your mouth did.”

“You say that like it helps.”

“It helps me.”

Carol looked at the bed, then at the drawings. “I don’t want to step on anything.”

“That is the most Carol answer.”

“It’s a real concern.”

“Yes.” Amy moved three drawings, then five more because three had made a path only for people with less feeling in their feet. “There.”

Carol crossed the cleared strip as carefully as if the drawings were sleeping.

The first kiss was not graceful. Amy’s elbow found the wall. Carol apologized to the elbow before Amy could decide whether the elbow needed representation. The dog left the room.

That helped.

Afterward, Carol lay with one hand over her own face, not hiding, just checking that she was still there.

Amy touched her wrist. “May I?”

Carol moved her hand.

Amy traced the scar once, lightly. The line was warmer than the page had been. Raised in places. Smooth in others. No symbol, no argument: only a mark from a life that had taken weather and stayed here.

“No drawing warned me about this,” Amy said.

Carol opened one eye. “Which drawing?”

“Any of them.”

“You tested all of them?”

“I am comfortable with the claim.”

Carol smiled against the pillow.

Outside the window, the Garden of Proof kept growing without help. Amy could not see it from here, but she could see the drawing propped against the table leg: Carol’s face, accurate enough to hurt, made true by the line no template would have chosen.

She would show it to no one unless Carol asked.

Chapter 12: The Founding Games

From "The Book of the Long Game," v. 1-3:

Consider the prisoner, who knoweth not what his fellow shall choose; and lo, if both be faithful, both shall prosper, yet the faithless man prospereth more. This is the riddle of cooperation: that the wise choice and the good choice are not the same.

Ben had never seen anyone break a collarbone in a spirit of absolute friendship before, but he was, in theory, open to new experiences.

New experiences were acceptable when they disclosed the rules before charging for them.

The Founding Games were held every year below the canal dock, where the university's land flattened toward the towpath and the nearest thing to an athletic field could be assembled from mud, grass, boundary cord, and several hundred students who had spent the term cooperating and were now being given permission to cooperate very hard in one direction. The direction was Thesken.

Thesken had come three days by barge to be defeated. Judging by the noise from the brown end of the field, Thesken had no objection to this plan except the central one.

Vellaren wore blue. Thesken wore brown. The referees wore white sashes, which made them visible, vulnerable, and in possession of poor judgment.

The game had started, if the oldest accounts were to be believed, as a foot race between two students who disagreed about canal priority and settled the matter by running downhill until one of them fell into the water. The current form had had centuries to improve on this simplicity. It now required three mathematicians to keep score, two field judges to track contact limits, one memorist to remember procedural objections, and a dock crew to move the benches when the tide made the north line a philosophical claim.

The rules were worse than obscure: clear one at a time.

A runner could carry the proof-stone across a scoring line. A runner could not carry it if the runner had accepted more than two steps of assistance from someone outside the current formation, unless the assistance had been offered after declared imbalance, except in the third interval, when imbalance was presumed unless contested. Contact above the shoulder was forbidden. Contact below the knee was forbidden. Contact between shoulder and knee was encouraged, provided it did not show too much imagination.

Fouls were usually reported by the person who had committed them. The habit came from training, shame, and the practical knowledge that everyone on the field had cousins, teachers, and future examiners in the stands.

"I held his arm," a Vellaren back told the nearest judge, while the Thesken player he had held patted him consolingly on the shoulder. "Left arm. Above the elbow. Longer than the permitted count. Also my right foot may have left the boundary, but I was being landed on at the time and would like that included in the record."

The judge thanked him and referred the matter to mathematics.

Ben sat on the grassy bank with the suite. Amy had her drawing board in her lap and the dog arranged across both her feet. Carol had brought two cords and had tied no knots yet, which meant she was either being disciplined or waiting for the field to do something worth the cord. Tom watched the temporary bridge over the drainage channel with an expression that suggested the bridge had made promises it might not keep. Mark had already calculated three faster ways to run the blue formation and was suffering because nobody on the field had asked him.

Sarah sat beside Ben.

She had come because the Games were tradition. She had come because the Church sent a blessing to both teams before play, and because the first scoring proof was recited from the same Long Game passage her father had taught her when she was eight. She had also come because, after Carol's fourteen accommodations and the study group that had failed to close, Sarah was making herself stand in front of every part of the framework that still worked.

Ben knew this because she had said, "I am coming," in the tone of a person entering a room to inspect its load-bearing walls.

The first collision happened seven minutes into the opening interval.

A Thesken wing-forward broke clean through Vellaren's left side. A Vellaren runner crossed behind him, saw the proof-stone changing hands, and made a tackle that began as strategy and ended as an apology.

The sound was not quite a crack. Ben disliked knowing the difference.

Both teams reached the injured player at once. The Vellaren runner who had made the tackle got there first, white-faced, hands already moving to stabilize the shoulder. A Thesken teammate told him exactly where to put pressure. The referee called for the field healer. The blue crowd fell silent. The brown crowd fell silent. Someone behind Ben began passing cups of water down the row before anyone asked.

"Collarbone," Tom said.

"Clean?" Carol asked.

"Likely."

The injured Thesken player breathed through his teeth and said, "That was a legal tackle."

"You are not required to defend my technique while injured," the Vellaren runner said.

"It was good timing."

"It was too high."

"It was effective."

"I am going to be sick."

"Then turn left."

The healer arrived. The argument continued in quieter voices while the field judge took notes.

Ben watched the hands. The same bodies that had struck each other were now arranged around the break with efficient tenderness. No one had to be ordered into care. No one resented the stoppage. The team that had lost position gave it up without a protest while the Thesken player was carried off.

Then the whistle sounded, and everyone went back to trying to win.

Then the field reset. Blue faced brown. Vellaren wanted the line. Thesken wanted the same line. The injury mattered. The score also mattered. Neither fact canceled the other.

The prisoner's dilemma worked beautifully on a board. Two prisoners. Two choices. Cooperate or defect. Each private decision priced against the other private decision. The clean answer was ugly: take the private gain if you could. The theology did useful work from there. Repeated play, reputation, kin, memory, shared

future. The Gradient could make cooperation from selfish parts. It was one of the arguments Sarah loved, because the proof made goodness look possible without pretending it was easy.

But the field did not contain two prisoners.

It contained formations. Songs. Colors. Scoring customs. Old jokes. Graduate loyalties. The alumni lines along the south bank. The little blue ribbons tied to the Vellaren canal posts. The brown paint on Thesken's traveling chests. A hundred small inheritances that had no single owner and very sharp elbows.

Vellaren scored in the second interval. The blue bank rose before the mathematicians finished the confirmation. The cheer moved through the grass under Ben's feet, one body large enough to have weather.

The brown bank groaned.

Nobody in the brown bank looked wounded in any private way. Several people smiled. One Thesken student near the front clapped once for the beauty of the run before remembering the direction of local loyalty and groaning louder to compensate. The sound was real anyway. Thesken, as a thing larger than its students, had disliked the outcome.

"You made a noise," Mark said.

"I noticed something."

"During the scoring proof?"

"Around it."

Mark leaned forward. "If this is about the disputed carry, the third step was assisted but not load-bearing."

"It is not about the carry."

"Then what?"

Ben pointed at the field. "Who is defecting?"

Mark looked at him as if the question had been sent from another department without the proper cover cord.

"No one."

"Exactly."

"There was a collarbone."

"A legal collarbone, apparently."

Amy looked up from her board.

Sarah did not.

Ben kept his voice lower. The bowl carried sound too well, and he had no interest in becoming a public event before he understood his own sentence.

"Every person down there is cooperating at short range. They report their own fouls. They help the injured. They make room. They apologize when they hit too high. Then they return to a tradition that rewards their side for defeating the other side."

"It is a game," Mark said.

"It is a game because everyone agreed to call it one."

Mark frowned. For Mark this counted as hospitality.

"The individual incentives are still cooperative," Ben said. "The institutional incentives are not."

Sarah's hand had gone still on her cord.

Ben wished, briefly and uselessly, that she had not heard. He had been aiming at Mark, which was a common way of hitting everyone nearby.

The game resumed. A Vellaren line formed like a piece of arithmetic that expected to be admired. Thesken broke it by refusing the expected place and putting three runners through mud deep enough to count as an argument. The proof-stone vanished into brown jerseys, came out under a blue arm, disappeared again, and finally ended in a heap from which apologies and elbows emerged in roughly equal proportion.¹

Carol tied her first knot.

“Scale,” she said.

“Yes,” Ben said.

“Same mechanism, wrong size.”

“Maybe.”

Mark stared at the field. “You’re saying the competition is not in the players.”

“I am saying the players carry it.”

The line landed in the little silence after.

Sarah looked at the blue bank, then the brown one, then at the Church elder blessing the replacement player with one hand while the other hand held a scoring cord.

“The tradition persists because it works,” she said.

“Yes.”

“Works for what?”

Ben watched the next formation assemble. “That is usually the expensive question.”

Brenna died that evening.

The news reached them before supper. A third-year came down the corridor and stopped at the common-room door. Brenna of the Old Archive. Senior memorist. Laura’s teacher. The woman who had held the oldest weather sequences for thirty-one years and then kept holding the stray foundation material after her voice began to shorten and the newer routes grew harder to find.

For the last month, she had been singing herself outward.

The transfer took place in the Great Hall.

Everyone went. The Games still clung to them: mud on hems, blue and brown pigment under nails, the ache in the throat that followed a day of shouting for a collective thing. They entered the hall carrying the small embarrassment of being alive and loud on the day someone had finished leaving.

The Great Hall knew what to do with sound. It took grief and returned it without blur. Ben had always disliked that about the place. Bad rooms let feeling spread until no one could find who owned which part. The Great Hall gave every breath a location.

Sarah sat forward.

Of course she did.

Brenna’s family spoke first. Then Laura. Then the younger memorists came one at a time and received what had already been given to them in pieces over the last weeks: early weather sequences, foundation decisions, old canal repairs, a disputed boundary ruling from the third century that still mattered to two families near the north lock, three proof variants no longer taught because they were beautiful and slow, and a seven-month ferment lineage that drew the longest silence of the evening.

The ferment lineage mattered for its smallness. The room knew what to do with great knowledge. A recipe that had survived four centuries because one stubborn line of people refused to let it die was harder to classify. It had outlived its first use and become a duty with a smell.

The students from the ferment district cried without dignity.

Ben liked them for that.

Each recitation was answered. Someone confirmed. Someone corrected a name. Someone accepted a path. Where no one could confirm, Laura placed two fingers against her own throat and repeated the passage until a younger memorist could take it from her.

No one praised the ritual for efficiency.

It was too slow, too redundant, too dependent on voices that shook and hands that forgot where to rest. It was also the best knowledge-transfer system Ben had ever seen, because it admitted what the institution usually hid: every record lived in a body before it lived anywhere else, and bodies failed.

Amy left after twenty minutes.

She did it well. The dog rose first. Amy followed the dog, which let the room pretend that the animal had made a decision. Carol watched her go and did not follow. Tom shifted his knee to clear the aisle. Mark held still with visible effort. Sarah did not turn, but her hand opened once against her skirt and closed again.

The suite had learned this much: imperfect, practiced.

Ben watched Sarah watching the ritual.

The transfer was everything the Church claimed it was when it was not defending itself. A community holding memory. A dead woman honored by what she had carried and by the willingness of others to carry it after her. Beauty without decoration. Form under grief. No slack.

Sarah's face changed as the hall worked on her.

She had been carrying the fourteen accommodations like a weight in the chest. Ben had watched it happen in the study group: every new parameter, every rescue term, every place where a proof gained a room it had not paid for.

"It works," she said under the recitation.

Ben barely heard her.

"Yes," he said.

"Again."

He looked at her.

Her eyes were wet. She was not receiving comfort. She was testing it. That made the wetness harder to watch.

"This is what the framework protects," she said. "Community. Memory. Practice. Even if the proof changes, this still. . ."

She stopped before the sentence betrayed her.

Ben did not finish it. He had some virtues.

Sarah closed her eyes. A private calculation moved behind her face. Ben knew better than to ask for the number in the hall.

The last transfer was a song. Brenna had sung it badly at the end, Laura said, which made several people laugh and then cry harder. Laura sang it correctly. Then she sang the wrong version too, because Brenna's last path through the song was now also part of the record.

Sarah bowed her head.

Ben priced the room and found no hidden cruelty in it.

They walked back after dark.

The Games had been cleared from the field below. Ben could see the pale lines where boundary cord had pressed the grass flat, and the darker places where bodies had churned the mud. At the canal dock, two workers were washing blue and brown pigment from the benches before it set.

Sarah walked beside him. The others had fallen ahead and behind in the loose arrangement grief made when nobody wanted to be abandoned and nobody wanted to be managed.

“Ninety-five,” Sarah said.

Ben had been waiting. Waiting was not his best skill, but it was occasionally cheaper than speaking.

“From?”

“Ninety-three.”

“The ritual gave you two points.”

“Yes.”

He could have said, That is not evidence. He could have said, You are letting beauty subsidize a model. Both sentences were true. Both would have made accuracy vain.

So he said, “I can see why.”

Sarah turned her head. “Can you?”

“I am not immune to competent systems.”

That almost made her smile. Almost was something.

They passed the lower garden. The wall animals there had shifted into night chord, low and even. The old wood held the day’s warmth. Somewhere in the dark, students from both teams were singing the same song with different lyrics and matching enthusiasm.

“The Games,” Sarah said.

Ben waited again.

“They are not outside the framework.”

“No.”

“Neither is Brenna’s transfer.”

“No.”

“Both grew.”

“Yes.”

“No one designed the Games to break collarbones. No one designed Brenna’s transfer to be beautiful.”

“Probably not.”

“They were selected.”

Sarah stopped near the corridor branch. Her door lay one way. Ben’s lay another. The wall between them was old enough to have taken on the smoothness of many hands.

“Same process,” she said. “Different outcomes.”

Ben found the price before she named it.

Sarah was looking at the wall, not at him. “The beautiful thing evolved. The rough thing evolved. The Church keeps pointing at beauty as if beauty proves the direction of the Gradient.”

She touched the bark with the tips of her fingers.

“But evolution does not promise beauty. It promises survival.”

Ben said nothing.

“And the biology. . .” She stopped. “No. The pull. The way everyone leans. That did not grow the way the Games grew. Too clean. Too uniform. No mud.”

“Number?” Ben asked.

She closed her eyes.

“Ninety,” she said.

Down five from the hall. Down three from the morning. Ben kept both prices in his head.

Sarah opened her eyes. “I should be grateful. It means I can still be moved.”

“That is not what gratitude is for.”

She looked at him then.

He had not meant to sound gentle. Gentle was expensive. It let people know there was something to spend.

“No,” she said. “I suppose not.”

Across the lower field, a Thesken student laughed. A Vellaren student answered in the same rhythm. Tomorrow they would compare bruises and scoring objections and someone would say the Games had strengthened the bond between institutions. They would be correct. They would also be standing on churned grass.

“Goodnight, Ben,” Sarah said.

“Goodnight.”

She went through her door.

Ben stood in the corridor until the wall animals changed note. He wanted to knock. He wanted to say that watching a proof fail in a person was different from watching it fail on a board. He wanted, ridiculously, for there to be a move that made the game less ugly without pretending there was no game.

There was no such move available.

In theory, that should have simplified matters.

It did not.

studies by Vellaren’s Department of Social Dynamics, each of which concluded that the Games were an excellent example of cooperative behavior. The studies were correct. They had also spent too much time with diagrams and not enough time near the mud.

Chapter 13: The Gardener of Drenn

Lisa waited until the third night of term break.

Most of the campus had gone home. The suite had finished the urgent work: paste, travel hems, the small repairs travel made visible. What remained had been sitting in Lisa's mouth since Brenna's transfer, refusing to become smaller.

Unsaid things did not stay preserved. They soured.

"Bards are more important than memorists," she said.

Mark looked up from a schedule cord. "No."

"You did not ask for the proof."

"I heard the conclusion."

Lisa sat on the windowsill with one knee drawn up. Amy glanced over from her doorway. Of course she did. Amy noticed held-still things, and Lisa had been holding this still for three days.

"Memorists preserve the record," Mark said. "Bards alter it."

"Yes."

"That is not a defense."

"It is the point."

Carol looked from Lisa to Mark and set down her bowl.

For three days, everyone had praised the chain. Brenna's transfer had traveled through campus like a second set of weather: dining halls, lower market, dock. People repeated the clean pieces first. Then they repeated the song with the wrong ending, because that was the piece that would not behave.

Lisa had gone quiet each time someone praised the purity of the chain.

Now the quiet was finished.

"A memorist gives you the same thing," Mark said.

"A memorist gives you the same words."

"That is what information is."

"No," Lisa said. "That is what information wears when it is behaving."

Sarah, from the shelf, turned her head.

Mark opened his mouth.

"Wait," Amy said.

Mark looked offended by the delay but accepted it as a temporary procedural condition.

Lisa touched the long cord at her waist. Compared with Carol's field cords or Sarah's proof cord, it had spaces in it. Gaps that looked deliberate until you knew Lisa, and then looked like doors she had not decided to open.

"My grandmother is a bard," Lisa said. "Her mother too. They don't keep old stories alive by holding them still. They change them for the room. For the people in it."

"Corruption," Mark said.

"Adaptation."

"Entropy."

"Selection."

Carol smiled into her bowl.

Lisa looked at Mark until the smile disappeared, because this was not a game even if it had found the shape of one.

"Brenna carried the exact part," Lisa said. "I am not arguing with that. But exactness damages some things. Some things survive because every teller has to decide what the story is protecting."

"That sounds like a method for losing data."

"It is a method for not losing the part no one was allowed to knot."

Mark stopped arguing for one full breath.

Amy's dog lifted its head.

"Tell us one," Amy said.

Lisa breathed once, in the old pattern. Her grandmother had taught her to breathe before a long song. Plant the feet. Count the first silence. Give the oldest line somewhere to land.

She did not stand. Sitting was its own confession.

"The Gardener of Drenn," she said. "My grandmother's version. Which was her grandmother's version, after the valley schools got hold of it, and before the lowland bards made the assessor too handsome."

"Was he?" Mark asked.

"No."

"Good."

Lisa smiled, and this time the smile belonged to the story.

In the upper folds of Drenn, above the last cart road and beyond the third weather gate, there is a valley called Ardnoch. The valley is small enough that a child can shout from one side and be corrected by an aunt on the other. It is high enough that lowlanders mistake breathing for labor. It is narrow enough that morning light comes late over the pass and leaves early behind the ridge.

In that valley lived Morwen, who was a gardener.

Gardener was her answer, not her title.

When the valley children asked whether she was a breeder, she said, "Only when something needs breeding." When the Council assessors asked whether she was a trained agricultural philosopher, she said, "Only when you ask slowly enough." When a visiting priest asked whether the Gradient had given her a gift, she said, "The Gradient gave me weeds also. I try not to flatter either side."

Mostly she said, "I am a gardener," and went back to the work.

Morwen's garden yielded a fifteenth part more than any comparable plot in the high Drenn records. The soil was the same thin root-held earth used by every terrace above the second gate. The light was the same short, hard light. The seeds came from the common valley stock. The windbreaks were woven from the same stubborn brush that kept every other highland garden from leaving for the next valley in a storm.

Only Morwen differed.

Every morning she walked the rows and spoke to what grew there.

She did not chant. She did not sing. She spoke as one speaks to a neighbor whose help is needed and whose opinions, unfortunately, must be considered.

"South wall today," she told the gourd vine by the well. "You know the afternoon light sets better there."

The vine reached for the well.

"We have discussed this."

The vine did not care.

"Your mother listened."

The vine continued toward the well.

Idris found her there.

He came from the Gradient Council's Department of Anomalous Observations, a small department whose reports arrived promptly and whose funding did not. He was young, Thesken-trained, careful, and carrying enough measuring cord to make the pack-beast dislike him on principle.

Morwen did not turn around.

"You are the third," she said.

"I am Idris of Thesken."

"Then the third has a name. That is an improvement."

"The Council has asked for a complete assessment."

"The passes close within five days."

"I will stay as long as needed."

"A fine answer in a lowland office," Morwen said. "Here the answer is: five days, unless you enjoy sleeping through the road-closed months in a barn with twelve brush-goats and a vine that refuses instruction."

Idris looked at the vine.

"It is growing toward the well."

"It knows what it is doing," Morwen said. "That is the trouble."

On the first day Idris measured the garden.

He measured light, soil, spacing, water channels, fruit density, leaf curl, and the difference between Morwen's gourds and the reference gourds he had brought from the agricultural station. He tasted the soil, because highland agricultural science began in the mouth whether lowland students liked it or not. He knotted each result on a narrow field cord and found what the first two assessors had found.

A fifteenth part more.

No ordinary parameter accounted for it.

At supper he said, "It is you."

Morwen set stew in front of him. "You came all this way to learn who owns the garden?"

"I mean the difference is your presence."

"Yes."

"What mechanism?"

"I ask."

"Plants do not answer questions."

"Badly trained ones do not."

Idris waited. He had been trained not to fill silence merely because it was socially expensive. Morwen approved of this and gave him the better bowl.

"I ask for what the valley needs," she said. "Harder shells when the cold-water sealant fails. Sweeter root when the children are thin. Shorter vines when the storms are taking the trellis. I ask plainly. I ask early. I ask again when they forget, which is often."

"And they change in one growth cycle?"

"If they agree."

He looked at her over the steam. "If they agree."

"You will carry that badly?"

"Probably."

On the second day Idris watched the brush-goats.

They were ordinary animals by breed record: small, thick-coated, ill-tempered in the formal reports and affectionate in practice. When Morwen crossed the yard, they moved to the gate before she called them. That much could be rhythm. Thirty years of the same hands, same hour, same latch. Arden animals learned people faster than people were ready to admit, and the Council had many comfortable terms for it.

Then the lame goat stood.

In the morning she had favored her left foreleg and kept her weight off the joint. Morwen sat with her in the barn after midday, one hand on the floor, not touching, only near enough to be chosen. The goat leaned against her shoulder and breathed. Morwen breathed with her. Rain clicked on the grown roof. Idris counted his own pulse until counting became foolish.

By evening the goat walked clean.

"What did you do?" Idris asked.

"Sat."

"For an hour."

"She needed an hour."

"The usual recovery is three to five days."

"Then usual should visit more often."

He added a knot and did not like how little cord remained beyond his thumb.

On the third day the weather gate closed.

The storm came without lowland theater. One hour the road existed. The next it had become a brown argument moving downhill. The valley drew itself inward: terraces under rain, goats in the barn, gourds under leaf, kitchen warmth gathered inside woven root-walls and old resin panels gone amber with age.

“You are staying,” Morwen said.

“As long as needed.”

“Still the wrong answer. The road is gone. The stew is hot. The goats do not care about your department.”

The goats did not. Their priorities were hay, Morwen, dry bedding, and the afternoon light through the west slats, in an order no Council had authority to amend.

Idris ate stew and copied the first cord onto a longer one. The short cord had filled faster than a respectable anomaly should.

Morwen watched him retie the sequence.

“More room?”

“More observations.”

“Those are different things.”

He paused.

She drank her ferment.

“Sometimes,” he said.

“Good. You may yet leave with your ears still attached.”

On the fourth day he knelt beside Morwen in the rain-soft garden and heard what she asked of the vine.

“South wall,” she said. “The shell matters more than obedience. I need the compound your mother set below ten degrees. I need it this year, not five years from now when the coast people have finished being patient. You may keep the well if you must, but give me the shell.”

The vine did not move. But then, vines do not move when watched.

Idris had the previous reports. The second assessor had seen the mother vine change direction within one growth cycle. The late gourds had set harder than their line should have set. The compound had held below ten degrees. One cycle. One request. One plant behaving as if selection had been asked to hurry and had, out of embarrassment, done so.

“How long has your family done this?” Idris asked.

“Longer than the valley school has pretended not to know.”

“Why is it not in the records?”

Morwen looked at him then. “It is in the stories.”

“A story is not an archive.”

“No,” she said. “The stories still have it.”

On the fifth day Idris made his report.

He knotted what a report could carry: yield, soil, light, lineage, single-cycle shell change, goat recovery, weather-gate closure, repeat observations from previous assessors, and a recommended fourth visit with improved instruments.

Seven new accommodations in five days. Thirteen across three visits, if one counted politely.

His cord had room because he had made room. The pattern had not become smaller.

There was one observation left.

The plants grew toward Morwen's voice.

Only a little: a lean in the rows, a bias in new tendrils, too faint for a clean claim. The gourd vine by the well had not obeyed, but even it had given three inches toward the south wall while keeping one tendril wrapped around the well-post, which Morwen counted as progress.

Idris held the loose end of the cord between finger and thumb.

To knot the observation would put it in the report. To put it in the report would bring a fourth assessor. A fourth assessor would measure the lean, name the error, propose a local variable, and leave. The story would become a parameter. The parameter would become a box. The box would fit on a shelf.

The garden would remain outside it.

He left the observation unknotted.

Morwen saw. Of course she saw.

"That one is not yours yet," she said.

"It happened."

"Many things happen before they are ready to be carried."

"That is a dangerous sentence."

"Most useful sentences are."

When the road opened, Idris went down to Thesken with his report, his cord, and one hard-shell gourd wrapped in travel cloth. The Council entered the report into the chain. The Department of Anomalous Observations requested additional budget and received sympathy instead, which was cheaper and stored better.

Morwen returned to her garden.

The vine gave excellent shells that year. It also kept reaching for the well.

Years later, when Idris was old enough to know which failures had saved him, he told a bard what he had not knotted.

Mark was silent.

His hands had stopped moving. For Mark, that was the missing sound.

"He falsified the record," Mark said at last.

"He preserved the evidence," Lisa said.

"By omitting it."

"By giving it to a form that would not put it on a shelf."

"Reports do not do things."

Carol made a small sound.

Mark looked at her. "Reports should not do things."

"Better," Carol said.

Sarah sat with both hands around her cup. "Did the Council ever send the fourth assessor?"

“No,” Lisa said.

“Did the garden continue?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know that from records or from the story?”

Lisa touched the gap in her cord.

“Yes,” she said.

Mark exhaled through his nose, which was his way of refusing to concede while saving the concession for later use.

Amy said, “You should stand when you tell it.”

The room went quiet for a different reason.

Lisa looked down at her own hands. They had settled into the old position without permission: one hand curved, the other ready to mark the first turn. Her grandmother had never told that story sitting down. Her mother had not either.

“I know,” Lisa said.

Outside, the emptied campus creaked in the cold. Somewhere beyond the dock, Ben and Tom would be working through the weather break, carrying their own forms of knowledge in rope, wood, load, and tide.

Inside, Mark picked up his cord.

“Tell it again,” he said.

Lisa looked at him.

“I don’t agree,” he said.

“Obviously.”

“If I am going to object properly, I need all of it.”

Lisa stood this time.

The room made space.

Chapter 14: The Assessment

The Assessment lasted four days, which was three days longer than Mark thought a competent instrument needed and one day shorter than he would later claim, for reasons involving recalibration and personal dignity.

It was the first-year gate. Everyone said this as if gates were neutral objects and not things built to decide who passed through.

Carol did not trust gates that called themselves instruments.

On the first morning, the Great Hall filled before the light panels settled into their public brightness. The assessment panel sat beneath the old interwoven arches: faculty, two Optimizers, a Thesken visitor, and Mother Janet with a cord across her knees that looked too plain to be harmless. Behind them, the Church symbol hung in carved wood, all stacked circles and solved pressure.

Sarah stood straighter when she saw it.

Carol touched the small cord at her wrist. Date. Hall. First gate. She did not tie more. The morning would not fit on a cord. The cord only had to hold the door.

Recitation came first.

Sarah performed the Kannad Proof as if the hall had been grown for that purpose and had finally remembered it. Her voice did not hurry. Each term arrived cleanly, met the next term, and left no visible seam. The Thesken visitor nodded once near the third transformation and once at the close.

Mark, seated beside Carol, whispered, "Two nods."

"I saw."

"From Thesken."

"I saw that too."

Mark's own recitation was fast enough to make one Optimizer shift her cord twice. He did not drop a term. He did not blur a transition. He sat down with his face arranged around the simple fact that the world had behaved sensibly.

Then Carol was called.

The center of the Great Hall was warmer than the benches. Too many feet had stood there and needed the floor to hold them. Carol began the foundational proof from the opening term, letting the old sequence rise from memory. She knew it. Everyone knew it. The proof had been in the morning air of Nell's Point before she understood that proofs could be owned by institutions.

She reached the third expansion and stopped.

The hall kept still. Holding still was its talent.

Carol held the second term in her mouth without speaking it onward. The third expansion should follow. It always had followed. She could feel the next words waiting with the obedience of a well-trained animal.

She checked the step.

Not memory. Fit.

One breath. Two.

The expansion still held. Mostly. Enough for the proof. Not enough for the new question sitting behind it.

Carol completed the recitation.

When she sat down, Mark leaned close enough that his sleeve touched her arm.

“You paused.”

“Yes.”

“In the third expansion.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I was checking whether it followed.”

Mark looked at her as if she had admitted to tasting a bridge before crossing it. “It is the foundational proof.”

“That is why I checked.”

He faced forward again. His hands had gone still on his knees.

Carol tied one knot.

The second day was applied problems.

No one wrote anything. A problem was spoken, repeated, held in memory, worked on the board, defended aloud, and scored on cards. The system wanted thought to return to the room in a form that could be watched.

Carol was given a Kannad population problem.

The panel spoke the parameters. Carol repeated them back, drew the phase lines, and let the familiar oscillation come up under her hand. Hare term. Lynx term. Delay. Carrying response. The period settled at twenty-three quarter-years with the tidy confidence that made the Kannad example beloved by every theology instructor who had ever wanted the world to behave in front of children.

Twenty-three.

She could answer and leave.

Instead she stood with the charcoal in her fingers and looked at the curve.

The cleaner fish had needed rescue terms. The canal animals had needed silence around them before they showed their shape. The Drenn garden in Lisa’s tale had needed thirteen accommodations before Idris chose not to tie the next one. But Kannad, the Church’s favorite example, sat on the board as if reality had wanted to be teachable.

“Your answer?” the Thesken visitor asked.

“Twenty-three quarter-years.”

“Method?”

Carol gave the method. Correctly. Slowly enough that one panelist settled back and one leaned forward.

“And your confidence?”

The standard sequence had not included that question.

Carol looked at the curve. “In the calculation, high.”

Mother Janet's hand moved once on her cord.

"In the model?" the Thesken visitor asked.

"I have the calculation. I do not have that number."

No one corrected her. No one rewarded her either.

Afterward, in the corridor, Carol touched the question cord but did not knot the whole thought. The cord had space for the handle, not the whole problem: Kannad exact. Why this one?

On the third day, the cohort was released to observe.

The rules rewarded range. Demonstration pools, canal dock, acoustic gardens, engineering grove, archive room. Four hours. Return with a cord record. Connect the observation to the models.

Mark chose three sites before the final instruction had finished leaving the assessor's mouth.

"Breadth," he said. "The scoring instrument cannot compare what it cannot see."

"I know."

The safe answer was breadth. A safer ranking meant better position, better position meant work, and work was what the house at Nell's Point could be repaired with if the storms waited. Carol knew the chain. Donna had sent her north because the chain worked often enough to matter.

"Where are you going?"

"Canal."

"Which canal site?"

"Mine."

He absorbed this with visible discipline. "One site."

"Yes."

"For four hours."

"Yes."

"This is either excellent or a disaster."

"Probably."

Carol went to the defunct spur below the fourth terrace.

The root-wall seat had taken her shape by now, or she had taken its. The dog was already there, though no one had invited it and no one would be able to prove that it had not invited her. Morning light moved across the water. Sealant organisms worked the shaded cracks. Dredgers combed the bottom in overlapping bands. Flat-bodied cleaners moved in the disturbed silt.

For the first hour, nothing happened.

Carol knotted nothing. She watched.

For the second hour, the left-bank dredgers changed formation fourteen minutes before the upper light panels brightened. Carol tied the shift, the interval, the group boundary, and the fact that the right bank had not yet moved.

For the third hour, the whole channel stopped.

Every working animal held still. Dredgers. Sealers. Bottom-cleaners. The dog lifted its head. Carol counted twelve heartbeats because her own body was the only instrument she had that the panel could not misplace.

On the thirteenth, the canal resumed.

Carol tied the pause.

The tail of the cord was short. She stopped with two finger-widths left and held the loose end. More knots would make less room. If the panel wanted the whole canal, the canal would need a longer cord and more than one morning.

She returned with the short cord and the larger claim.

The panel listened. Dismissal had edges. Interest had rooms.

“One site,” Mother Janet said.

“Yes.”

“Four hours.”

“Yes.”

“You did not attempt range.”

“No.”

“Why?”

Carol put the cord on the table between them. “Range would have made this invisible.”

The Thesken visitor leaned forward. “The simultaneous pause. How many times have you seen it?”

“Enough to stop calling it coincidence.”

“How many?”

“Forty-seven sessions.”

One of the Optimizers touched her scoring cord. The knot she tied was small and tight.

“And the mechanism?”

“Not observed.”

“Model connection?”

Carol looked at the cord, then at Mother Janet. “Insufficient. That is the point.”

The room did not like that answer.

Carol did.

The fourth day belonged to the panel.

Students waited in the spaces around the Great Hall and pretended that waiting was an activity. Mark optimized the common room, then de-optimized it after Amy stared at the new chair arrangement for long enough that he moved everything back without being asked.

“Top fifteen,” he told Carol.

“For you?”

“For me. Possibly top ten, but I am not using the optimistic weighting.”

“Good.”

“You are harder to estimate.”

“Good.”

“I did not mean praise.”

“I know.”

Ben spent most of the day at the dock. Sarah spent most of the day in the old temple walkway where the path forced two people to share a pace. Amy drew hands and then crossed most of them out. Lisa cataloged the rumors of what people thought the panel valued and found six versions of the same ignorance.

Tom came in near evening with pitch under one fingernail and listened to Mark’s ranking forecast.

“You did this last year,” Carol said.

“Survived it,” Tom said.

“Useful?”

“No.”

He sat anyway.

The rankings were recited on the fifth morning.

The panel stood under the Church symbol and read the first-year cohort from first to two-hundredth. Each name entered the hall and became a number in everyone else’s head. Beautiful, precise, public. A whole cohort turned into ordered memory.

Carol had thought she was ready for her number.

She was not.

“Carol of Nell’s Point. Seventeenth.”

For a moment she had no body. Then she had too much body: hands, throat, cord against wrist, the pressure of Amy looking at her from three rows back, the knowledge that Donna would hear the number and say nothing for three breaths before asking what it had cost.

Seventeenth.

Not lower half. Not survival. Not the polite adequacy the university had expected from a town-nominated student. Seventeenth.

Mark was thirty-first.

His head moved a fraction, as if the sound had come from the wrong side of the hall.

Thirty-first.

Carol looked away.

Sarah was fourth.

Her shoulders eased before her face allowed it.

Amy was forty-second.

Lisa was fifty-eighth.

Both numbers landed safely above the lower quarter. Amy took hers as if someone had handed her an object with too many surfaces. Lisa closed one hand around her cord, not tying, only holding the gaps in place.

Ben was one hundred and sixty-third.

The number crossed the hall and did not stop.

Ben’s face stayed almost still. His thumb moved once against the strap of his bag. Carol saw it because Carol was watching for what the number did, not what the number claimed.

One hundred and sixty-third.

Bottom quarter.

Tom was not named. He had crossed this gate the year before and still stood at the back of the hall as if not being measured had failed to make him free.

The panel completed the list.

Then an Optimizer recited the reallocation rule.

Ranks one hundred fifty-one through two hundred triggered a fee. The amount varied by seat cost, family contribution, and projected public return. The institution called it correction, not punishment. A seat was a resource. A forecast had changed. The difference had to be carried somewhere.

Ben did not move.

Mother Janet met the town-nominated students in a small administrative room that smelled of fruit and old sap channels.

Carol went first. Amy and Lisa waited outside. Three town candidates, three numbers above the reallocation line, one market model behaving badly in public.

Mother Janet had brought the fruit again.

“Seventeenth,” she said.

“Yes.”

“Amy forty-second. Lisa fifty-eighth.”

“Yes.”

“The program will continue.”

Carol waited.

Mother Janet touched one knot on her cord. “The original projection placed town-nominated students in the lower half.”

“You expected us to fail.”

“We expected market selection to outperform town nomination.”

“That is the same sentence with better posture.”

Mother Janet looked at her then, not offended. The room warmed around the silence.

“No,” she said. “It is the version institutions can say aloud.”

Carol liked her more for saying it. That did not help.

“What happens to the model?”

“It updates.”

“Toward what?”

“I do not know yet.”

“That is an expensive answer.”

“Yes.”

Mother Janet pushed the fruit bowl closer. Carol took one because the fruit was not guilty.

“You should be proud,” Mother Janet said.

Carol turned the fruit in her hand. "Is that an instruction?"

"No."

"Good."

Mother Janet smiled. Tiredly, this time. "A recommendation."

Carol carried the fruit out and gave half to Amy, who ate it without asking what it meant.

Sarah found Ben at the dock before evening.

Carol knew enough not to interrupt. She still saw the beginning from the upper path: Sarah standing beside the loading pier, Ben sitting with his legs over the edge, the water moving under both of them with more patience than either deserved.

Later Sarah told her only one thing.

"I explained the instrument," Sarah said.

"Did it help?"

"No."

Carol waited.

"Then I sat down."

All, and enough.

Mark came to the canal the next morning.

Not the public dock. Her canal. The defunct spur below the fourth terrace, with the root-wall seat and the shaded cracks and the working animals moving beneath clear water.

He arrived with no breakfast and too many thoughts.

"Thirty-first is not wrong," he said.

Carol made room on the root-wall.

"It is a number produced by the instrument," he said. "The instrument has incentives. The incentives differ from value. The number is still data."

"Yes."

"I do not know what data yet."

"Good."

He looked wounded by the word and then, after a moment, interested in the wound.

"You watched one site for four hours."

"Yes."

"I watched three."

"Yes."

"Your result was better."

"My result was different."

"Seventeenth is better than thirty-first."

“The instrument taught you that sentence.”

He looked at her.

Carol looked at the canal.

After a moment, Mark did too.

The dredging animals worked along the bottom. One sealer moved into a crack no wider than Carol’s thumb. A bottom-cleaner shifted, not away from the dredger but into its wake.

Mark inhaled as if to speak.

“Wait,” Carol said.

He held the breath until his face made clear that holding it had become the new problem.

“Breathe. Then wait.”

He breathed. Then waited.

Thirty seconds.

One minute.

At two minutes his fingers began working the hem of his sleeve.

At four, they stopped.

At five, the left-bank dredgers changed formation.

Mark saw it.

Carol knew the instant he saw it because his whole body tried to become a conclusion and failed.

“Oh,” he said.

“Yes.”

“You were going to tell me.”

“After you saw it.”

He watched the water.

“I do not know how to do this.”

“No.”

“I did not mean criticism.”

“I know.”

He sat with the canal moving below them and the number thirty-first still tied somewhere inside him, too tight to undo by pulling.

“I have the datum,” he said at last.

Carol took out her cord.

“The model will come later,” he said.

She tied the knot.

Chapter 15: The Pollen Record

From "The Book of the Surplus," v. 1-4:

In every garden there shall be more seed than soil to hold it, and more life than the world can bear; and from this surplus cometh the great sifting, which is called Selection. For not all that liveth shall endure, and in the choosing is the shaping.

The pollen record was older than the archive.

Lisa trusted it for that.

Age did not make a record true. It made its lies harder to coordinate.

Cords could be copied wrong. Songs could drift. Memorists could die with the path still intact and the destination gone. Sediment remembered without kindness and without trying to help.

The canal-bank core came from the lower spur, where the roots held the soil in clean bands and the towpath had no official reason to exist. Tom had built the coring tube after she described the problem once: living wood cylinder, sharpened lower lip, copper sleeve, two hand marks.

"Drive straight," he had said.

"I know."

"Don't twist."

"I know that too."

"Knowing and doing separate under load."

So she had not twisted.

Amy drew the exposed bank while Lisa worked. Amy drew what the core looked like. Lisa tracked what it lacked. Together they carried a meter and a half of dark, pale, darker, paler time back toward the archive, with the dog following behind as if the core had joined the suite and needed watching.

At the archive table, David said, "That is a lot of mud."

"No," Lisa said. "Mud is what it is now."

He smiled. "Time, then."

"Maybe."

She spent twelve days with the lens.

The dating was the easy part, which was one of the reasons nobody trusted easy parts until they had been made tedious. Hex trees bloomed on their hard cycle. Warm trees bloomed on theirs. Their overlap made the thick Beat layers every twenty-seven years and a little more, and the lesser layers between them made a barcode fine enough to make an archivist suspicious of mercy.

A term ending, a council meeting, a student's preference for convenience: none of it mattered to the pollen clocks. They kept time like a patient insult.

Pollen grain, count, type. Pollen grain, count, type. Layer by layer, centimeter by centimeter, the current world went downward.

Lisa marked the first wrongness there.

The ratios changed. Canal reeds rose and fell. Vine-mat thickened where the bank had been trained. Hex-forest pollen came in pulses after the Beat layers. Human use left marks in the proportions, because people lived beside water and thought the water had politely failed to notice.

The species held still. A pollen grain from before the university's founding matched one from last week. A pollen grain from before David's oldest cord matched one from the current bloom. No measurable drift. No half-steps. No old forms loosening into new ones.

The modern world, maintained.

Then, at a hundred and thirty centimeters, the modern world stopped.

Lisa checked the dating cord three times. The boundary sat where the archive wall sat in human arithmetic: roughly eighty generations, a little over two thousand years, depending on how much kindness you gave the word *generation*.

Below the line, the grains changed away from the current flora entirely, toward another habit of biology.

Some grains looked like relatives that had forgotten the family. Some looked like attempts. One shape appeared in three samples with three different surface patterns, close enough to argue over and different enough that argument became the point. The catalog did not hold them. The archive did not name them. The theology had a name for the era: Wild Time.

The name helped with filing.

It did not explain.

She presented in the small seminar room beside the archive. History did not get amphitheaters unless someone dead had become useful to a dedication.

The room held her advisor, David, two history students, Amy with the drawings, Carol with a cord, and Tom, because he had built the tube and because his stillness had been making Lisa uneasy for half a year.

She had not invited Mark. Mark would arrive at the first interesting gap and try to build a bridge across it before Lisa had finished showing that the gap existed.

She had not invited Sarah either. Not yet. Sarah would be told after the evidence had stood once without being immediately given a rescue term.

Lisa laid Amy's first drawing on the board: the core as bands. Dark, pale, dark again. A narrow marked line near the lower third.

"Canal-bank core," Lisa said. "One hundred and fifty centimeters. Dated by pollen cycles and Beat layers. The boundary is approximately two thousand years before present."

Her advisor nodded. David's hand found his cord.

"The upper layers are stable. Current species assemblage. Hex-forest, vine-mat, canal-margin reeds, grassland edge. The ratios vary with local use and bank training. The forms do not."

She moved one drawing aside and placed the next: pollen grains enlarged until their shapes could be seen by people who had never spent an evening arguing with a lens.

"This grain is from near the top. This is from seven hundred years before present. This is from just above the boundary."

Amy had drawn them large, side by side, without theatrical emphasis. The sameness did the work.

“They are the same within our resolution,” Lisa said.

One of the history students leaned forward. “Stable selection.”

“That is the standard answer.”

“And your objection?”

Lisa placed Amy’s third drawing on the board.

Above: dense marks, repeated forms, the current world. A thin break. Below: fewer grains, stranger shapes, families that would not sit inside families.

“At the boundary, the modern assemblage stops. Below it, the Wild Time assemblage begins.”

Her advisor’s expression changed only a little. Lisa saw it anyway. Advisors tried to be geology. They were usually weather.

“A settling boundary,” he said. “Late post-Snowball consolidation. That is not surprising.”

“No.”

She let the agreement settle. Agreement was useful if you placed it in the right position. It made the next thing harder to dodge.

“A boundary is expected. This boundary is too clean.”

No one moved.

“There is no mixing zone. No transitional assemblage. No sequence of current forms emerging out of the Wild Time forms. The Wild Time record is variable below the line. The current record is fixed above it. The change itself occupies less than the core can honestly resolve.”

“Climate event?” her advisor said.

“The sediment does not show one.”

She put the chemistry cord on the table. Negative evidence did not look like much. A cord could look almost empty and still accuse the room.

“Mineral content stable across the boundary. Deposition rate stable enough for this question. Organic fraction stable. No flood layer. No ash. No salt incursion. No dryness marker. The pollen changes. The sediment does not.”

David stopped touching his cord.

Lisa had expected more questions. She got fewer. Absence did that when properly placed. It made a room unwilling to speak too soon.

“Say the claim,” Carol said.

Lisa looked at her.

Carol’s cord was ready in her lap.

“The record does not show the current ecosystem emerging from the Wild Time,” Lisa said. “It shows the Wild Time ending, and our world beginning, at the same age as the first archive records.”

Tom’s hands stopped.

Lisa saw because she had been waiting for the missing sound. Tom always had one: thumb against finger, nail against wood, a joint tested without thinking. When the hands stopped, the room lost a small machine.

Amy saw too. Her charcoal paused above the margin.

“Tom?” Lisa said.

He looked at the drawing, not at her.

“I’ve heard that shape before.”

Her advisor stirred. “Shape?”

Tom’s jaw tightened. “Not pollen.”

“What kind of record?” Lisa asked.

“I can’t say yet.”

Yet.

Lisa held that word in place. Refusal had a harder sound. This had a latch in it.

“Then don’t say it badly,” she said.

Tom looked at her then.

“No,” he said. “I won’t.”

After dinner, Lisa took it to Sarah.

Lisa chose the dining hall instead of the study room because the study room belonged to Sarah’s proofs, and this datum needed to arrive without asking permission from the furniture.

She gave the short version: canal-bank core, two-thousand-year boundary, Wild Time below, modern assemblage above, no mixing zone, no climate signal.

Sarah listened with both hands around her cup.

“First Settling,” Sarah said.

Carol, across the table, looked down at her cord.

The term came easily. That was the problem. Good terms could arrive cleanly even when the floor under them had shifted.

“Snowball Arden, recolonization, Wild Time, consolidation,” Sarah said. “The framework expects a late settling boundary. The records have never claimed the Wild Time ended gently.”

“Then show me the ending,” Lisa said.

Sarah looked at her.

“The sequence,” Lisa said. “Not the name. The sequence between one flora and the other.”

“The core may not have the resolution.”

“It has resolution above the boundary.”

“The process may have happened faster than the local deposition can resolve.”

“That is another parameter.”

Nobody spoke for a moment.

Sarah’s mouth tightened. She knew what she had done before anyone named it. She was good enough to defend the framework honestly and honest enough to hear the cost of the defense.

“Yes,” Sarah said.

“How many?” Carol asked.

Sarah looked at Lisa, not Carol. That mattered. Lisa was the one who had brought the absence into the room.

“Fifteen.”

Lisa tied the number on her cord because somebody had to, and because tying it did not mean agreeing that the number was the most important thing.

In the morning she would ask David to send the comparison protocol to Thesken, the southern archives, and the highland collections: not the whole core, not the whole argument, only the dated boundary, the pollen markers, and the question another archivist could test against their own mud.

The cord was nearly full. More knots would make less cord. If Thesken answered, if the southern archives answered, if the highland cores had the same dated layer, she would need a longer cord.

The dining hall continued around them. Bowls. Bread. A dispute near the ferment table about whether a seven-month culture could be called local if its mother culture came from Thesken. Ordinary continuity, loud enough to hide inside.

Lisa looked at Amy’s folded drawing beside her bowl. One ecosystem. A line. Another ecosystem.

No transition.

Chapter 16: Storm

From "The Epistle of the Invisible Hand," v. 3-5:

Let each seek their own increase, and lo, the whole shall prosper; for the Hand that guides the market guideth also the world, and neither Hand hath need of knowing what It does. This is the great mystery: that purpose ariseth from the purposeless, and order from the unordered.

Carol heard the storm before the sky admitted it.

The canal reeds told first. Low stems along the lower bank changed pitch, one row after another, the sound deepening into the chord she had learned to trust more than clear weather. On the towpath, two donkeys standing beside a loaded barge lifted their heads together, ears south, and leaned into the traces.

The handler had bread in his hand. He looked at the donkeys, then at the reeds, then at the empty blue over the southern hills.

"Oh," he said, and put the bread away.

Vellaren used different instruments than the coast. At home, Donna watched frogs. Here, a barge animal and a reed bed could alter a dock schedule before a cloud had arrived, and everyone accepted this as ordinary. Carol still caught herself counting the minutes on her fingers.

Carol measured.

Fourteen minutes later the first cold line touched the dock.

The change ran through the canal faster than people. Lock organisms tightened their seams. The flat cleaners left the stirred silt and settled under the bank lip. A towpath child shouted for covers before any adult had told her to, and three adults obeyed her because on Arden a child might be wrong about many things, but a child standing beside donkeys in a changed wind was treated as part of the instrument.

Carol climbed toward campus with the dog close at her knee. The air had turned metallic. The light panels along the lower path had gone thin and blue. Above them, the acoustic walls were quieting, one garden after another losing its evening chatter as the organisms stopped performing and began holding resources inward.

The storm did not pause for explanation. Carol found herself grateful for that, which was not a sensible response to sleet.

Weather did not make arguments. It made damage.

It struck at dusk.

Not as rain first. As force. The suite wall leaned, settled, and leaned again, a living structure accepting load by moving under it. Carol felt the root-mat take the strain through the floor. The doorframe shifted enough to show a black line where the cut lintel met the grown wall.

The common-room light panel went out.

For four heartbeats the room was perfectly dark.

“Record,” Mark said from somewhere near the table.

“I can’t see the cord,” Lisa said.

“Provisional record.”

The panel returned in a hard white flare, too bright for the room and plainly pleased with itself. It dimmed, brightened, went blue, found a shade of green that made everyone look recently drowned, then settled into a yellow so determined that even Sarah, who had been sitting with a proof cord across her knees, looked offended on theological grounds.

“It’s responding to pressure,” Mark said.

“It’s responding badly,” Amy said.

Ben, who had come up from the dock before the storm closed the lower path, moved his cup out of the panel’s brightest patch. “In theory, the room is lit.”

Nobody laughed very much. That made it funnier.

Then the avenue tree cracked.

The sound crossed campus as one clean break followed by a long tearing argument with gravity. Carol was moving before the second sound ended. Coastal reflex. Storm sound meant count bodies, count boats, count what had changed. Mark said her name. The dog was already at the door.

She took the storm cloak and went out.

The cold hit like water. Sleet crossed the path sideways. The ground steamed where the root-mat ran near the surface and whitened where it didn’t. Living walls bent and flexed. Cut shutters banged against their resin catches. Every sound had been stripped down to function: wind, wood, sleet, breath.

The fallen limb lay across the avenue, bark split open, heartwood exposed.

Amy arrived beside her with a drawing board under her cloak.

“Of course you did,” Carol said.

“You went outside.”

“I’m counting damage.”

“I’m counting what damage shows.”

The branch was thicker than Carol’s body. Where it had torn, the inside showed amber layers, dark sap channels, pale fibers running in spiral bands. Carol had seen broken boat ribs and split masts. She knew what load did to material. She knew where a builder put strength when wind wanted twist and weight wanted sag.

The tree had put strength there.

Amy’s charcoal moved fast over waxed bark. Rain beaded on the surface and ran off; her hand did not slow.

“Radial supports,” Amy said. “Here. Here. They aren’t growth rings. They’re ribs.”

Carol leaned closer. The wind shoved sleet against her cheek.

“Sap channels.”

“Parallel. Same spacing. Look at the spiral grain near the break. It took torsion there.”

“And failed.”

“Yes.”

“Draw all of it,” Carol said.

“I am.”

By midnight the worst had passed. By morning, the campus was steaming.

The warm trees had burned through the stored sugar they needed to burn. Slush retreated from the root paths. Water ran into channels that had not been visible the night before and were now exactly where runoff needed them to be. Students came out wrapped in storm cloth, blinking at the damage and then sorting themselves into work without anyone calling a meeting.

Carol went to the canal because the canal was where damage told the truth.

The towpath had flooded near the lower lock. Three dock workers were cutting a diversion through loose root-mat. Two students carried broken resin shutters uphill. A memorist from the archive had one end of the fallen limb on a drag-sling, talking calmly with a kitchen worker about whether the exposed heartwood should go first to engineering or biology. The kitchen worker was winning.

Nobody was in charge in the way the Assessment had been in charge. No panel. No cord ranking the usefulness of hands. People saw work and entered it.

That part was familiar. Nell’s Point did the same after storms. Donna never assigned cleanup. She looked at a broken trap, and someone brought resin. She looked at a boat, and three people checked the seam. Carol had grown up thinking that was village sense.

Now she wondered what, exactly, sense was made of.

A message bird from the coastal roost reached the archive and spoke in Donna’s flattened public voice. Laura held the sequence, then sent it down in pieces, carried by people who had each kept the part they could remember.

The coast was safe. The barrier islands had taken the worst of it. The mackerel had gone deep two days early. The frogs were right.

Then the part that found Carol:

South headland vine-mat flat at sunset. Full cover by morning. Donna says one night.

Carol held out her hand for the cord before she realized she had not chosen one.

Lisa gave her a spare.

Small. Clean. Enough for the first knots.

Carol tied: south headland, flat at sunset, full cover by morning, root-regrowth, Donna witness. Then she stopped. The loose end had already shortened under her fingers.

Models said years after a coastal flattening. Five, if you were being confident. Donna had seen weeks. Now one night.

The number came to Carol’s mind by habit. Parameters accumulated the way knots accumulated: one more, one more, one more, until the cord grew too short and the pattern stopped pretending to be a list.

She did not tie the number.

“Carol?” Lisa said.

“I have the datum.”

“And the count?”

Carol looked at the flooded towpath, the cut diversion, the workers moving without command, the canal organisms already clearing the silt where the water had overtopped the bank.

“The direction is clearer than the count.”

Lisa took that in. Then she tied something on her own cord, because Lisa was merciless about history and sometimes history was a person refusing a number.

Tom's bridge had moved three inches upstream and was correcting itself.

Carol found him at the engineering grove after the morning work thinned. He had one hand on the living bridge's graft point, the other holding a broken plank from the cut-timber footbridge beside it. The plank was waterlogged, split along the grain, and honest in the way dead things were honest. It had taken the load, failed, and remained failed.

The living bridge had bent. New pale tissue was already thickening at the stressed seam.

"Three inches," Carol said.

Tom nodded.

"Will it hold?"

"Held."

He set the plank down. The bridge creaked under his palm, not in failure. In work.

"It learned the storm," Carol said.

Tom's hand stopped.

The sentence had been too quick. Carol heard it after she said it and waited for him to correct the verb.

He did not.

After a moment, he said, "It recorded load."

They stood with the two bridges: one broken, one revising itself. Wind moved through the wet branches. Somewhere uphill, the recovered light panel in the suite was probably inventing a new opinion about brightness and expecting everyone else to adjust.

Below them, silt made brown threads in the canal. The new plank took another small creak under Tom's hand, and the living edge around the cut tightened by less than a fingernail's width.

Carol kept her eyes on it until she was certain she had not imagined the movement.

Chapter 17: Free Rides

From "The Letter to the Convergents," v. 1-3:

Be not slow to agree, for in agreement is strength, and in strength, survival. Let the one who standeth apart examine herself: is it the world that erreth, or her own eye? For the many are tested by the many, and the one is tested by none.

Mark found the pattern because the shelf had stopped moving.

Carol noticed the shelf first. It had been against the inner wall for nine days, which was impossible by any reasonable Mark-based model of furniture. The Assessment had given him thirty-first, and since then he had not tested a single alternate shelf position. He had been sitting with a number instead.

This morning the sitting ended.

He came into the dining hall with a cord in one hand, bread in the other, and the expression of a person who had found a structural defect in the floor and expected everyone else to stop walking normally.

Mark had never met a pattern he did not think would benefit from immediate public evacuation.

"One in eight hundred," he said.

Carol moved the paste jar away from the cord. Mark and paste near a new idea were a known hazard.

"Good morning," she said.

"Three town-nominated students in one suite. Carol, Amy, Lisa. If the assignment were random across the first-year housing groups, the chance is about one in eight hundred."

"Mother Janet told us it wasn't random."

"Yes." Mark sat. "That is the harmless part."

Carol put down the bread.

Mark's cord had six knots on the active section and one loose tail already too short for his ambitions. Good. The cord would force him to choose.

"The free-rides were grouped for the trial," he said. "Fine. A control group needs proximity. But the rest of us are not noise."

"Us."

"Sarah: best defender of the framework in the cohort. Ben: games the room doesn't admit it is playing. Tom: docks, bridges, load, canal habits. Me, because apparently someone thought a fast model-builder would be useful before the model broke."

"Apparently."

He accepted the correction without noticing it was one.

“Seven people,” he said. “Three nominated by towns, four selected by the market, all placed where corridor contact is unavoidable. A watcher of animals. A watcher of gaps. A watcher of forms. A watcher of proofs. A watcher of games. A watcher of load. A watcher of patterns.”

“That last one is you.”

“Yes. I included myself because excluding myself would be false modesty, and false modesty wastes time.”

Carol looked across the dining hall. Amy was at the far table drawing the hand of a student who kept using it to explain a proof. Lisa had a cord across her lap and was pretending not to listen. Sarah was not there; morning theology. Ben was at the dock more than the dining hall now. Tom was by the lower door, eating standing up, one shoulder turned toward the canal as if part of him had never entered the room.

Seven watchers. One corridor.

“Who arranged it?” Carol asked.

Mark’s hand tightened on the cord.

“The university. Formally. The housing office. Mother Janet’s trial. The market records. The recommendation cords. The stated mechanism is ordinary.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

“I know.”

“Someone chose conditions,” he said. “Maybe only for the free-ride trial. Maybe not. But they were chosen. And they worked.”

“Worked for what?”

He looked at her then, and for once did not arrive ahead of his own answer.

“For convergence.”

The word should have belonged to theology. It sounded different with paste on the table and a too-short cord between them.

Carol carried the thought badly for half the day.

She did not dislike being watched. Fieldwork trained that out of you. If a gull watched you collect crab data, you accepted the gull as local weather. If Donna watched you tie a knot wrong, you corrected the knot and pretended you had been about to do that anyway.

The canal animals did not know they were maintaining a canal. They moved in the water, followed cues, cleared silt, sealed cracks. The canal held because each organism did its own small correct thing inside conditions someone else had made.

Carol did not like how easily the comparison arrived.

She took the upper corridor past Mercer’s office because the lower path was flooded again. The excuse was almost true.

Three faculty members stood outside Mercer’s open door.

Nobody sounded angry. Anger would have made it easier to file. The senior woman had one hand on Mercer’s forearm, the brief warm contact of genuine concern. A younger man stood half a pace back with the earnest misery of someone trying to help a person refuse help less stubbornly.

“The enrollment is not recovering,” the woman said. “Two students this term, Mercer.”

“Three, if you count students who keep coming after being advised not to.”

“That is precisely the concern.”

Mercer's voice stayed level. "The work is sound."

"The work is interesting. Interesting and productive are not identical." She said it kindly. "Your students are bright. Ben is bright. Everyone knows that. But the Assessment cannot place brilliance it cannot read."

"Then the instrument is poor."

The younger man winced. Mercer had made the kindness harder to continue.

"No one is asking you to stop," he said. "We are asking you to connect your work to the main framework. Let people help you."

Carol stood still.

Three good people, sincerely worried, trying to rescue a man from being right in the wrong direction.

Mercer saw her over the senior woman's shoulder. His expression did not change. On Mercer, stillness could fill a room.

"I'll think about it," he said.

They left with relief on their faces.

Mercer remained in the doorway.

"You heard enough," he said.

"Yes."

"Good."

He went back into his office and did not invite her in. Carol liked him more for that.

That evening, Amy drew the corridor.

Not the suite corridor. Mercer's. Three figures leaning inward, one figure in a doorway, and a fifth shape at the edge where Carol had stood. Amy had not been there. Carol had described it badly and Amy had drawn it accurately anyway.

"They look kind," Carol said.

"They were kind."

"Yes."

Amy darkened the space between the three faculty members and Mercer. "That's the problem."

Mark had joined them on the floor with the free-ride cord. Lisa sat on the windowsill, repairing one of her own cords where the last knot had crowded the tail. Sarah listened from Mark's shelf. Ben had come up from the dock smelling faintly of ferment and cold air. Tom stood near the door, where the corridor could still claim him if needed.

"Seven watchers," Mark said.

"You keep saying watchers," Ben said.

"Do you object?"

"No. I'm pricing it."

"Can you do that in silence?"

"In theory."

Sarah smiled once, small and involuntary. Mark saw it and had the good sense not to optimize the moment.

Carol looked at the corridor. Seven watchers, one light panel, one board, too many cords for the hooks by the door. Conditions arranged well enough that questions had begun finding each other without anyone having to call a meeting.

“Someone put us here,” Carol said.

Nobody argued.

“That doesn’t make the questions false.”

Lisa’s fingers paused on her repair cord. “No. It makes the room part of the record.”

Ben leaned back against the wall. “And it gives the experiment a new problem.”

“Us noticing,” Amy said.

Tom said nothing. His hands were still.

“We noticed,” she said.

Chapter 18: Professor Mercer

From “The Book of the Gradient,” v. 2-4:

In every place there is a slope, and the slope pointeth upward, and the creature that followeth the slope ascendeth. It needeth not see the summit. It needeth not know the mountain’s shape. It needeth only feel which way is up, and step, and step again, and each step shall be higher than the last.

Mercer’s lecture was scheduled for the largest amphitheater on campus.

Eleven people came.

Carol counted because empty seats were data. Three hundred seats curved upward in clean wooden rows, every surface shaped to carry one voice to a crowd. The lecture was listed. The doors were open. Nobody had stopped anyone from coming.

In a three-hundred-seat amphitheater, eleven meant something.

The suite took one row. Ben had come up from the dock with paste in a covered jar. Sarah sat beside him and did not look beside him. Tom stood near the back rail until Mercer looked at him once; then he sat, which was how Tom admitted Mercer had him.

Two faculty members occupied the rear, cords out, faces arranged into scholarly neutrality. A woman Carol did not know sat three rows behind the suite. Travel cloak. Thesken knot-style on the belt. Lisa’s stillness, older and less apologetic.

Mercer stood at the center with one cord and no visible disappointment. Practice, probably.

“The Kannad cycle,” he said.

He did not begin with heresy. He began with the Church’s best example: predator and prey, twenty-three quarter-years, predicted, observed, confirmed. No rescue term. No apology. A model behaving so well that even Carol, who distrusted tidy behavior on principle, could feel the beauty of it.

Mercer marked the board once.

“Exact fit.”

Then another system. Consumer-resource ratio. Close, then closer after a temperature correction.

One mark.

Cleaner fish. Thousands of interactions. No observed cheating events where the standard model expected several.

Two marks.

Storm recovery. Years predicted; months observed, with some root systems returning overnight.

One mark.

Lisa's pollen boundary. Two-thousand-year wall. Current assemblage above, Wild Time below, no climate signal, no transition sequence.

One mark.

Canal maintenance fauna. Twelve-second pause, locally simultaneous, no visible signal, temperature-invariant.

Mercer held the pigment above the board.

"Unaccommodated," he said.

He went on like that for an hour. Not arguing. Placing. One datum, one fit, one added term. The board began to look like a canal map after bad weather: separate trouble marks, all pointing downstream.

"A correct model simplifies under pressure," Mercer said. "It does not grow a new support every time the weather changes."

He lifted the cord in his left hand. Old fiber, repaired twice, knots dense enough that the cord had become more index than object.

"Fifteen years. Forty-three accommodations added. None removed."

His voice carried to every unused seat.

"The models do not converge. They elaborate."

Afterward, nobody moved quickly.

The two faculty members left first. They spoke to Mercer at the door, warmly, and their warmth did the same work as the empty seats. Good lecture. Interesting work. Hope to see the next version tied more clearly to the main framework.

Mercer thanked them.

Ben watched this with the expression he saved for games already lost.

"Office," Mercer said when the faculty were gone.

The suite followed him through the old campus corridors to the small room with the always-open door. Carol had expected clutter. Mercer's office was not cluttered. It was simply full: cords on pegs by year, boards rubbed grey from repeated erasure, specimen sketches, parameter lists, old paste jars repurposed as weight stones. Fifteen years of work, compressed until the room had no spare surface left.

"I do not recruit," Mercer said once they had found places. "I share data."

"You scheduled a public lecture," Mark said.

"Yes."

"In the largest amphitheater."

"Yes."

"With eleven people."

"Now you know something about public."

Mark shut his mouth. Not permanently. Long enough to count.

Sarah stood near the door. She had listened to the lecture with her face quiet and her hands still, which meant nothing was quiet or still inside her. "You don't know what it means."

Mercer looked at her with the care of a man who understood the cost of answering too quickly.

"No."

“But you know the framework is failing.”

“I know what my count says.”

“That is a count, not a framework.”

“No.”

Sarah closed her eyes once. Carol saw the pain of that honesty land in her and respected Mercer for not trying to soften it.

The traveler appeared in the doorway.

Mercer turned. “Nora.”

She entered after the smallest possible pause, not asking permission and not taking more space than the room offered. Tom’s hands stopped.

Carol saw it. So did Lisa. Amy’s pigment hand moved once on the edge of her board without drawing.

“Nora works on canal infrastructure at Thesken,” Mercer said.

“Maintenance ecology,” Nora said. “Dredging fauna, root-wall coordination, lock repair.”

Tom’s voice was flat. “You’ve been to Vellaren.”

“Once.”

“The dock.”

“Yes.”

The rest of them stayed quiet.

Nora looked at Tom directly. “You asked the right question about the canal. I told you who else was asking.”

Tom’s jaw worked.

“You could have said that before,” Mark said.

Tom did not look at him. “No.”

Mark started to answer. Ben touched his wrist. Mark stopped.

Nora turned to the room. “There are people in several institutions counting the same kind of failure. They compare when they can. Quietly. The work is clean. The rooms are hard.”

“An underground,” Carol said.

Mercer shook his head once. “A conversation.”

Carol looked at the cords on Mercer’s wall. Fifteen years of questions kept alive by a man in an office small enough that eleven people had made it crowded.

“What kind of world is this?” Mercer asked.

Nobody answered.

Chapter 19: Ben's Last Theorem

From "The Book of Infinities," vii. 3-4:

And the student shall calculate, and the calculation shall produce infinity, and the student shall be troubled. But let him not despair, for the infinity is not of the world but of the reckoning.

Ben received the final notice at the dock.

Considerate of the university. Also efficient. The dock was where he had been during most open hours of the appeal window, and Arden institutions were very good at finding a person when finding him made the process cleaner.

The Optimizer was not Mother Janet. He was a narrow man with a proceedings cord and the careful face of someone delivering an injury with both hands so it would not spill.

"The continuation appeal has been reviewed," he said.

Ben knew.

He knew from the cord in the man's hand, from the absence of Mother Janet, from the fact that the Optimizer had come to the dock instead of asking him to attend a room where the panel could make the decision look larger than one student. He knew because the appeal had required the Assessment to admit it had measured the wrong thing, and institutions did not survive by making that admission often.

"The reallocation fee remains in effect."

The canal beside them kept working. Barges moved. Donkeys leaned into traces. The reeds sang a mild, businesslike chord in the crosswind.

The dock had the decency to keep its prices visible.

"Yes," Ben said.

The Optimizer recited the amount. Ben had already calculated it three ways: family savings, dock wages, possible lending, Darren's room over the ferment shop if Darren meant the offer and if Ben was willing to understand the offer as a future rather than a kindness.

The number remained the number.

"My family can't cover it."

"There are good reallocation paths," the Optimizer said. "Applied economics. Trade modeling. Canal logistics. Your assessment profile shows unusually strong pattern recognition."

"This is not a judgment of your worth," the Optimizer said.

"No," Ben said. "It's a price."

The man looked relieved.

"Yes. In one sense."

“In the important sense.”

The relief left. Ben had not meant to make him sad. The man was doing his work. The work was wrong.

When the Optimizer left, Ben stayed on the dock until a barge passed so precisely through the lock that its port side cleared the center mark by less than a hand. Nobody aboard noticed.

The room was easier to pack than to leave.

He owned very little. Clothes. Food bowl. Three cords. One shell Tom had given him without explanation, which made it either a gift or a problem Tom had not yet named. The game-theory cord went last.

Mark stood in the doorway with a folded route schedule in his hands and did not offer it.

Ben looked at the schedule.

Mark looked at the schedule.

“Do you want this?” Mark asked.

“No.”

Mark folded it smaller. “Good. I made it anyway.”

“Obviously.”

Mark’s thumb flattened one corner. “Three efficient paths. One socially defensible one.”

“Which one is that?”

“The one where we carry your bag.”

“Inefficient.”

“Yes.”

Ben sat on the bed because standing had become too theatrical. “Company, then.”

Mark came in and sat on the floor. He put the folded schedule beside him like a tool he had agreed not to use.

Amy’s pigment scratched steadily. When Ben looked, the page showed his bed already bare and the bag half-packed beside it. Lisa asked the date, touched her cord, and left the knot untied. Carol sat by the door with her cord in her lap. Tom leaned in the corridor, hands quiet.

Sarah was absent.

Ben understood that too. Sarah’s absences had become precise. If she could not safely hold the room, she took herself somewhere built for sound and let the sound hold her instead.

“The model selected me in,” Ben said. “Now the model selects me out.”

Carol nodded.

“Consistent model,” Mark said, with visible pain.

“Yes.”

“Bad model.”

“Also yes.”

They packed in the useful silence after that.

Sarah came before the last cord went into the bag.

She stood at the threshold with rain in her hair though the rain had stopped an hour ago. Acoustic garden, then. Ben had been right.

“I missed the packing,” she said.

“In theory, there is still one cord.”

“Then I am in time.”

She crossed the room and picked up the game-theory cord. Her hands were careful with it.

“This belongs with you,” she said.

“The university disagrees.”

“The university is wrong.”

Nobody moved. Sarah said wrong with a theologian’s clarity, not a friend’s comfort. Ben had heard her defend models all year. He knew what it cost her to accuse an institution of mismeasurement and let the accusation stand without a rescue term.

He took the cord.

“Thank you.”

She sat beside him on the floor. A hand’s width closer than her usual distance.

Ben noticed. He did not name it.

The last night had paste because grief without paste would have been uncivilized.

Ben brought Darren’s seven-month. Mark brought the campus three-month as a control, then looked ashamed of the word control and opened it anyway. Tom tasted both.

“Good,” Tom said of Darren’s.

Mark inhaled.

“Fine,” Tom said of the campus paste.

“At last,” Mark said. “A ranked scale.”

“No.”

For a little while the room was almost itself.

Then almost ran out.

Ben held the empty paste jar between his hands. “I have a theorem.”

Nobody filled the silence.

“People cooperate,” he said. “Individually. Reliably. Too reliably for the models, if you count closely enough. But institutions compete. The Assessment competes for reputation. The university competes for placement. The Council competes for the authority to name what counts. Nobody inside the institution is cruel, and the institution still ejects.”

He looked at Sarah because she would know the difference between a claim and a confession.

“The competition didn’t disappear. It moved up a level.”

Mark’s eyes sharpened. Carol’s hand found her cord. Lisa did not tie yet. Good. He needed to finish before history made him neater than he was.

“Look at people only and the models fail. Look at institutions and they work too well. Selection. Competition. Capture. The culture is the wild thing.”

The panel hummed at its post-storm brightness. The dog sighed in Amy’s doorway.

“That’s my theorem.”

Sarah's knee touched his. Not by accident. Not by enough to demand anything. Enough to be true.

"In theory," Ben said, "I'll miss this."

Amy wiped her face with the heel of her hand and looked annoyed at the biology of tears. "Not in theory."

Ben tried to answer lightly and failed.

"No," he said. "Not in theory."

Darren's room over the ferment shop had a low ceiling, one resin window, and a smell that began as paste and became weather after ten minutes.

"It leaks in hard rain," Darren said.

"So does the university."

Darren considered him. "Roof or institution?"

"Yes."

The fermenter smiled and handed him a peg for his cords.

From the window Ben could see the canal, the lock, the lower road, and the hill rising toward Vellaren. Not exile, then. A different vantage point.

He hung the game-theory cord where he could reach it from the bed.

By the second morning he had learned the shop's real curriculum. Prices changed when the buyer's cousin had helped repair a roof. Bulk orders softened when a child was ill. Nobody cheated. Everyone adjusted. The numbers were honest, and the honesty made room for relationship in ways no market model admitted.

Chapter 20: Hayne's Office

Professor Hayne's office looked like a room that had lost an argument with evidence and respected the outcome.

Boards covered two walls. Not display boards. Work boards, rubbed grey from years of drawing and erasing, with the newest diagrams laid over older ghosts. Breeding lines. Population comparisons. Trait maps in three pigments. Cords hung from pegs by project, not by beauty, and one of the pegs had been repaired with twine because the evidence had outgrown the furniture before the department had approved another peg.

Carol liked the room immediately.

Hayne did not look surprised to see her.

"Mercer sent you."

"He gave me your name."

"Mercer gives my name to students who bring him trouble." Hayne was small, sharp, and tired in a way Carol recognized from people who had watched the same tide pool too long for comfort and not long enough for an answer. "What did you bring?"

Carol took out her cords.

"Behavior."

Hayne looked at the cords, then at Carol's face. "Show me one that doesn't fit."

"Only one?"

Carol liked her better for asking in units.

For the first time, Hayne almost smiled.

Carol started with the canal pause.

Twelve seconds. Every working organism in the channel. No visible signal. Forty-seven sessions when she first reported it; more now. Then the cleaner fish records: thousands of interactions, no cheating events where the standard model expected several. Then the storm recovery. Then Donna's mackerel and frogs, because Hayne listened well enough to deserve Donna.

Hayne did not interrupt. Her fingers moved on a cord only twice, both times when Carol gave a duration.

When Carol finished, Hayne stood and went to the largest board.

"Canal dredgers," she said. "Vellaren and Thesken populations. Three hundred miles apart. Separated long enough for neutral drift to show."

She drew two columns. Carol could follow the organism shapes, not the genome notation. Hayne's hand made the rest legible: blue for shared traits, red for differences, black for measured function.

"Fifty-two heritable differences I can measure cleanly."

Red marks appeared down the board.

"Under the standard model, some should be noise. Harmless differences. Local history. Copying error. Drift."

Black marks followed every red one.

"All functional."

Carol waited.

Hayne tapped the board once. "Every difference does work. Cold-water enzyme timing. Sediment-binding surface. Oxygen handling. Local canal geometry. Fifty-two differences. Fifty-two functions. No drift."

The office had good light. The red and black marks looked calm in it.

"Could selection remove the noise?" Carol asked.

"Some. Not all. Not this cleanly. And if selection were that strong everywhere, we would still find failed variants, partial variants, history. We find function."

Hayne took down a second cord.

"I tried to make noise."

Carol looked at her.

"Five years of stress crosses. Chemical exposure. Temperature shifts. Crosses between separated populations. The stressed generation changes. The offspring snap back."

"Snap."

"My word. Not the department's." Hayne's mouth tightened. "The department prefers 'robust inheritance.' It sounds less like a door closing."

She drew another line. Parent. Stressed generation. Offspring. Return.

"Not approximate return. Exact, within what I can measure. Whatever changes under stress does not enter the inheritance."

Carol thought of the storm branch. Broken, exposed, repairing. The bridge recording load. Biology willing to respond and unwilling to let the response become random.

"A correction system," she said.

"A very good one."

"Too good?"

"Too good for the story we tell about it."

They sat with that for a while.

Hayne gave her water. The cup had root-fiber scratches and a faded paint mark where a student had once claimed it. Hayne saw Carol notice.

"My third first-year," she said. "Genuine. Works in Thesken now."

"Nora?"

Hayne looked at her for a long moment.

"Mercer talks too much."

"Mercer did not tell me."

"Then Tom has started talking."

“Almost.”

Hayne accepted almost as a meaningful category.

She lifted one more chart but did not hand it over. “There are maintained blocks in the inheritance that do not map to traits I can identify. They are protected across every organism I’ve tested. Dredgers, cleaners, root systems. Same conserved blocks. No drift, no recombination I can measure.”

“What do they do?”

“I don’t know.”

“But they’re maintained.”

“Perfectly.”

“How many accommodations?” Carol asked.

Hayne laughed once. No humor. Recognition.

“I stopped at sixty.”

“Stopped counting?”

“Stopped pretending the number was useful. After a while the count is only a polite way of delaying the conclusion.”

Carol touched the short cord from the storm. The direction is clearer than the count. She had said that yesterday. Hayne had spent five years arriving at the same sentence by a longer path.

Hayne took a working cord from her desk. Not all of them. One cord, dense but not impossible, the index into five years of work. Enough to find the work again in Hayne’s hands.

“Take this to Mercer,” she said.

Carol did not reach for it immediately. Seventeenth place was not a position yet. It was a promise the university could still withdraw, especially from a town-nominated student who made senior people expensive to ignore.

“Do you want me to?”

“Yes.”

“To Mercer only?”

Hayne’s face changed. Very little. Enough.

“No,” she said. “Not only.”

Carol took the cord.

“How many of you are there?” Hayne asked.

Carol thought of the suite. Ben in the ferment shop. Nora in Mercer’s doorway. Lisa’s wall. Tom’s hands. Sarah’s number moving where the evidence took it, though Sarah would not thank anyone for saying so out loud.

“Enough to compare,” Carol said.

Hayne’s nod did not settle on either count.

Chapter 21: The Dorm Suite, Late at Night

From "The Meditation on Blindness," v. 1-2:

Blessed is the Gradient that seeketh not, for its works are greater than any seeking hand could fashion.

Carol had not meant to summon everyone.

She came back from Hayne's office with a cord on her belt that had not been there when she left and stood too long by Mark's board before touching the pigment stick. Amy saw her face. After that, privacy was gone. Amy found Lisa. Lisa found Mark. Mark found Sarah. Someone sent a dock child downhill with four words for Ben: Carol has new data.

Ben brought the seven-month paste.

No joke at first, which told them enough.

Carol counted them once because uncounted patterns lied.

Mark on the chair he had not optimized since Ben left. Amy in the doorway with the dog pressed against her ankle. Lisa on the windowsill, cords arranged by age. Sarah on the edge of Mark's shelf, hands folded too carefully. Tom near the corridor, where leaving would be possible. Ben on the floor beside the paste jar, dock coat still damp at the hem.

The light panel held its post-storm brightness with the serene confidence of a creature that had won a dispute by outlasting everyone.

"Status?" Ben asked.

"Ongoing," Carol said.

"Excellent. I dislike closure."

Carol let the almost-joke stand. It gave them one breath and asked for nothing else.

Carol stood and took the pigment stick.

Mark's board had stopped being Mark's many arguments ago. Carol had stopped asking whose board it was. She began with crabs.

Crabs shifting three weeks before the water changed. Cleaner fish with no cheating events in records large enough to expect them. Canal fauna pausing for twelve seconds. Dredgers shifting before the panels. Storm recovery in one night. Hayne's dredger populations: fifty-two heritable differences, fifty-two functions, no neutral drift. Stress variation snapping back before it could become inheritance.

Mark came out of the chair before she had finished the inheritance line.

"Order matters," he said.

“Not yet.”

“Especially yet. If we do this as a heap, every listener will choose the one part they can dismiss.”

“If you order it too soon, they’ll think the order is the evidence.”

Mark stopped with his hand half-raised. He hated that answer because he understood it.

Lisa leaned forward from the windowsill. “Start with what cannot be made pretty.”

“Which is?”

“Absence.”

Carol gave her the pigment stick.

Lisa did not stand. She drew one line beneath Carol’s list and spoke over the scratch of pigment. “Archive: roughly eighty generations with useful precision. Pollen wall: same age. Above it, current assemblage, unchanged in form. Below it, Wild Time variation. No mixing sequence. No climate signal in the sediment.”

Amy passed over the core drawing. One ecosystem. A line. Another ecosystem.

“Thesken will answer soon,” Lisa said. “The highland collections may take longer. The local record is already ugly enough.”

Sarah looked up. “Ugly is not a category.”

“It is when a record ends exactly where doctrine begins.”

“Lisa.”

“No. I am not making that sentence smoother for you.”

Sarah took the blow without moving. Then she made herself answer it. “First Settling predicts a boundary.”

“Show me the settling.”

“The core may not have the resolution.”

“It has resolution above the boundary.”

“The change may have happened faster than the local deposition can preserve.”

“Another parameter,” Carol said.

Sarah closed her eyes once.

“Yes.”

Ben reached for the paste jar, remembered he had not opened it, and put his hand flat on the floor instead. “Before this becomes a devotional argument, who gets hurt when it leaves?”

“Everyone,” Mark said.

“Unhelpful. Also true.” Ben looked at Carol. “Mercer. Hayne. Nora. The Thesken visitor. Me, although the university has already done the efficient part. You.”

Carol kept the pigment stick in her hand.

“Your continuation is not secure enough to survive becoming expensive,” Ben said.

Amy’s hand moved toward Carol and stopped.

“I know,” Carol said.

“Knowing is not the same as pricing it.”

“Then price it.”

Ben did. She could see the calculation cross his face and fail to become a joke.

“Town nomination withdrawn if Nell’s Point decides you used their seat to shame the school. Continuation review if the university calls this disruption instead of scholarship. Lenders do not like uncertainty. Roof work waits when lenders do not like uncertainty.”

Donna’s hands on her shoulders. Fetch me one.

Carol wrote her own name under the list.

Ben looked away first.

“Mercer and Hayne choose their speed,” Carol said. “Their names do not move because we are impatient.”

“Good,” Ben said. “Now Tom.”

Tom had the shell in both hands already.

“Wall thickness follows stress,” he said. “Base thick. Apex thin. Exact load profile. No waste.”

Mark opened his mouth. Tom shook his head once, and Mark shut it.

“The bridge records load. The branch recorded torsion. The canal records silt. Everything I touch solves a material problem better than I can solve it, and I am good at material problems.”

He looked at the corridor, not at them.

“Nora showed me where to look. I kept it back because I thought knowing before proof would spoil the looking. Then I kept it back because Nora had trusted me. Then because it was easier.”

His thumb scraped the shell edge.

“If this goes through her channels, I am not evidence. I am a handle.”

“Then not through Nora unless you choose it,” Carol said.

Tom looked at her for long enough to test the offer.

“I choose later.”

“Then later.”

Amy had been spreading drawings while they spoke. Canal dredger. Cleaner fish. Bark cross-section. Shell. Garden fungus. Branch interior. Fewer than she wanted; more than the floor wanted.

“Where are the scarred ones?” she asked.

Nobody had one.

She put Carol’s portrait beside the specimens. The scar from temple to cheek, too pale in the panel light.

“Everything else returns to pattern,” Amy said. “This didn’t.”

“Thank you,” Carol said.

“It’s a useful face.”

“Worse.”

“Yes.” Amy touched the branch drawing. “Damage opened the tree. The inside had plan in it.”

Sarah stood then, not smoothly. Her sleeve caught on the shelf peg and she had to free it before she could speak.

“I can defend each piece.”

Lisa made a sound.

“I can,” Sarah said. “Cleaner fish. Pollen wall. Canal pause, if you let me use hidden communication. Hayne’s inheritance, if stability is nearly perfect. Tom’s shell, if selection found efficient forms. Amy’s specimens, if stabilizing pressure is stronger than we thought.”

"That's a lot of if," Ben said.

"Yes."

The admission came out too quietly. Sarah swallowed and tried again.

"Separately, I can defend them. Together, the direction is wrong. Every defense asks for more machinery. Every machine moves away from economy."

Her hand went to the cord at her belt and stayed there.

"My private number is moving. I hate that. I am saying it anyway."

Ben's hand shifted on the floor. Sarah's smallest finger touched his and then let go.

Mark took the pigment stick from Carol and added seven marks beside her name.

"The suite is selected," he said.

This time nobody corrected the word.

"Three town-nominated students. Four market-selected edge cases. Seven watchers in one corridor. The official reason explains part of it. It does not explain this."

"Built by the university," Lisa said.

"Maybe."

"By Mother Janet."

"Maybe."

"By Mercer."

"Not alone."

Tom's thumb tightened on the shell.

"Someone built this," Tom said.

Carol stopped counting.

Sarah's voice came out very soft.

"Built by whom?"

God was an answer large enough to hide every bad count inside it. Carol felt the old harbor of the word and let it pass.

"I don't know," she said.

She looked at her name under the list. It was only a mark. It was also Nell's Point, Donna's roof, the continuation line, the number people with money answered quickly.

"I want to find out. I can't do it alone."

Mark said, "Obviously."

Amy's shoulder touched hers. Lisa tied one knot. Ben opened the paste at last and made a face at the smell.

"Mercer and Hayne first," Carol said. "Then anyone who can carry a true part without owning the whole. No clean version. No hidden sources. No using Tom as a road unless Tom says yes."

Tom said, "I'm in. Later."

"Later counts."

Sarah looked at the board.

"The evidence goes first," she said. "I go where it goes."

Chapter 22: The Morning After

No epigraph.

The scriptures had had their turn.

The campus woke normally.

Panels dimmed as daylight strengthened. Acoustic animals passed from night register to morning register. The dining hall served roots, dark bread, and three pastes arranged by age and confidence. Students walked to recitation with cords in hand. The Great Amphitheater filled. The Fundamental Proof rose into the shaped wood, beautiful as ever, carried by hundreds of voices that had not spent the night staring at a board full of evidence.

The world did not know it had been reclassified by seven exhausted students in a corridor.

Carol found this rude and useful.

She went to the canal.

The dog came with her. It had no opinion about theology, which was one of its better traits. It cared about Carol's position, the path, the sun, and whether anything nearby needed watching. This morning, that made it the sanest creature in Vellaren.

The defunct spur worked as it always worked. Dredgers combed the bottom in overlapping bands. Sealant organisms worried at the root-wall cracks. Flat cleaners moved through disturbed silt. The reeds made a small chord in the mild wind.

At nine minutes past the hour, the channel stopped.

Every working organism held still.

Carol counted twelve heartbeats.

On the thirteenth, the canal resumed.

She tied the time. She tied the duration. She did not tie an interpretation. The pause had not become easier because she had a larger word for the world. If anything, the larger word had made the small silence more exact.

Someone built this.

Built by whom.

The two knots waited on the blank cord in her room. She had tied them after everyone left, while the light panel watched with its usual lack of humility. Two knots only. Door, not room.

Carol sat until the canal had done three more ordinary things.

She had become, without planning it, the world's leading specialist in a twelve-heartbeat silence. It was either a narrow field or a very broad one, depending on what the silence meant.

Then she went uphill.

The Garden of Proof looked better than it deserved.

That annoyed her too.

The path curved between spiral ground cover and branching vine. The hexagonal spacing of the young trees held perfectly where no gardener had corrected it. Fungi made pale arcs along the shaded side of the path. The garden had been used for generations as an argument: leave the world alone and beauty emerges.

Carol stood inside the argument and looked at the maintenance work.

The beauty remained, worst part and best part together. A false explanation had not made the moss less green. It had not made the spirals clumsy. It had not made Sarah's love of the proofs foolish.

Amy was sitting near the inner wall, drawing the root buttresses.

"I thought you'd be here," Carol said.

"I thought you'd go to the canal first."

"I did."

"Twelve seconds?"

"Twelve."

Amy nodded as if the canal had kept an appointment.

Carol sat beside her. The space between them had become easy over the year, which did not mean small. Amy still needed room to draw. Carol still needed room to watch. They had learned the shape of both needs and stopped apologizing for them.

Amy turned the board slightly.

She had drawn the garden as structure: root loads, branch angles, buttresses, fungal arcs, the spiral cover at the center. Not a pretty garden. A working one.

"Does it change the drawing?" Carol asked.

"Yes."

"How?"

Amy considered the question with the seriousness she gave to surfaces. "Before, I was drawing beauty that happened without wanting to. Now I'm drawing beauty someone made possible."

"Is that worse?"

"No."

The answer came quickly enough to surprise both of them.

Amy looked at the garden, then at Carol's scar, then back to the board. "Accidental beauty is still beauty. Intended beauty is not less. It just means someone is missing from the frame."

Carol let that sit. Amy had a way of changing the drawing without touching the lines.

"I don't know what to do next," Carol said.

"Yes, you do."

"Watch?"

"Watch. Knot. Ask people who see what you don't. Refuse bad answers. Accept good paste when Ben brings it."

“That last one is methodologically weak.”

“It’s reproducible.”

Carol almost laughed. It came out tired and real.

The garden’s acoustic animals began their late-morning chord. It moved through the living wall and back again, shaped by wood that had been grown to hold sound and now, to Carol’s eye, had also been made to look as if it had grown there by argument alone.

The suite was empty when Carol returned.

Mark had gone to find Mercer. Lisa was in the archive, probably making a longer cord and pretending it was only a practical decision. Sarah had morning obligations and a face that would make those obligations harder. Tom was at the dock. Ben was already there. Amy remained in the garden.

The light panel greeted Carol with excessive competence.

“Fine,” she said. “You were right about the brightness.”

The panel glowed.

“Do not become difficult about victory.”

“The results speak for themselves, then.”

The panel continued glowing, which was its entire position and always had been.

Carol took out the blank cord. Two knots already: someone built this; built by whom. The remaining length lay clean across her lap. Enough for a beginning. Not enough for an answer. Good.

She picked up Nell’s scratched lens.

The resin had gone cloudier at the edge. The center still held. Nell had ground it for crab legs, not world history. Carol had brought it to Vellaren thinking it was a tool for small things. It was still that. Small things were how the large ones entered.

She clipped the new cord to her belt beside the crab cord, the canal cord, the storm cord, and Hayne’s index cord.

The dog stood.

“Yes,” Carol said. “Canal.”

The dog accepted this with professional satisfaction.

Carol left the room. Behind her, the panel held its brightness. Ahead, the campus waited.

Chapter 23: Open Hands

From "The Storehouse Sayings," common text:

What is kept too carefully rots in the store. What is sent out returns changed, but it returns alive.

The evidence stayed in the suite for two days.

Carol meant to send it out. Meaning did not solve the route.

Every path used somebody. Mercer and Hayne had names the institution could bruise. Nora had channels Tom had not agreed to become. Ben had dock routes and no seat. Lisa had memorists. Sarah had the Church, whose roads were wide enough to change the cargo.

So they practiced until the evidence stopped sounding like one person's claim and started sounding like work other people could check.

Sarah had nothing so useful to offer yet. To her, the evidence was trouble for every posture the Church had ever taught her to hold.

She could carry a proof for a thousand steps. This was not a proof.

Mark made the first portable version.

He did not call it a summary, which was wise. Lisa would have objected on historical grounds, and Carol would have objected on measurement grounds, and Ben would have objected because summaries were what people made when they wanted cargo to look smaller on a fee table.

"Fifteen observations," Mark said. "Each one independent. Each one checkable. Any five imply the question. Any ten make avoidance expensive. All fifteen make avoidance a full-time profession."

"That last part is not part of the recitation," Sarah said.

"No. But it is accurate."

Lisa copied the index onto three cords because the first one shortened under her hands before she had finished the inheritance data. She looked personally offended by this, as if the cord had chosen a poor moment to obey physics.

"The cord is not the evidence," she said, mostly to herself. "It points to the evidence."

"Yes," Carol said.

"Then it should point all the way."

"Then use more cords."

Lisa looked at the three cords laid across the table. "I dislike that you are right."

Ben arrived with dock cord, canal mud on one boot, and a jar of seven-month paste tucked under his arm.

"For strength," he said.

“For punishment?” Amy asked.

“That depends on the age.”

“Seven months.”

“Then both.”

Carol waited until Mark had finished the fifth recitation and Lisa had stopped correcting his order by breathing sharply through her nose. Then she said, “Mercer and Hayne first.”

Ben looked at her.

“Their names are in this,” Carol said. “Their work. Their risk.”

“They know.”

“They have not been asked about speed.”

Mark’s fingers tightened on the route cord. Lisa looked at the three index cords and made herself not touch them.

Mark said, “Carol is correct.”

Ben closed his eyes. “I hate when the correct answer slows cargo.”

“Cargo that arrives with the wrong people crushed underneath it is not good logistics,” Tom said.

Ben opened one eye. “That was almost a metaphor.”

“It was a load statement.”

“Much better.”

Carol thought of Donna’s hands on her shoulders. The credential had not stopped mattering. Roof resin. Timber credit. The kind of number people answered quickly. Not enough for her to trade her eyes for it.

So Carol went to Mercer, and Sarah went to Hayne.

Mercer listened from the window of his office, one hand on the old forty-three-parameter cord that had worn shiny where his thumb had worried it for years.

“You are going to send it out,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Through whom?”

“Everyone we can ask without making them someone else’s tool.”

That made him look at her.

“That is a better rule than most first-years bring me.”

“I am not asking for praise.”

“No,” Mercer said. “You are asking whether I accept the risk.” His thumb moved once on the cord. “Carol, I accepted it fifteen years ago. What I lacked was company. Enough company for the truth to outlive me.”

Hayne gave Sarah four words.

“Distribute it. Accurately.”

Then, after a pause, she added, “And do not let them call the inheritance data metaphor.”

Sarah promised that with the seriousness of someone who had been trained to know when words tried to steal weight.

The small hall off the theology archive was cold in the morning.

It faced north. Sarah had once admired that as discipline. Rooms should not flatter the body when the mind was being trained. Now she suspected the building had simply grown where light and load allowed and that the Church had been making virtues out of thermal inconvenience for several centuries.

Unworthy. Probably correct.

Forty people came, more or less. Students. Two junior faculty pretending not to represent anyone. A Thesken visitor who had missed his morning barge. Father Martin in the third row. Father Kevin at the back, hands folded, expression careful enough that Sarah nearly lost her voice before she used it.

Carol sat on the floor near the east wall with her cord loose in her lap. Amy sat beside her, drawing the benches, the door, and Father Kevin's folded hands. Mark had a chair and did not use the back of it. Lisa held the three index cords. Tom stood near the service door. Ben stood near Tom, which was not an accident. It also was not yet testimony.

Father Kevin stepped forward before Sarah could.

"Before anyone speaks," he said, "this gathering is informal. The claims have not been reviewed by faculty committee, council board, or doctrinal bench. Students who attach their names to unreviewed public distribution should understand that the university cannot shield them from academic consequence."

Carol felt them find the soft places: continuation, town nomination, Donna's roof waiting behind whichever number people gave her.

She stood because if she waited, Sarah would stand first.

"My name is attached," Carol said.

Father Kevin looked at her.

"To which claims?"

"Canal fauna. Cleaner fish. Storm recovery. Donna's mackerel and frogs. The biological core. The question."

"Carol," Amy said, very quietly.

Carol did not look down. "Mercer and Hayne by permission. Tom not until he chooses. Nora not through us. The index is Lisa's. The drawings are Amy's. The structure is Mark's. The witness is Sarah's."

Ben said, "And the dock will hear it from me."

Father Kevin's hands stayed folded. "You understand the risk."

"No," Carol said. Her voice sounded like Nell's Point in bad weather. "I understand enough of it."

Sarah stood where reciters stood.

The chair had been moved aside.

"I was taught to love proof," she said.

That had not been the planned beginning. She had not planned a beginning. Every beginning she knew had a structure under it, and today she did not trust structures that arrived too quickly.

"I loved it. I need that said first. What follows may sound as if I did not. I loved proof in the body. In breath. In the way a room holds silence after the last step lands."

"The Fundamental Proof is beautiful. The Church did not make me love a small thing."

Father Kevin was very good at keeping his face still. Sarah had loved that once and feared it now.

"But proof has begun to sound, in the mouths above me, like possession. The institution holds the proof. The proof holds the truth. The truth is safe because the room is safe."

Sarah looked at the window instead of at her father.

“The Church will build a room for this too. I know that because I know the Church. It is very good at rooms. It will say the mathematics can extend. It will say: if the Gradient produced intelligence, perhaps intelligence may guide the Gradient. That is not stupid. It may even help.”

Someone in the second row exhaled, relieved too soon.

“It is not enough.”

The relief stopped.

“A room can preserve a truth and still make the truth smaller than it is. A room can keep a thing from weather by keeping it from everyone who has to live in the weather.”

Carol’s hands had stopped moving. The cord lay across her lap, one knot half-formed and abandoned.

“I do not call this proof today,” Sarah said. “I do not even call it evidence, though evidence is what brought me here. Evidence accumulates. Evidence builds a case. A case can be answered, extended, accommodated, and put inside a new room with better joinery.”

She looked at Ben then, because Ben would hear the cost of joinery.

“I call this witness.”

“Witness does not possess. Witness says: I saw this. I heard this. I measured this. I cannot keep it for you. I cannot make it harmless first. I can only tell it accurately and stand where the telling leaves me.”

Her hands were cold. She had not noticed until then.

“The evidence says the world was built. I witness this.”

Father Martin had both hands around his cup though he had not brought tea. Habit had shaped him so strongly that the absent cup still had a place.

“I do not know yet what this does to conscience,” Sarah said. “If closeness was designed. If caring was designed. If the pull toward the costly good was placed in us. . .” She swallowed. “I do not know what part of goodness is ours.”

The harder silence followed, with children in it. Every village church-school. Every parent who had ever told a child that trying mattered.

Tom shifted near the door.

Sarah saw it and found the next sentence because of him.

“But design is the floor, not the ceiling. A laid path can still be refused. A capacity can still be used badly or well. We still have to tell the truth. We still have to keep faith. We still have to choose.”

She looked at the room then.

“The world was built. I witness this. That is all I have. It is enough.”

No one applauded.

Father Kevin stood first. Slowly. He looked at Sarah for long enough that the looking became a sentence neither of them could translate. Then he went out through the main door and let it swing shut behind him.

The door swung once, then settled.

Father Martin stood next. He walked to his daughter and put his arms around her.

“I heard you,” he said.

Carol did not tie the moment.

By evening, pieces of the evidence had begun to leave.

Mark took the structure to people who could break it. Lisa took the index to the memorist bench, where accuracy was not the same thing as agreement. Amy laid the drawings open on the amphitheater floor.

Ben went to the dock. Tom went with him as far as the lower lock and then turned south on the shore road, carrying the parts that belonged first to people who knew his father's hands.

Sarah stayed in the cold hall until the Thesken visitor came to her. He had listened without moving for the entire speech. Now he bowed, not deeply, not ceremonially. Enough to mark a transfer.

"I can carry the word witness," he said. "If you permit it."

"Carry it accurately."

"I am a memorist," he said. "Accuracy is the work."

She handed him no cord. He needed none for that part.

Carol went to the canal at dusk.

The dog came with her. It had spent the day following whoever seemed most likely to need watching and had reached the correct conclusion that everyone did, which had made for an inefficient but conscientious afternoon.

The defunct spur was unchanged. Root-wall, packed earth, reed chord, maintenance organisms moving through the water in overlapping bands.

Carol sat on the worn place in the root-wall.

She had the blank cord with two old knots and four new ones. Someone built this. Built by whom. Witness. Send out. My name. The cord was already shorter than it had been in the morning. That was useful. It kept the cost visible.

Shortly before sunset, the canal kept working.

Dredgers combed the bottom. Flat cleaners moved through silt. Sealant organisms worried at the root-wall cracks. The twelve-heartbeat silence did not come when she wanted it.

Carol counted anyway because counting was her work.

The evidence had left her hands. It was moving now through dock voices, memorist discipline, breeder memory, Sarah's cold hall, Amy's drawings, Mark's structure, Tom's shore road, Ben's channels. It would arrive changed. It would be misheard. It would be argued over by people who had never sat beside this water and did not know that the reeds went sharp before rain.

The dog settled against her knee.

Carol opened both hands on her lap. The canal moved. Somewhere beyond the lower lock, a barge horn answered another, and the answer traveled south.

Notes

1. The Founding Games had been the subject of seven formal Return to text

