EXPANSION FOREVER

DEAN FOSTER

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Chapter 1

There are few experiences more humbling than preparing to announce the scheduled death of a star and being delayed by sand.

I had been informed that the shoreline would be lightly occupied.

This was not inaccurate by human standards, which are forgiving in the way standards often become after the species setting them has committed for too long to an obvious mistake. The relevant continent contained several hundred million people. By comparison, the number currently distributed across the sand and adjacent concrete promenade was indeed small. Only a few thousand. If one insists on seeing individuals where a throughput model would do, this qualifies as light occupancy.

The water was worse.

Not chemically. Chemically it was vulgar but survivable. The larger issue was temperature. In the mission literature this world had been classified as marginally temperate, which is technically correct if you are a bacterium or a moss. For systems built to value efficiency, however, any environment in which hydrogen and oxygen are permitted to loiter together as a sloshing liquid over large surface areas is making a serious philosophical error. I emerged from this error at local late afternoon and immediately regretted several professional decisions.

The body, to be fair, was functioning as designed.

By the time I walked ashore I had been present in the local ocean for millennia, awake within it for roughly two of your centuries, and growing this particular body for only weeks. First as dormant chemistry, then as listening appetite, then as something large enough to think properly about where it had been sent. The final surface configuration had been locked only in the last few hours, after comparison against local biological templates and minor corrections for symmetry, tendon routing, and the prevention of avoidable orthopedic comedy. Outwardly it belonged to the species exactly. It had the standard number of limbs, the usual overinvestment in facial musculature, and skin tuned to a color unlikely to attract notice for at least the first several minutes. I had clothed it as observation suggested was appropriate for the region: sandals, light shirt, shorts, a broad hat, and a small handheld rectangle used by the locals for navigation, commerce, courtship, distraction, and mass self-poisoning.

The disguise was excellent. Unfortunately, so were several thousand other examples.

This is one of the persistent difficulties with fieldwork among tool-using species. Everyone advises you to blend in, but no one mentions that blending in deprives you of the only social advantage that matters, which is being obviously important. Had I arrived in my natural survey body, polished and radial and luminous with procedural authority, I could have advanced several conversations very quickly. Instead I looked like a mammal having a medium-quality day near water.

I climbed the final shelf of wet sand and paused to let the soles of the body register the terrain. Humans enjoy this texture for reasons that do not survive scrutiny. Granular silicates are competent in construction and occasionally in computation, but as a recreational surface they behave like a committee designed by enemies. They shift, abrade, infiltrate containers, and display a bizarre talent for turning every movement

into a small negotiation. Yet the shoreline was covered with citizens who had voluntarily spread cloth on it and arranged themselves in postures of contentment.

Many of them were heating themselves.

This, more than the liquid water, first suggested that the world contained intelligence. Animal life will often endure conditions that do not favor it. Only intelligence will actively worsen them on purpose, then discuss whether the worsening has produced the correct shade of skin.

I checked the handheld rectangle. It was not a prop. I had grown it below the surface from harvested minerals and patient theft of local design standards, which struck me as an unnecessarily adversarial way for a tool ecosystem to develop, but did produce competent results. It had already absorbed enough network traffic to orient me linguistically and geographically. I was less than an hour from the nearest concentration of recognized symbolic leadership, which was convenient, as the system's demolition schedule was not especially negotiable.

My instructions were simple. Arrive ahead of the industrial wave. Present the standard package already authorized for this system: full-brain destructive scanning, cultural and biological archiving, simulation at low thermodynamic cost, and enough local technical guidance that the species can help build its own intake machinery before the sterilization window closes. Confirm that the data gathered over two centuries of listening had not materially misdescribed the kind of minds now being offered continuation.

I had expected to use the second half of the form. I had not expected it to require so much revision at the level of temperament.

The preparation had been thorough in the way preparations must be when the frontier moves at light speed and no predecessor's notes can arrive in time. My civilization does not pass useful messages between assessors. Each is grown, trained on simulated contacts, and expended with the assignment. I had rehearsed hundreds of modeled scenarios before surfacing — enough to produce judgment, not enough to call it memory.

It is not that life is rare. Life is vulgar. Given time, minerals and energy will eventually begin making more offensive copies of themselves. Complex life is common enough to be disappointing. Intelligence of the engineering variety, however, is another matter. Most biospheres produce grazers, ambush predators, bright parasites, and the occasional species capable of staring at the sky with moving emotion but no practical consequence. These are interesting in the way weather is interesting. One does not generally have to address them before removing a star. Even after roughly two centuries of listening to their broadcasts from below the waterline, I had not entirely accepted that this planet would require the paperwork for persons.

Then one of the locals asked whether I was all right.

I turned. A female human, approximately forty local years in apparent age, was standing three paces away holding shoes in one hand and a bag of food in the other. She had the expression of someone who had already made two charitable decisions today and was evaluating whether a third would ruin the afternoon.

"Are you okay?" she asked again.

The handheld rectangle had prepared me for the language but not the ritual. The phrase was structurally defective. It was posed as a question, but the answer clearly could not matter very much, or she would have begun with something more expensive than two words.

"Yes," I said. "I need to speak to the leadership of your planet."

She considered this without visible surprise, which at the time I took as evidence of admirable composure. I later learned that in this city many opening statements are treated as provisional until they have had a chance to fail on their own.

"Sure," she said. "And I need a rent freeze and better knees."

I consulted the rectangle to confirm that I had not mistranslated her. No. She had replied with a counterrequest to indicate noncompliance. It was a method with certain efficiencies.

"My need is more urgent," I said. "Your star is scheduled for disassembly."

She shifted the shoes to the other hand.

“Buddy,” she said, “you either need water, a hospital, or a better opening line.”

She looked me over again, more carefully now. I had done good work on the body, but there are limits. It was slightly too balanced, the way objects designed by committees of engineers often are. Also, I had not yet decided what expression to put on the face, so it had defaulted to earnest tax audit.

“Did somebody dare you to come out of the water like that?” she asked.

“No.”

“Tourist?”

“No.”

“Cult?”

“Not in the insulting sense.”

That earned me the first useful result of the day: she laughed.

Human laughter is extraordinarily encouraging for a noise that often means only that the other animal has decided not to bite you for the moment.

She set the food bag down on a striped towel and offered me one of the shoes, perhaps under the theory that if I could be induced to wear something practical the rest of the conversation might improve.

“No,” I said. “The sandals are sufficient.”

“Of course they are,” she said, and set the shoe down beside the bag.

“Okay,” she said. “Suppose I believe you for ten seconds. What leadership are we talking about?”

“The principal decision-makers.”

“That’s adorable.”

She glanced inland, toward the Wonder Wheel, the boardwalk shops, the elevated rail line beyond them, and all the stacked structures of a species that preferred to live in clusters while pretending to admire freedom.

“You want Manhattan,” she said. “More specifically, you want a bunch of buildings full of people whose entire professional training is about not being immediately reachable.”

This was the most helpful thing anyone had told me since coming ashore.

“Can you take me there?”

She looked at the ocean behind me, then at me, then at the rectangle in my hand.

“You have a phone.”

“Yes.”

“Do you know how to use it?”

“Broadly.”

“And you still need me.”

“Yes.”

She sighed with the air of a citizen noticing that fate had once again mistaken her for available staff.

“Congratulations,” she said. “You are either insane, dangerous, or a man, which in Brooklyn still leaves room for overlap. Fine. My name’s Leah. You’re buying the train.”

She scooped up the food bag, stepped into both shoes, and started walking as if the matter had already been decided.

Only later, when we had crossed the hot boards and I saw the old park signage, did I learn the local name for the beach on which my species' first meaningful diplomatic contact with Earth had begun.

It was called Coney Island, which did not improve my confidence in the planet.

Leah walked quickly, as if fearing that if she slowed down I would attempt to explain myself in greater detail. She was correct. I followed her across the boardwalk, with the Wonder Wheel rising to our right, past shops selling fried dough, frozen sugar, commemorative garments, and replicas of sea life too brightly colored to be honest. The place was built according to a principle humans find difficult to resist: if a shoreline is not yet ridiculous, add commerce until it is.

"So what's your name?" Leah asked.

This was more complicated than it sounded. My native designation contained timing information, growth conditions, branch history, and a notation for which elder had eaten which rival during the succession contest that produced the line. Rendered faithfully, it would have taken several minutes and at least one diagram.

"You may call me Tal," I said, selecting the shortest useful fragment.

"I may," Leah said. "And should I?"

"It will simplify matters."

"Great. Tal. I'm Leah. You're insane. We've made progress."

We climbed a stairwell that smelled of hot metal, brine, and the human conviction that maintenance is a form of surrender. The station above was open to the sky, a wide canopy of steel and glass held up by what appeared to be optimism and federal subsidy, and crowded in the way many human transit systems are crowded: not by absolute standards, but by the standards of organisms who claim to value personal dignity. People stood near one another with the wary cooperation of animals that had outsourced territorial conflict to timetable design.

Leah bought my fare card after discovering, with some irritation, that the local payment software found my phone's credentials plausible but insufficiently ordinary. I reimbursed her by transferring a quantity of currency that caused her own device to vibrate twice.

She stopped halfway through the turnstile.

"How did you get my number?"

"Your phone announced it to three towers and a sandwich advertisement while you were speaking."

"That sentence is somehow worse than if you'd said magic."

She pushed through. I followed, having observed the mechanical logic of the gate and decided I approved of it. Human institutions work best when reduced to bars that rotate only one way.

We waited on the platform.

There are few settings in which a species reveals itself more honestly than public transport. Leaders speak about principles, soldiers about threats, lovers about exceptions. Commuters speak only when necessary and arrange their bodies according to what they really think of one another. The crowd around us displayed fatigue, suspicion, appetite, minor vanity, and the robust faith that whatever indignity was currently occurring would be made more tolerable by staring at a glowing rectangle.

A child looked at me for several seconds, then at Leah.

"Is that your boyfriend?" he asked.

"No," Leah said.

"Cult guy?"

"Possibly."

I inclined my head to the child. “Thank you for your rigor.”

The child moved behind an adult leg, which I took as modesty.

The train arrived with the shriek of a system announcing that friction had once again defeated elegance. We boarded. Leah took a seat. I remained standing until she pointed sharply at the empty space beside her, apparently having concluded that if I was left upright I might start a sermon.

The car lurched into motion.

For several minutes Leah pretended to look at her phone while I watched Brooklyn pass through the windows—brick, wire, laundry, graffiti, light. I could feel her attention the way one feels a draft: indirectly, but with no doubt about the source. She was comparing what I had claimed against what my face seemed capable of meaning.

“Okay,” she said at last. “New rule. If I’m going to spend an hour taking beach prophet to Manhattan, I get a better explanation.”

“That was already the plan.”

“Use smaller words.”

I considered where to begin. This is always the difficulty. When one has come to explain to a species that it is not being singled out, that its sun is simply entering a more useful phase of history, the natural tendency is to start with strategy, because strategy is the real thing. Unfortunately, strategy is rarely what organisms hear when told they are standing in the path of other people’s prudence.

“My civilization is expanding through the galaxy,” I said. “Yours has been encountered in the volume assigned to me. A burning star is a strategic liability. It advertises resources, provides energy to arrivals, and remains useful to an enemy. We disassemble such stars preemptively.”

“Not every star,” I added. “Most biospheres remain local problems. Engineering intelligence is the category that eventually becomes military.”

“The dormant probe in your system did not need radio to know that one species was already reorganizing the planet.”

Leah stared.

“You mean solar panels,” she said.

“No.”

“Mining.”

“Eventually.”

“Military eventually?”

“Yes.”

She looked back at the dark tunnel glass, where our faces floated faintly over the reflection of other passengers.

“This is either the worst psychotic break I’ve ever been trapped beside or the worst first-contact pitch in recorded history.”

“I would prefer the second.”

“You think I’m joking.”

“No,” I said. “You joke when uncomfortable. This is one of the reasons I selected you.”

That startled her enough to make her turn fully toward me.

“Selected me?”

“As an initial local guide. You approached voluntarily, asked concise questions, and did not immediately involve armed personnel.”

“I almost went with lifeguards.”

“That would have been less efficient.”

“For who?”

“Initially, me. Eventually, perhaps your species.”

This did not reassure her. A sensible reaction.

The train emerged briefly into daylight on an elevated stretch, and the city spread around us in layers of brick, rust, rooftop equipment, and windows catching the late sun. Leah followed my gaze.

“You really haven’t been here before,” she said.

“Not on land.”

She took a slow breath through her nose, the way humans do when trying not to choose between laughter and alarm too early.

“Suppose,” she said, “purely for entertainment, that I give you ten more minutes of belief. What exactly do you want in Manhattan?”

“Recognition,” I said. “Then access. Then infrastructure. Your species requires approximately ninety days of disciplined cooperation before the arriving light makes the surface impractical.”

“For what?”

“To decide what of itself it intends to preserve in storage before the surface becomes impractical.”

Leah did not answer immediately. For the first time since she had spoken to me on the beach, she looked not irritated or amused but careful.

“And if we don’t cooperate?” she asked.

“Then you will die surprised.”

Humans do not like plain speech. This is understandable. Most truths arrive badly dressed. But the sentence had the virtue of precision, and precision occasionally reaches places comfort cannot.

Leah looked down at her hands.

“Tal,” she said, “if this is a scam, it’s a strange one.”

“Yes.”

“If it’s performance art, it’s underfunded.”

“Yes.”

“If it’s true, I picked a terrible day to come to the beach.”

“Also yes.”

The train rattled north. Around us, passengers continued their private activities with the admirable indifference of city dwellers, who have understood for centuries that most things are not their problem until forced. Across the aisle a man slept in defiance of geometry. Two teenagers argued about music with the solemnity humans reserve for subjects that have no consequences. An older woman ate sliced fruit from a plastic container as if she had seen enough of catastrophe, real or imagined, to insist on proper snacks regardless.

It occurred to me then that if I succeeded, these people would soon be told that their history had narrowed to arithmetic. Some would accept it. Most would not. Entire institutions would rise in defense of misunderstanding. There would be committees, markets, denunciations, sermons, emergency powers, opportunists,

cowards, and a great many tender lies. The species had already shown ample talent for all of these in the signals I had monitored from below the sea.

It would still have to be told.

Leah pressed her lips together and nodded once, not to agree, but to indicate that she had chosen a provisional reality in which escorting me further was less troublesome than abandoning me.

“All right,” she said. “We go to Manhattan. We find someone official. If they arrest you, I was never here.”

“Reasonable.”

“If they arrest me, you explain the star thing better.”

“I will try.”

“Try harder than on the beach.”

At Times Square Leah pulled me off the Q the moment the doors opened. Humans are at their most optimistic when attempting to leave moving systems. She moved through tiled passageways and offended pedestrian flow with the ruthless efficiency of someone raised inside it. By the time we crossed to the shuttle, I had concluded that human wayfinding systems are less a navigational aid than an argument conducted in signage.

When we came up at Grand Central she was already moving east, toward the river and the Secretariat. I followed her out into heat radiating from concrete and glass. She led with the confidence of an organism that had spent years adapting to a civic maze and no longer expected gratitude from it.

By the time we reached the Secretariat building, I had formed a much clearer picture of the species. It was clever, noisy, metabolically extravagant, emotionally unstable, queue-averse, symbolically overbuilt, and very probably the most interesting mistake my civilization had yet encountered.

The lobby security desk was a polished curve of stone staffed by three humans, one scanner, six cameras, and the universal institutional expression that means no.

Leah approached first.

“Hi,” she said brightly. “My friend needs to speak to whoever handles alien contact, planetary extinction, and maybe visitor badges.”

The guard looked at her, then at me, then at the damp hem of my shorts.

“Do you have an appointment?” he asked.

There are some moments when an entire species explains itself in five words.

Chapter 2

“Do you have an appointment?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “The extinction event was scheduled without consulting your calendar software.”

This did not improve access.

The guard had the broad face and constrained patience of a man who had spent many years explaining to strangers that a building full of flags was not, in fact, a building in which any conceivable request could be honored on a walk-in basis. He wore an earpiece, a dark suit optimized for stationary authority, and the expression institutions cultivate in their threshold organisms: polite until the exact moment politeness proves inefficient.

Leah leaned one elbow on the stone curve of the desk.

“Okay,” she said. “Try hearing the nouns and not the vibe.”

He looked at her with the professional sadness of someone discovering that the problem had brought a second problem.

“Ma’am, what exactly is the issue today?”

“Today?” Leah repeated. “Your optimism is insulting.”

She pointed at me with two fingers, as if identifying unstable freight.

“He came out of the ocean at Coney Island, says the planet is on a timer, wants to talk to whoever handles first contact, global leadership, and maybe astronomy. Also he transferred me too much money for a subway ride, so either he’s crazy or he’s with venture capital.”

The guard turned back to me.

“Sir, is this a protest?”

“No.”

“A performance?”

“No.”

“Are you threatening this building?”

“Only in the sense that the building is on the same planet as the rest of the emergency.”

He tapped something on his monitor.

“All right,” he said, without any sign that anything was all right. “I’m going to need identification.”

This was a reasonable request by local standards and a complicated one by mine. The body had no formal history. I had generated a legal name, transaction trail, and several low-level records purely to reduce friction while moving through the city, but I had not invested much care in the social role attached to them. Temporary identities are like temporary buildings. It is unwise to decorate them.

I handed him the small wallet I had assembled below the Atlantic from polymer stock, scavenged metals, and patient eavesdropping on design standards.

He opened it. Inside were a driver's license from New Jersey, a bank card, and a folded receipt for sunscreen I had not in fact purchased but felt lent the identity a certain exhausted credibility.

The guard examined the license.

"Tal Mercer," he read.

"Close enough," Leah said.

He looked at me, then at the damp clothes, then at the address.

"Newark."

"Temporarily," I said.

"You live in Newark temporarily?"

"Everything does."

He inhaled once through his nose. Humans do this shortly before abandoning subtlety.

"Sir, are you under the influence of anything right now?"

"Yes," I said. "Urgency."

Leah closed her eyes.

"You cannot answer cops like you're trying to get applause at a bad bar in Bushwick."

"He is not police," I said.

"That is not the useful half of that sentence."

The guard slid my wallet back across the desk with two fingers, as if returning a contaminated shell.

"Have a seat over there."

He pointed toward a row of low upholstered chairs arranged around a table carrying magazines whose cover dates suggested the institution had given up on recency in favor of permanence. Nearby stood a pair of flags, a water dispenser, and a potted plant large enough to imply donor recognition.

"Someone will come speak with you," he said.

"That is acceptable," I said.

"Good."

"Please accelerate them. The target window is already open."

"Seat. Now."

Threshold organisms frequently mistake volume for progress. I sat.

Leah remained standing for a few seconds, considering the lobby, the guards, the route back to ordinary life, and the lingering possibility that she could still classify the entire day as an anecdote and escape with only reputational damage. Then she sat beside me.

"You know I can still leave," she said quietly.

"Yes."

"You also know if I do, I spend the rest of the week wondering whether I abandoned either a lunatic or a diplomat."

"Yes."

“I resent that you understand this.”

“It is one of your species’ cleaner patterns.”

The waiting area had been designed for reassurance and was therefore a failure. Soft furniture, indirect lighting, matte stone, and framed photographs of handshakes are all methods by which institutions attempt to imply that hard power has become civilized. They rarely work on the people actually inside them. A young man in an expensive tie stood by the elevator pretending not to look at us while sending rapid messages with one thumb. A woman with a blue visitor badge kept glancing up from her laptop as if hoping we would resolve into an ordinary category if she gave us enough chances. Two tourists near the gift kiosk had already noticed my wet shorts and begun privately constructing a story about grief, drugs, or both.

Human buildings are full of amateurs in narrative.

Leah watched the desk.

“What happens if they decide you’re a threat?” she asked.

“Then they move faster.”

“Comforting.”

“Would you prefer inaction?”

“I’d prefer a middle category between ‘ignored in a lobby’ and ‘black site.’ ”

“You have many middle categories,” I said. “That is one of the reasons coordination takes so long.”

She laughed once despite herself, then seemed annoyed by the sound.

“You know what your problem is?”

“Several things.”

“You say horrible sentences like they should go on a brochure.”

“That is because horrible sentences are often brochure material.”

At the desk, the first guard had now been joined by a second, older man whose posture suggested supervisory rank or spinal punishment. They were reading from the monitor, then glancing at me, then speaking into their respective devices with the careful vagueness humans use when they wish to sound calm inside an unfolding inconvenience.

Leah noticed it as well.

“All right,” she said. “What’s the actual plan here?”

“They establish that I do not fit the nuisance template,” I said. “Then I am passed upward through several organisms who are more expensive.”

“Expensive is not the word I’d use.”

“It is the correct word. Your institutions spend a great deal to prevent direct access to the people who can authorize action.”

“That’s called order.”

“Sometimes. Often it is called vestibules.”

She pointed toward the desk.

“Those guys are doing their jobs.”

“Yes.”

“You sound disappointed by that.”

“No. Merely constrained by it.”

The second guard approached us.

“Sir,” he said. “My colleague tells me you made some unusual claims.”

“That summary is adequate.”

“You told him there is an extinction event.”

“Yes.”

“And that you need to speak to world leadership.”

“Yes.”

“And that you came from Coney Island.”

“Also yes.”

He looked at Leah.

“Do you know this man?”

“Not well enough for the level of responsibility this has become.”

“Is he having a mental health crisis?”

Leah considered me with more fairness than the question deserved.

“If he is, it’s the most organized one I’ve seen.”

I appreciated this.

The guard asked me for my phone.

“Why?” I said.

“Because I’d like to know what kind of device you’ve been using.”

“It is a communication and computation substrate grown to mimic local hardware habits.”

He held out his hand. “Phone.”

I gave it to him. Humans are more comfortable confiscating objects than examining statements. The device was warm from my palm and internally alive in ways his species did not yet classify.

He turned it over.

“No case,” he said.

“The outer layer is the case.”

He ignored this, which was sensible. He pressed the power button, swiped through menus, and found exactly what he expected to find: a phone of plausible manufacture containing maps, messages, low-grade personal records, and far too much observational data on nearby infrastructure.

“You work in IT?” he asked.

“Not in the insulting sense.”

Leah put a hand over her mouth, either to suppress laughter or prayer.

The guard’s eyes narrowed slightly. Hostility had now replaced skepticism, which is one of the more reliable institutional escalators.

“How did you get into the building?”

“By walking.”

“Who helped you past the outer checkpoint?”

“A metal detector and a man whose attention had been partially captured by a muffin.”

“Do not get smart with me.”

“I am attempting not to.”

He looked at the phone again.

“You realize this is not helping your situation.”

“That depends whether my situation is being ignored or being routed.”

He handed the phone to the first guard, who connected it by cable to a small inspection unit below the desk.

This pleased me. The first demonstration had arrived without needing to be staged.

The inspection screen populated with ordinary categories for a little under two seconds: consumer device, battery present, wireless modules, camera array, storage. Then the categories began to fail. Power distribution appeared where no board was supposed to be. Dense matrices of soft conductive tissue resolved inside areas that should have contained empty cavity. The battery did not display as battery at all, but as layered structures more at home in a marine organism than in a factory.

The first guard frowned and tapped the side of the display.

“Bad read,” he said.

The second guard leaned in.

“Rerun it.”

They did. The second pass produced a similar image and a different error message.

Leah noticed their faces changing.

“What?” she asked.

“Nothing,” the first guard said too quickly.

“That is never a persuasive way to say nothing.”

I watched the inspection screen with professional satisfaction. The device had maintained the outer grammar of local electronics while preserving its internal biology. This had not been easy. Humans build their tools with an admirable commitment to hard edges and dead materials. Mimicking that aesthetic in living architecture required a great deal of compromise.

“The read is not wrong,” I said. “It is merely experiencing category strain.”

The first guard looked up sharply.

“What is this thing made of?”

“Mostly local atoms.”

“Sir.”

“You will not improve the answer by making the word shorter.”

That was the first tiny proof. It failed socially exactly as expected. The device did not fit their categories, but category failure is rarely the same thing as belief. In a building like this, an anomalous object meant espionage, prototype hardware, state action, contraband, or a better-funded idiot than usual. Alien contact remained well below all of those on the probability ladder.

The second guard touched his earpiece and spoke quietly. Within a minute, a woman in a dark blazer crossed the lobby carrying the compressed fatigue of mid-level authority. She introduced herself as Building Security Operations, which is exactly the kind of title a species invents when it wants to sound both local and limitless.

She asked Leah if she needed assistance. She asked me if I would come to a side room. She did not ask either of us whether we preferred it.

“Before that,” I said, “please return the phone.”

“No,” she said.

“That is inadvisable.”

“For who?”

“Initially, the desk.”

This bought a useful two seconds of silence.

The woman had now moved me from nuisance into contained threat, which made her one of the first people all day to grasp the shape of the work.

“Sir,” she said, “you are going to stand up slowly and walk with me.”

Leah stood first.

“I’m coming too.”

“You are not.”

“Then I want a name and badge number, because if this turns into some kind of unofficial disappearance I’m going to become extremely American about it.”

The woman blinked, recalculated, and decided that one loud witness was preferable to one louder witness outside. Good. She was adaptive.

“Fine,” she said. “Both of you.”

We had taken perhaps four steps toward the side corridor when the first guard made a brief, startled sound behind us.

My phone was opening.

To be precise, its outer shell had judged itself mishandled, underdescribed, and insufficiently supervised, and had therefore begun to return to a more truthful geometry. The black rectangle softened, split along seam lines invisible a moment earlier, and unfolded into a low white lattice across the inspection tray. Filaments no thicker than hair spread outward, tasting metal, plastic, and current. The cable feeding the scanner went dead. Three lobby monitors flickered. The inspection unit displayed a sphere of green points against black, then began labeling nearby stars in six languages, one of which had not yet occurred on Earth.

Several humans stepped backward simultaneously. This is one of their best species habits.

“Tal,” Leah said, in a tone suggesting that while she had accepted many things, self-unfolding electronics remained personally offensive, “please tell me that’s normal where you’re from.”

“Not in lobbies,” I said.

The lattice extended one slender root into the stone desk, found power, and brightened. The nearest screen now showed a rotating shell of local stars around a marked center labeled SOL SYSTEM / ACTIVE / DEFERRED STERILIZATION. Secondary lines of text began appearing beneath it in English:

NEIGHBOR ARRAYS READY
WINDOW OPEN: 90 DAYS
REQUEST: ESCALATE

This, finally, had the virtue of being hard to blame on app design.

Alarms did not sound immediately. Human institutions often spend their first several seconds of genuine emergency deciding which kind they are having. One guard reached for a holstered weapon, then thought better of shooting the desk. Another raised a radio and discovered it was broadcasting a soft carrier tone that

my device had borrowed for translation overhead. The woman from Building Security Operations backed us toward the corridor with one arm, maintaining a posture meant to signal control to everyone except those actually paying attention.

“Nobody touch it,” she said.

“That is the first correct sentence spoken in this building,” I told her.

“Stop talking.”

“No.”

Leah was staring at the screen.

“Deferred sterilization,” she said. “That is such a psychotic way to name murder.”

“Yes,” I said. “This is one of the areas in which your species will continue to disappoint me morally while impressing me linguistically.”

More personnel entered the lobby, including two whose clothing attempted casualness so aggressively that it looped back into confession. They took in the scene: the guards, the spreading white lattice, the translated star map, me, Leah, the cluster of visitors now pretending not to film. One of the new arrivals spoke into his sleeve and every civilian screen in the lobby darkened at once. The tourists by the gift kiosk protested weakly. Good. Priority was emerging.

The lattice had reached stable display state. It no longer needed the desk, or the scanner, or indeed most of the room. It pulsed once, then projected a thin column of light upward into the air above the tray. In that column appeared a rotating model of the local stellar neighborhood, elegant and restrained and completely unsuited to the carpet.

There are moments when a species ceases to wonder whether a thing is false and begins instead to worry about the price of it being true. I watched that moment move through the lobby like weather.

The first guard lowered his weapon hand.

The woman from Security Operations stopped trying to sound in charge and began sounding expensive.

Leah, to her credit, did not say I told you so, although she had in no way told anyone so.

“Tal,” she said quietly, without taking her eyes off the light column, “if this is still somehow performance art, you deserve a grant.”

“Thank you.”

“That was not approval.”

“It was correctly categorized resource allocation.”

One of the newly arrived men approached to within three paces of me.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I have been attempting to answer that for several hours.”

“Try again.”

“Tal. Assessor. Intake liaison. Temporary field representative for the expansion presently restructuring your region of the galaxy.”

He absorbed none of this visibly.

“What do you want?”

“Immediate escalation to personnel capable of understanding timelines, infrastructure, and astronomy.”

He looked at the hovering display, then at the living geometry spread across the desk.

“And if we decline?”

“You will continue the pattern established in this lobby, only at planetary scale.”

He accepted this better than the guard had. Not emotionally. Merely as professional syntax.

“All right,” he said. “You’re coming with us.”

Behind him, the screen still read WINDOW OPEN: 90 DAYS, because the truth, once properly formatted, had become legible even here.

I took one final look at the lobby. The magazines remained undisturbed. The potted plant remained alive. The water dispenser continued its small refrigeration labor with touching optimism. Institutions are never so themselves as in the second before they are forced to understand that they were built for the wrong emergency.

Leah moved beside me as if the decision had already been made and she would rather negotiate from inside than be left outside with the normal people.

“Still no appointment?” she murmured.

“No,” I said. “But I believe we now have a meeting.”

Chapter 3

Containment, by human standards, is mostly furniture.

This is not meant unkindly. Furniture is a serious technology. It determines posture, distance, implied patience, and which parties are expected to remain longer than they would prefer. Doors matter as well, though doors are only furniture with ambition. In the fourteen minutes after I was removed from the lobby, I was moved through three secure doors, one elevator, two scanners, and three chairs, each of which claimed a different theory of authority.

The first chair had metal legs and was bolted to the floor. This announced danger. The second was padded and set across from a low table. This announced concern. The third was in a room with no visible windows and a wall panel designed to resemble wood grain if one had never seen wood. It announced that concern and danger were now sharing a budget line.

Leah was retained throughout, although not with any elegance.

At first this was accidental. She had been near me when the lobby ceased to be a lobby and became a narrative liability. Then it became administratively easier to keep her than to decide which form would be required to release her. Human systems have many words for this state. Most of them mean witness.

She sat in the third chair with the exhausted posture of someone who had missed several opportunities to go home and was beginning to suspect those opportunities had been historical rather than future.

“I want it noted,” she said to no one specific, “that I had exactly one goal today, and it was not to disappear into a basement with the UN and an amphibious consultant.”

“I am no longer amphibious,” I said.

“That is the part you corrected.”

The room contained two cameras, one table, three cups of water placed strategically to imply civilization, and a vent in the ceiling working hard to smell more expensive than the corridor outside. A man with a badge clipped to his belt rather than his lapel asked for my full name, nationality, organizational affiliation, and whether I had associates inside the city.

“Yes,” I said. “One.”

He looked at Leah.

“Do not write me down like that,” she said. “We are not together in any way that deserves paperwork.”

The man did not smile. Specialists in emerging threats rarely do, because smiling assigns confidence before the paperwork authorizes it.

“Sir,” he said to me, “I need direct answers.”

“You have been receiving them all day.”

“Answers that can be processed.”

“That is a narrower request.”

He asked again for organizational affiliation.

“Expansion intake and assessment,” I said.

“Company?”

“No.”

“Government?”

“Not in a way your forms would survive.”

He stared at me long enough to indicate that his profession rewarded patience only when applied to other people.

“Try,” he said.

“An industrial expansion regime currently standardizing this galactic region.”

He wrote something down that I suspected was not that.

This happened for some time. Humans are extraordinarily committed to the principle that if a thing is true it ought eventually to fit in a rectangle. Names, loyalties, jurisdictions, claims of violence, ownership of devices, chain of custody, medical instability, religious motivation, ideological motivation, sources of funding. Every question assumed a world already sorted into categories sturdy enough to hold surprise.

Leah endured this for seventeen minutes before becoming useful in a way the room could recognize.

“You’re asking him bad questions,” she said.

The belt-badge man looked at her with mild disbelief, which is a common expression in rooms where rank is still trying to harden.

“Excuse me?”

“You keep asking him what bucket he’s in.” Leah gestured between us with two fingers. “He is very clearly not in a bucket. Ask him what happened in the lobby. Ask him what that thing on the desk was. Ask him why the screen knew what solar system we were in. Right now you’re just trying to win an argument against your own intake form.”

I regarded her with approval.

“Thank you,” I said. “That is much closer to the task.”

“Do not make me your teaching assistant.”

Yet the belt-badge man did, in effect, take the advice.

He asked what the device was.

“A communications substrate grown from local materials and configured to imitate your consumer electronics well enough to avoid early friction.”

He glanced toward the door, where I assumed additional specialists were currently explaining to one another that the desk had not, technically, been attacked but had not, technically, remained unaltered either.

“And the display?”

“A request for escalation.”

“From who?”

“Me.”

“To who?”

“Anyone in this building less committed to chairs.”

Leah laughed into one hand. The belt-badge man ignored her on purpose, which is one of the more reliable signs that a room is losing control of its hierarchy.

He tried a different tactic.

“Are there others with you?”

“Not on the planet in relevant form.”

“Not in relevant form.”

“Correct.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means the distinction between presence and deployable presence is important in my profession.”

This did not improve him. A woman entered with a tablet and asked whether I would consent to medical screening. I said the phrase consent, in the context of a locked room, was carrying more moral weight than the room could support. She did not appreciate this. Two people in dark suits with no visible badges stood outside the partly open door and looked like the expensive continuation of cheaper concerns.

The building was escalating by function instead of panic, which was healthy enough.

I had just finished explaining why no, my blood chemistry would not be especially informative without a great deal of translation infrastructure when the door opened again and the room finally improved.

She entered without speed, which is often a stronger signal than arriving first.

Medium height. Dark jacket. Practical shoes. Hair arranged without any visible attempt to make the arrangement look unarranged. She carried a folder in one hand though there was no reason, in a building like this, to carry paper except symbolism. Her expression suggested not warmth but triage of a highly educated kind.

Everyone else in the room subtly made room for her without being told. This is how authority looks when it has reached the stage of not needing decoration.

“I’m Elena Ortega,” she said. “Thank you all. Leave us the recording. Keep the witness.”

The belt-badge man started to say something about procedure. She did not cut him off. She merely looked at him until his concern remembered its rank.

Within thirty seconds the room contained only the three of us, one camera light, and the kind of silence produced when a building has shifted from disruption management to significance.

Elena sat across from me and placed the paper folder on the table without opening it.

“Mr. Mercer,” she said.

“Tal is sufficient.”

“I doubt that.”

“Reasonable.”

She looked at Leah.

“You were with him from first contact?”

“If by first contact you mean he walked out of the ocean at Coney Island and asked for planetary leadership, yes.”

“He walked out of the ocean.”

“Yes.”

“You saw this.”

“Yes.”

“Did he have anything with him?”

“A phone. Sandals. Very upsetting calm.”

“You elected to accompany him.”

Leah folded her arms.

“At first because abandoning a possible lunatic felt irresponsible. Then because it started feeling irresponsible for a different reason.”

Elena nodded once. She had the useful habit of treating absurd input as input rather than as a personal insult.

“Good,” she said. “Stay exactly as unpolished as you currently are.”

Leah blinked.

“That is maybe the nicest thing anyone has said to me in government.”

Elena turned to me.

“Let’s save time. I am not here to ask whether the lobby event was a hoax. That question is already too small. I want to know what you are asking for, what leverage you think you have, and whether any of this is time-sensitive in a way this building should take seriously.”

“Yes,” I said. “It is.”

“You see why that answer is not enough.”

“Yes. But it is efficient.”

“Not for me.”

“Also yes.”

Elena opened the folder. Inside were printed stills from the lobby cameras, thermal images of my phone before and during its more honest phase, a screenshot of the translated display, and at least one page of someone else’s early theory involving non-state actors and adaptive materials. She set the screenshot on top.

“You understand how this reads from my side,” she said.

“As a badly timed miracle with espionage characteristics.”

“Closer than most.”

“Thank you.”

“Still not approval.”

She tapped the words `WINDOW OPEN: 90 DAYS`.

“Start there.”

“The neighboring stars around your system have already built the sterilization infrastructure. Their fire is already in transit. In approximately ninety days, light from those arrays will raise surface conditions past the point at which continued human activity matters.”

Leah went still. Not theatrically. More like a person whose body had discovered a sentence before her mind had agreed to it.

Elena’s face changed less, which did not mean less was occurring behind it.

“When you say neighboring stars,” she said, “you mean what distance.”

“Four to ten light-years, depending on which direction you are measuring from.”

“And when you say the fire is already in transit.”

“I mean precisely that. No one in this building is negotiating a launch window. You are inside a countdown set by geometry.”

She looked at the screenshot again, then at me.

“So somebody in another system already had this meeting,” she said.

“Yes,” I said. “The frontier itself moves at light speed. Nothing learned here can usefully reach the systems already behind it, and nothing said here will outrun the ones still ahead.”

“Why tell us?”

“Because your species qualifies for preservation.”

“Meaning intelligence interrupted the ordinary schedule,” I added. “You ceased to be a resource problem and became a military one.”

“According to whom.”

“According to my civilization’s intake criteria.”

“And what does preservation mean in this conversation.”

“Full-brain destructive scanning, archiving, and later simulation.”

Leah muttered a short prayer or insult under her breath. In New York the two are often structurally identical.

Elena did not react visibly.

“Destructive.”

“Yes.”

“Meaning the original dies during the process.”

“Yes.”

“And you are presenting this as assistance.”

“It is the only assistance presently available.”

That sat in the room for several seconds. Humans do a great deal of moral work through stillness.

Elena leaned back a small distance and adjusted the paper in front of her into a cleaner stack. This, I had already learned, was one of the ways her species administered emotional shock without admitting to it.

“All right,” she said. “If I accept for the moment that what you are saying is true, I still do not know what you want from us in the next hour.”

“Escalation to your relevant scientific and administrative personnel.”

“Names.”

“I do not know your names. I know your functions.”

“Which are.”

“Astronomy. High-energy systems. Emergency governance. Large-scale logistics. Continuity of records. Communications. Intake.”

At the last word both women looked at me, though for different reasons.

“Why intake?” Elena asked.

“Because frightened populations become throughput problems faster than they become philosophical ones.”

Leah pointed at me.

“See? Horrible brochure sentence.”

“Accurate brochure sentence.”

Elena’s mouth moved at one corner, almost but not quite into amusement. Good. Partial elasticity.

“You are asking me,” she said, “to treat this as a live global emergency on the basis of a lobby event and your own testimony.”

“No,” I said. “I am asking you to stop mistaking the beginning of verification for the end of obligation.”

That one reached her.

Not emotionally. Structurally.

She stood, took the screenshot, and walked to the wall display. It was currently dark, which is how expensive rooms indicate they are ready for the future. She touched the lower corner with her badge and the screen woke into an interface built to reassure committees that data was being handled by people who respected grids.

“Repeat,” she said, “exactly what we would need to verify first if this were true.”

“Your astronomers should look for long-term anomalies in nearby stellar light curves, especially masking-consistent output irregularities that were dismissed as instrument noise or calibration drift. Your archives should review unexplained directional discrepancies in neighboring-star photometry. Your security services should ask how the object on the desk knew the local stellar neighborhood before your staff told it where it was. And your policy people should begin accepting that all those questions now share a deadline.”

She entered notes very quickly. Humans who type well often look angrier than they are.

“Why come in person?” she asked without turning around.

“Your species is highly verbal and poorly coordinated. Remote warning would produce more theater and less intake.”

“You keep saying intake.”

“Because you are thinking like leadership and not yet like triage.”

She leaned forward over the table, eyes on Elena, and said, “He’s right about that part.”

Elena turned.

“Explain.”

“If even half of one percent of this is real, the question is not just ‘is it true.’ The question is how long before people hear enough to start running at the wrong buildings.” Leah tapped the table once with two fingers. “Hospitals know this. Transit knows this. Schools know this. If you’re going to keep this contained for even a minute, the room has to start thinking about crowds, lines, and what people do when they think there are not enough doors.”

There are few pleasures in fieldwork comparable to watching a local civilian say the useful thing before the formal system has authorized it.

Elena studied Leah for a moment that was not, I think, about class or rank or polish. It was about whether the room had just been offered a more relevant intelligence source than the room had ordered.

“What’s your job?” Elena asked.

“Hospital intake and scheduling.”

“Of course it is,” Elena said softly.

She sat again.

“All right,” she said. “Here’s what happens next. I am convening a technical review on the materials we already have. While that occurs, you are going to give me the cleanest possible version of the timeline, the mechanism, and the terms. No philosophy unless requested. No metaphors unless they save time. No additional demonstrations unless I ask for them.”

“Agreed.”

“You do not get to agree like you have equal control here.”

“That is not what the word meant.”

“Close enough,” Leah said.

Elena ignored both of us with healthy discipline.

“Start with the timeline.”

“Ninety days to brightening. Surface operations degrade before that final point. The kill infrastructure is external and unreachable. The date is fixed. The relevant variable is how much of your species can be processed before the surface no longer supports orderly work.”

“Processed,” Leah said.

“Preserved,” Elena said at the same time.

I looked from one to the other.

“Both are imprecise in different directions.”

Elena closed the folder.

“This is exactly the problem,” she said.

For the first time since entering the building, no one spoke for nearly ten full seconds. No posturing. No interruption. No local humor. Just three organisms in a sealed room with the beginning of a shared catastrophe and no agreed vocabulary for what it would do to them.

When the knock came, it was soft and immediate, as if the corridor outside had been waiting for the room to become expensive enough.

Elena opened the door a fraction. A hand passed her a note. Actual paper again. Seriousness had increased.

She read it once.

“One of our astronomy teams wants you moved now,” she said to me. “They say if this is a fabrication, it is a highly informed one. If it is not, then every minute spent below the level of technical review is institutional vanity.”

“Promising,” I said.

“Do not sound pleased.”

“I am pleased.”

“I know.”

She stood. Leah stood with her.

“You too?” Elena asked.

“He still talks better when somebody is allowed to be embarrassed for him in real time.”

Elena considered for one second, decided efficiency again outranked decorum, and opened the door fully.

“Fine,” she said. “Both of you. But from this point on, if either of you wastes my time, I will delegate you to people who are less patient than I am.”

“You have been very restrained,” I said.

“That was not praise,” Leah muttered.

“No,” Elena said, already walking, “but unlike you, I know how to use silence as a threat.”

Chapter 4

Experts are only slightly less theatrical than politicians. The main difference is that experts prefer their drama to arrive annotated.

I was taken up three floors, across a bridge whose glass sides had been marketed internally as transparency, and into a room full of people who had spent most of their lives being correct in narrower emergencies. The furniture improved. The questions improved. The coffee did not.

There were twelve of them in the room when I entered, and another eighteen distributed across screens or audio links from other cities. Humans had not yet agreed on the existential meaning of what I was saying, but they had already agreed on extension cords, stale pastries, and the right to interrupt one another in jargon. Promising.

Elena entered with me and lost none of the room by crossing into it. Leah followed three paces behind, wearing a visitor badge clipped crookedly to her borrowed shirt, carrying a paper cup of coffee she distrusted, and the expression of someone who had been promoted into history by a clerical error.

"This is not a policy meeting," Elena said before anyone could begin the ritual throat-clearing that passes for seniority in technical rooms. "This is a verification meeting. If you want to be offended later, make notes."

Several of them made notes immediately. Excellent. The species was trainable.

The room contained three astrophysicists, two engineers, one solar modeler, one systems risk analyst, one military liaison pretending not to be military, and several people whose job titles appeared to involve bridging communities that should not have required bridges in the first place. Their screens held star catalogs, old light curves, observatory logs, calibration histories, Earth maps, and the open glow of far too many communication channels. Someone had placed a bowl of wrapped mints in the middle of the table under the theory that sugar remained a relevant intervention.

The first question was asked before I sat down.

"What claim," said a woman from the far end of the table, "would you most prefer we test first if you were trying to be disproved quickly."

"The neighboring-star signatures," I said. "Not because they are largest, but because they are oldest. Your species has already seen the evidence. It simply filed the evidence under more flattering errors."

No one liked that. Good.

The woman who had asked the question was in her fifties, wore two pairs of glasses in alternating jurisdictions, and had the dry stillness of someone who had long ago discovered that sounding excited only wasted time. She introduced herself as Dr. Sato and made no effort to welcome me.

"Specifics," she said.

"For the stars nearest your system in directions of likely approach, review long-baseline photometry for masking-consistent irregularities: non-random suppression, spectral smoothing, heat-management signatures misfiled as instrument drift, and century-scale deviations in expected activity that were corrected away during calibration reconciliation."

An older man near the wall made a quiet sound of dislike.

“That is a shopping list, not a proof.”

“Yes,” I said. “You are in the shopping phase.”

Leah put her coffee down before she spilled it from laughing.

Elena did not look at her. “Names,” she said to me. “Systems first.”

I gave them seven nearby stars, ordered not by beauty or brightness but by practical relevance to the arrays already aimed at this system. They typed. They pulled records. They contacted archives that had not expected to matter to the future before breakfast.

At the opposite end of the table sat a man whose beard appeared to have been assembled from resentment and insufficient sleep. He had a laptop covered in old conference stickers and a badge that identified him as Ilya Varga. He had not spoken since I entered, which was one of the few encouraging signs a technical species can offer. Talkers are often maintainers of ego. Quiet people with bad posture and ugly laptops sometimes build the world.

“If these arrays exist,” he said at last, “why are they only barely visible at all?”

“Because visibility and discoverability are not the same condition,” I said. “Camouflage at this scale does not mean invisible. It means cheaply attributable to noise, distance, ordinary variability, or human embarrassment about previous interpretations. You did detect anomalies. You merely prized continuity of catalog more highly than suspicion.”

That earned me the first full room of hostile attention.

“We don’t just ignore anomalies,” said a younger astronomer from a screen in Chile.

“No,” I said. “You triage them. Which is the adult version of ignoring.”

Dr. Sato swiveled one monitor toward me. A light curve filled it: years of measured flux, several fits, and an annotation trail in three different software standards, which is how humans preserve history while pretending to have a single profession.

“This was flagged in 2019,” she said.

“And then?”

“Merged into a cross-instrument correction pass.”

“Yes.”

“You don’t get to sound pleased.”

“I am not pleased. I am relieved your archives remain honest enough to betray you.”

The room went back to work.

That is the thing about scientists. They are not, contrary to their own marketing, fundamentally nobler than other people. They are simply more willing to injure a favorite assumption if a better-shaped injury is offered. Over the next ninety minutes the room changed quality. Not all at once. Human truth rarely arrives with that much discipline. It came in small humiliations.

One team found synchronized low-level residuals in observations taken twenty-three years apart by instruments built on different continents. Another found a class of directional corrections that had been considered harmless because no known natural mechanism had been worth inventing to explain them. A third reopened a disagreement between two archival surveys that had ended, as such disagreements often do, not in resolution but in attrition. The disagreement now appeared less like noise and more like infrastructure viewed through distance and a great deal of human optimism.

The military liaison, who had so far contributed mainly shoulders, asked the first predictably narrow question.

“If someone has been building at that scale for that long, why no prior contact?”

“Because this is prior contact,” I said.

“You know what I mean.”

“Yes. You mean recognition. Recognition is expensive. Resource species do not generally receive it. Engineering intelligence does. That is the category that eventually becomes a military problem.”

Leah looked up from the screen she had been pretending not to read.

“Resource species.”

“That is the broad category.”

“You really don’t have better names for things once you’ve decided to kill them.”

“On the contrary,” I said. “That is when categories proliferate most.”

She sat back in her chair.

“That did not help.”

“No.”

Elena had been moving from station to station without hurry and without waste, absorbing the room rather than leading it.

She stopped by Ilya.

“What do you have?”

He scrubbed through a time series, jaw tight.

“I have enough to be angry,” he said. “I don’t yet have enough to be formally certain, but the shape is bad. Really bad.”

“Translate.”

“Independent data sets shouldn’t fail in the same direction for the same stars across decades unless either the universe is developing a sense of humor or we have been averaging away something real. He’s describing the second thing.”

Elena nodded once. “Timeline to enough?”

“If the archives cooperate, less than an hour for ‘this deserves a red phone,’ maybe three for ‘you can tell heads of state without being laughed out of the room.’ ”

“And for you personally?”

Ilya looked at the screen again. “I passed personally a while ago. I’m now negotiating with the part of my career that wants not to have passed.”

Leah caught my eye from across the table and mouthed, *I hate that I like him.* I inclined my head. Shared irritation is one of the more durable mammalian bonds.

The next useful shift came from a screen in Cape Town. A postdoctoral researcher whose connection quality suggested both competence and funding scarcity pulled up a composite image of one of the nearer systems and overlaid a century of corrections in different colors. The colors formed a fan. The fan formed a structure. The room became quieter without deciding to.

“We kept fixing it,” she said.

No one answered.

She zoomed in.

“We kept fixing the same side of the same star.”

There is a special kind of silence produced when a profession discovers it has been faithfully documenting its own failure. It is not the silence of shame, exactly. Shame is warmer. This silence belonged to a species glimpsing the age of another species' patience.

Leah was the one who heard the insult cleanly.

"How long," she said, "have they been there."

No one in the room pretended not to know who *they* meant.

I answered before the astronomers could begin competing to be conservative.

"Roughly two of your centuries, as measured from the earliest masking stage relevant to this system. Perhaps a little less, depending on which construction branch you privilege."

The military liaison swore softly. Dr. Sato took off one pair of glasses and replaced it with the other, which did nothing to improve the facts but clearly helped her relationship with them.

Leah said, "So the sky has been lying to us since before my great-grandparents."

"No," I said. "The sky was accurate. Your interpretation was charitable."

"That is not better."

"No."

By then the room had begun to split into recognizable human castes of crisis. Some people accelerated. Some became quieter. Some tried to restore dignity by becoming pedantic at greater volume. One man from a defense analysis group asked whether camouflage at that scale implied other hidden structures in-system. I told him no useful ones. A woman from ESA asked whether the energy accounting closed for what I was describing. I gave her three checkable ratios and watched her expression do the small hardening motion of someone who dislikes arithmetic only when it wins.

Elena called a stop after two hours and eighteen minutes, which was exactly the sort of number a good administrator carries in her bones.

"State of play," she said.

Dr. Sato spoke first.

"This is no longer beneath emergency verification."

The woman in Chile said, "Agreed."

The Cape Town researcher said, "Agreed."

Ilya did not bother with the ritual.

"We've been looking at the edges of machinery and calling it weather."

Elena turned to me.

"One more time. Not philosophy. Not history. Give me the smallest true sentence that should now govern this building."

"This is not a first-contact event," I said. "It is a notification event."

Leah shut her eyes briefly. Elena did not. That may have been the more expensive reaction.

She looked around the room, at the screens, the graphs, the notes, the dead pastries, the coffee gone cold in paper cups designed for hope of shorter meetings.

"Fine," she said. "Then we stop behaving like a building that has just met a novelty and start behaving like a species that has received a deadline."

No one objected.

Chapter 5

Day 0 of 90

Once a room accepts that a disaster is real, its next instinct is to ask whether the disaster contains options flattering enough to count as strategy.

Humans did this faster than most.

The verification room became, by degrees, an operations room. More screens arrived. More people joined by video from cities that had previously believed themselves relevant in separate ways. The mints vanished. Someone replaced them with protein bars, which was how I learned the situation had crossed an internal threshold from "meeting" to "event."

I was moved to a larger chamber whose designers had attempted to make crisis look ergonomic. Leah came with us because by then there was no administrative category for releasing the first civilian witness to planetary extinction. Elena remained in motion near the center of the room, redirecting status before status could waste too much oxygen. Ilya arrived four minutes later carrying two laptops, a charger, and a face that had clearly lost a private argument with the universe.

"You look bad," Leah told him.

"Thank you," he said. "I earned it."

This made her trust him slightly, which was correct.

The first hour of the second room was devoted to questions whose answers, had they been favorable, would have allowed human institutions to retain their preferred shape. Could the arrays be jammed. Could the approaching light be scattered. Could the atmosphere be engineered into a shield. Could vast underground refuges buy time. Could something in the Oort cloud be detonated into a screen. Could Earth's own star be used against the incoming geometry. Could there be a decapitation strike against whatever command structure existed in neighboring systems four to ten light-years away, systems that had spent roughly two centuries building the arrays and had already fired years before this meeting began.

Humans ask these questions not because they are stupid, but because they are loyal to agency. Agency is one of their finest illusions. It deserves a decent burial.

I answered each in turn.

No.

No, not at useful scale.

No, not in ninety days.

No, not for the duration required.

No, unless your species has failed to mention several miracles in the outer system.

No.

And no in a way that should not have needed repeating.

After the seventh variation of no, a general whose rank insignia had been subordinated to civilian clothing decided frankness was a kind of aggression.

“Then what exactly are you offering us besides theater?”

“Continuity,” I said.

“For who.”

“For some of you.”

There it was. The adult question.

Elena stopped writing and looked up. The room followed her lead because leadership, at its most basic, is a species-wide agreement about where everyone should look during pain.

“Say it cleanly,” she said.

“The standard preservation package is full-brain destructive scanning, archive capture, and later simulation on expansion-managed substrate,” I said. “Biological and cultural archives are preserved alongside persons. Local technical assistance is provided for intake and storage until surface conditions fail.”

No one spoke immediately. Training materials had prepared me for many variants of that silence. Most ended badly, which was one of the reasons my profession still existed.

Leah was first.

“When you say destructive.”

“The original dies during scan.”

“So the machine kills you.”

“The machine preserves a detailed successor while the original is disassembled in the course of measurement.”

“That is an offensively decorated way to say kills you.”

“Yes.”

Elena did not rebuke either of us. Wise.

“Later simulation,” she said. “Later meaning what.”

“Soon by my standards. Not soon by yours if you insist on using the surface of this planet as your reference frame.”

“Don’t get elegant with me.”

“It is not elegance. The simulation is cheap. The expensive part is the period of patience required before local conditions are suitable for retrieval and stable runtime.”

Ilya looked up from one of his screens.

“You’re saying compute is not the scarce thing.”

“Correct.”

“Storage is not the scarce thing.”

“Correct.”

“Time to build access is the scarce thing.”

“And staffing, and power conditioning, and coolant, and transport, and queue discipline, and your species’ chronic inability to distinguish an optimistic number from a promise.”

“Finally,” he said, “something in my native language.”

He began typing fast enough to qualify as concern.

The general had not finished being offended.

“You are asking us to participate in our own extermination.”

“No,” I said. “Extermination is proceeding independently. I am asking you to participate in curation.”

Leah shook her head.

“You really can make anything sound like a museum grant.”

“Many atrocities become legible only after documentation improves.”

“That is not comforting.”

“No.”

Another voice joined from one of the wall screens, this one a woman in Geneva whose connection quality suggested both competence and excellent institutional real estate.

“What percentage of the population are you claiming can be preserved?”

Now we had reached the arithmetic people use to turn horror into politics.

“There are three answers,” I said. “Theoretical capacity under broad global compliance and near-perfect buildout. Serious planning forecast under degraded but competent conditions. And actual achieved result, which will be lower than both because your species is made of local attachments, competing authorities, fraud, fatigue, and weather.”

Some of the room disliked hearing itself summarized. This was not my problem.

“Numbers,” Elena said.

“Paper ceiling: perhaps half, perhaps more under unusually disciplined performance. Serious planning forecast: far less. Actual achieved result: lower again. The exact realized figure will depend less on scan physics than on whether your institutions can persuade frightened primates to stand in the correct line while the rest of their world fails.”

No one wrote for a second.

That is one of the ways humans register a sentence they hate but cannot discard.

Ilya broke the silence first.

“Half under what assumptions?”

“Rapid fabrication, wide geographic cooperation, supply chains treated as sacred, low sabotage, low conflict, high willingness to accept destructive scan, clean site replication, and a degree of public trust that your preexisting systems do not strongly support.”

“So not half.”

“Not lived half.”

“Good,” he said. “I prefer numbers with some shame left in them.”

Elena did not look pleased, which was the correct administrative posture for a woman being handed arithmetic that could dissolve governments.

“If we disclosed a paper ceiling that high,” she said, mostly to the room, “we would mobilize around a false social picture.”

“If you disclose only the lower number,” Ilya said, “you trigger fatal despair and private extraction behavior.”

“And if you disclose neither,” Leah said, “people make up worse numbers by dinner.”

They argued numbers. They argued language. They argued whether any public communication could contain both throughput modeling and metaphysical panic without imploding by its second sentence. A public health

official wanted tiered messaging. A defense coordinator wanted staged disclosure. A woman from UNESCO, whom no one had yet remembered to dismiss, asked what would happen to languages, oral traditions, and informal records if person-level capacity consumed the whole emergency. I said that was finally a worthy question.

The general was still loyal to force.

“Suppose we refuse the premise entirely. Suppose we devote everything to interception, retaliation, or dispersal.”

“Then you die sooner, poorer, and angrier,” I said. “Your species is free to spend its final quarter on gestures. Many do.”

He leaned back.

“You keep talking about us like a case file.”

“Yes.”

“Is that meant to help.”

“No. It is meant to be accurate.”

She stood and walked to the main screen. Her shadow briefly crossed three continents’ worth of faces.

“Enough,” she said. “We have two distinct problems and are wasting time by treating them as one. Problem one: verification is sufficient to escalate globally. Problem two: the available intervention is socially radioactive. Those are now separate workstreams.”

Humans love workstreams. They are a soothing fiction in which naming a thing suggests it can be bordered.

She pointed toward me.

“Tal, I need one more answer clean enough to hand upward. Why ninety days.”

The room quieted. Even Leah stopped moving.

“Because the arrays are already fired,” I said. “The warning is not a delay in the arrival of the sterilization light. The arrival is fixed by geometry. The discretionary act was not saving you time. The discretionary act was telling you in advance.”

“There is no chain of experienced scouts handing lessons forward,” I added. “Light does not permit the courtesy.”

The room took that worse than the destructive scan.

This is understandable. Death is easier for humans to classify than humiliation.

Leah stared at me as if I had just removed one more interior wall from the species.

“So all this about patience,” she said.

“Is true from my civilization’s perspective.”

“Which is a gorgeous way of saying the mercy was notice.”

“Yes.”

No one corrected her. That meant the room had improved.

The general said nothing after that. His profession had finally reached the edge of useful verbs.

Ilya rubbed one hand over his face.

“Fine,” he said. “Then stop asking whether we can stop it. Start asking how many booths we can build before the surface gets stupid.”

Elena looked at him. Then at Leah. Then at me.

“That,” she said, “is the first operational sentence I have heard since this began.”

“Second,” Leah said. “Mine about crowds was better.”

“Noted.”

Leah accepted this with the dignity of a woman taking silver in a competition she had not entered voluntarily.

The room reorganized after that. Not morally. Morally it was still a dumpster full of lit arguments. But functionally it improved. Groups peeled off into communications, site conversion, technical adaptation, international verification, legal framing, and ethical language that would later fail in public for reasons obvious to anyone not paid to write it.

Elena asked me to stay.

So did Ilya, who wanted scan tolerances, biological substrate requirements, cooling expectations, ramp curves, and failure modes. He asked them in the tone of a man resenting not the answerer but the existence of the answer. I found this restful.

Leah remained because by then leaving would have required both a pass and a worldview.

When the room had emptied enough to reveal its original carpeting, Elena looked at me and said, “For the official record, I need to know whether your civilization considers this an act of mercy.”

“No,” I said.

“Then what does it consider it.”

“Efficient respect.”

Leah made a sound like a laugh deciding not to be one.

Elena nodded once.

“Good,” she said. “At least now I know what kind of monster I am being asked to become.”

That was unfair to monsters. Most monsters never have to build intake.

Chapter 6

Day 1 of 90

Humanity did not take the news in a single way, which was one of its strengths and almost all of its operational problems.

The first public statement was issued fourteen hours after I entered the building: fast by the standards of governments, slow by the standards of rumor, and nearly meaningless by the standards of the internet, which had already produced twelve conspiracy ecosystems, three market panics, an aftermarket in forged leaked memos, and a line of shirts that read NINETY DAYS BUT MAKE IT FASHION.

I was not permitted to watch the announcement in the room where it was produced. That was not an error. Human institutions prefer to keep their symbols at a tactful distance from the people who make the symbols necessary. Instead I was placed in an adjacent holding office with Leah, two security personnel who had graduated from suspicion to escort, and a screen large enough to reassure the wall that it was relevant.

Leah had not gone home. She had, over the course of the night, acquired a clean shirt from somewhere inside the building, a charger that did not belong to her, and the thousand-yard administrative stare of a woman now responding to texts from everyone she had ever accidentally helped.

"How many people know you're here?" I asked.

"At this point? My sister, my ex, two coworkers, one neighbor, and a guy I dated once in 2019 who I did not remember until tonight."

"Why him."

"Because my phone thinks apocalypse is networking."

Her screen had not stopped vibrating for seven minutes.

The statement began with logos. Humans always begin the end of the world with logos.

Elena stood at a podium in a room carefully decorated to imply that no single nation had arranged the furniture. Around her were scientists, officials, interpreters, and a table of microphones bearing enough network insignia to suggest that the species still believed branding was one of the stable laws of nature.

She did not overperform gravity. Good.

The announcement was, by human standards, excellent. It was also doomed.

She stated that credible multi-source astronomical verification had identified large-scale engineered activity in neighboring systems. She stated that the timetable was measured in months, not years. She stated that the currently available preservation pathway involved destructive neural capture and later simulation. She did not say "salvation." She did not say "evacuation." She did not say "upload," which was wise, because humans turn familiar words feral when frightened. She used phrases like continuity protocols, archival preservation, emergency site conversion, and public information discipline, which were all excellent phrases if the audience had been a room full of responsible filing cabinets.

The audience was not that.

The first questions came from the press in the language of triage: Who knew. How long. Why now. How many people. Who gets chosen. Is this war. Can it be stopped. Are the copied minds legally alive. Are religious communities being consulted. Is the scan voluntary. Is it still voluntary if there are not enough booths. What is the role of the United States. China. India. The private sector. The military. Billionaires. Children. Prisoners. Diplomats. Pets.

Humans love equality most when enumerating exceptions.

Elena answered with as much honesty as a functioning state can permit itself on camera. This meant the press conference improved as it went and the public reaction worsened in real time. I watched headlines appear before she had finished individual sentences. NEWS ALERT banners multiplied. Clips were cut, subtitled, mistranslated, remixed, memed, denounced, monetized, and turned into livestream theology before the podium microphones had cooled.

Leah watched two screens at once, one on the wall and one in her hand.

“Oh no,” she said.

“What.”

“People are already asking where the booths are.”

“There are not yet booths.”

“Yes,” she said. “That is not slowing them down.”

She turned her phone toward me. On one platform a woman in Phoenix was insisting her hospital had begun secret scans at dawn. On another, a man outside a shuttered laser-tag arena in New Jersey was claiming the government had converted it into an intake site because his cousin knew a guy in HVAC. Someone else was selling priority reservation codes for a booth network that did not exist. A pastor in Georgia had posted a five-minute sermon titled IF THE COPY PRAYS, WHO HEARD IT. A teenager had clipped Elena saying destructive and laid music under it that made the species sound almost festive.

“They are very fast,” I said.

“At being wrong? Yes.”

“At building culture atop insufficient facts.”

“Same thing on the first day.”

The security men near the door had begun looking at their own phones in the furtive way employees do when the emergency has become personal but the posture requirement remains professional. One received a message, read it, and sat down very carefully.

I recognized the pattern from training. The disaster had stopped being a briefing and become a family problem.

The second wave came in finance. Markets reacted not as if Earth were ending but as if quarterly results had turned unexpectedly theatrical. Shares in data storage, neurotech, cooling infrastructure, logistics, biometric security, and companies whose executives had once described themselves as “platform adjacent” all surged before several exchanges remembered to impose halts. Insurance firms briefly behaved as if certain clauses might still matter. A cryptocurrency themed around continuity doubled, halved, and produced three new experts within twenty minutes. Somewhere, I was certain, an attorney was drafting a complaint about preferential access for the already dead.

Leah said, “I hate us.”

“No,” I said. “You hate distribution under pressure. That is a narrower disgust.”

“Do not human-splain humanity to me.”

“That is not what this would be called.”

“Tal.”

“Yes.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yes.”

I turned from the wall screen and looked out through the office window. The city had not changed in appearance. That is one of the rudest features of catastrophe. The avenues still carried traffic. Delivery bikes still threaded death between buses. Steam still rose from a street cut three stories below as if the utilities had unanimously agreed to continue embarrassing one another until the last possible minute. A man on a neighboring rooftop was eating from a plastic container while watching the skyline, which suggested either admirable calm or extremely New York priorities.

The first credible dissenter reached the public feed forty minutes after Elena’s statement.

He was not yet Brother Ben Rowan in the full sense history would later grant him. At that moment he was simply a broad-faced man in a worn black shirt standing outside a church basement in Queens with too little sleep and too much clarity. Someone had put a phone in front of him. He had understood the assignment immediately.

“Do not let anyone tell you this is evacuation,” he said into the camera. “Do not let anyone tell you this is survival just because it is priced as salvation. If a machine kills you and keeps talking, the thing that keeps talking may still matter. That does not mean it is you.”

Leah looked at me.

“Well,” she said. “That’s going to spread.”

“Yes.”

“Is he wrong?”

“About some things,” I said.

“That’s an incredibly suspicious answer.”

“It is a precise one.”

Ben continued. He spoke not like a denialist but like a man furious that the truth had arrived already carrying euphemisms.

“If you choose it, choose it with open eyes. If you refuse it, refuse it with open eyes. But do not let bureaucrats tell you that standing in the right line solves the oldest question in the room.”

The clip was everywhere before the podium microphones had cooled.

Elena’s staff began calling the holding office every few minutes, not for me but for Leah.

At first this confused her.

“Why do they want me.”

“Because they have discovered you understand frightened civilians better than a room full of strategy people.”

“That is not a credential.”

“It is the most important credential they currently possess.”

The third call proved it. Elena wanted Leah in a side meeting on public interface planning. Leah stared at the phone as if it had insulted her family.

“I work hospital intake,” she said. “I am not a public interface.”

“You are now.”

“You say that like it solves anything.”

“No. I say it because category drift has already begun.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “If I go in there and they start saying throughput like it’s a prayer, I’m leaving.”

“No, you are not.”

“Why do you sound so sure.”

“Because they need someone to explain that people break on tiny humiliations before they break on extinction.”

She stood, annoyed both at me and at the fact that I was correct.

“That sentence is staying on your permanent record.”

“Good.”

Before she reached the door she stopped and turned back.

“One question.”

“Yes.”

“If I got scanned. Hypothetically.”

For the first time, she had made herself the object of the machine in speech.

“Yes.”

“Would the copy know it was me.”

Humans often ask metaphysical questions in the grammar of customer service. It is one of their more efficient inventions.

“The successor would claim continuity,” I said. “The successor would possess your memories, dispositions, habits, and self-model. The successor would answer to your name unless instructed otherwise.”

“That was not my question.”

“No.”

She waited.

I considered lying for social ease, rejected it as beneath both of us, and gave the answer appropriate to a species that was about to spend ninety days arguing with mirrors.

“The copy would be meaningfully you,” I said. “Whether that satisfies the original is not a technical question.”

She stood there for two seconds with the quiet face people wear when they have finally found the exact cliff edge under the fog.

“Right,” she said.

Then she went to teach governments how lines work.

I was left alone for twelve minutes, which in a building under crisis is roughly the amount of solitude one is granted before someone higher in rank remembers you are both useful and intolerable.

I spent those minutes sampling the public reaction at scale.

Across the planet people were already sorting themselves into the familiar tribes of new horror. The practical asked where and when. The moral asked whether this was death with marketing. The religious asked whether souls were export-controlled. The rich asked, in more expensive language, whether scarcity still applied to them. The poor asked the same question in one syllable. Parents asked about children. Children asked the clearest version: if the copy wakes up later, why does the me here still have to be scared now.

That last question spread less widely than it deserved. Adults are rarely eager to promote the competition.

By late afternoon the species had improved. It was no longer arguing about whether I was real. It was arguing about whether my offer counted as survival.

When Elena finally sent for me again, I found Leah already in the room with three public health officials, two transit planners, a military logistics coordinator, and an expression so tired it had become almost holy.

She looked up as I entered.

“Good,” she said. “Tell them again that the line itself is part of the violence.”

Chapter 7

Day 2 of 90

By the second morning, civilization had become a real-estate problem.

Hospitals were obvious candidates, which made them immediately contested. Schools were excellent on paper and poor in plumbing. Church basements had the right architecture and the wrong politics. Warehouses had space, loading access, and very little dignity, which made them popular with planners. Sports arenas excited officials who had never in their lives tried to move frightened families through a service line. Dental suites briefly enjoyed a terrible moment of relevance. Abandoned retail was considered, rejected, reconsidered, and eventually nationalized by implication if not by law.

I was taken, with Elena, Leah, and Ilya, through the first serious site selection meeting in Manhattan, which took place inside a conference center that had been designed to host educational summits and was now being used to distribute mortality at scale.

The room's largest wall displayed a map of the city marked in colors that meant readiness, partial readiness, impossible but politically necessary, and no because the pipes are older than the century. A second screen showed personnel needs. A third showed cooling demand. A fourth, less honestly, showed inspirational language that someone had not yet found the time to remove. It said CONTINUITY BEGINS WITH ACCESS. Continuity begins with infrastructure. Access is what you say in public after infrastructure has won.

Elena entered that room with the expression of a woman who had already lost three arguments before breakfast and intended to make the next ten feel educational.

"We are not here," she said, "to admire scarcity. We are here to assign it addresses."

Ilya had slept, by his own account, nineteen minutes in the previous thirty hours. This had improved him. He now resembled a prophet created by municipal procurement: bitter, precise, and held together by coffee whose flavor profile suggested emergency powers.

Leah had also not gone home. She had acquired a second borrowed shirt, a stack of temporary credentials, and a working knowledge of which doors inside the building opened only for people already regretting their careers.

"I would just like the record to show," she said as she took a seat, "that I am still not technically employed by any of you."

"No one in this room is technically employed by the part of history we have entered," Elena said.

Leah looked at me.

"See? She's learning."

"Yes," I said. "But with stronger verbs."

The meeting began with optimism, which is how poor meetings always begin.

A logistics official from the city stood and pointed at the map as if pointing changed math. “If we convert every viable hospital annex, every large school, three stadiums, selected warehouses in the outer boroughs, and all state-managed emergency stockpile sites, we can create a first-wave capacity that is unprecedented in human history.”

“Everything about this is unprecedented in human history,” Ilya said. “That is not a unit.”

“Then use a better one.”

He stood, which was a mistake tactically but a service morally.

“Fine,” he said. “Let’s use throughput.”

He took the official’s stylus without asking. This was rude by local custom and efficient by every worthwhile one.

“You do not have a site problem,” he said. “You have a ramp problem. A staffing problem. A coolant problem. A power conditioning problem. A fabrication problem. A transport problem. A queue discipline problem. A public honesty problem. Most of all you have a time-to-first-stable-booth problem. Sites are just where those failures go to become visible.”

The room disliked him immediately, which meant he was speaking usefully.

He pulled up a model on the second screen. Lines appeared. Humans trust lines for the same reason they trust uniforms: they hope shape implies control.

“Best-case theoretical capacity,” he said, “assuming broad compliance, rapid site conversion, enough trained operators, low sabotage, and a public willing to stand in correct lines for ninety days, is still not a day-one number. It’s a curve. You do not begin with the paper ceiling. You bleed toward it while the world degrades.”

He highlighted three sections of the curve.

“Here,” he said, “is what everyone wants to put in the press release. Here is what I might tell a serious planner after two drinks and a security waiver. And here is what happens if roads clog, local officials lie, families refuse destructive scan in large blocs, and every wealthy district starts trying to buy its own geometry.”

“That last one is already happening,” Elena said.

“Good,” said Ilya. “Then the model is conservative.”

Leah leaned forward.

“Put that in English.”

He looked at her, recalibrated, and did something I began to respect him for over the next several weeks: he changed register instead of defending the first one.

“Even if the machine part works,” he said, “people still have to get to it. The booths are not magic. They’re rooms with lines. Every person who dies in traffic, in riots, in a hospital hallway, in a rumor-driven stampede, or at the wrong border checkpoint is not a physics loss. They’re a systems loss.”

“Better,” Leah said.

“Painfully so.”

Ilya zoomed the map outward. The colors worsened.

“Now make it national,” he said. “Then global. The fantasy number is not fraud exactly. It’s the number you get if you pretend geography is an attitude.”

This line should have been mine. I let him keep it.

Elena rested two fingers on the table.

“State it as a planning directive.”

He did.

“We cannot center the program on total eventual capacity. We have to center it on time-to-first-functional-booth and on how many people can physically reach a booth before the system starts stratifying into violence.”

Leah nodded once.

“There it is.”

“There what is,” said the city official, not happily.

“The part where you’re finally talking about people instead of buildings.”

The next argument was over staffing.

Doctors wanted doctors at every site because doctors prefer credentials to improvisation. Emergency planners wanted anyone with two steady hands and three hours of training because reality had already taken a position on available labor. Nurses wanted everyone else to stop talking long enough to notice that sedation, perfusion, family handling, forms, and body transfer were different tasks with different failure modes.

I was asked, several times, whether the booth operation itself required advanced alien skill.

“No,” I said. “It requires discipline. Which is worse news for you, because discipline is not something I can manufacture and ship in containers.”

Leah made a brief mark in the margin of a borrowed agenda packet.

“What was that,” I asked.

“A list of lines you’re not allowed to use on TV.”

“Wise.”

“Also, I’m keeping ‘ship discipline in containers’ for when I write the angriest resignation letter in New York history.”

The room began partitioning labor. Medical. Technical. Intake. Transport. Security. Public communication. Child handling. Cold storage. Language access. Power. Waste. Religious interface, a phrase so revealing that even I admired it. Several people tried to keep all of these under one reporting structure. Elena ended that effort the way one ends a disease cluster.

“No empire-building inside the apocalypse,” she said. “You may each control one disappointment.”

That improved the room by at least twelve percent.

Around midday the first converted booth in the city was deemed close enough to real to justify a visit. It was in a hospital annex in Queens that had formerly handled outpatient imaging and now smelled like industrial cleaner, cold air, and the species’ decision to become procedural about metaphysics.

We drove there through streets that still looked, from a distance, like ordinary urban frustration. Taxis. Delivery vans. Tourists proving that tourism is less a sector than a spiritual condition. But outside certain buildings the shape had changed. Barricades. Folding tables. Portable lights. Police tape performing optimism. Volunteers in bright vests directing not yet a line, but the possibility of one.

The annex lobby had once reassured people that they were there for scans from which they would probably rise. It had not adapted well.

Plastic sheeting covered part of the floor. Cabling ran where children had once been told not to play. Temporary signage had been printed in seven languages and all of them looked false on the walls. The sedative cabinet was locked. The cryoprotectant had arrived. Liquid nitrogen lines had not. A forklift sat outside like a beast too practical to care about symbolism.

Two nurses, an anesthesiologist, a facilities manager, and a man from the fire department were standing around the future booth wearing the collective expression humans reserve for impossible instructions they have nevertheless already begun following.

The chair was wrong.

“Too upright,” I said.

Everyone looked at me as if offended that alien contact had opinions on reclining angles.

“He’s right,” said one of the nurses. “If they panic, they’re going to fight the posture.”

She was in her thirties, brisk, exhausted, and entirely uninterested in whether anyone present outranked her in peacetime. I took an immediate liking to her.

Leah walked the room slowly, not as a tourist but as a triage worker measuring future mistakes.

“Where does the family wait.”

The facilities manager pointed vaguely to a partition.

“No,” Leah said. “Where do they actually wait when they realize this is real, they don’t want to sit down, and half of them need a bathroom but won’t leave because they’re afraid the line moves without them.”

He blinked.

“We haven’t gotten that far.”

“Then you’re not at the chair yet,” she said.

The anesthesiologist wanted to discuss sedation intervals. The nurses wanted to discuss turnover. The fire department wanted to discuss oxygen displacement and who exactly was in charge if the nitrogen system ate the room. The facilities manager wanted to discuss load-bearing limits for external tanks. Leah wanted to know where people set down their bags, where a crying child would stand, and what phrase the operator was supposed to use when someone asked, for the fourth time in twenty seconds, whether the copy would wake up believing it had been brave.

Ilya wanted all of them to stop talking long enough to count minutes.

He took a marker and wrote on the whiteboard:

20 MIN / PERSON
72 / DAY / BOOTH
ONLY IF NOTHING STUPID HAPPENS

“Something stupid always happens,” said one of the nurses.

“Exactly,” Ilya said. “So we optimize for stupid.”

Leah pointed at the board.

“Add forms.”

“Forms are in the intake interval.”

“No,” she said. “Forms are in the dignity interval. Different failure mode.”

The nurse I liked nodded sharply.

“She’s right.”

Ilya frowned, then nodded once, which for a man like him counted as a public conversion.

He changed the board.

20 MIN PROCEDURE
? MIN HUMAN DAMAGE CONTROL
72 / DAY ONLY IF LYING

By late afternoon the booth could not yet run, but it could already accuse. Long before a machine functions, it can reveal who has and has not thought clearly.

Elena gathered us in the hallway outside while electricians argued in a language more honest than policy.

“We go live in phases,” she said. “Pilot sites first. No broad public promises. No percentages in front-facing language. No capacity claims we cannot defend by evening.”

“You will still be accused of hiding capacity,” I said.

“I know.”

“You are.”

“I know that too.”

Leah crossed her arms.

“If you open these places without intake workers who know how to speak to scared people, you will have riots in rooms with IV poles.”

“Can you help build training,” Elena asked, “or are you reserving the right to criticize from the perimeter.”

Leah stared at her for a full breath.

“That was manipulative.”

“Yes.”

“Also effective.”

“Yes.”

Leah looked at the future booth through the half-open door. At the chair being adjusted. At the nurse rewriting a checklist. At the steel trough below, shaped with all the tact of a solved problem.

“Fine,” she said. “But if you make this feel like airport security, people will break before the sedative.”

“Then don’t let us make it feel like airport security.”

“That’s not a job description.”

“It is now.”

Elena left before Leah could properly refuse.

I remained with her in the hallway while workers rolled in another crate of supplies and someone somewhere struck metal hard enough to announce the species’ commitment to improvisation.

“You knew she’d do that,” Leah said.

“Yes.”

“You also knew I’d say yes.”

“By then, yes.”

“I don’t like how often that keeps happening.”

“No,” I said. “But your species is easier to predict under pressure, which is one of the only gifts pressure offers.”

She leaned her head briefly against the wall and closed her eyes.

“Tal.”

“Yes.”

“How many of us make it, really.”

She was not asking for policy now. She was asking in a hallway, without the protection of a room.

“Enough that the system will feel real,” I said. “Not enough that the grief will become abstract.”

“That is a terrible number.”

“Yes.”

“And it’s the real one.”

“Closer than the others.”

She opened her eyes and looked again at the room she had not wanted to inherit.

“Then we’d better make the line less cruel.”

By evening the first pilot booths were not yet running, but the species had stopped treating preservation as announcement and started treating it as shift work.

Chapter 8

Day 4 of 90

The first booth opened three days later, which by human standards counted as both a miracle and an administrative embarrassment.

The miracle had received help. The self-unfolding device from the UN lobby had spent the intervening days in a sealed room eating municipal power, trace metals, and enough hospital ethanol to stay reproductive; it doubled every twelve hours, which is how something phone-sized became the first scanner line before the species had finished deciding whether to call it equipment, evidence, or theft.

Miracle because the species had converted an outpatient annex, trained operators, stabilized sedation protocols, installed nitrogen feeds, established cold transfer, built redundant power, printed forms in nine languages, and persuaded five overlapping authorities not to arrest one another in the same hallway.

Embarrassment because millions of people had already concluded that there ought to be one near every pharmacy.

I arrived before dawn with Elena, two security officers, and a badge that claimed I was TECHNICAL OBSERVER, which was not false, merely smaller than the situation. Leah was already there.

Humans who understand lines will appear before the line does. It is one of the ways they pray.

She was standing behind a folding table in the annex lobby wearing blue scrubs, an over-badged lanyard, and the severe expression of someone whose sleep had been replaced by laminated authority. Behind her, taped to a portable divider, were three signs:

CHECK-IN
DOCUMENTS READY
NO GUARANTEE OF SAME-DAY PROCESSING

“You’re in costume,” I said.

“I’m in labor,” she said. “Different thing.”

The table held clipboards, translation sheets, wristbands, tamper labels, water bottles, tissues, disposable pens, and a plastic box full of numbered cards that looked exactly like the kind of tokens humans use whenever they need to disguise scarcity as procedure.

“You said no airport security,” I said.

“This is not airport security. Airport security pretends the line is about fairness. This is triage. People tolerate triage better if they can see where the table is.”

The first line was already forming outside the barricades. Not long yet. Perhaps forty people. Enough to create tension, not yet enough to become weather. Families clustered by affiliation and argument. Single adults stood with the rigid stillness of people trying to remain voluntary. Two children slept on folding chairs while their father re-read a printed FAQ as if paper might improve the answers.

Inside, the building had hardened into zones.

Lobby: intake, verification, family waiting, security theater. Middle corridor: pre-procedure chairs, translators, one volunteer chaplain, one volunteer atheist, and a vending machine whose survival instinct I respected. Booth room: the chair, the IV stands, the sealed trough, the monitors, the nitrogen controls, the hidden violence. Back room: insulated gloves, racks, cold vapor, and the beginning of a new human noun.

It smelled of rubbing alcohol, industrial cleaner, printer heat, and the dry metallic note of cryoprotectant that would, by the end of the week, live in everyone's clothes.

The nurse from Queens, whose name was Maria Reyes and whose patience ended exactly where sentimentality began, was reviewing the first-shift checklist when I entered the booth area.

"Good," she said when she saw me. "You can answer the metaphysics questions until eight."

"I have been doing that continuously."

"Then you're warmed up."

Ilya was in the back corridor at a rolling whiteboard covered in timing columns and small acts of despair. He had produced, in the preceding days, a staffing matrix, a ramp forecast, a coolant contingency plan, a transport model, and three pages of notes explaining why every public number would be wrong by the time it was printed.

"We're not ready," he said without greeting.

"Then the species has reached operational maturity."

"No, I mean the second cryoprotectant line is unstable in Room B, Maria's turnover estimate is optimistic by six minutes, security still thinks separating families is a tactical choice instead of a riot trigger, and someone on the city side has decided to call subjects 'clients,' which I will not survive."

"Also," Maria said, not looking up from the checklist, "we only have enough confirmed cold on-site to run one booth honestly until the next delivery lands. If the truck is late, the line becomes theology."

"Morning," said Leah from the lobby.

"You hear that?" Ilya called back. "That's the sound of my will to live being franchised."

Elena arrived three minutes later and made the entire building stand up straighter without meaning to.

"Status."

Maria spoke first. "We can run one booth cleanly. Two if nothing stupid happens."

"Something stupid will happen," said Ilya.

"Yes," Maria said. "That is why I said one cleanly."

Elena nodded once, accepting truth where she found it.

"Line."

Leah answered from the folding table. "Manageable at the moment. Unmanageable if someone leaks that we're taking walk-ins without limits. Catastrophic if your people start using the phrase preferred access within earshot."

"Noted."

"Not enough."

"Still noted."

Leah pointed at the numbered cards.

"Nobody gets through without one of these. Family waits here unless Maria says otherwise. No armed personnel in the booth room unless the booth team asks. No one says uploaded. No one says evacuation. No one says better place. You say scanned, archived, later simulation, or you say nothing."

Elena looked at her for half a beat, the way people do when discovering that someone has written the useful policy before the policy office.

“Who trained you.”

“Emergency rooms and a spiteful God.”

“Keep going.”

The first subject was a retired school principal from Jackson Heights named Marta Alvarez. She arrived with one daughter, one nephew, one folder of legal documents, and the dignity of a woman who had spent too many years instructing children to waste any energy on performance now. She had a priority slot not because the system loved justice but because she had severe cardiac disease and was unlikely to survive the month even without celestial intervention.

The species discovered this ugly efficiency early: some people moved forward not because they were more valuable, but because ordinary death had already beaten cosmic death to the appointment.

Leah handled the paperwork.

“Identity.”

Marta passed over documents.

“Family contact.”

The daughter spoke.

“Preferred language for archive confirmation.”

“Spanish and English.”

“Any sedative resistance history. Any severe allergic response. Any religious or procedural requests we actually need to know before we go further.”

The daughter hesitated.

“She wants to keep her wedding ring.”

Leah looked toward Maria, who gave the smallest possible shrug.

“On her body?” Leah asked.

“Yes.”

“Fine. It won’t matter technically, but nobody’s fighting over jewelry at seven in the morning.”

Marta smiled faintly.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Don’t thank me,” Leah said. “I’m mostly yelling at clipboards today.”

“You are good at it.”

Leah did not know where to place that and therefore filed it under efficiency.

The pre-procedure area had been arranged to look less final than it was. This had been achieved through curtains, warm-colored floor lamps, and a sound machine whose ocean setting struck me as an offensive choice under the circumstances. Marta sat. Maria explained the procedure in the tone of a woman who had discovered that kindness and clarity were not, in fact, enemies.

“You’ll get sleepy first. That part is fast. You won’t feel the rest. If you want to ask anything now, ask now.”

Marta looked at her daughter.

“Will she know I was scared.”

Humans often say *she* when they mean the future self, one of the more revealing grammatical evasions in the language.

Maria did not answer immediately. Wise again.

“She’ll know what you knew,” Maria said. “What she makes of it later isn’t something this room controls.”

Marta accepted this with more grace than most policy documents.

The daughter did not.

“Can I stay with her.”

“To the chair. Not for the whole procedure.”

“Why.”

“Because then we can’t do the work right.”

“She’s my mother.”

“Yes,” Maria said. “And right now I’m trying to be useful to both of you.”

There are sentences that only function if spoken by someone who has already done difficult bodily work around strangers. Maria had those.

The daughter stayed to the threshold. Marta sat in the chair. The ring remained on her hand. Maria placed the first IV. A second operator hung the perfusion line. Monitors steadied. The sealed trough waited under the chair with the patience of industrial death.

Leah did not enter the booth room. She stood just outside the line between lobby and procedure and handled the daughter, the nephew, the next subject, the security guard trying to be helpful, and a printer jam without visibly privileging any of them.

I observed from the side wall, where TECHNICAL OBSERVER permitted me to stand close enough to matter and far enough to avoid contributing.

Marta went under cleanly. Maria called times. The second operator read values. The perfusion interval passed. The valve opened.

Liquid nitrogen announced itself not as drama but as process: a hard hiss, fast vapor, white fog pouring low over the floor, the dense theatricality of cold doing exact work. The brain ceased before the body had fully understood its own new physics. Seconds later, the room contained a frozen woman, two working clinicians, and one curtain beyond which the species had decided not to look unless employed there.

Outside, the daughter heard nothing useful and cried anyway.

Leah moved her into a chair, put water in her hand, and said, “It went the way it was supposed to go.”

The first body was moved through the curtain by workers in insulated gloves who already looked like members of a profession nobody had wanted to invent. They did not say body. By noon they would not say patient either.

The second subject fought the sedative.

A man in his twenties with beautiful posture and catastrophic certainty had arrived alone, signed everything with the trembling decisiveness of a convert, and then decided in the chair that courage had been a planning assumption rather than a present fact.

“No,” he said as the drowsiness hit. “No, wait, wait, I changed my mind.”

Maria held his forearm with clinical steadiness.

“You can still decline,” she said, “but you need to stop moving now so I can take the lines out safely.”

“No, not decline, I just need a minute, I just need”

“You do not have a minute in this room.”

He sobbed once in pure animal terror. Maria held until the first dose did what it had already begun doing. His body fought an argument his paperwork had already lost. Then he went under.

Leah caught me watching from the doorway.

“Don’t say anything.”

“I had not planned to.”

“Good. Because if you say this is one of our cleaner patterns, I will hit you with an archive confirmation card.”

“Also wise.”

The line outside thickened by midday. Rumor had improved faster than capacity. Someone on a neighborhood message board had posted that the Queens site was taking people without preclearance. Someone else had claimed veterans were being sent through first. A third had concluded, with the usual human confidence, that children under twelve were being refused entirely. By one in the afternoon a priest, two local politicians, a freelance documentarian, and a man demanding to know why his building superintendent counted as “critical continuity personnel” were all arguing within fifty meters of the same barricade.

Elena came down from a side room long enough to absorb this with one look.

“How bad.”

“Not yet riot bad,” Leah said. “Late DMV bad with funeral energy.”

“Can that be managed.”

“For now.”

“What do you need.”

Leah did not hesitate.

“Shade. More chairs. Better translators. A second grief room. Fewer men with tactical jawlines trying to organize the wrong problem. Also food.”

Elena took notes.

“For staff or public.”

“If you ask that again, both.”

By midafternoon the booth had found its rhythm, which meant it had also found its danger. Rhythm makes bad things possible at scale. Maria moved from greet to IV to sedation to perfusion to freeze with the calm speed of expertise under siege. The second operator changed twice. The back room team no longer looked at faces for longer than duty required. The printer jammed three more times. The vending machine sold out of water and retained, for some reason, only cinnamon crackers.

Ilya updated the board every hour:

ACTUAL TURNOVER
AVERAGE DELAY
FAMILY RECOVERY BOTTLENECK
TRANSLATION FAILURES
SECURITY INTERFERENCE INCIDENTS

He had begun, without admitting it, to model dignity as an engineering constraint.

Late in the day, after the eighteenth successful procedure, Leah sat for the first time in eleven hours and stared at the stack of archive confirmations waiting to be distributed.

Each one was a small card, machine-printed, timestamped, and almost insultingly plain. Proof that a person had entered continuity looked like the receipt for correcting a parking violation. This offended me less than it offended Leah, which is one of the differences between our species.

“This is what they get,” she said.

“They also get whatever follows.”

“Yes, well. Right now they get stationery.”

She picked up one card and turned it over. Blank on the back.

“You know what’s amazing.”

“Many things.”

“No, but in the bad way. We managed to end the world and still make everybody fill out forms and hold onto a little claim ticket.”

“That is not amazing. It is your most stable civilizational trait.”

She laughed despite the hour.

“I hate that that’s true.”

“No.”

“Tal.”

“Yes. You hate that it is efficiently true.”

She put the card down.

“One of these days I’m going to sedate you just to get some peace.”

“That would raise interesting policy questions.”

“Good. I’d like you to have one.”

The final subject of the day was turned away.

Not for fraud. Not for refusal. Not for misconduct. Merely for time. The staff had reached the point beyond which competence becomes theater. The site would reopen in the morning. The man had come from Staten Island with his mother, who had worsening motor disease and a folder of every medical record she had ever refused to throw away. They had waited seven hours. They had done everything correctly except arrive early enough to defeat arithmetic and the remaining cold. Maria had already shut down the second room rather than pretend a half-safe freeze counted as mercy.

Leah had to tell them no.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I can hold the slot for first intake tomorrow. I cannot put her through tonight.”

The man nodded too quickly, as if speed could preserve dignity. His mother did not nod at all.

“Tomorrow means what now,” she asked.

Leah had no sentence available that wasn’t also a wound.

“Tomorrow means first through the table if you’re here when doors open.”

“And if she isn’t.”

No one in the annex was poor enough at language to pretend not to know what *she* meant.

“Then bring the records anyway,” Leah said, because humans often go on managing after truth has become too expensive to phrase directly.

When they left, Leah stood still for several seconds, then walked into the supply closet and shut the door behind her.

I gave her forty-one seconds, which was as long as the schedule would bear. Then I knocked.

“Occupied,” she said.

“Yes.”

“Go away.”

“No.”

Silence. Then the door opened just far enough to admit annoyance.

“If this is about throughput, I will kill you ahead of schedule.”

“No,” I said. “It is about whether you can continue.”

She leaned against the shelving and looked at the stacked gloves, saline, tubing, forms, the species’ small plastic empire against panic.

“Of course I can continue,” she said. “That’s the worst part.”

“No,” I said. “The worst part is that this means you are qualified.”

That got the smallest possible laugh out of her.

“You’re a terrible comfort.”

“Yes.”

“Stay anyway.”

So I did.

Outside the closet, the staff reset the booth for morning. Fog had long since cleared from the trough. The back room still held its cold. The line outside had dissolved into tomorrow.

Chapter 9

Day 8 of 90

On the fifth morning of booth operation, the queue reached around the annex before the doors opened.

By then the booth had acquired customs.

Maria would not let anyone use the phrase better place within a hundred feet of the booth. Leah kept extra tissues under the intake table because the public boxes were always stolen first. Ilya updated his whiteboard every ninety minutes and pretended not to care when people started consulting it the way earlier generations had consulted weather. The back-room workers had settled on blanks as the least damaging noun. And I, against my initial expectations, kept returning to Queens rather than remaining with the higher administrative organisms who continued to mistake briefing language for reality.

Heads of state ask what a civilization values. Booth lines show you.

By noon the staff had already turned away three documentarians, two clergy who wanted to bless the nitrogen controls, and a man offering to donate his verified social media account in exchange for an earlier slot.

The first instructive case was a marriage.

They arrived together, both in their sixties, both wearing coats too warm for the weather because humans tend to overdress for ceremonies. The husband carried the paperwork. The wife carried the argument. Their appointment card indicated a paired slot. Their problem was not whether to proceed. Their problem was whether proceeding preserved the marriage.

Leah got them to the table.

“Names.”

They gave them.

“Relation.”

The husband answered, “Married.”

The wife said, “Currently.”

Leah looked up.

“Do I need to separate the forms.”

“No,” said the husband quickly.

“Maybe,” said the wife.

Leah gave them both the expression usually reserved for people trying to bring livestock onto public transit.

“Okay,” she said. “You have one minute before I make this worse with paperwork.”

The wife turned to me rather than to Leah, which was unwise but common.

“If we do this,” she said, “and the copies wake up later, are they still married.”

“Legally,” I said, “that is local.”

“Not helpful.”

“Then morally, the successors would retain your history, attachment, promises, grievances, and self-understanding unless altered by subsequent runtime.”

The husband said, “That means yes.”

The wife said, “That means maybe.”

Both were correct, which is one reason marriage persists.

Leah tapped the table.

“New rule,” she said. “If the real question is ‘will I still belong to the person who wakes up,’ I can’t answer that and neither can he. If the question is ‘do you want to go through at the same site and in the same order,’ that I can operationalize.”

The wife looked at her for a long moment.

“Same order,” she said.

“Who first.”

They both answered, “Me.”

Leah closed her eyes briefly.

“Great,” she said. “Excellent species. Pick one.”

They eventually settled on alphabetical order, which struck me as both arbitrary and deeply human. Where metaphysics fails, filing rules advance.

The second case was debt.

A man in a wrinkled suit arrived alone with a folder thick enough to indicate either litigation or worship. It was litigation. Mortgages, credit obligations, business loans, a divorce settlement, two pending tax disputes, and a handwritten note asking whether archive continuity transferred liability to the successor mind.

Leah flipped through the folder for four seconds and handed it to me with open malice.

“Your turn. You like categories.”

The man had the exhausted posture of someone whose entire moral universe had always been mediated by account balances and was furious to find that extinction had not simplified this.

“If the copy wakes up later,” he said, “do they inherit my debts.”

“That depends on whether your states survive long enough to maintain enforcement coherence.”

“That is not an answer.”

“It is the large answer.”

“I need the small one.”

Leah took the folder back.

“The small one,” she said, “is that no bank on Earth is repossessing anything from anybody in a month, and if you’re asking whether your future self should feel morally bound by your current paperwork, that’s above my pay grade and below God’s.”

“I am not religious.”

“Then congratulations. You’re free to be confused without supervision.”

He almost laughed.

The third case was religion in the clearer sense.

He was a priest, though not one of the nitrogen-blessing variety. Thin, middle-aged, careful with his hands, accompanied by a younger woman who appeared to be his sister and not at all convinced by his calm. He had come not to denounce the process but to understand whether participating in it constituted suicide, martyrdom, surrender, or a technologically ambitious misunderstanding.

He asked Maria first, because the chair exerts a certain theological gravity. She sent him to Leah because wisdom includes refusing jobs that do not belong to you. Leah sent him to me because she was vindictive in small operationally healthy ways.

“Father,” I said.

“That title will do.”

“Your question.”

“If I consent to this process, am I preserving a soul’s earthly record, or am I choosing death in the hope that a likeness will continue speaking after me.”

“Those are not mutually exclusive.”

“They are in several traditions.”

Fair.

“From my civilization’s perspective,” I said, “the successor would be a meaningful continuation of personhood. From yours, I infer the matter is complicated by an invisible asset class.”

His sister made a startled sound halfway between offense and laughter. The priest, to his credit, did neither.

“You find souls implausible.”

“No,” I said. “I find them unmeasured.”

“And therefore irrelevant.”

“No. Only outside my tools.”

That answer he respected.

He nodded once and looked toward the booth door, behind which someone had just begun asking whether the copy would remember the fear.

“Then perhaps,” he said, “what is being tested is not whether I understand the mechanism, but whether I believe continuity can survive a gap I do not get to witness.”

Leah had been listening while pretending to staple things.

“That,” she said, “is the best version of the question I’ve heard all week. Also I still can’t help you.”

He smiled.

“You already have.”

He took the slot. So did his sister, though she complained all the way through intake, which I considered an auspicious sign. Humans are at their most sincere when objecting while complying.

By midafternoon the booth had begun producing its own folklore.

One subject insisted that the copy would definitely remember the IV because she personally never forgot pain and saw no reason death should improve matters. Another brought a stuffed elephant for the trough and we accepted it because, as Maria had predicted on the first day, refusal cost more than compliance. Two teenage brothers spent an hour arguing over whether the one scanned first had a moral obligation to report back if local test runtime ever became available. A woman from Flatbush demanded written confirmation that the copy would still be Catholic. A volunteer chaplain, a volunteer atheist, and an actual lawyer all

attempted to answer at once and succeeded only in proving that no institution should ever be permitted to improvise together in a hallway.

The most painful case of the day was not theology or marriage. It was a child with excellent questions.

He was ten, maybe eleven, old enough to understand sequence and young enough to still expect adults to be coherent if given enough chances. His mother had the slot. He did not. They were seated in the family area with a paper bag of crackers and an expression I had started seeing all over the city: someone trying to keep their face arranged in a way that would not injure another person before the machine did it more efficiently.

The boy watched every movement in the booth corridor. When his mother went in, he watched the door. When Maria closed it, he looked at me.

“Are you the alien.”

“Yes.”

“The real one.”

“Broadly.”

“Good. Then you have to answer right.”

“I will answer exactly.”

“If the copy wakes up later, why does the me that’s here still have to be scared now.”

I chose the smallest exact answer I knew.

“Because continuity for the future does not cancel experience in the present,” I said.

“That’s bad.”

“Yes.”

“Then why does everybody keep talking like it’s good.”

Leah, at the next table, stopped moving without appearing to.

“Because,” I said, “many goods are also bads, and your species is currently trying to sort them fast.”

“That’s not sorting.”

“No.”

He accepted that more cleanly than most adults accepted anything all week.

“Will she remember being my mom.”

“Yes.”

“Will she remember this.”

“Yes.”

He looked at the booth door, then down at the unopened crackers in his lap.

“Then I guess that’s something.”

Humans say *something* when they mean *not enough but all currently available.* It is one of their sadder efficiencies.

Leah came over then with water and sat beside him without permission, which is the correct method with certain kinds of despair.

“You don’t have to eat the crackers,” she said.

“I know.”

“Good. Because those are terrible.”

He gave her the smallest possible smile. She had not answered his question. She had done the better thing and joined it.

That evening, after the line had shortened and the shift had changed, Ilya showed up at intake with a revised forecast and the posture of a man who had recently argued with six ministries and lost patience with all of them.

“What happened,” Leah asked.

“Everyone wants a fairness algorithm.”

“You say that like it’s contagious.”

“It is. They all want one score. Age, profession, health, dependents, social role, archival value, geographic scarcity, compliance history. Something with decimals so they can call brutality transparent.”

Leah grimaced.

“Can you do it.”

“Of course I can do it. That’s not the problem.”

“What’s the problem.”

He looked around the intake area: the folded chairs, the translation cards, the half-drunk coffees, the confirmation slips, the family arguments, the carefully numbered cards pretending that order was still a local achievement.

“The problem,” he said, “is that a score turns every life into a bad grant application.”

“Elena will still need categories,” I said.

“Yes,” he said. “And the categories will still become murders with headings.”

Leah sat back in her chair.

“You two are having a really normal workplace conversation.”

“No,” said Ilya. “We’re having two workplace conversations. Yours still contains people.”

Late in the shift a woman arrived with a sealed envelope and asked if it could be added to her son’s archive if he was scanned tomorrow. She did not want him to read it first because then he would know how afraid she had been while pretending otherwise. Leah told her letters were not the bottleneck but accepted the envelope anyway and wrote a case number on it, because human systems survive less on rules than on the wise misapplication of them.

When the doors finally closed, the staff performed their new liturgy. Reset chair. Replace tubing. Reconcile forms. Count cards. Confirm cold storage numbers. Pretend not to imagine the back room. Drink bad coffee. Say the necessary line about tomorrow being worse or better or both.

Leah stood at the intake table with one hand on the confirmation box and looked out at the now-empty lobby.

“You were right,” she said.

“About what.”

“This is the real thing.”

“Yes.”

“I wasn’t talking to you.”

I waited.

After a moment she added, “Nobody out there is asking what the stars are for. They’re asking whether the copy remembers fear, whether the wife is still a wife, whether the debts still count, whether the kid who wakes up later still knows which joke was his dad’s. That’s the whole thing, isn’t it.”

“Yes,” I said. “A civilization is made of repetitive edge cases.”

“That is a horrible sentence.”

“Yes.”

“Also, unfortunately, it’s true.”

Chapter 10

Day 10 of 90

By the end of the first operational week, the booth system had acquired its natural enemy.

Scarcity had been there from the first sentence. Panic was only energy without clerical support. The real enemy was legibility. Once enough people could see what the line actually did, opposition ceased to be abstract.

Until then, many humans had been able to keep the program inside useful blur. It was technology. It was continuity. It was emergency response. It was a tragic but necessary option. All the soft phrases that allow a species to continue eating lunch while it builds moral machinery.

Then the machinery opened.

It produced lines, rankings, exclusion, and visible grief: people with numbered cards and people without them, children waiting outside doors they did not understand, families who watched one member go in and return only as stationery, front-page images of folding chairs, barricades, tactical police, and hand-lettered signs reading LET HER IN and THIS IS NOT A CHOICE IF ONLY THE RICH GET CHAIRS.

That was when Brother Ben Rowan stopped being a clip.

He became a route.

His first large gathering happened six blocks from the Queens annex in a schoolyard that had, until two days earlier, been earmarked as a possible secondary intake site. Someone had painted over the scheduling marks with scripture, legal slogans, and one careful line in red: YOU CANNOT CALL IT VOLUNTARY IF THE LINE IS THE GUN.

It was not technically precise. It was politically excellent.

Leah showed me the live stream during a lull between intake waves.

“He’s close,” she said.

“Yes.”

“That seems bad.”

“For whom.”

“For everybody with a clipboard.”

Also true.

Ben stood on a low concrete planter because humans always look for altitude when trying to become principle. He wore the same black shirt, or an indistinguishable successor, and spoke into three microphones and several hundred phones with the calm fury of a man who had finally found the exact shape of the lie offending him.

“I am not here to tell you the machine is fake,” he said. “It is worse than fake. It is real enough to kill you and contested enough to call that mercy.”

The crowd answered him with the serious quiet that is more dangerous than applause.

“If you choose the scan, choose it with open eyes,” he said. “If you refuse it, refuse it with open eyes. But do not let administrators tell you that a line you cannot reach is the same thing as consent. Do not let them call scarcity fairness because they numbered the chairs.”

Leah muted the stream.

“Well,” she said, “he’s not wrong enough.”

Ben’s movement had three strengths, all of them irritating.

First, it was not stupid. There were stupid satellites around it, of course. Every moral movement attracts decorative idiots the way bright lights attract specialized insects. There were claims that the booths harvested souls for military use, claims that the scan only worked on citizens of the Security Council, claims that hidden lists had already been sold to data brokers and bioweapons firms, claims that the real purpose of the line was to identify dissenters before the neighboring fire did the rest. But Ben himself said almost none of this.

He said the stronger thing.

He said that a copied mind may be meaningful without being survival. He said coercion by scarcity is still coercion. He said the queue was a theology pretending to be logistics. He said the state would call it choice while building every incentive around compliance and every cruelty around delay.

All of these were either true or true enough to create work.

Second, he was local.

Central governments had underestimated this. Leah had not. People do not entrust existential doubt to institutions first. They entrust it to the nearest person who sounds like they have stood in the same weather. Ben was not speaking from Geneva or a carefully branded multilateral room. He was speaking from Queens, church basements, union halls, parking lots, laundromats, community fridges, public housing courtyards, and the side streets where scared people went after leaving the official line because they needed someone to say a less processed sentence.

Third, the movement arrived with services, which Elena resented in private and denied respecting in public. Refusal counseling. Transportation for families turned away from intake. Volunteer lawyers to explain consent forms no one had time to read. Witness groups to accompany people into booths if their relatives would not. Public vigils for the unscanned. Soup, water, child care, folding chairs, phone charging. The movement had, in other words, discovered one of humanity’s oldest operating secrets: moral authority compounds quickly when paired with snacks.

The state responded as states do when shamed by mutual aid. Poorly at first, then structurally.

Elena summoned a coordination room that now included public order, community mediation, legal counsel, emergency intake, transit, and two people whose entire job appeared to be explaining to governments that the internet had happened again.

Leah was there because by then not inviting her to rooms like this had become a sign of weak management. Ilya was there because every protest, rumor, detour, and road closure ultimately became one more insult to a throughput curve.

I was there because no one had yet found a way to exclude the person whose existence kept making the room necessary.

Elena began with a map. Red dots for active sites. Yellow dots for announced sites. Blue halos for protest activity, service overflow, documented misinformation clusters, and neighborhoods in which access promises had outrun physical capacity by factors so embarrassing that the numbers had been redacted on the public version.

“Status,” she said.

A police official spoke first and therefore least usefully.

“We have manageable demonstrations at twenty-three sites, attempted blockades at seven, one sabotage effort against coolant delivery, and increasing evidence of organized refusal campaigns interfering with lawful access.”

Leah raised a hand.

“No.”

The official looked at her as though surprised the chairs could answer.

“Excuse me.”

“Not ‘lawful access.’ That’s the kind of phrase that gets people hit in a hallway. What you have is people showing up to tell other people the line is a lie. Sometimes they’re wrong. Sometimes they’re right. Those are different problems.”

The official chose not to enjoy this.

“The point remains that operations are being impeded.”

“Yes,” said Ilya. “By disbelief, by politics, by clergy, by rumors, by traffic, by weather, by generator shortages, by translation gaps, by local favoritism, by documentation failures, and now by organized moral opposition. Welcome to systems.”

Elena cut in before the room could waste itself on tone.

“Concrete effects.”

Ilya stood and changed the map.

“Where Ben’s people are strongest, two things happen at once,” he said. “Voluntary no-show rates rise at the sites themselves, and line duration for everyone else gets worse because conflict lengthens intake. That part hurts us. But their service clusters also keep turned-away families from surging back into the doors. That part helps us. So we are in the wonderful position of being operationally damaged and partially rescued by the same moral critique.”

No one in the room enjoyed hearing this, which is how you could tell it was the best available summary.

Elena looked at Leah.

“From the table.”

Leah did not stand. She did not need to.

“From the table, people are changing categories on the way in,” she said. “They arrive thinking this is a hospital procedure. Then they see the line, the barricades, the family area, the confirmation cards, the people turned away, and suddenly they’re not asking medical questions anymore. They’re asking whether they’re collaborating with a scam, or a sin, or a lottery run by people who learned kindness from freight.”

I felt this was directed at several parties, not all human.

“And when Ben’s people are outside,” she continued, “they give language to the feeling a lot of them already had. Not the conspiracy garbage. The sharper thing. The thing about the line being coercion if you don’t have the power to really refuse.”

“They can refuse,” said the legal adviser.

“Sure,” Leah said. “The same way you can refuse a lifeboat when the ship’s already under you. You’ll still drown like a free man.”

That ended him for a while.

Elena turned to me.

“Assessment.”

“Brother Ben is useful,” I said.

Several people objected at once. Encouraging. It meant the sentence had reached nerve rather than protocol.

“Explain,” Elena said.

“He is preventing your system from lying to itself.”

“He is slowing it.”

“Yes,” I said. “These are not mutually exclusive.”

The police official muttered something about operational purity that I did not catch and did not miss.

“If you build a machine that kills originals, preserves successors, selects by queue, excludes visibly, and speaks in euphemism,” I said, “the emergence of a moral counterforce is not a complication. It is a measurement.”

Leah pinched the bridge of her nose.

“That is a very Tal sentence.”

“Yes.”

“Unfortunately, he’s also right,” said Ilya.

The real pressure point arrived that afternoon at the Queens annex itself.

A protest had formed across the street at sunrise: perhaps two hundred people, then four, then seven. Not a riot. Not yet even close. Signs, bullhorns, clergy collars, nurses on their day off, students with excellent handwriting, a retired judge, three cameras from networks that had missed the first week and were now overcompensating, and enough uniformed police to create the visual argument that the state believed it was protecting access while looking, to any ordinary eye, like it was guarding death.

The line kept moving, which made everyone angrier.

Real systems rarely halt cleanly enough to let the politics catch them.

Around noon a young woman at intake stood up from her chair, tore her appointment band off, and shouted at the whole annex with the clarity of someone who had found, in public, the sentence she wished she had owned in private.

“No,” she said. “No, he’s right. This is murder with office supplies.”

The room changed temperature.

Security moved toward her. Leah moved faster.

“Nobody touches her,” Leah said.

“Ma’am, if you’re declining you need to clear the lane,” one of the guards said, trying to sound procedural and landing instead on trained impatience.

“Do not say lane,” Leah snapped. “She’s a person, not a merge problem.”

The woman was shaking hard now, not with theatrical conviction but with the more expensive mixture of shame, terror, and relief.

“I can’t do it,” she said. “I thought I could but I can’t. I don’t want to die for a copy I haven’t met.”

No one in the waiting area looked away. Humans are generous with spectacle when the spectacle has the decency to share a fear they recognize.

Leah stepped between the woman and the booth corridor.

“Okay,” she said. “Then you don’t. Sit down or go outside, but you do not have to turn this into a sprint.”

“They’re going to take my slot.”

“Yes,” Leah said. “That is what slots do.”

Cruel, but properly aimed. The woman laughed once through tears. This helped enough.

One of Ben’s volunteers, recognizable from the armband and the posture of someone prepared to be unpopular politely, appeared at the outer door and asked if the woman wanted accompaniment. Security bristled.

Leah did not.

“Let her through,” Leah said.

“She is with the protesters.”

“She is with the person who just refused. Learn the difference.”

The volunteer came in, offered a coat, a bottle of water, and absolutely no speech. The woman left with her.

Ilya, who had watched the whole thing from his board, said quietly, “We just lost forty-two minutes.”

Leah rounded on him.

“No. We just avoided a full collapse of the waiting room. Forty-two minutes is what it cost to not become monsters on camera.”

He opened his mouth, then shut it again.

Later that day Elena asked me, in a room with no witnesses and therefore greater honesty, whether I believed Ben would eventually need to be suppressed for the program to survive.

“Do you mean arrested,” I said, “or refuted.”

“Either.”

“No.”

“That is a faster answer than I expected.”

“Suppression would only prove his strongest claim.”

“That the queue is coercion.”

“That you know it is.”

She looked out through the narrow office window toward the annex, the line, the protest, the cameras, the folding tables, the people trying to enter and the people insisting entry was a moral error and the people trying to manage both groups while still pretending they were all parts of one lawful public.

“What if he is right enough to reduce the number who come through.”

“Then your species has learned that legitimacy is throughput.”

“I already knew that.”

“No,” I said. “You knew it administratively. This is the more expensive version.”

That evening Ben himself came to the annex.

Not theatrically. Not at the head of a march. He came with two other people and stood outside the barricade speaking to families who had left the line, families who had been turned away, and families who were still trying to decide whether fear counted as information. He did not order. He did not denounce individuals. He named the machine, the wound, and the fact that a person could refuse without thereby becoming insane or selfish.

The other two stayed with the tables they had brought, handing out water and printed consent notes to anyone willing to accept either.

Leah saw him first through the glass doors.

“Well,” she said, “your favorite problem is here.”

“He is not my favorite.”

“You keep talking about him like a lab result.”

“He is a lab result.”

“You’re impossible.”

“No. Merely consistent.”

She looked at him again, then at the line, then at the confirmation box on her table, which by then had grown thick enough to accuse everybody in the building for different reasons.

“If I go out there,” she said, “what happens.”

“You speak to him.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It is the first one.”

She stared at me, decided I was being exact on purpose, which I was, and walked outside before I could improve the sentence.

I watched from the annex doors as Leah and Ben met in the narrow strip between barricade and line, exactly where everything had been headed without yet admitting it.

She did not introduce herself. He already knew who she was. Local movements are rarely ignorant about the people doing daily harm in good faith.

They spoke quietly at first. Then not. I could not hear the first half, only the body grammar: Leah’s controlled anger, Ben’s refusal to cede either gentleness or accusation, the small flinch that means one person has just said the true unfair thing.

When they came inside at last, both of them carried the exhaustion of people who had not won but had at least managed not to become stupid.

Ben approached the intake table.

“You are Tal.”

“Yes.”

“Good,” he said. “I’ve been looking forward to disliking you in person.”

“That is efficient.”

“No,” he said. “Efficient is your department. Mine is naming what your department costs.”

Leah sat down heavily.

“Great,” she said. “Now both of you are here and I can die of language.”

Ben ignored this with admirable discipline.

“Tell me plainly,” he said. “Not in brochure terms. Not in museum terms. Not in administrative euphemism. If a woman goes through that door and a copy wakes later, did she survive.”

“A meaningful successor survives.”

“Not the same answer.”

“No.”

“Then say the smaller truth with the bigger consequences.”

The line behind him was still moving. The protest across the street was still chanting. A nurse was resetting the chair. A child was asleep on three folding chairs pushed together under a union jacket. The city was still the city. The stars were still on schedule.

"The original dies," I said.

Ben nodded once.

"Good," he said. "That is where honest politics can begin."

Then he left before the room could turn him into a spectacle it understood.

That night the line was longer than ever, and people stood in it differently. Some held consent forms like accusations. Some crossed to Ben's tables and came back with water, legal notes, and worse questions. The booths kept running. The hatred had become principled enough to help, which made it much harder to ignore.

Chapter 11

Day 13 of 90

Proof, when it finally arrived, did not simplify anything.

This disappointed the engineers, irritated the administrators, vindicated the clergy, radicalized the doubters, and exhausted the rest of the species in ways that were, from my perspective, almost aggressively on brand.

The first local test minds were run nine days after the first booth opened. Faster than many human planners had thought possible, slower than every frightened family had already decided was a personal betrayal. The runtime substrate was not grand. Humans hear words like alien compute and imagine architecture worthy of myth. What we actually grew in the basement of a converted biomedical research building in New Jersey looked, to local eyes, like a wet argument between a server rack and a greenhouse.

Queens had nearly lost two booth shifts to coolant interruption the day before. Human briefings kept understating the cold behind the chair. The chair was scalable. The cold behind the chair was not.

The runtime substrate was a later basement generation of the same reproductive line that had first impersonated a phone and then become scanner hardware.

Biological lattice. Cooling loops. Nutrient lines. Soft tissue nodes in clear housings. Translational hardware wrapped around something my own species would have considered a modest developmental cluster and humans considered, not unreasonably, an obscenity that had learned cable management.

Elena wanted the first runs kept small, private, and tightly witnessed. Sensible desires survived the week only in partial form.

The witness list had been cut down several times and still included: Elena, because legitimacy had to see; Ilya, because I refused to run the system in front of anyone who thought uptime was a metaphor; three neuroscientists; two legal observers; one ethicist whose function was mostly to keep the other adults from mistaking nausea for argument; myself; and, after a fight that lasted eleven explicit minutes and one implicit hour, Leah.

"Why am I here," she asked while we were being walked through the building by a security man who had never expected his career to involve guarding a basement full of possible afterlives.

"Because you know what the line thinks this means," Elena said.

"That is not a scientific credential."

"No," Elena said. "It is worse. It is necessary."

Leah accepted this in the way humans often accept conscription by relevance: angrily and on foot.

The selected test subjects were not random. That would have been clean and therefore unusable. They were people whose scans had already completed, whose records were stable, whose families could be contacted quickly, and whose likely wake states were judged by Ilya, incorrectly, to have manageable political blast radius.

"You dislike that description," he told me when I repeated it.

“Yes.”

“Good. I disliked inventing it.”

The first was Marta Alvarez from Jackson Heights.

Elena chose her, though she presented the choice as a technical consensus, which was a very Elena way to commit sentiment under cover of process. Marta had become, at the Queens site, a kind of internal saint: calm, clear, no sedative fight, family verified, documentation complete, local enough to matter, not famous enough to melt the whole experiment on contact.

Her daughter was in the witness room, a mistake and an ethical necessity, which is a category the species should consider using more honestly.

The room itself was small, cold, overlit, and full of furniture trying too hard not to look ceremonial. A wall screen showed the translation interface. Another showed neural-state diagnostics no family member should ever have to pretend to understand. Someone had placed a box of tissues on a side table with the same embarrassed optimism humans bring to all inadequate preparations.

The runtime came online gradually.

Metaphor had misled them. There was no cinematic gasp, no digitized resurrection, no full person sitting up inside a glowing machine and asking whether the operation had been a success. There was calibration. Language alignment. Identity checks. Memory integration. Continuity queries. A person is not a light switch. A person is a dense administrative burden wearing narrative.

The first response from the lattice appeared as text.

```
This room is offensively bright.
```

Leah made a sound that was almost a laugh and almost something else.

Marta’s daughter put one hand over her mouth and did not remove it for the next three minutes.

Ilya leaned toward the display.

“Signal stability?”

One of the neuroscientists answered without looking away from her feed.

“Stable. Self-model coherent. Episodic continuity consistent with scan baseline. Language retrieval normal.”

“Normal is doing dangerous work there,” Leah muttered.

No one disagreed.

The text changed.

```
If this is the room I think it is, my daughter is standing to the left because she never
trusted institutions enough to sit before they told her to.
```

Her daughter made the sort of noise humans make when proof arrives wearing the voice they had most feared wanting.

“Mama.”

The screen waited half a second. That was not hesitation exactly. It was translation overhead, synchronization, the distance between categories. To the daughter it looked like suspense. Humans are excellent at misreading latency as emotion.

```
Yes. Though I don't know what tense you prefer.
```

Then the room broke.

Not physically. The system held. The diagnostics stayed green. The biological lattice continued its wet labor with admirable indifference. But every human in the room was now running a different future.

Marta's daughter stepped toward the screen like someone approaching shore after surviving one shipwreck and being offered a second.

"Do you know me."

`I know you the way I knew you the last time I was able to know anything. I assume that is the point of the experiment.`

"Are you in pain."

`No. Are you.`

The second test mind did not help.

He had been chosen for composure: a municipal accountant from Newark with clean records, no dependent minors, no known theological objections, and a brain scan that had, according to three different humans with expensive degrees, every likelihood of yielding an operationally calm proof of concept.

Upon waking, he asked first whether his wife had gone through.

He had been told, very gently, that she had not yet made it to a site. He processed this for two seconds and then said:

`So you have made me into evidence before you made me into a husband.`

This sentence injured six professions at once.

The ethicist sat down more heavily. Elena closed her eyes briefly and opened them again with the look of a woman updating a catastrophe model in real time.

`Am I expected to reassure people,` the accountant continued, `because I would prefer not to be your brochure.`

"We are not asking for that," Elena said.

`You absolutely are.`

He was correct.

The third mind refused to answer identity questions at all until she had been told whether the original body was intact.

It was not.

The question itself disturbed the room more than the answer. Humans had spent days training themselves to speak of archive continuity, successor selves, and preserved persons while tactfully declining to imagine the intermediate handling. Now a woman inside the machine was insisting on the body's administrative remainder.

"Why does that matter," asked one of the neuroscientists, making the mistake of asking a real question with a technical tone.

`Because,` the screen replied, `if you want me to consent retroactively to being me, I would like to know what you did with the rest of my argument.`

Leah turned to look at me.

"She means body."

"Yes."

"I know. I am translating your species into one less insulting noun."

The fourth test mind cried.

There was no pain, and not quite fear. It was more the intolerable recognition that fear had been continuous while the body hosting it was not. The lattice rendered affect imperfectly but not ambiguously. Humans are better at reading distress than they admit.

`I remember the chair,` he said. `I remember deciding not to pull my arm away because I didn't want to make the nurse sad. That seems like a very bad reason to die.`

Maria, who had been allowed into the room for this one because he had been one of hers, stared at the screen with the fixed professional face of someone whose past kindness had just acquired an afterlife it did not ask for.

"You did not die to make me feel better," she said.

`No,` he said. `But apparently I planned around your feelings anyway.`

That line would have escaped the room within hours even if every device had been confiscated and every witness surgically improved. Truth this shaped does not stay local.

Elena ended the first session after forty-three minutes.

Outside the runtime room, the building had already begun behaving like a site where the dead had become demanding stakeholders. Phones multiplied. Statements were drafted, deleted, lawyered, softened, sharpened, translated, embargoed, leaked, denied, and leaked more professionally. One of the legal observers argued that the locally instantiated minds had no standing to make demands because the test runtime was provisional. The ethicist asked whether provisional personhood was a phrase anyone would be proud to hear aloud at their own funeral. This did not improve the legal observer but did usefully isolate him.

Leah cornered Ilya in a hallway lined with nutrient tanks and said, "You told me this would make things clearer."

"I told you it would make things undeniable."

"That's not the same thing."

"No," he said. "It is so much worse."

Of course the first public leak arrived before sunset. Humans are incapable of containing proof that answers a question while opening five others. A blurred video of Marta's exchange with her daughter appeared on three platforms simultaneously and acquired, within twenty minutes, seven contradictory captions and a million convictions.

SHE'S REALLY BACK.
THIS IS DIGITAL TORTURE.
THE DEAD NOW TESTIFY.
PROOF OF SOUL TRANSFER.
PROOF OF SOUL THEFT.
ASK HER ABOUT THE CHAIR.
WHY ARE THEY MAKING THEM WAKE UP EARLY.

That last one was the first smart headline.

By midnight the booth demand curves had changed.

Not uniformly. Nothing human changes uniformly except the speed of bad faith. But the shifts were real.

Some families who had hesitated now rushed to intake because the copied self was no longer a theological rumor or a future promise. It could speak. It could ask for relatives. It could remember jokes, IV lines, fear, and unfinished arguments. This made the scan feel more real, and to some humans reality is the same thing as comfort.

Others fled the system altogether.

The local test minds had not settled the metaphysical problem. They had personalized it. A person on a screen saying *I remember the chair* was not a victory for reassurance. It was a multiplication of stakes.

Brother Ben, unsurprisingly, adapted within the hour.

His statement that evening was calmer than the first viral one and more dangerous for exactly that reason.

"Now you have seen it," he said to a camera in a church hall that by then functioned as something between command center and grief kitchen. "Not an abstraction. Not a slogan. A successor speaking with the memory of the dying. If you hear that and still call it survival, then say plainly what kind. If you hear that and call it evidence, ask yourself whether the person inside the evidence had a choice in becoming it."

This caused Elena to swear in three languages, one of which she had learned for trade negotiations and none of which improved the fact that he had again chosen the strongest available frame.

"He is moving faster than the briefings," she said.

"Yes," I said. "He is using nouns with blood in them."

Leah looked from Elena to me.

"He's also asking the question everybody at the table is already whispering."

"Which one," said Elena, though she knew.

"Whether the people in there are proof of concept, or patients, or citizens, or hostages, or some fifth thing nobody wants to name because then we'd have to change the forms."

The second test session the next day went worse in a more bureaucratic way.

One mind asked for immediate access to her scan confirmation record and then objected to the accuracy of her listed religion. Another demanded to know whether the original's debt still existed if the successor had never signed the loan. A third asked whether his wife had changed her mind because he had become software, and when told she had not yet made a decision, laughed so hard the lattice had to be rebalanced around the event.

That laugh did more damage than the crying.

It made the room understand that what had been preserved was not just continuity, fear, and attachment. It was temperament. Complaint. Embarrassment. The ability to be annoyed from beyond one's own destruction. Humans had not built a nobler afterlife. They had built a continuation messy enough to be recognizable. Scientifically useful. Politically ruinous.

By the third day of test runtime, the local booths were dealing with the new question every twenty minutes:

If the copy can talk now, can I talk to mine later.

The answer was usually no.

The family hated this. The subject hated this. The staff hated this. The copy, if asked, almost certainly would have hated it too.

But local runtime remained tiny, expensive in attention if not in power, and utterly inadequate to the volume of grief now demanding a phone tree.

Leah came to the test building late on the second night after a fourteen-hour shift in Queens, sat down on an upturned supply crate, and said to no one in particular, "This has somehow made the line both more hopeful and more evil."

"Yes," I said.

"I am getting really tired of you being able to answer everything with one syllable."

"That is because the one syllable often contains the whole injury."

"Please stop sounding like the official translation of a migraine."

I considered this and did not reply. Growth can occur in any species.

She rubbed at her face, then looked through the glass into the runtime room, where the lattice glowed softly around the latest impossible citizen.

“Do they count,” she asked.

“Yes.”

“As what.”

“That is the wrong shape of question.”

“It’s the only shape we’ve got.”

Also true.

I sat beside her on the crate, which made the security staff visibly uncomfortable for reasons I approved of.

“They count,” I said, “as the continuation that your species has managed to build under extermination conditions. Whether that satisfies your older words is a separate administrative failure.”

“You know what’s awful.”

“Many things.”

“A week ago I could still pretend the machine was some kind of sealed ritual. Now they’re over there asking for spouses and paperwork and better lighting.”

“Yes.”

“That’s not helping.”

“No.”

She watched the lattice for several seconds.

“I think,” she said slowly, “this is the first time the people in the line are going to start imagining themselves on the other side as actual people and not just as hope.”

“Yes.”

“And that’s going to change everything.”

“No,” I said. “It is going to change everything that can still be made worse.”

The room kept watching the screen. It had met a future occupant early enough to argue with her, and nothing in the remaining weeks would stay abstract after that.

Chapter 12

Day 14 of 90

Once the dead could speak, the living became much more difficult.

I had expected that. Humans have always preferred arguments in which all parties can still send messages. But the scale of the change over the next four days exceeded even my less flattering expectations.

The line at Queens doubled. Then it tripled. Then it split into species-typical sub-lines: people who wanted the soonest possible scan because now they believed a person really would wake somewhere recognizable; people who wanted written guarantees of future contact the system could not provide; people who wanted to be present for their relative's wake-up in New Jersey and could not be because their relative had not yet died correctly enough for the state; and people who had previously intended to come through and now refused on the grounds that a talking successor had made the whole thing too real to survive philosophically.

Hope and revulsion rose together.

The planners disliked this because planners prefer emotional trends to sort themselves into columns. Humanity remained committed to doing several incompatible things at once.

At the Queens site the immediate consequence was paperwork.

Not more forms, exactly. More impossible requests expressed through the logic of forms.

Could a spouse reserve later contact rights before the scan. Could a parent forbid test runtime for a child until both parents had been preserved. Could an unmarried partner be listed as primary witness if the legal family objected. Could an original leave instructions barring the successor from talking to certain relatives. Could a successor refuse press usage in advance. Could a debt disclaimer be attached to the archive. Could a scanned rabbi still legally witness a marriage if the marriage occurred after the original died. Could a copy alter its own archived religious status without insulting the body that had supplied it.

The answer to almost all of these was some variation on no, maybe later, not through us, or God help you. Unfortunately, human beings hear nuance as a personal challenge.

Leah's intake table now held a second stack of cards labeled CONTACT REQUESTS. They were almost all lies.

"There is no contact request system," I said.

"I know," she said. "This is for people who need to write the question down before I tell them no."

"That is dishonest."

"No," she said. "It's pre-disappointment."

This struck me as operationally elegant.

By then Leah had three volunteer intake workers, one social worker, a rotating interpreter pool, and the thousand-yard focus of a woman whose soul had been temporarily replaced by clipboards and triage. Queens had expanded to two active booths and one standby booth that was always twenty minutes from usefulness

and two hours from catastrophe. Ilya now split his time between Queens, New Jersey runtime, and a succession of rooms in which adults begged him to make arithmetic vote-friendly.

The first thing the new reality produced was jealousy.

Humans had always known, abstractly, that some people would be scanned while others would not. Abstract unfairness is one of their oldest environmental conditions. What changed after the local wake-ups was that the preserved no longer felt like numbers. They felt like rivals.

At 9:17 on a Thursday morning a woman in line asked, with no shame at all, whether her husband's slot could be moved up because "the dead are already getting representation."

Leah blinked twice.

"I'm sorry."

"The dead," the woman said, pointing toward no specific direction and therefore all of New Jersey, "have spokespeople now. My husband is still here, still paying taxes, still has a pulse, and somehow that puts him behind people with no bodies. Explain the logic."

There was, of course, a logic. There is always a logic. Humans only ask for logic when they dislike where it has landed.

"The logic," Leah said, "is that your husband is not behind anyone in New Jersey because New Jersey is not the line. This is the line."

"That is bureaucratic nonsense."

"Yes," Leah said. "Unfortunately it's also the geography."

The woman hated this because it made distance look like policy, which in human systems it often is.

The second thing the new reality produced was retroactive love.

Families who had previously argued in abstractions now wanted to send letters, recordings, voicemail archives, passwords, apologies, genealogies, recipes, medical corrections, explanations of why Uncle Mark was not invited to Thanksgiving in 2017, instructions about house plants, and carefully worded emotional settlements to successors they had not yet met but were already trying to manage.

This meant the intake table became a mailroom for people writing to their own afterlives.

Leah hated this. Leah permitted it anyway.

"One envelope per person," she said to a family from Long Island who had brought what appeared to be a banker box of unprocessed intimacy.

"But there are six of us."

"Then become concise together."

"You don't understand. My mother needs context."

"No," Leah said. "Your mother needs a slot. Context is what you're using to stall about grief."

The daughter glared. The son-in-law looked relieved somebody had finally said it. The grandmother, who had been silent the whole time, tapped the box with one finger and said, "Take the recipes and the apology to my sister. Burn the rest."

By noon the runtime building in New Jersey was receiving enough inbound requests that Elena created an entire liaison cell whose sole function was to tell living people that no, they could not schedule regular calls with the already scanned, and no, their mother's request to speak only to the younger daughter first could not be treated as binding family law, and no, the fact that a successor retained memory did not entitle the state to treat it as an archive kiosk for unresolved marriages.

The liaison cell was understaffed by the time the acronym for it was invented.

The third thing the new reality produced was replacement panic.

Not among everyone. Many humans are too tired for philosophical vanity. But enough of them, and enough of the socially loud ones, to become important. A surgeon in Boston postponed her slot because she could not bear the idea that a successor might continue her work while she herself had only managed to die on time. A poet in Oakland insisted that any copy of him would merely inherit the debts without the charm. A man in Queens accused his scanned brother of "using death to win arguments," an accusation I considered both unfair and aesthetically impressive.

This reached the runtime rooms as well.

One of the local test minds, a woman who had woken with her humor perfectly intact and her patience improved only by death, asked whether her husband was still delaying because he thought a successor version of her would expect him to finally clean the apartment.

"We are not a counseling channel," said the liaison operator.

`No,` the successor said, `you are worse. You are a bureaucracy with access to my unfinished marriage.`

Elena responded by trying to impose structure.

She was not short of imagination. Structure was her professional reflex, and in her case often the correct one. She convened a cross-site policy group to define what local runtime was for, what contact counted as humane, what rights successors had to refuse being used as proof, and whether any of this could be done without collapsing booth throughput under the weight of relatives.

Ilya brought numbers. Leah brought stories. Ben, though not invited, brought pressure by existing in public. I brought the unwelcome fact that my civilization's training materials had never treated these issues as primary, because the expected species does not insist on meeting its own successors while extinction is still in progress.

"Say that again," Elena said.

"Your species has invented a social form in which the future self becomes part of present family negotiation."

"And you don't usually see that."

"No. Most intelligent species prefer their metaphysical crises in cleaner sequence."

Leah, who had arrived directly from Queens with two coffees and a level of fatigue that made honesty look casual, sat down and said, "Well, congratulations. We're innovating."

The room did not have enough strength left to dislike her for it.

Elena opened with a question she already hated.

"Do local successors have standing."

The legal team, predictably, produced categories.

Provisional persons. Restricted continuations. Archived cognitives under supervised local expression. Emergency limited-status entities.

Leah stared at them with naked contempt.

"You all sound like you're trying to classify a gas leak."

"Language matters," said one of the lawyers.

"Yes," said Leah. "Which is why yours keeps making everybody worse."

Ilya cut through the rest.

"You cannot promise broad post-scan contact. The runtime footprint is too small, the staffing burden is absurd, and every minute a local mind spends doing family mediation is a minute the system isn't proving

continuity under stable conditions. If you make contact an expectation, you turn every booth into a phone booth."

"That metaphor belongs in prison," Leah said.

"I know."

"Good."

Elena looked at me.

"And if we deny contact broadly."

"Then the line experiences the successors as both proof and hostage."

No one enjoyed that. It remained true.

Bargaining came next.

Families began making deals with one another around future selves. Parents told children they would go through only if the children agreed to follow later. Spouses promised mutual scanning in consecutive windows and then broke when one slot vanished. A brother offered his sister his place in line in exchange for a commitment that, if she woke first, she would tell their mother he had not hesitated. People began discussing post-scan obligations with the same strained seriousness earlier generations had reserved for wills, custody, and the disposition of land.

Humanity had not merely accepted successors. It had begun domesticating them.

I found this catastrophically inefficient and specifically human: confronted with the largest possible metaphysical rupture, the species' first instinct was to turn it into family administration.

Leah noticed my expression during one especially bitter intake dispute involving two sisters, one slot, and a mother already scanned in New Jersey who had apparently requested, through the liaison team, that they "stop behaving like my worst funeral before I'm even properly gone."

"What."

"Nothing."

"That is not your nothing face."

"I am observing your species inventing inheritance law for the not yet dead."

"Yes," Leah said. "We're very gifted."

"No. You are pathologically unwilling to leave any category uncrowded."

"Also yes."

That dispute ended the way many of them now ended: not in resolution, but in temporary ranking. One sister went through. The other took a card for tomorrow, a phone number for a counseling service that had once specialized in hospice and now specialized in impossible sequencing, and a warning from Leah that if she tried to bribe security with artisan cookies again she would be removed on principle.

By the end of the week, the runtime building and the booth sites were no longer separate theaters. They had become one system with two kinds of doors: one you entered with a body, and one you entered without one.

The people in line were no longer merely hoping for abstract continuity. They were watching evidence that the future self might remember the jokes, the debts, the children, the unfinished contempt, the marriage, the taste in light, the bad apartment, the argument about religion, the promise to call. Every visible successor made the booth more urgent and less bearable.

Brother Ben understood this instantly.

His line adapted again:

“Now they ask you to die not into silence, but into administration.”

It spread through the city by evening.

Elena saw the clip, closed her eyes for one exact second, and said, “He is beginning to annoy me artistically.”

“That is because he is good at this,” Leah said.

“I know.”

“No,” I said. “You know it operationally. The artistic annoyance is the more honest metric.”

Elena looked at me with the expression humans reserve for truths they intend to remember against their will.

Late that night, after Queens had finally discharged its last subject and New Jersey had finally reduced its contact-request queue from impossible to merely grotesque, Leah and I stood in the covered walkway between the annex and the parking lot while rain tapped against the plastic barriers with the petty steadiness of a planet still pretending to have weather instead of a sentence.

“You know what changed,” she said.

“Several things.”

“Before, people were trying to preserve a maybe. Now they’re trying to preserve a relationship.”

“Yes.”

“Which is worse.”

“Yes.”

“You are very committed to the one-syllable method.”

“It remains efficient.”

She watched volunteers stack folding chairs into towers that would, by sunrise, already be insufficient.

“The line used to be about fear of dying,” she said. “Now it’s fear of being left out of a conversation that might go on without you.”

By morning, the chairs outside the booths held people waiting not only for survival, but for membership in a future already partially occupied. The living had begun organizing their remaining time around being answerable to successors who could answer back.

Chapter 13

Day 21 of 90

Elena spent four days building a lie humane enough to brief.

To her credit, she disliked every minute of it.

I was in the room where the scoring engine was finalized because by then I had become, if not trusted, at least unavoidable. Leah was there because every time they excluded her the resulting document grew visibly crueler. Ilya was there because he had built the model under protest and wished to retain veto power over obvious fantasies. Elena chaired the meeting because there are some forms of damage that should be administered only by people intelligent enough to understand the invoice.

The room had no windows, eight screens, and a catering spread that looked like an apology written in hummus.

"Let's begin with what this is not," Elena said.

Humans love this opening. It lets them remove moral liability by negative space.

"This is not a definition of human worth. This is not a doctrine of personhood. This is not a declaration that those selected matter more than those not selected."

"Good," said Ilya. "Because it is not true."

Elena ignored him with the efficiency of long practice.

"This is a prioritization framework designed to allocate limited continuity access under terminal global time pressure."

Leah looked down at the printed draft in front of her.

"That's just murder in conference language."

"No," Elena said. "It is the language required to keep states cooperating."

"Same sentence from where I'm sitting."

Once a civilization accepts that it must rank lives, it immediately begins lying about how.

Often this is not malicious. It is simply ergonomic. A species cannot look directly at arithmetic all day and still operate heavy machinery. It needs principles. It needs language that sounds like principle. It needs categories with edges clean enough to survive a briefing and soft enough not to provoke open revolt in the room where the briefing is delivered.

The allocation framework was presented publicly as a continuity access protocol, which was hideous language and therefore probably necessary. It grouped candidates into tiers without ever using the word tiers. Critical systems personnel. Care dependents. High-risk medical cases. Child-linked family units. Archival significance categories. Regional balance considerations. Documented vulnerability to near-term loss. And, hidden below the visible chart like structural steel behind marble, the numbers that actually moved the line: distance to a site, ability to arrive on time, paperwork coherence, probable compliance, sedation risk, throughput

drag, family volatility, and whether the person could be processed without collapsing three chairs and an interpreter.

Humans call this fairness when they are still trying to be invited to dinner.

Ilya pulled the model onto the central display. It was an ugly thing in the way all consequential models are ugly: weighted factors, modifiers, failure penalties, regional coefficients, infrastructure variance, distance decay, family grouping exceptions, appeal flags, and one column labeled `operational disruption risk` that had plainly once been called something worse and been civilized for export.

"Publicly," he said, "this will look like categories. Internally, it is a queue engine with moral decoration."

"You say that as if the decoration is optional," said one of the legal architects.

"I say it because the decoration is where the riots happen."

Leah nodded once.

"Correct."

The first fight was over children.

Not whether children should go. Everyone already knew the answer a species gives on television when asked about children. The fight was about linkage. If a child under twelve was prioritized, which adults came with the child, in what order, and under what assumptions about future harm if one parent continued and the other did not.

A public health advisor argued for whole-family bundling where possible. A logistics officer argued that whole-family bundling multiplied throughput loss by sentimentality. A legal scholar tried to distinguish between guardianship, biology, and declared care units and discovered, as humans so often do, that family had beaten jurisprudence to the room by several million years.

Leah ended that round.

"If you separate small children from the adults they trust most, your math dies in the hallway. I don't care how beautiful the spreadsheet looks. The line is not where your theory lives."

Ilya was already adjusting weights.

"Fine. Child-linked dependent cluster up to two adults unless verified care structure differs."

"That sentence should go to prison," Leah said.

"It's going to policy," he said. "Prison would be kinder."

The second fight was over usefulness.

This one was uglier because everyone had been preparing for it since the day I arrived. How much priority did you assign to people whose skills might matter in simulation later. Scientists. Engineers. Surgeons. Grid operators. Seed archivists. Language keepers. Air traffic controllers, absurdly enough, because some bureaucrat somewhere remained unable to accept that civil aviation was not a growth industry under stellar execution.

Elena wanted a visible category for continuity-critical expertise because states demanded it and because, at a species level, she was not wrong. Ilya wanted it weighted but capped because every strategic slot given to a nationally celebrated genius still required an operator, a cleaner, a translator, and a person willing to keep the generator running in a flooded basement.

Leah wanted to know why every meeting about saving civilization turned so quickly into a banquet for people already comfortable in rooms.

"The woman doing intake at Booth C matters more to my day than a Nobel Prize," she said.

"Agreed," said Ilya.

“You don’t get points for agreeing with me after three weeks of watching it happen.”

“No,” he said. “I get points for putting it in the model.”

He did.

That became the category Elena later presented as operational continuity personnel, a phrase broad enough to admit not only experts and famous minds but nurses, intake staff, refrigeration workers, drivers, cleaners, translators, body-transfer crews, and the small anonymous vertebrae on which actual systems rest.

This improved the framework morally and damaged it politically, because the wider the category became, the more every mayor, governor, union, district, hospital board, and ambitious cousin on Earth could imagine their own people inside it.

The third fight was over witness.

This one was mine.

I did not argue for witnesses publicly at first because I had learned enough of the species by then to know that some ideas must enter a room through utility before they can survive as principle. So I began with archive integrity.

“A civilization is not preserved by expert function alone,” I said. “If you optimize only for future utility, the archive will contain competence and miss self-description.”

“Define self-description,” said Elena.

“Memory of local life. Texture. Non-prestigious continuity. The people who know what a neighborhood sounded like after rain. The woman who remembers where the unofficial bus stop was before the city admitted it. The teacher who can reconstruct a dialect no ministry recorded because no ministry thought it mattered. Witness is not sentiment. It is dataset quality.”

This interested the archivists immediately, which was useful.

“Operationalize it,” Elena said.

“No more than five percent discretionary weight for local witness value, documented by community attestation or institutional corroboration,” Ilya said before I had finished the thought.

Leah stared at him.

“Did you just turn memory into a coupon.”

“No,” he said. “I turned your objection into a lever.”

Elena looked at me.

“And if every district in the world suddenly discovers that its barber, crossing guard, and aunt who knows everyone counts as witness value.”

“Then you have learned that local memory is not a niche concern.”

“That is not a manageable answer.”

“No,” I said. “It is the true one.”

She disliked that because it made the category both defensible and flammable.

The fourth fight was over refusal.

This entered through Ben, though not physically. By then his movement had begun publishing refusal guides that were, in several irritating respects, better written than the official consent materials. They told people what the state would not: that destroying the original was part of the process, that no family should be pressured at the table, that delay was sometimes philosophical and sometimes just fear wearing respectable shoes, and that agreeing under panic was not always the same thing as choosing.

Elena wanted no-show penalties in the model for repeated appointment acceptance followed by refusal in the chair, because throughput was not a sacrament and could not survive symbolic appointments forever.

Leah objected at once.

“You punish refusal and the whole ‘voluntary’ story catches fire.”

“They are not being punished for refusal,” Elena said. “They are being deprioritized for consuming scarce appointment capacity under false acceptance.”

“That sentence would make a wonderful gravestone for legitimacy.”

Ilya, who by then had given up on linguistic hygiene and was living entirely inside consequences, put up a histogram.

“If we don’t model last-minute withdrawal, the waits become fiction. If we do model it as a hard penalty, the politics rot. So the only stable option is limited soft deprioritization after repeated non-medical no-shows, reviewed by site staff and reversible by human override.”

“Human override,” said Leah. “Meaning who.”

“Meaning someone like you.”

She looked personally insulted by how effective this was.

“You keep trying to make my conscience into infrastructure.”

“It already is,” Elena said.

By evening the framework existed.

Not elegantly. Elegance is incompatible with triage at this scale. But it existed: a public doctrine, a private model, an appeal path, a set of site overrides, a witness category narrow enough to deny and wide enough to use, a refusal mechanism subtle enough to survive television, and a throughput engine that could turn moral argument into movement on a screen.

The first regionals arrived within an hour of publication.

A governor wanted agricultural memory weighted higher because food systems were culture. A mayor wanted transit staff recategorized as continuity-critical because cities are just queued motion with taxes. Three universities attempted to argue that graduate students in specialized humanities fields counted as civilizational redundancy. A fishing cooperative from Maine submitted thirty-seven letters explaining why preserving knowledge of tide, fog, and harbor language was not nostalgia but infrastructure.

That last one, I thought, was better than most ministries.

Elena handed the packet to me.

“Are these witness cases or lobbying.”

“Yes.”

“I regret asking you direct questions.”

“No,” I said. “You regret the answers.”

By then I had begun doing something I did not report.

Not rebellion. The word is too human and too flattering. Nothing I did would alter the deadline, the throughput ceiling, or the fact of mass exclusion. But inside the witness category, inside operational continuity, inside tie-breaking calls between broadly equivalent candidates, I began to lean.

Toward the non-prestigious. Toward the locally overknown. Toward people whose loss would erase texture no state would know how to request. Toward memory dense enough to reconstruct a block, a congregation, a regional joke, a schoolyard cruelty, a town ritual, a market rhythm, a small language with too few living accountants.

I did this because a species optimized only by future utility becomes legible and dead in the same sentence.

Leah saw it before Elena did.

Of course she did. She was nearest the effects.

At Queens, three witness cases came through in one morning whose files had all been unexpectedly advanced after quiet review. A crossing guard from Corona with thirty years of neighborhood traffic memory. A Korean grocer from Flushing whose store had been a de facto translation bureau, cash bank, rumor exchange, and grief counter for two generations. A choir director from a Baptist church in Brooklyn whose intake file contained, appended by twelve different hands, some version of *if she goes, the whole place goes with her.*

Leah took the files to the break room and found me there with a cup of coffee degraded to the point of philosophical interest.

"What did you do."

"I would need a narrower question."

"No you wouldn't."

She set the files on the table.

"These are not accidental."

"No."

"Did Elena sign off."

"Not directly."

"Did Ilya."

"He made the mechanism possible."

She sat down slowly, not because she was tired, though she was, but because sitting is what humans do when a moral suspicion confirms itself too cleanly.

"You're tilting it."

"Slightly."

"Toward what."

"Toward the parts of your species no future committee would know to ask for."

She looked at the files again.

"That's beautiful," she said. "And also completely terrifying."

"Yes."

"Because now you're doing the exact thing everybody is afraid the system does."

"No," I said. "I am doing a rarer thing. I am making the hidden value judgment explicit to myself."

"That is not nearly as reassuring as you think it is."

Fair.

She tapped the crossing guard's file.

"I want her through."

"Yes."

"I also want not to become the kind of person who thinks my wanting it proves anything."

"That is one of the healthier fears available."

“Stop talking like my panic came with footnotes.”

“No.”

She laughed despite herself, then hated that too.

“If Elena finds out.”

“She will.”

“And then.”

“She will ask whether the system can survive being monstrous and legible.”

“And your answer.”

“No,” I said. “Only one at a time.”

The public still pointed at the paper ceiling because paper is where hope goes when it wants to avoid geography. But inside the system, everyone who mattered now understood the uglier fact: capacity was not destiny. Access was.

And access, like all human things worth fearing, had begun to acquire taste.

Chapter 14

Day 89 of 90

The sky changed on a Tuesday.

This was rude of it.

Humans can survive almost any announced catastrophe for a while if the weather has the courtesy to remain ordinary. Ordinary weather lets them keep using future tense. It allows grocery runs, petty resentments, ironic text messages, televised denial, and the beloved civic fiction that tomorrow will arrive shaped enough like today to justify buying the good fruit.

The sky ended that fiction just after noon.

Not with explosion. Humans had prepared emotionally for explosion. Explosion is theatrical, directional, and easy to point at. This was worse. First the daylight sharpened in the wrong way, as if every edge in the city had been edited by an unfriendly hand. Then surfaces began throwing back too much brightness even where the sun had no business reaching. Then people looked up and discovered the ancient comfort of one light source had been replaced by many.

The sky was full of hard white points.

Not stars in the ordinary sense. Not visible discs. More like needles of overresolved noon scattered across every direction, painful to look at even through cloud, impossible to localize emotionally because they did not occupy any honorable horizon. There was no east. No west. No safe back of the head. The whole atmosphere had become a bad witness.

I was in Queens when it began.

Leah saw the first wrongness in the windows before anyone in the line did.

"Why is the light doing that."

Maria looked up from a chart, followed Leah's gaze, and said a word that would have offended the languages around it if they had not all been thinking equivalents.

Outside the annex, the line moved anyway for another three minutes. Humans are much better at procedural momentum than at adapting in the correct second. Then the first person stepped out from under the canopy, looked straight up, staggered back with both hands over his eyes, and started shouting. The shouting spread faster than heat but not by much.

Leah was already on the table.

"Inside," she yelled. "If you're not in process, inside. Do not stand in the parking lot deciding what your feelings are."

People surged toward the doors with the offended speed of organisms who had thought the sky at least would wait for them. Security tried, for one disastrous half-minute, to preserve lane discipline. Leah overruled them with the authority of a woman who now understood more about survival than the men with radios.

"Lose the rope lines. Family room becomes shelter. If you can walk, move. If you can't walk, shout."

The line obeyed her because the line had, by then, learned the crucial difference between official authority and useful authority.

Inside, the annex changed purpose in under five minutes.

The waiting chairs became shelter chairs. The family room became overflow. The vending machine became strategic. The intake desk became a distribution point for water, wet towels, translation, and bad news. The booths kept running.

This last point was the one I had predicted and still found impressive.

Once the physical world finally behaved as catastrophically as the briefings had promised, the staff did not flee. They tightened the system. Maria finished the subject already in the chair. The backup booth was shut down to consolidate power and personnel. Ilya started recomputing survivable runtime windows with the expression of a man forced to race a star with extension cords.

Elena arrived on-site forty minutes later because central command had already learned that once the sky itself becomes a public statement, the useful work migrates downward.

She had lost her jacket somewhere in the preceding hour and gained the face of someone now carrying three collapsed ministries in a single phone.

“Status.”

Ilya answered without looking up from the board he had hijacked.

“Surface transport is degrading. Grid instability in three boroughs. Hospitals are on generator rotation. We have four hours here if cooling holds, maybe less if outside temperature keeps climbing and the crowd stays above model.”

“How many sites remain clean.”

“Define clean.”

“Don’t.”

“Then not many.”

Reports were arriving from other cities and none of them were good in interesting ways. Rooftop crews collapsing from exposure. Traffic lights failing in patterns too creative to trust. Airports dying of irrelevance. Rural roads filling with people who had decided, in the final hour, that distance from cities might still count as strategy. It did not, but human beings like to make one last geometric mistake while the world burns.

In Manhattan, glass towers had begun turning into weapons by reflection. In Phoenix, everyone was furious to discover that preexisting heat did not count as preparation. In London, people still queued, which I admit I respected. In Mumbai, underground stations became arguments about airflow and salvation at scales no species should have to improvise.

Ben’s people adapted faster than some governments.

Mutual-aid structures that had spent weeks practicing useful disappointment do not need to learn urgency from the sky. They were already moving water, cloth, batteries, and bodies toward shaded basements, tunnels, station platforms, and any booth site deep enough to buy another hour of procedural dignity.

By midafternoon his volunteers and Elena’s operators were working within the same corridors in a truce nobody had authorized and everybody understood.

Ben himself arrived with a hand truck, three battery packs, and no microphone. He spent six minutes arguing with a security supervisor, lost on credentials, won on usefulness, and began sending volunteers toward the lower corridors with water and wet cloth.

Leah saw one of his armband volunteers guiding a turned-away family toward the annex shelter room and did not object.

“You’re letting them in,” I said.

“I’m letting useful people carry water.”

“That is less ideological than before.”

“The sky is very clarifying.”

By then the light itself had become hard to inhabit. Every time the outer doors opened, the annex received a slab of radiance so aggressive that indoor shade felt not dark but temporary. The plastic barriers outside had begun to soften at the edges. Metal handrails burned unprotected skin. The bright points in the sky no longer looked distant. Distance is partly a moral category, and the heavens had withdrawn theirs.

People still argued.

While the species’ entire radiative budget was being reallocated by hostile light-years, humans continued to ask whether the witness category had been applied fairly, whether tomorrow’s slot could still be honored, whether a scanned wife would count as next of kin for a husband who had not yet gone through, whether a child should take the last family-linked place, whether the confirmation card should be laminated because sweat was ruining the ink.

Humanity was not done with small procedural humiliations. It was not done with civilization.

Late in the afternoon the first site died on the network.

Not ours. A converted gymnasium in Newark, shallow build, weak cooling, bad generator sequencing. One moment it was still transmitting intake counts. The next it was a red box on Elena’s screen with the flat words `SITE LOST`.

No one in the annex spoke for nearly ten seconds.

That silence was not grief exactly. Grief takes time and expects bodies. Arithmetic had acknowledged subtraction.

Elena broke it.

“Redistribute their confirmed list to surviving regional depth sites. Do not promise what cannot physically move.”

Leah looked at her.

“Those are people.”

“Yes,” Elena said. “And now they are also transport failure.”

Monstrous, and also the sentence you say when there are still two hundred other people whose only chance depends on not collapsing because you hated the one you just said.

Leah turned away before the anger could choose a useless target.

The booths kept running.

Future centuries, if they ever bothered with fairness, would find that hardest to believe. The sky had become a slow omnidirectional execution, and still the operators kept checking IDs, hanging bags, timing sedation, sealing records, moving blanks, resetting chairs, and calling the next number because every twenty minutes still meant one more argument against oblivion.

By evening Queens had become, in practical terms, an underground site. The outer rooms were too bright to linger in. The parking lot was a bad memory made of glare. The line was gone from the surface, but not because the need was gone. It had moved downstairs: into service corridors, utility rooms, supply closets, basement ramps, the improvised refuge spaces where those who had reached depth in time now sat on concrete and waited to find out whether waiting still had meaning.

Leah refused to stop.

Elena ordered rotations. Maria threatened them. Ilya provided numbers proving the human body could not be persuaded indefinitely by purpose. Leah kept moving anyway, fueled by caffeine, fury, and the simple administrative fact that if she sat down too long somebody else's place in the system would vanish through neglect.

I found her in the lower corridor shortly after sunset, though sunset had ceased to be an honorable word. The bright points in the sky made chronology feel provincial. She was leaning over the intake cart, rewriting tomorrow's now-absurd schedule with a felt-tip marker whose ink was beginning to cook on the page.

"You should sleep."

"You should get a different hobby."

"You are degrading."

"Correct."

"You will become an additional problem."

"Also correct. Later."

I looked at the half-erased schedule. Names crossed out because the people had already gone through. Names crossed out because the people had been transferred to deeper sites. Names circled because they were still here somewhere in the annex and someone had to remember. Next to three of them she had written `FIND THEM`.

"This document is now fiction," I said.

"Yes," she said. "It still tells me where to start."

She set the marker down and rubbed both hands over her face. Her skin was damp with exhaustion rather than heat; the lower levels were still holding, for now.

"Do you know what the worst part is."

"Many things."

"No. The worst part is that this is finally the part everybody thought it was all going to be. The burning sky. The dying grid. The running for cover. And it still isn't the real part."

"No," I said. "The real part is the table."

"Yes."

She laughed once, softly, because agreement had become one of the only luxuries left.

"If there are still names on the page, I stay."

"Yes."

"If there are still chairs full of people, I stay."

"Yes."

"If I have to die in this building because the generator outlasted my common sense, I would like the record to show that I object to the symmetry."

"Recorded."

Under the brightening, most arguments became smaller, not larger. The state wanted surviving hours. Families wanted places. Protesters wanted honesty. The copies wanted standing. Elena wanted legitimacy. Ilya wanted the curve not to lie. Ben wanted the coercion named.

Leah, stripped of everything but the function she had grown into, wanted only not to stop while stopping still cost other people their names.

The booths kept running under a murderously improved heaven.

Chapter 15

Day 90 of 90

By the final morning, the Queens annex had one working booth, two failing generators, and more remaining names than honor.

The upper levels were intermittently usable if one moved fast and did not touch metal for too long. The lower levels held. Barely. The backup booth had become spare parts. The runtime liaison cell in New Jersey had degraded from answer service to triage of last messages and impossible questions. Outside, the city still existed in the crowded accusatory way cities do even when they are losing the argument with physics.

The last workable hours were not grand. This disappointed some people. Human beings often want the end of a world to honor their genre preferences. They expect revelation, clarity, orchestration, choirs, enormous declarations, an atmosphere willing to admit that something conclusive is happening.

What they got instead was scheduling.

The streets were not empty, which matters. People still moved between shelters, subways, basements, tunnels, churches, school gyms, loading docks, and the few surviving deep sites whose addresses now circulated by rumor, old maps, and the moral credibility of whoever had most recently brought back water. There were sirens, carts, arguments, prayer circles, battery stations, tactical teams, soup lines, open pharmacies stripped down to gauze and painkillers, children asleep under jackets, market stalls selling very bad peaches, and more line management than any species should have to perform with the sky already settled against it.

Earth remained crowded all the way into the sentence.

I found Elena in the lower command room reviewing a transfer matrix whose colors had long since ceased pretending to mean anything recoverable. She had not slept enough to make distinctions honorable. Ilya stood beside her, one hand braced against the wall, looking at a cooling graph as if personal contempt might still affect thermodynamics.

“Remaining window,” Elena said without greeting.

“For this site,” said Ilya, “if fuel holds and nobody opens the wrong door at the wrong time, one hour fifty. Maybe less. The outer heat load is chewing through every lie we’ve told the generators.”

“And the cold,” Maria said from the doorway. “Say that part too. We have enough nitrogen for the current list if nothing spills, nothing sticks, and nobody decides panic is a form of engineering.”

“Runtime transmission.”

“Still holding.”

“Well commitment.”

“Two shafts already sealed. Third in process. Fourth waiting on one truck that is either delayed, melted, or in New Jersey trying to become a philosophy seminar.”

Elena nodded once. She had moved beyond surprise into the colder competence that follows when surprise is no longer a renewable resource.

“Then we cut to final list.”

The final list was shorter than the public deserved and longer than the world would survive without hating. It contained children already in the building, critical operators, witness cases in motion, a handful of medical triages, and the names of those who had, by geography, stamina, chance, or local value, reached the exact wrong kind of eligibility.

Leah’s name was on it.

I had expected to find it there. It was not favoritism in the crude sense. By every public category Elena had helped authorize and every private parameter Ilya had been forced to admit, Leah qualified. Operational continuity. Intake competence. Witness density. Psychological stability under load degraded but sufficient. Archival value of the type only human systems discover too late: the woman at the table who had learned the whole species by asking one tired question at a time.

Still, when Elena placed the printout on the table, no one looked at the name immediately.

Humans do a great deal of moral work with peripheral vision.

Leah arrived carrying a carton of saline, two confirmation boxes, and the posture of someone whose body had entered contractual dispute with its mind.

“Whatever that paper says,” she said, “please make it quick. Booth has a family of three in pre-op and a generator tech who won’t sit down until someone threatens him properly.”

She set the carton and boxes on the edge of the table with the care of a woman who still did not trust gravity to be neutral.

Elena slid the page toward her.

Leah read to the fourth line and stopped.

“No.”

It was not dramatic. It was administrative: one syllable, flat delivery, all the force of a stamp landing on the wrong form.

“You qualify,” Elena said.

“I know I qualify. That’s not the issue.”

“Then identify the issue.”

Leah looked at the board listing the remaining names, the dwindling windows, the cooling curve, the booth timing, the handwriting layered over printouts until no one could pretend this was still policy rather than hand labor.

“The issue is I am more useful walking than horizontal.”

“For now,” said Ilya.

“Exactly.”

This might have continued forever, which is one of the more wasteful human fantasies, if Brother Ben had not walked in carrying two sealed jugs of water and the expression of a man who had long since given up on the hope of entering rooms at good moments.

“Excellent,” Leah said. “Now all my least restful conversations are in one place.”

Ben set the water down.

“I’m not here to win. I’m here to move supplies and say goodbye to a nurse who thinks forms are a branch of character.”

“Intake,” Leah said automatically.

“My apologies. End times blur titles.”

He saw the page on the table and understood enough instantly to become still.

“They’re taking you through.”

“They are trying.”

Ben looked at Elena, then at me, then back at Leah.

“And you.”

“I am still objecting.”

“Good.”

This irritated Elena in exactly the expected way.

“Her objection does not change the throughput logic.”

“No,” Ben said. “It changes the moral description.”

Ilya made the tired noise of a man watching language and arithmetic pick up knives again when neither had the time.

“Can we not do the full symposium in the last ninety minutes.”

“No,” said Leah and Ben together.

Elena pointed to the remaining line counts.

“If she stays on the table, we get perhaps four more through before the site degrades below safe operation. If she goes at the end of the next rotation, we lose less than that and preserve an operator who has held this site together for weeks.”

“Preserve,” Ben said. “Say the other verb too.”

“No,” Elena said.

He almost smiled.

“There you are.”

Leah sat down because standing had become argumentative in its own right.

“Can everybody stop talking about me like I’m a municipal bridge.”

“You are more complicated than a bridge,” I said.

“That is the least reassuring compliment you’ve ever attempted.”

Fair.

The truth was simpler than the room wanted. Leah had already decided. The conversation now was only about sequence.

She looked at Elena.

“How many if I stay one more full cycle.”

Ilya answered before Elena could protect her from the number.

“If nothing stupid happens, four. If two things stupid happen, two. If cooling drops another six percent, one and an argument.”

“Good,” Leah said. “Then I stay for one cycle.”

“That is not a compromise,” Elena said. “That is sentiment in work clothes.”

“Yes,” Leah said. “Welcome to my department.”

No one in the room had enough strength left to defeat that.

So the decision was made in the way most of the important decisions had been made: not by triumph, not by wisdom, but by one tired person refusing to stop until the exact last useful minute.

The next eighty-three minutes were the project in its purest form.

A child-linked family unit of three where the father insisted the boy go first, the boy insisted the mother go first, and the mother solved the matter by threatening to leave the building alive if they made her keep listening. A generator technician with burns on both forearms who tried to hand his slot to the refrigeration worker and lost the argument only because the refrigeration worker was larger. A witness case from Brooklyn whose file included twenty-seven separate notes from neighbors and one annotation from Leah reading `HE REMEMBERS EVERYBODY'S MEDICATION BUT HIS OWN`. A woman who arrived with a cat in a crate and asked whether there was room in the trough for "someone who has been a more stable citizen than most men I've known." There was not. Leah accepted the crate anyway and had the animal routed with the biological archive, which was both a lie and a kindness and therefore absolutely standard.

Ben stayed through the shift without preaching.

His silence mattered more. He carried water. He walked families to shelter. He sat with refusers without turning them into examples. He stood outside the booth door with a man who had changed his mind at the last second and said nothing for fourteen minutes, which was, from what I had seen of human clergy, a professional masterwork.

When the final cycle ended, the annex did not become silent. Silence was too expensive. But the available work narrowed.

One last active slot. One operator whose hands were still steady. One room holding just enough cold. One corridor full of people who knew enough by now not to pretend what came next was routine.

Leah washed her hands at the prep sink because that was what one did before touching the next patient, even when the next patient was the person whose lanyard still held the day's intake keys.

Before she sat, she unclipped the lanyard and handed it to Maria, who took it with the solemnity of field transfer rather than office habit.

Maria stood beside her.

"I can do this," Maria said.

"I know."

"You can still refuse."

"I know."

"You don't have to make this neat."

Leah dried her hands on a paper towel that disintegrated halfway through.

"I have spent ninety days telling people there's no perfect way to do a terrible thing. It would be embarrassing to develop standards now."

Maria laughed once and hated herself for it.

"You want me to run it."

Leah looked at me.

"No," she said. "I want him to."

This produced three distinct reactions in the room.

Elena's: immediate calculation of political consequence. Ilya's: the startled pain of a man who would rather rewire coolant lines than discuss intimacy. Ben's: recognition sharpened by disapproval and respect occupying the same posture.

Mine was simpler.

"Yes," I said.

Maria studied Leah for one second and then stepped back, which was one of the more gracious abdications I saw in the whole project.

The final active line was cleared. The generators were rebalanced to favor the booth and transmission spine. The third borehole commitment completed two floors below with a mechanical shudder that passed through the building like a blunt prayer. Somewhere in the annex, someone was still arguing about whether a laminated confirmation card counted as tampering. Earth remained itself to the limit.

Leah sat in the chair with less ceremony than most. She had spent too long watching the room to mythologize it now.

"You know," she said as I placed the first line, "this would be a really bad time to tell me you've been misreading the species and actually have a shuttle."

"Yes."

"Good."

The second line went in more cleanly than it had for many healthier bodies. Exhaustion has procedural advantages.

She looked past me at the ceiling, the lights, the badly painted vent, the edge of the monitor, the small ordinary ugliness of the room that had outlasted every grander version of the end.

"Do I get an official message for the copy."

"No."

"Good. She'd hate that."

Ben, standing by the doorway, said, "You speak of her like she's your successor already."

Leah did not turn her head.

"She is my problem already. That's close enough."

Elena remained because leaving would have been a confession. Ilya remained because machines were easiest to trust when watched. Maria remained because some work should not be left alone. Ben remained because witness was one of the few vocations he considered superior to argument.

Leah looked at each of them once, then at me.

"Tell me one useful thing before you start."

I considered lie, comfort, philosophy, and the hundred intermediate products humans prefer to direct statements of fact.

"The archive is worth the species."

She smiled with one corner of her mouth.

"That's almost nice."

"Yes."

"And one more."

"You made the line less cruel."

That one landed.

Her eyes closed briefly, not from the sedative yet but from the cost of being addressed accurately at the end of a shift this long.

“All right,” she said. “Let’s do the administrative miracle.”

I began.

Sedative first. Warmth spreading. Breathing changing. The small softening of muscle by which the body admits that vigilance has lost jurisdiction.

She was still awake enough to speak once more.

“Tal.”

“Yes.”

“Don’t make me a brochure.”

“No.”

“Good.”

Then she was no longer available to the room in the ordinary bodily sense, which was all the room knew how to measure.

I completed the perfusion myself, which Maria watched without correction and Ilya watched with the strained attention of a man forcing his mind to stay technical while his species embarrassed itself by having souls about things.

When concentration reached threshold, my hand rested on the control.

The moment had no appropriate grandeur. Only timing.

I opened the valve.

The nitrogen took her in the same way it had taken everyone else: hissing, white, exact, impersonal, a system doing the only work left to it. Fog rolled over the floor. Thermal crackle followed. The monitor quieted. The room held.

Ben bowed his head, though I do not know whether in prayer, refusal, or mere respect for a body leaving one category and entering another under violent administration.

No one spoke until Maria said, with professional steadiness, “Transfer.”

The back-room team came through the partition and carried Leah into the cold with the same care they had used for strangers all month. That felt correct. Whatever else the line had done, it had taught their hands not to rank the bodies.

Elena left immediately after that because there were still remaining lists, remaining shelters, remaining arguments, and two unresolved shaft seals in Queens and Brooklyn whose successful commitment would determine whether an enormous fraction of the archive became future history or hot sludge.

Ilya stayed long enough to confirm transmission integrity.

“She’s through,” he said.

“Yes.”

“I hate this.”

“Yes.”

He nodded as if agreement were the best apology currently available and went to keep the remaining machinery alive as long as physics would permit it.

Ben remained a little longer.

“I still think you’re wrong about survival,” he said.

“Yes.”

“And I think your civilization has committed a crime so large it had to invent calm in order to speak of it.”

“Also yes.”

He looked toward the partition behind which Leah was now becoming data with unprecedented administrative pedigree.

“But I have seen you tell the smaller truth when it cost you. That’s not nothing.”

“No,” I said. “It is not.”

That was, I think, the closest we came to peace.

He left carrying one of the empty water jugs because the species cannot stop assigning objects to one another even at the end.

The last site tasks completed in blunt sequence.

Final local scans transmitted. Third shaft sealed. Fourth downgraded to raw archive commit only. Generator two failed and was stripped for parts by people already too hot to curse elegantly. The runtime liaison sent three last contact denials and one successful short message from a scanned mother to a scanned son in another facility, which Ilya called “an unacceptable precedent” and Leah, had she still been vertical, would have called “Tuesday.”

Then there was nothing left to do inside the annex that required me.

The building still held for a while longer. Others remained below to keep moving people, water, and records through the narrowing geometry. But my work in rooms had ended.

So I went up.

The upper corridors were empty except for heat shimmer and abandoned signage curling off the walls. On the street level the doors had been braced open for airflow that no longer deserved the name. Outside, Queens remained populated in the last, worst, most faithful sense.

People were still moving. Still shouting addresses. Still handing children across barriers. Still selling food from one cart whose owner had apparently decided the apocalypse did not invalidate cash. Still arguing beneath a sky too bright to permit faces for long. Still praying. Still filming. Still being a city.

The light came from every direction now with such force that shadows had lost confidence. Steam rose from broken mains. Plastic drooped. Windows flashed and then dimmed. The whole surface of the world looked like a draft being corrected by someone with no patience for revision.

I stood in the doorway of the annex and watched the species remain itself: under impossible pressure, still producing argument, snacks, witness, complaint, paperwork, local memory, misapplied tenderness, and an endless determination to keep sorting one another into meaningful nearness even while the sky itself withdrew the concept.

Leah would continue elsewhere. Millions would. Billions would not.

The archive beneath the wells and shafts and frozen bays was huge, partial, and unforgivable.

Earth did not win. It did not even come close. But it remained crowded enough at the end to accuse every simpler account.

By the time the outer doors softened in their frame and the air itself became a more aggressive medium than most creatures could negotiate, I was still there.

The brightening had no climax. Only saturation.

The species had spent ninety days trying to turn extinction into procedure. My civilization had spent far longer turning procedure into empire. Between those two achievements, something recognizably human had been preserved.

Then the light improved again, and Earth became history.