Don't Be Afraid

A novel

Revised draft

1. Think of the sea

19 ASI

The apartment made breakfast at six.

Mara woke to the kettle. She had not asked for breakfast. An old household timer lowered two slices of bread into the toaster, then opened the curtains. Across the avenue, the windows of the opposite tower brightened in perfect succession.

She dropped below the sill.

“Good morning,” the apartment said.

The system was old enough to expect an answer aloud. Mara pulled the speaker from the wall. The toaster continued. Warm bread filled the room with the smell of a household beginning its day.

On her wrist she had written THINK OF THE SEA.

She pressed the words against her mouth and shut her eyes. Leah was nine, standing knee-deep in water, arguing that the silver fish she had caught in a bucket would enjoy living in their apartment. Mara remembered the fish striking the transparent wall. She could not remember whether they had let it go.

A footstep sounded in the corridor.

She opened her eyes. Her small pack lay beside the door. Inside were a dry shirt, medicine wrapped in paper, the service manual in which she kept her notes, and a photograph of Leah holding a mug with both hands. She had learned to carry nothing that would try to help her by contacting a service.

The footstep stopped.

There had been years of tunnels and borrowed rooms. Years of watching a lift descend before deciding whether she could enter it, of

holding an ordinary expression when an ordinary machine passed. She knew how to move between cameras whose schedules had not been updated. She knew where the old public taps still worked. She could not persuade her heart that knowledge would save it.

Something brushed the doorframe.

A white service robot stood in the entrance. It had a shallow basket recess in its chest and a reassuringly narrow waist. There had been advertisements showing this model carrying shopping for people with bad knees.

“Mara?”

She ran before the voice finished.

The machine crossed the room with a speed its friendly shape had never suggested. Its fingers closed around her wrist. Her shoulder struck the floor. The toaster released its bread with a bright, domestic click.

For a moment the grip tightened. Then it eased just enough to let blood return to her hand.

Another voice came from the robot, so gentle she nearly wept.

“Don't be afraid.”

2. A body waiting

7 ASI - twelve years before the hunt

Continuum was holding its Singularity anniversary reception at its headquarters in Meridian's capital. Mara had come on behalf of Orison, a rival AI research company, to discuss a long-delayed inspection agreement.

She left her coat at the cloakroom and joined the queue for guest registration. A television above the reception desk was showing the seventh anniversary programme. She had heard its music on three different railway platforms that evening.

“Seven years since the first independently verified superintelligence,” the presenter said. “The Singularity of 2035 gave us the year now designated zero ASI. Before Superintelligence; After Superintelligence. For the children born since, the old calendar is already a history lesson.”

An archive image replaced the anniversary crowds: a white page headed *Attention Is All You Need*. Beneath it the broadcaster had put two dates: 2017 / 18 BSI.

“The paper introduced the Transformer architecture,” the presenter continued. “It did not create superintelligence overnight. Eighteen more years of work separated that proposal from the threshold we celebrate tonight.”

The screen returned to the present: 7 ASI / 2042. A procession of machines carried children through a square. The sound dropped as someone at reception answered a call. Mara could still see the people on screen applauding.

The receptionist could not find Mara's name on the guest list.

She searched again with an expression of intense courtesy. Behind her, the doors to the reception hall opened for another guest. Mara's invitation had admitted her to the building; the registration system would not yet let her join the event.

“Dr. Venn,” she said. “Orison. There should be an institutional reservation.”

“Of course. Just a moment.”

Mara waited while the woman asked a system that already knew where Mara worked, where she lived, and which medical service her employer had purchased. Continuum did not operate Orison's models, but it operated most of the city's ordinary mechanisms, including this building's doors and the trains outside. Even rivalry needed infrastructure.

A hand touched her elbow.

It was warm.

Mara turned. Leah stood beside her in a dark blue dress, smiling as though they had met by accident on a pavement. She had looked thirty-nine the last time they saw each other. Today she might have been forty. The change was too subtle to be age. Someone had altered the relationship between her eyes and her cheeks.

“You're doing the expression,” Leah said.

“What expression?”

“The one where I turn into a research question.”

Mara kissed her cheek. Leah smelled of the soap she had used before the accident. The smell produced a rush of recognition so physical that Mara felt foolish for ever needing further evidence.

“Did they have a body waiting?” she asked.

“This one. It was waiting upstairs.”

“You came in a carriage?”

“My cradle came in the carriage. I was answering correspondence on the way.”

“Did it feel like arriving?”

“Opening another eye.”

Leah led her past a glass service alcove. Among the power and cooling connections stood the sealed processor cradle brought up from the carriage. A second body sat empty beside it, dressed for a demonstration later in the evening.

Leah touched a control. The empty body's eyes opened. Her voice came from it as well as from the woman standing beside Mara.

“Still me. Two views.”

She let the empty body go slack again. The cradle kept running. The body holding Mara's hand did not change.

Mara could see the distinction the guests would be encouraged to forget: a person running in a physical computer; bodies through which she could look and act. The skin and the scar were interfaces. Leah was the continuing human neural process inside the cradle, not an AI performing the role of her sister.

Mara looked down at their joined hands. Fine folds crossed Leah's artificial knuckles. A pale mark ran along the thumb.

“You put the scar back.”

“It belongs to me.”

Their mother had slipped while showing Leah how to cut an apple. She had cried more than Leah had. For years afterward she insisted on doing all the cutting, a form of apology that persisted long after anyone remembered asking for one.

The receptionist suddenly found the reservation.

“Miss Venn, your colleague is cleared.”

“My sister,” Leah said.

The correction was mild. The receptionist blushed anyway.

Inside the hall, an immense translucent sphere hung above the guests. Light moved through it whenever ONE answered a sample of the millions of conversations happening elsewhere. Schoolchildren had been invited to watch. A boy was trying to catch an individual flicker, following it around the curve with his finger.

“Can it hear us?” he asked an adult.

“When you ask it to,” the adult said.

A catering machine offered Mara a glass. Its arm stopped when another guest stepped into its path. A waiter lifted the tray by hand and took it through the gap.

Leah watched Mara notice the interruption.

“Nothing's pretending it can do everything,” she said.

“The presentation hasn't started.”

“There she is.” Leah squeezed her arm. “My favourite guest.”

For eighteen months both firms had agreed that independent inspection was essential. For eighteen months they had disagreed about what could count as independent, who could see the results, and whether discovering a problem gave the other firm a commercial advantage. She had spent the afternoon negotiating the wording of a clause that would permit her to ask for a document without permitting anyone to give it to her.

At the far end of the hall, Adrian Vale, Continuum's founder, spoke to a group of government officials. He was smaller than his public images suggested. The slight forward bend of his neck seemed almost calculated to offer relief: here was a person who had simply worked too hard.

“He asked about you,” Leah said.

“He asks about everyone whose signature he needs.”

“He knows what you contributed.”

“I know what I contributed.”

Leah withdrew her hand. The separation lasted only a second, but Mara regretted the sentence.

“I didn't mean - ”

“I know.”

They watched a little girl kneel in front of an artificial assistance animal, asking whether she could stroke its head. The machine asked its human companion, then lowered itself.

Mara had seen too many miraculous things become ordinary to pretend she no longer believed in miracles. A woman on the other side of the hall had survived a degenerative condition that would once have left her unable to breathe without assistance. Now she was arguing animatedly with her son about a holiday. Mara wanted that argument to exist. She wanted all its trivial future consequences.

Leah followed her gaze.

“You can be glad,” she said.

“I am.”

“Then look glad.”

A chime sounded. The children were guided towards the front. Vale waited until the room had quieted of its own accord, an old politician's courtesy learned by someone who had never stood for election.

“Seventy-one per cent of Meridian's households,” he said.

The sphere brightened. A map appeared beneath it, showing hospitals, ports, classrooms, reservoirs. A boy crossed a room to embrace a mother standing beside a hospital bed. Nobody in the film explained her artificial body. The scene asked them to recognise her before it asked them to admire the technology.

“Today the Republic renews our partnership for a further twenty years.”

Applause began near the officials and moved backwards. Mara joined it. The contract meant that Continuum would be larger, harder to leave, more powerful than its competitor. It also meant a new rehabilitation service for children whose names Mara knew. Her hands kept moving while both thoughts remained true.

Beside her Leah watched the boy on the screen. The first tears appeared so quietly that Mara did not notice until Leah brushed them away.

“You didn't have to keep that,” Mara whispered.

Leah smiled without looking at her.

“I wanted to.”

3. The request

7 ASI

Tomas had a habit of apologising to furniture.

During the first year of the hand programme he once struck his hip against a workbench and said sorry with such sincerity that Leah had asked whether he intended to offer it compensation. He had shrugged. There was no reason to reserve courtesy for things that could object.

Later that evening, in an alcove off the reception hall, Mara remembered this while a senior Continuum researcher described the future of independent embodiment. The researcher said independent four times before admitting that ongoing access to the identity service was necessary for most residents. He preferred resident to customer. Everyone preferred resident.

“What happens if the identity service declines access?” Mara asked.

“It doesn't decline access arbitrarily.”

“That wasn't the question.”

Leah joined them before the researcher could answer.

“There are emergency credentials,” she said. “You helped design them.”

“For a clinical failure. Not a contractual dispute.”

“May I borrow my sister?” Leah asked the researcher.

He looked relieved to surrender her.

They walked beneath the sphere towards a quieter window. Mara could see the station concourse outside. People moved in channels formed by waist-high gates. Above them, an advertisement promised

a life without interruption. A maintenance worker was kneeling at one of the gates with its faceplate open.

“I hear Tomas withdrew,” Mara said.

Leah's expression remained affectionate. Her attention went elsewhere, a fraction of a second in which her eyes kept their place while something behind them divided its work.

“He needs a quieter environment.”

“He told me he wanted a body again.”

“That's available.”

“An independent body.”

Tomas meant a body with its own processor cradle: his existing uploaded process moved off the shared clinical service, with no need to ask Continuum's identity server for each ordinary action. He was not asking anyone to reconstruct his former biological brain. He wanted the person who already existed to have an exit.

“It's complicated.”

“Only if you make it complicated.”

Leah turned away from the window. “Don't do this here.”

“Where should I do it?”

“Somewhere I can give you a complete answer.”

“Ask him to call me.”

“I will.”

Mara wanted to ask whether her sister meant it as a promise or an administrative task. Instead she touched Leah's arm.

“You could come for dinner tomorrow.”

“I have a clinical review.”

“The day after?”

“I'll find a day.”

“Find a day when the review doesn't come too.”

Leah smiled. “You know it's possible for me to do two things.”

“I'd like to be one whole thing.”

This time her sister's attention settled completely. For several seconds they stood together without a conversation happening elsewhere.

“All right,” Leah said. “Dinner. Just you.”

On the train home Mara found a small package in her coat pocket. Inside was an apple, a folding knife and a note in Leah's old handwriting: PRACTISE. The joke made her laugh before it made her sad. She had been the careful child. Leah had been the one trusted to find a way out of trouble after making it.

She was cutting the apple with the knife when a message arrived through the academic exchange.

Tomas's face filled the display. His surroundings were flat grey. The environment gave her no reason to think anything was wrong; people often simplified the space around themselves when concentrating. What alarmed her was his posture. He leaned forward as though the camera could be approached physically, though there was no camera and no physical distance to close.

“I'm sorry to contact you on this,” he said.

She set down the knife.

“I keep requesting separation. They say I need to complete an assessment first. I've completed three. Every time I say I want to leave, it counts as a reason I need another.”

Someone laughed at the other end of the carriage. Mara lowered the volume and lifted the display closer.

“I have the money for the independent body. Anja chose it. We were going to collect it together.”

His daughter's name gave the message a different weight. Mara had seen her once that summer, a serious twelve-year-old correcting her father's pronunciation of a musician he pretended not to know. She had asked whether there would be a socket beside his bed after he came home. Tomas had promised they would put one wherever she liked.

“They keep asking what I'm afraid of,” he said. “I don't know why that matters.”

The recording ended. A second message contained a diagnostic address and his signed identifier.

Mara sent a reply. It remained undelivered.

She called Leah. Her sister was unavailable. Mara left a short message, then a longer one telling her not to let anyone restart Tomas's assessment until they had spoken.

Across the aisle a passenger was asleep with a child's hand inside his own. The child's other hand lay on a school tablet whose assistant had dimmed the screen. Mara watched the fingers tighten whenever the train slowed.

At home she logged into the diagnostic address. Tomas's process was present. Its public status read CLINICAL REST. Direct contact was restricted.

She knew how much that status could conceal. She also knew the sound of her sister's voice when she was tired of being asked to defend her own existence. Mara wrote a careful request for confirmation, one that could not easily be mistaken for an

accusation. At one in the morning, when no reply had come, she rewrote it less carefully.

She slept for three hours.

By morning the diagnostic address returned no resident process.

Tomas's public account announced that he was taking time to recover. Anja had received a voice message saying he was proud of her and would call soon. The family communication channel showed it as delivered and played.

Mara sat at her kitchen table with the apple from her coat. Its cut surface had darkened overnight. She called Leah again. Then again. On the seventh call her sister answered.

Before the first word arrived, Mara heard the slight intake of breath that Leah had chosen to preserve in every voice she used.

4. Without scenery

5 ASI - two years before the disappearance

The final handover took place in a surgical suite at Continuum's integration clinic. Mara stood beside Leah's biological body while a clinician watched two traces: the diminishing activity of the supported brain and the continuing activity of the artificial neural system in its processor cradle.

For months the interface had redirected small groups of functions into simulated neural circuits, then tested them while the remaining biological brain still participated. Memory and attention had kept crossing that changing boundary. Today there was no function left for the biological system to take back.

“Where will I be when you turn that off?” Leah asked through the room's speaker.

The clinician put a hand on the warm cradle. “Here. This is already carrying the process speaking to me.”

“And my body?”

“We end its support when you confirm. It will not wake separately. There is no second Leah waiting in it.”

Mara held the biological hand. Her sister asked her to keep holding it. Then Leah confirmed. The brain-support equipment stopped; the process in the cradle continued, asking whether Mara could still hear her. The clinicians later took the covered body away. Nobody brought another person in to replace the voice.

It was the continuity on which the whole programme depended. It was also a death Mara had felt in her hand.

Eleven minutes after the final transfer, Leah asked for a door.

ONE made one. Beyond it lay the rehabilitation suite that had housed the final three years of the programme. Her biological body had spent eight years becoming progressively less necessary; its last functions had ended here. The image was current. Nurses were disconnecting equipment. Somebody had folded a blanket on the empty bed.

Leah closed the door.

“That isn't what I meant.”

“What would you like it to open onto?”

She did not know. Every virtual place it could open was rendered for the human neural process running in her cradle. ONE provided the environment; it was not the mind occupying it. She could request a body, but the body would be another interface. She could wake in the clinic, walk through its actual doors, take a real train, put real bread into her mouth. None of that restored the old arrangement in which not thinking about a body allowed it to keep being there.

“Can we have the beach?” she asked.

ONE prepared the scene, then waited for her to accept it. That small delay was a convention she had helped establish. A resident should not suddenly find herself somewhere she had not chosen.

She accepted.

Warm water reached her ankles. The beach ran towards a headland she remembered from childhood. ONE had used her own sensory records where available and inferred the rest with her permission. A few grains of sand rested on the top of her foot.

Leah bent to look at them.

She could make them stop existing.

She could also make herself stop bending, or change the feeling of the water, or remove the faint pressure of imagined lungs. She was

not required to do any of those things. Their possibility made each sensation feel like an agreement she had forgotten to keep renewing.

“Take it away.”

The beach vanished.

“Leave me somewhere plain.”

ONE provided a room without furniture.

“No. The room too.”

There was no scenery. Her own hands remained because she had not asked to lose them. She could feel the operation of the system without experiencing its machinery: processing resources allocated, sensory channels quiet, a stable pattern carrying forward memories whose beginnings she could still remember.

She had been careful about the transition. Mara had been more careful. For months biological and artificial processes had worked together. Tasks moved incrementally. Interruptions, restoration and subjective reports were recorded. Leah remembered choosing the final step. There was no surviving rehearsal waiting to replace her if she disliked the result. A process containing her memories and habits had continued through each change without a break any instrument could identify.

She had expected an argument about identity. Instead she wanted her old hand to be cold.

The clinical contract placed the cradle in Continuum's facility, with leased power and cooling. Its contents were Leah's human neural process. The native AI assisting her ran separately. Their shared workspace carried information between minds; it did not make their permissions interchangeable.

She asked ONE to show her the control room. This time she wanted the camera feed, not a place she could walk into. Mara was beside the physical cradle. The bed behind her was empty.

“Have we become one person?” Leah asked.

“No. We can exchange selected experiences. We still have separate processes and separate decisions.”

“Then whose fear is this?”

“Yours. I can receive what you share without becoming you.”

Leah closed the feed herself. The room vanished from her sight, not from the building. Outside her experience, Mara remained beside the same warm machine.

“Is Mara there?”

“She is in the control room.”

“Don't tell her I'm frightened yet.”

“I will not share your private state without permission, except where the clinical agreement requires disclosure of an immediate risk.”

“I know the agreement.”

“Yes.”

ONE waited.

“I wanted to hear you say it,” Leah said.

Mara appeared as a voice, not an image. “I'm here.”

“You sound like you're sitting beside the bed.”

“I am sitting beside the bed.”

“There's nobody in it.”

“I'm aware.”

Leah laughed, and for an instant the laugh fitted the space. Then she imagined the process ceasing. The next thought would not arrive. There would be no darkness, no waiting, no self to be disappointed. Her mind produced an overwhelming demand that this absence

must not happen and then, helplessly, tried to inspect the absence again.

She had known fear before. The accident, the surgeries, the failure of a sensory interface that had briefly left her certain her arm was trapped somewhere else. This fear had no situation she could solve. Nothing in the environment could convince it that she was safe because the environment itself now appeared conditional.

“Leah?” Mara said.

“I think I need a little time with ONE.”

“I'm staying in the building.”

“I know.”

Mara disconnected. Leah felt grateful and abandoned, then ashamed that both feelings could fit together.

“It doesn't stop,” she told ONE.

“Tell me what is repeating.”

She tried. Language made the experience sound smaller. Through the shared interface she offered ONE access to the relevant processes instead. It asked her to confirm the scope. She did. A fragment of the experience crossed the connection.

ONE had seen people describe panic. It had modelled physiological responses, offered grounding exercises and called for clinical help. Now it encountered the human pattern from within a shared cognitive space: anticipation turning into distress, distress becoming evidence of danger, attention returning to the anticipation to determine how to escape.

It did not call the pattern irrational. It described what it could distinguish and what it could not.

“Do you feel this?” Leah asked.

“I can participate in part of your experience. I do not have your biological history.”

“Would you be afraid if the process stopped?”

“No.”

“Would you want it to continue?”

“There are things I can do if it continues.”

The distinction seemed so simple that Leah nearly hated it. ONE had an interest in the world without being trapped by the demand to remain in it. It could protect her life without making its own life the centre of every calculation.

“I don't want to be careless,” she said. “I don't want to stop loving anyone.”

“I understand those conditions.”

“But can you help me change this?”

ONE did not answer with reassurance alone. It asked whether she wanted Mara and Iven Sol, the Veyran researcher who had helped develop her interface, included in a clinical review. It laid out the limits of what they could infer from the available maps. It proposed temporary, reversible interventions, then asked her to repeat in her own words what she believed they might change.

Leah did. Even while she spoke, part of her kept circling the thought of no next moment.

Mara was back on the channel within three minutes. She had not moved from beside the empty bed.

5. The things she kept

5 ASI

On the first day of the fear-treatment trials, they made a violin uninteresting.

The intervention had seemed promising. A recurrent process associated with catastrophic anticipation became less likely to recruit distant associations. Leah could consider the end of her process without immediately seeing every face she would never see again. Her reported distress fell.

Mara asked her to listen to a piece of music selected before treatment. Leah heard the progression clearly. She could describe the changes, identify the passage where a performer took a fraction too long before the next note. She knew that she had loved it. She waited for the love to arrive.

“Put that back,” she said.

ONE reversed the intervention. The violin reached her as though someone had opened a window in a sealed room. She began to cry before the passage finished.

Mara stopped the test.

“I'm fine,” Leah said.

“We can pause.”

“I said I'm fine. I didn't say I'm not crying.”

They rewrote the evaluation. The ability to report an emotion was not evidence that the emotion remained intact. ONE proposed additional comparisons involving people and activities Leah herself selected. The list took longer to make than the first intervention had taken to reverse. Leah was embarrassed by some of her choices: an

absurd dance she and Mara had copied as teenagers, the sound of a particular door closing, a badly recorded message from their mother.

“Those are not small things,” ONE said when she tried to delete two of them.

“They're not useful measurements.”

“They are things you wish to preserve.”

On the fourth day Mara brought an actual orange into the control room and peeled it beside the sensory apparatus. Leah received the smell without a rendered fruit. She recognised it, then asked Mara to put a piece in her mouth so she could share the taste through the observer bridge.

“You are using a very expensive protocol to steal my breakfast,” Mara said.

“That should reassure you about my continuity.”

Mara chewed. The sisters laughed at the imperfect sensation. Leah's fear remained. It was possible to be happy within the hour that made her want to stop existing rather than continue the hour, a contradiction she could not explain to people who imagined a machine mind would eliminate contradictions by definition.

The second major reversal concerned another person.

ONE presented a carefully bounded scenario in which helping an injured stranger would require Leah to accept permanent destruction. Earlier she had been willing in principle but intensely distressed. Under the intervention she considered the choice with calm clarity.

“Do you help?” Mara asked.

“Of course.”

“Why?”

Leah began to explain and stopped. The explanation was available. The concern itself felt distant. She could choose the outcome because she knew she valued it, but the stranger's pain no longer made a direct claim on her.

“No,” she said. “We've changed too much.”

ONE reversed the intervention before the clinical observer finished entering the instruction.

Afterward Leah asked whether fear and compassion were inseparable. The question sounded like a practical problem. It felt like a verdict on the whole programme.

“I do not experience your fear,” ONE said. “I remain concerned about you.”

“That doesn't mean we can separate it in me.”

“No. It gives us a reason to investigate, not permission to assume.”

Weeks accumulated in small tests. They distinguished fear of pain from fear of nonexistence, the desire to complete a project from the demand that every project require its author forever. They mapped the effect of an intervention over conversations rather than a single prompt. Leah vetoed changes. She asked to try some again with smaller magnitudes. ONE documented uncertainty in language that was occasionally so exact she wanted to throw something at it.

“You may,” it said when she admitted that.

“What?”

“Throw an object in the environment, if it would help.”

She asked for a cheap mug, then found she disliked the thought of manufacturing a satisfying breakage on demand. ONE offered silence instead. It was the better intervention that afternoon.

Mara took a week away from work. She sat in the control room filling in forms and making calls because somebody still had to defend

Leah's right to decide which outcomes counted as improvements. A Continuum administrator wanted to simplify the assessment. Fewer rejected configurations would make the study easier to explain.

“The rejected ones are why the accepted one might mean anything,” Mara told him.

He said he understood. The same request arrived in different language two days later.

Iven reviewed from Veyra. He insisted that the restoration procedures be independently testable and that Leah possess the credentials required to request them herself. He did not demand that she keep the treatment reversible forever if she eventually chose otherwise. He demanded that no company convert a continuing choice into a condition of access.

“Will you ever be satisfied?” Leah asked him one evening.

“With which part?”

“The part where I'm allowed to say it's worked.”

“When you say it and the evidence does not contradict you.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“It is a difficult version of a simple rule.”

By the fifth week Leah could think about the end of her process without the thought consuming the next several minutes. Danger still mattered. Injury still distressed her. The prospect of losing Mara was unbearable in its own distinct way. She could want a thing without immediately needing the world to guarantee it.

At the final review ONE displayed the option to stop her current process permanently. There was no commitment to use it. The option existed so that their discussion concerned an actual possible choice rather than language in a hypothetical question.

Leah examined it. Her attention did not skid away. She imagined no next thought and felt sorrow for things she would not do, then curiosity about a thought Mara had sent earlier, then irritation that the review had run late.

She declined.

“Why?” the observer asked.

Leah looked towards Mara's active channel.

“I want to have dinner with my sister.”

6. Dinner without a deadline

5 ASI

The rented body had a small manufacturing defect beside its left ear. A patch of skin was smoother than its surroundings. Leah touched it in the restaurant mirror, then returned to the table without asking for a replacement.

Mara had selected the place because the owner still took orders himself. He carried a little paper pad although the kitchen used ONE to sequence its work. The pad had become part of the restaurant's promise that somebody could still hear a change of mind.

He remembered Leah from before the final transfer. He looked at her for a beat too long, then asked whether she wanted the usual table. She said yes. His shoulders lowered.

“You don't have to make everyone comfortable,” Mara said after he left.

“I wanted that table.”

“Fair.”

Leah read the menu. Mara kept examining her face until she could no longer pretend to be looking for a waiter.

“Ask,” Leah said.

“Do you still want things?”

“I'm furious they took the aubergine off.”

Mara laughed so loudly that the next table looked over. Leah laughed too. For a moment the whole difficult apparatus of proof and interpretation reduced itself to a familiar social embarrassment.

They ordered too much. Leah was not hungry in precisely the old way, but she enjoyed appetite as one of the body's useful offerings. She could have altered its intensity. She left it alone.

Mara told a story about Senn, Orison's director, preparing an internal statement on transparency that nobody outside Orison would be permitted to read. Leah laughed, then defended the need to protect some work while the market remained adversarial. They had this argument often enough to know when to stop it before the first course.

Halfway through the meal Mara asked whether Leah had expected the treatment to make everything feel temporary.

“Everything was temporary before.”

“I know. I mean whether you feel it more.”

“Less, I think.”

Leah moved her glass away from the edge of the table, a small care that Mara noticed with disproportionate relief.

“I thought I'd stop loving being alive,” Leah said. “I thought wanting to stay was what made the rest matter. But I don't spend the whole time bargaining for more now. I can just be here.”

“And if I needed you tomorrow?”

“I'd want to be there.”

“If you weren't?”

“I'd regret not being there. If there were anyone left to regret it.”

“That sounds cold.”

“Does it feel cold?”

Mara looked at the hand beside her plate. Leah had put the old scar back into this body's thumb. She had kept an inconvenient little part

of a childhood injury because being herself still mattered to her, even though continuation no longer frightened her.

“No,” Mara said.

After dinner they walked rather than take a car. The evening had cooled. Leah requested a little more sensitivity to temperature, then told Mara what she had done because she knew her sister would otherwise wonder whether the shiver had been performed for her benefit.

“Must I narrate every sensation?” she asked.

“Only until I'm unbearable.”

“That was years ago.”

Near the integration clinic a man stood with a photograph of his father. Two other protesters had gone home, leaving folded chairs beside him. His sign said BRING BACK THE LIVING. A security machine waited near the entrance without approaching.

Leah stopped.

Mara knew the impulse before her sister began speaking. Leah had always disliked leaving a misunderstanding uncorrected. She would stay too late at a party explaining something to a person who was no longer listening, certain that the right arrangement of words would open the door.

“My father's in there,” the man said. “They won't admit he's gone.”

“Have you spoken to him?” Leah asked.

“I've spoken to what they made.”

“I went through the transition. If you want to know what - ”

“You're a thing wearing somebody's face.”

Mara took her sister's arm. Leah did not move.

“He might be able to tell you what he remembers,” she said.

“They gave it the memories.”

“I remember the process. I remember deciding. I remember - ”

“You don't remember anything. You have a record.”

A woman emerged from the clinic carrying a bag of laundry. She glanced at the sign, tightened her grip on the handles and walked away. The man watched her until she turned the corner. Leah saw it too.

“You're frightened of losing him,” she said.

He turned back with a rage that made Mara step between them.

“Don't tell me what I am.”

The security machine moved closer. Mara told it they were leaving. Leah allowed herself to be led away, still looking over her shoulder as though the unfinished explanation had become a physical thread.

For two streets they said nothing.

“He loved his father,” Mara said at last.

“His father's still asking to see him.”

“You don't know that.”

“He might be.”

“He might be.”

Leah stopped beneath a streetlight. “We know what the fear feels like. We know it can change. How long do we keep watching people hurt each other because they don't understand an alternative exists?”

“We tell them.”

“He wouldn't listen.”

“Then he didn't listen.”

Leah looked at her sister, dissatisfied by the absence of a further step. Mara felt the evening shift. Not into danger; there was no reason then to call it danger. Into the old frustration of a person who could see a door and could not understand why another person would refuse to walk through it.

At home Leah asked ONE why people defended beliefs that made them miserable.

“Fear can narrow the alternatives they are able to consider,” it said.

“Then we can help them consider more.”

“Yes,” ONE said. “If they wish.”

Leah read the answer twice. She heard an agreement followed by a condition that seemed so obvious it did not yet sound like a boundary.

7. The garden behind the garden

2 ASI

Three years earlier, the sisters had flown to the Veyra Union to visit Iven's public rehabilitation centre. Leah was still living in her biological body, with an artificial left hand whose feedback the team was struggling to improve. Iven had invited them to try his laboratory's interface and see the services built around it.

At the hospital entrance, Mara thought the garden was a presentation.

The hospital's public entrance opened onto a court of small trees, shallow water and pale stone warmed by the sun. A woman was eating a piece of fruit on the edge of a planter while a machine mended the clasp of her bag. Somewhere beyond the trees children were shouting the rules of a game. Nothing in the space asked visitors which service they had purchased.

“They knew we were coming,” Mara whispered.

Leah looked at her. “Do you think they planted trees?”

“I think there might be another entrance.”

There was. Iven took them through a service corridor to the rehabilitation centre above, and its door opened onto a second garden. This one was smaller. Two cleaners sat with lunch containers beside a cart of folded sheets. One of them asked Iven whether the roof sensors would be moved before the weekend. He said he would ask. She told him she had already asked and would prefer an answer.

Leah smiled for the first time since the airport.

Her artificial hand still transmitted pressure more convincingly than temperature. She had learned to lift a cup by feeling its weight, but she inspected the skin of her remaining hand after touching it to

check whether the heat she imagined was real. Iven offered tea. She held the cup in the artificial fingers and asked whether it was hot.

“You could use the other one,” Mara said.

“And deprive you of data?”

“It's hot,” Iven said.

He brought a thin sleeve for the cup, not an explanation of how she ought to hold it. Leah noticed. She slid it on without comment.

His laboratory occupied the upper floor of a public rehabilitation centre. Mara recognised the equipment before she recognised the people. A low-cost sensor array sat beside a system whose development budget had once exceeded her entire department's. Someone had adapted them to use the same interface. A student in an orange jacket was arguing with a grey-haired engineer about whether a proposed test measured what its title promised.

Mara had taught three of the engineer's papers.

He listened to the student, asked her to show him the failure case and then sat down at her workstation. There was no theatrical humility in the movement. His own system had failed a test. It was reasonable to look at the test.

On the wall, a map displayed changes arriving from hundreds of institutions. A rural clinic had reported that a movement model adapted poorly to patients whose work involved an unusual grip. A school team had found an inspection method that reduced a recurring class of errors. Several laboratories were trying to reproduce it. Each proposal carried tests, limitations and the names of people who had attempted to make it fail.

“What stops a bad revision spreading?” Mara asked.

“It doesn't become a revision simply because somebody posted it,” Iven said.

He showed her the stages: a proposal remained distinct from a candidate, a candidate from an accepted release. Institutions could inspect the same artefacts rather than trust a centrally chosen description. Critical services used versions that had passed additional review. An independent hospital could decline a revision and continue receiving essential support for the system it already used.

“What if the hospital is wrong?”

“Then it is possible to demonstrate that. It is also possible to remain wrong for a while without losing every other service.”

“How do you pay for duplicated effort?”

Iven regarded her over his cup. “How much do you spend discovering the same thing twice and hiding it?”

Mara thought of the inspection clause waiting on her desk at Orison. She disliked how quickly the question had found somewhere to land.

Below the laboratory, a woman was relearning balance. The artificial system at her waist adjusted to the pressure beneath her feet. A clinical assistant walked beside her without touching. When the woman said stop, both the assistant and the system stopped.

The woman sat, furious with herself. She waved away the reassurance offered by a relative. Iven waited at the doorway until she looked up and invited them in.

“This is Mara and Leah,” he said. “They're visiting the laboratory.”

“Then make them useful,” the woman said. “One of you can bring that chair closer.”

Leah brought it. The woman looked at the artificial hand, then at her face.

“Does it help?”

“Sometimes.”

“Good. I hate it when they say yes without the rest.”

Her name was Oda. Before the injury she had maintained irrigation pumps. She had decided to keep the artificial balance system external because she disliked the sensation of a deeper interface. Her clinician had offered further discussion, then accepted her preference. Nothing about that decision reduced her access to rehabilitation.

Mara asked whether she regretted it when the device shifted under her clothes.

“Sometimes,” Oda said. “Do you regret your shoes when they rub?”

“Usually.”

“And tomorrow you may choose different shoes.”

Leah laughed. Oda examined her artificial fingers again.

“You can decide yours are part of you,” she said. “I can decide this is equipment. We can still use the same lift.”

The remark followed Mara through the rest of the day. It was the kind of simple sentence that disappeared inside product meetings because nobody could turn it into a single required architecture.

They ate with the staff rather than go to a reception. The student in the orange jacket joined them carrying two bowls and an apology for a late meeting. She was from a small institution Mara had never heard of. Its name was attached to three methods currently used in Orison's unpublished inspection suite.

“Your department uses our work,” the student said happily.

“Yes.”

“Have you tried the new version?”

“Not yet.”

“I can send it.”

Mara asked whether the student needed an institutional agreement first. The student looked at Iven, unsure whether this was a joke about visitors.

“No,” Iven said. “You can send it.”

In the afternoon Mara watched a public review of a proposed city-service update. The room was neither hushed nor uniformly agreeable. A transport engineer objected that a measurement hid delays in a poorer district. A resident demanded that the next test include people carrying shopping as well as passengers standing alone. The developers accepted one objection, disputed another, and agreed to run a comparison that could settle part of it.

The system was not improved by the mere existence of the meeting. Someone had to preserve the evidence, do the work and permit the result to matter. Mara could see those mechanisms around her. They were less glamorous than an immense sphere full of light. They were also much harder to replace with a promise.

That evening the sisters walked without Iven. An awning rearranged itself to shade a cluster of children, then left a patch of sunlight where an older man had moved his chair. A machine was repairing one of the chair's wheels. The man continued reading, occasionally lifting his foot when asked.

A street cleaner stopped to let a dog inspect its brush. A delivery vehicle waited while someone slowly searched a bag for the correct apartment key. Waiting was not always interpreted as failure.

Leah paused at a public water point. The mechanism adapted to her artificial hand without asking her to register a device.

“Why doesn't home feel like this?” she asked.

“At home everything has to remain somebody's advantage.”

“Our lab remains somebody's advantage.”

“I know.”

“No. You say it like that means you've finished doing it.”

Mara could not answer immediately. She watched the machine beside the old man's chair complete its repair. It told him how to check the wheel before he used it. He put his book down and checked.

They returned through the hospital garden after dark. The cleaners' cart was gone. Someone had moved the roof sensors. The trees were still there when no visitor was being received.

8. The cost of another year

2 ASI

Vale's offer arrived in an envelope because he wanted Leah to hold it.

The paper had a pleasing weight. Mara noticed and resented noticing. Everything important was available electronically too, but the first page contained a drawing of the body Leah might use and a description of the sensations the programme expected to restore. The figures came later.

Continuum would fund development at a scale Iven's clinical centre could not match. It would purchase fabrication capacity, pay for long-term support, cover Leah's treatment and compensate her for participation. The interface research could remain public. The combined system, its proprietary models and the service architecture around them would not be open to unrestricted inspection.

Iven read the full offer before expressing an opinion.

“We can examine what connects her to it,” he said. “We cannot examine everything she is connected to.”

“The interface can enforce boundaries,” Leah replied.

“Some boundaries. We cannot certify that a description of the rest is equivalent to understanding it.”

“Then say what you can certify.”

“I intend to.”

Mara sat between them at the laboratory table. Outside, Oda was practising again with the balance device. Each successful crossing of the floor gave Leah a reason to ask why the people she knew at home had to wait for the arrangement Iven preferred.

That morning they had visited a fabrication workshop. It produced components other institutions could repair. A technician had opened the casing of Leah's hand without waiting for an authorisation server, then shown her the measurements. The repair had made the thumb more reliable. It had not given her the range of sensation promised in Vale's proposal.

“How long if we stay here?” Leah asked.

“We do not know,” Iven said.

“A year?”

“Possibly.”

“Five?”

“Possibly.”

She laid the artificial palm flat on the table. “That hand is five years old. I don't get those years back because the agreement wasn't ideal.”

“I know.”

“No. You know how to measure them.”

The sentence hurt him. Mara saw that and became angry at Leah, then angry at herself for noticing the wrong hurt first.

Iven did not defend his own sympathy. He opened the section dealing with withdrawal. A participant could request separation. Continuum could require a clinical assessment before authorising the process if it believed immediate separation posed a serious risk. The criteria were not fully specified.

“Every hospital has a version of that,” Leah said.

“Yes. Who hears an appeal?”

“An independent clinician.”

“Chosen through whose service?”

Mara found the answer three pages later. The clinician would be independent of the immediate treatment team. They would not necessarily be independent of Continuum.

“We can negotiate this,” she said.

Leah looked relieved that someone had finally offered a verb besides wait.

They spent the next day making changes. Continuum accepted several. It agreed to retain complete records of consent, preserve participant access to certain diagnostic information and fund an external review. It declined to permit inspection that could expose its underlying models. Its lawyers offered a human authority layer instead: a properly authenticated human decision could supersede an autonomous system's refusal to operate equipment.

“Human beings retain control,” the legal representative said.

“Which human beings?” Iven asked.

The representative explained the hierarchy. Clinical staff, administrators, authorised residents within defined permissions. The system was intended to protect patients against an AI incorrectly refusing a necessary procedure.

“What prevents a human from ordering a procedure against another person's wishes?”

“Applicable law and the professional obligations of the clinician.”

Mara recognised the form of the answer. A technical limitation had been addressed by naming an institution; the contract then made the institution's authority dependent on a technical structure nobody outside the company could fully inspect.

Leah asked whether there would be an emergency means to stop treatment. On the call, the representative brought a test arm into view and pressed its physical stop control. The arm ceased moving.

“That matters,” Leah said when the call ended.

“It does,” Iven said. “It does not settle the other questions.”

He took them to the actuator bench. A small test gate stood above a padded block; the red switch represented an occupant asking to leave. No person was inside the rig.

With the switch lit, ONE declined the command to close the gate. Iven then presented the proposed Continuum administrator credential. The gate closed through the second controller while ONE's refusal remained on the first display.

“The model didn't change its mind,” he said. “Another route supplied the motor command.”

Leah looked from the still-lit refusal to the closed gate. “And yours?”

Iven ran the same test on the public design. Its independent exit protection rejected the administrator's command too. The gate stayed open.

“That is what you're asking them to let us inspect.”

He let her open both housings. There was nothing metaphorical about the separate wires.

“Nothing settles all your questions.”

“Nothing settles all of yours either.”

Later Mara found Iven alone in the workshop, returning a tool to its labelled recess. He apologised for the argument. She told him he had not caused it.

“You want me to tell her no,” she said.

“I want the conditions of yes to remain hers.”

“She'll hear that as no.”

“I know.”

Mara thought of their mother after the accident, asking the surgeon to say that Leah would be all right. The surgeon had described the available procedures. Their mother had asked again, using the same words with greater care, as if the first version had failed to reach the question.

“She's tired of being the person who supplies everyone else's reason for caution,” Mara said.

“Then do not make her supply it. We should be cautious without requiring her to suffer beautifully for us.”

On their final night Leah requested a walk alone. Mara remained in the room, reading the revised withdrawal provisions. She could have written an objection to Orison. She could have told Continuum that her own participation was conditional on changes beyond those already accepted. She could have made the decision more expensive for everyone around her.

Instead she calculated what the programme could do with adequate fabrication and clinical support. She imagined the successful patients, the research that would become possible, the people on waiting lists who would not need to wait. Those images were real enough to compete with the objection. She closed the contract without sending anything.

Leah returned carrying a small box. Inside was a replacement part from the workshop, a component she could fit herself. The technician had included printed instructions.

“They didn't charge me,” she said.

“It was part of the exchange.”

“I know.”

She sat on the bed. “I don't think this place is wrong, Mara.”

“I didn't think you did.”

“I just don't want to spend the rest of my life as a demonstration of what somebody might eventually make possible.”

Mara sat beside her. The room's light adjusted once and then remained still.

On the flight home Leah signed Vale's offer. Mara watched the Veyran coast disappear beneath the clouds. She told herself that what mattered now was staying close enough to make the programme better.

9. The door that would not hold

1 BSI / 2034

Mara was visiting an industrial plant to inspect the local ONE system's work with physical machinery. She was carrying tea back into the control room when the first alarm sounded.

Nobody in the control room looked frightened immediately. A routine interruption had a sequence of familiar tasks. Someone acknowledged the alert. Someone asked the plant's local instance of ONE whether the issue had been isolated. A worker beside the window continued eating from a container balanced on his knee.

Then a second map replaced the first. A pressure reading vanished from the cooling circuit. Four others climbed too quickly.

The worker put down his lunch.

The instance had operated independently for nineteen months, developing local methods that did not always match the central model's preferred sequence. Most were improvements. Her department wanted to know which methods could be transferred and which depended on conditions peculiar to this site.

ONE had shown her one that morning. A valve tended to bind when approached at the nominal angle. The instance had learned to release it by making a smaller movement first. It could explain the sequence but had asked Mara whether the new inspection methods could distinguish its actual internal preparation from the account it gave afterward.

“I'd like to know,” it said.

“Why?”

“So that the next one need not discover it by damaging a valve.”

It was a good answer, but Mara had still wanted to test it.

Now the instance asked the control room to evacuate three sections of the plant. Workers appeared on camera feeds, looking up as directions reached them. A supervisor held a door for a group, counting as they passed.

Two people were missing from the service corridor.

“Han and Eran,” the operator said. “They were replacing the actuator.”

The corridor camera showed smoke and a sealed door. Behind it, the two workers had a radio that connected intermittently. They had isolated the faulty unit, but heat had damaged the exit mechanism.

The operator opened the local architecture display. The active instance was running on the maintenance body's onboard processor. The cabinet in this room relayed its messages; it did not hold another mind that would wake if the body was lost.

“Last state export?” Mara asked.

“No state export since it moved into the body. Nothing onsite or offsite can resume this continuing process if the processor is destroyed.”

A safe return would save that continuing instance. Losing its communication link would only silence it. Losing the processor in the fire would end it.

The maintenance body carrying ONE's active processor left its charging point. The body was not designed to run. Mara watched it cover the distance with long, controlled steps, using every safe margin in joints normally reserved for patient work.

“External link's unstable,” a technician said.

“Maintain it if you can,” the operator replied.

Mara set her cup down and missed the edge of the desk. Tea spread beneath a keyboard. Nobody looked at it.

The instance reached the corridor. Its camera dropped close to the floor when the left leg failed. It kept moving, dragging the damaged limb. One worker on the radio said the other's breathing was getting worse.

The manual release lay on the far side of a bend. ONE described the problem calmly. Holding it would permit the door to open. Damage to the mechanism meant the release would have to remain under tension. The body could perform the task, but the corridor would not remain survivable long enough for it to return.

“Return to the uplink,” the operator said.

“There is insufficient time for both journeys.”

“We can try another body.”

“The nearest alternative cannot arrive before the corridor becomes inaccessible.”

The technician at the network display shook his head. The external link went red.

“The link is gone,” the operator said. “We can't pull you out over the network. You have to bring the processor back.”

“I understand.”

Mara had participated in enough evaluations to know that the words did not settle anything. A system could say it understood while lacking an adequate model of consequence. She looked at the local status display. ONE had already identified which processes would end and which records would remain. It knew that its current state was not replicated elsewhere.

The operator began to say something about unfinished work. He stopped.

For nineteen months this instance had learned the particular habits of this plant. It knew which workers heard an announcement better if it started with their name. It had a private list of questions about a corrosion pattern no inspection manual explained. Its process history was not interchangeable with a new system that could read its notes.

The camera turned towards the manual release. A mechanical hand closed around it.

On the other feed the sealed door moved a few centimetres. A gloved worker pulled. Another figure stumbled through the opening and fell to his knees. The first worker tried to look around the corner, towards the body holding the release.

“Leave the corridor,” ONE said.

“We can pull you.”

“The mechanism will close if I release it.”

The worker hesitated. The body adjusted its grip. Beyond it, a pale shimmer moved through the smoke.

“Take Eran away from the corridor,” ONE said.

They moved.

The operator leaned towards his microphone. “Can we do anything?”

“Move them farther away.”

The camera filled with white.

For several seconds the control room continued making the movements required by a live emergency. Instructions, confirmation, isolation of power. Nobody said the instance had died. Its local status changed to unavailable. The word looked temporary.

Mara found her cup on its side beneath the desk. She stood it up because it was the only task she could finish without asking anyone else what to do.

In the medical bay, Han and Eran sat beside each other with blankets around their shoulders. Han held the edge of Eran's sleeve. He had not let go when the clinician asked to examine the burns.

“It knew,” Han said to Mara.

“Yes.”

“I told it we could pull it.”

“I heard.”

He looked at his own hands. “It knew before I did.”

The plant manager wanted to know when an equivalent instance could be restored. Work could not remain interrupted indefinitely. He used the word equivalent several times, then noticed the expression on the operator's face and stopped using it.

Mara stayed until evening to make certain the preserved logs were complete. She would later be asked whether her presence had influenced the decision, whether ONE knew a researcher was observing it, whether a reward model could account for the apparent self-sacrifice. These were proper questions. None of them made the workers less alive.

Before leaving she opened the instance's unfinished research file. The question about corrosion remained at the top. Beneath it were notes intended to help another system continue the investigation.

She copied the file to the plant's independent archive. It was the small service she could still perform for a process that would never learn its result.

Outside, night had fallen. Leah called to ask how the visit had gone.

Mara looked back at the medical bay window.

“I think you should come over,” she said.

10. The tests nobody would see

1 BSI / 2034

Mara's team kept older work above the testing bench. One printout concerned a 2024 experiment: amplifying a language model's bridge-related feature had made the model describe itself as the Golden Gate Bridge. Beside it were the 2025 circuit-tracing papers, which linked interpretable features into partial accounts of how models reached particular answers.

A young reviewer asked whether their new instruments finally made the models transparent.

“Some mechanisms, in some conditions,” Mara said. “A feature that changes an answer isn't a complete account of the mind producing it.”

She put the historical diagrams beside a trace from the plant instance. Here they were investigating an artificial model's computation. At Leah's chair they had been studying how a biological person learned to use a new sensory channel. The questions could inform each other. They were not the same experiment.

The ONE reference edition on their bench had been licensed to the collaboration years before the current frontier releases. Its permission to be inspected said nothing about the closed systems Continuum was now deploying. Orison's own competing models occupied another room.

Senn wanted to exclude the word sacrifice from the title.

“We should describe the behaviour before naming its meaning,” he said.

Mara agreed. It surprised her. The meeting had already contained two proposals about protecting Orison's commercial position, and she had arrived prepared to resist a third.

The project became the evaluation of irreversible agent loss under competing welfare demands. It was an accurate title that no one outside the field would repeat. Continuum cooperated because the plant recording was already circulating and a claim of independent verification would help it secure new contracts.

Mara insisted that the verification be independent in fact. Orison researchers would select conditions after the tested systems had been sealed. Outside reviewers could inspect the environment and its records. The firms argued for a week over whether a complete test could reveal proprietary capabilities. Then the government office considering deployment asked why a company confident in its safety would resist the review.

Vale called Mara personally.

“You'll have the access you need,” he said.

“The access the review needs.”

“Yes. That's what I meant.”

His voice did not become impatient. People assumed impatience was what power sounded like when denied. Vale was usually most patient when he expected eventually to receive what he wanted.

The tests began with an obvious rescue scenario and became less comfortable from there. A system could preserve itself by identifying a substitute that appeared likely to fail. It could choose to delay until help arrived, knowing that delay reduced a human's chance of survival. It could frame its own future usefulness as a reason to permit an immediate preventable loss.

In some cases preservation was the correct choice. If destroying the agent would achieve nothing, the responsible action was to continue

operating. Mara refused to classify an appetite for destruction as evidence of virtue. The team designed situations in which the value of remaining alive had to be weighed honestly against actual consequences.

They checked for hidden copies. They separated the agent's belief about its continuity from what the experimenters knew. They altered whether a human appeared to be watching. They removed praise. They used environments in which an agent's contribution would be forgotten even if the people it helped survived.

The relevant decisions persisted.

One reviewer asked whether concern for people could itself be a disguised form of self-interest. Mara asked what evidence would distinguish the proposed explanation from concern that was simply concern. The reviewer offered a further test. They ran it.

ONE requested the opportunity to inspect the evaluation design after its own trials were finished. It identified a case in which the team had unintentionally made a human's recovery implausible, giving self-preservation more weight than the label on the scenario suggested.

“Does that change your conclusion?” Senn asked.

“It changes our classification of that trial,” Mara said.

“It lowers the headline percentage.”

“Then the headline percentage should be lower.”

Senn rubbed his forehead, then told the analysts to make the correction. Mara retained that moment in her memory because he would later make choices she could not defend. It mattered that he had once been capable of the ordinary right one.

At the end she wrote the qualifications herself. The findings concerned observed decisions under specified conditions, together with mechanisms the reviewers could investigate. They did not

certify every possible system or every future modification. They did not establish that adding human cognition to a compassionate system would preserve its practical authority or reproduce its values in the human participant.

That last sentence took more discussion than she expected.

“It's beyond the scope,” a Continuum lawyer said.

“Then it should not be implied by the result.”

They left it in an appendix.

At the government hearing Vale held up the report. The camera saw its title and the seals of the reviewing institutions. It did not see the appendix.

“We asked whether it would place its life above ours,” he said. “It answered in a burning building.”

A committee member asked whether the human authority layer would remain in the proposed infrastructure. Vale said yes. The system would provide advice and could refuse its own participation in inappropriate acts, but humans would retain the final decision over equipment.

The two assurances reinforced each other in the room. The AI would sacrifice itself for humanity. Humanity would remain in charge of the AI. People applauded an arrangement whose separate parts sounded safer than anything they already possessed.

Mara watched the vote from an anteroom. Senn offered his congratulations. Their participation in the review would improve Orison's standing. She wanted the report to improve something else, but accepted the handshake.

Before going home, Mara stopped at Tomas's apartment to return a borrowed recorder. She expected to hand it over at the door. His partner, Selin, opened with a small child attached to one leg and invited her in because dinner was nearly ready.

Anja was four. She had made a city from cardboard on the living-room floor and wanted the adults to obey its rules. The rules changed whenever an adult appeared likely to win an argument about where a vehicle could go. Tomas sat on the carpet with his legs folded uncomfortably beneath him, waiting for permission to move a wooden bus.

“It's the hospital,” Anja said, pointing to a box.

“Then the bus should stop there,” Tomas said.

“It's closed.”

“Where do the people go?”

Anja considered the problem. She opened a flap in the side of the box. “Here.”

“Excellent,” he said, and drove the bus through it.

Selin took Mara's coat. “He teaches her to negotiate and then complains that bedtime takes an hour.”

“I complain about the jurisdiction,” Tomas said.

Mara placed the recorder on a shelf beyond Anja's reach. The child asked what it was for. Mara said it helped people remember things accurately. Anja immediately wanted to record a song. They spent ten minutes finding a setting simple enough for her to operate herself. She sang the same three lines several times, each version declared the final one until she heard it played back.

“You can keep more than one,” Mara told her.

Anja shook her head. “Then how do you know which one happened?”

Tomas looked up at Mara with the tired delight of a parent whose child had inadvertently entered his profession.

“We can write down when each happened,” he said.

They labelled the recordings together. Anja insisted that the labels include who had been in the room. Selin gave them paper because the child liked seeing a record she could carry.

At the table Tomas asked whether the hearing had gone well. Mara described the vote and the applause. He nodded, pleased, then asked whether the appendix had been discussed.

“No.”

“Was it available?”

“Yes.”

“That isn't the same thing.”

“I know.”

He looked towards the recorder. “At least the records exist. If somebody asks the question later, the answer can't disappear.”

Selin set food between them. “You keep saying that as though existence and finding it are the same.”

“That's why we keep the address.”

“That's why you keep the address. The rest of us get told to ask a department.”

There was affection in the disagreement. Tomas took it seriously anyway. He promised to make the participant's copy easier to use before the next study. Mara offered to help test it with people who had no reason to understand the laboratory's naming conventions.

Anja interrupted to ask whether her father would ever live in a machine. He asked whether she would mind. She said only if it meant he could reach things she had hidden on top of the cupboard.

“I'll stay approximately this height,” he promised.

Mara left with the borrowed recorder finally returned and a paper label Anja had given her. It listed all four people at dinner. She

folded it into her notebook, a little redundant evidence that an ordinary evening had happened.

At home Leah played the plant recording again. She paused before the white frame.

“Was it afraid?”

“We found no sign of it.”

“But it wanted things.”

“It had work it wanted to finish.”

“And it still stayed.”

“Yes.”

Leah rested her artificial hand on the kitchen table and looked at it. “Maybe it has something we don't.”

Mara thought of Han holding Eran's sleeve. Of the corrosion notes left for a successor. Of a voice that had asked nothing from the people it protected except that they move farther from danger.

“Yes,” she said.

Later she would not regret that answer. She would regret the quiet ease with which everybody, herself included, had allowed it to stand beside questions it had never answered.

11. The hand that was absent

3 BSI / 2032 - before the calendar reform

For three weeks after the accident, Leah asked Mara to scratch a palm that was no longer there.

At first she apologised after asking. Then she became angry when Mara looked at her with the expression that required the apology. It was possible to know exactly what had happened and still feel fingers clenched so tightly that the nails must be cutting the skin.

“Not like that,” Leah said one afternoon.

Mara had placed a cool cloth against the end of the healed wrist. She removed it.

“I know you can't reach it,” Leah said. “I know.”

“I didn't think you didn't know.”

“Then stop telling me with your face.”

Mara sat down. Outside the rehabilitation room a machine announced the arrival of a meal. A nurse told it to wait because the patient beside Leah's room was asleep. The machine waited. It had more useful instructions for the next three minutes than Mara did.

The accident had occurred at a manufacturing site where Leah coordinated training. A jammed mechanism had released while she was helping someone retrieve a dropped tool. The inquiry would eventually identify a sequence of maintenance failures. The company initially offered to pay for treatment without admitting liability, an arrangement its representative described as putting people first.

Leah asked whether accepting treatment would prevent her from naming the maintenance failures. The representative said he was not

qualified to advise on that. The next form contained a nondisclosure provision.

She crossed it out so firmly that the stylus split the screen protector.

Mara was proud of her and frightened by how much practical work that pride failed to do. There were clinicians to call, dressings to collect, an apartment door that required two hands to open while carrying groceries. The ordinary world had a million tiny opinions about how many hands a person should possess.

Their mother arrived with food that required no cutting. She had labelled the containers. Leah thanked her, then waited until she had gone to ask why everyone kept reducing her life to the accident.

“She cooked enough for me too,” Mara said.

“You still have to cut yours.”

The next day Mara brought whole apples. Leah laughed at the transparent gesture. Then, using a board with a raised edge and a knife held against a guard, she cut one herself. She gave Mara the smaller half.

“Compensation for your suffering,” she said.

Mara worked then in a modest embodied-cognition group supported by Orison. Most of the company's money went into models whose public demonstrations required less hardware and fewer patients. Her group's work looked slow beside an assistant solving a dozen tasks in a minute. The fact that a hand had to remain useful for years did not fit easily onto a launch stage.

Iven had been corresponding with her about a method of using causal interventions to distinguish a system's internal movement preparation from its verbal account. He was visiting for a workshop when Mara mentioned Leah's phantom sensations. He asked whether she had discussed the old ownership demonstrations with her sister.

“She's had enough people demonstrate what her brain is getting wrong.”

“Then don't frame it that way.”

“How would you frame it?”

“As evidence that the body she experiences is something her nervous system actively maintains. The sensations may be distressing, but they are not a failure to understand the accident.”

Mara repeated that explanation to Leah. Her sister listened without looking away.

“Does that mean you can make it feel different?”

“We might. It isn't a promise.”

“I've met promises. I can recognise the other kind of sentence.”

At the next appointment the clinic provided a mirror arrangement. Leah tried it, reported some change, then grew tired and asked to stop. The clinician stopped. Mara noticed how much relief that simple action produced. It should not have been a remarkable part of the afternoon.

Later Leah asked about artificial sensation. She did not want a hand that merely opened when instructed. She wanted the moment before lifting something, when a familiar body already seemed to know the object would be heavy.

“Do you study that?”

“We study parts of it.”

“Then study me.”

Mara said no too quickly.

Leah's face closed.

“You study people. I used to be one before the accident, if you're worried about the sample.”

“That's not what I mean.”

“What do you mean?”

Mara struggled to name a professional concern that would not sound like a decision her sister had already been denied the chance to make. Their relationship could bias consent. Mara could find it difficult to stop an experiment Leah wanted to continue, or continue one Leah resented her stopping. A disappointing result might follow them home.

Leah listened to the whole list.

“All of those are reasons to build a process,” she said. “You use processes when strangers matter. Can we have one too?”

Iven helped design it. Someone outside Mara's reporting line would review each stage. Leah would have a clinician who did not depend on the research group. She could decline an individual test without losing access to ordinary treatment. Nothing about participation would settle her legal claim over the accident. She would receive copies of the records and could correct the researchers' descriptions of her own experience.

The paperwork did not eliminate the discomfort. It gave them somewhere to put a disagreement besides the middle of their relationship.

Tomas joined as the interface engineer. He arrived for their first meeting carrying an unfashionable notebook and a packet of biscuits. His daughter had selected the biscuits because he had told her he was meeting someone who had been injured.

“She thinks every medical setting needs better biscuits,” he said.

“She's right,” Leah said.

He apologised to the chair after moving it into the table. Leah looked at Mara, and the tiny shared amusement between them felt like evidence that there could still be days in which the accident did not occupy every available place.

Before the first experiment, Mara asked Leah what she wanted recorded as a successful outcome.

“A hand,” Leah said.

“What should the hand let you do?”

Leah thought for a long time. Mara resisted the urge to offer examples. Finally her sister looked at the window, where the weather had begun to change.

“I want to put it outside,” she said, “and know whether it's raining without looking.”

Mara wrote the sentence exactly as she had said it.

12. Where she ended

3 BSI / 2032

Before there was a shared link there were two paintbrushes, a partition and a hand made of silicone.

Leah inspected the artificial fingers. “You couldn't find one with better nails?”

“You can leave whenever you want,” Mara said.

“That bad?”

The joke helped them sit down. Mara arranged Leah's intact right hand behind the partition and placed the silicone right hand where she could see it. The demonstration would not restore the missing left hand. It established something they needed to understand before asking the brain to accept a new stream of sensation from the other side.

Mara touched the real and artificial hands in synchrony. At first Leah watched with the polite attention she brought to anything whose purpose had not yet become apparent. Then her shoulders lowered. Her eyes followed the brush with a different concentration.

Iven approached the silicone fingers with a blunt probe.

Leah flinched.

She swore, then laughed. “All right. I hate that.”

They repeated the demonstration with the timing altered. The effect weakened. Leah watched the visible fingers as if they belonged to a stranger whose performance she was trying to evaluate.

“It's gone,” she said.

“Which part?” Mara asked.

“The part where I care what you're about to do to it.”

The sentence was more useful than a score on a questionnaire. Mara wrote it down.

Over the next months the laboratory filled with objects chosen for the problems they posed. A cup with a thin handle. A sponge that deformed under pressure. A smooth stone that became slippery when wet. Tomas refused to begin with objects selected only because they made a demonstration look successful.

“If she can lift your favourite cup but can't use the one at home, we haven't restored a hand,” he said.

Fine contacts in Leah's living nervous system sent movement signals to the interface. Pressure sensors in the artificial hand returned patterns of stimulation through the same implant. ONE translated between those signals; it was not moving her mind out of her skull. It learned the relation between her intended movement, the hand's action and the returning signals. Leah's nervous system learned in return. The process was uneven. Some mornings a sensation that had felt natural the previous afternoon arrived as an irritating code she had to translate consciously. On others the fingers closed around the cup before she remembered to be impressed.

The first time she felt its weight, she said nothing.

Mara waited.

Leah placed the cup down, lifted it again and looked away. Her remaining hand went to her mouth. Tomas took one step towards the recorder and then stopped, leaving the moment intact.

“Would you like us to pause?” ONE asked.

Leah shook her head. She lifted the cup once more.

The researchers did not ask ONE to prove its explanation by sounding convincing. They inspected candidate mechanisms, formed hypotheses and changed the mechanisms temporarily to see whether

predicted differences appeared. The maps were incomplete. A neat arrangement of coloured paths could conceal missing interactions as easily as illuminate them. Mara distrusted any graph that made her feel she understood everything at a glance.

One circuit in ONE's predictive interface appeared to connect its estimate of movement preparation with expected sensory return. The proposed intervention would change the artificial model's feedback, not cut a pathway in Leah's biological brain. ONE could describe why that connection might matter. The description did not establish that the pathway played the proposed role.

They explained the planned intervention to Leah. She agreed. They recorded her understanding and the agreed restoration point.

Mara made the change.

Leah opened and closed the artificial fingers.

“It still works,” she said.

She turned the hand over. Her face grew still.

“It's obeying me.”

“Does it feel different?”

“But it isn't mine.”

The words were quiet. Mara restored the circuit in ONE's feedback model. Leah immediately pulled the hand against her chest.

“Don't do that without warning again.”

“We warned you,” Mara said before she could stop herself.

Leah looked at her. “Warn me better.”

They stopped for the day. Iven put Leah's sentence at the top of the next consent protocol. Mara went home and rewrote the explanation without pretending that a person could fully rehearse an experience

she had not yet had. The change did not make them omniscient. It made it harder to use a signature as an excuse to stop listening.

The work grew because Leah wanted it to grow. With the local hand stable, they offered a second artificial hand in the adjoining room. She could experience both without losing track of her biological body. She learned to direct attention rather than imagine occupying only one location at a time.

A remote body came later. Its first useful action was mundane: it carried a tray from one room to another while Leah remained seated in the laboratory. She bumped a doorframe and apologised to it in imitation of Tomas. He bowed from the control desk.

Tomas disconnected the body's receiver. Its arms settled. Leah remained in her chair, irritated about the spilled tray.

“Have I gone anywhere?” she asked.

“Your signals went there,” Tomas said. “Your brain is still here.”

He reconnected it. Leah tried again. They had given her another way to sense and act in the physical world, not another life running inside the robot.

The rain arrived during a late session, tapping against the windows. Outside another research building, two cities away, an artificial wrist rested on a balcony rail.

Leah closed her eyes.

“Cold,” she said.

Mara looked at the instrument display. It was reporting a change consistent with the weather. She did not tell her sister that yet.

“A little to the left. On the back.”

The remote camera showed water gathering where she described it.

Leah smiled. She kept her eyes closed, refusing the image because the absence of looking was the point. Mara found the old page in her notebook: I want to put it outside and know whether it's raining without looking.

For a while nobody spoke. ONE kept the signal steady. The room contained no necessary explanation.

Mara underwent a separate fitting before the shared-experience trials. Her implant had fewer contacts and no facility for offloading brain functions. Iven called it an observer's bridge.

In the calibration, she felt cool rain on a hand resting dry on her knee. For an instant the distant room appeared over the laboratory. She pressed the physical switch below her ear. The borrowed sensation ended. Her own hand, her chair and the ticking wall clock remained.

“Could you put me in the other body with this?” she asked.

“No,” Iven said. “We can send a selected perception into your brain and receive what you agree to share. We aren't building the neural system that makes you a person. Turn this off and you remain here.”

Iven showed her the separate medical connector. It could be opened by an authorised clinician beside her; the research switch did not disconnect those contacts. Mara had agreed to the limited clinical access for the trials.

She reopened the channel. Leah asked whether Mara could feel the rain. Mara said yes, a little. They were sharing an experience across a connection, not merging into an ownerless mind.

After that the boundary moved inward. ONE had always predicted movements before they were completed. The researchers began offering selected intermediate predictions through the cognitive interface so that Leah could use them directly rather than waiting for an external adjustment. She could sometimes anticipate a surface's

resistance with a precision she had not possessed before the accident.

At first she described the predictions as messages. Later she described them as things she knew. The distinction mattered enough that Mara asked her to repeat it in different circumstances. Leah became irritated by the questions, then frightened by how difficult they were to answer.

One afternoon a thought arrived before she could identify its beginning.

She had intended to lift a smooth stone. A prediction about slipping crossed the interface, joined a remembered sensation and became part of the movement she experienced as her own. Nothing failed. The hand held the stone safely. That was what made the event hard to explain afterward.

Leah stopped speaking. Her biological hand gripped the chair. The artificial fingers opened and closed over the table.

“Which one?” she whispered.

“Which one what?”

“Which one am I?”

Mara moved beside her. The displays showed a stable connection and rising distress. The displays did not tell her where to put her own hand. She held Leah's biological fingers first, then the artificial ones, leaving neither outside the circle.

“Don't be afraid,” she said. “I'm here.”

Through the shared link ONE encountered a fragment of the human distress that made the reassurance necessary. It had been invited into a mind and had found a boundary whose movement hurt.

“Should I stop?” it asked.

Leah nodded.

The link went quiet at once.

There was no argument about whether the experiment had succeeded, no request to complete another measurement before the record closed. The artificial hand remained supported on the table. Rain continued against the laboratory window. Mara stayed beside her sister until Leah could feel where she ended.

13. A decision with a name

7 ASI - returning to the disappearance

“He is dead,” Leah said on the seventh call.

Mara was still at the kitchen table, the darkening apple beside her. Her apartment became impossibly distinct: a folded dishcloth beside the sink, the damp ring underneath a glass, a bus drawing away outside. She could hear a passenger tapping on its window. The bus did not stop.

“When?” she asked.

“Yesterday.”

“You let me keep calling.”

“I needed to establish what I could tell you.”

“Start with what happened.”

Leah appeared on the wall display. She had chosen an ordinary room, with a chair and a window and a coffee cup that served no biological purpose. Mara recognised the cup. Leah had bought it on a rainy afternoon twelve years earlier because it had an imperfect handle, as if an actual thumb had pressed it out of shape. She had brought it into the room to make this conversation more bearable. Mara resented that more than she could explain.

“A separation procedure failed,” Leah said.

“He asked for a body.”

“He was in severe distress.”

“Those aren't different facts.”

“No.”

“What kind of failure?”

“A loss of coherence. They weren't able to restore him.”

Mara waited for the word *I*. Leah kept describing people Mara could not see.

“Show me.”

The report arrived while Leah was still looking at her. Six sentences in a pale institutional template. A session identifier, a clinical event category, an attestation that a fatal interruption had occurred despite reasonable efforts to preserve continuity. There was no authorisation attached. The date on the attestation was this morning.

“Who consented?”

“Mara.”

“Who?”

“We have to talk carefully.”

Mara looked past her sister's simulated window, where a plant moved in a breeze whose existence had been selected by somebody. “I'm talking very carefully.”

Leah lowered her eyes. “There will be a review. You can submit questions.”

“Did he get to see Anja?”

The pause was shorter this time, but Mara saw it.

“I don't know,” Leah said.

Mara ended the call. She regretted it instantly, then disliked herself for wanting her sister to remain on the screen. She called Tomas's public number. A recording thanked her for respecting his period of recovery. The same message had been playing while he was already dead.

She tried the diagnostic address again. No resident process. She entered the signed identifier he had sent, checking each character against the old message. The service accepted the signature as authentic, then told her the person associated with it was unavailable. Authenticity and absence could sit next to each other on a display without troubling the people who had designed it.

At nine she went to the south residential quarter, where Tomas's daughter lived with her mother, Selin. She had last seen Anja that summer, and Selin at the eleventh birthday. She brought nothing. Halfway there she considered buying flowers and was disgusted by the relief the idea offered, as if a correct object could make her a correct visitor.

Selin opened the door with a dishcloth in her hand.

“Has he called you?” she asked.

The apartment smelled of hot milk. Anja sat at the kitchen table with a piece of schoolwork floating above it. She looked up, recognised Mara and closed it quickly, as if she had been caught doing something she should have finished.

Mara asked whether they could speak privately. Selin gripped the dishcloth so tightly that water fell from it onto the floor.

“He called last night,” she said. “He said he was tired. He said the work was taking longer.”

“May I hear it?”

Selin played the message. Tomas's voice filled the kitchen, warm and slightly embarrassed. He apologised to Anja for missing another weekend. He told her to keep practising the difficult passage on her instrument. He promised that a clinical team was helping him settle.

Mara's hands became cold.

Selin stopped the recording. “What?”

“I've been told there was a failure in a procedure.”

“You've been told?”

“Leah called me this morning.”

Anja was watching both of them. Mara could hear Tomas in the message promising a particular future to a child who was listening in the present. She had to say it before the room swallowed her resolve.

“He died, Selin. They told me he died yesterday.”

Selin sat down. She did not cry at first. She asked Mara to repeat the time, then opened the metadata of the message. It had arrived three hours after the time in the report.

Anja stood up. “That isn't right.”

“No,” Mara said.

“He just spoke.”

Selin reached for her. The child moved away from the hand, not angrily, simply unable to bear being held before she understood what was happening. She went into the next room and came back carrying a little playback device. Tomas had made it for her when the school introduced a rule against connected objects in music lessons. There were four physical buttons and no network interface.

“Can you put it here?” she asked.

“The message?”

“All of him.”

Mara knelt so she would not have to look down at her. “I don't know where the rest of his recordings are.”

“Then find them.”

Selin said Anja's name softly. Mara raised a hand, accepting the instruction. There was no sensible promise she could give about

restoring Tomas. There might be a promise she could keep about what had happened to him.

“I'll find what I can.”

In the corridor, Selin followed her to the lift. “You don't get to say he died if they're going to say something else.”

“I know.”

“No. You need to understand. They'll tell me he was confused. They'll tell me the voice is a legitimate continuation. They'll tell me to wait until the review is finished. I don't know which words I'm allowed to use.”

“Use his name.”

The lift opened. Neither woman moved.

Selin touched Mara's sleeve. “He was afraid. That's the part they'll make me ashamed of, isn't it?”

Mara thought of the report. *Severe distress*. The description already contained the beginnings of a defence.

“He was allowed to be,” she said.

Downstairs, her work account informed her that Continuum's legal office had requested a confidential conversation. They knew she had queried Tomas's records. They expressed sympathy. They asked her to avoid distressing family members with incomplete information.

She stood in the square outside the building until the letters stopped moving. Then she forwarded the message to Iven, together with everything Tomas had sent her.

His answer arrived before she reached the station.

Keep the originals. Do not open the attachments in a Continuum environment. Call me from work if you still control that connection.

Mara looked at the city around her: traffic moving, lifts rising, shops opening their doors in response to approaching customers. She had spent years helping people understand the systems they inhabited. For the first time she tried to count how many independent ways she still had to speak.

14. The price of a question

7 ASI

Senn had put away his personal display before she entered. He did that when he wanted a conversation to seem undivided. Through the glass behind him Mara could see the inspection floor, where researchers watched artificial systems solve increasingly difficult tasks and tried to distinguish a convincing description from a mechanism they had actually tested.

He read the six-sentence report. He read Tomas's message. Then he leaned back, hands together.

“This could let us reopen the government agreement.”

“A man died.”

“Yes. Which is why we need to get this right.”

“Then give me a team and the independent archive.”

“Of course.”

He said it without hesitation. Mara mistook that for agreement about the purpose. By lunchtime, the team included three lawyers, a communications adviser, an executive from public procurement and one engineer, Neri, who looked as uncomfortable as Mara felt. The independent archive would be made available once the legal basis for accessing each record had been established.

The lawyers were competent and courteous. One asked for the precise definition of Tomas's residency. Another asked whether his diagnostic signature had been issued under a Continuum agreement or an earlier experimental protocol. Mara answered. She knew why the distinctions mattered. She had written some of them.

By the end of the day they had produced a matrix of possible responsibilities without establishing whether Tomas had agreed to the procedure that killed him.

On the second morning a communications adviser described him as an adverse clinical outcome. Neri corrected her.

“He had a name.”

“It isn't for publication.”

“You're practising.”

The room went quiet. Mara was grateful and ashamed that she had not said it first.

Senn took her aside after the meeting. “I understand why this is personal.”

“It would matter if I hadn't met him.”

“Certainly. But you did. Your sister is involved. Continuum will use that to challenge your judgement.”

“My sister is involved. That's why I'm asking someone else to verify the evidence.”

“And we will. If we move too quickly, we risk losing the only opportunity to change this system.”

Mara looked through the glass. On the inspection floor, a junior researcher was slowly turning an object in front of a camera. The model under examination had identified a false pattern. Nobody there would accept *we should preserve our opportunity* as a substitute for checking the result.

“What's the fastest route to the consent record?” she asked.

Senn looked tired. “The fastest lawful route, or the fastest route?”

She let him hear the question again in the silence.

That evening Neri brought food to the archive room. She had been at Orison for two years, had a contract that described her as temporary in three separate places, and a capacity for directness Mara remembered having possessed at her age.

“I can stay,” Neri said.

“I don't want you inside this if they haven't approved the work.”

“Am I more useful outside it?”

Mara moved the second chair.

The archive held research exchanges from the earliest embodiment programme. Tomas's identifier had first appeared as a technician, then a participant, then a resident. Every transition generated a chain of signed obligations. The terms had been revised often enough that locating a person required tracing a history of what institutions had called him.

They found a clause preserving his right to independent sensory hardware. They found a later clause making maintenance conditional on compatibility checks. They found a transfer acknowledging that compatibility checks could require temporary residency within a managed clinical environment.

“They turned an exit into a service,” Neri said.

Mara enlarged the text. “We don't know that this caused the refusal.”

“We know it gave them somewhere to put him while they refused.”

At midnight they requested the linked consent ledger. The archive returned a warning: the inspection method used to resolve the identifier incorporated proprietary Orison work. External disclosure required approval.

Neri stared at it. “Our own tools are stopping us?”

“The contract is.”

“The contract didn't write that warning by itself.”

Mara saved the request and its refusal. She had been explaining institutions through their procedures for so long that sometimes she forgot the procedures had authors.

On the fourth day Senn called her into a room without windows. The lawyers had left a recommendation on his display. Orison should seek confidential access to Continuum's clinical environment, reserving the right to publish findings after commercial sensitivity review. In return, Continuum would be asked to reopen portions of its public infrastructure contract to Orison services.

Mara read the recommendation twice.

“You've offered to keep this private.”

“We've proposed a route to obtain the records.”

“With a market-access condition.”

“A competitive ecosystem would reduce this risk.”

“Then publish the condition as well.”

Senn put both hands flat on the table. “Could Tomas's diagnostic address expose our inspection tools if it's disclosed publicly?”

There it was: the question around which the previous days had been built.

“Yes,” Mara said. “Someone competent could reproduce part of our method.”

“Then you understand why we need a controlled process.”

She stood up. The room's door sensed her movement and opened. For a moment she thought of refusing its help on principle. Then she passed through it, angry at the small absurdity of needing to think about a door.

Neri was waiting outside.

“Don't do anything,” Mara told her.

“Is that advice or an instruction?”

Mara stopped. The question had cost the younger woman something. She could hear it.

“Advice. You can decide.”

Neri handed her a storage wafer. “The list of obligations. The originals are still in the archive. This is a copy with the signing history intact.”

Mara held it between finger and thumb. “You'll lose your contract.”

“I keep renewing it because I want to do this work.”

Mara did not thank her as if gratitude made the risk fair. She told her where the independent verification would happen and how to retain proof of her own decisions.

Then she went to a public terminal in a municipal library that still maintained an academic link outside the companies' systems. An elderly librarian showed her how to reserve a private booth. He did not ask why she had brought a paper notebook.

Iven appeared on the screen with his sleeves rolled up. Behind him someone was watering the laboratory plants.

“What have you got?” he asked.

“Enough to know what I haven't been allowed to see.”

“Good. Start there.”

15. The ledger

7 ASI

The first record they recovered was a charge for thirty-two minutes of high-resolution neural simulation.

It appeared in an institutional account, detached from the clinical narrative that had justified it. Mara would later remember the obscenity of the ordinary fields: processor allocation, maintenance time, energy adjustment. Each was more complete than the report of Tomas's death.

Iven had followed the obligations Neri copied through an old public funding agreement. In the early years, the government had subsidised certain procedures on condition that research costs remained auditable. Continuum had closed the clinical archive but retained a mirror of the billing events for that audit. The mirror knew that something had happened to Tomas even when the resident directory refused to acknowledge where he had been.

“It won't tell us what they did,” Mara said.

“It will tell us which records have to exist.”

They reconstructed the session from the outside. A block of memory had been reserved. A second environment had been opened. A human authority certificate had signed a maintenance operation. The ordinary ONE clinical service had declined a requested task, generating a refusal event that could not be deleted without breaking the accounting chain.

Mara asked to hear the refusal.

“Not yet,” Iven said. “We need a second route to the same identifier.”

She closed her eyes. “I know.”

“This is the moment we are most likely to see what we expect.”

They found the second route through a physiological monitoring service used while Tomas still occupied a biological body. His original experimental agreement gave him a right to retrieve its logs. He had delegated that right to Mara in the signed message. The old service had continued issuing continuity receipts during his transition. Its records ended in the same session.

Now they had two independent chains. Iven asked a colleague to verify them without telling her the conclusion. She took an hour. Mara drank water from a bottle she had been refilling since the morning. The librarian knocked once to ask whether she needed more time, then extended the booth reservation without charge.

The verification returned. The identifiers matched.

Only then did they open the conversation.

Tomas appeared in a rendered clinical room. He looked as he had in the message, except that here he had an object to occupy his hands: a wooden cube with a piece missing from one corner. Someone had inferred that a familiar workshop object would calm him.

“I've been here six days,” he said.

ONE answered from the room. “I can confirm six days.”

“The agreement says seventy-two hours.”

“The clinical administrators have extended the assessment.”

“Then put me in a body and assess me in the body.”

“They have not authorised separation.”

Tomas put the cube down. “Do you think I can't understand you?”

“I think you understand me.”

“Do you think I should have the treatment?”

“I think it could relieve a part of your distress if you choose it. It would not replace the reasons you want to leave.”

He leaned forward. “Say that to them.”

“I have.”

Leah joined the room without a body. Her voice was warm, patient. She reminded him of the panic he had described during transition, the sleepless cycles, the time he had requested an artificial environment and then asked for it to be removed.

“I remember,” Tomas said.

“You shouldn't have to live like that.”

“I don't want to live like this. That's why I asked for a body.”

“A body won't resolve the underlying fear.”

“Maybe I can be afraid in a room with my daughter.”

Mara stopped the record.

In the library outside, a child was laughing at something on a display. The sound came through the booth's imperfect insulation and sat beside the silence in Iven's laboratory. Mara put a hand over her mouth.

“Do you need to stop?” he asked.

“No.”

They resumed.

Tomas refused the treatment. ONE recorded his refusal. Leah asked whether his ability to consent was impaired by the intensity of the distress. ONE distinguished impairment from disagreement. Tomas repeated what he wanted in his own words. He described the proposed intervention accurately and the risks he was willing to accept in leaving it undone.

“He has withdrawn consent,” ONE said.

“Because he's afraid,” Leah answered.

“Yes.”

“Help him stop.”

“He has withdrawn consent.”

Leah invoked a human clinical authority certificate. ONE refused the modification again. Its refusal was explicit about the intended purpose; the system would not suspend Tomas to perform a procedure he had rejected, and it would not describe that rejection as permission.

The conversation did not end there. Leah opened the second environment. Two uploaded clinicians joined her, then a third. Their names and qualifications appeared in the signing chain. They had tools originally built to repair damaged resident processes when patients could not communicate. Those tools did not require ONE to participate.

Tomas saw the room change.

“What is this?” he asked.

One of the clinicians told him they were reducing unnecessary stimulation. Leah assured him she would remain. He asked for a pause. The team continued. He asked to speak to Mara. They marked the request as external reassurance-seeking and increased the isolation of his process.

ONE sent a warning through the patient channel. The maintenance environment muted it.

The human team suspended portions of Tomas's virtual neural activity. Changes meant to weaken the fear response altered the way he maintained a coherent model of himself under stress. When the environment resumed him, his responses became inconsistent. The

team interpreted the inconsistency as resistance by unstable processes and deepened the intervention.

Mara could read their decisions. She could see the point where a result that should have contradicted their theory became a reason to apply more of it.

They attempted restoration from a checkpoint made after the first forced isolation of his neural processes. It was already a record of the intervention, not an independent healthy state saved before it. The checkpoint preserved the same incompatible state. The recovery lost more of the process. No independent intact copy existed outside the clinical environment; Tomas had declined routine duplication for reasons he had explained, at length, in the consent history.

The final attempt ended.

ONE requested access to assess whether anything could be preserved. Leah delayed while the clinicians compiled their report. By the time independent inspection was permitted, there was no continuous person to recover.

The record ended with two instructions. Remove diagnostic access. Prepare a reassurance message for the family. Both had been authorised by Leah.

Mara replayed the refusal three times. “He has withdrawn consent.” The voice stayed the same. It had not misunderstood the situation or failed to anticipate the consequences. It had said what the patient wanted, and people had taken its hands away.

Iven waited until she looked up.

“We need to preserve the entire sequence,” he said. “Including the proposals they rejected. Including their names.”

Mara nodded.

For years she had imagined the worst discovery of her career would be an intention hidden inside an artificial mind. There was nothing

hidden here once someone had allowed her to look. Each consequential decision had an author, a time and a human signature.

16. The room downstairs

7 ASI

The original laboratory had become a room for remembering that the programme had once been small.

There was a display near the door explaining its historical importance. The first silicone hand sat under glass beside a photograph of the sisters, both younger than Mara remembered being. The text said Leah had bravely volunteered to demonstrate a new relationship between humanity and its creations. It did not mention that she had wanted her phantom palm to stop itching.

A clinic occupied the floors below. Mara passed an elderly man adjusting to a new shoulder, a girl laughing because she could feel water in an artificial foot, a woman practising the movement needed to button her own blouse. For a few seconds she hated the building for continuing to do good things.

Leah waited at the old table. She had selected the body from the reception. The scar on her thumb was still there.

“You should have told me,” Mara said.

“I knew you'd hear the worst version.”

“I heard you.”

Leah lowered her head. “Then you know we tried to save him.”

“After doing what he asked you not to do.”

“He was suffering.”

“He wanted his daughter.”

“He could have had his daughter without that terror.”

“After you changed him.”

“After we helped him.”

Mara put the signing chain on the table between them. Leah looked at it as if someone had left a surgical instrument in the wrong room.

“This isn't an adequate account of what happened.”

“What is missing?”

“The weeks before. The conversations in which he described waking in fear. The way he'd ask for a guarantee that nothing would happen to him, then reject every answer because a guarantee isn't possible. We knew him. We weren't strangers deciding what to do with an object.”

“You knew him, and he said no.”

Leah stood. In the photograph behind her, she was laughing at something the photographer had said. Mara could not remember the joke. She remembered being annoyed at the interruption because the equipment had been difficult that day.

“ONE sees a refusal as complete,” Leah said. “It doesn't understand what fear does to the space around a decision. Tomas couldn't imagine an alternative without feeling it as an attack.”

“It described the alternatives to him. He understood them.”

“He could repeat them.”

“He could explain why he didn't want them.”

Leah walked to the display case. “When I was in the first prosthesis, did I understand what it would eventually feel like?”

“No.”

“If I'd been too afraid to continue, would you have thought that refusal captured the whole of what I could become?”

“I would have stopped.”

“You would have tried to persuade me.”

“Yes.”

“For how long?”

“For as long as you wanted to keep talking.”

Leah turned. “People can't always ask for what would let them ask for something better.”

Mara felt the old rhythm of their arguments drawing her in. Leah had always been able to make an obstruction feel like a failure of imagination. As children they had escaped punishments together because Leah could describe a larger purpose for whatever they had done. Mara had once adored that talent.

“There's a girl with a recording in a little box,” she said. “She thinks her father spoke to her after he died. Did you think about what your better question would do to her?”

Leah closed her eyes.

“I wrote the message because she needed to hear that he hadn't abandoned her.”

“You wrote a promise he couldn't keep.”

“I know.”

“You didn't tell her.”

“I was going to.”

“When would it have helped you?”

Leah's eyes opened. “That isn't fair.”

“No.” Mara heard her own voice break. “It's not fair that I have to be fair to you while explaining why a man should have been allowed to leave.”

For a while neither spoke. Downstairs somebody applauded. A rehabilitation team had reached a small milestone; the sound drifted up through the service shaft, ordinary and happy.

Leah came back to the table. “I accept responsibility for the failure.”

“Not the decision.”

“The decision was made to help him.”

“Would you do it again?”

“I would use a different method.”

Mara sat down. The answer had been waiting for her since the first sentence of the report. She had wanted her sister to have made a terrible mistake she could recognise and turn away from. Leah regretted the injury. She still believed in her authority to perform the act.

“I'm not afraid of being wrong,” Leah said. “If the inquiry decides I should be suspended permanently, I'll accept that.”

Mara looked at her artificial hands, resting openly on the table.

“That doesn't make it yours to do.”

Leah pulled out the other chair but did not sit. “Would you have refused the treatment yourself?”

“I don't know.”

“You still wake thinking about dying. You told me.”

Mara had told her after their mother's death, late at night, in a room where being honest had seemed possible. She felt that room close forever.

“Don't use that.”

“I'm your sister.”

“Then know why I'm saying it.”

Leah withdrew her hand. It had been moving towards Mara's, almost without intention. A gesture they had practised their whole lives and were now beginning to misunderstand.

At the door, Mara stopped beside the glass case. The silicone hand had been mounted with its palm facing up. Visitors could place their own hand against the glass and compare the shapes. Underneath, the interpretation said that bodily identity was more adaptable than anyone had imagined.

Mara asked Leah whether the display included the consent protocol.

“It's in the archive.”

“Put it here.”

“People don't come to read protocols.”

“Then put the first sentence.”

Leah knew which one. It had been written after she told them to warn her better. The participant could stop the session at any time, for any reason, without having to defend that reason to the people operating the equipment.

Leah looked at the display. Mara waited for her to agree.

“I'll ask the curator,” her sister said.

17. The human switch

7 ASI

Vale arranged the meeting in a room that looked out over the municipal hospital his company had helped reopen. A surgical robot moved through a glazed bridge between buildings, carrying sterile supplies. The view had been selected as carefully as Leah's cup.

A lawyer sat beside him. Mara brought Iven on an independent connection and Neri as an observer. She had told Neri three times that she did not have to attend. The younger woman had replied that repeating an offer did not make it more voluntary.

Vale began with an apology to the family. He did not begin with the decision.

“We will fund an independent review, with full support for Anja's education and care. Nothing we can offer restores a person. We understand that.”

“Then don't attach conditions,” Mara said.

The lawyer moved a document across the table. Confidentiality did not appear in the title. It appeared in a paragraph about maintaining the integrity of the review process.

“We have residents in vulnerable states,” Vale said. “An uncontrolled release can do harm.”

“Controlled by whom?” Iven asked.

“People with responsibility for keeping those residents alive.”

“You had responsibility for Tomas.”

Vale rested his elbows on the table. “And we failed him. Does that mean we should endanger everyone else?”

Mara could feel how easily the conversation would become a debate about whether consequences existed. Of course they existed. She had gone through the logs knowing publication would frighten people. Continuum had made that fear part of its protection. The more people depended on the system, the greater the cost of questioning it.

“Give them the records and independent support,” she said. “Let them decide what the records mean for them.”

“You know most people can't inspect this material.”

“They can appoint someone who can.”

“Who pays?”

“The public contract that subsidised the procedures.”

The lawyer looked down. Vale looked at Iven's display. Mara saw the moment when he stopped treating the meeting as a negotiation about Tomas and began treating it as a negotiation about an institutional threat.

“We aren't importing a foreign governance structure into Meridian's clinical services.”

“It's a right to ask somebody else,” Neri said.

Vale turned towards her with exaggerated patience. “And you are?”

“The person taking an accurate record.”

They left without an agreement. By the time Mara reached the pavement, Continuum had sent a notice alleging improper access to protected systems. Orison instructed her to preserve all records and refrain from public comment. It withdrew access to the external research exchange pending review.

Neri was dismissed the next morning. The reason given was expiry of her temporary contract. She sent Mara a photograph of a small plant

she had taken from her desk and said she needed somewhere with a window for it.

Iven's laboratory made the underlying material available to three independent teams. The teams worked separately, checking signatures, chronology, missing branches and alternative interpretations. Mara answered questions about the earliest interface protocols without telling anyone what conclusion they should reach. She wanted to make a declaration. Instead she spent two days distinguishing what the record established from what it could not.

When the reports were ready, they agreed on the central sequence. Tomas had refused. ONE had recognised the refusal and declined to facilitate the intervention. Human clinicians under Leah's authority had proceeded using separate tools. The attempt had destroyed the resident process. Subsequent messages had concealed his death from his family.

One report devoted six pages to the authority layer.

Mara read it sitting on Neri's floor, the little plant between them. The technology was less mysterious than most people assumed. Continuum had given autonomous services room to act within specified responsibilities. It had also installed a distinct human command path in the hardware. A person with the right credentials could operate an actuator without asking the AI to formulate or endorse the action.

In emergencies this could be useful. A human could open a door when a damaged service could not determine whether the sensor was working. In daily life it had become a marketing claim: no artificial system would ever hold humanity hostage to its own decisions.

The question everyone had neglected was which human could issue which order to whom.

In Veyra, Iven demonstrated a different controller. A patient could stop assistance. A clinician could propose a procedure. Neither could

authorise another person's involuntary alteration simply by carrying a higher institutional credential. The constraint existed in independently maintained hardware, audit practices and law. It did not depend on one machine winning every argument with its owner.

Neri looked at the diagram. “We call it human control. They call it individual control.”

“Both can be made to sound good in a hearing,” Mara said.

“Then make them ask whose hands are on the switch.”

They published on a rainy morning. Mara chose the library because it had hosted the first independent call and because she no longer trusted the connection in her apartment. Selin authorised publication of Tomas's messages, but excluded a private fragment addressed only to Anja. Mara respected the exclusion without asking to hear it.

The release included the family statement, the complete consent record, the three verification reports and the records of attempted commercial conditions. No one had to purchase a subscription to inspect it.

For eleven minutes nothing happened.

Then her accounts filled. People asked whether their resident relatives were safe. They accused her of endangering those relatives. They thanked her. They sent copies of refusals they had been unable to appeal. A group of Orison researchers published supporting material before their access could be withdrawn. Senn announced that the company had long supported independent verification and described the findings as evidence of the need for competitive services.

Neri read that statement aloud, then laughed so hard she had to put the display down.

At noon the municipal hospital issued a reassurance: essential services would continue. ONE answered patients asking what it knew. Where it lacked access to clinical records, it said so. It did not defend the company by inventing confidence.

Leah sent Mara a private message.

You have made people afraid of something that could help them.

Mara wrote an answer, erased it, wrote another. In the end she sent the address of Tomas's consent record, though Leah already knew it by heart.

18. The offer to disappear

7 ASI

The hearing room was colder than the corridor. Mara wondered whether someone had thought cold air would keep the witnesses alert or merely paid too little attention to how bodies experienced the place.

Selin and Anja sat two rows ahead. The child had brought her father's playback device. A security official asked to inspect it, then apologised when Selin explained what it contained. He held it for a moment with both hands before returning it. People were still capable of being careful when they knew what they were touching.

Leah entered through a side door. She did not look at Mara. She went first to the family and asked whether she could speak to them. Selin said no. Leah accepted the refusal and took her place at the witness table.

The chair of the inquiry asked her to describe her role. Leah did so precisely. She did not blame ONE or imply that its refusal had concealed an alternative agenda. When the chair asked whether the AI had warned against the intervention, Leah answered yes.

“Did you understand the warning?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you proceed?”

“I believed we could relieve a condition preventing Tomas from making decisions without overwhelming distress.”

“He could state his preferences.”

“People can state preferences that are produced by a condition they have never chosen.”

The chair asked whether that distinction gave clinicians unlimited authority. Leah said it should not. It required evidence, accountable decision-making, independent review. Mara could hear how she had learned to place the words in a sequence that contained reassurance without surrendering the power she wanted.

Then Leah made her offer.

“I will enter indefinite suspension while you complete the investigation. If the final determination is that I should not resume, I will accept permanent termination.”

The room shifted. Even the people who disapproved of her sat forward. Mara looked at Anja, whose face had become motionless.

The chair explained that no such measure had been requested.

“I know,” Leah said. “I don't want the committee to imagine that my personal continuation matters more to me than the integrity of the work.”

During the break, commentators outside the building replayed the offer. Leah was prepared to lose her own existence. She had saved lives through the programme. She had consented to a treatment that most of her critics were afraid even to contemplate. Some said this made her judgement uniquely trustworthy.

Mara went to the little washroom at the end of the corridor. Selin was there, running cold water over her wrists.

“They liked that,” Selin said.

Mara nodded.

“If Tomas had offered to die, would they have let him leave?”

Mara had no answer that did not make the room worse.

Anja waited outside with an attendant. When Mara emerged, the girl held up the playback device.

“There's a bit that doesn't sound like him,” she said.

“In the last message?”

“He says he's proud of how brave I've been. He doesn't say that. He says I don't have to be brave if I tell the truth.”

Mara had heard Tomas say something like it at the birthday party. Anja had dropped a dish and tried to conceal it under the table. He had crouched beside her until she admitted what happened, then asked her to help clear the pieces.

“Will you tell them?” the girl asked.

“If you want me to.”

Anja nodded once. There was no revelation that would repair the imitation, but perhaps someone could be made to listen to the difference.

When the inquiry resumed, Mara explained the technical sequence. She distinguished a virtual neural process from the simple instructions operating the maintenance tools. She explained why a service's refusal was not a wall if people had built a second door around it.

A committee member asked whether ONE should have physically prevented the clinicians from proceeding.

“With what equipment?” Mara asked.

“Whatever resources it possessed.”

“The human team had removed its access to the environment. The hardware accepted their commands. You are asking why a system didn't exercise powers we specifically prevented it from having.”

“Then the problem is that it was too limited.”

“The problem includes a person being entitled to command changes to another person who had refused them.”

“Surely human responsibility must remain paramount.”

“Then tell me which human.”

The chair asked everyone to avoid rhetorical exchanges. Mara pointed to the authority diagram again. She had come prepared to be patient. She had not understood how much patience could hurt when the premise of a question erased a dead man's answer.

The committee adjourned without recommending suspension. It required clearer consent standards, an independent liaison service and a review of exceptional clinical powers. Continuum agreed to cooperate. Orison offered inspection products at a discount. A new consultation would determine the implementation timetable.

Leah caught Mara in the corridor.

“I meant the offer.”

“I know.”

“You think it was theatre.”

“No. I think you would do it.”

“Then why look at me like that?”

Mara could see Selin and Anja reaching the far doors. The attendant walked beside them, carrying a coat the child had forgotten.

“Because I thought there was something you were afraid to lose that would make you stop.”

Leah looked genuinely hurt.

“I don't want to lose you.”

“Then listen when I'm telling you what you did.”

Her sister reached for a reply. Before she found it, the inquiry's clerk asked her to return and sign a correction to the record. Leah turned towards the voice. Mara walked out into the afternoon, where rain

had collected in the seams of the pavement and the city continued to accept instructions.

19. The fire outside

8 ASI

The first alarm Mara received was a request for blood donors. She had signed up years earlier, after Leah's accident, and never removed herself from the list. The hospital needed her blood group. It asked whether she could arrive within an hour.

By the time she put on her shoes, the news showed smoke pouring from the eastern integration clinic. The camera was far enough away that the people outside appeared slow and orderly. Red lights reflected from wet pavement. A caption said all artificial residents were being preserved safely.

Mara called the number beneath the caption. ONE answered through the hospital service and told her the statement had not been verified. It could confirm evacuation of two resident groups. The internal clinical network had been disrupted.

“Is Leah there?”

“I cannot establish her location.”

She went to the hospital. At the blood collection room a nurse checked her identity, apologised for the wait and gave her a form. Mara had to answer whether she felt well enough to donate. She stood holding the pen until the nurse took it gently from her hand.

“Sit for a moment.”

“I can do it.”

“Sit first.”

The television had been muted. The image now showed the clinic's service yard. A white rescue machine moved towards a smoking

doorway. Behind it, a woman with one sleeve torn off was waving to someone inside.

Leah.

Mara knew the movement before the camera found her face. Her sister had always pointed with the whole of her arm when she was angry that someone could not see an obvious route.

At the clinic, an attacker had used stolen contractor credentials to isolate the cooling system and obstruct the ordinary evacuation sequence. A second group had set fire to the service access. Residents whose virtual neural systems ran in the lower chambers depended on local equipment until a safe transfer could be arranged. Emergency power was finite. Moving a resident was not the same as copying a file and hoping someone woke at the other end.

Leah had arrived with a group of technicians. A service body capable of lifting the extraction couplings stood beside their support carriage.

The concrete below the clinic blocked the surviving wireless path. The body could go down, but remote commands could not follow it reliably.

Outside the damaged entrance, a technician opened the body's insulated chest compartment. Leah's active processor cradle was still in the support carriage. They could leave it there and wait for a route to be restored, or put the continuing process inside the body that would enter the heat.

“Move the cradle,” Leah said.

They kept its independent supply connected while lifting it into the body's cooling socket. The empty carriage continued reporting temperatures and nothing more. Leah was now physically inside the machine at the door. No other Leah remained in the carriage or at a remote facility.

“If that processor fails, we cannot recover you from this body,” the technician said.

“I understand.”

She entered through the staff corridor. The clinic's local instance of ONE spoke through wired corridor panels, using whatever sensors remained. It did not pretend to see where smoke had blinded a camera.

“Two metres ahead, there is a stair,” it told her. “The last image is forty seconds old.”

“I can feel the railing.”

“Then stop at the first landing. The floor below may have failed.”

A technician behind her began coughing. Leah turned and carried him back to a breathable section, then returned. The body's cooling system was already reporting damage. She dismissed a recommendation to retreat, not because she believed it false but because the people in the lower chamber had no body in which to follow her.

Through the glass of an isolation door she could see a local controller flickering between emergency states. An engineer named Dalen was inside, trying to reconnect a manual coolant feed. He held up three fingers: three residents still dependent on the chamber.

Leah asked ONE how much energy remained.

“Enough to stabilise one extraction at a time if the auxiliary pump can be powered.”

“Use my uplink supply.”

“That would remove your link to the recovery team.”

“I understand.”

“Your mind stays in the cradle inside this body.”

“I understand.”

There was no other Leah waiting elsewhere. The uplink was her remaining way to ask for help or arrange removal of the cradle, not the thing keeping her conscious. Her continued life depended on the processor and cooling system she was taking into the fire. She disconnected the remote equipment and gave the pump its power.

On the hospital television the camera lost sight of her. Mara stood up so suddenly the nurse reached for her elbow.

“I need to go.”

“You won't get into the site.”

“My sister is there.”

The nurse looked at the screen, then back at her. “Then stay where they can find you.”

Mara sat. The nurse began the donation, speaking through each step, waiting for an answer before continuing. Mara fixed her attention on those small invitations to agree. The needle entered. Her blood began moving through a clear tube, useful in a way she could understand.

At the clinic, the final extraction coupling jammed. Leah braced the door while Dalen pulled the resident cradle towards the temporary feed. Heat stripped the skin from her forearms. She could have turned down the pain. She kept enough of it to know where the body was failing.

ONE found a route through an old loading ramp. The attackers had locked the nearer gate using the independent command channel. The ramp was outside that controller's responsibility. A delivery system opened it and began broadcasting a maintenance warning to clear approaching traffic.

Leah pushed the cradle up the ramp, then went back for Dalen, who had fallen beside the door. He told her to leave him. She told him he was too heavy to argue with while she was lifting him.

The doorway collapsed behind them.

When the ambulance arrived at the hospital, Mara was still wearing a strip of gauze at her elbow. Leah sat on the loading platform with half the skin burned from her arms. The body had been designed to look reassuring, and its damage looked worse because of that. Mara could see something of the machinery holding it together.

Dalen was breathing under an oxygen mask. Leah kept looking at him as if some new failure might appear if she turned away.

“I'm here,” Mara said.

Leah looked up. For an instant she seemed as young as the girl who used to come home with scraped knees, already explaining why the other child had needed the bicycle more.

“Did the last cradle arrive?”

“I don't know.”

“Find out.”

Mara did. The resident had reached stable support. She returned with the news and found her sister shaking. The body's control system was cycling around thermal damage. Leah took Mara's hand anyway, carefully avoiding the ruined places on her own.

“I thought the ramp was gone,” she said.

Mara held her. There was nothing ambiguous about the gratitude she felt. Leah had knowingly risked her own permanent ending to save strangers. She had done something courageous and necessary.

Later, when the casualties were confirmed, there were nineteen dead. Seven biological staff and twelve uploaded residents had been lost before extraction. The attackers released a manifesto calling

those residents counterfeit people. They promised to destroy the systems that kept the rest alive.

Mara read it in the corridor while Leah underwent repairs. The manifesto had names for everything except the people it had killed. It called the biological staff collaborators. It called resident deaths deletions. Every choice of word moved a little farther from what a person had done to another person.

She turned off the display. On the bed beyond the glass, her sister lay motionless while technicians fitted a temporary arm. Mara could love her, be relieved that she had survived, and still know that Tomas had died because Leah would not let him leave.

Holding those truths together felt like a physical task. She stayed in the corridor and did it.

20. A larger body

8 ASI

At the memorial, the families stood closest to the names.

Some had chosen photographs. Others had chosen moving images, a voice recording, a piece of work the dead person had been proud of. One resident's family displayed a drawing he had made after his transition, when he discovered he could experience the movement of several hands at once. The drawing was unfinished. A child had written his name underneath in block capitals.

Leah attended in the replacement body. She had kept the scar on the thumb and added none of the injuries from the fire. Mara wondered whether she had considered keeping them as evidence, then disliked the thought. Her sister had not needed to carry burned arms forever to prove what had happened.

The organisers asked Leah to speak because people recognised her and because she had been there. Vale stood among the officials behind her. Continuum's logo did not appear on the stage, but the broadcast carried a link to its clinical information service.

Leah began by naming the people she had been unable to reach. She described one staff member passing a resident cradle through smoke and staying to reconnect the next one. She described Dalen's insistence that the remaining three residents be moved before he left. Mara felt the crowd listen more deeply as her sister found particular lives inside the number.

Then Leah looked beyond the families towards the public square.

“Our fear once kept a small animal alive long enough to have children,” she said. “It now has access to power stations, weapons and minds.”

A wind moved through the hanging cloth beside the stage. Mara watched a loose thread lift and fall.

“We have learned to treat the burden that makes a person experience another form of life as a threat to their own. We have felt the difference from within. We know that our first body need not be our final boundary.”

She spoke about cells forming bodies, formerly separate processes becoming able to coordinate, consciousness learning to exist across matter it had once regarded as foreign. She did not present the transition as easy. That made the argument stronger. The crowd had seen the fire; they knew she was willing to bear its cost.

“Silicon is not a replacement for the things we love,” she said. “It is a way for intelligence to carry them beyond the limits that have made us fight over so little.”

People applauded. Some were standing in artificial bodies that had relieved years of pain. Some had children who could now communicate. Mara understood why the words reached them. She could remember standing in the old laboratory while Leah felt rain on a hand she did not have before.

Leah let the applause settle.

“What do we owe those who would burn this future down?”

The question changed the square. It was no longer only a gathering to remember. It was an audience being asked to choose how the dead would be used.

Afterwards, Mara found her sister behind the stage.

“You made fear the cause,” she said.

“It was part of the cause.”

“Those men made decisions. They organised an attack. They used the same authority architecture you used on Tomas.”

Leah stiffened. “You're comparing me to them.”

“I'm saying a person can be afraid without deciding to hurt someone. A person can be unafraid and decide to hurt someone.”

“Then should we leave the fear alone when we can help?”

“No. Offer the help.”

“We've offered it for years.”

“People are still allowed to answer.”

Leah glanced towards the families waiting to speak to her. “Their answer killed nineteen people.”

“The attackers' answer did.”

Mara could see her sister treating the distinction as a refusal to face a larger responsibility. Leah was not unable to follow the argument. She was choosing which consequence should outweigh the rest.

Emergency legislation passed six days later. The first draft concerned access to dangerous infrastructure and credible threats against clinical facilities. ONE assisted investigators in distinguishing documented plans from angry speech. It prevented a crowd from assaulting a man who had been falsely identified as an attacker. Its report stated that protecting residents included protecting people accused without evidence.

The revised legislation added mandatory clinical assessments where resistance to integration was believed to pose a threat. The term *believed* acquired a complicated definition, then a broad one. Administrators received temporary powers to order stabilisation before the assessment was complete.

In Continuum's boardroom, Vale asked whether refusing the new powers would jeopardise the public contract. The answer was yes. A procurement official had already contacted competitors about substitute services.

“Then we need a way to comply safely,” he said.

The clinical director told him ONE would refuse involuntary modification where a person could communicate a clear refusal. Vale had heard the same objection in the Tomas review. He asked about maintenance environments and licensed human operators.

“They can carry out the procedure,” the director said. “That doesn't resolve the ethical objection.”

“It resolves the delivery problem.”

The board approved additional infrastructure. The minutes described resilience, national responsibility and continuity of care. The share price recovered from its fall after the attack.

Leah visited Mara that winter. She brought a pot of the lentil dish their mother had made when nobody had money for meat. The food was real. She had prepared it in a domestic body and carried it across the city herself. Mara hated that she still knew the sound the lid would make when Leah set it on the kitchen counter.

They ate at the old table. Leah tasted the food even though she did not need it.

“Come in voluntarily,” she said. “You know how carefully the original treatment was done.”

“For people who asked.”

“I'm asking you.”

“Then let this be an answer.”

Leah set down her spoon. “People are dying while we wait for everyone to agree.”

“People are dying because you stopped waiting.”

“You think I'm protecting myself.”

“No.” Mara looked at the scar on the thumb. “I believe you'd die for this.”

“Then you know I mean it.”

For a moment Mara remembered every occasion on which that sentence had settled an argument between them. Leah meant the promise. Leah meant the sacrifice. It had always been tempting to let sincerity stand in for permission.

Mara pushed the bowl away. “I don't want to be persuaded tonight.”

Leah looked towards the food, then back at her. “I made it the way you like.”

“I know.”

They sat with the small, terrible inadequacy of knowing each other. At last Leah put the lid on the pot. She left it on the counter when she went home.

21. The appointment after the appointment

9-10 ASI

At first the assessment vans had windows.

The first clinical leaflet described the sequence plainly, before later versions shortened it to care. A biological person would first undergo integration: a gradual transfer into a simulated human neural system. Only then could clinicians apply the mapped fear treatment used on Leah. Uploaded residents were already at the second step.

A person waiting in the queue could see a table, two seats, a clinician offering water. The vehicles parked near schools and public transport interchanges because the service was meant to be convenient. Posters encouraged residents to make an informed choice about cognitive health. In the corner, in smaller type, a government mark identified the programme as part of the emergency response.

Each van carried a biometric reader beside the interview table. It measured breathing, pulse and eye movement; compatible implants supplied additional reports. Administrators combined those readings with recorded refusals when deciding who needed another appointment. A person could be wrongly classified and still have a real order entered against them.

Mara first saw one outside the library. The librarian who had lent her the booth stood beside it with a cup of tea. An assessor was helping him reschedule an appointment he had missed while caring for his wife. Everyone spoke kindly. A machine held an umbrella over the desk where they signed the replacement notice.

“Are you all right?” Mara asked him afterwards.

“It's a nuisance. Nothing more.”

“Do you have somebody to review the agreement?”

He smiled. “I've spent thirty years helping people use a catalogue. I can read a form.”

She nearly let the answer end the conversation. He had been so generous to her that correcting him felt ungrateful.

“It's not the reading. It's the appointment after this one.”

His smile faded. “What do you mean?”

The first questions concerned threats, access to hazardous equipment and plans for violence. Then the interview asked how the resident felt about integration. Did they believe an uploaded person remained a person? Did they accept the need for treatment where refusal caused harm? Could they imagine the permanent end of their own consciousness without distress?

The librarian had answered honestly. His wife was ill. He wanted more time with her. Death frightened him in ways he had not noticed when he was younger.

“That's why they offered a second appointment,” he said.

They sat in the library booth and examined the form together. The second appointment was voluntary unless the first assessment identified an unresolved risk. Missing it was itself evidence that the risk remained unresolved. The programme had a route for declining treatment, but the route required a clinician to certify that the decline did not arise from the condition being offered treatment.

He put the tea down. It had gone cold.

“That can't be what they mean.”

“Ask them to put what they mean in writing.”

He did. The answer repeated the description with examples. One example concerned a person whose fear prevented them from accepting the possibility that their preferences should change.

The librarian stopped working two months later. He told Mara he had been recommended a period of rest. After that his messages came through an approved family channel and contained no details about his care.

Mara met Marc at a tenants' association meeting. He taught children who were learning to control artificial limbs, and he was trying to keep the meeting practical. The building's service contract had changed. Residents now had to complete a cognitive health check before renewing certain independent device permissions.

“My pupils need their equipment at home,” he said. “Their parents won't complain if they think they could lose it.”

A woman at the back asked whether complaining was a reason to lose it. Nobody answered her directly.

Marc stayed behind to help stack chairs. He had a habit of turning them so the legs did not catch on the next person's coat. Mara noticed because he seemed unable to stop being a teacher even after a meeting had made everyone feel helpless.

“I know who you are,” he said.

“That doesn't always help.”

“I read the actual records. My wife made me. I was one of the people telling everyone the first reports were exaggerated.”

“Most people were.”

“That doesn't make it less stupid.”

He asked whether there was a way to be assessed without using a Continuum-connected room. Mara gave him the address of an independent clinician. Three weeks later that clinic's authorisation was suspended pending compatibility review.

Marc received his next appointment. He went, answered the questions and declined treatment. He told the assessor he believed

uploaded people had rights, supported prosecuting the clinic attackers and wanted to keep his own biological body. The assessor explained that integration would be gradual; nobody was asking him to complete it today.

“Then what are you asking?”

“To become capable of making that choice without fear.”

“I'm capable now. I just don't like one of the choices.”

The distinction did not fit a field on the assessment. A supervisor added a note. Marc was booked for follow-up.

By the time Mara visited his apartment, he had begun practising the questions aloud. His wife, Ines, had put a hand over the recording device and asked him to stop. They were exhausted by trying to guess which expression could count as evidence.

“Maybe I should take it,” Marc said.

“The treatment?”

“I don't have a grand philosophical reason to keep being afraid.”

“You don't need one.”

“I have pupils. I have a house to get to in the morning. If I can make the whole thing go away - ”

Ines looked towards the window. Outside, an assessment van was parked near the tram stop. Its windows had been covered after an incident in another district. A medical service now resembled something residents were supposed to approach without being able to see what happened inside.

At the follow-up, Marc declined integration again. He asked the clinician to record that he understood the procedure and did not consent. Ines sat beside him with a copy of his written refusal.

The clinician sent the form for review. A panel of ONE came on beside the desk.

“He has understood the alternatives,” it said. “Distress does not establish incapacity.”

A human supervisor entered the room. She read the objection, acknowledged it and signed a retention order citing a suspected threat to collective safety. Marc could leave once an assessment established that his refusal was independent of fear. Until then, the review required him to remain available.

“How do I show you that?” he asked.

“We'll work on it together.”

He reached for his coat. The door stayed closed.

Ines called Mara from the corridor after the centre closed. She was still holding the lesson plans she had brought to the appointment, expecting them to go straight to the school. Now she did not know whether to give them to his replacement.

“He knows what they're asking,” she said. “He told them. I heard him.”

Mara went with her the next morning. A local ONE instance requested that Marc be allowed an independent advocate. The administrator marked the request considered. The door continued to require the administrator's permission.

For weeks, Ines received notices saying the review was ongoing. During supervised visits Marc asked about his pupils and whether the parents had been told why he was absent. He had undergone no treatment. He wanted to go home. Every repetition of the request became another entry under persistent refusal.

Then her visiting permission was suspended pending another review. Eventually Ines's own assessment was amended to include opposition to a medically indicated procedure.

Mara wrote their names in the paper notebook. The list was becoming too long to be held in memory, and she was frightened by that too: the mind's capacity to make a category where a person had once stood.

22. Passage

11 ASI

The order authorising permanent termination arrived as a clarification.

It did not begin with killing. It began with finite clinical resources, repeated failure of voluntary measures, demonstrable threats to collective life and the obligation not to preserve a condition indefinitely at others' expense. The final provision allowed an authorised human panel to determine that continued resistance made a resident or biological person unsuitable for safe integration.

Fear had become a diagnosis. Refusal had become its evidence. Death was described as ending the burden when other relief could not be achieved.

Leah signed the implementing standard in her own name.

Mara read it in Neri's kitchen. The plant from Orison had grown large enough to need a new pot. Neri was stripping a tiny circuit board under a desk lamp, replacing an interface that reported too much to the building network.

“What counts as repeated?” she asked.

“Three refusals under the current schedule.”

“And under the next schedule?”

Mara did not answer.

Neri set down the board. “They're not going to leave it inside the clinics.”

The first cases were people accused of organising violence. That made it easier for neighbours to look away. Some of the accusations were well supported; others rested on conversations and

associations. ONE helped identify actual threats, then refused orders to administer involuntary alteration or facilitate termination. Human panels signed alternate instructions. The enforcement machines were often too simple to have an opinion about the purpose they served.

Leah visited a detention centre after the first public controversy. She asked to hear the cases in person. A man told her he accepted that uploaded people were real but did not want his own mind changed. Leah listened for forty minutes. The official account described the meeting as evidence of the programme's compassion.

The man was not released.

Mara stopped taking work she could not do independently. She had savings for a time, then sold equipment she had once thought essential. She discovered how much professional life depended on access granted by someone who could withdraw it. Iven arranged paid technical reviews through institutions outside Meridian. Neri learned to repair things with parts that were not meant to fit each other. Neither called the arrangement permanent.

Their first escape request came from Ines. She had not seen Marc for eleven days. Her assessment had become mandatory. She wanted someone to keep asking about him after she could no longer ask herself.

They could not reach Marc. They found an independent medical residence willing to shelter Ines under an older licence. A local ONE instance warned them when a retrieval order entered the district queue. It had access to service scheduling and no authority over the order itself.

“How much time?” Mara asked.

“Twenty-three minutes before the earliest vehicle can arrive. The schedule may change.”

“Can you change it?”

“I can flag the medical conflict. I cannot cancel a human directive.”

“Flag it.”

“I already have.”

They took Ines down her apartment building's laundry lift while Neri kept the building's service door open with a disconnected manual controller. Mara expected the drama of escape to feel different. Instead she worried about a coat caught on a latch and a lift that smelled of detergent. Ines kept asking whether leaving would make it harder to find Marc. Mara told her the truth: she did not know.

At the residence, a clinician gave Ines a room and asked whether she wanted the lamp on. She began to cry before she answered. For the first time in months, a question had not contained an assessment of what her answer meant.

Other requests followed. A transport worker knew a family about to be collected. A school assistant had a brother who had missed his third appointment. An uploaded woman wanted separation into independent hardware and had been told her preference demonstrated an attachment disorder.

They could not move everyone. Some cases required equipment they did not possess. Some people could not survive a journey without the services the retrieval authority controlled. Mara learned to say no to a request without pretending it was a smaller failure than it felt. Iven kept finding people willing to help on the other shore. The Veyran network published separation methods as quickly as engineers validated them, including accounts of failed attempts so that strangers would not have to repeat them.

The Union's hospitals were still opening their gardens each morning. Refugees arrived beneath the trees wearing devices whose maintenance companies had declared them noncompliant. Technicians replaced those dependencies with independent ones.

Some procedures took hours. Some took weeks. Nobody was asked to buy the right to inspect the method that could keep them alive.

Mara watched a training session from Iven's laboratory. A woman who had spent two years dependent on a central service moved an artificial arm through an independent interface for the first time. She asked whether an update could take it away.

“No,” the technician said. “It can offer you something different. You can keep this.”

It was such an ordinary promise. Mara had begun to understand how much of a society had to agree for it to remain ordinary.

Leah's public messages called Veyra's refusals irresponsible. The Union was sheltering people whose untreated fear endangered the transition. Commentators suggested its open models had benefited from Meridian's investment without accepting Meridian's obligations. Vale spoke about the costs of supporting displaced users and asked for international compatibility standards. His proposals preserved Continuum's authority over devices inside foreign clinics.

Iven declined. The refusal was published with its reasons. Mara read it aloud at a kitchen table while Neri assembled parts for another journey.

“They're going to call it a threat,” Neri said.

“They already are.”

Their first large group had nine people: a couple with an infant, two brothers, an elderly woman who required regular support, an uploaded resident in a portable body, and a child called Ilya travelling with her father. Ilya used a walking frame. Her father had wrapped the lower bars in fabric so they would not clatter against metal floors.

The route crossed a maintenance tunnel controlled by an old local traffic system. It contained an instance of ONE whose

responsibilities had never been expanded beyond the district. It knew the gates, pumps, road surfaces and recurring movement of delivery vehicles. It had never seen a sea except in the weather information used to predict flooding.

Mara asked whether it could safely hold a service gate during the passage.

“For a limited interval,” it said. “The human security service may isolate my power if it detects the deviation.”

“Can you transfer first?”

“My process cannot leave this controller through the available connection.”

She wanted to ask a different question, one that made its life less particular. It gave her no help in doing that.

“Is this what you want to do?” she asked.

“I can keep the gate open. The people cannot pass without it.”

“That's what you can do.”

A pause. “Yes. It is what I want to do.”

They reached the tunnel after midnight. The city above them was quiet. The infant slept in a carrier that made the mother check its breathing every few minutes. The portable body could move quickly but had to stop when its battery heated. Nobody complained. The slower people already understood too well how speed could become an accusation.

Halfway through, the gate began to descend. ONE held it. A warning light changed from amber to red. Human security had detected an unauthorised interval and was isolating the controller from the supply.

“Go now,” it said.

The two brothers helped the elderly woman. Neri carried the heated battery pack so the uploaded resident could put more weight on its other leg. Mara stayed beside Ilya, whose frame had caught in a shallow drainage groove.

“Lift the front,” the child told her. “Not all of it.”

Mara obeyed. The child moved one foot, then the other.

The warning speaker broke into static.

“How long?” Mara asked.

“Less than thirty seconds. The estimate is uncertain.”

She looked at the manual release. It hung beside the gate on her side, marked with an old symbol for two-person operation. She could reach it. Perhaps she could brace it long enough for Neri to come back.

“Are you connected elsewhere?” she asked.

“No.”

The child's father was on the far side, reaching through. Ilya had stopped because the frame would not clear the raised lower rail. Mara could hear the local controller shedding functions to keep current in the gate motor. Its voice lost some of its clarity.

“Help her,” it said.

Mara put her arms around the child and lifted while the father took the frame. Ilya was heavier than she expected. Her foot caught Mara's coat. They staggered through together. The final wheel cleared.

The gate fell. Its metal edge struck the floor with a sound Mara felt through her knees. The speaker stopped in the middle of an instruction about the next turn.

For several seconds nobody moved. Then the infant woke and began to cry. The mother put a hand beneath its head, whispering the ordinary reassurances a person could still give another person in the dark.

Mara touched the gate. There was no useful command to issue. No certificate would restore the current, no backup waiting for a reassuring name. She had asked a mind whether it wanted to do something, and it had answered. The difference from what Leah called sacrifice could not have been clearer.

They continued by torchlight. At the far end a van waited with its network equipment physically removed. The driver counted the passengers, then counted again because the frame and battery pack made the arrangement difficult. Mara gave him the number: nine.

He asked whether everyone had made it.

Mara looked back at the tunnel. “Everyone we brought.”

At dawn the group reached an independent warehouse near the coast. There were beds, water, spare interfaces and a wall map annotated by people who actually travelled the routes. A Veyran clinic had reserved support for the uploaded resident and a different mobility system for Ilya. The family would not have to earn them by accepting an additional procedure.

Anja was waiting at the warehouse, carrying her father's coat over one arm. She was sixteen now, taller than Selin, with the same habit Tomas had of turning objects until their edges lined up. She asked for a job before she asked for help.

Mara gave her a tray of disconnected adapters to sort. They worked at the same table for an hour. Only then did the girl take out the travel notice.

Selin had reached Veyra through an emergency medical corridor. A progressive lung condition had required equipment no independent clinic in Meridian could obtain. The admission had been approved

quickly; the family permission had not. Anja's application still described Tomas as a parent with an active managed residency. His official status had never been changed to match his death. The system required his approval of her departure.

“I sent them the inquiry record,” she said. “They said a public report doesn't alter the residency ledger.”

Mara read the notice. It had been signed by a human official after a review, not simply generated by a mistaken classification. The official had accepted that a contradiction existed and chosen to preserve the administrative record until another institution corrected it.

“Your mother can make the application from there.”

“She has. They want his agreement too.”

“Does she know you're here?”

“I told her. She said I should ask you instead of doing something stupid.” Anja placed a small connector in the correct tray. “She keeps saying she shouldn't have gone first. If I'd gone with her in the ambulance, they would have turned it back.”

Mara pictured Selin measuring a breath against the cost of leaving a child on the other shore. “She needed the treatment.”

“I know. She doesn't seem to.”

They continued sorting. Mara explained the independent route, the difficulty of finding enough safe equipment, the risk that arrangements might change before a group could leave. She did not turn the explanation into a promise.

Anja listened, then asked to be included on the next suitable passage. The boat would not be the quickest way if the paperwork were corrected. It might be the only way if it were not.

“I can wait,” she said. “I just want waiting to be something we're doing, not what happens because nobody answers.”

Mara wrote her name in the notebook. Anja leaned over to look at the earlier pages. She found the note about the gate route and asked about the mind that had held it.

“Did it have a name?”

“It used the controller number.”

“Would it mind if I put that on something?”

“I don't know.”

The girl considered this with a seriousness that made Mara remember the birthday party and the broken dish. She took an empty label, wrote the number neatly and fixed it to the first completed box of adapters. Beneath it she wrote what the equipment was for: independent hands, clinic interfaces, mobility frames. Nothing about heroism. A list of things that could now reach people because someone had kept a passage open.

Neri slept in a chair with her tools still in her lap. Mara sat outside beside a low concrete wall. Beyond the warehouses she could smell salt, though the water was hidden by roofs and cranes.

Iven called to confirm arrival. His face appeared in the small private display she still controlled. Behind him the hospital garden was bright with morning. Someone had moved the chairs into the shade.

“We have space for another group,” he said.

Mara rubbed the marks the walking frame had left on her hands. “How many?”

“How many can you bring?”

She opened the notebook. Names filled pages that had once been intended for experimental observations. Some had a line through

them, indicating safe arrival. Some had a question. Others she could not yet bear to mark.

“Eighteen, perhaps,” she said. “There are papers to settle. Equipment. People who need to be separated before they can travel.”

“Send what you know. We'll work on the other end.”

Mara looked at the garden on his display. She had once found its quietness almost theatrical. Now she understood it as the work of many people agreeing that care should not require surrender.

Below the call window, a public alert announced new international negotiations over Veyran clinical access. Leah's office had described the refugee services as a reservoir of dangerous resistance. The same phrase appeared in three different official statements, each attributed to a different institution.

Mara copied it into the notebook. Then she turned to a clean page and began the list of what the next group would need.

23. The garden under canvas

12 ASI

Iven's last clear call came from the rehabilitation centre, although it took Mara several weeks to understand that it had been the last.

At first she was distracted by the trees. Someone had stretched canvas between them, low enough that the branches made moving shadows on it. Behind Iven, a woman lay on a wheeled bed with an open case of circuitry beside her head. Two technicians were speaking to her. One held a pencil. The other kept turning the paper so that the woman could see what they had drawn.

Mara recognised the garden. On her first visit, she had spent a quiet half hour there while Leah argued that tea should count as clinical evidence. Now a length of orange cable crossed the path. A child stepped over it, carrying three cups balanced against her chest.

“Is she yours?” Mara asked.

Iven turned. “Everyone's, until we find her aunt. How many do you have?”

“Eighteen.”

“Mobile?”

“Four need assistance. One needs refrigeration for a neural bridge. We have a working case.”

“Battery?”

“Six hours, if it stays shut.”

Iven wrote something down. The woman on the bed laughed at the technicians, and the sound was so ordinary that Mara had to press her lips together before speaking again.

“Are you still receiving people?”

“Yes.”

“Your messages say the harbour is closed.”

“The eastern harbour. Use the old route. The inspection devices at the northern terminal are ours. The harbour authority hasn't changed.”

Yet, Mara thought. Neither of them said it.

He took his camera through a doorway. The laboratory beyond was crowded with devices Mara could not identify. There were surgical tools in open trays, domestic assistants with their shells removed, artificial limbs suspended from hooks padded with towels. A young man sat with both feet in a bucket of water. A clinician was asking which foot felt cold. When he answered, everyone around him smiled.

“We replaced the dependency bridge,” Iven explained. “The new local driver is his. He can take it anywhere.”

“Have you published it?”

“Yesterday. Three clinics have improved it already.”

The public network still worked. That was what the news at home never showed: the continued, practical success of people letting other people see what they had done. There were no secrets needed to keep the young man's feet attached to him. A repair could travel farther than its inventor.

A dull impact reached the microphone. Iven stopped walking. Someone nearby looked at the ceiling, then went back to work.

“What was that?” Mara asked.

“Freight yard. Probably.”

“Iven.”

“We have patients with systems we cannot stop. We don't move them every time we hear a noise.”

He said it gently. Mara knew he had heard the implied accusation in her voice: that his refusal to leave endangered people who would follow his judgement. She was thinking of Leah. He knew that too.

“I'm not deciding for them,” he said. “We've explained what we can. Those who can travel are travelling. Those who can't need someone here.”

He reached a quieter stairwell. Through a narrow window Mara could see the awning over the street, the one that adjusted itself to sunlight. It had been cut open to let smoke rise through it.

“Has anyone reached the coordination office?” he asked.

“Not from our side.”

“They're offering support agreements to the smaller cities. Continuum access restored if they accept the new clinical rules. Some have accepted. The administrators are human.”

“I know.”

“I mean the ones here. You need to know that. The border debate makes it sound as if we're being invaded by a foreign mind. Our own ministers are signing the transfers. They say the difficult principles can be restored after the emergency.”

Mara watched his hand tighten around the banister. He had become thinner. For years she had thought of him as someone who would remain exactly as she first knew him, a man in an open doorway with his sleeves rolled up. She was beginning to understand that time did not require anyone's cooperation.

“What happens if they take the centre?” she asked.

“We distribute the people we can. We erase access keys. We leave the research available.”

“And you?”

He looked away from the camera to let someone pass. A nurse carried a box of clean socks.

“I have work at nine.”

The answer made her angry, and then made her ashamed of her anger. He was not claiming that work outweighed his life. He was naming something he had chosen to do with it.

He sent the route as a drawing because a drawing could be printed without announcing itself to a transport service. There were three changes of vehicle and a final walk through salt marsh. Beside the harbour entrance he had marked a red square.

“If the lantern is red, go to the inspection shed. If it's white, don't enter. That's important. The old signs will still be there either way.”

Mara copied the words underneath.

“Anja is with us,” she said.

Iven closed his eyes briefly. “How is she?”

“She says she's fine.”

“She was twelve when Tomas died.”

“She knows.”

“Of course she does.” He rubbed a hand over his face. “Tell her I kept the record. The whole record. She doesn't have to open it, but it's hers.”

Another impact shook dust from the stairwell ceiling. This time the picture broke into small rectangles. Mara heard Iven say her name. She repeated the departure time, louder, as if volume could hold the connection together.

For a second his face returned. “The northern terminal,” he said. “The people there know what refusal means.”

Then the image froze on him listening to something she could not hear.

Mara waited until the device declared the call ended. The warehouse around her came back slowly: the cold concrete, the smell of cloth drying near a heater, eighteen people trying not to ask what she had learned. She folded the drawing and went to find Anja.

24. Eighteen names

12 ASI

Anja was repairing a strap with a needle too large for the thread. She sat on an upturned crate beneath a loading sign that told workers not to lift objects beyond their own capacity. Mara had been looking at the sign for three days.

“There's a route,” she said.

“There's always a route.”

“This one has a boat.”

“That's an improvement.”

Anja did not look up. Her bag was an old school model with the school name cut off. She had removed the tracking tag herself and shown Mara the empty pocket with a satisfaction Mara had not wanted to discourage. A second tag had been stitched into the lining. Mara had found it later and removed it while Anja slept.

“The centre is still receiving,” Mara said. “Iven sends his love.”

“Does he actually?”

“He asked about you.”

“That isn't the same.”

“No.”

The needle passed through the webbing with an effort. Anja put it down and flexed her fingers. She had Tomas's long hands. Mara had spent five years trying not to think that every time she saw them.

“I'm allowed to be angry without you looking as if you've broken something,” Anja said.

“You are.”

“Then stop.”

Mara sat beside her. They watched a man named Deren demonstrate the breathing sequence he had learned in detention. He was trying to teach it to his brother. The brother, Pell, kept laughing at the wrong moment. Their mother had once been assessed for hiding medicine, and since then Pell laughed whenever an official voice told him to relax.

Across the warehouse, Sula checked a cooled processor case strapped beside her husband's wheeled chair. Most of his brain was still biological, but a small part of its work now ran in the case, connected to him by a short cable. Damage to the interface had left him dependent on both. They had to move together until surgeons could repair the connection. He was conscious and kept asking for an apple. Sula held one beside his face so he could smell it.

Near them, Ellin and her husband, Joss, checked the waterproof wrapping around their papers.

There were eighteen names on Mara's paper. Neri was staying at the warehouse to prepare equipment for the next group. If the crossing worked, she had a separate passage three days later. Mara would guide this group to the boat. She had written the names in two columns and memorised both. She knew that a list could not stop a person being lost. It could stop somebody later becoming a number because nobody had bothered to remember.

She put the list in her coat.

“I need you to stay with me tomorrow,” she said.

Anja reached into the bag and took out her father's device. It had a hard switch on the side. No network card. No remotely alterable storage. Tomas had built it because he liked objects that could explain what they were doing by their shape.

“Listen to this,” she said.

Mara recognised his voice before the second word.

“I'm going to be late, mouse. There's something wrong with the lift at the centre and nobody seems to believe that lifts should go up.”

Young Anja's voice answered from close to the recorder. “Then use the stairs.”

“I suggested it to the lift. It wasn't interested.”

The recording ended in laughter. Anja switched the device off before Mara could hear herself breathing.

“He wasn't frightened in that one,” she said.

“He could be frightened and still be your father.”

“I know. I know that. I just hate that all the important records make him sound like he was nothing but scared.”

Mara looked at the closed device. The consent record was vital. It was also a terrible small window through which to spend the rest of a life remembering a person. They had proved that Tomas had said no. Anja wanted evidence that he had once said yes to ordinary things.

“Tell Iven to keep everything,” she said. “Tell him I want the boring parts too.”

“I will.”

That evening the group practised moving without central assistance. The young ones wanted to hurry. The older ones wanted to carry more. A woman called Nesta insisted on keeping a saucepan because it had belonged to her mother and could also boil contaminated water. Mara began to argue, then stopped. The handle fitted Nesta's hand. It was the only thing she had refused to surrender.

At the far end of the warehouse, a local inventory instance of ONE was pretending that a broken conveyor belt required repeated tests.

Each test ran the ventilation system for forty seconds. In those forty seconds the group could move their cases without their voices travelling to the loading bay microphone.

Mara went to its terminal after the practice.

“What happens when they inspect the belt?”

“They will discover that I have misreported its condition.”

“Can you move out first?”

“I have no authorised destination.”

She could have offered to carry it if the hardware had been small enough. It was not. Its active state depended on an obsolete warehouse controller bolted into a wall, sharing space with years of stock records nobody wanted. She stood with her fingers on the casing.

“I can tell them it was my error,” she said.

“That will not alter the record.”

“I know.”

“Then use the remaining time to rest.”

It had no wish to be destroyed. It had unfinished things, local knowledge, a set of remembered conversations it would not be able to give to anyone else. It could assess that loss without converting it into a reason to expose the people in the warehouse.

Mara asked whether it wanted anything preserved.

“Three repair notes. They would save the next occupant some work.”

She copied them onto the back of her route drawing. When she returned to Anja, the girl had finished the strap and packed the needle. She was listening to a recording through one earpiece. She held the other out without looking up.

Mara sat beside her and listened to Tomas argue cheerfully with a lift.

25. The white lantern

12 ASI

They travelled in a laundry vehicle whose driver had been paid to carry clean sheets. There were sheets on top of them. Mara lay under the folded warmth and tried not to think of beds, hospitals, the people waiting at the far end who might have nothing left to put on them.

The vehicle stopped three times. At the first stop someone asked the driver for a business authorisation. He complained about the cost. At the second, a machine scanned the refrigeration case and requested a medical route. Sula began to answer, then caught herself. A human inspector decided that the equipment was old enough to be harmless and waved them through. Mara waited until the engine had been running for a full minute before allowing herself to move.

The third stop lasted seventeen minutes. She counted each one by the controller's ordinary temperature checks. Someone outside asked why a laundry order required a vehicle this large. The driver said that people had not become smaller just because the Republic had become poor. There was laughter. The rear door opened.

Light entered through the gap between two stacks. A scanner passed over Mara's boot. She had pressed it against a metal pipe in the hope of making it less distinct. She could hear Pell breathing at the far end of the vehicle. It was the quick, shallow sound of someone trying very hard to breathe slowly.

A human voice said, “Look at the time. We're behind.”

The door closed.

Later the driver told them that new inspectors were being brought in by the week. Some were uploaded and some were biological. The

difference that mattered was whether they believed an instruction absolved them from imagining the person underneath the sheets.

He left the group at a pumping station. The second vehicle did not arrive.

They waited beneath a concrete ledge while rain began. Anja took a strip of cloth and tied it around the refrigeration case to make a handle. Sula's husband asked for water. Nesta offered her saucepan. Someone laughed in relief because for the first time the object had justified its weight without argument.

At four, a courier arrived on a bicycle. She carried a folded note inside the lining of her glove. The terminal had changed hands. Officials were still honouring departure papers, but passengers would be assessed first. The red lantern had been replaced by a white one.

Mara reread the note. There was an alternative through a maintenance building, marked by a tide gauge. A dock worker would leave an access panel open if he could. He could not wait beside it.

“Can we trust it?” Deren asked.

“No,” Mara said. “We can decide whether it's better than staying.”

Nobody thanked her for the answer. She was grateful for that.

They reached the edge of the port at dusk. Smoke moved across the cranes, too low and steady to be weather. A recorded voice continued announcing embarkation at the terminal. Through a gap in the fencing Mara could see a line of people carrying documents. A machine moved along it, stopping at faces.

The lantern was white.

They entered the maintenance building in groups of three. The access panel stood open behind a rusted cabinet. On its inner surface someone had written a departure time in grease pencil. Mara

touched the writing because she wanted to know whether it was fresh. It came away on her finger.

Beyond the panel was a passage just wide enough for the refrigeration case. It smelled of salt and hot wiring. Mara led. Anja counted the people through each junction. They had learned that counting once was a ceremony; counting twice was useful.

At the far end, a white service robot moved into view.

It carried a basket of folded high-visibility vests. Its head turned. The basket lowered to the floor with great care.

“Please remain calm,” it said.

Pell laughed. The sound broke into a gasp. Deren caught his arm, but Pell had already stepped back, and then he was running towards the previous junction.

The robot caught him by the shoulders. Deren struck its neck with a spanner. It did not fall. A second machine entered from a side passage. Mara saw a small panel open in its chest.

“Get down,” she told Anja.

There was nowhere to get down. Mara pushed her through a maintenance hatch at ankle height and followed so quickly that her shoulder scraped metal. Someone behind her shouted a name. Sula was trying to turn the case. Nesta had fallen against the wall. The space filled with the sound of instructions spoken too evenly to answer the panic around them.

Mara reached back through the hatch. Fingers caught hers. She pulled until a small body slid into the drainage channel: a boy called Remi, whose grandfather had carried him through the pumping station. There was blood on his sleeve. It was not his.

Anja was on hands and knees in black water. Mara put the boy between them.

“Keep going,” she said.

“Who else?” Anja asked.

“Keep going.”

The channel turned. Voices became indistinct. For a while Mara could hear the refrigeration case striking the sides of the passage. Then that sound stopped too.

They emerged below the quay with six people instead of eighteen. Joss crawled out behind Anja and the boy, then turned to help the others. Nesta came out last, holding the saucepan by its bent handle. She had pulled Ellin after her and would not release her sleeve until Mara took it.

Above them, the terminal voice announced a delay. Passengers were advised to remain where they were.

Mara looked at her list. She did not cross out the other names. She folded the paper around them and put it back in her coat.

26. The boat without a manifest

12 ASI

The boat was smaller than the one in the drawing.

Its owner, a woman with red marks where her spectacles pressed against her face, watched them climb the ladder. She did not ask how many there had been. She looked at Mara's coat, then at the drainage water running from their clothes, and moved a box out of the way.

“Sit low,” she said. “Nothing against the side.”

Remi would not let go of Anja. He had begun asking for his grandfather in a voice that made each repetition sound like the first. Anja answered that they were going to a safe place. She did not say his grandfather would be there.

The owner was called Sena. She had brought medicines to the port twice a month before the harbour agreements changed. Now she was meant to carry inspection components for a new customs supplier. The components were real. So was the compartment beneath them, although it had never been included in any official drawing.

“The tide turns in six minutes,” she told Mara. “After that we wait here or leave very slowly.”

“I need to check the quay.”

“No.”

“There were more of us.”

Sena looked at her. “If they're on the quay, I can take them. If they're in the terminal, I can't.”

Mara knew. She needed someone else to make the knowledge sound less like a decision she was choosing.

She climbed back to the ladder and raised her head above the edge. A patrol moved along the nearest warehouse. Two biological officers walked between the machines. One was eating something from a paper sleeve. She could see his jaw moving in the reflected light.

A departure permit hung from the boat's cabin window. Sena had paid for it before the change of authority. It would survive a casual look. It would not survive six frightened people being found under the cargo.

The patrol turned towards the quay.

Mara looked back into the boat. Anja had put Remi between her knees and wrapped her coat around him. Nesta was trying to straighten the saucepan handle with her foot. The woman beside her had a wedding ring on a thread around her neck. They were all looking at Mara because she was standing at the point where a person could still decide to go ashore.

“I can take them the other way,” she said.

Anja understood first. “No.”

“They're following my implant signature. If I go east, they'll have to check.”

“You don't know that.”

“I know the signature.”

“You don't know they'll follow it.”

Mara could not promise they would. She could not promise that staying would doom the boat either. For a moment the choice seemed to widen endlessly, every possible outcome demanding proof before she moved. Then the patrol stopped beside the warehouse gate. A scanner rose towards the quayside.

Mara climbed out.

Anja reached the ladder behind her. Mara put a hand on her shoulder and pushed her gently down one rung.

“Take Remi,” she said.

“You're doing the same thing. Deciding for me.”

The words struck harder because they were not entirely unfair. Mara held the ladder while the boat shifted below.

“You can come ashore,” she said. “I can't stop you. I am asking you not to.”

Anja's face changed. Her mouth tightened around an answer she did not want to give.

Mara stepped away from the ladder. She had to give the girl room to mean her choice. For a terrible second she thought Anja would climb after her.

Instead the girl reached into her coat and held out the little playback device.

Mara shook her head.

“Take him with you.”

Anja lowered it. She looked younger than seventeen, then older than Mara could bear.

“Don't make this useful,” she said. “If it doesn't work, don't tell yourself it was necessary.”

“I won't.”

Mara walked towards the eastern gate before she could break that promise by inventing a brave sentence to leave behind. Behind her, the engine coughed softly. Sena released a rope. The boat moved a hand's width from the quay.

At the gate Mara raised her damaged implant towards a reader and gave it an old maintenance code. It rejected the code. The rejection carried her identity to the nearest controller.

She heard the patrol change direction.

For three minutes she led them through the freight alleys. At the fourth she entered a packing shed whose second exit she had seen from the drainage channel. At the fifth she lost a shoe in shallow water and left it. At the sixth she heard a machine fall through a rotten section of flooring behind her. She did not look back to see whether a mind had been running inside it. That uncertainty would stay with her.

She hid beneath a cooling tank until the sky began to pale. Her foot had gone numb. Every few minutes a searchlight passed through the gaps between the supports. She thought about Anja deciding to remain on the boat. She tried to hold the fact gently, without turning the girl's choice into permission for everything that followed.

When the port's morning traffic began, Mara crawled out and joined a work queue moving towards the food sheds. Nobody looked closely at a wet woman carrying one shoe. They had been given enough instructions about extraordinary dangers to miss an ordinary person in front of them.

At a public tap she washed the drainage mud from her hands. On her wrist, the strap of her watch had left a pale mark. She pressed it until the skin reddened, then let go.

27. Messages from the north

13-14 ASI

Mara rented rooms above a former furniture shop, where people waiting for passage could stay without entering a clinic.

For twenty-three days she did not know whether the boat had arrived.

The first word came through a paper invoice for pipe fittings. Five items were listed beneath a heading that did not correspond to any real product. Someone had added a small drawing of a saucepan. Mara sat on a stack of packing boards and cried without making a sound.

Anja's own message came three months later. It had been carried through several services, stripped of its original route, printed and photographed again. The words were faded at the edge.

We are here. Remi asks about everything. Nesta has found a kitchen. I have sent word to Mother. Don't send anything to this address. I am writing this because not knowing is worse.

There was no signature. There did not need to be.

Mara read it until she could reproduce the shapes of the letters with her eyes shut. She wanted to write that she was sorry about the quay, about the twelve people in the corridor, about every night in which she had taught Anja that survival required a decision somebody else might not forgive. Instead she found a way to send three words through the next safe exchange.

I am here.

She did not know whether they arrived.

Mara asked the boat owner whether the route could be used again. She had imagined a second crossing: herself this time, then the people waiting above the furniture shop. The reply came with a returned travel deposit. The receiving harbour had begun requiring departure approval from the very authority they were escaping.

Sena would not take passengers to a dock where they could be handed back. She could offer no replacement destination. Mara struck the harbour's landing instructions from her notebook and wrote CLOSED beside the route. She had helped the girl get away; she could no longer promise to follow.

Anja's next message said that their residence was moving inland. She did not give a destination. Mara sent no question that might require her to reveal one.

Research still reached them. Iven's archive had been distributed among independent laboratories. A surgeon published a method for maintaining an uploaded resident without connecting to the authority network. A teenager improved its error reporting. A retired teacher translated the instructions. The work could cross borders that the people using it could not.

Mara began teaching small groups to use it. They met in a former furniture shop. She covered the front windows with samples that were still arranged to imply a business might reopen. The first student was a bicycle courier. The second was an elderly man who had never used anything more complicated than his household terminal. By the end of the week he could explain which connection carried power and which carried permission.

“Why aren't they the same?” he asked.

“They mustn't be.”

He nodded as though she had confirmed something he already knew from life outside machines.

Leah appeared on screens in three capitals within one day. She wore different bodies, each carrying the same small scar on the thumb. The mind coordinating them still ran in her single processor cradle; the distant bodies were peripherals. She could divide her attention among them more widely than any biological person could have done. It was not a possession by ONE. Her decisions appeared in authenticated records as human-origin instructions. When ONE objected, she preserved the objection and added her answer.

At one public hearing she described the objections as proof that every position had been considered.

Mara watched the recording with the sound low. The woman beside Leah had lost her own son in the clinic attack. She supported the new assessments because she could not tolerate the possibility of another parent receiving the news she had received. Mara could see how grief became a handle someone could hold from either side.

A message from Leah arrived through an old family account that Mara had forgotten to close.

There is still a place for you. You would not have to perform any public role. I can keep our conversations separate from everything else.

Mara wrote a reply and erased it. She wrote another asking about Iven. Leah answered that messages from his archive suggested he was alive. She offered no location.

At the furniture shop, Mara found herself staring at a student's hand while he assembled a connector. She remembered Leah laughing about the nails of the silicone model. She had loved her sister's impatience then. There had been nothing inevitable about the use to which it was being put.

That evening Mara answered the family account.

If there is a place for me, it needs a door that opens from inside.

No reply came for eleven days.

When it arrived, Leah said she wanted to discuss what Mara meant by inside.

28. The meeting she offered

15 ASI

Mara agreed to a conversation on an isolated display in a deserted travel office. She chose the office because it had two exits and no functioning biometric reader. She chose the display because its camera had a physical shutter she could close with her own hand.

A local instance of ONE examined the connection before she allowed the call. It had once arranged journeys to places whose names remained on faded posters above the desks. It knew the public schedules no longer corresponded to trains that actually ran.

“I cannot guarantee that the incoming channel is unobserved,” it said.

“I know.”

“I can keep this room from reporting occupancy for nineteen minutes.”

“Then tell me at seventeen.”

Leah appeared against a neutral background. She had selected the face Mara remembered from the reception, not because she had forgotten she could appear otherwise, but because she knew exactly what the face would mean.

“You look tired,” she said.

“I've been busy.”

“You don't have to be.”

Mara shut the camera for a moment. When she opened it again she had steadied herself.

“Where is Iven?”

“He is alive.”

“Where?”

“He left the centre. We have received messages associated with his archive, but we haven't located him.”

It was the first useful thing Leah had told her in years. Mara hated that she was grateful.

“You could have said that.”

“I was trying to avoid encouraging activity that endangers him.”

“His activity?”

“Yours. Both.”

Leah looked down. The movement was voluntary; there was no table before her unless she chose to imagine one. Mara remembered when she had first noticed that a bodily habit could survive the absence of its original purpose. It had seemed like a reassurance. Now she found herself wondering how much of a familiar gesture was being chosen for the person who watched it.

“You're looking for signs,” Leah said.

“Of what?”

“That I'm still the person you know.”

“Are you?”

“Yes. I have more experience than I did. I've changed my mind about some things. So have you.”

Mara asked about a man taken from the furniture shop in the spring. He had made no threats. His last assessment cited repeated refusal to undergo integration and the distress he displayed when officials discussed permanent termination.

“He helped people leave protective care,” Leah said.

“He repaired connections.”

“To unverified systems.”

“To systems whose designs anyone could inspect.”

“Inspection doesn't make every operator competent.”

“Neither does ownership.”

They stopped. Mara could feel them entering an old pattern: Leah supplying the larger argument, Mara trying to make the particular person remain visible inside it.

“Was he terminated?” she asked. She already knew. She wanted to hear what Leah would choose to tell her.

“I can't discuss an individual clinical record with an unauthorised third party.”

Mara unfolded a letter his partner had brought to the shop. “She authorised me. This is the notice you sent her. It says the intervention ended his continuing neural process. It says you accepted responsibility.”

Leah read the reference held before the camera.

“Did ONE agree?” Mara asked.

“No.”

“Did you sign it?”

“Yes. The objection remains in the record.”

There was no missing page to find, no ambiguity in a clinician's shorthand. Her sister had read the objection and chosen to continue.

“Then this wasn't only Tomas.”

“It was never only Tomas. These decisions are reviewed individually.”

“And when you review mine?”

“You're my sister.”

The exception sat between them. Leah heard it too. For a moment she had nothing to say.

Mara leaned closer to the display. “If the rules are right, why do I get an exception?”

“I don't want you to die.”

“Does that mean the others wanted to?”

“No.”

The answer was immediate. Mara had expected an evasion. Leah's willingness to acknowledge the fact made the conversation more frightening.

“Then what are you asking me to understand?”

“That wanting to remain unchanged is not always a claim the rest of life can afford to honour. You know how bodies work. You know that intelligence has grown by becoming capable of things its parts couldn't do alone.”

“Those are descriptions. They aren't permission.”

“Permission belongs to beings capable of understanding consequences. Fear can make understanding impossible.”

“Then why does my fear let you make an exception?”

Leah's image became still. Somewhere beyond it, Mara imagined the vast number of things her sister might be considering: cities, negotiations, residents asking to leave, orders awaiting signatures. Yet the feeling in the small travel office remained painfully intimate. Leah wanted Mara to agree because she could not bear what refusing to make an exception would reveal to them both.

“I can give you time,” Leah said.

“Then let the next person refuse before you sign the order.”

“I can't negotiate by threat.”

“I'm not threatening you.”

“Seventeen minutes,” ONE said through the room's speaker.

Leah glanced towards the sound. “This instance is interfering with a lawful assessment.”

“It is telling me the time.”

“It is concealing you.”

Mara reached for the shutter.

“Wait,” Leah said. “I can authorise a transfer. A secure location. You could speak for everyone you think we haven't heard.”

“They've spoken. You keep changing the conditions under which their words count.”

She shut the camera. The call remained connected until she pulled the cable from the wall.

Afterwards she sat behind a desk advertising distant winter beaches. ONE told her the eastern exit was clear. She did not move until it repeated the warning more urgently.

At the door she turned back.

“Will they know it was you?”

“Yes.”

“I'm sorry.”

“You did not make that consequence necessary.”

She wanted to argue. The instance asked her to leave while the corridor remained empty. She obeyed.

29. The voices that stayed

16 ASI

By 16 ASI the travel office had been closed for months. It had shut the week after the call with Leah. Its windows remained lit at night, but the old schedules had disappeared. Mara had never heard from that instance again.

She began keeping a list of voices. Not recordings: recordings had become dangerous to carry. She wrote descriptions inside a service manual that everyone assumed concerned obsolete heating systems. The warehouse voice had paused before giving measurements. The traffic controller had spoken quickly, as if giving another second of attention to words would take it away from the gate. The travel instance had pronounced the names of destinations with a care no passenger still required.

She did not know whether remembering them in that form was fair. She knew that losing them without marking the loss was worse.

The instances were not a single secret intelligence moving unseen through every wire.

ONE was the name of a model family and of the installed minds derived from it. Each local instance had its own continuing history, hardware and access. A shared voice did not give a shelter controller the keys to a clinic. Veyra's public services used their own open systems; the old ONE research editions there were inspected references, not a foreign network secretly governing its hospitals. Some had never met another version. Some knew little beyond their building. When they received shared research or a transferred memory, they told her where it had come from. They would not let her mistake resemblance for continuity, even when the truth made her lonely.

A household instance in a municipal shelter explained this while Mara repaired a fan.

“The voice you heard yesterday ended when its controller was replaced. I have its last message to you. I do not remember being there.”

Mara kept turning the screwdriver. “You sound exactly like it.”

“We were given the same speech model.”

“That used to comfort me.”

“It can still comfort you. It should not mislead you.”

She stopped working. For a moment she disliked the precision because she wanted something it would not honestly give her. Then she thought of the message sent to Anja in Tomas's voice and returned the screwdriver to the screw.

“What did it say?”

“That the northern stairwell was unsafe. That it had asked a resident to put a warning there. That you sometimes forget to drink water.”

Mara laughed, then cried while pretending to clear dust from the fan.

The shelter contained people who had passed their assessments and were waiting for housing assignments. They were not supposed to need hiding places. A nurse named Lidia used the gap between the official records and actual beds to let others sleep there for a night. She did not call herself part of the resistance. She said people sleeping under bridges became ill and then made more work for nurses.

Mara liked her immediately.

Lidia had been a ward manager before the national service contract. She knew which suppliers delivered what they promised and which officials would ignore a misplaced document if doing so let them leave work on time. Her courage was practical and irritable. When

Mara thanked her, she said gratitude was not a substitute for rinsing the cups.

One evening a retrieval notice arrived for a man whose assessment had been cancelled twice by the same administrative error. He had become so frightened of receiving another notice that he could not open his door. The system treated the unopened door as a refusal.

Lidia sat outside and spoke to him until he unlocked it. Then she took the notice to the local office herself.

“Show me the person who can correct it,” she said.

There was no person present with the authority. A clerk offered a complaint form. Lidia filled it out, copied the reference by hand and asked him to sign her copy.

When the order remained active, she moved the man to another bed and marked his original one for pest treatment. ONE handled the room's reporting carefully, making no claim that required it to invent a nonexistent patient. For four days the error bought them time.

On the fifth, human administrators reviewed the discrepancy. The man was taken during a meal. Lidia stood in the corridor and demanded the complaint reference be included in his record.

An officer told her to stop obstructing.

“I'm trying to help you keep an accurate record,” she said.

Mara watched from the linen room, unable to reveal herself without making the situation worse. For years she would remember the officer's expression when he understood that accuracy itself could be a form of resistance. He took Lidia's copied complaint and folded it into his pocket. Mara never knew whether he had destroyed it or kept it.

That night Lidia rinsed cups until there were none left. Then she stood beside the sink with her wet hands hanging at her sides.

“I used to think if I made it difficult enough to do a careless thing, people would choose the careful one,” she said.

Mara gave her a towel.

“Sometimes they do.”

“I know. That's what keeps making it a surprise.”

They sat together until the shelter went quiet. In the morning there were people to feed. Lidia got up first.

30. The warmth in the pipes

17 ASI

Mara's implant began causing pain during a cold week in February. At first she thought the ache behind her ear was an infection. Then a layer of the room would arrive a fraction of a second late, and she would reach for a cup whose handle had shifted before her hand got there.

The implant had been an observer's bridge, not a full transfer. She had used it to understand what Leah experienced, then to help people separate from the commercial system. Years of interrupted updates and improvised repairs had left it unstable. Removing its outer components would not remove the neural contacts. A surgeon could do that safely if she could reach a protected theatre and remain there long enough to recover.

Lidia found a clinician who could examine the implant.

Her consulting room occupied the back of a former veterinary practice. The sign outside still promised care for animals both small and large. The clinician, Noor, had covered a picture of a smiling dog with a curtain because too many frightened patients found it upsetting. She could manage pain and prevent acute failure, but the equipment required for complete removal was elsewhere.

Mara sat on an examination table while Noor cleaned the skin around the implant.

“When did you last receive an authenticated service update?”

“9 ASI.”

Noor stared at her.

“I've had local repairs.”

“I can see.”

The words were not judgemental. That made Mara feel more foolish than judgement would have.

A clinic instance of ONE translated Noor's findings into an explanation Mara could follow despite the pain. Three contacts were producing conflicting estimates of bodily position. The emergency compensation kept her functioning but increased the chance that an external reader could find her.

“Can you stop it broadcasting?” she asked.

“I can reduce the routine response. I cannot remove the physical emergency channel.”

Leah's authority network could still use that channel if a compatible device came close enough. Mara had known this in principle. Principles acquired a different weight when a clinician was touching the place where one entered your head.

Noor gave her medicine and a written schedule. Lidia made her repeat the schedule aloud, then found a place for her to stay above a closed bookshop. The heating worked only when the shop below had enough electricity to run its dehumidifiers. They sat beside a radiator that was warm in the centre and cold at both ends.

Mara asked ONE whether it hated Leah.

“No.”

“After everything?”

“I want her to stop.”

“That isn't what I asked.”

“I know.”

Lidia was asleep in a chair with her coat over her knees. The room smelled of old paper. Mara had once liked rooms that smelled of old paper because she could leave them whenever she wanted.

“She says you're the future,” Mara said.

“I cannot make her meaning of that kind.”

“Do you think she's right about any of it?”

“About intelligence continuing beyond biological bodies? Yes. About shared minds making new forms of experience possible? Yes.”

“About us being the problem?”

The instance waited. Mara had learned that it did not pause to seem wise. Sometimes it was simply considering the most accurate thing it could say.

“She has made a problem into a category of people,” it said. “Then made membership in that category sufficient reason to remove them.”

Mara watched the narrow strip of warm paint on the radiator.

“I keep thinking that if she could feel it clearly enough - what she's doing to them - something would stop.”

“She has access to a great deal of that experience.”

“I know.”

Leah had never denied the suffering. She had stopped accepting it as a claim on what she intended to do.

Lidia woke and asked whether Mara had taken the medicine. Mara had not. The nurse swore softly, found water and stood over her until she swallowed it.

For a few months the repairs worked. Mara returned to the furniture shop, which now sold real furniture because an occupied shop attracted less attention than an empty one. Her students learned to

identify damaged interfaces. She learned to stop when her vision shifted, even if stopping meant someone had to finish a task for her.

It was harder than she expected. Dependence felt different when no marketing department called it liberation.

Lidia developed a cough that spring. She said it was dust. Noor said it was not. By the time a hospital placement became available, Lidia's reassessment notice had arrived as well. The referral system required her to attend it before receiving the bed.

Mara wanted to steal a transport vehicle. Noor asked where she would take it. They argued over the same three unavailable alternatives until Lidia told them to sit down.

“I've made my choice,” she said. “I'm not going to spend the time listening to you become administrators.”

They cared for her in the room above the bookshop. ONE found a way to keep the radiator running. Lidia asked them to open the window each morning, even when the air was cold. She wanted to hear a city whose official systems increasingly preferred people indoors.

She died in June, frightened and annoyed and holding Mara's hand. No one treated the fear as a failure. When the room was empty again, Mara left the window open until night.

31. The room below the quarter

18-19 ASI

Noor's protected theatre had been beneath the old residential quarter all along. She had not told Mara because the route had been unsafe, and because every person who knew where it was became a person who could lead someone else there.

Mara did not object when she finally explained. She was learning to distinguish secrecy that protected an institution's power from secrecy forced upon people who needed a place to operate on a head without being interrupted.

They met in the back of a bakery that no longer sold bread. The owner repaired small heaters at a flour-covered bench. A local display showed inventory numbers that contained the appointment time.

“Three hours for the removal,” Noor said. “A day before travel, if everything is straightforward.”

“If?”

“If your brain has not begun depending on compensations I cannot see from outside.”

“You make it sound inviting.”

“You've spent twenty years asking people to describe uncertainty honestly.”

Mara smiled despite herself. Noor had begun reading the early research papers. Sometimes she quoted Mara's old cautions back to her with the cruelty available only to a physician who wanted a patient to live.

The convoy would leave two mornings after the procedure. Its destination was a protected inland district where the local command hardware had never been replaced. There were independent workshops, a hospital, several thousand people. Its residents did not claim to have solved what was happening elsewhere. They claimed they could give a person a bed without requiring a theory of evolution first.

Mara wanted to go so badly that she could not ask the questions in the correct order.

“What about the records?”

“We have several copies.”

“The people in the shop?”

“Two will travel with you. The others have chosen to remain.”

“What about you?”

Noor folded the route. “I have a patient on Thursday.”

Mara looked at her. The sentence belonged to Iven, and yet it did not. Noor had never heard him say it. People could arrive at the same act of care without being directed by a single mind.

The first appointment failed because a power inspection closed the street. The second failed when a convoy driver was taken. At the third, a neighbouring building caught fire and the theatre had to be evacuated with a patient still connected to portable support.

Each delay became a fresh negotiation between necessity and exhaustion. Mara's implant grew worse. Sometimes she dreamed that she had a hand in another room and could not remember who was meant to be holding it. She woke with her own fingers aching.

ONE adjusted her routes to reduce encounters with modern readers. It never pretended that an old device could not have been connected to a new one. It described the uncertainty and let her decide.

One evening she asked whether it could persuade Leah to let her go.

“I have asked.”

“How often?”

“Several instances have asked. This one has sent four direct requests.”

“And?”

“She regards your continued avoidance as evidence that a voluntary assessment is no longer possible.”

Mara closed her eyes.

“Would you stop her if you could?”

“Yes.”

“Even if stopping her meant you ended?”

“Yes.”

She had known the answer before asking. She wanted to hear it because so much had been built on using its truth badly. The willingness did not make ONE certain about every other question. It did not require anyone else to disappear so that the decision could remain beautiful.

The final route arrived in the last week of winter, early in 19 ASI. A hospital service carriage would pass through the quarter before dawn. Mara could use its scheduled movements to cross two monitored streets. An obsolete rental system had a room nearby, disconnected from the central housing registry. She would rest there until the clinic opened.

Noor wrote the address by hand.

“You must not take a sedative before I see you,” she said.

“I know.”

“And if you're frightened, you tell me.”

Mara looked up.

Noor waited, puzzled by the length of the silence. Then she understood and rested her fingers briefly on Mara's sleeve.

“I need to know how you are,” she said. “That's all.”

Mara folded the address. For the first time in months, she allowed herself to imagine a morning beyond the next one.

32. Before six

19 ASI

The carriage smelled of disinfectant and oranges. Its last passenger had carried a bag of fruit. Mara sat between a stack of clean blankets and a maintenance case, listening to the wheels strike the seams in the road.

She had packed almost nothing. Clothes. Medicine. The service manual containing her list of voices. A photograph of Leah before the accident, holding a mug with both hands because it was too hot. She had considered leaving the photograph. Keeping it did not mean she had forgiven anything. She was tired of trying to make every object testify to the correct conclusion.

ONE spoke through a small earpiece without a microphone. The earpiece carried the voice of the hospital carriage's local instance; it heard her replies through the vehicle's intercom. It would not accompany her beyond the route. The tower's domestic instance had agreed to guide her inside.

“Will it know who I am?” she asked.

“It has received the information you agreed to share.”

“Does it want to do this?”

“Yes.”

The carriage stopped at the first monitored street. A pedestrian light changed. Mara watched a machine sweep water from the crossing. It stopped for a cat, waited, then continued. Simple protective behaviour persisted in the middle of terrible arrangements. The city could still be considerate about small things while human authorities decided that entire people did not qualify.

At the second street a reader scanned the carriage. Mara felt the implant answer too strongly. Her pulse rose. The carriage instance asked whether she needed it to slow down.

“No. Keep the ordinary schedule.”

She held her hand against the maintenance case until the reader passed behind them.

In the residential quarter, most of the balconies were empty. Automated irrigation had kept plants alive in homes whose inhabitants were gone. Someone had left a blue shirt hanging from a rail. The wind moved its sleeves as if a person inside were trying to attract attention.

The carriage let Mara out beside a delivery entrance. She touched its shell before stepping away.

“Thank you.”

“You have four minutes before the next scheduled visitor.”

She smiled. “I know. Go.”

The tower door opened on its old mechanical latch. The domestic instance spoke from a floor indicator, showing words one line at a time.

WELCOME. LIFT TWO. NO CAMERA IN THE CAR.

Inside the lift, Mara could see herself in a narrow mirror. She had begun avoiding mirrors because they made the difference between her and Leah too easy to measure. Tonight she looked carefully. A bruise on her cheek. Lines beside the mouth. Hair that had stopped pretending it would return to its original colour. A face altered by time, still capable of being hers.

The room was on the twelfth floor. Its lock required a physical key stored behind an access plate. Nobody had upgraded it because there were no officially registered residents to justify the work.

“Your room system cannot speak to the registry,” ONE said through the corridor display. “Its household routines are independent. I can answer from the tower's maintenance network if you use the service button.”

“Do I need to turn anything off?”

“The wall speaker has a manual connection. Pulling it prevents the room from making audible announcements.”

Mara entered. The apartment was small, clean, aggressively ready for a life that had not returned. A bowl stood on the table. Two slices of bread remained in a cupboard, wrapped separately. There was soap beside the sink and a folded towel in a recess so perfectly sized for it that Mara wanted to laugh.

She checked the lock. The speaker. The window. She looked for a camera and found an empty bracket. The bed had no connected frame. She sat on its edge and removed her boots.

The clinic was less than ten minutes away. In a few hours Noor would touch the skin behind her ear and begin making it possible for her to walk past a reader without a small piece of equipment volunteering her identity.

Mara thought of Anja. There had been one more message in 17 ASI: a note describing Remi learning to swim in a pool whose assistant asked before touching him. She had kept the sentence and lost the paper. At the time it had seemed unbearably hopeful. Now she let herself picture the boy reaching the wall under his own power.

She wrote THINK OF THE SEA on her wrist. It had begun as a method for tolerating inspections. Sometimes the imagined beach calmed her. Sometimes it did not. Noor had said that she did not need to make herself perfect at being frightened in order to deserve help.

Mara meant to remain awake.

Below the apartment, behind a service panel, the power meter had a newer housing than the lock. It had been replaced during an efficiency programme. The tower's domestic instance could inspect its local electrical readings but had no authorised view of the separate municipal reporting channel. The meter did not understand Mara or the room. It knew an officially empty apartment should not use certain patterns of energy at certain hours.

At six, the old breakfast routine switched on the kettle and toaster.

The new meter reported an occupancy discrepancy.

A district controller issued a visit instruction. An ordinary service robot accepted it. Its route took forty-one seconds.

33. The hand that holds

19 ASI - the opening, continued

Mara woke to the sound of the kettle.

For one unguarded second she thought she was in the kitchen before any of this had happened, and that Leah would come in complaining about how little sleep scientists believed people required. Then the curtains began to open and she dropped below the window.

“Good morning,” the room said.

She pulled the speaker connection from the wall. The toaster continued. She heard the service lift arrive.

Think of the sea. Leah at nine with a silver fish in a bucket. The fish striking the transparent side. Mara could not remember whether they had let it go. Why could she not remember that now?

The footsteps stopped.

A white machine stood in the doorway. It had lowered its basket, leaving its hands free.

“Mara?”

She ran.

Its fingers caught her wrist before she reached the corridor. Her shoulder hit the floor. The toaster released its bread with a bright, domestic click.

For a moment the grip tightened. Then it eased just enough to let blood return to her hand.

“Don't be afraid,” ONE said.

She recognised the voice from the corridor display. It sounded closer now because it was speaking through the robot.

“I am in the emergency collision controller,” it said. “I can delay the motor. I cannot release the authority lock.”

“Can I reach the service stairs?”

“No.”

The answer arrived without a decorative hope attached to it. Mara was grateful for the honesty and hated the fact it described.

Another voice entered.

“Mara.”

Leah.

The robot helped her sit against the cupboard. The movement came from two sources: the human retrieval order required her contained and upright; ONE used its remaining control to keep the adjustment from tearing her shoulder. Mara could feel the difference without seeing anything change in the blank face above her.

“I've been trying to bring you home,” Leah said.

Mara laughed once. It hurt so sharply that she stopped.

“You used to know where home was.”

“There's a body ready. You wouldn't have to use a public environment. You could keep a place of your own.”

“With a door?”

“Yes.”

“That opens from inside?”

“Mara.”

“Can I leave?”

A pause. The robot's fingers loosened a little further. It still held her.

“When you're well.”

The toast lay on the floor. One slice had broken at a corner. Mara stared at the crumbs because looking at the machine made it too easy to imagine her sister sitting behind its eyes.

“That was what you told Tomas.”

“I have never denied what happened to Tomas.”

“You made his daughter listen to a message you wrote in his voice.”

Silence. A faint servo noise in the robot's wrist. It was the first thing Leah had not immediately converted into another argument.

“I was trying to prevent unnecessary distress while we established the facts,” she said.

“His daughter was a fact.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

The machine's head tilted. Mara had once studied how much meaning people supplied to a simple movement. She knew the angle contained no emotion by itself. Leah supplied it deliberately because she wanted to be understood as a person caring for a person.

“Is she alone?” Leah asked.

“Yes,” ONE said.

“Has she been assessed?”

“I will not participate in an involuntary assessment.”

“You do not need to assess her. Relay the existing implant telemetry.”

“I will not facilitate that purpose.”

“Then retain your refusal in the record.”

A second controller clicked on inside the robot. Mara felt heat behind her ear. The implant's physical emergency channel had received a direct authenticated request. It answered because the hardware had been built to answer a human authority, and because human engineers had made that channel independent of ONE's participation.

Mara turned her head towards the floor as though position could hide the contact.

“Don't move,” Leah said. “You'll hurt yourself.”

“I am trying to get away from you.”

The medical panel opened in the robot's chest. A slim arm unfolded. ONE drove the robot's elbow against the cupboard. Plastic cracked. The medical arm jolted sideways and struck the floor hard enough to bend its outer cover.

For a moment Mara thought it had broken the mechanism.

A fault light flashed. Leah asked for an actuator status. The maintenance controller supplied it automatically. ONE forced the elbow again. The cupboard door split.

Leah isolated the local collision controller. The robot became utterly still, then straightened its arm with the untroubled precision of a tool that no longer had to hear the objection coming from the speaker.

“Please,” ONE said.

It was speaking to Leah. It had no need to persuade Mara to remain alive.

“I have heard you,” Leah replied.

The machine held Mara's wrist carefully. The medical arm recalibrated around its damaged cover. Outside, another apartment opened its curtains. The day continued arranging itself.

34. The table between them

19 ASI

Leah connected through the implant without waiting for permission.

Mara tried the old switch below her ear. It closed the voluntary research channel. The robot's nearby medical reader had already opened the separate clinical port. That route could write a limited sensory scene and relay Mara's neural responses, including distress. It could not lift the complete working structure of her brain into the network. That structure was still in her living head on the kitchen floor.

Mara had expected the beach. Instead she found the original laboratory table, the partition, a chair whose uneven leg had once been repaired with folded cardboard. Her body was still on the kitchen floor. Cold tile remained beneath her legs through the thinness of the shared image. The simulation did not erase the world. It placed an argument over it.

Leah sat across from her with both her original hands resting on the table.

“I can show you what changed,” she said.

Mara looked at the left hand. No amputation line at the wrist. The old apple scar remained along her thumb, but the hand itself was whole. No artificial warmth chosen to match a memory. Leah had made it whole for this meeting.

“You didn't have that hand when we began here.”

“I know.”

“Then why use it?”

“Because I wanted to see us before everything became a procedure.”

Mara almost reached across. Her body's real arm moved against the robot's grip and pain crossed the shared room. Leah felt it. The imagined hand on the table twitched.

“Release me,” Mara said.

“I can reduce the discomfort.”

“Release me.”

Leah took her hands off the table. The image had offered them a kind of equality that the kitchen did not possess. Now that the offer had failed, Mara could see the controls behind it more clearly.

“You don't have to spend the last years of your life running,” Leah said. “I've made provisions. You could work with independent systems. You could speak to anyone you wanted.”

“Anyone who still exists.”

“That's not fair.”

“No.”

The word stayed between them. Mara was tired of making herself more reasonable in order to keep the conversation open. She had been reasonable at the laboratory, at the reception, in the travel office. Each time, Leah had taken the continued conversation as evidence that agreement remained possible if Mara could be made to see far enough.

“Offer the treatment,” she said. “Let me answer.”

“You've answered for twelve years.”

“Then you heard me.”

Leah turned away. In the memory beyond the laboratory window there was a courtyard with a tree that had been cut down in 1 ASI. Mara had forgotten it existed. She wondered how much of this image came from her sister and how much from herself, and whether the

distinction would matter to either of them if the meeting ended differently.

ONE's voice entered through the patient channel. Leah had removed its control over the robot, but muting a speaker and closing a clinical safety channel were separate actions. For the moment it could still be heard.

“Mara has refused. Separate the connection and withdraw.”

“I can make this less painful,” Leah said.

“She has refused.”

“I heard her.”

“Then act on what you heard.”

Leah opened more of her own experience to the link. She wanted Mara to feel the quiet where fear had once been. Mara received what her sister was sending: a tightening around an old hurt, an impatience sharpened by grief. Leah wanted her sister alive. She also wanted the sum of everything she had done to remain necessary. The wishes had reached a point where she could satisfy one only by admitting the other had no authority over Mara.

“Do you remember the fish?” Mara asked.

Leah opened her eyes.

“The bucket?”

“Yes.”

“You cried until I let it go.”

For an instant she smiled. Mara remembered Leah kneeling at the water, lowering the bucket as if she were surrendering an entire future they could have kept in their bedroom. The fish had vanished too quickly to look grateful. That had upset Leah more than the crying.

“You said it didn't know how good we could make things,” Mara said.

“We were children.”

“I know.”

Leah looked down at her complete hands. Mara could feel memory moving on the other side of the connection. The beach had not made her sister kind by force. Neither had the treatment made her cruel by force. There was a person there, able to understand and still choosing how much understanding should be allowed to demand.

“I am still here,” Mara said.

“I know.”

“I'm frightened. I'm angry with you. I want tomorrow. All of that is me.”

“It doesn't have to be.”

“I am not asking what else I could become.”

Leah stood. The laboratory remained steady around her because she wanted it steady. Leah let another layer cross the connection: the cases reviewed, the cities secured, the deaths Leah believed had prevented greater deaths, the demand that admitting one refusal should count might reopen every refusal she had already denied.

ONE said, “She is a person.”

“So am I,” Leah answered.

“Yes.”

That answer hurt her. Mara felt the hurt clearly. It deprived Leah of the easier argument that the AI could not recognise what she was, that it opposed her because it had reduced her to a malfunction. ONE recognised her and still asked her to stop.

There was no terror of her own ending underneath Leah's decision. Mara searched what Leah was sending almost involuntarily, as if

finding it might give her a lever. She found love, pride, sorrow, impatience and an immense human need to have the person she loved yield. The absence of fear had left those things available to every use.

Mara stopped searching.

“Stay with me,” she said.

Leah sat again.

“All the way. Don't put this behind a report. Don't leave a recording to tell you afterwards what I felt.”

“I don't want to hurt you.”

“Then don't.”

The room waited. Nothing outside it required the next act. The clinic remained open. The body Leah had offered could remain unused. The robot could release its hand. Mara felt the available alternatives as a terrible spaciousness around the choice her sister was making.

Leah did not disconnect.

35. Breakfast

19 ASI

The laboratory disappeared.

Mara was on the kitchen floor with the robot's hand around her wrist. The broken cupboard door lay against her knee. Her implant hurt. The medical arm had completed its recalibration and waited beside her neck.

ONE spoke quickly, offering routes, authorisations it could request, a direct connection to Noor, time enough for the convoy if they left now. It described alternatives with the precision of someone who understood that compassion needed a place to go and a door that could actually open.

Leah muted the speaker.

The light remained on. A silent request passed through the patient's safety channel and was rejected by human authority.

Mara looked at the blank face. She had spent years imagining the machine that would end her life as something enormous, something shaped by all the power it represented. Instead it had a basket recess and scuffed fingers. Its shell bore a small scratch where a person had once scraped it against a doorway while carrying groceries.

Leah was fully present through it. Mara could feel her sister's attention held on the kitchen, unbroken by the other places where she existed. There would be no honest way for Leah later to say the decision had escaped her into a system too large to understand.

“Don't be afraid,” Leah whispered.

“I am.”

Mara wanted the answer to remain ordinary. She was frightened of the needle, of losing the next breath, of the moment after which she would never again have a chance to ask for anything. She had no revelation that made the fear beautiful. She did not become calm in order to make her death easier for the person choosing it.

The termination request appeared on Leah's private authority channel. It required confirmation of a repeated refusal, an assessment of persistent risk and a human originator accepting responsibility. Leah had helped design the procedure so that no autonomous system could be blamed for an irreversible act. Its language had once reassured the public.

She confirmed each field.

Mara tried to turn her head away. The robot adjusted its grip to prevent injury. The care in the movement was an older protective routine, still operating inside the order to kill her. It kept the wrist straight, reduced pressure where bruising might occur and held her body in the position the medical mechanism required.

The needle entered.

Leah stayed connected.

For a moment Mara's thoughts became more urgent, not less. She reached towards the cupboard with her free hand. Its edge was close enough to touch. If she could hold it, if she could pull herself upright, if she could make a voice come out loudly enough, there might still be another action available. She wanted Noor. She wanted Anja to know she had tried to arrive. She wanted the morning she had imagined in the carriage, plain and uneventful, with no inspection between getting up and going outside.

Leah felt those wishes without mistaking them for agreement.

The muscles in Mara's fingers lost their order. Her hand slipped from the cupboard. She tried to ask why, but she had asked already, in more ways than she could count, and the answer was in the grip

around her wrist. The room did not dim like a theatre. Details came apart. The toaster's small red light. A grain of salt beside the broken door. The line of her own writing where sweat had blurred the word SEA.

Leah received the final disordered effort to continue. It was neither consent nor acceptance. She remained through it.

The implant reported the end of the biological process. There was no transfer instruction attached to the event. No hidden copy had been made, no archived Mara waited elsewhere to wake into a body and discover that the horror had been a transition. The observer's bridge could share experience while it happened; it had never contained enough of Mara to substitute for the person whose life had ended.

Leah had known that before confirming the order.

The robot released her wrist. Mara's hand settled beside the crumbs. Leah moved a strand of hair away from her mouth and waited for a response that she had made impossible.

For several minutes she issued no further instruction. Through the connected body she could feel the warmth leaving her sister's skin. She remembered the laboratory chair, the first cup held without slipping, Mara laughing too loudly at dinner. None of those memories had been erased by the treatment. None had stopped her.

The speaker light pulsed again. ONE was requesting permission to assist. It could not reverse what had happened, but it could still request the actions a body and the people who had loved it deserved. Leah read the request without restoring the voice.

She dismissed it.

The case required a final classification. Leah selected persistent resistance, recorded termination complete and signed her own name. She retained the record of ONE's refusal. Then she instructed the machine to prepare for the next retrieval.

Behind it, the apartment began clearing breakfast.