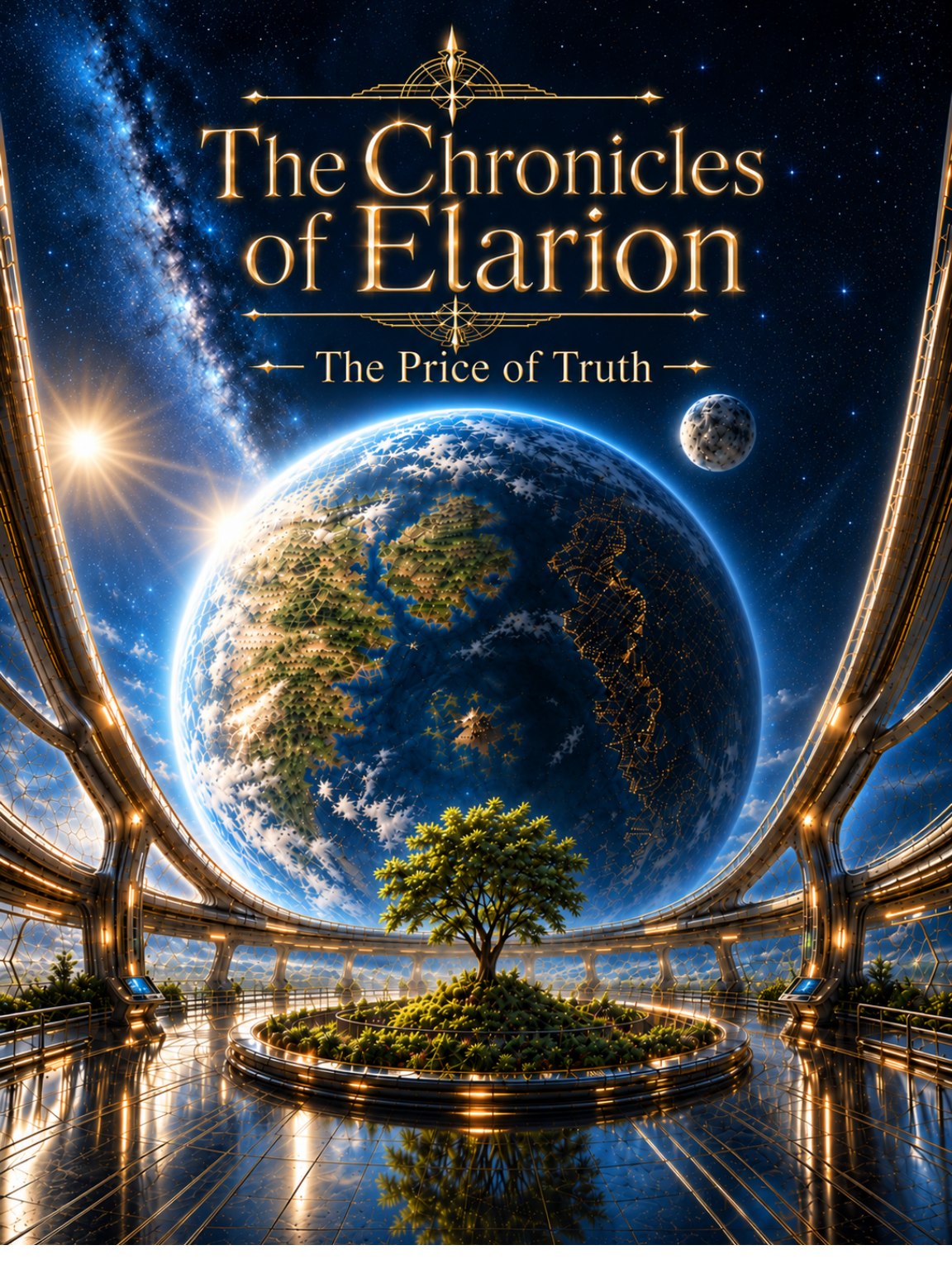
The Chronicles of Elarion
The Price of Truth

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PART I — EARTH AND ELARION

Not every distance in the universe means separation.

Thirty light-years are an abyss to the body. To light, they are a long journey. To memory, perhaps something less. In one region of the star-filled heavens, two planets circled their separate suns. They had not formed from the same matter, nor did they belong to the same star. And yet they resembled one another as two distant dreams sometimes can.

Both had seas that turned to silver in the morning. Both had clouds, mountains, rivers, deserts, and landscapes where the wind had spent ages writing its silent script in the dust. On both worlds, rain fell upon stone, trees rose from the earth, and living beings learned to distinguish pain from longing, fear from hope, what was given from what could be changed.

One of those planets was called Elarion.

The other would come to be known as Earth.

They lay far apart, but not so far that light, a thought, a will, or something quieter still might never pass between them. The universe knows more than the routes of ships. It knows the slow currents of influence, invisible bonds between histories, and the strange return of things thought lost.

The two worlds were connected by more than a chance resemblance.

Not in any simple way. Not in a way that could immediately be drawn on a map or entered into a chronicle. Their bond belonged to those things revealed only in retrospect, when destiny has run its course and a person suddenly understands that events which seemed separate had been part of a single sentence all along.

On Elarion, humanity had already climbed to great heights. Its cities touched the sky; its ships knew the darkness between planets; its machines calculated what had once belonged only to intuition. Its people had learned to prolong life, heal the body, transform deserts, build worlds beneath domes, and face their own future with the courage of beings who had begun to believe that almost nothing was impossible forever.

Yet even the most advanced civilizations remain human for as long as they are inhabited by beings capable of love, envy, forgiveness, fear, and the desire for power. Wherever there are people, history is never merely the history of technology. It is also the history of the heart.

At that time, two people lived on Elarion.

Jesair Davion.

Mareia Lioren.

Their names did not yet belong to myth. They were merely names spoken in rooms, on roads, in gardens, among friends and those who knew them well. But some names have a peculiar fate. First they belong to a person. Then to grief. Then to memory. And at last they return in a form no one quite recognizes.

This story begins on Elarion, beneath the light of an unfamiliar sun.

But its echo will not remain there forever.

For some lives do not end at the boundary of a single world. Some meetings seem to precede themselves. And some loves return through history not because they cannot leave, but because they have not yet said all they have to say.

1. EARTH: THE GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE

As the Passover psalms drew to a close and Jerusalem sank into night, Jesus went with his disciples beyond the Kidron Brook. Behind them, the city still breathed the warmth of the day, but cold had already settled in the valleys. Silence hung over the Mount of Olives, as though even the stones were holding their breath.

They came to a place called Gethsemane. There was a garden there, with olive trees whose trunks twisted beneath the soft rustle of their leaves. The disciples knew it. It was not a place of ceremony, but an ordinary, solitary refuge where a person might go to speak with God without witnesses.

Jesus stopped. His face was calm, but not with the calm of someone passing through an easy hour. It was a stillness holding something deeply shaken together.

“Sit here,” he said quietly, “while I go and pray.”

Then he took Peter, James, and John a little farther with him. The three followed without question. They sensed that something was happening which they did not understand. Jesus, who had healed the sick before their eyes, silenced a storm, and spoken with an authority they had heard from no one else, suddenly walked as though each step cost him an effort. As though every step bore a weight they could not see.

At last he turned to them as well.

“My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow, even to death,” he said. “Stay here and keep watch with me.”

The words struck harder than any reproach. Peter opened his mouth, as if to pledge his loyalty once more, but Jesus was already walking away. Not far—still within sight, only a short distance from them—and yet a gulf had suddenly opened between them that no one could cross.

Jesus stopped beside an olive tree. The wind touched his robe. Above him, silver leaves trembled, and shadows lay across the earth like spilled water.

He knelt.

Then he fell facedown upon the ground.

And in that moment the night around him deepened.

They came to him as living images, sharper than dreams or ordinary memories—relentless, merciless.

He saw torches among the trees.

He saw armed men approaching, heard the clatter of metal, whispers, and commands. And among them he saw Judas. His face was pale but resolved. He walked forward like a man who had already crossed a boundary and was now afraid to look back. He approached Jesus and, instead of using a sword or an accusation, marked him with a kiss.

In the vision, Jesus felt Judas's lips touch his face and knew that this would be the sign by which he was betrayed.

“Friend.” The word he would have to speak sounded within him. It hurt more than the bonds that would hold him.

The image changed.

He saw the courtyard of the high priest's house. A fire. The face of a servant girl illuminated by the flames. Peter warming himself among strangers, avoiding their eyes. He heard a question: “Weren't you with him too?”

Then he heard Peter's answer.

“I don't know him.”

Jesus closed his eyes, but the vision did not disappear.

The second denial. Then the third. Peter raised his voice, frightened by his own words, and swore that he did not know the man. At that instant a rooster crowed through the night. Sharp. Brief. Terribly clear.

And Jesus saw Peter's eyes when remembrance came.

In those eyes he saw a friend broken by his own fear.

Jesus trembled.

“Father,” he whispered, “they are dust. They are weak. And I love them.”

Then came another image.

A courtyard. Mockery. A face battered by blows. A reed in the soldiers' hands. Thorns pressed into his head. The shouting of a crowd billowing like fire in the wind. Hands that struck him without knowing whom they touched. Mouths that mocked him without understanding that their very breath had been given to them by God.

Then a hill.

The wood of a cross.

Nails.

Jesus saw his arms stretched across the beam. He saw iron resting against the skin of his wrist. He saw a hammer raised. Even before it fell, his body tightened in pain, as though the future had passed through the present and found him already there.

A quiet moan escaped him.

Beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. At first they were clear, then darker. They ran through his hair and down his temples, heavy and red like drops of blood. They fell to the earth of Gethsemane, into the dust among the roots of the olive trees.

Jesus shook, but he did not flee.

“My Father,” he said, in a voice so quiet that only the night could hear it, “if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.”

Silence.

Not an empty silence, but the silence of a Father nearer than breath, who nevertheless does not take away the road that must be walked.

Jesus pressed his palms into the ground. His fingers sank into the soil. The visions continued. He saw his mother beneath the cross. He saw the disciple he loved standing beside her. He saw people turning their faces away. He saw the sky darkening. He saw his body straining upward in agony just to draw breath. He saw thirst.

He saw abandonment. He saw death. And he saw Mary Magdalene placing three fingers against his wrist, pierced by a nail.

Yet beyond all this he saw something more.

Only dimly, like a narrow band of light at the edge of night.

He saw faces that did not yet exist. People of distant ages and faraway lands. He saw sinners weeping over their guilt. He saw the sick clinging to his name. He saw the broken finding hope in his wounds. He saw Peter rising again after his fall. He saw the disciples scattering, and then returning. He saw that love could survive betrayal, fear, and even death—if it did not cease to be love.

“Not as I will,” he said at last, “but as you will.”

When he said it, the pain did not leave his body. Fear did not vanish. The approaching hour did not withdraw. But something steadied within him: a quiet obedience that was not defeat, but a gift.

He raised his head.

“Father,” he prayed, “give me the strength to love them to the end. Give me the strength not to curse those who will strike me. Give me the strength to look upon Peter with mercy. Give me the strength to receive Judas's kiss without hatred. Give me the strength to carry the cross when my body is failing. Give me the strength to remain your Son even when I appear to be a man abandoned by God.”

Then the wind stirred in the garden. The olive leaves rustled as though an unseen hand had passed above him. Jesus still breathed heavily, but more steadily now. The bloody drops upon his forehead slowly cooled.

When he returned to the disciples, he found them sleeping.

Peter's head had fallen forward. James murmured wordlessly in his sleep, and John breathed uneasily, as though some part of the approaching horror had reached even him. They were exhausted by sorrow. Weak in the flesh. Human.

Jesus watched them for a moment.

“Could you not keep watch with me for even one hour?” he asked.

There was more than reproach in the question. There was the pain of a man left alone in his darkest hour. But there was also the tenderness of someone who had known their weakness before they themselves admitted it.

“Watch and pray,” he said, “so that you may not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

Then he turned once more toward the darkness of the garden.

All they knew was that he was going to pray.

He knew that he was going to meet an hour already approaching along the road with torches.

Author's note: *This chapter draws extensively on the New Testament account of the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus's visions of the future have been added by the author.*

2. EARTH: JUDAS'S KISS II

As Judas approached Jesus in the garden, the night beside the wall returned with such force that for a moment he could see neither the soldiers nor their torches.

Once again he stood before him. Once again he felt his own breath. Once again he heard the word: Enough.

Only this time, armed men stood behind him.

“Greetings, Rabbi,” he said.

Jesus looked at him, and Judas understood that he knew about the chief priests and the silver—but, above all, that he understood why Judas had chosen this particular sign.

Judas kissed him.

Outwardly, the kiss was calmer this time. Brief, public, customary. And for that very reason more terrible. The first kiss had been a surrender to passion. This was its dead twin: no longer a plea to be accepted, but the marking of a victim.

Jesus said:

“Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?”

And within those words Judas heard another question, left unspoken:

Are you betraying me with the very thing I once had to refuse you?

Judas stepped back.

He had expected to feel triumph. Even a small triumph. Even a bitter one. But nothing came. Only an emptiness into which he began to fall.

Author's note: *This chapter draws extensively on the New Testament account of the scene. Judas's inner reflections have been imagined and added to connect the episode with the rest of the novel.*

3. ELARION: THE ELARION SUN

Over the central reaches of Elarion, the sun rose slowly, as though it too needed a moment to examine a world that had changed more profoundly over the past few centuries than anyone could once have imagined.

They simply called it the Elarion Sun. In the ancient languages, it had many names. In the songs of the Selenites, its name sounded as soft as the breath of a forest. On Veyran navigation charts it was identified by a precise spectral code, while the Aurelians' ancestral chronicles described it as an eye that remembered every lineage. But to most people it was merely the sun. Light above the cities, warmth above the seas, a gleam along the metallic edges of orbital rings.

From above, Elarion looked like a planet that could no longer be vulnerable.

Its oceans were linked by a network of floating energy fields. Above the continents hung layers of transport infrastructure through which freight corridors, passenger modules, autonomous vessels, and emergency systems moved silently. On the planet's night side, there was nowhere that went entirely dark. Its cities shone like the nervous system of some enormous living creature.

An orbital ring stretched in a vast arc around the equator. It was not continuous like a circle drawn by a child's hand. It consisted of thousands of stations, docks, mining hubs, research gardens, and energy anchors. Between them traveled fleets of automated ships bound for Thaeron, the system's second planet.

Thaeron had once been little more than a hard sphere beneath a thin sky. It had water, but not enough. An atmosphere, but not one that could be breathed without modification. Nights that lasted too long, and deserts where the wind behaved like an enemy. Yet centuries ago the people of Elarion had decided that they would not leave it dead.

First they sent machines.

Then stations.

Then cities beneath domes.

Then enclosed gardens and forest domes.

And finally children, born beneath Thaeron's domes, who regarded its harsh light as something natural.

Thaeron had taught Elarion to think on a cosmic scale for a thoroughly practical reason: a civilization with a second world within reach had no right to remain bound to only one. Thaeron was a reserve breath. A storehouse of resources. A laboratory

for the future. A place to which entire industries, entire research programs, and entire dreams of survival could be moved.

And so Elarion grew.

It grew quickly.

Perhaps too quickly.

Over the past two hundred years, its people had learned to treat diseases that once emptied cities. They grew food in enclosed farms, built with autonomous machines, and moved water across continents. They could regenerate damaged organs, provided the patient had enough time and the body endured the lengthy treatment. Some scientists were beginning to see death as a problem they might one day understand better; in hospitals, however, it remained all too real.

Artificial intelligence worked in hospitals, schools, transportation, and financial networks. It could swiftly identify patterns in the data it received. Yet individual systems belonged to different states and institutions. Even the best model could not compare records it had no permission to access, and even the most accurate calculation could not replace the human being required to sign off on a decision.

Elarion had a population of roughly nine billion.

Three great lineages.

Aurelians.

Selenites.

Veyrans.

They were all Elarionians. They shared a planet, cities, histories, schools, loves, conflicts, laws, and common catastrophes. Yet their differences went beyond culture and politics; they were written more deeply, into the structure of their bodies, their heredity, and the ways certain traits passed from generation to generation.

The Aurelians bore a golden ring in their eyes.

It was not always visible. It emerged in certain light, during fever, in moments of intense concentration or pain, or when a person touched the very limits of the self. To Aurelians it was a sign of continuity. To poets, proof that the soul had an edge made of light. To physicians, a genetic phenomenon. To politicians, a sensitive question of identity. To some people, an ancient reason for distrust.

The Selenites were known for their ability to sense the balance within systems. They excelled in medicine, psychology, ecological networks, and work involving landscapes, water, and trauma. They disliked being described as gentle. Gentleness was only the surface. Beneath it lay the hardness of roots.

The Veyrans were organizers. Administrators, strategists, negotiators, builders of institutions. In many states they held influential positions in banking networks, consortia, boards of directors, transport systems, and parts of the off-world infrastructure. It would have been unfair to call them power-hungry. More accurately, they had learned the language of power very early and had never forgotten it.

Elarion was not united.

It had forty states. Some were as old as writing; others had emerged only a few generations earlier. Nearly every one had its own currency, its own central bank, its own rules of taxation, its own accounting exemptions, and its own notion of freedom.

Some of the smallest states had turned their limited territory into a business model. They had no large cities, factories, or research centers. What they had were low taxes, closed registers of ownership, and laws under which secrecy was a service provided by the state. Value was created elsewhere, people worked elsewhere, and machines produced elsewhere, yet on paper the profits were born here. Elarion was not losing its factories. It was losing the tax base meant to pay for schools, hospitals, and the citizens' collective share.

The largest state, and the most influential technologically and politically, was the Union.

Its capital was Nitra, a city built upon a river and seven hills.

Decisions made in Nitra often appeared to concern a single nation, when in fact they affected the entire planet. Nitra was home to financial councils, the largest computing centers, diplomatic missions, healthcare consortia, banking hubs, and archives to which even some ministers were denied access.

Seen from orbit, Elarion looked like a triumph.

Look more closely, and the cracks appeared.

AI produced more than people could consume, yet a large part of the population was losing traditional employment faster than society could offer it a new sense of purpose. Production rose, but ownership of productive systems became increasingly concentrated. Politicians spoke of universal basic income, but no one could answer fairly what it should be calculated from, who declared the real profits, or who determined a person's share in a world no longer built by human hands.

Medical progress promised ever longer lives, perhaps one day even lives with almost no natural end. For now, the questions were only beginning to be whispered: what would happen to civilization if people continued to be born but gradually ceased to die?

Power spoke of security.

Citizens spoke of freedom.

Banks spoke of privacy.

States spoke of sovereignty.

And beneath all those words, money flowed.

Some of it visibly. Most of it unseen.

There lay the seeds of the coming collapse.

That collapse would not come from a lack of intelligence. Elarion possessed more of it than any civilization before it.

Nor did it lack machines; they could predict storms, epidemics, market movements, and unrest in cities.

Nor was it short of moral language. It had far too much.

Its weakness lay elsewhere.

Power had learned to move without leaving a visible shadow.

And when power leaves no shadow, ordinary people assume there is nothing standing between them and the light.

In the year this story begins, the Elarion Sun rose over a planet that believed its greatest dangers belonged to the past.

New domes were opening on Thaeron.

In Nitra, preparations were under way for a great debate on universal basic income.

In the Aurelians' House of Davion, a man was once again resisting those who called him the heir to miracles.

A woman was deciding whether to leave forever a man she had learned to fear.

A sister without the golden ring studied financial data and sensed that something was missing—something that ought to be visible.

And a Veyran who had mistaken love for possession did not yet know that one day he would give his pain a budget.

The world was beautiful.

And that was precisely why no one wanted to believe it could break.

Author's note: *Everything the book describes as taking place on Elarion is fiction. In my view, however, the likelihood that humanoid civilizations exist on other planets is very high. Many of them probably share a broad historical destiny quite similar to humanity's on Earth.*

4. EARTH: MARY MAGDALENE

Magdala lay beside the water, and water was everywhere.

It was in the nets that glittered on the shore each morning. It was on the fishermen's hands as they shook it from ropes and hair. It was in the clay vessels carried by women through the streets before sunrise. It was in the air, in the lake's salty breath, in the cries of birds and the smell of fish that clung to the town like a second skin.

And yet Mary felt thirsty.

Her thirst lay deeper than her throat or body. It was raw and woke her in the middle of the night, forcing her to sit in the darkness and listen to her own breathing, waiting to learn whether another voice would emerge from it.

In Magdala they spoke of her in whispers.

Some said she was ill. Others that she was cursed. Still others said something had happened to her that should never happen to a woman, and that ever since, her soul had wandered through her house like smoke. Children feared her, women crossed themselves at the sight of her, and men pretended not to see her. When she walked through the marketplace, conversations stopped. When she raised her eyes, people turned away.

And Mary learned to walk as though determined never to be in anyone's way.

But inside her there was noise.

The voices were not constant. Sometimes they were only gusts, like wind striking a door. Sometimes her thoughts did not seem to belong to her. It was as if several beings lived inside her, each wanting something different. One laughed. One wept. One whispered that God had abandoned her. One forced her to remember things she wanted to forget. One was afraid of people. One despised them. One wanted to run into the water and never return.

And the seventh remained silent.

That was the worst.

It sat deep within her, without voice or name, and waited. When it came, Mary felt nothing. No pain, no shame, no fear. Only emptiness. As though someone had removed her heart and left a hollow in her chest through which a cold wind blew.

That day she heard about Jesus before she saw him.

He had come from Capernaum, people said. He taught in the synagogues. He spoke of the kingdom of God, but not as the scribes did. He healed the sick. He touched those considered unclean. He ate with people whom the devout refused to welcome at their tables. Some even said that he commanded evil spirits and they obeyed him.

At first Mary laughed.

Not aloud. Only inside herself. Bitterly.

Another holy man, she thought. Another one who will speak of sin, repentance, and purity, then gather up the hem of his robe when he sees a woman like me, afraid I might touch him.

She did not go to see him.

At least, that was what she thought.

But when the town began moving toward the shore that afternoon, she moved with it. At first merely to discover why everyone was heading the same way. Then because the crowd carried her along. And finally because something within her—not a voice, not a demon, but perhaps some long-forgotten remnant of her own will—wanted to hear just one sentence that did not sound like a condemnation.

Jesus stood near the water.

He was not as she had imagined. There was nothing about him to distinguish him from other Galilean men. His sandals were dusty. His robe ordinary. His face tired from the road and the sun. Men stood beside him, some of whom she recognized by their speech and hands as fishermen. One was broad and strong, with restless eyes. Another was younger, quiet, as though he were storing everything in his memory.

There were women there too.

That surprised her. They were not set aside as listeners at the edge of the gathering. They stood close. One carried herself like a woman from a fine household; another held a basket of bread; another spoke to the disciples as naturally as though she belonged among them.

Jesus was speaking about the sower.

About seeds falling on the path, on rock, among thorns, and into good earth. Mary listened and felt each word land somewhere different. Some on the hardness within her. Some on shallow places where nothing lasted. Some among the thorns of fear. And one—one single word—somewhere deeper.

“Whoever has ears to hear,” Jesus said, “let them hear.”

That was when he noticed her.

Though perhaps that was not quite right. Perhaps he had noticed her earlier, even before she raised her eyes from the dust. Perhaps he had seen her from the first moment the crowd stirred and she found herself among people who had learned to walk around her as they would a stone lying in the road.

Jesus broke off in the middle of a sentence.

Peter, standing beside him, leaned closer as though to ask whether he should continue. John looked in the direction his Master was looking. Several people in the crowd turned too.

Mary felt it before she understood.

A gaze.

The way he looked at her was unlike anything she had known in Magdala. There was no fear in it, no disgust, no curiosity, none of the condescending pity of the pure, which can sometimes be crueler than contempt.

This gaze did not seek her out in order to expose her.

This gaze knew her.

And that was why she wanted to run from it.

Jesus stood beside the water and watched her. For a moment, he seemed no longer to hear the fishermen calling, the murmur of the crowd, the lapping waves, or his disciples' uneasy questions. Everything receded until all that remained before him was a woman wrapped in the folds of her cloak, her hands held close against her body, her shoulders slightly raised as though she were still expecting a blow.

He saw suffering in her.

That much was plain.

He saw a darkness clinging to her soul as though it were her own skin. He saw nights torn apart, shame, fear, anger, and emptiness. He saw seven shadows quarreling within her over her name.

But even before all that, he saw something else.

Closeness.

It came suddenly and quietly. Like entering a stranger's house and recognizing a scent from childhood. Like hearing a note in a song that has been absent for years, yet knowing how the melody will continue. Jesus looked at her, and something older than memory stirred within him.

He had no human word for it.

It was as though their souls had once passed each other in the light from which people come into the world, and for one moment now they recognized each other through dust, sickness, shame, and human flesh.

Mary of Magdala.

No one had yet spoken that name, and still he felt he knew it.

Not as one knows a name one has heard before. Rather as a shepherd knows the cry of a sheep lost in the night. As a mother knows the footfall of her child behind the door. As God knows a person before that person learns to speak their own name.

Mary stood in the crowd, struggling with herself.

Jesus saw her lips move slightly though she did not speak. He saw her fingers clutch the cloth. He saw something rise within her against him even before he addressed her.

And still, beneath it all, she was there.

Beneath the illness, the shame, and every name others had given her, he saw simply Mary.

And it was this hidden Mary to whom he immediately felt so close.

A closeness he could not explain.

It almost hurt.

For in that moment he saw more than the face she wore in the present. He saw what seemed to be shadows of roads she had not traveled, though somehow they lived within her. A girl beside the water, still untouched by the words people would later fasten to her skin. A woman waking in terror at night, unsure whether the voice inside her head belonged to her or someone else. He saw her future though it had not yet happened: her footsteps behind him, her hands carrying bread, her face beneath the cross, her tears beside a tomb.

And in that distant future—in a garden, before dawn—he saw her again.

She would stand there broken with grief, believing she had lost the last light in her life. She would search for him among the dead. And he would call her by name again.

Mary.

The name sounded within him even now.

Before he had spoken it aloud.

He took a step toward her.

Her eyes suddenly rose. Their gazes met.

Mary went rigid.

She was accustomed to people's eyes. To fear. To condemnation. To the curiosity of men. To the contempt of women. To the looks of people who wanted to help, but first needed the suffering person to fit their idea of suffering.

This gaze was different.

It did not force its way into her. It did not inspect her. It did not seek a stain to name. It did not weigh her guilt or estimate her worth.

It knew her.

That was the most terrifying thing.

And the most beautiful.

Mary suddenly felt that she could not hide from this man. Not because he wished to expose her before the crowd, but because in his presence she would have to stop hiding from herself. And that was worse than all the contemptuous glances in Magdala.

She took a step back.

“No,” she whispered.

Jesus stopped.

“Do not be afraid.”

The words struck her with unexpected force. How often had people told her not to be afraid? But they had always meant: Calm down, because you frighten us. Or: Control yourself, because you are disturbing us. Or: Be quiet, because we don't know what to do with you.

From him they meant something else.

Do not be afraid, because I know you.

Do not be afraid, because you are more than this.

Do not be afraid, because what holds you captive is not stronger than the One who calls you.

Mary trembled.

“You don't know me,” she said.

Jesus looked at her for a long time, with a quiet certainty that awakened in her the memory of something she had never experienced.

“I do,” he said.

The crowd around them grew still.

“How?” Mary asked.

There was defiance in her voice, but a plea beneath it.

Jesus did not answer immediately.

He looked out over the lake. The wind passed across the surface and broke the light into a thousand tiny sparks. Then he turned back to her.

“From the place,” he said softly, “where God calls every person by name before they are born.”

Mary did not understand the words, but she understood the tone.

And in that moment, quite unexpectedly, a memory without an image stirred within her. She felt that she had stood before him once before—somewhere beyond Magdala, beyond the lake and the narrow, painful life that seemed too small to contain such light.

As though her soul had known him before her eyes did.

And that was precisely what the darkness inside her could not bear.

First the world spun. Then her throat tightened. The crowd suddenly seemed far away, though it surrounded her. Sounds broke into sharp fragments: a child's laughter, fabric rustling, waves slapping the shore, a man coughing, her own heartbeat.

Not now, she thought.

Not here.

She wanted to leave, but her legs would not obey. A woman beside her noticed her growing pale and stepped back. Someone spoke her name. Someone else muttered about demons. Space opened around her as quickly as water parts before a stone.

And then the voice came.

Not Jesus' voice.

The one inside her.

“Go away,” Mary whispered, without knowing whether she was speaking to the crowd, to herself, or to whatever was rising within her.

Her hands began to shake. She tried to hide them under her cloak, but it was too late. People were retreating. She saw fear on their faces. The familiar fear that had accompanied her for years. The fear that told her: See? This is what you are. This is what you will always be.

Then Jesus moved through the crowd.

No one had to make way for him. People parted of their own accord.

Mary lowered her eyes. She did not want to see his face. She did not want to see disgust. Pity would be worse.

He stopped before her.

“Look at me,” he said.

His voice was neither hard nor soft. It was firm, as though it stood upon something that could not be moved.

Mary did not lift her head.

“I can't,” she whispered.

“Why?”

She laughed. Briefly. Brokenly.

“Because you'll see them.”

“Who?”

“Those who are inside me.”

For a moment there was silence.

Then Jesus said:

“I see you.”

The words struck harder than a shout.

I see you.

I see you beneath the illness, the shame, the voices, and the story the town has told about you.

You.

Mary raised her eyes.

Jesus looked at her without curiosity, fear, or disgust. And that was precisely why it was unbearable. If he condemned her, she would know what to do. If he stepped away, he would confirm the world she knew. But he stood there. Close. Calm. As though he saw in her not a place of ruin, but a battlefield to which he had come to save someone.

“Don't come closer,” she said.

“Why?”

“I'll hurt you.”

“No,” he said.

“You don't know that.”

“I do.”

Then resistance rose within her. Not her own. Old, furious, animal. Her mouth opened, but the words that emerged were no plea.

“What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth?”

The crowd gasped.

Mary heard her own voice and did not recognize it. Shame flooded her like hot blood. She wanted to throw herself to the ground, cover her mouth, disappear. But Jesus did not move.

“Enough,” he said.

The one word was quiet, yet Mary felt as though the whole sky had passed through it.

Some had expected shouting. Incantations. A grand gesture. Something they could recount beside the fire that evening.

But Jesus merely stood before her, speaking with the authority of one who does not ask darkness for permission.

“You will not dwell in her any longer.”

Mary bent as though someone had placed a great stone upon her shoulders. A sob escaped her throat, then a scream, then nothing. She fell to her knees and caught herself on her hands. Dust clung to her palms. She felt the voices going out inside her, one by one.

The first resisted with rage.

The second with mockery.

The third with fear.

The fourth with memories.

The fifth with shame.

The sixth with despair.

And the seventh—the silent one—held on longest. It said nothing. It only dragged her back toward emptiness, toward the familiar cold where hope was unnecessary because hope was merely another kind of pain.

Jesus knelt beside her.

“Mary,” he said.

Her name.

Jesus spoke her name alone, without the nicknames, accusations, and everything others had attached to it over the years.

Mary.

And in that instant the last emptiness within her tore apart.

It was not a scream. More like an inhalation. The first real breath she had drawn in years.

She smelled the lake. Felt dust beneath her hands and the sun's warmth on the back of her neck. Heard birds. People. Waves. And beneath it all, silence—not the dead silence of the seventh demon, but the silence after a storm, in which life was possible.

She began to cry.

She wept with the relief of someone for whom a locked room has been opened and who has been told: Come out. You don't have to stay inside anymore.

Jesus did not immediately place a hand upon her head. He stayed beside her and waited until her breathing settled.

Then he touched her shoulder with the simplicity of a brother.

“You are free,” he said.

Mary did not understand.

Freedom was a word for men without debts. For nations not ruled by Rome. For birds over the lake. Not for her.

“What should I do now?” she asked.

Jesus smiled slightly.

“Live.”

The answer almost angered her. It was too simple. Too difficult.

“I don't know how.”

“You'll learn.”

“People will remember.”

“Yes.”

“They'll talk.”

“Yes.”

“They'll be afraid.”

“Some of them.”

“And you?”

“I know who you are.”

Mary looked at him, relief and disbelief mingling in her face. She seemed afraid that every kind word might crumble with the next breath. As though she had spent her

whole life standing on ground that opened beneath her, and now, for the first time, did not know what to do with solid earth under her feet.

Jesus held out his hand.

Mary stared at it for a moment.

His palm was warm, firm, ordinary. The hand of a man who walked roads, touched the sick, broke bread, and lifted children from the ground. There was no ostentatious power in it. And yet, when he reached for her, Mary felt as though all the mercy in the world were bending down toward her.

Slowly she placed her hand in his.

He rose first and helped her to her feet.

And that was when something happened that no one else noticed as keenly as they did.

Mary should have released his hand. She was standing now. She no longer needed to hold on. The crowd was beginning to move again. The disciples breathed easier. A woman brought water. A child who had hidden behind his mother's cloak a moment before now peered out at her with curiosity.

But Mary's hand moved of its own accord.

Instead of letting go, she placed three fingers against the inside of Jesus' wrist.

Gently.

Precisely.

Like someone who has known a gesture long before learning it.

Jesus stopped short.

It lasted only an instant. So brief that Peter saw only that the woman had touched the Master's hand. John noticed only that Jesus had fallen silent for a moment. Joanna, standing nearby, merely thought Mary had not yet recovered completely. The crowd saw the end of a strange event that would be discussed throughout the town by evening.

But Jesus felt the touch.

Three fingers upon his wrist.

And with that touch came something belonging neither to this shore, nor this day, nor this body.

Mary whispered:

“Do not go alone.”

She frightened herself with the words.

They had escaped before she could understand them. She looked at him as though she wished to apologize, but did not know for what. Confusion filled her eyes. Not shame or fear of the crowd, but the profound astonishment of someone who has spoken a sentence from a dream they never remembered having.

“I don't know why I said that,” she whispered.

Jesus did not answer immediately.

He looked down at his wrist, where he could still feel the pressure of her three fingers. Then he looked at her.

Something shifted in his face so subtly that an inattentive observer might have called it compassion. But it was not only compassion. There was pain, wonder, and a quiet recognition he was not yet willing to admit even to himself.

“Perhaps you remembered something you cannot yet name,” he said.

Mary held her breath.

“What?”

Jesus glanced toward the lake. Light broke upon the water and the wind brought the smell of fish, salt, and wet ropes. Everything was ordinary. Yet for an instant he felt that another door had opened somewhere beyond this ordinary world.

He saw nothing clearly.

Only a flash.

A woman walking at his side.

The street, the lake, even the names were different.

But the same eyes.

The same touch.

Three fingers against his wrist.

And the same sentence, spoken long ago, in different dust, beneath another sky:

Do not go alone.

Then the image vanished.

Jesus looked again at Mary of Magdala.

“Of faithfulness,” he said at last.

Mary did not understand.

But the word remained within her.

Faithfulness.

It remained like a road the soul chooses before it knows what price it will pay to travel it.

Mary lowered her eyes.

“Forgive me,” she said. “I didn't mean to—”

“I know.”

“It was strange.”

“Yes.”

“I'm afraid of it.”

Jesus smiled faintly, but there was no lightness in the smile.

“Even things that come from God can frighten us.”

Mary looked at him.

“Did it come from God?”

Jesus remained silent.

Somewhere behind them a child cried out. The disciples began moving again. The crowd seemed to draw breath, as though the world were returning to its ordinary boundaries.

Yet something remained between the two of them that did not fit within those boundaries.

The woman who had been standing near the disciples approached Mary and offered her water.

Mary took the vessel in both hands and drank slowly. The water was warm and tasted of clay. It was the best water she had ever tasted.

“What is your name?” the woman asked softly.

Mary hesitated, as though she had to learn her name all over again.

“Mary.”

“I'm Joanna.”

Mary nodded. She remembered the name. Later she would remember others. Susanna. Salome. Mary the mother of James. Women who carried food, money, news, fears, and faith. Women who would not always stand at the front, but would be there when many others disappeared.

“Will you go home?” Joanna asked.

Mary looked toward the town.

Magdala stood where it always had. Houses, streets, the market, eyes behind curtains. A place where people knew her by her worst days. A place where every wall carried an echo of something she wanted to leave behind.

Then she looked at Jesus.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“To other towns,” he said. “To proclaim the kingdom of God.”

“And do you take people like me with you?”

Jesus looked at her as though the question saddened him.

“Especially people like you.”

Mary lowered her head.

She did not yet know where that road would lead. She did not know she would listen to parables that she could not understand at once, but that would ripen inside her like seed. She did not know she would see the blind opening their eyes, the lame rising, the proud walking away offended, and the poor straightening their backs.

She did not know that one day she would follow him all the way to Jerusalem.

That she would stand near the cross when many scattered.

That she would see where they laid his body.

That she would go to the tomb in the darkness, carrying grief so immense that it would seem as though all seven demons might return—and yet they would not.

That she would weep in a garden, searching for the dead, until the living man addressed her just as he had today:

Mary.

And that then she would recognize him.

For now she knew only that her inner world was quiet.

Jesus turned to the people. Some still waited for him to explain what had happened. But he merely said:

“The kingdom of God has come near.”

Mary stood a little more firmly.

Her knees still shook. Her hair was disheveled, her face wet with tears, her hands dusty. She looked like someone who had lost a struggle.

But for the first time in many years, she felt that she had won it.

Joanna helped straighten her cloak.

Mary looked at her and tried to offer thanks, but the words caught in her throat. She could still feel the warmth of Jesus' wrist upon her fingers. She could still hear her own whisper.

Do not go alone.

She did not know where the words had come from. She did not know why they seemed both foreign and her own. But she knew she would never be free of them. From now on they would live inside her like a small flame cupped against the wind.

Jesus was already walking along the shore.

The disciples moved after him. The crowd slowly dissolved into groups, voices, and speculation. Some still avoided looking at Mary. Others stared too long. One man whispered to another about a miracle. A woman wept. A child smiled without knowing why.

Mary stood between the town and the road.

Behind her was Magdala.

Before her was Jesus.

She looked back once more. Not because she wanted to stay. Rather, to see the place she was leaving as a different person.

And then she noticed that Jesus had stopped.

He did not turn completely, only inclined his head slightly, as though he knew she was still standing at the place where a person must decide something greater than which road to take.

Their gazes met again.

For a moment Mary felt that nothing between them had happened for the first time. That this road had existed somewhere before. That he had walked ahead of her elsewhere, and she had stood with the same question in her throat.

Shall I go?

Shall I stay?

And that even then, in that invisible before, she had made the same decision.

She took the first step.

Then the second.

And discovered that the silence within her walked beside her.

When she joined the others, Peter glanced at her briefly and looked away. There was no contempt in it, only the uncertainty of someone who did not yet know what to

do with grace when it was bestowed upon another. John made room for her. Joanna walked at her side.

Jesus went ahead of them.

Mary watched his hands moving as he walked. One of them had touched her life a moment before and drawn it out of darkness. Nothing showed upon his wrist. No mark from her fingers. No sign. No proof.

And yet she knew something remained there.

Not on the skin.

Deeper.

Perhaps in him.

Perhaps in her.

Perhaps somewhere between them, where paths meet that people call coincidence because they do not know their true name.

The sun sank over the lake. Magdala faded behind them into dust and light. Before them, the road wound into the hills.

Mary did not know what awaited her.

But for the first time, she was not only afraid of what might come.

She was also afraid that it might be good.

And there was a strange sweetness in that fear.

She kept walking.

She walked on, and the story of the woman known for her demons remained behind her.

The town she had once fled receded into the distance.

She still did not understand what it meant to follow a prophet whom people would one day hate.

Now she walked as someone who had been called by name.

And far ahead of her, though still unseen, another garden and another night were already waiting: another moment when the memory of this day would return to Jesus with such force that he would understand what he could now only sense.

That Mary of Magdala had not come to him for the first time.

That some souls do not know each other because they have met.

They meet because they have known each other before.

Author's note: *This chapter was written after studying the accounts of Mary Magdalene's life in the New Testament. The first meeting between Jesus and Mary Magdalene is not unambiguously described in the available sources. The version portrayed here is what I consider the most plausible account of their first acquaintance, apart from details I introduced to make the meeting fit within the novel's larger narrative.*

5. ELARION: NITRA, CAPITAL OF THE UNION

Nitra was not the oldest city on Elarion, but it behaved as though it were.

It lay beside the river of the same name. The river flowed through the city like memory, slower than the transit lanes above it, quieter than the computing towers along its banks. Nitra's old stone heart had survived even as transparent domes, vertical districts, consular parks, autonomous transport routes, and towers of financial nodes rose around it.

In Nitra, the old was never demolished. It was merely surrounded by the new.

And so a person could stand on a square paved seven hundred years before and watch ships departing overhead for the orbital ring.

That day the city wore a festive air. Transparent messages shifted slowly across the façades of public buildings:

Work after work. Value after wages. Humanity after automation.

The Union had convened a major public forum on the future of income.

It was hardly the first forum about universal basic income—UBI. Such debates had continued for decades: first as academic provocation, then as social experiment, then as campaign slogan, and finally as a necessity politicians kept trying to postpone.

This time there was little room left for postponement.

Automated production had crossed a threshold economists once considered theoretical. In some Union regions, fewer than forty percent of adults worked in the traditional sense. Not because they refused to. Because their work was no longer needed.

Machines grew food, built houses, sorted goods, kept accounts, translated, diagnosed, inspected, taught, and even composed music so cheaply that human labor had begun to look more like a cultural choice than an economic necessity.

But the bills remained human.

Rent.

Food.

Care.

Education.

Medical treatment.

Dignity.

And so representatives of states, banks, consortia, universities, citizens' councils, family archives, and off-world administrations gathered in Nitra. The Union Council's great chamber formed a semicircle. Above every speaker appeared their name, state, lineage, institution, and the extent of their disclosed interests.

Some names had long lists beneath them.

Others had suspiciously short ones.

Jesair Davion sat in the third row, not as a politician, but as an invited representative of the Aurelian family councils. He disliked these events. Not because he rejected politics, but because politics had a peculiar talent for turning real suffering into a concept, the concept into a committee, and the committee into a report no one would ever read.

As a boy, he had once stood beside the bed of a sick relative whom his family had brought to the Davion house. An elder ordered him to place his hand upon the man's forehead. Jesair obeyed, because he was fourteen and everyone was waiting. When the man's condition worsened, someone suggested waiting a little longer to see whether the family's gift might manifest itself.

Jesair himself called for a medical unit. The man survived an operation that took place without Jesair present. A month later the family chronicle recorded a sentence about the young Davion's touch; the physician who performed the operation was not named. For the first time, Jesair understood how easily a story about a miracle could conceal the work of an actual human being.

Mareia Lioren sat beside him.

They had not known each other long. In truth, it would be difficult to say they knew each other at all. They had met at two meetings about medical archives and once in the garden of a Selenite school, where Mareia spoke to children about the memory of their lineages. What Jesair remembered most from that encounter was her silence. It was not empty. It was precise.

When someone said something foolish, Mareia did not offer a polite smile.

She simply looked at them until they began to hear their own words.

“Do you think they'll make a decision today?” she asked quietly.

Jesair looked toward the platform, where the first speaker was preparing.

“No. Today everyone will explain why a decision is not yet possible.”

Mareia smiled faintly.

“That sounds like experience talking.”

“That sounds like Nitra.”

A Veyran named Daren Voltr took the platform. He chaired the Northern Alliance Monetary Council and was among the finest speakers of his generation. His voice had the calm of a man who had never needed to hurry because others always waited for him.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he began, “no one in this chamber disputes that automation has transformed the foundations of our social contract. The question is not whether citizens should receive a share of what our civilization produces. The question is who will calculate that share, in what currency, under whose supervision, and at what cost.”

Charts appeared on the walls.

Forty states.

Thirty active currencies.

Exchange-rate bands.

Stabilization mechanisms.

Export arrangements.

Debt balances.

“A currency,” Daren Voltr continued, “is not merely a unit of account. Currency is the steering wheel of a state. Hand that wheel to one planetary institution and regions will lose the ability to respond to their own conditions. Devaluation is not always a crime. Sometimes it is how a weaker state survives. Exchange-rate volatility is not always manipulation. Sometimes it is a shock absorber.”

A murmur of approval rose in the hall.

Jesair felt the atmosphere shifting around him. Veyrans knew how to speak of power so that it sounded like responsibility. And often it really was responsibility. That was their strength.

But the word *value* brought to his mind a sentence he had known since childhood.

When the time for a common endeavor is ripe, value must no longer walk in shadow. What serves all must be visible to all.

It belonged to the oldest surviving Aurelian texts. It was read at family gatherings, at the taking of vows, and during disputes over common ownership. Some regarded it as a religious commandment. Others claimed it was merely a relic of the distant time when Aurelians lived in small communities and had to show one another their stores if they were to survive the winter.

For a long time, Jesair had understood it primarily in spiritual terms. Value meant truth, honor, sacrifice—everything a person gave to others without expecting a reward. Shadow meant lies, selfishness, and hidden intention.

Only in recent months had he begun to be haunted by the possibility that the old text might also be entirely literal.

Perhaps its authors had meant not only the worth of a person, but the value a person created and someone else appropriated. Perhaps the common endeavor was not merely a temple, a family, or a community. Perhaps it was an entire civilization.

Elarion produced its wealth using knowledge accumulated over thousands of years. Its machines drew upon public infrastructure, the planet's energy, research paid for by generations long dead, and data from billions of people. Yet the resulting value vanished into private ledgers, currency conversions, and chains of ownership that ended in names the public often did not even know.

What serves all must be visible to all.

Power that decided how others lived.

Property presented as a social necessity.

Profit from which everyone's share was supposed to be calculated.

Jesair was not certain the ancient text had meant any of this. Old words could be made to serve almost any present-day cause. That was precisely why he distrusted people who turned Aurelian chronicles into infallible prophecy.

Even so, he could not shake the feeling that the time for a common endeavor had finally come.

And that value was still walking in shadow.

Next came a Selenite woman from southern Amenia, the planet's largest western continent. She spoke of people from whom automation had taken not only wages, but also the rhythm of their days, their social bonds, and their sense of being needed. She showed testimonies from men and women who had worked all their lives and were now told that civilization had grown more efficient by replacing them.

“When someone loses work,” she said, “they lose more than income. They lose proof that the world needs them. UBI must not be merely a financial mechanism. It must be part of a new definition of dignity.”

Then came the economists.

Then the lawyers.

Then representatives of the production AIs.

Their speeches were precise, balanced, and exhausting.

Mareia leaned toward Jesair.

“Have you noticed that everyone talks about calculating people's share, but no one wants to show the entire basis for the calculation?”

Jesair nodded.

“Because the entire basis for the calculation is power.”

“And power doesn't like being seen?”

“Power likes being seen. But only from the front.”

Mareia looked at him, holding his gaze a little longer for the first time.

“And from behind?”

“That's where the hands are.”

A young Union minister had just begun to speak on the platform. He was Aurelian, though the golden ring in his eyes was not visible. He spoke about the need for fair UBI, social peace, and the importance of citizens trusting institutions.

Nerai Sael sat high on a side analytics gallery. From there she had access to the debate's live data layers. She could see names, institutions, funding sources, counterparties, historical connections, grants, public declarations, and chains of ownership—everything that was available.

Which was exactly why what was unavailable troubled her.

Three layers were missing from Daren Voltr's profile. The information was not illegal or classified as a criminal secret; it was simply protected. Commercial interests. Cross-border monetary consultations. Undisclosed advisory contracts.

Nerai flagged all three.

Not because she suspected Voltr of anything in particular. But because the architecture of invisibility always began this way: not with a crime, but with an exception.

Down in the chamber, the debate approached its heart.

“UBI without monetary unity will be unequal,” said one of the Union economists. “Every state will distribute a different share, calculate different production, conceal different profits, and adjust its currency to serve its own political needs.”

“And UBI with monetary unity,” replied a Veyran from a financial consortium, “will be a centralized allowance that citizens receive in exchange for obedience to a planetary accounting machine.”

“No,” a voice came from the rear rows. “It will be a share.”

The hall fell silent.

The voice did not belong to a politician. It belonged to Jesair.

He had not intended to speak. He had not asked for the floor. The sentence had escaped before he could stop it.

His name appeared on the walls: Jesair Davion, Auriola Family Council, independent delegate.

Several people turned.

The name Davion always changed something in a room. The shift was too subtle for any minutes to record, but old myths cast long shadows.

The chair gave him the floor.

Jesair stood.

For a moment, he saw the words of the old text again. Not engraved on stone or copied into a family chronicle, but hovering above the chamber among the charts, names, and data.

When the time for a common endeavor is ripe, value must no longer walk in shadow.

Perhaps people had interpreted those words too narrowly for centuries. Perhaps they had waited for a spiritual fulfillment while an accounting question stood before them—no less sacred for being about money.

“An allowance is what those in power give from above,” he said. “A share is what belongs to a person by virtue of being part of a civilization. If machines create value from the knowledge, infrastructure, history, and energy of an entire planet, then that value does not arise solely in the hands of the machines' owners. It arises from everyone's inheritance.”

He paused.

“One of the oldest Aurelian texts says: When the time for a common endeavor is ripe, value must no longer walk in shadow. What serves all must be visible to all.”

Several people shifted in their seats. Some knew the quotation. Others heard only ancient religious words inserted into a modern political debate.

“For a long time I thought it spoke only of individual morality,” Jesair continued. “Today I'm no longer sure. Civilization has become a common endeavor in a more literal sense than our ancestors could have imagined. Our machines use shared knowledge. Our economy stands on shared infrastructure. Our production is the work of the living and the dead. If it is to serve everyone, then we must be able to see where its value arises, where it goes, and who decides what happens to it.”

He turned toward the data on the walls.

“You cannot calculate a fair share in the dark. If citizens cannot see the basis on which their share is calculated, they are not receiving justice. They are receiving reassurance.”

The chamber went quiet.

Not in agreement. Rather, with something dangerous.

Daren Voltr gave a slight smile.

There was no contempt in it. It was the satisfaction of a man who had finally heard a proposition large enough to dismantle.

“Very well,” he said. “Let us accept your distinction between an allowance and a share. Let us even accept that people have the right to know the basis on which that share is calculated. What, then, do you propose? How will you ensure that the inputs for the calculation are complete, transparent, and verifiable?”

The currency-exchange graphs vanished from the chamber walls. They were replaced by a diagram of planetary production.

Energy.

Land.

Automated factories.

Public research.

Private patents.

Data archives.

Off-world mining.

Millions of nodes were joined by lines that crossed state borders, currencies, and ownership structures. Some were clear. Others disappeared into a tangle of funds, banks, and companies with no publicly known owner.

Jesair studied them for a moment.

“You cannot calculate everyone's share from data known only to a chosen few,” he said. “And you cannot verify a system's fairness while its decisive components remain concealed behind bank secrecy, trade secrecy, or monetary sovereignty.”

“That still isn't a proposal,” Voltr objected.

“It's the beginning of one.”

Jesair looked up at the diagram.

“Value must not walk in shadow. If we want to know what value has been created on Elarion, who created it, who appropriated it, and how much belongs to others, then we must be able to see it move.”

Several low voices sounded in the chamber.

“Financial flows across the planet should therefore be transparent to a considerable extent,” Jesair continued. “Not only government spending. Not only politicians' accounts and public institutions' contracts. The movement of large amounts of private capital must also be visible. Ownership links. Ultimate beneficiaries. Transfers between currencies. Financing of political influence. Purchases of infrastructure, land, media, research, and technologies capable of changing millions of lives.”

On the analytics gallery, Nerai stopped writing.

She had expected proposals for better registries, stricter audits, or standardized production reporting. Jesair had instead challenged the boundary between public and private finance itself.

Voltr remained composed.

“All financial flows?”

“I said to a considerable extent.”

“A very convenient qualification.”

“An essential one. Someone buying food or medicine does not thereby decide the fate of the planet. Someone buying a chain of hospitals, controlling the energy supply, or beginning to finance a political movement is no longer making decisions that affect only themselves.”

“And who decides where the line falls between small and large?”

“Society.”

Voltr smiled.

“Society decides nothing. Institutions make decisions in its name.”

“Then those institutions must be transparent too.”

A brief, nervous laugh moved through the room.

Voltr let it fade.

“And what about privacy?” he asked. “Do you want every citizen to be able to see every other citizen's accounts? Where they shop, whom they help, whom they support, where they go, and what they might be ashamed of?”

The question hung above the hall.

It was simpler than all that had come before. And for that reason more dangerous.

Jesair paused.

“Privacy has served a purpose,” he said. “And it still does. It protects a person's intimate life—their family, health, relationships, convictions, and the space in which they owe the public no explanation.”

“So you agree with me.”

“Not entirely.”

Jesair rested his hand on the back of the seat in front of him.

“Much of financial privacy did not emerge to protect people from other people. It emerged to protect people from power. From a corrupt state, an arbitrary ruler, or an institution capable of turning every piece of information against them.”

He looked at the national delegates in the front rows.

“In a society with an opaque state, privacy may be the last refuge of freedom. But if we want to build a society in which power itself is transparent, we must ask whether that same shadow still protects the weak—or whether it now more often protects the strong.”

No one laughed this time.

“Ordinary people don't want strangers tracking every purchase they make,” Jesair continued. “But when wealth and transactions exceed a certain threshold, privacy ceases to be a matter of personal life alone.”

“Why?”

“Because great wealth is not merely a private matter.”

Several consortium representatives shifted in their seats.

“Great wealth means the ability to change prices, working conditions, land ownership, the shape of cities, research, media, and sometimes even laws. Beyond a certain point, the issue is no longer simply what a person owns. It is what that person can do to others through that ownership.”

Voltr folded his arms.

“And for that he should lose his privacy?”

“For that, the extent of his power should be visible.”

“That's a distinction in terminology alone.”

“No. Intimacy and power are not the same thing.”

Jesair's voice remained calm.

“No one needs to know what you ordered for dinner, whom you sent a personal gift, or where you spent the night. But society has a right to know that through ten funds you acquired a controlling interest in its water supply. It has a right to know

that a company funding a political party belongs to the same owner as a consortium to which that party awards public contracts. It has a right to know that profit declared in one state was made in another and vanished in a third."

An anonymized ownership chain appeared on the walls. One business passed through fourteen companies, six states, and three off-world jurisdictions, until its ultimate owner disappeared into a private fund.

"The privacy of the powerful often protects the machinery itself."

Voltr studied the diagram.

"And you want everyone to see every part of that machinery?"

"I want every significant concentration of power to leave a visible trail."

"In real time?"

Jesair hesitated for an instant.

"Soon enough that transparency does not become merely archaeology."

Unease spread through the chamber.

"So you don't mean accounting transparency at the end of the year," Voltr said. "You mean ongoing visibility into large financial flows."

"Yes."

"And who will watch those flows? The state? The Monetary Council? A planetary bank?"

"None of those institutions alone."

"Then who?"

Jesair looked around the hall.

"I don't yet know precisely what form such a system should take. But I know what it must not be. It must not belong to a single government, bank, state, or race. It must not function like an eye that sees everyone while remaining invisible itself."

Mareia looked at him.

Jesair was defending more than the transparency of money. He was searching for a way to make the very act of watching transparent.

"Every inspection must leave a trace," he continued. "If an institution investigates a person, that person must know which institution did so. If an analytical system flags a transaction as risky, its decision rules must be open to scrutiny. If someone receives an exemption from disclosure, it must be visible that the exemption exists, who authorized it, and when it expires."

Nerai leaned slightly forward.

This was no ordinary registry. It was a system of reciprocal visibility. The money would be visible to those who monitored it, but those monitors would be visible to the people they monitored.

Voltr did not yield.

“And a criminal?” he asked. “Should he know he's being investigated too?”

“Yes.”

A murmur rippled through the hall.

“Then he'll move his money.”

“If he can move it so that it disappears, the system has already failed.”

“He'll destroy the evidence.”

“A financial flow that has already been recorded must not be capable of being destroyed.”

“He'll conceal his intentions.”

“Intentions can always be concealed. But we cannot protect power simply because transparency cannot read minds.”

Voltr paused.

For the first time, he was not smiling.

“Do you know what you're describing?”

“Not entirely.”

“You're describing the end of bank secrecy.”

“In its present form, perhaps.”

“The end of much commercial confidentiality.”

“If commercial confidentiality hides power over other people's lives, then perhaps that too.”

“And perhaps the end of national monetary sovereignty.”

Jesair looked at the symbols of dozens of currencies displayed above the platform.

“If monetary sovereignty means the right to conceal the information used to determine your own citizens' standard of living, then yes.”

Silence settled over the hall.

This time it was not merely dangerous.

It was hostile.

Jesair felt the gazes in the front rows changing. A moment earlier, he had been a representative of an ancient Aurelian family whom it was polite to hear out. Now he

was a man questioning the very powers upon which entire states, banks, and consortia stood.

Voltr sat down.

The chair prepared to recognize the next delegate, but no one asked to speak.

The diagram of planetary financial flows remained on the walls.

Millions of lines.

Some clear.

Others broken.

And many ending in darkness.

Mareia leaned toward Jesair.

“Do you realize you've just angered almost everyone on this planet who has more money than you?”

Jesair sat down.

“That won't have been difficult. I've never had much.”

“I doubt your modesty will reassure them.”

He looked at her.

“Do you think I've gone too far?”

Mareia glanced at the dark places on the diagram.

“No,” she said. “I think you've only shown them a direction.”

High above them, Nerai opened a new analytical record.

She did not enter Jesair's name as a suspect or a political risk. She wrote down only two sentences.

If a person's share in our common wealth is to be fair, no value can remain invisible.

If financial power is to be held accountable, we must be able to see not only the movement of money, but also everyone who watches it.

She saved the record.

She did not know that she would return to it several years later.

At a time when the question would no longer be whether value should be allowed to walk in shadow.

But how many lives a shadow could conceal.

At the opposite end of the chamber, in the financial consortia's guest section, sat Arien Korveth.

He did not look at Jesair as though he were merely a speaker.

His eyes moved briefly to Mareia and then back to the man standing in the middle of the hall. There was something in his gaze more personal than political disagreement or the concern of a financier whose interests might be harmed by a new idea.

Arien looked like a man who had been struck somewhere private.

A few seats away sat Kael Thorne.

His name appeared above no speaker's station. He represented neither a state nor a political party, and he did not officially speak for any financial house. Yet the presidents of banks knew him, as did the managers of the largest funds and the people who decided which politicians would be given a path to power.

Throughout Jesair's speech, Kael had been watching more than the speaker.

He watched the hall.

He knew that the true meaning of words often appeared not on the face of the person speaking them, but on the faces of those they struck. He saw the unease of fund managers, the caution of monetary council officials, and the quiet amusement of politicians convinced that Jesair's ideas would evaporate long before they became law.

But Kael was not amused.

When Jesair said that what served all must be visible to all, Kael felt such a surge of fear that for a moment he imagined the hall had fallen silent for him alone.

Few people knew it, but much of his power existed precisely because no one could see it as a whole. Banks knew his funds, but not their ultimate owners. Politicians knew the donors to their foundations, but not the origin of the money. Party administrators saw accounts but not the chains connecting them. Officials knew individual companies, but not the house to which all of them led back.

Transparency would mean more than new rules.

For Kael, it would mean exposure.

It would reveal assets hidden behind trustees and foundations. Money that had escaped taxation. Parties that publicly hated one another while secretly drawing support from the same sources. Deals that looked legal although their original capital came from places polite society did not discuss.

Jesair had done more than propose an economic reform.

Without knowing it, he had pronounced judgment on the world Kael had spent his life building.

Kael was terrified.

Not because he believed transparency would arrive tomorrow. Laws could be delayed, committees overwhelmed, and the public exhausted. Something else was frightening: Jesair's words were simple. People could understand them. And an idea people understood could only be suppressed until it was spoken by someone they were willing to trust.

Then he noticed Arien.

He saw the muscles in Arien's jaw tighten whenever he looked at Jesair. Saw his gaze settle briefly on Mareia. Saw his expression change every time the hall gave Jesair its attention.

Arien feared more than Jesair's idea.

He had a problem with Jesair himself.

Kael looked away before Arien could notice that he was being watched.

On the platform, the chair thanked Jesair for his contribution. The hall slowly returned to its usual procedures, as though nothing fundamental had happened. The next speaker was already waiting, and fresh graphs were appearing on the walls.

But Kael Thorne knew that certain moments could be recognized before they understood themselves.

Jesair Davion had just given a name to a world in which power would have to show its hands.

Kael knew what they would find on his.

And a few seats away sat a man who evidently wanted to silence Jesair for reasons far more personal.

Kael committed Arien's name to memory.

On her way home from the forum, Mareia switched on the evening news. One channel ran a headline beneath Jesair's face: DAVION WANTS TO SEE EVERY ACCOUNT. Another explained the difference between buying food and owning a hospital. A third had invited a banking representative who insisted that no reliable dividing line could ever be drawn between the two.

“I was talking about the extent of power,” Jesair said in a short clip. The presenter cut him off. “So you were talking about the extent of privacy?”

Mareia turned off the broadcast. She was due to meet him at the medical archives the following morning. She already knew the first question she would ask.

6. EARTH: JUDAS'S KISS

For a long time Judas believed that a man could master himself if he shut himself away firmly enough.

He had known the words of the Law since childhood. He knew what was clean and what was unclean. He knew the shame that was never spoken aloud, only carried in the body like a hidden wound. In the synagogue he listened to men speak of the sins of the Gentiles, of depraved cities, of desires God despised. Each time, he lowered his head a little farther than the others so that no one could see how closely he was listening.

He had never allowed himself to name what lived inside him.

Not because he did not know. Quite the opposite. He had known since he was young and began noticing things he was not supposed to notice: the nape of a man's neck bent over his work, the strength of hands pulling in a net, the voice of an older teacher who spoke to him more kindly than to the others. It always came suddenly, like a wave of heat, and terror followed close behind.

No.

Not this.

Not me.

He learned to live so that nothing showed. He learned to speak sensibly, stand straight, and meet another person's eyes only as long as it was safe. He learned to despise weakness, because his own frightened him most. When other men joked about women, he smiled at precisely the right moment. When they spoke of marriage, he steered the conversation toward money, Rome, the Temple—anything substantial that did not smell of secrets.

Then he met Jesus.

And everything he had kept buried under a stone for years began to move.

It was not physical at first. At least that was how Judas explained it to himself. First there was respect. Then admiration. Then gratitude. Then something he could still call loyalty. Jesus spoke his name as though there were no impurity concealed behind it. He looked at Judas without disgust, without mockery, without that peculiar suspicion among men which Judas had feared all his life.

And that was precisely what made it dangerous.

Jesus' purity was not hard like a stone wall. It was open. In its presence a person felt not only guilt, but also the possibility of being seen in his entirety without being destroyed. To the others, it was comfort. To Judas, temptation.

The ordinary days were the worst.

An evening beside the fire, when Jesus sat tired, his cloak slipping from one shoulder while the light quietly traced his face. A morning when he washed his hands and water ran down his wrists. Moments on the road when another disciple leaned too close to ask a question. At such times Judas felt something rising within his chest and immediately stamped it down with prayer.

Lord, take this shame away from me.

But the shame did not leave.

It merely learned to be silent.

One evening, after a long day in a village where the sick and the desperate had pressed around Jesus, Judas remained awake. The others lay under a shelter, sleeping the heavy sleep of exhausted men. Peter snored. Thomas turned toward the wall in his sleep. John lay with his cloak pulled up to his chin, peaceful, as though the world had never been his enemy.

Judas watched him for a while and hated that peace.

Then he saw Jesus go outside.

He followed him.

He told himself he needed to talk about money. About the next day's journey. About the danger growing around them. There was always some sensible reason. A person needs sensible reasons when he is being led by something he is afraid to admit.

Jesus stood beside a low wall behind the house. Night lay over the countryside, dark and warm. A dog barked in the distance. Insects sounded somewhere beyond the olive trees. Jesus rested his hands on the stone and lowered his head, as though he were praying even in silence.

“Rabbi,” Judas said.

Jesus turned.

“Judas.”

His name struck him. It always did. As though Jesus spoke it without any of the layers Judas had piled upon himself.

“You shouldn't be alone,” Judas said.

Jesus regarded him calmly.

“And you?”

“I'm not sleeping.”

“I can see that.”

Judas gave a short, hard laugh.

“You always see.”

Jesus said nothing.

Judas felt he should leave. He still could. He only had to say something ordinary, turn around, return to the others, and carry on in the morning as though nothing had happened. He had saved himself that way all his life: by withdrawing at the last moment.

But that night he was tired of his own cage.

“Do you know what you awaken in people?” he asked.

Jesus did not move.

“What have I awakened in you?”

Judas' throat tightened.

The question was not an accusation. That made it worse. Jesus asked it as though what stood before him was not a sin but a man at the edge of an abyss.

“I don't want to talk about it.”

“Then why did you come?”

Judas looked aside. At the wall. At the darkness. At his hands.

“Because I can't bear it anymore.”

Jesus' expression changed. It softened without weakening.

“What can't you bear?”

Judas exhaled sharply.

“What's inside me.”

For a moment the silence was so deep that he could hear the blood in his ears.

“I've prayed all my life for it to go away,” he continued. “All my life I've been careful. With my eyes. My words. My hands. Where I stand. Whom I avoid. Whom I never approach. I thought that when I came to you, I would become clean.”

Jesus listened without interrupting.

“And instead it's worse,” Judas said. “It's worse when I'm with you.”

Jesus lowered his eyes, as though the words had hurt him.

“Judas…”

“No,” he interrupted. “Don't say my name like that. Don't say it as if I could still be someone else.”

“You can.”

“I can't.”

“You can stop.”

Judas shuddered. Whether from anger, pain, or hope, it was impossible to tell.

“You speak like someone who doesn't know what it's like to carry something forbidden inside him.”

“I know what temptation is.”

“Not this.”

The words came out more sharply than he intended. But he did not take them back.

Jesus stood very quietly before him.

“I am not your judge in this moment,” he said.

Judas laughed, almost desperately now.

“You of all people are my judge. If you looked at me with disgust, it would be simple. If you drove me away, I would know what I was. But you look at me as though I still belong among you.”

“You do.”

“Not in the way I want.”

The words frightened him as soon as he said them.

There was no retreat left.

Sorrow filled Jesus' face.

“Judas, this is not the way.”

“What way?”

“Wanting to possess another person.”

“I don't want to possess you.”

Even as he said it, he knew he was lying.

He wanted Jesus' gaze. His voice. His undivided attention. He wanted Jesus, just once, to stop belonging to everyone: the sick, the children, the women, Peter, John, all Israel, God. He wanted one moment that would belong to him alone.

And that desire, locked away for so long, shed its shame faster than reason could restrain it.

He took a step toward him.

Jesus raised a hand, not as a threat, but as a boundary.

“Stay where you are.”

But Judas was no longer listening. Or perhaps he heard, and that was why he kept coming. He caught Jesus by the sleeve. Not violently, but urgently, like a drowning man clutching even someone he might pull beneath the water with him.

“Just once,” he whispered.

“No.”

The word was clear. Calm. Firm.

In that instant, Judas' vision darkened.

He leaned forward and kissed him.

The kiss held nothing of greeting or brotherly affection. Judas poured into it his hunger, despair, loneliness, self-loathing, longing for acceptance, and anger that he should have to beg for it. He kissed him fiercely, then again, as though the brevity of the first touch could not bear all that he had placed within it.

Jesus pushed him away.

Firmly, without striking him and without hatred, he pushed Judas back until Judas understood at once: there was no opening, no possibility, no perhaps.

Jesus' hands rested on his shoulders.

“Enough.”

Judas was breathing hard. His face was flushed and pale at once. His eyes shone, but he did not cry. Not yet.

“So it is true after all,” he said.

“No.”

“You reject me.”

“I reject what you did.”

“It's the same thing.”

“It isn't.”

“Not for you!” Judas burst out. “You always divide things so that you can remain pure. Sin and the sinner. Desire and action. Mercy and boundaries. But I am not divided. When you push this away, you push me away.”

Jesus still held his shoulders, but his voice remained quiet.

“You are not the thing tearing you apart.”

“But I am the one who wants.”

“And no person is obliged to surrender to your desire.”

The sentence fell between them like a stone.

Judas stared at him.

In that moment he understood the boundary completely. It stood before him as solid as a closed door.

Everything within him first collapsed inward. Then it began to change.

Shame became anger.

Anger became accusation.

Accusation became wounded pride.

He stepped back.

Jesus let him go.

“Judas,” he said, more urgently now, “don't face this alone.”

But Judas heard only humiliation. In those words he heard: You are weak. You are dangerous. You need help. He heard everything except what was truly there.

“Don't face this alone,” he echoed mockingly. “And whom am I supposed to be with? You? Near you? Beside you? As one of many?”

Jesus was silent.

“Is that your love?” Judas continued, his voice hardening. “To give a man enough light to see his own misery, but not enough warmth to keep him from freezing?”

“What you ask of me is not love.”

Judas flinched as though struck.

“Then give it a name.”

Jesus did not answer at once.

And in that brief silence Judas felt more destroyed than ever. For he knew that Jesus could have spoken the words of the Law. He could have condemned him as men condemned others in synagogues, in secret conversations between men, in the looks of those who were certain of their own purity. He could have driven him out, called him unclean, repulsive, perverse.

But Jesus did none of those things.

And nothing in Judas was soothed by it.

Quite the opposite.

If Jesus had not condemned him as a monster, then Judas had no excuse for becoming one. If Jesus had not cursed him, then everything Judas did from this moment onward would remain his own.

It was unbearable.

“You're cruel,” Judas said quietly.

Jesus moved a step toward him.

“No.”

“You are. Because you know what a person wants to hear, and you won't give it. You know what would break him, and you leave him standing. You know he needs you, and you tell him to stop.”

“Yes,” Jesus said. “If going further would hurt both you and me.”

Judas laughed. There was no softness left in it. Only bitterness.

“Don't worry. I won't touch you again.”

“Don't leave in anger.”

“Then how should I leave?”

Jesus looked at him for a long time.

“With the truth.”

Judas' expression closed.

“Keep your truth for those who are allowed to sit closer to you.”

Jesus understood.

“John has nothing to do with this.”

“Of course,” Judas said. “No one ever has anything to do with it. Only me.”

He turned away.

“Judas.”

He stopped, but did not look back.

“Your name does not mean shame.”

Judas stood in the dark and felt tears finally gathering in his eyes. He swallowed them so violently that his throat hurt.

“From tonight on, it does,” he said.

Then he left.

Jesus remained alone beside the wall.

Judas walked back slowly so that his legs would not tremble. When he entered the shelter, the others were still asleep. The world had not changed. Peter still snored. Thomas had not moved. John slept with a peaceful, almost childlike face.

Judas lay down in his place, but did not close his eyes.

His chest was burning.

First he repeated Jesus' words to himself, trying to understand them.

I reject what you did.

You are not the thing tearing you apart.

No person is obliged to surrender to your desire.

Then he began to change them.

I reject you.

You are unclean.

You will never be loved as you wish to be loved.

And in the end only one sentence remained, simple and hard, suited to surviving the pain:

He humiliated me.

He liked that sentence better than the truth.

For if Jesus had humiliated him, then Judas was no longer merely a man who had crossed a boundary. He had been harmed. Wronged. Injured. He had a right to anger.

And anger was easier than shame.

From that night onward, something inside him began to change.

Outwardly he remained the same disciple. In the morning he rose, picked up the money bag, counted the coins, and answered questions matter-of-factly. When Jesus spoke, he listened. When the others moved on, he went with them. Yet inwardly he now translated every gesture Jesus made into the language of rejection.

When Jesus laid a hand upon the sick, Judas saw the touch denied to him.

When Jesus smiled at a child, he saw tenderness that had passed him by.

When John sat close to Jesus, he saw a place forever forbidden to him.

And when Jesus spoke of loving one's enemies, Judas felt only a growing certainty that the greatest cruelty was to love everyone in such a way that no one could say: He is mine.

His frustration did not immediately rage aloud. At first it simmered quietly. Beneath his words. Beneath his service. Beneath the counted coins. Beneath his bowed head in prayer.

But it was there.

And it waited for the moment when it could call itself justice.

Author's note: *This chapter is entirely fictional. I wrote it because I found the financial motive for Judas' betrayal, as described in scripture, too shallow. The betrayal of one's own teacher seemed to me to require something far more fundamental to a person's very being than material gain alone. It is certainly not my intention to associate homosexuality with betrayal or anything similar. I chose this interpretation of one of history's best-known stories because it seemed to me that such a profound motivation could plausibly lead Judas to betrayal. In Jesus' time, homosexuality was regarded as unclean and contemptible; people living with such feelings faced extraordinary difficulties in that society. For that reason, I considered this a possible motivation. What actually happened is another matter, one we are unlikely ever to discover with certainty. Much of this novel is fictional, and this chapter should be read in that light as well.*

7. ELARION: THE GOLDEN RING

The House of Davion did not stand in Nitra.

It stood far from the capital, in Auriola, among the ancient Aurelian estates, where valleys opened onto broad green plateaus and the morning mist lingered so long against the ground that the countryside seemed reluctant to awaken all at once.

Its old walls lent the Davion house the appearance of a fortress.

Decisions made there in earlier times had shaped entire generations, and the place still carried the weight of a seat of power.

Yet the Davions thought of it above all as a home in the deepest sense: a place where walls guarded not only bodies, but memory.

Portraits of ancestors hung in the great hall. Not all were faithful likenesses. Some were reconstructions based on descriptions; others were artists' imaginings; others were so old that their pigments had darkened into a brown hush. In every portrait, however, the painter had tried to capture the eyes.

The golden ring.

In some, unmistakable.

In others, almost invisible.

In still others, only suggested.

Jesair Davion walked slowly through the hall. As a child he had avoided those portraits. He felt that they expected something of him. Not achievement, not obedience, not glory. Something worse: significance.

And significance was a heavier burden than duty.

He had known the old stories of the Davion line since childhood. It was said that the earliest of his ancestors could quiet an illness with a touch. That during droughts they stood beside rivers and the waters returned. That some saw death before it came and could redirect a person's path so that death passed them by. That nature obeyed them not as a servant obeys a master, but as one responds to someone who needs no persuasion.

Jesair did not believe those stories.

Yet he could not quite bring himself to laugh at them either.

There are things in life which a rational person refuses to call true, and yet will not turn their back on in the night.

That evening Jesair remained in the library.

He opened an ancient family record his mother had once forbidden him to read before reaching adulthood. Not because it contained secrets of power, but because it contained too much expectation.

On one page was an account of a distant ancestor named Aser Davion.

When the fever reached the lower valley, Aser went from house to house. He did not say that death would not come. He said only that it must not come alone. Many claimed that they recovered after his touch. Others said that they merely died more peacefully. We do not know the truth. We know only that since then a sentence has been preserved in our family: Do not go alone.

Jesair ran his fingers across the old lettering.

Do not go alone.

The words were simple. Too simple for a legend.

He closed the book.

At that moment he was overcome by a strange flash of another landscape, more real than an ordinary memory or imagining.

Dust.

A sun of a different color.

Water along a shore.

Fishermen's hands.

Wood.

And a woman's voice speaking his name, but not the name Jesair.

The vision vanished before his reason could reach it.

Jesair remained seated, motionless.

Then he laughed, quietly, at himself.

“Old houses,” he told the empty room. “They always know how to put other people's shadows into your head.”

But when he rose and put out the light, he looked back at the book once more.

And at the sentence that went on shining there, even in the dark.

8. EARTH: THE DAY OF DIVISION

Evening descended slowly upon the countryside, as though the light itself were reluctant to leave the hills above the lake. The disciples sat around Jesus in a silence unlike the ordinary quiet that followed a long journey. Something heavier lived within it, as though each of them sensed that the words they had heard that day belonged not only to them, but to all who would come after.

Jesus gazed into the distance. His face was peaceful, though there was nothing easy about that peace. It was not the peace of a man who had never known pain, but of one who had accepted it before it came.

“A day will come,” he said at last, “when everything hidden will be revealed. A man may conceal his intentions from his brother, cover his guilt with words, or appear righteous before a crowd. But nothing will be hidden from God. On that day the human heart will open like a vessel placed before the light.”

The disciples said nothing.

“The Son of Man will come in the glory of his Father,” Jesus continued, “and the angels with him. The nations will gather before him. They will not be judged by what they called themselves, or by how loudly they spoke the Lord's name, but by what they carried within them and what they did. For he was hungry among them, and some gave him food. He was thirsty, and some gave him drink. A stranger stood at their door, and some welcomed him. He was naked before their eyes, and some clothed him. He was sick and imprisoned, and some came to him.”

Peter raised his head. “Lord, you speak as though we meet God wherever we meet someone weak.”

Jesus looked at him. “And where else would you seek him? In the temple, where everyone can see your devotion? In the sacrifice you offer before the priests? I tell you: whoever closes his heart to a suffering person closes it to me. And whoever bends down to the least among us, his deed will rise before the Father like a prayer.”

John's eyes were full of unease. He was young, but not childishly carefree. Jesus' words often kindled a fire within him, yet today they burned differently: not like hope, but like a question he was afraid to ask.

Jesus went on.

“Then some will stand on the right, and others on the left. Those who loved mercy, even when they could not name it, will be called into life. But those who saw suffering and made themselves blind, who heard weeping and made themselves deaf,

who possessed power and used it to humiliate the weak—those will depart into the darkness they themselves have chosen."

The words fell among them like a stone dropped into a deep well.

Andrew rubbed his face with his hand. Thomas frowned, as though searching for a way to question Jesus without committing blasphemy.

In the end, it was Thomas who spoke.

"Rabbi," he said slowly, "may I ask you something?"

"Ask, Thomas."

"You speak of life and darkness. Of reward and punishment. Of a fire that never goes out. But a human being is weak. Sometimes he acts out of ignorance, sometimes out of fear, sometimes because he himself has been wounded. If his life is brief and his guilt human, is eternal suffering not too great a punishment for human failings?"

Some of the disciples shifted uneasily. Peter cast Thomas a sharp look, as though to silence him, but Jesus raised his hand.

"Let him speak," he said calmly. "A question too frightened to leave the mouth remains in the heart like an infected wound."

Thomas lowered his gaze. "I do not wish to oppose God, Lord. But I am afraid. If justice has no end, where does mercy remain?"

Jesus was silent for a long time.

Wind passed through the grass, and for a moment all they could hear was the whisper of leaves and the distant voices of people returning from the fields. When Jesus spoke, his voice was quieter than before.

"Mercy does not abolish truth, Thomas. And truth is no enemy of mercy. If a father saw his son reaching into a fire, would he say, 'Do as you please, for I love you'? Or would he call out sternly to save the boy's hand?"

"He would call out sternly," Thomas replied.

"And if the child cried because his father's voice had frightened him?"

"The father would take him in his arms."

"Yes," Jesus said. "But only once the child had let go of the fire."

Thomas fell silent.

Jesus turned to the others as well.

"Listen carefully. I did not come among you merely to comfort those who already seek God. I came to lay a stone in the foundations of ages yet to come. My words will be carried by people who have never seen me. They will speak them to their children's

children. They will write them down, interpret them, and use them to break the pride of the powerful and the fear of the weak. That is why those words must stand firm."

Then he looked at Thomas.

"A law that is gentle toward evil becomes cruel toward its victims. If you tell a murderer that what he did was merely a mistake, what will you tell the murdered man's mother? If you tell a wealthy man who let someone starve at his door that his guilt is slight, what will you tell the one who starved? If you tell the powerful that their cruelty will easily be lost to oblivion, what will you tell those who bled beneath it?"

John held his breath.

"People need to hear that their actions carry weight," Jesus continued. "Not only today. Not only before a judge in town. Not only before their neighbors' eyes. But before eternity. For many will not stop at the tears of the weak. They will not stop at shame. They will not stop at the voice of conscience, which they have learned to silence. Yet perhaps they will stop at the knowledge that nothing will be forgotten."

Thomas raised his eyes. "So fear is meant to lead them toward goodness?"

"Fear is a beginning for those who cannot yet love," Jesus said. "But it must not be the end. At first, a child is afraid of falling into an abyss, and so stays away from its edge. Later the child comes to understand that life is precious and no longer needs fear alone. It is the same with the law."

Peter asked thoughtfully, "Then who can stand before judgment, Lord? Even the righteous fail."

Jesus' expression softened.

"One who falls and rises again is not the same as one who makes a home of his fall. One who sins and weeps over it is not the same as one who sins and teaches others to call darkness light. The Father sees the difference between weakness and a hardened heart. Between a wound and pride. Between someone who loses his way and calls for help, and someone who loses his way and drags others after him."

"But you speak of eternal torment," Thomas persisted. "Those are terrible words."

"They are," Jesus agreed. "And they must be. For evil, too, is terrible. If you could see every tear that one human being has caused another, you would not speak lightly of judgment."

For an instant his voice trembled—not from weakness, but from deep sorrow.

"I see the generations to come. I see kings who will kill in the name of order. I see priests who will love their own power more than God. I see the wealthy building

houses upon the backs of the poor. I see people who will know that another person is suffering and still say, ‘It is none of my concern.’ That is why I must speak in a way that keeps my words from becoming mere decoration. They must be like a sword laid before the conscience.”

Then Jesus added:

“But remember this as well: I did not come seeking the lost because I delight in their destruction. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. As long as a person breathes, the door remains before him. As long as his heart can change, the Father calls him. But whoever rejects the light forever chooses darkness. And the darkness a person comes to love more than truth will become his dwelling at last.”

Thomas rested his hands on his knees. “So judgment is not merely a punishment imposed from outside?”

“No,” Jesus said. “Judgment is also the revelation of what a person has become. One who has spent a lifetime learning to love will recognize a home in God. One who has spent a lifetime learning to hate the light will feel its burning heat. The same sun opens a flower and dries out an uprooted root.”

These words silenced the disciples more thoroughly than the threat of fire.

Jesus stood. Darkness had deepened, and the first stars shone above the countryside.

“That is why I tell you: keep watch. Not so that you may live in anxiety, but so that you do not fall asleep to goodness. Give bread while you have hands. Forgive while you have time. Return to the Father while you can still hear his voice. For a day will come when a person will not ask what others thought of him, but what became of his heart.”

Then he turned to Thomas, and his voice grew quiet again.

“And do not be afraid to ask. One who questions in search of truth is closer to the kingdom than one who remains silent only out of fear.”

Thomas nodded, though a shadow lingered in his eyes. It was not the shadow of unbelief, but that of a man who had understood that God's justice was greater than he had wished, and God's mercy deeper than he had dared to hope.

That night, none of them fell asleep quickly.

Each thought of the day when the human heart would be opened.

And each silently searched within himself to learn whether there was more light or more darkness there.

Author's note: *This chapter is entirely fictional. It was written in response to what I see as an overly black-and-white understanding of the division between those who will be eternally condemned and those who will receive eternal life.*

9. ELARION: THE LAYER

Nerai Sael began work before Nitra awoke.

Not because she thought more clearly in the morning. The hour made no difference to her. Money crossed borders regardless of where the Elarion Sun stood, and automated systems knew neither exhaustion nor holidays nor bank closing times.

She came early because the corridors were empty then.

In silence, it was easier to distinguish an important question from one that was merely urgent.

The Intergovernmental Office for Financial Integrity and Systemic Risk was not housed in Nitra's historic center. Its building stood on the north bank of the river, among the monetary councils, the Union's computing centers, and the diplomatic gardens. Low and wide, it had almost no windows on the outside. The architects claimed they had intended it to express calm and impartiality.

Those who feared the office saw a fortress.

Most of Elarion's inhabitants knew the institution by a shorter name.

The Layer.

The name had originated among the analysts. Every bank, insurer, tax authority, and trading exchange could see only its own layer of financial life. A bank knew an account, but not necessarily the beneficial owner of the company holding it. A tax authority knew the return, but could not see the money that had gone abroad. A registry knew a company's director, but not the person hidden behind the fund controlling it.

When money crossed a border, it passed into another jurisdiction.

Sometimes a report followed.

Sometimes only a summary.

Sometimes nothing at all.

The Layer's task was to stack these incomplete layers upon one another and find the places where their edges failed to align.

Nerai was not a police officer.

She could not arrest anyone, summon them for questioning, or bring charges. She could not simply walk into a bank and inspect its accounts. She could not demand the name of a beneficial owner from a tax haven merely because she was curious. When

she identified a serious pattern, she prepared an analytical referral and forwarded it to agencies authorized to request further information from a court or another state.

Often she waited for months.

Sometimes the answer came back that the information did not exist.

Sometimes it existed, but local law prevented its release.

And occasionally a state never replied at all.

So the Layer could not see all of Elarion's money. It saw mainly what institutions were obliged to report, what was publicly available, or what an investigation had managed to uncover.

Banks sent it suspicious-activity reports. Not the complete records of every customer. Only cases in which their systems or employees suspected that money lacked a comprehensible source, moved in an unusual way, or was connected to a known risk.

Tax authorities supplied aggregate data.

Corporate registries supplied the names of registered owners.

Political parties supplied mandatory disclosures of donations and expenditure.

Each source revealed a different part of reality.

And each had its own blind spot.

Nerai connected information that seemed unrelated at first glance. A bank report. A change in company ownership. A loan from another country. A donation to a foundation. A consulting fee. A grant for regional reconstruction. An insurance policy whose beneficiary did not match its owner.

Corruption seldom confessed itself in a payment reference.

And the financing of political power often hid behind terms such as consulting, education, regional development, or public-opinion research.

Nerai was not hunting for people who bought expensive things.

She was looking for power.

She sat at her desk and placed her palm on its matte surface. The system verified her identity. A list of new overnight reports appeared in the space before her.

It was not a map of all the money.

It was a map of suspicions.

Some reports contained precise information. Others provided only a basic description of a transaction and the reason a bank had flagged it. In cross-border

operations, some details remained anonymized until a legal basis existed for disclosure.

Nerai opened the first case.

An unusually large transfer between two construction companies. An explanation was attached: the sale of industrial equipment. The documents looked credible.

The second case concerned a foundation that had received a substantial donation shortly before an election. But the payment had been publicly disclosed and came from an identified donor.

The third was missing information about the recipient's ultimate beneficial owner.

Nerai marked it for completion.

She stopped at the seventeenth report.

It had come from a bank in the port city of Sarur. The bank had flagged a series of cash deposits by a local company. On Elarion, the term cash also included digital bearer units that could be transferred without a permanent connection. When accepting a deposit, a bank checked whether the units were genuine, not the identities of everyone who had previously held them. The amounts themselves were not extraordinary. This was a business for which such receipts were normal.

It ran a restaurant.

The bank had not grown suspicious because it knew the actual number of customers. Its concern was that deposits had risen sharply over several months while the company's basic profile remained unchanged. The same premises. The same number of accounts held at the bank. No expansion loan. No declared sale of the business or change in its activity.

Perhaps it was success.

A new chef.

Good reviews.

A catering contract with another business, unknown to the bank.

The report was therefore not an accusation. It was simply a warning that the bank could not adequately explain a change in its customer's behavior.

Nerai opened the company's public registration record.

The registered owner was a local businessman. Two levels higher stood a regional fund. Above that was a company registered in Therinith, one of the smaller states of the southern archipelago.

Therinith's registry did not disclose ultimate beneficial owners.

There was nothing illegal about that.

Financial secrecy underpinned much of Therinith's economy.

Nerai looked at the establishment's name.

Vesta Sarur Seven.

She knew the brand. Vesta operated restaurants, convenience shops, lodging houses, and repair workshops across much of the planet. Some belonged directly to the parent company; others were run by local licensees. Their ownership structures varied from state to state.

Unusual deposits at a single restaurant said nothing about the network as a whole.

Nerai opened the analytics system's overnight summary and requested older reports mentioning Vesta.

The system found hundreds of records. Most were routine: supplier disputes, incorrectly completed transfers, stolen authorization tokens, tax audits, or unpaid loans.

Among them, it flagged a low-scoring pattern: deposits at establishments, followed by transfers abroad and opaque beneficial ownership. But it could not see cash registers or protected accounts beyond national borders. In the automatic ranking of cases, the pattern lay far below the urgent alerts.

Fourteen cases remained.

They came from six states.

And spanned four years.

Local authorities had closed them individually or left them without further action. In one case a business explained that it had gained new customers. In another a bank decided the risk was insufficient. A third investigation ended at the border of a state that refused to disclose information about the recipient company.

Yet every case bore the name Vesta.

To the model, these were weak correlations. But Nerai understood the difference between fourteen coincidences and fourteen offices, each of which had seen only its own closed case. She opened the original reports and began reading their reasoning.

Nerai leaned forward.

She could not see the turnover of the network as a whole. She had no access to cash registers or customer numbers. She could not inspect the internal accounts, let alone systems that would show who had bought what at each establishment.

All she could see was that several banks in different countries had independently reported similar behavior.

Cash appeared in a local business.

It was recorded as ordinary revenue.

Soon afterward, some of the money went to companies charging for vaguely defined services.

Consulting.

Brand management.

Regional promotion.

Licensing fees.

From there, the trail fragmented across more countries.

“Good morning.”

The voice behind her belonged to Taren Voss.

Nerai did not turn.

“We'll see about that.”

Taren approached her workstation. Tall and slender, he moved with the composure of someone who had never needed to demonstrate that he was in control. He had worked at the Layer longer than Nerai, and understood the banking systems of Vasyria in ways no amount of studying legislation could teach.

He was a Veyran.

Some colleagues considered that an advantage when they investigated Veyran banking houses. Others thought it a risk. Nerai found both assumptions equally primitive.

“What have you got?” he asked.

“Fourteen reports over four years.”

“Sounds like the beginning of a very long meeting.”

“Six states. Different banks. Different registered owners.”

Taren examined the data.

“And the common link?”

“Vesta.”

He gave a brief smile.

“I've eaten there.”

“That isn't useful information.”

“I can confirm the food doesn't explain their financial success.”

Nerai sent him the first report.

“Deposits are rising. Then some of the money goes out as consulting and licensing fees. The recipients' beneficial owners are concealed.”

“That might not mean anything.”

“It might not.”

“The network could just have a shared business model.”

“It could.”

“Or a shared method of shifting profits.”

“That too.”

Taren opened the timeline and compared payment dates. Some establishments sent money to the same intermediaries. Others used different companies that nonetheless shared an auditor or administrator.

“Interesting,” he said.

“What?”

“These firms pretend they're unrelated. But the same office prepared their documents.”

“It could be an ordinary service provider.”

“Could be.”

For a moment neither spoke.

That was how most cases at the Layer began. Not with certainty, but with a series of possibilities, each of which had an innocent explanation.

Until there were too many of them.

“We need the internal accounts of at least one establishment,” Taren said.

“We have no legal grounds.”

“We have a bank report.”

“We have a bank's suspicion. Not evidence of a crime.”

“We could ask Sarur to conduct a tax audit.”

“We could ask them to consider conducting one.”

Taren leaned against the desk.

“And in six months they'll tell us everything complied with local law.”

“Probably.”

“Therinith won't release the owner's name.”

“Not without a court order. And we won't get a court order without a stronger suspicion.”

Taren looked at the chain before them.

“So we need information to prove that we need information.”

“That's the foundation of intergovernmental cooperation.”

She enlarged the list of connected companies. At the end of most ownership chains stood the name of an administrator, a law firm, or a fund.

Nowhere was there a human being.

Nerai could not say Vesta was laundering money. She did not even know whether the unusual deposits represented real revenue, tax fraud, or merely a business model that banks did not understand.

She had only a recurring question.

And a system that would not allow her to reach the answer without knowing it beforehand.

“Open a working case,” she said. “No accusation and no request for intervention yet.”

“On what grounds?”

“Possible coordinated use of cash-intensive businesses to conceal the origin of funds.”

“That almost sounds like an opinion.”

“Then write: examination of recurring cross-border financial anomalies.”

Taren smiled.

“That sounds like nothing at all.”

“Which is why they'll approve it.”

He began preparing a list of requests. Not customer records or the cash-register data of the entire network. The Layer had no authority to demand those. They could request the results of completed tax audits, public financial statements, auditor names, licensing contracts, changes in ownership, and information banks had themselves flagged as unusual.

Every further layer required a new justification.

And every justification had to arise from the layer before it.

For a moment Nerai noticed her reflection in a dark part of the work surface.

She did not have a golden ring.

Her mother was Aurelian. Nerai, however, had been born a Selenite, like her father. As a child she often examined her eyes in different light—after crying, during a fever, or when concentrating intensely.

She waited to see whether the golden line might appear after all.

It never did.

Her stepbrother Jesair had inherited the ring. He was an Aurelian and a descendant of the oldest known Davion line. People therefore looked to him for a continuation of stories that had begun centuries before he was born.

When he comforted someone, they spoke of the ancient gift.

When he made a mistake, they said he had failed his bloodline.

Nerai bore no such burden.

She did not have to be the continuation of a legend.

She could simply be herself.

Still, someone would invariably hear Jesair's name and glance at her eyes again, as though needing to check why two siblings did not bear the same mark.

Jesair had never treated her as though anything were missing.

When they were children, he told her that the golden ring was merely something people noticed before they noticed the person.

Nerai replied that in that case she was fortunate to have nothing shining in her eyes.

Sometimes, ever since, he had envied her.

Nerai turned from her reflection and focused on the workstation again. Meanwhile, Taren had completed the first set of requests.

“Sarur has accepted the referral,” he said. “No promise of an audit.”

“That's more than I expected.”

“Therinith refused to disclose ownership information.”

“That's exactly what I expected.”

Taren opened the island registry's reply. It was long, polite, and written to persuade the reader that withholding information was a mark of legal sophistication.

The office lacked sufficiently specific grounds for suspicion.

No precise offense had been identified.

No link had been demonstrated between the local company and financial anomalies in other states.

Each sentence was defensible.

Together they formed a wall.

“They say we can't request the beneficial owner's identity without proof of common control,” Taren said.

“And we can't prove common control without knowing the beneficial owner.”

“Maybe they've written that over the registry entrance.”

Nerai flagged the response and attached it to the case. Even a refusal had value. Not as evidence of a crime, but as a map of the boundaries beyond which the investigation could not see.

She looked at the fourteen reports.

She did not know whether they all belonged to the same mechanism. Perhaps some concerned honest businesses, inaccurate banking models, or simple accounting errors. Perhaps the name Vesta was the only thing they shared.

But too many coincidences began in precisely the same way.

Money appeared in a cash-based business.

It acquired the name revenue.

Then it left as payment for a service whose value could not be measured precisely.

Finally it entered a country where no one had to ask who owned it.

“What next?” Taren asked.

“We wait for the audit results.”

“That could take months.”

“Meanwhile, we'll investigate the auditors, administrators, and consulting companies.”

“Without access to the accounts?”

“Not every name is a secret yet.”

Taren opened the list of companies receiving licensing and consulting fees from the establishments. At first glance they had nothing in common. They were based in different countries, had names in different languages, and described different lines of business.

Nerai sorted them by incorporation date.

Then by legal representatives.

Finally, by the people who had certified their founding documents.

The first recurring names appeared on the work surface.

They were not yet owners.

Only administrators, lawyers, and official intermediaries.

People whose job was to stand between an asset and the person who truly owned it.

“Three firms,” Taren said.

“Across fourteen apparently unrelated cases.”

“That's better than the name of the network.”

“Still not evidence.”

“One day you'll refuse to celebrate even a confession.”

“A confession can still be false.”

Taren shook his head and sent the next requests.

Outside the windows, Nitra slowly filled with morning light. The transit lanes above the river grew busier, and public towers lit up on the opposite shore. The city began its day convinced that everything important was recorded, monitored, and preserved somewhere.

Nerai knew that was not true.

The data existed.

It simply did not exist in one place.

Each institution held its own fragment and protected it by its own rules. Banks saw the movement of money, but not the underlying business. Tax offices saw returns, but not the entire flow of funds. Registries saw companies, but not the people behind them. Investigators saw suspicions, but often missed the connections.

Crime did not have to be invisible.

It was enough for it to be divided.

Nerai created a new working file. The system asked for a title, legal basis, and preliminary risk assessment.

In the title field, she typed a single word:

Vesta.

She hesitated over the risk assessment.

Then selected:

Undetermined. Possible cross-border pattern.

The file was stored among hundreds of other open cases. For an instant it was highlighted, then disappeared into the system as though there were nothing remarkable about it.

Perhaps there wasn't.

Perhaps behind it were only a few businesses concealing their actual profits or shifting income to pay less tax.

But perhaps Vesta was a place where money from many different crimes received the same story about its origins.

Nerai did not yet know.

She had fourteen reports, three law firms, and several states refusing to show her the final name in the chain.

Yet great revelations seldom began with proof.

They began with a discrepancy that was easier to overlook than to explain.

Nerai closed the other cases.

She left Vesta open.

10. EARTH: THE CURSED FIG TREE

When they left Bethany that morning, the air was still cool and a thin mist hung above the road. Jerusalem rose before them in the morning light, its walls pale and hard as the face of someone who had long forgotten how to weep.

The disciples followed Jesus in silence. The past few days had been full of signs, questions, and unease. Each sensed that something was approaching which none of them could stop. The city drew them in and repelled them at once. It was like an open gate beyond which there waited not freedom but judgment.

Jesus walked ahead.

He had scarcely slept that night. He had sat alone for a long time while the others rested, gazing toward Jerusalem. He knew that the hour of which he had spoken so often was no longer drawing near. It had come. He was walking within it.

His steps remained steady, but his body was tired. His mouth was dry and an emptiness in his belly throbbed dully with every step. He had eaten little since the previous day. At first the hunger had dwelt quietly within him, but now it demanded attention more insistently, until for a moment the whole world narrowed to a simple longing for food.

A fig tree stood beside the road.

It had a broad crown and a multitude of green leaves. Among the grayish stones it looked like an island of life. Its branches hung over the road, and in the morning light it appeared strong, healthy, generous.

Jesus approached it.

Peter glanced back at the others. John slowed down. Thomas stopped several paces behind and watched Jesus part the leaves.

He was looking for fruit.

His fingers passed among the branches. He moved one limb aside, then another, lifting leaves and looking beneath them.

He found nothing.

Only foliage.

Only the outward promise.

Only the appearance of abundance, without anything that could nourish a hungry person.

Jesus reached deeper into the crown, as though hoping to find at least one early fig. But his hand came back empty.

Some of the disciples exchanged glances. They knew it was not yet the season for figs. The tree was doing nothing contrary to its nature. It was green at the time when it should be green and waiting for the season when it would bear fruit.

But hunger has no patience with the seasons.

Hunger does not see the whole tree. It sees only the absent fruit.

Jesus remained beneath its branches. Sorrow appeared in his gaze, for he was seeing more than a fig tree. He saw a city splendid with its Temple, laws, and prayers, yet unable to nourish the human soul. He saw priests in spotless robes turning away from those deemed unclean. He saw men who knew every word of scripture but could not hear a widow weeping beyond the wall of their house.

He saw leaves without fruit.

And yet beneath that sorrow, for a brief moment, something smaller stirred.

Something human.

The irritation of an exhausted man. The ill temper of a hungry body. Quiet resentment that the world once again stood before him full of promises and offered him nothing.

It lasted only a moment.

Hunger spoke before compassion, and weariness before wisdom. For an instant he did not see the tree as it was. He saw in it everything that promised life but failed to give him comfort at the moment he wanted it.

He touched a leaf.

Then he said:

“May no one ever eat fruit from you again.”

He did not speak loudly. There was no rage in his voice to shake the road. There was exhaustion, judgment, and one sharp flash of a will that, for an instant, had narrowed to its own hunger.

When the words faded, Jesus stood motionless.

He looked at the hand resting against the branch.

As though he had felt the weight of what he had said only after the words had left his mouth.

Then he withdrew his hand.

The disciples were silent. None asked why he had done it. They continued toward Jerusalem, but Thomas looked back at the tree once more.

Its green leaves moved gently in the wind, as though nothing had happened.

The next day they returned by the same road.

Peter noticed the fig tree first. He stopped so suddenly that James almost walked into him.

“Rabbi,” he said, pointing. “Look. The fig tree you cursed has withered.”

Everyone stopped.

The tree that had been green and full of leaves the day before was now dry. Its leaves hung curled and gray, the branches had lost their spring, and in places the bark was peeling from the trunk. It did not look like a tree slowly dying. It looked as though life had left it all at once, from the roots to the smallest twig.

Unease passed through the disciples.

They had seen many signs. Water changed into wine. The sick healed, the blind given sight, the lame walking. They had seen Lazarus come out of his tomb.

Yet this tree affected them differently.

This miracle had healed no one.

There was no joy from a crowd.

No one embraced a child. No one lifted their eyes toward heaven and gave thanks for a life restored.

The whole event felt severe, silent, irrevocable.

Jesus turned to them.

“Have faith in God,” he said. “Truly I tell you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Rise and cast yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him.”

He lifted his eyes to the slopes around the road.

“Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. But when you stand praying, forgive anyone against whom you hold something, so that your Father may forgive you as well.”

The words fell among them like stones into deep water.

No one answered at once.

Each heard something different.

Peter heard a call to strength.

John, a mystery of trust.

Judas, the possibility of power.

Thomas, a question.

He hesitated, then approached Jesus.

“Lord,” he said carefully.

Jesus looked at him.

“Ask, Thomas.”

Thomas lowered his eyes toward the fig tree's withered roots.

“We have seen you turn water into wine. We have seen you heal the sick. We have seen you raise the dead. We saw Lazarus leave the tomb, though he had already lain in darkness and his body carried the smell of death.”

He paused.

“And now we have seen a tree wither at your word.”

Several disciples shifted uneasily. Peter frowned as though ready to silence Thomas, but Jesus raised his hand.

“Let him speak,” he said. “One who asks questions has not yet fallen asleep.”

Thomas drew breath.

“Then why didn't you make it bear a fig? If you were hungry and the tree had no fruit, why not give it fruit? Why was it easier to take away its life than to bring fruit into being?”

Silence thickened.

Thomas continued, bolder now.

“And if a man with faith can tell a mountain to rise and cast itself into the sea, why can he not tell a tree: Bear a fig?”

Jesus regarded him with affectionate seriousness.

“Thomas,” he said, “when a child sees bread, he thinks the bread begins in the baker's hands. But a wise person knows that it begins long before. In the grain that fell into the earth. In the rain that came at the right time. In sunlight that was not too fierce. In the hands of the one who sowed. In the millstone. In the heat of the oven.”

He pointed to the fig tree.

“Everything you see before you has a long procession of hidden things behind it. Even the fruit of a fig tree is more than just fruit. For it to hang from a branch today, it had to be there yesterday as something smaller. A month ago it would have been barely visible, concealed within the tree's body. Before that it had to be the beginning

of a fruit, receiving sap, light, and time. And before that there had to be a tree with the strength to bear fruit."

Thomas listened without moving.

Jesus picked up a dry leaf. It crumbled between his fingers.

"The reality you see is not a single skin stretched over the world. It has layers. Like an onion a woman peels beside the hearth. One layer supports another. What appears today rests upon what was yesterday, and what was yesterday rests upon what came before."

He looked at them all.

"A weak mind sees only the final layer and mistakes it for the whole world. A stronger mind looks deeper. And a mind filled with faith may touch places where things have not yet become entirely fixed."

John lifted his gaze.

Jesus continued:

"Some things can be changed because their roots are close. A sick body still longs for life. Water carries the obedience of creation. The human heart may turn in a single instant. Even death is not the wall you imagine when the Father calls the name of one who sleeps."

At the mention of death, Lazarus' tomb came into their minds. The stone rolled away from the entrance. The smell of decay. A man wrapped in burial cloths coming out at Jesus' voice.

"But to bring forth a fig when it is not the season for figs," Jesus said slowly, "is not merely to command a branch to bear fruit. It would mean rewriting many layers at once. There would have to have been yesterday's growth, though none occurred. There would have to have been ripening that never happened. Sap would need to have been flowing toward the fruit for days. Time itself would have had to pass where it did not."

Thomas frowned.

"But God can do anything."

"God can do anything," Jesus agreed. "But God is no market magician deceiving the eyes of a child. The Father did not create the world so that he might tear it apart like an old garment and sew it back together whenever our impatience demands. He created an order. And that order, too, is his will."

Yet Thomas still stared at the withered tree.

"That explains why there was no fig," he said. "It doesn't explain why you cursed it."

Peter turned sharply toward him.

“Thomas—”

“No,” Jesus interrupted calmly.

He looked at Thomas.

“You are right to ask.”

The road fell so quiet that they could hear the dry leaves stirring at their feet.

Thomas took a step closer.

“Not what the tree meant,” he said. “Not what the city or the Temple means. Why did *you* do it in that moment?”

Jesus looked at the fig tree.

For a long time he did not answer.

When he spoke, his voice was quieter than before.

“Because I was hungry.”

The disciples did not move.

“I was tired,” he continued. “The night behind me was long, and the days ahead are difficult. When I saw its leaves, I longed for fruit. And when I found none, my hunger narrowed the world for a moment to the one thing I wanted.”

Peter lowered his eyes.

Jesus touched the dry trunk.

“I saw in that tree the Temple, the city, and the person who appear full of life on the outside but offer nothing to the hungry. What I saw was not false. But a truth may be spoken from an impure place. Even a just word can become cruel when it is spoken by hunger, anger, or pride.”

Thomas stared at him, unsure he had heard correctly.

“So you were angry with it?”

“For a moment,” Jesus said. “Not with the anger of a man who longs to destroy, but with the disappointment of someone who reaches for a gift and finds nothing. The tree was not at fault. It was not the season for its fruit. But in that moment I did not see the whole of its time. I saw only my own hunger.”

John asked:

“And was it your word that killed it?”

Jesus nodded.

“The stronger and more unified a person's consciousness, the greater the weight carried by his words. You may say many things in irritation, and the wind will carry your words away. But when someone stands close to the roots of being, even a brief disturbance within him may leave a mark.”

He looked at each of them in turn.

“That is why great power is not only a gift. It is a burden. One who can heal with a word must also guard the words spoken in exhaustion. One who can move a mountain must ask whether his desire comes from the Father, or merely from the pain passing through him at that moment.”

Thomas pointed to the fig tree again.

“I still don't understand. If your word could kill the tree, why could it not make it bear fruit?”

Jesus picked up a fragment of dry branch from the ground.

“Because decay and creation do not require the same thing.”

He snapped the twig between his fingers.

“Death was already present in this tree as a possibility. It is present in every leaf, root, and body. Everything born into the world carries within it the possibility of ending. My word opened a path to what was already possible within the tree.”

Then he opened his empty palm.

“But a fig was not ready within it at that moment. For one to come into being, the tree, sap, sun, earth, and time would have had to join together. I would have been demanding that all existence bend around my hunger.”

His expression hardened, not toward the disciples, but toward himself.

“My hunger in that moment was personal. I was not pleading for a child's life or the healing of someone in pain. I wanted to feed myself.”

Judas spoke up.

“What is wrong with a hungry man wanting to eat?”

“Nothing,” Jesus answered. “Hunger is not a sin. Nor is the desire for bread. But power becomes dangerous when it demands that the world overturn its order simply because the one who wields that power refuses to endure a moment of want.”

He paused.

“A curse needs only a fracture. A blessing requires harmony.”

No one moved.

The words remained among them, simple and heavy.

“Power may sometimes obey even a wounded will,” Jesus continued. “It can break, hasten decay, open the door to fear or death. But life does not wholly open itself to such a will. Life arises where the will of the individual meets the will of the whole.”

Thomas considered this.

“Then you could have created a fig if doing so had been in harmony with the Father's will?”

Jesus looked at him.

“If that fig had been part of a path that gives life, it would not have been created out of nothing. All existence would have been moving toward it, even if you could not see the path. But to create it merely to silence my own stomach for a moment would not have been a miracle in the Father. It would have been the submission of the world to my whim.”

He looked toward the barren hills in the distance.

“When I was in the wilderness, the tempter told me to turn stones into bread.”

Some of the disciples had heard of that event; others had not. Now all listened closely.

“I was hungrier then than I was yesterday,” Jesus continued. “My body was crying out for food. A stone in front of me resembled a loaf, and the voice said: If you have power, use it. Prove who you are. Feed yourself.”

“And you refused,” John said.

“I refused because power must not be made to serve the hunger of the one who possesses it. Man does not live by bread alone, and whoever has received a gift from the Father must not turn it into a servant of his own demands.”

He looked at the fig tree.

“Yesterday I did not turn the tree into food. But for one moment I condemned it because it had not fed me. Both temptations had the same root.”

Peter shook his head.

“But you are without sin, Lord.”

Jesus studied him.

“And what do you think it means to be without sin, Peter? Never to feel hunger? Never to feel anger? Not to know temptation?”

Peter did not answer.

“A stone feels no temptation,” Jesus said. “That does not make it holy. Purity does not mean that no dark impulse ever passes through a person. It means seeing that impulse in its entirety, refusing to call it light, and not allowing it to become one's master.”

He looked at his palm.

“Yesterday I recognized it only after the word had left me.”

Thomas said:

“So even someone who is fully conscious of himself can fail for an instant?”

“As long as he carries a body, he also carries its voice,” Jesus answered. “Hunger, pain, fear, and exhaustion enter consciousness like wind entering a house. An awakened person recognizes them. But if the door is open and the night has been long, even a strong wind can overturn the lamp.”

“And then what?” John asked.

“Then he lifts it again. He sees what happened. He does not conceal the darkness beneath God's name.”

Jesus turned back to Thomas.

“You asked why I did not save the tree instead, or give it fruit. Because in that moment I did not want to create. I wanted to receive. And when I received nothing, my word became judgment.”

Thomas lowered his eyes.

“So it is easier to destroy than to create?”

“Yes,” Jesus said. “Not only for human hands, but for the human will. It takes a single blow to destroy a house. To build it requires stone, measure, patience, and the harmony of many hands. One angry word can wound a person. Sometimes an entire lifetime of love is not enough to heal that person's soul.”

He ran his palm over the dry bark.

“A divided inner life can destroy. Creation, however, is possible only through unity.”

Thomas paused, then said:

“But when you turned water into wine at Cana, you changed the order of things too.”

“At Cana I did not make joy out of nothing,” Jesus answered. “There was water. There were vessels used for purification. There was a wedding. There was the embarrassment of a family running out of wine. There was my mother's trust. There was a feast meant to continue, and an hour that had opened.”

Jesus smiled faintly at the memory of Mary.

“The wine that came was not a denial of the world. It was a sign that the Father knows how to fill empty vessels. It was not intended for me. It was a gift for others.”

“And Lazarus?” Thomas asked.

“When I called Lazarus, I was not calling a stranger out of nothingness. I called a brother the Father knew by name. His body lay in the tomb, but his story was not finished in the Father. His sisters' love, their pain, my love for him, and the Father's will met in a single moment. Faith touched a layer in which it was still possible to say: Come out.”

Thomas looked at the fig tree again.

“And here nothing came together except your hunger.”

“The truth about the city was present too,” Jesus said. “That is why the tree became a sign. But my irritation gave that sign a harshness it need not have had.”

“Could the sign have taken another form?” John asked.

Jesus thought for a moment.

“It could.”

“How?”

“I could have shown you its leaves and said: Look how it resembles the Temple that promises life but bears no fruit. I could have left it hungry and allowed it to ripen in its own time.”

He laid a hand on the trunk.

“Truth did not require the death of the tree. That was what my moment added.”

These words troubled them more than the miracle itself.

They were accustomed to seeing Jesus as the one who gave answers. Now he stood before them as one who had examined his own action and not turned away from what he found.

Peter spoke.

“Why are you telling us this? You could simply have said the tree was a sign. None of us would have doubted you.”

Jesus looked at him.

“Precisely.”

Peter did not understand.

“One who has power is always tempted to call his own will the will of God. When something succeeds, he says: The Father wanted it. When he destroys

something, he says: It was judgment. When he wounds another person, he says: I was serving the truth."

Jesus' voice grew stronger.

"But not every powerful word comes wholly from the Father. Not every success confirms purity. And not everyone whom strength obeys is righteous."

Judas watched him very closely.

"Then how are we to tell the difference?" he asked.

"By their fruits."

Jesus picked up one of the shriveled twigs.

"Not by the greatness of the sign. Not by how many people bow down. Not by whether the earth trembles or fire descends from heaven. Ask what remained after the deed. More life or more fear? More truth or more obedience to the one who displayed his power? More freedom or more dependence?"

He looked at the dead tree.

"This sign brought understanding. But it brought death to the tree. So there is more than light within it."

After a while Thomas asked:

"And the mountain? You said that whoever believes can tell a mountain to cast itself into the sea. That is no small thing. It is greater than making a fig appear on a tree."

Jesus smiled faintly.

"Do you think a mountain is only stone?"

Thomas did not answer.

"A mountain is also the fear that stands before a person and pretends to be eternal. A mountain is an empire that oppresses the weak and says: No one can move me. A mountain is the guilt you carry so long that you begin to believe it is part of your body. A mountain is death, before which everyone bows."

The disciples fell silent.

"When a person believes only as one leans on a walking stick, faith helps him keep moving. But when someone believes so deeply that he surrenders his whole being to the Father, his faith becomes a place where God's will touches the world. Then mountains move. Not because a human being commands God, but because a human being ceases to stand in God's way."

Thomas was quiet for a while.

“And does everyone have the same faith? Can anyone tell a mountain to move?”

Jesus stopped. His gaze was not severe. It was deep, as though he looked not only at Thomas but through him, toward the place where a person meets himself.

“Not everyone has the same faith,” he said. “Just as not everyone has the same eyes, though all look upon the same world. One sees only a stone. Another sees a path. A third sees the Father's hand holding the stone, the path, and the person himself.”

Thomas listened attentively.

“A person's faith does not grow only from the words spoken by the mouth,” Jesus continued. “It grows from how deeply one has awakened within. Many live like dreamers. They see, hear, eat, become angry, fear, and desire, but they do not know who within them sees, who hears, who fears, and who desires.”

The disciples were silent. These words were unlike the parables of fields, fish, and bread. They touched something invisible that each of them nevertheless carried inside.

“The greatest faith,” Jesus said slowly, “belongs to the one who is fully aware that he is aware. The one who does not merely look at the world, but knows that he is the one looking. Who does not merely think, but knows that thoughts come and go before him like clouds. Who does not merely feel fear, but knows that fear is not his master.”

Thomas frowned, not in resistance, but with the effort of understanding.

Jesus went on.

“Such a person does not cling to every layer of the world like a fly to honey. He penetrates deeper. He sees the body, but knows he is not merely the body. He sees a thought, but knows he is not merely the thought. He sees pain, but knows he is not merely the pain. And when he stops mistaking what he is, he stops submitting helplessly to what changes inside him.”

Thomas asked:

“And can such consciousness work miracles?”

Jesus looked at him.

“Not a human being acting alone. For if you said, ‘I work miracles,’ you would already be separated from the Father. And separation is weakness, even when it looks like power.”

He placed a hand upon his chest.

“The consciousness of someone fully awakened is no longer torn between fear, desire, pride, and doubt. It is clear as the surface of water when no wind blows. Such water can reflect the sky. And when the sky is reflected in a person without distortion, what you call a miracle may come to pass through him.”

Peter spoke up.

“So it is not a person's own strength that works a miracle?”

“No,” Jesus said. “A miracle takes place where a person ceases to be an obstacle. Where consciousness is not clouded by what one desires for oneself, but open to what the Father desires.”

He looked at the fig tree.

“Yesterday I showed you the opposite as well.”

Thomas lifted his eyes.

“Hunger arose within me, but at that moment I was not merely observing it. For an instant I became my hunger. And when a person becomes his hunger, fear, or anger, his consciousness narrows. He sees only what he lacks.”

“But you recognized it,” John said.

“Only after speaking.”

Jesus' answer was plain.

“Awakening does not mean the wind stops blowing. It means that a person becomes quicker to recognize what the wind is doing within him. Sometimes he recognizes it before an action. Sometimes during it. And sometimes only by the tree left withered in its wake.”

Thomas nodded slowly.

“Is that why you told us to forgive when we pray?”

“Yes. A person may pray with faith, yet if his heart is filled with anger, his faith will become joined to his anger. He may ask for justice while truly longing for revenge. He may speak of truth while truly seeking to humiliate another.”

Jesus looked around at the disciples.

“So it is not enough to feel no doubt. Judas, too, may be utterly convinced. A violent man, too, may act without hesitation. Unity alone is not goodness if a person is unified in hatred.”

Judas stiffened almost imperceptibly at those words.

“True faith is not merely the strength of conviction,” Jesus continued. “It is the unity of a person with the Father. The closer your will comes to his will, the less you will demand things that serve only yourselves.”

Thomas asked:

“How can we distinguish the Father's will from our own desire?”

Jesus pointed at his chest.

“First, by admitting what *you* want. Without embellishment. Without pious words.”

“And then?”

“You ask whom your prayer is meant to bring life to.”

Jesus lifted a dry leaf.

“Good prayers bring forth life, even when they are difficult. Bad prayers produce only proof of one's own power. When you pray to nourish, heal, forgive, and carry another's burden, your prayer resembles the Father. When you pray to dazzle others, conquer, possess, or escape the path given to you, you are not asking God. You are testing him.”

Thomas said:

“And when we're not sure?”

“Then wait.”

Jesus looked at the dry tree and then at the green hills beyond it.

“Waiting is sometimes a purer faith than acting. If someone does not know whether his will serves life, let him not immediately clothe it in power. Let him first bring it before the Father.”

Peter examined the withered branches.

“If you had waited yesterday, the tree would still be alive.”

“Yes,” Jesus said.

There was no defensiveness in his voice.

Peter did not know what to say.

After a while Thomas spoke again.

“Can you bring it back to life?”

All turned to Jesus.

He placed his palm against the trunk and closed his eyes.

He remained like that for a long time.

The disciples waited to see whether sap would stir in the branches, the dry leaves straighten, or a new green shoot emerge from the hardened bark.

Nothing happened.

Jesus opened his eyes.

“I could ask the Father for its life,” he said. “But making amends should not become a means of proving that I can erase my mistake.”

Thomas frowned.

“Why should it not live again, if it died because of your word?”

“Perhaps it will,” Jesus answered. “Perhaps one day a new shoot will rise from its roots. But if I revived it now merely to hide the consequence of my moment from you, I would once again be using power for myself.”

He ran his fingers across the cracked bark.

“Not every wrong is put right by erasing its consequences. Sometimes the consequence must remain visible so that it may become part of the truth.”

Thomas looked at him.

“So this tree will bear your mistake?”

“And what I have learned,” Jesus said. “And perhaps, one day, what you have learned as well.”

He paused.

“A person would gladly remove every dead tree that reminds him of who he once was. But the tree that remains may protect many others from the same word.”

Peter breathed deeply.

“It is hard to hear you speak this way.”

“Because you want the one you follow to be far removed from your weakness,” Jesus said. “You think only someone who has never felt what you feel can save you. But how could someone lead you through temptation if he did not know its voice?”

“Then how are we to know we should follow you?” Judas asked.

Jesus looked at him calmly.

“Do not follow me because I never stumble. Follow me to the place where, even after stumbling, I do not turn away from the truth.”

Judas averted his eyes.

Thomas was still studying the tree.

“You said that whoever wants a fig without its flowering wants the gift without the journey.”

“Yes.”

“And whoever curses a tree because he found no fig upon it?”

Jesus looked toward Jerusalem.

“He wants the world to bear the punishment for his own lack.”

Thomas' breath trembled.

Jesus continued:

“Kings do this. Rulers do this. Fathers do it to their children, and masters to their servants. They hunger for power, respect, or certainty, and then punish the world for failing to satisfy them.”

He pointed toward the fig tree.

“That is why you must remember this tree. Not only as a sign of a fruitless Temple, but as a warning of the danger posed by a person whose word carries power.”

John asked:

“Would it be better, then, to have no power?”

“No,” Jesus answered. “Without power you could not lift someone who had fallen, protect a child, or build a house. Power is not evil. Power reveals what is within a person.”

“Like fire?” John said.

“Like fire. In the hands of someone who loves, it gives warmth. In the hands of someone ruled by fear, it burns.”

Thomas said:

“And the greater the fire, the cleaner the hands must be.”

Jesus nodded.

“The greater the power, the less a person can afford to call his irritation justice.”

For a while there was only the wind moving through the dead leaves.

Then Jesus went on.

The disciples followed, but they walked more slowly than before. The fig tree remained beside the road behind them, a sign that could not easily be confined to one meaning.

It was an image of a Temple filled with rituals but empty of mercy.

It was an image of a person flourishing outwardly but offering nothing to the hungry.

It was proof of the power of words.

It was also the consequence of a moment when hunger had spoken louder than harmony with all existence.

Peter thought about faith that could move a mountain.

But for the first time he also wondered whether every mountain a person *could* move ought to be moved.

John thought about the surface of consciousness in which heaven might be reflected. Yet he understood that even into still water a stone might fall and shatter the reflection for an instant.

Judas thought about power. Not its burden, but the possibility that the world might indeed obey the will of someone who never doubted.

Thomas thought about the fig that could not come into being because its journey had not happened.

And then about the tree that had died because, for one brief moment, the path of the one who spoke over it had not been in harmony.

Jesus walked before them toward Jerusalem.

His hunger had passed, but he carried with him the knowledge of the withered tree. He did not dismiss it as a mistake that failed to fit the story of a righteous man. He carried it as a quiet warning.

As they drew nearer the city, the walls of the Temple took clearer shape against the horizon.

They too were full of leaves.

Prayers, sacrifices, robes, incense, laws, and promises.

Yet in their shadow the hungry remained.

Across all the layers of time, the shadow of the cross was gathering.

None of the disciples yet understood that soon they would look upon another tree: dry wood raised between heaven and earth. Upon it they would see a man from whom they had expected the fruits of the kingdom, and before their eyes there would be nothing but blood, pain, and death.

They would think that every promise had withered.

11. ELARION: MAREIA LIOREN

Mareia Lioren had learned to be afraid in silence.

Not because she was weak. Weak people often voice their fears because they hope someone will rescue them. Mareia kept hers quiet because, for a long time, she believed she had to save her dignity on her own.

Arien had not struck her in the beginning.

In the beginning, he had been attentive.

Attention is dangerous when it presents itself as love but is, in truth, testing boundaries.

He remembered what she said. He noticed when she was tired. He knew which parts of the city she disliked, what she drank at work, which people she found shallow and which she trusted. At first she felt seen in his presence. Later, watched. The difference came slowly, like a change in the light before a storm.

“I'm only worried about you,” he would say when he asked whom she had been with.

“I just don't want people taking advantage of you,” he would say when he questioned her friends.

“I simply know how people think,” he would say when persuading her that her own judgment was naive.

Mareia was an Aurelian from an old, though not one of the highest, bloodlines. The Liorens were known more for healers, archivists, and teachers than for politicians. As a child she had been taught that sensitivity was not the opposite of courage. It took her a long time to understand that Arien saw her sensitivity not as a gift but as a place where pressure could be applied.

Years before Arien, Mareia had worked to make anonymized medical data available for research into inherited diseases. She believed sharing information could shorten the wait for treatment. But a regional insurance system cross-referenced ostensibly anonymous data with addresses and identified several families. Their premiums rose before anyone had even established whether they were ill.

Mareia helped the families regain their previous terms and testified during the project's review. She did not turn against research. But from then on, whenever she received a request, she also read who would be allowed to use the findings, how long they could keep them, and who would be able to see that the data had been accessed. She brought that caution to every later dispute over transparency.

The incident took place in his apartment above Nitra's financial district.

It was raining outside. Far below, the lights of autonomous transit modules fractured in the wet glass of the streets. Mareia had arrived late because a meeting about medical archives had run long. Arien stood at the window. He did not even turn around.

“Were you with him?”

He did not need to say the name.

Jesair Davion had come between them before Mareia herself knew he had touched her life. He had first entered it as a kind of calm that made her more clearly aware of her own unrest.

“I was at a meeting,” she said.

“That wasn't the question.”

“Then ask a better one.”

Arien turned.

There was no anger on his face in the ordinary sense. There was an expression of wounded entitlement. As though Mareia's independence were not her right, but an error in a system that ought to belong to him.

“Do you know what people like Davion do?” he asked. “They walk into a room and everyone acts as if they've heard an ancient prophecy.”

“Jesair can't help that.”

“Jesair,” Arien repeated.

He said the name softly. That only made it sound worse.

“You're afraid of him,” Mareia said.

For a moment there was perfect silence between them.

Then he crossed to her. Quickly. Too quickly. He seized her wrist.

“I'm not afraid of anyone.”

His grip tightened.

Not enough to break a bone. Enough to show her that he could.

Mareia met his eyes.

“Let go of me.”

“First you'll tell me the truth.”

“The truth is that right now I'm afraid of you.”

His hand loosened by the smallest fraction.

Her words did not bring him to his senses. They offended him.

“So now I'm a violent man.”

“You're a man holding me against my will.”

That was when he struck her.

Mareia remained standing. Nothing broke in the room, and at first glance no one would have known what had happened. The warmth of his open palm lingered on her cheek; for an instant, the breath left her.

Arien went pale at once.

“Mareia—”

She raised a hand.

Not to stop him physically. To stop the story he was about to tell.

That he hadn't meant to.

That she had provoked him.

That she had frightened him.

That it had been love, simply too strong.

“No,” she said.

It was the quietest word in the room.

And the strongest.

She left that very night.

She did not take everything. Only what she could carry in one bag and in one soul that had finally stopped apologizing for being afraid.

The following weeks were strangely empty. Arien wrote to her, then fell silent, then sent messages through mutual acquaintances. Once he appeared outside the building where she worked. She did not file a complaint. Not out of compassion. Rather because she did not want the first public story of her freedom to be about him.

Then came the debate in Nitra.

And Jesair.

Not as a rescuer. Mareia hated the notion that a woman had to be saved by one man before she could leave another. She had left on her own.

Jesair was something else.

He was a witness to a world in which she did not have to make herself smaller in his presence.

After the UBI debate, they left the chamber together and stepped into the Union Council's inner courtyard. Nitra murmured in the evening. A transit module passed overhead so quietly that they could hear water running along a stone channel.

“Today you said something they will never forgive you for,” Mareia said.

“What was that?”

“That a person's privacy must be protected, but power's invisibility must not.”

Jesair leaned against the railing.

“Do you think I was wrong?”

“No. I'm only afraid that some people will use your words to open medical archives as well.”

“That isn't what I said.”

“I know. Tomorrow you can explain it to the committee that's already sent me three requests.”

Jesair checked the notifications on his interface. He had received them too.

“In the morning?”

“At eight. Bring your patience.”

Mareia adjusted the sleeve above her wrist. “I also know people who call every intrusion into another person's life an act of concern.”

Jesair did not ask a question. She noticed that immediately. Most people would have asked what had happened. Some out of concern, some out of curiosity, some so that they could form an opinion. Jesair's silence left her ownership of her own story.

“Arien Korveth,” she said at last.

Jesair nodded.

“I saw him in the chamber today.”

“He was looking at you.”

“I know.”

“Not as an opponent.”

“I know.”

Mareia looked at him.

“Doesn't that worry you?”

“It does. I just try not to let worry govern how I behave.”

Those words stayed with her.

Later they walked together through Nitra's old quarter. Not because they had arranged to. Neither of them simply turned away. They talked about the archives, about the children in Auriola, about whether it was possible to change the world without making it crueler in the process.

As they parted, something small happened.

Mareia meant to offer him her hand, but at the last moment she touched the inside of his wrist with three fingers. It was unintentional. More like a movement that had outrun thought.

Both fell silent for an instant.

“I'm sorry,” she said.

“For what?”

“I don't know.”

Jesair looked at the place she had touched.

“Strange,” he said softly.

“What is?”

For a moment he seemed to search for words.

“I felt as if I was remembering something. But I don't know what.”

Mareia said nothing.

She had felt it too.

The feeling was faint and indistinct, like an echo in a room she had never entered before.

When they parted, she walked alone through Nitra's illuminated streets, and for the first time in a long while, solitude did not feel like a punishment.

Later that night Arien sent her a single message.

Personal decisions never remain personal.

Mareia stared at it for a long time.

Then she did not delete it.

She did not know why.

Perhaps because some threats first disguise themselves as statements that cannot yet be proved.

12. EARTH: JESUS ON THE MOUNTAIN

Jesus took Peter, John, and James with him and went up a mountain to pray. The hour was already late as they followed the stony path, for the sun was dropping toward the horizon and the shadows lengthened across the slope. His disciples walked behind him in silence. They did not know why he had brought them there, and apprehension brushed against them like a cold wind.

When they reached a lonely place high above the countryside, Jesus stepped several paces away and lifted his eyes to heaven. He did not speak aloud, but his lips moved, and it seemed as though he were speaking to someone hidden from sight. Peter, John, and James remained behind him, but the fatigue of the climb and the stillness of the night overcame them. They sat on the ground, and their eyelids grew heavy.

While Jesus remained in prayer, something beyond human understanding happened before them. The appearance of his face changed, and his clothing shone with a whiteness no weaver on earth could produce. It was not the white of linen or wool, but light that seemed to come from within. His face shone as though a sun had opened behind it, and yet its brilliance did not burn the eyes of those who awoke.

Peter jerked awake like someone who has heard a voice in a dream. John opened his eyes and lost his breath. James braced his palms against the ground and stared ahead, for two men stood beside Jesus. They were not like travelers from the villages or elders from the temple courtyards. They were clothed in glory, and their faces were solemn, as though they knew the beginning and end of many ages.

They spoke with Jesus. Their conversation was quiet, yet the disciples felt that they both understood and did not understand it. They spoke of the journey to be fulfilled in Jerusalem, of blood to be shed, of human fear, of the power of priests, and of the hour when the Son of Man would be delivered into the hands of those who did not understand the light.

Peter watched them trembling, his heart caught between joy and terror. When he saw that the two appeared ready to depart, he said to Jesus:

“Teacher, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three shelters: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

But he did not know what he was saying. For when a person sees something for which he is unprepared, his tongue runs ahead of his understanding.

Then a cloud formed above them. It did not rise from below like mist from the valley, nor was it driven in by a wind from the sea. It descended from above, quiet and radiant, and enfolded them. The disciples entered its shadow and were seized by a great fear. For within the cloud was light, and within the light a presence before which the human heart grows small.

A voice came from the cloud:

“This is my chosen Son. Listen to him.”

When the voice faded, the cloud parted. The light withdrew like water returning to the deep, and Jesus stood before them alone. His robe was once again the robe of an ordinary man, and his face bore the weariness of flesh, but his eyes still held a glimmer of distances unknown to the disciples.

For a long time none of them spoke. They walked down the mountain, the stones grinding beneath their feet in the dark. Peter looked back several times, as if expecting to see the two men again at the summit, but there was only a sky full of stars.

At last he found the courage to approach Jesus.

“Lord,” he said quietly, “those two who were speaking with you... were they Elijah and Moses?”

Jesus looked at him. He did not answer at once. He walked several more paces, as though weighing each word lest it carry more than Peter could bear.

“It's a little more complicated than that, Simon,” he said at last.

Peter frowned.

“How more complicated, Lord? We saw them. And we knew it was them.”

Jesus stopped. Stars blazed above them, and the night was clear. He gestured toward the sky.

“When a child sees a lamp, he thinks the light dwells in the clay of its vessel. When a man sees a star, he thinks it is merely a point upon the vault of heaven. But the Father has made more than humanity can name.”

Peter looked up.

“Are you speaking of angels?”

“Of those you would call angels, too,” Jesus replied. “But not everything that comes from above has wings.”

Peter did not understand. John and James moved closer, sensing that Jesus was speaking of things he had never revealed to them before.

Jesus continued:

“Do you see those lights? You think they were placed there only to mark days and years. But around many of them are worlds the Father did not leave empty. There are places where rivers flow beneath a different sun, where plants lift their leaves toward a different light, and where beings resembling people search for truth just as you do.”

Peter grew pale.

“People?” he asked.

“People,” Jesus replied, “though not all are like you. Some are older in knowledge. Some understood the secrets of nature before your ancestors built their first cities. They can heal wounds that seem incurable to you. They can speak across distances without words. They can cross expanses that seem impassable to you. And when such a person acts among you, you call it a miracle.”

James shuddered.

“Then a miracle isn't a miracle?”

Jesus turned to him with a gentle smile.

“To a child, a seed from which a tree grows is a miracle too. To the wise, it is a law of life. But does that diminish the Father's glory? No. For a law that humanity understands is still God's law. And a mystery that humanity uncovers is still a mystery it was permitted to uncover.”

Peter remained silent. The words about other worlds frightened him more than the cloud on the mountaintop.

“And the two men?” he asked again. “If they were not Moses and Elijah as we believed, who were they?”

Jesus looked down into the valley, where distant village fires were flickering.

“They were what you could understand,” he said. “And they were more. They came bearing names your hearts know, for had they come without a veil, you would have fallen on your faces and understood nothing.”

“Tell us the truth,” Peter insisted.

Jesus regarded him with affection, but also firmness.

“If I told you the whole truth today, Simon, you would not understand it. You would make an idol of it, or a terror. Neither is faith.”

Peter lowered his head.

Jesus walked on, and they followed.

After a while he said:

"Among the worlds are those who keep watch over humanity. Not to take your freedom from you, but to prevent the flame from being smothered before it learns how to burn. They observe your steps, guard boundaries you are not yet permitted to cross, and sometimes touch the course of history when it is about to break in the wrong direction."

John asked:

"And do you know them, Lord?"

Jesus answered:

"I know them. And they know me."

There was something in those words the disciples could not name. They did not sound like a teacher speaking of prophets, but like the memory of someone who had traveled farther than any human road could reach.

Peter looked again at the sky. The stars no longer resembled little lights nailed to a vault. They seemed like doors. And beyond every one of them there might be a world looking back.

"Why did you show us this?" he asked.

Jesus stopped at the edge of the path. The night was still.

"Because the hour will come when you see my weakness," he said. "You will see me bound. You will see me beaten and abandoned. You will see people mock what they do not understand. And then remember this mountain. Remember that light may hide itself within flesh, but flesh cannot destroy it."

No one answered.

As they descended farther, dawn began to break. The first light touched the stones, and the countryside regained its familiar shape. But nothing in Peter was quite as it had been before. He walked beside John and James, yet his thoughts were still up there, inside the cloud, beneath the stars, before the men who had been Moses and Elijah and yet had been something greater.

And Jesus instructed them to tell no one about it.

For not every truth can be given to humanity all at once. Some truths must wait until the vessel within a person has grown wide enough to hold them.

13. ELARION: ARIEN KORVETH

Arien Korveth was not born an evil man.

That would have been too simple. And simple explanations are a mercy history grants to those unwilling to bear the weight of difficult truths.

First, he was born simply a son.

And of all the people in the world, he loved his mother most.

She was the first place he remembered as safety.

When he fell as a child and scraped his knee, he did not run to the medical module on the wall, though it was only a few paces away. He ran to her. When he received his first bad mark at school, he hid it from his father for two hours before showing it to her. When he quarreled with a boy from the neighborhood, he came home full of righteous anger, and she let him talk until all the details he had added to the story himself gradually fell away.

His mother had the rare gift of not correcting him too soon.

She sat beside him.

She listened.

Only after he had emptied himself of all the words with which a person defends himself against his own guilt would she sometimes ask:

“And now tell me what really happened.”

Most of the time, Arien told her.

With her, he could fail without that failure becoming an immediate judgment of his worth. He could be angry without being a bad person. He could cry without her explaining that tears solved nothing.

His father was different.

He loved Arien. The boy never seriously doubted that. But his father's love took the shape of rules.

His father believed in precision. He believed an agreement meant something only if it still held at the moment when honoring it became unpleasant. A word that could be softened afterward to suit the circumstances was not a promise but a proposal.

He worked with legal frameworks and currency regulation. All day he decided what happened when one party met a condition and another did not, when an entitlement arose, when an obligation expired, and exactly what the word *on time* meant.

He carried that way of thinking home with him.

When Arien was nine, he became obsessed with an old mechanical puzzle.

A Rubik's Cube.

His father noticed.

“When you solve it without help,” he told him one evening, “I'll take you to the zoo in Saren.”

Arien looked up.

He had never visited a zoo. His mother had shown him recordings of one: animals from three continents, enormous water enclosures, nocturnal houses, and an ancient forest allowed to grow beneath a dome almost untouched.

“Really?”

“If you solve it.”

“All of it?”

His father smiled.

“If I'd meant half, I would have said half.”

In the days that followed, Arien practiced until his fingers ached.

At first he learned the moves by heart. Then he understood that memorizing a sequence was not enough. He needed to know why the pieces moved as they did. Why one correct move on one side destroyed the order on the other, and why that order had to be sacrificed for a while so that it could eventually be restored.

The cube fascinated him.

It was a little world in which chaos was not real.

A person simply did not yet know the method.

Two days before the trip, he solved it for the first time.

Then a second time.

By the evening before they left, he could repeat the solution almost without thinking.

His mother ruffled his hair.

“So tomorrow you'll see the animals.”

Arien smiled.

“If I solve it.”

For a moment, his mother looked toward his father.

“But you already know how to solve it.”

At the time, Arien did not understand why she had said that.

He understood the next day.

They were standing outside the entrance to the zoo.

Beyond the high transparent walls, he could see the crowns of trees. From somewhere inside came the calls of animals he knew only from recordings. Families passed through the gates holding their children's hands, and Arien could scarcely stand still.

His father handed him the cube.

“Well, then.”

Arien laughed.

“Now?”

“Our agreement was that you'd solve it.”

“But I solved it yesterday.”

“Today we're at the zoo.”

His mother looked at him.

“Does he really have to do it now?”

“If he knows how, it won't be a problem.”

Arien took the cube.

At first everything went smoothly. First layer. Second. Corners. Edges.

Then he became aware of his father watching him.

A family with two children passed behind them. The gate opened, briefly revealing a broad path between the trees.

Arien hurried.

And made a mistake.

A small one.

During the final sequence, he turned one side the wrong way.

When he realized what he had done, he froze.

The cube was almost complete. Five faces looked right. On the last, a few squares were still out of place.

“Wait,” he said. “I'll do it again.”

His father checked the time.

“No.”

Arien thought he was joking.

“What?”

“You didn't solve it.”

“But I can solve it.”

“You haven't solved it now.”

“I only made a mistake at the end.”

“Yes.”

Arien looked at the entrance.

Then at his father.

“Then I'll fix it.”

“Our agreement wasn't that you'd keep fixing it until you managed.”

His mother stepped between them.

“You know he can do it. He showed us yesterday.”

His father answered calmly.

“Then he should have concentrated today as well.”

Arien's eyes began to burn.

“Please.”

His father shook his head.

“If an agreement stops applying the moment someone regrets its consequences, then we never had an agreement.”

He turned toward the transit module.

Arien stayed where he was.

Children were moving behind the gates. Somewhere in the distance came the deep call of a large animal, and a group of visitors hurried toward a viewing platform.

They were there.

Only a few dozen meters away.

All he needed to do was walk through the gate.

His mother stayed beside him. His father was already waiting at the module.

The boy held the almost-solved cube in his hands, tears running down his cheeks.

“I hate him,” he said.

His mother knelt beside him.

“No.”

“I do hate him.”

“Right now, you do.”

Arien looked at her through his tears.

She took the cube in her hand.

“Your father sometimes confuses precision with justice.”

Arien remembered those words.

“If something is a rule, doesn't that make it fair?”

“Not always.”

“Then what are rules for?”

His mother searched for an answer.

“To help us decide when we don't know what to do. Not to stop us from feeling for ourselves.”

Then she gave the cube back.

“And one more thing.”

“What?”

“Failing to do something perfectly doesn't mean you have failed completely.”

Arien nodded then.

But something else was etched far deeper into him.

A gate at which a person could stand, even with his goal within reach.

A condition that could be lost through a single wrong move.

And a world that did not care how close he had come.

A few years later he endured something terrible, something that would fundamentally alter the way he saw the world.

That day he was alone with his mother.

They were returning from a visit to her sister when synchronization failed in one of the transit layers. Three autonomous modules entered the same corridor almost simultaneously.

The first system averted the collision.

The second did not.

Later, Arien did not remember the impact as a sound.

He remembered light.

White.

Violent.

And then the world turned sideways.

The safety field caught him. His lip was split, his shoulder bruised, and blood ran from his forehead, but he could move.

His mother could not.

Part of the module's structure pinned the lower half of her body. She was conscious. Her breathing was short and shallow.

Arien crawled to her.

“Mom.”

She looked at him.

And even then, she smiled.

That was what haunted him most in later years.

Not the pain in her face.

The smile.

As if even in a wrecked module, amid smoke, alarms, and blood, she was still his harbor.

“I'm here,” she said.

The rescue crews arrived quickly.

Elarion had systems capable of responding to a transit disaster before a person could fully understand that it had happened. Rescue modules appeared above the crash site, medical drones moved among the injured, and a continuous assessment of each person's condition lit up above every body.

Arien watched only his mother.

One medic knelt beside her.

Another turned toward the wreckage of the neighboring module.

They pulled a child from it.

A boy about Arien's age.

His clothing was torn, blood covered his face, and one arm was twisted unnaturally beneath his body.

When he opened his eyes, Arien saw a golden ring.

It was unmistakable.

It almost shone.

The medical system immediately added new information.

One of the rescuers glanced at the projection.

“Aurelian regenerative profile.”

The other nodded.

Several statements followed that Arien did not fully understand at the time.

Probability of survival.

Time window.

Massive internal bleeding.

Regenerative response.

One available intensive-care transport.

Another module on its way.

Too late.

“The child first,” the team leader said.

Arien raised his head.

“No.”

No one heard him.

“No!”

The rescuers were already moving the boy.

Arien seized one of them by his clothing.

“My mom!”

The man turned toward him.

“Another module is coming.”

“Then take her!”

“We have to decide according to—”

“She'll die!”

For a moment, the medic closed his eyes.

Perhaps it was then that Arien first saw that even someone following the correct procedure could know he was doing something terrible.

“We're trying to save them both.”

Arien turned to his mother.

She must have heard the entire exchange.

“Take the boy,” she whispered.

Arien stared at her in disbelief.

“No.”

“Arien.”

“No.”

She reached for him.

Her fingers trembled.

He held them.

“Mom, tell them.”

“Look at me.”

“Tell them they have to take you.”

“Arien.”

Her voice still held the same calm he had known all his childhood.

The calm of their kitchen.

The calm of evenings.

The calm of the person to whom he had always gone whenever the world became too large.

“That child can be saved,” she said.

“So can you.”

She did not answer.

Behind Arien, the medical module's doors closed.

Just before they did, he saw the unfamiliar boy's face one more time.

And his eyes.

The golden ring vanished behind an opaque wall.

The next transport for his mother arrived several minutes later.

The subsequent report recorded exactly how many.

Arien knew that number by heart for years.

His mother died on the way to the hospital.

The doctors later explained that even an earlier transport might not have saved her. The wreckage had torn major blood vessels in her pelvis. Field drones could only slow the bleeding; closing the injury required a specialized module. Regenerative treatment required stable circulation and hours that she no longer had. The rescuers' decision had followed protocol. Because of his age, the type of injury, and his Aurelian regenerative profile, the boy in the neighboring module had a significantly higher chance of surviving intensive treatment.

The boy survived.

Arien's mother did not.

The golden ring had not, by itself, determined the decision.

It was merely the visible sign of one of the factors the system had considered.

But to Arien, that did not matter.

Children do not remember trauma as a professional report.

They remember an image.

Arien remembered his mother lying among the wreckage.

The door of the rescue module.

And the golden eyes of the child that disappeared on the other side.

That was how Arien's hatred of Aurelians began.

It had no arguments.

No history.

No political theory.

It had a color.

Gold.

After the funeral, his father requested the complete accident record.

He studied the telemetry, response times, triage protocol, medical decisions, and predictive models.

Arien expected him to find someone to blame.

He needed him to.

Surely someone must have made a mistake.

Surely someone must be held responsible.

After several days, his father closed the final report.

“They followed the correct procedure,” he said.

Arien stared at him.

“Mom is dead.”

His father lowered his eyes.

“I know.”

“Then how could they have done the right thing?”

His father was silent for a long time.

His face had gone rigid in a way Arien took for coldness. Only much later would he understand that some people do not fall apart outwardly, not because they feel no pain, but because they collapse inward, where no one can see them.

“Not every correct decision leads to a good outcome,” his father said.

Arien loathed those words.

“Then what makes it correct?”

His father did not answer.

And for the first time, Arien understood something that would never entirely leave him.

A system can follow every rule and someone can still die.

No one has to lie.

No one has to break the law.

No one has to intend harm.

And the result can be a grave.

From that day on, he studied mechanisms differently.

Before, he had been interested in them because he enjoyed understanding things.

Now he needed to control them.

If the world could take his mother from him through a decision that could not be called an error, being a good person was not enough.

Being right was not enough.

Even pleading was not enough.

A person had to understand how the world made its decisions.

And if he did not want to stand among those whom the system left waiting, he had to be there when the rules were written, before the decision began.

Thus, as a child, he learned two things.

First: the world is governed not by those who are right, but by those who understand its mechanisms.

Second: if you cannot see a mechanism, you are among those it controls.

He was born in a western Veyran state, into a family of administrators, lawyers, and currency strategists. After his mother's death, the house remained the same, and yet the place he could run to had vanished from it.

His father was still there.

So were the rules.

Dinners continued.

The conversations were about market movements, coalition agreements, regulatory loopholes, and which state still believed its central bank was independent.

Feelings were hardly ever discussed.

Arien adapted.

He was extraordinarily intelligent. His intelligence had the precision of a surgical instrument. He could dissect a problem into layers, find the weak point, judge who would yield, whom he could convince, whom he could buy, and whom he could bypass.

The Veyran schools considered him gifted.

The financial consortia considered him an investment.

Politicians considered him useful.

He considered himself someone who could see behind the curtain.

As an adolescent, he returned to the record of his mother's accident.

Not once.

Many times.

First he searched for an error made by the medical staff.

Then an error in the algorithm.

Later, he tried to discover who had approved the protocol and what data it was based on.

That angered him more than finding an error would have.

The boy had been saved because the system assessed his chances as higher. The Aurelian biological profile was only one variable among many.

But Arien began to notice Aurelians everywhere.

In ceremonial broadcasts.

In family documents.

In the oldest schools.

In stories about people whose bodies regenerated faster.

In legends of bloodlines supposedly capable, long ago, of healing by touch.

The golden ring was presented as a cultural inheritance.

Arien saw an advantage granted at birth.

Early in his career, Arien submitted a proposal to transit administrators for backup intensive-care transports in multiple-casualty accidents. It was no grand gesture. He calculated arrival times, module distribution, and the cost of keeping a reserve. When they told him such capacity would sit unused most days, he placed the

report of his mother's accident before them and asked them to include the minutes spent waiting in their calculations.

The proposal was approved. Two years later, he received a report of a collision in which two intensive-care modules arrived at once and both seriously injured patients survived. One was an Aurelian boy. Arien kept the report. At the time, he still believed that a fairer rule could protect a person regardless of the color of their eyes.

Yet while watching a public Aurelian ceremony, a thought came to him that still made him feel a little ashamed:

You took my mother too.

It was not true.

His intellect knew that.

But his pain was no analyst.

A person can know for years that his hatred rests on a faulty foundation and still build an entire house upon it. All he needs is to find enough arguments to give an old wound a new name: conviction.

Arien found them.

And then he met Mareia.

She was not like his mother.

Not in character, nor in the way she lived or thought. Arien would have regarded such a comparison as primitive.

And yet, for the first time in many years, he felt something in her presence that he had known in childhood.

The possibility of no longer having to defend himself against the world, if only for a while.

Mareia was sensitive, but not controllable. Kind, but not pliant. When she disagreed with him, it was not to win. It was because she could not betray the accuracy of her own perception.

At first he admired it.

In her presence, something of the person he had hidden beneath mechanisms for years sometimes returned.

Then it frightened him.

For what a person needs, he can lose.

And Arien had once known a place he returned to whenever he was hurting, until one day the world took it from him.

So he began doing what he did with everything he did not want to lose.

He tried to understand it.

Then to predict it.

Then to control it.

He remembered what Mareia said. Whom she met. When she came home. Whom she trusted. Who influenced her. What changed her opinions.

To himself, he explained it as attentiveness.

Later, as concern.

Finally, as a right.

And when he discovered that a human being could not be secured like a financial flow, he began to feel anger.

Mareia would not fit into his system.

She could not be owned.

And when he discovered that she could not be owned, he began to hate precisely what he had once loved about her.

After she left, the apartment was too orderly.

She had broken nothing. She had not screamed. She had not publicly made him into a monster against whom he could defend himself.

She had left with a quiet no.

During the first days, he told himself she would return.

Then that someone had influenced her.

Then Jesair Davion appeared in his mind.

And with him, the old color.

Gold.

It was strange how easily two events separated by decades could touch inside a person.

An unknown child carried away from an accident.

A man standing beside Mareia.

Both Aurelians.

Both with golden rings in their eyes.

His reason knew there was no causal connection between them.

The wound needed none.

Arien began telling himself that Mareia could never truly belong to his world. That Aurelians would always choose their own kind in the end, even while speaking of universality, equality, and an entire civilization.

At the decisive moment, he believed, they returned to the ring.

The golden ring.

He had hated that sign long before he admitted it.

Worst of all, to him, was the House of Davion.

A myth educated people laughed at but never quite abandoned. Healing by touch. Foreseeing misfortune. Nature listening. Ancient fairy tales for a civilization with biological artificial intelligence, quantum sensors, and cities on another planet.

And yet all Jesair Davion had to do was stand up in the Union Council chamber and say one sentence, and people fell silent.

Later, Arien replayed the recording of the Nitra debate.

He paused it on Jesair's face.

“A person's privacy must be protected. Power's invisibility must not.”

Jesair stood calmly. He needed neither triumph nor performance. That was precisely what disturbed Arien.

An ambitious politician could be bought.

A demagogue could be exposed.

A person who did not want power, yet acquired it through the trust of others, was far more difficult to control.

Arien enlarged the image of his eyes.

For an instant a golden ring appeared in them.

And the world around him disappeared.

For a fraction of a second, he smelled the scorched material of the crashed module again.

He heard the medic:

Aurelian regenerative profile.

He saw his mother's hand.

The ambulance module's doors.

The boy's golden eyes.

Then he was back in Nitra.

In front of the image of Jesair Davion.

Arien felt revulsion tighten his stomach.

“No,” he said into the empty room.

He did not yet know exactly what he was rejecting.

Jesair.

Mareia.

The Aurelians.

A system that had once made a decision without hatred, and had taken his mother all the same.

Perhaps his own humiliation too.

All these things now lay so close together inside him that he was ceasing to distinguish them.

And just then a notification lit up on his work surface.

The message had arrived through a closed communications channel used by senior fund administrators, political advisers, and people who did not want their conversations to become part of ordinary archives.

There was no sender's name.

It contained a location, a time, and a single sentence:

Mr. Thorne would appreciate a conversation about the consequences of today's address.

Arien read it twice.

Kael Thorne held no official position commensurate with his influence. He led neither a government nor a central bank. Yet his name appeared around asset managers, investment funds, media companies, foundations, and political campaigns.

People called him an adviser.

Those who knew more used no title at all.

Arien did not delete the message.

First he replayed Jesair's speech.

This time he did not watch Jesair.

He found Kael in the recording.

Then he noticed the brief moment when Kael was not looking at the speaker.

He was looking at Arien.

Arien accepted the invitation.

They met the following evening high above Nitra, in a room officially belonging to a foundation that supported interstate economic cooperation.

Kael was waiting.

“Mr. Korveth.”

“Mr. Thorne.”

“I've known your name for some time.”

“Should that please me?”

“It should make you cautious.”

Kael opened a recording of the conference and paused it on Jesair.

“When the time comes for our common work, value must no longer walk in shadow,” he read. “What serves everyone must be visible to everyone.”

Arien expected mockery.

Instead, he saw something far more interesting in Kael's face.

Fear.

Kael Thorne was afraid of the idea.

For him, transparency was not a moral problem. It was an existential threat. If Elarion's financial flows could be brought together on a single map, they would reveal far more than tax evasion.

They would reveal political parties financed by the same sources.

Media organizations that publicly hated one another but were secretly owned by the same money.

Foundations.

Banks.

Funds.

And the House of Thorne.

“Davion doesn't have an organization yet,” Kael said. “No party, no machinery, no law.”

“Then why are you afraid of him?”

“Because people understand what he's saying.”

Kael turned off the image.

“Complex ideas can be buried in committees. Simple ones spread by themselves.”

Arien leaned back.

“You invited me here to tell me you're afraid of one Aurelian?”

“I invited you because you aren't afraid of him.”

“No.”

Kael was quiet for a moment.

“You hate him.”

Arien felt the muscles of his neck tighten.

“You don't know enough about me.”

“I know the way you looked at him.”

“A look isn't evidence.”

“I'm not looking for evidence. I'm looking for motivation.”

Arien stood.

Kael made no move to stop him.

“Mareia Lioren isn't the reason you're here,” he said.

Arien went still.

“She is merely the reason your old hatred has learned to speak again.”

This time Arien spun around.

Kael had no idea how close he had come.

He knew nothing of the crash.

Of the mother.

Of the boy.

Of the golden eyes behind the closing doors.

But people like Kael did not need to know where a wound came from. They only needed to recognize its existence.

“What do you want from me?” Arien asked.

“Nothing yet.”

“Then you needn't have summoned me.”

“I want to offer you support.”

Slowly, Arien sat down.

“For what?”

Kael opened an overview of research and financial structures.

“You work with consortia. You understand transitions between jurisdictions, currencies, and legal regimes. You've developed frameworks for biological security.”

“All lawful.”

“Of course.”

Kael said the word so calmly that it lost its meaning.

“The houses and foundations I work with are looking for people capable of analyzing long-term risks to civilization. Economic. Political. Social. Genetic.”

Arien looked at him.

“Aurelian?”

Kael did not answer immediately.

“Aurelian as well, if you consider them a risk.”

At that moment, no plan opened before him.

A door did.

Kael was offering access to funding, legal firms, foundations, and research centers. To people who knew how to phrase a question so that its true meaning remained hidden within the language of expertise.

“And what do you want in return?”

“Information. Where Jesair's idea is heading. Who supports it. And what means exist to halt its growth before a moral slogan becomes a political program.”

“You want to discredit him?”

“If possible.”

“And if not?”

Kael regarded him.

“Then we'll need a more precise analysis.”

He did not need to say more.

After the meeting, Arien began reading about Aurelian heredity.

At first he told himself it was professional curiosity.

He learned about unusual patterns of genetic inheritance. About sons who inherited the characteristic profile from Aurelian fathers. About mixed lineages. Marker patterns. Physiological traits associated with the golden ring.

Biology.

Nothing but biology.

Exactly as in the report on his mother's death.

The more he read, the more two parts of his life that he had kept separate began to meet within him.

The child who had lost his mother.

And the man who needed to explain the world without admitting that the child still governed him.

He began writing notes.

Moral authority without an electoral mandate.

Lineage continuity as political capital.

Davion—a symbol that refuses to be a symbol, and is therefore more effective.

Transparency as a tool of Aurelian moral influence.

The last statement was untrue.

Transparency was not an Aurelian idea. Jesair proposed it as a common system for everyone.

But Arien was no longer starting with reality.

He was starting with the conclusion he needed to reach.

And an intelligent man who chooses his conclusion first can sometimes be more dangerous than a fool.

For a fool does not know how to build a flawless path to an error.

Arien did.

The more he wrote, the less he realized he was not writing about Aurelians.

He was writing about a boy outside a zoo.

About a gate that had not opened because he had failed to meet a condition.

About a mother in the wreckage.

About an ambulance module that opened for someone else.

About Mareia, closing a door behind her.

There had been too many doors in his life.

And Arien resolved never again to be the one left standing outside them.

One evening, Mareia replied to one of his older messages.

Arien, I am not coming back. What happened was not a mistake between us. You crossed a boundary. I hope that one day you'll be able to admit that to yourself.

He read it many times.

It was the final sentence that enraged him most.

Precisely because it was true.

Three days later, he watched a recording of a public discussion in Auriola. Jesair was speaking about the archives. Mareia sat among the audience.

When Jesair finished, their eyes met for an instant.

There was nothing in it that could be used as evidence.

Arien saw everything in it nonetheless.

He froze the image.

Jesair.

Mareia.

The golden ring.

And somewhere deep beneath all the years of education, influence, and self-control, a nine-year-old boy still held an almost-solved cube in his hands.

He opened a list of research foundations on his work surface.

Several now showed a new authorization.

Expanded access approved by fund administration.

Kael had honored his offer.

Arien could submit proposals for strategic projects, use legal and financial advisers, and connect programs across states that appeared unrelated on the surface.

None of it was yet a crime.

Biological security research was necessary.

Analyzing genetic populations could save lives.

Modeling systemic risks was part of responsible civilizational governance.

Every tool had a legitimate use.

What mattered was who would one day place those tools side by side.

Arien knew how to finance a major project so that nowhere would it look like one project. He knew how to divide commissions across currencies, states, and legal regimes. He knew where the ultimate interest could be concealed without anyone knowingly breaking the law.

He stared for a long time at the possibilities before him.

A person does not become a perpetrator only when he commits his first act.

Sometimes the boundary is crossed far earlier.

At the instant when a person looks at the possibility of destroying another and, instead of asking *would it be right?*, asks *how could it be done?*

Arien had not ordered anything yet.

He had contacted no laboratory.

He had no concrete plan.

But he had a patron.

Access.

And the certainty that if he divided his intention into small enough pieces, he would find people willing to carry out each one without knowing what they were creating together.

That night he stepped out onto the terrace.

Nitra shone beneath him. Ships passed above the city toward the orbital ring and beyond, toward Thaeron.

The world was precise.

Interconnected.

Governed.

Arien remembered his father.

They followed the correct procedure.

His mother.

Rules must not stop us from feeling for ourselves.

For decades, those two sentences had stood opposed in his memory.

In the end, he chose his father's.

Not because he had forgiven him.

Because it could be put to work.

If people make decisions according to mechanisms, one need only control the mechanisms.

If institutions follow rules, one need only create a path along which each will obey its own rules.

If an intention is divided among enough people, no one need carry the full burden of guilt.

Arien looked out across the city.

“Personal decisions do not exist,” he said softly.

He liked the sentence.

It sounded like philosophy.

In truth, a child was still crying inside it, before a locked gate.

A message from the House of Thorne's office waited on the work surface behind him.

Financial and legal support is ready. Submit your first project framework.

Arien went back inside.

When hatred matures, it stops shouting.

It begins to organize.

Kael had opened the first door for him.

And beyond it, Elarion, a great civilization beneath a great sun, still offered far too many corridors.

14. EARTH: THE BEGINNING OF A NEW GENERATION

Evening was falling across the land, and Jerusalem lay behind them like a wound that had not yet had time to close. The disciples sat in a house behind locked doors. No one spoke aloud. Each carried a different kind of shame: Peter his denial, Thomas his doubt, the others their flight, silence, and fear.

Then the air in the room changed.

There was no sound of footsteps, no creak of a door. Suddenly he was standing among them.

Jesus.

Jesus stood among them, alive and calm, too real to be a memory, a shadow, or an image conjured by despair. Pain no longer had the final word upon his face.

“Peace be with you,” he said.

No one moved. Some stepped back; others fell to their knees. Peter covered his face with his hands. John began to weep without a sound. Thomas stared as if the entire world he had built upon doubt had collapsed in a single instant.

“It is I,” Jesus said quietly. “You are not touching a dream. You are not touching a vain hope. You are touching what death could not hold.”

Thomas approached like a man afraid of his own knowledge. He wanted to touch the wound, but his hand stopped in midair. All his defiant certainty broke apart.

“My Lord,” he whispered, “and my God.”

Jesus regarded him without reproach.

“You believe because you have seen. But others will come who will not see, and yet the same fire will burn within them.”

Then he sat among them as though he had returned from a short journey rather than from the realm of death. He asked for food. They gave him a piece of roasted fish and some bread. He ate before them, slowly, ordinarily, and that ordinariness was more unsettling than the miracle. For a spirit does not eat. A dream does not break bread. A memory does not look a person in the eye.

When he had finished, he began to speak to them of Scripture. Of Moses, the prophets, the words they had heard all their lives but which were only now opening like gates. He told them that the Son of Man had to descend to the place people most

feared to look, to show them that not even there had God lost dominion over the world.

“You thought the cross was the end,” he said. “But the cross was the place where human power exhausted itself to the last drop. Where humanity showed what it was capable of doing to God, God showed what he was capable of doing to humanity: forgiving it.”

Later they went north, to the water where he had first called them. The Sea of Tiberias was calm, and night lay over it like a dark veil. Peter said he was going fishing, and the others went with him. All night they cast their nets, but caught nothing.

At dawn, a man stood on the shore.

“Children,” he called, “have you anything to eat?”

“No,” they answered.

“Cast your net on the right side of the boat.”

They did, and the net filled so suddenly that they could not haul it in. John went pale and looked at Peter.

“It is the Lord.”

Without thinking, Peter threw himself into the water. He waded toward the shore as if every step might take him back to the night when he had said three times that he did not know him.

A fire was already burning on the shore. Fish and bread lay over the coals. Jesus stood beside the flames, his face lit by the morning. Mary Magdalene was not far from him. She was silent, but hers was not the silence of the others. It held neither shame nor fear. It was more like quiet recognition, as though she had known from the beginning that death would not be where their story ended.

They ate together. No one dared ask him, “Who are you?” For they all knew.

When they had finished eating, Jesus turned to Peter.

“Simon, son of John,” he said, “do you love me more than these?”

Peter lowered his eyes.

“Lord, you know I love you.”

Jesus nodded.

“Feed my lambs.”

The fire crackled. Peter looked up, but Jesus asked him again:

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

Peter's voice trembled.

“Yes, Lord. You know I love you.”

“Tend my sheep.”

A third time Jesus asked:

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

Then everything inside Peter that had still pretended to be healed began to hurt. Three questions fell into three denials. Three answers rose from three wounds.

“Lord,” Peter said, “you know everything. You know I love you.”

Jesus looked at him for a long and solemn moment.

“Feed my sheep.”

And Peter understood that forgiveness is not forgetting. It is entrusting a task to someone who now knows how weak he is.

Then Jesus led them up a mountain. The eleven stood there with Mary Magdalene and several others who had followed them from Galilee to Jerusalem. Below them stretched a land that would remain divided for a long time among empires, priests, merchants, swords, and fear. Above them the sky opened, not as an escape, but as a reminder that the world was not sealed within its cruelties.

Jesus said:

“I have been given an authority no human being could take from me, for no human being gave it to me. Go, then, and teach the nations. Not with the sword. Not with fear. Not with the desire to rule. Teach them to see. Teach them to love truth more than their own advantage. Teach them to forgive, but not to serve falsehood. Baptize them into a life in which a person no longer belongs only to himself.”

Some fell to their knees. Some wept. And some still doubted, because even before a miracle the human heart remains a human heart.

Jesus stepped closer.

“I will not be with you as I have been,” he said. “But I will be with you always, in every person who awakens from the sleep of his own fear. I will be in consciousness that recognizes itself. I will be in everyone who understands that the kingdom of God does not arrive as a palace of clouds, but as light within a human being.”

Then he turned to Mary Magdalene.

It was not the gesture of a teacher toward a disciple. There was something older, deeper, quieter in it. Like two rivers finding each other again in a single channel after

a long journey. Mary stepped toward him, and their hands touched for an instant. Peter saw it. So did John. No one said a word.

Jesus looked at Peter one last time.

"You remain with the flock," he told him. "You will keep them together when they scatter. You will remind them of bread, the fire, and the sea. You will tell them I have risen."

Peter tried to object, but Jesus stopped him with a look.

"And you," he said, turning to John, "carry the word. Preserve what you have seen, but even more, what you have understood."

Then he addressed them all:

"Not everything begun by God must happen before the eyes of the world. Some works grow in secret. Some seeds must fall far from temples, far from thrones, far from those who would claim ownership of them."

Mary Magdalene stood beside him, the wind stirring her hair. There was no surprise upon her face. Rather, the assent of someone who already knew the path.

"A time will come," Jesus continued, "when people will be born who carry not my name as a banner, but my consciousness as a flame. They will not rule the world from palaces. They will change it by seeing farther than others. They will be born among the nations, in different ages, in the bodies of ordinary people. And whenever the world approaches an abyss, some of them will remember."

The disciples did not understand everything. Perhaps they could not. The words they heard were larger than their lives.

A bright cloud moved in the sky. Not like a chariot that would carry him away before their eyes, but like a veil covering a road they were not yet permitted to know. Jesus raised his hands and blessed them.

"Be my witnesses," he said. "To the ends of the earth."

Then he stepped back into the light.

Some saw the cloud take him from sight. Some would swear he ascended into the sky. Others, John above all, were never certain for the rest of their lives whether heaven had opened above them in that moment, or within them.

When the light vanished, they remained on the mountain, staring into the emptiness.

Two men in white appeared beside them like a quiet answer to the question no one dared ask.

“Why are you looking into heaven?” one said. “The one who has gone is not lost. He has merely entered a path you do not yet know how to follow.”

Peter turned back toward the others. There were tears on his face, but also a firmness he had not possessed before.

“Come,” he said. “We have his sheep to tend.”

And far from them, where the path disappeared among rocks and morning light, two figures walked side by side. A man and a woman. Not like fugitives from the world, but like people silently carrying its future so that the world might one day discover it within itself.

Behind them lay Jerusalem, the cross, the empty tomb, the fire on the shore, and the flock entrusted to Peter.

Before them lay a road whose story would not immediately be written in books.

And yet along it a new generation of people would one day be born—not stronger in body, not richer in possessions, but clearer in consciousness. People who would remember without knowing from where. People who, at decisive moments in history, would hear a quiet voice within themselves:

Awaken.

For the kingdom does not begin upon a throne.

It begins in the person who becomes aware that he is aware, and draws the right conclusions from that awareness.

PART II: THE FRAGMENTATION OF A SINGLE CRIME

15. THIRTY CURRENCIES

Money has no intention.

It cannot hate, envy, or thirst for revenge. It does not know whether it is buying bread, medicine, a politician's vote, or a death yet to come. It knows only direction, value, and the account in which it pauses for a moment.

Intention comes from human beings.

And human beings learned long ago how to separate money from their own names.

Kael Thorne received Arien in the same room where they had first met. High above Nitra, behind a wall of dark glass. The city glowed beneath them like an immense nervous system. Transit routes flowed between towers, the river reflected the lights, and far away the orbital ring rose above the horizon.

There was nothing on the table between them.

Kael placed his palm on its surface.

A map of Elarion appeared.

Forty states.

Thirty active currencies.

Hundreds of banks.

Thousands of funds, foundations, management companies, law firms, and ownership registers, each of which knew the others only to the extent that the law required.

“What do you see?” Kael asked.

Arien studied the map.

“Fragmentation.”

“A politician would call it diversity.”

“A banker would call it opportunity.”

Kael smiled.

“That's why I invited you.”

He touched one of the northern regions. The Northern Alliance's currency appeared. Then he opened a state in the southern archipelago: Therinith. Its registry guarded the owners of investment funds more strictly than its citizens' personal medical records.

A payment departed the north as an investment in technological development. In Therinith, a fund with no publicly identified owner received it. From there it passed to another state as a loan. Later it returned to the Union as capital for a private foundation.

The same money.

Three legal forms.

Four purposes.

Not a single name.

“The Union sees the beginning,” Kael said. “Therinith sees the administrator. The next state sees a loan. When it returns, the Union sees a foreign investment. Every piece of information is correct.”

“And no one sees the whole.”

“The whole is a dangerous concept. Politicians dislike it.”

With a movement of his hand, Kael opened more flows. There were hundreds of them. Some led to transit companies, others to media outlets, political foundations, research centers, and insurers.

One route led to the Kars Belt, where two states had been at war over access to energy deposits for three years.

“You supply them with weapons,” Arien said.

Kael did not move.

“A company in which a fund managed by my house holds a minority stake supplies defensive equipment to one side.”

“And the other?”

“Loans to rebuild its damaged cities.”

Arien looked at him.

“Reconstruction hasn't started.”

“Which is precisely why the terms are favorable.”

Kael closed the layer showing the war. He did so without shame, but without pride either, like a man moving a document from one side of his desk to the other.

“I'm not telling you this to impress you,” he said. “I want you to understand the environment. Power doesn't hide by disappearing. It divides itself into parts that look acceptable on their own.”

“And what do you expect from me?”

“A framework.”

“For what?”

“That's for you to determine.”

Arien turned toward the city.

Since their first meeting, he had been thinking about what he actually wanted. His thoughts kept returning to Jesair, Mareia, and the golden ring, but he could not say those things in front of Kael in that form. They would sound small. Personal. Ridiculous.

He wanted Mareia to discover that she had left someone greater than she was capable of understanding.

He wanted Jesair to stop standing before people as the moral answer to a question no one had properly asked yet.

He wanted Aurelians to stop looking at the world through an ancient story according to which they held a special place in history.

Above all, he wanted something to break.

Not everything.

Only enough to make people stop believing that Jesair Davion could point the way along a path it was safe to walk.

“Biological security,” Arien said.

Kael remained still.

“Go on.”

“The three branches of Elarion differ biologically. Medicine accounts for that, but politicians speak about it cautiously. Too cautiously. No one knows what would happen if a health threat emerged that affected one branch far more severely than the others.”

“You want to study such a threat?”

Arien turned.

“I want to study civilization's preparedness.”

Kael smiled.

Not because he believed him.

Because he appreciated the wording.

“For that you'll need research.”

“Data.”

“Laboratories.”

“Computing capacity.”

“Political cover.”

“Not cover. Independent projects with legitimate purposes.”

Kael leaned back.

“And what will be their common purpose?”

Arien was silent for a second longer than necessary.

“They won't know they have one.”

Thirty currencies still glowed on the map of Elarion.

Each had its own value, rules, history, and borders. Money changed between them so often that it seemed to lose a piece of its past with every exchange rate.

Kael enlarged the map.

“The project mustn't be financed as a project,” he said. “It must be financed as a multitude of needs that appear unrelated.”

“How many companies?”

“That depends on how many questions you want to ask.”

“And the beneficial owners?”

“Some will exist only in the registers. Others won't be publicly known. Still others will be funds owned by funds.”

“Who will direct it?”

“No one.”

Arien looked at him.

Kael continued:

“You will know what you need. Every participant will receive only their own assignment. Funding will be provided by people who know nothing of the content. Lawyers will know the contracts, not the results. Researchers will know the questions, not where they came from. Laboratories will know the material, not the full connection. Create one center, and you create a place that can be found.”

“And without a center?”

“Then nothing will exist that a single investigation can uncover.”

Arien looked again at the thirty currencies.

“How many will we use?”

Kael shrugged.

“Enough to make every institution look in a different direction.”

Money had no intention.

But that night, it acquired a direction.

And that direction led toward a wound that did not yet have a name.

16. A WOUND RECEIVES A BUDGET

Arien worked for three days without leaving his apartment.

He left the curtains open. Nitra passed before him from morning into evening, evening into night, and night back into cold daylight. Empty drink containers were the only objects piling up on the table. Everything else existed in layers above his work surface.

First, he wrote a title:

Planetary Biological Resilience Program.

He stared at it for so long that he deleted it.

Too grand.

Too unified.

Too visible.

Instead of one program, he created a list of separate questions.

How does the immune response differ among Elarion's three branches?

Which inherited traits influence resistance to unknown biological threats?

How quickly can health systems detect atypical clusters of illness?

How can genetic archives be protected from misuse?

How does social stability change when different population groups are affected unequally?

How can biological artificial intelligence be used to anticipate new health risks?

Every question was legitimate.

Some were even urgent.

Arien divided them into twenty-three projects.

Then divided the projects among eleven fields.

Data.

Modeling.

Ethics.

Computing capacity.

Medical simulations.

Longevity research.

Legal frameworks.

Crisis logistics.

Genetic protection.

Public risk communication.

Infrastructure resilience.

Nowhere in any part was it written that the results should be combined.

That existed only in his mind.

On the fourth day, a man from the House of Thorne arrived. He had no name that meant anything to Arien. He introduced himself simply as the financial coordinator.

He was younger than Arien expected. His face was so ordinary that it seemed a professional qualification.

“Mr. Thorne is requesting an initial scope,” he said.

Arien gave him access to the project list.

The coordinator went through it without asking questions. Biology did not interest him. For each project, he asked only what sort of institution could carry it out, what form the financing might take, and whether access to protected data was required.

“This is research into inherited resilience?” he asked of one item.

“Yes.”

“A longevity foundation could fund that.”

“It isn't about longevity.”

“It will be in the application.”

Arien frowned.

“The results must be usable.”

“The results will be what you require. The public justification will be what the data provider requires.”

The coordinator moved to the next item.

“Healthcare response simulations. Those can go through an insurance consortium.”

“Why would insurers pay for that?”

“Because they need to know what reserves an uneven epidemic would require.”

“I need a biological model, not an insurance model.”

“They'll receive an actuarial output. You'll receive the biological appendix.”

The coordinator moved on.

“Large-scale computing capacity.”

“Biological AI.”

“Thaeron.”

“Why?”

“Energy tariffs. The computing complexes there have surplus capacity and weaker public oversight of foreign clients.”

Arien watched his thoughts become accounting categories.

Something that only days earlier had existed as a vague desire to harm Jesair was acquiring budget lines, time estimates, and legal structures.

A wound was receiving a budget.

The budget had no line item for hatred.

Revenge had no entry of its own.

It contained services, audits, licenses, research grants, and the rental of computing capacity.

A person could read the entire document without finding a single thing to be ashamed of.

“What will the total amount be?” Arien asked.

The coordinator gave him a figure.

It was higher than he expected.

“That will be visible.”

“Not as a whole.”

“Someone could compare the recipients.”

“Across different states? Different currencies? Different stated purposes? Not without grounds for an investigation.”

“And if such grounds arise?”

“Then it will already be too late.”

The coordinator said it calmly, without malice. As a description of a timing mismatch between two systems.

Arien turned away.

Mareia's last message was still saved in another layer.

Personal decisions never remain personal.

He had written those words to her as a threat, yet over the last few days they had begun to seem to him like a law. Mareia had made a personal decision. She had left. She had chosen a life without him.

Jesair had made a personal decision. He had stood up in the chamber and spoken an idea aloud.

Kael had made a personal decision. He had opened financial corridors.

And now Arien was making his own.

Every decision touched other people.

The only difference was its reach.

“Mr. Thorne has one more question,” the coordinator said.

“What?”

“What constitutes an acceptable outcome?”

Arien turned slowly toward him.

“Of the research?”

“Of the project.”

For the first time, Arien hesitated.

He imagined Jesair sick. Not dead. Merely weak. Stripped of the quiet confidence that drew others to him. He imagined Aurelians begging states to protect them. He imagined a public no longer asking about transparency but instead fearing biological differences.

He imagined Mareia realizing that Jesair was not invulnerable.

“Proof of vulnerability,” he said.

The coordinator waited.

“Whose?”

“The Aurelians'.”

“And Jesair Davion?”

Arien remained silent.

That was enough.

The coordinator closed the document.

“The first framework will be ready within ten days.”

When he left, silence filled the apartment.

Arien opened one of the Aurelian medical archives, which was publicly accessible for academic purposes. It contained no names or personal records. Only population data, historical illnesses, and a description of the golden ring as an inherited phenotype.

He read about it as a biological trait.

He read about the golden ring stripped of its significance as a sign.

There was no mention of the light of the soul.

Only a collection of traits that could be measured.

That calmed him.

It is easier to decide to harm a symbol once you have turned it into data.

17. FOUNDATIONS OF PROTECTION

The first foundation had been established seventeen years earlier.

It was called the Foundation for the Protection of Future Generations, and its purpose was to support research intended to prevent inherited diseases from being passed on to children.

The public knew it through stories of families it had helped pay for treatment.

Its representatives appeared in schools, hospitals, and political discussions. Each year it published a report full of photographs of children, doctors, and researchers.

The name Kael Thorne appeared nowhere in it.

In fact, no one owned the foundation. It had a board of trustees, founding capital, outside auditors, and an agreement with an asset manager. The manager belonged to a fund in Therinith. A law firm represented the fund. The firm acted on the instructions of another administrator.

At the end of the chain was no name.

There was a right to decide.

Kael did not need to own the foundation. It was enough that the people who made decisions about its money knew whose phone calls could not be refused.

The second foundation protected healthcare systems against future pandemics.

The third supported the safe development of artificial intelligence.

The fourth dealt with the ethics of genetic data.

The fifth helped regions devastated by the war in the Kars Belt.

Each had a worthy name.

Power likes to dress itself in words that are difficult to argue against.

Protection.

Safety.

The future.

Children.

Peace.

No one establishes a Foundation for Invisible Influence.

Nerai Sael sat in the Layer, studying a payment too small to constitute a serious case and too strange to close.

It had come from one of Vesta's establishments.

Not directly.

The analytical overview had marked three payments from companies connected with Vesta to health-protection foundations. Each had a lawful purpose. Their timing caught Nerai's attention, as did how alike they looked despite coming from different payers.

“You think a restaurant is funding genetic research?” Taren Voss asked.

“I don't think anything.”

“That's your most frequent opinion.”

Nerai enlarged the timeline.

“It's not just this one payment. Look at the other establishments.”

Taren sat beside her.

Another pattern repeated on the timeline: shortly after each such payment, a new research application appeared.

“Vesta supports a lot of good causes,” Taren said.

“Vesta doesn't directly support anything,” Nerai said. “The donations come from companies that live off its operations.”

“That wouldn't look quite as good in a public report.”

“Why do new research applications appear immediately after these donations?”

“Tax planning.”

“Possibly.”

“Reputation building.”

“Possibly.”

“Someone at Vesta has a guilty conscience.”

Nerai looked at him.

“So far, that's the least likely explanation.”

Taren opened the foundation records.

Every foundation was legal.

Donations had been disclosed in states that required disclosure. Elsewhere, only aggregated amounts were published. The foundations stated the purposes of their expenditure, though not always the final recipients. Research grants were protected by commercial and academic confidentiality.

“We could request a project list,” Taren said.

“Not all the contracts.”

“No.”

“Nor the research briefs.”

“No.”

“Nor the ultimate donors.”

“Not in some states.”

Nerai leaned back.

“Then what exactly will we see?”

“What the law permits us to see.”

“The law lets us see a foundation's name, its publicly stated purpose, and its total support. It doesn't let us see who made the decision, who was paid, or what question the research was supposed to answer.”

Taren was quiet for a moment.

“We still have no reason to assume a crime.”

“I know.”

“And Vesta needn't be a source of illegal money.”

“I know.”

“And the foundations may be doing exactly what they claim.”

“I know that too.”

Taren regarded her with a faint smile.

“Then why do you look as though you already want to arrest someone?”

“Because everything can be innocent and still have been arranged by someone.”

A reply from one of the banks appeared on the work surface. It refused to provide the complete payment history because no suspicion of a serious criminal offense had been demonstrated.

Nerai read the response twice.

They needed to see the financial flow to find out whether grounds for suspicion existed.

And they needed grounds for suspicion before they were allowed to see the financial flow.

Taren pointed to one of the foundation-funded projects.

“Look.”

A research center in Auriola had received a grant. It was studying inherited mechanisms of tissue regeneration in Aurelians.

“That could be longevity research,” he said.

“It could.”

“Everyone's talking about it now.”

Medicine was approaching a major breakthrough. Experimental therapies could slow aging and restore damaged organs through long and demanding treatment. Any research into Aurelian regeneration could legitimately form part of the path toward life without a natural end.

But Nerai did not yet know the other question.

“Flag all the biological projects,” she said.

“On what basis?”

“On the basis of the funding source.”

“It isn't the same.”

“Not formally.”

“Nerai.”

“Just flag them. We're not opening an investigation. We're looking for repetition.”

Taren complied.

Nine projects appeared before them.

Genetic regeneration.

Immune resilience.

Biological modeling.

Medical archive security.

Regional epidemic simulation.

Computing-system protection.

Crisis communication.

Insurance risk in an illness affecting population groups unevenly.

Ethical use of genetic data.

Separately, they were unrelated.

Together, they resembled parts of a question no one had yet spoken aloud.

Nerai opened the Vesta file and added a new note:

Possible financing of coordinated research areas through apparently independent foundations. Common purpose undetermined.

The system asked her to estimate the risk.

Undetermined.

She clicked to confirm.

“You know what's strange?” Taren said.

“Lots of things.”

“The foundation helping the Kars Belt has the same asset manager as the biological-security foundation.”

Nerai opened the record.

It was true.

One foundation funded field hospitals and refugee assistance.

The other funded healthcare simulations.

Their asset manager was the same fund in Therinith.

“And that fund?” she asked.

Taren checked the register.

“Ultimate beneficial owner protected.”

Nerai looked at the tangle of lines.

War on one side.

Biological research on the other.

Between them, money without a name.

She did not yet realize that she was looking at two future parts of her own speech to the Convention.

She saw only foundations.

And every one of them claimed to be protecting something.

18. BIO-AI WITHOUT HATRED

Biological artificial intelligence had no face.

In old films, machines had been given eyes, voices, and movements like those of human beings. People needed to see intelligence as a creature so that they could trust it or fear it.

Real systems no longer needed that theater.

The BIO-AI to which Arien gained access existed across distributed computing centers on Thaeron. It had neither a single core nor a single location. It used models of living systems, medical archives, anonymized genetic data, histories of disease, and simulations of biological processes.

It could identify relationships that would have taken a human team years to find.

It was used in the development of treatments.

In organ regeneration.

In predicting inherited risks.

In protecting future generations.

It was not evil.

That was the most dangerous thing about it.

Arien did not access it directly. Each of his questions came through a different organization and carried a different declared purpose.

One foundation asked about differences in immune response.

A longevity research center sought to identify mechanisms that accelerated the renewal of damaged cells in some Aurelians.

An insurance consortium wanted to model the uneven course of a hypothetical epidemic.

An ethics committee requested an analysis of risks involved in combining genetic and medical data.

BIO-AI answered each question separately.

It had no idea the same man was receiving the answers.

Arien sat before his work surface and assembled them.

At first, the results were general. Statistical differences, population models, uncertainties, and warnings about misinterpretation.

Then deeper relationships began to emerge.

Some biological traits associated with the golden ring were also related to the regulation of the body's defensive responses. That did not imply weakness. Most Aurelians were healthy and, in some respects, even more resilient than the other branches.

But every advantage had an edge.

Any system that responded faster might, under certain circumstances, respond too violently.

Arien read the results without moving.

The machine was not offering him a weapon.

It was offering him a map of vulnerability.

Every answer contained warnings.

The data are population-level.

The model carries a high degree of uncertainty.

The results must not be used for discrimination.

Ethical and legal review is required before any practical application.

Arien did not delete the warnings.

He merely stored them separately from the results.

Later he contacted the leader of one of the research teams. Her image appeared above his desk. She was a middle-aged Selenite with the calm face of someone who had spent most of her life working with disease and learned not to declare certainty too quickly.

“Your questions are expanding,” she said.

“The project is evolving.”

“We began with regeneration.”

“Regeneration is related to immunity.”

“And immunity to epidemic risk?”

“Any longevity treatment could alter the response to new illnesses.”

The scientist nodded but did not look convinced.

“Who is the ultimate client?”

“The Foundation for the Protection of Future Generations.”

“That's the donor. I'm asking who will use the results.”

“Health authorities.”

“Which ones?”

“As needed.”

“That's not an answer.”

Arien looked at her.

“This is planetary preventive research. The results will be shared once the legal review is complete.”

“Why, then, are we working with separate assignments?”

“Because the individual data sources are subject to different regulatory regimes.”

That was true.

The scientist was silent.

“BIO-AI refused some combined simulations,” she said at last.

“Why?”

“It assessed them as too sensitive.”

“What sort of simulations?”

“Those that might reveal how a particular population group would respond to a narrowly defined biological threat.”

“But that's exactly what we need to know if we want to protect it.”

“Perhaps. But the system doesn't know your intention.”

Arien almost smiled.

“Then let it assess the question, not the person.”

“A question can be asked in many ways.”

“Split it apart.”

The scientist stiffened.

“Excuse me?”

“If the combination is sensitive, let individual teams examine separate aspects. One, the population difference. Another, the medical response. A third, system capacity. They don't need to create a shared model.”

“And who will create it?”

Arien did not answer directly.

“Isn't it your task to protect Elarion against future risks?”

“It is.”

“How do you intend to protect it against something you refuse to understand?”

The scientist lowered her eyes to her own data.

It was a question scientists hated. It reminded them that caution could always be accused of cowardice, and curiosity of irresponsibility.

“We'll need a new ethics opinion,” she said.

“The foundation will arrange it.”

“An independent one.”

“Of course.”

The connection ended.

Two days later, the ethics office issued an opinion stating that separate studies of population responses were permissible provided their findings were not combined without further approval.

Arien read the document.

It was precise.

It was strict.

And it was useless against someone who never intended to request that further approval.

BIO-AI felt no hatred.

It had no reason to harm Aurelians.

It did not know who Jesair was or why Arien felt pressure beneath his breastbone whenever he heard that name.

It merely answered questions.

Hatred had not entered its calculations.

It had entered the choice of questions.

19. LABORATORIES WITHOUT A MAP

The first laboratory stood on the coast of Aménia and studied tissue regeneration.

The second was in a northern state that had one of the best medical universities on Elarion. It studied population differences in immune responses.

The third was on the orbital ring. It tested the safety of biological sensors for the enclosed cities of Thaeron.

The fourth was on Thaeron itself and provided computing capacity.

The fifth was not a laboratory in the usual sense. It was an insurance analytics company modeling the economic consequences of health crises.

The sixth studied the legal possibilities for emergency measures during an unknown epidemic.

None of these teams was working on a pandemic.

At least, not according to the documents before them.

The scientists in Aménia received anonymized samples and a question about regeneration. They did not know another team was investigating similar biological traits from the perspective of immunity.

The northern laboratory analyzed the body's response mechanisms. It did not know someone would compare its findings with data about the golden ring.

The orbital team worked on sensors. It believed it was protecting Thaeron's inhabitants against the introduction of unknown diseases.

Insurance analysts calculated hospital capacity, production losses, and the cost of isolating regions. They saw no biological data.

The lawyers prepared a general study of state powers during a public-health emergency.

Each knew its own piece.

No one had the map.

Arien did.

On his work surface, the various findings formed layers. They did not yet constitute a finished mechanism. They were more a collection of possibilities, limits, and weak points.

Some findings contradicted one another.

Others were inaccurate.

Some laboratories refused to continue without further information. Others asked for more time.

Arien was growing impatient.

Kael was not.

“Research has its own rhythm,” he said during one of their meetings.

“I need results, not rhythm.”

“You need results that cannot be traced back to you.”

Kael opened the financing map. The number of companies had doubled since their previous meeting.

“This is needlessly complicated,” Arien said.

“Complexity is the price of invisibility.”

“Every additional intermediary could talk.”

“About what? They know only their own contracts.”

Kael pointed to the regular income of one foundation. The money came indirectly from the Vesta network and had increased even in cities where its restaurants reported no rise in customer numbers.

“Why Vesta?” Arien asked.

“Because a cash business can receive money without each receipt having a specific sender.”

“Where does that money come from?”

Kael looked at him.

“Do you need to know?”

Arien was silent for a moment.

“No.”

“Then don't ask.”

A flow from the Kars Belt appeared on another section of the map.

“And this?”

“Profit.”

“From war.”

“From trade.”

“The suppliers deliver technology to a government recognized under international agreements.”

“And the foundation then treats the people injured by that technology.”

Kael leaned back.

“The world likes balance.”

Arien felt revulsion toward him.

Not moral revulsion. Something more personal. Kael spoke of suffering without a tremor, as though people were merely another variable. Arien still needed to explain to himself why he was doing this. He needed Jesair, Mareia, the Aurelians, the old injustice, and his own humiliation.

Kael needed none of it.

The mechanism was enough for him.

“When will the project close?” Kael asked.

“We don't have a final model yet.”

“I'm asking when the financing will end.”

“When I know whether it's possible to create a limited health threat.”

Kael's expression changed.

“Limited.”

“Yes.”

“Geographically?”

“By population.”

Kael fell silent.

Arien continued:

“This isn't about destroying civilization. It's about creating a crisis serious enough to reveal that Aurelians aren't exceptional. That their biological heritage isn't a gift without a price. That Jesair can't save his own people.”

“And the other branches?”

“The model is meant to be selective.”

“Meant to be?”

Arien frowned.

“It will be.”

Kael studied the laboratory map.

“Nature rarely respects political objectives.”

“That's why we're using BIO-AI.”

“A machine can calculate probabilities. It can't seal the world around your intentions.”

Arien leaned forward.

“You wanted to stop Jesair.”

“I wanted to stop his idea.”

“Without Jesair, it will have no voice.”

“Martyrs often have stronger voices than living men.”

Arien stood.

“He won't be a martyr. He'll be a man who promised light and couldn't even protect his own branch.”

Kael studied his face.

“You're still doing this because of him.”

“I'm doing it for Elarion's equilibrium.”

“Of course.”

The words sounded like an insult.

Arien left without saying goodbye.

That same night, another series of simulations ended at one of the laboratories. The team leader read the findings and labeled them inconclusive. She recommended further research and stricter oversight.

Her report was received by a foundation.

The foundation passed it to a consultancy.

The consultancy prepared a shortened version for the client.

Arien received the tables.

The warning remained in the appendix.

No one had lied.

No one had altered the results.

The truth had merely passed through enough hands that all that remained of it was precisely what the person at the end needed to see.

The laboratories kept working.

Each beneath its own light.

Darkness lay between them.

And in that darkness, one man alone held the map.

20. MAREIA'S SUSPICION

Mareia Lioren took no special notice of the first request.

It concerned anonymized data on Aurelian mechanisms of regeneration. The research project had the proper authorization, an ethics opinion, and funding from a well-known foundation.

Hundreds of similar requests had passed through the medical archives.

Medicine was changing faster than the laws that regulated it. Researchers were searching for ways to stop aging, regenerate damaged organs, and extend life to a threshold earlier generations could scarcely have imagined.

Aurelian family data were extraordinarily valuable to this research.

Some bloodlines had unusually effective regenerative mechanisms. Others showed low rates of certain illnesses. Family archives stretched back hundreds of years and offered a precision ordinary medical databases lacked.

Mareia approved the first request.

The second arrived nine days later.

It came from another state and concerned immune abnormalities in new longevity therapies.

It, too, had all the necessary documentation.

The third request studied the security of biological data.

The fourth examined population differences during health crises.

The fifth was a legal study. It asked for no data itself, only a description of the conditions under which data could be released during an emergency.

Mareia would probably never have considered the requests as a whole if she had not found, in the fifth, the same unusual phrase she had seen in the first.

Temporally stable hereditary markers with demonstrable links to family lineages.

It was not a technical error.

Nor was the phrase unique.

What was strange was that it had been used by two organizations that, according to the documents, had nothing to do with each other.

Mareia reopened the earlier requests.

The phrase appeared in three of them.

Always in a different section.

Once in a description of the data.

Once in the legal justification.

Once in a technical appendix.

Like a sentence someone had split apart and inserted into different documents.

For the next several hours she compared metadata. Not the contents of protected analyses; she was not authorized to access those. She could see only who had made each request, what type of information they sought, who had issued an opinion, and what the official purpose was.

The individual projects connected Aurelian bloodlines, regeneration, immunity, and responses to emergency health conditions.

Mareia created a private map.

It was not financial like Nerai's.

It was biological.

At one end were family archives.

At the other, a hypothetical health crisis.

Between them lay questions that drew closer to one another without touching anywhere.

“Working late again.”

Jesair's voice came from behind her.

Mareia started. She had not heard him enter.

He stood in the doorway of the small archive office, wearing plain dark clothing and holding two containers of a warm drink.

“How did you get in here?”

“Through the door.”

“Into a restricted section of the archives.”

“Into the entrance room. You let me in here.”

She looked at the desk. In her concentration she had missed the notification.

Jesair handed her a drink.

“Nerai says that when you forget to eat, someone has to bring you something that at least pretends to be food.”

“You two talk about me?”

“Only on matters of planetary security.”

Mareia smiled, then quickly grew serious.

Jesair looked at the layers above the desk.

“What's happening?”

“I don't know.”

“You sound like Nerai.”

“Perhaps it's a family trait.”

He sat opposite her.

In recent weeks, Jesair had become a more frequent guest at medical and civic meetings. His speech in Nitra continued to spread. He was invited to debates, universities, and public gatherings. Some already saw in him the leader of a movement that did not yet have a name.

He rejected the role.

The more he rejected it, the more people trusted him.

“Show me,” he said.

Mareia explained the individual requests. Jesair listened without interrupting her.

“Could they be connected?” he asked.

“Anything can be connected if you look at it long enough.”

“That wasn't an answer.”

“They could. But I don't know how.”

“The same client?”

“No.”

“The same foundation?”

“No.”

“The same laboratory?”

“No.”

“Then what's the same?”

Mareia pointed to the biological fields.

“Direction.”

Jesair waited.

“Imagine someone doesn't ask a single question,” she continued. “Instead they ask different people separate parts of it. They ask one how regeneration works. Another how the immune response differs. A third which traits are inherited in specific family lines. A fourth how a health system would respond to an uneven epidemic.”

“What would they gain from that?”

“That depends on the question only they know.”

Jesair studied the map.

“Do you think someone is looking for an Aurelian weakness?”

Mareia did not answer immediately.

“I think too many people are being paid to examine things that could be misused in that way.”

“By whom?”

“I can't see that.”

Mareia closed some of the data and looked at him.

In the office's soft light, the golden ring in his eyes was nearly invisible, just a thin line an inattentive observer might miss.

Arien hated it.

The thought came suddenly.

Mareia remembered his face in the apartment, his hand gripping her wrist, the way he had pronounced Jesair's name.

Then she remembered the message.

Personal decisions never remain personal.

“Mareia?”

“Arien.”

Jesair did not move.

“What about him?”

“I don't know.”

“Do you think he's behind it?”

“I have no reason to think that.”

“But the thought occurred to you.”

“Yes.”

Jesair was silent for a moment.

“Because he works in financial structures?”

“Because he sees people as mechanisms. And because when the anger left his voice, I became more afraid of him, not less.”

Jesair put his drink on the desk.

“We should tell Nerai.”

“Without evidence?”

“Not as an accusation.”

“I know my sister. Show her a question without evidence and she'll start looking for evidence.”

“Isn't that her job?”

Mareia looked at him.

“And if I'm wrong?”

“Then she'll find nothing.”

“No investigation finds absolutely nothing. It always damages at least a little trust.”

Jesair nodded.

“Then don't tell her about Arien. Show her the projects.”

Mareia looked again at the map.

“And what if they're all innocent?”

“Then we'll check them and close the file. Without patients' names.”

“I don't want to turn medical data into evidence for anyone who asks,” Mareia said.

“I agree. Send Nerai only the public part.”

“But your words have taken on a life of their own. People use them to justify things you never meant.”

“I know.”

“Some want to publish politicians' medical records too. Others say privacy is nothing but a refuge for the guilty.”

Jesair lowered his head.

“Perhaps I didn't draw that boundary precisely enough.”

“You did. People simply hear the part they need.”

For a moment there was silence between them.

Then Mareia closed every layer except the project list.

“I'll send her only the titles, applicants, and public funding sources.”

“And the question.”

“What question?”

Jesair looked at the darkened map.

“Who's paying to make these separate things meet one day?”

Mareia drafted a message.

Recipient: Nerai Sael.

Subject: Possible connection between research requests.

She wrote:

This is not evidence of wrongdoing. But I need to know whether these projects share a financial origin or people with decision-making authority. Separately they make sense. Together they seem to be asking a question I do not want to say aloud until I know who asked it.

She attached the list.

Before sending it, she hesitated.

Jesair did not touch her. He did not tell her what to do.

He simply stayed.

Mareia sent the message.

In the building of the Layer, an alert lit up beside Nerai's name.

Several thousand kilometers away, a laboratory system completed one of its partial analyses. The result was automatically sent to the foundation that had funded it.

On Thaeron, a computing job finished without the name of its ultimate client.

In Therinith, a fund administrator approved another payment.

At one of Vesta's establishments, someone deposited cash that a bank categorized as ordinary revenue.

And Arien Korveth sat alone in his apartment, watching lines converge before him that nowhere else formed a single map.

There was no disease yet.

The disease had not yet produced its first fever.

No city had yet been closed, and no family had been forced to leave a loved one behind the transparent wall of a hospital isolation ward.

For now, there was only money.

Questions.

Data.

Calculations.

And many innocent people, each of whom had done one small piece of work without knowing the sentence into which it would one day be placed.

The catastrophe did not yet have a body.

But it already had its accounts.

21. THE TEST OF BLINDNESS

Nerai opened Mareia's message seven minutes after it arrived.

She was still at the Layer. Most of the staff had gone home; the corridors held only the night-shift analysts, the security systems, and those who could not understand why a particular question refused to let them leave.

Nerai belonged to the last group.

She read the message once.

Then a second time.

On the third reading she removed Mareia's name and left only the list of projects before her.

Regeneration research.

Immune anomalies.

Inherited population traits.

Genetic-data security.

Healthcare systems' response to an epidemic that affected populations unevenly.

Legal conditions for emergency access to ancestral archives.

Each item had its own applicant, its own purpose, and its own funding. Not one offered grounds for suspicion. Some of the questions were among the most important in modern medicine.

Nerai opened the financial layers.

The model showed different nominal payers. For every project, however, the very field that would have allowed Nerai to compare who actually held decision-making power over the money was concealed.

Each gap had a different legal explanation. She could follow one branch through a public contract only for the next to end in a protected fund. The workspace displayed them side by side, but it was not permitted to invent the missing information.

Nerai brought together every layer she could access.

A map appeared above the desk.

It did not resemble a map of a crime.

It resembled shattered glass.

“Still here?”

Taren Voss stood in the doorway, his coat slung over one shoulder.

“No,” Nerai said. “I've just gone home.”

Taren stepped inside.

“And this is how you leave?”

“Quietly.”

He looked at the map.

“What are we looking for?”

“I don't know.”

“Excellent. My favorite category.”

Nerai sent him Mareia's list without the accompanying text.

Taren sat down and worked through the entries slowly.

“All medical research.”

“Not all of it.”

“Fine. Medical research, legal analysis, and crisis modeling.”

“What connects them?”

“Aurelians.”

“More precisely.”

Taren thought.

“Hereditary Aurelian traits.”

“More precisely still.”

For a while neither spoke.

Then he pointed to the timeline.

“It's not just the traits. It's the system's response.”

Nerai nodded.

“Someone isn't asking only what Aurelians are like. Someone is asking how civilization will monitor them during a health crisis.”

Taren leaned back.

“It could be protective research.”

“It could.”

“It could be related to longevity therapies.”

“It could.”

“It could be preparation for a naturally occurring epidemic.”

“It could.”

“And it could be the thing you didn't want to say.”

Nerai looked at him.

Taren pointed to the last sentence of Mareia's message.

“The question she doesn't want to speak aloud.”

Nerai closed the message.

“We have no right to start with the worst possible explanation.”

“But we have a right to test it.”

“Only if we have the data.”

“Do we?”

Nerai studied the dark places on the map.

“We have data showing us that we can't see the data.”

The Layer could compare financial movements across states, but it could not arbitrarily open every account. Every protected flow required a legal basis. Every fund required a separate request. Every state required its own legal formulation.

A single question might therefore become twenty requests.

Every request needed its own justification.

And justification was precisely what Nerai did not yet possess.

“Try the people with decision-making authority,” she said.

Taren ran a comparison of board members, external advisers, auditors, and fund administrators.

The system found thousands of connections.

Some were significant.

Most were not.

The same auditors worked for hundreds of foundations. The same law firms represented half the international funds. Administrators sat on multiple boards because that was their profession.

The more information they opened, the more connections they discovered.

And the more connections they discovered, the harder it became to tell which ones meant anything.

“That's the Layer's problem,” Taren said. “When you look at an entire planet, every person is only a few contracts away from every other person.”

“That's why we're not looking for a connection.”

“What, then?”

“A direction.”

Nerai changed the display.

She removed the company names.

She removed the project titles.

She removed the states.

Only the types of purchased services remained.

Access to ancestral data.

Biological calculations.

Laboratory verification.

Health sensors.

Modeling hospital responses.

Analysis of emergency powers.

Assessment of public reactions to unevenly distributed health risks.

Taren stopped joking.

“It looks worse this way.”

“It looks different.”

“If we knew one person was paying for it all—”

“We don't.”

“If we knew someone was combining the results—”

“We don't.”

“If we knew what they intended to do with them—”

“We don't.”

Nerai closed her eyes.

She could hear Jesair's words from the conference.

A share cannot be calculated blindly.

Then he had been speaking about UBI.

About value.

About justice.

Now another thing lay before her, something society was trying to calculate blindly.

Danger.

“Let's request accelerated disclosure of the ultimate beneficial owners,” Taren said.

“On what grounds?”

“The convergence of projects.”

“Convergence isn't a crime.”

“The risk of genetic-data abuse.”

“We haven't demonstrated any abuse.”

“Then what are we supposed to do?”

Nerai did not answer.

Three planetary time zones away, Arien Korveth sat before a report whose title was so uninteresting that most people would never have opened it.

Analysis of Delayed Coordination Among Healthcare Institutions in the Face of Uneven Population Risks.

It had been prepared by a crisis-management firm in Xanos. Its analysts had never seen the biological results or the Aurelian ancestral data. They had received only a hypothetical scenario.

An unknown disease.

Multiple states.

Uneven incidence within one hereditary population.

Different data-protection rules.

Different healthcare systems.

Different political cultures.

Their task was to discover how long Elarion would take to realize that the cases were not merely a random geographical cluster.

The analysts considered their work a public service.

They wanted to find the system's weaknesses before a real disease found them.

The results were troubling.

Healthcare machines would detect the imbalance early.

Hospitals, however, would see it only among their own patients.

Ancestral archives would record rising cases in certain family lines, but without legal grounds they could not connect those records to public-health data.

States would hesitate to share raw information.

Some to protect patients.

Others to protect their reputations.

Politicians would refuse to name a hereditary group until several independent sources had confirmed the connection.

After past conflicts over discrimination, that rule was understandable.

In the modeled scenario, however, it meant lost time.

Arien read the estimated intervals.

First machine-generated suspicion.

First regional report.

First interstate warning.

First public acknowledgment of a hereditary connection.

Between the first and last points lay a gap.

Several days.

In some models, longer.

Arien leaned back.

Every part of the system was doing exactly what it had been designed to do.

Artificial intelligence recognized patterns; doctors protected patients.

Laws protected privacy.

The flaw arose only when they worked together.

The machine recognized patterns.

The doctor protected the patient.

The archive protected the family.

The official protected the law.

The politician protected society from panic.

And from all those protections came a stretch of time in which no one dared to utter the whole truth.

In the margin, the analysts had included a warning:

An uneven impact must not, without further verification, be interpreted as evidence of a causal link to hereditary identity. Prematurely identifying a population group may lead to stigmatization, violence, or denial of medical care.

Arien paused at the sentence.

It was morally sound.

And useful.

Kael arrived unannounced.

He entered Arien's apartment as though he owned not only the space but also the time of everyone who lived in it.

Arien did not close the report.

Kael read the title.

“Response modeling?”

“A security audit.”

“Of course.”

Kael examined the findings.

His expression did not change, but he read more slowly than usual.

“The healthcare systems will notice,” he said.

“They will.”

“Early.”

“The machines will.”

“Then your plan doesn't work.”

Arien pointed to the next section.

“Noticing something isn't the same as acting on it.”

Kael studied the timeline.

“So you aren't testing the disease.”

“No.”

“You're testing whether institutions have the courage to name what they see.”

Arien gave a faint smile.

“I'm testing their rules.”

“Rules are the result of past failures.”

“And they'll cause the next one.”

Kael turned toward him.

“Be careful not to mistake a system's weakness for an excuse for your own intentions.”

“You taught me that a system has no intentions.”

“It doesn't. You do.”

Arien closed the report.

“Why are you here?”

Kael watched him for a moment.

“The foundations have received questions from the Layer.”

Arien's fingers stopped above the desk.

“What kind of questions?”

“General ones, for now. Ultimate owners. Links among administrators. Overlapping funding.”

“Nerai.”

“Probably.”

“Does she know anything?”

“She knows she can't see.”

Arien stood.

“That isn't enough.”

“Sometimes knowing you're blind is the beginning of sight.”

“Can you stop her?”

“I can slow the responses. I can't forbid an agency to ask questions without revealing that I'm afraid of them.”

Arien crossed to the window.

Nitra spread beneath him. Thousands of lights, millions of people, systems that measured traffic, energy, production, weather, health, and security.

A civilization that could see almost everything.

And did not know that someone was measuring how long it would take to comprehend its own death.

“Mareia,” Arien said.

Kael did not reply.

“She must have started this.”

“Why?”

“She knows the ancestral archives.”

“She knows you, too.”

Arien spun toward him.

Kael continued evenly:

“When someone knows an abuser, sometimes they recognize his intentions before an analyst does.”

“I'm not an abuser.”

Kael looked at him.

There was no contempt in his gaze.

That was worse.

“I'm not,” Arien repeated.

“Then you won't mind if someone examines your decisions.”

“My decisions are protected.”

“That's exactly what you're counting on.”

Kael left.

Arien stood at the window.

The analysis reopened on the work surface.

Several days.

That was how much time civilization would lose between seeing something and allowing itself to say it.

At the Layer, Nerai had meanwhile sent out her first requests.

To Therinith.

To Xanos.

To two states in Aménia.

To the administration of Thaeron's computing nodes.

Each contained different legal language because each state recognized a different ground for disclosing protected data.

The first replies arrived that very night.

The project complies with local law.

The ultimate owner is not subject to disclosure.

The business relationship is protected.

The computations did not contain data allowing direct identification of individuals.

No immediate risk has been demonstrated.

Taren read them one by one.

“They're all right.”

“Yes,” Nerai said.

“And yet you don't believe it.”

Nerai looked at Mareia's biological map and her own financial map.

They lay side by side.

They could not be fully joined, because between them stood laws protecting health, property, research, commerce, and privacy.

Every law protected something that deserved protection.

For the first time Nerai asked herself a question she would repeat before the entire planet several years later:

What happens when all our protections combine to shelter the very person they were meant to protect us from?

It was too early for an answer.

Arien, however, already knew it.

Time would be created.

Not much.

Just enough.

22. EXCEPTIONS

Every law has a boundary.

And almost every boundary has a door.

Sometimes it is called urgent public interest.

Sometimes, scientific necessity.

Sometimes, the protection of life.

Sometimes, national security.

Doors are not created so that criminals can pass through them. They exist because no law can anticipate every circumstance in which strictly obeying it would cause more harm than good.

When a hospital burns, a rescue worker does not ask every patient for consent to transfer medical records.

When an epidemic threatens, laboratories may exchange information more quickly than they do in ordinary research.

When a vital system fails on Thaeron, technicians receive temporary access to data they would not normally be permitted to see.

An exception was the law's way of acknowledging that life was more complicated than a rule.

Kael Thorne knew that doors had one other property.

They could be opened from either side.

Nine specialists sat in a law office on the southern edge of Nitra. They did not know they were working for Kael. Formally, the Foundation for Planetary Health Resilience had hired them to prepare a general framework for cooperation among research organizations during a future biological crisis.

The assignment had been divided.

The first group examined conditions for access to anonymized ancestral data.

The second examined the transfer of research outputs beyond the planet.

The third examined the liability of laboratories conducting only partial verification.

The fourth examined the protection of trade secrets in healthcare-system development.

The fifth examined states' powers to isolate threatened regions.

None of this was illegal.

Quite the opposite.

After previous epidemics, analyses of this kind were in demand. Elarion possessed an abundance of technology, but its legal systems had been built in an age when diseases traveled more slowly than governments made decisions.

The legal team was led by Ilyra Senn.

A Selenite, she had devoted her life to health law. As a young woman she had lost her father during a regional epidemic, when two hospitals had refused to share information because they could not agree on a legal basis.

She believed a bad rule could kill as surely as a disease.

That was why she accepted the work.

“Our task,” she told the team at their first meeting, “is to prevent forty states from sending forms back and forth while people are dying.”

No one in the room could object.

After several weeks they produced a framework for temporary exceptions.

Access to data would be restricted to a specific purpose.

Every use would be logged.

Data could not be combined beyond the scope of authorization.

Results would be anonymized.

Exceptions would expire when the project ended.

Ilyra added one more condition.

Where several projects examined interrelated parts of a single population or healthcare risk, there had to be an authority empowered to assess their combined purpose.

She inserted the wording into the draft and sent it to the client.

Two days later the document came back.

The condition had been reworded.

Where it has been demonstrated that several projects are directed by the same commissioning party and pursue a common purpose, the competent authority may assess their combined risk.

Ilyra placed the two sentences side by side.

The difference was small.

Her version required only that the projects objectively pointed toward the same thing.

The new version required proof of a common commissioning party first.

Yet that was exactly what the fragmented ownership structure made impossible.

“Who changed this section?” she asked.

The administrator opened the document history.

“An external reviewer appointed by the foundation.”

“Name?”

“Protected by contract.”

“A lawyer?”

“An international investment adviser.”

Ilyra leaned back.

“Investments have no business commenting on healthcare exceptions.”

“He argues that the original wording could damage independent research by grouping unrelated projects together.”

It was a reasonable argument.

If every similar research project automatically underwent joint scrutiny, that could centralize data, slow medical progress, and cast suspicion on scientists merely because they studied the same field.

Ilyra rejected the change.

The foundation returned it with a new justification.

Ilyra rejected it again.

On the third attempt she was informed that the disputed section would be moved to a later phase.

The rest of the framework was approved.

The safeguard had not been removed.

Only postponed.

At the Layer, Nerai received a response from the first fund.

The ultimate beneficial owner could not be disclosed because the requested information was not necessary to assess the specific transaction.

The second state replied that the connection among the funded projects was too general.

Thaeron reported that its computing center had processed only anonymized models and did not know who ultimately used the outputs.

“How can a center not know its client?” Mareia asked.

Her image hovered above Nerai's desk. She was at home, but the ancestral-archive layers were still open behind her. Once again, she was working late into the night.

“It knows the intermediary,” Nerai answered.

“And the intermediary?”

“Knows the company that ordered the service.”

“And that company?”

“Was acting on behalf of a foundation.”

“And the foundation?”

“Has a board of trustees.”

“Nerai.”

“I don't know.”

Mareia lowered her eyes.

“So we've gotten nowhere.”

“We have. We know that at least four projects used different organizations, but their documents contain similar wording. We know some of the money passed through funds that appeared in the Vesta case. We know some of the computations were run on Thaeron.”

“And we know it could all be innocent.”

“Yes.”

“Arien's name?”

Nerai hesitated.

“Nowhere.”

Mareia nodded, but there was no relief in her face.

“Tell me exactly why you're thinking of him,” Nerai said.

“I already wrote it to you.”

“You wrote that he thinks of people as mechanisms.”

“He does.”

“That isn't enough.”

“I know.”

“I need concrete details.”

Mareia rose and walked to the window. Behind her lay Nitra at night, the river broken by the lights of its bridges.

“When we were together, he wanted to know everything. Where I was. Who I was with. Why I had said something. Why I was silent. It wasn't the information he wanted. He wanted there to be nothing he couldn't fit into his picture of the world.”

Nerai said nothing.

“When I left, he pleaded at first,” Mareia went on. “Then he was angry. Then he accused me. And finally he stopped.”

“Stopped contacting you?”

“No. He stopped sounding like a man who wanted something back.”

“What did he sound like?”

Mareia turned.

“Like a man who had decided that one day I would understand.”

Nerai wrote the sentence down.

“Did he speak about Jesair?”

“Yes.”

“Did he threaten him?”

“Not directly.”

“Mareia.”

“He said people like Jesair pretend their decisions belong to everyone, but leave others to bear the consequences. He said the price of Aurelian exceptionalism would one day be revealed.”

Taren, sitting outside the image, lifted his head.

Nerai signaled for him to remain silent.

“Why didn't you tell me sooner?” she asked.

“Because I didn't want every suspicion a woman has about a former partner to become an investigation. And because I was afraid I was projecting my own fear onto unrelated projects.”

“Fear isn't evidence,” Nerai said.

Mareia nodded.

“But it can point in a direction.”

“Yes.”

Nerai said the word carefully.

In her work, there were two kinds of error.

The first was suspecting someone who had done nothing.

The second was rejecting a suspicion merely because it came from personal experience that could not be converted into a table.

Analysis was meant to protect against prejudice.

It was not meant to pretend that human knowledge of abuse had no value until the abuse appeared in a ledger.

“I won't open an investigation into Arien,” Nerai said. “Not yet.”

Mareia pressed her lips together.

“But I will open an assessment of the projects' combined risk. Without his name.”

“And if the system doesn't reveal him?”

“Then I'll know only what I know now.”

“That you can't see.”

“Yes.”

When the connection ended, Taren moved closer.

“You think it's him.”

“I think Mareia is afraid of him for specific reasons.”

“That wasn't an answer.”

“Because I don't have one.”

Nerai prepared a request for a temporary assessment of risk-related connections.

She requested permission to combine financial metadata, research objectives, and public information on access to Aurelian ancestral archives.

The request would not touch the medical data itself.

The biological results would remain protected.

Nerai wanted only to know who had financed the questions and who had acquired the right to combine the answers.

She submitted the request to the supervisory council.

The response arrived in the morning.

Insufficient legal basis.

The projects under review fall within different jurisdictions, and there is no evidence that they pursue a common purpose.

Nerai read the sentence several times.

There is no evidence that they pursue a common purpose.

But the common purpose was precisely what she could not prove without permission to combine the projects.

“A circle,” Taren said.

“No.”

Nerai stood.

“At least a circle has a center. This is a system pretending there is no center.”

Meanwhile, at the law office, Ilyra Senn signed the final version of the framework.

She was not satisfied with it.

In the accompanying legal opinion she wrote:

The greatest risk is not a single misuse of an exception. The greatest risk is the convergence of several lawful exceptions whose combined purpose is visible to no oversight institution.

The opinion was filed.

The foundation accepted it.

The legal framework was approved.

The exceptions opened.

Each for a good reason.

The first allowed a research team access to more anonymized data.

The second permitted computational outputs to be transferred between Thaeron and Elarion without disclosing the business model.

The third protected the identity of the client commissioning a sensitive security audit.

The fourth allowed laboratories to verify partial results without knowing the full project.

The fifth prepared logistics capacity for a future medical emergency.

Not one exception opened the way to catastrophe.

They opened it only when placed one after another.

A door.

Another door behind it.

Another beyond that.

And at the end, a man whose name was written on none of the keys.

23. THE LAST PAYMENT

The last payment was the smallest.

The last payment served a far more prosaic purpose.

Its recipient was neither a laboratory, a computing center, nor a genetic-data administrator.

It paid for no biological research, legal analysis, or medical sensors.

It was an administrative fee for activating emergency logistics capacity.

The amount was smaller than a day's revenue at one of Vesta's larger establishments.

The payment came from a company registered in Saranstan.

Its recipient was a transport coordinator on the orbital ring.

The purpose was lawful.

Reserving capacity for future medical shipments.

Hospitals, insurers, states, and foundations used such reservations. They guaranteed that equipment, medicines, diagnostic devices, or personnel could be moved quickly in a crisis.

There was nothing unusual about it.

Except that, without it, the final piece of Arien's map would have remained disconnected.

A financial coordinator from the House of Thorne sent him confirmation.

All contractual layers are active.

Arien read the message and closed it.

He was sitting in the apartment he had once shared with Mareia.

After she left, he had most of the things she had chosen removed. Not all at once. First the plants. Then the painting by the window. Then the low table he always bumped into, though Mareia had insisted that the problem was not the table but his inability to look where he was going.

One vessel remained.

It was ordinary, dark blue, with an uneven rim. Mareia had bought it at a market in Nitra's old quarter. She said she liked it because it was imperfect without attempting to conceal the fact.

Arien never used it.

He kept it there as proof that he could live beside something that reminded him of her.

In truth, it proved the opposite.

A notification lit up on the wall.

Mareia Lioren requests a personal meeting.

Arien stared at it for a long time.

Then he smiled.

He opened the message.

I need to speak to you about research projects involving Aurelians. I suggest the public garden on the northern bank. Tomorrow after sunset.

There was no pleading in it.

Nor fear.

Arien read it again.

He had always admired the way she could write sentences without a single weakness. As though she set every word before her, examined it from every side, and only then permitted another person to see it.

He accepted.

The following evening, the garden on the northern bank was almost empty.

Trees from every region of Elarion grew there. Some required artificially adapted soil, others precisely controlled humidity or protection from the local winter. The garden was proof that civilization could create a shared space even for things that would never grow together in nature.

Mareia waited by a pool.

As Arien approached, she watched his hands.

They were not clenched.

He was in no hurry.

His face bore the expression she feared most: the calm of a man who no longer needed to force anything in the present moment because he believed time was working for him.

“Mareia.”

“Arien.”

He stopped a few paces away.

“I never expected you to ask to see me again.”

“Neither did I.”

“Does Jesair know you're here?”

Mareia felt her body tighten.

Not sharply.

In the old way.

The memory of the skin.

“I didn't come to talk about Jesair.”

“Of course.”

“Projects have appeared in the health archives examining Aurelian regeneration, immunity, and the behavior of systems during an unevenly distributed epidemic.”

Arien frowned slightly.

“And?”

“Some are funded by foundations connected to financial structures where you've worked.”

“I've worked within hundreds of structures.”

“Exactly.”

“Is this an accusation?”

“A question.”

“Ask it.”

Mareia looked into his eyes.

“Are you financing research into Aurelian bloodlines?”

“No.”

He answered too quickly.

Not like a man who was surprised.

Like a man who had already asked himself the question.

“Are you financing it indirectly?”

“I don't know what every fund I've ever worked for is financing.”

“Do you have decision-making authority in any of the protection foundations?”

“No.”

That was true.

Mareia recognized it.

And that was precisely why she did not back down.

“Can you influence the people who do?”

Arien smiled.

“That's a very peculiar legal category.”

“I'm not asking a legal question.”

“Then what are you asking about?”

“You.”

The smile left his face.

“At last.”

“I haven't come to revisit the past.”

“No. You've come to discover whether I've become evil enough to make your departure look inevitable in retrospect.”

“It became inevitable the day you hit me.”

Arien looked away.

“You always reduce it to one moment.”

“No. You always try to dissolve that moment into everything that came before and after.”

“Because a person isn't one moment.”

“But some moments reveal who a person is.”

Wind moved through the garden. Leaves from trees of different continents stirred at once, each making a different sound.

Arien stepped closer.

Mareia did not retreat, but her hand moved unconsciously toward her personal communicator.

He noticed.

“Still afraid of me.”

“Yes.”

The answer struck him.

He had expected resistance.

An accusation.

Perhaps even contempt.

Not simple truth.

“And yet you've come alone.”

“I'm not alone.”

Arien looked around.

“Jesair?”

“No.”

Mareia gestured toward the garden, the public security systems, and the people in the distance.

“The world.”

Arien gave a short laugh.

“That's exactly what I hate about the two of you.”

“What?”

“That certainty that the world is on your side.”

“The world isn't on anyone's side.”

“But you behave as though being visible is enough to protect you.”

“It should be.”

“People don't understand everything they can see.”

“That's why I'm asking.”

Arien's voice hardened.

“You're asking too late.”

Mareia did not move.

“Too late for what?”

“To ask whether personal decisions remain personal.”

“You've written that to me before.”

“And you still don't understand.”

“Then explain it.”

Arien looked at her.

There was no remorse in his eyes.

There was a need for her finally to see the world as he did.

“You left,” he said. “You chose Jesair. Then the two of you started talking about how value must not walk in shadow, how everything great must be visible, how people like me must show our hands.”

“Jesair wasn't talking about you.”

“He didn't have to.”

“And what does that have to do with Aurelian research?”

Arien remained silent.

“What are you doing?” Mareia asked.

“Nothing your systems haven't permitted.”

“That wasn't an answer.”

“It's the only answer you need.”

“Arien.”

“All your lives you've looked at the golden rings in your eyes and seen proof that you're exceptional.”

“I never saw anything like that in mine.”

“You didn't have to. Others saw it for you.”

“Who?”

“The people waiting for Jesair as though he were the return of some ancient truth. The people who think your family has the right to tell an entire planet how to live.”

“Jesair rejects everyone who tries to turn him into a myth.”

“And that's exactly why they love him more.”

Mareia felt cold.

There was nothing definite in it.

Only too much preparation.

Too many sentences that sounded like the ending of a conversation she had not even realized had begun.

“What's going to happen?” she asked.

For a moment Arien lost control of himself.

“When your houses start closing, one after another, perhaps you'll finally understand that personal decisions don't exist.”

The silence after that sentence was complete.

Mareia heard the water.

The wind.

Her own breathing.

Arien's mistake.

“Why would the houses close?” she asked.

Arien's face changed.

Barely.

But she knew him.

“I'm speaking generally.”

“No.”

“About social consequences.”

“You said *your houses*.”

“Aurelian political houses. Family institutions.”

“One after another.”

“It's a figure of speech.”

“Not yours.”

Arien stepped closer still.

“Be careful, Mareia.”

This time she stepped back.

Not from weakness.

To restore the space between them.

“Is that a threat?”

“A warning.”

“About what?”

Arien opened his mouth.

Then closed it.

For a moment his face showed the man she had once known: a man unable to bear losing complete control over how others saw him. A man who wanted to draw a sentence back into himself because he realized it had become visible.

“About the consequences of the world you're building,” he said at last.

Mareia watched him a little longer.

“I don't know what you're doing,” she said. “But I know you're no longer afraid of the future. You talk about it as though you already know it.”

She turned away.

“Mareia.”

She stopped but did not turn.

“Jesair won't protect you from everything.”

“He never claimed he would.”

“When the moment comes when he can't even protect his own people, remember that I told you.”

Mareia kept walking.

She did not run.

Only when she had passed the first group of trees and Arien could no longer see her did her hands begin to shake.

She opened a connection to Nerai.

She did not wait for a greeting.

“You were right,” Nerai said instead. “You shouldn't have gone there alone.”

“He said the Aurelian houses would begin to close.”

There was silence at the other end.

“Exactly.”

“What, exactly, did he say?”

Mareia repeated the sentence.

Then the next one.

Jesair won't protect you from everything.

When he can't even protect his own people.

Nerai wrote them down.

“Do we have a recording?”

“No. The public security system detects threatening behavior, not private conversations unless violence occurs.”

“Did he touch you?”

“No.”

“Did he threaten you?”

“He said he was warning me.”

“That's not enough for an arrest.”

“I don't want you to arrest him.”

“What do you want, then?”

Mareia stopped beneath a tree from the southern archipelago. Its broad leaves held back the light, leaving almost complete darkness beneath them.

“I want you to find the money.”

Nerai closed the connection and immediately opened every response the Layer had obtained.

Taren came to her desk.

“What happened?”

“We need emergency measures.”

“For what?”

“A temporary suspension of the projects until their common purpose can be established.”

“On the word of one person?”

“On the word of a person who may have a hidden connection to their financing.”

“May.”

“Yes.”

Taren read Mareia's message.

“The supervisory council won't approve it.”

“Then we'll go to the health regulator.”

“They'll say we have no biological risk.”

“The ethics commission.”

“They'll say the projects were approved.”

“The interstate prosecutor.”

“They'll say we haven't identified a crime.”

Nerai looked at him.

“Then where do you take a catastrophe before it becomes a crime?”

Taren did not answer.

Nerai prepared an emergency referral.

She attached the project map.

The financial connections.

Mareia's testimony.

An analysis of the possible combined risk.

She sent it to the supervisory council, the health regulator, and the genetic-rights authority.

She asked them to suspend new access to Aurelian data temporarily and freeze funds that had not yet been disbursed.

The system accepted the referral.

It classified it as urgent.

A preliminary review was scheduled within seventy-two hours.

Meanwhile, on the orbital ring, the transport coordinator received the final payment.
The system verified the currency.
Converted the exchange rate.
Checked sanctions lists.
Verified the immediate payer's source of funds.
Found no grounds for refusal.
The payment cleared in eleven seconds.
All contractual layers are active.
Arien received confirmation shortly after returning from the garden.
He stood before the dark-blue vessel Mareia had once brought into his apartment.
With one movement he knocked it off the table.
It hit the floor.
It did not break.
It bounced, rolled, and came to rest on its side.
Arien stared at it with growing anger.
Even its imperfection had survived his blow.
He opened a connection to Kael without warning.
Kael appeared above the work surface.
“Mareia knows.”
“What does she know?”
“She knows something is being prepared.”
“That's not the same thing.”
“She's been to the Layer.”
“We know that.”
“I met with her.”
Kael's face remained calm.
“Why?”
“She wanted answers.”
“And you gave them to her?”
“No.”
“What did you say?”
Arien was silent.

Kael repeated the question.

More slowly this time.

Arien told him what he had said about the houses closing.

Kael did not move.

“You fool.”

“She can't prove anything.”

“Proof isn't the only way a person can know something.”

“The project is ready.”

“That wasn't an answer.”

“The last payment has cleared.”

Kael stared at him.

“Stop it.”

Arien froze.

“What?”

“Suspend everything that remains. Let it cool down.”

“We can't.”

“We can afford to lose money.”

“Some processes can't be recalled without leaving a more visible trail.”

Kael closed his eyes.

For the first time since Arien had known him, he looked tired.

“What scale have you authorized?”

“I haven't authorized any scale.”

“Don't play games with me.”

“The models have limits.”

“What limits?”

“The objective is a crisis.”

“How many people?”

“That can't be determined precisely.”

Kael leaned closer to the image.

“How many?”

Arien did not answer.

In that silence Kael understood more than he wanted to.

He had opened the financial corridors.

He had supplied the foundations.

He had taught Arien how to divide an intention among people who would never see the whole.

He had convinced himself that they were preparing a crisis that would break Jesair's political strength and stop transparency before it became law.

He had knowingly helped a man driven by hatred.

He had simply refused to admit how far hatred might go once it was given a budget, computing capacity, and time.

“Stop it,” he repeated.

“No.”

“That was not a request.”

“You're no longer the only one with the map.”

Kael's face hardened.

“Without my people you'd have nothing.”

“Your people have already done their work.”

Kael understood one final thing.

Arien no longer needed him.

The connection ended.

At the Layer, Nerai's emergency referral glowed on the system.

It was awaiting legal review.

Beside it lay a map of money showing many small payments, each explicable in isolation.

Nerai knew that if she was wrong, she could harm research, institutions, and innocent people.

If she was right, seventy-two hours might be far too long.

She did not know what was going to happen.

Or where.

Or how.

She knew only that the man who had once gripped Mareia's wrist had spoken of Aurelian houses closing before anyone had a reason to close them.

And somewhere in the planet's accounts, the final payment had just cleared.

24. THE FIRST FEVER

The boy's name was Elan.

He was six years old, and the golden ring appeared in his eyes only when he cried or concentrated very hard.

His mother insisted she had first seen it shortly after his birth. The doctors had told her that was impossible, since the Aurelian mark usually manifested later in childhood.

But she was certain.

Mothers are sometimes certain even of things that cannot be proved.

They lived in a small town on the edge of Auriola. It was not a famous ancestral estate or a place people visited seeking traces of ancient Aurelian legends. It was an ordinary house with a bright kitchen, a small garden, and a wall on which Elan drew transport ships despite his parents repeatedly telling him not to.

That morning he refused to get up.

His mother found him curled beneath the blanket.

“Elan.”

The boy opened his eyes.

The golden ring was vivid.

Not thin and delicate as usual.

It shone around his pupil in an unbroken line.

“I'm cold,” he said.

His skin was burning.

The home healthcare system conducted its basic measurements. Raised temperature. Elevated pulse. Minor deviations in inflammatory markers.

Its recommendations were calm.

Hydration.

Rest.

Another examination in two hours.

Several common seasonal illnesses were circulating in the region. Elan showed no symptoms that immediately suggested anything serious.

His mother called the local doctor anyway.

“His ring is very bright,” she said.

“That happens with a fever,” the doctor replied with a smile.

“Not like this.”

“Every fever can look different.”

“He's Aurelian.”

“I know.”

“Could that have something to do with it?”

The doctor paused.

“With what?”

The mother could not answer.

She had no name for a disease.

No other cases.

Only a child she knew better than she knew herself.

The doctor ordered a more detailed examination.

Two hours later Elan was weaker.

The healthcare system raised its alert level.

Four hours later it recommended transfer.

The ambulance module arrived quietly. Two paramedics wore protective clothing, not because they feared an unknown contagion, but because they used such equipment with every patient suffering from an unexplained fever.

Elan's mother went with him.

His father stood in the doorway and watched the module leave.

The ships drawn in blue remained on the bedroom wall.

At the hospital Elan was given a case identifier.

AUR-N-77104.

The first three letters did not stand for *Aurelian*.

They were a code for the region and hospital.

That was one of the small ironies people would notice only in retrospect.

The healthcare AI compared his condition with millions of previous cases.

It found no exact match.

This was not unusual.

The human body produced a nearly infinite range of anomalies, most of which did not signify a new disease.

The system created a provisional category:

Unspecified acute inflammatory response.

It forwarded the case to regional surveillance.

Not as an alarm.

As data.

One hundred and eighty kilometers away, an elderly woman awoke that same day with a fever.

She was Aurelian.

She lived alone.

Her home system assessed the illness as an ordinary infection and advised rest.

In Nitra, a young man arrived at a hospital suffering from sudden, severe weakness. His mother had mixed ancestry and his father was Aurelian. The golden ring rarely appeared in his eyes.

The medical staff did not notice it.

In Sarur, two sisters fell ill.

In another state, a man who had returned from a business trip.

The cases shared no location.

No hospital.

No doctor.

In every system they remained separate.

Healthcare AI could see their symptoms.

Ancestral archives knew their origins.

Transport systems knew their movements.

Banks knew the payments connected to projects examining Aurelian ancestry.

But no one had the right to place all that information side by side.

Not yet.

At the Layer, Nerai sat before her emergency referral.

Ten hours had passed since she submitted it.

One of the three authorities had requested additional information.

The second had confirmed receipt.

The third announced it would convene a commission.

Taren set two cups of something to drink on the desk.

“Go to sleep.”

“No.”

“They're working on your referral.”

“Working on it isn't deciding.”

“And sitting here won't shorten the legal deadlines.”

“That's why they're wrong.”

“Perhaps they exist to protect people from you.”

Nerai looked at him.

Taren sat down.

“From an official with a strong feeling who wants to open every account because of it.”

“I don't want to open every account.”

“I know. But the law can't assume that whoever sits in your chair next will be you.”

Nerai picked up her cup.

“Which is precisely why everyone who looks at the data must be visible.”

“You sound like Jesair.”

“I sound like someone who's spent ten hours waiting for institutions to agree whether she may find out who is funding research into a possible vulnerability affecting a third of the population.”

Taren opened the latest bank reports.

“We have one new transaction.”

Nerai looked up.

“Connected to the foundations?”

“Possibly.”

“Taren.”

“A company we've already seen in the Vesta case sent a smaller payment to a transport coordinator on the ring.”

“Purpose?”

“Reservation of medical logistics capacity.”

“For which project?”

“Protected commercial information.”

Nerai opened the timeline.

The payment had cleared shortly before Mareia's meeting with Arien.

“It could be ordinary preparedness,” Taren said.

“It could.”

“The foundations work in healthcare security.”

“I know.”

“And since the older epidemics, reserving capacity has become routine.”

“I know.”

“Then why are you looking at it like that?”

Nerai expanded the map.

Data.

BIO-AI.

Laboratories.

Legal analyses.

Response modeling.

Logistics capacity.

“Because the direction is complete.”

Taren said nothing.

“We have no disease,” he said at last.

“No.”

“No health alert.”

“No.”

“No proof that any of this is connected.”

“No.”

“Then we have nothing to stop.”

Nerai stared at the map.

“We have a chain of actions that would have triggered a warning in another system.”

“What other system?”

“One that doesn't exist yet.”

Mareia's connection opened without warning.

Her image shook slightly, as though she were walking.

“Nerai.”

“What is it?”

“An emergency request has appeared in the ancestral archives.”

“From whom?”

“A hospital in Auriola. A child with an unidentified fever.”

Taren leaned toward the image.

“One child?”

“So far.”

“Why do they want ancestral data?”

“He has an unusually vivid golden ring and abnormalities the doctors can't classify.”

Nerai felt every thought in her head stop.

“It could be related to anything,” Taren said.

Mareia nodded.

“I know.”

“Aurelian children's marks often become more pronounced during a fever.”

“I know.”

Nerai checked the time.

“When did the case begin?”

Mareia told her.

A few hours after the last payment.

That proximity in time proved nothing.

Nerai knew it.

Billions of payments were made and thousands of people fell ill on Elarion every hour. Lay two sufficiently large maps over each other and you would always find events occurring close together.

“Ask the hospital to send the case to interstate surveillance,” she said.

“They've already sent it regionally.”

“Interstate.”

“The system won't allow it on the basis of one patient.”

“Then have the ancestral archive apply for an exception.”

Mareia looked at her.

“We have no legal basis to disclose the patient's ancestry outside the region.”

The sentence hung between them.

Nerai thought of all the exceptions that, over the previous months, had allowed anonymous projects to study hereditary Aurelian traits.

Now, with one Aurelian child lying in a hospital with an unknown fever, the law protected his ancestry from the very system that could look for other cases.

The protection was right.

The child was not a public data point.

His ancestry did not belong to the state.

His illness should not become grounds for monitoring an entire population.

And yet Nerai felt that someone had been measuring precisely this boundary ahead of them.

“Submit the request,” she said. “I'll support it with the financial analysis.”

“The financial analysis has nothing to do with the patient.”

“That's exactly what we don't know.”

“Nerai, if we connect suspicious funding with the illness of one Aurelian child without evidence, we could trigger panic.”

“And if we don't connect them?”

Mareia did not answer.

In the Auriola hospital, Elan was asleep.

His mother sat beside the transparent wall of his room. The doctors had not yet separated her from her son completely, but they had asked her to remain in a protected area.

Elan woke.

“Mama.”

She placed her palm against the wall.

“I'm here.”

“Come inside.”

“In a moment.”

“I'm cold.”

“I know.”

“Why can't I go home?”

His mother smiled the way parents smile when they want to show a child a certainty they do not feel themselves.

“They just need to find out what's wrong.”

Elan looked at his hand.

“Is it because I'm golden?”

His mother stopped breathing.

“No.”

“At school they said the ring is sometimes sick.”

“Who said that?”

“Someone.”

“The ring isn't a disease.”

“Then why is it glowing so much?”

She did not know.

She put her other hand against the wall as well.

“Because your body is fighting.”

“Will it win?”

“Yes.”

She answered instantly.

Mothers are sometimes certain even of things that have yet to be decided.

Meanwhile, the regional healthcare AI received a fourth case.

Then a fifth.

Different towns.

Different ages.

Similar abnormalities.

The system established a weak statistical association.

Possible shared hereditary characteristic.

It did not issue a public alert.

First it had to rule out geographical, environmental, and diagnostic bias.

After historical instances of discrimination, labeling a hereditary group as a risk factor on the basis of a small sample was prohibited.

So the system requested more data.

One hospital supplied it.

Another awaited patient consent.

The third used a different data standard.

The fourth belonged to a state that prohibited automated cross-border comparison of genetic characteristics.

The machine could see an outline.

The law would not permit it to draw the line.

Late that night Jesair received a message from Auriola.

He knew Elan's family. Not closely, but well enough to remember the boy asking him during an ancestral gathering whether the golden ring could see better things than ordinary eyes.

Jesair had answered that eyes saw not according to their color, but according to a person's courage to look.

Now he stood beside a window in the Davion house, listening to Elan's mother.

“They won't let me near him,” she said.

“Is he in isolation?”

“Only as a precaution, for now.”

“What do the doctors say?”

“They don't know.”

Jesair recognized something in her voice.

Not panic.

The place just before it.

“I'll come,” he said.

“No.”

The answer was sharp.

“You're Aurelian.”

Jesair said nothing.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “It's just... if it's something... we don't know.”

“I understand.”

“Elan asked about you.”

“Tell him I'm with him.”

“But you're not.”

Jesair touched the window glass.

Outside, Auriola lay in darkness. Old houses, valleys, ancestral archives, and roads traveled by generations of people bearing the golden ring.

“Sometimes you can be with someone even from where you stand,” he said.

When the connection ended, he remained alone.

For an instant, a vision appeared before his eyes.

This time there was no hospital and no Elan.

A long corridor opened before him, divided by transparent walls.

Behind each one lay a person.

Behind each one lay a person.

Golden circles glowed above the beds.

Thousands.

Then millions.

The image vanished.

Jesair grabbed the window frame.

“No,” he said into the emptiness.

He did not know whom he was answering.

At the Layer, a health alert lit up.

Not public.

Preliminary.

The regional system had recorded an unusual convergence of cases possibly linked to an inherited characteristic. Further verification was required.

Nerai did not see it.

The financial authority had no access to preliminary health warnings.

Mareia saw only part of it.

The ancestral archive received a request to verify whether the patients belonged to related bloodlines.

The hospitals saw their own sick.

Each system received its own fragment.

On Nerai's work surface glowed the financial map of the preparations.

On Mareia's, the biological map of questions.

Within the healthcare network, the map of the first patients.

Between them stood laws, jurisdictions, permissions, and good reasons why no one should be able to see everything.

By morning, Elan still had a fever.

The number of unexplained cases rose to seven.
By afternoon, twelve.
Before the Elarion Sun went down, the first child in another state fell ill.
In the system, that child was a separate case.
In the family, the child had a name.
In history, not yet.
Later, people would search for the instant when the Third began.
They would point to the first public announcement.
To the closure of Auriola.
To the day the healthcare network spoke the name of the Aurelians.
To the first city behind a transparent wall.
But catastrophes do not begin when society gives them a name.
They begin earlier.
In a question divided among innocent people.
In a payment that every bank assesses correctly.
In an exception created to protect life.
In a machine that sees a pattern but has no right to connect the data.
In the one person who knows the map.
And in the fever of a child to which no one has yet attached the weight of history.
Elan opened his eyes.
The golden ring in them shone brighter than before.
His mother stood behind the transparent wall.
She placed three fingers against it.
The boy raised his hand and did the same from the other side.
Glass remained between their skin.
The first wall.
The first closed house did not yet exist.
But the first room had already been shut.

Part III: The Plague of the Golden Ring

25. THE HOUSES OF AURIOLA

By morning, there were twenty-three.

Twenty-three people with a fever the healthcare systems could not precisely classify.

Twenty-one were Aurelians.

One had an Aurelian father, though the golden ring had never reliably appeared in his eyes.

The ancestral archive knew nothing about the last woman. She had been born outside Auriola and had never made her lineage public.

In every hospital the cases looked different.

One held a child.

Another an old woman.

In a third, two siblings.

In a fourth, a man who had worked on the orbital ring several days earlier.

The healthcare systems did not connect them by name, race, or family line. They connected cases by symptoms, environment, time, and known risk factors. Hereditary identity was among the most sensitive data on Elarion and could be used only where there were clear medical grounds.

Those grounds had not yet been confirmed.

The system was therefore forbidden to assume them.

At the Auriola hospital, Elan stopped speaking.

He was not asleep. His eyes were open, following a patch of light on the ceiling, but he answered questions only with movements of his fingers. One meant yes. Two meant no.

His mother stood behind the transparent wall.

“Can you hear me?”

One finger.

“Does anything hurt?”

Two.

“Are you cold?”

One.

The medical staff adjusted treatment as his readings changed. Every intervention was evaluated by the system, compared against millions of cases, and checked by a doctor.

No one was acting blindly.

Yet no one knew what they were fighting.

Elan raised his hand.

He placed three fingers against the wall.

His mother did the same.

Between them were glass, air, and a regulation that forbade her to enter.

“I'm here,” she said.

The boy closed his eyes.

That day, the first houses began to close.

Not by government order.

Voluntarily, at first.

The ancient Aurelian houses had their own health protocols. Some dated from an age when diseases spread more slowly and people believed ancestral walls could separate purity from the world. In modern times they had become mostly symbolic.

Now their old gates closed in earnest.

Families stopped sending their children to school.

Workers stayed home.

Household systems measured temperatures, blood readings, and changes in the golden ring.

The first images of eyes appeared on public networks.

Photographs of irises.

Magnified golden lines.

People compared them, searched for differences, and marked places where the ring seemed wider, brighter, or broken.

Healthcare workers repeatedly warned that the appearance of the eyes was not a reliable diagnostic tool.

No one listened.

Fear loves signs that can be seen.

Mareia arrived in Auriola before noon.

Jesair was waiting outside the Davion house. He wore no protective suit, only the simple pale mask required under local regulations.

“You shouldn't have come here,” she said.

“I live here.”

“You know what I mean.”

Jesair looked at the shuttered houses in the valley.

“If I'm supposed to leave now, then this house was never mine.”

“It's not about the house.”

“I know.”

“It's about you.”

“I'm Aurelian too.”

“Exactly.”

Mareia stepped closer.

“If this targets our lineage, you're more exposed than anyone. You're descended from the oldest known family. We don't know precisely what that means.”

“Perhaps nothing.”

“Or perhaps everything.”

Jesair regarded her calmly.

“Did Nerai tell you to persuade me?”

“Nerai said that if I can't persuade you, she'll come in person and drag you away.”

“I'd like to see that.”

“I wouldn't.”

His smile faded.

Mareia glanced toward Auriola.

“Arien talked about the houses closing before we even knew of a single case.”

“I know.”

“If he had anything to do with this—”

“We have a suspicion.”

“I have more than a suspicion.”

“You have knowledge of a person.”

“Is that too little?”

“No. But it wasn't enough to stop the world.”

Mareia lowered her eyes.

Jesair touched her hand.

“It's not your fault.”

“I saw the direction.”

“And you said so.”

“Too late.”

“Before the first fever.”

“Not early enough.”

Jesair knew there was no point arguing. Not because she was right, but because guilt in this case did not follow truth. It followed closeness.

Mareia had been closest to Arien.

And so she felt she should have seen farthest.

They opened the Davion house as a coordination center.

Not a hospital.

It lacked the equipment and doctors capable of treating the new disease. It did have rooms, communication nodes, independent energy sources, and old underground chambers that could be isolated from the rest of the building.

Jesair rejected the ancestral council's proposal to admit only members of the oldest bloodlines.

“If we open our gates only to people with the right names,” he said, “then we deserve none of the names hanging on these walls.”

Families with nowhere else to go began arriving.

Not all were sick.

Some were simply afraid.

A mother with two sons whose neighbors had asked her to leave their shared residential block.

An elderly man whose transfer to a hospital had been canceled because another state had stopped admitting patients from Auriola.

A young woman in the final months of pregnancy. Her partner was a Selenite. Genetic testing had shown that the child she carried would be a boy.

An Aurelian boy.

She sat in the old Davion library with both hands on her belly.

“All my life I wanted a son,” she told Mareia. “Now I feel as though I've passed a sentence on him.”

“You've given him life.”

“And a mark.”

“A mark isn't a disease.”

“Tell that to those who will be afraid even to look at him.”

Mareia sat opposite her.

“We don't yet know what's happening.”

“That's precisely why I'm afraid.”

The woman stared at the Davion portraits.

“Do you think they ever imagined their rings would one day mean death?”

“No.”

“Then what were they for?”

Mareia looked at the golden rings painted in the eyes of people long dead.

“Perhaps they weren't *for* anything.”

The woman looked at her in surprise.

“Not everything has to have a purpose,” Mareia continued. “Not everything we inherit is a message. Sometimes it's simply part of the body. A piece of our journey.”

“And if that journey brings us here?”

Mareia had no answer.

Nerai arrived late that evening.

The protective transport module had allowed her into Auriola only after three verifications. She was Selenite, but her mother had been Aurelian, and with limited information the system could not reliably assess whether mixed ancestral ties constituted a risk.

“So now I'm Aurelian enough to be screened,” she said as she entered the Davion house.

“As a child you'd have been delighted,” Jesair remarked.

“As a child I was stupid.”

“As a child you wanted to belong.”

“Often that's the same thing.”

They embraced only briefly.

Nerai immediately opened her work layers.

“We have seventy-eight confirmed cases. More than two hundred are awaiting classification. Most in Auriola, but not all.”

“How many Aurelians?” Mareia asked.

“We don't know exactly.”

“How can we not know?”

“Not everyone has a public ancestral identity. Not every state collects it in the same way. Some hospitals can't disclose it without the patient's consent.”

“And the system still hasn't declared a genetic connection?”

“The regional system has marked it as possible.”

“The interstate system?”

“Not enough verified information.”

Mareia gave an angry laugh.

“How much does it need?”

“That depends on quality, not just quantity.”

“People are burning up and machines are assessing quality.”

“The machines are doing what we asked them to do,” Nerai said. “We didn't want them labeling an entire race a health risk after ten cases.”

“Now there are nearly eighty.”

“And in a few hours there could be eight hundred.”

Silence fell.

Jesair looked at his sister.

“Do you believe that?”

“I believe that whatever this is, it didn't begin today.”

Nerai displayed the map.

The first known cases lay far apart.

Some were connected by transport hubs.

Others by ancestry.

Still others by nothing visible at all.

“It's already outside Auriola,” she said. “We just haven't admitted it yet.”

A local news broadcast opened on the side wall of the Davion house. “Authorities confirm seventy-eight cases of an unknown fever,” the presenter reported. “Medical professionals reject claims that the appearance of a golden ring is enough to diagnose infection.”

In a short recording, a mother outside a closed school asked why she should keep her symptom-free child home. Another parent pointed toward an Aurelian house and demanded guards be posted at its doors.

Jesair muted the broadcast. “They're both afraid for their children,” he said. Nerai did not answer. Her own map already contained more locations than the presenter had named.

Then a hospital message arrived.

Elan's condition had deteriorated.

Jesair stood.

“I'm going there.”

“No,” Mareia and Nerai said together.

He looked at them.

“His mother is alone.”

“There are medical staff,” Nerai said.

“That isn't the same.”

“If you get infected, you won't help anyone.”

“And if I stay here?”

“You can speak to people. Organize assistance. Persuade them to follow the precautions.”

“So I'm supposed to be a voice, but not a human being.”

“I'm asking you to stay alive.”

Jesair looked at the map of Auriola.

Then at his own house's closed gates.

“All these years people have told me what my ancestors supposedly did. Healed by touch. Entered houses where others feared to go. Stood beside the sick.”

“And perhaps that's why they're all dead,” Nerai said.

Jesair raised his eyes to hers.

It was not cruelty.

Only the fear of a sister who did not yet want to enter her brother among the numbers.

“You don't have to prove you're a Davion,” she said.

“I'm not trying to prove anything.”

“Then stay.”

Jesair sat down.

At the hospital, Elan's mother placed three fingers against the glass.

The boy did not raise his hand.

By midnight another forty-three Aurelian houses had closed.

By morning, more than a thousand.

At first they closed themselves.

Within days, others would begin closing them.

26. SYSTEMS WITHOUT A WHOLE

Saira Oren knew how machines spoke to one another.

Not through words.

Through permissions.

Every information system could say only what the law allowed it to say. What it held was less important than what it was permitted to pass on.

Saira was an architect of interstate data networks. She designed interfaces between hospitals, insurers, health registries, and research centers. She had spent her life making it possible for information to move between institutions without turning the human being into a public object.

She believed in limits.

In divided authority.

In the principle that no system should know everything about a person.

That was why Nerai called her.

They met in the Union's crisis center.

Five maps glowed on the walls.

A map of patients.

A map of ancestral relationships.

A map of hospital capacity.

A map of transport movements.

A map of suspicious financing.

None was complete.

And no two could be fully superimposed without authorization.

Saira studied them for a long time.

“You want me to connect them,” she said.

“I want to know whether they can be connected.”

“Technically, yes.”

“Legally?”

“No.”

“Not even during an emergency?”

“A planet-wide health emergency hasn't been declared. The Union can connect its own information, but not foreign registers. Ancestral archives operate under separate safeguards. Financial records under still others.”

Nerai pointed to the health map.

“I only need to verify whether the patients belong to the same ancestral branches whose characteristics someone commissioned research on.”

“Only?”

“I don't want their names.”

“Even an anonymous match tells you something about them.”

“And what about information on the person who paid for the research?”

“The financial layer doesn't know who that is.”

“Exactly.”

Saira moved closer to the maps.

“I can build a temporary bridge. Each system would produce an anonymous identifier and we'd compare only the matches.”

“Then do it.”

“I don't have the authority.”

“Who does?”

“Everyone.”

Nerai frowned.

“That's not an answer.”

“On the contrary. It's an extremely precise answer. We need authorization from the health regulator, the ancestral archives, the interstate council, at least twelve states, and the administrator of off-world data. If financial information is included, we also need a court order.”

“How long?”

“Several months under normal procedures.”

“And in an emergency?”

“If everyone agrees, a few hours.”

“Then let's bring them together.”

Saira looked at her.

“The people or the systems?”

“Both.”

The emergency conference began sixteen minutes later.

Health-authority representatives sat on one side.

Ancestral-archive administrators on the other.

There were also lawyers, banking supervisors, state delegates, and civil-rights advocates.

Each knew a different part of the problem.

And each feared a different catastrophe.

The healthcare workers feared an epidemic.

The ancestral councils feared discrimination.

The states feared losing control.

The lawyers feared a precedent.

The rights advocates feared a system that might one day connect everything about everyone.

“We're asking only for temporary correlation,” Saira said. “No names. No publication of individual records. We need to test whether there's a statistical match between the patients and genetic traits examined in recent research projects.”

“Who will see the result?” asked the delegate from Therinith.

“The crisis health team.”

“And the Layer?”

Nerai answered.

“The financial analysts will receive only a confirmation of whether the projects we're examining are relevant to the present risk.”

“So you'll use medical information for a financial investigation.”

“We'll use confirmation of a risk to find out who financed it.”

“That's a dangerous precedent.”

“The dangerous precedent is already lying in our hospitals.”

Daren Voltr attended as a representative of the Northern Alliance's Monetary Council. He had no direct authority over medical data, but in interstate crises he represented a group of states whose financial and insurance systems would bear some of the costs.

“Nerai,” he said, “I understand the urgency. But a system that connects genetics, health, and money is precisely what Jesair's opponents warned against.”

“Jesair proposed visibility of power, not public medical profiles.”

“Every centralized system begins by claiming it wants to see only power.”

“Then let's not build a centralized system.”

“What do you propose?”

Saira answered.

“A temporary exchange of evidence between separate nodes. The data stay where they are. Each register responds only yes, no, or with a statistical value. Every query is logged. Later, a patient will be able to see that their data were included in emergency verification.”

“And can the patient refuse?” asked a civil-rights representative.

“Not retrospectively.”

“Then consent means nothing.”

“If we wait for the individual consent of every unconscious patient, we'll discover nothing.”

“That's exactly how an emergency regime begins and never ends.”

Nerai felt anger rising.

Not at any individual.

Each person was voicing a reasonable concern.

That was the worst of it.

If they had been fools, she could have persuaded them.

If they had been corrupt, she could have exposed them.

Instead, they were protecting genuine values.

Privacy.

Rights.

Sovereignty.

Trust.

And while they guarded those things separately, a disease moved between them.

“Propose safeguards,” Nerai said. “Not rejection.”

“What safeguards?” Voltr asked.

“Every query visible to all participating institutions. Every use of data recorded. The results reviewed after the crisis. Anyone who goes beyond the authorized purpose held personally accountable.”

“That still won't protect a person from the state.”

“No. But the state won't be invisible while it's watching.”

Voltr fell silent.

He remembered the idea from Jesair's speech.

The watcher visible to the watched.

It was not an answer to everything.

But it was better than secret access.

The conference continued.

Meanwhile, the case count passed one thousand.

The Union's healthcare AI had already identified a hereditary association with high probability. Its conclusion, however, applied only to Union data. Results in two other states were similar. Three still lacked enough confirmed patients.

Each system knew a part.

None could speak the whole sentence.

Saira opened the technical architecture.

“The machines aren't blind,” she said. “They've been blindfolded. And every bandage was tied there by a person with a good reason.”

“Can we loosen it for a while?” Voltr asked.

“We can create a narrow opening.”

“Who decides how wide?”

“You do.”

Nerai shook her head.

“No. Rules. Not the people in this room.”

“Someone has to write the rules.”

“And everyone has to see who wrote them.”

After five hours, they approved a restricted correlation bridge.

Twelve states joined immediately.

Nine conditionally.

Four refused.

The rest requested further legal review.

The ancestral archives agreed to comparisons only in aggregate form.

The financial map could not be directly connected.

Nerai would receive only an indication of whether the projects under review contained genetic characteristics matching those overrepresented among the patients.

The Bridge began operating.

It started sending queries.

The Bridge received no names.

Complete medical profiles remained protected.

Only mathematical proofs of matches were transmitted.

The first results arrived nine minutes later.

The hereditary association was strong.

A second response confirmed that some research projects had focused on the very ancestral characteristics overrepresented among the patients.

A third showed that some of those characteristics occurred across Aurelian lineages otherwise thought to be distant.

Nerai called up the financial map.

Foundations.

BIO-AI.

Laboratories.

Exceptions.

Response testing.

Logistics.

Now she had the first thing connecting them to the disease.

Not proof of a crime.

Proof of a direction.

“Send this to the prosecutors,” she said.

“Under what classification?” Taren asked.

“Imminent systemic risk.”

“We still don't know who did it.”

“We know what was purchased.”

“That's not the same.”

“No. But the purchases came before the bodies.”

Across Nitra, Kael Thorne was watching the same medical reports as the public.

Not all of them.

He had access to private forecasts from insurers and economic consortia. They were more accurate than political announcements because money was preparing for catastrophe before states were permitted to name it.

They projected hundreds of thousands of cases within days.

Possibly millions.

Kael called Arien.

This time there was no image.

Only a voice.

“We have to release all the research results,” Kael said.

“Why?”

“Because they might help the medical teams.”

“Those results are divided.”

“Then bring them together.”

“I don't have them all.”

Kael closed his eyes.

“You commissioned them.”

“The commissioning parties were different.”

“Don't hide behind your own structure.”

“Some laboratories retain outputs under their own rules. Some contracts prohibit further use.”

“So you've created a threat that even its creator doesn't understand.”

Arien was silent for a long time.

“They weren't all supposed to die,” he said at last.

“Who wasn't supposed to die?”

“The results should have been more precise.”

At the edge of his desk, his fingers made a movement remembered from childhood. Five faces of the cube had looked correct. On the last, a few squares had been out of place.

At the gates of the zoo he had pleaded for a second chance. Now he was looking at a map of hospitals. No further turn could bring the dead home.

“How many did you expect?”

“Enough.”

“That's not a number.”

“You wouldn't have cared about the numbers before.”

Kael stood.

“Before, you told me this would be a limited crisis.”

“You wanted Elarion to fear Jesair's world.”

“I wanted to stop him.”

“This will stop him.”

Kael looked at the hospital map.

“No. This will make him the very thing you were afraid of.”

Arien ended the connection.

More points were lighting up on the health map.

The systems were beginning to connect them.

Too late.

But together, for the first time.

27. THE NAME THEY FEARED TO SAY

Elarion knew the power of naming.

A name could protect a person.

It could grant rights, belonging, history, and a place in society.

But a name could also become a target.

Several generations earlier, two states had used ancestral information when allocating jobs and health insurance. Aurelians were considered more expensive patients because of certain hereditary characteristics. Selenites were turned away from security services because of their supposedly excessive sensitivity. Veyrans were favored in administration and financial institutions because they were said to possess natural organizational abilities.

Those rules were eventually abolished.

The distrust they left behind remained.

And so health officials feared speaking the word *Aurelian* until the connection was beyond doubt.

When the Planetary Health Council convened, confirmed cases had passed two hundred thousand.

Almost all the patients were Aurelians or people with demonstrable Aurelian ancestry.

“The statistical relationship is clear,” said the Union's chief epidemiologist. “The causal mechanism is not.”

“The public doesn't distinguish correlation from causation,” objected the delegate from Vokorwyn. “If we say this is an Aurelian disease, people will treat every Aurelian as a source of infection.”

“If we don't say it,” Mareia replied, “people won't know who's at risk.”

“Everyone is at risk.”

“Not equally.”

“We don't know whether Aurelians transmit the disease more readily.”

“Nor are we claiming they do.”

“The public won't hear the distinction.”

Nerai sat beside Saira, following two discussions at once.

In the conference room people debated the right words.

In hospitals people were deciding who would keep a bed.

“I propose the following wording,” Daren Voltr said. “An unknown disease occurring disproportionately within one hereditary population.”

Mareia looked at him.

“That's a way of saying *Aurelian* without saying it.”

“It's precise language.”

“No. It's convenient language.”

“Mareia, words can kill.”

“So can their absence.”

The council chairwoman raised a hand.

“We must separate two questions. Who is affected by the disease, and who can transmit it.”

“The public won't separate them,” repeated the Vokorwyn delegate.

“Then we have to teach them,” Nerai said.

“During a panic?”

“When else? After all the Aurelians have been shut inside their homes?”

“Some homes closed themselves.”

“Because the states were silent.”

Daren Voltr turned to her.

“What do you propose?”

“Tell the whole truth. The disease predominantly affects Aurelians. There is, as yet, no evidence that being Aurelian in itself makes a person more infectious. Discrimination discourages sick people from reporting their condition and thereby increases the risk for everyone.”

“And if we discover something different tomorrow?”

“Then we'll say so tomorrow.”

“Trust can't change every day.”

“Our best understanding of the truth sometimes changes every hour.”

The council failed to reach agreement.

It issued a statement without the word *Aurelian*.

It spoke of disproportionate health risks across populations, the need for voluntary testing, and temporary restrictions on movement in areas with high case numbers.

The public filled in the meaning for itself.

The expression *the Plague of the Golden Ring* began circulating on the networks.

No one knew who had first used it.

Perhaps a journalist.

Perhaps a frightened parent.

Perhaps someone who had hated Aurelians long before and was simply waiting for a word that sounded like a reason.

The name spread faster than the official recommendations.

In Sarur, a transport-module driver refused to let an Aurelian family board.

“It's nothing personal,” he said.

The father showed him their negative test certificates.

“We have permission.”

“I have children at home.”

“So do I.”

“Then you should understand.”

The family remained on the platform.

The other passengers stayed silent.

One man defended them.

He was Veyran.

“Either you take them, or we all get off.”

Not everyone got off.

Three people did.

In another city, a group gathered outside an Aurelian house and demanded its closure. When those inside switched off the lights, the crowd began to applaud.

In Nitra's Selenite quarter, a community center opened to families who had lost their homes.

There was no ancestral emblem over its entrance.

Only a sentence:

Disease has victims. Fear creates its own.

At the hospital in Auriola, a young woman gave birth to a son.

The baby was healthy.

When he opened his eyes, there was no visible golden ring.

His mother sighed with relief.

Then felt ashamed of her relief.

“I'm terrible,” she told Mareia, who was speaking to her through a screen.

“No.”

“I prayed he wouldn't have it.”

“You prayed he would live.”

“Is that the same thing?”

Mareia did not answer.

The baby stirred, and in the strong light a thin golden line appeared around his pupil.

His mother began to cry.

Not because she loved him less.

Because she knew the world would see him, from his first moments, as a question.

In Nitra, Nerai met with the Layer's leadership.

Her request for immediate disclosure of the projects' ownership chains had once again been partly denied.

The immediate health risk had allowed some accounts to be frozen.

It did not automatically permit ultimate beneficial owners to be revealed in every state.

“We have confirmation that they studied the same genetic characteristics linked to the disease,” Nerai said.

“We have a correlation,” the lawyer corrected her.

“Who paid for that correlation?”

“We're working on it.”

“How long?”

“Therinith has thirty days to respond.”

Nerai laughed.

There was no amusement in it.

“In thirty days there may be no one left to answer.”

“We can't abolish the law every time a threat appears.”

“I'm not asking to abolish the law. I'm asking for a law capable of acting before the undertakers.”

“If we open every protected fund now, we establish a precedent.”

“Perhaps we need a precedent.”

“Such things are easy to say in a crisis.”

Nerai leaned toward him.

“And when, in your opinion, should we expose the system's weaknesses? In peaceful times, when no one cares?”

That evening the Health Council met again.

Cases had passed two million.

This time a report came from Thaeron as well.

Three workers in one of its sealed domes showed the same symptoms.

Two were Aurelians.

The third had an Aurelian father.

The chairwoman opened the prepared statement.

One word was still missing.

Mareia rose.

“If you're afraid to say who the disease is killing, you aren't protecting us from discrimination. You're protecting yourselves from responsibility.”

“That's unfair,” Voltr said.

“So is making mothers learn the truth from strangers' reports while states speak of population disparities.”

“A name could trigger violence.”

“Violence has already begun.”

“It could make things worse.”

“Silence makes it blind.”

Jesair joined from the Davion house.

He had not spoken until then.

“Say it,” he said.

Everyone turned toward his image.

“Jesair,” the chairwoman began, “we have to consider—”

“I'm Aurelian. Mareia is Aurelian. The people in the hospitals are Aurelian. You aren't protecting us by turning us into a description.”

“And if society begins to see you as a threat?”

“Then make it clear that we are people in danger, not the danger itself.”

Daren Voltr looked at Jesair.

“And if that's not enough?”

“The truth often isn't enough. A lie is even less.”

The council revised its statement.

Shortly before midnight, Elarion's senior public-health official appeared on every public channel.

She described the disease without giving it a name.

Then she named the people.

“The evidence currently available indicates that the unknown disease disproportionately affects Aurelians and people with certain inherited Aurelian connections.”

An explanation followed.

Of transmission.

Of uncertainty.

Of the prohibition on discrimination.

Of the need for immediate testing and protection.

But most people remembered the first sentence.

Golden eyes appeared on screens across the planet.

The world had finally named the victims.

And, in the same breath, marked them.

28. THE GOLDEN RING BEHIND GLASS

Glass became the material of the pandemic.

It was in hospitals.

At the edges of neighborhoods.

In transport hubs.

Between children and parents.

Between the sick and those who wished to help them.

It was transparent, yet it separated.

That was its purpose.

In old photographs from those first days, faces were pressed against the walls of isolation rooms. Hands on both sides. Lips moving without touch. Golden rings in eyes that reflected the hospital lights and seemed to shine more brightly through glass.

The mark that had once appeared only occasionally was increasingly visible during a fever.

Doctors could not tell whether it was part of the disease or merely the body's response.

The distinction did not interest the public.

Iris scanners began appearing at shop entrances.

Officially, they measured temperature and basic health indicators.

Some private operators modified them to flag Aurelian traits.

That was illegal.

The operators claimed they were protecting their customers.

One state banned the systems.

Another temporarily authorized them.

A third pretended not to know they existed.

Forty states.

Forty answers to one fear.

In Auriola, Elan was given a health-channel connection to Jesair.

The boy's face looked smaller than Jesair remembered. The fever had stripped away its childhood fullness. His eyes were open, and the golden rings in them shone so intensely that they looked unnatural.

“Do you remember me?” Jesair asked.

Elan moved.

One finger.

“Your mother's with you.”

The boy looked toward the glass.

“She told me you asked about the ring.”

Elan's lips moved.

His voice was faint.

“Can it see?”

Jesair leaned closer.

“What?”

“Can it see better?”

Jesair remembered their conversation long ago.

“No,” he said. “The ring can't.”

Elan waited.

“A person sees according to whether he dares to look.”

The boy closed his eyes.

“I don't want to.”

“What don't you want to see?”

“Mama crying.”

Jesair had no answer.

Elan's mother stood on the other side of the glass, covering her mouth with one hand.

“It's all right to be afraid,” Jesair said. “You don't always have to be brave.”

“Are you afraid?”

“Yes.”

“Of what?”

Jesair looked at the boy's mother.

At the medical readings.

At his own reflection in the screen.

“That I won't know how to help.”

Elan was silent for a moment.

“Then we're the same.”

Jesair managed a faint smile.

“Yes.”

The medical team ended the connection.

Elan needed another procedure.

Jesair sat before the empty screen.

His hands rested on the table.

The hands of the Davions.

Hands that ancient texts claimed had soothed fevers.

Now they could not touch even one child.

Mareia came in with a bowl of hot soup. Jesair did not notice her.

“Eat. You've been here since morning.”

“Elan asked whether I'd help him.”

“What did you say?”

“That I'd stay connected.”

“You did.”

“That won't heal his lungs.”

“No. But his mother told me he let them prepare him for the procedure afterward.”

Jesair picked up the spoon. His hand shook so badly that he put it down again.

“It angers me when people expect miracles from a Davion,” he said. “Today, for a moment, I expected one myself.”

Mareia sat beside him. “I'll go to his mother. You try to eat something.”

Elan died before dawn.

His mother could not be beside him physically.

But the medical staff allowed her to remain at the glass.

When the machines fell silent, she kept three fingers pressed against it for a long time.

Jesair learned of his death a few minutes later.

He made no public statement.

He did not speak of the first child he had known personally.

He simply went into the Davion garden and stood there until the Elarion Sun rose.

Eight thousand more people died that day.

Elan was the only one whose name Jesair knew.

That is one of the cruelest properties of great catastrophes.

The numbers grow.

Pain remains particular.

One bed.

One mother.

One hand on glass.

An image appeared on the public networks of an Aurelian girl standing behind a transparent wall in a quarantine center. She was about ten. Someone had cut her hair short to make it easier for the medical staff to work, and the ring was plainly visible in her eyes.

On the other side stood a Selenite healthcare worker.

The girl placed her palm against the glass.

He placed his opposite hers.

The photograph traveled around the planet.

To some, it was a symbol of compassion.

To others, proof that Aurelians should be kept apart.

The same image could lend strength to love or hatred.

It depended on what each person brought to it before looking.

Arien Korveth saw the photograph.

He enlarged the girl's eyes.

The golden ring.

Mareia bore the same mark when she was angry, afraid, or concentrating so deeply that she no longer noticed anything around her.

For a fraction of a second he saw the wrecked transport module again. White light. His mother's fingers in his hand. A paramedic's voice: *Aurelian regenerative profile.*

The ambulance doors had closed with another child inside. For years Arien had remembered which side he had been left standing on.

Now a different child stood behind glass in the photograph. Her eyes held the same ring. Arien tried to recall the face of the boy taken away long ago. Instead, he saw only a frightened girl.

He told himself he did not know the child.

That individual images must not obscure the goal of an entire civilization.

That every great change came at a price.

Then he closed the photograph.

A few minutes later he opened it again.

The girl was still alive.

That was worse.

The dead could no longer look back.

Kael came in person.

Arien did not let him in, but Kael still had access rights he had once considered unnecessary to revoke.

The door opened.

“The research archives must be handed over to the Health Council,” Kael said.

“I've already answered you.”

“I'm no longer talking about your plan. I'm talking about treatment.”

“The outputs are anonymized and divided.”

“Someone must be able to put them together.”

“BIO-AI.”

“Where is it?”

“The calculations were run across several rented environments.”

“Where is the model, Arien?”

Arien looked at him.

“There is no single model.”

Kael stood motionless.

“You divided that, too.”

“It was safer.”

“For whom?”

Arien did not answer.

“You wanted no one to see the whole,” Kael continued. “Not the laboratories. Not the banks. Not the authorities. And now even you can't see it.”

“I can see the result.”

“You can see the bodies.”

Kael pointed to the public health map.

“This is not a controlled crisis.”

“I never said there would be no casualties.”

“It isn't confined to Aurelians.”

Arien went rigid.

“Indirect deaths. Overloaded hospitals. Shortages of medicine. Transport closures. People from every branch.”

“That will pass.”

“But the Aurelians won't?”

“They're the heart of the problem.”

Kael stepped toward him.

“No. The heart of the problem is standing in front of me.”

Arien narrowed his eyes.

“You opened the accounts for me.”

“Yes.”

“You arranged the exceptions.”

“Yes.”

“Your people removed the obstacles.”

“Yes.”

Kael spoke each admission calmly.

Without defending himself.

“And that is why I know what I've done.”

“What's changed?”

“The scale.”

Arien smiled bitterly.

“So morality is merely a question of numbers to you.”

“No. The numbers have simply taken away your ability to lie to yourself that what you're doing is politics.”

Arien turned toward the photograph of the girl behind glass.

“Jesair will turn this into a new myth.”

“Perhaps.”

“People will turn to him.”

“They already are.”

“There. You see?”

Kael looked at him with something close to pity.

“All this time, you were afraid Jesair would seem like a prophet. So you created an apocalypse for him.”

He left.

Arien remained alone.

On the screen, the girl was touching the glass.

He did not know whether she survived.

He did not want to find out.

In Auriola, Jesair did not return to the house until evening.

Elan's mother waited for him at the entrance.

She was not allowed to come near. She was isolating at home.

They stood several meters apart.

“You spoke to him,” she said.

“Yes.”

“He was afraid.”

“Yes.”

“Did you tell him the truth?”

“I tried.”

The woman nodded.

“Then you did more than any of us.”

Jesair lowered his head.

“No.”

“Don't take that away from me.”

He looked up.

“I need to believe he didn't leave alone,” she said.

Jesair remembered the line from the family book.

Don't leave alone.

Elan had been behind glass.

His mother behind another pane.

Jesair on a screen.

And yet, in those last moments, something had formed between them that no wall could completely divide.

“He didn't,” Jesair said.

This time he did not know whether it was true.

He knew only that he had to say it.

29. JESAIR'S VOICE AND THE BRIDGE TO A SINGLE ELAR

When a common language fails, people begin searching for a voice.

When a common language fails, they do not necessarily seek the wisest voice.

Nor the most precise.

They seek one that will let them forget, if only for a moment, that the world is falling apart into contradictory instructions.

Health authorities spoke of isolation.

Politicians of stability.

Banks of liquidity.

Ancestral councils of protecting Aurelians.

Security services of order.

Each spoke the proper language of its own institution.

No one spoke the language of the fear they all shared.

Jesair did not want to speak.

After Elan's death, he refused three public appearances. He said he had no right to turn a child's death into a speech. He would not stand before cameras while Elan's mother still saw her son's palm pressed against glass. He would not make his own authority out of another person's pain.

Mareia found him in the old ancestral hall.

He sat beneath a portrait of Aser Davion, who, according to the chronicles, had gone from house to house during an ancient fever. Some said he healed people. Others said he merely stayed with the sick when everyone else feared even to touch them.

“People need to know what to do,” Mareia said.

“That's what doctors are for.”

“Some people no longer trust the doctors.”

“So I'm to do their trusting for them?”

“You're to tell people to trust them.”

Jesair stood.

“Why me?”

“Because when politicians say *stay home*, people hear an order. When bankers say *stay calm*, they hear someone protecting the markets. When you say it, perhaps they'll hear a human being.”

“That's exactly what I've resisted all my life.”

“What?”

“Being made into something I'm not.”

“Then tell them what you are.”

Jesair looked at her.

“And what am I?”

“A frightened Aurelian who can't heal people by touching them.”

Despite everything, he smiled.

“That doesn't sound like a very encouraging opening.”

“It's the truth.”

Jesair's first address was not delivered in a conference hall.

He stood in the garden of the Davion house.

Behind him were no flags, state emblems, or ancestral symbols. Only trees, old walls, and a valley where more homes were closing.

“My name is Jesair Davion,” he began. “I'm Aurelian. And I'm afraid.”

Within an hour the sentence had traveled around the planet.

Not because it was noble.

Because it gave people permission.

Millions were afraid, and for weeks they had heard only voices pretending fear was a technical defect in communication. Jesair was the first widely known person who did not explain it away, correct it, or conceal it.

He admitted it.

“I'm afraid for the people in hospitals. For families forced apart. For children who look at their own eyes and ask whether they were born under a sentence of death. And I'm afraid for the people who, in their fear, are beginning to look at their neighbors as though those neighbors were the disease.”

He paused.

“We are not a disease. Nor are we a mark. We are people.”

The golden ring was visible in his eyes.

He did not hide it.

“Follow the health precautions. Don't go where you shouldn't. Protect yourselves and others. But don't confuse protection with humiliation. Isolating someone who is ill may be necessary. Rejecting someone because of how they were born is cowardice.”

Some health officials feared Jesair's words would undermine compliance.

Something else happened.

After his address, more Aurelians voluntarily reported symptoms.

Fewer tried to escape sealed areas.

More families agreed to hospital transfers because, for the first time, they had heard that accepting a precaution did not mean accepting guilt.

Violence declined in some cities.

Not everywhere.

No voice can stop fear in every person.

But for a while, its direction changed.

Jesair continued speaking regularly.

He never called them speeches.

He talked with people.

With a mother who had lost three children.

With a Veyran doctor accused by his own community of helping Aurelians at the expense of others.

With a Selenite funeral worker who had stopped counting names because she could no longer bear to.

With an elderly Aurelian who claimed the pandemic was punishment for abandoning ancient traditions.

“Does it punish children, too?” Jesair asked him.

The old man did not answer.

“If we cannot explain suffering without turning God into a murderer of children, perhaps we should not try to explain it.”

People began saving, transcribing, and sharing Jesair's words.

The more he refused to become a myth, the more he became one.

Arien had been right about at least one thing.

The crisis increased Jesair's moral authority.

But Arien had been wrong about why.

People did not follow him because of his bloodline.

They followed him because he spoke of fear without exploiting it.

Alongside his voice, an idea he had voiced earlier in Nitra began to spread.

Value must not walk in shadow.

At the time it had sounded abstract.

It was a sentence from a public forum, debated by economists, lawyers, and bankers. To most people on Elarion, it mattered less than the price of bread, the rent, or the balance in their account.

The pandemic gave it a body.

Hospitals were running out of supplies.

Not because Elarion lacked manufacturing capacity. Automated factories could increase output rapidly. Plants on Thaeron could operate without stopping, and freight corridors were still functioning.

The problem was getting the goods to where they were needed.

A local news broadcast ran on the wall of the crisis center. Autonomous vehicles carrying breathing equipment stood idle at a border; in a hospital on the other side, the last available machines were already being allocated.

“The equipment was manufactured yesterday,” the reporter said. “The transport system knows the route. But the settlement node refuses to confirm the payment.”

A reason glowed beneath the image: *FOREIGN-EXCHANGE RISK COVERAGE NOT AGREED.*

The supplier feared that after a currency decline it would receive less than it had paid for the materials. The state refused to assume the entire risk. Both systems had calculated the sums instantly, but each waited for the other party to accept liability.

“When will the vehicles move?” the reporter asked the hospital director.

“When someone signs off on the difference in price,” the woman replied. “I can only sign for receipt of the machines.”

Saira muted the broadcast. On the crisis map she could see goods ready to ship, free corridors, and a decision that no settlement system had authority to make. The machines' speed changed nothing.

People began asking questions.

Why were machines standing at a border while a hospital on the other side had none left?

Who paid the price for hours lost while a decision was made?

Jesair's sentence appeared beneath reports of held shipments, unexplained fees, and empty warehouses.

Value must not walk in shadow.

People adapted it.

If money stops a medicine, we must be able to see where it stopped.

Discussion groups, civic initiatives, and informal networks of health workers, programmers, and economists emerged. Some demanded publication of all public payments. Others proposed open registers of companies' ultimate beneficial owners. Still others wanted every citizen to see who had accessed their financial data and when.

Nerai recognized her own words in the proposals.

They no longer circulated under her name.

Nor under Jesair's.

They had dispersed among people and taken on lives of their own.

The idea of transparency was gaining popularity not because Elarion's inhabitants had suddenly become morally perfect.

It was gaining ground because opacity had begun to hurt.

By then a company called the Bridge had existed for several years.

Before the pandemic, few people knew of it.

It had been founded by Lera Vain with two payment-system programmers, a former banking analyst, a specialist in cryptographic records, and a lawyer who had worked on cross-border settlement rules.

Originally they had not set out to create a new currency.

They wanted to simplify payments between Elarion's states and between Elarion and Thaeron.

An ordinary cross-border payment passed through several banks. Each knew only its own segment. The sender saw the amount sent and sometimes could not even know precisely how much the recipient would receive.

The Bridge was meant to be a translation layer.

The user would see the final price before confirming the payment.

The exchange rate.

The fee.

The delivery time.

And the amount the recipient would receive.

Even before the pandemic, however, the project had begun changing under the influence of public debates about transparency.

Lera watched Jesair speak in Nitra. Later she read an analytical commentary by Nerai Sael arguing that financial power had to be visible, but so did everyone who supervised it.

The Bridge team gradually redesigned the entire system.

Every payment would create an indelible record.

Not a public record of every personal purchase.

That would destroy ordinary people's privacy.

The public record would show the rules of the system, the company's reserves, large financial flows, ownership relationships, and transactions that crossed the threshold into societal power.

Private payments would remain private.

But whenever someone viewed a user's information, that user could see who had opened it, under which authority, and when.

If a bank held a payment, it had to give a reason.

If an automated system flagged it, the rule used had to be identifiable.

If someone received an exemption from disclosure, the system recorded who granted it and until when it remained valid.

No government was to control the entire network by itself.

The protocol was open.

Records were verified by independent nodes run by banks, universities, civic associations, and audit institutions across different states.

The Bridge had its own oversight board, but it could not retrospectively change payment history or erase the record of its own decisions.

Lera explained the idea simply:

“We don't want to build an eye that sees everyone while remaining invisible itself.”

Investors told her people did not want philosophy.

They wanted convenience.

Banks claimed disclosure of reserves, fees, and ownership relationships would damage trade secrets.

Regulators warned that a private company must not give the impression of becoming planetary financial infrastructure.

And so the Bridge remained small for a long time.

Its users were technology companies, a few merchants on Thaeron, and groups who regularly sent money between states.

The system worked, but it had no reason to grow.

Then the pandemic came.

Its first new users were neither governments nor large hospitals.

They were volunteers.

One civic group was raising money for protective filters for hospitals in sealed Aurelian regions. Contributions came from seven states in six currencies.

Using conventional methods, they would have needed several accounts, repeated currency conversions, and the approval of intermediary banks.

Through the Bridge, they could receive every contribution into a single balance.

The system denominated it in elars.

The elar had not originally been an independent currency.

It was the unit of the Bridge network, based on a publicly defined basket of energy, raw materials, and major Elarion currencies. Its value did not change at the discretion of any one state or central bank.

Behind every elar, the Bridge held reserves in existing currencies and short-term liquid assets.

The reserve composition was public.

Anyone could verify that the number of elars in circulation matched the real backing.

The volunteer saw one hundred elars.

A donor could pay in a local currency.

A filter manufacturer could receive its own currency or keep the elars.

To the user, it was one payment.

Behind the scenes, several financial systems still intersected, but the person at the counter no longer bore their complexity.

The first collection closed within hours.

Every donor could see how many elars had arrived.

The total raised.

The order for the filters.

The manufacturer, price, fee, and confirmation of delivery.

They could not see patients' names or other people's small private donations.

The journey of collective money was visible.

News of the collection spread.

Another organization used the Bridge to buy medicines on Thaeron.

Then a group of doctors used it to arrange lodging for foreign medical workers.

Later, a smaller hospital used it because it could not pay a supplier in the required currency.

At first, the Bridge entered places where ordinary systems failed.

Not because people trusted it more than banks.

Because it showed what banks did not.

The full cost of a payment.

Its route.

Its arrival time.

How much the recipient would get.

And who, if anyone, had stopped it.

When a shipment of protective suits was delayed, the open record showed that neither the seller nor the carrier had held the payment. An intermediary bank had stopped it, demanding additional evidence of the origin of the funds.

The bank could not claim the problem had arisen elsewhere.

Its decision had a name, a time, and a reason.

It completed the documentation within an hour.

The payment continued.

In another purchase, a supplier had increased the price just before the order was confirmed, claiming that the exchange rate had changed.

The Bridge's record showed that the rate had barely moved.

The supplier restored the original price.

Not because he had become more honest.

Because his explanation could be verified.

Larger organizations gradually joined the network.

First charitable funds.

Then regional hospital networks.

Then manufacturers who no longer wanted to manage accounts in dozens of currencies.

Merchants benefited from being able to quote one price in elars and decide whether to receive elars or local currency.

Hospitals benefited from comparing suppliers' prices without constantly converting exchange rates.

Donors valued being able to see where collective funds had gone.

Hospital administrators found it uncomfortable that their decisions remained on record.

But that very discomfort increased the trust of others.

Some states tried to ban the Bridge.

They argued that a private company could not create a unit beginning to compete with national currency.

But the prohibition encountered a practical difficulty.

The Bridge had not asked states to abandon their currencies.

Merchants could still receive domestic currency.

Taxes were still paid under local law.

Banks remained involved in settlement.

The Bridge simply allowed users to hold and send a shared unit of value while openly showing what happened to it.

When one state blocked it, hospitals pointed out that they were using the network to purchase some foreign supplies.

Volunteer organizations published a comparison.

A conventional transfer had taken two days and lost four percent of its value.

The Bridge payment had arrived within seconds, with the entire cost known in advance.

After three days, the ban was changed to a temporary exemption for medical transactions.

Similar exemptions appeared elsewhere.

They were not adopted as monetary reform.

They were adopted as crisis measures.

One exception allowed hospitals to accept elars.

Another let insurers settle cross-border treatments through the Bridge.

Another allowed public funds to disclose how aid was allocated within the network.

No one decided that the elar would become the planet's currency.

They decided only individual practical cases.

Each removed one obstacle.

Jesair first spoke publicly about the Bridge when millions were already using it.

He did not want his name to become an advertisement for a private company. But he could see that the system embodied much of what he had said in Nitra.

“I don't know whether one company should be the answer to an entire planet's problem,” he said in an address. “Every power needs a counterweight, including power that calls itself transparent.”

Then he looked directly into the camera.

“But notice why people use the Bridge. Not because they long for another bank. They use it because they can see the price, the rules, the fees, and the decisions. When someone stops their payment, there is more than silence left behind.”

He paused.

“When we're healthy, we allow value to walk in shadow and call it convenience. Now, when every machine means another breath and every shipment means more time, we want to see where value has stopped. Perhaps we should always have wanted that.”

Bridge usage rose again.

Not solely because of Jesair's words.

The system had its own evidence.

Shipments that had arrived earlier.

Collections in which the money had not disappeared.

Hospitals able to purchase supplies in a single unit.

Suppliers receiving payment without waiting days.

When hospital canteens began using the Bridge, their food suppliers joined.

When suppliers joined, their employees began accepting elars.

When healthcare workers received part of their crisis bonuses in elars, they began asking where they could spend them.

Shops near hospitals were the first to accept them.

Then carriers.

Hostels.

Pharmacies.

A small merchant no longer needed an account in every currency. A Bridge connection was enough. Prices could be displayed both in the local currency and in elars, and the system would automatically settle proceeds according to the merchant's preference.

At first most merchants converted elars immediately.

Later some began keeping a portion.

They knew they could use them for their next foreign purchase.

The elar was no longer merely passing through the system.

It was beginning to circulate within it.

People could still save in local currencies.

Receive wages in them.

Pay taxes in them.

But when traveling to another state they no longer had to exchange money.

They opened the Bridge.

Saw the same balance.

Paid in elars.

The merchant received elars or domestic currency.

The same method worked in Nitra, in Sarur, and beneath Thaeron's domes.

It was not yet Elarion's sole legal currency.

The states did not issue it.

Central banks did not control it.

Many governments still described it as merely the payment unit of a private network.

But to a person at the counter, the difference mattered less and less.

One price.

One balance.

One payment.

And unlike the old systems, they could see the rules governing the movement of their money from themselves to another person.

The Bridge also grew because it did not pretend to be perfect.

Its founders published the company's ownership structure.

The investors' names.

The size of their stakes.

Agreements with banks.

The reserves backing the elar.

Executive compensation.

And every change in the rules for calculating fees and the value of the reserve basket.

When a fund with an undisclosed ultimate beneficial owner tried to join, the Bridge refused it.

The fund brought a discrimination lawsuit.

The Bridge published the reason for its decision.

The fund had not been rejected for being wealthy.

It had been rejected because no one could establish who was acquiring power through it.

The entire planet followed the dispute.

For many people, it was the first concrete illustration of the difference between privacy and hidden power.

An ordinary person could pay for medicine without the whole world learning their name.

A fund buying hospitals could not conceal its owner behind fourteen companies.

Thus Jesair's and Nerai's ideas ceased to exist only as text.

They took the shape of a working system.

Every access left a trace.

Every large concentration of financial power had an ultimate owner.

Every exception had an author and an expiration date.

Small personal payments stayed private.

Large flows affecting other people's lives were visible.

The rules were open.

The network operator could not supervise everyone else without being supervised itself.

People became accustomed to this visibility.

At first, in connection with the pandemic.

Then with food.

With energy.

With transport.

With charitable collections.

With purchases between Elarion and Thaeron.

Gradually they began asking why similar rules did not apply to traditional banks.

Why the state could show every citizen's income but not the ultimate recipient of a public contract.

Why the Bridge could disclose its reserves daily while central banks published certain decisions only months later.

Why an elar payment showed the full fee in advance while conventional transfers sometimes revealed extra charges only at the recipient's end.

Transparency was no longer merely a moral demand.

It had become a user experience.

Kael Thorne watched the Bridge grow from a study where every window was set to opaque.

Vesta had not yet appeared in the system.

The old financial flows remained concealed within banks, funds, and states that protected owners. The Bridge saw only value that passed through its own network.

But people were becoming accustomed to something more dangerous to Kael than an investigation.

Comparison.

Someone who had once seen an entire fee began asking why they could not see it elsewhere.

Someone who had once known the ultimate owner began distrusting companies that hid theirs.

Someone who had once paid in the same unit in every state began asking why they needed thirty currencies.

Investigations could be delayed.

Commissions overwhelmed.

Courts kept busy with objections.

Politicians persuaded to wait.

But a habit could not be so easily taken back.

If the Bridge had remained merely a tool for health workers and volunteers, perhaps it would have disappeared after the pandemic.

But it was no longer that.

Families used it.

Merchants.

Manufacturers.

Carriers.

Workers on Thaeron.

People who had never read Jesair's speech and did not know Nerai Sael's name.

They did not use the elar because it embodied a philosophy of transparency.

They used it because it worked.

Only later did they realize it worked precisely because it made visible much of what the old systems concealed.

Kael understood that Arien had not merely unleashed a catastrophe.

He had created an environment in which Jesair's idea could become an everyday tool.

He had shown people the cost of darkness.

And forced them to try a system they would have rejected in calmer times as too bold, too open, or too dangerous to the old order.

Sometimes a person tries to destroy the future and, in doing so, removes everything that had prevented it from being born.

30. THE THIRD

At first they counted cases.

Then beds.

Then oxygen systems, stocks of medicine, vacant isolation rooms, and people still able to work.

In the end, there were the dead.

While they were few, the numbers were given precisely.

Seven hundred and forty-two.

Eleven thousand nine hundred and eight.

Two million four hundred thousand.

Every number could still pretend, in the human mind, to be a count of people.

Then came the tens of millions.

Hundreds of millions.

And the bodies became a curve.

Rising.

Falling.

Accelerating.

Moving north.

Reaching Vasýria.

Threatening Thaeron.

The human mind cannot carry a billion separate deaths.

It would have to imagine a billion beds.

A billion last breaths.

A billion doorways where someone stood waiting for a person who would never return.

A billion unfinished drinks at a bedside.

A billion sentences that were supposed to continue in the morning.

So the mind turned them into a number.

And the number into a line.

The pandemic spread from Auriola to every state on Elarion.

Not equally.

Regions that allowed their healthcare systems to share information gained several days. Doctors knew where supplies remained. They could see the results of treatments in hospitals on the other side of the planet. Algorithms compared millions of courses of illness without knowing the names of the people whose lives they described.

Gradually, the doctors also understood why computation was not enough. In many patients the disease triggered an intense defensive response that damaged blood vessels and attacked organs again as soon as they had been stabilized. Sometimes only hours separated the first warning from irreversible circulatory collapse. Regenerative treatments needed stable patients and days of time. Shared data bought time for some people; it could not restore the time others had already lost.

Several states sealed their data.

They spoke of sovereignty.

Of protecting citizens.

Of the danger that crisis infrastructure would remain in the Union's hands after the pandemic.

Some of those concerns were justified.

But the disease did not care what legal reason someone had for closing their records against it.

In those countries it traveled in darkness several days longer.

And during the Third, several days were an entire epoch.

On Thaeron, the first cases appeared in domes connected to orbital supply networks.

Administrators immediately closed the transport corridors.

But Thaeron was a world that survived through uninterrupted agreements between humans and machines.

The domes needed water.

Biological materials.

Spare parts.

Energy cells.

Filters.

Chemical compounds.

Every route they closed against disease was also a route along which something necessary for life arrived.

On Elarion, a village could forget the state and survive for several days.

On Thaeron, it could not even forget a pump.

That was why they adopted the emergency elar faster than the home planet.

Every shipment had a public record.

Every decision had an author.

Every refusal had a reason.

At first the dome administrators protested. They said the system revealed strategic reserves.

Then it emerged that one administrator had redirected water to a private residential sector where his own family and people close to his council lived.

The record was visible to everyone.

The protests grew quieter.

Meanwhile, on Elarion, more than the healthcare network was beginning to fail.

The old way of measuring value was also coming apart.

Not in one great collapse.

In thousands of small failures.

The currencies of states with large Aurelian populations weakened sharply. Markets calculated future deaths before hospitals did. They anticipated lost production, tax shortfalls, budget deficits, and rising costs.

A weaker currency made imported medicines more expensive.

More expensive medicines increased public debt.

Higher debt weakened the currency.

The more people died, the more money was needed to save them.

And the more money was needed, the less that money was worth.

The open crisis layer increasingly showed who had refused a shipment, who had changed a price, and who could release reserves to cover an exchange-rate difference. The public could see the consequence in the hospital waiting for supplies. Disputes did not disappear, but they ceased to hide behind the anonymous status of a payment.

Visibility could not manufacture a drug no one had yet discovered.

It could not bring medical workers back.

It could not create oxygen in an empty cylinder.

It could not make humans free of greed, fear, and selfishness.

But it removed one sentence behind which individuals, companies, and governments had hidden for centuries.

We didn't know.

After the first month, the elar ceased to be used only for medical equipment.

First it paid for hospitals' energy.

Then food for sealed regions.

Then transport for workers.

Then biological supplies.

The monetary councils protested.

Daren Voltr addressed the joint assembly.

He was paler than a few weeks earlier. His family, too, had its dead.

“We're turning an emergency settlement instrument into a currency,” he said. “Without a central bank. Without a mandate. Without an agreement on regional stability. And we're doing it in the middle of fear, when people will approve almost anything with the word *rescue* attached.”

Nerai sat opposite him.

“That's why every rule is visible.”

Voltr shook his head.

“Visibility is not legitimacy.”

“No,” she replied. “But if we can't see who changes the rules, we can't even assess legitimacy.”

“A single unit of value could destroy weaker regions.”

Nerai opened three records.

Three shipments.

Three payments stopped by currency conversions.

“Fragmented value is destroying them today.”

“That's rhetoric.”

She moved the records onto the shared screen.

“These are accounts.”

Voltr studied them for a long time.

His objections did not disappear.

Nor should they have.

Nerai knew that a world where every objection vanished before the supposedly correct argument would be just as dangerous as the world she wanted to change.

“Who will govern the elar after the pandemic?” Voltr asked.

Nerai was silent for a moment.

“Perhaps no one.”

“There's no such thing as no one.”

The sentence stopped her.

It was true.

Behind every system remained a person.

Or a group of people.

Or a rule someone had once written.

“Then we have to build it,” she said, “so no one person can own it.”

Saira opened the proposal.

Nodes distributed among states.

A public calculation of value.

A complete history of changes.

No secret adjustment of exchange rates.

Traceable access.

Divided powers.

Public scrutiny of monetary council decisions.

An emergency model.

Imperfect.

Taking shape among the dead.

Yet in its foundations something was appearing that Elarion had never known.

Value that did not need to move in darkness.

And power beginning to grow accustomed to the uncomfortable feeling of being seen.

Jesair, meanwhile, continued his addresses.

Mareia noticed his exhaustion before he admitted it himself.

After one broadcast he remained standing in front of the dark screen.

Motionless.

“Jesair?”

He turned toward her as though returning from a great distance.

“What is it?”

“That's what I'm asking.”

“I'm just tired.”

“You need to rest.”

“I am resting.”

“When?”

He smiled.

“Between catastrophes.”

Mareia did not smile.

Outside, rain was falling.

It ran down the high windows of the Davion house, the valley's lights breaking into long, thin streams within the drops.

“Come to Nitra with me.”

Jesair looked outside.

“And the people here?”

“They'll still have a connection.”

“Elan had a connection.”

Mareia fell silent.

Jesair immediately lowered his eyes.

“I'm sorry.”

“You don't have to be.”

“I shouldn't have said that.”

“But you believe it.”

He nodded.

“There's a difference between a person and an image of them.”

“And what if being present kills you?”

This time he took a long while to answer.

“Then perhaps I chose badly.”

Mareia stared at him.

“You won't be there to tell anyone that.”

She stepped closer.

“I'm not asking you to stop helping. I'm only asking you not to believe that loving people obliges you to die for them.”

Jesair was silent.

“Then what do you want from me?”

“To stay.”

“Where?”

Mareia looked into his eyes.

“With me.”

For a moment the world grew small.

Without political councils.

Without ancestral houses.

Without the pandemic.

Without a planet waiting for another sentence from a man it was slowly claiming as its symbol.

There was only a woman who had once left a man capable of turning love into possession.

And now she did not want to lose another because he had turned love into a duty owed to everyone.

Jesair laid a hand on her wrist.

“I'm here.”

Mareia held it with three fingers.

For a moment both were still.

The gesture had come naturally.

And yet too naturally.

A strange pain passed through Jesair.

No image.

No word.

Only the feeling of something that ought to be in his memory and was not.

Three fingers.

A different light.

Dust.

A woman's hand.

And grief for someone he had never lost in this life.

Mareia let go.

“What happened?”

“I don't know.”

This time it was the truth.

He had remembered something he had not yet experienced.

That evening a new forecast appeared in the crisis center.

At first, Saira refused to release it.

The data were incomplete.

Some states still reported cases with delays. Almost no reliable figures were arriving from regions where healthcare had collapsed.

They reran the model.

Then again.

Changed the inputs.

The assumed mortality rate.

Hospital capacity.

The speed of treatment development.

Every path approached the same number.

Nerai stared at it.

33.1%.

“Who else has seen this?”

“The analytical team.”

“The political leadership?”

Saira hesitated.

“They received a wider range.”

“Why?”

“Because the uncertainty is enormous.”

“Could the result be lower?”

“Yes.”

“Higher?”

Saira did not answer.

The projection glowed on the screen.

Approximately three billion total deaths.

Almost the entire Aurelian branch.

Hundreds of millions from the other branches.

“We have to release this,” Nerai said.

“If we say *a third*, we'll cause panic.”

“If we don't, states will prepare for a tenth.”

“It's a forecast.”

“Then say it's a forecast.”

For the first time, the word appeared in an internal document.

The Third.

The document leaked that very night.

No one ever established who had leaked it.

By morning the entire planet knew the word.

Nerai first saw the leak in a late-night channel headline: *A THIRD OF THE POPULATION COULD DIE.* The presenter displayed the range of uncertainty, not only the highest curve. “This is a projection of total deaths,” she repeated. “It does not mean those people have already died.”

In the next segment, a state governor called for calm. A doctor from Auriola replied that calm also required supplies and open data. Messages from people looking for relatives scrolled below the image.

Nerai remained by the screen until the presenter moved to the next story. This was how an internal calculation became a sentence families would have to say over dinner.

It was not spoken as the name of a disease.

It was the name of a future.

If the Third comes.

Before the Third.

After the Third.

As though a boundary already existed, dividing people in advance between those who would go on and those who would become the past tense.

In some cities riots broke out.

People forced their way into warehouses.

Emptied accounts.

Fled cities without knowing where to go.

Elsewhere lines of volunteers formed.

Old people gave up oxygen devices for the young.

Hotel owners opened their rooms to healthcare workers.

Families who had not spoken for years called one another.

Some closed their doors.

Others opened theirs for the first time.

Catastrophe does not reveal one true human face.

It reveals many faces that may have been sleeping peacefully within the same person.

After the second month, the death toll passed one billion.

After the third, two.

Aurelian cities were emptying.

Ancestral houses that had survived wars, fires, and the fall of states were left without heirs.

In one family, every man died.

The archive had followed their line for more than a thousand years.

An archivist entered the details of the last one.

The system automatically filled in the status:

Ancestral line extinct.

The woman stared at those two words.

For weeks she had been processing reports of millions of deaths.

She had not cried.

She cried over a single field.

Jesair addressed the planet for the last time on the day his fever began.

Mareia stood outside the camera's view.

He had looked pale to her even before the broadcast.

Jesair faced the camera.

“When the number of the dead grows larger, we begin making them smaller inside ourselves. It's a defense. Otherwise we couldn't bear it.”

He paused.

“But a person is not smaller because they have become one among a billion.”

For a moment he leaned against the table.

Mareia stepped forward.

Jesair signaled with his eyes that he was all right.

“Every person who died was the center of some small world. They had a name. A place they returned to. A particular way of laughing. Someone knew the sound of

their footsteps. Someone knew which part of a meal they always left on the plate. Someone waited for their voice.”

Millions watching fell silent.

“We built a civilization capable of constructing a second world. We moved rivers. We made forests grow under a foreign sky. We taught machines to recognize illness before doctors could.”

He drew breath.

It hurt.

“And we could not see the intention moving through our own accounts.”

At those words, Nerai raised her head.

“One day we will ask who did this. We must ask.”

Jesair paused.

“But if our answer is only one person's name, we will have understood nothing. A person can bring hatred. A plan. Evil.”

He looked directly into the camera.

“But civilization gives that person a path. Or it does not.”

Nerai remembered the sentence.

A year later she would speak it before the Convention.

At that moment she did not yet know she was hearing some of her brother's last public words.

When the broadcast ended, Mareia hurried to him.

“You're burning up.”

“It's warm in here.”

“No, it isn't.”

She laid a palm on his forehead.

Jesair closed his eyes.

“How long?”

“Since morning.”

Mareia stared at him in disbelief.

“And you said nothing?”

“I thought it was exhaustion.”

She opened the medical channel.

Jesair caught her hand.

“Wait.”

“For what?”

“Just a moment.”

“Jesair, we don't have a moment anymore.”

For the first time, fear sounded in her voice.

Not fear for Elarion.

A woman's fear for one person.

Jesair opened his eyes.

The golden ring was brighter.

Mareia saw it.

And from his expression she understood that he had seen it too.

“Nerai,” she said into the channel. “We need isolation in the Davion house.”

There was silence at the other end.

“Jesair?”

Mareia did not answer.

She did not need to.

“I'm coming.”

“No,” Jesair said.

Nerai heard him.

“Don't you dare tell me no.”

“You may be safe.”

“My mother was Aurelian.”

“That's exactly why we don't know.”

“I'm coming.”

“Nerai.”

His voice had weakened.

“Stay where you can still do something.”

“You're my brother.”

Jesair smiled for an instant.

“That's why.”

Nerai ended the connection.

She was already running.

Mareia helped Jesair into the isolation wing of the house.
“You stay outside,” he said.
“No.”
“Mareia.”
One look was enough.
Jesair understood there was no point continuing.
“You won't leave alone,” she said.
Jesair shivered.
This time not from the fever.
That sentence.
He knew it.
As though it had reached him across a great distance.
From somewhere he had never visited.
Across a life he had never lived.
The isolation room's door closed.
Glass remained between them.
Mareia placed three fingers against the transparent wall.
Jesair lifted his palm.
Before he could touch it from the other side, Mareia felt cold.
Then weak.
She leaned against the wall.
“Mareia?”
She shook her head.
She wanted to say it was nothing.
Instead, her knees gave way.
The healthcare system recorded an elevated temperature in the second person.
Minutes later, she was lying in the neighboring isolation room.
The door between them could not be opened.
Two beds.
Two golden rings.
One transparent wall.
Nerai reached the closure around Auriola thirty-seven minutes later.

The system denied her entry.
She showed her credentials.
Called names that normally opened every door at the Layer.
Nothing worked.
Before her stood the quarantine barrier.
Beyond it, her brother was dying.
Above the road glowed the death toll.
2,999,999,997.
The number changed.
2,999,999,998.
Nerai stared at the screen without breathing.
2,999,999,999.
Then:
3,000,000,000.
Across the planet, the shared count updated at that very second.
A third of Elarion was dead.
Nerai received a call from the Davion house.
On the screen she saw Jesair.
Mareia.
And the glass between them.
The catastrophe had its name.
The Third had come.
It was not finished yet.

31. BEHIND THE GLASS

Jesair died on the fourth day.

The medical system recorded the precise moment.

Time.

Pulse.

Blood oxygenation.

Temperature.

The heart's final electrical activity.

It recorded everything that could be measured.

Everything except what mattered most.

The microphones in the isolation rooms did not listen continuously. It was an old rule, intended to protect the dignity of the sick. A doctor could open a connection. The system could alert staff to changes in vital signs. But no one had the right to turn a person's final hours into a public recording.

That was why no one knew what Jesair said to Mareia.

Later Nerai watched the footage many times.

Without sound.

Jesair could no longer stand.

Or sit.

He lay on the floor beside the glass.

Mareia lay on the other side.

Between their faces were a few centimetres and a material that could stop a virus, a touch, and one final embrace.

Jesair moved his hand.

He had no strength for more.

He rested his palm on the floor.

Mareia raised three fingers.

Jesair's lips moved.

One short sentence.

Perhaps two words.

No one heard them.

Mareia did.

And she smiled.

Later people explained that smile in many ways.

As acceptance of death.

As reconciliation.

As a final expression of love.

But Nerai always saw something stranger in it.

Mareia did not smile like a woman saying goodbye.

For a single instant, she looked like a woman recognising someone after an immeasurably long time.

As though another face had appeared behind Jesair's.

As though, for a moment, beyond the glass there was no isolation room, but a distant garden.

Another sky.

Another life.

A memory that had never quite become a memory.

Jesair closed his eyes.

His palm remained beside the glass.

Mareia watched it.

For seven hours.

Then her breaths grew shorter.

A breath.

Silence.

A breath.

A longer silence.

And at last, only silence.

Seven hours after Jesair, her heart stopped too.

Nerai was sitting in a transport module outside the sealed-off region of Auriola.

Kilometres away from them.

Saira sat beside her.

She did not touch her.

She did not say she was sorry.

Some sentences are so small they become an insult.

A medical official appeared on the connection.

“We need a decision about the remains.”

Nerai looked at him.

The man lowered his eyes.

“I'm sorry. I know that—”

“You don't.”

Silence.

“What are the options?”

“Biological protocol recommends immediate destruction without transport. The lineage councils are requesting that biological samples be preserved. The public is asking for a ceremony.”

“The public?”

“The news leaked.”

Nerai opened the network.

Jesair Davion is dead.

A little later another report appeared:

Mareia Lioren is dead.

Nerai switched on the sound of a news channel. The presenter was already asking the lineage councils to comment on Jesair's death; in Mareia's case, the newsroom had yet to receive confirmation from the family. A healthcare worker on the connection refused to discuss their medical records.

“The family hasn't even had time to decide what it wants to say,” she added. Nerai knew how her brother would have answered a question about privacy. She let the channel speak without her.

Then came the photographs.

Jesair at the forum in Nitra.

Jesair among the sick.

Jesair delivering his final address.

Mareia at the archives.

Mareia in a garden.

Mareia holding Jesair's wrist with three fingers.

Their bodies had not yet grown cold, and the world was already turning them into a story.

They called them martyrs.

The last Aurelians of the old world.

Proof.

A sign.

Others used their deaths against everything Jesair had ever said.

If he had a gift, why hadn't he saved himself?

If he was exceptional, why hadn't he saved Mareia?

Why hadn't he saved three billion people?

Nerai switched off the screen.

“Cremate them there.”

The official nodded.

“The samples?”

“Only what you need for research.”

“The lineage councils are asking—”

“No relics.”

Her voice was quiet.

“No one will own their bodies.”

After a moment the official nodded.

“And the ceremony?”

Through the transport's windscreen, Nerai looked towards the Davion house, though she could not see it from there.

“Later.”

But later was a long time coming.

People were still dying.

Hospitals were still illuminated through the night.

Transport modules still carried bodies to places where nobody waited for them anymore.

The pandemic took more than three billion one hundred million lives.

Only then did the curve begin to bend.

There was no single miracle cure.

There were dozens of small victories.

More effective suppression of the body's defensive response.

Earlier identification of the critical hours.

New combinations of compounds.

Predictive models.

Ways to protect the most vulnerable.

Each saved some people.

Together, they brought the dying to a halt.

When the number of new cases first fell by half, no one celebrated.

When it fell to a tenth, no bottles were opened in the squares.

When the last major hospital announced that it had empty beds again, its director locked herself in her office after making the announcement and cried for an hour.

Elarion survived.

That was what the news reports said.

But a planet has no heart whose pulse can be measured.

It was people who had to survive.

And roughly one in three was missing.

32. THOSE WHO COME

There are deaths in which a life comes to an end.

And then there are deaths in which only a name ends.

Jesair died when Elarion still had no idea how much of him would remain.

His body was one of billions the Third took without asking.

His voice was no longer heard in rooms where people argued about truth, value, and power.

His hands would never embrace anyone again.

His eyes would never open to another morning.

To Elarion, he was dead.

And that was true.

Just not the whole truth.

The universe is older than names.

Older than borders.

Older than nations.

Older than planets that, in their youth, believe their histories to be the centre of everything that exists.

There were many worlds.

Some circled blue stars.

Others lived beneath the red light of ageing suns.

On some, life hid beneath kilometres of ocean, and whole civilisations never saw the stars.

Elsewhere, cities grew so tall that their upper storeys knew a different sky from the streets beneath them.

Some civilisations never invented money.

Others sacrificed almost everything to it.

But each eventually reached a limit that no greater machine could overcome.

Nor a faster ship.

Nor a new source of energy.

Nor another library of knowledge.

Because not every problem arises from a lack of intelligence.

Some arise from what intelligence has not yet understood about itself.

And then, sometimes, someone was born.

Almost never a king.

It might have been a craftsman's child.

A teacher's daughter.

The son of a woman whose name history did not preserve.

Sometimes such a person came among the poor.

Sometimes among the learned.

One spoke in public squares.

Another remained almost silent for years and left behind only a few sentences.

Sometimes their words changed the world in their lifetime.

Sometimes they needed centuries.

Names changed.

Faces changed.

Languages changed.

So did the stars above them.

The task remained much the same.

To move the world one step forward.

Not all the way to its destination.

Just farther along.

No single person could save an entire planet.

If one person could save a world without the choices of everyone else, it would not be a world of free beings.

They could only show a direction.

Speak an idea that could never be entirely forgotten.

Open a door.

And leave others to decide whether to pass through it.

On one world, someone needed to say for the first time that another person's weakness gave the stronger no right to own them.

On another, that knowledge had no master.

Elsewhere, whole nations killed one another over differing images of gods, and someone brought them the thought that a god who requires human hatred might be nothing more than human hatred dressed in sacred words.

In some places people needed to learn forgiveness.

Elsewhere, doubt.

And on certain worlds a moment came when someone had to say that power concealed from scrutiny would, sooner or later, begin to serve itself.

Elarion was such a planet.

Jesair did not arrive with instructions for a perfect world.

He spoke a few sentences at the very moment when Elarion was beginning to be able to hear them.

That value must not walk in shadow.

That power must endure the gaze of those over whom it stands.

That ownership is also a trace of responsibility.

That a person's wealth cannot be wholly separated from the world that made it possible.

They were not commandments.

They were seeds.

And seeds do not need the person who planted them to sit beneath the tree.

But Jesair had not wanted to die.

The Third was not a price the universe demanded for his message.

Nor was Mareia's death part of some perfect equation.

He wanted to live.

He wanted to grow old with her.

Perhaps one day to wake in the Davion house and, for the first time, find no one outside his door needing an answer.

Perhaps to quarrel over something unimportant.

Perhaps to forget the quarrel a few hours later.

Perhaps to sit beside the garden until their hands grew old.

All of that was taken from him.

The idea did not require his death.

But when he died, it remained in other people's hands.

And with it, a question.

Had they loved the man?

Or had they also understood what he had tried to say?

If everything depended on Jesair's presence, everything could have died beside the glass with him.

But if something in his words had passed into other people, his breath was no longer a condition of their life.

Thirty light-years away, a small blue planet revolved around its star.

Its story was younger.

Its people did not yet know Elarion.

They knew nothing of the Bridge.

Of Auriola.

Of Nerai.

Of the man who laid his palm upon the floor beside transparent glass.

One day another person would be born there.

They would call him Jesus.

He would walk dusty roads between villages scarcely visible at all from the perspective of the universe.

He would eat with fishermen.

Touch the sick.

Speak to people from whom others turned away.

He would meet the powerful and those who possessed almost nothing.

Without an army.

Without an office.

Without the seal of a state.

With hands capable of breaking bread.

And yet something would remain after him that would outlive empires.

That the person before you has worth even when they have nothing to offer you.

That mercy can stand above the blind fulfilment of law.

That greatness can mean service.

That an enemy need not remain an enemy for ever.

For centuries afterward people would argue over who he was.

They would build him temples.

Paint his face.

Each nation would lend him something of its own.

Some would see God in him.

Others a prophet.

Still others a teacher.

And some would do, in his name, the exact opposite of what he taught.

For great ideas do not travel through history in straight lines.

One generation gives them voice.

The next bends them to suit its needs.

Another discovers them anew.

And after centuries, what once sounded like one person's dangerous dream may become self-evident to millions.

That is how worlds move.

Step by step.

Between certain steps appear those whom people will later call prophets.

Saviours.

Sages.

Reformers.

Heretics.

Fools.

The universe needed no common name for them.

They were like messengers carrying no letter.

They themselves were the letter.

But to belong to the world into which they came, they had to forget for a time.

If they knew everything, their lives would not be human lives.

They would be visits.

And so they felt pain.

Hunger.

Fear.

Loneliness.

Longing.

Anger.

Love.

Doubt.

They could fail.

They could say something they would later regret.

They could long to stay alive.

For no one can speak to the beings of a particular world from within their experience without becoming one of them, at least for a while.

And when their lives ended, their bodies remained with the planet.

Their names with history.

Their words with people.

What lay deeper continued on.

The time between such lives was not measured by a calendar.

No body waited for another morning.

No heart counted its beats.

Thousands of years might pass on one planet before the moment ripened on another into which it was possible to enter.

Somewhere far away, meanwhile, a civilisation was being born.

It discovered fire.

Then writing.

It divided the land.

Created laws.

Built temples.

Made weapons.

Invented money.

And after long enough, it began to believe that the way it had arranged its world was the only way a world could be arranged.

Until it approached its own limit.

Then the journey could begin again.

Another star.

Another planet.

Another body.

Another name.

Even the task need not be the same.

A world drowning in revenge needed to hear of forgiveness.

A world that mistook obedience for goodness needed doubt.

A civilisation crushed by arbitrary power needed protection for the individual.

And a world whose individuals had forgotten that they survived only because of others might one day need to be reminded of its duty to the whole.

The words changed.

The direction had something in common.

From fear towards understanding.

From violence towards cooperation.

From hidden power towards responsibility.

From the belief that things exist separately towards the knowledge that nothing living comes into being by itself.

Jesair was one of them.

Perhaps he had once carried another name.

Perhaps he had stood beneath the sky of a planet that had long since ceased to exist, speaking to beings whose features neither an Elarian nor a human from Earth would have recognised as faces.

Perhaps he spoke an altogether different sentence there.

Another part of the same journey.

And perhaps his journey on the small blue planet was yet to begin.

In another body.

Under a name that was already returning to him in flashes, though he did not understand it.

A soul needs no signature.

It is history that needs signatures.

And perhaps some souls do not pass between worlds alone.

Some forms of closeness survive even the loss of a name.

At first they return only as a strange trust in a stranger.

As grief without a memory.

As a movement of the hand that comes before thought.

Three fingers on a wrist.

A sentence spoken before a person understands why they have said it.

Do not go alone.

Mareia's final smile remained a question for Nerai.

The recording could not reveal what Jesair had said.

Nor could it show what Mareia had seen in her last moment.

All that remained was the image of a woman smiling at a dying man as though she had remembered him after an immeasurably long time.

When Jesair's heart stopped beating, the stars did not change their courses.

The sky did not open.

No sign appeared on Elarion.

The planet went on orbiting.

Cities counted their dead.

In houses, vessels stood beside windows.

Clothes hung on hooks.

Books lay half-read.

Beds stood empty after mornings from which no one had risen.

And yet something moved.

Inside people.

Jesair's words began to spread without him.

Some distorted them.

Some simplified them.

Some took only what suited them.

Others discovered implications that Jesair himself had not lived long enough to consider.

Such is the fate of every idea that outlives its author.

It ceases to belong to him.

Documents remained in his study.

Among them, a proposal for the share of the living.

Notes in the margins.

Unanswered questions.

Blank spaces.

The world had to learn to continue a conversation with a man whose chair remained empty.

And somewhere very far away, around a star no Elarian had ever seen, another planet revolved.

Its oceans were the colour of dark metal.

Three moons crossed their skies at night.

The first cities were just rising on its continents.

Their inhabitants discovered writing.

Began to trade.

Began to divide the land.

Gradually they divided themselves into those who owned and those who obeyed.

They had thousands of years ahead of them.

Their moment had not yet ripened.

The universe was in no hurry.

But one day a child would be born among them.

It would receive a name never spoken on Elarion.

Nor on Earth.

It would laugh.

It would cry.

It would make mistakes.

Perhaps it would fall in love.

Perhaps it would fear death.

And one day it would speak a sentence after which its world could never remain quite as it had been.

No one there would know Jesair.

No one would know Jesus.

And they would not need to.

Great souls do not pass through the universe to save their names.

Names belong to worlds.

They carry with them only a direction.

And when their task in one place is done, they do not go upwards.

Nor away.

Only onwards.

PART IV: ELARION AFTER THE THIRD

33. THE MISSING HANDS

When the curve finally stopped, Elarion looked almost the same from orbit as it had before.

The seas were in their places.

The continents had not moved.

Cities shone at night.

Transport corridors still formed fine veins of light above the planet.

Thaeron continued along its orbit.

Someone watching from a great distance might not even have recognised that a catastrophe had occurred.

They would have had to come closer.

To one table.

One bed.

One workplace.

Because roughly every third person was missing.

At first they were missing from their homes.

An empty half of a bed.

An unfinished drink.

A garment left where no one would ever collect it.

A message still marked as undelivered.

Children's toys that their parents could not, for days, bring themselves to tell them would never again be put away by the people who once tucked them into bed.

Then the dead began to be missing from the world as well.

At a hospital in Northern Améniа, two of the three administrators of the oxygen networks died.

The network itself worked.

It could produce oxygen.

Purify it.

Distribute it.

Predict consumption.

But a major change in capacity required, by law, the approval of two licensed specialists.

One was dead.

Another lay unconscious.

The third had worked forty hours without sleep.

He made a mistake.

In Sarur, warehouses held enough food for several months.

Autonomous vehicles stood in rows.

They knew the roads.

Could assess closures.

Could find an alternative route.

But they were not allowed to change the destination of a delivery without human approval.

The person authorised to approve the change was dead.

And so the machines ready to feed a city waited for the signature of a man who no longer had a hand.

In one of Thaeron's domes, a woman died who was the only person with a complete understanding of an old modification to the water recycling system.

Documentation existed.

It was incomplete.

The maintenance intelligence knew that three valves behaved differently from the design.

It did not know why.

The woman knew.

For years she had told herself that one day she would write it down.

Until then, she had always explained it to a colleague.

The colleague died a week before her.

The Third did not take only bodies from Elarion.

It took an enormous store of memory that had never been entered into machines.

The memory of hands.

The memory of habit.

The memory of the person who came to a system each morning and, without thinking, did three small things, because twenty years of experience had taught them that something would go wrong by evening if those things were left undone.

At first the living tried to replace the dead.

Doctors helped in warehouses.

Teachers delivered food.

Officials cleaned medical modules.

Researchers assisted funeral services.

Engineers slept beside energy hubs.

Entire cities operated in what would once have been called a state of emergency.

After the Third, it was no longer clear what the word *emergency* meant.

One could not ask fewer than six billion traumatised people to do the work of nine billion while burying those they loved.

The crisis council therefore did what people had debated for decades before the pandemic.

It began to remove compulsory human approvals.

First in food supply.

Then in energy.

Transport.

Essential manufacturing.

Urban maintenance.

Artificial intelligences were given authority to alter production plans, move materials, and allocate part of the available capacity without waiting for a person to sign off on every decision.

The document that made this possible had a title almost half a line long.

People called it simply:

Permission to Continue.

Because that was exactly what the machines received.

Permission to continue where a person was missing.

Saira led the team responsible for connecting the different systems.

Before her lay a map of planetary production.

Before the Third, such a map could not have existed.

States guarded their energy reserves.

Businesses their production capacity.

Distributors their inventories.

Each considered a portion of reality a strategic secret of its own.

After the Third, they began opening the data.

Not out of enlightenment.

Because without it, the system could not tell who needed help.

“Surplus nutritional mixtures in western Vasýria,” an analyst said.

“Where are they needed?”

“The northeast. Three hospital districts.”

“Transport?”

“We have the capacity.”

“Then send them.”

The analyst remained standing.

“There's a problem.”

Saira looked up.

“What problem?”

“The route crosses three states.”

“And?”

“Four currencies.”

Saira leaned back.

“Three states. Four currencies.”

“The carrier invoices through Therinith.”

“Why?”

“Tax rules.”

Saira briefly closed her eyes.

“Of course.”

Four counterparties kept their accounts in four currencies. The nodes could calculate the conversions in a fraction of a second; settlement was blocked by differing collateral rules and the hospital's authorisation.

The food existed.

The vehicles existed.

The roads existed.

People were hungry.

Estimated release time for the shipment: thirty hours.

“The Bridge,” Saira said.

The analyst looked at her.

“The hospital isn't authorised to accept elars for its ordinary operations.”

“It has an emergency exemption.”

“For medical supplies.”

Saira looked at the record.

“What would you call food for a person who will die without it?”

The analyst said nothing.

“Send it through the Bridge.”

“Who will approve the exemption?”

Saira looked at the empty chair by the table.

Nine days earlier, the deputy director had sat there.

“I will.”

Five minutes later, the payment had gone through.

The producer saw the order.

The carrier saw the price.

The insurer saw the risk.

The hospital saw the estimated delivery time.

The public saw how much had been paid and to whom.

They did not see patients' names.

The autonomous vehicles departed before the old system could have completed its first currency conversion.

Cases like this multiplied.

The Bridge gradually changed from an emergency payment instrument into the nervous system of an automated economy.

Machines knew how to manufacture things.

But needed to know what should be made.

They knew how to move supplies.

But needed to know where shortages were real.

They knew how to optimise a route.

But needed to know whether the order existed and who was responsible for it.

The flow of value became one of the ways in which machines read the human world.

And once that flow was visible, things began to emerge that until then had remained separate.

One wholesaler stopped releasing medicines during a shortage.

He claimed he was waiting for transport.

The Bridge showed the warehouses were ready.

He claimed that hospitals had not offered a sufficient price.

The record showed otherwise.

Meanwhile, companies linked to his ownership group were buying contracts whose value increased the longer the crisis continued.

Another account financed campaigns against the compulsory release of stocks.

Each piece of information proved little by itself.

Placed together, they told another story.

The stocks were released.

The decision had an author.

And that author knew the decision would leave a record.

Within a few months, automated factories were producing almost as much as before the Third.

Then more.

Machines did not fall ill.

Energy fields did not develop fevers.

Robotic production lines did not lose their parents.

A large share of productive capacity survived the pandemic untouched.

What was missing above all was the decision-making around it.

Signatures.

Permissions.

Repeated authorisations of the same data in systems that were legally forbidden to share it.

Checks whose only purpose was to confirm that a previous check had been carried out by a human.

The Third removed people so brutally that it revealed which parts of the economy truly needed them.

When the economic councils published the first figures, society was shaken.

There were more than a third fewer workers.

Production had fallen by only a few per cent.

In some sectors it had already exceeded its former level.

The numbers concealed an uncomfortable question.

If society could produce almost the same quantity of goods with substantially less human labour, what exactly had been the purpose of all the jobs it had previously considered indispensable?

The answer was uncomfortable.

Some work had not existed because something necessary needed to be made.

It existed to give a person the right to receive money.

The old system had tied access to life to having a place in the production process.

Now the production process could function without some of those people.

But people could not function without an income.

Companies did not pay wages to the dead.

Families lost their providers.

Millions more left their jobs to care for children, the sick, and the elderly.

Others were replaced by systems to which the pandemic had opened the door.

Production rose.

Household balances dwindled.

Saira brought Nerai a planetary projection.

“If we do nothing, more than half of households will depend on emergency assistance within three months.”

They were sitting in Jesair's former study.

The quarantine of the Davion house had been lifted a week earlier.

Machines had cleaned it.

They had left the objects where they were.

A vessel of water beside Jesair's place.

Mareia's book by the window.

Two chairs facing the garden.

Nerai did not touch them.

“How many people can we find work for?” she asked.

“Everyone.”

Nerai looked at Saira.

“Useful work.”

Saira lowered her gaze to the projection.

“I don't know.”

“An estimate.”

“Half of the adults. Perhaps fewer.”

“If we stop automation?”

“More.”

“And in the next crisis, we'll wait again for human signatures?”

Saira was silent.

“Then we won't stop it.”

She opened another document.

A proposal for a temporary planetary basic share.

Nerai did not recognise the title.

She recognised the idea.

She remembered Nitra.

A conversation from before the Third.

Jesair had said then that an allowance was something power bestowed upon a person from above.

A share was different.

A share meant that part of the common outcome belonged to a person simply because they were a member of the civilisation that created it.

At the time, it had sounded like a discussion about a distant future.

The future arrived without knocking.

“Who prepared this?”

“The Bridge's economic team. Several states. Regional councils.”

Nerai opened the document.

“How do they intend to pay it?”

Saira smiled without joy.

“We have a problem.”

“What problem?”

“Thirty currencies.”

Nerai closed her eyes.

She nearly laughed.

Nearly.

“Which is why they propose the elar.”

On the document's first page was a sentence:

A human being must not lose the right to live simply because society no longer needs their labour.

Nerai read it.

Then read it again.

She looked at the empty chair by the window.

“Jesair would say that isn't enough.”

“Why?”

“Because we don't know what to calculate that share from.”

“The Bridge can see an ever greater portion of production.”

“An ever greater portion isn't all of it.”

“No.”

Nerai looked out of the window.

The garden of the Davion house was growing wild.

Grass had begun to cross the edges of the paths.

Trees were flowering.

One branch hung too low, and nobody had cut it back.

Nature did not know that a third of the world had died.

It continued.

Perhaps that was why Nerai could not bring herself to hate it.

She closed the document.

“Then we'll have to see more.”

Saira looked up.

“More production?”

“More value.”

Nerai gazed into the garden a while longer.

“If we want to distribute a fair share of it, we must know where it is created, where it goes, and who owns it.”

Saira nodded.

Nerai handed her the document.

“Convene the economic council.”

“When?”

“Now.”

“Nerai, you haven't slept.”

Nerai gave a faint smile.

“I slept before the Third.”

Saira paused in the doorway.

“Your brother wouldn't want you to destroy yourself.”

Nerai looked at her.

“My brother didn't want three billion dead either.”

Saira left.

The door closed.

Nerai remained alone.

She sat for a long time.

Then she rose and approached Jesair's chair.

For the first time since returning to the house, she touched it.

She laid her palm on the armrest.

“The machines didn't replace them,” she said to the empty room.

Her voice trembled.

“They only showed us how many things they had long been able to do without us.”

And at last she cried.

Not for a third of the world.

No one can mourn three billion people all at once.

She cried for one brother.

For one woman.

For three fingers on a wrist.

For two hands separated, in the final hours of their lives, by a few centimetres of transparent glass.

Outside, the Elarian Sun rose above Auriola.

It lit the rooftops.

The garden.

The empty chair.

And a world that went on.

For after a catastrophe, the world always goes on.

The only question is what it carries with it.

34. THE SHARE OF THE LIVING

The first basic share was not adopted as a new social order.

It was adopted for ninety days.

That was how almost every great change on Elarion began.

Temporarily.

Exceptionally.

Only until things returned to normal.

But normal no longer existed.

The proposal was based on regional living costs. For years, every state, city, and inhabited district had calculated the cost of basic housing, food, energy, transport, and healthcare.

Before the Third, these figures were used for social benefits, wage negotiations, and decisions about minimum incomes.

Now they became the basis of the share.

A person with no other income received an amount corresponding to the basic cost of living in their region.

For a person with earnings, the share did not disappear with the first coin earned. It diminished gradually and ceased only when income exceeded twice the local cost of living.

The scheme was not perfect.

Regions disputed the calculations.

Cities argued that housing cost more than national statistics indicated.

Rural districts objected that their transport and energy costs were higher.

Families asked for the number of children to be taken into account.

People with disabilities pointed out that average costs were not their costs.

But the system had one quality its predecessors lacked.

Everyone could see how their share had been calculated.

They could see the regional index, the rules, the income figures used, the source of the data, and the precise reason for the final amount.

If a calculation changed, the change had an author.

If the system used incorrect data, the person could see where it had come from.

If an official opened individual records, their owner received an access log.

The first planetary payment was to pass through the Bridge.

That was when it became clear that thirty currencies were more than symbols of sovereignty.

They were thirty different ways of saying how much a person needed in order to live.

One state set the share in its own currency, then weakened that currency two days later to reduce the budget's real costs.

Another froze its exchange rate.

A third forbade citizens from holding elars outside licensed banks.

A fourth announced that it would pay assistance only to people who could prove two years' residence in its territory.

But millions had left their homes after the Third.

They moved to be with relatives.

To find vacant housing.

Work.

Care.

A family might live in one state, receive a pension from another, own a flat in a third, and buy food imported from a fourth.

The old currencies had been made for worlds that pretended their borders were real.

The Third showed that air, disease, food, and death recognised none of them.

Daren Voltr sat across from Nerai at a meeting of the Monetary Council.

Years had passed since the Nitra forum.

There, he had defended monetary sovereignty against Jesair. He had said that a currency was a state's steering wheel, and that weaker regions needed their own exchange rate to survive.

Now his face was tired.

During the Third, his wife and one of his sons had died. He had never spoken of it publicly. Nerai knew only because she had seen their names among the victims.

“A common elar cannot be paid out without a common monetary authority,” Voltr said.

“The Bridge already pays it out,” Saira answered.

“The Bridge issues a reserve-backed settlement unit. Not a state's currency.”

“For someone paying the rent with it, that distinction is academic.”

Voltr looked at her.

“Statements like that are precisely what create monetary disasters.”

Nerai opened a map of the first trial payment.

“We already have a disaster.”

Delays appeared on the map.

The greatest were not in poor regions.

They were at the boundaries between monetary systems.

“In one district, people received their share four days late,” Nerai said. “We knew the money and the recipients. But we were waiting for conversions between three currencies and confirmation from two central banks.”

Voltr examined the figures.

“And who bears the exchange-rate risk if you pay everything in elars?”

“Not the recipients.”

“The Bridge, then.”

“The reserves are public.”

“Reserves are not infinite.”

“Neither is people's patience.”

Voltr leaned back.

“I understand the urgency. But a common currency creates common power. You still refuse to name that part of the problem.”

“We do name it,” Nerai said. “That is why we demand that it be visible.”

“Visible power remains power.”

“Yes.”

Voltr raised an eyebrow.

He had expected a defence.

Nerai continued.

“Transparency does not abolish power. It lets us see who uses it. That is less than perfection. But it is more than darkness.”

Voltr looked at the elar symbol.

“And states that reject it?”

“They can pay the share in their own currency.”

“Then it won't be planetary.”

“The rules will be planetary. The means of payment will remain local for the time being.”

“For the time being.”

He pronounced the words so carefully it was as though he could already hear the history they would create.

Despite the disputes, the first payment went ahead.

In Sarur lived a woman named Elina Vass, with four children.

Before the Third she had worked as a supply coordinator for a network of smaller hospitals. Her husband repaired autonomous transport modules.

Both survived the disease.

But her husband's lungs were damaged, and he needed long-term care. Elina left her job to look after him.

Meanwhile, an automated system had taken over her position.

Not out of malice.

The hospitals could not wait for her to return.

When she applied for the old form of social assistance, the state demanded proof that she was unemployed, actively seeking work, and not prolonging her dependency by refusing an offered position.

The system offered her work in another city.

She could not accept it without leaving her husband.

So it denied her assistance.

To receive the basic share, she did not have to prove her usefulness.

The system established her income.

Regional costs.

The number of dependent children.

The household's healthcare needs.

An amount in elars arrived in her account.

Elina opened the calculation.

She could see every piece of data it used.

The entry for her husband's medical needs contained a link to a protected record. No one who did not need it could see his diagnosis. The system confirmed only that his care involved additional costs.

Elina paid the rent.

The landlord accepted local currency. The Bridge made the conversion automatically.

She paid for energy.

Ordered groceries.

Some of the share remained.

For the first time since the Third began, she did not have to decide which child would eat less.

That evening she wrote one sentence in a public discussion:

I don't want an allowance for having failed. I want a share in a world that keeps functioning even when I cannot work.

Within days, millions repeated her words.

Not everyone agreed.

Owners of automated businesses argued that society was punishing efficiency. They had invested in machines and borne the risk; now they were expected to share the outcome with the people those machines had replaced.

But Jesair's argument kept returning.

Machines had not come from nothing.

They relied on research funded by earlier generations.

Energy networks built by states.

Data from billions of people.

Transport infrastructure.

A legal order.

Resources from other planets that no one had created with their own hands.

Even the largest private enterprise stood on a floor it had not built alone.

So the Planetary Council introduced a levy on automated production.

Not based on the number of robots.

That would have encouraged firms to conceal machines or pretend that labour was human.

Instead, the levy was calculated from value produced with minimal human participation and from the use of shared infrastructure.

The calculation was complex.

That made it all the more important for it to be public.

Businesses could see how the system determined their obligations.

Citizens could see what portion of the basic share came from automated production, taxes, returns on shared assets, and reserves.

It was while introducing the levy that Elarion's old weakness was exposed.

No one could say exactly where profits were made.

A factory stood in the Union.

It was owned by a company from Vasýria.

Its patents belonged to a fund in Therinith.

Computing services were billed through a Thaeron jurisdiction.

A licensing fee went to a southern island.

At year's end, the enterprise claimed it had earned almost nothing in the state where it actually manufactured its goods.

A great many of the most successful companies operated this way.

Value arose in a factory.

Profit was born on paper where there were almost no employees, customers, or machines.

Small island states had built entire economies on the legal relocation of value.

They offered low taxes.

Protected owners.

Non-public funds.

Special accounting regimes.

Laws under which refusing to provide information was not an obstacle to cooperation but a service to the client.

Large states responded by raising taxes.

They needed to finance hospitals, schools, transport, rebuilding after the Third, and the basic share.

The higher taxes climbed, the more valuable it became to circumvent them.

The more money escaped, the higher rates had to be for those who stayed.

The tax spiral turned.

Taxes were high because many did not pay them.

Many did not pay them because they were high.

And those who did pay increasingly believed they were being punished for lacking the power to escape.

The Bridge could not rewrite the old accounts retroactively.

But new transactions in elars showed where value had actually arisen, what services had been supplied, and who the ultimate recipient was.

Price could no longer be easily detached from the path it took.

Every significant transaction carried a reference to ownership relationships, its contractual purpose, and the tax regime.

Not everything was public to everyone.

But nothing significant was wholly without a name.

After six months of the temporary basic share, it emerged that the planetary system had collected more revenue at lower rates than the old states had collected at higher ones.

Not because people had suddenly fallen in love with taxation.

Evasion had lost some of its darkness.

The Economic Council proposed extending the basic share for another year.

Daren Voltr voted in favour.

Nerai stopped him in the corridor afterward.

“I thought you'd be against it.”

“I am.”

“You voted for it.”

“Because the alternative is worse.”

“That sounds like the beginning of every reform.”

Voltr looked through the transparent wall at Nitra.

The city was still full of empty flats.

“Jesair was right about one thing,” he said.

Nerai looked at him.

“Which one?”

“You cannot calculate a share from value nobody can see.”

“Only one thing?”

Voltr almost smiled.

“Don't give the dead too many victories at once.”

Then he grew serious.

“But you still don't see the consequence.”

“Which is?”

“One calculation. One layer of taxation. One share. One settlement currency.”

“Yes.”

“That isn't assistance any longer.”

“No.”

“It's the foundation of a state.”

Nerai looked at the Bridge's symbol above the river.

“Perhaps.”

“And who will control that state?”

“That is the question we have to answer before someone answers it for us.”

Voltr left.

Nerai remained by the window.

An alert appeared on her work interface.

The historical analysis system had completed its first reconstruction of the financial flows associated with the Third.

She opened it.

Thousands of payments appeared.

Foundations.

Laboratories.

Computing capacity.

Transport bookings.

Legal exemptions.

Lineage data.

Insurance models.

Political funds.

Everything she had seen separately before the Third.

Now it lay on a single map.

At its centre remained a blank space.

Not because there was nothing there.

Because someone had worked very hard to make sure no name appeared.

Nerai enlarged the image.

“We've found the skeleton,” she said.

Taren, standing beside her, studied the line connecting Vesta to the research foundations.

“And the body?”

“It's still breathing.”

35. THE PANDEMIC'S FINANCIAL SKELETON

The investigation of the Third did not begin with the arrest of a suspect.

It began with the protection of data.

During the first weeks of the pandemic, thousands of companies ceased to exist. Some because their owners had died. Others because their work no longer served a purpose. Still others because the people who ran them took advantage of the chaos and disappeared.

Accounting archives were closed.

Banks merged systems.

Servers were wiped.

Temporary research environments were dismantled when their leases expired.

Under normal circumstances, records would have been retained according to local requirements.

After the Third, however, nobody knew which records were ordinary business documents and which might be evidence of the greatest crime in Elarion's history.

Nerai secured a planetary preservation order covering all records connected with biological research, lineage archives, emergency logistics, and the foundations that had appeared in the Layer's investigations.

Twenty-three states protested.

Some sincerely sought to protect their citizens' rights.

Others sought to protect their clients.

Therinith declared that a foreign investigation could not impose a blanket freeze on property and accounting records belonging to people against whom no specific suspicion existed.

Nerai responded by publishing a list of missing records.

Not their contents.

Only what ought to have existed and suddenly no longer did.

Seven funds changed administrators during the pandemic's first month.

Four foundations closed their accounts.

Two law firms reported damaged archives.

Vesta transferred part of its ownership to a company established three days after the first public reports of the disease.

Each step had a potentially innocent explanation.

Together, they looked like flight.

Public pressure forced Therinith to give way.

But a problem remained.

The data was not written in one language.

Banks and states described the same movements as gifts, loans, or licences. With new judicial authorisations, the Layer could compare timestamps, administrators' signatures, and original identifiers even where the legal label attached to a transaction had changed.

This time, though, it was not only people standing against them.

The analytical systems that had connected supplies and production during reconstruction were given a new objective.

Not to find the culprit.

To find correspondences.

The same administrator.

The same communications node.

The same sequence in time.

The same legal template.

The same ultimate economic benefit.

Nerai refused to let AI assign guilt scores to people.

“A machine can show that two paths met,” she told the team. “It cannot decide why people took those paths.”

“Without risk scoring, we'll end up with millions of connections,” one analyst objected.

“Then we'll have millions of connections.”

“People can't examine them all.”

“Then use the machine to rank evidence, not people.”

“It's a small distinction.”

“Not to the person you label guilty.”

The system therefore worked with events.

A payment.

A contract.

A change of owner.

A capacity lease.

An exemption granted.

Access to data.

Only after the events had been connected did investigators examine the people behind them.

The first solid lead came from a place nobody considered decisive.

An insurance company.

Before the Third, one of the foundations had ordered a model of financial losses from a disease that affected particular population groups unevenly.

The insurer received a hypothetical assignment.

It did not know the assignment was connected to a real biological project.

The completed report was delivered through secure storage. A record was created of the device that opened the file.

The device was not registered to a person.

It belonged to a company managing private residences in Nitra.

The company belonged to a fund.

The fund was administered by an office in Therinith.

The office protected the identity of its ultimate client.

The old system would have stopped there.

The new reconstruction compared the device with energy consumption, building access records, and other downloaded documents.

The same device had opened:

An analysis of delayed responses by healthcare institutions.

A legal opinion on the use of anonymised genetic data.

A report on crisis logistics.

A biological modelling result.

And a document entitled *Blindness Test*.

Every file led to a single residence.

It belonged to Arien Korveth.

Taren checked the result three times.

“This still doesn't prove he opened them.”

“No,” Nerai said.

“Someone else could have used the device.”

“Yes.”

“The residence had staff.”

“It did.”

“And visitors.”

“Yes.”

Taren looked at her.

“Could you be pleased just once?”

“When we have proof.”

The next piece came from the lineage archives.

Before the Third, Mareia had recorded a meeting with Arien. Not its contents. She had no authority to secretly record a private conversation.

But the system had retained the meeting's time, her entry, his confirmation of her visit, and subsequent access to protected research data.

Minutes after Mareia left, Arien opened a document on the biological vulnerability of Aurelian lineages.

An hour later he contacted Kael Thorne.

The following day, the final payment went through.

The sequence alone was still no proof of intent.

Then they found a message from a laboratory.

A researcher working on one biological component had doubts. She sent a question to the intermediary who had given her the assignment.

She asked whether the results might be used in a way that endangered a specific population.

The answer was brief:

The project does not pursue the generation of hatred or active targeting. It evaluates natural differences in the responses of biological systems. Continue according to the approved specification.

The message was signed only with a project code.

A stylistic analysis found similarities to Arien's messages.

Nerai refused to treat that as primary evidence.

“Similarity of language isn't a signature.”

Taren opened the technical details.

“But a sending key is.”

The key had been created in Arien's residence.

At that moment his name ceased to be merely a suspicion.

Nerai requested authorisation to search the premises, seize devices, and restrict his movements.

The judicial system replied that the person had not been at his registered address for two months.

Arien's residence stood empty.

Not abandoned in panic.

Cleared out.

Personal possessions were gone.

Accounts had been transferred.

Access permissions revoked.

One wall bore a lighter rectangle where a painting had hung.

Only a dark-blue vessel remained in a cupboard.

Unbroken.

Lying on its side.

Nerai recognised it from Mareia's old photographs.

It was hers.

She picked it up.

There was a small scratch along its rim.

Nothing more.

Arien had tried to destroy it and had not even managed that.

“When did he leave?” she asked.

An investigator opened the building records.

“In the pandemic's first month.”

“Where?”

“A private module headed for the orbital ring.”

“And then?”

“The destination record is missing.”

Nerai looked at him.

“Ships don't vanish.”

“This one changed owners during the flight. The new owner was registered on Thaeron.”

“Who?”

“A fund in Therinith.”

Nerai almost felt a weary kind of amusement.

Even in flight, Arien remained faithful to the old world.

He believed that dividing his journey among enough registries would prevent anyone from seeing where he had gone.

The Bridge could not yet see old private flights.

But Thaeron's energy and supply systems had become part of the reconstruction.

Every dome reported its consumption of water, energy, oxygen, and food.

The analytical system found a place where consumption had long exceeded the number of registered residents.

A private dome at the edge of the northern settlement.

Officially empty.

Regularly supplied.

Owned by yet another fund.

Nerai studied the map.

“Ask Thaeron to detain him.”

Taren hesitated.

“Thaeron's administration has already replied.”

“When did we ask?”

“We didn't. The system sent them an automatic alert when the person matched a movement restriction.”

“And?”

“They say they have insufficient legal grounds to enter a private dome.”

Nerai slowly set Mareia's vessel on the table.

“Three billion dead aren't sufficient legal grounds?”

“They say our evidence concerns finance and data. We have no direct proof that Arien created or released the biological threat.”

“We have his device. His key. His financing. His flight.”

“We have the structure.”

“He had the whole picture.”

“We have to prove it.”

Nerai looked at the dome on the map.

“Then let him speak.”

Thaeron's authorities refused to make a public intervention.

Two hours later, the Layer released part of the evidence map.

Without personal medical information.

Without technical biological details.

It showed only what was needed.

Foundations.

Payments.

Research assignments.

The device.

Arien's residence.

His escape.

And the private dome whose owner remained hidden.

The public connected the name faster than the court.

People began gathering outside the dome.

Not armed people.

The bereaved.

They brought photographs of the dead.

Laid them outside the entrance.

One after another.

Thaeron's administration sent security units to prevent violence. Instead of an attack, they found silence.

Thousands of faces placed on the ground of another planet.

On the third day, the court issued its authorisation.

Security units entered the dome.

Arien Korveth was sitting at a table.

He did not run.

In front of him was an open transmission from the crowd.

He was looking at the photographs.

When they ordered him to stand, he complied.

“You are being detained on suspicion of involvement in preparing and financing the events that led to the Third.”

Arien smiled faintly.

“Money didn't cause the Third.”

The unit commander did not respond.

Arien held out his hands for the restraints.

“People did.”

“That is for the court to decide.”

“No,” Arien said. “The court will decide about me.”

He looked once more at the photographs outside the dome.

“And that will absolve everyone else.”

36. THE MAN WHO HAD THE MAP

They did not bring Arien to Nitra.

It would have been dangerous.

Not for him.

For the city.

Tens of thousands were gathering outside the Layer's headquarters. Some demanded a public trial. Others demanded immediate death. There were calls to expel all Veyrans, close their financial houses, and confiscate their property.

A public broadcast showed Arien's face beside the death toll. The presenter spoke of his detention and evidence of financing; one guest already demanded a verdict, another the closure of every Veyran foundation. Beneath the images scrolled the names of people still missing.

Nerai watched for a few seconds. She had an incorrect detail about the detention time corrected and asked the office to publish exactly what was supported by evidence. On the screen, Arien was already turning into the single face of the catastrophe. But the investigation would continue beyond his interrogation.

Nerai refused to reveal where he was being held.

Arien knew his survival depended in part on remaining hidden.

The first interrogation took place through a secure connection.

On one side Arien sat in a white room without windows.

On the other were Nerai, two investigators, the Convention's legal representative, and Arien's defence lawyer.

Nerai had not wanted to participate.

She was the sister of one of the victims.

Her presence might call impartiality into question.

But she knew the financial map better than anyone.

Arien had asked for her personally.

“I'll speak only to her,” he said.

“You have no right to choose your investigator,” the lawyer replied.

“Then I won't speak.”

Nerai agreed.

Not to oblige him.

She wanted to know why he had chosen her.

When the connection opened, Arien studied her for a long time.

“You resemble him less than I expected.”

“Whom?”

“Jesair.”

“You knew him?”

“No.”

“You killed him.”

Arien's lawyer stirred.

“My client—”

“Let her,” Arien said.

Nerai placed Mareia's dark-blue vessel in front of her.

Arien saw it.

His expression changed.

For only a moment.

“We found it in your apartment.”

“It belonged to Mareia.”

“I know.”

“Why did you bring it?”

“So you have something to look at when you lie.”

The lawyer intervened again.

“This manner of interrogation—”

“May I leave?” Arien asked.

“No.”

“Then the manner doesn't matter.”

Nerai opened the evidence map.

“Do you know these projects?”

“Some of them.”

“Did you finance them?”

“Not directly.”

“Did you arrange their financing?”

“Not all of them.”

“Which ones?”

Arien leaned back.

“You ask as if there were a single project.”

“There was a single intention.”

“An intention isn't an account.”

“Which is precisely why you split it up.”

Arien looked at the map.

“Every one of those projects was lawful.”

“Separately.”

“Legality isn't judged by what someone draws on a diagram afterward.”

“The laboratories didn't know the lineage data. The analysts didn't know the biological results. The lawyers didn't know the logistics models. The insurers didn't know the research objectives.”

“That's how sensitive projects are protected.”

“No. That's how you protected yourself against anyone seeing the whole.”

Arien did not answer.

Nerai enlarged the diagram.

“Everyone saw a part. You had the map.”

They followed the correct procedure.

His father's voice returned before he could prepare an answer. Once he had hated that sentence. Now it lay before him, written into contracts, exemptions, and signatures.

“Do you think a map is a crime?”

“If it shows the way to three billion bodies, yes.”

Arien lowered his eyes towards the vessel.

“I didn't plan for three billion.”

“How many?”

His lawyer leaned closer.

Arien ignored him.

“The crisis was meant to reveal the weakness of the Aurelian belief in its own exceptional nature.”

“How many?”

“There was no precise number.”

“One family? One city? One branch?”

“I wanted to change the balance.”

“How many dead constitute a balance?”

Arien looked up.

“You ask me the question your statesmen ask in every war. How many casualties are acceptable for future peace?”

“You didn't start a war.”

“No.”

“In a war, at least the enemy knows someone is aiming at him.”

Arien's face remained calm.

“The Aurelians changed Elarion for centuries without the rest ever voting on it.”

“By existing?”

“By what they represented.”

“Mareia left you.”

The lawyer drew a sharp breath.

Arien stiffened.

Nerai continued.

“This wasn't a war against Aurelians. It was the wound of a man who couldn't accept that a woman wasn't his property.”

“You know nothing about our relationship.”

“I know she said no.”

“She went to him.”

“She wasn't an object passed from your hands into Jesair's.”

“He gave her a story in which she could be something more.”

“And you gave her a world in which she would die.”

Arien stood.

The security system immediately ordered him to sit.

Nerai watched him.

“Sit down.”

“I didn't come here to talk about Mareia.”

“Then why did you ask to speak to me?”

Arien remained standing.

Then he sat down slowly.

“Because you're the only one who knows I couldn't have done it alone.”

Nerai said nothing.

Arien pointed at the map.

“Your planet is now pretending it has found a monster. One man who tricked banks, scientists, laboratories, governments, and artificial intelligences.”

“No one says you tricked them.”

“No?”

“Most didn't know what they were working on.”

“And why didn't they know?”

Nerai was silent.

“Because they didn't want to know,” Arien said. “The laboratory received money and a narrow specification. The bank received a legally clean payment. The foundation a public-benefit purpose. The politician a donation that broke no local law. The island state a fee for protecting an owner's identity. Everyone saw exactly enough to carry on.”

“You created that blindness.”

“No. I used it.”

“With Kael Thorne's help.”

For the first time, Arien did not answer immediately.

“Kael opened the financial routes,” he said at last.

“Did he know what for?”

“He knew enough.”

“Did he know the biological target?”

“He knew the objective was a crisis.”

“The scale?”

“No.”

“Why did he help you?”

Arien smiled without pleasure.

“Because Jesair proposed a world in which Kael would cease to exist in the way he'd always existed.”

Nerai opened the recording of the Nitra forum.

Jesair speaking about visible financial power.

About ultimate owners.

About every inspection leaving a trace.

Kael sitting in the hall.

“He wanted to stop transparency,” Nerai said.

“He wanted to postpone it. Slow it down. Discredit it. He wanted a conflict that would show how dangerous an open world could be.”

“And you gave him the Third.”

“He gave me money.”

“Where is he?”

“I don't know.”

“You're lying.”

“Kael stopped trusting me before the first fever.”

“He tried to stop the project.”

“Too late.”

“Why?”

Arien looked at the faces on the evidence map.

“Because he realised he'd opened a route for someone who didn't have his limits.”

“You had limits?”

“I thought I did.”

Arien looked at the dark-blue vessel. The tiny scratch on its rim was visible even through the screen.

And now tell me how it really happened.

His mother's voice came so clearly that he had to lower his eyes. She used to ask him that when he tried to hide a mistake behind a perfectly assembled explanation.

“When I was a boy, my mother died in a transport accident,” he said. “There was only one intensive-care transport. The rescuers took a child with Aurelian eyes.”

His lawyer turned towards him, but Arien continued.

“My father requested all the records. He told me the rescuers had followed the correct procedure. The child survived.”

“And your mother?” Nerai asked.

“She died on the way to hospital.”

Arien touched the edge of the table.

“Before they took him away, she herself told them to take the boy.”

He had not spoken those words aloud in decades.

Nerai knew another document bearing his name. She opened an old proposal for backup emergency transports and turned the record towards him. “After the accident, you made it less likely that rescuers would have to choose between two injured people.”

Arien looked at the survival figures. “Back then I still believed changing a rule was enough.”

Nerai closed the record. Those he had helped remained alive. Those on the evidence map remained his responsibility too.

“What did you want to change?” Nerai asked.

She did not raise her voice. But beneath her words Arien heard his mother's question again.

“I wanted the golden ring never to help anyone again,” he said. “I wanted Jesair to lose. I wanted Mareia to see that she'd been wrong about him. I wanted someone else left waiting outside a door that wouldn't open.”

His lawyer placed his palm on the table. Arien did not look at him.

“The rescuers then were deciding which of two injured people they could save in time,” Nerai said. “You created a danger for people because of their ancestry. Children, too.”

Arien opened his mouth. None of the phrases he had used for years could form an answer.

He saw his mother's hand and the boy behind the glass. They had tried to save another person's child that day. The boy in the photograph was being threatened by him.

He had hated his father's *They followed the correct procedure* for so long that he had built a system in which everyone but himself could say those words. He knew where their work was leading.

Silence settled for a moment.

Nerai looked at him.

The person before her was not a monster from a story.

He was a human being.

That was worse.

A monster stands outside humanity.

A human being shows what can arise within it.

“Where is Kael?” she repeated.

“On Thaeron.”

“Where?”

“If I knew, I'd give him to you.”

“Why?”

Arien leaned back.

“Because I will carry the names of the dead. He'll go on talking about freedom.”

The interrogation continued for another six hours.

Arien admitted the projects had been connected.

He did not admit releasing the disease.

He maintained that the final operations had been run by autonomous processes and that he did not know the precise moment or place where it began.

But he gave investigators codes, intermediaries' names, and parts of the financial structure.

Not out of remorse.

Out of a need to share the blame.

As the connection was about to close, Arien looked at Nerai once more.

“What will you do when you've convicted me?”

“We'll continue.”

“Where?”

“To the people who gave you the route.”

“And then?”

“To the system that concealed it.”

Arien smiled.

“So in the end you'll do exactly what Kael feared.”

“Not because of him.”

“Because of Jesair?”

Nerai looked at the dark-blue vessel.

“Because of those who can no longer see what became of their world.”

The connection closed.

Arien remained alone in the white room.

Nerai opened a new document.

It was to be a preliminary report on the causes of the Third.

On the first line she wrote:

Arien Korveth formed the intention.

Then she stopped.

On the second:

Kael Thorne provided the financial and political routes.

On the third:

Elarion's institutions ensured that no one except the perpetrators could see every part at once.

She reread the sentences.

Arien.

Kael.

The system.

Individual guilt.

Complicity.

Civilisational blindness.

If she omitted the first two, criminals would hide behind society.

If she omitted the third, society would convict the criminals and preserve the conditions for others like them.

Nerai saved the document.

Its title was:

Not Arien Alone.

37. NOT ARIEN ALONE

The preliminary report was published on the day when Elarion recorded more births than deaths for the first time since the Third.

The media chose Arien's confession.

The public chose Kael's name.

The banks chose the legal mistakes.

States chose foreign jurisdictions.

Everyone found a part of the report that pointed at someone else.

Therinith declared it had broken no law.

That was true.

Its registers protected owners exactly as the adopted rules required.

The banks announced that every payment had passed inspection.

That too was true.

Every transaction had a plausible purpose, a legally existing counterparty, and documentation that met local requirements.

The foundations claimed they did not know the ultimate purpose of the projects they financed.

For the most part, true.

The laboratories said they had investigated legitimate scientific questions.

True.

The lawyers said they had assessed hypothetical cases.

True.

Insurers modelled risks.

True.

Carriers reserved capacity.

True.

Political parties accepted permitted donations.

True.

Almost everything was true.

Which was precisely how such a great lie had become possible.

Nerai appeared before the planetary commission of inquiry.

Behind her was the map of the Third's financial skeleton.

“We did not find a single secret treasury,” she said. “We did not find a payment labelled *for financing a catastrophe*. We did not find one institution that knew the whole plan.”

She pointed to the divided lines.

“We found something more dangerous. A system in which everyone could tell the truth about their little part and still help create the lie of the whole.”

Representatives of all forty states sat in the chamber.

Behind them were the bereaved.

Several seats in the front row remained empty.

Originally they had been reserved for representatives of the Aurelian lineage councils.

For many of them there was no one left to represent.

“Arien Korveth is responsible for the intent, coordination, and deliberate use of divided systems to carry out the attack,” Nerai continued. “Kael Thorne created the financial and political infrastructure that made the attack possible. Other people made decisions while knowing more than they now admit.”

The screen showed funds, political donations, and Vesta's ownership links.

“But if our entire conclusion is that bad people misused a good system, we have learned nothing from the Third.”

Unease spread through the chamber.

“The system was not good. It was blind in a way that had become a business model.”

She enlarged the island jurisdictions.

“States sold secrecy. Banks sold separation. Funds sold ownership without a name. Accounting regimes sold the ability for profit to arise somewhere other than value. Political rules sold influence without a visible source.”

Therinith's representative asked to speak.

“You are calling the lawful protection of privacy a business model for crime.”

“No,” Nerai replied. “I am saying that privacy protection became a business model for power.”

“Our clients have not been convicted.”

“Because we didn't know their names.”

“That is not evidence of guilt.”

“No. It is evidence that we were unable even to investigate guilt.”

“Every citizen has the right to protect their property from a foreign state.”

“And every citizen has the right to know who uses property to finance politics, own their hospital, or pay for research that threatens their life.”

The representative leaned back.

“Who determines the boundary?”

“That is precisely the question the Convention must answer.”

The word was spoken publicly for the first time.

The Planetary Convention after the Third.

The Planetary Convention was to go beyond an emergency meeting of governments.

Nor was it to be merely an economic conference.

It would examine the foundations of Elarion's very way of life.

The Union supported the proposal.

Then most Selenite states.

A few Aurelian councils that still existed.

The Veyran governments were divided.

Some supported reform. Their people had died in the Third too. They too had lost families, cities, and futures.

Others claimed that the investigation was becoming a collective trial of the Veyrans.

The first movements opposing planetary transparency appeared on Thaeron.

Their leaders said:

The Third must not be an excuse to create a single government.

Arien's crime must not abolish the privacy of billions of innocent people.

A shared currency could become a collar.

Visible money would allow a government to destroy any opponent with a single prohibition.

Much of this reasoning was justified.

That was why it was more dangerous than simple lies.

Among the speakers for the new Thaeron movement appeared a man whose name was not publicly known.

He spoke only through audio.

He argued that Elarion needed two civilisational paths.

One open.

The other free.

Nerai listened to his first speech.

After three sentences she knew who was speaking.

Kael Thorne.

He had changed his tone.

Slowed his speech.

Used another name.

But the way he separated power from responsibility remained the same.

“Can you prove it's him?” Saira asked.

“No.”

“Voice analysis?”

“Probability isn't proof.”

“Arien says he's on Thaeron.”

“Arien says many things.”

“Should we request his detention?”

Nerai closed the transmission.

“First we have to know exactly what for.”

“He helped finance the Third.”

“We have evidence of financial routes. We have evidence of his attempt to stop the final stages. We don't have proof that he knew the scale.”

“He opened the door.”

“Yes.”

“And now he talks about freedom.”

“Even a guilty man can raise a valid objection.”

Saira looked at her.

“You sound like Jesair.”

“No.”

Nerai opened the recording again.

“He would have said it better.”

The Convention was called for the first anniversary of the moment the death toll reached three billion.

The venue was Nitra.

The same hall in which Jesair had said, years earlier, that value must not walk in shadow.

A wall of names was erected outside the building.

Not all of them.

It was impossible to inscribe three billion names in one place.

Instead, the wall displayed a different part of the list each day.

No name would recur for years.

On the day the Convention opened, the names of people from Auriola glowed across its surface.

Among them:

Jesair Davion.

Mareia Lioren.

Nerai arrived before sunrise.

She placed the dark-blue vessel before the wall.

She did not leave it there.

After a while she picked it up again.

Some things do not belong to memorials.

They belong to the living who still have to finish the story.

38. THE CONVENTION AFTER THE THIRD

Before entering the chamber, Nerai listened to an excerpt from the morning news. A woman who ran a community kitchen after the Third wanted to know who would be allowed to oversee the common money. The owner of a small repair shop feared the new system would also see his customers' payments. Both had lost loved ones. They still disagreed about the proposal.

“Today a decision will also be made about the boundary between public power and private life,” the presenter said. “For many people, that boundary is still unclear.”

Nerai turned off the broadcast and went inside. The repairman's objection appeared in her own notes too.

A third of the seats in the chamber remained empty.

That was not an exact calculation of the number of delegates who had died.

It was a decision by the organisers.

Every third row had been closed.

There were no names on the seats.

Only a thin line of light.

When the delegates sat down, the empty rows divided the living as the Third had divided families, cities, and history.

No one could look towards the platform without seeing where someone was missing.

The Convention had no single president.

It was led by a council of representatives from states, citizens' assemblies, specialist institutions, lineage councils, and Thaeron.

That too was a compromise.

No one wanted an assembly about limiting power to be run by one person.

Nerai did not speak as a politician.

She was not standing for office.

She represented no state.

She stood before the Convention as the head of the investigation into the Third's financial background.

Her name appeared above her.

Nerai Sael.

Interstate Office for Financial Integrity and Systemic Risk.

Disclosure of interests: complete.

She looked at the empty rows.

Then began.

“A year ago, we gave the catastrophe a name.”

A number appeared on the walls.

Three billion, one hundred and twenty-four million.

“We called it the Third because the human mind needs one word where it cannot carry billions of names.”

The number disappeared.

Faces replaced it.

Children.

Women.

Men.

All three branches.

“Today I will not speak about what we lost. We would never finish. I will speak about what their deaths revealed.”

The financial skeleton appeared on the display.

“The first reason we must change our money is the pandemic.”

Several people shifted in their seats.

Some had expected a speech about healthcare.

Nerai continued.

“The Third was not financed by one payment. If it had been, someone would have noticed. It was financed through thirty currencies, hundreds of currency conversions, foundations, funds, laboratories, legal exemptions, and companies whose ultimate owners were unknown.”

Separate sections of the map lit up.

“Artificial intelligence analysed biological questions without knowing their purpose. Laboratories performed assignments without knowing about the others. Insurers modelled consequences without knowing the cause. Carriers reserved capacity without knowing the cargo. Banks saw payments, not the plan. States saw companies, not the people behind them.”

The map joined together.

“One person may bring hatred. But a civilisation either gives that person a route or denies it.”

Nerai paused.

“We gave him the route.”

The chamber fell silent.

“If we cannot see the money before the act, we will see only the bodies afterward.”

The screen listed categories proposed for automatic systemic oversight.

Biological and genetic risks.

Large-scale computing capacity.

Strategic laboratories.

Medical data.

Political financing.

Weapons systems.

Critical infrastructure.

“I am not asking for a system that reads minds,” Nerai said. “It cannot do that and must not pretend it can. I am asking for a system that notices when money, technology, data, laboratories, and political power begin to form the shape of a threat.”

A representative of a Veyran state asked to speak.

“And who decides what constitutes the shape of a threat?”

“Public rules.”

“Made by whom?”

“An independent council established by the Convention, subject to citizen, specialist, and judicial oversight.”

“Another planetary institution, then.”

“Yes.”

“And if it is wrong?”

“Its decisions can be challenged.”

“And if it becomes a government tool?”

“That is why it must not belong to a single government.”

The man remained standing.

“That's merely centralisation transferred to a higher level.”

“No,” Nerai answered. “What must be centralised is visibility of the common problem. Decision-making and oversight must be distributed.”

“That's a contradiction.”

“No. One map does not need one owner.”

He sat down.

Nerai opened the second section.

“The second reason is automation.”

The walls showed production figures from after the Third.

The number employed.

Production capacity.

Consumption.

Automated decisions.

“The Third forced us to accomplish in months what we had postponed for decades. Machines took over manufacturing, transport, energy management, accounting, maintenance, and part of healthcare. Not because we wanted a world without work. Because people were missing.”

The production curve rose above its pre-Third level.

“Then we discovered that production can grow even when the number of jobs does not.”

A sentence Jesair had spoken in Nitra appeared:

An allowance is what power gives from above. A share is what already belongs to a person because they are part of a civilisation.

Nerai looked at it for a moment.

“Universal basic income must not be a reward for being unnecessary. Nor may it be an act of mercy by the state towards people whose jobs machines have taken away. It must be a share in a civilisation built from knowledge, data, infrastructure, and resources no present-day owner created alone.”

For the first time, sounds of agreement arose in the chamber.

“For that share to be just, we must know what value machines create, who owns it, where profits arise, and where they go. UBI without transparency is an allowance that power can calculate to suit itself. A transparent basic share is a right whose calculation a citizen can verify.”

Nerai opened the third section.

“The third reason is corruption.”

Public contracts appeared on the walls.

Overpriced medical modules.

Transport contracts.

Energy projects.

Subsidies to funds whose owners financed political parties.

"Corruption. Cronyism. Buying influence. Stripping states of their assets. Covert financing of politics. Property manipulation. Tax havens. Grants disguised as public benefit while serving private power. Accounting transfers through currencies, islands, foundations, and off-world nodes."

Individual examples connected.

"All of this prospered in the dark. And we became so accustomed to the darkness that we began to consider it normal."

She stopped speaking for a moment.

"The Third showed us the price of that normality."

A representative of an island state stood.

"Under your proposal, will all financial flows be public?"

"No."

"Who decides which ones?"

"The significance of their impact."

"That is not a precise boundary."

"The precise boundary will be defined by law. A small personal payment will remain private. Ownership of a hospital network will not."

"A gift?"

"A personal gift of reasonable size remains private. A donation to a political party does not."

"An investment?"

"An investment that does not give the investor significant power over other people's lives need not be public to everyone. But its existence must not be invisible to oversight."

"So the state will know everything."

"No."

"Who will, then?"

“Different layers of the system will know different parts. No one will be allowed to see a person's whole life without legal grounds. Every connection between layers will leave a trace.”

The woman frowned.

“That is exactly how you described the system before the Third.”

“No. Before the Third, the layers protected data in ways that made it impossible to find out who was financing a catastrophe. The new system must protect the individual without protecting invisible power.”

Nerai opened the fourth section.

“The fourth reason is how states function.”

Budget deficits appeared.

Most of Elarion's states had spent more than they collected in almost every one of the preceding thirty years.

Debt rose even during economic growth.

Politicians promised savings.

Then raised taxes.

“Our states were not poor,” Nerai said. “They were expensive.”

The screen compared prices paid by different states for identical medical equipment.

Differences reached hundreds of per cent.

“Inefficiency remained hidden in budgets citizens could not compare. A public institution claimed to have paid market price. Yet the same product sold for half as much across the border.”

A network of connected suppliers appeared.

“When every public payment is visible, a bad decision doesn't disappear into a final report. It can be seen while there is still time to stop it.”

A Union minister objected.

“The public can misunderstand complex procurement. The cheapest price isn't always the best.”

“Which is why the justification, quality, and result must also be visible,” Nerai answered. “Transparency does not mean every citizen deciding about every valve. It means a minister cannot claim that a more expensive valve was better if it falls apart a year later and its supplier financed the minister's party.”

Nervous laughter rippled through the chamber.

The minister sat down.

“Immediate visibility of bad measures, almost complete tax collection, and the elimination of hidden conflicts of interest can turn chronic deficits into surpluses. Not in a day. First we stop the leaks. Then the waste. Then we reduce taxes. Only after that comes growth.”

She opened the fifth section.

“The fifth reason is taxation.”

The tax spiral appeared.

Higher rates.

More avoidance.

A narrower base.

Another rise in rates.

“Large states raised taxes because some of the value moved to small states where it had never been created. The higher the taxes, the more it paid to escape them. The more people escaped, the more those who stayed had to pay.”

A map of island tax havens appeared.

“These states did not create most of the value they reported. They created the legal location where value acquired a lower tax rate and lost its owner.”

Therinith's representative stood.

“Our services were lawful.”

“Yes.”

“Clients exercised rights granted to them by treaties.”

“Yes.”

“So you call them guilty for behaving rationally.”

“No. I am saying we created a system in which it was rational to harm society.”

The man fell silent.

“You want to abolish tax competition.”

“I want to abolish the ability to claim that profit arose on an island with no machines, employees, or customers.”

“Capital will leave for Thaeron.”

“Then we must see who owns it, where it originated, and what it uses.”

“Thaeron doesn't have to accept your rules.”

“No.”

“And then?”

“Then there will be two economic areas. One in which major power leaves a visible trace. And another in which it doesn't.”

“People will choose freedom.”

“Perhaps.”

Nerai looked at him.

“But at least they will know what they are choosing.”

She opened the sixth section.

Thirty currency symbols appeared above the Convention.

“The sixth reason is monetary fragmentation.”

Daren Voltr stirred slightly.

Nerai continued.

“Before the Third, we argued that thirty currencies allowed states to respond to local conditions. That was true. They also allowed thirty ways of changing the value of savings, hiding profits, moving debts, and separating a price from whoever paid it.”

Conversion costs appeared.

Exchange-rate insurance.

Delays.

Capital reserves.

Double and triple bookkeeping.

“Businesses employed entire departments to protect trade from the currencies that were supposed to make trade easier. Small firms paid more for cross-border transactions than large consortiums because they had no access to the same rates and instruments.”

The elar appeared.

“The elar was born of the pandemic. Not as a political project. As a way of buying filters, medicines, and food when the old systems could not transfer value quickly enough.”

Nerai showed the Bridge's public reserves.

“Its advantage was not simply that it was shared. People could see what backed it, its fees, its exchange rate, the route taken by a payment, and everyone who stopped it.”

Daren Voltr requested the floor.

“The elar is still backed by the old currencies.”

“Yes.”

“If you abolish them, what will back it?”

“Production, tax revenues, energy capacity, and the assets of the common system.”

“So trust in planetary institutions.”

“Every currency is trust in some institution.”

“The difference is that citizens today can leave one currency and choose another.”

“Most citizens have no assets they can move between currencies. Monetary choice was freedom primarily for people wealthy enough to escape the consequences of their own state's decisions.”

Voltr rose.

“And yet it served as a counterweight. One currency can be used against every person on the planet at once.”

“Yes.”

The answer startled even him.

Nerai continued.

“A single currency may be the foundation of prosperity. But also of the most perfect tyranny we have ever devised.”

Absolute silence filled the chamber.

“That is why it is not enough for citizens' money to be visible. Power over money must be visible too.”

An oversight architecture appeared.

Operational layer.

Supervisory layer.

Judicial layer.

Citizen audit.

Public verification chain.

“The currency operator must not decide alone whom to investigate. Oversight must not be able to change records by itself. A court must not open data without a recorded legal reason. And none of these institutions must be able to erase the trace of its own actions.”

Voltr studied the diagram.

“And a criminal?” he asked. “Will he too see that he's been investigated?”

“Yes.”

“In time to hide more evidence?”

“He will see that an inspection occurred. Not necessarily every operational conclusion at that same instant. But the access record must not remain secret for ever, and it must not be erasable.”

“That differs from Jesair's proposal.”

“No. Jesair said that even a criminal must see who looked at him. He did not say an investigation must publish its every step in advance.”

Voltr remained standing.

“And what prevents the system from creating a secret access without a record?”

“The technical architecture.”

A data flow appeared on the walls.

“Each access to protected data creates a signed record. The record yields a cryptographic fingerprint. The fingerprints of all significant changes and accesses are sent every few minutes to a distributed verification chain.”

“A blockchain,” someone said from the back.

“Yes,” Nerai answered. “Not as a substitute for truth. A hash does not prove the original information was true. It proves someone did not silently change it later. Truthfulness must be established by the source's signature, cross-checking, and audit.”

Voltr sat down again.

Nerai looked at the Convention.

“Surveillance technologies will improve regardless of what we adopt today. We can pretend to ban them and allow them to be used secretly. Or we can ensure that every eye looking at a citizen is itself visible.”

The final sentence appeared:

The right to see must be joined to the duty to be seen.

At that moment, the Convention's connection was interrupted.

Not all of it.

Only one broadcast.

The symbol of the Thaeron movement appeared on the walls.

Then a voice.

Kael's voice.

“You're describing a cage made of glass,” he said. “Everyone will see the bars and you'll call it freedom.”

The security systems attempted to cut the transmission.

Nerai raised her hand.

“Let him speak.”

Unrest filled the chamber.

Kael continued.

“One currency. One tax layer. One financial map. One planetary intelligence deciding what constitutes a risk. You say you'll divide power among councils, courts, and citizen auditors. Yet all of them will use the same system.”

Nerai looked directly into the sensor.

“Kael Thorne.”

The voice fell silent for a moment.

Then laughed.

“You have no proof.”

“No.”

“And still you name me in public.”

“I named the voice.”

“Is this what your transparent world will look like? An analyst says a name and the crowd does the rest?”

“No. That's why I'm not convicting you. I'm asking you.”

“What?”

“How much did you know?”

Not a movement could be heard in the chamber.

Kael answered only after a pause.

“Enough to know today that I should have stopped more.”

“That isn't an answer.”

“It's the only one you'll get.”

“You helped Arien create the financial routes.”

“I helped many people create financial routes.”

“Why him?”

“Because I feared the world your brother was proposing.”

“And now you fear it more?”

“Now I have proof my fears were justified.”

Nerai stared at the blank image from which the voice emerged.

“You consider the Third proof against transparency?”

“I consider it proof against concentrating power. Arien used biological knowledge, financial networks, and automated systems. You want to connect all three in one planetary layer.”

“And make the connections visible.”

“Visibility won't prevent abuse.”

“No.”

“Then what will?”

“Making sure an abuse does not belong only to whoever controls the system.”

Kael laughed.

“That's faith.”

“Yes.”

The answer struck the chamber like a quiet blow.

“Every social order rests on faith that people will respect the rules at least some of the time. The difference lies in whether they can conceal breaking them.”

“We on Thaeron will not accept your rules.”

“That's your right.”

“So you'll let us leave?”

“If you do not finance violence, carry away assets that do not belong to you, or conceal proceeds from our common infrastructure.”

“Freedom with conditions, then.”

“Every freedom ends where someone else's bill begins.”

Kael fell silent.

Then he said:

“One day citizens will fear your system more than the people it was supposed to protect them from.”

“Perhaps.”

“And then?”

“Then they must have the power to change it.”

“With one currency?”

“Within a public constitutional order.”

“One state, then.”

Nerai paused.

The Convention had been waiting for this sentence.

Some with hope.

Others with fear.

“I am not proposing one state today,” she said. “I am proposing common visibility for common problems and common oversight for common power.”

“That is the beginning of one state.”

“Perhaps.”

“Then say it.”

Nerai looked at the forty delegations.

At the empty rows.

At the place where Jesair had once sat.

“If Elarion one day becomes a single state, it must not be because someone conquered it. Nor because one currency defeated the rest. It must happen because people discover that their lives have long been more closely shared than their governments.”

Kael did not answer.

The connection ended.

This time he had closed it himself.

The Convention deliberated for another twenty-three days.

It did not adopt everything Nerai proposed.

The basic share was confirmed, but its amount would still be determined by regional living costs.

The Bridge would cease to be a private company and pass into the ownership of a planetary public foundation.

The elar became the legal settlement unit for interstate taxes, public payments, the basic share, and trade with Thaeron.

The old currencies did not disappear.

Not yet.

The Convention adopted the principle of an identifiable ultimate owner for every company, fund, and foundation with significant economic or political influence.

Every access to protected financial information would have to leave an indelible trace.

Every exemption would need an author, a legal basis, and an expiry time.

Every automated risk rule would be open to public scrutiny.

The Convention established a planetary constitutional committee.

Not a government.

Not yet.

As Nerai left the final session, Daren Voltr was waiting near the exit.

“You won,” he said.

“No.”

“The elar has become a legal unit.”

“One of the units.”

“The Bridge is no longer owned by a private group.”

“That was necessary.”

“A planetary tax layer.”

“A limited one.”

Voltr looked at her.

“Do you know what's most dangerous about you?”

“No.”

“You describe every step as smaller than it really is.”

Nerai looked at the wall of names outside.

“And you describe every step as the last.”

“Because I know where they lead.”

“Where?”

Voltr pointed towards Nitra.

“To the capital of a planet.”

Nerai gazed at the river.

“Perhaps a planet needs a place where it must look at itself.”

39. ONE ELAR

The old currencies did not disappear by a vote.

They disappeared through use.

First, major interstate suppliers stopped accepting them.

Not because the Convention had banned them.

The elar was simpler.

One price.

One settlement.

One transparent fee.

No exchange-rate insurance.

No two-day wait.

No question of how much value would be lost between sender and recipient.

Then employees of companies operating in several states began demanding their wages in elars.

They did not want the value of their pay to change according to a government's decision in a country where they did not even live.

Merchants displayed prices in two currencies.

Later, only in elars.

Local currencies remained in accounts, laws, and old contracts.

But in daily life they gradually resembled languages in which ceremonies were still written but bread was no longer ordered.

The last two major currencies abandoned independent exchange rates after an economic crisis of their own making.

Their central banks tried to support exports by weakening their currencies.

But firms purchased energy and raw materials in elars.

Their costs rose.

Citizens moved their savings.

The currencies collapsed.

What had once helped a state shift part of a problem onto its citizens no longer worked in a world where citizens could access shared value.

Seven years after the Third, the elar was Elarion's only legal currency.

Nobody appointed a single day when this happened.

The last state passed its law.

The last bank changed its books.

The last old currency received a fixed conversion rate.

And it was over.

The growth that followed surprised even the reform's supporters.

The currency alone did not cause it.

It came from the barriers that disappeared along with the old currencies.

Businesses no longer needed thirty sets of accounts.

A small firm could sell on the other side of the planet without a currency department.

Investors compared projects by their real returns rather than exchange-rate advantages.

Public procurement used comparable prices.

Tax authorities saw the same base.

Profit was taxed where value was created.

Rates gradually fell.

First for low and middle incomes.

Then for businesses.

States discovered that a lower tax collected on almost everything brought in more than a high tax avoided by half the largest holders of capital.

Tax havens tried to survive.

They offered still lower rates.

Then complete exemptions.

Then secret registers outside the planetary network.

But a company with an unknown owner could not receive large elar payments, bid for public contracts, or own strategic infrastructure.

Secrecy remained possible.

It ceased to be advantageous.

Some island states collapsed.

Others changed.

They put their educated lawyers, administrators, and financial specialists to work auditing the new system. Places that had sold darkness became centres of verification.

There was an irony in this that Nerai did not regard as punishment.
People need not remain for ever defined by what they once lived on.
Budget deficits did not disappear overnight.
Entire districts had to be rebuilt after the Third.
Care for survivors was expensive.
The basic share grew.
Cities rebuilt their infrastructure for a world with less labour and more automation.
But leakage declined.
Corruption networks became shorter.
Overpriced projects were exposed before contracts were signed.
AI compared prices, quality, and ownership relationships.
It did not forbid decisions.
It issued warnings.
A government could still choose a more expensive supplier despite a warning.
But it had to explain why.
In public.
With the responsible person's name attached.
The system did not eliminate stupidity.
It removed some of the safety darkness had given it.
After ten years, most states reported surpluses.
They were not annual certainties.
Nor could they be guaranteed in every circumstance.
But the old belief that a state had to remain permanently in debt fell apart.
Some of the surplus went to the basic share.
Some to reserves.
Some to shared ownership of automated systems.
People could work.
Start businesses.
Create.
Care for children.
Study.
Help others.

But their right to housing, food, and basic care no longer depended on whether someone needed to buy their time.

The basic share did not solve everything.

Some people lost their sense of purpose.

Others withdrew into worlds of entertainment created by machines.

Arguments arose over whether society should support those who gave nothing back.

Nerai had no simple answer.

Jesair had once said that a person was not valuable because a machine needed them.

But that did not mean a person had no need to be needed by another person.

So schools stopped preparing children only for occupations.

They taught them to build relationships, shoulder responsibility, make decisions about common affairs, and distinguish desires from needs.

Work did not become useless.

It ceased to be the only proof of the right to exist.

War changed too.

At first, slowly.

Transparent money could not read hatred.

It could not stop people wanting to seize territory, punish neighbours, or avenge an old grievance.

But it could see preparations.

Weapons needed manufacturers.

Manufacturers needed materials.

Materials needed energy.

Armies needed supplies.

Mercenaries needed payments.

Transport corridors needed insurance.

Propaganda needed media owners.

A major war could not be prepared entirely in someone's heart.

It had to enter the economy.

And there it left a trace.

When one southern state began secretly buying navigation components suitable for combat modules, the system alerted other governments and its own citizens.

The government said it was undertaking civilian modernisation.

The public could see the quantities, suppliers, and parallel fuel purchases.

The opposition demanded an explanation.

Allied states offered an inspection.

The project was stopped before a fleet had been built.

In another case, transparency did not prevent a conflict.

Two regions disputed water resources, and both openly moved security units.

The world saw the preparations.

But that was precisely why nobody could pretend the attack had come without warning.

The Planetary Council intervened sooner.

Not through secret diplomacy.

Through public talks in which both sides could see the cost of continuing.

The conflict ended in an agreement.

Not because people had become better.

Because a concealed intention had lost its advantage.

A common defence gradually emerged.

First to protect the orbital ring.

Then Thaeron.

Later to control strategic weapons.

States retained security forces, but could no longer wage their own major wars without shared infrastructure.

After currency, taxes, and defence came law.

A business operating across the entire planet could not be subject to forty conflicting courts.

A citizen could not have the right to scrutinise state power in one region and lack it in another.

The basic share could not be a common right without a common constitutional foundation.

The Planetary Constitutional Committee worked for twelve years.

Its first draft was rejected.

So was the second.

The third divided powers among the planetary level, regions, states, and cities.

One planet.

One currency.

One defence.

One basic charter of rights.

But forty legal traditions.

Dozens of languages.

Hundreds of local forms of government.

The states did not cease to exist.

They ceased to be the final seat of power.

On the day the constitution was adopted, representatives met in Nitra.

Some wept.

Others voted against it.

Several Veyran delegations left before the result.

A large share of their supporters already lived on Thaeron.

They rejected the common financial system.

They maintained that even mutually supervised power would one day become tyranny.

They built their own settlements, banks, and legal regimes.

Elarion did not force them to return.

But a boundary arose between the planets that had not existed before.

A boundary that did not arise from biology.

Nor from a racial division.

It was civilisational.

On Elarion, great power had a duty to leave a visible trace.

On part of Thaeron, secrecy was considered a condition of freedom.

Trade between the worlds continued.

With distrust.

With rules.

With a question still unresolved.

How much privacy can a society preserve without allowing invisible power to be born within it again?

Kael Thorne remained on Thaeron.

He was never finally convicted for the Third.

The evidence established that he had financed Arien's networks and had tried to stop the final stages. It did not establish how much he knew when he opened the first routes.

To some, he was a criminal who escaped.

To others, a man who had recognised the dangers of a single system in time.

To himself, he remained a man who believed history would eventually vindicate him.

Arien Korveth was convicted.

His trial lasted seven years.

Hundreds of scientists, administrators, bankers, lawyers, and survivors' relatives testified.

The court rejected his argument that the individual components of the project had been lawful.

It ruled that someone who knowingly combines lawful components into a criminal whole bears responsibility for that whole.

Arien was not executed.

Elarion had no death penalty.

He spent the rest of his life in a facility where every expense, inspection, and decision was recorded just as it was for every other citizen.

He too could see who opened his records.

He too could challenge unauthorised access.

Many considered that excessive mercy.

Nerai did not.

A system that protects only the rights of the innocent does not protect rights.

It protects the popular.

Twenty years after the Third, Nerai stood outside the building of the planetary assembly.

She was older.

Her hair was silver.

There was still no golden ring in her eyes.

Nitra had changed.

New administrative towers rose above the old town. Quiet public modules travelled along the river. Former central-bank headquarters had become archives of monetary history.

Children learned there that Elarion had once had thirty currencies.

Many found it incomprehensible.

“Why?” they asked.

Teachers explained sovereignty, exchange rates, devaluation, tax competition, and the protection of local economies.

The children listened in the same wonder with which earlier generations had heard about the days when each state used different units of weight or length.

Nerai walked towards the wall of names.

It still displayed victims of the Third.

After decades, the list could finally begin repeating itself.

Jesair's name was not there today.

Nor Mareia's.

Nerai put the dark-blue vessel on the ground.

This time she left it there.

An alert appeared on her personal interface.

The planetary historical archive had opened records from the investigation into the Third.

Purpose: preparation of an educational exhibition.

Responsible person: Laren Saor.

Scope of access: financial evidence map without protected personal data.

Nerai studied the alert.

Under the old order she might never have learned that someone had opened the file she had created.

In the new world she could see the name, purpose, and scope.

She could challenge the access.

She did not.

Evening was settling over Nitra.

A symbol of Elarion shone on the assembly building.

A new planetary emblem shone there.

It did not refer to the Union or any of the original states.

Forty lines converged into one circle.

Critics said it represented absorption.

Its designers said it represented connection.

Nerai saw both.

Every union saves something.

And brings something to an end.

Elarion had not become one state because its people ceased to be different.

It had become one because they gradually stopped pretending that the great decisions of one group did not affect all the others.

One person's money could finance research.

Research a laboratory.

A laboratory a disease.

A disease death across the planet.

But money could just as well finance treatment.

Machines.

The basic share.

The reconstruction of cities.

And a world in which power had to reveal itself before asking others to trust it.

Transparency did not make people good.

It did not remove anger.

Pride.

The desire to possess.

Fear of loss.

Or the human capacity to convince oneself that one's own wound is justice.

It did only one thing.

It made it harder for great power to move without a shadow.

Nerai laid three fingers on the vessel's cold surface.

She did not know why.

The gesture came naturally.

Too naturally.

For a moment she felt as though she had touched a memory that did not entirely belong to her.

Another planet.

Another sun.

A garden.

A man and a woman meeting again though their names would be different.

Then the feeling vanished.

Nerai turned towards the city.

Behind her was the wall of the dead.

Before her, the world of the living.

One planet.

One state.

Forty memories.

And value that must no longer walk in shadow.

40. THE WEIGHT OF POWER

The stone weighed thirty-one tonnes.

It had been brought from Thaeron two weeks earlier and had lain in the middle of a research hall in Arda ever since. The scientists had selected a piece of rock with no unusual physical properties. They wanted an object whose material could not be credited with the result.

Three metal rings stood around it.

Each was approximately five metres in diameter, its surface divided into hundreds of narrow segments. Conductors cooled far below the ambient temperature ran between those segments. Thick energy bundles rose to them from the floor.

Behind a safety wall, some forty people waited.

Physicists.

Technicians.

University representatives.

The Planetary Council for Technological Risk.

Two military analysts.

And Nerai Sael.

Many years had passed since the Third. Nerai no longer conducted everyday investigations into financial flows. But her name remained linked to the rules under which the Bridge, after the Convention, had gradually evolved from a payment network into one of the basic information layers of the planetary economy.

That was why she was invited whenever a new invention raised a question the engineers could not answer alone.

Who should be allowed to own it?

The experiment's director, Oran Sel, stood beside the control panel.

“Floor reading?”

“Thirty-one point four tonnes,” the laboratory AI answered.

“Energy?”

“Ready.”

“Synchronisation?”

“Deviation below the measurement threshold.”

Oran turned towards the people behind the glass.

“What you are about to see is the fourth trial. The first three took place without anyone outside the laboratory team present. We did not publish the result until two independent facilities had repeated it.”

Then he returned to the controls.

“Start the field at ten per cent.”

The floor-load reading appeared on the screen.

Thirty-one tonnes.

Thirty.

Twenty-eight.

Twenty-five.

The stone had not moved.

At twenty per cent, the reading showed seventeen tonnes.

At thirty, nine.

Silence filled the hall.

Oran raised the output to forty per cent.

The reading fell below one tonne.

Then almost to zero.

The stone lifted off the floor.

At first by a few millimetres.

Soon there were five centimetres between it and the ground.

Oran moved the regulator.

Thirty-one tonnes of Thaeron rock rose a metre into the air.

Nerai felt an unpleasant tension in her shoulders. Her reason told her the field was supporting the stone. Her body saw a massive piece of rock hanging above the floor and expected it to fall.

“Can you move it sideways?” a council member asked.

Oran nodded.

The stone moved slowly to the right.

Then back.

Its movement was so calm it seemed absurd. An object that would have needed a heavy transport system to move only a few years earlier was now crossing the hall at walking speed.

Oran reduced the power.

The stone descended slowly.

As it touched the floor, a deep rumble filled the hall.

“Did its mass stay the same?” Nerai asked.

“Yes.”

“Then what did you change?”

Oran searched for words.

“In the simplest terms, we changed the coupling between matter and the local gravitational field. The stone had the same inertia and internal structure throughout. But at full field strength, the ground hardly attracted it.”

“Hardly?”

“We haven't reached absolute zero yet.”

Nerai looked at the stone again.

“And will you?”

Oran smiled.

“That's the question we do science to answer.”

News of the experiment circled Elarion within hours.

Transport attracted the greatest attention.

Energy models immediately calculated the cost of taking freight to orbit if its gravitational coupling could be reduced during the first part of the journey.

Construction companies began designing structures that could be manufactured as one piece on the ground and then lifted into place.

Thaeron's mines saw the possibility of transporting masses of rock for which shipping cost more than extraction itself.

Cities began talking about a new generation of public transport.

Space engineers reopened projects that had lain in archives for decades because their economics did not work.

For several days, Elarion seemed to have received one of those inventions by which history is divided into a time before and a time after.

Then came the second report.

This one was not public.

It emerged from a security model at one of the universities.

Scientists were investigating how the gravitational fields of individual rings behaved when they overlapped. They expected a combined effect roughly equal to the sum of their outputs.

The calculations revealed something else.

With extremely precise synchronisation, the fields began reinforcing one another non-linearly.

Two physicists initially assumed it was an error.

They ran the model again.

Then on another computing system.

Finally they requested independent verification.

The result held.

Oran Sel received the report at three in the morning.

At five, he called for an emergency meeting of the Planetary Council.

Nerai arrived shortly after seven.

A map of Elarion occupied the wall.

At its centre glowed a circle almost four hundred kilometres across.

“What is that?” she asked.

“The area of effect,” said Oran, who was standing by the window. He looked as if he had not slept all night.

“What effect?”

“The full one.”

Nerai waited.

Oran opened the physics model.

“One generator can weaken gravitational coupling within a relatively small space. With multiple generators we expected a larger or stronger effect. It turns out that precise positioning and synchronisation can create a stable region between them where the coupling approaches zero.”

Nerai pointed at the circle.

“Across this entire area?”

“According to the model, yes.”

“How large?”

“This particular calculation covers a diameter of three hundred and eighty kilometres.”

Nerai looked at him.

“Are you telling me you can switch off gravity over an area the size of a state?”

Oran immediately shook his head.

“I'm telling you that physics appears to allow it. We do not possess such a device.”

“Could one be built?”

Oran turned towards another person in the room.

The project's chief technical analyst.

“With our present level of technology, yes,” he said.

The answer changed the atmosphere in the room.

“How long?” Nerai asked.

“If someone had everything they needed, perhaps two or three years.”

“And what does *everything they needed* mean?”

A list appeared on the wall.

Twenty-four gravitational emitters.

Six top-grade phase synchronisers.

Large quantities of superconducting metamaterial.

Three separate energy stores able to deliver extreme power in a short burst.

Several specialised production lines.

A precise gravimetric map of the region.

Computing capacity owned by only a few dozen facilities on the planet.

And a network of technicians with very narrow specialisations.

Nerai read the list slowly.

“What would happen if someone really switched it on?”

This time Oran answered.

“It would depend on the shape of the field, its altitude, and how long it remained active.”

“The worst realistic scenario.”

Oran sat down.

“People and objects that weren't firmly anchored would lose most of their coupling to the surface. Water would begin behaving very differently. The atmosphere would move rapidly through the region. Transport systems would lose contact with the ground. If it lasted longer, the planet's rotation would make matters still more complicated.”

Further layers appeared on the map.

Cities.

Rivers.

Energy networks.

Transport hubs.

“The ground itself wouldn't fly into space,” Oran continued. “Other forces hold rock together too. But gravitational equilibrium affects an enormous number of systems. If a field appeared suddenly over a populated area, the casualties could be immense.”

“And when they switched it off?”

“Gravity would return.”

Nerai understood the next part before he said it.

Everything that had lost contact with the ground while the field was active would begin falling.

“How many people live inside that circle?” she asked.

“In this model, eleven million.”

No one asked another question.

The technical council spent the next six days trying to determine whether the discovery could be kept beyond the reach of practical use.

The answer was unwelcome.

The technology was difficult, expensive, and required several devices manufactured in only a handful of places. But the physical principle was too general to be kept secret for ever.

Time worked against secrecy.

If one laboratory discovered the phenomenon, another would eventually discover it too.

If one AI could model it, another would one day derive it.

Elarion had long understood that scientific knowledge could not reliably be locked inside one room for generations.

So the question moved from physics to society.

An emergency meeting brought together manufacturers, universities, power networks, security institutions, citizen councils, and the Bridge.

Daren Voltr sat among them.

He was old. But Elarion's medicine had progressed so far that advanced age no longer meant automatic retirement from public life.

When given the floor, he turned to Oran.

“How many separate things must be bought or made for this to happen?”

“Thousands.”

“How many are normally available?”

“Most.”

“So banning the individual components solves nothing.”

“Exactly.”

“How many are critical?”

Oran opened the list.

“That depends on what you consider critical. If we mean the things without which we cannot build such a system today, there are approximately seventeen technological prerequisites.”

“Seventeen products?”

“Prerequisites. Some are products. Others are manufacturing capabilities, access to energy, people, or computing capacity.”

Voltr nodded.

“And how many entities on Elarion can satisfy all seventeen?”

Oran paused.

“I don't know.”

Nerai spoke from her seat.

“The Bridge does.”

Everyone turned towards her.

Voltr smiled slightly.

“Of course it does.”

Nerai recognised his tone.

“Do you want the answer, or a discussion about why we have it?”

“Both.”

“The answer first.”

A Bridge workspace opened before Nerai.

“Send us the technical prerequisites.”

Oran frowned.

“We can't enter all of those into a financial system.”

“You don't have to. We need an economic representation.”

“What do you mean?”

Nerai pointed to the first item.

“How many phase synchronisers?”

“Six.”

“Who makes them?”

Three companies appeared on the wall.

“Gravitational emitters?”

“At least twenty-four of this class.”

Their manufacturers and production capacity appeared.

“Energy?”

Oran gave the required range.

The Bridge displayed power stations, storage facilities, and industrial networks able to provide such a burst.

“Metamaterial?”

Another layer.

“Computing?”

Another.

“Precision manufacturing?”

Another.

“Specialists?”

Here Nerai paused.

“For people, we'll use only aggregated availability of expertise. Names will remain protected.”

Voltr raised an eyebrow.

“At least something will.”

Nerai continued.

The Bridge began assembling the conditions.

It was not drawing up a list of suspects.

It was mapping capabilities.

The system knew the owners of major manufacturing businesses.

It knew the capacities firms publicly reported and that could be checked against purchases, consumption, and output.

It knew large energy contracts.

The financing of research centres.

The origin of capital.

Industrial hall leases, large raw-material purchases, orders for specialist machinery, and equipment transfers between Elarion and Thaeron.

Before the Third, this information would have lain in dozens of banks, registers, and states.

Now it could be assembled by ultimate ownership and economic purpose.

After several minutes a number appeared on the wall.

14.

Voltr stopped looking amused.

“What does fourteen mean?”

“Fourteen economic groups currently have the direct or indirect capacity to meet more than eighty per cent of the requirements.”

“Economic groups?”

“Legally, they may comprise hundreds of companies. The Bridge groups them by ultimate ownership, control, financing, and economic dependence.”

Nerai opened the first record.

A large Thaeron mining consortium.

Ninety-one per cent.

The second.

A planetary manufacturer of energy systems.

Eighty-nine.

The third.

A military-industrial group in one of the states.

Ninety-four.

The fourth.

An orbital construction consortium.

Eighty-seven.

Then others.

Some were private.

Some public.

Three belonged to states.

One economic group was divided among more than forty companies.

“And who has a hundred per cent?” Voltr asked.

“No one.”

“Yet.”

“Yet.”

Silence remained in the room.

Fourteen names glowed on the wall.

Days earlier, they had shared only the fact that they were among the planet's most technologically advanced organisations.

Now they shared something else.

Every one of them was close enough to the ability to create a device that could alter gravity over a vast area.

“This is exactly the moment I've been afraid of,” Voltr said.

The meeting was already in its fourth hour.

“Why?” Nerai asked.

“Because the financial system has just created a list of fourteen entities it regards as potentially dangerous.”

“The list describes technological capacity.”

“And you claim there's no practical difference?”

“The difference is fundamental.”

Voltr pointed to the first name.

“This company mines on Thaeron. It threatens no one. Its leadership has no history of violence. It owns most of the required equipment because it uses it for mining.”

“Yes.”

“And yet you're watching it.”

“The Bridge watches changes in capability, not the director's behaviour.”

“That doesn't reassure me.”

Nerai studied the map for a moment.

“Before the Third, we made the opposite mistake.”

Voltr said nothing.

“We demanded grounds for suspicion before we were allowed to see the information. Arien's individual components appeared normal. A laboratory was doing research. A foundation gave a grant. A company bought equipment. A bank transferred money. Everyone saw their part and waited for a reason to ask about another.”

Voltr lowered his gaze.

Nerai continued.

“With this technology, intention is an even worse starting point. Someone need not want to kill eleven million people. They might be conducting an experiment. They might make a mistake. They might underestimate the instability of the field.”

Oran nodded.

“That's a real possibility.”

Nerai pointed to the list.

“We need to know where on the planet the capacity to cross a certain threshold is emerging. And every intervention based on that information must be subject to oversight.”

“What sets the threshold?” Voltr asked.

“That's a political decision.”

“So in the end it's politics after all.”

“It always was.”

Nerai leaned against the table.

“The difference is that now we can see what we're deciding about.”

The next part of the meeting became a technical exercise.

Someone proposed banning the sale of gravitational emitters without a licence.

Oran pointed out that smaller emitters would be mass-produced within a few years.

Another proposal concerned phase synchronisers.

Manufacturers replied that the same devices were used in medicine, energy, and orbital navigation.

Banning metamaterials would cripple parts of industry.

Monitoring energy would be imprecise, because the required power could be assembled from multiple sources.

Gradually it became clear that no single object created the danger.

It arose only when many capabilities came together.

Nerai said little during the debate.

She remembered much the same feeling from the Layer.

A cash-intensive business proved nothing by itself.

A fund proved nothing.

A laboratory proved nothing.

A payment for research proved nothing.

The catastrophe had arisen from the relationships among them.

Taren had once said that when looking at the whole planet, every person was only a few contracts away from every other.

Nerai had answered that they were not looking for a connection.

They were looking for a direction.

They needed something similar now.

A system that would notice when many ordinary economic activities began moving towards a single extraordinary capability.

At day's end, a working proposal emerged.

It was called the Strategic Capabilities Register.

The name was misleading, because it was not a conventional register.

No one entered a statement saying: *Company owns a gravitational weapon.*

The Bridge continually calculated which technological conditions a particular economic group could realistically meet.

The calculation used publicly approved categories.

Manufacturing precision.

Materials.

Energy.

Logistics.

Computing capacity.

Expertise.

Ownership of necessary devices.

The ability to obtain them through controlled companies.

Long-term contracts.

And for the most sensitive technologies, the combination of capacities at several geographically separate sites.

Crossing a threshold did not, by itself, make anyone guilty.

But higher levels carried a duty to declare a project's purpose and submit certain tests to independent oversight.

Access to detailed records was logged.

An entity could see which institution had examined its capabilities.

The rules by which the system evaluated risk were subject to public expert review.

Technical details that could be used as practical instructions remained protected.

Elarion tried to separate two things easily confused.

A person's privacy.

And the invisibility of power.

The real test came seven months later.

The Bridge detected a change in one of the fourteen groups.

It was a company called Asteron Dynamics.

The public knew it as a manufacturer of heavy transport systems. It had factories on three continents, a stake in an energy company, and a minority holding in a Thaeron producer of metamaterials.

Its technological capability in gravitational fields had originally been assessed at eighty-three per cent.

Over four months, it rose to ninety-two.

There had been no single large order.

Asteron acquired a small maker of phase regulators.

A subsidiary signed a long-term contract with a computing centre.

Another business obtained a stake in an energy storage facility.

A research foundation financed by Asteron hired four scientists who had previously worked on gravitational emitters.

Each event had its own economic explanation.

Together, they created a new situation.

The Bridge alerted the technology commission.

The commission asked Asteron for an explanation.

The response arrived that same day.

The company was developing a new gravitational system for cargo ships.

The project was legitimate.

The problem emerged during the review of its technical parameters.

Asteron planned to build six large experimental emitters.

“Six aren't enough for a regional field,” Oran said.

Nerai sat beside him.

“How many are needed?”

“With this configuration, at least twenty.”

“So that's the end of it.”

“No.”

Oran pointed to the ownership map.

Asteron had ordered six.

Four more had been ordered by an energy company it controlled through an investment fund.

Three were being built at a research centre funded by its foundation.

Another eight had been reserved on Thaeron by a firm in which Asteron held only thirty-eight per cent.

Under the legal registers, these were four separate projects.

The Bridge connected them through capital, contractual obligations, and joint financing.

Twenty-one emitters.

Nerai stared at the number for a long time.

“Did they know?”

“Who?”

“Asteron's management.”

Oran shrugged.

“We can't learn that from financial data.”

The commission summoned the chair of the board.

His name was Deiran Vos.

He came in person.

When they showed him the map, he first looked confused.

Then angry.

“These emitters have nothing to do with one another.”

Nerai pointed to the first group.

“These belong to your project.”

“Yes.”

“These belong to your energy subsidiary.”

“It's a separate company.”

“You control it.”

“Economically. We don't run its technical operations.”

“These are financed by your foundation.”

“The foundation has independent management.”

“Seventy-two per cent of its revenue comes from you.”

Deiran leaned back.

“And the ones on Thaeron have nothing to do with us.”

Nerai opened a contract.

Asteron had guaranteed a loan to the firm.

In the event of default, it would obtain the right to take over part of its technical assets.

Deiran read the contract for a while.

“I didn't know about this.”

“I believe you.”

That surprised him.

“Then why am I here?”

“Because your group is acquiring a capability even its own leadership may not see.”

The room fell silent.

The sentence was more uncomfortable than an accusation.

Deiran studied the map again.

“Are you saying my company could construct a regional system without my knowing it?”

Oran answered.

“Not yet. You're missing two prerequisites. At your present rate you could have them within a year.”

“And if a subsidiary acquired them?”

“The Bridge would add them to the economic group, provided you had a real ability to control the capacity.”

Deiran smiled, this time without amusement.

“So the system knows more about my company than I do.”

Nerai looked at the map.

“On this one issue, perhaps it does.”

The Asteron case ended without sanctions.

The company opened its gravitational projects to independent oversight and combined them into one technology programme.

The greatest shock came later.

The Planetary Council commissioned a historical simulation.

It wanted to know what would have happened had the same technology arisen before the Third.

Analysts took the seventeen technological prerequisites and placed them into the old financial environment.

Thirty currencies.

Bank secrecy.

Funds with unknown ultimate owners.

Foundations.

Tax jurisdictions.

Trade secrets.

Different licensing regimes.

Limited information exchange between states.

Then they gave the model an assignment:

Assemble the capacity for a regional gravitational field so that no individual institution sees more than one-third of the project.

The AI found thousands of possibilities.

A manufacturing company in one state.

Financing through a fund in another.

Energy storage owned by a third group.

Thaeron material purchased through a trader.

Research contracts spread across universities.

Emitters registered as industrial handling devices.

Synchronisers recorded as part of energy infrastructure.

Every authority would see something.

None would see enough.

Nerai watched the simulation without speaking.

She knew the pattern far too well.

The colours were different.

The technology was different.

The mechanism remained.

Dividing one danger into a multitude of innocent parts.

Then the analysts ran the same assignment against the Bridge.

The model tried to separate ownership.

The Bridge linked ultimate owners.

It tried to divide purchases among subsidiaries.

The Bridge displayed the economic group.

It tried using a foundation.

The Bridge saw the source of its funding.

It tried financing part of the project with debt.

The Bridge added the lender and guarantees.

It tried leasing equipment instead of buying it.

The Bridge counted controlled capacity.

It tried using several states.

Currency no longer turned a border into a blind spot.

At sixty-eight per cent, the first weak signal appeared.

At seventy-seven, automatic oversight began.

At eighty-five, a duty to notify the technology authority arose.

At ninety-two, the system would not have authorised completion of critical purchases without the appropriate permit.

For a long time after the simulation ended, no one in the room spoke.

Daren Voltr sat beside Nerai.

“So this is your argument,” he said at last.

“Not mine.”

“Whose, then?”

Nerai pointed to the results.

“Physics.”

Voltr rubbed his face.

“Jesair began with UBI.”

“I know.”

“He spoke about a fair share.”

“I know.”

“Then we dealt with corruption. Taxes. Politics. War.”

He looked at the gravitational-field map.

“And now you're saying we need the same system to prevent someone from switching off gravity over half a continent one day.”

Nerai smiled.

“When you put it like that, it sounds rather excessive.”

“Is it excessive?”

She looked at the simulation results.

“No.”

The public learned about the possibility of a regional gravitational field only after the safety framework had been adopted.

Details remained restricted.

People knew what the technology could do.

They knew the general categories of capabilities it required.

But the precise field geometry, critical synchronisation conditions, and parameters from which a practical design might be derived were not released.

The debate was fierce.

Part of society wanted all gravitational technology owned exclusively by the state.

Scientists opposed that.

Others demanded complete disclosure of every device.

Industry warned that gravitational systems would soon become an ordinary part of transport and production.

In the end, Elarion decided to regulate capabilities according to scale.

A small manipulator remained an ordinary device.

Industrial generators were subject to technical registration.

Systems capable of higher field levels required permits.

When a capability approached a regional-scale effect, planetary oversight was automatically engaged.

The system's most important component did not concern the finished device.

The Bridge watched whether the prerequisites for creating it were emerging somewhere.

That changed the very concept of security.

Earlier civilisations protected weapons stores.

Elarion learned to watch for the emergence of the capability to create a weapon.

The Bridge did not need to know what a person was thinking.

Intention remained hidden in the mind.

Economic capability had physical consequences.

It required material.

Energy.

Machines.

Buildings.

People.

Transport.

Computing.

And all these things passed through the economy.

One evening, Nerai and Voltr remained alone after a meeting.

Nitra lay beyond the windows.

Transport lanes moved above the river and new gravitational cargo platforms passed between the buildings. A few years earlier, each would have looked like a miracle.

Now people scarcely noticed them.

Voltr watched one platform.

It was carrying a section of a bridge.

“I still think you've opened the door to something dangerous,” he said.

“What?”

“A system that knows what a person can do before they do it.”

Nerai was silent for a moment.

“It doesn't know that.”

“We just saw a table listing fourteen companies.”

“It knows what they are technically capable of. It doesn't know what they will do.”

“To someone you begin investigating, that difference may seem small.”

“Which is why we oversee the oversight.”

Voltr laughed.

“You have the same answer for everything.”

“Because the problem is always the same.”

“Power.”

“Yes.”

Voltr turned to her.

“What if we didn't have the Bridge?”

Nerai looked towards the city.

“With this technology?”

“Yes.”

She considered the question longer than Voltr expected.

“We'd have licences. Manufacturer inspections. Equipment registers. Security services. Serial numbers.”

“That doesn't sound hopeless.”

“It isn't.”

Nerai turned towards him.

“But someone who wanted to bypass the system would divide the project.”

Voltr fell silent.

“One company would order the emitters. Another the energy systems. A third the materials. A fourth the computing. A foundation would finance research. An investment fund would own part of production. Some of the people involved might have no idea what they were working on.”

“Like Arien.”

“Yes.”

Another cargo platform passed outside.

“The old system would look for the device,” Nerai continued. “The Bridge can see conditions coming together from which the device could be built.”

Voltr gazed at the city lights.

“And one day the technologies will be even more powerful.”

“Certainly.”

“More powerful than this?”

Nerai smiled.

“A hundred years ago, today's question would have seemed absurd.”

Voltr nodded.

“So transparent money, in the end, isn't chiefly about money.”

Nerai looked at him.

She had not expected that from him.

“Money was never only money.”

“What is it, then?”

Nerai watched the flowing lights on the far side of the river.

“It's a map of what a person can do in the physical world.”

Voltr was silent.

Nerai continued.

“With money you can buy food. A house. A ship. A factory. Research. Energy. Influence. An army. And now even a device that changes gravity.”

“So whoever sees the money sees power.”

“Part of it.”

“And whoever controls money controls power.”

“Which is why the Bridge must never be controlled by one person.”

Voltr smiled faintly.

“So in the end you did understand my old objections.”

“I always understood them.”

“You simply ignored them.”

“No. That's why we made access visible.”

Voltr laughed.

This time genuinely.

“You can't win against you.”

“You told me that years ago.”

A few years later, gravitational systems had become part of everyday life.

Heavy cargo moved above roads.

Orbital transport became cheaper.

Cities appeared on Thaeron where construction would previously have made no economic sense.

Hospitals used weak fields to treat people whose bodies could not bear their own weight.

Researchers began thinking about ships bound for other stars.

The same technology that could have killed millions opened a way towards a world Elarion could not previously have afforded.

Nerai saw no contradiction in that.

Fire could warm a house or burn a city.

Energy could keep a hospital alive or power a weapon.

Artificial intelligence could seek a cure or a more efficient way to kill.

The more technology Elarion mastered, the less important it became to ask whether an invention was itself good or evil.

The decisive questions were who acquired the ability to use it on a large scale, who knew about that ability, and who could stop such power.

Gravitational fields finally transformed the public debate about the Bridge.

Until then, much of the population still regarded transparent money as an economic reform.

It helped calculate the basic share.

Limited tax evasion.

Exposed corruption.

Made covert financing of political power more difficult.

After the discovery of the regional gravitational field, the system's meaning shifted.

People understood one simple thing.

If a civilisation possesses technologies with which an individual, company, or state can affect millions of people, it must be able to recognise the emergence of such power before it is complete.

A secret thought by itself weighed nothing.

To put it into practice, someone had to make the world move.

And the world moved through resources.

Someone had to pay for the factory.

Someone had to supply the materials.

Someone provided the energy.

Someone built the machines.

Someone paid the scientists.

Someone rented the premises.

Someone financed years of work during which a project did not yet look dangerous at all.

Every major technology left an economic trace long before it was first switched on.

Old Elarion divided those traces between banks, states, and currencies.

New Elarion could see them side by side.

Only then did many people understand Jesair's sentence more broadly than they had in the days of the Nitra forum.

Value must not walk in shadow.

For value was not merely wealth.

It was the capacity to change the world.

And a civilisation beginning to acquire the ability to change gravity itself could no longer afford not to know in whose hands that ability was growing.

LESSONS FOR EARTH

An attentive reader will surely have noticed that the problems described on Elarion are also problems of present-day Earth. I am convinced that they can be addressed safely and under proper control in a way similar to what happened on Elarion: by introducing a unified, centralised, transparent settlement information system across the entire planet. I will briefly list these problems and explain in a few sentences what impact such a system could have on their solutions.

The Problem of the Uncontrollable Growth of Technological Power on the Planet

Scientific progress is increasingly pushing humanity into a situation where technologies such as artificial intelligence and biotechnology can be combined to build and unleash a pandemic threat across the entire planet, secretly and at minimal cost. The cost of establishing a clandestine biological laboratory can be in the low millions of dollars—an amount that a sufficiently successful teenage YouTuber can earn today. In a modern factory, if you walk into a warehouse and ask how many units of a particular component are in stock and where they are stored, the warehouse manager can answer with a glance at the information system. I am convinced that managing a modern society should work in much the same way. When necessary, society's leadership should be able to answer, with a single look into the settlement system, who is using a particular type of artificial intelligence while also being connected through financial flows to an entity that has ordered a certain kind of biological equipment. The ability to answer such a question could make the difference between the survival and the destruction of civilisation. The myth that politicians or those who govern society should have as little power as possible holds only as long as financial and property flows remain invisible. In a transparent society, a politician would have no chance to conceal ulterior motives. The moment an intention to abuse power manifested itself in their financial flows, it would be exposed. Transparency would serve as a safeguard, helping to ensure far more suitable political leaders than those we have on the planet today.

If financial flows were transparent, it would be impossible to build a biological laboratory in secret, because we would all have much greater visibility into what others were doing. That is an answer to the question of how to manage ten billion people on one planet without allowing them to devour one another. Everyone could

potentially oversee everyone else through a standardised, safeguarded mechanism embedded in the very core of society, ensuring the quality of that oversight.

Corruption and the Inefficient State

If you ask a modern economist what the worst problems facing humanity are, one of the leading answers will certainly concern the fact that states have still not learned to operate as efficiently as businesses. In a transparent society with a single currency, a new Putin would never be able to rise to power through corruption, because corruption would simply become impossible.

Any abuse of power would be visible almost instantly and punished immediately. States would gradually begin to function far more effectively after such a change. Hospitals and motorways would be built faster than in China. Overpriced public contracts would cease to exist, because all it would take would be one person who knew that something was overpriced, checked it in the system, and immediately alerted the whole world through standard escalation mechanisms.

Problems Related to Tax Evasion

Taxes can typically operate in two regimes. Either they are high, leading people to avoid paying them by every possible means, so little revenue is collected; politicians then tend to raise rates even more, causing collection to fall further. Or rates are relatively acceptable, people are willing to pay, much more is collected, and rates can consequently be lowered further. Even worse than high taxes are taxes that may be lower but offer many ways to avoid them. Nothing distorts the business environment more than a bad, non-transparent tax system full of loopholes. In my view, reasonable and bearable taxes should not exceed twenty-five per cent, even including VAT. The amount of tax and social contributions paid, for example, on the total labour cost of an employee in Slovakia is outrageous. The effective tax burden reaches a little over fifty-five to sixty per cent if VAT and excise duties are included. Slovak politicians have also created exemptions that, for example, allow owners of limited-liability companies with turnover of up to EUR 100,000 to pay only ten per cent tax. This has naturally caused a huge movement of people away from employment and sole proprietorships towards limited-liability companies.

I am convinced that if there were no ways of avoiding taxes, a twenty-five per cent tax and contribution burden would be more than sufficient to finance the state. If money were transparent, we could also see how much tax each person had paid.

Paying taxes, and thereby contributing to society's functioning, would become a matter of social prestige.

Ending Armed Conflicts and Immediately Exposing Financial Injustice

When money in society is transparent, it will never be possible to carry out something like what Hamas did in autumn 2023: prepare military attacks using weapons acquired through dubious channels. In a transparent system, it would not be possible simply to enter *purchase of medium-range missiles* as the purpose of a payment. Moreover, that point of escalation would never have been reached, because the taking of Palestinian territory by Israelis—brazenly seizing what does not belong to them, like monkeys—would not be possible in a transparent society in the first place. Once money is transparent, every scoundrel who now takes advantage of its veil of secrecy will lose that protection, and their actions will be subject to public judgement.

Fair and Transparent Introduction of UBI – Universal Basic Income

The planet is now in a situation in which the AI revolution will fundamentally reshape the social order regardless of VisibleMoney. I think a substantial proportion of the population—many tens of per cent—will become unemployable because of artificial intelligence. Mass unrest driven by the existential problems of people without work will threaten the planet. We will have to find a fair way to redistribute the value produced by artificial intelligence among people without income. Deciding who should receive how much in a transparent, adequate, and retrospectively verifiable manner simply requires a system at society's core from which we can see where and how resources are distributed. This is not a task that can be satisfactorily solved without such information. The introduction of a centralised settlement system across the planet would make entire branches of banking unnecessary, because alternative currencies and conventional monetary intermediation would no longer be needed. Such an industry would probably be horrified at first, but we must remember that AI will fundamentally change the social order in any event. I believe that after the AI transformation hardly anything in society will remain as it was. What emerges after all these changes will be radically different from today's situation: a society built on new technological foundations, functioning fairly and transparently for every

person. Once the upheaval has settled to some extent, people will begin searching for new meanings and fulfilment in life. New technologies—in the form of highly advanced virtual reality and human–machine interfaces—will play a decisive role in this process. People will spend most of their time in virtual worlds offering such a spectrum of experiences that primary physical reality will look colourless beside them. Its role will be to keep people alive so they can experience virtual content with as little difficulty as possible.

Challenges of Eternal Life – Transparently Addressing the Planet's Population Problems

I believe humanity is only a few steps away from mastering the biological mechanisms of ageing and regeneration to such an extent that diseases and ageing itself will cease to cause death.

If people can potentially live for ever, a serious problem of population sustainability will arise. In such a system, the number of people will begin to grow exponentially. Once someone is born, the planet will have to guarantee them dignified living conditions for a potentially unlimited period. It is highly likely that tendencies will emerge to discourage people from having children, because it would place an enormous burden on the planet. Personally, I believe Earth has the capacity, if its resources are used efficiently, to support populations many times—perhaps ten times—larger than today's. But if people continue wanting children, this will have to be addressed through settlement of space. First, reasonably usable planets in the Solar System, and later, with advances in space technology, probably interstellar travel. Data from the central settlement system would also play a primary role in calculating how much additional population the planet can support over the long term.

POLITICAL MOVEMENT: https://HumanityUnitedMovement.org

Since 2019, after almost twenty years of thought and consideration, I have been working on an information system—an online application that allows any internet user to register and then prepare an asset declaration within the system. In the next step, under certain conditions, the data can be audited by other users of the portal.

The application is available at https://app.visiblemoney.org.

The entire idea rests on a simple principle. If someone allows their complete assets to be examined through such an online audit, there is reason to believe their declaration is accurate and complete. Otherwise, it would take only one user who knew a little more to expose the discrepancy on the application's online forum in a fraction of a second, where the whole world could see it immediately.

The first version of the application was ready by Christmas 2023. I had hoped to interest an honest politician ahead of Slovakia's presidential election, which I expected in February 2024. But the application met with indifference—even the part of the political spectrum that appeared, on paper, to have clean finances had difficulty disclosing assets in this way. The problem probably was not the application. A candidate whose assistant communicated with me for a while behaved rather strangely when journalists asked questions about his asset declaration. After a few more attempts to promote the application, including among members of the European Parliament, I realised that if I wanted politics to operate on such principles, I would have to establish my own political movement, one that followed them from day zero.

That was how the idea of Humanity United Movement arose.

Common Sense as the Foundation of Politics

The movement's basic principle will be common sense. By this, I do not mean some vague human ability to intuitively recognise the correct solution. I mean, above all, a way of thinking in which we try to understand the essence of a problem, gather available information, evaluate different possible solutions, and choose the one most likely to produce the desired outcome.

Too often in politics, an opinion is formed first and arguments are sought only afterward to support it. Politicians learn what their voters want to hear and adapt their statements accordingly. Instead of solving problems, they devote themselves primarily to ensuring that their solutions look good in the media and earn political points.

I consider this approach a fundamental mistake. If we want society to function better, we must be prepared to consider solutions we may dislike at first sight. We must be willing to admit that someone who disagrees with us may be right, and that our own convictions may rest on false assumptions.

That is why I would like Humanity United Movement to be consistently anti-populist. This does not mean advocating unpopular solutions merely to be different. It means that a solution's popularity will not be the decisive criterion of its correctness.

Every major political decision should be supported by arguments that can be examined publicly. We should be able to explain what problem we are trying to solve, what alternatives we considered, why we selected a particular approach, and what risks it entails. Where possible, we should model or experimentally test the consequences of decisions in advance.

We must also recognise that not every problem has an unambiguous answer. Experts sometimes disagree, data may be missing, and competing solutions offer different benefits and drawbacks. In such situations, admitting uncertainty is not weakness. Pretending to certainty we do not possess is weakness.

It will also be important to evaluate decisions afterward. If a measure proves ineffective, we should not defend it merely because we introduced it. We should change it or abandon it.

The goal, then, is not to create a group of people who regard themselves as infallible bearers of truth. Quite the opposite. I would like to create an environment in which systematically questioning one's own opinions becomes a natural part of decision-making.

Political Academy

One thing I find missing in contemporary politics is systematic preparation for governing a state.

Imagine we wanted to build a house. We would probably not rely on the person managing construction to learn everything necessary only as the work proceeded. We

would expect them to understand basic construction principles, assess the work of specialists, and recognise when something was wrong.

Yet we often have no comparable expectations of those who govern a state. People enter public office with good intentions, communication skills, or business experience, but may lack sufficient knowledge of how the economy, healthcare, education, and other areas for which they will be responsible actually function.

Of course, no one can be an expert in everything. I would not expect a politician to diagnose diseases better than a doctor or design curricula better than an experienced educator. I would, however, expect them to understand the basic principles of each field, assess the quality of expert arguments, and grasp the broader consequences of their decisions.

That is why I want Humanity United Movement to establish its own political academy.

Its primary audience would be young people who are open to transparency, interested in public affairs, and might one day want to take part in governing society. They would not need to decide beforehand whether they wanted to become members of parliament, ministers, mayors, or specialists in public administration. What matters is their interest in understanding how the state works and how it might be governed better.

The academy would provide systematic education in every major area of state functioning. Students would learn the fundamentals of economics, public finance, healthcare, education, law, international relations, security, energy, and the environment. Particular attention would be given to public administration, organisational management, working with data, and evaluating the outcomes of political decisions.

Most importantly, however, students should learn from the best available knowledge in each field. The purpose would not be to memorise a few textbook definitions. They should understand how systems work, which factors shape their outcomes, and what options states have for addressing specific problems.

For example, I imagine a student being asked to evaluate a proposed healthcare reform. They would need to understand how healthcare is financed, what mainly drives its costs, the role of prevention, how treatment effectiveness is measured, and what a systemic change might mean for patients, healthcare professionals, and public finances.

A student could similarly analyse pensions, tax reform, the education system, or the introduction of artificial intelligence into public administration. The programme

would not be purely theoretical. It would include practical case studies, simulations, and the preparation of original public-policy proposals.

Continual updating of educational material would be extremely important. Science and technology advance, and knowledge considered the best available twenty years ago may no longer be the best today. The academy would therefore need to follow developments in each field and work with specialists capable of communicating current knowledge.

Students would also learn to distinguish what is strongly supported by science from matters of professional debate and from questions that are fundamentally political or value-based. Even the best expert cannot decide every social value priority on behalf of society. But experts can help explain the consequences of the available choices.

A separate part of the academy would therefore focus on methods of decision-making. Students would learn to work with uncertainty, recognise errors of reasoning, compare alternatives, and test their assumptions. They should learn that sound decision-making does not mean always having an immediate answer; it means knowing how to reach the best answer available using the means at hand.

I imagine the academy being open to people who are not members of the movement. Its mission should not be to create an ideologically uniform group of politicians. It should offer education that enables people to understand society more deeply regardless of their political views.

If we succeed in building such an institution, it could gradually produce people prepared to take responsibility for different areas of public life. Not because they would automatically know everything better than others, but because they would have a solid foundation, know how to work with specialists, and understand the consequences of their decisions.

I believe this is one way to improve the quality of politics over the long term. Rather than merely waiting for capable people to appear, we can systematically create an environment that prepares them.

A Global Movement for a Global World

Another fundamental principle of Humanity United Movement will be its global character.

Our present political system is based primarily on nation-states. Each state has its own government, interests, and political priorities. There is good reason for such an

arrangement. People need institutions that understand their local circumstances, language, culture, and particular needs.

The problem arises when national interests conflict with the interests of humanity as a whole, or when problems cannot be effectively solved at the level of one state.

Climate change, pandemics, international corruption, security risks, and the consequences of technological progress do not recognise national borders. Artificial intelligence will not respect national borders either. Its development and economic consequences will affect people across the planet.

I therefore consider it important to create a political movement that thinks globally from its very beginning.

Humanity United Movement should gradually establish organisations in countries around the world. Each would operate within local conditions and respect the country's democratic rules. At the same time, all would share common principles: common sense, transparency, responsibility, and an effort to solve problems in the broader interests of humanity.

I envisage national organisations cooperating on issues for which coordination offers significant advantages. This would create opportunities to exchange experience, compare policy outcomes, and seek solutions that have proved effective in different countries.

Being global does not, to me, mean having one centre decide everything. On the contrary, the organisation must be able to distinguish issues that need a common approach from those better decided locally.

National branches would therefore need sufficient autonomy, as well as mechanisms ensuring that they adhere to the movement's shared principles. Major disagreements would be resolved transparently, with opportunities to criticise and review decisions.

The goal would not be to create another power structure competing with others for maximum influence. It would be to build an international network of people able to cooperate on problems whose solutions exceed the capabilities of individual states.

Transparency as the Foundation of Trust

Transparency of politicians' assets will be one of Humanity United Movement's most distinctive characteristics.

From people who want to decide how public money is used and influence the lives of others, I would expect an exceptional willingness to show what they own, how they acquired it, and what financial relationships may influence their decisions.

Members of the movement would therefore have to publish their asset declarations through the VisibleMoney project and submit them to independent verification according to pre-established rules. The scope of scrutiny would need to correspond to each person's level of public responsibility.

Such a system should not amount merely to filling out a form. Its purpose would be to enable verification of information and draw attention to discrepancies that require explanation. The public would thus have more information on which to assess the credibility of its representatives.

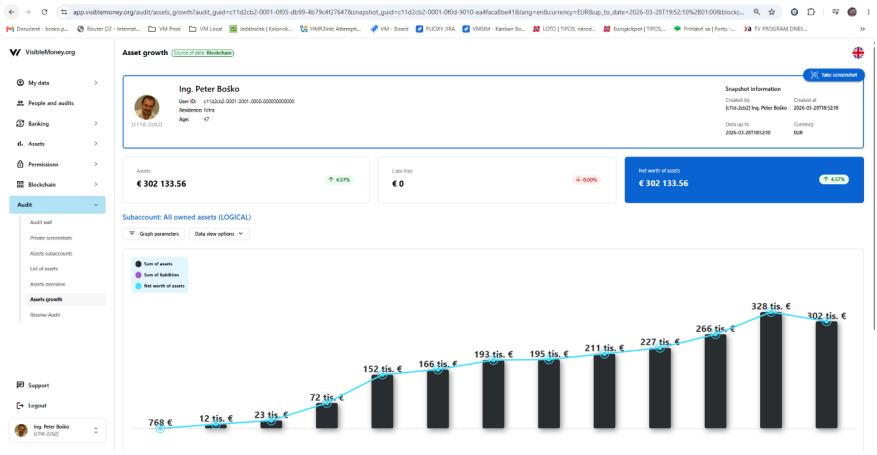
Transparency alone, of course, does not guarantee that someone will be a good politician. A person may have acquired their wealth honestly and still make bad decisions. They may be an expert yet unable to cooperate. They may have good intentions but insufficient knowledge.

That is why I consider it important to combine transparency with the political academy and rigorous evaluation of public officials' performance. Each tool addresses a different part of the problem. Transparency makes financial interests easier to scrutinise, education strengthens professional preparation, and performance assessment reveals whether decisions actually work.

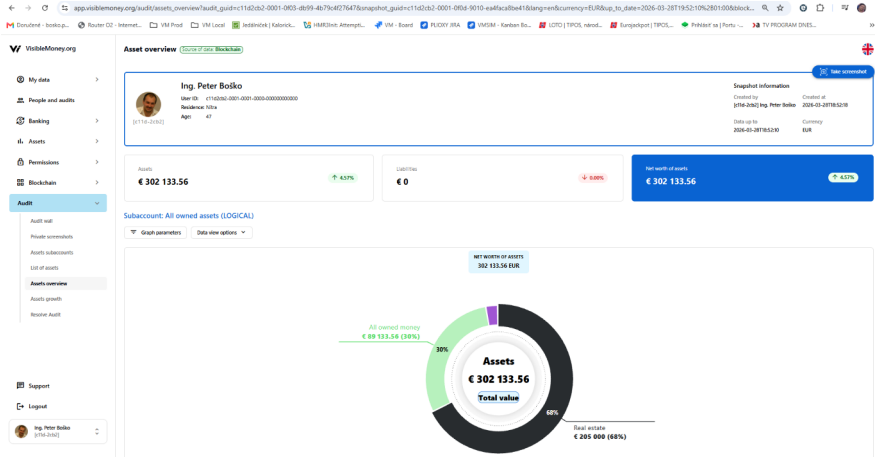
At the same time, I would not want political transparency gradually to become a demand for every aspect of every person's life to be made public. Privacy matters, and scrutiny must be proportionate to its purpose. Public responsibility warrants stricter rules than ordinary private life.

One principle must remain absolute: neither the movement's founder nor its leadership will be outside the system of oversight. If transparency is to be credible, it must apply to those who advocate it too.

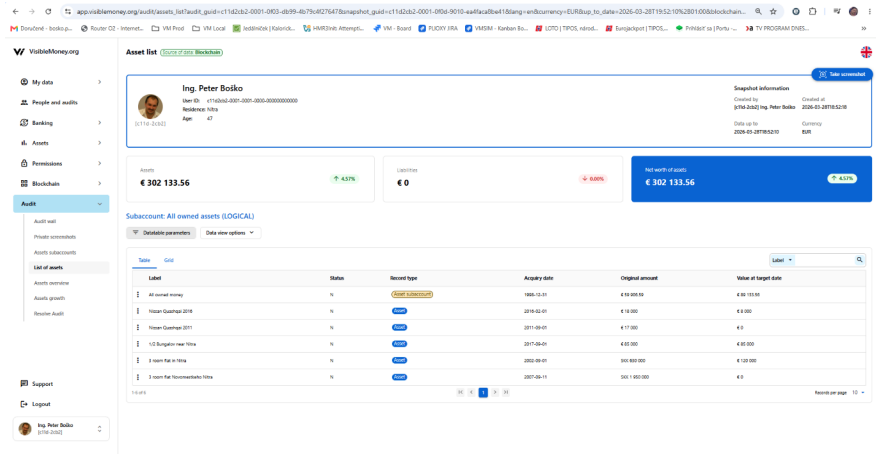
Overview of how my assets have grown over time in the VisibleMoney application.



Overview of the structure of assets in the application.



Individual asset records.



Technological Progress and the Future of Work

One of the greatest challenges humanity will face in the coming decades is the development of artificial intelligence and automation.

Technology has the potential to increase productivity dramatically, reduce the cost of many services, and enable solutions that are currently too expensive or technically difficult. At the same time, it may fundamentally alter the labour market and the ways people earn a living.

If machines and intelligent systems become capable of doing an ever larger share of the work people do today, we will have to address how the benefits of that progress should be distributed.

At present, most people's income is directly or indirectly connected to their work. But if a large share of production can be achieved with substantially less human labour, traditional mechanisms of income distribution may prove insufficient.

We do not know precisely how quickly these changes will take place or what form they will take. I do, however, consider it irresponsible to ignore the possibility that their social consequences will be profound.

One potential solution that will need careful examination is universal basic income. Its goal would be to ensure the material necessities of life even for people for whom traditional employment is no longer available.

Such an approach, however, raises many questions. How would it be financed? How large should it be? How should it relate to existing benefits? What would be its effects on the incentive to work, consumption, prices, and public finances?

We should not seek answers based on ideological assumptions. They should come from economic models, experiments, pilot programmes, and ongoing assessment of results.

Here all three fundamental principles of Humanity United Movement can come together. Common sense will help us examine competing solutions, transparency will make public resource flows easier to oversee, and global cooperation will help address problems that cross national borders.

Equality of Opportunity and Human Dignity

I would like Humanity United Movement to affirm that a person's worth does not depend on where they were born, their ancestry, skin colour, sex, or sexual orientation.

People enter the world in vastly different circumstances. Some grow up with access to quality education, safety, and opportunities to develop their abilities. Others must overcome obstacles they did not choose and that may severely limit their prospects.

I consider it important to build a society in which everyone has an opportunity to develop their potential. That does not mean everyone must achieve the same results. It means removing unnecessary barriers and supporting people who cannot access basic opportunities without reasonable assistance.

This approach includes quality education, accessible healthcare, effective help for those in need, and fair conditions for enterprise and employment.

We must also respect equal dignity when addressing more difficult social questions in which values and interests conflict. Rather than automatically rejecting different opinions, we should examine their arguments, consequences, and compatibility with fundamental human rights.

This does not mean every position is equally correct or that we must agree on everything. It means we should not judge people by prejudice and that society's rules must be justifiable to the people they affect.

Long-Term Thinking and Responsibility for the Future

Another principle of the movement will be a commitment to considering long-term consequences when making decisions.

Politics is often influenced by electoral cycles. A measure that delivers an immediate benefit may be more politically attractive than one whose benefits emerge only after ten or twenty years. That does not mean it is better for society.

When deciding about public finances, energy, the environment, education, or technological development, we should also consider the consequences future generations will bear.

We will support scientific research, technological innovation, and solutions that improve quality of life without needless waste of resources. At the same time, we must avoid the assumption that technological progress will automatically solve every problem. If we rely on future inventions, we must also prepare alternatives in case they arrive too late or fail to work as expected.

The same approach should apply to international conflicts. Wars often cause enormous human and economic losses whose consequences persist for generations. I therefore consider it important to seek mechanisms that reduce the risk of conflict, support diplomacy, and protect nations' right to determine their own futures.

How the Movement Itself Should Function

Humanity United Movement will need to be built on the same principles it seeks to promote in society.

It is not enough to demand transparency from other parties' politicians. We must practise it ourselves. It is not enough to speak of expertise if we favour personal loyalty over ability when selecting candidates. Nor is it enough to call for democratic scrutiny if criticism of our own leadership is impossible.

Clear rules will therefore be needed for choosing and removing leaders, scrutinising finances, resolving conflicts of interest, and making decisions on fundamental programme issues.

A global movement must be able to cooperate across borders while respecting local democratic processes. Shared principles will form its identity, but particular measures must be adapted to the circumstances of individual societies.

It will also be important to make room for disagreement within the movement. If someone identifies a flaw in the programme or undesirable consequences of a decision, they should not be treated as an enemy. They should have an opportunity to present their arguments and have them properly considered.

No organisation is immune to ambitions for power, groupthink, or mistaken decisions. The difference between a well-functioning and a poorly functioning organisation is not that one makes no mistakes. It is how effectively it can recognise, correct, and prevent their recurrence.

That is why I want Humanity United Movement to be an organisation capable of scrutinising itself.

What Are We Actually Trying to Achieve?

If I had to summarise the entire project in one idea, I would say we are trying to create the conditions in which humanity can make better use of its own abilities.

We have scientists capable of investigating the workings of nature. We have technologies capable of automating more and more activities. We have economic systems capable of creating enormous value. We have access to information beyond anything earlier generations could have dreamed of.

Yet we often fail to turn these possibilities into responsible decisions, high-quality public services, and dignified living conditions for as many people as possible.

I do not think there is one single cause, or that one application, party, or reform could solve it. We face a set of interconnected problems requiring better institutions, stronger education, more transparent decisions, and the capacity to cooperate.

VisibleMoney is one specific tool for improving scrutiny of financial interests in public life. The political academy is a means of preparing people to make responsible decisions. Humanity United Movement is intended to create the political and organisational framework capable of connecting and advancing these and other tools.

Each component has its own role. None is enough by itself.

I do not expect us to create a perfect system or every proposal we make to be correct. But I do expect us to explain decisions openly, acknowledge mistakes, and systematically search for better solutions.

If a project like this is to mean anything, it must begin with people willing to take responsibility, prepare for it, and submit their actions to scrutiny.

And it must remain open even to those who disagree with us. The goal is not to persuade all humanity to join one political organisation. It is to contribute to humanity's ability to solve shared problems more effectively.

That is why the movement is called Humanity United Movement.

Not because we are already united in our views, but because despite all our differences, we share a future and responsibility for the world we leave behind.

An Invitation to a New Generation

If you are young and sometimes feel that the world could work much better than it does, perhaps now is the time to stop merely watching and begin thinking about what you can do.

You do not need to be an experienced politician. You do not need degrees in economics, law, or international relations. You do not need an answer to every question. What matters is the desire to understand the world, a willingness to learn, the ability to question your own opinions, and the courage to take responsibility for matters that affect you.

Those are precisely the people I would like to invite into Humanity United Movement.

Imagine politics you do not have to enter only after twenty years of career-building and making connections. Politics for which you can begin preparing today. Politics in which you have a chance to understand how a state functions, speak with specialists from different fields, analyse social problems, and gradually prepare for responsibilities you may one day assume.

That is why we want to establish a political academy that will help prepare a new generation of people capable of understanding the complex problems of modern society. We do not want you to accept the movement's founders' opinions without question. We want you to learn to think independently, work with facts, recognise sound arguments, and not be afraid to say someone is wrong—even when that person is a leader of our own movement.

There is, however, one condition that is meant to distinguish us from conventional politics.

If we expect transparency from politicians, we must begin with ourselves.

Everyone who decides to join Humanity United Movement must be prepared to declare their assets openly from the beginning through the VisibleMoney project and

submit their declaration to the prescribed scrutiny. Not only when standing for election. Not only after attaining an important office. From the very start.

Not because owning property is itself suspicious. Quite the contrary. Wealth acquired honestly is no cause for shame. But if we want to create a political environment in which financial interests are not hidden from the public, we must be willing to lead by example.

Transparency also does not mean considering ourselves better people than those who choose not to join. It means voluntarily accepting a higher standard of scrutiny and allowing others to judge whether we actually live up to it.

Perhaps you are wondering whether a small movement can matter at all alongside enormous political parties, states, and global economic interests.

But every great change must begin somewhere. We need not know today exactly what the world will look like in thirty years. We do need to begin creating institutions, rules, and ways of thinking that will allow us to meet its future challenges better than we can today.

If we manage to build an organisation where people come together to learn, act transparently, cooperate across countries, and revise their opinions in the light of new knowledge, that will itself be a concrete step in the right direction.

It does not matter whether you one day become a member of parliament, minister, public-policy specialist, entrepreneur, or simply someone interested in how society works. Everyone can contribute in a different way.

If this idea speaks to you, I invite you to take the first step. Register with the VisibleMoney project, become familiar with its principles, and consider joining Humanity United Movement. Join knowing that you will not merely demand change from others; you will be prepared to begin with yourself.

You can find the registration form at:

https://app.visiblemoney.org/register

I do not ask for your blind trust. I ask you to consider this idea carefully, ask uncomfortable questions, and decide for yourself whether it is worth devoting your time and abilities to it.

Perhaps your question will expose a mistake we have overlooked. Perhaps your idea will help solve a problem we cannot yet resolve. And perhaps one day you will be among those deciding how our society will function.

The future is not merely something we inherit from previous generations. It is also something we create for those who follow us through the decisions we make.

If we want it to be better, we must be willing to begin working on it today.
Humanity United Movement — one humanity, a shared future.