Go On Their Count

Fourth Wall Gaming

Prelude

Nine hundred and seventy-five years ago, a species with one star spent everything it had on robot ships, and sent them out at a twentieth of the speed of light, and did not expect to live to see any of it work.

Each ship carried half of a pair. The other half stayed home. A pair is made together, in one place, in one go, in a silence colder and darker and stiller than anything in nature, and if anything at all touches it while it is being made you have four metres of extremely expensive scrap and you begin again. They attempted four thousand, one hundred and nineteen. Three thousand and eleven worked.

Where a ship arrived, a door opened.

A door is instant. You step up onto the plate, and you are eight light years away, and the only reason you know you crossed is that the air is different. Nothing else goes. Not light, not a signal, not a word, not a gram of cargo — only a person, and whatever a person is holding. Inside a system, radio works and everybody forgets it. *Between* stars, the only thing that moves is somebody walking.

Which means a letter from Sirius to Earth travels at the speed of a fifteen-year-old getting round to it.

Because that is the other half of it: only the young can cross. A crossing costs the body something that does not come back, and it is spent fast, and by about twenty-two a person is finished. So the entire traffic of human space — every message, every account, every doctor wanted three doors away, every old woman who wants to see her sister — rides on children. They are called first-throughs. They are paid, they are housed, they are nobody's child, and at fifteen they are the most useful people alive.

Carrying another person through costs more than crossing alone. Not an inconvenience; days off the end of a life, counted. A child is cheap to carry and an adult is dear, and anybody over about twenty-

two cannot cross at all, not once, not ever, and must be carried by somebody young or stay where they are for good.

Twenty-eight systems hang off that, and nobody will ever build another door, because the thing that would pay for one cannot be gathered through the doors there already are. So the Causeway was not built by anybody now alive. It was inherited, and the parts of it that can be reached are maintained.

The doors do not always stay where they are. A door is pinned not to a place but to a depth — to the sum of all the gravity around it — and once in a while that sum has more than one answer, and the far mouth goes somewhere else. It is called straying. It has happened often enough that there is a word for it, and a slate four metres wide on the gallery wall at Sirius with every door in human space written on it in chalk, and where it currently goes, and when somebody last looked.

In the spring of year six hundred and two a door at Kapteyn's Star stopped answering, and eleven thousand people went with it, and the line on the slate has never been changed.

The star is still there. You can see it from a corridor.

Chapter 1 — The Kettle

❖

Day nought · dawn

The ready room smelled of hot metal off the hall below, and of tea that had been wrong for six hundred years.

Nine doors going at once under the window, nine queues, the noise coming up through the floor like weather. A long table. A kit rail. The kettle.

Calloway had her back to the room and four people were telling her she was wrong about it. One of them was standing on the table. One was a cairn, low and plated and immovable near the hotplate, who had been there some hours.

"—because you *scald* it. Every morning. We have told you every morning for a year."

"I was doing this before your mother qualified."

BlingBling was on the kit rail above the suits, going bright-dark-bright at the speed that meant she was laughing, and the boy on the table kept losing his thread because of it.

Then Calloway turned round and saw Lint in the doorway, and her whole face changed.

"Lin." She put the pot down. "There she is. Thirty-four and still upright." To the room, not looking away: "This one swims. In water. Outdoors."

The one on the table said, "In *what*?"

"Sit down, don't let them give you the tea, and tell me how the elbow is — because the log says you went through Procyon twice on Tuesday and I know exactly what that housing does to people."

"Fine," said Lint. "The elbow's fine."

Calloway gave her a look that filed that under *answers I will come back to*, and went back to the pot.

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Lint tipped her chin a fraction at the kit rail and flicked two fingers — *what's going on* — and BlingBling answered before her hand was down, because she had been waiting to be asked.

> He is trying to ask her something. Twenty minutes. Four run-ups. The tea is not the subject.

The cairn by the hotplate said, in that unhurried way, "He has been building to it since the night watch. We are all very invested."

"*Thank* you, Ossuary," said the boy on the table.

And Calloway, pouring, not turning round: "Ask me properly or get down, Pell, the pair of you are making the room strange."

So Lint asked him directly what he was talking about, which is not the same as taking the hint, and Pell went a deeper shade of pink and said it fast, at the table rather than at anybody.

"I want to go on the Wolf Gate rota. Permanent. Not the rotation — the standing run."

Somebody by the kit rail whistled, because the Wolf Gate is a dull door and nobody asks for it.

"My mother's at Ladder," he said. "And my brother. He's six. I get out there twice a year on the rotation and he's a different kid every time, he doesn't—" He stopped, and shrugged, and went back to the middle distance. "That's it. That's the whole speech. It was better at four in the morning."

Calloway had not turned round. She had been pouring the same pot for about fifteen seconds longer than pouring takes.

"Yes," she said.

"I had — there's more of it—"

"I'm sure there is. The answer's yes, Pell, it was yes before you got on the table. You're on the standing run from the next rota. Go and tell your mother."

⁂

Then she set a mug down in front of Lint. It was, demonstrably, scalded.

"Drink that and stop encouraging them." A slate beside it. "Procyon again, I'm afraid. Mina Haral's coming back and somebody has to go and get her — she's a reader, she's eighty-one, and she is not crossing without a first-through who'll be patient with her. Five light years, shortest hop on the Causeway, you'll be back before the watch turns."

Chapter 2 — Five Light Years

❖

Day nought · first watch

The dressing room. Everything went in the locker — boots, the lot, because nothing dead crosses and never has. Only the membrane stayed, which is alive and grown to you and the single exception there has ever been. Hers was two years old and starting to cloud across the shoulders, which is thirty-four crossings showing.

And there was the half-second with nothing in it — BlingBling gone, not quiet but *absent*, the way a tooth is absent — and then she was back, blazing green all over Lint's shoulder, saying the thing she says every single time.

Still here. Still here. Still here.

Procyon smelled different. Colder air, and something citrus they put through the scrubbers. The boots on that side were stiff and square-toed and a size generous, and she would be giving them back in an hour.

Mina Haral was waiting on the bench, already dressed, with a bag on her knees and her hands folded on top of it. Eighty-one. Thin as paper. She looked up and smiled like Lint was late.

"You'll be the Garden girl. Good. Sit down a minute before we do this — not for me. For you."

She looked at Lint properly, which at her age involved turning her whole head, and her eyes went to the shoulders of the membrane and stayed there.

"Thirty-four. Mm. You're quick, then. They work you."

Then she counted it off on fingers like dry sticks. "Right. Here's how we do this, and you'll forgive an old woman for saying it out loud, because the ones who don't say it out loud are the ones who get careless. It takes minutes, not seconds. You hold it and you don't hurry it. I'll be heavier than you expect and I will not help you. And if it starts going wrong at any point, you stop, and you put me back down on this bench, and we try again tomorrow."

A beat. "Say it back to me."

Lint said it back. All four.

"Good. Most of them get the first three." Mina patted the warm bag on her knees. "The fourth is the one they argue with, and I have had two argue with me, and I did not travel with either of them again."

She got up — slowly, one hand on the bench, waving off the one Lint offered — and went to stand in front of the housing.

"I'll tell you what I tell all of them. You're not carrying a passenger. You're carrying the door. I'm just what's in your arms while you do it."

BlingBling had gone absolutely still on Lint's collarbone. Not dark. *Still*, which is a different thing and much rarer.

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She took Lint's arm. She was, exactly as promised, heavier than she looked.

And it did not take.

She knew it before she was two steps in. A crossing for one is nothing — a step and a change of air. This was like pushing a door against a wind on the other side of it: the field was there, she had hold of it, and it would not *open* for two. It gave, and set, and gave again.

Mina Haral was a weight on her arms and she did not help, exactly as advertised, because helping is the thing that gets people hurt. Her eyes were shut. Her hands were folded.

And BlingBling, who had not shown a single colour since the bench, flared once — hard, white, right at the edge of vision, which is not a word in any vocabulary the two of them had ever built. It was just an alarm.

The bench was four steps back. Mina had told her what to do. Mina had also told her she'd watched two people argue with her about it.

Since when do we give up half way.

She pushed, and the door did the thing nobody at the Yards can teach you, because you cannot practise it: it stopped being a door she was holding open and became a thing that was holding *her*. The set went out of it all at once. Her arms were still full of Mina and the floor was still under her and none of that was any help at all.

Then she let go of the door.

That was the only decision she actually made, and she made it in about a fifth of a second, and it was the right one — and letting go of a door you are halfway through is like stepping off a stair that isn't there.

The floor came up and hit both of them.

She was on her back on the Procyon side with Mina Haral half across her chest and the issue tunic torn at the shoulder, and the tallyman was already shouting for a hall doctor and three people were running. Mina was breathing. Her eyes were open. There was blood from her nose, a thin bright line of it, and one of her wrists was wrong.

Lint's arms had no strength in them at all. Everything from the elbows down was somebody else's. The clouding went all the way up her forearms now and she could see it from there, and she had never been able to see it before.

Mina Haral turned her head — slowly, the whole head, the way she does — and looked at her.

"Good girl," she said. "You let go."

⁂

Two doors down was a four-bed infirmary with three beds empty.

"There she is," said Mina, and sounded pleased. "The girl who dropped me."

"I'm sorry." It came out flatter than Lint meant. "I should have put you down. You told me and I didn't and I'm sorry."

Mina considered this with her head on one side. "Yes. You should. And you did, in the end, about a second later than was ideal — which is roughly where I'd put most of them, so don't go making a career out of it."

She shifted the bag an inch, which seemed to be how she thinks.

"I was turned back at a hall when I was twenty-two. In Alpha Centauri, by a doctor younger than me, who was very kind about it." A pause. "I have been paying children to carry me ever since, because I would not stop working, and I have never once pretended that is a clean thing to do."

She looked up — the whole head.

"Forty-one times. I know every name. Today's was free, and it went wrong, and you are the only one of them who has come down the corridor to say so."

Her good hand found Lint's and tapped it twice, briskly, the way you'd settle an account.

"Go home. Tell Calloway it was my fault and my figures, because it was. And come back for me in three days, when I'm stronger and you are too — I don't want anybody else."

⁂

Then Lint asked BlingBling whether there was anything *she* wanted to do while they were here, which was a question nobody had put to her on a working day in her life.

BlingBling took a moment. Then — gold, a quick showy spiral of it down the sleeve and back, far too big for the question.

> Nothing. I am fine. I have no needs. I am a serious professional.

A pause. Then, smaller, in the green she uses when she isn't performing:

> There's a gallery on the third level. Unfiltered. Procyon's a white star and the dwarf makes it strange, and the light comes in raw and it is the best light anywhere on the Causeway and every glint within four doors knows it.
>
> I have never seen it. We are always turning round at the hall.
>
> Also I would look *incredible* in it.

The gallery was a long room with one wall missing. Not missing — glazed, floor to roof, unfiltered, and nobody had put a shutter anywhere near it. Procyon came in white and hard and made every edge in the room too sharp, and off to one side the dwarf sat in it like a chip of something much brighter than it had any business being.

It was the cleanest light Lint had ever stood in.

And there were eleven glints in there. On the rail, on the sills, two of them hanging upside down off a light fitting for reasons of their own, and the whole room was talking — colour going back and forth across it, fast, overlapping, a conversation at a speed no mouth could manage.

She could not read a word of it. Not one.

Then BlingBling went out into the middle of it, into the raw white, and *lit up* — the greens and the gold and that hot pink, all of it at once, a creature from a system where the sun tries to kill you several times a day standing in the best light in human space being absolutely unbearable about it.

The room responded. Loudly. Somebody flashed something that was obviously rude and she gave it straight back.

And Lint found she had sat down on the bench along the back wall with her useless arms in her lap, in the white light, watching her friend show off to strangers — and that the day had stopped being the worst one she'd had.

Twenty minutes on a bench in the best light in human space. Her arms came back by degrees. The clouding on her forearms did not, and won't.

At the end of it she lifted two fingers and flicked them — *let's go* — the same two fingers she'd used for that since she was thirteen.

BlingBling came off the sill mid-sentence, abandoning what was clearly a winning position, and was on her collarbone before Lint was off the bench. One short gold pulse.

Yes. Home. Thank you.

She didn't say it again or make anything of it, which from her is enormous.

⁂

The return was nothing at all. A step, a change of air, BlingBling out and back, and the Nine came up around her like noise she'd forgotten was loud.

She came up the gallery stair with nothing in her hands and no reader behind her, which is not how anybody leaves this station and comes back, and two people in the hall watched her do it.

Calloway was at the window with her back to the room, and she had been there long enough to have seen it.

"Tell me."

"I failed. Then I pushed and broke her wrist."

Calloway turned round. She looked at Lint's face for about a second and at her forearms for longer.

"Is she alive?"

"Yes. Broken wrist. They're keeping her overnight because she's eighty-one. She said to come back for her in three days."

Calloway let out a breath she had clearly been holding since Lint came up the stair empty-handed. Then she pulled out the chair opposite and sat down in it, which she almost never does, and pushed the indefensible tea across the table without asking.

"Right. You failed the carry. That happens, it happens to everybody, and it is not what I want to talk about." She waited until Lint looked up. "You pushed after it set."

Not a question.

"Lin, I have done thirty-one years of this and I have lost eleven people, and not one of them was lost because they weren't good enough. Every single one was lost because they were having a bad day and decided they could have it both ways."

"I messed up. It's all on me. She even told me to repeat what to do and I didn't do it even then. And I swore."

Calloway took that without blinking, and let it sit for a moment so Lint could hear herself having said it.

"Good. That's the right answer and I'm glad you got there without help." Then: "And you swore."

"…Yes."

"In front of Mina Haral."

"She said *language*."

"I should think she did." Calloway's mouth did something she didn't quite get under control in time. "That woman taught half the readers in human space and she has a tongue on her like a dock crane, and she will be *delighted*. She'll bring it up every time she sees you for the next forty years."

She let Lint have about three seconds of that, which was exactly as much as she needed.

Then she leaned in on her elbows.

"Here's what I actually care about, and then we're done with it. You stopped. Late — a second late, and a second is the whole thing — but you stopped, and you put her down, and she's alive and complaining about it in a Procyon infirmary tonight." She tapped the table once. "That's the skill. Not the carry. *Stopping* is the skill, and almost nobody your age has it at all, and you've got it about a second slower than you need it."

She stood, took the mug back untouched, and tipped it down the sink.

"Three days. You go back for her, you do it properly, and you do not get on the rota before then — I'll have your hide. Go and feed your membrane, go and sleep, and tell BlingBling she can stop pretending she isn't listening from the kit rail."

A small, deeply unconvincing pulse of innocent blue from above the suits.

Chapter 3 — White, Not Clouded

❖

Day nought · the dead watch

She didn't sleep. She got maybe an hour of the kind that isn't, the kind where you're aware of the blanket, and then she was just lying in the dark doing the carry again with a different ending. Four or five different endings. In two of them she put Mina down.

She got as far as the water point on the second level. Then the hall below did the thing it does.

It isn't a sound. It's about nine people all stopping being loud at the same moment, which is a sound of its own.

Door four. A night transit, which nobody schedules.

Rill came up out of the housing already peeling the membrane off her forearms, and she was very good at it — no stagger, no hand on the frame, the way you do it when you've done it two thousand times. Twenty-one. There is a record scratched on a stanchion in the Yards with her name against it and nobody has got close in four years.

Two hall kids who can't cross and never will were *already* at the bottom of the stair with a towel and a flask.

And behind her, up out of the same door about forty seconds later and much more slowly, came a man in a good coat with a soft bag, who was not Threshold, who was not fifteen, and who was being very carefully not looked at by everybody in the hall.

Rill handed him off to somebody waiting at the far arch without a word. Transaction. Done.

Then she sat down on the bottom step, took the flask off the hall kid, said something that made her laugh, and tipped her head back against the rail with her eyes shut.

From the second-level rail you could see her forearms. They weren't clouded. They were *white*.

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She opened one eye, because people always know, and found Lint on the second-level rail at four in the morning in a blanket.

"…You're the new one. You're up late."

"You're Rill. Yeah. Messed up a transit today."

"Rill. Yeah." She said it the way you'd admit to a surname. Then she shifted over on the step and tapped the deck beside her twice with two fingers, which is the same signal Lint uses on BlingBling, and apparently everybody uses it, and she had not known that.

Lint came down the stair in a blanket and told her. Not all of it. The carry, the set, the push.

Rill did none of the things she'd been braced for all evening. No wince. No *oh no*. She listened with her eyes shut like somebody checking a figure.

"Is she alive?"

"Yes. Broken wrist."

"Hm." A pull from the flask. "Then you didn't mess it up."

And she said it so *easily*.

"That's the job, new one. It sets, you push, you find out. Everybody who's any good at this has pushed." She held a hand out flat in the low light, and it was steady, and it was the white of a thing left too long in water. "They'll all tell you the number of people who died

pushing. Nobody ever counts the ones who got carried out because somebody did."

"Who was it, anyway. Procyon run?"

"Mina Haral. Yep."

Rill laughed. Actually laughed — once, short, surprised out of her. "*Mina.*"

"You know her?"

"New one, everybody knows her. She taught my reading. Not me specifically — she taught the people who taught us, there's about four hundred of us who think she taught them personally and she lets us all think it." Then, flatter: "I've carried her twice."

The hall kid with the towel went very still.

"Alpha Centauri, both times. First one I was seventeen and she talked the entire way through the housing about the ceiling, which is a thing she does so you don't have time to be frightened, and I didn't work that out until years later." A beat. "She tips. You'd think she wouldn't, because she's got nothing, and she does, every time, and you can't give it back because she just puts it in your boot."

She turned the flask round in her hands. "Eighty-one. Still going. Honestly it's —"

And she stopped. Just stopped, mid-sentence, like a door closing softly in another room. Lint watched her decide not to finish it.

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"Bet you've carried her before," Lint said, when Rill was already turning for the arch.

She stopped. "Twice. I just told you twice." Not sharp. She looked at Lint for a second longer, working out whether she hadn't been listening or whether she was asking something else, and then deciding it was something else.

She came back two steps. "You mean the man in the coat."

Lint didn't say anything, which is the same as saying yes.

"Right." Rill set the flask down on the step. "Ask it properly, then. You've earned one straight answer tonight and I'd rather it came from me than off somebody on the gallery."

So Lint asked her why she takes them. And she gave it in one sentence, the way you'd read out a number:

> "Because the money is real, and it's the only money anybody has ever offered me for *afterwards*, and nobody — not Calloway, not the Threshold, not one person in six hundred years — has ever worked out what a frayed-out first-through is supposed to do with the rest of her life."

The hall was very quiet. Even the kid with the towel.

"That's it. That's the whole thing. It isn't brave and it isn't tragic, it's a job." She picked the flask back up. "And Mina Haral pays children to carry her because the alternative is she never sees Procyon again, and the hall at twenty-two told her no, and she was *twenty-two*."

Then she was done. You could see her be done.

"Right. Yards. Tomorrow, if you're not asleep by then." She was going. "You still haven't told me your name."

"Lint. Call me Lin."

"Lin." She tried it once, nodded like it had been filed. "Rill. Which you knew."

She was three steps into the arch when she stopped and turned round, and this time she took a moment over it.

"Hey. Lin. You asked me that without your face doing anything."

"…Was I supposed to?"

"Everybody does. Not on purpose." She shrugged, and it was a tired, genuine, slightly embarrassed shrug, and for a second she looked about nineteen. "Anyway. It was nice. Go to bed."

Chapter 4 — Like a Farmer

❖

Day one · grounded, first of three

Rill put the bag in her hands. Wet sand in canvas, worn shiny at the strap.

"Feet behind the plate. Nobody catches for you on the first one, so just get it there."

Forty metres of open void. Six levels of the Nine stacked above it and the hall noise coming up from below.

She didn't think about it, which is the whole trick, and the Quick did the rest. The bag went out flat and low and landed in the hands of a boy on the far rail who absolutely was not expecting to have to do anything, and who caught it anyway, mostly with his chest.

Rill said nothing for a second. "…Hm."

"Hm?"

"You've got a horrible flat throw and I hate it." She took her sleeves down and then shoved them back up again. "Right, that's not fair, you should know that's actually good. Garden thing? You lot throw like you've had weather."

"*Garden thing?* What am I, a lawn ornament?"

Rill actually laughed, which from her is a loud noise. "She's from the Garden, Ferren. She's stood in weather nobody made."

"I've stood in weather!"

"You've stood in a *leak*."

⁂

Best of five took nine minutes and turned into the thing everybody on four levels stopped to watch.

Ferren was better than her. Nineteen, two intakes up, and a throw that went out so flat it looked like it was on a wire. He took the second and the fourth without appearing to try, and he was *nice* about it, which was unbearable. She took the third because his catcher sneezed.

And she took the fifth because he went for the spectacular one and she didn't. Her bag went out flat and low and boring and landed in a hall child's lap, who had not moved off the top rail the entire time, and who caught it one-handed without putting the flask down.

Dead silence for about a second and a half. Then forty metres of gallery made a noise you could feel in the deck plate.

"That's — no. *No.* That's a boring throw. That's an *agricultural* throw—"

"It counted," said the hall child.

⁂

Which is roughly when something a metre across and the colour of nothing in particular detached itself from the upper rail, where it had clearly been all along, and drifted down through the middle of the void without any obvious means of doing so.

A **fathom**. Eyeless. Not interested in being looked at. It stopped about two metres off, and a voice arrived in the middle of her head without passing her ears.

> You are all throwing into a dead charge. There is a standing field across this gap and not one of you has felt it once.

> I could put that bag in the child's hands from here, blind, at twice the distance. I have been offering to demonstrate this for six years.

"Nobody asked, Vantage," said Ferren, through his teeth, not looking at it.

> *Nobody ever does.*

"OK," said Lint. "I'll bite. Show me."

> Six years, and the person who finally said yes had been there a day.
>
> *…Oh.*

For one unguarded instant the dryness dropped clean out of its voice, and that was somehow the most embarrassing thing that happened to anyone in the gallery that day. Then it recovered, hard.

> *Very well. Since someone has finally shown some rigour.*

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It made the boy on the far rail hold the bag, four metres out from the plate, and then it went up — twelve, fifteen metres, until it was a pale smudge against the underside of the next deck, and it stopped in a place where there was visibly nothing to stop against.

> *There is a conduit run behind that panelling.*

A pause.

> *Of course you cannot feel it. You have eyes.*

"Get on with it," said Ferren.

> *Let the bag go.*

And it didn't fall straight. It fell *wrong* — drifted about a metre and a half sideways on the way down, which should be impossible in a cylinder with its own gravity and absolutely no wind, and landed in the hall child's lap for the second time in five minutes.

The hall child looked down at it. Then up. Then said, with enormous satisfaction, "It counted."

Dead quiet across four levels.

"…What was that," said Rill, slowly.

Air.

Vantage was already drifting back down, insufferable again and visibly pleased about it.

> *The gallery exchangers push a column up the void and nothing in it is still. You have all been throwing through a river for two hundred years and calling it skill.*

Ferren sat down on the walkway.

Lint gave the gallery the full face — eyes wide, mouth round, both hands up, the whole *oooooooo* — and four levels of the Nine gave it straight back, which was the loudest thing that had happened in the Yards all week.

"I'm being bullied," said Ferren, to nobody.

Then she turned back to Vantage and told it properly that it was actually, genuinely cool, and that she'd never have known it was there.

And the fathom — eyeless, a metre of membrane, a hundred and ninety centimetres off the deck — went completely still.

… Yes. Well.

It did not know what to do. You could tell it did not know what to do, from a creature with no face whatsoever.

"And," she added, "I might actually be able to *use* that. If I didn't throw LIKE A FARMER."

"OH, that's mine," said Ferren, both arms out. "That's my line. You can't have my line."

⁂

It settled, more or less, at her eye level, and when it spoke again it had dropped most of the performance and kept all of the snobbery.

It is not complicated. The column is strongest at the waist and it turns about a third of the way across. A flat throw fights it. A throw you release half a hand higher and slightly off-true lets it carry.

A pause.

Ferren has been correcting for it unconsciously for four years and has no idea he does it. That is why he is good and cannot teach anybody.

"I'm RIGHT HERE."

I am aware.

Then: *I will show you. Not today — the light is wrong and the exchangers run hard until the second watch, and you have been awake for four hours after breaking an old woman's wrist, which the entire station has discussed.*

The gallery noise dropped about half a step.

Tomorrow, then. If you are still curious.

"Oh yeah. Tomorrow. I'll be here — got nowhere else to go."

Tomorrow.

A pause, and then, with the air of someone conceding a great deal:

Vantage. Since you did not ask, which was correct of you.

And it went straight up and out through the gap under the next deck, where there is presumably a conduit run and a column of moving air and something that passes, in here, for a sky.

Chapter 5 — A Line Is When

❖

Day one · afternoon

She spent the afternoon doing the thing a Pathfinder does without being told to: walking a place until she could draw it. Two kilometres of cylinder, turning once every ninety seconds. Forty thousand people. Nothing grown outside it, nothing mined there, no ground within eight light years in any direction — every stone of it carried.

The decks are named for the doors, and each one smells and behaves like the place it leads. The Procyon Stair is a suburb — five light years, prams on the walkway. The Coldwater Run is red light and grain dust and the only corner of the Nine that smells of farming. The Wolf Gate queue is shift workers, the roughest line in the hall and, everyone agrees furiously, the best food on the station.

And three things she noticed that she wasn't told.

The architecture is built for five peoples, and once you see it you can't unsee it: ramps where there should be stairs, a dim corner left in every concourse, and duct grilles cut to scatter gauge on every deck — a mesh sized so a glint can pass and nothing larger can. There's a line in every budget argument about them. Somebody, centuries ago, designed this station so that the smallest people in it could go anywhere.

Second: outer decks are shuttered by default, and opening one is a small occasion. She worked out which handful are *not*.

Third, and this is the Pathfinder in her: she could now get from the hall to any deck two ways, and one of them wasn't through a concourse.

⁂

Which is how she ended up, near the end of it, back at the waist of the cylinder under **the Standing**.

Four metres of slate on the gallery wall above the hall, every door in human space written on it with where it currently goes. Updated whenever a courier comes in with better information. The most important object in the Causeway, and it's a *slate*, because a slate can be corrected in eleven seconds by somebody on a stool.

People stop under it without meaning to. She'd just done it.

"You're the new one. You've been walking all day. I've seen you three times."

She knew her, actually. "You were on the top rail. With the flask. You caught my last throw one-handed."

"It counted," said the girl, with enormous satisfaction, as though the matter had been in doubt all day and she had personally settled it.

She came down off the stool. Small, eleven or so, chalk to the elbow, a rag through her belt and the unmistakable bearing of someone doing a job. She wiped her hand on the rag before she offered it, which was more manners than anyone had shown Lint since she got there.

"Sennet. Everyone calls me Sen. I do the Standing on second and third watch."

She said *I do the Standing* the way an admiral says the name of a ship.

"Not the *writing*, obviously, the tallymen write. I keep it. Dust it, square the lines, chase the ones nobody's updated." A pause, slightly flinty. "I'm the one who notices when a line's gone stale. I noticed the Bell line was eleven days old and nobody else did."

She tested at nine, then. The whole family came, and she frayed like an adult, and no knack ever surfaced. That's the ordinary outcome and everybody says so beforehand and nobody quite believes it about their own. Lint didn't ask. Nobody who's been taken up ever asks.

"Do you actually know how to read it? Properly? Most of you don't. You read your own door and walk off."

"I dunno — I just try to figure it out. What's the right way, Sen?"

"Right," said Sen, and she was *delighted*, and she squared her shoulders.

"Four things on every line. People only ever read two." She tapped along the Procyon line with the flat of the chalk. "**Door. Where it goes. Who last stood it. Which watch.** That's it."

"Now. The bit nobody reads is the *fourth* one, and the fourth one is the only one that matters. Because a door tells you where it went *when somebody last looked.* That's all. The Bell line said Bell and it was eleven days stale and everybody kept reading it like it was today, and a door can stray in the time it takes you to walk down here."

She said it with real heat.

"A line isn't true. A line is *when*. If you don't read the watch you're just reading a rumour that somebody wrote up neatly."

That was better than anything the Yards taught her about the Standing.

"Huh."

"Yes, *huh*." She was extremely pleased. "Everybody says huh."

⁂

Then she went up two steps on the stool and reached well over to the left, to a part of the slate where the chalk had gone into the stone and the stone had gone grey around it, and she didn't touch it, and Lint got the strong impression that nobody touches it.

"And then there's that one."

Kapteyn's — no answer this watch

"Six hundred and two," said Sen. "Spring."

She looked at it for a moment with her head tipped.

"*This watch.* That's what you write when a door doesn't answer and you expect it to answer later. It's the normal thing. I write it four or five times a year." She wiped a bit of chalk off her fingers. "Somebody wrote it that afternoon because they thought they'd be rubbing it out by the next one."

A beat.

"Nobody's ever changed it. It's the stalest line on the board by about six hundred years and it's the only one I'm not allowed to square up." She frowned at it, properly affronted, eleven years old and the keeper of this thing. "I've asked twice."

Eleven thousand people, twelve and a half light years out.

*
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"Everybody shows you Kapteyn's eventually," she said, matter-of-fact, climbing back down. "The star, I mean. Up on the top gallery when the shutters are open — it's dim, you'd walk past it. They all want to be the one who shows you."

She looked up. "Has anyone done it to you yet?"

"No one. Not yet."

"You busy? Do you want to show me?"

Sen stopped with the rag halfway to her belt. "…Me?"

"You're the one who knows where it is."

There was a pause of about two seconds in which she visibly did not know what to do with her face, and then she got it under control, and then she said, far too casually:

"Well. I mean. I'd have to get Oris to sit the slate." A beat. "He's rubbish. He doesn't dust."

She was already off the stool.

Chapter 6 — Four Thousand Points

❖

Day one · second watch, bay four

Nine levels up, and the spin got lighter the whole way, and by the top gallery she was walking in that half-floating way that makes the Yards kids show off and makes everybody over thirty hold the rail.

The upper gallery was long and curved and almost empty, and shuttered — of course it was. Sirius comes through every port as a hard blue-white the filters never quite tame.

Sen walked to the fourth bay along and put her hand flat on the plate beside it.

"This one. Second watch, every day, for about forty minutes. Nobody knows. There's a maintenance override and the man who does the override is called Hesk and he thinks he's the only one who ever uses it."

A clunk somewhere behind the wall. Then the shutter went up.

⁂

And it was just stars.

That's the thing nobody tells you. Sirius wasn't in that bay — she'd picked the one looking the other way — so there was no glare, just the deep black and about four thousand points of it, and the Nine turning slowly enough that the whole field drifted.

Sen waited. She didn't fill it. She'd done this before and she knew the gap is part of it.

Then she leaned in next to Lint's shoulder and pointed, and her finger was small and chalky, and she sighted along it carefully to get it right.

"There. Not the bright one — that's nothing, that's a foreground thing. The dim one, just under it, orange. You'd walk straight past it."

Lint had to look twice to find it. Then she couldn't stop seeing it.

"Kapteyn's," said Sen.

Twelve and a half light years. Eleven thousand people, in the spring of six hundred and two. A good world, farms and foundries, and a door that went dark and stayed dark.

"It's still there," said Sen. "That's the bit. People go *oh, that's sad*, and it isn't sad, it's *there*. It's a whole world and it's sitting right there and you can see it from a corridor."

She lowered her arm. "And the light coming out of it now left twelve and a half years ago, so even if something happened yesterday we wouldn't—"

She stopped herself, because she's eleven and she could hear that she was showing off.

"Anyway. That's it. That's the thing everybody wants to do to you." A small, satisfied breath. "And I got to do it."

*
**

She stayed. Sen went back down at speed because Oris was sitting her slate.

So it was her and the bay and four thousand points of light. The Nine turned. The field drifted, slowly, the whole of it together, which is the only way you ever really feel the spin once you've lived in it.

BlingBling didn't say anything for the whole ten minutes. She came off the stanchion at some point and sat on the rail beside Lint's

hand, not touching, dimmed right down — not the sleeping colour, a different one, flatter — and kept her own counsel, which for her is close to unprecedented.

And then four hundred metres of curve turned out to be four hundred metres of curve. Shuttered bays, numbered. A fire locker. A long scuff on the deck where something heavy got dragged a century ago. Two notices about not using the gallery as a shortcut, one of them stencilled over the other.

Which is why she didn't notice the time going.

The clunk came from behind the wall, the same one as before, and the shutter in bay four slid down at the far end of the curve. And the lights up there are on the same override as the shutter, because of course they are, because nobody is ever up there.

It went properly dark.

BlingBling came up off the rail instantly and went to full white, which is about as much light as a hand torch and about as much subtlety as a flare, and she was extremely pleased to be useful.

*
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Ninety seconds into walking back, a voice came from a hatch at ankle height, slightly muffled, deeply aggrieved.

"— who's *up* here?"

A panel swung. A head came out of the deck. Fifties. Coverall. A headlamp pointed straight at her.

"You're not Oris."

"…No."

"How'd you know about the second-watch override?" He hauled himself up out of the hatch and stood, and he was not angry, he was *scandalised*. "That's not — nobody knows about that. I don't put that on a sheet."

He peered at her. "You're one of Calloway's. The new one. Thirty-four at fifteen." A pause, and then, bitterly: "It was Sennet, wasn't it."

"I'd love to know who's asking," said Lint, perfectly pleasantly, "because the lights just went out on me four hundred metres from a stair, and I don't actually know your name."

That landed. You could see it land.

"…Hesk." He said it like he was conceding a point he hadn't expected to be playing for. "Deck systems. Shutters, ports, atmosphere trim on nine through twelve." He straightened his coverall. "And the lights are on the *shutter* circuit, up here, which is not my doing, that's six hundred years old and there's a line in the budget about it every single year—"

"It's dark, though."

"It is dark," he admitted, with enormous reluctance. "Yes. It is dark."

He got a torch out of a leg pocket, finally, and put it on the deck pointing up, which filled the whole bay with a soft bounce and was a far better idea than anything either of them was doing.

"Right. Second-watch override. Who told you?"

"Somebody who keeps the Standing and notices when a line's gone stale."

"*Sennet.*" He closed his eyes briefly. "That child is eleven years old and knows more about this station than my own staff. I've found her in a trunking run. Twice."

A beat.

"She's not wrong, though. That bay's the only one on the upper deck that doesn't look into Sirius, so it's the only one worth opening, and nobody ever asks, so I open it for forty minutes when the trim's settled and I eat my lunch in it." He said this defiantly, as if expecting to be challenged. "There's no rule against it."

Then, suspiciously: "What were *you* doing up here? There's nothing up here. I've been doing this nineteen years and there is nothing up here."

She pointed down the curve at bay four, which was shut, and had nothing there now but a grey plate and a number stencilled on it.

Hesk looked where she was pointing, and then at her, and the scandalised thing went out of his face.

"Ah," he said.

He didn't ask which star. He didn't say *oh, Kapteyn's* either. He just stood there for a second with his hands in his pockets.

"Nineteen years I've had this deck." He said it to the shutter rather than to her. "And they only ever come up here in a crowd. Fourteen of them at a time, somebody's birthday, somebody showing off to a visitor — up, point, *ooh*, down the stair, gone in four minutes."

He took his torch back off the deck.

"Nobody's ever come up on their own and stood there."

Then, briskly, because he was embarrassed: "It's orange. You'd think it'd be red, people always expect red. It's not far off the colour of the warning lamp on a trim panel, which I've always found extremely annoying."

So he did know which one it was. Without looking. From a corridor, with the shutter down. Nineteen years of lunches.

"Right." He was already walking. "Thirty seconds. Don't tell Sennet I did it twice in one watch, she'll want it in writing."

The clunk. The shutter went up. The lights didn't — he left those off, deliberately, and that turned out to be the entire difference, because without the gallery lights the glass stopped being a window with reflections in it and just stopped being there.

Four thousand points. The field drifting with the spin.

Hesk stood a couple of metres off, not crowding, eating a sandwich he had produced from somewhere, and said nothing at all for a long time.

Then: "Twelve and a half years, that light. So whatever's happening there now, we'll find out when I'm dead."

He chewed.

"Still there, though."

Chapter 7 — Supper for Four

❖

Day one · dusk, the low gallery

She went to the Wolf Gate queue, because she'd been told four separate times that day that it has the best food on the station and she'd decided to find out. They were right and they will never stop telling you. She brought back enough for four, on the theory that it wouldn't be wasted.

They were on the low gallery, which is where everybody under about twenty ends up at dusk.

Ferren saw the tray first and his whole face changed. "Oh, that's Wolf Gate. That's *Wolf Gate.* Rill. Rill, she's been to the Wolf Gate."

"I can see."

"On her *first day off.* Unprompted."

"I was there," said Sen, off shift, chalk washed to the wrist, sitting on the rail with her heels hooked under it. "She's been everywhere. Three times I saw her."

Rill took a bowl without being asked, which from her is a compliment, and knocked her shoulder into Lint's once as she sat down.

So: Ferren, who lost at sling that morning and had told nine people about it in a tone suggesting he had been present at something historic. Rill, twenty-one, sleeves down. Sen, eleven, who keeps the most important object in the Causeway. And BlingBling, established

on the rail at precisely the height where the gallery lamp hit her best, holding court for an audience that did not technically exist.

It was, Lint realised, a crew. Assembled in a day and a half, out of nobody she was given.

⁂

She was most of the way through when a man came along the gallery and stopped at the end of the bench. Good coat. Fifties. Entirely at ease.

"Ferren. How's the shoulder?"

"Fine — yeah, fine, it was nothing—"

"Four weeks ago you couldn't lift a crate and you were *extremely* brave about it." He was smiling. He looked at Sen. "Sennet. Is the Bell line still wrong?"

"It's right now."

"Because of you, I heard." He said it like it mattered, and Sen sat up about an inch.

Then he turned, and he had Lint's name before she'd said it.

"And you're Lint. Out of the Garden, thirty-four at fifteen, came in on the eleventh." He put a hand out. "Benno Raske. I've been hearing about a flat throw all afternoon."

Rill went very slightly still beside her.

Lint turned and looked at Rill. She looked for a beat too long. Then another one. She was still looking when Rill turned her head and found her doing it — and she got nothing at all out of her face, because there was nothing on it, because she's twenty-one and has had four years of people looking at her sideways and has got extremely good at being a wall.

What she did get was Rill seeing her check.

Her sleeves were already down. She pulled one cuff a half-inch further over her wrist anyway, which was not a thing she needed to do, and went back to her bowl.

Benno saw it too. Benno sees everything. He didn't let it sit for even a second.

"What do I do," he said, taking the question up warmly, as though it were the most natural thing anyone had asked him all week. "I arrange carries."

He said it plainly. No softening at all.

"Somebody needs to be three doors away and won't wait a fortnight for the manifest. A pressure fitter wanted at Coldwater by the second watch. An old woman who wants to see Procyon one more time." A small open gesture. "The Threshold runs the traffic that's scheduled. I find couriers for the traffic that isn't, and I agree a price, and I pay it on the day. I've never underpaid anybody in my life and you can ask anyone on this gallery."

"He hasn't," said Ferren, with his mouth full. It was not a defence. It was just true and Ferren knew it was true.

"I was landlocked at twenty-three," Benno added, easily, without a trace of self-pity. "So I'm no use to anybody through a door. This is what's left."

He looked at the tray — the four bowls, the Wolf Gate food, the empty one.

"You've bought supper for three people on your day off, which tells me more about you than the throw did." He straightened up. "I'm not asking you for anything tonight, Lint. I'd just rather you knew my name from me than from somebody on the gallery."

A beat. "Can I get another round of that in? Sennet eats like a docker and I enjoy watching it."

"Sorry," said Lint, a bit flustered. "I only got enough for us."

"*Us*," Benno repeated.

Not sharply. He just turned the word over once, the way you'd check the weight of something, and something went across his face very fast and was gone before you could name it.

Then he smiled and it reached his eyes.

"Fair enough." And he sat — on the end of the bench, leaving a clear space, in the manner of a man who has sat on a lot of benches where he wasn't quite invited. "I've eaten. I'll just be here a minute."

⁂

He was a minute and it was a good minute.

He asked Sen whether the Standing had a line for the new door at LHS 1140 yet, and Sen said *no, because it isn't a door yet*, with enormous scorn, and Benno said "quite right, I'm being sloppy," and meant it. He told a story about a Coldwater grain crate that came through upside down in 'ninety-one and what was inside it and what the tallyman said, and Ferren laughed so hard he had to put the bowl down, and Sen had heard it before and was mouthing along with the punchline.

He didn't ask Lint a single thing about herself.

He didn't look at Rill once, either, and Rill didn't look at him, and the two of them managed this so smoothly that you'd have to be watching for it.

Then he stood, tapped the rail twice, and went. Three separate people said hello to him before he was out of sight.

"He's *brilliant*," said Ferren, wiping his eyes.

"Mm," said Rill.

Sen, from the rail, flatly: "Mum says don't take his money."

"Your mum says don't do loads of things."

"She says it about *him* the most."

⁂

Lint put her thumb out towards the end of the gallery where he'd gone — then turned her hand over, palm down, fingers shut. *I don't like him.*

BlingBling came off the lamp bracket and down onto the bench beside her knee, out of the good light, which she does not do for nothing.

No. Nor do I.

He talked to everyone on this bench. He asked the child about her slate and the loud one about his shoulder and he knew your number before you said it.

He did not look at me once. Not once. Not when I moved, not when I lit, not when I was six inches from his hand.

Everyone looks at me. I make certain of it. He is the first person on this station who did not bother.

I do not think he is pretending to be kind. I think that is the worst part.

And glints cannot be bought and cannot carry cargo and cannot be hired, so there is nothing a man who arranges carries would ever need from one.

Sen was still on the rail with her heels hooked under it, and she'd watched that whole exchange without understanding a single flash of it, and she didn't ask.

What she said instead, eventually, was: "Rill's going to be at the void tomorrow. She said she would, so she will." A beat, eleven years old and entirely matter-of-fact. "She doesn't come down much any more."

Chapter 8 — Sticky

❖

Day two · dawn, grounded

She woke up on her own. BlingBling was a grey smear on the pillow, came up to a slow unwilling bronze when Lint's weight left the bunk, registered that nothing was happening, and went straight back to grey.

On the stair, two Wolf Gate loaders went past her with crates, mid-grumble.

"— and it's *sticky* again, I stood there like an idiot—"

"It's sticky every spring. Give it a second and it has you."

"I gave it a *second*."

And they were gone round the turn of the stair.

She caught them two flights down. They were happy to talk. Of course they were — loaders with crates and a grievance, and she was fifteen and Threshold and actually asking.

"**Sticky.**" The older one set his crate on the step. "You've not had it yet, then. So — you step up, you give it your weight, and nothing. Not a push. It just goes solid, like the ring's a wall. Then you come off it, you give it a second, you go again and it has you. That's sticky."

"That's a *set*," said the younger one. "They teach you set at the Yards."

"Set's what happens once. Sticky's when it's doing it all week."

"It's the same thing—"

"It is *not* the same thing, because set's your fault and sticky's the door's."

And then, in passing, like a man describing weather:

"Seven's sticky every spring. Has been since I started. You give it a second and it has you, and come summer it stops, and nobody thinks about it."

And it went past her.

Not because she wasn't listening. Because it was the single most reassuring sentence anybody had said to her since she arrived, and it arrived in a stairwell from a man with a crate on his knee who had been doing this job since before she was born.

"So it's — that's just a thing it does?"

"It's just a thing it does." He got the crate back up on his shoulder. "Everything here's got a thing it does. Four's loud, the Old Line smells of fish twice a year and nobody's ever found out why, and seven's sticky in the spring." He set off down the stair. "You'll have a door you hate inside a year and it'll be a different one to mine."

The whole thing took ninety seconds, and she came away from it feeling considerably better about a door she had not been worried about in the first place.

Chapter 9 — The Tenth Speech

❖

Day two · fourth level

"Books?" The tallyman looked at her like she'd asked where they keep the horses. "…You want a *book*? What for?"

"To read?"

"You can't read a book, they're—" He stopped. He visibly recalculated her age and her three days. "Right. No. A book's an animal. Palm-sized, placid, breathing. You put a payload in its cells and a first-through walks it across. You don't read a book, you *carry* one."

"Then what do I—"

"**Reading.** You want reading. Ask for reading."

And then he told her where, and the answer was so large it took a second to land.

Everything. Every text written anywhere in human space, in every system, for nine hundred and seventy-five years. All of it. Because reading is *data*, and data goes into a genome, and a genome goes into an animal, and a child carries the animal — and a kid crossing with a book in her hand is bringing more than a library.

So the Nine holds the complete written output of the species, three times over, in a store on the fourth level that nobody visits, because it is simply *there*, the way the air is there.

"Course you can. It's not locked. Nothing's locked." He went back to his slate. "Nobody goes. There's too much of it. You walk in there and it's everything anybody ever wrote and you stand about for ten minutes and then you go to the Yards instead."

⁂

Which is when Sen, who had come down off her stool at some point in the last minute and was standing at Lint's elbow with her pen behind her ear and no shame whatsoever about having listened to all of it, said:

"I'll tell you what to read."

She said it the way she says *I do the Standing*.

"Everybody does that. Goes in, stands there, comes out. It's because they go in wanting *something to read* instead of wanting to find something out." A small shrug. "Mum says that's the whole difference and she's right. So — what do you actually want to find out?"

"I just want a good story. I'm bored. We have libraries on Earth."

"You have *libraries*?" Sen stopped dead. "On Earth. Actual — buildings? With it all *in* them? Paper?"

"Yeah. There's one in the next valley from us. It's four hundred years old and it smells."

"It *smells*." She said it with enormous reverence. "What of?"

"Dust and feet."

Sen stared at her for a second with her whole face lit up, and Lint realised, slightly late, that she had just told the only person on the station who will never go anywhere about a building full of paper that she used to be bored in.

"Right," said Sen. "Well. We've got better."

⁂

The store on the fourth level was three rooms, lit, warm, entirely silent, and completely empty of people.

Sen gave her **The Low Stair**: a hall child at Alpha Centauri in the four hundreds who can't cross, and never does, the whole way through — and who works out what's wrong with a door from the *outside*, from the queue, just by watching who comes through it and when.

"It's not exciting. Nothing happens. She's right at the end and nobody believes her and it just stops." She shrugged, and said it to the corridor rather than to Lint: "It's the only one where somebody like me is any good at anything."

Then Lint asked the station itself for a third.

"Hey Big Man. Any recommendations?"

Big man. A pause that was, unmistakably, him filing that away for the second time. *Yes. Three.*

Sen went very still beside her, because she had just realised who Lint was talking to.

One. Not Thirty-One Doors. You will read all eleven hundred of them eventually and there is nothing I can do about that.

"Sen said it was rubbish."

Sen is right. Sen has been right about this for two years and has excellent judgement and should be listened to more often than she is.

Sen did not say anything. She had gone a colour Lint had mostly seen on glints.

Two. The Low Stair is the best thing written in this century and I would have put it in front of you myself. Take her recommendation over mine; she has read it eleven times and I have read it once.

Three, which you did not ask for. My own. The surviving speeches of the Reach, complete, nine hundred and forty of them, which is almost the whole of what we have from before the Launch. Two generations of people standing up in halls and arguing out loud about whether to

spend everything there was on a thing that would not pay out for nine hundred years. They wrote it all down, obsessively, including the losing side, including the forty years when the losing side was winning.

They are not exciting and they are a bit long and the tenth one is the best thing anybody has ever said. I was made by those people and I have read them two hundred times and I still do not entirely understand how they did it.

"Huh," said Lint. "Let's do the speeches. I always thought history was interesting."

Sen's eyebrows went up about a centimetre. "…Really?"

"We did history at school. It was the good one."

"Huh." She wrote something on the back of her hand with the pen. "Nobody picks those."

Nobody picks those, Sirius agreed, and did not elaborate, and gave the strong impression that he was pleased and was not going to make a thing of it.

⁂

They were dense. The first was nine pages of procedure and she nearly stopped. The third was a woman from somewhere called Tangier arguing that the whole programme was immoral because it spent the poor of her century on the comfort of a century that did not exist, and she was *good*, and Lint read it twice, and she was not sure she was wrong. The sixth was a man who had clearly been shouted at before he stood up.

And then the tenth, and she understood why he'd said it. It was short. Less than two pages. No numbers in it at all, which after nine speeches of numbers is like a door opening.

> *I have heard it said in this hall that our grandchildren will thank us. They will not. They will not know our names, and they will have no particular reason to look them up, and the ones who do will find us difficult and strange and will be right.*

I have heard it said that we are owed something for this. We are owed nothing. We are not building it for our grandchildren. We are building it for whoever is alive when it is finished, who is none of us, and who will owe us nothing at all.

And I have heard it said that we should wait until we can better afford it. There is no such year. There is no later generation for whom this is cheaper, and every year we wait is a year added to the end of it, and the thing we are deciding is not whether it is expensive. It is whether a species with one star stays a species with one star.

So I will not ask you to be brave, and I will not ask you to be remembered.

I am asking you to pay for something you will not see, for people who are not here, who cannot be consulted, and who will never know. That is the whole of what is being asked.

I ask you to vote for it anyway.

Two pages. Nine hundred and seventy-five years ago. And eight point six light years from the valley where she grew up there is a station with her bunk in it, because they did.

Sen had sat down on the other end of the bench without being invited and was reading over her arm, which she did not apologise for.

"…Did they vote for it?"

Eleven years old, keeper of the most important object in the Causeway, and she had never read this.

"Yeah," said Lint. "We're here aren't we?"

Sen looked at the page for a moment longer, and then said, "Huh," in a tone that was going to end up on the back of her hand, and did not say anything else.

Chapter 10 — Nothing Happened

❖

Day two · still the fourth level

"Hey Big Guy. What else? What happened to the Reach? What's a good history for that?"

Sirius took a second over it, which he does not usually do.

That is the hardest question in the archive and I am going to tell you why before I give you anything to read, because otherwise you will think the reading is bad.

Nothing happened to the Reach.

There is no war in the record. No plague, no collapse in the accounts, no final message, no last transmission from Luna, nothing anybody can point at. The launches thinned out and then they stopped, and the reason is that there was nothing left, and the thing they had built was not going to pay out for another eighty years.

*So the end of the greatest undertaking of the species is an **absence**, and historians hate absences, and the good ones say so and the bad ones invent a catastrophe. Be suspicious of anything that gives you a villain.*

Read The Thinning — Ovarr, about two hundred years ago, and it is the honest one. Four hundred pages of a woman going through the launch manifests year by year, counting ships, and refusing to explain the gap she finds. The whole book is her declining to make something up. It is the best discipline you will ever see on a page.

And then the thing it leads to, which is the part everybody skips. Eighty-five years of nothing. They finished building and then nobody heard anything for eighty-five years — to a generation that had been told its whole life this would happen and had begun, quietly and privately, to stop believing it. Barnard's came in at a hundred and nineteen. This station at a hundred and seventy-four. Each one a lifetime apart, each one arriving to people who had only ever heard about the last one from their grandparents.

It is the longest-running promise anybody has ever kept, and every single person who made it was nine centuries dead before it finished being kept.

A pause, and then the thing he volunteered, because he always does.

> *And there is one more fact in it that is not in Ovarr and is not in the speeches, and I would rather you had it from me on a bench than off somebody on a gallery in a year's time.*
>
> *Nobody is ever going to build another door.*
>
> *Not because the knowledge is lost — it is not, any engineer at the Yards can tell you how a pair is made. Because* ***only bodies and boxes cross a door.*** *No bulk, no fleet, no treasury. Twenty-eight systems can never pool what twenty-eight systems have, and one anchor pair costs more than any single system has produced in nine centuries.*
>
> *The thing that would pay for a new door cannot be gathered through the doors we already have. The network forbids its own extension, and that is not a policy anybody chose. It is the shape of the thing.*
>
> *Which means we did not build this. We inherited it, and we maintain the parts of it we can reach.*

A beat.

Every first-through works that out in their first year. You are three days in. I would rather you heard it sitting down.

⁂

"Why did they cost so much?"

Because you cannot make one carefully.

*An anchor pair is **entangled** — both halves made together, in the same place, at the same moment, bound at a level nothing since has been able to reach into. That is the whole of what a door is. Not a machine. A marriage.*

*And the enemy of entanglement is **everything.** Warmth. Light. Vibration. A single atom of gas touching it. Anything at all interacting with any part of that ring, at any point while it is being made, and the binding is gone and what you have is four metres of extremely expensive scrap.*

So to make one you need a volume of the universe four metres across that is colder than anything in nature, darker than anything in nature, and absolutely still, and you need it to stay that way for the whole of the making.

*That is the bill. Not the ring. **The silence around the ring.***

That is what Mercury's mirrors were for. Not powering a factory — powering a refrigerator. The entire output of a planet's worth of mirrors, poured into keeping one small room quiet enough.

And here is the part that makes it uncollectable, which is the thing that really matters to you. You cannot build one in stages. You cannot make a third of a pair this decade and come back to it. It is one object, made in one go, and if the coherence breaks at minute nine of a two-year process you begin again with nothing.

*So it cannot be **accumulated**. You cannot save up. There is no partial anchor anywhere in human space, because a partial anchor is a pile of metal.*

A pause, and then the number, because he always has the number.

They attempted four thousand, one hundred and nineteen pairs.

Three thousand and eleven of them worked.

A thousand and eight did not, and every one of those was a decade of somebody's whole civilisation turned into scrap, and the record of each failure is three lines long and signed, and they kept going.

The twelfth speech is a man apologising to a hall for the four hundred and sixtieth failure. He does not resign. He asks for the money again. They give it to him.

Sen had stopped pretending to read over Lint's arm and had her chin on her knees.

"Four hundred and sixtieth," she said. "And they *gave it to him.*"

Somewhere a long way below, the hall went on being loud about nine queues, eight of which were moving. The warm-air return ticked. BlingBling was asleep on the ledge above their heads, and second watch was still a couple of hours off.

Chapter 11 — Where She's Working

❖

Day two · port side, fourth level

"OK. That's enough of the history. Give me a copy of the Low Stair. I'll read it somewhere."

The store had a stack of blank sheets by the door, because of course it did — monomer, thin as a leaf, and you touch one to the shelf index and it takes the text and holds it until you wipe it.

Sen did it for her. She did not ask whether Lint wanted her to.

"Right. So." She was extremely businesslike and she was also not quite managing it. "Don't read the last chapter first."

"I wasn't going to—"

"Everybody says that." She held the sheet a moment longer before she handed it over. "And don't skip the bit in the middle where nothing happens for forty pages and she's just counting people in the queue. That's the *best bit*. Everybody skips it."

"Why's it the best bit?"

Sen looked at her like she'd asked why water's wet.

"Because that's where she's *working*."

Then she gave her the sheet, and turned round, and squared up three things on a shelf that did not need squaring up, and said to the shelf:

"It's not very good at the start. Just so you know. It gets good."

And then she was off out of the store at speed with her pen behind her ear, and you could hear her going down the corridor at about twice the pace she came up it.

She has recommended that to eleven people, said Sirius, pin only, in the specific flat voice he uses when he is telling you a fact and declining to tell you what to do about it.

You are the first one who took it.

⁂

"I like Sen," Lint said. "She seems like she'd be a good friend."

From the ledge above her head, without opening — well. Without doing whatever it is she does instead of opening her eyes.

She is.

A pause, and then a slow amber that meant she was awake after all and had been for a while.

She reads flash.

"...She what?"

Not well. About as well as you read a Coldwater manifest — slowly, and she gets the tenses wrong, and she cannot do colour at all so everything anybody says to her comes out flat. But she reads it. She is the only human on this station who does.

She sits on a stool at the busiest wall on the Nine, all day, every second and third watch, and every first-through who passes that board has one of us on their collarbone, and we talk constantly, and we have done it over her head since she was about six.

So she learned. On her own. Out of watching.

> Tace-of-the-Rail says she started signing back when she was nine and got it wrong for two years and nobody corrected her because nobody realised she was doing it on purpose.

A longer pause. BlingBling dimmed down a tone, which is her being careful.

> She cannot cross, Lin. She will never go anywhere. And she has taught herself the only language on this station that belongs to people who go everywhere, and she keeps the board that says where all of it currently is, and she is eleven.
>
> So — yes. I should think she would be an extremely good friend.

A flicker of gold.

> She has also never once told me to stop, and I have been showing off at her for three days.

*
**

She had a spot. She'd found it on her grounded day without knowing she was looking for one.

Fourth level, port side, past where the Coldwater offices stop being offices — a maintenance gallery about thirty metres long that smells of grease and has a run of ports down one side that nobody has ever bothered to shutter, because nobody comes there and the view is in the wrong direction for anybody to care.

The wrong direction being: away from Sirius.

So there was no glare. Just the black, and four thousand points of it, drifting slowly with the spin.

She sat on a cable trunk with her back against the wall and the sheet on her knees, and before she read a word of it she did the thing

she had done every time she had been in that corridor, which was three times now.

She found **Sol**.

It isn't hard once somebody has shown you. It's about as bright as Polaris was from the valley — a clear, unremarkable, perfectly ordinary star, in a part of the sky her grandmother would have called Hercules, which from there is bent slightly out of shape in a way that took her a while to work out and then annoyed her for a week.

Everything is nearly right and nothing is quite right. The Plough is there and has a star too many. Orion is behind you and inside out.

Eight point six light years. The light coming off that point now left when she was six, which means somewhere in it is the summer she fell off the wall, and her mother is in it, and the library in the next valley with the dust and the feet.

BlingBling came off her collar and sat on the trunk beside her hand, and did not get between her and the port, which she has never once done in that corridor.

⁂

Then she read.

And Sen was right: it isn't very good at the start. Forty pages of a girl called Oress at Alpha Centauri in the four hundreds, who failed her test at nine and works the queue at the Low Stair handing out numbered tokens, and the writing is flat and nothing happens and twice Lint nearly put it down.

And then somewhere around page sixty she starts counting.

Not because anybody asks her to. Because she is bored and she is standing there anyway, and she begins writing down who comes through and when — and she keeps doing it for eleven years, in the margins of a token book, while the whole of her life goes past the top of the stair.

It got good about forty pages after Sen said it would.

She was a hundred and ten pages in, and the spin had moved Sol about a hand's width across the port, when her pin went.

Second watch in eleven minutes. The fathom has been in the gallery void since the first and is pretending it has not been.

Chapter 12 — Drawn in Light

❖

Day two · second watch, the void

Vantage was there, obviously. It had been there since first watch and it was going to pretend otherwise for at least a minute.

You are punctual. I had not formed a view either way.

Ferren was at the plate with a bag, having come off an early, with the specific smugness of a man who turned up uninvited and got away with it.

"Told you I was coming."

"You said you were coming."

"And here I am. Observe." He tossed the bag up and caught it. "Learning."

Up on the handrail, eleven glints were already drilling intervals, and BlingBling went up to join them and was immediately and loudly insufferable about having been elsewhere.

⁂

Vantage came down to about head height, which for it is close.

Two days ago I told you that you were all throwing into a dead charge and that there is a standing field across this gap and not one of you has felt it once. That was

unkind and it was also imprecise, and I have had two days to think about how to say it properly, so here it is.

You cannot feel a field. You have eyes. ***But you can see what it does.***

The exchangers at the waist push a column of air up this void — and it is not still, and it is not uniform. It is strongest at the waist, it weakens going up, and it ***turns*** *about a third of the way across because of the deck geometry above you. Which means a bag thrown flat and hard fights it for the first third and then gets shoved off-true for the rest.*

That is why Ferren is good. He corrects for it without knowing he does.

"I keep *telling* you I don't—"

You have been doing it for four years and that is precisely why you cannot teach anybody.

So. You will not learn to feel it. You will learn to ***read*** *it, and I am going to show you how, because it is extremely simple and nobody has ever looked. Dust. Lamp flicker. The way the hall noise arrives louder for half a second. There are about nine tells in this void and they are all visible to a person with eyes, and I have been watching you lot miss them for six years.*

Stand at the plate. Don't throw. Watch the gap for a full minute.

A full minute. Then another one, because she wasn't having it.

And she got **nothing**.

The void was forty metres of nothing with handrails round it. There was dust, because there is always dust. The lamps did what lamps do. The hall noise came up and went away and came up again and she could not tell whether that meant anything or whether she was a fifteen-year-old staring at a gap.

"…I can't see it."

No.

Vantage said it without any disappointment at all, which was somehow worse.

*You are looking for **air**, and air is not visible, so you are looking for a thing that is not there. I have explained it badly. That is mine, not yours.*

"You said there were nine tells—"

There are nine tells and they are all second-order. Dust that is going the wrong way, and you do not know which way is wrong. A lamp flicker, and you do not know the lamp's normal. I have six years of this void to compare against and you have three days, and I have just asked you to read a language by staring at it.

It went quiet for a second. Then:

So let us do this properly, and I am going to say something that costs me considerably.

*I am the wrong teacher. I can feel the field and therefore I cannot show you how to see it, which is **exactly** the thing I said about Ferren eleven minutes ago, and I did not notice I was doing it.*

Ferren, with enormous joy: "*HA.*"

Be quiet.

*There are twelve creatures in this void who do not feel the field and do not need to see it, because they are **in** it. All day. Every day. They fly through that column and they correct for it and they have done since they hatched.*

Up on the handrail, eleven glints and her own had stopped drilling.

Ask them.

And BlingBling came down off the rail at speed and landed on her collarbone, and you could tell from two metres away exactly what was coming, because she had said it to Lint three days earlier on that exact deck and neither of them had thought anything of it at the time.

There is a standing field in the gallery void, and I have always known about it, and I thought everybody did.

*
**

"How do I see it?"

You don't. You can't see air, Lin, air isn't a colour. Honestly.

You see *me*.

And then she was off the collarbone and out into the void. Lit. Full gold, deliberately, the brightest she had ever gone in a working space — and she flew the gap in a straight line at the waist, and about a third of the way across Lint watched her *get pushed*.

Not drift. *Pushed*, a clean metre and a half sideways, and she didn't fight it, she rode it out and came round and landed on the far rail.

Then she came back the other way, lower, and it hardly touched her. Then higher, and it shoved her almost into the underside of the deck.

"— oh."

Oh.

She agreed, insufferably.

And then the other eleven came off the rail, because of course they did, because showing off is how they learn anything.

Eleven glints and hers, all lit, flying the column at different heights in a loose shambolic formation that was being argued about the entire time — and forty metres of void turned into a **diagram**.

She could see the whole thing. The column standing at the waist. Where it weakens going up. The turn, a third of the way across,

exactly where Vantage said it was and absolutely nothing like where she had imagined it.

It was in the air, drawn in light, by twelve people who found it so obvious they never mentioned it.

Four levels of gallery stopped to watch and nobody pretended they hadn't.

Very quietly, from somewhere above the deck:

I did say that I was the wrong teacher.

Ferren sat down on the plate. "Four years," he said, to nobody. "Four years I've been doing this."

⁂

And here is the thing nobody warns you about.

Twelve glints were holding a formation in mid-air to show her where the column was. Four levels of gallery had stopped. A fathom who waited six years for somebody to ask it a question was at her shoulder. Everything she needed to know was drawn in light, in front of her, forty metres wide.

And she overthought it so comprehensively that she forgot to throw properly. Half a hand higher than feels correct — she went about *three* hands higher, because she was concentrating, and she released late, and the bag went up out of the column entirely, missed the turn, missed the whole phenomenon she had just had explained to her by a committee, clipped the handrail on the far side at an angle of pure insult, and dropped forty metres into the netting.

Dead silence from four levels. Then a single voice from the second gallery: "*OHHHH.*"

"That," said Ferren, with immense care, "was worse than your normal throw."

"I know."

"That was worse than any throw I have ever seen. And I've seen a hall child throw with the wrong hand on purpose."

"*I know.*"

A control, of sorts. We now have one data point establishing that the information is not sufficient on its own.

"Thanks."

You are welcome.

BlingBling was extremely gold and absolutely silent on her collarbone, which is the single most devastating thing she could possibly have been doing.

"*Grash* it. Try again."

Nobody says *language* out there. That's the Yards. The bag came back up on a line. She stopped concentrating. That was the only thing she did differently.

*
**

And then, because the day had gone well and she was fifteen:

"Do a flip. Try not to die. Wooo hooo."

Two of them, actually.

She got one foot on the cable trunk by the plate and went up, and in ninety-second spin at the waist of a two-kilometre cylinder you go up *far* — and the first rotation was clean and she had time, so much time, absurd amounts of time, and somewhere in the middle of it she decided to have another one.

She came down on the plate on both feet with her knees absorbing it and one hand out for balance and she did not even stagger.

And then, because the Garden is still in her somewhere, she finished it with a bow.

The void went **off**.

Four levels. The Wolf Gate kids hammering on the handrail. Somebody at the second gallery doing a sustained note that was going to get them told off. The hall child with the flask standing on the top rail, which is explicitly banned four times over.

"**TWO?**" Ferren had both hands on his head and was walking in circles. "She did *two*. On the plate. After that throw. Rill — **Rill** —"

And Rill was on the stair, because she had come down again, and she was leaning on the rail with her arms folded and she was laughing — properly, openly, the whole way, which nobody at the Nine had seen her do.

"Yeah," she said. "All right. That was good."

Eleven glints went up all at once off the handrail in one enormous synchronised flash and immediately broke into an argument about who was late. BlingBling was in the middle of them, lit like a signal lamp, and was not arguing, because she had nothing to prove to anybody in that void.

> Vantage teaches extremely badly and was right about everything, and I have decided he is one of ours.

A pause from somewhere above the deck.

...I shall take that in the spirit in which it was intended.

⁂

She didn't go far afterwards. Fourth level, port side, past where the Coldwater offices stop being offices. The maintenance gallery with the ports nobody bothered to shutter.

Her spot.

Somebody had been in there since that morning. There was a cushion on the cable trunk that had not been there before — an old one, Threshold grey, with a repair on the corner in somebody's bad stitching — and it had very obviously been put there on purpose by a person who knew she came there and did not want to be caught doing it.

She read the speeches until the warm-air return and the low orange lamps did for her, and fell asleep on it, and that is where day two ended.

Best day ever.

Chapter 13 — That's How It's Done

❖

Day three · dawn

She woke on the cable trunk with a cushion under her hip and a crick in her neck that was going to be with her until lunch. The sheet had slid onto the deck. Page a hundred and ten, still.

Today was three days.

She had said three days to an eighty-one-year-old woman sitting on a Procyon deck with a broken wrist, and the woman had said *come back for me*, and Calloway had left the run on the rota without saying anything about it.

Wash. Feed the membrane. Boots — the Procyon one and the Nine one, side by side, which is two stars and is nothing much yet.

The hall at that hour was the quiet end of the night shift turning over into the early one. Nine queues. Eight of them moving the way they always move.

And **door seven** had a line of about twenty people in it, which is a lot for that hour, standing about rather than moving, and a tallyman at the head of it with his arms folded.

As she came past, the older of the two Wolf Gate loaders from the day before caught her eye and tipped his head at the queue with the long-suffering cheerfulness of a man whose morning was already annoying.

"Sticky," he said.

And went back to waiting.

⁂

The Procyon Stair was three along, running clean, and the tallyman there knew her name and asked after Ossuary. She stepped up and it took her instantly — the way a door is supposed to, the way all thirty-four of hers had, step and you're there and the only reason you know is that the air changed.

Mina Haral was sitting up in a chair, dressed, with her left wrist in a moulded brace and a bag already packed at her feet, and she had very obviously been ready since about six.

She saw Lint in the doorway and her whole face went.

"*Three days.*"

⁂

She told her in about ninety seconds, as an afterthought, because to her it was one. Nobody had ever put the question to the cargo.

Don't hold her still. She's got a hundred and sixty years of balance between the two of them and Lint would be fighting hers. **Go on her count, not yours** — because she is the one who can't do anything about it, so the moment she isn't ready is the moment it sets. And **talk the whole way**, not to settle her, to settle *you*, because a frightened carrier is a stiff carrier, and she has spent forty-one crossings being a conversation so some child had something to do with their mouth.

Then the condition, and she was immovable about it.

"If it sets, you put me down. Not ease off. **Put me down**, on whichever side we're on, and let go, and don't spend four seconds being brave at me." She tapped the chair arm. "Say it."

Lint said it.

"Good. Right." She got her good arm up over Lint's shoulder. "The ceiling in this hall is a disgrace and has been for thirty years—"

And the air changed.

"— and the *second* motion was about the ceiling and it failed because by then everybody was bored of ceilings, which is the entire history of public works in this system—"

It didn't set. Not once. Not even the pull.

Because she moved with Lint, and she went on her own count, and she has been doing half this job since before Lint was born.

⁂

The Nine. Hot metal, nine queues, the smell of home.

Lint came up out of the Procyon housing with an eighty-one-year-old woman against her chest still talking about ceilings, and put her down carefully on the deck plate, and Mina stood — on her own, with her good hand on Lint's shoulder for about four seconds and then not even that.

"There," she said. "*That's* how it's done."

Then she looked round at a hall she was last standing in at twenty-two, and stopped talking for the first time in four minutes.

The tallyman on the Procyon Stair had gone very still. Two of the queue had put their bags down.

Mina Haral — who taught half the readers in human space, who was turned back in this hall at twenty-two, who has paid children forty-one times to bring her home — was standing at the Nine on her own two feet with a brace on and her bag at her side.

BlingBling came off Lint's collar and went up and hung above the two of them doing something extravagant and gold that she had no business doing in a working anchor hall, and nobody told her to stop.

Mina got her breath back, and squared her shoulders, and said:

"Right. Where do I sign? Because somebody is going to want a form and I would like to be the one who finds them rather than the other way round."

*
**

Over by the cordon rope at door seven, the queue had got longer.

Chapter 14 — Forty-One for Twenty-Three

❖

Day three · morning

Mina Haral's business took eleven minutes and was a thing of beauty.

She did not look for an office. She stood in the hall and asked the Procyon tallyman who currently keeps the residency sheet, and he told her, and she had him send a runner rather than going herself — "I am eighty-one and I have just been carried eight light years, Mr Orsel, I am not walking to the fourth level." A clerk arrived at a trot. She signed two things, declined to sign a third until it was read to her properly, and got a berth assignment out of a man who was clearly intending to say there were none.

"Right. Done." She put the pen down. "And you've been very patient and I have watched you look over at that queue about nine times. Go on. I'll find Nettie."

⁂

Up close it was worse than it had looked from the stair.

The queue was thirty-odd people and it was not a queue so much as a crowd that had stopped pretending. Coldwater men with crates on their shoulders. A Wolf Gate shift steward in orange talking

quietly and continuously to nobody in particular. Two first-throughs in membranes, sitting on a stanchion base, waiting.

And the housing was *lit*. Four metres across, perfectly ordinary, exactly like the eight others.

What was happening was this, over and over.

A first-through steps up to the ring. Gives it her weight.

Nothing.

She comes off. Shakes her hands out. Goes again — and this time she stands there, on a lit plate, in front of thirty people, for a length of time that you could *watch*.

And then she's gone, and the queue shuffles, and the next one steps up.

That is the thing you cannot un-see once you have seen it. Yesterday the loaders said *give it a second and it has you*, and that was folklore, the kind of thing every deck says about some door. Today she was standing four metres from a ring watching a nineteen-year-old stand on a plate long enough that there was time to look at her boots.

Somebody behind her in the queue said *come on*, under their breath, to nobody.

*
**

The tallyman at the head of the line was a man of about forty with a sheet on a board, and he was not taking names.

He was making marks. A short stroke each time somebody stepped up, and then a longer one when they went through, and the gap between the two was a space he was leaving on the sheet, and the spaces were not all the same width.

Nobody had told him to do that. He was a tallyman. Tallying is what he does.

He had about forty of them down the page.

*
**

She asked the Old Man, on the pin, whether there was anything a first-through had that could feel whether a door was open and safe.

And the answer was specific, and it was no.

The knack you are thinking of is the Listen, and you have not got it. You can tell something about the far side before you step through — pressure, heat, whether there is air, whether there is a floor, whether anybody is standing there. It is never detailed. It is the single most valuable thing a first-through can have and it is the reason any of them survive a door that has moved. There are two or three in every intake. There was one in yours and she went to Barnard's.

A pause, and then the thing he volunteered.

But understand what you are standing in front of. ***Every human knack reads the far side.*** *That is what they are all for. Not one of them reads the* ***near*** *side, because for nine hundred and seventy-five years there has never been anything on the near side to know. A door is either where it is or it has strayed, and the only thing it does is open.*

So you are standing in a hall full of first-throughs and there is nothing in any of them that can read a lit ring.

In the queue, the two in membranes on the stanchion base were watching the plate with the flat expression of people whose turn is coming.

The tallyman made another mark.

"Big man." She said it quiet, pin only, matching him. "Get someone to seven with the Listen. Something's up."

***

Right. Two things, and the first one is that it will not do what you think.

Fast and quiet and straight back at her.

The Listen reads the far side. It will not tell you why seven is sticky.

A beat.

It will tell you whether the far side is still the far side. Which is a live question, is not being asked by anybody in that hall, and is worth considerably more than it sounds.

Dray Enns. Seventeen, four years on the rota, works the Cold Doors and Procyon, has the Listen and is quiet about it the way they usually are. He is asleep in bunkroom six on the third level and came off a late. I cannot order him and I have no standing to ask him. You can ask him, and he can say no, and if he says no that is the end of it.

And the second thing you did not ask for.

Of course.

The tallyman at the head of that queue is called Pell Ivor and he has been on seven for eleven years, and he is making marks on a board. A short stroke when somebody steps up, a long one when they go through, and the gap between them left open. He has about forty of them down the page. Nobody told him to. He is a tallyman and tallying is what he does, and it is the most valuable object in that hall by a considerable margin.

And I cannot read it.

A pause, and it cost him something to say.

I have cameras in that hall and I have had them for nine centuries. He holds the board against his chest at an angle, the way everybody does, because it is his sheet. I can see that there are marks. I cannot see the spacing.

The only way anybody gets that sheet is for a person to walk up and ask a man for it.

*
**

"Oi. Pell Ivor! How many attempts?"

He looked up like a man who had been shouted at in a hall he had worked for eleven years, which he had.

Then he looked at the Threshold flash on her membrane, and the question got through to him, and something shifted.

"…Attempts."

"Yeah. Not crossings. **Attempts.**"

He turned the board round.

"Since the watch turned." He ran a thumb down the page. "**Forty-one step-ups. Twenty-three through.**"

Forty-one for twenty-three.

"Nearly two goes each."

"Nearly two goes each." He tapped a column. "And that's not the number that bothers me. Week last Tuesday I'd have had twenty-three for twenty-three and I'd not have written anything down, because it's one for one, because it's *always* one for one." He shrugged, embarrassed. "Started keeping it on the Friday. Didn't tell anybody. It's not a fault, is it. Nobody logs a sticky door."

"What's the gaps for?"

"The waiting." He said it like it was obvious, and then heard himself. "How long they stand there. I leave a space the size of it."

And he has no clock. He has been drawing the length of a pause on a sheet of paper, by feel, forty-one times, because he is a tallyman and that is what tallying is.

*
**

Then her pin, quietly.

I have been timing it off the deck camera since you told me something was up, which is four minutes ago, and I have five.

Two point one. Two point four. Two point two. Two point six. Two point four.

Seconds, on the near side, standing in a lit housing before it takes them. I can measure this directly and perfectly — it is inside my hull, in front of a camera I have had for nine hundred years, and I have never had any reason to point one at a plate because a door opens instantly.

Mr Ivor's sheet goes back to Friday. Mine goes back four minutes.

A pause.

His is worth more than mine.

Pell Ivor was still holding the board out, and he had gone slightly pale, because he had just heard half of that off her face.

"Is that — am I in trouble? For not logging it?"

Behind him somebody stepped up to the ring, and gave it her weight, and stood there.

And now that she had a number in her head she counted it, and it was a long way past two.

Chapter 15 — He Only Looked At It

❖

Day three · the hall

"You're not in trouble."

He took that about as well as a man can who has just worked out that his private sheet is the only record of something.

And she did not say the other half out loud, which was *we all are.*

⁂

Bunkroom six, third level. Nine bunks, dark, the specific fug of eight people on different shifts. She found him by the boots — a Cold Doors pair and a Procyon pair, which the Old Man had told her to look for.

Dray came awake badly, the way anybody does off a late, and he was seventeen and narrow and had the half-second blank stare of somebody who thought they had three more hours.

"…Who're you?"

"Lint. New one. Garden." She kept her voice down for the other seven. "You've got the Listen."

He went from asleep to completely still in about a quarter of a second, which tells you something about having the Listen.

"Who told you that?"

"The Old Man. I asked him."

"…Right." He sat up. "He does that."

So she gave it to him fast and in order, and she gave him the *evidence* rather than the worry, because that was the only thing she had that was worth anything. Pell Ivor's sheet: forty-one step-ups, twenty-three through, since the watch turned, one for one every week of the last eleven years until Friday. And five timings off the deck camera: two point one, two point four, two point two, two point six, two point four seconds, standing in a lit housing before it takes you.

Dray listened to all of it without once interrupting.

Then he said: "Sticky's half a second. Sticky's *always* half a second. That's what sticky is."

"Yeah."

"Two point six isn't sticky."

"No."

He was already reaching for his boots.

He did not ask whether he would get in trouble, or who sent her, or whether Calloway knew. What he asked, pulling the second boot on, was the professional question.

"Has anybody listened at it?"

"I don't think anybody's thought of it. It's a near-side problem and the Listen's a far-side knack, so—"

"So it won't tell you why it's sticky." He stood up. "It'll tell you if the far side's moved."

He stopped in the doorway with his membrane over his arm, and for the first time he looked properly awake, and properly young, and slightly frightened.

"Has anybody checked that? In three days of it being sticky, has one person checked whether that door still goes where it's supposed to go?"

"Course not. They're just banging away at it to get it to open."

Dray closed his eyes for a second.

"…Yeah. That's what I'd be doing." He got his membrane on over his head. "That's what I *have* been doing, on four. Four's been sticky twice this year."

⁂

He moved fast and he didn't talk, and halfway down the stair he said one thing without looking round.

"If it's moved, they'd know. Twenty-three went through this watch and nobody's come back screaming. People are arriving at the refinery and going about their day."

"So it hasn't."

"So it hasn't." A beat. "So what am I listening *for*."

He didn't have an answer and neither did she, and he went anyway.

Pell Ivor gave him the gap without being asked twice. A tallyman who has been privately counting something for five days does not need persuading that somebody should look at it.

The queue did not like it. There was a noise.

And then Dray stepped up to the ring — not onto the plate, not giving it his weight. Just close. One hand out, not touching anything, the way you'd hold a hand near a stove.

And he stood there with his eyes open and absolutely nothing in his face.

The hall did the thing the hall does when thirty people stop talking.

It took about four seconds and then it went wrong.

She didn't see what happened, because nothing happened. He was standing with his hand out and then his hand wasn't out, it was at the side of his head, and then his knees were gone and he was on the deck plate.

Ossuary was there before she was. The queue surged forward and the Wolf Gate steward turned round and started shouting at thirty people to get back, and they did, mostly.

⁂

Dray was conscious. That was the first thing. Conscious, on his back, both hands over his eyes with the heels of his palms pressed in hard, and there was blood coming out of his nose and down his jaw in a way that was not dramatic and was extremely wrong.

"— alright, lad, you're alright, don't sit up—"

"*It's two.*"

He said it to the ceiling, through his hands.

"What?"

"It's — there's *two*." His breath had gone short. "There's two of them. It's both. It's both at — it's two places and they're —"

And then he couldn't. You could watch him try and you could watch it not come, and he made a sound that was a seventeen-year-old being properly frightened in front of thirty people.

"I don't — I've done four hundred of these. I've never — it's **both**. It's both at once and I can't—"

The hall doctor arrived at a run from the second level with a bag.

Pell Ivor had his board down by his side, forgotten. The queue was dead silent and backed up four metres further than the cordon rope.

Somebody behind her said, quietly, "He only looked at it."

⁂

And over her pin, flat and fast and stripped right down:

Lin. I have all of that on camera and audio and I have logged it verbatim at the time, which means in about nine minutes it will be the only account anybody has.

And I need to say the unwelcome thing now rather than later, because somebody is going to repeat 'it's two' in a committee by this evening.

He was hurt getting it. That makes it the least reliable testimony in this hall. A frightened seventeen-year-old with a nosebleed said a thing he could not finish and could not explain, and I cannot tell you whether he perceived something real or whether his knack simply failed badly and the words are what failure sounds like.

I do not know. Neither does he. And neither does anybody who repeats it.

A beat.

He is going to be all right. The doctor is not worried, she is being thorough. You should go and stand where he can see you, because you are the person who woke him up.

*
**

"I'm so sorry. It's my fault."

The doctor had a pad against his nose and his head turned and was telling him in a flat professional voice to stop talking and breathe through his mouth, and he did not stop talking.

"'S not." It came out thick. "Not your fault."

"I woke you up—"

"You gave me a *sheet*." He got one hand off his eyes and squinted up at her, and there was blood on his teeth, which was the most frightening thing she had seen all day. "Forty-one for twenty-three. Two point six. I've been on the rota four years. I heard those numbers and I *knew*."

The doctor: "Dray. Mouth."

"— and then I asked whether anybody'd checked, and nobody had, and I'm the one who *can*." He let his head go back. "So I did. That's the job. That's the whole job."

A pause while he breathed.

"Done four hundred crossings. Never once used it for anything that mattered." Quieter. "Wasn't going to be the first time I didn't."

The doctor got him sitting up against Ossuary's knee and shone something in both eyes and was visibly less worried than she had been ninety seconds earlier, and said so out loud, deliberately, for the benefit of thirty people.

"He's all right. Nose and a headache. He'll have a bad evening."

The hall let out a breath you could hear.

⁂

And then it changed, and you could feel the moment it did.

Because thirty people had just watched a kid go down on the plate.

Nobody logs a sticky door. Everybody logs a first-through on the deck.

The Wolf Gate steward had stopped managing the queue and was talking to the tallyman, fast. Pell Ivor had his board back up and was holding it like a document now rather than a habit. Somebody two levels up on the gallery was leaning over the rail shouting a question at somebody else.

And the queue — thirty-odd people who had spent three days being annoyed about standing on a plate — had gone very quiet and had stopped moving forward.

A Coldwater man with a crate said, to nobody in particular: "I'm not going through that."

⁂

Calloway has it, said her pin. *She is on the stair now and she will be here in about forty seconds. And Lin — thirty people heard him say 'it's two' and nine of them are already repeating it.*

"Yeah, well. I trust him. It's two — somehow the crossing got split."

Dray, from the deck, with a pad against his nose: "…*Thank* you."

The doctor: "Mouth."

That is a conclusion, said Sirius, *and I am not going to tell you whether it is right. But I have a fact that bears on it directly and you should have it before Calloway gets here.*

Nobody has arrived anywhere unexpected.

Inbound traffic from Gliese 65 has run all watch. Four this morning. Every one of them came up out of seven and every one of them had come from the refinery corridor — the same hardened run, the same shelter behind it, Vey's board on the bulkhead. It is on the Standing, confirmed this watch, in Sennet's hand, because that is what the Standing is for.

So whatever 'two' means, it does not mean that people are coming out in two places. That rules something out. It does not explain anything.

*
**

Calloway came off the bottom of the service stair at a pace that was not a run and was not far off one, with Dunnel behind her.

She took in the whole thing in about two seconds. Dray on the deck against Ossuary's knee with a pad on his face. The doctor. The queue backed up four metres past the rope and nobody moving. Thirty people all looking at her.

And a fifteen-year-old standing in the middle of it who was off the rota.

She did not say *Lin* this time.

"**Doctor.** Is he hurt?"

"Nose and a headache. He'll have a bad evening. I'd like him off this deck."

"Take him. Ossuary, go with her." She didn't watch them go. "Pell — hold that queue and nobody steps up until I say so, and I want that board in my hand in ten minutes."

"Director." He was visibly relieved to be given an order.

Then she turned round, and the whole hall was listening, and she knew it.

"Right. Lin. Walk me through it from the beginning, and don't tidy it up."

⁂

It came out in order, and her hands were not entirely steady and her voice mostly was.

The loaders yesterday, and *seven's sticky every spring*, and that she had taken that as reassurance. Pell Ivor's board this morning. The five timings off the deck camera. That she asked the Old Man for somebody with the Listen, and that he told her first that it reads the far side and not the near, and would not tell her why seven is sticky. That she went to bunkroom six and woke Dray off a late. That she gave him the sheet and the numbers and nothing else.

That *his* question was the one nobody had asked: in three days of it being sticky, has one person checked whether that door still goes where it is supposed to go.

Then precisely what happened. He did not step onto the plate. He did not give it his weight. He stood at the ring with one hand out, not touching anything, the way you'd hold a hand near a stove. Four seconds, maybe five. His eyes were open the whole time and there was nothing in his face. Then his hand went to the side of his head and his knees went. He was conscious on the deck and he said *it's two* to the ceiling, then *there's two of them*, then *it's both*, then *it's two places and they're* — and he could not finish it, and he tried, and it did not come. The blood came from his nose about ten seconds after he went down.

And then she gave her the inconvenient half, before she asked for it, which was the only part of it she had deliberately decided to do.

That Sirius logged all of it verbatim and then said that Dray was hurt getting it, which makes it the least reliable account in the hall — a frightened seventeen-year-old said a thing he couldn't finish and couldn't explain, and nobody can tell whether he perceived something

real or whether that is simply what a knack sounds like when it fails badly.

And that nine people within earshot were already repeating *it's two.*

Calloway listened to every word of it without moving. Behind her, Dunnel was writing.

When she finished, she was quiet for about three seconds, and then she asked exactly the question Lint had known she was going to ask.

"Who authorised a first-through to put his knack on a housing that is behaving abnormally?"

Nobody in the hall said anything.

"Lin. Look at me. **Who authorised it?**"

"No one. I thought someone should check it rather than just trying to jump through."

Calloway took that without blinking.

"Right. Then here's both halves, and you're getting them in front of thirty people because thirty people are listening and they're entitled to hear what the Threshold thinks."

⁂

"**The first half.** You are off the rota, you had no standing, and you went to a bunkroom and woke a seventeen-year-old and put him in front of a housing that is doing something nobody understands. He is on his way to the second level with a pad on his face."

She did not raise her voice at all, which was worse.

"You didn't hurt him. You gave him a sheet and he made his own call, and he's four years on the rota and entitled to. But nobody who could weigh that risk *weighed* it, and the reason is that you didn't come and get me. Twelve minutes, Lin. I was two decks up."

"…Yeah."

"Say it back."

"I should have come and got you."

"You should have come and got me." She nodded once. "That's the whole of it and I'm not going to say it again."

A pause.

"**The second half**, and it's bigger.

"You were *right*."

She turned round so the hall got it properly.

"Three days that door's been sticky. Three days of first-throughs standing on a plate for two and a half seconds and coming off and going again, and four hundred people on this station calling it weather — **including me.** I've walked past that queue twice today.

"Nobody checked. Nobody asked the one question a Listen could answer. And the reason nobody did is that a sticky door isn't an incident, so nobody logs it, so it never arrives on my desk, so I never weigh it."

A beat.

"That's not a fifteen-year-old's failure. That's mine, and it's Dunnel's, and it's every tallyman on this deck's, and Pell Ivor's been privately counting since *Friday* because he knew and had nowhere to put it."

Pell Ivor looked at the floor.

*
**

Then she stopped being gentle about any of it and started being a director, fast.

"**Dunnel.** Seven is closed. Cordon at four metres, nobody steps up, and I want that logged as an incident this minute with Dray's name on it and the time."

"Director."

"**Pell** — board. Thank you. Go and sit down somewhere and don't let anybody take that sheet off you but me.

"**Mert** —" the Wolf Gate steward "— your queue goes home and you tell them the truth, which is that I don't know what it's doing and I'm not sending anybody into it until I do. They won't like it. Tell them anyway."

"Twelve thousand people on the other side of that, Director."

"I know exactly how many people are on the other side of that."

And then she turned back to Lint, and the hall had got very quiet, and she asked it like it was the next item on a list.

"Right. You've been ahead of me all morning. **What haven't I got yet?**"

Chapter 16 — Doors Don't Have Seasons

❖

Day three · the cordon

"*What the grash, Call—*"

"Mm." Entirely unbothered. "Language, and go on."

"You just told me off in front of thirty people."

"I did. Both those things are true at once and you're going to have to get used to it." She folded her arms. "You've been twelve hours ahead of me since yesterday morning and I'd be an idiot to tell you off and then not ask. I don't care who's got the information. I care that it's in this hall and not in my hand."

Dunnel, from behind her, not looking up from the slate: "She does this."

"I do this."

⁂

"I'm the one who goes, Call. Me. Always."

Calloway looked at her for a long second.

"I know you are. That's the bit that keeps me awake." She said it quite gently and entirely without conceding anything. "And 'always'

is how I lose people. Eleven of them. Every single one was somebody who was always the one who went."

She let that sit for exactly as long as it needed to.

"Right. What have the Wolf Gate lot been saying?"

"I dunno — that it's stickier than normal, or something. Just since this morning."

And Pell Ivor's head came up.

"…No."

Everybody looked at him. He went slightly red and said it anyway, because he is a tallyman and the number was wrong.

"Beg pardon, Director. It's not this morning. I started the board on **Friday**." He turned it round. "Five days. It's been going since Friday and it's been getting worse the whole time, and this morning's just the first day you could *watch* it."

Calloway's jaw moved.

"Five days."

"Five days."

"Pell." She was very quiet now. "You've been on seven eleven years."

"Twelve in the autumn."

"Have you seen it do this before?"

And he opened his mouth to say no, and then didn't, and you could see him actually go and look for it rather than answer fast — which was the single most useful thing anybody did in that hall all day.

"…It goes sticky every spring."

The hall noise, which had come back a bit, went out.

"Every spring. Half a second, maybe. Four or five days of it and then it stops and you forget about it till the next one." He was turning the board over in his hands. "I've had it eleven times. Twelve."

"And this?"

"This isn't half a second, Director." He looked up. "I've got two and a half on the page and it's still going up, and we're on day five."

⁂

Eleven times. Twelve. Half a second, four or five days, and then it stops.

Somewhere above them Sen was on her stool at the board with the pen in her hand and she had stopped writing.

And Dunnel said, slowly, to nobody: "Doors don't have *seasons*."

So Lint stopped talking and got out of the way, which turned out to be the most useful thing she did all morning.

⁂

Dunnel's line was the one that did it.

"Sirius. Fault records. Seven. Every spring, going back."

I have nine hundred and seventy-five years of fault records and I have already looked, and the answer is nothing. There is not one entry. Not a single logged fault on seven for stickiness in eight centuries.

"How is that—"

Because nobody logs a sticky door. He said it flatly. *It is not a fault. It is an inconvenience that resolves itself, which is the definition of the thing nobody writes down, and that is not a failure of the record. It is what the record is* ***for*** *and what it is not for.*

"Then Pell's board is the only—"

Mr Ivor's board, and one man's memory of eleven springs, is the entire documentary history of this phenomenon. Yes.

Pell Ivor looked like he would very much like to sit down.

And then Sirius said the thing nobody had asked for, and the hall went still for the third time in an hour.

However. I have been looking in the wrong place and I have found it in the right one.

*Faults are not the only thing I keep. I keep **throughput.** Crossings per watch, per housing, continuously, since the fourth century, because a station runs on traffic and traffic is counted whether or not anybody cares why.*

*And if a door takes half a second longer to open, several hundred times a watch, for four or five days, then throughput on that housing **dips**. Slightly. Measurably. And then recovers.*

A pause.

It is there. It has always been there. I have seven hundred and ninety-four of them.

⁂

Dunnel stopped writing.

"Seven hundred and—"

One for very nearly every year the door has existed. A shallow dip, four to six days, followed by full recovery. It is in the data under every single director this station has had and not one of them has looked at it, including me, until eleven minutes ago.

"So it *is* a spring thing."

No.

And that was the word the whole hall heard.

That is what I wanted to tell you and it is why I interrupted. They are not annual. The gap between them is not three hundred and sixty-five days and it never has been.

The dips drift. Slowly, steadily, round and round the calendar, for eight hundred years. Which is precisely why everybody on this deck believes it is a spring thing — because a man works seven for twelve years and in twelve years it barely moves, so it is always roughly when he remembers it.

Mr Ivor is not wrong. He is just not old enough.

Calloway had both hands on the cordon post.

"Then what's the gap?"

I am computing it properly rather than quickly, because this is a number somebody is going to put in front of a council and I am not going to be approximately right about it.

Give me the watch.

⁂

Three hundred and sixty-six days and a fraction. Drifting about a quarter of a day each time.

Seven hundred and ninety-four of them, back to the fourth century, as regular as anything I hold.

Dunnel: "That's a *year*. That's nearly exactly a year."

It is nearly exactly a year, which is why nobody has ever questioned it, and it is not a year. A year is an Earth convention this station carries around for sentimental reasons. Nothing at Gliese 65 has any interest in it whatever.

What has a period of three hundred and sixty-six days at Gliese 65 is ***the refinery.*** *It goes round BL Ceti once in that time, and the far mouth is in a corridor inside it, and a mouth is pinned to a gravitational potential.*

So once per orbit the refinery passes through a part of the well where the sum gets briefly awkward, and the door is slow for four days, and everybody says it is a spring thing and gets on with their lives.

"Then why's this one different?"

Because of the other number, and I have that too, and it is the one I would like everybody in this hall to hear slowly.

The dips are not all the same depth. Most are a tenth of a second and nobody notices. Some are half a second and Mr Ivor remembers those. And the depth has ***its own cycle****, much longer, sitting on top of the annual one.*

Twenty-six and a half years.

A long pause.

Which is the orbital period of the twins around each other. They are an eccentric pair and they come to closest approach once in twenty-six and a half years, and when they do the whole potential landscape of that system reshapes hardest — and the annual flutter in the door becomes something else.

There are thirty of those in my record. Thirty deep ones in seven hundred and ninety-eight years.

The last was twenty-six years ago.

Nobody said anything at all.

Pell Ivor, very quietly: "I came on seven twelve years ago."

You have seen twelve shallow ones and no deep ones. Nobody currently working this deck has seen a deep one. The youngest person at the Nine who has is sixty-one years old and was a courier for eight months.

"And this one?"

This is the thirty-first.

It is day five and it is at two point six seconds, and the deepest value anywhere in the previous thirty is one point one.

⁂

Dunnel had sat down on the bench inside the cordon.

Calloway had not moved at all. Up on the gallery, four levels of people who had been going about their business an hour ago were hanging over the rails in total silence.

And Sen was on her stool at the Standing with the pen in her hand, looking down at the hall, eleven years old, having just watched the station work out that a door has a *clock*.

Thirty-one, said Sirius, on the hall. *Day five. Two point six seconds against a previous record of one point one.*

And I want to put one more thing in front of this hall before anybody decides anything, because it is a fact and it is the one that bears on what happens next.

The thirty previous deep cycles all ended. Four to six days, and recovery, every single time, for seven hundred and ninety-eight years.

A pause.

This is day five of a thing that has always stopped by day six. I do not know whether it is about to stop or whether it has stopped being that thing. Nobody does. There is no second case.

Chapter 17 — The Near Side

❖

Day three · the hall, then the office

Calloway finally straightened up.

"Right. Lin — go and find out which of my four hundred have the Listen, and do not let one of them near that ring. Names on a sheet, that's all."

She turned to Dunnel. "And get me Reader Haral. She's in this hall somewhere and she's been standing at the back of it for ten minutes."

⁂

Fourteen.

He had it before she had finished asking.

Out of four hundred and six first-throughs currently at the Nine. Two or three per intake, as the Yards tells you. I will give you them in the order they are useful rather than alphabetically.

She got a sheet off the bench and wrote while he talked, which was faster than it sounds because he paced himself to her hand without being asked.

Dray Enns, seventeen, Cold Doors and Procyon. On the second level with the doctor and not to be asked anything by anybody for the rest of the day.

Then the three who have actually worked seven and know what it feels like on a good day — Marn Sethe, twenty; Obbie Laurel, nineteen; Ciss, sixteen, who goes by Ciss and will correct you.

Then eight who have never worked it: Teal, Harran Voss, Nim, Edda Bray, two Castels who are cousins and will both answer to Castel, Pel Orro, and Juun.

And two I am going to name separately. Ferren Dask has a trace of it — not a knack, a trace, enough that he can sometimes tell whether there is air and nothing else, and he has never told anybody because it is embarrassing to be nearly good at something. And Rill has it properly and has not used it in four years.

"…Rill?"

Rill has it properly. And he did not elaborate, which was him declining to hand her somebody else's business.

Fourteen names, in order, with the three who know seven at the top. It took ninety seconds.

She put it in Calloway's hand.

She read it, and her eyebrows went up once, at the bottom of the page.

"Right. Good. That's quick." She folded it. "And nobody goes near that ring."

*
**

"Call — I'm not off the rota."

She looked up.

"It's day three. You said three days on the first night. And you left the Procyon run on for me this morning and I did it, and I carried a reader eight light years before breakfast, which means I've already worked today with your say-so."

Dunnel made a very small noise and turned it into a cough.

Calloway looked at her for a moment, and then did the thing that makes her worth working for, which is concede the point immediately and completely.

"That's correct. You're on the rota as of this morning and the Procyon run was mine to give, and I gave it. Fair."

Then, without a pause:

"**And you're still not going near that ring**, and I want you to notice that I've just changed my reason rather than pretending I hadn't.

"It's not the grounding. It's that you pushed after a set four days ago, that housing is doing something with no precedent in eight hundred years, and you are the single most useful person in this hall precisely because you keep walking into the thing in front of you."

She put the folded list in her breast pocket.

"So. You're on the rota. Where I put you."

"I go where you tell me to go. Send me."

Calloway's face did something very slightly.

"…Right. Good." She didn't make anything of it, which is how you know she noticed. "Then here's where I'm sending you, and it isn't a consolation job.

"Four hundred and six first-throughs on this station. Every one of them has been standing on plates all week. Seven's been sticky five days and *nobody told me*, and the reason isn't that they're stupid, it's that there was nowhere to put it.

"You've been here four days and you've got two things out of a stairwell and one off a tallyman's private sheet that I didn't have. **You ask people things and they tell you**, and nobody on my staff has done that all week because we were all busy being busy."

She took a step closer so the hall didn't get this bit.

"So go and collect it. All of it. Which doors have been sticky, when, how long, how bad. Not just seven — *all nine*. I want to know whether

this is one housing or whether I've got a station-wide problem and have been reading nine separate inconveniences."

"…Nine."

"Nine." She held her eye. "Because if four's been sticky too and nobody's mentioned that either, then everything Sirius has just told this hall about one refinery's orbit is the wrong shape, and I'd very much rather find that out from you in an hour than from a committee in a month."

And then, loudly enough for the gallery, deliberately: "And you've got **standing** for it, as of now. Anybody asks who sent you, it's me. Anybody declines to answer a courier off the rota, they can decline to answer the Director instead. Dunnel — note that."

"Noted."

"Take whoever you need. Not Dray."

⁂

And then the Old Man said it on her pin, in the flat voice, while she was still three steps from the cordon.

The fathom in the gallery void does not see. It feels what the air in a room is doing — that is how it knew about the column. It is the only creature on this station that reads a room by its field rather than by looking at it.

Every knack you have been told about this morning reads the far side. That one reads the near.

So she said it out loud, because somebody had to and she was the one standing there.

"Call. Vantage. The fathom in the void — it reads fields. Near side. Not the far side. The *near* side, where we're all standing."

Calloway went very still.

"Say that again."

Lint said it again.

Dunnel's head came up off the slate. "Director — the fathoms have been in that void since the Cold Doors opened."

"I know how long they've been in the void, Dunnel." Flat. Not at Dunnel. "Right. **Get it.** Ask it properly, it's a citizen, and if it says yes it comes to me and not to that ring."

She was already turning to the queue.

"Then the nine doors. Go."

⁂

Vantage was where it always is, and it came down before she had got to the rail, which it had not done before.

Something has happened in the hall. Four levels have been quiet for an hour and I can feel the queue not moving from up here.

So she told it. Dray at the ring and what he said and the blood. Pell's board, five days, forty-one for twenty-three. Seven hundred and ninety-four shallow dips and thirty deep ones and twenty-six and a half years, and that this is the thirty-first and it is at two point six on day five against a previous record of one point one.

And then the ask — properly, because it is a citizen, and she said so out loud in that order.

Vantage did not answer for a long moment.

Say the last part again. The part about what I would be for.

"Reading the near side. The housing. Not through it — *it.* What the field in that ring is actually doing, now, while it's lit. Every human knack reads the far side. Dray put his hand near a door that's got two answers and it knocked him down. You read a room by what the air in it's doing. That's not the same sense and it might not be the same risk."

It is certainly not the same sense.

A pause.

It might very well be the same risk, and I would be guessing, and I am not going to tell your director that I know it is safe.

It drifted lower.

But I will tell you what I think it is, and then I will come, and she can decide.

*Dray reached **through**. That is what the Listen is — a sense that goes to the far side, and it went to a far side that is currently two things. I would not be reaching through anything. A field is here. It is in the metal and the air of that ring whether anybody is crossing or not, and I have been reading fields in this void for six years without putting my hand in anything.*

A beat.

I think it is more like standing next to a fire than reaching into one. I think that, and I do not know it, and the difference matters.

*
**

And Lin — understand what you are asking, because you are fifteen and polite and you have not said it.

If I can read that housing, then every fathom in human space can read every housing in human space, and has been able to for nine hundred years. There are eleven of us at the Nine. There are thousands across the Causeway. We have been riding on children's collarbones through doors we could have been reading the whole time.

That is not a small thing to hand to the Threshold. It makes my people useful in a way we have not been, which will be good, and it will also mean somebody will

want us at every ring on every station, and nobody will ask us twice after the first time.

It rose slightly.

I am going to say yes anyway. I want it on the record that I saw that coming.

Take me to her. And I would like Hesk present, because he will have thought about the field in those housings for nineteen years and will be the only human in the room who can tell her whether I am talking nonsense.

⁂

Finding Hesk took eleven minutes and involved Sen, who knew exactly which trunking run he was in and did not ask why she wanted him.

He came up out of a deck hatch on the third level with a headlamp on and a wrench in his teeth and the expression of a man whose morning was going fine.

"…You again."

"Calloway wants you."

He took the wrench out of his mouth.

"*Calloway* wants me."

"And a fathom asked for you by name."

He looked at her for a long moment, then at the hatch he had just climbed out of, then back at her.

"Right," he said. "Well. That's my afternoon gone."

⁂

The office. Calloway. Dunnel with the slate. Mina Haral in the good chair with her brace on a cushion, who had been in the room for twenty minutes and had evidently been told everything already and had formed opinions about all of it.

And then a fifteen-year-old, a deck engineer in a coverall, and a metre of eyeless membrane which would not use the corridor and had come along the open side of the stairwell.

Dunnel got up and propped the door wide without being asked, which Vantage noticed.

That was thoughtful. Thank you.

Vantage put it to Calloway itself, which was right, and it put it exactly as it had put it to Lint — including the parts against its own case. That it would not be reaching through. That a field is in the metal and air of that ring whether anybody is crossing or not. That it thought this was more like standing beside a fire than reaching into one, and that it *thought* that and did not know it, and the difference matters.

And then the part she had not said and it did.

If I can read that housing, Director, then every fathom in human space can read every housing in human space. There are eleven of us here and thousands across the Causeway, and we have been riding on children's collarbones through doors we could have been reading the entire time.

Which will be good. And it will also mean somebody will want one of us at every ring on every station, and the asking will be a formality after the first time.

I am saying yes. I would like it minuted that I saw that coming.

Dunnel wrote it down.

*
**

Calloway turned to Hesk.

"Is it talking nonsense?"

Hesk had gone very quiet and was holding his wrench in both hands.

"…No." He cleared his throat. "No, Director. And I've got something and I don't know if it's anything."

"Go on."

"A housing draws. Big draw, short, every crossing — it's on my bus on the hall deck and it has been for nineteen years." He turned the wrench over. "And **seven dims the hall lamps**. Little flicker, half a blink, nobody sees it. Been doing it as long as I've been here."

"All nine do that."

"No, Director. Three does, because three's old. Seven does it *more*, and seven's done it more since Friday, and I've —" he stopped. "I've been meaning to put a note in. It's lamps. You don't write up lamps."

Mina Haral, from the chair, very dry: "No. You don't write up lamps."

Nobody said anything for a second.

I could tell you whether the draw and the dimming are the same event, from the rim, in about four seconds.

Calloway looked round the room — a fathom, an engineer, a reader, her deputy, and a fifteen-year-old.

"Just need to know what's happening," said Lint. "This is weird and I'm a bit scared."

Calloway did not tell her it was fine.

"Good. It's weird and I'm scared too, and so is everyone on that gallery, and the ones who aren't haven't understood it yet."

She pulled a chair round with her foot so it was facing the rest of them.

"Sit down. Here's what we've got.

"Five facts. Seven's been setting five days. It's at two and a half seconds and climbing. It's done this seven hundred and ninety-four times before, thirty of them badly, and every one of those thirty stopped by day six.

"Today's day five.

"And nobody on the far side knows any of it, because the only way to tell them is to send a child through the thing we're frightened of."

She looked at Vantage in the doorway.

"So the question in this room is whether I let a citizen who isn't mine put his sense on that ring, having watched one of mine go down doing something adjacent two hours ago."

Mina, from the good chair, not looking up: "That's not the question."

Calloway said yes in about four words, and the room emptied.

Chapter 18 — Fourteen Hours

❖

Day three · the ring, and the far side of it

The hall. Cordon open on one side. Vantage settled at the lip of the housing, close enough that the light off him went strange, and stopped moving.

Nobody counted out loud. Everybody counted.

Eleven seconds. Then he came off the lip, fast, and went up two metres before he spoke.

> *There is a slope across that ring and it runs from the port side to the starboard side and it is* ***steep****. Not the field of a working housing. I have felt three others this week to compare and they are flat.*
>
> *And it is not steady. It moves — a hand's width, side to side, about twice a second, the whole time. It is hunting.*

He stopped.

> *I can also tell you which way it is leaning, and I would like somebody to write it down before I say it, because I will only be sure once.*

Dunnel already had the pen.

"Wait. Listen."

Lint put a hand up. He stopped.

Nine queues. The Procyon Stair running. Somebody's crate going over two bays down. A tallyman reading out a manifest.

And the housing, which makes no sound at all and never has.

Vantage waited. So did the hall.

"…Nothing. Sorry. Go on."

Port side. The low side is port, and the slope is dragging that way, and it has been the whole eleven seconds.

Hesk, very quietly, from behind the cordon rope: "Port's the awkward approach. That's the side everybody stands on."

*
**

The rest took four minutes and came out as a number.

Vantage's slope, plus Hesk's lamp flicker, plus seven hundred and ninety-four dips, and the answer was that door seven was going to move, port side, and not on day six.

Fourteen hours, said Sirius. *Plus or minus four. I would not bet the far side of it on the minus.*

Calloway did not sit down.

"Right. Twelve thousand people, a hundred and forty on the branch, and nobody over there knows. Mert — get me every courier on this deck who'll volunteer, in the hall, now."

Then, to Lint, flat:

"You're the one who goes. You said so twice today. Through, tell Vey, come straight back."

Dunnel: "Director, she's four crossings in today and the last one was carrying."

"She slept, and she's the only one of mine who's done a hard carry clean this month."

Calloway looked at her.

"Yes or no."

"Of course I'll go."

⁂

Ossuary had her sealed in ninety seconds. Mina said one thing on the way past and it wasn't *good luck*.

The plate. BlingBling on her collar.

It set, and kept setting. She came off, eased, went again. Nothing. Again. Nothing.

Ninety seconds of a lit ring refusing her in front of the whole hall.

And then she stopped fighting it for a quarter of a beat — and it had her *instantly*. No wait at all. Less than any of the twenty-three that morning.

⁂

Hot metal. Ozone. The hardened corridor, shift workers eight deep, and a tallyman already turning round.

Vey was twenty metres away at the corridor mouth and saw her come up out of the housing with nothing in her hands.

"Seven's shut at your end?"

"No. It's moving. Fourteen hours, port side."

She didn't ask who said so.

"Rolf — shelter board, now." Then back to her, already walking. "Tell me the rest while I wake twelve thousand people."

So she gave it to her walking, in order, and Vey didn't interrupt once. Seven hundred and ninety-four of these in the record. Thirty bad ones. A twenty-six-year cycle and this is the thirty-first, and it is day five at two and a half seconds against a previous worst of one point one. A slope across the ring, steep, port side, hunting twice a second. Fourteen hours, plus or minus four.

And that it is not going to shut. It is going to **move**.

Vey stopped dead at the shelter board.

"Move where?"

"Nobody at the Nine knows. Same potential, same system, that's all the physics gives us."

And she went very still, and then she said it.

"**Ladder.**"

She was already pulling a chart off the wall.

"Sixty-one people. Survey post, hundred and ninety million kilometres out. They've got a ring in a shed that's never opened in two hundred years and it sits at our depth, because the first crew put it there *on purpose* in case this ever happened."

She looked up.

"And they've got no shelter. And the twins are closing."

"Ok. What does that mean?"

⁂

Vey turned the chart round and explained it slowly, without softening.

"A door isn't tied to a *place*. It's tied to a **depth** — how deep it sits in all the gravity round here. Like a water level. It doesn't care which rock it's on. It cares what level it's at."

A finger on the chart. "We're here, this corridor, at a certain depth." The finger moved. "And a hundred and ninety million kilometres out is Ladder. Sixty-one people on a rock. And by accident of where that rock sits — **Ladder's at the same depth as us.**"

"So when it jumps—"

"It goes *there*. Not away. Not shut. There."

She tapped it twice.

"We lose it. Twelve thousand of us, cut off, four weeks by ship to the only working door in the system. We'll live — we've got the shelter and we grow more than we eat. We'll just be gone until somebody cares.

"And Ladder gets a door they've never had. Sixty-one people who could never leave, suddenly able to."

She rolled the chart up.

"Welded roof. No shelter. And the twins are closing."

⁂

"Ok. Can you signal them directly what's going to happen? What's your plan here?"

"Inside a system? Course we can."

Vey was already at the console.

"Light works. Ladder's ten and a half minutes away by radio and we talk to them four times a day about supply runs. It's only *between stars* that nothing crosses but a person — everyone forgets that because everyone only ever thinks about doors."

She started typing.

"So here's the plan and it's three things.

"**One.** I tell Ladder in the next minute. They've got fourteen hours and a ring in a shed, and the first thing those sixty-one people are going to do is dig that shed out and find out whether the apron's still flat.

"**Two.** I put twelve thousand people in the shelter and I keep them there, because the twins are closing anyway and that part was always coming.

"**Three** — and this one's yours, and it's the only one I can't do."

She looked up.

"**Nobody at the Nine knows where that door is going.** And in fourteen hours it'll be standing in a shed next to sixty-one people with nowhere to shelter, opening onto your hall — and if your lot aren't *expecting* it, they'll waste a day finding out."

She went back to typing.

"So go. And go soon, because when it moves, whoever's standing on this side of it stays here for about a month."

"Yep. I might be back. Depends on what Calloway says." A beat. "Good luck."

Vey didn't look up from the console.

"Don't wish me luck, I've got a shelter. Wish it at the shed."

Then, as Lint turned for the corridor:

"And if your director sends you back — come *before* the fourteen hours, not after. I'd rather tell you I'm fine than have you find out."

*
**

A short set, one ease, and it had her.

The Nine. Nine queues, a cordon, and about forty people who had been staring at an empty lit ring for eleven minutes.

Calloway was two metres from the rope.

"Where's it going?"

"**Ladder.** Sixty-one people, hundred and ninety million kilometres out, survey post. There's a ring in a shed there that's never opened — same depth as the refinery corridor, so when it jumps it lands there. Fourteen hours. Vey's telling them now by radio and putting her twelve thousand in the shelter."

Dunnel stopped writing.

"Ladder's got no shelter," said Lint. "And the twins are closing."

Calloway turned round to the hall and the hall was already quiet.

"Right," she said. "Then in fourteen hours that door opens into a shed with sixty-one people standing round it, and we are the only way out they have ever had."

She raised her voice.

"**I want every first-through on this station in this hall.**"

Chapter 19 — Don't Brace

❖

Day three · the hall, thirteen hours and forty

The hall filled in nine minutes.

Four hundred and six first-throughs is not a crowd, it's a weather event — the Wolf Gate kids first because it's their door, then Coldwater, then everybody, down the service stairs and over the gallery rails. Ferren arrived with his boots in his hand. Sen was already on her stool with the board live and a fresh column ruled.

Calloway didn't make a speech. She gave them the five facts in ninety seconds and then started assigning.

And she put Lint on the thing nobody else could do.

"You've crossed seven twice today and you're the only one who has. Every single one of them is going to step onto a plate that fights them and most of them have never felt it. **Teach them to ease.** You've got until it moves."

Four hundred faces.

She is a terrible public speaker, and it turned out not to matter, because she did not speak to four hundred people. She spoke to eleven, and told them to go and tell eleven each, which was the only thing she could think of.

What she gave them was the whole of what she knew and it took about forty seconds.

It goes solid. Don't brace. Everybody braces and it's worse. Take the weight right off, let it come back on slow, and it has you.

That's it. That's all of it. A loader on a stairwell gave her half of it yesterday and an eighty-one-year-old woman gave her the other half that morning.

It went round the hall in four minutes and came back changed — by the time it reached the far gallery somebody had turned it into a rhythm, three words, and two hundred people were saying it at once like a counting song.

Don't brace. Take it off. Let it come.

⁂

Ferren shouldered through to her with his boots still in his hand.

"Lin. The shed." He was out of breath. "Vey's lot can dig it out, right? But nobody's *stood in it* for two hundred years. What if the apron's gone, or the ring's seized, or—"

Rill, behind him, arms folded:

"Then the first one through finds out."

"Yeah. That's the job."

Rill didn't answer, but she moved to stand next to her rather than behind Ferren, which was new.

Thirteen hours and forty minutes.

Down in the ring, Dunnel taped a sheet to the deck plate and wrote **2.9** on it in pen, because the board was four levels up and nobody wanted to look away.

⁂

"What do you want to do?" said Rill, beside her, not looking at her.

"I want to be the one to go. Of course. What about you?"

Rill took a while.

"Me."

One word, and then the rest of it in one go, flat, like reading a number off a sheet.

"Because I've got a year and you've got twenty, and the first one into that shed finds out whether the apron's cracked or the ring's seized or there's rock sitting in it, and if it's rock then whoever's standing in it when they find out doesn't come back. That's not brave, Lin. It's just what the numbers are."

She finally looked at her.

"And everybody in this hall is about to spend a day being noble at each other about it, so I'd rather get in first and be boring."

Then, immediately, before Lint could say anything:

"Your glint's gone up to the rail with mine. Tace is teaching her something and I have never once seen Tace teach anybody anything."

"I just love glints. Just the best." And then, because it needed saying: "Look, Rill, you're just amazing. I'll back you up whatever. The main thing is to save those people. Everyone's coming back, yeah?"

"Mm," said Rill, which is not yes.

She didn't lie. She also didn't say the other thing.

What she did was knock her shoulder into Lint's, once, hard enough to shift her, and then look up at the handrail where Tace-of-the-Rail was doing something slow and precise and BlingBling was — for possibly the first time in her life — watching rather than performing.

"She's learning to hold an interval," Rill said. "That's not a glint thing. That's a *working* thing. Tace only teaches it to one in ten."

A pause.

"You've been here four days."

*
**

Over at the cordon, Calloway raised her voice: "**Who's first into the shed?**"

And about ninety hands went up.

Rill did not put hers up.

She walked — straight through the middle of ninety raised hands, to the cordon rope, in front of Calloway.

And she pushed her sleeves up.

Four years of nobody saying it out loud, and she put both forearms on the rope in the light where the whole hall could see them, and said nothing at all.

Calloway looked at them for a long moment.

Then she said, quietly enough that only the front two rows heard it: "Put your sleeves down, Rill."

And louder, to the hall: "**Noted. Everybody who raised a hand, Dunnel's taking names.**"

Rill came back with her sleeves still up.

⁂

Dunnel had a sheet on the bench and was taking names in two columns, which Lint only understood when she got close: one for *has crossed seven*, one for *hasn't*.

Hers went in the first column. There were four names in it.

"I know." Dunnel didn't look up. "You were the second one in today and Ferren was the first. Dray's in there too and he's not crossing anything." She wrote. "That's three."

"Who's the fourth?"

"Rill. Four years ago."

Behind her, somewhere up the gallery, the counting song was still going.

⁂

Then a shout from the ring.

One of the Wolf Gate couriers had been on the plate for a count of about twelve and came off it shaking her hands out, and she stepped up again, and came off again.

"— it's not *having* me—"

Dunnel's pen stopped.

Second courier stepped up. Same. Third.

Three in a row and nobody through, and the sheet on the deck plate said 2.9, and Koth from the Coldwater run was already saying out loud the thing everybody in the hall had just worked out at the same time.

"If it won't take anybody *now*, there's no relay. We're just waiting thirteen hours for it to go."

Calloway, flat and fast: "Somebody who's crossed it today. On the plate. **Now.**"

Ferren was on an early and asleep. Dray was on the second level.

There were two of them left in that column and Rill was thirty metres away at the cordon.

"Rill, you coming?"

She was beside her before Lint had got to the plate.

"Second shot's mine."

Ossuary cleared the ring. Nobody said anything. BlingBling locked on.

It set, and kept setting. Three goes, easing clean every time, and the fourth. Nothing.

Rill's hand was on her shoulder to move her off the plate.

Fifth attempt. She took the weight right off, let it come back slow — and it had her.

Hot metal. The corridor. Shift workers going the other way with bedding, because Vey was already moving twelve thousand people.

She was back on the Nine inside forty seconds.

"**It takes.**" She was saying it before her foot was off the plate. "Four refusals and the fifth one went. It's not shut — it's just *slow* and you have to keep going."

The hall made a noise.

Dunnel was writing. Calloway wasn't.

"Five attempts," she said. "How long did the five take?"

"…Ninety seconds? Maybe a bit over."

"Ninety seconds a crossing, sixty-one people." She was doing it out loud. "That's an hour and a half if every single one goes fifth time, and nothing else goes wrong, and the number doesn't rise."

Rill, beside her, sleeves still up: "It'll rise."

Chapter 20 — A Bowser on the Ring

❖

Day three · the last of it

Four hours went.

Not quietly. The Nine turned into something she had not seen it be: Dunnel's two columns became a rota, the growing decks gave up two hundred mattresses, somebody turned the Wolf Gate mess into a receiving hall because it was nearest, and the counting song went round the gallery until a hall child started a second one about Ferren that he pretended not to hear.

Every watch, somebody who had crossed seven stood the plate and found out whether it still took. It did. Five attempts. Then six. Then six.

The sheet taped to the deck said **3.3**.

⁂

And at the sixth hour a Wolf Gate courier came up out of the housing with his boots in his hand and Vey's handwriting folded in his chest seal, and the hall stopped.

Calloway read it and her face did something.

Then she read it out, because four hundred people were standing there.

Ladder answered in twenty-two minutes. Sixty-one accounted for, all well, all told.

They have found the shed.

It has been their dry store for a hundred and ninety years. There is a fuel bowser parked on the apron that has not moved since before anybody living was born and has sunk eleven centimetres into the concrete.

The ring is underneath it.

They have thirteen hours and forty-one people who can lift. Tell me what you want them to do.

Four hundred first-throughs, a station director, an engineer, a fathom and a reader, and nobody said anything for about three seconds.

Then Hesk, from somewhere near the back:

"…Is there a *drain* under that apron?"

⁂

"Drain?" Calloway rounded on him.

"It's a survey post. They wash things down. If there's a drain run under that apron then the slab's undermined and that's *why* it's sunk eleven centimetres — it's not weight, it's a void." Hesk had his wrench out again without noticing. "And if it's a void I'm not having forty-one people lift a bowser off a ring. You don't lift a bowser. You drain it, you cut the lip of the dish it's made, and you *roll* it."

"Can you tell them that from here?"

"I can tell them that from here and it'll be wrong, because I've never seen the thing." He had gone pale. "Director, I need to know whether that's a drain or a sinkhole and whether the ring's taken the load, and the only way I find out is somebody asks them the right questions and brings the answers back."

And then everybody in that hall worked out the shape of it at the same time.

Ladder can only be reached by radio, through Vey. Twenty-two minutes each way. And Vey can only be reached by a person walking through door seven.

Which was now taking six attempts and ninety seconds and reading **3.3**.

Hesk needed three round trips. Maybe four.

⁂

Calloway didn't look at Lint. She looked at the four names in Dunnel's first column.

"Hesk, write your questions. Short. Numbered."

He was already writing on the back of his own hand.

Rill was pulling her sleeves down.

Six attempts. Then eight. Then she lost count, because Dunnel was counting for her and had got to eleven.

It would not have her.

She came off the plate with her arms shaking and Hesk's numbered questions still folded in her chest seal, and the sheet on the deck said 3.3 and Dunnel was writing **3.6** underneath it.

Rill had her sleeves down and was standing at the edge of the ring.

Lint stepped off and handed her the questions.

Rill took them, and didn't say anything, and didn't make it a moment.

She stepped up.

Third attempt. She eased off it once and it had her, and the hall made a noise that was mostly relief and partly something else, because everybody had seen whose arms those were.

⁂

Fifty-one minutes.

She came back with Vey's answer and Ladder's answer under it, and she was grey around the mouth, and she gave the sheet to Hesk and not to Calloway.

Hesk read it standing up.

Then he sat down on the bench inside the cordon, which nobody had seen him do.

"It's a drain," he said. "It's a drain and it's been leaking into that fill for a century and the slab's got a void under one corner the size of a bunk." He looked up. "They can't roll it. They roll it and it goes *through*."

Dunnel: "Then they lift it."

"Forty-one people can't lift a bowser."

Rill, sitting on the deck plate with her back against the stanchion, not looking at anybody: "They could drop it."

"Drop it." Hesk was on his feet again. "Say that again."

"The hole's under the corner. So stop fighting it." Rill didn't get up. "Cut the slab round the bowser, not under the ring. Let the corner go. It drops into its own hole and sits in a pit, and the apron the ring's in stays where it is."

Hesk stared at her.

"…How long have you been thinking about that?"

"Since you said void."

He was already writing on the bench. "Needs the cut line two metres clear of the ring minimum, needs them to know which corner, and needs somebody to tell me how deep that void is or they'll take the ring down with it." He stopped. "Three questions. One trip."

*
**

Dunnel, quietly: "Director. Fifth attempt failed on the last four people who tried. Including two off the list."

The sheet on the deck said **4.1**.

Calloway looked at it for a long moment.

"Then this is the last one we get. Hesk — three questions, and make them the right three, because whatever comes back is what those sixty-one people are doing without help after that."

Six hours and ten minutes.

Rill was still sitting against the stanchion and had not got her colour back. Ferren was awake and in the hall with his boots on and had crossed seven once that day. Lint had a sheet of three questions nobody else could carry.

"I go."

Ossuary sealed her. Hesk put the three questions in her chest seal himself.

Nine attempts. Eleven. Dunnel stopped counting out loud because it wasn't helping.

Twice it *nearly* had her — that half-instant where the weight goes and you're already moving — and both times it came back solid and put her on her heels.

Ossuary's hand was on her arm and he hadn't pulled yet.

Six hours four minutes. Three questions in her chest seal. Sixty-one people and a bowser on a ring.

She went again.

The thirteenth attempt was the one where it nearly had her, and she was already committed — weight gone, shoulder through where the air changes — when the slope swung and it came back **solid** against her left side.

It didn't throw her. It just stopped being soft, with her arm inside it.

She heard something before she felt it.

Ossuary had her off the plate before her knees finished going.

It wasn't much. That was the strange thing — a wrench, the sort of thing you'd get off a badly-stacked crate. She could move the fingers.

It just didn't want to go above her shoulder, and it was *cold* in a way that is not like being cold.

Nine couriers on the Wolf Gate deck have had a version of this all spring and nobody wrote it up.

Hesk's three questions were still folded in her chest seal.

⁂

Five hours fifty. The sheet on the deck said 4.1 and nobody was going to write another number under it, because nobody was going to get a reading.

The doctor was coming down the gallery stair with a bag.

Calloway crouched down in front of her on the deck plate, which put her below her, which she had not done for anybody all day.

"Lin. Look at me. Did it take you at all? Any part of it, any instant?"

"I got nothing. Nothing at all."

Calloway closed her eyes for a second.

"Right."

She stood up. "Ferren."

⁂

Ferren went eleven attempts and got nothing. Rill shoved her sleeves up and went fourteen and got nothing, and had to be helped off, and was furious about being helped off.

Two more after that, off Dunnel's second column, who had never felt a set before and now had.

By the ninth hour the hall had stopped sending people up. Not on an order. People just stopped.

Hesk's three questions came out of her chest seal and went into a drawer in the ready room, unsent, and nobody said anything about it, and that was the worst thing that happened all day.

⁂

Three hours twelve.

The hall didn't empty. Four hundred first-throughs and about two thousand other people sat down on the deck plates and the gallery stairs and waited, because there was nothing else to do and nobody wanted to not be there.

Sen stayed on her stool.

At three hours and four minutes a Coldwater courier called Nim — nineteen, second column, who had been quietly standing the plate every twenty minutes for two hours without being asked — stepped up again.

And door seven went.

No sound. No flash. The lit ring simply stopped being lit, between one of her breaths and the next, with both her feet on the plate.

She was standing on cold metal.

For about four seconds nobody in that hall breathed, and then Nim said, in a very small voice, "…I'm fine. I'm fine, I'm — there's nothing. It's just *off*."

⁂

Bunk nineteen. Boots off, membrane in its tray, left arm not going above the shoulder.

BlingBling came in off the rail and dimmed right down on the pillow — the sleeping colour, which she only does there.

Somewhere four levels down, four hundred people were sitting on deck plates in front of a cold ring, and most of them weren't going anywhere either.

Chapter 21 — The Shed

❖

Day four · dawn

Somebody was shaking her shoulder and it was Sen, which should not have been possible, because Sen is eleven and that is a first-through bunkroom four levels from her slate.

"It's *lit*."

⁂

The hall at a dead run, down the service stair, and she could hear it before she saw it — two thousand people making a sound she had never heard a station make.

Door seven was lit.

Nine queues, eight of them stopped dead and all of them watching the ninth. The cordon still up. Dunnel's sheet taped to the deck with nothing written under **4.1**, because nobody had stood the plate yet.

Calloway was inside the rope and Ossuary was beside her and nobody was on the ring.

Nobody knew what was through it. Nobody knew whether the apron had held, or whether that bowser had gone into the hole or onto the ring, or whether anybody over there was standing up.

Calloway saw her come off the stair.

She didn't order it. She just stepped back from the plate and left the space, and about four hundred people worked out what that meant at the same time.

*
**

Lint walked up to the rope. "Is my kit vacuum and radiation?"

It wasn't. Vacuum and hard cold, both — which is a good pairing and the one she had carried since the Yards. Not radiation.

And Ladder is red rock under a welded roof with the twins closing.

The kit store was nine metres behind her and a re-draw takes about six minutes. Door seven had been lit for four and nobody knew how long it stays.

Ossuary already had her seals in his hands and was waiting to be told which.

On her collar, BlingBling had gone a colour she had only seen once — flat, hard, attention — and she was looking past her at the ring rather than at anybody in the hall.

Lin. Ask me about the twins.

"Sure."

I was hatched there.

Not a performance. No colour in it at all, which from her is the loudest thing she can do.

Nobody at this station has ever put that together with where that door is going, and I have been here two years. It is not a storm, Lin. It is a *season*. The sky goes wrong for weeks and then once or twice a day it tries to kill you, and you do not get a warning from an instrument, because by the time an instrument has it you are already lit.

A pause.

> You are going into a shed with a welded roof and no rock over it and a skin that stops cold and does not stop light. I cannot fix your kit. I cannot smell a flare coming and neither can anybody else.

She came round onto the front of the collar so Lint could actually see her.

> What I can do is count that door. Every one of us can. I counted it with you yesterday and I was within four hundredths of you and neither of us was guessing. So you will not have to wonder whether it is getting worse while you are standing in it, because I will be telling you, every time, out loud.
>
> Nobody on Ladder has anybody who can do that.

Ossuary, quietly, still holding the seals: "Lin. Six minutes for a re-draw, or now."

"Now. Of course."

*
**

Ossuary sealed her in forty seconds. Rill was at the rope with her sleeves up and didn't try to stop her. Calloway said nothing at all, which was permission.

She stepped up.

It set.

Not the hunting, grinding thing of the day before — this was different and worse in a way she felt immediately. It was *flat*. Solid from the first instant, the same every time, no give and no nearly.

Four attempts. She eased perfectly each time, the way four hundred people had spent a day learning to.

Nothing.

And Hesk, who had come down to the rope and should not have been inside the cordon, said it out loud before she was off the plate:

"That's not sticky. That's **full**."

Nobody in the hall knew what that meant for about two seconds, and then enough of them did. A throat cannot establish into solid matter. It was lit — so there was air in that shed. But something was sitting in the ring.

Eleven centimetres of fuel bowser, maybe.

Rill, at the rope: "Lin. Off. Now."

Fifth attempt — and Hesk was wrong, and she felt him be wrong, because it gave.

Not easily. It let her in the way a door moves when something heavy is leaning on the other side of it.

Then air.

⁂

Dust. Bad orange light from a single strip. Cold, dry air that tasted of rust and lamp-fed greenery.

And she came out *sideways*, shoulder-first, because the ring was not clear — there was a sheet of cut deck plate leaning across two-thirds of it, propped, deliberately, like a man holding a door with his boot.

That was what had been leaning on her.

Four seconds, and here is what they got her.

The bowser *is* in a pit. They did it. It was sitting nose-down in a hole the size of a bunkroom about four metres off, and the cut edge of the slab was raw and fresh, and the ring's apron was intact right up to a line somebody had drawn in pen two metres out.

The plate across the ring was a shield. Rock dust and grit were everywhere and they had been cutting concrete in a sealed shed, so somebody had covered the mouth to keep the dust out of it.

There were nineteen children sitting in a row against the far wall with their names written on their hands.

And about thirty people, filthy, grey-faced, mid-work, who had all stopped.

A woman with a cutting torch still in her hand said, into total silence:

"…Is it open?"

⁂

"Yep. I'm here, from the Nine. Looks like it's operating."

The woman with the torch put it down.

"Tace Orun. Foreman." She didn't offer a hand; both of hers were filthy. "You're Threshold. How many of you are there?"

"Four hundred and six."

Something happened in that shed. Not a cheer. Thirty people who had spent thirteen hours cutting concrete with hand tools heard a number and had to sit down.

Tace didn't sit down.

"Right. Then I want you back through that ring and I want you to go now, before anything else, because you're the only thing in this system that can tell them." She was already turning to the wall. "The children are ready. They've been ready for nine hours."

And from the row against the far wall, nineteen kids with their names on their hands were all looking at her.

On her collar, BlingBling had gone up to full gold without being asked — the only bright thing in that shed — and she was not showing off. She was lighting the ring.

⁂

"Who am I taking? May as well start now."

"You take Oris." Tace didn't look at the list. She hadn't needed to for two days. "Front of the row, the big one."

He stood up before she'd finished saying it. Fifteen, maybe — a head taller than the rest of them and broad across the shoulders, and the only one of the nineteen who looked too big to be carried.

Which, if you think about it for half a second, is exactly why he was first.

Tace did not explain that and would not if you asked her.

He came over and got his arms up without being told. "I know how. They made us practise on the apron." A beat. "I'm the heaviest. Sorry."

She went on his count, because Mina taught her that four days ago, and it works on a fifteen-year-old off a rock as well as it works on an eighty-one-year-old off Procyon.

Three sets. The fourth one had them.

⁂

The Nine.

Hot metal, nine queues, and two thousand people who had been staring at a lit ring for eleven minutes with nobody in it.

She came up out of door seven with a boy in her arms who had never been off the rock he was born on.

The hall didn't cheer. It made a noise much worse than that.

She got him down onto the deck plate and he stood up and looked at nine housings in a ring and four levels of gallery and about two thousand strangers, and he said, "…It's *warm*."

"**IT'S OPEN.**" She was shouting it over the top of him. "It works, the apron held, they dropped the bowser, there's a plate across the ring to keep the dust out — **sixty-one people and nineteen children and they're all ready and they've been ready for nine hours.**"

Calloway was already turning round.

And four hundred and six first-throughs started moving at once.

Chapter 22 — Go On Their Count



Day four · the hall

There was a line. It formed itself in about ninety seconds and it was four hundred people long and went up the service stair and round the second gallery, and Dunnel was walking it with the sheet shouting two columns at people.

Lint walked past the whole thing and got on the end of it.

Rill was about forty places ahead and saw her do it. She didn't say anything. She held up two fingers and flicked them — *let's go* — which she had definitely learned off watching Lint and BlingBling, and which she had no business knowing.

⁂

The nineteen took **thirty-one minutes.**

That is the thing she will remember. Eighteen more children, eighteen different first-throughs, nobody carrying twice, a glint on every third collarbone counting the sets, and Sen on her stool writing a name on the board each time one landed.

By the time the queue had moved thirty places the children were finished and she hadn't even got to the rope.

So she never got her second carry, because four hundred people got there first, and the whole hall was roaring, and Oris was sitting on a crate being handed food by strangers.

Then Dunnel's voice went flat across the hall and the noise dropped.

"That's nineteen. **Nineteen of nineteen.**"

And in the quiet after it, Calloway said the other number.

"Forty-two adults."

Nobody moved. Because every single person in that hall had done the sum by now: a child carries cheap. An adult costs the carrier a fortnight off the end of their life, and three or four in a row finishes anybody.

Forty-two.

Four hundred and six.

Calloway stepped up onto the bench inside the cordon so the whole hall could see her, and she did not dress it up.

"I am not ordering this. Anybody who wants to go home can go home and I will never raise it again."

*
**

Lint stood up on the bottom step of the service stair, which got her about a metre, and she could see the whole of it.

Some of them went.

Not many. Maybe thirty, out of four hundred and six — down the far stair, quietly, not looking at anybody, and nobody said a word to them and nobody ever will, because Calloway said she'd never raise it and four hundred people heard her.

Everybody else stayed where they were.

The twenty-ones came down from the upper gallery. She counted eleven of them. Every single one was somebody whose arms you could read across a hall.

Ferren shoved to the front and was told to get back twice.

Up on the wall Sen had wiped the children's column and ruled a new one and written **42** at the top of it, and she was standing on the stool rather than sitting, with the pen in her fist.

And Dunnel was at the bench with a fresh sheet, saying the same sentence over and over to a line that was not moving away:

"Name, and how many you've done today. Name, and how many you've done today."

Rill was four places from the front with her sleeves up.

*
**

"Lint. Four transitions. One child carry."

Dunnel didn't write it down. She looked at her.

"Two."

"…What?"

"Two today. One out, one carry." She tapped the sheet. "Yesterday was four and a bad one and a wrenched arm, and yesterday doesn't count because you slept and I'm not having the whole hall doing that sum wrong on the first night." She wrote it. *Lint — 2 — one child.*

Then, without looking up, in the same flat voice she had used on about ninety people:

"Forty-two adults. Four hundred names on this sheet. You're not going to get one, Lin."

A beat.

"Unless you want the other job."

Behind her, inside the cordon, Hesk and Vantage and the hall doctor were standing round the bench with a sheet between them, and Calloway was pointing at it.

"What's the other job?"

Dunnel nodded at the bench.

"Forty-two carries. Four hundred people who've never carried an adult, most of them doing their first one tonight, and every single one of them is going to feel it set with somebody's mother in their arms."

She finally looked up.

"Hesk says they'll average two and a half sets each. Doctor says the injuries won't come from the carrying, they'll come from the fourth second — the bit where a fifteen-year-old decides they can have it both ways."

And then she said it, and it was the thing Calloway had said to her on a deck plate four nights earlier with Mina Haral's wrist broken on the floor.

"Somebody has to stand on that plate for however long this takes and be the person who tells them to **put them down.** Out loud. Every time. And make it stick."

A beat.

"It can't be an adult. None of them would listen, and none of them know what it feels like."

Over at the bench, Calloway had stopped pointing at the sheet and was watching her.

⁂

"Ok. I can do that." And then, because it was obvious the moment she thought of it: "Can I ask Mina to help me? No-one's better for teaching."

Dunnel's pen stopped.

"Reader Haral can't cross."

"That's why she's perfect. You can't use her up."

⁂

They sent a hall child for her and she was there in six minutes, which at eighty-one with a braced wrist means somebody carried the stairs for her and she was furious about it.

Lint gave her the job in about fifteen words.

Mina Haral looked at four hundred first-throughs and a sheet with **42** on it, and did not ask a single question about the physics, or the door, or how long it would hold.

What she asked was: "How many of them have ever been carried?"

"…None of them. We're the ones who carry."

"Right." She handed her stick to the nearest teenager without looking at him. "Then not one of you has the faintest idea what it's like at the other end, and that's the whole problem, and it's been the whole problem for nine hundred years."

She got herself up onto the bench — refused help, took it anyway when Ossuary simply lifted her — and sat on it so she was at head height with the queue.

"**You.** First one. Come here and pick me up."

Rill, four places from the front, said: "Me?"

"You've got the arms for it and everybody's watching you anyway. Come on."

⁂

Rill picked her up and Mina was immediately, loudly, comprehensively critical.

"No. You've got me like a crate. Why have you got me like a crate?"

"Because you *are*—"

"Say that again and see what happens." She shifted deliberately against Rill's grip. "Feel that? That's me trying to help and you stopping me. I've got a hundred and sixty years of balance between us and you're fighting all of it. Let go a bit."

"If I let go you fall."

"Then I'll fall and we'll both have learned something."

Four hundred people watched the best first-through at the Nine get told off by a woman with one working wrist, and somebody up on the second gallery made a noise and got elbowed.

Rill loosened her grip about a centimetre.

"**There.** Now — you're going to go on your own count, aren't you."

"…Yeah?"

"Don't. Go on *mine*. I'm the one who can't do anything about it, so the second I'm not ready is the second it sets, and you'll never know because nobody's ever told you." She tapped Rill's shoulder with her good hand. "And talk. All the way through. Not for me — I've done forty-one of these, I'm fine. For *you*, because a frightened carrier is a stiff carrier and you need something to do with your mouth."

Rill, flatly: "I don't talk."

"Then you'd better learn in the next four minutes, hadn't you."

⁂

It went round the hall the way the other one had. Twenty minutes and it was a song too, and it was longer than Lint's and it was funnier, and the chorus was **GO ON THEIR COUNT**.

Dunnel's sheet said the first eight carriers were ready.

Mina settled back on the bench and jerked her chin at the plate.

"Right. You're on that side of it and I'm on this one. When one of them pushes, I'll know before you do — I'll have felt it forty-one times. You say it."

"Hey Dunnel. I want to go back. Mina's got this. She doesn't need me."

Dunnel didn't argue. She just did the thing she does, which is work out where the hole in the plan is.

"Mina's got this side. Who's got the other one?"

"…What?"

"Forty-two adults get picked *up* on an apron a hundred and ninety million kilometres from here." She tapped her sheet. "The set happens at both ends. You've got four hundred kids about to feel it with somebody's father in their arms in a shed, and the only person who can tell them to put him down is standing on a bench in *this* hall."

She wrote something.

"So yes. Go back. And do the job over there."

Then she looked up, and she said the cost out loud, because she is the one with the sheet and that is what the sheet is for.

"Mouth's been open ninety-one minutes and nobody has any idea how long it holds. If it goes while you're on that side you're on a rock with a welded roof and no shelter and the twins closing, with sixty-one people and whoever else is stuck there, and nobody's coming for a very long time."

Rill, from the front of the queue, had turned round.

"Lin."

"Ok. I've got it."

Rill didn't say anything else. She stepped out of the queue, walked her to the rope, and knocked her fist against her arm once.

Chapter 23 — Four Hundred for the Night

❖

Day four · the apron at Ladder

Dust and bad orange light and the cut edge of the slab. Tace Orun had got the plate off the ring and two people with brooms keeping the grit down.

Forty-two adults on that rock, and Tace had them in an order. Thirty-four of them were in a line along the wall under the lamp halls, and the other seven were still working, and not one person was arguing about which they were.

Lint told her what she was there for in one sentence and she got it immediately, which is what two days of thinking about one problem does to a person.

"Right. You stand there." She pointed at a spot a metre from the ring where Lint could see a carrier's face and reach their shoulder. "And you say it loud and you say it to the *carrier*, not to mine. Mine'll do what they're told."

By the shed door there was a needle on the wall in a brass case, and a ledger hanging off a nail beside it on a loop of wire, swollen with damp and written in a lot of different hands.

⁂

Then the relay started and it went on for a very long time.

It works like this. A first-through comes up out of the ring, blinking at the orange light. Tace puts the next one in front of them. They pick them up — badly, usually, first time — and Lint is talking before they've finished: *go on their count, not yours, and if it sets you put them down.*

About a third of them set. She called four of those off the plate in the first hour.

Two of the four cried about it afterwards, and both of them went back in the queue.

Nobody was hurt. Nobody.

Eleven. Then nineteen. Sen's counting was happening eight point six light years away and Lint couldn't see any of it, and somebody told her the number every time they came through.

*
**

At twenty-six, Rill came up out of the ring.

And she didn't wait for Tace.

She walked past the front of the line — past a woman who had been standing there for forty minutes — and stopped in front of a man about halfway down, and picked him up.

Tace said, "That's not the order."

Rill said, "I know."

"Rill — now's not the time. Seriously."

Rill didn't put him down and didn't look away.

"Raske's paying me four hundred for this one."

That was it. That was the whole answer, and it was true, and she gave it flat in front of Tace Orun and a line of thirty-odd people and the man in her arms, who had the decency to look at the floor.

Then she changed the subject, the way she always does.

"Number's at two point nine on the Nine side. It's climbing again." She shifted her grip. "Tell Tace to start putting the heavy ones first while it's still cheap."

And she stepped onto the apron and went.

Lint caught her eye as she did it. She didn't say anything. She just held it, and shook her head once, slowly.

Rill's face did something she couldn't stop, and then she was gone, and the man went with her.

The woman at the front of the line watched the whole thing and said nothing at all.

Tace Orun said nothing.

Nobody in that shed said one word about it, and the relay did not stop, because the next first-through was already coming up out of the ring and there were people left and a number that was climbing.

Tace put the next one in front of the new arrival.

"Go on their count," Lint heard herself say. "And if it sets, you put them down."

⁂

Thirty-one. Thirty-three.

It got worse as it went, and not because anybody got tired. Because the number was climbing on the Nine side and the carriers were arriving having fought for it, and a kid who has just spent ninety seconds being refused by a door is a kid whose arms are already shaking when Tace puts somebody's grandmother in them.

She called five more off the plate in twenty minutes.

One of them — Wolf Gate, about sixteen, she never got her name — argued with her. Properly argued, in front of everybody, with an old man in her arms.

She said it again and the girl put him down and sat on the concrete with her head in her hands, and the old man patted her shoulder and got back in the line.

Then a long gap. Four minutes, nothing, and everybody in that shed looked at the ring.

And then a gap that went on for nine minutes, and Tace Orun came and stood next to her without saying anything, and there was one woman left in the line.

*
**

"How many first-throughs are still here?"

Tace had been counting. Of course she had.

"Four of you."

She nodded along the shed. Two sitting against the wall by the lamp hall doors — the Wolf Gate girl who had argued, and a boy who had set three times and hadn't tried to go back yet. One more up by the cut edge of the slab, standing, watching the ring, who had come through eleven minutes ago and had not managed to go the other way since.

And her.

"Three of yours got stuck on this side in the last half hour." Tace said it without any particular weight. "Two of them have tried going back empty. Couldn't."

BlingBling had been dark on her collar for twenty minutes, which she had not done since the night the wrist broke. Then she came up — not gold. A hard, flat white Lint had never seen on her.

> Three point four. And it is going up between crossings now instead of between watches.

*
**

And then the needle in the brass case by the door moved, and Tace Orun looked at it for about a second and a half.

"Front coming." She said it at a normal volume to the whole shed, which was how Lint knew it was serious. "**Pit. Now.**"

Nobody argued. Nobody asked her how she knew. Thirty-odd people who had lived under that sky their whole lives simply started moving, and the ones who didn't know where to go looked at her.

"Tace — what are your orders?"

She answered in about two seconds, because she had had two days and this is the part she is actually good at.

"The pit." She was already pointing. "Four metres of rock between you and the sky and it's the deepest hole on this rock and we dug it this morning. Round the bowser, under the lip, backs to the wall. It'll take all of us and it'll be filthy."

To her own people: "Lamp halls go dark, doors shut, *nobody* in the open. Move."

Then to Lint, flat:

"Your three come with us. They're not crossing anything in four minutes and I'm not having children stood on an apron under that."

And she did not give an order about the last one in the line.

The woman was sixty-odd. She had been standing there for an hour and ten minutes and she had not sat down, and the ring was lit two metres away, and there was nobody on that side who could carry her through it except Lint.

"Ok. Take her through." And then, to the shed: "I'm coming back."

⁂

She had watched thirty-three carries from four metres away for two hours. She was the best-prepared passenger on that rock and she got her arms up before she was asked.

"On my count," she said. "I've been listening."

Three sets. Four. It was flat and total and it had nobody.

Behind her Tace was shouting people down into the pit and the Wolf Gate girl was arguing about leaving her and being dragged.

The woman in her arms said, "Put me down, love."

"No," Lint told her, and went again.

Fifth set, and she said *now* on her own count, and it had them both.

*
**

The Nine. Noise like a wall. Two thousand people, Sen on her stool with the pen already moving, Mina Haral on the bench with both hands flat on her knees.

She put the woman down on the deck plate and she stood, and Dunnel's voice went up over everything:

"**That's the line. That's all of them out of the line.**"

The hall came apart.

And she was already turning round, because there were three first-throughs and thirty-odd people from Ladder going into a hole in the ground, and she had said she would come back.

Rill was four metres away and got to her first.

"Don't." She had her arm. "Lin, that's a flare and no shelter and your skin's cold-and-vacuum—"

"Tace is putting them in the pit. Four metres of rock. My three are down there and I said I'd come back."

Calloway, from inside the cordon, had already heard all of it.

She didn't argue. She looked at her for about a second and then stepped back off the plate, which is how she says yes.

Rill let go of her arm and swore.

Ossuary checked her seals in eleven seconds flat.

It set. Set again. Set a third time and a fourth, and BlingBling was flashing the number onto her collarbone in a hard white she could see through her own membrane, and it was not getting smaller.

Rill had hold of the back of her membrane and had not pulled yet.

Then her hand came off, because there was nothing left to hold.

⁂

Dust. Orange light. An empty shed with the lamp halls dark and the doors shut and nobody in it.

Four metres to the cut edge and then down — and the pit is not a pit from the inside, it is a raw concrete wound with a fuel bowser nose-down in the middle of it and people pressed round it under the lip with their backs to the rock.

Tace Orun's hand came up out of the dark and hauled her in by the shoulder of the membrane and somebody else got her legs, and the Wolf Gate girl was shouting something that was mostly swearing.

She ended up jammed between a boy of about nine and the cold curve of the bowser with four metres of rock over her head.

BlingBling went out entirely. Dark, still, flat against her collarbone, which her own people will tell you she can do and nobody who has met her believes.

Tace, in the dark, to nobody: "Heads down. Count of forty."

Somebody started counting out loud and about ten people joined in.

⁂

"How many more people? I thought that was all the kids and the adults."

Tace answered between numbers, because she had the only accurate list on that rock and she had had it in her hand for two days.

"**Eleven.**"

Her, and seven of hers who had stayed back on purpose — the broom crew keeping grit out of the ring, the two who shut the lamp halls, the woman who worked the cutting torch — and Lint's three.

"Thirty-four went out of that line. I'm the sixty-first name on my own board and I'm not going till my shed's empty." She was counting with everybody else and talking in the gaps. "That's how it works. Foreman's last."

The boy of nine jammed against her shoulder said, "And me, because I hid."

Tace, flatly, without heat: "And him, because he hid, and we will be discussing it."

So the row against the far wall had been eighteen, and the hall had called nineteen of nineteen.

Twenty-two. Twenty-three.

⁂

Thirty-one. Thirty-four.

Nothing happened. That is the part nobody tells you about a flare from under rock — there is no bang and no light and no heat. The air in the pit goes very slightly strange and your teeth ache, and somewhere above you, through four metres of stone, something you cannot perceive at all is scouring the apron you were standing on ninety seconds ago.

Forty.

Tace kept counting past forty to sixty, because she has done this her whole life and forty is for children.

Then BlingBling came up off her collarbone — a single short green — and about two seconds later Tace said, "That's it," and eleven people started swearing and laughing at the same time.

⁂

She climbed out into a shed that looked exactly the same.

The ring was still lit. And here is where the sum stops working.

Eleven people. She had one crossing left in her and she knew it the way you know you're hungry — one, maybe, and the second would be the kind you don't come back from properly.

One carry gets one person out.

"Take one of the adults."

Tace shook her head before she'd finished.

"Take the boy."

He was nine and he was standing right there and he knew exactly what was being discussed.

"A child costs you minutes. One of mine costs you a fortnight off the end of your life and gets *one* person off this rock." She said it with no softening at all. "You've got one in you. Spend it on the cheap one and come back tomorrow with arms."

Then, because she is the foreman and it is her rock:

"And it isn't going to be me. My shed's not empty."

⁂

The boy's name turned out to be Teo and he did not argue, which told her he knew he'd lose.

"Arms round. On my count, not yours. Talk to me the whole way — doesn't matter what about."

"I hid in the bowser pit yesterday too," he said. "There's a gap under the tank."

It set. Set. Set again — and she felt the thing Mina had warned her about, which was not the door at all. It was her own hands. On the fifth set her grip was wrong and she knew it before it even went flat, and Teo said, patiently, "You've stopped talking."

Sixth crossing of the day. Nobody has ever done six.

Seventh set. He said *now* on his own count, which nobody taught him and everybody on that rock had been watching for two hours, and it had them both.

⁂

The Nine hit her like a wall again and this time her legs didn't love it. She put Teo down on the plate and he stood there looking at two thousand people and a ceiling and said, quietly, "It's *inside*."

Sen's pen moved.

Dunnel took the number off her sheet and said it out loud, and then said the other thing, which was that there were eleven people still on that rock and the door was reading three point six.

Chapter 24 — Sixty of Sixty-One

❖

Day four · night, into day five

She sat down on the deck plate with her back against a stanchion, which was the first time she had sat down since dawn, and she watched other people do it.

There was nothing left in her arms and she had known it on the plate with Teo. Six crossings. Nobody has ever done six, and the reason nobody has is that the seventh is the one that takes something back off you.

Mina Haral came off the bench and got both thumbs into the back of her neck and did not let her get up, and she did not try very hard.

It took most of the night and she watched all of it.

⁂

It stopped working. Not all at once.

The first carry took four sets instead of one. The second took nine. By the fourth, the first-through was coming back out of the ring empty-handed with her jaw set, and the number on Dunnel's sheet had gone three point six, four point one, four point four, and a carry that had taken forty seconds at dawn was taking eleven minutes.

Vantage read it off the rim every half hour and said the number out loud to the whole hall and did not soften it once.

Two things happened in that hour.

A first-through called Oris — one of the three who had been stuck on the Ladder side, who had come home and would not stay home — forced it. Didn't wait for a carrier, didn't wait for the count, just walked at it because he was fifteen and he had spent a day on a rock with people who could not leave it. It took him and let go of him halfway. He came down on his back on the Ladder apron with a collarbone you could hear from four metres away, and he was on the wrong side of it.

And the Wolf Gate girl, the one who had argued about leaving her — she got home. Walked out of the ring at the Nine on her own two feet at forty-four seconds, sat down, and was sick on the deck plate. The third of them came through about an hour behind her and went straight to bed and nobody saw him for a day.

Six of the seven went. Then the number was five point two and the mouth was not hesitating any more. It was *letting go.*

Vantage, flat, to the whole hall: "The potential at the far mouth is resolving to a second value. I give it minutes, not hours."

Still on Ladder: Tace Orun. One of her crew. And a fifteen-year-old with a broken collarbone who could not be carried by anybody who was not very good indeed.

⁂

Rill went back in for him.

Twenty-one years old, with however few crossings she had left and nobody's estimate agreeing on the number. It took her five sets, and she came out of that ring forty minutes later with a fifteen-year-old over her shoulder, put him down on the plate, and sat on the deck beside him and did not get up for an hour.

Four hundred for the night, and the last one was hers, and she was paid for the one before it.

Nobody said anything about either, which is how that hall works.

Mina called *put them down* from the bench three hundred-odd times and lost her voice doing it, and at some point near the end she stopped being able to say it and started just raising her hand, and four hundred children who had had two hours of her watched for the hand.

⁂

Then the last of Tace's crew came through, and that was sixty.

Nobody had to be carried off that rock after that, because there was nobody left on it who wanted to be.

Tace Orun stayed.

She crossed the sixty-first name off her own board — hers — handed the board to Oris to take through, and then stood back off the apron with her hands behind her and said she had a rock to run and a drain to fix and she would see them when the door was sure of itself.

Calloway argued with her through a mouth at five and a half seconds and lost.

⁂

It went three hours later, in the dead watch, and it made no sound at all.

⁂

Morning.

Door seven at the Nine was warm, steady, and read zero point zero. It had not read zero in four days.

And it opened onto a concrete apron under a welded roof, where a foreman was sweeping grit out of a ring that had worked exactly once in a hundred and ninety years and now worked every time.

The Standing had been corrected. Sennet did it at some point in the night and nobody saw her do it. Where the refinery's line used to run there was now a line that said **LADDER**, and against the refinery there was nothing at all, for the first time in seven hundred and

ninety-eight years. Twelve thousand people on the far side of nothing, entirely safe, and completely alone, and the Tally did not know yet.

Sixty people were asleep on the Threshold floor. Four hundred first-throughs had given up their bunks and were sprawled in the galleries and on the stairs, and three of them were asleep in the kettle alcove. Somebody was already complaining, loudly, that the Wolf Gate food run was gone and what were they supposed to eat now.

There was nothing left in her at all, and her arm would not go above her shoulder.

And she was the only person on that station who had stood in that shed.