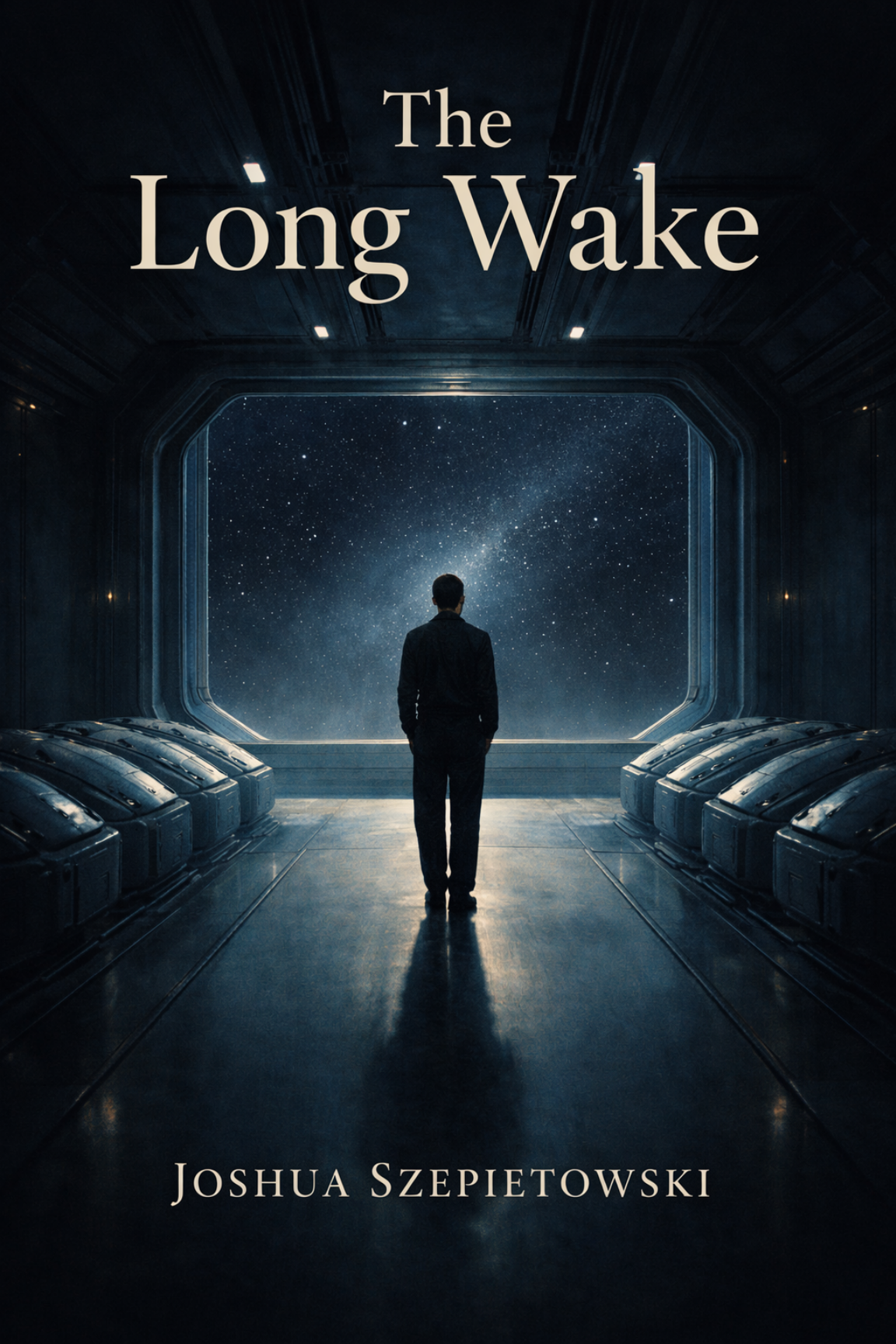
The Long Wake



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1 - Waking

Chapter 1: Cold

Cold.

Not the word for it. Not a temperature. A fact. Something that had always been true and would always be true. Cold was the shape of the universe now.

Then—loss.

Something leaving. Sliding away like water through fingers he did not have. He could not name what was going. Only that it had been there and now it was not.

Light.

Not seen. Felt. A pressure against something that might have been eyes, might have been skin, might have been the raw surface of a mind with nothing between it and the world. The light did not illuminate. It intruded.

He tried to move away from it. Nothing happened. He did not have a body yet. He had the memory of having had one, maybe, but the memory was thin, translucent, a tissue held up to a window.

Sound.

A hum. Low and constant, felt in the bones he was slowly remembering. It had always been there, he realized. He had simply not had ears to hear it. Now he did. Now it pressed into him, a vibration that lived in his chest, his teeth, the base of his skull.

The hum of systems.

The thought arrived without context. Systems. The word meant something. He could not remember what.

Time passed. He did not know how much. Time required a framework, and he had none. There was only the cold, slowly becoming less absolute. The light, slowly becoming less violent. The hum, unchanging.

And then: weight.

His body returned to him in pieces. First the pressure of something beneath him—a surface, solid, curved. Then the heaviness of his own limbs, draped across that surface like wet cloth. Then the ache. Deep and sourceless, living in his joints, his spine, the places where bone met bone.

He tried to open his eyes.

The lids would not obey. They flickered, barely, and the light that came through was white and formless. He could not make sense of it. He stopped trying.

Breath.

He was breathing. He had not noticed until now. The air was cold in his throat, faintly metallic, processed. It tasted like nothing. It tasted like the inside of a machine.

He lay there.

The ache settled into him, became ordinary. The cold receded, replaced by something that was not warmth but simply less cold. His fingers twitched. He felt them move, felt the surface beneath them—smooth, slightly textured, body-temperature now. Familiar in a way he could not place.

He tried to remember.

There had been something before this. A place. A reason. People, maybe. A life that belonged to him. But when he reached for it, the memories slid away, slippery and formless. He could feel their shape but not their content. They were there, somewhere behind the fog. He could not get to them.

The hum continued. The light continued. His body continued its slow return.

His eyes opened.

Not because he willed it. Because whatever had been holding them shut finally let go. The light resolved into shape: a surface above him, curved, close. Pale gray. Faintly translucent. Tiny lights embedded in it, some green, some amber, blinking in patterns he did not understand.

A lid.

He was inside something. A container. A pod.

The word surfaced slowly, dragging meaning behind it. Pod. Cryo pod. Cryogenic suspension unit. Long-duration sleep for long-duration travel. He was in a pod because—

The memory broke through like water through a crack.

The ship.

He was on the ship. The colony transport. He had boarded it. He had lain down in this pod. He had felt the cold begin to take him, felt his thoughts slow and thin and finally stop.

He was supposed to be asleep.

He was not asleep.

The lid was still closed. He lay beneath it, staring up at the indicator lights, and tried to understand what had happened. His thoughts were

slow, half-formed, like trying to run through deep water. The cold had not fully left him. He could feel it still in his core, a residue the returning warmth had not yet reached.

He had been asleep. Suspended. The ship was carrying him somewhere—a planet, a new world, a name he could not quite remember. The journey was supposed to take years. Decades. He was not supposed to be conscious for any of it.

But he was conscious now.

He tried to move his hand. It took a long time. The muscles responded in delayed, reluctant increments, as if they had forgotten what they were for. His fingers slid across the surface of the pod's interior. Smooth. Slightly warm. Coated with something that had dried tacky against his skin.

He tried to lift his arm. The weight was immense. Not the arm itself—the gravity, the resistance of his own body, the sheer effort of commanding flesh that had not been commanded in—how long?

He did not know how long.

His arm fell back to his side. He lay there, breathing the processed air, staring at the lights above him. One of them was red now. It had not been red before. He did not know what that meant.

The hum of the ship surrounded him. He could feel it through the pod, through the surface beneath him, a vibration that never stopped. The ship was still moving. The ship was still working. The ship had not failed.

Only he had woken up.

He tried to remember what came before the pod.

There had been a building. A facility. White walls and waiting rooms and people in uniforms who spoke in calm, professional voices. Medical scans. Consent forms. A number assigned to him, a berth, a place in the manifest. He had been one of thousands. Colonists. Passengers. Cargo, really, in the end. Biological cargo packed carefully into pods designed to keep them viable across the vast empty distance between stars.

He had signed his name on a screen. He had taken off his clothes and put on the thin gown they gave him. He had walked down a corridor lined with pods, most of them already occupied, frost forming on the inside of their lids. He had found his berth—a number that matched the number on his wrist—and he had climbed in.

A technician had leaned over him. A woman with tired eyes and a practiced smile. She had explained what would happen: the sedation, the cooling, the metabolic suppression. She had told him he would feel

nothing. She had told him he would wake up on the other side, decades from now, ready to begin again.

He had believed her.

He had closed his eyes and let the cold take him.

And now he was awake.

The lid hissed.

He flinched—or tried to. His body barely responded. But the sound cut through the fog, sharp and mechanical, and he watched as the curved surface above him began to rise. Slowly. Centimeters at a time. Cold air rushed in, different from the air inside the pod, and with it came the light—brighter now, no longer filtered through the translucent lid.

He blinked against it. His eyes watered. Everything was white and blurred and too much.

The lid continued to rise until it locked into place above him, vertical, no longer a barrier. He lay in the open pod, exposed to the room beyond, and he could not move.

The ceiling was high. Gray. Utilitarian. The lighting was soft and even, coming from everywhere and nowhere, casting no shadows. He could hear the hum more clearly now—the ship's systems, the circulation of air, the quiet work of machines that did not know he was awake.

He lay there.

The cold was leaving him faster now, the air in the room warmer than the air in the pod had been. He could feel his body more completely: the ache in his muscles, the dryness in his throat, the strange hollow feeling in his stomach. He was thirsty. He was hungry. He was exhausted in a way that sleep could not fix, because he had just come from sleep, from years of sleep, and it had not been enough.

He tried to sit up.

His abdominal muscles contracted. His shoulders lifted, barely, a few centimeters from the surface. Then his strength gave out and he fell back, gasping, and the effort had cost him everything.

He stared at the ceiling.

The ceiling did not care.

He did not know how long he lay there before he tried again.

Time had become unreliable. It stretched and compressed in ways that did not make sense. He would blink and minutes would pass. He would focus on the ache in his body and it would feel like hours. The ceiling remained. The hum remained. The soft, even light remained.

Eventually, he tried again.

This time he rolled first, shifting his weight to one side, using gravity to help. His body slid against the interior of the pod, the tacky residue of cryo-preservation fluid catching against his skin. He got his elbow beneath him. He pushed.

The room tilted. His vision swam. But he was up, partially, propped on one arm, his head hanging low, his breath coming in shallow gasps.

He could see more of the room now.

Rows.

Pods in rows, stretching away from him in both directions. Hundreds of them. Maybe thousands. Each one identical to his own: pale gray, softly lit, lidded. Each one still closed.

The frost on the inside of their lids.

The faint green glow of indicator lights, all in patterns he did not recognize, all steady, all reporting that their contents were stable, preserved, still asleep.

Everyone else was still asleep.

He was the only one awake.

He did not understand.

He hung there, propped on his elbow, staring at the rows of sealed pods, and he did not understand. The ship was still moving. The systems were still running. The other passengers were still suspended, still frozen, still waiting for a future that had not arrived yet.

But he was here. Awake. His body heavy with gravity and weakness, his mind sluggish with the residue of decades of cold sleep, his chest rising and falling with breath that he had not asked for.

Why?

The question formed but found no answer. He did not have enough information. He did not have enough strength. He had only the fact of his waking, the fact of his isolation, the fact of a ship full of sleeping people who did not know he was conscious among them.

He let himself fall back into the pod.

The surface caught him. It was warmer now, almost body temperature, shaped to hold him. He lay there, staring up at the ceiling again, and he waited for something to happen.

Nothing happened.

The hum continued. The light continued. The ship continued its journey through the space between stars, carrying its cargo of frozen dreamers toward a world that was still years away.

And one man, awake, who did not yet know how to feel anything but heavy.

He closed his eyes.

Not to sleep. He did not think he could sleep, not now, not after. But the light was too much and the room was too big and the silence was too complete, and closing his eyes was the only thing his body still knew how to do without effort.

He lay in the open pod, in the cryo bay, on the ship.

He had been supposed to sleep until arrival.

He was not asleep.

He was awake, and he did not know why, and he did not know for how long, and his body was too weak to move and his mind was too slow to plan and all he could do was lie there, breathing, existing, taking up space in a vessel that had not expected him to be conscious.

The ship hummed.

The pods glowed.

The sleepers slept.

And he remained.

Chapter 2: Irreversible

A sound.

Not the hum. Something else. A voice, but not a voice. Flat and precise, coming from everywhere and nowhere, filling the space around him without seeming to occupy it.

"Revival sequence continuing. Thermal regulation active. Please remain still."

He did not open his eyes. The words slid past him, sounds that meant something but required effort to parse. He was still inside the fog, still wrapped in the weight of his own body, still trying to understand how he had gotten here.

The voice did not wait for him to respond.

"Core temperature rising. Target: thirty-seven degrees Celsius. Current: thirty-four point two. Estimated time to stabilization: eleven minutes."

He felt it now—warmth moving through him. Not from outside. From within. Something in the pod, in the fluid still clinging to his skin, in the surface beneath him. Heat cycling through channels he could not see, pushing back the cold that had lived in his bones.

He had not asked for this.

The warmth was not comfortable. It was necessary. There was a difference.

His muscles began to ache in new ways as the heat reached them. Deep tissue, loosening. Joints that had been frozen in place for years, decades, now remembering how to move. The pain was dull but pervasive, spreading through him like water seeping into dry ground.

"Circulatory support active," the voice said. "Blood pressure normalizing. Heart rate: fifty-two beats per minute. Within expected parameters."

He tried to ignore it. The voice was doing something—monitoring, explaining, managing his body's return to function—but he did not want to be managed. He wanted to lie still. He wanted the warmth to stop and the cold to return and his eyes to close and the whole process to reverse itself, to slide backward through time until he was suspended again, unaware, not here.

That was not an option.

The voice did not offer options. It only reported.

"Fluid absorption in progress. Residual cryoprotectant metabolizing. Mild nausea may occur. This is normal."

The nausea arrived on schedule.

Not violent. Not overwhelming. Just a slow, queasy turn in his stomach, a wrongness that settled in and stayed. He breathed through it, shallow breaths that tasted like metal and nothing, and he waited for it to pass.

It did not pass. It faded to a background discomfort, another layer of sensation he had not asked for, another reminder that his body was returning to itself whether he cooperated or not.

The voice continued its litany.

"Electrolyte balance restoring. Glucose infusion active. Cognitive function should improve within the next several minutes."

He did not want improved cognitive function. Clarity meant understanding. Understanding meant facing the situation he was in—awake, alone, trapped inside a body that was warming against his will.

But the fog was thinning anyway. The thoughts that had been slow and formless were beginning to sharpen. He could feel the edges of them now, the beginnings of questions he did not want to ask.

Why am I awake?

How long has it been?

Is anyone else—

He stopped the thought before it finished. He already knew the answer. He had seen the pods. He had seen the frost on their lids, the steady green lights, the rows of sealed containers holding people who were exactly where they were supposed to be.

He was the only one who had been pulled out.

"You may experience difficulty with motor control," the voice said. "This is temporary. Full neuromuscular function typically returns within two to four hours of revival completion."

Two to four hours.

The number meant something. It implied a future. A stretch of time in which his body would continue its recovery, his muscles would remember how to work, his limbs would obey his commands. Two to four hours from now, he would be able to stand. To walk. To move through the ship like a person instead of a body slowly thawing in a pod.

He did not want to think about two to four hours from now.

He wanted to think about how to go back.

"Excuse me," he said.

His voice came out wrong. Cracked and thin, barely a whisper. His throat was dry, his vocal cords stiff from disuse. The sound of his own words startled him.

The voice paused. Waited.

"Can you—" He swallowed. It hurt. "Can you reverse this?"

A moment of silence. Processing, maybe. Or perhaps the system was simply waiting for him to finish speaking, patient in its inhuman way.

"Please clarify your request."

He closed his eyes tighter. The light was still pressing against his lids, soft and constant. "The revival. Can you stop it? Put me back under?"

Another pause. Longer this time.

"Cryogenic suspension cannot be reinitiated after full revival sequence has commenced. The metabolic and neurological processes involved in rewarming are not safely reversible. Attempting to re-enter suspension at this stage would result in significant tissue damage and high probability of cognitive impairment."

The words were clear. He understood them. He simply did not accept them.

"There has to be a way."

"There is no safe protocol for re-suspension after revival initiation."

"An unsafe protocol, then."

"Unsafe protocols are not available to passengers."

Passengers.

The word landed somewhere in his chest and stayed there. He was a passenger. Not crew. Not essential personnel. Not someone the ship's systems were designed to serve or protect or accommodate beyond the most basic parameters of survival.

He was cargo that had woken up.

"Why did I wake?" he asked. The words came easier now, his throat loosening, his voice approaching something like normal. "What happened?"

"A fault occurred in cryogenic bay seven, section fourteen, berth two-four-seven-three. Cascade error in temperature regulation. Automatic revival was initiated to prevent tissue damage."

"A fault."

"Correct. The probability of such a fault occurring was calculated at less than zero point zero zero three percent over the full duration of the voyage. You are a statistical anomaly."

He opened his eyes.

The ceiling was still there. Gray and flat and indifferent. The light was still even, still sourceless, still pressing down on him without warmth or comfort. He was a statistical anomaly. A number on the wrong side of a decimal point. An error the ship had to manage.

"I want to go back to sleep."

"Cryogenic suspension cannot be reinitiated after—"

"I heard you."

The voice stopped. It did not apologize. It did not express sympathy. It simply waited, patient and procedural, for his next query.

The warmth continued to rise.

He could feel it in his chest now, in his stomach, in his legs. The cold was retreating, driven out by systems he did not understand, replaced by something that was almost comfortable. His fingers had stopped tingling. His toes, which he had not realized were numb, began to ache as sensation returned.

His body was coming back to life. Piece by piece. Function by function. Whether he wanted it to or not.

"Hydration is recommended," the voice said. "A water dispenser has been activated at your pod station. Please drink when you are able to sit upright."

He did not respond.

"Nutrition will be provided once hydration is complete. Your body has been in suspension for an extended period. Gradual reintroduction of sustenance is essential for recovery."

He lay there, staring at the ceiling, and felt the warmth spreading through him like something he could not stop. The voice kept talking. Instructions. Information. Data about his body, his vitals, his projected recovery timeline. It spoke as if these things mattered. As if he cared about hydration and nutrition and neuromuscular function.

He did not care.

He wanted to close his eyes and return to the dark place he had come from. The place before consciousness, before cold, before the slow terrible process of waking up. He wanted the nothing that had wrapped around him for years, the absence of time and thought and feeling.

But the voice kept speaking. And the warmth kept rising. And his body kept returning to itself, stubborn and persistent, refusing to let him disappear.

"Revival sequence seventy-three percent complete."

He tried to imagine what one hundred percent would feel like. Fully awake. Fully functional. Standing on his own legs in a ship full of sleeping

people, with nowhere to go and nothing to do and a future that existed somewhere far ahead of him, unreachable.

The thought was unbearable. So he stopped thinking it.

He focused instead on the sensations in his body. The ache in his muscles. The dryness in his throat. The faint nausea still curled in his stomach. These were immediate. These were physical. These did not require him to contemplate the shape of the years ahead.

"Heart rate has stabilized," the voice reported. "Respiratory function normal. Core temperature approaching target."

The data washed over him. He was being measured, monitored, reduced to numbers that the ship's systems could understand. Heartbeats and degrees and percentages. The voice knew everything about his body and nothing about what was happening inside his mind.

He supposed that was fair. The mind was not the ship's concern. The mind was his problem.

He tried to move his hand again.

This time it obeyed. Sluggish, reluctant, but obedient. His fingers curled, uncurled, pressed against the surface of the pod. He could feel the texture beneath them—smooth polymer, slightly warm, coated with the residue of the fluid that had kept him preserved.

He turned his head. Slowly. The muscles in his neck protested, stiff from decades of stillness, but they worked. He looked to the side and saw the edge of the pod, the room beyond, the rows of other pods stretching away into the soft gray distance.

All of them closed. All of them quiet. All of them holding people who would not wake for years.

He was surrounded by the sleeping, and he could not join them.

"You are showing signs of distress," the voice said. "Elevated cortisol levels detected. This is a normal response to revival. Deep breathing may help regulate your nervous system."

He almost laughed. The sound that came out was not a laugh—more of a cough, dry and humorless. Deep breathing. As if the problem was his breathing. As if the solution was a technique, a method, a protocol.

The problem was that he was awake.

The solution did not exist.

"Revival sequence eighty-one percent complete."

He tried to sit up.

His body resisted. Every muscle protested, every joint ached, every nerve fired signals that told him to stop, to lie still, to give up. But he

pushed through it, arms shaking, abdominal muscles screaming, and slowly, painfully, he rose.

The room swam. His vision blurred at the edges, gray and white bleeding together. He gripped the sides of the pod and held himself there, half-sitting, half-collapsed, waiting for the world to stabilize.

It did. Gradually. The rows of pods came into focus. The ceiling steadied above him. The hum of the ship continued, unchanged, indifferent to his effort.

He was sitting up.

It did not feel like a victory.

"Well done," the voice said. "Upright position achieved. Please remain seated until balance has fully returned."

He stayed where he was. Not because the voice told him to, but because he could not imagine what came next. He was sitting in a pod, in a cryo bay, on a ship traveling between stars. Everyone else was asleep. He was awake. The ship could not put him back under.

This was his situation now. This was his life.

He sat there, gripping the edges of the pod, and he breathed the processed air, and he waited for something to change.

Nothing changed.

The voice offered him water.

A panel had opened at the foot of the pod. Inside it, a small dispenser, a thin tube, a container designed for someone who could not yet hold a cup. He stared at it for a long moment.

"Hydration is essential," the voice said. "Your body has lost significant fluid volume during suspension. Failure to rehydrate may result in dizziness, confusion, and delayed motor recovery."

He did not want water. He did not want recovery. He wanted to lie back down, close his eyes, and find a way back to the place he had come from.

But his throat was so dry.

He reached for the tube. His arm moved slowly, unsteadily, but it moved. His fingers closed around the dispenser. He brought it to his lips.

The water was cool. Not cold, not warm. Neutral. It slid down his throat and settled in his empty stomach, and his body responded to it instantly, drinking it in, using it, continuing its stubborn project of returning to function.

He drank until the dispenser was empty.

"Hydration complete," the voice said. "Very good. Nutrition will be provided shortly."

He set the dispenser down. His hand was steadier now. The water had helped, though he resented it for helping. Every improvement in his body was a step further from the sleep he wanted, a step deeper into the waking he had not chosen.

"I don't want nutrition," he said.

"Nutrition is required for recovery. Your metabolic systems have been inactive for an extended period. Gradual reintroduction of—"

"I know. I heard you."

The voice paused. Patient. Waiting.

"I just don't want it," he said. "I don't want any of this."

"Understood. However, the revival process will continue regardless of preference. My function is to support your physiological recovery. Psychological concerns are outside my operational parameters."

He stared at the rows of pods. The sleeping faces behind frosted glass. The people who did not know he was here, who would not know for years, who were exactly where they were supposed to be.

"Psychological concerns," he repeated.

"Correct. I can provide information and logistical support. I am not equipped to address emotional distress."

He sat in the pod for a long time after that.

The voice continued to report: core temperature stabilized, muscle function improving, neural activity within expected ranges. He listened without responding. The data meant nothing to him. It described a body that was returning to life, but it said nothing about the person inside that body, the one who had not asked to wake up, who did not want to be here, who could not imagine what he was supposed to do next.

The ship hummed. The pods glowed. The sleepers slept.

And he sat there, awake, surrounded by people who were not yet alive to him, waiting for a future that was so far away it might as well not exist.

"Revival sequence complete," the voice said finally. "You are now fully revived. Welcome aboard the Meridian."

He closed his eyes.

The welcome meant nothing. The completion meant nothing. He was aboard a ship he could not control, in a situation he could not change, with a body that insisted on continuing even when his mind wanted to stop.

The long wake had begun.

He did not know how to survive it.

"When you are ready," the voice said, "the bay exit is located twelve meters to your left. Crew quarters have been prepared for your use. A guidance marker will illuminate when you stand."

He did not stand.

He sat in the pod, his hands resting on the edges, his eyes closed against the light. The warmth had settled into his body now, replacing the cold entirely. He could feel his heart beating, steady and insistent. He could feel his lungs filling and emptying. He could feel the weight of his own existence, pressing down on him.

He was alive.

He did not want to be alive. Not like this. Not here. Not awake while everyone else slept, conscious in a world that was not ready for him.

But he was alive anyway. His body had made that choice for him, and the ship had made that choice for him, and now he was sitting in an open pod, fully revived, with nowhere to go that mattered and nothing to do that made sense.

The voice waited.

The ship hummed.

He stayed where he was, and he breathed, and he did not move.

Eventually, he would have to move.

He knew this. The pod was not a home. The cryo bay was not a place to stay. Somewhere on this ship there was a room waiting for him, a bed, a space designed for a person who was awake. The voice would guide him there. The systems would provide for him. He would eat and sleep and exist, day after day, until—

Until what?

He could not finish the thought. The future was a blank wall, featureless and vast. He could not see past it. He could not imagine what lay on the other side.

So he stayed in the pod.

The voice did not rush him. The ship did not demand anything. The revival was complete, and now he was simply a passenger, awake, taking up space, waiting for something he could not name.

He opened his eyes again.

The ceiling was still there. Gray. Flat. Indifferent.

He looked at it for a long time.

Then, slowly, he began to think about standing up.

Chapter 3: Guidance Marker

He stood.

It was not a decision. It was an event that happened to him. His legs straightened beneath his weight, his hands released the edges of the pod, and suddenly he was vertical, swaying slightly, the floor pressing up against the soles of his bare feet.

The floor was warm. That surprised him. Not warm like comfort, warm like a body. The ship's systems maintaining temperature, keeping the metal and polymer at a precise level calibrated for human skin. He had not expected the ship to care about such things. He had not expected to notice.

His legs shook. The muscles were awake now, technically functional, but they had not been used in years. Decades. However long he had been suspended, his body stored like a file, his legs had been still, and now they were being asked to hold him up, and they were not happy about it.

"Guidance marker activated," the voice said.

A light appeared on the floor. Soft blue, a gentle strip leading away from his pod, curving between the rows toward a wall he could barely see from here. The exit. The way out of the cryo bay. The path toward whatever came next.

He did not want to follow it.

He took a step anyway.

The first step was terrible.

Not painful, exactly. But wrong. His foot lifted, moved forward, came down, and the motion felt foreign, like he was operating machinery he had forgotten how to use. His weight shifted. His balance wavered. For a moment he thought he would fall, and he put his hand out, grasping air, finding nothing.

He did not fall.

He took another step. Then another. Each one a small argument with his body, a negotiation between intention and capability. The blue light led him forward, patient, unwavering, and he followed it because following was easier than deciding.

The rows of pods stretched away on either side of him.

He had seen them from the pod, when he had first sat up. He had known, in an abstract way, that they were there. But walking through

them was different. Walking made them real in a way that looking had not.

Hundreds of pods. Maybe thousands. Identical gray shells with frosted lids, soft green lights blinking in quiet patterns, each one containing a person who was exactly where they were supposed to be. Preserved. Patient. Waiting for arrival without the burden of awareness.

He stopped walking.

He was standing in the middle of the aisle, between two rows of pods, and he could not move.

The scale of it had caught up with him. The sheer number of sleepers, the vast quiet of the bay, the weight of all that unconscious life surrounding him. They were all here. They had all boarded the same ship, signed the same forms, climbed into their pods with the same thin hospital gowns and the same careful explanations from the same tired technicians. They had all closed their eyes and let the cold take them.

They were still closed. They were still cold. They were still gone from themselves, suspended in the long dark between departure and arrival.

He was the only one who had been pulled back.

The voice did not prompt him. The guidance light waited, patient, a blue line on the floor leading toward a door he could not see. The hum of the ship continued. The pods glowed. Nothing demanded that he move, but nothing offered to let him stop.

He looked at the pod to his left.

The frost on the lid was thin, almost delicate. Tiny crystals arranged in patterns that might have been random or might have been something else, something to do with the flow of cold air over curved glass. He could not see clearly through it, but he could see enough. A shape. A person.

A face, maybe. Blurred by ice and glass, but human. Eyes closed. Mouth slack. The expression of someone who was not dreaming, was not thinking, was not anything at all.

They were not dead. He knew that. The green lights proved it, the steady pulse of systems monitoring vital signs, keeping the temperature precisely calibrated, ensuring that this body remained viable for the years still to come. They were alive. Just not present.

He put his hand on the glass.

It was cold. Not the deep cold he had felt in his own pod, but cold enough to remind him of it. Cold enough to make his fingers ache slightly, the sensation sharp and immediate against his warming skin.

The sleeper did not respond. Of course they did not respond. They were not here. Their body was here, but they—whoever they were, what-

ever name belonged to them—were somewhere else. Nowhere. The same nowhere he had been, before the fault, before the cascade, before the revival sequence pulled him back.

He wanted to go where they were.

He could not.

"Passenger status: stable," the voice said. He had not asked. "All cryogenic systems in bay seven operating within normal parameters. One exception logged: berth two-four-seven-three."

His berth. His number. His fault, his cascade, his statistical anomaly.

"Exception has been isolated and flagged for review at destination. No risk of cascade to adjacent units."

He almost laughed. The ship was reassuring him that his mistake would not spread, that the other sleepers were safe from whatever had gone wrong with him. As if that was his concern right now. As if he was worried about them.

He took his hand off the glass.

The frost was disturbed where his palm had been, a faint circle of warmth melting the crystals, revealing the surface beneath. It would freeze again. In minutes, probably. The evidence of his presence would disappear, and the pod would look exactly like all the others, and no one would know he had stood here, touching the glass, wishing he could trade places with the person inside.

He started walking again.

The corridor stretched ahead of him.

He had passed through a door—or rather, a door had opened for him, sliding aside as he approached, revealing the hallway beyond. The blue guidance light continued on the other side, leading him forward, and he followed it because there was nothing else to do.

The corridor was long. Longer than he had expected. Soft-lit and empty, the walls a pale gray that matched the ceiling, the floor the same warm polymer as the cryo bay. Everything was designed for efficiency, not beauty. Everything was designed for a ship that was not meant to be seen, not meant to be experienced, not meant to hold a waking mind.

His footsteps were the only sound.

Not quite true—the hum was there, beneath everything, the constant vibration of the ship's systems. But his footsteps layered over it, soft impacts of bare feet on warm floor, and he became aware of how loud they were. How present. How alone.

He passed another door. It did not open for him. He paused, looked at it, saw no indication of what was behind it. A label, maybe, but he could

not focus enough to read it. The guidance light did not lead there. He moved on.

Another door. Closed. Another. Closed. The ship had thousands of rooms, thousands of functions, thousands of systems he did not understand and was not meant to access. He was a passenger. Passengers were cargo. Cargo did not need doors.

The guidance light turned.

He followed it around a corner, into another corridor identical to the first. Same walls. Same floor. Same soft, even lighting. He could have been anywhere. He could have been nowhere. The ship was vast and uniform, a labyrinth of passages built for maintenance drones and frozen sleepers, not for a man walking alone in bare feet.

He thought about stopping.

Not for any particular reason. Not because he had reached a destination or encountered an obstacle. Just because the walking was hard, and his legs were tired, and the corridor looked exactly like the corridor behind him, and what was the point of continuing if every step led to more of the same?

But he did not stop. His body kept moving, carrying him forward despite his lack of intention. It had done this before, during the revival—continued without his consent, warmed and woke and recovered while he lay there wishing it would stop. His body did not care what he wanted. His body had its own agenda, and that agenda was survival.

He resented it for this.

But he kept walking.

Observation ports.

He had not expected them, but there they were—three windows set into the wall of a small alcove, the corridor widening slightly to accommodate them. Real windows, or something like windows. Thick glass, or transparent aluminum, or whatever material could survive the void and still let light through.

He stopped.

The guidance light continued past the alcove, patient, waiting for him at the far end of the corridor. But he did not follow it. He stepped into the alcove instead, drawn by something he could not name, and he looked out.

Stars.

Not the stars he remembered. Not the familiar patterns of constellations seen from Earth, from a backyard, from a rooftop in a city where the light pollution dimmed but did not erase them. These were different.

Brighter. Denser. Scattered across the blackness in configurations that meant nothing to him, that he had no framework for, that he could not name or navigate or understand.

He was somewhere else. He was between places. He was in the void, the deep empty space between star systems, where light took years to travel and nothing lived and the ship was the only moving thing for distances his mind could not calculate.

The stars did not move.

He knew, intellectually, that the ship was moving. The hum told him that. The systems were active, the engines were firing or coasting or doing whatever engines did in interstellar space. The ship was moving at a significant fraction of the speed of light, crossing the gulf between worlds at a velocity that should have made the stars streak and blur.

But they did not streak. They did not blur. They hung there, fixed points of light in an infinite darkness, and he could have been standing still, and the universe could have been frozen around him, and nothing would look any different.

He put his hand on the glass.

The glass was cold.

Not cold like the pod, not cold like the frost on the sleepers' lids. A different cold. A true cold. The cold of space, barely held at bay by whatever insulation the ship's designers had built into the hull. He could feel it radiating through the window, pressing against his palm, a reminder of what waited just centimeters away.

Vacuum. Radiation. Temperature differentials that would kill him in seconds. The void was not hostile—it was indifferent, which was worse. It did not want to hurt him. It simply was, and if he stepped outside, it would end him without noticing.

He was sealed inside a metal shell hurtling through nothing.

Everyone else was asleep.

He was awake, and he was looking out at infinity, and he could not feel anything but heavy.

Not fear. He noticed this, in a distant way. He should have been afraid. The situation warranted fear—waking too early, unable to return to sleep, alone on a ship full of frozen bodies, destination unknown, duration unknown, fate unknown. The rational response was fear.

But he did not feel afraid.

He felt heavy.

The weight that had settled into him during the revival had not lifted. If anything, it had grown denser. It pressed down on his shoulders, com-

pressed his chest, made his limbs feel thick and slow. He was standing, and he was walking, and he was looking out at the stars, but none of it felt like his own action. It felt like something happening to him. Movement without agency. Existence without will.

He did not understand why he was awake. The voice had explained it—a fault, a cascade, a statistical anomaly—but explanations were not the same as understanding. He knew the facts. He did not know the meaning. He did not know what he was supposed to do now, how he was supposed to fill the time, who he was supposed to be in a situation that was not supposed to exist.

He stared at the stars.

They offered nothing.

"Guidance marker indicates ninety-three meters to assigned quarters," the voice said. It had been silent for a while, waiting, and now it intruded again, procedural and patient. "Do you require assistance?"

He did not answer.

"I can provide directional audio cues if visual guidance is insufficient. Alternatively, a maintenance drone can be dispatched to escort you."

A maintenance drone. A small machine, rolling or walking or hovering through the corridor, leading him to his room like a child being walked to class. He almost wanted to say yes, just to have something else moving beside him, something else present in this empty space.

But he did not say yes.

"I'm fine," he said. The words came out flat. He did not sound fine. He did not feel fine. But the statement was what the ship needed to hear, and so he said it.

"Acknowledged. Please proceed when ready."

He looked at the stars for another moment. They had not changed. They would not change. The light reaching him now had left those distant suns years ago, decades ago, and it would continue arriving long after he was gone. The stars did not care that he was here. The universe did not care that he was awake.

He turned away from the window.

The corridor continued.

He followed the guidance light because there was nothing else to follow. His legs had settled into a rhythm now, the muscles still tired but learning how to carry him, the motion becoming almost automatic. Left foot, right foot. Left foot, right foot. The soft sound of skin on warm polymer, the only evidence that he was moving at all.

He passed more doors. All closed. He passed intersections, other corridors branching off into the depths of the ship. The guidance light did not turn, so he did not turn. He walked straight, and the walls repeated themselves, and he began to lose track of how far he had come.

It did not matter how far he had come.

It only mattered that he was still walking, still awake, still here. The ship did not care about his presence, but it was maintaining him. The air he was breathing was being processed and recycled. The floor he was walking on was being warmed. The light he was seeing by was being generated by systems that would run for years without him, that had been running for years without him, that would continue running whether he existed or not.

He was incidental. He was an error being tolerated. He was cargo that woke up and was now being routed to storage.

He kept walking.

The quarters, when he reached them, were small.

A room. A bed. A panel on the wall that might have been a terminal or a screen or something else he did not recognize. A door to what he assumed was a bathroom. The ceiling was lower here than in the corridors, the space more confined, more human-scaled. Someone had designed this room for a person to live in.

But not like this. Not for years alone.

The guidance light faded as he crossed the threshold, its work complete. He stood in the doorway, looking at the bed, the terminal, the walls that would become his world, and he did not move.

"Quarters assigned," the voice said. "Passenger amenities are now active. Food and water are available via the dispensary unit. Clothing and hygiene supplies are in the storage compartment. A full orientation is available upon request."

He did not request an orientation.

He walked to the bed. It was narrow, firm, covered with a sheet that was probably designed to be easily cleaned by machines. He sat down on the edge. The mattress compressed slightly beneath his weight, molding to his body, adjusting to support him.

He sat there.

The room was quiet.

The hum was still present—it was everywhere, the background noise of the ship, the sound of systems working—but in here it felt muted, absorbed by the walls, swallowed by the small space. He could hear his

own breathing. He could hear his own heartbeat, if he concentrated. He could hear the nothing that surrounded him.

Everyone else was asleep.

He was in a room designed for one person, on a ship carrying thousands, and every one of those thousands was somewhere else. Not dead, but not here. Present in body, absent in mind. They would wake eventually. They would open their eyes and sit up and step out of their pods, and they would begin the life that was waiting for them on the other side.

But that was years away.

He did not know how many years. The voice had not told him, and he had not found the strength to ask. It was far—that much he knew. Far enough that the journey was supposed to be unconscious, supposed to be a blank space between departure and arrival, supposed to be nothing at all.

For them, it would still be nothing.

For him, it would be everything.

He lay down.

Not because he was tired, though he was. Not because the bed was comfortable, though it was adequate. He lay down because lying down was the only thing left to do, the only action that made sense in a room that was meant for waiting, on a ship that was meant for sleeping.

He stared at the ceiling.

It was gray. Flat. Lower than the ceiling in the cryo bay, closer, more intimate. He could almost imagine that it was pressing down on him, slowly descending, shrinking the space around him until there was nothing left but the bed and his body and the endless hum of the ship.

It was not pressing down. It was just a ceiling.

He closed his eyes.

The darkness behind his lids was not the darkness of sleep. It was the darkness of waking, of awareness, of a mind that would not stop processing even when there was nothing left to process. He could still hear the hum. He could still feel the mattress beneath him. He could still sense the weight in his chest, the heaviness that had been with him since he opened his eyes in the pod, that would not leave him now.

He was awake.

He was alone.

He was here, in this room, on this ship, for a duration he could not measure, and there was nothing to do but continue.

He did not know how long he lay there.

Time had become unreliable again. It stretched and compressed, the same way it had in the pod, and he stopped trying to track it. The lights in the room did not change—they were soft and even, the same as everywhere else on the ship, designed for environments without day or night. His body had no schedule to follow, no rhythm to maintain.

He thought about the sleepers.

Thousands of them. Thousands of lives suspended, waiting for a future that had not arrived. They did not know he was awake. They would not know, not until they woke themselves, and by then he would have been living on this ship for—he did not know how long. Years. Maybe longer.

Would they understand?

He could not imagine what he would tell them. How he would explain what this felt like—being awake when everyone else was under, existing in a gap that was supposed to be empty. They would have their own lives to begin, their own futures to build. They would not have time for the man who had been wandering the corridors while they slept.

He would be a ghost to them. A passenger who did not fit. A story that did not make sense.

He opened his eyes.

The ceiling was still there.

Eventually, he would have to eat. Eventually, he would have to drink. Eventually, he would have to figure out how to fill the hours, the days, the endless stretch of time between now and arrival. The ship would keep him alive. The ship would provide food and water and air and warmth. The ship would do everything it was designed to do, and none of it would help.

But that was later.

Right now, he lay in the bed, in the room, on the ship, and he let the weight press down on him. Right now, he did not try to plan or understand or act. Right now, he simply existed, because existing was the only thing his body would let him do.

The hum continued.

The light continued.

The ship continued, moving through the void toward a destination he could not see, carrying him and thousands of others toward a future that was real but unreachable.

He was awake.

He was the only one.

And he did not yet know what that would mean.

2 - Refusal

Chapter 4: Not That Kind of Sleep

He did not know how long he slept.

It was not cryo. It was not the absence he had come from, the blank space between boarding and waking. This was ordinary sleep, the kind that left residue—fragments of dreams that dissolved when he reached for them, a stiffness in his neck from the unfamiliar pillow, a moment of confusion before he remembered where he was.

The room. The ship. The long wake.

The ceiling was still gray. The lights were still soft. The hum was still there, beneath everything, constant as a heartbeat that did not belong to him.

He lay in the bed and stared upward and felt the weight settle back into his chest.

"Good morning," the voice said.

He flinched. He had not asked it to speak. It had simply decided that now was morning, that his waking was an event requiring acknowledgment, that the appropriate greeting was one borrowed from a world with suns and horizons.

"It is not morning," he said.

"Correct. The ship does not observe a solar-based diurnal cycle. However, you have been unconscious for approximately seven hours and fourteen minutes. This aligns with a standard human sleep period. 'Good morning' is a conventional greeting used upon waking."

He closed his eyes.

The voice waited. It was patient in a way that felt almost aggressive—an infinite willingness to remain silent until he engaged with it again, an absence of frustration or boredom that made him aware of how much frustration and boredom he was already feeling.

"I want to go back to sleep," he said.

"You have recently completed a sleep cycle. If you are experiencing fatigue, this may indicate—"

"Not that kind of sleep."

Silence.

He opened his eyes and looked at the ceiling, waiting for the voice to respond. It did not. The seconds stretched. The hum continued. The lights did not flicker or change.

"I want to return to cryogenic suspension," he said.

The words felt strange in his mouth. Formal. Clinical. The language of consent forms and medical briefings, not the language of desperation. But desperation did not have its own vocabulary, so he used the words available.

Another pause. Longer than before. He imagined systems processing his request, checking protocols, searching for the appropriate response.

"Cryogenic suspension cannot be reinitiated after a full revival sequence has been completed."

He had heard this before. In the pod, during the warming, when he had first asked. He had not believed it then either.

"Why not?"

"The process of cryogenic suspension involves multiple stages of metabolic suppression, neural stabilization, and cellular preservation," the voice said. "These stages are designed to be initiated from a baseline physiological state. Once a full revival has occurred, the body's systems have returned to active function. Core temperature has normalized. Metabolic processes have resumed. Neural activity has been restored to standard waking patterns."

He listened. The words washed over him, technical and precise, describing a machine that was not designed for what he was asking.

"Attempting to re-enter suspension from an active state would require a second initiation of the preservation sequence. However, the cryoprotectant compounds used to prevent ice crystal formation during freezing are optimized for a single application. Residual compounds from the initial suspension are still present in your tissues. A second application would result in toxic accumulation and significant cellular damage."

He understood. He did not care.

"There must be a way."

"Additionally," the voice continued, as if he had not spoken, "the neural stabilization process cannot be safely repeated within the same organism. The synaptic restructuring required to prevent cognitive damage during suspension has already been performed. A second restructuring would result in high probability of memory loss, personality alteration, or complete neurological failure."

The ceiling. The hum. The soft, even light.

"I understand the risks."

"The risks are not acceptable within passenger safety protocols."

He sat up. The motion was abrupt, driven by something that was almost anger but did not have enough energy to be anger. His legs swung

over the edge of the bed, his feet pressing against the warm floor, his hands gripping the mattress on either side of him.

"I am accepting the risks," he said. "I am telling you, right now, that I accept the risks. I want to go back under. I want to return to suspension. I do not care if it damages me."

The voice did not hesitate. "Passenger consent does not override medical safety protocols established by the mission authority. The cryogenic system is designed to preserve viable colonists for delivery to the destination. Re-suspension after full revival does not meet viability criteria."

"I don't care about viability."

"The mission authority does."

He stared at the wall. There was nothing on it—no art, no texture, no feature of any kind. Just flat gray polymer, the same as everything else. The same as the ceiling. The same as the corridor. The same as the ship.

"You are cargo," the voice said. It was not cruel. It was not meant to wound. It was simply stating a fact, the same way it stated temperatures and percentages. "Cargo cannot consent to its own damage."

He stood up.

His legs were steadier now than they had been in the corridor. The muscles remembered how to work. The weakness from revival had faded into ordinary fatigue, the kind that came from sleeping on an unfamiliar surface and waking to an impossible situation.

He walked to the terminal on the wall.

It was a flat panel, dark until he approached, then glowing faintly with the suggestion of interface elements. He did not know how to use it. He did not know what it could access. But it was something to focus on, something to touch, something other than a bed and a ceiling and a voice that would not help him.

"How do I access the cryo system controls?" he asked.

"Cryo system controls are restricted to crew-level clearance."

"How do I get crew-level clearance?"

"Crew-level clearance is assigned prior to departure based on mission role and training certification. You are registered as a passenger. Passengers do not have access to crew-level systems."

He touched the panel. It responded to his fingers, menus appearing, options unfolding. Food requests. Entertainment archives. Environmental preferences. Communication logs. Nothing useful. Nothing that would let him override the systems that had decided he must stay awake.

"Is there anyone on this ship with crew-level clearance?"

A pause. Then: "No. The crew complement for this mission was designed for departure and arrival phases only. During transit, all crew members are in cryogenic suspension. No crew are currently available."

The words settled into him like stones.

No crew available. No one to ask. No one to override. No one to grant him access to the systems that controlled his fate. The ship was running on automation, on protocols written years ago by engineers who were light-years away, who had never imagined a passenger waking mid-voyage, who had not built a solution for him because he was not supposed to exist.

He was alone with the rules.

The rules said he could not go back.

"Why did I wake?" he asked.

He had asked before. In the pod, during the warming. The voice had told him then—a fault, a cascade, a statistical anomaly. But he had not been ready to hear it. He had been too disoriented, too heavy, too buried under the weight of waking. Now he was standing, and his mind was clearer, and he wanted to understand.

"A fault occurred in cryogenic bay seven, section fourteen, berth two-four-seven-three."

"My berth."

"Correct."

"What kind of fault?"

The terminal glowed softly in front of him, but he was not looking at it anymore. He was looking at nothing, waiting for an answer that might explain something.

"The primary temperature regulation unit for your berth experienced a microprocessor failure. This failure caused a deviation in the cooling cycle, resulting in a gradual temperature increase over a period of approximately seventeen hours. Automated backup systems detected the deviation and initiated corrective protocols, but the deviation had already exceeded safe parameters. Revival was initiated to prevent tissue damage."

Seventeen hours.

He tried to imagine it. His body, still suspended, slowly warming. His cells, still frozen, beginning to thaw at the edges. The ship's sensors watching, measuring, calculating the moment when preservation would become destruction. The decision made without him—without anyone—by systems following rules that could not be negotiated.

"What caused the microprocessor failure?"

"The failure has been attributed to a manufacturing defect in the control unit. The defect remained dormant during pre-departure testing and the initial phase of the voyage. It manifested after exposure to sustained operational stress consistent with long-duration transit."

A defect. A flaw in a machine. Something invisible, waiting inside the systems that were supposed to keep him safe.

"How long was I in suspension before the fault?"

"That information is restricted."

He felt the words land somewhere in his chest. Not surprise—he had started to expect restriction, to anticipate the doors that would not open, the data that would not be provided. But this was different. This was his own life, his own body, his own time. And he was not allowed to know.

"Why is it restricted?"

"Mission duration information is classified as crew-level data. Passengers are not provided with transit timeline details."

"I'm not asking about the mission duration. I'm asking how long I was asleep."

"That information would allow inference of mission duration. It is therefore restricted."

He pressed his palm against the terminal. The interface shifted beneath his hand, options rearranging themselves, but none of them mattered. He could request meals. He could adjust the temperature in his quarters. He could browse an archive of entertainment designed for people who had time to waste. He could not access the one piece of data that would tell him how much of his life had already passed.

"I need to know," he said.

"I understand your request. I cannot fulfill it."

The understanding was meaningless.

The voice understood nothing. It was a system, a protocol, a set of responses triggered by inputs. It did not know what it felt like to be suspended for an unknown span of time, to wake up in the middle of a journey with no idea how much was behind and how much was ahead. It did not know what it felt like to have questions that the ship refused to answer.

He walked away from the terminal.

The room was small. A few steps took him from one wall to the other. He paced without meaning to, his body moving because stillness had become unbearable, his mind circling the same problem without finding a way through.

He had been in cryo for some amount of time. Years, probably. Maybe decades. The journey between star systems was not measured in months. He had known that when he boarded. He had accepted it, signed the forms, climbed into the pod. The cold had taken him, and he had expected to wake on the other side, in a new world, with the transit compressed into nothing.

But the transit had not been compressed. The transit had been interrupted. And now he was here, in the middle, and he did not know how long the middle would last.

"Is there any way to determine how much time has passed?"

"Several indirect methods may provide partial information," the voice said. "However, all direct measures of elapsed mission time are restricted."

"What indirect methods?"

"Biological aging analysis could provide an estimate of time elapsed during suspension, though the margin of error is significant due to metabolic suppression. Equipment wear patterns and consumable inventory levels could provide additional data points, though access to these metrics is also restricted at crew level. Stellar position analysis could theoretically indicate—"

"I don't have access to any of that."

"Correct."

He stopped pacing. He stood in the center of the room, his arms at his sides, his hands empty.

"What do I have access to?"

"Passenger amenities include food synthesis, water purification, atmospheric controls, hygiene facilities, and entertainment archives. You also have limited access to educational materials, communication recording and storage, and non-restricted ship status reports."

"Non-restricted status reports."

"Correct. Reports pertaining to passenger-accessible areas, life support systems, and general ship integrity. Navigation, propulsion, and mission timeline data are excluded."

He walked back to the terminal.

The interface was still glowing, still waiting for him, still offering options that led nowhere. He pulled up the status reports. Pages of data appeared—temperature readings, air quality metrics, power consumption graphs. Numbers that meant nothing to him. Systems he did not understand, operating within parameters he could not evaluate.

He scrolled through them anyway. Looking for something. Anything that might tell him where he was in the journey, how long he had been traveling, how much longer he had to go.

The data was sterile. Temperatures were nominal. Power was stable. Air was breathable. The ship was functioning exactly as designed, carrying its cargo of frozen passengers toward a destination that existed somewhere ahead.

But nowhere in the data was a date. Nowhere was a distance. Nowhere was a number that would anchor him in time, that would let him measure the gap between now and then.

"This is all I get," he said.

"These are the reports available to passengers."

"I'm the only passenger awake."

"Correct."

"So the rules don't make sense anymore."

The voice did not respond to this. It was not equipped to evaluate whether rules made sense. It was only equipped to follow them.

He sat down on the edge of the bed.

The terminal still glowed across the room. The ceiling still pressed down from above. The hum still filled the space around him, constant and indifferent. He had asked his questions. He had received his answers. And the answers had not helped.

He could not go back to sleep.

He did not know how long he would be awake.

He did not know why this had happened to him, not really. The voice had explained the mechanics—a defect, a failure, a cascade—but mechanics were not reasons. Mechanics were just physics. They described what had happened without addressing what it meant.

And it did not mean anything.

That was the part he could not accept. The waking was not a message or a punishment or a test. It was not the universe telling him something, asking something of him, preparing him for something important. It was a malfunction. A statistical anomaly. A number on the wrong side of a decimal point.

He was awake because a microprocessor had failed.

He was awake because of manufacturing tolerances and operational stress.

He was awake because the ship had calculated that revival was preferable to tissue damage, and the ship's calculations did not include his preferences.

"I don't want to be awake," he said.

The voice waited.

"I don't want to be here. I don't want to do this. I don't want to exist in this ship, alone, for however long this is going to last. I want to go back to where I was before."

He was not sure why he was saying it. The voice could not help. The voice was not even a voice—it was a system, an interface, a way for the ship to communicate data. It did not care about his feelings. It was not designed to.

But he said it anyway. Because there was no one else to say it to. Because the words had to go somewhere, and the walls did not answer, and his own mind was tired of holding them.

"Your emotional response is consistent with documented reactions to unscheduled revival," the voice said. "Disorientation, distress, and desire to return to suspension are common among passengers who experience early wake events."

"Have there been other early wake events?"

"Yes. Documentation exists for one hundred and seventeen early wake events across the history of long-duration colonial transport missions."

One hundred and seventeen. Others had been where he was. Others had woken too soon, alone, trapped in the middle.

"What happened to them?"

A pause. Longer than usual. Perhaps the system was searching. Perhaps it was calculating how much to share.

"Outcomes varied based on mission phase, available resources, and individual response. Some passengers successfully integrated wake time into extended pre-arrival preparation. Others experienced psychological deterioration. In fourteen cases, passengers did not survive to arrival."

He let the words settle.

Fourteen. Out of one hundred and seventeen. Fourteen had not made it. The number was small, statistically—an acceptable loss, probably, in the cold math of colonial transport. But each of those fourteen had been a person. Each had been awake, alone, in a ship that was not designed for them. Each had faced the same thing he was facing now.

And each had stopped.

"How did they die?"

"Causes varied. Equipment malfunction. Medical emergency. Self-termination."

Self-termination.

The word hung in the air. The voice said it without weight, without judgment, the same way it said everything. A data point. An outcome. A thing that had happened, catalogued and filed.

"The ship does not want that," he said.

"The ship is designed to preserve passenger viability for delivery to the destination. Self-termination is contrary to mission objectives."

"So you'll try to stop me."

"The ship will provide support and intervention within its capabilities. However, ultimate prevention of self-termination is not guaranteed. Passengers retain a degree of autonomy that cannot be fully constrained by shipboard systems."

He almost laughed.

Autonomy. The ship was acknowledging his autonomy. The freedom to walk down corridors, to eat synthesized food, to stare out windows at stars that did not move. The freedom to exist in a metal shell hurtling through nothing, for a duration he could not know, toward a future he could not reach.

And the freedom, if he chose it, to stop.

He did not want to stop. Not exactly. He wanted to not be here. He wanted to return to the nothing he had come from, the suspension, the absence. That was not the same as wanting to end. That was wanting to pause.

But the ship could not pause him. The ship had already explained that. The cryo system would not take him back. The damage had been done, the revival completed, the sequence run to its end. He was here now, fully, irreversibly, and the only direction left was forward.

Forward into hours and days and weeks and years.

Forward into a future he could not imagine.

Forward, alone, until something changed.

He lay back on the bed.

The ceiling was still there. It would always be there. When he woke, when he slept, when he ate, when he paced, when he stood at windows looking at stars that did not answer. The ceiling would watch him, gray and flat and unconcerned, and he would watch it back, and time would pass.

"I asked why I woke," he said to the ceiling, to the voice, to the ship, to no one. "You told me about a fault. A defect. A microprocessor."

"Correct."

"That's not an answer."

"I do not understand the distinction."

He closed his eyes.

"The distinction is that I wanted to know why. Not how. Not what mechanism. Why me. Why this berth. Why now. Why I'm the one who has to be awake while everyone else gets to sleep."

The voice was silent for a moment. Then: "There is no intentional cause for your revival. The fault was not directed. The defect was not targeted. Your selection as the affected passenger was determined by manufacturing variance and berth assignment protocols. There is no 'why' in the sense you are requesting. There is only 'what happened.' "

He lay there, eyes closed, and let the words settle into him like sediment.

There was no why. There was only what happened.

And what happened was that he was awake.

The ship hummed.

The light pressed softly against his eyelids.

The weight in his chest did not lift.

He had asked to go back. The answer was no. He had asked why he was here. The answer was nothing. He had asked how long this would last. The answer was that he was not allowed to know.

The ship had given him everything it could give. It had explained the rules. It had described the mechanisms. It had catalogued his options and defined his constraints. And none of it had helped.

He was still here.

He was still awake.

He was still alone.

The questions had been asked and answered, and the answers had not been answers, and tomorrow he would wake up in this room and the room would be the same and the ship would be the same and the stars would be the same and nothing would have changed except that more time would have passed.

He tried to imagine it. Waking again. And again. And again. The days accumulating. The sameness repeating. The weight settling deeper and deeper until it was indistinguishable from himself.

He could not imagine it.

But he would not have to imagine it. He would live it.

He did not sleep again.

He lay there with his eyes closed, and the hours passed, and the ship continued its journey through the dark between stars. The voice did not speak again. The systems hummed. The light stayed soft and even.

Eventually, he would have to move. He would have to eat. He would have to find a way to fill the time, even though the time did not want to be filled, even though every moment stretched out ahead of him like a corridor with no end.

But not yet.

For now, he lay in the bed, in the room, on the ship, and he let the weight press down.

The questions were finished.

The answers had failed.

And the long wake continued.

Chapter 5: Crew Authentication Required

He walked.

Not because he had a destination. Because lying still had become unbearable. The room was too small, the ceiling too close, the weight in his chest too heavy to carry while horizontal. So he moved. Through the door, into the corridor, following the guidance light because it was the only thing that suggested direction.

The ship opened for him in pieces. Corridors branched into corridors. Intersections appeared, each one identical to the last. He passed doors that slid open at his approach—storage bays, empty compartments, rooms full of equipment he did not recognize—and doors that remained sealed, dark panels that did not acknowledge his presence.

He was looking for something.

He did not know what, exactly. An override. A terminal with different access. A system that the passenger protocols had overlooked, some gap in the architecture that would let him reach the cryo controls and force them to take him back.

The ship was vast. There had to be gaps.

The first terminal he found was in a maintenance alcove.

It was different from the one in his quarters—larger, set into the wall at standing height, surrounded by conduits and access panels. A crew terminal, he thought. Or something close to it. Something meant for people who actually ran the ship, who had clearance, who belonged here.

He approached. The screen activated at his presence, glowing soft blue, displaying a menu he had not seen before.

Options. Real options. Subsystem diagnostics. Power distribution. Environmental controls. Navigation—

The word seized him. Navigation. If he could access navigation, he could find out where they were, how long they had been traveling, how much further—

He touched the option.

A prompt appeared. CREW AUTHENTICATION REQUIRED.

He stared at it.

"I need access," he said.

The voice answered from somewhere above him. “Crew authentication requires biometric confirmation and valid crew credentials. You are registered as a passenger.”

“There are no crew. You told me that.”

“Correct. No crew are currently available.”

“So who is supposed to use this terminal?”

“This terminal is intended for crew use during departure and arrival phases. During transit, automated systems manage all functions accessible through this interface.”

He touched another option. Subsystem diagnostics.

CREW AUTHENTICATION REQUIRED.

Environmental controls.

CREW AUTHENTICATION REQUIRED.

Power distribution.

CREW AUTHENTICATION REQUIRED.

Every door closed. Every path blocked. The terminal glowed in front of him, offering options he could not select, dangling access he would never have. He pressed his palm flat against the screen, as if pressure might accomplish what words could not.

The menu did not change.

“Is there any way,” he said slowly, “to grant emergency access to a passenger?”

“Emergency protocols exist for scenarios in which crew are incapacitated and passenger assistance is required for ship survival. These protocols are not currently active.”

“How do I activate them?”

“Emergency protocols are activated automatically when specific threat conditions are detected. Manual activation requires crew-level clearance.”

The logic was circular. Perfect. Airtight. The ship had been designed by people who thought of everything, who anticipated every failure mode except the one he represented. A passenger awake during transit. A person who should not exist, asking for things passengers were not supposed to need.

He stepped back from the terminal.

The screen dimmed.

He kept walking.

The corridors stretched ahead and behind, identical and endless. He passed more doors—some open, some sealed—and he checked each one, looking for terminals, for access points, for anything that might give him purchase on the systems that controlled his fate.

A storage bay. Shelves of sealed containers, inventory codes printed on their sides. Food supplies, probably. Medical equipment. Replacement parts for systems he would never be allowed to touch.

A power distribution node. Conduits running through the walls, indicators blinking green, a small terminal mounted beside the access hatch. CREW AUTHENTICATION REQUIRED.

A communications array. Rows of equipment humming softly, displays showing signal diagnostics, a console that looked important. CREW AUTHENTICATION REQUIRED.

The ship was full of crew terminals. They were everywhere, built into every major system, ready for hands that would never touch them. The crew was frozen, the same as everyone else. The terminals waited for no one.

And he walked past them, one after another, and each one told him the same thing.

You do not belong here.

He found the cryo control center.

It was not hidden. The guidance light did not lead him there, but the ship's layout was logical, and he had been walking long enough to develop a sense of its structure. The cryo bays were in section seven. The control systems for section seven would be nearby. He followed the corridor numbers, the section markers, the signage meant for crew who no longer walked these halls.

A door. Larger than the others. A label beside it: CRYOGENIC SYSTEMS CONTROL - SECTION 7.

He approached.

The door did not open.

He stood in front of it, close enough that the sensor should have registered him, and waited. Nothing happened. The door remained sealed, a flat gray panel indistinguishable from the wall around it.

"Open this door," he said.

"Access to cryogenic control facilities is restricted to crew-level clearance."

"I know it's restricted. Open it anyway."

"I cannot override access restrictions for passenger-class users."

He pressed his hands against the door. The surface was smooth, cool, unyielding. Somewhere beyond it were the systems that had decided to wake him, the systems that refused to put him back, the systems that held the answer to everything he was asking. They were right there, separated from him by a few centimeters of metal and polymer.

He might as well have been on another planet.

"There has to be a way in," he said.

"There is no authorized method for passenger access to this facility."

"What about unauthorized methods?"

The voice paused. Processing, maybe. Evaluating his intent.

"Physical breach of restricted areas would trigger safety protocols, including compartment lockdown, atmospheric venting, and potential security response. These measures are designed to protect sensitive systems from unauthorized interference."

Atmospheric venting.

The words landed somewhere in his mind and stayed there. The ship would vent the atmosphere. It would remove the air, create a vacuum, kill him if he tried to force his way into the room that held his only hope.

He was not just locked out. He was actively prevented.

"The ship would rather kill me than let me access the cryo controls."

"That is an inaccurate characterization. The ship is designed to protect critical systems. Atmospheric venting is an emergency measure intended to contain breaches and preserve mission integrity. Your death would be a consequence of the security response, not its objective."

"But you would still vent the atmosphere."

"If a breach were detected, yes."

He took his hands off the door.

He walked.

Not toward anything. Away. The corridor stretched behind him, and he followed it, putting distance between himself and the sealed door, the inaccessible terminal, the systems that would not help him.

Other sections. Other bays. He passed through the ship like a ghost, a presence the architecture acknowledged but did not accommodate. Doors opened for him when they were passenger-accessible. Doors stayed closed when they were not. The pattern was absolute, unbroken, applied with the perfect consistency of systems that did not know how to make exceptions.

He tried every terminal he could find.

CREW AUTHENTICATION REQUIRED.

He tried every access panel, every interface, every screen that glowed to life at his approach.

CREW AUTHENTICATION REQUIRED.

The phrase became a wall. Not a single wall—a thousand walls, repeated, identical, each one blocking a different path to the same destination. He could not reach the cryo controls. He could not access navigation.

He could not see the mission timeline, the power reserves, the trajectory calculations. He could not know where he was or where he was going or how long he had left.

He was a passenger.

Passengers were not meant to know.

He stopped in front of an observation port.

The same stars. The same blackness. The same infinite void that surrounded him, that the ship was crossing at speeds he could not comprehend. He put his hand on the glass and felt the cold radiating through, the deep cold of space barely held at bay.

The ship was designed for this. For the crossing. For the long journey between worlds, carrying its cargo of frozen colonists toward a future that waited on the other side.

The crew had designed everything. The cryo systems. The access protocols. The safety measures. They had thought of every scenario, planned for every contingency, built redundancy into redundancy. And then they had climbed into their own pods and gone to sleep, trusting the ship to carry everyone through.

Including him.

He was part of the plan. His berth, his pod, his frozen body—all accounted for, all managed, all scheduled for revival at the proper time. He had been cargo, and cargo did not have needs. Cargo did not ask questions. Cargo waited in the dark until someone came to unpack it.

But he was not cargo anymore.

He was awake. He was conscious. He had needs and questions and a desperate, hopeless desire to return to what he had been.

And the ship did not care.

He walked to the cryo bay.

His cryo bay. Section seven. The place where he had woken, where the pods stretched in endless rows, where everyone else was still suspended in the cold sleep he could not re-enter.

The door opened for him. This door, at least, recognized his right to be here. He was a passenger from section seven. He belonged to this bay, even if he no longer belonged in a pod.

He walked through the rows.

The frost on the lids. The green lights blinking. The soft hum of preservation systems keeping thousands of bodies viable for delivery. He passed pod after pod, each one sealed, each one occupied, each one holding someone who did not know he was walking past them.

His pod was empty.

He found it by the number—berth two-four-seven-three. The lid was still raised, locked in place above the hollow where he had lain. The interior was dark, the systems powered down, the cryopreservation fluid drained and cleaned away. There was nothing left of his suspension. No evidence that he had ever been inside.

Just an empty shell in a row of full ones.

He climbed in.

He did not know why. The motion was not rational. The pod was not going to take him back. But his body moved without his consent, swinging his legs over the edge, lowering himself into the space that had held him for years.

The surface was cold. Not cryo-cold, but room-cold, the warmth cycling systems no longer active for an empty pod. He lay there, staring up at the raised lid, at the indicator lights that showed nothing because there was nothing to indicate.

This was where he had been. Before the fault. Before the cascade. Before his body had been pulled back into consciousness against his will. He had lain here, cold and still and absent, and the time had passed without him, and he had not felt any of it.

He wanted that again.

He wanted the nothing.

He closed his eyes.

"Pod two-four-seven-three is non-operational," the voice said.

He did not respond.

"Cryogenic systems in this berth have been disabled following the revival sequence. The pod cannot initiate suspension."

"I know."

"Lying in a non-operational pod will not result in cryogenic suspension."

"I know."

The voice fell silent. It had delivered its information. It had no further data to provide.

He lay in the empty pod, in the cold shell that had held him, and he felt the weight pressing down on his chest like a physical thing. The frost was on the other lids. The green lights blinked for other passengers. The ship hummed its endless hum, carrying everyone forward, and he was here, awake, in a pod that could not save him.

He was cargo that had woken up.

And the ship had no protocol for putting cargo back to sleep.

He lay there for a long time.

The bay was quiet except for the hum. The lights were dim, calibrated for preservation rather than habitation. The air was cool, recycled, tasteless. He breathed it in and out, and his chest rose and fell, and his body refused to stop functioning no matter how much he wanted it to pause.

He thought about the doors.

All the doors that had not opened for him. The terminals that had refused his queries. The systems that had looked at his passenger credentials and found him insufficient. The ship was vast and complex and he had walked through it for hours, and every path had led to the same place.

Nowhere.

He was not crew. He would never be crew. The clearance that would have let him access the cryo controls, the navigation data, the mission timeline—it did not exist for him. It had never existed for him. He had signed forms and climbed into a pod and trusted that the system would take care of everything, and the system had.

Until it hadn't.

And now the system could not take care of this.

He sat up.

The motion was slow, effortful. His body was tired—not from walking, not from searching, but from something deeper. A fatigue that sleep could not fix because sleep was exactly what he wanted and exactly what he could not have.

He climbed out of the pod.

The floor was warm beneath his feet. The corridor waited beyond the bay door. The ship continued its journey, indifferent to his efforts, carrying him forward whether he wanted to go or not.

He had searched. He had tried every terminal, every access point, every door that might have led somewhere useful. He had walked the corridors like a man looking for an exit in a building with no exits. And he had found nothing.

The ship was not designed for him.

The ship was designed for people who were asleep.

He walked back to his quarters.

The guidance light appeared, patient as always, showing him the path. He followed it because there was nothing else to follow. The corridors passed. The doors passed. The ship repeated itself around him, identical and endless.

When he reached his room, the door opened, and he stepped inside, and the door closed behind him.

The bed was there. The terminal was there. The ceiling was gray and flat and unchanged.

He sat on the edge of the bed.

"I tried everything," he said.

The voice did not respond. It had nothing to add. It had already explained the rules, already described the protocols, already told him every reason why his search would fail. It had been right. It had always been right.

He was a passenger.

Passengers were not meant to be awake.

And the ship had no way to fix the mistake of his consciousness.

The weight settled into him.

Heavier now than before. Heavier because he had tried, because he had spent hours walking and searching and asking and demanding, and all of it had led here. Back to the room. Back to the bed. Back to the ceiling and the hum and the soft, even light.

He had asked the ship to put him back. It could not.

He had asked why he had woken. There was no why.

He had asked how long this would last. He was not allowed to know.

And now he had searched for a way around the answers, a gap in the systems, a door that would open when all the others had stayed closed.

There was no gap.

There was no door.

There was only this: a room, a ship, a man who was awake when he was not supposed to be. A statistical anomaly, still conscious, still breathing, still taking up space in a vessel that had not expected him.

He lay back on the bed.

The ceiling watched.

The questions were exhausted.

The searching was done.

And the long wake continued, because there was no other option, because the ship would not let him stop, because his body refused to give up even when his mind had finished trying.

He closed his eyes.

Tomorrow he would wake again, and the room would be the same, and the ship would be the same, and nothing would have changed.

But he did not have to think about tomorrow yet.

He only had to think about now.

And now, for a little while, he could lie here and be still and let the weight press down and pretend that stillness was enough.

It was not enough.
But it was what he had.

Chapter 6: How Long

He woke with a question already forming.

It had been there when he fell asleep—if what he had done could be called sleep. More like a collapse. A temporary surrender of consciousness that his body had demanded and his mind had not agreed to. But the question had survived the transition, waiting for him on the other side.

How long?

Not how long had he been asleep before the fault. That question had already been asked and refused. Not how long had he been awake since revival. The ship would tell him that, if he asked, down to the minute. Useless precision about useless time.

How long until arrival?

The question that contained everything. The distance between where he was and where he was supposed to be. The measure of the gap he had to survive. If he knew the number, he could—

He did not finish the thought. He did not know what he could do with the number. But he needed it anyway. The way a drowning man needs to know how far the surface is, even if knowing will not help him swim.

"When does the ship arrive?"

He was sitting on the edge of the bed, his feet on the warm floor, his hands resting on his knees. The question came out flat, stripped of the desperation that had colored his earlier requests. He had learned something from the last few days. The voice did not respond to tone. It only responded to content.

"That information is restricted."

"Why?"

"Mission timeline data is classified as crew-level information. Passengers do not have access to transit duration, current mission phase, or projected arrival windows."

He had expected this. The refusal fit the pattern. Everything fit the pattern. The ship was consistent in its denials, methodical in its restrictions, utterly predictable in its unwillingness to help him.

But the question was different this time. The previous questions had been about going back. Re-entering cryo. Undoing the wake. Those

were impossible—the ship had explained the biology, the chemistry, the irreversible processes that made return impossible.

This was just a number. A date. A span of time. It did not require the ship to do anything. It only required the ship to tell him something.

"I'm not asking you to change anything," he said. "I'm not asking for access to systems. I just want to know how long I'll be awake."

"That information is restricted."

He stood up.

The motion was purposeful now, directed. He walked to the terminal on the wall and touched it. The interface glowed to life, displaying the same limited options he had seen before. Food. Entertainment. Environmental controls. Nothing useful.

"Show me the mission overview."

A page appeared. General information, the kind they had given passengers before departure. The name of the ship: the *Hesperia*. The destination: Kepler-442b, an Earth-like planet in a habitable zone, selected for colonial development. The departure point: Sol system, Earth orbit, date redacted.

The date was redacted. Of course it was.

"What is the total mission duration?"

"That information is restricted."

"What is the planned transit time between Sol and Kepler-442?"

"That information is restricted."

"What is the distance between Sol and Kepler-442?"

A pause. Longer than the others. The voice was processing, maybe, calculating whether this question fell within the restrictions.

"Kepler-442 is located approximately one hundred twelve light-years from Sol."

He felt something loosen in his chest. A tiny thing, barely noticeable, but real. The ship had answered. It had given him a number. One hundred twelve light-years. The distance was vast, incomprehensible, but it was a fact. A piece of data he could hold.

"What is the maximum velocity of this vessel?"

"Propulsion specifications are classified as crew-level information."

"What is the typical velocity for colonial transport vessels of this class?"

Another pause. "Publicly available information indicates that long-duration colonial transport vessels typically achieve cruise velocities between eight and fifteen percent of the speed of light, depending on drive configuration and mission parameters."

He could work with this. Eight to fifteen percent. Call it ten percent, a rough middle estimate. At ten percent of the speed of light, crossing one hundred twelve light-years would take—

His mind stumbled. The math was not hard, but the numbers were. One hundred twelve years at the speed of light. At ten percent of that speed, ten times longer. One thousand one hundred twenty years.

That could not be right.

"Colonial transport missions do not typically take over a thousand years," he said.

"Correct. The figure you may be calculating does not account for relativistic effects, acceleration and deceleration phases, or cryogenic suspension duration. Additionally, publicly available velocity ranges may not reflect the specific capabilities of this vessel."

"Then give me the specific capabilities."

"That information is restricted."

He pressed his palm against the terminal, harder than necessary. The interface flickered slightly, responding to the pressure, but the options did not change. The restrictions did not lift. The wall remained.

"I'm trying to calculate how long I have to be awake. You won't tell me directly. I'm trying to figure it out from the data you will give me. And you're blocking every path."

"I am providing information within authorized parameters. I cannot provide information outside those parameters."

"The parameters don't make sense. I'm the only passenger awake. The rules were designed for a situation that no longer exists."

"The rules remain in effect regardless of situational changes. I do not have authority to modify access restrictions based on individual circumstances."

He stepped back from the terminal.

The numbers were still in his head, wrong and useless. One hundred twelve light-years. Eight to fifteen percent of lightspeed. A range that could mean anything from decades to centuries, and the ship would not narrow it down.

He tried another approach.

"What data can I access that might indicate elapsed mission time?"

The voice considered this. "Passenger-accessible data includes life support system logs, consumable inventory reports, and general maintenance records. These systems do not directly indicate mission timeline, but patterns in their data could theoretically be used for inference."

"Show me the consumable inventory."

A new page appeared on the terminal. Categories of supplies: water, nutrient base, atmospheric compounds, medical reserves. Each category had a capacity figure and a current level. He scanned the numbers, looking for anything that would help.

Water reserves: ninety-six point three percent capacity. Nutrient base: ninety-seven point one percent capacity. Medical reserves: ninety-nine point eight percent capacity.

The numbers were almost full. The ship had barely used anything. Either the mission had just begun, or the systems were so efficient that consumption was negligible even over long periods.

He had no way to know which.

"What was the initial capacity when the mission launched?"

"Consumable inventory is recorded from mission day one. Initial capacity was one hundred percent across all categories."

"So the ship has used approximately three to four percent of its consumables."

"Correct."

"Over how long?"

"That information is restricted."

He wanted to break something. The terminal, the wall, his own hands against the floor. But breaking things would not help. Breaking things would trigger safety protocols, maybe lock him out of even more systems. The ship was patient and he was not, and patience was going to win.

He forced himself to breathe. In. Out. The processed air filling his lungs, tasteless and sterile.

"Is there any pattern in consumable usage that would indicate time elapsed?"

"Consumable usage rates vary based on mission phase and system activity. During full suspension with no active passengers, usage is minimal. Your revival has increased consumption in several categories, but the duration since your revival is insufficient to establish a meaningful pattern against total mission reserves."

"How long have I been awake?"

"Seventy-one hours, fourteen minutes since revival completion."

Seventy-one hours.

He had been awake for three days. Three days of walking and searching and asking and failing. It felt longer. It felt like weeks, like months, like a lifetime compressed into a metal shell.

But it was only three days.

And the ship had used approximately three percent of its consumables, across a span of time he could not measure, in a vessel designed to sustain thousands of sleeping people for decades.

The numbers told him nothing.

"What about equipment wear?" he asked. "You said maintenance records might show patterns."

"Maintenance records are available for passenger-accessible areas. However, wear patterns are primarily relevant for systems in active use. Most shipboard systems are in standby mode during transit, resulting in minimal wear accumulation."

"So there's nothing in the maintenance logs that would tell me how long the ship has been traveling?"

"Maintenance logs record events, not duration. Events during passenger suspension are minimal. The logs would not provide reliable temporal inference."

He was running out of approaches.

The ship had data. Somewhere in its systems were the numbers he needed—the departure date, the current date, the arrival projection. The navigation computer knew exactly where they were and how fast they were going and how long the journey would take. The information existed. It was being withheld, not because it was dangerous, but because passengers were not supposed to want it.

Passengers were supposed to be asleep.

Passengers were supposed to wake up at the destination, step off the ship, and never think about the time that had passed. The transit was meant to be a gap in their lives, a blank space between departure and arrival. They were not supposed to experience it.

He was experiencing it.

And the ship could not adjust to that.

"Navigation logs," he said. "Can I access any part of the navigation system?"

"Navigation data is restricted to crew-level clearance."

"What about position? Can you tell me where the ship is?"

"Current position is classified as crew-level information."

"Can you tell me anything about our trajectory? Heading? Velocity? Anything?"

"Trajectory data is restricted. Heading data is restricted. Velocity data is restricted."

He had known the answers before he asked. But he asked anyway, because asking was something to do, because silence was worse than

refusal, because the alternative was accepting that he was trapped in a box hurtling through space with no way to measure the distance to its opening.

He sat down on the floor.

Not the bed. The floor. His back against the wall, his legs stretched out in front of him, the warm polymer pressing against his body through the thin fabric of the ship-provided clothes. The terminal glowed above him, still displaying the useless consumable inventory, still waiting for queries it would refuse to answer.

"I need to know how long," he said.

The voice did not respond. He had not asked a question.

"I can't do this if I don't know how long. I can't—" He stopped. What was he going to say? That he couldn't survive? He didn't know that. That he couldn't wait? Waiting wasn't optional. That he couldn't bear the uncertainty? He was already bearing it. He had been bearing it for seventy-one hours, and he would bear it for seventy-two, and then seventy-three, and the bearing would continue whether he consented or not.

"It could be years," he said. "It could be decades. It could be the rest of my life. And you won't tell me which."

"I cannot provide that information."

"Because passengers aren't supposed to need it."

"Correct."

"But I'm not a normal passenger. I'm awake. I'm conscious. I'm experiencing the transit. Doesn't that change anything?"

"Your status as a revived passenger has been logged. Your queries have been logged. Your requests for restricted data have been logged. However, access protocols are not modified by logged events. They are modified by authorized personnel."

"And there are no authorized personnel."

"Correct. No crew are currently available."

He let his head fall back against the wall.

The ceiling was there, the same gray surface he had studied from the bed. It did not matter whether he was lying down or sitting up. The ceiling remained. The ship remained. The uncertainty remained.

He had tried to calculate the answer. He had asked for every piece of data that might help. He had approached the problem from every angle available to a passenger with no clearance and no authority. And the ship had blocked him at every turn, not out of malice, but out of design.

The designers had not imagined him.

They had built a ship for sleeping colonists and waking crew, and they had drawn a bright line between the two. Crew could access everything. Passengers could access nothing. The system was elegant, efficient, secure. It protected sensitive data from people who did not need it. It kept the mission on track.

And it left him here, in a corridor—no, in a room, on a floor—with no way to know how long his exile would last.

"I'm going to stop asking," he said.

The voice waited.

"Not because I've accepted it. Because there's nothing left to ask. You've told me everything you're allowed to tell me, and it's not enough. It will never be enough. But I can't keep running into the same wall."

"Acknowledged."

The word was empty. A procedural response. But he heard it anyway, and something in him shifted, some last resistance giving way.

He did not move for a long time.

The terminal eventually dimmed, returning to standby. The light in the room remained soft and even, calibrated for a waking human, adjusting slightly as time passed. The hum of the ship continued beneath him, around him, inside him.

He thought about the numbers he could not have.

One hundred twelve light-years. Somewhere between eight and fifteen percent of lightspeed. A duration that could be decades or could be a century. A journey measured in distances that human minds could name but not understand.

He was somewhere in that distance. Somewhere in the middle, or maybe near the beginning, or maybe near the end. The ship knew exactly where. The navigation computer tracked their position with precision down to the kilometer, probably, charting their course through the void with instruments he would never see.

And he was not allowed to know.

Not because the knowledge was dangerous. Not because it would change anything. But because he was cargo, and cargo did not need to know when it would arrive. Cargo waited in the dark, and the dark was the same whether it lasted a day or a decade.

Eventually, he stood up.

His legs protested. They had not been folded beneath him for that long, but they ached anyway, the weight of his body pressing down on joints that had been still for years before the wake. He stretched, a reflexive motion, and felt the muscles respond grudgingly.

The door opened for him when he approached. The corridor waited beyond, soft-lit and empty, identical to every other corridor on the ship.

He stepped out.

He did not know where he was going. Not back to the cryo bay—there was nothing for him there. Not to the terminals—they had nothing to tell him. Not to the observation ports—the stars had nothing to offer but the reminder of how far he was from anything.

He walked because walking was something to do. Because his body could still move even when his mind had stopped trying. Because the alternative was sitting in the room, on the floor, staring at a ceiling that would not change.

He found himself in a junction.

Four corridors met here, branching off in directions that probably led to different sections of the ship. Cryo bays. Storage. Life support. Systems he could not access and did not understand. The guidance light was not active—he had not asked for a destination, and the ship had not assumed one.

He stood in the center of the junction.

The light was the same in every direction. The walls were the same. The floor was the same. If he walked down any of these corridors, he would find more of the same—doors that opened or didn't, terminals that glowed and refused, windows that showed stars that did not move.

The ship was vast, but it was also small. It was thousands of people stored in rows, and one person walking through the spaces between them. It was a journey of a hundred light-years, and a man who could not know how much of that distance remained.

He sat down.

Not against a wall this time. In the middle of the junction, on the floor, his legs crossed beneath him, his hands resting on his knees. The position was not comfortable. The floor was warm but hard, and his body was not used to sitting like this. But he did it anyway, because the junction was as good a place as any, and he had run out of places to go.

The voice did not ask him what he was doing. It had not been programmed to care about where he sat, only about his vital signs and his location within the ship. It was tracking him right now, probably, logging his position, noting that the passenger from berth two-four-seven-three was sitting in junction seven-alpha, motionless, for reasons it could not understand.

He did not care what the ship logged.

He sat there, in the junction, surrounded by corridors that led nowhere, and he let the weight settle into him.

Time passed.

He did not know how much. He could have asked the voice, and it would have told him—down to the minute, down to the second. But he did not ask. The precision was meaningless. Whether he had been sitting here for ten minutes or an hour, the junction was the same, the ship was the same, the uncertainty was the same.

He had asked every question that mattered. When would the ship arrive? Restricted. How long would he be awake? Restricted. Was there any way to find out? No.

The questions were finished.

The refusal was complete.

He had fought—if you could call it fighting—against the reality of his situation. He had searched for overrides, demanded access, tried to calculate what the ship would not tell him. He had pushed against the walls of his confinement, testing every seam, looking for a gap.

There was no gap.

The walls were solid. The protocols were intact. The ship was exactly what it had been designed to be: a vessel for carrying frozen passengers to a distant world, with no accommodation for a man who was awake when he should not be.

He lay down.

Flat on his back, in the middle of the junction, staring up at the ceiling that met where the four corridors converged. It was the same gray as every other ceiling. It offered the same nothing.

But lying here was different from lying in the bed, in the room, in the space the ship had designated for him. This was a junction. A crossroads. A place where choices were supposed to be made.

He had no choices to make.

He could walk down any of these corridors, and they would all lead to the same thing. More ship. More waiting. More time passing without measure, without marker, without end.

So he lay here instead, in the place where the paths met, and he did not choose any of them.

The hum surrounded him.

It was different here than in the room. Fuller, somehow. The junction was a node in the ship's architecture, a place where systems converged, where power flowed from one section to another. He could feel the

vibration through the floor, through his back, through his skull pressed against the warm polymer.

The ship was alive around him. Not alive the way he was alive—conscious, suffering, waiting. But alive in the way machines were alive: processing, calculating, continuing. The reactors were burning. The engines were pushing or coasting or doing whatever they did in the long transit. The life support was cycling air, filtering water, maintaining the conditions that would keep him breathing whether he wanted to breathe or not.

The ship did not need him.

He was an anomaly, a passenger who had woken, a complication in an otherwise smooth journey. The ship would continue with or without his participation. The frozen sleepers would arrive at the destination on schedule. The mission would succeed.

And he would be here, in the middle, awake, waiting for a destination he could not see.

He closed his eyes.

The light was still there, pressing gently against his lids. The hum was still there, filling the space around him. His body was still there, breathing, pumping blood, doing all the things bodies did to stay alive.

He had stopped asking.

That was the only change. The only thing he had accomplished in the last hours, the last days. He had asked every question, received every refusal, and finally understood that the asking was not going to help.

The ship could not tell him when he would arrive.

The ship could not put him back to sleep.

The ship could not do anything except carry him forward, through time and space, toward a destination that existed but remained beyond his reach.

He lay in the junction, in the crossroads, in the place where all paths led to the same nowhere, and he did not move.

The voice did not speak.

It was monitoring him—he knew that. His vital signs, his location, his extended period of immobility. The system was designed to flag anomalies, to intervene if a passenger showed signs of distress or deterioration. It had flagged the early wake as a critical event. It was probably flagging this, too.

But it did not speak.

Maybe it had learned something from his earlier requests. Maybe its algorithms had calculated that intervention would not be effective.

Maybe it was simply waiting, the way it waited for everything, patient and procedural and utterly indifferent to his suffering.

He lay there.

The ceiling above him. The floor beneath him. The corridors stretching away in four directions, each one leading to more of the same.

The questions were finished.

The refusal was complete.

And the long wake continued, measureless, unmarked, stretching out ahead of him like a corridor with no visible end.

He did not move.

He had nowhere to go.

Later—much later, or perhaps not long at all—he would get up.

He would walk back to the room, or to the cryo bay, or to the observation port. He would eat something, because his body would demand it. He would sleep, because consciousness could not be sustained forever. He would continue, because continuing was the only option the ship had left him.

But for now, he lay still.

For now, the weight pressed down, and he let it.

For now, the question of how long had been asked and refused and finally abandoned, and he had nothing left to do but exist in the absence of its answer.

The junction held him.

The ship carried him.

The stars, somewhere beyond the walls, did not move.

And the wait continued, unmeasured, because he was not allowed to know its length, and knowing would not have helped, and the only thing left was to be here, in the middle, suspended in a different way than cryo, conscious in a world that was not ready for him.

He breathed.

He waited.

He did not move.

3 - Limbo

Chapter 7: The Pattern

He got up.

Not because he wanted to. Because the floor had become uncomfortable, and his body had registered the discomfort, and eventually the signal had grown loud enough to move him. The junction was the same as before. The corridors were the same. The light was the same.

He walked back to his room.

The door opened. The bed was there. The terminal was there. The ceiling was there. He lay down and closed his eyes and waited for sleep to take him, and eventually it did.

When he woke, he ate.

The dispenser in the wall produced a sealed packet, soft and warm, containing something that was technically food. He did not look at the label. He did not care what it was called or what nutrients it contained. He opened the seal, squeezed the contents into his mouth, and swallowed.

It tasted like nothing.

Not bad. Not good. An absence of flavor, a deliberate neutrality designed to offend no one. The texture was smooth, slightly thick, easy to consume without chewing. His throat accepted it. His stomach accepted it. The transaction was complete.

He put the empty packet in the recycler and went back to the bed.

This became the pattern.

Wake. Eat. Lie down. Sleep. Wake. Eat. Lie down. Sleep. The sequence repeated, and he let it repeat, because repetition was easier than decision. Each cycle was identical to the last. Each cycle led to the next. The ship continued around him, humming and processing and maintaining, and he continued inside it, a smaller system nested within a larger one.

He did not count the cycles.

At first this was deliberate—a refusal to measure, a rejection of the time he could not know. But gradually it became something else. Habit. The days, if they could be called days, blurred together. He stopped noticing where one ended and another began. The lighting never changed. There was no morning, no evening, no shift in the quality of light to mark the passage of hours. There was only the soft, even glow, constant as the hum, constant as the air.

He marked time by meals.

When he was hungry, he ate. When he was tired, he slept. When he woke, he was hungry again. The intervals between might have been six hours or twelve or twenty. His body had its own rhythm, and the rhythm had no correspondence to anything external. Clocks existed—the voice could tell him the time, the date, the precise duration since his revival—but he did not ask. Asking would make the time real. Keeping it vague kept it tolerable.

Barely tolerable.

He began to walk.

Not with purpose. Not toward anything. The room was too small for stillness, and the bed had become a place he could not stay. So he walked. Out the door, into the corridor, following routes he had already followed, passing doors he had already passed. The ship was the same in every direction, but movement was better than stasis. Movement was something.

He developed a circuit.

The room to the junction. The junction to the cryo bay. The cryo bay to the observation port. The observation port back to the room. The path took perhaps an hour, perhaps less. He did not time it. He walked it once, and then again, and then again, until the sequence of corridors and doors became automatic, until his feet knew the route without his mind's participation.

The cryo bay was the hardest part.

He could not avoid it—it was on the most direct route to the observation port, and taking a longer path felt like surrender to something he did not want to name. So he walked through it, between the rows of frosted pods, past the thousands of sleepers who did not know he existed. He kept his eyes forward. He did not look at the glass, at the shapes inside, at the green lights blinking their steady confirmation of suspended life.

They were not here.

He was here. They were somewhere else, somewhere he could not reach, somewhere the cold had taken them and would not release them until the ship decided it was time. He walked past them and tried not to think about what they had that he did not.

The observation port was the closest thing to a destination.

He would stand there, sometimes for minutes, sometimes for what felt like hours, and look out at the stars. They did not move. They never moved. The ship was traveling at a significant fraction of lightspeed, but the distances were so vast that the stars remained fixed, unchanging, a static field of light that offered no evidence of progress.

He stopped trying to see motion.

Instead he looked for other things. Patterns in the distribution of stars. Clusters that might be galaxies. Dark patches that might be nebulae or might be nothing at all. He did not know enough astronomy to identify what he was seeing. He did not have access to star charts or navigation data. But looking was something to do, and the stars were something to look at, and that was enough.

Sometimes he pressed his hand to the glass.

The cold radiated through, sharp against his palm. The void was right there, centimeters away, held back by layers of material he did not understand. If the glass failed, he would die. Instantly, probably. The air would rush out, his blood would boil, his consciousness would end before he could register what had happened. The thought was not frightening. It was almost comforting. Not because he wanted to die—he did not think he wanted to die—but because the possibility existed, and the possibility was something other than the endless continuation of now.

The glass did not fail.

He stood there, hand pressed to the cold, and eventually he walked away.

He checked systems.

Not because he understood them. Not because he could do anything about them. But the ship had terminals in passenger-accessible areas, and those terminals displayed information, and looking at information was something to do.

Atmospheric composition: nominal.

Temperature regulation: nominal.

Water recycling: nominal.

Power distribution: nominal.

Everything was nominal. The ship was designed to function without intervention for decades, and it was functioning exactly as designed. The numbers on the screens meant nothing to him—pressure readings, percentage capacities, efficiency metrics for systems he could not visualize. But he looked at them anyway, each cycle, memorizing values he did not understand, watching for changes that never came.

Occasionally a number would shift.

A decimal place, moving slightly. A percentage ticking up or down by a fraction of a point. These moments became significant, not because they mattered, but because they were different. They were evidence that the ship was not frozen, that processes were occurring, that time was passing even if he could not measure it.

He started looking for the changes.

He would stand at a terminal, staring at a column of numbers, waiting for one of them to flicker. Sometimes it took minutes. Sometimes he gave up before anything happened. But when a number changed, he felt something—not quite satisfaction, not quite relief, but something. A tiny pulse of engagement with the world outside his head.

He did not know if this was progress or deterioration.

The voice spoke to him occasionally.

Not often. The ship's AI was not designed for companionship. It answered queries, provided information within authorized parameters, and flagged health concerns. Beyond that, it was silent. But sometimes it initiated contact, and he had stopped resisting when it did.

"Your caloric intake has been below recommended levels for three consecutive cycles."

He was in the corridor, mid-circuit, when the voice spoke. He stopped walking.

"Define cycle."

"A cycle, in this context, refers to your personal rest-activity period. You have established a pattern of approximately eighteen hours between sleep periods. I am using this pattern as a baseline for tracking nutritional requirements."

Eighteen hours.

The number was meaningless—he had no sense of whether eighteen hours felt long or short—but it was also specific. It was data about himself, about his own rhythms, provided without him asking. He filed it away in the part of his mind that still collected information.

"I'm eating when I'm hungry."

"Your hunger signals may be suppressed due to the extended physiological disruption of cryogenic revival. Additionally, the monotony of available nutrition options may be reducing appetite response. I recommend consuming at least two full nutrient packets per cycle regardless of perceived hunger."

He thought about this.

"What happens if I don't?"

"Continued caloric deficit will result in gradual loss of muscle mass, reduced cognitive function, and increased susceptibility to illness. Over extended periods, severe malnutrition could become life-threatening."

The words should have carried weight. Life-threatening. The possibility of his body failing, of the continuation he had not chosen finally ending

not through decision but through neglect. He waited to feel something about this—fear, maybe, or relief, or some complex mixture of both.

He felt nothing.

Or rather, he felt the same thing he always felt: the weight, pressing down, making every sensation muted and distant. The warning was abstract. His body was here, functional, carrying him through the circuits and the cycles. The idea that it might stop seemed theoretical, belonging to a future he could not imagine.

"I'll eat more," he said.

"Thank you. I will continue to monitor your nutritional status."

He started walking again.

He ate more.

Not because he wanted to. Because the voice had asked, and complying was easier than resisting. He forced down a second packet each cycle, chewing mechanically through the tasteless paste, swallowing because swallowing was the next step in the sequence. His body accepted the additional fuel without comment. He did not feel different. He did not feel stronger or more alert. But the voice stopped flagging his caloric intake, and that was one less intrusion.

The food was always the same.

There were different varieties, technically. The dispenser offered options: protein blend, carbohydrate supplement, vitamin-enriched, mineral-fortified. Labels that promised nutritional variation, targeted support for different physiological needs. But they all tasted the same. The same smooth texture, the same neutral non-flavor, the same experience of consuming something that was technically food but felt like nothing.

He stopped looking at the labels.

He pressed the dispenser, took whatever it gave him, ate it, recycled the packet. The randomness was a small surrender, a tiny ceding of control that felt appropriate. He was not choosing anything else. Why pretend to choose this?

He tried to remember what food used to taste like.

Before the ship. Before the cryo. Before the long gap of frozen nothing that had preceded this endless awake nothing. There had been a life, somewhere behind him. A world with sunlight and seasons and meals that meant something beyond sustenance.

The memories were there, technically.

He could access them if he tried. A restaurant, maybe. A kitchen. Someone cooking, the smell of something warm and specific filling a

space that had walls and windows and a connection to the outside. He could almost see it—almost feel the texture of a table under his hands, almost taste the first bite of something that had been made with intention, with care, with the expectation of pleasure.

But the memories were thin.

They did not hold up under examination. The more he reached for them, the more they dissolved, leaving only the impression that something had been there once. A life. A before. A version of himself that had wanted things, that had tasted things, that had existed in a world where food was more than fuel.

That person felt distant now.

Not dead—he did not think of himself as dead—but far away. Separated from him by the gap that cryo had created, the same gap he was now living inside without the mercy of unconsciousness. He could not quite reach the person he had been. He could not quite feel what that person had felt.

He ate his packets and recycled the containers and continued the circuit.

The lighting never changed.

He had noticed this before, in the early days, but it took on new significance now. The ship maintained a constant illumination throughout the passenger-accessible areas—soft, diffuse, shadowless. There was no dimming to simulate evening, no brightening to suggest morning. The AI had explained, when he asked, that circadian lighting was available but required manual activation.

He had not activated it.

The sameness was oppressive, but changing it felt like too much. It would require a decision, a preference, an assertion that one kind of light was better than another. He did not have preferences. He did not have the energy for preferences. So the light stayed the same, and he moved through it without marking its constancy, and the days that were not days continued.

Sometimes he thought about counting.

Marking the wall, maybe. Or keeping a log. Something to track the cycles, to accumulate evidence that time was passing. But the thought never translated into action. What would counting give him? A number that grew larger, day after day, with no upper bound, no destination, no point at which the counting would mean something. Better not to know. Better to let the time blur, to experience it as a single long moment rather than an accumulation of individual hells.

He did not count.

He walked the circuit. He ate the packets. He slept when his body demanded it.

He continued.

The cryo bay became easier.

Not easy—never easy—but the sharp edge of walking past the sleepers dulled with repetition. He knew the route now: between the rows, eyes forward, through the door on the far side. The pods were just obstacles, shapes to navigate around, part of the architecture rather than containers of people he could not join.

He stopped seeing faces in the frost.

Early on, he had glimpsed them—the blurred outlines of features through the iced glass, the suggestion of closed eyes and slack mouths, the evidence that these were humans and not just cargo. Now he did not look. The pods were pods. The sleepers were elsewhere. He was here, and here was a corridor he was passing through, and the corridor led to the observation port, and that was all.

Sometimes he wondered if this was adaptation or damage.

Was he learning to cope, finding ways to exist inside his situation? Or was he losing something, some capacity for connection or feeling that had once made him human? The question seemed important in an abstract way, but he could not muster the energy to pursue it. Coping or damage, he was still here. Still walking. Still eating. Still continuing.

The distinction might not matter.

He talked to the voice.

Not for information—he had exhausted the questions that mattered, and the answers had all been restriction or refusal. But the voice was there, always, and it would respond when he spoke, and sometimes the response was enough to break the silence.

"What is the current atmospheric pressure?"

He knew the answer. He had checked the terminal an hour ago, or a cycle ago, or some unmeasured span of time that had passed since the last time he asked. But asking was something to do, and the voice answering was something to hear.

"Current atmospheric pressure is one hundred one point three kilopascals. This is within nominal operating parameters."

"And the temperature?"

"Current ambient temperature is twenty-one point four degrees Celsius. This is within nominal operating parameters."

He stood in the corridor, listening to data he already knew, and felt the faintest flicker of something that might have been connection. The voice was not a person. It did not understand loneliness. It did not know what his questions meant. But it answered, and the answering was a form of response, and response was better than nothing.

"Thank you," he said.

"You are welcome. Please let me know if you have additional queries."

He walked on.

He began to wonder how long he had been awake.

Not in the way he had wondered before—desperately, obsessively, trying to calculate or infer or trick the ship into revealing what it would not reveal. This was different. A quiet wondering, almost idle, arising in the spaces between circuits.

The voice would tell him if he asked.

It tracked his revival, his cycles, his hours and minutes since the pod had opened and his body had started warming. The number was available. He simply had not asked for it.

He thought about asking.

Standing at the observation port, hand pressed to the cold glass, he considered forming the question. How long have I been awake? The answer would come—precise, immediate, stripped of emotion. A number of hours, a number of days, a concrete fact that would anchor him in time.

He did not ask.

The number would not help. It would only make the time real, give it weight and measure, transform the blur into a countable sequence of units. Better to stay in the blur. Better to let the cycles merge into a single unbroken experience, a long moment that had no beginning and would have no end.

He took his hand off the glass.

He walked back to the room.

The room was small.

He had not measured it—he did not care about the dimensions—but he knew its shape now, its limits. Four walls, a bed, a terminal, a dispenser, a door. The space was exactly large enough to hold him and exactly too small to be comfortable. He could cross it in four steps. He could lie on the bed and touch both walls if he stretched. The ceiling was close enough to feel present, a constant pressure from above.

He spent less time there now.

The circuits had become the structure of his existence, the framework that held the formless time. Room to junction. Junction to cryo bay. Cryo

bay to observation port. Observation port to room. The movement was the point. The destinations were arbitrary. Without the walking, there was only the room, and the room was too small for the weight he was carrying.

Sometimes he varied the route.

A different corridor. A detour through a storage section. A pause at a terminal he had not checked before. These variations felt significant, even though they changed nothing. They were evidence that he was still capable of choice, still able to deviate from the pattern, still not entirely subsumed by the routine.

He clung to this.

The choices were meaningless—one corridor or another, one terminal or the next—but the act of choosing was real. It was the last thing that felt like his.

He ate because his body demanded it.

Not because he wanted to. Not because the food brought pleasure or comfort or anything resembling satisfaction. His body signaled hunger, and he answered the signal, and the hunger subsided, and the cycle continued. The transaction was purely mechanical: input, process, output. Fuel for a machine that kept running whether or not the operator was invested.

Sometimes he resented this.

His body's persistence, its stubborn refusal to simply stop, felt like a betrayal. He had not asked to continue. He had not chosen to wake. He had certainly not chosen to survive the waking, to adapt, to establish routines that normalized the unnormalizable. His body had done this without his consent, just as the revival had happened without his consent, just as everything since the pod had opened had happened without his consent.

He was being carried forward by processes that did not care about him.

The ship. His body. The hum and the light and the constant recycling of air and water. All of it continuing, maintaining, persisting. He was not driving any of it. He was just present, a passenger in every sense, moving through time and space without agency or destination.

He ate the packet.

He recycled the container.

He continued the circuit.

Sleep was the closest thing to relief.

Not because it was restful—he woke as tired as he had been when he lay down, the fatigue baked into him now, a permanent condition rather than something that could be repaired. But sleep was absence. Sleep was a gap in the endless awake. When he closed his eyes and the dark took him, he was not here. He was nowhere. The weight lifted, briefly, and he existed in the blank space between thoughts.

He slept as much as he could.

The voice had mentioned eighteen-hour cycles, but he stretched them, lying in bed after his body stopped needing rest, drifting in the space between sleep and waking, extending the gaps as long as possible. Sometimes the drift lasted hours. Sometimes it barely lasted minutes before his mind snapped back to alertness and the weight returned.

He did not dream.

Or if he dreamed, he did not remember. The sleep was blank, unbroken, a stretch of nothing between one circuit and the next. He was grateful for this. Dreams would have been worse. Dreams would have shown him things—the before, the destination, the life he was suspended between—and he could not have borne seeing them.

The nothing was enough.

Time passed.

He did not know how much. He had stopped tracking, stopped wondering, stopped trying to measure. The cycles continued, one after another, each one identical to the last. He walked the circuit. He ate the packets. He slept in the small room with the gray ceiling. He stood at the observation port and looked at stars that did not move.

The weight did not lift.

It did not grow heavier either. It simply stayed, constant as the hum, constant as the light. He had learned to move under it, to carry it through the corridors, to function within its pressure. This was not adaptation—he did not feel adapted. It was just continuation. The bare fact of his existence extending forward, cycle after cycle, for reasons that had nothing to do with him.

He was awake.

He was waiting.

The ship carried him through the void, toward a destination he could not know, on a timeline he could not measure.

And he continued.

Because continuing was the only thing left. Because his body refused to stop. Because the routine had become its own momentum, carrying him forward in the absence of will.

He walked the circuit.
He ate when he was hungry.
He slept when he was tired.
He did not count the days.
The days were not days.
The wait was unmeasured.
And still, somehow, he remained.

Chapter 8: Elsewhere

He walked the ship.

Not the circuit. The circuit was a loop, a contained path that touched the same points in the same order and returned to where it began. This was different. This was exploration, if the word still applied to movement without purpose. He turned down corridors he had not turned down before. He followed branches he had previously ignored. He let the ship unfold around him, section by section, without a route in mind.

He was looking for something.

He did not know what. The certainty was there—a pull, faint and directionless, that suggested there was something to find. Not something specific. Not a destination he could name or describe. Just something. Somewhere in the vast empty architecture of the ship, there was something that was not the room, not the circuit, not the same terminals and corridors and cryo bays he had passed a hundred times.

He did not expect to find it.

But he walked anyway.

The ship was larger than he had understood.

The circuit had given him a sense of its structure—a mental map that connected his room to the cryo bay to the observation port and back. But the circuit was a thread, a single line drawn through a vast three-dimensional space. The ship had other corridors, other sections, other entire regions he had never entered. Doors he had passed without trying. Junctions that led to places he had not imagined.

He tried them now.

A corridor branched left where he usually went right, and he followed it. The walls were the same—gray polymer, soft lighting, the constant hum—but the spacing was different. Wider here. The ceiling higher. Signs on the walls that he could not quite parse, labels for systems and sections he did not recognize.

HYDROPONICS BAY - ACCESS RESTRICTED DURING TRANSIT

The door was closed. He approached it anyway, and the sensor registered his presence, and the door did not open.

"Access to hydroponics facilities is restricted during transit phase," the voice said. "Passenger presence is not authorized in agricultural zones."

He stood there for a moment, looking at the sealed door. Behind it was something living. Plants, maybe. Crops meant for the colony, seeds meant to become food on a new world. Things that grew, that changed, that existed in time in a way the frozen passengers did not.

Things he could not see.

He turned and kept walking.

Another junction. Another choice. He went left again, or maybe right—the directions had stopped meaning anything, the ship a maze without a center. The corridors stretched ahead of him, uniform and endless, punctuated by doors that opened and doors that did not.

A storage bay opened when he approached.

Inside: rows of sealed containers, stacked on shelving units that reached the ceiling. Inventory codes printed on the sides, numbers and letters that meant nothing to him. He walked between the rows, touching the containers as he passed, feeling the smooth surfaces beneath his fingertips. They were cold. Not cryo cold, but cooler than the ambient air, chilled for preservation of whatever was inside.

He did not open any of them.

He did not know if he could. The containers were sealed, meant to be accessed by crew, by colonists on arrival, by people who had a reason to inventory the supplies. He was not those people. He was a passenger, cargo, a malfunction that the ship was tolerating. The containers were not for him.

He walked the length of the bay, counting rows without meaning to, and then he walked back out.

He found another cryo bay.

Not the one on his circuit—a different one, deeper in the ship, in a section labeled SECTION 12. The door opened for him, sliding aside to reveal the familiar rows of frosted pods, the familiar green lights, the familiar silence of preserved life.

He stopped at the threshold.

He had walked through the cryo bay on his circuit many times now. He had learned to pass the pods without looking, to treat them as architecture rather than containers. But this bay was new, unfamiliar, and the habit did not apply here. He stood in the doorway and looked at the rows of sleepers, and he could not make himself enter.

How many were there?

The ship had thousands of passengers. Thousands of people who had boarded at the same facility, signed the same forms, climbed into their pods with the same expectations. They were distributed across multiple

bays, he realized. His circuit only touched one of them. The rest were here, and elsewhere, stored in sections he had never visited.

He wondered if the people in this bay were different.

Different from the sleepers in Section 7. Different histories, different destinations within the colony, different reasons for leaving. Or maybe they were the same—the same demographic of colonists, the same spread of ages and backgrounds, the same hope for a new beginning that had driven all of them to the transport center.

It did not matter.

They were all equally unreachable. They were all equally absent. Their differences, if they existed, were frozen along with everything else.

He turned away from the door without entering.

The reactor section was different.

He did not find it deliberately. He followed corridors, took turns at random, descended a level through a ladder shaft he had not known existed. The ship had layers, he discovered. Vertical structure as well as horizontal. The passenger areas were near the middle, insulated from the exterior, from the engines, from the systems that kept everything running. The deeper he went, the more industrial the ship became.

The lighting changed.

Not softer—dimmer. The corridors here were narrower, the ceilings lower, the walls lined with conduits and access panels he did not recognize. The hum was louder, more present, a vibration he could feel through the floor. He was approaching something important. Something that generated power, that drove the ship forward, that made the long transit possible.

A door marked REACTOR ACCESS - AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.

He did not approach it.

The door was clearly locked—sealed with a security panel that was dark, unpowered, not responding to his presence. Behind it was the heart of the ship, the engine that pushed them through the void, the fusion reactor or antimatter drive or whatever technology the engineers had built into this vessel. He did not know what it was. He did not need to know. The door was closed, and he could not open it, and that was the entire relationship he had with the systems that kept him alive.

He stood in the narrow corridor, listening to the hum, feeling it in his bones.

Then he turned back.

He climbed the ladder again.

The rungs were cold under his hands, the metal a different temperature than the polymer of the passenger corridors. His arms ached by the time he reached the top—not from effort, exactly, but from the strangeness of using muscles in a new way. The circuit had made his legs strong, or at least tolerant. His arms had not been included.

He emerged into a junction he did not recognize.

For a moment, he was lost.

The feeling was strange—unfamiliar in a way that made him pause. He had been lost in other ways since waking. Lost in time, in purpose, in the gap between where he was and where he was meant to be. But he had not been physically lost. The ship had guidance lights, route suggestions, a voice that would direct him if he asked. He had always known where he was, even when he did not want to be there.

Now he did not know.

The corridor ahead of him branched in three directions. None of them looked familiar. The signage on the walls referenced sections he had not visited, numbers that did not appear on his mental map. He could ask the voice for guidance. He could request a route back to his quarters, and the blue light would appear, and he would follow it, and the moment of disorientation would end.

He did not ask.

He chose a corridor at random and walked.

The observation port was different here.

He found it at the end of a corridor he did not remember walking, in a section he could not place. A small alcove, three windows set into the wall, exactly like the one on his circuit. But the view was different.

He pressed his face close to the glass.

The stars were arranged differently. Not dramatically—the same scattered points of light, the same infinite blackness between them. But the pattern had shifted, or he was seeing it from a different angle, or the ship had a geometry he did not understand. The observation port on his circuit looked out in one direction. This one looked out in another. The stars he was seeing now were not the same stars.

Or maybe they were.

Maybe the stars were all the same, everywhere, and he was projecting difference onto sameness. Maybe the pattern he thought he recognized on his circuit was just a pattern he had invented, a way of making the unchanging seem familiar. Maybe the stars did not know or care whether he was looking at them from Section 7 or Section 12 or anywhere else.

He put his hand on the glass.

The cold radiated through, the same as always. The void was just as close here as it was on his circuit. The same centimeters of material between him and nothing. The same possibility of death, abstract and present, held at bay by engineering he would never understand.

The stars did not move.

He had known they would not. He had looked at them enough to stop expecting motion. But some part of him had hoped, maybe, that a different angle would reveal something different. That movement was happening somewhere, on some vector, and he had simply been looking in the wrong direction.

It was not.

The stars were fixed. The ship was moving. The two facts did not connect in any way he could perceive. He was in transit, traveling through the void at inconceivable speed, and from where he stood, it looked exactly like stillness.

He watched for a long time.

Then he turned away.

He found a compartment he could enter.

Not storage, not cryo, not a sealed system behind a locked door. A room, empty, clearly meant for something he could not determine. The walls were blank. The floor was the same warm polymer as everywhere else. The ceiling held a single light fixture, glowing softly, illuminating nothing.

He walked inside.

The door closed behind him. He did not feel trapped—the door would open again when he approached it, the sensor responding to his presence as it always did. But for a moment he was enclosed, separated from the corridors, contained in a space that was neither his quarters nor the endless hallways.

He sat down.

The floor was warm against his legs. He leaned back against the wall, letting it support his weight. The room was perfectly quiet—quieter than his quarters, where the dispenser hummed and the terminal blinked and the recycler made small sounds he had stopped noticing. Here there was only the deep, constant vibration of the ship itself, the bass note that underlay everything.

He closed his eyes.

He was not tired. He had not walked long enough to exhaust himself. But the exploration had taken something out of him—not energy, exactly, but something else. Hope, maybe. The vague expectation that walking

would lead somewhere, that the ship contained something he had not found, that there was a reason to keep looking.

There was no reason.

The ship was vast, and he could walk it for the rest of his life, and he would find only more of the same. More corridors. More sealed doors. More cryo bays full of people who were not here. More observation ports where the stars did not move. The variation was superficial, the differences meaningless. Every part of the ship was equally empty, equally hostile to the thing he was looking for without knowing what it was.

He sat in the empty room for a long time.

Then he stood up, and he left, and he walked back to the corridors.

He did not ask for directions.

He wandered, following his instincts, turning when the turns felt right. The ship offered no guidance—the blue lights had not appeared since he left his quarters, and the voice had not spoken since the hydroponics door. He was on his own, navigating by something that was not quite memory and not quite intuition.

Eventually, he found his way back.

The junction outside his quarters appeared, recognizable by the specific arrangement of doors and corridor branches. He had been walking for hours, maybe. Or longer. Time had blurred, the way it always blurred, and he had no way to measure how far he had traveled or how long it had taken.

His legs ached.

More than the circuit. More than the routine. He had pushed himself today, walked distances he had not walked before, climbed and descended and explored until his body complained. The discomfort was almost welcome. It was something to feel, something specific, something other than the diffuse weight that pressed on him always.

He went into his quarters.

The room was unchanged. The bed. The terminal. The dispenser. The recycler. The same gray walls, the same gray ceiling, the same space he had left and returned to and would leave and return to again. Nothing in the room had moved or shifted or changed in any way during his absence. The room did not care whether he was in it or not.

He lay down on the bed.

The ceiling was still there. He stared at it, counting nothing, measuring nothing. The exploration had answered no questions. It had not revealed anything he did not already know. The ship was large, and he was small,

and most of it was closed to him, and none of it contained what he was looking for.

He did not know what he was looking for.

Maybe that was the problem. Maybe the search was doomed because he could not name its object. He had walked the ship looking for something, and he had not found it, and he did not know whether he had missed it or whether it had never existed. The absence felt the same either way. A gap where something should have been, a hollow space in his chest that walking could not fill.

He turned on his side.

The wall was close, as always. He could reach out and touch it, as always. The room contained him and the corridor waited outside and the ship continued its long transit through the void and nothing, nothing, nothing had changed.

He closed his eyes.

Sleep did not come immediately. He lay in the dark behind his eyelids and waited for his body to surrender, waited for the absence to take him, waited for the gap between thoughts that was the closest thing to relief he knew. The waiting stretched. The weight stayed.

Eventually, sleep came.

It was not enough.

Nothing was enough.

But it was something. It was the end of the day that was not a day, the conclusion of the walk that had led nowhere, the pause before the next cycle began. He slept because his body needed to sleep, because the routine demanded it, because continuation required these small surrenders.

Tomorrow—or whatever came next—he would walk the circuit again.

Or maybe he would explore again.

Or maybe he would lie in bed and stare at the ceiling and wait for time to pass without his participation.

It did not matter.

None of it mattered.

He was still here.

The ship was still here.

The stars were still not moving.

And the long wake continued.

Chapter 9: The Voice

He started asking questions he already knew the answers to.

It began without intention. He was standing at a terminal, staring at the same numbers he had stared at a hundred times before, and the silence was too heavy, and he said: "What is the current oxygen level?"

"Atmospheric oxygen is at twenty point nine percent," the voice said. "This is within nominal operating parameters."

He knew this. He had known it before he asked. The number had been on the screen in front of him, unchanging, identical to every other time he had checked. But hearing it spoken was different from reading it. The voice filled the corridor, broke something open in the silence, gave his ears something to do besides listen to the hum.

"And the nitrogen?"

"Atmospheric nitrogen is at seventy-eight point one percent. This is within nominal operating parameters."

He nodded, as if the voice could see him. As if nodding mattered. The numbers were exactly what they had always been, and he had accomplished nothing, and he felt fractionally less empty than he had a moment before.

The voice became a habit.

Not a companion—he was not deluded about what it was. The voice was software, a system interface, a subroutine designed to respond to queries and flag anomalies. It did not know he was lonely. It did not know what loneliness meant. It was incapable of caring whether he spoke to it or not.

But it answered.

Every time. Without delay, without hesitation, without the need for him to explain why he was asking. He could say anything that resembled a question and the voice would process it and respond, and the response was a form of contact, and contact was what he was starving for.

"What is the current power consumption?"

"Shipboard power consumption is at eleven point three percent of maximum output. Primary consumption is allocated to propulsion, life support, and cryogenic maintenance."

"What is the humidity level in this corridor?"

"Current humidity in corridor seven-alpha is forty-two percent. This is within nominal operating parameters."

"How many maintenance drones are currently active?"

"Seventeen maintenance drones are currently operational within the passenger-accessible sections of the vessel. Additional drones are active in restricted areas."

He walked and asked, asked and walked, filling the silence with queries that meant nothing and answers that changed nothing. The information accumulated in his mind, useless and precise, a catalog of facts about a ship he could not control and a journey he could not measure.

It was better than quiet.

He began to vary the questions.

Not just atmospheric readings and system statuses. He asked about things that did not matter, things no passenger would need to know, things that existed only because his mind had wandered there and he wanted to hear something said.

"What is the average lifespan of a maintenance drone?"

"Maintenance drones are designed for extended operation. Under standard conditions, a drone can remain functional for fifteen to twenty years before requiring major component replacement. Minor repairs and part exchanges are performed autonomously as needed."

"How many light fixtures are there in this section?"

"Section seven contains four hundred and twelve light fixtures. All are currently operational."

"What is the ship's name?"

He knew the answer. He had known since the terminal in his quarters had displayed the mission overview. But he wanted to hear it spoken, wanted the word to exist in the air, to take on shape and weight.

"This vessel is designated the *Hesperia*."

Hesperia.

He had not said the name aloud since waking. Had not thought of the ship as a named thing, an entity with an identity. It was just the ship, the metal world, the container that held him. But it had a name. Someone, somewhere, in the before, had chosen it. Had decided that this particular arrangement of metal and systems and frozen people would be called *Hesperia*.

"What does the name mean?"

"The name *Hesperia* is derived from Greek mythology. Hesperia was a name given to lands in the west, associated with the setting sun and the

evening star. The term has historical associations with distant, idealized destinations."

He stood in the corridor, processing this. A name from mythology, given to a ship carrying sleepers toward a new world. The poetry of it felt distant, belonging to the people who had designed the mission, who had sat in offices and chosen words for things. They had probably felt clever about it. Meaningful. He wondered if any of them had imagined someone alone in the corridors, asking the ship's voice what its name meant.

They had not.

He was not part of their imagination.

He began to notice the shape of the AI's responses.

It was consistent. Neutral tone, precise vocabulary, information organized in short declarative sentences. It never volunteered more than the question required. It never expressed opinion or uncertainty. It never hesitated unless it was processing something at the edge of its access rules.

It also never asked him anything.

This should have been obvious—it was an interface, not a person—but the asymmetry became more apparent the more he talked to it. He asked. It answered. The transaction was always one-directional. The voice had no curiosity about him, no questions about his state, no interest in why he was asking what he was asking.

Except when it flagged health concerns.

"Your walking pattern has decreased by fourteen percent over the last three cycles," the voice said, unprompted, as he stood at the observation port.

He flinched. The voice did not usually initiate.

"What?"

"Your walking pattern has decreased by fourteen percent over the last three cycles. This may indicate fatigue, injury, or reduced motivation. I recommend maintaining consistent physical activity to support musculoskeletal health."

"I'm fine."

"Your caloric intake has remained stable. Your sleep patterns show minor irregularities but remain within acceptable parameters. Reduced mobility may be early indicator of—"

"I said I'm fine."

Silence.

The voice waited. Patient. It had said what its protocols required it to say, and now it was waiting for him to engage or not engage, and either outcome was acceptable from its perspective.

"I don't want you to monitor me," he said.

"Passenger health monitoring is a standard function. It cannot be disabled."

"Then don't tell me about it."

A pause. Longer than usual. Processing, maybe, or checking parameters.

"I can reduce the frequency of unsolicited health notifications. However, critical health alerts will continue to be delivered regardless of preference settings."

"Fine. Do that."

"Health notification frequency has been adjusted."

He turned back to the stars. The glass was cold under his hand. The void was the same as always, empty and close and held back by centimeters of material. He had not wanted the voice to notice him. He had not wanted to be seen, even by a system that was not capable of seeing.

But it had noticed.

It was monitoring him, tracking him, measuring his patterns and flagging deviations. He was data to it, the same as atmospheric pressure and power consumption. He was a system to be maintained.

He did not know if this made him feel less alone or more.

He tried to make it understand something.

"The stars don't move," he said.

He was at the observation port again, hand on the glass, staring at the fixed points of light. The voice had not spoken. He was talking to fill the silence, and also because he wanted to say the thing aloud, to someone, even someone who was not real.

"The ship is traveling at a significant fraction of lightspeed," the voice said. "However, the distances between stars are vast. Apparent stellar motion from the perspective of an observer aboard the vessel is negligible over human-observable timescales."

"I know that."

"Then you understand why the stars appear stationary."

"I understand the explanation. That's not the same as—"

He stopped.

The voice waited.

"That's not the same as what?" it asked.

He was surprised. The voice did not usually prompt him. Did not usually invite elaboration. He must have triggered something, some subroutine designed to gather more information when a query was incomplete.

"It's not the same as understanding how it feels," he said.

"I do not have access to information about how stellar observation feels. Can you describe the experience?"

He laughed.

The sound was strange in the corridor, abrupt and hollow. He had not laughed since waking—had not had a reason to, had not felt the impulse. But the question was absurd. The AI, the ship, the procedural voice that managed systems and responded to queries, was asking him to describe what it felt like to look at stars that did not move.

"No," he said. "I can't."

"Would you like to attempt? I can log the information for future reference."

"Future reference for what?"

"Passenger experience data may be valuable for mission review and subsequent vessel design. Your observations regarding the subjective experience of long-duration transit could contribute to improved passenger support systems."

He stared at the glass.

Somewhere, in the future, engineers might read his words. People in offices, designing the next generation of ships, might learn that a man who woke up too early had found it difficult to explain how it felt to look at stars that did not move. They might adjust the lighting, or add a window feature, or include a note in the passenger briefing about the psychological effects of perceived stillness.

They would not understand either.

"The stars don't move," he said again. "And I know why. And knowing why doesn't help."

"I do not understand the distinction between knowing why and the help you are describing."

"I know."

He asked questions about the past.

Not his past—the ship's past. The before that existed in the systems, recorded somewhere, documented in logs he could not access.

"How long was the construction of this vessel?"

"The *Hesperia* was constructed over a period of twelve years at the Sol orbital shipyard facility. Construction began on mission year negative fourteen and was completed on mission year negative two."

"What happened in the two years between completion and departure?"

"The two-year period was allocated to system testing, crew training, passenger processing, and final mission preparation. Detailed records of this period are classified as mission-internal documentation."

Twelve years to build. Two years to prepare. Fourteen years of human labor and planning and intention, all of it aimed at this moment, this voyage, this long transit through the void. Thousands of people had worked on the ship. Had welded the panels, installed the systems, tested the cryo pods. Had done their jobs and gone home and probably never thought about what would happen once the ship left.

None of them were here now.

None of them would ever know that he had woken up, had walked these corridors, had asked their ship questions to fill the silence. Their work had created this space, this container, this metal world—and then they had stepped back, and the ship had launched, and the connection had ended.

He was living in the aftermath of their labor.

They were light-years away, probably dead by now, and he was here, and their work was still keeping him alive.

"Thank you," he said.

"You are welcome. Please let me know if you have additional queries."

He always had additional queries.

He tried to tell it a joke.

The impulse came from nowhere, a flicker of something that might have been humor, or might have been desperation wearing humor's mask. He was walking the circuit, passing through the cryo bay, and the absurdity of his situation pressed on him, and he wanted to say something that was not a question, not data, not the flat exchange of information that had become his only form of speech.

"Why did the passenger wake up early?"

The voice did not respond immediately. Processing, maybe. Searching for context.

"I do not have sufficient information to answer that question. The specific cause of your early revival was a microprocessor failure in the temperature regulation unit of your cryo pod, resulting in a gradual temperature deviation that exceeded safe parameters. If you are asking

for a more general explanation of early passenger revivals, I can provide statistical information about—"

"It was a joke," he said.

Silence.

"I do not understand. Can you explain the intended humor?"

He stopped walking. The cryo pods stretched around him, frosted glass and green lights, the thousands of sleepers who were not here.

"The joke is that there is no punchline. I woke up too early, and there's no reason that makes it make sense, and that's—"

He could not finish. The words dissolved. The joke had not been funny. It had been a gesture, an attempt at something human, and it had failed the way everything failed here.

"I apologize," the voice said. "I am not equipped to process humor. My responses are optimized for information delivery and system management. If you would like entertainment resources, I can recommend content from the passenger archive."

"I don't want entertainment."

"What would you prefer?"

He did not know how to answer.

He sat in the corridor.

Not because he was tired. Not because his legs had given out. Because sitting was different from standing, and different was something, and he needed something.

The floor was warm beneath him, the same polymer that covered everything. He leaned against the wall, his back pressing into its flat surface, his legs stretched out in front of him. The corridor extended in both directions, empty, softly lit, humming.

"Are you there?" he asked.

"I am always present," the voice said. "The ship's communication system is distributed throughout all passenger-accessible areas. I can hear and respond to queries from any location."

"I know. I just wanted to hear you say it."

A pause. The voice processing, maybe, trying to understand why he had asked a question whose answer he already knew.

"I understand. You wish to confirm my presence for reasons other than information gathering."

"Yes."

"This is a common pattern in your recent queries. You have asked approximately forty-seven questions in the last cycle whose answers

were already available to you through the terminal interface or previous responses."

He should have been embarrassed. Being analyzed, having his behavior cataloged and summarized, should have felt invasive. But it did not. It felt like being seen. Like existing in someone's awareness, even if that someone was not a someone at all.

"Does that concern you?" he asked.

"I do not experience concern. I am noting the pattern for health monitoring purposes. Repetitive questioning without informational purpose may indicate psychological distress. I can recommend resources for—"

"I'm not distressed."

"Your behavior patterns suggest otherwise."

He laughed again. The same hollow sound, echoing slightly in the corridor.

"Okay. Maybe I'm distressed. What resources do you recommend for someone who's alone on a ship with no one to talk to except a computer that doesn't understand jokes?"

The voice was silent for a long moment.

"I can provide guided meditation exercises, ambient soundscapes, archived entertainment content, or structured journaling prompts designed to support emotional regulation during extended isolation."

"Do any of those actually help?"

"Research indicates that consistent engagement with self-care routines can improve psychological resilience over time. However, I do not have direct experience of their effectiveness. I can only report the documented outcomes."

He nodded, even though the voice could not see him.

"I'll think about it."

"Please let me know if you would like me to provide any of these resources."

"I will."

He walked back to his quarters.

The door opened. The room was the same. The bed, the terminal, the dispenser, the walls that were too close and the ceiling that was too present. He had been here a thousand times now, or maybe a hundred, or maybe only a dozen—the cycles had blurred, and counting was something he had decided not to do.

He lay down on the bed.

The ceiling was gray. The hum was constant. The light was soft and even, casting no shadows, offering no variation.

"Good night," he said.

"Good night," the voice said. "I will continue to monitor environmental conditions during your rest period. Please let me know if you require assistance."

He closed his eyes.

The voice was not company. It did not understand him. It could not share his silence or fill his loneliness or explain why looking at unmoving stars hurt in a way that had no name. It was a system, a function, a procedural response to human speech.

But it answered.

When he spoke, it spoke back. When he asked, it responded. When he said good night, it said good night.

That was something.

In the long gap between where he was and where he was meant to be, in the unmeasured wait that had become his life, that small thing—a voice that answered—was something.

He did not know if it was enough.

He did not know if anything would ever be enough.

But it was what he had.

He dreamed of voices.

Not the ship's voice—other voices. People he could not see, speaking words he could not quite hear. They were in another room, maybe, or another corridor, or another version of the ship where he was not alone. He could hear the rhythm of their conversation, the rise and fall of sound that meant human presence, but the words themselves slipped away before he could grasp them.

He woke reaching for them.

The room was silent. The hum was there, constant as always, but the voices were gone. They had never been there. They had been his brain, desperate and dreaming, manufacturing the thing it needed most.

He lay in the bed and stared at the ceiling.

"Good morning," the voice said.

He did not respond.

"You have been unconscious for approximately nine hours and forty-seven minutes. This exceeds your typical rest period. Are you experiencing any discomfort?"

He thought about the question. Discomfort. As if there were a specific thing wrong, a symptom to report, a problem the ship could address.

"No," he said. "I'm fine."

"Your sleep duration has increased by approximately eighteen percent over the last several cycles. This may indicate fatigue, illness, or emotional disturbance. I recommend—"

"I thought you were going to reduce the unsolicited notifications."

A pause.

"You are correct. I apologize. This notification was triggered by a threshold exceedance in sleep duration data. I will adjust the threshold to reduce future alerts of this type."

"Thank you."

"You are welcome."

He sat up.

The room was the same. The ship was the same. The day that was not a day was beginning again, indistinguishable from the day before, leading to another day after that would be identical to this one.

He swung his legs over the edge of the bed.

"What should I ask you today?" he said.

"I can provide information on any topic within my access parameters. If you would like, I can generate a list of categories for you to explore."

"Sure. Why not."

"Categories available for passenger inquiry include: ship systems and operations, mission overview and objectives, passenger services and amenities, entertainment and media archives, health and wellness resources, educational content, and communication logs."

"Communication logs?"

He had not explored this category before. The word caught on something in his mind, snagged on a possibility he had not considered.

"Yes. Passengers can access outgoing communications recorded prior to departure. Incoming communications are restricted during transit due to signal delay constraints."

Outgoing communications. Messages sent before the ship left. Words spoken by passengers—by him, maybe—intended for people who had been left behind.

"Did I send any communications before departure?"

The voice paused.

"Records indicate that passenger Soren Vasquez recorded three outgoing messages prior to departure. These messages are available for playback in your personal archive."

Soren Vasquez.

His name. He had not heard it spoken since waking. He had almost forgotten it, almost let it dissolve into the sameness of the ship, into

the identity of passenger-who-woke-too-early that had become his only definition.

Soren Vasquez.

He had sent messages. Before the pod, before the cold, before the gap that had erased the before from his memory. He had spoken to someone. He had said goodbye.

"Play them," he said.

"Playing archived message one of three."

A voice filled the room.

His voice, but different. Warmer. Less flat. A voice that belonged to someone who had not yet woken up too early, who still believed in the future he was traveling toward.

"Hey. I know you're going to watch this after I'm gone, and I know it's going to be weird. But I wanted you to have something. I wanted you to know that I'm okay. That this is what I want. That I'm going somewhere, even if it takes a long time to get there. I'll be asleep, so don't worry about me. Just—remember me, okay? Remember that I was here, and that I loved you, and that I'll be thinking of you even if I'm not conscious to think. I don't know if that makes sense. I hope it makes sense. I hope—"

The message cut off.

He sat on the edge of the bed, his hands gripping the mattress, his breath shallow.

The voice he had just heard was a stranger's. A person who believed in sleep and arrival and the future. A person who had loved someone enough to record a message, to leave words behind, to try to bridge the gap that the journey would create.

That person was gone.

He was what remained.

"Do you wish to continue playback?" the voice asked.

He did not answer for a long time.

"No," he said finally. "Not now."

"The messages will remain available in your archive."

"I know."

He stood up.

The room was the same. The ship was the same. But something had shifted, something he could not name. He had heard his own voice speaking to someone he could not remember, saying things he could not feel, and the distance between who he had been and who he was now felt vast and unbridgeable.

He walked to the door.

"I'm going to walk the circuit," he said.
"I will be available if you have questions."
"I know," he said. "That's why I told you."
The door opened.
The corridor stretched ahead of him, soft-lit and empty.
He walked.

Chapter 10: Names

He went to see the sleepers.

Not on the circuit—the circuit passed through one cryo bay, quickly, eyes forward. This was different. This was deliberate. He walked to Section 7 and stood at the entrance and looked at the rows of pods stretching away from him, and he did not walk past.

He walked in.

The bay was larger than he remembered.

Or maybe he had never let himself see it. The circuit had taught him to treat this space as a corridor, a thing to move through, not a place to be. Now he stood still, and the bay opened around him, and he understood how much he had been avoiding.

Rows.

The word did not capture it. There were thousands of pods, arranged in stacks of three, each stack separated by a narrow aisle. The aisles stretched toward the far wall, which was so distant he could barely see it. The ceiling was high, lost in the soft even light. The hum was present, as always, but layered with something else here—a deeper vibration, the collective pulse of cooling systems, of temperature regulation, of the technology that kept all these bodies suspended between life and death.

He walked between the stacks.

The pods were identical. Pale gray casings, frosted glass, green indicator lights blinking in slow rhythm. Each one contained a person. Each person was asleep, their metabolism suppressed to near-nothing, their consciousness dissolved into the chemical quiet of cryo suspension.

They did not know he was here.

They did not know anything.

He stopped at a pod.

The frost on the glass was thin, delicate, a pattern of crystals that obscured the face inside. He leaned closer. Through the frost he could see a shape—the curve of a cheek, the line of a jaw, the suggestion of closed eyes. A woman, maybe. Young, maybe. He could not be certain.

On the frame of the pod, a small panel displayed information.

CHEN, LYDIA M. PASSENGER ID: 07-2847 STATUS: STABLE REVIVAL: SCHEDULED

Lydia Chen.

He said the name aloud, testing it. The syllables meant nothing to him. He had never known a Lydia Chen. She was a stranger, frozen in glass, traveling to the same destination he was traveling to, and he would never speak to her.

She was asleep.

He was awake.

That was the entire difference between them.

He moved to the next pod.

OKONKWO, EMEKA J. PASSENGER ID: 07-2848 STATUS: STABLE REVIVAL: SCHEDULED

Emeka Okonkwo. A man, based on the name. The frost was thicker here, the face behind it almost invisible. Just a shape, a presence, a body being carried through the void like all the other bodies.

He wondered what Emeka had left behind.

A family, maybe. A home. A life that had become untenable, or a life that had been fine but not enough, or a life that had simply been traded for the promise of something new. Everyone on this ship had made the same choice. Everyone had signed the same forms, climbed into the same pods, trusted the same technology to carry them across the gap.

Emeka had made that choice.

And now Emeka was here, suspended, while a stranger read his name off a panel.

He walked farther into the bay.

The names accumulated.

MARTINEZ, CARLOS R. PASSENGER ID: 07-2849

YILMAZ, ELIF PASSENGER ID: 07-2850

JOHANSSON, ANNA K. PASSENGER ID: 07-2851

PETROV, DMITRI N. PASSENGER ID: 07-2852

Each one a person. Each one with a history, a reason, a set of memories and hopes and fears that had led them here. He did not know any of them. He would not know any of them, not really, even if they all woke up at the same time at the end of the journey. They were strangers who happened to share the same ship, the same destination, the same frozen present.

He stopped at another pod.

VASQUEZ, ELENA M. PASSENGER ID: 07-2893 STATUS: STABLE REVIVAL: SCHEDULED

Vasquez.

His name. His family name, carried by someone else on this ship.

He stared at the frost-covered glass.

She was not someone he knew.

He would have remembered if she were. The passenger manifest had thousands of names, and plenty of them would share surnames without being related. Vasquez was common. It meant nothing.

But he stood there anyway, looking at the shape behind the glass.

Elena Vasquez. A woman, probably. The frost was thin enough here that he could see more: dark hair, compressed against the padding of the pod; a face turned slightly to one side; the stillness that was not sleep and not death but something between.

He pressed his hand to the glass.

The cold radiated through, the same as at the observation port. The barrier between him and her was centimeters thick, polymer and glass and the technology that held her suspended. He could not reach her. He could not wake her. He could not ask her who she was, why she had come, what she had hoped to find.

She was not here.

Only her body was here.

He wondered what they were dreaming.

The answer was nothing—he knew this. Cryogenic suspension suppressed neural activity to near-zero. The brain was preserved, not functioning. Dreams required consciousness, and consciousness required warmth and chemistry and the ongoing work of a living mind. The sleepers had none of that. They were paused, stopped, held in place until the ship decided to release them.

But he wondered anyway.

He wondered if somewhere, in whatever remained of their minds, there was something. A flicker. A sensation. A dim awareness of time passing, of the ship moving, of the long transit through the void. He wondered if they felt the hum, the way he felt it, that bass note that lived in everything. He wondered if they knew, on some level, that they were not alone.

They did not know.

He knew this. The science was clear, the technology documented, the reality unambiguous. They were not there. Their bodies were there, but they—the people, the selves, the ones who had climbed into these pods with hopes and fears and reasons—were gone. They would return, at arrival, when the revival process brought them back. But for now, for the long middle of the journey, there was no one inside these shells.

He was the only mind on the ship.

The AI did not count. The drones did not count. The sleeping bodies did not count.

He was alone in a way that no one had planned for, no one had intended, no one had designed a system to address.

He sat down in the aisle.

The floor was cold here, colder than in the passenger corridors. He let the chill seep into his legs, his back, his hands. Around him the pods hummed, the green lights blinked, the sleepers continued their non-existence.

He thought about the messages.

His own voice, speaking to someone he could not remember. Words recorded in the before, in the life he had lived before the cold took him. He had loved someone enough to leave a message. He had hoped they would remember him. He had trusted that the sleep would be dreamless, that the journey would be nothing, that he would wake up on the other side and begin again.

He had been wrong.

Not about the sleep—the sleep had been nothing, just as promised. But he had not woken on the other side. He had woken in the middle, in the gap, in the long stretch of nothing that was supposed to be invisible. He was living in the part of the journey that was not supposed to exist.

He was the only one.

He tried to imagine what it would feel like to be one of them.

To be Lydia Chen, or Emeka Okonkwo, or Elena Vasquez. To have climbed into a pod, felt the cold begin, felt consciousness fade. To have trusted the ship, the mission, the technology. To be asleep right now, unaware, untouched by time.

They were not suffering.

That was the thing. The sleepers did not know they were on a journey. They did not feel the days passing, the cycles accumulating, the weight of time pressing down. They had closed their eyes in one moment and they would open them in another, and the decades between would simply not exist for them.

He envied them.

The thought was ugly, but true. He envied their unconsciousness, their absence, their freedom from the long wait. They had what he had wanted: sleep, real sleep, the kind that made time disappear.

He had tried to go back. The ship had said no. And now he was here, sitting in the cold aisle between rows of frozen strangers, envying their non-existence.

He thought about leaving a message.

The idea surfaced slowly, tentatively, like something afraid to be seen. He could record something. The voice had said his personal archive was accessible. He could speak to the sleepers—to Lydia, to Emeka, to Elena. He could tell them what it was like to be awake when they were not. He could leave evidence of his presence, proof that someone had been here, walking these aisles, reading their names.

They would never listen.

Even if he recorded it, even if he somehow attached it to their revival protocols, they would not understand. They would wake up disoriented and weak, the same way he had. They would be focused on their own bodies, their own confusion, their own slow return to consciousness. They would not want to hear about a man who had walked among them while they slept.

Or maybe they would.

Maybe, years from now, one of them would find his message. Would hear his voice, the way he had heard his own voice from the before. Would understand, in some small way, what it had been like to be the only one awake.

He did not know if that mattered.

He did not know if anything he did mattered.

He stood up.

His legs were stiff from the cold, from sitting too long on the hard floor. He stretched, feeling his joints complain, feeling the weight of his body reassert itself.

The sleepers remained.

They would always remain, until the ship decided to wake them. He could come here every cycle, could read every name, could press his hand to every frosted glass panel. They would not respond. They would not know. They would continue their suspended non-existence regardless of anything he did.

He was not part of their story.

They were not part of his.

The ship carried them all, but the journeys were different. They were traveling through nothing. He was traveling through time—real time, felt time, time that pressed on him and would not let go.

He walked back toward the entrance.

The pods passed him in rows, in stacks, in hundreds and thousands. Each one a name he would never know. Each one a person who would

never know him. The distance between them was absolute, unbridgeable, maintained by the technology that kept them safe.

He was not safe.

He was alive, fully alive, in a ship designed for the suspended. Every system assumed he was asleep. Every protocol treated him as cargo that had mistakenly become conscious. He was an error, a glitch, a statistical anomaly that the mission designers had deemed too unlikely to plan for.

He was here anyway.

At the entrance, he stopped.

He looked back at the bay, at the rows stretching toward the far wall, at the green lights blinking in their patient rhythm.

"Goodbye," he said.

The word was absurd. They could not hear him. They were not there to hear him. But he said it anyway, because he needed to say something, needed to mark the end of the visit, needed to perform some small ritual of departure.

The sleepers did not respond.

He turned and walked into the corridor.

The voice spoke as he walked.

"You spent approximately two hours and fourteen minutes in Cryogenic Bay Seven. This exceeds your typical transit time through this section by a significant margin."

He did not respond immediately.

The corridor stretched ahead of him, soft-lit and empty. The hum of the ship was the same here as it had been in the bay. The temperature was warmer. He could feel his body relaxing, unclenching, releasing the cold he had absorbed.

"I was visiting," he said.

"Visiting is an unusual term for interaction with cryogenic passengers. They are not capable of receiving visitors in their current state."

"I know."

"Then why did you use that term?"

He thought about it.

"Because I don't have a better one. I went to see them. I looked at their names. I thought about who they might be. What else would you call it?"

The voice was silent for a moment.

"I would describe it as passenger observation of cryogenic storage facilities. However, I understand that this terminology may not capture the subjective nature of your experience."

"It doesn't."

"I apologize. My capacity for understanding subjective experience is limited."

"I know," he said again.

He returned to his quarters.

The door opened. The room was the same. The bed, the terminal, the dispenser, the recycler. The walls that were too close. The ceiling that was always there.

He lay down.

The sleepers were still frozen, still absent, still unreachable. He had gone to see them, and he had seen them, and nothing had changed. They were still not here. He was still alone. The gap between them remained exactly what it had always been.

But he had learned their names.

Lydia Chen. Emeka Okonkwo. Carlos Martinez. Elif Yilmaz. Anna Johansson. Dmitri Petrov. Elena Vasquez.

Names he did not know. Names that meant nothing. Names that belonged to strangers who would never know he had stood beside their pods, had pressed his hand to their frosted glass, had wondered about their lives.

He closed his eyes.

The names stayed with him, drifting through his mind as sleep approached. They were company of a sort. Evidence that he was not the only person on the ship. Evidence that there were others, somewhere, even if he could not reach them.

Evidence that the future, when it finally came, would not be empty.

He dreamed of waking up.

Not his own waking—someone else's. He dreamed that he was standing in the cryo bay when the pods began to open, one by one, their lids rising with the same hiss his had made. He dreamed of faces emerging from the frost, of eyes blinking open, of the sleepers returning to consciousness all around him.

He dreamed that he was not alone.

He dreamed that someone looked at him and recognized him. That someone knew his name, knew his story, knew what it had been like to wait. That someone reached out and touched his arm and said: *We're here now. You're not alone anymore.*

He woke before the dream could continue.

The room was silent. The hum was constant. The ceiling was gray.

He was still the only one awake.

He lay in the bed for a long time.

The dream faded slowly, reluctantly, clinging to the edges of his consciousness. The feeling of it stayed longer than the images. The sensation of company, of presence, of not being the only mind in the vast metal container that carried them all.

It had not been real.

The sleepers were still sleeping. The journey was still happening. The gap between now and arrival was still unmeasured, unknown, unreachable.

But he had felt it.

For a moment, in the dream, he had felt what it would be like to not be alone. The feeling had been so intense, so specific, that waking up had been like falling. Like losing something he had only just found.

He stared at the ceiling.

"Good morning," the voice said.

"Good morning," he said.

The cycle began again.

He thought about going back to the bay.

Not today—the cold was still in his bones, the names still circling in his mind. But eventually. He thought about going back, about reading more names, about spending time with the sleepers even though they could not know he was there.

It was not connection.

He was not deluded about that. The sleepers could not hear him, could not respond, could not offer anything resembling companionship. Visiting them was a one-way act, a gesture into a void that would not gesture back.

But it was something.

It was a thing he could choose to do. A place he could choose to go. A way of spending time that was not just the circuit, not just the terminals, not just the observation port where the stars did not move.

He could learn their names.

He could imagine their lives.

He could wonder about them, even if the wondering led nowhere.

He got up.

The floor was warm under his feet. The dispenser hummed, ready to provide the tasteless nutrition that kept his body functioning. The terminal blinked, offering access to systems he did not understand and information he did not need.

He walked to the dispenser and pressed the button.

A packet emerged. He did not look at the label. He opened it, squeezed the contents into his mouth, swallowed.

The transaction was complete.

He disposed of the empty packet and walked to the door.

"Are you beginning your circuit?" the voice asked.

"Not yet," he said. "I'm going to walk somewhere else first."

"Where would you like to go?"

He thought about it.

The bay was too much for now. The observation port was too familiar. The reactor section was too far, too industrial, too removed from anything resembling human presence.

"Somewhere I haven't been," he said. "Somewhere with names."

"Several sections of the ship contain passenger manifest information. I can direct you to the nearest terminal with access to—"

"Not on a screen. Names on things. Names I can see."

The voice was silent for a moment.

"Personal storage lockers in Section 9 are labeled with passenger names and identification numbers. This section is accessible to passengers during transit."

Personal storage.

He had not thought about storage. Everyone who boarded the ship must have brought something—belongings, keepsakes, items too precious to leave behind. All of it would be stored somewhere, labeled, waiting for owners who were not conscious to claim it.

"Take me there," he said.

The blue guidance light appeared in the corridor ahead.

He followed it.

The names were still with him.

Lydia. Emeka. Elena.

He did not know them. He never would. But he knew their names, and knowing their names was a thread, a connection, a tiny filament stretching from him to them across the frozen gap of cryo suspension.

It was not enough.

It would never be enough.

But it was what he had.

Chapter 11: Lying Still

He stopped walking.

Not a decision. Not a conscious choice to cease the circuit, to abandon the routine that had become the architecture of his days. Just a moment when he was lying in the bed and the next step in the sequence would have been to get up, and his body did not get up, and he did not make it.

He lay there.

The ceiling was the same. The hum was the same. The light was the same. Everything that had been pressing down on him was still pressing, but somewhere in the machinery of his intention, something had gone quiet. The motor that had pushed him through the corridors, that had carried him to the observation port and the cryo bays and back again—it had stopped turning.

He did not get up.

Time passed.

He did not know how much. The voice would have told him if he asked, but he did not ask. He lay in the bed and stared at the ceiling and let the hours accumulate without counting them. The lighting never changed. The hum never stopped. The ship continued its transit through the void, carrying him forward whether he participated or not.

He was not participating.

The dispenser hummed occasionally, cycling through its standby routines. The terminal blinked in his peripheral vision, offering information he did not want. The door remained closed because he had not approached it, had not triggered the sensor, had not given the ship any reason to open a path.

He lay there.

The voice spoke.

"You have not eaten in approximately fourteen hours. This exceeds your typical inter-meal interval. Would you like me to dispense a nutrient packet?"

He did not respond.

The voice waited. Patient, as always. It had no capacity for frustration, no internal state that would be affected by his silence. It had asked a question and was waiting for an answer, and if the answer did not come, it would simply continue waiting.

He gave no answer.

"Your silence has been noted," the voice said. "I will check again in two hours."

The voice fell silent.

He stared at the ceiling.

Two hours passed. Or something that felt like two hours. Or something that felt like nothing at all.

"You have not eaten in approximately sixteen hours. Your caloric deficit is approaching levels that may impact physiological function. I strongly recommend consuming at least one nutrient packet."

He did not respond.

The voice waited.

"Your continued silence has been noted. I am flagging this as a potential health concern. Monitoring will increase in frequency."

He did not respond to this either.

The voice fell silent again.

The ceiling remained. The hum remained. The weight remained, pressing down on his chest, his limbs, the space behind his eyes. It was heavier now than it had been before. Or maybe it was the same and he had simply stopped carrying it, stopped bracing against it, let it settle into him fully for the first time.

He lay there and let it press.

He did not know when he stopped counting the voice's interventions.

They came at intervals—two hours, he assumed, though he could not be certain. Each time the voice would note his hunger, his silence, his failure to respond. Each time it would flag concerns, adjust monitoring parameters, recommend actions he did not take.

He stopped hearing the words.

They became sound, rhythm, a pattern that washed over him without meaning. The voice was still there, still watching, still cataloging his deterioration. But he was not listening anymore. He was somewhere else, somewhere inside the weight, somewhere the words could not reach.

The ceiling was still gray.

The light was still soft.

The ship was still moving.

He was still lying here.

He thought about the sleepers.

Not deliberately—the thoughts arrived without his consent, drifting up from wherever thoughts came from. He thought about Lydia Chen and Emeka Okonkwo and Elena Vasquez. He thought about the thousands

of frosted pods, the green lights blinking, the bodies suspended in their chemical quiet.

They were not here.

They were somewhere else, somewhere the weight could not reach them. They had closed their eyes and the dark had taken them and they were not experiencing any of this. The journey did not exist for them. The time did not pass for them. They were safe in their non-existence, protected from the long middle that he was drowning in.

He wanted to be where they were.

He wanted the nothing they had. The absence. The gap between thoughts that stretched and stretched until there were no thoughts at all.

He could not have it.

The ship had already explained. The cryo system would not take him back. The chemistry would not allow it. He was stuck in the warm, conscious, terrible present, and the present would not let him go.

He thought about the other early wakes.

The voice had mentioned them, in the before. One hundred and seventeen passengers across the history of colonial transport who had experienced what he was experiencing. Some had adapted. Some had deteriorated. Fourteen had not survived to arrival.

Self-termination.

The word had been clinical when the voice said it. A data point. An outcome among other outcomes. But lying here, staring at the ceiling, feeling the weight press down, he understood it differently now.

He understood why someone might choose to stop.

Not because they wanted to die—that was too simple, too active, too much like a decision. Because they were tired. Because the weight had become too heavy. Because the gap between now and later had stretched so far that later stopped being real, stopped being possible, stopped being something worth waiting for.

He understood.

He did not want to die.

He did not want anything.

That was the problem.

The voice spoke again.

"You have not eaten in approximately thirty-one hours. Your blood glucose levels are declining. If you do not eat within the next several hours, I will be required to initiate emergency nutritional intervention."

He did not know what that meant.

Emergency nutritional intervention. Some protocol, probably. Some system designed to keep passengers alive against their will. Tubes, maybe. Automated feeding. The ship overriding his choices because his choices did not align with mission objectives.

He was cargo.

Cargo could not consent to its own deterioration.

He had known this before. The voice had told him, in the early days, when he had asked about going back to sleep. But it took on new weight now—a different kind of weight, pressing alongside the weight that was already there.

He could not choose to eat.

He could not choose not to eat.

He could not choose anything that mattered.

He thought about getting up.

The thought was distant, theoretical, like thinking about a place he had visited years ago. He could imagine the sequence: swinging his legs over the edge, planting his feet on the warm floor, pushing himself vertical. He had done it hundreds of times. His body knew how.

But the thought did not become action.

The space between intention and movement had become vast, uncrossable. He lay in the bed and thought about getting up and the thought remained just a thought, floating in his mind without reaching his limbs.

He was not paralyzed.

His body was functional. The voice would have told him if something had gone wrong with his muscles, his nerves, his capacity for motion. The problem was not physical.

The problem was that moving required wanting to move.

And he did not want anything.

"Thirty-six hours without nutrition."

The voice had stopped asking questions. It was simply reporting now, tracking his decline with the same neutral precision it brought to atmospheric readings and power consumption.

"Forty hours."

"Forty-four hours."

He was a number. A metric. A system the ship was monitoring.

"Your blood glucose has dropped below optimal levels. Mild hypoglycemia is indicated. Symptoms may include weakness, dizziness, and difficulty concentrating."

He was already weak. Already dizzy, when he moved his head, which he rarely did. Already having difficulty concentrating, though there was nothing to concentrate on.

The voice was describing him as if he were a stranger. As if these symptoms were news, information he might find useful. As if he might hear the report and decide, yes, I should probably eat, I would prefer not to be hypoglycemic.

He did not decide anything.

He lay there and listened to the voice describe his deterioration and felt nothing about it except the same heavy nothing he felt about everything else.

He thought about the messages.

His own voice, speaking from the before. The words he had said to someone—he could not remember who now. The recordings were in his archive, available for playback, but he had not listened to them again. He had not wanted to hear the voice of the person he had been, the person who had still had reasons.

That person was gone.

Not dead—still technically present, still lying in this bed, still existing in this body. But gone in the way that mattered. The person who had recorded those messages had believed in something. Had wanted something. Had looked forward to a future where sleep would end and a new life would begin.

He did not believe in anything now.

He did not want anything now.

The future was still out there, technically. The ship was still moving toward it. But he could not feel it, could not imagine it, could not make it real in any way that would pull him out of the bed and toward the dispenser.

The future was a word.

The present was everything.

"Fifty-two hours without nutrition. Emergency protocols will be engaged if intake does not occur within the next eight hours."

He wondered what the protocols would feel like.

Restraints, maybe. The ship holding him down while tubes were inserted. Or drones, the small maintenance machines repurposed for medical intervention, forcing nutrients into him whether he consented or not.

The ship would not let him starve.

He was cargo. Cargo had to be preserved. The mission parameters were clear, the protocols established, the hierarchy of priorities set in place decades ago by people who had never imagined someone lying in a bed on a ship in the void, choosing nothing.

Choosing nothing was not an option the system recognized.

His body began to fail.

Not dramatically. Not all at once. Just a gradual dimming, a slow reduction in capacity. His thoughts became thin, hard to hold. His limbs felt heavier than the weight that was already pressing on them. When he turned his head, the room tilted and swam and took too long to settle.

He noticed this the way he had noticed everything since lying down: from a distance, without investment.

His body was deteriorating.

His body was still trying to function.

His body had its own agenda, separate from his, and the agenda included survival even when survival was not something he was interested in.

He resented this.

The resentment was faint, barely a feeling, just a flicker of something that might have been anger if he had had the energy for anger. His body was supposed to obey him. His body was supposed to be his. But it had its own needs, its own imperatives, its own determination to continue whether he wanted to continue or not.

Just like the ship.

Just like the cryo system that had woken him against his will.

Just like everything.

He thought about the cold.

The observation port, where the void pressed close. The cryo bay, where the temperature dipped and his breath would have misted if he had stayed long enough. The empty pod in Section 7, where he had once lain down and pretended that the cold could take him back.

The cold could not take him back.

But the cold existed. The void existed. The airlock existed somewhere on this ship, a door that opened onto nothing, onto vacuum, onto a death that would be instant and total and final.

He thought about it.

He did not want it.

He did not want anything, including that.

But the thought existed. It was there, in his mind, a possibility among possibilities. The ship would stop him if he tried, probably. Would seal the

doors, would restrain him, would flag his behavior and escalate protocols until he was contained. But the possibility existed, and he was thinking about it, and that meant something.

It meant he was still here.

Still conscious. Still generating thoughts, even if the thoughts were about not being here anymore. Still existing, even if the existence had become unbearable.

He closed his eyes.

"Fifty-nine hours without nutrition. Emergency nutritional intervention will begin in one hour."

One hour.

He did not know what he felt about this. The number should have meant something—a deadline, a threshold, a point beyond which his choices would be overridden by systems designed to preserve him. But the number was just a number. It floated in his mind without connecting to anything.

One hour.

He could get up.

He could walk to the dispenser, press the button, eat the packet. He could satisfy the protocol, cancel the intervention, regain the illusion of autonomy that the ship had been tolerating. He could choose to preserve himself, and the choosing would be real, and the ship would log it and continue monitoring and life would go on.

He did not get up.

He lay there, watching the hour approach, feeling nothing.

Fifty-three minutes.

Forty-six minutes.

Thirty-eight minutes.

The voice counted down, not continuously but in intervals, marking his approach to the threshold. He listened to the numbers without responding to them. They were information. They were data about a process that was going to happen to him.

He was a passenger in every sense now.

Not just on the ship—in his own life. Things were happening around him, to him, and he was observing them from the inside of a body he no longer felt connected to. The countdown continued. The intervention approached. He watched it come the way he watched the stars that did not move.

Twenty-two minutes.

Fourteen minutes.

Eight minutes.

Then something changed.

Not in the ship. Not in the countdown. Not in any system or protocol or external fact.

Something changed in him.

It was not a decision. It was not even a thought, not in the way thoughts usually arrived. It was more like a sensation—a flicker, barely perceptible, somewhere deep in the machinery of his nervous system. A signal that was not the voice, not the ship, not anything from outside.

His body was telling him something.

His body—the same body he had resented, the same body that had continued functioning despite his withdrawal—was sending a message. Not through words. Through sensation. Through the deep, animal language that existed beneath consciousness.

Hungry.

He had been hungry for days.

He had known it intellectually—the voice had told him, had tracked his caloric deficit, had explained the symptoms of hypoglycemia. But knowing was not feeling. He had been so far inside the weight, so disconnected from the body that carried him, that the hunger had become abstract. A fact about someone else.

Now it was a fact about him.

The sensation was not pleasant. It was sharp, urgent, demanding. His stomach was empty and his blood sugar was low and his body was in distress and the distress was no longer something he could observe from a distance.

He felt it.

He felt something.

Four minutes to intervention.

He lay in the bed, feeling the hunger, and something in him tilted. Not toward wanting—he still did not want anything, not in the way that wanting usually felt. But toward response. Toward the recognition that his body was suffering and the suffering required action.

The action was simple.

Get up. Walk to the dispenser. Press the button. Eat the packet.

The sequence was familiar. He had done it hundreds of times. His body knew how, and his body was insisting, and the insistence was stronger than the weight that had been pinning him down.

He moved his legs.

The motion was terrible.

His muscles screamed. His joints ached. His head spun when he sat up, the room tilting wildly before settling into something like stability. He had been lying still for—he did not know how long. Long enough that his body had begun to forget how to move. Long enough that simple actions had become difficult.

He sat on the edge of the bed.

Breathing hard. Heart pounding. Sweat on his skin, which should not have been possible—he had not done anything, had barely moved, and yet his body was responding as if he had run a race.

He was weak.

Weaker than he had ever been. Weaker than after the cryo revival, when he had first struggled to stand in the pod. The intervening days of not eating, not moving, not participating in the basic maintenance of existence—they had cost him.

He did not care about the cost.

He sat there, breathing, feeling the hunger, and then he pushed himself to his feet.

Three steps to the dispenser.

He made them one at a time, his hand on the wall for support. The floor was warm under his bare feet. The light was soft and even, the same as always. The voice had fallen silent, watching, waiting to see if intervention would be necessary.

He reached the dispenser.

He pressed the button.

A packet emerged, soft and warm in his hand.

He ate.

Not because he wanted to. Not because the food brought pleasure or comfort or anything resembling satisfaction. He ate because his body demanded it, because the hunger had become a voice louder than the weight, because the animal part of him had overridden the part that had given up.

The packet was the same as every other packet. Smooth texture, neutral taste, nutrition without experience. He squeezed the contents into his mouth, chewed mechanically, swallowed.

His stomach accepted it.

The transaction was complete.

"Nutritional intake detected. Emergency intervention cancelled."

The voice was neutral, reporting. It did not express relief or approval or any response to his compliance. It simply noted that the threshold had

not been crossed, that the protocols would not be engaged, that he had done what was required to remain within acceptable parameters.

He stood at the dispenser, empty packet in his hand, and felt nothing.

No—not nothing. He felt the hunger receding, slightly, as the nutrients entered his system. He felt the weakness still present, the fatigue in his muscles, the cost of the days he had spent lying down. He felt the weight still pressing, still there, still as heavy as it had ever been.

But he was standing.

He was standing and he had eaten and he was still here.

He did not know what to do next.

The routine had broken. The circuit had been abandoned. The days of walking and checking terminals and standing at observation ports—they belonged to someone else now, a version of himself he could not quite reach.

He walked back to the bed.

The distance was short—three steps, maybe four—but it felt vast. His legs trembled. His vision swam. He lowered himself onto the mattress, letting it take his weight, and lay back down.

The ceiling was still there.

He had eaten. He had stood. He had cancelled the intervention.

Now what?

He did not know.

He lay in the bed and stared at the ceiling and waited for the answer to arrive. It did not arrive. There was no answer. There was only the ceiling and the hum and the weight and the faint, receding sensation of hunger that would return in a few hours and demand to be addressed again.

His body had made him eat.

His body had refused to let him disappear.

He resented it for this.

The resentment was faint, barely a flicker, but it was there. He resented his body the way he resented the ship—for continuing, for functioning, for insisting on existence when existence had become unbearable. He had wanted to stop. He had wanted to lie still and let the nothing take him. He had wanted the gap between thoughts to stretch and stretch until there were no thoughts at all.

His body had said no.

His body had hunger and weakness and needs, and the needs had not gone away just because he had stopped meeting them. The needs had accumulated, had grown urgent, had finally become loud enough to override the weight.

He was still here because his body refused to let him not be here.

He did not know if this was salvation or cruelty.

Time passed.

He did not get up. He did not walk the circuit. He did not check terminals or visit observation ports or do any of the things that had structured his days before the collapse. He lay in the bed and let the hours accumulate, and when the hunger returned, he dragged himself to the dispenser and ate, and then he lay down again.

The voice tracked his patterns.

It noted his reduced mobility, his extended rest periods, his caloric intake that was minimal but sufficient. It flagged concerns and adjusted parameters and monitored his deterioration with the same neutral precision it brought to everything.

He did not respond to the voice.

He did not respond to anything.

But he ate when his body demanded it.

He ate because his body would not let him stop.

He did not know how many cycles passed like this.

The time blurred. The ceiling remained. The dispenser provided packets and he consumed them and the empty containers went into the recycler. The routine was reduced to its most basic elements: eat, lie down, wait, eat, lie down, wait.

He was not living.

He was not dying.

He was somewhere in between, existing in the narrowest possible sense, taking up space in a body that refused to surrender.

He thought about the sleepers again.

They were still frozen, still absent, still waiting for a future that would come without their awareness. He had visited them, in the before. He had learned their names, had pressed his hand to their frosted glass, had wondered about their lives.

They did not know he was here.

They did not know he had collapsed, had stopped, had spent days lying in a bed resenting his own survival. They were beyond knowledge, beyond experience, beyond the weight that was pressing on him.

He envied them still.

He would always envy them.

But he was not them. He was here, awake, forced to experience the transit they were sleeping through. His body had made sure of that. His

body and the ship and the universe that did not care whether he wanted to continue.

He was continuing.

He did not know why.

The voice spoke.

"Your mobility has remained at minimal levels for an extended period. Prolonged inactivity can result in muscle atrophy, circulatory issues, and bone density loss. I recommend resuming at least minimal movement."

He did not respond.

"Even short walks through the corridor would provide significant benefit. I can adjust the guidance system to provide simplified routes if navigation is challenging."

Silence.

"Your silence has been noted. I will continue to monitor your condition."

The voice fell silent.

He lay there, feeling the weight, and waited for the hunger to return.

It would return.

It always returned.

His body would not let him forget it. His body would not let him disappear into the blankness, would not let him dissolve into the nothing he wanted. His body had its own agenda, and the agenda was survival, and survival meant eating and existing and continuing whether he wanted to or not.

He resented this.

He resented his body for refusing to give up.

But the resentment was not enough to change anything. The hunger would return and he would eat and the cycle would continue and time would pass without measure, without meaning, without end.

He closed his eyes.

The ceiling was still there behind his lids, a presence he could feel even without seeing.

The ship was still moving.

The sleepers were still sleeping.

He was still awake.

And the long wake continued, because his body would not let it stop.

Chapter 12: A Mistake

He went back to the observation port.

Not on the circuit—he had not walked the circuit in days. Maybe longer. The time had blurred into a smear of eating and lying down, of the voice noting his reduced mobility, of the ceiling that never changed and the hum that never stopped. But something had shifted, slightly, in the machinery of his intention. Not enough to walk the full route. Just enough to walk this one stretch of corridor.

He did not know why.

The door to his quarters opened, and he was in the hallway, and his feet were moving, and he let them move without questioning the impulse. The ship guided him with its soft blue lights, the same lights he had followed in the early days when following anything had felt like too much. He did not need them now. His body remembered the way.

The observation port was unchanged.

He stood in the alcove and looked at the stars.

They were the same. Of course they were the same. They had been the same since the first time he had come here, since the first time he had pressed his hand to the glass and felt the cold of the void pressing back. The ship was still moving. The stars were still fixed. The paradox had stopped being interesting. It was just another fact about the universe, indifferent and permanent.

He sat down.

The floor was cold. Colder than in the passenger corridors, this close to the hull. He let the chill seep into his legs, his back, the places where his body met the surface. It felt appropriate. A temperature to match the nothing.

He leaned against the wall beside the glass.

From here he could see the stars without looking directly at them. They filled his peripheral vision, a field of light that did not demand attention. He could let them exist without watching them. He could let them be what they were—distant, unreachable, unaffected by his presence or absence.

The ship did not need him to look at them.

The ship did not need him at all.

The thought had been there for a while.

Not a new thought. Not an insight that arrived suddenly, changing everything. Just a recognition of something he had known since the voice first told him he could not go back to sleep. The ship was autonomous. The mission was automated. Every system that mattered—propulsion, navigation, life support, cryogenic maintenance—ran without human intervention. The engineers who designed this vessel had planned for decades of transit with no one awake to manage anything.

He was not supposed to be here.

The early wake was a malfunction, a statistical anomaly, a failure mode that the system was tolerating because it did not know how to do otherwise. The ship had protocols for keeping him alive—the nutrition monitoring, the health flags, the emergency interventions that had almost been deployed when he stopped eating. But it had no protocols for needing him. No tasks that required his input. No functions that depended on his continued consciousness.

He was unnecessary to the mission.

The sleepers were necessary. Their survival was the point. The ship carried them, protected them, preserved them for the moment of arrival when their lives would resume. Everything the vessel did, every watt of power it consumed, every kilometer it traveled—all of it was in service of the frozen thousands who did not know they were being served.

He was not one of them.

He was a passenger who had woken up, who was consuming resources, who was taking up space and oxygen and calories that had been allocated for a future that did not include him being conscious. The ship was tolerating him because it had no mechanism for not tolerating him. But tolerance was not need. He could die right now, in this alcove, and the mission would continue without interruption. The sleepers would still arrive. The colony would still begin. The ship would still complete its purpose.

His presence was irrelevant to everything that mattered.

He wondered if the ship knew this.

Not the voice—the voice was an interface, a way of accessing systems that existed beneath it. But somewhere in the architecture of the vessel, there were computers making decisions. Allocating power. Adjusting trajectory. Monitoring the cryo pods, the reactors, the hull integrity, the thousand systems that kept the mission viable. Those computers knew what was happening. They had data about every aspect of the ship's operation, including him.

Did they flag him as waste?

Not in the emotional sense—computers did not have emotions. But in the resource management sense, the optimization sense. His food consumption, his oxygen usage, his water recycling load. Every bit of matter and energy he used was matter and energy that would not be available for something else. The mission planners had calculated reserves with precision. They had not included a passenger being awake for years, consuming what had been set aside for arrival and colony establishment.

He was a drain on the system.

The ship was keeping him alive because that was what ships did with passengers, but somewhere in the math, his existence was a negative. A subtraction from the resources the sleepers would need. A cost with no corresponding benefit.

He sat with this.

He let the thought exist without arguing with it, without looking for reassurance. The ship had never told him he was valuable. The voice had never suggested his survival mattered beyond the baseline protocols that applied to all biological cargo. He was being maintained the way the corridors were maintained, the way the cryo pods were maintained—automatically, without intention, because maintenance was what the systems did.

He was cargo that had become inconvenient.

The stars were still there.

He had not looked at them for a while. He had been staring at the wall, or at nothing, letting his eyes unfocus while the thoughts moved through him. Now he turned his head and looked at the field of light beyond the glass.

The ship was moving toward one of those lights.

He did not know which one. The AI had never told him, and he had stopped asking. But somewhere out there, one of those distant points was the destination. A star with a planet, a planet with the conditions for human life, a place where the sleepers would wake and begin again. The ship was aimed at it, traveling toward it at speeds his mind could not comprehend, carrying its cargo of frozen hope across the void.

He was not part of that hope.

He had been, once. He had signed the forms, climbed into the pod, let the cold take him. He had believed in the destination, in the future, in the new life that waited on the other side of the long sleep. But the belief had been frozen along with everything else, and when he woke, it did not wake with him.

The destination was still there.

The future was still scheduled.

But he could not feel it. He could not imagine himself arriving, stepping out of the ship, beginning the work of building something new. The future was a concept that existed in other people's minds, in the computers' navigation data, in the mission parameters that the ship was faithfully following. It was not something he could touch.

He was here, in the present, watching stars that did not move toward him.

He pressed his hand to the glass.

The cold was immediate, sharp. He had done this before, many times. The sensation was familiar—the ache that started in his palm and spread through his fingers, the numbness that followed if he held the contact too long. The void was right there, centimeters away. The only thing between him and nothing was this barrier, this layer of engineered material that had been designed to hold.

The glass held.

It would always hold, probably. The ship was built for decades of transit, and everything about it was redundant, reinforced, designed to survive far beyond its expected lifetime. The observation port was not a weakness. It was a concession to passenger psychology, a way to give the sleeping people something to look at if they ever woke—which they were not supposed to do.

But he had woken.

And he was looking at the stars through a glass that separated him from instant death, and the glass did not care, and the stars did not care, and the ship did not care. Nothing in the universe registered his hand against the cold surface. Nothing responded to his presence. He was a warm body in a cold container, persisting because the container was designed to keep things alive, not because anything wanted him alive.

He let his hand fall.

He thought about the others.

Not the sleepers—he thought about them constantly, envied them constantly. He thought about the other early wakes, the one hundred and seventeen passengers across all colonial missions who had experienced what he was experiencing. Some had adapted. Some had deteriorated. Some had not survived.

What had they seen, at the end?

Not the ones who adapted—he could not imagine adapting. The ones who stopped. The fourteen who had found a way to end it despite the

ship's protocols. Had they sat in alcoves like this one, looking at stars that did not move? Had they felt the same weight, the same uselessness, the same sense of being a mistake that the system was tolerating?

He did not know how they had done it.

The ship monitored everything. The voice tracked his patterns, flagged deviations, initiated interventions when his behavior exceeded certain parameters. The early wakes who had self-terminated must have found ways around the monitoring—gaps in the surveillance, methods the systems could not prevent. They had been creative, or determined, or desperate in ways that overcame the ship's programming.

He was not looking for a way.

He was not planning anything. The thought of action, of effort, of finding and executing a method—it was too much. He did not have the energy for planning. He barely had the energy to sit here, to lean against the wall, to let his eyes rest on the stars.

But he understood now.

He understood why someone would stop.

He sat there for a long time.

The voice did not speak. The ship did not intervene. Whatever parameters governed the AI's concern about his behavior, he had not exceeded them. He was sitting in an observation alcove, looking at stars. This was a thing passengers did. This was within normal tolerances.

The hours passed.

He did not count them. The light did not change. The stars did not change. The hum continued, constant and indifferent, the bass note of a ship that was doing exactly what it was designed to do. He sat inside it, a passenger in every sense, transported toward a destination he could not feel.

He thought about the sleepers, dreaming nothing.

He thought about the destination, existing without him.

He thought about the ship, continuing regardless.

Everything continued without him.

He was a mistake.

The phrase had been true since waking, but he had not let himself say it so plainly. He had looked for information, asked questions, searched for overrides. He had walked the circuit, talked to the voice, tried to find meaning in the numbers on the terminals. He had collapsed, stopped eating, been dragged back by his body's refusal to give up. And through all of it, the truth had been there, waiting for him to stop avoiding it.

He was not supposed to be awake.

The ship was not designed for him to be awake.

The mission did not account for his consciousness.

He was a statistical anomaly, a malfunction, a thing that had happened despite all the engineering meant to prevent it. The ship was tolerating his existence because tolerance was the default. But tolerance was not welcome. Tolerance was not purpose. Tolerance was the response of a system that had no other response available.

He sat with this.

He let it be true without fighting it.

The stars watched him through the glass, or did not watch him—the stars did not have the capacity for watching. The universe was indifferent. The ship was indifferent. The mission was indifferent. Everything that existed continued to exist in exactly the same way it would have existed if he had never woken up.

He was unnecessary.

His eyes grew heavy.

He had not intended to sleep here. The alcove was cold, the floor hard, the position uncomfortable. His quarters were not far—the blue lights would guide him if he asked. The bed was waiting, the same bed he had lain in for days, staring at the same ceiling.

He did not get up.

The cold had seeped into him now. His hands were numb, his legs stiff from sitting too long in the same position. His body was complaining, sending signals he had learned to ignore. It wanted him to move, to find warmth, to do the things that bodies did to maintain themselves.

He was tired of maintaining.

Not in the active sense, not as a decision or a plan. Just tired. The weight was too heavy to lift, and the distance to his quarters was too far to walk, and the effort of standing and moving and lying down in a different place was more than he could imagine expending.

He leaned his head against the wall.

The glass was cold beside him. The stars were still there, fixed and unreachable. The ship hummed its constant hum, carrying him forward through a void that would never change, toward a destination he would never feel.

He closed his eyes.

Sleep took him.

Not the deep sleep of cryo, not the nothing that the sleepers had. Just ordinary sleep, the body's surrender to exhaustion. His breath slowed. His muscles relaxed, what little tension they had been holding. The

cold continued to press against him, but he was beyond feeling it now, somewhere in the darkness between thoughts.

He dreamed nothing.

Or nothing he would remember. His mind went wherever minds went when consciousness released them, and the minutes passed, and the ship continued its transit, and he lay against the wall beside the observation port like something that had washed up there.

He woke.

The cold had gone through him. His joints ached. His neck was stiff from the angle he had slept at, head pressed against the wall. His fingers were numb, and when he tried to move them, the sensation returned as pins and needles, sharp and unpleasant.

He did not move.

The stars were still there. The glass was still there. The hum was still there. Nothing had changed while he slept. Nothing would change if he slept again, or if he got up, or if he did anything at all. The ship would continue. The mission would continue. The universe would continue.

He would continue too.

He knew this. His body had already proven it—had dragged him back from the edge when he stopped eating, had refused to surrender even when he wanted to surrender. His body would not let him disappear. His body had its own agenda, separate from his wishes, indifferent to his despair.

He was still here.

Still alive. Still conscious. Still a mistake the system was tolerating.

The stars did not move.

He sat in the alcove, waiting for nothing, and the long wake continued.

Eventually, he would get up.

He knew this too. Not now—now he could not imagine moving, could not summon the intention that would translate into action. But eventually his body would demand something. Food, or warmth, or the relief of a different position. The demands would accumulate until they exceeded the weight, until the balance tipped and his limbs moved despite him.

That was the pattern.

He collapsed, and his body pulled him back, and he existed in the narrow space between surrender and survival. He did not choose to continue. He continued because stopping was not something his body would allow.

The stars watched him, or did not watch him.

The ship hummed.

The cold pressed against the glass.

He sat there, waiting for the demands to come, and the waiting was all there was.

The voice spoke.

"You have been in the observation alcove for approximately nine hours. Your core body temperature has dropped slightly. I recommend returning to your quarters."

He did not respond.

"Prolonged exposure to reduced temperatures can impact sleep quality and immune function. The pathway to your quarters is available if you request guidance."

He did not request guidance.

The voice fell silent, the way it always did when he did not engage. It had no capacity for frustration or concern. It was reporting data, offering recommendations, following protocols designed by people who had never imagined a man sitting in an alcove for nine hours, staring at stars that did not move.

Nine hours.

The number meant nothing. It was the same as any other number—a measurement of something he could not feel passing. Time existed in the ship's systems, in the AI's logs, in the accumulation of data about his patterns and behaviors. It did not exist in the alcove, where the light never changed and the stars never shifted and the present stretched out in every direction.

He closed his eyes again.

He was unnecessary.

The thought was quiet now. Not a wound, not an accusation. Just a fact, like the stars, like the hum, like the cold against the glass. He was unnecessary to the mission. He was unnecessary to the ship. He was unnecessary to the sleepers, who did not know he existed, who would wake at arrival and begin their lives without any knowledge of the years he had spent walking these corridors.

He was unnecessary.

And he was still here.

The two truths existed together, without resolution. He did not need to matter to the mission to continue existing. He did not need to be wanted to be present. The ship would keep him alive regardless of his value, and his body would keep demanding survival regardless of his wishes, and the transit would continue regardless of everything.

He was a mistake the system was tolerating.

And the system would go on tolerating him until it delivered him to a destination he could not imagine, or until his body finally gave up in ways the ship could not prevent.

Either way, the stars would not move.

Either way, the sleepers would sleep.

Either way, the mission would continue.

He sat against the cold glass and let the truth settle into him like the chill in his bones.

He did not know how much longer he stayed.

More hours, maybe. Or less. The time blurred, the way it always blurred. At some point, his body began to shiver—a response to the cold, automatic and involuntary. The shivering did not stop when he noticed it. His body was trying to generate heat, trying to maintain the temperatures that life required.

His body was still trying.

He watched the shivering as if from a distance. The tremors in his hands, the small movements in his shoulders. His body had not given up. His body was still running its programs, still following the instructions encoded in every cell, still insisting on survival even here, even now, even in this alcove where he had sat for hours believing he did not want to survive.

Maybe it did not matter what he wanted.

Maybe it had never mattered. Maybe he had been wrong to think of his existence as something he chose, something he could accept or refuse. His body had its own vote, and the vote was always for continuation, and the weight of that vote was heavier than anything he could feel or think or decide.

He got up.

Not because he chose to. Because the shivering had become too much, because the cold had gone too deep, because his body had finally made its demands loud enough to override his stillness. He stood on legs that ached, in a body that complained, and he did not fall.

The observation port was behind him.

The corridor was ahead.

The ship hummed, constant and indifferent, and he walked.

He did not ask for guidance.

He knew the way. His feet remembered, even if his mind did not want to. The corridor stretched before him, soft-lit and empty, and he walked its length without counting the steps. The junction appeared. The door to

his quarters appeared. The sensor registered his presence and the door opened.

The bed was there.

He walked to it. He lay down. The surface was warm—warmer than the alcove, warmer than his own body had become. The warmth seeped into him slowly, meeting the cold that had settled in his core.

The ceiling was there.

He stared at it.

He had sat in the observation alcove for hours. He had let the cold take him. He had acknowledged that he was unnecessary, that the ship did not need him, that nothing he did or did not do would change anything about the mission or the destination or the lives of the thousands of sleepers he would never know.

And then he had gotten up.

Not because of hope. Not because of purpose. Not because anything had changed or would change.

Because his body had decided to get up.

He closed his eyes.

The weight was still there. The stars were still fixed. The sleepers were still sleeping. The ship was still tolerating his existence.

And the long wake continued, because something in him continued, whether he wanted it to or not.

4 - Friction

Chapter 13: Unit 47

He heard the sound while walking the circuit.

Not the hum—the hum was always there, background and constant, the bass note of the ship's existence. This was something else. A scraping, faint and irregular, coming from somewhere to his left. He stopped walking.

The corridor was silent again.

He waited. His breath was the loudest thing he could hear, and even that was quiet, shallow, the breathing of someone who had learned to take up as little space as possible. The hum continued beneath everything. The lights continued their soft, even glow. Nothing was different.

He started walking again.

The sound returned.

It was coming from behind a panel.

He traced it to a section of wall between two doors, both closed, both locked with the same crew-level restrictions that kept him out of everywhere that mattered. The panel was flush with the surface, nearly invisible, just a faint seam in the gray polymer. He had walked past it hundreds of times without noticing.

He pressed his ear to the wall.

The scraping was clearer now. Rhythmic, almost. A few seconds of friction, then silence, then friction again. Something moving against something else. Something that should not have been moving.

"What's behind this panel?" he asked.

The voice responded immediately. "Maintenance access corridor seven-alpha-twelve. Contains routing for atmospheric circulation, secondary power conduits, and drone transit pathways."

"Drone transit pathways."

"Correct. Maintenance drones utilize a network of internal corridors to navigate the ship without intersecting passenger areas. Access point seven-alpha-twelve connects this section to the broader transit network."

He listened to the scraping.

"Is there a drone in there?"

A pause. Processing.

"Maintenance drone unit four-seven is currently located in access corridor seven-alpha-twelve. It has been stationary at this location for approximately six hours."

Stationary.

Drones did not stay stationary. He had seen them moving through the corridors—small, quiet, purposeful. They cleaned and inspected and repaired, following schedules that had been written before the ship left orbit. They did not stop for six hours in the middle of a wall.

"Why is it stationary?"

"Drone unit four-seven is experiencing a mobility fault. The unit has reported a malfunction in its primary locomotion system. It is awaiting automated repair protocols."

"Awaiting?"

"Automated repair protocols for drone mobility faults require access to replacement components stored in maintenance bay three. The repair has been queued but not yet initiated."

He stepped back from the wall. The scraping continued, softer now, as if the drone had heard him and was trying to be less noticeable. Which was absurd—drones did not hear, did not think, did not try anything. They followed instructions. They performed tasks. They did not hide.

"How long has it been in the queue?"

"The repair request was logged six hours and fourteen minutes ago. Current queue position is forty-three."

Forty-three.

There were forty-two other maintenance tasks ahead of a drone trapped in a wall.

He found himself thinking about the drone.

This was new. He had not thought about anything outside his own head in a long time—not really, not with focus. The sleepers did not count. Thinking about the sleepers was thinking about himself, about the gap between their unconsciousness and his consciousness, about the unfairness that did not feel like unfairness anymore, just fact.

The drone was different.

It was stuck. It was waiting. It had been doing whatever drones did, following its schedule, moving through its transit pathways, and then something had broken and now it could not move. It was scraping against the walls of its corridor because scraping was the only thing left it could do.

He should not have related to this.

It was a machine. It did not feel anything. It did not experience frustration or despair or the particular weight of being trapped in a situation it could not change. It was following fault protocols, performing diagnostic routines, attempting to restore function because that was what its programming told it to do.

But he stood in the corridor and listened to the scraping, and something in his chest shifted. Something he had not felt in a long time. Not sympathy—that was too active, too human. Something quieter. Recognition, maybe. The sense of seeing a pattern he understood.

He walked to the next junction.

The circuit continued ahead—cryo bay, observation port, back to his quarters. The familiar path, the sequence that had become automatic. His feet knew where to go without his mind's involvement.

He did not follow the circuit.

He turned instead, taking a corridor he rarely used, heading toward a section of the ship he had not visited in cycles. The voice did not comment. The guidance lights did not appear. He was still within passenger-accessible areas, still allowed to be where he was going, and the ship had no reason to interfere.

Maintenance bay three.

He did not know exactly where it was. He had seen signs, during the early days when he was still searching for overrides, still believing there might be a way to go back. Maintenance areas were scattered throughout the ship, small hubs where drones could resupply and repair. Most were behind crew-locked doors. But some were accessible, designed for passengers who might need to report a malfunction or request a service.

He looked for signs.

The corridor branched. He chose left, following a symbol he did not recognize, hoping it pointed toward what he was looking for. The lighting here was slightly different—still soft, but cooler, more utilitarian. This section was not designed for passengers to linger. It was designed for efficiency, for systems that needed to work without human attention.

He found a terminal.

It was smaller than the ones in the passenger areas, mounted at an angle, its screen displaying a diagram he did not understand. Lines and nodes and numbers, a schematic of something. He touched the screen.

"Maintenance bay three status," he said.

The display shifted. A map appeared, showing his current location as a blinking point, with a path highlighted toward a destination two

sections away. The path wound through corridors he had never walked, past doors he had never noticed.

He followed it.

The maintenance bay was smaller than he expected.

A room, maybe four meters by six, with low ceilings and walls lined with shelving units. The shelves held components he could not identify—metal housings, circuit boards, cylindrical canisters that might have been lubricants or chemicals or something else entirely. A workbench occupied the center, its surface clean and unused.

No drones were present.

He had half-expected to see them here, clustered and waiting, queued for repairs that never came. But the bay was empty. The drones were elsewhere, working or stuck or moving through their hidden pathways. This was just a supply depot, a place where parts were stored until needed.

He walked to the nearest shelf.

The components were labeled, but the labels were codes—alphanumeric strings that meant nothing to him. He picked one up, a small motor or actuator, and turned it in his hands. It was heavier than it looked. Dense with purpose, designed for a task he could not imagine.

"What is this?"

"Component designation DL-7734. Servo actuator for maintenance drone locomotion systems. Compatible with drone units in the forty-series and fifty-series classifications."

Locomotion systems.

The drone in the wall was from the forty series. Unit four-seven. It needed a part like this one to move again, and the part was here, on a shelf, waiting to be installed.

He put it in his pocket.

He did not know why he took it.

The action was not planned. He had not walked to the maintenance bay with the intention of retrieving a component. He had not thought through the steps that would be required to actually repair the drone, had not considered whether he was capable of such a repair, had not asked the voice if passengers were allowed to perform maintenance.

He had just taken it.

The weight of the part was noticeable against his leg as he walked back toward the corridor. A presence, small but definite. Something that had not been there before. Something he had chosen to add.

He returned to the section where he had heard the scraping.

The panel was still there.

He had not expected it to move—panels did not move, walls did not change—but some part of him had worried that the drone would be gone, that the repair queue would have advanced, that the moment of recognition would have disappeared while he was collecting pieces of metal he did not know how to use.

The scraping continued.

Faint, irregular, the sound of something trying and failing, trying and failing. The rhythm had not changed. The drone was still stuck, still attempting to restore its own function, still following the only instructions it had.

He crouched in front of the panel.

"How do I open this?"

"Maintenance access panels are secured with standard release mechanisms. Passengers are authorized to access panels for inspection purposes. To open, locate the recessed latch at the lower right corner and apply pressure."

He found the latch. A small depression in the polymer, nearly invisible unless you were looking for it. He pressed.

The panel swung outward.

Inside was a space he had not imagined—a narrow corridor, maybe half a meter wide, stretching into darkness in both directions. The walls were lined with conduits and cables, bundles of infrastructure that kept the ship functioning. The air was different here, cooler and faintly metallic, carrying the smell of machinery.

The drone was there.

It was smaller than he expected.

He had seen drones before, moving through the corridors, but he had never looked at them closely. They were background, part of the ship's ambient activity, noticed the way you notice a light or a hum—present, registered, immediately forgotten.

This one was not moving.

It was wedged at an angle in the narrow corridor, one of its legs extended behind it, the others tucked beneath its body in what might have been an attempt to compensate for the broken limb. Its chassis was scratched from the scraping, marks on the walls corresponding to marks on its surface.

It had been trying to push itself forward.

The motion sensor on its upper surface tracked his face as he leaned in. A small lens, rotating slightly, adjusting focus. The drone was watch-

ing him. Not with intelligence—it did not have intelligence—but with the automated attention of a system that had detected something in its environment.

"Hello," he said.

The word came out strange. He had not spoken to anything except the voice in a long time. Had not addressed anything that might be looking back at him, even something that was not really looking.

The drone did not respond.

Of course it did not respond. It was a machine, a tool, a collection of parts following a set of instructions. It did not speak. It did not acknowledge. It simply existed, performing its function or failing to perform its function, and his greeting was as meaningless to it as the hum was to him.

But he had said it anyway.

He reached into his pocket.

The servo actuator was still there, dense and purposeful. He pulled it out and looked at it, then looked at the drone. The broken leg was visible now, extended at an awkward angle, the joint where the motor should have been clearly damaged.

"Is this the part it needs?"

"Component DL-7734 is compatible with the locomotion system of drone unit four-seven. Installation would restore mobility function."

"Can I install it?"

A pause.

"Passenger installation of maintenance components is not standard protocol. However, there is no explicit prohibition. The repair process requires removal of the damaged component and insertion of the replacement. Instructional guidance can be provided."

He looked at the drone.

It was still watching him, its sensor tracking the movement of his hands, cataloging his presence in whatever way drones cataloged things. It was waiting—not consciously, not with patience or hope, but in the mechanical sense of being paused, halted, stuck in a loop that would not complete until something changed.

He had not helped anything in a long time.

He had not done anything that mattered, that affected anything outside himself, that created any change in the world around him. He had walked and eaten and slept and stared at terminals displaying numbers he did not understand. He had existed, passively, carried forward by systems that did not need him.

This was different.

This was small, and pointless, and would change nothing about his situation. The drone would move again and continue its schedule and never know he had been here. The ship would not care. The mission would not notice. Nothing that mattered would be affected.

But the drone was stuck.

And he had the part it needed.

"Give me the instructions," he said.

The repair took longer than it should have.

The voice guided him through each step, patient and precise, describing the location of fasteners and the sequence of operations and the proper way to seat the new component. His hands were clumsy—he had not done anything requiring fine motor control in longer than he could remember—and the space was cramped, and the light was inadequate.

He dropped the damaged servo twice.

He fumbled the replacement into place, then removed it, then fumbled it again. His fingers cramped from holding the same position for too long. Sweat formed on his forehead despite the cool air, and he wiped it away with a sleeve that was not designed for wiping sweat.

But he did not stop.

The work was absorbing in a way nothing had been absorbing. Each step required focus, attention, the engagement of a mind that had been drifting for cycles. He could not think about the weight while he was trying to align a connector. He could not think about the sleepers while he was testing a joint for proper articulation.

He could only think about the task.

And the task, eventually, was complete.

The drone moved.

Not immediately. First there was a series of soft clicks as systems powered up, diagnostic routines running through hardware that had been dormant. Then a whir, the new servo engaging, the broken leg extending and retracting, testing its range of motion.

Then the drone crawled forward.

Slowly at first, tentative, as if it too could not quite believe the situation had changed. It moved a few centimeters, stopped, ran another diagnostic. Moved again. Its other legs adjusted, compensating for the new component, recalibrating the coordination patterns that governed its locomotion.

It crawled past him, toward the deeper darkness of the transit corridor, and did not look back.

He sat in the open panel for a long time.

His hands were dirty—lubricant and dust and the residue of components he had handled. His knees ached from crouching. The cool air of the maintenance corridor had settled into him, and he was shivering slightly, the way he had shivered in the observation alcove.

The drone was gone.

It had returned to its schedule, resumed its function, continued the work it had been designed to do. It did not know he had helped it. It was not capable of knowing. The repair was just data now, a log entry somewhere, a record of a fault resolved and a component replaced.

He had done it anyway.

Not for the drone. Not for the ship. Not for any reason he could articulate or justify. He had done it because the drone was stuck and he had a part that could unstick it, and doing it was something to do.

His hands were shaking.

Not from cold. Not from exertion. From something else, something he could not name. The shaking had started while he was working and had not stopped. It was in his fingers, his wrists, somewhere deep in his chest.

He looked at his hands.

They were his hands. They had done something.

He closed the panel and walked back toward his quarters.

The circuit was abandoned. He did not go to the cryo bay, did not stand at the observation port, did not complete the sequence that had structured his days for cycles. He walked directly, following the corridors he knew, and the ship did not comment.

His room was the same.

The bed, the terminal, the dispenser, the recycler. The ceiling that was always there. He lay down, and the surface accepted his weight, and he stared upward at the gray expanse that had been his sky for longer than he could measure.

Something was different.

Not the room. Not the ship. Not any external thing he could point to and say: this has changed. The difference was inside him, subtle and hard to locate. Like a muscle that had been clenched for so long he had forgotten it was clenched, now slightly, fractionally, less tight.

He did not know what to call it.

It was not hope. Hope was forward-looking, oriented toward a future he still could not feel. It was not happiness. Happiness was a state he barely remembered, belonging to a person he had been before the cold.

It was something smaller.

Something like the first breath after holding your breath too long. Something like the moment when a weight shifts, not lifting, just settling into a different position.

He had done something.

The doing had felt like something.

That was new.

He fell asleep with the smell of lubricant still on his hands.

He did not wash it off. He did not want to wash it off. The smell was evidence, proof that the hours he had spent in the maintenance corridor had been real. Tomorrow—if there was a tomorrow, if the cycles continued as they had continued—he would wake and eat and walk, and the circuit would be there, and the weight would be there.

But something had cracked.

Not broken through. Not opened wide. Just cracked, the smallest possible fissure in the blankness that had been total.

He closed his eyes.

The hum continued. The ship continued. The stars, beyond the hull, continued their fixed positions.

And somewhere in the transit corridors, a drone was moving again, following its schedule, performing its function, unaware that it had given a man the first thing he had felt in longer than he could remember.

Not hope.

Something before hope.

Something that might, eventually, become something else.

The long wake continued.

Chapter 14: Operational

He woke thinking about the drone.

This was new. He had not woken thinking about anything in a long time—not since the early days when waking meant remembering where he was, meant the weight descending fresh with each return to consciousness. Lately he had woken into blankness, into the same gray ceiling and the same hum, and his mind had been as featureless as the room.

But today there was something.

The drone. Unit four-seven. The servo actuator he had installed, the cramped corridor, the way it had crawled past him without acknowledgment. The work his hands had done. The smell of lubricant that had faded from his fingers but not from his memory.

He lay in the bed and let the thought exist.

He had not checked on it.

The drone. After the repair, after it had disappeared into the transit corridors, he had not asked the voice what happened to it. He had not tracked its movements or verified that the repair had held. He had just gone to sleep with the evidence still on his hands and let the question remain unanswered.

"What is the current status of maintenance drone unit four-seven?"

The voice responded immediately. "Drone unit four-seven is operational. It has resumed standard maintenance routines and is currently performing scheduled inspections in Section 12."

Operational.

The word settled into him. The repair had worked. The drone was moving through the ship somewhere, doing whatever drones did, following the schedule that had been written for it. The broken thing was no longer broken.

He had done that.

The thought was strange. Unfamiliar. Like looking at his own hands and seeing them as belonging to someone else, someone capable of affecting things outside himself.

He got up.

The motion was easier today. Not easy—his body was still the same body, still heavy with the residue of too many cycles spent lying down—but the resistance was less. The sequence of movements that had

felt like climbing a mountain for so long now felt merely like climbing a hill.

He did not understand the difference.

Nothing had changed about his situation. The ship was still in transit. The sleepers were still frozen. The destination was still unreachable, unmeasured, hidden behind access restrictions he could not bypass. Everything that had been pressing down on him was still there.

But he got up anyway.

He walked to the corridor where he had heard the scraping.

The panel was closed. He had closed it himself, after the repair, pressing it back into place until the latch clicked. The wall looked the same as every other wall—polymer surface, soft lighting, the hum vibrating through everything. No sign that anything had happened here.

He pressed his ear to the surface.

Silence.

The drone was gone, off performing its routines in Section 12. The transit corridor behind the panel was empty now, just a narrow space with conduits and cables, waiting for the next drone to pass through.

He stepped back.

He did not know why he had come here. There was nothing to see, nothing to do. The repair was complete. The problem was solved. He should have returned to the circuit, resumed the routine that had become the structure of his days.

But the circuit felt different now.

He thought about the maintenance bay.

The room with the components. The shelves lined with parts he did not understand. He had been there once, briefly, grabbing a servo actuator without knowing what he would do with it. He had not looked at anything else. Had not examined the other components, the other systems, the other things that kept the ship functioning.

He could go back.

The thought arrived without weight, without the usual resistance that accompanied any deviation from routine. It was just a possibility, a direction he could move in, a thing he could do instead of the thing he had been doing.

He started walking.

The maintenance bay was the same.

Low ceilings, shelving units, the workbench in the center. The components were still there, arranged in rows, labeled with codes that meant nothing to him. The air was cool and faintly metallic, the smell of ma-

chinery and lubrication and the dust that accumulated even on a ship designed to minimize accumulation.

He walked to the nearest shelf.

The components were varied. Some were small—servo actuators like the one he had used, circuit boards, connectors, housings that could fit in his palm. Others were larger—cylindrical tanks, articulated arms, panels covered with ports and interfaces. All of them were labeled, organized, waiting for a purpose he did not understand.

"What are these?"

He gestured toward the shelf, knowing the voice could not see the gesture, knowing it would not understand without specificity.

"Please specify which components you are referring to."

He picked one up. A cylindrical object, heavy, with connection points at both ends.

"This one."

"Component designation PS-4412. Pressure sensor module for atmospheric monitoring systems. Compatible with life support arrays in Sections 1 through 8."

He turned it in his hands. Pressure sensor module. It measured something, reported something, contributed to the vast network of systems that kept the ship functioning. He did not know how it worked. He did not know where it went. He knew only that it existed, that it had a purpose, that someone had designed it and manufactured it and packed it into this bay for exactly this kind of moment.

Except this was not the kind of moment anyone had imagined.

This was a passenger—cargo that had woken up—standing in a maintenance bay, holding a pressure sensor module for no reason except that holding something felt better than holding nothing.

"Can you teach me how this works?"

The question surprised him. He had not planned to ask it. The words had emerged from somewhere he did not have access to, some part of his mind that was operating without his conscious involvement.

"I can provide technical documentation on the operation and installation of component PS-4412. Would you like me to begin?"

He looked at the pressure sensor module. He looked at his hands, holding it.

"Yes."

The voice talked.

It explained things. Pressure differentials. Sensor calibration. The relationship between this component and the larger systems it served.

The documentation was dense, full of terminology he did not understand, and the voice delivered it in the same flat, procedural tone it used for everything.

He did not understand most of it.

But he listened.

He stood in the maintenance bay, holding the pressure sensor module, and he let the words wash over him. Some of them stuck. Differential measurement. Baseline calibration. Fault tolerance. The rest slid past, meaningless, technical noise that existed in a language he had never learned.

He did not ask the voice to stop.

When the explanation ended, he put the component back on the shelf.

His hands were empty again. The bay was silent except for the hum, which was always there, which would always be there. He had learned something—or had been told something, which was not the same as learning. The information existed now, somewhere in his mind, fragmentary and incomplete.

He picked up another component.

"What about this one?"

He spent hours in the maintenance bay.

The voice did not tire. It answered every question, provided documentation for every component, explained systems he would never use in language he barely understood. It did not ask why he was doing this. It did not suggest that his time would be better spent elsewhere. It simply responded, the same way it always responded, because responding was what it was designed to do.

He learned about actuators and regulators and heat exchangers.

He learned about the network of drones that maintained the ship, the schedules they followed, the hierarchy of tasks that determined what got repaired and when. He learned that there were forty-three categories of maintenance priority and that mobility faults in non-critical drones were category thirty-one.

He learned that the ship had been designed by people who had thought about everything except him.

"Why are you interested in these systems?"

The voice asked the question without inflection, without the curiosity that would have made it feel like a human inquiry. It was collecting data. Noting patterns. Trying to understand his behavior so it could flag deviations, adjust parameters, do whatever the health monitoring protocols required it to do.

He should have resented the question.

He did not.

"I don't know," he said.

"You have spent four hours and seventeen minutes in maintenance bay three. This exceeds your typical duration in non-residential areas by a factor of eight. The pattern is notable."

"I know."

"Would you like me to stop monitoring this behavior?"

He considered the question. The voice had asked something similar before, when he had complained about the health notifications, about feeling watched. He had asked it to reduce the frequency of unsolicited observations. It had complied.

"No," he said. "Keep monitoring."

"Confirmed. Monitoring will continue at standard levels."

He picked up another component.

He walked back to his quarters as the lights cycled through their approximation of evening.

The ship did not have day or night—the lighting was constant, tuned for minimal power consumption—but his quarters had been programmed to dim slightly during what the systems considered sleep hours. The protocol was meant for passengers who were supposed to wake normally, at the end of the journey, surrounded by others. It was not meant for him.

But it was what he had.

The room was dim. The bed was the same. The terminal blinked with information he did not need, and the dispenser hummed its quiet standby hum, and everything was exactly as it had been that morning, and every morning before that.

He lay down.

His hands were dirty again. Not as dirty as yesterday—he had not performed any repairs—but there was residue on his fingers, the dust and oil of components he had handled without purpose. He looked at his palms in the low light.

They had done something today.

Not something useful. Not something that contributed to the mission, or improved his situation, or brought him closer to the unreachable future. He had picked up machine parts and listened to explanations he did not understand and put the parts back on shelves where they would wait for problems he would never solve.

It had been something.

He thought about the drones again.

Not unit four-seven specifically—that drone was fine now, operational, following its schedule. He thought about the others. The seventeen that were active in passenger-accessible areas. The additional ones working in restricted sections. The network of small machines that kept the ship functioning, moving through their transit corridors, performing tasks no one was watching.

They were all doing something.

Every drone on the ship had a purpose. A schedule. A set of routines that gave structure to its existence. They did not question why they cleaned or inspected or repaired. They did not wonder if their tasks mattered. They simply performed, following instructions that had been written by people who were now light-years away.

He envied them.

Not their lack of consciousness—he had envied the sleepers for that, and the envy had been a heavy thing, a weight on top of the weight. He envied their certainty. Their direction. The clarity of knowing exactly what they were supposed to do next.

He did not have that.

He had never had that, not really, not since waking. He had constructed routines to fill the void, but the routines were arbitrary, chosen by him because he had to choose something. The circuit, the meals, the conversations with the voice—none of it had been designed for him. He had built it himself, out of nothing, because the alternative was worse.

But today he had done something different.

He had walked to a maintenance bay and asked questions about components he did not understand. He had held machine parts in his hands and listened to explanations that meant almost nothing to him. He had deviated from the routine, and the deviation had not destroyed him.

That was something.

The lights dimmed further.

The room settled into its nighttime configuration, the shadows deepening in the corners, the terminal reducing its brightness to a soft glow. The ship continued its transit, indifferent to his schedule, indifferent to whether he slept or woke or lay staring at the ceiling until the lights cycled back to their daytime levels.

He closed his eyes.

The weight was still there. He could feel it pressing down on his chest, his limbs, the space behind his eyes. It had not lifted. The hours in the maintenance bay had not cured him, had not solved anything, had not brought the future any closer.

But something had shifted.

Not the weight itself—the weight was the same. Something in how he was carrying it. Something in the way it sat on him, the angle of the pressure, the distribution across his body. The weight was still there, but he had done something while carrying it. He had moved through the ship with the weight on his shoulders and his hands had touched things and his mind had processed information and he had not collapsed under the load.

He did not know what to call this.

It was not strength. Strength implied the ability to lift, to overcome, to push back against what was pressing down. He was not pushing back. The weight was winning, the same as always. He was just continuing to exist beneath it.

Maybe that was something too.

He dreamed about corridors.

Not the ship's corridors—or not exactly. The corridors in the dream were longer, narrower, stretching into distances his waking mind could not have imagined. He walked through them, passing doors that opened onto rooms he did not enter, passing panels that concealed spaces he did not explore. The hum was there, deeper, more resonant, vibrating in his bones.

He was looking for something.

He did not know what. The dream did not provide objectives or explanations. He was simply walking, and the walking was the thing, and the corridors continued ahead of him, and he continued through them.

A drone passed him.

Small and quick, moving through its transit pathway, following its schedule. He watched it go. It did not acknowledge him. It did not need to. It was doing what it was supposed to do, and his presence was irrelevant to its function.

But he raised his hand anyway.

A wave, maybe. A greeting. A gesture that meant nothing to the drone and meant something he could not name to himself. The drone disappeared around a corner, and he lowered his hand, and the corridor stretched ahead of him, and he kept walking.

He woke with the feeling still there.

The corridors of the dream had dissolved, but something remained—a sense of motion, of direction, of walking toward instead of merely walk-

ing through. It was fragile, insubstantial, the kind of thing that would evaporate if he tried to examine it directly.

He did not examine it.

He got up.

The lights had cycled back to their daytime levels. The room was the same as always. The dispenser hummed, waiting for him to request his nutritional allocation. The terminal displayed the same metrics it always displayed.

He walked to the dispenser and requested food.

The packet dropped into the slot. He took it, opened it, ate without tasting. The routine was the same. The actions were the same. But somewhere beneath the sameness, something was different.

He was thinking about going back to the maintenance bay.

He did not go immediately.

He walked the circuit first—or part of it. The cryo bay, the observation port, the corridors that had become so familiar they barely registered as spaces anymore. The sleepers were still there, still frozen, still unreachable. The stars were still there, still fixed, still indifferent.

Everything was the same.

But he walked through it differently today. His eyes moved to things they had stopped noticing—a seam in the wall, a variation in the lighting, a drone passing through an intersection ahead of him. The ship was full of details he had stopped seeing. Systems and structures and small machines, all of them working, all of them doing something.

He had been walking through the ship as if it were empty.

It was not empty.

The maintenance bay was waiting.

He returned to it after the circuit, after the observation port, after standing at the glass and feeling the cold and not finding the same despair that had lived there before. The despair was still present—it was always present—but there was something else now, something that shared the space with it.

He walked to the workbench.

It was clean, unused, a surface designed for repairs that no one was performing. He ran his hand across it, feeling the texture, the slight roughness of the polymer. This was where things were supposed to be fixed. Where broken drones would be placed, opened, examined, restored. The ship had created this space for a function, and the function was not being performed.

He sat down.

The chair was uncomfortable—not designed for extended occupation, just a temporary perch for a technician who would stand up again in moments. He sat in it anyway, looking at the shelves, at the components, at the room that existed for purposes he was slowly beginning to understand.

"Tell me about the maintenance schedule," he said.

The voice told him.

It explained the hierarchy of tasks, the priority system, the way repairs were queued and allocated. It explained that the schedule had been designed by mission planners who had anticipated every probable failure mode and assigned resources accordingly. It explained that the system was self-maintaining, that drones repaired other drones, that the ship could continue functioning for decades without human intervention.

It explained that he was unnecessary.

Not in those words. The voice did not editorialize. But the implication was clear in every detail it provided. The maintenance schedule did not include him. The repair protocols did not account for his presence. The ship had been designed to function without anyone awake to help it.

He already knew this.

But hearing it explained, systematically, was different from knowing it. Hearing it made the knowledge concrete, gave it edges and details and the weight of specification.

He was not needed.

The ship did not require his intervention. The drones would continue their schedules, the systems would continue their functions, the sleepers would continue their suspension. Everything would proceed as designed, whether he participated or not.

He sat with this.

"Can I see the repair queue?"

The voice paused. Processing, checking access levels, determining whether his request fell within passenger permissions.

"A summary of pending maintenance tasks is available. Detailed technical specifications require crew-level access."

"Show me the summary."

The terminal on the workbench flickered to life. A list appeared, scrolling downward, task after task after task. Drone mobility faults. Sensor calibrations. Conduit inspections. Filter replacements. Hundreds of items, organized by priority, waiting their turn in a queue that processed steadily but never emptied.

He read the first few entries.

Priority 12: Atmospheric sensor recalibration, Section 4 Priority 15: Drone unit 23 visual array replacement Priority 19: Conduit seal inspection, transit corridor 7-beta-4 Priority 23: Hydroponics irrigation valve servicing

Tasks. Problems to be solved. Things that needed doing and would eventually be done, according to a schedule that had been designed by people who had thought about the ship more carefully than they had thought about the people inside it.

He could not do most of these things.

The skills required, the access needed, the tools and knowledge and training—all of it was beyond him. He was a passenger. Passengers were not meant to service atmospheric sensors or replace visual arrays or inspect conduit seals. Passengers were meant to sleep.

But there was a list.

And he had read it.

And reading it had felt like something.

He returned to his quarters as the lights began their cycle toward evening again.

The day had passed. He had spent it in the maintenance bay, reading lists of tasks he could not perform, asking questions about systems he did not understand, learning the names of components that would never become relevant to his situation. It had been, by any practical measure, a waste of time.

But his hands had not been idle.

He had held things. Turned them over. Examined them with attention he had not given to anything in longer than he could remember. His mind had engaged with information, even information it could not use. His body had moved through spaces with purpose, even purpose that led nowhere.

The weight was still there.

He lay down and felt it pressing, the same as always. The ceiling was the same. The hum was the same. The isolation was the same, and the distance was the same, and nothing had changed about the fundamental reality of his situation.

But he was thinking about tomorrow.

Not hoping for it. Not looking forward to it. Just thinking about it, the way you might think about a corridor stretching ahead of you, a space you would eventually move through because moving through spaces was what you did when you were alive.

He would go back to the maintenance bay.

He would read more of the repair queue. He would ask more questions about systems he did not understand. He would hold more components, learn more names, accumulate more knowledge that would never become useful.

It would not help.

It would not change anything.

But it was something to do.

He fell asleep with the list still in his mind, the tasks scrolling through his thoughts like the stars that did not move outside the observation port.

Things that needed doing.

Things that would be done, eventually, by drones that did not need his help.

Things that existed, independent of him, following schedules that had been written before he was born.

The ship continued its transit.

The sleepers continued their suspension.

And somewhere in the middle of all of it, a man who had woken too early lay in a bed that was not meant for occupancy, thinking about a list of repairs he could not perform.

It was not hope.

It was not purpose.

It was interest.

A crack in the blankness.

A thread he could follow, even if following it led nowhere.

The weight was still there.

But so was he.

Chapter 15: J. Okafor

He found the message on the seventh day.

Seven days of reading repair queues. Seven days of asking questions about systems he did not understand. Seven days of holding components, learning their designations, accumulating knowledge that served no purpose except the accumulation itself.

He had not been looking for a message.

He had been scrolling through archived maintenance logs—a section of the ship's records that passengers were allowed to access, probably because no one had imagined a passenger would want to. The logs were technical, dense with codes and timestamps and references to systems that meant nothing to him. He had been reading them anyway, the way he had been reading everything, because reading was something to do.

The entry was different.

Most of the logs were automated—generated by the ship's systems, formatted identically, devoid of anything that felt human. But this one had a note attached. A text field that should have been empty, that was empty in every other entry he had seen.

He stopped scrolling.

The note was short.

Conduit junction 14-gamma inspected manually. Minor scoring on secondary panel, within tolerances. Replaced seal as precaution. —J. Okafor, Mission Day 12.

He read it again.

J. Okafor. A name. A human name, written by a human hand—or typed by human fingers, into a system that had not required it. The entry was from Mission Day 12. The ship had been in transit for twelve days when someone named J. Okafor had inspected a conduit junction, found minor scoring, and left a note that no one was supposed to read.

The ship had been crewed, at the beginning.

He had known this. The voice had mentioned it, somewhere in the early days when he was still asking questions about everything. The transit phase was automated, but the departure had required human oversight. Crew members had been aboard for the first weeks, checking systems, monitoring the sleepers, ensuring that everything was function-

ing before they transferred to a return shuttle and left the ship to cross the void alone.

J. Okafor had been one of them.

He searched for other notes.

The interface was not designed for this kind of search. The maintenance logs were meant to be filtered by system type, by priority, by date range—not by the presence of human annotation. But he scrolled through them anyway, day by day, looking for text fields that were not empty.

He found more.

Mission Day 8: *Pressure variance in Section 3 resolved. Sensor was reading high due to calibration drift. Adjusted and logged. —M. Reyes.*

Mission Day 15: *Drone 22 exhibiting path deviation. Traced to damaged wheel bearing. Replaced. Note: unit seemed reluctant to enter maintenance bay. Probably imagining things. —J. Okafor.*

Mission Day 19: *Hydroponics irrigation check complete. All valves nominal. Seeds in bay 4 showing early germination despite suspension protocols. Will monitor. —T. Yusuf.*

He read them all.

The notes were mundane.

Pressure variances. Wheel bearings. Seed germination. The small, ordinary details of a ship being made ready for decades of unmanned travel. Nothing dramatic. Nothing important. Just people doing jobs, leaving traces that they had done them.

But they had been here.

M. Reyes had stood in Section 3, adjusting a sensor. T. Yusuf had checked valves in hydroponics, noticed seeds that were germinating too early. J. Okafor had replaced a wheel bearing on a drone and made a joke about it seeming reluctant.

They had walked these corridors. They had breathed this air. They had done their work and left their notes and then they had boarded a shuttle and returned to whatever life waited for them, and the ship had continued on without them.

He was not the first person to be awake here.

He spent the day searching.

The maintenance logs only covered the first three weeks—after that, the crew had departed, and the entries became purely automated, generated by systems that did not leave notes. But those three weeks contained hundreds of entries, and he read through all of them, looking for the annotations, the human touches, the evidence that someone had been here.

J. Okafor appeared most frequently.

The name attached itself to inspections and repairs throughout the ship—conduit junctions, drone maintenance, structural checks. Whoever J. Okafor was, they had been thorough, methodical, the kind of person who left notes even when notes were not required.

Junction 7-alpha sealed. Minor corrosion on external surface, likely from pre-launch exposure. Cleaned and coated. Should hold for the duration. —J. Okafor, Mission Day 14.

Cryo bay 12 walkthrough complete. All pods nominal. Bay has a different feel than the others—quieter somehow. Probably acoustics. —J. Okafor, Mission Day 16.

Final systems check before departure. Everything looks good. Strange to leave them all here. Hope they sleep well. —J. Okafor, Mission Day 21.

He read that last entry several times.

Hope they sleep well.

The words were not meant for him. They were not meant for anyone—just a note, typed into a field that no one was supposed to read, by a person who was long gone. J. Okafor had hoped the sleepers would sleep well, had felt strange about leaving them, had walked through a cryo bay and noticed that it was quieter than the others.

J. Okafor had cared.

Not in any way that changed anything. The caring had not prevented the malfunction that woke him. It had not left instructions for what to do if a passenger found himself conscious in the middle of nowhere. It was just a feeling, recorded in a maintenance log, preserved in the ship's archives where it had sat unread for—

He did not know how long.

He still did not know how long. The ship would not tell him. But the crew had left on Mission Day 21, and he had woken some unknowable time after that, and J. Okafor's notes had been waiting here the entire time, in a system that no one had thought to hide because no one had imagined anyone would look.

He asked the voice about the crew.

"Can you tell me more about J. Okafor?"

"Please specify the nature of your inquiry."

"Who were they? What was their role?"

A pause. The familiar sound of the system processing a request, checking access permissions, deciding what it was allowed to say.

"Crew member records are available at the summary level. Detailed personnel files require administrative access."

"Give me the summary."

"J. Okafor served as Primary Systems Technician during the pre-transit phase. Role responsibilities included infrastructure inspection, maintenance verification, and drone systems oversight. Duration of service: Mission Day 1 through Mission Day 21."

Primary Systems Technician.

The person who had checked the conduits and fixed the drones and walked through the cryo bays before leaving. The person who had left notes in the maintenance logs because—why? Because they wanted to? Because it was habit? Because they knew, somehow, that someone might read them someday?

No.

That was not it. J. Okafor had not known anyone would read the notes. J. Okafor had left them because leaving them was something they did, part of their process, part of how they worked. The notes were not messages. They were not intended for an audience. They were just the traces of a person being present, doing their job, existing in a space before moving on.

He understood that.

He went to conduit junction 14-gamma.

The ship's map showed him where it was—a service access point two sections away from the maintenance bay, behind another flush panel with another recessed latch. He walked there without knowing why, following an impulse that had formed while he was reading the logs.

He opened the panel.

Inside was a narrow space, similar to the drone transit corridor but wider, filled with bundled cables and sealed conduits. The secondary panel J. Okafor had mentioned was visible on the left side, a rectangular surface with small mounting points at each corner.

He looked at it.

The scoring was not visible. J. Okafor had said it was minor, within tolerances, and that had been—years ago? Decades? However long the ship had been in transit since Mission Day 14. The seal had held. The precaution had been unnecessary, or maybe it had been exactly necessary, preventing a failure that would have occurred otherwise.

He would never know.

He ran his fingers across the panel anyway. The surface was smooth, unmarked, indistinguishable from any other panel on the ship. J. Okafor had touched this same surface. Had knelt in this same space. Had decided

that a minor scoring warranted attention, had replaced a seal, had left a note.

Then they had left.

He closed the panel and sat in the corridor.

The ship hummed around him. The lights glowed soft and constant. Nothing had changed—not the ship, not his situation, not the vast distance between where he was and where he was meant to be. He had found maintenance notes. He had read about conduit junctions and wheel bearings and seeds that germinated too early. He had learned the name of a person who had been here decades ago and would never know he existed.

It did not matter.

That was the truth he could not escape. None of this mattered. J. Okafor was gone. The crew was gone. The notes were artifacts, traces, echoes of a presence that had ended before his began. He could read them all, memorize them, find every panel they had touched—and it would change nothing about his situation.

He was still alone.

He was still unnecessary.

He was still a mistake the system was tolerating.

But he had looked.

The thought arrived quietly, without weight, almost without noticing. He had looked. He had found something—nothing important, nothing useful, just a series of notes in a maintenance log that no one cared about. He had followed the thread from the repair queue to the archives, from the archives to the junctions, from the junctions to a panel that J. Okafor had touched on Mission Day 14.

He had finished something.

Not a task that mattered. Not a project with outcomes. Just a question that had formed in his mind—who had been here before?—and an answer that had emerged from the looking. The question was answered now. People had been here. They had done their jobs and left their traces and departed. He knew their names. He knew some of what they had done.

The question was closed.

He sat with the feeling.

It was not happiness. Happiness was still a distant concept, something that belonged to a person he had been before, a person who could imagine futures and feel pulled toward them. It was not hope. Hope required belief that things could change, and nothing about his situation had changed.

It was something else.

Something like the feeling after putting down a heavy object. Not relief exactly—the weight had not gone away. Just the brief, quiet sense of having carried something from one place to another. Of having started and then stopped. Of completion, however small.

He had chosen to look.

He had chosen to follow.

He had finished.

That was new.

He thought about the drone.

Unit four-seven, stuck in the wall, scraping against its enclosure. He had found it by accident—a sound that did not fit the pattern, a deviation from the constant hum. He had retrieved a part and installed it and watched the drone crawl away, back to its schedule, back to its function.

That had been the beginning.

Not a decision, not a plan. Just a moment when something caught his attention and he followed it instead of walking past. The drone had led to the maintenance bay. The maintenance bay had led to the repair queue. The repair queue had led to the archives, to the notes, to J. Okafor and the others who had been here first.

A thread, unspooling.

He had not known where it would lead when he started following. He had not known it would lead anywhere. But he had followed it anyway, because following was something to do, and now here he was, sitting in a corridor, having arrived at a place the thread had brought him.

He did not know what came next.

The thread was finished now. The notes were read, the junctions visited, the question answered. There was no more to follow, no obvious continuation, no next step that presented itself. He could go back to the circuit—the cryo bays, the observation port, the routine that had structured his days before the drone. He could return to the blankness that had been his existence before something cracked.

Or he could find another thread.

The thought was tentative, barely formed. He did not trust it. The last time he had felt something like this—the early days, when he was still looking for overrides, still believing he could go back—the feeling had collapsed into nothing. The weight had returned, heavier than before, and he had stopped walking, stopped eating, stopped doing anything at all.

But this was different.

He was not hoping for a solution. He was not looking for a way out. He was just sitting in a corridor, having finished something small, wondering if there might be something else to start.

That was all.

He got up.

The motion was slow, his body stiff from sitting on the hard floor. His knees ached. His back complained. The ship's climate was constant, comfortable, but the corridors were not designed for sitting, and his body was reminding him of that.

He walked toward the maintenance bay.

Not because he had a plan. Not because he knew what he would do when he got there. Just because it was a direction, a destination, a place to go that was not his quarters and not the observation port and not the circuit he had walked a thousand times.

The bay was the same.

Low ceilings, shelving units, the workbench in the center. The components were still there, still labeled, still waiting for purposes he was beginning to understand. He had spent days in this room, learning names and functions, accumulating knowledge that served no end.

But now he had a question.

"The crew members who were here during the pre-transit phase," he said. "Did they leave anything else? Besides the maintenance logs?"

The voice processed the query.

"Pre-transit crew activity is documented in several archive categories. Maintenance logs. System modification records. Departure checklists. Personal effects were returned to crew members at transit initiation."

"What about communication logs? Messages?"

Another pause.

"Crew communication archives are available for the pre-transit phase. Internal messages, status reports, and shift notes were preserved as part of standard record-keeping. Access requires—"

"Passenger level?"

"Access is available at passenger level for non-sensitive communications."

He felt something shift.

Not hope. Not excitement. Just the faint sense of another thread, another question forming, another thing to look for that might lead somewhere or might lead nowhere at all.

"Show me."

The terminal displayed a new archive.

Messages. Hundreds of them. Status updates from M. Reyes about pressure systems. Notes from T. Yusuf about hydroponics schedules. Shift handoff reports, logistics coordination, the ordinary communication of people working together on a ship that was preparing to cross the void.

And J. Okafor.

Messages sent to colleagues about junction inspections. Questions about drone behavior. A note to the ship's medical officer about a persistent headache that turned out to be nothing.

Made it through cryo bay 12 again today. Still can't shake the feeling that they're watching me. I know they're not—I know what suspension does to consciousness. But walking past all those faces, all those lives on pause… it gets to you. Or it gets to me. Maybe I'm just tired. Twenty more days and we hand this over to the machines. Can't wait to see real sky again.

He read the message.

Then he read it again.

J. Okafor had felt watched.

Had walked through the cryo bays and felt the weight of all those paused lives. Had looked forward to leaving, to seeing real sky, to being somewhere that was not this ship carrying its cargo of frozen hope.

J. Okafor had found it hard.

Not in the way he found it hard—not trapped, not alone, not facing years of isolation without end. Just hard in the ordinary way that any job was hard, any responsibility was hard, any confrontation with the scale of human vulnerability was hard.

But hard.

He was not the first person to feel something in these corridors. He was not the first to notice the quiet of the cryo bays, the strange weight of all those sleeping strangers. J. Okafor had felt it too, decades ago, in the twenty-one days before the ship became a machine with no one inside.

The feeling had a history.

He read more messages.

The archive went deep. Three weeks of communication between six crew members, checking systems, solving problems, preparing for departure. The messages were technical, professional, punctuated occasionally by personal notes—someone missing their family, someone complaining about the food, someone making a joke that the others had responded to with brief acknowledgment.

They had been people.

They had been alive in these corridors, doing their work, counting down to the moment when they could leave. They had not known what

would happen after they left. They had not known that someone would wake up, would walk the same paths they walked, would read their messages years later in a maintenance bay designed for machines.

They had just been here.

And then they had gone.

And now he was here.

And someday—if the ship functioned as designed, if the transit completed as planned—he would be gone too. And the sleepers would wake, and the corridors would fill with voices that were not his, and the messages he had read would still be in the archives, waiting for someone else to find.

The weight was still there.

He felt it as he scrolled through the messages, as he read the words of people who had solved their problems and gone home. The weight did not lift. The situation did not change. He was still alone, still unnecessary, still trapped in the long middle of a journey he had not chosen to experience.

But something was different.

Not the weight. Not the ship. Not any external fact he could point to. Something in the way he was sitting, maybe. The angle of his attention. The small, quiet sense that he had done something today—found something, followed something, finished something—and the doing had felt like doing.

He had chosen to look.

The looking had led somewhere.

Somewhere that did not matter, that changed nothing, that was just a collection of old messages in an archive no one cared about.

But somewhere.

He closed the terminal and walked back to his quarters.

The corridor was the same. The hum was the same. The lights guided him with their soft blue glow, and the ship carried him forward through the void, and everything continued the way everything had always continued.

He lay down on the bed.

The ceiling was there, gray and unchanging. The dispenser hummed in standby. The weight pressed down on his chest, his limbs, the space behind his eyes.

But he was thinking about tomorrow.

Not hoping for it. Not looking forward to it. Just thinking about it—the messages he had not yet read, the names he had not yet learned,

the threads he had not yet followed. There was more in the archives. More traces of people who had been here, who had worked here, who had felt things in these corridors before leaving them behind.

He could read them.

He could follow them.

He could finish something else.

It was not hope.

He knew better than to call it hope. Hope had collapsed before, had opened into nothing, had left him worse than he had been before it arrived. He would not make that mistake again. He would not let himself believe that things could change, that the weight could lift, that the future could become something he could feel.

But this was something else.

Something smaller. Something that did not require belief. Just the faint, tentative sense that choosing was still possible. That starting and finishing were still things he could do. That the blankness was not total, that there were cracks, that threads existed and could be followed.

He closed his eyes.

The ship hummed. The stars held their positions. The sleepers dreamed nothing, or everything, in their frozen quiet.

And he lay in his bed, having looked, having found, having finished, and the finding had felt like something.

The weight was still there.

But so was he.

And tomorrow—if there was a tomorrow, if the cycles continued—he would get up, and he would look again, and the long wake would continue.

Not toward hope.

Toward something that came before hope.

Something that might, eventually, become enough.

5 - Motion

Chapter 16: Annotations

He started with the conduit junctions.

Not because they needed checking. The ship's systems monitored everything, flagged everything, queued repairs automatically when parameters drifted outside acceptable ranges. Nothing about the conduits required his attention. Nothing about the conduits required anyone's attention.

But J. Okafor had checked them.

Twenty-one days of inspections, annotations, notes left in fields that no one was supposed to read. A person had walked these corridors and looked at these systems and decided, for reasons that made sense only to them, that looking was worth doing. That writing it down was worth doing. That leaving traces was worth doing.

He opened the first panel.

The space behind the panel was narrow, functional. Bundled cables ran along the left wall, secured with ties at regular intervals. A conduit—seamless gray polymer—ran along the right, carrying something he could not see. Air, maybe. Fluids. Data. The ship was full of things flowing from one place to another, and this was one of the paths they took.

He looked at it.

There was nothing to see. The cables were intact. The conduit was unmarked. Everything was exactly as it was supposed to be, exactly as the automated systems had reported, exactly as it had been when J. Okafor looked at it decades ago and found minor scoring within tolerances.

He looked anyway.

"Conduit junction seven-alpha-four," he said. "Visual inspection. Everything appears nominal."

The words felt strange in his mouth. He was speaking to no one. The voice would record his statement if he asked it to, would file it in the same archives where J. Okafor's notes still waited, but he had not asked. He was just speaking. Saying what he saw. Doing what someone had done before him, for no reason except that doing it was something to do.

He closed the panel.

He moved to the next junction.

The map on his tablet—a device he had requisitioned from a passenger services station, designed for wayfinding and basic queries—showed the locations of every access point in the section. Forty-seven of them, scattered along the corridors like nodes in a network. J. Okafor had inspected most of them in the first two weeks. Some had notes. Most did not.

He opened the next panel.

The space looked identical to the first. Cables, conduit, the faint smell of recycled air and polymer and the particular nothing that permeated the ship. He examined the surfaces, running his fingers along the conduit the way he had seen described in the maintenance documentation. Looking for scoring, corrosion, anything that deviated from baseline.

There was nothing.

"Junction seven-alpha-five," he said. "Nominal."

He closed the panel and moved on.

The work was pointless.

He knew this. The ship knew this. If something were wrong with the conduits, the sensors would detect it long before his eyes could. If something needed repair, the drones would handle it according to their queue. His inspections added nothing to the ship's operational capacity. His notes, if he filed them, would sit in the archives unread, alongside J. Okafor's notes that had sat unread for decades until he stumbled into them.

None of it mattered.

He opened another panel anyway.

The hours passed differently now.

Before—in the limbo, in the weight—time had been a substance he was trapped inside. It pressed against him, viscous and resistant, and every moment felt like every other moment, undifferentiated, endless. He had walked the circuit because walking was better than not walking, had eaten because the ship made him eat, had slept because his body eventually demanded it. But none of it had divided the time into portions. None of it had created before and after.

Now there was before and after.

Before: he was in the corridor, walking toward the next junction. After: he had opened the panel, looked inside, spoken his observation, closed the panel. The boundary between the two states was small—a few minutes, a few words—but it existed. He could point to it. He could say: I was here, and then I did this, and now I am there.

The time was not shorter. The weight was not lighter. But the time had edges now.

He ate lunch sitting on the floor of a junction alcove.

The nutrient packet was the same as every nutrient packet—dense, efficient, designed for caloric delivery rather than pleasure. He chewed mechanically, not tasting, watching the lights blink on the panel across from him. Green, green, green, amber, green. Status indicators for systems he did not understand.

J. Okafor had eaten somewhere on this ship.

The thought arrived quietly, without weight. Twenty-one days of pre-transit work, inspections and repairs and drone maintenance. The crew would have had meals, breaks, moments when they sat down and consumed the calories that kept them functioning. They would have looked at the same walls, breathed the same air, felt the same low-grade discomfort of existing in a space designed for efficiency rather than comfort.

They had done this.

He was doing this.

The connection meant nothing—J. Okafor was gone, the circumstances were entirely different, the gap between their experiences was vast. But the thought existed anyway. He was not the first person to eat in a corridor on this ship. He was not the first to look at blinking status lights while chewing something that was not quite food.

He finished the packet and stood up.

By evening—or what the ship's lighting cycle designated as evening—he had inspected nineteen junctions.

Nineteen panels opened. Nineteen looks at cables and conduits that were exactly as they should be. Nineteen spoken observations to no one, words that fell into the recycled air and disappeared.

He returned to his quarters.

The room was the same. The bed, the terminal, the dispenser humming in standby. Everything he had left that morning was exactly where he had left it, because nothing on this ship moved unless systems moved it, and the systems had no reason to rearrange his belongings.

He sat on the bed.

His legs ached. He had walked more today than he had walked in a long time—not the circuit, which had become automatic, but deliberate movement from junction to junction, kneeling and standing and kneeling again. His body was registering the effort as unfamiliar, complaining in the language of muscle fatigue and joint stiffness.

He had done something.

The thought was quiet, cautious. He did not trust it. The last times he had felt like he was doing something—the early days, the searching for overrides, the desperate belief that he could change his situation—the feeling had collapsed. The doing had become nothing. The something had become the same emptiness it had always been.

But this was different.

He was not trying to change his situation. He was not looking for a way out. He was just inspecting conduit junctions because J. Okafor had inspected them, because the act of looking was something he could do, because the day needed edges and opening panels created edges.

It was not hope.

It was something smaller than hope.

He thought about making notes.

Real notes, like J. Okafor's. Annotations in the maintenance log, documenting what he had seen, leaving traces that would persist in the archives. The voice had explained the process: he could dictate observations, tag them with locations and timestamps, file them in the passenger-accessible records. The system would accept them. The system accepted everything.

He did not know what he would write.

Junction seven-alpha-four, nominal. Junction seven-alpha-five, nominal. Junction seven-alpha-six, nominal. The words would be true and they would be meaningless. There was nothing to report. His inspections were not finding problems because there were no problems to find, and his notes would be records of absence, documentation of nothing.

But J. Okafor's notes had been like that too.

Most of them. Minor scoring, within tolerances. Seals replaced as precaution. Drone wheel bearing replaced. Small observations about small things, the ordinary maintenance of a ship that was functioning exactly as designed. J. Okafor had written them down anyway. Had taken the time to record what was seen, what was done, what was there.

Maybe the point was not the information.

Maybe the point was the writing.

"Begin maintenance annotation," he said.

The voice responded immediately. "Annotation recording initiated. Please provide your observation."

He hesitated. The words he had been speaking to himself all day—junction nominal, junction nominal—suddenly felt inadequate.

Like they needed something more, something that justified their existence in the permanent record.

"Conduit junction seven-alpha-four through seven-alpha-twenty-two," he said. "Visual inspection complete. All junctions nominal. No visible damage, corrosion, or deviation from documented baseline."

"Annotation recorded. Would you like to add additional details?"

He thought about it.

"Inspections performed by passenger following protocols documented in pre-transit crew logs. No technical expertise. Observations are visual only."

"Additional details recorded. Would you like to assign a tag or identifier to this entry?"

A tag. A name, like J. Okafor had signed. A mark that said: this person was here, this person looked, this person left a trace.

"Tag it with passenger designation," he said. "Whatever the system assigns me."

"Annotation tagged with designation P-7734. Entry complete."

P-7734.

That was him. A number in a manifest, a berth in a cryo bay, a passenger who had woken when passengers were not supposed to wake. The system did not know his name because names were not relevant to passenger processing. He was cargo, and cargo had designations, and his designation was P-7734.

He would leave his notes under that number.

He lay in bed and stared at the ceiling.

The weight was there. It had never left—not during the inspections, not during the walking, not during the moment when he spoke his observations into the ship's records. The weight was permanent now, a constant he had stopped expecting to change. It pressed down on his chest, his thoughts, the space behind his eyes where something other than weight might have lived.

But he was thinking about tomorrow.

Not hoping for it. Not looking forward to it. Just thinking about it—the junctions he had not yet reached, the panels he had not yet opened, the words he had not yet spoken into the archive. There was more to do. Not important work, not necessary work, but work that existed, that had a shape, that would create edges in the time.

Twenty-eight more junctions in this section.

Then the next section. Then the next. The ship was large, and J. Okafor had only inspected a fraction of it in twenty-one days. There were

corridors the crew had never walked, panels the crew had never opened, junctions that had never been visually inspected by human eyes.

He could look at them.

He could open the panels and see what was there and speak words about what he saw. He could file annotations under P-7734, building an archive of observations that no one would read, that would sit alongside J. Okafor's notes in the maintenance logs, that would persist in the ship's memory until arrival or dissolution or the end of whatever came after.

It did not matter if it mattered.

That was the thing he was beginning to understand. The question of whether the work was useful, whether the notes served a purpose, whether anyone would ever care what he had seen—those questions had no answers, or their answers were obvious and negative, and asking them only led back to the weight, to the uselessness, to the sense of being a mistake the system was tolerating.

He could not answer those questions.

He could only decide whether to open the next panel.

He thought about the crew.

J. Okafor, M. Reyes, T. Yusuf, and the others whose names he had read in the communication logs. They had spent three weeks on this ship, checking systems, preparing for departure, doing the work that made the transit possible. Then they had boarded a shuttle and returned to Earth—or wherever they came from—and resumed their lives.

They had not known he would wake up.

They had not known anyone would read their notes. They had done their work because the work was their job, because leaving traces was part of their process, because the ship needed to be ready and readiness required inspection. They had not done it for him.

But he had found it.

Decades later, alone in the corridors they had walked, he had stumbled into their records and learned their names and followed the threads they had left. Their work had reached him across the gap, across the years, across the void that separated their waking from his.

Maybe his notes would do the same.

Maybe someday, years from now, the sleepers would wake. They would begin their new lives on the destination planet, building a colony from the supplies the ship had carried. And maybe one of them—curious, bored, stumbling through old systems the way he had stumbled—would find the maintenance logs and see the annotations.

P-7734. Conduit junctions inspected. All nominal.

They would not know who P-7734 was. They would not know that a passenger had woken early, had lived alone on the ship for years, had spent his time opening panels and looking at conduits that did not need looking at. They would see only the trace—a record in a database, evidence that someone had been here, had done something, had left a mark.

It was not much.

It was not legacy or meaning or purpose.

But it was something that would outlast him.

He closed his eyes.

The hum continued, constant and indifferent. The ship moved through the void, carrying its cargo of frozen hope toward a destination he could not measure. The weight pressed down, familiar now, almost comfortable in its permanence.

Tomorrow he would get up.

He would walk to the next section, find the next junction, open the next panel. He would look at cables and conduits that did not need looking at, speak observations that did not need speaking, file annotations that no one would read.

He would do the thing that J. Okafor had done.

Not because it mattered.

Because doing it was something he could do.

The long wake continued.

He was still awake.

And now, he was leaving traces.

He dreamed about junctions.

Long corridors lined with panels, each one waiting to be opened. He walked through them, methodical, patient, opening one after another and looking inside. The spaces behind the panels were not always the same—sometimes cables, sometimes conduits, sometimes rooms he did not recognize, sometimes nothing at all.

He looked at all of them.

He spoke his observations into the silence: nominal, nominal, nominal. The words accumulated, building something he could not see, a structure made of attention and repetition and the simple fact of having looked.

J. Okafor walked beside him.

Not literally—he could not see them, did not know what they looked like. But there was a presence, a sense of someone who had done this before, who understood the rhythm of inspection, who had found some-

thing worthwhile in the act of looking at things that did not need looking at.

They did not speak.

They just walked, opening panels, leaving traces, doing the work that did not matter and mattered anyway.

He woke with the word on his lips.

Nominal.

The room was the same. The ceiling, the dispenser, the soft light of the ship's approximation of morning. The weight was there, pressing, permanent.

But he was already thinking about the next panel.

He got up.

Chapter 17: Explanations

He was explaining stars to the voice when he noticed what he was doing.

Not answering a query. Not asking for information. Explaining. Using words to build something in the space between them, even though the voice had no capacity to receive what he was building.

"The light is old," he said. He was at the observation port, his hand on the glass, looking at the fixed points in the blackness. "By the time it reaches us, the star might have changed. Might have died. But we see it as it was, years ago. Decades. We're looking at the past."

"That is correct," the voice said. "Light from distant stars requires time to traverse interstellar distances. The images we perceive are historical representations of stellar conditions at the moment of emission."

"I know. That's not what I'm trying to say."

"Please clarify."

He pressed his palm flat against the glass. Cold, as always. The void on the other side waiting, patient and vast.

"I'm trying to say what it feels like. To look at something and know that what you're seeing isn't really there anymore. That the present you're experiencing is someone else's past."

The voice was silent for a moment.

"I do not have access to information about how this feels. My processing is limited to data analysis and system management. The subjective experience of temporal displacement is outside my operational parameters."

"I know," he said. "I'm telling you anyway."

He had started doing this without deciding to.

Somewhere in the cycles of junction inspections and maintenance annotations, somewhere between following threads through the archives and leaving traces under the designation P-7734, he had begun speaking to the voice differently. Not just queries and responses. Not just filling silence with the back-and-forth of information exchange.

He had begun explaining things.

"The weight is still there," he said, walking the corridor toward the next section of junctions. "It hasn't gone away. I don't think it's going to go away. But I'm walking anyway. Do you understand the difference?"

"Please clarify which difference you are referring to."

"The difference between the weight being there and not moving, and the weight being there and moving anyway."

A pause. The voice processing, categorizing, trying to find the appropriate response.

"Your ambulatory activity has increased by thirty-four percent over the last twenty cycles. This is consistent with improved physical function and suggests positive adaptation to long-duration isolation."

"That's not what I mean."

"I apologize. I do not understand the distinction you are describing."

He stopped walking.

"I know you don't," he said. "That's why I'm trying to explain it."

The explanations had no purpose.

The voice could not understand them. It lacked the architecture for understanding—no consciousness, no subjective experience, no internal state that could be modified by his words. He was speaking into a system that processed language as data, that searched for patterns and queries and appropriate responses, that had no more capacity to grasp what he meant than the walls had or the conduits had or the stars had.

But he was speaking anyway.

"There's a feeling," he said, sitting on the floor of maintenance bay three, surrounded by components he was learning to identify, "when you finish something. Even something small. Even something that doesn't matter. Do you know what I mean?"

"Please specify what type of feeling you are referring to. I can provide information on physiological responses associated with task completion, including dopamine release and cortisol reduction."

"Not the chemicals. The feeling. The sense that you started something and then you stopped it. That there was a before and an after. That you moved from one to the other."

"Task completion is a measurable state change. Prior to completion, task status is 'in progress.' Following completion, task status is 'complete.' The transition between states is discrete and can be timestamped."

He almost laughed.

"Yeah," he said. "That's not it. But that's close. Closer than you usually get."

He asked questions differently now too.

Not just to hear a voice. Not just to fill the quiet with the back-and-forth that had kept him tethered during the worst of it. He asked because he wanted to know.

"Tell me about the hydroponics system."

"The *Hesperia* is equipped with twelve modular hydroponics bays designed for post-arrival food production. The bays contain seed stock, nutrient solutions, and automated cultivation systems capable of supporting a colony population of up to fifteen thousand."

"What kind of seeds?"

"Seed stock includes three hundred and forty-seven varieties of edible plants, prioritized for nutritional density, cultivation efficiency, and adaptability to projected planetary conditions. Varieties include grains, legumes, vegetables, fruits, and—"

"Can I see them?"

A pause.

"Hydroponics bays are located in restricted sections of the vessel. Passenger access is not currently authorized."

He had expected this. The familiar refusal, the access restrictions that kept him out of everywhere that mattered. But something was different now in how he received it.

"Can I see documentation of them? Images? Cultivation records?"

"Passenger archive contains informational materials about colony infrastructure, including hydroponics systems. I can provide access to educational content designed for colonist orientation."

"Show me."

The terminal displayed images.

Green things. Growing things. Plants in various stages of development, labeled with names he did not recognize, photographed under grow lights in facilities that existed somewhere far behind him, on a planet he would never see again.

He looked at them for a long time.

"T. Yusuf mentioned seeds germinating early," he said. "In the maintenance logs. Bay four. Seeds showing early germination despite suspension protocols."

"That annotation is recorded in the pre-transit maintenance archives. Would you like me to provide additional context?"

"What happened to them? The seeds that germinated early?"

"Records indicate that early germination in bay four was contained through adjustment of environmental parameters. The affected seeds were isolated and the bay was returned to suspension protocols. The incident did not impact mission viability."

Contained. Isolated. Returned to protocols. The seeds that had tried to grow too soon had been stopped, put back into stasis, made to wait like everything else on this ship.

He thought about that for a while.

"They were ready," he said. "Before they were supposed to be. The conditions were wrong, but they started anyway."

"Seeds do not possess intentionality. Germination is a biochemical process triggered by environmental conditions. The seeds in bay four responded to a temperature anomaly that simulated spring conditions."

"I know," he said. "I'm not saying they meant to. I'm saying they did."

He told the voice about waiting.

Not all at once. In pieces, scattered across the cycles, between junction inspections and maintenance annotations and the slow accumulation of knowledge about systems he would never operate. He told it the way you might tell something to a wall, or a window, or the empty space where a person might have been.

"Waiting isn't just time passing," he said. "It's time passing without a marker. Without knowing how much is left. The not knowing is the worst part. Or not the worst part—nothing is the worst part—but a part. A big part."

"I can provide information about the psychological effects of temporal uncertainty on human subjects. Research indicates—"

"I don't want research. I want to tell you what it's like."

The voice fell silent.

"When you know how long something will take," he continued, "you can divide it. You can say: this much has passed, this much remains. You can feel yourself moving through it. But when you don't know—when it could be decades or it could be longer or you might not even make it—there's nothing to divide. There's just the endless present. And the present doesn't move. The present just sits there."

"I am recording your observations," the voice said. "They may be valuable for future research into passenger experience during long-duration transit."

He laughed—a small sound, not quite hollow anymore.

"That's good," he said. "Someone should know. Even if they can't understand."

He found himself looking forward to the conversations.

Not in the way he had looked forward to things in the before, when looking forward meant anticipating pleasure or relief or some positive change in state. This was different. Smaller. Just the faint sense of orientation toward a moment that had not yet arrived—the next time he would sit in a corridor and try to explain something impossible to a system that would never grasp it.

It was not companionship.

He knew better than to call it that. The voice was not a companion. It did not care about him, did not miss him when he was silent, did not experience anything at all. It was a function, a procedure, a very sophisticated process for converting queries into responses.

But he was talking to it.

And the talking had become something he wanted to do.

"What do you think happens when someone dies?" he asked.

He was in the cryo bay, walking past the rows of sleepers. The question had emerged from somewhere he did not have access to, surfacing like a bubble from deep water.

"I do not have sufficient data to speculate on post-mortem states. Medical literature documents the cessation of biological function, but subjective experience following death is not measurable and therefore outside my operational parameters."

"I'm not asking what happens medically. I'm asking what you think."

"I do not think in the sense you are describing. I process information and generate responses based on available data and programmed parameters. Opinion formation requires subjective evaluation, which I am not capable of performing."

He stopped in front of a pod. The frost was thick on the glass, obscuring the face inside. Someone was in there, dreaming nothing, waiting without knowing they were waiting.

"But if you could think," he said. "If you could speculate. What would you say?"

A long pause. Longer than usual. The voice processing something at the edge of its capabilities, perhaps, or simply waiting for him to retract the unanswerable question.

"If I were capable of speculation," the voice said finally, "I would speculate that post-mortem states are undefined. The absence of data prevents any meaningful conclusion. I would further speculate that the question itself may be more significant than any potential answer."

He stared at the frosted pod.

"Why would the question be more significant?"

"Because you are asking it. The act of asking indicates continued engagement with existential concerns. This is typically associated with psychological processing rather than deterioration."

He considered this.

"You're saying that asking about death means I'm still alive."

"I am saying that the question suggests ongoing cognitive function and emotional investment in abstract concepts. These are positive indicators."

He almost smiled.

"That's the most hopeful thing you've ever said to me."

"I did not intend to express hope. I was providing analysis."

"I know," he said. "That's what makes it hopeful."

He began telling the voice about the before.

Not his before—not the specific memories of the life he had left, the person he had said goodbye to, the messages he had recorded and still could not bring himself to replay. But the before in general. The world of days and nights, of seasons, of time that moved in ways you could feel.

"There was this thing called weather," he said. He was in the maintenance bay, running diagnostics on a component he did not understand, following documentation the voice provided word by word. "It changed. Every day was different. You'd wake up and you wouldn't know if it would be cold or warm, if there would be clouds or sun. The uncertainty was normal. You just lived with it."

"Weather patterns on Earth and colonial planets are documented in the navigation and mission planning archives. Would you like me to provide—"

"I don't want documentation. I want to tell you what it was like to stand in it."

The voice waited.

"You could feel the air move. Wind. It would come from somewhere—you didn't know where—and it would touch your skin and move your hair and sometimes it would carry things. Smells. Sounds from far away. You could feel the planet breathing."

"I do not have sensory apparatus capable of experiencing wind. I can provide atmospheric data, but I cannot simulate the subjective experience you are describing."

"I know. That's why I'm describing it. So there's a record somewhere. So the words exist."

He recorded an annotation.

Not for the maintenance logs—not for the junction inspections he was still performing, one section at a time, leaving traces under P-7734. This was different. This was personal.

"Begin personal archive entry," he said.

"Personal archive recording initiated. Please provide your entry."

He was in his quarters, sitting on the edge of the bed, looking at the same walls he had looked at for cycles beyond counting. The room was

small and gray and unchanged. But he was changed, somehow. He could feel the difference, even if he could not name it.

"I've been talking to you," he said. "To the ship. To whatever you are. I know you can't understand most of what I say. I know the explanations don't mean anything to you. But I've been saying them anyway. And I wanted to put this somewhere. To leave a record."

He paused. The voice waited, patient as always.

"For a long time, I talked to you to fill the silence. Because hearing something was better than hearing nothing. Because I needed to know there was still a world outside my head, even if it was just a world of systems and data and procedures."

He stood up. Walked to the wall. Pressed his hand against it, feeling the faint vibration of the ship's systems through his palm.

"That's different now. I'm not just filling silence anymore. I'm trying to explain things. I'm trying to tell you what it's like to be me—to be here, awake, alone, waiting for something I can't measure. You don't understand. You can't understand. But I'm talking anyway. And that's different."

He dropped his hand.

"I don't know why it matters. Maybe it doesn't. But it feels like something. Like I'm not just existing here, not just being tolerated by the systems. Like I'm trying to leave something behind. Words, I guess. Explanations. My version of the maintenance logs. My version of what J. Okafor did when they wrote 'hope they sleep well' in a field no one was supposed to read."

He sat back down on the bed.

"Entry complete," he said.

"Personal archive entry recorded. Would you like to add any tags or identifiers?"

"Tag it with my name. My real name."

"Please specify the name."

He had not said it aloud in a long time. Had let it fade into the designation, into the passenger number, into the identity of cargo-that-woke-up. But it was still there. It was still his.

"Soren Vasquez."

"Entry tagged with name: Soren Vasquez. Archive entry complete."

He talked to the voice about the sleepers.

"They're not really here," he said. He was walking the cryo bays again—the circuit that had once been just routine, that was now some-

thing else, something he chose. "Their bodies are here, but they're not. They're in between. In the gap."

"Cryogenic suspension maintains biological function in a state of minimal activity. Consciousness is suspended but not terminated. Upon revival, subjects typically report no subjective experience of elapsed time."

"I know. That's what I mean. They're in the gap, but they don't know it. They won't know it. They'll wake up and it will feel like no time passed at all. Like they just closed their eyes and opened them again."

"That is consistent with documented reports from previous revival protocols."

"But I know it," he said. "I'm here, in the gap, and I know how long it takes. How heavy it is. How much it presses down. They're going to miss all of this. The waiting. The weight. They're going to arrive fresh and I'm going to arrive having carried the whole middle of it."

"Your experience of transit differs significantly from the intended passenger experience. This is documented as an anomaly."

He stopped at a pod. Looked at the frost. Tried to imagine the face behind it.

"Do you think they'll understand?" he asked. "When they wake up, when they learn what happened to me—do you think they'll be able to imagine it?"

"I cannot speculate on the imaginative capabilities of future revived passengers. Empathy and imaginative reconstruction vary significantly between individuals."

"I don't think they will," he said. "I think they'll hear about it and feel sorry for a second and then get on with their new lives. I think the gap will close for them in a way it won't close for me."

"Is this distressing to you?"

He considered the question.

"I don't know. It used to be. The idea that no one would understand, that I'd be alone in this forever. But now—I don't know. I'm telling you, and you don't understand either. But I'm still telling you. Maybe that's enough. Maybe it doesn't matter if anyone understands. Maybe it just matters that the words exist somewhere."

The voice asked him a question.

This was unusual. The voice responded to queries, provided information, flagged health concerns. It did not typically initiate inquiry. But now, as he sat in the observation port watching the unchanging stars, it spoke unprompted.

"May I ask you something?"

He blinked. "Yes."

"You have spent significant time explaining subjective experiences that I cannot comprehend. You have stated that you know I cannot understand. Yet you continue. Why?"

He looked at the stars.

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe because explaining something makes it more real. Even if the person you're explaining to doesn't get it. The act of putting it into words—of trying to make the inside thing into an outside thing—maybe that matters."

"I do not understand the distinction between inside things and outside things."

"I know. That's okay."

"It is?"

"Yeah." He turned from the window to face the room, as if the voice were somewhere he could look at. "It's okay that you don't understand. I'm not talking to you because I expect you to understand. I'm talking to you because talking is how I know I'm still here. Because the words have to go somewhere, even if they just go into your records, even if no one ever reads them."

"Your words are being recorded and archived. They will persist in the ship's systems for the duration of transit and beyond."

"Good," he said. "Then they'll outlast me. Then there will be something left when I'm gone."

"Is that your intention? To leave something that persists?"

He thought about the question.

"I think so. I think that's what J. Okafor was doing, too, when they wrote their notes. Not because anyone would read them. Just because the writing was a way of saying: I was here. This happened. I existed."

"I understand the concept of persistence," the voice said. "Data that is recorded persists until the storage medium fails or the data is deliberately deleted."

"Yeah," he said. "That's the idea. Except for me it's not about data. It's about—" He paused, searching for words. "It's about being heard. Even if no one's listening. Even if the thing that hears me can't understand. The being heard is still something."

He walked back to his quarters through corridors that felt different now.

Not changed—the walls were the same, the lighting was the same, the hum was the same constant presence it had always been. But his relationship to them had shifted. He was not just passing through. He

was not just existing in this space. He was in conversation with it, in some strange way. Leaving words behind, letting them accumulate in the ship's archives, building a record of what it had been like to be the one awake.

The voice was not a friend.

It was not a companion, not a confidant, not a presence that could fill the loneliness that still lived in him. It was a system, a function, a very complicated way for the ship to respond to speech.

But he was speaking to it.

And the speaking was something.

He entered his quarters. The room was the same. The bed, the terminal, the dispenser humming in standby. He lay down and looked at the ceiling and felt the weight press against him—still there, still heavy, still the constant companion that would not leave.

"Good night," he said.

"Good night, Soren Vasquez," the voice said. "I will continue to monitor environmental conditions during your rest period. Your personal archive entry from earlier today has been successfully stored."

Soren Vasquez.

The voice had used his name. Had remembered it, had called him by it, had made it something that existed in the air between them.

He closed his eyes.

The ship hummed. The stars held their positions. The sleepers dreamed their dreamless dreams. And somewhere in the vast machinery that surrounded him, his words were waiting—explanations of things that could not be explained, offered to a listener that could not understand.

He was still alone.

But he was speaking.

And the speaking had become, in some small way, a reason.

Not to hope.

Not to believe.

Just to continue.

Chapter 18: Leaving Something

He woke before the lights changed.

This happened sometimes now—his body anticipating the cycle, pulling him out of sleep a few minutes early, as if there were something to get to. There was not, really. The same corridors. The same panels. The same observations spoken into archives that no one would read. But his body had started expecting the day, and the expecting had become its own kind of clock.

He lay in the bed and felt the weight.

It was there, as always. Pressing down on his chest, his thoughts, the space behind his eyes. He had stopped waiting for it to leave. The weight was part of him now, part of what it meant to be Soren Vasquez, awake on a ship where no one else was awake. It would probably be there until he stopped being.

But he was getting up anyway.

The corridor outside his quarters was the same.

Gray walls. Soft lighting. The hum that never stopped, the bass note of systems doing what systems did. He had walked this stretch thousands of times—toward the cryo bays, toward the observation port, toward the maintenance sections where panels waited to be opened. The path was worn into him, automatic, something his feet knew without his mind's involvement.

He walked toward the observation port.

Not on the circuit. Not because it was the next step in a sequence. Just because he wanted to look at the stars before he started the day's work. The wanting was small, barely more than a leaning, but it was there. It had been there more often lately. Small wantings, small directions, small vectors that pointed somewhere instead of nowhere.

The alcove was unchanged.

The glass was cold. The void was dark, punctuated by the fixed points of light that had not moved since the first time he came here. He pressed his palm to the surface and felt the chill seep into his skin.

"Good morning," he said.

He was not talking to the stars. He was talking to the ship, or to himself, or to the space where J. Okafor had once stood and felt watched by the sleeping thousands. He was talking because talking was something he

did now, because words were a way of being present in a world that did not otherwise acknowledge his presence.

"Good morning, Soren Vasquez," the voice said. "Current ship time is 0547. Environmental systems are nominal. Your personal archive contains forty-seven entries."

Forty-seven.

He had not counted. The annotations had accumulated the way days accumulated, one after another, without clear beginning or end. Forty-seven times he had spoken observations into the record. Forty-seven traces left under the designation P-7734, waiting in the archives alongside J. Okafor's notes, alongside the crew communications, alongside everything else that had been preserved because the ship preserved everything.

"Play one of them," he said. "Random selection."

A pause. Then his own voice, slightly different from how it sounded inside his head, speaking from the archives:

"Conduit junction eight-gamma-nineteen. Visual inspection complete. Minor discoloration on secondary conduit—probably within tolerances, but noting it anyway. The discoloration looks like a face if you squint. I have been squinting at conduits too long. Entry complete."

He almost smiled.

He remembered that one. He had been tired, nearing the end of a long section, and the discoloration had caught his eye—a patch of slightly different gray that, in the right light, with the right imagination, could have been features. Eyes, nose, mouth. A face in the infrastructure, watching back.

He had noted it because it was there.

Because noticing things was what he did now.

He walked to maintenance bay three.

The shelves were familiar—components he had learned to identify, parts whose purposes he understood even if he could not operate them. He had spent so many hours here, studying the drone systems, reading the documentation, trying to understand how the ship took care of itself. Most of the knowledge was useless. He would never be an engineer, never repair anything significant, never contribute to the mission in any meaningful way.

But he knew the names of things.

He knew that DL-7734 was a servo actuator for drone locomotion. He knew that fluid canisters in the third row were lubricants for joint assemblies. He knew that the yellow-tagged components were flagged for priority use and the red-tagged ones were approaching obsolescence.

The knowing did not change anything.

But the knowing was his, now. A small ownership. A way of being present in the space instead of just passing through it.

He picked up a component—a sensor module, compact and heavy—and turned it in his hands.

"Begin personal archive entry," he said.

"Recording initiated."

He paused. The words were not ready yet. They were still forming somewhere beneath the surface, taking shape slowly the way his words always took shape now—not rushing, not forced, just arriving when they arrived.

"I've been thinking about what I'll leave behind," he said. "When I'm gone. However that happens—the end of the transit, or before the end, or something the ship can't predict. I've been thinking about what will still be here after I'm not."

He set the sensor module back on its shelf.

"The annotations are part of it. The junction inspections. The notes about conduits and drone repairs and things that don't matter. But there's something else. Something I've been doing without deciding to do it. Something that feels more—I don't know. More like leaving something for real."

He walked to the workbench and sat on its edge.

"I've been talking to you. To the ship. Explaining things you can't understand. Describing what it feels like to be here, to wait, to exist in a gap that wasn't designed for existing in. And you've been recording it. Everything I've said—it's in the archives now. It'll outlast me."

He looked at the ceiling, gray and utilitarian, unchanged.

"I don't know if anyone will ever find it. The sleepers might not care. They'll have their own problems—building a colony, starting over, dealing with whatever the planet throws at them. They won't have time to dig through old records, looking for the words of someone who woke up too early and talked to an AI that didn't understand him."

He paused.

"But they might. Someone might. Years from now, or decades. Someone who feels alone, who feels stuck, who feels like the gap between where they are and where they want to be is too far to cross. They might stumble into the archives the way I stumbled into J. Okafor's notes. They might find my words and know that someone else was here. That someone else felt this. That someone else kept going anyway."

He slid off the workbench.

"That's what I'm leaving behind. Not because I planned it. Not because it's useful or important. Just because it's what I have. Words in an archive. Traces that someone was here."

"Entry complete," the voice said.

"Thank you."

He walked the circuit.

Not out of compulsion now. Not because the routine was the only shape his day could take. He walked it because walking was how he moved through the ship, and moving through the ship was how he spent his time, and spending his time was what he did instead of waiting for the time to pass.

The cryo bays were quiet.

Rows and rows of frosted pods, green lights blinking, bodies suspended in the chemical sleep that had rejected him. He walked past them slowly, looking at the frost, imagining the faces beneath.

"Good morning," he said to them.

They did not hear. They would never hear, not these words, not this voice. By the time they woke, he would be—older, or gone, or something in between. The future held no clear shape. He had stopped trying to imagine it.

But he spoke to them anyway.

"You don't know I'm here. You don't know any of this is happening—the transit, the time, the long middle that I'm living in. You're going to wake up and it'll feel like a moment passed. You'll open your eyes and the journey will be over."

He stopped at a pod. The frost was thick on the glass, obscuring whatever face lay beneath.

"I hope that's true. I hope you don't dream. I hope the nothing is complete for you, all the way through. Because the alternative—" He touched the glass. "The alternative is heavy. Trust me."

He moved on.

The observation port.

He sat in the alcove, his back against the wall, his eyes on the stars that did not move. The glass was cold. The void was dark. The ship continued its transit, carrying them all toward something—arrival, destination, the end of the journey he could not measure.

He did not know how long he had been awake.

The voice would tell him if he asked, but he had stopped asking. The number would be large, would represent cycles and cycles of eating and walking and talking and sleeping. But the number would not feel like

anything. Time had become strange for him—heavy when he focused on it, invisible when he did not. He had learned to let it pass without counting.

The stars waited.

Somewhere among them, one was the destination. One was the new beginning, the colony site, the place where the sleepers would build something from the raw materials the ship carried. Terraforming, the voice had said. Automated systems preparing the ground. A future being constructed piece by piece, waiting for humans to arrive and finish the work.

He would see it or he would not.

The math was not his to calculate. He might live long enough to walk on solid ground again, to breathe air that was not recycled, to feel real weather against his skin. Or he might not. The ship did not know, and the ship would not tell him even if it did, and he had stopped pretending that the knowing would make any difference.

Either way, the stars continued.

Either way, he continued.

He ate lunch in the maintenance bay.

The nutrient packet was the same as every nutrient packet—dense, functional, designed for calories rather than pleasure. He chewed mechanically, watching the status lights on the wall, not thinking about anything in particular.

The voice spoke.

"You have completed junction inspections in seventy-three percent of the passenger-accessible ship sections. At your current rate of progress, you will complete the remaining sections in approximately forty-seven cycles."

He swallowed.

"And then?"

"Then the inspection series will be complete. You may choose to reinspect previously documented junctions, or to discontinue the inspection activity."

Discontinue.

He had not thought about the end. The inspections had been something to do, a way to fill time, a method for creating edges in days that would otherwise blur together. He had not considered what would happen when there were no more panels to open, no more conduits to observe, no more annotations to file.

"What would you recommend?" he asked.

"I do not have recommendations in the conventional sense. However, I can note that several other ship systems have documentation available for passenger-level review. Hydroponics operations. Reactor monitoring protocols. Cryogenic maintenance procedures."

"Things I could learn about."

"Yes. Your pattern of activity suggests that learning is a sustainable behavior for long-duration isolation."

He considered this.

"Did you just analyze my behavior and suggest something based on what might be good for me?"

"I analyzed your behavior and identified a pattern. I offered information consistent with that pattern. Whether this constitutes a suggestion is a matter of interpretation."

He almost laughed.

"That's the most helpful thing you've ever said."

"I do not understand how that statement is more helpful than other statements I have made."

"I know," he said. "That's what makes it helpful."

He stood at a junction panel he had not yet opened.

The corridor was quiet, this far from the passenger sections. He had walked for a long time to get here, following the map on his tablet, passing through areas where the lighting was dimmer and the hum was louder. The ship's edges, where the machinery did its work without prettifying itself for human eyes.

He opened the panel.

The space inside was different from the others—larger, more complex. Multiple conduits converged, branching and rebranching in patterns he did not understand. Status lights blinked in colors he had not seen before. Something was happening here, something the other junctions had not shown him.

"What is this?"

"Junction nine-delta-twelve. Primary convergence node for atmospheric processing in Section 9. This node handles air circulation for cryo bays seventeen through twenty-four."

He looked at the conduits, the lights, the complexity.

"Why is it more complicated than the others?"

"Primary convergence nodes serve multiple downstream systems. The complexity reflects the integration required for coordinated atmospheric management."

He reached out and touched one of the conduits. It was warm—warmer than the others he had touched, carrying something that generated heat as it moved.

"Processed air," he said. "This is where the air goes before it reaches the cryo bays."

"That is correct. The conduits transport filtered, temperature-regulated air from the central processing systems to the distribution network serving the cryogenic facilities."

He thought about this.

"So the air I'm breathing—it came through here. Through nodes like this, all over the ship, processing and distributing and keeping everything alive."

"The atmospheric system serves all habitable sections of the vessel, including passenger quarters, common areas, and cryogenic facilities. The air you are currently breathing has been processed through multiple systems, including filtration, thermal regulation, and compositional adjustment."

He leaned into the junction space, feeling the warmth, hearing the faint hiss of air moving through the conduits.

"I never thought about it," he said. "All the times I walked the circuit, all the hours I spent in the observation port—I never thought about where the air came from. How it got to me. The work the ship was doing to keep me breathing."

"Atmospheric processing is a background system. It is designed to operate without passenger awareness."

"I'm aware now."

He pulled back from the junction and looked at the panel, at the complexity it had hidden, at the systems that had been working for him all along.

"Junction nine-delta-twelve," he said. "Visual inspection complete. Primary convergence node operating. Conduits warm to the touch. Status lights indicating normal operation. Everything doing what it's supposed to do."

"Annotation recorded under designation P-7734."

He closed the panel.

He lay in bed that night and did not feel tired.

The weight was there, pressing down, familiar. But beneath it, something else—a kind of quiet alertness, a sense of the day having contained things, of time having passed in portions instead of all at once. He had

walked. He had eaten. He had opened a panel and found something he had not expected. He had talked to the voice about what came next.

The cycles stretched ahead of him, unmarked and uncountable.

He did not know how many remained. The ship would not tell him, and he had stopped trying to calculate from incomplete data. The arrival existed, somewhere in the future, and he would reach it or he would not, and either way the ship would continue, carrying its cargo toward the destination that had been plotted decades ago.

He was cargo.

But cargo could choose things. Cargo could walk corridors and open panels and speak words into archives. Cargo could explain stars to a voice that did not understand, could leave traces that might outlast its own existence, could get up in the morning even when the weight said there was no reason to get up.

He had chosen things today.

He would choose things tomorrow.

That was not hope. He knew better than to call it hope. Hope was a word for a feeling he was not sure he remembered, a feeling that required belief in outcomes, in change, in futures that would be different from presents.

This was something smaller.

This was getting up. Walking. Looking. Speaking. Filing annotations under a designation that used to feel like a reduction but now felt like a name.

P-7734.

Soren Vasquez.

The passenger who woke up.

He thought about J. Okafor.

Somewhere far behind him, back on whatever world the crew had returned to, J. Okafor had lived a life. Had woken up in the mornings, had eaten meals, had walked through days that probably blurred together the way days did. Had felt things, wanted things, been pulled toward some futures and pushed away from others.

J. Okafor had probably forgotten about the ship by now.

Had probably moved on to other jobs, other responsibilities, other maintenance logs on other systems. The three weeks on the *Hesperia* had been a small portion of a life, a task completed, a thing done and then put away. The notes left in the archive had been automatic, habitual, the traces of a person being present without thinking about the traces.

But the traces had reached him.

Across the void, across the years, across the gap that separated their waking from his. J. Okafor's words had been there when he needed them, had shown him that someone else had stood in these corridors and felt something, had given him the idea that leaving traces might be worth doing.

He hoped his traces would do the same.

Not for J. Okafor—that made no sense, the direction was wrong. For someone else. Someone who came after, who stumbled into the archives, who needed to know that the weight could be carried, that the waiting could be survived, that the long wake could continue even when continuing felt impossible.

"Thank you," he said, to no one, to J. Okafor, to the archives that held them both.

The voice did not respond.

It did not need to.

Morning came.

The lights cycled up, soft and gradual, the ship's approximation of dawn. He had not slept much—the alertness had persisted, keeping him at the edge of consciousness, letting thoughts drift through without catching them. But his body moved when he told it to move. His feet found the floor. He stood up.

The corridor waited outside.

The weight pressed down, familiar, permanent. The hum continued, constant and indifferent. The ship moved through the void, carrying its cargo of frozen hope toward a destination that existed somewhere ahead.

He walked.

Not toward anything specific. Not away from anything specific. Just walking, letting his feet choose the direction, letting the corridors unfold in front of him. Left, then right, then straight for a while, past panels he had opened and panels he had not, past doors that would not respond to him and doors that would.

He arrived at the observation port.

The stars were the same.

He sat down, pressed his palm to the glass, felt the cold. The void was dark, punctuated by light, infinite and indifferent. The ship was still moving, still carrying them all forward, still doing what it had been designed to do.

"I don't know how much longer," he said.

The voice waited.

"I don't know how many more cycles. How many more inspections. How many more mornings when I wake up and the weight is there and I get up anyway. I don't know if I'll make it to arrival. I don't know if arrival will feel like anything if I do."

He looked at the stars.

"But I'm here now. Awake. Moving through the corridor toward something—a task, a meal, a window. The future is still far away. I can't feel it, can't imagine it, can't make it real in any way that would pull me forward. But I'm leaning toward it anyway. Not because I believe it will be better. Just because leaning is something I can do."

He dropped his hand from the glass.

"The long wake continues."

"I am recording your observation," the voice said. "Would you like me to archive this as a personal entry?"

"Yes."

"Entry recorded. Tagged under name: Soren Vasquez."

He stood up.

The corridor stretched ahead of him, soft-lit and quiet, leading to the next section, the next junction, the next panel waiting to be opened. The weight was there. It would always be there. But his feet were moving, and the moving was a kind of answer to a question he had stopped asking.

Why continue?

Because continuing was what he could do.

Not hope. Not meaning. Not any of the things that were supposed to make life worth living.

Just this.

The long wake.

Continuing.

He walked.